

#### D. The Death of Robert Cecil (1612)

Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, James I's Lord Treasurer, Secretary and most powerful councillor, died on 24 May 1612. His death provoked a voluminous outpouring of libellous epitaphs that were countered by a smaller number of written defences in both verse and prose. The sheer multitude of libels shocked experienced observers like the newsmonger John Chamberlain (1.362, 364-65), while they clearly amused Cecil's factional enemies at court. Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, sent one "prety Epitaphe" to the royal favourite Robert Carr, Viscount Rochester, commenting that "I have seldome seen the traces of a more unhappy pen and yet to deale plainly with your Lo if I should die in this instant I knowe not what one point to taxe of untruth or fiction" (PRO SP 14/70/21, 1 August 1612). The notoreity of the libellous attacks on Cecil also provoked John Donne into setting down some rather unorthodox thoughts on the poetic and moral utility of verse libels (77-79). These poems have been intelligently analyzed and contextualized by Pauline Croft ("Reputation") in a pathbreaking essay on Cecil's reputation. Croft's analysis draws attention to the set of interconnected and politically resonant charges and images that recur throughout the libellous epitaphs: the allegation, also made at the time of the events in question, that Cecil had engineered the downfall and execution of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, in 1601; his fiscal oppression of the realm as Lord Treasurer and Master of the Wards; his physical deformities (short stature and crooked back); and his alleged sexual corruption, potently symbolised for the libellers by the bodily decay and stench supposedly caused by a fatal dose of syphilis. The selection of poems below gathers together the twenty two surviving libels on Cecil (plus one libellous anagram), and the four extant verse defences that circulated in manuscript.