Emotion in the Tudor Court
Irish, Bradley J.

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Chapter 4

The Dreading, Dreadful Earl of Essex

“Love is a thing full of anxious fear.”¹ So says Ovid’s grief-struck Penelope, in a phrase often poached by Renaissance humanists, as she pleads for news of her husband’s long wandering fleet.² In the middle of July 1597, the 63-year-old Queen Elizabeth I was similarly beset with anxious fear, and similarly watched the sea for sign of her beloved. Only days before, the most worthy men of her realm had set a triumphant course for Spain, intent on relieving the arch-tyrant Philip II of both his navy and his colonial plunder; the voyage was commanded by royal favorite Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, the man who had assumed the place in Elizabeth’s heart once held by his stepfather, the great Earl of Leicester.³ But fate was cruel to the English fleet. Shortly after its departure, both land and sea had quaked with “an extreame storme which lasted afore and after six dayes”: the “leke wether at this tyme of the yere,” exclaimed Admiral Thomas Howard, vice-admiral of the enterprise, “was never cene by man.”⁴

The queen’s love for her peers (and the soldiers they commanded) was not conjugal, and her suffering paled beside Penelope’s years of grief—but this mattered little at the time, as Elizabeth anxiously awaited word of the “storme beaten fleet.”⁵ When it finally came, the news was better than expected: though bruised and battered, and thwarted in their aims, her ships had reached safe harbor. The queen was especially relieved to learn of Essex, whose vessel had staggered to port “in great extremetye & imminent perrill of sinkinge in the sea”; upon hearing of his return, the earl was later told, “the wattr came plentyful out of her eyes.”⁶ For Essex, however, there was little time to celebrate. He still had a war to wage, and a fleet to reassemble:

Since my last I am remoued from Fawmouth to Plimmauth, a most toylesumm iorney, butt such as I cold nott forbear, because I must seeke to gather my scattered flock. I haue found Sir Walter Rawleigh,
Sir Francis Vere, Sir George Carew, Sir William Haruy, and Captain
Throgmorton, with 4 of the queens greatt shippes heere.7

“I mett with Sir William Brooke and Sir Ferdinando Gorge,” Essex con-
tinues, “in the Drednought,” as plans were hatched to set sail again.

“The rise of English naval mastery,” writes Geoffrey Parker, “may be said
to have started with the launch of the *Dreadnought*, the first ‘all big-
gun battleship,’ in 1573.”8 A vessel of very “neere twenty saile” and over
thirty guns, the *Dreadnought* was among the first experimental designs
of master shipwright Matthew Baker, the man whose technical genius
would revolutionize the warships of the Elizabethan navy.9 As “probably
the most gifted English shipwright of his age,” Baker initiated a paradigm
shift in nautical design; in his hands, the discipline of shipmaking (revital-
ized by an innovative use of blueprints and formulaic procedures) became
a field of enormous imaginative dexterity, freeing the architect from the
laborious task of managing adjustments at the site of construction.10
Under his direction, English warships were equipped with an extended
gundeck and sleeker design (the “race-built” style), an optimization with
results that seemed fantastical: Elizabeth’s navy could now carry heavier,
more devastating artillery, and do so with greater precision and finesse.
The *Dreadnought’s* relative ordnance capacity was without equal, and
before long new ships were commissioned and old ships were retrofitted
according to her model. It was with this technical mastery, fifteen years
later, that the English captains “completely thwarted Philip II’s design to
invade and conquer the realm, and drove the Armada into ignominious
flight back to Spain.”11 It is with good reason, then, that Parker speaks of
the rise of English naval supremacy as “the *Dreadnought* Revolution of
Tudor England.”

But in the bone-shaking storm of July 1597, the *Dreadnought* may
have had some trouble living up to its name—at least, that is, if we are
to go by the accounts of her unlucky sailors. Sir William Brooke, the
*Dreadnought’s* commander in the action, sent rueful report of the “dis-
tres and harmes receaued by this late tempest”; “euery one,” he admitted,
“complain of to be in his ship.”12 Others in the fleet were more forthcom-
ing about the dire experience of braving the storm. As Sir Walter Raleigh
describes it, the conditions on his *Warspite* were dreadful indeed:

In my shipp it hath shaken all her beams, knees & stanches well in
a sunder, in so mich as on Saterday night last wee made accompt
to have yeelded our seules vp to god, for wee had no way to worke
ether by triinge, hollinge, or drivinge that promised better hope, our men beinge wasted with labor & watchynge & our shipp so open every wher, all her bulk head rent & her verye cookrome of brike shaken down in to powder.13

In one of his most powerful early poems, the young John Donne similarly recalls the horrific scene:

Lightning was all our light, and it rain’d more
Then if the Sunne had drunke the sea before;
Some coffin’d in their cabbins lye, ‘equally
Griev’d that they are not dead, and yet must dye.
And as sin-burd’ned soules from graves will creepe,
At the last day, some forth their cabbins peepe.

“Compar’d to these stormes,” Donne reveals, death seemed “but a qualme,” and the desperate crew could not manage “to feare away feare” in the face of oblivion.14

But for a man like Essex, whose sense of self was built on fantasies of martial glory, it was not even this threat of destruction that summoned feelings of dread: on the contrary, it was the intolerable thought that he would be barred from fulfilling the promise of his generalship, and that King Philip would escape a crippling defeat. When the fate of Essex was still unknown, Raleigh worried that “ether my Lord Generall hymme sealf will wrestell with the seas to his perrill, or constrayned to cum bake, be fovnd vtterly hartbroken”—despite the fact that, as all would readily admit, “it be not in the powre of man to fight agaynst ellements.”15

The earl’s return confirmed the latter suspicion, as Raleigh would shortly inform the council:

Sir I beseich yow to worke from her Maiestye summe cumfort to my Lord generall, who I know is dismayd by thes mischaunces, even to death, although ther could not be more dvn by any man vppon the yearth, God havinge turned the heavens with that fury against vs, a matter beyovnd the power or valure or witt of man to resiste.16

Essex was devastated by the initial setback of his command. He would quickly rally, and put to sea again, but the expedition that unfolded proved even more disastrous. This campaign, usually known today as the “islands voyage,” was the final major military action of Elizabeth’s
reign. Less than four years later, Essex would lose his head at the queen’s command.

To conclude *Emotion in the Tudor Court*, I attempt to reconstruct the emotional characteristics of the late Elizabethan courtly sphere; my focus is the Earl of Essex and his followers, who in early 1601 took to the streets of London in an infamous armed uprising. What affective state, I ask, drove Essex and his men to such a desperate action, and how did it emerge from the increasingly ruthless courtly experience of the decade that preceded it? We have seen how, in the middle years of Elizabeth’s reign, a series of shared political rejections led to the creation of certain emotional communities at court; in the 1590s, as Elizabeth’s death loomed and England’s future hung uncertainly, the value of such alliances would only intensify, transforming court into a factional battlefield. This deep uncertainty about the future set Elizabeth’s courtiers against each other, in a struggle to assert their own will in the face of oblivion.

This cultural moment, I suggest in what follows, may be best understood through the affective category of *dread*: an emotional current central to the late Elizabethan court, and central to the late Elizabethan experience more generally. Emerging from the context of religious devotion, dread may be seen as a hierarchical affect, a terror or anxiety that acknowledges the other’s mastery: dread is the fearful reverence that the creation owes its creator, or that the subject owes their sovereign, or that the sailor owes the tempest, precisely because of the categorical distinction between the two. To *dread* is to fear that which is earthshaking, that which is rupturing, that which is mind-bending; it is fear, no doubt, but it is a fear that acknowledges domination, or the potentiality of being dominated.

A series of dreadful conditions marked England in the 1590s, including the aging queen’s unsettled succession, persistent threats of foreign invasion, and widespread social and cultural unrest. In the courtly sphere, this general affective atmosphere led to the intensification of rivalrous, violent conflicts; the factionalism that plagued the late Elizabethan court thus gave rise to a particular form of interpersonal dread, as men like Essex and his enemies each struggled to assert their own mastery and subjugate their opponents. With the court’s social hierarchy in flux, the competition was particularly grinding: courtiers and their adversaries found themselves simultaneously feared and fearing, each trying to dominate the other and secure the favor of their queen. It is this affective contest that defined the courtly experience of the 1590s, and that ultimately drove the Earl of Essex to his ruin.
My treatment of dread in this chapter, and my understanding of its affective dynamics, is broadly inspired by the modern psychological concept of terror management theory—an approach, appropriately enough for a discussion of the Elizabethan court, that situates the emotion within the context of self-esteem, culture-building, and interpersonal conflict. Emerging from the work of the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, terror management theory (TMT) is how a trio of psychologists in the 1980s attempted to account for a pair of bedrock questions about human behavior: “Why are people so intensely concerned with their self-esteem?” and “Why do people cling so tenaciously to their own cultural beliefs and have such a difficult time coexisting with others different than themselves?” The answer to both, they discovered, owes to an existential truth.

At the core of terror management theory is humanity’s awareness of its own mortality—a condition that, by virtue of our “relative helplessness and vulnerability to ultimate annihilation,” presents the species with the “constant danger of being incapacitated by overwhelming terror.” In response, the theory suggests, we have solved this existential quandary by developing cultural worldviews: humanly constructed beliefs about reality shared by individuals in a group that serves to reduce the potentially overwhelming terror resulting from the awareness of death. Culture reduces anxiety by providing its constituents with a sense that they are valuable members of a meaningful universe. Meaning is derived from cultural worldviews that offer an account of the origin of the universe, prescriptions of appropriate conduct, and guarantees of safety and security to those who adhere to such instructions—in this life and beyond, in the form of symbolic and/or literal immortality.

TMT thus maintains that anxiety-buffering is contingent upon both “faith in a particular cultural drama that portrays human life as meaningful, important, and enduring” and the “belief that one plays a significant part in that drama”—and that, by “meeting or exceeding individually internalized standards of value, norms, and social roles derived from the culture,” people can accordingly “maintain psychological equanimity despite their knowledge of their own mortality.” At the level of personal psychology, such worldviews mitigate the terror of death “primarily through the cultural mechanism of self-esteem,” the system through which individuals understand themselves as a “valuable contributor to a meaningful universe.” It is thus through cultural participation—such as the Elizabethan
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aristocrat’s membership in the social organization of the court, or his or her membership in the broader community of Christian faith—that “people are able to construe the self as a valuable contributor to a meaningful existence,” granting them a crucial identity beyond that of a “mere material animal fated only to obliteration upon death.”

Because of culture’s guiding role in allaying such dread, the psychodynamics of terror management are socially embedded, insofar as “people’s social relationships with others play an important role in maintaining a sense of existential security.” From its origins, TMT “has emphasized the importance of other people to validate the individual’s worldview and self-worth,” arguing that “the human needs for togetherness, intimacy, attachment, and affiliation are subordinate components of the fundamental need for self-preservation.” Accordingly, the theory has a particular interest in intergroup dynamics, as social conflict arises naturally when anxiety-buffering worldviews clash in opposition. Because “so many of the meaning- and value-conferring aspects of the worldview are ultimately fictional,” encounters with “other people with different beliefs is fundamentally threatening”—and research has thus emphasized the “critical function of the ingroup for terror management,” as social units participate in “worldview defense” to ward off the existential threats posed by rivals. Indeed, empirical studies suggest that reminding individuals of death’s inevitability “leads to harsh punishment of those who violate values of [their] worldview . . . and more positive reactions to others who uphold values of the worldview or otherwise help validate the worldview”; in laboratory settings, for example, mortality cues “lead to increased tolerance for racism” and “to aggression directed toward people who disparage one’s worldview.” What’s more, TMT has much to say about the charismatic leaders (like Essex) who lead these conflicting social groups: studies indicate that “affection for charismatic leadership increases when terror management needs are activated,” and terror management processes are thought to engender “support for charismatic leaders who share one’s cherished beliefs and aggression against those who hold rival beliefs.” In sum, TMT reveals how a fundamental human dread guides complex behavior in the social world, as clusters of like-minded actors struggle to assert their respective worldviews in the attempt to ward off oblivion.

These, the central tenets of terror management theory, are supported by ample empirical evidence: in the last three decades: “hundreds of published studies . . . have demonstrated that mortality salience leads people to favor and defend their cultural worldview and to demonstrate that they possess socially valued attributes and skills.” There is little doubt,
I think, that the Elizabethan courtier invested heavily in the defense of cultural worldviews and the demonstration of social dexterity—and TMT thus offers a valuable groundwork from which to build an affective understanding of court factionalism in the dreadful 1590s, a time when threats of existential annihilation (of the monarch, of the nation, of the cosmos) seized much of public discourse, and a time when social conflict dominated the courtly sphere. In this chapter, I don’t apply the prescriptions of TMT strictly—but instead, to demonstrate another way of engaging a body of extra-literary work on emotion, I use its governing insights on social conflict and affective worldview-building to launch my own treatment of courtly interaction within the emotional framework of dread. Recently, scholars have taken some initial steps in exploring the affective dimension of the Essex saga; Will Tosh, for example, observes the “highly-personalised, emotionally heightened service practised by certain members of the Essex circle,” while Alexandra Gajda notes the “strikingly emotive language” of Essex’s patronage correspondence. To help further reconstruct the affective experience that shaped both Essex’s career and the final years of the Tudor dynasty, I conclude my study of emotion in the Tudor court by considering how dreadful a place it must have been.

The Last Favorite

The man who became Queen Elizabeth’s final favorite was the eldest son of Walter Devereux, first Earl of Essex (1539–1576), a royal servant whose short life (as both private investor and government agent) was consumed with the task of colonizing the intractable Irish frontier. At his father’s death in 1576, the young Robert Devereux inherited his earldom at the age of ten; his mother Lettice secretly married the Earl of Leicester in 1578, and after several years of travel and study Essex joined his stepfather at court in 1585. Later that year Essex followed Leicester to the Low Countries, as part of the English military effort to support continental Protestantism. Essex was granted the prestigious command of the cavalry, and he saw action at both Doesburg and Zutphen; throughout the campaign, he displayed the rash courage that would become his martial trademark. (At Zutphen, Stow records, “the earle of Essex charged with his cornet . . . threw his launce in his rest, and overthrew the first man, and with his curtelax so behaued himselfe that it was wonder.”) He returned to England a rising star, backed by Leicester’s unequaled influence; in 1587 he was granted his stepfather’s former post as master of the horse, and in the following year entered the Order of the Garter.
In 1588 Leicester’s unexpected death left a vacuum at court. Though Essex would eventually inherit his stepfather’s role as chief favorite, his triumph at court was not immediate, and in the final years of the decade he jockeyed for position with men like Raleigh. Around 1590 Essex married Frances Walsingham, daughter of Secretary of State Francis Walsingham and widow of Sir Philip Sidney—but did so “without acquainting the Queen therewith, who was therefore offended at it.”

The queen’s anger was only temporary, however, and in 1591 Essex was granted formal command of his first military campaign, an expedition designed to aid the French king Henri IV against encroaching Catholic forces; the action was a failure, however, and the demoralized Essex returned to court in January 1592, determined to become more involved in directing matters of state. It was at this time that he began to assemble a formidable circle of secretaries and agents, the seeds of what would become the Essex faction. Essex focused on gathering intelligence and bolstering influence on the Continent, secure in his commitment to direct military engagement with Catholic Spain.

In 1596 Essex took co-command of the English assault on the Spanish port of Cadiz, the crowning achievement of his military career. After destroying the naval defenses, Essex led a land assault on the city; with his characteristic blend of rashness and bravery, he orchestrated the daring capture of Cadiz, and soon returned home to popular acclaim. Elizabeth, however, was far less pleased with the affair, and refused to press her military advantage. Furthermore, while Essex was at war, his enemy Robert Cecil had been appointed secretary of state, and the earl now saw his influence waning with the queen; Essex, it was said, suffered a “discontent hee could not conceale, being thereupon exceedinglie dejected in countenance and bitterly passionat in speech.”

To make matters worse, his next military command (the “islands voyage,” described earlier) was an unmitigated failure. When plans to assault the Spanish port of Ferrol were spoiled, Essex diverted the remaining fleet to the Azores, with the hope of intercepting a returning transport of Spanish treasure. This gamble failed by an agonizingly narrow margin, and Essex returned to England with little to show but a damaged reputation.

Though Essex still enjoyed both favor and influence with the queen, the failed excursion of 1597 marked a turning point in his career, which would steadily decline until its end. In late 1598 he received a final chance to achieve the military glory he had so long sought: he was named lord lieutenant of the English expedition to Ireland, an army charged with suppressing the rebel chieftain Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone. In the spring of the following year, he landed in Dublin, prepared to settle matters
with a quick, decisive victory—but the grim Irish terrain made a direct assault impossible, and he spent the next several months meandering through Ireland in a series of costly, minor excursions. Distanced from court, Essex became increasingly concerned about the situation at home, convinced that Cecil and his allies were actively working against his interests. In August 1599 he was tempted to lead his army back into England to confront his enemies directly, an act of treason that was prevented by his advisors. The desperate Essex met privately with Tyrone in September, where he engineered a makeshift, temporary truce with the rebel. Dismissing explicit orders to the contrary, he soon left for London, where he infamously “staied not till he came to the Queens Bed Chamber, where he found the Queen newly up, the Hare about her Face.”

In light of his erratic behavior and unauthorized return, Essex was soon taken into custody; for the next several months, he was confined to York House as the Privy Council debated his conduct in Ireland. His political enemies, such as Cecil, Raleigh, and Attorney General Edward Coke, worked tirelessly to prepare a case against him, which would eventually come to allege that Essex was secretly in league with Tyrone and had long desired to usurp the throne. The earl, however, maintained his popularity, and retained no small hold over Elizabeth; the queen eventually loosened the terms of his imprisonment, and spared him the ignominy of a public trial. On June 5, 1600, a special inquiry was empaneled at York House, where his performance in Ireland was denounced. Though he defended himself admirably, Essex was nonetheless stripped of all royal appointments and remained a prisoner of the queen.

Though eventually released from custody, Essex was forever banished from court, with little to show for his years of service but a mound of debt. (For their part, his enemies would continue to amass evidence in the hope of future prosecution.) In October Elizabeth revoked the earl’s customary lease on sweetwine, the foundation of his income, finally dashing any hopes for recovery. As we will see, Essex and his followers grew ever more disaffected; the earl was desperate to secure both himself and his country from the enemies who, he was certain, were pushing Elizabeth and her succession closer to Spain. With the new year, Essex and his advisors fell to increasingly drastic measures: only direct action, they concluded, could free Elizabeth from the likes of Cecil and Raleigh. In the coming weeks, a plan evolved: Essex and a group of sympathetic nobles would make their way into the queen’s presence, where they would (with appropriate reverence) expose her ministers for their corruption.

On Sunday, February 8, 1601, Essex and his followers were finally pushed to action, when there arrived at Essex House a delegation of
councilors with a “message from her Maiestie that Robert Earle of Essex should speedily dissolue his company, and he himselfe should presently Come to the Cort, with promise that his greefs should gratiously be hard.”34 (Essex had been called to appear before the council the night before, inciting panic in his followers.) Still fearing a trap, and heeding rumors that Raleigh and Lord Cobham sought his life, Essex refused the order, as he and his confidants scrambled to put their premature plans into action; the messengers were imprisoned in Essex House, and the earl and his roughly 300 followers set off, armed but not armored. Banking on his popularity, Essex decided first to appeal to London before engaging the queen herself: his men marched through the streets, proclaiming that they came only in self-defense, intending to forestall a plot against the earl. The action, however, was a disaster. The townspeople didn’t rise to his aid, and the Privy Council had preempted the mob’s arrival, alerting several of London’s key officials. The city gates were shut, streets were blocked, and a counterforce was deployed; Essex and his ever-shrinking company narrowly escaped by boat to Essex House, where they would surrender after a brief siege.

The fallout of the uprising was immediate. In the Star Chamber, Essex and his followers were denounced by members of the Privy Council; in London they were (by official instruction) denounced from the pulpit. On February 19 Essex and his coconspirator Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, were found guilty of treason, for open rebellion and seeking the lives of the council members. Though Southampton was spared, Essex was executed at the Tower six days later.

The Nasty Nineties

The spectacular fall of the Earl of Essex, a self-destruction underwritten by the combined operation of fear and desperation, is something of an index to the social and political atmosphere that settled over England in the final years of Elizabeth’s reign. Quite apart from the courtly intrigue at the center of power, it was a precarious time for England more generally: as all Elizabethans were aware, the queen was creeping towards the grave, the realm lacked an heir, and unrest at both home and abroad threatened the very existence of their nation. In both court and country, dread was perhaps the defining affective mode of the 1590s—an era Patrick Collinson famously dubbed the “nasty nineties”—and it was in these dreadful times that Essex emerged as England’s most formidable courtier.35
The affective significance of dread begins with the word itself. Despite today’s more casual usage, “dread” in the early modern period was not simply a synonym of “fear,” a fact indicated by the theological context from which it emerged. The notion seems to have first appeared in the twelfth century, here (in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s oldest recorded example) in the verbal form:

De eorðliche lauerd ne mei don na mare bote pinen Þe wrecche licome to deaðe. Ah godalmihitn Þe mei fordon eiðer ȝe Þine wrecche licome and Þine saule. Swilcne lauerd we aȝen to dreden. Þet is godalmihitin.

[The earthly lord may do no more than put the wretched body to death, but God Almighty may destroy both thy wretched body and thy soul. Such a lord we ought to dread, that is God Almighty.] The thematic terms of this construction carry wholesale into early modern usage, as when the “troubled soule” of a late Elizabethan pamphlet describes “dreading [God’s] displeasure, whose wrath maketh the deuells to quake.” Though occasioned by a fantasy of divine annihilation, the sentiments here are equally predicated on the magnificent power which makes that wrath possible: hence the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s primary definition “to fear greatly, be in mortal fear of; to regard with awe or reverence, venerate.” The affective connection between fear and veneration suggests the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, connotations that “dread” variants would begin to accrue in the intervening centuries. In the secular correlate, this basic polarity appears in perhaps the term’s most familiar early modern usage: the title of “dread sovereign.” The idea of dread was thus multivalenced, a union of anxiety and awe that became implicated in some of the era’s primary cultural struggles.

And, as has been well-documented, in the 1590s England’s cosmic and social order was dreadfully threatened. Facing an unsettled succession and a moribund queen—and keenly aware of the civil wars that had long ravaged France—Elizabetians were gripped by fear of their immediate political future; “seeing God hath ordayne you our nursing mother,” cried one pamphleteer to his sovereign, “wee your children cry vpon you, & most earnestlie beseech you, that by neglecting this motion, you vnnaturallie leave vs not vnto the evident spoile of the mercilesse bloodie sword.” Indeed, that sword continued to threaten: while England was miraculously delivered from the would-be Spanish invaders of 1588, King Philip reassembled his fleets in the subsequent years, and
throughout the 1590s English anxieties were persistently spurred by rumors of a new Spanish assault. Though Philip’s naval attempts of 1596 and 1597 came to naught, those on England’s coast could again do little but “wayte the cominge of the kinges armada.” The natural order proved equally inhospitable: from 1593 to 1597 an “unprecedented series of harvest failures” led to the nation’s most devastating famine of the sixteenth century. Missives from the period heartbreakingly chronicle this “harde time of deareth,” which led some to speculate that “the course of nature is very much inuerted; our yeares are turned vp-side downe; our sommers are no sommers, our haruests are no haruests; our seed-times are no seed-times.” And famine wasn’t the only such natural upheaval: English subjects had to contend, in the early years of the decade, with the fact that their nation was “most greviously afflicted with the Pestilence.” Frantic letters of the period warned that “the plage is of late in london greatly increased,” while the queen released a series of proclamations “for the preseruation of her good Subiectes from the plague.” Collectively, these dreadful events of the 1590s were thought by many to foretell the pending annihilation of the world: a collection of texts from the period reflects the growing conviction that “the afflictions and miseries of the world by earthquakes, warres, pestilence, famine and such like” were an index of Christ’s imminent arrival.

For such Elizabethans, “our Saviour’s coming” promised a glorious resolution to the worldly suffering of the 1590s—and indeed, as we shall see, in the final phase of his life the ruined Essex came to understand deeply that a reverent dread of his creator offered ultimate solace from the whips and scorns of a career at court. But though they were understood as finite, such dreadful times still had to be endured, and the stakes were amplified for those, like Essex, who played an immediate role in directing England’s political, social, and religious future. And in the courtly sphere, the era’s cosmic and cultural turmoil found a ready correlate: the rampant factionalism that came to plague politics in the declining years of Elizabeth’s life. For those in the trenches, the late Elizabethan court indeed seemed a war zone of social violence, and commentators routinely reveal how the envy, emulation, and backbiting that undid Artegall would often emerge along party lines. Sir Francis Bacon, nothing if not a veteran of these wars, observed how common it was to think that “the Principall Part of Policy” is “for a Great Person to governe his Proceedings, according to the Respect of Factions”—but when “Factions are carried too high, and too violently,” he warns, it is a “Signe of Weaknesse in Princes; And much to the Preiudice, both of their Authoritie and Businesse.” In the essay “Of Friendship and Factions,” the literary polymath (and
Sir William Cornwallis reminds the would-be courtier that “loue wil not, or cannot be vniversall,” and that the wise man “must not entertaine the humor of neutrallitie” in the conflicts of high politics. And Sir Robert Naunton, reflecting upon the career of Queen Elizabeth not long after her death, famously declared that “the principall note of her raign, will be, that she ruled much by faction and parties, which herself, both made, upheld, and weakened, as her own great judgement advised.” Though the last three decades have seen fierce debate about the nature of factions in Renaissance England—and though JanetDickinson has importantly challenged overly simplistic views of late Elizabethan factionalism—most historians of the period echo the assessment of Simon Adams: in the 1590s “the Court was nearly torn apart by a factional struggle of major proportions.”

In this struggle, the Essex circle was a quintessential faction, and its affective experience in the late Elizabethan courtly sphere was largely occupied with both suffering and inflicting dread. Despite Essex’s de facto status as primary favorite, he enjoyed little true dominance over the social domain, and in the 1590s he and his allies found themselves dodging as many attacks as they themselves administered. As such, the struggle for the late Elizabethan court was implicitly an affective struggle over the terms of dread: who is the object of terror, and who is the terrified object? Who demands social reverence, and who inspires social fear? Which party can master the emotional experience of the other?

The ambiguity of this social dread finds an analogy in the term itself: with a single word encompassing verbal, adjectival, and substantive forms (itself a relative anomaly in the English affective lexicon), “dread” also displays, in early modern usage, a notable ability to convey both subjective and objective meaning. That is to say, in each grammatical category, “dread” can equally attach to both the fearful subject and the feared object that evokes it. Though obscured in conventional phrases like “Dread God” or “Dread Sovereign,” there is nonetheless a latent way that dread can announce its capacity to be undone, by entailing its own opposition: in early modern usage, “dread” (like the verbs “let” or “seed”) has the capacity to evoke its own antonym, making it what is sometimes called an “autantonym” or “Janus word.” Encompassing its own binary, “dread” might lock both subject and object in a zero-sum game of affective negotiation, in which each term, equally dreadful, struggles to tip the scales from subjugation to mastery.

Before God and queen, such linguistic games were hardly helpful—but in a different context, one of lateral social contestation, the reciprocity of fear was an important affective circuit. In the 1590s, both the Essex
circle and its courtly enemies were infused with dread, though what that statement meant at any particular time is exceedingly difficult to sort out. In this social arena, factional politics ensured that oppositional parties found themselves both inspiring and succumbing to anxiety and terror. This affective warfare, waged under the dreadful skies of the 1590s more generally, ensured that the collective atmosphere of suspicion and treachery was mutually reinforcing, as combatants were locked in a persistent struggle to control the terms of who was dreading, and who was being dreaded. The Janus-faced linguistic potential of “dread,” I suggest, is analogous to the Janus-faced affective negotiations that were being contested in the social arena. I turn now to the specific courtly milieu in which dread reigned, by considering both what the Earl of Essex and his men dreaded, and what dread they inspired in their political adversaries.

To begin, then: why did Essex dread his enemies?

The Earl of Essex: Dreadful Subject

In 1593 the Essex partisan Anthony Standen, writing to Anthony Bacon, thought debilitating illness a worthy trade-off from life at court:

I do begin truly to bless and commend your infirmity, which if you might receive without pain or torment, I would think you in the superlative degree beholding to it, as a cause to retain you from a place, from whence all charity is exiled, and all envy and treachery doth prevail, and where a prince of the most rare virtues and divine parts is assieged with persons so infected with malice.

Court could be a miserable, corrupting, soul-sucking place, and it was especially so in the 1590s. But it was also a critical home for Essex, even though it would ultimately destroy him.

As factionalism soaked into the bedrock of the Elizabethan political scene, and relationships were polarized accordingly, the court became an increasingly oppositional, increasingly dangerous place for men like Essex, who found themselves ever more alienated from their enemies and enmeshed with their friends. It is no wonder, then, that in late 1597 a concerned partisan warned Essex of the forces working against him:

Pardon mee, that am and euer will be redie prest in all offices to thy seruice, thow art full of wisdom, bountie, and valor, and dost performe all thinges with much honor, and yet mee thinks thow art
least perfect in securely woorkeinge thy owne good, which in this age, and tym of vncertentie, is most needfull to bee cared for, but by the way let mee tell thee, thy owne patience, I say thy patience hath continually from the beeginninge giuen way to thy crosses, practised by a dubble faction verie stronge against thee.\textsuperscript{56}

We have seen in the previous chapter how shared feelings of persecution and alienation generate courtly solidarity, but the advent of factionalism altered this dynamic greatly. Sidney and Leicester faced a noncompliant monarch, and accordingly manifested a symbolic opposition to manage and reclaim feelings of frustration and impotence. But what was largely a symbolic conflict for the previous generation became unsettlingly real for Essex, who, in the final phase of his life, really did face a group of adversaries actively working to undo him.

Indeed, there was a steady stream of rumor and intelligence that enemies had “layd secret plotts, and damnable deuices” to ruin Essex and his allies.\textsuperscript{57} Some were probably true, some embellished, and some invented, but each contributed to the collective mood of suspicion, grievance, and moral righteousness that would increasingly settle over Essex House. In 1598, for example, Essex was informed that a network of Jesuit agents was secretly suggesting that “it were a verie merritorious acte to Stabb or kill the Earle of Essex if you can come att him”; a year later, he was told that his enemies plotted “to work some treson . . . agans your person,” and was warned to be vigilant against “any suche assasanes.”\textsuperscript{58} In the final months before the rising, Essex desperately reached out to James VI in Scotland in a last-ditch effort to secure support; enemies at court, Essex bewailed, orchestrated the “corrupting of my servants, stealing of my papers, suborning of false witnesses, procuring of many forged letters in my name, and other such like practises against me.”\textsuperscript{59} When Essex and his men finally took to the streets in 1601, they did so announcing that the “Earle of Essex should haue beene murdered the night before in his owne house by Sir Walter Rawleigh, the Lord Cobham, and others.”\textsuperscript{60}

What’s more, the fear and suspicion of external adversaries also worked to undo the faction from within, via the possibility that a Judas or Sinon might be lurking in its ranks. We get something of this in an exchange between Gilly Merrick and Henry Cuffe, two of the earl’s prominent associates:

Then soe I here some of our owne famely are very malitious againste vs both, butt esspetaly againste me. The coursses practysed are soe bayse thatt I would hatt my self yf ytt were true, butt I shale better
satisfie ytt whene I come then to trobele you with a tedyus letter. I am very sorry thatt some of them proffessinge Relygion can be soe malitious. Wee haue envy and malyce inoughe, besydes to haue ytt plottysde and practysed by thos thatt my lord vseth soe nere him.\textsuperscript{61}

Consistent with the general atmosphere of paranoia in which he was engulfed, Essex was aware that ostensible supporters might have an ulterior motive. “I haue bene many tymes and deeply wounded by practising libellers,” he complained during the time of his disgrace in 1600, “who since my committment have shadowed ther intended mischeefe to me under pretended greefe or passion for me”; in such an environment, the earl had to fear “the corrupcyon of some of hys servantes that had accesse to hys chamber, who myght take & wrytt owt hys loose papers.”\textsuperscript{62} Even close friends, Essex was warned, needed to be watched carefully: “take heede, and remember, that christ had but twelfe, and on proued a diuell.”\textsuperscript{63}

In the 1590s, then, life at court entailed very little security: enemies abounded, and even friends could not be trusted. But attendance on the queen was a necessary evil, and because of the importance of this physical presence, the correspondence of the period bubbles with distant courtiers anxiously trying to keep up on the happenings at the power-center. For those unlucky enough to get them, lengthy assignments on the political periphery were often attributed (though not always rightly) to either royal displeasure or the malice of some other courtly notable. But a military man like Essex found himself in a particular bind: he constantly agitated for a foreign deployment that would remove him from the very site of political power. When at sea or in the field, he was not at court, and could not control the machinations of his enemies. Even in his earliest years, Essex was aware that the management of such absence was a primary courtly strategy. In 1587, when Leicester’s conduct in the Netherlands was under suspicion, Essex sent word to the Continent that he would guard his stepfather’s interests:

[Queen Elizabeth] hath bene since longe with her counsaile, what is agreed on I know not, [but] I desired her, she wold know your enemies and not belieue any thinge they shuld say, yf they layd any matter to your charde, that she wold suspend her iudgemant till she did heare yourself speake. I will watch with the best diligence I can that your enemies may not take advauntage of yourr absence.\textsuperscript{64}

Only a few years later, when Essex himself had aims on Continental exploits, it was noted that “his frendes here hathe advised him to the
contrary, wishing him rather to seke a domesticall greatnesse." In retrospect, Essex apparently found this advice to be spot on, at least according to an account sent to Robert Cecil: upon his disappointing return from France in 1591, the earl was said to be "infinitely discontented," because "he suspecteth my Lord your father [Lord Treasurer Burghley] hath not so much favored him in his absence as he expected."66

Throughout his political career, Essex’s enemies would regularly capitalize on these periodic absences, and thus the thrill of martial deployment could not be detached from the anxiety that accompanied foreign action. Most notably, Essex was fighting at Cadiz when his primary rival Cecil was promoted to secretary of state, despite the fact that the "queene had given him a faithfull promise not to doe it, and had confirmed her promise by her letter sent to him to Plymmbough before his setting saile."67 In fact, Essex was advised to be wary of "plausible offers, which may be made unto you to prolong your absence," and was warned of a "plot laid to recoil his lordship, and to keep him aloof by some new employment, which it was presumed would be pleasing to him."68 Though the earl enjoyed both general popularity and the queen’s favor, this alone was not enough to ensure political safety; as Hammer explains, Essex (unlike Leicester) lacked allies "in key posts who could support his initiatives or defend his interests in his absence."69 But when the tables were turned, Essex found himself paralyzed by his sense of honor: after Robert Cecil left on a special diplomatic envoy in early 1598, the earl refused to take advantage of his rival’s departure, despite Francis Bacon’s suggestion that “Mr. Secretary’s absence” was a fine time to strike.70 It was thus a dreadful game that a military man like Essex had to play: were the potential rewards of martial glory worth the risk of leaving court?

In the daily struggles of the late Elizabethan courtier, there was much to be anxious about. As Essex was well aware (and was endlessly told), his enemies strove to usurp his social power, and some even strove to take his life; he burned with the desire to engage the enemies of England and the enemies of Christendom, but was plagued with worry about how he would be undone in absence. But dread was not only an affective state that characterized social interaction in this manner: importantly for literary studies, the anxiety and suspicion that marked the Essex circle’s experience in the courtly sphere also manifests in the texts that Essex and his allies produced and circulated in its name.

As Hammer has elucidated, Essex’s popular reputation as a dashing soldier-playboy obscures the depth of his intellectual curiosity, a dispositional feature that was further cultivated as a matter of prudent policy.71
Like that of Sidney, Essex’s approach to politics was thus integrated into a larger philosophical and intellectual outlook, which itself helped contribute to the affective mode of his circle. For Essex and his followers, this outlook was famously shaped by the sixteenth century’s emerging fondness for Tacitus, the Roman historian with a particular knack for treating political corruption and treachery—and for revealing how virtuous men might resist them. Initially explored on the Continent by thinkers like Machiavelli and Jean Bodin, and cultivated at Cambridge (where Essex and many members of his circle studied), the methods of Tacitus provided a novel way of viewing history for a group of men increasingly interested in mastering the brutal skills required for life at court. This “politic” history, inspired by Tacitus, looked to the past for practical wisdom on the arts of statesmanship, which might be put to mercenary use. In an attempt to examine the often inscrutable phenomena of contemporary politics, a new breed of historical thinkers “concentrated on political causation, searching into the psychology of ruler and ruled; and they analyzed the role of fortune in history, and the extent to which men could plan for the unpredictable.” As such, they increasingly tended to the “secondary causes” of history: those historical actors, like Essex, who shaped the world through the force of individual will, and from whose example political wisdom could be extracted.

Though this development, it now seems, was not quite the sharp transition in humanist sensibility described by a previous generation of scholars, there is little doubt that the increasing interest in Tacitus had important implications for early modern thinkers. With this Tacitean approach to history, the Essex circle would eventually find a political playbook well suited to their evolving temperament: as a historian of the tyrant, Tacitus provided ample ammunition for a vigorous critique of courtly corruption. In his 1601 essay “Of Histories,” Robert Johnson offers a penetrating description of the Tacitean historical subject:

Another kind [of history] there is like labyrinths, relating cunning and deceitfull friendshippes, how rage is suppressed with silence, treason disguised in innocence, how the wealthy haue beene proscripted for their riches, and the worthy vndermined for their vertue. These prouoke vs to eschew their viletie and lacke of vertue, and to be rather vices then greatly vertuous: and although they bee distasted by those who measure Historie by delight, yet they are of most vse in instructing the minde to the like accidents.

“In this ranke,” Johnson continues,
I preferre Tacitus as the best that any man can dwel vpon: Hee sheweth the miseries of a torne and declining state, where it was a capitall crime to bee vertuous, and nothing so vsafe as to be securely innocent, where great mens gestures were particularly interpreted, their actions aggrauated, and construed to proceed from an aspiring intent: and the prince too suspitiously iealous touching points of concurrancie, suppressed men of great deserete, as competitors with them in that chieffe grounde, the loue of the people.

A historian so sensitive to issues of aspiration, jealousy, and popularity proved notable in a social landscape increasingly torn by factionalism. But in addition to its ideological implications, there is another way that the turn to Tacitus appealed to the cutting-edge thinkers of the 1590s: Tacitus’s famed style of tough, restrained, and sententious prose was adopted by the politic historians in conscious opposition to the Ciceronian excesses of contemporary academic discourse, echoing Montaigne’s call to “fortifie and harden our hearing, against the tendernesse of the cerimonious sound of wordes.”

By replicating Tacitus’s stylistic virility, the scholars of the Essex circle asserted a localized, intellectual identity that mirrored the larger strategies by which Essex announced himself as England’s foremost martial presence. Not surprisingly, such verbal considerations fold back into larger issues of historiography: Tacitus offered the politic historians “a style admirably suited to men who aimed at psychological realism and the ‘poyse’ of political experience in their own work and who admired strong and self-reliant heroes like William I, and Henry IV, and Henry VII.”

This linkage between style and ideology would become valuable cover to an intellectual coterie increasingly interested in subversive political philosophy, and increasingly suspicious of prying eyes. For though the Tacitean aphorism lent itself to easy memorization, Tacitus also veiled his insights in famously difficult Latin. Such murkiness was co-opted as a political asset: with it, the politic historians could “conceal their true thoughts in riddling and ambiguous words, both to preserve themselves from immediate persecution and to enable them to await an outcome before committing themselves to a course of action.” In his comments on Tacitean style, Johnson underscores this captivating union of masculine bluntness and crafted obliqueness: Tacitus constructs his history, he observes, “with such an art, hiding art, as if hee were aliusd agents, by enterlacing the serios of the tale, with some iudiciall, but strangelie briefe sentences.”
The Essex circle’s fondness for Tacitus and Tacitean historiography seems to have contributed to an intellectual, political, and stylistic ethos for those in the know—and it was one underwritten by the affective mood of the 1590s. As such, Tacitus was a powerful courtly symbol, insofar as devotion to his works indicated a series of intellectual assumptions about the value of history, a series of political assumptions about the correspondence between imperial Rome and England’s own cankered age, and a series of stylistic assumptions about the formal strategies best suited for exploring such matters. In a letter of advice to Fulke Greville from the mid-1590s, Essex himself proclaimed “Tacitus simply the best” of all historians, and this attitude seems to have informed much of the earl’s outlook.83

We know that Essex read Tacitus actively; less than a year after the earl’s death, a letter makes reference to a “paper boke of my lord of Essex notations of Cornelius Tacitus.”84 But it seems that his engagement with the Roman historian was more elaborate still: according to Ben Jonson, in 1591 Essex penned the elaborate, anonymous preface to Sir Henry Savile’s partial translation of Tacitus’s Historiae.85 In this “seminal document of the Tacitean revival in England,” Essex offers lavish praise of the historian who “hath written the most matter with best conceyt in fewest wordes of anie Historiographer ancient or moderne;” Tacitus, he argues, veils his meaning in such obscurity that “the second reading ouer will please thee more than the first, and the third then the second.”86 The preface is capped with a tranhistorical conclusion, in which Essex, perhaps slyly, contrasts “our owne happie gouernement” of Elizabeth with the Rome that “did suffer miseries vnder the greatest Tyrant.”87

Essex’s remarks introduce the first extended translation of Tacitus to be published in England, Savile’s The Ende of Nero and Beginning of Galba, Fower Bookes of the Histories of Cornelius Tacitus. This edition sparked English interest in both Tacitus and the methods of politic history; in addition to its partial translation of the Historiae, the volume contained Savile’s original essay The Ende of Nero and Beginning of Galba, a piece of new-style history designed to bridge the temporal gulf between Tacitus’s Annales and Historiae. Jonson deemed this act of intellectual ventriloquism the edition’s greatest virtue:

But when I read that speciall piece, restor’d
Where NERO falls, and GALBA is ador’d,
To thine owne proper I ascribe then more;
And gratulate the breach, I griev’d before:
Which Fate (it seemes) caus’d in the historie,
Onely to boast thy merit in supply.88
By borrowing the robes of Tacitus, Savile acquires license to craft a piece of history in the new politic style: in Savile’s creation, for example, the rebel leader Julius Vindex is praised for his attempts “to redeeme his cuntrey from tyranny and bondage” by taking arms against the emperor Nero. As David Womersley argues, the novelty of this reconstruction enables Savile and his readers to explore heterodox categories of political thought, such as the appropriate grounds for tyrannicide and the necessity of military heroes (not unlike Essex) “making successful, principled interventions in the political life of a nation which, in at least some educated and contemporary minds, shared the same underlying form of absolute monarchy as Elizabethan England.” To be sure, in a recent article Paulina Kewes has importantly reminded us that the concerns of 1591 were not the concerns of 1601, and that scholars must guard against reading Savile’s edition anachronistically: at the moment of publication, she argues, “Savile’s volume was neither a jaundiced anatomy of royal envy and courtly corruption nor an antimonarchical manifesto,” and thus we should not see it as reflecting viewpoints that Essex and his circle would not come to adopt for several years. But the larger point is that the inherent content of Tacitean history offered fertile soil for the increasingly discontented Essex circle to eventually till—and indeed, as Kewes notes, even in 1591 “Savile was keen to warn his patron Essex about the pitfalls of court intrigue and royal jealousy.” In his anonymous preface, Essex himself describes the Tacitean subject as “the miseries of a torn and declining state: The Empire vsurped; the Prince murthered; the people wavering; the souldiers tumultuous; nothing vnlawfull to him that hath power, and nothing so vnsafe as to bee securely innocent”—a catalog of horror that cannot help but inflect Savile’s prayer, on the facing page, that Elizabeth find “a Tacitus to describe your most glorious raigne.” As the decade continued, and as factionalism ravaged the court, this connection would be ever more appealing for Essex and his ilk, who found themselves ruminating upon one Tacitean lesson in particular: “that a good Prince gouerned by euill ministers is as dangerous as if hee were euill himselfe.”

To varying degrees, Tacitus featured in the political thought of numerous men associated with Essex, including (besides Savile) Henry Cuffe, Henry Wotton, Francis and Anthony Bacon, and Antonio Perez. A variety of texts indebted to Tacitus emerged from their collective pen. Of particular note is The State of Christendom, or, A Most Exact and Curious Discovery of Many Secret Passages, and Hidden Mysteries of the Times, a political tract first printed in 1657, but written in the 1590s. Though the text has been traditionally attributed to Wotton (who is credited on
the title page of the first edition), Alexandra Gajda’s recent study suggests that Anthony Bacon is more likely the primary author—but either way, there is no doubt that it emerged from a follower of Essex, and became “a text that shaped the mental world of the Essex circle.” Robert Johnson, we have seen, referred to Tacitean history as labyrinthine, and it is thus not surprising that this text’s exposure of “secret passages” owes to the Roman historian; the author reveals how the “Competencies, Pretensions, Titles, Quarrels, and Debates” of Europe’s princes have “greatly weakened” the Christian fellowship, exemplified most spectacularly by the tyrannical reign of Philip II. While *The State of Christendom* draws some specific material from Tacitus—for example, a description of “the Treasons of Sejan, his policies, and his purposes”—its primary debt to Tacitus is the more general thematic exploration of “the bleak realities of political corruption,” and of the steps that subjects might take to counteract it. Like Savile, *The State*’s author borrows the Tacitean mode to advance daring views on the limits of sovereign authority, making it “the most unequivocal statement of the legitimacy of resistance by a non-Catholic English author from the accession of Elizabeth until the civil war.” As an affective resource, such resistance would come to prove a valuable refuge for Essex and his followers.

**The Earl of Essex: Dreadful Object**

In the 1590s, the Earl of Essex and his associates found much to dread in the political sphere; this atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and suspicion was embedded in the texts that their circle produced. Turning now to their courtly opponents, we find that Essex was equally a source of dread for his adversaries: as a popular, martial hero, Essex was an ideal symbol for the disaffected Elizabethans of the 1590s, who sought a champion to deliver them from the social and political unrest cataloged earlier in the chapter. To those who opposed him, Essex cut a terrifying figure, and his capacity for political violence was a grave concern for enemies like Cecil, Raleigh, and eventually Elizabeth herself. And in a further Janus-twist, dread of Essex equally manifested in the textual sphere, though with an inverse trajectory to that which we have just witnessed: for Elizabeth and her agents, textuality was not a refuge from dread, but rather a source of it, as works relating to the earl risked cloaking all manner of seditious content. That Essex might prove dangerous was an increasing concern for both his courtly rivals and Elizabeth. As events proved, this fear was well-founded.

Why, then, did Essex’s enemies dread him?
The Earl of Essex, writes his biographer, “lived his life as self-consciously as if it were a work of art, and sought to make himself indisputably the leader of his generation by excelling all of his contemporaries in accomplishments and zeal.” As friend to Sidney and stepson to Leicester, Essex was exceptionally well positioned to inherit a wealth of symbolic stock; in the 1580s, the model of Sidney became the blueprint for the courtly persona of the developing Essex, who tapped an array of private and public connections to position himself as his mythological heir. It was the harrowing experience of war that forever cemented the two young men; Essex was knighted for his bravery in the same battle that dealt Sidney his mortal wound, and as he lay dying the shepherd knight bestowed his best sword on his young friend. The mythic potency of this exchange only galvanized the existing connections between them, and when Leicester died in 1588 it was apparent that the young earl would inherit the mantle of the Sidney/Leicester circle. With this pedigree, Essex was poised to seize command of Elizabeth’s court and the minds of her subjects: a feature that made him potentially dangerous to an aging, weakening queen.

Even in his earlier years, Essex understood the deep importance of public self-promotion—and though this awareness would build him a circle of devotees, it also put him in perennial conflict with Elizabeth, who did not appreciate being upstaged. After the defeat of the Armada, for example, the earl sponsored the highlight of London’s subsequent festivities, at least according to one observer:

I was, however, present at the last review, which was held by the earl of Essex on the 26th, and which I am assured was the best of them all. There was a company of 60 musketeers, 60 harquebussiers on horseback, and 200 light horse. The uniforms were of orange-coloured cloth, with facings of white silk, and several of the light-horsemen had surcoats of velvet of the same colour, trimmed with silver. . . . A joust was then held in the open field (i.e., without lists), and the earl of Essex ran two tilts against the earl of Cumberland. As they are two of the best horsemen in the country the spectators were much pleased at this.

It is not hard to imagine why this visual display would have pleased the onlookers, and done much for Essex’s popularity. Yet at the same time, beneath the celebratory frame, Essex here essentially leads a private army through the streets of London—a convention, to be sure, appropriate to his aristocratic station, but one that ominously prefigures the events of a
decade later. One very important spectator, in fact, was not amused with the proceedings:

Several other gentlemen then joined, and they tilted first two against two, and then four against four; the earl of Essex always running against the earl of Cumberland. When they had finished with the lance they drew their swords, but when her Majesty saw this she made a sign with her hand that they were to cease, but they set to and she shut the window, in order not to see them.

This anecdote exposes a central fault line of Elizabethan aristocratic identity: nobles like Essex struggled with the competing pulls of obedience to the monarch and fidelity to the autonomous individual will. For a man in the business of self-promotion, it was very tempting to side with the latter.\(^{101}\) As master of the horse, Essex enjoyed “a supervisory role over tournaments, which he exploited to its fullest potential”; this control was most famously exemplified in the Accession Day tilts of 1595, a fulsome celebration of Essex himself.\(^{102}\) The queen, again, was not happy at his antics: “if she had thought their had bene so moch said of her,” Elizabeth was alleged to have remarked, “she wold not haue bene their that Night.”\(^{103}\)

Essex’s less ceremonial exploits made for even better publicity—and though his martial triumphs, in the larger sense, were relatively minor, the victories he did command reminded England of his might. The sack of Cadiz, “one of the very few decisive military successes” in England’s war with Spain, was an especially potent site for self-presentation; the queen eventually was forced to ban the publication of documents relating to the affair, lest a piece of more partisan propaganda undermine the official account she had constructed.\(^{104}\) Nonetheless, Essex was popularly commemorated in ballads like “the welcome home of the Earle of Essex the Lord Admirall from the victorious voyage of Cales”—allegedly written spontaneously by Thomas Churchyard “vpon the sodaine sight of the Earle of Essex comming to the Court”—or “Long had the proud Spainards advauted to conquer us,” which celebrates the “most valyant and hardy” Essex as a paragon of chivalry:

“Now,” quoth the noble Earl, “Courage, my Soldiers all! Fight and be valiant, then spoyl you shall have; And well rewarded all, from the great to the small: But looke that the Women and Children you save!”\(^{105}\)
In fact, the mythos of the heroic Essex was enough to spark a fashion trend. During the voyage, Essex famously grew a square beard, and as visual images of the victorious earl circulated, so too did his style of grooming. Within two years, this trend among England’s young gallants was widespread enough for Everard Guilpin to mock it in *Skialtheia*, his caustic collection of epigrams:

I know some . . .  
Which scorne to speake to one which hath not bin  
In one of these last voyages: or to one  
Which hauing bin there yet (though he haue none)  
Hath not a Cades-beard.  

The Cadiz beard would feature prominently in subsequent visual representations of the earl, and remains today one of his trademark features.

But it is not just the beard of Essex that figures in *Skialtheia*. Much more seriously, Guilpin mocks Essex under the guise of that “great Foe-lix,” who “passing through the street, / Vayleth his cap to each one he doth meet”:

Who would not thinke him perfect curtesie?  
Or the honny-suckle of humilitie?  
The deuill he is as soone: he is the deuill,  
Brightly accoustred to bemist his euill:  
Like a Swartrutters hose his paffe thoughts swell,  
With yeastie ambition: Signior Machiauell  
Taught him this mumming trick, with curtesie  
T’entrench himselfe in popularitie.  

As has been long recognized, these lines recall *Richard II*’s famous depiction of Bolingbroke, the man with whom Essex was, and would forever become, linked in popular imagination. For an ambitious peer like Essex, popularity came with the cost of being thought to court it. In a famous letter of advice, Francis Bacon directly addresses the crux of popular support, suggesting a shrewd tactic that recalls the dissembling manner of Guilpin’s portrayal, but inverts its trajectory:

[Popularity] is a thing good in itself, being obtained as your Lordship obtaineth it, that is *bonis artibus*; and besides, well governed, is one of the best flowers of your greatness both present and to come;
it would be handled tenderly. The only way to quench it *verbis* and not *rebus*. And therefore to take all occasions, to the Queen, to speak against popularity and popular courses vehemently; and to tax it in all others: but nevertheless to go on in your honourable commonwealth courses as you do.¹¹⁰

Five years later, the rising itself would reveal that Essex had greatly over-estimated his own standing with the people—or rather, it would reveal that popularity alone, in this context, was not enough to rouse Londoners to take up arms against the queen’s counselors. Unfortunately for Essex, his crowd-pleasing disposition was still said to be damning evidence of ill intentions: immediately after the rebellion, Cecil railed that Essex’s “affabilite and Curtosie manifested his desire to be populer,” while at his trial it was alleged that Essex “affected popularity and to be the Mynion of the people,” thus proving his action “was premeditated and had the deeper roote.”¹¹¹

But for his fearful enemies, it was not simply that Essex courted popularity—more dangerous still was with whom, specifically, he was popular. Though he variously occupied roles as both courtier and politician, Essex saw himself primarily as a man of war: it was in war that Essex cemented himself as the heir to Leicester and Sidney, just as it was in war that he secured the loyalty of countless men who would serve him in the coming years. Though his enemies in the 1590s increasingly painted Essex as an unstable warhawk, the earl still openly acknowledged his “friendshippe to the chiefe men of action, and fauour generall to the men of warre”:

> For most of them which are accounted the chiefe men of action, I doe entirely loue them: they haue beene my companions both abroad and at home: Some of them began the wars with me, most of them haue had place vnder me, and many of them had me a witnesse of their rising, from Captaynes, Lieuetenants, and priuate men, to these charges which since by their vertues they haue obtayned. Now I knoe their vertue I would chuse them for friends, if I had them not, but before I had tryed them, God in his prouidence chose them for me: I loue them for my owne sake, for I finde sweetenesse in their conuersation, strong assistance in their imployment with mee, and happinesse in their friendshipe. ¹¹²

As his reference to “rising” suggests, Essex was notorious for bestowing knighthoods to his men, often to Elizabeth’s fury, and often in contempt
of her explicit order to the contrary. Manuscripts from the period are flush with lists of “the knights made at Caliz” or “those that have bene knighted by the Lord Lyvtenent in Ireland.”

In fact, during the proceedings against him at York House in 1600, Essex’s fondness for knighting was one of the explicit charges levied against him. Before his appointment to Ireland, the panel recalled, “it was a question disputable & in great Consultacion before his goinge over, whithr by reason of his making so many knightes in former employmentes he should haue that authoritye in his Comission or no”; he was ultimately granted authority, but was by the “Queene hir self required to be very sparing in that respect, and to make very few & those of very good desent & quality.” But Elizabeth routinely struggled with curbing the will of a warring peer, and the earl’s flouting of her proviso was both flagrant and habitual:

Notwithstandinge which warninge after his Coming ouer into Ireland, he made a great number of knightes which, being by the Queene very much misliked, he was afterwaerdes by lettres in the Queens name required to hold his hande, and yet after the receipt of those lettres, he made many.

The crown’s fears were well-founded. As suggested by one account of his return to London in 1599, Essex commanded a magnetism that drew such soldiers to his physical presence: “His Lordships soddain Retorn out of Ireland, brings all Sortes of Knights, Captens, Officers, and Soldiers away from thence. . . . This Town is full of them, to the great Discon tentment of her Majestie.” But at the same time, his charisma was such as to assure loyalty even in absence: only weeks later, he would receive word from Ireland that “the full crie of our poore remnant of freinds is Essex or none, Essex out of hand or all is loste.” The ability to command such a following was an asset of enormous power, and it was a source of enormous distress for those to whom it might be directed.

But for that very reason, the sword of popularity cut both ways. Francis Bacon, noting that “her Majesty loveth peace,” would famously advise Essex to subdue his “affinity with a martial greatness”: such a “militar dependence,” he warned, “maketh a suspected greatness.” Subsequent events proved this to be sound reasoning. The earl’s reputation as a man of arms made it effortless for the crown to construe the rising as an act of open, violent, civil war. Essex and his followers, says one account of the indictment, conspired
not only to deprive the Queens Maiesty from her Royall seate and dignity but also to procure the death, and destruccion of the Queene, and to procure a Cruell slaughter of her Maiesteies Subjects, to make Cruell warres within this Realme of England and alter the Relligion established by her Maiesty and so Change the gouvernemt therof, and for the effecting therof did intend to goe to her Maiesties house at White-Hall her Maiestie beeing then within the sayd house, and by force and power to seaze vpon the Queenes person and to take her into his Custody. 118

But nonetheless, Essex continued to assert himself fundamentally as a man of the sword, and insisted upon his natural affinity with other such soldiers. “That generally I am affected to the men of warre,” he explained, “should not seeme strange to any reasonable man: the graue iudge fauours the student of the lawe, the reuerend Bishoppes the labourers of the ministerie, And I, since her Maiestie hath yeerely vsed my seruice in her late actions, must reckon my selfe to the number of her men of warre.” 119

Essex’s ability to court widespread public favor and amass a hard core of military followers made him a formidable opponent for his courtly adversaries; it is not surprising, then, to hear his foe Cecil complain of “how hard termes the erle of Essex standeth to me, and how apt diuers of his followers are to throwe Imputations vpon me.” 120 Essex was a dangerous man to have as an enemy, as his rivals were well aware: “I am not wize enough to give yow advise,” Raleigh warned Cecil in 1600, “butt if yow take it for a good councall to relent towards this tirant, yow will repent it when it shalbe to late.” 121

For the Essex circle, we have seen, the dread elicited by adversarial courtly interactions had a textual correlate in literary production. There is an analogous dynamic in the crown’s response to Essex, though directed to a different end. Whereas the Essex circle adopted the Tacitean ethos to brace themselves against the storm of political corruption, and the Tacitean style to alleviate their fears of exposure within it, the earl’s enemies engaged the literary field inversely: for them, textual production threatened to be a site of sedition and subversion, obscuring all manner of treasonous secrets. They found in textuality a source of endless dread—and their efforts centered on shedding light into its depths.

Examples of the Essex circle’s engagement with dangerous texts have been well-documented by scholars of the period. Most notable is one of the single most analyzed theatrical moments of the sixteenth century: the specially commissioned performance of Richard II by the Lord
Chamberlain’s Men on Saturday, February 7, 1601. On this evening, only hours before the earl’s rising, a cadre of key Essexian partisans (including, as Gilly Merrick recalls it, “Lord Monteegle, Sir Christephr Blont, Sir Charles Percye, Ellys Iones, and Edward Bussshell”) famously decided to take some entertainment:

At the mocyon of Sir Charles Percye and the rest, they went all together to the Globe, over the water wher the Lord Chamberlens men vse to playe, and were ther somwhat before the playe began . . . the play was of Kyng Harry the iiijth, and of the kyllyng of Kyng Richard the second played by the Lord Chamberlens players.\textsuperscript{122}

With good reason, literary scholars have long explored how this dramatic performance (almost certainly Shakespeare’s \textit{Richard II}) might serve as a particularly meaningful example of how literature participated in the working (and unworking) of early modern political structures; the anecdote is prominently foregrounded in Stephen Greenblatt’s introduction to the 1982 collection \textit{The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance}, a de facto manifesto for the budding New Historicist movement.\textsuperscript{123} The smoking gun, as the crown investigation would subsequently uncover, is that members of the Essex circle (most notably Percy) actively commissioned this performance from the players:

Sir Charles Percye, Sir Iosclyne Percye, and the Lord Montegle, with some thre more spoke to some of the players, in the presans of this examinante to haue the playe of the deposyng and kyllyng of Kyng Rychard the second to be played the Saterday next . . . Wher thys examinante and hys fellowes were determyned to haue played some other playe, holdyng that play of Kyng Richard to be so old & so long out of vse as that they shold haue small or no Company at yt. But at their request this examinante and his fellowes were Content to play yt the Saterday and hadd their xls [forty shillings] more then their ordynary for yt and so played yt accordyngly.\textsuperscript{124}

That Essex’s men actively requested \textit{Richard II}, a play about the deposition of a feeble monarch by a virile, popular nobleman—a nobleman, no less, with whom Essex had been associated in contemporary discourse—proved particularly enticing for those scholars interested in how early modern literary forces circulated within larger fields of power.

Hammer has recently deflated some of the “more extravagant” theories about the relationship of Shakespeare’s play to the subsequent rising.\textsuperscript{125}
The action on Sunday morning, for example, was a sudden response to a newly discovered plot against the earl (thus Essex’s men did not purposely commission the play to prime themselves or London for the next day), while the crown’s subsequent investigation into the Lord Chamberlain’s players was casual and nonpunitive (and thus sought evidence that might be brought against the conspirators at trial, not to indict the public stage). Yet nonetheless, the royal response to the Essex rising still made a direct correlation between the events on the stage and the events of the next day—thus Francis Bacon says of Merrick, in the crown’s official account of the uprising, that “so earnest hee was to satisfie his eyes with the sight of that Tragedie, which hee thought soone after his Lord should bring from the Stage to the State.”¹²⁶

Also pressing for the crown was the well-known textual anxiety inspired by the young historian John Hayward—who, in dedicating his *The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henrie the IIII* to Essex, would inadvertently bring misfortune upon both himself and his would-be master.¹²⁷ In January 1599, Hayward published his prose account (in the Tacitean mode) of the rise of King Henry IV and the deposition of Richard II, in an apparent bid for patronage from the earl.¹²⁸ Hayward overshot his mark, producing a volume that was not provocative, but inflammatory: according to the crown’s later account,

1. he selecteth a storie 200 yere olde, and publisheth it this last yere, intendinge the application of it to this tyme
2. [he] maketh choice of that story only, a kinge is taxed for misgovernement, his councell for corrupt[ion] and covetous for there priuate [benefits], the king censured for conferring benefits of hatefull parisites and favories, the nobles discontented, the commons groning vnnder countinuall taxation. There vppon the king is deposed, and by an erle, and in the ende murdre[d].¹²⁹

The book, which Essex openly denounced, was soon suppressed by authorities for its seditious content. But the text reemerged on the crown’s radar during the York House proceedings of June 1600, when the earl was explicitly accused of sponsoring it: “a certaine dangerous seditious Pamphlet, was of late put forth into print, concerning the first yeeres of the raigne of Henry the fourth, but indeed the end of Richard the second, and who thought fit to be Patron of that booke, but my Lord of Essex.”¹³⁰ Hayward, now imprisoned in the Tower, was construed as the agent of some grander scheme; the book’s content was such, reports Bacon, that the queen “would not be persuaded that it was his writing
whose name was to it, but that it had some more mischievous author, and
said with great indignation that she would have him racked to produce
his author.” Though Hayward offered a spirited defense of his historiographical autonomy, the events of the earl’s rising was all it took for
the crown to authenticate its claims about the seditious content of *The Life and Raigne*. Elizabeth’s agents immediately seized the opportunity to
insert Hayward into its official narrative of the insurrection, and his book was denounced as a blueprint for regicide: Essex’s treasonous intentions,
it was declared by Cecil in the Star Chamber, “appeared by the booke
written of Henry 4th wherein many thinges weare inserted to make this
tyme seeme like the tyme of King Richard 2 & that they weare to be
reformed by him like as did Henry 4th.” For his unsolicited profession of solidarity, Hayward would remain in the Tower until Elizabeth’s death.

At other times, the earl and his agents raised the crown’s ire by pro-
ducing propaganda directly. This was the case after the Cadiz raid, when
Essex found himself jockeying with Sir Walter Raleigh over credit for the
successful action, and actively worked to secure the lion’s share of martial
glory. Shortly after the assault, Essex’s followers in London received a
“discourse of our great Action at Calez penned very truly according to
his Lordships large instructions,” to be “deliuered to some good printer
in good characters and with diligence to publish it.” Essex’s aim, it
was reported, was “that it should with the soonest be sett in print, both
to stopp all vagrant Rumurs and to inform those that are well affected
of the truth of the whole”—but, to insulate the earl from political blow-
back, it was warned that “nether his Lordships name nor myine not any
other [should] be ether openly named, vsed, or soe insinuated.” (The
letter’s writer is Henry Cuffe, one of Essex’s several secretaries.)
The council, however, sniffed out Essex’s plan, and before long Cuffe “was
charged by her Maiestie . . . vppon paine of death not to sett forth any
discourse of this service without her priuity.” As Hammer reveals,
such bans “did not deter Essex,” but “merely made his propagandising
more difficult”: despite the queen’s warning, the finished document was
nonetheless circulated in England, Scotland, France, Italy, and the Low
Countries.

Finally, the crown was also deeply fearful of the poetic libels that
circulated both before and after the Essex rising. The earl himself was
no stranger to this genre; in the early 1590s, he and Raleigh engaged
in a poetic flyting over the queen’s favor—Essex, punning on his rival’s
given name, memorably declared that “it is to much to thinke, / So pure
a mouth should puddle water drinke”—and Raleigh’s anti-court poem
“The Lie” inspired a cluster of satirical responses with apparent ties to Essex and his party. But as the decade progressed, the libel emerged as a valuable weapon in factional warfare, and seems to have been employed vigorously on behalf of Essex. In the immediate aftermath of the rising, several members of the council include remarks on libelers in their general denunciation of Essex and his men. Lord Treasurer Thomas Sackville was particularly incensed:

First, to the matter of the libellers. In my opinion they deserve death better then open enemies; they are dangerous, & who can be fre from their stroake; they barke in secret, and ought to be subject to the Censure of death: there ys remedy against the sworde, against gunnhott etc., but none against backebyters & libellers.

This concern was for good reason: a number of anonymous poems survive that actively denounce the enemies of Essex, in a variety of manners. For example, the minor beast fable “A dreame alludinge to my L of Essex, and his adversaries” embeds specific reference to Essex’s enemies in its portrayal of “A stately HART” (the earl himself) undone by treacherous machinations: as the fable unfolds, the poet takes shots at Cecil (“a CAMMELS uglie broode”), Raleigh (“His meate blood RAWE”), Cobham (“A muddye BROOKE”), and crown prosecutor Edward Coke (“A leafe wee’le have from Co-oake”). This technique is amplified further in “Admir-all weaknes wronges the right,” which has been said to offer “a virtual roll-call of Essex’s enemies.” Unsurprisingly, it is the “Cankred Cecill” who receives the most venom from the anonymous backbiters on Essex’s side. The opening lines of a “Libell against Sir Robert Cecill” offers a representative sample:

Proude and ambitious wretch that feedest on naught but faction
Prevaile and fill thy selfe, and burst with vile detraction
Detraction is thy game, and hathe bene since thie youthe
And wilbe to thie dyeing daie, He lies that speakes the truthe
But well I knowe thy bosome is fraught, with naught but scorne.

The attacks against Cecil here recall the terms of anti-Wolsey satires: “First did thy Sire,” the poem continues, “and now thy selfe by Machivillian skill / Prevaile, and curbe the Peeres as well befits your will.” In “Chamberlaine Chamberlaine, one of her graces kinn,” a poem composed after the earl’s execution, Cecil’s pretensions are equally mocked in the manner of Skelton:
Little Cecill tripps up and downe, he Rules bothe Court & Croun
with his great Burghley Clowne, in his Longe fox-furd gowne
with his Longe proclamacion, hee saith hee saved the Towne.146

Both before and after Essex’s death, Cecil is vilified in the anonymous poems that circulated throughout London. It is no wonder, then, that he and his allies were especially incensed that “the Taverns and ordinaries are filled with tales of governement and matters of state . . . which doe falsely and traytorouslye slander her sacred Majestie and her whole Counsell.”147

The crown’s concerns were well-founded, at least according to a piece of evidence that suggests an immediate connection between libels and sedition. One week after the failed Essex rising, a cadre of emboldened apprentices had “intended to meete at the Exchange . . . at x of the Clocke in the morninge,” to embark upon a dashing caper to liberate the earl from crown captivity.148 Though the plot was spoiled prematurely, the crown’s subsequent investigation revealed their plan of action: “They intended to drawe theire companie together by Libells with hope to have 5000 persons.” Without further evidence, it is not clear what form these “libells” took; in the early modern period, the word “libel” had a flexible connotation, with usage signaling both non-moralized texts (the generic “little book”) and all manner of written slander and invective. But whatever the precise form, the apprentices apparently thought that such writings could galvanize London to a surprising degree: they anticipated a turnout dwarfing that of the rising itself.

Beneath the dreadful skies of the 1590s, Essex and his enemies were deadlocked in an affective struggle, each fearing, and each feared. After his disgraced return from Ireland, and his subsequent destruction in the proceedings that followed, the terms of the contest changed, as Cecil, Raleigh, and the anti-Essex party powerfully asserted their own mastery over the operation of dread in the courtly sphere. In the final months of his life, as Essex was increasingly choked with terror and paranoia, he was forced to try to reclaim the terms of dread for a final time. This attempt set off a chain of events, both worldly and cosmic, that would drag him to ruin.

The Dreadful End

In the early weeks of 1601, the fears of the Essex circle were boiling over; there seemed little hope of recovery, and the chambers of Essex
House echoed with shadowy reports of plots to destroy the earl. A group of frustrated, alienated followers surrounded the equally disposed Essex, and the mutual mood quickly worsened. Sir John Harington, the queen’s godson, records a chilling glimpse of this malaise:

It resteth wythe me in opynion, that ambition thwarted in its career, dothe speedilie leade on to madnesse; herein I am strengthened by what I learne in my Lord of Essex, who shyftethe from sorrowe and repentaunce to rage and rebellion so suddenlie, as well provethe him devoide of goode reason or righte mynde; in my laste discourse, he uttered strange wordes, borderyninge on suche strange desygnys that made me hastene forthe, and leave his presence.\textsuperscript{149}

Though likely embellished by hindsight, Harington’s report at least partly indicates the affective toll of this dire moment. On the morning of Sunday, February 8, the group’s collective dread reached a critical mass: after receiving “ceryetn aduertisementes on the Saterdaye night that his private enimies was vp in armes against him,” Essex and his men found themselves pushed to a radical act of resistance.\textsuperscript{150} As Essex later told it, the events of that morning were sparked by a spontaneous gathering of his adherents, suddenly united to thwart this attack against their symbolic epicenter:

[To the charge] that I gathered a Companye togither and that by that means intended forceably. . . . I answere the Company that was gathered togither in my howse assembled themselues vpon intelli-
gence being giuen out vnto them that my life was sought for & that without any priuitye at all vnto me these my seruants and fearefull friends in my howse [were making the reports] knowne amongst them.\textsuperscript{151}

As we have seen above, when this group of fearful friends took to the streets, statements of terror and persecution became their rallying cry. Such proclamations served to justify their bold action and incite an atmosphere of collective panic: by assuring onlookers that “they came into the Citty only for safty of their liues,” the rebels imagined that London’s citizens, equally moved by fear, would be roused to join the cause.\textsuperscript{152}

In this desperate action, Essex thus makes a last-ditch attempt to assert his will over his courtly enemies, by orchestrating a final conflict that ensured absolute destruction for the loser. To galvanize his followers,
Essex continued to denounce men like Cecil and Raleigh, the “Atheists and Catterpillers” that perverted the queen’s will and sought his own life; with this common enemy, he hoped to assure the group’s adherence to both “the lawe of nature” and “good seruice,” by casting their action as a political purgative. In the rising’s aftermath, however, this maneuver would be deemed a despicable fraud:

The Earle of Essex [employed] false Suggesting to the Cittizens & others of violence and murder to be intended and attempted against him in his house, thereby to breed a commenseracion in the people of his estate and danger and to drawe them to hatred of such as he Called his priuate enimies.

Essex is charged with inciting panic—a common affective state that might subsequently be retooled into an instrument of violence. During his trial, the earl’s alleged strategy is elaborated more specifically:

Why then did you and the whole Company goe vp and downe the citty through gracious street, Cheapeside and other the Cheefe streets, vpon a purpose to get ayd, and a multitude of Runnigates and Vagabounds which might winde with you villanously to effect that which you had trayterously determined.

The crown’s lawyers suggest that Essex is ensnaring those whom he engages, creating an enmeshment in which his fears become their own (“winde with you”). The affective symbiosis serves to collapse the social hierarchy, as both peer and pauper are imagined sympathetic in their mutual dread—a fantasy that doubly triggers the crown’s own fear of sedition, linking paranoia over high-level courtly intrigues (coup, assassination attempts, etc.) with fears of popular unrest (religious rising, food riots, etc.).

But Essex’s popularity, we have seen, was grossly misjudged. The action fizzled, as London failed to rise (or even open its gates); the party retreated by barge to Essex House, where they staged a perfunctory standoff, before surrendering peacefully to the crown’s agents. A week later, Essex and Southampton were tried together for treason; Essex protested his innocence in a rousing defense, but there was little doubt of the outcome. As the prisoners were escorted back to the Tower, “the Axe was carried before them with the edge towards them.” Here they awaited their sentence:
Nowe you must goe to the place from whence you came, there to be laied on a hurdell, drawn to the place of execution, hanged and cutt down or you bee dead, then your members to be cutt of, and burnt before your faces, your heddes to be cutt of and your bodies to be quartered and dispersed at the Queenes pleasure, And the Lord have mercie on your soules.\textsuperscript{157}

Such horrors did not come to pass: Essex would be granted a more honorable beheading, while Southampton escaped the axe entirely. But with the promise of these tortures, as prelude to the eternal uncertainty of oblivion, Essex now faced a different kind of dread.

The dread explored in this chapter has been largely collective in nature: Essex and his allies feared the machinations of his courtly enemies, while his enemies (and Elizabeth) feared that the earl’s power and popularity might upend the social order. In the aftermath of his failed rising, however, the Earl of Essex came to know what it was like to be alone. Despite all attempts to rouse her, London did not respond as he had hoped, leaving his action without desperately needed support—and on a day, the most important of Essex’s life, where “everything that could go wrong did go wrong.”\textsuperscript{158} There were, as we have seen, some immediate professions of loyalty to the earl, such as the plot of the apprentices. But Essex himself, awaiting imminent execution, would turn inward and upward. His dread was shifting its object, and the likes of Raleigh and Cecil seemed far less important to him now.

Only days after a defiant performance in the courtroom, the earl suddenly summoned Elizabeth’s agents, so that he might “deliuer his knowledge of those Treasons which he had formerly denyed at the Barr.”\textsuperscript{159} In a marked reversal, Essex began to realize that his priorities had been gravely misaligned. And with a short time to live, he had little interest in the profane bonds that linked him to this world, including those that he had forged with his former allies:

He did meruailous earnestly desyre that wee would suffer him to speake vnto Cuffe his Secretary, against whom he vehemently complayned vnto vs to haue ben a principall Instigator to theis vyelent courses which he had vndertaken, wherein he protested that he chiefly deysred that he might make yt appeare that he was not the only perswader of theis great offences which they had commytted, but that Blont, Cuffe, Temple, and those other persons who were at the priuate conspiracy at Drury house.
With his eternal soul on the line, Essex was naming names, and he had plans to make sure his conscience was cleared fully. Not content with merely exposing the chief conspirators, the earl revealed that the extent of their intended action was yet unknown to the crown:

[They] had more dangerous and malycious endes for the disturbance of the Estate then he doth nowe fynde coulde haue ben preuented yf his proiect had gon forwarde, as well appereth by the confusion they drewe him to even in his owne house that morning that he went into the citty.

To be sure, Essex’s reimagination of the events was self-interested: here, it is he who was drawn unknowingly into the schemes of these traitors, a bystander swept up in the collective action. To make his peace, Essex affirms that he was not a type of Bolingbroke, but rather a counterpart of King Richard, and thus of Elizabeth herself: noble souls, tragically led to ruin by others. It is thus with no small self-pity that Essex declares to Cuffe, when his secretary was brought before him a final time, that “none hath ben a greater Instigator of me then yourselfe, to all theis my disloyall courses into which I haue fallen.”

In what is almost certainly the last poem he ever wrote, Essex reflects upon the dangers of bad fellowship, a social cancer so apt to bring destruction upon the godly:

Ill company, the cause of many woes,  
The sugred baite, that hideth poysned hooke;  
The rocke unseene that shipwrackt soules o’rethrowes,  
The weeping crocodile that killes with looke,  
The readiest steppe to ruine and decay,  
Grace’s confounder, and helle’s nearest way.

How many have been ruined by the company they keep, seduced into an unforeseen fall? Yet in these dreadful days, Essex continues, to be social at all is to expose oneself to the agents of corruptions:

But he is held no sotiable man  
In this corrupted age, that shall refuse  
To keepe accursed company now and than;  
Nay but a foole, unless he seeme to chuse  
Their fellowship, and give them highest place,  
That vildest live, and furthest off from grace.
Essex must indict himself with the same charges of bad company that he had so often levied at the queen. With newfound clarity, he reveals the caterpillars in his own garden; Essex discovers that the greater threat is not what was plotted by his rivals, but that which he invited upon himself. It is a moment of royal atonement, as the earl’s empathy with Elizabeth provides means for his reintegration into the unity of her symbolic self—not as a profane sovereign, but as anointed conduit of heavenly grace.

In disavowing his earthly ties, Essex did considerable violence to the social ecosystem that had, with his nourishment, come to flourish around him. Though some of the earl’s associates would regroup in the court of James I, the fate of the Essex circle’s charter members is recorded bluntly by George Carleton, in a letter written just weeks after the rising:

You must needes here by common report of the vnadvised & misch- evous action of the Erle of Essex & his adeerentes; dangerous to the person of our Quene, fearfull to the state, & mischevous to him & all his partakers, especiallye to thos that were of hys secrett counsell & partyes with him in the plott: wherof dierue haue alreddye suffredd death, thoughe not with him yet after him. Therle himself was beheaded in the tower first, Sir Guillam Merricke & Cuffe his secreterye were after hanged, drawne & quartred att Tiborn, & lastleye Sir Charles Danvers & Sir Christopher Blunt were beheaded on tower hille openlye.\textsuperscript{163}

All that outrage, all that turmoil, all that dread, reduced to a few passing lines. Yet, as Carleton continues, there is a larger story here about the frailty of union in this fallen age:

Ytt was strange to see the begininge of this action (wherof I was a behollder) & somewhatt strange to consider the circumstances now toward the end. For thes noble & resolute men assured of one an other by their undoubted valour & combined together by firme oathes, beinge all taken, severed, examined, & the principalls array- gned & condemnpt, sett in the end before their deathes to such playne confessions & accusations one of an other.

Once embattled in a zero-sum game with their courtly rivals, the Essex men similarly set upon each other—each man determined “to strive who could drawe one an other in deepest.”

Denouncing his coconspirators entailed a commitment to atonement, however revisionist the narrative that enabled it; the humbled Essex
rejected the facilitators of his earthly ambition, turning toward the unifying promise of faith. In a short poem that seems to date from this period, Essex struggles with such reorientation, seeking an account of how his shattering self is refracted in the hearts and minds of the world at large:

I am not as I seeme, I seeme and am the same;
I am as divers deeme, but not as others name;
I am not as I shoulde; I shoulde be as I saye;
In wantinge what I woulde, I must be as I maye.

finis qd Rob: Essex Comes

The poem is obscure to me; I assume that the second line is animated by an implicit opposition of sinner/traitor, while the final line’s “wantinge” suggests the ambivalence inherent in his action, insofar as it might entail both desire for the worldly (a successful outcome in the rising; the queen’s grace and pardon; etc.) or the sacred (the salvation he turned away from). But whatever its precise meaning, the affective tenor is dizzying for both the poet and his reader, as Essex struggles to disentangle himself from the countless sites of external investment in which his identity had become ensnared.

In “The Passion of a Discontented Minde,” Essex’s final poem, the earl comes to address his sin and salvation far more directly than in the cryptic epigram above—and in this poetic finale, he devotes no small space to establishing the proper object of creation’s dread, and the proper way to be dreadful. For though sinfulness demands that we “live in feare, distrust, and terror”—and though “heav’nly contemplation,” in turn, yields a “minde set free from care, distrust, or feare”—Essex still praises the “terror unremovable” of the creator, at “whose sterne lookes all creatures are afraide,” and at whom dread is rightly directed as an instrument of salvation (165, 144, 142, 302, 78). Essex was once among those “fond worldings” who “without feare worke Virtue’s fowle abuse”—but as he learned to fear, and learned to fear correctly, he seems to have learned that “banishment from everlasting blisse” is our own doing, “Because we fled from him we should have served” (286, 39, 81, 156). Essex acknowledges the informed volition that marked his descent into sin, and his descent away from God:

Thrise happy sinner was that blessed Saint,
Who though he fell with puffe of woman’s blast,
Went forth and wept with many a bitter plaint
And by his teares obtained grace at last;
Chapter 4

But wretched I have falne of mine accord,
Tenne thousand times against the living Lord. (91–96)

Is it possible that Essex, on some profane level, considered himself equally undone by a “puffe of woman’s blast”—but the poem’s professed aim is pitched quite differently. “I see my sinnes arraign’d before my face,” Essex exclaims, realizing that, through the workings of faith and grace, they might be pressed to a nobler service:

Thou deepest Searcher of each secret thought,
Infuse in me thy all-affecting grace;
So shall my workes to good effects be brought,
While I peruse my ugly sinnes a space,
Whose staining filth so spotted hath my soule,
As nought with wash but teares of inward dole. (73, 19–24).

To complete his confession, the earl thus affirms his rejection of the world and its trappings, committing himself to the infinite unity of dreadful atonement; “so wil I come,” Essex promises his maker, “with feare and blushing cheeke, / For giving others what to thee belonge” (338–39).

With this promise, finally, Essex acknowledges the significance of his own guilt, and the significance of the judge by whom it was pronounced. After a struggle to control the meaning of “dread” in the courtly battlefields of the 1590s, Essex is left finally with only awe and reverence for his God and queen. On the morning of February 25, 1601, as he addressed the English nation for a final time, Essex “gave thanks to Almighty God from the bottom of his heart, that his designs, which were so dangerous to the state, succeeded not”—he had, he assured the gathered crowd, “now looked thoroughly and seriously into his sin, and was heartily sorry he had so obstinately defended an unjust cause at the bar.”166 Having shed himself of his company, Essex promised that “he had now learned how vain a thing the blast of popular favour and applause was.”167 Courtly friends and courtly foes mattered little now; it was only God who might “strengthen his mind against the terrors of death.”168 And in facing the dread of oblivion, whatever strength Essex might muster is attributed alone to grace:

He bewaylded his sinnes with the greatest shewe of true repen
taunce. he begged at godes handes strength . . . , acknowledginge his owne weaknes & infirmitie, adding further that there was no man fearfullr in nature than himself, whereof he had a trewe feeling for
that he had passed some danger & thereby knewe his owne imbecility. But gave vs for a note that were beholders that if he shewed any strength or Constancye in that passage it was to be attribututed to godes grace & favour, for he himself was weaker than anye.169

After a final prayer, “beesching god that he wold not permitte Sathan to distract him at that instant when the body & soule should be seperated,” Essex placed himself on the block, where he “patientlie receaved the stroake of thexecucioner.”170 It took three strikes to remove his head entirely—but, at the very least, “neither bodie, armes nor hedd ever stirred after the First.”171 During the “tyme of his beinge on the scaffold,” one witness approvingly observed, “the Erle never uttered worldlie thought.” Essex had learned whom to fear, and Essex had learned how to dread.

When, decades later, Sir Henry Wotton reflected on the fate of his patron Essex, he offered his own first hand assessment of political life in the “nasty nineties”: at that time, he writes, “there were in Court two names of Power, and almost of Affection, the Essexian and the Cecilian with their Adherents.” 172 For scholars of the early modern period, his emphasis on power is probably not surprising. But it is the complementary invocation of affection—a word that, in contemporary usage, could tellingly signal an emotive passion, a general stirring, a personal affinity, or even an adopted style—that encapsulates my larger argument in this chapter.173 Factional participation in Renaissance England was no doubt motivated by social self-interest, as an adaptive strategy to achieve one’s political and material aims. But, then as now, there is also an affective force to collective identification and in-group membership, and it is this crucial emotional component of social conflict that has been seldom considered by scholars of the period. As we have seen, it did not always feel good to be a member of the Essex faction in the late 1590s—but it always felt like something, and it is this something that demands more consideration by future researchers.