

10 November 2008

Dr Alexander Samson (UCL)

Sovereignty in the Queen's Closet: The Court and Household of Mary Tudor and Philip of Habsburg

The gender roles of male and female sovereigns have been much studied by court historians in recent years. Queens regnant were always problematic figures in societies in which patriarchal assumptions were otherwise unquestioned. But their male consorts could be doubly problematic. Unlike Elizabeth I, Mary I saw marriage as an essential and unavoidable duty. However, her status as a married woman conflicted with other important aspects of her royal image. Mary regarded herself as being married to England as much as her younger sister would later claim. Marriage to a foreigner could therefore be seen as a form of sexual violation. Yet her English subjects also tended to view her husband as an effeminate figure whose masculinity had, as a consort, been compromised. His infidelities, whether real or imagined, were the subject of salacious speculation. Married life between the two also created more immediately practical difficulties. The English courtiers appointed to Philip's Privy Chamber expected that, as Henry VIII's Privy Chamber servants had, they would play a substantial part in national and international politics. They were disappointed when Philip preferred to rely on his Spanish servants. But Dr Samson argued that overall Philip adjusted well to the peculiar circumstances of his English sojourn. It helped that Spanish queens had traditionally been more powerful than their English counterparts. Philip could not but be aware of the unavoidable parallels with Ferdinand and Isabella. He fully participated in English court politics, while always recognising that he had to do so through his wife. As a Spaniard, he had no difficulty in accepting that a monarch should work in conjunction with his subjects, yet, at the same time, he knew that a successful king had to project a certain image. Samson suggested that, in England, Philip was trying to be the ideal courtier to his wife and that he largely succeeded. **AB**