

Marek Smoluk
University of Zielona Góra,
Zielona Góra, Poland

The Favourites of James I and their impact on the King's home and foreign policy

The pantheon of British queens and kings ranges from glorious monarchs, who were the builders of the British Empire to helpless rulers under whose reign England lost its vast land possessions and much of its prestige. Similarly, British history encompasses such sovereigns as Henry I (1100-1135) who was an advocate of justice as well as cruel tyrants the like of William Rufus (1087-1100). Examples of extremes abound in all aspects of monarchical life, not to forget the proclivity of the British royalty to indulge in a broad range of sexual activities.

From the Norman Conquest to the present day, there have been a significant number of heterosexual kings who failed to remain faithful to their wives and sought lust and/or compassion outside their marital vows. At the opposite pole of man's sexuality, British history records many rulers who were distinctly homosexual and often, in spite of being married, indulged themselves with partners of the same sex. It is interesting to note that none of the British gay kings were ever either disposed of or assassinated solely because of sexual preferences. The only case of murder was in the instance of Edward II (1307-1327).

This occurred as the result of a fatal choice of male lovers whom the nobility refused to tolerate.

The aim of this paper is to present James I (1603-1625)¹ from the perspective of his sexuality and thus evaluate to what extent this first Stuart king allowed his personal desires to influence his monarchical duties. Also, the intention of this work is to assess the role of his particular favourites with reference to their impact on the King's home and foreign policy within his twenty-three year reign.

According to many psychological assessments, our sexuality is determined long before we enter adulthood. In order to be able to understand James's sexual preferences and thus, the degree to which he was influenced by his male lovers, his childhood experiences must be taken into consideration. Even a brief examination of James's childhood indicates that all pre-conditions were fulfilled to divert his sexual interest towards partners of the same sex. On the advice of Presbyterian Church officials that the Prince should be brought up in the company of men, all women were removed from his surroundings². In addition, the boy was raised virtually without a mother, who having been charged with having an affair with Earl of Bothwell and found at the same time responsible for her involvement in murdering her husband, faced a death penalty in Scotland. To avoid this, Mary Queen of Scots sought refuge in England. Worse still, even had his father, Lord Darnley, not been killed in questionable circumstances, the Prince would have been unable to find him a masculine example to follow as Darnley had the reputation of being fatuous, vain and light-minded³. In view of his father's death and the boy's loneliness, coupled with a feeling of in-security, it seems clear that his early years led inevitably to his tendency to fancy men and an obsession about his being assassinated at the same time in the future.

¹ James VI of Scotland, a son of Mary Queen of Scots and Lord Darnley, succeeded the English throne as James I.

² O. Bucholz, N. Key, *Early Modern England, 1485-1714: A Narrative History*, Malden 2004, p. 208.

³ M. Farquhar, *Królewskie Skandale*. Warszawa 2002, p. 100.

Undoubtedly, these factors, even if they did not turn the young Prince gay, certainly paved the way for his open homosexuality.

Amongst the first of young James's male lovers, Esmé Stuart is prominent. Having been brought up at the French court, where homosexuality was more popular than elsewhere, Esmé Stuart returned to Scotland at the age of thirty-seven. Although he had already been married with four children, his physical attractiveness as well as good manners made thirteen-year-old James fall in love with him⁴. The Prince's infatuation became common knowledge as "he often embraced and kissed him [Esmé] in public places"⁵. In token of his love, the King passed on to his lover vast lands and wealth including Arbroath Abbey, Crooktown and Renfrewshire. In addition, James heaped honours upon Esmé Stuart elevating him first to the position of Earl of Lennox and subsequently to the posts of Lord Chancellor and First Chamberlain. All of that would have passed unnoticed or even eventually been tolerated, had not Esmé Stuart been Catholic and left his Catholic wife and children in France. English Protestants as well as the Scottish clergy saw the King's favourite as a direct threat to the stability of Protestantism in the British Isles. Under these circumstances, the Scottish Protestant nobles acted quickly: hardly had Esmé Stuart been captured when he was banished from Scotland.

The expulsion of James's lover seems to have created mixed feelings. On the one hand James was genuinely sorry to lose his beloved Esmé⁶. On the other hand, the fellow's departure turned out to be a blessing for James. The King's observations of these events and his subsequent deliberations led to a complete transformation in his personality. Not only did James VI become more self-righteous and

⁴ A. Stewart, *The Cradle King: A Life of James VI & I*, London 2003, p. 51.

⁵ Own translation quoted from: Ch. Carlton, *Królewskie faworyty w Anglii*, Warszawa, Wrocław, Kraków 1995, p. 52.

⁶ Despite James VI's devotion to Esmé Stuart, the King had other lovers viz. Francis Stuart or Patrick of Gray. Therefore this imposed upon him break-up with Esmé Stuart was not so devastating.

convinced of the divine right of king⁷, but also he came to terms with his homosexuality. Clearly, the situation with Esmé Stuart's banishment resulted in James becoming more stable in his rule of Scotland. Ch. Carlton makes an interesting parallel between James's reign prior to and after the event under discussion now, and claims that in the period to follow, the King's successes could only be comparable to the achievements of Robert the Bruce⁸.

As James became more mature, the more conscious he was of his sacred duty to produce an heir who would continue the dynasty he had started. Although women were still outside his scope of sexual desires, the twenty-three-year old King got engaged in courting Ann of Denmark. In 1589 they got married in Denmark, and shortly after, they returned to Scotland. Having secured his succession, James VI began to drift away from his wife. Although they had six more children, prior to the birth of the last, Sophia, in 1606, James had already turned to his old habits and fell in love once again; this time with Robert Carr.

The King met this new lover at a tournament in 1607. There was an immediate mutual attraction, which resulted in a springboard effect, launching Carr's career at court. Almost instantly he was elevated to knighthood, a year later he became Lord Rochester and the following year he was offered a seat on the Privy Council. His final preferment was that of Earl of Somerset. Such a collection of high state offices illustrates the initial intensity of James's love of Carr. In turn the King's paramour with greater zeal began to interfere with the making of the King's foreign policy. As a consequence, James started to show pro-Spanish leanings. Already by 1604 the King had begun to display a sympathetic approach toward the Spanish court. Attempts to improve relations, however, were doomed to failure as long as the

⁷ W. Barlow, *The Summe and Substance of the Conference [...] at Hampton Court, London 1604*, p. 78-83 [in:] M. Myszal, *Outline of British History*, Kraków 1997, p. 142-143.

⁸ Ch. Carlton, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

Spanish Inquisition persecuted English merchants, who traded with the ports of both Spain and Portugal.

On Carr's suggestion, James I concluded peace with Spain in 1611. This event initiated a period during which England continued to maintain good relations with Spain. Robert Carr can only be credited with laying the foundations for the building of diplomatic links with Spain. He was disliked not only for conducting foreign policy but also for interfering with internal policy, such as the imposition of unquestionable taxes⁹ without the approval of Parliament. All the new taxes and impositions were introduced as the result of the growing debt, which in 1608 had amounted to £600,000¹⁰ and the consequent constant quest for money. To improve the Crown's finances James, at the request of his adviser Salisbury, introduced a Great Contract "by which Parliament would vote a monarch a regular income of £200,000 a year [...] in return for the abandonment of its rights of wardship, marriage and purveyance"¹¹. The scheme was short-lived and no sooner had it collapsed than short-term initiatives were used just to get by.

In July 1610 James was once again in desperate need of more money. This time he applied for £500,000, however this was turned down. This time was the first occasion James had been accused of having expended too much on his favourites. Such recrimination irritated Robert Carr so much that he persuaded the King to dissolve Parliament. The monarch then proceeded to act precisely as Carr had suggested, which shows clearly the degree of influence the lover exercised over James I. As a consequence of Carr's interference, no Parliament was summoned from 1610 to 1621¹².

Being the monarch's lover, Robert Carr was not accustomed to fore-going his desires to realise his whims, even if such action resulted

⁹ Anon, *The History of Kings and Queens of England and Scotland*, Singapore 2002, p. 159.

¹⁰ Ch. Daniell, *A Traveller's History of England*, Gloucestershire, 1996, p. 117.

¹¹ J. P. Kenyon, *Stuart England*, Penguin Books, 1990, p 74.

¹² H. Zins, *Historia Anglii*, Warszawa 1995, p.169.

in the widening of the gap between the court and the earldom¹³ and thus ultimately leading to Carr's downfall, which indeed it did. The King's paramour fell in love with the Lady Frances Howard; she would have been a perfect match, had not the Lady been wife to the Earl of Essex. Lady Howard and Carr had woven a plot to get rid of her husband by having the Earl drink a concoction, which resulted in his impotence. On the pretext that the marriage had not been consummated due to failure on the husband's part, Lady Howard and Carr set about making application efforts for the annulment of the marriage. James I was well aware of the couple's vicious intentions. It is noteworthy that his support and persuasion of the bishops to grant permission for the divorce made the plan feasible. The event illustrates explicitly the extreme lengths to which the King was prepared to go just to please his lover.

No sooner had Carr been able to marry Lady Frances Howard legally than Thomas Overbury, his wife's earlier admirer, threatened to reveal the details concerning the poisoning of Lady Frances' first husband¹⁴. Thomas Overbury and Robert Carr were not fond of each other - to put it mildly - and this threat deepened their mutual dislike. Robert Carr, who had just been elevated to the position of the Earl of Somerset, felt confident enough that he would be able to extricate himself from his problems by persuading the King to have Thomas Overbury sent to France or better to Russia as an ambassador¹⁵. Thomas Overbury's rejection of the offer led first to his imprisonment and thence his death. There is some evidence, which implies that Robert Carr was involved in murdering his blackmailer¹⁶. Two years later Robert Carr and his wife were themselves arrested. They were found guilty of murdering Overbury and sentenced to capital punishment. James, who was not to see his ex-lover again, as his last

¹³ Ch. Carlton, *op.cit.*, p. 48.

¹⁴ J. P. Kenyon, *op.cit.*, p. 80.

¹⁵ A. Stewart, *op.cit.*, p. 261.

¹⁶ N. Cawthorne, *Życie prywatne angielskich władców*, Warszawa, 2000, p. 53.

favour, converted the death penalty to lifetime imprisonment. Robert Carr was released after seven years.

Long before Carr's downfall, the King's lust had been diverted towards a much younger man, George Villiers. His introduction to the King was not coincidental. Archbishop Abbot, who arranged the introduction, had anticipated that he would be amply rewarded for it. Similarly, the Queen, who hated Robert Carr, deliberately helped young Villiers enter the circle of the royal court as redress to Carr. Nonetheless, neither the archbishop's nor the Queen's endeavours would have meant anything had it not been for George Villiers' beauty, which the King found irresistible. From the very first moment they met, James was so fascinated and overwhelmed by his appearance that he gave Villiers a nickname "Steenie"¹⁷. This nickname was an abbreviation of St Stephen whose face, according to the Bible, was resplendent of an angel"¹⁸ According to a contemporary account, "Everything in him was so delicate and beautiful, especially his hands and face seem to be the most feminine and attractive"¹⁹.

In addition to his handsome appearance, Villiers displayed certain attractive individual qualities: sparkling conversation, dancing, the playing of cricket and horse riding, which the King would appreciate in others highly²⁰. Not surprisingly, therefore, his looks coupled with these other attributes made him a "tasty morsel" for the King. Yet, few courtiers believed that anything lasting would come of it. The majority claimed that Villiers would become yet another toy of the King that would be discarded as soon as he got bored with it²¹.

Contrary to common expectations, the first encounter between James and George, which was held in Farnham in 1615, was a springboard, launching their deep and comparatively unusual relationship. The comparison was made as that between a "father and child" or "spouses". Such expressions are present in their

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Own translation quoted from: N. Cawthorne, op.cit., p. 53.

²⁰ Ch. Carlton, op.cit., p. 50.

²¹ Ibidem.

correspondence. In one of the letters, after Villiers' marriage, James wrote:

My sweetest and most beloved child! Your beloved father gives you and your daughter his blessing. The Lord sends you sweet and cheerful awaking, all the best in this sacred bed and bless the following fruits, now that I have boys in alcove to play with. My dear, when you grow up, keep away from people's importunity, who may put confusing ideas in your head so that I could see our glittering, white teeth and so that you could keep me company in my journeys. God bless you. James R²².

George Villiers' speedy rise in power and status is ascribed not only to his outstanding attractiveness, but also the diplomatic skills he displayed. Unlike other of the King's lovers, Villiers was best able to adjust his behaviour and beliefs to the requirements of a situation. He, for example, acted as a mediator in arguments between the King and the Queen and also, was skilful in easing the pain of the first obvious signs of James growing older (he suffered from porphyria). George also showed his devotion to James in many other respects. The explanation of such dedication lies not in George's deep affection he held for the King, but can be discovered in the young man's understanding that without his James, his offices and the wealth he came to possess would have little value.

The relationship was based on their mutual need and realisation that they were indispensable to each other. Thus, the King reciprocated George's devotion by treating him as a son and taking care of his family. George Villiers' career progression was meteoric and his accruing of preferment was far superior to anyone else in the kingdom. The parvenu was knighted as a Gentleman of Bedchamber in 1615, the following year he became Baron Whaddon and Viscount Villiers, in 1617 Earl of Buckingham, in 1618 Marquess of Buckingham and finally in 1623 Earl of Coventry and Duke of Buckingham - the first non-royal duke²³ in the King's realm for over a century.

²² Own translation quoted from: N. Cawthorne, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

²³ K.O. Morgan, *The Oxford History of Britain*, Oxford, 2001, p. 352.

The concentration of such power and status within one person must have given rise to envy and indignation amongst the members of the royal court as well as Parliament. Also, the spawning of anxiety was, certainly, caused by the fact that in previous years the King was apt “to single out people in political life, who were not very outstanding”²⁴. In spite of mounting criticism, James would reply bluntly: “Christ had His John and I have my George”²⁵.

The problems of the Crown during the time of Buckingham’s ascendancy were little different to those ten years before. The constant lack of money that James and Carr had faced and which they had resolved by the suppression of Parliament for eleven years, cropped up in the early twenties when Villiers was at the King’s side. To fill the Crown’s vaults, James - following Buckinham’s advice - resorted to numerous finance enhancing schemes. One of which was the setting up of the order of baronets, which was the selling of honours for cash. The number of titles sold rose quickly especially in comparison with earlier decades. For instance, during Elizabeth’s reign only 18 peerages were sold whereas between 1603-1620 about 48²⁶. As more and more holders could boast of having a title, the attractiveness of the purchase began to wear off. The economic principle of ‘supply and demand’ led to a decrease in the price, and the initiative no longer generated as much money as would have been hoped for.

To the same, if not greater extent, Buckingham participated in laying the foundations of a relationship between the King and Parliament from 1621 when it was summoned after an eleven-year break. The House of Common started off by criticising the selling of monopolies and other administrative abuses. Consequently, an enquiry was ordered, which after four months ended with charges being laid against two minor entrepreneurs: Sir Francis Mitchell and Sir Giles Mompesson²⁷. Although no official accusations were made against

²⁴ Own translation quoted from: N. Davis, *Wyspy*, Kraków 2003, p. 489.

²⁵ Ch. Daniell, *op.cit.*, p. 118.

²⁶ J. P Kenyon, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 92.

Buckingham, the MPs could feel that they were beginning to gain the upper hand. For example, in May 1621 the Commons prepared regulations strengthening the penal laws for Catholics, but only at the request of king James, were they suspended until to the following year.

By November the sales of titles and monopolies had declined drastically, and James, on Villiers' advice, applied for subsidies to help defend the Lower Palatinate²⁸. The Parliament granted its permission for one further subsidy making it subject to both the reinforcement of the laws against Catholics and the termination of diplomatic ties with Spain. The latter demand was unrealistic and infuriated the King. In response to MPs' demands, James - under Buckingham's influence - threatened to imprison the members of the House of Commons. In return, the MPs' reaction was to protest formally in the Journals of the House of Commons:

The Commons now assembled in Parliament, being justly occasioned thereunto concerning sundry liberties, franchises and privileges of Parliament, amongst other here mentioned, do make the protestation following:

That the liberties, franchises, privileges and jurisdictions of Parliament are the ancient and undoubted birthright and inheritance of the subjects of England [...] and that every Member of the said House hath like freedom from all impeachment, imprisonment, and molestation [...] for or concerning any speaking, reasoning, or declaring of any matter or matters touching the Parliament or Parliament-business; and that any of the said Members be complained of and questioned for anything done or said in Parliament, the same is to be showed to the King by the advice and assent of all the Commons assembled in Parliament, before the King give credence to any private information²⁹

James, acting on the spur of the moment, tore up the offending document and dissolved Parliament.

At the end of James's reign, Buckingham's last and perhaps most scandalous decision was to become involved in a daring plan with the King's son – Prince Charles. The two decided to visit the Spanish

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Historical Collections of Private Passages of State, Weighty Matters in Law, Remarkable Proceedings in Five Parliaments, Vol. 6 [in:] M. Misztal, op.cit., p. 147.

court incognito. This shocking and most inappropriate behaviour resulted in the calling off of the marriage plans, and consequently brought England closer to war with Spain. The irony was that this misconduct in Spain helped the Duke of Buckingham gain popularity.

Parliament was summoned in 1624 and through Buckingham's persuasion, its members granted their consent to give subsidies for war with Spain. In return Parliament demanded the abolition of monopolies, participation in the control of expenses and that the King would not be allowed to make important decisions in foreign policy without Parliament's sanction³⁰. The money raised to defeat the Spanish was wasted, since the expedition failed as soon as the English had crossed the Channel. It so appears, James I in the last months prior to his death was unfortunate enough to experience a series of failures, to which clearly Buckingham had contributed.

In summary, it is beyond question that Robert Carr exerted a noticeable influence on James I both in politics and personal life. English society was indignant at the King's being so lenient and obedient, yet they would rather put the blame on Robert Carr, not James I, for the Crown's moral as well as financial failures. One contemporary account summarised it in the following way: "The exhibition of these gold caves cost England more than Queen Elizabeth had spent during all the wars"³¹.

George Villiers' involvement in governing the country was quite different from that of Robert Carr who "never competed for political power"³². This new King's favourite not only did so but also gained it. Buckingham's various political decisions at home and in foreign affairs as well as in matters of religion, echoed loudly throughout the kingdom as well as abroad. His diplomacy and influence, which on the one hand enabled him to take over the highest positions in the country, on the other did not prevent him from becoming involved in

³⁰ H. Zins, *op.cit.*, p. 170.

³¹ Ch. Carlton, *op.cit.*, p. 59.

³² J. P. Kenyon, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

scandals and corruption³³. What is remarkable about Villiers is that he did not fall from power the moment his lover and patron died. As a close friend of James's son, he continued to exert influence on politics and exercise power during the reign of Charles I.

It is noteworthy that the term homosexual came into use in the English language at the turn of the 19th century, up to which time people had not been identified according to their sexual preferences. King James, who in present terminology was 'gay', regarded homosexuality as an unforgivable sin³⁴. Interestingly enough, there was a penal code on the basis of which homosexuals could be prosecuted, but in reality this law was scarcely ever applied in practice. The reason for this could be that people such as the King, Robert Carr, George Villiers and other gay VIPs from the royal court would rather have kept this clause of the Criminal Code unused so as it could not affect them. Alternatively, they activated the old adage: one law for the rich, another for the poor.

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³³ D. Kagan, S. Ozment, F. M. Turner, *The Western Heritage*, New York 1987, p. 450.

³⁴ N. Cawthorne, op.cit., p. 49.

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