

M. Monopolies and Corruption: the 1621 Parliament

The two sessions of the 1621 Parliament, the first for seven years, spanned a period of just under twelve months, from 30 January 1621 to 6 January 1622. One of the principal motivations behind James's decision to summon the Parliament, his desire to raise the funds necessary for a war that the King saw as possible but avoidable, proved relatively unproblematic. Indeed, many of the debates throughout the sessions were peaceable, and many of the proceedings routine. Yet there were also undeniable tensions throughout. Debates on freedom of speech strained relations between the King and Parliament, while a number of controversial parliamentary initiatives challenged policies and individuals associated with the monarch. As the libels concerned with this year demonstrate, many observers were fascinated by the apparent challenges posed by the Parliament to the King and his court. The spectacular falls of particular statesmen, such as Francis Bacon, might therefore be interpreted as signal instances of a righteous Parliament purging the nation of courtly corruption.

The single issue that most preoccupied newsmongers and libellers was the status of patents and monopolies. The use of patents had escalated throughout James's reign, providing the King with a convenient alternative to taxation, and an easy means of rewarding royal servants. In general, patents involved the farming out of certain judicial functions previously performed by state officials, such as the licensing of inns and alehouses. Patentees would typically pay the Crown for their patent, and levy licences and fines in order to profit from the arrangement. More specifically, patents of monopoly involved the grant, in exchange for a cash payment to the Crown, of a protected right to pursue a particular form or method of trade or industry. They became intertwined with the development of particular "projects", at a time when the English economy was diversifying rapidly (Thirsk). Arguably, the 1621 Parliament was prompted to pursue this issue as a result of a frustrating incapacity to comprehend economic conditions characterized by a scarcity of coinage (Russell 98-111). Once the matter had been raised, however, it led parliamentarians not only to tackle some crucial constitutional issues, but also to stretch the powers of parliament by reviving the process of impeachment. The pursuit of certain prominent monopolists stirred a frenzy of parliamentary activity and popular interest. Most notably, Sir Giles Mompesson had made many enemies through his energetic manipulation of

patents and monopolies. He was a commissioner for the licensing of inns; he was authorized to sell decayed timber from royal forests; and he was also engaged in the enforcement of a law that prevented any person from manufacturing gold and silver thread without a special licence. Another target of the parliamentarians, Sir Francis Michell, was also involved in enforcing the licences for gold and silver thread, as well as being a commissioner for the licensing of alehouses. The connections of such men with the court, and particularly with the leading dispenser of court patronage, George Villiers, Marquis (and future Duke) of Buckingham, informed much of the vitriol directed against them in popular political discourse.

In due course, the parliamentary investigations led to a man much more highly placed in the state, the Lord Keeper, Sir Francis Bacon. Though not directly involved in patents and monopolies, Bacon was implicated since he had acted as a legal referee, certifying the controversial patents for the licensing of gold and silver thread. To this alleged instance of corruption was added unrelated claims that he had accepted bribes in the course of his judicial work. While he appealed to his long-time patron, Buckingham, and also to James himself, Bacon found himself increasingly isolated as the Parliament employed the obsolete procedure of impeachment in order to bring about his downfall. The case provoked numerous libels. Some poems do little more than play on his name, exploiting the obvious potential for puns on hogs and preserved meat. Others target Bacon's relations with members of his household, interpreting his reputation for excessive generosity in political terms, and bringing into the public domain apparently longstanding rumours of homosexuality. Most interestingly, a number of the poems position the fallen Lord Keeper, either explicitly or implicitly, as an example of more widespread, even systemic, corruption. In this context, a long poem written in support of Bacon ("When you awake, dull Brittons, and behold") and the two responses it elicited ("What hatfull fury dipt thy raging Quill", "Blame not the Poet though he make such moane"), are particularly illuminating.

While the parameters of the first two subsections below are relatively transparent, the final subsection includes five somewhat miscellaneous poems under the heading "The Aftermath: reflections and assessments". These poems appear to date from late in 1621 (technically, therefore, while the Parliament was still in session), or from shortly afterwards, and in general adopt a detached and reflective stance towards the "rowlinge tumblinge Age" ("One worthy

Chancellour rendred up his place”). Some focus on John Williams, who replaced Bacon as Lord Keeper; others glance towards the projected Spanish Match, parliamentary discussion of which finally convinced James to dissolve the 1621 Parliament; one simply represents the life of the court, and the associated business of patronage, continuing apace (“The Kinge & the court desyrous of sport”). While these poems do not necessarily document a desire for an ongoing programme of reform, they articulate underlying tensions and concerns, which would surface more insistently in debate about the Spanish Match, and also in recurrent attacks on Buckingham.

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