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**Carlo M. Bajetta**

### A New Version of “The Ways on Earth” by Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex

**Abstract I:** Almeno come poeta, Robert Devereux, conte di Essex, non godette di particolare reputazione tra i suoi contemporanei. Furono le generazioni successive (per le quali il Conte fu epitome degli eroi di un’epoca svanita) a far a gara nel procurarsi copie dei suoi versi e delle sue ardenti lettere indirizzate ad Elisabetta I. L’articolo presenta una versione inedita di un suo sonetto “The Ways on Earth, have paths and turnings known”, contenuta in una miscellanea solo recentemente venuta alla luce. Questo documento, oltre a costituire una nuova attribuzione del brano poetico ad Essex, è una significativa testimonianza della sua duratura fama: una reputazione postuma che lo ha reso protagonista di romanzi, melodrammi e film dal XVIII sino al XXI secolo.

**Abstract II:** Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex did not have a significant reputation as a poet among his contemporaries; nevertheless, both his passionate missives and his verses were much sought after by members of later generations who saw in him one of the last heroes of a glorious era. A hitherto unprinted version of one of his sonnets, “The Ways on Earth, have paths and turnings known” is contained in a recently rediscovered 17<sup>th</sup> century English miscellany. This article prints the text of this manuscript, a key document which attributes this lyric to Essex and a testimony to the long-lasting fame, which has made him the protagonist of novels, melodramas, and films from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Robert Devereux Earl of Essex, Elizabethan Poetry, Elizabeth I, Elizabethan Courtier Poets, Early Modern Manuscripts.

Few Elizabethan courtiers could dramatise their condition as well as Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex (1565-1601). A member of the English élite aristocracy (his family could be traced back to the days of the Norman conquest) and one the Queen’s chief favourites throughout the late 1580s and 90s, he nevertheless lost no occasion to advance his position at Court through a skilful use of his literary talents.

He could pose as a melancholic lover to attract Elizabeth I’s attention, as he did on one occasion, when he protested her attention to a new favourite and

chose to evaporate his thoughts in a Sonnet (beeing his common way) to be sung before the Queene, (as it was) by one *Hales*, in whose voyce shee tooke some pleasure [...]:

And if thou shouldst by Her be now forsaken,  
She made thy Heart too strong for to be shaken.

As if hee had beene casting one eye backe at the least to his former retirednesse. But all this likewise quickly vanished, and there was a goodwhile after faire weather over-head (Wotton 1641: sig. A3).

Nor was poetry his only gift. Essex could also write letters full of pathos and passion to the Queen. While in Ireland in 1599, for example, he sent a missive to Elizabeth in which he declared:

Let me honestly and zealously end a wearisome life, let others live in deceitful and unconstant pleasure; let me bear the brunt, and die meritoriously; let others achive and finish the work, and live to erect Trophies. But my prayer shall be, that when my Sovereigne looseth mee, her Army may not loose courage, or this Kingdome want phisicke, or her dearest Self misse Essex, and then I can never go in a better time, nor in a fairer way (Moryson 1617: 36).

Significantly, both of the texts reproduced above appeared in collections published after the Earl's death. Notwithstanding his patronage of writers such as Francis Bacon, Henry Wotton, the classicist Henry Savile, and the linguist and translator William Jones, Essex did not enjoy a vast reputation as a writer among his contemporaries. His letters and verses, however, were much sought after by members of later generations, who saw in him – as well as in other figures such as Sir Walter Raleigh – one of the last heroes of a glorious era (cf. May 1980: 18-20; Bajetta 1998).

Celebrated by Shakespeare in *Henry V* as a military hero (act V, chorus), and sometimes seen as an influence on the characters of Hamlet and Coriolanus (cf. Highley 1997: 135; Lacey 1970: 247; Holland 2013: 98-99; Tempera 2014: 2295-2296), Devereux was to be remembered over the centuries mostly for his unfortunate rebellion of 1601 – which led to his execution – and especially as Elizabeth's 'last love'. By the later decades of the seventeenth century, he had already become the protagonist of a Spanish *comedia* (*Dar la vida por su dama: El conde de Sex* by Antonio Coello, 1638), three French *pièces* (*Le Comte d'Essex* by Gautier Coste de La Calprenède, 1639; *Le Comte d'Essex* by Thomas Corneille, 1678 and, in the same year, *Le Comte d'Essex: tragedie* by Claude Boyer), as well as of one English play by John Banks, *The Unhappy Favourite; Or the Earl of Essex, a Tragedy* (1682). The 'tyranny of passions' featured prominently in these works as well as the image of the unfortunate lot of a man who, in Banks's words, neither 'the Queen's repentance, nor her tears could rescue [...] from the malice of his enemies, nor from the violence of a most unfortunate death' (Sutherland 1977: 185).

Such a rich literary tradition eventually transformed Essex into the hero of melodramas and operas such as Saverio Mercadante's 1833 *Il Conte d'Essex* (with libretto by Felice Romani), Gaetano Donizetti's *Roberto Devereux* (1837; libretto by Salvatore Cammarano based mainly on François Ancelot's *Elisabeth d'Angleterre*) and Benjamin Britten's 1953 *Gloriana*. Britten took inspiration chiefly from Lytton Strachey's famous *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928), a book which was to influence much later productions, including Maxwell Anderson's 1930 play *Elizabeth the Queen*, the 1939 film derived from this, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (starring Bette Davis and Errol Flynn) and, at least in part, many of the filmic representations of Essex up to his brief cameo in *Anonymous* (2011; cf. Musio 2007; Paltrinieri 2007; Bertheau 2009; Caigny 2009; Teulade 2009; Zuili 2009; Hopkins 2013).

Essex's considerable European reputation in the seventeenth century was probably linked to the extensive number of international connections he had established in the 1590s in an attempt to equal the network of spies and informants Sir Francis Walsingham had set up in the previous decades (cf. Hammer 1999). The aura of myth that posthumously surrounded his character, however, derived mostly from the way his end had been depicted in his native England. After his execution, his figure was soon romanticised by the many celebratory poems and broadside ballads which appeared in print and in manuscript. It was in the Jacobean era, in fact, that Essex's name was in many respects vindicated as the victim of political intrigue, a view, as seen above, which figured prominently in Banks's play as well as in other contemporary works. Such a depiction of his character contributed greatly to the dissemination of Essex's texts, which were often accompanied by narrations of his end in manuscript miscellanies (cf. Beal 2005; Eckhardt 2009: 59-60; Gordon 2013).

One such miscellany is Bibliothèque National, Paris MS Fr 5549, a volume which has recently been discussed in connection with some unpublished mock-epitaphs by Raleigh and some of his associates (Bajetta 2022). This manuscript consists of two distinct sections, MS Fr 5549(1), the diary of the Parisian priest Jehan de La Fosse (cf. Venard 2004), and MS Fr 5549(2), and a collection of epitaphs, short poems and *dicta* written by at least six scribes on different sheets of paper between the late-sixteenth and the early seventeenth century (henceforth *Fr2*). Most of the entries in *Fr2* are transcripts of funerary inscriptions and epitaphs transcribed from Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, French, and English printed sources. These include Lorenz Schrader's *Monumentorum Italiae* (1592) and Tommaso Garzoni's *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (which, as shown by one quotation from 'fol. 929', may have been consulted in the 1588, 1592, 1593, 1599 or 1605 editions). Together with, and often alongside these, the manuscript refers to books such as William Segar's *Honor military, and ciuill* (1602) and William Camden's *Remaines of a Greater Worke, Concerning Britaine* (1605). Among the latest datable texts, one finds an epitaph for Henry, Prince of Wales (d. 1612), and one supposedly written by Thomas Walsingham (d. 1630). The fact that no other text quoted in the manuscript appears to be later than 1625 and that no mention is made of later important collections such as John Weever's *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631) indicate that the volume was probably complete by the mid-late 1620s.

On the first page (fol. 173) one scribe copied seven items which focus on events and figures from the 1590s-1600s: Latin verses for Sir John Norris (d. 1597), an epitaph on John

Story (the Regius lecturer and professor of civil law who was executed for treason in 1571), one on 'my Lord Treasurer' (either William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who died in 1598 or Thomas Sackville, 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Dorset, d. 1608) and two short pieces including a mock epitaph which appeared in Matthew Sutcliffe's *A ful and round answer to N. D. alias Robert Parsons* (1604: 238). The watermark in this section, quite probably a variant of Briquet 13194, may confirm that these pages were compiled about the late 1600s (cf. Briquet 1968, 4: 655).

Two poems connected with Essex appear on fol. 173v. The first is a copy of Robert Pricket's epitaph 'There sleeps great Essex, darling of mankind', in print by 1604 as the conclusive section of Pricket's *Honors fame in triumph riding. Or, The life and death of the late honorable Earle of Essex*. The manuscript version seems to be related to the one which appeared in this book, as it presents only spelling variants together with some occasional differences in punctuation:

Of the Late Earle of Essex beheaded in the Tower

Ther sleepes great Essex, darlinge of mankinde,  
fayre honors lamp, foule envies pray, artes fame,  
Natures pride, Vertues bulwarke, lure of mynde,  
wisdomes flower, valours Tower, fortunes shame,  
Englandes sonne, Belgias light, Fraunces starre, Spaines thunder.  
Lysbones lightninge, Irelandes cloude, the whole worldes wonder  
(*Fr2*, fol. 173v).

This is followed by Devereux's "The ways on earth have paths and turnings known", explicitly attributed to him by using both the word 'again' before the beginning of the text, and adding Essex's name after the last line. This version presents some significant variants when compared to the ones in the other two most important witnesses of it, British Library Royal MS 17 B 50, fol. 2 (*R*), and Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poetry C.744, fol. 59v (*RC*). The sonnet as transcribed in *Fr* is printed below verbatim, followed by an account of the variants in *R* and *RC*. The later copies deriving from (*R*), British Library Sloane MS 4128, fol. 14v and Bodleian Douce MS e.16, fol. 118 have not been collated (cf. May & Ringler 2004: no. EV 24641. May 1980: 46, no. 8; 93, 125, printed from *R*). Brevigraphs have been expanded and italicised.

again./

The waies on Earth, have pathes *and* turninges knowne  
The waies on sea are gone by nedles light  
The birdes in the he ayre the nerest way haue flowne,  
*and* vnder earth the moules doe cast aright  
a way more hard then these I needes must take  
where none can teach, nor noe man can direct  
where noe mans good for me example makes,  
but al mens faultes doe teach hir to suspect.

[5

her thoughtes *and* myne such disproportion haue  
 all strength of loue is infinite in me; [10  
 she vseth the advantage tyme *and* fortune gaue,  
 of worth *and* power to gett the liberties.  
 Earth, Sea, heavens, hell, are subiect vnto lawes:  
 but I must suffer, *and* can knowe noe cause.

Earle Essex.

0 againe] Verses made by the Earle of Essex in his Trouble *R*; omitted *RC*.  
 3 in the ayre] of th'aire *R*; in the ayer *RC*; haue] *om. RC*. 4 moules] Moulds *RC*.  
 6 none] noe man *RC*. 8 faults] thaughts *RC*.  
 10 in] to *RC*. 11 the] *om. RC*. 13 heavens] heaven *R*.  
 14 but I] but I, poore I, *R*; and can knowe] and I knowe *RC*; and knowe *R*  
 Signature] My Lord of Essex verses *RC*; R:E:E *R*.

On the whole, *Fr* presents a better-scanning text than both *R* and *RC*, especially in line 14. As the collation can show, *Fr* disagrees with both *R* and *RC* at various places and does not appear to have been copied from either of the two witnesses. This manuscript, then, presents another, independent, attribution of this text to Essex, an element which is no doubt a confirmation of the authorship of "The Ways on Earth".

No concrete event can be linked with any certainty to Essex's sonnet. One could take the title given in *R* ('Verses made by the Earle of Essex in his Trouble') as a reference to the period after his return from Ireland on 28 September 1599. Royal displeasure of a less dramatic kind, however, cannot be ruled out: the poem quoted above, 'And if thou shouldst by Her be now forsaken', for example, was associated by Wotton (1641: sig. A3) with a momentary ascent to favour of the Earl of Southampton. Moreover, writing a poetic complaint was a strategy employed by Essex on various occasions – his competition with Raleigh in the late 1580s-1590s being just one instance (cf. May 1980: 87-88; 93).

Interestingly, *Fr* is not just an important document to understand Essex's paternity of these verses. One has just to think of the different ways he succeeded in self-fashioning his own figure. As Andrew Hiscock has efficaciously summarised:

over the course of his lifetime, the mythologies of Essex (in which writers and the earl himself deeply invested) were both numerous and diverse. At Elizabeth's court, he began his career having a particular affection for the identities of knight errant and courtly lover, though these were displaced increasingly as the 1590s wore on: he strove tirelessly for national, nay international recognition as a man of state, a spymaster and as a distinguished military commander. The cultural mediation of all of these various personae was shaped in one way or another by his reputation for intellectual pursuits, most especially classical study [...] Thereafter, he was all too often reduced to the principal role of anguished lover, of romantic lead on European stages during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – and indeed into the nineteenth century with *Roberto Devereux* (1837), Donizetti's opera or *tragedia lirica*, in which the by now



very familiar love triangle of Elizabeth, Essex and the Duchess of Nottingham was given yet another airing for a willing audience (Hiscock 2013: 121).

Devereux emerges in *Fr* in a very similar way: an unfortunate hero, a scholar, a patron of the arts, and ultimately as a passionate lover. He is first remembered in ‘Ther sleeps great Essex’ for his intellectual and military prowess, and as a man beloved and admired by all mankind, except England’s enemies, and this image is matched by the one presented in “The Ways on Earth”, which is clearly a special kind of love complaint. In this sonnet Essex’s ‘infinite’ ‘strength of love’ is matched by another kind of force that derives from ‘time’, ‘worth’, ‘position’ and ‘fortune’. He cannot match such power, nor really understand the behaviour of a lover whose actions are way beyond his control. This woman seems to be, in fact, almost beyond the control of Nature; her supremacy is simply overwhelming, but the reason for her actions remains undecipherable: the lover has no choice but to suffer in respect of some fault he has not committed.

Essex’s reputation, then, appears here very much in line with the afterlives of his figure in the next three centuries. This sonnet – which knew a very limited circulation, typical of some of the Earl’s secretive courtly lyrics – was no doubt written to elicit pity from the Queen. It must have been one of the many difficult moments of what is portrayed here, as well as in many other lyrics by Essex, as a tempestuous relationship. Certainly, at least in its early phases, when the Earl ‘chose to evaporate his thoughts in a Sonnet’ his poetic complaints managed to bring ‘faire weather’ again. No verses, however, could save him from being executed by his beloved monarch in 1601.

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**Carlo M. Bajetta**, PhD, FEA, is Professor of English at Università della Valle d'Aosta, Italy and General Editor, together with Jonathan Gibson, of *The Oxford Sir Walter Raleigh*. He contributed to *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*, and the *Oxford Online Bibliographies*. His publications include *Sir Walter Raleigh* (1998); *Whole volumes in folio* (2000) and, together with G. Coatalen and J. Gibson, *Elizabeth I's Foreign Correspondence* (2014). He has edited Wordsworth's, Shelley's and Reynold's 1819 *Peter Bell* poems (2005), Thomas More's English Poems (2010), and the Italian letters of Elizabeth I (2017).

[c.bajetta@univda.it](mailto:c.bajetta@univda.it)