

## **L. King and Favourite: James, Buckingham and the Villiers Clan (c.1617-1623)**

King James I met George Villiers, the younger son of a minor Leicestershire gentleman, during the royal summer progress of 1614. The King was quickly entranced and, by the end of the year, the court newsmongers had acknowledged Villiers as one of the King's new favourites. Villiers's rise at court was orchestrated in part by a loose coalition of courtiers resentful at the personal and political dominance of James's chief favourite Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset. By the end of 1614, Villiers had received court office as a "cupbearer" to the King—a position without formal power but with tremendous potential for the wielding of informal power through guaranteed access to the royal person. In April 1615, Villiers was knighted and created a Gentleman of the Bedchamber, one of the most critical court offices for controlling access to and patronage from the King. Through the spring and summer of 1615, Somerset and his supporters struggled fiercely to shore up their influence with the King against Villiers and his backers. But when Somerset was implicated in the Overbury murder in the autumn of 1615 (see Section H), Villiers's triumph as favourite seemed assured.

George Villiers would remain, until his murder in 1628, the preeminently powerful courtier of the age, exercising increasing and unparalleled formal and informal political influence. One measure of his power can be seen in his rapid accumulation of titles, honours and offices. In January 1616, he became Master of the Horse; in April 1616, a Knight of the Garter, and in August 1616, Viscount Villiers and Baron Whaddon. In January 1617, Villiers was created Earl of Buckingham, and the following month he was formally admitted to the King's Privy Council. In January 1618, he was elevated again, this time to Marquess of Buckingham, and a year later he replaced Charles Howard, Earl of Nottingham, as Lord Admiral. In May 1620, he concluded a spectacular marriage with Katherine Manners, daughter of the Earl of Rutland, and, finally, in May 1623 he was elevated to the highest ranks of the English peerage as Duke of Buckingham.

Yet this dizzying accumulation of title and office tells only a fraction of the story. The years from 1616 to 1628 were the Buckingham era: no area of royal policy, domestic or foreign, was untouched by his influence; court politics and court patronage were firmly, if never

uncontestedly, under his control; and, most remarkably, he established and maintained strong emotional bonds and close working relationships not only with James I, but also with James's son and heir Charles, allowing Buckingham to become favourite to not one but two English kings. Unsurprisingly, Buckingham also became a centre of political controversy, both at court and in parliament. The favourite was a subject of widespread popular debate, fascination and speculation, acquiring over the years a distorted but potent reputation as a cynosure of corruption and vice. This reputation was created in and shaped by the news media of the day, and especially by the escalating numbers of verse libels that, by the mid- and later-1620s, increasingly came to focus on the favourite's sins as an explanation for the troubles of the age.

This section collects a series of verses written c.1617-1623 that focus on two of the most troubling aspects of the Buckingham ascendancy: his personal relationship with King James I, the very foundation of his power; and the rewards reaped by his extended family as a result of his relationship with the King. Historians continue to debate the exact nature of James I's emotional ties to his favourites, agreeing on little else beside the evident fact of his intense love for, and passionate relationships with, both Buckingham and his predecessor Somerset. While Buckingham's most learned recent biographer has little doubt that the relationship between King and favourite was sexually consummated (Lockyer 22), other scholars remain unconvinced. The libel evidence does not allow us to resolve these knotty and crucial biographical problems, but it does allow us to track contemporary perceptions of the relationship between King and favourite, and to attempt to gauge the political significance of the anxieties that the relationship raised. This section includes the most widely-circulated royal statement on Buckingham's worth—three distinct English translations of James I's Latin poem celebrating (and defending) Buckingham's appointment as Lord Admiral—and the two verses that most explicitly alleged a homosexual relationship between the King and his "Ganymede" favourite. Both "Ganymede" poems date from the early 1620s, a period in which anxiety and speculation about the possibly sexual relationship between James and Buckingham may have become widespread for the first time. (A verse rebutting these and other libels—"Withold thy fiery steeds great God of light"—is included in Section N.) In addition to these two poems, we include a related poem adapted from the same source as one of the "Ganymede" verses, a

widely-circulated, somewhat cryptic, epigram on the hunter King's love for "Buck-in-game", and a song that focuses less on James's immoral relationship with his favourite, than on his morally questionable relationships with some of the young men surrounding Buckingham at his court.

The remaining two poems in this section focus on the second troubling aspect of the Buckingham ascendancy: the largesse, in titles, offices, advantageous marriages, lands and gifts, doled out to Buckingham's kindred by a besotted monarch.