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THE REPUTATION OF ROBERT CECIL:  
LIBELS, POLITICAL OPINION AND  
POPULAR AWARENESS IN THE  
EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

By Pauline Croft

READ 2 MARCH 1990

ON 29 April 1612 the London letter writer John Chamberlain penned another of his regular epistles to his friend Sir Dudley Carleton, ambassador in Venice. For weeks a chief news item had been the declining health of the Lord Treasurer, Robert Cecil Earl of Salisbury. 'I wish I could send you better assurance' Chamberlain wrote, 'but as far as I can learn there is more cause of fear than hope'. Salisbury was journeying to Bath, where he had often sought relief before, but he had been 'very yll by the way yesterday and was almost gon once or twice'. His death was assumed to be imminent. 'He is alreedy much lamented and every man sayes what a misse there wold be of him and indeed [he] is much prayed for'. The news later in June was more of a surprise. Salisbury's passing, on the return journey from Bath, had been followed not by the expected tributes to his irreplaceability, but by a flood of 'outragious speaches'. Chamberlain reported that 'fresh libells come out every day', and on 2 July he was constrained to write that

'the memorie of the late Lord Treasurer growes dayly worse and worse and more libells come as yt were continually, whether yt be that practises and juglings come more and more to light, or that men love to follow the sway of the multitude: but yt is certain that they who may best maintain yt, have not forborn to say that he jugled with religion, with the King, Quene, theyre children, with nobilitie, Parlement, with friends, foes and generally with all. Some of his chaplains have ben heard to oppose themselves what they could in pulpit against these scandalous speaches but with litle fruit'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. N. E. McClure (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1939), i. 346-7, 350, 362, 364-5.

The libels of 1612 have often been noted in passing, but never studied in detail. They are of great historical interest, revealing much about current attitudes and demonstrating the existence of a lively and informed body of public opinion which relished political gossip and subjected famous figures to a far-from-deferential scrutiny. Moreover, although Chamberlain noted only the defamatory libels, the debate was not one-sided, for the late Lord Treasurer proved to have some vigorous and hard-hitting defenders.

There has been a danger of exaggerating the significance of the outburst against Cecil, not least because of the references in Chamberlain's famously readable letters. Another observer, the second Earl of Dorset, noted that 'when great men die, such is either their desert or the malice of the people or both together, as commonly they are ill spoken of'. Although Dorset considered the attacks on Salisbury the worst he had seen, his words are a reminder that satirical and denigratory comments were very much part of Elizabethan and Jacobean politico-literary culture. Later in 1612, within weeks of the death of the extravagantly mourned Prince Henry, 'lies and slanders' were circulating about him.<sup>2</sup> The 1580s and 1590s saw the rise of popular and sensational news pamphlets (associated particularly with the prolific Thomas Nashe), moralistic and topical tracts, prose fiction, and above all, satires and epigrams. So great was their ferocity that in June 1599 further publications were banned.<sup>3</sup> This crackdown had only a temporary effect, for epigrams, epitaphs and memorial poems were establishing themselves as standard literary forms. Between 1590 and 1620, the composition of short pieces of verse, both satirical and laudatory, on named or anonymous figures, became immensely fashionable at court, in the universities and in the taverns of London. The vogue owed much to Sir John Harington, the Queen's godson, who circulated scores of epigrams in manuscript, but there were many other writers who popularised the form in print.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Bastard, Samuel Rowlands, Richard West, Sir John Davies and John Davies of Hereford all published volumes of epigrams in these years, as did the parliament man John Hoskyns, who met regularly with other wits

<sup>2</sup>British Library, Stowe MS 172, fo. 319, 22 June 1612. Roy Strong, *Henry Prince of Wales and England's lost Renaissance* (1986), 8–9.

<sup>3</sup>Recent studies include Charles Nicholl, *A Cup of News: the life of Thomas Nashe* (1984), Sandra Clark, *The Elizabethan Pamphleteers: popular moralistic pamphlets 1580–1640* (1983), Paul Salzman, *English Prose Fiction 1558–1700: a critical history* (Oxford, 1985), and Raman Selden, *English Verse Satire 1590–1765* (1978). For the bishops' ban, Selden, 72.

<sup>4</sup>'Epigram' with regard to verse satire describes any length of poem. John Wilcox, 'Informal publication of late 16th century verse satire', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, xiii (1) 1949–50, 191–200. *The Letters and Epigrams of Sir John Harington*, ed. N. E. McClure (Philadelphia, 1930), 44–52.

including Inigo Jones and Richard Martin at the Mermaid and Mitre taverns. From this group came the famous 'fart poem' with its vivid descriptions of members of the Commons who in 1607 had been present at an embarrassing incident. In 1609 the playwright Thomas Dekker, in his parody of contemporary manners *The Guls Hornebooke* explained how to attract attention in a tavern. 'After a turne or two in the roome, take occasion (pulling out youer gloves) to have some Epigrams, or Satyre, or Sonnet fastned in one of them that may . . . offer itselfe to the gentlemen'.<sup>5</sup> Such items would include the libels on Cecil and other leading figures. They circulated widely, spreading from the chattering classes of the capital out into the provinces, and the commonplace books kept by innumerable gentlemen were full of them. One copied over the years between 1602 and 1630, probably in London and Wales, contains poetry and prose in Latin, English and Welsh, with items on public figures (including Cecil) and court scandals.<sup>6</sup> Epitaphs and libels often circulated for decades in manuscript, written out either by professional scribes for a fee, or passed from hand to hand for readers to copy themselves. The impact of printing has overshadowed the continued importance of manuscript circulation right up to the end of the seventeenth century. Political, educational and polemical texts, sermons and parliamentary speeches, the works of Sir Robert Cotton and Sir Henry Spelman, the poetry of John Donne, all reached a wide public through manuscript rather than print. In some literary circles there was still a belief in the social and intellectual superiority of manuscript publication, but with a vast range of lesser items, 'predominantly satiric and occasionally lubricious', the need to escape censorship, or a prosecution in Star Chamber for scandalum magnatum – the libelling of great men – seems a more likely motive. Anonymity was a useful protection.<sup>7</sup> To this extensive genre of manuscript epigram literature belong the libels that appeared on the death of Robert Cecil.

The majority of epigrams were unflattering, and most of the great personages of the day figured in them. The accession of James I was celebrated in innumerable verses, but a more critical note was soon

<sup>5</sup> For a printed version of the fart poem and discussion of the texts, Baird W. Whitlock, *John Hoskyns, Sergeant-at-Law* (Washington D.C., 1982), 283–92. *The Non-dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. A. B. Grosart (5 vols., 1884–6), ii. 240.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Roberts' commonplace book is now Bodleian Library, MS Don c 54. For a printed example, *The Doctor Farmer Chetham MS., being a commonplace book in the Chetham Library*, ed. A. B. Grosart (2 vols., Manchester, 1873).

<sup>7</sup> Harold Love, 'Scribal publication in 17th century England', *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society*, ix (2) 1987, 130–54. It is notable that the manuscript satires and epigrams on the Overbury scandal openly name Robert Carr and Frances Howard, but the printed pamphlets do not. Clark, 87.

apparent. One which begins 'Listen jolly gentlemen' ridiculed the king's indolence and his 'merry boys', while a clutch of related couplets ironically acclaimed James' hunting prowess. There are verses attacking the avarice of the Scots alongside odes of thanksgiving for escape from the Gunpowder plot. The first Earl of Dorset, Salisbury's predecessor as Lord Treasurer, was lampooned after his death for taking bribes in legal cases.<sup>8</sup> The Earl of Northampton, 'the great archpapist, learned Curio', was depicted as converted to the Church of England not so much by the theological skills of James I, as by his 'power to say, Recant thine error, And thou shalt be a privie counsellor'. Northampton's religious ambiguity was also skewered in an epigram labelling him as 'His Majesty's earwig'. The matrimonial problems of Sir Edward Coke, 'Cocus the pleader', inspired other versifiers.<sup>9</sup> Leading churchmen did not escape. On Whitgift's death in 1604 a lengthy set of verses accusing him of being 'the Jesuits' hope' was pinned to the hearse itself. His successor was similarly blamed for Romish tendencies. 'Bancroft was for plays, Lean Lent and holy days' begins one libel which alleged that the archbishop kept open a back door at Lambeth for 'the Strumpet of Rome'. The extensive literature of the 1620s has recently been studied for evidence of the transmission of news and the formation of public opinion, but it should not be assumed that critical appraisal of political figures began with the Duke of Buckingham. The voluminous libels and epigrams of the later Elizabethan and Jacobean period offer a valuable and as-yet-unworked source for the political culture of the earlier years.<sup>10</sup>

Libels were often linked with campaigns of defamation. In the tense summer of 1585, a smear campaign against Lord Burghley insinuated that he was not committed to the protestant cause. It asserted also that 'England was become regnum Cecilianum'.<sup>11</sup> The attacks of 1585 set the pattern, for similar criticisms both written and spoken continued through the 1590s. As Robert Cecil joined his father on the privy council, the plausibility of a *regnum Cecilianum* increased. It became a commonplace to assert that they conspired to thwart the

<sup>8</sup> Bodleian, Malone MS 23, pp. 10, 19. Public Record Office, State Papers Domestic Jas. I, SP 14/69/67. Bodleian, MS Hearne's Diaries 67, pp. 28-9. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington D.C., MS 1027.2, p. 6. Bodleian, MS Rawlinson poet 65, fo. 2. Bodleian, MS Tanner 306, fo. 422. Bodleian, MS Eng poet e 14, fo. 95v. rev. Bodleian, MS Don c 54, fo. 6v.

<sup>9</sup> *Doctor Farmer Chetham MS*, ii. 198. Bodleian, MS Malone 23, p. 1a.

<sup>10</sup> *Les reportes del cases in Camera Stellata*, ed. W. P. Baildon (1894), 223. Bodleian, MS Ashmole 1463, fo. 13. Richard Cust, 'News and Politics in early 17th century England', *Past and Present*, 112 (1986), 60-90. Thomas Cogswell, 'The Politics of Propaganda: Charles I and the people in the 1620s', *Journal of British Studies*, 29 (1990), 187-215.

<sup>11</sup> PRO, SP 12/180/23, 47.

careers of other men of talent, promoting only 'base penn clarkes'.<sup>12</sup> The second Earl of Essex was depicted as the most prominent victim of the policy of exclusion. The contrast between the Cecils, a recently-ennobled family of civil servants, and the dashing military leader was a sharp one, and followers of Essex attacked the Cecils as 'goose-quilled gents'. Members of Essex's household reviled the younger Cecil's hunchback; 'here lieth the Toad' was scrawled on the lintel of his chamber at court.<sup>13</sup> After Essex's abortive rising, libels about his opponents circulated in London. Sir Walter Raleigh was censured for 'bloody pride' and the avarice which led him to lay additional burdens on the Cornish tin miners. Robert Cecil was caricatured.

Little Cecil trips up and down, He rules both court and crown  
With his brother Burghley clown, In his great fox furred gown  
With the long proclamation, He swore he saved the town  
Is it not likely!<sup>14</sup>

Essex and his aristocratic followers deplored the absence of noble blood on the privy council, and another libel accused the Cecils of a deliberate campaign against the nobility.

First did thy sire and now thy self by Machivillian skill  
Prevail and curb the Peers as well befits your will.

The tone is remarkably venomous, addressing Cecil as 'Proud and ambitious wretch that feedest on naught but Faction' and describing him as 'Dissembling smoothfaced dwarf . . . I know your crookback's spider-shapen'.<sup>15</sup> In a much lengthier poem, which memorably relates the downfall of Essex in dream form, using a beast fable, Cecil featured as 'the Camel' with its hump, while Essex was 'the Hart' and Elizabeth 'the Lion'. The camel brings a poison in a glass which deceives the lion into exiling the hart.

O that a Camel should a Lion lead . . .  
Camel for burden is, and for the way,  
And not for kingdom's stern and sceptre's sway.  
By sleight get Camels sways, and Lion sleeps  
And noble Hart in dampie dungeon keeps.  
Wake noble Lion, and this Camel scorn . . .

<sup>12</sup> *The State of England Anno Dom. 1600* by Thomas Wilson, ed. F. J. Fisher, Camden 3rd ser., Miscellany xvi, (1936), 42.

<sup>13</sup> *Historical Manuscripts Commission, Salisbury*, xi, 586, xiv, 162.

<sup>14</sup> PRO, SP 12/278/23. I have modernised the spelling in this and other libels.

<sup>15</sup> Bodleian, MS Don c. 54, fo. 20. For an allegation in 1592 that Burghley deliberately suppressed the ancient nobility, British Library, Additional MS 12510, fos. 8v, 22v.

Your Grace to Ireland should the Camel send  
His back will bear Tyrone and never bend.<sup>16</sup>

Many of the themes of the posthumous libels were present in the earlier outburst of popular verse defending Essex. Cecil's shortness of stature, his monopoly of power, his hunchback and his factious villainy became established tropes. The death of Essex was to haunt him. In 1604, Samuel Daniel's classical tragedy *Philotas* was censured by the privy council for alluding too dangerously to the late Earl, and by analogy hinting at Cecil himself in the character of the treacherous dwarf Craterus. The accusation that Cecil and his friends at court had 'plotted worthy Essex' fall' was still being repeated in 1612, with the added twist that Cecil's painful death, his 'foul loathsome end', was itself proof of 'how foully then they did offend'. Another libel referred to a 'work of darkness never to be forgotten'.<sup>17</sup> The allegations were testimony to the enduring fascination of the Devereux name, the chivalric values which Essex personified, and probably also the attractions of that policy of a continued war against Spain which Essex had advocated and the Cecils after 1598 deplored. The contrast between Essex and Robert Cecil epitomised the common Renaissance antithesis between the sword and the pen, the man of action and the sedentary clerk, the aristocrat and the bureaucrat. It is not surprising that it proved so enduring in popular verse. In 1612 the ten-year-old Symonds D'Ewes was struck by the hate-filled rejoicing at Salisbury's death, and in his autobiography he set down his mature opinion that it was the lasting popular affection for Essex that lay behind the libels.<sup>18</sup>

By 1601, when Essex went to the block, Robert Cecil had succeeded his father as secretary of state and Master of the court of Wards. The assertion that he ruled both court and crown was widely believed, although he privately described the Queen as ever more autocratic and difficult to manage in her declining years.<sup>19</sup> In 1603 he successfully masterminded the accession of James I, which gained him a barony as well as ensuring his retention of the Wards and the secretaryship. In 1605 he was created Earl of Salisbury, and in 1608 he succeeded

<sup>16</sup> Bodleian, MS Don c.54, fo. 19. The copyist has written the identifications in the margin.

<sup>17</sup> David Morse, *England's Time of Crisis: from Shakespeare to Milton* (1989), 62-7. Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fo. 12. BL, Trumbull Misc. v, fo. 11.

<sup>18</sup> *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Sir Simonds D'Ewes during the reigns of James I and Charles I*, ed. J. O. Halliwell (2 vols., 1845), i. 50-51. Cecil was blamed for the death sentence. In 1615 the historian William Camden, who had attended Essex's trial, considered that 'to this day but few there are which have thought it a capital crime'. William Camden, *Annales*, translated R. Norton (1635), 542-3, 549.

<sup>19</sup> *Calendar of the Carew MSS 1601-3 preserved in the Archbishopal Library at Lambeth*, ed. J. S. Brewer and W. Bullens (1870), 157, 221, 260, 358-9. *HMC Salisbury*, xix. 21.

Dorset as Lord Treasurer, thereafter holding the three greatest offices of state in an unparalleled monopoly of power. The parlous condition of the crown's finances had already been evident to Cecil in 1601 and by 1608 urgent measures were needed. Not since Lord Treasurer Winchester under Mary had there been such activity at the Exchequer, and it is not surprising that hostility to his fiscal efforts featured prominently in the posthumous libels. Taxation was a common theme. The five parliamentary sessions of 1604 to 1610 voted in all four subsidies and seven fifteenths and tenths. Even though the subsidy was in sharp decline, each levy bringing in less than the one before, the total was still an exceptional amount for peacetime. Salisbury had warned the king that it was likely to be resented, for after the heavy tax burdens of the 1590s, expectations of relief were widespread on James' accession. Far from receiving any praise for his efforts to cope with the crown's financial crisis, Salisbury was described as

Oppression's praiser, Taxation's raiser . . .  
The country's scourger, The cities' cheater  
Of many a shilling.<sup>20</sup>

Since the collection of subsidy money was routinely staggered to ease the impact on the subject, between 1603 and 1612 only three years were free of levies. The frequency of these demands produced a particularly popular libel which begins,

Here lies Hobbinall, our shepherd while here  
That once in a year, our fleeces did sheer.<sup>21</sup>

Parliamentary taxation was not the only financial burden for which Salisbury was blamed. After the sessions of 1604 and 1610, the lack of adequate supply drove the crown to require loans on privy seals. Once again, in private Salisbury had made plain his own strong distaste for these prerogative measures, but to no avail. The loans were raised and in the public eye he was to blame.

His care for the commons his country now feels  
With tricks and with traps and with privy seals.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup>P. Croft, *A Collection of several speeches and treatises of the late Lord Treasurer Cecil*, Camden 4th ser., Miscellany xxix (1987), 262–3, 280, 290. Bodleian, Tanner MS 299, fo. 11v.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. fo. 12. Northants Record Office, Isham (Lampport) MS 4304. BL, Harleian MS 1221, fo. 74. Harleian MS 6038, fo. 18.

<sup>22</sup>N.R.O., Isham (Lampport) MS 4304. Croft, *A Collection*, 261, 290–1. PRO, SP 14/67/43, 22 Nov. 1611. The collection of privy seals was at the forefront of attention early in 1612. Chamberlain noted that they were 'dispersed all over' and that payments were being made by 'the meaner sort' in January, and the Venetian ambassador

England was the most lightly taxed of the three great monarchies of western Europe, but the libels illustrated the immense resistance to any fiscal levies that were not related to the visible and extraordinary needs of the realm. At heart most Jacobean Englishmen still believed as their ancestors had done, that the king should live of his own, and they assumed that the ordinary revenues allowed him to do so. The integrity of the crown's own lands was thus a symbol of the assumed financial independence of the monarchy. Although in 1608 Salisbury steered through a major new entail, attempting to protect the remaining royal patrimony from the generosity of James I, he was depicted rather as a despoiler, since his efforts at rationalisation necessitated the selling off of some of the mills and outlying smaller properties. Nor was it appreciated that he had toiled incessantly to bring some order into the chaotic administration of the crown's valuable woodlands. One libel described him as

A statesman that did impoverish the crown  
Sold mills and lands and forests cut down.<sup>23</sup>

Salisbury also increased the entry fines and leases for crown lands in line with inflation, bringing in a more realistic income after years of neglect. In view of the criticisms of both parliamentary taxation and loans on privy seals, it might be expected that efforts aimed at increasing regular revenue would be welcomed as a step towards lightening the burden on the subject. Inevitably, however, the policy was unpopular with those who had benefited from the slack management of previous lord treasurers. It was perhaps a tenant of crown property who concluded one libel with the line, 'He is gone to Hell, to raise the Devil's rent'.<sup>24</sup> The jest once again underlined the impossible financial situation of the monarchy, when every move to increase income offended one interest group or another. The libels mirrored the trenchant but often contradictory criticisms levelled by subjects against early Stuart attempts at financial reform. There was still a belief that the problem was only superficial. As an earlier epigram by Sir John Harington put it,

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reported in February that 'every diligence will be used in calling up the loan without delay'. Chamberlain i. 330. *Calendar of State Papers Venetian*, 1610-13, pp. 291, 294.

<sup>23</sup> N.R.O., Isham (Lampport) MS 4304. For Salisbury's efforts on the woods, Croft, *A Collection*, 259-60.

<sup>24</sup> N.R.O., Isham (Lampport) MS 4304. For Salisbury's efforts to improve the rents of crown lands, L. M. Hill, 'Sir Julius Caesar's journal of Salisbury's first two months and twenty days as lord treasurer, 1608', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xlv (1972), 311-27.

England men say of late is bankrupt grown  
The effect is manifest, the cause unknown.

Harrington ended with an obsequious reference to the new king:

Can any man tell how to help this disorder  
Faith one good Stewart would put it all in order.

Significantly his poem continued to circulate in James' reign with the variant ending, 'Faith one good lord would put all in order'.<sup>25</sup> The simplistic notion that all that was needed was a change of personnel made it impossible to attract enough support, in the House of Commons or in the country as a whole, for the fundamental restructuring necessary to avoid a bankrupt monarchy.

Although the libels emphasise Salisbury's financial exactions, there is virtually nothing about the great contract of 1610, his major attempt at a parliamentary solution to the financial crisis. It was glanced at obliquely—

The king's misuser, The parliament's abuser  
Hath left his plotting . . . is now a-rotting<sup>26</sup>

but the absence of anything more specific indicates once again that popular comprehension of complex issues was limited. It was much easier to make allegations of corruption than to address the underlying problem with a constructive remedy. Moreover, Salisbury's efforts on behalf of the royal revenues had not prevented him from amassing a substantial fortune himself. Although senior posts were salaried, they brought in a pittance, not even enough to pay the secretaries and clerks employed to assist with the workload. The Lord Treasurer was entitled to a fee of a pound a day, together with robes worth £15.7s.8d.<sup>27</sup> Inevitably the bulk of his income came from other sources, particularly the profits of wardships and deals with the customs farmers. There were only routine comments about wardship in the libels, indicating perhaps that their authors were not of the social rank likely to suffer from the attentions of the court of Wards.<sup>28</sup> However, there were sharp attacks on Salisbury's own subsidy payments, which were absurdly low. The subsidy had long since ceased to provide an equitable tax system and during the reign of Elizabeth assessments became totally unrealistic. The landed classes as a whole

<sup>25</sup> *Letters and Epigrams of Sir John Harrington*, 301, 'How England may be reformed'. Bodleian, Malone MS 23, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> Bodleian, Tanner MS 299, fo. 11v.

<sup>27</sup> Cambridge University Library, MS Ee v. 24, fo. 3.

<sup>28</sup> BL, MS Trumbull Misc. v, fo. 11. Bodleian, MS Malone 23, p. 19.

benefited from low rates, but the richest benefited the most.<sup>29</sup> The disparity between Salisbury's vigorous efforts on behalf of the crown, his rapidly increasing personal wealth, and his minimal tax contribution was noted and resented. The Hobbinal libel already quoted on the subsidy continues,

For oblation to Pan his manner was thus  
Himself gave a trifle and offered up us.  
So with his wisdom this provident swain  
Kept himself on the mountain and us on the plain.<sup>30</sup>

Since subsidy payments fell disproportionately on the middling and poorer sort, the spectacle of a lord treasurer as wealthy as Salisbury pressing for parliamentary supply was bound to provoke accusations of tax evasion and hypocrisy. The lightness of English taxation compared to that raised abroad, which might have been a persuasive argument in the attempt to restructure the crown's finances, was forgotten in the bitterness engendered by the inequities of a system which allowed privy councillors and members of the House of Lords to avoid paying anything like their fair share.<sup>31</sup>

A similarly bitter note of social criticism surfaced in the libel which begins,

Here lies thrown for the worms to eat  
Little bossy Robin that was so great  
Not Robin Goodfellow nor Robin Hood  
But Robin th'encloser of Hatfield Wood.<sup>32</sup>

James I's passion for hunting had led him to covet Theobalds, the great mansion surrounded by extensive parkland which Burghley had built and bequeathed to his younger son. By way of exchange Robert Cecil received the old royal property of Hatfield, which he at once began to transform. To create what is now the New Park, he took in

<sup>29</sup> 'The richer the taxpayer, the less his true wealth was captured by the subsidy assessments'. R. Schofield, 'Taxation and the political limits of the Tudor state', *Law and Government under the Tudors: essays presented to Sir Geoffrey Elton*, eds. C. Cross, D. Loades and J. J. Scarisbrick (Cambridge, 1988), 253. Salisbury was rated at 2s. 8d. in the pound on £300 in 1606, when his income was approaching £50,000 per year. *HMC Salisbury*, xix. 272. L. Stone, *Family and Fortune: studies in aristocratic finance in the 16th and 17th centuries* (Oxford, 1973), 59–60.

<sup>30</sup> See above p. 49.

<sup>31</sup> The contrast with other European states was realised at the time. On the question of a catholic bride for Prince Henry, the Venetian ambassador reported that 'it is very openly said that if a Tuscan woman comes here she will counsel taxation'. *CSPVen.*, 1610–1613, p. 396.

<sup>32</sup> Bodleian, MS Ashmole 1463, fo. 13. MS Ashmole 38, p. 182. Bodleian, MS Rawl. poet 1155 p. 70. Bodleian, MS Tanner 299 fos. 12–12v. Bodleian, MS Eng. poet f 10 fo. 97. N.R.O. Isham (Lampport) MS 4304.

about half of Hatfield Wood (the old Great Park), in which there were extensive common rights. Much of the woodland was then used for fuel in the great brickmaking enterprise for the house itself. Common woodland was a vital local resource, not least in providing firewood for the poor, and Cecil had already proved himself a ruthless encloser at Brigstock, his property in Northamptonshire, where a large-scale riot broke out in 1603 protesting at the sale of wood.<sup>33</sup> The intrusion of Cecil power into the area around Hatfield was bound to cause problems, not least because the old royal estate had been indulgently managed for generations. There are indications that Salisbury was aware of the problem and made efforts to give the commoners a reasonable deal, but the enclosing of the wood was deeply resented. A striking symbolic protest was planned for the day of his funeral, when there was a plot to lay open the newly-impaled grounds. Word leaked out and the disturbances were prevented, although later the protesters succeeded in pulling down some fences. It was noted that there were 'very few or none of the gentlemen of the country' present at the funeral service, because they had not been asked. The libels' reminder of Robert Cecil's reputation as an encloser, and the thrusting of his grand new house and park into a settled rural community, points to the simmering tensions of agrarian society in the early seventeenth century. Similar conflicts of interest between landowners and the users of land led to the Midland rising of 1607, and in 1612 riots occurred in the forest of Dean against Salisbury's close friend the Earl of Pembroke.<sup>34</sup>

Other matters of current controversy were also touched on. As secretary of state Salisbury was responsible for foreign policy, and some libels link diplomacy with religion.

With tricks and deceits of leger de main  
 He played like a juggler with France England and Spain  
 He feigned religion and zealous affection  
 Yet favoured the papists and gave priests protection.<sup>35</sup>

The search for suitable marriages for the two eldest royal children, Prince Henry and Princess Elizabeth, dominated the years between

<sup>33</sup> I am grateful to Mr. Robin Harcourt Williams, librarian and archivist to the Marquess of Salisbury, for information from the Hatfield Manor Papers on the concentration of commoners' rights in Hatfield Wood; there were none elsewhere in the park. For the importance of woodland in the local economy of Brigstock, P.A.H. Pettit, *The Royal Forests of Northants*, (Northants. Record Society xxiii, 1968), 171-4.

<sup>34</sup> Chamberlain i. 353, 365. PRO, SP 14/70/49, 14 Aug. 1612.

<sup>35</sup> Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fo. 11. Huntington Library California, MS HM 198, fo. 126. The juggler simile proves that this was one of the libels seen by Chamberlain in July 1612.

1610 and 1612. Although Salisbury dutifully carried out the king's instructions to seek an Infanta for Henry, he was never convinced that a Spanish match was a real possibility. The Franco-Spanish alliance of 1611, marrying the Infanta to Louis XIII, proved him right. However, the anti-popery of the verse reflected a widespread distaste for any foreign policy which was not explicitly protestant, while the greater tolerance shown to catholics both lay and clerical after 1603 did not commend itself to those Englishmen who wished to see the recusancy laws strictly enforced. Serving James I entailed walking along a tightrope of religious and foreign policy, and such a balancing act inevitably incurred the accusation of 'juggling' levelled at Salisbury both before and after his death. To many of his countrymen he seemed uncommitted to either protestantism or the protestant cause.<sup>36</sup> By February 1612 there were already signs of the tension over the inescapable linkage between religion at home and diplomacy abroad which was to increase so markedly after the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. In the spring and summer of 1612, as negotiations proceeded with Tuscany and Savoy for a bride for Henry, popular and ecclesiastical hostility mounted steadily. The prince himself was opposed to a catholic match, and a major confrontation with his father was only averted by Henry's premature death. The libels testify to the depth of public unease. The outpouring of popular hostility between 1621 and 1623 as the Spanish match was revived for Prince Charles was entirely predictable after the experience of 1612.<sup>37</sup>

It will be apparent that the 1612 libels contained many criticisms of Robert Cecil's policies. But as Chamberlain's sense of shock testified, they went beyond political criticism. The themes which emerged most insistently and savagely were those of Salisbury's crooked back and his sexual appetites. It would be easy to dismiss these more scandalous aspects as merely the Jacobean equivalent of the gutter press, but the remorseless images of deformity and moral corruption have an importance beyond mere titillation. There was no doubt about the hunched back, for even his admirers described Robert Cecil as 'a little, crooked person'.<sup>38</sup> The libels were relentless.

<sup>36</sup> cf. 'Religion's scoffer' in Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fo. 11v. For further discussion, P. Croft, 'The Religion of Robert Cecil', forthcoming in *Historical Journal*.

<sup>37</sup> *CSPVen.*, 1610-13, pp. 270, 275, 278, 280-1, 375. PRO SP 14/71/12. The negotiations are outlined by Roy Strong, 'England and Italy: the marriage of Henry Prince of Wales', *For Veronica Wedgwood These*, eds. R. Ollard and P. Tudor-Craig (1986), 59-87.

<sup>38</sup> Sir Robert Naunton, *Fragmenta Regalia: or, observations on the late queen Elizabeth, her times and favourites* (1824), 137. Naunton was present at Salisbury's deathbed.

Here lies Robert Cicil, Compos'd of back and pisle  
and again

Here lies great Salisbury though little of stature,  
A monster of mischief, ambitious of nature.<sup>39</sup>

Comparisons were made.

At Hatfield near Hertford there is a coffin,  
A heart-griping harpy, of shape like a dolphin<sup>40</sup>

always depicted heraldically as curved. Perhaps most blunt,

The Devil now hath fetched the ape,  
Of crooked manners, crooked shape.<sup>41</sup>

Damning historical parallels were drawn.

Here lieth Robin Crooktback, unjustly reckoned  
A Richard III; he was Judas the second——  
Richard or Robin, which is the worse?  
A crooktback great in state is England's curse.<sup>42</sup>

Chamberlain enclosed a similar effort for Carleton to see.

While two Great Rs both crouchback stood at the helm,  
The one spilt the blood royal, the other the realm.

Disapprovingly he endorsed it, 'Richard Duke of Gloucester, Robert earl of Salisbury, a silie vurs'. Another libel more charitably commented

Though Crookback the vulgar did term him in sight  
There were more beside him that were not upright.<sup>43</sup>

These 'silly verses' made plain the public identification of Robert Cecil with Richard of Gloucester, and there is a remarkable chronological relationship between Cecil's career and the popularity of the histories of King Richard III. The depiction of Richard as 'little of stature, ill-featured of limbs, crook-backed' originated with the publication of Sir Thomas More's *Workes* in 1557, but the theme was not taken up in the popular theatre until much later. Shakespeare's play was written and first performed around 1591, the year that Cecil was

<sup>39</sup>BL, Add. MS 25348, fo. 9v. N.R.O., Isham (Lampport) MS 4304. Variants in Bodleian, Malone 23, p. 65, and Huntington, MS HM 198, f. 125v.

<sup>40</sup>Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fo. 11, Bodleian, MS Firth d 7, fo. 156. Huntington, MS HM 198, fo. 126. BL, MS Egerton 2230, fo. 34.

<sup>41</sup>Bodleian MS Tanner 299, fo. 11.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid fo. 13. Bodleian, MS Malone 23, p. 10, MS Malone 26, pp. 65-6.

<sup>43</sup>Chamberlain i. 356. PRO, SP 14/69/67 (1).

sworn a privy councillor, and about the same time an anonymous drama, *The true tragedy of Richard III* also appeared. An unsatisfactory quarto of Shakespeare's play was published in 1597, just after Cecil had become principal secretary of state, followed by another reprint in 1598. In June 1602, a year after the Essex revolt confirmed Cecil's pre-eminence on the privy council, Ben Jonson was commissioned to write a tragedy, *Richard Crookback*. It was assumed that the theme would be popular since he was paid the unusually large advance of £10. In the same year, Shakespeare's play was reprinted and it appeared again in 1605. In the year of Salisbury's death there appeared *The tragedy of King Richard III by William Shakespeare newly augmented*, in quarto. Of all Shakespeare's plays, only *Henry IV part I* can show a longer list of early reprints; but after 1612 there was no further printing for ten years, in marked contrast to the previous run of publication.<sup>44</sup> The enduring fascination of the saga of Richard III may seem to need little explanation, and the popularity of chronicle plays drawn from English history was at its peak between 1590 and 1610. Nevertheless, audiences in those years were also exceptionally alert to contemporary political applications, and it seems very likely that the drama of a ruthless hunchback, a younger son with vaulting ambition, gained extra appeal from its topicality.<sup>45</sup> Whatever the intention of the dramatists, the frequent depictions of Richard III on stage must have reinforced the public image of Cecil as a pitiless, cunning monster. John Day, whose comedy *The Isle of Gulls* was a London sensation in the winter of 1606, also underlined the hunchback motif. Day originally depicted a hunt-loving monarch, 'King Basilius', but the too-obvious pun on the king's own *Basilicon Doron* was toned down by the nervous printer, and the character emerges as Duke Basilius. He is dominated by his adviser, the upstart dwarf Dametas, who monopolises patronage and does not permit suitors to approach the duke without bribing him first. Answering a question about the play, 'Is there any great man's life charactered in it?', the spokesman Prologue responds, 'None I protest sir; only in the shape of Dametas he expresses to the life the monstrous and deformed shape of vice'. Dametas can be seen as a composite character, incorporating all the vices found at court, but the topical reference was unmistakable.<sup>46</sup> The libels' emphasis on Salisbury's short stature and hunched back would appeal to a public already well accustomed to the charac-

<sup>44</sup> *The Riverside Shakespeare*, eds. G. Blakemore et al., (Boston, 1974), 708–9. David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: a life* (1989) 90–1.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge, 1987), 141–7. David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 233.

<sup>46</sup> *The Works of John Day*, ed. A. H. Bullen (2 vols., 1881), i. 5 (each play separately paginated). A. H. Tricomi, *Anticourt Drama in England 1603–42* (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1989), 34–41.

terisation. Another literary motif is the comparison between Salisbury and a fox, an animal of legendary cunning. 'Sure I am they have earthed the fox' and variants formed the last line of several libels. Ben Jonson's *Volpone: or, the Fox* was written and performed in the winter of 1606 just after the Gunpowder plot. Literary scholars have frequently linked it with Salisbury, since at least two characters—Volpone himself and the dwarf Nano—incorporate possible references. In 1606 Salisbury was still giving Jonson occasional commissions, so the likelihood that the dramatist would deliberately offend his patron seems remote. However, Jonson's intentions and the public's reading of *Volpone* may well have varied. The frequent use of fox imagery in the posthumous libels strengthens the view that the play was seen by the theatre-going populace as referring, however obliquely, to Salisbury.<sup>47</sup>

The images and literary resonances in the libels are of historical interest since the seventeenth century had little hesitation in equating physical imperfection with both moral and political decay. In December 1612, Francis Bacon produced his essay 'On Deformity', one of the new ones added by him to the collection originally published in 1597. It was at once remarked that 'the world takes notice that he paints his late little cousin to the life'. To Bacon, deformity was not an outward sign but an inward cause, of a character devoid of natural affection, 'extreme bold', and industrious 'to watch and observe the weakness of others, that they may have somewhat to repay'. Furthermore, deformity could be used in rising to great place, for it 'quencheth jealousy ... it layeth their competitors and emulators asleep'. As in ancient times kings put their trust in eunuchs, so now in the deformed; and since they 'seek to free themselves from scorn, which must be either by virtue or malice ... therefore let it not be marvelled if sometimes they prove excellent persons'. The suggestion that Salisbury had risen, not through talent or desert but through exploiting others' initial refusal to take him seriously, was an insidious way of belittling his achievement, while the comparison with eunuchs underlined the theme of physical and political inadequacy. The ambiguous and faint praise at the end of the essay allowed Bacon to retain his apparent superiority. From his letters to James I, however, it is clear that he had hated his cousin, while being consumed with envy at his success and embittered by what he saw as Salisbury's

<sup>47</sup> Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fo. 11. Bodleian, MS Ashmole 38, p. 182. Ashmole 1463, p. 13. N.R.O., Isham (Lampport) MS 4304. Tricomi, 41. For Jonson's relations with Salisbury, Richard Dutton, *Ben Jonson* (Cambridge, 1983), 144–53. Rowlands' epitaph on Salisbury, 'In Vulponem' begins, 'The Fox is earthed now in ground' and contains the lines, 'Of whose successe-full thriving wit, Bookes have been made, and playes been writ'. *Complete Works of Samuel Rowlands*, ed. E. W. Gosse (3 vols., Glasgow, 1880), iii. 13.

withholding of patronage. The essay must have been prepared for publication just as the libels were circulating. By leading the attack on Salisbury, they emboldened Bacon to vent his bile after years of suppression.<sup>48</sup>

Public opinion in the early seventeenth century was not squeamish in discussing physical disability, and the same brutal frankness is apparent in the libels' treatment of sex. They unhesitatingly attributed Salisbury's death to venereal disease.

Oh ladies ladies howl and cry, For you have lost your Salisbury  
 He that of late was your protection, He is now dead by your  
 infection  
 Come with your tears bedew his locks, Death killed him not  
 It was the pox.<sup>49</sup>

Robert Cecil never re-married after the death of his wife in January 1597, but two ladies were repeatedly associated with him thereafter. One was Catherine Countess of Suffolk, wife of his longstanding friend Thomas Howard the Lord Chamberlain. Lady Suffolk served Salisbury as constant go-between with successive Spanish ambassadors, who all paid tribute to both her influence and her insatiable rapacity. Their association was common knowledge—James I made jokes about it—and Salisbury bequeathed her his best diamond ring, a stupendous gift worth around a thousand pounds. Yet he also went out of his way to pay warm tribute to Lord Suffolk, describing him as his oldest and dearest friend. The family link was cemented when the Suffolks' daughter Catherine was married in 1608 to Salisbury's heir.<sup>50</sup> Can the association between Salisbury and the Earl and Countess of Suffolk have been an amicable *menage à trois*? Or was Lady Suffolk not so much Robert Cecil's lover as his political confidante, one effective professional operator collaborating with another? Lady Walsingham, mistress of the robes to Anne of Denmark, kept a lower profile, but it was noticed that the marriage of Lord Cranborne to Catherine Howard took place at her court lodgings, and that Lady Suffolk was not present. In Salisbury's will Lady Walsingham was left a modest annuity and £500 made up of debt remission and repayments.<sup>51</sup> Whatever the truth about this curious network of relationships, the libels proffered the worst interpretations, relishing

<sup>48</sup> *Francis Bacon: The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher (1985), 191–2. *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, ed. J. Spedding (7 vols., 1857–74), iv. 313, 371.

<sup>49</sup> Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fo. 11v.

<sup>50</sup> *Letters of King James VI and I*, ed. G.P.V. Akrigg (1984), 234. A.J. Loomie, 'Sir Robert Cecil and the Spanish Embassy', *Bull. Inst. Hist. Res.*, xlii (1969) 30–57. There are numerous versions of the will. I have used that from Hatfield House, MSS Box V/182.

<sup>51</sup> *HMC Salisbury*, xx. 149. Chamberlain i. 273. Hatfield MSS Box V/182.

the themes of high-class cuckoldry, adultery, and their fatal consequences.

Twixt Suffolk and Walsingham oft he did journey  
To tilt at the one place, at th'other to tourney  
In which hot encounter he got such a blow  
That he could not be cured by Atkins or Poe.

Another ends with the same allegation.

Let Suffolk now and Walsingham  
Leave their adulterous lives for shame  
Or else their ladyships must know  
There is no help in Dr. Poe  
For though the man be very cunning  
He cannot stay the pox from running.<sup>52</sup>

There are other, cruder versions. Their significance lies in what they reveal about attitudes to leading court figures. Recently, James I has benefited from much positive reevaluation, but the image of his court has been less studied, with the exception of the Bedchamber. Where the question of court corruption has been raised, it is usually associated with the Overbury scandal of 1614–15 and the homosexual relationship between the king and Buckingham in later life. However, there is ample evidence for a growing distaste for the court much earlier, in the years immediately before and after 1603. Thomas Bastard's scathing epigram of 1598 on monopolies held by court figures—'courtier leather, courtier pinne, and sope, And courtier vineegar, and starche and carde'—sounded a note heard increasingly in subsequent years.<sup>53</sup> Instead of the misleading concept of 'court and country', literary scholars have utilised the more perceptive term 'anti-court', for much of the sharpest criticism was voiced not in the country but in London, and often by individuals with court connections. The theatre was full of comment on upper-class vice, as in plays such as Marston and Barksted's 'The Insatiate Countess' of 1610.<sup>54</sup> The literary evidence underlines the theme of sexual depravity as a metaphor for political corruption, seen so clearly in the libels on Robert Cecil. By 1612 public opinion was savagely attacking the king's leading minister on matters of private morality, while the two women closely associated with him, defamed as 'bawds', 'drabs' and 'lecherous wretches', were

<sup>52</sup> Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fos. 11–12.

<sup>53</sup> Neil Cuddy, 'The revival of the entourage: the Bedchamber of James I', David Starkey et al., *The English Court* (1987), 173–225. *The Poems English and Latin of the Rev. Thomas Bastard M.A.*, ed. A. B. Grosart (1880), 23.

<sup>54</sup> Tricomi, 101. By 1631 eight English countesses were thought to merit the description.

both prominent at court. The impact must have been considerable. After three generations of protestant evangelism, many English people were increasingly godly in their moral outlook. Cecil was seen in the context of a court abhorred by all Christian people.

Oppression, lechery, blood and pride, He lived in  
And like Herod—Died.

Conduct books for women extolling such virtues as chastity, submission and silence were achieving remarkable popularity; the limits of acceptable social behaviour for women were narrowing.<sup>55</sup> The endlessly repeated allegation that Salisbury died of the pox, a shameful end for a great statesman but somehow even worse when caught from women of the highest social status, illustrates that rising alienation from court life and values which can be discerned from the 1590s. It is only necessary to contrast Cecil's reputation in sexual matters with that of his straitlaced father to see how great was the change between Burghley's death in 1598 and Salisbury's in 1612.<sup>56</sup> Popular attitudes to leading ministers and courtiers, and ultimately by association to the king and queen themselves, were being transformed. The denigration of the court was an important aspect of the increasing failure of majesty to awe the political nation, in itself far more of a problem for the Stuart dynasty than it had ever been for the Tudors.<sup>57</sup>

Ironically, it is clear from the papers of his chief doctor that whatever the nature of his relationships with Lady Suffolk and Lady Walsingham, Robert Cecil did not die of the pox. Sir Theodore Mayerne was emphatic; 'nihil unquam siphillicum', he wrote. By the summer of 1611, when Salisbury consulted Mayerne, he was already seriously ill, and the evidence indicates that he was suffering from an advanced state of scurvy, together with tumours, almost certainly cancerous, in the stomach, liver and neck.<sup>58</sup> His physical symptoms,

<sup>55</sup> Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fos. 11–12. N.R.O., Isham (Lampton) MS 4304. Alison Wall, 'Elizabethan Precept and Feminine Practice: the Thynne family of Longleat', *History*, 75, no. 243 (1990), 24–7. The Lake scandal of 1619 brought forth similar libels describing Lady Lake as 'A bitch of Court, a common stinking snake'. Bodleian, Malone MS 23, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Burghley's widely-circulated 'Advice to a son' begins, 'Son Robert, the virtuous inclination of thy matchless mother...'. *Advice to A Son: Precepts of Lord Burghley, Sir Walter Raleigh and Francis Osborne*, ed. L.B. Wright (Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington D.C., 1962), 9–13.

<sup>57</sup> For a discussion of other aspects of 'the problem of diminished majesty' Conrad Russell, *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford, 1990), 23.

<sup>58</sup> Mayerne's notes of the consultation of 28 July 1611 are in his *Ephemerides* (BL, MSS Sloan 2058–76), from which an abbreviated version was printed by Sir Henry Ellis, *Original Letters Illustrative of British History* (11 vols., 1824–46), 2nd ser., iii. 246. There is a full account of Salisbury's condition, based on Mayerne's notes, together

widely known and publicly discussed, were used in the libels as metaphors of the corruption of power.

And let all that abuse the king, Themselves to greatness so to bring  
Be forced to travel to the Bath, To purge themselves of filthy froth.<sup>59</sup>

The symptoms of scurvy are repellent, especially the ulcerous and weeping sores which produce a bloody fungus, the 'filthy froth', and the unbearably foetid breath. The details of Robert Cecil's death do not make for easy reading, but the libels were pitiless. Several referred to the stench of scurvy.

This Taper, fed and nursed with court oil,  
Made great and mighty by rapine and spoil—  
Unable now to spread more light about  
Like a lamp dying, Stank and went out.<sup>60</sup>

The 'Fox' libels usually ended with the handy rhyme, that he 'stank while he lived and died of the pox'. In the discussion of his fatal sickness, there was also gleeful satire on eminent medical men, in whose activities there was intense public interest but little confidence. Incompetent and fraudulent doctors were a familiar joke. Few could afford the fees of court physicians, so the ineffectiveness, and worse, of the ministrations of Dr Poe and Dr Atkins, who accompanied Salisbury to Bath, occasioned some satisfaction.

To the good of the state he was a mainstay  
Till Poe with his syringe did squirt him away.<sup>61</sup>

Mayerne, doctor to the royal family, was widely credited with having hastened the end of both Robert Cecil and, later, Prince Henry. The failure of 'the rare Frenchman' who 'could do him [Salisbury] no good with his baths or his plaster' was enthusiastically ridiculed. That Salisbury was suffering from scurvy was common knowledge, and Chamberlain thought it 'of easie and ordinarie cure yf yt be not too far overpast'. The confidence was misplaced; the diagnosis of scurvy, which Mayerne made with impressive accuracy, was one thing, but effective treatment was another. The relationship between scurvy and diet was not fully appreciated until 1753, and little that was done for Robert Cecil by his doctors was of much use. Most of the treatments

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with the regimen proposed for his cure, in a document made by or for Dr. Henry Atkins, another of his medical men. Hertfordshire Record Office, MS 65440.

<sup>59</sup> Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fo. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid f. 11. Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse* (New Haven, 1959), 247–9, notes that disgust at sex and emphasis on the corruptions of the flesh became an increasingly common theme in the literary satire of the early 17th century.

<sup>61</sup> Clark, 167–8. Huntington, MS HM 198, fo. 125v. Bodleian, MS Malone 23, p. 65, reads 'sirrop' for 'syringe'.

were positively harmful.<sup>62</sup> The verses revealed a widespread scepticism about contemporary professional medicine which was only too justified.

The libels preserved in the surviving manuscripts are anonymous. Can anything be said about their authorship? The much-copied 'Here lies our Hobbinal' quoted earlier was asserted by John Aubrey to be the work of Raleigh, since 'old Sir Thomas Malett, one of the judges of the king's Bench, who knew Sir Walter Raleigh . . . did remember these passages'. Despite this, the editor of Raleigh's verse excluded it, as merely 'a wretched piece of scurrility'. It scarcely measures up to the poet's grander efforts, but it is by far the most consciously literary of the libels, with its deliberately Spenserian references to Hobbinal, classical images of the nymph Phyllis, the shepherd's hornpipe, and oblations to Pan. In 1612 Raleigh had been in the Tower for nine years, his alliance with Cecil long since ended. He had already written verses on court corruption, and he might well have penned a bitter epitaph in the style of his old friend Edmund Spenser. It seems cavalier to ignore the very specific attribution from old Sir Thomas Malett.<sup>63</sup> Apart from Raleigh, the author of only one other libel is named, 'one Hessels', a servant of the Earl of Arundel and a notorious gamester, who in 1613 'blazed abroad' a poem on Salisbury. Hessels' seven verses began rousingly—'Advance advance my evil-disposed muse'—but rapidly deteriorated into limping abuse. Although his poem caused some stir at the time, the fact that it survived in only one copy indicates that, unlike Raleigh's epigram, it lacked market appeal.<sup>64</sup>

Recent studies have stressed the importance of faction in the politics of the early seventeenth century, and the libels written around the time of Essex's downfall undoubtedly depicted Cecil as deeply involved in factional struggle. It might be assumed that the striving for office that took place after May 1612 would reveal something about the origins of the outburst of denigration. Were these libellous attacks orchestrated by Salisbury's political enemies? There is no evidence that this was so, and nothing links the libels with any court figure apart from Raleigh. Moreover, their lively and often scurrilous language, their general lack of much literary pretension, and the absence of elaborate classical references all suggest that they should be considered as spon-

<sup>62</sup> Bodleian, MS Tanner 299, fo. 11. Chamberlain i. 338. K. J. Carpenter, *The History of Scurvy and Vitamin C* (Cambridge, 1986), 1–17. Although 'fruits in their seasons' were allowed, Salisbury underwent purges and glisters, together with punctures to draw off the waters of the accompanying dropsy. *HMC Downshire*, iii. 266.

<sup>63</sup> Bodleian, MS Rawl. poet 26, fo. 78. Bodleian, MS Eng. poet e 14, fo. 79. *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. A. M. C. Latham (1929), 196.

<sup>64</sup> BL, Trumbull MS Misc. v, fo. 11. *HMC Downshire*, iv. 20.

taneous expressions of popular culture. Mostly metropolitan, the libels originated in the tavern world of pamphlets, epigrams and satire rather than among factious courtiers. However, once they appeared, the libels were received with great pleasure by the Earl of Northampton, who passed them on with approbation to his ally Viscount Rochester, the king's favourite. Northampton's letters to Carr contain many acid references to 'the little lord' and such was his loathing that at one point he casually referred to Cecil as 'itself'.<sup>65</sup> Although it has been convincingly demonstrated that Northampton collaborated with Salisbury on political issues, the letters written after the latter's death bear out Bacon's private assessment that the two men were deeply antagonistic. Like Bacon himself, Northampton hated Salisbury but kept his animosity reined in during the Lord Treasurer's lifetime.<sup>66</sup> His pleasure at the circulation of the libels reveals his secret hatred, but nothing points to Northampton as the patron of their authors. The presence of the obscure libeller Hessels among Arundel's retinue might suggest a Howard network, but at least one libel assumed that another Howard, the Earl of Suffolk, would form a continuing political alliance with the second Earl of Salisbury. 'Old Sarum now is dead; young Salisbury lives' it begins, before going on to insinuate that Suffolk had overlooked his wife's behaviour in order to profit politically from the connection with Salisbury.<sup>67</sup> It is too simple to see the Howards as a monolith in Jacobean politics. In the public eye, Suffolk was an ally of the Earl of Salisbury, Northampton was not, and there is no suggestion of an orchestrated Howard campaign. It is also too simple to ascribe all evidence of political opinion to court faction. By the early seventeenth century, public interest in current affairs was easily sufficient to generate a multitude of spontaneous political libels.<sup>68</sup> There is no evidence that they were artificially concocted as weapons in a court struggle.

Such spontaneity is only partly present, however, in the literature defending Robert Cecil, for the majority of the tributes can be linked to the orchestrated campaign by his family and friends to rebut criticism. The campaign was in itself a remarkable tribute to the importance attached to a good reputation in the public eye. The spontaneous items included a ballad, price 6d., entered with striking

<sup>65</sup> PRO, S.P. 14/71/16. Northampton's usual description of Salisbury as 'the little lord' here became 'the littel one itself' and in an extraordinary passage, writing to James I, he insinuated that Salisbury was in hell with Queen Elizabeth, 'whear he kneels befor his olde mistress by an extreeme whotte fieres side'. PRO, SP 14/71/3.

<sup>66</sup> Spedding, iv. 52-3. Linda Levy Peck, *Northampton* (1982).

<sup>67</sup> N.R.O., Isham (Lamport) MS 4296.

<sup>68</sup> It is noteworthy that later in 1612 there was a campaign of defamation against Northampton, who prosecuted his denigrators in Star Chamber. Chamberlain i. 396.

speed in the Stationers Register on 27 May, only three days after Salisbury's death and entitled 'Brittayne's generall teares shedd for ye greate losse it hadd by the death of the righte noble and worthy Robert Earle of Salisbury'.<sup>69</sup> This must have been around the time of the sermons preached in his defence by his chaplains, which Chamberlain noted on 2 July, but it is clear from another tribute that these efforts did not stem the tide of libels.

Oh that such wisdom that could steer a State  
Should now be valued at so cheap a rate . . .  
Fate of our age! See how this dead man lies  
Bitten and stung by Court and City flies . . .  
At this great Pillar's fall when all thus laugh  
Dreads not the whole world the next epitaph?<sup>70</sup>

The 'flies' stung the Cecil circle into more vigorous action, for on 23 July the Stationers Register listed 'a booke called "A Remembrance of the Honours due to the lyfe and death of Robert Earl of Salisbury treasurer of England"'. This was by the Londoner Richard Johnson, who had already scored a number of literary successes including a polished lament on the death of Elizabeth. Proclaiming his 'intyre affection long borne to the honoured house of the Cecills', Johnson gave an account of Salisbury's distinguished career, 'because I see the Muses lippes lockt up', and attacked the 'ignoble spirits' whose 'scandalous speeches' were defaming him. They were 'no other but the poysonous plots and devises of rebellious papists', a shrewd appeal to English prejudice. Johnson's pamphlet, also priced at 6d, went into two editions, another measure of public interest.<sup>71</sup> Around the same time there appeared *The Character of Robert Earl of Salisbury Lord high treasurer of England*, the work of the dramatist Cyrill Tourneur, which circulated in manuscript, possibly to appeal to a more refined audience. Tourneur had served in the low countries under Sir Edward Cecil, a leading English captain, to whom he was distantly related; Sir Edward was married to the Lady Theodosia Cecil to whom the *Character* was dedicated. It began with a tribute to Burghley, another sign of its origins within the Cecil circle, and contained a sharp rebuke to those who jeered at Salisbury's deformity. 'Had his body been an answerable agent to his spirit, he might have made as great a Captain as he was a counsellor'. The tract's most pungent comment was that while 'every effect of graciousness' was attributed to the king, fiscal

<sup>69</sup> It could be one of those items entered, but never printed. G. B. Harrison, 'Books and Readers 1591-94', *The Library* 4th ser., viii (1927), 273-6.

<sup>70</sup> Chamberlain i. 365. Bodleian MS Eng. poet e 14, fos. 95v. rev.-96v. rev.

<sup>71</sup> For a fuller discussion of Johnson's work, Croft, *A Collection*, 250.

severity was blamed on Salisbury alone. From the number of surviving copies Tourneur's work enjoyed considerable success.<sup>72</sup> The efforts of Johnson and Tourneur were obviously done to commission, with the Cecil family hiring writers already well known in the literary world. The picture they painted was of a devoted counsellor, trained up by his great father, and highly esteemed by both the monarchs he had served. To counter the allegations of debauchery, they stressed his philanthropy and his edifyingly Christian deathbed; allegations of corruption were ascribed to mere envy. The most distinguished of the defenders of Salisbury, however, was not a hired litterateur but Sir Walter Cope, chamberlain of the Exchequer and servant of the Cecils for a total of thirty-eight years. Cope's *Apology*, another manuscript production, was boldly addressed to the King himself, and depicted the Lord Treasurer's tireless efforts to bring some order into the chaos inherited from Dorset in 1608. 'He lost the love of your people only for your sake and for your service', wrote Cope, pulling no punches. The *Apology* was widely read and carefully noted, though according to Northampton, it was at once rebutted by another hostile epigram.<sup>73</sup> The closeness of the Cecil circle in death as in life attracted satirical comment. One libel concludes

Thus here lies his lordship interred as you see  
And no doubt but his soul is where it should be  
If pray for the dead you cannot with hope,  
Yet say Lord Have Mercy on Beeston and Cope.<sup>74</sup>

James did not respond to Cope's plea to come to the defence of the late Lord Treasurer, and he made some sharp criticisms of Salisbury before the meeting of the next parliament. However, the King went out of his way in November 1612 to show favour to Cope, staying with him at his house in Kensington. Although the visit was not a social success, Cope was promoted to the mastership of the Wards.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 250–1. Tourneur's characterisation was erroneously attributed to Wotton by Logan Pearsall Smith, who printed it in *The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton* (2 vols., 1907), ii. 487–9.

<sup>73</sup> For the *Apology* and the strong probability that Cope was responsible for other measures to defend Salisbury's reputation, Croft, *A Collection* 251–4. Sir Julius Caesar's heavily underlined copy, endorsed '1 July 1612', is BL, Lansdowne MS 151, fos. 112–23v. The mathematician and geographer Thomas Harriot, friend of Raleigh and Northumberland, copied out passages of the *Apology*. BL. Add. MS 6789, fo. 527. PRO, SP 14/70/21.

<sup>74</sup> Bodleian, MS Malone 23, p. 65. Huntington, MS HM 198, fo. 125v. Sir Hugh Beeston, another of the inner circle, was one of the six bannerrolls at Salisbury's funeral. *HMC Salisbury*, xxi. 374.

<sup>75</sup> Chamberlain i. 391, 393. The King 'was quicklie wearie of Kensington because he saide the wind blew thorough the walles that he could not lie warme in his bed'.

James was not a vindictive man and one of the qualities he admired, and prided himself on, was personal loyalty. Cope's outspoken defence of his late master had not permanently alienated the king. His generous attitude may also have been influenced by the fact that one of his leading courtiers was another defender of Salisbury. In 1611, as Salisbury's ill-health worsened, William Earl of Pembroke acted as his link-man with the king, which can only mean that the Lord Treasurer trusted him implicitly. Pembroke and his brother Philip Earl of Montgomery were among the inner circle of friends who watched over Salisbury one night in February 1612 when his doctors feared he was near death, and in the last days of his life, at Bath, Salisbury expressed a wish never to be parted from Pembroke. The Earl was elevated to the privy council just as Salisbury died.<sup>76</sup> Pembroke came from a great literary family and was an active poet before he was burdened by court office. The epitaph he composed cannot rank as one of his best efforts, but it firmly defended Salisbury against charges of corruption and recognised that by his reform of the regulations of the court of Wards in January 1611, he had sharply restricted his own profits as Master.

You that read in passing by, Robert Earl of Salisbury  
 Know that in so short a story Thou canst never find such glory.  
 All state secrets on him laid, He the staff of Treasure swayd  
 Gave his Master all the gain, Of the Wards reserv'd the pain.  
 Govern'd all with so clean hands, As most Malice silent stands  
 And who snarl will be soon, Found dogs barking at the moon.  
 This tomb hath his bones possess't  
 Heaven and friends hold dear the rest.<sup>77</sup>

Linked with Pembroke's effort was one by a poet of far greater stature, Samuel Daniel, who had begun his career as tutor at Wilton. 'Well-languag'd Daniel' also regarded Salisbury as a patron, for in spring 1612 he had completed the first draft of *The First Part of the History of England*, originally dedicated to Salisbury. On the latter's death, with the work already in press, Daniel rapidly transferred the dedication to Robert Carr.<sup>78</sup> This awareness of the realities of patronage did

<sup>76</sup>Northampton noted the closeness of Salisbury and Pembroke. PRO, SP 14/69/56, SP 14/70/21. Chamberlain i. 324, 336, 351.

<sup>77</sup>The holograph poem, presumably presented by Pembroke to the second Earl of Salisbury, is Hatfield MS 140/116. Robert Kreuger, *The Poems of William Herbert third earl of Pembroke*, (unpublished Oxford B. Litt. thesis, 1961), 72. There is a copy in N.R.O. Isham (Lampport) MS 4296, and other versions are discussed by J. Pitcher, *Samuel Daniel: the Brotherton Manuscript* (Leeds texts and monographs, new ser., 7, 1981), 173-5.

<sup>78</sup>R. B. Gottfried, 'The Authorship of "A Breviary of the History of England"', *Studies in Philology*, 53 (1956), 172-90, proves that Daniel, not Raleigh, was the author. The

not stop Daniel from composing an epigram to accompany that by Pembroke, and his poem is the finest of the literary tributes.

If greatness wisdom policy of state  
 Or place or riches could preserve from Fate  
 Thou hadst not lost the company of men  
 Who wert both England's purse and England's pen.

Great little lord! who only didst inherit  
 Thy father's goodness honours and his spirit  
 But death that equals sceptres with the spade  
 He with thy father's bones to sleep hath laid.<sup>79</sup>

These tributes to Salisbury all derived from his close circle of family, friends and allies. Unlike the libels, none was anonymous and it is politically significant that Pembroke and his client Samuel Daniel were prepared to be identified publicly with the Cecil family. Richard Johnson in his tract had deplored the silence of the University of Cambridge, for outpourings of verse to great men were something of a convention in both universities. Perhaps in response, Benjamin Hinton of Trinity College produced six verses of elegy on 'poor England's silver-headed senator'.<sup>80</sup> Another tribute, the most curious, was a lengthy poem entitled *Les larmes funebres francoises*, by a Poitevin gentleman, the Sieur de la Faye. It is an odd mixture of English and French, with a warning at the beginning about the complexities of French pronunciation, and on the title page a verse from Revelation, 'Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord . . . for they rest from their own labours and their works follow them'. The Sieur de la Faye was a protestant, since he described the English as enjoying the fruits of the Gospel, and the poem was dedicated to the second Earl of Salisbury. Perhaps they had met in France on his earlier grand tour. Although the twenty verses are laboured, *Larmes funebres* emphasised that Salisbury had a European reputation. Unfortunately although it is printed, there is no indication as to where, or how widely it circulated.<sup>81</sup> All in all, the defences of Robert Cecil were impressive in their range and commitment, and though they lacked the raciness of the libels, they found a receptive audience. The libellers did not have it all their own way.

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earlier draft, seeking 'your furtherance (righte Noble Earle of Salsbury)' is BL, MS Cotton Titus iii. 33.

<sup>79</sup> Pitcher, 175-6. There are two further verses.

<sup>80</sup> *Ballads from Manuscripts*, ed. W. R. Morfill (2 vols., The Ballad Society, 1873), ii. 297-8.

<sup>81</sup> STC 4895.7. The only copy, bound in with other works, is at Hatfield House and I am grateful to Mr. Robin Harcourt Williams for producing it for me.

The impact of the controversy over Salisbury can be seen some months later. *Abuses Stript and Whipt*, by the poet George Wither, a professional writer who lived by his pen and aimed at an extensive audience, was entered in the Stationers' Register on 16 January 1613. His comments reflected the uncertainty left in the public mind after the campaign of libels and the counter-attack.

For that great mighty Peere that dyed lately  
 Ere-while was mighty, powerful and stately: . . .  
 But now (alas) hee's gone; and all his Fame  
 You see not able to preserve his name  
 From foule Reproach . . .  
 In spite of all his greatnesse, 'tis well knowne  
 That store of Rimes and Libels now are sowne  
 In his disgrace. But I hear divers say  
 That they are slanders. (Then the more knaves they  
 That were the Authors) but if so it be  
 He were from those vile imputations free;  
 If that his Vertue's paid with such a curse,  
 What shall they looke for, that are tenne-times worse?

Wither tactlessly touched on a number of sensitive topics, not least the description of kings 'most bountifull to fooles', but it is significant that when he was imprisoned for his work, he blamed Northampton. The latter presumably read the last two lines as a prophecy of his own posthumous prospects. It is also notable that when Wither was in trouble again in 1621, he thanked Pembroke for interceding for him.<sup>82</sup>

The extent of popular political consciousness in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries has been much debated in recent years. The emergence of an active public opinion formed by the circulation of literary, dramatic, religious and parliamentary material can be traced back to the controversies involving Leicester and Burghley in the 1580s. The intensive lobbying engaged in by organised puritanism, and the widespread circulation of the Marprelate tracts, accelerated the process. Elsewhere in Europe, in the low countries and in Spain, the same decade saw a very similar emergence of commentary on politics and political theory.<sup>83</sup> In 1612, the circulation of both the

<sup>82</sup> *Abuses Stript and Whipt* was very popular, with at least five editions in 1613. For the text quoted here, George Wither, *Juvenilia* (3 vols., printed for the Spenser Society, 1871), i. 165-7. Joan Grundy, *The Spenserian Poets* (1969), 14-5.

<sup>83</sup> P. Collinson, 'Puritans, men of business and Elizabethan parliaments', *Parliamentary History* 7, pt. 2, (1988) p. 211 n. 97. For the outpouring of pamphlets in the low countries between 1566 and 1588, E. H. Kossman and A. F. Mellink, *Texts Concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands* (Cambridge 1974) and for the remarkable manuscript circulation in

attacks on Cecil and the defences of him illustrates the appeal of material dealing with current affairs. Originating mostly in London, where there was already an audience avid for news and quick to pick up topical references at the theatre and in printed satire, political epigrams and tracts were quickly carried to readers in the localities, in both manuscript and print.<sup>84</sup> More specifically, the libels revealed the divide between those in government, aware of the pressing need for a refoundation of crown finance, and a public which saw only individual corruption and extortion. Such incomprehension makes it easier to understand the reluctance of the House of Commons to respond to schemes such as the great contract. Distrust on matters of religion and foreign policy also deepened the divide. The emphasis on Robert Cecil's hunched back evoked vivid images of political crookedness, together with historical echoes of ruthless ambition. Disapproval of his private life, and the attacks on Lady Suffolk and Lady Walsingham, both described as carriers of the pox, sprang from a deep distaste for the court which was increasingly seen as a centre of moral decay. The appalling physical details of Salisbury's death could easily be depicted not only as retribution for a dissolute life but also as evidence of corruption in high places, combining fascination with revulsion. Cecil's role in the downfall of Essex, and his own death in 1612, produced a torrent of libelling and counter-assertion which reflected the interest of an increasingly literate society in public figures. Moreover, after the polarisation of opinion in the debate over Salisbury, it comes as no surprise that there has been little subsequent agreement on his achievements. Where the libels depicted his self-interest and corruption, his defenders contrasted his tireless and devoted labours as counsellor and minister. They prefigured exactly the opposing views of Robert Cecil arrived at by modern historians.<sup>85</sup> In death as in life the lord treasurer proved to be an intensely controversial figure. The extensive circulation of such differing assessments of his career not only testified to the vigour of popular political culture in the early seventeenth century, but also marked the next stage in its evolution, bridging the gap between the previous high point of public interest in the 1580s and the even more highly charged atmosphere of the 1620s.

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1587-8 of dream visions highly critical of Philip II's policies, R. L. Kagan, *Lucrecia's Dreams: Politics and Prophecy in 16th century Spain* (Berkeley, 1990).

<sup>84</sup>Gurr, 49-79. Clark, 19.

<sup>85</sup>Cf. Joel Hurstfield's review of Menna Prestwich, *Cranfield: politics and profits under the early Stuarts* (Oxford, 1966), 'The Political Morality of early Stuart statesmen', *History*, 56, no. 187 (1971), 235-43.