

## TOURING PLAYERS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF ELIZABETH: WHAT WERE THEY PLAYING?

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During the first decade of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, 1558–1568, William Cecil, the Queen's First Minister, re-activated the policy first begun by Thomas Cromwell in 1535 to use plays and players as tools of state propaganda. As early as 1968, David Bevington noted this in *Tudor Drama and Policy*, citing a letter of the Spanish Ambassador, Gomez Suarez de Figueron, count of Feria, to his master, Philip II of Spain.<sup>1</sup> The idea was picked up by Paul White in *Theatre and Reformation*,<sup>2</sup> but neither scholar was able to take the idea much beyond the simple fact that it was so. Recently I have been looking at this idea from the double perspective of a consideration of Cecil himself and a gathering together of the information that has been collected by Records of Early English Drama about the touring companies that emerged in the mid sixteenth century and their patrons.<sup>3</sup> Everything we know about Cecil's education, circles of friendship and marriage, and intellectual and religious affinity makes it plausible that he would support the use of drama as a means to strengthen Elizabeth's hold on power and solidify the Protestant cause. From his university days he had been accustomed to seeing plays that were powerful Protestant polemics. He was a close associate of Richard Morison who had enunciated the theory that vernacular plays should be used for the inculcating of Protestant principles in the general population that had strongly influenced Thomas Cromwell.<sup>4</sup> During the time Cecil was part of the inner circle of government in the Edwardian years and again when he became Elizabeth's first minister in 1558, the pattern of provincial touring by players patronized either by the monarch or by members of the Privy Council, begun under Cromwell's ascendancy (1535–1541), was reinstated. A careful study of the patterns of patronage based on REED's *Patrons and Performances* website<sup>5</sup> provides a picture of the playing companies that were on the road in mid century and the names of their patrons. From this information it is possible to come to a sense of how many companies were patronized by members of the Privy Council or people closely associated with them. In Cromwell's time the percentage recorded of such companies was 83%; under Edward 77% and in the first five years of Elizabeth's reign 83%. Of the 173 performances so far recorded in those years (1558–1563),