

P. The Buckingham Assassination (1628)

On 23 August 1628, in the Greyhound Inn on Portsmouth High Street, a disgruntled, melancholic infantry lieutenant, badly wounded during the 1627 expedition to the Ile de Ré, twice passed over for promotion to captain, and owed over eighty pounds in back pay, plunged a cheap knife into the heart of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham. Gasping an astonished oath, the great favourite fell to the floor, dead, while the assassin retreated unobserved through the ensuing chaos to the inn's kitchen where he would eventually surrender to the Duke's men with the calm admission that "I am the man". He was John Felton, the forty-year-old scion of a minor gentry family from Suffolk that had fallen on hard times. Angry that Buckingham had ignored his case for promotion, and increasingly desperate as he became ever more short of cash, Felton had come across a copy of the 1628 Parliament's Remonstrance against the Duke and had thus come to believe that his private sufferings were but a small part of the sufferings the whole nation had endured under the favourite's corrupt rule. To kill the Duke, Felton imagined, would be an act of personal and national redemption. Before setting out for the Greyhound Inn, therefore, Felton had written and then sewn into his hatband two apologies for the murder: in them, he insisted that he had acted as a patriot, a gentleman and a soldier. He had struck the blow for the public good.

The impact of Buckingham's assassination was immediate and immense, utterly transforming the English political landscape. While the King retreated to his chambers, grief stricken, news of the murder spread across the country, inspiring spontaneous and often reckless outbursts of joy. The assassin was taken under armed guard from Portsmouth to the Tower of London, where he was repeatedly interrogated, possibly under torture, about his motives and accomplices. For three months the authorities attempted to uncover the conspiracy they were sure lay behind the Duke's murder, but the assassin insisted he had acted alone. By late November, the investigation had run its course and Felton was at last put on trial for Buckingham's murder. Tarred by the authorities as a wicked, atheistic criminal who had acted solely to avenge his personal grudges against the Duke, Felton was convicted and sentenced to death. Two days later, on the gallows at Tyburn, he confessed before a crowd of onlookers, and openly repented his crime. After he was hanged, Felton's body was cut down, carried to

Portsmouth and then strung up again to rot in chains.

The assassination, and the trial and execution that eventually ensued, triggered a massive outpouring of political verse, some of which was printed 150 years ago by F.W. Fairholt (*Poems and Songs Relating to George Villiers*), and a more complete collection of which is now published here for the first time. We have grouped the poems into three subsections. The first consists of an array of mocking epitaphs for the Duke, combined with a variety of generically and stylistically ambitious poems couched as dialogues between the murdered Duke and several infernal interlocutors, or as wracked confessions uttered by the Duke's ghost from its new abode in hell. Celebrating—and by implication legitimating—the assassination, many of these verses rake over the charges that had dogged Buckingham in the last few years of his life. In their lines, we meet again all the elements of Buckingham's libellous persona: the witch, the papist, the poisoner, the sexual predator, the monopolist of power, the perverter of justice, the social upstart, the seller of offices, the breaker of parliaments, the betrayer of the Protestant cause, the incompetent villain of the Ile de Ré, the seducer and deceiver of kings.

Our second subsection contains the smaller, but in many ways even more powerful, collection of verse primarily concerned with or addressed to John Felton. The poems celebrate Felton as Buckingham's perfect antithesis: as a patriot hero, the nation's martyr, the epitome of martial manliness and self-sacrifice, the heir of the divinely inspired Israelite assassins and of the republican patriots of ancient Rome, the man whose bravery had liberated king and nation from Buckingham's perverted rule. Alongside their hymns to Felton, a number of these verses also elaborate explicit and occasionally quite legalistic defences of the assassination, now reimagined not as a murder but as an execution of the will of divine justice upon a nefarious criminal.

The third and final subsection collects poems that offer very different responses to the assassination. Some contemporaries were profoundly ambivalent about the manner of Buckingham's demise, and a small group of poems (including two well-known pieces by James Shirley and Owen Felltham) wrestled openly with the event's moral and political complexities. Several other poets—including Thomas Carew and Sir William Davenant, who would later become major participants in Caroline court and literary culture—took a straightforwardly

hostile view of both the assassination and the celebrations that followed it. Others still composed fulsome epitaphs on the murdered Duke, attempting to wrest Buckingham's reputation free from the accumulated grime of years of libellous assault. And finally, some writers inveighed directly at the libellers who had rejoiced at the Duke's death, identifying amidst the hosannas to the heroic Felton the dangerous noise of religious dissent, popular credulity, lower-class disorderliness, and anti-monarchical politics.

In a pathbreaking essay, Gerald Hammond identified in these warring poems clear symptoms of "the country's fragmentation" as "sensibilities became dissociated" (49). Recent work has added to this perceptive diagnosis, discovering in and around the assassination evidence of a profound political crisis. Many of the poems celebrating the assassin or the assassination assumed that Buckingham's murder would instantaneously ease the political tensions of the few past years, reuniting king, people and parliament, and reinvigorating a militant English Protestantism. Yet the poems also reveal how little chance this hope of redemptive transformation ever had of materializing. Beneath explicit avowals of loyalty to the throne, there lurked unresolved questions about the King's responsibilities for his favourite's misrule and fears about his intentions for the future. Sometimes these anxieties pushed quite radical sentiments out into the open. Ranged against the libellers' fears for a nation beset by popery and court corruption, were eloquent voices preoccupied with a different threat, the threat to monarchy, order and hierarchy posed by popular, puritanical and republican political impulses. The libels and the counter-libels thus bear eloquent witness to the perilous state of the nation at the end of Buckingham's life, a nation that was in many ways teetering on the brink of a bitter, and potentially unresolvable, ideological crisis. Since Hammond's work was published, several scholars have offered interpretations of a number of the poems in our collection. The bulk of the commentary has come from literary critics, and includes a major study of representations of Felton by James Holstun (158-186), and important briefer assessments by David Norbrook (50-58) and Andrew McRae (*Literature* esp. 71-75, 133-34). Political historians have been slower to give these materials the attention they deserve. For now, there are readings of several libels in Alastair Bellany's essays ("Raylinge Rymes"; "Libels in Action"), and in his unpublished doctoral dissertation ("The Poisoning of Legitimacy?" ch. 11). A forthcoming study by Bellany and Thomas Cogswell will offer a major reassessment of the

assassination, making extensive use of the libels and counter-libels (*England's Assassin*).

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