

The Blinde-Worm's Sting in Macbeth

by Connie J. Beane

Adder's fork, and blinde-worm's sting....
Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.
Macbeth 4.1.16, 20–21

The ingredients that go into the infamous witches' cauldron in *Macbeth*—eye of newt, toe of frog, etc.—are familiar to anyone with even a passing acquaintance with English literature, and as far as orthodox scholarship goes, that is all they are: eyes, toes, fingers.

While *Macbeth* ostensibly depicts events that occurred in 11th-century Scotland, Shakespeare scholars assert that there are numerous allusions connecting characters and themes in the play to people and events in late 16th- and early 17th-century England. Up to now, however, there has been no attempt to parse the contents of the cauldron for possible allusions, despite the relentless repetition in the witches' chant of the words “double, double,” which seems to suggest that there are other meanings lurking beneath the surface imagery of this scene.

Most scholars skim over the first 38 lines of this scene, sometimes deigning to explicate the superficial meanings of the various ingredients, but usually dismissing it as mere melodrama, designed to give the audience a cathartic shiver before passing on to more important issues. However, let us consider the proposition that, like other elements in *Macbeth*, the contents of the cauldron were meant to be understood by a contemporary audience as allusions to things that were more than merely eyes, toes, and fingers.

If we consider the Oxfordian theory of the Shakespeare authorship, one particular item—the *blinde-worme*¹ (4.1.16)—catches the eye and suggests a

possible allusion to William Cecil, Lord Burghley—the Queen's Secretary of State and later her Lord Treasurer.²

While this may seem at first glance to be a case of confirmation bias,³ what if there do exist contemporary documents which link Burghley to the words *blind* and *worm*? If such documents exist, might they not only explicate a hitherto unsuspected Shakespeare allusion, but also open up the possibility that the other ingredients in the witches' cauldron have "double" meanings?

To determine that, we will review and examine five ideas suggested by the words comprising this half-line in the fourth act: (1) the reptile known as the *blindworm*, along with its constituent words (2) *blind* and (3) *worm*; the word (4) *slow*, a constituent of "slow-worm," which was then interchangeable with blindworm; and finally (5) the word *sting*. First, we will seek to ascertain if, taken together, they have a meaning or meanings beyond the one that appears on the surface, and second, if there is indeed a demonstrable connection to Elizabeth's Lord Treasurer.

The blind-worm/Slow-worm

Orthodox scholarship assumes that by *blinde-worme* Shakespeare meant the small legless lizard (*Anguis fragilis*⁴) commonly called the blindworm or slow-worm in England; the two terms were often used interchangeably during the 16th-century. The first recorded use of "blind-worm" goes back to the mid-15th-century; "slow-worm" dates back to the first millennium, with at least four documented uses in the last half of the 16th-century.⁵

Shakespeare used the term "blindworm" twice in the canon. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* it is plural and printed as one word in the 1600 quarto and as two words in the First Folio; in *Macbeth* it is singular and hyphenated.

Despite the name and the suggestion in *Macbeth*, the creature is not blind and its bite (or sting) is negligible. Neither is its bite poisonous, despite what William Harrison has to say in the "Description of England" in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577):

...Nevertheless we have a blindworm, to be found under logs, in woods and timber that hath lain long in a place, which some also do call (and upon better ground) by the name of slow-worms, and they

Connie J. Beane earned her BA with a dual major in English and library science and was employed by the Florida State Archives. Later she established the Florida Information Associates, Inc., a service providing research and information retrieval from the records of the Florida State Legislature, Florida government agencies, and state and county courts. She previously appeared in *The Oxfordian* 20 with the article, "The True Story of Edward Webbe and Troublesome Travailes."

are known easily by their more or less variety of striped colours, drawn long-ways from their heads, their whole bodies little exceeding a foot in length, *and yet is their venom deadly...*” (Harrison) (emphasis added).

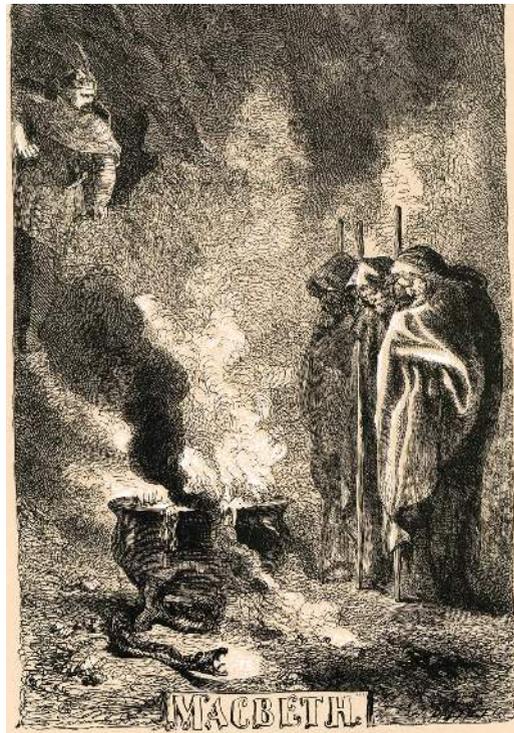
Edward Topsell in his *Historie of Serpents* (1608) echoes Harrison’s errors as to both eyesight and toxicity:

This Serpent [which he calls the slow-worme] was called in auncient time among the Graecians *Tythlops* and *Typhlines*, and *Cophia*, because of the dimnes of the sight thereof,...and from hence the Latines haue taken their word, *Caecilia quasi caecus serpens*, a blind serpent...

...It is harmelesse except being prouoked, yet many times when an Oxe or a Cow downe in the pasture, if it chaunce to lye vppon one of these Slow-wormes, it byteth the beast, & if remedy be not had, there followeth mortalitie or death, for *the poyson thereof is very strong...* (Topsell 240) (emphasis added)

Orthodox commentators seem to feel that these more-or-less contemporary beliefs regarding the toxic quality of the blindworm’s bite constitute sufficient explanation for the reptile’s inclusion in the witches’ noxious brew, and this is where they stop searching for its meaning.

Although Elizabethans believed, however mistakenly, that the reptile was *blind*, and might have therefore associated it with the Latin word for “blind,” this, in and of itself, does not provide sufficient evidence for us to argue that, as used in *Macbeth*, it constitutes an allusion to William Cecil. We must look elsewhere.



“Blind” and William Cecil

In John Baret’s *Alvearie* of 1573⁶ (Baret) under the major heading “Worm, *Vermis*,” he cites the phrase “a slowe worme being blinde” and gives the Latin equivalent of “slow-worm” as *Caecilia* (Baret “W ante O,” line 367), just as Topsell did more than 30 years later. Under “blind” he gives the Latin equivalent *caecus* (Baret “B ante L,” line 749).

Baret's dictionary thus appears to provide a link between Cecil's surname and the Latin word for the "blind" slow-worm, but there are two problems in using it as the foundation for the allusion in *Macbeth*. First, although the written forms are similar,⁷ the Elizabethan pronunciation of the two words was very different, "Cecil" being *sess-sill* and the Latin "Caecilia" being *kay-cheel-ya*. Second, William Cecil did not always spell his name "Cecil."

Orthography in England in the 14th through 16th centuries was fluid. Records show that Cecil's grandfather David used the form "Syssel" and his father Richard the form "Cysssel." William presumably used the later form, at least in his youth.

William entered Cambridge in 1535 at the age of 14—the first of his family to attend university—and in the 16th-century it was common in academic and court circles to Latinize one's name. The Lambeth Palace Library holds a volume of pedigrees, designated MS 302, compiled by Cecil; some of the material appears to date from his student years at Cambridge, 1535–1540. Two inscriptions in the front of the volume give his name variously as William Cycell and Guilielmus Cicellus and suggest that it was at that time that he began to Latinize the spelling of his surname, morphing the *s*'s to *c*'s but retaining the *ess*-sound in the pronunciation.

Whatever drove his youthful decision to change the spelling of his surname, it came back to vex him later in life. As his oldest son Thomas wrote to his uncle Hugh Allington on November 13, 1605:

...My Lord my father's altering the writing of his name maketh many that are not well affected to our house to doubt whether we rightly descended of the house of Wales because they write their name Sitselt and our name is written Cecyll, my grandfather wrote it Syssel and so in autographs all ye thir names differ, whereof I marvel what moved my L. my father to alter it... (Owen 131) (spelling modernized)

In a recent study of the Cecil pedigree (Cissel), David C. Cissel suggests that William Cecil began researching his ancestry around age 30, about the time he was sworn in as one of the two Secretaries of State to Edward VI in 1550. Cecil had apparently received little or no information about the family's origins from his grandfather (who died in 1540) or his father (who died in 1553). His research identified a number of families bearing the surname of "Cecil" scattered around England (Cissel 54–58), but he was unable to document a definitive link between his earliest known relative—his father's father David—and any of these families.

At some point,⁸ however, he discovered the Sitsilt or Sitsylt family of Allt-Yr-Ynys in Wales. The Sitsylts were neither more aristocratic nor wealthier than other Cecil families of the period, but for William's purposes they had three

important advantages: they were Welsh like the Queen's Tudor forebears, they occasionally spelled their surname as he did,⁹ and they had a familial connection to Blanche Parry, Queen Elizabeth's longtime attendant and a distant relative of her cofferer, Sir William Parry (Cissel 38). William Cecil subsequently discovered a pedigree for the Sitsilts that reached back to the Norman conquest, and then identified a link between those Sitsilts and his grandfather David.¹⁰

While this matter may appear to be of interest only to genealogists, William Cecil's alleged Sitsylt ancestry is very much to the point because it provides a contemporary and highly publicized connection between the words "blind" and "Cecil."

Cecil and the Roman *Cecelia*

In 1592 there was a flurry of publications by both Protestants and Catholics, engendered by the issuance in 1591 of Queen Elizabeth's proclamation against seminary priests.¹¹ Among these publications was an anonymous work¹² entitled *An aduertisement written to a secretarie of my L. Treasurers of England, by an Inglishe intelligencer as he passed throughe Germanie towards Italie Concerninge an other booke newly written in Latin, and published in diuerse languages and countreyes, against her Maiesties late proclamation, for searche and apprehension of seminary priestes, and their receauers, also of a letter vwritten by the L. Treasurer in defence of his gentry, and nobility, intercepted, published, and answered by the papistes* (hereinafter cited as *Advertisement*) and dated August 1, 1592.

The first part of *Advertisement* was a summary in English of a much longer Latin publication which came to be known as *Philopater*, which the author calls "the moste sharpe, bitter, and odious thing that euer I thinck was written by the papistes..." (Philopater 7). It scourged Elizabeth's advisors for their role in oppressing and maltreating English Catholics; Burghley was subjected to particular abuse.

The second part was also translated from *Philopater* and gave what purported to be the text of a letter from Lord Burghley to one Michael Moody, his agent in Antwerp, in which Burghley supposedly laid out a "defence of his gentry, and nobility." In this letter he is alleged to claim that

...the Cecills of Stamford, doe come of the auncient howse of the Sit siltes [*sic*] of wales, and are descended from the reigne of the conquerour, & haue matched, & come of many noble howses both of England and wales, yea of the Princes of wales (for these are my L. owne wordes in his fore said letter)....

The “Inglishie intelligencer” continues:

Secondly he [Philopater] taketh vpon himself to shew that at this flourish, or at leaste wise the more part thereof, is but an ambitious fiction of M. Cecill himself, and very ridiculous to all English of the discreeter sort: for that he saith, that many yet remēber when M. Cecil for diuers yeares after his comming to credit, went about to deriue his name of Cecil, frō Cecilius the Romaine name, whereof their vvere diuers, but especially that famous rich man named Caecilius Claudius vvho as Plinius writeth, after greate losses receaued in the ciuil warres, lefte notwithstanding in his testament. . . infinite quantitie of ready mony, vnto whome this awnswerer upposeth that our M. Cecil at that tyme, desired to be like as well in vvealth as in name, and for that he imagined that the proge-ny of those Cecils had remayned in England, euen from the Romaines tyme, and that his howse vvvas descended of the same: He write himself (as he doeth now also in this his letter) Cecil, with two c. c. and after the first of them an E, which is far different in antographie frō Sitsilt vvchich himself writeth with tvvo s. s. twoo T. T. and tvvo I. I. (Philopater)

The Sitsylt family's ancient lineage was alleged to date back to the reign of Edward III, beginning with their ancestor Sir John Sitsylt. The first public mention of this lineage was in Gerard Legh's *Accedence of Armory* (1562).¹³ Ten years later the same story appeared in an expanded form in John Bossewell's *Workes of Armorie* (1572)—much of which was cribbed from *Accedence*—dedicated to William Cecil, newly elevated to the peerage as Lord Burghley. Bossewell included a plate depicting that famous knight “James Sitsilt, Lord of Beauport” with his arms on a shield and banner (Bossewell fo. 80), followed by transcripts, in French, of documents supporting the legend; the said “writings” having been supplied by “the ryte honorable the Lorde of Burghley, to whome in blood the same belongeth, whose name being written at thys daye *Cecill* is neuertheless in Wales, both in speche and common writing vsed to be vttered *Sitsilt* or *Sitsild*. . .” (Bossewell fo. 80v–81). Several pages later Bossewell provides a full-page plate of Cecil's arms, with elaborate mantling, crest, supporters, the Garter, and motto, followed by a long and fulsome blazon of the whole (Bossewell fo. 106–108). It is far and away the most elaborate treatment of any coat of arms in the volume, not excepting that of the Queen.

Advertisement's “Inglishie intelligencer” or “Philopater” himself was apparently familiar with Bossewell's *Workes*.

Although the allegedly “purloined letter” was extensively quoted in Latin in Person's *Responsio ad Edictum* and in English in *Advertisement* (Loomis 202 f8), the letter itself is no longer extant—if it ever existed—so we cannot be certain if its contents were accurately reported, or if some or all of it was invented to embarrass Cecil. As Loomis points out, “[Cecil's] letter was



William Cecil, 1st Baron Burghley, Riding A Grey Mule, The Cecil Coat Of Arms Suspended, by the English School.

hardly a discreet one to send overseas” (202)—and Cecil was not known to be imprudent or given to ill-considered actions.

Whatever the veracity of the supposed stolen letter and its accusation regarding Cecil’s alleged claim that his surname derived from the Roman *Caecilia*, the accusation was published in 1592, and given that *Advertisement* was widely circulated in England, Cecil would have become associated in the public mind with the *Caecili*, supposed descendents of Caecus, the god Vulcan’s “little *blind* boy.” The link between Cecil, the *Caecili*, and “blind” is firm, and its origin can be traced to a very specific time frame: 1592.

“Worm” and William Cecil

Among Oxfordian scholars it is almost an article of faith that Lord Burghley drew a parallel between the year of his birth and the Diet of *Worms*.¹⁴ I have been unable to find any mention of this tale that predates the early 20th-century, and no documentation in contemporary records which would support the allegation that he ever spoke of the matter.¹⁵ However, whether he was born in 1520 or 1521, his birth would have occurred roughly six months before or six months after the Diet (January–May 1521), so he could have legitimately made a connection between the timing of the two events by saying he was born “within” a year of the Diet.

In the absence of definitive confirmation of such a claim by Cecil, we sought elsewhere for documentation of a possible parallel between “worm” and Cecil.

In the *OED*, the earliest definition that appears under “worm” is found in *Beowulf*, and refers to a serpent, snake, or dragon. This definition agrees with the physical appearance of *Anguis fragilis*, the blindworm, which although taxonomically a lizard, has no legs and appears quite snakelike.¹⁶ Later definitions of “worm” in the *OED* have distinctly pejorative connotations—a destructive pest, maggots such as eat dead bodies, one of the pains of Hell (figuratively), a human being likened to a worm or reptile as an object of contempt or scorn, one who preys on society, etc.—a general term of contempt which could have been applied to anyone, not just Cecil, by enemies or detractors.

Cecil was explicitly associated with both worms and serpents in the same *Advertisement written to a Secretarie of the Lord Treasurer's of England* (1592) mentioned above, wherein he was characterized as “a malignant and wrangling worme” (Persons 43) and “this old ambitious serpent” (Persons 67). The same conditions of timing and widespread distribution would therefore be applicable to the English public being aware of a link between “worm” and “Cecil.”

“Slow” and William Cecil

We have shown that “blind” and “worm” can be linked to Burghley, but what of the attribute “slow” in the related term *slow-worm*?

The *OED*, under the noun form of “slow,” lists it as being in use in the mid-15th-century as a term for a slow, or slow-going person, a sluggard. This doesn't quite fit the connotations of the cauldron scene in *Macbeth*, but as an adjective, “slow” has a long and varied history. It has been used since the first millenium for persons who are not quick, either mentally or physically.

While William Cecil does not appear to have been known for witty repartee, his intellect was formidable, even in his old age, so he would probably never

have been described as mentally “slow.” But having been born in 1520, Cecil was 72 years old and physically failing by 1592, and may have required the use of a cane or staff to aid his mobility, thereby justifying associating the term “slow” as well as “blind” to his *worm*-ness.

However, it happens that William Cecil was prominently associated with a staff in another, more important context than age-related debility, which fortuitously brings us to the final element in the *blinde-worme* allusion: its “sting.”

The blind-worm’s “sting”

Scientists now know that, while it looks like a snake, *Anguis fragilis* is a harmless lizard incapable of inflicting a serious bite, much less a venomous one. However, “sting” has a wide range of meanings, including: the act of stinging, the effect of being stung, the organ used to inflict a wound, or figuratively, the pain or wound inflicted (*OED* “sting,” n. 2). It is particularly interesting to find that in the *OED* the earliest example of the noun is found in the Scottish and northern dialects of English, and signifies “a pole, staff.”

Cecil as Lord Treasurer was one of several court officials who bore a white staff of office. It is a prominent feature in a number of his portraits and mention of a staff would have been sufficient to suggest his identity even to persons who had never seen him and would not have recognized him by sight.

There is also the possibility that the *blinde-worme*’s “sting” refers to something which inflicted a wound on the worm itself.

The same *Advertisement written to a Secretary of the Lord Treasurer’s of England* referred to above is eminently fit to be termed a “sting.” *Advertisement* was a summary, a preliminary taste of the *Responsio ad Edictum*, commonly known as *Philopater*, published the same year, 1592, but months later. *Philopater* was composed in Latin, probably by Robert Persons, and addressed to the influential politicians on the world stage, and as such would have had a strictly limited audience in England. *Advertisement*, on the other hand, was in English and certainly aimed at the widest possible distribution in England. Manuscript as well as printed copies circulated widely (Houliston 54).

Advertisement’s satirical remarks about Cecil’s name and genealogical pretensions and its characterization of him as a “worm” and a “serpent” were unpleasant enough, but its summary of *Philopater* was, as the fictitious author of *Advertisement* himself asserted, “the moste sharpe, bitter, and odious thing that euer I thinck was written by the papistes” (Persons 7). Walsingham, Leicester, and the other advisers and counselors of Queen Elizabeth, all dead by this time, came in for their share of abuse, but it was Cecil who was

the main target. He was accused of numerous misdeeds such as urging his patron, the Duke of Somerset, to execute his own brother, and then working with the Earl of Warwick to betray the Duke. He supposedly conspired with Dudley to set aside both Mary and Elizabeth to place Lady Jane Grey on the throne. He and his cronies allegedly worked to keep Queen Elizabeth unmarried so as to profit by the uncertainties of the succession.

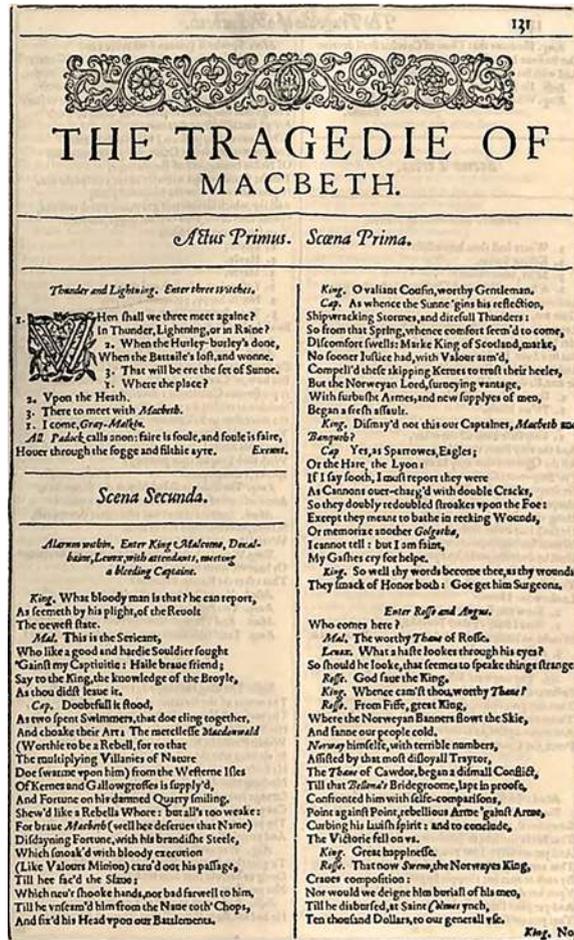
The “blinde-worme” and the date of *Macbeth*

We have shown that the *blinde-worme's sting* can be linked to William Cecil through the Latin meaning of his name (blind), through pejoratives (serpent and worm) applied to him by contemporaries, and to the Scottish term for the staff he carried as an official of Elizabeth's court). Moreover, the blind/worm linkage can be traced to a single publication—*An Advertisement*—which would have been conspicuous in the public mind in 1592.

In literature an allusion is defined as

[a]n indirect or passing reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work, the nature and relevance of which is not explained by the writer but relies on the reader's familiarity with what is thus mentioned. The technique of allusion is an economical means of calling upon the history or the literary tradition that author and reader are assumed to share.... Topical allusion is especially important in satire.... (Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms)

Because of these characteristics, allusions tend to be ephemeral by nature; even a short lapse of time can serve to blur the connection between the words and the source of their inspiration.



We assume that an allusion to William Cecil couched in terms of the content and associations of *An Advertisement* would have become stale or unintelligible by about 1596. If the cauldron scene as printed in the First Folio was written as a whole, within a few weeks or months, at least this portion of the play containing the *blinde-worme* allusion was probably written between 1592 and 1597.

Redating the play to the period 1592–97 serves to refute the contention that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, could not have been the author, since it places the composition of the play firmly within his lifetime. The orthodox chronology, as proposed by E.K. Chambers in 1930, places *Macbeth's* composition in 1606, two years after de Vere's death in 1604.

The importance of decoding the *blinde-worm* allusion

The evidence presented strongly suggests that the author of *Macbeth* intended his audience to take the “blinde-worm” as a reference to William Cecil, Lord Burghley. More important, it suggests the possibility—if not the probability—that other items in the list of cauldron ingredients were also intended to be taken as allusions to contemporary personalities and events.

Aside from the implications it has for the authorship question, this possibility suits the theme of the play far better than the conventional dating of c. 1606. The witches notwithstanding, the overarching focus of the play is on *succession*—an issue which would have been crucial and timely during the last decade of Elizabeth's reign, but which was rendered moot with the accession of James in 1603.

If there are indeed contemporary allusions hidden under the cauldron ingredients, this raises the importance of the entire scene to the play. Seen from this new perspective, it functions as a bridge, the means by which the audience is able to perceive the connection between the “historic” tale of ancient Scotland and contemporary Elizabethan politics.

Endnotes

1. Printed in the First Folio as hyphenated: blinde-worme.
2. The allusion, as understood by Oxfordian scholars, references the presumed similarity of pronunciation between the surname and the Latin word for “blind,” and Cecil’s birth “during the Diet of *Worms*.” In *Hamlet* there is some byplay with this latter pun: Hamlet: “Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet.” (4.3)
3. “Confirmation bias,” people’s tendency to process information by looking for, or interpreting information that is consistent with their existing beliefs. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (<https://www.britannica.com/science/confirmation-bias>, acc. February 5, 2024).
4. *A. fragilis* is native to Eurasia, and is found all over Europe, as far east as the Urals and the Caspian Sea. It is common in England, but not Ireland. *Apropos* to its appearance in *Macbeth*, it is also common in Scotland.
5. *Hall’s Vnion: Henry IV* (1548) f. xxiii, “Auoidyng the slowe worme and deadely Dormouse called Idlenes;” W. Ward tr. G. Ruscelli, *Secretes Alexis of Piemount* (1558) f. 30v, “A certayne litle Serpent called a Slowe worme;” R. Greene, *Menaphon* (1589) sig. K3v, “Thine eyes are like the slow wormes in the night;” and T. Nashe, *Haue with you to Saffron-Walden* (1596) sig. G3, “Was euer. Ledgerdemaine a slow-worme, Viuacitie a lazy bones?” It should be noted that two of these uses—Hall and Nashe—were metaphorical. The other two were general references to the reptile or its physical characteristics (eyes).
6. Baret’s dictionary was dedicated to Sir William Cecil.
7. This may suggest that the playwright wrote his plays with as much an eye to their being *read* as to their being *performed*.
8. Possibly not long before the publication of Gerard Legh’s *Accedens of Armorie* (1563).
9. In Wales and in England members of the extended family spelled their surname variously as Sitsilt, Sicelt, Seycil, Seisel, Cycele, Cycyl, Cicil, and even Seyseld (Nares 9), and occasionally Cyssell or Cicell.

10. Although the families of Cecil's two sons still hold to the proposition that their ancestral pedigree is precisely as it was "documented" by their illustrious founder, most genealogical experts have pronounced the Sitsilt pedigree a complete fabrication unsupported by evidence, and suspect that the link between the Sitsilt family and David Cecil is based on documents which are speculative, if not outright forgeries.
11. *A declaration of great troubles pretended against the realme by a number of seminarie priests and Jesuits* (London, Oct. 18. 1591), in *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (eds.). 3 vols. New Haven, 1964–69, vol. 3, 86–95.
12. The authorship of this document has been variously ascribed to Robert Persons (or Parsons), Richard Verstegan, and Robert Creswell.
13. Sir William Cecil is not specifically mentioned in *Accedens*, but the arms he adopted carry the "coat" of Sir John Sitsylt in the 1st and 6th quarters: barry of ten, argent and azure, with six sable escutcheons bearing silver lions (*Accedens* Fo. 49).
14. Nina Green's "Oxmyths" debunks this statement by asserting categorically that since Cecil was born on September 13, 1520, while the Diet of Worms took place January 27–May 25, 1521, he could not have spoken of having been born "during" the Diet. However, contemporary sources give two different years for Cecil's birth, 1520 and 1521, and Cecil himself switched between the dates, although he used the earlier date in his will in 1598.
In Martin A.S. Hume's *The Great Lord Burghley: A Study in Elizabethan Statecraft* (1898), 6–7, we find an extended explanation for the confusion in dates. However, it is evident that for at least part of his life—and possibly the greater part of it—Cecil himself *thought* he was born in 1521.
15. It should be noted that Hume's biography, published in 1898, does not mention the "Diet of Worms" story.
16. The blindworm was classified as a serpent by Topsall in 1608.

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