

Grace Rhys's *The Charming of Estercel* as an Essex Novel

By Christian von Hassell

Ever since the Earl of Essex lost his head in early 1601, he has lived on through virtually every cultural medium. Historians, novelists, poets, musicians, librettists, and the other arbiters of Essex's legacy have created a mountain of work about the failed favourite of Elizabeth. These creations all trace how Robert Devereux - 2nd Earl of Essex, favourite of Elizabeth, Privy Councilor, war hero, and frequent darling of the public – fell so hard. The tragic arc of Essex's fall and the sheer theatricality of his personality certainly provide exciting and workable subject matter. Essex's failed 1599 attempt to quash Tyrone's rebellion in Ireland – so crucial to his actual downfall – frequently proves a key component of representations of the earl. The question then arises: how the Irish have remembered Essex, a man defeated by rebels in Ireland but who ultimately led his own uprising against the Crown.

Emily Lawless's 1890 novel, *With Essex in Ireland* stands out as the most prominent rendition of Essex's time in Ireland by an Irish author, and interestingly proves quite sympathetic towards Essex. Those sentiments would reappear roughly two decades later in a novel by another Irish woman, Grace Rhys (1865-1929). Entitled *The Charming of Estercel*, Rhys's book marks a rather obscure but truly unique iteration of the Essex story. *Estercel* transposes numerous elements common to Essex retellings onto a fictional love story set in 1599 Ireland. Motifs and personalities from the standard Essex saga – like mirrors and playing cards, or Essex's impulsiveness, or Elizabeth's capriciousness – work their way into the novel's scenes and characters, letting not just Essex but Essex's somewhat fictionalized legacy pervade the text. Furthermore, as Rhys's novel praises Essex – leader of a campaign to suppress Irish independence – it poses complex questions about Irish perception of England's history.

I

Some knowledge of Essex life and legacy remains crucial to understanding *The Charming of Estercel* as an Essex novel. Born Robert Devereux in 1565 to Lettice Knollys

and Walter Devereux, the 1st Earl of Essex, Robert became the 2nd Earl of Essex after his father died in Ireland in 1576. After living under the ward of Lord Burghley and studying at Cambridge, Robert Devereux made a brief and fairly low-key debut at court in 1584, before leaving to fight in the Netherlands. Soon however, Essex returned far more conspicuously, up to his neck in public chatter of exceptional – though probably reckless – acts of battlefield courage, a consistent staple of Essex's persona. This time, the Queen took a keen interest in young Essex and the two quickly became close companions. She helped him politically, naming him Master of the Horse in 1587, and financially, bestowing upon him a lucrative lease on sweet wines customs a year later in 1588. In 1593, she appointed Essex to her Privy Council, where he would develop a fierce rivalry with Robert Cecil.

Elizabeth's relationship with Essex oscillated between extremes, with Essex shunned from court for months only to return to nearly instant favour from the Queen. Still, as the 1590s progressed, Essex increasingly found himself on rough terms with Elizabeth, and by 1599 he had fallen seriously out of favour. When he left for Ireland late that March, Essex probably knew that triumph over Tyrone really marked his last chance at true redemption. However, questionable tactical choices combined with disease and desertion left his army more than halved by July. Essex had no clear route to defeat Tyrone in Ulster. The Queen, however, proved incessant with her orders to directly confront the Irish rebel leader and Essex ultimately rallied his army and marched north to Ulster. Upon reaching Tyrone, the impossibility of success through military engagement became overwhelmingly clear. Here, the two leaders held their famous parley in Bellaclynthe Ford and made a six-week truce. Sure that his rivals were manipulating the Queen at home, Essex wanted to use the break to return to London to speak with Elizabeth. Against clear orders from the Queen, he left Ireland, making it to Whitehall in the very early morning four days later, where he barged into Elizabeth's bedchamber to find her without her wig and partially clothed. Essex was ultimately put on house arrest and suffered other political and financial demotions until leading his failed uprising in February 1601. After the Crown found him guilty of treason, Essex was beheaded on the 25th of that February.

Ever since, dramatists, painters, biographers, and ballad-singing beggars have all told and retold the story of Essex, effectively typifying a set of dramatized personalities and sub-

narratives that rule Essex's legacy to this day.¹ These recurrent elements emerge from historical reality, total fiction, and everything in between. Essex truly did catch the Queen unbewigged and partially clothed upon his return from Ireland. However, equally persistent sub-narratives like the apocryphal "ring story" have absolutely no historical basis. By the time Rhys published *Estercel* in 1913, three centuries of dramatization and replication had created a very recognizable, mildly fictionalized Essex archetype. Indeed, that Essex – rather than the historical, true Essex - pervades *Estercel*.

The Charming of Estercel follows such a mountain of Essex works that precisely identifying each of Rhys's sources would prove impossible. Still, Emily Lawless's 1890 novel *With Essex in Ireland* safely holds rank as *Estercel*'s most relevant predecessor. Written fourteen years before *Estercel*, Lawless's novel takes the form of the diary of Henry "Hal" Harvey, fictional secretary to Essex during his Ireland campaign. Not only do both novels - *With Essex in Ireland* and *Estercel* - concern Essex's time in Ireland, but they are each authored by Irish women writers of roughly the same era, who coincidentally also each spent the majority of their lives in London. Each novel venerates Essex; thrashes England; glorifies the Irish and their fight for independence; appoints Cecil the villain; and, finally, lets Essex achieve his ruin – or at least solidify the certainty of it– entirely within the confines of Ireland and entirely without Elizabeth's presence.² It should not surprise that these two novels possess similarities, but the distinctiveness, scope, and nature of such similarities overwhelmingly solidifies Lawless as a central influence on *The Charming of Estercel*.

II

Grace Rhys and *The Charming of Estercel* have almost totally evaded scholars' grasps. Her books achieved some popularity among the public, and within literary London, she ran in very prominent circles. However, most writers only mention Grace Rhys in the context of her husband Ernest, a writer himself and a close companion of W.B. Yeats. Her novels perhaps fall under the umbrella of "popular" – rather than "literary" – fiction, a

¹ Biographies by G.B. Harrison and Robert Lacey both give a far more detailed look at Essex's life, the latter paying special attention to the nature of his relationship with Elizabeth.

² The notion that Essex *fell* in Ireland in 1599 – implied by Lawless's novel – also has substantial footing in historical reality. It would have been nearly impossible for Essex to ever recover favour after he returned. That factor combined with Essex's hot-headed personality forced the Earl into his desperate, hopeless uprising.

potential source of retrospective anonymity likely furthered by her work as a children's author. Nevertheless, the lack of scholarly writing and public familiarity with Rhys remains clear and thus some background information about Rhys and *Estercel* will provide context for more detailed discussion of her novel's treatment of Essex.

Born Grace Little in County Roscommon in 1865, she moved in with her uncle as a teenager after her father gambled the family estate away. In 1890, Grace visited London where she met her soon-to-be husband – Welsh poet and editor Ernest Rhys – at a party thrown by the Yeats family. Ernest was a prominent character among London literary crowds, founding the Rhymers' Club with W.B. Yeats and serving as the editor of Everyman's Library. Grace and Ernest married at the start of the next year, remaining in London.³

Indeed, like Yeats and Wilde, Grace Rhys played the curious role of the Irish author living in London. For the Rhys couple – again, as with Yeats – locale did not impede the couple's serious love of Celtic culture. Such affinity actually first sparked Ernest's relationship with Yeats in 1887, three years before Grace came to London. Yeats biographer R.F. Foster describes the young Irish poet's nearly immediate friendship with Ernest, a “born-again Welshman starry-eyed about all things ‘Celtic’” (Foster 64). Grace Rhys's social circle and husband must have at least somewhat influenced Grace Rhys's cultural tastes. However, from the very beginning of her career, Rhys herself demonstrated a consistent and sincere interest in elevating Irish and Celtic culture. A few years after marrying Ernest, Grace Rhys began editing children's books and fairy tales to which her introductions often claim - with dubious legitimacy but unquestioning Celtic pride - that the stories have roots in Irish folklore.⁴ She continued to demonstrate this cultural allegiance through the end of her career, lauding Celtic literature in a passionate introduction to her 1927 collection of Irish, Welsh, and Scottish poetry, *A Celtic Anthology*.⁵

She wrote her first novel – *Mary Dominic* – in 1898. Yeats helped publish the novel and it received warm praise from Lady Gregory, but *Mary Dominic* never gained much

³ The Rhys couple lived primarily in London though they did spend some extended periods traveling abroad and living in Wales.

⁴ The Dictionary of Irish Biography's entry on Rhys makes this point. However, at this moment, the actual content of her introduction is currently unverified.

⁵ She relishes Celtic poetry as the unique place where “the unstable realities of life...have been dissolved in a sensitive medium and recreated for our better inspiration” (34-35).

commercial traction. Rhys's second novel, *The Wooing of Sheila*, proved most popular out of her seven, most of which take place in Ireland, frequently in a historical, Gaelic Ireland. Rhys also wrote poetry, essays, and short stories, frequently published in collections, like *The Quest of the Ideal* (1913), *About Many Things* (1920), and the posthumously published, *A Book of Grace* (1930).

The foundation of Rhys's 1913 Essex novel – *The Charming of Estercel* – lies in a 1904 short story of the same name. Published in the June issue of *Harper's Magazine* and illustrated by Howard Pyle, the short story proves remarkably similar to the opening two chapters of the novel. Set at the fictional Ardhoroe Castle in Ulster, Eileen – the daughter of the castle's chief – has become lovesick over her cousin, Estercel. Despite Eileen's infatuation with the young man, he never pays her much attention. Languishing over Estercel, Eileen seeks the advice of her nurse. The two put a love charm on a ring and sneak it onto Estercel's finger. Instantly, he falls in love with Eileen. The story ends shortly thereafter with Eileen feeling slightly guilty for deceiving Estercel with the charm.

Published nine years later, the eponymous novel begins nearly identical fashion, pulling many passages verbatim from the *Harper's* story. Still, the novel diverges in a couple areas. It changes Eileen's name to "Sabia" and depicts Estercel as momentarily angry about the love charm. Overall, the two versions' most significant discrepancy remains not just Essex's total absence in the short story, but the total absence of all political implications in the short story. While Essex and the historical setting might not prove crucial to the opening chapters of the novel, the narrator mentions him by the middle of the second chapter, providing initial context for a narrative heavily intertwined with his notorious Irish campaign.

In the novel, Essex and Tyrone both exist beyond the historical backdrop, functioning as important but ultimately supporting characters. The narrative's real focus lies on Estercel, Meraud, and Sabia, three fictional Irish characters caught in a love triangle. Supposedly old friends with Essex, Tyrone sends Estercel to Dublin to propose an alliance to the earl against the furtive Robert Cecil. Betrothed to sweet and innocent Sabia, Estercel – the novel's hero – struggles in Dublin with the stunning, dangerous Meraud. Bewitched by a mysterious mirror, Meraud grows more and more prone to jealousy and ruthless ambition as the novel progresses, ultimately seeking Estercel's ruin. Treacherous villains like Sir Xylonides Bullen

work their way into the story, leaving honorable Estercel and his truly exceptional horse, Tamburlaine, caught in a sea of malicious, cunning deception.

Following the template of the short story, the novel itself begins at Ardhoroe Castle, with Sabia charming Estercel with the ring. Soon however, Estercel receives orders from Tyrone to seek out Essex, who has just arrived in Dublin. In Dublin, “Ruddy-haired” Meraud immediately becomes infatuated with the handsome Estercel and helps him get an audience with Essex during the intermission of an outdoor play.⁶ In order to fend off eavesdroppers, Estercel delivers Tyrone’s message to Essex in Latin, which the confident Essex pretends to comprehend. Believing Essex understood the message, Estercel then plans to return to Ulster the following morning.

However, that night, he makes a nearly fatal joke to Meraud, suggesting she ride home with him on Tamburlaine. After Meraud agrees enthusiastically to the fake offer, Estercel retreats and apologizes, thoroughly unaware of the gravity of his mistake. Rage boiling, Meraud removes herself in silence, all too ready for her brutal revenge. Very early the next morning, Meraud names Estercel a spy for Tyrone in a letter to Sir Xylonides Bullen, knowing that Bullen – a cruel and powerful Englishman in Dublin - would rejoice in the opportunity to arrest and torture this young man. Within hours, Estercel sits stretched on the castle grate, his legs and wrists slowly breaking.

Soon thereafter, Meraud’s aunt – now confident the mirror has put a curse on her niece – smashes it with a large prayer book, instantly returning the bewitched Meraud to normal. The newly sentient Meraud quickly grows overwhelmed with guilt and desperation to save Estercel from the Castle grate. She seeks out Essex, who upon learning about the situation, sympathetically orders Estercel released. Tied to Tamburlaine’s back, the nearly dead and totally immobile Estercel makes it back to Ulster in one brutal ride through the night. After a couple weeks of recovery under Sabia’s tender care, Estercel miraculously regains his ability to walk and joins Tyrone’s army near Bellaclynthe. In a scene right after Tyrone and Essex have their famous parley, Tamburlaine breaks loose and strikes dead Bullen’s servant, who had been posing as an Irish soldier to spy on Tyrone’s army. The novel

⁶ The play is about Crispin and Crispinianus, recalling *Henry V*, the one Shakespeare play that explicitly alludes to Essex. The Chorus compares King Harry’s triumphant return to London to a similar return of Essex from Ireland in the possible future: “Were now the general of our gracious empress / As in good time he may, from Ireland coming, / Bringing rebellion broached on his sword.”

concludes soon thereafter, with Estercel finally together with Sabia again at Ardhoroe, while leaving Essex to his inevitable doom in England.

Such a synopsis of *The Charming of Estercel* simplifies great deal of the narrative and hardly even addresses Essex's presence in the text. Still, with regard to the plot, that description does cover the basics, and more details will certainly emerge with further discussion of Essex.

III

Essex seeps into Rhys's novel through both explicit and implicit modes. Arguably, the novel's more implicit and subtle allusions to the Essex story depend on the more explicit modes to become markedly apparent. It makes sense then to begin with novel's explicit treatment and portrayal of Essex and the Essex story. The narrator and the characters themselves frequently engage in fairly pointed discussion of Elizabethan politics, hewing to a common version of the Essex story in which the manipulative Cecil functions as the villain. Furthermore, Essex's actual actions within the narrative follows congruent characterizations of Essex as oblivious but fundamentally honorable and even genuinely kind.

Estercel most immediately addresses the Essex story through explicit, pointed, and loosely accurate discussion of English politics by its narrator and characters. Tyrone's initial meeting with his council marks the novel's first – and perhaps most shocking – foray into extreme characterization of Essex and Cecil. At the meeting, Tyrone surprises his council when he explains his intent in allying with Essex against Cecil. He deems the whole English campaign merely Cecil's attempt to ruin Essex: “the hunchback, Robert Cecil... fights not with me but with Essex. To destroy the earl they have sent him hither” (37). Comparing him to Cecil, Tyrone kindly calls Essex the “one man of all the court who held it a shame to deceive his enemy, to use craft and poison and treachery” (38). Keeping with the totally fictitious backstory, it turns out – marking a tremendous deviation from the historical record – Tyrone can trust Essex because the two spent years of their youth together. In fact, the novel's Tyrone helped the young earl mourn the murder of his father by:

“Many and many a time has [Essex] wept on my neck, knowing not how to contain his heart within him that burst with hatred of the Lord of Leicester, for that he had murdered his father by poison and taken his false mother to wife. Ay, and he loathed the presence of his mother, knowing not truly whose son he was.” (38)

Though rumors that Leicester murdered Walter Devereux possibly manifested among the public as early as 1576, the first written accusation arrived in 1584 with *Leicester's Commonwealth*. An anonymously authored pamphlet, *Leicester's Commonwealth* vigorously attempts to defame Dudley, deeming him an adulterer, traitor, and murderer many times over. Tyrone's plan ultimately involves making his old friend King, tying Essex – the otherwise aggressor against Ireland – into a symbol of independence: “once Essex is on the English throne, we are his allies, slaves no longer: Ireland is free!” (43). Indeed, many of Essex's enemies publicly speculated that he and Tyrone had a secret alliance, and such speculation manifested at Essex's trial.

Using equally pointed language, the narrator casts Cecil as the villain, Essex as the flawed but deeply admirable hero, and Elizabeth as simply the unwitting victim of Cecil's manipulation. The narrator never forgoes the opportunity to thrash Cecil, however cheaply: “that little crooked man, five foot two in height with the curved spine...he that never had a friend, he that was captain of an army of paid spies, torturers, poisoners, and bullies” (252). Such a description also quite aptly reflects the novel's consistent tendency to wax towards hyperbole as it characterizes the story's key historical figures.

Essex's flaws – his impetuosity, his uncontrollable rage when confronted with dishonorable rivals, his perennial disobedience – recur in very similar forms throughout Essex retellings, which the narrator reinforces in *Estercel*. Essex and Tyrone were the world's two most honorable men, the narrator tells us, “but while [Tyrone] was a wise and foreseeing leader of men...[Essex] was a creature without prudence whose gusty emotions fooled his will” (288). The narrator describes how such faults led to Essex's tragic end:

“Soon he was to take that swift and secret journey to the English court; soon he was to see the backs of all his friends; he was to find the hand of the old woman that loved him use a whip to strike him; he was to know his wife beset for money bribes by sham gentlemen while she lay in bed with her young babe; he was to see the wise man Bacon whom he had long befriended become so very wise as to plead before the kingdom for the death of the man that had helped him. He was to feel the final madness of revolt and fury, the worse bitterness of a weak humiliation. An honest and generous fool among intriguers, it was to be his fate to die a thousand deaths in one” (298).⁷

⁷ The last line of this passage recalls Essex's painfully clairvoyant 1600 letter to Elizabeth in which he deemed the thought of posthumous infamy “A thousand times worse than death” (Walter Devereux 99).

Ultimately, the narrator's pointed descriptions of Elizabethan politics reiterate a specific archetype of the Essex story under which the more subtle motifs and tropes can then fall.

IV

Estercel also engages with Essex and the Essex story through more subtle vehicles. Rhys transmutes and fractures the personalities of Essex, Elizabeth, and Cecil onto her fictional characters, filling their struggles with motifs common to the Essex story. Discerning "who's who" requires some flexibility and patience with the narrative's lack of consistent allegorical structure. Still, these borrowed elements – even if fragmented – help elucidate themes common to Essex retellings. Ultimately, Sir Xylonides Bullen functions as Cecil, Meraud as Elizabeth, and, remarkably, Tamburlaine the horse serves as the novel's truest counterpart to Essex.

Perhaps the most straightforward of these parallels, Sir Xylonides Bullen – with his explicit distaste for Essex and penchant for cruelty – quickly becomes a clear Cecil character. Bullen possesses a deep thirst for personal advancement and achieves such through very Cecilian methods – manipulation, deception, spies, torture, and bribery. From the very beginning, Bullen wants an Irishman whom he can torture, hoping to find some intelligence against Essex, which would thereby earn him some favour with Cecil. Indeed, his allegiance to Cecil – just like Cecil's allegiance to anyone – remains predicated upon the prospect of future advancement. His natural contempt for Essex even seems to mirror Cecil's: "this Essex from boyhood was a queen's darling, and I do not like the breed" (105). Many depictions of Cecil show a tirelessly hardworking – if still conniving – politician with deep resentment for the ease with which Essex rose to power and Bullen certainly appears to share such resentment. Ultimately, Bullen coaxes Estercel's true identity out of Meraud, orchestrates the subsequent arrest of the hero and almost playfully rejoices in the brutal torture that follows, leaving him the novel's true villain and a very clear Cecil character.

Discerning the counterparts of Elizabeth and Essex in *The Charming of Estercel* requires a little more nuance. In each case, multiple characters seem quite possible candidates. Estercel naturally comes across as an Essex character: the novel's hero, he is tall, handsome, well-read, brave, honorable, exceptionally loyal, and even finds himself nearly ruined by a potential Elizabeth-figure, Meraud. Still, Estercel proves almost too perfect to

truly resemble Essex, carrying virtually none of the earl's flaws, flaws typically present in even very positive portrayals of Essex. Without Essex's impulsiveness, rage, stubbornness, and propensity to disobey authority, Estercel remains a thoroughly incomplete Essex figure.

Interestingly, Tamburlaine, Estercel's horse whose name recalls Marlowe's great beacon of ambition, seriously reflects both the flaw and virtue of Essex. Essex's rise and fall really marked a transition from his attributes – bravery in battle, intelligence and charm at court – to his faults – disobeying the Queen's orders in Ireland and impulsively deciding to lead his uprising on that February morning. Tamburlaine also follows such a trajectory, initially impressing everyone with his strength, loyalty, and intelligence before growing reckless, hot-headed, and impulsive. Also recall that, for most of his adult life, Essex served as Master of the Horse, a detail particularly conspicuous in portraiture, with Essex frequently depicted wearing the position's seal around his neck. Indeed, as Tamburlaine grows more unruly tougher to control, he becomes the only real “master of the horse.” In one brief scene, we even learn of Tamburlaine's relationship with “Eliza, the brown mare that he loved” (224), recalling the romantic side of Essex's relationship with Elizabeth, which has long proven a fundamental element of the archetypal Essex story.

While the notion that a horse might function as an Essex character might sound somewhat absurd, Tamburlaine exceeds all limitations of what a normal horse can do. Tamburlaine proves almost fantastical in his abilities, understanding human conversation, remembering nearly everything he sees, and even using his teeth to toss Estercel onto his back. Towards the beginning of the novel, Estercel shows off Tamburlaine's abilities to Meraud in the meadow. Estercel asks Meraud to pretend to strike him in order see how Tamburlaine might respond to an attack on his master. The horse demonstrates robust loyalty unleashing “a low and horrid scream...rearing his hoofs in the air that he might strike her down with them” (73). In this scene, Tamburlaine also demonstrates his physical prowess with the impossible feat of grabbing his master by the belt and tossing him into the saddle. Of course, such intelligence, loyalty, and physical prowess alone do not sufficiently create an Essex-character out of Tamburlaine.

However, after Estercel's arrest, Tamburlaine begins to fulfill the Essex mold more completely. The narrator describes the horse's impatience for cunning treachery and propensity towards emotional extremes: Tamburlaine “knew love and rage; he knew a traitor

by the smell of him; and he knew revenge” (148). The horse commits a serious act of loyalty and perseverance, delivering Estercel back to Ardhoroe in one night, saving his dying master’s life. Mildly recalling Essex’s greater propensity to defy the Queen after Cadiz, Tamburlaine grows more resistant to authority after this amazing feat of strength. Indeed, Ardhoroe’s horse trainer Owen suggests – in words Elizabeth could have said herself about Essex – that the horse has an ego problem: “He is altogether above himself...He has been too long without discipline” (247).

In a pivotal scene towards the end of the novel, Tamburlaine’s impetuosity and impatience for treachery manifests into deadly violence. While waiting for Tyrone to return to camp from his parley with Essex, Tamburlaine breaks free from Estercel’s control, charges someone who appears to be an Irish soldier and strikes him dead with his hooves. A crowd forms around the slain body and disparate shouts emerge, calling for Tamburlaine to be shot. Echoing how Elizabeth might very well feel about Essex, one observer in the crowd notes, “As they grow older, these great-horses are apt to become terrors” (294). Another member of the crowd soon reveals that the man Tamburlaine killed was a servant of Sir Xylonides Bullen and had been spying on Tyrone’s army. Tamburlaine thereby assumes Essex’s method for dealing with Cecil, confronting the cunning deceiver boldly, directly, and with nearly no deliberation. Ultimately however, the horse lives on, whereas Essex’s confrontation culminated in his prompt ruin.

IV

Elizabeth – an utterly crucial figure in any Essex story – certainly haunts Rhys’s novel. Again though, identifying her counterpart proves less than straightforward. Both Sabia and Meraud fulfill the Elizabeth function, though to differing extents. Refusing to kiss Estercel before marriage, Sabia does somewhat serve as a beacon of chastity, possibly connecting her to the Virgin Queen. She also gives Estercel a ring, immediately conjuring thoughts of the ‘Essex ring,’ a very common trope in Essex retellings. However, the ring’s function in *Estercel* ultimately proves irreconcilable with its function in the standard Essex story.

After dismissing the ring, the other parallels surrounding Sabia feel inadequate to those of Meraud, whose personality and function in the narrative ultimately leave her a far

more complete Elizabeth character. One of the most recurring and iconic symbols within Essex lore, the ring initially seems like a clear allusion to Essex. In most versions of the ring story, Elizabeth gives Essex a ring as a token for future redemption were he to lose favour with her at some future time. After Essex is sentenced to death for treason, the ring – for one reason or another - never makes it to back Elizabeth: in some iterations, he willingly holds onto it, effectively choosing to die; in others, he gives it to a page boy who delivers it to the wrong person. A common variation involves the boy mistakenly delivering it to the Countess of Nottingham – who either out of jealousy for the Queen or by her husband’s persuasion – never gives it to Elizabeth. In essence, the ring signifies the possibility of redemption or the effect of meddling by malicious rivals on Elizabeth’s and Essex’s personal relationship.

In *Estercel*, Sabia gives Estercel the ring – with the love charm enclosed – to first gain his love. The ring then helps Estercel survive the brutal torture on the grate. When Estercel sleeps at Ardhoroe, recovering from Bullen’s torture, Sabia sneaks into his room and removes the ring. She then tosses it into river, catching the eye of a catholic priest who explains his wish that the ring could serve the church.⁸ Sabia’s ring has such strong connotations to Essex yet it ultimately insufficiently parallels the ring of the standard Essex story. In fact, the ring actually precedes Essex’s involvement in *Estercel*, functioning as the central component of Rhys’s 1904 short story. Sabia herself also proves too perfect to truly resemble Elizabeth, demonstrating none of the faults – and indeed, few of the strengths – that help define Elizabeth. Perhaps because both Sabia and the ring precede Rhys’s addition of Essex to her 1904 short story, neither really fits smoothly with the Essex parallels.

Red-haired, ambitious Meraud FitzPierce then becomes the clear – if exaggerated – Elizabeth character. Meraud demonstrates a level of ambition and self-determination removed from that of the normative 16th century woman. When she first sees Estercel, she claims with unnerving directness, “I like him better than anyone I have seen. I choose him now” (65). During the pageant celebrating Essex’s assumption of the Lord Lieutenancy, ambition begins to bubble within Meraud:

⁸ This chapter is entitled “The Ring and the Fisherman.” This title, combined with the presence of the catholic priest in the scene, might allude to the “Fisherman’s Ring” or *Annulus Piscatoris*. The Fisherman’s ring is the Pope’s signet ring for documents of unsubstantial importance. Also, in the 1912 silent film, *Queen Elizabeth*, Catherine Howard herself retrieves the ring from Essex and her husband – Admiral Howard – throws it in the Thames.

“Many feelings, strange and new, rose in her breast, the desire to lead, to be at least among the first, to be away from these tamed ladies who were so poor of spirit: for there are found among men and women beings that breathe more naturally among the great, and whose strength and ardour teach them to climb continually.” (84)

This desire to differentiate herself from the “tamed ladies” firmly conjures a likeness to Elizabeth’s defiance of gendered expectations. However, this ambition grows too strong in Meraud and becomes dangerously intertwined with her other emotions. Throughout the novel, Meraud also demonstrates the almost manic fickleness of Elizabeth: one second drooling over Estercel, one moment wishing his ruin. Portrayals of Elizabeth’s and Essex’s relationship - including films like *Queen Elizabeth* (1912) and *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939) – often depict the two almost constantly alternating between conflict and playful affection.

The meadow scene proves particularly reflective of the ease with which Meraud flips to aggression. After witnessing Tamburlaine’s incredible talents and even a little bit of playful flirting with Estercel, a sudden boldness overcomes Meraud as she – determined to prove her superiority – implicitly threatens the novel’s hero: “Aha, you are no queen’s man. I know you for what you are, coming from Tyrone’s country and all. You are no boy to be looking for an English college. I have you now in my hand to play with!” (78). Meraud’s audacious jabs really solicit Estercel’s truest resemblances of Essex. Later in that same scene, Estercel retorts harshly, “If you were another man I would know what to do, break you over my knee” (80). As in many Essex retellings, this volatile behavior fuels both romantic chemistry and serious dispute, though as always, the dispute – predicated on distrust, pride, jealousy, and stepping too far outside the bounds of forgiveness – outweighs whatever romance initially might have existed.

Like the ring trope, mirrors – and Elizabeth’s duel obsession and hatred of them – pervade Essex stories and even representations of Elizabeth that do not particularly concern Essex. The mirrors fuel her jealousy of younger women and insecurity regarding whether Essex truly could love such an old woman. In a frequently recurring scene, Elizabeth gazes at a mirror, brooding over her age before smashing her mirror and violently ordering all of her much younger maids-of-honor to remove all the mirrors from the castle.

A mirror rules Meraud as well. At the start of the novel, Meraud finds a mysterious new mirror in her new room. Her mother proves immediately skeptical of the mirror and the

other items left in the room, including a deck of cards, immediately recalling that famous scene from the early stages of Elizabeth and Essex's friendship: "At night my Lord is at cards, or new game or another with her, that he cometh not to his own lodgings till birds sing in the morning" (Lacey 43) Seemingly the near definition of a "tamed lad[y] with so poor a spirit," Meraud's mother cannot stomach this mere deck of cards. In her disgust, she utters one of the novel's best lines: "It is even as I thought! Playing-cards in a maiden's chamber! ... Give them to me, sister, that I may burn them" (63). Elizabeth – forever unmarried – indeed was a "maiden" even in her old age, leaving the mother's desperate plea a very clever bit of irony.

The mirror proves far less humorous than the playing cards, cursing Meraud with a sense of cruel ambition and a malicious thirst for control over others, especially Estercel. As Meraud's ambition grows, her image in the mirror grows paler and sterner. In one scene, she sees a face in the background, implied to be that of Queen Elizabeth: "It was ruddy-haired like her own, with crimson cheeks; the red lips her open and the fierce eyes were bent upon her" (100). Like Elizabeth, Meraud becomes jealous of other women when with the mirror, worrying about why Estercel wears the ring. When Estercel reveals that he has already promised his love to another woman, jealousy overwhelms Meraud, who after some time back at home spitting hateful language at the mirror, sells out Estercel to Bullen: "She had received her first insult, and she would destroy the man who insulted her" (112). Meraud then realizes that her face has turned into that of the ghostly Elizabeth apparition from earlier, thus becoming Elizabeth through ruining the man she loves.

At the same time, Meraud's ultimate redemption – desperately but successfully securing Estercel's freedom from the Castle grate - does not entirely follow the Elizabeth mold; the Queen certainly did not save Essex from the Tower. However, we do learn that after freeing Estercel, she leaves for England and joins the court of Elizabeth. Furthermore, the young woman quickly rises to the Queen's favour: "She has come to great preferment. She is become one of her majesty's maids of honour. Her majesty was pleased to say that the lady reminded her of her own youth being of the same complexion" (291). Arguably, Elizabeth's celibacy and refusal to marry mark a distinct refusal of passion for the sake of nobler goals. Meraud has followed Elizabeth in that regard, rejecting her passion fueled desire for men as well as power for its own sake. Like Elizabeth, Meraud has learned to

suppress her passion and emotion for selfless service to a higher cause: “Forever turning aside in repentance, continually redeeming ambition by true greatness, she was yet rendered incapable of simplicity” (186). Indeed, this ultimate pursuit of “true greatness” lets both Meraud and Elizabeth – otherwise beacons of emotional instability – emerge somewhat unscathed from their grievances and mistakes.

Certainly *Estercel’s* transposition of Essex tropes falls short of any totally cohesive allegorical structure. Even with Tamburlaine, Meraud, and Bullen functioning in *Estercel* very similarly than their respective counterparts might in a typical Essex retelling, countless irregularities persist: other characters besides the horse might reflect Essex’s frustration and impatience; the ring – despite its status as one of the strongest images in Essex lore – really fails to build a substantive link to Essex and Elizabeth; the list goes on. However, flaws aside, *The Charming of Estercel’s* fragmented reimagining of elements crucial to the archetypal Essex story marks a truly unique narrative invention.

V

The question remains about why the Irish might look favorable on Essex. After the novel’s somewhat quaint first couple chapters, political undertones quickly overwhelm the narrative, with firm nationalistic sentiments flowing through its protagonist and narrator. Interestingly, this nationalist bent does not inhibit the novel’s exceptionally kind portrayal of Essex. Rather, such nationalist convictions only manifest into anger and hostility when directed towards either England altogether or – and much more severely – Cecil, Essex’s great rival. For the most part, Elizabeth is neutral, but mainly she is irrelevant. Cecil has total control.

As previously mentioned, the 1904 short story never enters the historical world and thus proves almost naively pastoral in comparison. In setting the narrative in 1599 Ireland, Rhys by necessity invokes politics. Whether the politics of Rhys’s era invoked her to make that choice remains unanswered but surely plausible. Without dismissing the timelessness of anti-England sentiments in Ireland, the late 19th and early 20th century must mark a particularly fiery time in history for Anglo-Irish relations. Furthermore, this period of nationalism coincided with movements revive Irish culture, like the Gaelic League, an organization founded in 1893 that sought and still seeks to this day to protect and revive the Irish language. *Estercel* certainly seems conscious of the push to de-Anglicize Ireland: the

novel's hero – Estercel – cannot speak English, a mark of cultural purity. Little information about Grace Rhys's political convictions remains extant in the public sphere. However, her known severe *cultural* allegiance to Ireland seems at least congruent her subject matter and choice to create a Gaelic-speaking hero. Still, cultural predilections of the author – whatever form they might take – do not fully explain *Estercel's* glorification of Essex.

The novel proves fiercely supportive of Tyrone's Rebellion as well as more timeless notions of Irish independence. Tyrone is greeted like a god when he arrives at Ardhoroe Castle in the beginning of the narrative.

“For a moment [Tyrone] stood and smiled as he listened to the cries of blessing that invoked the light of God about him while walked the world, and heaven for his bed when this life was done. And then to see the women when he moved on! To see them down upon their knees scraping up the precious handful of dust on which his foot had trod! Not one of them would turn to her work till she had tied up in safety this treasure which each of them would carry to her grave.” (33-34).

Though the narrator here describes the affection the Irish people have for Tyrone, the enthusiastic tone suggests the narrator also shares such affection. Indeed, the novel has numerous instances when the narrator more explicitly reveals a pro-Irish disposition. Through the narrator's own clear pro-Irish bent, the novel assumes as its own the pro-Irish sentiments of its characters as well. Indeed, once the narrator's political sympathies become clear, even the descriptions of Ulster's pastoral beauty that linger throughout the text seem to further notions of Irish perfection.

Estercel proves exceptionally kind to Essex. Besides using mostly warm language to describe the Lord Lieutenant, the novel also predicates its true climax – Estercel's survival and release from the dungeon – on Essex's uncompromising compassion. At the famous parley in the Bellaclynth Ford, the narrator describes an Essex who possesses perhaps almost traitorous levels of sympathy for Ireland: “instead of a wasted mourning famine-stricken country, he saw a fair and prosperous land united under one wise and strong leader” (289). Essex consistently serves as a near symbol of Irish legitimacy, a particularly curious phenomenon in the novel.

It makes perfect sense that a novel with a strong Irish nationalist undercurrents could emerge from the early 20th century. It is tougher to reconcile the novel's nationalism with its sympathy to Essex. One must wonder why – in a time of particularly tense Anglo-Irish

relations – the Irish might look so favorably upon a man who once led an army to suppress the fight for independence.

Emily Lawless's 1890 *With Essex in Ireland* demonstrates a quite similar contradiction, so one possible explanation inevitably lies in the influence Lawless had on Rhys. Lawless's novel thrashes the English far more severely than *Estercel* ever does, a curious characteristic of the work considering the temperate conservatism of Lawless's individual political views, which included firm opposition to home rule. Lawless – evidenced by some of her non-fiction writing - genuinely viewed Essex warmly and sympathetically. In her 1887 *Story of Ireland* – a quick but quite subjective history of Ireland – she attributes Essex's failure in Ireland to his high level of virtue: "his natural chivalrousness, his keen perception of justice...an independence of vulgar motives...all helped to bring about that failure" (Lawless 209). The precise roots of Lawless historiographical treatment of Essex remains murky, with virtually no sources listed in her *Story of Ireland*. Regardless, this idolization of Essex and implicit vilification of Cecil certainly make it into her novel three years later, and then, prevailing onward, into Rhys's 1913 *The Charming of Estercel*.

It is too far-fetched to say that the Irish might sympathize with someone who tried to lead his own uprising against the Crown. However, Essex's failure – as opposed to the brutal success of his successor, Mountjoy – perhaps makes the mere prospect of Irish sympathy for Essex less absurd. Still, failure alone hardly seems sufficient cause to warrant such a positive portrayal. Eve Patten thinks Lawless's novel's acceptance of Essex marks an attempt to vindicate imperialist values, "progress, piety, rationality, and order" (Patten 288). While Lawless's personal views might have waxed imperialist, her novel proves far more subversive than Patten allots, severely questioning the legitimacy of colonial tactics through brutal depictions of English treatment of Irish women and children.

In both *Estercel* and *With Essex in Ireland*, warm representations of Essex effectively mark acts of defiance against England. Ireland effectively assumes, as her own, a man too honorable to survive in that ethical wasteland, England; a man who, in making a truce with Tyrone, recognized the Irish nation; and, one severely punished for doing so, subjected to exile, financial ruin, and, ultimately, his head – all for making a truce.

While certainly not without flaw, *The Charming of Estercel* proves an interesting take on the Essex story. As a case study, it thoroughly demonstrates the impact cultural revision and reimagination have had on Essex's legacy, in so far as it transposes aspects of Essex retellings rather than of Essex's life itself. Ultimately, these reworked motifs and tropes still ask questions similar to more traditional Essex retellings: who wins in the great battle between secret, conniving treachery and bold, honorable confrontation?; What really rules affairs of state – chivalrous morals, clever alliances, bold action, subtle manipulation, or just pure ambition?; Can love exist alongside ambition? Furthermore, especially in the context of Lawless's *With Essex in Ireland*, Rhys's novel poses intriguing – if somewhat unanswered – questions about how the Irish wrestle with England's history. For all these reasons, *The Charming of Estercel* – despite its relative anonymity – marks a key Essex novel of the early 20th century and absolutely warrants further study.

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