

Thomas Corns, ed.. *The Royal Image: Representations of Charles I.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xvi + 316 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-59047-1.



Reviewed by Malcolm Smuts

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This volume contains ten essays by scholars based in English departments -- one by a musicologist and one by Kevin Sharpe that chides other historians for their disinterest in questions of representation and exhorts them to pay more attention to literary studies. It thus reflects, and indeed arguably exaggerates, the extent to which analysis of Stuart political culture has become the preserve of historicist critics more than historians. The dominant methodology is close textual analysis and the essays display both the strengths and limitations of this approach.

At their best they provide illuminating analysis of the rhetorical strategies and tropes through which the King's supporters and enemies portrayed his rule. Some large themes emerge in the process. Ann Baynes Coiro demonstrates the importance of royal fertility as a motif of Caroline court culture but comments that emphasis on a foreign Catholic queen "was vulnerable to unfriendly reading" (31). Joad Raymond and several other contributors extend the argument by showing how, in the 1640s, the King's relations with his wife and family became a source of both sympa-

thetic and hostile representations of his character. Martin Dzelzanis and David Lowenstein provide further discussion of how the King's more determined enemies portrayed him during the Civil War, while a particularly good essay by Sharon Achinstein argues that Milton's view of Charles evolved out of his lifelong preoccupation with the Counter Reformation and popish plots.

Other contributors examine royalist representations of Charles after his execution. Elizabeth Skerpan Wheeler's skillful analysis of "the rhetoric of self-representation" in *Eikon Basilike* shows how the royal narrator of this best-selling memoir adopted a tone carefully modeled after the Psalms that was strongly reminiscent of established traditions of Protestant martyrology and spiritual autobiography. This strategy not only helped reestablish Charles's credentials as a defender of the Church but encouraged readers to identify with him and even to appropriate his language in their own prayers and meditations. Lois Potter extends the story by examining ways that 1650s royalists commemorated Charles's death through private rituals of mourning, including do-

mestic gatherings to read aloud from *Eikon Basilike*. Laura Lunger Knoppers observes that even in the eighteenth century an imagery of royal suffering in defeat, rooted in memories of Charles I, "lived on in Jacobite song and ballad," imparting a peculiarly introspective and passive quality to English absolutist ideology (264).

All these essays provide insights that historians need to take seriously. But as a model for a deeper cultural history of Stuart kingship the collection has limitations. It deals with only a selection of the literary and material forms through which the King was represented to his subjects, leaving out court sermons, officially prescribed prayers and the rhetoric of royal proclamations, among other things. A long and well-researched contribution by John Peacock dealing with visual imagery deals almost exclusively with portraits, ignoring heraldic insignia and other material objects that symbolized the King's authority. In short, coverage is heavily skewed toward genres and forms traditionally favored by literary critics and art historians. No collection can cover everything, of course. But the selection of topics in this anthology, as in so much of the existing literature on royal cults, silently begs crucial questions about just what it meant to "represent" a king to his people in the seventeenth century.

Secondly most of the contributors deal only sporadically, and not always very confidently, with the processes through which representations were disseminated and assimilated. Wheeler and Potter, who provide illuminating discussions of how different editions of *Eikon Basilike* were packaged and read, are exceptions; but too many other essays fall back on a whiggish model, set out in Corns's preface, of a Caroline court culture shaped by "Habsburg and Bourbon precedents" that attempted to project "regal splendour with a refulgence unmatched in English history," only to be challenged by "political discourses deeply sceptical of the assumptions of Stuart monarchism" associated with "parliamentary opposition." (xv).

This view harks back to pre-revisionist scholarship by critics and historians like Stephen Orgel, Roy Strong and H. R. Trevor Roper, although the revisionist Sharpe now seems ready to endorse it (pp. 289 ff.). The whole approach rests on an unexamined assumption that baroque court culture was always essentially a medium for "projecting" royal ideology. Like too many other studies of political imagery, this volume lacks any sustained investigation of how cultural forms were actually employed at court and in other social environments, as well as any sustained comparative analysis between English practices and those employed elsewhere in Europe.[1]

The issues at stake are exemplified in what is, in most respects, an admirable essay on visual imagery by John Peacock. This goes well beyond previous work by including not only familiar Van Dyck paintings but objects like coins, medallions and engravings. Yet the evidence Peacock assembles does not unequivocally support his central contention that Charles carefully oversaw the creation and dissemination of his own visual image as an "act of state." Although Charles certainly took an interest in his own portraits and in some other forms like medallions, his efforts at using sophisticated baroque imagery as a public medium turn out to be less impressive than one might have anticipated. There were some innovations in the coinage but the single most impressive Caroline coin -- the true "masterpiece" according to Peacock -- appeared only in 1646, from the London mint controlled by Parliament. London's most accomplished engravers were associated with the court but only one high quality engraving of a Van Dyck royal portrait appeared before 1642. Many printed representations of the King were reissues of earlier images of him as Prince of Wales or of his brother Prince Henry, with re-engraved faces that Peacock describes as "gauche". This situation contrasts markedly with that in contemporary France, where Richelieu used prints systematically to disseminate allegorical images of his rule designed by leading court artists.[2] Peacock ac-

knowledges that most Van Dyck portraits of the King were either sent abroad as gifts to foreign rulers or displayed within the relative privacy of royal palaces, but asserts that "many copies" were made for other patrons, a point echoed by Sharpe who refers to an "industry of studio copies" (pp. 228, 293). Yet only two examples are provided, both involving peers with close connections to the court.

The one essay that provides an alternative to the view of court culture as propaganda is Jonathan Wainwright's, on "The King's Music". In it Charles again emerges as an innovator, patronizing composers who imported advanced European styles. Yet the most sophisticated court music was not employed in the relatively public masques, whose scores remained fairly conservative, but for performances within the King's privy chamber and in the Catholic chapels of Henrietta Maria. The new music did not remain confined within a narrow courtly milieu, however, because "the system of manuscript dissemination produced by the court network -- the web of contacts created by movement from the provinces to London of patrons and their households (including musicians) -- was perfect for insuring the spread of up-to-date styles of composition" (170). Unlike most students of the subject, Wainwright has taken seriously the need both to situate cultural forms within precise social contexts and to reconstruct channels through which innovations were disseminated. The result is a significantly different picture of how cultural relationships worked.

Although one can certainly agree with the argument of Sharpe's conclusion that historians need to pay more attention to issues of representation, this should not mean jumping off the revisionist bandwagon onto that of the new historicism. What the field urgently requires at the moment is not just more attention to rhetoric and forms of representation -- useful as that can sometimes be -- but more work on the precise social, political and ceremonial contexts in which court

art and literature were created and absorbed. This collection provides another solid addition to the already extensive body of scholarship on political imagery in Stuart art and literature. Only sporadically, however, does it point the way toward the kind of deeper and more rigorous interdisciplinary work needed to reorient scholarship in fundamental ways.

Notes

[1]. For a recent collection that confronts both problems, while also challenging the notion that court culture is basically cultural propaganda, see John Adamson, *The Princely Courts of Europe: Ritual, Politics and Culture under the Ancien Regime, 1500-1750* (London, 1999).

[2]. Cf. Jonathan Brown, "Peut-on Assez Louer Cet Excellent Ministre?": Imagery of the Favourite in England, France and Spain," in *The World of the Favourite*, ed. by J.H. Elliott and L.W.B. Brockliss (New Haven and London, 1999), 223-35.

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