

A Restoration Attack on Royal Favouritism: Sir Robert Howard's *The Great Favourite, or, the Duke of Lerma* (1668)

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EN Abstract. *The Great Favourite, or, the Duke of Lerma* (1668), by Sir Robert Howard (1626-98), dramatises the Machiavellian strategies employed by the Duke of Lerma, *valido* of the Spanish monarch Philip III, to retain royal support. Scholars have sought to associate the topic of this play with the Earl of Clarendon's ruling experience and banishment in 1667. However, *The Great Favourite* is a criticism of the whole political system Clarendon represented, that of the rule of Machiavellian chief ministers, which was far from disappearing in England with his fall. After a brief review of the play's reception history, I will defend the above hypothesis by showing the different anti-Machiavellian criticisms Howard tried to stress throughout the play and both the textual and contextual reasons why *The Great Favourite* should be seen as an attack on the political model embodied by the Earl of Arlington, Charles II's consolidated Machiavellian royal favourite.

Keywords. *The Great Favourite*, Howard, favourite, Machiavellian, Arlington.

ES Un ataque contra el favoritismo regio en la *Restoration: The Great Favourite, or, the Duke of Lerma* (1668) de Sir Robert Howard¹

ES Resumen. *The Great Favourite, or, the Duke of Lerma* (1668) de Sir Robert Howard (1626-98), dramatiza las estrategias maquiavélicas empleadas por el duque de Lerma, favorito del monarca español Felipe III, para conservar el favor real. Los estudiosos han intentado asociar la materia de esta obra con la experiencia de gobierno y ostracismo del conde de Clarendon, ocurrido en 1667. No obstante, este enfoque resulta en cierto modo restrictivo. *The Great Favourite* es una crítica al sistema político que Clarendon representaba, el del gobierno por favoritos, lejos aún de desaparecer en Inglaterra con su caída. Tras un breve repaso a la recepción de la obra, se defenderá dicha hipótesis desglosando las diferentes críticas anti-maquiavélicas que Howard trató de destacar a lo largo del argumento, y las razones textuales y contextuales que explican por qué *The Great Favourite* debería concebirse como un ataque al modelo político encarnado por el conde de Arlington, el consolidado favorito maquiavélico de Carlos II.

Palabras clave. *The Great Favourite*, Howard, favorito, maquiavélico, Arlington.

Sumario. 1. Introduction. 2. An attack on Machiavellian Royal Favourites in Restoration England. 3. Conclusions. Works Cited.

Cómo citar: Sell Maestro, A. (2025). A Restoration Attack on Royal Favouritism: Sir Robert Howard's *The Great Favourite, or, the Duke of Lerma* (1668). *Pygmalion*, 17, 21-30

1. Introduction

1. Pacto Vno, Binis Thalamis, Belloque Triformi,
2. Lege emptâ, Gallis repetundis, Fraude Telonum,

¹ Funding research project: this article is an outcome of the projects «A Polycentric Monarchy of Urban Republics before the European Rivalry in the Iberian Atlantic (1640-1713)» (ATLANREX) (PID2022-14501NB-I00) and «La Monarquía Hispánica y el Oriente de Europa: visiones imaginadas y articulación real de Polonia y Rusia en la Edad Moderna (PID2021-123689NB-I00)», funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). It was completed while benefitting from a postdoctoral research contract «Juan de la Cierva», awarded by the State Research Agency of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (JDC2024-053607-I).

3. Principis edicto, Populi prece, voce Senatûs

1. Regnum perdidit, 2. Ædes condidit, 3. Exuit ostrum.

[1. By means of a treaty, two marriages and threefold war;

2. By corrupting the laws, the extortion of the French, customs' fraud,

3. By the Prince's command and the people's prayers, the Senate's vote;

1. He destroyed the kingdom; 2. He built a Palace; 3. He cast off discarded the purple.]²

The target of this Latin epigram was Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon (1609-74). He had been accused by the House of Commons of having taken advantage of his privileged position in Whitehall as Lord Chancellor and father-in-law of the King's brother to enrich himself illicitly while bringing about the ruin of Charles II's kingdoms by taking a number of misguided decisions, such as the sale of the geostrategic stronghold of Dunkirk to the French, the barren Anglo-Portuguese royal marriage, and the outbreak of the ill-fated Second Anglo-Dutch War (Taylor, 2022: 600-601). Adding to this his own growing quarrels with his sovereign, it is not surprising that the latter shared Parliament's discontent and welcomed the dismissal of his veteran adviser on 30 August 1667, prior to his painful exile to France, where he ended his days far from the court and unforgiven by the King (Roberts, 1957: 1-5; Hutton, 1989: 250-253; Pincus, 1996: 426-438; Seaward, 2003: 230-233). The widespread circulation of this epigram during the last third of the seventeenth century shows how deeply ingrained all these criticisms against the Lord Chancellor's actions remained in the Restoration's political imagination. Those actions had emanated from the arbitrary and excessive power of an individual who had abused the authority granted to him by his proximity to Charles II to pursue his own benefit through Machiavellian practices and to the detriment of the English subjects. In other words, what this short piece of verse criticised was the regime of autocratic government which allowed the King to relinquish his royal prerogative and delegate his political functions to his favourite.

So widespread was the criticism of rule by favourites that it even reached the stage. On 20 February 1668, the King's Company performed a play based on this premise for the first time at the Theatre Royal in London's Drury Lane: *The Great Favourite, or, the Duke of Lerma*. Loosely based on the historical context surrounding the fall from royal grace of Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas (1552-1625), Duke of Lerma and *valido* of the Spanish King Philip III (1598-1618), its author, English courtier Sir Robert Howard (1626-98), showed how the main character, recently banished, exploits the King's death and the accession to the throne of his young heir, presumably Philip IV, in order to regain royal favour by forcing his daughter Maria to become the new King's mistress. However, having achieved this goal, Maria, somewhat troubled by the immorality of her actions, disappears. The enraged king attacks the Duke of Lerma with the support of those aristocrats who had opposed Lerma's return to power from the outset, including his brother-in-law, the Duke of Medina. Eventually, Lerma is put on trial for his ongoing corrupt behaviour and just as everything seems to be leading to a tragic outcome, there is a twist in the final scene: the favourite learns that he has just been made a cardinal thanks to the help of his confessor, who had moved to Rome. Fortunately for Lerma, the ecclesiastical immunity attached to his new status spares him from execution (Howard, 1668, *passim*; Douglas-Canfield, 2000: 78-82).

To date, scholars have approached the analysis of Howard's play by studying the role of its preface – particularly its treatment of the use of metre in “serious plays” – in the debate between Howard and his brother-in-law, John Dryden (1631-1700)³. In fact, Howard used the preliminaries of *The Great Favourite* to question some of the arguments put forward by Dryden in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, also printed in 1668, although already in manuscript circulation since 1666 in the form of a dialogue between four learned friends of the author, one of whom was Howard himself, represented as the character of Crite (Arundell, 1929: 207). Through this avatar, the courtier had retorted to Dryden, personified in turn by Neander (i.e. the “new man”), that “your rhyme is incapable of expressing thoughts naturally [...] for what is more unbefitting the majesty of verse than to call a servant or bid a door be shut in rhyme?” (Dryden, 1896: 82). The criticism of the impairment of wit caused by rhyme continued in the prefatory material to *The Great Favourite*, where Howard makes another plea against Dryden's intransigence in advocating that serious theatre should be subject to rules of metre “as strict as Sancho Panza's doctor” (Howard, “To the Reader”: n. p.)⁴. In contrast, Howard believed that these rules should not be considered as fixed and as having the force of law, but rather as conditional, that is, as mere propositions that each author could choose to accept or reject (Arundell, 1929: 206-212). Consistent

² The English translation is by Edward Taylor, who glosses the epigram as follows: The first line lists three policy disasters of his tenure as Lord Chancellor: the “one agreement” is his sale of Dunkirk to the French in 1662, the “two marriages” are those between James, duke of York, and Anne Hyde (Clarendon's daughter) in 1660, and Charles II and Catherine of Braganza (which had produced no heirs) in 1662, and the “threefold war” was the Second Anglo-Dutch War, fought against the French, Dutch and Danish; these three conditions [...] of means, are presented as resulting in the first claim of the final line, that Clarendon destroyed the kingdom. In the same way, the second line lists three ways that Clarendon allegedly secured funds by corruption – through his legal work as Lord Chancellor, through his dealings with the French and through exploiting customs duties – which, as the second part of the final line explains, led him to build a “palace”, the sumptuous Clarendon House (built 1664-1667). The third line asserts the breadth of opposition to Clarendon, by king, people and Parliament, which resulted in him “cast[ing] off the purple” (i.e. his legal robes); he was dismissed by the king in August 1667 (Taylor, 2022: 600-601).

³ John Dryden had contracted an advantageous marriage in 1663 with Lady Elizabeth Howard, one of Sir Robert Howard's sisters (Winn, 2008: 46).

⁴ Howard is referring to one of the passages in *Don Quixote* (II, 47), in which Sancho Panza, then ruler of Baratania island, confronts during a banquet a strict physician who prevents him from eating the delicacies on the menu (Cervantes, 1993: 907-915).

with these premises, a glance at the work reveals frequent use of both rhyming verse and blank verse. In other words, rhyme and formal aspects in general were relegated to the background:

For in the difference of *Tragedy* and *Comedy* [...] there can be no determination but by the taste; nor in the manner of composure [...] I will not therefore pretend to say why I writ this play, some scenes in blank verse, others in rhyme, for I have no better a reason to give than chance (Howard, "To the Reader": n. p.).

In short, poetry, conceived in its broadest sense as encompassing drama among other genres, should not be subject to the rules of metre or rhyme, the deployment of which depended rather on random criteria, such as individual taste. The preface was, for the most part, a sustained paraphrase of this same idea, repeated with such verbosity that it would seem that Sir Robert Howard was keen to drum his position into the reader's mind with a view to dissuading him from accepting his brother-in-law's exaggerated assumptions. However, the controversy between the two authors, although public and widely reported, was not rooted in deep mutual animosity, nor does it seem that the work's style was what concerned Howard most (Oliver, 1963: 80-119). Moreover, in a *Defence* of his essay, written soon after the publication of *The Great Favourite* and in response to the direct criticisms levelled in its preface, Dryden found no objection to praising the final version of Howard's text, for which he himself wrote the prologue, stating that its author had "so much altered and beautified" the original manuscript that "it can justly belong to none but him" (Dryden, 1896: 102). And for the record, Dryden himself would soon contradict his essay's arguments by explicitly denouncing the monopoly of rhyme in so-called serious theatre, a case in point being the preface to one of his most representative tragedies, *Aureng-Zebe* (Dryden, 1676: n. p.).

These arguments show that the debate between Howard and Dryden on the use of rhyme in serious dramas was rather superficial in terms of style; in other words, both were ultimately aware that poetical aspects did not determine the quality of a composition. One might then wonder why Howard decided to devote so much space to this futile dispute. Two reasons could be given, both related to the context of the work and, more incidentally, to its content. Firstly, as some scholars have pointed out, the resort to controversy over rhyme was a reflection on paper of the factional strife in which English politics was embroiled: Howard, as a client of George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham, was thus pitted against Dryden, protégé of the Earl of Clarendon, his main rival at Whitehall, with the added incentive that Dryden's entry into court life had initially been sponsored by his brother-in-law, Howard himself (Mack, 2007: 134-135; Winn, 1987: 178-190). Secondly, and in close connection with this point, it should not be ruled out that this digression was a conscious strategy on Howard's part to distance himself from a content that was already controversial, in line with other contemporary authors who used the prefatory material of their works, especially translations, to disown more or less tacitly the topics of the originals they were adapting⁵. In this connection, Howard writes:

for the subject, I came accidentally to write upon it; for a Gentleman brought a play to the King's Company called *The Duke of Lerma*; and by them I was desired to peruse it, and return my opinion, whether I thought it fit for stage; after I had read it, I acquainted them that in my judgment it would not be of much use for such a design, since the contrivance scarce would merit the name of a plot [...] and on the person of Philip the 3 there was such a mean character, and on the daughter of the Duke of Lerma, such as a vicious one, that I could not but judge it unfit to be presented by any that had a respect, not only to Princes, but indeed to any man or woman (Howard, "Preface": s. p.).

The original idea was not Howard's, and he even disapproved of two of the main characters, namely Philip III, on account of his selfish, arbitrary nature, and, above all, Maria, the daughter of the Duke of Lerma, because of her perversion. By bringing forward these explanations Howard was attempting, on the one hand, to avoid accusations of plagiarism such as those that Dryden might already have poured on the original manuscript, aware that the fall from grace of the Spanish favourite was a recurring topic in seventeenth-century English drama. In fact, Robert L. Mack has pointed out that, when composing *The Great Favourite*, the English courtier would have been inspired, at least in part, by lost works by Henry Shirley and John Ford, both playwrights of the previous generation (2007: 135). In any case, Howard seemed more interested in avoiding any parallels that might be drawn between the text and its courtly context, that is, the one in which, as will be explained later, Howard moved and struggled to thrive.

The truth is that controversy was inevitable from the very moment the plot of the play drew obvious parallels with the actual experience of the deposed Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Clarendon. Just as the Duke of Lerma was portrayed by Howard as a despotic ruler who, despite his questionable actions for his own benefit, ultimately managed to avoid trial and, therefore, certain death, so the Earl of Clarendon was one of Charles II's closest statesmen who, having monitored the King's administration of favours from his privileged position in Whitehall, had fled the consequences of his impeachment by going into exile on the continent. Added to this was Howard's treatment of his regal characters, namely, a tyrannical Philip III and a weak Philip IV, who was easily manipulated by his mistress Maria, daughter of Lerma. Philip IV ran the risk of comparison with

⁵ It is worth mentioning, for example, the cases of Francisco de la Torre y Sevil, translator of Welshman John Owen's *Epigrammata* into Spanish (1674), and the Englishman Paul Rycout, who rendered Baltasar Gracián's *El Criticón* into his mother tongue (1681). The former, for risking printing the work of an author indexed by the Holy Office, and the latter, for doing the same with a treatise written by a Jesuit at the height of anti-papist fervour in England, found themselves in the position of having to use their wit to distance themselves from the content and justify its publication (Sell, 2021: 53-70; Sell, 2023: 33-56).

Charles II, who was at the time involved with courtier Barbara Palmer, Countess of Castlemaine, in an ongoing relationship which Buckingham was trying to ruin in the same way that he had promoted Clarendon's fall. Because Howard was one of Buckingham's main protégés, because tales circulated that the political conspiracy against the Lord Chancellor had been hatched in Castlemaine's chambers and, above all, because the actress chosen to play Maria in the first performance of the play before the King was Nell Gwyn, who in April 1668 would replace the countess as the King's favourite mistress, explains why the author of *The Great Favourite* made sure to distance himself from its content in the preface to the reader (Arundell, 1929: 208; Hutton, 1989: 262; Steinman, 1871: 91-95).

It is possible that more than one attendee at this first palatine performance expected it to be interrupted at any time for the reasons explained. In any case, as the ubiquitous diarist Samuel Pepys noted, "the play [was] designed to reproach our King with his mistresses" but fortunately for Howard, "it ended all well, which saved all" (Pepys, 1893: 330-331). One might wonder, however, what led Howard to compose such a controversial play, aware of the resentment it could generate at Whitehall. He confined himself to offering rhetorical justifications based on self-esteem: if there were some who wondered whether "I was concerned to let the World judge what subject matter of offence was contained in it" and if there were others who "were pleased to believe little of it mine", he would take it upon himself to retort to the former that he would be grateful "to have received some advantage in the opinion of the sober part of the World by the loss of theirs" and to the latter, the most critical, that he would be satisfied if something in his work aroused in them "so ill designed an envy as to place it to another author" (Howard, "To the Reader": s. p.). However, it could be argued that Howard's aim was not merely to challenge his critics from an intellectual standpoint, nor to expose Clarendon's questionable governance practices. In publishing *The Great Favourite, or, the Duke of Lerma*, he pursued a more far-reaching goal, which was to question a particular model of royal favouritism embedded in the context of a political situation that directly affected him and convinced him that it was still a relevant issue worthy of criticism by being brought to the stage.

2. An Attack on Machiavellian Royal Favourites in Restoration England

Setting aside the specificity of the plot details outlined above, a careful reading of *The Great Favourite* reveals a cluster of criticisms that are not so much directed at the particular figure of Clarendon and the regime that sprang up under his influence as at the ill practices associated with the system of favouritism, which ultimately benefited only those who held the position of favourite, while harming all those they governed. The King's chief minister, whatever its name and specific powers depending on the particularities of each region, was nothing more than the usual culmination of the process of courtly promotion prevalent in Early Modern Europe, including England, whereby an individual ruled by proxy of his monarch after earning his trust (Levy Peck, 1999: 81-104; Malcolm, 2019: 33-60; Worden, 1999: 229-264). Seventeenth-century European courts were structured around the munificent nature of a sovereign prince who guaranteed order in the realm by granting favours and privileges to his subjects. The key to thriving in courtly society was to get close to the sovereign. This was the minimum requirement for aspiring to high office in the royal entourage as chief minister, that is, as the prime intermediary capable of controlling access to the monarch by the rest of his subjects and, therefore, acting as the effective administrator of royal generosity (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2002: 57-60). All courtiers truckled to this paradigm, including Sir Robert Howard, who took part in it as Buckingham's client, while this aristocrat himself was an eternal aspirant to be Charles II's favourite in circumstances which, as will be explained, were not the most favourable to his interests.

For Howard, the real problem lay not in the role of favourite itself, but in the questionable procedures that some of its suitors pursued in order to gain and retain that advantageous position. Thus, the Duke of Lerma was not vilified in *The Great Favourite* for being the King's chief minister, but for his immoral and even anti-Christian behaviour. It would be impossible to think otherwise bearing in mind that, having fallen from grace by decision of Philip III, he used his own daughter, the beautiful and chaste Maria, as a tool to make the young Philip IV, who had recently been enthroned, fall in love with her and regain royal favour: "fortune and I did long ago agree / I to make work for her and she for me" (Howard, 1668: 54). In this sense, exclusive access to the royal person and the consequent management of his intrinsic generosity were firmly protected. There was his daughter Maria, who, feeling guilty for her lack of shamelessness, did not hesitate to compare the royal favourite, Lerma, to the lover who wins the prince's heart and ignores his other advisers, thus proving right those who suspected that this play represented an attack on the excessive influence of Charles II's mistresses over his own government and person (Howard, 1668: 33-35). In this regard, Howard himself put it into the mouths of several of his characters that Lerma's renewed power depended exclusively on the influence that Maria exerted over King Philip IV. Thus, while Medina proclaimed that "in Maria's eyes lies Lerma's power", the monarch himself had no trouble confirming that "Thy father shall both life and honours owe unto thy virtues" (Howard, 1668: 21, 24). In other words, Maria is the instrument that allows Lerma to get close to the King and at the same time guarantee the preservation of his privileged position by means of their unbreakable paternal-filial bond: as long as the King is in love with his daughter, he will continue to benefit his favourite, and since the King has no intention of giving up his mistress, it would seem that the Duke's position will remain stable. The father's dependence on his daughter is clear because, after all, Lerma needs Maria to enjoy full immunity from the monarch.

Meanwhile, the third vertex of this triangular relationship, King Philip IV, was portrayed as a mere puppet at the mercy of the other two. Described by his confessor, a supporter of the favourite, as a person of "easy nature" with a "temper too gentle", his *valido* takes advantage of his weak character to make him fall in love

with his daughter and, above all, to strengthen his influence over him, if not in the most effective way (since the King seems overtly sceptical about the stability of Lerma's position), at least in terms of external appearances (Howard, 1668: 10). Not surprisingly, in early modern European courts, where dissimulation was the key to success, it was just as important to be what one appeared to be as it was to be what one actually was. Thus, according to Norbert Elias, "the differentiated elaboration of the external, as an instrument of social differentiation", was characteristic of the court's configuration as a setting for sociability (1982: 87; Álvarez-Ossorio, 1998-1999: 264-265). Regardless of his actual position, Lerma was interested in projecting a differentiating self-image which made him appear to be as close as possible to the monarch. The strategy proved effective, as his rivals were quick to notice: the Duke of Medina, for example, notes that Philip IV was "in Lerma's pocket" and the Count of Bruchero remarks that the favourite "hangs in the King's bosom like a crucifix" (Howard, 1668: 24-25).

Initiatives such as this show that, while it is true that Lerma's return to royal favour in the most advantageous of posts owed much to his daughter's position in the sovereign's affections, another reason for his success lay on his own wit and practicality: for instance, in his ability to surround himself with a range of sidekicks who covered up his misdeeds and, ultimately, influenced the plot twist and facilitated a successful outcome. Howard gave Lerma a broad cast of clients, some of his own invention and others based on real characters such as Rodrigo Calderón, who, at the end of the day, were nothing more than mere pawns rewarded with bribes to fulfil the Duke's ambitions. Thus, towards the end of the play, feeling cornered by his detractors, he unapologetically refers to "the vast sums I gave my instruments to turn them into friends" (Howard, 1668: 57). Just as he used Maria to deceive the King, Lerma employed his protégés for purposes of questionable morality, with his confessor bearing the brunt of the consequences: not only did Lerma entrust him with the awkward task of convincing Maria to become the royal mistress, but, aware of the fragility of his position, he sent him to Rome to intercede with the Holy See to have him invested as a cardinal and thus enjoy full immunity. The confessor succeeds but commits suicide for fear of reprisals. The news that this endeavour had been satisfactorily accomplished reach Lerma when his fortunes were at their lowest ebb: deeply distressed by her unwanted role in her father's plans and encouraged to do so by her uncle Medina, Maria has disappeared from the scene. Nonetheless, Lerma informs the courtiers of his recent appointment to the position of cardinal and avoids thereby the execution to which he was doomed (Howard, 1668: 9-10, 57-58, 64-66).

Lerma's happy outcome, far from justifying his career, serves to reinforce the portrait of the favourite that Howard has sought to paint throughout the work; a portrait that, as stated, did not correspond to just any model of an evil chief minister, but to the archetype of the Machiavellian favourite, which he sought to criticise. Not surprisingly, the Spanish *valido* was presented as an individual who based his political promotion on a policy of deceit and circumspection that entirely disregarded Christian virtues. In the play, those virtues are only represented by his daughter Maria, who initially rejects the persuasive manoeuvres of the confessor, labelling them as "heresies" (Forte, 2008: 167-180; Howard, 1668: 11). So irreligious are her father's stratagems that he does not hesitate to use the Church, through his confessor, as yet another instrument to achieve his ill-fated goals: not only to convince his daughter to become Philip IV's mistress, but even to play a part in securing a cardinal's hat. At the end of the play, the Duke of Lerma has achieved his egotistical initial aim, which was "to make Spain know I am their Deity" (Howard, 1668: 15). He is an alienated individual who cares only about his own survival, even above the integrity of his allies, from the confessor who committed suicide to the executed Calderón and, of course, above the interests of the kingdom. The presence of the favourite in the sovereign's entourage is continually associated with the ruin of Spain by his court rivals, led by Medina himself, who compete for their share of power but fear possible reprisals resulting from his abuse of authority. Thus, the Marquis of Alcala, for example, lamented the fact that Lerma's unexpected return to royal favour "has sunk the hopes and fortunes of all Spain", and Medina himself was no less clear when he begged the new king, Philip IV, to return him to his former banishment, concluding his reproach with a peremptory "but 'tis for all your Kingdom, not for me" (Howard, 1668: 19, 22).

The adoption of anti-Machiavellian approaches such as this, with the aim of criticising the actions of those royal favourites whose power was considered abusive, had not been at all uncommon in the English dramatic tradition since Elizabethan times. Starting with Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1582), several authors had followed suit, including Christopher Marlowe in *The Jew of Malta* (1589-90) and *The Massacre at Paris* (1589-93), Ben Jonson in *Sejanus His Fall* (1604) and, of course, William Shakespeare himself in plays like *Richard III* (1592-94), *Othello* (1603) or *Coriolanus* (1604-05). They had given prominence to characters with a Machiavellian streak similar to Howard's Lerma, inflaming a fervour against the controversial precepts introduced by the Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513), which would become firmly established in English and European literary and philosophical discourse during the first half of the seventeenth century (Bawcutt, 1970: 3-49; Ceramella, 2019: 107-125; Falocco, 2002: 64-74; Ferneyhough, 1953: 66-82, 128-210)⁶. On the other hand, the ironic component of many of these works should not be overlooked. Ultimately, some of the characters who were portrayed with Machiavellian stereotypes (Marlowe's Duke of Guise being perhaps the most obvious example) and the settings in which their perverse actions unfolded belong to the sphere of

⁶ Beyond drama, Machiavelli's doctrines were not well received in the philosophical works of English authors as influential and popular in the first half of the seventeenth century as Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes (Ceramella, 2019: 118-119).

Catholic reform, where anti-Machiavellian trends were most prevalent due to the theoretical incompatibility of the Florentine philosopher's teachings with the dominant Tridentine confessionism.⁷

One such setting was Spain, which featured prominently, especially in early works such as those by Kyd, due to the prevailing atmosphere of Anglo-Spanish hostility during the last third of the sixteenth century (Forte, 2008: 167-180; Sell, 2020: 50). Moreover, in subsequent years, there was a tendency to emphasise the topic of exaggerated Spanish pride, which had been a commonplace in anti-Spanish literature in general since the late Middle Ages (López, 2015: 68-86; Sanchez, 2004: 8-10; Sell, 2020: 44-46; Villaverde, Castilla, 2016: 23-27). Howard could be seen as the heir to this tradition by choosing Lerma as the main character and Madrid's court as the setting for *The Great Favourite*. In fact, Howard seems to have had fairly accurate knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the fall from grace of the Duke of Lerma, probably on the strength of reading the lost plays by Henry Shirley and John Ford. For example, like Calderón, the characters of Pedro and Lorenzo are based on two of Lerma's protégés, Pedro Franqueza, *secretario de los consejos*, and Lorenzo Ramírez de Prado, although the latter seems to be confused with his father Alonso, *consejero de Hacienda*. In turn, the poisoning of the queen mother is inspired by rumours that had placed Calderón as the main culprit in the death of Philip III's consort in late 1611. At the same time, the Duke of Medinaceli was, indeed, Lerma's brother-in-law, although by the late 1610's his wife's brother had already died, and the title was being held by her nephew. Finally, although it is also true that Lerma assumed the cardinalate to evade responsibilities, the role of the confessor was completely distorted by Howard: Dominic Father Fray Luis de Aliaga not only did not collaborate in the Duke's appointment but had been an open detractor of his from the beginning (Feros, 2002: 303-336, 413-464). However, in view of the circumstances that will be explained later, perhaps he was simply following a Machiavellian tradition already familiar in English drama, above all as a result of the popularity of the trial and ensuing public execution of the Duke's chief favourite, Rodrigo Calderón, which became a poetic *topos* serving as a deterrent to those who abused political power or placed themselves under the protection of a tyrant (Cruz, 2014: 51-70)⁸.

None of the criticisms of the Machiavellian favourite were neutral. Just as Kyd sought, among other issues, to question King Philip II's right to his newly annexed kingdom of Portugal, and Marlowe intended to make an anti-Semitic claim after a plot against Elizabeth I's life organised by her Jewish physician was uncovered, Howard also harboured ulterior motives when writing *The Great Favourite* (Ardolino, 2018: 129-143; Sherman, Preedy, 2021: 41-42). It has already been pointed out that scholars tend to agree that behind the censorship of Lerma's perverse actions lay an attack on Clarendon and his government. Without seeking to refute this argument, which is plausible given both the date of composition of the original manuscript and Howard's own opposition to the Lord Chancellor within the courtly setting of Whitehall, it could be argued that *The Great Favourite's* retained its pedagogical utility even after the fall and subsequent exile of Clarendon. Indeed, the play's message might have become even more urgent after its belated publication in 1668. For with Clarendon's flight, one royal favourite may have disappeared from the English court, but the power of another, Sir Henry Bennet, Earl of Arlington (1618-85), had been consolidated. Indeed, his governing practices bore greater similarities to those attributed by Howard to Lerma than to those of the ill-fated Lord Chancellor.

Born into a family of rural gentry, after studying at London's Westminster School and Oxford's Christ Church College, Bennet had entered the service as personal secretary first to the Earl of Bristol and then to the Duke of York during their French exile, before moving to Madrid as the King's envoy (1657-61). Returning from his successful mission, which had involved convincing Philip IV to forge an Anglo-Spanish alliance, he went on to serve as Charles II's private secretary of languages. This was just a preliminary step to his definitive socio-political rise, which he achieved in October 1662 on his appointment as Secretary of State, not without first being granted the title of Earl of Arlington and several honorary and material rewards (Barbour, 1914: 1-10; Eagles, 2022: 16-18; Eagles, Dennehy, 2022: 1-2; Littleton, 2022: 129-130; Malcolm, 2022: 44). After some five years contending with Clarendon for the monopoly of royal favour, the Lord Chancellor's self-imposed exile in November 1667 had left Arlington free to consolidate a political regime that he had been strengthening since his appointment as Secretary of State. By February 1668, when *The Great Favourite* was first performed, that regime was already expanding, but was also raising the hackles of rival court factions, above all the one led by Buckingham, to which Howard belonged.

For the latter, as for many other opponents, the Earl of Arlington embodied at least three of the Machiavellian flaws attributed to Lerma in *The Great Favourite*: his deceptive political procedures, his religious ambiguity, and his lavish displays of wealth. Firstly, precisely because of his stay at the Madrid court and his dealings with Luis de Haro, nephew of the Count-Duke of Olivares, who had held the reins of Spanish politics for more than fifteen years (c. 1643-61), the future Secretary of State had assimilated certain Spanish manners that influenced his character and his style of government. In particular, he attracted the attention of his critics for his (self-)imposed mask of gravity (*gravitas*) – a mixture of “authority, serenity and restraint” – which he manifested almost cartoonishly in an exaggeratedly serious and reflective mood, emphasised by his skillful use of silences, the haughtiness of which cowed his interlocutors (Covarrubias, 1611: 449r; Marshall, 2022:

⁷ In several passages of *The Prince* (1513) and *Discourses on Livy* (c. 1517), Machiavelli explained that religion was only useful to the prince as a tool for dominating his subjects (Parsons, 2016: 1-13).

⁸ Rodrigo Calderón (1576-1621), who had been under the protection of the Duke of Lerma since 1595, first as a page and later as his chief subordinate, was executed in Madrid's Plaza Mayor on 21 October 1621 as part of the trial against his master. Used as a scapegoat in the face of Lerma's unexpected immunity, his death was considered unjust and exemplary by many. Therefore, his case became a subject fit for creative writing and was consequently publicised by such renowned authors as Francisco de Quevedo and Luis de Góngora (Martínez, 2009: *passim*).

101-104). His much-mistrusted circumspect character was also deployed on in the religious domain. When one of his rivals, Anthony Ashley-Cooper, argued that Arlington was “neither a good Protestant nor a good Catholic”, he was voicing the opinion of many contemporaries who were entirely unable to discern the Secretary of State’s true religious affiliation. Probably a crypto-Catholic by influence of his Spanish experience, Arlington never showed any interest in declaring his position clearly. His conception of religion was, after all, practical and varied according to his interlocutors: he presented himself as an Anglican before his King’s subjects and, tacitly, as a Catholic towards the two main allied courts, the French and Spanish. In other words, for Arlington, as for Lerma, religion was merely a political tool (Malcolm, 2022: 42; Marshall, 2022: 90; Sell, 2024: 368). Thirdly, all these character traits were emphasised by his concern to create an external image of material opulence that would help to generate the distinction that the main character in Howard’s play also craved, whether in his clothing or in the exotic decoration of his residences, the result of illicit self-enrichment according to his critics (Jacobsen, 2014: 122-132; Jacobsen, 2009: 301-312).

Thus, Arlington embodied some of the main clichés associated with Machiavellian rulers. This is why it is hardly surprising that Howard had these parallels in mind when publishing and staging *The Great Favourite*, despite the disappearance of Clarendon, that is, who was initially intended to be the target of criticism. This assertion would be mere speculation were it not for the fact that the author of the play was a militant opponent of Arlington’s government. As one of the most active members of the Duke of Buckingham’s faction, Howard had for some time been taking a stand in the House of Commons against the Secretary of State’s foreign policy. It favoured a progressive rapprochement with the France of Louis XIV, which became more accentuated in the following months in the context of the emerging secret negotiations which would end up with the agreement of the Secret Treaty of Dover (Hutton, 1986: 301; Hutton, 1989: 263)⁹. Aware of Howard’s active opposition to an Anglo-French league, as well as his kinship with England’s leading Catholic noble family and his estrangement from the French ambassador, the Spanish embassy in London sealed an alliance with Howard and, by proxy, the Buckingham faction in 1669, whereby Howard and his elder brother, the Catholic Earl of Berkshire, undertook to promote the interests of the Spanish monarchy in Parliament in exchange for financial rewards¹⁰. The brothers’ commitment, and that of Howard in particular, was beyond doubt, at least judging by the opinion of Sir Orlando Bridgeman, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, who confessed that all the good correspondence between the Spanish and English monarchies was due to Howard, who was the best candidate to be employed in the business (Sell, 2024: 268-269).

However, despite initial expectations, the alliance between the Howard brothers and the Spanish embassy bore little fruit for a number of reasons, the chief of which, apart from the differences that gradually arose between both parties, was the obstacle of Arlington’s hold on the post of favourite and his geopolitical roadmap. The Secretary of State retained his post thanks, on the one hand, to the support of an extensive network of clients that he himself had cultivated and consolidated in key positions within the English administration at home and abroad and, above all, because he still enjoyed the King’s favour (Jacobsen, 2014: 121-122; Sell, 2024: 101-102). His harmony with the King was decisive in his strategy to maintain power. This is hardly surprising, given that both men shared the same view of the political governance of the kingdom. Firstly, from the beginning of his reign, Charles II had felt comfortable relying on his chief minister as a tool of government, a practice he had learned from his experience at the French court, where it was common for a single secretary of state to monopolise power in the field of foreign policy (Greir-Evans, 1923: 102, 125). Secondly, the political and religious priorities of both men coincided. King and secretary preferred important decisions to be made either by royal prerogative or in small court circles rather than in Parliament, an institution they mistrusted due to its often-critical stance on regal geopolitics. In this area, Charles II and Arlington held identical views, both believing that, if England was to emerge stronger from its internal struggles, it should achieve neutral status in the many European disputes. That neutrality aroused mistrust among foreign courts who were eager for them to take a stand. The same was true with religion, as the King shared his favourite’s practical and therefore ambiguous approach to Church (Hutton, 1989: 456; Marshall, 2022: 95-96; Sell, 2024: 378). Arlington’s survival in power was due, in part, to the fact that his lord shared some Machiavellian traits with him, if Machiavellian is understood to mean “a subtle statesman or cunning politician” (Blount, 1656: n. p.). So much so that, although the earl ended up losing the Secretaryship of State to Parliament, he remained at Charles II’s side as Lord Chamberlain, controlling the King’s munificence, but in the background. In the end, Arlington, like Sir Robert Howard’s Lerma, had managed to survive: the end had justified the means.

3. Conclusions

Sir Robert Howard’s *The Great Favourite, or, the Duke of Lerma* (1668), which depicts the stratagems employed by the Duke of Lerma, *valido* of King Philip III of Spain, to earn the favour of his weak successor and remain in power, is a work with greater depth than scholarship has attributed to it. It is true that its prefatory

⁹ From his seat in the House of Commons, Howard had shown an active commitment to Spanish geopolitical interests by questioning, for example, the destination of those funds approved on Arlington’s initiative and warning that his poor governance was having a negative impact on England’s reputation among its anti-French allies (Grey, 1769: 157-215; Hutton, 1989: 268-270).

¹⁰ The main goal of the Spanish monarchy was to halt the advance of French influence in Whitehall because if England ended up allying with France, the Triple League pact, which brought together the Dutch, Swedes and English under the protection of Madrid, would threaten to dissolve, leaving Louis XIV free to continue attacking Spanish strongholds in Flanders (Sell, 2024: 266-268). See an overview of these and other related topics within Charles II’s reign in Harris’s monograph (2005: 43-84).

material provided some valuable information for understanding the content of disputes over formal aspects such as the use of rhyme in dramatic works. It is also true that the exiled Lord Chancellor, the Earl of Clarendon, who until the end of 1667 had been very close to the English king Charles II, was the main target of the criticism levelled throughout the work. However, a more detailed analysis of the text and the context surrounding the publication and performance of *The Great Favourite* reveals that Howard's goal was more ambitious: to launch an attack on the system of Machiavellian chief ministers and their entourage in general, in line with previous authors. This was part of an effort to remove the Earl of Arlington from power, a political figure, who, in his capacity as Secretary of State with extensive powers, had established himself as a faithful type of the Machiavellian model. Indeed, many of the faults attributed to Lerma in the play, such as his taciturn political procedures, the creation of an extensive, consolidated and useful network of clients, the devaluation of religion and its use as a political tool, and the creation of a grandiloquent, egotistical self-image emphasising his proximity to the sovereign and, therefore, his influence in the administration of royal favours and mercies, could equally be ascribed to Arlington. Given the noteworthy fact that neither Lerma nor Arlington suffered reprisals for their immoral exercise of power, the final lesson of Howard's *The Great Favourite* seems to be clear: the fact that the government of favourites was based on questionable procedures did not mean that it was ineffective.

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