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Under the Sign of Minerva: Mary Delany's Court Education and Early Augustan Aristocratic Feminism

This paper was a call to arms for the serious integration of intellectual, gender and court history. Court historians are, of course, fully aware that courts were complex, polycentric institutions in which both intellectuals and women could find important roles. More to the point, those intellectuals and those women were sometimes the same people. But, as Professor Campbell Orr pointed out, studies of these 'bluestockings' often present them in isolation. In the case of Mary Delany, the court was a recurring theme throughout her life. As a Granville, she had been born into one of the great court families of the late seventeenth century and, had Queen Anne lived longer, would probably have become one of her Maids of Honour. Hopes of gaining a court position under George II also came to nothing. Only in old age, as a result of their shared interest in paper collages, did she become close to Queen Charlotte. But what Delany exemplified was a continuing tradition of female education associated with the court throughout this period. The education of young royal women, specifically Princesses Mary and Anne, had been a topical subject in Restoration England and had helped encourage Bathsua Makin, a pioneering advocate of female education. Another early writer on the subject, Judith Drake, wanted education to prepare women for life at court, not least so that they could outsmart its many predatory male libertines. Mary Astell fits into this same tradition. But was this feminism? This debate on education did tend to ignore women's inferior status in law. Yet Delany herself is an example of a woman who had a full grasp of the legal intricacies arising from wills and marriage settlements. Moreover, even if most female courtiers were denied many of the advantages their male counterparts took for granted, those women moving in court circles were still able to play significant, varied and sometimes unexpected cultural roles. **AB**