

The second earl of Essex's 'Great Quarrel' and its letters

Abstract: This article examines an exchange of letters between Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, and Thomas Egerton, and its contribution to Essex's posthumous reputation. The letters were supposedly written during Essex's absence from court in 1598 following what has often been called his 'great quarrel' with Elizabeth, and have been accepted as an indicator of his politics since almost immediately after their initial circulation in manuscript. In that context, they helped to concretise already polarized opinions about Essex, but the majority of copies that now survive were made much later, in the years and decades following his execution. As such, their role needs to be considered independently of the factional issues at the end of Elizabeth's reign. This article begins by describing the frequently contradictory narratives into which the letters were put, and the critical significance given to them by early readers. It goes on to discuss the important role of authoritative primary evidence in the evaluation of Essex before and after his execution. A final section surveys key manuscript collections in which the exchange is copied. Collectively, the evidence suggests that the key role of Essexiana was to invite and promote interpretation while sustaining the memory of key moments in Essex's troubled career.

Keywords: Manuscript, miscellanies, letters, reputation, readership, anthologies.

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In miscellanies and letter-books of the early seventeenth century, two of the most commonly copied texts are an exchange of letters between Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper (1540-1617), and his younger friend and social superior, Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex (1565-1601). The first refers obliquely to a state of hostility between Essex and Elizabeth, before whom Egerton thought the younger courtier ought to humble himself in order to regain acceptance and favour. Essex's reply was heedless of Egerton's advice, expressing a virtually seditious stance on monarchy in an angry and unrepentant style. As far as we can tell, a complete narrative to frame these letters was only made fully public with the 1635 publication of William Camden's *Annales*, in which he gave a dramatic description of what has been regarded a 'great quarrel' between Queen and subject that has proved compelling to readers ever since.¹

This essay will consider the function of these letters prior to Camden's *Annales* of 1635, and especially their role in sustaining Essex's public image. This was a period in which responding to the earl was fraught with difficulties; clear allegiances and enemies had been established around Essex at court during his lifetime, but such clear-cut divisions of affiliation were far harder to sustain later.² So while William Barlow's Paul's Cross sermon of 1 March 1601 can be correctly described as 'a high-profile sermon against Essex', Barlow is still concerned to recognise the affection 'which I continued as intire unto him as any follower of his till his open fall'.³ On the other hand, unambiguous praise of Essex was likely to get the author into trouble: in April 1601, a student of Christ Church College, Oxford, was imprisoned for delivering an oral declamation which included a defense of Essex; and although Robert Pricket's panegyric *Honors Fame in Triumph Riding* (1604) was able to enter print,

¹ William Camden, *Annales, or, The History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princesse Elizabeth Late Queen of England. Contayning all the Important and Remarkable Passages of State, both at Home and Abroad during her Long and Prosperous Reigne*, trans. R. N. Gent (London: Benjamin Fisher, 1635) 493-4.

² On Essex's early reputation see Maureen King, "'Essex, that could vary himself into all shapes for a time": The Second Earl of Essex in Jacobean England', (PhD, University of Alberta, 2000), and 'The Essex Myth in Jacobean England' in Glenn Burgess, Rowland Wymer and Jason Lawrence (eds), *The Accession of James I* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 177-186 as well as Kevin D. Lindberg, 'A Torch Borne in the Wind: The Cultural Persona of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex', (PhD, Ohio State University, 2001).

³ Paul E. J. Hammer, 'Devereux, Robert, second earl of Essex (1565-1601),' in ODNB; online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, October 2008, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7565>> (accessed September 24, 2008); William Barlow, *A Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse, on the first Sunday in Lent; Martij 1. 1600. With a short discourse of the late Earle of Essex his confession, and penitence, before and at the time of his death* (London: Mathew Law, 1600), sig. B4v(v).

the author was still jailed for writing it (though exactly who he offended is not clear).⁴ Even Samuel Daniel's far more ambiguous *Philotas* (1605) was sufficient to have him brought before the Privy Council for its alleged allegory of Essex.⁵

Manuscript letters seem to have been a slightly 'safer' way of retaining Essex solidly in public memory, while also facilitating readers' interpretations of the earl's life, and scrutiny of them is instructive in several ways. The manuscript copies of the Egerton-Essex letters remind us that while early readers may have understood the general contours of Essex's political life, there was little knowledge of this 'great quarrel' conducted on intimate terms with Elizabeth. Yet that gap of knowledge was not necessarily a problem for readers, and the letters did not in themselves require or demand validation from a wider narrative structure. Indeed, numerous sources suggest that it was simply possessing a sense of authority that made certain texts and utterances their prominence. As such, the letters can be seen to contribute to a wider body of authentic 'primary' evidence for Essex's thought and actions that was open for interpretation, whether sympathetic or adversarial. This is borne out by the role of the letters in manuscript, and especially in manuscripts with a strong collection of 'Essexiana'. While the letter exchange stands in for a fragment of Essex's life, in manuscripts it was complemented by other texts on the courtier, some of which were similarly 'literary' and rhetorical in style, while others were more prosaic, factual, and 'documentary' in nature. The manuscript collections do not offer responses to Essex, either explicit or implicit; rather, they invite interpretation without being inherently partisan.

For all they reveal about Essex's rash statement on government, the letters in question contain little that connect them to private events or knowledge. Egerton refers to Essex's 'vnseasonable discontentment', and the present as a moment where Essex's own 'cause' is at hand; later he asserts that 'you have gyven cause, and yet take a scandal vnto you'.⁶ The outline of 'effects' is given – that he harms himself, and likewise his friends, and assists his enemies – but without any clues of what has led to them. The idea that Essex is somehow absent from the court remains implicit in the statement that Egerton 'wolde not have trobled you with so

⁴ King, 'Essex in Jacobean England', 126-9.

⁵ Hugh Gazzard, "'Those Graue Presentments of Antiquitie": Samuel Daniel's *Philotas* and the Earl of Essex', *The Review of English Studies New Series* 51:203 (2000), 423-50.

⁶ A.R. Braunmuller (ed.), *A Seventeenth-Century Letter-Book: A Facsimile Edition of Folger MS V.a.321* (Newark and London: University of Delaware Press, 1983), 54, 57. Unless stated otherwise references to the letters of Essex and Egerton are taken from this edition.

many Idle blottes' (61) had he been able to consult with Essex in person. In his reply, Essex is more forthcoming about his absence: while complaining of his allies, that 'when I was a Courtier I coulde yeelde no fruyte of my love to them, Nowe I am an hermytt, they shall feare no envie for there love to me' (61). But whereas Egerton might have been trying to side-step the issues involved while urging the earl to a reconciliation, they are at the fore-front of Essex's response, who writes how 'in some causes I must appeale from all earthlie Iudges, and if in any, then surely in this: when the highest Iudge on earth, hath imposed vpon me the heaviest punyshement, without tryall, or hearing' (61). Towards the end, having fatally put a question mark over monarchic fallibility, he restates that 'I have recyved wronge and I feele it' (66-9). Taken together, these letters mark a dramatic change in Essex's circumstances, with his having gone into some kind of exile, but the motivations for the current 'vnseasonable discontentment' are no more than alluded to. Yet what has been most important for successive generations of readers are the questions that the situation has forced Essex to raise: the question of whether, after being abused, 'Dothe religion enforce me to sewe?'; and even more stridently, 'can not princes Erre? and can not subiectes recyve wronge? is an earthlie power, and authoritie?' (66). As much as the earl might have been driven to these questions by a recent moment of strife, they certainly do not depend on knowing the nature of the 'vylest of indignities'.

All the same, Camden was prepared to give a very close account of what had lead to these rash statements. He writes of a closet discussion concerning who should be made Lord Deputy of Ireland, with only Elizabeth, Essex, and three others present; the Queen proposed Sir William Knolles ahead of Sir George Carew, who Essex favoured that he might 'ridde him from the Court'. In a moment of anger, Camden relates how he turned his back 'with a scornfull looke' and received a 'cuffe on the eare' from the impatient monarch who 'bade him be gone with a vengeance.' Having put his hand to his sword, Essex 'in great discontentment hasted from the Court'.⁷ Egerton wrote to him before the earl's return to court by October that year.⁸ Overall, the form of Essex's quarrelling and reconciliation with the Queen is familiar from throughout the earl's career as a courtier.⁹ Essex himself clearly clearly felt that this

⁷ Camden, *Annales*, 493-4.

⁸ Braunmuller, *Letter-book*, 417.

⁹ As recognised in Hammer, *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62. Examples include his endeavour to join the battle of Sluys in June 1587, and, his disappointed dejection after the 'Islands voyage', both of which earned him greater favour;

was an effective practice, even to the very end of his life - one report of Essex's final arraignment indicates that after his imprisonment, 'he hoped, that this late affliction, wold fitt him to her majestie to call him agayne to the Courte'.¹⁰

In 1598, whatever return Essex made after the quarrel was not accompanied by an increase of favour. According to Camden's account, Essex went on to achieve some kind of rehabilitation, when he 'became more submisse, and obtained pardon, and was received againe of her into favour', though this was recorded with a sense of foreboding, 'that fortune is seldome reconciled to her foster-children, whom shee hath once forsake'.¹¹ The reconciliation was not complete and Essex was left in a weakened position; to Camden, and many others since, it was a point from which Essex could not make a return. According to the influential assessment by Mervyn James, it was the moment at which late medieval 'honour' codes were broken.¹² Elizabeth had 'submitted Essex to the unbearable dishonour which a publicly administered woman's blow involved'.¹³ The letters are not merely an ancillary part of this shift, but make the case quite explicit. Essex, in his reply, wrote that 'I owe Her majesty the duty of an Earl and lord marshal ... but I can never serve as a slave or villein', effectively stating, as James glosses, 'that obedience could not be demanded beyond the bounds of honour'.¹⁴

Manuscripts suggest that little or no knowledge of Camden's context accompanied the circulation of the letters.¹⁵ The elliptical and varying titles that the correspondence was given, for example, rarely place them in the now commonly agreed moment of the summer of 1598.¹⁶ Early modern readers did not always feel a need to date texts, and a number of them only specify their sender and recipient, such as 'My Lord keeper to the Earle Marshall:', 'The L. keeper to the e. of Essex' or similar.¹⁷ The individual texts are not immediately commandeered into any larger moment, even if the same manuscripts copy the letters within wider collections of Essexiana. Some

see Hammer, *Polarisation*, 61-2, and 'Devereux, Robert, second earl of Essex'. Compare also the poem sometimes associated with Essex in Francis Davison's *Poetical Rhapsody* - Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *A Poetical Rhapsody, 1602-1621*, 2 volumes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), vol. 1, 20.

¹⁰ Chetham's Library MS A.4.15, 10v.

¹¹ Camden, *Annales*, 494.

¹² John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 445.

¹³ Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 445.

¹⁴ James, *Society, Politics and Culture*, 445.

¹⁵ No autograph copies of the letters known to survive.

¹⁶ Braunmuller (ed), *Letter-Book*, 417.

¹⁷ Chetham's Library, MS A.4.15, fol. 26^r; British Library (hereafter B.L.), Add MS 48126, fol. 97^r. See also Bodleian (hereafter Bod.) MS Rawl. D.1048, fol. 26^r, Folger MS V.a.321, fol. 2^r.

copyists seem to acknowledge the limitations of their historical knowledge by giving needless exaggerations of these simpler titles. For example, the copy made by John Hopkinson reads 'Sir Thomas Egerton L. Keeper of the greate seale of England his letter of aduise to Robert Earle of Essex, Earle Marshall of England', inadvertently disregarding Egerton's own request to regard it as an opinion instead of advice.¹⁸

A number of manuscripts make some effort to put the letters into a more specific time frame relative to known events of Essex's life. The situation given them might still be vague, as in one copy in which Essex's name is supplemented with the simple addition of 'being then in resrainte'.¹⁹ The phrase may refer to Essex's imprisonment under Egerton's guard in October 1599 following his return from Ireland; yet as Braummuller states it would have been unlikely that Egerton wrote to Essex without any reference to their physical proximity.²⁰ Other manuscripts make this connection even stronger, and the title 'A le^t of the L Keeper to the E of Essex being coommitted on his returne from Ireland', or similar, is found in at least two manuscripts.²¹ One copy from the Brotherton Library ratchets up the historical specificity with the title 'A Letter from Thomas Egerton, Baron Ellesmere, Lord Keeper, to the Earl of Essex, relating to his actions in Ireland, and opposition to the Queen. Dated 12th October, 1599'. The reply is dated to the 14th.²² Most manuscripts that date the text keep it in 1599, but one outlier takes it another step further, placing Egerton's letter on 'ixth of lanuary: Ano: Domini 1601', very shortly before Essex's insurrection.²³ In general, without the anecdotal knowledge that Camden could supply, copyists incline towards placing the letters at several key moments in Essex's history. Unlike the 'great quarrel', the return from Ireland and the rebellion were both monumental political events; it would have been difficult to imagine that a falling-out with such a violent result came from something so comparatively minor as an administrative argument.

The problems in the dating and historical position of the letters are further exemplified in the datings given by their earliest printing, in the 1611 History of Great Britaine by John Speed (1551/2–1629).²⁴ The letters are two of only eight complete

¹⁸ West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford 32D86/44, 232, which bears comparison with Yale, Beinecke, Osborn MS b 8, fol. 1r.

¹⁹ Bod. MS Don c. 54, fol. 17r.

²⁰ Braummuller (ed), Letter-Book, 417.

²¹ B.L. MS Harl. 677, fol. 109v, and Huntington MS. HM 102, fol. 6r.

²² Brotherton Library MS Lt q 57, fol. 4r.

²³ Folger MS V.a.164, fol. 104r.

²⁴ Since the EEBO facsimile and transcript of the 1611 edition is incomplete, the following is based on John Speed, The history of Great Britaine under the conquests of ye Romans, Saxons, Danes and Normans Their originals, manners, warres, coines & seales: with ye

texts that are inserted into the twenty-third chapter's narrative history of the reign of Elizabeth, which includes pertinent letters, poems, and declaration.²⁵ After the chapter reaches 1600, it reverts to a few years earlier to account 'what lamentable successe the height of his [Essex's] rise brought him', beginning with the previously mentioned return from Ireland, and proceeding through to his insurrection and execution.²⁶ After a brief introduction to the situation, firmly placing the action in mid-1599, the narrative shifts to Essex's return from Ireland 'priuately and vnaccompanied', and omits the details of his departure or his reception at home besides his 'now remaining in the Lord Keepers custody'.²⁷ The letter is finally introduced in terms of the conversations the two would be having, that

he was often and seriously dealt with, by that truly honourable and prouident Statist (of whom hee was intirely affected) somewhat to decline his lofty soaring, lest in mounting too high, he should melt his waxen wings against the hot Sunne, and not to suffer the sore to fester till it were past cure; to which purpose also he afterward wrote him a letter of pithy and sapient perswasions, out of the abundance of his well-wishing heart; the cobby whereof we held worthy to be heere presented.²⁸

All of this seems to prepare us for another dating to October 1599, but inexplicably, the letter of Egerton is dated to 'Iulie 18. An. 1598', consonant with modern datings, but inconsistent with its introductory narrative. Speed does not date the undertakings in Ireland to 1599, but it would be possible to work out as much with reference to previous pages; so it is inexplicable why the dating to fifteen months previous would be given. After Essex's reply, the 1599 narrative is fairly swiftly resumed, with the assembling of a council to censure the earl.²⁹ Perhaps the 18 July dating is a particularly bad typographical error; or perhaps Speed happened to have a copy of the letter dated to July but only had the popular narrative to fit around the Ireland incidents. Unable to produce an alternative set of events he simply fudged together

successions, lives, acts & issues of the English monarchs from Iulius Caesar, to our most gracious soueraigne King Iames (London: William Hall and John Beale, 1614).

²⁵ Speed, History, 831-882.

²⁶ Speed, History, 876-880; his return is previously mentioned on 874.

²⁷ Speed, History, 877.

²⁸ Speed, History, 877.

²⁹ Speed, History, 878.

the two distinct time frames. Either way, this rather removes the validity of Speed as an authority for the dating, and his work is not sustainable as a reliable source.³⁰

These inconsistencies do not mean that early modern readers would have been dissatisfied with the text they had in front of them. The publication of the letters in Speed's *History*, as well as numerous other discursive responses to Essex, testify to modes of reading that do not depend on a strict narrative chronology for their success. In his study of reading history in early modern England, D. R. Woolf describes how early modern readers tended to read their histories 'for the example, the isolated episode, the portable anecdote, rather than end to end for a complete sense of the work'; they did not necessarily take an interest in 'reading for the plot'.³¹ This principal of 'discontinuous' reading underpins the reading of letters in manuscript circulation. Although assessing in strict terms the reasons why early readers chose to read the letters they did can be so difficult, it remains useful to consider how they did so.³² The manuscript miscellanies discussed in the last section of the article will make us reconsider this position, but it remains that the letters' isolation from any clear narrative enables their consumption in ways that would feed into the representation of Essex in key respects.

Though Speed's inconsistent account may be dubious as a historical source, he sets it up so the letters do not rely on their precise relationship to a contextual narrative. Before introducing the Egerton letter, Speed had implied 'that some secret vnder-workings gaue fire to his passionate discontents, I doubt not, hauing seene his owne letters penned in that behalfe'; these letters are not identified with the ones printed, it remains true that the 'vnder-workings', or obscure events themselves, are no more important than the manifestation of these 'passionate discontents'.³³ From the start, Essex is set up as a model, since the 'lamentable successe the height of his rise brought him' recommends him as 'the example of fortunes daliance, and of the unstayed felicity had in this life'.³⁴

³⁰ Braumuller (ed), *Letter-Book*, 417. There are similar inconsistencies in Thomas Birch, *Memoirs of the reign of Queen Elizabeth* 2 volumes (London, 1754), vol. 2, 384-388, 392.

³¹ Woolf, *Reading History in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 104, 106.

³² Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England* (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2012), 203-212.

³³ Speed, *History*, 876.

³⁴ Speed, *History*, 876.

In the run-up to the letters themselves, Speed's text moves from a specific narrative to a positing of the earl as a far more general exemplum. In the quotation above concerning Essex's treatment at the hands of Egerton, and the reference to Daedalus and Icarus' escape from Crete (which may refer to a now lost dialogue between the men), the scene is set for the letters to have significance beyond the bounds of an empirical and factual biography. Speed again employs the inverse progression, from the general example to the specific context:

The distempered humor discovering it selfe in this letter, argueth both the depth of his settled discontent; and the danger of giuing way to violent passions, which not onely depriue the wisest of the vse of their owne vnderstanding, but also blinde their eyes that they cannot see, nor apprehend the benefit of other mens faithful counsels.³⁵

Speed shows that enjoying these vestiges of Essex's fame does not preclude critical judgments on his example, and he is again careful to utilise the letter for its value as an exemplar. Significantly, the text argues for both the condition of Essex's mind ('his settled discontent') and the generic general example to be drawn ('the danger of giuing way to violent passions'). The general argument appears as the more important thing, drawn out of (or read into) the original text. The function of the letter is not, in a strict narrative sense, historical or biographical, but lies instead in foregrounding wider issues in Essex's life as biography and example. The fact that Egerton's letter is further described as 'pithy and sapient perswasion', and 'the copy whereof we held worthy to be heere presented', suggests further that the letter could be prized here for its rhetorical value.³⁶

There is a sense in which Speed's reading of the letters is an unofficial, recreational one. But a comparable use of the letters appears to have been made in the most serious of contexts: Essex's hearing at York House in February 1600. And in the trial, the letter text itself certainly did take a very prominent position. In Camden's account of the proceedings at York House in June 1600, Bacon's charges against Essex are summarised in a short paragraph: Essex 'had made the Earle of *Southampton* Generall of the horse'; he had been too liberal with knighthoods; he had taken his forces to Munster, thereby neglecting to tackle Tyrone; he 'had a conference with him

³⁵ Speed, *History*, 877.

³⁶ Speed, *History*, 877.

[Tyrone] not beseeming the Queenes Maiesty, nor the dignity of a Lord Deputy', made the worse by its secrecy.³⁷ In Camden's account, the letter to Egerton was reserved until the end, becoming the 'centerpiece' of the attack, whose quotation and discussion is given at greater length than any of the preceding charges.³⁸ As Camden relates:

All these points the Queenes learned Councell highly aggravated, producing out of his letters written above two yeeres before, (whereof copies were lately dispersed by his followers,) these short abrupt sentences: No tempest is more furious than the indignation of an impotent Prince. The Queenes heart is hardened. Cannot Princes erre? Can they not wrong their subiects? What I owe as a subiect I know well, and what as Earl Marshall of England. From hence they argued, as if he esteemed the Queene for an impotent Princesse, and voyd of reason, compared her to Pharaoh, whose heart was hardened, that she cared no longer for truth and lustice, and as if he besides his fidelity, ought neither obedience nor thankfulness.³⁹

At this point, the circumstances of the letter's production are disregarded, its whole point being the statement itself and its authorship. Interpretation plays an important role: the idea that Essex 'esteemed the Queene for an impotent Princesse' proceeds from the letter, and is not a statement taken directly from the letter itself. The critical interpretation of the opinions in the signed manifesto becomes paramount, possessing more forensic weight than any of the observed – but disputable – transgressions in Ireland.

These readings of the Egerton-Essex letters are divorced from their immediate context, and thereby place significant faith in the authority of the texts themselves. This corresponds to a tendency in the early reception of Essex to emphasise key documents and sources in the interpretation of his career. Fulke Greville would complain that Essex's 'letters to private men were read openly, by the piercing eyes of an Atturnie's office, which warrantes the construction of every line in the worst sense against the writer', making little appeal to external, subjective evidence for

³⁷ Camden, *Annales*, 530.

³⁸ Andrew Gordon, "A Fortune of Paper Walls": The Letters of Francis Bacon and the earl of Essex', *English Literary Renaissance* 37:3 (2007), 319-36 (326).

³⁹ Camden, *Annales*, 530.

Essex's innocence.⁴⁰ Likewise, Barlow's sermon, which condemns Essex only after a great deal of care, insistently claims that:

I will deliuer nothing vpon meere information and report, which is sometimes malicious, oft times parcial, at all times vncertaine, but what these eares of mine haue heard from his owne mouth in that two houres conference with him before his death, and these eyes of mine seene vnder his owne hand, and subscribed with his name, which since his death I humbly desired to see, which was both honourably and easily graunted vnto me, that I might speake nothing whereof I haue not by those two meanes certayne knowledge.⁴¹

Barlow's privileged position means that he is able to go one step further than Bacon and Speed and rely on documentary evidence whose production he himself has witnessed. Rhetorically, he was good to his word: later in the sermon, he suddenly stops while discussing Essex's religion, 'because it is not within his confession verball or written, to which I promised to stand'.⁴²

A similar emphasis on the words of the earl himself is manifest in a report of his confession written by Abdie Assheton, Essex's personal chaplain. Assheton, even while professing to 'speak nothing but truthe' in his record of the dialogue with Essex, seemed expressly concerned with the imminent reception of his patron's words.⁴³ Regarding Essex's newly discovered guilt, he explained:

he exagge = rated it with .4. Epithites, desyring god to forgive his –
Great: his Bloodie: his Cryinge: his Infectious sinne; whiche woorde
Infectious hee privately had explyained to vs, that it was a leprosie wch
had infected farre & nere. /.

⁴⁰ Alexander Grosart (ed), The works in verse and prose complete of the Right Honourable Fulke Greville, lord Brooke, 4 volumes. (New York: AMS Press, 1966 [1870]), vol. 4, 157.

⁴¹ Barlow, A Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse, sig.Cr.

⁴² Barlow, A Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse, sig.C4iii(r).

⁴³ Braunmuller (ed), Letter-Book, 97, 105.

These wordes are said to aggravate my lords offence, & therefore everie one should be content to take them at the shortest meaninge, and not to ratch them to the furthest.⁴⁴

Assheton recognises the likelihood of misinterpretation and misrepresentation even as he reproduces the grave terms in which Essex expressed his culpability. His appeal, however, is strictly based on the extent of Essex's admission in the speech itself, without recourse to any other evidence of re-inscription.

By visiting these examples of the ways in which people responded to Essex's final acts, and more particularly to his letters, it is possible to see a model of political and historical interpretation that is very different to our own. Instead of seeking extensive and comprehensive ranges of texts with which to assess Essex, and to place his actions in a continuous narrative, there was a tendency to restrict oneself to close reading. The willingness to read in this way meant that continuity of narrative was not a paramount interest for early copyists, and its absence surrounding Egerton's exchange with Essex did not seem to trouble his early commentators, whether they were attacking him or being comparatively sympathetic towards him.

The dissemination of the Egerton-Essex exchange in manuscript is an important part of its cultural significance. At first, the process of dissemination seems likely to have been an active attempt at publicly presenting Essex. According to Camden's record of Bacon's accusation, 'copies were lately dispersed by his followers,' presumably in the hope of rallying support for him.⁴⁵ But the copying of the letters over a much longer period after Essex's death does not have such an obvious function, even though copies made in this period represent the vast majority of those that now survive. Nonetheless, an analysis of a selection of the surviving post-execution copies does give some indication of their role in sustaining Essex's reputation.⁴⁶ Alongside other texts by and about Essex, the letter exchange with Egerton provided a factual report that was open to reading and interpretation by a public of manuscript readers.

⁴⁴ From 'Docter Asheton his owne letter concerninge my Lorde of Essex', in Braunmuller (ed), *Letter-Book*, 102. Ashton immediately proceeds to give his own reading of those 'Epithites'.

⁴⁵ Camden, *Annales*, 530.

⁴⁶ A great deal of archival groundwork on these texts is presented in Gordon 'A Fortune of Paper Walls', 324-7, which discusses the letters in terms of their earliest dissemination. See also Gordon, 'Copicopia, or the Place of Copied Correspondence in Manuscript Culture: A Case Study' in James Daybell and Peter Hinds (eds), *Material Readings of Early Modern Culture: Texts and Social Practices, 1580-1730* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 65-81.

Most recorded copies of the letters appear in larger collections of manuscript texts. They are often copied amongst extensive compilations of texts on sixteenth and seventeenth century politics.⁴⁷ Yet they can also be found in miscellanies in which copying this kind of prose text is very unusual, and next to texts far more oriented towards recreation or entertainment.⁴⁸ When the poet and anthologist Francis Davison included 'Letters of all sorts. especially by the late E. of Essex' on his list of 'manuscripts to gett', it was one of several categories including 'Orations. Apologies. Instructions. Relations.', 'Sports ^masks^ & Entertayments, to the Late Queen. / The King. &c.', and 'POEMS of all sorts'.⁴⁹ Their popularity is attested by their copying in notebooks where there is little established interest in copying complete texts at all.⁵⁰

The current account is most interested in collections in which texts by and about Essex are a sustained interest to their compiler. Groupings of such texts can be usefully thought of as 'Essexiana', though this is modern label, and does not represent a stable or authorised corpus.⁵¹ Letters are a crucial part of Essexiana, including items like Penelope Rich's letter to Queen Elizabeth on New Year's Day 1600; and an exchange between Francis Bacon and Henry Howard, in which Bacon attempted (unsuccessfully) to re-align his patronal allegiances away from Essex; and the Egerton-Essex exchange most prominently. Others, such as a letter from Baron Mountjoy to Essex on his absence from court, appear significantly less frequently. The responsibility for the aggregation of Essexiana is very often the result of work done by readers and collectors. Thus, while this body of material should be regarded at some level as having had a role in the 'construction of the self', or acting as a tool that a court figure could use to 'make his case for him', we must remember that the late courtier's representation was subject to all the contingencies of manuscript circulation, including the actions of copyists.⁵² In miscellanies, that representation often means that both narrative and fragmentary readings of the late courtier's life come together in suggestive ways. Whereas in the early dissemination of the letters,

⁴⁷ For example, Hopkinson MS; BL Add. 48126; Osborn fb 117; Osborn b 8; Brotherton Lt q 57.

⁴⁸ BL Harl 677, Bod Don. C. 54.

⁴⁹ BL MS Harl. 298, fol. 159v.

⁵⁰ Chetham's MS A.2.23 44v-45v (reverse foliation).

⁵¹ By that token Essexiana has a form distinct from the body of texts edited by Pauline Croft as 'A Collection of Several Speeches and Treatises of the Late Lord Treasurer Cecil ... In the Years 1608, 1609, and 1610', *Camden Society* 4th series 34 (1987), 245-318.

⁵² Daybell, *The Material Letter*, 188; Gordon, 'A Fortune of Paper Walls', 336.

the texts were equated to statements of allegiance or affiliation (as we have seen), late copies seldom demand or encourage an 'appropriate' reading. Instead, they tacitly invite reading and interpretation, whatever the ostensible motivations for their collection may be. Whether their circulation was motivated by categories such as 'entertainment', 'antiquarianism' or 'education', their provision of raw material for independent thought and construction seems common to most instances of copies that now survive.

In the extensive letter-book Folger MS V.a.321, copied in two trained hands, the Egerton-Essex letters appear to have been placed into a suggestive chronological relationship with other materials relating to the end of the earl's life, in spite of a 'general lack of perceptible organization' across the manuscript as a whole.⁵³ The particular choice of texts the manuscript includes – some of which are very rare – seem especially balanced in offering both 'primary' sources together with competing interpretations of Essex's life. The opening thirteen folios of the manuscript are constituted of Essexiana, opening with the Egerton-Essex exchange (fols 1r-4v). They are followed by a summary list of seven charges made against Essex in his 1599 Star Chamber hearing (fols 4v-5r). After a blank half-page, the prose texts resume with a copy of a letter sent from Essex to Elizabeth expressing regret for his ruined position, which is neatly transcribed over two pages (fols 5v-6r) and followed by Penelope Rich's letter to Elizabeth from New Year's Day 1600 (fols 6v-7v). Letters continue with an exchange between Francis Bacon and Henry Howard (fols 8r-9r). A more direct emphasis on Essex then returns with speeches made by Cecil against Essex, dated to February of 1601, presumably between his insurrection and arraignment (fols 9v-11r); and finally, with a far more sympathetic account of the confession witnessed by Essex's pastor, Abdie Ashheton (fols 11v-13v), another rare text.

Overall, the texts appear in accurate chronological order, from the beginning of Essex's real problems to his final execution, and suggest something like a narrative sequence. The exchange with Egerton offers an overview of the position that Essex had been reduced to, subsequently substantiated by the more specific list of charges made against him on his return from Ireland. The petitionary letters that follow corroborate how the change of circumstances announced in his letter to Egerton had become a permanent feature of his life. As if we were to wonder what this dejected,

⁵³ Braunmuller, Letter-book, 34.

friendless position meant, Cecil is on hand to offer instruction in how he was a 'most trecherous & popular Traytor' (fol. 9v) – with details of all his seditious transgressions. This stands in considerable contrast to Abdie Assheton's account of the confession, in which he is vitally concerned not to lay 'the least wrongfull imputation' upon Essex (fol. 13v).

This collection could never be taken for a complete account of Essex's last years. The coverage that V.a.321 offers is partial even in comparison to what is offered by other manuscripts. While providing both 'literary' texts and rather less stylish pieces of evidence, V.a.321 gives a concise though fragmentary overview of the most important moments of the end of Essex's life. Within this scheme, however, the potential flexibility and indeterminate dating of the 'great quarrel' letters, and others, has the potential for undertaking more generalised readings and interpretations of Essex. The arrangement provides suggestive dynamics of movement and development that are interesting, but would not be strictly necessary.

Short and snappy texts were not the only way for early modern readers to consider Essex's life, as detailed accounts of his appearance in Star Chamber and his final arraignment circulated widely in manuscript, though less extensively than the letters.⁵⁴ Such texts provided the interpretative to-and-fro hinted at in V.a.321 with substantial primary documentation, in a relatively cohesive and concise form. Chetham's Library MS A.4.15 presents an unusual case of an amateur-copied manuscript that brings together some very extensive tracts with the more ephemeral letters associated with Essex. MS A.4.15's collection of Essexiana begins with two long prose accounts, of the trial leading to Essex's execution (fols 1r-15r), and then the Star Chamber speeches of November 1599 (fols 18r-23r).⁵⁵ After these texts, and five blank sides, the letter from Egerton to Essex appears, though it is missing its final paragraph and the crucial response from Essex – most likely the result of a copying session truncated for reasons unrelated to the text itself. The procession of Essexiana is briefly stopped - by a widely circulated letter from Elizabeth to Lady Norris, concerning the death of the latter's son in Ireland in 1599 - before resuming with Penelope Rich's letter to Elizabeth (fols 29r-30r), a short letter from a dejected Essex in Ireland (fol.30v), a letter from Mountjoy written on Essex's absence from

⁵⁴ For a collection of legal prose tracts very different in its presentation from anything discussed here, see Bod. MS Bod. 966, 289-309.

⁵⁵ It is likely that both of these texts were in general circulation: another version of the first can be found in Bod. MS e Mus 55, fols. 17r-23v.

court (fol.31r), and the exchange between Francis Bacon and Henry Howard (fols 32r-33r). Overall, MS A.4.15 combines some of the most substantial and detailed accounts of Essex's life available in manuscript, along with more fragmentary moments of letter-writing. The long prose tracts integrate many different pieces of documentation and interpretation, which as collections do not seem to speak for a particular point of view.

The material in MS A.4.15 is not carefully arranged, owing to the method of the manuscript's production. It seems likely that the texts were copied simply as they came to hand, without any intermediate stage of organization. But also, the texts in A.4.15 were brought together by different copyists at different times: those texts up to and including the Penelope Rich letter are written in hand A, which is possibly professional but nonetheless quite variable in its presentation; hand B copies Essex's letter to Elizabeth, the letter from Mountjoy, and the Bacon-Howard exchange. These are the only contributions that hand B makes to the manuscript, making B a rather auxiliary contributor who does not have any long-term commitment to the manuscript's production. With these practical issues so near the surface of A.4.15 it is unsurprising that organization should be such a secondary concern. Asking about the underlying motives behind the collection of Essexiana is made difficult by the overall composition of the manuscript. Following its prose texts, MS A.4.15 presents a major collection of poetry, including verse by John Davies, Donne, Ben Jonson, Walter Raleigh and Francis Davison. If the book began with an ostensibly serious and high-minded political function, it is certainly not sustained throughout; the boundaries between pure 'entertainment' or 'recreational' reading, and political analysis, seem to have little meaning here.⁵⁶

V.a.321 and A.4.15 present extensive collections of Essexiana, but in some cases, complete manuscript volumes are given entirely to those materials. Other important figures had similar attention given them – for example, the Somersets in the 1610s, and the earl of Castlehaven in the 1620s – but it is not common, and indicates Essex's particular public importance at this time. Another two manuscripts, Folger MS V.a.164 and Rosenbach MS 444/27, illustrate the contrasting ways in which a collection specific to Essex could be produced and presented.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ A similar problem might be traced in any collection that intercalates Essexiana with more varied patterns of collection – see especially Bod. Rawl. D. 1048.

⁵⁷ Other complete volumes of Essexiana include BL MS Royal 17 B L and NLS, MS Adv. 34.2.10; the latter is the subject of Gordon, 'Copycopia, or the Place of Copied Correspondence in Manuscript Culture: A Case Study', 65-81.

Rosenbach MS 444/27 is a slim quarto, finely bound in pale vellum with a green ribbon tie still attached to the rear cover's outer edge. All of its contents were copied in a confident professional secretary hand, with the one exception of a final poem copied in a later hand (and not on the topic of Essex). Substantial gaps are left between different entries, perhaps as 'a display of conspicuous consumption'.⁵⁸ It has a more immediate aesthetic appeal than any of the other manuscripts discussed here. The texts it compiles are familiar from the Essexiana widely available in the early seventeenth century: it begins with a letter from Essex to Elizabeth (fol. 2r-v) as also found in V.a.321, and goes on to include an unusual piece on 'Considerations touchinge the Peace now in Speeche', possibly authored by Essex (fols 4r-10r), a poem by Essex ('There was a tyme when seellye Bees coulde speake', fols 12r-13r), Essex's correspondence with Egerton (13r-14r, 15r-16r), finishing with the longest text, Essex's 'Apology' (19r-41r).⁵⁹

Although the 'Apology', like the 'Considerations', responds to particular moments in Essex's history, this volume has no documentary lists nor extensive prose accounts; there is an emphasis on the more 'literary' side of Essexiana. Considered together with its physical form, it seems very likely that the targeted reader was someone other than the copyist; perhaps it was even produced for individual sale without a specific user in mind. The Essex-Egerton letters, although key texts in Essex's life and in any narrative biography of the earl, easily fall into this space, where he might be treated more on the grounds of exemplar than a criminal.

The sense of this being a 'finished' book at some level is mirrored in a contrasting way in Folger MS V.a.164, which has been described as 'one of the most extensive collections of texts relating to Essex's treason trial'.⁶⁰ Associated with one Francis ap Rice, who was either the scribe or the author of the manuscript's tracts, it begins with a descriptive title page, advertising itself as 'The manner of the proceedings of Robert Earle of Essex and Henry Earle of Southampton, with their Arreignment'

⁵⁸ As suggested in Gibson, 'Casting off Blanks: Hidden Structures in Early Modern Paper Books', in Daybell and Hinds (eds), *Material Readings*, 208-28 (213).

⁵⁹ An unusual text, other copies of 'Considerations...', can be found in Folger MS V.a.164, fol.134v; Surrey History Centre, LM/1331/8; Birmingham City Archives MS 3887/107/1-2 (where it is dated to August 1598); Cambridge University Library, MS Mm. iv. 24 fols 58-9, and BL Cotton Vespasian C/XIII fols. 145r-146v. On 'There was a tyme...' see Steven W. May, 'The Poems of Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford and of Robert Devereux, Second Earl of Essex,' *Studies in Philology* 77.5 (1980), 109-10. Other, unrelated texts have been compiled in a later hand at fols 1r and 41r.

⁶⁰ Gordon, 'A Fortune of Paper Walls', 327.

(fol.16r). The texts inside give a very impressive range of perspectives on Essex's final insurrection and the legal proceedings that followed, beginning with an account of his actions on the 8th of February, 1601, with a special emphasis on the speeches made to him by the councillors who came to his house (fols 24r-33r); after that, a substantial account of his arraignment with Southampton on the 19th of February, though different to that in MS A.4.15 (fols 35r-78v), backed up by a more succinct list of 'The general proofs of the points of the indightments' (fols 80r-82v) and a description of the court's layout for the arraignment (fols 86v-89r). The portion of the manuscript devoted to these narrative and descriptive accounts concludes with 'Speeches in the starr Chamber against Robert Earle of Essex the xjth of february 1601' (fols 89v-99r). The extent of these accounts is striking: even without offering, for example, any responses to the 1599 Star Chamber speeches, the arraignment is presented with a staggering range of references. The volumes' three letters appear after the long tracts, and are announced with the title 'Letters sent vnto Robert Earle of Essex with his answere to the same' (fol.104r); here, the Essex-Egerton correspondence (fols 104r-108v) is featured alongside Penelope Rich's letter to Elizabeth (fols 120r-123r). These are joined by another document – a list of prisoners taken with Essex, along with their places of imprisonment (fols 123v-132r) – before the final piece of Essexiana in the volume, his poem 'ffrom silent night true register of moanes' (fols 134r-144r). Whereas the Rosenbach manuscript prefers those more 'imaginative' texts that might be unhinged from very specific circumstances and offer to construct the image of Essex in one or another particular way, the Francis ap Rice manuscript is far more invested in the minutiae of a narrative account of Essex's last days. Nonetheless, this does not imply either sympathy or antagonism towards Essex; it is simply a different mode of reading. As a result, the letters seem an almost odd choice for inclusion, more a part of the reading experience of the poems included, rather than the lists and narrations.

The Essexiana in the manuscripts discussed here neither manifest nor demand a partisan opinion. Receiving a copy of the letters between Egerton and Essex may once have been a mark of following the Earl, but going into the seventeenth century, the significance of copying and reading the same texts was no longer so clear-cut. Faced with a similar set of primary materials, Pauline Croft has written that 'the impact on public opinion of the material contained in these documents, as they circulated for well over a decade among the politically aware, can only be guessed

at'.⁶¹ But the contribution and impact made by Essexiana was to keep his life and complaints in the memory of a new generation of readers who may or may not have been aware of the events around the time of Essex's death. The efficacy of manuscript letters in doing so is demonstrated by the diverse contexts in which they were collected. Such different circumstances could readily fulfil many approaches to reading, while still requiring a modicum of interpretation to make the texts meaningful and significant. Few copyists appear to have been interested in bringing together complete narrative accounts of Essex's life, and what materials they did compile required independent judgment. Exactly what compilers made of the texts, once at hand, is liable to remain elusive: but to a surprisingly large extent, the choice was in their hands.

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⁶¹ Croft, 'A Collection', 256.

⁶² I am grateful for discussions of Essex's letters with many people, but especially Dr Lucy Munro, who helped me discover the richness of the primary sources concerned with his reception.