Chapter 3

The Rejected Earl of Leicester,
the Rejected Sir Philip Sidney

In the final movement of book V of *The Faerie Queene*, Artesall, the knight of justice—who, aided by the war-machine Talus, had already extended his cold and brutal mandate to the far reaches of Faerie Land—liberates the island commonwealth of fair Irena from the arch-tyrant Grantorto, in an episode refracting the cankered plight of historical Ireland, a long-festering wound in the side of Elizabethan political culture. Having toppled the head of the insurgency, Artesall sets out to cleanse the isle of Grantorto’s stain, hunting down rebels and collaborators while working to restore the authority of its rightful sovereign. Yet before Artesall can fully “reforme that ragged common-weale,” he finds himself recalled to Faerie Court, his virtuous tasks obscured at home by the shade of “enues cloud.” In answering the summons, he is beset by the dual hags Enuie and Detraction—who, with their monstrous pet the Blatant Beast, do “barke and bay / With bitter rage and fell contention,” befouling the honorable knight with words “most shamefull, most vnrighteous, most vntrew.” In chapter 2 we saw the power of envy in the courtly sphere, and Artesall proves no match for its barbs and bites: he must yield the stage to Calidore, a knight whose courtly arsenal will, in the poem’s final proper book, prove at least a bit more apt than sword or flail. Bruised and battered from his long endeavors, and smarting from slander’s sting, Artesall trudges forth to Gloriana’s court, “returning yet halfe sad.”

This is hardly a notable end for a rather notable knight, and it is easy to appreciate why his return is a doleful one. But why, we may stop and wonder, does the poem describe this disgraced hero as *half* sad? Why is Artesall’s sadness only partial, and what comprises this alternate, conflicting response? What does this emotional state tell us about Artesall, and what does it reveal more generally about the Elizabethan courtly experience?
This chapter is an attempt to imagine what these mixed feelings might be, and how they might emerge from the particular nature of Artegall’s career of royal service. My focus, however, lies not with Artegall’s struggles in the fictive court of faerie, but rather with those of the courtly makers themselves: a group also tasked with negotiating the emotional intricacies of life at court, and whose varied fortune as servants to Queen Elizabeth would find complex expression in figures like Spenser’s knight of justice. In my analysis, this contested affective terrain is situated in an equally contested social context: the political experience of the late 1570s, a period crucial in shaping the climate of Elizabeth’s subsequent rule. My interest in this chapter surrounds two key players on this stage: Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester (the famed courtly favorite) and his nephew and protégé Sir Philip Sidney (the famed courtly poet).

The most notable courtier of the Elizabethan period, Leicester was the central node of a vast network of courtly patronage and influence; this amorphous collective, which I will (informally) refer to throughout as the Leicester party, found common ground in a series of broad ideological commitments, such as an interventionist outlook on the affairs of Europe and an inclination to the reformed faith. Yet despite Leicester’s unequaled mastery of the courtly game, the actualities of Elizabethan policy routinely brought disappointment and frustration to those of his political persuasion—and despite their overriding personal loyalty to the queen, men like Leicester and Sidney had to brave the persistent sting of way-laid plans, neglected proposals, and personal slights. To begin charting the affective consequence of this position, I will in this chapter consider how the Leicester party contended with courtly rejection: the affective response occasioned by the blockage, deferment, or disruption of one’s political goals, and (as in the case of Artegall) by the failure to have one’s political value actualized and appreciated within the court’s social world.

Recent research has shown that rejection hurts, both psychically and physically. It is not pleasant to have one’s ambitions thwarted—and that pain is exacerbated, we must imagine, when those ambitions are weighed on a geopolitical (and even cosmic) scale. But there is also, I argue in this chapter, a silver lining to this affective cloud of courtly frustration. Such ostensible failures also have a shadow life as productive social moments, generating new modes of personal identity and new forms of political collectivity: a conciliatory affect comprising the other half of Artegall’s sadness. Rejection, I suggest, could be powerfully constitutive to Elizabethan courtiers like Leicester and Sidney, insofar as it sanctions a reciprocal ethos of protest and opposition: an ostensible failure, when salvaged and repackaged as heroic or ennobling, can become a striking
announcement of one’s refusal to be fully integrated into the symbolic universe of Elizabeth’s court, and of one’s willingness to break script from its enabling fictions. But what starts as a posture of individual bravado (or heroism, or narcissism, or recklessness) is soon transformed, through the channels of performance, to an intersubjective act: by broadcasting his own alienation, the courtier offers an alliance to the similarly minded, inviting them to join him in an alternate social order. This community of disaffection—galvanized both by a concurrent set of political and social goals, and by the ongoing opposition to those goals—assumes the role of a courtly subculture, founded and sustained by the affinity of negative affect.

In the uncertain courtly climate of the late 1570s, such a recuperative model of rejection was particularly valuable for Leicester and Sidney; it finds particular expression, I suggest, in the pageantry that they sponsored in this period. In the second half of the decade, the Leicester party treated Elizabeth to an elaborate series of multimedia events—such as the queen’s progresses to Kenilworth and Woodstock, and Sidney’s pageant *The Lady of May*—in which all manner of suits, appeals, and advertisements were couched in the splendor and spectacle of nominal royal delight. But despite their primary (and genuine) commitment to the task of royal ingratiation, these literary performances, I argue, nonetheless seem to anticipate and account for the possibility of their own failure. Leicester and his proxies embed within these texts certain discursive contingency plans, in which spoiled or frustrated attempts at flattery and insinuation might be retroactively claimed as a symbolic, collective victory by the ostensibly slighted party. As we will see, and as Leicester and Sidney were well aware, even the stock tropes of royal performance housed a latent source of entropic and oppositional energy, waiting to redeem a would-be failure. In the 1570s, when Elizabeth’s grip on England’s symbolic and political order was not yet fully realized, it was a particularly valuable time to squeeze royal lemons into courtly lemonade.

**Why So Rejected?**

The precise manifestation of Leicester and Sidney’s courtly rejection in the 1570s emerged from two primary nodes of social contestation. The first entailed Leicester’s long-simmering ambition to secure Elizabeth’s hand in marriage—an extended affair that had lingered, albeit faintly, for nearly two decades. It was shortly after her accession in 1558 that Elizabeth developed her affection for the young Robert Dudley; as
master of the horse, he enjoyed close and frequent contact with the queen, and within less than a year their intimacy was the subject of rumor and innuendo on both sides of the Channel. Perceptions worsened in September 1560, when Dudley’s wife Amy Robsart was found dead of a broken neck, apparently after “falling downe a paier of stayres.” Though cleared of wrongdoing by the coroner’s inquest, Dudley was plagued for decades by rumors of a domestic conspiracy—a theory infamously expounded in the so-called *Leicester’s Commonwealth* (1584), a Catholic polemic that has been called “the most notorious of Elizabethan political libels.” Yet despite this bad publicity, Elizabeth wavered little in her affection for Dudley, and within only weeks of Robsart’s death, reports circulated that “hyr Hygness shoold marry hym” before too long.

There was no doubt that England longed for a royal wedding; in the first Parliament of the reign (only weeks after her coronation), the queen was petitioned with a formal request to find the realm a suitable king, in whom its future hopes might be secured. But Elizabeth could not, as unvalued persons do, carve this matter for herself—and whatever the inclinations of her heart, Dudley was not an especially apt choice for such a royal match. The queen’s young court, already swirling with envy and resentment at his being favored, would hardly be settled by such a choice, and by embracing her own subject (a fraternization usually thought beneath a prince’s dignity), Elizabeth equally threatened to tarnish her reputation abroad, all the while foreclosing the possibilities of matrimonial diplomacy. Throughout 1561, Dudley scrambled to make himself a more appealing candidate, even entreating the Spanish powers to agitate on his behalf—but the support he had secured was not enough to sustain him in the coming months. By 1563, Susan Doran argues, Elizabeth was left with “apparently little desire and certainly no intention of taking Dudley as her husband.” The moment had passed for Dudley, who was no longer a plausible romantic contender; “the queen will never choose to marry me,” a Spanish ambassador reported him to say, “because she is determined to marry some great Prince.” In the years to come, Dudley (now ennobled as the Earl of Leicester) would devote no small energy to undercutting, or outright sabotaging, the foreign suitors that vied for Elizabeth’s hand—and while this opposition cannot be attributed merely to spite, there is nonetheless no small hint of cumulative rejection in the affective cloud surrounding it. Although Elizabeth would never marry Leicester or any great prince, there were certainly times when the latter seemed close to happening: especially, as I will touch upon later, in the final years of the 1570s. Leicester’s marriage suit was an early casualty of Elizabeth’s reign, but proved remarkably resilient in clinging onto life.
The rejection of this possibility, we will see, is reimagined and rechanneled in the courtly performances that he sponsored.

The second cause of agitation in the 1570s—more immediate, more intense, and more dispersed among Leicester’s party—concerned the religious strife that ravaged the nations of Europe, and the extent to which England should and could enter the fray. Leicester, Sidney, and a group of similarly minded men at court (including Secretary of State Francis Walsingham and William Davison, English ambassador to the Low Countries) persistently pushed for direct English military intervention in the late 1570s; their overriding agenda concerned the ongoing revolt in the Netherlands, and how England might best help this Dutch resistance overthrow the yoke of Spanish tyranny. Leicester envisioned himself commanding an army, with Sidney at his side, to overthrow the forces of Continental papistry—and on many occasions during this period, he was assured by the queen that his plan would be enacted. Yet, as so often was the case with Elizabeth, such plans changed swiftly, and in the 1570s both Leicester and Sidney were consistently frustrated in these long-sought ambitions. Their fantasies would not be realized for nearly a decade, in the final years of both their lives.

Some context is necessary. In the second half of the 1560s, inhabitants of the so-called Low Countries—a complex patchwork of distinct, though geopolitically related provinces, corresponding largely to the modern nations of Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands—took up arms against their collective Habsburg sovereign, in attempts to liberate themselves from King Philip II and escape the flames of his inquisitors. It was no easy thing to rule the Low Countries, an amorphous political conglomeration that boasted its own hereditary aristocracy, and Philip II (who was not, like his father, born in the Low Countries) was willing to make the necessary concessions, granting members of the Dutch nobility a nominal stake in their own governance. On matters of religion, however, Philip would not budge, and his refusal to accommodate the growing pockets of Calvinism in his territories—combined with more endemic frustrations over taxation and centralization efforts—sparked outbursts of iconoclastic resistance in 1566. Yet this initial push would meet a hasty end: the Calvinist forces of William (the Silent) of Orange, the charismatic rebel-prince whose name would become synonymous with the struggle for Dutch independence, were no match for the counter-insurgency of the Duke of Alba, whose Spanish troops restored a brutal order to the land and secured the governorship for their general. With Philip’s blessing, Alba installed a blood tribunal to exterminate whatever traces of resistance might be uncovered, and in the wake of his entry into
the Low Countries, over 60,000 people are said to have fled the region.\textsuperscript{20} Orange, however, would not be deterred, and the rebellion simmered over the next decade, variously engaging the Spanish with waves of violence and uneasy truces.

For Leicester and his fellow reformers, the situation in the Netherlands activated a number of personal motivators, both sacred and profane: delivering the Dutch their independence would liberate a valuable economic center from French and Spanish control and strike a blow at the heart of Continental Catholicism. A letter to Walsingham of 1571 reveals the intensity of Leicester’s commitment to immediate intervention on the Dutch behalf:

\begin{quote}
I think her Majestie shall be advised not to lose all these good advantages offered her, specially when they tend both to the setting up of Gods true Religion, and establishing of her own surety, with augmentation of her Crown. For my part, I never found cause since her Reign, that moveth me more to further it; and be you assured, I will do all that is possible that somewhat may come thereof.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

But while no friend of the papal authority—whose bull of excommunication had, only a year earlier, essentially entailed a contract on her life—the queen was even more loath to sponsor insurrection against an anointed king; this was especially true after her own harrowing experience in the Northern Rebellion of 1569.\textsuperscript{22} And though the infamous massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Day in 1572 (witnessed firsthand by Sidney and Walsingham) would fortify the resolve of England’s interventionist reformers, it ultimately helped to mend relations between England and Spain, who formalized their amity with the Treaty of Bristol in 1574.\textsuperscript{23} In the years that followed, Leicester and his allies on the council continued to agitate for intervention, with little success.

The tide seemed to turn in the fall of 1576, when a swarm of mutinous Spanish troops “putt to sacke” the city of Antwerp, unleashing “a petyf-full slaughter & a mysarable spoyle” on that city’s unfortunate citizens.\textsuperscript{24} Like the sack of Rome (1527) and the Massacre (1572), the siege of Antwerp (or “the Spanish Fury”) would become another iconic moment in the sixteenth century’s long history of religious violence. The galvanized Dutch States (often fractured by matters of policy and religion) formed a united coalition of resistance, and Queen Elizabeth, now receptive to her council’s pleas, tentatively authorized financial and military support to the cause. But despite the waves of optimism that swept through the Leicester party, their hopes would prove agonizingly hollow: the two years
that followed were plagued with difficulties and deferrals, and Leicester could do little but wait for a command that would not materialize, as did the many on the Continent who sought his coming. The decision was finalized in March 1578, when Elizabeth reached a compromise: rather than deploying the promised English forces, which threatened to antagonize Spain and France, she would instead sponsor the German reformer Count John Casimir, whose mercenary army would protect the interests of the Dutch States. After months of negotiations and assurances, the sudden shift in policy—from direct military intervention (through the states themselves) to indirect financial intervention (through the proxy Casimir)—was a grave disappointment to the gung-ho counselors.

To understand the quality of this rejection, it is necessary to recognize the vast energies (social, psychic, and intellectual) that Leicester had invested in his promised generalship. In the second half of the 1570s, correspondence on both sides of the Channel buzzed with anticipation of the earl and his forces—a collective excitement that made Elizabeth’s eventual decision devastating. “My Lord of Leicester,” it was first reported in the English diplomatic community, “is the moste deseirowse to goe the chiefe of this Iorney that ever yowe herd of, and dothe labor that bothe by his owen policy, and by the favor of all his freindes.” This deployment seemed inevitable—and “yf ther be cause to send ayd,” Leicester himself would later ensure, “her majestie doth promys my self shale have the Chardge.” According to one report, in fact, the earl had made up his mind before Elizabeth:

My Lord of Leicester commeth over generall of all the men which her majestie shall send in the lowe Countries. This is his full determynation, but yet vknownen vnto her highnes, nether shall she be acquainted with it, vntill she be fully resolued to send.

In this conviction, Leicester was encouraged by a network of hopefuls on the Continent—including, he was told, the Prince of Orange himself, who “dailye insist vpon the callinge ouer of your Lordship, aswell to satisfie his longinge desyre to see and honour youe in person, as for the common wealhes sake, which he is owt of dowbt shalbe singularlye relieued by your transportation.” As Leicester was reminded, he was essential to the Dutch cause, both as a political supporter and as a general:

I fynd the Prince the most desyrous man in the worlde of your Lordships comminge ouer, and yt ys the strenge he daylye harpes on, but as one carefull, I thinke, aboue all men, of your Honors welfare.
He hath considered and discoursed with me at large of all the difficulties, one of the greatest whereof might be your longe absence from court, which might perhaps breed as great prejudice one way as profit another, knowinge how by your creddytt and presence there, all their causes haue the better speedie and successe.\textsuperscript{30}

This fondness, in fact, extended to those of his party: when discussing with Orange “persons to supplye your Lordships roome,” the English ambassador William Davison made the welcome suggestion of “my good Lord of Warwick, your Lordships brother, or, if that might not be, Master Phillip Sidney, both men so agreeable to his Excellencie, as in a world I could not haue made a choyce to his better contentment, for the honorable opinion he hath both of the one and other.”\textsuperscript{31}

Because of this intense expectation, Elizabeth’s sudden change of policy in March 1578 was crushing. Only days later, Leicester reveals his despair in a heart-wrenching letter to Davison:

\begin{quote}
I know you thinke much in me that I have wrytten so syldome to you of late, but truly I have byn so troubled to se the alteracions of our resolucions as I nether had mynd to wryte, or doe any thing.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

For Leicester, it was impossible not to take the news as a personal failing, and thus as an implicit insult to his honor:

\begin{quote}
And ageyn, for my owne parte, hit can not but greve me, putting my self so farr forward as I dyd, & the matter in so great shewe of my going as yt was, to imagyn what want may be thought in me that so great a chaunge ys happened, spetyally being a mynister, as I have been, in the cause, & holding the place I doe. But I take god to record I have donne my best & vtter most to sett hit forward as I thought hit most safe & honorable for her majestie, and he knoweth best also how lytle I sowght therin any iote of my owne partyculer.
\end{quote}

In language bordering on the apocalyptic, Leicester’s anxiety for the realm’s safety has a clear theological bent, a feature which suggests the extent to which his intervention was framed as a divine mandate:

\begin{quote}
Well I can say no more, but I pray god we be all as we ought & that her majestie & this Realme fynd no dangerous lacke of this alteracion. . . . I had rather a 1,000 tymes hassard my lyffe in seking to
preuent so great daungers as everye way ar lyke to happen to vs & our frendes, than lyve in the greatest fellycyyt or securytye for my owne personne that may be wyshed. But our good god hath found vs, I fear, to vnworthie [of] his former blessinges. Hit ys he alone nowe that can help vs, I meane myraculously, seing the apparaunt ordinary courses ar so overslipt.

But perhaps most of all, Leicester could not but feel that he had failed Orange personally:

I have almost nether face, nor countenance to wryte to the prince, his expectacion being so greatly deceaued, but I hope you wyll lett him faythfully knowe how yt greveth me, & that he wyll think I am a subiect & seruant, but that loveth him as much as any mann that lyveth, who soever he be, and wysheth his prosperitye as greatly, and so shuld he have found, yt god had byn pleasyd that I had come this voyage or that yet hit may please him that so hit may fall out hearafter.

For those of Leicester’s party, this was all a bitter pill to swallow. After years of hopeful expectation, they had missed their chance to seize the reins of Christendom—and this failure, combined with that of Leicester’s marriage suit, would greatly shape their affective world in the immediate future.

The Nature of Rejection

In the late 1570s a cluster of very powerful men at court were bound by a mutual dissatisfaction with the queen’s proceedings, which often seemed (to them) overtly contemptuous of her advisors’ counsel, her realm’s well-being, and her own personal safety at large. When exploring the emotional resonance of this configuration, one fact is paramount: by rejecting the aims of men like Leicester and Sidney, Elizabeth inflicted no small violence on their very identity as English subjects. For a prominent peer like Leicester, the queen’s policy of deferment could be experienced as a direct ontological injury; by denying Leicester his army, she barred him from actualizing the active political selfhood for which he was, according to the culture’s logic, natively designed.33 Sidney shared with his uncle this neo-chivalric outlook on the nature of service and autonomy—but like Surrey, with whom he shared a general affective disposition, Sidney
would never fulfill the promise of his upbringing, and his courtly career was even more plagued with frustrations and disappointments.

Rejection is a difficult thing to study, insofar as the word often serves as an umbrella term for concepts such as “rejection, ostracism, abandonment, and exclusion”—but it is a topic of enormous interest in social psychology and related disciplines, where scholars have been tracking, among other things, the cognitive and emotional consequences of interpersonal rebuffs.³⁴ It is further difficult to consider the consequences of rejection for men like Sidney and Leicester, some of the most privileged subjects in the English realm—hardly those social actors apt to garner the most sympathy. But it is crucial to remember as we proceed that the affective consequences of the Leicester party’s political fortunes were formed by relative expectations, in the sense that attendance at court can be thought of as a “status-organizing process”: that is, one “in which evaluations of and beliefs about the characteristics of actors become the basis of observable inequalities in face-to-face social interaction,” and where participants are thus “differentially evaluated in terms of honor, esteem, or desirability, each of which is associated with distinct moral and performance expectations.”³⁵ Because “people pursue status as an (emotional) goal in itself,” devaluation at court had significant affective consequence, even for the most well-heeled of Elizabeth’s subjects.³⁶

Indeed, in the last decade “dozens of studies in different nations have revealed that socioeconomic status only weakly predicts an individual’s subjective well-being,” while “research on the cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal consequences of being rejected shows that people’s perceptions of acceptance and rejection do not always map onto how accepted or rejected they objectively are.”³⁷ In other words, scholars now argue that “hierarchy can be conceptualized as objective social status (e.g., education level) or subjective social status (i.e. one’s own judgment of one’s status)”—and, it turns out, “subjective social status [is] more consistently and strongly related to psychological functioning” than more traditional markers of class and cultural rank.³⁸ Recent research speaks of a “local-ladder effect,” in which “an increased sense of power and a sense of social acceptance” relative to peers leads to higher subjective well-being (with the opposite, of course, also being true).³⁹ Despite their objective, material advantages, men like Leicester and Sidney were thus still positioned to be deeply affected by such rejection, especially within the status-amplifying boundaries of the courtly sphere. This is because what has traditionally been thought of as self-esteem may be more accurately called “social esteem”—and, “threats to self-esteem,” in turn, can be conceived of as “events that make the possibility of social exclusion
Arguing that “the self-esteem system evolved as a monitor of social acceptance, and that the so-called self-esteem motive functions not to maintain self-esteem per se but rather to avoid social devaluation and rejection,” theorists like Mark R. Leary and his colleagues argue that humans innately possess a “sociometer”: that is, a “subjective monitor or gauge of the degree to which the individual is being included and accepted versus excluded and rejected by other people,” tasked with scanning “the social environment (often at a nonconscious or preattentive level) for cues connoting exclusion, rejection, and ostracism and alert[ing] the individual by means of negative affect.” Subjective self-esteem is “simply an indicator of the quality of one’s social relations vis-à-vis inclusion and exclusion”—making it of particular consequence to those, perched atop the social hierarchy, who were dispositionally inclined to puff their feathers.

I have suggested that feelings of social rejection among the Leicester party—that is, dips in the sociometer—led to the creation of a temporary community of disaffection, in which members actively performed their opposition to the direction of Elizabethan courtly policy. To understand the affective mechanics of this maneuver, it is useful to consider the literature on the social psychology of schism. In simplest terms, a schism occurs when a splinter population, feeling rejected by its in-group, turns the tables and initiates its own process of rejection. When a subpopulation feels “marginalised and discriminated against, rather than valued and respected,” schismatic action “is seen ultimately as a way of escaping [the] undesired identity and emotional distress” caused by intra-group dissonance. Precipitating the schism, Fabio Sani observes, is the fundamental belief among dissident members that mainstream “group identity has been subverted”; this response, in turn, “will prompt negative emotions (i.e. dejection and agitation) and decrease both group identification and perceived group entitativity (i.e. cohesion, oneness).” When a courtly subpopulation like the Leicester party becomes “dissonant both with what they wish the group to become (the ideal group) and with what the group has the obligation to be (the ought group),” members must contend with “important cognitive and affective consequences . . . [that] generate a mixture of both dejection-related emotions (disappointment, sadness) and agitation-related emotions (apprehension, uneasiness).” Unsurprisingly, the splintering can work to reassert and reaffirm new in-group cohesion, aligning it with affective and cognitive processes of group dynamics more generally: “group devaluation leads to higher identification with the devalued in-group,” while “increased in-group identification after (perceived or actual) group devaluation is an
assertion of a (preexisting) positive social identity that counters the negative social identity implied in societal devaluation.”

Aggrieved by the queen’s rejection of their aims, the Leicester party enacted—or at least enacted the fantasy of—such in-group schism, becoming what we might term a courtly subculture: “an enclave, a cult, or a distraction of antithetical values that are expressions of either frustrations with or interventions into the dominant structure of legitimization and control within society.” And as it signaled a temporary disruption of the orthodox courtly social order, we can equally label this subculture (and the literary texts it created) as delinquent. Because antisociality is “a way of communicating one’s disdain of the system and hence claiming membership among like-minded others”—and because “acts of exclusion from the formal social order are signals of eligibility for inclusion in groups that oppose the social order”—delinquent action is “perhaps the clearest possible way of indicating that you see authority as opposed to you and hence that you are opposed to authority.”

The openness of such opposition is a key feature, making it of particular value in the hyper-surveilled world of the court:

Delinquent acts are primarily conducted as part of a group activity and a public activity. Delinquents are keenly aware of their audience and seek to manage their reputation, and part of that reputation involves establishing distance from a key outgroup—the system. Thus, delinquency is characterized not only by exclusion from the mainstream, but by inclusion in a group defined in terms of opposition to authority.

From atop the Elizabethan social order, men like Leicester and Sidney performed their discontent in such delinquent play, an affective countermeasure to the frustration and blockage occasioned by their courtly rejection.

To speak of delinquency is appropriate, I think, given the intense connection between interpersonal rejection and aggression. The motives for “antisocial reactions to rejection” are manifold, but have obvious connection to social slight; “anger,” it has been argued, “has two important facets, namely, venting frustration and displaying dominance.” Indeed, in many cultures, to display anger is to assert a privilege either already possessed or actively desired—a clearly attractive reparative technique for a frustrated courtier looking to reassert a wounded ego. Here the objective, ontological status of men like Sidney and Leicester once again becomes salient, because it “appears that people who are emotionally
invested in grandiose self-views are the most aggressive, particularly in response to an esteem threat”: it is those tending toward the narcissistic that respond in this way to devaluation, and “the link between threatened egotism (i.e., inflated self-views) and aggression has been extensively documented across a range of situations.”54 I don’t think it is overreaching to suggest that enhanced egotism was part of the psychic equipment of any elite Elizabethan courtier—and indeed, the biographies of Sidney and Leicester (to say nothing of Surrey, or, as we’ll see, Essex) are flush with examples of rampant self-regard.

To the Elizabethan courtier, it mattered little that such social aggression was often self-defeating: the “fundamental motivation to protect the perceived worth and integrity of the self,” research suggests, can have “maladaptive consequences,” while “reaffirming a threatened domain can have the effect of exacerbating dissonance.”55 (Or, as a recent book chapter nakedly announces in its title: “Social Exclusion Increases Aggression and Self-Defeating Behavior While Reducing Intelligent Thought and Prosocial Behavior.”)56 This particular response to goal-blockage and exclusion leads to the fundamental paradox of the aggression/rejection response: why on earth do people (or groups) so often respond to rejection with behavior that cannot help but demand further rejection?57 “One possibility,” suggest Kipling D. Williams and Cassandra L. Govan, “is that the need for belonging and self-esteem may pull toward inclusionary reactions and the need for control and meaningful existence may pull toward antisocial reactions”; another “is that both reactions are triggered in the individual: anger and retaliation at an implicit level, and hopes for reinclusion at the explicit level.”58 Whatever the case, it is my argument that the rejected Elizabethan courtier was forced to negotiate this precarious position: knowing that reintegration into the orthodox order was an eventual necessity, but needing still to engage in affective repair, their antisocial aggression required being bold but not too bold. This paradox, I think, helps explain the many aspects of the Tudor courtly experience that seem immediately self-defeating, or that defy strict logic: courtiers like Leicester and Sidney routinely engaged in behavior that was perhaps politically maladaptive, but affectively energizing.

Political rejection threatened to be emotionally crippling, and men like Leicester and Sidney necessarily developed strategies to manage it. One such technique can be detected in the literary performances with which they were associated. To repair the psychic wounds of political frustration and disappointment, those of the Leicester party drew collective strength from a series of textual and performative moments designed to reassert their own autonomy, by announcing themselves incompatible with the
larger symbolic matrix that governed Elizabethan monarchal representation. Such moments are not simply “subversive,” in the sense of suggesting a challenge to the dominant discourse; rather, they exist to publicize a challenge that has already taken place, and to remind the royal powers of who is making it. The mode is less immediately combative than it is confessional—though the confession, to be sure, is of the malcontent’s willingness (and happiness) to engage in courtly combat. For the disaffected courtier, I suggest, such disruption could generate a heroic moment of existential autonomy—an assertion of wicked will that demonstrates, like the example of Camus’s Sisyphus, that “there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.”

Leicester and Sidney’s entertainments have been primed to produce such moments: even as they celebrate Elizabeth’s glory, they nonetheless have been armed with a series of embedded countermeasures, textual features that might be activated at a moment’s notice to unleash an unsuspecting attack or cloak a hasty retreat. A history of failure sows anticipation of a failing future—a crippling truth, unless that possibility is co-opted in advance.

After decades of New Historicist scholarship, it is no surprise to find that courtiers and their proxies found means to thread strands of discontent and opposition within the larger, conventional framework of monarchal celebration. But my point is not to observe that the pageants of the 1570s contained moments of subversion, but rather to emphasize how these texts anticipate their own failing, and how these failures can engender productive forms of collective identification. Such a strategic display of disaffection is doubly fortifying to the courtier’s sense of personal autonomy: it frees them from the burden of masking negative affect (and thus diverting the costly “emotional work” of such dissimulation) and flaunts, through a naked breach of decorum, that his force of will is not such that will be deterred by fear of reprisal. When this technique is deployed across a network of discontent (such as that formed by Leicester, Sidney, and the similarly minded), the result is to forge an alternate model of community—an oppositional anti-court, defined by its attempt to refashion, through an act of affective reversal, negative social meaning into the stuff of identity confirmation and alternative political action.

So how did they do it? By turning to the woods.

Into the Wild

In the middle of May 1578, when riding through the woods of Leicester’s estate at Wanstead, Queen Elizabeth found herself suddenly starring in
Philip Sidney’s earliest surviving literary composition. During her regular summer “progresses”—in which the royal court, fully mobilized, would tear its way through the houses and manors of its nobility—Elizabeth was routinely entertained by elaborate spectacles and performances; in this particular pageant, known now as *The Lady of May*, Sidney had cast the queen as mediator in a rustic debate that had spontaneously erupted before her. A country girl, lately on the cusp of “that notable matter” of matrimony, finds herself equally inclined to the suits of Espilus—a wealthy shepherd, offering a life of ease and comfort—and Therion—a lusty forester, promising a life of activity and exhilaration. As the drama unfolds, both sides debate the merits of the lovers and their professions, before the queen is finally called upon to adjudicate.

Given Therion’s virile, vital associations with the active life, modern readers have tended to agree that he is *some* kind of literary figuration of the Sidney/Leicester agenda—and this is with good reason, as we will see. Yet at the same time, if Sidney wanted to assure a victory for the forester, there are a few details he might have spared: when not off “stealing me venison out of these forests,” the lady admits, Therion often “grows to such rages, that sometimes he strikes me, sometimes he rails at me.” This rather naked assertion certainly troubles Therion’s representational status, and is enough for some to disqualify any association with Sidney altogether: “on a literal level,” Katherine Duncan-Jones wonders, “could he have expected the Queen to reward a violent poacher?”

My analysis of *The Lady of May* will conclude this chapter. Yet Duncan-Jones’s reasonable question demands an answer now, and the thrust of it has implications for a more general reading of the Leicester party’s literary ethos—because yes, she’s fundamentally right, it does seem unlikely that Sidney would expect the queen to unequivocally reward such renegade behavior. But the very notion, as Duncan-Jones frames it, is premised on the assumption that Sidney’s absolute and overriding interest was securing the reward for his proxy—and this supposition (and the spirit that animates it) risks limiting our understanding of courtly dynamics, especially as they inflect and are inflected by the courtier’s subjective experience. As demonstrated by the literature on rejection reviewed above, there were very good affective reasons why a frustrated courtier might construe himself so unsuitably, however imprudent as a matter of immediate policy.

And indeed, there were good reasons why Sidney and Leicester might want to align themselves specifically with the forester Therion, the figure whose native domain was the depths of the wild, liberated from the softening touch of art and culture, and from the order and degree of the
monarch’s court. By virtue of their standing, the average Elizabethan aristocrat had a functional relationship with the natural world: nobles often joined the queen in her favorite pastime of hunting, and their newly built estates, elaborately stylized with gardens, parks, and other artificial landscapes, drew much of their significance via contrast with the surrounding woodland. Yet there was also a more substantial way that England’s wild proved a site of identity management for Elizabeth’s nobility. Concepts of the wild were a vital counterbalance in the long development of European courtesy, as a site of contestatory energy that threatened to disrupt the symbolic order of civil discourse, and that threatened to disrupt the principles of governance itself.

That wildness was thought antithetical to authority is suggested by a representative document of early 1538, in which a northern prior denounces the recent religious risings against Henry VIII:

> And as touchinge all other persones of what sorte of menn so euer theye bee, kynne or frende, or other, that shall fortune to vtter their stomakkes agaynst the kinges highnes, or to be accused of the same, I for my parte shall bere them less favour then I wold do to turkes: for turkes, albeyt they be infideles, yeat they be of the same nature, menn as we bee—and those that do rebell agaynst their naturall prince, whome by goddes lawe and mans lawe they ought to defende, be to be reputed as no menn, but as serpentes and wyelde beestes.

In the ordered world of a monarch’s realm, there was little room for such savageness. Yet this protestation, an orthodox Renaissance commonplace, obscures a central paradox about the nature of the wild: that, as it works to strip a man bare, wildness necessarily exposes the raw human stuff that had been fettered by his social clothes. This untapped vein of power, autonomy, and (as in the emerging “noble savage” trope) even virtue could fuel a shadow-self, an alternate guise that might, by giving the lie to the social world that cloaked it, enable a mode of intense actualization. There is perhaps no purer form of virility than the one experienced on the descent to join those “reputed as no menn.” For this reason, I suggest, the wild was a site of valuable fantasy for the disaffected Elizabethan aristocrat, who saw in it a symbolic opportunity to perform the recuperative and compensatory affective measures I have described above.

Fundamentally, of course, The Lady of May is a pastoral literary exercise, and both foresters and wildness can be generally related to the larger discourse of pastoralism, the Elizabethan courtier’s conventional
The Rejected Earl of Leicester, the Rejected Sir Philip Sidney

mode of literary critique.\textsuperscript{70} The social dynamics of pastoralism have been elucidated by the work of New Historicist scholars like Louis Adrian Montrose, who suggests that pastoral forms served “to mediate differential relationships of power, prestige, and wealth in a variety of social situations.”\textsuperscript{71} Rather than a mere “longing after innocence and happiness,” the pastoral genre’s “fundamental self-contradictoriness” made it a powerful vehicle of indirect argument, as suggested by a much-cited passage of George Puttenham:

> The poet devised the eclogue . . . not of purpose to counterfeit or represent the rustical manner of loves and communication, but under the veil of homely persons and in rude speeches to insinuate and glance at greater matters, and such as perchance had not been safe to have been disclosed in any other sort.\textsuperscript{72}

It seems clear that pastoralism was the “appropriate medium in which living princes may be obliquely criticised or instructed,” and that “its properties of dissimulation and insinuation make it apt to embody any motive that it might be impolitic, graceless, or dangerous to advance openly in the predatory environment of a Renaissance court.”\textsuperscript{73} But, as the fundamental contest of \textit{The Lady of May} reveals, the discourse of wildness—even as it is embedded within the pastoral mode—enables a related critique which is not appropriate, and which is impolitic, graceless, or dangerous—and that sometimes this friction was to be preferred, especially as an affective resource. This association with wildness was especially valuable during the first half of Elizabeth’s reign, when the political and representational modes that defined her were still pliable, and when discourse (oppositional or otherwise) was not yet inflected by the cult of Gloriana, the structure of symbolic orthodoxy that governed courtly expression in the 1580s and 1590s.\textsuperscript{74}

Though the pageants of the 1570s were a reification of the Elizabethan symbolic order, Leicester and Sidney routinely found means within to introduce a node of chaos, by aligning themselves with this energy of the wild—a maneuver enabled by the natural setting in which they occurred. While there has been some discussion about the political nature of wildness in this period, I think that the range and significance of its affective valence has not yet been understood.\textsuperscript{75} In the sixteenth-century imagination, notions of wildness conjured a complex tapestry of associations, telling all manner of tales about the men and beasts that inhabited the natural world. In this folk tradition, a variety of archetypes soon emerged—though it is not easy to delineate them precisely. Writing nearly
a century ago, Robert Withington observed the challenge of sorting out this cast of characters:

The relation between wild-men, green-men, foresters, Robin Hood, the Moors and the devil is very difficult to clear up. A great many cross-influences must exist; and it seems obvious that all these figures are connected.\textsuperscript{76}

Because these stock types share an associative range, it is not necessary to profile them completely—but by sketching the broad parameters of their thematic domain, it becomes clear that they collectively activate an affective suite of aggression, virility, and opposition.

Remaining with Therion, we can begin with the figure of the forester: the man who, with trap and axe, bravely seeks his fortunes in the wild, a potent symbol and worthy champion of the active life. As Catherine Bates has recently argued, the act of hunting has long been vital to notions of “heroic masculinity” in the Western literary tradition; in the Renaissance, she importantly demonstrates, varieties of hunting motifs signaled ongoing negotiations of “wealth, status, prestige.”\textsuperscript{77} Though the forester motif figured widely in the sixteenth-century literary imagination, it seems to have been a particular favorite of Elizabeth’s father—the king who, armed with his majestic codpiece, actively mythologized himself as the font of virility. As such, the forester made regular appearances in the entertainments of Henry VIII’s reign, and the records of his pageants are flush with receipts for “foresters’ coates and hoods” and “hunters’ jack-ets.”\textsuperscript{78} (In fact, the forester featured in King Henry’s coronation revelries, in a spectacle recorded by Hall.)\textsuperscript{79} Furthermore, a cluster of forester songs are recorded in British Library Additional MS 31922, the “Henry VIII Manuscript,” a songbook in which the work of composers like William Cornish and Robert Cooper is preserved alongside King Henry’s own literary and musical compositions.\textsuperscript{80} Though the forester/hunter figure assumes several different roles in this collection, it nonetheless harmonizes around two central assertions: that the wild is a site of both violent and erotic opportunity, and that the forester is the man best poised to activate it. Exploiting the commonplace trope of the erotic hunt, the foresters of these songs deploy an arsenal of horns, spears, and arrows to celebrate (or mourn the decline of) the masculine lustiness with which they are naturally endowed. The opening verse, for example, of Cornish’s “Blow thi hornne hunter” entails an almost ritualistic invocation of the phallus:
In general, the forester figure in this collection accrues a thematic cluster: notions of erotic abundance, implicit and explicit violence, and masculine, homosocial autonomy. Though the forester is the least savage (and least subversive) denizen of the natural world, he nonetheless stands on the threshold of wildness—and as such, he begins to introduce, in regulated form, the energies of wanton violence, sexual aggression, and unfettered autonomy that only intensify as we proceed further into its depths.

Leicester and Sidney may have especially admired one particular forester of the “wilde Countries”: the infamous Robin Hood. As “chiefe gouernoure” of the wild, Robin Hood presided over an outlaw court of his merry men, a political subculture bound by the affective affinity of mutual alienation. He enjoyed a robust presence in the folklore of late medieval and early modern England—and we know he appealed to the Sidney family, who staged a Robin Hood performance during their spring festivities in 1574. (There’s reason to think that Leicester, Elizabeth’s own “sweet Robin,” may have also identified with this alternate namesake.)

Embodying a “permanent state of resistance to governmental authority,” the Robin Hood figure of the late Middle Ages was inherently “chaotic, centrifugal, even subversive.” Born to a “Forester [who] shot in a lusty long Bow,” Robin is routinely described as a “gode yeman” in the ballad tradition; for reason of this humble start, he was a star of folk traditions (like the May Day festivals) that upended the conventional social hierarchy. But in the early modern period, Robin Hood underwent an enormous social change, and it was one that made him even more meaningful to men like Leicester and Sidney. For reasons still not entirely clear, the sixteenth century witnessed a “gentrification” of the Robin Hood legend, in which the outlaw became increasingly imagined not as a working-class hero, but as a displaced, disaffected, or exiled aristocrat.

In the early decades of the century, he was already a figure notable in court fiction (in 1510, for example, Henry VIII and his friends took the guise of “Robyn Hodes men” to perform before Queen Catherine), and as the era progressed, Robin would become a natural denizen of the courtly universe—though one fundamentally opposed, in his kingdom of the wild, to the site of court proper. Thus, in the second half of the sixteenth
century, as Leicester and Sidney were rehearsing their grievances in the
imaginative space of the wild, the Robin Hood of medieval lore was simul-
taneously adopting a form in which they might increasingly recognize
themselves. In this new order, it has been said, “May games [were] now
war games” and “the politics of Robin Hood [were] revolutionary”—
features that, by lending a stately gravity to the tale’s folk origins, aligned
it with the affective mode the Leicester party. Blending antiauthoritarian
aggression with moral righteousness, the merry men were an apt model
for a community of frustrated courtiers.

But if the forester is one step removed from the site of court and culture,
there are many figures even more natively suited to the wilderness. The
most prominent is the wild (or savage) man, the half-beast who embodied
the primordial condition, untamed yet by the civilizing process. Though
known by many names (wild man, savage man, green man, woodwose),
he is familiar to readers of Elizabethan literature; he appears on stage, for
example, as Bremo in Mucedorus, while his image is refracted in many
personae in The Faerie Queene, through which Spenser explores the con-
tours of human nature. “Depicted in deliberately grotesque terms,” he
was “covered with a thick coat of hair, or with moss and ivy, and carry-
ing an uprooted tree or club”; he is thus a presocial form of the forester,
who (with culture’s guiding hand) replaced a coat of natural hair with
the cured hides of his quarry, and who traded the phallic brawn of his
club for the phallic finesse of an arrow. As such, the wild man equally
evoked associations of violence, sexuality, and raw freedom—but as a
creature immune from the laws and mores of society, he amplified them
to a potentially terrifying degree. From this native state, the wild man
thus “implied everything that eluded Christian norms and the established
framework of Christian society”—that which “was uncanny, unruly, raw,
unpredictable, foreign, uncultured, and uncultivated.” Because the mon-
arch’s court was the epicenter of rule and culture, the wild man thus
stood as a perfect inversion of the courtier: a position that might prove
enormously productive for those, like Leicester and Sidney, who had tem-
perament to inhabit it. (That wild figures were often motivated by “a
case of rejected love” furthers the association for Leicester.) Though the
wild man existed in many forms throughout the early modern period,
he was, at his core, antithetical to the principles of sovereignty; this fact
prescribed his orthodox role in Elizabethan pageants, to be tamed by the
queen’s presence. He was thus an apt vessel, even more than the forester
figure, for courtly fantasies of subversion, opposition, and autonomy.

The wild man was featured regularly in shows of the 1570s, in a
variety of permutations. In addition to the Leicester-sponsored events
discussed below, he figured in the New Year’s revels of 1574, a pageant in July of the same year, and in George Whetstone’s 1578 comedy *Promos and Cassandra*.97 (Like the forester, the wild man was also a favorite of Henry VIII: the folk figure of hypermasculine abundance found reflection in one of England’s most hypermasculine, patriarchal, and phallic kings.)98 The raw vitality of the wild man figure, and a further indication of his potential suitability as a site of identification, is similarly confirmed by his linkage to characters of the divine, or legendary, variety. In many instances, the wild man is associated with a pair of related figures from antiquity: Sylvanus, spirit of the forest and countryside, and Silenus, spirit of the wild.99 Like the wild man, both can be seen wielding uprooted trees—and Silenus, as companion to the satyrs and foster father to Dionysus, was especially prone to fits of frenzy.100 Along with such classical contributions, the wild man’s symbolic meaning was inflected by local custom. Though the wild man is a stock character of European folklore, his particular manifestation in England is indebted to the “green man” of Celtic mythology, an analogous native of the natural world—and for this reason, the savage man of the English forest is often clothed not in hides and hair, but in vines and ivy.101 The wild man also had a curious affinity with Saint George, England’s patron saint and ur-champion: for example, the “St. George plays” of the medieval and early modern period often employed “leaves or green branches” in their costuming.102 Both the classical and native English traditions expanded the wild man’s symbolic range by allowing his inherent linkage with strength, virility, and autonomy to manifest within the cosmic register of heroes, legends, champions, and divines.

And indeed, there is one such association that demands particular note. In *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, Ernst Cassirer importantly argues that Hercules is a principal icon of early modern autonomy: in defeating his allegorical nemesis Fortune, Hercules asserts the supremacy of truth, judgment, and freedom, epitomizing the supreme notion of valor (*fortezza*). (That is, the “strength of virility itself, the strength of the human will which becomes the tamer of destiny, the *domitrice della fortuna*.”)103 Embodying the proximity of man and god, Hercules was a particularly apt hero of the early modern period, and it is not surprising that he enjoyed a rich career as a symbol of Renaissance virtue.104 Yet, because of his traditional signification in art and literature—armed with a club, and draped in the skin of the Nemean lion—Hercules would also develop an association with the wild man topos of European folk culture. In the Middle Ages, there grew an increasing correspondence between “a man clad in fur, and one endowed with it by nature,” and for
obvious reasons, many “attributes of the strong Hercules . . . coalesced into those of the conventional wild man.” In some cases, the association was quite explicit: for example, a fourteenth-century illustration of Seneca’s _Hercules Furens_ depicts Hercules as unmistakably wild, a club-wielding, anthropomorphized lion-man marked by both human hands and feline paws and tail. As Michael Wintroub notes, this version of Hercules—which extends the god-man permutation to god-man-savage—reveals that the wild man equally encompasses “a discursive field in which the normative values of elites could be negotiated and/or contested.” The addition of Hercules further thickens the associative texture of Leicester and Sidney’s interest in the wild man topos: to the unrestrained, dangerous, and audacious power of the savage man, the classical hero added notions of nobility, governance, and even humanist eloquence, all without yielding the fundamental core of volatility that makes savagery so seductive in the first place.

Virility, aggression, autonomy, rebellion, violence, lust, subversion, phallicism, patriarchy, heroism, primitivism, naturalism, frenzy, audacity, degeneration, and virtue: the discourse of wildness evoked many things in the sixteenth-century English imagination. Some were commendable, even honorable. But many still were chaotic, posing an inherent danger to the core principles of governance and social order—or, perhaps worse still, in the case of many of the gendered terms, announcing a specific challenge to the authority of a (virgin) queen. Insofar as identification with wildness entails a kind of style, this symbolic range may be thought to entail what Sarah Thornton (adopting Bourdieu) calls “subcultural capital,” the “subspecies of capital operating within . . . less privileged domains” of mainstream culture. The discourse of wildness was a thing of endless productivity for a cadre of disaffected men in Elizabeth’s court, in which they could find a thematic and formal vocabulary to perform affective states of rejection, discontent, and antisociality—and indeed, to dismantle, however temporarily, the very notions of courtship.

With the previous discussion in mind, I will now consider how the oppositional thematics of wildness are deployed by the Leicester/Sidney circle in three entertainments of the late 1570s: the pageants at Kenilworth and Woodstock in 1575—which begin to employ the disaffected poetics I have been describing—and Sidney’s _The Lady of May_ in 1578—which, in response to three additional years of rejection, is even more explicit in promoting the discontent of its sponsors. In each performance, elements from the lexicon of the wild are strategically exploited in the service of an antisocial undersong, sounding notes of negative affect even within the
celebratory mode of the entertainment proper. Such songs would soon enough become the official soundtrack of the pasture—but in the 1570s, they emerged from a considerably more frenetic place, and were invested with fantasies of a wilder nature.

**Leicester and Sidney, Entertainers**

*Kenilworth, 1575*

In July 1575 Leicester hosted an entertainment for the roving queen at his magnificent castle of Kenilworth. Present during the nineteen-day celebration was the young Philip Sidney, freshly returned from his two-year finishing tour of Europe; the primary poetic architect, however, was the well-known writer (and grizzled soldier) George Gascoigne, who seems to have guided much of the festivities. The events were recorded in two contemporary accounts: Robert Laneham’s eyewitness report, published in 1575 as *A Letter Whearin Part of the Entertainment Vntoo the Queenz Maiesty at Killingwoorth Castl in Warwik Sheer in This Soomerz Progres 1575 Iz Signified*, and Gascoigne’s pseudo-official version, published (anonymously) a year later as *The Princelye Pleasures, at the Courte of Kenelwoorth*. As these texts reveal, the queen was honored with such panoply of spectacle—song and dance, playlets, combat, pyrotechnics, and special effects—that it has been often claimed that the events entailed a de facto marriage proposal on Leicester’s behalf. Yet, in spite of this motive—or, perhaps more rightly, because of it—there also exist moments of oppositional energy, in which Leicester and his proxies anticipate the likely failure of this very proposition. In doing so, they find means to assert their own wild autonomy, by promoting the suitor’s fundamental inability to be integrated in (and thus reduced to) the symbolic universe of his beloved.

At the outset of her stay, Elizabeth was lavishly celebrated even before she reached the grounds of Kenilworth proper: “there met her on the way, somewhat neere the Castle, Sybilla, who prophecied vnto her Highnes, the prosperous raigne that she should continue, according to the happy beginning of the same” (2:290). With this happy ambush, Elizabeth was treated to a welcome verse, promising a peaceful future for herself, her subjects, and her realm.

Yet even within this conventional welcome, the Sybil—“placed in an arbor in the parke neere the high way where the Queenes maiestie came” (ibid.)—finds subtle means to establish a demarcation between the
feminine source of the queen’s authority and the masculine consensus by which it is enabled. This tension is detected even within her ostensibly benign prayer for a peaceful realm:

You shalbe called the Prince of peace,
and peace shalbe your shield,
So that your eyes shal neuer see
the broyls of bloody field. (2:291)

Though apparently unremarkable, these lines acknowledge a literal fact of no small importance: Elizabeth’s eyes won’t ever see the field of war, and this is precisely the feature that separates her from martial subjects like Leicester, Sidney, and Gascoigne. Though Elizabeth may preside over the fictive combats of the pageant world, the Sybil reminds her that she, unlike her mighty father, was a monarch barred from the theater of war. Elizabeth’s engagement with the realm of blood and steel was restricted to the kind of martial role-playing we see before Tilbury—a justly celebrated gesture, but one whose rhetorical power is ultimately premised on the queen’s fundamental incompatibility with the realm of genuine combat.

But while Elizabeth may have been excluded, the site of war was nonetheless a key domain for the formation and management of aristocratic identity, in which men like Leicester and Sidney strove to “vindicate their honor and authority” through exploits in the field.¹¹² The same neo-chivalric spirit that inspired their flair for martial pageantry assured that the symbolic combats they staged were an inadequate substitute for the thing itself: the real place for affirming their aristocratic ontology was in battle, and this was the birthright that Elizabeth insistently denied them. Indeed, when the opportunity was finally presented, many would ruthlessly seize it: the queen’s command was routinely disobeyed in times of war, when her generals found means to subordinate her will to their own. (As we will see in the next chapter, this was a tactic of the Earl of Essex.) These social dynamics are being negotiated even within the celebratory mode of the pageant—and, for all its orthodoxy, the observation that Elizabeth’s “eyes shall neuer see / the broyls of bloody field” cannot help but activate alternate ways to read the mock-combats that will be subsequently staged for her entertainment.

After the confirmation that Elizabeth’s reign would be marked by tranquility, she encountered a bellicose dumb show that suggested the opposite:

Her Majesty passing on to the first gate, there stode in the Leades and Battlementes thereof, sixe Trumpetters hugelie advaunced,
much exceeding the common stature of men in this age, who had likewise huge and monstrous Trumpettes counterfetted, wherein they seemed to sound: and behind them were placed certaine Trumpetters, who sounded in deede at her majesties entrie. And by this dum shew it was ment, that in the daies and Reigne of K. Arthur, men were of that stature. So that the Castle of Kenelworth should seeme stil to be kept by Arthurs heires and their servants. (2:291–92)

The trumpeters, with their exaggerated height, physical prowess, and “huge and monstrous” phallic devices, signal the potent virility of Leicester’s world, recalling the brawn of the savage man archetype. It is thus not surprising that they announce the earl as a figure of Arthur: the font of British chivalry, a heroic warrior, a defender of the faith, and (above all) a king. It is difficult to think that this is not, on some level, a challenge to Elizabeth’s authority: she is being welcomed as a subject to an alternate realm, an artifact of England’s heroic past, in which Leicester rules as warrior-king. Indeed, though Leicester took extensive steps to modernize the grounds, Kenilworth was still an “ancient military fortress,” recalling the domains of the overmighty peers that Elizabeth’s father and grandfather struggled so endlessly to undo. In the 1570s Leicester continued to fortify and expand his arsenal at Kenilworth, from which he commanded a nearly unthinkable reserve of potential power:

Not for over half a century had a subject possessed such formidable military resources. If only he could have ensured the loyalty of his men, Leicester was in a position to defy all comers, even perhaps his sovereign. He was the last of his kind in English history.

Though the arsenal wasn’t merely for show, its primary force is symbolic, transforming Kenilworth into a counterculture monument to the force of Leicester’s exceptional magnificence—though one devoted officially, of course, to eliciting her majesty’s pleasure. When we recall that Henry VIII was invested in the mythos of Arthur, whose ancient authority would premise his world-shattering claims of religious prerogative, it becomes clear that the symbolic world of Kenilworth provides an alternate court to Elizabeth’s own, grounded in the patriarchal principles of a hypothetical Dudleian rule. Given this investment in virility, it is not surprising who Leicester elected as the champion of his heroic, masculine realm: “when her maiestie entred the gate, there stoode Hercules for Porter”
(2:292). For the interventionalist Leicester party, who ached to don spurs on behalf of the Low Countries, such fantasies of a militaristic empire were an obvious affective well, counteracting the threat to aristocratic ontology posed by Elizabeth’s continual reluctance to engage.\textsuperscript{119}

As the festivities continued, the pageant’s engagements with the discourse of wildness became further explicit. Later in the week, for example, Elizabeth encountered an “\textit{Hombre Saluagio}, with an Oken plant pluct vp by the roots in hiz hande, him self forgrone all in moss and Iuy” (2:250). Initially unaware of the queen’s presence, the savage man has been stirred by the disruption of his domain, and seeks someone to explain “why all these worthy Lords and Peeres, / are here assembled so” (2:297). In a comic exchange with Echo, the wild man (who seems to have been played by Gascoigne) is led through a brief précis of the pageant’s proceedings to date—a recapitulation that serves to emphasize the extraordinary efforts of “O Dudley,” who “gaue him selfe and all, / A worthy gift to be received, / and so I trust it shall” (2:301). He finally spots Elizabeth herself, the guest of honor; he falls to his knees, begging that she might accept the service of such a “wilde and sauadge man” (2:302).

Unlike many of the playlets during the progress, the saga of the Savage Man is left puzzlingly unresolved; despite his promise (and willingness) to yield, there is no catharsis, no transformation, and no integration into the social order. The texts give no hint of Elizabeth’s response, and the terms of his submission are accordingly unclear. Indeed, his final words to the queen contain a barely concealed challenge—“And take in worth the wilde mans words, / for else you do him wrong”—and his concluding remarks, as Gascoigne tells it, invoke rejection and despair:

\begin{quote}
let me go seeke some death,
Since I may see this Queene no more,
good greefe nowe stop my breath. (2:303–4)
\end{quote}

An odd way, it seems, to conclude the sequence, which is notable in itself for suspending the conventions of the wild man transformation trope.

But the reason for this abrupt ending may be indicated by an event that is omitted in Gascoigne’s text. As Laneham tells it, another incident had actually concluded the wild man episode:

\begin{quote}
Az thiz Sauage for the more submission brake his tree a sunder, kest the top from him, it had allmost light vpon her highness hors hed; whereat he startld and the gentleman mooch dismayd. See the benignittee of the Prins, az the foot men lookt well too the hors, and
\end{quote}
Though merely an accident, it is suggestive that the savage man brings near-disaster to the queen, via the very act that is intended to signal his submission: her courtiers might sublimate much of their desires, but there is nonetheless a potential cost to the civilizing process of Elizabeth’s court. In fact, according to a contemporary Spanish dispatch, the wild man episode wasn’t the only occasion at Kenilworth that presented danger to the queen:

The queen majesty, as I write, is far away from here, at my Lord of Leicester’s castle, called Kenilworth, where the earl has treated her to many festivities. It is said that one day, while going to hunt, a traitor (whom they then seized) shot at her with an arrow—though others say he was just shooting at the deer, and meant no harm. The bolt passed by the queen without hurting her, thank God.¹²⁰

Was there a Robin Hood lurking in the woods of Leicester’s Kenilworth? The queen, it seems, didn’t have much luck with clubs or arrows on this visit—the phallic signifiers of the wild proved a too-real reminder of the dangerous virility that stood in symbolic defiance of her order.

As we have seen, the Kenilworth festivities were punctuated by an oppositional undersong, in which Leicester and his agents embedded themes that strategically cut against the spirit of the celebration proper. This is perhaps no better exemplified than by the events surrounding the so-called Masque of Zabeta, a sequence in which the organizers seem to deploy, but at the same time anticipate the failure of, a coded marriage proposal to the queen. Apparently intended as a centerpiece of the queen’s visit, the masque reveals how the nymph Zabeta, a former disciple of Diana, is encouraged to join Juno and her cult of matrimony.¹²¹ (Continuing the prevalent motif, the performance also features “a man cladde all in Mosse,” who announces himself as “the wylde mans sonne” [2:309].) But though the show was “prepared and redy (euery Actor in his garment) two or three dayes together,” it never was realized—and while allegedly postponed for “lack of opportunitie and seasonable weather,” it has in fact “long been suggested (and is generally accepted) that the real reason for the cancellation of Gascoigne’s marriage masque was the sensitivity of its overt call for Queens to wed” (2:322; ibid. footnote 556). By printing the playlet’s text in his 1576 account, Gascoigne scores a minor
revenge, ensuring that the nixed performance would still have life in the public record: the volume’s preface, in fact, explicitly signals the inclusion of “one Moral and gallant Deuyce, which neuer came to execution, although it were often in a readinesse” (2:289). In not addressing “the real source of the queen’s displeasure,” Susan Frye observes, this maneuver “subtly undercut[s] her and protect[s] the participants by pretending that her actions are unfounded.”

But even more important is the fact that, while this particular show was canceled, Leicester seemed determined that Elizabeth would hear the tale of Zabeta, one way or the other. Days later, in the final moments before “her departure from thence, the Earle commanded master Gascoigne to devise some Farewel worth the presenting”—and to do so, the poet clad himself “like vnto Syluanus, God of the Woods” (2:322). Of the dozens of allegorical figures that had appeared throughout the week, Gascoigne selects the lord of “these woods and wildernes” to engage Elizabeth for a final time; he follows alongside the queen as she rides, delivering a series of speeches designed to entice an extension of her visit (ibid.). As Sylvanus explains it, the “late alteration in the skyes” should be attributed to the “flowing teares” of the gods, grieved at her imminent departure, and the anticipation of which reverberates throughout the natural world:

Not onely the skies scowled, the windes raged, the waues rored and tossed, but also the Fishes in the waters turned vp their bellies, the Deere in the woods went drowping, the grasse was wery of growing, the Trees shooke off their leaues, and all the Beastes of the Forrest stoode amazed. (2:324–25)

But Sylvanus next turns to the show that had been allegedly ruined by this meteorological upheaval: in lieu of the canceled performance, Gascoigne himself unfolds the “strange and pitifull adventures” of Zabeta—the nymph “surpassing all the rest for singuler gifts and graces”—and her unlucky suitors—“whome shee hath turned and conuerted into most monstrous shapes and proportions” (2:326). As they proceed throughout the forest, Sylvanus narrates this gallery of wretched souls (such as “Constance,” turned to “this Oke,” or “inconstancie,” to “yonder Popler”), forcing the queen to gaze upon the casualties of her displaced erotic obstinacy (2:326–27). Of particular interest is the fate of “Ambition”:

She dyd by good right condemne hym into this braunch of Iuy, the which can neuer clyme on hygh nor florysh without the helpe of some other plant or tree, and yet commonly what tree soeuer it ryse
by, it neuer leaueth to wynde about it, and strayghtly to infolde it, vntyll it haue smowldred and killed it. (2:327)

Though a normal enough indictment of the courtly rat race—and of the clawing upstarts that so aggrieved men like Sidney and Leicester—ivy is also the essential signifier of the English wild man, an association that substantially thickens the moment’s symbolic importance. On one hand, the wild man is a living monument to the deleterious effects of unchecked courtly ambition: covered in ivy, he offers visual witness to the process of predation that Sylvanus describes, and which slowly erodes the bedrock of aristocratic ontology. Yet on the other, the wild man is not simply covered in ivy, but is made of it: in this sense, he is ambition animated, with the seizing of autonomy it entails, and with the threat of destruction to those who might impinge it. Following an increasingly familiar pattern, this slick maneuver embraces the alluring threat of courtly ambition even as it righteously condemns it.

But the centerpiece of Sylvanus’s catalog is the figure of “Deepe desire,” who was turned into “this Holy bush . . . now furnished on euery side with sharpe prickinge leaues, to proue the restlesse prickes of his priuie thoughts” (2:328). Unlike Zabeta’s other victims, desire is given the opportunity to speak for himself—but his attention is fixed not on his tormentor, but on Elizabeth. He returns to the queen’s meteorological significance, reviewing how these “great floods of mone” have disrupted the natural order, before imploring her to

commaunde againe,
This Castle and the Knight,
which keepes the same for you:
These woods, these waues, these foules, these fishes
these deere which are your dew. (2:329–30)

Such a pledge, he assures, will redeem his natural form. Sylvanus equally craves, in his final words, “that you would either be a suter for him vnto the heauenly powers, or else but onely to giue your gracious consent that hee may be restored to his prystinate estate” (2:331).

Like the earlier savage man episode, the princely pleasures of Kenilworth end indeterminately, at least as it appears in the textual record. Elizabeth’s response is not recorded, but the progress proceeded as expected: an implicit rejection of desire, as it is framed by this final encounter. But why, to conclude these weeks of extravagance and expense, was Elizabeth even given this final opportunity to reject her host?
Did Leicester and Gascoigne really expect the queen to embrace the offer?

The answer, I think, is that this rejection has been anticipated, and written into the text itself, via the contestatory forms that Leicester inhabits: forms that, in effect, underwrite the failure of their own rhetorical aims. The very shape of Leicester’s transmuted desire (the consequence of his enforced submission to the Elizabeth-figure Zabeta) flaunts its aggression, threatening to prick those who encroach upon its space. The threat of violence is specifically phallic, as when Sylvanus quips on the differences of “he Holly” and “she Holly”: “Nowe some will say that the she Holly hath no prickes, but thereof I entermeddle not” (2:328). But the “prystinate estate” of Leicester’s desire—that is, the desire that would be unleashed by Elizabeth’s favor, and to which she herself would submit—is more threatening still in the sheer magnitude of its force:

I am that wretch Desire,
whom neither death could daunt;
Nor dole decay, nor dread delay,
Nor fayned cheere enchant.
Whom neither care could quench,
nor fancie force to change. (2:328)

It is only Zabeta’s rejection that has capped the bottle of desire—and it is hard to imagine why Elizabeth would want to uncork it.

In 1575, it would have been exceptionally unlikely for Elizabeth to give her hand to the Earl of Leicester. I find it hard to believe that any of his associates expected that she would. While this certainly does not mean that Leicester would have rebuffed the opportunity to become an Arthurian king of England, it does suggest that he was aware of his suit’s near impossibility—and accordingly, that he and his agents knowingly constructed a fictive world that was ultimately destined to memorialize its failure. In anticipation of this inevitable end, Leicester populates this world (and associates himself with) a cast of wild figures that are adversarial, threatening, and fundamentally unsuitable for engaging the queen: a maneuver that, when considered retrospectively, co-opts the autonomy of Elizabeth’s choice, and reconfigures her rejection as a confirmation of his own fundamental power. This consolation is grounded upon the performance of opposition and contention; in the texts of the Kenilworth shows, the discourse of wildness functions as an escape clause, drafted ahead to absorb and refashion the sting of frustrated desire. It is no accident that Leicester’s guise of the holy bush so resembles Zabeta’s lover...
Contention, who was transformed to a “bramble Bryer” armed to “catch and snach at . . . garments, and euery other thing that passeth by it” (2:327).

In a perceptive chapter—which tellingly begins with the heading “Gascoigne’s Wilderness Years”—R.W. Maslen notes that “George Gascoigne specialized in the fiction of failure”; this tendency is perhaps best exemplified in “Gascoignes Wodmanship,” his most famous lyric, which recounts a woeful hunter who “shootes awrie almost at every marke.” Emerging from the discourse of the wild, I suggest, the Kenilworth festivities reflect Gascoigne’s deep commitment to failure—but it is failure pointedly deployed in the affective interests of Leicester and his allies.

Woodstock, 1575

Not long after the events at Kenilworth, Elizabeth was treated to another such round of festivities at her manor of Woodstock, organized by its keeper (and Leicester client) Sir Henry Lee—the man who would go on, as the queen’s official champion, to become the guardian of the Elizabethan neo-chivalric cult of honor. Though surviving records don’t account fully for her month-long stay, we do know that she witnessed, with apparent delight, an intricate pageant of interlocking, star-crossed lovers in the romantic mode; its centerpiece is the two-part drama of Gaudina and Contarenus, a rousing tale in which love is ultimately sacrificed for public service. Though readings diverge wildly, there is near-universal agreement that the entertainment must, in some way, be read in conjunction with Kenilworth; some, for example, find it a “response or riposte” to the pro-matrimony slant of the previous event, while others have “argued that there are close similarities in their respective agendas” regarding “Leicester’s ambitions as defender of the Protestant cause in the Low Countries.” And though there is consensus that she was pleased by the proceedings—part of which, at least, she commanded “should be brought her in writing”—I still think there is a way in which the masculine prerogative of the Leicester party is embedded within the surviving text: the saga of Gaudina and Contarenus again offers the opportunity to transform royal rejection into a badge of empowered alienation.

As in many such entertainments, the host of this sequence is a denizen of the wild. The story is unfolded by the unfortunate Hemetes, a blind hermit who presides over an isolated bower “couered with greene Iuie, and seates made of earthe with sweete smelling hearbes” (2:374). Recalling Zabeta’s victims at Kenilworth, he is defined primarily as a casualty of erotic violence, the terms of which are twisted into the larger narrative.
Once a strapping knight, Hemetes fell for a coy enchantress (“most deynty to be dealt with”); to rebuff his advances, she “putt on the shape of a Tigresse so terrible to behould” that he was convinced (prophetically) to “neuer more sett eye on her” (2:377). His vow became literalized, however, when he was “sodenly striken blynde” by Venus, as punishment for his rejection of love (2:378). (His sight, unsurprisingly, is eventually restored by Elizabeth’s presence.) This hermit figure is a central framing device, which situates the narrative within the realm of wildness—and the symbolic freight of enforced hermitage will stand in sharp contrast to the position of self-imposed exile that the story’s Leicester figure will eventually occupy.

In the pageant, Leicester ultimately seems to occupy the role of Contarenus, “a knight (of estate but meane but of value very great),” whose love for Princess Gaudina has been frustrated by her father (a “mighty duke” of Cambria), at whose behest he was magically exiled for a term of seven years (2:375, 374). In the first sequence of the pageant, Hemetes recounts how Gaudina, fleeing her father’s court, is finally reunited with her champion; in her journey, she becomes the chaste companion of Loricus, another knight jilted in love, who serves as her protector until Contarenus’s arrival. In the second half of the entertainment, a playlet works to undo the forward progress of the first. In its action, “this haughty Duke” elects to “leaue his Princely states” in search of his daughter—and though not the most sympathetic figure, he now assumes the role of the questing knight, “whom fortune doth constraine, / with fruitlesse toyle to trauel stil in vaine” (2:414, 413, 414). A Queen of Faerie (before the figure was synonymous with Elizabeth) moderates their eventual encounter, in which the Duke begs her, on behalf of “countries good,” to “neglect, / The Loue of him which led you so astray” (2:423); the Faerie Queen similarly urges Gaudina to suppress her love for the public good. Despite rigorous debate on the nature of civic duty, Gaudina will not budge: as a last resort, the Duke turns to Contarenus himself, “to see if his desire might be delaide” for the sake of the commonwealth (2:427).

It is thus by his own will that Contarenus, after hearing further deliberations, reluctantly forsakes his long-sought beloved, agreeing to “yeeld to Countries good / the thing which to possesse so neere he stood” (2:430). With good reason, this is often taken as the swan song to Leicester’s kingly ambitions; Berry, for instance, argues that here the earl offers “explicit” acknowledgment that “his service could not be rewarded with marriage.” But the larger point, I think, is the extent to which the Leicester-figure assumes complete mastery over his beloved; it is Contarenus who takes possession of Gaudina, and it is Contarenus who agrees to
dissolve their love—in an act, what’s more, that only serves to glorify his civic virtue. If the Kenilworth entertainment is underwritten by a bond of interpretive insurance, in which rejection is anticipated and accounted for in advance, here there is hardly need for such safeguards: the Woodstock pageant dismisses Elizabeth before she has any chance to say otherwise.

Such a posture is reflected in Contarenus’s refusal to be reintegrated into the newly harmonized Cambrian court. Though the Duke welcomes him home, and vows to reward him handsomely for his loyalty, Contarenus views his exile as final:

My Lord, what you haue done, your state maintains, exiling me that did offend your eye, My life must be in course of restlesse paines, for her whom care of countrey doth denye. Good hap light on the land where I was borne, though I doe liue in wretched state forlorne. (2:430)

The extent of his sacrifice is magnified by this oppositional mode; by construing himself as a political martyr, Contarenus only serves to amplify his own stoic resolve. The knight leaves once again as a man apart, a hero cast out from his own brood, but one whose unimpeachable virtue is now free to serve a master who might better appreciate its value. Alienated from the courtly world, he is left to roam “where so aduentures hard shal carry”—that is, throughout the wilds and frontiers of unknown lands (2:434). What’s more, Contarenus explicitly declares that this antisocial impulse will, in fact, ultimately forge new channels of affinity:

And tel my Lady deere that I intend, henceforth to seeke if I may meet her friend, Loricus whom the Hermit did commend, Ile bid him thinke and hope one day to find Reward for that his faithful seruice long, til when we both may plaine of fortunes wrong. (2:434)

Like Leicester and Sidney, the disappointed knights Contarenus and Loricus are conjoined in a community of discontent. Even in absence, the socio-spatial valence of this community is suggested by the de facto member Hemetes, the third such jilted knight: this is a collective of the wild, united by the mutual affective experience of frustration, and bonded by the mutual social experience of courtly alienation.
Perhaps, as is often suggested, the Woodstock pageant does entail Leicester’s vow to renounce his erotic claim to Elizabeth, if he is only given leave to pursue his fortunes elsewhere—like in the Low Countries, backed by an army of her soldiers. But even so, the affective essence here seems to be one of relative positionality, in which Leicester announces the productivity of rejection, and his readiness to “retire and draw [him] selfe apart” (2:431). This force of will, and the streak of latent sadism that accompanies it, is finally etched in the princess herself, in a brand that marks her as forever his:

Yet this I am assur’d e her Princely heart,
where she hath lou’d wil neuer quite forget,
I know in her I shal haue stil apart,
in honest sort I know she loues me yet. (2:434)

This is, I think, no small consolation—and it is one of immense empowerment for a frustrated and rejected subject. And, as Doran notes, it would have to do: “In November 1575 Elizabeth declined to accept the sovereignty of the Netherlands which had been offered to her by the States of the provinces, and over the next two years she consistently turned down their appeals for a military alliance.”

“If,” begins the Tale of Hemetes, “you marke the woords with this present world, or were acquainted with the state of the deuises, you shoulde finde no lesse hidden then vttered, and no lesse vttered then shoulde deserue a double reading ouer” (2:374). Depending on who is doing the double reading, I suggest, the 1575 entertainments at Woodstock could simultaneously contain very different affective registers.

The Lady of May, 1578

I arrive finally at Philip Sidney’s infamously obscure entry into the realm of literary politics: The Lady of May, performed at Leicester’s newly purchased manor of Wanstead in mid-May 1578. The themes of opposition, virility, and audacity pervade Sidney’s literary debut—a reflection of three further years of disappointment and frustration with Elizabeth and her policy. (To remind: it was only two months earlier that Elizabeth had suddenly abandoned her long-promised, long-delayed plans for direct intervention in the Low Countries, opting instead to fund the mercenary troops of Count Casimir.) There are exceptionally few things that can be settled in this odd little show—though Linda Shenk has recently offered the intriguing suggestion that it reflects the contemporary Anglo-Dutch
relations discussed above—but I will here argue one main point: the affective stakes of *The Lady of May* have not yet been accounted for, because we have not yet understood the precise implications of Sidney’s adversarial mode.137

*The Lady of May* begins with a spatial disruption, in which the boundaries of Wanstead’s aristocratic frame are breached by a foreign presence. It was during a stroll through the manor’s garden, just as Elizabeth “passed down into the grove,” that

there came suddenly among the train one apparelled like an honest man’s wife of the country; where, crying out for justice, and desiring all the lords and gentlemen to speak a good word for her, she was brought to the presence of her Majesty.138

She falls in supplication, begging that the queen aid her in her plight. The point of contention, we’ve seen above, is her daughter’s two very different suitors, “both loving her, both equally liked of her, both striving to deserve her” (21.19–20). But what might otherwise suggest a light interlude, we learn, has a more serious dimension:

But now lastly (as this jealousy, forsooth, is a vile matter) each have brought their partakers with them, and are at this present, without your presence redress it, in some bloody controversy; my poor child is among them. (21.20–23)

The distraught mother points Elizabeth in the direction of the broil, praying that she might defuse the escalating tension and deliver her daughter to safety.

Though conflict is an integral part of Elizabethan pageantry, the combative elements often emerge (as we saw at Kenilworth and Woodstock) from a framework designed to contain, distance, or soften the violence—such as the overt presence of allegorical, fantastical, or historical content, or the ritualized ceremony of the tournament tradition more generally.139 But the clash at Wanstead entails a very real breach of the social order, recalling not the mythical battles of the earlier pageants, but the “controuersie betwene . . . wilde men” that plagued administrators in Tudor Ireland.140 Though these combatants, so apt to be allegorized and abstracted, are not realist in any modern sense, they are still of a different register than dragons, faeries, and enchantresses; as such, their conflict recalls the local feuds and personal conflicts that really did occupy the lords and justices of Elizabeth’s realm, particularly in its frontiers. It is
through this verisimilitude, ironically enough, that Sidney defuses much of the queen’s symbolic majesty: even within the framework of monarchical deference, *The Lady of May* imagines (like the Sybil at Kenilworth) a space that is largely immune to the coercion of Elizabeth’s social and symbolic authority, by creating a humble landscape that makes no attempt to soar to the aerial register of the (soon-to-be) Faerie Queen. To begin his pageant, Sidney announces Elizabeth’s alienation from the playworld created in her honor, by staging a challenge to which she is (in his mind) fundamentally unsuited to respond: the symbolic body politic of Albion’s warrior queen might be fit to parlay with Hercules and sylvan gods, but what could the body natural of the 44-year-old Elizabeth do to quell an outbreak of rustic gang warfare?

And the conflict is sudden: after the country lady departs, and before Elizabeth can proceed further, “there was heard in the woods a confused noise, and forthwith there came out six shepherds, with as many fosters, haling and pulling to whether side they should draw the Lady of May, who seemed inclined neither to the one nor other side” (22.15–18). (Also amidst the fray is the comic schoolmaster Rombus, an ancestor of Shakespeare’s Holofernes, whose absurd commentary on the action is repaid in full with “many unlearned blows” [22.22].) The struggles are finally suspended at the sight of Elizabeth, and the young lady steps forward to unfold the opposition of Therion and Espilus. I now quote her appraisal in full:

> Espilus is the richer, but Therion the livelier. Therion doth me many pleasures, as stealing me venison out of these forests, and many other such like pretty and prettier service; but withal he grows to such rages, that sometimes he strikes me, sometimes he rails at me. This shepherd, Espilus, of a mild disposition, as his fortune hath not to do me great service, so hath he never done me any wrong; but feeding his sheep, sitting under some sweet bush, sometimes, they say, he records my name in doleful verses. (25.2–10)

Her dilemma, as posed to the queen, is “whether the many deserts and many faults of Therion, or the very small deserts and no faults of Espilus be to be preferred” (25.11–13).

Before adjudicating, Elizabeth is presented with several rounds of argument (by both the litigants and their seconds) on “whether the estate of shepherds or foresters were the more worshipful” (26.24–25). Espilus stresses both the abundance and ease of the shepherd’s life, marked as it is by the “pasture rich, the wool as soft as silk”; he begs the lady to “let not
wild woods so great a treasure have” (26.9; 25.34). Therion, on the other hand, stresses the wild autonomy of a life unfettered by such objects:

Two thousand deer in wildest woods I have,
Them can I take, but you I cannot hold:
He is not poor, who can his freedom save,
Bound but to you, no wealth but you I would. (26.13–16)

After these opening statements, “the shepherds and foresters grew to a great contention whether of their fellows had sung better”; the shepherd Dorcas and the forester Rixus continue the verbal skirmish, debating the relative merits of their trade for a period much longer than the primary rivals (26.23–34). As they see it, the distinctions between both suitor and vocation point to a fundamental divide in matters of temperament: Rixus is appalled that any would “liken Espilus, a shepherd, to Therion, of the noble vocation of huntsmen,” while Dorcas equally refuses to “liken Therion to my boy Espilus, since one is a thievish prowler, and the other is as quiet as a lamb that new came from sucking” (27.13–14, 18–20). But while Dorcas will further extol the easy life of the shepherd (whose contemplative eye is only “busied in considering the works of nature”), Rixus suggests that the virtues of pastoralism are already a natural component of the active life:

I was saying the shepherd’s life had some goodness in it, because it borrowed of the country quietness something like ours. But that is not all; for ours, besides that quiet part, doth both strengthen the body, and raise up the mind with this gallant sort of activity. (28.14; 29.14–17)

With this rhetorical maneuver, the debates are brought to a close, and Elizabeth is granted the floor.

With good reason, readers of the pageant have often puzzled over Sidney’s sympathies in the conflict, and virtually every possible permutation has been proposed. Some have argued that Sidney had no horse in this forensic race; Catherine Bates, for example, suggests that “the two suitors are in essence exactly the same,” and that the impossibility of choosing between them signifies the “ultimate arbitrariness” of Elizabeth’s power. Duncan-Jones, as we have seen, sees his allegiance as more pointed, claiming the pageant’s design makes it “both apt and predicable that the Queen should choose Espilus, the inoffensive shepherd, rather than Therion, the active forester.” But Sidney is most often thought
to side with the champion of the active life, an outlook that underwrites several of the most influential readings of the pageant: Stephen Orgel, for example, argues that the gruff Therion still displays a sensitivity to the “contemplative virtues,” obviating his more limited rival, while Montrose similarly finds that “Sidney harmonizes action and contemplation in the forester’s life,” by moving “the audience from a situation of indecision between two antithetical extremes to a realignment that shows one term to incorporate, revise, and transcend the other.” With Therion thus associated with the interests of Sidney, Leicester, and the more actively inclined Protestant party, he becomes, in many such readings, an advocate for the author’s position on any number of topical issues, such as intervention in the Netherlands, the royal favor owed to Leicester, or Sidney’s desire to take a more rigorous role in English politics.

As should be quite clear, I too associate Sidney and Leicester with the virile, aggressive, and autonomous energy of the wild forester Therion, for the reasons that have been enumerated in this chapter. But the import of this association may have a different valence than has been usually understood, and it is one that is best exemplified by how Elizabeth elected to resolve the conflict. After the conclusion of the debate, the lady begs Elizabeth to make her selection, with a final proviso that “in judging me, you judge more than me in it” (30.12). The queen’s decision, however, is recorded by Sidney in a maddeningly truncated response: “This being said, it pleased her Majesty to judge that Espilus did the better deserve her; but what words, what reasons she used for it, this paper, which carrieth so base names, is not worthy to contain” (30.13–15). This outcome, unsurprisingly, has elicited even more critical puzzlement: if Sidney built the superior case for Therion, what do we make of his defeat? Some, like Orgel, have viewed the outcome as a disastrous mistake—the queen, perhaps not paying full attention to the pageant’s subtleties, simply assumed that “shepherds are the heroes of pastoral”—while others, like Montrose, suggest the queen’s decision was purposeful and deliberate, entailing a “conscious and pointed rejection of Sidney’s pastoral paradigm for the just and temperate relationship that should obtain between freeborn English gentlemen and their sovereign.”

But to return at last to Duncan-Jones’s central question: is it reasonable to think that Sidney would have expected his virgin queen to sentence the May Lady to an outlaw life, made only worse by regular beatings? Probably not. Yet there can be no denying, as we have seen in this chapter, that Leicester and Sidney consciously and deliberately associated themselves with the forces of wildness in the pageantry they sponsored. As Edward Berry has persuasively argued, the May Day context suggests (or
perhaps insists) that Therion is the pageant’s folk champion: it is he, not the gentle shepherd, who must preside over the day’s celebration of virility and misrule. For the traditional May King is none other than Robin Hood: a man who, like Therion, famously boasts to “lyve by our kynges dere.” As de facto ruler of Wanstead’s symbolic frame, this Robin is an apt guise for he who rules its literal one: Robin Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Leicester’s association with the forester figure is made further explicit by the pageant’s epilogue, in which Leicester (“Master Robert of Wanstead”) is ironically imagined as a “huge catholicam,” praying to the Virgin Elizabeth on a pair of “Papistian beads” (31.23–24, 28, 31). This bizarre moment, like so many others in the pageant, is difficult to assess. It is perhaps most commonly read (though I’m not sure rightly) as “Dudley’s decisive abdication from the king-game”; it is also possible to assess the image wickedly, insofar as Leicester accepting Elizabeth’s rejection humbly is about as likely as him turning to the pope. But one thing is clear: it quite explicitly transforms the defeated Leicester into a hermit-figure, the malcontent of the wild. This precise image is deployed by Cooper, to culminate his ode on the forester’s retirement:

Now will I take to me my bedes
for and my santes booke.
And pray I wyl for them that may
for I may nowght but loke.
yet haue I bene a foster.

Leicester is a disappointed hermit, and disappointed hermits are retired foresters. Given the entire network of associations, it seems impossible not to read Therion as a proxy for Leicester.

We are left, then, with granting Duncan-Jones’s premise, but radically inverting the conclusion we draw from it. Therion is an unlikely winner in this contest, but this does not, in turn, mean that he lacks the author’s sympathies: rather, it reveals that Sidney was willing to cast his uncle in a losing role, and accordingly dictate the terms of the inevitable rejection. This would not, in fact, be unusual for Sidney: in both poetry and prose, Bates argues, “Sidney’s numerous avatars” find themselves “put into positions in which they repeatedly fail . . . to hit, hunt, or shoot properly.” But failure can be co-opted. As in the other pageants, The Lady of May insistently asserts the benefits of the forester’s life, which in its wildness valorizes notions of virility, aggression, self-sufficiency, and autonomy. In the foresters, Sidney presents an antisocial community of outlaw hunters, a site of fantasy identification that could not possibly be accommodated
within the Elizabethan symbolic order. As such, the (anti)sociality of
the “wild fool” inherently threatens the more pliant community of the
“sheepish dolt”—a community which is, as Dorcas himself reveals, sim-
ply a reconfiguration of the conventional courtly world:

How many courtiers, think you, I have heard under our field in
bushes make their woeful complaints, some of the greatness of
their mistress’ estate, which dazzled their eyes and yet burned their
hearts . . . making our vales witnesses of their doleful agonies! So
that with long lost labour, finding their thoughts bare no other wool
but despair, of young courtiers they grew old shepherds. (28.18–26)

Despite attempts to differentiate between the young courtier and the
despairing shepherd, they are still creatures of the same order. By embrac-
ing this form of retirement, the ex-courtier remains bound, sheep-like,
to the same symbolic system that he attempts to flee; pastoral retreat
is rendered harmless, a benign form of opposition that is anticipated,
accommodated, and underwritten by the larger terms of the bond of
courtship. As Rixus rebuts, to become truly unfettered from the courtly
world, one must go off the grid entirely, by embracing the virtue and
freedom of the wild:

O sweet contentation, to see the long life of the hurtless trees; to
see how in straight growing up, though never so high, they hinder
not their fellows; they only enviously trouble, which are crookedly
bent. What life is to be compared to ours, where the very grow-
ing things are ensamples of goodness? We have no hopes, but we
may quickly go about them, and going about them, we soon obtain
them; not like those that, having long followed one (in truth) most
excellent chase, do now at length perceive she could never be taken.
(29.18–25)

For Sidney and his party, this is a site of affective redemption, home to
an antisocial community that draws collective strength from its outcast
status. The very identity of this subculture is premised on rejection, which
is again reimagined as a badge of honor.

Derek Alwes, in his provocative reading, suggests that “failure was
inscribed” in The Lady of May—and to a point, I agree, in the sense that
Sidney could hardly expect Elizabeth to choose the suitor in which his own
identity was invested. Yet in the larger sense, I am arguing that it was
even more impossible for Sidney to lose: by choosing Therion, Elizabeth
publicly endorses Sidney, and co-signs his party’s temperament, and by choosing Espilus (as she did), she ascribes to them an outsider status that they have already prepared to embrace, and which they have primed as a site of psychic and social empowerment. The oppositional dynamics of wildness, quite ironically, make *The Lady of May* a very accommodating play: a fact confirmed by its baffling conclusion, a song in which the winner Espilus (possibly in duet with Therion) tells “two short tales” in praise of the wild agenda. They are both worth quoting in full:

Silvanus long in love, and long in vain,
At length obtained the point of his desire,
When being asked, now that he did obtain
His wished weal, what more he could require:
“Nothing,” said he “for most I joy in this,
That goddess mine, my blessed being sees.”

When wanton Pan, deceived with lion’s skin,
Came to the bed, where wound for kiss he got,
To woe and shame the wretch did enter in,
Till this he took, for comfort of his lot:
“Poor Pan,” he said, “although thou beaten be,
It is no shame, since Hercules was he.”

Officially, Espilus’s song is said to be “tending to the greatness of his own joy, and yet to the comfort of the other side,” but this can hardly be taken at face value: the first ditty tells of the forest god’s erotic triumph, and the second of the shepherd god being assaulted by the wild man’s legendary form. Clearly the song is meant to champion the spirit of Therion, in a way too forceful to be conciliatory—but this does not necessarily mean, as is usually claimed, that Sidney expected his forester to be crowned victor. As we have seen, there is another way that Sidney might have controlled the fortunes of his litigants. This ode to wildness was likely sung, despite Therion’s defeat: anticipated by the pageant’s architect, Sylvanus and Hercules are finally vindicated, even in the face of public rejection.

In the *Arcadia*, it has long been argued, Sidney displays little overt sympathy to the “Cittezens of the woodes,” that dangerous rabble of common folk who upend the social order with open rebellion. But as a means of aristocratic identity management, I hope to have shown, the outlaw, outsider fantasy was nonetheless an invaluable affective resource for Leicester, Sidney, and their adherents—men ostensibly rejected by the queen’s maddening refusal to place their will in front of her own.
In from the Wild

If The Lady of May provided an affective boost for the Leicester/Sidney party, it would have been a much-needed one: the early months of 1578 did not bode well for those of their persuasion, and things would continue to degrade as the year unfolded. Interventionist fantasies of military glory remained spoiled by Elizabeth’s pledge to Casimir; to make matters worse, the queen had recently reopened marriage negotiations with Francis, Duke of Anjou and Alençon, brother to the French king—a suitor who provoked widespread disdain in both court and country, but perhaps most of all to men like Leicester and Sidney. The rejection I have discussed throughout this chapter—which, refined through a community of opposition, might be called upon as a source of political strength—was hardening into despair, and resistance to the queen’s will seemed increasingly futile. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that during the queen’s summer progress in 1578, the pageantry she witnessed (with which Leicester seems to have had at least some connection), took on a rather different tone. In these performances, Queen Elizabeth is praised in strikingly new terms:

Who euer found on Earth a constant friend,
    That may compare wyth this my Virgin Queene?
Who euer found a body and a mynde
    So free from staine, so perfect to be seene,
Oh Heauenly hewe, that aptest is to soile,
And yet doste liue from blot of any foyle.\textsuperscript{154}

Just a few years earlier the nymph Zabetha was indicted for this very disposition, and the queen herself was begged to counteract the ruin it had brought to Leicester’s world. But here, in a stunning reversal, Elizabeth’s state of unmatched matrimony is reimagined as a reflection of her unmatched virtue.

This shift in emphasis would have drastic implications for the future of Elizabethan representation: “The Norwich entertainments of August 1578,” Susan Doran argues, “were the first recorded public occasion where the appearance of the cult of the Virgin Queen can be seen.”\textsuperscript{155} This cult, it seems, emerged from a desperate attempt to thwart the undesirable match with Alençon—an attempt that was ultimately vindicated, insofar as Elizabeth was forced to concede, in 1579, that the would-be nuptials evoked too much ill will to proceed. (Talks, however, would linger for years to come.) But before long, the image of Gloriana would be ruthlessly seized upon by Elizabeth herself—who, in an ironically familiar
maneuver, refined this site of opposition into a reservoir of enormous power, from which she fueled the machines of orthodoxy that would dominate her reign’s second half. This system of representation, Montrose observes, “may have had its origins in symbolic resistance to the royal will”—but in its “exorbitant final phase, this resonant nexus of images was instrumental to the interests of the monarch and her increasingly authoritarian and isolated regime.”

To be sure, this regime did not eradicate the discourse of wilderness from Elizabethan literature; indeed, George Peele’s *Araygnment of Paris* (c. 1581; pub. 1584), the first major pastoral entertainment of the 1580s, stages the woodland gods Faunus, a “hunter [with] a faune,” and Siluanus, a “woodman with an oken bowe laden with acornes.” But in terms of oppositional spirit, Peele’s offering bears little resemblance to the pageants sponsored by Sidney and Leicester in the 1570s. In this performance, as Montrose describes, Elizabeth’s mastery of the fictive scene is undisputed:

Entertainments such as those sponsored by the Earl of Leicester at Kenilworth and Wanstead in the 1570’s ostensibly offered a choice to the Queen but it was one in which the options were skewed against female independence or dominion. . . . *The Araygnement of Paris* is typical of royal entertainments in its hyperbolic treatment of the royal spectator and her fictional personae. But it differs from many of the entertainments of the previous two decades in that it fully acknowledges and celebrates the Queen’s own choice, her complex transcendence of the simplistic oppositions contrived by her courtiers.

In light of such thematic developments, Montrose is surely correct in suggesting that pastoralism settled into “an authorized mode of discontent” in the Elizabethan court, and thus not “a critique made in terms of a consciously articulated oppositional culture.” But the earlier discourse of wildness, I have suggested in this chapter, *did* enable such an oppositional (counter)culture, at a time when many Elizabethan courtiers were increasingly alienated by their queen’s policy—and at a time, in the 1570s, when there was still a place for such pricklier disaffection.

In the early cantos of *The Faerie Queene*’s fourth book, a grand tournament is organized by the noble Satyrane—the half-satyrs hero who tamed his innate savagery to join the fraternity of virtuous knights. Throughout the tourney, Satyrane fares exceptionally well, until the arrival of an unknown figure:
Till that there entred on the other side,
A straunger knight, from whence no man could reed,
In quyent disguise, full hard to be descride.
For all his armour was like saluage weed,
With woody mosse bedight, and all his steed
With oaken leaues attrapt, that seemed fit
For saluage wight, and thereto well agreed
His word, which on his ragged shield was writ,
Saluagesse sans finesse, shewing secret wit.\textsuperscript{160}

This savage man unleashes a frenzied attack on the other competitors, single-handedly routing the field before the awed spectators. Satyrane, who had forsaken the woods for the civil world, is defeated by a foe whose engagement with the wild is absolute.

Who is this brutal knight, who dispatched his adversaries so completely? The narrator delivers us from uncertainty:

Much wondred all men, what, or whence he came,
That did amongst the troupes so tyrannize;
And each of other gan inquire his name.
But when they could not learne it by no wize,
Most answerable to his wyld disguize
It seemed, him to terme the saluage knight.
But certes his right name was otherwize,
Though knowne to few, that \textit{Arthegall} he hight,
The doughtiest knight that liv’d that day, and most of might.\textsuperscript{161}

Long before he was half-sad, the knight of justice understood the attraction of savagery. Like Leicester and Sidney, he was charged with protecting the realm of the Faerie Queene—and like Leicester and Sidney, he understood that sometimes it required stepping outside of it entirely.