The Dance of the Courtier: Politics and Performance in Elizabethan and Jacobean England

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Abstract:
In the Renaissance courts of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, courtiers clamored for the chief role of the monarch’s “favorite”, frequently utilizing their extensive knowledge of the arts to catch the royal eye. Behind each court favorite is a story of their intensive performance for the monarch—especially in dance, theatre, the joust, and wardrobe—by which they played an involved role in a very unique and sensitive relationship with these powerful yet vulnerable rulers, the dance of the courtier. My research thoroughly analyzes how exacting courtiers utilized these court arts to thrust themselves into the spotlight and thereafter be in close proximity to their sovereign, exercising political influence on England. The project also explores the gendered differences between the courts of a queen and a king. The research requires extensive examination of primary sources including courtiers’ journals, personal correspondence, speeches, and financial recordings to understand how Englishmen at the time viewed these courtiers and to catch valuable clues of their calculations within the courts. It also requires the use of secondary sources such as modern scholarly journals, articles, and books for a strong comparison. Previously it has been argued that the arts were a frivolous aspect of the courts, but my findings assert instead that these performances were essential to a courtier’s rise to power. Political power in England was intricately and irrevocably intertwined with performance and the arts.

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In order to place the analysis of law and politics in a broader context, topics discussed include economics, religion, social customs and thought, in addition to questions concerning the forms of action at common law, disputes between the courts, law and equity, and the political activities of Parliament, the Privy Council, and the Crown. 1604. The speech of the Lord Chancellor of England, in the Eschequer Chamber, touching the post-nati. [etc.] Includes indexes. I. Egerton, Thomas, Baron Ellesmere and Viscount Brackley, 1540?-1617. Much of the existing literature was composed by courtiers or writers who were patronised to present that which their Vil. viii. PREFACE. During Elizabeth's reign, England experienced the true cultural reawakening of thought and art. Elizabeth's court was a magnet, which attracted the most talented individuals of the era. Music, poetry, literature and drama flourished under Elizabeth's reign, largely due to the Queen's love of the arts. The Mayday celebration consisted of the decorating of the maypole and dancing around it. In the summer, bonfires were burned and dances were held to celebrate Midsummer's Eve on June 24. Elizabethan drama was greatly influenced by Roman authors whose works were translated from Latin into English. Lawyers at the Inns of Court translated the works of Seneca and in their spare time tried to imitate the Roman philosopher.