

The Lies and Spies of Old Queen Liz

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The year is 1591, and Queen Elizabeth I has turned England into a surveillance state. Spies and saboteurs lurk around every corner, waiting to sell poor souls down the river to curry favor with Her Majesty. The severed heads of traitors can be seen lined up on spikes atop London Bridge.



With political tensions rising and the economy circling the drain due to a drawn-out war with Spain, there is little the average Englishman will not do to save themselves from social and financial ruin. Secrets, plots and suspicion abound; it is a very dangerous time to roam the streets of London.

But considering the number of enemies — both in England and overseas — who were clamoring for her head, is it any wonder the Queen kept her subjects under careful watch? She kept a particularly close eye on the Catholics in her country, many of whom were displeased to have a Protestant on the throne. In 1591,

it was less than 60 years since Elizabeth's father, King Henry VIII, had broken away from the Catholic Church and established his own Church of England in order to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn. England was rife with religious upheaval during those 60 years. Many English Catholics believed Elizabeth's swift death to be the only answer for their woes.

Shrewd ruler that she was, Elizabeth responded by establishing an expansive spy network designed to catch these schemers and would-be assassins. Agents were tasked with roaming the streets in search of conspirators

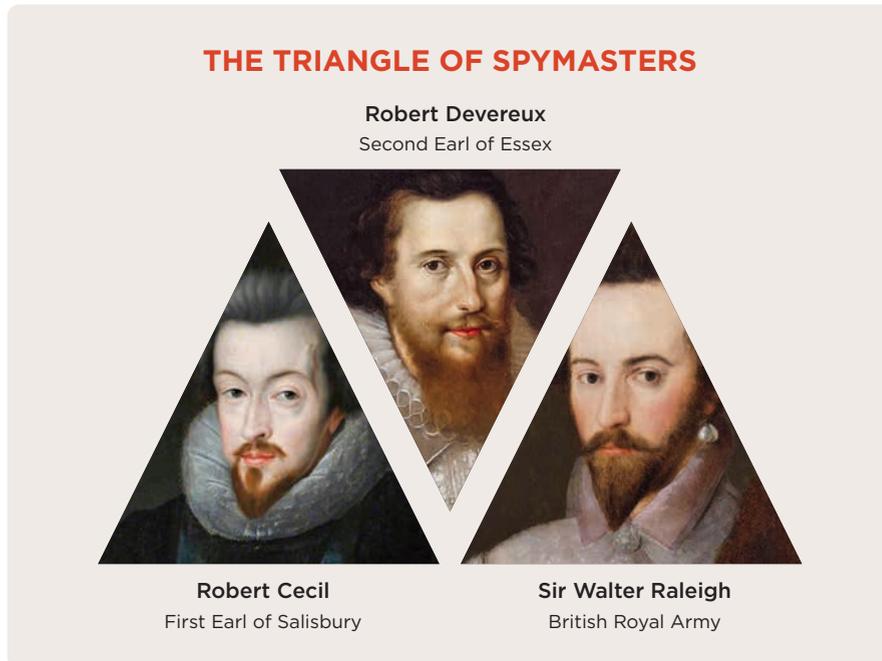
and sometimes went undercover with potential traitors. It was almost impossible to determine who was secretly reporting to Her Majesty. Anyone caught voicing a subversive opinion, stating disapproval of the Crown or even just carrying a Catholic rosary might find themselves being called in for questioning — or worse.

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At the center of it all: a trio of rivals with significant sway and equal hunger for power. Each was vying for the unofficial position of head spymaster that had previously been occupied by Sir Francis Walsingham, who died in 1590. Each had their own claim to Walsingham's position, and each was willing to stab the others in the back (so to speak) to secure their place.

The most passionate and dangerous of these rivals was Robert Devereux, Second Earl of Essex — a man with high political ambition and one of the Queen's favorites. A fierce military leader, Devereux was known for being a wild card. He took an aggressive approach to the espionage game, and he was not above inserting himself in situations that he had been explicitly warned away from. Some found his arrogance exasperating, but the Queen (at this point in time, at least) found it endearing and gave him her favor. She was not the only one, as many subjects favored his zealous approach to the "Catholic problem." He was also son-in-law to the late Walsingham, and some English nobles considered him to be Walsingham's rightful successor.

However, Devereux faced stiff competition from Robert Cecil, First Earl of Salisbury — Walsingham's former pupil and seemingly natural successor. Cecil had learned the art of statecraft from his father, Lord Burghley, and the art of espionage from Walsingham. A levelheaded and strategic man, Cecil was responsible for some of the Queen's most successful operations during his time. But for all his efficacy, he was none too adored by the people. Cecil



was known to be a hunchback and a miser who was not overly personable. While his talent for politics exceeded Devereux's, he unfortunately lacked charisma. Cecil had the skills, but Devereux had the swagger.

Completing the spymaster triangle was Sir Walter Raleigh — a writer, statesman and soldier for the British Royal Army. Although less involved in the spy game, Raleigh held dangerous information about many individuals. As the Queen's favorite, he enjoyed unparalleled access to Her Majesty. Raleigh was not without controversy, however. It was rumored that he was an atheist who led scholarly discussions on the values of atheism. Raleigh was particularly hated by Devereux, who saw Raleigh as a threat to his relationship with the Queen. Devereux attempted to discredit Raleigh by coercing his associates into revealing compromising secrets about him. Nonetheless, Raleigh was clever and beloved by the Queen, and he always managed

to stay ahead of Devereux's power plays. But in 1591, he found himself in a delicate position, as he had recently married one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting without Her Majesty's permission — a secret that put Raleigh in hot water when the Queen learned of his indiscretion.

Thus, the game was on. And the power? Anyone's to grab. Would it be Devereux, the loose cannon with something to prove? Or Cecil, the calm-and-collected heir apparent to the previous spymaster? Or Raleigh, the wily-but-subversive survivor? More importantly, what did this back-alley war between Her Majesty's heads of state mean for the lowly agents serving as pawns in their three-way chess match? When one is at the mercy of powerful figureheads, what must be done to survive? Can two young poets like Shakespeare and Marlowe afford a genuine connection amid this minefield? In these deadly and treacherous times, can such a thing as friendship even exist? 