



The 'so-called Essex ring' teachers' notes

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Follow-up questions

1. At which point during her reign was Elizabeth most at risk of being overthrown?
2. Of all her closest courtiers, it was William Cecil who exerted the greatest influence on Elizabeth's reign. Discuss
3. Why was it important for Elizabeth to keep control of her image?
4. 'I will have but one mistress here, and no master'. Considering the role of her favourite courtiers, to what extent were Elizabeth's words true?

Transcript

We often use our clothes, accessories, and jewellery to tell the world who or what we favour. A football shirt is a clear visual statement of the team we support. A locket or bracelet might have the name of the person that we love engraved on it. and this is not a new idea.

In the Tudor era, it became fashionable amongst the wealthy to exchange portrait miniatures as a sign of favour or between loved ones. In the same way that many people today control their image on social media, Queen Elizabeth I also kept firm control of her image. Artists were required to paint her not as she looked but as she wanted to appear. Elizabeth then distributed her portrait miniatures to her closest friends as a sign of her favour. People wore these miniatures to demonstrate their loyalty to her. The public show of loyalty became more important from the 1570s after the Pope declared Elizabeth a heretic and the Catholic threat against her grew.

Colourful portrait miniatures were often painted on vellum (animal skin). They might be given already set into a piece of jewellery, although often they came unframed, and the recipient then paid for the jewellery that would hold it.

This object is from the Abbey's Queen's Diamond Jubilee Galleries. What do you notice about it? Who might have worn it? We can see that the ring contains a cameo portrait of Queen Elizabeth I. The ring is made from gold. The inside is enamelled with blue flowers, probably forget-me-nots, on a gold ground. What do you think? Was it given to the Queen or by the Queen? And what is the message behind the flowers? A ring is both an intimate and a public piece of jewellery. Only the wearer knows what is engraved on the inside, but everyone can see from the outside.

The ring is believed to have been given by Queen Elizabeth to her favourite courtier, Robert Devereux the Earl of Essex. Essex was in fact the step-son of the Queen's former favourite Robert Dudley, who had died in 1588. When Dudley died, Essex took on many of his step-father's roles. They enjoyed dancing and playing cards together, and he became Elizabeth's Master of Horse, which meant they spent even more time together. Essex was in his 20s and Elizabeth was 30 years older. The story goes that Elizabeth gave Essex the ring and told him that if he ever found himself in trouble, he should send her the ring with its message 'forget-me-not' and she would help him.

Essex's close relationship with the Queen did not make him popular and he himself could often be rather reckless and bold. He took to disobeying the Queen, confident that she would always support him. The relationship fell apart over time with Essex finally attempting to overthrow the Queen and her government. While awaiting execution in the Tower of London, in one last desperate bid for survival, he managed to smuggle his ring out of the Tower in the hope that it would reach the Queen. Whether she would have helped him or not we will never know, as the ring fell into enemy hands and never reached her.

The story was written down in the early 1600s and it may just be a story. But this miniature of Elizabeth I shines a light into the world of royal patronage - something that Elizabeth made into an art form.