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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 1773 one of the most prominent society women in Britain, Elizabeth Seymour Percy, Duchess of Northumberland, noted with some satisfaction in her diary that there was 'certainly no deficiency or want of public entertainments this Year'.[1] She went on to list 134 forms of entertainment in London, including the theatre and opera, puppet shows, pleasure gardens, circuses, assemblies, model exhibitions, lectures, shows (such as Cox's Museum), clubs, learned societies, taverns and debating clubs. Most of these entertainments were relatively recent developments, having been established since the accession of George III in 1760.[2] The Duchess was probably basing her survey on a newspaper article published a few months before, entitled 'On Places of PUBLIC DIVERSION', which listed the diversity of entertainments in London as evidence of the degeneracy of the times. The article suggested that the economic crisis of early 1773 had been caused by the many 'alluring walks of dissipation' in the metropolis and claimed that women were particularly susceptible to these 'abandoned schools of pleasure'.[3] The Duchess is unlikely to have endorsed such a condemnation of London's sociable temptations. A prominent figure in the court of George III, with family connections to the Earl of Bute, she was renowned as one of the metropolis's leading political hostesses, who played the role of lady of fashion to the hilt. Horace Walpole described her as a 'jovial heap of contradictions' for whom 'shows and crowds and junketing were her endless pursuits'.[4] Famous for her assemblies or routs at Northumberland House at Charing Cross, the Duchess can be said to have presided over the picture of London which her diary implicitly endorses, a London of proliferating distractions, of manifold entertainment appealing to both 'high' and 'low' – above all, a sociable London.

This book is concerned with recuperating the centrality of women of fashion such as the Duchess of Northumberland in the public culture of the late Georgian period.[5] It explores the anxiety which the increasing visibility of these women generated, apparent in the newspaper writer's

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association of economic crisis with 'abandoned schools of pleasure', and examines the broader implications of these developments for a cultural history of late Georgian Britain. The two decades that are the focus of this study – the 1760s and 1770s – were the years of the mobilization of public opinion and the commercialization of politics by John Wilkes and his followers; of the expansion and consolidation of empire as a result of the Seven Years War; of epoch-making enterprises such as the Cook voyages; of a consumption-driven economy at home and rampant speculation in places such as India; and finally, of national trauma in the form of the loss of the American colonies.[6] They were also years of scandal. The newspaper and periodical press, which expanded considerably after 1760, thrived on a succession of *causes célèbres*, some of which overshadowed events of apparently greater national significance, such as the crisis in America. The saga of the adultery case involving the King's brother the Duke of Cumberland and Lady Henrietta Grosvenor, which dominated the newspapers between 1769 and 1771, was followed by the scandalous banking crash of 1772, the controversy surrounding the French diplomat the Chevalier D'Eon, and a succession of forgery cases involving the 'Macaroni Parson', William Dodd (1777), and the bankers Robert and Daniel Perreau and Daniel's mistress Margaret Rudd (1775–6).[7] The Perreau–Rudd case competed for the attention of the public with the legal controversies surrounding Elizabeth Chudleigh, Duchess of Kingston, who was tried for bigamy before the House of Lords in April 1776. Three years later the talk of the town was again focused on a woman of fashion, this time Martha Ray, the mistress of the Earl of Sandwich, who was shot by her lover, the Reverend James Hackman, as she was leaving Covent Garden theatre.[8]

For a long time these scandals were regarded as being of peripheral significance to a historiography dominated by the grand narratives of politics, economics and empire. They are beginning to be re-evaluated as evidence of the profound changes that Britain was undergoing in this period. They reveal how these changes were manifested in a complex interpenetration of issues of gender, sexuality, class, economics, empire and nationhood. Writing about the Dodd case, for example, John Money claims that it exposed how the 'dynamics of credit were imperfectly understood and its use imperfectly regulated . . . by presuming too much on the particular relationships on which his own position depended, [Dodd] had exposed the general fragility of the conventions by which his contemporaries lived'. Dodd's fate, according to Money, highlighted the difficulty of 'reconciling an ideal of freedom . . . based on permanent and absolute

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property with the reality of a society increasingly dependent on borrowing and lending', an anxiety which Donna Andrew and Randall McGowen also identify in their analysis of the Perreau–Rudd case: 'If seemingly honest dealers [such as the Perreaus] were exposed as unworthy of the trust bestowed on them, if reputations could not be relied upon, then the wealth so ostentatiously displayed in London might well prove to be an illusion'.[9] For all three historians the scandals involving Dodd and the Perreaus and Mrs Rudd indicate a 'crisis point' – the phrase is Money's – a moment when the confidence generated by the Seven Years War and a booming economy seemed to turn in on itself, producing a profound anxiety about the practice and ideology of civility and commerce, the bulwarks of British identity. That anxiety became concentrated on the phenomenon of fashion. Encompassing dress, consumerism and developments in sociability and print culture – what contemporaries referred to as the 'fashionable world' – fashion epitomized both the acquisitive dynamism of a commercializing culture which was necessary for the progress of civilization and the inherent tendency of that commerce to corrupt its subjects. This duality of commerce had been a longstanding theme in eighteenth-century culture and before, often feminized in the figure of 'Lady Allurea' or luxury, but the 1760s and '70s represent a distinctive phase in the history of fashion, in which its effeminizing and fantastic tendencies are magnified, threatening to become not merely symptomatic but culturally hegemonic.[10] So far-reaching was this development, I will argue, that the 1760s and '70s had to be neutralized or forgotten as the eighteenth century's bad dream, an interlude of frivolous dress styles, of high heads and high heels, and crimes and misdemeanours in high life, before the more obviously political 'crisis' decade of the 1790s. This study is a contribution to the re-evaluation of the 1760s and '70s begun by historians such as Money, Andrew and McGowen, John Brewer and Kathleen Wilson, and in literary studies by Harriet Guest. It argues that in order to understand the magnitude of what erupted in Britain in the 1790s (and in the Romantic period more generally), particularly in relation to gender, we need to review the cultural landscape of the 1760s and '70s, taking proper cognisance of phenomena such as fashion and scandal. What are the implications for our understanding of the revolutionary decade of the 1790s of, for example, Paul Langford's observation that there was a 'full-blown revolution' for women in the 1770s?[11] This decade is notable for an efflorescence in women's writing and cultural production in general. Catharine Macaulay dominated the writing of history; Anna Letitia Barbauld published her first collection of poetry to acclaim in 1773; Hannah Cowley, Elizabeth Griffith

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and Hannah More made names for themselves as playwrights; Angelica Kauffmann had achieved fame as a painter while the Bluestocking circles associated with Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter and the 'Sylph' Elizabeth Vesey reached the height of their development in this period. In 1778 Fanny Burney published her first novel, *Evelina*, which was in part a guide to how the young lady might navigate, and profit from, the public amusements of the metropolis catalogued by the Duchess of Northumberland in 1773. As in the case of the scandals of the 1770s, the cultural prominence of women in this decade has been largely forgotten; while individual artists have received attention, the phenomenon of Langford's 'full-blown revolution' as a whole has not been substantively analysed,[12] nor has there been any sustained attempt to link the high profile of women as artists, performers and *salonnièrres* with other women in the public eye, such as Margaret Rudd or the Duchess of Kingston. One of the goals of this study is to narrow the gulf which might seem to separate women such as Macaulay, Barbauld and Burney as serious writers and intellectuals from women of fashion such as the Duchess of Northumberland or actresses such as Frances Abington. Granted, there are significant political and class differences between Macaulay and Northumberland, but they also shared a taste for display and theatricality, for lavish interior design and fine clothing. They could also have read about each other in the newspapers. In other words, they were both creatures of fashion, who exploited cultural developments after 1750 to make a distinctive name for themselves in the public sphere.

In order to gauge the presence of such women in public life and ultimately explain the anxiety which this generated, it is necessary to look for women outside traditional modes of endeavour such as the printed text or visual art. For the 'revolution' which Langford discerns in this period is underpinned by a revolution in the modes of sociability. It is no accident that the Duchess of Northumberland should note the number of public diversions in the metropolis with approval, because women were the main beneficiaries of the expansion of entertainment that occurred after 1760. Women made their presence felt as participants, sponsors and sometimes subjects of a vibrant social scene, as theatre- and opera-goers, as masqueraders, as debaters, as attenders of lectures, auctions, art exhibitions and music concerts, as shoppers and promenaders. Research in the commercialization of culture which has transformed eighteenth-century studies in the last thirty years or so has long recognized, in John Brewer's words, the 'power of women as cultural consumers'.[13] But, as Amanda Vickery points out, systematic analysis of what this power actually entailed or how it

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developed over time has not taken place. Vickery states: 'There is no comprehensive survey of the public venues to which women were drawn and institutions in which they participated. Hence, there remains an extraordinary mismatch between the precision of the conceptual claims made about women in public and the exceeding murkiness of historical knowledge.'[14] Vickery goes on to remedy this omission by charting the various modes and venues of sociability in which polite women could claim cultural visibility. In line with her critique of the separate spheres model of women's history, which claimed an increasing sequestration of women in the domestic sphere as a result, predominantly, of the rise of Evangelicalism after 1780, she concludes that 'the scope of public entertainment [for women] remained remarkably constant' between the 1720s and 1820s. She argues 'the weakness of the case which takes it for granted that privileged women were swept out of public space in the later eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries'.[15] How does Vickery's emphasis on continuity rather than change accord with the claims made by other historians that there was indeed a radical shift in attitudes towards gender and the public roles of women in the late eighteenth century? For Dror Wahrman, the 'last couple of decades . . . appear to have witnessed a sudden anxiety about the permeability and instability of gender categories, an intensifying anxiety that extended into a wide variety of cultural sites . . . and thus merits, arguably, the label "gender panic"'. Moreover, Wahrman claims that 'there is ample evidence to suggest that [this] cultural transformation . . . preceded the French Revolution and its effects . . . whatever this transformation was, it is not reducible to the effects of the threats posed by French republicanism or Wollstonecraftian feminism'.[16] Historians therefore seem to be profoundly divided over whether there was a 'gender panic' in this period and, if so, exactly when, what this panic consisted of and what its long-term effects were, and, if there was an identifiable panic, whether it bears any relationship to the empirical evidence of continuity in women's presence in public life. Vickery acknowledges that 'female publicity' was a 'matter of long-standing concern and debate', but ultimately suggests a distinction between an ideology of gendered roles and lived experience, with women learning to negotiate and adapt to the former without necessarily conceding historical agency.[17] While Vickery's narrative of the presence of women in public life is a compelling one, it is nonetheless the case that this continuity did not remain stable between 1720 and 1820. There were 'hot' periods in the history of women in Georgian public culture, periods of innovation and development when ideology and experience, rather than proceeding on parallel tracks, fused in

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ways that produced both crisis and opportunity for women. One such period, I will argue, is the 1760s and '70s. I want to extend Vickery's project of casting light into the 'murkiness of historical knowledge' by analysing what was different or innovative about public culture after the accession of George III. What made it so noteworthy that the Duchess of Northumberland was compelled to transform a newspaper's condemnation of the many diversions of the town into a cause for celebration?

The Duchess's survey, and the newspaper report on which it was based, offer an image of metropolitan public culture in 1773 that is remarkably heterogeneous. They reveal the breadth of entertainment from which men and women of all classes could choose, ranging from the Royal Academy to the Dog and Duck spa at Lambeth, frequented by all the 'riff-raff and scum of the town'.[18] Also significant is the inclusion as 'places of public amusement' of a number of gentlemen's clubs and political societies, including the Wilkite Bill of Rights club which met at the London Tavern, the Bucks and Anti-Gallican clubs, as well as debating societies, or 'Disputation Clubs', most notably the Robin Hood Society. Like Cox's Museum, these clubs were relatively recent developments, signs of an expansion in associational culture in general which has been recognized as reconfiguring politics in this period.[19] The Duchess's linking of these sites with other forms of entertainment confirms John Brewer's important interpretation of Wilkite radicalism as representing a commercialization of politics.[20] It also reminds us that hegemonic political culture in the Georgian period was channelled through the protocols and behaviours associated with male homosociality. The fellowship, conviviality, drinking and merriment that went on in these clubs were not merely incidental to politics but crucial to the reinforcement and furthering of affiliations and group identities between men that, moreover, sought to demarcate politics as an activity from which women were excluded. What is the relationship between the rise of such clubs and the dominance of women elsewhere in Georgian public life, as documented by Vickery? If male homosociality could be politicized in this way, what kind of politics, if any, might be configured by female homosociality? Could assemblies and card parties *have* a politics?

The framework within which I explore these questions is Jürgen Habermas's account of the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.[21] The invocation of the public sphere has become so ubiquitous in historical studies and literary criticism since the late 1980s that some scholars have suggested that its value has become so diluted as to be virtually meaningless, while others have gone further to challenge its premises and also Habermas's credentials as a historian of England.[22]

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While Habermas can be critiqued for using outdated historical models, and for not recognizing the importance of the English Civil Wars, it is not yet time to jettison his concept of the public sphere which retains some usefulness as an analytical model for late Georgian culture, as I hope to show in this study.[23] For Habermas, the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries witnessed a formative phase in the evolution of modernity – the emergence of 'public opinion' as an ideology and social practice that challenged the claims of absolute governments to representativeness based on religious authority or hereditary right. This new public sphere, the main forums of which were the coffee-house, tavern or club and the newspaper and periodical press, constituted its authority on the exercise of reason, promoting openness or transparency in opposition to the state's reliance on secrecy. Underpinning this ideology was a sociability which put into practice the ideal of social inclusiveness, distinguishing the publicness of the emergent bourgeoisie from the exclusionary and opaque culture of the court. For Habermas the transformation in the public sphere wrought by cultural change was a precondition of the rise of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, but the effectiveness of the republic of letters as a mode of critique and a forum in which the ideals of an egalitarian openness could be realized was short-lived. By 1830, he argues, the critical function of literature and culture in general had been subsumed by the profit-driven goals of the market: 'rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode'.[24] Joan Landes and others have argued that Habermas's emphasis on the public sphere as rational-critical debate is masculinist in privileging the spaces and practices in which men dominated.[25] More recently, his neo-Frankfurt-school narrative of the decline of enlightened communitarianism into a fragmented public of individuated mass consumption has been described as implicitly gendered, contrasting a manly public of disinterested social intercourse with an effeminized public of self-gratifying consumers.[26] However, Dena Goodman has cautioned against oversimplifying Habermas's model of the public sphere, particularly in ways that might conflate it with the ideas of public and private spheres that have shaped women's history. She suggests that Habermas's framework is more nuanced than its critics have allowed, pointing out that the 'authentic public sphere', the one that counters the inauthenticity of the state's claim to publicness, actually consists of three elements: first, 'the market of culture products' of 'the Town' (*Kulturgütermarkt*); second, 'the Republic of Letters, with its institutions of intellectual sociability'; and third, 'the public sphere in the political realm', which was essentially

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the political function of the republic of letters.[27] The authentic public sphere which belonged to the private realm (*Privatbereich*), insofar as it did not have the status of fully fledged publicness as long as state and court power continued to exist, was distinguished from the intimate public sphere in which Habermas placed 'the realm of commodity exchange and social labour' and 'the conjugal family's internal space' (*Intimsphäre*).[28] The crucial distinction, therefore, is between state authority identified with the secretive, exclusionary court, and the private realm in which the republic of letters and its associated institutions represented only one, if a nonetheless increasingly dominant, element. The boundaries between the various elements of the private realm, which included the republic of letters *and* the intimate sphere of the bourgeois family, were not so hard and fast, largely because no single element of the private realm had attained the kind of representative publicness identified with the court. When commentators refer to the 'classic Habermasian public sphere' they are usually referring to only one element of the private realm – the public sphere of the world of letters, clubs and the press. Viewed in its totality, his theory of the private realm, within which the public sphere of the republic of letters took shape, offers a potentially useful model with which to analyse British society in the eighteenth century, especially from the perspective of gender, that avoids some of the conceptual problems associated with the public–private dichotomy in women's history and social history in general. As Lawrence E. Klein has precisely argued: 'Generally in the eighteenth century, the distinction between the private and the public did not correspond to the distinction between home and not-home. Two implications result. First privacy was ascribed to forms of life that we would consider public. Second and more important, people at home, both men and women, were not necessarily in private . . . The gender of these eighteenth-century "publics" cannot be determined by an a priori commitment to the publicity of men and the privacy of women.'[29]

Comparatively little attention has been paid to what Habermas refers to as 'the Town' or 'market of culture products' and how it relates to the public sphere of the republic of letters. Indeed, Habermas himself does not elaborate his concept of 'the Town', ultimately privileging the republic of letters as the main forum of the authentic public sphere. In his original formulation the republic of letters would appear to have been an offshoot of 'the Town': 'The "town" was the life center of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the court, it designated especially an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the salons, and the *Tischgesellschaften* (table

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societies).'[30] In the British case 'the Town' corresponds with the world of commercialized polite culture – the theatres, pleasure gardens, exhibitions etc. – which women dominated, while the republic of letters was to be found in the associational life of clubs, coffee-houses, the press and imaginative literature. Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* therefore offers another way of asking whether card-parties or assemblies could have a politics. What is the relationship between the public sphere of the republic of letters and the world of 'the Town'? Was the utopian potential of the kind of social interchange idealized in the coffee-house model of the public sphere also to be found in other venues and modes of sociability?

The 1760s and '70s are the period in which the republic of letters began to distinguish itself from 'the Town' in order to claim authority as the authentic voice of the authentic public sphere, as it emerged from the private realm. Wilkite politics and the associational culture on which it was based were crucial in this respect. As Kathleen Wilson has argued, Wilkite clubs in both London and the provinces shaped a 'broader symbolic valuation of gender identities, upholding a homosocial, heterosexual and predominantly masculine ethos of conviviality and politics that staked out both physically and ideologically a male domain within the socially-mixed and potentially transgressive spaces of urban society'.[31] How and where this 'staking out' took place, and its long-term implications for politics, including gender politics, and for literary culture, are the concerns of this study. Fundamental to my argument will be an emphasis on sociability as the ideological and material battleground on which this struggle occurred. By 'sociability' I mean the practices, behaviours and sites that enabled social interaction that was oriented towards the positive goals of pleasure, companionship or the reinforcement of family, group and professional identities. Sociability was of course manifold and multivalent: as Clara Tuite and I have argued elsewhere, it tends to be treated by both historians and literary critics as an unchanging given rather than as a set of concepts and related practices, configured by factors of class, ethnicity and gender, which altered in meaning in the course of the century.[32] A useful taxonomy of sociability in the eighteenth century is offered by Peter Clark in his *British Clubs and Societies*. He refers to 'an intricate tessellation' of social activity 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 created by the commercialization of culture in venues such as the coffee-house, the inn, tavern, alehouse, the proliferation

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of forms of voluntary association, theatres, pleasure gardens, dancing assemblies and so on. Within this last category Clark notes distinct gender differences between what he calls 'fashionable sociability', 'influenced by sensibility and the public presence of women', and the sociability of the club, the coffee-house and the tavern, which was strongly identified with male homosociality.[33] This distinction is analogous to the relationship between Habermas's 'the Town' and the republic of letters. 'Fashionable sociability' forms the major focus of this book: I will adapt Clark's term to refer to a highly theatricalized and thoroughly feminized arena of social interaction, identified with, though not the sole preserve of, the female aristocracy and upper gentry.

Sociability not only took many forms in eighteenth-century Britain, but was also ideologically inflected in a variety of ways.[34] It underpins Enlightenment philosophy and politics, for example, as a practice and ideology of politeness that legitimated the claims of emerging groups in the 'private realm' to stand for the authentic public sphere. The best model of society, according to Adam Smith, was a conversational one in which pleasure arose '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'.[35] For David Hume, the advantage of trade was in relaxing the distinctions of class and gender, epitomized by 'clubs and societies' in which men and women could meet 'in an easy and sociable manner . . . [feeling] an increase in humanity, from the very habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other's pleasure and entertainment'.[36] The mixed-sex sociability of 'the Town' was therefore increasingly freighted with an ideological meaning that conceded to women a public visibility and legitimacy at the centre of what Hume called the 'conversable world'. Such developments sanctioned the emergence of Bluestocking circles after 1750, associated with women such as Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter, Catherine Talbot and Hester Chapone.[37] The Bluestockings were primarily concerned with the promotion of a female-centred sociability, based in the households of women such as Montagu, which took the Enlightenment model of harmonious conversation as its *raison d'être*. In Habermasian terms, Bluestocking conversation took place at the intersection between 'the conjugal family's internal space', insofar as it was located in the household, and the public sphere of the republic of letters because it partook of similar ideological goals of civilized debate which brought individuals of diverse social and political backgrounds together.[38] As fashionable occasions, publicized in newspaper commentary and mediated through correspondence and other networks, Bluestocking

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