Subversion or Collusion?: Revising Jacobean England. *A Review Article*

MICHAEL SCHOENFELDT

University of Michigan

Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Linda Levy Peck, ed., *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Flanked on one side by Elizabethan England, whose own precarious splendors have been particularly amenable to nostalgia from the Jacobean era to the present and, on the other, by the Civil War, whose strategically moralized discourse of courtly decadence has framed the predominant view of the Stuart court, Jacobean England has suffered from its historical position. Both of the books under review intend to reevaluate the culture of Jacobean England by focusing on arenas neglected by traditional historiography—the experience of women and the mental outlook of the Jacobean ruling elite. One book, then, considers what it might have been like to view the world through the lenses made available by the dominant ideology, while the other studies the creations of those theoretically disenfranchised by the dominant ideology. *Writing Women* is written by a literary scholar; *The Mental World* is a collection of essays by historians, literary scholars, and political theorists edited by a historian. Neither book could be called New Historicist, but both books inhabit that increasingly rich territory shared by literature and history that New Historicism has opened up. Together, these books show how useful historical and literary scholarship can be in disabusing us of the misconceptions that delimit our account of any historical period; but they also indicate areas where the analytical vocabularies of literary and historical studies have reached an impasse. Particularly striking in both books is the tendency of even the subtlest of analyses to force intricate issues of individual agency into a dichotomy between subversion of or collusion with a dominant culture. At the same time, the best moments in both books challenge the very notion of a single dominant culture and, instead, depict culture as a multiplicity of sites of competing signification.

In *Writing Women of Jacobean England,* Barbara Lewalski disputes the received wisdom that Jacobean England was "a regressive period for women" after the rule of Elizabeth, the female monarch, noting that "remarkably

0010-4175/97/4967–4917 $7.50 + .10 © 1997 Society for Comparative Study of Society and History

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500020909 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enough, it is in the repressive Jacobean milieu that we first hear English women's own voices in some numbers" (pp. 2, 3). Lewalski divides her study into three groups of three women each: In the first group are three royal ladies—Queen Anne, Princess Elizabeth, and Arbella Stuart—"all of whom placed themselves directly and publicly in opposition to King James"; in the second group are three women—the countess of Bedford, Anne Clifford, and Rachel Speght—who "rewrite patriarchy by using contemporary institutions and interpreting contemporary discourses so as to claim within them rights and status normally denied women"; and in the third group are three women—Elizabeth Cary, Aemilia Lanyer, and Lady Mary Wroth—"who claimed the major genres and wrote their resistance, their fantasies, and their imaginative visions in complex literary terms" (pp. 4, 5, 6).

Although she does not confront directly the larger reasons for this outburst of female literary creativity in a decidedly patriarchal regime, Lewalski suggests that the inherent dissonances of the dominant patriarchal ideology may inadvertently nurture forms of self-awareness in its subjugated class of women. Thus, it is not so much a sense of resisting or subverting the dominant culture that leads women in this manifestly patriarchal culture to produce works of profound literary self-consciousness as it is their having to choose among the "conflicting demands and loyalties" that this culture imposes upon them (p. 8). This rich and supple formulation, which finds within the contradictory practices of a patriarchy intended to silence women the occasion for creative female agency, is one that subsequent scholarship on women writers would do well to heed. But when she turns to analyzing the writings of the women themselves, Lewalski deploys a language of resistance and subversion that sometimes belies the complexity of this formulation. She is right, for example, to view Queen Anne as a far more complex figure than "the frivolous lightweight of the usual historians' portrait"; but it is a long way from asserting that she is "a distinct person" to claiming for her and her court an "oppositional politics" (pp. 16, 18). Lewalski is also correct to perceive patronage as a creative activity and so to take seriously the conventional dedicatory language which credits the patron for producing the aesthetic object. But Lewalski interprets masques perhaps intended to influence court policy as subversive of the court. She construes, moreover, conventional praise of women uttered in several masques the Queen sponsored as evidence of her "subversion" of patriarchy (p. 28). Only the Queen's Catholicism puts her in direct opposition to James's policies, and even there Lewalski must concede that the Queen aligned herself with "the Essex-Sidney faction of internationalist Protestants" against "the Catholic Howards" (p. 23). The chapters on Princess Elizabeth and Arbella Stuart compel attention not so much for the literary work produced by these women as for the process by which literary genres infiltrate their lives: Lewalski finds Princess Elizabeth using romance elements in her letters, imagining herself as a romance heroine, and argues that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500020909 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the unfortunate Arbella Stuart feigns madness and dresses as a male—activities cobbed in part from the Renaissance stage—as a response to patriarchal oppression. These early chapters reveal the inadequacy of our own analytical vocabularies, which wedge the manifold nuances of political and social positioning into the procrustean alternatives of subversion or collusion.

The chapter on Lucy, countess of Bedford, rests its case for her subversive activity by arguing that Bedford "associated herself closely with Queen Anne's subversive masques and Princess Elizabeth's oppositional politics" (p. 96). If one has felt that subversion is an inadequate term for female accomplishment in the earlier chapters, one will obviously feel its inadequacy here. The account of Anne Clifford, author of an absorbing diary, is on firmer ground when it asserts that "In writing down her *res gestae* Anne Clifford asserted the significance of her female life" (p. 125). But even here, Clifford's many lawsuits are construed as "an instance of sustained public opposition to patriarchal authority and property settlements" (p. 125); while her retirement to the country is interpreted as an act of "resistance to the patriarchal authority invested in her husbands" (p. 133). It may on the contrary have been the wish of those husbands that she remain in the country and direct their estates while they live a life of power at court.

The chapter on Rachel Speght is in many ways the most interesting in the book. Although little known, Speght is, in Lewalski's description, "the first Englishwoman to identify herself, unmistakably and by name, as a polemicist and critic of contemporary gender ideology" (p. 153). Lewalski's language of resistance is on much firmer ground with Speght, author of an aggressive and articulate entry into the *querelle des femmes,* entitled *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (1617). Speght's admirable polemical goal in this tract is to "make the prevailing Protestant discourse yield a more expansive and equitable concept of gender" than that available (p. 157). Speght's sense of the subversive possibilities of the Christianity that underpins the patriarchal hierarchy allows her to "mount a serious, coherent, liberalizing critique of gender ideology couched in terms of the dominant discourse" (p. 161). In her chapter on Aemilia Lanyer, though, Lewalski tends to devalue Lanyer's earlier (1611) and equally ingenious use of Christianity to challenge the hierarchies of class and gender. Lanyer, Lewalski argues, "appears to have been sincerely, if not very profoundly religious" (p. 219). Lewalski mistakenly views Lanyer's religious emphasis—she entitles her work *Salve Deus Rex Iudaeorum*—as mere window dressing for proto-feminist polemic. But much of the power of the poem derives from Lanyer's capacity to synchronize Christianity's overturning of terrestrial hierarchies with a feminist sense of the injustices of patriarchy. Lewalski nevertheless gives much valuable biographical and bibliographical information about Lanyer, her book, and the women whose patronage she seeks. In the process she helps repair the damage done not only by centuries of neglect but also by the attention of A. L. Rowse, whose convic-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500020909 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tion that Lanyer is Shakespeare's "dark lady" led to the only edition of the *Salve* between 1611 and 1994.

The chapter on Elizabeth Cary is very strong, equal to the fascinating and complex figure it describes. Lewalski shows how Cary's life was marked by "the clash of authorities claiming her obedience, which led her to develop a strong if conflicted sense of self" (p. 180). Cary is "the first English woman to write a tragedy, the Senecan *Tragedie of Mariam* (1613)" and the "first English woman to write a full-scale history, the Tacitean *History of the Life, Reign and Death of Edward II* (c. 1627–28)" (p. 179). Expertly explaining how genre could function as a political language, Lewalski demonstrates how Cary "chose genres and took over generic strategies which allowed her to explore dangerous political issues, focused in her case by the situation of queen-wives subjected at once to domestic and state tyranny" (p. 179). The final chapter, on Lady Mary Wroth ("the most prolific, most self-conscious, and most impressive female author of the Jacobean era," in Lewalski's arguable estimation [p. 243]), is appropriately the longest, and includes much useful paraphrase of then-unpublished material (the second book of Wroth's prose romance *Urania,* and her pastoral tragicomedy *Love's Victory*). "Wroth's originality," Lewalski argues, "resides in claiming the romance, the lyric sequence, and the pastoral drama as vehicles for exploring women's rather than men's consciousness and fantasies" (p. 244). It will be left to subsequent readers to explore exactly what alterations occur in relocating in these genres a discourse of explicitly female desire.

It would be easy but unfair to quibble about the important authors Lewalski's focus on Jacobean England forces her to exclude: An Collins, Mary Sidney, Isabella Whitney, and Margaret Cavendish. The canon of Renaissance women writers will be in flux for quite a while (although Cary, Lanyer, Wroth, and Cavendish have already attained the relative security bestowed by affordable paperback editions). The book brings to the study of early women writers two things often missing in recent feminist work—a sense of the expressive power of genre, and a dedication to archival excavation. The book is a goldmine of information about these too-little-known women, and a cogent statement of their importance. It will make subsequent work on these and other women easier, and better. Just as Lewalski's vocabulary of subversion betrays the inadequacy of our current political vocabulary to express the manifold prospects for individual agency in repressive regimes, so does Lewalski's use of new critical reading techniques reveal the inability of our critical lexicon to evaluate without condescension or condemnation the remarkable aesthetic accomplishment of these women, and of many others like them.

Whereas Lewalski intends to rescue Jacobean England from its reputation as a time and place hostile to women and their accomplishments, Linda Levy Peck has designed *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court* to redeem the Jacobean court from its reputation as a place of rampant corruption. Bringing together "specialists in history, literature, and political theory," the editor

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500020909 Published online by Cambridge University Press

intends to "reconstruct the mental world of the Jacobean court" (p. 2). The interdisciplinary focus is particularly important to the study of the Jacobean court, Peck argues convincingly, because James I presented a "new type: the king as litterateur" (p. 4). The collection is far more consistent than most such collections, both in approach and in quality, even though there is no sense of a party line that is being argued. The essays are united only in their common goal of revising our opinion of the Jacobean court by seeing that court through the conceptual lenses available to its constituents and in their success at doing so. Although one could ask the editor and authors to apply a bit more theoretical pressure to the techniques necessary truly to enter into the minds of a culture so distant from our own, this reviewer prefers the rich empirical results the authors present to the vapid skepticism that such theorizing all too frequently produces.

The collection is divided into three parts. Part One, "Reconstructing the Jacobean Court," is the most traditional. The essays are united by a common vision of James as an author of significance and of the importance of understanding his writings and his political actions in contexts within and beyond England. In "Patronage and Politics under the Tudors," Wallace MacCaffrey explores the political machinery of patronage in place at the moment of transition from Elizabeth to James. Elizabeth, he concludes, "bequeathed to James a fair political inheritance but one which would require the most delicate finetuning if it were to function harmoniously" (p. 35). In an informative essay, Jenny Wormald asserts the uniqueness of James's Scottish heritage, and argues that his two most noted political works, *Basilikon Doron* and *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies,* must be read against a tradition of Scottish political theory ignored by most English scholars. One leaves the essay in agreement about the importance of the Scottish context but wondering whether James, rather than the English people, should be blamed for the severe misunderstandings that resulted between the monarch and the nation he was poised to rule. The final two essays in this section are in delightful opposition. Where J. P. Sommerville argues that there was "no place in James's political outlook for the idea of an ancient constitution underlying the rights of both sovereign and subject" (p. 65), Paul Christianson asserts that the central political debate in Jacobean England was not a dispute between "theories of absolutism versus constitutionalism" but rather a contest between "rival interpretations of the ancient constitution" (p. 95). One completes these two essays not so much convinced by either position as persuaded that consistency was frequently sacrificed to contingency in the political debates of the period and that speeches in this (and perhaps any) period should not be abstracted for signs of a consistent ideology but rather contextualized as deeply contingent utterances, affected by audience and circumstance.

The essays in Part Two, "Court Culture and Court Politics," turn from the political theory to the aesthetic expression of the court, revising the common view of the court's frivolity, corruption, and decadence. Arguing against any

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500020909 Published online by Cambridge University Press

simple notion of a uniform Jacobean court culture, Malcolm Smuts demonstrates that in Jacobean England "one finds a remarkable assortment of urban and aristocratic, native and foreign influences converging on a court that had not yet established a dominant cultural attitude" (p. 112). This is an extremely important lesson, but one that will make the cultural history of the period much more difficult to write well. In "Lancelot Andrewes, John Buckeridge, and Avant-Garde Conformity at the Court of James I," Peter Lake puts such an approach into action, reminding us that the most avant-garde liturgical position in the early years of James was not radical Puritanism but the high church ceremonial best articulated by Lancelot Andrewes. Although Lake's technique of arguing by accumulating short quotations from various sources sometimes arouses suspicion about the syntactical as well as rhetorical context from which those quotations arise, the essay brilliantly revises the ways in which one conceives the meaning of conformity in early Jacobean England. Whereas we normally think of Robert Cecil living as secure a political existence at James's court as his father had at Elizabeth's court, in "Robert Cecil and the Early Jacobean Court" Pauline Croft reminds us of the political tightropes that Cecil had to walk in order to achieve and sustain his power in the new regime. In "The Mental World of a Jacobean Grandee," Peck looks closely at the production and consumption of culture by Henry Howard, earl of Northampton. Describing Howard as one who "participated in every major political and religious debate of his time: supporting the legitimacy of women rulers, justifying the authority of bishops against the Presbyterians, arguing the power of the king against the temporal power of the pope, challenging astrology and contributing to the education of princes literature" (p. 151), Peck takes us, as the title promises, into the mental world of an important but underappreciated participant in Elizabethan and Jacobean affairs. In the final essay of this section, "Seneca and Tacitus in Jacobean England," J. H. Salmon eruditely demonstrates how the classics, and Seneca and Tacitus in particular, made possible a Neostoic ethos of independence, discontent, resistance, and criticism in Jacobean England. This essay offers an important and convincing demonstration of the interdependence of literary form and political imagination.

The final section, "Literature and Art," explicitly confronts this interdependence. It begins with "The Court of the First Stuart Queen," in which Leeds Barroll offers independent support to Lewalski's discussion of the cultural importance of Queen Anne and her circle. Jerzy Limon's "The Masque of Stuart Culture" is a useful if largely derivative account of the genre which has become most closely identified with the Stuart court. In "Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, as Collector and Patron," A. R. Braunmuller provides a fascinating interpretation of one of the more notorious courtiers of Jacobean England. Braunmuller shows how Carr, who is usually only remembered as the minion of James I and the scandalous husband of Frances Howard, lived a rich and fascinating life as a patron of the arts in the three decades after his conviction

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500020909 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in 1616 for the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury. In the final essay in the collection, "John Donne, Kingsman?" Annabel Patterson alertly calls attention to Donne's "deep ambivalence about the world in which he both desperately wanted and deeply disdained to participate" (p. 252) and eloquently argues that "when among the historians of this period the major competing models for a theory of motivation are principle versus self-interest, it may be useful to show how difficult it is, in certain complex political careers (and even for the protagonist), to adjudicate between them" (p. 255). But the essay turns from this beautifully articulated ambivalence into a narrower project which seeks out potentially subversive puns in a wide range of Donne's poetry and prose in order to rescue his reputation from those critics—here John Carey and Jonathan Goldberg—who have found in Donne an expedient adherence to absolutism.

These two books, then, point together not only to the importance of reevaluating the cultural accomplishments of Jacobean England but also to the urgency, and the difficulty, of reconceiving the language in which we describe the relationship between individuals and cultures. Both books, that is, begin to founder on the containment-subversion paradigm that has polarized, even paralyzed, so much recent work on the literature and history of the Renaissance. In order to begin to understand fully the mental world of the Jacobean court, we need an analytical terminology capable of articulating positions that are neither oppositional nor conformist, and able to depict how individuals inevitably collaborate and contend with the culture that they inhabit and produce. The evidence of the two works under review here suggests that, while literary critics may be at present more successful at theorizing such a model, historians are currently somewhat more successful at allowing such a model to infiltrate their analyses. Both books begin to point the way by positing the court not as a monolithic structure but as a series of proliferating centers of individual and collective activity. It is important to consider, as both books indicate, that the consumption as well as the production of culture can be a creative act. This becomes particularly important when one is trying to determine the creative role played by a part of the population, such as aristocratic women, traditionally denied a voice. It is worth mentioning that both books remain somewhat court-centered, not only in their stated subject, but also in their outlook; this is not a criticism but a reminder of the limitations that infuse a term like "Jacobean." Although both books do question the centrality of the monarch in the production of court culture, neither book questions the concept of periodization by monarch in which they both participate. Perhaps one way to reconceive the accomplishments of Jacobean England, particularly at a moment when the very idea of hereditary monarchy is being challenged, would be to get rid of such monarch-centered terminology altogether.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500020909 Published online by Cambridge University Press