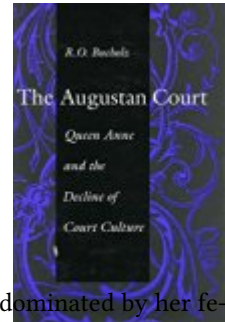


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

R. O. Bucholz. *The Augustan Court: Queen Anne and the Decline of Court Culture*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993. xvi + 418 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2080-9.

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The study of courts and court culture has in recent years – at least since the translation of Norbert Elias’s *Court Society* (1983) – become extremely fashionable in early modern British studies. Bob Bucholz’s clearly written and meticulously researched *Augustan Court* is another contribution to this genre. Yet the book’s subtitle “Queen Anne and the Decline of Court Culture” indicates the novel twist. Bucholz’s is a study of the decline of a “premodern institution.” (p.85) His study of Anne’s “household servants, courtiers, and the environment they inhabited” (p.3) explicates the causes and consequences of that decline.

Under Charles II and James II, Bucholz suggests, the court remained vibrant and exciting. After the Revolution, however, William and Mary introduced Whigs and republicans to the royal household, people who had no experience of courts and had been bred up to despise them as sources of corruption. Consequently court life in the 1690s was stripped of its gaiety. By Anne’s accession the court had clearly receded in importance.

Anne, however, was determined to restore the court to the splendor and importance which it had enjoyed in the reigns of her father and uncle. Unfortunately, Anne’s court, Bucholz shows, was chronically short of money – so short of money that Anne was not only unable to patronize the arts or pay off her servants, but she was even prevented from pursuing reforms which would have streamlined the court.

Despite these handicaps, Bucholz demonstrates persuasively that Anne exerted firm and constructive control over her court. Anne’s household was not overly corrupt. Nor was it full of sinecures. Bucholz effectively demolishes the myth, largely manufactured by the Duchess of Marlborough (Sarah Churchill) and her Whig

historian followers, that Anne was dominated by her female favorites. In a variety of ways Anne was successful in exerting her independence, committing herself to “the cause of moderation.” (p.76). Sarah was unable to stuff the household with Whigs. But her rival Abigail Masham was no more successful in filling the household exclusively with “Tories, Royalists and Jacobites.” (p. 107) Even on progress Anne scrupulously partook of the hospitality of both Whigs and Tories. Despite the Queen’s reclusiveness – a result of her shyness and declining health – no ministry was able successfully to isolate the Queen from their political opponents.

While Anne did maintain the court’s independence from party, she was unable to restore its political and cultural centrality. Bucholz demonstrates conclusively that the court was “decidedly secondary” to Parliament as a political institution. (p. 188) He follows Holmes, Horwitz, Speck, Clyve Jones, Clayton Roberts in suggesting that distribution of household office had a negligible political effect. Not only was there no massive increase in the number of Parliamentary placemen at court, but those MPs who were awarded places tended to vote along party political lines. They did not form a court party. Nor was Anne’s court a cultural center. This was not because the Queen was uninterested in the arts, but because of her declining health, the court’s dwindling financial resources, and the development of the City as an alternative cultural venue. Anne’s court, Bucholz suggests, was not the political and cultural center that it had been. But this was not the fault of the Queen.

Bucholz’s detailed study of Anne’s court raises a number of broad and interesting questions. First, what precisely was the nature of Anne’s moderation? What was its ideological content? Bucholz proves that Anne

refused to become either a Whig or a Tory Queen. Was this because she, following in the footsteps of the Marquis of Halifax, opposed political extremism? Or, was it because she was unsympathetic with the entire notion of party politics? That Anne was, as Bucholz persuasively argues, consciously neo-Elizabethan (pp. 205ff.) suggests that Anne's political ideas like her courtly style might have been somewhat old-fashioned.

That financial shortcomings precipitated or at least accelerated the decline of court culture, raises a second larger question: why was Anne's court so poorly funded? Of course, the war with France severely strained the financial capacities of the Augustan state; but one is still left to ponder why members of Parliament chose to place the monarch's court so low on the list of fiscal priorities. Was it because there was profound ideological discomfort with supporting an institution whose primary purpose was "to promote veneration of a divinely appointed hereditary monarch"? (p. 85)

Finally one wonders in a broader sense about the origins of the court's decline in social prestige. Bucholz notes that in Anne's reign "the royal household was declining as a place where the ruling class came" (p. 200) because other social institutions such as political clubs, coffeehouses and the great country house were successfully competing for the affections of the political nation. Cultural producers were seeking and finding alternate sources of patronage. (pp. 241-242) That Jonathan Swift could confide that "the court serves me for a coffeehouse" suggests just how far the cultural balance had shifted by the first decades of the early eighteenth cen-

ture. (p. 247) Yet, the coffee house and the political club were not the products of post-1688 England. They were very much in evidence in the 1650s and in the reign of Charles II. Consequently one wonders whether, considered in a broader social context, Charles II's court was not fundamentally different from those of his predecessors, whether during his reign the court for the first time was merely one among many cultural producers. Perhaps, then, one should consider whether the origins of the decline of court culture might be found in the English Revolution, whether the transformation of the English public sphere might have begun in the 1650s rather than in the 1690s.

Nevertheless whenever and wherever one locates its origins, Bucholz conclusively demonstrates that by the end of Anne's reign the court was no longer the center of English cultural or political life. Indeed, Bucholz shows the entire nature of English political culture had been transformed. "In the brave new political world of postrevolutionary England," Bucholz concludes, "ritual, symbol, and personal allegiance were coming to mean less and less to an increasingly cosmopolitan, venal and partisan ruling class." (p. 250) Anne might have wished to revive court ceremony and etiquette, but the Glorious Revolution had brought to a definitive end the age of baroque monarchy in England.

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