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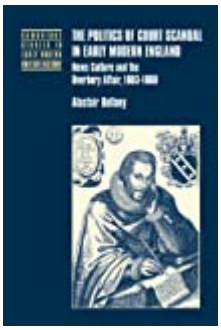

Alastair Bellany. *The Politics of Court Scandal: News Culture and the Overbury Affair, 1603-1660.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvii + 312 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-78289-0.

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Sex and Violence at the Court of King James

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Revisionists used to tell us that there wasn't much serious criticism of the government in early seventeenth-century England. That curious idea has become less fashionable recently, but one group of the revisionists' successors continues to insist that it's to the inner workings of the royal Court rather than to Parliament or the "country" that we should turn if we want to understand Stuart politics. Alastair Bellany's splendid new book on the Overbury affair and its many public representations suggests that the Court historians may be right–though not, I suspect, in quite the way that they have intended.

Sir Thomas Overbury was the mid-level courtier whose murder in the Tower in 1613 led to the downfall of James I's favorite, Robert Carr, when the crime was uncovered two years later. Overbury had been Carr's indispensable assistant in the young man's transformation from handsome royal bedfellow to apparently serious statesman; he read the foreign dispatches for him, drafted the letters, and did much of the hard work that his patron was either disinclined to do, or incapable of doing. But he made the mistake of opposing Carr's marriage to the glamorous Frances Howard, daughter of the Earl of Suffolk, an alliance that would cement his ties with the powerful, pro-Spanish, Howard clan. The problem was that Frances was already married, to the Earl of Essex, and that she took an implacable dislike to the censorious Overbury. So while the proceedings leading to the annulment of her marriage went forward (Essex had to be humiliated by proving that he was impotent), Overbury was maneuvered into disobeying a royal order to accept a diplomatic appointment and put in the Tower. There he was poisoned by people employed by Frances, possibly with the knowledge of the Earl of Somerset, as Carr had now become. Three months after Overbury's death Carr and Frances were married, in perhaps the most lavishly extravagant of Jacobean court weddings, celebrated in masques and verses by some of the greatest literary luminaries of the age: Jonson, Campion, Chapman, Donne.

In 1615 it all came out, and there ensued a series of sensational public trials culminating in those of the disgraced Somerset and his Countess. Several of the lesser participants were duly hanged, but as one of them had feared, James I and his judges made "a net to catch the lit-

tle fishes and let the great ones go" (p. 233). The Earl and Countess were indeed found guilty of murder, but were pardoned by the King and allowed to live out their lives in secluded disgrace. Scholars have generally accepted their guilt, though in 1993 David Lindley, in *The Trials of Frances Howard*, argued that the lady's offence lay as much in her representation as the stereotypical sexually independent woman so much feared by contemporaries as in whatever had been proved against her on unassailable evidence. The narrative of her crimes, carefully constructed by the Chief Justice, Sir Edward Coke, and the Attorney-General, Sir Francis Bacon, certainly contained all the ingredients of the most melodramatic Jacobean tragedy: poison, sorcery (Frances consulted the magician Simon Forman on how to make Essex impotent), the promotion of provocative and unfeminine styles of clothing, and worst of all suspicions of Catholicism. The trials brought before the public a sordid picture of court immorality and disorder.

The affair has attracted plenty of attention from that day to this, but it has generally been marginalized by political historians, who have tended to see it as simply a seventeenth-century version of our own supermarket tabloid sensationalism. It was, Bellany shows, much more than that. He is perhaps a bit too lenient towards Carr, and towards Frances Howard's great uncle, the powerful Earl of Northampton, who undoubtedly knew more about the murder than would have been good for him if he had not himself conveniently died in 1614. But the guilt or innocence of the Somersets and their Howard relatives is not Bellany's main concern. What he is interested in is the deployment of the scandal in political discourse, and his purpose is to use it to interrogate important aspects of early Stuart political culture. This requires him to explore the complicated court intrigues which led to Carr's replacement as royal favorite by George Villiers, the future Duke of Buckingham, and this he does with great skill. He also surveys the mechanisms–the authorized accounts of trials, the unauthorized narratives in newsletters and less professional correspondence, the scandalous verse libels that circulated so widely in both oral and written form–by which reports of the affair were transmitted from the Court to a large and socially diverse audience. The Overbury scandal became so important because a voracious public appetite for news already existed both in London and the provinces.

Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust, and other historians have taught us a good deal about the circulation of political news in Jacobean England, and Bellany's case-study confirms their findings. But even to those familiar with the general contours of the "news culture" of the period, the amount of discussion generated by the affair may come as something of an eye-opener. Among much else Bellany provides the clearest and most intelligible account that we yet have of the "powder poison plot" about which Coke kept dropping dark hints during the trials.

Carefully combing through a wide variety of sources, he clarifies the paranoid suspicions that the tragically early death of Prince Henry, James's Protestant and staunchly anti-Spanish heir, had been the result of a sinister Catholic conspiracy in which Robert Carr was himself involved; that Overbury knew enough about this for the conspirators to have to dispose of him; and that their intention was to go further and poison James and his Queen and enable the Catholics to seize power during the resulting confusion, thus achieving by poison what Guy Fawkes had failed to do by gunpowder. Unfortunately for James there later emerged some carefully coded suspicions that he himself knew something about his son's murder; on this, Bellany might have made more of Sir Anthony Weldon's story about the King's panic when he thought that Somerset might uncover the plot during his trial. Weldon was writing thirty years later, but he had been in the Court at the time, and got the story from the Lieutenant of the Tower, Sir George More, who was in a good position to know. At all events, the fact was that the popish plot was spawned within the Court, not outside it as in 1605, and James's subsequent pardon of Somerset made it hard to present the episode as a repeat performance of the earlier one in which a virtuously Protestant King providentially escapes from being poisoned by evil Catholics. Instead it presented that "image of a popishly corrupted royal court" which eventually played such an important role in the undermining of the Stuart monarchy (p. 210).

Bellany sometimes piles on more details of court intrigue and foreign policy than the non-specialist will find easily digestible, but his story is dramatic enough to compensate for this. One useful part of his book is its engagement with the now-familiar gender implications of court politics. Like Lindley, Bellany shows how conveniently Frances Howard could be used in libels and other public discussions of the scandal to typify the conventional image of the sexually-emancipated disorderly woman whose independence and moral libertinism threatened the basis of the patriarchal system. Frances and her confidante Mrs. Turner also provided sensational examples of the way in which sorcery and witchcraft were continually stalking the land, and their promotion of the famous yellow ruffs and other foreign

fashions undermined the submissive modesty expected of virtuous English ladies. Bellany rightly connects the affair with the debate over gender roles that became so acrimonious a few years later, a debate which was indeed partly triggered by the Overbury affair, in the misogynist tirades of such authors as Thomas Tuke and Joseph Swetnam. The associations between unruly women, popery, poison, and witchcraft lived on in Protesant paranoia for years to come, as the work of Frances Dolan (regrettably absent from the book's bibliography) has also recently reminded us. James himself, as Bellany notes, was alleged to have been poisoned by Buckingham in a conspiracy in which the Duke's Catholic mother played a major role. This aspect of early Stuart history was for too long regarded as ridiculous and as having affected only the stupid and credulous. In recent years it has become harder to dismiss it in this way; after Bellany's book it will be impossible to do so.

In the short-term history of factional court politics, the scandal hastened the downfall of one royal favorite (Carr) and the establishment of another (Villiers). But it did not lead, as for a time in the autumn of 1615 seemed possible, to a major shift in James I's policies towards the anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish stance advocated by the Earl of Pembroke and the "patriot" group which had hailed Carr's disgrace. More important was its long-term contribution to enduring beliefs in James I's tolerance of court corruption, moral disorder, and popery.

James's successor cleaned up the immorality, but in other ways Charles I's court presented (rightly or wrongly) the same impression of popish influence which he inherited from his father. The groundwork for this had surely been laid by the strong residue of Jacobean court scandal left in the political memory. Bellany's rich and perceptive analysis of the Overbury story's survival in the plays, pamphlets, and libels is thus a major contribution to our understanding of the Stuart period. It will also surely be of interest to a wider circle of historians studying the relationship between high politics and public opinion. Let us hope that Cambridge will soon bring out a paperback edition that ordinary readers can afford.

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