Struensee in Britain: The Interpretation of the Struensee Affair in British Periodicals, 1772

Merethe Roos

The new favourites, grown giddy in this rapid elevation, lost all appearances of moderation in their prosperity. Count Bernstorff and the old faithful servants of the crown, were disgraced and banished from court: and such of the ancient nobility as did not degrade themselves by their conduct, met with the same fate.¹

His prepossession in favour of the English recommended him to the esteem and confidence of a young unguarded princess, who could not suspect an innocent freedom could be interpreted as a crime, and affability misrepresented by an indecent familiarity, by an artful, vigilant, and wicked rival.²

These two very dissimilar quotations concern the same man, Johann Friedrich Struensee (1735–1772), and his closest aide, Enevold Brandt (1738–1772). Struensee functioned as the de facto political leader of the absolute monarchy of Denmark-Norway for fifteen months between the years 1770 and 1772. The quotations are taken from articles that appeared in 1772 in two different British periodicals, The Annual Register and Town and Country Magazine, respectively, and they reveal different takes on Struensee and his politics in Britain. The two excerpts illustrate how a single political incident could be spun differently and directed toward different audiences, depending upon the magazines in which they appeared. One of these periodicals, The Annual Register, is regarded as an argumentative political magazine. The other, Town and Country Magazine, was a periodical that anticipated our own contemporary tabloid culture.

The political incident to which both periodicals refer is of special interest to Britain because a member of the British royal family played a central role in the overthrow of Struensee’s government. Struensee had come to Copenhagen

² ‘Memories of the Count Struensee and de Brandt, lately butchered by the sentence of an iniquitous Tribunal, wholly influenced by the Brunchault of the North’, Town and Country Magazine, or Universal Repository of Knowledge, Instruction, and Entertainment (1772), p. 246.
as the King’s personal physician in 1769, and he soon found an outlet for his political ambitions: he could take advantage of the fact that the mentally ill Christian VII could only function as the nominal leader of the state. Struensee’s political success was certainly tied to his affair with Queen Caroline Mathilda (1751–1775), who gave birth to their daughter in 1771. Caroline Mathilda was British-born, the youngest child of Frederick, Prince of Wales, and hence also a sister of George III. In 1771, after the birth of his daughter, Struensee appointed himself maître des requêtes and officially declared himself Count to become the nation’s political leader.

As Jonathan Israel indicates in his chapter in this volume, Struensee’s actions provoked an outcry from the public at large, not only because of his intimate relationship with Caroline Mathilda, but also because of his leadership style and his apparent political objectives. He introduced radical political reforms, which were rapidly implemented and entailed, among other things, a simplification of bureaucracy, significant liberalisation of criminal laws, and far more liberal moral and social regulations. In addition to the public objections to his manner and political views, there were other grounds for dissatisfaction with Struensee among his contemporaries. Firstly, as John Christian Laursen has underlined, for an increasingly patriotic and nationally oriented Danish population, it was regarded as highly insulting that Struensee (who originally came from Schleswig-Holstein and thereby was regarded as a foreigner) made no efforts to learn Danish. Secondly, Struensee was accused of being a Spinozist. Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677) was known to be the most significant heretic in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because he denied the existence of an omnipotent and transcendent God. And thirdly, as Michael Bregnsbo has pointed out, Struensee obviously misunderstood the political culture of absolutism as it had been practiced in Denmark since 1660. Struensee’s time in power ended with a coup d’etat on 16 January 1772, carried out under orders from Queen Dowager Juliane Maria (1729–1796), her son Hereditary Prince Frederik (1753–1805), and the theologian Ove Høegh Guldberg (1731–1808). After the revolution, Struensee and Brandt were arrested,

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4 Laursen shows that among Danish court official Bolle Wilhelm Luxdorph’s 45 volumes of press freedom writings, there are many pamphlets that accuse Struensee of being a Spinozist. Ibid.