CHAPTER 5

A LOVING SCHOLAR OF HIS QUEEN’S WISDOM: THE EARL OF ESSEX, ANGLO-FRENCH AFFAIRS, AND OF LOVE AND SELF-LOVE (1595)

For Elizabeth’s Accession Day in 1595, Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, and Francis Bacon produced the entertainment Of Love and Self-Love—a device filled with more references to Elizabeth’s demonstrations of erudition than any other poetic text I have examined from the reign. Bacon and Essex echo Elizabeth’s 1592 oration at Oxford and her 1593 translation of Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy throughout the entertainment, and in doing so, they depict the earl as a loving pupil of his queen’s wisdom. Certainly, Essex’s signature image had always been that of a lover, but understanding how Essex and Bacon shape this role specifically through references to Elizabeth’s learning exposes Essex not as a passionate playboy but rather as a geopolitically shrewd statesman whose particular expertise is international affairs. As Paul E. J. Hammer has noted, Essex devoted massive resources in 1594 and 1595 to become England’s preeminent figure in international intelligence. The references to Elizabeth’s learning in Of Love and Self-Love shed light on how Essex worked to integrate his military and transnational interests with his loyalty to Elizabeth—all to demonstrate that he was the best candidate to become her next principal secretary during this period of international crisis.

In the entertainment, Essex acknowledges the gravity of the political situation but transforms seriousness into queen-centered delight and praise. Essex remains the dashing, charismatic courtier whom Elizabeth often found so compelling, and the entire
device exudes love for the queen, even though Elizabeth’s reaction showed displeasure. According to eyewitness Roland Whyte, she left in a huff at the end of the performance, saying “that if she had thought their had bene so moch said of her, she wold not haue bene their that Night, and soe went to Bed.” At first glance, Elizabeth’s complaint that all the focus was placed on her seems inconsistent with the action of the entertainment. The device portrays a Hermit, a Soldier, and a Statesman presenting arguments to the squire of Erophilus (the latter clearly representing Essex) with the hopes that Erophilus will abandon selflessly loving his sovereign mistress and instead adopt one of their vocations. Elizabeth is almost never mentioned in the whole entertainment. Exposing the references to her wisdom that pervade the device, however, confirms that Elizabeth was right: the piece is indeed all about her. In part, her negative response could suggest that *Of Love and Self-Love* was a failure for Essex, and perhaps it was. As a counterargument to the assumption of failure, it is worth considering that the criteria for determining success or failure might be too narrow. Essex did gain information by hearing Elizabeth’s response, specifically regarding his interest in getting the queen to adopt a more conciliatory approach to Anglo-French relations—an agenda that I will discuss shortly.

It seems that Essex was quite proud of this entertainment, as Sir Henry Wotton observes in the seventeenth century. Wotton describes Essex’s writings as “beyond example, especially in his familiar Letters and things of delight at Court, when he would admit his serious habits, as may be yet seen in his Impresses and Inventions of entertainment, and above all in his darling piece of love and, self love” (emphasis added). *Of Love and Self-Love* is worthy of pride, for it is immensely clever. In it, Essex proclaims unflagging devotion to Elizabeth specifically as a learned queen, and he uses the international resonances to Anglo-French affairs associated with her Latin oration at Oxford and her translation of Boethius to present the international credentials that distinguished him from Robert Cecil, his rival for the position of chief advisor. Cecil, too, was deeply involved in international affairs but always conducted his service from within England. Essex, conversely, was the cosmopolitan candidate who possessed direct military and political experience abroad. In November of 1595, he was even answering all of Elizabeth’s foreign correspondence. Elizabeth had given him this responsibility to show her continued