

e-Luminations: Equivocation

Robert Cecil

In Equivocation, Robert Cecil plays a crucial role. He is King James' right-hand man, the power behind the throne, who tells Will Shagspeare that the king wants him to write a play about the Gunpowder Plot. Here is a little of his background.

Queen Elizabeth may have called Cecil “elf” or “pigmy,” but she certainly relied upon him. King James I, who called him the equally demoralizing “Beagle,” did as well.

Slight and hunchbacked, Robert Cecil was the son of William Cecil, Elizabeth’s principal minister. The younger Cecil was groomed to be a statesman and was brought into her service as a young man. He proceeded to become as indispensable to her as his father.

He was a protégée of Sir Francis Walsingham, who had instituted a wide-ranging spy network throughout England and abroad. Upon Walsingham’s death, Robert Cecil became secretary of state. After the death of his father, he moved up to leading minister.

Cecil sat in Parliament and was knighted by the queen and sworn a member of the Privy Council at 28. His biggest rival was Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, a favorite of the queen. But with the failure of Essex’s disastrous coup against Elizabeth in 1601, Cecil gained in power.

Toward the end of Elizabeth’s life, since she had refused to designate a successor, Cecil communicated secretly with James VI of Scotland to insure a smooth royal transition. When James took the throne, Cecil continued the spy network and his power grew enormously. Like his father, Cecil was virulently anti-Catholic and he reintroduced harsh recusancy laws.

He and James were linked in a strange way: Cecil’s father had persuaded Elizabeth to have James’ mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, killed. In *Equivocation*, James says of Cecil, “His father killed my mother. That makes us brothers.”

James raised him to peerage and Cecil amassed several titles, becoming Earl of Salisbury in 1605, about the time of this play.

One theory holds that he framed the conspirators for his own political ends. But historians are mixed. Mark Nicholls, who wrote *Investigating Gunpowder Plot*, disputes that notion.

But many have raised the question over the years that since Cecil knew of the plot 10 days before it was to occur, why did a man with such enormous powers do nothing to stop it until right before it was to happen?

—Catherine Foster

This is an excerpt from OSF's 2009 Illuminations, a 64-page guide to the season's plays. For more information, or to buy the full Illuminations, [click here](#). Members at the Donor level and above and teachers who bring a school group to OSF receive a free copy of Illuminations.