

‘I felt a noble shock’:
James Boswell in German
Princely Courts

Markku Kekäläinen

On May 8, 1762, the young James Boswell wrote from the Scottish home estate Auchinleck to his friend Andrew Erskine in a blissful mood: ‘The sunshine is mild, the breeze is gentle, my mind is peaceful. I am indulging the most agreeable reveries imaginable.’¹ The imagery floated far away from the austere Scottish soil: ‘I am thinking of the brilliant scenes, of happiness, which I shall enjoy as an officer of the guards. How I shall be acquainted with all the grandeur of a court, and all the elegance of dress and diversions.’ The central components of this sunny future plan were aesthetic pleasures and the myriad delights of the courtly world, not forgetting the important acquaintances he would make, becoming ‘a favourite of ministers of state, and the adoration of ladies of quality, beauty, and fortune!’² The tone did not change with the years: ‘I was in fine spirits and full of courtly ideas’, Boswell remarked eight years before his death.³

This article deals with Boswell’s attitudes towards the courtly milieu in the context of eighteenth-century British court discourse. My central argument is that, strongly contrary to the anti-court ethos of his intellectual and social milieu, Boswell had an affirmative and enthusiastic attitude towards the court. Moreover, the fact that he was not an old-school court aristocrat like Lord Chesterfield but, in many senses, a highly affective ‘man of feeling’ of the age, did not diminish the uniqueness of his positive view of court culture.

The Laws of Sincerity

Boswell has often been seen as an Addisonian and Johnsonian London gentleman whose principal milieu was the semi-public sphere of the Metropolis and who shared the core values of the coffee-house society. However, Boswell had a special relationship with the court, and his enthusiastic appreciation of court culture can

be seen as quite an exceptional phenomenon in the context of the eighteenth-century British cultural debates. Since the Puritan revolution hostility towards the vanities of the Continental court culture had been a permanent topic in the British cultural discussion; luxury, dissimulation, and hedonism had been seen as an ultimate threat to austere mores and republican liberties. John Locke, Shaftesbury, and Joseph Addison's and Richard Steele's moral weeklies shared the republicans' stance, although in a more moderate form, and in the second half of the century, in the age of sentiment, court critique received a more emotional tone: the cult of honesty and sincerity could not accept the dissimulation and theatricality which were the central features of courtly sociability.

The focus of the court critique was courtly sociability, its theatricality and extravagance. According to Gerald Newman, the symbolic turning point in the British culture of politeness was in 1751 when the sentimental poet and essayist William Shenstone wrote that he would prefer the 'Laws of Sincerity' over the 'Rules of Politeness'.⁴ Boswell lived in a milieu which was becoming hostile towards aristocratic forms of politeness. A symptomatic event was the so-called Chesterfield-controversy after the publication of *Letters to His Son* (1774), a work whose snobbery and acceptance of theatrical dissimulation raised a reaction. Dr. Johnson's comment on the manners of the dancing-master and the morals of a whore was very typical.⁵

The court critique was aimed at the forms of sociability which embraced theatrical dissimulation, the use of social masks, flattery as well as hypocrisy as positive elements in social interchange. The culture of politeness has been one of the most debated topics in eighteenth-century intellectual and cultural history over the last decades. John Pocock, Lawrence Klein, and Philip Carter have recognized a break in the development of the British culture of politeness in the decades after the Glorious Revolution. This alteration of the cultural paradigm personified in the figures of John Locke, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, and Addison and Steele meant that the code of early modern theatrical politeness was replaced by the code of urban politeness which emphasized inner moral qualities and benevolent sociability. According to this interpretation, the new code of politeness was principally the creation of Whigs and the commercial classes.⁶ According to Lawrence E. Klein, Shaftesbury's theory of politeness had a strong anti-court ethos. The 'dazzle' of the court distorted perception and misdirected cognition in moral matters, and 'Court-greatness and Politeness', that is, theatrical display which turned man's attention to the deceitful instead of his inner reality, were contrary to a 'true Relish and simplicity in Things or Manners', Shaftesbury wrote in his notebooks.⁷ Later Anna Bryson, Markku Peltonen, and Mikko Tolonen have

emphasized the continuity of the courtly forms of politeness in the eighteenth century and the multiplicity of the concept of politeness – without denying the reality of the new paradigm.⁸

According to Michèle Cohen, by the 1760s there was a shift in the discussions of the codes of sociability when English honesty, plainness, and unpolished integrity began to be valued over polite and sophisticated behaviour.⁹ Philip Carter agrees when he recognizes two successive although partly overlapping phases in the eighteenth-century British culture of politeness: when Locke, Addison, and Steele had introduced a gentlemanly ideal in which polite behaviour was the reflection of inner moral qualities, the cult of sentiment injected the requirement of emotional sincerity and attachment to polite sociability. According to Carter, it was the emphasis on 'communing with others' emotions, rather than acting with good breeding, which most clearly distinguished sentimental from polite sociability'. Both interpretations were equally hostile towards the courtly systems of civility.¹⁰ Carter argues that Boswell's attitudes towards sociability belonged mainly to the interpretation of politeness stated by Addison, Steele, and some other Augustan humanists, although there was, according to Carter, a certain sentimental component in Boswell's orientation.¹¹ In many ways, Boswell was a representative of the age of sensibility, but while the main current of the age was unsympathetic towards the court and the 'corrupt' lifestyle of fashionable society, I would argue that, for Boswell, the courtly milieu was an epitome of civilized life.

The Rendezvous of the Great

The Court was the core of representative publicness, and from the perspective of eighteenth-century social satire it was the centre of corruption, effeminacy, and debauchery; its theatrical sociability and extravagant forms of ostentation were perceived as a lethal threat to healthy manners and true gentlemanship. The satirical pamphlet *The Midnight Spy* (1766) crystallized the falsity of courtly life: 'At court, they are striving for titles, places and pensions; here prevail, in the highest degree, vanity, pride and dissimulation, nor can the face hardly be considered as the index of the mind.'¹² The courtly vanities were standard material for social satire, and the aversion was strengthened by the splendid courtly life of the arch enemy France.

The pamphlet *London Unmask'd* offered a typical though coarse argumentation. The author, who called himself the 'Peripatetic', saw the court as a kind of school for life because 'the experience of courts, considered as the rendezvous of the

great, affords much knowledge of the world, and teaches more useful lessons than the best library that can possibly be collected'. But the lessons of the court were bitter ones: 'the stateliness of buildings, the elegance of furniture, the grandeur of monarchs, the brilliancy of a levée, and all the glittering ornaments which attend a throne, are apt to disturb our quiet, infuse envious and ambitious thoughts, and ever cause us to aspire to rival the courtier in all his honours and dignities.' The rivalry of the court was a corruptive element, and although the courtly scene offered a dazzling performance, it destroyed sane judgement. 'The sumptuous banquets of that bewitching spot take off our relish for the homely fare of our own tables; the splendour of equipage dazzles our eyes,' wrote the Peripatetic, and he realized that 'the whole scene collected in one view, sets our brains a madding; and has, in all ages, been the destruction of many'. Finally, the courtly scene was 'nothing more than a dream; and when we are roused from the delusive reverie, we discover its folly and fallacy'.¹³ The court was a pernicious delusion which dispelled solid moral and mental coordinates.

The courtly milieu with its special entertainments was a target of Addison's and Steele's social satire. Vanity, empty formalism, and the uncritical aping of continental influences were the central themes in this respect. Steele wrote about the levees of the great: 'These Worthies are got into an habit of being Servile with an Air, and enjoy a certain Vanity in being known for understanding how the World passes. In the Pleasure of this they can rise early, go abroad sleek and well dressed, with no other Hope or Purpose but to make a Bow to a Man in Court Favour.' The courtly system of dependencies which generated false politeness and encouraged vanity was the main corruptive element in the eyes of Addison and Steele, and in this sense they continued the seventeenth-century republican court critique. Unnatural sociability was the pointless interchange between disguised men:

It is wondrous that a Man can get over the Natural Existence and Possession of his own Mind so far, as to take delight either in paying or receiving such cold and repeated Civilities. But what maintains the Humour is, that outward Show is what most Men pursue, rather than real Happiness. Thus both the Idol and Idolater equally impose upon themselves in pleasing their Imaginations this way.¹⁴

From Steele's common-sense point of view, the illusory character of the courtly milieu dissolved the line between truth and falsity and seduced people to vain spectacles instead of the real world. The vainest of all the vain courtly spectacles was the Italian opera, the craze of fashionable society in the first decades of the

eighteenth century. In the attitudes towards this form of fashionable amusement several central themes of the moralist court critique were connected: effeminacy (castrati were a special topic of satire), pompous luxury, public show based on pure appearance, and a suspicious Continental origin.¹⁵ 'An Opera', Addison wrote in *The Spectator*, 'may be allowed to be extravagantly lavish in its Decorations, as its only Design is to gratify the Senses, and keep up an indolent Attention in the Audience.' The pure sensuality without stern moral substance made this form of art suspicious, if not worthless, and the whimsicality and irrational turns of the plot were contradictory to the requirements and demands of the adult reason: 'Common Sense however requires, that there should be nothing in the Scenes and Machines which may appear Childish and Absurd. How would the Wits of King *Charles's* Time have laughed to have seen *Nicolini* [1673–1732; a Neapolitan contralto] exposed to a Tempest in Robes of Ermin, and sailing in an open Boat upon a Sea of Paste-Board?'¹⁶

According to Henrik Knif, Addison and Steele offered a 'commonsensical coffee-house vision of life' to its middle class readers which 'permitted people to smile at the excesses of the fashionable world', and the Italian opera had a privileged position in this social satire.¹⁷ Alok Yadav argues that Addison's hostility towards Italian opera had a strongly nationalist undertone; according to Yadav, Addison's main focus was not on the aesthetic qualities of the Italian opera, rather he was 'primarily concerned with the contest between "foreign" and native English arts'.¹⁸ So the Addisonian reception of the Italian opera would have also risen from 'provincial anxieties'; the English had a deep consciousness of their cultural provinciality compared with the French and Italians, but, besides political liberty, plainness of manners and an austere aesthetic were becoming the distinctive features of the English cultural identity.¹⁹ According to Linda Colley, eighteenth-century Britain's highest elite had proclaimed its cultural superiority at home by assuming Continental modes and fashions, but by the last quarter of the eighteenth century this distinctive strategy was coming to be seen as 'decidedly imprudent'; and even long before that, the nationalist popular press had found cultural cosmopolitanism degenerate and alien to English plainness.²⁰

Addison was not a Puritan hostile towards sensual pleasures; on the contrary, his series of essays on the pleasures of the imagination is one of the basic texts of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory. But somewhere there was a limit between irrational extravagance and the calm and reasonable way of enjoying aesthetic objects. In *The Spectator*, Addison wrote on the wretched taste of Nicolini's audience, and he expressed the wish that 'our Tragedians would copy after this great Master in Action. Could they make the same use of their Arms and Legs, and inform

their Faces with as significant Looks and Passions, how glorious would an *English* Tragedy appear with that Action which is capable of giving a Dignity to the forced Thoughts, cold Conceits, and unnatural Expressions of an *Italian* Opera.²¹ The main target of the opera bashing was not, of course, the music but the theatrical, spectacular, and extravagant features typical to the Baroque and Rococo courtly culture. The honest English gentleman was above all a man of sense, and the affectation, wild imagination, and irrationality of the Italian opera were contradictory to the common sense idea of good taste.

Luxury and Magnificence

Politically, Boswell was a steady monarchist and Tory; his belief in hereditary rank, the natural inequality of men, and High Church Anglicanism was unwavering. According to Frank Brady, Boswell's approach to politics was always 'conservative, idealistic, and emotional'.²² Boswell's monarchism was highly aesthetic by nature; he had a natural and unconditional confidence in the traditional political and social order, but what was really fascinating in the monarchical system for him was its spectacular choreography of power. It fed Boswell's insatiable imagination with visions of splendour, magnificence, and elegance, which the common-sense man Richard Steele would have called delusion. In Boswell's eyes, republics had a bad record in this issue. 'I cannot be of opinion', he wrote in the essay 'On Luxury' (1778), 'that the luxury of magnificence and elegance in building, in planting, in dress and equipage, and in all the fine arts, ought to be at all discouraged; for I think that all these kinds of luxury promote diligence and activity, and lively enjoyment, without being at all hurtful.' Then Boswell criticized the sumptuary laws of the modern republics like Venice, Lucca, and Ferrara: 'I remember, that when I was at Lucca, the strange regulation that the citizens of that state shall appear drest only in black, appeared to me to be an ill-judged as well as a very dull negative provision.' Highly developed civilization encouraged plurality and splendour because human happiness was strongly connected to the imagination and its ability to express itself in various and magnificent forms. 'Surely a society of human beings,' he argued in the essay, 'who present to each other only a dusky uniformity, is not so happy as a society where invention is exerted, and taste displayed, in all the varieties of forms and colours which are to be seen in splendid courts and brilliant assemblies.'²³

Boswell associated the 'varieties of forms and colours' with the courtly milieu, and this was not an accident: from his earliest notes, the court had been the centre

of the full and civilized life in his imagination; it was characterized by terms like variety, splendour, vivacity, elegance, and magnificence. The court was the crystallization of civilized life, and the essence of civilization was to be found among the mirrors, velvet, and busts of the assembly rooms. A delight in public grandeur was mixed with the aesthetic of variety and imagination. In spite of its relative modesty, the scene of the domestic British monarchy could sometimes satisfy Boswell's longing for magnificence. 'Then went and saw the King and Queen pass from the Opera, and then saw the Guards drawn up in the court of the Palace while the moon shone and showed their splendour. I was all gentle felicity,' he wrote down in 1762.²⁴ He did not assume the identity of a passive and invisible observer, but found himself an active participant in the courtly spectacle, a man to be seen. 'In a full suit of black clothes [in a barrister's court suit] went to His Majesty's levee,' he noted in May 1787, 'where I had not been since I brought my family to London. I wished to observe how he behaved to me, as I thought of presenting a memorial to him to have some mark of his royal favour to me. It was a delightful day.'²⁵ 'This day being the Queen's birthday, I was amused by seeing multitudes of rich-dressed people driving in their splendid equipages to Court,' wrote the young Boswell in his journal, and in this enthusiastic spirits he noted that 'a court is a fine thing. It is the cause of so much show and splendour that people are kept gay and spirited.'²⁶ He returned to the romantic past of his native Scotland. The nostalgia for the archaic past merged with the actual experience of fashionable court life when he went on to note that 'I recollected all the stories of the old Scottish magnificence when our monarchs resided at Holyroodhouse, and I wished to see such days again.'²⁷

In his pamphlet *Reflections on the Late Alarming Bankruptcies in Scotland* (1772), Boswell followed the ethos of the early modern code of 'noble magnificence' according to which conspicuous consumption was justifiable, or rather necessary, among the aristocratic social rank. The writer remembered the time when 'no body dined or supped at our houses [...] except the houses of men of high rank, or in public offices, who were therefore obliged, in point of decorum, and for the purposes of good policy, to give entertainments to large and general companies'.²⁸ The absence of a court was the principal reason for the decay of strict social distinctions which had so vital importance for developed civilization. Boswell quoted an anonymous French writer: "In a monarchical state, are two orders, essentially separate and distinct, the nobles and the plebeians: the functions of the former are to defend it; those of the latter to feed and enrich it, without ever aspiring to useless honours, which are not made for them."²⁹

According to David Kuchta, who has studied the sartorial codes in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, the eighteenth-century English elite

drew a sharp distinction between English plainness and the luxury and hedonism of Continental Absolutism. Kuchta situates the break in the codes of dress in the late seventeenth century; he uses the term 'noble magnificence' to illustrate the situation before 1688, which after the Glorious Revolution was substituted by 'refined simplicity'.³⁰ During the 'old sartorial regime', ostentatious dress was essential to aristocratic men's social and gender identity, and it was a highly important component of the cultural definition of the aristocracy in Tudor-Stuart England.³¹ The Glorious Revolution was the turning point in attitudes towards outward appearance. Refined simplicity was now a mark of the true aristocrat and patriot: 'After 1688, the good repute of the gentleman rested not on conspicuous consumption, but on inconspicuous consumption, on the display of public virtue, while virtue itself was defined as the absence of display.'³² Maxine Berg has emphasized that, in eighteenth-century Britain, modern commercial luxury avoided aristocratic extravagance and pursued 'civility, taste, and elegance'; at the same time, the spread of new luxury undermined the enforcement of the sumptuary laws.³³ According to Neil McKendrick, the feverish pursuit of commercial luxury and the imitation of the rich among the middle ranks aroused moral anxiety and widespread public debate; luxury was the focus of many-sided intellectual, moral, and religious problematizations.³⁴

Boswell never condemned luxury and extravagance *per se* but, according to him, the spread of conspicuous consumption among the lower social strata was a suspicious phenomenon; when the men of lower rank were content with their position, they 'may be esteemed as reputable men in their station, while they remain in their own places with contentment and quietness, and do not fret their minds by a vain and restless contention for equality'.³⁵ Boswell censured the people who 'have lived with a degree of elegance, becoming in people of first rank, but ridiculous and offensive in men of low extraction: Such unprincipled men having been entrusted with the money of numbers, and with the *all* of some, have villanously consumed it, and involved their creditors in the same ruin, though not in the same guilt, with themselves.'³⁶

Luxury itself was not a problem; the problem was that the differences between estates had been blurred and the wrong people had adopted conspicuous consumption. 'The mischief', Boswell wrote in the pamphlet, 'is, that for some years past there has been in Scotland an abominable spirit of levelling all those distinctions which ages of civilized society have, through all the gradations of politeness introduced amongst mankind.'³⁷ In his view, the court was the centre of gravity which had kept the ancient order of estates intact, and when this magnetic force had ceased, manners had loosened and the foundations of the social order had

been shaken: 'Ever since the seat of government has been removed from among us, we have been increasing in riches and barbarity, as a body in proportion as it grows fat becomes coarse [...] And hence it has happened that there is no distinction of tables, as there is no distinction of ranks.'³⁸ Boswell sharpened his point by referring ironically to Hesiod: 'This, though an iron age with a vengeance, in the true sense of the expression, is, in one respect, a golden age; for gold is the object on which all inclinations are fixed.'³⁹

The spirit of equality had dissolved the qualitative differences between social ranks, and the materialistic ethos had created an illusion that the originally exclusive forms of civilization were within the reach of all who had sufficient material resources so that 'all must have an equal number of dishes, all must have wines equally costly, as all think themselves equally *gentlemen*'.⁴⁰ It seems obvious that Boswell did not share the opinion that the commercialization of culture encouraged the refinement of manners. On the contrary, he was confirmed in his belief that 'our gentlemen of the last age were much more polite than those of the present.'⁴¹ Boswell lived in a semi-fictitious aristocratic world where the age-old distinctions of rank were mixed with modern metropolitan pleasures.

A Grand Court Day

'In a day or two I am to set out for Berlin,' Boswell wrote from Holland to Temple in 1764. 'I shall be presented at the different courts upon the very best footing. I shall acquire real knowledge as well as elegance of behaviour in the company of a politician and a courtier.'⁴² For Boswell, the German princely courts, which he visited on his Grand Tour in 1764, were a kind of school for the *haute monde*. He remembered his rank as an Old Scots Baron, and he calculated that 'a Scots baron cannot do better than travel in Germany'.⁴³ Italy and France were over-civilized; nature was 'quite destroyed' there, and the people had grown up in a milieu so artificial that the 'true manly character' was 'melted into elegant ease'.⁴⁴ This was a curious comment from Boswell who had always admired sophisticated forms of sociability, but it seemed that Gallicized German courts offered him a suitable mixture of the foreign and familiar. In Germany, the Scots baron could 'acquire French and polite manners, and at the same time be with people who live much in the same style that he must do at home'.⁴⁵ What was most important, the Scots baron 'may thus learn to support his character with dignity, and upon his paternal estate may have the felicity of a prince'.⁴⁶

‘This was a grand court day.’⁴⁷ This exclamation could be the motto of Boswell’s German journey. From the very beginning, the splendid milieu of the German princely courts had an enormous mental effect on the highly sensitive Boswell; and after completing the Grand Tour through the German courts he summarized that ‘at all of them I found state and politeness’. He wrote to his friend Temple from Berlin, where he had become acquainted with the milieu of the Prussian monarch: ‘You see me now, Temple, restored to myself, quite *The Great Man*.’⁴⁸ Strong emotional and aesthetic sensations which he experienced during his journey left permanent marks on his identity.

The first resort was the court of Brunswick – ‘I then went to the Reigning Court. The palace is ancient, and the rooms filled me with respect.’⁴⁹ – and this visit defined the tone of the journey. Boswell took the courtly compliments very personally: ‘After supper the Duke of Brunswick honoured me with a pretty long conversation, and I am sure that his Highness was pleased.’ The lack of critical distance was manifest in Boswell’s courtly discourse; the enthusiastic tone was not changed since the early letter to Erskine: ‘Here now do I find myself in the very sphere of magnificence. I live with princes, and a court is my home. I took leave of the Duke, and a cordial adieu of all the courtiers. I found myself already liked by them with affection.’⁵⁰

The German Grand Tour was full of splendid dinners and assemblies, as in the court of Brunswick, where there was ‘a prodigious company to dine at Court, and a most magnificent dinner [...] Grand music played in an apartment adjoining, and round the table was a vast crowd of spectators. I confess that I was supremely elevated’.⁵¹ Suddenly, the elegant and grandiose sociability contrasted with the gloomy Presbyterianism of native Scotland: ‘I had the utmost pleasure of contrast by considering at this hour is assembled Auchinleck kirk and many a whine and many a sad look is found therein.’⁵² Soon the shadow went away and Boswell hoped that he would never ‘encourage a least gloomy idea of religion’ and that he would be ‘firm and cheerful’.⁵³

Boswell was not particularly familiar with the milieu he described. He could not see through the surface of the world he depicted, and it is possible that he did not want to either. On the contrary, he liked to experience immediate sensations, not to see the forces functioning below the surface. Boswell’s identification with the courtly milieu was both personal and emotional; he sought passionately an affective disposition, and in a way he felt he existed in a field of emotional forces which were in constant change: ‘I was next presented to all the Grands, &c., and to the Dames d’honneur. Next the Duke came out, to whom I was presented, and next to the Duchess.’⁵⁴ The Apollonian figures of the court possessed magical

qualities and made an indelible impression on the sensitive Scotsman: 'I was quite struck to find myself at table in the Palace of Brunswick, with that illustrious family. I sat opposite to Prince Ferdinand, whose presence inspires animated respect. He absolutely electrified me. Every time that I looked at him, I felt a noble shock.'⁵⁵

The electoral court of Saxony was one of the pinnacles of the journey. The baroque city Dresden had a magical aura in Boswell's eyes, and he found the courtly life in the magnificent residential city highly fascinating: 'I went to the French *comédie*, which is very pretty here. I saw the Elector, Prince Xavier, and several more of the Court. I was enlivened with new ideas.'⁵⁶ The next day the social choreography continued. Boswell hoped to be presented as a British officer: 'I accordingly put a cockade in my hat and tied a crape round my arm, and was presented at the Court of Saxony as "an officer in Loudoun's regiment" [...] It was a great palace. The Court went from room to room, I believe to visit different princes.'⁵⁷ It is revealing that the distinctions typical to British court discourse were totally non-existent in Boswell's remarks: he never referred to the effeminate impacts of the court; not to the corruptive features of conspicuous consumption; not to the disastrous economic consequences of reckless squandering; not to the system of unsymmetrical dependencies, which had been found highly corruptive in British republican discussion; and most importantly, not to the absolutist form of government as a tyranny.

An Electrifying Impact

The most important destinations as a matter of course were Berlin and Potsdam, the capital and the residence of the Kingdom of Prussia. In the centre of the Prussian court existed the mystical though virtually invisible ruler Frederick the Great. Boswell's first impressions in Potsdam and Berlin were of the aesthetic splendour and social refinement of the courtly milieu. 'We went and saw the garden of Charlottenburg, which is spacious and elegant,' wrote Boswell in Berlin in a very typical remark.⁵⁸ 'Madame de Froment and I', he noted in his journal, 'dined tête-à-tête, after which we went and were shown the Palace, which is magnificent. The King's concert-room is very elegant.'⁵⁹ Boswell was well informed about the King's exceptional intellect, and the visit to Sans Souci confirmed this. 'We looked through a glass door and saw his bedchamber and a neat little library. All his books were bound in red Turkey and handsomely gilt,' Boswell wrote when he had seen the works of Voltaire and Frederick, and he noted, 'Great and pleasing were my thoughts.'⁶⁰

Gradually Boswell approached the object of his admiration, the King of Prussia: 'I then went to the Parade. I saw the King. It was a glorious sight.'⁶¹ There was some original and unchallenged *Urkraft* in the King: 'As a loadstone moves needles, or a storm bows the lofty oaks, did Frederick the Great make the Prussian officers submissive bend as he walked majestic in the midst of them [...] I was in noble spirits, and had a full relish of this grand scene which I shall never forget.'⁶² The enchantment continued at a dinner party where Boswell was 'only a simple spectator', and there he had 'a full view of the King. I was very well amused'.⁶³ Later he wrote to Henri de Catt after having seen the King in the parade: 'I have already had the honour of seeing His Majesty two or three times. Imagination may do much, but I am sure that he has an aspect of superior guise. Upon my soul, I was struck. He electrified me. Every time I looked at him, I felt the shock of the heroic.' Boswell referred to his exceptional mental disposition when he wrote that M. Catt's blood did not circulate as rapidly as his.⁶⁴

Boswell did not write much about music but he was very impressed when he first listened to the 'the most pathetic expression set to the tenderest music' of the Italian opera.⁶⁵ The Italian opera was a vital element of the courtly and fashionable scene of eighteenth-century Europe. This form of courtly spectacle had a highly stimulating impact on Boswell. In Brunswick he had gone to the opera, which he described as 'very noble'. The opera house was huge and the decorations were 'much finer than in London'. The piece of opera was called *Enea in Lazona*. 'A bold manly voice' of a singer struck the young Scotsman 'prodigiously', and Boswell confessed that he had never been 'so much affected by music' and that his 'hypocondriac deadness' went away. Besides the music, the enchanting milieu was an important reason for this mental reaction: 'How happy am I now! I dined at Court, and after this noble opera I returned to Court and supped elegant and grand.'⁶⁶

Sometimes Boswell's courtly enthusiasm reached to the celestial spheres. He had attended a Sunday concert in the Duke's Chapel in Brunswick, where he had heard 'a psalm performed with magnificent music, eunuchs and other singers from the opera, an organ, a French horn, flutes, fiddles, trumpets. It was quite heaven.' Boswell wrote how he had adored God after the occasion and 'hoped for immortal joy'.⁶⁷ The atmosphere in the court of Brunswick seemed to be especially fascinating; Boswell felt there both unreserved admiration and familiar affection. 'My spirits bounded,' he noted in his journal, 'yet was I solemn, and stretched my view to the world of futurity. It was fine to be in the Palace of Brunswick, and see the illustrious family brilliant and gay, and the Prince diverting himself after his scenes of heroism.'⁶⁸ The social satire of Addison and Steele as well as of several

pamphleteers had found the sensualism of the Italian opera strongly corruptive, and the use of castrates was seen as the lowest record of the decadence of masculinity. Boswell did not make these kinds of distinctions; for him, the court with all its fashions and entertainments was an unbroken aesthetic experience, without any discord.

Boswell's attitude towards the courtly and fashionable milieu was that of a romantic lover: blind, passionate, and enchanted. Such expressions as 'with affection', 'noble shock', 'noble spirits', 'electrified', and 'struck' emphasized the strongly emotional character of Boswell's courtly experience. He did not observe the courtly milieu from the perspective of a moralist 'spectator' like Addison and Steele or a cynical insider like Lord Chesterfield and the Duke of Saint-Simon. On the contrary, he identified with the new milieu with naive enthusiasm, and without any critical reflection. He was an outsider who passionately tried to be fully involved in the courtly spectacle, which offered appropriate material for his overdeveloped imagination and grandiose fantasies. Boswell was a sentimental man of feeling in the disguise of an early modern courtier.

Notes

1. James Boswell, *Letters Between the Honourable Andrew Erskine, and James Boswell, Esq.* (London, 1763), pp. 104–105.
2. Boswell, *Letters Erskine*, pp. 105–106.
3. James Boswell, *Boswell: The English Experiment, 1785–1789*, ed. Irma S. Lustig & Frederick A. Pottle. (London: Heinemann, 1986), p. 134.
4. Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740–1830* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 132.
5. Michèle Cohen, 'Manliness, Effeminacy and the French: Gender and the Construction of National Character in Eighteenth-Century England', in *English Masculinities, 1660–1800*, ed. Tim Hitchcock & Michèle Cohen (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 44–61.
6. Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society: Britain 1660–1800* (Harlow: Longman, 2001); Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
7. Klein 1994, pp. 94, 175.
8. Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Markku Peltonen, *The Duel in Early Modern England: Civility, Politeness and Honour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Mikko

Tolonen, *Self-love and Self-liking in the Moral and Political Philosophy of Bernard Mandeville and David Hume* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2009).

9. Cohen 1999, pp. 53–54.

10. Philip Carter, 'Polite "Persons": Character, Biography and the Gentleman', in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002), pp. 333–354.

11. Carter 2001, pp. 58, 65–66, 183–201.

12. Anonymous, *The Midnight Spy, or a View of the Transactions of London and Westminster* (London, 1766), p. 15.

13. *London Unmask'd; or the New Town Spy* (London, 1784), pp. 86–89.

14. *The Spectator*, vol. II, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 257.

15. Henrik Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators: Studies in Journals, Opera, and Social Scene in Late Stuart London* (Helsinki: Finnish historical society, 1995).

16. *The Spectator*, vol. I, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford, 1965), pp. 22–23.

17. Knif 1995, pp. 37–38.

18. Alok Yadav, *Before the Empire of English: Literature, Provinciality, and Nationalism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 162–163.

19. Yadav 2004, pp. 1–2, 156–163.

20. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 164–166.

21. *The Spectator* I, p. 59.

22. Frank Brady, *Boswell's Political Career* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1965) p. 32; see Thomas Crawford, 'Politics in the Boswell-Temple Correspondence', in *Boswell: Citizen of the World, Man of Letters*, ed. Irma S. Lustig (Lexington KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1995), pp. 101–117.

23. James Boswell, *Boswell's Column*, ed. Margery Bailey (London: Kimber, 1951), p. 58.

24. James Boswell, *Boswell's London Journal*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1950), p. 53.

25. Boswell, *English Experiment*, p. 134.

26. Boswell, *London Journal*, p. 148.

27. Boswell, *London Journal*, p. 148.

28. James Boswell, *Reflections on the Late Alarming Bankruptcies in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1772), p. 11.

29. Boswell, *Bankruptcies*, pp. 9–10.

30. David Kuchta, *The Three-piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England, 1550–1850* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 4.

31. Kuchta 2002, p. 24.

32. Kuchta 2002, p. 5.

33. Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 20–25.

34. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer & J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982), pp. 9–21.
35. Boswell, *Bankruptcies*, p. 10.
36. Boswell, *Bankruptcies*, pp. 4–5.
37. Boswell, *Bankruptcies*, p. 7.
38. Boswell, *Bankruptcies*, pp. 7–8.
39. Boswell, *Bankruptcies*, p. 8.
40. Boswell, *Bankruptcies*, p. 8.
41. Boswell, *Bankruptcies*, p. 12.
42. James Boswell, *Boswell in Holland, 1763–1764*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1952), p. 275.
43. James Boswell, *Boswell on the Grand Tour: Germany and Switzerland*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1953), p. 109.
44. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 109.
45. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 109.
46. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 109–110.
47. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 173.
48. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 173.
49. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, pp. 14–15.
50. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 15.
51. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, pp. 57–58.
52. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 58.
53. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 58.
54. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 15.
55. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 12.
56. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, pp. 131–132.
57. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 133.
58. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 29.
59. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 17.
60. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 17.
61. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 23.
62. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 23.
63. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 29.
64. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 31.
65. Peter Martin, *A Life of James Boswell* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 96.
66. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 53.
67. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 60.
68. Boswell, *Germany and Switzerland*, p. 60.

Summary:

'I felt a noble shock': James Boswell in German Princely Courts

The article deals with James Boswell's (1740–1795) attitudes towards the courtly milieu in the context of eighteenth-century British court discourse. The central argument is that, strongly contrary to the anti-court ethos of his intellectual and social milieu, Boswell had an affirmative and enthusiastic attitude towards the court. Moreover, the fact that he was neither an Addisonian moralist 'spectator' nor a cynical court aristocrat like Lord Chesterfield, but in many senses a highly affective 'man of feeling' of the age, did not diminish the uniqueness of his positive view of court culture. On the one hand, Boswell's appreciation of the court was connected with his firm monarchism and belief in hereditary rank; on the other hand, he was aesthetically fascinated by the splendour and magnificence of the courtly milieu. His appraisal of the court did not include the common-sense moralism of the moral weeklies or the cynical observations of the aristocratic court discourse; rather his attitude was immediate, emotional, and enthusiastic in the spirit of the cult of sensibility.

Keywords: James Boswell, Joseph Addison, Germany, court, politeness, civility, luxury, conspicuous consumption