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0521026091 - Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770-1840

Edited by Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite

Excerpt

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I

*Introducing Romantic sociability**Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite*

On the night of 28 December 1817, the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon held a dinner in the painting room of his studio at 22 Lisson Grove, London. The centrepiece of the room, illuminated by the flickering light of a winter's day fire, was *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*: the occasion was partly marking a completion of a phase in the painting which had involved Haydon's portrait of William Wordsworth witnessing Christ between the figures of Voltaire and Milton. Present at the party were Wordsworth himself, John Keats, who was meeting Wordsworth for the first time, Charles Lamb and Thomas Monkhous. The evening soon became exceedingly convivial. There was a vigorous debate on the merits of Homer, Shakespeare, Milton and Virgil, and toasts were made to Voltaire and Newton. Others joined the party in the course of the evening – the surgeon Joseph Ritchie, who was about to embark on a trip of exploration in Africa, and John Kingston, comptroller of the Stamp Office and a man with some pretensions in *belles lettres*. According to Haydon, Kingston had been curious to meet Wordsworth partly because of the latter's literary celebrity but also because, as distributor of stamps for Westmorland, Wordsworth was Kingston's inferior in the civil service. 'The moment he was introduced he let Wordsworth know *who* he officially was', writes Haydon in his diary. This produced an awkward moment of self-consciousness for Wordsworth, who was exposed before the company as a placeman, subject to the authority of men like Kingston. The latter's attempt to enter into the world of these artists and writers by talking to Wordsworth about poetry was ridiculed by a drunk Charles Lamb, who countered Kingston's sage remarks with the nursery rhyme 'Diddle diddle don', an assertion of the infantile and the ludic against the bureaucratic intruder. 'There is no describing this scene adequately', Haydon commented.

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There was not the restraint of refined company, nor the vulgar freedom of low, but a frank, natural license, such as one sees in an act of Shakespeare, every man expressing his natural emotions without fear. Into this company, a little heated with wine, a Comptroller of the Stamp Office walked, frilled, dressed, & official, with a due awe of the powers above him and a due contempt for those beneath him.

He goes on:

There was something interesting in seeing Wordsworth sitting, & Keats & Lamb, & my Picture of Christ's entry towering up behind them, occasionally brightened by the gleams of flame that sparkled from the fire, & hearing the voice of Wordsworth repeating Milton with an intonation like the funeral bell of St Paul's & the music of Handel mingled, & then Lamb's wit came sparkling in between, & Keats's rich fancy of Satyrs & Fauns & doves & white clouds, wound up the stream of conversation. I never passed a more delightful day & I am convinced that nothing in Boswell is equal to what came out from these Poets. Indeed there were no such Poets in his time. It was an evening worthy of the Elizabethan age, and will long flash upon "that inward eye which is the bliss of Solitude."¹

The 'immortal dinner', as it was described in Haydon's *Autobiography*, was a sociable event staged by the painter in what was both a private and a professional space – his studio – and before a work in progress which was not merely a kind of theatrical backdrop but another kind of guest in dialogic relationship with the drama before it.² *Christ's Entry* was a heroic vindication and, indeed, sanctification, of the capacity of men of genius to transcend the age. The dinner has been restaged on a number of occasions in biographies of the principals and has recently been the subject of a study in its own right which uses the event as a centrepiece of biographical accounts of the protagonists and a survey of metropolitan culture in 1817, but it has not received any sustained critical attention within Romantic studies, like 'Romantic sociability' as a whole.³ The turn to history in Romantic studies has given us some glimpses into the sociability of men and women of the Romantic period – for example, the dense network comprised by the reform societies, publishers' dinners, theatre-going and supper parties of the Godwin circle in the 1790s; the suburban sociality of sonnet-writing contests, tea-drinking and music-making of the Hunt circle in the 1810s and 1820s; the 'Italianate salon' of William Roscoe at Liverpool; John Clare's scrutiny of Coleridge, Lamb and Hazlitt at the *London Magazine* dinners of the 1820s; the freneticism of Thomas Moore's conversational commerce; Helen Maria Williams's anglicization of French salon sociability – but in only a few of these cases has sociability actually been the focus of the analysis

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and there has certainly been no work which has attempted to define 'Romantic sociability' or map a possible field of study in such terms.⁴

Within the social history of the long eighteenth century it would be true to say that sociability has received more substantial attention in work by scholars such as Peter Borsay, John Money, Kathleen Wilson and Peter Clark.⁵ Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen's *English Masculinities* uses sociability as a sub-category in which to group two of the chapters of that collection while both John Brewer's *Pleasures of the Imagination* and Amanda Vickery's *The Gentleman's Daughter* deal extensively with the topic, without explicitly foregrounding it.⁶ Paul Langford's essay 'Manners and the Eighteenth-Century State: the Case of the Unsociable Englishman' tackles the subject more directly, culminating in a sub-section entitled 'English sociability'. Langford's essay exemplifies a general tendency in eighteenth-century history, literary studies and social and political theory to regard sociability ahistorically as a given of social interaction which does not require explanation.⁷ For example, the two essays in *English Masculinities* grouped under the rubric 'Sociability' which address plebeian male sociability and gendered constructions of conversation for upper-middle class and elite males, suggest that sociability varied according to class and social rank, but the editors do not directly address how they are using the category nor how their essays might inflect its meaning. Leslie Mitchell's *TLS* review of Peter Clark's monumental *British Clubs and Societies* speculated that the willingness of Britons to associate in clubs and societies could be explained by urbanization and a non-interventionist state post 1688 but 'must also owe something to what was innate in the British character', a universalizing perspective also apparent in Langford's essay which develops into what is in effect a polemic about English national character.⁸ Rejecting the Habermasian model of the public sphere, Langford defines 'English sociability' as 'distinct from sociability as extended kinship and sociability as the divided or alienated self, as public' and concludes with a quote from a Victorian, George Gissing, to the effect that English sociability has never been 'ceremonial' or 'mirthful' but 'as regards every prime instinct of the community . . . [the English] social instinct is supreme'. Glossing this quotation, Langford concludes: 'If, at last, [English sociability] is an illusion, it is one that has entranced the English themselves. Its most lasting legacy is surely the potent image of the gentleman as the authentic representative of Englishness, in the character which the eighteenth century bestowed on him.'⁹ Langford's essay illustrates the continuing discursive potency of sociability, how it can articulate particular constructions

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of gender, class and national identity. As this volume will outline, this discursive potency is not just a feature of current academic discourse on sociability but was apparent in the eighteenth century.

The comparative neglect of events such as Haydon's account of the 'immortal dinner' is a reflection of the marginal status of texts such as the essay, diaries and letters in Romantic literary studies, which have had considerable ideological investment in canonical genres and forms such as the lyric, as well as in a narrow text-based definition of the Romantic public sphere. As Paul Magnuson states: 'The public space of Romanticism is the book and the periodical', which suggests that it is not to be found in the theatre, the debating club, the bookshop or the dining room.¹⁰ An argument of this volume is that we need to recover the significance of sociability, not simply for biographical studies of Romantic writers or in order to contextualize their work, but as a kind of text in its own right, a form of cultural work – sometimes playfully convivial as at 22 Lisson Grove – which was a fundamental part of the self-definition of Romantic writers and artists. Another reason why events such as Haydon's 'immortal dinner' have been neglected is the apparent incompatibility of such convivial and theatrical social occasions with Romanticism's traditional identification with the lone poet, withdrawn into productive introspection, with individualism rather than collective activity, and with the cultivation of the authentic rather than the performative self.¹¹ These emphases have been given a historical inflection in Mark Philp's claim that in the 1790s 'the ideals nurtured by sociability collapsed . . . leaving the stage free for the isolationism of the Romantics', a statement which appropriately highlights the crucial significance of the 1790s but which also proposes the 'Romantics' as anti-sociable and Romanticism as a whole as representing the rejection of Enlightenment sociability.¹² The chapters in this volume will attempt to challenge these assumptions. It is our contention that the solitary self has stood for Romanticism for too long: this volume will investigate its sociable other.

If the sociable occupies the position of the other of a solitary or interiorized Romanticism, this is partly because there has been no critical tradition of representing a Romanticism in which sociability is a value. As Lawrence Klein has pointed out, '[i]t is often observed that a reaction against emphatic sociability took shape in the form of a rehabilitation of solitude'.¹³ Before we move on to survey the heterogeneous forms that could be said to constitute Romanticism's sociable others, it might be

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worth mapping the move from what Klein refers to as the ‘emphatic’ sociability of the earlier eighteenth century to the Romantic moment of solitude, which is engaged in Haydon’s dialectic between solitude and sociability. In *British Clubs and Societies*, Peter Clark refers to ‘an intricate tessellation’ of social activity in the Georgian period of which he distinguishes three broad categories: the ‘private’ sociability of the home, where ‘the greatest volume of social contact took place’; an ‘old-style’ sociability based around the church, parliament, court and the street; and a ‘new-style’ sociability engendered by the commercialization of culture in venues such as the coffee-house, the inn, tavern, alehouse, the proliferation of forms of voluntary association, theatres, pleasure-gardens, dancing assemblies and so on. Within this last category Clark notes but does not substantively analyze distinct gender differences between what he calls ‘fashionable sociability’, ‘influenced by sensibility and the public presence of women’, and the sociability of the club, coffee-house and tavern, which was strongly identified with male homosociality.¹⁴ The predominance of the coffee-house and the club as models of sociability, both within eighteenth-century representations and contemporary readings of the period, has functioned to produce a paradigmatic model of sociability that is implicitly male and homosocial. It is one of the aims of this volume to re-examine this model in order to account for a more diverse range of sites of sociability, in particular, sites which are more inclusive of female modes of sociability, and to account for forms of female participation in the public sphere more generally, as part of a larger investigation of gender and Romantic-period sociability.¹⁵

The coffee-house and the club are the primary sites and practices of the conversational model of culture which starts to gain ground in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ A vital cultural formation in this respect is the early periodicals, in particular, Richard Steele’s *The Tatler* (1709–11) and Joseph Addison’s *The Spectator* (1711–12, 1714).¹⁷ Whilst *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* exist for us as edited ‘texts’, they began their lives as ‘papers’, circulating within the heterogeneous worlds of the actual sites of sociability with which they conducted their sociable traffic. There are a number of ways in which the early eighteenth-century public sphere might be said to announce sociability as a value:

- (1) in the modelling of culture as a conversation, and the cultivation of the sociable virtues of laughter, clubbability, conviviality, taste and politeness;¹⁸
- (2) in the modelling of culture as object of spectatorship (a less participatory yet more theatrical model than (1) above);

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- (3) in the use of sociability to ground moral judgements in Enlightenment moral philosophy;
- (4) and in the production of sociability as a value through its absence, i.e., in the satirical production of the absence of sociability or through the sentimental conventions of melancholy and pathos.

Written from particular coffee-houses (*The Spectator* was written from Lloyd's, for many years), where the editors reported on the passing sociable world they saw and heard, and where they were known (at least to begin with) to their audience of readers, the periodical papers are significant in attesting to the importance of sociability as a fact in eighteenth-century public culture, and in producing this sociability as a value. *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* produce sociability as both a fact, as anecdote, topic, as part of the 'motley' of 'Whate'er men do, or say, or think, or dream' (*The Tatler*, motto for No. 1, p.15) and as a value. Part of what is distinctive about this early eighteenth-century public discourse, then, at least as it is manifested in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, is its utopic heterogeneity, and a certain Menippean satirical and carnivalesque inclusiveness. If these papers strike William Godwin as 'strikingly loose and unsystematical',¹⁹ it is because they are intended to be, in that a certain looseness keeps the model of conversation in view of the reader. In *The Tatler*, conversation provides a model of democratic exchange: 'Equality is the Life of Conversation' (*The Tatler* No. 225, p. 174). And if equality is the life of conversation, it is also the life of business exchange:

Man is said to be a Sociable Animal, and, as an instance of it, we may observe, that we take all Occasions and Pretences of forming our selves into those little Nocturnal Assemblies, which are commonly known by the Name of Clubs . . . When Men are thus knit together, by a Love of Society, not a Spirit of Faction, and don't meet to censure or annoy those that are absent, but to enjoy one another: When they are thus combined for their own Improvement, or for the Good of others, or at least to relax themselves from the Business of the Day, by an innocent and cheerful Conversation, there may be something very useful in these little Institutions and Establishments. (*The Spectator* No. 9, p. 39, p. 42)

Part of what is at stake here is the integration of politics and business into sociable practice. Here, sociability is produced as a naturalizing feature of business, as the clubbable man eases into 'innocent and cheerful Conversation' at the end of the 'Business of the Day'. The assertion that the spirit of the club is 'not a Spirit of Faction' also registers the erasure of political interest as a key feature of early Hanoverian modes of

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politeness and sociability: politics and sociability do not go hand in hand. Our volume seeks to examine what happens to this model which keeps politics and sociability separate in a period such as the 1790s which is marked, we argue, by highly charged combinations of politics and sociability. Jon Mee's chapter, in particular, examines the nature of precisely this kind of transformation of an early eighteenth-century mode of sociability, elaborated in the work of Shaftesbury, within the radical political cultures of the 1790s in the circles of Robert Merry.

Another significant model of sociability is the theatrical, performative or what John Dwyer has referred to as the 'spectatorial model'²⁰ of culture. This model intersects with the conversational model, but can diverge from it in that it can involve a less participatory model of culture and sociability. As *The Spectator* No. 1 says: 'I have acted in all the parts of my Life as a Looker-on, which is the Character I intend to preserve in this paper.' (*The Spectator* No. 1, p. 5). The figure of the spectator is a significant sociable presence in the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment, a crucial cultural form of the classical eighteenth-century public sphere. Adam Smith founds the Scottish Enlightenment tradition of what John Dwyer has referred to as 'spectatorial ethics', exemplified by Smith's invocation of the 'cool and impartial spectator' (in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1749, revised 1790)). As Dwyer has also suggested, sociability is an 'imperative' of Enlightenment moral philosophy in general.²¹ According to Adam Smith, the best model of society is a conversational one in which pleasure arises 'from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another'.²² This moral philosophy is exemplary in its elaboration of sociability as a value. Moral philosophy and journalism are not separate realms, though. Indeed, the bringing together of journalism and philosophy – the open and critical discussion of modes of behaviour and everyday life – is a critical impulse of the bourgeois public sphere. As Addison's speaker in *The Spectator* No. 10 says: 'I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at tea-Tables, and in Coffee-Houses' (*The Spectator* No. 10, p. 44).

And just as Scottish Enlightenment philosophy is characterized by a focus on emphatically social and sociable relations, so too does this new coffee-house sociability involve both a democratization of philosophy and an enactment of the ideal of philosophy as a mode of sociable

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interchange. *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* papers popularize the philosophical ideals of the Scottish Enlightenment, self-consciously promulgating sociability as a virtue.

In *The Spectator*'s reading of Thomas Hobbes's *Discourse of Human Nature* (1650), its satirical reproduction of Hobbes's misanthropic reading of laughter as pride – '[a]ccording to this Author therefore, when we hear a Man laugh excessively, instead of saying he is very Merry, we ought to tell him he is very Proud' (*The Spectator* No. 47, p. 200) – produces the sociable virtue of laughter, thereby offering another example of the early eighteenth-century public sphere's production of sociability as a value. Running counter to the pessimistic and mechanistic model of civil society offered by Hobbes, produced out of a seventeenth-century background of religious and civil conflict, this reading offers a moment at which *The Spectator* foregrounds its own ideological implication within the Enlightened Hanoverian Whig regime in its valuing of social order and harmony, free of the 'Spirit of Faction', and of an order of 'Merry' sociability. Even the categories of melancholy and pathos are pressed into sociable service in the culture of the early eighteenth-century public sphere. The discourse of sentiment, for example, involved the category of catharsis, which relies on the sympathy of spectators. As Addison writes in *The Spectator*, it is by contemplating the 'greater miseries of others [that] a man forgets his own and obtains the needed mental catharsis' (*The Spectator* No. 387). A literature of pathos is a primary tool also in this training of feeling. Dwyer has referred, for example, to the Ossian poems of James Macpherson as attempts to 'increase humanity through the skilful manipulation of pathos'.²³

In this context, the political overdetermination of sentiment and sensibility in the 1790s as signifiers, on the one hand, of Jacobin revolutionary excess, and on the other, of counter-revolutionary chivalry and loyalism (most notably in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)), offer a measure of what is distinctive about Romantic-period sociability in contrast with the earlier period. In the 1790s, one of the primarily contested set of associations with sentiment is sociability and anti-sociability. In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, written in the late 1790s though not published until 1811, the sensibility embodied in the character of Marianne Dashwood is represented as emphatically anti-sociable. This is inflected in the novel through the counter-revolutionary perception of sensibility as a form of excess which threatens social and familial stability. John Mullan's important *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (1988) frames a discussion of the

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relations between solipsism and sociability in the moral philosophy of Shaftesbury, Adam Smith and David Hume with a play on the title of Austen's novel and passing references to Austen. For Mullan, Austen's identification of sensibility with anti-sociability is invoked as though Austen transcends the struggles over the definition of sociability and sentiment that Mullan is describing in the book, rather than participating in the contestation of the meaning of both sociability and sentiment that characterized the 1790s. Furthermore, Mullan both endorses the conventional literary-historical narrative which reads the Austen novel as a sociable cure for sentimental excesses, and relies on an idea of sociability as a given which does not require explanation.²⁴ Our project, on the other hand, understands sensibility and sociability to be heavily contested terms and practices critically implicated in the cultural politics of the 1790s, with often highly unstable meanings.

The culture of sentiment is a vital part of what Jürgen Habermas in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* refers to as the 'audience-oriented privacy' which develops in the early eighteenth century.²⁵ Genres such as the letter and the diary, as well as the epistolary novel²⁶ – sentiment's primary literary genre – all participate in the particular *frissons* of this new culture of 'audience-oriented privacy', in which forms of intimacy are staged in public. A similar recognition of the public and socially oriented production of the individual underlies Niklas Luhmann's investigation of the 'codification of intimacy', and the culture of 'affect-management',²⁷ which is predicated upon an understanding of the individual not as an isolate, but as a socially recognized entity who is required to *perform* his or her individuality within a repertoire of codes and modes of affect. Such conventions break down any absolute distinction between the solitary and the sociable. Similarly, such a culture of 'audience-oriented privacy' suggests a complicated version of the so-called public and private distinction, which has been such a significant category of cultural, social and historical analysis since the English translation in 1989 of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Here the public sphere is used to account for the ways in which modern European democracies are distinguished from their centralizing absolutist predecessors, and refers to a democratic space of discursive interaction in which citizens participate in a public culture of critique. Implicated in the economic, social and cultural developments of *laissez-faire* capitalism, the public sphere is nonetheless distinct in principle from both apparatuses of state and from economic markets. The distinction between the so-called private and public spheres has been a critical distinction

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for cultural history, for the study of gender and for politically oriented studies of culture, and for our rubric of sociability. Within this field of debate on the public and the private, as in the social and literary history of this period, the category of sociability is engaged regularly but fleetingly, never elaborated in its own right. When sociability does make an appearance, it is often used as a term of differentiation from the political, as a site of mere play or of a purposeless form of performance or theatricality. Influential in this respect is the work of the German sociologist Georg Simmel, whose 1911 essay 'On Sociability' identifies sociability as any social interaction which exists primarily 'for its own sake and for the fascination which in its own liberation from [social] ties it diffuses'. It is a 'play-form' of interaction which need have 'no extrinsic results'. 'Sociates feel that the formation of a society as such is a value; they are driven toward this form of existence.' For Simmel, sociability's 'aim is nothing but the success of the sociable moment and, at most, a memory of it'.²⁸ A similar ahistoricizing construction of sociability is apparent in more recent accounts of the public sphere, for example in Jeff Weintraub's reference to: 'The approach, exemplified . . . by the work of Ariès (and other figures in social history and anthropology), which sees the "public" realm as a sphere of fluid and polymorphous sociability, and seeks to analyze the cultural and dramatic conventions that make it possible.'²⁹

Weintraub's tag of 'fluid and polymorphous' underplays the complexity of the historical and social specificities that might be said to be played out in sociable practices. And Bruce Robbins's summary of Weintraub's model, in his introduction to *The Phantom Public Sphere*, emphasizes the theatricality of sociability, its 'symbolic display and theatrical self-representation [which] has little if anything to do with collective decision making or state power'.³⁰ Here, sociability is opposed both to political power and to rational communality; it is fully comprehended by a model of theatricality which is associated with individualistic impulses of 'display' and 'self-representation'.

Similarly problematic in this respect is Nancy Fraser's reading of the public as 'a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk'.³¹ The pure metaphoricality of this relation between the theatre and the public sphere – by which an abstracted model of the theatre and of the public sphere become mutually signifying – works to evacuate both of any real material meaning. The public sphere is not simply a theatre, and sociability is not purely dramatic. The theatre is one particular form of material site of the public and of the sociable, with specific and changing conventions of sociable behaviours. To elaborate this materiality (as against a kind of abstractedness) is one