GENDER, AUTHORITY, AND CONTROL:
MALE INVECTIVE AND THE RESTRICTION
OF FEMALE AMBITION IN EARLY
MODERN SCOTLAND AND ENGLAND,
1583–1616

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ABSTRACT

Sixteenth-century discourse is filled with criticisms about the ambition of women and the proletariat. This article explores the connection between gender, ambition, authority, reputation, and the language of condemnation at the Jacobean court. It argues that the prevailing rhetoric vilifying female ambition reflects contemporaneous anxieties about female dominance and authority. In turn, male invective, libel, and slander, directed toward politically active elite women, represent men’s attempts to re-exert their authority over women perceived to be subverting established hierarchies of power. By tracing the use of invective in letters, court poetry, and moral essays, this paper reveals the ways in which abusive language was used to damage women’s reputations in order to establish and maintain male authority over women and other men in the court of James VI/I.

Keywords: Scotland; women; slander; libel; 16th century; 17th century; power; authority; social control

By 1584, Elizabeth Stewart, the countess of Arran, had attained the height of her political influence in Scotland. Her husband,
James Stewart, first earl of Arran, dominated government affairs, for, having been made acting Lord Chancellor in May, he was appointed Lord Chancellor in September following the death of the previous incumbent, the ailing sixth earl of Argyll. The countess herself was recognized by the political community in Scotland as a powerful and manipulative presence in the Court of Session, Scotland’s highest civil court, and her perceived ambition was viciously attacked in the commentaries of and correspondence between members of this political community.1 Almost thirty years later, Frances Howard, the countess of Somerset, was similarly targeted in the wake of the Overbury murder scandal for her perceived ambition. These two ‘ambitious’ women, one Scottish and one English, both courtiers of James VI/I, led astonishingly parallel lives. In examining the ways in which both women were the victims of male invective during a critical period in the formation of Britain as a tangible reality, it is possible to contextualize the social control of women and the regulation of women’s behaviour in British terms rather than in Scottish or English terms alone.2 This provides a broader perspective on

the issue and takes into consideration similarities that might otherwise remain hidden from our view.

Elizabeth Stewart was the daughter of the fourth earl of Atholl and Elizabeth Gordon, daughter of the fourth earl of Huntly. She was first married to Hugh Fraser, fifth Lord Lovat, widowed in 1577, and then married in 1578 to Robert Stewart, earl of Lennox, and later, earl of March. Elizabeth was described as young and beautiful; she was also more than twenty-five years younger than her second husband. She soon found her marriage to March to be unsatisfactory and she began an affair with James Stewart, who, in 1581, was created earl of Arran. That same year, Elizabeth had her marriage to March annulled on the grounds of his impotence. She then married Arran, though both were required to “do ecclesiastical penance…much against her will” as Elizabeth had been pregnant with Arran’s child at the time of their marriage.3 Following this third marriage, “the countess’s prominent and

decidedly non-traditional role in Scottish national politics between 1583 and 1585 earned her opprobrium from across the political spectrum”, for, even before Arran had been made Lord Chancellor in 1584, Elizabeth was noted to have involved herself in factional politics, urging James VI in 1583 to strike off the earl of Bothwell’s head following a brawl between Bothwell and Lord Hume.4

Like Elizabeth Stewart, Frances Howard’s personal life invited scandal and the censure of court gossips and commentators. Frances was the daughter of Thomas Howard, first earl of Suffolk, and Catherine, daughter of Sir Henry Knyvett. In 1606, at the age of fourteen, she married the thirteen-year-old Robert Devereaux, third earl of Essex; however, the couple were initially considered too young to be allowed to consummate their marriage. Essex went abroad for three years, but the union remained chaste even after his return to England. By 1611 or 1612, Frances had become romantically involved with Robert Kerr, youngest son of Thomas Kerr of Ferniehirst and Janet Scott.5 Kerr was later made the earl of Somerset in 1613. That same year, Frances petitioned for a divorce from Essex on the grounds of the nonconsummation of their marriage, and three months later, she and Somerset were wed.

This marriage became the subject of a number of early Jacobean court libels, and though the relationship between Frances and Kerr was supported (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) by James VI/I and Frances’s Howard relations, it was unequivocally opposed by Kerr’s friend and client, Sir Thomas Overbury. Overbury viewed the marriage between Frances and Kerr with hostility, fearful that the countess and

5 N.B., the English spelling of Somerset’s surname is “Carr”; however, the Scottish spelling, “Kerr”, has been retained throughout this article.
her family would usurp his own influence over the earl.\textsuperscript{6} As Overbury’s relationship with Somerset became increasingly strained, his position at court became increasingly tenuous. A man noted for his arrogance, he had offended Anna of Denmark by laughing at her, and the withdrawal of Somerset’s support led James VI/I to offer Overbury an ambassadorship as a mechanism for removing Sir Thomas from court. Overbury refused the offer and was subsequently confined to the Tower of London on 21 April 1613.\textsuperscript{7} Six months later, he was dead.

When Overbury died in the Tower of London on 14 September 1613, it was widely believed that his death had been orchestrated by Frances Howard. For two years, rumours of the countess of Somerset’s involvement in Overbury’s demise circulated at court until a confession was obtained from one of the Tower’s warders, who admitted to bringing Sir Thomas poisoned food and medicine at the instigation of the countess of Somerset and her husband. An anonymous tract detailing this, as well as two other confessions and executions connected to Overbury’s apparent murder, was published in late 1615 under the title, \textit{The Iust Downefall of Ambition, Adultery, and Murder}. While reflecting upon the conspirators’ evil natures and the appropriateness of the sentences passed down, the author of this tract also placed particular emphasis upon the wickedness of ambition in women. Ambitious women, according to the author, “shew [themselves] to be troublesome disturbers of the world, powerful to make small things great and great [things] monstrous.”\textsuperscript{8} This use of the word


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{8} Anonymous, \textit{The Iust Downefall of Ambition, Adultery, and Murder...} (London: R. Higgenbotham, 1615), 9.
‘monstrous’ to indicate the perverting influence of ambitious women upon the natural world echoes the anti-gynecocracy sentiments of John Knox, George Buchanan, and Christopher Goodman; here, the pamphlet’s author co-opted the established rhetoric of these sentiments, which declared female authority to be unnatural and women to be unfit rulers, in order to establish that women who even just desired power were not only troublesome but unnatural and prone to disturbing the balance of the affairs around them.

This early modern discourse on the nature and legitimacy of female authority provides considerable insights into the cultural anxieties of early modern men. Both Sir Thomas Smith and Christopher Goodman held that it was the natural order of things for women to be excluded from holding office, writing, “we do reject women, as those whom nature hath made to keepe home and to nourish their familie and children, and not to medle with matters abroade, nor to beare office in a citie or common wealth” for, “God is not contrarie to him self, [Genesis 3] whiche at the begynninge appoynted the woman to be in subiection to her housbande, and the man to be head of the woman (as saithe the Apostle) who wil not permitte so muche to the woman, [1 Corinthians 14:1; Timothy 2] as to speake in the Assemblie of men, muche lesse to be Ruler of a Realme or nation.”9 Of course, it was legally possible for women to inherit both peerages and crowns in Scotland and England; however, female peers were prohibited from sitting in the House of Lords and queens regnant, according to the rhetoric, should have been prohibited from ruling their kingdoms. That the validity of female rule and authority should be thus questioned with the frequency and ferocity with which it appeared in contemporaneous discourse.

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9 Sir Thomas Smith, De Republica Anglorum: A Discourse on the Commonwealth of England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906), 30; Christopher Goodman, How Superior Powers Oght to be Obyed of Their Subjects... (Geneva: John Crispin, 1558), 52
suggests both an unwillingness to reconsider traditionally defined worldviews and a real fear of the repercussions of male submission to demonstrations of female dominance. According to Ruth Kelso, the traditional view of authority during the Renaissance was predicated on authority that had been bestowed upon the male sex directly by God.\textsuperscript{10} This, then, was the foundational argument upon which every early modern anti-gynecocratic writer eventually relied: that women, by nature, were subject to the authority of men according to the will of God, therefore, it should not be possible for a woman to wield political authority, particularly if she was also a wife. Sharon Jensen, Constance Jordan, and Armel Dubois-Nayt have all written excellent treatments of the debates surrounding women and power in early modern Britain that go into this subject in far greater depth and detail than this article has space for.\textsuperscript{11} For that reason, it can only introduce the existence of these debates and suggest that such debates reflect the presence of a certain level of cultural anxiety surrounding the notion of female authority or dominating behaviour.

Women perceived to be dominating or self-serving were often called ‘ambitious’ by the men opposing them and this indicates a similar kind of cultural anxiety surrounding the concept of ‘ambition’ in this same period. Derived from the Latin \textit{ambitio} (the canvassing for votes), ‘ambition’ was understood in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain to be the desire for power. In modern usage, ‘ambition’ has assumed a synonymous relationship with words like ‘goal’ and


‘objective’, yet early modern Britons would have associated ‘ambition’ with the concept of ‘power’ and with sins like pride, avarice, and envy.12

If, therefore, we understand ‘ambition’ to be largely interchangeable with ‘pride’, ‘avarice’, ‘envy’, and ‘vanity’, and to moreover be inextricably linked with the concept of ‘power’, it is unsurprising that the anonymous author of *The Just Downfall of Ambition, Adultery, and Murder* coded female ambition as a trait that was intrinsically negative. Male ambition was also vilified in this period, but to a lesser extent, and with less violently gendered language. Consequently, it is proposed that the prevailing rhetoric describing the objectionable and offensive nature of female ambition reflects contemporaneous anxieties about female dominance and authority. In turn, male invective, slander, and libel, directed at politically active elite women represent men’s attempts to re-exert their authority over women who were perceived to be subverting established hierarchies of power by damaging, or attempting to damage, these women’s reputations.

Libels, in particular, open a window into the political world and culture of early modern Britain. Alastair Bellany suggests that “[l]ibels—acting in concert with other

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12 This semantic characterization of ‘ambition’ has been demonstrated through the text embedding of early modern discourse material. Text embedding uses a mathematical vector to plot the semantic ‘distance’ between the words contained in a particular corpus. It is then possible to measure this semantic distance and determine which words are the most semantically similar to one another. The smaller the distance between words, the more closely related their meanings. Thus, in the text embedding of ‘ambition’, it was determined that this word had the closest semantic relationships with the words, ‘pride’, ‘envy’, ‘avarice’, and ‘vanity’ in early modern Britain. For a more detailed explanation of the process of text embedding and its application as a tool for the excavation of historically appropriate semantic characterizations, see L. Baer-Tsarfati, “To Control a (Wo)Man’s Ambition: Gender, Class, and the Maintenance of Customary Authority in Early Modern Scotland, 1500–1625,” PhD diss. (University of Guelph, 2020/1, forthcoming).
'underground’ genres—such as newsletters, manuscript separates, and surreptitious print—played a critical, subversive role in shaping public perceptions of political events and personalities.”13 Yet, C.E. McGee argues in turn that “Although [libels] sometimes expressed a populist rejection of oppressive authorities, [they were] more often a means by which one group of people pressured others to conform to established social and sexual mores. Libel broke the law to enforce another law, the entrenched codes of conduct of a patriarchal order. In this context, libelous poetry was a powerful medium for the transmission of gender stereotypes.”14 In arguing that male invective directed at ‘ambitious’ women was intended to control the behaviour of these women, this article builds on McGee’s argument and expands it by looking at other male writings beyond the literary genre of verse libels. Of course, the success of these attempts at exerting control depends upon the importance of women’s reputations in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain. Adam Fox notes that “[t]he effect of this kind of ridicule could be devastating on its victims” for “they were exposed to a public shaming from which there was no escape and little redress.”15 Moreover:

Libels were obviously an effective way in which people might jeer at and wound [others]. The effects might be just as damaging to victims as any physical assault, indeed, perhaps much

more so, for, whatever the widening horizons and affiliations of the ‘better sort’ in this period, the loss of reputation…still mattered greatly to most…Often they were inspired by malicious and spiteful motives and had no justification other than petty personal jealousies. But they might also be a powerful articulation of popular opinions and sensibilities, the communal expression of a sense of justice. Brought to bear upon those who offended against perceived norms, they could be an informal censor and regulator of the most potent kind.16

Premodern writers took note of this, commenting upon the importance of reputation and the damage that slanders and libels could inflict. Christine de Pizan, still widely read in sixteenth-century England and Scotland, emphasized that talk about a person could do great damage, a cautionary note with distant antecedents, in, for example, the depictions of reputation in Virgil and Ovid, whose works were similarly well known to early modern elite readers.17

By examining examples of male commentary, verse libels, and their correspondence to one another, we can see the ways in which abusive language was used to damage women’s reputations in order to establish and maintain male authority over women in the court of James VI/I. Both Elizabeth Stewart and Frances Howard were frequent targets of male vitriol in those periods of their lives during which they were politically active or prominent at court. Elizabeth Stewart was active in

16 Ibid., 329.
Scottish politics as the wife of James VI/I’s favourite, the future Lord Chancellor of Scotland. Frances Howard achieved prominence as the English wife of another one of James VI/I’s Scottish favourites. While Frances Howard was targeted by the male authors of verse libels, Elizabeth Stewart appears in the abusive commentaries and correspondence of Scotland’s political elite.

John Colville was a Presbyterian minister who had taken part in the Raid of Ruthven and then supported the earl of Gowrie’s 1582–3 administration; this put him at odds with the earl of Arran whose political ascendancy followed the disgrace of Gowrie and his supporters. His hostility toward Arran and his wife is not surprising, then, and in a letter written to Lord Burghley in February 1584/5, Colville reported that “[t]he Erl of Arran gydis all togidder with his lady quho is maid Lady Controller.”

Although there is no formal record of the countess of Arran assuming the position of Controoller before, during, or after her husband’s appointment to the office of chancellor, Colville’s casting of her in this way reveals concerns within the political community that Elizabeth Stewart had grown too powerful for their liking. The countess of Arran was frequently characterized as rapacious, her avaricious nature itself suggesting her unbridled ambition and desire for influence and power.

Patrick, Master of Gray was yet another political rival of the Arrans who was ultimately responsible for their fall from power. He was the recipient of a letter reporting on court affairs sent by William Davison, an English diplomat sent by Elizabeth I to Scotland. In it, Davison wrote of Elizabeth Stewart’s role in selling pardons within the Court of Session, noting that “the Master of Marr…hath obteyned his pardon, though with much difficulty, bycause that booth fell not into

the hands of my Lady my commere” but that “[o]ne Hamilton
gudman…has made his Composition with her for 3000lb
Scottish, and procured his exemptcion out of the sentence.”
Effectively, Davison claimed that the Master of Mar’s
difficulty in obtaining a pardon stemmed from his failure to
bribe the countess of Arran while the Hamilton goodman’s
bribe of £3000 Scots secured his pardon for a similar offense
to Mar’s. The implication therefore is that Elizabeth Stewart
accepted bribes in order to exert influence upon her husband
who then applied pressure where necessary to obtain the
desired results. In so doing, she would have effectively
executed the intercessory functions of queenship without the
authority of rank and for the sole purpose of personal gain. That
is, one of the traditional roles played by Scottish queens was
the act of pleading for mercy on the behalf of supplicants to the
crown. In this ritualized act of intercession, the queen’s pleas
allowed the king to exercise mercy without himself appearing
weak while allowing the queen to demonstrate her own virtue,
couched within traditional expressions of femininity.
Elizabeth Stewart’s acceptance of bribes to influence the
outcomes of cases heard by the Court of Session follows this
paradigm; however, Elizabeth was not the queen, her husband
was not the king, and rather than signalling virtue, the Arrans’
actions were instead perceived to be wholly self-interested.
Before the creation of Arran’s government in 1583, there had
been no serious female influence at court since Mary, Queen of
Scots’ abdication in 1567, and the “dexterity with which the

19 Thomas Thomson, ed., Letters and Papers Relating to Patrick Master of
Gray, Afterwards, Seventh Lord Gray (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club,
1835), 2–3.
20 For a discussion of queens as intercessors and as sources of influence
upon kings (both husbands and sons), see Fiona Downie, She Is But a
Woman: Queenship in Scotland, 1424–1463 (Edinburgh: John Donald,
2006).
countess filled this vacuum made her all the more conspicuous and perhaps prey to greater criticism.”

In April 1584, a man from Atholl claimed that “he heard a witch say that the Ladie Arran had used witchcraft against him, and if he provided not for contrare venome, it would come to his destruction.” Later that month, the Lords Enterprisers, gathered at Stirling and described the countess of Arran as “depending on the response of witches and [an] enemie to all human society.” In Davison’s letter Elizabeth Stewart is said to have consulted witches, and a year later, she was called a “laciuous viccked woman, and one blundered of witchcrafte.” That so many of these commentaries accuse the countess of Arran of associating with witches cannot be seen as idle or insignificant in this period. The Witchcraft Act had been passed in Scotland in 1563, making the conviction of practicing witchcraft or of consulting with witches a capital offense. Although the first of the major Scottish witch-hunts did not begin until 1590, an accusation of witchcraft in 1584 still carried a very real and tangible threat of physical harm, let alone loss of reputation. It is possible that Elizabeth’s status as the wife and daughter of earls may have insulated her against an actual prosecution for witchcraft; however, the act of calling her a witch or of accusing her of consorting with witches cannot be seen as anything other than an intentional attempt to

21 Grant, “Politicking Jacobean Women,” 98.
23 A name given to the group of Presbyterian nobles who had supported the first earl of Gowrie in his opposition to the coalition formed by the duke of Lennox and the earl of Arran in 1582, and who had likewise participated in the Raid of Ruthven during which James VI was abducted and then held captive until his escape the following year.
damage her reputation and good standing within the community.\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, it is telling that this was the preferred slander employed against her as it completely devalues her perceived influence by ascribing its source to the supernatural, once again stressing the unnaturalness of female ambition. There is a sort of logic to this connection. If ambition in a woman was perceived as inherently ‘unnatural’, then it only makes sense that an ambitious woman would choose to pursue her unnatural desires by using unnatural, or supernatural, means. The emphasis placed on the role of witchcraft in Elizabeth Stewart’s rise to power can also be seen as a sly attack upon the integrity of her husband. As a man who failed to control his ‘ambitious’ wife, one who, moreover, regularly sought the guidance of witches, Arran could only be viewed as an ineffective governor of his own household. How then, could he be trusted to govern Scotland?

The slanders and libelous correspondence levelled at the countess of Arran very rarely took aim at her sexual character despite the salaciousness of her affair, divorce, and premarital pregnancy. This contrasts sharply with the treatment that Frances Howard received in England. Though she too was called a witch by her detractors, most of the verse libels in which she was the principal subject focus primarily upon her perceived immoral and lustful sexuality. Few of these poems overtly describe Frances as ‘ambitious’, or ‘proud’, yet the fact that she was perceived by contemporaries as ‘ambitious’
cannot be questioned. As Frances was a member of the politically powerful Howard family, any union with an equally politically prominent figure would have been perceived as arising from both personal and dynastic ambition. This is explained by Allastair Bellany and Andrew McRae in their overview of the Essex divorce case and Frances Howard’s remarriage to Robert Kerr. As the “intimate favourite of King James I, this marriage would tie the increasingly politically ambitious favourite to the powerful Howard faction, signalling a shift in [Kerr’s] hitherto anti-Howard political leanings, and providing the Howards with a massively increased opportunity to influence royal policy in both domestic and foreign affairs.”

Accordingly, the first court libels attacking Frances Howard were circulated during and immediately after the proceedings that nullified her first marriage, suggesting that such libels may have had an influence upon how she was later portrayed. These poems primarily attacked the countess’s sexual purity—for instance:

A page a knight a Vicount, and an Earle
was matched Lately to an English girle
But such A one as nere was seene before
A mayde, a wife, a Countesse and A whore

and

Letchery did consult with witcherye
how to procure frygiditye
upon this ground a course was found

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28 Early Stuart Libels, “F1”.

to frame unto a nullatye
And gravitye assuming lenytye
gave strength to this impietye
hoping thereby a way to spye
to rise to further dignyte
But whats the end both foe and frend
cry shame on such austerytye
And booke and bell do dam to Hell
the Lord and Ladyes lechery

This second verse is particularly interesting in that though its primary aim is an attack upon Frances Howard’s perceived sexual transgressions, it does so by accusing her of causing her husband’s impotence through the use of witchcraft, either her own or someone else’s. The purpose of doing so was evidently her desire to procure a divorce and thus satisfy her unnatural ambition (“hoping thereby a way to spye / to rise to further dignyte”) by attaching herself to the king’s favourite.

Yet, this libelous association of Frances Howard with witchcraft cannot be read as being as wholly sinister as the slanders against the countess of Arran discussed above. This is because prosecuting a woman for witchcraft and securing a conviction for the crime was more difficult in England due, in part, to the centralization of the law courts in England and the relative freedom exercised by church authorities and local elites in the prosecution of witchcraft in Scotland. 30 The poem remains, however, a nasty assassination of Frances Howard’s character that was intended as much to damage her reputation as it was to damage the reputation of her husband in another parallel between the two women. Just as the casting of Elizabeth Stewart as an associate of witches can be viewed as

29 Early Stuart Libels, “F2”.
30 See, Brian P. Levack, Witch-hunting in Scotland: Law, Politics, and Religion (London: Routledge, 2008) for further discussion of these differences.
an attack on the earl of Arran, the casting of Frances Somerset as a witch or an associate of witches can be seen as an attack on the earl of Somerset. English courtiers were undoubtedly well-acquainted with James VI/I’s interest in matters pertaining to witches, as well as his reputation as the “greatest enemy [the Devil] hath in the worlde.”31 The king was known to have participated in the North Berwick witch trials of 1590 thanks to the publication of the pamphlet, *Newes from Scotland* in London in 1591, and editions of James VI/I’s *Daemonologie* were in print in London by at least 1603, inspiring and influencing English treatises about witch-finding and prosecution.32 Knowing, then, the king’s feelings about witches and witchcraft, it is possible that the authors of these libels were motivated by a desire to remove the earl of Somerset from within James VI/I’s inner circle. After all, if the king wished to maintain his reputation as the Devil’s greatest enemy, then how could he justify maintaining a relationship with a man whose wife was a witch? Still, most of the libels directed at the countess of Somerset continued to focus upon her scandalous sexuality. The emphasis placed upon Frances Howard’s sexual immorality speaks to the perceived effectiveness of policing female sexuality as a method of exerting control in early modern England. Laura Gowing’s examination of female sexual slander in London demonstrates just how powerful attacking the sexual reputation of an Englishwoman could be. She notes that:

as the primary targets of insult, women occupied a very particular place in the negotiation of sexual guilt and honour. Insults of women played on a culpability for illicit sex that was unique to them. The personal, verbal, social and institutional sanctions against ‘whores’ and ‘bawds’ had no counterpart for men. Men were less likely than women to be presented for illicit sex. Men’s adultery was never an accepted ground for marital separation as women’s was. And the word ‘whore’ had no male equivalent.33

Following the death of Sir Thomas Overbury, the libelous verses directed at the countess of Somerset began to accuse Frances of murder as well as sexual immorality and witchcraft. One of the earliest of these was a simple modification of the first verse quoted above:

A page, a knight, a viscount and an Erle  
All foure weare wedded to one lustfull girle  
A match well made, for shee was likewise foure  
A wife a witch, a murderer, and a whore34

It is difficult to prove that the circulation of verses like these, which explicitly named Frances Howard as Sir Thomas Overbury’s chief assassin, was responsible for the countess’s eventual arrest and conviction, as well as the arrest and conviction of the earl of Somerset, for the murder (and

34 Early Stuart Libels, “H5”.
complicity with the murder) of Sir Thomas in the Tower of London. That said, it is not difficult to imagine that the circulation of these kinds of libels at the court of James VI/I played a significant role in damaging the couple’s reputation in London and abroad. Perhaps most interesting is that the libels directed at Frances Howard did not cease when she was convicted of Overbury’s murder. A final poem, dating from 1615/16 appears to revel in the downfall of the Somersets:

From Roberts coach to Robins carr
Franke, flings, and climes, and travels farr
And Tom attempts the carr to staye
Whom Weston whipps out of the way
Moone, sunne, and many a starr beesyde
Lends Franke there [sic] light, her carr to guide
Olde Venus with her borrowed light
Finds beasts, and riders passing right
Att length an Elvish trick is showne
That Franke, and carr, are overthrowne,
The Turner, and then quickly spye
Where coaches creepe and carrs doe flye.
To four fierce beasts this race did trust
Call’d pride, ambition, murder, lust;
Woonder all men, is itt nott strange
Tyme should make so greate a change
Of Gods wrath it is a token
That the greatest Carr is broken
Sinn did loade itt, honnor top’t itt
Tyme disclos’de itt, vengeance cropt itt.35

In twenty lines, the author of this verse traces the history of Frances Howard’s involvement with Robert Kerr, playing upon a pun of the earl’s surname to chart the couple’s swift decline.

35 Stuart Court Libels, “H3”.
Here, ambition and pride are explicitly added to the charges of murder and lust, and the author seems to enjoy pointing out that these sins were justly punished by God in an act of divine vengeance. Most importantly though, this verse serves as both a celebration of the Somersets’ disgrace and as a warning to other women to avoid any appearance of ‘ambition’.

Both Elizabeth Stewart and Frances Howard were perceived to be ambitious women, eager to exercise power, though both did so through the exertion of influence upon their politically prominent husbands. Arran was Lord Chancellor from 1584 to 1585 and in that time Elizabeth Stewart was derisively called the kingdom’s first “Lady Comtroller” while it was suggested that she dominated her husband in the governance of Scotland. Frances Howard was accused of using her influence over the earl of Somerset to further the interests of her family and to arrange for the murder of his one-time client and friend. Though politically prominent for a time, both women were toppled from their positions and grew increasingly insignificant. The earl of Arran became entangled in a murder scandal in 1585 that resulted in the forfeiture of his title and in the removal of both him and his wife from court. Frances Howard and her husband spent six years in the Tower of London before they were pardoned by James VI/I and allowed to retire into obscurity in the English countryside.

In targeting the reputations of women perceived to be overly ambitious and guilty of exercising too much authority or influence over their husbands, male authors sought to maintain control over these women’s behaviour. Damaging women’s reputations in this way was a deliberate act of punishment for transgression with the intent of ‘correcting’ that transgression by either altering these women’s behaviour or by precipitating their disgrace, thus stripping them of the ability to exercise any significant power at court. The earl of Arran and the earl of Somerset had both been royal favourites of James VI/I. It is worth considering, then, whether male abuse and
invective directed at politically active elite women might be seen as an attempt to exert control over these women through the damaging of their reputations. Likewise, male abuse and invective directed at politically active elite women might also be seen as an attempt to exert control over men perceived to have not only failed in properly exerting their own authority over their wives, but also who might themselves be perceived to be demonstrating illegitimate forms of ambition. Certainly libels were directed at men as well as at women; however, the language in these verses, slanders, and gossip is less violent, and men are likely to be depicted as foolish, incompetent, or cuckolds. As C.E. McGee explains, “…men were to be responsible for the containment of women whose concupiscence made them an abiding source of anxiety. This presumed ‘frailty’ of womankind gave libellers the purchase needed to strike a blow at other men.”36 We see, then, that male invective, directed at women, was a tool for exerting male authority over not only women, whose sexual morality and identities as properly Christian women might be called into question as a threat of loss of reputation, but also over the men in these women’s lives who were themselves perceived to have failed patriarchal social structures through their inability to control their wives. Women’s speech was highly policed in early modern society37 but through the use of invective to

36 McGee, “Pocky Queans and Hornèd Knaves,” 147.
threaten women’s reputations, men’s speech could be used to control women’s behaviour, reasserting male dominance and authority over those women perceived to be subverting established hierarchies of control.