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Review Essay

Identity Politics

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Marilyn Morris. *Sex, Money, and Personal Character in Eighteenth- Century British Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). Pp. xiv + 257. $85

Morris's ambitious book seeks to untangle an incredibly knotty topic: how the private lives of powerful figures became a matter for national concern during the eighteenth century, and, conversely, how public scrutiny affected the private lives of statesmen. Morris examines how one's personal life was viewed as an arbiter of one's ability to govern — both for monarchs and politicians. "No longer God's vicegerents, monarchs and their heirs apparent had become political players, and thus had to share the public stage and the representational realm with members of both Houses" (16). They had, in other words, to *prove* their fitness to rule, a factor that had become more and more important since the messy reign of Charles I, and even more pressing given the catastrophic consequences of Louis XVI's incompetence over the Channel.

Morris provides much detail of the press coverage of comparable events across the course of the century, focusing especially on contrasting the courts of Georges II and III, and identifying a trend toward presenting news as "human-interest stories" (210). Reports of the wedding of Princess Anne to William IV of Orange (March 1734), for example, "stressed its political and downplayed its personal aspects" (107), whereas, during the betrothal of the next princess royal, in 1797, "the press made ribald jokes about the dynastic aspect of the match and treated Princess Charlotte as if she were a local village girl rather than a diplomatic asset" (109). Morris finds that, on all sides, "The print cultures of their eras used notions of personal character to further partisan interests" (5). Moreover, then as now, "selective reporting" was rife (7). In effect, Morris argues that politicians and royals, equally, "became fictionalized and richly imagined like characters in novels as multiple publics observed and discussed their images" (10). With the rise of the novel genre, individual lives became public stories to tell.

Morris explains that George III sought, in a way his Hanoverian predecessors had not, to promote himself publicly as a loving family man. This had consequences for those around him in politics. In order to be a political success, a man had to maintain a public image of domestic virtuousness, while privately remaining, in Samuel Johnson's term, "clubbable." The key was getting the balance right. "Domestic devotion was admirable as long as it did not render a man a boring homebody. Sexual irregularities were

tolerable as long as they did not affect a man's physical and emotional accessibility to other members of his party" (97). Personal politics, and notions of masculinity, were riddled with contradictions; a reputation for domestic bliss was valorized, but so too was prowess at womanizing and gaming. To elucidate her point about male hypocrisy when it came to balancing the familial with the clubbable, Morris draws on the case of Sir Gilbert Elliot, who wrote "heart-tugging love letters" to his wife, while keeping an adulterous second family secreted away, and making passes at various women, including Lady Elizabeth Webster, later Lady Holland (86–87). The latter railed against his insincerity: as she wrote in her diary, on 14 February 1794, he merely "affects great conjugal felicity" (86). Both the "increase in heterosociability and close male bonding … remained essential to political success," so that "In spite of growing condemnation of extramarital liaisons and sharper scrutiny by newspapers, politicians' shared intrigues could forge lifelong allegiances" (133). As an overview of how masculinity was constructed in Georgian politics, Morris's book must surely become essential reading.

Financial, as well as sexual, continence was also a national concern. Morris details the relationship between personal and national economy (135–73), taking the example of the Prince of Wales (later George IV) to illustrate the paradoxical attitude toward his extravagance. Ministerial and Opposition newspapers both praised the Prince's elegance in some contexts, but condemned its expense in others (158). *The Times* and the *Morning Post*, for instance, gushed over the spectacular diamond sword he wore to the queen's birthday in 1791 — an item that the *Morning Post* claimed "rescued and elevated the national character" — while simultaneously noting its cost of £80,000, roughly £11 million in today's money (158). At the corresponding event in 1792, *The Times* reported that the prince was the best dressed gentleman at court, but also that a pickpocket had attempted to pinch the celebrated sword and almost broken its hilt; the paper speculated that the would-be thief must have subscribed to French notions of equality of riches (159). Even the prince's sartorial choices became a national and political matter.

In her preface, Morris writes that "the family life of the monarch first became a subject of national interest during the latter part of George III's reign because of increasingly personal press coverage" (ix), but interest in the sexual and financial personal lives, behavior, and characteristics of monarchs and politicians was hardly new to the eighteenth century. At the Restoration, Charles II's unconcealed extravagance, sexual and financial, was a common cause of complaint. In his diary entry for 15 May 1663, for instance, Samuel Pepys observed archly,

> the unhappy posture of things at this time; that the King doth mind nothing but pleasures and hates the very sight or thoughts of business. That my Lady Castlemayne rules him; . . . as the Italian proverb says, *Cazzo dritto non vuolt consiglio* ["a rigid prick takes no advice"].[1]

Despite the king's attempts to prevent unflattering material from being printed — the Printing Act of 1662 was designed to curtail the distribution of "heretical schismatical blasphemous seditious and treasonable Bookes Pamphlets and Papers" — critiques continued to appear.[2] A broadsheet called *The Poor-Whores Petition* (25 March 1668), for instance, alludes to Lady Castlemayne's personal power over the King to suggest, satirically, that she should come to the aid of her fellow whores, suffering as a result of

the recent Bawdy House Riots. In a general sense, people have always worried and gossiped about other people's sexual and financial behaviour; such tittle-tattle is an evergreen of political history. Morris's more interesting point is that coverage of people's private lives came, in the late eighteenth century, to assume a recognizably modern form: in a sense, it was the first "tabloid" era. A fuller analysis of the changing print cultures of the period, and their public reception, would perhaps have allowed her to make this argument more forcefully.

Morris's stated aim is to "bridge the chasm" between "high and popular politics," by investigating "how the domestic idiom" had an impact "on the careers of MPs and on the images and ideas broadcast to society at large" (16), but "society at large" features only tangentially, for her focus remains principally on the political and court classes. Morris contends that the Hanoverian "royal court became a public arena for articulating and debating societal values … via the press" (98), but this was a small world: those who consumed political literature were often connected — albeit sometimes loosely — with those who formed its subject. Politics was personal precisely because many readers (and writers) of political print had direct knowledge of the social spheres to which it made reference: Richard Steele, for example, who founded *The Tatler*, *The Spectator*, and *The Guardian*, became MP for Stockbridge in 1713, and was knighted by George I (27). This is not necessarily a criticism; rather, it prompts us to reflect upon the development of "mass" media, and the connected concept of "public interest" in this period.

It is not always clear why Morris concentrates so intently on the reigns of George II and III, or whether she intends to make such far-reaching claims about the eighteenth-century's uniqueness in embodying a shift from the celebration — or at least irrelevance — of personal license, to an obsession with personal probity. If she does, then the causal mechanism is left largely unexplained. Other writers, such as Dror Wahrman, in *The Making of the Modern Self* (2004), have posited that the very idea of personal character and identity began to alter in the 1780s, ushering in Romanticism's preoccupation with the notion of "the self." One would have been interested in Morris's take on whether, and how, this shift was felt in politics.

There is much to admire in Morris's book. She has an impressive command of primary material — periodicals, newspapers, pamphlets, caricatures, letters, diaries — and makes extensive use of local detail, revealing an intricate knowledge of the vast range of characters involved, and their relationships with one another. This is, of course, a strength, although there are moments when it can seem like a weakness. In places, the reader might get bogged down in detail, with the risk that broader themes are occluded. That is a shame, since Morris's central thesis is both bold and stimulating. A single issue — sex, money, or personal character — would have provided ample material for a whole book, and the present volume is, perhaps inevitably, an eclectic mix of broad-ranging survey and intricate specifics. The author immerses us in a fascinating, labyrinthine, wealth of detail, even if, in the process, she leaves implicit certain issues that deserve fuller explication. While this tends to make the central narrative a challenge to follow, it is one that is well worth the effort.

Notes

1. Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews, 11 vols. (London: HarperCollins, 2016), 4:136–37.
2. "Charles II, 1662: An Act for preventing the frequent Abuses in printing seditious treasonable and unlicensed Bookes and Pamphlets and for regulating of Printing and Printing Presses," in *Statutes of the Realm, Vol.5: 1628–80*, ed. John Raithby (London: Great Britain Record Commission, 1819), 428–35, British History Online at https://www.british-history.ac.uk/statutes-realm/vol5/pp428-435.