

The Murder of James I

Professor Paulina Kewes in conversation with Professor Andrew McRae

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Paulina Kewes: ‘The King is Dead. Long Live the King’. Professor Andrew McRae and I are at the Bodleian Library talking about the circumstances of the death of James I in 1625. What is in the pamphlet *Forerunner of Revenge*?

Andrew McRae: Well here we have a manuscript copy of one of the most scandalous text of the seventeenth century: a text that opens up world of rumour and libellous assault within the court. It was written by George Eglisam, who we know little about but we know was he was one of King James I’s personal physicians. And its central allegation is that James had been murdered at the hand of the royal favourite: the Duke of Buckingham. It says ‘the king being sick, the duke took his opportunity when all the King’s doctors physic were at dinner, offered to the King a white powder to take, the which the king long time refused. But overcome by his flattering importunity, at length took it, drunk it in wine, and immediately became worse and worse falling into many soundings and pains and violent fluxes of the belly, so tormented that his Majesty cried out aloud: oh this white powder, this white powder! Would to God I had never taken it! It will cost me my life.’

PK: What does this extraordinary text tell us about royal death?

AMcR: Well, it reminds us that the death of any monarch is a liminal moment, a time of change, a time of potential crisis. And obviously in 1625 the succession was not in doubt. James had one male heir: Charles. Still, there are all sorts of questions that Charles’s new subjects might reasonably have been asking. They will be asking for instance whether Charles might take a more aggressive militaristic stance towards the continental wars of religion than his father had done. Might he change the tone of the Church of England? Might he shift the Church of England perhaps more towards the new doctrines known as Arminianism, that were doctrines feared by their opponents as a form of popery? And would the Duke of Buckingham, the court favourite and clearly after the king the most powerful man in the kingdom, manage to retain his influence?

PK: What does the *Forerunner* tell us about the culture of the royal court?

AMcR: I think this the *Forerunner* helps us to appreciate the nature and the authority of the court at this time: an environment where unelected men and women could wield great influence. Within the court you have personal, family, religious, political identities which are all hopelessly, dangerously intertwined. Individuals and families could rise quickly and they could fall even more quickly. And scandals were a feature of James as rain. Scandals become a kind of a prism through which observers of the court understand court politics and relationships between individuals. And, by the early 1620s, one man had assumed almost unprecedented power. George Villiers was a man with his origins in the minor gentry. But he was brought to court and he established a close relationship with James: clearly an intimate relationship with

James, possibly sexually intimate relationship with James. He accumulated very carefully, very cannily throughout his rise multiple offices of state for himself also members of his family. But he made many enemies along the way. Many people resented his influence over the king.

PK: Given the proximity of Buckingham to James, it must have been quite shocking to hear or read the allegation that he in fact poison his last test

AMcR: This was a scandalous text. Nonetheless, Buckingham was never more exposed then at the time of the death of James. There was no guarantee that he, as a court favourite, despite all these great offices, would maintain his power. And various people saw this as the moment to bring him down.

PK: In that case, what can the text, the scandalous text tell us about the circulation of news and rumour and early Stuart England?

AMcR: This was a text that could not be written, technically. There were strict rules of censorship at this time. But various texts, including this one, managed to evade those rules. Initially it was written in Latin and was circulated in England in manuscript form, such as this one, passed from hand to hand, copied by one hand, passed round again. It was also printed in continental Europe in Latin, and also in English, and smuggled back into England. This was a fairly common way that dangerous scandalous text could find a way into circulation in England, evading the censorship regime. James himself, though, took constraints on speech very very seriously. He was committed to the notion that certain mysteries of state were beyond common comprehension. He published proclamations about this. He wrote poems about this. Nonetheless, the rise of commentary about domestic political affairs is actually one of the great narratives of seventeenth-century history, because people were discussing the events. They were discussing them in taverns. They were discussing in the open air. They were writing letters about these events. They are writing poetry about it. Historians talk about subjects in this century turning into citizens, becoming more involved in, more actively involved in, the matters of state

PK: What would have happened to someone found with a copy, either manuscript copy or printed one on that person?

AMcR: I think somebody [in the] in that situation could easily be exposed to prosecution. Now, that said, there weren't a lot of those prosecutions. Eglisham fled the country and never returned to England after writing this text. So there was that danger. He knew that he could not stay, as an exposed author of a text like this. He had no place any longer in England. All the same, there was a culture in which a lot of people were circulating dangerous material and getting away with it. So, although it was something that people were not allowed to do, it was something that was happening all the same.

PK: Would you say that the text was a libel on Buckingham?

AMcR: The term libel is a term that was used fairly loosely at this time. Most often it was used to refer to poems actually. Libellous poems (forms of satire actually) directly pointed at individuals. There was an awful lot of libels written against Buckingham himself. But a libel could also be a speech. It could be printed text, a prose text such as this one.

PK: What the argument of the *Forerunner*? What did it that actually say? What sort of evidence did it come up with to substantiate its claim that James had indeed been poisoned by Buckingham?

AMcR: There is not an awful lot about motive. But there is a pattern of deaths because this

there wasn't just wondered if there were two key deaths that the forerunner focuses on the Marquess of Hamilton as well. There is a narrative in the texts of Buckingham and also Buckingham's mother being involved in a plot to kill both of these men.

PK: What are the larger implications of the *Forerunner* for our understanding of royal deaths and moments of succession, transition from one ruler to the next?

AMcR: I think the forerunner helps us to appreciate just what was at stake at any moment of Royal death. However easy the transition may appear to be, there's all sorts of shifting in terms of personal relationships, in terms of political identities. And here is a text which blows all that apart by coming along and claiming that the royal favourite (possibly even the royal favourite's new patron) was involved in a plot against James. It attempts to break open and to undermine what would otherwise have been an easy transition, and what in many respects was an easy transition, from one ruler to the next.

PK: So did the pamphlet actually convince many contemporaries that James had been poisoned?

AMcR: It appears that actually not a lot of people were convinced by this. I think that within the culture of commentary on the court, within the culture of people who looked carefully at the court and looked for signs of corruption signs of scandal and news, used these as ways of understanding the court and understanding power, then yes it fed into those narratives, it fed into those suspicions. And yet there were not a lot of people who were openly trying to attack Buckingham on these grounds. It helped people to build a narrative about Buckingham as a dangerous, subversive individual. But it wasn't, it was never, the key charge against Buckingham, even when he was confronted in the Houses of Parliament.

PK: You mention that Buckingham enjoyed the patronage and favour of King James. What happened after James's death?

AMcR: Well, Buckingham, which is unusual for a court favourite, he managed to maintain this power across that reign, to manage his relationship with Charles equally skilfully as he had with James. It was a very different relationship: very different in terms of age, and the kind of closeness that he'd had with James he didn't have with Charles. But he still maintained that power and influence over Charles. He was more hated than ever, though. And he was exposed in the early parliaments of Charles to some quite open attacks that he actually hadn't faced before then.

PK: So despite its attempt to blacken the character of the duke, the *Forerunner* didn't succeed in alienating royal favour from him. I mean, what was its wider impact?

AMcR: I think perhaps it never intended to alienate royal favour. Perhaps Eglisam never really believed that that could be done. But it takes its place in the inner as part of a wider, quite important, campaign against the duke, to blacken the name of the duke, to bring down the duke in terms of public opinion, in terms of the opinion of the House of Commons, and that was quite successful. Although he survived the attacks in Parliament, in 1628 discontented soldier (a man by the name of John Felton) confronted him in Portsmouth, stabbed him, killed him. And this assassination of Buckingham was one of the great political events of the time. Felton was obviously himself hanged for the offence. But he was quite widely celebrated in a number of poems which got written on the death of Buckingham, and many of them presented Felton as a great patriot. So really never before had the ideological divisions within the state started to open up quite as much as at that moment in 1628. And if you look forward into the early 1640s,

when censorship breaks down, a number of the scandalous texts from earlier in the Stuart era (including the *Forerunner of Revenge*) were published, were printed in London: helped to form at history, like at a secret history, of the early Stuart era, repositioning the court as a place of scandal, a place of corruption, and helping to feed a narrative that would draw the country into civil war.

Bodleian items featured (by shelfmark): G. Pamph. 1524 (20); Wood D18; Malone 23.