

H. The Overbury Murder Scandal (1615-1616)

The courtier and poet Sir Thomas Overbury died in September 1613, a prisoner in the Tower of London. His death was widely noted but little lamented at the time (see Section F), and was typically attributed to natural causes, though opinion as to the exact cause varied. Two years later, however, in September 1615, King James received information suggesting that Overbury had in fact been poisoned. Genuinely disturbed by the evidence, James authorized a thorough investigation into the circumstances of Overbury's death. Within weeks, the Overbury murder case had triggered the most sensational court scandal of the age. The opening spate of interrogations had identified Overbury's keeper Richard Weston as the principal actor in the poisoning, and had connected Weston to a series of accessories, including Sir Gervase Elwes, Lieutenant of the Tower, Sir Thomas Monson, Elwes's court patron, and Anne Turner, widow of a fashionable London doctor. But, far more sensationally, the evidence had also led to the alleged architects of the murder plot, none other than the royal favourite, Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, and his wife Frances Howard, whose marriage late in 1613 had provoked a significant outpouring of libellous scorn (see Section F). Politically weakened by the rise of George Villiers as a new royal favourite, Somerset was unable to stall the murder investigation, and by mid-October 1615 the Somersets were under arrest and widely assumed to be guilty of Overbury's death. Weston, Turner, Elwes, and an apothecary called James Franklin, were all tried, convicted and hanged for Overbury's murder between mid-October and early December 1615. Monson was brought to stand trial twice in late November and early December, but on both occasions had his trial postponed. After many delays and complex political manoeuvrings, the Earl and Countess of Somerset were tried and convicted in late May 1616 for their parts in Overbury's death. Both were sentenced to death, but both were spared by the king, and remained prisoners in the Tower until their release early in 1622.

Reflecting on the affair twenty years later, Sir Simonds D'Ewes noted that "This discontent gave many satirical wits occasion to vent themselves into stingy libels; in which they spared neither the persons, families, nor most secret advowtries of that unfortunate pair", the Earl and Countess of Somerset (*Autobiography* 1.87). The libels are in fact but one element in a rich array of contemporary comment on the scandal that circulated in manuscript and in print to

a geographically broad and socially diverse audience, giving the Overbury affair a publicity that was to prove highly threatening to the moral authority of the court. Most of the libels take as their primary target either Robert Carr or Frances Howard, neither of whom was openly attacked in the printed pamphlets on the scandal. A few poems attack both the Somersets at once, and a few others deal with the scandal as a whole, touching briefly on some of the other alleged murderers. Another small group of poems focuses primarily on Overbury. Some of these poems circulated both scribally and as printed epitaphs published in the front material to successive editions of Overbury's poem *A Wife*, from 1616 on.

Both Lindley's and Bellany's recent scholarly studies of the scandal use libels extensively. Lindley focuses chiefly on the libels against Frances Howard, reading them for the most part in the context of Jacobean gender ideologies as fixated on the Countess's transgressive womanhood. Bellany (*Politics*) uses libels to explore the mechanisms of early Stuart news culture that helped publicize the Overbury affair, and to describe and interpret the multiple political meanings embedded in contemporary representations of the scandal.

Several of the libels published here were printed in the appendix to White's narrative history of the Overbury scandal, and in Sanderson's short collection of "Poems on an Affair of State".