



# A Culture of Fact: England, 1550-1720

*Barbara J. Shapiro*

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## **A Culture of Fact: England, 1550-1720** Barbara J. Shapiro

Barbara J. Shapiro traces the surprising genesis of the "fact," a modern concept that, she convincingly demonstrates, originated not in natural science but in legal discourse. She follows the concept's evolution and diffusion across a variety of disciplines in early modern England, examining how the emerging "culture of fact" shaped the epistemological assumptions of each intellectual enterprise. Drawing on an astonishing breadth of research, Shapiro probes the fact's changing identity from an alleged human action to a proven natural or human happening. The crucial first step in this transition occurred in the sixteenth century when English common law established a definition of fact which relied on eyewitnesses and testimony. The concept widened to cover natural as well as human events as a result of developments in news reportage and travel writing. Only then, Shapiro discovers, did scientific philosophy adopt the category "fact." With Francis Bacon advocating more stringent criteria, the witness became a vital component in scientific observation and experimentation. Shapiro also recounts how England's preoccupation with the fact influenced historiography, religion, and literature?which saw the creation of a fact-oriented fictional genre, the novel.

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