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The Politics of Chivalry and Courtly Love at the Later Elizabethan Court

During the final decade or two of her life, the contrast between the splendid painted portraits of Elizabeth I and the reality of the ageing monarch's physical presence was often stark. Thus, in 1597 the queen appeared to the French ambassador, Andre Hurault de Maise, as very aged, wrinkled and strangely attired. In great contrast, however, her courtiers and ministers, even visitors to her court, usually saw her differently. To them, even in the 1590s, she glowed with magnificence, beauty and bejewelled brilliance. Robert Cecil typically and extravagantly praised her "angelic presence" and even de Maise described her as graceful and dignified. Privately, too, Cecil employed the language of exaggerated praise with the queen. But, significantly, the praise was reciprocated by Elizabeth, and in similar language. Was this no more than the ritual and mutual flattery exchanged between ambitious courtiers and their gracious monarch? In fact such expressions reflected the codes of genuine courtly love, with their medieval origins in chivalric values. They were especially revealing in the behaviour of young male courtiers towards their aged queen. The former employed such elaborate terms to express their own loyalty and devotion; also to reflect Elizabeth's glory and, particularly as she aged, her wisdom. The queen carefully employed make up, dress and jewellery in her attempt to make the physical reality confirm the courtly, sometimes specifically Platonic, image. Elaborate and vastly expensive court entertainments, such as that of 1581, when her possible marriage to the duke of Anjou was being debated, reflected chivalric assumptions and were manipulated to achieve important diplomatic and political ends. During the 1590s, Elizabeth's unusually intimate relationship with the glamorous and handsome young earl of Essex provided many opportunities for expressions of devotion and love on his part, dignity, authority and grace on hers. Essex expressed himself in the complex language of knight errantry. He played what was in part a chivalric game, in part a deeply serious and sincere effort to manipulate the queen. Her indulgence toward him permitted the earl to go beyond conventional courtly language – so far beyond that his playfulness, resentments and insensitivity, and his shocking intrusion into the queen's most private space, alienated the monarch and contributed to his fall from grace. The earl's disgrace revealed his failure to fully understand the character and limits of chivalric values, political reality and Elizabeth's own sensitivities. An examination of the earl's career, within the world of Renaissance courtly culture, helps us understand the political reality in which the Elizabethan elite lived. Overlooking the role of chivalric expressions of loyalty, duty and other similar values means we fail to appreciate the dynamics of the Tudor court and its politics. CN