Persons’ Displeasure: Collaboration and Design in *Leicester’s Commonwealth*

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The biography of the book known as *Leicester’s Commonwealth* stimulates much thought about the subversive book trade between France and England in the years following the English Mission of 1580/1: tensions between opportunity and ideal, personal feeling and group identity, propaganda and literary form, informers and information, diplomacy, war and polemic. It was written in the early summer of 1584 and probably printed on a press in Rouen directed by Fr Robert Persons (1546–1610). Hundreds of copies were couriered to England, probably by lay brother Ralph Emerson (1553–1604), who returned to France in August after delivering 810 books. On his next journey, in September, he was arrested on his arrival in London from Norwich, with a consignment of “slanderous books,” “touchinge some of the honorable Counsell,” and imprisoned in the Counter in the Poultry. John Bossy claims that the book was smuggled into England via the French embassy, conveniently situated near the river in the vicinity of the Temple. There is no good reason why both routes might not have been used; at all events, Walsingham saw a copy on 28 September; Leicester’s

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nephew Sir Philip Sidney sprang to the defence, and a Royal Proclamation of 12 October cried treason. Early in 1585 a French translation was published, followed a few months later by a short Addicion, in a rather different style. That Addicion was in turn translated into English by Sir John Harington and others, but never published.\(^6\)

The debate about the authorship has been inconclusive. The case for the emigré nobleman Sir Charles Arundel rests on the defamatory or libellous character of the work, and its close association with the interest of the Howard clan and French politics: the failed Anjou match and the Huguenot threat.\(^7\) During Anjou's courtship of Queen Elizabeth Arundel, along with Henry Howard (1540–1614), the future Earl of Northampton, had been intimate with the Earl of Oxford, and all three flirted with Catholicism. Late in 1580, possibly as a result of alarm over the arrival of Persons and Campion, Oxford renounced his incipient Catholic faith and informed on his friends. As a result, Arundel was imprisoned and then held in more informal custody for several months.\(^8\) In his extensive depositions against Oxford, whom he now called his "monstrous adversary," he recalled their common hostility to Leicester. Oxford had been detained in 1579 as a result of his libels against Leicester,\(^9\) but now Leicester was the very man who, to use Peck's term, "weaned" Oxford from his Catholic associates.\(^10\) By publicising the libels, Arundel may have hoped to drive a wedge between Oxford and Leicester; by 1585 Oxford was distancing himself from Leicester, abandoning his command of a company of horse at Flushing as soon as Leicester arrived to take charge of the English forces in support of the Dutch revolt.\(^11\)

Arundel's depositions against Oxford, dating from January 1581, include a memorandum of "Articles wherof Oxford wold have accusid Lester." The content of these accusations is certainly germane: especially the report that Oxford tried to get hold of poison from Leicester that was "of Ceasare," probably an


