

“I’m quite regardless what the world can  
say!”: Marriage, Media, Agency and the New  
Female Coterie in the Late Eighteenth  
Century

By

Rachel Eleanor Boddy

A thesis submitted to Victoria University of Wellington  
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in History

Victoria University of Wellington

2019

## Acknowledgements

I owe the greatest thanks to my supervisor, Senior Lecturer Dr. Valerie Wallace. Without her advice, guidance, and regular reassurance that things will be great, this process would have been much harder, and much less enjoyable. Thank you for encouraging me to reach further.

The collegial nature of the staff and students of the History Department has been a source of great support throughout my time at Victoria University of Wellington.

I am also deeply grateful to Brenda Joyce, the donor of the Jack Pearce Scholarship, for supporting and valuing my work. My thanks also to the Victoria University of Wellington Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Joint Research Committee, who supplied the funding for my archival research trip which made this thesis possible.

Thank you also to the librarians and archivists whose work often goes unappreciated. The help of those at the British Library, National Archives at Kew, the Museum of English Rural life, the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, the Dorset History Centre, the Isle of Wight Record Office, the West Sussex Record Office, the Lancashire Archives, and the Staffordshire Record Office was invaluable.

And of course, to my family. To my siblings, Emma, Lucy and Jarrod, thank you for being there for me no matter what. I am beyond lucky to have the best siblings ever. To my loving parents, Heather and Ian, nothing I have ever done or will ever do would be possible without you. And finally, to Jacob —my strength and stay. I couldn't have done it without your love, support and constant encouragement.

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## Abstract

The New Female Coterie was a group of disgraced upper-class women in the late eighteenth century traditionally dismissed as ‘scandalous’, ‘fallen’ or victims. This thesis re-evaluates these women, exploring the ways in which they utilised their agency to navigate divorce and separation proceedings which were designed for the benefit of men. It also investigates the constraints, such as family or wealth, that restricted their agency. The thesis further considers the ways in which the women were empowered by combining as a collective. This thesis utilises under-examined sources such as satirical cartoons, pamphlets, and *The Rambler’s Magazine* to show that media itself could constrain women either by side-lining women’s agency or by portraying it as a negative and dangerous thing. Media representations of the New Female Coterie provide evidence of the sex panics which, historians argue, reached their apex in the 1790s. This thesis posits instead that anxieties regarding women’s sexual behaviour originated earlier than is often suggested. By examining the under-explored women of the New Female Coterie, this thesis contributes to scholarship on female agency in the Georgian period.

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## Introduction

In an unfashionable street in the fashionable part of London in 1782 sat Lady Seymour Worsley. Having escaped from her husband, and been abandoned by her lover, Lady Seymour Worsley was well-known by London society for her scandals. Nevertheless, Lady Seymour Worsley claimed that she was “quite regardless what the world [could] say” about her.<sup>1</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley and the other members of the New Female Coterie valued their agency and independence. Their choices may have taken them on twisting paths, but it was important to them to have made their own decisions and to have had some control over their lives. For Lady Seymour Worsley, and the other five members of the group that came to be known as the New Female Coterie, their agency had altered their lives in significant ways.

The New Female Coterie was a group of disgraced eighteenth-century upper-class British women. The group consisted of Lady Seymour Worsley; the Honourable Mrs. Catherine Newton; Lady Henrietta Grosvenor, the Countess Grosvenor; Lady Elizabeth Smith-Stanley, Countess of Derby; Viscountess Penelope Ligonier; and Lady Caroline Stanhope, the Countess of Harrington.

Lady Seymour Worsley eloped with her lover and the criminal conversation trial between her lover and her husband was one of the most notorious trials of the latter part of the eighteenth century. Mrs. Catherine Newton married her husband at sixteen and in her short marriage she engaged in many affairs. Lady Henrietta Grosvenor embarked on an affair with the King’s brother which gained the notice and censure of many. Lady Elizabeth Derby left her husband and her children upon the discovery of her affair, but she was never granted a divorce. Lady Penelope Ligonier’s affair with an Italian poet led to a duel between her husband and her lover, and her own divorce. Lady Caroline Stanhope remained married to her husband although both engaged in frequent affairs. Contemporary upper-class society considered these women scandalous and they were widely discussed in the media.

Yet in spite of contemporary interest and attention directed towards these women, they have been mostly side-lined by the annals of history. They often appear

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<sup>1</sup> *An Epistle from L-Y W-y to Sir R-d*, 1782, CUP/408/k/17, British Library [BL], London, p.2.

in biographies of their husbands, regularly featuring in paragraphs which use these women as illustrations of a challenge or embarrassment that their husbands had to overcome.<sup>2</sup> Russel's article, 'Killing Mrs Siddons: The Actress and the Adulteress in late Georgian Britain', mentions many members of the group, although not as a specific collective, instead connecting their scandals, and others like them, with the "panic generated by adultery".<sup>3</sup> She acknowledges the significant role of the media in creating these scandals, aided by what she calls 'the theatre of adultery'.<sup>4</sup> Rubenhold's biography of Lady Seymour Worsley is one of the few works which discusses the women of the New Female Coterie as a group and she works to establish Lady Seymour Worsley as a rounded and independent figure. Rubenhold considers the New Female Coterie as a group in one of her chapters, and briefly utilises *The Rambler's Magazine*, which featured articles discussing this group, to suggest how this group may have functioned.<sup>5</sup> However, the chapter remains quite focused on the ways in which these women were on the outskirts of society, calling them Lady Seymour Worsley's "*demi-monde* circle".<sup>6</sup> Beyond this, the group has been little discussed. These women are often either patronised, victimised or ignored yet they led full and interesting lives, and those lives were much more complex than is often recognised.

The women of the New Female Coterie not only are little discussed as a group, they have been subject to surprisingly little attention as individuals. Lady Henrietta Grosvenor features in works about the royal family at that time, but she features largely as a scandalous figure.<sup>7</sup> Greig uses Lady Elizabeth Derby as an example of the way in which the 'Beau Monde' excluded those who did not adhere to their social codes.<sup>8</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> S. M. Farrell, 'Grosvenor, Richard, first Earl Grosvenor', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/11669, accessed 18 February 2019; James Falkner, 'Ligonier, Edward [Francis Edward], Earl Ligonier of Clonmell', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/16651, accessed 18 February 2019; Philip Woodfine, 'Stanhope, William, first Earl of Harrington', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/26257, accessed 15 October 2018; Nigel Aston, 'Worsley, Sir Richard, seventh baronet', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/29986, accessed 18 February 2019; Alan G. Crosby, 'Stanley, Edward Smith, twelfth earl of Derby (1752–1834)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47080, accessed 3 October 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Gillian Russell, 'Killing Mrs. Siddons: The Actress and the Adulteress in late Georgian Britain', *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2012, p.420.

<sup>4</sup> Russell, 'Killing Mrs. Siddons', pp.420–426.

<sup>5</sup> Hallie Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W: An Eighteenth-Century Tale of Sex, Scandal and Divorce*, (London: Vintage, 2008), pp.171–183.

<sup>6</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.183.

<sup>7</sup> Stella Tillyard, *A Royal Affair: George III and his Troublesome Siblings*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.202–212.

addition to Rubenhold's biography, Lady Seymour Worsley features in articles that discuss different aspects of her criminal conversation trial, but again the focus is less on Lady Seymour Worsley as an individual, and more on her scandalous trial.<sup>9</sup>

Lady Caroline Harrington, Lady Penelope Ligonier and Mrs. Catherine Newton have been even less discussed. Mainz notes Lady Caroline Harrington in relation to the Chevalier D'Eon, noting her position as chairwoman of a jury who are deciding on M. D'Eon's gender in a satirical print.<sup>10</sup> Russell describes her as a "court woman of notoriety", and emphasises her role in public and private forms of sociability.<sup>11</sup> Russell further says that both Lady Henrietta Grosvenor and Lady Penelope Ligonier became "a byword for feminized metropolitan licentiousness for years", and later notes that Mrs Catherine Newton became the focus of public attention for her own adulteries.<sup>12</sup> Lloyd similarly suggests that Mrs Catherine Newton became a focal point for scandal, connecting her with the previous cases of Lady Henrietta Grosvenor and Lady Seymour Worsley.<sup>13</sup> None of these sources focus specifically on these women, but all note their transgressive actions.

This thesis argues that these women had agency and used it to try and get what they wanted, albeit within a set of constraints. Although these constraints, such as money, family, or their representation in the media, may have hindered their choices and their independence, their lives were not controlled by these factors. Instead, the women of the New Female Coterie worked to choose their own paths within the confines of upper-class society. Greig's *The Beau Monde* details the world of the eighteenth-century upper class, their exclusivity and intricate processes for being 'in', which has been instrumental in discovering how people might also be 'out'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah Lloyd, 'Amour in the Shrubbery: Reading the Detail of English Adultery Trial Publications of the 1780s', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2006, pp.421–442; Cindy McCreery, 'Breaking all the Rules: The Worsley Affair in Late-Eighteenth-Century Britain', in Regina Hewitt and Pat Rogers (eds.) *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Eighteenth Century Society: Essays from the DeBartolo Conference*, (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), pp.69–88.

<sup>10</sup> Valerie Mainz, 'The Chevalier D'Eon and his Several identities', in Simon Burrows, Jonathan Conlin, Russell Goulbourne, and Valerie Mainz (eds.), *The Chevalier D'Eon and his Worlds: Gender, Espionage and Politics in the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Continuum Books, 2010), p.118.

<sup>11</sup> Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.66, 21; Gillian Russell, 'The Peeresses and the Prostitutes: The Founding of the London Pantheon, 1772', *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2005, p.11.

<sup>12</sup> Russell, 'Killing Mrs. Siddons', pp.422–423.

<sup>13</sup> Lloyd, 'Amour in the Shrubbery', p.425.

<sup>14</sup> Greig, *The Beau Monde*, pp.192–228.



Recent historiography has shifted from focusing on what women could not do, to what they could, a trend continued in this thesis.<sup>15</sup> Some scholarship has discussed the ways in which upper-class women could exercise their agency to get involved with politics. Convention, if not technically law, excluded women from voting, but they possessed some influence over the votes of the men around them.<sup>16</sup> However, women were expected to exert this political agency for their families and within existing social or regional networks.<sup>17</sup> Clark suggests that canvassing for someone outside of one's own family may have been scandalous, meaning that familial bonds protected women from scandal but also limited women's agency in politics.<sup>18</sup> For example, the Duchess of Devonshire's 1784 campaign in the streets of Westminster for Charles James Fox was criticised as she campaigned for someone outside of her family, thereby disgracing both her gender and her rank.<sup>19</sup> This example of the Duchess of Devonshire emphasises that external factors tempered women's agency.

In contributing to this trend, this thesis seeks to understand not simply what genteel women were constrained from doing due to their gender or status, but what they *could* do. In doing so, I hope to present a more rounded portrait of these women and a fuller exploration of this group than what has come before. In order to do this, I will explore not only how the women of the New Female Coterie navigated through divorces and separations, but also how the media represented them and their agency. This thesis avoids portraying these women as passive onlookers in the breakdown of their marriages by recognising the small but meaningful ways that these women influenced the paths their lives took. Many other studies of political or marital female agency in this era explore the ways in which women had agency solely within familial surroundings.<sup>20</sup> This study recognises that marriage and family could act as

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<sup>15</sup> Amanda Vickery, 'Introduction' in Amanda Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.vii.

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Chalus, 'Women, Electoral Privilege and Practice in the Eighteenth Century' in Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds.), *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), pp.19, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Richardson, "Well-neighboured Houses": The Political Networks of Elite Women, 1780–1860' in Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds.), *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), p.56.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.57.

<sup>19</sup> Judith S. Lewis, '1784 and All That: Aristocratic Women and Electoral Politics', in Amanda Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp.101, 111.

<sup>20</sup> Laura E. Thomason, *The Matrimonial Trap: Eighteenth-Century Women Writers Redefine Marriage*, (Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2014); Elaine Chalus, "'To Serve my Friends": Women and Political Patronage in Eighteenth-Century England', in Amanda Vickery (ed.), *Women*,

constraints on female agency, but that women could and did exercise agency exclusive of those situations.

Thomason describes the ways in which women used writing as a means to figure out their identities as individuals as well as wives. Writing also allowed them to evaluate and reconcile their positive and negative feelings about marriage.<sup>21</sup> While Thomason considers the more emotional response to marriage, Dabhoiwala's *The Origins of Sex* considers the way people understood sex both in and outside of marriage. It explains what people in the eighteenth century would consider to be transgressions of their social, sexual, and moral codes.<sup>22</sup> Stone has written seminal texts on both divorce and the family, themes that run throughout this thesis, yet he does not pay enough attention to women's agency within divorce or the family. He suggests that the late eighteenth century saw an increase in companionate marriages, and this, combined with portrayals of happy marriages in novels, meant that women began to have unrealistic expectations of their own happiness in marriage.<sup>23</sup> He further suggests that this trend for companionate marriages led to a "reassessment of power relations between the sexes" and rising rates of those who remained unmarried.<sup>24</sup> Although this thesis does not concern itself overly with why the women of the New Female Coterie were unhappy in their marriages, their efforts to escape their marriages indicate that they were.

Sociability, particularly male associational homo-sociability, reached its apex in the eighteenth century. The number of clubs and societies grew throughout the eighteenth century, and they covered a wide variety of interests. These ranged from scientific, art, and horticultural societies, to the typical gentleman's clubs, which had spaces for discussion, gambling and dining. Clark notes that "by 1800 clubs and other forms of association had become a vital component of the social life of the educated English-speaking classes, whether at home or abroad."<sup>25</sup> However, he acknowledges

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*Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp.57–89; Richardson, "Well-neighbour'd Houses", pp.56–73; Judith S. Lewis, *Sacred to Female Patriotism: Gender, Class, and Politics in Late Georgian Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Thomason, *The Matrimonial Trap*, pp.1–2.

<sup>22</sup> Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England, 1530–1987*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.259.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), pp.336, 375.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p.3.

that this associational world was mainly restricted to men, with women only welcomed into some debating, philanthropic, musical or occasionally literary clubs.<sup>26</sup> Russell describes traditional upper-class female sociability in the eighteenth century as “domiciliary sociability”. By this she means “the range of activities – balls, assemblies, masquerades, theatricals, dinner, card-parties and general visiting – conducted in the household, by which elite women in particular were able to claim a role for themselves in mid-eighteenth-century public culture.”<sup>27</sup> Although female friendships traditionally existed outside of associational culture, these relationships were no less important. They acted as support for behaviour, could impact reputation and maintained important social networks.<sup>28</sup> There was a trend in the 1780s for women to join or create debating societies, which met in assembly halls or private rooms rather than taverns and discussed ‘women’s issues’ such as marriage.<sup>29</sup> However, women remained a minority in associational life and female sociability could be stigmatized for being frivolous, or unnecessary. Any intrusion into male-centric domains of sociability could be resented.<sup>30</sup>

One club which intruded on male forms of associational sociability was the Ladies Coterie or Ladies Club.<sup>31</sup> This club originated in the 1770s and continued in some form into the next decade. This was the club after which the New Female Coterie was named, although whether they named themselves in deliberate mockery or as homage, or were named thus by *The Rambler’s Magazine*, I have not been able to ascertain. Members of the Ladies Club paid five guineas annually, and additional money for dinners or card games.<sup>32</sup> It was founded by a group of high-class women and accepted both male and female members. New members were admitted by a ballot, in which the women chose the men and vice versa.<sup>33</sup> They co-opted a form of

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<sup>26</sup> Clark, *British Clubs*, pp.130–131.

<sup>27</sup> Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p.11.

<sup>28</sup> Ingrid H. Tague, *Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690–1760*, (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2002), pp.175–178, 182–3; Greig, *The Beau Monde*, pp.95–98; Amanda E. Herbert, *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity and Friendship in Early Modern Britain*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p.196.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, *British Clubs*, pp.200–202.

<sup>30</sup> Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p.30.

<sup>31</sup> This will be referred to as the Ladies Club in this thesis for clarity.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Cullen v. Queensberry, Minutes, accounts, and vouchers of the ‘Lady’s Club, Afterwards Arlington House Club: London’, *Rule and Member Books 1770s and 1780s: Rules X, XI, XII & XVI*, Chancery: Master Tinney’s Exhibits, C104/146 Part Two, The National Archives [TNA], Kew.

<sup>33</sup> The women who started the Ladies club included Mrs FitzRoy, Lady Pembroke, Mrs. Meynell, Lady Molyneux, Miss Pelham and Miss Lloyd; see Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.175; Cullen v. Queensberry’, Minutes, accounts, and vouchers of the ‘Lady’s Club, Afterwards Arlington House Club:

exclusion used in male clubs wherein a submitted black ball would reject the candidate's application, as opposed to the white ball which would welcome a candidate.<sup>34</sup> In spite of being named for the women in the club, it was easier for men to gain admittance, and by the mid-1770s, men managed the club almost exclusively.<sup>35</sup> A Mr. James Cullen took over the management of the club in 1775, and was responsible for collecting subscriptions, organising amusements such as balls, dinners, and concerts, and stocking the club.<sup>36</sup> In spite of these civilised entertainments, and the high-born roster of members, reports treated the club as if it was barely respectable, insinuating that it encouraged all sorts of licentious behaviour.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps because of the gender mix or the adoption of elements of male sociability, the Ladies Club was condemned for the behaviour of its members.<sup>38</sup> One satirical print, called 'The Female Coterie' (Figure 1), displayed a number of men and women in a club behaving indiscreetly.<sup>39</sup> People were gambling large amounts of money and cheating at cards, there were symbols of money-lending and cuckoldry, women who were drinking copious amounts, women and men being over familiar with each other, and one couple appeared to be sneaking off to the bedrooms. It appears

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London', *Rule and Member Books 1770s and 1780s: Rules I & II*, Chancery: Master Tinney's Exhibits, C104/146 Part Two, TNA.

<sup>34</sup> Lady Caroline Harrington was one of the women who was blackballed from the Ladies Club, in spite of the fact that Lady Molyneux, one of the founding members, was likely Lady Caroline Harrington's daughter. It is possible that Lady Caroline Harrington initiated the New Female Coterie because she was excluded from the Ladies Club as a way of having her own, slightly less respectable club. This does not explain why Lady Isabella Molyneux would have excluded her mother, but Lady Mary Coke does suggest that Lady Caroline Harrington was on poor terms with Lady Isabella Molyneux just before her wedding, though Lady Mary did not know why: Lady Mary Coke, *The Letters and Journals of Lady Mary Coke*, Vol. 2, (Bath: Lonsdale and Bartolomew Ltd, 1970), Saturday 26 November 1768, p.415; 'Cullen v. Queensberry, Minutes, accounts, and vouchers of the 'Lady's Club, Afterwards Arlington House Club: London', *Rule and Member Books 1770s and 1780s: Rule V*, Chancery: Master Tinney's Exhibits, C104/146 Part Two, TNA.

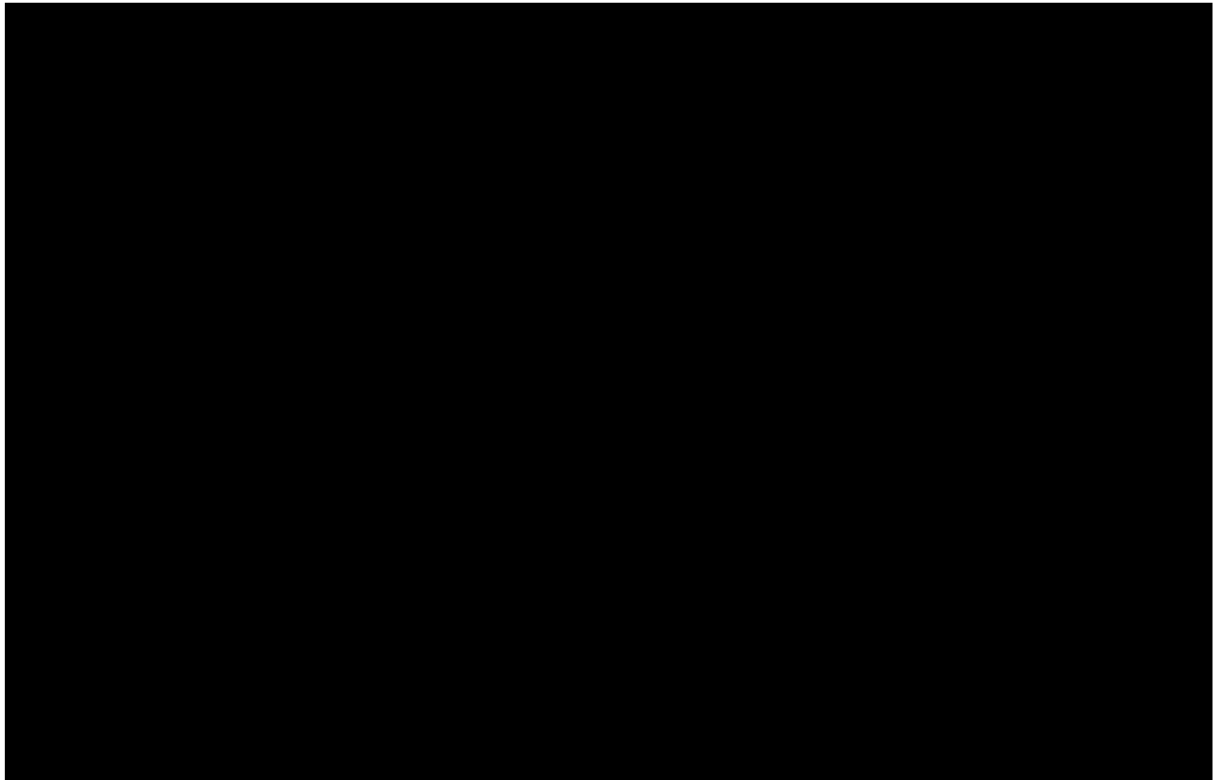
<sup>35</sup> Although a receipt of the Earl of Egremont's for his subscription to the club does call it "the Lady's Included Club": 'Bills paid by George, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Egremont himself to London Tradesmen', 1775, Petworth House Archives, PHA/8047, West Sussex Record Office, Chichester; 'Cullen v. Queensberry, Minutes, accounts, and vouchers of the 'Lady's Club, Afterwards Arlington House Club: London', *Rule and Member Books 1770s and 1780s: Rule VIII, III, & IV*, Chancery: Master Tinney's Exhibits, C104/146 Part Two, TNA.

<sup>36</sup> 'Cullen v. Queensberry, Minutes, accounts, and vouchers of the 'Lady's Club, Afterwards Arlington House Club: London', *Mr Cullen Proposes for his taking Management of Coterie*, 29 March 1775, Chancery: Master Tinney's Exhibits, C104/146 Part One, TNA; 'Cullen v. Queensberry, Minutes, accounts, and vouchers of the 'Lady's Club, Afterwards Arlington House Club: London', *Entertainment Book*, Chancery: Master Tinney's Exhibits, C104/146 Part One, TNA.

<sup>37</sup> Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, pp.78, 79, 81.

<sup>38</sup> Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p.72.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Bonnor, 'The Female Coterie', 1770, BM Satires 4472, British Museum[BM], London.



**Figure 1:** ‘The Female Coterie’.

the Ladies Club was criticised because its members encroached on a space traditionally occupied by men. Clubs and spaces for social drinking were traditionally coded as masculine, and the Ladies Club’s entrance into this space, along with the club’s use of processes belonging to gentleman’s clubs (such as the black ball) suggested that its members transgressed societal norms.<sup>40</sup> Russell suggests that the Ladies Club, and other similar types of sociability, require further research, particularly to explore “the ‘crisis’ in gender relations” that has been seen in this era.<sup>41</sup>

The New Female Coterie appears to have adopted a mode of sociability somewhere between the masculine and feminine modes—what you might call ‘domiciliary-associational sociability’. The women of the New Female Coterie constituted a club, which debated issues that affected the group and conducted serious discussions about members’ lives; and also, a friendship group, which created space for gossip, support and camaraderie. The New Female Coterie seems to have been one of the few clubs, perhaps the only club, that was all female, and which utilised both domiciliary and associational forms of sociability. The participation of the New Female

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<sup>40</sup> Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre*, p.69.

<sup>41</sup> Russell, ‘The Peeresses and the Prostitutes’, p.12.

Coterie in both forms of sociability highlights the importance of collectivity, in any form, to these women for empowerment and support. The New Female Coterie suggests that social bonds remained significant following their separations, although the form of sociability in which they engaged may have changed.

This thesis will begin by introducing the women of the New Female Coterie in more detail and giving some background on their lives and the events for which they became notorious. It will describe the social and sexual norms of the day as well as locating the Coterie within late-eighteenth-century society. Section one of the thesis will then focus on the agency that the New Female Coterie exhibited in the final stages of their marriages. It will suggest that one of the ways in which these women escaped marriage was through making their adulteries obvious enough to catch the attention of their husbands, neighbours and friends. It will also consider the ways in which the New Female Coterie navigated the legal proceedings of divorce, criminal conversation, and separations, which were systems designed for the use of men. This thesis will then explore the ways in which the New Female Coterie used their agency after these legal proceedings, including how the confines of family and situation still limited their agency to an extent. It will further explore how being part of a collective empowered these women.

Section two will examine a range of media sources to suggest that the media portrayed the agency of the New Female Coterie either as a decidedly negative thing, or as non-existent. Many satirical prints and pamphlets often side-lined the agency of the women of the New Female Coterie. However, their portrayal in *The Rambler's Magazine* emphasised their agency to highlight the way in which their transgressions and independence made them dangerous. These reports reflect contemporary fears about women's behaviour. Similarly, the testimony of servants in pamphlet media allowed for criticisms of the behaviour of the upper-class. The New Female Coterie contributed to the erosion of class boundaries through their transgressive sexual relationships with those of a lower class. Throughout this thesis there are references to 'intermediary spaces'. This is a term I have used to refer to spaces that were both public and private, or gendered as both male and female, and both low class and high class. The New Female Coterie's presence in these intermediary spaces exemplifies their status as being on the outskirts of society as they lived and visited many of the same physical spaces whilst not being welcomed or treated in the same way. Some of

the women of the New Female Coterie utilised the media to push back against negative portrayals of their agency whilst for others the effects of their representation in the media had long lasting impacts, constraining their choices in numerous ways.

Additionally, this thesis will argue that these portrayals of the New Female Coterie in the media contributed to the panic about morality, sexuality and gender traditionally regarded as reaching its apex in the 1790s. Many historians have singled out the 1790s as a decade of change in England.<sup>42</sup> Of these, three in particular have specified that it was a decade of panic about morality, sexuality and gender. These panics were all underpinned by the same anxiety about women and the way that they ought to act. Stone suggests that the 1790s saw a serious panic about the moral state of the nation. He attributes this in part to the increase in criminal conversation actions and also to the fears that the French Revolution had created about luxury and licentious behaviour amongst the aristocracy.<sup>43</sup> Binhammer suggests that the 1790s witnessed a number of pivotal events and changes, such as the French Revolution, which caused alarm about female sexuality. This 'sex panic' led to a re-evaluation of female standards of behaviour. Women were now expected to be more domestic and less sexual.<sup>44</sup> Wahrman examines plays from the latter quarter of the eighteenth century to illuminate the way in which gender roles became codified by the 1790s, when they had been comparatively flexible in the 1770s.<sup>45</sup> He identifies this tightening of gender boundaries as arising from anxieties about the crossing of gender boundaries that arose following the American War. Although this period of panic seems to have reached its apotheosis in the 1790s, like Wahrman, I believe that this period of alarm can instead be connected with the end of the American War in 1783. Both Stone and Binhammer date the panic later, specifically connecting it with the French Revolution. Although it is likely that the French Revolution heightened these anxieties into the

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, 'The Affective Revolution in 1790s Britain', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2001, pp.491–521; Clive Emsley, 'An Aspect of Pitt's "Terror": Prosecutions for Sedition during the 1790s', *Social History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1981, pp.155–184; Gillian Russell, "'Faro's Daughters": Female Gamesters, Politics, and the Discourse of Finance in 1790s Britain', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2000, pp.481–504; Michael T. Davis, 'The Mob Club? The London Corresponding Society and the Politics of Civility in the 1790s', in Michael T. Davis and Paul A. Pickering (eds.), *Unrespectable Radicals? Popular Politics in the Age of Reform*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), pp.21–40.

<sup>43</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.276–277.

<sup>44</sup> Katherine Binhammer, 'The Sex Panic of the 1790s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1996, p.410.

<sup>45</sup> Dror Wahrman, 'Percy's Prologue: From Gender Play to Gender Panic in Eighteenth-Century England', *Past & Present*, No. 159, 1998, pp.122–124.

fully-fledged panic that Stone, Binhammer and Wahrman identify, anxieties about women are evident earlier than this, as is shown by the media portrayal of the New Female Coterie. Portrayals of the New Female Coterie highlight a number of anxieties relating to women and their behaviours.

The thesis will conclude by considering not only what the New Female Coterie can tell us about wider society in the period in which they lived, but also how society and the situation of women subsequently changed. It will suggest that the New Female Coterie's independence, along with other factors, led to a backlash against female agency. This backlash led to a tightening of moral and social expectations for women that would largely last until the 1960s.

This thesis has utilised a variety of regional archives to uncover the lives of the women of the New Female Coterie in order to examine how they used their agency. Family papers found in both national and small county archives across England have been instrumental in piecing together some of the details about these women's lives. However, the usefulness of these papers relies entirely on what the descendants of these women or of their husbands decided to keep. There is a preponderance of legal ephemera—wills, marriage settlements, annuities, separation agreements, drafts of legal documents and letters to and from lawyers—and only a few letters written by these women. Often descendants take it upon themselves to censor the records left by any family members that they feel were inappropriate, immoral, or who otherwise behaved in a manner perceived not to fit with the descendant's social code. In spite of this pre-emptive censorship by family members, family papers remain a useful source.

As the group left no formal records such as meeting books, membership registrations or rules and as there are few extant letters written by the women, much of the information about them must be gleaned from other sources. A valuable source in unearthing the lives of some of the women of the New Female Coterie is *The Letters and Journals of Lady Mary Coke*. Lady Mary Coke was a keen social observer, and her diary reveals the daily activities and lifestyle of an upper-class woman. She also observed her social peers, including some of the women of the New Female Coterie; her diary thus sheds light on how these women and their scandals were received. However, Lady Mary's comments need to be treated with caution. She valued her own observations and moral judgements highly, and often held onto disagreements from the past. It appears she was not very fond of Lady Elizabeth Derby, whom she knew



before she married, because of a long-standing feud with her mother; nor does it seem she liked Lady Henrietta Grosvenor, for reasons that are unclear. It seems she got along well with Lady Caroline Harrington, frequently attending her Sunday evening card games. Yet Lady Mary Coke may have only felt kindlier towards Lady Caroline Harrington as the card games allowed for access to the Duke of York, with whom Lady Mary Coke had a long-standing and very likely one-sided flirtation.<sup>46</sup>

The women of the New Female Coterie were also widely discussed in the media. The New Female Coterie, as individuals and as a group, feature as the subject of many satirical prints, pamphlets and articles, particularly in *The Rambler's Magazine*. The eighteenth century saw a massive expansion in the press of England. In 1695 censorship in England came to an accidental end when the Licensing Act lapsed.<sup>47</sup> Censorship was not imposed again until 1799, creating a century of almost unprecedented freedom of the press, and as such a great expansion in the numbers of newspapers, magazines, pamphlets and other ephemera.<sup>48</sup> During the 1780s, there were over a dozen London-based newspapers, and at least another fifty regional or provincial papers.<sup>49</sup> The eighteenth century also saw the origins of a significant trade in magazines. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, likely the first to use the term magazine, began publishing in 1731 and survived until 1922.<sup>50</sup> Magazines offered a wide variety of news, such as political, civil and societal news, medical advice (for problems real or imagined), shipping news, royal reports, reviews, poems, letters to the editor, anecdotes, gossip, and weather. Often, magazines might crib this information from the newspapers of the day, but this did not stop magazines from becoming a very popular medium.

In addition to the vast expansion of the periodical press, pamphlets became a common sight in eighteenth-century life, covering topics as diverse as religious didacticism, sensationalist scandals, current trials, and more. This expansion of the media throughout the eighteenth century meant that more people than before had access to the goings-on of English life, whether it be political news, or social scandals.

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<sup>46</sup> Jill Rubenstein, 'Coke [née Campbell], Lady Mary', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/26257, accessed 5 February 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, p.315.

<sup>48</sup> Clark, *British Clubs*, p.427.

<sup>49</sup> Clark, *British Clubs*, p.172.

<sup>50</sup> Anthony David Barker, 'Cave, Edward', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4921, accessed on 17 October 2018.

The expansion of the press and the increase of widely proliferated materials such as pamphlets, magazines and satirical prints are important for this thesis as the constant presence of the women of the New Female Coterie in these forms of media had very real effects on their lives. Pamphlets were widely available, often anonymously written, and allowed people to share their opinions and views on the latest happenings. Lady Seymour Worsley utilised pamphlet media in order to tell her side of the story but many more, anonymous pamphlets discussed or disparaged the women of the Coterie and their scandals.

The New Female Coterie also featured in satirical prints. Satirical prints at this time covered a wide variety of political and personal issues. The lack of direct censorship laws throughout the century meant that artists could address the faults of important people, often in a fairly crude fashion, without the immediate fear of retribution. This did not mean that artists named the people in their works, but the caricatures were designed to be obvious, and the semi-obsured names were intended so that a reading public familiar with the happenings of the day were able to guess who was being discussed. The artists caught on to matters of public interest and heightened this interest through their often scandalous or salacious takes. Some events were of such obvious interest to the public that they were covered multiple times in a variety of versions, such as Lady Seymour Worsley's trial. It was this interest in the trials and lives of the women of the New Female Coterie that make satirical prints such a valuable source to understand the way that the media presented the New Female Coterie to the public. The prints ignored their agency, or otherwise hindered it.

*The Rambler's Magazine, or the annals of Gallantry, Glee, Pleasure and the Bon Ton* represents one of the richest sources on the New Female Coterie.<sup>51</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine* was published monthly between 1783 and 1791 with a yearly supplement. Although I have no information about the readership of *The Rambler's Magazine*—such as statistics on distribution—the subtitle of the magazine suggests some conclusions. It declared that it was “Calculated for the Entertainment of the Polite World; and to furnish the Man of Pleasure with a most delicious banquet of Amorous, Bacchanalian, Whimsical, Humorous, Theatrical and Polite Entertainment.”<sup>52</sup> This subtitle, and the fairly coarse content of the magazine, suggests

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<sup>51</sup> Not to be confused with *The Rambler*, Samuel Johnson's periodical.

<sup>52</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine; or, the annals of Gallantry, Glee, Pleasure, and the Bon ton; calculated for the Entertainment of the Polite World and to furnish the man of pleasure with a most delicious*

that it was created for upper-class men who enjoyed ribald humour, likely the same sort of men who frequented brothels, and spent time in gentleman's clubs. However, Gatrell suggests that "the fact that some of [the] jokes [in *The Rambler's Magazine*] appropriated the female voice at men's expense" strongly suggested that there were at least some female readers "for whom such jests were palatable and plausible".<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, I think that women were likely not the main audience. As discussed in the next chapter, gentlemanly libertinism was considered fashionable behaviour for upper-class men, and this magazine likely catered to that trend.

Regardless of who was the intended audience, *The Rambler's Magazine* is a valuable source for examining the New Female Coterie. *The Rambler's Magazine* printed two debates held by this group—one which was likely a real discussion and another which was not—in addition to a number of 'toasts' that were supposedly given by the group, an interaction and a letter, all of which were likely imagined. It is likely that the longer discussion, 'Cytherian Discussions', was an authentic account of a discussion held by these women as it was "taken in short hand by Thomas R-B—TS-N."<sup>54</sup> Rubenhold suggests that this was a Thomas Robertson, a friend of Lady Penelope Ligonier and one of the journalists working for *The Rambler's Magazine*. She suggests he was present for some of the gatherings of the New Female Coterie, although Rubenhold does not specify whether the group invited him or if he requested to be present. Although I cannot verify this information, this is one of the few articles presented in *The Rambler's Magazine* without an anonymous author or an author using an obvious pseudonym, making it far more likely that the 'Cytherian Discussions' were at least derived from real discussions held by the New Female Coterie. The shorter discussion, 'The Court of Scandal', and the other articles supposedly written, discussed or given by the New Female Coterie, were probably invented. *The Rambler's Magazine* presented these interactions as real scenarios, yet no authors were given, and much of the subject matter was titillating or steeped in sexual euphemism. The sources are still a valuable resource to illuminate contemporary anxieties about women regardless of their veracity. If these items from *The Rambler's Magazine* were real debates, then it is an insightful look at the way in which these women felt about

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*banquet of Amorous, Bacchanalian, Whimsical, Humorous, Theatrical and Polite entertainment*, 1783–1784, General Reference Collection, CUP/820/A12, BL.

<sup>53</sup> Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), p.360.

<sup>54</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, July 1783, p.248.

the way that society treated them. If, however, the magazine invented these discussions, they still provide a revealing look at the way that media sources presented these women and their agency to the public. Historians have never before utilised these reports to explore the agency of women and the portrayal of that agency. Nor have historians used these sources to show the ways in which anxieties about women plagued the latter twenty years of the eighteenth century. These anxieties about women and their behaviour, sexuality and morality can be seen clearly in *The Rambler's Magazine's* portrayal of the New Female Coterie.

This thesis often uses phrases such as 'fallen' women, 'scandalous' women, or 'notorious' women, in spite of the fact that it actively works against these reductive ideas. This thesis seeks not to make moral judgements, but instead to evaluate these women in respect of their lived experiences and their portrayal in the press. As such, where phrases such as the above have been used, they are meant to indicate an eighteenth-century perception of these women, not the author's own. Similarly, when the term 'ladies' is used, it is not used to mean women generally. It is used to describe women of rank or title who, whether or not they held the title of Lady, acted or were supposed to act in a manner which upheld their status.

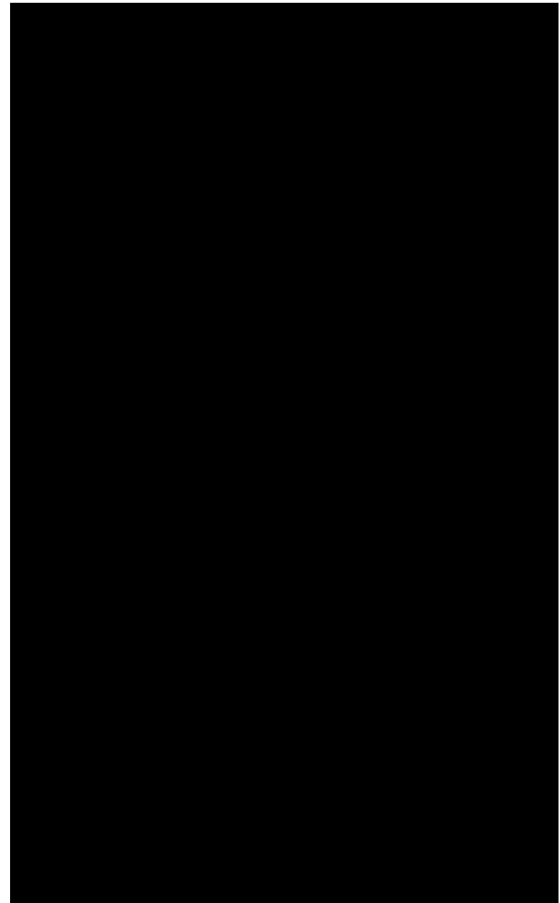
When one of the aims of this thesis is to recognise these women on their own terms, a number of issues arise when it comes to naming them. Conventional histories name all their subjects by their last name, but this becomes difficult when the women of the New Female Coterie had maiden names, married names, and sometimes names from a second marriage. Some had titles that were different again from their married names. Not only that but addressing them solely by their husband's titles seems to undermine their efforts to leave their marriages. However, it cannot be denied that there is some clarity to be had in connecting these women to their husbands through their names. Some histories address all their subjects by their first names, in an attempt to equalise and humanise the convention. But in the eighteenth century, formal addresses were common even amongst friends, and stripping these women of their honorifics, when most of these women were not officially divorced and so retained their titles, seems somehow wrong. Additionally, using only first names becomes confusing when the women's six husbands comprise a John, a William, two Edwards and two Richards. But using titles to differentiate these men when women are still referred to solely by their first names would undermine attempts at equality.

Therefore, in an attempt to find a middle ground between clarity, equality and humanisation, this thesis will use their honorific, their first name, and the name associated with their title, or their last name if they do not possess a title. For example, rather than discussing Lady Elizabeth Smith-Stanley, the Countess of Derby, she will be referred to as Lady Elizabeth Derby.

## The World of the New Female Coterie

### Who were the New Female Coterie?

In 1775, when the heiress Lady Seymour Worsley (*née* Fleming, *b.* 1758 *d.* 1818) was seventeen years old, she married Sir Richard Worsley. The early years of their marriage were marked by a notable coolness towards each other. This state of affairs caused Lady Seymour Worsley to complain that she felt “slighted”, and that she had kept her virginity for three months following the wedding because Sir Richard could not perform his marital duties.<sup>1</sup> She had multiple affairs throughout their marriage, which came out in 1782 in a scandalous criminal conversation trial, following her elopement with George Maurice Bisset, one of these lovers. The spouses officially separated on the 14<sup>th</sup> June 1788, and Lady Seymour Worsley lived between London, the surrounding counties and the European continent for the next twenty years.<sup>2</sup> A clause in her separation agreement trapped Lady Seymour Worsley in France whilst the French Revolution occurred; she returned from France years later in ill health. When her husband died in 1805, she swiftly married her twenty-six-year-old lover and resumed her maiden name of Fleming via royal license. She and her new husband, who also adopted the name Fleming, lived out the rest of their lives in France.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 2:** Joshua Reynolds, ‘Lady Worsley’, c.1780, Harewood House.

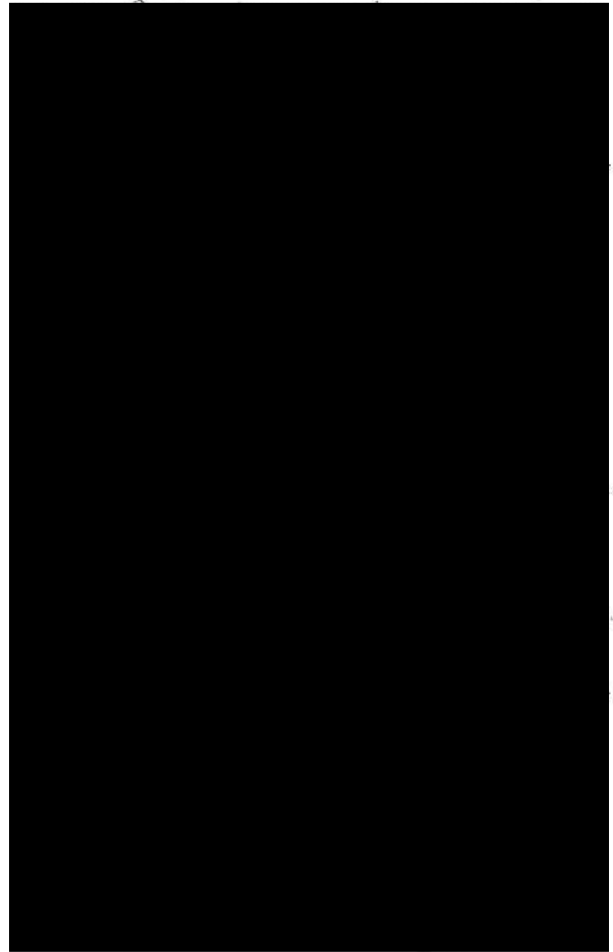
<sup>1</sup> Hallie Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W: An Eighteenth-Century Tale of Sex, Scandal and Divorce*, (London: Vintage, 2008), pp.35, 33.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Deed of Separation’, 14 June 1788, Worsley Family Papers, JER/WA/35/24, Isle of Wight Record Office [IOWRO], Newport.

<sup>3</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.261–262, 265.

The Honourable Mrs. Catherine Newton (*née* Seymour, *later* Constant, b. 1760 d. 1823) married John Newton Esquire in 1776, when she was sixteen and he was 59. They spent their early marriage in Bath and later at John Newton's country estate in Staffordshire, King's Bromley. Mrs. Catherine Newton conducted affairs in both these locations and by 1778 the two were unofficially separated. John Newton escorted his wife to France, supposedly in order for her to join a convent there. Mrs. Catherine Newton's pregnancy in 1780 provided fairly conclusive evidence of adultery. Her husband began proceedings for a separation from bed and board in the consistory courts, a proceeding which named numerous other men, including

her husband's ward, an actor in Bath, her coachman and her footman and "divers [sic] other Persons" as having committed adultery with her.<sup>4</sup> John Newton's will declared that he had disinherited the son that Mrs. Catherine Newton had borne in 1780, a child also named John Newton, and further stated that he hoped that he would soon gain a



**Figure 3:** 'Mrs Newton bathing in the River Trent, Assisted by Mr Baggs', 1782, taken from *The Trial of the Hon. Mrs Catherine Newton...* see footnote 4.

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<sup>4</sup> *The trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton, Wife of John Newton, Esq. and daughter of the Right Honourable and reverend Lord Francis Seymour; at the Consistory Court of Doctors commons; upon a Libel and Allegations, Charging her with the crime of adultery with Mr. Isham Baggs, a young Oxonian; Mr. Brett, a Player at Bath; Thomas Cope, Mrs. Newtons's coachman; Isaac Hatheway, her Footman; John Ackland, of Fairfield, in the County of Somerset, Esq. and divers other Persons. With all the interesting Scenes fully, minutely, and circumstantially displayed. Containing the whole of the evidence in that very Extraordinary Trial, 1782, CW3324522430, accessed via Eighteenth Century Collections Online.*

divorce.<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Catherine Newton later re-married a Mr. Jacob Constant and lived with him and their children in Cleves in Germany until her death on the 19<sup>th</sup> January 1823.<sup>6</sup>

Lady Henrietta Grosvenor (*née* Vernon, *later* Porter, *b.* 1745 *d.* 1828) met the Earl of Grosvenor in the middle of a rainstorm in 1764.<sup>7</sup> They married a month later, and she soon came to regret her hasty marriage. The earl was a wealthy man, and supposedly his doctor had encouraged him to marry swiftly as the doctor feared that recurring venereal disease had damaged his health.<sup>8</sup> His habits did not change much after his marriage, and he continued to frequent brothels and gambling dens. Following the birth of an heir in 1767, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor was often noted to be in the company of the Duke of Cumberland, the younger brother



**Figure 4:** Carrington Bowles, 'Henrietta Grosvenor (*née* Vernon), Countess Grosvenor', 1774, NPG D34993, National Portrait Gallery, London.

of King George III.<sup>9</sup> The couple originally met at busy, public locations, such as Vauxhall Gardens, the opera, or court, where their meetings in crowds could be

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<sup>5</sup> Legally, any child born within a marriage counted as legitimate, so John Newton declared in his will that this son was a bastard, and that he had never had any children with Catherine Newton nor had he been in her company since parting ways in Paris in 1777; further, the wording in the will makes it unclear whether or not a divorce had been granted or if a suit had merely been lodged: 'Correspondence re divorce of John Newton of Kings Bromley, 1776–1782', Papers of the Lane Family of Kings Bromley, D357/K/3/1, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Service: Staffordshire County Record Office [SCRO], Stafford.

<sup>6</sup> 'Correspondence chiefly between Thos. Lane, later between Jn. Lane, and Wm. Chamberlayne, trustee for Jn. Newton's divorced wife Catherine, re payments of annuity with copy death certificate of Catherine *née* Seymour, widow of Jacob Constant in Germany', 1782–1823, Papers of the Lane Family of Kings Bromley, D357/K/4/1, SCRO.

<sup>7</sup> He was at this time the Baron Grosvenor but was created the Earl Grosvenor in 1784.

<sup>8</sup> Stella Tillyard, *A Royal Affair: George III and his Troublesome Siblings*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), p.153.

<sup>9</sup> Tillyard, *A Royal Affair*, p.154.



explained as innocent encounters. When their dalliance grew more serious and began to be noted, they met at apartments above a milliner's shop. Lord Richard Grosvenor intercepted impassioned letters from the Duke of Cumberland and sent servants to catch the pair *in flagrante* at an inn in St Albans. Lord Richard Grosvenor began suits which would initiate divorce proceedings, not realising, or not believing, that Lady Henrietta Grosvenor could begin a counter-suit, which alleged his own, constant adulteries. Lady Henrietta Grosvenor's solicitors uncovered numerous young women who would testify to her husband's affairs. She won £1200 maintenance and lived most of the rest of her life on the edges of society. Shortly after her husband's death in 1802, she married a Lieutenant-General George Porter, a member of parliament for Stockbridge.<sup>10</sup>

As the daughter of one of the famous Gunning sisters, society considered Lady Elizabeth Smith-Stanley (*née* Hamilton), the Countess of Derby (*b.* 1753 *d.* 1797) to be one of the great beauties of her day.<sup>11</sup> Yet in spite of this fact, and supposed interest from two dukes, she ended up married to the Earl of Derby.<sup>12</sup> He held a great *fete Champêtre* to celebrate their nuptials in 1774 yet some reports characterise her as an unwilling bride, cajoled by her mother.<sup>13</sup> Lady Elizabeth Derby had three children in the four years following her marriage, though by 1778 she was likely involved in an affair with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke of Dorset, and it was alleged that the third child was his. In 1779 Lady Elizabeth Derby, depending on which report you read, had either fled her

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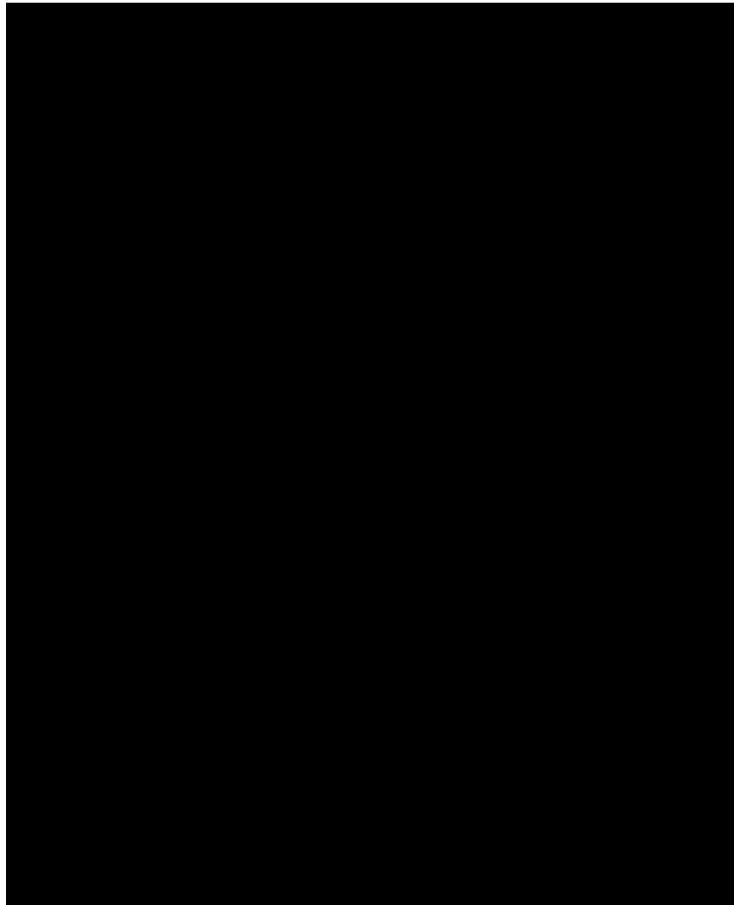
<sup>10</sup> 'Porter (afterwards De hochepiéd), George (1760–1828), of Stockbridge, Hants', *The History of Parliament*, [www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/porter-%28afterwards-de-hochepiéd%29-george-1760-1828](http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/porter-%28afterwards-de-hochepiéd%29-george-1760-1828), accessed 3 October 2018.

<sup>11</sup> The Gunning sisters were the daughters of an impoverished Irish peer, who made their way to London in 1750 and become social successes, noted for their beauty and vivacity. The elder sister, Maria Gunning (Lady Elizabeth Derby's aunt) married the Earl of Coventry in 1752 and died of lead poisoning from her cosmetics in 1760. Elizabeth Gunning (Lady Elizabeth Derby's mother) married the Duke of Hamilton (Lady Elizabeth Derby's father) in a clandestine wedding in 1752. Following his death, she married the Marquess of Lorne, who soon became the 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Argyll. In 1776 she was created Baroness Hamilton of Hameldon in her own right: Rosalind K. Marshall, 'Campbell [née Gunning], Elizabeth, duchess of Argyll and suo jure Baroness Hamilton of Hameldon [other married name Elizabeth Hamilton, duchess of Hamilton and Brandon]', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/11744, accessed 30 November.

<sup>12</sup> Lady Mary Coke notes that the Duke of Devonshire showed pointed interest in 1772, Robert Sackville-West that Lady Elizabeth Derby and the Duke of Dorset had formed some sort of connection before her marriage to the Earl: Lady Mary Coke, *The Letters and Journals of Lady Mary Coke*, Vol. 4, (Bath: Lonsdale and Bartolomew Ltd, 1970), Wednesday 30 December 1772, p.158; Robert Sackville-West, *Inheritance: The Story of Knole and the Sackvilles*, (New York: Walk & Company, 2010), p.131.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.204.

husband's home, or been refused entry to it.<sup>14</sup> High society thought that she might marry her lover, the Duke of Dorset, but her husband refused to initiate divorce proceedings, leaving her legally wed, but, in reality, exiled from high society. Having initially retreated to the countryside while she awaited her husband's decision about their marriage, Lady Elizabeth Derby then removed to continental Europe for some time. She spent the rest of her life living between the continent and London on the £800 per annum in pin money that she received from her husband.<sup>15</sup> She suffered from ill health for



**Figure 5:** George Romney, 'Elizabeth Stanley, (née Hamilton), Countess of Derby', c.1777, NPG D35130, National Portrait Gallery, London.

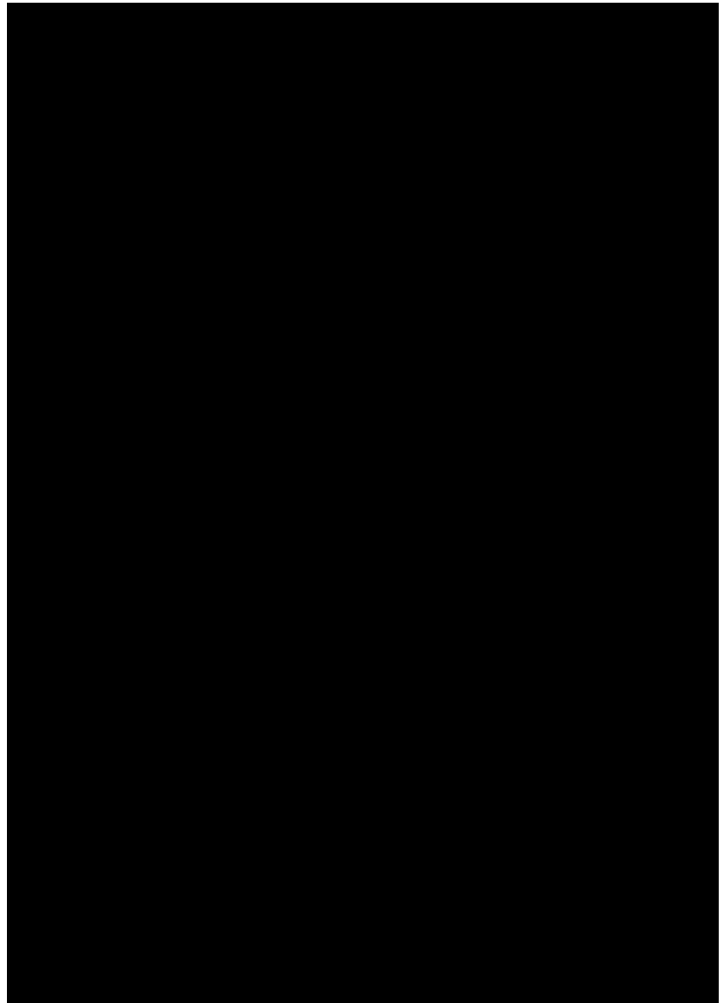
most of her latter life and spent much of her time at spa towns trying to recuperate until her death in 1797, aged forty-four.

Lady Penelope Ligonier (*née* Pitt, *later* Smith), Viscountess Ligonier (*b.* 1749 *d.* unknown) met and married her husband, Edward Ligonier, in Paris in 1766. They lived in Europe for a short time, enjoying companionship with friends and acquaintances before they returned to England. Upon their return, she began an affair with the Italian poet Count Vittorio Alfieri at her their estate in Surrey, Cobham Park. Her servants noticed Alfieri's surreptitious night-time visits and informed her husband. He

<sup>14</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.49, 56; *The Rambler's Magazine; or, the annals of Gallantry, Glee, Pleasure, and the Bon ton; calculated for the Entertainment of the Polite World and to furnish the man of pleasure with a most delicious banquet of Amorous, Bacchanalian, Whimsical, Humorous, Theatrical and Polite entertainment*, Supplement for 1783, General Reference Collection, CUP/820/A12, BL, p.504; Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), p.66; Greig, *The Beau Monde*, p.206.

<sup>15</sup> 'Deed of Separation', 28 February 1780, A Bundle of Private Family papers under seal 1780–1797, Earls of Derby (of Knowsley), DDK/25/5/1, Lancashire Archives [LA], Preston.

challenged Alfieri to a duel in Green Park in London and instigated proceedings for a parliamentary divorce from his wife. Lady Penelope Ligonier was the only woman of the New Female Coterie who was definitely divorced from her husband. Immediately following the divorce, she left for Europe, accompanied by her mother, and her sister-in-law. Alfieri, who had ended their affair upon discovering he was not Lady Penelope's only lover, escorted her some of the way out of London.<sup>16</sup> She gained a £600 annuity from her husband, and her father allowed her another £500 per annum and the use of a cottage to live in on the outskirts of his estate.<sup>17</sup> She lived between her father's estate, the continent, and London for most of her life. In 1784, Lady Penelope Ligonier got married again to a Captain Smith, a trooper in the Blues regiment, but little is known of her life after this.



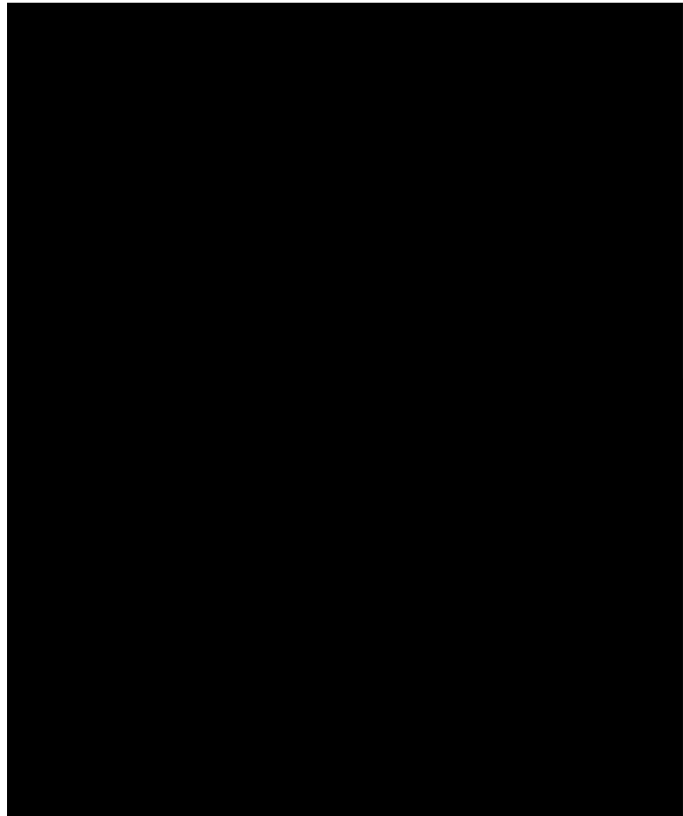
**Figure 6:** James Scott, after Thomas Gainsborough, 'Penelope Ligonier (née Pitt), Viscountess Ligonier', original c.1770, mezzotint 1868, NPG D3591, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Lady Caroline Stanhope (*née* FitzRoy), the Countess of Harrington, (*b.* 1722 *d.* 1784), was the unofficial leader of the New Female Coterie. She married William Stanhope, the second Earl of Harrington in 1746, and they had seven children together. While he was alive, the couple were known for their frequent affairs. Lady Caroline Harrington managed to stay on the right side of respectability because her husband frequented brothels and did not appear to mind that his wife was enjoying herself in

<sup>16</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.178.

<sup>17</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.178.

the same manner. One of her affairs was reputed to have been with one of her footmen, yet she maintained her status in society due to her husband's complaisance.<sup>18</sup> She hosted gambling nights at her London house every Sunday throughout the season, events attended by royal dukes, peers and peeresses, and even the notably snobby Lady Mary Coke.<sup>19</sup> Her husband died in 1779, at which point she became known as the Dowager Lady Harrington until her own death five years later.<sup>20</sup>



It is possible to trace how some of these women knew each

**Figure 7:** Richard Cosway, 'Caroline, Countess of Harrington', Wikimedia Commons.

other, although some of the connections were looser than others. Lady Seymour Worsley's sister was Lady Jane Harrington. She married Charles Stanhope, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Harrington, who was the Dowager Lady Caroline Harrington's son. Lady Seymour Worsley was also reputed to have slept with Lord George Pitt Rivers, Lady Penelope Ligonier's brother, although there is no concrete evidence to suggest this was so.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of the rumour's veracity, Lady Penelope Ligonier was in attendance at the criminal conversation trial between Sir Richard Worsley and George Bisset.<sup>22</sup> Lady Penelope Ligonier also likely attended many of the same events in society as did Lady Elizabeth Derby, and magazines often featured the two women together.<sup>23</sup> Lady

<sup>18</sup> Valerie Mainz, 'The Chevalier D'Eon and his Several identities', in Simon Burrows, Jonathan Conlin, Russell Goulbourne, and Valerie Mainz (eds.), *The Chevalier D'Eon and his Worlds: Gender, Espionage and Politics in the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Continuum Books, 2010), p.118.

<sup>19</sup> Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 1, Sunday 9 November 1766, p.95; Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 1, Sunday 16 November 1766, pp.101–102; Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 1, Sunday 11 January 1767, p.114.

<sup>20</sup> Woodfine, Philip, 'Stanhope, William, first earl of Harrington', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/26257, accessed 15 October 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.144.

<sup>22</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.144.

<sup>23</sup> Greig, *The Beau Monde*, p.168, 187.

Henrietta Grosvenor often visited the dowager Lady Caroline Harrington's house, particularly to attend her noted Sunday evening gambling parties.<sup>24</sup> Lady Henrietta Grosvenor likewise noted in a letter to her lover that Lady Caroline Harrington had tried, but been unable, to visit her during her confinement, but that Lady Caroline Harrington would be the first person she would visit once she was back in town.<sup>25</sup> Mrs. Catherine Newton cannot be so easily linked. She was of good birth as the granddaughter of a duke, but her short marriage, much of it spent in the country, means that it is difficult to trace her connections. Perhaps some of the women of the New Female Coterie, like Mrs. Catherine Newton, Lady Seymour Worsley, Lady Penelope Ligonier or Lady Elizabeth Derby met in Paris. Mrs. Catherine Newton was in France for a time after her separation, as she was supposedly joining a convent there, and the Ladies Elizabeth Derby, Seymour Worsley and Penelope Ligonier all travelled in Europe, including Paris, for some time after their marriages ended.

Although we can draw connections between these women, the New Female Coterie left nothing in the way of meeting books, membership lists, activities books or notes, which makes it difficult to say definitively what this club did, and to what degree they were formalised. Rubenhold suggested that they met semi-regularly for a period around 1783–1784 at a brothel just off the fashionable streets of the West End, and reports from *The Rambler's Magazine* concur.<sup>26</sup> If the New Female Coterie met as a formal group, then certain assumptions can be made about what went on during their meetings. Most clubs and societies had some element of traditional sociability about them, so it is likely that for these women, the times when they met up provided opportunities to catch up on news and engage in gossip with each other which was an important way to create bonds of intimacy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 2, Sunday 7 June 1767, p.20; Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 2, Sunday 28 June 1767, p.38.

<sup>25</sup> *The Genuine Copies of Letters which passed between the Duke of Cumberland and Lady Grosvenor, To which is annexed a clear account of the Trial in the Court of King's Bench, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1770; wherein Lord Grosvenor was plaintiff and the Duke of Cumberland Defendant, for Criminal Conversation with the Plaintiff's wife. The fifth Edition*, 1770, BLLO1017712199, BL, London, p.22.

<sup>26</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.175; *The Rambler's Magazine*, January 1783, p.34; *The Rambler's Magazine*, July 1783, pp.248–250, 270–271; *The Rambler's Magazine*, August 1783, pp.292–295.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp.12, 126; Edith B. Gelles, 'Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 22, No.4, 1989, p.667.

Echoing both traditional forms of female sociability and elements of male club life, food and drink, potentially in the form of tea, would likely have been available to the members of the club.<sup>28</sup> Tea was a significant part of the domiciliary sociability that characterised the relationships of upper-class women. Although not drunk exclusively by upper-class women, tea eased social gatherings and facilitated exchanges.<sup>29</sup> Male clubs were often more focused on heavy drinking and gambling, but it is more difficult to say whether the New Female Coterie echoed these elements of associational sociability. On the one hand, it cannot be forgotten that these women were ladies, raised to adhere to certain societal expectations about the way in which women should behave. These codes of behaviour did not include heavy drinking or excessive gambling, even though certain notables, such as the Duchess of Devonshire, racked up enormous gambling debts.<sup>30</sup> However, the women of the New Female Coterie had already transgressed behavioural norms through their adultery and involvement in trials. Perhaps their involvement in this group symbolised their willingness to continue transgressing these norms, and alcohol consumption and gambling may have made up parts of their meetings.

The autonomy shown by the New Female Coterie in the way their meetings ran and the location where they met may have been possible because they were no longer married. In his book on British clubs in this period, Clark suggests that the lack of significant associational activity on the part of women may have had to do with their legal status. He suggests that creating a club that was for women and run by women would have been difficult when women could not sign documents or look after financial matters in their own name.<sup>31</sup> While we do not know whether the New Female Coterie expected dues from its members, or how they organised their meetings, the Coterie seems to support this idea of Clark's. Rubenhold suggests that the club met at the establishment of a Mrs Prendergast, who was the madam of a brothel in St James's.<sup>32</sup> The Coterie knew of this brothel through Lady Caroline Harrington, whose husband reportedly used it frequently.<sup>33</sup> As most of the women of the group were either

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<sup>28</sup> Clark, *British Clubs*, p.225.

<sup>29</sup> Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp.207–208.

<sup>30</sup> Foreman, *Devonshire*, p.185.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, *British Clubs*, p.202.

<sup>32</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.175, 180.

<sup>33</sup> E. J. Burford, *Royal St. James's: Being a Story of Kings, Clubmen and Courtesans*, (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1988), pp.199–201.

divorced or legally separated from their husbands, they had a higher level of autonomy over their legal and financial decisions.<sup>34</sup> As such they could decide and negotiate the nuances of their club's meetings for themselves. As section one will show, this ability to meet as a collective empowered these women and created supportive networks for them.

## Eighteenth-Century Society

Strict hierarchies of class and gender stratified eighteenth-century society. Men of the upper or upper-middle classes held power.<sup>35</sup> Subtle differences in manners, dress and morality served to preserve the distinctions of the upper class from those below who sought entry through emulation.<sup>36</sup> Although the specifics of society shifted subtly throughout the eighteenth century, it remained "religious, patriarchal, hierarchical, conservative, and male-dominated."<sup>37</sup> In spite of this established base of power, fears often arose about corruption, immorality and the endangerment of the nation.<sup>38</sup> Using religious, patriarchal, and pseudo-scientific arguments, parliament, and society more broadly, constantly debated female behaviour and reputations.<sup>39</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century, a centralised metropolitan ruling class based in London had arisen. This phenomenon developed after the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, which established regular parliaments. Regular sittings required peers and members of the gentry to be in London for the sitting of parliament each year. Over time they began to bring their families with them, leading to the rise of what was known as the season.<sup>40</sup> The months of the season, usually November to June, were

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<sup>34</sup> Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England, 1530–1987*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.153.

<sup>35</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, Dangerous People?: England 1783–1846*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.370.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.4–5, 67.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremy Black, *A Subject for Taste: Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*, (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), p.xvii.

<sup>38</sup> Sarah Lloyd, 'Amour in the Shrubbery: Reading the Detail of English Adultery Trial Publications of the 1780s', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2006, p.424.

<sup>39</sup> Faramerz Dabhoiwala, 'The Construction of Honour, Reputation and Status in Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 6, 1996, p.208; Katherine Binhammer, 'Thinking Gender with Sexuality in 1790s' Feminist Thought', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Autumn, 2002, p.669.

<sup>40</sup> Greig, *The Beau Monde*, pp.6–7.

a whirl of social engagements during which time dynastically beneficial marriages were often arranged.

The world of this newly metropolitan elite society centred on the West End of London, specifically the area known as St James's with its leafy residential squares, theatres, shops and ballrooms. Although the West End was primarily understood as a space for the elite, there existed areas where the boundaries between classes were fluid. Stables, back alleys, and even certain areas like back staircases in the homes of the elite were understood to be spaces for the lower classes of London. The elite and lower classes—particularly the elite and their servants—coexisted in an almost symbiotic relationship. Areas such as pleasure gardens, theatres, the main thoroughfares and the parks were open to the public and permitted a certain degree of cross-class interaction. They were sites for upper-class meetings, certainly, but not exclusively, as they were also sites where those of the lower class could congregate to socialise or to assist their employers. These were also spaces where prostitutes and courtesans could be encountered and either ignored or acknowledged. Gender could also divide spaces. Domestic areas were usually understood as female. Wives primarily hosted and organised parties that were held at the residence of a couple.<sup>41</sup> Areas such as drawing rooms, receiving rooms, gardens and other such areas were understood to be the domain of the gently bred woman, whilst the library or study often remained under the purview of the man of the household, and were often decorated in more masculine tones.<sup>42</sup> The gendering of these spaces allowed for the creation of traditional domains for men and women. As we shall see, the New Female Coterie were criticised for transgressing these spatial boundaries.

The upper class in the eighteenth century were known by names such as the elite, the beau monde, the bon ton, and others. These names were supposed to emphasise a certain urban-based, fashionable, centre of power. Traditionally, this fashionable elite consisted of high-ranking peers and members of the aristocracy but could expand to include those who were fashionable or who had gained authority in some other way. Contemporaries found the precise criteria for acceptance into this world difficult to articulate. Greig suggests that “to be fashionable in the eighteenth

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<sup>41</sup> Judith S. Lewis, *Sacred to Female Patriotism: Gender, Class, and Politics in Late Georgian Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2003), p.100.

<sup>42</sup> Amanda Vickery, 'Wallpaper and Taste', in *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkxx9](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vkxx9), pp.none.



century was not merely to be modish or trendy. Rather it was a 'mysterious talisman' and an 'invisible standard' involving pedigree, connections, manners, language, appearance, and much else besides."<sup>43</sup> Acceptance into this world meant being one of the chosen few who were important either socially, politically, or economically. Although the specifics of what granted access to this upper echelon of society remained unclear, those in the know followed certain rules.

Although many of these rules could be found in advice and etiquette guides, those who performed them best were those raised to adhere to them. When middle-class aspirants sought entry into the upper class, those above them condemned their adopted gentility.<sup>44</sup> Young ladies of good families were brought up to understand how to curtsy, how to address other ranks, how to dance, and flirt while doing so, and how to detect improper advances as opposed to those overtures they should welcome. Although marriage of any kind was better than remaining unwed, the perfect marriage was one where the lady married up socially, although it was acceptable for men to marry beneath them either for love or money.<sup>45</sup> For these young ladies, marriage to an acceptable young man, preferably a wealthy and titled gentleman, was the goal.

Once married, families were patriarchal, with the father as the head of the family. Wives adhered to the husband's wishes and produced children to carry on the line. Elite families sought to have a son who would inherit the title, lands and estates. Children were usually not brought into public until they reached adulthood, often remaining in the care of nurses, governesses or tutors.<sup>46</sup> When female children reached adulthood, they were presented to court and society as debutantes. Wives ran the household by organising the maintenance of the house, controlling the menus, and facilitating the smooth running of large households that consisted of both servants and family members. In spite of contemporary satires which painted wives as consumers of unnecessary luxuries, wives were often very careful customers, as maintaining a household required vigilant oversight and judgement.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Greig, *The Beau Monde*, p.3.

<sup>44</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p.67.

<sup>45</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p.113.

<sup>46</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), pp.450–451.

<sup>47</sup> John Styles and Amanda Vickery, 'Introduction', in John Styles and Amanda Vickery (eds.), *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700–1830*, (New Haven: The Yale Center for British Art, 2006), pp.2–4.

Men and women were largely guided by gendered codes of behaviour. Male gallantry, as it was commonly and somewhat euphemistically called, was a widely accepted part of aristocratic life.<sup>48</sup> Moral standards for men were far laxer than for women; men could engage with women in a manner of different ways without receiving punishment, exclusion or exile for their actions as women could. Men were expected to act as libertines as libertinism indicated a healthy masculinity. The eighteenth century also saw a revitalised interest in classical republicanism, which idealised the ancient Roman republic and put a strong emphasis on the masculinity that men should exhibit. Conversely, classical republicanism suggested that effeminacy, meaning indulgence, luxury, or otherwise behaving like a woman, endangered Britain and its men.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, men needed to act as aggressive seducers, who pursued women.

This was a change from previous centuries when women had been perceived as the naturally more lustful gender. Women were thought to be less able to control their appetites, and therefore were more at danger of losing their reputations via imprudent sexual intercourse.<sup>50</sup> However, by the end of the eighteenth century, the opposite was recognised to be true—society regarded women as delicate, sexually passive and at danger from more aggressive male passions. Women were now supposed to protect themselves against male advances while an increasing trend towards a cult of motherhood portrayed women as gentle, almost asexual beings.<sup>51</sup> As a result of these ideas about women's inherent sexual natures, women were condemned for displaying their sexuality. By the end of the eighteenth century, as the treatment of the New Female Coterie indicates, women who showed that they enjoyed sexual encounters were seen as betraying the moral standards for their gender.

Women were expected to be chaste before they were married. The eighteenth century had more sexual freedom than previous centuries, in the sense that most sexual activity was now beyond the arm of the law and was no longer actively

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<sup>48</sup> Donna T. Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice: The Attack on Duelling, Suicide, Adultery, and Gambling in Eighteenth-Century England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p.128.

<sup>49</sup> Anna Clark, *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.11.

<sup>50</sup> Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p.141.

<sup>51</sup> Ruth Perry, 'Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England', in John C. Fout (ed.), *Forbidden History: The State, Society, and the Regulation of Sexuality in Modern Europe*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.112.

punished.<sup>52</sup> However, *more* sexual freedom did not equate with *total* sexual freedom. Chastity before marriage was still valued highly by the upper classes as it ensured that offspring produced from a marriage would be legitimate. As such young ladies were chaperoned carefully. For some, a certain expectation of chastity remained during marriage. Wives were expected to welcome their husbands' advances, but not actively seek them. This was particularly true in some aristocratic marriages which were dynastic rather than companionate, made for the benefit of great families. The aforementioned connection between motherhood and asexuality meant that women were not expected to appear overly interested in sex.

Perhaps because of this expectation, prostitutes became ubiquitous in London. Upper-class men often took wives while still maintaining a mistress or frequenting brothels. By the mid-eighteenth century, a narrative had become entrenched which pitied prostitutes as victims of a cruel world.<sup>53</sup> Tales abounded of innocent country girls arriving in London for work, only to be preyed upon by brothel madams who supposedly targeted girls fresh off the stage-coach from the regions.<sup>54</sup> However, this narrative about these ensnared prostitutes focused more on the cheaper, more common street-walkers, as opposed to the higher-class members of what was sometimes called the *demi-monde*, from the French for 'half-world'. Members of this 'half world' were often of a higher class than prostitutes who inhabited brothels and, rather than being tricked by madams, had chosen prostitution as a way to support themselves after their marriages ended or their families disintegrated. They tended to engage in longer term affairs or acted as kept mistresses for men of quality, living in fairly luxurious situations, with gifts of the latest in fashions, or jewellery.<sup>55</sup> As such they existed very close to the high society world of the aristocracy and may have encountered them in public spaces such as the parks, the opera, or pleasure gardens such as Vauxhall or Ranelagh. Men could know and interact with these women, whilst respectable women either had to pretend these women did not exist or that they did not know what their profession was.

Adultery, not only with prostitutes and mistresses, but with members of the lower classes, or fellow members of the aristocracy, was fairly common in eighteenth-

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<sup>52</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, pp.66, 77.

<sup>53</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, p.156.

<sup>54</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, p.212.

<sup>55</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, p.531.

century London. In spite of the expectation of libertinism for men and the expectation of chastity for women, the reality for many upper-class marriages was that both parties engaged in affairs. The upper class often tolerated affairs, provided that the lovers conducted themselves with discretion. This added to the perception of the aristocracy as adhering to slightly looser moral codes than the rest of society. Perhaps because many aristocratic marriages were still conducted for social, financial or dynastic reasons, the elite recognised the benefits of finding companionship elsewhere. In some marriages this caused tensions, but in many others, the spouses accepted it with equanimity. For example, Lord Peniston and Lady Elizabeth Melbourne (*m.* 13 April 1769) were both aware of the other's long-standing affairs, with Sophia Baddeley, a known courtesan, and George Wyndham, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Egremont, respectively.<sup>56</sup> Light gossip about men and women was common, and the press often noted flirtations, even if they came to nothing. The elite even considered common knowledge affairs to be discreet if they lacked concrete evidence. When gossip became too well known or substantiated it could create scandal which damaged reputations and ended marriages. It was at this point that legal options were sought, with the three main legal options being criminal conversation, separation from bed and board, and parliamentary divorce.

The processes involved in ending a marriage were not designed to allow women to escape unhappy marriages. Women were ineligible to petition for divorce and were likewise excluded from criminal conversation proceedings. These legal paths were designed to benefit men and allow them to dictate the future of their family line. One legal avenue available to women was a separation from bed and board. Although contemporaries often referred to it as a divorce, it did not entirely dissolve a couple's marriage. Instead a separation made it possible for spouses to live independent lives, even though they remained legally married. In order to gain this separation, the petitioner had to prove either life-threatening cruelty, repeated or drastic adulteries, or a combination of both.<sup>57</sup> Although spouses became financially independent, could live separately, and a husband could not force a wife back to their home, neither party could legally marry anyone else.<sup>58</sup> This was often seen as a first step towards a

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<sup>56</sup> Jonathan David Gross, 'Lamb [nee Milbanke], Elizabeth, Viscountess Melbourne', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/47307, accessed 12 October 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.193.

<sup>58</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.153.

parliamentary divorce, as a proven separation showed clearly that the marriage had not been working.<sup>59</sup> If, however, the husband's suit for separation failed, then he was unable to petition for a parliamentary divorce.<sup>60</sup>

A criminal conversation suit, like the separation, was often perceived to be the first step towards gaining a parliamentary divorce. This tort law allowed a wronged husband to sue his wife's lover for damages for his loss of the company of, and sexual congress with, his wife, caused by the lover's imposition. Criminal conversation saw the wife as the property of the husband, and therefore sought to redress any damage to that property.<sup>61</sup> In order to decide the sum a husband would receive in reparations, a jury composed of 'gentlemen of fortune' placed a value on a wife's company, her lover's assumed wealth, and the damage done to the relationships of the trio.<sup>62</sup> However, in spite of the fact that women, their behaviour, and their value were central points in a crim. con. trial, women themselves were noticeably absent from the proceedings.<sup>63</sup> They were not allowed to appear in court, even in their own defence, in spite of contemporary satirical prints which showed such women as appearing in front of a judge.<sup>64</sup>

Parliamentary divorce ended the marriage entirely, allowing both spouses free to remarry; however, it required the Houses of Parliament to pass a bill into law in order to sever the marriage. Two witnesses needed to provide evidence of the wife's adultery and there needed to have been good marital relations prior, including no cruelty or adultery from the husband which supposedly 'drove' the wife to adultery.<sup>65</sup> Although the husband kept any money that the wife had brought to the marriage, he was expected to make provision by granting a lifetime annuity.<sup>66</sup> The number of parliamentary divorce cases rose sharply towards the end of the decade—1799 saw twelve divorce petitions, ten of which were granted.<sup>67</sup> Parliamentary divorce was a costly and time-consuming event, which meant that the cases debated in the Houses

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<sup>59</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.320.

<sup>60</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.210.

<sup>61</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.241–242.

<sup>62</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.234.

<sup>63</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.234.

<sup>64</sup> 'The Trial of the D. of C. and Lady G. for Crim. Con.' 1770, BM Satires 4845, BM.

<sup>65</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.323–4.

<sup>66</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.323.

<sup>67</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.325.

were often those of the wealthy and titled who sought to preserve the legitimate patrilineal descent of their titles, lands, and wealth.

The end of the eighteenth century brought further anxieties about the stability of the nation, ushered in by revolutions in America and France. The American War of Independence, or the American Revolutionary War, occurred from 1775 to 1783, although discontent had been brewing in the American colonies before war broke out. The French Revolution began in 1789, with the fall of the Bastille and the production of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. People in England saw the two revolutions as evidence of the rapidly changing and ever dangerous world in which they lived.<sup>68</sup> Both revolutions, although fought for different reasons, aroused anxieties across the country and both eventually involved Britain in wars.

When the American Revolution began in 1775, to some the conflict seemed more like that of a civil war, or of an errant child acting out. King George III viewed himself as the father of the nation and thus of Britain's colonies. To him the colonists seemed like spoilt children; to the colonists the King seemed like an unreasonable father.<sup>69</sup> The American War created issues of identity for the British, who struggled to identify 'us' and 'them' amongst the similarities shared by the two sides.<sup>70</sup> Britain's government believed they would soon subdue the uprising of the colonies. However, the American colonies declared independence in 1776 and, with the assistance of the French, won the war. Britain recognised their independence in the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the same year that *The Rambler's Magazine* began printing articles about the New Female Coterie.

The loss of the American colonies was a significant blow to Britain's international reputation, both to its prestige as a military power, and to its reputation as a colonial ruler.<sup>71</sup> In the aftermath of the American War, organised groups began to call for parliamentary reform to challenge the idea that the ruling class should be "a

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<sup>68</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, revised ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p.178; Clark, *Scandal*, pp.113–114; Michal Jan Rozbicki, *Culture and Liberty in the Age of the American Revolution*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), pp.34–35; Ben Wilson, *Decency and Disorder: The Age of Cant, 1789–1837*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp.xxxi–xxxii.

<sup>69</sup> Holger Hoock, *Scars of Independence: America's Violent Birth*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2017), pp.66–67.

<sup>70</sup> Dror Wahrman, 'The English Problem of Identity in the American Revolution', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 4, 2001, p.1238.

<sup>71</sup> Hoock, *Scars of Independence*, p.397.

kind of private occupation of limited governmental circles.”<sup>72</sup> Some of the ruling elite regarded this challenge to their power, along with the danger of those who did not adhere to traditional standards of behaviour, such as the women of the New Female Coterie, as a threat to the further stability of the nation.

During the American War, women’s bodies, clothing and behaviour became politicised. Clothing became a site of resistance as patriotic American women wore homespun American cloth rather than imported fabric and adherence to fashion was seen as frivolous and unpatriotic.<sup>73</sup> The ideal American woman was demure and plain in dress and speech; cultivated, yet not artificial.<sup>74</sup> Like most standards of womanhood, it was a difficult line to walk. Patriots linked attention to fashion with aristocratic, British rule, and condemned it for its feminine, de-stabilising influence.<sup>75</sup> Similarly, British men may have made links between feminine fashions and their use in the American War as a symbol of resistance. This connection may have created links between the threat to societal stability posed by the American colonies and the destabilising influence of women, particularly those such as the New Female Coterie who had shown they were not interested in the status quo. These anxieties about women and their dangerous opinions on sex and behaviour can be clearly seen at this time through the articles written by *The Rambler’s Magazine* about the New Female Coterie.

The French Revolution signalled the end of the ‘old regime’, a feudal, aristocratic form of rule that had lasted hundreds of years. The French Revolution began in 1789, but its end date is somewhat uncertain—though many suggest that it ended with Napoleon’s coup in 1799, which led to the Napoleonic Wars with Britain. English contemporaries saw the Revolution’s overturning of France’s long-entrenched class order as one of its most revolutionary, and personally dangerous aspects. Some in England supported the early phases of the French Revolution. The later terror with its mock trials and executions of not only the monarchy but large portions of the

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<sup>72</sup> Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution*, pp.179–181.

<sup>73</sup> Kate Haulman, *Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), pp.81–82.

<sup>74</sup> Haulman, *Politics of Fashion*, p.84.

<sup>75</sup> Haulman, *Politics of Fashion*, pp.13–14, 6.

French aristocracy, justified by the leaders of the terror as being necessary to cleanse France of its moral rot, put an end to most English support for the Revolution.<sup>76</sup>

The French Revolution linked ideas of moral degeneracy with the aristocracy. Pamphlets and satirical prints were distributed in both France and Britain which portrayed the monarchy and the aristocracy in a variety of creative sexual positions, and more criticised Marie Antoinette for her influence over her husband, her distance from the problems of the ordinary people, and her lavish and conspicuous consumption.<sup>77</sup> Some prints drew parallels between France's supposedly corrupt monarchy and the royal family of Britain, particularly connecting Marie Antoinette and the British Queen Charlotte for the influence they could wield over their husbands, amplifying fears of 'petticoat government'.<sup>78</sup> The English had perceived French influence as effeminising prior to 1789, but the Revolution created connections between that effeminacy and social instability, indicating that the English feared their masculine culture becoming influenced by women.<sup>79</sup>

The eighteenth century was a time of changing and conflicting standards. Women were understood to be sexually voracious yet required to be chaste. Strict class and gender hierarchies prevailed, but these boundaries could be transgressed. Men expected chastity from their current or potential wives yet were themselves expected to act in a libertine manner to seduce women. Revolutions in America and France upset traditional understandings of gender and class orders and created anxieties about the stability of the nation. As this thesis will demonstrate in the succeeding sections, the New Female Coterie illustrates the ways in women could transgress or negotiate these conflicting standards.

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<sup>76</sup> Susan P. Conner, 'Public Virtue and Public Women: Prostitution in Revolutionary Paris, 1793–1794', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 1994–1995, p.222.

<sup>77</sup> Clark, *Scandal*, pp.4, 113; Wendy Doniger, *The Ring of Truth: And Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) pp.215–217.

<sup>78</sup> John Richard Moores, *Representations of France in English Satirical Prints, 1740–1832*, (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp.61, 160, 178.

<sup>79</sup> Moores, *Representations*, pp.31, 37–40.



## Section One: Agency and Divorce

Marriage was intended to be a lifelong state, yet for some women it became an untenable institution in which they felt they had little agency. Accounts often portray the dissolution of marriage as something that happened *to* women, seeing them as passive or victims in divorces and criminal conversations.<sup>1</sup> Women had few legal options to escape their marriages, as the process to ending a marriage was created for the benefit of men. Stone emphasises the ways that separation proceedings were difficult for women. Their access to criminal conversation suits was non-existent, as proceedings regarded them merely as ‘property’ of their husbands; their suits for separations from bed and board were only won when the circumstances of their situations were untenable; and parliament did not hear any female divorce petitioners in the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> It is true that there were limited legal options available to women trying to leave marriages but this did not mean that they lacked agency. Instead, they exercised their agency throughout legal proceedings and beyond in order to try and gain the best outcome for themselves. This agency, of course, was not unlimited, and, as this section will explain, family and money could still affect and constrain agency.

With few legal options to leave a marriage, the women of the New Female Coterie encouraged divorce proceedings by courting scandal which would damage their husbands’ reputations if they ignored it. Mrs. Catherine Newton engaged in obvious adulteries with a number of men to encourage gossip amongst the servants and her neighbours. Lady Henrietta Grosvenor went a step further and travelled from London to Cheshire and back with her royal lover in tow which caught the notice of the English countryside and later the London press. She hoped this would gain her a divorce. When she later learned her lover had moved on, she acted to block divorce proceedings to avoid becoming penniless. Lady Seymour Worsley took the most noticeable action when she eloped with her lover from her husband’s home. A later criminal conversation trial humiliated her husband and he refused to instigate divorce

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<sup>1</sup> Gillian Russell, ‘Killing Mrs. Siddons: The Actress and the Adulteress in late Georgian Britain’, *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 51, No. 3, 2012, pp.426, 428; Katherine Binhammer, ‘The Sex Panic of the 1790s’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1996, p.428; Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England, 1530–1987*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.150, 234, 241–242, 324.

<sup>2</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.234, 193, 321–323.

proceedings, limiting Lady Seymour Worsley's agency significantly. Although leaving their marriages were acts of agency, the choices of these women remained constrained after divorce or separation by the decisions of their families, and by their own wealth or lack thereof. Yet, as will be discussed below, coming together as a collective after the dissolution of their marriages likely empowered these women.

By exploring the ways in which the women of the New Female Coterie had agency in and after leaving a marriage, this section provides new evidence of upper-class women exercising their agency within social bounds. *The Matrimonial Trap* explores the way in which upper-class (or aspiring) women expressed their agency through their writing about entering marriage, a system that did not allow women much action. Through their journals and letters, these women expressed their thoughts and fears about the requirements and roles of marriage. They discussed the anxieties of choosing an appropriate partner and positioned themselves in their writing as an obedient daughter or a submissive potential wife to others.<sup>3</sup> This thesis builds on Thomason's work to explore what happened when marriages broke down. Thomason articulates particularly well the dual truth of eighteenth-century life that marriage was both an expected part of life and a significant source of anxiety for women. These interconnected truths hold particularly true for the New Female Coterie who married to suit convention yet escaped when marriage became a near intolerable situation.<sup>4</sup> This chapter seeks to explain the way in which these women handled a marriage that society claimed was a necessity and that was also a source of great unhappiness to them. Like *The Matrimonial Trap*, this work queries the idea that women were passive or victims of the actions of others; instead it explores the ways in which women could, or could attempt to, work the system.

## Escaping Marriage

Mrs. Catherine Newton, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor and Lady Seymour Worsley each escalated their attempt to gain the notice of those around them with their adulteries. Mrs. Catherine Newton's adultery drew notice as she was constantly found in inappropriate places such as the stables, or the servants' stairs, but she localised her

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<sup>3</sup> Laura E. Thomason, *The Matrimonial Trap: Eighteenth-Century Women Writers Redefine Marriage*, (Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2014), pp.7–8.

<sup>4</sup> Thomason, *The Matrimonial Trap*, p.161.

actions to her own estate. Lady Henrietta Grosvenor made her adultery too obvious to ignore by travelling the length of the country with her lover in tow whilst Lady Seymour Worsley took the further step of eloping with her lover. The indiscretion of these attempts meant that none could be reasonably ignored by their husbands. Indeed, John Newton escorted his wife to exile in France, Lord Richard Grosvenor set a trap to catch his wife in the act, while Sir Richard Worsley searched furiously to find the lovers who had hidden themselves in London. However, the choice to try and force their husbands into divorcing them did not gain the desired result for any of these woman, albeit for different reasons.

Adultery amongst the upper class was often ignored provided that the partners were discreet and avoided the direct notice of society. Stone suggests that this period saw the rise of the companionate marriage; however, the Marriage Act of 1753 allowed for greater parental influence. This act made it illegal for anyone under the age of twenty-one to get married without parental consent, which allowed for aristocratic parents to encourage dynastic matches which were socially and financially beneficial.<sup>5</sup> As a result, seeking comfort and affection outside of a marriage was an understood part of society, but discretion was key. To gain the notice of society was to be censured, and, particularly for women, whose affairs endangered the legitimate inheritance of the family's wealth and title, to risk exclusion. Women who had been brought up to understand society's rules and restrictions understood the delicate balance that their relationships needed to maintain. They were aware that a woman who was indiscreet was a woman who would become an outcast, and who could be cast off by her husband.

For Mrs. Catherine Newton, a member of the New Female Coterie, the path to making herself an object of scandal was simply to be indiscreet with her adulteries to the point where her neighbours, servants, or friends noticed, and gossip spread. Mrs. Catherine Newton was sixteen when she married her husband in 1776, while her husband, the wealthy planter John Newton, was nearing his sixtieth year. She was known to be a high-spirited girl, and her youth, and potential lack of emotional connection with her husband may have contributed to her unhappiness in her marriage. Reports of Mrs. Catherine Newton's trial list her having affairs with five men

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<sup>5</sup> Stone, Lawrence, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), pp.328–333; Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.124, 127.

and “divers[sic] other Persons.”<sup>6</sup> More important than the number of men with whom she committed adultery, was the careless way in which she conducted those affairs. Mrs. Catherine Newton was fairly open about her flirtations with other men, making it obvious to those around her. For example, at her trial servants remarked that her behaviour with a married actor became the talk of polite society in Bath when she and her husband resided there.<sup>7</sup> Reports of the trial particularly noted the fact that Mrs. Catherine Newton seemed to have rented a room near the theatre, ostensibly for singing lessons, though the servants who testified did not believe that the actor was really her singing instructor.<sup>8</sup> It seemed an unlikely place for Mrs Catherine Newton to be, and it suggested she had rented the room purely for her encounters with the actor.

The trial made much of Mrs. Catherine Newton’s presence in unexpected places. Servants commented on Mrs. Catherine Newton’s presence in the stables, in back stairs to visit ‘puppies’, or in the bedroom of Mr. Baggs, John Newton’s ward. When testifying, servants in the house noted that although she slept in a room down the corridor from Mr. Baggs, she claimed a spare room as her dressing room. This room possessed a bed and a connecting door to Mr. Baggs’ chambers.<sup>9</sup> It was also right above the housekeeper’s parlour, where the butler, housekeeper and maid all ate breakfast together. Mrs. Catherine Newton would tell her maid she did not wish to dress yet, then go to her ‘dressing-room’, where the servants below could hear her entrance, followed by the entrance of Mr Baggs. They would later find the bed sheets in the ‘dressing-room’ rumpled and un-made.<sup>10</sup> The testimony of the housekeeper suggested that Mrs. Catherine Newton’s presence in unexpected areas was specifically noted by others in the household as strange and that her presence upset the normal workings of the household. The housekeeper claimed that the maid said that Mrs. Catherine Newton “began to think all appearance of modesty quite unnecessary.” Mrs.

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<sup>6</sup> *The trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton, Wife of John Newton, Esq. and daughter of the Right Honourable and reverend Lord Francis Seymour; at the Consistory Court of Doctors commons; upon a Libel and Allegations, Charging her with the crime of adultery with Mr. Isham Baggs, a young Oxonian; Mr. Brett, a Player at Bath; Thomas Cope, Mrs. Newtons’s coachman; Isaac Hatheway, her Footman; John Ackland, of Fairfield, in the County of Somerset, Esq. and divers other Persons. With all the interesting Scenes fully, minutely, and circumstantially displayed. Containing the whole of the evidence in that very Extraordinary Trial, 1782, CW3324522430, accessed via Eighteenth Century Collections Online, p.1.*

<sup>7</sup> *The Trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, pp.14, 33.

<sup>8</sup> *The Trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, pp.15, 33.

<sup>9</sup> *The Trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, p.19.

<sup>10</sup> *The Trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, pp.17, 34.

Catherine Newton's indiscretion with her affairs had become so noticeable that the servants began to gossip about her behaviour. The maid further suggested that Mrs. Catherine Newton's immodesty would soon not remain confined to the house and that "Mrs. Newton would bring herself, at last, to commit the act of adultery in public" and thus embarrass her husband and his family name.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs. Catherine Newton was the daughter of the Dean of Wells and granddaughter of the 8<sup>th</sup> Duke of Somerset and as such would have been brought up to know and understand her future role as a wife and eventually a mother.<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Catherine Newton would have understood that openly flirting, being unattended in shadowy places with men other than her husband and being too familiar with her servants were inappropriate for her position. In spite of this understanding, Mrs. Catherine Newton acted in precisely that 'inappropriate' manner and conducted herself in a fashion designed to gain attention. Her upbringing appears to have been a feature of the trial, with witnesses testifying that they knew whose daughter she was but had not heard anything untoward about the manner in which she was raised.<sup>13</sup>

Mrs. Catherine Newton's noticeable indiscretions were likely conducted in the hopes of encouraging the consequences that others saw as so damning. She married a man who was over forty years older than her, had no children that her husband could lay claim to, and she likely had little in common with her husband. She likely saw few downsides in trying to escape the marriage and thus engaged in affairs in public places, but also in areas that were usually reserved for servants. The choice to engage in her affairs in places that were well frequented by others, particularly servants, meant that someone would almost certainly uncover her affairs, which would hopefully initiate some form of separation. She likely believed that the servants would report to her husband, who would have found the indiscretion of his wife's affairs and the notice drawn intolerable. Mrs. Catherine Newton's tendency to find herself in the stables, in the hayloft or in a back staircase likely made her affairs even more overt, because she transgressed class boundaries at the same time as she transgressed moral boundaries. Her presence in spaces reserved for servants indicated that her actions were out of the ordinary and therefore a transgression of societal norms.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, p.23.

<sup>12</sup> The Dean of Wells was head of the Chapter of Wells Cathedral in Somerset and the title Duke of Somerset dated from the sixteenth century.

<sup>13</sup> *The Trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, pp.11, 30.

Lady Henrietta Grosvenor also made a spectacle out of her affair, not only in London society, but also throughout England, providing ample situations in which to get caught. Having married Lord Richard Grosvenor hastily following their first meeting in 1764, she soon came to regret it, lamenting to her brother that she felt neglected and rejected by her husband, who appeared to prefer the gambling halls and brothels of London to her company.<sup>14</sup> She embarked upon her own affair with the younger brother of King George III, Henry, the Duke of Cumberland. Her peers noted their flirtations at court and other society events. Lady Mary Coke noted that Lady Henrietta Grosvenor “twice burst out into such violent fits of Laughter that She was obliged to hide her face behind her fan” because of “something Prince Henry [later Cumberland] said to her”.<sup>15</sup>

Lady Henrietta Grosvenor’s overt behaviour with her lover led to a trap and a criminal conversation trial. Lord Richard Grosvenor intercepted a letter sent between his wife and the duke, and later received reports of a poorly disguised man who seemed to be following Lady Henrietta Grosvenor on her journey north to their country estate in Cheshire.<sup>16</sup> Lord Richard Grosvenor caught this poorly disguised ‘Welsh Gentleman’ and Lady Henrietta Grosvenor in a trap of his making when his servants burst in on the lovers at their inn to find their clothes in disarray, and the Duke of Cumberland sprinting back to his room to try and claim he had been nowhere near.<sup>17</sup> Lord Richard Grosvenor began proceedings for separation, including a criminal conversation trial.<sup>18</sup> Because of the servants’ eyewitness testimony, the most contentious issue in this case was not whether or not the adultery had occurred, but whether or not the Duke of Cumberland, as the brother of the King, should receive a more or less harsh punishment for his indiscretions. In the end, the duke had to pay £10,000, a mere fraction of the £100,000 requested as damages, but still an astronomical sum for the day.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Stella Tillyard, *A Royal Affair: George III and his Troublesome Siblings*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), p.154.

<sup>15</sup> Lady Mary Coke, *The Letters and Journals of Lady Mary Coke*, Vol. 1, (Bath: Lonsdale and Bartolomew Ltd, 1970), Sunday 24 August 1766, pp.27–28.

<sup>16</sup> Tillyard, *A Royal Affair*, pp.162–163, 165.

<sup>17</sup> Tillyard, *A Royal Affair*, p.167; Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 3, Thursday 14 June 1770, p.244.

<sup>18</sup> Tillyard, *A Royal Affair*, p.168.

<sup>19</sup> £10,000 in 1770 equates to roughly £872,553 in 2017: ‘National Archives Currency Converter: 1270–2017’, *The National Archives*, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/>, accessed 19 November 2018.

Throughout July and August of 1770, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor and the Duke of Cumberland were still much in each other's company, and Lady Mary Coke reported gossip that the duke still visited and went for outings with Lady Henrietta Grosvenor.<sup>20</sup> However, in late 1770, the duke was seen out and about with another woman, and by the autumn of 1770, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor knew that not only was she unlikely to reconcile with her husband, but that she would also not end up as the Duchess of Cumberland. Confirmation came when reports spread in November of 1771 of the Duke of Cumberland's marriage.<sup>21</sup> She knew that if her husband's suit for separation passed the courts with no contest then she would be left with little money to sustain herself and society would likely ostracise her.<sup>22</sup> An uncontested suit would ease her husband's path to their divorce and compound her own unhappiness. Lady Henrietta Grosvenor began a counter-suit. The defence of 'Recrimination' would block her husband's suit, as it essentially alleged that the adultery by a husband had encouraged or allowed the wife's own adultery.<sup>23</sup>

Lady Henrietta Grosvenor began a counter-suit in Doctor's Commons to protect herself from being left poor and wholly alone. She sought out old mistresses of her husband who were now on the street, who were willing to testify that they had engaged in affairs with Lord Richard Grosvenor while he was married, and she alleged that these constant indiscretions had led to her own.<sup>24</sup> In April of 1771, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor won her suit for separation, allowing her to live separately from her husband, and granting her an annual maintenance of £1200. Her successful suit meant her husband's failed, which blocked Lord Richard Grosvenor from seeking a divorce through parliament.<sup>25</sup> As a woman, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor was not able to instigate divorce proceedings, but her ability to produce a counter-suit proved effective in ending the divorce process. While she did not have the agency to begin divorce proceedings, she had enough to end them once they would no longer prove profitable to her. Her decisions in this matter show us that women's priorities could change, and that their actions and choices often reflected their current circumstances. Once Lady Henrietta Grosvenor saw there was no chance to become the Duchess of Cumberland,

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<sup>20</sup> Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 3, Monday 16 July 1770, p.258; Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 3, Sunday 22 July 1770, p.261.

<sup>21</sup> Tillyard, *A Royal Affair*, p.178; Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 3, Sunday 24 November 1771, p.483.

<sup>22</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.193.

<sup>23</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.209–210.

<sup>24</sup> Tillyard, *A Royal Affair*, pp.179–180.

<sup>25</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.210.

she chose to block divorce proceedings. This choice meant that she remained legally bound to her husband, but ensured her a degree of freedom, an annuity and certainty about her future.

Although Lady Henrietta Grosvenor's adultery caught the notice of the country, Lady Seymour Worsley's elopement became the talk of fashionable English society. She and George Bisset eloped from Kent to London where they hid in a hotel for many days. Sir Richard Worsley sent servants to spy on the couple to gather information for an upcoming trial.<sup>26</sup> Sir Richard's fury led him to take George Bissett to court for criminal conversation to gain monetary damages. Sir Richard Worsley's attempt to ruin George Bisset through a criminal conversation trial backfired. The elopement provided fairly concrete evidence of adultery for the courts and Sir Richard Worsley may have believed that George Bisset would have had little in the way of a defence. Instead, George Bisset's defence team produced a series of Lady Seymour Worsley's past lovers, including Viscount Deerhurst and the Marquess of Graham, as witnesses. They showed that not only was Sir Richard guilty of neglect of his wife which allowed her to engage in affairs, but that he cheerfully invited men to sleep with his wife, and that he would peep through windows and keyholes while his wife engaged in extra-marital affairs.<sup>27</sup>

The most notorious of the incidents that came out in the trial became known as 'the affair at Maidstone Bath'.<sup>28</sup> Sir Richard and George Bisset both belonged to a militia which camped at Coxheath in Kent during the summer of 1781. Militia troops had previously been camped at Coxheath in 1778, and the place became renowned for the licentious behaviour of the officers, their wives and numerous camp followers.<sup>29</sup> When the militia returned in 1781, Sir Richard rented a house and encouraged George Bisset to reside with them, likely to present an innocent façade for the affair of George Bisset and Lady Seymour Worsley, and Sir Richard's own voyeuristic part in it.<sup>30</sup> One afternoon the trio visited the baths at Maidstone, the nearby town, splitting off to use the gendered sides. When they finished, the two men dressed and went to the Ladies' side to wait for Lady Seymour Worsley. She was dressing herself inside the bathhouse

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<sup>26</sup> Hallie Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W: An Eighteenth-Century Tale of Sex, Scandal and Divorce*, (London: Vintage, 2008), pp.93–95.

<sup>27</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.52–53, 125–126.

<sup>28</sup> *An Epistle from L-Y W-y to Sir R-d*, 1782, CUP/408/k/17, BL, p.7.

<sup>29</sup> Mortimer, 'A trip to Cock's Heath', 1778, BM Satires 5523, BM.

<sup>30</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.51.



when her husband called out “Seymour! Seymour! Bisset is looking at you”, while Bisset looked through the window above the door to see her undressed.<sup>31</sup> She resumed dressing aided by the bathing woman who had seen all. The trio then left, laughing together over the fun of their joke.<sup>32</sup>

George Bisset’s lawyers used the event at Maidstone Bath to show that Sir Richard not only was aware of the couple’s affair, but that he colluded in their relationship. The maid at the Bath-house signed an affidavit which described the day’s events and explained that she believed that George Bissett would not have been able to reach the window over the door without the assistance of Sir Richard. She suggested that he had lifted Bisset up in order to see his naked wife, noting that if he had not lifted him, then he would certainly have been able to pull Bisset away with ease.<sup>33</sup> A lawyer from each side went to view the baths at Maidstone and ascertained that this was true.<sup>34</sup>

Lady Seymour Worsley’s physical absence from the courtroom of the criminal conversation trial did not stop her from becoming an indelible presence during its proceedings. Procedure of the criminal conversation trial dictated that those involved did not speak for themselves, so neither the plaintiff nor the defendant testified.<sup>35</sup> Much of the evidence given by the lawyers related to Lady Seymour Worsley’s actions, and many of the witnesses, particularly those called for George Bissett’s defence, were past lovers of Lady Seymour Worsley. She must have directed Bisset and his legal team towards the doctor who treated her for venereal disease or past lovers who might have been willing to come forward and testify.<sup>36</sup> In consenting to this as a legal strategy,

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<sup>31</sup> ‘*The trial with the whole of the evidence, between the Right Hon. Sir Richard Worsley, bart. comptroller of His Majesty’s household, governor of the isle of Wight, Member of Parliament for the Borough of Newport in that island, one of the verdurers of the New Forest, colonel of the South Battalion of the Hampshire Militia, one of His Majesty’s most honourable privy council, F.R.S. and A.S.-plaintiff, and George Maurice Bissett, Esq. defendant, for criminal conversation with the plaintiff’s wife; Before the Right Hon. William, Earl of Mansfield, and a special jury, in His Majesty’s Court of King’s-Bench, Westminster-Hall, on Thursday the 21st of February, 1782. Taken in short hand by Robert Pye Donkin, of the King’s-Bench Treasury-Office, 1782, CB3332461900, accessed via Eighteenth-Century Collections Online, p.11.*

<sup>32</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.53.

<sup>33</sup> *The trial with the whole of the evidence, between the Right Hon. Sir Richard Worsley*, p.12.

<sup>34</sup> *The trial with the whole of the evidence, between the Right Hon. Sir Richard Worsley*, p.18.

<sup>35</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.234.

<sup>36</sup> Society connected venereal disease with both elite men and female prostitutes, but not normally with elite women, even though all three did get venereal diseases. Links made between elite women and venereal disease normally accused them of acting as prostitutes, or highlighted other moral issues: Noelle Gallagher, *Itch, Clap, Pox: Venereal Disease in the Eighteenth-Century Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), pp.64, 214

Lady Seymour Worsley likely hoped that proving Sir Richard Worsley to be lacking as a husband might make a later divorce more likely. In choosing to reveal her own indiscretions in a very public forum, she may have believed that damaging her own reputation would hurt Sir Richard Worsley more than it would hurt herself.

The jury granted Sir Richard just one shilling of the £10,000 he had requested in damages for the loss of his wife's company.<sup>37</sup> Legally, the jury had to find in favour of Sir Richard as it was hard to deny that the adultery had occurred. Nevertheless, they did not wish to endorse Sir Richard's behaviour and thus gave him an insulting sum. They wanted to show their disdain for both Sir Richard's behaviour towards his wife, and his wish to try and profit from a situation which they perceived to have been at least partly of his own making. The response from the jury humiliated and infuriated Sir Richard.

As a punishment for the couple whom Sir Richard saw as having caused his humiliation, he refused to initiate the divorce proceedings which would have allowed Lady Seymour Worsley and George Bisset to get married. Seeing no future where they could marry and regain some modicum of respectability together, and in spite of the fact that Lady Seymour Worsley was pregnant with their child, George Bisset left her. Thus, Sir Richard left Lady Seymour Worsley in limbo for a number of years, neither truly a wife nor truly independent. In the meantime, Sir Richard left the country on an extensive trip around Europe, hoping that time and distance would erase some of the scandal. These circumstances severely limited the agency of Lady Seymour Worsley as with no lover, no income, and no settled home, she had few options to take. She chose to become a mistress to wealthy men, not only to encourage the scandal surrounding her in hopes that Sir Richard Worsley would return to finalise the settlement, but also to survive financially. Lady Seymour Worsley may have survived, but her husband did not respond to her taunts. The elopement and criminal conversation trial took place throughout 1781 and 1782, yet the separation between Sir Richard and Lady Seymour Worsley was not finalised until 1788.<sup>38</sup>

Unlike Stone, who emphasises that women lost their legal status upon marriage, were treated as property in criminal conversation trials, and were largely passive in the dissolution of their marriages, this thesis suggests that women utilised

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<sup>37</sup> *The trial with the whole of the evidence, between the Right Hon. Sir Richard Worsley*, p.20.

<sup>38</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.231.

their agency in other ways throughout the end of their marriages.<sup>39</sup> It is true that the processes involved in ending a marriage were not designed to allow women to escape. Both divorce and criminal conversation (and even to an extent separation from bed and board) were designed to benefit men, and to allow them to dictate the future of their family line. In this way the legal processes to end a marriage appear to have allowed women little agency over their futures. However, the lack of legal choices did not mean that women had no options available to them, it just meant that the options from which they could choose were a little more limited. Mrs. Catherine Newton, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor and Lady Seymour Worsley of the New Female Coterie tried to force their husbands into beginning divorce proceedings. Each of these women escalated their efforts to get caught. Mrs. Catherine Newton caught the attention of her servants and neighbours through her inappropriate interactions with her servants. Lady Henrietta Grosvenor travelled from London to Cheshire while her lover was in disguise, gaining censure and ridicule. However, to prevent herself from ending up penniless, she also acted to block her husband's divorce proceedings when her lover married elsewhere. Lady Seymour Worsley eloped, gaining the notice of London society, particularly through her involvement in a scandalous criminal conversation trial. These women showed that they had options in escaping a marriage and that they took them, but also that these options were not fool proof. The New Female Coterie were guided in their choices by which avenues had been left to them by their husbands and lovers.

## Negotiating Independence

### *The Impact of Money on Agency*

Although the decisions made by the women of the New Female Coterie in escaping their marriages meant they were often cut off from a number of their former friends, and often even from their families, they were not left entirely penniless and alone. The money available to the New Female Coterie impacted their choices, and in many cases their reliance on other people's wealth constrained their agency. Separations and divorces usually included some form of financial agreement between the husband and wife, often in the form of a yearly allowance. This annuity was usually agreed as part of the divorce or separation proceedings. The amount was decided in

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<sup>39</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.150, 241, 324.

relation to the woman's situation and the amount she had brought to the marriage, which did not revert to the wife during her husband's lifetime, and often the annuity did not maintain anywhere near the same sort of lifestyle they had lived when married.<sup>40</sup> Both the amount and source of their incomes relied almost entirely on the negotiations with or generosity of their husbands and lovers, and the ease with which these women could access this annuity impacted the quality of their life in significant ways.

In addition to the annuity Lady Penelope Ligonier gained in her divorce, her father, George Pitt, gifted her an annual allowance.<sup>41</sup> Although others in the New Female Coterie found that their marital struggles often led to their estrangement from their families, George Pitt supported Penelope financially. His marriage had also been unhappy, and he and his wife lived separately from around 1771, likely a reason that he may have felt sympathetic towards his daughter.<sup>42</sup> He had paperwork drawn up which granted her £500 a year "for & during the Term of [her] natural Life".<sup>43</sup> Lady Penelope Ligonier's divorce granted her £600, which, combined with the £500 annuity from her father, meant that she could live in a manner that was closer to that to which she was accustomed. Lady Penelope Ligonier was often noted for her travels around England and beyond, and the availability of funds allowed her to come and go more or less as she pleased.<sup>44</sup> This freedom to pursue her own path and choose not only where she lived but where and when she travelled was a significant amount of freedom for a woman in this era. However, it has to be noted that the money that Lady Penelope Ligonier received made it possible for her to make these choices for herself. Had her portion of the divorce settlement been smaller, or her father not felt that he

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<sup>40</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, p.345.

<sup>41</sup> Due to the timing this was likely to be her father, who later became the first Baron Rivers, rather than her brother who shared his name.

<sup>42</sup> G. F. R. Barker, Revised by R. D. E. Eagles, 'Pitt, George, first Baron Rivers', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/22328, accessed 28 September 2018.

<sup>43</sup> 'Draft Articles of Agreement Between Penelope Pitt (previously Viscountess Ligonier) and George Pitt, concerning an annuity of £500 to be paid to the former', 1773, The Wellington Estate Collection, Wellington/1304, Museum of English Rural Life, Reading.

<sup>44</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*; or, the annals of Gallantry, Glee, Pleasure, and the Bon ton; calculated for the Entertainment of the Polite World and to furnish the man of pleasure with a most delicious banquet of Amorous, Bacchanalian, Whimsical, Humorous, Theatrical and Polite entertainment, May 1783, General Reference Collection, CUP/820/A12, BL, p.198; *The Rambler's Magazine*, April 1784, p.159; *The Rambler's Magazine*, August 1784, p.307; *The Rambler's Magazine*, October 1784, p.398.

needed to contribute anything more towards her annual allowance, then her situation may have been much different.

In the years following her elopement, Lady Seymour Worsley existed largely on the generosity of her lovers. The most notable of these were Isaac Byers, a plantation owner from the West Indies; Joseph Boulogne, the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, a mixed race member of the French court and son of a planter; and Dick England, a skilled duellist with a dark reputation.<sup>45</sup> In spite of their financial support, she still wrote letters back to her husband's steward, asking him to settle debts of hers.<sup>46</sup> Although she likely chose to consort with men whom she found attractive or appealing, there was a level of necessity in these affairs. Before Sir Richard would finalise their separation, she had little in the way of income, and even once they had separated, her £400 income did not support her in her usual manner. She relied entirely on Sir Richard's paying on time, and often had to write to request advances on her quarterly payment in order to meet her needs.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the £400 per annum she gained as part of her separation, she also agreed that she would absent herself from England for the following four years. In this decision she had very little choice. Sir Richard would not proceed without this caveat, even though his lawyer said that "as a British subject" he could not approve of it.<sup>48</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley agreed that her allowance would be withheld if she returned to England before the allotted four years was up.<sup>49</sup> She had waited over six years to be legally separated and perhaps foresaw little difference to her life if she lived in England or in France. However, this clause in the separation meant that Lady Seymour Worsley got caught up in the French Revolution. Letters sent from Lady Seymour Worsley to her husband's bankers end in December 1792, two months after the fall of the Bastille, so there is little evidence to tell us exactly what happened to Lady Seymour Worsley during this time. It is likely that, as part of the Duc of Orléans' social set, she was arrested around April of 1793, and potentially she spent some years

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<sup>45</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.221, 228–229, 241.

<sup>46</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley to William Clarke Esq., 27 December 1791, Worsley Family Papers, JER/WA/38/1, WORS/145, IOWRO.

<sup>47</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.222; Lady Seymour Worsley to William Clarke, Esq. (assumed), likely 1797, Worsley Family Papers, JER/WA/38/1, WORS/149, IOWRO; Lady Seymour Worsley to William Clarke, Esq. (assumed), 7 august 1797, Worsley Family Papers, JER/WA/38/1, WORS/150/2, IOWRO.

<sup>48</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.231.

<sup>49</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.231–232.

imprisoned alongside other ladies of her calibre, such as Grace Elliot Dalrymple, whose letters do mention an unknown friend.<sup>50</sup> We know little else of her until 1797 when she returned to England and fell ill.<sup>51</sup> Although Lady Seymour Worsley had brought wealth into the marriage, when it came to separation proceedings, Sir Richard possessed all their money, and as such he had a powerful form of control over Lady Seymour Worsley. Sir Richard knew that without his agreement to a reasonable annuity, Lady Seymour Worsley's position in life would be far more difficult, as she would struggle to feed, clothe and house herself. He utilised his wealth to coerce his wife into agreeing to leave the country.

Wives often did not get access to all their clothing, which represented a significant source of wealth, following divorces or separations. The clothing of the upper class in the late eighteenth century could often be very costly.<sup>52</sup> Not only was it expensive but clothes were a clear indicator of wealth and status and dressing correctly was one of the ways that upper-class society recognised and regulated itself. Without the clothing to fit into society, women had fewer options on where they could go and with whom they could interact, as being incorrectly dressed for the location or occasion would make their presence noticeable, even were their scandals not an object to their presence. Not only did clothing signify the wealth and position of these women, but clothing also represented a potential form of income. London had a thriving second-hand trade, and the possession of a costly trousseau of clothing could have represented an income if these women were struggling financially.<sup>53</sup> When Lady Seymour Worsley eloped, she took only the brown riding habit she was wearing and spent many months attempting to regain the rest of her wardrobe. Sir Richard Worsley was reluctant to relinquish it because holding her clothes meant he still exerted some control over his wife—there were places she could not go without the proper attire. Even once forced to send her clothes, he retained the most expensive pieces, claiming his money had bought them.<sup>54</sup> Sir Richard Worsley's retention of his wife's clothes seems to suggest

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<sup>50</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.243–244.

<sup>51</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley to William Clarke, Esq., 27 May 1797, Worsley Family Papers, JER/WA/38/1, WORS/148, IOWRO.

<sup>52</sup> Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe: 1715–1789*, rev. ed. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002), pp.78–80.

<sup>53</sup> Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.61–62.

<sup>54</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.102–3, 196

that he was aware that clothing was an avenue through which his wife could present the best version of herself and create an income that was not solely controlled by him.

Similarly, jewellery was not intended to remain the property of the wife following a separation. Families passed down heirlooms and important pieces of jewellery to their descendants.<sup>55</sup> Gifts of smaller pieces of jewellery given directly to the wife may have remained in her possession, but the majority remained with the husband for his descendants. Some wives may have retained possession of jewels for her lifetime, but they were not her property to sell. A letter from Lady Elizabeth Derby's husband suggests that she ignored the stricture. He wrote to her companion,

I am very sure /however I might express myself/ that it was never in my Thoughts or Intention that Lady Derby should have leave to dispose of her Diamonds by sale. I have considered them as lent to her & entirely recallable at my pleasure – a Power however which I certainly never meant to exercise during her Life —This was the utmost of my Intention in letting her take the Jewelry after leaving my House.<sup>56</sup>

He claimed he never intended that the jewellery should be an “Absolute Gift”, and that Lady Elizabeth Derby knew this. Regardless, she sold the diamonds, likely to provide herself with an extra source of income. It seems she did not mind that it would upset her husband and getting rid of these diamonds may also have represented Lady Elizabeth Derby ridding herself of her husband's influence. Though the diamonds were her husband's, she chose to sell them in defiance of convention and to shed the degree of control over her possessions which her husband still retained.

Money and wealth equalled a certain level of power, even in eighteenth-century England. The generosity of Lady Penelope Ligonier's father allowed her to live in reasonable style and travel as she pleased. Lady Seymour Worsley lived on the generosity of her lovers whilst she similarly fought to sign a settlement with a financial agreement, assenting to restrictive terms upon which her income was dependent in order to gain some financial freedom. She also sought to retrieve her clothes from her husband's possession, recognising that they brought either status or a source of income. Lady Elizabeth Derby sold her jewels in contravention of her husband's

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<sup>55</sup> Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.55–56

<sup>56</sup> Lord Edward Derby to S Gunning (assumed.), date unknown, A Bundle of Private Family papers under Seal 1780–1797, Earls of Derby (of Knowsley), DDK/25/5/12, LA.

wishes. For these women, who relied on the wealth and generosity of the men in their lives, whether that be a father, lover or husband, money represented a fairly significant constraint on their individual agency.

### *The Impact of Family on Agency*

The relationship that families were willing to commit to with the women of the New Female Coterie often impacted the quality of their subsequent lives. Having a parent or sibling on their side could mean help either with their social reputation or with their wellbeing. On the other hand, some separations split families so decisively that contact was never resumed.

Lady Seymour Worsley's choices were both restricted by her husband and then expanded by her sister. As we have just seen, a clause in Lady Seymour Worsley's separation agreement saw her caught up in the French Revolution. Lady Seymour Worsley suffered through the Revolution because her husband had been too humiliated by her actions to allow her to remain in England, and it adversely affected her health. Lady Seymour Worsley was unable to return to England when the Revolution was imminent because of a clause in her separation agreement that her husband had insisted upon. However, if her husband had constrained her choices in this way, her reconnection with her family upon her return offered her new options. Lady Seymour Worsley returned from France in 1797, ill and unable to fund a recommended trip to the seaside to recuperate. Her sister and her husband, the Earl and Countess of Harrington, reconciled with Lady Seymour Worsley for the first time since the criminal conversation trial. They took her with them to the seaside resorts of Weymouth and Brighton to aid her recovery, before helping her to find a better residence out of London.<sup>57</sup> Just as Lady Penelope Ligonier was able both to travel and reside quietly in the country due to assistance from her father, so too was Lady Seymour Worsley able to recover with aid from her sister. The women of the New Female Coterie had greater freedom to choose where they went or where they chose to live, yet their circumstances still limited these choices. Connections with (preferably wealthy) family members made more paths available to these women, yet these options were reliant on the choices of their family members.

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<sup>57</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley to William Clarke, Esq., 27 May 1797, IOWRO; Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.247–248.



Letters from Lady Seymour Worsley show how her renewed connection with her family was a great source of joy and happiness to her. She writes to her husband's steward, who, it seems, acted as a conduit not only for money but also news, to say "you will I know be glad to hear that I am restored to the Love and regard of all my family they have all been to see me and I have been to my Dearest mothers and Sister, They are all goodness to me you must think what happiness."<sup>58</sup> She reinforces this sentiment a few months later in an effusive letter. "Thinck[sic] how good it is of my Dearest Mother to come 280 Miles to see me," she says, "I expect her here about the 27<sup>th</sup>. You may imagin[sic] how happy this new profe[sic] of my Mothers Love and affection must make me. Indeed all my family are very kind and good to me".<sup>59</sup> It is clear that the reunion with her family after over a decade of little, if any, contact brought Lady Seymour Worsley great joy. She even said that "It will be my constant wish to do all I can to make me deserving of my friends Love and protection."<sup>60</sup> These letters suggest that Lady Seymour Worsley recognised the benefits of having connections in society. Wealthy family members created options in the places that one was able to visit, or in the means available. More importantly, the letters suggest she recognised that her family represented an important source of happiness, and that it might even be worth her while to amend her behaviour in order to keep them in her life.

When society uncovered Lady Elizabeth Derby's affair, her mother stood by her and attempted to restore her good name. Her mother, the socially powerful Duchess of Hamilton and Argyll, suggested that Lady Elizabeth Derby retreat from social life for a while. In the wake of Lady Elizabeth Derby's affair and separation from her husband, she went from being one of the toasts of high society, to being all but ostracised by those same people. In her prime, Lady Elizabeth Derby was frequently discussed in newspapers for her "dress and beauty" or "dress and taste", often alongside the Duchess of Devonshire, another leading light of their day.<sup>61</sup> Lady Elizabeth Derby's position in society soon became a grey area—she had left her husband but was still legally married to him, plus rumours circulated that the Duke

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<sup>58</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley to William Clarke, Esq., 27 May 1797, IOWRO.

<sup>59</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley to William Clarke, Esq., 19 August 1797, Worsley Family Papers, JER/WA/22/1, WORS/150/1, IOWRO.

<sup>60</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley to William Clarke, Esq., 19 August 1797, IOWRO.

<sup>61</sup> 'News', *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, Tuesday 21 January 1777, Issue 1327, London; 'News', *General Evening Post*, 17–20 January 1778, Issue 6875, London, both accessed via 17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers.

of Dorset would wed her as soon as her divorce came through, making her a duchess.<sup>62</sup> In spite of her transgressions, her family attempted, fruitlessly, to convince the Earl of Derby to reconcile with his wife, and to convince society to accept her back.<sup>63</sup> A few months after Lady Elizabeth Derby's initial departure from her marriage, a delegation of young ladies went to visit her. Because of her uncertain position, people watched with great interest to see who would visit. The party consisted mainly of younger women from the Whigs. The Duchess of Devonshire, Lady Elizabeth Derby's one-time friend, wished to be amongst them, but the work of the Duchess of Hamilton and Argyll had not been quite effective enough, and the Duchess's mother forbade her from visiting Lady Elizabeth Derby.<sup>64</sup> Lady Elizabeth Derby's mother may have held some sway over the younger generation, who wished to visit Lady Elizabeth Derby and, at least temporarily, maintain their social bond.

Although Lady Elizabeth Derby's reputation in England needed constant reparation by her mother, European high society welcomed her. Lady Elizabeth Derby attended "a great Ball at the Pallace[sic]" where she interreacted with "the D[uke] and Dss[duchess] of Wirt[embourg]... the young Prince of Wir[tembourg] [and] Prince George of Mecklenbourg".<sup>65</sup> Her company was sought after, and she wrote to a friend that she "resisted the invitations of Mes<sup>d</sup> de Bonfleurs... &c– &c as it would have been silly to have been so near the K[ing] & not to have seen him."<sup>66</sup> Her retreat to Europe, taken on the advice of her worldly mother, proved beneficial to her social standing. Her company in Europe, it seems, cared less for her damaged reputation. Perhaps the English were right to regard European moral standards as looser than their own.<sup>67</sup>

Whilst she created new bonds in exile in Europe, Lady Elizabeth Derby attempted to maintain some of her English connections through correspondence. One of the relationships that she attempted to repair via correspondence was with her husband. However, her husband staunchly refused to engage in communication with

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<sup>62</sup> Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), p.67; Greig, *The Beau Monde*, p.206.

<sup>63</sup> Greig, *The Beau Monde*, pp.207–208.

<sup>64</sup> Foreman, *Devonshire*, p.69.

<sup>65</sup> Lady Derby to the Duchess of Argyll, 18 December 1781, in the Duke of Argyll (ed.), *Intimate Society Letters of the Eighteenth Century: Volume 1*, (London: Stanley Paul & Co, 1910), p.277.

<sup>66</sup> Lady Derby to the Countess Gower, 18 December 1781, PRO: Domestic Records of the Public Records Office, Gifts, Deposits, Notes, and Transcripts, PRO 30/29/4/3/15, TNA.

<sup>67</sup> Lady Mary Coke, *Letters*, Vol. 3, Thursday (assumed) 11 January 1770, pp.202–203.

her, writing, if necessary to her travel companions.<sup>68</sup> In a letter to her mother she wrote,

I have taken more than once[sic] occasion to write to Him [Lord Derby], and one Letter in particular which if he had not fully determined not to allow himself to feel or think about me he would at least have answered me, and I should not have thought it possible to read all I wrote, even of a person one had never been acquainted with, without having some feeling for them. But he has been silent to that as to all my other Letters.<sup>69</sup>

Lord Edward Derby's knowledge of his wife's ruined reputation, and his own injured honour, likely meant he was unwilling to listen to any new communications from his wife. He was clearly angered by his wife's affair, as evidenced by his refusal to grant her a divorce, dashing her hopes of marrying her lover and returning to society. His refusal not only to correspond with his wife, but to allow her to create a new future severely limited the choices that were available to his wife.

Lady Elizabeth Derby's actions were most severely limited by others when it came to her children. Whether or not the revelation of Lady Elizabeth Derby's affair with the Duke of Dorset was a calculated move on her part to escape her marriage, or whether the duke's lack of discretion incurred her departure, Lady Elizabeth Derby likely did not foresee all the consequences.<sup>70</sup> One of these was her subsequent inability to see her children. Lord Edward Derby refused to let her return to visit their children or to let the children visit her. She later wrote to her husband, pleading to be allowed to see or write to them, claiming he could "not doubt of [her] care of [her] own child".<sup>71</sup> Lord Edward Derby may have believed that distance from her children would hasten her return. During a divorce or a separation, English common law allowed the husband to retain all rights to his children until their maturity, controlling whether the mother could write to them, see them, or make any contact at all.<sup>72</sup> Lady Elizabeth Derby may have believed that a divorce settlement would include an agreed upon custody arrangement, which would take into account her role as a loving mother. However, her adultery alone allowed courts to deem her unfit to have custody of her children.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Lord Edward Derby to S Gunning (assumed.), date unknown, DDK/25/5/12, LA.

<sup>69</sup> Lady Derby to the Duchess of Argyll, 29 July 1782, in Argyll (ed.) *Intimate Society Letters*, p.282.

<sup>70</sup> Foreman, *Devonshire*, p.196.

<sup>71</sup> Lady Elizabeth Derby to Lord Edward Derby, date unknown, A Bundle of Private Family papers under Seal 1780–1797, Earls of Derby (of Knowsley), DDK/25/5/3, LA.

<sup>72</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.170, 340.

<sup>73</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.170–171.

Lady Elizabeth Derby was not the only woman of the New Female Coterie who lost custody of her children in escaping her marriage. Lady Henrietta Grosvenor had three children, whom it is unlikely she ever saw after her well-publicised affair and trial. Likewise, Lady Seymour Worsley left behind a baby daughter and a young son. The daughter was likely the offspring of her lover, not of her husband, and so she attempted to regain custody of her daughter, only for her daughter to die in somewhat suspicious circumstances in between the elopement and the trial.<sup>74</sup> Her son had remained at their home on the Isle of Wight when the couple travelled and Lady Seymour received updates on his well-being from her husband's steward.<sup>75</sup> Little is known of her son's life, but he died whilst performing an exercise as a lieutenant in Prince William of Gloucester's regiment in 1795, aged eighteen.<sup>76</sup> For these women, their estranged husbands controlled their access to their children. They had no opportunity to maintain connections with their children as their husbands refused them contact.

The connections that were made or severed with family members had significant effects on the agency of these women by offering them different choices. In spite of her husband's decision to exile her to France, Lady Seymour Worsley was happy at reconnecting with her sister, not least because she allowed her to recoup her health. Similarly, Lady Elizabeth Derby maintained her connection with her mother, who attempted to smooth her life in exile and rehabilitate her reputation in England. However, Lady Elizabeth Derby's husband refused to connect with her, which impacted on her happiness, and cut her off from her children entirely. For women, loss of children was often a consequence of leaving a marriage about which they could do little without their husband's consent. The connections with family, or the loss of former links, had a significant impact on the agency that these women were able to exercise and the ways in which they were able to conduct their lives following separations.

### *The Impact of Collective Agency*

Grouping together as the New Female Coterie—an unofficial club for disgraced women—may have allowed the women discussed above to support and empower each

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<sup>74</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.104–105.

<sup>75</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley to William Clarke, Esq. (assumed), 27 December 1791, IOWRO.

<sup>76</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.246.

other. The importance of social bonds amongst women in the eighteenth century is becoming increasingly recognised by historians.<sup>77</sup> Social bonds were just as important for ‘disgraced’ women as they were for women who belonged to a secure social set. For the New Female Coterie, the ability to exercise collective agency to resist the unwritten rules of society and to empower each other should not be underestimated.

The women of the New Female Coterie spent their early lives in society, but they spent the majority of their lives after their affairs, separations and divorces on the outskirts of society. It is likely that they lost a number of their acquaintances following their separations, and that they missed the constant rounds of polite sociability that life in high society entailed. Although we do not know exactly how the group formed or what brought these women together, it is possible that they sought each other out and clubbed together still to feel connected to the life that they had left, without having to risk rejection because of their damaged reputations. In spite of the fact that these women were all known for being scandalous women, their lives took individual twists and turns, yet belonging to a collective such as the New Female Coterie gave them roots and connections to come back to.

Debating clubs became very popular in the 1780s, and, although primarily created for men to debate issues, some women’s or mixed clubs existed.<sup>78</sup> As the introduction to this thesis suggested, the New Female Coterie may have been one of these exclusively female debating clubs. *The Rambler’s Magazine* reported the proceedings of one of their debates, and also printed another, likely imagined, debate involving these women. These articles suggested that even if debating was not their primary function, it was certainly understood to be one of the activities in which they engaged.<sup>79</sup> The ‘Cytherian Discussions’ printed in *The Rambler’s Magazine* discussed

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<sup>77</sup> Ingrid H. Tague, *Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690–1760*, (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2002), pp.162, 164–166; Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp.192, 205–209, 218–221, 242–243, 248, 271, 278–282; Elaine Chalus, ‘“To Serve my Friends”: Women and Political Patronage in Eighteenth-Century England’, in Vickery, Amanda (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp.58–60; Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson, ‘Introduction’, in Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds.), *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), pp.10–11; Sarah Richardson, ‘“Well-neighboured Houses”: The Political Networks of Elite Women, 1780–1860’ in Gleadle, Kathryn and Richardson, Sarah (eds.), *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), pp.56–57.

<sup>78</sup> Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp.200–202.

<sup>79</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, pp.270, 253.

the censure relating to adultery which all of these women had experienced. The opportunity to air their opinions, their grievances, their justifications and even their disappointments likely came as a welcome opportunity to these women. Their opinions may not have been welcome in other arenas and even other debating clubs or mixed-gender clubs, like the Ladies Club mentioned in the thesis's introduction, may not have welcomed their unconventional views on the matter. The chance to hear and be heard was likely important to these women who existed on the edges of society and were likely cut off from many of their former friends and acquaintances. The New Female Coterie may have functioned as a debating club for the disgraced, providing opportunities for collective social bonding.

The New Female Coterie exercised their collective agency in defying societal expectations by meeting in a brothel. Supposedly the group met in a brothel in King's Place owned by the Madam Sarah Prendergast. The group had links to this brothel and this madam as Lady Caroline Harrington's husband, Lord William Harrington, had frequented this brothel during his life and his use of the brothel supposedly kept Mrs. Prendergast in business.<sup>80</sup> King's Place was a small avenue which adjoined St James's Place, a street notorious for its gentleman's clubs.<sup>81</sup> The brothel's location meant that the club met right in the centre of fashionable London, not far from the theatres, shops, and leafy residential squares which constituted the West End at this time. However, the brothel was also located in an intermediary space, within the geographical boundaries of fashionable London society, but not accepted by that society. By placing themselves in the same area as all their previous friends and families whom they might encounter on the street as they went to and from their meetings, the New Female Coterie, it could be argued, were defiantly demonstrating to society that they did not care whether society accepted them. By entering a brothel in the company of other notorious women, the group implied that their reputations amongst high society no longer carried the same weight as they had before. Utilising their collective agency to meet at a brothel, as opposed to another location like a private residence, meant that these women could live their lives with some dignity as well as signalling to society that they had little interest in their strictures.

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<sup>80</sup> E. J. Burford, *Royal St. James's: Being a Story of Kings, Clubmen and Courtesans*, (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1988), pp.199–201.

<sup>81</sup> Burford, *Royal St James's*, p.125.

There is evidence to suggest that the women of the New Female Coterie supported each other through their trials and in the aftermath. At the trial for criminal conversation between Lady Seymour Worsley's husband and lover, one of those in attendance was Lady Penelope Ligonier. She likely came to show her support for a friend and she may even have reported back to Lady Seymour Worsley, who was not permitted to attend the trial which concerned her. A writer who recorded the trial noted that Lady Penelope Ligonier made up one of a number "of the cyprian corps."<sup>82</sup> The same author further suggested that Lady Penelope Ligonier had attended out of "a most sympathetic concern" for her friend.<sup>83</sup> Lady Penelope had been through a similarly public and notorious divorce trial, and she may have come to show her support for Lady Seymour Worsley and her actions. The connection between these two notorious women and the other women of the New Female Coterie likely allowed them to feel more secure in the knowledge that they were not alone in their choices and the decision to try and leave their marriages.

In spite of the lack of concrete information about the New Female Coterie and its precise form and function, it seems clear that their collective agency was an important aspect of the group. They may have originally connected over their existence at the outskirts of their former social world, but it is likely that the bonds of their domiciliary-associational sociability brought them closer. By engaging in the activities of domiciliary sociability—drinking tea and exchanging news and gossip—and those of associational sociability—debates and potentially gambling and drinking—the women of the New Female Coterie both transgressed societal norms about how men and women should socialise and supported each other in their transgressions and choices. *The Rambler's Magazine*, it seems, was threatened by their collectivity, and by their entrance into male-dominated activities, a point which will be discussed further in section two. As a place to socialise and maintain friendship bonds, as an arena in which to share views and opinions about divorce, and, most importantly, as a way to show society that their exclusion did not matter and that their lives were still worthwhile

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<sup>82</sup> The Cyprian Corps was a phrase used in the eighteenth century to refer to a group of prostitutes, usually the slightly more expensive ones: 'Cyprian, *adj. and n.*', *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/46673?redirectedFrom=Cyprian#eid](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46673?redirectedFrom=Cyprian#eid), accessed 20 February 2019; *The Morning Herald*, in Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.110

<sup>83</sup> *The Morning Herald*, in Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.110.

and fulfilling, it probably had great value to these women. In banding together, they likely lifted each other up.

## Conclusion

The women of the New Female Coterie utilised their agency in the breakdown of their marriages. Stone portrayed men as dominating proceedings to end marriage, with women as passive bystanders, and Russell and Binhammer have discussed the way that women were portrayed as victims in criminal conversation trials.<sup>84</sup> Women could not instigate divorce proceedings but that did not mean that they had no options. The New Female Coterie likely used their affairs to try and gain the notice of their neighbours, the countryside, and high society. They probably hoped that these widely noticed indiscretions would embarrass their husbands enough that they would begin divorce proceedings. These efforts were not always successful. The agency exhibited by the New Female Coterie was further constrained by their families, husbands, and wealth following separation or divorce and they had to work with the options available to them. Yet, these women utilised their collective agency to defy societal expectations, air their opinions and support each other.

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<sup>84</sup> Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp.150, 234, 241–242, 324; Russell, ‘Killing Mrs. Siddons’, pp.426, 428; Binhammer, ‘The Sex Panic’, p.428.



## Section Two: Agency and the Media

The New Female Coterie exercised agency in order to escape marriages which made them unhappy, yet media sources overlooked their agency or portrayed it as a negative thing. Just as families and wealth could either aid or constrain the agency of the women of the New Female Coterie, so too could media representations. Whilst some women utilised media in order to express themselves, others suffered from the depictions of their actions. Media sources, particularly *The Rambler's Magazine*, often vilified the actions of these women and their independence, portraying it as unladylike, as transgressions of norms, and even as a potential threat to social stability. These women had pamphlets printed about them and their trials, and one of the women even utilised a pamphlet in order to share her side of the story. The New Female Coterie featured, moreover, in a variety of satirical prints, which were largely salacious in content. This chapter will look at satirical prints, pamphlets, and *The Rambler's Magazine* to explore the ways in which these media sources could act as both aid and constraint to the options available to these women.

### Satirical Prints and an Ignorance of Agency

Artists such as James Gillray and George Cruikshank became well-known between 1780 and 1830 for their incisive, acerbic, sometimes erotic, and occasionally even cruel satirical prints.<sup>1</sup> Artists often caricatured well-known figures in order to identify them without risking a suit for libel. Scandals that caught the public's attention, such as those of the New Female Coterie, were often the subject of a variety of satirical prints. There is some debate about the distribution of prints, but they were certainly available to purchase, and many of the wealthy, such as the Prince of Wales and Charles James Fox, collected satirical prints in spite of being ridiculed in them themselves.<sup>2</sup> Certain satirical prints show that printshop windows formed a sort of free gallery, suggesting that the general public could view some prints without purchasing.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Richard Moores, *Representations of France in English Satirical Prints, 1740–1832*, (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp.15–16.

<sup>2</sup> Moores, *Representations*, pp.9, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Carrington Bowles, 'Spectators at a Print-Shop in St. Paul's Church Yard', 1774, BM Satires 3758, BM; Matthew Darly, 'A Macaroni Print Shop', 1772, BM Satires 4701, BM; Moores, *Representations*, p.4.

The British Museum holds a number of social and sexual satirical prints from this era which, Vic Gatrell maintains, historians have largely neglected, focusing on the political prints as opposed to social ones.<sup>4</sup> Gatrell suggests that this is because information on circulation and reception of the prints is lacking; thus, it can be hard to draw conclusive evidence about their impact. Yet, whether we subscribe to Donald's view that satirical prints transcended class boundaries because prints drew inspirations and allusions from a variety of sources, or to Moores' suggestion that the price excluded the lower classes, there is little doubt that thousands of satirical prints were produced in the later eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> I think it is fair to say that these prints would not have been produced without an audience. Even without knowing who specifically the audience was, we can still understand that satirical prints illuminate some of the humours and fears of English society at this time. As Gatrell says, and I agree, satirical prints provide valuable insights into what was "thinkable and doable in the past, regardless of the assumed numbers of people involved or its assumed normative standing."<sup>6</sup> This thesis contributes to the growing number of works that use satirical social prints as insights into eighteenth-century life. If few have utilised these sources, fewer still have used them to examine the ways in which the prints portrayed female agency.<sup>7</sup>

A series of satirical prints were produced which referenced the Maidstone Bath Affair from the Worsley v. Bisset criminal conversation trial.<sup>8</sup> The prints tended to follow the same broad strokes as each other, usually featuring Lady Seymour Worsley dressing herself with the assistance of a maid while a face peers through a window at her. In most, it is George Bisset's face, and he is standing on Sir Richard's shoulders.

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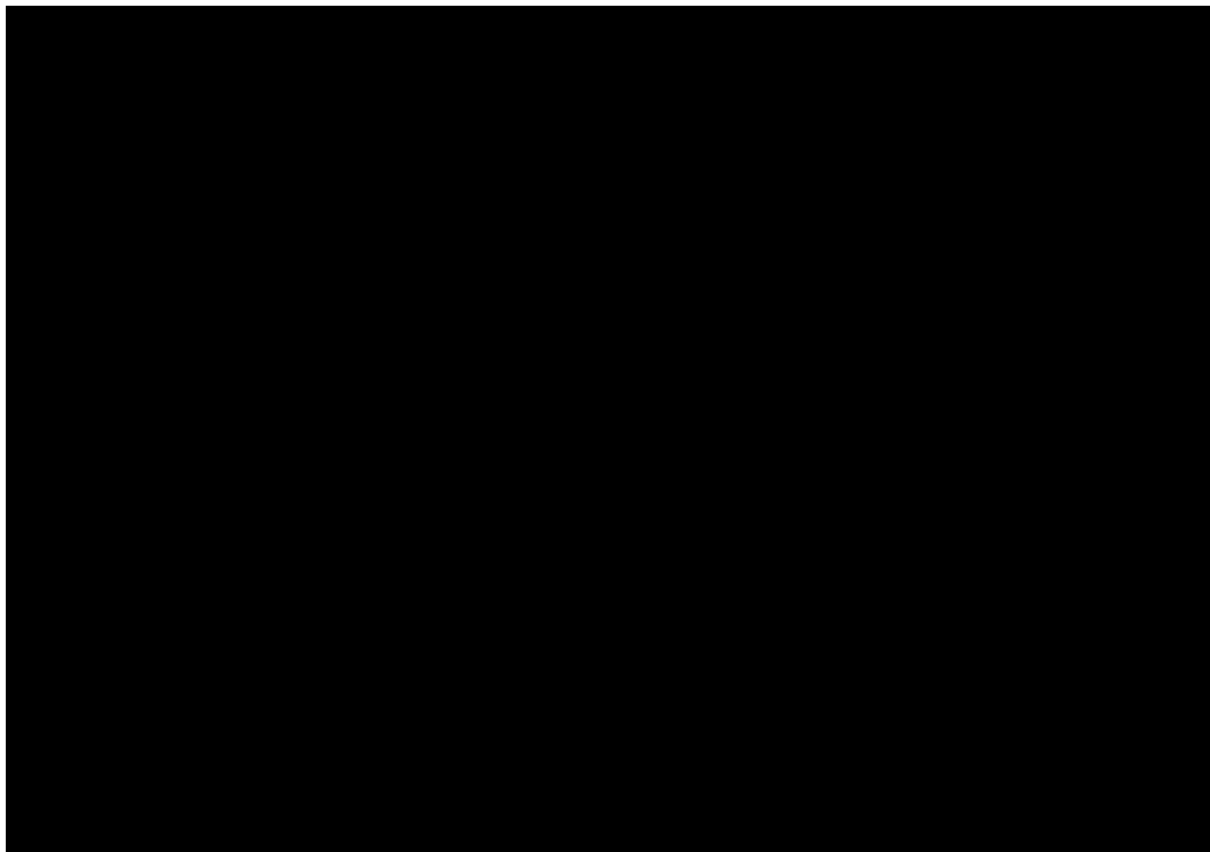
<sup>4</sup> Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London*, (London: Atlantic Books, 2006), p.10.

<sup>5</sup> Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p.2; Moores, *Representations*, p.4.

<sup>6</sup> Gatrell, *City of Laughter*, p.14.

<sup>7</sup> Attention has been drawn to terminology, with issues about the use of both 'cartoon' and 'caricature' as being terms that are, respectively, anachronistic and not entirely accurate. Moores investigates Nicholson's suggestion that prints be referred to as 'political prints' as the "most basic and unexceptionable of terms" and notes that she has little suggestion to make for those prints that are social rather than political in nature. As this thesis is quite specifically interested in those same social prints, it will refer to them as 'satirical prints', or 'satirical social prints' if clarification is needed: Moores, *Representations*, pp.1–3.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the Worsley v. Bisset trial, see section one.



**Figure 8:** 'A Maidstone Whim'.

**Figure 9:** 'Lady Worsley, dressing in the Bathing House'.

It was a well-known image, and clearly a popular one, given how many versions circulated.<sup>9</sup>

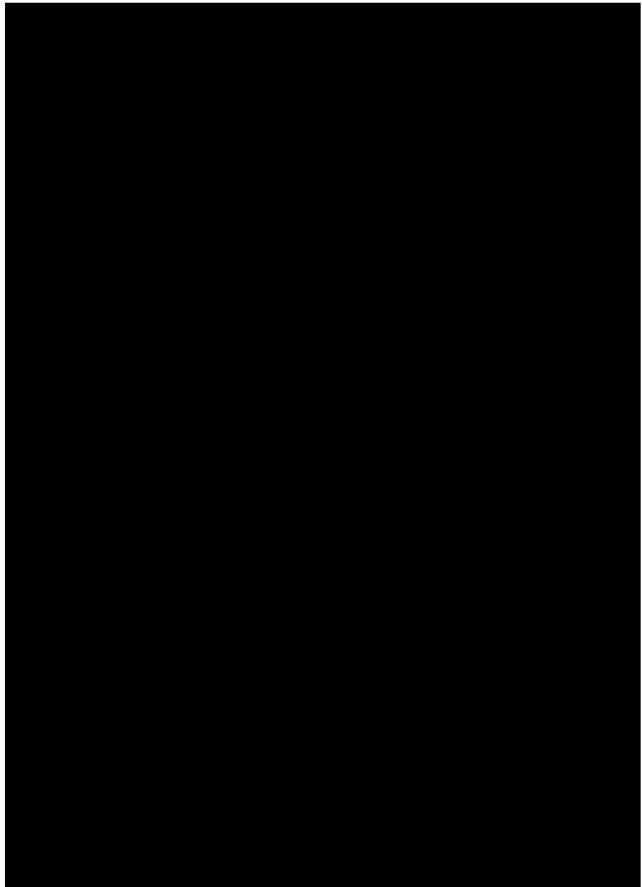
One version, 'A Maidstone Whim' (Figure 8), did not feature Lady Seymour Worsley, but instead showed the view from outside the bath-house, where Bissett climbed on Sir Richard's cuckold's horns.<sup>10</sup> This satirical print, much like the criminal conversation trial which revealed this event, ignored Lady Seymour Worsley's central role. It attempted to erase her from her own narrative, in spite of Lady Seymour Worsley's tendency to vocalise her opinion. The print is attributed to William Wells, a publisher or printer, but there is no listed artist. Three other prints, 'Lady Worsley, dressing in the Bathing house' (Figure 9), 'Sir Richard Worse-than-sly, exposing his Wifes Bottom; —O Fye' (Figure 10), and 'The Maidstone Bath or the Modern Susanna'

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<sup>9</sup> The British Museum alone holds seven prints which relate to the affair at Maidstone Bath, and another two which refer to other aspects of the Worsley trial.

<sup>10</sup> William Wells, 'Maidstone Whim', 1782, BM Satires 6107, BM.

(Figure 11) and all present silent versions of Lady Seymour Worsley.<sup>11</sup> Of these, the former two have no listed author or printer, and the latter is attributed to Gillray, who was noted for living on the edge of society himself and producing somewhat “hostile satire” as a result.<sup>12</sup> In all three prints, Lady Seymour Worsley has her back facing the window, but has turned her head towards it. Her expression seems mostly placid, perhaps a little surprised. She makes no attempt to cover her breasts, but her arm drapes in front of her lower half. However, the lack of speech from Lady Seymour Worsley in all four satirical prints suggests that these portrayals of Lady Seymour Worsley attempted reduce the



**Figure 10:** ‘Sir Richard Worse-than-Sly, exposing his Wifes Bottom; —O Fye’.

amount of agency attributed to her. Much like in the criminal conversation trial between her husband and her lover, Lady Seymour Worsley and her voice are absent from these prints, meaning the print crafts her reputation without her input. sidelining Lady Seymour Worsley from an event that came to define the rest of her life not only colours the view of her but presents her as a passive onlooker to her own life, something that her actions and pamphlet, discussed later in the chapter, will refute.

Some satirical prints present Lady Seymour Worsley not only as passive but as innocent in the affair at Maidstone Bath. Both ‘The Maidstone Bath or the Modern Susanna’ and ‘Lady Worsley, dressing in the Bathing House’ (Figures 9 and 10) draw a parallel between Lady Seymour Worsley and the biblical Susanna. The story of Susanna tells of a young woman, viewed by two elders while she bathed. They

<sup>11</sup> ‘The Maidstone Bath or the Modern Susanna’, 1782, BM Satires 6108; ‘Lady Worsley, dressing in the Bathing House’, 1782, BM Satires 6111; James Gillray, ‘Sir Richard Worse-than-sly, exposing his Wifes bottom, —o Fye!’, 1782, BM Satires 6110; all BM.

<sup>12</sup> Donald, *The Age of Caricature*, p.30.

threatened to say she had met a lover unless she slept with them. Susanna refused, and was almost put to death for her promiscuity before the prophet Daniel proved her innocence.<sup>13</sup> ‘The Maidstone Bath or the Modern Susanna’ draws an obvious connection in the title while ‘Lady Worsley, dressing in the Bathing House’ draws a more oblique link between Lady Seymour Worsley and Susanna, through a picture on the wall of the bath house which appears to show Susanna being watched from the castle walls while she bathes. These satirical prints portray Lady Seymour Worsley as almost



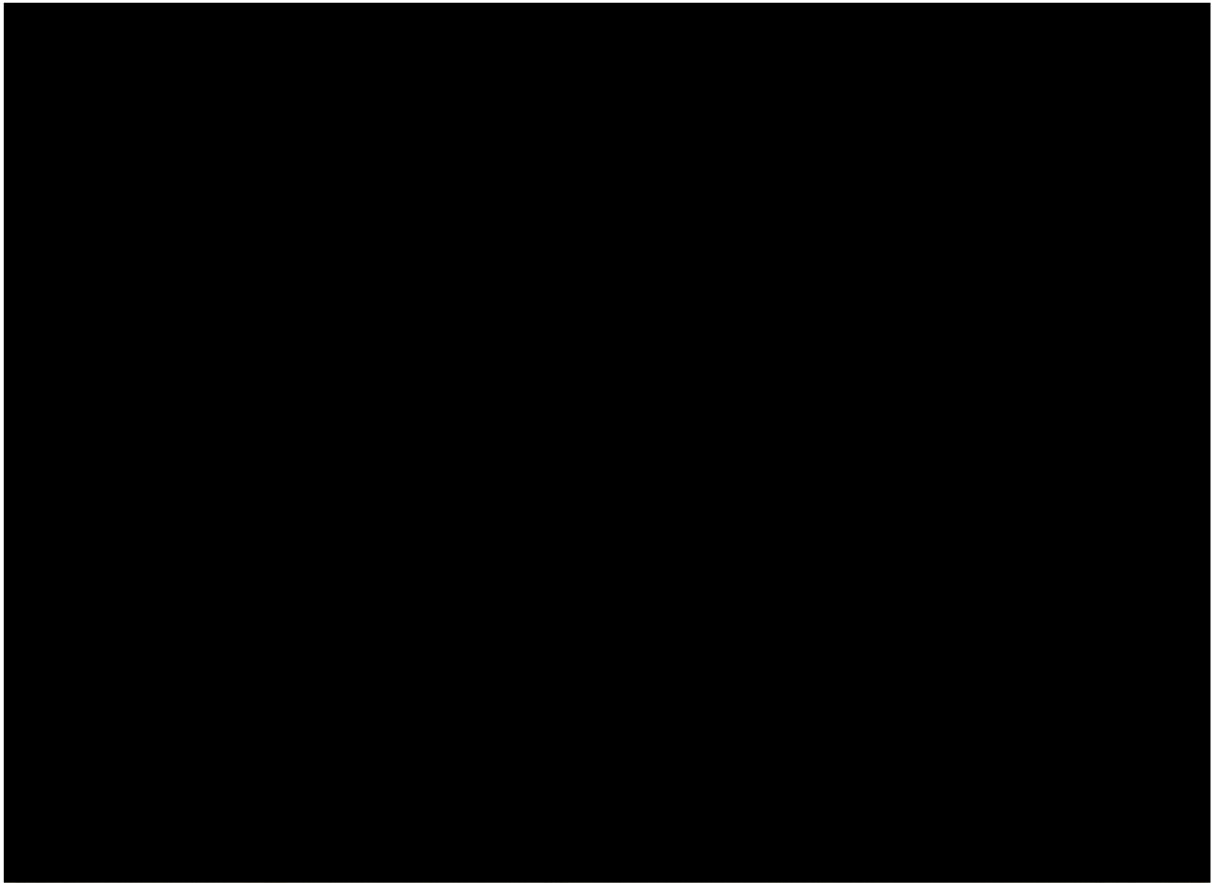
**Figure 11:** ‘The Maidstone Bath or the Modern Susanna’.

innocent, while the prints portray Bisset and Sir Richard as leering and lecherous, taking advantage of her nudity for their own satisfaction. ‘The Modern Susanna’ presents Sir Richard as gaining satisfaction from his orchestration of this viewing, a droopy looking tap on the wall in front of him hinting at his potential impotence.<sup>14</sup> Although this is a more sympathetic portrayal of Lady Seymour Worsley than that in many other forms of media, the print ignores the actions and choices that brought her to this position. Instead, through an allusive connection with Susanna, the prints portray her as controlled by those with whom she interacts, reducing her to a bystander in her own life.

In contrast to the previous satirical prints about the Maidstone Bath affair, ‘A Bath of the Moderns’ (Figure 12) is an example of a print in which Lady Seymour

<sup>13</sup> Daniel 13. Susanna is excluded from most Protestant bibles, but the Catholic Church still accepts it as canon. It was likely a known story in Protestant England in spite of this, as Handel produced an eponymous oratorio based on the story in 1749: Donald Burrows, ‘Handel, George Frideric’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/12192, accessed 15 November 2018.

<sup>14</sup> ‘The Maidstone bath or the Modern Susanna’, 1782, BM Satires 6108.



**Figure 12:** 'A Bath of the Moderns'.

Worsley is the most fully dressed, and one of the few where she actually speaks.<sup>15</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley's words express her pleasure in being viewed by Bissett, saying "Bliss-it he goes all lengths to pleasure me."<sup>16</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley seems to be an active and willing participant in this act of voyeurism, as she faces the window and smiles. The presence of her voice highlights this, as she expresses her pleasure and welcomes, rather than rejects, Bissett's gaze. Although this satirical print portrays her with more agency than other prints, she is also portrayed as somewhat lascivious. Her cheerful acceptance of this intrusion into her privacy and her open interest in a man who is not her husband paints her as bold and sexually assertive. Satirical prints about Lady Seymour Worsley and the affair at Maidstone Bath either tended to acknowledge Lady Seymour Worsley's part in this affair—but in such a way that she appears as a notorious 'fallen woman'—or more typically to silence Lady Seymour Worsley and portray her as a passive bystander.

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, this print is published by a woman—an Elizabeth Darchery—who seems to have published a number of social and political satirical prints.

<sup>16</sup> 'A Bath of the Moderns', 1782, BM Satires 6106, BM.

Satirical prints not only side-lined or highlighted agency, they also affected the reputation and public perception of these women. Prints about Lord Edward Derby went some way towards redeeming Lady Elizabeth Derby's reputation and social standing. Lady Elizabeth Derby had retreated from the centre of society to avoid creating more scandal; yet, during her lifetime, her notoriety appeared to decrease while her husband's increased. His obvious infatuation with an actress named Elizabeth Farren in London became the object of fun in many prints. Artists pointed out that Elizabeth Farren had not become Lord Edward Derby's mistress, the more expected relationship between an earl and an actress, and portrayed the earl as slavishly and undignifiedly devoted. In pointing out the disparate ranks of Elizabeth Farren and Lord Edward Derby, satirical prints suggested that Elizabeth Farren kept her relationship with the earl close but platonic in order to angle for a countess's coronet.<sup>17</sup> In these prints, the Earl of Derby is often portrayed as being so short and round that he appears almost child-like, especially in comparison to the tall, skinny, worldly-looking Elizabeth Farren. Lord Edward Derby's presentation as a guileless, almost idiotic man improved Lady Elizabeth Derby's reputation by comparison. Not only had her choice to absent herself from society not created any more fuel for her own scandal, as discussed in section one, but the earl's embarrassing infatuation served to lessen the scandal of Lady Elizabeth Derby's indiscretions in society's collective memory.<sup>18</sup>

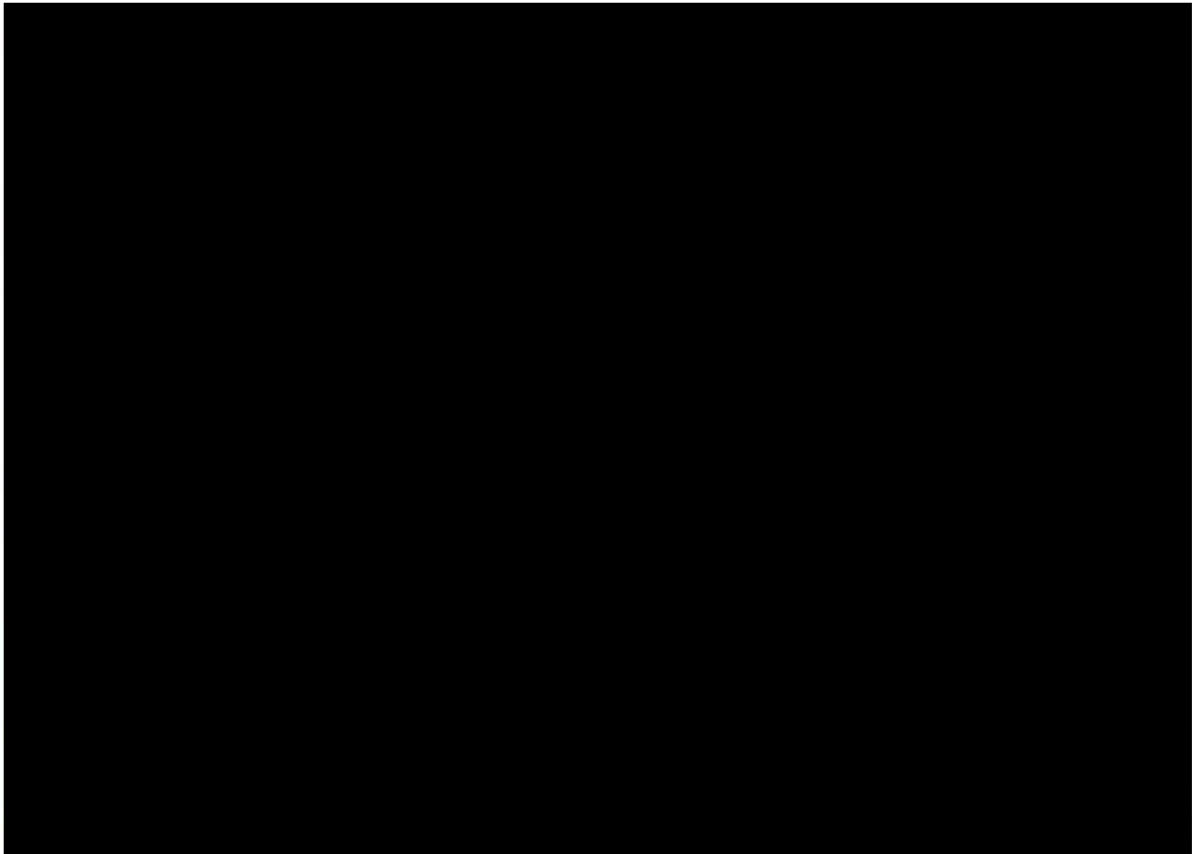
Although the rejuvenation of Lady Elizabeth Derby's reputation meant that she could potentially have been able to retake her place in society, her health worsened, and she died in 1797. Her husband's swift re-marriage helped to create a more sympathetic memory of her. 'Darby and Joan or the Dance of Death' (Figure 13), created in 1797, the year that Lady Elizabeth Derby died, makes clear this sympathetic post-mortem portrayal.<sup>19</sup> The print portrays the Earl of Derby and Elizabeth Farren, arm in arm, dancing exuberantly, high kicking and waving their arms. Elizabeth Farren is dressed somewhat ostentatiously, with lace, ribbons and a train; beads,

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<sup>17</sup> See John Raphael Smith, 'Derby Diligence [Lord Derby following Miss Farren]', 1781, BM Satires 5901; William Dent, 'The Platonic Lovers', 1784, BM Satires 6714; William Holland, 'Beatrice fishing for a Coronet', 1790, BM Satires 7735; Robert Dighton, 'Derby and Joan', 1795, BM Satires 8727; James Gillray, 'A peep at Christie's;—or—Tally-ho, & his Nimeny-pimmeney taking the Morning Lounge.', 1796, BM Satires 8888; James Gillray, 'Contemplations upon a Coronet', 1797, BM Satires 9074; all in BM.

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.209, 212.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Newton, 'Darby and Joan or the Dance of Death', 1797, BM Satires 9075, BM.



**Figure 13:** 'Darby and Joan or the Dance of Death'.

pearls and bows adorn her hair; while the earl is portrayed as short, rotund, and balding. In the corner of the print, lies a coffin with a serene, peaceful face—Lady Elizabeth Derby. A woman weeps over her dead body, while Elizabeth Farren appears to look on and smile. The contrast between the peace of Lady Elizabeth Derby's corpse in the corner, and the ostentatious glee of the earl and Elizabeth Farren, may have generated sympathy for Lady Elizabeth Derby, portrayed now as serene, demure and placid. This print shows us clearly that the media played a significant role in portraying these women and their agency, even after death. Lady Elizabeth Derby's death meant she was unable to exercise any agency. Potentially the lasting image of her was one which ignored the role that she played in leading a life that she chose. The satirical print, like others of Lady Seymour Worsley, implied that it had been her husband's action and her husband's choices which controlled Lady Elizabeth Derby's life, rather than her own. The foregrounding of her husband pushes Lady Elizabeth Derby to the back of her own story. As we saw in section one, a number of factors constrained women's agency, but this cartoon seems to suggest that Lady Elizabeth Derby had no agency at all; instead she was a passive bystander.



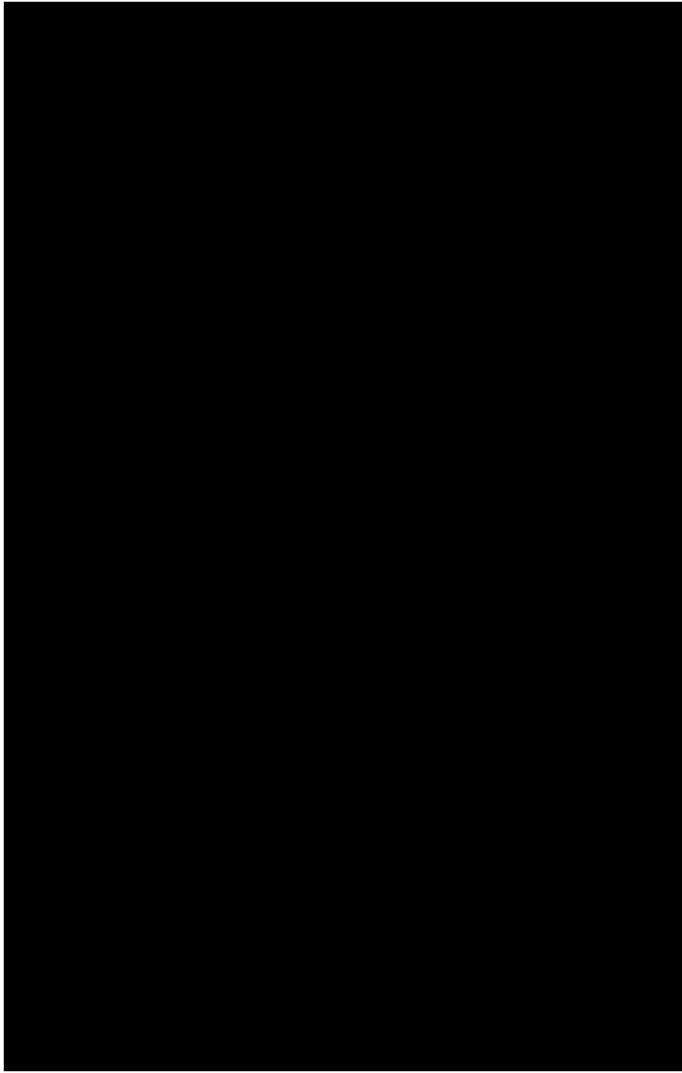
Satirical prints also kept the scandal alive long after the event had passed, hindering women's abilities to move on. Two prints entitled 'Lady Grosvenor & Duke of Cumberland Surprised by the Servant' and 'The Unwelcome Intruders' (Figures 14 and 15) were illustrations produced for *Moore's Annals of Gallantry or The Conjugal Monitor*, a "collection of curious and important trials for divorces, and actions of crim. con.". They were published in 1814, forty-five years after the affair itself had taken place.<sup>20</sup> The former print shows a servant of Lord Richard Grosvenor's surprising the couple in the park, while the Duke of Cumberland hides himself behind a tree; and the latter shows servants of Lord Richard Grosvenor interrupting the couple in an inn. Although the dress and



**Figure 14:** 'Lady Grosvenor & Duke of Cumberland surprised by the Servant'.

illustration style of the prints show clearly that they were produced after the actual event, their content echoes the narrative presented in original reports on the Grosvenor affair. Both prints portray Lady Henrietta Grosvenor as flighty—in the first she takes fright from a servant, looking as if she wants to flee, and in the second she kneels in a corner in a dishevelled room when servants discover her affair. The production of these prints to illustrate the tale of Lady Henrietta Grosvenor's affair and trial, in a volume of works meant to describe and possibly to warn about them,

<sup>20</sup> George Cruikshank, 'Lady Grosvenor & Duke of Cumberland Surprised by the Servant', 1814, 1871,0429.732 and George Cruikshank, 'The Unwelcome Intruders', 1814, 1871,0429.73; both BM; A. Moore, 'The Annals of Gallantry: or, The Conjugal Monitor: being a collection of curious and important trials for divorces, and actions of crim: con. during the present reign; accompanied with biographical memoirs and anecdotes and illustrated with notes', London, 1814, General Reference Collection CUP/700/m/44/, BL.



**Figure 15:** 'The Unwelcome Intruders'.

reminded the public of the scandal and Lady Grosvenor's role in it. Thus, her reputation remained damaged and her options limited.

Many of the satirical prints featuring Lady Seymour Worsley portray her as a silent and passive bystander in the affair at Maidstone Bath. Only one of the prints allowed her a voice, which portrayed her as an active, if lascivious, participant. Sympathy for Lady Elizabeth Derby increased after her death and her husband's swift remarriage, but representations of her portray her as passive and demure, ignoring the actions she took in pursuit of her own happiness. Satirical prints, such as those representing Lady Henrietta Grosvenor's affair, kept the scandal alive, reducing future

options. Satirical prints, then, often ignored the agency of the women of the New Female Coterie, or otherwise attributed it to other actors such as their husbands. Prints shaped women's reputations and thus affected the options available to them. Those prints that did acknowledge the women's agency seem to have represented it as a negative thing, by portraying the women as lascivious or as behaving in an otherwise inappropriate manner.

## Pamphlets and a Critique of Behaviour

Scholars have primarily utilised trial pamphlets to explain the way that adultery in the latter part of the eighteenth century was discussed and represented.<sup>21</sup> Lloyd uses

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<sup>21</sup> Donna T. Andrew, "Adultery à-la-Mode': Privilege, the Law and Attitudes to Adultery 1770–1809', *History*, Vol. 82, No. 265, 1997, p.11.

trial pamphlets in order to explore the small details that arose from trials of scandalous women such as Lady Seymour Worsley and Lady Henrietta Grosvenor.<sup>22</sup> Binhammer suggests that the rising number of pamphlets addressing divorce and adultery provide evidence of the sex panic of the 1790s.<sup>23</sup> Little attention has been given to the way in which the trial pamphlets portrayed the actions and decisions of the women involved, or the way in which this reporting could affect their lives. *The Scandalous Lady W* considers some of the pamphlets that were supposedly by Lady Seymour Worsley or written about her in order to illustrate not only the intense interest in Lady Seymour Worsley following the trial, but her public sniping at her husband.<sup>24</sup> This chapter will look at the way in which both trial reporting and assorted other pamphlets critiqued women's behaviour while largely ignoring their agency, and also the way in which pamphlets could be used to justify this behaviour.

Pamphlets disseminated a variety of news. They were easily made and cheap to purchase, often costing around one shilling. They were often produced anonymously, or with a pen-name which sometimes provided hints to the author's identity. Pamphlets provided not only information for consumers but often amusement as well, as they regularly offered news or opinions on the scandals of the day. Proceedings of separation and criminal conversation trials were also widely reported in pamphlet form. These pamphlets were presented as verbatim reports of the proceedings, but occasionally they focused on aspects of the case that were trivial but that had caught the public's attention and filled out the story or painted an amusing or scandalous narrative.<sup>25</sup>

Servants' testimonies in trial reporting often did damage to women's reputations. Servants presented many of the testimonies at criminal conversation and separation trials and they were often used as character witnesses, to testify to the general behaviour of the woman in question. As we saw in section one, during the discussion of Mrs. Catherine Newton's trial, servants were seen as good witnesses because they were often privy to intimate details about the lives of the aristocracy

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<sup>22</sup> Sarah Lloyd, 'Amour in the Shrubbery: Reading the Detail of English Adultery Trial Publications of the 1780s', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2006, pp.421–442.

<sup>23</sup> Katherine Binhammer, 'The Sex Panic of the 1790s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1996, pp.409–434, pp.414–415.

<sup>24</sup> Hallie Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W: An Eighteenth-Century Tale of Sex, Scandal and Divorce*, (London: Vintage, 2008), pp.189–90.

<sup>25</sup> Lloyd, 'Amour in the Shrubbery', pp.422–423.

because of their proximity. This meant that they could often testify to small details of adulteries that caught the public attention and fleshed out the narrative provided in pamphlets. Russell has suggested that criminal conversation trials were particularly theatrical, with lawyers calling on emotions and exaggerations in order to sway the jury, and this flair for the dramatic may have been echoed in trial pamphlets.<sup>26</sup> The portrayal of these affairs in pamphlet literature, however, foregrounded different aspects of the trial in order to present a more entertaining and more scandalous read. As opposed to Russell's suggestion that the theatricality of the trials rendered women as passive— "the victim[s] of a predatory seduction"—pamphlet trial reporting criticised the behaviour and the independence of the women.<sup>27</sup> Servants' reports on the behaviour of their mistresses could be seen as inviting lower-class critique of the behaviour of the aristocracy. Testimony from the lower class disapproved of the morals of the aristocracy, part of a growing trend which criticised the behaviour and moral laxity of the upper class.<sup>28</sup>

Servants' testimonies affected women's reputations even when the servants in question could not speak conclusively to the behaviour of the woman in question. Some servants who gave evidence in trials could not give particularly detailed testimonies as they had only worked for their employers for a short amount of time. In Mrs. Catherine Newton's trial, the first witness was a groom who had only worked for John Newton for five months. He provided much of his evidence with the caveat that his testimony was "to the best of his knowledge and belief" and not necessarily concrete fact.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in the Worsley criminal conversation trial, Francis Godfrey, a servant of Sir Richard's, admitted that at the time of the elopement, he had only lived with the couple for one day.<sup>30</sup> He was therefore not able to speak conclusively about

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<sup>26</sup> Gillian Russell, "'The Theatre of Crim. Con.': Thomas Erskine, Adultery and Radical Politics in the 1790s", in Michael T. Davis and Paul A. Pickering (eds.), *Unrespectable Radicals? Popular Politics in the Age of Reform*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p.58.

<sup>27</sup> Russell, 'The Theatre of Crim. Con.', p.59.

<sup>28</sup> Donna T. Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice: The Attack on Duelling, Suicide, Adultery, and Gambling in Eighteenth-Century England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p.3.

<sup>29</sup> *The trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton, Wife of John Newton, Esq. and daughter of the Right Honourable and reverend Lord Francis Seymour; at the Consistory Court of Doctors commons; upon a Libel and Allegations, Charging her with the crime of adultery with Mr. Isham Baggs, a young Oxonian; Mr. Brett, a Player at Bath; Thomas Cope, Mrs. Newtons's coachman; Isaac Hatheway, her Footman; John Ackland, of Fairfield, in the County of Somerset, Esq. and divers other Persons. With all the interesting Scenes fully, minutely, and circumstantially displayed. Containing the whole of the evidence in that very Extraordinary Trial*, 1782, CW3324522430, accessed via Eighteenth Century Collections Online, p.4.

<sup>30</sup> *The trial with the whole of the evidence, between the Right Hon. Sir Richard Worsley, bart. comptroller of His Majesty's household, governor of the isle of Wight, Member of Parliament for the*

the habits of the Worsleys. Nevertheless, the testimonies of these servants were still published without drawing specific attention to the fact that the servants gave evidence drawn from a very limited acquaintance. It is likely that the evidence provided by the servants was taken as more concrete evidence of the women's behaviour than it should have been, potentially increasing the damage done to the reputations of these women.

An example of this critique from servants can be seen in the testimony of the servants at Mrs. Catherine Newton's trial. Much of the counsel's questioning of the servants focused on Mrs. Catherine Newton's behaviour, and her general nature. Many of the answers seemed to suggest that Mrs. Catherine Newton was wanton and behaved in a manner that was not aligned with her station in life. One servant said that she "seemed to be of a very free and open disposition", while another described her as having a "very improper manner; and her behaviour, in general, was remarkably free and flighty".<sup>31</sup> While these testimonies recognised that Mrs. Catherine Newton acted with some level of independence, servants who witnessed her behaviour portrayed her acting to suit herself as being unbecoming for a woman of her status. As a contrast, discussion of her husband's behaviour was mostly limited to brief statements on whether he treated his wife with respect.<sup>32</sup> Servants who testified described John Newton as quiet and sober, neither jealous nor suspicious, and a good husband.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the same servants described Mrs. Catherine Newton as improper, flighty, a flirt, immodest, inappropriate and overly familiar.<sup>34</sup> The differing portrayals here certainly indicate a deep-seated gender bias, but also indicate that the behavioural standards for men and women were different, and that the servants recognised and discussed the inappropriate behaviour of the upper classes.

Due to this focus on the behaviour of the wife, husbands and lovers found it easier to rehabilitate their reputations. This is not to suggest that men's reputations did not suffer at all—the award of one shilling in damages by the jury humiliated Sir

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*Borough of Newport in that island, one of the verdurers of the New Forest, colonel of the South Battalion of the Hampshire Militia, one of His Majesty's most honourable privy council, F.R.S. and A.S.-plaintiff, and George Maurice Bissett, Esq. defendant, for criminal conversation with the plaintiff's wife; Before the Right Hon. William, Earl of Mansfield, and a special jury, in His Majesty's Court of King's-Bench, Westminster-Hall, on Thursday the 21st of February, 1782. Taken in short hand by Robert Pye Donkin, of the King's-Bench Treasury-Office, 1782, CB3332461900, accessed via Eighteenth-Century Collections Online, p.6.*

<sup>31</sup> *The trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, pp.5, 14.

<sup>32</sup> *The trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, pp.11, 14–16.

<sup>33</sup> *The trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, p.11.

<sup>34</sup> *The trial of the Hon. Mrs. Catherine Newton*, pp.14–15, 23.

Richard Worsley and his portrayal in the press as an impotent voyeur significantly damaged the image of a cultivated, learned gentleman he had tried to create.<sup>35</sup> Yet following the criminal conversation trial, Sir Richard travelled through Europe and gained a reputation as a collector of antiquities.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, George Bisset's name became synonymous with the criminal conversation trial, yet, following his separation from Lady Seymour Worsley, he married the half-sister of the Earl of Peterborough in 1787, became a Justice of the Peace in Hampshire and neighbours described him as a kind and generous man.<sup>37</sup> Even Lady Elizabeth Derby's husband, Lord Edward Derby, welcomed her lover back to his social set, inviting him to parties and to stay at his country estate. Meanwhile, Lord Edward Derby never responded to one of his wife's letters.<sup>38</sup> Although separations affected men's reputations in the short term, the long-term effects rested disproportionately on women's shoulders, as it was their agency the media criticised.

The trial between Lord Richard Grosvenor and the Duke of Cumberland, quite unsurprisingly, drew much interest from the press. Many pamphlets were printed recording the details of the trial surrounding the affair between Lady Henrietta Grosvenor and the Duke of Cumberland. Of particular interest was a series of letters between the two lovers which had been used as evidence during the trial. Tillyard, who focused mainly on newspaper reporting and novelisations of her adultery and trial rather than trial reports, described Lady Henrietta Grosvenor's portrayal in the press as follows: Grosvenor was "the innocent bystander in a tawdry low-life world, giddy and silly, but a pawn in the great game of dynastic ambition, passed on to a profligate aristocrat by her ambitious family and only turning to Prince Henry when her husband has ceased to need her".<sup>39</sup> Yet, the correspondence showed that she was a willing participant in the affair, who felt herself to be in love. She declared that she "quite live[d] only upon the thoughts of its not being a great while before [she had] the happiness of a Letter from [him]".<sup>40</sup> In spite of this evidence of her active participation

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<sup>35</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.161, 168–169.

<sup>36</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, pp.205–218.

<sup>37</sup> Rubenhold, *The Scandalous Lady W*, p.220.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Sackville-West, *Inheritance: The Story of Knole and the Sackvilles*, (New York: Walk & Company, 2010), p.131.

<sup>39</sup> Stella Tillyard, *A Royal Affair: George III and his Troublesome Siblings*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2006), p.178.

<sup>40</sup> *The Genuine Copies of Letters which passed between the Duke of Cumberland and Lady Grosvenor, To which is annexed a clear account of the Trial in the Court of King's Bench, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of*

in this affair, the pamphlets focused instead on the Duke of Cumberland. The pamphlets censured his behaviour as inappropriate for his rank, making fun of his poorly written letters and his generally foolish behaviour during the affair wherein he had attempted to hide, disguise himself, and lie his way out of situations.<sup>41</sup>

This focus in the pamphlets on the Duke of Cumberland's idiocy and on Lord Richard Grosvenor's trap erased Lady Henrietta Grosvenor's active part in the affair. Reports attributed her agency to either Lord Richard Grosvenor or the Duke. One pamphlet described her as "the unhappy lady seduced".<sup>42</sup> Her own letters echoed this unhappiness but instead of connecting her unhappiness with her decision to engage in an affair, the pamphlet instead suggested that the Duke of Cumberland, as a man of the world, seduced her, a naïve woman. The pamphlets suggested that Lady Henrietta Grosvenor took no part in her affair, thus side-lining her from her own life. Her transgressions were certainly not ignored, as one pamphlet discussed in great detail the biblical and historical antecedents which marked Lady Henrietta Grosvenor out as an adulteress.<sup>43</sup> The pamphlets seemed to suggest that although Lady Henrietta Grosvenor was not directly responsible for her own downfall, instead being caught in the activity of her husband and the duke, she should nevertheless suffer the social consequences that came with the label of an adulteress.

In contrast to pamphlet portrayals of Lady Henrietta Grosvenor, a pamphlet account of the events at the Maidstone Bath credited Lady Seymour Worsley with her agency but with an emphasis on the lewdness of her behaviour. An anonymous pamphlet called *The Whim!!! Or, the Maid-Stone Bath* was dedicated to Lady Seymour Worsley and detailed the events of the Maidstone Bath affair, a subject which, as has already been shown, was of great interest. In poetic verse, the pamphlet described the events of the day, although unlike many other portrayals of this event, the pamphlet portrayed Lady Seymour Worsley as the instigator of the event, rather than as a bystander. The poem suggested that while Lady Seymour Worsley, Sir Richard

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July 1770; wherein Lord Grosvenor was plaintiff and the Duke of Cumberland Defendant, for Criminal Conversation with the Plaintiff's wife. *The fifth Edition*, 1770, BLL01017712199, BL, p.20.

<sup>41</sup> *The Genuine Copies of Letters*, p.80.

<sup>42</sup> *Free Thoughts on Seduction, Adultery and divorce. With Reflections on the gallantry of Princes, particularly those of the blood-royal of England. Occasioned by the late intrigue between his Royal highness the Duke of Cumberland, and Henrietta, wife of the Right Honourable Lord Grosvenor, by a Civilian*, 1771, BLL01000708153, accessed via Eighteenth-century Collections online, p.9; *The Genuine Copies of the Letters*, p.21.

<sup>43</sup> *Free Thoughts on Seduction*, pp.8–9.

Worsley and George Bissett were out in the countryside, Lady Seymour Worsley encouraged her husband to rest while she refreshed herself in the bath house.<sup>44</sup> Whilst she was gone, Sir Richard recounted her charms to a listening Bissett, and the duo decided to view Lady Seymour Worsley.<sup>45</sup> Rather than emphasising the decision of the two men to view Lady Seymour Worsley, the poem dwelt upon her behaviour in the baths when she knew she was being watched. The poem suggested that she put on a show for her watching lover, as she stood to display herself better “and blew her Mars [Bissett] a kiss.”<sup>46</sup> The two men cheered whenever “an *attitude* was *lewd*”, while Bissett sighed while she drew her hands over “*Love’s globes*”.<sup>47</sup> The poem in this pamphlet suggested that Lady Seymour Worsley was to blame for the events at the Maidstone Bath, and that her interaction and showing off for the men viewing her was unladylike behaviour. Unlike other representations of this affair, Lady Seymour Worsley’s agency was not side-lined, and she had just as much of an active role as did the two men. However, the pamphlets suggested that her agency revealed her to be lewd with almost exhibitionist tendencies.

Adding to this portrayal of Lady Seymour Worsley was the prefatory “dedication to Lady Worsley” written by “the Editor”.<sup>48</sup> It appeared to praise Lady Seymour with “admiration and applause at the *liberality* of [her] manners”.<sup>49</sup> However, the praise was only surface deep as it also congratulated her on being “well-skilled in the quality of every Cyprean *commodity*”, “a lover of the whole Human Race”, and “formed [as] a breathing Paradise, for the universal bliss of Mankind”.<sup>50</sup> The preface intimated that Lady Seymour Worsley slept with a wide variety of men, and it took this further by suggesting that she wished “to form a *Male Seraglio*, for [her] own use!”<sup>51</sup> The suggestion that Lady Seymour Worsley would hire a variety of men in order to satisfy her sexual appetites indicates that ‘the Editor’ perceived Lady Seymour Worsley’s actions in escaping her marriage to be dangerous. By invoking the idea of the ‘male seraglio’, the editor may have been suggesting that Lady Seymour’s

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<sup>44</sup> *The whim !!! or, the Maid-Stone bath. A Kentish poetic. Dedicated to Lady Worsley*, 1782, CW3311305647, accessed via eighteenth century collections online 6 February 2019, pp.3–4.

<sup>45</sup> *The whim !!!*, p.4.

<sup>46</sup> *The whim !!!*, p.9.

<sup>47</sup> *The whim !!!*, pp.10–11.

<sup>48</sup> *The whim !!!*, pp.i, vi.

<sup>49</sup> *The whim !!!*, p.i.

<sup>50</sup> *The whim !!!*, pp.ii–iii.

<sup>51</sup> *The whim !!!*, pp.iii, iv.



agency would encourage her to enter the domain of prostitution and invert the traditional roles of men and women.

Lady Seymour Worsley was not content to let pamphlets critique her independence or her choices, instead utilising the pamphlet form in order to offer a rebuttal of the media portrayal of her. In *An Epistle from L—y W-----Y to Sir R-----D*, Lady Seymour Worsley lamented her marriage, acknowledged her reputation amongst other fallen women, described the passions that Bisset raised, and disparaged her husband by suggesting that he could not raise the same, or any passions in her or himself.<sup>52</sup> She wrote “What though for thee I’m styl’d, in ev’ry page, / The Messalina of the present age” to acknowledge that the press portrayed her as a wanton seductress following the criminal conversation trial between her husband and her lover.<sup>53</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley, however, used her pamphlet to suggest that her actions were her own choice and she had just “strictly follow’d Nature’s liberal plan,” implying that her actions were a natural choice.<sup>54</sup> She recognised that her actions had contributed to the ruin of her reputation, but it seems found that the censure she received from the press for her supposedly unwitting mistakes was worth it. She says “Blame on, ye Prudes! And censure those who may, / I’m quite regardless what the world can say!”<sup>55</sup> This quote, used in the title of this thesis, suggested that she cared little for the censure she had received for her affair. Indeed, it implied that she was willing to deal with the consequences, provided that she made her own decisions and controlled her own life.

This pamphlet supposedly written by Lady Seymour Worsley explained that the affair at Maidstone Bath had empowered her. It would be easy to suggest that Sir Richard’s allowing and aiding another man to view his wife in a state of undress rendered Lady Seymour Worsley merely an aesthetic object, stripping her of her independence and agency. Indeed, the pamphlet claimed that Sir Richard Worsley was “the *author*[sic] of thy shame”.<sup>56</sup> She also claimed that she did not act to hide herself for fear that her husband “would chide” her for doing so.<sup>57</sup> However, it appears that

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<sup>52</sup> *An Epistle from L-Y W-y to Sir R-d*, 1782, CUP/408/k/17, BL, pp.1–16.

<sup>53</sup> Messalina was the third wife of the roman emperor Claudius and her name was used in the eighteenth century as a descriptor for licentious women: June Schlueter, ‘An Eighteenth-Century manuscript of La Nouvelle Messaline’, *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, Vol. 105, No. 2, 2011, p.177.

<sup>54</sup> *An Epistle*, pp.2–3.

<sup>55</sup> *An Epistle*, p.2.

<sup>56</sup> *An Epistle*, p.7.

<sup>57</sup> *An Epistle*, p.8.

Lady Worsley believed the event to have been a positive one. Rather than feeling objectified by her husband, she felt admired and supported by her lover. Her declaration that “He [Bisset] thought me Venus ris’n from the flood”, and his obvious admiration of her appears to have made her feel empowered, particularly in contrast with her husband’s obvious lack of interest.<sup>58</sup> Not only did Lady Seymour Worsley feel empowered by the event at Maidstone Bath, but her act of writing about it for a public audience likely further emboldened her. Thomason considers the ways in which women’s writing could empower them within marriage, but her focus is largely on epistolary writing. Lady Seymour Worsley’s choice to write a pamphlet in justification of her actions was fairly unusual. A more common option for women who became embroiled in scandal was either to withdraw from society until the scandal lessened or to see if it would disappear as a topic of conversation.<sup>59</sup> Addressing it directly and owning to having felt enjoyment rather than regret about her indiscretions was an unlikely and a bold tactic. Wanko suggests that an “outspoken” woman was seen as being “at best immodest, at worst a whore.”<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, Lady Seymour Worsley clearly felt that her voice had worth and that her experiences could be best conveyed by herself.

If anything, it seems Lady Seymour Worsley encouraged the media portrayal of her notorious reputation as it acknowledged her agency. She suggested that “blushing Maids” should continue to “tell the doleful tale”, while she, the “well-experien’cd Dame / Enjoy[ed] the pleasure”.<sup>61</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley wanted the word of her actions spread, potentially so that people knew that she had played a significant part in the affair. Moreover, it appears she did not regret it, instead revelling in the pleasure that she had enjoyed. She referred to others who “In blubb’ring accents” and “with words ambiguous” told others “the false oaths by which their hearts were on, / [and] How much they struggl’d ere they were undone.”<sup>62</sup> Was Lady Seymour Worsley suggesting that women who claimed that they were not active or willing participants in their own affairs were lying? Because her own happiness had increased through her act of agency, she could not believe, it seems, any woman who claimed regret or that men

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<sup>58</sup> *An Epistle*, pp.8, 6.

<sup>59</sup> Greig, *The Beau Monde*, pp.199, 202.

<sup>60</sup> Cheryl Wanko, *Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Lubbock Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2003), p.75.

<sup>61</sup> *An Epistle*, p.3.

<sup>62</sup> *An Epistle*, p.3.

tricked them. Lady Seymour Worsley's pamphlet implied that she spurned a boring if virtuous life in favour of revelling in the freedom and increased happiness that she had gained.<sup>63</sup> This pamphlet suggested that Lady Seymour Worsley not only conducted her affairs on purpose and for her own pleasure but lacked regret for her actions. Further, this pamphlet illustrated some of the behaviours of women which inspired fears that came to light in the latter part of the eighteenth century. These fears will be discussed in more depth later in this section.

Pamphlets were a popular way of spreading news and opinions about the latest scandals of the day and the women of the New Female Coterie featured in many. Several of these pamphlets criticised these women for their behaviour, particularly by the testimonies from servants. A few pamphlets critiqued the behaviour of these women while simultaneously ignoring their agency in their affairs. Yet Lady Seymour Worsley rebutted her portrayal in the media by writing her own pamphlet which suggested that she not only was an active participant in her affair, but that she had no regrets about it. The pamphlets examined suggest that female agency was occasionally ignored but often vilified, with even Lady Seymour Worsley acknowledging that the portrayal of herself in the media showed her as lascivious and wanton.

### *The Rambler's Magazine and the Emphasis on Scandal*

Much has been made of the way in which magazines such as *The Rambler's Magazine*, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, *the Bon Ton Magazine* and *the Town and Country Magazine* often printed the proceedings of criminal conversation or separation trials.<sup>64</sup> There was an increasing number of periodicals available to the reading public, with new publications numbering 151 by the 1790s.<sup>65</sup> The large majority of these targeted men, and many had a fairly salacious or sensationalist tone to their writing. Although many scholars have utilised these magazine sources to analyse the way in which magazines transformed trial reporting into a titillating and intriguing sensation, only Morris has noted the way in which sensationalised reporting

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<sup>63</sup> *An Epistle*, pp.3, 6, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Lloyd, 'Amour in the Shrubbery', p.428; Andrew, 'Adultery à-la-Mode', p.9; Binhammer, 'The Sex Panic', p.425.

<sup>65</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, revised ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p.181.

in magazines portrayed women as having agency.<sup>66</sup> She focuses on the portrayal of sexual agency and how that could be threatening to male privilege. Few others have examined magazine reporting beyond those relating specifically to trials, and even fewer have examined the agency they attributed to the women and the impact that representation of agency may have had on their lives.

*The Rambler's Magazine* printed a number of articles about the women of the New Female Coterie, both collectively and in smaller groups. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the magazine presented many of these articles as real-life happenings, but they were more likely to be scenarios created by the magazine. They were often scandalous or titillating in some way, likely to appeal to their upper-class, libertine, male readers. However, the imagined articles still provide valuable insights into the way in which women who transgressed society's norms were perceived. The 'Cytherian Discussions', however, are more likely to have been based on real discussions of the New Female Coterie. If these discussions did have input from the New Female Coterie then it provides more evidence of the New Female Coterie attempting to craft their own image in the media, just as Lady Seymour Worsley did in her pamphlet. This significant act of agency likely illustrated a desire to take back some control over their representation in the media and consequently their reputations.

Overall, *The Rambler's Magazine* offers a number of insights into the New Female Coterie and how they dealt with their media portrayals. *The Rambler's Magazine* did not side-line these women nor attribute their agency to other people. Instead, the women were often portrayed as having significant amounts of agency, but, unsurprisingly, this was not portrayed as a positive thing. Instead, their agency made them seem sexually aggressive, overly assertive, unladylike and potentially even associated with prostitution.

### *The Demi-Monde*

*The Rambler's Magazine* hinted that the women of the New Female Coterie shared significant similarities with the demi-monde. The term 'demi-monde' was used to refer to courtesans and mistresses who existed at the edge of high society, not properly welcomed into that world, but co-existing with it through their relationships.

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<sup>66</sup> Marilyn Morris, 'Marital Litigation and English Tabloid Journalism: Crim. Con. in *The Bon Ton* (1791–1796)', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2005, p.50.

The elite considered women such as Mary Robinson, ‘Perdita’; Grace Dalrymple Eliot, ‘Dally the tall’; and Gertrude Mahon, ‘the Bird of Paradise’, to belong to the demi-monde because of their reputations as courtesans and mistresses, but also their origins in middling to gentry families. These women were all, or had been, married, and all engaged in affairs with high-profile men. Just like the New Female Coterie, they were frequently written about in newspapers and magazines, and were a familiar sight around the West End of London.<sup>67</sup> Women of high society would likely not have acknowledged the demi-mondaines, even though elite women likely knew them and encountered them in public social spaces such as the park, theatre or pleasure gardens.

*The Rambler’s Magazine*, along with some newspapers, made links between the behaviours of the New Female Coterie and the demi-monde, noting the assertiveness, wantonness and aggression of the former group. *The Rambler’s Magazine* printed a list ranking “some of the most fashionable votaries of Venus”, this being a euphemism for courtesans.<sup>68</sup> Lady Seymour Worsley, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor, and Mrs. Catherine Newton all made the list, placing third, fourth and ninth out of twenty-four respectively. Other significant names from the demi-monde—Mrs. Robinson, Mrs. Eliot, and Mrs. Mahon—made up numbers two, six, and ten. *The Rambler’s Magazine* was not alone in making these connections between women of the New Female Coterie and the demi-monde. One newspaper article suggested that “Harris’s List” would soon add Lady Henrietta Grosvenor.<sup>69</sup> *Harris’s List of Covent Garden Ladies* was a guide to prostitutes available in London, printed from the mid to late 1700s.<sup>70</sup> Media reports did not seem to care whether or not these women engaged in prostitution, instead continuing to draw connections between the two groups. Another news report noted Lady Henrietta Grosvenor’s presence in intermediary spaces such as the theatre. It suggested her tentative re-entry into polite society had

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<sup>67</sup> Martin J. Levy, ‘Robinson [née Darby], Mary [Perdita]’, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/23857; Martin J. Levy, ‘Elliott [Eliot; née Dalrymple], Grace [nicknamed Dally the Tall]’, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8675; Susan Gardner, ‘Mahon [née Tilson], Gertrude’, doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/64354; all accessed *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 15 November 2018.

<sup>68</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine; or, the annals of Gallantry, Glee, Pleasure, and the Bon ton; calculated for the Entertainment of the Polite World and to furnish the man of pleasure with a most delicious banquet of Amorous, Bacchanalian, Whimsical, Humorous, Theatrical and Polite entertainment*, April 1783, General Reference Collection, CUP/820/A12, BL, p.153.

<sup>69</sup> ‘News’, *Public Advertiser*, London, Thursday 2 January 1772, Issue 11599, accessed via 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> Century Burney Collection Newspapers.

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Campbell Denlinger, ‘The Garment and the Man: Masculine Desire in “Harris’s List of Covent-Garden Ladies”, 1764–1793’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2002, p.357.

gone as far as being seen “in the stage box” and “in the circle” at the theatre, but noted that she would be unlikely “to tread the chaste, hallowed ground of the Court”.<sup>71</sup> The presence of both the New Female Coterie and the demi-monde in these intermediary spaces is yet another parallel, as both groups existed on the edges of society; neither entirely in society, nor yet entirely excluded from it.

Furthermore, *The Rambler’s Magazine* shared gossip about these women which suggested that, like the demi-monde, they had significant sexual appetites. Lady Penelope Ligonier had become scandalous following her affair with Vittorio (or Victor) Alfieri, his subsequent duel with her husband and his refusal to marry her once he discovered she had had previous lovers. At the time, he noted that their affair had generated a lot of publicity, with newspapers reporting all the details about the affair, down to names and ages.<sup>72</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine* printed innuendoes about Lady Penelope Ligonier’s life and choices, even once she had re-married. “The quondam lady Ligonier, who so recently espoused one of the troops of the blues, is billeted at the Blue-boar st-Alban’s...—Her ladyship associates familiarly with the *privates*, but will not *condescend* to speak to any one *officer* of the the [sic] above corps – she is too fond of the *blues* in *buff*.”<sup>73</sup> Lady Penelope Ligonier was still portrayed as a sexually voracious woman, one who perhaps could not be confined to a single *private*. Instead, the magazine implied that she would once again violate her marriage vows with multiple men. The magazine attributed agency to Lady Penelope Ligonier, but the portrayal of this as sexual aggression was intended as criticism rather than praise.

*The Rambler’s Magazine* continued this theme of portraying these women as promiscuous and sexually aggressive in a series of letters, supposedly sent from Lady Henrietta Grosvenor to Lady Penelope Ligonier. The letters were supposedly sent in 1784, around the time when Lady Penelope Ligonier re-married. The letters expressed Lady Henrietta Grosvenor’s disbelief that Lady Penelope Ligonier would willingly shackle herself to a man again. “You seem to prefer a single dish to a feast,” she declaimed, “and to be an enemy to the charms of variety.”<sup>74</sup> Lady Henrietta Grosvenor implied that having only one man with whom to engage in sexual intercourse was a

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<sup>71</sup> ‘Business’, *Middlesex Journal or Chronicle of Liberty*, London, 9–11 January 1772, Issue 434, accessed via 17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers.

<sup>72</sup> Vittorio Alfieri, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Victor Alfieri*, (Henry Colburn: New Bond Street London, 1810), pp.230–231.

<sup>73</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1784, p.279. Italics are the magazine’s own.

<sup>74</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, October 1784, p.383.

great loss, and seemed to suggest that she herself slept with many more, and moreover, enjoyed having the freedom and independence to do so. By emphasising the supposed volume of men with whom Lady Henrietta Grosvenor had slept, the magazine may have been drawing a parallel between her and the demi-monde, who often switched protectors when a long-term liaison came to an end. Lady Henrietta Grosvenor told Lady Penelope Ligonier that her person, "is too charming to be the property of one man". Instead, she suggested that her "person", which, the audience would have understood, referred to her body, could "make thousands happy."<sup>75</sup> The magazine portrayed Lady Henrietta Grosvenor almost in the position of a brothel madam, enticing others to join her profession. Whilst the magazine did not link the New Female Coterie with the demi-monde explicitly, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor's invitation to Lady Penelope Ligonier, advising her to sleep with many men for their pleasure, may have encouraged readers to connect the Coterie and the demi-monde, whose profession was making men happy.

*The Rambler's Magazine* suggested that women such as Lady Henrietta Grosvenor existed on the outskirts of society, welcomed into some spaces, such as the theatre, whilst still excluded from others, such as the court. It also implied that Lady Henrietta Grosvenor and Lady Penelope Ligonier acted in sexually voracious and licentious ways. Whether or not the readers of *The Rambler's Magazine* considered the women of the New Female Coterie to be demi-mondaines is uncertain, but *The Rambler's Magazine* certainly made links and connections between the traits of the two groups.

*'Anecdote of Mrs. N--t-n and Lady W--s--y.'*

The sexual aggression and assertion of these women was further shown in a series of articles printed throughout 1783 which detailed a supposed interaction between Mrs. Catherine Newton and Lady Seymour Worsley. The series between the two women was almost certainly imagined, as their subterfuge and sexual escapades seem to have been designed to titillate and amuse the readers.<sup>76</sup> The series showed the women being faux-polite when they encountered each other, whilst they simultaneously attempted to outwit the other by sleeping with their lovers or servants.

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<sup>75</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, October 1784, p.383.

<sup>76</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, February 1783, p.61.

The series portrayed the two women as having remarkable control over their actions, and a deft mastery over the situations in which they found themselves. Nevertheless, this portrayal of agency highlighted the ways in which the series perceived their independence as subverting societal norms.

In one episode of the saga, Lady Seymour Worsley explained that her current paramour, Lord Deerhurst, was the best lover she had ever had. Hearing this, Mrs. Catherine Newton set up a plan through which she could trick the blind Lord Deerhurst into sleeping with her by convincing him that her voice was that of Lady Seymour Worsley. Mrs. Catherine Newton succeeded in her trick, even gaining a compliment on her improved performance. On one level, this interaction portrayed Mrs. Catherine Newton as competent, self-possessed and gaining control of not only the situation she found herself in but also Lord Deerhurst. However, *The Rambler's Magazine* portrayed Mrs. Newton not as an individual with agency, but instead as a primarily sexual object. After Lord Deerhurst slept with Mrs. Catherine Newton, believing that she was Lady Seymour Worsley, he commented that if he did not know better, he would assume that “he had actually been the first happy man who had loosed the vestal zone.”<sup>77</sup> This comment suggested that Mrs Catherine Newton’s sexual traits were more obvious than any others, and further implied that Mrs. Catherine Newton fulfilled the function of mistress, a woman understood to be available for the sexual enjoyment of her male protector. *The Rambler's Magazine* primarily portrayed Mrs Catherine Newton as a ‘whore’, a woman who was inherently sexual and the opposite of the ideal woman.<sup>78</sup> The ideal upper-class woman was increasingly styled as a wife and mother, a role that was surprisingly un-sexualised.<sup>79</sup> Mrs. Catherine Newton had at least one child at this point, with whom she had gotten pregnant after her separation from John Newton.<sup>80</sup> In spite of Mrs. Catherine Newton’s literal position as a mother, she is here represented as having an unnatural interest in sex, using unorthodox, and somewhat underhand methods for getting what she wanted.

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<sup>77</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, March 1783, p.101.

<sup>78</sup> Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p.207.

<sup>79</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, p.354.

<sup>80</sup> It is unclear where this child spent his childhood, as there is little record of him until he is older. Although fathers had rights over their children when it came to marital separations, John Newton likely took no interest in this illegitimate offspring, though they shared a name, as he later disinherited John Newton Jr: Papers relating to John Newton Junior, Son of Catherine nee Seymour (disowned as bastard by John Newton Senior), 1804–1813, Papers of the Lane Family of Kings Bromley, D357/K/5/1, SCRO.



In another episode of the series, Lady Seymour Worsley pursued Mrs. Catherine Newton's manservant after she revealed that the servant was more than capable in bed. Having found the manservant, Lady Seymour Worsley "with dexterity threw him upon his back on the sofa[sic], attacked, and like another St. George, subdued the dragon."<sup>81</sup> The connection here with St George, the patron saint of England and a powerfully masculine figure, indicated that Lady Seymour Worsley's agency made her a masculine figure herself. The magazine suggested that by becoming more aligned with a masculine character she had lost her claim to femininity through her actions and choices. Her agency and assertion meant that society no longer saw her as lady-like.

This saga continued the theme of female masculinity into the last episode. First, Lady Seymour Worsley paid off the manservant for his services. Outwardly, at least, this was for his role as a valet, but, in fact, this payment represented a reversal of the traditional roles enacted by men and women in brothels, where the man traditionally paid for the pleasure of having sex.<sup>82</sup> The masculine image was further compounded when the two women uncovered each other's treachery, and they openly fought one another, not only throwing their opponent's caps into the fire, but landing a few good punches, enough to give each two black eyes a piece. These "female gladiators" as the magazine described them, needed to be physically separated to stop the fighting.<sup>83</sup> Although boxing had become a favourite pastime of men of the aristocracy, women who fought were considered extremely ill-bred. These women were not only portrayed as engaging in a male pastime, but as doing it poorly. They made themselves look ridiculous as the fight, although a masculine activity, became coded as female and petty through their tossing of caps into the fire. The series suggested that in utilising their agency to trick and to fight others, they lost their claim to femininity, but also were not convincing in their use of these male traits. They existed in an almost limbo state between the genders. *The Rambler's Magazine* implied that in crossing societal gender and moral boundaries, the women were no longer either appropriately feminine, but nor could they be successfully masculine.

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<sup>81</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, February 1783, p.61.

<sup>82</sup> Traditionally men were helped to dress by valets or footmen while women were helped by ladies' maids or chamber maids: Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp.136, 139, 140, 143, 158.

<sup>83</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, March 1783, p.102

*The Rambler's Magazine* thus portrayed women using their agency as a negative thing. Throughout their interactions both women were confident, assertive and in control of the situations in which they found themselves. However, this series did not praise these women for these qualities; instead it painted them as sexually aggressive and as attempting to cross gender boundaries in order to get what they wanted. These women were neither sedate nor demure, and the magazine series suggested that it was their agency which subverted the ideals of femininity and made them less like ladies. *The Rambler's Magazine*, or the contributor of this series at least, seems to have believed that these women sacrificed their femininity to gain their freedom.

*'The 'NEW TOASTS', Approved of by the New Female Coterie'*

'The Toasts of the New Female Coterie', "intended to be given after the Ode on New year's Day, 1783", consisted of twelve short and pithy statements, many of which were euphemistic.<sup>84</sup> Much like the 'Court of Scandal' discussion there is no way to tell whether these toasts were truly by the New Female Coterie or not. Likely they were not written by the Coterie, as the title suggested that the group merely "approved" of the toasts.<sup>85</sup> The members of the New Female Coterie supposedly endorsed the issues and values proposed in these toasts. These included acknowledgements of their own sexuality, bold female behaviour, and apparent support of prostitution.

The interest in sex shown by these women is one of the themes continued in these toasts. These toasts expressed this through a number of double entendres. Toast number three celebrated "Long members and short parliaments."<sup>86</sup> It was certainly not a celebration of the work done by the members of parliament; instead it supported men whose bodies, it implied, were made to pleasure women, and shorter parliaments which would presumably allow for more leisure time. As with the earlier saga between Lady Seymour Worsley and Mrs Catherine Newton, this toast suggested a reversal of the way in which women and men normally interacted. Here, the women discussed men's bodies and their ability to please them instead of the opposite. Similarly, the twelfth toast asked that "the Printer of the Rambler's Magazine give satisfaction to the

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<sup>84</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, January 1783, p.34.

<sup>85</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, January 1783, p.34.

<sup>86</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, January 1783, p.34.

ladies” which one could assume was sexual satisfaction, though whether this was the wish of the New Female Coterie or the printer himself is not made clear.<sup>87</sup>

The toasts also suggested that the women celebrated their ability to do what they wanted, including prostitution. The first toast read “May he never have an empty purse who spends freely on the ladies”, suggesting that the New Female Coterie encouraged men to spend their money “freely” on prostitutes and mistresses.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, the second toast “As you like it” could be read as a suggestion that the men who are freely spending can have things to their own satisfaction if they are willing to pay for it. Alternatively, it could be understood to mean that these women should do things to suit themselves, rather than others. Either way, it still suggested that the New Female Coterie were not acting in a manner of which upper-class society would have approved. Likewise, toast number seven hinted that women should not fear the consequences of their actions. It said, “She who will not fear what man can do unto her” and implied that women should act more freely, rather than acting within the rules of a patriarchal society. It could be argued that this, combined with the first two toasts of the article, presented women’s agency and industry as a very selfish thing; the women cared only for themselves and not about their impact on other people.

Like the ‘Anecdote of Mrs. N—t—n and Lady W—s—y’, ‘the Toasts of the New Female Coterie’ portrayed the agency of the New Female Coterie as a negative thing. While these toasts are very heavily couched in innuendo, they can still be decoded. In spite of their light hearted and witty tone, these toasts point to real anxieties. The New Female Coterie’s apparent lack of care about the consequences that stemmed from their choices and their supposed endorsement of prostitution are examples of behaviours of women that many in genteel society regarded with fear.

### *The Discussions of the New Female Coterie*

*The Rambler’s Magazine* printed two different discussions which were supposedly held by the New Female Coterie throughout 1783. The magazine used these discussions to highlight some of the anxieties about women that arose at about this time. 1783 was the year in which Britain lost the American War, increasing fears of the loss of hierarchy, and in which, as the background section to this thesis explained,

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<sup>87</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, January 1783, p.34.

<sup>88</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, January 1783, p.34.

women's bodies, clothing and choices had become politicised.<sup>89</sup> Another indication that this was the beginning of a shift in the way in which women were perceived is, according to Lewis that "the 1784 Westminster campaign was the first election in British history in which the position of women became a contentious political issue."<sup>90</sup> Although the New Female Coterie were in no way responsible for this shift, their choices and images, as depicted in *The Rambler's Magazine*, reflect contemporary anxieties about women's morality, sexuality and opinions.

I suggest that these anxieties about women signal the beginning of what some historians have called the 'panic' of the 1790s. Historians often cite the French Revolution as the origin for these fears about women—their behaviour and morals—and the threat that they posed to the state of the nation.<sup>91</sup> However, there is evidence to suggest that these anxieties existed earlier, and that the French Revolution exacerbated these fears, rather than creating them. The writings of *The Rambler's Magazine*, particularly the debates and discussions concerning the New Female Coterie, certainly show evidence of fears about what women did and how this behaviour subverted societal norms regarding female behaviour.

The two discussions printed in *The Rambler's Magazine* in 1783 are subtly different but share a common theme of anxieties about women. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, it is likely that the longer debate, called 'Cytherian Discussions', was a more accurate report of a discussion held amongst the women of the New Female Coterie.<sup>92</sup> It tackled the question "How far is the censure, on those members of this assembly, who have distinguished themselves in the annals of gallantry, reasonable and just?"<sup>93</sup> In other words, these women were debating whether their censure for adultery was justified. The shorter of the two discussions was called

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<sup>89</sup> Kate Haulman, *Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), pp.123–124, 126, 133, 144; Holger Hoock, *Scars of Independence: America's Violent Birth*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2017), pp.121, 307.

<sup>90</sup> Judith S. Lewis, '1784 and All That: Aristocratic Women and Electoral Politics', in Vickery, Amanda (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p.92.

<sup>91</sup> Andrew, 'Adultery à-la-Mode', p.17; Binhammer, 'The Sex Panic', p.410; Gillian Russell, 'Faro's Daughters': Female Gamesters, Politics, and the Discourse of Finance in 1790s Britain', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2000, pp.481–482; Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England, 1530–1987*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.277.

<sup>92</sup> Cytherean (or Cytherian) originates from the Greek name of Aphrodite or Venus, and in this time period was used primarily to mean "a votaress of Venus; a prostitute attached to a heathen temple in India; also generally.": "Cytherean, *adj.* and *n.*", *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/46725?redirectedFrom=Cytherean#eid](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46725?redirectedFrom=Cytherean#eid), accessed 8 November 2018.

<sup>93</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, July 1783 p.248.

“The Court of Scandal; or the New Female Coterie” and was likely an imagined conversation between the women of the New Female Coterie in which they shared anecdotes of their own euphemistically-phrased sexual adventures and those of others. The former, as a more authentic discussion, highlighted what these anxieties about women were and why they existed, whilst the latter amplified these fears through the licentious, if imagined, talk.

### *The ‘Cytherian Discussions’*

The ‘Cytherian Discussions’ were conducted between Mrs. Catherine Newton, Mrs. W-----s—a woman who was likely meant to stand for Lady Seymour Worsley—and another, unidentified lady.<sup>94</sup> The speakers took turns to talk, giving speeches that touched on their own experience with adultery and censure, and drew broader connections. The first speaker Mrs. W-----s—Lady Seymour Worsley—began the argument by suggesting that women were within their rights to seek “sensual amours” elsewhere when their husbands were “incapable of conjugal consummation”.<sup>95</sup> She continued her argument by challenging the idea that society allowed men to engage in adultery without censure while women paid the ultimate price. The second speaker, Mrs. Newton, argued that if adultery for both men and women should be forgiven, then there should be no difference between having an affair with one person multiple times, or sleeping with many people only one time.<sup>96</sup> The un-named Lady rose to rebut both of these arguments by saying that adultery was worthy of censure, but adultery should be equally harshly judged whether committed by a man or a woman. She further stated that adultery was a spreading infection—one spouse engaging in an affair encouraged the other to commit adultery with someone else’s spouse and so on.<sup>97</sup> The first speaker rose again to rebut the previous points, claiming that adultery could be necessary in a marriage as a marriage was ordained for the procreation of children, so “if [their] husbands are not competent to the purpose for which marriage were instituted, there can be no sin in receiving the effectual embrace of others”.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> The Mrs W-----s, who speaks first, is potentially a code for Lady Seymour Worsley as she raises some points about her marriage which match facts known about Lady Seymour Worsley’s, for example the fact that she remained a virgin for three months following her marriage.

<sup>95</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, pp.248–249.

<sup>96</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, August 1783, p.293.

<sup>97</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, August 1783, pp.293–294.

<sup>98</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, August 1783, p.294.

Both the first and the third speaker advocated for greater gender equality in the consequences stemming from adultery, albeit with opposing justifications. Mrs. W----s, the first speaker, suggested that it was unreasonable for society to censure women for their adulteries but not men, when both swore the same marriage oaths to “forsake all others”.<sup>99</sup> She suggested then that adultery should not receive the censure it did, and instead that both men and women “having the same passions... and possessing the means, are equally right in the gratification of them.”<sup>100</sup> The third, un-named, speaker also suggested that the consequences of adultery should be equal between the different genders, but suggested that, rather than having no consequences for either gender, the consequences of adultery should rest equally on both men and women. Neither of the options the women gave here would have reassured those who held power, had they read this debate. The idea of allowing women to commit adulteries without the censure that accompanied the threat of being caught challenged societal norms that suggested that women should be, or at least appear to be, chaste. However, equally the suggestion that men should receive harsher consequences for their adulteries would not have found favour. An accepted aspect of eighteenth-century society was the inequality between expectations of the genders. Male libertinism was, as discussed in the background section, an expected feature of high society, one which proved masculinity. Indeed, parliament voted down many adultery bills throughout the latter quarter of the eighteenth century precisely because they attempted to punish the men involved with adulteries as well as imposing severe consequences for the women.<sup>101</sup>

Mrs. Newton’s speech exemplified the fears aroused by the suggestion that censure for adultery was unjust for women. She suggested that if women, “having the same passions as men, [were] equally right in the gratification of them” then it should be equally as acceptable to take multiple lovers.<sup>102</sup> She argued that there should be no real distinction between “a woman who [received] that pleasure from many men — than [her] who [repeated] it frequently with one”.<sup>103</sup> This statement suggested that women who had committed adultery would be more likely to do so again. Mrs. Newton’s speech appeared to encourage increasingly licentious behaviour from these upper-class women, who were supposed to follow strict social codes. It seemed to

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<sup>99</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.249.

<sup>100</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.249.

<sup>101</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, p.77.

<sup>102</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, August 1783, p.292.

<sup>103</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, August 1783, p.292.

argue for a more relaxed code of behaviour for women, perhaps one more akin to that of upper-class men, with their libertine expectations. Mrs Newton's speech suggested that she wanted to upset the gender hierarchy.

Mrs. W-----ms proposed that adultery for the purposes of children should be justified. This speech may have amplified fears of the consequences associated with increased female adultery. Her reasoning focused on the fact that the ostensible reason for marriage was the procreation of children. Therefore, if a women's husband was incapable of doing his husbandly duty, a wife should find another way to become pregnant so that her husband's "name may not be rooted out of the land of the living."<sup>104</sup> Although Mrs. W-----ms framed adultery as an act to preserve her husband's line, it may have instead increased fears about the desecration of that lineage. One of the reasons adultery by men was more widely accepted than adultery by woman was that women's affairs threatened the legitimate inheritance of titles, lands or wealth through illegitimate pregnancies. An unspoken code suggested that women should produce a legitimate heir before they began to take lovers. However, this suggestion by Mrs. W-----ms instead called for women knowingly to threaten legitimate patrilineal descent. Her intention was supposedly to benefit the family and yet her attempt to give her husband's estate to another man's child, may have been regarded by readers as undermining patriarchal society which was buttressed by the law of primogeniture.

The 'Cytherian Discussions' suggested that the New Female Coterie equated sexual fulfilment with happiness. Mrs. W-----s suggested that as divorced or separated women "We [women] certainly then have the same right to provide and consult for our happiness, which they [men] had to promote theirs."<sup>105</sup> Traditionally, upper-class wives committed the majority of their attention towards their husbands and their career, their family, or the maintenance of the household. Women engaged in domiciliary sociability, but often social bonds were not only of benefit to the woman's own contentment but also were advantageous to their families by creating political connections for their husbands or promoting marriages for their children. Mrs. W-----s proposed that if her husband could not fulfil his end of their marriage vows thereby sacrificing her "chief earthly happiness" then she deserved to prioritise her own

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<sup>104</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, August 1783, p.293.

<sup>105</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, July 1783, p.249.

happiness by finding sexual fulfilment with another.<sup>106</sup> This is a view of female happiness and fulfilment that was less common in the eighteenth century, particularly as the end of the century drew nigh, and the ideal woman became one who was wholly consumed by her maternal duty. Women who sought happiness through their sexual encounters transgressed the boundaries of what was appropriate, perhaps to an even greater degree than earlier in the century.

Much as did Lady Seymour Worsley with her pamphlet, the New Female Coterie seemed to have used *The Rambler's Magazine* as a platform to share their own views. The group used the discussions to justify their own actions and discuss the alteration of wider societal norms. In standing up for themselves and explaining their way of thinking they attempted to take some part in the creation of their portrayal in the media. However, these discussions should be treated with caution. These articles may not be the honest discussions of the New Female Coterie. Even if these discussions did occur, it is possible that the author twisted the words in order to appeal further to the magazine's readership, who, judging from the contents of the magazine in general, were not averse to reading scandalous or titillating articles. Without further information on Thomas Robertson, the alleged author of the piece, it is difficult to ascertain whether his reporting was accurate. It is clear in this discussion that the agency of these women is not ignored; instead the discussions portray these women as rational, if endorsing views that were not generally accepted. Overall, the 'Cytherian Discussions' implied that the women of the New Female Coterie endorsed adultery and prioritised their own passions and happiness over the moral and social stability of the nation. The magazine's readership would have found these ideas confronting and frightening.

### *The 'Court of Scandal'*

Unlike the 'Cytherian Discussions', the article called 'The Court of Scandal; or the New Female Coterie' was unlikely to have had input from the women of the New Female Coterie and therefore illuminates contemporary anxieties about women, particularly divorced or separated women. As the women of the New Female Coterie were likely not involved in this discussion, the report provides evidence not of how these women described themselves but instead of the way the magazine portrayed

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<sup>106</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, July 1783, p.249.



them to others. Even the name used— ‘the Court of Scandal’—suggested that *The Rambler’s Magazine’s* focus was on providing an entertaining and perhaps alarming look at women who had subverted societal norms. The article seemed to suggest that the very nature of their sociability was a danger—by meeting in a brothel, engaging in unladylike talk and celebrating their collectivity, they presented a threat to societal norms. The discussion focused on the way the exchange of gossip could be lewd and unladylike. In this shorter discussion, the focus was on sex, although it was usually referred to by a variety of euphemisms. This discussion seems to have been crafted to suggest to readers that the sexual enjoyment, sexual control, class transgressions and crudity shown by these women were a danger to society.

‘The Court of Scandal’ portrayed the women of the New Female Coterie, and the women whom they discussed, as enjoying and actively seeking out sexual relationships. Mrs. Newton acknowledged that Thomas the coachman, with whom she was known to have had an affair, was a very satisfactory lover by saying that “he drove well”.<sup>107</sup> Lady Harrington agreed that she could “dwell upon the agreeable intercourse [she] afterwards had with [her] man Thomas” suggesting that she remembered her lovers and her sexual encounters with pleasure. Lady Harrington even compared her lovers, suggesting that Thomas, whom she had already referenced, “beat Colonel C---s himself”.<sup>108</sup> Her words suggested that she sought out sexual engagements that would bring her more pleasure than her last. Not only did this potentially amplify anxieties about class, where a servant beats out someone from the gentry or aristocracy, but, like other aspects of these debates, it underlined female licentiousness. There were further suggestions that these women sought out beneficial sexual encounters for themselves. They discussed a “Lady Milkpot”, who “has been for some weeks in search of another spout that will fit her to a nicety.”<sup>109</sup> This euphemism seemed to suggest that the women of the New Female Coterie and other women that they knew actively desired their sexual encounters. Lady Milkpot seemed to have been successful in her search as Lady Derby described how Lady Milkpot “gained her *end*, for she was always *craving*”.<sup>110</sup> It implied that these women not only sought out sexual encounters, but unapologetically enjoyed them. Moreover, the article suggests this was not a one-off

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<sup>107</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.270.

<sup>108</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.270.

<sup>109</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.270.

<sup>110</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.270.

scenario; instead the discussion painted her as sexually voracious. Not only was this not the first “spout” that Lady Milkpot was in search of, but she wanted one that would suit her, suggesting that she had encountered some which had not. Not only did she crave these scenarios, she was “always” craving.

The crudity of the women’s talk and the constant use of sexual euphemism in the report may also have suggested to readers that these women were talking and acting in a manner that did not fit traditional standards of upper-class female behaviour. Although they protected the identities of the upper-class men whom they discussed and referred to sexual acts and bodies in veiled terms, there was little doubt that this discussion was what we might now term ‘locker room talk’. Much was made of men having “good spouts” and being “good spouters”, with little attention given to any qualities that did not pertain to the sexual. This was a manner of speaking usually reserved for men in their discussions about women whom they took as lovers or wished to take as lovers. *Harris’s List of Covent-Garden Ladies*, for example, listed prostitutes of all prices available in London, describing them by their beauty and sexual talents.<sup>111</sup> In some ways, this conversation replicated and reversed the contents of *Harris’s List*, by discussing men only for their looks (at one point Lady Worsley worried that “Baron Oakham’s wig will fall off and shew his bald pate”) and their sexual abilities.<sup>112</sup>

This discussion also described the way these women took control of their sexual encounters in an inversion of traditional gender roles. Eighteenth-century male libertinism dictated that men should act as the seducers and were supposed to be the ones who relentlessly pursued women. Women were supposed to put up at least a token resistance in the name of their virtue, but they were not traditionally expected to act as the aggressors in sexual encounters.<sup>113</sup> However, the women of the New Female Coterie discussed other women who acted in sexually aggressive and assertive ways. Mrs. Newton shared the tale of “Miss Penelope Prue” who took “a firm resolution to be *ravished*”.<sup>114</sup> Miss Penelope Prue was not content to wait and instead “resolved to turn ravisher herself, and accordingly found the way to William the footboy.”<sup>115</sup> Mrs. Newton’s tale of Penelope Prue implied that women who enjoyed sex were more likely

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<sup>111</sup> Campbell Denlinger, ‘The Garment and the Man’, p.358.

<sup>112</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.271.

<sup>113</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, pp.142, 145.

<sup>114</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.271.

<sup>115</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.271.

to subvert their expected gender role in order to gain their own satisfaction. As England was a patriarchal society which rested solely on men having control not only in public institutions but also in their homes and interactions with others, this control taken by women may have been unsettling to the magazine's male readership.

This discussion further portrayed these women as acting more like men when it came to sex by showing them engaging in more transactional sexual encounters. Lady Harrington tells of Lady Milkpot's interaction with an unnamed man. She said, "He in one of his nocturnal excursions meeting with her, after a long *tete-a-tete* they agreed to rivet; and went to the rivetter's in *Long Acre*, and another *tete-a-tete* and cul-a-cul ensued."<sup>116</sup> Not only did they engage in "cul-a-cul", the two lovers first sat down and had a lengthy discussion, and only after this did they agree to "rivet".<sup>117</sup> This was not a woman who had been overtaken by her passion or taken in by a man's seduction, as society believed to be the common-place manner for women who engaged in extra-marital sex. Moreover, once they agreed to "rivet", they retire to a specifically designated "rivetter's", likely an allusion to a brothel.<sup>118</sup> This suggestion is further supported by the fact that 'Long Acre' was a street in Covent Garden, an area which was home to theatres and brothels, and was well known as a centre for prostitution.<sup>119</sup> This suggested that the sexual encounters discussed without disapprobation by these women were much more transactional than expected of women's sexual encounters. Whilst sexual encounters for men were recognised to often be transactional because of the prevalence of mistresses, prostitutes, and brothels, women's inappropriate sexual encounters were explained as women being either swept away by passion, or, more likely, as being seduced by men's forceful natures. Women were not expected coolly to enter into sexual relations after discussing them; if they did, society recognised them as prostitutes.

The gossip exchanged by these women may also have inspired fears about inter-class encounters. Mrs. Newton tells a story about "Miss Lovecock" who remained a virgin until she was forty-five and "past the danger of child-bearing". At that point she "hired a butler who knew how to turn his key; [and] a servant in livery occasionally

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<sup>116</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, July 1783, p.270–271.

<sup>117</sup> Cul can be translated as 'bum', 'ass', or 'sex': 'Cul', *Collins French to English Dictionary*, [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/cul](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/french-english/cul), accessed 11 January 2019; *The Rambler's Magazine*, July 1783, p.271.

<sup>118</sup> *The Rambler's Magazine*, July 1783, p.271.

<sup>119</sup> Campbell Denlinger, 'The Garment and the Man', pp.362, 371.

supplied his place, entirely to her satisfaction, and they bid defiance to scandal and population.”<sup>120</sup> These fears about the New Female Coterie were not entirely unfounded. Lady Penelope Ligonier and Mrs. Catherine Newton had crossed class boundaries by engaging in affairs with their servants. The press had denigrated Mrs. Catherine Newton for her sexual intercourse with both her coachman and her footman, whilst Lady Penelope Ligonier was reported to have had an affair with her footman before that with Vittorio Alfieri. These relationships were the subject of much speculation in magazines and pamphlets. Trial pamphlets of Mrs. Catherine Newton’s trial, as discussed above, reported specifically on her presence in areas that were unsuitable for her status. Her presence in these ‘servant’ areas made her adulteries even more obvious to those around her. *The Rambler’s Magazine* also made a lot of Lady Penelope Ligonier’s known interactions with those of a lower class, particularly through their ‘Amorous and Bon Ton intelligence’ section, the magazine’s version of gossip pages. In May 1783 the magazine recognised her as a “recluse”, but still made note of her connection “near Wakefield” with “a hatter”, in an innuendo-laden paragraph.<sup>121</sup> The next year, it noted her presence in Northampton, and her continued “mixing... with the yeomanry”.<sup>122</sup> This constant reference to Lady Penelope Ligonier’s connection with those of a lower status revealed the existence of real fears about the place of servants and the lower class along with the susceptibility of upper-class women.<sup>123</sup> These inter-class connections between women of the upper class and their servants may have suggested that women with salacious appetites could overturn the fragile class hierarchy.

This article, it could be argued, suggested that these women demeaned themselves through their knowledge of and interest in sex. The introduction to the article stated that the New Female Coterie exemplified “some of the GREATEST, and Smallest female characters, UNCHARACTERISTIC in this nation.”<sup>124</sup> This article made clear that it discussed women who came from the upper echelon of society—the “Greatest” in society, —while implying that they were petty or focused on inconsequential matters—the “Smallest” women of society.<sup>125</sup> It also pointed out that

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<sup>120</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.271.

<sup>121</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, May 1783, p.198.

<sup>122</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, April 1784, p.158.

<sup>123</sup> Gillian Russell, “‘Keeping Place’: Servants, Theater and Sociability in mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain”, *The Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2001, pp.23.

<sup>124</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.270.

<sup>125</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.270.

these women did not act in the manner prescribed for them. Most of these women retained their titles as they were separated rather than divorced, but this discussion implied that while their titles made them “great”, their characters diminished their value as women. The magazine’s presentation of the fact that they no longer acted appropriately for their rank is further supported by the description of these women as “uncharacteristic in this nation.”<sup>126</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, it seems, suggested that by their actions the New Female Coterie had disgraced their ranks, and their continued and enthusiastic talk about men, sex, and adultery made them unfit still to belong, however nominally, to upper-class fashionable society.

The conclusion to the ‘Court of Scandal’ indicated that *The Rambler’s Magazine* perceived the behaviour of these women to be a threat to societal norms. Following the final remarks by Mrs. Newton in the discussion, “A general laugh ensued, which was presently interrupted by the cry of Fire! - Fire! – Fire! – which like most incendiaries destroyed the harmony of society and dispersed the court.”<sup>127</sup> This concluding sentence is very revealing about contemporary fears. It suggested that these women were “incendiaries” who had the potential to “[destroy] the harmony of society.”<sup>128</sup> Similarly, the identification of these women as a court shows that *The Rambler’s Magazine* understood the collectivity of these women as a danger. This concluding sentence reads almost like a warning. The magazine may have been designed in part to amuse, but it also revealed very real fears about the way in which women who ignored social conventions regarding sex, gender, behaviour and morality had the potential to undermine the stability of society. That the New Female Coterie had engaged in extra-marital affairs and transgressed social norms was well known. The article emphasised their crude discussions and overt interest in sex, their masculine attitudes towards sexual encounters and their inter-class connections. The ‘Court of Scandal’ suggested in its subheading and its conclusion that these factors made these women a disgrace to their rank but also, by likening them to “incendiaries”, that their actions threatened the very stability of the nation.

*The Rambler’s Magazine* did not try to silence the voices of the New Female Coterie, as some other media outputs did. Nor did the magazine celebrate the agency of these women. Instead, it portrayed the independence and activity of the women of

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<sup>126</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.270.

<sup>127</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.271.

<sup>128</sup> *The Rambler’s Magazine*, July 1783, p.271.

the Coterie as a negative thing which, by subverting the traditional roles of women, could prove a danger not only to themselves, but to wider English society. By highlighting these anxieties, *The Rambler's Magazine* may have contributed to the development of the moral panic which, historians have argued, reached its apex in the 1790s but which, this thesis suggests, can be traced to an earlier period.

## Conclusion

Satirical prints, pamphlets and *The Rambler's Magazine* all focused a lot of attention on the women of the New Female Coterie. Satirical prints often ignored the agency of these women, or, if they acknowledged it, portrayed the women as sexually licentious. Pamphlets often side-lined women in their portrayals, in spite of the fact that reports from pamphlet media could have significant effects on the women's lives. However, Lady Seymour Worsley utilised pamphlets as a form of agency, in order to tell a different side of the story and justify her behaviour. *The Rambler's Magazine*, unlike a majority of prints or pamphlets, did not ignore the agency of these women, instead highlighting it to show the ways in which these women transgressed moral, sexual, and gender boundaries. The magazine provides evidence for these women's views about adultery and censure, and their refusal to be silenced. It further suggested that the collectivity of these women was something to be feared, as it encouraged their choices and discussions. These magazine articles provide evidence of contemporary anxieties about women's unruly behaviour which, it was believed, threatened the stability of the nation.

## Conclusion

Lady Caroline Harrington, Lady Seymour Worsley, Lady Elizabeth Derby, Lady Penelope Ligonier, Lady Henrietta Grosvenor and the Honourable Mrs. Catherine Newton were all considered to be scandalous women of their day. Because of their role as scandalous, separated or divorced wives, they have been side-lined from the main historical narrative of the eighteenth century. Historians have barely examined the women of the New Female Coterie. Where these women are discussed, contemporary views of their scandals have been largely accepted, and, excepting Rubenhold's biography of Lady Seymour Worsley, there have been few re-evaluations of them. Studying the New Female Coterie expands our understanding of the ways in which women of the upper class could exercise their agency to escape their marriages and lead independent lives afterwards. This study has also revealed the ways in which the media portrayed that agency, either side-lining it or using it to critique their behaviours, emphasising the sexual aggression of the women, their transgressions of gender roles, and their loose morality. This portrayal reflected anxieties about women's behaviour and the threat it supposedly posed to the stability of the nation.

This work is the first to examine the New Female Coterie in detail as individuals and as a collective. It has considered what this group may have represented to the women who belonged to it, and to their contemporaries. The importance of social bonds to women of the upper class has been well documented by historians; this thesis has explored the ways in which this sociability was important to those on the fringes of high society, who had lost many former friends and family members. By utilising aspects of both domiciliary and associational forms of sociability—such as tea and gossip, and focused discussion and potentially gambling—the New Female Coterie both empowered themselves and supported each other. However, their engagement with both forms of sociability also signalled a transgression of traditional ideas of male and female sociability. This transgression was one of the reasons that *The Rambler's Magazine* was so fearful of their collectivity and the behaviour that it might encourage.

This study has suggested that women had independent agency, although the actions of their husbands, families, or the media could still constrain this agency. Often, examinations of upper-class women of this period look at the ways in which

women could work within the systems that bound their society, such as political agency within known familial and social spheres, or the way in which women might exercise agency within marriage.<sup>1</sup> This thesis builds on this work by exploring the ways in which women could lead interesting and fulfilling lives even outside of those traditional upper-class structures. Throughout this thesis there has been a consideration of how women could work with or subvert the systems of hierarchy, power, and expectation that underpinned upper-class society. This study has examined the ways in which women could act in order to escape marriages in which they were unhappy, even though proceedings to end a marriage were not designed for their benefit.

Women who encountered scandal have often been forgotten or portrayed only for the scandals with which they dealt. Scandalous women can be difficult to trace through source material, as often descendants destroyed or censored documents thought to be damaging to individual or family reputations. By examining a combination of legal, personal and media sources, this thesis presents a more well-rounded portrait of these women and their lives. These women have been represented as ruined, scandalous or as victims. This thesis has shown that the women of the New Female Coterie made choices and took action in the hope of a happier life.

This thesis has utilised under-examined sources to unpack media portrayals of the New Female Coterie and their agency. It has suggested that contemporary pamphlets, satirical prints and articles from *The Rambler's Magazine* largely either ignored female agency, critiqued female behaviour or presented their agency as a threat to the hierarchical systems that underpinned English society. These media sources portrayed female agency as a danger to upper-class society because it worked to subvert the class- and gender-based hierarchies and social norms that governed the ways in which people were expected to behave.

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Chalus, "'To Serve my Friends': Women and Political Patronage in Eighteenth-Century England", in Vickery, Amanda (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp.57–89; Sarah Richardson, "'Well-neighbour'd Houses': The Political Networks of Elite Women, 1780–1860" in Kathryn Gleadle and Sarah Richardson (eds.), *Women in British Politics, 1760–1860: The Power of the Petticoat*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000), pp.56–73; Judith S. Lewis, *Sacred to Female Patriotism: Gender, Class, and Politics in Late Georgian Britain*, (London: Routledge, 2003); Laura E. Thomason, *The Matrimonial Trap: Eighteenth-Century Women Writers Redefine Marriage*, (Maryland: Bucknell University Press, 2014).



This thesis has further suggested that articles printed in *The Rambler's Magazine* indicate that the panics identified by historians as reaching a climax in the 1790s were rooted in a slightly earlier period. The French Revolution is often cited as the starting point for the moral, sex, and gender panics that other historians have identified. However, anxieties about women and their behaviours existed earlier. Certainly by 1783, when the American Revolution ended and *The Rambler's Magazine* printed the articles about the New Female Coterie. Historians have not utilised these media sources before as evidence of the panics of the late eighteenth century. *The Rambler's Magazine* showcased the New Female Coterie to show that there was reason to be worried about the possibility that increased female agency would prove dangerous to society. Indeed, the magazine suggested that the women of the New Female Coterie set a dangerous precedent through their sexual aggression, transgression of class and gender roles, and their open sexuality.

In the final two decades of the eighteenth century, the anxieties about women, their behaviour, and the safety of the nation increased. These fears lead to a repression of women's freedoms. Britain still felt the very real consequences of the French Revolution as the British were at war with France from 1803 to 1815. A greater number of people were prosecuted for sedition, debating societies had to be licensed, and women's behaviour came to be increasingly policed in polite society.<sup>2</sup> Parliament debated bills to criminalise adultery in some form in 1771, 1779, 1800, 1809 and 1856 suggesting that adultery had "become a dangerous and scandalous evil."<sup>3</sup> The decade of the 1790s led to stricter social and moral codes, and a repression of women and their sexual and social behaviours.

By the end of the eighteenth century, perceptions of gender roles and sex had shifted. Previously, society had expected women to be active and assertive in sexual matters; now, women's passivity was required. Dabhoiwala refers to this as the "desexualisation of women", where "sexual ignorance and passivity came increasingly to be valued as essential components of respectable femininity and heterosexual

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<sup>2</sup> Clive Emsley, 'An Aspect of Pitt's 'Terror': Prosecutions for Sedition during the 1790s', *Social History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1981, pp.155–156; Peter Clark, Peter, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp.119–120.

<sup>3</sup> Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p.77; Baron William Eden Auckland, *Substance of the speeches of Lord Auckland, in the House of Lords, May 16<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>d</sup>, 1800; in support of the bill for the punishment and more effectual prevention of the crime of adultery*, (Piccadilly: Printed for J. Wright, 1800), CW104249804, accessed via Eighteenth-Century Collections Online, p.14.

love.”<sup>4</sup> He adds that this was not merely a male ideal as “most women themselves internalised it, and policed it in others.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the new model for the ideal woman now became that of the mother, as maternal instincts associated with tenderness and mildness, came to be expected of women. Sexual double standards were now more marked, as women were held to an even higher standard of morality and behaviour than those of the eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

The emergence in the early nineteenth century of a strong strain of Christian evangelicalism assisted the cementing of a backlash against women’s independence and agency. This Christian evangelicalism focused heavily on women’s rightful place in the home. That is not to say, of course, that women were confined to their houses; they were still visible members of the community and more opportunities to get involved in religious life or contribute to charity became available.<sup>7</sup> However, this religious charitable activity further reinforced the new image of the tender, mothering, kind woman who only wished to look after others and was self-effacing about her own desires. Christian evangelicalism restricted women’s roles by promoting an expectation that a Christian woman would put the needs of others, her husband and her family primarily, above her own.

The effects of the panic of the 1790s and the resulting pushback against women’s behaviour had long-lasting effects. By the 1820s contemporaries agreed that, as regards behaviour and talk, society had become much more modest, and that sexual immorality had either significantly lessened or been driven underground.<sup>8</sup> The Victorian era is generally well understood to have had somewhat repressive standards of sexual behaviour, where sexual information and imagery were often policed. These standards of behaviour were, in many ways, considered the norm until the 1960s and even affected the way in which the eighteenth century became viewed, as there was a renewed interest in Georgian lives in the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Biographies of

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<sup>4</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, p.354.

<sup>5</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, p.354.

<sup>6</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, pp.232–233.

<sup>7</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, Dangerous People?: England 1783–1846*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.363–374.

<sup>8</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, p.356.

<sup>9</sup> Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex*, p.353.

important figures portrayed eighteenth-century high society as frivolous and full of sexual vice and hedonistic pleasure.<sup>10</sup>

This perception of eighteenth-century life as lascivious has affected the way the New Female Coterie, and other women like them, have been presented over the years. What we know of these women has been reduced to the scandalous presentations put forward by reports of their trials and adulteries. The repression of women's behaviour following the 1790s had long lasting effects for the New Female Coterie. Their agency and their well-rounded individualism has been lost, perhaps hidden from view because their lives were perceived as sinful or immoral. This new study seeks to understand eighteenth-century society according to the way these women would have viewed it, not according to later standards of behaviour or morality. The New Female Coterie deserves a re-evaluation of their lives, their portrayal in the media and their agency.

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.231.

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