

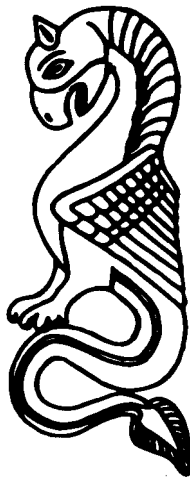
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Queen Elizabeth and Essex: A Dutch Rhetoricians' Play

Wim Hüsken¹

Introduction

The oldest history of 's-Gravenpolder, a village located on the island of Zuid-Beveland in the province of Zeeland, dates back to 1315 when Count William III of Holland (1287-1337) ordered that the salt marshes bordering the 'Voiirtrappe' area in the south-eastern part of the island be enclosed. Hence the name "'s-Gravenpolder', the Count's reclaimed land. Two years later, in 1317, the first harvest was gathered in. Since detailed information as to when people started living in the polder is not available it is uncertain whether the new land was, in its early years, merely used for agricultural reasons or for habitation as well.²

Some time during the sixteenth century a Rhetoricians' Chamber, named *De Fiolieren* or Stock-Gillyflowers, was founded in the village, by then the central habitat of the polder which had been renamed Middel- or Koornpolder. The precise date of the Chamber's foundation is unknown but, according to an archival record, it was re-established in 1596 after having been inactive for many years. From then on its members continued to work as a Rhetoricians' Chamber until 1818. Some time during the 1920s, the town archivist D.A. Poldermans retrieved a large collection of documents belonging to *De Fiolieren* from under a fool's costume in an old milk container previously used as a ballot box. Apart from a few account books and attendance records it contained a relatively large number of plays as well. On an earlier occasion I gave a synopsis of the contents of this remarkable collection.³ Part of this treasure-trove is a play on the execution of Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, who was beheaded on 25 February 1601, after being found guilty of high treason.

Why would members of a Rhetoricians' Chamber in a little village such as 's-Gravenpolder be interested in this topic? What sources did the author of the play use? And is his account of Essex's affairs and his trial accurate? Before

addressing these questions I shall summarize the play and outline some of the most fascinating events in the earl's short yet turbulent life.

The Play

Two manuscripts of the play survive. The first one – hereinafter 'MS a' – is signed by a certain Michael Michaelis, working under the motto 'Traght naart Beste', Attempt for the Best; this manuscript is dated '1629 April 11'. Whether Michaelis was the author of the play or the scribe who copied the text from an older script is unknown. The second manuscript, 'MS b', also in the archives of the *Fiolieren*, is dated 9 June 1694. This version is signed by a certain 'Adriaen Eeuwoutsen raes'. A reason why neither of the two manuscripts may represent the original text can be found near the end of the play where one of the characters reminds the audience of the long time the Chamber had been inactive. In or shortly after 1601, the year in which Essex was beheaded, this remark would have made sense, but in 1629, more than thirty years after the Chamber's restoration, it would hardly have been meaningful.⁴ So both Raes and Michaelis may be scribes. As for the date of the conjectured original, there are indications that it must have been written after 1603. I shall return to this matter below.

The play opens with a dialogue between two allegorical characters, representatives of evil called Schyn van Recht (Semblance of Justice) and Jaloers Bedryf (Jealous Affair), the former a man, the latter a woman. Their main task in the play consists of seducing other personages by whispering jealous thoughts into their ears, an activity typical for the type of stage-character they represent in Dutch Rhetoricians' drama, the so-called *sinnekens*.⁵ Occasionally they notify the audience about what happens off-stage. In their opening scene they inform one another about the journey Essex has recently made to Ireland in order to suppress the Irish revolt led by Hugh O'Neill, earl of Tyrone:

Hy was deur bevel na Ierlandt gesonden ras.

Jaloers Bedryf

Dats waer, om dat Herry Bagnal schier gesonden was,
Tjaer vyftienhondert tnegentigh en acht.

Schyn van Recht

Teron sloegh vyftien hondert Engelsen met cracht.
Daer waren onder veel capiteyns en officieren.

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Jaloers Bedryf

De reste berghde haer in Arnach en de quartieren

En op de sterckte Fagh om behouden tleven. [MS b, fol. 2v]

[He had quickly been ordered to Ireland. *Jealous Affair*: That's true, because Henry Bagenal was unexpectedly killed in the year 1598. *Semblance of Justice*: Tyrone forcefully beat 1500 English, many of them captains and officers. *Jealous Affair*: The rest went into hiding in Armagh and its quarters and at the stronghold of Fagh to save their lives.]

The sympathy of the sinnekens obviously resides with Essex. They describe him as a brave man experienced in matters of warfare (*een man in oorloge ervaren en cloeck*). It was he, they say, who, through his forbearance, brought the war to an end (*met syn gratie doorloge tenden brochte*). Back home, however, he was arrested and at this very moment he is imprisoned in the house of the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. Schyn van Recht observes that Essex looks like bursting with sorrow and anger (*Essex schynt te bersten van rou en spyt*). The sinnekens betray their true character when Jaloers Bedryf remarks that he will make Essex go mad (*Ick, Jaloers Bedryf, sal hem doen dol rasen*) while Schyn van Recht says that they intend to conceal their deeds by giving them a polished outlook (*een bepeerelt schyn*).

In the next scene Essex, *een costelyck man* (a wealthy man) bemoans his state. He realizes that a sham of justice and jealousy have caused him to be in this predicament, thus alluding to the names of the sinnekens as the driving forces behind his opponents' plotting. He has always been loyal to his Queen and he remembers well his success in Cadiz which was his crowning achievement and reflected favourably on her. The sinnekens encourage him to stay put, but Essex feels weak and ill. Meanwhile Elysabeth (Queen Elizabeth) wonders why so many people turn out to be traitors once they carry a sword. Essex in particular has let her down. She asks Baron Bochorst (Thomas Sackville Lord Buckhurst) to find out why Essex decided to turn against his Queen. When she leaves, a number of heads appear from behind the curtain shouting, *Godt bewaer de coninginne*, God save the Queen. In a scene-apart the two sinnekens rejoice in their success: they will see to it that Essex's trial will be a real case of sham justice. In it Menich Advocaet (Many a Lawyer), who represents the law, accuses Essex of having led the army to the southern parts of Ireland rather than to the north. Moreover, he

alleges he has wasted 30,000 guilders, spoken face to face with the earl of Tyrone and, against the Queen's express command, knighted many English soldiers. Since his premature homecoming he has achieved very little or nothing. Menich Advocaet therefore accuses him of 'lese magestates' (*lèse majesté*). Essex tries to justify his behaviour, but the sinnekens, who listen in on this cross-examination, are not convinced. Baron Bochorst is won over, however, and allows the earl to return home, though not to visit the Queen.

Lord Cobham (Henry Brooke Lord Cobham) is not satisfied with the outcome of Essex's trial. In a short monologue he discloses his intention to bring his opponent down, no matter how. Coincidentally Walter Raeleygh (Sir Walter Raleigh) crosses his path, his mood in high spirits. Now our time has come, we shall plant our ideas into the Queen's mind, he boasts (*Nu sullen wy in de coninginne ons verstant saeyen*). Like Darius and Julius Caesar, the earl has finally fallen into disgrace. The sinnekens decide to increase their evil doings by insinuating further jealous thoughts into the ears of Cobham, Cecyl (Sir Robert Cecil) and others:

Cobham, Cecyl en ander syn teghen hem.

Die moeten wy ter dege in d'oor blasen.

[MS a, fol. 7r]

Introducing themselves by their 'surnames', 'Recht' (Justice) and 'Bedryf' (Affair), rather than by their full names, the sinnekens offer their services to Essex, who has reentered the stage in a desperate mood. The earl mistakes them for Recht Bedryf (Honest Affair). They confirm his suspicion regarding his foes; some would indeed want to see him hanged. In addition to that, they tell him that his servant Daniel has secretly sold copies of his letters to his enemies, pretending that they are originals, for the incredible sum of 20,000 guilders.

Southampton (Henry Wriothesley earl of Southampton), is the next person to pay the earl a visit. He reveals that he knows very well what goes on in the minds of Essex's antagonists using terms directly related to the names of the sinnekens:

Uut Jalosie ist dat sy uwen staat benyden.

Duer Schyn van Reght sy de conincken playsant rieden

Om u te stellen vanden hooghen graat besyden.

...

Sy maken haar wys, dat wit swert is.

[MS a, fol. 8r]

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[Out of Jealousy they envy your state, through Semblance of Justice they happily advised the Queen to depose you from your high position . . . They make her believe that white is black.]

The only person who might be able to change the situation is the Queen herself; Southamton therefore advises his friend to try and get access to her.

Regretting what has happened to Essex, Elysabeth delivers a melancholic speech about the reversals of fortune suffered by famous people from antiquity such as Alexander the Great and Hannibal. The sinnekens tell her that Essex is not worth her affection because he is a traitor who would gladly be prepared to serve as an assistant to the Spanish king. When they learn that the Queen wants to hear Essex's side of the story they quickly return to his house to warn him not to accept her invitation because he may risk being arrested. There Essex's secretary proposes to his master that he should storm the court, occupy its gates and main entrances, and present his case to the Queen. Essex himself is thinking of something violent (*iet heftichs*) such as an assault on the City of London. However, no decision is taken as yet.

When Essex does not appear at court, Elysabeth sends for him. Once again the sinnekens advise the earl not to lend his ears to the Queen's demands. Sommich Raetsheer (Many a Councilor) is granted access to Essex but only to be kept prisoner while Essex and his followers march on London. The sinnekens give an 'eyewitness account' of what happens in town during which two shots are fired (*hier schietmen tweemael*). Schyn van Recht reports that Essex was shot through his hat, that one of his servants was killed and that his stepfather, Christopher Blount, was mortally wounded. When Essex eventually has to surrender the sinnekens cry victory.

In the next scene Robbert Cecyl (Robert Cecil), Cobham and Raeleygh reflect on the reasons why Essex attempted this coup. According to Cecyl his revenge evolved out of a jealous affair, reinforced by a semblance of justice. Once more the names of the sinnekens are used to explain the impulses behind the motives of an individual:

Maar uut Jaloers Bedryf syn dees wraken gebloyt,
Daar Schyn van Reght hem in gesterckt heeft.

[MS a, fol. 16r]

The three men end their conversation by making their way to Westminster where Essex will be tried, while at court Elysabeth and Baron Bochorst confer about how to judge him. The Queen tells Bochorst that she has asked Essex's peers to act as his justices. However, nobody will be allowed to defend Essex on penalty of undergoing the same punishment as Captain Lee who was hanged because he dared to speak in the earl's favour.

At the beginning of the trial Essex requests permission to have some of the judges removed from the bench for being prejudiced. Sommich Raetsheer refuses because an equal number of the earl's own friends appear to be present as well. After reminding the court of the Irish disaster, Sommich Raetsheer refers to Essex's roaming through London during that fatal day of the assault on the City, shouting that England had been sold to the Spanish Infanta. Essex retorts that he never intended to do the Queen any harm but that he has three enemies: Robbert Cecyl, Lord Cobham, and Raeleygh. These men in particular would not hesitate to deliver England up to the Spaniards, as Cnollis (Sir Francis Knollys) will be able to confirm. Following the statement delivered by this witness, Sommich Raetsheer pronounces the case to be sufficiently clarified and the peers retreat to judge the case. Shortly after that Baron Bochorst reads out the sentence: Essex and Southamton will both be beheaded on a day and a time to be set by the Queen. In a monologue following the trial, Elysabeth indicates that it is impossible for her to pardon Essex even if he were to request this, but the earl does not seem to have any plans in that direction. The sinnekens, appearing on stage by the end of the Queen's monologue, differ in opinion about what should be done with the two convicted men. Schyn van Recht favours lifelong imprisonment, whereas Jaloers Bedryf prefers to see them beheaded. Asked by his companion where he was during the trial, Jaloers Bedryf informs him that he was in the hearts of the peers. Had it not been for him they would never have sentenced Essex to death. Schyn van Recht for his part sat on the tongues of the lawyers and judges:

[*Schyn van Recht*]

Waar was Jaloers Bedryf met syn perten
Doemen pleyte?

Jaloers Bedryf

Waer?

Schyn van Recht

Ja.

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Jaloers Bedryf

Ick sat binnen inde heeren herten.
Ten ware duer my, sy haddent gelaten.
Waer saet ghy?

Schyn van Recht

Ick sat op de tonghe vande advocaten
En reghters; die voedick al met liste. [MS a, fol. 20r-v]

The next scene is set in the Tower where Essex bewails his ill fortune, and Elysabeth gives voice to her own regrets. The following morning Mr Carew (Sir George Carew) is sent to the Tower to announce that the Queen has decided to change Essex's death penalty to life imprisonment. On hearing him pronounce these words the sinnekens panic. They will do everything they can to prevent this. Subsequently, Sir Edewaert Darie (Edward Darcy)⁶ appears on stage saying that the Queen has ordered Essex's immediate execution. Once more the sinnekens supply the audience with an eyewitness account of the event but this time it is also shown on stage. They notice that the scaffold has been made out of the timber used to support the canons in one of Essex's biggest victories, the battle of Cadiz. Essex prepares to die by saying a last prayer. Another messenger, Jhon Killegruw (John Killigrew), arrives from the court with letters from the Queen, and her ring as an extra token of credibility, to save the earl's life, but he is too late; Essex has just been beheaded. Elated to see their work end in this way the sinnekens sing a merry song. Edewaert Darie and Jhon Killegruw meet each other centre-stage where Darie reports Essex's last minutes in graphic detail to Killegruw. Their tasks completed, the sinnekens decide to retire, particularly as the whole world now hates them. Finally Darie and Killegruw describe Essex's death to the Queen who bursts into tears on hearing the news and leaves the two men behind. In concluding speeches they address the audience reminding all present that pride frequently leads to a downfall when Lady Fortune turns her wheel.

Robert Devereux, earl of Essex (1565-1601)

Robert Devereux was born on 10 November 1565, the third child and first son of Walter Devereux (1539-76), first earl of Essex, and Lady Lettice Knollys († 1634).⁷ Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife, was an aunt of Lady Lettice's

mother, Katherine Carey (1529-69). Hence, Robert's mother was a second cousin to Queen Elizabeth.⁸ Two years after Walter Devereux's death, Lady Lettice remarried, on 21 September 1578, Robert Dudley, the earl of Leicester (1532-88), and he in turn introduced the young earl to court in September 1585. Dudley's first military undertaking followed in December 1585, when as Master of the Horse he joined Leicester to the United Provinces. In reward for his valiant part in the capture of Zutphen, Essex was made knight banneret. By 23 November 1586, he was back home.

Essex became a regular visitor to the Queen, accompanying her on her long rides, talking and playing cards with her until early in the morning. His star rose rapidly, but he also made enemies, Walter Raleigh (c. 1552-1618) and Robert Cecil (1563-1612) in particular. On 18 June 1587 Essex was made Master of the Queen's Horse. When, in the following month, he had a serious argument with the Queen about his sister Dorothy, who had fallen from grace, Essex jumped on his horse and rode to Sandwich with the intention of crossing to the United Provinces to help the Dutch army resist the Spanish siege of Sluys, claiming that 'A beautiful death is better than a disquiet life'.⁹ Moments before he could board the ship he was, by Elizabeth's command, stopped by Robert Carey.¹⁰

In the Spring of 1590 Essex secretly married Frances Walsingham (1567-1632), the widow of Philip Sidney, who had died on 17 October 1586 after receiving a mortal blow in the battle of Zutphen a few weeks earlier. In order to help the Protestant French king, Henry IV (1533-1610), in his struggle against anti-Protestant resistance in Rouen, Essex was sent to Normandy at the head of an army of about 4,000 soldiers. Helped by a number of more experienced warriors than himself, Essex anchored on 3 August 1591 in the port of Dieppe. The enterprise ended in a disaster, as most of Essex's subsequent military exploits would. A further disappointment awaited him back home when he learned that not he but one of his rivals, Lord Buckhurst (1536-1608), had been elected Chancellor of Oxford University.

Fortune smiled again upon Essex after Raleigh had seduced and secretly married one of Queen Elizabeth's maids of honour, Elizabeth Throckmorton. A few months after she had given birth to a son, in March 1592, she and Raleigh were imprisoned in the Tower. Following their release the two were banned from court – Raleigh for about five years, Bess, 'who would prove a domineering wife'¹¹ for the rest of her lifetime. On 25 February 1593, Essex was honoured with a seat on the Privy Council. Further members were, among others, Thomas Sackville Lord Buckhurst, the Lord High Butler of England, William Cobham, the Lord

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Warden of the Cinque Ports and Lord Chamberlain, his maternal grandfather Francis Knollys (c. 1514-96) the Treasurer of the Household, and Robert Cecil. The next few years were relatively quiet until, seeing that the Spanish king was, after the disastrous 1588 enterprise, once again preparing for an invincible Armada to invade England, Elizabeth decided, in March 1596, that an English fleet should sail to Spain to prevent Philip II from carrying out his plan. Essex and Charles Howard, Lord Effingham, were appointed its commanders with Raleigh as Rear Admiral. The expedition for Cadiz set out in early June with one of the squadrons consisting of twenty-four ships led by the Dutch Admiral Jan van Duvenvoorde (1547-1610). The expedition was relatively successful, and upon his return to England Essex was welcomed as a hero. The Spaniards, however, refused to give up their attempts to attack England and in the next year another fleet was ready to sail. Eager for a reprise of his former success, Essex offered to strike once more, but this time the journey would end in disaster on a grand scale. An attempt to capture the island of San Miguel in the Azores failed, a Spanish fleet worth £3,500,000 in silver was missed by only three hours, while enemy ships were heading for the English coast. The new Armada was subsequently shipwrecked off the coast of Finisterre in October 1597, however, and by the end of the same year Essex reached the highest position in his career when he was appointed to the post of earl Marshal.

Meanwhile the Irish Lords were stepping up their rebellion against the English. Hugh O'Neill (c. 1550-1616), earl of Tyrone, had become the uncontested leader of the resistance¹² with Ulster as the centre of war. On 14 August 1598, Henry Bagenal, Marshal of the Army, failed to recapture the Yellow Fort at Blackwater, losing his life in the attempt, and what remained of the English army had to retreat to the town of Armagh. On receiving the news of the Irish disaster, Essex persuaded the Queen that a firm hand was needed and that he himself was the only suitable candidate for restoring law and order. Assigned the task of punishing Tyrone, Essex reached Dublin on 15 April 1599 with one of the largest armies ever sent overseas during Elizabeth's reign.¹³ On his arrival he appointed one of his long-standing devotees, Henry Wriothesley (1573-1624), earl of Southampton, as General of the Horse. By doing so he defied the Queen's command which had explicitly forbidden him to use his authority to that end. During the next few months very little progress was made. Disease and massive desertion caused the English army to shrink to about 4,000 men. In early September Essex even attempted to make peace with Tyrone, much to Elizabeth's dissatisfaction, and by the end of the month the earl returned to England without

having achieved anything.

Back in London Essex wished to speak to the Queen at once. He barged into her bedroom without having washed his face or changed his attire and he spoke to her for a few minutes. Later the same day, refreshed and somewhat more presentable, they had a second conversation but it was obvious that Elizabeth was not satisfied with the outcome of Essex's journey. Members of the Privy Council advised her to have him arrested and later in the evening Essex was put under house arrest at York House on the Strand, the residency of Thomas Egerton (c. 1540-1617), Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. Essex fell ill almost instantaneously and, by the end of the year, was near dying. It took him almost half a year to recover. By the Spring of 1600 he was allowed to return home but his house arrest was not terminated and appeals to the Queen proved to be of no avail. On one occasion Essex even sneered, 'shortly they will play me upon the stage'.¹⁴ In the end it was decided that the earl's conduct in Ireland should be assessed at law. From 5 June, the better part of the summer was spent on lengthy interrogations but on 26 August it was the Queen herself who made an end to the trial by deciding to release Essex from imprisonment. He was, however, still not permitted to return to court.

By the beginning of 1601 Essex, for whatever reason, had become more and more convinced there was a plot to remove Queen Elizabeth from the throne, which would mean a victory for his life-long opponents, Cecil, Raleigh, Cobham, and Buckhurst in particular. On 3 February he assembled an elite gathering of supporters at his house on the Strand to consider possible solutions, by which time there were rumours that Essex himself would be assassinated. On Sunday 8 February, the earl and his followers waged an assault on the City, the Tower, and the court. Within hours it was clear that the inhabitants of London did not support this rebellion and that Essex and his men were outnumbered by those who claimed to defend the Queen's honour. Back home at Essex House, the former residence of the earl of Leicester,¹⁵ the earl was besieged by troops of the Lord Admiral, Charles Howard, and about ten o'clock in the evening Essex and his men surrendered. The earl was brought to Lambeth Palace and from there, at the crack of dawn of the following day, to the Tower. On 19 February he and some of his fellow-conspirators – among them the earl of Southampton and Essex's step-father Christopher Blount (c. 1556-1601) – were tried. Six days later, on 25 February, Essex was beheaded. Southampton was sentenced to death too, but the Queen decided to commute his sentence to life imprisonment. Two years later, after James I had ascended the throne, he was released from prison.

Accuracy of the Play

The author of the play from 's-Gravenpolder supplies his audience with many details of the events leading up to Essex's eventual death, some closer to the official version than others.

In their first dialogue the sinnekens refer to the earl's Irish adventure. According to them, fifteen-hundred English were killed in 1598 in the battle of the Yellow Fort at Blackwater between Henry Bagenal – who lost his life at the event – and Hugh O'Neill, the earl of Tyrone. Those who managed to save their lives allegedly retreated to Armagh and the neighbouring stronghold of Fagh (*de sterckte Fagh*). Henry's half-brother Samuel prevented the Irish of gaining an even bigger victory. Present day estimates of how many men actually lost their lives vary between 830 and 2000.¹⁶ Hence with his estimate of 1500 men killed the author of the play was not very far off the mark. His observation that it was Samuel Bagenal who prevented the English from having to stomach an even bigger disaster than suffered on 14 August is also very much to the point. A stronghold called *Fagh* seems, however, to be unknown. The amount of money wasted by Essex on this Irish campaign is estimated by the author of the play at 30,000 guilders. Although the total funds spent on this journey were many times larger than that, Essex's private income must have come close to the amount mentioned. His Irish army, excluding those civil servants not actively involved in the war, cost the English state £277,782.15s; the earl himself was paid £10 per day.¹⁷ In various documents, among them Camden's *History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth*, the costs of Essex's Irish adventure is set at £30,000.¹⁸

On the morning of the assault on the City of London, the playwright has Sommich Raetsheer knock at Essex's door to order him to report to court. Did the author of the play know the names of the four deputies of the Privy Council – Thomas Egerton, the earl of Worcester, John Popham, and Essex's uncle William Knollys – who came to summon the earl in the early morning of 8 February 1601? The name Sommich Raetsheer does hint at a plural concept but it will have been for practical reasons that the author decided to introduce an allegorical character representing the four delegates in one person.

Essex and Southampton are regarded as the two highest noblemen involved in the rebellion. The list of offenders was, however, much longer: six, including Essex, eventually lost their lives, Charles Danvers and Christopher Blount being the most prominent amongst them. It is noteworthy in this respect that the author

of the play has the Queen inquire with Baron Bochorst whether 'Capiteyn Lee' (Captain Lea), one of Essex's men in Ireland, has already been executed. According to the author of the play the reason for his conviction was, . . . *omdat hy voor Essex te spreken hadde begonnen. / Dies hy tegen my en het ryck hem hadde vertast . . .* (. . . because he had embarked upon speaking in Essex's favour. Thus he affronted me and the State . . .). In fact Captain Lea's crime was much more serious than just speaking in the earl's favour; Robert Cecil described it in a letter to George Carew as follows:

Captain Thomas Lee, one of the earl of Essex's Irish Captains, has been seized in the palace, and being examined confesseth that he had an intention to have taken the Queen at supper time when she was at supper, and there to have locked the doors, pinning her up till he had forced her to sign a warrant for the earl's delivery out of the Tower. This vile purpose he had already broken to Sir Henry Neville and Sir Robert Cross who discovered it.¹⁹

Essex had many friends at court but perhaps even more enemies who, according to the playwright, included Lord Cobham, Walter Raleygh, and Robbert Cecyl in particular. On the morning of the attack on London, Southamton and the earl's 'Secretaris' (Secretary) confront Sommich Raetsheer with the rumours they have heard regarding the plans of Essex's adversaries. A striking aspect of the play is the fact that the author does not mention this secretary, Henry Cuffe, by name even though he would play an essential role on the day of the rebellion, 'a Mephistopheles to Essex's Faust'.²⁰

Southamton

Hoe na soudt ghy garen verraden hem
En quansys hier comt om tstick vermooyen!
Wy kennen wel Cobhams flicke flooyen
En Walter Raleych met syn mede plichters.

Den Secretaris

Men hoort te rabraken sulcke onvrede stichters
Die hare magesteyt met alle quade aast
En Robbert Cecil die in haar alle schade blaast.
Ick hope sy sullen noch hals en beenen breken! [MS a, fol. 14r.]

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[*Southampton*: How much would you like to betray him, coming here pretending to garnish things! We know well Cobham's cajoling, Walter Raleigh's and his conspirators. *The Secretary*: One ought to break such mischief-makers who feed her majesty with all kind of evil and Robert Cecil who blows all those delusions into her ears. I hope they will break their necks and legs anon!]

Eye-witness accounts of the events testify that Cobham and Raleigh in particular were seen as the main schemers, Cecil mainly stayed in the background. William Masham, an occasional servant at Essex House, stated in his declaration before Lord Buckhurst that, early that morning, he had run into Pettingale,

. . . a servant of Lady Essex, who told me that Cobham and Raleigh would have murdered my Lord that night . . . [M]y Lord himself came forth, and . . . he told the people that he acted for the good of the Queen, city, and crown, which certain atheists, meaning Raleigh, had betrayed to the Infanta of Spain.²¹

Masham himself was arrested on the day and fined £100 before being released on 14 June. A similar statement incriminating Cobham and Raleigh was made by a certain Fra[nci]s Smith.²² The earl had indeed reasons to suspect an attempt on his life. On the very day of the assault on the city of London one of Essex's secretaries, William Temple, wrote a letter to goldsmith Edward Westword, telling how

. . . my Lord of Essex was informed that there were lying here in the city Jesuits who had conspired his Lordship's death; and yesterday night late, his Lordship received intelligence from the court, that if he stirred out of Essex House he should be murdered.²³

The trial in which Robert Devereux was found guilty of high treason took place on 19 February, 1601. In all likelihood, the author of the play from 's-Gravenpolder consulted one of the accounts of the proceedings of the day. The scene in which Essex and Southampton, one of the accomplices in the assault, are

interrogated by Baron Bochorst, Menich Advocaet, Robbert Cecyl, Lord Cobham, and Walter Raeleygh, closely follows the report published by Camden. In some cases, however, the author of the play has certain characters make statements which were in fact made by others. Southamton, for example, remarks:

En Robbert, den secretaris, voordert met Spayngen
Den sorghelycken pays, daar hy by achte,
Dat den tytel vande Infante, van maghte,
Tot de croone van Engelants oprecht
Soo goet haar achte, heeft hy geseght,
Als iemant anders by comparatie. [MS a, fol. 18r]

[And Robert [Cecil], the secretary, is favouring the precarious peace with Spain, and he holds the opinion that the title of Infanta, by nature, honestly makes her qualified to anyone else for that matter to wear the crown of England.]

The wording of this statement almost literally echoes Camden's account, except that according to Camden it was not Southamton who uttered these words but Essex: 'Essex added, that he understood that Secretary *Cecyl* had said to one of the Councill, that the Title of the *Infanta* of *Spain* to the Crown of *England* was as good as any other of the Cempetitours whosoever.'²⁴ The continuation of this part of the interrogation in the play and in Camden parallel one another step by step: Robert Cecil, hearing these allegations, falls to his knees begging Essex and Southamton to name the man who made this allegation, upon which Southamton (in the play it is Essex who does this) names Essex's father-in-law, Sir William Knollys. Brought in as a special witness, Knollys confirms that it was a certain R. Doleman, pseudonym of Robert Parsons (1546-1610), who, in 1594, had published, *A conference about the next succession to the crowne of Inghland*, in which the Spanish Infanta was mentioned as a suitable successor to the English Queen. Cecil replied, 'Is it not a strange impudence in that Doleman to give as equal right in the succession of the Crown to the Infanta of Spain as any other?'²⁵ In the play, Cnollis indicates clearly that Cecyl thought Doleman's ideas to be a disgrace for the Crown and the English nation (. . . *twelck den secretaris sprack schande te wesen / Voor de croone en staat van Engelant*), thus making it possible to relieve him of any further suspicion.

After Elizabeth had signed the order for the earl's execution, she twice

changed her mind and reversed orders. On 24 February, 'she sent her Command by Sir *Ed. Cary* that he should not be executed . . . shortly after [that] she sent a fresh Command by *Darcy*, that he should be put to Death'.²⁶ The author of the play has the Queen change her mind even a third time by sending a certain Jhon Killegruw to the Tower to stop the earl's execution. Killegruw informs the audience that Elysabeth gave him her ring to add credibility to his directives and as a token of her sincerity: 'Haren rynck gaf sy my tot teeken hier inne'. Although there is no evidence of a third envoy being sent on Elizabeth's behalf, this story may have been added to the play in order to make reference to a popular anecdote, spread by rumour shortly after Essex's death. Lytton Strachey, noting that his readers should regard this story as 'a sentimental novelette' rather than an historical account, summarizes it as follows:

Afterwards a romantic story was told, which made the final catastrophe the consequence of a dramatic mishap. The tale is well known: how, in happier days, the Queen gave the earl a ring, with the promise that, whenever he sent it back to her, it would always bring forgiveness; how Essex, leaning from a window in the Tower, entrusted the ring to a boy, bidding him take it to Lady Scrope, and beg her to present it to her Majesty; how the boy, in mistake, gave the ring to Lady Scrope's sister, Lady Nottingham, the wife of the earl's enemy; how Lady Nottingham kept it, and said nothing, until, on her deathbed two years later, she confessed all to the Queen, who, with the exclamation 'God may forgive you, Madam, but I never can!' brought down the curtain on the tragedy.²⁷

The reference to the ring by this Jhon Killegruw shows an inversion of details such as occur elsewhere in the play, because it was, according to the story, not the Queen who gave the ring to one of her servants but Essex who sent it to Elizabeth. However, if the reference in the play to the ring relates to this particular anecdote, then it gives us a *terminus post quem* for the play's composition. Lady Nottingham died in 1603, and the story of the ring would clearly have been unknown before her death, so the play cannot have been written until at least two years after Essex's revolt.

Essex and the Low Countries

The overriding question remains why the inhabitants of a small village in the Low Countries, 's-Gravenpolder, should display such a particular interest in the fate of an English nobleman. In 1586, Robert Devereux created a deep impression on the Dutch when he accompanied his stepfather, the earl of Leicester, on his sojourn in the Low Countries. It was, according to Paul Hammer in his recent monograph on Essex's political career, during this year that the earl's military and political paths were shaped.²⁸ Barely twenty years of age, this short stay was, however, not the sole reason for Essex's subsequent popularity, even though he attracted a lot of attention in the crowds as a highly skilled participant of various jousting events.

A much more important factor in the Dutch appreciation of Essex's political position would have been his influential view that direct English involvement in the Low Countries was beneficial to the Dutch and the English nations alike. In December 1594, the earl wrote to Prince Maurice of Nassau, 'there is nothing more connected with the welfare of England than the prosperity of the United Provinces'.²⁹ Eventually he would become the most important spokesman for Dutch affairs across the Channel.³⁰ Moreover, since Essex was seen as the 'leader of the Puritans' in England – in March 1602 he was posthumously identified as such in a document sent by the English priest Thomas Bluet to the Cardinals of Borghese and Aragon – this made him even more qualified to being the ideal ally for the Dutch.³¹ Indeed, the earl became known as 'the leading advocate of the overseas Protestant cause in English politics',³² and because he was also not anti-Catholic, acceptable to Dutch Calvinists and moderate Italian Roman-Catholics alike.³³ In some respects Essex's position replicated that of William of Orange (1533-84), the assassinated leader of the Dutch revolt. Essex had started promoting himself as a religiously inspired politician by the end of 1591, after the campaign in France where he had tried to help Henri IV fight anti-Protestant resistance.

News about the earl's revolt and his subsequent death must have spread around the country like wildfire. To the tune of 'Welladay', people would sing *A Lamentable Ditty composed upon the Death of Robert Lord Devereux, late earl of Essex, who was beheaded in the Tower of London, on Ashwenesday in the morning, 1600*. In the Low Countries information about what had happened in London was available almost instantaneously. On 10 February 1601, Robert Cecil wrote a letter to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland as well as to the English officers in

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the Low Countries about Essex's assault on the city of London.³⁴

Dutch public interest in the earl's affairs had increased during the last years of the century, witnessed by a number of publications relating to his various enterprises. In 1599, an English pamphlet on his voyage to Ireland, including a description of the nature of the Irish people and how they started their rebellion, was immediately translated into Dutch as *Warachtighe Tijdinghe ende corte beschrijvinghe van Yrlant . . . Met een verhael wat de Yrische voor een volc is, hoe sy . . . haer in rebellicheyt stellen . . . waer door hare Majesteyt bedwongen is geweest den Grave van Essex met een groote armade derwaerts te senden. Tot Londen by Christoffel Barker . . . ende nu by Cornelis Claessz tot Amsterdam, 1599*.³⁵ An *Apology*, written in 1598 and published in 1603, in which Essex defended himself against those who accused him of being 'the hindere of the peace and quiet of his country', was also translated into Dutch. In the latter case there is even a direct link with the province of Zeeland in that the Dutch version of this document was translated and published by a printer in Middelburg, Caspar Coolhaes: *Apologie oft verantwoordinge vanden Grave van Essex, teghen de ghene die hem jaloerselick ende ten onrechten schelden als beletter des vredes ende ruste zijnes vaderlands*.³⁶ The story of Essex's execution was made public in yet another Dutch text, available shortly after the tragic events had taken place in a pamphlet entitled *De executie van Robert, grave van Essex, inde Tower oft casteel, 1601*.³⁷

It will not be easy to find documents describing the history of Essex's life and death containing similarities that are striking enough to identify them as direct sources for the Dutch play. In England many accounts circulated of the events of February 1601, both in writing and in oral form, and, no doubt, the same will have been the case on the continent of Europe. The only safe conjecture is that the author of the play had access to a detailed account of Essex's trial and his subsequent execution and death. After years the story of Essex and his relationship with the Queen held its appeal to authors, and historians, playwrights and composers of operas retold the story of his revolt. In their own way the two manuscripts from 's-Gravenpolder also attest to the story's abiding place in the popular imagination.

NOTES

¹ Dr Paul Hammer of the University of Adelaide, Australia, kindly read an earlier version of this essay. He made a number of very helpful suggestions for improvement, for which I am very grateful.

² Information regarding 's-Gravenpolder's oldest history has kindly been supplied by the staff of Heinkenszand's City Archives in which the records of 's-Gravenpolder are now kept. Very little is known about Voirtrappe. Onomastic data suggest that it was once a settlement but it must have ceased to function as such long before the middle of the sixteenth century.

³ Cf. Wim Hüsken, 'Between Evil and Temptation: 'Sinnekens' in Rhetoricians' Drama from 's-Gravenpolder', *Dutch Crossing* 20 (1996), 128-47.

⁴ Should the similarities, noted below, between the play and William Camden's *Annales rerum Anglicarum et Hibernicarum, regnante Elizabetha*, a book printed in Leyden in 1625, be more than accidental then our conjectures regarding year of origin of the play and Michaelis's authorship would have to be revised.

⁵ There are certain points of resemblance between 'Sinnekens' and the Vice in English morality plays. See Peter Happé and Wim Hüsken, 'Sinnekens and the Vice: Prolegomena', *Comparative Drama* 29 (1995), 248-69.

⁶ Edward Darcy was one of the 'Groomes of her Majesty's Privy Chamber' who held letters patent from the Queen for a private monopoly to import playing cards from overseas or have them manufactured in England. See *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, ed. by J.R. Dasent, new series 31 (London: Stationery Office, 1907), pp. 55-56.

⁷ Most information regarding Robert Devereux, earl of Essex, has been derived from G.B. Harrison, *The Life and Death of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex* (London: Cassell & Co., 1937); Robert Lacey, *Robert Earl of Essex: An Elizabethan Icarus* (Trowbridge: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1972); Alison Weir, *Elizabeth the Queen* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1998); and Paul E. J. Hammer, *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁸ Harrison, *Life and Death of Robert Devereux*, p. 1, calls Lady Lettice a cousin of Ann Boleyn, while Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics*, p. 33, thinks that Robert's mother was a cousin of Elizabeth. Table 2, 'The Boleyn and Howard Connection', in Weir, *Elizabeth the Queen*, p. 513, shows that both are wrong. Katherine Carey, Lady Lettice's mother, was Elizabeth's cousin and a niece of Ann Boleyn. Only Lacey, *Robert Earl of Essex*, p. 15, is therefore correct in calling Robert's mother, Lady Lettice, a second cousin to the Queen.

⁹ Quoted by Weir, *Elizabeth the Queen*, p. 387.

¹⁰ See Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics*, p. 62.

¹¹ Weir, *Elizabeth the Queen*, p. 413.

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¹² See for the early years of the Irish wars Hiram Morgan, *Tyrone's Rebellion: The Outbreak of the Nine Years War in Tudor Ireland* (Woodbridge: Boydell, for the Royal Historical Society, 1993).

¹³ Weir, *Elizabeth the Queen*, p. 439.

¹⁴ Harrison, *Life and Death of Robert Devereux*, p. 261.

¹⁵ See Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics*, p. 131.

¹⁶ Steven G. Ellis, *Ireland in the Age of the Tudors, 1447-1603: English Expansion and the End of Gaelic Rule*, (London & New York: Longman, 1998), p. 345, claims that 830 were killed, 400 wounded and 300 defected to the enemy. Harrison, *Life and Death of Robert Devereux*, p. 204, and Lacey, *Robert Earl of Essex*, p. 216, believe 2000 were lost. The same figure is given by Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I: War and Politics, 1588-1603* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 410, and by G.A. Hayes-McCoy in *A New History of Ireland*, ed. by T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin and F.J. Byrne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), III: *Early Modern Ireland, 1534-1691*, p. 124.

¹⁷ See John McGurk, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: The 1590 Crisis* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 200-03 and Table 16.

¹⁸ William Camden, *The History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth, Late Queen of England* (London: Benjamin Fisher, 1675), pp. 613-14. Camden wrote his *Annales* between 1608 and 1617; a complete edition of the Latin text was printed for the first time in 1625 in Leyden as *Annales rerum Anglicarum et Hibernicarum, regnante Elizabetha* (Lugdunum Batavorum, Ex officina Elzeviriana, 1625). Camden had invited the French historian Pierre Dupuy (1582-1651) to act as trustee for his manuscript, fearing that it would eventually disappear if it were not printed soon. The London edition of the Latin original of the complete work dates back to 1627; the first English translation was published in 1630. See William Camden, *The Historie of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princesse Elizabeth, late Queen of England: Selected Chapters*, ed. by Wallace T. MacCaffrey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970) XXIV, and Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Queen Elizabeth's First Historian: William Camden and the Beginnings of English 'Civil History'* (London: Cape, 1971).

¹⁹ Cf. *Letters from Sir Robert Cecil to Sir George Carew*, ed. by John Maclean (London: Camden Society LXXXVIII, 1864), pp. 72-73. Quoted from G.B. Harrison, *The Elizabethan Journals, Being a Record of Those Things Most Talked of During the Years 1591-1603* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1928, reprinted 1938 and 1955), pt. III, p. 151.

²⁰ Lacey, *Robert Earl of Essex*, p. 109.

²¹ See *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of Elizabeth, 1598-1601*, London, 1869, p. 547.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 549.

²³ Ibid, p. 545. The *Calendar State Papers* identifies the earl's secretary as *Edward Temple* but the examination, on 1 July 1601, of a certain *W[illia]m Temple* regarding allegations accusing Jesuits priests planning to murder Essex makes it clear that his first name was William. See *Calendar of State Papers, 1601-1603*, London, 1870, p. 61.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 617.

²⁵ Harrison, *Life and Death of Robert Devereux*, p. 309.

²⁶ Camden, *History of The most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth*, p. 622.

²⁷ Lytton Strachey, *Elizabeth and Essex: A Tragic History*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1928), p. 259.

²⁸ See Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics*, p. 38

²⁹ Ibid, p. 128.

³⁰ In private correspondence with the author (5 March 2000), Paul Hammer writes: 'In 1598, Essex was instrumental in preventing Elizabeth from emulating Henri IV and making a separate peace with Spain, which would have left the Dutch vulnerable and alone (as explained in his *Apology*). This cost him a great deal of his political credit with Elizabeth and left him very exposed when he went to Ireland in 1599.'

³¹ See *Calendar of State Papers, 1601-1603*, London, 1870, p. 170.

³² See Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics*, p. 107.

³³ Ibid, p. 178.

³⁴ See *Calendar of State Papers, 1598-1601*, London, 1869, p. 547.

³⁵ See W.P.C. Knuttel, *Catalogus van de pamfletten-verzameling berustende in de Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 1486-1853*, ('s-Gravenhage: Algemeene landsdrukkerij, 1889-1919, reprinted Utrecht: HES Publishers, 1978) 9 vols., vol. I, n° 1091. The English pamphlet has so far not been identified.

³⁶ Ibid, n° 1213.

³⁷ See H.C. Rogge, *Beschrijvende catalogus der pamfletten-verzameling van de boekerij der Remonstrantsche kerk te Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1862-1865) II,2,1. Place of publication and name of publisher are unknown. Unfortunately I have not been able to consult this booklet.