Under new management: royal PR in 1603

Hock, J.

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Jonas Hock | Leiden University

James I of England, Public Domain

King Charles III had a smooth succession to the throne of England. He had had decades to prepare for the role, and his subjects already knew what to expect from their new monarch. When King James VI of Scotland became James I of England in 1603 after Queen Elizabeth I's death, the situation was exactly the opposite. His new subjects were unsure what to expect of him. Thus, how he presented himself in public was crucial, especially early on in his English reign. He did not have a smooth succession, as within months a plot to remove him from power was discovered. Not to be daunted, James attempted to use this very plot to shape his public image, by staging a dramatic act of judicial theatre.

The conspiracy against the new King that was uncovered in the summer of 1603, referred to as the *Main Plot* and the subsidiary *Bye Plot*, is difficult to assess. It is not

certain how specific its plans were and what, if any, practical preparations for them had been taken. These plots allegedly involved high-ranking nobles and other well-connected individuals, chief amongst them Sir Walter Raleigh. Eventually, eight conspirators were found guilty of treason and sentenced to death. Three sentences were carried out, and on 9 December three more were supposed to follow.

On the morning of 9 December 1603, just as the first of the three condemned had been led to the scaffold, a messenger stepped forward and handed a letter from the King to the Sheriff of Hampshire, Benjamin Tichborne, who was in charge of the proceedings. After reading the letter and receiving verbal instructions, Tichborne proceeded to lead each man to the scaffold one by one, letting them think they were about to die, before reading out James's letter, which granted them a stay of execution. By all accounts, this was met with cheers and applause.

There are three letters that report on the dramatic fashion in which this happened. The first was sent from Tichborne to the Privy Council on 10 December. The second letter was written on 11 December from Dudley Carleton, then in the employ of Earl of Northumberland, to his benefactor and friend John Chamberlain, who regularly collected and forwarded news to a large network of correspondents. Lastly, Robert Cecil, the King's Principal Secretary, sent a letter to Ralph Winwood, who was then the English representative at The Hague, on 12 December. All three letters agree on the basic facts, although Carleton adds more flourishes and detail. According to all three sources, the letter that granted the stay of execution was written in James's own hand, and both Cecil and Carleton claimed James had taken the decision to show mercy entirely by himself. They also claimed he had only taken a single gentleman of his bedchamber, John Gibb, into his confidence, who had helped write the letter and then delivered it.

The version of the letter delivered to Tichborne is lost, but a draft of it exists. The draft is not written in James's hand, and the handwriting remains unidentified. The most likely candidate would of course be John Gibb, but it is also possible that a scribe was omitted from the official version of events. The draft does however feature several changes in the King's hand, which give insights into his process and show how he staged his theatre of mercy.

Most of the changes James made were spelling changes, specifically changing words to Scots spelling variants. James' language was unsurprisingly strongly influenced by Scots, but he also adjusted the degree of these features, depending on the addressees of his letters. For example, when writing to Queen Elizabeth, James used fewer Scots expressions and spellings than in letters written at the same time to fellow Scots. By changing English spellings to Scots variations, James makes the letter clearly a letter *by the King.* An impression that would have been reinforced by the fact that James apparently went to the trouble of writing the sent version in his own hand. By emphasising the Scots features of his language, James also highlighted his national origin, which is especially notable as anti-Scottish sentiment was rife in England at the time and had been used in polemics against James's succession. Just like the language,

the content of the letter was very focused on James, personally. The reasons he gives for his decision to spare the plotters' lives include a natural inclination towards mercy, which he nonetheless stresses must be balanced with his responsibility to ensure public safety, as well as the circumstances of his recent accession.

The person whom one might have most expected to be involved in the writing of the letter was Robert Cecil. He was not only an experienced and extremely capable minister, who had already been Principal Secretary to Queen Elizabeth from 1596 onwards but also one of the King's most trusted advisors at the English court. In the last years of the queen's life, he had furthermore conducted a secret correspondence with James in which they planned the accession in detail. It had been Cecil who proclaimed James King within hours of Elizabeth's death, and he was richly rewarded with more offices and titles over the course of the next years. However, stylometric analysis has shown that Cecil was indeed not involved in the writing of the letter. Whether he truly did only learn of the letter's existence when James summoned the Privy Council on the day the executions would have taken place cannot be said with certainty. It is also possible that Cecil did not want to draw attention to himself in the context of the plot, as two of the conspirators were his brothers-in-law. What is certain, however, is that Cecil made use of the letter for publicity purposes immediately after it had been delivered. Cecil wrote to Tichborne on 10 December, asking him to forward the King's letter, that had been delivered so dramatically the day before. In his letter to Winwood, written on 12 December, Cecil not only recounts the events, but also includes a copy of the letter, likely based on the sent version. This text also includes the changes made in James's hand in the draft, which indicates that they were most likely also included in the sent version. Cecil was evidently eager to see the story of the King's magnanimous mercy spread. By sending his account and a copy of the King's letter to Ralph Winwood, then the English agent with the Estates General of the Low Countries in The Hague, Cecil also ensured that this image would also reach an important international ally.

Dudley Carleton sent his report of the events to John Chamberlain on 11 December. Carleton includes more details than the other accounts, such as the condemned men's behaviour on the scaffold. Some of these details are things he could not have witnessed personally, such as James's speech to the Privy Council, which might indicate that he received information from someone within the King's inner circle. Notably, Carleton also enclosed a copy of James's letter to Tichborne with his own account. This means he had been given access to the letter, either by Tichborne or by Cecil. Letting Carleton see the letter would have been a convenient way to bring it into circulation, as the addressee of Carleton's letter, John Chamberlain, was a prolific letter-writer, who regularly forwarded the news he received to a wide network of correspondents. Notably, Carleton's report to Chamberlain is not entirely positive about the King. He claims that when James explained his decision to the Privy Council, he did so in such a convoluted manner that nobody could understand him. He also stresses that at the execution of one of the plotters four days earlier, only the executioner and Tichborne had proclaimed "God save the King" while the stay of execution on 9 December was met with general cheers and applause. Despite the best efforts on the parts of the King and Cecil alike, they could not control what commentary was added to the letter they wanted to use to present how merciful and wise the King was. In Carleton's account, he instead seems somewhat

socially inept, and the public mood seems more tense than James and Cecil would probably have liked.

Regardless of what the crowd's reaction on the day was actually like, the strategy of using the case of the Main- and Bye-Plotters and James's letter granting them a stay of execution as a way to present the new King as merciful and wise did fail. When the events of 9 December 1603 were discussed by historians in subsequent centuries, this was usually done with a high degree of antipathy to James. His actions were presented as cruel, capricious, and ineptly theatrical. When looking at the draft of his letter, however, this view must be revised. Rather than granting the stay of execution on a whim, James prepared his words carefully and even adjusted minute details so that his words would have the greatest impact. The theatrical way in which the news was delivered probably did add to the anguish of the condemned, but ultimately spared them a worse fate.

Ultimately, the image of James as a merciful monarch faded because the way he wanted to be seen changed. The two plots of 1603 were soon overshadowed by the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, which is remembered much more prominently to this day. James's reaction to that plot was anything but merciful, and subsequently he cultivated a much stricter image, emphasising authority and allegiance over good-natured mercy.

Further Reading:

- Akrigg, George P.V., editor, *Letters of King James VI and I*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984)
- Courtney, Alexander, 'The Scottish King and the English Court: The Secret Correspondence of James VI 1601-3.', in *Doubtful and Dangerous: the Question of Succession in Late Elizabethan England,* ed. by Susan Doran and Paulina Kewes, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 134-151
- Francis, Edwards. *The Succession Bye and Main Plots of 1601-1603*. (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006)

This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant agreement No. 864635, FEATHERS).

Jonas Hock is a historian and literary scholar from Germany, whose work focuses on the Reformation and the seventeenth century in Protestant regions of Europe. He has investigated the relationship between James VI/I and his secretariat as part of the FEATHERS Project at Leiden University for the past two years.

Twitter: @amoderndandy

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