

ARTICLE

Smoking Clubs in Graphic Satire and the Anglicizing of Tobacco in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Abstract

Focusing on *A smoking club* (1793/7) by James Gillray, this essay presents satiric representations of smoking clubs in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British prints, arguing that they reflect and mediate contemporary understandings of tobacco as an intoxicant in British associational life. The breadth of potential cultural connotations – from political and social parody to light-hearted humour – is traced through the content and imagery of selected prints. These prints rely on the familiarity of contemporary audiences with political and social knowledge, as well as a visual iconography iconically realized in William Hogarth's *A midnight modern conversation* (1732).

I

In her magisterial *Catalogue of personal and political satires in the British Museum*, M. Dorothy George described James Gillray's *A smoking club* (BMC 8303; [Figure 1](#)) as a burlesque of the House of Commons, 'a smoking-club, a plebeian gathering in which quarrelsome members were wont to puff smoke at each other'.¹ This satiric print was first published in 1793 by J. Aiken on Castle Street, Leicester Fields. It was reissued by Hannah Humphrey, sometime after 1797, when she moved her thriving print shop to the fashionable address of St James Street in London's West End. The lasting appeal of *A smoking club* prompted Humphrey to reprint it at least into the early nineteenth century.² Humphrey displayed Gillray's satires in her print shop window, where they would be seen by clientele and politicians frequenting the area. Some would

¹ The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 793.02.13.01+ and M. Dorothy George, *Catalogue of prints and drawings in the British Museum: division I, political and personal satires* (11 vols., London, 1870–1954), cat. no. 8303. Hereafter, references to satirical prints will be given as BMC numbers.

² The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, holds an impression printed on Whatman paper with 1808 watermark. See Auchincloss Gillray album, vol. 3, leaf 27, online at <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/11811406>.



Figure 1. James Gillray. *A smoking club*, 1793 (1797 reprint), etching with hand colouring, BMC 8303. Source: Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 793.02.13.01.1+.

enter to browse her stock and make purchases. Wealthy elites collected such prints in albums where they would be shared, often among company, as fodder for social gossip and political comment. Understanding the nuanced humour of Gillray's political parody rested on the ability of his audiences not only to identify the persons depicted but also to negotiate the tensions of civility and impoliteness, and of political commentary and moral derision represented in this and other contemporary satiric prints of smoking clubs.

Scenes of smoking clubs, and of tobacco smoking more generally, were ubiquitous in graphic satire in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century London. Computer-assisted analysis conducted by Andrew Salway and James Baker for their 'Curatorial voice project' identifies 408 results for the word 'pipe' in the dataset of descriptions of satirical prints published between 1770 and 1832 in the *British Museum collections online*. Tellingly, 'pipe' figures in the top 300 most frequent keywords in George's catalogue.³ This notable presence of pipe smoking as a trope in graphic satire during this period suggests that such imagery carried a strong cachet, and accordingly can tell us a great deal about contemporary views on the intoxicating effects of smoking

³ The 300 most frequent words in the 1.5 million words in the dataset were presented at the 'Defining curatorial voice' workshop organized by Andrew Salway and James Baker, Digital Humanities Lab, University of Sussex, 26–27 February 2019. 'Pipe' was the 297th most frequent word. Andrew Salway and James Baker in *Curatorial voice: legacy descriptions of art objects and their contemporary uses*, 22 March 2019, https://github.com/CuratorialVoice/data/blob/master/research-outputs/2019-03_antconc/pipe_CONCORDANCE.txt.

tobacco, its social context, and, most interestingly for our purposes here, the varied facets of cultural and political understandings that satiric representations of smoking clubs potentially insinuated for contemporaries.

Delineated with imaginative, humorous licence, graphic satire does not necessarily provide straightforward, reliable evidence of specific realities or of actual smoking clubs but rather offers representations of contemporary notions. In his recent work on parody in satiric prints, David Francis Taylor posits that ‘caricature is an intermedial form’, one which appeals to an ‘educated eye’ and requires sophisticated cultural knowledge to negotiate sophisticated content.⁴ If effective political and social satire generally relies on, and then subverts or builds on, certain cultural knowledge and well-established iconographies, then the ways in which visual satirists in eighteenth-century Britain used joking scenes of smoking clubs to comment both humorously and derisively on national topics – political and social – necessarily resonated with contemporary viewpoints. Familiarity with tobacco as an intoxicant within clubbing practices, as well as with a spectrum of existing visual tropes of smoking, must underlie potential understandings of satiric prints that feature social smoking. Following Taylor’s contention, this article begins with the premise that Gillray’s joking comparison of political leaders with ordinary smoking club members depended on his viewers’ knowledge of the well-established practice of sociable smoking, the cultural currency surrounding it, and a preceding visual iconography.

By the later eighteenth century, the smoking club – real or imagined, generic or specific – as subject for satiric prints both reflected and rested on a thorough assimilation of sociable tobacco smoking as an English cultural practice.⁵ The satirical punch of visual tropes in Gillray’s *A smoking club* drew on a long and deep-rooted history of masculine clubbing in which tobacco, as an intoxicant, along with alcohol, figured prominently in the practice of masculine sociability and identity formation among affluent social groups.⁶ Associational life – so well entrenched by the eighteenth century – was the legacy of an early modern form of collectivism that Phil Withington defines as ‘voluntary and purposeful’ and identifies as a ‘more general exercise of public authority’ that was ‘embedded in companies, societies, and incorporated bodies’.⁷ This long history of political oligarchy sustained through sociability, hospitality, and mutuality certainly underlies Gillray’s late eighteenth-century

⁴ David Francis Taylor, *The politics of parody: a literary history of caricature, 1760–1830* (New Haven, CT, 2018), pp. ix–x.

⁵ In her article in this issue, Lauren Working shows that, during the seventeenth century, the relationship between tobacco, sociability, and English imperial aspirations dissociated the intoxicant from its origins and that the Indigenous ritual practice of smoking was likewise anglicized in accordance with notions of civility. The thorough assimilation of tobacco into British society parallels what Brian Cowan calls the complete ‘Anglicization of oriental coffee’ by the early eighteenth century. Brian Cowan, *The social life of coffee: the emergence of the British coffee house* (New Haven, CT, 2005), p. 4.

⁶ Phil Withington, ‘Intoxicants and society in early modern England’, *Historical Journal*, 54 (2011), pp. 631–57.

⁷ Philip Withington, *Society in early modern England: the vernacular origins of some powerful ideas* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 13 and 231.

political parody of members of the House of Commons gathered as a smoking club. By the date of Gillray's print, the rituals, conventions, modes of discourse, frequent use of intoxicants, and material objects (including tobacco pipes) that shaped company and sociability, according to Withington, would have been familiar to all knowing audiences.⁸

II

Gillray's *A smoking club* ostensibly illustrates a congenial group of five gentlemen, a club, gathered around a tavern table to smoke and drink as a typical, if perhaps unflattering, British activity. Billowing smoke fills the space. A punch-bowl and a frothy beer mug sit on the table, perhaps distinguishing the status of the respective drinkers.⁹ Both beer and punch were considered respectable alcoholic beverages in stark contrast to gin, for example, which was deemed a dangerous vice of London's lower classes, as so famously contrasted in William Hogarth's pair of prints *Beer street* and *Gin lane* (1751).¹⁰ In addition to drink, all the men in Gillray's print puff tobacco in English-manufactured clay pipes, which can be distinguished by their length and the size of their bowl from the shorter pipes of the Indigenous peoples of North America.¹¹ The polite civility of diverting smoke from the faces of companions made possible by the elongated English pipes is, however, completely eschewed by Gillray's smokers. While wisps of smoke issue from their diminutive pipe bowls, the intoxicated club members deliberately exhale great clouds directly at each other. Smoking here becomes a jesting sign both of contemplative thought and of the engagement of fellowship. At the same time, the smoke itself humorously intoxicates as it simultaneously conceals and reveals darker aspects of the characters and hidden agendas of the club members.

Although they engage in impolite behaviour, the members of this smoking club were not at all the plebeians of George's later description in complicity with Gillray's derisive humour cited above. Any fashionable patron of Humphrey's print shop or collector of Gillray's prints would immediately recognize this smoking club as a meeting of leading politicians easily identifiable by Gillray's signature caricatured depictions. Seated on benches around a long narrow table, two tory statesmen, Prime Minister William Pitt and Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville, on the near side, face the opposition leaders,

⁸ Phil Withington, 'Company and sociability in early modern England', *Social History*, 32 (2003), pp. 291–307.

⁹ In the hierarchy of price and status of alcoholic drinks, punch was in the middling range, somewhat more expensive than beer. Neither was prohibitively expensive. While different types of drinks were commonly associated with different vessel materials, punch was consumed at a range of venues, but the material culture of punch-drinking crossed material lines of demarcation. Karen Harvey, 'Ritual encounters: punch parties and masculinity in the eighteenth century', *Past & Present*, 214 (2010), pp. 165–203, at pp. 176–7.

¹⁰ Ronald Paulson, *Hogarth's graphic works* (3rd edn, London, 1989), pp. 185–6 (BMC 3126 and 3136).

¹¹ For a comparison of Algonquin and English tobacco pipes, see Lauren Working, 'Tobacco and the social life of conquest in London, 1580–1625', in this issue. See also Eric G. Ayto, *Clay tobacco pipes* (Aylesbury, 2002).

Charles James Fox and Richard Brinsley Sheridan across the table. The parliamentary setting is indicated by a suggestion of the gallery columns of the House of Commons. At the head of the table (left), Henry Addington, Viscount Sidmouth, sits in a raised armchair in the manner of the chairman at a tavern club. He dons the hat, wig, and gown of the speaker.¹² His mace has been transformed into a crutch-like stick. Addington aims voluminous plumes of smoke at the benches of both parties – a visual pun made by the tavern benches. Pitt, on the speaker's right, holds a frothing tankard inscribed with George III's monogram 'G.R.' and directs a cloud of smoke at Fox, who puffs back. Before Fox is a tray of pipes and a paper of tobacco, signifying his reputation for abuse of intoxicants; he is commonly depicted in contemporary caricatures as a dissipated gambler, drinker, and libertine. On the extreme right, Dundas, draped in plaid, dips a ladle into a punchbowl also inscribed 'G.R.', while puffing at Sheridan, who is depicted with his characteristic, red drunkard's nose as he sits across the table next to Fox.

Gillray's early cataloguer Thomas Wright described *A smoking club* as a 'caricature of the position of affairs in the House of Commons [as] a clever view of the smoke in which the chiefs of either side freely clouded their antagonists', astutely drawing out the metaphor of tobacco intoxication and muddied political debate.¹³ In her study of the intersection of polite manners and company in eighteenth-century England, Kate Davison has posited a useful way of rethinking eighteenth-century sociability that permits the breaking down of a binary opposition of polite and impolite, elite and popular in theory and practice, challenging us to rethink eighteenth-century sociability in a more pluralistic fashion.¹⁴ Accordingly, she describes a category of 'intimate bawdiness' that permitted 'a tacit acceptance of looser manners' under circumstances of an appropriate level of familiarity that allowed for polite prudence to be waived when men met together in friendly homosocial encounters. An option that co-existed alongside politeness, 'intimate bawdiness' follows a lasting tradition of bawdy forms of gentlemanly sociability that might include the excessive, impolite tobacco smoking enjoyed by Gillray's parodied parliamentarians.

By the eighteenth century, the practice of smoking tobacco had a long history of migration from North America, where it was introduced to British (and European) settlers by Indigenous peoples, back to the metropole, where it quickly became domesticated and entrenched for better or worse in British society and culture. The correspondence of Horace Walpole and his circle provides useful insights about the contradictory allure and repulsion of tobacco. Writing from Peterhouse, Cambridge, on 17 November 1734, Thomas Gray opens his letter on the pervasive use of tobacco in male fashionable society with an epigram that is an adaptation of one attributed to Glycon: 'All is

¹² Identified in manuscript annotation on the print and by Wright and Evans as Loughborough, 'cogitating' between the parties. This, however, is inconsistent with the House of Commons setting and with Loughborough's appointment (26 Jan. 1793) as chancellor. Thomas Wright (ed.), *Works of James Gillray, the caricaturist with the history of his life and times* (London, 1873), p. 166.

¹³ Wright, *Works of James Gillray*, p. 166.

¹⁴ Kate Davison, 'Occasional politeness and gentlemen's laughter in 18th c England', *Historical Journal*, 57 (2014), pp. 921–45.

Dust, and all is pie, and all is tobacco.’ In the body of his letter, Gray sets out to prove to Walpole that, indeed, ‘everything is tobacco’, for it

will not be so difficult to show that tobacco is everything (at least here), for there is not soul in our college (a body I should say) who does not smoke or chew. There is nothing but whiffing, from fellow to sizar; nay, even the very chimneys, that they mayn’t be thought particular, must needs smoke like the rest, whilst unfashionable I labour through clouds of it with as much pains as Milton’s poor Devil took when he travelled through Chaos [in *Paradise Lost*].¹⁵

Walpole’s friend William Cole, on the other hand, wishes for tobacco, now thoroughly British, writing that ‘I wish I could smoke tobacco, which would amuse the evenings, which injure the eyes more than the daylight, but I cannot even go on with the British herb tobacco.’¹⁶

III

While debates about the virtues and vices of tobacco, which originated in the late sixteenth century, continued into the eighteenth century, sociable smoking nevertheless evolved into a thoroughly English practice.¹⁷ In fact, by the later eighteenth century, scenes of intoxicated clubbing had become an established visual trope in British prints, most famously codified in the works of William Hogarth, whose long pictorial legacy reached well beyond his lifetime. In her landmark social history *Hogarth to Cruikshank: social change in graphic satire*, M. Dorothy George states that ‘in any view of eighteenth-century London there should be a tavern scene and a gaming house’.¹⁸ Leaving aside the complex issues of satire as historic evidence, George’s account of Hogarth’s iconic image of tavern clubbing, *A midnight modern conversation* (1732; Figure 2), as an early archetypal representation of British sociable smoking is useful to my point.¹⁹ In this scene, eleven men, at various stages of inebriation, many with wigs askew or missing, gather in a well-furnished, panelled room, perhaps a public house. The late hour of the male debauchery is indicated by the case clock at the left back corner, which reads 4 o’clock, presumably a.m. Upon the tavern table sits a large chinoiserie punchbowl. The mantelpiece is piled with bottles, which also litter the floor. In the foreground, a drunken man leaning

¹⁵ W. S. Lewis et al., eds., *Horace Walpole’s correspondence* (48 vols., New Haven, CT, 1937–83), XII, p. 63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II, p. 34, 21 Feb. 1777, n. 1.

¹⁷ See Working, ‘Tobacco and the social life of conquest’. Some argued that smoking was virtuous and patriotic because it kept the transatlantic trade afloat; others believed that it subverted morality. Medicinal and health benefits were presented against concerns about addiction. For a concise summary, see James Walvin, *Fruits of empire: exotic produce and British taste, 1660–1800* (New York, NY, 1997), ch. 5, ‘The Indian weed: tobacco’, pp. 66–88.

¹⁸ M. Dorothy George, *Hogarth to Cruikshank: social change in graphic satire* (New York, NY, 1967), p. 43; see also Paulson, *Hogarth’s graphic works*, pp. 84–5.

¹⁹ George, *Hogarth to Cruikshank*, p. 43; BMC 2122.



Figure 2. William Hogarth, *A midnight modern conversation*, 1732, state 3, etching and engraving, BMC 2122.

Source: Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, folio 75 H67 800 v.1.

on a chair for support inadvertently pours wine on his prostrate companion, who has tumbled to the floor in an overturned chair. Five members of the party smoke pipes. Only two issue small plumes of smoke. A broken pipe lies discarded on the floor. According to George, the only ‘toper’ who is completely master of himself is the parson beside the brimming punchbowl: this is clearly Cornelius Ford, ‘whom no amount of liquor could disturb’. Included in the group are a tipsy tobacconist, whose singing of bacchanalian songs admitted him to tavern society, a rakish beau, a barrister, and a military officer, prone on the floor, while the man tipsily spilling liquor over him is a physician.²⁰

Though Hogarth asserted ‘think not to find one meant resemblance here’, scholars have identified specific portraits as well as social types in *A midnight modern conversation*. In pinpointing Hogarth’s characters as actual historical individuals, George is following early chroniclers of Hogarth’s prints, such as John Nichols, George Steevens, and John Ireland. Ireland quotes the full engraved verse that was added to Hogarth’s plate sometime after its publication, denying any resemblance to individuals and instead presenting the prints as depicting only general social vice:

²⁰ George, *Hogarth to Cruikshank*, p. 42.

Think not to find one meant resemblance here;
 We lash the vices, but the person spare.
 Prints should be prix'd, as authors should be read,
 Who sharply smile prevailing Folly dead.
 So Rabelais laugh'd, and so Cervantes thought
 So Nature dictated what Art has taught.²¹

Ireland nevertheless argues that this postscript is merely a conceit contending that 'it is very certain that most of these figures were intended for individual portraits but Mr. Hogarth, not wishing to be considered as a personal satirist, and fearful of making enemies among his contemporaries [sic], would never acknowledge who were the characters'. He goes on to identify individuals, faithfully portrayed in 'compleat inebriation'. Ireland claims, 'upon the authority of Sir John Hawkins, of Anecdotic memory', that the cleric is John Henley, the high priest of Clare Market. He corroborates his assertion by comparison to a known portrait sketch, noting that 'our smoking parson' is characteristically exhibited with a corkscrew, which is occasionally used as a tobacco-stopper, hanging upon his little finger.²²

No matter the identity of the individuals, Hogarth's vivid characterization of intoxicated merriment fascinated diverse audiences throughout his lifetime and beyond. His scene of raucous male drinking and smoking in the metropole circulated widely throughout England, the continent, and even the colonies as original prints, pirated copies, posthumous restrikes by later publishers, and many later copies. It decorated punchbowls and teacups and elicited a lengthy description in verse.²³ It was the origin of a play at Covent Garden 'taken from Hogarth's celebrated print'. There were copies in France and Germany, where travelling showmen exhibited wax figures of the characters (1786). The verses on one of the French copies make it an illustration of national character: 'Chaque peuple a son gout: — the Frenchman sings, the Italian has his concert, the German the pleasures of the table, for the Englishman sa Ponche et la Pipe.'²⁴

A broadside titled *The bacchanalians, or, a midnight modern conversation* includes a poem addressed to Hogarth.²⁵ This altered but clearly appropriated scene and composition contains a lengthy verse, which calls out the artist's ubiquitous humour in illustrating how midnight modern conversations 'mingle all faculties and stations', uniting 'the Priest, the Beau, the Cit, the Bite; Where Law & Physic join the Sword, and Justice deigns to Crown ye Board'. Here, 'no loftier theme' is pursued than 'punch, good company and dues'. Yet the verse also presents the tavern, with intoxicating drink and smoke, as a site of political debate: 'to boast of Crimes, or tell ye Shame, of raking talk or Reformation,

²¹ John Ireland, *Hogarth illustrated* (2nd edn, 3 vols., London, 1793), II, p. 96.

²² *Ibid.*, II, pp. 93–102.

²³ See David Brewer, 'Making Hogarth heritage', *Representations*, 72 (2000) pp. 21–63, at p. 32; and idem, 'Ritual encounters: punch parties and masculinity in the eighteenth century', *Past & Present*, 214 (2012), pp. 165–203.

²⁴ George, *Hogarth to Cruikshank*, p. 42.

²⁵ The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University (LWL), folio 75 H67 800 v.1.

Tis all good Modern Conversation'. The business of the nation is here taken up by tradesmen who discuss credit and taxes as parliaments and great men count losses and debts.

Purveyors of tobacco likewise embraced the raucous revelry of intoxicated smoking and drinking represented in Hogarth's *A midnight modern conversation* and appropriated his clubbing scene for smoke shop advertisements. A shop card for Richard Lee at 'ye Golden Tobacco' adapted Hogarth's scene with the addition of a framed painting of a black boy and possibly another of a reclining Native American hanging on the back wall as obvious references to the colonial origins of tobacco.²⁶ Catherine Molineux contends that tobacco-nists banked on the appeal of exoticism when they used images of New World peoples, often a hybrid of Native American and African figures, to tempt potential customers with images that 'suggested a complex interaction of ideologies of empire, the social experience of smoking, and the cultural meanings of tobacco'.²⁷ Lauren Working argues somewhat differently that the appeal of tobacco was related to the thrill of colonizing America and subjugating its peoples, and gentlemen consciously framed masculine civility in relation to their role as colonizers.²⁸

An empty tobacco paper inscribed 'Freemans Best' placed on the table in *A midnight modern conversation* establishes a specific link between Hogarth's club scene and an actual tobacco shop. In a reciprocal reference, a shop card for *Freeman's tobacco paper* engraved by George Bickham the Elder is likewise an obvious, although cropped, borrowing from *A midnight modern conversation*.²⁹ Another close appropriation of Hogarth's club scene is a painted copy at the Yale Center for British Art, which is elongated horizontally to the proportions of a probable shop sign or overdoor for a tavern.³⁰ In both these later cases, references to empire are absent as in Hogarth's original archetypal scene, reasserting tobacco smoking as a thoroughly British practice, centred in the metrope, and one that has become so ingrained that it can stand as an effective trope for parody of British society and politics.

The question then is why was Hogarth's enormously popular composition so blatantly appropriated as a trade card for tobacconists? Other relatively staid representations of social smoking and drinking, such as James Worsdale's painting of *The Limerick Hell Fire Club* (c. 1736) or the group portrait of *Elihu Yale seated at table with the second duke of Devonshire and Lord James Cavendish* (c. 1708), were available options.³¹ The raucous Hogarthian composition, then, presumably carried a favourable connotation and the pervasive adaptation of the iconic scene as an advertisement for tobacconists must indicate that contemporaries identified this positive aspect in the intoxicated debauchery so humorously, yet convivially, depicted. Thus, the reception

²⁶ Copy by Samuel Ireland in 1794. LWL, folio 75 H67 800 v.1.

²⁷ Catherine Molineux, *Faces of perfect ebony: encountering Atlantic slavery in imperial Britain* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), p. 157 and passim.

²⁸ See Working, 'Tobacco and the social life of conquest'.

²⁹ LWL, folio 75 H67 800 v.1.

³⁰ Conversation with Scott Wilcox, Deputy Director for Collections, Yale Center for British Art.

³¹ Respectively at the Yale Center for British Art and the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI.4523).

and early interpretation of Hogarth's comic print confirm that smoking was widely understood as an act of male sociability, which could at once sell tobacco in shops and taverns and attract clientele to establishments offering both drink and smoke. Moralizing content that may have been gleaned from earlier Dutch genre scenes of lower orders in this new context has accordingly receded and been replaced with humorous connotations of society and good company for middling and elite classes. Similarly, even during the campaign against gin in the mid-eighteenth century, a light-hearted composition illustrating a husband burdened by his drunken wife sitting upon his shoulders served as a sign for a public house in Oxford Street.³²

IV

If the character of eighteenth-century London clubs was ambivalent, the history of clubs dedicated as smoking clubs per se is even more elusive, perhaps because of their informal nature.³³ Vagueness begins with Samuel Johnson's definition of the club simply as 'an assembly of good fellows meeting under certain conditions'.³⁴ Johnson was a notable character of eighteenth-century club life, and his name is connected with a number of social clubs, which held their meetings at coffeehouses and taverns.³⁵ Initially, clubbing seems to have been an informal arrangement for sharing the cost of drinks or a feast rather than a regular meeting or institutionalized establishment with a fixed agenda.

How much were clubs dedicated to smoking a distinct reality as compared to a powerful jesting idea? By 1800, clubs and other forms of association had become a vital component of the social life of the educated English-speaking classes. In his history of *British clubs and societies, 1580–1800*, Peter Clark states that clubs and societies were widely regarded 'as a distinctly British phenomenon'.³⁶ He calculates that during the eighteenth century there may have been up to 25,000 different clubs and societies and over 130 different types of societies meeting in the English-speaking world. 'Clubs and societies', he asserts, 'became one of the most distinctive social and cultural institutions of Georgian Britain'.³⁷ Primarily urban phenomena, these associations were nearly always restricted to men, although members were recruited from a wide spread of age groups and social backgrounds. The image and concept of the voluntary society penetrated every nook and cranny of British social and cultural life.³⁸ The abundance of satiric prints on the theme corroborates this.

³² Sheila O'Connell, *The popular print in England* (London, 1999), p. 115.

³³ Valérie Capdeville, 'The ambivalent identity of eighteenth-century London clubs as a prelude to Victorian clublife', *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens*, 81 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.1976>.

³⁴ Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary* (London, 1755).

³⁵ Ralph Neville, *London clubs: their history and treasures* (New York, NY, c. 1911), p. 7.

³⁶ Peter Clark, *British clubs and societies, 1580–1800: the origins of an associational world* (Oxford, 2000), p. 5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

Markman Ellis has observed that 'A coffee-house exists to sell coffee, but the coffee-house cannot simply be reduced to this retail function.' Following Samuel Johnson's definition of a coffeehouse as 'a house of entertainment where coffee is sold, and the guests are supplied with newspapers', Ellis suggests that, more than being a place that sells coffee, 'a coffee-house is also an idea, a way of life, a mode of socializing, a philosophy'.³⁹ The smoking club similarly carried complex cultural connotations. Just as the coffeehouse provided a social and cultural space for political and intellectual debate, the smoking club also offered opportunity for convivial socializing, characteristically under the intoxication of tobacco and usually with heavy or excessive drinking.⁴⁰ While coffeehouses were physical establishments widely distributed throughout London and the provinces, with a well-documented and much-studied history, the more informal smoking club which had no ties to particular premises and which met in coffeehouses or taverns, as well as rooms of separate establishment, has been less studied.

Valérie Capdeville, in describing the ambivalent functions of clubs, notes that the first ones appeared in London during the Restoration period and answered both a need for social intercourse and an aspiration towards political freedom or defiance.⁴¹ She further comments that 'dining and drinking, gambling and conversation were the chief motivations for such gatherings and enabled clubmen to share their political, scientific or artistic interests in a convivial and "safe" male-only environment'.⁴² Nonetheless, in a letter to his friend Horace Mann, Horace Walpole quipped that, while 'the nominal qualification of being elected a member of the illustrious Society of Dilettanti is having been to Italy ... the real one [is] being drunk'.⁴³ Moreover, although the members of the Society of Dilettanti in Thomas Patch's large-scale caricature painting *The golden asses* do not partake of tobacco, smoking was a significant part of such drunken gatherings on a wider scale.⁴⁴ Richard Newton's *Soulagement en prison; or, comfort in prison* (1793) commemorates the social gathering of historical figures imprisoned at Newgate for sedition or similar offences and their friends who visited and dined with them.⁴⁵ The thirteen men sit around an oval table in Windsor armchairs, smoking long pipes,

³⁹ Markman Ellis, *The coffee-house: a cultural history* (London, 2004), p. xi.

⁴⁰ Despite historical associations ranging from sedition to sociability to civility, coffeehouses were 'so politically au courant, so ideologically up-to-date, so accurate a gauge of public opinion' that they were the places that politicians and journalists went to collect news and opinions. The coffeehouse provided a venue for public political discussion and, even more, provided the social and cultural locus for an early modern English public sphere. See Steve Pincus, "'Coffee politicians does create': coffeehouses and restoration political culture', *Journal of Modern History*, 67 (1995), pp. 807–34, at pp. 831–2. Fascinatingly, Phil Withington demonstrates that little material evidence of coffee-making and drinking survives, thereby corroborating the idea that the coffeehouse was more powerful than the act of consumption. See Phil Withington, 'Addiction, intoxicants, and the humoral body', in this issue.

⁴¹ Capdeville, 'Ambivalent identity', p. 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ A version of this painting is at the LWL.

⁴⁵ A drawing is at the LWL. For the related print, see BMC 8339.

drinking, and sharing convivial company. The identities of the diners are given via a numbering system keyed to names engraved beneath the design. Among the prisoners is William Holland, the publisher of the print.

Certainly, then, social smoking was a prominent part of eighteenth-century club life, but what can we know about the existence of actual smoking clubs? James Walvin outlines the shift of tobacco smoking from exclusive taste in the early seventeenth century to pervasiveness in a broader, more popular consuming public for whom taverns became the most common spaces for smoking. Despite the proliferation of specialist tobacco shops, alehouses and taverns were the main retail outlet across England and actively promoted tobacco by inviting customers to take a pipe with their drink.⁴⁶ Ralph Neville's reminiscence *London clubs* records traditional lore that smoking was allowed at public club meetings, except at a few of the most aristocratic coffee- or chocolate houses.⁴⁷ However, he offers no elaboration or documented testimonial. Even more surprisingly perhaps, neither 'smoking' nor 'tobacco' appears in the index to Clark's comprehensive work on British clubs.

The challenge, noted by Clark, for documenting the history of clubs is that newspapers frequently provide our only reference for many of these informal societies.⁴⁸ A search for the term 'smoking club' in online databases of eighteenth-century newspapers frustratingly produces few results, although these scant references may enrich our understanding of the connotations of smoking clubs. In addition to repeat advertisements for popular satiric prints of smoking clubs,⁴⁹ even rarer newspaper notices appear to link smoking club members with dissident or even criminal behaviour. On 4 October 1806, a report on the Westminster election in the *Morning Post* described the proceedings and character of the 'soi-disant Electors of Westminster, at the Crown and Anchor', as 'a riotous meeting' of a 'factious junto'. Regardless of the specific complaints, what interests us here is the evocation of that junto 'that wished to degrade the Electors of Westminster, by assuming their name and character, merely to produce a scene of riot and confusion, in which a few foolish smoking club orators and parish politicians might have an opportunity of declaiming to a larger mob'.⁵⁰ Similarly, a notice of proceedings at the Old Bailey from 19 September 1807 reinforces a low social status and other negative connotations of smoking club members as being from labouring classes. A prisoner, although found not guilty of the murder, and the deceased are connected to a smoking club where they were both members and had quarrelled.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Walvin, *Fruits of empire*, pp. 71–2.

⁴⁷ Neville, *London clubs*, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Clark, *British clubs*, p. 10.

⁴⁹ These include a print titled *City smoking club* published by William Holland in 1787/8. This very rare print may be the same as an impression at the Wilhelm Busch Museum, Hanover. I am thankful to Cristina Martinez for bringing this print to my attention. See *The World*, 7 Nov. 1789. Other advertisements announce prints of smoking clubs by William Henry Bunbury.

⁵⁰ *Morning Post* (London, Edinburgh), 4 Oct. 1806, issue no. 11,118.

⁵¹ 'Old Bailey', *Morning Chronicle*, 19 Sept. 1807.

Still another less nefarious but belittling mention of a smoking club appears on the front page of the *Whitehall Evening Post* for September 1784:

The experiment of filling balloons by the smoke of pea-straw having failed, some Gentlemen who belong to a Smoking Club in Fleet street, are determined on trying whether a Balloon will not ascend with the smoke of tobacco; and it is said, that a party of fifty have subscribed their names to have a Balloon made against the 30th of next month, and to fill it by each smoking as many pipes as will be necessary for that purpose. It is not yet settled what weight it is to elevate, or how many of the party are to ascend with it.⁵²

It is difficult to imagine that there is not considerable jest in this report of quasi-scientific pursuit paired with the ridiculous goal of excessive smoking to fill the balloon. Satiric texts such as Laurence Dermott's *Ahiman Rezon* list smoking clubs among such other ludicrous societies as the no nose club, the long nose club, and the farting club to name just three, 'not worth notice, whose chief practice consists in eating, drinking, singing, smoaking, &c'.⁵³

V

This suggestion of smoking as characteristic of the uncivil and the inane underlies many of Gillray's effective parodies. Notably, for our purposes, his satires of clubs for smoking and drinking nominally include actual historical societies. *Anacreontick's in full song* (1801; Figure 3) parodies the London society founded in 1766 for amateur musicians from aristocrat to professional, which in fact met at a series of taverns and coffeehouses.⁵⁴ The print clearly borrows all the stock elements of Hogarth's iconic club scene in *A midnight modern conversation*: much-caricatured jovial, intoxicated men are gathered for a drink and a smoke around a tavern table. Some wildly gesticulate, toasting or singing, while others sleep under the influence. As in Hogarth's print, a clock on the wall, here set to 3:40, indicates that the frivolity has extended into the wee hours of the morning. To underscore the midnight drunken carousing, the clock is decorated with a carved bacchanalian figure of Time sitting astride a cask. A portrait of the society's mascot, Anacreon, hangs on the wall on the other side.

In the spectrum of the satiric view of the smoking club, there is an ever-present tension, albeit light-hearted, between civil conversation, elite masculinity, and degeneration/immorality. Such humorous embrace of potential degeneration was presumably safe among the knowing elite audiences who consumed these luxury images that embody a nuanced understanding about

⁵² *Whitehall Evening Post*, 30 Sept.–2 Oct. 1784, issue no. 5,769.

⁵³ Laurence Dermott, *Ahiman Rezon: or a help to all that are, or would be free and accepted masons* (3rd edn, London, 1778). See also Edward Ward, *The history of London clubs, or, the citizens' pastime* (London, 1709).

⁵⁴ LWL, 801.12.01.09+ (BMC 9764).



Figure 3. James Gillray, *Anacreontick's in full song*, 1801, etching with hand colouring, BMC 9764. Source: Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 801.12.01.09+.

how civility/incivility worked together in sophisticated ways in English sociability.⁵⁵ The imagery of graphic satire must be seen as 'part of a nexus of images and discourses in contemporary culture'.⁵⁶

Interestingly, Gillray's *A smoking club* has precedence in more light-hearted humorous scenes. Other caricaturists tried their hand at smoking club scenes as well. For example, the drawing *A new way to find out a customer!!* by the gentleman artist G. M. Woodward, issued as a print in March 1800 by William Holland, portrays a smoke-filled room in which an innkeeper humorously uses a bellows to clear dense tobacco smoke from the tavern interior in order to help a servant find his master in the crowd.⁵⁷ The innkeeper proclaims, 'You say you want a little gentleman in a brown wig. I have really so much smoking business in my parlour that 'till I make use of the bellows I can never distinguish a customer, I believe that is the gentleman you mean.'

⁵⁵ Lauren Working, review of Keith Thomas, *In pursuit of civility: manners and civilization in early modern England*, *Journal of Social History*, 53 (2020), pp. 820–3.

⁵⁶ See Mark Hallett's analysis of William Hogarth's *A harlot's progress* in Mark Hallett, *The spectacle of difference: graphic satire in the age of Hogarth* (New Haven, CT, 1999), p. 100.

⁵⁷ The drawing is in LWL, drawings W87, no. 22. Publication details for the print are based on dealer records.

The servant excitedly responds in dialect ‘Yes, Yes, sure enough that be Master, but before he vanishes again, tell him that Missis has sent the street door key.’ Woodward’s scene, in which smoke obfuscates the man, corroborates the insinuation in Gillray’s print that smoking clouds the political debate. In Hogarth’s *Time smoking a picture* (1761), pipe smoke becomes a means of trickery.⁵⁸ In this print, issued by the artist as a subscription ticket for his history painting *Sigismunda*, which he painted to contest the preferred status of continental old master paintings over work by contemporary English artists, smoke highlights the derision that prompted the embittered pictorial diatribe. The figure of Time as an old winged man sits on a broken statue, blowing pipe smoke at a landscape painting on the easel in front of him. He has pierced the canvas with his scythe. A large jar labelled ‘Varnish’ sits on the floor. Here the darkening pipe smoke ‘ages’ the painting so it can be deceptively presented to foolish collectors as an old master work with darkened varnish.

The smoking club of graphic satire also includes the amusing social gatherings in the prints of Henry William Bunbury, whose social caricatures were rendered with more light-hearted, gentle humour. Bunbury was an amateur gentleman artist, praised by Horace Walpole in his *Anecdotes of painting in England* as ‘the second Hogarth’, whose ‘rank and bashful merit’ and ‘too rare exertion of superior talents, confine the proofs to a narrow circle’.⁵⁹ Although the denial of public recognition and commercial interest reflect the rhetoric of amateur status of the gentleman artist, Bunbury’s images were indeed intended for elite audiences – the same audiences who would appreciate the inside jokes of Gillray’s politically oriented smoking club of parliamentarians. Among Bunbury’s light satires, and the works of those who followed him, are several prints of smoking clubs or club night gatherings. For example, *The smoaking club* (1792) by Charles Knight after H. W. Bunbury portrays a familiar scene of men, here elderly, all smoking long pipes.⁶⁰ Some are sleepy, others puff smoke at each other. On the wall is a framed notice of rules that underscore key elements of the parody of smoking club satires, including Gillray’s *A smoking club*. The first rule, echoing the farcical implication of excessive smoking implied in the balloon experiment, states that ‘No Gemman to be a member of this Society who cannot smoke three pipes at one sitting’. Another rule, underscoring the offence of every member of Gillray’s *A smoking club*, is that ‘Any member who puffs designedly in the face of another, to be find six-pence or be puff’d at in return by the whole company’. Artists other than Bunbury also provided more gentle caricatures, including the *City smoking club* by an unknown artist, published by Holland in 1788.

On the other hand, Gillray’s *A smoking club* is clearly not alone in pairing smoking with overtly political satire. In fact, early in his career, Gillray himself experimented with more generic parodies of politics and smoking as in *The country politicians* (1784), published by Hannah Humphrey’s older brother,

⁵⁸ LWL, Hogarth 761.03.00.01.2, impression 2. Paulson, *Hogarth’s graphic works*, cat. no. 208; BMC 3836.

⁵⁹ Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of painting in England* (4 vols., Strawberry Hill, 1771), IV, p. viii.

⁶⁰ LWL, 792.01.10.02++. BMC 8220.

William, from his premises on the Strand.⁶¹ Here a parson and barber smoke profusely while a squire wearing spectacles reads the news from a broadside. Likewise, Thomas Rowlandson's bumbling character Doctor Syntax finds himself in heated debate with pipe in hand by the hearth of a crowded tavern. The title, *Doctor Syntax in the middle of a smoaking hot political squabble...* (c. 1813; Figure 4), cleverly makes explicit the connection of smoking and politics.⁶²

Notably, even Hogarth's archetypal *A midnight modern conversation* included more specific political connotations, which his contemporary audiences would certainly have understood. Ronald Paulson suggests that Hogarth's inclusion of the *London Journal* and the *Craftsman* in the pocket of the man at the far right indicates that this character is a politician. Paulson further posits that these publications were propaganda journals of Walpole and the opposition, respectively, and thus the presence of the magazines serves as a connection between tobacco, wine, and spirits being consumed and the excise being proposed on those 'essentials'.⁶³

Moreover, it is not a big leap from Rowlandson's fictional and generic print back to Gillray's appropriation of smoking as metaphor for the machinations of particular politicians. In *A smoking club*, Gillray's evocation of pipe smoke as a metaphor for the pitfalls of uncivil communication that can ensnare political debate among adversaries forms a most effective foundation for his parody. This pairing of politics and smoking which expresses the tensions over behaviour of gentlemen holding contrasting political opinions is a subject he took up in other prints as well. Two more examples will make the point. *God save the king, in a bumper, or, an evening scene three times a week at Wimbleton* (1795) portrays the tory politicians Dundas and Pitt drunkenly toasting the king.⁶⁴ Dundas, draped in plaid, holds his glass for a refill, while Pitt, leg splayed on the tabletop, tipsily tries to pour from an upside-down bottle, spilling its contents. Dundas smokes, while Pitt's broken pipe lies on the table littered with empty bottles and glasses. In *The feast of reason & the flow of soul, i.e., the wits of the age setting the table in a roar* (1797), the politician John Courtenay (1738–1816), as the chairman of a tavern club, sits smoking at the head of an oblong table.⁶⁵ Addressing George Hanger, who faces him at the foot of the table, he remarks: 'I say, Georgey how do Things look now?' The words issue from their mouths in irregularly shaped speech bubbles delineated as clouds of smoke. Hanger answers: 'Ax my Grandmother's Muff, pray do!' He holds a pipe, his wine glass is overturned, and his bludgeon is thrust in his top boot. On Hanger's right sits Charles James Fox, who leans back in his chair and utters with amusement, 'O charming! – charming!' Opposite Fox sits Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who clasps a decanter of 'Brandy' in one hand, a glass in the other. He says, with a sly smile, 'Excellent! – damme

⁶¹ LWL, 784.01.11.01. BMC 6730.

⁶² LWL, 813.00.00.04+. Not in BMC.

⁶³ Paulson, *Hogarth's graphic works*, cat. no. 128, pp. 84–5.

⁶⁴ LWL, 795.05.27.01+. BMC 8651.

⁶⁵ LWL, 797.02.04.01+. BMC 8984.



Figure 4. Thomas Rowlandson, *Doctor Syntax in the middle of a smoaking hot political squabble...*, c. 1813, etching and stipple with hand colouring.

Source: Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University, 813.00.00.04+.

Georgey, Excellent'. Next to him, and on Courtenay's right, is M. A. Taylor, who flourishes his pipe as he exclaims, 'Bravo! the best Thing I ever heard said, damme'. On the table are decanters of 'Mum' and 'Champaig[n]'. Above Courtenay's head is a framed picture of a simian creature in a cap of liberty, squatting on the ground and smoking a pipe.⁶⁶

The particularly strong, barbed metaphorical ridicule of politics, both official and informal, in satiric prints of smoking clubs is underscored by contemporary testimony and explicit connection between smoking and political contests made by Henry Seymour Conway in a letter of 16 February 1741 to Horace Walpole. Conway describes the way that Sir Robert Walpole's opponents drown their feuds in tobacco, writing,

after scheming the whole winter [to remove Sir Robert Walpole from his Majesty's council], holding council upon council and junto upon junto, rallying the debris of last winter's secession, and raking together the whole hotch-potch, that mingled mass of Jacobites, Tories, Whigs, Republicans etc. men of all principles and of no principles, in order to give a total overthrow before next winter, calling out of their graves a

⁶⁶ Wright, *Works of James Gillray*, p. 226.

dozen or two of *veteres, vieti, veternosi senes*, who have been buried for ages in the country, drowned all party feuds in October and tobacco, and even forgot there was such a thing as politics ...⁶⁷

More generally, Clark observes that Irish and British governments were widely ridiculed as societies of loquacious, corrupt, and foolish nonentities, particularly clubs.⁶⁸

VI

Whether political and social parody, imagined gatherings, or commemorations of actual smoking clubs, representations in graphic satire demonstrate the assimilation of smoking as a thoroughly British social practice, which was linked with clubbing, another widely recognized British cultural phenomenon. The smoking club of graphic satire is at once an amusing social gathering in the prints of H. W. Bunbury and an image of solidarity among political prisoners in Richard Newton's *Soulagement en prison*. Smoking could also derisively suggest more nefarious activity in smoke-filled rooms populated with dishonest politicians, who disingenuously 'blow smoke' at each other in works like James Gillray's *A smoking club*.

The gatherings of elites at printshop windows, around folios of caricatures in the libraries of private collectors, or sharing the entertainment of rented albums were all sociable exercises in themselves. In such convivial consumption of political satire – images of smoking clubs among them – we can imagine a knowing, shared viewership to demarcate a discrete elite audience, one that functioned as a virtual social cadre, even a club, bound by a common understanding of inside jokes or parodied sociability in much the same way that David Francis Taylor describes the circulation of caricatures within a reasonable elite literary culture that actively fostered and sequestered that culture in important ways.⁶⁹ Gillray's *A smoking club* offers multi-faceted options for the interpretation of intoxicated clubbing. The imagery can at once be understood as a scene of gentlemanly sociability, even intimate bawdiness, and at the same time convey underlying connotations of domestic oligarchic power and global empire that associative behaviour fostered. Further, the act itself of knowing viewing of satiric prints by contemporaries provided agency to join people together as a form of sociability and intimate bawdiness, just as did the social construct of intoxication by tobacco and drink in 'smoking clubs'.

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⁶⁷ Lewis et al., eds., *Horace Walpole's correspondence*, XXXVII, pp. 89–90.

⁶⁸ Clark, *British clubs*, pp. 4–5.

⁶⁹ Taylor, *Politics of parody*, p. xi.

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