‘VON DEM AM KÖNIGL. PREUSSISCHEN HOFE ABGESCHAFFTEN CEREMONIEL’: MONARCHEICAL REPRESENTATION AND COURT CEREMONY IN FREDERICK WILLIAM I’S PRUSSIA

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Introduction: the enigmatic Frederick William I

Scholars have recognized the significance of the court in early modern Europe since Norbert Elias’s *The Court Society* made its great impact in the 1970s and 1980s.¹ Elias’s foundational work explained the political usefulness of opulent baroque courts and argued that the court was indispensable as a ‘filter’ between the monarch and his country. Elias’ basic argument has since been generally accepted as one of the basic tenets of early modern European history, but the utility of a magnificent court was already understood in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.² By the early eighteenth century, various writers explained the court’s functions quite explicitly. Indeed, the norms of monarchical representation and court ceremony had become so standardized by this period that contemporaries could write exhaustive ‘scientific’ volumes about court fêtes and courtly behavior.³ A central

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³ Bossuet, Montesquieu and others candidly discussed the utility of Louis XIV’s lavish court, while discussion of ceremonial was especially popular among German authors such as Gottfried Steive, Julius Bernhard von Rohr and Johann Christian Lünig. Within Prussia, both Christian Thomasius and Christian Wolff discussed the utility of the monarchical court. On Louis XIV, see Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). On German authors, see Milos
proposition at the time – and in modern scholarship – was that the court allowed a monarch to portray himself as he wished foreigners and his subjects to perceive him. Typically a monarch used emblems, architecture, festivals, artwork, ceremonies and other means to represent his legitimacy, magnificence, power and glory. This article explores some of the implications and limits of such monarchical representation by closely examining one exceptional case.4

My empirical focus is on the royal court and the self-representation of Frederick William I of Prussia (r. 1713–1740). Frederick William was known during his reign, and has been viewed ever since, as a bizarre enigma who dissented from orthodox modes of courtly behavior.5 Frederick William’s reign has generally been understood as a cultural and intellectual dark age between the magnanimous baroque patronage of his father, Elector/King Frederick III/I (r. 1688–1701–1713), and the

4 Courts were also understood as centers of power and communication, and as clearinghouses for patronage and information that provided a vital locus for informal governance. Current scholarship takes up these themes, which will be touched on below. However, this article concentrates on addressing the issues raised by monarchical representation at early modern courts.