

Early Jacobean England (c.1603 - 1610)

This section collects the surviving libels written during the first seven or eight years of James I's reign—the one known poem from this period not in this section, “The Parliament Fart”, appears in Section C. The poems are arranged—with two exceptions—in chronological order, and the one poem that has proved impossible to date precisely has been included at the end of the section.

We begin with some miscellaneous poems from the opening months of the reign, responding to the scramble of English courtiers to greet the new King as he made his way from Scotland; to James's orders that all men worth forty pounds a year present themselves at his coronation for knighting; and to the King's promotion to title and high office of the controversial, and supposedly ex-Catholic, Lord Henry Howard.

These are followed by what is probably the most significant cluster of poems from the early part of the reign: the verse written in response to the dramatic fall of Sir Walter Raleigh. James I arrived in England with a low opinion of Raleigh, shaped in part by highly critical assessments sent to him by Robert Cecil and Henry Howard during the last years of Elizabeth's reign. Soon after a famously awkward first meeting, James stripped Raleigh of his office of Captain of the Guard, his London residence at Durham House, and his lucrative monopoly on the licensing of wine retailing and imports. In mid-July 1603, Raleigh's close ally Henry Brooke, Lord Cobham, implicated him in two murky Catholic plots against the King. The Bye Plot was an alleged plan to kidnap James and force him to grant toleration to Catholics; the Main Plot supposedly involved designs for a Spanish invasion, the deposition of James and the establishment of his cousin Arabella Stuart as Queen. Raleigh was imprisoned and, in November 1603, tried and convicted as a traitor for his planned role in the Main Plot. Although his life was spared, his lands were confiscated—his chief property, the manor at Sherborne in Dorset was given to James I's young Scottish favourite Robert Carr—and Raleigh remained in the Tower until radically (if only temporarily) altered political conditions led to his release early in 1616. The poems composed on Raleigh's fall are uniformly unsympathetic, viewing his ruin as an appropriate punishment for his many sins, moral and political, but in particular for his widely

suspected role in the destruction of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex. By the time of his release in 1616, however, Raleigh's reputation had changed. The degree of the shift can best be seen in the poems written at the time of his execution in 1618 (Section I), but we include here a poem from 1614 that indicates some of the ways that Raleigh's rehabilitated reputation could already be used to critique Jacobean court mores.

The last group of poems in this section consists mostly of libellous epitaphs on courtiers and ministers—on Archbishops of Canterbury John Whitgift (d.1604) and Richard Bancroft (d.1610), on Charles Blount, Earl of Devonshire (d.1606) and his wife, Penelope Rich (d.1607), and on Lord Treasurer Thomas Sackville, who was Lord Buckhurst and Earl of Dorset (d.1608). Of these poems, by far the most significant is the libel on Whitgift. The poem itself is a fascinating example of Puritan polemic in the style of the late Elizabethan Marprelate pamphlets, mixing seriously intended attacks on the failings of the English Church—its quality of ministry, its hierarchy, its ceremonial style and its system of ecclesiastical courts—with an artfully crude and “popular” carnivalesque style. More significantly, the Star Chamber prosecution of the alleged author of the poem, Lewis Pickering, helped redefine the law of seditious libel: Edward Coke's report on the case, “De Libellis Famosis”, became the standard interpretation of the crime. Pickering's case made it clear that it was possible to libel the dead, that truth or falsehood were legally immaterial to whether a statement was a libel or not, and that, perhaps most importantly, to libel a minister of the Crown was an inherently seditious act (see Bellany, “Poem”).

Although, read as a whole, the libels from this period do not document a growing political crisis in early Jacobean England, a number of these verses do reveal some notable potential political faultlines. One verse, for instance, lampoons what Lawrence Stone called the Jacobean “inflation of honours”, the King's tendency to grant honours—knighthoods and aristocratic titles—at a far greater rate, at a cash price, and to a socially more diverse group of men, than his predecessor had done (“Come all you Farmers out of the Countrey”). Stone controversially argued that the consequent debasement in the value of honour played an important role in a growing crisis of confidence in monarchy and aristocracy that would seriously undermine traditional authority in the decades before the Civil War (*Crisis* and *Causes*). The other interesting faultline is revealed in the libels' anxiety about crypto-popery in high places,

documented here not only in the libellous epitaphs on Archbishops Whitgift and Bancroft, but also in the 1603 attack on the sincerity of the Earl of Northampton's conformity to the Church of England, and in the obscure 1606 poem denouncing William Cecil, 3rd Lord Burghley, as a crypto-Catholic and traitor. As we shall see in later sections, by the 1610s and 1620s the fear that popery was nestled within the royal court and political hierarchy became one of the major themes of verse libellers, and a source of more widespread political anxiety and conflict.