

A9 Proude and ambitious wretch that feedest on naught but faction

Notes. This libel includes all the usual themes found in the many attacks on Sir Robert Cecil, including his short stature and hunched back, his supposed monopoly of power (especially at the expense of aristocrats) and Machiavellian dissimulation, by which he allegedly controlled the Queen, dominated the anti-Essex faction and ultimately brought down Essex himself.

“Libell against Sir Robert Cecill”

Proude and ambitious wretch that feedest on naught but faction

Prevaile and fill thy selfe, and burst with vile detraction¹

Detraction is thy game, and hathe bene since thie youthe

And wilbe to thie dyinge daie, He lies that speakes the truthe

But well I knowe thy bosome is fraught, with naught but scorne

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Dissemblinge smothfac'd dwarfe, wold god thad'st ne're bene borne

First did thy Sire and now thy selfe by Machivillian skill

Prevaile, and curbe the Peeres as well befittes your will²

Secreat-are³ I knowe your Crookebacke spider shapen

Poison to the state and Comons, Foe to vertue frend to rapine

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Soe farewell I post to hell

To bringe more newes

Good Gentlemen let this bill stand⁴

Till some good bodie have put to his hande

God save the Queene⁵

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Source. Bodleian MS Don. c.54, fol. 20r

A9

¹ *detraction*: i.e. presenting the qualities of virtuous men to seem like vices.

² *First did...your will*: a principal charge by Catholic polemicists against Cecil's father ("sire"), William Cecil, Lord Burghley, was that he deliberately worked to "suppress" the political influence of the peerage. Although prominent in the *regnum Cecilianum* tracts of 1592, this claim was levelled

against Burghley by Catholic critics as early as 1572 (e.g. John Leslie, *A treatise of treasons against Q. Elizabeth and the croune of England* (1572)).

³ *Secreat-are*: pun on “Secretary”.

⁴ *let this bill stand*: a “bill” is a written document intended for public display. A more specific meaning, which seems to be implied here, is that of a formal set of charges lodged in legal proceedings to open a case. This would make this rhyme literally an indictment of Cecil.

⁵ *Till some...God save the Queene*: the allusion here seems to be to John Stubbes, who famously published *The discoverie of a gaping gulf whereinto England is like to be swallowed* (1579), an explosive book which criticized, in the most scathing terms, Elizabeth’s intention to marry a Catholic French prince, the Duke of Anjou. Elizabeth was so angry at this public intervention in matters of state that Stubbes was punished by having his right hand cut off. Stubbes re-emphasized his patriotism—and further boosted popular support for his stance—by raising his bloody stump and crying “God save the Queene”. Elizabeth subsequently abandoned her plans to marry Anjou. The implication of this allusion seems to be that England now needs another Stubbes-like patriot (“some good bodie”) who is willing to risk the Queen’s anger by publicly denouncing Cecil and urging her to punish him. This would also suggest that Cecil is a new Anjou-like figure, whose ability to deceive the Queen threatens the realm in the most profound manner.
