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'By merie company...free from importunitie': The Bedchamber and Jacobean Kingship Revisited

Debates about the role of the Tudor Privy Chamber have over the past thirty years spread outwards to influence much research on court politics in other periods and other countries. Few early-modern court historians have not been influenced at some level by David Starkey's work on Henry VIII's Privy Chamber. For historians of the early Stuart courts, one important question has been whether Starkey's conclusions about the importance of the Henrician Privy Chamber are equally valid for its seventeenth-century equivalent, the Bedchamber. Neil Cuddy has argued that they can. According to him, the Jacobean Bedchamber, especially during Buckingham's ascendancy, was as important – and in much the same way – as the Privy Chamber had been under Henry VIII. However, Alexander Courtney, who has recently completed a Cambridge PhD thesis on the subject, has come to the conclusion that this view now needs to be modified. Courtney began by pointing out that James I had a strong sense of the theoretical difference between the roles of his ministers and those of his household servants. Business and pleasure, while equally necessary to a wise and responsible monarch, were to be kept separate. But did James's practice diverge from his carefully thought-out theory? Much depends on how far the Bedchamber servants took part in the ordinary routines of government. Did they, as Cuddy has argued, present many of the documents signed by the King? Courtney disputed Cuddy's statistics, arguing that, while their role was not negligible, the Bedchamber servants were not encroaching on the duties of the secretary of state to the extent that Cuddy has suggested. Moreover, the real decisions about whether to advance particular pieces of business had usually taken earlier in the process. Nor can the Bedchamber be said to have sidelined the Privy Council. James did tend to rely on small groups of advisers, but the favoured individuals were more likely to be particularly trusted privy councillors; this was more a Cabinet Council than a Bedchamber faction. The problem was that by the early 1620's this inner circle consisted of James's more Hispanophile advisers. This only seemed to confirm the accusations that he had become dependent on a clique of popish favourites. **AB**