

## THE DECLINE OF THE MONARCH'S PREROGATIVE: BANKS AND HIS IMITATORS

VICTORIA ARRECIADO CHARLO  
*University of Seville*

*The Unhappy Favourite or the Earl of Essex* (1681) by John Banks is the first British play that deals with the love affairs of Elizabeth I and her favourite Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex. The success of this play, which was more than seventy years on stage, brought other British writers, Ralph, Jones, and Brooke, to imitate it during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The characters and plots of all these plays are almost identical, but there are many instances in which the decline of the monarch's power can be observed: Ralph hints that the monarch's power is not above justice, Brooke claims more freedom for the subjects, and Jones questions the divine origin of the monarch's power. So through one play we can appreciate the political change that the country was experiencing from 1681 on.

*The Unhappy Favourite or the Earl of Essex* (1681) by John Banks is the first British play about the love affairs of Elizabeth I and her favourite Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, that ended tragically with the earl's execution. This subject had been previously dealt with by Spanish and French playwrights, such as Coello, La Calpranedé and Thomas Corneille. In England, references to these historical facts had been made by Ben Jonson, Chapman and other authors, but the fear of censorship prevented the subject to be directly undertaken in Britain up to 1681.

All these plays – Spanish, French and British – focus their attention mainly in the sentimental aspects of the event, though in different degrees; the continental plays in addition are less accurate in what refers to historical events, and anachronisms are often introduced in order to get certain dramatic effects. Banks achieves a better balance between political and sentimental scenes. The success of his play, which was more than seventy years on stage, brought other playwrights to imitate it during the first half of the eighteenth century.

The changing process of the image of the royal prerogative will be checked through Banks's play and its rewritings. *The Unhappy Favourite's* great acceptance was

more than probable due to the “secret history” of relevant historical characters that is displayed. The historical events are just a pretext to build up a sentimental drama. But this does not mean that we should overlook the many hints about the monarch’s position given in Banks’s play as well as in his imitators’ – Ralph, Brooke, and Jones.

This can be followed mainly from the way characters address to the queen and also from many direct references to the monarch’s power. Before analysing these aspects, it is important to bear in mind some circumstances that influenced the facts and speeches that appear in the plays, and therefore must be taken into account in order to avoid misinterpretations: on the one hand, the historical facts narrated took place at the turn of the seventeenth century, so the authors are sometimes faithful to how things were at that time, and not to what was happening in their country at that moment. On the other hand, these are sentimental dramas, Elizabeth loves the Earl of Essex, and therefore the way sometimes other characters address her and her frequent doubts about how to manage different situations are due to her personal circumstance more than the result of a loss of power.

In fact, it is quite evident that these plays illustrate the political change that England was experiencing: during the 1680s the emergence of political parties was taking place, although not in the modern sense – they were based in political allegiance but lacked organisational structure. Important events like the Popish Plot (1678) or the Glorious Revolution (1688) indicated the people’s concern about the shift that the relationship between the crown and Parliament was experiencing, and so, it is not surprising that the playwrights should make references to the monarch’s role in their tragedies. Besides, the country had witnessed the execution of their monarch only thirty years ago (1649), so the writers’ point of view when building royal characters could not be the same as before this important historical moment.

As Harris explains, in 1660 “there was little consensus about what kind of monarchy should be restored” (1993: 6), this is, how much power the king should have and if it should be constrained by Parliament. The main political conflict in Restoration England therefore was “to achieve a balance of power between the crown and Parliament” (1993: 8). Still up to 1689, “the monarch determined all questions of policy and selected all ministers of state. He had the power to suspend or dispense with Parliamentary statute by his royal prerogative. Parliament had no independent existence, since the king had the right to determine its sitting, prorogation and dissolution” (1993: 14).

Banks builds the character of a queen with absolute power just in a moment when the debate about the extent of the monarch’s power was most intense. His main contribution in this sense is the importance given in *The Unhappy Favourite* to the counsellors and courtiers who surrounded the queen, diminishing her power. At the beginning of the play, when the queen feels her authority threatened, she passionately defends her position:



is wider than Ralph's: not only does he defend the subject's liberty, but also the monarch's, which could be a way of claiming equality:

QUEEN. — Dare not then  
 To dictate to me farther; I'm a Briton —  
 I was born as free as you, and know my privilege  
 Henceforward you shall find that I'm your queen,  
 The guardian and protectress of my subjects;  
 And not your instrument to crush my people:  
 No passive engine for cabals to ply,  
 No tool for faction — I shall henceforth seek  
 For other lights to truth; for righteous monarchs,  
 Justly to judge, with their own eyes should see;  
 To rule o'er freemen, should themselves be free. (Brooke 1761: 13)

Brooke follows Banks in showing how the queen's authority is threatened. The loss of power of the monarch can be observed when the queen declares that she cannot protect Essex any more (Brooke 1761: 36). But his most important contribution in manifesting the decline of the monarch's prerogative is the moment in which a subject, Rutland, challenges the queen's supremacy. Banks had also made reference to the monarch's power over her subjects' lives, but not in such a subversive way:

RUTLAND. O yes, the Queen!  
 They say you've power of life, and death ——— Poor  
 Queen!  
 They flatter you. — You can take life away,  
 But can you give it back? (Brooke 1761: 75)

Finally Jones, only three years later, introduces other aspects - although he follows closely Banks and Brooke- that show significant changes in this process concerning the image of royal authority. The queen's position is also threatened several times in his play, but nevertheless she seeks incessantly to display a "democratic" image before her people, she longs to appear as what we could consider a "modern" monarch: "I'll nurse no party, but will reign o'er all, / And my sole Rule shall be to bless my People" (Jones 1753: 13). She's concerned with popularity and the preservation of a positive image:

QUEEN. The Public Good is all my Private Care.  
 Have I not ever thought the meanest Subject,  
 Opprest by Power, was, in his just Complaint,  
 Above a King? (Jones 1753: 39)

In spite of the evolution society had achieved at that time, she still claims the power over her subject's life (Jones 1753: 40). In contradiction to this, the queen mentions the laws as the ones that will condemn Essex. By keeping distance with judicial procedures, she consciously avoids to be identified with the instrument of Justice in a situation in which a subject is about to be sentenced to death.

Jones, in opposition to Banks, questions the divine origin of the monarch's power, he finds dangerous that too many people, born without privileges, could

influence the monarch's final decisions. If the sovereign's sacred rights confers him a powerful position, he cannot yield to the pressures of those who surround him, he must show more independence:

SOUTHAMPTON. Had sacred Right's eternal Rule, been left  
To crafty Politician's partial Sway?  
Then Power and Pride wou'd stretch th'enormous Grasp,  
And call their arbitrary Portion, Justice: (Jones 1753: 10)

In conclusion, we can observe that a successful play imitated very closely along a period of seventy years retains plot and characters almost identical to the original in the eighteenth century versions, but a progression in the changing role of the monarch can be observed, as the result of the political transformations that the country was experiencing. When Banks composed his play, authors like Milton in *Eikonoklastes* had already questioned the divine rights of monarchs, asserted the superiority of Parliament over the king and attacked the monarch's right over his subjects' lives (Milton 1955: 280-84). This evolution of thought can also be found in the plays mentioned above, although fiction went more slowly than radical political discourses. To speak about the monarch's position was possibly not the writers' aim, for these are not history plays but sentimental dramas, but they were immersed in a particular moment of the history of Britain, and it was unavoidable that the general state of opinion should influence the small variations introduced in their works.

It is also remarkable the choice made by these playwrights, who transformed a traitor to the crown into a national hero. This can be considered a way of challenging authority, but also as a sign that monarchy no longer held an absolute right to power.

## REFERENCES

- Banks, J. 1939 (1681): *The Unhappy Favourite or The Earl of Essex*. Ed. Thomas Marshall Howe Blair. New York, Columbia UP.
- Brooke, H. 1761: *The Earl of Essex*. London.
- Chapman, G. 1988 (1608): *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Coello y Ochoa, A. de 1973: *El Conde de Sex*. Ed. Donald Schmiedel. Madrid, Playor.
- Cornille, T. 1830 (1678): *Le Comte D'Essex >Chefs-D'Oeuvre de Th. Cornille*. Vol. XII. Paris.
- Harris, T. 1993. *Politics under the Later Stuarts 1660-1715*. London, Longman.
- Jones, H. 1753: *The Earl of Essex*. London.
- Milton, J. 1955 (1644): *Aeropagitica and Other Prose Works*. London, Everyman Library.
- Ralph, J. 1730: *The Fall of the Earl of Essex*. London.