The Historical Journal, 43, 3 (2000), pp. 669–697 Printed in the United Kingdom
© 2000 Cambridge University Press

ELITE WOMEN, SOCIAL POLITICS, AND THE POLITICAL WORLD OF LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND*

ELAINE CHALUS
Bath Spa University College

ABSTRACT. *Political historians have recognized that politics and high society interacted in eighteenth-century England; and most would also recognize the presence of elite women in the social world of politicians. These assumptions have not, however, been subjected to much scrutiny. This article takes the social aspects of politics seriously and aims to provide an introduction to social politics – the management of people and social situations for political ends – and, specifically, to the involvement of women therein. Politics in eighteenth-century England was not just about parliament and politicians; it also had a social dimension. By expanding our understanding of politics to include social politics, we not only reintegrate women into the political world but we also reveal them to have been legitimate political actors, albeit on a non-parliamentary stage, where they played a vital part in creating and sustaining both a uniquely politicized society and the political elite itself. While specific historical circumstances combined in the eighteenth century to facilitate women's socio-political involvement, social politics is limited neither to women nor to the eighteenth century. It has wider implications for historians of all periods and calls into question the way that we conceptualize politics itself. The relationship between the obstinately nebulous arena of social politics and the traditional arena of high politics is ever-changing, but by trivializing the former we limit our ability to understand the latter.*

In late November 1765 both Lady Rockingham and William Pitt were in Bath. Here, society was less politically charged than in London and the social circle was sufficiently small to facilitate socializing across political divides. As her letters to her husband demonstrate, she turned this to political advantage. The death of the duke of Cumberland at the end of October had left the Rockingham whigs lacking public credibility. They believed that public confidence in the ministry would be restored if they could obtain some mark of

* Earlier versions of this article have been presented at seminars at the Universities of Oxford and York, and the Institute of Historical Research, London. I would like to thank the participants of these seminars for their comments. Special thanks must also go to Hannah Barker, Philip Carter, Penny Corfield, Amanda Foreman, Joanna Innes, Paul Langford, Alan Marshall, Jane Rendall, Susan Skedd, Roey Sweet, Barbara White, and Susan Whyman. The research upon which this article is based was funded at various stages by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Committee for Graduate Studies at the University of Oxford, and Wolfson College, Oxford. Permission to consult the Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments is courtesy of Olive, Countess Fitzwilliam's Wentworth Settlement Trustees and the Director; permission to consult the Devonshire papers, Chatsworth House, is courtesy of the Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

support from William Pitt.[1] In early November, the cabinet had decided to approach Pitt formally, but the king's disapproval had prevented further action.[2] Consequently, any overture to Pitt had to be handled very carefully indeed. It would need to be made informally and in such a way that the ministry would not be compromised if nothing came of it in the end. Given this and the fact that Pitt's unpredictability made dealing with him difficult at the best of times, Rockingham put the matter into a safe pair of hands: his wife's. He trusted her political acumen; she was socially adept and used to socializing for political ends; and she knew the innermost workings of the ministry without being an official part of it.[3]

Ostensibly, Lady Rockingham approached Pitt because she wanted to buy a pair of his coach horses. The horses were actually a convenient cover for carefully choreographed socio-political action. They gave her the excuse she needed to establish contact, first by note and then later in person through reciprocal visits.[4] This gave her the opportunity to gauge Pitt's political stance and allowed her to transmit a Treasury minute from Rockingham. She also acted as a safe intermediary through whom Rockingham and Pitt could communicate.[5] By securing Pitt's approval of the minute, she laid the groundwork for future negotiations. While nothing further ensued because of Pitt's unwillingness to play a part in any ministry in which he was not the head, Lady Rockingham had fulfilled her remit. She bought the horses,[6] opened a line of communication with Pitt and obtained his approval of the minute. What is more, she ensured that both sides emerged without losing face.

[1] Newcastle to Grafton, 6 Nov. 1765, British Library (BL) Add. MS 32,971, fo. 290; Newcastle to Featherstonhaugh, 30 Nov. 1765, BL Add. MS 32,972, fos. 78–9. For an earlier interpretation of this episode, see Paul Langford, *The first Rockingham administration, 1765–1766* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 104–5.

[2] Rockingham to Newcastle, 6 Nov. 1765, BL, Add. MS 32,971, fo. 287; George III to Bute [10 Jan. 1766], in *Letters from George III to Lord Bute, 1765–1766*, ed. Romney Sedwick (London, 1939), pp. 241–6.

[3] For an example of Lady Rockingham's political acumen, see her pointed advice to Rockingham on the death of Cumberland: Lady Rockingham to Rockingham [Bath, Nov. 1765], Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments (WWM), R168-177-1–2. Her political involvement did not stop with the fall of the Rockingham administration. In March 1767, for instance, when she was once again in Bath and forced to discuss politics with Rockingham by post, he lamented the absence of his 'Minerva' but made use of her letters: 'Your *Political* letters are well timed & I make use of them – I won't tell you how – but write on –': Rockingham to Lady Rockingham, Grosvenor Square, 31 Mar. 1767, WWM, R156-9; 30 Mar. 1767, R156-8. See also my '"*My Minerva* at my elbow": the political roles of women in eighteenth-century England', in Stephen Taylor, Richard Connors, and Clyve Jones, eds., *Hanoverian Britain and empire: essays in memory of Philip Lawson* (Woodbridge, 1998).

[4] Rockingham to Lady Rockingham, Grosvenor Square, 28 Nov. 1765, WWM, R156-6. The process whereby Lady Rockingham secures a visit from Pitt and, in return, pays a visit to Lady Chatham and Pitt, is a model of exquisite politeness and flattery: Pitt to Lady Rockingham [Bath, Nov.–Dec. 1765], WWM, R151-1; Lady Rockingham to Wm. Pitt [Bath, Dec. 1765], PRO, Chatham papers, 1st ser., 30/8/54, fos. 230–1, 232–3.

[5] Lady Rockingham to Wm Pitt [Bath, Dec. 1765], PRO, 30/8/54, fos. 230–1; see also their correspondence in WWM, R151-1–4.

[6] Lady Rockingham to Pitt [Bath, Dec. 1765], PRO, 30/8/54, fos. 234–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

At the same time that she was courting Pitt, Lady Rockingham was also working to establish links with the Camdens, key supporters of Pitt, who were also in Bath at the time. Once again, she used the social arena to pursue a political goal. As she reminded Rockingham, this kind of social management had to be taken slowly; it could not be rushed:

> I will say all you desire to Ld: Camden the first time I see him, in regard to the dining it must be as it happens, I told you he was quite free & easy to me, & we talk'd much of my removal to this house with many fine speeches from him of losing me from the other, which made me say I should hope to see him in this, therefore I think if it falls in my way I may perhaps ask them to drink tea, which I believe will seem less premeditated than the form of a dinner, & I fancy you will agree with me – I din'd to day with Mr: Murray & Ly Kath: they had besides, General Stewart, & Mr: Hunt who is here, the latter I must tell you was invited in the political way, Ly: Kath: thinking that as he was a good Minority Man he would be pleased to be asked of the Party with me, he lives in the same house with them – Ly: Kath: ought to be the Ministers Wife, I assure you – .[7]

This tea-first, dinner-later strategy was eminently sensible. Both were activities in which women commonly took leading roles and neither was likely to be politically embarrassing if handled correctly. By beginning with a meeting over tea, she could initiate contact with the Camdens in a relatively informal, superficially social, situation. This played down her political purpose and obviated the need for any kind of commitment on either side. Given her position as the 'Ministers Wife', this was important. Dinner invitations had to come later. They suggested a degree of intimacy and 'connection' that was more than social, especially coming from someone in her political position. Lady Katherine Murray's dinner serves as an immediate case in point. By inviting a man with known whig sympathies to a dinner where Lady Rockingham was the guest of honour, she was acknowledging his allegiance and flattering his self-importance at the same time.

These anecdotes bear examination for what they show about women's involvement in the social aspects of political life. On one level, they reveal an ongoing dialogue about politics – indeed, a working political partnership – between Lady Rockingham and her husband. On another, more significant, level, Lady Rockingham's matter-of-fact tone in recounting them suggests that both she and Lady Katherine Murray saw themselves, and were seen by the men in their circles, as functioning members of a political world where social situations were frequently used for political ends.

I

Political historians have always accepted that there was some interweaving of society and politics in eighteenth-century England; most would also accept that this involved some elite women. Like other historical commonplaces,

[7] Lady Rockingham to Rockingham [Bath, 1765], WWM, R168-80.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

however, these assumptions have been accepted largely at face value. Historians have thus far paid little serious attention to the social aspects of politics, the construction and operation of politicized society in the eighteenth century, or the part that women played in that society.

There are historiographical and evidential reasons for this. To a large extent, it is a subject that has fallen outside the prevailing concerns of political and women's historians. Although it deals with the politics of the ruling elite – the very stuff of traditional whig and Namierite political history – it focuses neither on high politics nor on men. Indeed, for some historians it will be replete with half-forgotten memories of 'old corruption', concerned as it is with both the disenfranchised female half of the political elite and the operation of a highly personal, influenced-based form of politics that took place outside of parliament in social situations. This is especially likely because, as a subject, it remains amorphous and anecdotal. It lacks clear boundaries and specific source materials; it also remains stubbornly unquantifiable and impervious to neat correlations with policy decisions. Nor does any of this make it fit more easily into studies of popular politics. Here, it is disqualified by class as well as gender. Recent developments in political history have laid the foundation for studying it, however. As political historians have begun to turn their attention to the study of political culture, they have started to develop a more transactional, inclusive understanding of eighteenth-century politics.[8] As a result, the disenfranchised members of the extra-parliamentary nation are now accepted as legitimate political actors,[9] ritual and ceremony are recognized as playing a valuable part in electoral politics,[10] and an increased sensitivity to gender is beginning to lead to new insights into women's involvement in political life.[11] The last of these developments has also coincided with a new interest in women and politics by various women's historians critical of too simplistic an

[8] See, for instance, Linda Colley, *Britons: forging a nation, 1707–1737* (London, 1992); Eckhart Hellmuth, ed., *The transformation of political culture: England and Germany in the late eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1990); Paul Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989); also his *Public life and the propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (Oxford, 1991); and, especially, his 'British politeness and the progress of Western manners: an eighteenth-century enigma', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 7 (1997), pp. 53–72.

[9] John Brewer, *Party ideology and popular politics at the accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976). For recent work on the press, see Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, politics and public opinion in late eighteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1998).

[10] Frank O'Gorman, 'Campaign rituals and ceremonies: the social meaning of elections in England, 1780–1860', *Past and Present*, 135 (May 1992), pp. 79–115.

[11] See, for example, Colley, *Britons*; Elaine Chalus, '"That epidemical madness": women and electoral politics in the late eighteenth century', in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus, eds., *Gender in eighteenth-century England: roles, representations and responsibilities* (Harlow, 1997); also my '"*My Minerva* at my elbow"'; and my '"To serve my friends": women and political patronage in mid-eighteenth-century England', in Amanda Vickery, ed., *Women, privilege and power* (Stanford, forthcoming); P. J. Jupp, 'The roles of royal and aristocratic women in British politics, c. 1782–1832', in Mary O'Dowd and Sabine Wichert, eds., *Chattel, servant or citizen: women's status in church, state and society* (Belfast, 1995); Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, culture and politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998); Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

application of separate spheres ideology to the early modern period.[12] The gap between women and politics is starting to be filled.

What follows seeks to further this process. It emerges from a reading of approximately 150 personal and political correspondences of male and female members of the political elite over the second half of the eighteenth century.[13] It is intended to serve as an introduction to social politics – the management of people and social situations for political ends – and, in particular, to women's involvement therein. Although wide-ranging, it does not claim to be exhaustive. It maintains that politics permeated and periodically set eighteenth-century society alight. It gave the men and women of the political elite a common language, common concerns, and, to a larger extent than previously assumed, a shared experience. It also served as a determinant of status. For the women, who were traditionally connected with the social arena and whose place in the creation and maintenance of society became increasingly important in the eighteenth century, this fusion of society and politics ensured politicization. For the political elite as a whole, society became an extra-parliamentary stage upon which both small and large political dramas could be enacted. It was also a stage upon which women could play leading roles and be recognized by their contemporaries for doing so. While social politics was often fashionably deplored, it was a fact of eighteenth-century political life. We need to have a clearer understanding of it and of women's socio-political involvement if we wish to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of eighteenth-century politics and the operation of the political world.

In order to do this, we need to rethink our definition of politics. Most political and women's historians still implicitly or explicitly see politics as the science of governance. This is reflected in a hierarchy of political venues, with parliament at the top. It is also present in a tacit valorization which assumes that the only 'real' politics is high politics. In order to be 'real', actions and venues must be shown to have some direct impact on high politics and policy decisions. They must be measurable in some way. This interpretative framework has had an enormous effect on our understanding of women's historical political experience. In the main, it has led historians on a quest to discover how women made a 'difference', usually in relation to the operation

[12] See, for instance, Donna Andrew, '"The passion for public speaking": women's debating societies', in Valerie Frith, ed., *Women and history: voices of early modern England* (Toronto, 1995); Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana: duchess of Devonshire* (London, 1998); Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in early modern England, 1550–1720* (Oxford, 1998); K. D. Reynolds, *Aristocratic women and political society in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 1998); Sarah Richardson, 'The role of women in electoral politics in Yorkshire during the eighteen-thirties', *Northern History*, 32 (1996), pp. 60–84; Hilda L. Smith, ed., *Women writers and the early modern British political tradition* (Cambridge, 1998); Anne Stott, '"Female patriotism": Georgiana, duchess of Devonshire, and the Westminster election of 1784', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 17 (1993), pp. 60–84.

[13] For further information, see my 'Women in English political life, 1754–1790' (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1997).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of electoral or parliamentary politics.[14] While useful, this limits what is considered worth studying and devalues those aspects of women's political involvement which are not immediately direct or quantifiable.

Politics is, however, not always quantifiable or direct. It is in fact a very messy, nebulous business, where outcomes can be shaped by such intangible elements as personality, appearance, and influence, and by the creation and manipulation of belief and atmosphere. It is now (as any modern politician or spin doctor would agree), and arguably always has been, an art as well as a science.[15] And the art of governance is tantalizingly elusive, resistant to scientific analysis. This is, I would argue, especially true of politics in the eighteenth century. It is with this more complete understanding of politics in mind that we need to approach social politics and evaluate women's socio-political activities. Their part in the creation and maintenance of a politicized society is in itself a highly valuable political contribution and should be recognized as such. If and when it is possible to demonstrate that individuals or groups of women were able directly to affect policy through their socio-political endeavours, this should be done, but it should not be the primary goal.

II

Undoubtedly, the extent to which society was politicized in the second half of the eighteenth century owes a great deal to the historical moment. Parliamentary service was becoming more prestigious, more and more legislation was being passed, and the nation as a whole was becoming more politicized. The parliamentary political world, however, remained highly personal and familial, the prerogative of a relatively small elite. The importance that contemporaries attached to the personal dimension of politics is emphasized by the significance of patronage and such nebulous concepts as interest, influence, and 'connection'. At the same time, the rise of polite society encouraged more mingling of the sexes in a wider range of social activities and in a correspondingly expanding variety of social venues.[16] The result was a vibrant political culture and, for at least the political elite, a vital, sometimes vulgar, but none the less uniquely politicized, society.

This politicized society owed its existence to the institution of parliament. By making what was, in contemporary European terms, such a sizeable group of men into political actors, politics became a feature in the lives of a similar

[14] See, for instance, the literature around the best known of all eighteenth-century political women, Georgiana, duchess of Devonshire. Until recently, academic interest in the duchess focused on her electoral activities during the Westminster election of 1784. Even Amanda Foreman's admirable biography of the duchess, while clearly demonstrating the full range of the duchess's political activities, still implicitly privileges this hierarchical notion of politics: Foreman, *Georgiana*.

[15] This duality is recognized in the OED's definition of 'politics'.

[16] Literature on politeness has proliferated in recent years. See, especially, Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness: moral discourse and cultural politics in early eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1994); Langford, *Polite and commercial people*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

number of women. This laid the foundation for more extensive female political involvement than court-based politics had ever provided. Namier's 'inevitable Parliament men' had wives and daughters, and the latter tended to marry into similarly political families.[17] The discovery of women in eighteenth-century political life should therefore not be surprising: it was first familial, then factional, and only occasionally personal. Retrieving these women as political actors is an act of historical reintegration, not part of a neo-whig agenda of progress and liberation.[18]

Whenever parliament was sitting, it excited a persistent buzz of curiosity, capturing the imagination of the nation in a way that is difficult for us now to comprehend. Parliamentary affairs were debated and dissected in person, by letter, and in the press, not only because they were the issues of the moment, but also because they involved the most important – and frequently the most colourful – figures of the day. Family involvement in parliamentary politics often demanded some degree of participation from women, especially in maintaining family interests at the local level, but just having an MP or a politically active peer in the family had an impact on women's lives.[19] It could determine how and where women lived, how much time they had with their husbands, who they socialized with, what kinds of social events they attended, and, occasionally, even what they wore. Parliament took politically active men to London for between three and nine months every year and, by the second half of the century, more women (and children) appear to have joined in the annual migration, as parliamentary sessions lengthened and the social season became increasingly important. The lone MP in lodgings, still a familiar figure in the 1750s, was increasingly replaced by the political family living on a fashionable street in the West End by the last quarter of the century.

Parliament brought the political elite to London, but few venues existed that were tailored to meet the social needs of politicians. The Houses of Parliament were notoriously cramped, uncomfortable, and inconvenient – not conducive to the kind of socio-political manoeuvring that was so much a part of eighteenth-century politics. A wide assortment of clubs, taverns, and coffee-houses partially filled this gap. They supplied important, and uniquely male, venues for politicized socializing. Still, their political influence can be overemphasized. In London, more consistently than anywhere else, 'Society' itself was charged with politics. A political current ran through events at the court, the theatre, the opera, balls, and assemblies; even everyday encounters in the streets, parks, or public gardens, or activities like visiting, dinners, and cards could be politicized. A late debate or a division could take enough men

[17] Sir Lewis Namier, *The structure of politics at the accession of George III* (2nd edn, London, 1960), p. 2.

[18] Anna Clark, 'Gender and politics in the long eighteenth century', *History Workshop Journal*, 18 (1999), pp. 252–7.

[19] For further details, see my '"That epidemical madness"', and my '"*My Minerva* at my elbow"'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

out of circulation to cast a blight over the best-laid social plans: dinners were delayed; card parties and assemblies were blighted; balls suffered from a shortage of partners; and the crowds at the theatre and the opera were noticeably thinner. During particularly tense moments, women postponed meals and stayed up, sometimes all night, in order to follow the latest political developments – delivered by notes or messengers.[20] Interest in politics was such that the first man to arrive from the House of Commons after an important division could bring a loo party to a halt;[21] social evenings were interrupted so that controversial new publications, such as Wilkes's address to the freeholders of Middlesex, could be read aloud;[22] and important decisions, such as the prince of Wales being voted out of the queen's council during the regency crisis, could flash through a theatre, diverting the audience's attention entirely away from the stage.[23]

Just being members of this society ensured some degree of female politicization. Political excitement and interest were contagious, periodically sweeping through society, affecting everything and everyone in their wake. When this happened, it was impossible not to be affected by what contemporaries often referred to as a contagion: an 'epidemical Madness';[24] the 'rage of politics'.[25] Nor was this a new development in the second half of the century. Writing during the first uncertain months of the Broad Bottom administration in 1744, Lady Hervey had explained to a correspondent that, 'if one does not know how to use the words *war*, *invasion*, *treaty*, *minister*, *patriot*, *rogue*, and *rascal*, with all the rest of the political jargon, one must not pretend to correspond or converse with any human creature, either in town or country'.[26] Similarly, writing from London nearly thirty years later, Lady Spencer would concentrate on 'those three material articles the Peace the Debates in Parliament & the Opera'.[27] During times like these, even women

[20] Journal, London, 26 May 1767, in *The letters and journals of Lady Mary Coke* (4 vols., Edinburgh, 1889–96), II, p. 6; duchess of Devonshire to Lady Spencer [London, 19 Dec. 1788], Chatsworth MSS (Devonshire papers) 934. During the marathon debate of 17–18 Feb. 1783, Lady Spencer's network of male family members, friends, and political supporters kept her very well informed. She received notes from parliament detailing the latest developments in the debate from, in turn, Lord Althorp, Lord Jersey, Lord John Cavendish, Lord Lucan, Henry Minchin, Lord Althorp again, and Richard Rigby, at 8 p.m., 10 p.m., 10.30 p.m., 'past 12 o'clock', 3 a.m., 8 a.m., and 8.05 a.m., respectively. See BL MS Coll. (Althorp papers), F. 120 [unfoliated].

[21] Journal, London, 27 Feb. 1767, 30 Nov. 1774, *Letters and journals of Lady Mary Coke*, I, pp. 158–9, III, p. 437.

[22] Journal, London, 6 Feb. 1769, ibid., III, p. 19.

[23] Hon. Mrs Martha Harcourt to Lady Harcourt [London], 16 Jan. 1789, in *The Harcourt papers*, ed. E. W. Harcourt (14 vols., Oxford, 1876–1905), IV, pt 1, p. 178.

[24] Breadalbane to Lady Grey, Edinburgh, 10 Nov. 1767, Bedfordshire Record Office, Wrest Park (Lucas papers) (BRO, WP), L30/9/17/125. For the political charge generated by electioneering, see my '"That epidemical madness"'.

[25] 'Lady Spencer to Nuneham, Rome, 13 Apr. 1764', in *Harcourt papers*, ed. Harcourt, VIII, p. 75.

[26] Lady Hervey to [Mr Morris], Ickworth, 7 Apr. 1744, in *Letters, with a memoir and illustrative notes* (London, 1821), no. XV, p. 57.

[27] Lady Spencer to the duchess of Devonshire [London], 8 Dec. 1782, Chatsworth MSS 472.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who were well away from London were likely to remark that there was suddenly 'no Subject of conversation but Politics'.[28]

III

And conversation there was in abundance. Politics was something that the members of the political elite had in common, and talking about politics served a number of purposes. The quest for the latest 'News' was unending. As a careful distillation of the most up-to-date information about people, places, and political developments, 'News' referred to information that was political or social, or a mixture thereof. It was most likely to be political gossip. 'News' was found anywhere that members of the political elite met. It could be provincial or metropolitan, but it was most likely to be centred on, and generated by, London and Westminster. For contemporaries, it was simply 'the Chat of the Town'.[29] Those who needed more information than they could gather in person, or lacked the necessary personal contacts often supplemented their store of 'News' with that found in printed publications, particularly pamphlets and newspapers.

Once gathered, 'News' was pondered and analysed. Then, it was disseminated, either in person or by letter. On one level, it served as little more than padding: social chit-chat. As such, it fulfilled all of the functions of gossip: it narrated, interpreted, and judged; it fostered a sense of inclusivity; and it acted as a means of social control.[30] At another level, it served a political purpose. For the socially ambitious – men and women – knowledge of men and measures suggested proximity to power and was a weapon in the battles of social one-upmanship that were rife in society. For politically ambitious women, it was the very essence of interest and influence. Being the first to know the latest developments (and pass them on or not) could be decisive, personally or electorally: personally, because of the importance that rumour and gossip could play in obtaining patronage; or, electorally, by forecasting the downfall of an administration or calculating the timing of a dissolution. The eagerness with which correspondents sought to ascertain who was likely to live or die, or who was 'in' or 'out' with the minister or the king, was part of a dynamic that can appear morbid or inordinately self-seeking to modern sensibilities. It was, however, only logical at a time when an individual's career, a family's social status or its economic situation could depend upon the swift receipt and judicious use of just such information. It is no wonder that social interactions

[28] Agneta Yorke to Philip Yorke, Sydney Farm [18 Jan. 1789], BL, Add. MS 35,386, (Hardwicke papers), fo. 435v.

[29] General Cunningham to Lady Spencer, St James's Place, 17 Nov. 1772, BL, MS Coll. Althorp, F. 119.

[30] I plan to address the political uses of gossip and rumour in the eighteenth century at greater length elsewhere. As a subject, gossip is gradually starting to attract attention. For a general study, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York, 1985).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

among the political elite often had an air of self-interested political alertness that barely masked a sharp competitive edge.

For socially active women, or women whose homes were political meeting-places, collecting 'News' was not difficult. Although Lady Grey excused her tardiness in sending electoral information to her husband in 1760 by saying, 'News is not apt to Walk into ones Dressing-room to one',[31] she was not entirely correct. Apt or not, it occasionally did. For fashionable women in London, dressing rooms could be meeting-places and the source of all sorts of information.[32] In general, 'News' entered the home via family members, friends, and visitors (male and female), and was shared as a matter of course during visits, over cards, or with food and drink. The type of information that women gathered reflected the circles in which they moved. Once gathered, it was passed on. Comments about parliamentary men and measures appear – unsurprisingly – most consistently in the letters of women who had close parliamentary connections. Mothers with an eye to their children's political educations or future careers frequently included chronicles of political events in their letters. Mrs Harris, the mother of the future Lord Malmesbury, was typical when in 1763 she recounted the day's developments in parliament to her adolescent son: 'Your father returned from the House at two this morning: great debating. Lord North moved...'.[33] Daughters from politically active families were likely to do the same. Writing to her father, Lord Guilford, in 1775, Louisa Verney reported all that she had learned about who would get the new cabinet appointments. She also enclosed the preceding Tuesday's minutes of the House of Lords.[34] From the opposing, Foxite, camp, the duchess of Devonshire regularly sent what she learned to her mother: 'All our uncles din'd here today. The dissolution is not credited in the city.'[35] Since Lady Spencer managed the family's political interest at St Albans, this sort of electoral news was necessary. News of national import was also certain to be passed on and discussed. The victorious battle of the Saints in April 1782 elicited a sardonically patriotic response from Anne Brompton:

Mr A[ddington] – is all exultation upon this important victory & is writing at a great rate on the subject – we females may be allowed I hope to participate in the general

[31] Lady Grey to Royston [Wrest Park, Jan. 1760], BL, Add. MS 35,376, fo. 40v.

[32] Duchess of Devonshire to Lady Spencer, London, 24 Mar. 1784, Chatsworth MSS 610.

[33] Mrs Harris to James Harris, Whitehall, 15 Nov. 1763, in *A series of letters of the first earl of Malmesbury his family and friends from 1745 to 1820*, ed. earl of Malmesbury (2 vols., London, 1870), I, p. 99. Lady Stafford's political grooming of her son, Granville Leveson Gower, began yet earlier. By the time that he was twelve (in 1787), she had already set up William Pitt as his model politician and was regularly including an assortment of political information in her letters to him. See *Lord Granville Leveson Gower (first Earl Granville) private correspondence, 1781 to 1821*, ed. Castalia Countess Granville (2 vols., London, 1916), I, pp. 5ff.

[34] Louisa Verney to Guilford, London, 8 Nov. 1775, Bodleian Library (Bodl.), MSS North d.16 (correspondence of the earl of Guilford), vol. XIII, fos. 61–2.

[35] Duchess of Devonshire to Lady Spencer [London], 17 Mar. 1784, in *Georgiana: extracts from the correspondence of Georgiana, duchess of Devonshire*, ed. Lady Bessborough (London, 1955), p. 77. For the most thorough examination of the duchess, see Foreman, *Georgiana*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

satisfaction it has occasioned amongst the other Sex – for my one part I feel much interrested [sic] tho' no great *Politician*, & truly wish the French, Dutch, Spaniards & all a *total* defeat – .[36]

IV

Although the commercialization of leisure that was taking place during the eighteenth century meant that there were more opportunities and places for men and women to mix, the home remained one of the main venues. The importance of personal connections in politics and patronage, and the relatively amateur and informal approach to politics itself, meant that politicians, patrons, and clients often met, mingled, and plotted in each other's homes. Much of the politicking that would take place in public or in institutionalized settings by the later nineteenth century was still firmly based in the home in the eighteenth century.

The extent to which social activities in the home were politicized depended upon the political importance of the host family and those on the guest list. Timing and location could also be important. Activities in London during the parliamentary season were the most consistently politicized, but so too could be the visits, dinners, house parties, and public days that were part of maintaining a political interest in the country. The latter could play an important part in the overall electoral process and were especially likely to become openly political as elections approached.[37] Visits and dinners bear further examination here, as they served the widest range of political ends.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, visiting was a ritualized activity which ranged from the ceremonial to the purely personal.[38] In some households, guest lists were predetermined by the hostess's or the family's political affiliation, but most politically active families attracted a wide assortment of visitors. Women's socio-political involvement could only have been facilitated by the linking of women with the social arena. Social events were considered to be largely their prerogative. Contemporary men's and women's sources are rife with references to visiting 'Mrs This' or dining at the home of 'Lady That'. In his pocket diary for 1754 the solid tory squire, Sir Roger Newdigate, noted the majority of his dinner engagements by hostess rather than host.[39] James Boswell, as a young man about town in 1762, did the same: 'I had Erskine with me at breakfast, after which he and I went to Lady

[36] Mrs A. Brompton to Charlotte Addington [n. p.], May 1782, Gloucestershire Record Office (GRO), D421 C8.

[37] For a discussion of women's involvement in the social aspects of the electoral process, see my '"That epidemical madness"'.

[38] For a careful examination of the ritual of visiting at the turn of the eighteenth century, see Susan Whyman, *Sociability and power in late Stuart England: the cultural worlds of the Verneys, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 1999). I would like to thank Susan Whyman for letting me consult her manuscript prior to publication.

[39] See, for example, the diary of Sir Roger Newdigate for 1754: Warwick County Record Office, CR 136 A(585).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Frances Erskine's, and then I went to Lady Northumberland's.'[40] More than thirty years later Sir Gilbert Elliot also regularly followed this pattern. His account of one such dinner is particularly revealing, as it emphasizes what could happen when women controlled the family's socializing but held different political views from their husbands:

I dined on Sunday at Mrs Legge's in Grosvenor Square, with Windham, Pelham, Douglas, Cholmondeley, and Elliot. Legge is a violent Tory, or, if you please, in his heart strongly against all our party. This is occasioned by his connection with Lord Bagot and his family, who have, I know not why, a perfect dominion over him. He is so quiet a little man, that I never suspected this till lately; but as Mrs Legge and all her friends are of another sort, I fear Mr. Legge suffers much internal mortification, for he never sees at his own house any company of his own way of thinking; and as *we* are pretty strong, and sufficiently violent in our conversation, he must undergo it all in solitary silence and dudgeon.[41]

For young women, this sort of politicized socializing in the home often formed an important part of their political education.[42] A young guest of Mrs Delany's in 1783, for instance, was left to contemplate the *realpolitik* of allegiance, ambition, and power after sitting in on a discussion which revealed that Lord Stormont's family had switched allegiances:

My uncle Frederick came and staid near 2 hours. Lady *Stormont* came; they talk'd of ye politicks of ye day; Lady S[tormont] was more animated and open upon the subject than usual. The K[ing] was blamed for his want of o*peness*, in short ye language of ye S[tormont] family was totally different to what I *had ever* heard it. Ye P[rince]'s conduct was praised. Mr. F[ox] was *no longer* an obnoxious person. I will make no further mem., for it is painfull to dwell on the *power of interest* over ye human mind and heart![43]

The homes of those politicians who were 'in business' were often awash with information. Members of these families were expected to keep their friends and correspondents informed. Lady Mount Edgcumbe was thrilled to her patriotic core when her home became the '*rendez-vous*' for 'Admirals, Captains, & Secretaries … & A. Keppel his lodging', when the fleet returned to port for a refit in 1778. She also gained unrivalled access to naval news, and, as she informed Lady Harcourt, 'you may depend upon it that I know the truth, & you may depend upon it that I tell it'.[44]

Men and women who were in London during the parliamentary year were

[40] Journal, 30 Dec. 1762, in *Boswell's London journal, 1762–1763*, ed. Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1950), p. 111.

[41] Sir Gilbert to Lady Elliot, Pall Mall Court, 20 Jan. 1789, in *Life and letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot first earl of Minto from 1751 to 1806*, ed. Lady Minto (3 vols., London, 1874), I, p. 267.

[42] See, for example, Elizabeth Appleton, *Private education: or, a practical plan for the studies of young ladies: with an address to parents, private governesses and young ladies* (2nd edn, London, 1816), pp. 292–3.

[43] Miss Hamilton, diary, Clarges Street, 22 Dec. 1783, in *The autobiography and correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany: with interesting reminiscences of King George the third and Queen Charlotte*, ed. Lady Llanover (3 vols., 2nd ser., London, 1862), III, p. 187.

[44] Lady Mount Edgcumbe to Lady Harcourt, Mount-Edgcumbe, 2 Aug. 1778, in *Harcourt Papers*, ed. Harcourt, VIII, pp. 274–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

expected to be sources of 'News', no matter their personal preference. For those who disliked politics, this was a burden. One of William Shenstone's male correspondents fell into this category: 'Now for News – I am in *London*; for which Reason, I suppose I must not be excused; tho' I hate it, remember very little, and am most likely to blunder in the Recital of that little. The House of Commons have addressed the King…'.[45] Lady Frances Scott, who both disliked politics and made fashionable *ennui* a way of life, strove to find ways to confound her correspondents' expectations. As her stepfather was Charles Townshend, the chancellor of the exchequer, and the family lived in Downing Street, she could not plead ignorance. Instead, writing to the duchess of Portland, she turned the argument around neatly:

I suppose you do not expect news from me, as I daresay you know, much more at Welbeck, than I do in the *Chancellor of the Exchequers* House, for there one hears too much either to remember or believe anything; for which reason I shall not tire your Patience with a tedious list of all those who either do, or are Expected to fill the vacant offices.[46]

For those who were interested in politics, this task was not as onerous. As the wife of the first lord of the Admiralty, Lady Anson lived in the Admiralty and benefited from a steady stream of visitors who supplied her with a great deal of information. She put what she learned to good use in what she light-heartedly termed her 'Office' as '*News-Writer* to ones freinds [sic]'.[47] In her case, the 'freinds' were primarily the members of her family who were not in London, specifically her brother, Joseph, who was stationed at The Hague, and her eldest brother and his wife, who spent a good deal of their time in the country.

Information gained in this way was valuable coin in the currency of social exchange, but it could also have direct political purpose. When, in November 1783, a morning visitor of Louisa Macdonald's confirmed rumours about the Fox/North administration's plans for action on India at the beginning of the upcoming parliamentary session, she immediately sent the news to her stepmother, Lady Gower. She knew that it would give Lady Gower ammunition to press the ever-reluctant Gower, then in opposition, to attend:

I hear the Ministers intend to bring forward & carry through as much Business as possible before Christmas as many People whom they think likely to oppose them are not come up. An adherent of theirs told me so yesterday morning. The first that will come upon the Tapis will be the subject of India, where I understand the administration are to strike a bold stroke & recal [sic] Mr. Hastings sending in his Place his avowed Enemy Mr. F[rancis]. The former has so strong a Party in this Country that I own I did not think they would have ventured it & scarcely know how to believe it yet, but it is not intended to bring it on as a direct Question lest in that Form it should not be carried, but to institute a Board who are to report to the Crown their advice respecting all

[45] Mr Whistler to William Shenstone [London], 13 Apr. [n. d.], in Frances Seymour, *Select letters between the late duchess of Somerset … and others* (2 vols., London, 1778), II, p. 31.

[46] Lady Frances Scott to duchess of Portland, Downing Street, Dec. [1766–7?], Portland papers, University of Nottingham (PP), PwG 169.

[47] Lady Anson to Lady Grey, Admiralty, 24 Oct. [1758], BRO, WP, L30/9/3/83.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Measures & the Crown to be invested with a power of acting. All this is however only the Town Talk but it is much credited.[48]

Although this information seems to have been gleaned from a social call, some visits were motivated more – or entirely – by political concerns. Political visits sought to persuade or pressure, seek or dispense advice, or declare or discern allegiances. All could lead to women visiting and being visited with political intent. In the country, requests for pardons and patronage were frequently made of women who were the representatives of leading families and/or had useful connections of their own. Anne Boothby Skrymsher was both a member of a leading county family in Leicestershire and a friend of Charles Jenkinson's. As a result, her interest was eagerly sought. In 1763, after having been 'worryd continualy [sic]' to obtain a reprieve for a man who was believed to have been unjustly convicted, she took up the case with Jenkinson: 'I Shall thank You as long as I live for upon my honor hear [sic] is one of the aldermen of Leicester has come running Seven mile on foot in a heavey [sic] rain to desire me to write to you again.'[49]

For women from politically active families and especially for women who were known to be politically active themselves, these sorts of visits were a matter of course. They were encouraged by prevailing beliefs about influence as inherent in intimate, personal relationships: women who were close to political men were assumed to have at least the potential for unrivalled political interest. At times, both men and women appear to have self-consciously, even cynically, exploited this belief and other negative stereotypes about women and politics. Assumptions about women's 'natural' inclination to meddle or their lust for power could be used to trivialize or dismiss their involvement in politics, but these beliefs could also be used to provide a convenient cover for action. Thus, women could act as principals or intermediaries in political manoeuvres which might prove difficult or compromising if handled directly by men. If the women were successful, the affair could then become official; if they failed, it could be dropped discreetly.

At times, therefore, the purpose of visits was implied rather than stated. When the duchess of Portland received a visit from William Burke prior to the opening of parliament in 1774, she was left slightly puzzled: 'I think his visit to me was chiefly to desire me to press you all in my power to come to town some time before the Parliament meets.'[50] Similar examples can be found in the correspondences of politically active families, great and small, throughout the period. When George Grenville became first lord, Gilbert Elliot paid a special visit to Elizabeth Grenville. In part, the visit was to reiterate his personal support for Grenville. More importantly, he came to tell her that he had been

[48] Louisa Macdonald to Lady Gower, Adelphi (London), 14 Nov. [1783], PRO (Granville papers), 30/29/4/5/47, fos. 719v–20.

[49] Mrs Boothby Skrymsher to Charles Jenkinson, Tooly Park, 20 Sept. 1763, BL, Add. MS 38,201 (Liverpool papers), fo. 91.

[50] Duchess of Portland to Portland, Burlington House, 14 Nov. 1774, PP, PwF 10661.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

authorized to relay Lord Bute's support: 'that he wished every friend of his to give their thorough assistance'.[51] He was relying on her passing this information on to Grenville.

That women also turned their visits to political ends underlines both the interconnections between society and politics at the time and the way that familial politics integrated women into political life. During election years, candidates' and patrons' wives were expected to exchange visits with the womenfolk of the leading voters; between elections, these visits, while less frequent, aimed at maintaining or consolidating the family's political interest.[52] Similar visits also took place on a grander scale in London. Women as politically and personally diverse as the duchess of Northumberland and Lady Rockingham can be found visiting and socializing with the lord mayor and lady mayoress of London when their factions were in search of political support.[53] As it was *de rigueur* for the elite to view the lady mayoress as the epitome of vulgarity, the onset of these visits invariably generated sarcastic comments from the supporters of other factions. The fact that Lady Rockingham's visits coincided with the duke of Grafton's resignation did not go unremarked by Lady Irwin, a partisan of the new North administration: 'the Gentle Marchioness I hear has been twice to visit the Lady Mayoress what a regard they must have for each other! such Patriotesses'.[54]

The resumption of visiting between women who had been divided by politics was also remarked, as it served to indicate that social harmony was being restored. Although such visits might mean little more than the resumption of ordinary social relations between individuals and families, they also bore watching. Depending upon people and circumstances, they could also be a sign of an impending political reconciliation. For the women who were involved, these sorts of visits required tact. The duchess of Devonshire, re-establishing contacts in Derbyshire after the vitriolic 1784 election, knew this well: 'I went to Mrs Gisborne & found [her] vastly fearful of any offence being taken about Election disagreements & you may be sure I was very very civil.'[55] When political divisions were familial, the situation was yet more delicate. The complicated, on-again-off-again relationships of the Grenville cousinhood are a case in point. Whenever the men were not speaking, their wives handled the necessary business between the families through letters and visits. When reconciliation became a possibility, it too was mooted through the women. In 1764, when relations between Lord Temple and George Grenville were at an

[51] 'Mrs Grenville's narrative of events from November 1763–January 1764', in *The Grenville papers: being the correspondence of Richard Grenville, earl Temple, K.G., and the Right Hon. George Grenville, their friends and contemporaries*, ed. William James Smith (4 vols., London, 1852–3), II, p. 243.

[52] See my 'Women in English political life', pt 3.

[53] For the duchess of Northumberland, see Lady Irwin to Lady Gower, Templenewsham, 2 Mar. 1770, PRO, 30/29/4/2/32, fo. 170v.

[54] Lady Irwin to Lady Gower, Templenewsham, 2 Apr. 1770, PRO, 30/29/4/2/33, fo. 173.

[55] Duchess of Devonshire to Lady Spencer [Chatsworth], 16 Aug. 1784, Chatsworth MSS, 639A.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

all-time low, a family situation arose that allowed Grenville to make the first step towards re-establishing contact and political connection. As Elizabeth Grenville's journal indicates, the women dealt with the situation smoothly:

Tuesday Feb: 12. Mr Grenville recd. a letter from Mr H. Grenville from Constantinople dated Jan: 3d. stating to him the uneasiness of his situation there & his earnest wish to be recall'd. Mrs Grenville went to Lady Temple Wednesday 13 to communicate this to her & to acquaint her with the proposition Mr Grenville intended to make to Mr Henry of the office of one of the Comiss[ioners] of the Customs then vacant wch. as it would oblige him to vacate his seat in parliament would exempt him from involving himself in the unhappy differences in his own family. Lady Temple seem'd pleas'd with the kindness of this scheme towards Mr Henry & said she would take an occasion to apprize Ld. Temple of it. Mrs Grenville told her she was at liberty to do it if she pleas'd but that she brought no message from Mr Grenville to Ld Temple.[56]

Visits could also be put to factional ends. When the duke of Gloucester married without the king's approval, the opposition took his side while the administration supported the king. This division was pointedly underlined in women's visits to the new duchess. Almost without exception only the wives of opposition MPs called upon her.[57] A similar situation had arisen when the duke and duchess of Bedford's house had been attacked by a mob of weavers in 1765. Sympathizers from almost the entire political spectrum had called to express their support. There was, however, one notable absence: the Butes. Animosity between the Bedfords and the Butes had been fuelled by Bedford, who had tactlessly insisted to the king that Bute had instigated the riot. Although the Northumberlands, representing Bute's following, paid a token visit, the duchess of Bedford took the view (correctly) that Lady Bute's non-appearance was a political as well as a social slight:

Ld & Ly Northd. made a visit at Bedford House while Mr Grenville was there, Ld Northd. had a very cold reception & the language wch. pass'd before him could not be very pleasing. The Dutchess [sic] of Bedford [said] that the only persons who on this occasion had neither sent nor come to her was Lady Bute & Mrs Anne Pitt & that she was very glad of it as it put an end to all difficulties of situation between her & Lady Bute.[58]

By no means all of the socializing that took place in the home was intimate mixing among friends. While hosting public days was one of the socio-political duties of the summer for women from politically active aristocratic families, fashionable women in London often opened their homes on designated days or evenings during the parliamentary season. These 'days' saw guests come and

[56] Political diary of George Grenville, 1761–8 (by Elizabeth Grenville), BL, Add. MS 42,083, fo. 116r–v.

[57] Mrs Howe to Lady Spencer, Grafton Street, 22 Feb. [1773], BL, MS Coll. Althorp, F. 43. A similar use of visiting by opposition women as a statement of political support can be found during the Queen Caroline Affair in 1820. See E. A. Smith, *A queen on trial: the affair of Queen Caroline* (Stroud, 1993).

[58] Diary of George Grenville, 20 May 1765, BL, Add. MS 42,083, fos. 172v–3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

go, exchanging polite conversation, society gossip, and political affairs. Cards, refreshments, music, or even an impromptu hop might be included. In December 1760, when the big houses were just starting to open up for the winter, Anne Brudenell informed Lord Guilford that the 'Duts: of Norfolk is very soon to open her house every Wednesday, the Duts: of Bedford has begun Thursday'.[59] And, in 1762, Boswell was thrilled to receive an invitation to the duchess of Northumberland's select Fridays.[60] While the balance between the social and political components of these events varied, the political allegiances of the hostesses and their families, and the political loyalties and/or ambitions of the guests, could be reflected in who attended. The duchess of Norfolk, although a member of the Catholic aristocracy, identified with the Old Corps whigs; the duchess of Bedford was a central figure in the Bedford faction; and the duchess of Northumberland was both a member of the court and related through marriage to Lord Bute.

As hostesses, women were well placed to be political facilitators. Those who had menfolk 'in business', or who had social or political aspirations themselves (or whose families did), worked to achieve the right blend of society and politics. In 1780, after William Eden's political ambitions were boosted by his appointment as private secretary to Lord Carlisle, the new lord-lieutenant of Ireland, his wife opened their house so regularly that contemporaries spoke of her 'constant Supper'. Although she never succeeded in becoming one of London's leading hostesses, her home did become a minor political venue much frequented by the members of the *bon ton* and the clientele of Brookes's club.[61]

The outstanding political hostesses of the period were mistresses of mixing the social with the political. Placed at the centre of the political world by birth or marriage, they made a 'career' of politicized socializing, using their skills more for factional than family ends. Most of what is known about eighteenth-century political hostesses still centres on the semi-legendary activities of the foremost opposition hostesses of the last quarter of the century. They did not hold the field alone, however. More work needs to be done to uncover the activities of their administration counterparts. Lady Salisbury, for example, loved spectacle and splendour, and seems to have channelled her inexhaustible energy into her activities as a hostess with the same verve that she put into fox-hunting. Her most impressive socio-political coup came with the entertainment of George III and Queen Charlotte, when they travelled to Hatfield in 1800 to review the local militia in the park of Hatfield House.[62] In her memoirs, Lady

[59] Anne Brudenell to Guilford, London, 4 Dec. 1760, Bodl., MS North d.8, fo. 28v.

[60] Journal, 10 Dec. 1762, in *Boswell's London journal*, ed. Pottle, p. 73.

[61] Lady Waldegrave to Lady Gower, Whitehall, 30 Oct. 1780, PRO, 30/29/5/2/55, fo. 205.

[62] Tracing the activities of the administration hostesses is difficult because they have left fewer caches of relevant documents. See David Cecil, *The Cecils of Hatfield House: a portrait of an English ruling family* (London, 1975), pp. 188–91; *Memoirs of the Lady Hester Stanhope, as related by herself in conversations with her physician*, ed. Charles Meryon (3 vols., London, 1845), II, p. 105. The duchess of Gordon's flair for entertaining seems to have been passed on to at least some of her daughters. Lady Shelley recounts in amazement a visit to Woburn in 1812 that saw the duchess of Bedford

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Hester Stanhope, William Pitt's last hostess, included Lady Salisbury as one of the few outstanding hostesses of the late eighteenth century. She grouped her together with the Ladies Liverpool and Mansfield, the marchioness of Stafford, and the duchesses of Rutland and Gordon. Each had her own style. Given Lady Hester's own hoydenish predilections as a young woman, it is not surprising that she preferred the duchess of Gordon's flamboyance and informality to the duchess of Rutland's elegance and restraint. She recalled the duchess of Rutland's entertainments as 'so heavy – a great deal of high breeding and *bon ton*; but there was, somehow, nothing to enliven you', whereas at the duchess of Gordon's 'there were people of the same fashion, and the crowd was just as great; but then she was so lively, and everybody was so animated, and seemed to know so well what they were about – quite another thing'.[63] She reserved her highest praise for Lady Liverpool, who she rated as a more skilled all-round hostess than the famed duchess of Devonshire:

I have seen Lady Liverpool come into a room full of people; and she would bow to this one, speak to that one, and, when you thought she must tread on the toes of a third, turn round like a tetotum, and utter a few words so amiable, that everybody was charmed with her. As for the Duchess of D[evonshire], it was all a 'fu, fu, fuh', and 'what shall I do? Oh, dear me! I am quite in a fright!' – and so much affectation, that it could not be called high breeding; although she knew very well how to lay her traps for some young man, whom she wanted to inveigle into her parties, and all that.[64]

The ability of political hostesses to 'inveigle' potential supporters was crucial to the opposition during their long period in the political wilderness in the late eighteenth century. Lacking the administration's built-in ability to use power, patronage, and place to attract followers, the opposition politicians had to make membership desirable if they wished to maintain a credible political following. How better to do it than to invest it with social cachet? Fortunately for the fate of the late eighteenth-century opposition, the charisma of Charles James Fox was equalled by that of its leading political hostess, the duchess of Devonshire. She and Lady Melbourne, in particular, were both leaders of the *ton* and dedicated to the opposition cause. They were renowned for keeping their houses 'perpetually open' and attracting a glittering, if fast, cross-section of elite society. According to a disapproving Lady Harcourt, all of the prince of Wales's subsequent – and, in her view, wrong-headed – political actions could be traced to them. The prince had been understandably attracted to the homes of these 'two young, handsome, and agreeable women ... fond of amusement'. It was there, however, Lady Harcourt complained, that 'Mr.

start a pillow fight in the card-room after dinner that ended in 'a regular battle ... with cushions, oranges, and apples'. The ball hosted by another daughter, the duchess of Richmond, on the eve of the battle of Waterloo, has become legendary. Lady Shelley to Lady Spencer, Woburn, Dec. 1812, in *The diary of Frances Lady Shelley, 1818–1873*, ed. Richard Edgcumbe (2 vols., London, 1912–13), I, pp. 49–50. [63] *Memoirs of Lady Hester Stanhope*, ed. Meryon, II, pp. 52–3.

[64] Ibid., pp. 105–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fox, Mr. Burke, and Mr. Sheridan had first free access to him.'[65] The political dividends that the Foxite whigs reaped as a result of their hostesses' efforts were obvious to contemporaries. Lady Hester Stanhope was not alone in recognizing the special part played by the duchess of Devonshire; her efforts even won the grudging admiration of a much sterner critic, Lady Mary Coke. She conceded: 'She really is a very good Politician. As soon as ever any young man comes from abroad he is immediately invited to Devonshire House and to Chatsworth – and by that means he is to be of the Opposition.'[66]

This combination of good company, preferably supplemented by good food and drink, was a staple of eighteenth-century politics. Meals of all sorts, but especially dinners, proved ideal for political gossip, discussion, or debate. They were also well suited to seeking favours or support, openly or through the exercise of charm, flattery, and solicitation. Women's presence at dinners seems to have been increasingly taken for granted. At the very least, by the second half of the century the woman of the house was expected to do the honours. It is not uncommon to find references to dinners where men outnumbered women,[67] but a dinner that had no women at all – a 'Man dinner'[68] – came to occasion comment and even some complaint by the last quarter of the century. Henry Mackenzie, writing in 1792, complained about just such a dinner with friends in London. The food and the wine had been excellent, but he had 'an objection to the entertainment': 'It was a *male* party, Mr. Hom[e's wife] not being with us.' She had, he reveals, gone to the theatre to see Mrs Siddons perform.[69]

Attending or hosting dinners with overt or covert political purposes was expected of women from politically active families. In the country, dining with the squire and his family, with the local aldermen (with or without their wives), or even with groups of freeholders (most likely during election years), was a familial political duty, hardly an option.[70] In London, where the need to entertain across social divides in order to maintain a political interest was minimized, dinners might dwindle into social gatherings of friends. On the other hand, they might also be politicized to advance personal or factional interests. In such cases, it was important that the company include a number

[65] Elizabeth Lady Harcourt, 'Memoirs of the years 1788–1789', in *Harcourt papers*, ed. Harcourt, IV, pt 1, p. 41.

[66] Scottish National Register of Archives, Douglas-Home MSS D95/54: diary of Lady Mary Coke, 12 Sept. 1787, as quoted in Foreman, *Georgiana*, p. 174. My thanks to Amanda Foreman for making me aware of this.

[67] This practice did not disappear in the nineteenth century. Lady Shelley records being the only woman present at a dinner of politicians at Robert Peel's on 23 Nov. 1819: 'Of course politics were much discussed, though we are all on the same side – against the Radicals', in *Diary of Frances Lady Shelley*, ed. Edgcumbe, II, p. 90.

[68] When Therese Parker's MP husband held 'a Man dinner which she did not like', she simply went and dined with her sister: Anne Robinson to Frederick Robinson, Whitehall, 1 Mar. 1773, BL, Add. MS 48,218, fo. 37v.

[69] Henry Mackenzie to [unknown], London, 26 Mar. 1792, in Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC), *Home*, pp. 137–8.

[70] See my 'Women in English political life', pt 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of hand-picked guests who could be relied upon to flatter the guest of honour's sense of self-importance or put him at his ease.[71]

Eighteenth-century politicians used private visits and dinners *en famille* as marks of favour.[72] For women this could be an imposition, but it was an inescapable one. Usually, husbands and wives worked together to ensure that a few select guests were present to ease the burden of entertaining. Occasionally, however, even a woman as committed to playing the part of 'La femme d'un ministre' as Lady Emily Kildare could find herself in an awkward situation, if a guest arrived completely unexpectedly:[73]

My Sister says she don't understand the Adjutant Generals dining with me *en famille* that as you may imagine was by chance Lord K[ildare] had invited him as he does all Officers & people in employment now he is in the Government and he happened to come one Day when we were quite alone that's to say *en famille* the Girls, Lady Dowager and ourselves.[74]

Indeed, such a predicament would have been difficult for Lady Kildare's sister, Lady Caroline Fox, who was uncomfortable in social situations. Lavinia Lady Spencer was another political wife who kept her socio-political activities to a bare minimum, but, in her case, it was because she disliked having to mix with persons of lower rank. When her husband was at the Admiralty during the French Revolutionary wars, it was customary to invite all returning sea captains to dinner. She accepted the men, but refused to invite their wives, thus pre-empting any need to maintain their acquaintance later.[75]

More politically astute hostesses accepted the necessity of these sorts of meals; they might even initiate them. Lady Rockingham, as the beginning of this article has demonstrated, understood the political potential of the dinner table and was accomplished in making use of it. An invitation to dine with her was known to be as political as it was social. Whether she was persuading chance guests to stay for dinner and discussions at Wentworth Woodhouse[76] or issuing invitations as part of her political armoury in Bath or London, she was as likely to act on her own as with her husband. Like the duchess of Devonshire after her, she turned her London home into the headquarters of the faction. She was particularly noted for using her dinners to secure Rockinghamites who were wavering in their loyalties. That she would have 'influence' was simply assumed:

[71] Lady Shelley's description of her efforts to make the duke of Wellington's first visit to their estate in Sussex a success illustrates the amount of work even a 'private' visit could entail. Not only did she work with her steward to ensure that the tenants knew about the visit and gave the duke a rapturous welcome, but she was careful to invite dinner guests who she knew would be congenial to him: *Diary of Frances Lady Shelley*, ed. Edgcumbe, II, pp. 66–7.

[72] See, for example, Newcastle's use of an invitation to dine with his wife: Newcastle to Henry Bilson Legge, Newcastle House, 13 Jan. 1762, BL, Add. MS 32,933, fo. 269.

[73] Lady Kildare to Henry Fox, Kildare House, 5 Mar. 1757, BL, Add. MS 51,426, fo. 119v.

[74] Lady Kildare to Henry Fox [Carton?], 19 Aug. [1756?], ibid., fos. 76v–7.

[75] *Diary of Frances Lady Shelley*, ed. Edgcumbe, I, p. 78.

[76] See, for instance, Dartmouth to Guilford, Sandal, 7 Oct. 1767, Bodl., MS North d.11, fos. 68–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mr Arskine [sic] & Gilbert Elliot came to see me … I told him of Lady Rockingham having invitd Mr Townshend to supp [sic] with her, & that she had done the same by Mr Conway when he was supposed to be cool towards the Ministers; that a fine Lady wd always have influence, & I wish'd they wou'd not accept of her invitations.[77]

While being a 'fine Lady' in all its senses was surely a factor in a political hostess's success, the best hostesses had other characteristics as well. They were charming, good at handling people, sensitive to social nuance, and possessed a thorough understanding of the workings of the political world. These were skills that were honed with age and experience. According to Lady Holland, who spoke from experience, being a political hostess was ideally suited to 'all women of a certain age and in a situation to achieve it'.[78]

Of the older women who were political hostesses in the second half of the eighteenth century, Lady Hervey was the most renowned. Cultured and intelligent, her wit and beauty as a young woman had been celebrated in the writings of Pope, Gay, and Voltaire. As a maid of honour to Queen Caroline and, later, as the wife of the famous courtier, Lord Hervey, she had been at the heart of the political world for much of her adult life. By the time of the accession of George III, she was in her sixties and her connection with the court was nearly as old. This put her in a strong position as an experienced hostess and political adviser at the start of George III's reign. She held daily dinners in London during the winter for no more than six guests at a time, 'all chosen esprits' (male and female).[79] A lifelong Francophile, her entertaining was self-consciously patterned along French lines, but her political instincts were distinctly English. Her guests were provided with an excellent table and, if contemporary comments are to be believed, encouraged to exchange 'News' and discuss politics. Her guests seem to have found their evenings profitable as well as enjoyable. 'All that I have wrote I heard this evening at Lady Hervey's', wrote Lord Ilchester to his brother in 1763, relaying the latest Wilkesite gossip.[80] Or, from Sir William Musgrave, then working to establish Lord Carlisle's interest at Morpeth in time for the 1768 election: 'The duke [Grafton] has hopes that Mr. Black may be induced to quit Sudbury and engage on your interest, but I have just been dining with Lady Hervey, where I saw Lady Sar[ah] B[unbury], and she thinks that Mr. Bl[ake] is too far engaged.'[81]

Lady Hervey's regular guests included established politicians[82] interleaved with interesting and/or beautiful young women, some of whom, like Lady Sarah Bunbury, were also political. Promising young men were also included.

[77] Journal, London, 16 Mar. 1767, in *Letters and journals of Lady Mary Coke*, I, p. 178.

[78] Lady Bessborough to Lady Harriet Leveson Gower, 5 Feb. 1811, in *The letters of Lord Granville Leveson Gower*, ed. Castalia Countess Granville (London, 1916), p. 381.

[79] Hester Chapone to [unnamed], Chelsea, 28 July 1768, in *The works of Hester Chapone* (4 vols., London, 1807), II, p. 166.

[80] Ilchester to Holland [London, 3 May 1763], BL, Add. MS 51,421, fo. 42.

[81] Sir William Musgrave to Lord Carlisle, London, 29 Oct. 1767, in HMC, *Carlisle*, p. 218.

[82] See, for instance, BL, Add. MS 51,416, fos. 19, 57, 67, 90.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To ease their entry into political society and influence their future 'connections', she performed the classic service of a political hostess, introducing them to 'appropriate' politicians in a social setting. Henry Fox recorded just such a meeting in 1758: 'On Thursday at Ly Hervey's to meet a very amiable young Man, of great Merit, – Lord Charlemont.'[83] Several years later, when Charlemont was working frantically to avert a political crisis over the superficially trivial issue of the Irish peeresses' right to walk in the procession at George III's wedding, he turned to Lady Hervey for advice. He also benefited from her ability to act as an unofficial channel to Lord Bute, and thus the king. In his memoirs he reflected with pride that he had been acquainted with her, 'as all the celebrated men of rank and talents in London or Paris then were'.[84]

Of course, mixed-sex dining was by no means a guarantee of dinner-table politics, or breakfast or tea-table politics, for that matter. There were undoubtedly many instances when stereotypes ran true and politics entered the dining room with the port, after the ladies had retired. Contemporary sources suggest, however, that among the political elite this was not the norm. Instead, the political content of meals seems to have been as varied (and as variable) as the guest list. Some people were simply expected to be sources of political information. 'Dinner – Mrs Crewe came but no News', noted Edmund Burke ruefully in 1787.[85] Others were political sponges. When Lady Mary Coke was not debating political issues over the dinner tables she frequented, she seems to have been soaking up political gossip. Her journal entries and letters to her sisters record many dinners and much 'News'. A dinner at the French ambassador's in 1767, for instance, yielded the latest rumours on the state of the ministry:

> we were twenty in Company as usual. Mr Selwyn told Me he heard all was at Sea again, & nothing settled with regard to the Administration. Ld Hillsborough dined there & said he was going very soon with his Family to Ireland. Ly Albemarle told me Lord Albemarle was gone to Buxton. As to Your Neighbours, they are doing all in their power to bring his Lordship into a Place that everybody agrees he is most unfit for.[86]

While it may be pushing the argument too far to suggest that Lady Mary regularly 'worked' the dinners she attended for her own ends, there is no doubt that she did so at times. Personal and political agendas were often bound up together, and a captive audience over a dinner table was too good an opportunity to pass up. If nothing else, the conversation could be turned so as to broach a subject and gauge reaction; if well received, it could be followed up later through other channels.

[83] Henry Fox to Lady Caroline Fox, Pay Office, 28 Nov. 1758, BL, Add. MS 51,416, fo. 57.

[84] HMC, *Charlemont*, I, pp. 15–17; *Memoirs of the political and private life of James Caulfield, earl of Charlemont*, ed. Francis Hardy (London, 1810), p. 64.

[85] Edmund Burke to Richard Burke Jr [n. p.], 19 June 1787, in *The correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. T. W. Copeland et al. (10 vols., Cambridge, 1958–78), V, p. 340.

[86] Journal, London, 8 July 1767, in *Letters and journals of Lady Mary Coke*, II, pp. 45–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

V

Just as eighteenth-century politics was by no means restricted to high politics, women's exposure to or involvement in politics was not limited to the home. Remaining politically aloof or unaware would have been almost impossible for women whenever a political situation came to dominate society. At the end of the Seven Years War, when popular animosity against Lord Bute was at its height, Elizabeth Montagu's sister, Mrs Scott, described the situation in England to her brother in Italy:

The lowest artificer thinks now of nothing but the constitution of the government ... The English always seemed born politicians, but were never so universally mad on the subject as at present. If you order a mason to build an oven, he immediately inquires about the progress of the peace, and descants on the preliminaries. A carpenter, instead of putting up a shelf to a cupboard, talks of the Princess Dowager, of Lord Treasarre [sic], and of secretaries of state. Neglected lie the trowel and the chisel, the mortar dries and the glue hardens while the persons who should use them are busied with dissertations on the government.[87]

Whenever this 'reign of politics' swept out into the streets, as it did in the form of crowd action, it affected women as well as men. Only a particularly brave or foolhardy woman chanced attracting the ire of the crowd. Something of both, Lady Mary Coke put herself at risk during the Middlesex election of 1768 by neglecting to ensure that her servants were properly primed: 'I mett [sic] with a Woman in Piccadilly that was rather uncivil. As I came by, She was crying out, "Wilkes & liberty", & my servants making no answer, She gave such a blow to my Chair that She had very near over set it.'[88] Her situation could have been much worse. Horace Walpole, writing at the same time, described the mobs blocking Piccadilly, tearing apart the coaches of Wilkes's opposition, scratching and spoiling other carriages with graffiti and breaking their windows.[89]

Windows, in general, were a favourite target of crowd action. Residents who did not illuminate their houses or accede to other crowd demands were fortunate if broken glass was the only damage they suffered. With a hostile crowd even these regular precautions might not prevent vandalism. Given the potential danger to people and property that crowd action could pose, refusing to comply with a mob's demands was a political statement in itself. It took as determined a woman as the duchess of Hamilton to refuse to compromise her political beliefs in the face of a Wilkesite mob:

The day was very quiet, but at night they [the mob] rose again, and obliged almost every house in town to be lighted up, even the Duke of Cumberland's and Princess Amelie's. About one o'clock they marched to the Duchess of Hamilton's in Argyle

[87] Mrs Scott to Mr. Robinson [n. p.], Sept. 1762, in *A lady of the last century*, ed. John Doran (London, 1873), pp. 125–6.

[88] Journal, London, 29 Mar. 1768, in *Letters and journals of Lady Mary Coke*, II, p. 226.

[89] Horace Walpole to Sir Horace Mann, Arlington Street, 31 Mar.–1 Apr., 1768, in *The Yale edition of Horace Walpole's correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (48 vols., London, 1937–83), XXIII, p. 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Buildings (Lord Lorn being in Scotland). She was obstinate and would not illuminate, though with child and as they hope of an heir to the family, and with the Duke her son and the rest of her children in the house. There is a small court and parapet-wall before the house: they brought iron crows, tore down the gates, pulled up the pavement, and battered the house for three hours. They could not find the key of the back door, nor send for any assistance.[90]

This kind of popular political action was most likely to occur when particular issues divided society into political camps. But the social activities of the political elite – far from immune to 'the baneful effects of politicks'[91] – could become specifically, sometimes surprisingly aggressively, politicized by events that did not involve the masses. Balls and assemblies seem to have been the most regularly affected. Held simultaneously by the hostesses of opposing factions or sponsored by contending candidates or clubs they raised political awareness, polarized political feelings, and forced the members of the political elite to declare their allegiances publicly through their attendance and, at times, by their dress.

Like other aspects of women's involvement in political life, their participation in highly politicized social events elicited a double-edged response. They were expected to take part, but they were also criticized for doing so. Conservatives, moralists, and individuals who found it politically convenient to condemn the activities of an opposing faction might all complain of women's activities. If nothing else, traditional notions about women's love of meddling still had some purchase, and blame for the periodic bouts of political frenzy that swept through society could be laid at their feet. While there is little evidence that women fostered dissension out of spite or some inborn desire to unleash the forces of chaos, it is true that they were often actively engaged in elevating the political temperature and politicizing elite society itself. Personal loyalty, political belief, and a desire for social or political importance were all motivating factors. So, too, was the sheer excitement of the game.

VI

It was with the regency crisis of 1788 that this interweaving of politics and society reached its eighteenth-century apogee. While historians have focused on the constitutional aspects of the crisis and the machinations of the various politicians and doctors, they have paid little attention to the fact the crisis was also an intensely divisive socio-political event, one in which women took a leading role.[92] Not only did women play factional rather than familial parts in

[90] Ibid., pp. 6–7.

[91] Mrs Howe to Lady Spencer [n. p.], 17 Apr. [1784], BL, MS Coll. Althorp, F. 53.

[92] John Derry's high political monograph on the regency crisis remains unrivalled. John W. Derry, *The regency crisis and the whigs, 1788–1789* (Cambridge, 1963). Most recently, Amanda Foreman has touched on the socio-political aspects of the crisis in exploring the involvement of the duchess of Devonshire. She also reveals the rivalry between the women of the opposing factions and marks the triumph of the administration political hostess, the duchess Gordon, at the end of the crisis. See Foreman, *Georgiana*, ch. 13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the regency crisis, but their social activities also came to take on symbolic importance for the political community at large.

George III fell ill at the beginning of November 1788, a time of year when few politicians were in London. By the time that it became apparent that a regency would be necessary and the political elite had gathered in London, it was the beginning of December.[93] From then on, the political temperature rose rapidly. By the end of December, the regency had become the dominant and divisive issue in society. This had dire consequences for social harmony. Lord Jersey complained to his old friend, Lady Spencer, 'one subject only occupies the minds & consequently no other discourse can prevail – I have been witness to very few unpleasant scenes, but I have heard that many, almost too serious, have occurred when accidental opposite opinions have met in private houses – .'[94] Women from the opposing political camps became actively – even avidly – partisan. It was not long before conservative men like Lord Sydney were attributing the enmity to women's political enthusiasm:

> We have seen no times when it has been so necessary to separate parties in private company. The acrimony is beyond anything you can conceive. The ladies are as usual at the head of all animosity, and are distinguished by caps, ribands, and other such ensigns of party. They have driven old Queensberry out of England by calling him a Rat for deserting his master to hobble after a young Prince.[95]

The crisis generated such antagonism between the opposing groups that even the facade of carefully constructed politeness that marked late eighteenth-century society was breached. While finding the highly political and equally eloquent duchess of Gordon at the opera 'surrounded by men talking politics as fast and as loud as possible' would not have been unusual at any time,[96] an assembly where the women of one faction greeted the entrance of those from the other with distinctly unladylike hooting and groaning definitely was.[97] Similarly, the behaviour that Martha Harcourt encountered at another assembly would have made conduct-book writers despair: 'there was a great assembly; the Regency Caps nodding at each other all over the room, and boasting against those who were without them, and against those who wore the Constitutional Coats, which were also very numerous. You may be sure the Dss

[93] For instance, the duke and duchess of Devonshire and Elizabeth Foster were still at Chatsworth when the king became ill. They left for London on 18 November, arriving at Devonshire House at 5 a.m. on 20 November. Charles James Fox undoubtedly had the longest and most exhausting trip, tearing across Italy and France to arrive in London on 24 November. See Elizabeth Foster, 'Journal of events of my own times, 1788', BL, Add. MS 41,579; Derry, *Regency crisis and the whigs*.

[94] Jersey to Lady Spencer, London [31 Dec. 1788], BL, MS Coll. Althorp, F. 112.

[95] Sydney to Cornwallis, London, 21 Feb. 1789, in *Correspondence of Charles, first Marquis Cornwallis*, ed. Charles Ross (3 vols., London, 1835), II, p. 406.

[96] Miss Sayer to Madame Huber, Audley Street, 27 Jan. [1789], in *The journal and correspondence of William, Lord Auckland*, ed. Robert J. Eden (2 vols., London, 1861), II, p. 281.

[97] Journal, London, 2–3 Mar. [1789], in *Betsy Sheridan's Journal*, ed. William Lefanu (Oxford, 1986), p. 153. I would like to thank Susan Skedd for this reference.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of Rutland did not wear the cap.'[98] Another supporter of the court remarked with satisfaction on a comparable situation at one of the duchess of Gordon's balls: 'The Prince ask'd the Dutchess of Gordon to wear such a Cap; she said she would sooner be hang'd. He made the same Request to the Dutchess of Rutland, who refused, tho' in politer Terms.'[99]

This use of fashion to declare political allegiance was a long-established eighteenth-century practice by the time of the regency crisis.[100] It was especially common during elections, when women and men both sported cockades, and women ornamented their dresses (often in 'party' colours) and themselves with ribbons, bandeaux, and other political symbols. True to form, the practice engendered both criticism and encouragement – usually simultaneously – from opposing political camps. The adoption of the regency cap by the female supporters of the prince of Wales during the regency crisis is probably the best recorded instance of the politics of fashion. The cap itself was an impressive creation: 'mountains of tumbled gauze, with three large feathers in front, tied together with a knot of ribbon, on which was printed in gold letters, "Honi soit qui mal y pense, de la Regence"'. It was also expensive, costing at least seven and a half guineas.[101] While this alone must have ensured that it remained

[98] Hon. Mrs Martha Harcourt to Lady Harcourt [London], 16 Jan. 1789, in *Harcourt papers*, ed. Harcourt, IV, pt 1, p. 180. The reference to Constitutional Coats is to the 'Constitutional uniform' adopted by the members of the Constitutional Club. These men who supported the king used fashion in the same way that the supporters of the prince used blue and buff. Their uniform, as described proudly by James Bland Burges, would have been striking: 'a dark blue frock, with a broad orange velvet cape and large yellow buttons round each of which is the inscription, "Constitutional Club". The waistcoat is white kerseymere, with yellow buttons bordered round with orange-coloured silk. The breeches are white kerseymere with yellow buttons. In point of taste we certainly beat the Blue and Buff of our opponents.' Moreover, as Sir James makes clear in a letter of 11 Jan. 1789, they wore the 'uniform' in the Commons as well as at social events: 'Our uniform goes well. Several people told me they will put it on. To-day in the House we were a pretty knot of orange capes, Pitt, Lord Mornington, Lord Bayham, Lord Belgrave, Villiers, Addington, and myself. I never saw Mr. Lamb so pleased with anything as with this dress, which he says is a wise and manly thing. I have been endeavouring to make Hasting's party assume it, and I believe I shall be successful, for two have promised to do so.' As quoted in *Selections from the letters and correspondence of Sir James Bland Burges, Bart.*, ed. James Hutton (London, 1885), p. 126.

[99] Lady Stafford to Granville Leveson Gower [London], 12 Feb. 1789, in *Lord Granville Leveson Gower*, ed. Granville, I, pp. 14–15.

[100] See my 'Women in English political life', pt 3. During the brouhaha prior to the repeal of the Jewish Naturalization Act, opposing political factions appear to have vied to 'out-Christian' each other. *The Connoisseur* satirized women's use of Christian symbols, especially the cross, to decorate their clothing and themselves: 'I observed the other Night at the Assembly, that the Ladies seemed to vie with each other in Hanging out the Ensigns of their Faith in orthodox Ribands, bearing the Inscription on NO JEWS, CHRISTIANITY FOR EVER. They likewise wore little Crosses at their Breasts; their *Pompons* were formed into Crucifixes, their Knots disposed in the same Angles, and so many Parts of their Habits moulded into that Shape, that the whole Assembly looked like the Court on St. *Andrew's* Day': *The Connoisseur*, no. 13 (25 Apr. 1754), I, p. 77. Interestingly, this piece was quoted in *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, where the battle to spearhead the repeal was most heated: *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 18 May 1754.

[101] Harcourt to Lady Harcourt, London, 25 Jan. 1789, in *Harcourt papers*, IV, pt 1, p. 200. Madame Huber claims that the caps cost at least seven guineas: Madame Huber to Mrs Eden [London], 21 Feb. [1789], in *Journal and correspondence of Lord Auckland*, ed. Eden, II, p. 292.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fashionably exclusive, enough acerbic comments survive to suggest that it was worn by women other than those of the innermost whig circle. Above all, it was most decidedly a political purchase and was worn deliberately. Regency caps appeared at an assortment of social functions, where they served their purpose well: they attracted attention and made a forceful, visual, political statement.

When the king recovered, the country celebrated. The celebratory drawing room of 26 March 1789 was a testimony to the importance still attached to the monarchy. It saw such numbers of the political elite in attendance that there was an excessive crush. Supporters of the king came to reiterate their loyalty; those who had supported the prince to reinvent it. Lady Louisa Stuart (Lord Bute's daughter) informed her sister of her experience:

The King is recovered, and everyone else is gone mad! Oh, what a winter we have passed! The Drawing-room on Thursday was crowded many degrees beyond any Birthday I ever saw, and really made a frightful scene – many people crying and fainting, and going into screaming fits. I was so squeezed and demolished myself, I was near crying too, and trembled so when I was thrown against the Queen, I did not know what she said to me. Lady Macartney was in violent hysterics after she came home.[102]

Lord Jersey echoed this, but looked at the situation more pragmatically. The problems, he informed Lady Spencer, arose from bad planning of crowd movement past the queen, combined with people's desire to be first to proffer their congratulations: 'the consequences were natural; faintings away, screaming, loss of Caps, bags, shoes, & I suppose almost every part of the dress that was not quite attached strongly to the Person of the wearer'. There was also a certain triumphalism among the king's female supporters that manifested itself in their dress:

A very great majority of the Ladies wore a bandeau with God save the King upon it, & had pictures, Medals & a variety of extraordinary & curious modes of expressing & marking the same sentiment – the Dss. of Portland, Ly Fitz[william] & others of the same opinion [the women of the prince's camp] did not wear any such symptoms of loyalty.[103]

Lady Louisa Stuart's more detailed description makes it clear that refusing to wear some token of loyalty would have been immediately noticeable, as even the queen and the princesses had done so:

Almost everybody at Court had some motto or other in their cap. '*God Save the King.*' '*Long life to the King.*' '*Vive le Roi, Dieu nous l'a rendu.*' The Queen had a *bandeau* of "*God Save the King*" in diamonds, the Princesses the uniform cap with gold spangles, but two or three ladies had stuck up a huge print on sattin [sic] as big as one's two hands, in a frame, Britannia kneeling to return thanks, which was a *new touch*, indeed.[104]

[102] Lady Louisa Stuart to Lady Portarlington, South Audley Street, [post-26 Mar.] 1789, in *A prime minister and his son*, ed. E. Stuart Wortley (London, 1925), p. 217.

[103] Jersey to Lady Spencer [London, 27 Mar. 1789], BL, MS Coll. Althorp, F. 112.

[104] Lady Louisa Stuart to Lady Portarlington [London], 30 Mar. 1789, in Lady Louisa Stuart, *Gleanings from an old portfolio*, ed. Mrs. Godfrey Clark (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1895–8), II, p. 119.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Balls also heralded the king's recovery. Balls were one of the most consistent vehicles of faction for the political elite and this event proved to be no exception. The political divisions between the members of White's and Brookes's clubs carried over into the subscription balls they held at the Pantheon and the Opera house, respectively.[105] White's triumphal ball took place first and appears to have been the most splendid, presumably reflecting both the ten guineas that each of the organizers subscribed and their sense of self-conscious, political theatre. To emphasize their loyalty to the king's cause (and their success), they specified that all the women were to appear in an elaborate costume: 'a very pretty white Uniform with gold lapels',[106] to be worn with a medallion around the neck and loyal versions of the regency cap. Young and fashionable women were to wear caps with '"*God Save the King*" upon it in gold spangles, and four very high feathers on the other side'; a less showy variation without feathers was designed for chaperones.[107] As Lady Louisa Stuart pointedly remarked, 'Loyalty is a most expensive virtue at present.' According to her sums, the costume for White's ball cost between £23 and £24, the medallion five guineas and the caps another six guineas. While some women would have been able to cut costs by using their own dress-makers, others would have had to turn to one of the three milliners that had been appointed to make the costume by the arbiters of fashion for the night, Lady Chatham and the duchesses of Rutland and Gordon.[108] One (probably intended) consequence of the dress requirements was to ensure that the vast majority of opposition women refused to attend:

> The Opposition ladies … decline coming to the ball; but there probably will be some exceptions. Mrs Sawbridge had ordered her dress, but upon finding that the Duchess of Devonshire was not to go to the ball, she thought it would be improper in her, and therefore countermanded her dress. I know the Queen had a wish, with the Princesses, to see the ball; but it was given by subscription, and was evidently a party ball. The idea was laid aside, and they are not to come.[109]

With an entrance fee of three and a half guineas per person, Brookes's ball was also meant to be exclusive. However, it was not the cost, but whether the women who had supported the court would attend that made it the talk of the town. Even Gilbert Elliot, who was anything but enamoured with what he termed 'petticoat politics', informed his wife that it was rumoured that the women of the court faction would attend, 'by way of censuring ours for staying

[105] A. Storer to William Eden, London, 21 Apr. 1789, in *Journal and correspondence of Lord Auckland*, ed. Eden, II, p. 315.

[106] Margaret Grenville to Lady Camelford [London, ?3 Apr. 1789], BL, Add. MS 69,292 [unfoliated].

[107] Lady Louisa Stuart to Lady Portarlington [London], 30 Mar. 1789, in her *Gleanings from an old portfolio*, ed. Clark, II, p. 119. Lady Louisa's detailed description of the 'uniform' itself in this letter emphasizes its splendour. The visual impact in the ballroom must have been dazzling.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Lt-Gen. Grant to Lord Cornwallis, London, 18 Mar. 1789, in *Correspondence of Cornwallis*, II, pp. 434–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press

away from White's'.[110] On the day of the ball itself, it was still a matter of speculation. People believed that the court women would not attend after all, wrote Anthony Storer, 'as the ladies in opposition would not honour the Pantheon with their appearance, so (it is said) the ladies who support Government will not deign to attend to-night the ball at the Opera-house'.[111] It was because the women were a politically identifiable group – 'the ladies who support Government' – that their attendance was at issue. As the vanguard of the victors, what they did bore the scrutiny of the political world at large. Not only did their actions reveal the depth of the social divisions caused by the crisis and the willingness (or not) of the winners to show magnanimity and begin the healing process, but they were also important politically, as a foreshadowing of the nature of political dealings between the administration and the prince's supporters in the immediate future.

VII

Politics in eighteenth-century England was not just about parliament and politicians, even for the members of the political elite; it also had a social dimension. By expanding our understanding of politics to include social politics, we reintegrate women into the political world. As legitimate political actors, albeit on a non-parliamentary stage, women played a vital part in creating and sustaining a uniquely politicized society and the political elite itself.

While specific historical circumstances combined in the eighteenth century to facilitate women's socio-political involvement, social politics is limited neither to women nor to the eighteenth century. Indeed, it has wider implications for historians of all periods and for the way that we conceptualize politics itself. We need to know more about the way that it operated in other periods and under different forms of government. The relationship between the obstinately nebulous arena of social politics and the traditional arena of high politics is ever-changing, but by trivializing the former we limit our understanding of the latter. We need, for instance, to look no further than the recent history of Northern Ireland to find very familiar examples of the use of the dinner table for distinctly 'high' political ends.

[110] Sir Gilbert to Lady Elliot, London, 2 Apr. 1789, *Life and letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot*, ed. Minto, I, p. 294.

[111] A. Storer to William Eden, London, 21 Apr. 1789, in *Journal and correspondence of Lord Auckland*, ed. Eden, II, p. 315.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X99001314 Published online by Cambridge University Press