

Cambridge University Press

0521854059 - Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

*“Prerogative pleasures”: favoritism and monarchy
in early modern England*

From the appearance, in 1584, of the enormously popular libel known as *Leicester's Commonwealth* to the assassination of the Duke of Buckingham in the summer of 1628, hostility toward seemingly all-powerful royal favorites played a central role in the development and articulation of anti-court sentiment in England. Even after Buckingham's death, royal favorites continued to loom large in the English political imagination, providing a convenient shorthand for corruption and tyranny in numerous plays, poems, and polemics composed and circulated during the personal rule of Charles I. This heated and ongoing controversy over the institution of royal favoritism functioned during this entire period as both an arena in which deep-seated political and ideological concerns were contested and as a crucial symbolic vehicle for their public expression.

The sentiment behind the period's interest in favoritism comes across loud and clear in the remarkable title given to one of Sir Dudley Diggs's speeches from the parliament of 1626 as reprinted in 1643: *A speech delivered in Parliament concerning the evill consequences that doe attend this state by committing places of trust into the hands of court-favourites wherby it doth plainly appear to be the originall of all publick grievances and combustions of this kingdom.*¹ Behind this extraordinarily sweeping claim about the significance of court favoritism lies the fact that thinking about royal favorites inevitably meant thinking about the uneasy intersection of the personal and the public in a political system traditionally organized around patronage and intimacy. Writers arguing about favoritism therefore do so in part to explore the most fundamental ideological questions concerning personal monarchy and the early modern public sphere, questions about the nature and limits of prerogative and about the enfranchisement or otherwise of subjects. I want to argue, in fact, that the discourse of corrupt favoritism is this period's most important unofficial vehicle for exploring constitutional unease concerning the nature and limits of personal monarchy within the balanced English constitution.

Cambridge University Press

0521854059 - Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England*

The list of controversial Elizabethan and Jacobean figures seen as royal favorites includes men like Sir Walter Raleigh, Robert Devereaux, 2nd Earl of Essex, Sir Christopher Hatton (said to have had “more Recourse unto her Majestie in her Pryvye Chamber, than Reason would suffice, yf she weare . . . vertuouse and well inclined”), and Philip Herbert, Earl of Montgomery (King James’s first English favorite).² But by and large the cultural stereotype of the Machiavellian court favorite was developed in England in relation to three particularly high-profile figures: Robert Dudley, the Elizabethan Earl of Leicester, Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, the Scottish bedchamber favorite who rose to prominence following his knighthood in 1607 and who fell from grace in 1616 after being convicted of poisoning his associate Sir Thomas Overbury, and George Villiers, the much-loathed Buckingham, who replaced Carr in King James’s affections and who managed to become in time the favorite of Charles I as well.

Each of these men was influential in his day, and so the resentment that their influence fostered in the hearts of rivals and opponents has everything to do with the cut and thrust of court maneuver.³ It is hard, though, to read much that was said and written about these figures without realizing that there is more to the discourse of favoritism than just a series of isolated court contests: the kinds of invective leveled against successive favorites are so consistent as to hint at habits of political imagination that extend beyond the context of any single career. This is true in terms of the striking recurrence of what Robert Shephard has called the “bogey myths” of favoritism – the way each favorite attracted a similar set of lurid scandal tropes – but also, more subtly, in the way that successive favorites are pigeonholed by observers into the same ethically charged stereotypes set in meaningful opposition to traditional models of honor and duty and service.⁴ Well before Buckingham burst onto the scene, in other words, Englishmen were likely to imagine royal favorites as religiously apostate, cowardly upstarts, skilled in dancing but lacking in wisdom or military training, dependant entirely upon the monarch’s errant whim, treacherous and sexually omnivorous, and all too ready to make use of the black arts of sorcery and poison. In fact, there is considerable reason to believe that a figure like Buckingham attracted these forms of opprobrium because they were already current as ways to think about the problem of the royal favorite before his political debut.

The figure of the all-powerful royal favorite, in other words, is a cultural fantasy, one developed in relation to historical persons and situations but one best understood in larger mythic or ideological terms. The appropriate questions to ask, therefore, have to do with the cultural work performed by

Cambridge University Press

0521854059 - Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)*“Prerogative pleasures”*

3

representations of favorites: why were the recurring stereotypes concerning favorites compelling? To whom were they compelling? What larger theoretical questions are raised in the discourse of favoritism? What kinds of answers are supplied? What, in this larger sense, is the period's fascination with the idea of the all-powerful favorite really about? Asking these questions quickly leads beyond the world of court politics narrowly construed, for the discourse of favoritism includes images of corrupted court intimacy and its socio-political affects that clearly appealed to a broader cross-section of the population than the direct rivals of the favorites themselves. English writers of all kinds produced an avalanche of plays, chronicles, verse histories, epigrams, memoirs, prose fictions, and polemics that explored the contours of the problem of royal favoritism. For example, though only a small handful of them are well known today, there are upwards of fifty extant plays from 1587–1642 that deal centrally with the problem of royal favoritism. Add to this the number of plays containing anticourt satire that pointedly alludes to Leicester, Somerset, or Buckingham, or that feature sustained thematization of the politics of intimacy, and that number could easily be trebled. Likewise, historians and literary scholars are only now beginning to take note of the massive corpus of politically topical poems and polemics that circulated widely in manuscript, especially from the 1620s on.⁵ These deal prominently, though not of course exclusively, with the controversial royal favorites who became figureheads for anticourt sentiment. All of these disparate kinds of writing – fictions, histories, libels, and polemics – constitute the discourse of favoritism.

That phrase may seem to impose too much unity on what is, finally, a very heterogeneous body of texts. But it is a central premise of this book that we can in fact uncover, by attending carefully to the tropes, stories, and *dramatis personae* with which favoritism is figured, a sustained and often sophisticated engagement with key theoretical questions about the ancient constitution and the limits of prerogative. This is a book, in other words, about the way literature in general helps perform a kind of cultural work usually thought of only as the job of political theorists. The Elizabethan and early Stuart fascination with the figure of the corrupt royal favorite, I want to argue, reflects a profound ambivalence about the legitimacy of personal intimacy as a political mechanism and thus, by extension, explores questions concerning the nature of the relationship between monarch and subject that contribute, ultimately, to the emergence of proto-republican ideas about public service, to what Annabel Patterson has recently discussed as the seventeenth-century origins of a liberal political thought, and to what Jürgen Habermas has famously called

Cambridge University Press

0521854059 - Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England*

“the structural transformation of the public sphere.”⁶ Though I am of course leery of the teleological impulses that have typically accompanied this kind of argument, it is worth being very specific here about the ways that Elizabethan and early Stuart debates about court favoritism help lay the groundwork for larger transformation of the kind theorized by Habermas. Most obviously, these arguments help re-imagine the relationship between the personal and the public. That is, hostility to favoritism tends toward the emergence of a critique of personal monarchy and, as Habermas argues, “civil society came into existence as the corollary of a depersonalized state authority.”⁷

We might also think of the impact of the discourse of favoritism on the emergence of a public sphere in terms of its impact upon the dissemination of news and the encouragement of thought and conversation about public matters beyond the confines of the court. Before the advent of printed newspapers, a great deal of politically sensitive information was circulated in manuscript. Much of this material deals with controversial favorites, of course. More significantly, interest in controversy concerning favorites played an important role in the development of manuscript culture and thus in the kind of readerly counterpublics made possible by it. H. R. Woudhuysen has suggested that manuscript circulation of *Leicester's Commonwealth* (a libel that was vigorously suppressed by the government in its printed form) may have provided the key model for the subsequent circulation of politically charged material, and it is possible too that demand for information concerning the scandals that beset Somerset in 1613–16 resulted in a general strengthening of the networks by which manuscript news and libels were disseminated.⁸ There can be no question, certainly, that libels concerning Buckingham are among the most widely circulated manuscript materials throughout the 1620s and 1630s. Because the circulation of manuscript material conforms to pre-existing social networks, it is to some degree a phenomenon limited to the elite. But there is considerable evidence that these materials were read by a broad cross-section of literate subjects, and not only in London.⁹ Moreover, Alastair Bellany has recently argued that the circulation of ballads, rhymes, and oral gossip as well as libels and newsletters would have helped make court scandal a topic of discussion among an even wider variety of ranks and classes.¹⁰ It seems appropriate to say, therefore, that the furor surrounding favoritism is an important part of the pre-history of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere both because of the kinds of political ideas explored within the discourse of favoritism and because of the kinds of semi-public exchange this discourse participated in and helped to encourage.

Cambridge University Press

0521854059 - Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)*“Prerogative pleasures”*

5

To avoid teleology, though, it helps to think of the ongoing debate over favoritism not (or not only) as a precursor to more modern forms of political thought but as the manifestation of a fissure built into the edifice of English constitutional monarchy, the system of government described by Sir John Fortescue as “*dominium politicum et regale*” (political and royal dominion).¹¹ Fortescue, famously, distinguishes between English constitutional monarchy and absolutist monarchs on the continent who rule according a system of civil law whose first premise is that “what pleased the prince has the force of law.”¹² By contrast, the English king, ruling “politically” – with parliament and by means of native common law – triumphs as a ruler by suppressing his own will, thereby minimizing its potential to lead him into tyranny:

a king is free and powerful who is able to defend his own people against enemies alien and native, and also their goods and property, not only against the rapine of their neighbours and fellow-citizens, but against his own oppression and plunder, even though his own passions and necessities struggle for the contrary. For who can be freer and more powerful than he who is able to vanquish not only others but also himself? The king ruling his people politically can and always does do this.¹³

Fortescue is interestingly ambivalent, here and elsewhere, about the personal aspects of royal government. For even as he praises the English constitution for helping to rein in the monarch’s personal weaknesses, he treats the resulting self-abnegation as a kind of neo-stoic personal triumph of royal character itself. Our kings, Fortescue seems to be saying, are personally great because they govern themselves and they govern themselves because our institutions govern them. This ambivalence about the royal will, I would argue, survives more or less intact in the early modern English political imagination, and helps contextualize the period’s anxious uncertainty about the status of royal favorites, real or imagined political agents who owe their wealth and influence to their status as that which “pleased the prince.”

The resulting ambivalence about the validity of royal pleasure and the politics of intimacy is encapsulated by the useful phrase “prerogative pleasures” that I have chosen as the title of this chapter. This phrase originates as a description of royal favoritism offered up in an anonymous play called *The Faithful Friends* that was most likely written during the 1620s. This play, set in pre-republican Rome, opens with a debate about the preferment of a young royal favorite named Marcus Tullius who, to the consternation of his political rivals, has just been appointed to lead the Roman armies against the Sabines. The ensuing controversy was no doubt designed to

Cambridge University Press

0521854059 - Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England*

evoke for contemporaries the controversy surrounding Buckingham, who was made admiral of the English navy in 1619. Criticism of Buckingham's performance in that office – particularly after the military failures of the mid-1620s – was widespread, but *The Faithful Friends* is an essentially royalist play, one that defends not only the king's choice of servants but more generally his right to choose them. And here, in the play's opening scene, the vituperation of Tullius's enemies is rebutted with what is apparently supposed to be a stirring defense of favoritism by a upstanding young man named Marius:

pardon mee
if I make question of your loyalties
that dare disprarrage thus my sovereigns choyce
of his respected subject, it infers,
a doubt made of his wisdome, why should wee
tax the prerogative pleasures of our Prince
whom he shall grace, or where bestowe his favors
that Law's allowed to every private man,
then to confine or disallowe a king
were most injurious and preposterous.¹⁴

Marius's argument moves uneasily between two highly conventional but subtly contradictory defenses of favoritism. First, he argues that to oppose the favorite is to challenge the king's right to make appointments and is therefore tantamount to treason. This defense hinges, we might say, on the uniqueness of the king and on the notion that the king's "wisdome" is beyond question: favoritism as *arcana imperii*. But then, awkwardly, Marius shifts his ground, suggesting that to deny a king freedoms enjoyed by private men is a preposterous inversion of hierarchical order. The bestowal of personal favor is thus imagined as at once a representative act of the king's political wisdom and, by analogy, as a personal choice appropriately protected from public scrutiny.

The phrase "prerogative pleasures" acts as the pivot between these two formulations, and nicely captures the uneasiness of their conjunction. For there is a kind of latent semantic tension between the resolutely political connotations of the word "prerogative," particularly in the context of an argument about royal appointments, and the defense of pleasure as a private pursuit. A "private man" is a man who does not hold office, and we can therefore hear, in Marius's use of the word "private," Habermas's definition of it as "the exclusion from the sphere of the state apparatus."¹⁵ The problem with "prerogative pleasures," though, is that they are not so excluded, a

Cambridge University Press

0521854059 - Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)*“Prerogative pleasures”*

7

nagging dissonance that becomes even more vexed as the speech progresses. Kings, Marius explains, are “subject to their passions.” Thus:

Alexander the great had his Ephestion
Philip of Spaine his Lerma, not to offend.
I could produce from Courts that I have seene
More royall presidents, but ile not give
such satisfaction to detractive tounge
that publish such fowle noyse gainst a man
I know for truly Vertuous.¹⁶

Given that the correlation between government and self-government is an absolute commonplace of early modern political theory (as in Fortescue), the declaration that kings are subject to passions is ambiguous at best as a defense of personal favoritism. And the examples cited do not reassure. To Englishmen in the 1620s, the court of Spain was the very house of treachery, and so Marius’s invocation of Philip III is a poor defense of his “soveraigns choyce / of his respected subject.” Alexander, too, is frequently used to exemplify precisely the conflict between royal greatness and the disfiguring effects of passion. One thinks of Lyly’s *Campaspe* (1584), where Alexander has to overcome his own affection for the title character, or of Fluellen’s description of him as a flawed and overly passionate ruler (“a little intoxicates in his prains”) in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*.¹⁷

Even Marius seems to recognize, albeit somewhat belatedly, that his list of precedents could as easily be used as ammunition for the “detractive tounge” of Tullius’s opponents as for the defense of “prerogative pleasures.” Hence his hasty-sounding decision to cite no further examples. And the shakiness of Marius’s defense of favoritism reflects an equivalent uncertainty on the part of the play’s authors. The speech stands under double erasure in the sole manuscript copy of *The Faithful Friends*: the whole speech is marked for deletion in one hand and the second half again marked for deletion by another.¹⁸ Marius’s awkward defense of favoritism is, in other words, a kind of monument to the difficulty early modern writers had conceptualizing the role of the king’s affections and pleasures within a system of political thought that lacked a fully articulated distinction between the public and private spheres.

One upshot of this conceptual difficulty is a tendency to imagine the ideal ruler as being impossibly free of personal intimacies. This is what Shakespeare does with Henry V (Fluellen’s antitype of Alexander).¹⁹ I’m thinking here not only of the banishment of Falstaff – an attempt, perhaps, to exorcise the specter of Richard II’s wanton favorites – but also of the

Cambridge University Press

0521854059 - Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England*

scene in *Henry V* where the king exposes and excoriates the treachery of his bedfellow and confidante Lord Scroop, one whom, as Exeter says, Henry has “cloyed with gracious favours” (2.2.9):

What shall I say to thee, Lord Scroop, thou cruel,
Ingrateful, savage, and inhuman creature?
Thou that didst bear the key of all my counsels,
That knew'st the very bottom of my soul,
That (almost) mightst have coin'd me into gold,
Wouldst thou have practic'd on me, for thy use?
(2.2.94–99)

One purpose of this scene is to reverse the moral polarity of the banishment of Falstaff, so that instead of seeing the king as the betrayer of his intimates we might see him instead as one betrayed by them. But it is striking that Shakespeare goes to such lengths to establish the king's freedom from personal entanglements as an authorizing attribute – he takes counsel from representative figures from the church and peerage in Act 1, but not from intimates like Scroop who might require special treatment or reward. Instead of intimacy and bounty, Henry's rule can as a result be conceived of in terms of what the chorus calls “a largess universal, like the sun” (4.0.43).

This idea of monarchy uncorrupted by the personal makes more sense as an ideological fantasy than as a practical or proscriptive idea of government. No early modern king ruled impersonally. It is not even clear what that would mean in terms of real, lived experience. I am struck, moreover, by the dissonance between this fantasy of rule and the emphasis elsewhere in Tudor political writing upon the importance of intimacy for securing sound and reliable counsel for the monarch. For, though intense personal friendship is not the only way of imagining the bond between the king and his agents, and though (as Laurie Shannon has recently described) there are subtle tensions between the egalitarian language of classical friendship and the realities of political hierarchy, intimacy and friendship are nevertheless an important and persistent way of imagining the laudable relationships that make up the king's service and provide much needed advice.²⁰ Early modern England, in other words, emphasizes the importance of the king's personal relationships while fantasizing that he or she might be able to rule without them. This dissonance is encoded in the awkward crosscurrents of Marius's speech about “prerogative pleasures.”

Despite the real political influence of figures like Leicester, Somerset, and Buckingham, the all-powerful royal favorite is also an ideological construct,

“Prerogative pleasures”

9

the exact inverse of the dream of the impersonal monarch. For at the core of the culture’s paranoia concerning the royal favorite resides an impossible figure of total apostasy and disaffiliation, a figure empowered entirely and exclusively by the will of the monarch and thus freed from the kinds of alliances and loyalties that might otherwise involve ethical constraint. As I will argue in chapter 2, this is the great innovation of the influential libel *Leicester’s Commonwealth*, a text that depicts the Elizabethan earl as a fully protean and rapacious figure, an upstart from an upstart family unrestrained by any larger system of religious or political loyalty. Of course, nobody, not even a Leicester or a Buckingham, could operate politically while floating free of the densely interconnected networks of obligation and affiliation that shaped the horizons of possibility in the close-knit political world of early modern England. But this radically disaffiliated figure, the monstrous progeny of royal affection, is surprisingly prominent in the period’s figurative imagination. Where Shakespeare’s *Henry V* offers up the fantasy of a king without attachments – all prerogative, no pleasures – the cultural fantasy of the corrupt royal favorite embodies the opposite extreme: he is the creature of the king’s prerogative pleasures, the symptomatic expression of what happens when “what pleased the prince” trumps law and custom. That is to say, recalling Fortescue’s analysis, the figure of the protean and all-powerful royal favorite that figures so centrally in the period’s political imagination is the personified manifestation of absolutism and its perceived tendency toward tyranny.

Just as the discourse of favoritism includes many kinds of texts, so it contains a wide range of attitudes and postures concerning the link between favoritism, absolutism, and tyranny. There are texts (*Leicester’s Commonwealth* is one, I think) whose attitude is evasive, attempting to explore corrupt favoritism as the expression of royal will while finessing the awkward question of the king’s complicity. Other texts (we might think here of Marlowe’s *Edward II*) seem carefully designed to explore the link between favoritism and the king’s prerogative pleasures. In Jonson’s *Sejanus* and in later Roman plays influenced by it, what looks at first like corrupt favoritism turns out to be a screen for the workings of autocratic tyranny. In Caroline court plays like Davenant’s *The Fair Favourite* (1638) the impulses of royal will are themselves recuperated from accusations of tyranny along with the institution of favoritism. But for all their manifest differences, the focus on favoritism shared by all of these texts (and many more, discussed in the pages that follow) is animated by a larger interest in prerogative pleasures: in, that is, the nexus of concerns linking favoritism to larger questions about

Cambridge University Press

0521854059 - Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England

Curtis Perry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

royal will, the limits of prerogative, and the political enfranchisement of subjects.

The idea that the period's endless debates about favoritism encode deeper socio-political concerns is hinted at in a remarkable letter delivered to King Charles from an anonymous "Ignoto" during the impeachment proceedings against Buckingham in 1626. For one thing, Ignoto argues explicitly that attacks on Buckingham mask a deeper regicidal intent. Even more suggestively, the letter supplies a nicely paranoid history of controversy over favoritism as an ongoing contest over the nature of monarchy itself. Puritans and other malcontents, the letter argues, began to make trouble "about *anno* 23. *Eliz.* and spit their venom not only against the Bishops, but also against the Lord Chancellor Hatton, and others, the Queens Favourites and Councillors, as they do now against the Clergy and the Duke." Faced with similar dissent, King James "strengthened himself ever with some Favourite, as whom he might better trust than many of the Nobility tainted with this desire of Oligarchy." Therefore: "It behoveth, without doubt, His Majesty to uphold the Duke against them; who if he be but decourted, it will be the Corner-stone on which the demolishing of his Monarchy will be builded. For if they prevail with this, they have hatched a thousand other Demands to pull the Feathers of the Royalty."²¹ Though this letter clearly reflects the specially paranoid mentality of the 1620s, the manner in which Ignoto reads the attack on Buckingham provides a useful glimpse into the ideological significance of the conflicts surrounding favoritism from the days of Hatton on: to attack favoritism *is* in a sense to attack the nature of personal monarchy, or, more precisely, the personal aspects of royal power.

For this reason, I am not satisfied with the conventional notion that attacking the king's servants provides a way to voice dissent while maintaining a fundamental loyalty to the king. To be sure, this is very often the rhetoric within which public attacks on the king's associates are framed – and one recognizes at once the utility of such a position for public discourse under a king – but it makes just as much sense to argue that attacking favorites provided a way to articulate criticism of a king and his government that would otherwise have had to remain unspoken.²² To put this another way, the idea that criticizing the king's intimates and counselors deflected criticism away from the king is a variation on a common type of sociological argument, the safety valve theory by which the expression of resentments in encoded and displaced forms serves a socially conservative, cathartic function and thus enables the persistence of the system that generated resentment in the first place. So: attacks on favorites are a safety