

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEWS

COURTS, COURTIER, AND CULTURE IN TUDOR ENGLAND*

NATALIE MEARS

University of Durham

ABSTRACT. *Geoffrey Elton's model of Tudor politics, which emphasized the importance of political institutions and which dominated our understanding of Tudor politics for much of the second half of the twentieth century, has been challenged by a number of historians for over twenty years. They have re-emphasized the importance of social connections and cultural influences and turned attention away from studying the privy council to studying the court. In doing so, they have gone back to re-examine earlier approaches by Sir John Neale and Conyers Read which Elton had challenged. Yet, these new socially and culturally derived approaches, recently labelled 'New Tudor political history', remain varied and its practitioners sometimes at odds with each other. Focusing on both established seminal works and recent research, this review considers the different elements of these approaches in relation to Tudor court politics. It assesses the methodological problems they raise and identifies what shortcomings still remain. It demonstrates that Tudor politics are increasingly defined as based on social networks rather than institutional bodies, making issues of access to, and intimacy with, the monarch central. Our understanding has been further enhanced by exploration of political culture and its relationship to political action. However, the review points to the need to integrate more fully the political role of women and the relationship between the court and the wider political community into our understanding of Tudor politics, as well as place England into a European context.*

In his inaugural address as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge in November 1989, Patrick Collinson made a veiled critique of revisionism, and specifically the work, *Political history: principles and practice*, written by Geoffrey Elton, his predecessor. Elton had located policy-making and public affairs in the public institutions of the privy council, parliament, judicial courts, and the financial departments of the crown, rather than the court (which he defined as a private institution). These were the areas, he argued, in which the struggle between the royal prerogative and 'constitutional forces' – as he defined 'politics' – took place. Though, in *Political history* and his lecture on parliament for the Royal Historical Society, Elton acknowledged that social networks played a role in Tudor politics, his distinction between 'public' and 'private', his narrow definition of court politics as 'the power politics of an élite', and his dismissal of royal administration (in the household) as based on the mere personal vagaries of the monarch precluded him from acknowledging that such approaches had any great significance. It was this institutional approach and Elton's exclusive emphasis on sovereign and separate states as the only

* I would like to thank Tom Freeman for reading a draft of this review and to the anonymous readers for their comments.

political units worthy of study that Collinson challenged. It was essential, he argued in 1989, 'to explore the social depths of politics': politics in and between local communities (including villages, guilds, confraternities) and their vertical connections to lordship and monarchy. Moreover, how individuals understood their political roles, the problems facing their community and how to deal with them (especially quasi-republican ideas) also needed to be explored. Together, this would create 'an account of political processes which is also social'.¹

Collinson's words tapped an existing vein of dissatisfaction with the perceived failure of revisionist history to deal with questions first raised by Conyers Read and Sir John Neale in the early twentieth century about the role of ideology and social connections in politics. Works by Simon Adams, George Bernard, C. S. L. Davies, Steve Gunn, Eric Ives, Wallace MacCaffrey, David Starkey, and Penry Williams – many of which predated Collinson's lecture – demonstrated clearly what Collinson suggested: that politics was less about institutions (as defined by revisionists) than the interaction between those institutions, people, and ideas.² These historians have constructed a more socially derived understanding of Tudor politics; that is, one that identifies social networks and clientele as central to the process of governance and, as a result, identifies the court as the centre of politics, rather than the privy council as in Elton's model. Other scholars, like John Guy³ and Steve Ellis, have emphasized the importance of exploring political culture and non-Anglocentric perspectives respectively.⁴ Together, these works form a new approach to Tudor political history. Moreover, while this approach remains anchored in archival research, it has also responded to issues raised by both post-modern theory and interdisciplinary scholarship.

¹ Patrick Collinson, 'De republica Anglorum: or, history with the politics put back', in Collinson, ed., *Elizabethan essays* (London and Rio Grande, 1994), pp. 1–29.

² A highly selective list of these scholars' contributions would include Simon Adams, 'Favourites and factions at the Elizabethan court', reprinted, with postscript, in John Guy, ed., *The Tudor monarchy* (London, 1997), pp. 253–74; G. W. Bernard, *The power of the early Tudor nobility: a study of the fourth and fifth earls of Shrewsbury* (Brighton, 1985); Patrick Collinson, 'The monarchical republic of Queen Elizabeth I', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 69 (1987), pp. 394–424; Patrick Collinson, 'The Elizabethan exclusion crisis and the Elizabethan polity', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 84 (1993), pp. 51–92; C. S. L. Davies, *Peace, print and protestantism, 1450–1558* (London, 1976); S. J. Gunn, *Early Tudor government, 1485–1558* (Basingstoke and London, 1995); Eric Ives, *Anne Boleyn* (Oxford, 1986); Wallace T. MacCaffrey, 'Place and patronage in Elizabethan politics', in S. T. Bindoff, J. Hurstfield, and C. H. Williams, eds., *Elizabethan government and society: essays presented to Sir John Neale* (London, 1961), pp. 95–126; Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *The shaping of the Elizabethan regime: Elizabethan politics, 1558–1572* (Princeton, NJ, 1968); idem, *Queen Elizabeth and the making of policy, 1572–1588* (Princeton, NJ, 1981); idem, *Elizabeth I: war and politics, 1588–1603* (Princeton, NJ, 1992); C. Coleman and David Starkey, eds., *Revolution reassessed: revisions in the history of Tudor government and administration* (Oxford, 1986); David Starkey et al., eds., *The English court: from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (London and New York, 1987), pp. 71–118; Penry Williams, *The Tudor regime* (Oxford, 1979).

³ John Guy, 'The rhetoric of counsel in early modern England', in Dale Hoak, ed., *Tudor political culture* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 292–310; Guy, 'Tudor monarchy and political culture', in John Morrill, ed., *The Oxford illustrated history of Tudor and Stuart Britain* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 219–38; Guy, 'The 1590s: the second reign of Elizabeth I?', in Guy, ed., *The reign of Elizabeth I: court and culture in the last decade* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1–19; Guy, 'General introduction', in Guy, ed., *Tudor monarchy*, pp. 7–8.

⁴ Steven G. Ellis, 'A border baron and the Tudor state: the rise and fall of Lord Dacre of the north', *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), pp. 253–77; Ellis, 'Tudor state formation and the shaping of the British Isles', in Ellis and Sarah Barber, eds., *Conquest and union: fashioning a British state, 1485–1725* (London and New York, 1995), pp. 40–63.

Specifically, it seeks to broaden the scope of archival resources by utilizing iconographical, literary, and dramatic material and is sensitive to contemporary use of language.⁵

Though this new approach to Tudor political history has been labelled 'New Tudor political history' and some of its key elements defined, its genesis and foci are varied. Practitioners dispute over the most effective tools for reconstructing Tudor politics and hence the very nature of politics itself. Moreover, not only do some of their individual approaches raise important methodological questions, but the emphasis on incorporating the study of literary, visual, and material sources with conventional archival research also raises issues about the use of such sources. Focusing on the court, this review considers the different approaches historians have adopted and the methodological issues that have been raised. It then assesses the picture of the Tudor court derived from their works and relates them to scholarship on early modern courts in general.

I

Both during his lifetime and since, the challenge to Elton's institutional and bureaucratic conception of Tudor politics has focused around three main elements: the roles of the nobility, the privy chamber, and factionalism. Influenced by studies of continental nobility that questioned Norbert Elias's influential assumptions of aristocratic decline and 'civilization', George Bernard has played a leading role in challenging Elton's emphasis on bureaucrats, like Thomas Cromwell. He has demonstrated the continuing power of the nobility: they remained an important dynamic of Tudor government, militarily and politically (at the centre and in the localities), 'the most powerful and most influential segment of society'.⁶ In his 1973 doctoral thesis and subsequent articles, David Starkey, one of Elton's students, challenged the primacy of the privy council as the central political forum, arguing that the privy chamber was the most significant organ of royal authority. He argued that the appointment of Henry VIII's favourites to positions in the privy chamber, beginning with Sir William Compton as Groom of the Stool in 1510, transformed the privy chamber structurally and politically. Its members assumed a range of financial, administrative, diplomatic, and military duties and, perhaps most importantly, acted as a key point of access to the monarch.⁷ If the privy chamber was the locus of

⁵ Further key works include Stephen Alford, *The early Elizabethan polity: William Cecil and the British succession crisis, 1558–1569* (Cambridge, 1998); Margaret Aston, *The king's bedpost: reformation and iconography in a Tudor portrait group* (Cambridge, 1993); Paul Hammer, *The polarisation of Elizabethan politics: the political career of Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, 1585–1597* (Cambridge, 1999); Dale Hoak, ed., *Tudor political culture* (Cambridge, 1995); Markku Peltonen, *Classical humanism and republicanism in English political thought, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1993); Quentin Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge, 1996); Maurizio Viroli, *From politics to reason of state: the acquisition and transformation of the language of politics, 1250–1600* (Cambridge, 1992); Greg Walker, *Plays of persuasion: drama and politics at the court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1991); Walker, *Persuasive fictions: faction, faith and political culture at the court of Henry VIII* (Aldershot, 1996).

⁶ G. W. Bernard, 'The Tudor nobility in perspective', in Bernard, ed., *The Tudor nobility* (Manchester, 1992), pp. 1–48, and a revised version as 'The continuing power of the Tudor nobility', in Bernard, ed., *Power and politics in Tudor England* (Aldershot and Burlington, VA, 2000), pp. 20–50, from where the quotation is taken (p. 44).

⁷ David Starkey, 'Court and government', in Coleman and Starkey, eds., *Revolution reassessed*, pp. 29–58, and reprinted in Guy, ed., *Tudor monarchy*, pp. 189–213; Starkey, 'Intimacy and innovation, the rise of the privy chamber, 1485–1547', in Starkey, ed., *The English court*, pp. 71–118; Starkey, 'Representation through intimacy: a study of the symbolism of monarchy and court office in early

authority, then Starkey and, independently, Eric Ives identified the dynamics of Henrician politics in factionalism; a dynamic Elton himself had identified as the key to Cromwell's fall in 1540 and which, influenced by Starkey and Ives, he developed still further.⁸ Courtiers and councillors grouped together to compete over royal favour and patronage, to influence policy decisions and to bring down their rivals (Cardinal Wolsey, Anne Boleyn, Thomas Cromwell, the Howards, Stephen Gardiner, and the 'minions' in 1519). This interpretation confirmed earlier work by Conyers Read and Sir John Neale who had both independently argued that Elizabethan politics were factional as councillors and courtiers were divided over political issues (Read) or competed over patronage (Neale).⁹

The ways in which these three challenges to Elton's conception of Tudor politics – the roles of the nobility, the privy chamber, and factionalism – have developed, and their impact on shaping an alternative model, have been mixed. Work by Simon Adams, showing how Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, consciously maintained and constructed a wide-ranging clientele, suggests that aristocratic clienteles remained significant both in governance and to the self-perception of members of the nobility, including newly established courtier-nobles. Adams suggested that Leicester's clientele not only gave him an important role in local politics but may also have been more important in establishing his claims to a prominent position at court than his close, personal relationship with Elizabeth.¹⁰ Similarly, reassessing the career and reputation of Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, Paul Hammer has shown that the nobility continued to see themselves as royal advisers and military leaders. Essex believed that he should have a leading role in policy-making in the 1590s because he was one of the leading peers of the realm. He also conceived his actions and martial ambitions within the French aristocratic code of the *noblesse d'épée*, which emphasized blood and social hierarchy as prerequisites for royal service and placed martial and natural law above civil and common law.¹¹ However, the political roles of the nobility and gentry remain matters of debate. Ellis, for example, has argued that the military power of the older nobility (e.g. the Kildares in Ireland, Lord Dacre in the north) and their role in administering border areas was challenged by the crown and that the crown was able to disrupt traditional patterns of local influence by introducing new men

modern England', in I. Lewis, ed., *Symbols and sentiments: cross-cultural studies in symbolism* (London, 1977), pp. 187–224, and reprinted in Guy, ed., *Tudor monarchy*, pp. 42–78.

⁸ David Starkey, 'From feud to faction: English politics, c. 1450–1550', *History Today*, 32 (1982), pp. 16–22; Eric Ives, 'Faction at the court of Henry VIII: the fall of Anne Boleyn', *History*, 57 (1972), pp. 169–88; Ives, 'Henry VIII: the political perspective', in Diarmaid MacCulloch, ed., *The reign of Henry VIII: politics, policy, and piety* (Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 13–34; G. R. Elton, 'Thomas Cromwell's decline and fall', *Historical Journal*, 10 (1951), pp. 150–85; idem, *Reform and Reformation: England, 1509–1558* (London, 1977); Christopher Haigh, *English reformations: religion, politics, and society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993).

⁹ Conyers Read, 'Walsingham and Burghley in Queen Elizabeth's privy council', *English Historical Review*, 28 (1913), pp. 34–58; J. E. Neale, 'The Elizabethan political scene', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 34 (1948), pp. 97–117, and reprinted in Neale, *Essays in Elizabethan history* (London, 1958), pp. 59–84.

¹⁰ Simon Adams, 'The Dudley clientele, 1553–1563', in Bernard, *Tudor nobility*, pp. 241–65; Adams, '"Because I am of that contreye and mynde to plant myself there": Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester and the West Midlands', *Midland History*, 20 (1995), pp. 21–74.

¹¹ Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan politics*; Mervyn James, *Society, politics and culture in early modern England* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 425, 430.

to new areas (like the Russells in the south-west in the 1530s).¹² Moreover, the gentry became increasingly important in politics at the centre and in the localities; a process reinforced, it has been argued, by social, economic, and institutional changes (especially the establishment of a smaller advisory council at the centre) which diminished the role of the nobility as key figures at court and as 'natural counsellors'.¹³ Conversely, Richard Hoyle has demonstrated that, at least in the north, the contraction of older noble power owed more to the personal failures of the sixth earl of Northumberland than to a conscious attack by the crown.¹⁴ He has also shown how introducing new men into areas could be problematic. They lacked the landed base and extensive networks of clients to exercise effective border governance and were not always able to build these up because of the limited availability of land and the existence of established noble clienteles against which they had to compete.¹⁵

In a debate with David Starkey in this journal in 1988, Elton questioned the significance of the military and judicial capacities of the gentlemen of the privy chamber as well as their importance as channels of communication and means by which to obtain the king's signature. He also challenged the chamber's financial importance: it had no income of its own and was used primarily for the king's building expenses and as a war chest. Though Starkey responded to these issues effectively, it was apparent that, while he was correct to reassert the significance of the royal household and of access and personal intimacy in Tudor politics, the pre-eminent political role he gave to the privy chamber needed modification.¹⁶ It was clear, for instance, that the documents for which the principal gentlemen, Sir Thomas Heneage and Sir Anthony Denny, obtained Henry's signature were bills and petitions and did not represent major policy decisions.

It was also unclear how far the privy chamber model could be used to explain the nature of Tudor governance beyond Henry VIII's reign. In a collection of essays edited by Starkey, John Murphy argued that, after an initial eclipse under Protector Somerset who transferred the centre of power to his own household, the privy chamber re-emerged as a key focus of political life during the rest of Edward VI's reign and Mary's.¹⁷ The influence of Murphy's arguments have been mixed. They have been adopted in Diarmaid McCulloch's recent and persuasive account of Edward VI's reign, *Tudor church militant*,

¹² S. J. Gunn, *Early Tudor government, 1485–1558* (Basingstoke and London, 1995), ch. 1; Ellis, 'A border baron and the Tudor state', pp. 253–77; Brendan Bradshaw, 'Cromwellian reform and the origins of the Kildare rebellion, 1533–1534', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 27 (1977), pp. 69–93; Steven G. Ellis, 'Tudor policy and the Kildare ascendancy in the lordship of Ireland, 1496–1534', *Irish Historical Studies*, 20 (1977), pp. 235–71; Ellis, 'Thomas Cromwell and Ireland, 1532–1540', *Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), pp. 497–519.

¹³ Gunn, *Early Tudor government*, ch. 1; John Guy, 'General introduction', in Guy, ed., *Tudor monarchy*, p. 2.

¹⁴ R. W. Hoyle, 'Henry Percy, sixth earl of Northumberland and the fall of the house of Percy, 1527–37', in Bernard, ed., *The Tudor nobility*, pp. 180–211.

¹⁵ R. W. Hoyle, 'The first earl of Cumberland: a reputation reassessed', *Northern History*, 22 (1986), pp. 63–94; Hoyle, 'Faction, feud and reconciliation amongst the northern English nobility, 1525–1569', *History*, 84 (1999), pp. 590–613.

¹⁶ G. R. Elton, 'Tudor government', and David Starkey, 'A reply: Tudor government: the facts?', *Historical Journal*, 31 (1988), pp. 425–34 and pp. 921–31 respectively. Dr Starkey acknowledged that he had pushed the importance of privy chamber servants as royal messengers beyond what the evidence could support but believed the substance of his model remained true.

¹⁷ John Murphy, 'The illusion of decline: the privy chamber, 1547–1558', in Starkey et al., eds., *English court*, pp. 229–46.

but not in Jennifer Loach's biography of Edward.¹⁸ Little attention has been paid to the Marian privy chamber, as the key focus of governance in Mary's reign has been identified as either the privy council or the 'select council': a group of councillors selected by Philip II to help Mary govern and modelled on existing Habsburg practice.¹⁹ Moreover, Pam Wright's essay in Starkey's collection has proved highly influential in establishing that the privy chamber had no significant political role during Elizabeth's reign.²⁰ One reason for this was that Elizabethan attitudes towards gender prevented female privy chamber servants (who now numerically dominated the chamber) from assuming advisory, administrative, military, and diplomatic roles. Yet, Elizabeth also insisted the privy chamber operated as a 'cocoon' rather than a political cock-pit and refused to allow political debate into its environs. Under these circumstances, the privy chamber's significance was primarily in patronage where its female members offered a 'free market economy' of favours.²¹

Factional arguments have also been problematic. In an influential article, Simon Adams demonstrated that the near-contemporary sources that Conyers Read and Sir John Neale had used to argue that Elizabethan politics were factional – William Camden's *Annals* (Books 1–3, 1615; Book 4, 1629) and Sir Robert Naunton's *Fragmenta regalia* (1641) – were infused with authorial biases and modelled on Tacitus, who, characterizing the Roman emperors as corrupt and their courts as faction-ridden, had become increasingly fashionable from the 1590s amongst writers concerned with issues of kingship, power, and corruption.²² Analysing the language of factionalism as well as changes to the nature of aristocratic clientage and royal allegiance, Adams was able to reject convincingly the existence of persistent factionalism in the second half of the century, apart from Edward VI's reign and the closing decade of Elizabeth's. Factionalism was characteristic of most of Edward VI's reign (1547–53) because the Reformation changed the nature of social allegiance, created ideologically committed clients, and transformed the court into 'a battleground for religiously-based factions'. The struggle between Somerset and Northumberland was also crucial, though its origins remain clouded in mystery. Factionalism revived in the 1590s partly because, as Elizabeth aged, her grip on politics weakened and partly because the second earl of Essex sought to establish himself as the queen's foremost councillor and assume the leadership of the interventionist party, who counselled military support of the Dutch and the French Huguenots.²³ Adams's view of the 1590s has been

¹⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor church militant: Edward VI and the protestant reformation* (London, 1999); Jennifer Loach, *Edward VI*, ed. George Bernard and Penry Williams (New Haven and London, 1999).

¹⁹ Dale Hoak, 'Two revolutions in Tudor government: the formation and organization of Mary I's privy council', in Coleman and Starkey, eds., *Revolution reassessed*, pp. 87–115; Glynn Redworth, '"Matters impertinent to women": male and female monarchy under Philip and Mary', *English Historical Review*, 112 (1997), pp. 597–613.

²⁰ Pam Wright, 'A change in direction: the ramifications of a female household, 1558–1603', in Starkey et al., eds., *English court*, pp. 147–72. See also J. B. Greenbaum Goldsmith, 'All the queen's women: the changing place and perception of aristocratic women in Elizabethan England, 1558–1620' (PhD thesis, Northwestern, 1987), ch. 5 and pp. 209–12; C. Merton, 'The women who served Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth: ladies, gentlewomen and maids to the privy chamber, 1553–1603' (PhD thesis, Cambridge, 1993), ch. 6. ²¹ Wright, 'Change in direction', pp. 152–7, 160–3, 167–9.

²² Adams, 'Favourites and factions'; F. J. Levy, *Tudor historical thought* (San Marino, 1967); Levy, 'Hayward, Daniel and the beginnings of politic history', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 50 (1987), pp. 1–34.

²³ Adams, 'Favourites and factions'; Adams, 'Faction, clientage and party: English politics, 1550–1603', *History Today*, 32 (1982), pp. 33–9.

supported by Paul Hammer's detailed study of Essex, though challenged by Susan Doran.²⁴

The existence and extent of factionalism at the Henrician court also remains controversial. George Bernard, Greg Walker, and Retha Warnicke have led the way in challenging Starkey's, Ives's, and Elton's arguments on key episodes – the fall of Wolsey, Anne Boleyn, and Cromwell and the 'expulsion of the minions' (1519). In a number of essays, now collected together in *Power and politics in Tudor England*, and in his introduction to that volume, George Bernard has argued that factional interpretations are not supported by the evidence when it is read critically, especially regarding Henry's active role in policy-making and the influence of advisers and courtiers.²⁵ Greg Walker has highlighted the importance of uncovering contemporary usage of language – in the case of 1519, the Venetian ambassador's misunderstanding of English idiomatic use of 'Frenchified' to denote bad behaviour – in conjunction with close analysis of timing, personalities, and context.²⁶ Retha Warnicke has emphasized the need to reconstruct the wider social, cultural, and mental milieu of individuals. In her controversial *The rise and fall of Anne Boleyn*, she attributed Boleyn's fall to her putative delivery of a deformed foetus which engendered a suspicion in Henry that his wife was either an adulteress or a witch.²⁷ In her new study, *The marrying of Anne of Cleves*, Warnicke locates the collapse of the Cleves match in Henry's 'psychogenic impotency': impotency caused by his belief that Anne was already a married woman on account of a pre-contract with Francis of Lorraine. Warnicke identifies Cromwell's clumsy handling of Henry's impotency and his ill-timed attempts to patch the marriage up, when it was clear the king sought an annulment, as the key factors causing the minister's fall.²⁸

The crux of the debate on Henrician factionalism is how the king's personality and authority is defined: was he easily manipulated by competing factions or did he know his own mind, enabling factions little opportunity to shape or direct policy? It is on this issue in particular that Eric Ives and George Bernard differ. Ives acknowledges that 'Henry was not the puppet of faction; he remained dominant' but he characterizes Henry as emotional and impulsive. Coupled with the belief that policy initiatives often emerged from courtiers and factions around Henry, Ives diminished Henry's role and suggested the king was vulnerable to factional manipulation.²⁹ Conversely, Bernard rejects the factional model because he believes that Henry held the dominant position in policy-making: he was open to influence, rather than manipulation, but only on tactics or timing and not the actual substance of policy.³⁰ The problem with this debate is that the relationship between the king and his elite subjects who formed factions has often been defined in monochromatic terms: either Henry is always strong and his subjects always weak, or vice versa. This has

²⁴ Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan politics*; Susan Doran, *Monarchy and matrimony: the courtships of Elizabeth I* (London and New York, 1996).

²⁵ Bernard, *Power and politics*, especially pp. 4, 17–19.

²⁶ Greg Walker, 'The "expulsion of the minions" of 1519', *Historical Journal*, 32 (1989), pp. 1–16.

²⁷ Retha M. Warnicke, *The rise and fall of Anne Boleyn* (Cambridge, 1989).

²⁸ Retha M. Warnicke, *The marrying of Anne of Cleves: royal protocol in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2000). Though this is a detailed and fascinating study, Warnicke's explanation of the failure of the Cleves marriage ultimately fails to convince because there is neither solid evidence of Henry's 'psychogenic impotency' nor means to ascertain whether Henry would have used such a potentially ego-damaging reason to divorce an increasingly diplomatically (and possibly physically) unattractive wife, even if he laid the blame on Anne.

²⁹ Ives, 'Henry VIII', pp. 30–3.

³⁰ Bernard, *Power and politics*, pp. 7–17.

tended to deny the essential fluidity of politics and policy-making, as well as the importance of change in personalities and circumstances.

This, perhaps over-simplified, picture of the relationship between Henry and his courtiers was challenged in an important paper presented at the University of Glasgow in 1994 by Steve Gunn and subsequently published in the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*. Evaluating a range of different approaches to understanding early Tudor government, and assessing the problems sources posed, Gunn argued two things. First, it was necessary to distinguish between the 'structures' or political spheres in which individuals acted: small family groups, larger affinities, factions, groups of courtiers and/or councillors working co-operatively together. This would enable historians to identify more clearly who was working with whom and for what purpose. It would also highlight times when loyalties or aims cut across the boundaries of the 'structures'. Second, the issues on which subjects interacted with Henry (patronage, policy-making, etc.) and the ways they did so also needed to be distinguished. This would enable the relationship between the king and his subjects to be reconstructed more sensitively. Together these two approaches might break the 'trench warfare' of the study of early Tudor politics by reconciling the polarization of views on Henry's personality and authority. And it would do so, at least partly, by demonstrating that courtiers were able to initiate policy and that Henry could be persuaded by these courtiers at one time, and at other times, impose his own will on them.³¹

Though Gunn's approach has been called 'fruitless' and 'inconclusive' by Bernard, it seems to offer a more productive way to explore the relationship between the monarch and their courtiers and the nature of Tudor court politics. As Cliff Davies remarked in private correspondence to Professor Bernard which is cited in the introduction to *Power and politics*, 'in any political situation influence flows in every direction ... nobody makes decisions in a vacuum, multilateralism is inherent in any decision-making process'.³² Breaking down the different loyalties of courtiers, and the ways they interacted with the monarch, allows us to reconstruct the multilateralism of Tudor politics.

Partly in specific response to dissatisfaction with factional models and partly in a broader reaction against the perceived failure of revisionism to respond effectively to questions posed by Read and Neale about the roles of social connections and ideology in politics, new approaches to reconstructing a socially derived model of politics have been explored.³³ These comprise four key aspects. First, the investigation of the relationships and interaction between people, ideas (including monarchical power, Ciceronian concepts of citizenship, republicanism, and confessionalization), and institutions, including the conventions or rules that governed them. Second, the importance of classical and Renaissance traditions which provide the political, cultural, and intellectual context for actions, methods, and ideas. Third, an exploration of how individuals presented themselves and their actions to others. This draws on Stephen Greenblatt's concept of 'self-fashioning': that individuals consciously constructed and presented a persona, for their own ends, which did not always match reality.³⁴ It is important for assessing critically sources which purport to reveal straightforwardly the life or mental world of contemporary figures. Fourth, archival research of traditional sources – letters, statutes, financial accounts, legal records, etc. – remains central. But literary, visual, and material sources are also explored and

³¹ Steven Gunn, 'The structures of politics in early Tudor England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 5 (1995), pp. 59–90.

³² Bernard, *Power and politics*, pp. 6–7.

³³ Key works are included in the citations given above in nn. 2–5.

³⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance self-fashioning, from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980).

attention is paid to contemporary uses and meanings of language. Fifth, it consciously acknowledges the importance of exploring geographical areas usually regarded as peripheral and insignificant: the north, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland.

From the application of this approach, a number of related foci have developed: an emphasis on the nature of Tudor political culture, counsel, policy-making, the mental worlds of key individuals, and the adoption of 'self-fashioning'. Dale Hoak's edited volume *Tudor political culture* has been an important contribution with essays exploring the roots of 'imperial monarchy', the different 'languages' of counsel, monarchical, and civic concepts of parliamentary representation, the rituals, ceremonies, and languages utilized within parliament as well as the social and politico-cultural connections between the centre and localities.³⁵ It has been underpinned by specialist studies, including Markku Peltonen on classical-republicanism and Maurizio Viroli on 'reason of state'.³⁶ Building additionally on the work of Quentin Skinner (on education and classical rhetoric) and Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton (on contemporary reading practices), reconstructions of political culture are increasingly being mapped on to political events, transforming our understanding of the nature of Tudor politics.³⁷ Stephen Alford has utilized Skinner's, Jardine's, and Grafton's work to reconstruct Sir William Cecil's education. In conjunction with explorations of Cecil's strong protestant commitment and his awareness of the strategic significance of Scotland and Ireland to England's territorial safety, it enabled him to construct a picture of Cecil's political perceptions and beliefs. He then uses this to explore how Cecil's perceptions and assumptions informed his responses to the central issues of the early Elizabethan political agenda: Elizabeth's marriage, the succession, and the threat posed by Mary Stewart and catholic conspiracy. Conversely, Thomas Mayer's magisterial *Reginald Pole: prince and prophet* uses Greenblatt's concept of 'self-fashioning' (of which Pole was a past master) to make greater sense of Pole and his actions. Exploring how Pole was presented by himself and others, this approach enables Mayer to assess more fully the interaction between personality, circumstance, and contingency.³⁸

II

These new approaches to reconstructing the nature of Tudor politics raise three methodological issues. How should the relationship between political culture and political deeds be explored most effectively? How should literary, dramatic, visual, and material arts be used? How is it best to reconstruct the relationship between politics, cultural forms, and patronage of the arts?

In a seminal article in 1969, Quentin Skinner challenged the common practice of treating texts autonomously, arguing instead that they must be understood and placed in their historical context, defined broadly as both the writer's mental world and the prevailing conventions governing the treatment of issues with which they dealt.³⁹ 'We can

³⁵ Dale Hoak, ed., *Tudor political culture* (Cambridge, 1995).

³⁶ Peltonen, *Classical humanism and republicanism*; Viroli, *From politics to reason of state*.

³⁷ Skinner, *Reason and rhetoric*; Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, "'Studied for action": how Gabriel Harvey read his Livy', *Past and Present*, 129 (1990), pp. 30–78.

³⁸ Alford, *The early Elizabethan polity*; Thomas Mayer, *Reginald Pole: prince and prophet* (Cambridge, 2000).

³⁹ Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), pp. 3–53, and reprinted in James Tully, ed., *Meaning and context: Quentin Skinner and his critics*

hardly claim to be concerned with the history of political theory', he argued, 'unless we are prepared to write it as real history – that is, as the record of an actual activity, and in particular as the history of ideologies.'⁴⁰ It was an approach that was mutually advantageous for historians of politics as well as of ideas. A better understanding of the intellectual climate would help shape the understanding of politics because ideology and action mutually informed each other. Political activity set the agenda by making issues, such as monarchical authority or resistance, problematic and matters of debate to which the theorist responded, resulting in an endorsement of or challenge to prevailing conventions. Similarly, political theory, shaped by the linguistic and literary context, showed the range and limits of the ideas available to theorists and practical politicians alike.⁴¹

In *The early Elizabethan polity*, Alford adopts Skinner's approach to explore how Cecil's political principles and aims were shaped by contemporary political theory. He also demonstrates how Cecil's proposals to remedy the succession problem in the 1560s drew closely on existing ideas of the 'Great Council', but turned to new ends: choosing a successor after Elizabeth had died. Anne MacLaren's *Political culture in the reign of Elizabeth I* adopts the older approach⁴² which treats texts as more autonomous discourses. MacLaren reconstructs Elizabethan political culture and contemporaries' conceptions of Elizabeth's queenship using a small body of canonical printed treatises. She also uses what she terms 'speech acts' in the parliaments of 1566, 1571, and 1572.⁴³ Usefully contextualizing the issue of female monarchy in wider issues of imperial monarchy and the royal supremacy, MacLaren argues that Elizabeth and her subjects adopted a 'providential' model to legitimate her queenship. Elizabeth was hailed as Deborah, a deliberate exception to the convention of male monarchs, appointed by God to restore the true faith and enacting his will as manifested in the advice of male counsellors ('godly watchmen').⁴⁴

MacLaren's approach allows for close analysis of canonical texts and, like work influenced by Skinner's model, is sensitive to language. However, it is less effective than Alford's *The early Elizabethan polity* in demonstrating tangible links between ideas and actions. MacLaren offers no evidence to demonstrate that Elizabeth justified her queenship in providential terms (pp. 25–33) while the analysis of parliamentary 'speech acts' is of limited effectiveness because the speeches are divorced from the wider political context in which they took place. Indeed, a new and highly useful, wide-ranging selection of Elizabeth's own speeches, letters, prayers, and other written works edited by Leah Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose, *Elizabeth I: collected works*, would indicate that, while Elizabeth was highly cognisant of the gender issue, she played with it only to reject it.⁴⁵ There can be problems in adopting Skinner's approach: the complex relationship between political theory and real events, or between theory and an individual's beliefs and principles, can be

(Cambridge and Oxford, 1988), pp. 29–67; Quentin Skinner, 'Motives, intentions and the interpretation of texts', in Tully, ed., *Meaning and context*, pp. 68–78, esp. pp. 50–3.

⁴⁰ Skinner, 'Some problems in the analysis of political thought and action', in Tully, ed., *Meaning and context*, p. 99.

⁴¹ Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding', pp. 56–9; Skinner, 'Some problems', pp. 99, 107–12.

⁴² A. N. McLaren, *Political culture in the reign of Elizabeth I: queen and commonwealth, 1558–1585* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁴³ James Tully, 'The pen is a mighty sword: Quentin Skinner and his critics', in Tully, ed., *Meaning and context*, pp. 8–9.

⁴⁴ McLaren, *Political culture in the reign of Elizabeth I*.

⁴⁵ Leah Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose, eds., *Elizabeth I: collected works* (Chicago and London, 2000).

over-simplified or crudely reconstructed. Equally though, by forcing the historian to focus on the relationship between theory and practice, it demands evidence be produced to explain the relationship – something neglected in the other approach, as practised by MacLaren.

A second problem of the new approach to Tudor political history is how best to use poetry, prose literature, drama, masques, visual arts, architecture, and clothing as sources. The way historians have used drama and masque provides useful insights. Two separate developments have led to greater value being placed on drama and court entertainments as important for understanding early modern court culture and the role of drama in political debate. Influenced by sociological approaches, Norbert Elias's highly influential *The court society* (written in the 1920s; published in 1969) asserted that drama, masques, and entertainments, previously defined as trivial and insignificant, were in fact central to early modern court societies.⁴⁶ This message was endorsed more recently by New Historicists, particularly those influenced by the work of Stephen Orgel (though he himself was not a New Historicist). In his *The illusion of power*, Orgel argued that Jacobean masques embodied, demonstrated, and upheld the status quo of Stuart power.⁴⁷ However, though historians have adopted these ideas, they have explored drama primarily through and as printed texts (where extant) rather than adopt, like literary and drama scholars, a dramaturgical approach in which the ways that entertainments were staged, performed, and received are reconstructed. This approach has a number of problems. First, the printed text could be different from the original performed version as plays could be edited to keep abreast of changing political circumstances. Greg Walker, Norman Jones, and Paul Whitfield White have shown, for example, that this was the case for Thomas Norton's and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc*, first performed at the Inner Temple and at court at Christmas 1561–2 but not published until 1565 (with an important second edition in 1570).⁴⁸ Second, the printed text does not necessarily reflect how the play was performed. This is important because the way a play was performed shaped how its message was articulated and what issues were emphasized. Third, the printed text fails to address the question of audience reaction, central to understanding how drama was used to advise the prince or comment on political issues. Fourth, it is unclear why plays were printed and became increasingly marketable. Indeed, this is a central question in Greg Walker's *The politics of performance in early Renaissance drama*, though one which the evidence, even sensitively handled, will not allow him to answer fully.

A more effective approach lies in interdisciplinary scholarship and the exploration of dramaturgy. For instance, challenging Orgel's arguments about Jacobean masques, drama and literary scholars have recovered evidence which demonstrates that audiences did not act as 'model' audiences, receiving, understanding, and accepting the message of a masque

⁴⁶ Norbert Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt and Neuwied, 1969); idem, *The court society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford, 1983).

⁴⁷ Stephen Orgel, *The illusion of power: political theatre in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, LA, and London, 1975); David Bevington and Peter Holbrook, 'Introduction', in Orgel, ed., *The politics of the Stuart court masque* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 3–5.

⁴⁸ The 1570 edition of *Gorboduc*, printed by John Day, differs from the first edition and an eye-witness account of the performance at the Inner Temple. See Henry James and Greg Walker, 'The politics of *Gorboduc*', *English Historical Review*, 110 (1995), pp. 109–21; Greg Walker, *The politics of performance in early Renaissance drama* (Cambridge, 1998), ch. 6; Norman Jones and Paul Whitfield White, 'Gorboduc and royal marriage politics: an Elizabethan playgoer's report of the premiere performance', *English Literary Renaissance*, 26 (1996), pp. 3–16.

or play. They did not always recognize the message of the play, or accept it if they did. If the monarch was present, the audience often watched them rather than the play.⁴⁹ This is important because it focuses attention on the way that political messages in drama were received and enables us to evaluate more critically the role of drama in counselling and political debate. Problems still remain. Eye-witness accounts of performances are scattered and fragmentary, for instance, but a dramaturgical approach allows us to identify actual responses to political messages or advice in drama; to pinpoint ways in which kings, courtiers, councillors, and others sought to shape or influence policy and to explore how these individuals negotiated their positions over policy and influence.

Some of the fruits of dramaturgical approaches are evident in Walker's *The politics of performance in Renaissance drama*. Using an eye-witness account of the first performance of *Gorboduc*, Walker shows that audience members did understand the play in terms of a debate on Elizabeth's marriage and succession, and specifically a recommendation of Dudley's candidacy. Crucially, he shows how the play was also open to other interpretations, particularly regarding the ambiguous and composite figure of Fergus and references to the Grey claim in Act 5.⁵⁰ This was significant, Walker suggests, because the audience of lawyers at the performance in the Inner Temple did not accept that Henry VIII could legitimately alter the succession. Similarly, the performance of Sir David Lindsay's *The Thre Estatis* at Linlithgow in 1540 shows that James V exploited the performance to introduce and demand immediately that his bishops enact ecclesiastical reform, but the play was also used as an opportunity by others to push James towards a more thorough reform programme: to coincide with the performance a privy councillor, Thomas Bellenden, submitted to James abstracts of statutes and proclamations on ecclesiastical reform in England.⁵¹

Recent research on the interaction between the monarch and his/her subjects through drama and masques is reinforced by work in other fields, including P. E. McCullough's study of Elizabethan and Jacobean court preaching.⁵² McCullough demonstrates that preachers perceived themselves as having an admonitory and advisory role. Having significantly more regular access and exposure than playwrights to Elizabeth and, more particularly, James, the pulpit became 'a site of conflict not consensus' (p. 5). Lancelot Andrews used his sermons on Gowrie and Gunpowder Days (times of celebration of Stuart rule and of affirming one's loyalty) to castigate the court for its licentiousness and for giving mere 'ear-service' to sermons. Similarly, James VI and I hauled the Scottish Presbyterians to Hampton Court in 1606 for a fortnight's tuition, via sermons, on the royal supremacy and *jure divino* episcopacy. Conversely, sermons could be used to scold the monarch, as exemplified most famously by Edward Dering's sermon in Elizabeth's presence in February 1570 which lambasted the queen for failing to reform ecclesiastical abuses.

The use of drama, literature, visual, and material sources also raises broader questions. Should we privilege some cultural forms over others? How effectively and how widely were cultural forms able to convey political messages? Sydney Anglo, Theodore Rabb, and Malcolm Smuts have played leading roles in answering these questions critically. Malcolm Smuts has demonstrated that our privileging of painting as the superior art

⁴⁹ Bevington and Holbrook, 'Introduction', pp. 8–10; John Astington, *English court theatre, 1558–1642* (Cambridge, 1999); Andrew Gurr, *Play-going in Shakespeare's London* (Cambridge, 1987).

⁵⁰ Walker, *Politics of performance*, ch. 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 4.

⁵² Peter E. McCullough, *Sermons at court: politics and religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean preaching* (Cambridge, 1998).

form is anachronistic, reflecting modern rather than contemporary tastes and priorities. While acknowledging that it is a crude indicator, he has convincingly shown that the significantly higher financial value of (and expenditure on) tapestries, clothes, furnishings, and food compared to paintings suggests that these were the key ways in which kings and courtiers demonstrated their wealth, magnificence, and hence power and thus should be the focus of study. In 1613, £1,700 was spent on the lace alone on a dress for Princess Elizabeth and Lord Doncaster spent £3,000 on a banquet in 1621. Conversely, a Van Dyck portrait cost £25.⁵³ Similar concerns have been articulated by Sydney Anglo and Theodore Rabb who have also questioned our wider assumptions about how visual images were used to convey political messages, including questions of who had access to courtly show, entertainments, pageants, etc., and how widely complex allegorical messages contained therein were understood.⁵⁴

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, Simon Thurley's *Whitehall Palace: an architectural history of the royal apartments, 1240–1698* demonstrates persuasively how cultural forms were used to convey political messages.⁵⁵ Thurley reconstructs in detail the building history of York Place and the east side of Whitehall. He then uses this to provide some solid answers to questions about the significance of architectural display in the sixteenth century. He is able to show that though rebuilding was stimulated by fashion and practical concerns (including major internal renovation of the queen's lodgings, neglected by the unmarried Elizabeth, between 1603 and 1615 for Anna of Denmark (1574–1619)) extensive work did coincide with major changes to the exercise of kingship. The deliberate failure to provide lodgings for the queen on Henry's acquisition of the palace on Wolsey's fall, Thurley argues, was a visual demonstration of Henry's repudiation of Catherine of Aragon. Having established Whitehall as his principal residence, Henry deliberately made the palace visually distinctive, adopting and extending Wolsey's use of flint work and black and white chequering which was not used widely elsewhere. Construction of the King Street and Holbein Gates – particularly the latter which was the main point of access to the law courts and Westminster Abbey from Charing Cross – were as much visual symbols and reminders that individuals were entering royal territory as attempts to rationalize the palace grounds. Building work was also a barometer of royal favour as suggested by provision of lodgings for the rehabilitated Princess Mary in the ambitious waterfront buildings begun in the 1540s (p. 58) and for Robert Cecil earl of Salisbury in a suite of rooms near James VI and I's (p. 78).

III

Research influenced by new socially and culturally derived approaches thus shows that Tudor politics were centred on the court as much as they were on the privy council,

⁵³ R. Malcolm Smuts, 'Art and the material culture of majesty of early Stuart England', in Smuts, ed., *The Stuart court and Europe* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 86–112.

⁵⁴ Sydney Anglo, ed., *Images of Tudor kingship* (London, 1992), ch. 5; Theodore K. Rabb, 'Politics and art in the age of Christina', in Marie-Louise Roden (ed.), *Politics and culture in the age of Christina* (Stockholm, 1997), pp. 9–22. Rabb's arguments, expressed in an earlier article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, have been challenged by Kevin Sharpe, 'Representations and negotiations: texts, images, and authority in early modern England', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), pp. 853–81.

⁵⁵ Simon Thurley (with contributions by Alan Cook, David Gaimster, Beverley Nenck, and Mark Samuel), *Whitehall Palace: an architectural history of the royal apartments, 1240–1698* (New Haven and London, 1999). See also Thurley, *The royal palaces of Tudor England: architecture and court life, 1400–1547* (New Haven and London, 1993).

parliament, judicial courts, and financial departments of the crown. The work of George Bernard and Richard Hoyle on the nobility, Simon Adams on clientele, and Penry Williams on social networks demonstrate that successive monarchs relied more on social networks, formed by ties of kinship, friendship, and clientage, to govern the realm than institutional bodies. The political principles and beliefs of monarchs and their subjects have begun to be reconstructed and the ways that Renaissance ideas of magnificence, as well as classical-humanism, confessionalization, and classical-republicanism, shaped individuals' actions are being explored. A particular focus has been on the importance of the competing political creeds of 'imperial monarchy' and the 'mixed polity'. The former emphasized that a monarch's *imperium* (command) was ordained by God and that monarchs did not have to act on the advice of their counsellors. The latter defined the polity as comprised of the monarch, council, and parliament acting co-operatively together. The monarch's prerogative was limited by the advice of the council and parliament had to assent to any significant political change, especially changes to religion or the succession. Yet gaps remain in two areas: the role of women in Tudor politics and the relationship between the court and the wider political community. What research has been done in these fields and why has it not been incorporated fully into the newer picture of Tudor politics?

Constance Jordan's essay 'Women's rule in sixteenth-century British political thought' has been central in increasing historians' awareness of the extent to which contemporary attitudes to gender and female monarchy dominated the debate on royal power from Mary I's accession in 1553. The question of how a female ruler could legitimately and successfully rule a patriarchal society that argued women were unfit to rule by Biblical and natural law defined relationships between Mary and Elizabeth and their counsellors.⁵⁶ Consensus on the precise role of gender remains illusive: MacLaren's *Political culture in the reign of Elizabeth I* suggests that Elizabeth was forced to define her queenship in providential terms to answer widespread beliefs that her gender disqualified her from claiming the throne through inheritance.⁵⁷ Mary Hill Cole's *The portable queen* argues that Elizabeth had to use royal progresses to upset 'normal' methods of governance to retain and assert her authority against her male counsellors.⁵⁸ Carole Levin's '*The heart and stomach of a king*' suggests that Elizabeth's gender was a problematic issue for many of Elizabeth's subjects, leading them to challenge her legitimacy in a number of ways.⁵⁹ Conversely, Patrick Collinson, in two seminal essays 'The monarchical republic of Elizabeth I' and 'The Elizabethan exclusion crisis', has argued that Elizabeth's queenship was shaped more by a fundamental dissonance over political issues and creeds.⁶⁰ This view is supported by John Guy's *The reign of*

⁵⁶ Constance Jordan, 'Women's rule in sixteenth-century British political thought', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 40 (1987), pp. 421–51; Paula L. Scalingi, 'The scepter or the distaff: the question of female sovereignty, 1516–1607', *Historian* (USA), 41 (1978–9), pp. 59–75; Patricia-Ann Lee, "'A bodye politique to governe": Aylmer, Knox and the debate on queenship', *Historian* (USA), 52 (1990), pp. 242–61; Amanda Shephard, *Gender and authority in sixteenth-century England* (Keele, 1994); Redworth, "'Matters impertinent to women"'; Judith Richards, 'Mary Tudor as "sole queen"?: the gendering of Tudor monarchy', *Historical Journal*, 40 (1997), pp. 895–924.

⁵⁷ McLaren, *Political culture in the reign of Elizabeth I*.

⁵⁸ Mary Hill Cole, *The portable queen: Elizabeth I and the politics of ceremony* (Amherst, 1999).

⁵⁹ Carole Levin, '*The heart and stomach of a king*': *Elizabeth I and the politics of sex and power* (Philadelphia, PA, 1993). See also Mary Thomas Crane, 'Video and taceo: Elizabeth I and the rhetoric of counsel', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 28 (1988), pp. 1–15.

⁶⁰ Collinson, 'Monarchical republic', pp. 402, 407; Collinson, 'Exclusion crisis', *passim*.

*Elizabeth I*⁶¹ and Stephen Alford's *The early Elizabethan polity*.⁶² Elizabeth and her counsellors clashed over the religious settlement, her marriage, the succession, Mary Stewart, and intervention in Scotland and the Netherlands. These clashes were exacerbated by Elizabeth and her counsellors holding opposing beliefs on the nature of monarchical authority which could lead to deadlock over whether counsellors' advice had to be accepted and who made policy decisions. Many counsellors believed England was a 'mixed polity' and that, therefore, Elizabeth should listen and accept their advice. Believing herself to be an 'imperial' monarch, this was a position that Elizabeth rejected.

However, the role of women other than queens regnant in politics remains neglected despite a growing body of research that shows the importance of aristocratic and gentlewomen was not negligible. In a key article in this journal, Barbara Harris demonstrated that individual aristocratic women took stances on key political issues, including Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, and played an active and important role in forging and strengthening patron/client relations. The latter were important because they facilitated communication between the centre and localities as well as strengthened the regional political power of the nobility, which was dependent on royal favour.⁶³ Other studies have reinforced and extended this picture. Maria Dowling and Thomas Freeman have shown that Anne Boleyn was an important evangelical patroness, including conniving (at the least) in the presentation of Simon Fish's *Supplication for the beggars* to Henry VIII.⁶⁴ Ciaran Brady has demonstrated that both leading Gaelic and Anglo-Irish women, like Fionnuala MacDonnell, Agnes Campbell, Grace O'Malley, and Eleanor Butler countess of Desmond, acted in military, advisory, and diplomatic capacities to hinder or facilitate English conquest and governance of Elizabethan Ireland.⁶⁵ By focusing on the mechanics of letter-writing, the styles and models women adopted or rejected, a new collection edited by James Daybell, *Early modern women's letter-writing, 1450–1700*, is able to highlight ways in which women realized these roles: manipulating both letter-writing conventions and female stereotypes to establish or extend local political standing, to maintain contact with the royal court and to defend, maintain, and extend their family's social and economic interests.⁶⁶ Importantly, Claire Walker convincingly demonstrates that such activity was not confined to lay aristocrats and gentry: prioresses of English convents on the continent were as adept and persuasive in their correspondence as lay women and as politically active, operating important news networks, campaigning for lay support of English exiles and giving financial assistance to Charles II.⁶⁷

This work suggests that, though women did not have the central political role assumed by men, they could be active in politics and their actions were often integral to

⁶¹ Guy, 'The 1590s', pp. 1–19. See also Guy, 'Tudor monarchy and its critiques', in idem, *Tudor monarchy*, pp. 93–100.

⁶² Alford, *Early Elizabethan polity*.

⁶³ Barbara Harris, 'Women and politics in early Tudor England', *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), pp. 259–81. Professor Harris's monograph, *English aristocratic women, 1450–1550: marriage and family, property and careers*, was published in September 2002, too late for inclusion in this article.

⁶⁴ Maria Dowling, 'Anne Boleyn and reform', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35 (1984), pp. 30–46; Thomas S. Freeman, 'Research, rumour and propaganda: Anne Boleyn in Foxe's "Book of martyrs"', *Historical Journal*, 38 (1995), pp. 797–819.

⁶⁵ Ciaran Brady, 'Political women and reform in Tudor Ireland', in Margaret MacCurtain and Mary O'Dowd, eds., *Women in early modern Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 69–90.

⁶⁶ James Daybell, ed., *Early modern women's letter-writing, 1450–1700* (Basingstoke and New York, 2001).

⁶⁷ Claire Walker, "'Doe not suppose me a well mortified Nun dead to the world": letter-writing in early modern English convents', in Daybell, ed., *Early modern women's letter-writing*, pp. 159–76.

policy-making and governance at the centre and in the localities. Therefore, their roles need to be incorporated into our understanding of Tudor politics if we are to obtain a 'rounded' picture of how the Tudors' dominions were governed and what contemporaries' political goals were. The reasons why this has yet to be achieved seem various. John Murphy's positive assessment of the Marian privy chamber has had little impact because Marian historians have focused primarily on exploring the 'mid-Tudor crisis': a period of religious change, famine, rebellions, and war around the middle of the sixteenth century which allegedly challenged and changed the nature of the Tudors' rule. It has only been with Elizabeth Russell's 'Mary Tudor and Mr Jorkins' (1990), Judith Richards's 'Mary Tudor as "sole queen"?' (1997), and Glyn Redworth's "'Matters impertinent to women'" (1997) that the issue of gender has been applied to Mary's reign.⁶⁸ But even this has not led to an assessment of the political role of women other than the queen. Pam Wright's essay on the political insignificance of the women in the Elizabethan privy chamber seems to have been doubly influential here.⁶⁹ It rejected the idea that the privy chamber played an important role in Elizabeth's reign, as Starkey had argued for Henry VIII. Though Wright did not deal with Mary's reign, her arguments seem to have been applied to Mary by default: what applies to Elizabeth, must surely apply to Mary. Elton's legacy of the importance of formal institutional bodies remains significant too. The privy council continues to be regarded as the main, corporate, advisory body and extra-conciliar counsel as antipathetical to the 'normal' process of policy-making. Both exclude or minimize the political role of women.⁷⁰ Recent research that has explored contemporary ideas of counsel and advice-giving has done little to remedy this. Counsel was defined by men, in printed discourses and letters between those involved in governance, as a male activity. These ideas were reinforced by contemporary debate on female monarchy. It legitimated queenship by arguing that the intellectual, emotional, and physical inabilities of a queen to exercise power wisely would be compensated for by the fact that she would govern by listening to and accepting the advice of her (male) counsellors.⁷¹ To these, specific historiographical trends have also been important. As Ciaran Brady has highlighted, assessment of women's political activity in Ireland has been hindered less because of the availability of sources than because, over the past century, Irish history has been defined in terms of English conquest and colonization. This emphasis on war seems to exclude women, though MacDonnell, Campbell, and the countess of Desmond were all directly or indirectly involved in military resistance of the English or of Irish rebels.⁷²

There also seem to be broader, conceptual reasons. First, reconstructions of political structures and processes have tended to be either monarch-centred (as in Mary Hill Cole's *The portable queen*) or courtier/councillor-centred (Stephen Alford's *The early Elizabethan polity* and Anne McLaren's *Political culture in the reign of Elizabeth I*). Consequently, the study of the

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Russell, 'Mary Tudor and Mr Jorkins', *Historical Research*, 63 (1990), pp. 263–76; Judith Richards, 'Mary Tudor as "sole queen"?: the gendering of Tudor monarchy', *Historical Journal*, 40 (1997), pp. 895–924; Redworth, "'Matters impertinent to women'".

⁶⁹ Wright, 'A change in direction'.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Michael Barraclough Pulman, *The Elizabethan privy council in the fifteen-seventies* (Berkeley, LA, and London, 1971); and Alford, *Early Elizabethan polity*, esp. pp. 69–70, 208.

⁷¹ Guy, 'The 1590s', p. 13; John Knox, *The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* (Geneva, 1558); John Aylmer, *An harborowee for faithfull and trewe subjects* (Strasbourg, 1559).

⁷² Brady, 'Political women', pp. 70–5, 78–80.

relationship between the monarch and their courtiers/councillors has tended to focus on *either* the monarch *or* their courtiers/councillors rather than on their interaction. Second, much attention has been focused on counsel and policy-making at the centre. There has been less attention either on the implementation of policy or on the establishment and maintenance of the social networks argued to have been central to Tudor governance. The interests of the nobility and gentry, other than leading councillors like Cecil, have also been relatively neglected. These are all areas in which, as Harris's work has shown, women played important roles.

New ways to understand the relationship between the court and the wider political community also seem needed. Works like Markku Peltonen's *Classical humanism and republicanism in English political thought, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1993), individual essays by Norman Jones, David Harris Sacks and Robert Tittler in Hoak's *Tudor political culture* (Cambridge, 1995), as well as much earlier work, such as Mervyn James's study of the concept of order, have begun to explore the evolution, penetration, and use in the localities of key ideas, like classical republicanism and parliamentary representation.⁷³ However, the actions of individuals outside the court are still defined as being commissioned or manipulated by the privy council. Michael Graves and Patrick Collinson have argued that, for instance, debates by MPs in parliament on Elizabeth's marriage, the succession, and the religious settlement were organized by privy councillors who sought to 'bounce' Elizabeth into action by applying pressure in parliament, when conciliar advice had failed.⁷⁴ The production of printed pamphlets, like John Stubbe's *The discoverie of a gaping gulf* (1579) which discussed critically Elizabeth's proposed marriage to the duke of Anjou, have been understood in a similar way: commissioned by councillors to apply pressure to Elizabeth.⁷⁵ These views have been reinforced by assumptions that political debate outside the court was restricted because of limited access to news: professional newsletters did not develop fully until the early seventeenth century.

Research in a number of fields is beginning to question these assumptions. Thomas Freeman has demonstrated convincingly that Thomas Norton, whom Graves identified as working in conjunction with the privy council in parliament, acted independently in the parliament of 1571 to introduce a new ecclesiastical law code, the *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum*, which would have reformed the ecclesiastical courts and discipline on more puritan lines.⁷⁶ Peter Clark has shown that inns and alehouses acted as an important nexus for political news and debate,⁷⁷ while, in *Oral and literate culture in England, 1500–1700*, Adam Fox has explored the varied ways in which a wide range of men and women, throughout

⁷³ Mervyn James, 'The concept of order and the Northern Rising, 1569', in James, *Society, politics and culture*, pp. 270–307.

⁷⁴ M. A. R. Graves, 'The management of the Elizabethan House of Commons: the council's men-of-business', *Parliamentary History*, 2 (1983), pp. 11–38; Graves, 'The common lawyers and the privy council's parliamentary men-of-business, 1584–1601', *Parliamentary History*, 8 (1989), pp. 189–215; Graves, 'Elizabethan men of business reconsidered', *Parergon*, 14 (1991), pp. 111–27; Patrick Collinson, 'Puritans, men of business and Elizabethan parliaments', *Parliamentary History*, 7 (1988), pp. 187–211.

⁷⁵ Collinson, 'Puritans, men of business and Elizabethan parliaments'. I have put forward a contrary view in Natalie Mears, 'Counsel, public debate, and queenship: John Stubbs's *The discoverie of a gaping gulf*, 1579', *Historical Journal*, 44 (2001), pp. 629–50.

⁷⁶ Thomas S. Freeman, "'The reformation of the church in this parliament': Thomas Norton, John Foxe and the parliament of 1571", *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997), pp. 131–47.

⁷⁷ Peter Clark, *The English alehouse: a social history, 1200–1830* (London, 1983).

the sixteenth century, gained access to news and expressed their opinions.⁷⁸ Both these arguments make the absence of professional newsletters less significant for the circulation of news and the existence of political debate. Carole Levin's '*The heart and stomach of a king*' substantiates these arguments by exploring a number of cases in which ordinary men and women expressed views on Elizabeth's marriage, the succession, and female monarchy, even if some of her conclusions seem anachronistic and informed more by modern feminist concerns than those of contemporaries.⁷⁹

These works suggest that if our understanding of the relationship between the court and the wider political community is to develop, we need to explore the political awareness of individuals outside the court. We also need to recognize that those individuals may have held political principles and been prepared to act on them, just as those at court did. And we also need to explore the connections between courtiers and those outside the court in a more sensitive way. Privy councillors and courtiers may have sought to 'bounce' the monarch into action in parliament and through print, but equally MPs, writers, and others may have acted independently.⁸⁰

IV

Over the past couple of decades Tudor political history has 'returned to court' and historians have refocused their attentions on the significance of the royal household, issues of access and intimacy, social networks, and court culture in an attempt to answer questions that the more institutionally focused revisionism had failed to do. Though social and cultural emphases have always been strong, study of the early modern court more generally has undergone a similar process. Norbert Elias's *The court society* (written in the 1920s and 1930s but not published until 1969) and *The civilising process* (1969) have dominated the field as much as Neale, Read, and Elton did Tudor political history at the same time.⁸¹ Elias resurrected court studies as a valid field of research from nineteenth-century hostility to what was perceived as a paternalistic, authoritarian, despotic, and corrupt institution. The central element of Elias's model was that monarchs, above the fray of competition themselves, deliberately cultivated a climate of conspicuous consumption and competition over status at court to make the nobility financially dependent on the crown, thereby taming (or civilizing) them, reducing the political or military threat that they posed and weakening the nobility as a group. It enabled Elias to demonstrate that the early modern period acted as a transitional period between medieval feudalism and modern centralized democracy, much as Elton had located the rise of modern, bureaucratic government in the 1530s.⁸²

⁷⁸ Adam Fox, 'Rumour, news and popular political opinion in Elizabethan and early Stuart England', *Historical Journal*, 40 (1997), pp. 597–620; Fox, *Oral and literate culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000), ch. 7.

⁷⁹ Levin, '*Heart and stomach of a king*'.

⁸⁰ I am exploring these issues in *Counselling Elizabeth I: politics, queenship and public discourse* (Cambridge, in preparation).

⁸¹ Norbert Elias, *Über den prozeß der Zivilisation* (2 vols., Bern, 1969); Elias, *The civilizing process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (2 vols., Oxford, 1978–82).

⁸² Elias's arguments are effectively summarized in Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of power: Norbert Elias and the early modern court*, trans. Lorri S. Granger and Gerard T. Moran (Amsterdam, [1994?]). Jürgen Freiherr von Krüdener independently arrived at largely similar conclusions and has also been influential, see Krüdener, *Die rolle des hofes im absolutismus* (Stuttgart, 1973).

As with Neale and Elton, Elias's model has come under growing attack. In a detailed dissection based on research on the two dominant continental courts – Vienna and Versailles – Jeroen Duindam, for instance, has challenged Elias's emphasis on the bureaucratic nature of early modern government and questioned the extent to which Elias's model can be applied to the nobility as a whole. He has reasserted the patrimonial nature of early modern monarchy, its reliance on reciprocal relations between monarchs and the elite, and has demonstrated not only the diversity of noble experience and activity at court but also that only a small minority (5 per cent under Louis XIV) were regularly at court.⁸³ He has also questioned Elias's wider assumptions about the social and economic context and made valid criticisms about Elias's choice of sources (including his reliance on hostile sources, like Saint-Simon), his approach (specifically the relationship between history and sociology) and his definition of 'civilization', which privileged Western culture while ignoring relevant non-European comparisons, notably with China.⁸⁴

Despite these historiographical parallels, the study of court-based Tudor politics remains isolated from the broader field of court studies and the extent to which they are mutually informing is limited. Individual works, like George Bernard's on the nobility and Peter McCullough's *Sermons at court*, have responded directly to trends in court studies, either challenging key aspects of Elias's model or reflecting the recent shift in the focus from drama to religious ceremony and ritual. Otherwise, responses to key assumptions – about the declining role of the nobility, the growing bureaucratic nature of governance, and the 'top-down' nature of relationships between the monarch and courtiers – have not been placed in a wider European context. Explorations of political, ideological, and cultural connections between England and the continent have not generally been pursued independently. John Guy has pointed to comparisons between Henrician and early Valois counselling practices; Diarmaid MacCulloch has convincingly shown how the Edwardian regime perceived itself, and attempted to establish itself, as the leading protestant centre in Europe while Jennifer Loach's and Thomas Mayer's studies of Edward VI and Cardinal Pole respectively have emphasized the impact of Renaissance ideas and style on individuals.⁸⁵ But a wider comparison with the continent of policy-formulation, the structures of governance, the nature of court culture, and the role of courtiers remains unwritten. For example, John Adamson's essay on the Tudor and Stuart courts in his collection *The princely courts of Europe* is strong on culture but less effective in sketching the political activity of the court.⁸⁶ If the parallels between developments in Tudor political and continental court historiography make such comparisons easier, then the perspectives that Bernard and McCullough have brought to changing the way we understand Tudor politics suggest that such an approach would be mutually beneficial.

Despite these problems, the contribution of established and junior academics to our understanding of Tudor politics over the past twenty years or so has been significant. The work of George Bernard, David Starkey, Penry Williams, Simon Adams, Wallace MacCaffrey, and others has provided some convincing answers to the questions of the roles of social connections and ideology in early modern politics, raised by the work of

⁸³ Duindam, *Myths of power*, chs. 3 and 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 36–9, 184–7, 170–3.

⁸⁵ John Guy, 'The French king's council, 1485–1526', in Ralph A. Griffiths and James Sherbourne, eds., *Kings and nobles in the later middle ages* (Gloucester and New York, 1986), pp. 274–94; MacCulloch, *Tudor church militant*; Loach, *Edward VI*, ch. 11; Mayer, *Reginald Pole*.

⁸⁶ John Adamson, 'The Tudor and Stuart courts, 1509–1714', in *idem*, ed., *The princely courts of Europe: ritual, politics and culture under the Ancien-Régime, 1500–1700* (London, 1999), pp. 95–117.

J. E. Neale and Conyers Read but not resolved by revisionists. The Tudors governed their dominions through a network of nobles and gentry rather than solely through institutional bodies like the privy council. Not only did this mean that the court was the main forum for policy-making, but that issues of access to, and intimacy with, the monarch were crucial. Studies of the court have shown how the Tudors adopted Renaissance ideas of princely magnificence, while interdisciplinary research on court drama and sermons has demonstrated that political debate was polymorphic and not confined to conciliar meetings. Reconstructions of the principles, beliefs, and actions of leading individuals have helped chart connections between political theory and practical policy-making. They have also highlighted points of contention between the monarch and their courtiers, especially over female monarchy and the role of counsel in the second half of the sixteenth century. Some important areas remain to be integrated fully into this picture, notably the role of women other than regnant queens. Evaluating the extent of political awareness and participation outside the court, as well as placing Tudor politics in a European context, would enrich our understanding still further. If the quality of contributions like Barbara Harris's 'Women in early Tudor politics', James Daybell's collection on women's letter-writing, Walker's *The politics of performance*, McCullough's *Sermons at court*, and Fox's *Oral and literate culture* are representative, then there is a fruitful harvest to be reaped in these fields.