Letters & Laws: How Literary Genre Shaped 18th-Century Clubs

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ABSTRACT

DANIEL LUPTON: Letters & Laws: How Literary Genre Shaped 18th-Century Clubs
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As private social clubs overtook public coffeehouses as the key venue for intellectual exchange in mid-18th-century Britain, these clubs’ members looked to literature for models of how to speak, interact, and, of course, write. Literature provided clubs not only practical advice about how members should behave, but also a set of aesthetic touchstones and allegiances that were vastly important in a world that conceived of sociability—like literature—as a “fine art.” This project locates social clubs within their literary, historical and philosophical contexts, tracing the development of the wider club phenomenon and examining how clubs shaped 18th-century British philosophers’ theories of sociability. Arguing against the widely held notion that clubs were an institution of what Jürgen Habermas called the “critical public sphere,” I contend that, in practice, 18th-century clubs tended to be both private and conservative. Exploding in popularity during a time of political and economic retrenchment, clubs of the 1730s-50s, by and large, were not venues for civic engagement but rather, I argue, a retreat from the conversations that took place in institutions of the public sphere such as newspapers and Parliament. This dissertation’s first two chapters investigate the social, cultural, and intellectual circumstances that shaped mid-18th-century club culture, while the next three chapters demonstrate how literature profoundly influenced particular groups’ patterns of
sociability. I examine three sets of clubs from across Britain’s social spectrum—the working class, the middle class, and the elite—all of which engaged with the world of letters as a way to change or affirm their social standing.
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I: Introduction

I am writing to you in defense only of the liberty of the club, and of that sort of freedom which is taken amongst gentlemen and friends, who know one another perfectly well. And that 'tis natural for me to defend liberty with this restriction, you may infer from the very notion I have of liberty itself.

-Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury¹

As the third Earl of Shaftesbury wrote these lines in 1714, the practice of gentlemen forming themselves into private clubs was well established among Englishmen, but it had not yet become the monolithic (yet extremely variegated) social institution that it would become later in the 18th century. Indeed, modern readers might be surprised to find Shaftesbury championing the private social club as consonant with “the very notion… of liberty itself” when that prototypical institution of British intellectual freedom—the public coffeehouse—still enjoyed ascendancy over private social clubs as the key venue for intellectual exchange, particularly in London. However, it would be wrong to assume that Shaftesbury’s argument was borne out of a conservative impulse to restrict who might enter the marketplace of ideas. As Shaftesbury’s comment indicates, as British

intellectual culture moved gradually, in the decades from the 1720s through the 1740s, out of the coffeehouses and into the clubs, it was generally—if mostly tacitly—agreed that this shift in venue garnered the modern British gentleman more, not less, freedom. 18th-century British gentlemen, by and large, viewed the private social club as the ideal social institution for the modern age, free from the awkward and inefficient social conventions that characterized the private, personal visit, the effeminacy and affectation that defined the fashionable new French institution of the salon, and the heated party allegiances for which the coffeehouses were known. Clubs were idealized as spaces where ideas (whether they be serious, silly, learned, or debauched) could not only be introduced, but where they could also be refined, honed, and propagated. As such, clubs enjoyed a close connection with Britain’s ever-growing literary sphere. Whereas one finds Dryden displaying his wit at Will’s Coffeehouse and Addison meeting at Button’s Coffeehouse early in the 18th century, one finds literary production gradually moving out of the coffeehouses and into clubs after 1720. The Scriblerians, the Nonsense Club, Johnson’s Literary Club, and other examples abound of writers creating for themselves a private society that could aid in the development and appreciation of their work.

This study aims to investigate these deep connections between club culture and literary culture as both ascended to cultural prominence in the English-speaking world during the first half of the 18th century. While literary production would continue to be closely linked to club culture at least until the 19th century (when, gradually, the romantic model of the solitary genius would usurp club culture’s collaborative, sociable model), this study focuses primarily on the decades between 1720 and 1750. Private social clubs had been growing in popularity since the Restoration (and one can find
examples of clubs dating back further than this), but these decades mark the era when British gentlemen—particularly men of letters—revised their model of public intellectual sociability such that clubs gained the upper hand over coffeehouses as their most valued site for intellectually substantive social interactions. The reasons for these revisions are various, and will be addressed at length in the first two chapters of this study.

To summarize quickly, though, there were both practical and theoretical reasons why clubs came to dominate the English gentleman’s social life during this period. As for the former, coffeehouse discussions had become stigmatized as having been paralyzed by the narrow-minded concerns of party politics. During the “rage of party” in the first two decades of the 18th century, when changes in power were frequent and party tensions ran high, coffeehouses provided the perfect civic venue for playing out these high political dramas. As the political regime stabilized under the Walpole ministry in the 1720s, however, writers came to look scornfully on debates that bore any resemblance to party conflict, and as such coffeehouses quickly became less fashionable. As for the theoretical reasons why gentlemen, on the whole, came to prefer clubs to coffeehouses, these changes were much slower, more gradual, and more difficult to chart. However, it is clear that the eighteenth century saw many thinkers posing new approaches to the study of sociability. Many of these thinkers placed sociability at the center of their definitions of humanity. While 17th-century philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke viewed man primarily as rational—and, hence, the philosophers sought rational explanations for patterns of sociability—18th-century thinkers such as Shaftesbury, Adam Smith, and David Hume saw man primarily as sociable. Sociability was at the center of these philosophers’ understanding of the world, and man’s struggles for status
and prestige among other men were understood as fundamental to what it meant to be human.

The 18th century is remembered both as an age of sociability and as an age of remarkable scientific discovery. The fashion for private social clubs, one might say, resulted from the confluence of these interests. Clubs were, at their core, social experiments. By creating these microcosmic societies, the members of 18th-century clubs manipulated the variables that controlled typical social interaction. In the “real world” status was conferred by money or title; in clubs, one could achieve status based on his ability in oratory, the strength of his ideas, his capacity for ingesting alcohol, or even the ugliness of his face. Indeed, clubs were the canvas on which 18th-century men and women painted their portrait of an ideal social world, and as one might expect, these portraits differed widely. Some of these worlds were characterized by leisure, others by productivity; some were highly refined, others deliberately crass; some theatrical, some staid. Clubs were united, however, by the assumption that a group of individuals could deliberately fashion a social order that did not organize the world solely according to title, wealth, or political power, even if that order could be maintained only for a few hours every fortnight.

The club culture of the 18th century encompassed a broad range of models, from small, informal social circles to large, complex institutions such as the Royal Society. Indeed, as Peter Clark has argued convincingly, by the latter half of the 18th century, clubs and societies dominated the social lives of most men, particularly those who spent

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all or most of their time in London. As Clark argues, late 18th-century Britain was an “associational world” in which men—and, to a lesser extent, women—defined themselves by the organizations to which they belonged. Another aim of this study is to investigate the historical, cultural, and theoretical underpinnings of 18th-century club culture, with particular attention to how these groups’ members relied on the institutional character of clubs to fashion both individual and collective identities. Central to this investigation is the general reassertion in the English-speaking world of the inherent value of sociability during the early 18th century. Particularly since the English translation of Jürgen Habermas’s influential study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, scholars have been increasingly apt to see social connections—including those offered by clubs and societies—as pathways to social, economic, and political advancement. I argue, however, that the 18th century saw a turn toward the appreciation of sociability for its inherent worth, and that this turn was one of the key factors contributing to the rise of club culture. To see the primary goal of club culture as the creation of connections that members could then exploit in the political or economic spheres is to miss much of what made 18th-century club culture unique. By valuing social interaction for its own sake, 18th-century clubs and societies, in essence, turned sociability into a form of art, and like painting, sculpture, or literature, sociability offered the imaginative artist near-limitless potential for self-expression.

The confluence between social and aesthetic experience is another of this study’s key theoretical underpinnings. As I argue in chapter 2, in the work of 18th-century Britain’s key social theorists—primarily Shaftesbury, Smith, and Hume—we find a

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distinct resonance between social and aesthetic experience. This is in stark contrast to 17th-century theorists such as Hobbes and Locke, both of whom understood social relationships as being determined primarily—if not exclusively—by power, and judgment (i.e. reason) as the most useful tool for navigating these social relationships. Shaftesbury, Smith, and Hume, on the other hand, sought to explain more complex social phenomenon such as style, grace, wit, and empathy, all of which required an appeal to a different conception of power and the postulation of a different basis for social interaction. While neither philosopher says so explicitly, I argue that all three turn to aesthetic experience as an analogy—if not a basis—for humanity’s sociable impulses. Just like art, social interaction can stimulate the intellect or the ego, but it can also provide its own unique, inherent sources of pleasure and aversion.

This conception of sociability as something akin to aesthetic experience is borne out by my historical examination of 18th-century club culture. As a wealth of recent scholarship has established, self-fashioning was a matter of much consequence in the 18th-century social world. Clubs and societies provided not only a venue for exhibiting these exquisitely crafted identities, but also a member’s club affiliations were often a key part of those identities. If sociability, particularly clubbing, was conceived as an aesthetic enterprise, then one’s aesthetic allegiances were extremely important. Thus, we find countless clubs based on the members’ shared aesthetic allegiances: the Society of Dilettanti, whose members poured over collections of ancient coins and statuary, the Royal Society of Arts, which worked to secure exhibition space and educational opportunities for Britain’s young artists, and the many literary clubs such as Dr. Johnson’s Turk’s Head Club, whose members gathered to discuss and even to compose
literature. These aesthetic allegiances were phenomenally important in shaping groups’ institutional identities as well as the individual identities of their members, a pattern I explore at length in chapters 3-5.

I do not assert that this view of clubs as aesthetic enterprises adequately explains the entire range of 18th-century voluntary association. Many groups, such as the Royal Society, were too large, too heavily institutionalized, and too bureaucratic to allow the kind of flexibility needed for the creative self-fashioning I describe above. Other groups, by contrast, were so small and informal that they possessed little collective identity. Given my interest in self-fashioning and identity formation, this study generally excludes both of these types of groups, except in cases where the groups on which I focus defined their identity against these types of institutions (such as the agricultural research clubs in Chapter 4 who defined themselves against the Royal Society). In general, though, the groups on which this study concentrates possess three key characteristics. First, they have a name. The act of choosing a name is a key moment in the formation of a club, and often the first time a group explicitly grapples with issues of self-fashioning. Some groups ignored the question, simply adopting the default name of the location where they met (itself a decision of as much consequence as choosing a unique name) while others put a great deal of effort and thought into an original name. Second, the groups I study were small and flexible enough that their most energetic members were able to participate actively in shaping the group’s identity; in other words, these groups were ruled by a sort of direct democracy. This, of course, excludes groups like the freemasons—since their federated structure meant that most members had no influence over freemasonry’s shape and direction—as well as large groups such as the Royal Society, whose ornate
bureaucratic structure likewise limited members’ ability to participate actively in managing the group’s public and private identities. Third, the groups that interest me most employ some sort of simple episcopacy or bureaucratic structure in order to distinguish and honor certain members and/or distribute duties and privileges. This process of self-organization not only gave groups another venue for creative self-fashioning, but also separated them from more informal social groupings in which distinction was either assumed based on outside criteria such as social rank or determined on an ad-hoc basis. While most of the groups I examine in this dissertation meet all three of these criteria, I am not interested so much in establishing a taxonomy for identifying and categorizing clubs as I am interested in finding the clubs whose members were interested in creating and managing a club, not simply belonging to one.

While I hope to provide a coherent rationale for focusing on the particular sample of clubs I have chosen, I also acknowledge and embrace the breadth of organizations to which the term “club” applied in the 18th century. The *OED* takes care to define two distinct species of club. The first, whose first usage is cited in 1670, is defined as “an association or society of persons of like sympathies, of a common vocation, or otherwise mutually acceptable, meeting periodically (under certain regulations) at some house of entertainment, for social intercourse and cooperation.” This, of course, explains the classic 18th-century vision of the club as a social institution. However, the *OED* also cites a second definition, emerging in the mid-18th century, of a club as “An association formed to combine the operations of persons interested in the promotion or prosecution of some object; the purpose is often indicated in the title, as Alpine, athletic, chess, cricket, football, literary, natural history field, tennis, yacht club, etc.; benefit, clothing,
coal, goose club, etc.” In other words, this definition describes clubs whose primary aim is not sociability, but some other objects such as playing cricket or football (this sports-related usage persists in modern-day Britain and America, where our professional sports teams are still referred to as clubs), bird-watching, jogging, etc. Though, in this study, I deal with clubs that might fall under either definition, I focus on clubs that emerged in the 1730s and 1740s—a period between the emergence of these two definitions—for a reason. The difference between these two definitions reflects a significant change in British culture in the late 18th and 19th centuries. While the early 18th century may have borne residual traces of the showiness and flair of early modern court culture, this model of sociability was increasingly viewed as vain and superficial later in the 18th century, when one can see the beginnings of a Victorian culture that valued productivity and professionalization over the kinds of “leisure” activities that were based on aesthetic appreciation. One can see the beginnings of this shift in the clubs I study, all of which struggled, to one degree or another, to strike a particular balance between leisure and productivity. By the middle of the 18th century it becomes increasingly difficult to find institutions that devote themselves purely to conviviality, though conviviality and sociability, I would argue, were no less integral to the success of later groups whose members insisted they had a higher purpose. Over the course of the 18th century it became necessary to frame one’s social interaction with some other purpose, whether professional or amateur. Clubs, which accommodated just this kind of self-fashioning, were the perfect venue for creating this type of frame, particularly for those who could

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4 For more on this broad cultural shift, see ch. 4 of this study as well as Bruce Redford, *Dilettanti: The Antic and the Antique in Eighteenth-Century England* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2008), particularly the concluding chapter.
not find a way to insert themselves into a professional community. Indeed, the fashion for clubbing may even have contributed to this need to do more than simply socialize. By uniting people with shared interests, backgrounds, and resources, clubs created optimal conditions for those who would put their collective energy toward some higher purpose.

While these contrasting definitions give a rough indication of changes in practices of sociability across the period, they hardly give a vivid picture of the club phenomenon as a whole. In this study I will take care to emphasize how individual clubs fashioned a unique identity, but there are also a few material characteristics that are common to most clubs. First, clubbing tended to be an exclusively male phenomenon, at least until near the turn of the 19th century. 18th-century Britain was still very much a chauvinistic society, and there is no known British club from the period where women and men met one another as intellectual equals, as they did in the French salons that met during the same period. Indeed, women, as a rule, did not belong to clubs and societies, with the exception of so-called “box clubs,” though sociability was at best only a passing concern for these types of groups. When women did participate in clubs, their presence tended to be, as Clark describes it, “decorative,” rather than substantive. In terms of class heterogeneity, with some exceptions clubs tended to be rather homogenous; though clubbing was a widespread phenomenon and nearly every Englishman, no matter how poor or rich, belonged to one or more clubs, individual clubs tended to pull their membership from a relatively small cross-section of the social spectrum. Few groups had

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5 For more on Box Clubs, including gender dynamics within these clubs, see Chapter 10 of Peter Clark, British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000).

formal rules banning potential members based on social class or occupation, though “token” representation from outside a club’s principal social stratum was not uncommon. In regards to the material conditions of club meetings, by and large clubs tended to meet in taverns. Some larger and/or wealthier clubs had purpose-built houses or rooms (sometimes within taverns) and some smaller clubs met at members’ homes (though this was uncommon given the mental and financial burden this could put on members), but most clubs found drinking establishments convenient since they provided large and open spaces and the necessary refreshments. Indeed, many tavern-keepers courted clubs since the bills they incurred could comprise a significant portion of their establishment’s business. By mid-century most clubs met weekly or fortnightly, beginning their meetings in the early evening, often around seven or eight o’clock.

If these were the ways in which clubs tended to be similar, there were far more ways in which clubs differed from one another. Members’ costs differed widely. Many clubs that courted a working-class audience worked to keep their prices low; the Robin Hood Debating Society charged sixpence for entry, a price which both allowed the patron to participate in the evening’s debate and entitled him to a forty-ounce tankard of beer or lemonade. Some elite clubs placed a much heavier financial burden on their members; in addition to regular fees, members of the Society of Dilettanti were required to pay to have their portrait painted by the Society’s official “Limner” (a post held by George Knapton and, later, Sir Joshua Reynolds), no small expense. Every year that a member let pass without having his portrait painted, he was forced to pay a substantial fine the group

\[\text{\textsuperscript{7}}\text{Ibid.}, \text{211.}\]
referred to as “face money.” Clubs also differed considerably in their approach to the accouterments of club life such as officers, costumes, and rituals. Though many clubs were rather Spartan in this regard, the Freemasons’ more baroque approach was clearly influential. The Freemasons, famously, created not so much an aesthetic for their group but rather an entire mythology, one that placed the group’s origin in the building of Solomon’s temple a millennium before Christ. Many groups followed this example, creating fictional and even mythological origin stories for their groups; the Society of Bucks, for instance, claimed to have been founded by Nimrod in ancient Babylon. Other groups were more influenced by the visual impact of the Freemasons’ often-impressive costumes. Sir Francis Dashwood—an enthusiastic proponent of “fancy dress”—managed the costumes for many of the groups with which he was involved, including the Divan Club, the Society of Dilettanti, and the Medmenham Monks. Many groups also invested a great deal of energy in internal offices and other honoraria for their clubs. Nearly every club named a president who presided over meetings and a treasurer who managed the group’s purse, but more imaginative posts were not uncommon. Another identifying feature for many clubs was their initiation rituals. As Clark notes, many of these rituals were extremely stylized, almost to the point of making no sense at all; the Oxford Free Cynics, for example “required newcomers to learn ‘a symbolical set of words and grimaces.’”


10 Ibid., 223.
to prove themselves by participating in group sex acts.\textsuperscript{11} Along with managing the topic and tenor of conversation at their meetings, these aspects of club life offered the clubman near-limitless opportunity for creative self-expression.

Though British voluntary institutions’ explosion in popularity can be dated precisely to the early-to-middle decades of the 18th century, no scholar has yet ventured a satisfactory explanation for why clubs exploded in popularity just when they did. It stands to reason that 18th-century clubs evolved from other, earlier forms of organized social interaction such as bell-ringing societies, trade guilds, academic societies, or medieval fraternities, though in practice clubs share little in common with these earlier institutions of sociability. In this section I will examine clubs’ relationship to other (predominantly older) forms of organized public sociability.

As I noted above, the etymology of the word “club” is complex and, at times, unclear. The \textit{OED}'s first citation of the term “club” as “an association or society of persons of like sympathies, of a common vocation, or otherwise mutually acceptable, meeting periodically (under certain regulations) at some house of entertainment, for social intercourse and cooperation” is from 1670. The origin of this meaning, however, is obscure, as is its relation to earlier senses of the word “club” as a “thick stick” or the suit in a deck of cards. Geoffrey Ashe has argued that clubs arose from the practice of “clubbing,” or combining, expenses among groups of associates who frequented the same tavern,\textsuperscript{12} but the \textit{OED} only dates this use of the term to about a decade earlier, appearing


in various sections of Pepys’s diary in 1659 and 1660. There are also other contemporaneous usages of the term that could offer a tenable origin for the term “club” in its modern sense; the *OED* argues that it is unclear whether the modern sense of the term derives from “a knot or association of persons, or a ‘clubbing’ of the expenses of an entertainment, or of contributions towards it.” Indeed, there are several related definitions that date to the late 17th and 18th centuries, including the sense of the term as the building where a private club met (first appearing in 1776), as well as dozens of derivations and combinations from the word “club,” including “clubster” (1734), “clubbable” (1783), “clubbist” (1793), and “clubical” (the *OED* dates the term to 1800, though Alexander Hamilton uses the term frequently in his *History of the Ancient and Honorable Tuesday Club*, which he composed in the 1750s13). This complex etymological history hints at both the strength and suddenness of how this sense of the term “club” garnered its cultural currency.

This muddled origin of clubbing is reflected in Peter Clark’s examination of early modern institutions of sociability. Clark attempts to establish a genealogy for the 18th-century club, examining numerous forms of sociability that were popular in 16th- and 17th-century Britain, including county feast societies, bell-ringing societies, academies and academic societies, fraternities, and professional guilds. Ultimately, though, Clark argues that this is a futile enterprise, and that it is impossible to establish precisely how early clubmen combined elements from other types of social institutions to create the

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18th-century club’s recognizable form. Indeed, this approach seems flawed from the start, as the 18th-century club was not a Frankenstein monster that cobbled together the most serviceable elements from other, already existing social institutions. Club culture was ultimately a response to the fact that the conditions under which men socialized—where, when, how often, and to what purpose—were changing rapidly, and the older venues for sociability listed above no longer fulfilled their purpose under these new conditions. Thus, rather than examining older forms of sociability for clues as to club culture’s origins, it seems more pertinent to examine the social, intellectual, and cultural conditions of early 18th-century London, since this is where and when the fashion for clubs really got going, and establish how club culture filled the unique needs of that time and place better than any other social venue.

Numerous important historical and cultural trends laid the foundation on which club culture would be built during the first half of the eighteenth century. Chief among these trends was the slow and gradual process, beginning in the early 17th century, whereby the focus of British intellectual culture shifted away from the clearly defined hierarchies of the court and the country house and toward the metropolis. This entailed not only a shift in the venues for intellectual culture, but a shift in the very ways in which social connections were conceived and valued in 18th-century Britain. As befitting such an important change, numerous social, literary, and philosophical historians have studied these changes in values, though no definitive account—or even a definitive set of terms

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with which to discuss this shift—has emerged. In her study, *From Courtesy to Civility*,\(^{15}\) for instance, Anna Bryson characterizes this change as a movement from the values of “lordship” to the values of “urbanity.” Bryson explains:

> Very abstractly, the modes of urbanity are those of an elite whose members tend to vest their sense of social identity in their possession of a shared culture principally expressed and elaborated in the conduct of social relations with each other; the city is the obvious and pre-eminent, but not the only milieu in which such modes can be developed. The modes of lordship are, by contrast, those of an elite whose individuals vest social identity in the separate, if structurally similar, hierarchies of services and networks of allegiance in which they enjoyed commanding positions.\(^{16}\)

As Bryson argues, the move from a culture of “lordship” to one of “urbanity” signals more than simply a change in the types of public courtesy people displayed to one another (e.g. doffing their caps, bowing, etc.); rather, this move indicates a fundamental change in how social networks were both understood and valued. In a culture of “lordship,” the value of one’s social connections is gauged according to an external, legible—and theoretically stable—system. Social status in a culture of “urbanity,” however, was a moving target; what might be valued in one venue or among one set of connections might not be valued somewhere else. While this system of values was not exactly relativistic, there was no central authority to which one could appeal to assess the value of one’s social connections or one’s self among his or her connections. In other


\(^{16}\) *Ibid.*, 113.
words, this culture of “urbanity” provided no universally acknowledged social ladder to climb; one who wished to make his mark in society had not only to cultivate desirable social connections, but also frame those connections in a way that emphasized their value and exclusivity. To complicate matters even further, this culture of “urbanity” did not completely displace the waning culture of “lordship”; as Bryson argues, the nobility hardly abandoned their interest in ritual displays of rank and hierarchy in the 17th and 18th centuries.\(^17\)

While Bryson’s account highlights the destabilization of traditional social hierarchies engendered by the culture of lordship, Lawrence Klein centers his account of this trend on the changing role of the gentleman in late-17th- and early-18th-century British culture. In his study of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury’s social and political philosophy,\(^18\) Klein argues that as traditional social institutions such as the clergy, the country gentry, court, and the monarchy were divested of much of their power over the course of the 17th century, that power fell to a class of “gentlemen” who came to dominate London’s (and, by extension, the English-speaking world’s) social and political scenes. These self-styled “gentlemen” invoked a discourse of “politeness” in which one’s social value was assessed according to an index of “agreeability.” It was this quality of “agreeability” rather than mere birth or background that accorded one social standing, though of course the gentleman of breeding was ideally situated to embody this emerging ideal. As I will explain more fully below, the notion of “agreeability” was central to how

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 119, 136.

this new style of gentleman approached discourse; in other words, it was agreement—and not disagreement or debate—that was the focus and ultimate goal of polite discourse. As Klein goes on to argue, this discourse of “politeness” extended not only to conversation and social interaction, but also extended other acts: “the spread of ‘politeness’ to different discourses is the process of gentlemen taking over those discourses and appropriating them into the world of ‘polite’ social, intellectual, and literary creation.”19 Klein interprets Shaftesbury’s moral philosophy as an attempt to codify the norms of this new gentlemanly culture, but in practice no acknowledged standard of what constituted “politeness” or even a “gentleman” existed. As with Bryson’s model of “urbanity,” the discourse of politeness articulated by Klein replaced a relatively stable and universally acknowledged system of valuing a person’s social merits with a system that was at best dynamic, and at worst relativistic.

In his treatise on clubs, Peter Clark, somewhat less systematically, describes this shift as a move toward an “associational world” in which not only social status but social definition is comprised by one’s voluntary associations: friends, family, colleagues, and, perhaps most importantly, club affiliations. For Clark, the fashion for voluntary association in 18th-century Britain is part of a broader fashion for self-improvement that spreads steadily across the century. While the displacement of Britain’s old ruling class can seem, in Bryon’s and Klein’s accounts, as a move toward a murky kind of social relativism, Clark puts a positive spin on the dynamism of club culture, which evolves considerably over the course of the century to accommodate shifting notions of what constituted improvement. The history of clubs, for Clark, is a movement toward an ever

greater degree of organization and more clearly defined aims, a genealogy that strains to connect the heavily bureaucratic philanthropic and scientific societies that thrived in 19th-century Britain (many of which would eventually transform into part of the state bureaucracy) with the looser, more anarchic social and drinking clubs that dotted early 18th-century London. Though Clark does not say so explicitly, implicit in his emphasis on improvement is the idea that earlier clubs, which focused on sociability, offered their patrons a prospect of improvement by allowing them to associate themselves with members of a higher social standing (and, indeed, many 18th-century clubs sought to validate themselves by cultivating an aristocratic membership) while later clubs sought to improve their members by focusing their energy toward ventures—including, most prominently, philanthropy and scientific research—whose social and economic utility was acknowledged by the larger populace. As this evolution confirms, because club culture was so malleable—so responsive to cultural shifts whether they were abrupt or gradual—their importance to British culture, particularly in the metropolis, only increased with each passing decade as more and more types of human interaction began to fall under the scope of clubs’ operations. Thus, for Clark, this gradual move toward more decentralized and dynamic patterns of sociability is a function of British culture’s gradual adoption of the values of capitalism; in other words, as productivity becomes an ever-more-important index, voluntary association’s ties to that culture of productivity (and, by contrast, the country squierarchy’s ties to obsolete forms of technology) provided a compelling argument for voluntary association’s general utility.

While the broad shifts described by Bryson, Klein, and Clark identify some of the large-scale changes in cultural and social values that made club culture not only possible, but indeed necessary, these slow cultural movements on their own do not adequately explain the rather sudden rise of club culture in the early 18th century. I argue that two other, narrower, historical developments—in conjunction with the broader shifts in social values outlined above—provided the impetus for club culture’s sudden rise to prominence in the first half of the eighteenth century. These events were the rapid growth in London’s population—in particular the establishment of the winter season during which members of the gentry increasingly were compelled to spend most of their time at a London residence—and the consolidation of political power under Robert Walpole’s Whig ministry in the early 1720s. The combined effect of these two patterns was to bring ever-increasing numbers of well-to-do gentleman to London and take away the political engagement that might have otherwise occupied their attention. While clubs became such an important part of London social life that eventually nearly everyone—from all political affiliations, economic classes, etc.—was compelled to participate, I argue that it was these politically disaffected gentlemen who pushed London’s intellectual culture out of the contentious public space of the coffeehouse and into the more restrictive, private, and exclusive space of the private social club.

While it is well established that London’s population grew exponentially throughout the Restoration period and across the 18th century, less remarked upon are the patterns of seasonal migration that led to London’s establishment as the gentry’s cultural center. As Anna Bryson argues, the habit of spending winters in London increased among the gentry throughout the 17th century, with the pattern growing even more prevalent in
the years after the Restoration. While some may have migrated to the capital out of professional or economic necessity (as Bryson notes, enrollment figures at the Inns of Court increased exponentially over the period, indicating that more and more well-to-do young men were preparing for the bar), the primary draw of London was social. Indeed, one can find the anxiety about this newly important clash of country and city cultures played out in numerous Restoration comedies, including William Wycherly’s *The Country Wife* and George Farquhar’s *The Beaux’ Strategem*. While these conservative moralists tended to focus on the ways in which the vicious and self-absorbed values of the city corrupted the supposed moral purity of country life, London itself was changing as well, undergoing a transformation from a center of professional and governmental life to Britain’s social and cultural center, a shift which only increased the capital’s attractiveness to the fashionable gentry. In other words, as more and more gentry flocked to London, the city became more fashionable, which, in turn, made it attract even more fashionable (and would-be fashionable) gentry. This cycle played no small part in the explosion in London’s population across the 18th century, as members of the middling and lower orders filed into London, attracted by these patrons of consumer culture.

Thus, we find that patterns of migration helped to define 18th-century London as the nation’s social and cultural center; however, the changing political climate during the first half of the 18th century also served, ultimately, to underscore London’s status as a social center for the well-to-do and de-emphasize its (still formidable) status as a political

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center. A side effect of the consolidation of political power under Robert Walpole’s ministry during and after the 1720s was that broad-based political engagement was more or less discouraged. As W.A. Speck explains, the scope of the political arena became distinctly narrower after 1714 as the intense party political feuds that characterized Queen Anne’s reign faded and political power gradually moved into the hands of a small group of Court-oriented Whig politicians. These politicians, with Walpole at their head after 1721, not only controlled the House of Commons (which was, by this point, the more powerful and important of the two houses), but also controlled the distribution of powerful and lucrative ministerial appointments. The consolidation of these powers among Walpole and a few others effectively crushed the opposition for the next two decades. This pattern, along with the passage of the 1715 Septennial Act, which required parliamentary elections every seven years instead of every three, had the effect of cooling the intense political feuds of the early part of the century. Further, because there were fewer elections and, hence, fewer candidates begging for the attention of their constituents, the nation’s inner political workings moved out of the public’s immediate line of sight.

The broad chronology of these political events—i.e. intense party-political argument and strife during the first two decades of the 18th century and a period of consolidation and stabilization following after 1720—maps onto a similarly broad shift in patterns of social interaction among the gentry during the same period. As I will argue

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24 For more information about the Commons’ accumulation of power, see *Ibid.*, 15.
more fully below, during the period of dramatic and contentious action in the political arena around the turn of the 18th century and continuing until the end of Queen Anne’s reign, well-to-do men preferred to congregate in public coffeehouses. While, rather famously, certain coffeehouses tended to attract a certain clientele, these spaces were characterized by their open, public nature and the comparatively heterogeneous population that tended to congregate there. These sorts of spaces were well-suited to the type of public critical discourse described by Jürgen Habermas, and because the unstable political arena offered would-be politicians and intellectuals the hope of quick social and professional advancement, there was no shortage of well-to-do gentlemen willing to engage in this discourse. By contrast, the species of private social club I described above surged in popularity beginning in the 1720s (at virtually the same time Walpole came to power) and, unlike coffeehouses, these clubs tended to meet in private and to restrict their membership. Further, while many clubs explicitly decided upon a general topic for their conversation, very few clubs included current political issues among these topics; many more explicitly banned political debate because it incited the passions of faction and impeded the natural flow of sociable conversation. While neither the consolidation of power under Walpole nor the retreat from political engagement constituted by club culture could be said to cause the other, these two patterns no doubt compounded one another and helped to define the decades between the 1720s and 1760s as a period in which—for most well-to-do Englishmen—social pursuits superseded political ones.

Thus, the histories of 18th-century coffeehouse culture and 18th-century club culture are intimately related. Many scholars even conflate the two, since the cliques that met at certain coffeehouses often resembled clubs, and clubs themselves often met at
coffeehouses. Though their periods during which they were in fashion overlapped considerably, I will argue here that coffeehouses began to wane in popularity during the 1710s, particularly among more fashionable and learned Londoners, while clubs’ popularity grew steadily during the same period, and indeed continued to grow throughout the rest of the century. Of course it is impossible to identify a point at which clubs’ popularity overtook that of the coffeehouses, but were one to choose such a date it would undoubtedly be during the 1710s or, at the latest, in the early 1720s. The first known coffeehouse in Britain opened its doors in Oxford in 1650\textsuperscript{25}, spreading to London soon after; by 1700 coffeehouses existed all over London.\textsuperscript{26} Appearing in London around the time of the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 and growing in popularity and social importance during the years of political near-catastrophes such as the Exclusion Crisis and the Glorious Revolution, coffeehouses would remain, at least until the end of the 18th century, associated in the British cultural memory with an unstable and unpredictable political climate. This association results not simply from a chronological accident, but because coffeehouses themselves were one of the most important, if not the most important, venue in which political negotiations took place. As Brian Cowan notes in his study of 18th-century coffeehouse culture, “many of the early coffeehouses fulfilled the functional equivalent of what we would today call office space.”\textsuperscript{27} Indeed, most business (political and otherwise) was conducted in public houses of one sort or another—taverns,


\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, 29.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, 192.
alehouses, inns, etc.—but the coffeehouse benefited from coffee’s association with sobriety and productivity (as contrasted, for instance, with ale’s associations with torpor and dullness). However, these were still very much public spaces; more popular coffeehouses could easily attract 40 or 50 patrons at any given time, and most coffeehouses sat all of these patrons together at 3 or 4 long tables. With so much important business so easily overheard, coffeehouses became centers for gossip, and many keepers of coffeehouses cleverly capitalized on this pattern by stocking the latest newspapers, making their businesses centers for legitimate news as well. As Cowan explains:

The early coffeehouses were most notable as centers for news culture. The coffeehouses bundled news and coffee together as a means of attracting their customers. News could be consumed in a variety of different forms: in print, both licensed and unlicensed; in manuscript; and aloud, as gossip, hearsay, and word of mouth.

Given the coffeehouse’s deep connections with the emerging culture of news and information, it seems like no coincidence that the period generally acknowledged as the golden age of the coffeehouse—the first decades of the 18th century, under the Whig ascendancy led by fashionable coffeehouse patrons such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele—is also remembered as an age characterized by the “rage of party.”

\[28\] Ibid., 44.

\[29\] Ibid., 83.

\[30\] Ibid., 87.

\[31\] Ibid., 193.
One of the primary reasons why, in the early 18th century, clubs replaced coffeehouses as the primary venue for Britain’s intellectual culture was an irresolvable tension between the idea of coffeehouse culture as articulated by Addison and Steele in their *Tatler* and *Spectator* essays and the reality of coffeehouse conversation, which was clearly more democratic than the polite patrons would have liked. As Cowan argues, for Addison and Steele the coffeehouse was ultimately more of an ideal than an actual place:

In its ideal form, the public sphere envisioned by the Spectatorial periodical essay was a carefully policed forum for urbane but not risqué conversation, for moral reflection rather than obsession with the news of the day or the latest fashions, and for temperate agreement on affairs of state rather than heated political debate. In other words, it was not envisioned as an open forum for competitive debate between ideologies and interests, but rather as a medium whereby a stable sociopolitical consensus could be enforced through making partisan political debate appear socially unacceptable in public spaces such as coffeehouses or in media like periodical newspapers.\(^{32}\)

Cowan’s characterization of the Spectatorial public sphere, much like Anna Bryson’s ideals of “urbanity” and “civility” and Klein’s notion of “agreeability” described above, are marked not by debate and disagreement, but by the kind of natural and easily-achieved consensus that results from a shared background and culture, an ideal that finds perhaps its most eloquent expression (as Lawrence Klein notes) in the Earl of Shaftesbury’s philosophy. As is evidenced by Shaftesbury’s defense of clubs quoted at the beginning of this chapter, private clubs were much better equipped than coffeehouses

to achieve this ideal of easy consensus, since those who fostered disagreement could be 
excluded. One can see these assumptions at work in Swift’s *Journal to Stella*. When 
Swift arrives in London in the fall of 1710 he resumes his relationships with his Whig 
political contacts, and as such he is obliged to spend much of his time in coffeehouses, 
particularly St. James Coffeehouse where Addison held court. However, as Swift’s 
relationship with Addison sours, he resolves to change his behavior: “Pr’ythee, do not you 
observe how strangely I have changed my company and manner of living? I never go to 
a coffee-house; you hear no more of Addison, Steele, Henley, Lady Lucy, Mrs. Finch, 
Lord Somers, Lord Halifax, etc. I think I have altered for the better.”33 As Swift 
extricates himself from his coffeehouse connections, he invariably turns to private clubs 
for his new connections, forming a club with 12 of his new Tory friends. As Swift 
explains, “The end of our Club is, to advance conversation and friendship, and to reward 
deserving persons with our interest and recommendation. We take in none but men of 
wit or men of interest; and if we go on as we begin, no other Club in this town will be 
worth talking of.”34 As we can see in Swift’s account, exclusivity and like-mindedness 
are they key reasons he prefers his club over the coffeehouses. Despite their political and 
personal disagreements, Swift and Addison shared the assumption that social and 
intellectual stimulation are compromised when participants’ ideas and assumptions are 
too heterogeneous; true wit is the result of minds working comfortably and harmoniously. 
Given this assumption, it seems inevitable that clubs—which meticulously curated their 
membership—would be more attractive than the coffeehouse, where the best


conversations would invariably be disrupted by other patrons who were not of a similar mind.

Under this account, the rise of club culture seems, at its core, like a conservative movement, a backing away from the more open and democratic exchanges that took place in the coffeehouses. While modern readers might choose to judge club culture in this way, this is certainly not the way that the typical urbane gentleman of the early 18th century would have understood the matter. Clubs did represent a retreat into the private sphere, but the primary goal of this retreat was not simply to cultivate exclusivity, but to create social spaces that were not defined by political allegiances. Club culture was a product of an era of consolidated political power, and a close examination finds that political passions were merely repressed, not eliminated. Most clubs took great pains to present themselves as bi- or post-partisan, but many of these same clubs came to an end over political disputes; Sir Francis Dashwood’s Medmenham Monks, for instance, were a private club devoted to debauchery, but they ultimately parted ways due to an irresolvable political feud between the Earl of Sandwich and John Wilkes. While coffeehouses reveled in their patrons’ political identities, members of clubs, by and large, worked to order their microcosmic societies by just about any criterion other than political power or party allegiance. This attempt to control and order the makeup of their societies—and to make the instruments of this control legible through titles, ranks, etc. — does seem conservative to modern readers who have been raised to value democracy and diversity. However, the goal of most clubs was not simply to establish this order, but to establish that order so that they could move past questions of social status and get to what the club wanted to do, whether that was engage in learned conversation, share scientific
knowledge, or make bawdy puns. The patrons of 18th-century clubs likely would have argued that a pure democracy—or even a natural meritocracy—cannot function adequately without an explicitly-defined and externally visible social structure that ensured that each person knew exactly where he stood, and clubs provided this type of structure in a way that the more open and anarchic environment of the coffeehouse could not.

In its attempt to curate and control social interaction, the 18th-century club bears a striking resemblance to another emerging venue for conversation, the French salon. To create a comprehensive list of the ways in which the French salon culture of the 17th and 18th centuries resembled and differed from 18th-century British club culture would be a rather quixotic quest, since such a list would, at some point, almost certainly devolve into a list of the ways in which French and British cultures differed during this period. That being said, French salons and British clubs shared, I argue, a devotion to sociability as an art and as an end in itself. Though both are often identified as institutions of Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere, neither devoted themselves drily to the mere pursuit and development of ideas. Indeed, scholars who have sought to highlight the social and political significance of these groups have a habit of making both clubs and salons seem less fun than they often were.

Unlike British clubs, which can sometimes seem hopelessly heterogeneous, the material circumstances of French salons were more or less uniform. Salons were universally headed by a salonnière, a woman of (usually, but not always) established social rank who hosted the group, provided refreshments, and directed the topic and the flow of conversation. Salons almost always met in private homes, usually beginning in
mid-afternoon, when a meal would be served, with discussion continuing late into the evening. Salons usually met once or twice a week, and a salonnière might choose to devote certain hours of the day or certain days of the week to particular topics of conversation. Those topics were, by and large, extremely diverse, though they were almost always serious: literature, science, and political theory were but a few of the disciplines explored by the patrons of France’s salons. Another defining feature of the French salon was its temporary suspension of social rank inside its doors. While the salonnière was the group’s undisputed head, different social groups—particularly the nobility and the bourgeoisie—mixed freely at the salon, relating to one another as equals and giving primacy to the strength of ideas themselves rather than the social rank or standing of the person who articulated those ideas. Salons were, thus, the perfect place to make or break one’s reputation as a writer or a thinker, since one’s social rank and background were, ostensibly at least, ignored once one entered the salon.

Somewhat counter-intuitively given its defiantly egalitarian internal structure, many scholars have understood salons as the nobility’s attempt to maintain their social relevance as a class in the wake of changing political and economic realities in early modern Europe. Both Benedetta Craveri and Steven Kale argue that, as the nobility’s role as organizers of local military power declined in late medieval and early modern Europe, the nobility was forced to find new ways to justify their class identity and social


utility. The salon, then, served to recast the nobility as a class defined by *style* rather than by military might or wealth. The internalization of the salon’s rather baroque, and always unwritten, social codes then served as evidence of good breeding. Kale also suggests that, thanks to its origins as a venue for performing the nobility’s class identity, the salon reached its peak in social importance during times when “French politics was open enough to allow for a certain degree of debate and association, but closed enough to restrict active participation to a narrow elite.”37 Thus, while the salon sought to make room for marginalized voices within its doors, the institution’s influence in the outside world was fundamentally tied to the nobility’s constantly fluctuating level of influence in wider French culture.

Scholars have also seen the French salon as a historically important social institution because of the unique role women played in salons’ conception and management. Undoubtedly, the salon was one of the few venues in which intellectually curious women could reveal their desire for knowledge, to say nothing of the unique opportunity to discuss intellectual matters with men as relative equals. How, then, did women’s power within the peculiar social milieu of the salon translate to political and social power outside the salon’s doors? While the evidence seems clear that women had near-absolute dominion over the structure of the salon itself, and, hence, could be said to serve as the architects of the social world that undergirded the Enlightenment, it is

difficult to trace definitively the influence this structure had on more recognizable literary, political, and cultural products of the Enlightenment.\(^{38}\)

While British clubs did not, in general, share the salon’s gynocentrism, its relatively serious intellectual character, or its traditional ties to the nobility, clubs did share the salon’s emphasis on the inherent joy of sociability. In recent decades, scholars have downplayed this clearly fundamental tenet of salon culture as they traced how salons impacted women’s place in wider French culture or how salons related to the political clubs that contributed so directly to the French Revolution. However, the English publication of Benedetta Craveri’s fascinating book, *The Age of Conversation*,\(^ {39}\) has served to refocus scholars’ attention on the aesthetic delights of the salon. For all of the great literature and profound philosophical and political ideas that resulted from salon culture, the institution itself was founded on the joy of interpersonal communication, and the anecdotes that Craveri relates recall, for more anglophilic readers, the vibrant social world described by James Boswell in his *Life of Johnson*. In describing the differences between the salon and our own social world, Craveri notes that:

> It is the art of conversation—society's art par excellence—that we miss most and that most demands our admiration, just as it commanded the appreciation of La Bruyère and Talleyrand, developed as an entertaining end in itself, as a game for shared pleasure, conversation obeyed strict laws that guaranteed harmony based on


perfect equality. These were laws of clarity, measure, elegance, and regard for the self-respect of others. A talent for listening was more appreciated than one for speaking. Exquisite courtesy restrained vehemence and prevented quarrels. In describing the salon, Craveri’s mix of legal and aesthetic language is telling. Within the salon, conversation is an “art,” yet it is still defined by “strict laws.” It is not, however, the mere strictness of the social code that shapes the space, but this possibility of making art out of human behavior, a possibility betrayed by the evocative phrase “exquisite courtesy.” It is this elevation of human behavior to the level of art, this wholehearted acknowledgement of the importance of aesthetic experience to feelings of sociability, in which French salon culture and British club culture most resemble one another.

As I will argue later in this dissertation, however, not all British clubs shared the salonnières’ tenet that conversation was an end in itself. In reading about French salon culture, one often wonders how those who attended salons found the time to write the works of literature for which they are now best remembered. Though, as scholars such as Dena Goodman and James Van Horn Melton have argued, the French salon was fundamentally tied to the world of French letters. The oppressive censorship of French totalitarianism meant that much of what was said at salons could not appear in print, at


least within France’s borders. It is for that reason, perhaps, that French salons can often seem like floating islands, all but detached from the wider currents of French culture. Many British clubs, on the other hand, had a far more intimate and transparent relationship to print culture, publicizing their proceedings and membership lists, buying and reading texts together, and even directly sponsoring publications. While salons had to keep print culture (particularly of the political variety) at arm’s length lest they attract the attention of government spies and censors, British clubs were relatively free to fashion their relationship to print on an individual basis, and while many groups affirmed the salonnières’ belief in conversation as an end in itself, many others looked to print to validate and enshrine for posterity the most productive and interesting parts of their conversations.

Along with coffeehouse culture and the French salon, another institution that heavily influenced the development of the 18th-century club was freemasonry. Also like coffeehouses and salons, freemasonry is often understood as part of 18th-century club culture itself, though the origins, character, and reputation of freemasonry were markedly different from the wider clubbing phenomenon. Part of the reason why confusion persists about the relationship between freemasonry and club culture in general during the 18th century is because freemasonry remains an extremely contentious topic, even within academia. Writers who have a vested interest in freemasonry’s self-created mythology—primarily authors of salacious and outrageous popular histories and, of course, masons themselves—are not easily distinguished from reputable critics who want to uncover the actual history of freemasonry. Thus, even the most straightforward histories of 17th- and 18th-century freemasonry must engage with the masons’ attempts to mythologize their
own history, and as a result authors often perpetuate the very myths they try to dispel. In the interest of avoiding these scholarly mis-steps, my remarks on freemasonry itself will be limited to verifiable and widely acknowledged facts and the swirl of rumors that surrounded the group will be treated as just that: rumors. That said, freemasonry emerged in Scotland around the turn of the 17th century, evolving from the professional guilds that structured much of medieval life in the British Isles. The most likely explanation for how freemasonry evolved from these guilds is as follows: in many Scottish towns during this period members of guilds devoted to professions such as masonry, carpentry, blacksmithing, etc., enjoyed the “freedom of the city,” a set of special rights that allowed them to hold events such as public parades and marches and society feasts (this is the origin of the word “free” in “freemasonry”). Eventually these events became fashionable, and some gentlemen unconnected with the guild desired entrance to them. These gentlemen were made members of the masons’ guild despite the fact that they had no connection to the profession of masonry. For reasons that remain unclear (perhaps simply because of the influx of Scotsmen into London during the 17th and 18th centuries), this practice gradually spread outside Scotland into England and Ireland and, eventually, throughout the world.

Perhaps as a way to justify the fact that most of its membership had no connection to the modern profession of masonry, the freemasons developed a mythology that posited building and architecture as metaphors for a sound moral life. Masons have always been careful to insist that freemasonry is not a religion, a fact that not only has shielded them from persecution during times of intense religious bitterness (if not outright hostility), but also significantly broadened the group’s potential membership base. They do, however,
require that masons believe in a “supreme being.” Within masonic ritual, this “supreme being” is referred to as the “Grand Architect of the Universe,” and familiar Judeo-Christian moral tenets are recast under this ornate architectural allegory. Masons’ commitment to exploring this allegory through their self-mythology, iconography, and ritual is, perhaps, the group’s defining feature for outsiders, as masonic ritual can seem obscure, bizarre, and suspect, particularly to those unfamiliar with this over-arching metaphor. Indeed, from its inception until the present day, religious conservatives and conspiracy theorists have accused freemasons of propagating occult beliefs and rituals. While one can argue that it is these extremists themselves who have propagated the associations between freemasonry and the occult in the popular imagination, one must also acknowledge that masons themselves have cultivated the aura of mystery surrounding their group, with their penchants for closed-door meetings and participating in public marches and parades while wearing unusual regalia.

Thus, we see that much of the history of freemasonry is distinct from that of general club culture in the 18th century; freemasonry evolved earlier than clubs and in Scotland rather than England. However, both private social clubs and freemasonry were part of the wider fashion for voluntary association in the 18th century; both surged dramatically in popularity across the 18th century and both must have seemed virtually inextricable from the social fabric of the English-speaking world by the year 1900. As such, there was no small degree of reciprocal influence between freemasonry and other sorts of clubs. Take, for instance, the pattern of pseudo-mystical and occult practices that one finds in many 18th-century clubs. There is no precedent for this sort of behavior in the Restoration and early-18th-century coffeehouse culture to which club culture originally reacted, and these
rituals also seem inconsistent with the values of urbanity and civility that club culture tended, more generally, to uphold. Undoubtedly, though, many clubmen were attracted to the air of eroticized mystery that surrounded masonic ritual and sought to cultivate a similar mystique around their own clubs. The Scottish Beggar’s Benison society, for instance, was a secret club devoted to the pleasures of sex and the power of the phallus. In a parody of the freemasons’ use of arcane and antiquated architectural instruments, the group curated a collection of erotically-charged objects such as phallically-shaped glasses and a wig purportedly made from the pubic hair of one of Charles II’s mistresses. The group also possessed a dish that was said to be central to the group’s initiation rituals, which climaxed with all of the present members ejaculating into the vessel. It is impossible to determine whether or to what extent these objects were used for their intended purposes, but it seems clear that much of the power of these objects was symbolic; they gave the gossip’s imagination a starting point from which he or she could develop a spectacularly lurid picture of what might be happening behind the group’s closed doors. The freemasons’ rituals and garb also seemed to capture the imagination of Sir Francis Dashwood. As one historian notes, Dashwood was an “enthusiastic fancy-dresser,”\(^43\) and indeed it seems clear that the oriental flair in dress practiced by the groups Dashwood helmed—including the Divan Club and the Society of Dilettanti—must have been inspired, at least to some degree, by the masons’ fetching robes and headgear. Dashwood’s most notorious riff on freemasonry, however, was his Medmenham Monks, a private club of elite rakes who met at Dashwood’s estate in West Wycombe. Just as the masons’ closed-door meetings allowed the more paranoid members of the public to

speculate so wildly about what transpired behind those doors, Dashwood cultivated an air of mystery around the Medmenham Monks. The existence of the group itself was something of an “open secret,” but what actually transpired at their meetings remains, even now, impossible to ascertain. Stories about the group abound, including tales of group sex, prostitution, occult ritual, satanism, black magic, and (most mildly) superhuman feats of alcohol consumption. Nearly all of these reports, however, are mere rumors; most are traceable back to Charles Johnston’s fictionalized account of the group in his 1760 novel *Chrysal; or, the Adventures of a Guinea*, or are merely speculation based on other known facts about the members. Dashwood’s collection of occult and erotic reading material, for instance, has convinced many writers that the Medmenham Monks experimented with the actions described in Dashwood’s library. No matter what actually transpired at the Monks’ meetings, however, it seems clear that a major part of their appeal was that they were not only a society, but a “secret society,” and freemasonry served, to some extent, as a workable model for how secrecy paired with hints of the occult could be used both to capture and to manipulate the public’s imagination.

Along with secrecy and exclusivity, freemasonry’s organizational structure also influenced 18th-century clubs, even if most clubs did not fully adopt the masons’ baroque internal organization. Freemasonry’s distinctions of ranks—its degrees, and its offices such as “Grand Master”—clearly influenced many clubs that used these offices either as honoraria or as ways to distribute the group’s administrative and financial responsibilities. Nearly every club had a president and treasurer. In Swift’s club, for instance, president was a rotating office, and the member who held it was responsible for

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44 For more on the Medmenham Monks, see Chapter 5.
settling the tavern bill (excluding wine) for the next meeting.\textsuperscript{45} Dashwood’s Society of Dilettanti elected an “Archmaster” who, Society historian Bruce Redford argues, resembled the masonic grand master and presided over an initiation ceremony resembling the freemasons’.\textsuperscript{46} Less serious societies often manipulated this idea of rank, title and office to aid in their mockery. One is again reminded of the Oxford Free Cynics’ “symbolical words and grimaces,”\textsuperscript{47} which must have made the initiates appear rather ridiculous in front of the existing members, as well as Dr. Alexander Hamilton’s Tuesday Club, whose members intentionally elected their dullest member president to make him a more visible target of the others’ ridicule. In most cases, this light hazing was good-natured; Hamilton even undercut his own authority as secretary of the Tuesday Club by referring to himself in his history of the club as “Loquacious Scribble.”

While clubs clearly were influenced by the freemasons’ penchant for making their social organization explicit through rank and title, the unique ways in which clubs adapted this pattern ultimately served to separate clubs from the masons. The masonic approach was decidedly pseudo-political; not only did masonic rules and regulations dictate the distribution of power and authority within a lodge in much the same way that ministerial positions distribute responsibility throughout a government, but freemasonry also evolved a set of what can only be called diplomatic conventions whereby lodges officially recognized and established diplomatic relations with one another. These

\textsuperscript{45} Jonathan Swift, \textit{The Journal to Stella} (Middlesex: Echo Library, 2007), 283.


relationships were mediated through the Grand Lodge, which controlled the charters of new lodges and negotiated the rules that would define and govern freemasonry. Most clubs, on the other hand, were far less organized, and very few clubs sought to evolve into franchises. Most clubs had a goal beyond simply establishing and managing a club—they wanted to engage in stimulating conversation, or debate seriously, or discuss their latest science experiments—and for these clubs the formal social apparatus was useful only insofar as it aided the members in achieving their primary aims. For those who were interested in the mock-politicizing that was so essential a part of freemasonry, joining the masons themselves obviously would have been a far more gratifying and expedient choice than attempting to start a large, federated organization from scratch. Further, the prospect of creating his own club from scratch would have appealed to creative and entrepreneurial 18th-century gentlemen in a way that freemasonry’s strictly federated structure could not. If freemasonry was, like club culture, a sort of social experiment, then it was one whose parameters were dictated by the largely unseen hand of the Grand Lodge. Put a different way, the mason was following someone else’s rules; clubmen could create those rules for themselves. With such a clear division in character between the clubs and the masons, both types of group were able to grow, largely unimpeded, throughout the 18th century.

Freemasonry and clubs not only did not significantly cannibalize one another’s potential membership, they probably helped one another achieve their ubiquity in the culture of the 18th-century English-speaking world. Freemasonry’s federated structure—while it likely would have felt inhibiting to clubmen like Dashwood and Hamilton who ambitiously sought to create microcosmic societies in their own image—was essential to
its spread throughout the globe, particularly since freemasonry was embraced early on by Britain’s merchant seamen. These seamen aided in the spread of masonic lodges not only in the well-known British colonies in America, the West Indies, and India, but also across eastern and western Europe and throughout the Ottoman Empire, these lodges often serving as a connection to British culture for Englishmen who were, in geographical terms at least, very far from home. Freemasonry’s federated structure meant that individual lodges—no matter their physical location—had a consistency that would have been extremely attractive to travelers who missed Britain’s unique take on sociability.

While modern scholars have argued, more or less convincingly, that the spread of freemasonry aided the spread of British political ideals such as freedom of the press and democracy throughout the world,⁴⁸ the spread of freemasonry inarguably influenced the spread of other British-style social institutions such as clubs throughout the English-speaking world, and indeed further. Nowhere is this clearer than in America, where clubs made a belated but powerful appearance on the social scene in the 1740s and continued, along with freemasonry, to grow rapidly in popularity over the course of the century.

Thus, we find that clubs’ relationship to other forums for sociability during the 17th and 18th centuries was extraordinarily complex, with clubs both adopting useful characteristics of other institutions and deliberately reacting against other aspects of those institutions. The ideal of easy, productive sociability posited by most patrons of club culture is important, though, not only because of its place in the histories of politics and sociability, but also because club culture was an articulation of a new kind of social theory. As I have argued (and as I will argue more extensively in chapter 2), men of the

18th century sought to join clubs because their notions of how and why human beings socialize were changing. As I will argue in the next section, the new social theories that found their expression in club culture continue to interest and influence 20th and 21st-century social theorists.

As the numerous references above indicate, the past three decades have seen no shortage of scholarly interest in the nature of 18th-century sociability. Even given all this attention, though, no single work has emerged as authoritative. The only near-universal scholarly touchstone remains Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a work that, particularly since its first English-language publication in 1989, has been cited in nearly every serious scholarly discussion of 18th-century social institutions, including clubs as well as coffeehouses, salons, and freemasonry. Despite its ubiquity, however, nearly every critic who invokes Habermas’s text does so with a host of qualifications. The main problem with Habermas’s text is that it is not what many scholars would like it to be: a definitive and convincing historical account of how changes in patterns of sociability in 18th-century England influenced the period’s rapidly-evolving political climate. While Habermas clearly views his own project as historical—the book is organized as a history of the concepts of the “public sphere” and “public opinion” from the 17th century until the middle of the 20th century—his chronology is typically criticized as reductive and slapdash, and his most influential readers have largely ignored this chronology altogether, attempting to extract from it more general theoretical conclusions about the complex interactions between the private and public spheres, the media, and the state. As James Melton succinctly puts it, the
central question of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is one of social theory: “what are the conditions under which rational, critical, and genuinely open discussion of public issues becomes possible?” To read Habermas’s work as pure social theory, however (a strategy which, as I stated above, requires one to read against Habermas’s own stated aims and essentially to disregard the structure and the organization of the book), is to ignore the fact that his work has been particularly important to critics who focus on the Restoration and 18th century. Thus, rather than entirely jettisoning Habermas’s chronology as some critics have suggested, it seems rather more prudent to examine why Habermas found this period so important and why critics of Restoration and 18th-century literature and culture have continued to apply Habermas’s insights to their period.

Though Habermas is the critic responsible for making Restoration coffee-house culture more widely known among scholars and critics outside of eighteenth-century studies, Habermas does not identify anything endemic to the nature of the coffeehouse that accounts for its importance in his “socio-historical analysis.” Indeed, coffeehouses of much the same stripe as those that plied their trade during the Restoration era continued to exist well after what Habermas identifies as the institution’s “golden age” between


50 Habermas refers to his own work as a “socio-historical analysis,” (Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 2), admittedly an ambiguous description, but, nevertheless, one that places historical analysis on the same footing as abstract social theory.

What interests Habermas about coffeehouses are not the venues themselves, but the period of time during which they were popular, a period that (in Habermas’s account) allowed them to serve an important role in the complex relationship between private citizens, the news media, and the state. Habermas argues that coffeehouses served, essentially, as the interface between the private lives of citizens and the state; coffeehouses were the venue where the disparate opinions of the rabble were (using the medium of the public use of reason) debated and refined into “public opinion,” a force which was uniquely situated to exert real political force for the first (and possibly the last) time during this period. While the political circumstances of the decades around the turn of the 18th century (including the growth of Parliament’s power under Harley and Walpole, and, relatedly, a series of monarchs who were either, like James II and William III, embroiled in constitutional controversy, or, like Anne, sickly and reclusive) played an important role in allowing space for public opinion’s newfound importance, another important factor was this public’s relationship with the news media. As I noted above, coffeehouses were particularly important as centers of news culture, but (as Habermas points out), the birth of news culture actually predated the establishment of a news industry later in the 18th and into the 19th century. Later publishers would recast public debate as something to be consumed passively (think of the debates between panels of experts on public television), but during the period of the coffeehouses’ golden age, Habermas argues, patrons actively debated the contents of the news. During the

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period he identifies, coffeehouses themselves were where the news—presented, essentially, as raw material in the early periodical press—was digested and where its significance was decided.\(^{54}\) It was only later in the 18th century, Habermas goes on to explain, that the press itself would become the primary venue for criticism. Indeed, the “public” as Habermas defines it was, during the period of the coffeehouses’ dominance, identical with the readership of this news media.\(^{55}\) Due to this unique confluence of historical factors, “public opinion” during this period, more closely than it ever would again, approximated a sort of rational consensus of an informed public, and that rational consensus could be wielded as power in the political arena.

While Habermas frequently lumps in clubs with coffeehouses and salons, there are two problems with extending Habermas’s analysis of coffeehouse culture to clubs: first, his analysis of coffeehouse culture is based largely on accounts of suspect veracity; second, the “socio-historical analysis” that Habermas applies to coffeehouses does not apply in the same way to clubs because the institutions thrived in vastly different political climates and had entirely different relationships to state power. As numerous scholars have pointed out, Habermas’s account of the coffeehouses relies primarily—perhaps even exclusively—on Addison’s and Steele’s accounts of coffeehouses in their *Tatler* and *Spectator* essays. Of course, Addison and Steele clearly had a vested interest in portraying coffeehouse culture in this manner, as they were attempting to cast themselves as authoritative moral philosophers who were, nevertheless, urbane and fashionable.

\(^{54}\) *Ibid.*, 32.

While subsequent historians such as Brian Cowan\textsuperscript{56} have been able to corroborate Habermas’s contention that coffeehouses were centers of news culture and political gossip, historical evidence hardly points to coffeehouses being the rational utopia that they can sometimes seem like in Habermas’s account. Still, even if coffeehouses were not as strictly dedicated to the use of reason as Habermas would have them, Habermas’s account of the rapidly-evolving, dynamic relationship between private and public spheres, the media, and the state helps us to understand why coffeehouses thrived during what he describes as their “golden age” and why coffeehouses became vastly less important at virtually the same moment that Robert Walpole came to power. As Habermas argues, during the 16th and 17th century as the old feudal order collapsed and the modern state arose in its place, the latter defined a zone of state (i.e. “public”) authority. As the body of persons subject to that state authority became self-aware of their status as an “abstract counterpoint” to state authority, this opponent of state authority coalesced into what Habermas calls “the public sphere of civil society.”\textsuperscript{57} Though they were defined in opposition to “public” (i.e. state) authority, this sphere was not private as such; that which was not subject to state authority could be and was still a matter of concern to the general public. In other words, the realms of state and private authority overlapped significantly, particularly since state decisions in regards to issues such as mercantilist or tax policies could have far-reaching effects on ordinary people’s private lives, influencing the things they bought, how they dressed, etc. Because of this


\textsuperscript{57} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 23.
increasing overlap in state and private authority during the 17th and 18th centuries, what Habermas calls “the zone of contact” between state authority and citizens’ private lives widened considerably. Habermas insists that this zone of contact was fundamentally “critical” in the sense that it provoked “the critical judgment of a public making use of its reason.”\textsuperscript{58} Put differently, as government began to play a larger and more decisive role in citizens’ private lives, those citizens were forced to think rationally about how government affected them personally (particularly since there was, as yet, no critical news media to make those connections for them). While Habermas’s point about the critical character of this zone of contact is debatable, I want to turn my attention to the curious dynamic between public and private at play in the “zone of contact” that he describes. What interests Habermas about coffeehouses is precisely that in them private persons chose to make their ideas public. If we are to accept Habermas’s contention that it is the willful and conscious entry into this zone of contact between private and public that constitutes “the public sphere of civil society,” then it seems logical to understand club culture as a revision of the public/private dynamic that was at play in the coffeehouse.

The abbreviated political history of 18th-century Britain recounted above provides a tenable answer to why the nature of this “zone of contact” between the private sphere and state authority would have to be revised. In the turbulent political climate of the early 18\textsuperscript{th} century, the coffeehouses’ function as the primary zone of contact between private and state authority was important because it was here where the opposition would find the rationale to support their hoped-for change of power. During Queen Anne’s reign, 

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 24.
when Tories held an uncertain grip on power and Whigs constantly anticipated the sickly queen’s death, the court of public opinion in the coffeehouses fiercely debated what changes in policy should follow when Anne’s death would trigger a redistribution of power. After Anne’s reign, however, Walpole’s powerful ministry and the heartiness of George I meant that the prospect of a vast redistribution of power seemed further off. The opposition’s courting of public opinion hardly stopped—most visible was Bolingbroke with his paper *The Craftsman*—but the free-for-all that was politics under Anne’s reign rapidly coagulated into a dynamic that found Robert Walpole against everyone else, and Walpole holding all of the cards. Under Walpole, the most important zone of contact was no longer the “public sphere of civil society” because political negotiations were not, for the time being at least, about negotiating the will of the public against the dictates of the state. Rather, the hardening of party politics under Walpole’s ministry meant that the most important zone of contact was now between the party in power and the opposition. Harley, Bolingbroke and the other Tories had argued for the Treaty of Utrecht by pitting the interests of the people against the interests of the state. Walpole, by contrast, was able to consolidate his power not by calming the waters that lay between the public and the state, but by navigating around them. Walpole maintained authority by deftly managing intra-governmental matters such as the distribution of ministerial appointments and royal patronage, and how Walpole would choose to distribute favor and how he would placate the voice of the opposition became the most important political questions during his ministry. Thus, the political sphere’s most important zone of contact moved from the coffeehouses (people versus the state) to Parliament and Downing Street (Whigs versus Tories).
This chronology explains why coffeehouses gradually became less important to politics under the Georges, but why, then, did clubs arise to take their place? Several scholars noted above pose compelling arguments as to why patterns of urban migration and other material changes in the lives of 18th-century Londoners necessitated a reorganization of the social sphere around qualities other than family lineage and occupation, but why did clubs, in particular, seem to serve these needs (at least for men) better than any other social institution (at least after 1730)? In order to answer this question, I appeal to a critic whose work is not typically applied to 18th-century clubs: Pierre Bordieu. Bordieu’s famous contention in his landmark study *Distinction* that, “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier,”59 famously foregrounded the importance of aesthetic judgment in how we evaluate the relative value of social groups. Bordieu’s study sought to map socially recognized hierarchies within the arts (between different periods, genres, or artists) onto a similar socially recognized hierarchy of consumers who are divided along lines of social and class background and level of education, revealing that aesthetic judgments are fundamental to the way that we understand class divisions. Though Bordieu does not present a historical chronology comparable to Habermas’s, I contend that the process of social (self-)definition by way of aesthetic taste and judgment that Bordieu describes has its origin in the same 18th-century social institutions as the “public sphere of civil society” that Habermas describes. Indeed, Habermas himself acknowledges the importance of aesthetic judgment to the formation of the kinds of communities he describes, arguing that the communities that were constituted in the coffeehouses and salons began as critical literary discourse, the scope of the conversation

widening to include politics only after the tone of these discussions had been established. As above, what is important here is not the chronology that Habermas describes, but his identification of debates about aesthetic judgments as primary to (or models for) critical discussions about political issues. I argue that (largely in response to the sequence of political developments described above) the movement from coffeehouses to clubs constituted not only a retreat from the political sphere on the parts of clubs’ membership, but also an implicit acknowledgement that aesthetic judgment is the most intellectually tenable form of critical conversation. Over time—perhaps due to clubs’ continued dominance of male social life throughout the rest of the 18th century—aesthetic judgment would become codified as one of the true markers—perhaps the only true marker—of authentic class identity.

As most scholars of club culture have noted, clubs and coffeehouses differed relatively little in important defining factors such as their clientele and their regional distribution. Where they did differ was in the fact that clubs chose consciously to constitute themselves around a particular idea or activity. These ideas and activities can be described, in nearly every instance in which the group falls under the definition of clubs I established at the beginning of this chapter, as aesthetic preferences, and clubs relied on these aesthetic preferences to, as Bordieu put it, classify themselves as classifiers. Many clubs’ attitude toward aesthetic appreciation was obvious; for connoisseur societies such as the Divan Club, their raison d’etre was the appreciation of art and culture of a particular stripe. However, aesthetic allegiances were no less important to other types of groups. The science clubs, for instance, were not simply

dedicated to natural science as an area of intellectual inquiry, they were also dedicated to scientific inquiry as a kind of lifestyle, or a culture. These clubs’ emphasis on the primacy of quantifiable data over theoretical reasoning and their preference for a plain, direct style were just as important as aesthetic allegiances as they were as expedient procedures. The embrace of these aesthetic preferences, likewise, classified its adherents (who announced their status via membership in clubs and societies) as a new breed of science professional superior to the old model of the dilettante or gentleman experimenter. Similarly, the members of the Nonsense Club founded by Charles Churchill and Robert Lloyd rallied around “nonsense” as an aesthetic ideal that positioned the group’s members as an avant-garde who were more daring than members of the Augustan establishment who emphasized order and logic. By billing themselves as microcosmic societies, clubs implicitly compared themselves to other societies—other clubs, certainly, but more importantly society as a whole—and the distinctions they made between themselves and these other societies, by and large, were based on their aesthetic preferences for particular topics of inquiry or styles of discussion.

Thus, we find that while previous scholars have tended to characterize 18th-century clubs as institutions that fostered increased civic and political engagement, an examination of the political and cultural conditions under which club culture developed and a closer examination of clubs themselves reveal a more complicated picture. In contrast to the coffeehouses of Restoration and early-18th-century London, which were politically charged public spaces, clubs tended to keep their distance from the political sphere. Further, whereas other venues for sociability constituted communities around
political ideology (coffeehouses, political parties), occupation (guilds), geography (the
country house, the feudal estate), or birth (the domestic and extended families), clubs
defined themselves by their aesthetic allegiances. These aesthetic allegiances and the
judgments based on them not only established common ground and easy conversation
among the clubs’ membership, but also allowed clubs’ members to perform their
allegiances to established and/or ambition toward higher class status.

In the preceding pages I have attempted to sketch the political and cultural
conditions that led to clubs’ popularity in the 18th century, establishing a chronology of
club culture’s development that relies too heavily on neither Habermas’s history of the
development of the public sphere nor older (but persistent) Whiggish narratives about
economic progress and the advancement of capitalism. In the next chapter I will examine
attitudes toward and arguments about sociability in 17th- and 18th-century philosophical
discourse, noting how these critical and theoretical conversations influenced the shape of
18th-century club culture (in the case of 17th-century philosophers such as Thomas
Hobbes and John Locke) and responded to clubs’ popularity (in regard to 18th-century
philosophers such as the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, Adam Smith, and David Hume).
Chapters 3-5 present case studies of particular clubs whose members used the aesthetic
allegiances by which they defined themselves to perform—and in some cases attempt to
change—their members’ class status. Chapter 3 focuses on the Robin Hood Society, a
London debating club populated by working men, predominantly tradesmen. The
members of the Robin Hood saw an opportunity for social advancement in intellectual
culture’s emerging focus on the power of ideas themselves rather than the authority of the
person who delivered them, and the men who debated there worked to emulate the
intellectual culture that they hoped would embrace them. Chapter 4 examines two agricultural research societies, the Dublin Society and the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture, and Commerce (later the RSA, or Royal Society of Arts). These clubs comprised predominantly middle-class intellectuals who were interested in the advancement of scientific research, particularly that which contributed to Britain’s economic prosperity. While the Robin Hood Society attempted to emulate the aesthetic preferences of those above them, these agricultural clubs were more ambivalent about their class allegiances. One finds that attitude apparent in their approach to rhetoric. While their middle-class values of productivity led them to prefer the terse and direct style of the “new science,” members also sought the patronage of approval of the upper classes. However, in arguing for the value of their groups’ work to these classes, members of the Dublin Society and the RSA employed a different, much older set of literary conventions for portraying agricultural progress: georgic poetry. Thus, these groups used their aesthetic allegiances to different types of rhetoric to navigate their relationship between the middle and upper classes. Finally, Chapter 5 considers two elite clubs: Dr. Alexander Hamilton’s Tuesday Club in Annapolis, Maryland, and Sir Francis Dashwood’s Medmenham Monks (also known as the Hell-Fire Club). Rather than perform their upper-class status through traditional connoisseurship, these groups defined themselves as members of the ultra-elite by ironically embracing pleasures and pursuits that many of their peers would have considered beneath them: puns, conundrums, heavy drinking, the occult, and uninhibited sex. These case studies—along with the historical, cultural, and intellectual information detailed in chapters 1 and 2—present compelling evidence that clubs—and the aesthetic preferences and judgments of taste around which
those clubs were constituted—were at the very center of many of the most profound cultural developments in 18th-century Britain.
II: The Liberty of the Club: Club Culture and Philosophical Discourse in Britain, 1650-1780

As I argued in the previous chapter, the rise of club culture in 18th-century Britain paralleled broader changes whereby the values, preoccupations, and modes of sociability of the Renaissance were replaced gradually by those of a culture of politeness. These changes not only prompted shifts in modes of socialization—especially among men—they also prompted theorists to propose new ways of describing and analyzing human sociability. This shift is particularly apparent in the history of 17th- and 18th-century British moral philosophy. Whereas for 17th-century thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, answers to the dilemmas of moral philosophy lay in an analysis of human subjectivity, 18th-century philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith placed equal if not greater emphasis on the social institutions through which human nature is articulated and expressed. Both Hobbes and Locke had examined social institutions—in particular the political state—but their narratives about how man extracted himself from the state of nature placed civil society and the state of nature in a binary opposition that obscured the complexity of practical social interaction. In other words, for both Hobbes and Locke the key question regarding civil society was, “should each of us join it?” Hobbes answered this question with an emphatic “yes” and Locke with a heavily qualified “probably,” but what is important here is that they framed the question in the same way. Hume and Smith, on
the other hand, took humanity’s engagement in society as a given. For them, the question was
“which permutation of civil society most efficiently fosters freedom, happiness, and wealth?”
When they asked this question, the answers they gave and their many lines of thought resulted in
the discourse of political economy, a new, historically contingent mode of philosophy which not
only tackled traditional areas of philosophical inquiry such as epistemology, ethics, and political
theory, but also sought to integrate and account for the unique historical circumstances of the
modern world, in particular the rapidly-developing capitalist economies of 18th-century Western
Europe.

In addition to asking different types of questions than earlier philosophers, the political
economists of middle and late 18th-century Britain also appealed to different types of evidence
to support their claims. Much of Hobbes’ and Locke’s intellectual energy was spent explicating a
heuristic they referred to as the state of nature, a sort of abstraction that dramatized man’s
dilemma about whether or not to engage in civil society. Hume and Smith, however, tended to
appeal to examples taken from everyday life as experienced by middle-class British citizens of
the 18th century. Importantly, the kinds of lives that Hume and Smith wrote about foregrounded
the values of sociability and politeness, particularly as those ideas were expressed by the 3rd Earl
of Shaftesbury (Shaftesbury’s most important follower, Frances Hutcheson, taught both Hume
and Smith at the University of Glasgow). The social milieu in which both Hume and Smith cut
their intellectual teeth—the secular university culture of 18th-century Glasgow—actively
encouraged the adoption of values consistent with Shaftesbury’s culture of politeness. The clubs
that formed the backbone of 18th-century Scottish intellectual culture—groups such as the Select
Society, the Rankenian Club, and the Aberdeen Philosophical Club—were enormously
influential in weakening the bonds between academia and the clergy (a traditional link that, by
comparison, stifled intellectual progressivism at the English universities in the 18th century) and forming new and important connections between the professoriate and a new generation of economically and scientifically progressive gentry. Hume and Smith saw first-hand the power of social institutions—including both formal ones like the universities and more informal ones like the clubs that they attended—to reshape and realign the moral, political, and intellectual values of a community, and ultimately both philosophers would propose systems that acknowledged this power. For these philosophers, to understand man in his 18th-century British social milieu was to understand human nature and sociability brought to a more complex and advanced state than at any other point in human history, and it was this assumption that helped to change fundamentally the ways in which the next several generations of European philosophers would discuss morality, ethics, aesthetics, and of course sociability itself.

As creatures capable of memory and reflection, human beings often look to how things were in order to understand how they are. The ways in which we conduct these investigations into our past, however, are deeply influenced by the intellectual assumptions and values of the culture in which we are raised. For the cultures of medieval Europe—in which religion dominated many, if not most, aspects of daily life—inquiring into man’s origins meant consulting scripture. As thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine sought to understand and to explain social and political phenomena such as evil and war, they looked for answers in the social groupings and interactions that were portrayed in the Bible: Adam and Eve within and without Paradise, Cain and Abel, and Cain’s foundation of the first city, Canaan. This

mode of inquiry, however, declined rapidly in explanatory power (and, as a consequence, in cultural visibility and importance) after the publication of Thomas Hobbes’ seminal philosophical works, which began appearing in the 1640s and were significantly revised and developed in new editions and new works throughout the 1640s, 50s, 60s, and 70s. As Helen Thornton argues, where medieval and Christian thinkers sought to establish a chronology of man’s origins, Hobbes’s philosophy instead offered a logical account of how human society developed. While those who remained intellectually invested in the old, medieval mode of argument struggled to reconcile Hobbes’s innovative account of society with the received Christian chronology, many more (and more influential) authors were intrigued by Hobbes’s innovation. Profoundly influenced both by political instability in England during the time in which he wrote as well as by explorers’ discovery of “primitive” cultures in North America, Africa, and Asia, Hobbes warned that the “state of nature”—his term for man’s pre-social environment—was a state into which human beings could return at any time. Famously, because of man’s relative lack of physical defenses and relative equality of strength and intellect, this state entailed a life that was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Hobbes’s account not only implicitly questioned the chronology of human history offered by the Bible, but also explicitly contradicted those thinkers (both Christian and otherwise) who insisted upon man’s innate benevolence and sociability. For the first time in many centuries, a new way of

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63 See *Ibid.*, particularly the introduction and Ch. 5.

approaching the study of human nature—both in terms of individuals and their relationship to society—was ascending to prominence.\textsuperscript{65}

But what does it mean, precisely, to say that Hobbes’s account of society was “logical?” In her use of the term, Thornton opposes “logical” to “historical:” “For Hobbes, the state of nature was a logical account of the origins of society, but it was also a constantly recurring possibility, because it was any period of time in which a society lacked a common power to keep order.”\textsuperscript{66}

Though Hobbes’s 17th- and 18th-century commentators often missed this point, explications of Genesis tended to offer an account of society that was diachronic: we began in a perfect state (Eden), from which we have steadily devolved. Hobbes’s account, on the other hand, was largely synchronic: man always was and always will be struggling to extricate himself from the state of nature. Thus, for Hobbes, the study of society was not a question of archaeology or even history, but one of rational investigation and reflection. As Thornton’s use of the word “logical” hints, this change entailed not only a shift in the social philosopher’s objects of study (which would now tend to be scenes from hypothetical examples instead of fables from ancient manuscripts), but also corresponding changes in which analytical tools would carry the most explanatory force. For instance, Biblical exegesis emphasized etymological arguments and evidence, and scholars often established or overturned arguments by positing new etymologies for key terms in the

\textsuperscript{65} As Pat Moloney argues, though Hobbes did not—at least not by himself—initiate this broad movement away from Edenic accounts of man’s social origins and toward the State of Nature paradigm, his work did mark something of a historical tipping point at which discussions of the State of Nature overtook explications of Genesis in intellectual prominence and credibility, at least among the philosophical cognoscenti. See Pat Moloney, "Leaving the Garden of Eden: Linguistic and Political Authority in Thomas Hobbes," History of Political Thought 18, no. 2 (1997): 242-66.

\textsuperscript{66} Helen Thornton, State of Nature or Eden?: Thomas Hobbes and His Contemporaries on the Natural Condition of Human Beings (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 1.
relevant texts. In Hobbes’s arguments, however, etymology was a far lesser concern; he sought to reveal aspects of human nature that were so fundamental as to be not only pre-social, but possibly pre-linguistic as well. Hobbes’s goal was to achieve a kind of universal understanding of human nature and sociability that went beyond their articulation in a particular text or even a particular word: the truths that Hobbes sought would be confirmable by reason alone.

Hobbes and the writers who followed his example drastically changed the character of philosophical discourse by radically de-emphasizing the Bible as a source of evidence and authority, but the exemplary materials with which they replaced the Bible were not as neutral or as transparent as these thinkers would have had them. As Pat Moloney argues, “like the state-of-nature discourse that replaced it, what life would have been like in Eden was a philosophical exercise, a thought experiment, a heuristic device.” In other words, both discussion of Eden and the state of nature helped to foster an understanding of complex issues such as the nature of political interaction and sociability by emphasizing what the authors took to be the most important variables for understanding these phenomena and de-emphasizing or eliminating variables that were deemed to be of trivial importance. The creation story in Genesis highlighted man’s sexual and familial connections and our relationship to divine authority by eliminating civil and governmental authority, cultural tradition / difference, and scarcity of resources from

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67 See, for instance, Thornton’s arguments about the foundation of Canaan (Ibid., 137-141) or the controversy about how the tree of knowledge was named (Ibid., 32-41).


69 Ibid., 246.
consideration.\textsuperscript{70} Hobbes’s account of the state of nature, on the other hand, emphasized fear, isolation, and uncertainty by positing a version of human society in which nearly all traces of modern political economy were assumed absent. As Hobbes states in \textit{De Cive}, “Let us return again to the natural state, and consider men as if they had just now suddenly sprung from the earth like mushrooms, in full maturity, without any binding relation to each other.”\textsuperscript{71} Like the creation story, Hobbes’s state of nature was a fable, but it was a fable that had the ring of truth and science about it. Hobbes’s state of nature is so compelling and so immersive that it can be difficult to stop to consider the apparent arbitrariness of what Hobbes chose to include and exclude from his story. We are meant to imagine an example of man who has the intelligence to do violence against those who are bigger and stronger than himself, but not the mental capacity to devise any reliable means of self-defense; who is interested enough in how others perceive him to take pleasure in glory, but can garner no satisfaction from an act of benevolence. Hobbes rigs his system so that meaningful and pleasurable interactions between humans are extremely difficult to achieve. Commentators from the 17th century until today have disagreed in many aspects of their interpretation of Hobbes’s work, but it seems impossible to contend that he offers a vision of humanity that is anything but profoundly isolated.

While Hobbes seemed to design his system deliberately to exclude the possibility of sociability, John Locke revised Hobbes’s state of nature paradigm to bring concerns about

\textsuperscript{70} Of course, commentators argued about the extent to which each of these were or were meant to be eliminated, among numerous other considerations and controversies. The point of my example is not to provide a definitive list of all of the considerations that were at play in discussions of Eden, but rather to illustrate the argument that these discussions were, at their core, abstractions.

sociability back into consideration, at least to a limited extent. Locke’s key innovation was to refigure the state of nature not as a description of a society (i.e. “the North American Indian is in a state of nature,” “revolutionary France is in a state of nature,” etc.), but a description of a relationship between individuals. For Locke, two individuals are removed from a state of nature in relation to one another when they consent to government by a common authority. Thus, two British men in Locke’s day were not in a state of nature with respect to one another because they acknowledged themselves to be governed by the same authorities: the crown and Parliament. An Englishman and a Frenchman, however, would be in a state of nature with respect to one another because they consented to no common authority. Whereas, for Hobbes, man’s social relationships would always be tenuous, awkward, and ad hoc, Locke reworked the science of political theory as a matter of articulating and describing social relationships, which were themselves fundamental to the human experience. Human beings will inevitably come into contact with one another, but the nature of the connections they form can vary considerably by the mutually acknowledged rules that govern their relationship. When two people are in a state of nature with respect to one another, their relationship is governed by the dictates of reason (which is why Locke disagrees with Hobbes that the state of nature is a state of war), and when two people join the same commonwealth and remove themselves from the state of nature with relation to one another they have simply added another library of rules to govern their interaction: those of civil society. Thus, for Locke man does not have to invent sociability from scratch, he simply has to refine and articulate the natural sociable impulses that arise from our occupation of the same space and our shared rational faculties.

As I have argued, Hobbes and Locke were precipitous in changing preconceptions about what counted as compelling evidence in philosophical discourse. Whereas, in the preceding
centuries, political philosophers had to prove that their theories were consistent with tenable interpretations of scripture, after Hobbes’s and Locke’s seminal works the primary testing-ground for political theory was the hypothetical tableaux, and the state of nature was the most definitive and recognizable of these. While the considerations emphasized under these new heuristic devices helped to focus philosophers’ attention on problems of sociability, models such as Hobbes’s state of nature placed human beings in opposition to rather than cooperation with one another. This sense of opposition, however, seemed inconsistent with deep-seated cultural beliefs about the fundamental sociability and benevolence of the human race, not to mention the evidence of everyday life, in which man socialized rather easily and found joy and comfort in fellow-feeling. In response to this tension, British philosophers of the 18th century would continually rework Hobbes’s heuristics with the goal of accounting for the rich and complex social phenomena that surrounded them in the modern metropolis while retaining the logic and clarity that made Hobbes’s and Locke’s work so compelling.

Another influential aspect of Hobbes’s and Locke’s work was that they did not simply take humanity’s sociable impulses as an assumption; they sought to account for these impulses with reasoned arguments. While these two philosophers disagreed about the nature of humanity’s relationships outside of civil society as well as the character of the ideal civil society, both presented the formation of civil society as a decision man makes based on a rational calculation of his own self-interest. Both Hobbes and Locke sought to portray human nature according to a kind of mathematics in which self-interest was the unit of measurement and analyses of costs and benefits to the self provided the theorems with which to calculate and weigh these units. These modes of analysis—pioneered by Hobbes and Locke in British philosophical discourse, Newton
and the members of the Royal Society in natural philosophy, as well as continental thinkers such as Descartes and Spinoza—would prove enormously influential over the following centuries, but they were hardly assented to universally. In fact, when 18th-century thinkers assessed the canon of “modern” British philosophy, one in particular of these intellectual dissenters—the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury—rivaled and perhaps even eclipsed the influence of Hobbes and Locke. Though Shaftesbury’s work does not fit comfortably within many of our assumptions about what constituted a philosopher of the Enlightenment (and, indeed, his work gradually faded from the canon of Western philosophy in the 19th and 20th centuries), many of the 18th century’s leading intellectuals—including Hume, Rousseau, and Kant—found Shaftesbury’s ideas compelling enough to give them sustained and serious attention. Two of Shaftesbury’s most influential (and controversial) tenets were his insistence on man’s innate benevolence (a point that made his work amenable to Christians and moralists) and his proposition that man possesses a moral sense that is distinct from his rational faculties. For 18th-century philosophers, these arguments provided the perfect counterpoint to Hobbes’s insistence on rationality and self-interest. Further, while Hobbes (and, to a lesser extent, Locke) proposed systems that portrayed each individual human being as essentially isolated, in Shaftesbury’s work sociability was the center from which not only morality, but also understanding itself emanated. For patrons of Britain’s rich and varied 18th-century social world—including its countless clubs and societies—it is hardly surprising that Shaftesbury’s ideas rang true.

That Shaftesbury viewed man as inherently sociable is hardly a matter of controversy. As he states bluntly, “If eating and drinking be natural, herding is so too. If any appetite or sense be
natural, the sense of fellowship is the same." However, Shaftesbury did not conceive of sociability merely as a primitive impulse. Like Aristotle, Shaftesbury understood participation in society as essential for the perfection of human nature, a thesis neatly summed up by one of Shaftesbury’s most famous metaphors: “We polish one another, and rub off our corners and rough sides by a sort of amicable collision. To restrain this, is inevitably to bring a rust upon men's understandings.” Shaftesbury’s tumbler metaphor is illuminative, shedding light on both the epistemological status of his moral sense and the importance of sociability to his moral and aesthetic philosophies (which turn out to be identical). As Howard Caygill argues, Shaftesbury differed from the preceding generation of British philosophers in that he posited sensibility as an independent faculty rather than as an operation of the faculty of judgment, a move that is apparent in Shaftesbury’s description of human beings as stones in a tumbler. Just as what makes the stones able to be polished is their capacity to have their form gradually chipped away, so does Shaftesbury insist that what makes human beings social, moral, and artistic is our capacity to be moved by moral and aesthetic beauty. While, for Hobbes and Locke, social connections are based on rational calculations of self-interest, for Shaftesbury sociability is based on the fact that we share this passive faculty of sensibility and taste that enables each of us to recognize the inherent good of providentially-ordered moral and aesthetic beauty. In other words, society coalesces around a shared recognition of the beautiful.

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72 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, ed. Philip J. Ayres (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 51.

73 Ibid., 31.

This purported link between sociability and taste is one of the most controversial aspects of Shaftesbury’s philosophy. For his critics (including Shaftesbury’s contemporaries like Mandeville as well as modern writers like Caygill), Shaftesbury’s contention that taste informs both the individual’s self-interest as well as the interests of society as a whole is untenable. For Caygill there is an irresolvable tension between the “pleasurable moral sense of the market and the violent compulsion of production.” In Shaftesbury’s work social harmony is the natural result of the individual’s preference for order and beauty, but Caygill refuses to see those who find themselves at the lowest rungs of the economic ladder as engaged in the pursuit of beauty and truth. Indeed, the life of an indentured servant, a prostitute, or a chimney-sweep seems more like a Hobbesian struggle for survival than high aesthetic quest, and the economic benefits that flow from their station toward the upper ranks owe more to the violence done against these economic cogs than any conscious or unconscious pursuit of self-betterment. This is precisely the point Bernard Mandeville makes in his allegorical poem The Fable of the Bees, in which he contends that it is the upper classes’ pursuit of luxury that provides the market’s real engine. Far from seamlessly coagulating into benefit for the general collective interest, individual greed would only result in general public benefits under the “dextrous management” of politicians.

Despite the weakness of Shaftesbury’s argument for this moral sense and the strength of the arguments against it, the link Shaftesbury posed between sociability and aesthetic appreciation continued to thrive in intellectual discourse throughout the 18th century, particularly in Britain. A sizable number of people simply refused to acknowledge the rational calculation of

75 Ibid., 62.

76 Bernard de Mandeville, The Fable of the Bees, ed. E.J. Hundert (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 68.
self-interest as the basis for human social interaction, and Shaftesbury’s account—while intellectually fuzzy—allowed his readers to acknowledge that sociability *is* in man’s self-interest while denying that self-interest is the sine qua non of social interaction. Shaftesbury accomplishes this by demoting the status of reason to a post-hoc check on the moral sense that he proposed. As Lawrence Klein argues, the shape of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics* belies the lack of confidence Shaftesbury had in the rational rhetoric of systematic philosophy to persuade and to motivate. The *Characteristics* is a highly mixed work in terms of both genre and content, weaving together genres as diverse as the epistle, rhapsody, systematic moral philosophy, and soliloquy, and moving fluidly between topical subjects such as the rise of religious enthusiasm and more abstract philosophical subjects. The *Characteristics* begins, rather oddly, with “A Letter Concerning Enthusiasm,” an epistle about religious fanaticism written to Shaftesbury’s friend Lord Somers. Near the beginning of the letter, Shaftesbury notes, in an apparently jocular manner, that, “All I contend for, is to think of [religion] in a right humour; and that this goes more than half-way towards thinking rightly of it, is what I shall endeavour to demonstrate.”

The “right humour” to which Shaftesbury refers is one characterized by moderation; for Shaftesbury, it is this moderate attitude—and not any particular rational precept or argument—that has the most bearing on whether one “thinks rightly of it,” that is, makes proper decisions about one’s own religious beliefs and practices. The importance of this “right humour” for subjects beyond religion is emphasized by Shaftesbury’s placement of the “Letter Concerning


Enthusiasm” at the very front of the Characteristics. Rhetorically, the epistolary style in which this essay is written establishes a conversational tone and implies an intimate relationship between the author and the reader. In other words, it puts the reader in the “right humour” to appreciate Shaftesbury’s ideas. The topic of this first essay in the Characteristics is also key. While religious enthusiasm seems, on the surface, to have little to do with the moral philosophy explored in the bulk of the Characteristics, Shaftesbury’s attitude toward this topic—that moderation and equanimity are always preferable to enthusiasm—gives the reader evidence of the fact that the author himself is in the “right humour,” i.e. one that is measured and moderate. It is the establishment of a proper tone and a respectful relationship between the reader and author that will do the most to persuade the reader of Shaftesbury’s arguments. Shaftesbury’s emphasis on “right humor” and “disposition” is not meant to devalue rationality. Instead, Shaftesbury implies that rationality functions best when employed post-hoc to evaluate the validity of an action or argument. This is also apparent in the structure of the Characteristics as a whole, which takes great pains to establish the “right humour” before Shaftesbury offers a systematic account of his moral philosophy in the fourth section. Importantly, though, this section only begins nearly halfway through the voluminous work. By the time the reader arrives at An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit—the systematic section of Characteristics—Shaftesbury has already introduced most of his key theses. Viewed in context, the point of this systematic exploration is not to persuade the reader, but to assure the reader that the arguments that have, presumably, persuaded him already are rationally valid. For Shaftesbury this is not only the best way to present complex philosophical ideas, but also the best way to make everyday moral and aesthetic judgments.

The problem, of course, with demoting rationality’s role in moral judgment is that this entails refiguring morality as “perfect taste in morals,” placing moral judgments in the same
murky conceptual waters as aesthetic judgments. For Kant, this decision rendered the moral theory of Shaftesbury and his followers “unphilosophical” because it offered no rational explanation for how this sense of taste (whether in morals or aesthetics) is developed or why its dictates correspond (at least ideally) to those offered by reason. Shaftesbury would have his moral and aesthetic theories fused into one consistent whole, but his reader finds no effective philosophical glue to bind them. Instead, Shaftesbury’s (non-)explanation is the *je ne sais quoi*: a “proportion” that undergirds both the beauty of aesthetic objects and the morality of actions, and can be recognized by the faculty of taste but not analyzed or even identified by the rational faculty.\(^7\) While, in Caygill’s reading of Shaftesbury, divine providence underwrites the *je ne sais quoi*’s power,\(^8\) I argue that Caygill overlooks the fact that Shaftesbury gives sociability a key role in developing the faculty of taste. As I argued above, Shaftesbury insists that one must be in the “right humour” in order to make sound judgments of taste, and throughout the *Characteristics* social interaction is the most effective tool for shaping this “humour,” either rightly or wrongly. This is what Shaftesbury means when he says that “I am writing to you in defense only of the liberty of the *club*, and of that sort of freedom which is taken amongst gentlemen and friends, who know one another perfectly well.”\(^9\) Shaftesbury defends polite social institutions because they make us—like the stones in his tumbler—*receptive* to harmonious proportions, the appreciation of which guides sound moral and aesthetic judgments.

\(^{7}\) For more on the “*je ne sais quoi*” see Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Philip J. Ayres (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 63-4, 150, 191, 203.


Thus, while the proportion itself is divine and eternal, the capacity to appreciate it is the product of socialization, making Shaftesbury’s philosophy much closer to Hume’s than many of his less generous critics would allow.

It was not this take on the power of sociability, however, that intrigued Shaftesbury’s most important and visible follower, Francis Hutcheson: it was Shaftesbury’s proposition of a faculty of moral sense. In fact, Hutcheson actually de-emphasized sociability relative to Shaftesbury, proposing an epistemology that placed the innate idea of beauty in each individual consciousness, an idea which is raised by the “power” Hutcheson called the “Sense of Beauty.” As Howard Caygill argues, not only are other human beings irrelevant to the appreciation of moral and aesthetic beauty, the material world seems to be irrelevant as well:

The idea [of beauty] is produced or ‘raised in us’ while the sense is the power to receive the already produced idea; there is no question of the idea arising from any reflection on the senses. The sense is a passive receptive power determined by the idea; but the idea is not an object, even though a sense of beauty perceives it in the same way as a physical sense perceives a material object. What on an initial reading seemed a straightforward derivation of the idea from the sense appears on closer inspection to rest on a complex inversion of Locke’s procedure.82

In other words, Hutcheson agreed with Shaftesbury that the moral sense was a passive, receptive faculty, but the idea of beauty that it receives is not acquired by sense, but actually exists already in the human mind. When it came to the idea of beauty (which, as in Shaftesbury, was identical to the moral and aesthetic good) Hutcheson was a Cartesian rather than a strict empiricist, arguing that our idea of beauty is an innate feature of consciousness.

82 Ibid., 54.
Interestingly, two of Hutcheson’s students at Glasgow University—David Hume and Adam Smith—would propose some of the most compelling syntheses of moral, aesthetic, social, and economic philosophy. The problem of tying together these diverse philosophical strands grew steadily in importance across the 18th century as Britain underwent widespread economic and social change. In response to these changes, during the middle and later decades of the 18th century a generation of Scottish philosophers—including Hume and Smith as well as Adam Ferguson, John Millar, and others—pioneered the discourse of political economy, a new branch of moral philosophy that highlighted the role of the marketplace and the modern political state in shaping moral discourse. While earlier theorists looked for the basis of morality in an eternal natural law or in the will of the monarch, political economists proposed that in order to understand morality in the modern age one must understand how moral assessment plays out within modern social institutions such as the marketplace and the state. Like Hobbes and Locke, these Scottish philosophers were engaged in a kind of “conjectural history,” but whereas those earlier philosophers saw the origins of civil society as containing the key to unlocking moral, social and political theory, the Scottish school of philosophers tended to view 18th-century European society as the apogee in the development of human sociability. Consequently, these philosophers argued that sociability is best understood in this modern context rather than


abstracted from it. While much of 17th-century philosophy had hovered in unfamiliar, abstract realms such as the state of nature and Descartes’ realm of pure thought, this new generation of philosophers would engage consciously with the material conditions of modern life.

While Hobbes and Locke illustrated their theories with stories about a primitive state of nature, these Scottish philosophers’ heuristics tended to be based on modern social institutions such as the stock exchange or the club. As Christopher Finlay argues, Hume’s social and moral philosophy is inseparable from its context, which “is the sociable world of the clubs, societies, and the wider public sphere that developed in England from the latter half of the seventeenth century onwards and was increasingly visible in post-union Scotland.”

Nowhere were the social changes wrought by the modern economy more apparent than in lowland Scotland, where a progressive gentry and a non-elitist educational system spurred a remarkably fast transition toward a modern society centered around commerce, industry, and information. As this generation of Scottish philosophers sought to make sense of these changes, they appealed to the methods and principles of moral philosophy, and indeed modern society could also help to illuminate the abstract principles of philosophy. As Christopher Finlay explains, Hume invoked scenes from clubs and societies as illustrations in the service of intricate theoretical exposition (such as in the case of causation) but it needs emphasizing that, at other times, the principles of philosophy (and those concerning causal reasoning in particular) are called upon to explain the mundane

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85 Ibid., 63.

phenomena. The examples Hume uses to illustrate causal associations in I.3 are shown in the present book to be, not anomalous, but indicative of important relationships between his theory of knowledge, his theory of the passions and his approach towards the social contexts within which human nature is seen.\(^{87}\)

As Finlay explains, for Hume, scenes from modern social life were more than just illustrative examples; these scenes were, in fact, the raw material of philosophy itself. Hume’s work was innovative in its proposition of a truly empirical method. Even if, as Hume seemed to imply in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, human nature itself was unchanging,\(^{88}\) the intricate social interactions that were a staple of 18th-century European society allowed fundamental aspects of human nature such as reason, passion, sentiment, and sociability to achieve their fullest expression. In Hume’s work the everyday was philosophical, and vice versa.

While Shaftesbury had attempted a “defense of the clubs,” it is with these Scottish philosophers’ development of the discourse of political economy that we finally see modern social institutions accounted for philosophically. Themselves members of clubs such as the famous Select Society, writers like Hume, Smith, and Ferguson described human beings as naturally (if not necessarily originally) sociable. Within their influential works, both their premises and the heuristics they relied on to enliven, illuminate, and explain these premises placed modern forms of sociability in the foreground. For Hume and Smith, morality was a necessary consequence of sociability; while particular moral codes are historically and culturally

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contingent, the propensity to engage in moral evaluation and judgment are unavoidable. What makes man sociable is also what makes him moral.

One of the key assumptions that separates David Hume’s work from that of his philosophical forbears was his deep belief that philosophy should be descriptive rather than normative. In response to a criticism from Francis Hutcheson that he was “insufficiently warm in the cause of virtue,” Hume insisted that he was a “moral anatomist” who described rather than advocated.\(^9\) It was this contention—that philosophy should explain and illuminate the world as it exists around us—that guided both his innovation in the types of heuristics he employed (as explained above) and in many of his key premises, including the importance of social institutions to moral discourse and his denial of the fundamental and innate sense of benevolence argued for by Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Like writers as diverse as Pope and Rousseau, Hume sought to be the “Newton of the Mind,” one who revealed the logical order that undergirded the apparently complex and even chaotic actions of the human psyche. Further, for Hume—rather famous in his atheism—it was important to locate the source of this order in something other than divine providence. Hume found this sense of order in social interaction, which he understood as governed primarily by sympathy.

Hume’s theory of sympathy followed from his denial of a fundamental sense of benevolence. Indeed, it is surprising that, in order to propose a fully-integrated moral and social theory, Hume would begin by denying the very premise that, for Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, binds humans together socially and makes our interactions beneficial and productive. For Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, benevolence was fundamental to sociability: it is our natural fellow-

feeling that prompts human beings to engage with one another. Hume, however, took very seriously Mandeville’s objection that selfishness seemed to guide as much or more of human behavior than benevolence; for Hume, any tenable social theory must provide convincing accounts of both benevolence and selfishness, and the theory of sympathy that he proposed accounted for a wide range of human interactions and emotions, from positive ones like love and esteem to negative ones like envy, hatred, and vanity. Hume first explicates his theory of sympathy in Book II of *A Treatise of Human Nature*. While Hume does not offer a concise, formal definition of sympathy, he introduces it (somewhat circularly) as “that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.”  

This “propensity” of sympathy is so powerful that its effects can be felt as strongly as the direct, selfish passions; a passion experienced indirectly through sympathy can have “such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection.”

For Hume, however, sympathy is more than simply our psychological ability to “put ourselves in someone else’s shoes” as it were; rather, it is fundamental to the way in which human beings experience the world. As Christopher Finlay argues, sympathy informs even what we would normally take to be base, physical—and hence purely selfish—desires: “Only within society, that is, in the company and gaze of others, can desire itself be actuated fully and can even the most selfish propensities of human individuals be fully realized.”

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91 *Ibid*.

to gaze upon others, it prompts us to realize that we are being gazed upon ourselves, resulting in a sort of “mirror tunnel” effect. Since the passions aroused by sympathy wield the same “force and vivacity” as direct sense impressions, the passions that result from our internalization of others’ sympathetic gaze—pride, self-esteem, etc.—are deeply important. Indeed, they are so important that in the modern economy the self-regarding passions that cluster around the term “reputation” carry a weight that can seem markedly disproportionate to the more direct, selfish pleasures that the things upon which we base our reputation—including money and other possessions—have the power to raise in us. Hume’s theory of sympathy provides a powerful social bond, but the connections it articulates are far more complex than the social relationships described by Hobbes as based on selfishness or by Shaftesbury as based on benevolence. Like a long and haphazardly knotted rope, social connections as Hume describes them are difficult to untangle.

Significantly, though, for Hume neither all social connections nor all sympathetic passions are created equal. As is the case with our most basic ideas,93 when we speak of the impressions gathered through this process of sympathy, “resemblance and contiguity are relations not to be neglected.”94 The recognition of cause and effect relations undergirds the concept of social obligation in Hume’s philosophy, but in describing social connections in this way Hume increases the importance of social bonds relative to those based on economic or political relationships. The “resemblance” we recognize between ourselves and other human beings is what allows sympathy to function, so a greater degree of resemblance between ourselves and the

93 See A Treatise of Human Nature Book I, particularly Part III, “Of Knowledge and Probability.”

objects of our sympathy will yield a more powerful psychological sensation. For Hume, the most important kinds of resemblances are the ones that define us as members of the same community. As Finlay explains:

sympathy occurs between all human beings (indeed, between all animals) since all are fundamentally similar. But it occurs the more strongly between those who have discovered further similarities or formed bonds and associations: in Hume's essays, these include the clubs and societies in the cities of modern Europe, as well social classes, professions and entire nations. By establishing commonalities between members of more exclusive groups - similarities in tastes, values, habits and opinions, for instance - human individuals reinforce the basis for sympathetic communication; in so doing, they increase, thereby, the strength of the bonds which hold their groups together. Sympathy, therefore, both grows in strength with the degree of sociability already attained and contributes to sociability an additional force thus helping it to grow too. Sympathy, therefore, is a mechanism through which the social passions and sentiments of people, in a sense, progress; they articulate themselves with greater force and refinement according to the social conditions in which they occur.95

As Finlay notes, there is a kind of snowball effect to the operation of sympathy in social institutions like clubs whereby the more that the members of a club interact, the more their members recognize resemblances between one another, and the more they want to socialize. For this reason, these kinds of social relationships are the most important in shaping our moral and aesthetic judgments. Finlay argues further that Hume’s emphasis on these types of social connections deeply informs his theory of civil society and his political philosophy; since these

types of institutions are so influential and important, the best government for Hume is the one that allows these types of social relationships to thrive.\(^{96}\)

Though his key work was titled *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume’s thought began a transition whereby philosophers began to focus less on the operations of the individual human consciousness and more on the social institutions and processes through which human nature is expressed. As I noted above, the work of Hume and the other Scottish philosophers of his generation would coalesce into the discourse of political economy, a conversation that would achieve its most influential expression in the 19th century, when it was digested by Karl Marx and when other strands evolved into the modern disciplines of sociology and economics. More so than Hume, however, the 18th-century Scottish philosopher most associated with the term “political economy” is Adam Smith. While Hume was, himself, a thoughtful and provocative economist, Adam Smith’s articulation of what became known as the “*laissez-faire*” system of economics in his book *The Wealth of Nations* would prove enormously influential. Smith’s ambition, however, was not merely to describe or proscribe an economic theory, but to expound a theory of a *just* marketplace that allowed space for virtue as well as economic prosperity. As for Hume, Smith’s key question was “which political and economic systems allow virtue and prosperity to thrive?” Perhaps even more than Hume, however, Smith recognized the momentum of these systems, and that under the right conditions this momentum could allow human beings to transcend the key concerns—scarcity, greed, poverty, etc.—that arose from the understanding of human society primarily as a struggle between individuals.

Like both Shaftesbury and their teacher Frances Hutcheson, Hume and Smith denied that man’s rational faculties are the primary source of his moral judgments, but Smith went even

\(^{96}\) See *Ibid.*, Chapter 8.
further than Hume in insisting that moral “feelings” are socially conditioned and constructed, and that, as Susan Purviance puts it, “moral dispositions are social dispositions.”

In his influential book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759, revised 1790), Smith outlined a moral theory that was fully embedded in the social world: for Smith, morality is both experienced and communicated by processes of sympathetic identification. While, as I argue below, Smith retained some allegiance to abstract moral systems of the type advocated by the stoic philosophers, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* the human moral experience is portrayed as the effect of being part of a complicated social web. Indeed, as was the case for Hume, Smith rejected the idea that there was a faculty of “moral sense,” instead contending that morality is a consequence of the ways in which human beings engage with one another imaginatively in the social world. For Smith, the faculty of imagination is order-seeking. The imagination imposes order on the social world by attempting to account for the behavior we observe in others with narratives about connections between others’ thoughts and motivations and those observed behaviors. Moral judgment is the act of evaluating the motivations that we have connected with these observed behaviors. Social engagement also forms the basis of our moral self-evaluation; as Smith explains, society is a mirror in which we occasionally catch sight of ourselves, and we judge ourselves primarily by how we think we appear to others.

Due to the inherent epistemological limitations of social engagement (we cannot know, with any degree of certainty, others’ thoughts), moral judgment is, at best, an imperfect process, often resulting in

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misunderstanding and conflict. Further, not only is moral judgment, for Smith, a fundamentally social act, but the standards by which we make these judgments are socially determined as well. Smith acknowledges no natural law or providential code that governs or describes human conduct across cultures and time periods, insisting that morality is historically and culturally contingent. Thus, for Smith morality is social at two levels; moral judgment is the act of bringing discrete relationships to bear against the aggregate of social relationships in society as a whole, the microcosm judged by the standards of the macrocosm.

While Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is still read seriously by modern critics, the influence of that book pales in comparison with that of his economic treatise, *The Wealth of Nations*. *The Wealth of Nations* is often read merely as economic theory—indeed, it is, with some qualification, still a key text in the history of *laissez faire* economics—but as Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff explain, Smith approached the economic issues he explored in *The Wealth of Nations* through the lens of what was, at its core, a problem of social justice. Smith’s theories, they argue, “were developed in the context of an intense eighteenth-century debate about the inequality and luxury of modern commercial societies.”

This was the problem that Hont and Ignatieff term “the paradox of commercial society:” though, in 18th-century Europe, the ordinary laborer received a very small portion of the profit generated from his or her labor relative to workers in primitive economies, these laborers nevertheless enjoyed a standard of living higher even than privileged actors in more primitive economies. Since these lower orders enjoyed such a high standard of living, is it still unjust that merchants, landowners, and other possessors of capital profit much more handsomely within this economic system? The “invisible hand” of Smith’s economic system—in essence, the market’s unavoidable tendency to promote relative

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equilibrium and stability when left to its own devices—allowed Smith to offload the moral
responsibility of securing the laboring classes’ standard of living onto the market itself rather
than those who held power within that market. Thus, Smith could agree with Mandeville that the
selfishness and opulence of the wealthy propelled a country’s economic engine without being, as
Mandeville was, forced into a moral condemnation of that opulence. As Hont and Ignatieff put it,
“Smith's arguments were designed to show how an economy of abundance could be created in
which this […] antimony between the needs of the poor and the rights of the rich could be
transcended altogether.”\textsuperscript{100} Indeed, Smith insisted that it was by securing the rights of the rich
that you also secured the needs of the poor. Consequently, for Smith moral evaluation could not
be based on the effects of actions (since selfishness and opulence had positive effects), but on an
analysis of intention, which takes place via the processes of sympathetic identification described
in \textit{The Theory of Moral Sentiments}.

The key innovation of Smith’s argument in \textit{The Wealth of Nations} was neither his
recognition of the paradox of commercial society nor his proposition of a division of labor theory
to solve this paradox; both of these ideas had been explored to a greater or lesser degree by
earlier authors. Rather, Smith’s most important move was insisting that the comfort the lower
classes enjoyed was the product of the economic system’s design rather than the motivations of
the individual actors within that system. This is not to say that—as in Mandeville’s philosophy—
the individual actor’s motivations are always impure. Smith’s system leaves room for a range of
different motivations and actions, from reprehensible greed to the patient exercise of the stoic
virtues that Smith himself advocated. Despite the unpredictability of individual motivation,
however, the principles of economic competition and natural prices meant that, in the aggregate,

\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Ibid}. 
the damage done by the most selfish actors would have minimal impact, particularly on the system as a whole. When this relationship between the individual and society is examined next to Hobbes’ and Locke’s, the differences are striking. Hobbes and Locke had trouble getting any tenable iteration of civil society off the ground because, in their system, the collective’s power to influence the actions of the individual was always tenuous and shaky. In Smith’s system, however, the economic system as a whole has so much inertia that the individual’s actions only have limited consequences. The individual is so fully embedded in the economic and political universe in which he acts that actions themselves are of only secondary importance. The choices made by economic actors—the prices they set and pay, the labor they perform and the compensation they receive—are constrained by forces that are under no particular individual’s control. As I noted above, by emphasizing the ways in which economic actions are constrained by the market’s inertia, Smith made morality a matter of judging intentions rather than the consequences of actions. Thus, Smith’s moral theory looks less like Hume’s proto-utilitarianism and more like that of stoics such as Zeno and Epictetus, whom Smith greatly admired\textsuperscript{101} (Hume had rejected Stoicism as little better than Christian morality in its postulation of an absolute moral code). Since the effects of an individual’s actions in the economic sphere were limited and unpredictable in Smith’s system, those effects could hardly be the basis of moral evaluation. Consequently, Smith appealed to the “spirit and manhood”\textsuperscript{102} of the stoics as an example of the kind of personal moral code that could foster ethical action within his economic system.


\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 37.
Thus, for Smith, since an individual’s actions are so constrained by the weight and momentum of the economic system as a whole, our evaluations of others’ intentions are much more important (since it is only these intentions, and not effects, by which we can judge actions). As with Hume, both the abstract criteria on which we base moral judgments and the practical ways in which we apply moral principles are socially conditioned and constructed. Given these principles, social institutions are particularly important in Smith’s philosophy. The marketplace and the club are the laboratories in which moral principles are concocted, the venue in which they are practiced, and the court in which they are judged. Consequently, human beings’ social connections are strung together by something far stronger than mere benevolence or self-interest. Instead, sociability is deeply integrated into Smith’s very epistemology, informing the very ways in which we see and understand the world around us.

As this rough sketch of the history of British moral and political philosophy in the 17th and 18th centuries indicates, over the course of these two centuries the philosophical sphere came to engage ever more deeply with issues of sociability. Much of this had to do with the ways in which members of that philosophical sphere lived, worked, and communicated during this time of rapid social and economic change. Urbanization, advancements in road-building and other transportation systems, and the development of more sophisticated postal networks meant that the intellectual utopia referred to as the “Republic of Letters” could exist as a virtual community, if not a physical one. Indeed, in the Glasgow and Edinburgh of the 1740s and early 1750s a Republic of Letters was very nearly a reality, with minds as great as Frances Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and David Hume all exchanging ideas in the context of an urban academic culture that was resolutely secular and modern. Given the fact that their ideas evolved in such a rich social
context, it is hardly surprising that Hume and Smith in particular proposed moral theories that emphasized how moral judgments themselves are byproducts of the ways in which human beings socialize. Hume and Smith helped to free philosophy from its entrapment in the Cartesian world of ceaseless and inescapable self-reflection, allowing future generations of thinkers to focus their attention on the murky yet compelling world that exists between minds. Indeed, in the later 18th and 19th centuries the power of these connections would be explored more deeply in the work of writers like Adam Ferguson, Karl Marx, and Fredrick Engels. Smith had harnessed the explanatory power of his analysis of the economic system in order to recast the ways in which moral judgments operate in the economic sphere, but Ferguson, Marx, and Engels would go even further with this line of argument, exploring how the individual’s identification with broader groups or communities (including, most importantly, social class) could guide action, judgment, and even perception.

Hume and Smith did more than simply recognize the power and importance of social institutions, however; they also secured the explanatory power of social analysis within the philosophical sphere. For philosophers like Hobbes and Locke, the analysis of historical events was, at most, illustrative. The real work of philosophical argument took place on the level of abstraction, of “first principles.” For Hume and Smith—as had been the case, to some extent at least, with Shaftesbury and Hutcheson—a significant part of an argument’s strength came from its applicability to a familiar world. The power of this method of deductive reasoning is apparent in Smith’s proposition of the “invisible hand” that ensures the market’s stability. The “invisible hand” is a phenomenon that we only know by its effects; its cause, we presume, is the design of the economic system itself, but due to its vastness and intricacy human beings only have a small window into how that system actually functions. The “invisible hand” cannot be explained by
first principles—hence its invisibility—but that does not mean that human beings do not react to and interact with it. By insisting that these mysterious but observable phenomena were not the operations of providence (and consequently the domain of religious discourse), Hume and Smith drastically increased the modern philosopher’s purview and opened up an important new front in the Enlightenment’s war against superstition, irrationality, and incomprehensibility.

The preceding two chapters have explored the social and intellectual contexts in which club culture developed, came to prominence, and eventually began to dominate the social sphere of the 18th-century English-speaking world. In the following three chapters, I present three case studies of clubs that operated within this sphere. While all of the clubs examined in these chapters are products of the social, political, and intellectual contexts I have examined thus far, these case studies exhibit the profound malleability of club culture, its ability to accommodate vastly different backgrounds, preoccupations, and ambitions. In Chapter 3 I examine the Robin Hood Society, a debating society comprised of working-class Londoners who sought to lift themselves above their social station and engage in the culture of ideas flourishing around them. Ultimately, though, the group found that social prejudices were alive and well in 18th-century London, and club culture was perhaps not as socially transformative as it would seem on the surface. In Chapter 4 I turn to two middle-class scientific research societies: the Dublin Society and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). While the Robin Hood Society was a working-class organization seeking to elevate its members’ social standing, the members of the Dublin Society and the RSA tended to come from the “middling orders,” and hence walked a fine line between working-class values of productivity and older, aristocratic values that emphasized gentility and connection to the past. I conclude with an examination of two elite groups, Sir Francis
Dashwood’s Medmenham Monks and Dr. Alexander Hamilton’s Tuesday Club. Both of these groups drew their membership from the social elite, and as a result their members were in a position to critique and even explode the values that undergirded wider club culture. My analyses of these clubs, which drew their membership from a surprisingly wide swath of social and economic backgrounds, displays not only the inclusiveness and flexibility of club culture, but also the excitement and optimism that accompanied club culture’s rise to prominence. Like the literary sphere that was exploding concurrently, club culture offered its participants a chance to engage with and reflect upon the rapidly changing world around them. What clubs did with this power was as varied and as interesting as one would expect given the flexibility of the small social group and the remarkable heterogeneity of clubs’ membership.
III: Parody, Imitation and the Robin Hood Society’s Quest for Intellectual Legitimacy

Instead of being an auditor, I commenced a speaker at the club: and though to stand up and babble to a crowd at an alehouse, ‘till silence is commanded by the stroke of a hammer, is as low an ambition as can taint the human mind; yet I was much elevated by my new distinction, and pleased with the deference that was displayed to my judgment.

—Dick Freeman

from Francis Gentleman, *History of the Robin-Hood Society*, 1764

The story of Dick Freeman, which appears near the end of Francis Gentleman’s 1764 *History of the Robinhood Society*, differs very little from the type of cautionary tale one might find in Henry MacKenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* or Sarah Fielding’s *David Simple*. Born to a noble, decent and wealthy farmer and educated by a country parson whose wholesomeness would put Squire Allworthy to shame, Dick is sent to London to become a clerk in his wealthy cousin’s law office. As is typical in these sentimentalized moral fables, after a brief period of resistance Dick becomes receptive to his cousin’s philosophy of libertinism. Though he is slow to abandon his Christian principles, Dick eventually reaches a tipping point that signals the hopelessness of his moral dissipation. In sentimental novels and fables, this moral tipping point is usually part of a scene of self-realization in which the protagonist commits a crime so egregious that it can no longer be coherently rationalized; take, for instance, the scene from *Moll*
Flanders in which Moll steals the bundle from the apothecary’s shop, setting in motion her career as an unapologetic pickpocket. Dick Freeman’s equivalent moment of self-realization, on the other hand, is prompted by his decision to advocate publicly for his new philosophy at the Robin Hood Society, an “ale-house disputation”\textsuperscript{103} group that met in London’s Butcher’s Row. For modern readers, it may be difficult to understand why Gentleman would equate participating in a public debate with this signal moment of moral hopelessness. Generally, we laud political awareness and engagement as a civic virtue, and indeed public opinion plays a vital and well-recognized role in modern Western democracies. This, however, was not the case in 18th-century England. During the Robin Hood Society’s heyday in the 1750s and 1760s, the group’s existence was a fiercely contentious topic, their purportedly heretical and treasonous speeches making them a favorite whipping boy of essayists, satirists and writers of these sorts of formulaic moral fables.

One gets a sense of these prejudices against the Robin Hood Society from Dick Freeman’s self-disgust in the above quotation. His speeches are not politically productive—they are mere “babbling” —and the “elevation,” “distinction” and “deference” he enjoys are unconnected to the value of his ideas and, hence, undeserved. Dick Freeman’s sense of “elevation” would have been blameworthy not only because it was undeserved, but also because it was a disruption of the normal social order. While the explosion of political and social commentary in the press was slowly eroding long-calcified notions about who could discuss what, the Robin Hood Society’s parliamentary trappings were jarringly incongruous with their undistinguished social position and lack of political power, especially given that the Society was populated almost exclusively by tradesmen, merchants and low-level professionals like Dick Freeman. 18th-century moralists

\textsuperscript{103} Elisha’s Pottage at Gilgal, Spoiled by Symbolical Cookery at Oxford, Being a Few Remarks (by a Reviewer) on a Sermon Preached before the Warden... (London: R. Baldwin, 1760), 19.
did not react well to similar violations of the social order in masquerades and theatre performances, and their response to the Robin Hood Society was immediate and indignant.

Prevailing social prejudices often led 18th-century writers to dismiss the Robin Hood Society out of hand, but our own prejudices and preoccupations have led modern critics to view 18th-century debating societies through a distorted lens as well. 18th-century debating societies like the Robin Hood have rarely been discussed by modern critics, but when they are mentioned they are identified almost universally, as Mary Thale states, as “a manifestation of the Enlightenment.” Indeed, Roy Porter has cited 18th-century debating societies as evidence that a “low Enlightenment” or “popular Enlightenment” existed alongside the better-known works of Britain and France’s literary and cultural elite, and \textit{An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age} cites the Edinburgh debating societies as “the training ground for the Scottish Enlightenment.”

Taken abstractly, the idea of ordinary British working-men assembling to debate political and social issues dovetails nicely with Enlightenment thinkers’ tendency to rely on empirical evidence or \textit{a priori} reasoning rather than a detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the classics (which would have been unavailable to the lower-class members of the Robin Hood); however, one is hard-pressed to find evidence of Enlightenment modes of thought in the Robin Hood’s actual debates. Rather than adopting these new models of intellectual inquiry, speakers at the Robin Hood were more apt to approximate—18th-century critics might say bastardize—older

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\textsuperscript{105} Roy Porter, \textit{The Enlightenment} (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 5.

}
models of intellectual inquiry and debate, in particular the scholastic tradition of eisegetical criticism.

Modern critics who associate mid-18th-century debating societies with political populism are on similarly shaky footing. Particularly problematic is the modern tendency to interpret these groups’ marginalization as evidence that they were socially and politically progressive. The Robin Hood in particular tended to debate moral and theological issues rather than politics, and when they did address contemporary political issues they were as likely to advocate conservative positions as populist ones. Though some debating groups became politicized during the Wilkes controversy several decades later, during the 1750s the Robin Hood generally avoided hot-button political issues, for reasons I will explain below.

Though there are elements of truth in both the 18th-century and modern critical assessments of the Robin Hood Society, both positions distort or dismiss much of the evidence in order to align the group with overly broad (and, in the case of modern critics, often anachronistic) social and political categories. Thus, my goal in the first section of this chapter is to sketch the intellectual habits of the Robin Hood Society—as far as they can be generalized—without recourse to these overly general and/or anachronistic ideological descriptors. Applying to the Robin Hood Society terms such as “freethinker,” “progressive” or “Enlightenment” not only flattens the diversity of opinions, positions and identities at the club, it also rewrites the group’s history as a teleological movement toward a “goal” of ideological homogeneity when, in fact, the Robin Hood’s fundamental allegiance was to argument itself. The members’ commitment to the dialectical processes of argument and debate far outweighed their allegiance to any particular position, with members frequently playing “devil’s advocate” in order to ensure the liveliness of debate even when everyone present might have been broadly in agreement.
regarding the topic up for discussion. While examining (rather than dismissing) this pattern makes it more difficult to classify the Robin Hood Society according to modern political taxonomies, this reading allows us to better understand the Robin Hood’s peculiar (to us, at least) intellectual character, as well as how the group engaged with, influenced, and served as an example within broader cultural debates about religious tolerance, class, education and intellectual authenticity.

In the second section of this chapter I will examine the reaction to the Robin Hood Society in the 18th-century press, with particular attention to how parody influenced both the published debate about the Society and the operation of the group itself. During the peak of public interest in the group during the 1750s, satirists frequently attempted to undermine the Robin Hood’s intellectual legitimacy through parody, fictionalizing the Robin Hood as a perversion or a corruption of authentic intellectual exchange. Writers found it both convenient and significant to parody the Robin Hood Society because, as I mentioned, the inexperienced debaters at the Robin Hood tended to imitate or approximate established conventions of intellectual discourse and debate. However, the Robin Hood was a problematic object of satire for two important reasons. First, the group’s open admission policy meant that anyone interested in participating in their debates was free to do so, even if he only attended in order to mock and to laugh at the other debaters. As the group was satirized more frequently their attendance swelled, and these new members brought with them prejudices about the Robin Hood based on the accounts they had read in published attacks on the group. Since these new members were of equal status with existing members, the Robin Hood’s actual meetings quickly came to resemble the satirical portraits of the group in the press. Secondly, after 1751 the Robin Hood Society chose not to defend itself in print. Not only did this policy allow the Robin Hood’s attackers to define the
group’s reputation, but it also served prematurely to escalate the viciousness of the attacks on the group. Without a pro-Robin Hood faction to temper the accusations of the satirists, those who wrote about the Society attempted to top one another with increasingly ludicrous parodies and burlesques of the group. Eventually these parodies would become the lens through which the public viewed the real-life Robin Hood Society, undermining the group’s intellectual authority and effectively destroying their reputation.

In the final section of this chapter I briefly discuss a few debating societies that competed with the Robin Hood during the 1750s and 1760s as well as the history of London debating societies after 1770. Despite the harsh critical reaction against the group, several entrepreneurs recognized the economic viability of the Robin Hood and attempted to imitate it for their own profit. I briefly analyze the ways in which these entrepreneurs sought to improve the Robin Hood’s model, with particular attention to how they sought to pre-empt the criticism the Robin Hood received in the press through strategies of self-parody. Finally, I briefly recount the explosion of London debating groups in the fall of 1779 and 1780, noting how the vastly different political conditions of that period resulted in a species of debating society that would have been all but unrecognizable to members of the Robin Hood.

Though it is unclear exactly when the group began meeting, the first mention of the debating club that would become the Robin Hood Society appeared in print in 1750. At that time, Mary Thale and Iain McCalman tentatively date the Robin Hood’s founding to the 1730s, but this seems unlikely. Neither scholar cites an account of the club published before 1750, and while two 18th-century histories of the club—The Cause of Liberty and The History of the Robinhood Society—argue that the group is even older, both of these works are untrustworthy. Most likely the Robin Hood began meeting in the late 1740s, since it had clearly been meeting for some time when it was first mentioned in 1750 in the anonymous pamphlet An Address to the
the group was meeting at the Essex Head Tavern in the Strand, though in 1750 the group’s popularity forced them to move to the more spacious room at the Robin Hood and Little John Tavern in Butcher’s Row. While the group called themselves “The Society for Free and Candid Inquiry,” like many 18th-century clubs they were more often referred to by the name of the tavern at which they met; thus, the group was referred to as the Essex Head Society until they moved to their new location, after which they were referred to almost exclusively as the Robin Hood Society. The group met each Monday evening and members (I use the term loosely since there was no formal membership system; anyone was invited to attend) paid sixpence for the opportunity to hear and participate in the debate; a 40-ounce tankard of porter or lemonade also was included with the price of admission, and additional refreshments were available for purchase. Though it is difficult to gauge exactly who composed the group’s membership, surviving accounts indicate that the group was comprised largely of tradesmen, including tailors, shoemakers and low-level professionals such as clerks and copyists. Each meeting was chaired by a president, a position that, during the 1750s, was held by a man known popularly as “the Baker” (née Caleb Jeacock, but so-called after his profession). The president’s main duty was to enforce the 5-minute time limit for each speaker, and Jeacock was famous for wielding his gavel with little sympathy for those who would ignore this limit. At the end of each meeting, topics were proposed by paper ballot for the next meeting. Before that meeting, the president selected the order in which topics would be discussed. If a suggestion was signed, then the person who proposed the topic would be allowed to speak first, whereas if the topic was submitted

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108 One source contradicts this, stating that members received “as much belch and porter as the conscience of each individual would permit him to swallow.” See An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society (London: J. Brooke, 1751), 7.
anonymously the president would “own” the topic and begin the debate himself. From there, debaters would speak in turn based on where they were sitting that evening.

The Robin Hood Society’s rules and procedures are, to some extent, a reflection of the club’s intellectual idiosyncrasies, but their policies also are indicative of popular attitudes toward debate and oratory in wider 18th-century British culture. While modern debaters are judged primarily based on the coherence and force of their arguments, 18th century debaters were more connected to the classical oratorical tradition in which, as Mary Thale states, “attention was paid to tone of voice and gesture as well as to the argument and diction.”

Oratory and acting were treated as closely related fields; men such as Samuel Foote moved easily between both venues, and the Robin Hood Society often was mentioned in the same breath as the “spouting clubs” in which amateur and aspiring professional actors gathered to present pre-rehearsed monologues and set pieces to one another for critique. Indeed, the author of The Robin-Hood Society: A Satire wrote against both debating and spouting clubs (leveling many of the same accusations at each), and critiques of the two institutions have overlapped so frequently that a few subsequent scholars have assumed they were one and the same. In keeping with this emphasis on performance, the Robin Hood’s rules self-consciously managed the staging of each speech and made sure that no person’s remarks were too long for the audience’s attention span. By contrast, the content of speeches was left wholly unrestricted; members were free to speak on any topic they desired and pursue whatever argumentative strategies appealed to them. Sometimes, it is quite apparent,


speakers took the floor with little or no argument at all, their main goal evidently to evoke laughter rather than to analyze or dispute the proposed topic; anecdotes about notable insults, barbs and other assorted witticisms abound. Though debates (particularly political debates) are now seen primarily as utilitarian enterprises, something you suffer through in order to be a good citizen or a good student, 18th-century audiences saw debates primarily as a form of entertainment.

Appreciating the Robin Hood Society’s emphasis on performance and entertainment is crucial to understanding the group, particularly since modern accounts of the Robin Hood have over-emphasized their interest in and impact on the political sphere. Iain McCalman has argued that the Robin Hood of the 1740s and 1750s served as an important influence on, even a pattern for, what he calls “popular radical debating clubs” that provided meeting-places for radical organizers during the American Revolutionary War and the Wilkite controversy.\textsuperscript{111} Mary Thale (also lumping the Robin Hood of the 1750s with the more politicized debating clubs of the 1770s and 1780s) notes that, “government took these societies [i.e. debating clubs] seriously, fearing the danger of mobs made irreligious and seditious by persuasive orators.”\textsuperscript{112} These critics tend to rely on the assumption that the Robin Hood’s debates worked toward some larger end of political agitation or social advancement. This assumption is difficult to support with primary evidence. As I will explore more fully below, the Robin Hood orators’ primarily allegiance was to


\textsuperscript{112} Mary Thale, “Deists, Papists and Methodists at London Debating Societies, 1749-1799,” \textit{History} 86, no. 283 (2001): 330. Even during the 1750s, writers who attacked the club tried to link the Robin Hood with treasonous and revolutionary plots despite the fact that evidence of political radicalism at the club was scant (see \textit{An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society} (London: J. Brooke, 1751), esp. 2-3).
argument itself rather than to any specific political position or platform. One often finds members supporting positions with which they do not agree, presumably playing “devil’s advocate” in order to sustain the debate. The two pamphlets authored by members of the Robin Hood Society—*The Cause of Liberty* and *An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society*—also exhibit this fascination with the nuances of argument and logic, weaving together strings of syllogisms with apparently little regard for whether these tight arguments will actually persuade their reader. The Robin Hood’s unofficial motto was that they served as “rational entertainment,” and indeed members seemed to attack their topics more like Sudoku puzzles than meaningful political causes.

Another likely reason why the Robin Hood Society’s degree of political engagement has been overestimated is that critics have assumed—again, with little or no primary evidence—that the Robin Hood’s meetings were modeled on Parliamentary debates. In fact, Parliament would not have been an accessible model for the Robin Hood since verbatim reports of Parliament’s debates were not available until 1771. Earlier in the century, magazines such as the *Political State* and the *Gentleman’s Magazine* had published detailed (if haphazard) reports on Parliament’s debates, but Parliament cracked down on these reporters in 1738. As interest in the Robin Hood Society peaked in the 1750s and 1760s, summaries of Parliamentary debates were published only after each session of Parliament broke for recess, and even then magazines used pseudonyms and other literary devices to protect themselves from prosecution under the laws against publishing Parliamentary proceedings.\(^\text{113}\) A close examination of the Robin Hood’s rules also reveals little connection to Parliamentary debates. At the Robin Hood, members were not divided into sides or parties. In fact, by organizing the debate based on spatial concerns rather

than the content of the speeches, the Robin Hood implicitly encouraged members to express singular opinions; in other words, there was apparently no impulse within the group to homogenize the multiplicity of voices by consolidating them into “pro-” and “con-” camps or anything resembling political parties. In addition, the Robin Hood’s debates did not posit an end or a goal such as legislation; once each member said his piece on a topic they simply moved onto the next, with at most a short, impromptu summary by the president.

A more likely model for the Robin Hood’s debates was the Latin disputation, which was an important part of 18th-century pedagogical practice. John Brubacher and Willis Rudy describe one such 18th-century disputation:

The tutor would appoint a thesis such as *animae immortalitas patet ex lumine rationis* ("the immortality of the soul is manifest by the light of reason"). The student called upon to respond could choose either to affirm or deny the thesis, but in either event had to do so in Latin. […] After making clear the issue he set forth his affirmation or denial in a series of Aristotelian syllogisms. When he finished the other students were allowed to object, but their objections too had to be couched in Latin syllogisms. […] And so the disputation continued till the respondent or objectors had been silenced. At this point the tutor, who had been acting as moderator, stepped in to summarize the arguments and state his own point of view.\(^{114}\)

Though no modern critics have explored the similarities between the Robin Hood debates and this academic exercise, the connection was apparent to contemporaries who were familiar with both institutions. The group was frequently referred to as a “school” or an “academy” and cited as a venue where less experienced speakers could learn their chops (at their own peril, of course).

The connection is even made explicit in one fictional account of the club, which refers to “an ale-house disputation” taking place at the Robin Hood. As in these Latin disputations, the Robin Hood began debate with the statement of a proposition or a question that members then worked to dissect and refine. The differences between this style of argument and Parliamentary debate are subtle but important. Parliamentary debate is focused on persuading the audience to undertake a particular course of action. By contrast, the sole aim of the Robin Hood’s debates was to refine the idea itself. One finds no examples of the Robin Hood performing the types of cost-benefit analyses that are a key feature of legislative debates. Indeed, the theological controversies to which the Robin Hood returned again and again resisted this type of analysis (alas, the true nature of the Holy Trinity, the group’s favorite debating topic, had very little economic impact on anyone in England, with the possible exception of the Anglican clergy). Clearly the Robin Hood debaters were not interested in politics in the way that modern critics imagine; they pursued argument as if it were a game or—like the Latin disputation—a form of intellectual exercise.

The Robin Hood’s debates also echoed the traditional Latin disputation in their style of argument, adapting the use of syllogisms to the members’ particular interests and educational backgrounds. While the students who participated in a Latin disputation would quote key classical authorities in Latin, speakers at the Robin Hood frequently employed English-language quotations from ancient and modern authors. Knowledge of the classics in particular—even in translation—seems to have carried great cachet at the Robin Hood, and members eagerly attempted to associate their own arguments with those of established intellectual authorities. This strategy was not always met with approval; as one satirist complains, “a great name frequently

115 Elisha’s Pottage at Gilgal, Spoiled by Symbolical Cookery at Oxford, Being a Few Remarks (by a Reviewer) on a Sermon Preached before the Warden... (London: R. Baldwin, 1760), 19.
proves more than a sound argument [at the Robin Hood]; and people, with whom learning and reason have no sort of weight, are yet prevailed on to resign their judgments, and to give up their opinions to an antient [sic] whom time has sanctified, or to an illustrious orthodox writer, whose notions and sentiments have been honoured and embraced by the world."

116 The Robin Hood debaters dropped classical references whenever possible, but orators also referenced the work of their British contemporaries. Another satirist, George Colman, complains:

_Toland, Tindal, Collins, Chubb and Mandeville_, they seem to have got by heart. A shoemaker harangued his five minutes upon the excellence of the tenets maintained by Lord Bolingbroke; but I soon found that his reading had not been extended beyond *The Idea of a Patriot King*, which he had mistaken for a glorious system of freethinking.  

117 Colman’s satire in this passage is surprisingly complex, hinting at the many purposes these references served within the Robin Hood’s discourse. By quoting these established authorities, debaters clearly sought to share in the sense of intellectual legitimacy enjoyed by these authors. However, Colman neatly subverts this attempt by listing a group of authors known more for their radical religious ideas than their powers of reasoning, not only short-circuiting the debaters’ attempts to establish their own intellectual authority, but also reinforcing the Robin Hood’s reputation for religious radicalism. Colman’s attack also hints that the Robin Hood orators worked together to digest and organize the literary and philosophical canon. Though the (presumably fictional) speaker’s mis-categorization of Bolingbroke’s political work as a theological treatise is ridiculous, we can appreciate the debater’s attempt to fit Bolingbroke’s


117 George Colman, _The Connoisseur; by Mr. Town, Critic and Censor-General_ (London: R. Baldwin, 1756), 1:50.
ideas into a broader canon of thought. This attempt to understand how Bolingbroke’s work functions as part of a wider discourse community seems analogous to—if not modeled on—the way in which students in a Latin disputation work together to understand how each individual syllogism fits into a philosopher’s larger thesis or over-arching system of thought.

Colman’s satire raises one of the key issues in 18th-century debates about the value of the Robin Hood Society: the nature of intellectual authenticity. Attacks on the Robin Hood frequently turned on this issue for several reasons. First of all, the Robin Hood’s attempts to maintain order through its house rules placed them at odds with a literary sphere in which argument and debate were deeply aestheticized. In contrast to the Restoration and early 18th-century ideal of the urbane, delicately-ordered coffee-house discussion in which the true wit knew instinctively when and what to speak, the Robin Hood’s conversations were governed by a useful, but clunky, set of overtly-stated rules which were strictly enforced. As one satirist complained:

If you believe him [the president], there cannot be a Society calculated for nobler ends, than that over which he presides: free and candid enquiry, are the founding titles appropriated to it. But whilst our orator is speaking; Time sir! Time sir! Time sir! is always flowing from his mouth.\textsuperscript{118}

As this passage hints, the Robin Hood’s strict enforcement of the rules frequently conflicted with its purported intellectual mission. While the time limit for speeches and the organization of debates by seating position ensured that each member would be allowed his fair share of the group’s attention, these rules made it difficult for ideas to develop beyond the five minutes allowed to each speaker. The small amount of time allotted to each speech occasionally could be

a problem, but satirists were far more apt to attack the time limit because it was too long: “it is a law there to speak what you will for five minutes, without interruption, be what it will; and I could not learn they were obliged to confine themselves even to the subject at debate, but might ramble at pleasure.”¹¹⁹ To those who attacked the club, the very existence of these rules served both as evidence that the Robin Hood orators were not authentic intellectuals and that the group was more interested in preserving each speaker’s vanity rather than adequately managing the content of the debate.

More importantly, though, the Robin Hood’s attempts to establish its own intellectual legitimacy violated long-honored English social traditions about the relationship between class and education. While, during this same period, Scotland was using its program of public education to collapse traditional class distinctions,¹²⁰ in England the notion that the method and extent of a child’s education should be reflective of his or her social class persisted well into the 19th century. To the conservative 18th-century gentleman, the Robin Hood’s membership, which consisted largely of tradesmen and low-level professionals, simply was incongruous with its intellectual mission and, furthermore, constituted an attempt by its members to act “above their station.” Satirists who attacked the club relied heavily on these social prejudices, fictionalizing a version of the Robin Hood Society in which these attempts at social climbing always were apparent (and consequently appeared ridiculous) to the well-trained eye. One author described a speaker who “would now accomplish himself in his old age, when it is too late. He begins to read the poets at fifty, and were it not for the badness of his memory, would make a hopeful scholar.” The futility of this exercise is confirmed when “to shew his improvements, he repeats a favourite


This anecdote’s comic juxtapositions—between the speaker’s age and his attempt at self-education, or between his actual level of education and his pretension to learning—rely on the audience’s assumption that the proper or normal time for this sort of education is childhood, when this education would almost certainly be reflective of the family’s social class. While this scene is tinged with the pathetic, most of the scenes in which false learning is exposed are straightforwardly comic. Malapropism is a key feature of nearly every satirical account of a Robin Hood speech, most of which also portray the speakers making child-like incorrect grammatical constructions such as “most reputablest.” Occasionally these mix-ups can be of some consequence, such as when a Mr. Gallipot renders his treatise on venereal disease ridiculous by assuming the words “contagion” and “infection” are synonymous. This mistake could not have been made by an authentic scholar of Latin and Greek, who likewise would not have insisted, like one purported Robin Hood speaker, “Brittanias […] Britanicus! Well; that’s the same thing.” While a modern reader might be tempted to sympathize with these men who do not have the education necessary to express themselves as they wish, in attacks on the Robin Hood these characters are invariably portrayed as shameless social climbers. Further, as with characters such as Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Sheridan’s comedy The Rivals, in the satirists’ fictionalized accounts of the Robin Hood these

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potential violations of the established social order are always apparent to the reader; a member of
the Robin Hood never gets mistaken for a true intellectual.

Finally, accusations of intellectual illegitimacy clung to the Robin Hood because the
group’s peculiarly conservative intellectual character ran counter to progressive trends in
philosophy and aesthetics, trends that placed ever-increasing value on originality and singularity.
Though we usually associate this emphasis on originality (and corollary de-emphasis on the
authority of the canon) with the Romantic period, over the past few decades numerous
scholars—among them Patricia Phillips, Margaret Rose, and Robert L. Mack—have uncovered
these ideas in mid-17th-century theories of poetics and aesthetics, tracing their influence through
the 18th century. Rigorous classical study still had its advocates during the period—Samuel
Johnson and Sir Joshua Reynolds spring to mind—but the mid- and late-18th-century literary
and cultural landscape is littered with “pre-Romantics” like Edward Young, James Thomson and
William Cowper, all of whom tended to emphasize individual subjective experience over the
explicit re-interpretation of classical themes and texts. In this environment, the Robin Hood
Society must have seemed quite odd. In their disconnection from the standards of classical
education they may have resembled these “pre-Romantics,” but the members of the Robin Hood
Society clearly revered the canon and actively pursued a model of intellectualism that was
incompatible with this emerging focus on phenomenological experience. From the perspective of
the modern critic, it would have made more sense for the Robin Hood to adopt this emergent

Enlightenment model of intellectualism, and indeed other clubs like the Dublin Society in Ireland

were harnessing the intellectual power of working men, employing their valuable practical knowledge in service of the “new science.” However, the Robin Hood’s reverence for the text (particularly the classical text), their parroting of scholastic traditions like the Latin disputation, and their focus on theological and doctrinal topics for their debates all associate the group with older models of intellectual discourse. While the bibliophilic poets and scholars of the Restoration and early-18th century such as Dryden and Pope seem, on the surface, to be a likely model for the group, in fact the Robin Hood’s argumentative strategies and intellectual preoccupations bear far more resemblance to medieval scholastic traditions of philosophy and theology. Like the scholastics, the debaters at the Robin Hood saw the written text—not individual subjective experience—as the ultimate source of intellectual authority, and again like the scholastics, members of the Robin Hood stretched their interpretations of these texts to the limits of critical coherence in order to support their arguments.

The speaker’s appropriation of Bolingbroke’s *The Idea of a Patriot King* in the service of his argument for freethinking in the above quotation is one example of the Robin Hood’s critical approach, but these anecdotes abound in satires of the Robin Hood, since satirists could present these feats of critical dexterity as errant mis-readings. In another example, a satirist recounts a Robin Hood debate on the catechism of the Church of England:

One amongst them stood up and began with a confident air, and a ludicrous sneer, to attack the notion of a Trinity, which it seems he found in the catechism: that it was absurd and inconceivable, that one should be three, and three one, considering it merely in a numerical sense, and then attacked the doctrine there taught, that the good acts of one man should be imputed to the benefit of another, but that every man should rather, as he thought, be

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126 See Chapter 4.
answerable for his own acts. Another imagined, that the catechism taught transubstantiation in its full compleat sense and latitude, and that nothing else could be meant by the words, *verily and indeed taken in the Lord’s supper.*

Though the satirist presents the debaters’ readings of the catechism as flights of “imagination” unconnected to reason, one can see the influence of scholastic eisegetical criticism in the way that the debaters bend and twist texts to their own purposes without regard to the author’s original intention. While the ostensible subject of the debate is the catechism, the speakers do not attempt to break down the text systematically, to understand its historical context or even to determine what the catechism, as a text, might “mean.” Instead, they appropriate the text in service of their own pre-formed argument, referencing the text where it seems to dovetail with their own argument and ignoring the parts of the text that seem to contradict their position. The second speaker, for instance, quotes the line in the catechism that states that the body and blood of Christ were “verily and indeed taken in the Lord’s supper,” but conveniently ignores the context of that quotation:

*Question:* What is the outward part or sign of the Lord’s Supper?

*Answer:* Bread and wine, which the Lord hath commanded to be received.

*Question:* What is the inward part, or thing signified?

*Answer:* The Body and Blood of Christ, which are verily and indeed taken and received by the faithful in the Lord’s Supper.

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As anyone familiar with the doctrines of the Anglican Church might expect, the catechism clearly underscores the symbolic nature of the communion, using this separation of “outward part” and “inward part,” of “sign” and “signified,” to close off the literal (Catholic) reading of the ritual in which the bread and wine do not stand for, but become, the body and blood of Christ. However, the Robin Hood speaker completely ignores this context; he wants to find evidence of Catholic doctrine in Anglican ritual, and his highly selective quotation is designed to serve that goal alone.

The Robin Hood Society’s adaptation of the scholastic critical tradition may seem like a chronological anomaly since that school of criticism fell out of fashion after the Middle Ages. That is, until one realizes that the debaters’ key training-ground was not the university or even the parish schoolhouse, but their weekly church service. While secular philosophers had long moved on, 18th-century parsons continued to employ this scholastic style of eisegetical criticism; indeed, one can see this style of criticism employed even in today’s Christian churches, where this type of selective quotation is used to marshal the Bible in service of political positions on topics like abortion and gay marriage, topics which the documents’ original authors did not—and in many cases could not—have supported. The importance of the church sermon as an intellectual model makes sense given the Robin Hood speakers’ argumentative strategies, but the connection comes into clearer focus when one notes that the Robin Hood’s primary subjects of debate were theological and doctrinal controversies such as the nature of the Holy Trinity and the mysteries of transubstantiation. By the mid-18th-century these topics were very much out of vogue within the sphere of writers and philosophers who are still popular among modern readers. The best-remembered authors of the period tended to concentrate on ethical rather than doctrinal questions, and the pedantry of the Anglican clergy on these topics served as a well-worn
punching bag for the period’s satirists. However, despite the waning cultural relevance of these questions, the Robin Hood continued to pursue these topics with a vigor that even their contemporaries found difficult to understand.

The nature of the Holy Trinity was the most important of these topics. Satirist Richard Lewis called the issue the Society’s “everlasting butt,” and insisted members returned to this issue no matter what the purported topic for debate:

> For in all the times I have attended there, to observe the method of their procedure, there was never a religious question discussed, but that the Deistical gentlemen, when speaking, (I will not say, to the question, for it’s seldom they speak to that) attacked the mysterious part of Christianity, which, as a judicious author justly observes, “it is the glory of our religion to find unfathomable, by the line of reason.”

The Trinity served as such a perfect “everlasting butt” for several reasons. First of all, since the doctrine still would have been a regular part of many parsons’ sermons, the members of the Robin Hood Society would have been familiar with the various arguments and counter-arguments regarding the nature of the Trinity. Since sermons provided such an important intellectual model for the group, addressing topics covered in those sermons would have allowed members to imitate this model very closely before attempting to develop their own arguments on unfamiliar topics. Secondly, though the nature of the Trinity was elevated as an important topic within Christian theology, it could be reduced to fundamental, easy-to-understand mathematical principles. This was particularly important for those speakers who would argue against the

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Trinitarian doctrine; as one speaker noted in a previously quoted example, one cannot be three and three cannot be one, therefore the doctrine is insupportable by reason. It must have been extremely satisfying for amateur orators to destroy (in their eyes, at least) nearly two millennia of Christian learning with this simple, irrefutable equation. As I noted above, within the Robin Hood Society there was a deep appreciation for the aesthetic beauty of a tightly composed, logical argument. The arguments against (and, to a lesser extent, for) the doctrine of the Holy Trinity perfectly suited the group’s aesthetic priorities while simultaneously connecting the group to the intellectual traditions that they most valued.

Satirists exploited the group’s continued interest in doctrinal debates by associating the Society with maligned religious sects. Rather than examining the Robin Hood’s debates as clashes of ideas, writers were far more apt to present the group’s meetings as clashes of identities: Calvinists, Arminians, Quakers, Roman Catholics, Jews, deists and others “within and without the Pale of the Church of England.” While the Society itself saw this multiplicity of voices as evidence of its devotion to “free and candid enquiry,” satirists saw the tolerance of these groups’ members as evidence of the group’s commitment to blasphemy and, as a result, constantly harped on the various sectarian allegiances of the group’s members. For instance, Francis Gentleman devotes over half of the pages of his History of the Robinhood Society to an annotated list of the group’s most noteworthy members, all of whom are meticulously catalogued according to their religious affiliation and profession. Note this typical entry for a Mr. M*r*y:

A taylor by trade, formerly Quaker, now a deist; and a very merry fellow that he is. He has no great abilities, nor very contemptible ones.\textsuperscript{132}

or this one for George B**dg*:\textsuperscript{133}

A noted bug-doctor in Hatton Garden, author of several unintelligible pamphlets, full of pious rants and enthusiastic jargon, and unmeaning stuff. He is a Quaker, and has often held forth as a preacher, in which character he must certainly appear to advantage, as he has a facility of utterance, and can harangue for half an hour together in such a style and manner it shall be impossible for any mortal to fathom his meaning. Fine accomplishments these for a Quaking preacher!\textsuperscript{133}

While Gentleman occasionally expands his portraits to include specific details about the orators’ speeches to the Society, these types of broad descriptions are far more common, as they are both in other satirical accounts of the group and even in the few pro-Robin Hood pamphlets. By describing the group’s meetings using this language of sectarian identity, writers effaced any trace of originality in the orators’ speeches, confining them, at best, to restatements of well-established ideological platforms. Not only did this strategy undermine any intellectual contributions made by members of the Robin Hood, but also it fatally tied the Robin Hood’s fortunes to those of the socially maligned sects that were said to populate the club.

Despite the repeated accusations of blasphemy by the club’s detractors and the Society’s willingness to tolerate the expression of diverse viewpoints, the over-arching political character of the Robin Hood could hardly be described as radical. Indeed, as I have argued above, it is

\textsuperscript{132} Francis Gentleman, \textit{History of the Robinhood Society} (London: James Fletcher & Co., 1764), 145.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ibid.}, 146.
impossible to describe the Robin Hood coherently with political or ideological labels such as “radical,” “progressive” or “conservative” because the group’s commitment to the dialectical process of debate meant that members often expressed opinions with which they did not agree in order to sustain debate. Unfortunately there is no authoritative primary documentation of the debates that took place at the Robin Hood during the 1750s, but the group did start publishing short summaries of their debates in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1776. In these brief summaries we find the club’s dedication to the dialectical processes of debate clearly outstripping any connection to a particular political platform. The March 11, 1776 edition of the *Morning Chronicle* summarizes a debate over whether “philosophy and the abstruse sciences [have] been advantageous to mankind in general?”

**Question was carried in the affirmative.**—It was expected that a proposer of such a question would have taken (Mons. Rousseau’s, or) the uphill side; but it happened otherwise, and a speaker, who wondered such a question could be put, very ingeniously supported the difficult side of it.134

The summaries printed in the 1770s contain numerous examples such as this, in which a minority of members played devil’s advocate in order to ensure the debate’s liveliness. It would be wrong, however, to assume that these devil’s advocates were always forced to argue for the conservative side. Take, for instance, a January 1776 debate about monarchical vs. republican government, which was “determined in favor of a monarchical form.”135 While such authoritative data is not available for the rowdier Robin Hood of the 1750s, the evidence points toward a similar

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dynamic. If a majority of the members in any given debate had advocated any of the radical religious or political ideas attacked by satirists, surely those satirists would have made it clear that a majority of the club’s membership advocated these dangerous ideas. Instead, satirists were content to attack individual speakers, portraying the institution at large as a cacophony of dissenting voices rather than a singular ideological threat. 

For these reasons, modern historians who have connected the Robin Hood Society with particular political positions paint a distorted portrait of the group. By attempting to impose upon its diverse membership a single set of political priorities, 20th-century historians obscured perhaps the most interesting features of the Robin Hood Society: their commitment to dialectics and their adaptation of the scholastic intellectual tradition. These allegiances, which make the group so difficult to understand and describe under the terminology of 20th-century identity politics, place the Robin Hood Society at a fascinating point in the history of ideas, reaching backward to St. Augustine’s theories of textual criticism while at the same time anticipating the theories of dialectics that would be explored decades later by Kant and Hegel. These theories share the Habermasian tenet that power resides in the argument itself, not in its speaker, and this democratic approach to debate placed the Robin Hood Society in distinct opposition to wider 18th-century British culture, which was still organized around social hierarchies that, with few exceptions, only acknowledged the intellectual authority of the clergy and the well-educated leisure class. Whereas 20th-century historians mistook the Robin Hood’s democratic approach to argument for political progressivism, 18th-century critics understood the Robin Hood’s mission perfectly. The overwhelming proportion of them, however, vehemently disagreed with this central tenet of the Robin Hood Society’s intellectual mission. As a result, the Robin Hood was treated almost universally as an object of ridicule in the 18th-century press. In the next section, I
will explore the Robin Hood’s dismal reputation among 18th-century authors, investigating how depictions of the club in these texts informed the group’s public reputation and influenced the internal operations of the Robin Hood Society itself.

In July of 1754, a reader wrote to the *London Evening Post* to complain about the salacious and blasphemous topics proposed by the Robin Hood Society at their debates. The author recounts two particularly lurid topics: “Whether Mary was a Virgin after she was delivered of our Saviour” and “Whether the Holy Ghost was not an Adulterer for laying with a Man’s Wife.”¹³⁶ No doubt the author’s report was meant to provoke the ire of his readers, but it seems at least as likely to have prompted a chuckle. The topics’ juxtaposition of the sacred and profane seems playfully transgressive, and if indeed the topics actually were proposed for debate at the Robin Hood (the author cites no authoritative proof that they were), it seems likely that they were not meant as subjects to be considered seriously, but merely as comic relief. One must remember, after all, that each member of the Robin Hood Society was entitled to 40 ounces of beer with his admission to the debate, so perhaps it is unsurprising that the group’s members occasionally stepped outside the boundaries of good taste.

This letter to the *London Evening Post* cleverly references many of the public’s anxieties about the Robin Hood Society: that they engaged in blasphemy, that the club’s tavern setting encouraged members to mix bawdy talk with their debates on religious doctrine, and that the group’s doctrinal debates were so abstract as to be pointless. These were damaging accusations, but not everyone reacted with this letter-writer’s moral outrage. Indeed, the public’s reaction to the Robin Hood Society generally fell into one of two categories: disgust and dismissiveness.

These two adjectives could aptly describe the attitude of nearly every author who wrote about the group during the 18th century. For some writers, the Robin Hood Society was a beacon of irreligion, a symbol of everything that was wrong with the increasingly permissive and secular space that was 18th-century London. For other writers, the group was simply laughable, a living parody as vivid as a scene from Pope’s *Dunciad* or Fielding’s *Tom Jones* brought to life before their very eyes. Virtually no one had positive words for the group (which rarely defended itself in print), so the polemics, parodies, satires and lampoons written against the club were, for all intents and purposes, the Robin Hood’s public face. As such, the authors who wrote about the Robin Hood Society wielded extraordinary power over the group, and their depictions of the club’s members as hopeless buffoons or unrepentant blasphemers shaped public perception about this controversial group.

Strangely, the question of how to assess the Robin Hood’s moral value (or lack thereof) proposed by the group’s earliest critics quickly morphed into an aesthetic question: namely, what was the proper literary genre for depicting the Robin Hood Society? The writers who saw the Robin Hood Society as dangerous attacked the group with vitriol, composing both straightforward polemics against the group and parodies of the members’ speeches that sought to turn public opinion against the club. Other writers were less concerned with the Robin Hood’s moral influence, but saw comic potential in these working men’s pretension to learning. These writers composed elaborate, imaginative parodies that used as a comic engine the public’s prejudice that uneducated men were fundamentally unfit for learned debate. Unlike the parodies and polemics that clearly sought to take the club’s members down a peg or two on the social ladder, these authors seemed as though they were barely interested in the real-life Robin Hood, except insofar as they served as a departure point for flights of literary fancy. The conflation of
these moral and aesthetic issues in literature about the Robin Hood Society complicates our interpretation of the 18th-century debate about the group’s merits. Were the authors who lampooned the group honestly offended by the words spoken at their meetings, or were these writers simply comic opportunists looking for an easy target? The public, by and large, seemed to prefer the more imaginative parodies of the group, but was this pattern due to the public’s refusal to see Robin Hood as a significant moral threat, or was it merely because the book-buying public preferred parody to polemic? Parsing the original documents written about the Robin Hood Society is exceedingly difficult because there were, in essence, two Robin Hood Societies. One was a controversial debating club that met each Monday night in Butcher’s Row. The other was a work of literary imagination whose focus, membership, and habits were entirely subject to the will and priorities the authors who wrote about it.

In this section I will examine literature about the Robin Hood Society as it moved from straightforward polemic early in the 1750s toward much more complex and imaginative literary forms later in the 1750s and into the 1760s, viewing this transition as part of a pattern in wider literary culture whereby moralistic forms were emptied of their polemical content and mined for their aesthetic potential. The earliest writers to attack the Robin Hood Society relied on straightforward and virulent polemic, but the tenor of the debate changed when writers decided to mock, rather than decry, the Robin Hood Society. The introduction of parody into the debate about the Robin Hood Society served, at first, merely as another tool in the polemicist’s arsenal, another way to emphasize the moral and intellectual shortcomings of this group of men who offended so many. As the public grew uninterested in the moral debate about Robin Hood Society, however, another group of writers emptied these parodies of their polemical tone. Since they no longer sought to sway public opinion about the real-life Robin Hood Society, these
writers had no pressing need to create a believable representation of the club, freeing them to write increasingly ludicrous and absurd parodies with the Robin Hood Society at the center. The trajectory of literature about the Robin Hood Society through the 1750s and 1760s sheds light on similar patterns in the histories of literary genres that developed at around same time, including sentimental fiction, gothic fiction, and even the novel itself. All of these genres have their genesis in moral literature (moral fables, anti-Catholic tracts, conduct books), which is to say literature that prioritizes its didactic “lesson” over formal invention and imagination. Just as the later parodies of the Robin Hood Society emptied the earlier parodies of their moral center, so did authors such as Sterne (in *A Sentimental Journey*), Walpole (in *Castle of Otranto*), and Fielding (in *Tom Jones*) seem—almost to the point of paradox—to become fascinated with the aesthetic possibilities of moral literature. Though literature about the Robin Hood Society did not, of course, develop into an enduring literary genre, the group’s story serves as a compelling analogue to changes that were happening throughout the literary sphere during this period.

The first surviving reference to the Robin Hood Society in print is part of a 1750 pamphlet called *An Address to the Public: Occasioned by the Lord Bishop of London’s Letter to the Clergy and the People of London and Westminster*. The pamphlet’s main argument is for more rigorous public prosecution of the statutes against gaming and prostitution, but in outlining the generally sorry state of Christian piety in England, the author notes:

The agents for infidelity trust not to books alone for the success of their doctrine, they have their sermons advertised weekly to support it, they have schools for teaching their diabolical tenets opened almost every night at public-houses; at one of which held every *Monday* night at a public-house, near the *Temple*, I have heard such horrid blasphemies
uttered, as have made even libertines shudder, and in any other Christian country, must have met with certain death.  

While this is the only mention of the Robin Hood Society in the pamphlet, the author’s criticism of the group is provocative. Referring to the group as a “school for teaching […] diabolical tenets” that would make “even libertines shudder,” the author’s vague yet suggestive description seems to associate the debating club with the occult. Despite the clearly spurious nature of this attack, *An Address to the Public* prompted an almost-immediate reply from a committee of the Robin Hood’s most prominent members: a four-penny pamphlet titled *The Cause of Liberty and Free Enquiry Asserted; or, a Vindication of the Essex-Head Society*. 

While the vaguely occultist imagery in *An Address to the Public* seems to discredit its accusations, the authors of *The Cause of Liberty* took quite seriously the pamphlet’s insinuation that the Robin Hood’s members engaged in blasphemy. However, rather than simply denying this charge outright, *The Cause of Liberty* adopts a far more difficult argumentative strategy. The pamphlet’s authors acknowledge the presence of Catholics, deists and other non-conformists in their group, but they attempt to support their tolerance of these parties by appealing to nationalistic notions of liberty and the Protestant tenet that religious authority resides in the Bible.

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138 While *The Cause of Liberty* is unsigned, the author of *Genuine and Authentick Memoirs of the Stated Speakers of the Robin Hood Society* (London: F. Stamper, 1751) argues that it was “first designed by a Baker, begun by a —, carried on by a linen-draper, and finished by three different hands of no less eminence” (2). While the *Genuine and Authentick Memoirs* is generally unreliable as a source and the author’s account of the composition of *The Cause of Liberty* is probably exaggerated, the central point that *The Cause of Liberty* was produced by leading members of the Robin Hood Society seems credible given that document’s consistency with the Robin Hood’s general intellectual character and its staunchly pro-Robin Hood stance.

alone rather than in any human being. This delicately-balanced, highly-abstract argument—essentially, that the Society was promoting the cause of revealed religion (and, by implication, the Church of England) by subjecting it to attack at its meetings—is overshadowed even within *The Cause of Liberty* by the candid admission that the Society had, “for some time,” entertained and considered the arguments of Roman Catholics and continued to give respectful consideration to the arguments of professed deists.\(^{140}\) The authors also align their group with religious iconoclasts such as Martin Luther and John Calvin and distance themselves from the established church,\(^{141}\) rhetorical moves that probably did more damage than good to the group’s public reputation. *The Cause of Liberty* is clearly a rhetorical mis-step for a number of reasons. Not only did the group fail to counter the accusations of blasphemy leveled at them, but also this document helped to cement the group’s reputation for pedantic, overly-abstract argumentation. Further, the vociferousness of the Robin Hood’s reply established an antagonistic tone for the public debate about the group’s merits, a tone that would only escalate over the next year.

In December 1750 the Robin Hood was attacked again, this time in a letter to the *Whitehall Evening Post*, sparking another flare-up in the published debate about the group’s merits. While the argument over *An Address to the Public* remained relatively civil, the writer to the *Whitehall Evening Post* attacked the group with a mixture of ridicule and invective that quickly escalated the debate:


\(^{141}\) See *Ibid.*, 20, in which it is asserted that deism’s “chief strength consists not so much in opposing the *scripture* doctrine, as those *misconstructions*, which some professors of Christianity themselves have put on it” (emphasis in original). This and other statements like it throughout *The Cause of Liberty* imply the members’ unwillingness to accept doctrines merely because they were officially sanctioned by the church.
Sixpence introduced us to the audience, […] and entitled us with the rest, to as much belch and porter as the conscience of each individual would permit him to swallow; and by the law of the place, each person was allowed five minutes, and no longer, to display his parts on each topic, or rather to disembogue and vent the indigested matter that heavy liquor naturally produces; for it is a law there to speak what you please for five minutes, without interruption, be it what it will; and I could not learn they were obliged to confine themselves even to the subject in debate, but might ramble at pleasure; in short, a place of perfect liberty, as they term it, but more truly a place of licentiousness.\textsuperscript{142}

The fiery, occasionally nasty tone of this letter escalated the debate about the Robin Hood’s merits even further than the Robin Hood’s stern, but ultimately even-handed The Cause of Liberty. The author of this letter portrays the members of the Robin Hood not as doing intellectual work, but as merely undergoing (mostly involuntary) biological processes such as “disemboguing,” “venting” and “swallowing.” He also accuses the group’s leadership of corruption, arguing that the Robin Hood’s president embezzled money from the Society.\textsuperscript{143} In addition to these personal attacks, the author also criticized the group’s general mission and its institutional structure. Many of these critiques would become standard, repeated by nearly every author who attacked the Robin Hood in print: the strictness of the club’s rules (especially the five-minute time limit for speeches), the group’s intemperate consumption of alcohol and the members’ tendency to digress. Listed clearly, succinctly, and forcefully as they are in this letter, these accusations present a highly unflattering portrait of the Robin Hood Society.

\textsuperscript{142} Qtd. in An Apology for the Robin Hood Society (London: J. Brooke, 1751), 7.

\textsuperscript{143} See An Apology for the Robin Hood Society (London: J. Brooke, 1751), 35-36.
The Robin Hood once again chose to respond to this attack, issuing the pamphlet *An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society* in June 1751.\(^{144}\) Despite the failures of *The Cause of Liberty*, *An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society* failed to develop beyond the unsuccessful arguments and rhetorical strategies offered in the Society’s first pamphlet, frequently overstating the group’s claim to freedom of speech and refusing to deny or even qualify the accusations that they tolerated blasphemy. The following passage neatly summarizes the central argument of *An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society* and gives a good indication of the tone of the entire document:

> Have not they [i.e. the members of the Robin Hood Society, as Englishmen] a right to communicate their sentiments to each other, or to the publick, upon any subjects whatever? How much more so upon all points of morality, government, religion and policy, in which, as good men, and good subjects, they are so nearly concerned and interested: nor can their [sic] be any other restraint put upon a people pretending to liberty, but what is just sufficient to prevent them from publishing, by any means whatever, either *blasphemy* or *treason*. I mean by Treason, any thing that tends *directly* to call our legal sovereign’s right in question, to the crown of *Great-Britain*, or to excite his subjects to an open rebellion or secret conspiracy against his most *sacred person*. As for what he [i.e. the writer to *The Whitehall Evening Post*] has been pleased to call, perhaps a little injudiciously in another part of his letter, *blasphemous cavils*, I shall not presume to give any definition.\(^{145}\)

As in *The Cause of Liberty*, the central claim of *An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society* rests on the reader’s acceptance of both a broad conception of freedom of speech and a narrow, literalist

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\(^{144}\) According to an advertisement in the *General Advertiser* dated 4 Jun 1751.

interpretation of the laws against blasphemy and treason. Note, for instance, the author’s insistence that restrictions on freedom of speech should be “just sufficient” to prevent blasphemy and his definition that treason must tend “directly” (emphasis in original) to excite rebellion. Like The Cause of Liberty, An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society feels over-argued, the author preferring to construct a delicately balanced logical argument rather than attempting actually to persuade the reader with a mix of logic, emotional appeals and arguments about the character of the Society’s members. Both The Cause of Liberty and An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society are all logos with no ethos or pathos, documents meant to display the author’s argumentative skill rather than convince the audience of the group’s legitimacy. This emphasis on logic is in keeping with the group’s aestheticization—even fetishization—of logic that I demonstrated in the previous section. However, even if the reader is to accept the terms of the author’s debate, the author’s unwillingness and/or inability to offer a legal definition of blasphemy that specifically protects the Robin Hood’s debates is damning, especially given that attacks on the group place far more emphasis on their allegations of blasphemy than their more far-fetched accusations of treasonous rhetoric.

As with The Cause of Liberty, An Apology for the Robin-Hood Society failed to sway public opinion in favor of the group, and indeed probably confirmed, for many, the accusations of blasphemy the author sought to counter. Perhaps as a result of these two failures, hereafter the Robin Hood established an official policy of not publicly responding to attacks on the group. Ultimately this strategy of silence proved far more successful in quelling critics than attacking their accusations head-on. Though writers would continue periodically to publish these sorts of direct invectives against the Robin Hood, the frequency and intensity of those attacks declined sharply after the Robin Hood ceased responding in print. The writers who attacked the Robin
Hood also seemed to learn something from this early stage in the debate. While no-holds-barred attacks in the style of the letter to *The Whitehall Evening Post* could rile up the public, this style of rhetoric also implicitly acknowledged the group’s power by treating them as a significant threat to the authority of the Church and government. As later critics of the Robin Hood moved away from this style of direct invective and toward a new genre—namely, parody—writers developed strategies for undermining the Robin Hood’s intellectual authority without acknowledging the group’s potential social and political power.

As I have argued, early attacks on the Robin Hood Society such as the letter to the *Whitehall Evening Post* sought to eviscerate the group’s reputation with allegations of blasphemy, drunkenness, and even treason. However, as John Dryden had argued some 60 years earlier, “there is […] a vast difference betwixt the slovenly Butchering of a Man, and the fineness of a stroak that separates the Head from the Body, and leaves it standing in its place.”

After 1751, the writers who attacked the Robin Hood Society in print increasingly seemed to seek the “fineness of stroak” that Dryden described, gradually abandoning the straightforward attacks I discussed above and moving toward elaborate parodies of the group and its members. It is difficult, however, to attribute this transition to a single aesthetic or a moral agenda. Indeed, the writers who attacked the Robin Hood Society were clearly growing more ambitious with their attacks through the early 1750s, constructing increasingly imaginative parodies of the group throughout the period. The question remains, though, whether writers moved away from direct polemic and toward parody (and correspondingly shifted their tone from anger to mockery) for aesthetic reasons, or simply because this strategy was more effective in destroying the Robin

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Hood’s intellectual credibility. In all likelihood, it was a combination of moral outrage and literary ambition that propelled the initial transition from polemic to parody, but, as I will argue in this section, literary ambition would soon take over as the key motivation for attacking the Robin Hood Society in print. With the public growing bored of the moral debate about the Robin Hood Society’s merits, authors jettisoned the polemical content of the earlier parodies and wrote increasingly elaborate—and often decidedly absurdist—works that had little, if anything, to say about the real-life Robin Hood Society that continued to meet each Monday evening throughout the 1750s and 1760s. Eventually, the Robin Hood Society would coalesce into a literary trope, deflecting the most damaging critical attention away from the group and allowing them to continue operating throughout this period with relatively little attention from the general public.

The emergence of parody as the dominant genre for depictions of the Robin Hood Society happened rather abruptly. The first parodies of the group appear in 1751, and the most earnest and vociferous attacks against the group in the London periodicals disappear at the same time. Though many of these parodists prefaced their works with a more serious moral critique of the club, these critiques were never delivered with the force of attacks such as the letter to the Whitehall Evening Post, and the relegation of these critiques to the parodies’ prefatory material made it quite clear where the authors’ priorities lay. While there is no clear impetus for this abrupt change in approach among the Robin Hood Society’s critics, a variety of factors likely contributed to the shift. Most importantly for those authors who were honestly offended by the Robin Hood Society, direct polemic had proven ineffectual in influencing public opinion against the group. Despite their intensity, the attacks in An Address to the Public and The Whitehall Evening Post failed to lead to any legal action against the group or even any apparent outrage among the public at large. When the angry attacks on the group in these publications failed to
spark a bona fide public controversy, perhaps writers decided that it would be more effective to undermine the group’s reputation with mockery rather than confronting the Robin Hood head-on with anger and bile. As I will argue, this motivation to undermine the Robin Hood’s reputation is apparent in early parodies of the group, which still seem to have a moral stake in the public’s perception of the Robin Hood.

It also seems likely that, during the early 1750s, the Robin Hood Society itself underwent fairly substantial demographic shifts that changed the fundamental character of the group in a way that made it less offensive to moralists. The Robin Hood’s membership exploded in the wake of the attention they received from the press during the early 1750s. The room at the Essex Head that group occupied in 1750 could only accommodate 100 debaters, but the Robin Hood averaged about 200 attendees each week between September 1750 and April 1751, when the early controversy about the group peaked. While there are no surviving records indicating who attended the Robin Hood’s meetings, these members likely came from a wider socio-economic background than the strictly working-class debaters who populated the club early in its existence. Indeed, by the mid-1750s references to the group’s working-class origins are rare. If, indeed, the Robin Hood became more heterogeneous during this period, its critics may have lessened the intensity of their attacks on the group given that its ranks may well have contained their social equals or even their betters.

The most important factor that seems to have influenced the transition from polemic to parody among authors who wrote about the Robin Hood Society was that writers seemed to be fascinated by the comic possibilities of the group. For early parodists, the disjunction between the members’ lack of education and their pretension to learning proved to be a comic wellspring.

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with authors displaying remarkable invention in their portrayals of how the interests and qualifications of the lower classes are apparently incompatible with the concept of informed intellectual debate. Even when parodists avoided these class-based critiques, the Robin Hood proved to be an irresistible example of that most hated of 18th-century sins, false learning. Thus, it was literary innovation—and not social critique—that drove most of the writers who wrote about the Robin Hood in the mid and late 1750s. We can observe a pattern whereby parodies of the Robin Hood Society become increasingly ambitious and elaborate over this period, with authors taking many of the critiques of the club from the early polemics—their intemperance, their long-windedness, their strict obedience to the rules, etc.—amplifying them to the point of absurdity and re-imagining them as the guiding principles of a deeply ironic vision of an anti-intellectualism. As these parodies inched toward absurdity, the element of social critique that was the *raison d’etre* of earlier attacks gradually dropped away.

The first writer to parody the Robin Hood Society was the author of a 1751 attack entitled *Genuine and Authentick Memoirs of the Stated Speakers of the Robin Hood Society.* While *Genuine and Authentick Memoirs* started the rage for parodies of the Robin Hood Society, the book is still very much connected to the earlier polemics against the group. Direct invective of this sort could have easily come from the author who wrote to the *Whitehall Evening Post*:

> So dangerous are the opinions, and so blasphemous the assertions of this licentious assembly, by whom the fundamentals of Christianity have been so boldly attacked; that there is no error so absurd but finds a patron, nor truth so sound, but meets with an adversary; and all under the specious disguise of investigating truth; let me therefore “advise this generation of wranglers, for their own and for the publick good, to act at least

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so consistent with themselves, as not to burn with zeal for irreligion, and with bigotry for nonsense.” From these men we have every thing to fear, and nothing to hope for; “Folly joined with impiety is madness in perfection.”

Mirroring the larger document’s fluid movement between the genres of parody and polemic, this passage lodges two separate, but related, critiques of the Robin Hood Society. On the one hand, the group is “dangerous,” “blasphemous,” and “licentious,” and on the other they are “absurd” and “specious” speakers of “nonsense” and “madness.” In other words, the writer criticizes both the form and the content of the Robin Hood’s speeches, arguing further that the union between the two is “madness in perfection.” Though the members of the Robin Hood Society manage to meld blasphemy and nonsense into a kind of perfect unity, the critique lodged by the author of Genuine and Authentick Memoirs is fundamentally bifurcated. When the author addresses the Robin Hood’s reported blasphemous speeches, he relies on straightforward polemic of the type quoted above. However, in critiquing the “absurdity” and “nonsense” (and their related intellectual vices of pedantry and cant) that are also key features of the Robin Hood Society’s meetings, the author turns instead to parody.

Due, no doubt, to the near-ubiquity of irony and parody in post-modern literature, film, and culture, theories of parody have enjoyed something of a renaissance in the past several decades. Parody’s reputation had been severely damaged by 19th and early 20th-century critics who saw the genre as an inferior mode of literary production, appropriate only to an author’s formative works. Though authors and critics of the post-modern era have, once again, made parody respectable, disagreement persists about the very nature of parody. Is parody, as Gerard Genette

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149 Ibid., 21-22.
argues, a formal genre with definable generic traits, such as the sonnet or epic? Is it, as Linda Hutcheon argues, a method or a technique that can be employed by authors to many different literary or political ends? Or is parody, as in Mikhail Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World, simply an attitude or a stance, which can be adopted within the context of a wide range of literary and cultural practices? Simon Dentith manages to combine many of the strengths of these various approaches with his concise definition of parody as “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice.” Dentith’s formulation has been influential among recent theorists of parody, foregrounding as it does the practices of imitation and allusion while leaving the term open enough to encompass a wide range of critical attitudes, formal qualities and cultural practices. For Dentith, there are two essential ingredients that must be present for a text to fall under the rubric of parody: imitation (or its close cousins allusion and restatement) and polemic (though Dentith interprets the term widely; a parody need not be an attack per se, but it must make some kind of evaluative judgment of the text or practice being imitated or alluded to).

Dentith’s focus on polemic as an essential ingredient in any parody sheds light on the complex relationship between the Robin Hood Society and the authors who parodied the group throughout the 1750s and 1760s. The parodies of the Robin Hood that appeared early in the 1750s fit Dentith’s definition of parody perfectly, imitating members’ speeches in a manner that

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harshly judged the orators’ intellectual qualifications and priorities. Parodists generated their critiques by amplifying characteristic elements of the Robin Hood members’ speeches (their loquaciousness, their impropriety, their unfamiliarity with the classics, etc.) to the point of absurdity. These distorted portraits of the Robin Hood invited readers to re-evaluate the sober portraits of the group that had already appeared in publications such as *The Cause of Liberty*. Dentith refers to parodies that work through this process of amplification as “critical parodies.” \(^{154}\) Critical parody relies on the reader’s comparison of the parodic text with the text being parodied; if the reader cannot make this comparison, then the parodist’s polemical intent will be illegible. As Dentith notes, the work may still remain interesting or entertaining if its polemic is rendered illegible in this manner (since it may have other features that make it valuable to readers), but without this element of polemic the work cannot properly be said to function as parody. \(^{155}\) As I will argue, the polemical intent undergirding parodies of the Robin Hood Society became illegible in just this manner. Due to a confluence of factors—in particular the Robin Hood Society’s silence in the press and the ever-increasing literary ambition of its parodists—the polemical element plays a much smaller role—perhaps even disappearing altogether—in later parodies such as Richard Lewis’s *The Robin-Hood Society: A Satire*. Because no one in the press offered a sober portrait of the Robin Hood Society, these later parodies did not force readers to reconsider an original text. For everyone who could not or did not attend a Robin Hood Society meeting, the portraits of the group offered in these parodies effectively was the Robin Hood Society. This disconnect between the real-life Robin Hood and the group’s literary personae short-circuited parodies of the group, shielding the real-life Robin

\(^{154}\) *Ibid.*, 32.

Hood from its most harmful critics and allowing them to operate more or less undisturbed throughout the later 1750s and 1760s.

Most of the parody in *Genuine and Authentick Memoirs*, however, is decidedly straightforward, maintaining a clear connection between the real-life Robin Hood and the amplified, fictionalized version offered in the parody. In most cases it is not difficult to determine the author’s target. For instance, the club’s president, Caleb Jeacock, is represented by a figure called “B——r” (the author makes it quite clear that the name is “Baker,” which was, famously, Jeacock’s day job). The character of “Baker” shares many traits with Jeacock such as his profession, his pretension to learning, and his penchant for enforcing the club’s rules rather harshly. However, the author of *Genuine and Authentick Memoirs* fleshes out those shared traits with other, presumably fictional, details that force the reader to consider these traits in a harsher light. For instance, the author gives Baker a hastily sketched back story, claiming that he was raised by poor, humble parents who nevertheless “took the utmost care of his education.”

In light of his parents’ care in providing him with a sound primary education and securing him a respectable apprenticeship, the Baker’s (unfounded) intellectual pretensions (“He has more than once challenged to a publick disputation, a noted clergyman of the Church of England”) are particularly damning, seeing as he would have been eminently well-suited to a happy and quiet middle-class life. This mocking portrait of the Baker clearly falls under Dentith’s rubric for parody, sarcastically imitating the real-life Jeacock’s speech (the author lists several linguistic

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faux-pas such as “What is much more seldom to be met with”\textsuperscript{158}, his actions (the aforementioned debating challenge, which turned out rather poorly for Jeacock), and his treatment by the other members of the club (they “mount him on the wings of fame: he is wise, learned, good and great,”\textsuperscript{159} etc.) in a manner that clearly passes harsh judgment on Jeacock’s intellectual pretensions and lack of qualifications. The author also repeats this pattern with several other characters such as “C—p—o,” who seem also to have been based on real-life members of the Robin Hood Society. As with Baker, the author of Genuine and Authentick Memoirs takes care to construct these character sketches so as to emphasize the pretension and incompetence of their real-life counterparts.

While the sketches of Baker and C—p—o fit Dentith’s definition of parody quite well, more puzzling are the passages describing characters such as “Mr. Fondlechurch” and “old Whipstitch.” While these passages clearly contain elements of parody, they also include other imaginative details whose connection to the real-life Robin Hood Society (polemical or otherwise) is difficult to discern. Note the description of “old Whipstitch,” who:

With a gygantick cloven foot, and a swinging mutton fist, both which he occasionally brandishes in a most warlike manner, […] makes the following harangue. Mr. President, sir, I think what the last gentleman took notice and observed, was very good; when a man is poor, as the saying is, every body does what they will with him, and he can’t help it, all which he spoke of better than I can repeat it, and so it don’t argufy; for why now in our way of business, as we say in the way of speaking, our master does as they please with us, and we can’t remedify them, because for as how they have the law on their side, and have a

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 5.
unitation among themselves, and all that: and so I think, what was said was very well spoke of, and that it was very good, and he has convinced me that people as can’t takes their own parts, are brow-beat as he rightly exprest, and therefore I leave it.\(^{160}\)

Whipstitch’s ineloquence and malapropism clearly constitute a general parody of speeches that took place at the Robin Hood Society, but what of his “gygantick cloven foot,” or his “swinging mutton fist?” While these physical attributes may be intended to identify a real-life member of the Robin Hood Society, within the context of Genuine and Authentick Memoirs these monstrous details seem out of place, straining as they do the connection between the real-life Robin Hood and the version of the club presented in the text. These details perform no clear polemical function within the text; if they are meant to criticize or otherwise comment upon the Robin Hood Society or one of its members, then it is not immediately clear how these details, or the overall monstrous character of Whipstitch, do so.

Though the monstrous elements of the description of Whipstitch cannot be said to constitute parody under Dentith’s definition, the passage clearly holds value from a literary perspective. With the possible exception of Baker, Whipstitch is the most memorable character in Genuine and Authentick Memoirs of the Robin Hood Society, and it is these outrageous details that lodge the character in the reader’s brain, not the rather straightforward and conventional polemic that dominates most of the rest of the book. Simon Dentith notes that, as in the case of Whipstitch, there is a certain literary pleasure to be derived when parody loses its polemical function: “sometimes […] laughter is the only point, and the breakdown of discourse into nonsense is sufficient reward in itself […] It is not for nothing that parody is a close cousin, perhaps even a progenitor, of the tradition of nonsense poetry that descends from the seventeenth

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 12-13.
century and includes Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll.” Parody, in most cases, involves two deeply interrelated missions, one aesthetic (the creative re-appropriation of another’s words or actions) and one moral (the polemical or judgmental argument levied against the original text). Though, under Dentith’s definition, both of these missions must be completed in order for a work to fall under the rubric of parody, this does not discount the individual importance of either mission. As we saw in early polemics such as the letter to the *Whitehall Evening Post*, polemic can function just fine on its own without the restatement or allusion necessary to constitute parody. After *Genuine and Authentick Memoirs*, on the other hand, a pattern emerges whereby authors become more interested in the aesthetic qualities of parody and less interested—perhaps even completely uninterested—in the moral half of the parodic mission. Once authors abandoned the serious moral mission of criticizing the Robin Hood Society, literature about the group took on a playfully absurdist tone. Though the writer of *Genuine and Authentick Memoirs* seems only to have used parody as one weapon in his polemical arsenal, other practitioners of irony recognized the comic possibilities inherent in the disjunction between the group’s working-class background and their pretensions to higher learning. Though many of these works contain some cursory element of polemic against the Robin Hood Society, this element is consistently rendered secondary to the work’s aesthetic mission. In effect, the moral or polemical element of these later parodies was merely a pose, the adoption of which allowed comic writers to partake in the fruitful aesthetic potential they recognized in the structure and character of a group like the Robin Hood Society.

After *Genuine and Authentick Memoirs*, one can clearly observe a pattern whereby parodies of the Robin Hood Society grow more absurd and less polemical. 1751 and 1752 saw a

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number of shorter parodies of the Robin Hood Society appear in newspapers and magazines, all of which fit this pattern. Generally only 4-7 pages long, these short pieces devoted little or no lip service to moral arguments against the Robin Hood Society, instead giving the full spotlight to inventive parodies of the group’s speeches. Christopher Smart’s humor magazine *The Midwife* published a fictional Robin Hood debate over “whether ‘tis best to oil a man’s wig with honey or mustard, *being proposed to the most numerous assembly that ever met at the Robin-Hood.*”  

One speaker (mis-)interprets this as a significant moral question and analyzes it in terms of the four cardinal virtues, while another (a Mr. William Honeycomb, who may have a vested interest in the matter) sees “popery, jacobitism and toryism lurking at the bottom” of this seemingly insignificant question.\(^{163}\) Numbers 8 and 9 of Fielding’s *Covent-Garden Journal* also parody the Robin Hood, and while Fielding adopts the already-familiar trope of depicting the members questioning the fundamental utility and value of Christianity, he makes the unique decision of rendering several of the speeches in phonetic spelling in order to signify the ignorance of the speakers. Take, for instance, this speech by “James Skotchum,” a barber:

Sir, I ham of upinion, that reliogin can be of no youse to any mortal soule; bycause as why, reliogin is of no youse to trayd, and if reliogin be of no youse to trayd, how ist it is yousefool to sosyaty. Now no body can deny but that a man maye kary on his trayd very wel without religion; nay, and better two, for then he maye work won day in a wik mor than at present; whereof no body can saye but that seven is more than six: besides, if we haf

\(^{162}\) Christopher Smart, *The Nonpareil; or, the Quintessence of Wit and Humour: Being a Choice Selection of those Pieces that Were Most Admired in the Ever-to-be-remembered Midwife; or, Old Woman’s Magazine* (London: T. Carnan, 1757), 205.

no relidgin we shall haf no pairsuns, and that will be a grate savin to the sosyaty; and it is a
maksum in trayd, that a peny sav’d is a peny got.164

Unlike the author of Genuine and Authentick Memoirs, neither Fielding nor Smart displays more
than a passing interest in assessing the moral worth of the Robin Hood. However, both
recognized the comic potential in the idea of a working-men’s debating society, and their essays
contain remarkably subtle plays on the already-established comic tropes associated with the
group. Note, for instance, how each author finds unique ways to portray these tradesmen’s
preoccupation with the cash economy. Smart’s Mr. Honeycomb does his best to associate a
competing product with “popery, jacobitism and toryism” while Fielding’s barber seems to
calculate economic, ethical and theological worth on the same accountant’s ledger. While one
can, with some effort, understand these depictions as polemical, it seems more likely that readers
enjoyed a text such as Smart’s for the sheer absurdity of a bunch of grown men engaging in a
deep, intellectual debate about a topic as apparently inconsequential as how to oil one’s wig. In
other words, the polemical function of these texts remains fundamentally subservient to their
aesthetic mission. Earlier attacks on the Robin Hood simply sought to destroy the group’s public
reputation; both Smart and Fielding, however, are more interested in the fundamental comic
tension in the idea of the Robin Hood Society itself: that this style of debate was as ill-equipped
to address the questions relevant to the Robin Hood’s members as the members themselves were
ill-equipped to engage in this style of debate. As they illustrate the often-absurd consequences of
this tension in their comic vignettes, Fielding and Smart rarely paint the Robin Hood’s speakers
as malicious or dangerous. Rather, it is the absurdity of the situation—and the aesthetic
possibilities inherent in that absurdity—that attracted these comic writers to their subject.

164 Henry Fielding, The Works of Henry Fielding, Esq: with the Life of the Author (Edinburgh: A.
Donaldson, 1771), XII: 75.
While Smart’s and Fielding’s parodies can elicit a chuckle from even the modern reader, one finds the comic potential of the Robin Hood Society realized most fully in Richard Lewis’s 1756 poem *The Robin-Hood Society: A Satire with Notes Variorum* (1756). Clearly inspired by Pope’s *Dunciad* (not only does Lewis pay strict attention to Pope’s laundry-list of epic conventions, he also replicates the ornate mock-scholarly apparatus that enveloped Pope’s original), *The Robin-Hood Society: A Satire* seems to have been the most popular piece of writing devoted solely to the Robin Hood Society, receiving printings in four separate cities and being well-advertised in the London papers upon its release. While it received a tepid appraisal in the *Critical Review*, the work was remembered well enough (and long enough) that the author of *The History of the Robinhood Society* could refer readers to it eight years later. The work also seems to have acquired some small degree of fame for its author, Richard Lewis, who went on to write several works in the same vein, including a satire on spouting clubs and an apparently-lost novel titled *The Adventures of a Rake: In the Character of a Public Orator through the Counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, and Oxfordshire, &c.* In addition, Lewis’s publishers continued to trade on his fame as pre-eminent skewerer of the Robin Hood Society; newspaper advertisements for Lewis’s subsequent works always identified him as the author of *The Robin-Hood Society: A Satire*.

From a literary standpoint, Lewis’s *Satire* is far more ambitious than previous attacks on the Robin Hood Society. Rather than focusing his attention on the shortcomings of individual speakers at the club, Lewis paints an impressively comprehensive portrait of a group whose

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165 Oct 1756 issue.

166 See an advertisement in the 6 Nov 1759 issue of the *London Chronicle*. 
institutional character is fundamentally flawed. Lewis explains how this focus informs his moral critique of the club in his preface, arguing that it is because the overwhelming character of the group is “scandalous,” “shameless,” and “pernicious” that the doctrines advocated there are overwhelmingly “vile,” “heterodox,” “blasphemous,” “absurd,” and “ridiculous.” It is hardly the members’ fault that they have fallen under the influence of such an organization, and indeed Lewis insists, “I have no private quarrel or personal pique against any member of the Society.” Instead, Lewis’s principle target is “a society founded on such a basis.” Most of the Robin Hood’s previous critics had lodged a two-pronged attack against the group, censuring their offenses against both religion and intellect. This dual purpose no doubt contributed to the generic confusion in works such as Genuine and Authentick Memoirs, in which the attacks on the Robin Hood’s supposed blasphemy tend more toward straightforward polemic while its attacks on the group’s intellectual shortcomings tended more toward parody. By subsuming these individual critiques under a more comprehensive attack on the group’s institutional culture, Lewis gives his Satire a sense of generic cohesion and unity of purpose that no previous parodist had achieved. Though, in his preface, Lewis argues that his focus on the culture of the Robin Hood Society is part of his moral imperative, upon closer examination it seems more likely that his moral critique is, in fact, an extension of the work’s aesthetic architecture. As is clear from the work’s full title, The Robin-Hood Society: A Satire with Notes Variorum, Lewis clearly intended to follow closely the model for mock-epic laid out by Alexander Pope in his poem The Dunciad


Ibid., iii.

Ibid., ii.
(which, from its second edition, was titled *The Dunciad with Notes Variorum*). Lewis relies heavily on Pope’s adaptations of traditional epic conventions to structure his work, and he also imitates the extensive mock-scholarly apparatus that appeared in Pope’s original. Again following the pattern laid out by Pope’s *Dunciad*, the goddess Dulness stands at the center of dangerously warped systems of morals and aesthetics which reward incoherence and stupidity at the expense of the recognition of ambition and genius. Lewis’s decision to follow Pope’s model by placing Dulness at the center of his text’s cosmology would have made the two-prong attack against the Robin Hood speakers’ religion and learning favored by most writers who attacked the group impossible. Cleverly, though, rather than simply concentrating on the members’ intellectual shortcomings (which would have made perfect sense given the centrality of Dulness), Lewis gives Dulness a *modus operandi*: she seduces members of the group by gratifying their vanity. All of the standard critiques of the Robin Hood Society—their loquaciousness, pedantry, blasphemy, and drunkenness—are subsumed under this root evil of vanity, cementing both Lewis’s moral pose and his aesthetic architecture, which places Dulness at the center of all the actions within the text. Note, for instance, how Lewis’s introduction of the Robin Hood’s president cleverly dramatizes the members’ deference for one another:

> With aspect grave, he rises from his seat,
> And as he rises, all th’inferior crowd,
> Their wonted homage pay, and doff their hats.
> So I have oft beheld near *Bedlam’s* walls,
> The proud empiric mount his wooden stage,
> Display his borrow’d hair, whilst all the throng,
> Scorning to shew less breeding than the *quack*,

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Displace their hats, and strain their list’ning ears.  

While the president’s numerous pretensions are obvious in this passage—his “aspect grave,” his “borrow’d hair,” etc. —Lewis’s point is not only to attack the Baker’s vanity, but also to illustrate how the Robin Hood itself is designed to gratify this vanity. The poet notes twice that members doff their hats to the Baker, calling the reader’s attention to the real-life Robin Hood’s institutional ritual and rhetoric. The passage’s lofty poetic diction, with its heavy-handed amplification, renders absurd the Society’s deference to this man whose only qualifications are the possession of a clock and a hammer. Though the Baker, by virtue of his position as president and moderator, enjoys more of the Society’s dutiful attention than any other member, the Robin Hood offered each of its attendees a weekly 5-minute taste of the respect and deference due to a preacher or a member of Parliament, with none of the costs of education or other dues-paying incurred by those exalted men. While the earlier attacks on the club attributed the members’ motivations for attending the Robin Hood to their hatred for Christianity, Lewis’s conceit implicitly criticized the orators’ thirst for attention. Still, despite centrality of vanity to this passage, Lewis does not heap rage upon his subjects. Instead, within the poem, the Robin Hood Speakers are like automatons that simply walk in the direction of self-gratification, usually to great comic effect. Lewis’s point, then, is not to criticize the members for this (ostensibly) moral failing, but rather to enjoy the purely aesthetic pleasure that comes from recognizing the irony of a group founded upon such backwards precepts.

Lewis’s treatment of the club’s attitude toward alcohol works along similar lines. While previous authors had criticized the Robin Hood for the impropriety of discussing religion in a tavern, within Lewis’s text alcohol is essentially morally inert. However, the centrality of alcohol

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to tavern culture gives Lewis ample opportunity to engage in flights of poetic fancy. Lewis
cleverly weaves porter and lemonade—the two drinks on offer at the club—not only into the
fabric of the group, but also into the very structure of his poem, even replacing the epic’s
traditional invocation, an address to the muses, with an address to these beverages:

By porter, and by lemonade inspir’d,

The bard nor needs the Heliconian spring,

Nor courts the aid of the Aonian maids.\footnote{Ibid., 18.} \footnote{Ibid., 19-20.}

As with Lewis’s criticism of vanity within the group, the group’s consumption of alcohol is
reprehensible from both a moral and an aesthetic standpoint (pushing members to treat serious
topics lightly and impairing their judgment and taste), but again Lewis is far more interested in
the aesthetic angle. Note this footnote to the above passage, in which the author revels in the
irony of the members’ attempts to debate while drunk:

According to the antient adage, “tell me your company, I will tell you what you are,” this
well-informed bard, appeareth inclinable to deduce the nature of the oratory of this society
from the liquors used by them: and right well seemeth that his quaint surmise: for it is an
undoubted truth, that the different diets of mankind, may well account for the difference in
their composition. The vivacity of a Frenchman, and the heaviness of a German, are easily
deduced from this principle. And it is observable, that among the orators of this society,
those who quaff porter, generally speak with great gravity, unmeaning solemnity, and an
un-interrupted dullness; while, on the other hand, those who drink lemonade, are
impertinently witty, unseasonably smart, and acutely ridiculous.\footnote{Ibid., 18.}
In this passage Lewis displaces the blame for the members’ oratorical shortcomings onto alcohol, identifying it not simply as an enabler, but as an active agent within the group. This passage illustrates both the de-emphasis of the parody’s polemical content (the alcohol is blamed for the bad speeches rather than the members themselves) and the stylized, almost absurdist tone that characterize Lewis’s Satire. Both of these patterns disrupt the reader’s ability to read the work as even a loose imitation of the actual Robin Hood Society’s meetings. While the righteous indignation behind a polemic such as the letter to the Whitehall Evening Post is almost palpable, one gets the impression that the actual Robin Hood Society did not morally offend Lewis. Rather, the author was a literary opportunist who sought to exploit the irony of a drunken, uneducated intellectual society, and, if he could manage, also to parlay the group’s notoriety into attention for his own work. The polemical dimension of The Robin-Hood Society: A Satire is merely a matter of course, a tone that Lewis must adopt—however briefly—in order to engage in the style of parody that, clearly, interested him more on an artistic than a moral level.

Lewis’s parody is thus emptied of its polemical content, and as such it can barely—if at all—be said to function as parody, instead coming off as an absurdist foray into irony. In this respect, Lewis’s Satire seems very much akin to the novels of Laurence Sterne or even early gothic fiction such as Horace Walpole’s Castle of Otranto. In A Sentimental Journey, for instance, Sterne borrows the architecture of sentimental fiction—the deeply sensitive, first-person narration, the episodic narrative structure, etc.—but empties this form of the moral reflection that forms the emotional center of similar works such as Mackenzie’s The Man of Feeling. Like Lewis, Sterne was fascinated by the artistic possibilities of sentimental fiction but apparently unmoved by the genre’s moral tenets. Rather than finding some new source for the genre’s moral weight, Sterne simply emptied the form of its moral center, leaving in its place a
sort of stagey, surface-level emotion that makes his reader speculate as to the true depth of his hero Yorick’s feeling. In a similar vein, gothic fiction such as Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto* invokes the strange, the horrible, and the terrifying (such as the scene in which a giant helmet falls from the sky), but these sensation are not used in service of some greater moral purpose, they are merely enjoyed for their own sensual effects. The bizarre, fantastic, and sublime elements in Walpole’s novel function as a sort of morally inert stimulus, the author apparently more interested in the mechanics of how these sensations can be evoked than how they can be used to better his audience from a moral standpoint. This adoption of these normally morally significant or morally weighty subjects into, essentially, literary chess pieces, is a hallmark of this era of the eighteenth century.

Rather than reverting back to the style of earlier polemics or more biting parodies, other authors followed Lewis’s lead in treating the Robin Hood Society as a literary trope rather than as a representation of a real-life organization. After the *Satire*’s publication in 1756, the Robin Hood Society’s continued to make scattered appearances in the press, but it is never in the context of a polemical attack, even an attack couched in parody. In 1762 Samuel Foote (who had himself attended the Robin Hood Society regularly) published a rather drab three-act comedy called *The Orators*. Though *The Orators* is set in a debating society, the point of the play is not so much to satirize debating societies as it is to provide a context for several rather obvious instances of physical comedy. Similarly, Francis Gentleman’s 1764 book *The History of the Robinhood Society* reads less like an account of the group’s origins and more like a literary miscellany with the Robin Hood Society serving as a loose framing device. Aside from a lengthy section in the middle of the book containing descriptions of some of the club’s most famous
speakers (many of whom were no longer alive by the time the work was published) along with pithy assessments of their oratorical skill, most of *The History of the Robinhood Society* is taken up with short moral essays and fables. The moral essays are presented as speeches by long-forgotten members of the Society, and characters within the moral fables invariably visit the Robin Hood in order to deliver a highly hypocritical oration on whatever Christian virtue they happen to be violating. Indeed, it is quite clear that this unremarkable work of hack writing has little to do with the historical Robin Hood Society. As in *The Orators* and Lewis’s *Satire*, Gentleman’s Robin Hood Society did not serve to comment upon the real-life group. Instead, the group merely served as a literary motif, a convenient expedient for tying together disparate themes of immorality, blasphemy, and stupidity. No doubt some of the readers who perused these books would have been surprised to find out that a real-life Robin Hood Society existed, so generic and conventional had depictions of the group become.

Even in 1754, a full decade before Francis Gentleman’s book serves as the last substantial literary treatment of the Robin Hood Society, the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* had noted that they “must decline publishing [any further stories about the Robin Hood Society], as we have dismissed any farther altercation on that subject; and we do not doubt but that the public have fixed their opinions on the veracity and merit of the different opponents.” Indeed, the public’s interest in the actions of this controversial group does seem to have been exhausted by the mid-1750s, but the architecture of their story—particularly the central irony of a drunken, uneducated intellectual society—had imaginative value well beyond its use as a criticism of this purportedly impious club. As later writers refined the term “Robin Hood Society” with details

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173 *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* of 5 Dec 1754.
from their imagination (rather than simply from observations of the club’s meetings), some reviewers complained that the portrayals of the group offered in these works was inaccurate. As the reviewer from the Critical Review noted about Richard Lewis’s Satire, “this society is not so infamous as he endeavours to represent it.”\textsuperscript{174} Such an assessment entirely misses the point; it was only by detaching his depiction of the society from reality that Lewis was able to create such an impressive and ambitious work. The reviewer from the Critical Reviewer argues further that, “To exhibit some ridiculous pictures is a failing wherein the Robin-Hood shares in common with all other societies or mixed assemblies.” In this comment the reviewer hits upon the reason why so many literary authors were fascinated by the club phenomenon: the club’s ability to unite diverse interests, views, personalities, and stories. Of course this was important to the social function of real-life clubs, serving as some clubs did to institutionalize and normalize relationships among diverse populations. However, as Francis Gentleman’s History of the Robinhood Society makes particularly clear, the social club also could serve as an effective literary framing device that could unite diverse narratives and themes into a cohesive—if episodic—text.

While the coagulation of the Robin Hood Society’s literary persona into a set of literary conventions (one might even argue clichés) shaped the work of the authors who wrote about the group, this pattern also had important consequences for the real-life Robin Hood Society. The spate of literary attacks against the Robin Hood during the early 1750s decimated the group’s reputation, making them a laughing-stock. By the end of the decade, however, the words “Robin Hood Society” had come to signify far more than simply the name of the group that met each Monday evening in Butcher’s Row. By 1760, “Robin Hood” had become a generic term for any

\textsuperscript{174} Oct 1756.
debating club or assembly of would-be intellectuals, particularly clubs who were viewed as subversive, pretentious, or ineffectual. These two developments—the calcification of their literary personae as a stock comic cliché and the increasing use of the club’s name as a generic term—provided cover for the group, which still met each week in Butcher’s Row. From the mid-1750s until the mid-1770s the Robin Hood Society operated almost entirely below the public radar. No author published a direct polemic against the group, and discussion about the parodies such as *The Robin-Hood Society: A Satire* that appeared during the period centered on the literary merits of those works rather than the moral merits of the Robin Hood Society itself. During this period of media blackout, the Robin Hood actually managed to shake off its reputation for drunkenness, pedantry, blasphemy, as well as, sadly, its identity as a working-men’s group. When the Robin Hood Society once again appeared in the London papers in the mid-1770s (when they began publishing short summaries of their debates), the group’s new members commanded respect and wielded real political power. The members who began the Society for Free and Candid Enquiry likely would have been surprised to see the respect the group commanded in its later years, but doubtless they would have been even more surprised that the polemicists and parodists who first destroyed their reputation inadvertently created the space that allowed for the group’s redemption.

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175 See, for instance, the *St. James's Chronicle or the British Evening Post* for 19 Jul 1764. Upon hearing reports of a new literary society at Oxford, a reader writes in to ask, “Is it a Royal Society? or a Robin Hood Society?” as if to contrast the two. Note, also, the American debating club who took their name from the English group. For more information on this group see The Robin Hood Society. *Debates at the Robin-Hood Society in the city of New York on Monday night, 19th of July, 1774* (New York: The Robin Hood Society, 1774).

176 See, for instance, the review of Lewis’s *Satire* in the *Critical Review*, noted above.
In 1753, an anonymous author published *A Dialogue between Dean Swift and Thomas Prior, Esq.; in the Isles of St. Patrick’s Church, Dublin, Oct. 9, 1753*. Despite the title, the conversation never actually took place since, by that time, Jonathan Swift had been dead for eight years and Thomas Prior (founder of the Dublin Society) for two. The characters in this fictional dialogue are the men’s ghosts, each of which is restless because of the present condition of their Irish homeland. Ostensibly, the writer has invented this scenario in order to support the Dublin Society’s application to the English Parliament for funds, but this issue is only raised on the 128th page of the 134-page pamphlet. In the preceding pages, Prior and Swift butt heads over a litany of political and social issues facing Ireland in the middle of the 18th century: among them absenteeism, trade imbalance, religious diversity, public works, and education. While the ghosts agree that these problems exist, their disagreement about the roots of these issues and how best to address them leads the debate into contentious and occasionally even violent territory. Swift repeatedly lobs at Prior criticisms that also might apply to the hack writer of *A Tale of a Tub* (Swift: “Why there is not in all *Bedlam*, a Man so absurdly distracted by an Over-load of Projects”177), while Prior repeatedly attacks Swift’s credibility as a politician and divine (Prior: “let me tell you *Dean*, if you will be taunting, that if the political Secrets of the latter End of the

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177 *A Dialogue between Dean Swift and Thomas Prior, Esq.; in the Isles of St. Patrick’s Church, Dublin, Oct. 9, 1753* (Dublin: unknown, 1753), 123. Emphasis in original.
Queen’s Reign were detected, you would be found as rank a Jacobite as many Authors in those Days represented you to the World”¹⁷⁸. One would imagine a conversation between two dead men would be placid, but such is not the case.

Why, then, should a debate between two supposed Irish patriots become so heated? Though neither Swift nor Prior had a hand in the work, the author of the dialogue recognized that the men had very different ways of communicating their concerns, and indeed two fundamentally different ways of viewing the problems facing Ireland. Swift, as one might expect from one of British literature’s most revered and vicious satirists, emphasizes shortcomings in character, attacking the native Irish for laziness, Ireland’s Anglican ruling class for a lack of pride in their estates, and the English government for cruelty. Further, since most of the “Irish problem” is based on these shortcomings of character, there is no apparent solution that would get to the root of the problem with any immediacy. Prior, on the other hand, has no problem posing dozens of potential solutions. He is the consummate utilitarian, carefully listing each issue facing Ireland, proposing a bevy of potential remedies for each, and then carefully calculating cost-benefit ratios to determine which one is likely to be most effective. Unlike Swift, Prior is relatively unconcerned with the character of the Irish people, preferring to concentrate on problems for which there are immediate, practical solutions.

Almost without exception, the justifications for Prior’s plans are presented as monetary figures, and it is assumed that the state of the island’s economy is closely linked to the well-being and happiness of those who live there. It is this approach that most clearly separates Prior’s voice from Swift’s in the dialogue, and indeed most of the conflict between the characters can be attributed to Swift’s refusal to acknowledge Prior’s statistics. Note, for instance, this passage in

which Swift responds to Prior’s assertion that the Dublin Society’s efforts to drain bogs and reclaim land from the ocean have altered Ireland’s climate for the better:

Swift: You pretend to take Offence at my Expressions, but I see plainly, what vexed you was, because forsooth I reflected with some Spleen, on your little huckstering Society, with its two-penny Rewards and three-penny Premiums, for going any silly Errands you sent People on; and so in mere Contradiction you make them reform our Heaven and Earth, and mend our very Climate and the Face of Nature. For my part as to the Face of Nature and the Country, I know no great Alterations, but the shaving her Beard close, and cutting down all her Woods, so that we now pay 40,000 l. per Annum for imported Timber.  

Swift employs numerous rhetorical devices to devalue Prior’s statistics in this passage, using meiosis to mock the small size of the Society’s premiums, describing the Society’s reported accomplishments with a combination of ironically inflated (“Face of Nature,” “Heaven and Earth”) and bathetic (“shaving her Beard close”) rhetoric, and finally posing his own counter-statistic, implicitly accusing Prior of presenting a selective and biased interpretation of the island’s economic health. However, despite the vehemence of Swift’s attacks, Prior never becomes perturbed. For him, the dialogue is a rhetorical war of attrition that he will win only by piling on statistic after statistic, burying Swift’s barbs under a mountain of evidence.

*A Dialogue between Dean Swift and Thomas Prior* is not, in itself, a work of great literary merit. However, it is telling that the work’s anonymous author chose a famous neo-classical poet and the founder of the first prominent agricultural society in the British Isles as the

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179 *Ibid.*, 44.
representatives of these divergent viewpoints. Over the second half of the 18th century, agricultural societies such as the Dublin Society in Ireland and the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce in England grew steadily in membership, visibility and influence while the poetic genre that celebrated agriculture and industry—georgic poetry—declined in popularity, eventually disappearing altogether from the poetic landscape. In this chapter I will argue that the contemporaneity of these trends is not merely coincidental. While the fashion for georgic poetry during the first half of the 18th century may have spurred the popular interest in agriculture on which these societies thrived, the ethical link between poetic and manual labor espoused in georgic ultimately worked against the genre’s complex rhetoric of simulation, allusion and digression. Indeed, once these neo-georgic ethics were codified in the constitutions of agricultural societies, celebrating Britain’s agriculture and industry with great feats of wordsmithery was no longer an adequate offering to the commonwealth; one was expected to contribute in more practical ways. As Rachel Crawford has argued, “industrious leisure became a hallmark of the latter decades of the eighteenth century and was interpreted as a moral quality,” particularly for upper-class men. Within the context of the agricultural society, the trend Crawford notices manifested itself as a strictly utilitarian ethics that judged members of the society (as well as applicants for premiums and membership) strictly according to their measurable contributions to the British economy. While the rhetoric of the English georgic did not disappear completely from the discourse communities that encompassed these societies, references either to Virgil’s poem or to the British poets he inspired were rare. For these men of “industrious leisure,” the georgic poem did not speak to their new ways of judging, valuing and interacting with one another. Their new unspoken code of ethics relied

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fundamentally upon the rhetoric of statistics and empirical science, a rhetoric that, despite
genre’s reputed practicality, does not mesh well with the georgic poem. Within these agricultural
societies the evocation of the georgic mode was, in effect, overdetermined, referencing a
complex web of nationalistic sentiments that may have been philosophically compatible with the
societies’ missions, but did not map easily onto the groups’ utilitarian rhetoric. Thus, georgic
references typically served only ceremonial functions, appearing as epigraphs, monuments and
occasionally even dialogues between dead Irishmen.

As illustrated above, both georgic poets and agricultural research societies valued
cultivation of the land, but their arguments for the importance of agricultural labor were entirely
at odds. Georgic poets endorsed manual labor and moral reflection as essential components of
the ideal life. Agricultural societies, on the other hand, praised manual labor because they
believed that a nation’s economy was the key measure of its greatness, and agriculture was the
backbone of the British economy. Further, each group tailored their rhetoric to their ethical
priorities. Georgic poetry’s dense, allusive poetic style was perfectly suited to its mission of
exploring the complex moral parallels between farmer and poet, land and language, soil and soul.
Agricultural societies, by contrast, adopted a direct and economical prose style, their approach to
language mirroring their goal of making the farm more efficient and productive. The history of
the 18th-century agricultural revolution can be read as a struggle between these competing ethical
and rhetorical models. At the beginning of the century, georgic still held sway as the traditional
means of collecting and disseminating information about farming and husbandry, but as
agricultural research societies gained influence they established their utilitarian ethics and
concise prose style as the institutional language of practical agriculture. Georgic was accordingly
relegated to the status of an antiquated literary phenomenon. To the late-18th- and early-19th-century poets who explored the connections between humanity and our environment, georgic’s complex poetic voice was a stylized relic, as unfit for their purpose as the pastoral’s singing swain.181

In this section I will examine the critical history of the English georgic, arguing that since the 18th century critics have bifurcated the genre into distinctly opposed formal and ethical components. This critical pattern actually reflects a tension in georgic poetry between poetic and manual labor, though georgic poets found this tension productive. Indeed, all of georgic poetry’s central metaphors (poet/farmer, soul/soil, language/land) are reconfigurations of this opposition between poetic and manual labor adapted to diverse aspects of rural life. While the relationship between poetry and agriculture serves, along with the other iterations of this metaphor, as the motor that drives georgic poetry, critics tend to read georgic’s approaches to the land and to poetry itself in isolation from one another. In georgic, poetry and agriculture are inextricably linked by the genre’s guiding ethos of cultivation, but critics recast the productive disjunction between poetic and manual labor as an irreconcilable contradiction. When this pattern was combined with the ethical and rhetorical transformations in British culture that I will analyze in the second section, georgic poetry quickly became an unsustainable enterprise.

While georgic poetry loomed large in the 18th-century literary sphere, today the genre has been all but forgotten. As a measure of its popular invisibility, the Wikipedia entry “Literary Genre” lists an array of micro-genres such as the “medical novel” and the “Newgate novel” (i.e.,

prison literature), yet it fails to mention georgic.\textsuperscript{182} Even specialized reference works such as \textit{The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms} often omit georgic as well.\textsuperscript{183} Critics tend to speak loosely of the “death” of literary genres and movements, but it is rare to find a genre whose historical parameters have been defined as narrowly and precisely as those of English georgic poetry. Traditionally, critics have argued that the English georgic enjoyed less than a century during which it might have been called a popular literary genre. In this narrative, the English georgic began with Joseph Addison’s essay on Virgil’s \textit{Georgics} (which originally appeared as the preface to John Dryden’s 1697 translation of the poem) and ended abruptly in the latter decades of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century when a new generation of nature poets abandoned the strict imitation of Virgil’s model.

Critics posit Addison’s essay as a key point in the development of georgic poetry for two reasons. First, Addison’s essay outlined the essential characteristics of georgic poetry as a literary genre. The most important elements include the poem’s “middle style” of diction (between the rustic language of pastoral and the elevated style of epic), its didactic tone, and its use of farming and husbandry as guiding poetic motifs.\textsuperscript{184} Upon the publication of Addison’s essay, these characteristics were canonized as the “rules” of georgic composition, inspiring a generation of poets including John Philips and Alexander Pope to compose poems according to this scheme. Second, Addison’s essay precipitated a radical shift in how critics understood the


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{183} Ross Murphin and Supryia M. Ray, eds. \textit{The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms} (Boston: Bedford, 1997).}

intent of Virgil’s *Georgics*. Before the 18th century, Virgil’s poem was understood not simply as a work of art; it was also read as an instruction manual for all aspects of rural living. In much the same way that the Bible was (and, indeed, still is) read daily as a guide for developing and honing a Christian way of life, Virgil’s poem was read and re-read, its readers searching for answers to both moral questions and practical concerns such as what time of year to plant crops or breed animals. Recent critics such as Joan Thirsk have argued convincingly that Virgil’s poem influenced agricultural practice well into the 17th century, and like the medieval Biblical scholars who approached their text in myriad ways—literally, allegorically, analogically—readers interpreted the *Georgics* on several different levels, taking the poem seriously both as a practical manual and as moral literature. Addison, however, insisted that georgic’s primary—perhaps even sole—mission is moral. For Addison, the poem’s information about practical agriculture, while it is more than mere window dressing, ultimately works in the service of the poet’s main theses about ethics and morality.

Since Addison’s time, critics have disagreed about the relative importance of georgic’s ethics and poetics. For most of the 20th century, critics tended to emphasize georgic’s complex poetic form, reading 18th-century English georgic poems as imitations or reenactments of Virgil’s model. The most important of these critics is John Chalker, whose book, *The English Georgic: A Study in the Development of the Form*, argues for an extremely narrow canon of formal English georgics. Deeply influenced by Addison’s formal taxonomy of georgic,

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Chalker makes the case that voice is the genre’s defining trait. Whereas the pastoral poet adopts a stylized poetic persona, impersonating the rugged shepherd, the georgic poet speaks in the first person. By speaking from first-hand experience and (ostensibly, at least) in his own voice, the poet underlines his moral authority as an author and ensures the seriousness of the genre’s didactic tone. This is not to say, however, that the georgic poetic voice is natural or unaffected; for Chalker, georgic requires a self-conscious adaptation of Virgil’s idiosyncratic poetic voice.

To qualify as georgic under Chalker’s system of classification, Chalker’s requires poets to emulate Virgil’s extended patriotic passages, adopt his use of longer narrative episodes such as the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, and include passages of mock-heroic that balance the poem’s overall didactic tone.\(^{188}\) In addition to these larger patterns, Chalker also believes poets must imitate Virgil’s countless rhetorical tics and patterns that manifest themselves at the sentence and even the word level. Chalker’s lengthy catalog of georgic’s rhetorical tropes is impressive, and he succeeds in creating a strict set of criteria that a poem must meet in order to qualify as georgic. As with other rigid systems of formal classification, though, Chalker’s system becomes frustrating when he specifically excludes poems that have long been identified with the georgic tradition, the most prominent of these being Pope’s *Windsor Forest* and Thomson’s *Seasons*. Moreover, one is left with the question of why, exactly, georgic became popular in England precisely when it did. Beginning in the 1980s, a new wave of georgic scholars sought to answer this very question.

Whereas Chalker viewed the 18\(^{th}\)-century georgic primarily as a formal experiment, the most influential critic of the English georgic in the past thirty years, Anthony Low, argues that georgic is primarily a moral philosophy rather than a poetic genre. In Low’s words, georgic is “a

way of living and seeing.”\textsuperscript{189} Low’s study, \textit{The Georgic Revolution}, traces the influence of georgic ethics through the works of several 17\textsuperscript{th}-century British authors. At the beginning of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century, Low argues, georgic ethics were out of favor due to their incompatibility with the courtly or aristocratic ideal, which stressed the value of \textit{sprezzatura}, or gentlemanly ease.\textsuperscript{190} Since most poetry was composed for a court audience, the values of court were invariably reflected in the ethical priorities of the era’s verse, which not only undervalued manual labor but actually condemned it as unbecoming a man of rank. Despite this value system, Low goes on to argue, a number of important writers (including, most significantly, Spenser and Milton) became interested in the poetic, ethical and even the technological\textsuperscript{191} aspects of Virgil’s poem. As the events surrounding the English Civil War wrought fundamental changes to traditional court culture, didactic literature surged in popularity, giving these previously unfashionable works an audience. Low’s narrative culminates where georgic’s story typically begins: with Dryden’s ambitious translation of Virgil’s \textit{Georgics} and the brief fashion for formal georgic poetry during the first half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. By recasting georgic as a moral philosophy and all but ignoring the genre’s distinct formal traditions, Low brings a much wider range of texts under the georgic umbrella, including poets such as Spenser and Milton who never wrote anything resembling a formal georgic.


\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Ibid.}, 5.

\textsuperscript{191} For more information on Renaissance adoption of practical agricultural methods espoused by Virgil, see \textit{Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England}, particularly the introduction and chapter 1, Thirk’s “Making a Fresh Start.”
Low’s approach has been influential, especially among his fellow Marxist critics, informing recent work by Rachel Crawford and Sarah Wilmot. Both of these scholars expand Low’s inventory of social and political causes for the popularization of georgic poetry and ethics. Importantly, though, they also follow Low’s lead in deemphasizing—even ignoring—georgic poetics. Note, for instance, how the “working definition” of georgic poetry that Crawford adopts from Low avoids any mention of the genre’s formal tradition:

Georgic is a mode that stresses the value of intensive and persistent labor against hardships and difficulties; […] it differs from pastoral because it emphasizes work instead of ease; […] it differs from epic because it emphasizes planting and building instead of killing and destruction; and […] it is preeminently the mode suited to the establishment of civilization and the founding of nations.

This definition allows Crawford (as it does Low) to stretch her survey of the English georgic beyond the genre’s previously defined chronological boundaries. Whereas Low argued that the English georgic had an incubation period that extended to the 16th century, however, Crawford argues for widening georgic’s influence in the opposite direction, helping to support Low’s stated, but unexamined, claim that georgic’s popularity was responsible for the agricultural revolution that began in the second half of the 18th century. As Crawford states, “georgic forged a powerful metaphoric association between nation and soil that remained intact when its

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authority foundered in the last quarter of the century.” Given her understanding of georgic as, above all, an ethical—rather than literary—phenomenon, it is hardly surprising that Crawford assigns the genre a primarily ethical legacy.

As I have shown, critics since Addison have consistently bifurcated georgic into distinct formal and ethical missions, privileging one aspect of the georgic tradition over the other. While critics amplify and distort the tension between georgic’s poetic and ethical missions, I argue that they are actually responding to a key theme in georgic poetry: the moral justification of poetic labor. As Low observed, georgic poetry argues for the inherent moral value of cultivating the land. A reader might ask, then, why the poet wastes his time writing when he should be tilling the fields? One could argue that georgic functions as a celebration of or advertisement for rural life, but this does not seem to fit georgic’s poetic voice. Georgic poetry is didactic, but not polemic. Further, if georgic poetry becomes a mere description of rural life (rather than an integral part of it), it risks sliding into pastoral. Many critics, including Low and Alastair Fowler, have noted a tendency for georgic to collapse back into pastoral. Whereas georgic celebrates the inherent moral worth of manual labor and rural life, pastoral uses a rustic, stylized version of the rural landscape and its inhabitants as a decorative motif. If a poet wants his work to be read as georgic, he cannot simply use the rural economy as a means toward his end of writing descriptive verse; instead, he must embed his poetry within the ideal life he describes. While critics have had difficulty understanding poetry as a fundamental component of the

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194 Ibid., 87.


georgic lifestyle, georgic poets from Virgil to Pope have presented specific arguments for why poetry is fundamentally important to rural life.

Virgil relies on two main justifications of poetic labor in his own *Georgics*, and georgic poets continued to adapt these arguments well into the 18th century. Virgil’s most comprehensive solution to the problem of poetic labor is his conflation of the poet and farmer, a pattern that reappears in several forms and contexts throughout the *Georgics*. In the first book, for instance, Virgil compares the difficulty with which the earth is cultivated to the difficulty of changing men’s minds and habits. Virgil calls humanity a “stony race,” comparing man to soil that is difficult to till, a metaphor that implicitly casts the poet as a cultivator of men’s minds. The identification of poet and farmer reappears at the end of Book II, this time in an even more explicit form. Closing the first half of his poem, Virgil announces that “in our course we have traversed a mighty plain, and now it is time to unyoke the necks of our smoking steeds” (II: 541-2), a metaphor that equates Virgil’s poetic project with surveying a “mighty plain,” with particular emphasis on the intensity of that labor (“smoking steeds”). This passage recasts Virgil’s entire poetic project as equivalent to backbreaking labor, an equation that is emphasized by this passage’s prominent placement at the *Georgics’* exact center. For Virgil, farming and poetry are not simply comparable. They are, in fact, identical, each activity feeding into the ethos of cultivation that drives Virgil’s moral code.

In other passages, Virgil presents a second moral justification for his poetic labor. In the first book’s lengthy descriptions of the natural rhythms—yearly, seasonal, monthly, and even daily—with which a farmer must be acquainted, Virgil sets up a symbiotic relationship between leisure and labor that allows both the field and the farmer to maintain their health. The

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197 Virgil, *Georgics* (Loeb Classical Library, 1999), I: 60-65. Further references will be cited parenthetically by book and line number.
instruction that “with change of crop, the land finds rest, and meanwhile not thankless is the unploughed earth” (I: 83) is echoed when the workers enjoy a brief respite before the spring planting season:

Then [in the last days of winter] lambs are fat and wine is most mellow; then sweet is sleep, and thick are the shadows on the hills. Then let all your country folk worship Ceres; for her wash the honeycomb with milk and soft wine, [...] nor let any put his sickle to the ripe corn, ere for Ceres he crown his brows with oaken wreath, dance artless measures, and chant her hymns. (I: 340-350)

Worship of Ceres, goddess of agriculture, counter-intuitively, does not entail working the land but resting and feasting. By temporarily putting down their sickles, these farmers become part of the same cycle that requires fields to lie fallow in order to remain productive. Throughout the *Georgics’* first book, Virgil stresses the fact that nature is a system, arcane and difficult-to-interpret though that system may be. Both man and the land he tills are part of that system and thus subject to the cycles of labor/leisure, famine/feast, and difficulty/ease that the gods dictate. Though Virgil values labor in the *Georgics*, he does not advocate constant, backbreaking labor. Within this system there is ample room for Virgil’s poetic project, just as there is time allotted for worshipping the gods joyously through song, dance, and theatre.198 Thus, Virgil’s poetry, even if it is not productive in an economic sense (and, thanks to its status as a practical manual, one certainly could argue that it is), is valuable by virtue of its place in this elegantly balanced natural system.

English georgic poets also explored this relationship between poetic and manual labor, and many writers relied on the justifications of poetic labor developed by Virgil. In *Cyder*, one of the

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most careful imitations of Virgil’s *Georgics* in English, John Philips paints a portrait of Virgil that conflates his identities as poet and farmer, emphasizing how the georgic ethos of cultivation informed both aspects of the poet’s life:

Studious of Virtue, he no Life observes
Except his own, his own employs his Cares,
Large Subject! That he labours to refine
Daily, nor of his little Stock denies
Fit Alms to *Lazars*, merciful, and meek.

Thus sacre*d* Virgil liv’d, from courtly Vice,
And Baits of pompous *Rome* secure; at Court
Still thoughtful of the rural honest Life,
And how t’improve his Grounds, and how himself[.]²⁹⁹

In this passage we can see that Philips has fully internalized the Virgilian ethos of cultivation. The last line in particular is a deft expression of the link between moral and manual labor, with Philips using zeugma to underline grammatically the philosophical link between improving the soil and the soul. For Philips, the character of the “honest man” exemplified by Virgil applies this ethos of cultivation to every aspect of his life, including self-reflection, social interaction, and, of course, how he tends his land. As in Virgil’s *Georgics*, the same moral impulses drive both agriculture and poetry, and as a result the cultivation of both the earth and the mind (even if, in Philips’ version, it is the poet’s own mind) have an essential place in the poem’s over-arching ethical system.

In a similar passage in *Windsor Forest* (the so-called “happy man” passage), Pope relies on Virgil’s other strategy for justifying poetic labor. Like Virgil, Pope believes that the ideal life follows the regular, natural rhythms of the land:

Happy the man whom this bright Court approves,

His Sov'reign favours, and his Country loves:

Happy next him, who to these shades retires,

Whom Nature charms, and whom the Muse inspires;

Whom humbler joys of home-felt quiet please,

Successive study, exercise, and ease.²⁰⁰

Given his extensive use of the motif of *concordia discors*, it is no surprise that Pope’s ideal life consists of a series of well-balanced but distinct phases. Like the natural cycles to which Virgil refers in the *Georgics*, Pope’s periods of “successive study, exercise and ease” embed in the poet’s life the same syncopated rhythms that sustain the health and productivity of the land. Whereas Virgil’s dichotomy of labor and leisure merely argues for poetry as an acceptable pursuit in one’s spare time, however, Pope insists that study (which we can take to include reading and writing poetry) is an essential part of this cycle. Indeed, Pope posits study as a form of labor on equal footing with manual labor. By raising poetry above the status of mere relaxation, Pope argues that poetry is not simply acceptable within, but also necessary to the ideal rural life.

As I have argued, exploring the complex relationship between poetic and manual labor was a key feature of georgic poetry from Virgil’s time until the 18th century. In the previous examples, Virgil, Philips, and Pope all valued poetry as an essential element of the ideal or moral life. The scientific and agricultural research societies that sprang up across mid-18th-century Britain, on the other hand, did not seek to achieve the ideal life; they sought to increase the economic productivity of Britain’s soil. As a result, these groups tended to appraise actions in terms of pounds and pence, calculating their potential positive or negative impact on the British economy. As this new, utilitarian moral calculus superseded all other means of valuing the land, the traditional justifications of poetic labor put forth by georgic poets were no longer compelling, and georgic’s long-observable tension between manual and poetic labor dissolved into self-contradiction. In the next section, I will argue that these massively influential agricultural research societies adopted a rhetorical and ethical approach to the land that was fundamentally incompatible with georgic. As these groups institutionalized the rhetorical and ethical tenets of the “new science,” they not only influenced the conduct of scientific research but also how that research was understood and valued within wider British culture. Further, by recasting georgic as ornament in ceremonial contexts such as epigraphs, inscriptions, and monuments, agricultural societies robbed georgic of its traditional ties to agricultural practice. In this environment, georgic poets could no longer argue for the value of their own poetic labor.

Historians have long argued that 18th-century Britain’s scientific and agricultural revolutions institutionalized the modes of thought and argument that today’s natural scientists still rely upon. Too often, though, critics have attributed these cultural changes to a power inherent in science itself, ignoring the complex social forces that prompted researchers to
abandon their traditional approaches in favor of this new way of seeing and organizing the natural world. Sarah Wilmot, for instance, argues that “the power of science […] lay in its emblematic uses as a symbol of progress, in its ability to symbolize change in general, not in its membership.” Wilmot insists that it was modern science’s narrative of progress and discovery that compelled researchers to adopt its tenets, but I argue that the “new science” owed much of its influence in 18th-century Britain to research clubs such as the Royal Society, the Dublin Society, and the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce. These groups were crucial to the development of science in the 18th century, funding research, awarding cash premiums for promising innovations, and providing a social network for scientists that fostered collaboration and healthy competition. By advocating the “new science,” research societies ensured that their vast membership, eager for their groups’ recognition and support, would tailor their work to the rhetorical and ethical models they advocated. Along with the more systematic research methods of the “new science,” however, came a whole host of ethical, epistemological, and rhetorical models, many of which ran counter to tradition. In this section I will examine the histories of several mid-18th-century agricultural research societies, devoting particular attention to how these groups reshaped the demographic composition of the British scientific sphere and changed the rhetorical, ethical, and political premises under which that sphere operated. These groups’ approach to agriculture was particularly influential, significantly altering the way that British scientists—and eventually British people in general—saw their own soil. The ethical and rhetorical models these societies advocated eventually superseded the traditional justifications for rural life, rendering the main venue for those justifications—georgic poetry—obsolete.

As the first scientific research society of its kind in the nation,\textsuperscript{202} the Royal Society shaped scientific culture in Britain for decades, perhaps even centuries, to come. While the impact of the Royal Society’s research is well understood and appreciated, few critics have recognized the Royal Society’s importance as an institutional model. The exception is Michael Hunter, who argues in his study, \textit{Establishing the New Science}, that “in merging the formality of constitution, decision-making and finance with a devotion to research, the Royal Society set an example which was to prove deeply influential among other voluntary institutions founded to pursue scholarly ends from the 18\textsuperscript{th} century onwards.”\textsuperscript{203} The Royal Society provided a model for groups that sought to establish a scientific community, but it was not the only possible model. Indeed, the Royal Society itself had undergone a massive upheaval early in its history, changing both the focus of the group’s research and the structure of its bureaucracy. The Royal Society began with a bureaucratic structure based on the idea of semi-autonomous, subject-oriented committees that would meet separately to organize and plan their research and report their results to the larger group.\textsuperscript{204} During its nascent years, members assumed that the Royal Society’s work would be collaborative, an assumption supported by the evidence of the group-authored \textit{Sylva} and the 1665 corporate patent application on behalf of the Society.\textsuperscript{205} These collaborations proved increasingly impractical and difficult to administer, however, and after the Society

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{202} As Hunter notes, there were few direct models for the Royal Society upon its creation and “precious few” indirect ones. Michael Hunter, \textit{Establishing the New Science: The Experience of the Early Royal Society} (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), 16.


\textsuperscript{204} See \textit{Ibid.}, Chapter 3, “An Experiment in Corporate Enterprise.”

\textsuperscript{205} \textit{Ibid.}, 100.
\end{footnotesize}
adjourned due to the plague in late 1665 members abandoned the committee structure upon their re-constitution. Because of these changes in the group’s bureaucracy, much of the Society’s collaborative work ceased and the group became, in essence, a forum for members to discuss projects that were planned and carried out individually or in small ad-hoc groups. These institutional changes had another important side effect: the society gradually abandoned the emphasis on practical and applied science apparent in its early proceedings. Most of its early committees were organized around applied science subjects such as agriculture, mechanics, and anatomy, but the Society’s focus on these areas died with the committees. The reasons for this abandonment of one of the Society’s most important early goals are complicated, but Hunter attributes the shift in direction to the difficulty in conducting as well as disseminating this kind of applied research. Without the larger group’s pressure, members had no incentive to tackle these more difficult and time-consuming projects.

The Royal Society’s bureaucratic structure may have discouraged its members from undertaking research in the applied sciences, but later in the 18th century several groups would emerge with the intention of filling the gap between theoretical research and its practical implementation. The need for such an organization was apparent to much of the scientific community; as Crawford notes, “the perception among the British who lived in the middle years between revolutionary [scientific] developments and the practical expression of those developments was certainly that something new and of great importance was happening in the

\[206\] *Ibid.* , 94.

very soil of Britain." What Britain lacked, however, was an institutional apparatus for connecting researchers with farmers on a mass scale. A few key men devoted themselves to solving this problem, and the private social club provided just the forum through which they could raise money, foster collaboration, and disseminate the most valuable and promising research to farmers who were, more often than not, still using techniques that had not changed for centuries. Fueled by a tireless work ethic, a nationalist spirit, and an overwhelming enthusiasm for experimental farming and husbandry, men such as Thomas Prior and William Shipley were the catalysts of a movement that would eventually become known as the agricultural revolution. As I will argue, the histories of the groups these men founded are a crucially under-examined part of the history of 18th-century science and industry. Men such as Prior and Shipley did more than simply evangelize for the “new science;” they stamped their organizations with their own priorities and assumptions, and as their groups grew more popular their influence reverberated through wider British culture. Ultimately, these agricultural societies ushered in a new approach to ethics and rhetoric that would fundamentally change the ways British people valued their land and the people who worked it.

The Dublin Society, officially founded on June 25, 1731, was the first of these practically oriented groups to emerge. The Dublin Society is often linked to the well-known Philosophical Society at Trinity College that included Bishop Berkeley and Thomas Prior among its membership. Whereas that earlier group was modeled on the Royal Society, however, Prior’s

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vision for the Dublin Society was more comprehensive. Rather than simply providing an audience for researchers working in experimental farming and husbandry, Prior sought to involve the Dublin Society in all stages of scientific advancement, from funding initial experiments to printing instruction manuals and conducting workshops on equipment and techniques that could improve productivity. The Society’s most ambitious and expensive early project was to hasten the implementation of Jethro Tull’s revolutionary new plow. Prior’s new group not only offered free, hands-on instruction with the plow for those willing to travel to the Society’s experimental farm just outside Dublin, they also printed 1,000 copies of Tull’s *Horse-Hoeing Husbandry* and distributed them for free across Ireland.\(^{210}\) Since even popular books and pamphlets printed in London often had initial print runs below 500 copies, it is clear that, from the start, the Dublin Society foresaw a prominent role for itself. As James Livesey argues, the Dublin Society fulfilled many of the functions that we expect from the modern nation-state, and indeed many of the Society’s branches and committees were later subsumed into the Irish government.\(^ {211}\)

The Dublin Society emerged during one of the most turbulent periods in Irish history, and the conditions under which it began would shape the group’s priorities for decades to come. During the Dublin Society’s early years, the Irish economy was in total disarray, having been decimated by the negligence of its peerage and the self-serving economic policies of the English Parliament. The English Parliament banned the importation of Irish wool and livestock into England and heavily restricted Ireland’s trade with foreign nations and other English colonies.


English monetary policy also helped destroy Ireland’s domestic economy, flooding the country with near-worthless currency and depleting the value of Irish property. Early in his life Thomas Prior expended a great deal of energy railing against these injustices. In 1729, he published a controversial pamphlet entitled *A List of Absentees in Ireland and the Yearly Value of their Estates and Incomes Spent Abroad with Observations on the Present State and Condition of that Kingdom*, a list of Irish peers who, Prior argued, upset the country’s trade balance by spending abroad money which was generated by Irish capital. Indeed, according to Prior, a number of the peers named in his document had never even set foot in Ireland. While Prior’s crusade against absenteeism was successful in passing a patchily enforced absentee tax through the Irish Parliament, he soon realized that this top-down approach to reform would have little lasting impact. As a result, Prior designed the Dublin Society to incorporate a broad swath of the Irish population, uniting upper and lower classes in the pursuit of Irish prosperity. As Crawford argues, clubs like the Dublin Society “indicate the vitality of the intermediate classes, their zeal for self-improvement, [and] their forward-looking efforts to protect their new economic power.” Prior took advantage of this fashion for self-improvement and industriousness, combining these motivators with a nationalistic rhetoric that appealed to a broad cross-section of the Irish population.

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212 Dublin: R. Gunne, 1729.


Prior’s 20th-century biographer, Desmond Clarke, has noted the Dublin Society’s establishment of “a spirit of self-reliance and independence in the more nationally-minded and public-spirited Anglo-Irish.” Clarke hits upon the key rhetorical approach that allowed the Dublin Society’s mission to resonate with such a wide swath of Irish society: nationalism. As Livesey argues, Prior’s “instrument for national salvation became the Dublin Society.” From his List of Absentees onward, Prior’s own writings were characterized by a strong nationalist sentiment, and he often invoked duty to one’s country as a powerful motivator. The very name “Dublin Society” signaled that the group was proud of its location despite its provincial status, and when the group’s name was changed to the Royal Dublin Society after it received a royal charter in 1745, its new moniker reflected Ireland’s conflicted status as a British commonwealth with its own rich native history. Further, the major focus of the society’s research was on maximizing the use of Irish land by isolating the most efficient and profitable plants and animals that could be raised there. The Dublin Society’s research was concerned, quite explicitly, with the Irish soil, and by focusing research in this direction the Society ensured that those who participated in its projects and sought its premiums developed an awareness and, hopefully, an appreciation, of what made their country unique.

As I noted above, the Dublin Society’s activities were wide-ranging; the group sponsored research, awarded premiums, and worked directly with farmers. The arena in which the Dublin Society’s influence is most clearly observable, however, is the literary sphere. Over its first several decades, the Dublin Society produced a staggering amount of literature. In addition to


sponsoring dozens of stand-alone editions such as Tull’s *Horse-Hoeing Husbandry*, the group published weekly letters in Irish newspapers and journals. These missives were first collected in their own edition in 1739 as *The Dublin Society’s Weekly Observations*, which, in addition to scientific essays such as “Several Letters on Flax-Husbandry” and “A Method of Raising Hops in Red-Bogs,” was prefaced by an essay on the general health of the Irish economy, with particular attention to rectifying the country’s negative trade balance. The society also regularly published its by-laws (editions appeared in 1766 and 1769) and its list of premiums (editions appeared in 1782 and 1796), and in 1766 the group published its application for a royal charter. As one might expect from an organization with such a high profile, the Dublin Society was also the subject of numerous pamphlets, poems, articles, and books. These include *A Dialogue between Dean Swift and Thomas Prior, Esq.* and James Arbuckle’s “A Poem Inscribed to the Dublin Society.” The Society’s list of publications was so immense that anonymous authors would occasionally trade on its name (just as anonymous authors would ascribe their work to popular writers such as Swift and Fielding), resulting in publications such as *Cursory Observations on Ireland. By a Member of the Dublin Society.* By mid-century, the Dublin Society’s name had become a valued mark of legitimacy for authors who wanted to connect their own work to the group’s reputation for rigorous research and forward-looking nationalism.

The Dublin Society’s most important literary legacy, however, is its extensive body of scientific publications. It is through these publications that the Dublin Society institutionalized the terse rhetoric and the utilitarian ethical premises that would prove so influential in wider British culture. Most of the Society’s publications were intended for an audience engaged with

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218 Dublin: R. Reilly, 1739.

the latest scientific research, as their titles indicate: *On the Culture and Curing of Madder*, 220 *The Art of Tanning and Currying Leather: With an Account of All the Different Processes Made Use of in Europe and Asia...*, 221 *Considerations upon the Exportation of Corn*. 222 All of these documents rely on the terse, minimalist rhetoric of the new science to present their research as clearly and succinctly as possible. *The Art of Tanning*, for instance, employs a tight, diagrammatic system of organization, presenting its information under nested headings with no transition between sections. The first of these headings, “Of Hides and their Qualities,” is further divided into Irish hides, green hides, salted hides, and others. Each section simply lists the instructions on how to tan hides of this type. “Of Salted Hides,” to list but one example, begins:

> Such hides as the Butchers cannot immediately dispose of to Tanners, must be salted, lest they putrefy and corrupt; this is done with 3 pounds and a half, or 4 pounds of Salt (demorue) or Salt mixed with Alum, which is lightly scattered over the flesh side, observing to put a little more at the head, and along the back and edges, as being the most difficult parts to save. 223

As I have argued, the rhetoric is minimalist, presenting only the barest of practical justifications for each action (e.g., salt the hides lest they putrefy, put more salt at the head because it is difficult to save). This author loses no space to digression, assuming that the most legible and

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222 John Wynn Baker, *Considerations upon the Exportation of Corn* (Dublin: S. Powell, 1771).

223 *The Art of Tanning and Currying Leather* (Dublin, S. Powell, 1773), 3.
efficient way to communicate is with as few words as possible. Virtually all Dublin Society authors followed this template. Most documents are even so terse as to dispense with the dedicatory epistles that were a standard feature of most 18th-century publications, addressing their topic directly with little, if any, preface or pretense. Henry Brooke’s *A Brief Essay on the Nature of Bogs, and the Method of Reclaiming Them*, for example, begins simply, “I have heard it estimated by several judicious and accurate calculators, that near a fourth of this Kingdom is overspread with bogs.” Brooke goes on to outline a plan for how these bogs can be reclaimed as productive land, but at no point does he offer a moral justification for his project; the wastefulness of potentially productive land going unused is self-evident to both Brooke and his readership. As we can see, the Dublin Society was deeply committed to this terse rhetorical style. Moreover, the group’s ethos of productivity is so deeply embedded in its work that most authors do not feel compelled to advocate it explicitly.

When authors do choose to justify their research morally, it is usually with minutes from a Dublin Society meeting, and these prefaces also exhibit the group’s single-minded pursuit of economic productivity. Note this reproduction of the Society’s minutes in the preface to John Wynn Baker’s *Considerations upon the Exportation of Corn*:

1. Resolved

That it appears to this society, that a quantity of corn, meal, flour and malt, in value to upwards of 600,000 l. has been imported into this Kingdom in the two years ended the 25th of March, 1771, the greatest part whereof has been paid for in specie; and without said supply, the Kingdom would have been in the most difficult condition.

2. Resolved

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That it is the opinion of this Society, that the sending out of the Kingdom so large a sum of money, has been a great cause of the high exchange, the many bankruptcies, the lowness of credit and scarcity of money so severely felt among us.  

Baker continues to list the 12 other resolutions that led to the composition and publication of the main document. Almost all of these resolutions address Ireland’s economic health specifically and directly, with frequent appeal to monetary figures and statistics. As in Brooke’s essay on bogs, Baker presents no moral justification for his project; within the Dublin Society, the countless statistics he references carry their own weight, particularly those statistics rendered in terms of pounds and pence.

The institutional rhetoric and focus on statistics (particularly monetary statistics) might seem familiar and unremarkable for modern readers, but it is important to note that these types of publications represented a marked shift from how scientific subjects—particularly subjects related to practical agriculture—were discussed even just a few decades earlier. Take, for instance, a 1740 dialogue called *The Laird and Farmer. A Dialogue upon Farming, Trade, Cookery, and Their Method of Living in Scotland, Balanc’d with that of England*, which gives practical guidance on subjects such as fencing enclosures, managing weeding, and irrigation, but presents this information as a dialogue between two Scotsmen, one a curious Laird and one a well-traveled farmer. A reader can certainly glean similar information from this text as she could from one of the Dublin Society’s publications, but the information is organized narratively rather

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225 John Wynn Baker, *Considerations upon the Exportation of Corn* (Dublin: S. Powell, 1771), 4-5.

226 Dublin: R. Griffiths, 1740.
than in charts or under detailed subject headings. Note the beginning of Chapter 3, “Hops Planting, Pruning, and Preparing for Sale:"

Scot. But to go on: how do they [i.e. the English] plant and prepare hops for sale, and to such profit?

Trav. They in winter plant sprouts, which are then pulled from the root, and carefully kept from the cold, by being cover’d up with dung and earth, being set about two yards from one another, and in the spring they beat the ground hard […]\textsuperscript{227}

To the modern reader, the narrative frame that surrounds the practical information seems cumbersome and unnecessary; how, for instance, is a reader supposed to re-locate a piece of information if he or she needs to consult the text again later? Rather than simply remembering the information’s topic (such as bog-draining or hops preparation) and consulting a list of subheadings, the reader must remember the arc of the two characters’ conversation. Further, a practical assessment of the information contained in the text is rendered difficult by the narrative frame. A reader cannot help but note the Laird’s naiveté and the Traveler’s eloquent and confident oration, character traits that color our readings of the positions these characters advocate. In a text like this, authors endorse methods not simply by stating their potential benefits and costs, but by associating them with likable and credible characters.

This pattern goes some distance toward explaining why the farming methods explained and advocated in Virgil’s \textit{Georgics} remained popular for so many centuries after new and more efficient methods had been developed. As Joan Thirsk has argued, during the Renaissance classical works on husbandry provided much of the information about practical farming techniques that had been lost as Britain’s farmers came to rely almost exclusively on traditional

\textsuperscript{227} \textit{Ibid.}, 10.
farming methods, and as such Virgil’s work remained an important scientific touchstone well into the 17th century.\textsuperscript{228} The ethical appeal—an argument based on the credibility of the author or speaker—carried far more weight in the early modern period than it does today. This difference is particularly stark in the sciences, a discourse in which modern readers and researchers have come to expect direct evidence to support any claim, no matter who the speaker. The 100-plus publications that the Dublin Society sponsored before the turn of the 19th century, along with the terse, practical demeanor they presented at their meetings and in other social contexts, were a significant force in scientific culture’s move away from ethical appeals and toward the logical appeals that scientists still rely on today. The influence of this shift is apparent not only in the tone and construction of scientific texts over the period, but also in the remarkable growth of scientific research societies in the latter half of the 18th century, many of them explicitly created on the Dublin Society’s model.

Unsurprisingly given the quick success of the Dublin Society, England was not far behind in creating a similarly high-profile society devoted to applied science. In 1754 William Shipley founded the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (later shortened to the Royal Society of Arts, or RSA). Directly inspired by the Dublin Society (though clearly England’s economic situation was hardly as dire as Ireland’s), Shipley believed that an incentive program that rewarded innovation could spur technological advancements that would increase Britain’s already-growing standing on the world stage. Whereas the Dublin Society concentrated on publication and dissemination of information early in its existence, from the start the RSA focused more narrowly on Shipley’s program of incentives. As Shipley argues in his

original proposal for the society,\textsuperscript{229} “profit and honour are two sharp spurs, which quicken invention, and animate application.”

Despite this emphasis on “profit and honor,” like Prior, Shipley recognized the usefulness of nationalist rhetoric in motivating potential contributors to the RSA. In an early effort to distance the RSA from its Irish inspiration, an anonymous history\textsuperscript{230} appeared which traced the idea for the Society to William Shipley’s visit to a Northampton horse fair. At the fair Shipley noted that the competition for the king’s plates for breeding race horses had caused horse-breeders from all over Britain and the Continent to gather at this fair. After witnessing the power of economic and honorary incentives to spur advancement, Shipley devoted all of his resources to expanding the idea to all sorts of potential agricultural innovations. Thus, while the Dublin Society was started with the explicit mission of raising the Irish people up from poverty, the RSA was designed to move England from its place as a comfortable, stable economic power to a world leader in science and technology. Though many of the methods employed by the two groups were similar, the RSA’s response to a very different environment resulted in a group with quite a different character than the Dublin Society.

In Shipley’s \textit{Proposals for raising by subscription a fund to be distributed in Premiums for the promoting of improvements in the Liberal Arts and Sciences, Manufactures, &c.},\textsuperscript{231} the RSA’s founder puts forth a version of nationalism based not on race or history, but on the individual contributions to the society’s overall utility made by its individual members. Shipley

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{229} \textit{A Concise Account of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce} (London: S. Hooper, 1763), 11. This document reprints Shipley’s original proposal (now, presumably, lost) in full.

\textsuperscript{230} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{231} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{footnotesize}
argues that “The Augustan age amongst the Romans, and some preceeding [sic] ages among the Greeks, were remarkable for the delicacy of their taste and the nobleness of their productions.”

In other words, it is not the people who made Rome and Greece great, it was the “productions” that were made by those people. Further, Shipley argues that:

None, I presume, will imagine that the men of those times were endued with natural abilities superior to the rest of mankind in former ages, or in this our present time, but their abilities generally equal, rose to this superiority, by falling into a more fertile soil, and being exerted under more favorable influences. Had the same advantages been enjoyed, even in the most supine and barbarous periods, there is no doubt but genius would have shined, and industry toiled, and very probably with equal success.

While the comparison between 18th-century England and Augustan Rome was hardly novel, Shipley deploys the comparison in a curious manner. While the Augustan age was typically invoked as a model of political stability, economic expansion and artistic advancement, Shipley attributes the much-heralded accomplishments of the Augustans to the luck of living in a fertile climate. Shipley’s play on English nationalism in this passage is subtle; basically, he challenges the English by arguing that even “supine and barbarous” people could achieve the greatness of Augustan Rome. Presumably, a civilized people like the English should be able to achieve even more. Not only does this argument spur to action those who already have the nationalistic attitudes that Shipley exploits, but also Shipley creates a deep association between labor and patriotism, attempting to tie the English people to their soil in much the same way that Thomas Prior did with the Dublin Society.

\[232\] \textit{Ibid.}, 10.

\[233\] \textit{Ibid.}, 10-11.
In the writings that came out of the RSA, this link between nationalism and productivity manifested itself in a rhetoric that prioritized economic utility above any other positive attributes that a person or project might possess. There is scarcely a page in the aforementioned anonymous history that does not feature some form of the words “use” or “utility,” and the final third of the book is taken up with a detailed explanation of how the projects awarded premiums by the RSA have impacted the English economy. For instance, the author notes that, “the imports of Madder from Holland have amounted for some time past 200,000 pounds per annum.” However, through the aggressive implementation of RSA premiums, farms have sprung up in various parts of the kingdom, the largest devoting 29 acres to the crop. The author speculates, proudly, that, “in a very short time we shall have no occasion to send to Holland for a vegetable, which will thrive as well in our own country.” The use of statistics in this passage is hardly uncharacteristic of the work as a whole. Particularly interesting is the way in which the statistics seem to carry their own weight. Attributed to no particular authority or method, the numbers speak for themselves with an authority that invites the reader to believe them. As Rachel Crawford has argued, “productivity was […] powerfully linked in the public imagination with Britain’s own ability to produce food, to its agriculture.” The history of the RSA exploits this link by piling on statistic after statistic about how many pounds worth of food England has produced, currently produces and will produce. Scarcely any other evidence for the Society’s usefulness appears in the history.

The anonymous history of the RSA ends with a prayer that perfectly sums up the Society’s rhetorical strategy of linking a utilitarian rhetoric to nationalistic sentiments:

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234 Ibid., 50.

That this most free and independant [sic] Society, instituted for the public good, may long continue to do honor to its patrons, and that its present most excellent plan with all possible improvements may be handed down to posterity, and by them be sacredly revered, and firmly upheld with the rest of those inestimable privileges, which have rendered us superior to all the nations of the world.  

In this passage you can see the aforementioned ways in which the character of the RSA differed from that of the Dublin Society. While the Irish group’s rhetoric was occasionally grim and its actions painted as desperate, even last-ditch attempts to resuscitate the Irish economy, the RSA casts itself as another jewel in Britain’s crown. Though their respective relationships to their mother countries were different, the two societies shared a penchant for utilitarian arguments and a reverence for the statistic, particularly the economic statistic.

Still, despite the differences in their approach to the relationship between science, industry, and country, the RSA was very much founded in the Dublin Society’s image, and the same kind of terse, utilitarian rhetoric on which the Dublin Society relied is foregrounded in nearly every aspect of the RSA’s public image. Aside from the aforementioned History (which was an anonymous, presumably unauthorized publication), the RSA projected a strictly professional image, its publications limited to lists of its members and premiums and, after 1783, a yearly publication of papers delivered at the Society’s meetings. Like the publications associated with the Dublin Society, the RSA’s Transactions were, rhetorically speaking, firmly in the camp of the “new science.” However, the RSA clearly viewed the Royal Society’s Philosophical Transactions as an important rhetorical model. Rather than publishing their research, as the

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Dublin Society did, on no set schedule and in no set format, the RSA’s *Transactions* followed the Royal Society’s model more closely. Transactions were published annually, and papers were organized by topic; the volume from 1785 contains sections on agriculture, polite arts, manufactures, and mechanics, as well as sections detailing the premiums the Society has awarded, the premiums currently being offered, and a list of the Society’s current members and officers. In addition to the regular publication of these transactions (hefty, imposing volumes that weighed in at several hundred pages), the RSA’s imposing institutional structure was also underscored, after 1774, by its custom-built office space on John Street. Since very few clubs—including scientific and agricultural research societies—had purpose-built spaces, the RSA’s imposing neoclassical building in central London gave the Society a sense of institutional gravity that few other groups (aside from the Royal Society) possessed. In presenting this strong institutional facade, the RSA was an important forerunner of the larger, more bureaucratic organizations that came to prominence during the Victorian period. Indeed, the RSA itself became one of these organizations during the 19th century, and it is a testament to the group’s influence and efficiency that the British government’s Department of Science and Art grew out of one of the RSA’s many subcommittees.237

Both the Dublin Society and the RSA profited enormously from their strong ties with this rhetoric of the new science. Thanks to enormous population growth as well as the rapid urbanization of both the English and Irish populations throughout the 18th and into the 19th centuries, the improvements in agricultural efficiency and production that the two groups developed and advocated for were essential. Further, in a culture that was increasingly wont to measure the value of social institutions, people, and just about everything else in terms of pounds

and pence, both groups were well-situated to argue for their own merit. While more dilettantish philosophical and scientific societies tended to die out during the latter half of the eighteenth century, the Dublin Society and the RSA continued to thrive. Indeed, both groups still function today; the RSA in particular is still a commanding presence in the City of London, and still continues to award prestigious fellowships to scholars and artists. The success of these two groups is a testament not simply to the vision of their respective founders or the inherent value of their missions; rather, it is also evidence of the power and adaptability of voluntary social institutions in general. Thanks to their institutional flexibility (and also, partly, to the timing of when they were founded), these groups were able to respond quickly and effectively to changing tides in scientific research. Both groups quickly and wholeheartedly incorporated both the rhetorical tenets of the “new science” as well as the movement’s focus on practical application over theory, and these decisions combined with the Victorian reverence for bureaucracy ensured that both groups would continue to be highly successful.

As I have argued, both the ethical priorities and the prose style that the Dublin Society and the RSA employed in their official publications departed radically from the traditional georgic ethos that placed inherent moral value on the land’s cultivation. This is not to say, however, that georgic did not inform these groups at all. Both societies bear the marks of georgic tradition, but georgic’s influence over these groups was minimal. For instance, many groups with an interest in agricultural research included the term “georgic” in their name; one of the Royal Society’s short-lived committees was called the Georgical Committee and the RSA also had a Georgical.

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Committee that remained the Society’s most important sub-committee for years. Further, the
traditional division of agricultural science into four subjects or fields—field crops, trees, animal
husbandry, and beekeeping—comes from the subjects of the four books in Virgil’s poem.
Curiously, most English writers retained this division despite the fact that beekeeping was a
rather small part of British farm life, and in many farming manuals beekeeping is given attention
disproportionate to its place in the British economy. More significantly, as Crawford notes,
“agricultural writings incorporated many aspects of the georgic agenda, particularly its rampant
nationalism.” As I argued above, both georgic poets and agricultural research societies
(including the Dublin Society and the RSA) exploited the connection between a nation’s power
and the productivity of its land.

Georgic informed the activities of the Dublin Society and the RSA at these abstract levels,
but both groups also adopted georgic language and imagery on occasion, though only in limited
contexts. In this chapter’s concluding section I will examine these groups’ explicit uses of
georgic rhetoric, arguing that agricultural societies’ misappropriations of georgic undermined the
genre’s moral authority and hastened its demise. Specifically, by reserving their invocation of the
georgic mode for ceremonial contexts such as epigraphs, inscriptions, and monuments, the
Dublin Society and the RSA reduced georgic representations of the land to the status of a
decorative motif, in effect recasting georgic as pastoral. In order to explain this pattern more
fully, I return to the complex relationship between georgic and pastoral.

\[239\] See Rachel Crawford, *Poetry, Enclosure and the Vernacular Landscape, 1700-1830*

Numerous critics have explored the permeable territory in which pastoral and georgic overlap. Pastoral can blend into georgic when the moral value of work is emphasized, and georgic can collapse into pastoral when its moral intent becomes vague or suspect. Alastair Fowler presents an interesting take on this thesis in his essay, “Georgic and Pastoral: Laws of Genre in the 17th Century.” Fowler argues that genres tend to form in matched pairs—georgic and pastoral, epigram and lyric, romance and novel—and the closest of these relationships “suggest[…] the exclusivity of the antonym relationship in semantics.” The histories of these matched pairs of genres are always deeply intertwined. Fowler describes a pattern in which, as one of the genres in these matched pairs achieves prominence over the other, the features shared by the pair tend to be identified with the more popular genre, a process Fowler describes as cannibalization. Fowler traces this pattern through the history of georgic and pastoral, arguing that as didactic literature grew in popularity over the course of the 17th century, georgic (both Virgil’s poem and the genre) gained esteem while pastoral was demoted to the status of a quaint, anachronistic genre that deserved little attention. Consequently, once georgic poetry had attained its supremacy by the middle of the 18th century, all poems about the rural landscape were classified as georgic, regardless of whether they contained pastoral elements. This equation would have been reversed during the Elizabethan period when pastoral reigned supreme over georgic.

I contend that georgic’s cannibalization of pastoral created space for agricultural societies to invoke the georgic tradition in a manner that is clearly more pastoral than georgic. Authors


writing on behalf of agricultural societies often tried to signal their identification with the broad ethical priorities of georgic by referencing Virgil or his British imitators, but more often than not these authors failed to recognize the full scope of georgic’s ethos of labor and cultivation. Take, for instance, John Arbuckle’s “A Poem Inscribed to the Dublin Society.” The poem begins with an epigraph from *Georgics* II:

> Hanc olim veteres vitam coluere Sabini,
> Hanc Remus et frater, sic fortis Etruria crevit
> Scilicet et rerum facta est pulcherrima Roma.
> Such a life the old Sabines once lived, such Remus and his brother. Thus, surely, Etruria waxed strong; and Rome has thus become the fairest thing on earth.

Rather than quoting one of the countless scenes in the *Georgics* that discuss the value of practical agriculture directly, Arbuckle chooses a passage that portrays the precise historical moment when humanity left the golden age (Virgil’s poem continues, “such was the life golden Saturn lived on earth”) and entered the age of civilization. Arbuckle closes the quotation just before Virgil describes the enclosure of the city of Rome and how the “godless race banqueted on slaughtered bullocks,” a transition that is jarring in Virgil’s poem. Virgil deliberately contrasts this moment of upheaval with the previous era’s idyllic setting, even referring to “Remus and his brother” in an effort to gloss over the violence that accompanied the founding of Rome. Unyoked from its contrasting element of war and bloodshed, the epigraph functions in Arbuckle’s poem as nostalgia for a time when work was not necessary. Though the quotation comes from Virgil’s

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244 Translation taken from Loeb Classical Library, 1999.

Georgics, there is nothing georgic about the passage as Arbuckle extracts it; it does not even mention (much less value) manual or moral labor.

In the poem proper, Arbuckle makes a concerted effort to celebrate the value of work. Rather than fully committing to a moral scheme that values work for its own sake, however, the poet sets up a system whereby hard work is suffered in exchange for a reward of glory and ease. His examples are not plowmen themselves but Cincinnatus and Cato, men who loved the rural life but distinguished themselves in war and politics. Rather than praising their work ethic, it is Cincinnatus’s and Cato’s political glory that Arbuckle emphasizes:

For, in that Age of uncorrupted Hearts,

The rural Shades were Nurseries of Arts,

And bred, though now it scarce will gain Belief,

The Senator, the Patriot, and the Chief. 246

Not only does Arbuckle refer once again to an “Age of uncorrupted Hearts,” he also fails to value rural life for its own sake. Farmers themselves are not praised in this passage; Arbuckle praises land and labor only insofar as they are “Nurseries of Arts.” The liberal mixture of georgic and pastoral tradition in Arbuckle’s poem highlights the genres’ ethical incompatibility. If georgic has one essential ethical premise it is the intrinsic value of manual labor, but Arbuckle repeatedly posits labor as a means to another end such as the recapture of a golden age or political glory. As such, Arbuckle’s poem ultimately has more in common with pastoral (which describes the golden age) and epic (which details feats of war and statesmanship) than georgic.

The sculptural monument to Thomas Prior in Christ Church, Dublin (Fig. 1) exhibits a similar tension between georgic and pastoral elements. The monument allegorizes Prior’s work

with the Dublin Society in a classically inspired frieze that depicts Prior introducing Ceres (goddess of agriculture and abundance) to Hibernia, the personification of Ireland. The frieze may resemble the above-mentioned scene from Virgil’s *Georgics* in which the farmers worship Ceres, but the monument celebrates agriculture’s rewards rather than the cycles of labor and leisure to which Virgil refers. No one in the frieze is working; implements such as a rake and spade lie unused on the ground. The motif of fruit, vegetables, and nuts (including the pomegranate, a traditional emblem of beneficence) that ties together the various parts of the sculpture also emphasizes the commodities that result from agricultural labor rather than the value of that labor itself. Further, the abundance that Hibernia receives appears to be a gift from the gods. Because this bounty results from the gods’ beneficence, the frieze seems to portray the sudden rebirth of a golden age, pastoral’s traditional setting. By emphasizing the value of the reward one receives for labor rather than the value of the labor itself, the monument distances itself from georgic and aligns itself with the utilitarian ethics that undergird the Dublin Society’s publications.
Unsurprisingly given the historical connections between the two organizations, London’s RSA exhibited a similar attitude toward georgic rhetoric. However, the RSA embraced an even more capitalistic agenda, distancing the group even further than the Dublin Society from the traditional georgic ethos. As I have argued above, two traits essential to the georgic ethos are an emphasis on the inherent value of work and an embrace of the natural cycles that make that work both possible and gratifying. Despite the group’s dedication to the cause of practical agriculture,
neither of these ethical tenets of georgic is emphasized in the discourse surrounding the RSA. Indeed, neither the RSA’s original name—the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce—nor its shortened moniker the Royal Society of Arts notes the centrality of labor or land to the group’s mission. Instead, these central forces of the georgic ethos were valued merely as means toward greater economic prosperity for Britain. Further, the means by which the Society would encourage and promote advancement would also be economic in nature; the Society’s most important mission was to offer cash incentives for encouraging inventions, ideas, and projects. Still, while the RSA was in no way shy about the fact that economics served as its moral center, the group continued to rely on georgic and more broadly classical gestures to give the group both a sense of greater intellectual heft and to link its cause with the nationalistic ethos that was a central part of georgic.

Compared with the Dublin Society, reference to georgic themes and imagery within RSA-related documents is quite rare. Indeed, imagery of any sort is rare in the RSA’s documents, which is somewhat surprising for an organization that was founded by a drawing-master and included the patronage of the visual arts as one of its key missions. These differences are owed largely to a difference in how the two organizations were conceived and pitched by their respective founders. Thomas Prior saw the Dublin Society as an institution that would be the catalyst for a reawakening of a kind of national pride in the production and potential of Ireland’s land. The RSA, by contrast, did not attempt to promote such large-scale changes in social attitudes. Rather, the RSA focused more narrowly on Britain’s economic sphere, seeking to affect the kinds of changes that might be truly understood and appreciated only by persons who were deeply involved in the industries of agriculture and manufactures. Just as the RSA took the Dublin Society’s goals and honed them to focus narrowly on the economics of agriculture, so
does the imagery surrounding the RSA dispense with much of the pomp of the Dublin Society’s use of georgic motifs, highlighting instead the RSA’s economic mission.

The image most central to the public face of the RSA in its early decades was the medal designed by the architect James Stuart Painter and given to several figures important to the RSA’s founding and early development, including William Shipley. In addition to being distributed to the Society’s most influential members, the medal was also reproduced on the frontispiece to several early RSA-related documents, including Thomas Mortimer’s *A concise account of the rise, Progress, and Present State of the Society For the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce* (1763) and the Society’s published list of premiums for the years 1777-1780. The medal’s design curiously echoes the monument to Thomas Prior in Christ Church, Dublin:

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247 The seal may also appear in the Society’s published list of premiums for other years, but the lists mentioned were the only volumes currently in the British Library’s collection.
Whereas Prior’s memorial depicts Prior introducing Ceres, goddess of agriculture and abundance, to Hibernia, the personification of Ireland, the RSA’s medal depicts Minerva and Mercury, the classical deities of arts, manufactures, and commerce, making offers to Britannia. Perhaps owing to its minute scale, the tableau depicted on the RSA medal is stark, dispensing with the comparatively ornate imagery of abundance that characterized Prior’s memorial. This starkness, however, underscores the narrowness of the RSA’s mission. Even if it borrowed from Virgil only selectively, Prior’s memorial was an attempt to connect the Dublin Society’s work with a traditional georgic ethos; the monument depicts Prior’s (and, by extension, the Dublin Society’s) work as an attempt to recognize and harness the land’s natural abundance. The RSA medal, however, seems to depict a largely impersonal economic transaction between Britannia, Minerva, and Mercury. Perhaps this is fitting given that Mercury is the god typically associated with trade and commerce (his name is related to the Latin word *merx*, from which we derive
words like “merchandise,” “commerce,” etc.), but one cannot ignore that the image casts the relationship between the RSA and the spheres it sought to influence as curiously one-dimensional. There is no sense of communion with or even appreciation of nature or the land. Britannia simply accepts what Minerva and Mercury have to offer. When the medal was redesigned in 1802, the figure of Britannia was omitted and the design was further simplified to include only Minerva and Mercury’s heads:

![Revised Medal of the Royal Society of Arts](image)

*Fig. 3: Revised Medal of the Royal Society of Arts*

The redesigned medal represents an even further move away from a traditional georgic ethos, emphasizing the RSA’s value of arts and commerce for their own sake rather than as a function of humanity’s relationship with the earth. The revisions to the medal’s design were suggested by the painter James Barry:
Nothing can be more happily imagined than the idea consisting of Britannia aided by Minerva and Mercury, the classical tutelary deities of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce; and this old device, like many other good old usages, cannot be amended by any change in the substratum. It requires nothing more in its essence, and will most happily coalesce and accommodate with all the acquisitions and improvements of the most enlarged and refined culture. For this purpose a little more *gout* and character in the figures is all that is necessary, enlarging them so as to fill the space with more dignity, and taking away from their individual scattered appearance by the little graces and arts of a more improved composition.  

As Barry explains, the revised medal sought to emphasize the inherent “dignity and consequence” of arts and commerce by enlarging and further emphasizing their representative figures. Still, Barry glosses over the fact that by eliminating Britannia from the composition, the newly redesigned medal recasts the RSA as an organization devoted to the inherent worth of arts and commerce rather than for their relationship with or benefits to Britain’s land.

James Barry’s influence on the visual culture of the RSA was not limited to his suggestions for redesigning the group’s most important medal. Indeed, Barry’s paintings in the Great Room of the RSA’s custom-built house on John Adam Street in central London have been the images most closely associated with the RSA since the finished works were installed in 1790. At times, the fame of Barry’s paintings have rivaled or even exceeded the fame of the RSA itself. Conceived in 1777, Barry’s six paintings for the RSA’s Great Room sought to depict, as the title suggests, *The Progress of Human Culture and Knowledge*. The subject of these six paintings is as ambitious as the size of the canvases themselves—nearly 12 feet tall and ranging in width

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248 “Medals of the Society of Arts.” *Journal of the Society of Arts* 29 (1881): 851. The images of the Society’s medals in this paragraph are also reproduced from this article.
from 15 to 42 feet in width—hence, there is insufficient space in this chapter for a full explication and critique of these monumental works of art. Rather than analyzing what Barry’s paintings depict, then, I want to highlight what these paintings do not portray: a substantive communion with the land. Barry’s series of six paintings do not represent humanity learning to live with nature, but rather triumphing over it. The series begins with a depiction of a savage man in the state of nature; the sixth and final of the series presents a return to Elysium in which the most important and influential writers, painters, philosophers, politicians, and scientists in human history anachronistically commune with one another and celebrate their achievement. Under the sixth painting is inscribed the motto, “That the attainment of happiness, individual as well as public, in this world and hereafter, depends on the cultivation of the human faculties.” Barry’s series is as straightforward a depiction of the Enlightenment’s teleological view of history as one is likely to find. Humanity’s relationship to the world is presented, essentially, as a puzzle that is meant to be solved (and, indeed, Barry believed that it will be solved; the creation of the RSA is the penultimate step in the process). One might expect Elysium to be depicted as a state of harmony with nature and its cycles, but in Barry’s painting these cycles have been obliterated, or at least rendered obsolete by the relentless forward march of human progress, a march aided and sponsored by the RSA.

The RSA’s emphasis on economic issues and faith in the power of human progress represent a fundamental epistemological shift in the perception of both agriculture and humanity’s relationship to the land in general. As I argued above, the georgic ethos emphasizes the importance of natural cycles—labor and leisure, scarcity and abundance, etc. —but the RSA’s economic ethos left no room for this conception of time as fundamentally cyclical.

249 Indeed, entire volumes have been devoted to Barry’s Great Room paintings, including the recent collection of essays Cultivating the Human Faculties (Bethlehem: Lehigh UP, 2008).
Instead, the RSA relied on a linear conception of economic time, one where, along with the other sciences and the arts, agriculture grows ever more efficient and productive by the year and Britain’s wealth and economic influence trend ever-upward with no limit. Particularly in their research-oriented publications, the RSA gives the impression that they are on a relentless forward march, constantly striving for greater efficiency, greater productivity, and greater profitability. This mindset rewards precisely the type of innovation that the RSA sought to nurture, but the advocate of georgic must insist that something has been lost. Whereas the georgic worker seeks to commune with the land, to become one with it and participate in its life and its cycles, the RSA’s capitalist ethos places humanity in an antagonistic relationship with the world around us. Further, this attitude transforms agriculture from a lifestyle into an industry, one as relentless and uncompromising as the manufacturing industries that were taking hold in London during the RSA’s early decades.

Thus, these two organizations that ostensibly sought to re-devote Irish and British citizens’ attention to the land ironically helped to undermine the georgic ethos. Though both groups made gestures toward georgic, as I have argued, georgic’s poetic traditions are not easily separated from the genre’s fundamental ethical premises. Unless a poem, monument, or group embraces georgic’s key ethical premise—the intrinsic value of labor—any invocation of georgic rhetoric will ring hollow. Scholars have mistakenly described the general moral stance of the 18th-century agricultural revolution as georgic. While both georgic poets and agricultural research societies concerned themselves with cultivating the land, georgic values cultivation for its own sake. The Dublin Society and the RSA, on the other hand, valued labor only insofar as it made a significant and measurable impact on their countries’ respective economies. Over the course of the 18th
century, the utilitarian ethics that groups such as the Dublin Society and the RSA relied upon continued to gain influence in Britain’s popular and intellectual culture. As a result, it became increasingly difficult for writers—poets included—to acknowledge labor’s intrinsic worth. Agricultural labor had to be tied to some other measure of value: the economy, physical health, or the aesthetic pleasure of the picturesque. While the rural landscape would, in the decades after these societies began, achieve newfound prominence in English verse, both the unique poetic characteristics and the fundamental ethical premises of georgic would all but disappear from British poetry.
As I have demonstrated in the previous two chapters, 18th-century men from both the working and middle classes relied on their club affiliations to affirm or alter their class standing. This was also the case for the English-speaking world’s economic and social elite, who had their own exclusive clubs and societies. These elite institutions were the ancestors of the private social clubs that still line London’s Pall Mall, the elegant furnishings of their upper-level rooms tantalizingly visible from the street below. Expensive sofas and antique works of art, however, were not 18th-century clubs’ only means of demonstrating their members’ wealth and power. These were not merely clubs whose members had things that “ordinary” men did not; rather, they were clubs that did the things that other men only talked or wrote about. Like their cultural forbearers—Restoration-era rakes such as John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester and George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham—the members of elite clubs such as the Medmenham Monks and Dr. Alexander Hamilton’s Tuesday Club demonstrated their superiority by substantially revising the mutually constitutive relationship between freedom and constraint prescribed by prevailing standards of politeness and morality. These clubs provided a venue in which members could promote their indulgence in drink, sex, and nonsense, the very appetites that moralists would have them constrain. As with the Restoration rakes, however, the members of these clubs were not simply railing against prevailing moral discourse; or, at least if they were, they were doing so
in an interesting and artful fashion. Indeed, literature and literary discourse were fundamental to how these libertines conceived and executed their bombastic displays of freedom. Literature provided both models for their outrageous behavior and precedents for types of discourse—including amoral and bawdy language as well as nonsense and cant—that allowed the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club to implicitly question the logical foundations on which popular moral discourse rested. Pornography and nonsense were hardly the literary tools one might expect from groups with an elite, well-educated membership, but as I will explain, both groups found great joy in manipulating and defying expectations.

In addition to configuring their individual and group identities against the stiff prudery of popular moral literature—behavior which we might expect from these libertines—this chapter also examines a second way in which the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club engaged with literary discourse: both groups inverted, distorted, and questioned the tenets of sociability on which club culture purportedly rested. While club culture, in general, upheld conviviality and community as its ideals, these two clubs interrogated the nature of modern sociability by counter-intuitively building a secret society around the intensely individual pleasures of sex (in the case of the Medmenham Monks) and by institutionalizing rules that actually promoted faction and conflict rather than easy sociability (in the case of the Tuesday Club). As with their imitation of famous literary libertines’ indulgences, these clubs’ skeptical attitudes toward popular sociability were deeply informed by literary discourse. In particular, both clubs were influenced by what Edward Said famously called “Swift’s Tory Anarchy.”250 Just as Swift’s writings resisted “any fixed boundaries” between “waste and conservation, absence and

presence, obscenity and decorum,”251 both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club interrogated the permeable boundaries between private and public, solitude and sociability, and rational discourse and nonsense. However, just as Swift’s writing has often been appropriated in support of a tory moral paradigm, so have these two clubs’ parodies, critiques, and deconstructions of club culture been subsumed into the guiding narratives about conviviality and sociability that shape our modern understanding of 18th-century club culture. In this sense, the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Clubs were not straightforward social gatherings, but what I call “anti-clubs:” associations that paradoxically interrogated the nature of association itself. The aim of this section, then, is to foreground these clubs’ fraught relationship to prevailing assumptions about how sociability worked and to consider what their critiques had to say about wider club culture.

In essence, both the Tuesday Club and the Medmenham Monks functioned as living satires of club culture. While these satires were, of course, shaped by the dominant club culture against which they reacted, the social tableaux that the two groups created were also deeply informed by the literary discourse of satire. This constitutes a different relationship between club culture and the literary sphere than the ones I explored in Chapters 3 and 4. As I argued in those chapters, the influence of literary discourse on club culture was pervasive, but clubs tended to describe their relationship to literature as a kind of allegiance that clubs relied on primarily as an index of their members’ class status. The Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club, by contrast, deliberately blurred the lines between literary representation and the actions that were purportedly being represented. The key members of both groups were well aware of the ways in which books shaped their speech and performance and the social architecture of their respective

251 Ibid., 49.
groups. Further, these two groups were not simply shaped by literary culture; they self-consciously manipulated their audiences based on the demands and expectations of modern print culture. In a sense, these clubs served as a reaction against the increasing importance that print culture played in the life of the self-appointed aesthete.

The most obvious trait shared by the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club is exclusivity; both groups drew their membership from the upper crust of their respective communities. The ringleader of the Medmenham Monks was Sir Francis Dashwood, whose title of Baron Le Despencer made him chief of England’s baronetcy. Around 1750, Dashwood began renting a property that included the ruins of Medmenham Abbey, a Cistercian monastery that had fallen into disrepair.\textsuperscript{252} Dashwood renovated the property extensively, rebuilding the abbey and decorating it with “lurid pictures” and phallic statues, and adding a library to house his collection of erotic literature. Over the entrance of the abbey Dashwood installed the motto from Rabelais: “Fay ce que voudras” (“do what you will”).\textsuperscript{253} The friends that Dashwood invited to this private playground came from the elite circles in which he circulated while in London; other key members of the group included John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich, Sir William Stanhope (son of Lord Chesterfield), and George Bubb Dodington, Baron Melcombe. A few other non-peers formed an outer circle of Monks who were apparently not privy to some ceremonies and activities. These lesser members included the poets Charles Churchill and Robert Lloyd, as well as John Wilkes, who seems to have garnered an invitation to the group based solely on his


\textsuperscript{253} Fergus Linnane, \textit{The Lives of the English Rakes} (London: Portrait, 2006), 129.
exploits in libertinism. Though the Medmenham Monks were the subject of nearly constant
goagination in the London press, what actually happened at their meetings is rather unclear, confused
by the torrent of lies and half-truths that permeated the discourse surrounding the group. What is
clear, however, is that England’s most notorious libertines met regularly and engaged in some
kind of bacchanalia that included both heavy intoxication and some public or semi-public sex
acts. The Tuesday Club was similarly exclusive. Started in 1745 by a Scottish émigré, the
physician Dr. Alexander Hamilton, the Tuesday Club was composed of members of the political
and social elite of Annapolis, Maryland, including numerous members of Maryland’s colonial
legislature and judiciary as well as the city’s official printer. The Tuesday Club emphasized its
members’ privileged status by cultivating connections with the national and international elite; as
Robert Micklus notes, “most men of any note who came to Annapolis visited the Tuesday
Club,”254 the group’s list of visitors including men as prestigious as Ben Franklin.255 The
members of the Tuesday Club were young, wealthy, and powerful, and as a result their group
was extremely fashionable. The Tuesday Club’s activities, however, hardly betray the members’
education and good breeding. As recounted in Hamilton’s loose and jocular unpublished history
of the group, *The History of the Ancient and Honorable Tuesday Club*, the Tuesday Club
devoted most of their time to activities more befitting bored schoolboys. The group posed and
solved riddles and conundrums, sang catches, and above all else argued with one another about

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Honorable Tuesday Club*, ed. by Robert Micklus (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University
Press, 1995), xvi.

255 Oddly enough, there is a chance that Franklin may have visited the Medmenham Monks as
well. He and Dashwood were close friends later in life, though it is difficult to tell whether their
friendship overlapped with the Medmenham Monks’ existence.
their status within the group. These activities were, of course, performed alongside heroic feats of alcohol consumption.

While both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club drew their membership from their respective communities’ social elite, the groups also shared an added sense of ultra-exclusivity due to the fact that they were closed, private clubs that hand picked their members from ever-so-slightly wider (though still very exclusive) communities. As I noted in Chapter 1, it was not uncommon for men to belong to several clubs, and different groups’ memberships often overlapped considerably. Such was the case with the Monks and the Tuesday Club, both of whom served, essentially, as the exclusive inner circle of another community. Most, if not all, of the Medmenham Monks were also members of a London antiquarian group called the Society of Dilettanti. Despite the dryness of their purported purpose, collecting and analyzing artifacts from the ancient world, in their early years the Dilettanti garnered a reputation as a boozy and rambunctious group. As Horace Walpole described them, the Dilettanti were “a club, for which the nominal qualification is having been in Italy, and the real one, being drunk: the two chiefs are Lord Middlesex and Sir Francis Dashwood, who were seldom sober the whole time they were in Italy.”

The Dilettanti were already known as boisterous, but Dashwood chose only the most notorious of the Dilettanti for his Medmenham Monks. The Tuesday Club also drew from an already-exclusive group; nearly all of the group’s members belonged to Maryland’s colonial legislature. Though the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club had very different relationships to the larger groups from which they sprang, this quality of ultra-exclusivity afforded both groups a privileged position from which they could critique the practices of the wider groups to which its members also belonged.

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While every club’s creation is, at its core, an attempt to revise the tenets of club culture—after all, why else would one start a new club rather than simply join an existing one? —the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club were particularly antagonistic in their approach, their identities shaped in large part against those of the dominant groups from which they sprang. Much like relationship between an episodic novel’s individual stories and its over-arching frame, the actions of the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club were meant to be read alongside—or more likely against—the actions of overlapping groups. Further, I argue, the relationship between these two groups and the larger groups from which they sprang suggests the complex relationship between a satirical or parodic text and its object. Just as Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* implicitly asks the reader to make frequent comparisons between its hero and Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, so do the actions of the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club prompt one to reconsider the Dilettanti and the Maryland legislature. For instance, when one reads accounts of the Tuesday’s Club’s blatantly nonsensical interactions in Hamilton’s *History*, one must consider these actions in light of the eminent reasonableness with which the members conducted themselves in their day-to-day lives. Were their Tuesday Club interactions meant to let off steam after a tiring day or week of rational discourse? Was the nonsense rampant at the Tuesday Club’s meetings meant to call into question the true reasonableness of the actions these men performed in their more recognizable social and political roles? I will return to these questions later in the chapter, but for now I merely wish to establish that both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club were self-aware of how their groups would be read by the outside world. Many of both groups’ activities were conceived not strictly for the members of the group themselves, but also for how these activities would be read and understood by those who learned about them through second-hand accounts.
In arguing that the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Clubs functioned, in effect, as living satires meant to be “read” against both the members’ other groups and wider club culture in general, I posit a complex relationship between these clubs and the literary sphere. It is unsurprising that the members of these two groups would be self-aware of how their actions would be represented and interpreted in the literary sphere; after all, in addition to being well educated and intelligent, both groups included several published authors in their ranks. However, one might also wonder why, given the members’ experience in the literary sphere, they chose to enact these complex living satires rather than simply writing more conventional literary texts. This is the type of question that cannot be answered definitively. Perhaps the members were ambitious and wanted to create something more complex than a typical written text. Perhaps the decision was not a conscious one; the members of these groups could have been so deeply involved in the literary sphere that they simply could not help considering how their actions would be “read” in the inevitable written documentation of their groups’ activities. Regardless, both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club relied on a complex and unconventional conception of the relations between the social and literary spheres, as well as between oral and print communication.

In his in-depth study of the Tuesday Club, *The Tuesday Club of Annapolis (1745-1756) as Cultural Performance*, Wilson Somerville touches on the complex relationship between oral and print culture in the Tuesday Club. As Somerville notes, “we are to understand the importance of speech in the Tuesday Club partly as an alternative to print.” This is not to say that the Tuesday Club’s meetings were not literary; in fact, they were extremely so. Members composed and recited poetry, sang songs and catches, pondered riddles and conundrums, and traded local

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and national gossip. However, as Somerville implies, members of the Tuesday Club seem to have self-consciously avoided committing these activities to print, this despite the fact that they numbered a printer among their ranks. Instead, the Tuesday Club seems to have been designed, at least in part, as a throwback to a manuscript culture in which literary production was exchanged, debated and ultimately shaped by face-to-face interaction, in contrast to the usually private act of reading printed matter. Somewhat ironically, while print culture helped to facilitate communication and homogenize culture across the Empire, these would-be provincials in Annapolis chose to revert to an older, nearly anachronistic model of literary culture in order to signal their allegiance with the values advocated by conservatives such as Swift and Pope who were writing from the Empire’s cultural center. Thus, the Tuesday Club’s gesture toward manuscript culture paradoxically served both to highlight and to efface their second-class status in relation to the literary culture of London, the Empire’s cultural center.

Sir Francis Dashwood’s Medmenham Monks also defined their group primarily as an alternative to print culture, though their motives were decidedly more elitist. Like Hamilton and his Tuesday Club, the Monks were interested in the social differences of private reading versus literary performance, but in making frequent reference to the genres of erotic and pornographic literature, the Monks cast this distinction in a different light. Though pornography had been around for hundreds of years, print culture—as was the case with poetry, music, etc.—changed the social parameters under which pornography was viewed and exchanged. The proliferation of erotic prints and publications pushed pornography even further into the private sphere, and further it reshaped sexual fantasy as an act of imagination rather than physical performance. The Medmenham Monks, composed largely of members of the aristocracy and exclusively of members of England’s social and cultural elite, sought to display their superiority to this trend by
troubling this newly intense privatization of sexual experience. Of course the sex acts they organized and participated in at the club’s meetings demonstrated the irrelevance of basic cultural mores to the club’s ultra-elite membership. This social statement is further underscored when you consider how print culture informed the Medmenham Monks’ activities. As avid collectors of pornography, the group’s members were undoubtedly extremely familiar with the literary conventions of pornography. However, rather than using these texts as part of their private sexual rituals, they dramatized the scenes portrayed in these texts, staging them as semi-public texts meant to be read and appreciated by the club’s other members. The point, in essence, was that the members of the Medmenham Monks were the kind of men who actually did what others only fantasized about privately. Thanks to their elite social status, the Medmenham Monks possessed a hyper-masculine agency that—in their own minds at least—was powerful enough to override even the most basic cultural expectations of privacy and propriety.

Though the Tuesday Club and the Medmenham Monks were intended as very different kinds of cultural statements, they are similar in that both were conservative reactions against the increasing dominance of print culture over everyday life in the British Empire. Both groups sought to re-create a pre-print culture that valued speech and/or performance over the more difficult-to-control, more fundamentally democratic print culture that threatened to diminish the members’ power and standing within the wider culture. Paradoxically, though, print culture loomed large in the activities of both clubs, shaping their activities at nearly every level. In fact, one could argue that, in the case of both clubs, the actions and interactions that happened at their meetings were not complete until they were digested into texts. In other words, both groups sought to disseminate information about themselves in texts, though importantly they were texts that avoided or subverted the still-new print culture that was coming to define the Empire. In the
case of the Medmenham Monks, these texts were the rumors and gossip that spread about the group. Of course, news of their outrageous whoring and their mock-religious rites would have been far too shocking to print in a publication of repute, but the tales about their meetings were exactly the type of thing that would circulate quickly as word-of-mouth gossip. Indeed, stories about the group were almost certainly amplified and distorted, in the manner of the children’s game “telephone,” in ways that were no doubt infinitely amusing to the members of the group. For the Tuesday Club, their text was Alexander Hamilton’s *History*, a manuscript that sought both to organize and to obscure what actually happened at the group’s meetings, in effect doing much the same thing that gossipers did for the Medmenham Monks. Thus, texts occupy a central—yet strangely shifting—space in both clubs. Texts both legitimize and canonize the other types of interactions—musical, conversational, sexual, etc.—that happen within the club, but they also repeatedly and fundamentally destabilize those interactions by freely mixing fiction with fact. The blurring of the line between actions and the texts that represent those actions is a recurring theme with both the Tuesday Club and the Medmenham Monks. While other clubs were impacted by the literary sphere’s power and prestige, the privileged status and educated background of these two clubs allowed their members to figure their club interactions in such a way that they also impinged upon the literary sphere.

Thus, both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club relied on a remarkably complex relationship between the social and literary spheres as well as between oral and print communication. In the next two sections of this chapter I will explore how these clubs managed these relationships as they critiqued both the dynamic between freedom and constraint in popular moral discourse as well as the purported philosophical tenets of popular sociability itself. As elite groups, both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club operated in ways that suggest that
the normal rules of morality and sociability did not apply to them. However, rather than simply ignoring these rules, both groups staged complex critiques of prevailing assumptions about morality and sociability. As was the case with the groups I studied in Chapters 3 and 4, these clubs’ activities ultimately served to affirm the members’ standing as members of the social elite. However, the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club both sought more than simply to display and parade their elite status. By interrogating and significantly revising the moral and philosophical tenets on which club culture rested, these clubs sought to turn sociability into an art form. Further, like more recognizable 18th-century artists such as Jonathan Swift, William Hogarth, and Laurence Sterne, they were determined to have a great deal of fun doing so.

Maximilian Novak offers the most succinct and often-referenced recent definition of Restoration libertinism in his 2001 essay “Libertinism and Sexuality.” Novak’s influential description of the basic doctrines of libertinism can be distilled to three fundamental tenets:

1. Physical sensation is a better guide to truth than formal learning (thus age and experience carry little authority)
2. Social conventions should be ignored (these are merely strictures of the old and unfeeling)
3. Social institutions—particularly marriage and government—should be treated with distrust (their entire purpose is to prevent the general public from attaining the libertine’s enlightenment)

Novak’s definition seems to serve as an adequate distillation of the philosophies of notorious Restoration-era libertines such as John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, and George Villiers, Duke of

Buckingham. After all, these men were legendary for more than just their spectacular feats of indulgence. Rochester in particular was a notorious nihilist; though he was, by all accounts, the life of any party, the frequency with which he destroyed his own social relationships (particularly with King Charles II) betrays a distinct lack of value for social connections. But what of the members of the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club? Like Rochester and Villiers, the members of these groups were legendary for their indulgences in wine and women, and consequently they were branded as libertines and rakes by many during their own time. However, the second and third tenets of Novak’s definition appear to exclude the very possibility of a libertine club. What are clubs but social institutions, means of externalizing and formalizing social conventions? Under Novak’s definition, the prototypical libertine would be, no doubt, highly suspicious of the very idea of clubs, yet in the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club we find men who appear to be libertines banding together. Is this not a contradiction in terms?

In this section I argue that the members of the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club adapted and revised earlier models of libertinism in order to pose new critiques of Enlightenment morality. These groups operated in a very different social milieu than their Restoration forbears; by the middle decades of the 18th century, the libertine’s signature posture of aggressive licentiousness was not only tolerated, it was practically encouraged under the codes of masculine conviviality that gentleman were expected to follow. Institutionalizing the tenets of this updated definition of libertinism in their clubs, the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club exposed a key contradiction in masculine codes of behavior in mid-18th-century England: the ideal gentleman was expected to possess both the transgressive, anti-social stance of the Restoration-era libertine, yet he was also expected to be accommodating, sociable, and even sentimental. By socializing the historically anti-social libertine, this paradoxical definition of masculine
conviviality contained the libertine’s actions within a private, marginalized realm that minimized the disruptive and destructive force of his outbursts. As I argue, while men like the Earl of Rochester shocked, provoked, and critiqued the authorities against which they raged, the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club, by contrast, turned their attention inward, creating furtive, private worlds in which they implicitly interrogated the compatibility of the libertine’s anti-social posture and the 18th-century gentleman’s convivial sociability.

As was the case with many 18th-century clubs, two of the primary preoccupations of both the Tuesday Club and the Medmenham Monks were the consumption of alcohol and bawdy talk and behavior. In this respect, members of both groups would have been classified as libertines. While the term “libertine” is generally applied in these contexts, the term “rake” (short for “rakehell”) is usually used to describe 18th-century men who behaved in a similar fashion. There is no clear reason for this pattern; the OED cites several 17th-century usages of the term “rake” in this sense (“rakehell” dates all the way back to the 16th century), so critics cannot simply be avoiding anachronism. Perhaps the pattern serves as a way to differentiate 18th-century pleasure seekers who, by and large, did not share the Restoration libertine’s philosophical nihilism, or perhaps it is simply a reflection of the ubiquity of Hogarth’s The Rake’s Progress during the period. Regardless, I choose to use the term “libertine” instead of “rake” for an important reason: its clear linguistic connection with the concept of freedom (as well as its inverse, restraint). One of the OED’s definitions of “libertine” is “a man who is not restrained by moral law.” The self-conscious rejection of moral precepts is one of the defining traits of both the Tuesday Club and the Medmenham Monks. These men deliberately figured themselves as morally progressive, and the term “libertine” points linguistically to these men’s deliberate intervention into moral discourse in a way that the more obscure term “rake” does not. Indeed, while the term “libertine”
usually connotes an informed philosophical position, the term “rakehell” seems to disconnect immoral action from any broader philosophical or intellectual point; the “rakehell” is one who rakes, or stirs up, hellishness merely for amusement or mischief. While the members of the Tuesday Club and the Medmenham Monks certainly enjoyed raising hell, I argue that they did so not merely for pure enjoyment, but also as an interrogation of moral discourse. The members of each group actively explored the boundaries that usually lay between freedom and restraint, and as such “libertine”—which invokes the very freedom these men sought—seems an altogether more appropriate term.

Another reason I insist on the term “libertine” is that both clubs probably took the antics of Restoration libertines such as Rochester and Villiers as models. However, neither members of the Tuesday Club nor the Medmenham Monks simply emulated these examples; they revised them significantly to fit the moral and social preoccupations of their own era, which differed from Restoration values in several key respects. First of all, the middle decades of the 18th-century—when both groups met—was the beginning of the industrial era, in which productivity would be valued over innate aristocratic privilege; the nobility of the nobility was being called into question as people focused their attention on things—land, labor, efficiency-increasing inventions such as Jethro Tull’s plow—that contributed directly to Britain’s economic well-being. Second, as I have explained throughout this dissertation, this age of sociability valued easy, informal social interactions over the strict enforcement of external social hierarchies. These hierarchies elevated men like Rochester and Villiers and allowed them to commit their outrageous acts while remaining relatively free of punishment. Even for aristocratic men such as the key members of the Medmenham Monks, these privileges were no longer available, at least

259 See Chapter 4 for more on this transition.
to any comparable extent. Further, without a strong court culture to focus the public’s attention on the elite’s antics, outlandish performances might well fall on deaf ears. The Monks were aware, however, of the power of the rumor mill and they manipulated it masterfully. In fact, three members of the Monks—John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich, Sir Francis Dashwood, and John Wilkes—each managed simultaneously to uphold reputations as dedicated public servants and libertines in their private lives. In doing so, they significantly revised the tenets of Restoration libertinism and adapted the pleasures and preoccupations of the libertine to the unique cultural constraints of their own age.

Still, as I argued above, placing the members of the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club into a genealogy of libertinism is, at best, an awkward fit. Thus, before I return to the actual acts that classed the members of these clubs as libertines I want to sketch briefly the two most prominent critical definitions of British libertinism during the long 18th century. Each of these definitions focuses on a different part of the (long) century and a different literary genre in which the libertine was typically portrayed during that period; as such, both definitions are ultimately limited by these historical and generic constraints.

The first, and by far the most prominent, definition of British libertinism focuses on the Restoration rake as embodied by real-life men such as the infamous Lord Rochester and characters in Restoration comedic plays by authors such as William Wycherly and George Etherege. This definition is most succinctly summarized in Novak’s three tenets as paraphrased at the beginning of this chapter. The Restoration libertine’s embrace of Novak’s three tenets goes very far toward explaining much of what is unique about his eccentric behavior, including Lord Rochester’s frequent lashing out against authority figures such as Charles II as well as the anarchic wit displayed in Rochester’s writing and by libertine characters such as Etherege’s
Dorimant. Aside from the rather uncontroversial first tenet about the pursuit of pleasure, it is interesting to note that both of the other tenets focus on the libertine’s attitude toward social connections. Novak’s definition emphasizes the libertine’s unconventional social behavior because his definition is based on examples drawn primarily from the stage; as he states: “libertine behavior and ideas were intimately intertwined with stage presentation.”

One of drama’s most important strengths as a medium is its ability to portray intricate social situations, complex sequences of action and reaction. The wit attributed to Dorimant in Etherege’s *Man of Mode* describes, essentially, that character’s sensitivity to the mostly-unspoken rules of social etiquette and his unique ability to subvert, recast or even redefine these expectations in surprising ways. Since the stage is so ideally suited to dramatize these complex social tableaux, it is hardly surprising that Novak’s definition of libertinism focuses our attention on the libertine’s visible social actions rather than his intentions, motivations, or other internal states of mind.

These internal states of mind are emphasized—perhaps, over-emphasized—in the second definition of libertinism that I want to discuss. In *Honest Sins*, her 1999 study of Fielding’s plays and novels, Tiffany Potter aims to define and examine a specifically Georgian mode of libertinism. Potter argues that across his career—beginning with his early work for the stage but reaching fruition with his later novels—Fielding advocated a substantial revision of the libertinism developed during the Restoration era. Potter argues that Fielding’s Georgian libertine adopted the Restoration rake’s naturalism—that is, his belief that physical pleasure is natural and, therefore, good—but abandoned the aggression, cruelty, and essentially anti-social attitudes

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that characterized men like Rochester. The prototypical Georgian libertine for Potter is Tom Jones, a character who continually seeks the gratification of his physical desires, but who has a “good heart” and takes no pleasure in others’ pain. As Potter argues, this new revision of libertinism not only made the libertine more palatable, but also allowed the libertine to locate himself within the emerging literary and cultural discourse of sentimentalism. However, just as Novak’s definition of Restoration libertinism is limited by its focus on the stage, so is Potter’s definition limited by its focus on Fielding’s novels. The assessment of whether one has a “good heart”—that is, whether his or her motivations and intentions are pure—is a task ideally suited to the novel, which lays bare its characters’ minds. Indeed, it is a question that seems nearly impossible to answer outside the narrative scope of the novel. For instance, how would we assess whether Sir Francis Dashwood had a “good heart?” The materials from which we construct biographies—letters, portraits, anecdotes, official documents and records, etc. —do not offer the evidence we would need to make a definitive case either way.

Returning to the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club, I argue that these groups significantly revised existing models of libertinism in order to accommodate the heavy emphasis they and their fellow 18th-century men placed on sociability. Dispensing with the nihilism of men like Rochester and Villiers, both groups sought a model of libertinism that was at the same time provocative, masculine, and sociable. Both groups took many lessons directly from the Restoration libertine’s handbook: for instance, their love of drink. However, other aspects of the libertine’s informal code were revised significantly. The most important of these was the libertine’s attitude toward sex. Sex is typically conceived as a private action, and the isolated, nihilistic Restoration libertine had no trouble reconciling this conception of sex with his fundamentally solipsistic relationship with the world around him. However, the 18th-century
libertine—the members of the Medmenham Monks in particular—faced a different set of challenges in incorporating the libertine’s love of sexual pleasure into their club. How could they make sex, an essentially private enterprise, social? Rather than simply create a club in which members simply had sex publicly, the Medmenham Monks achieved their goal of being simultaneously provocative, masculine, and sociable by implicitly comparing their sex lives to the genre of anti-Catholic pornographic literature, thereby encouraging the publication of their private sex acts.

As I have already noted, while the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday club may have revised the libertine’s take on sociability, they certainly did not revise his policies on sensual indulgence. Both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club were preoccupied with two key interests: drinking and sex. In fact, one of the few concrete details that we know about the Medmenham Monks regards their prodigious capacity for drink. The only surviving primary document confirming the group’s existence is a scrap of the account-book kept by Paul Whitehead, which confirms that Dashwood kept a great deal of wine on hand at the abbey. As for the Monks’ indulgence in sex, this was, by all accounts, of legendary extremity. Many accounts of the groups find them importing “wenches” from London to gratify the members’ intimate desires, and while these reports are, of course, impossible to verify, we do know that Dashwood possessed a large collection of pornographic literature that the members almost

\[262\] Geoffrey Ashe cites “a fragmentary series of pages from the Abbey’s cellar-books” that he consulted in the archives at West Wycombe. The pages record bottles of wine issued to members of the Medmenham Monks (identified by pseudonyms) for their “private devotion” at the Abbey. See Geoffrey Ashe, *Do What You Will; a History of Anti-Morality* (London: W.H. Allen, 1974), 119-120.
certainly perused at the Monks’ meetings. Many critics also infer that Wilkes’ famous *Essay on Woman* was originally composed for the pleasure of the Medmenham Monks. The Tuesday Club’s meetings were similarly boisterous. As Robert Micklus argues, drinking was deeply integrated into the fabric of Maryland club culture of the early 18th century; of the 40 or so clubs that existed in Annapolis in 1720, nearly all were drinking clubs such as “wine Clubs, punch Clubs… Syder Clubs, [and] Rum Clubs.” While the Tuesday Club broke this tradition by not devoting themselves solely to the consumption of alcohol, they hardly abstained, as club monikers such as “Jonathan Grog” might attest. The Tuesday Club also shared the Medmenham Monks’ interest in sex, a preoccupation that manifested itself mostly in the form of bawdy talk. Hamilton’s *History* includes a long-running series of jokes about the club’s “Longstanding Members,” and the subjects of the groups’ riddles and conundrums as well as their general banter was often rather explicit. As was the case with the Medmenham Monks, members of the Tuesday Club clearly saw the continual performance of these dual obsessions with drink and sex as essential to their possession of a kind of elite masculinity.

While the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club’s emphases on drink do not grate against popular conceptions of sociability (after all, is there a more natural social institution than the drinking club?), their pursuit of sexual pleasure is much more problematic. Fringe sex acts

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265 Qtd. in Robert Micklus, *The Comic Genius of Dr. Alexander Hamilton* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 34.


such as orgies aside, sex is typically conceived as an intensely private act, not easily reconciled with the easy, informal sociability that characterized the typical 18th-century club. The members of these groups, however, were dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure, and one could hardly have expected them to give up the exquisite pleasure of sex. The Tuesday Club’s attitude was rather conservative; they limited themselves to bawdy talk such as the aforementioned jokes about the club’s “longstanding members.” The Medmenham Monks, however, sought to be far more provocative. As befitting the members’ intelligence and literary acumen, however, the group came up with a clever solution for how to render sex sociable: they enacted scenes from the anti-Catholic pornographic literature that Sir Francis Dashwood collected and stored at Medmenham Abbey. The sex acts themselves would still be private, but by aligning these acts with an established literary genre, the members of the group rendered stories about their escapades easily transferrable into a literary form. The Monks’ re-enactment of anti-Catholic pornography cleverly juxtaposed the high (the convivial clubman, enlightened homosocial exchange) with the low (prostitution, sex, and all things carnal), implicitly confronting the tenets of conviviality, politeness, and propriety on which club culture rested. Further, by forming a club for the purpose of performing a quintessentially private action—that is, having sex—and by making that private act into a public spectacle, the Medmenham Monks upset the typical private/public dynamic on which club culture rested.

In her study of 18th-century pornography and erotica, Mighty Lewd Books, Peakman explores how anti-Catholic sentiment informed the history of late-18th-century erotic and pornographic literature in Britain. Peakman argues that early anti-Catholic propaganda attacking the sexual transgressions of the clergy, which had been popular since the late 17th

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century, eventually “had the effect of inflating sexual tension, with Protestant anxieties erupting in erotic fantasies about priests' sexual misdemeanors.” For the English reading public, the more unfamiliar trappings of Catholicism—for example, the confession booth or the convent—came to carry an inherent erotic charge that was exploited again and again by writers of pornography and erotica. Novels such as *Nunnery Tales Written by a Young Nobleman* (1727) and *The Cloisters Laid Open: or, Adventures of the Priests and Nuns with Some Account of the Confessions, and the Lewd Use They Make of Them* (1750) helped to develop a rhetoric and an iconography of a secret Catholic sexual underworld. While we have no authoritative account of what transpired within Medmenham Abbey’s walls, nearly all accounts of the Medmenham Monks’ meetings contain some combination of sexual and Catholic imagery. As reports of the club made their way through the echo chamber of 18th-century gossip, many would have made the connection between the Medmenham Monks and this subgenre of erotic literature, concluding that Medmenham Abbey was a sort of sexual theme park that allowed the Monks to live out fantasies derived from anti-Catholic pornography. Francis Dashwood chose to memorialize his interests in Catholicism and erotica in portraits by George Knapton and William Hogarth, both of which found Dashwood in the character of a naughty priest. Though these portraits were painted before Dashwood formed the Medmenham Monks, this connection between Catholicism and sex was directly associated with the club as well; according to second-hand accounts of the club’s activities, members were deeply committed to playing the part of Catholic sexual deviants, deploying highly eroticized Catholic terminology whenever possible. They reportedly referred to their wine as “sacrament” and their collection of erotic books as “sacred texts,” they addressed each other by the title of “brother” in their written communication,

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and they referred to the women who attended their meetings (reportedly prostitutes provided by the well-known madam Charlotte Hayes) as “nuns.” While this language may seem fairly innocuous today, as Peakman’s study makes clear, its sexual connotations would have been apparent to 18th-century readers, particularly given the members of the Medmenham Monks’ established reputations as libertines. By playing the part of naughty priests, however, the Monks did more than simply give their activities an extra sense of erotic charge; they—temporarily at least—adopted the stance of the “other.” Catholicism was exotic and alien, and to parade one’s interest in this quintessentially un-English religion was to cultivate a sense of isolation from the mainstream of 18th-century English culture, a stance that significantly troubles any view of the Monks as an ordinary, convivial social club.

The architectural improvements that Dashwood made to Medmenham Abbey also reference this anti-Catholic erotica and underscore the club’s alienation from the wider culture that existed around the group. Moreover, these renovations further support the notion that the Monks’ attitude toward sex was hostile to conventional modes of 18th-century male homosociability. Medmenham Abbey itself was, of course, a relic from England's Catholic past, though by 1750 it was a barely-recognizable ruin, a mess of medieval architecture and Tudor-era improvements and additions. Rather than continuing the abbey's march toward modernity, Dashwood chose to fashion the structure into a building that was habitable while maintaining the essential character of a medieval Catholic ruin. According to Horace Walpole (who was not a Medmenham Monk, but bribed one of Dashwood’s servants to show him the Abbey), Medmenham was decorated with “bawdy pictures” that served as erotic icons, and “each [monk]
As Julie Peakman has argued, confined spaces such as the confession booth and the monastic cell were a prominent trope in anti-Catholic erotica, and Medmenham Abbey seems to have been renovated with this in mind. Indeed, Wilkes describes an inscription on one statue at Medmenham that makes this connection quite clear: “peni tento non penitenti” (“a penis tense, not penitence”). While the pun is silly, the connection between sex and the confession booth is clear; if a Medmenham Monk takes your confession, the result of the meeting will not be “penitence,” but a “penis tense.” The existence of these “individual cells” is important, not only because it confirms that the Monks relied on the public’s familiarity with anti-Catholic erotica to generate much of their meetings’ erotic charge, but also because it indicates that the Monks did not engage in orgies. In other words, the Monks did not approach sex as a homosocial activity. Their group was not a sex club; ironically, the group apparently came together simply so that they could break apart, after which they would enjoy their individual, separate sexual liaisons.

The most remarked-upon of Dashwood’s “improvements” to Medmenham Abbey, however, was his installation of the motto “Fay ce que voudras” (“Do what you will”) over the Abbey’s entrance. The motto is a reference to another famous abbey, Rabelais’ Thélème. Thélème was Rabelais’ satire of the hypocritical character of 16th-century monastic life; instead of the Spartan accommodations one would expect to find in a medieval abbey, Thélème contained all of the creature comforts of a grand castle. Rather than diligently following monastic laws, the residents of Thélème followed only one rule, which was actually a non-rule: “do what you will.” Dashwood’s invocation of this motto has led numerous authors to assume that Medmenham Abbey was a kind of proto-hippie commune based on the principles of free

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love. Louis C. Jones, for instance, writes that, “the dominant note at Medmenham was one of careless pleasure,” and Gerald Suster argues at length that Dashwood and his compatriots were engaged in pagan worship of “male and female energies.” I argue, however, that the Monks’ adoption of the motto “do what you will” makes more sense as a simple nod to Rabelais’ similar sex-filled abbey. Indeed, Bakhtin’s formulation of the socially transgressive ideal of carnival and the carnivalesque grows out of his study of Rabelais, and Dashwood and his Monks no doubt recognized and reveled in the ways in which the social order was disrupted at Thélème. As I noted, the key rule at both Thélème and Medmenham Abbey was “do what you will,” which actually functions as a non-rule, since it does not restrict behavior in any way (since even if one self-censors his behavior, he is still following his own preferences). Rules and by-laws were a fundamental component of 18th-century club life, and such a blatantly empty dictate as “do what you will” constitutes a sly critique of the generally held assumption among 18th-century clubmen that clearly articulated rules would lead to easy sociability. Further, it hardly takes a Hobbesian pessimist to believe that if each person pursued his or her own will without regard to others who do the same, the inevitable result will be conflict. While the secrecy surrounding the Monks’ meetings means we have no information about whether the group courted internal controversy on a regular basis, we do know that two of the groups’ key personalities—John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich and John Wilkes—had a violent falling out. As Wilkes’ trial for obscenity proves, the friendships forged at Medmenham were not sacred; Sandwich even used Wilkes’ “Essay on Woman” —which was purportedly composed by and for the enjoyment of the Medmenham Monks—as a key piece of evidence in the House of Lords’ prosecution of his


former friend. Writers like Shaftesbury were apt to rhapsodize about the club as a kind of enlightened masculine utopia, but the Medmenham Monks pursued no such ideal. Though, like utopian communities such as Thélème, Medmenham Abbey was closed off from the world, the Monks’ disconnection from society seems sinister rather than nostalgic, anticipating the claustraphobic settings that would later be explored so terrifyingly by the Marquis de Sade.

In addition to interrogating the tenets of popular sociability, the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club’s indulgences in drinking and sex were also clearly meant to underscore the members’ masculinity. Many aspects of their behavior will be familiar to any academic working on a campus with any sort of Greek culture, but how did these actions read in their 18th-century context? Were the members of the Tuesday Club and the Medmenham Monks just 18th-century frat boys whose wealth and status allowed them to act out adolescent fantasies in particularly outrageous ways? Erin Mackie explores a similar topic in her 2009 study *Rakes, Highwaymen and Pirates: The Making of the Modern Gentleman in the Eighteenth Century*. Mackie argues that discourses of gentlemanliness and criminality were, in the 18th century, mutually constitutive. Once can observe this cross-pollination of masculine identity both in “gentleman criminals” such as MacHeath from John Gay’s enormously successful play *The Beggar’s Opera* and in the identities of rakish gentlemen such as James Boswell. For Mackie, though the modern gentleman is “guided by codes of polite civility and restraint, eschew[s] personal violence for the arbitration of the law, [is] oriented toward the family in an increasingly paternalistic role, purchasing his status as much, if not more, through the demonstration of moral virtues as through

that of inherited honor,”\textsuperscript{274} masculine authority continues “to rely on modes of privilege, aggression, and self-authorization that violate the moral, social, and legal dictates that constitute its own legitimacy.”\textsuperscript{275} In other words, though the modern gentleman would set himself apart from older, more aggressive models of masculinity (such as that embodied by the Restoration rakes like Rochester), both older, aristocratic and modern criminal models continued to inform modern notions of masculinity at the deepest levels. Thus, the rougishness that so clearly informs the actions of the Tuesday Club and (especially) the Medmenham Monks is at once a throwback to established (or, perhaps at their point in the 18th century, waning) models of aristocratic masculinity and an attempt to negotiate and perform a new model of masculinity for a modern culture in which class and individual subjectivity have supplanted rank and birth as the sources of social power and authority.

Indeed, as Mackie goes on to argue, the performance of masculinity was so important to 18th-century men because the aristocratic claims that had formed the basis of masculine and aristocratic identity and privilege grew far less important in the wake of the Whig settlement of 1689. Whereas, in aristocratic culture, the relations between masculine and feminine were construed (along with relations of class and rank) as a dynamic between dominant and subordinate, the post-1789 “paradigm of sexual difference locates gender within an individual's innate character, his or her subjectivity; it makes gender a personal, private matter fixed inwardly.”\textsuperscript{276} Masculine privilege was no longer an innate feature that went along with one’s membership in a certain social class; it was a highly individual matter and each person had to

\textsuperscript{274} \textit{Ibid.}, 1.

\textsuperscript{275} \textit{Ibid.}, 2.

\textsuperscript{276} \textit{Ibid.}, 7.
perform his masculinity for himself lest it be assumed that he did not possess masculinity and its attendant power and privileges. It is for this reason, then, that the performance of masculinity plays such an important role in the elite cultures of the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club. The antics in which these groups engaged not only secured the members’ identities as men, but also opened the possibilities for the power and privileges on which an individual’s identification as masculine depended. In 18th-century British culture, to be elite was to be masculine; if one aspired to one of these types it was necessary that he aspire to the other as well.

One important effect of this new link between masculinity and privilege was that the elite male was defined exclusively as heterosexual. This had not been the case during golden age of Restoration libertinism; the unquenchable sexual appetite that had defined Rochester’s character ran roughshod over prevailing definitions of what constituted “polite” behavior, sexual or otherwise. As Rochester describes in “Regime de Vivre,” the definitive description of the Restoration libertine’s lifestyle:

I rise at eleven, I dine about two,
I get drunk before seven; and the next thing I do,
I send for my whore, when for fear of a clap,
I spend in her hand, and I spew in her lap.
Then we quarrel and scold, 'till I fall fast asleep,
When the bitch, growing bold, to my pocket does creep;
Then slyly she leaves me, and, to revenge the affront,
At once she bereaves me of money and cunt.
If by chance then I wake, hot-headed and drunk,
What a coil do I make for the loss of my punk!
I storm and I roar, and I fall in a rage,
And missing my whore, I bugger my page.
Then, crop-sick all morning, I rail at my men,
And in bed I lie yawning 'till eleven again.277

As one can observe in this poem, the Restoration libertine’s attitude toward sex was characterized by extremity and license, but while the 18th-century libertine strove for the former, his attitude about what constituted license had narrowed considerably. Sodomy, along with cross-dressing, was considered effeminate by the middle decades of the 18th century, and hence the very opposite of the privilege and power to which the gentleman aspired. One can observe this in attitudes toward fops and cross-dressing “mollies,” each of whom was universally loathed by adherents to this new code of masculinity. Both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club were defiantly heterosexual, and while both groups seemed to regard the phallus as a source of almost superhuman power and privilege, it was exclusively sexual dominance over women that afforded one privilege among his masculine social relations. As I noted above, the members of the Tuesday Club never lost an opportunity to pun about the group’s “longstanding members,” one of which Robert Micklus recounts in detail:

The first of the favorite maxims of that “celebrated Club wit,” Jonathan Grog, states “that if one would gain a Ladie’s affections he ought to persevere, and stand stiffly to it without

277 Paul Hammond, ed. Restoration Literature: An Anthology (Oxford, Oxford UP, 2002), 108-109. In this particularly anthology, “Regime de Vivre” is uncredited; though the poem appears in Rochester’s manuscripts, scholars debate whether it was actually composed by Rochester himself. Regardless of whether Rochester actually wrote the poem, my point in this paragraph still holds given he enjoyed it enough to recopy it alongside his own poems.
shrinking.” “This was a good Standing Joke,” Hamilton adds, “and fit for a Longstanding member.”

As one can see here, the power of the phallus is construed in terms of heterosexual sex, a pattern from which the Tuesday Club never deviates. The members of the Medmenham Monks were similarly fixated. Among the Society of Dilettanti (the antiquarian society that included most of the Medmenham Monks) the study of the ancients’ sexual habits appears to have been a preoccupation, a line of enquiry which eventually would result in the controversial publication of Richard Payne Knight’s *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* in 1786. Sir Francis Dashwood’s creative approaches to architecture and landscaping also hint at these libertines’ regard for the phallus. As I mentioned above, Dashwood renovated the gardens at his estate in West Wycombe Park to resemble the contours of the female form; the centerpiece of this conceit was the “Temple of Venus.” The name ostensibly referred to the small building containing a copy of the Venus de Medici, but it almost certainly signified more directly the small grotto just below, which corresponded to the vulva in Dashwood’s landscape representation of the feminine anatomy. Entering into this grotto allowed one, metaphorically at least, to become the phallus as it performed its holy (to the Monks) act of penetration. For both the Monks and the Tuesday Club, the phallus and the act of coitus were deeply symbolic of the power and authority that these privileged and powerful men wielded in the social and political realms.

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Thus, we find that the antics of the Restoration-era libertine provided a fraught model for the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club. While both groups would have admired the Restoration libertine’s lifestyle of extremes—including his all-consuming preference for freedom over constraint—other aspects of the Restoration libertine’s modus operandi—including his general viciousness and disregard for others—would have been abhorrent. Still firmly enmeshed in a culture of lordship, the Restoration libertine sought to prove and preserve his aristocratic privilege, but (as I noted above) the 18th-century libertine saw the source of his social power as his adherence to the tenets of heterosexual masculinity. Thus, when they sought literary models for the behaviors in which they wanted to engage, both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club chose innovative new models. While (as I will discuss below) the Tuesday Club looked to the anarchic satire that was pouring forth from London’s literary sphere, the Medmenham Monks chose anti-Catholic pornography. For a group interested both in exploring the extremes of alcohol consumption and sex and mocking the arcana of Catholic rites and rituals, this literature was a godsend. In addition to aligning neatly with many of their own interests and preoccupations, the act of adapting tales served as a critique of prevailing social practices. The Monks’ staged sex scenes interrogated the public/private dynamic on which club culture rested, redesigned the relationship between the heretofore-isolated libertine and the wider social world, and—perhaps most importantly—underscored the group’s ultra-elite status. While ordinary men might surreptitiously read pornography, these were men who lived pornography. In other words, the members of the Medmenham Monks possessed the social and monetary means as well as the masculine hubris necessary to make fantasy reality.
While stories about the famous libertines of the Restoration era and the genre of anti-Catholic pornography provided useful literary precedents for the Medmenham Monks’ and the Tuesday Club’s preoccupations with alcohol and sex, these were not the only models that these two groups looked to. As I noted above, the members of both the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club came from the social and economic elite of their respective communities; as such, they were well educated and well read. While members of both groups participated in the literary sphere to a greater or lesser degree, their actions as well as the literary texts that they produced betray an intimate familiarity with both the classics and the major works of their own century. Both groups differed from standard clubs in important respects, but they were conventional in the sense that witty repartee was valued by both groups. Indeed, literary allusion is one of the most fertile soils in which displays of wit can grow. Hamilton’s history of the Tuesday Club is shot through with literary allusions, and while few documents related to the Medmenham Monks exist, perhaps the most important one—Wilkes’ *Essay on Woman*—is itself an extended burlesque of Pope’s *Essay on Man*. For the well-educated and worldly gentlemen who belonged to these two groups, literature was embedded in the very ways in which they understood the world, and as a result literary values shaped these groups in very deep ways. In this section I will discuss how both groups adapted for their own purposes literary genres, patterns and tropes such as paradox, satire, burlesque, and parody, all of which were prevalent in the anarchic satire that dominated the literary sphere over the first half of the 18th century. Deeply influenced by the cutting-edge satire being produced at the time, both the Tuesday Club and the Medmenham Monks adopted the ironic spirit of authors like Swift and Pope. Just as those authors used the tools of the literary sphere to lodge a critique of literature itself, so did both of these groups use club culture to interrogate their culture’s assumptions about the nature of sociability. Further, just
as Swift’s and Pope’s critiques of the literary sphere produced vibrant and memorable works of
literature, so did these clubs’ critiques of sociability result in lively and memorable sociable
interactions.

Readers are often surprised when they approach Dr. Alexander Hamilton’s account of his
Tuesday Club expecting to find the type of staid and straight-laced literature that we tend to
associate with colonial America. Hamilton composed his *History of the Ancient and Honourable
Tuesday Club* throughout the later 1740s until his death in 1756, and the influence of both the
Tory satirists such as Swift and Pope as well as good-natured Georgian satirists like Fielding is
undeniable. As Robert Micklus notes, the Tuesday Club itself was an attempt to “imitate British
culture” while Hamilton, in his history of the group, also “imitates British prose models.”

Micklus does not simply argue that Hamilton and the Tuesday Club were derivative, though; for
Micklus, Hamilton’s two chief works—the *History of the Ancient and Honourable Tuesday Club*
and *The Itinerarium of Dr. Alexander Hamilton* (an account of Hamilton’s travels throughout the
northeastern colonies) —synthesized the traditions of bitter satire and good-natured comedy that
competed for space in the 18th-century British world of letters. From the Tory satirists—
whose strain of harsh invective was descended from Juvenal’s vicious attacks—Hamilton took a
certain viciousness, an authoritative density of reference, and a willingness to attack specific
targets, naming names when the situation called for it. However, Hamilton balanced this vinegar
with honey he garnered from good-natured Georgian comic writers, most importantly Fielding

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280 Robert Micklus, *The Comic Genius of Dr. Alexander Hamilton* (Knoxville: University of

(whose *Tom Jones* Hamilton read and greatly admired\(^{282}\)). In Hamilton’s writing (particularly about the Tuesday Club), there is much of the “good nature” by which Tiffany Potter\(^{283}\) defines the Georgian libertine. As Micklus explains:

Before the eighteenth century a “humorist”—a character whose behavior was controlled by his or her dominant humor—was a source of ridicule; early in the eighteenth century, however, a character’s humor became a positive sign of his or her comic individuality.\(^{284}\) While Hamilton can be acerbic about those whose faults he deems socially harmful or personally grating, he was, indeed, a connoisseur of the kinds of foibles Micklus describes. Indeed, for Hamilton the relish of these idiosyncrasies is indispensable to the “clubical character” that he seeks to articulate and promote throughout his *History*.

Nowhere is Hamilton’s appreciation of “comic individuality” more apparent than in his treatment of Tuesday Club President Nasifer Jole (whose real name was Charles Cole; Hamilton developed similarly descriptive pseudonyms for nearly all of the characters in his *History*).

While the Tuesday Club was, like many 18th-century clubs, founded on the ideals of humility and equality, Jole’s inflated self-image is apparent from the moment his character is introduced:

> Mr Nasifer Jole, otherwise Carlo Nasifer Jole, was a native of old England, and the County of Kent claims the honor of his birth, he often Justly values himself on his being born an Englishman, and is not alittle [sic] fond of letting it be known, that he is a man of Kent, sprung of a race of ancient heroes and true british blood, not a kentish man, who is only the

\(^{282}\) *Ibid.*, 142.


mungerell Issue of the Roman, Saxon, Norman, Dane, Scot, pict, and a hundred other mixed foreign Nations, that gained footing in England but of late.285 

In addition to calling attention to his familial heritage, Jole sees himself as distinguished even within the Tuesday Club. Though the group initially forms without officers, Jole plies the rest of the group with expensive treats and drinks in an effort to have himself named president of the Tuesday Club.286 Further, as soon as the Longstanding Members make Jole president he assumes a physical presence befitting his office: 

the Honorable Nasifer Jole Esqr made his appearance, in a flamming [sic] Suit of Scarlet, a magnificent hat, bound round with massy Scoloped Siler lace, a fine large and full fair wig, white kid Gloves, with a gold headed cane, and I cannot be certain whether or not he had a Silver hilted Sword, with a beautiful Sword knot of Ribbons, white Silk Stockings rolld [sic], large Shining Silver Shoe buckles, his coat and vest edged round with gold twist.287 

While one could imagine a purely moralistic author portraying Jole’s thirst for power as damaging, the group does not indict Jole, at least not straightforwardly. Far from being offended by Jole’s ambition, the rest of the club members take it in stride, using Jole’s peculiar “humor” as a source for their own amusement:


286 While Hamilton does not say outright that Jole engineered his own election as president of the Tuesday Club, Hamilton’s account of Jole’s insistence on providing expensive and elaborate drinks and food for the club immediately precedes the account of Jole’s election, making the connection all but explicit. See *Ibid.*, 62-6.

He was very fond of punctillios [sic] Ceremonies, and distinguishing badges of honor, thinking they contained in themselves something very edifying, expressive and Significant, and the long Standing members soon find out this weakness, in a Course of a few years, loaded him with ceremonies, and ornamented him with a superfluity of pompous accouterments.\(^{288}\)

At least for a time, the members of the Tuesday Club are able to turn Jole’s peculiar quirk of character—one might even be tempted to call it a vice—into a win-win situation: Jole is gratified by the reverence the Tuesday Club shows for him, while the wittier members of the Club get to use Jole as a subject for their experiments in the mock-epic poetry that was popular at the time. Note, for instance, Hamilton’s epic invocation for the chapter in which he introduces Jole:

> I am now entering upon a chapter in this History, in which I shall have occasion for the asistance [sic] of all the muses, which Inhabit Parnassus, from its top to its bottom, from the highest of the Sublime, to the lowest of the bathos; from Virgil to Bavius, from Milton to Pryn and Wythers, from Cervantes and his follower Henry Fielding Esqr, to the Reverend Mr Gazeteer Eachard & the Celebrated Mr John Bunyian.\(^{289}\)

While Hamilton’s mock-epic style obviously owes much to Pope’s *Dunciad*, it seems appropriate that Hamilton mentions Fielding here, as his treatment of Jole’s ambition and self-regard remind one of Fielding’s treatment of Squire Western in *Tom Jones*, another character who is obviously flawed from a moral standpoint yet lovable nonetheless. At no point does Hamilton seem annoyed with Jole; Hamilton the author and the mischief-maker no doubt values Jole highly for the hilarity that regularly ensues from his presence.

\(^{288}\) *Ibid.*, 70.

There is, however, something of a dark tinge to the symbiotic relationship between Jole and the rest of the Tuesday Club. Indeed, Jole’s feelings eventually become hurt when he realizes that the Tuesday Club’s reverence for him is merely a wind-up. The Club’s mockery of Jole makes it clear that the members of the Tuesday Club are not “friends” in the sentimentalized, psychologized sense of the term, but there is a strangeness to their relationship that goes beyond the lack of sentimentality. While one might expect that the goal of any club would be to grease the wheels of sociability—to make interactions among the members as easy and as enjoyable as possible—this was most certainly not the case with the Tuesday Club. Hamilton recounts in his History several key points at which the members of the Tuesday Club made choices that seem deliberately to foster strife, discord, and conflict. It is these counter-intuitive choices, I argue, that prompt modern readers to compare Hamilton’s work to more anarchic 18th-century satirists such as Swift and, especially, Sterne. The Tuesday Club was, in essence, a club that fostered a kind of anti-sociability, and the most effective wrench that they threw into the gears of sociability was the Gelastic Law.

After the initial laws that set up meeting times and the bill of fare that would be provided at the Tuesday Club, the Gelastic Law was the first rule that the group passed. At their 6th meeting, or “Sederunt” as Hamilton referred to them, the Tuesday Club passed the Gelastic Law with the following text:

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290 See Ibid., 70.

291 See, for instance, Robert Micklus, The Comic Genius of Dr. Alexander Hamilton (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 142. While Micklus invokes Sterne’s writing in relation to Hamilton’s a few times, the possibility of direct influence seems unlikely, as Hamilton died several years before Sterne produced any of his major works.
Law VII: That if any Subject of what nature be discussed, that levels at party matters, or the administration of the Government of this Province, or be disagreeable to the Club, no answer shall be given thereto, but after such discourse is ended, the Society shall laugh at the member offending, in order to divert the discourse.\(^{292}\)

While the Gelastic Law seems to have been meant originally as a typically witty take on the rather standard prohibition against talking politics at club meetings, as the club develops the Gelastic Law is invoked more and more as an antidote to seriousness wherever it might manifest itself within the Tuesday Club. Take, for instance, when Sir John Oldcastle is formally indicted by the Tuesday Club for proposing a bawdy toast: “to the pious memory of Sally Salisbury’s C—t.”\(^{293}\) As Oldcastle is ostensibly defending himself in an address to president Jole, he “drank again, \textit{viva voce}, the same filthy toast, for which he had been but Just Indicted.”\(^{294}\) At this Hamilton himself becomes upset, protesting because Oldcastle’s gesture of defiance has brought an end to the mock-trial, but as he protests the club enacts the Gelastic Law against him, laughing at him in a “tumultuous and Clamorous manner.”\(^{295}\) Of course Hamilton was not discoursing on either of the specific topics—party politics and government—that were specifically cited in the text of the Gelastic Law, but Hamilton’s discourse did fall under the broad heading of talk that was “disagreeable to the club.” This broad implementation of the

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\(^{293}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 112-3. As Micklus’s footnote explains, Sally Salisbury was alias of Mrs. Sarah Priddon, a fictitious whore who was the subject of a popular 1723 novel by Capt. Charles Walker.

\(^{294}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 113.

\(^{295}\) \textit{Ibid.}
Gelastic Law is in keeping with the high value Hamilton places on laughter—or the “gelastic faculty,” as he calls it—throughout his writings. Indeed, it seems quite clear that despite his depth and breadth of learning, Hamilton loved a hearty laugh more than a strong argument or even a well-turned phrase.

However, when Hamilton describes the invocation of the Gelastic Law in his History, the result is not pure laughter and lightness in the Fielding school of comic writing. While Robert Micklus argues that the Gelastic Law fostered a “spirit of cordiality,” I am struck by how the Gelastic Law isolates one member of the group and makes him the sole subject of the rest of the Club’s derision. Of course Hamilton’s History—a defiantly unsentimental text—is uninterested in how the characters’ feelings might be hurt by this sense of isolation, but one cannot escape the way in which the Gelastic Law seems to work counter to the spirit of conviviality that one expects from club culture. Hamilton himself even acknowledges at one point that the Tuesday Club’s irreverence can go too far:

Tho Jesting and Joaking [sic], is often a very pritty [sic] Innocent and entertaining amusement, when Introduced with a proper prudence and discretion, . . . being like a game at Shuttle Cock, where the volatile and feathered witticism is bandied about from hand to hand, with great Glee, vivacity and agility, which alighting upon any of the bye standers or players, by reason of its light Substance, being Compounded only of Cork and feathers, neither hurts nor bruises, yet have I often known that a Joke or Jest, tho’ volatile and light enough in it’s [sic] own nature, would occasion abundance of Enmity and ill blood, and

\[296\] _Ibid._, 5.

even outrageous quarrells [sic] and blows both wet and dry, where the Shuttle Cock, (to Carry on our metaphor,) lighted upon a tender Skin or an Inflammed or excoriated part, or in a word galled an old Sore.298

As Hamilton’s extended simile explains, though the Tuesday Club served as an alternative or microcosmic society, the group did not exist in isolation from the outside world and the “old Sores” that that world might have inflicted on its members. However, the Gelastic Law—since it highlights members’ foibles rather than taking them off the table for discussion and mockery—had the potential to make this problem worse. The Law—in the way that it opposes an “us” (the laughers) and a “them” (the laughed-at) —not only remakes the club into a gang, but also ensures that any member could lose his spot in that gang at any moment. As we saw above, even Hamilton—the Tuesday Club’s clear intellectual leader—is not immune to serving his turn as the laughed-at.

This somewhat perverse approach to club culture and sociability is also apparent in the club’s treatment of their president, Nasifer Jole. As I noted above, Hamilton’s attitude toward Jole in the History is, in general, one of good-natured mockery. Indeed, the Club’s election of Jole as president is an inspired bit of bathos worthy of the masters of that trope, Swift and Pope. By elevating Jole to such a lofty position, the ridiculousness of Jole’s behavior is all the more visible, particularly given the disjunction between Jole’s pettiness and the lofty rhetoric Hamilton and the other members employ whenever Jole is their subject. However, some of the more impolitic members of the group are unable to maintain this lofty rhetorical style when their own honor is offended. This was the case when Mr. Quirpum Comic implied that Jole’s

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numerous pet cats made his home “nasty, and perfumed with a disagreeable Odor.” Jole, ever sensitive to matters of status and prestige, is highly offended: “this raised his honors Spleen and resentment to such a height, that he was heard to swear in his wrath, that he never would come nigh the Club again.”299 President Jole is similarly frustrated during his confrontation with Chancellor Philo Dogmaticus; the two have a protracted verbal dispute that ends with the Chancellor resigning his status as Longstanding Member.300 These incidents prove without a doubt that Jole is the most cranky and irritable member of the Tuesday Club, which seems to be precisely why the other longstanding members elected him president. Hamilton in particular often strives “to put the Club Into an uproar and confusion,”301 and Jole’s splenetic outbursts are, more often than not, the cause of this strife. For all of Hamilton’s promotion of an easy, “clubical” approach to sociability and the “gelastic faculty,” in practice the group is more likely to excite drama, controversy, and heated argument. Where most 18th-century clubs took specific steps (such as banning the discussion of controversial issues such as politics and religion) to steer discussion toward, placid, neutral topics, the Tuesday Club deliberately fostered aggression and faction.

Another key way in which Hamilton and the Tuesday Club subverted standard approaches to social interaction was in their emphasis on written and spoken interactions that were deliberately crude, childlike, or outright nonsensical. While the Enlightenment elevated “rational conversation” as the most desirable form of social interaction, the Tuesday Club—despite the


300 Ibid., 290-302.

301 Ibid., 126.
members’ education and clear ability to communicate within the accepted boundaries of polite, rational conversation—deliberately subverted these Enlightenment-approved ways of relating to one another. As the Tuesday Club’s Chancellor, Philo Dogmaticus, stated: “This unparalleled Club, has found the Secret of Inlarging [sic] their pleasure by making Sense and Nonsense, equally the objects of it, so suiting all Capacities, between the wise and the foolish, the Learned and the Ignorant. Can the pleasures of such a Club be with any propriety Called ordinary?”302 As Dogmaticus’s comment indicates, the Tuesday Club’s interest in nonsense was in some respects carnivalesque, not only throwing a wrench in the gears of rational conversation, but also subverting both established social hierarchies as well as the idea of meritocracy that would eventually become one of the central intellectual tenets of the American Revolution. The Tuesday Club’s Gelastic Law turned any potential source of seriousness into mockery; the Law obliged the group to mock openly any member who began to discourse on any subject that was “disagreeable to the club,”303 and there was nothing more disagreeable to the members of the Tuesday Club than seriousness. The Tuesday Club’s election of Nasifer Jole as their leader also flies in the face of society’s organizing principles. By elevating Jole, undoubtedly the Club’s dullest member, the Tuesday Club also elevated the qualities that Jole represents: spleen, luxury, vanity, and pettiness. It hardly takes an Enlightenment philosopher to see that these qualities are not the basis of any stable social order, and indeed the Tuesday Club proves to be anything but stable.

However, the most pointed way in which the Tuesday Club provided a counterpoint to “rational conversation” was in the group’s obsession with low forms of wit such as puns and

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child-like puzzles such as conundrums, riddles, rebuses, and anagrams. In *Spectator* #61 Addison had condemned “that which consists in a jingle of words, and is comprehended under the general name of punning,”304 but in Book VII of his *History* Hamilton makes a concerted effort to rehabilitate the history of these “Jingle Jangle men,”305 composing a history of wit that begins with the devil’s “certain quibbling Speeches and dowble [sic] entendres”306 and proceeds through Biblical history and the classical era all the way to Hamilton’s relative contemporaries such as Dryden and Milton. While Addison opposes true wit (which penetrates past mere language to the ostensibly stable realm of meaning and ideas) to false wit (which plays on the surface of language), Hamilton ignores this surface/depth dynamic, instead proposing a new definition of wit that focuses on the dynamic of order and disorder: “Wit then, is a certain faculty, actuated by the fancy, which can out of Chaos bring order, and again reduce order to a Chaos.”307 The perfect example of this dynamic is the anagram, which asks its participant to take an ordered bit of language (“Jasper Goswall,” to use one of Hamiltons’ examples), throw the individual letters into a chaotic jumble, then reassemble them in a new order (“Jasper Goswall” becomes “A Gallows I press”).308 This focus on the tenuous connection between order and chaos perfectly


suits the Tuesday Club, whose own rules and practices danced haphazardly over the line between social order and chaos.

When we examine closely the Tuesday Club’s use of these forms of “low wit” we can see many of the Club’s predominant patterns and preoccupations come to the fore. As one might expect, the Tuesday Club often focused these forms of wit on their libertinish occupations, alcohol consumption and sex. Note, for instance, Jonathan Grog Esqr’s rather hypocritical swipe at Laconic Comas: “Why Is L:C’s mouth like a puppet Show? [. . .] Because there is always Punch in it.” Conundrums also frequently turned toward the bawdy: “Why is the king’s prick, in marking down a Sheriff like an Elephant?” “ans: Because it always Stands.” Most importantly, though, the Club’s attitude toward puns, conundrums, etc. is an example of the group’s embrace of paradox. As I noted above, Hamilton gives over a lengthy chapter to establishing a history of puns, conundrums, etc. that argues for these devices being accepted within the canon of true wit. However, in the next book, with very little warning, comes the following passage:

It was then moved by Jealous Spyplot Senr Esqr and seconded by the worshipful Sir John, that the Conundrums should be totally abolished and expelled, as a Species of low wit altogether unworthy of the dignity of the Club, and, upon the vote’s passing round, they were, unanimously abolished, and banished the Club for ever, to the no small Satisfaction of the Master of Ceremonies and the Secretary [i.e. Hamilton himself], whose Invention was already worn thread bare in this (as it was esteemed) low and vulgar exercise.\(^\text{311}\)

\(^{309}\) Ibid., 163.

\(^{310}\) Ibid., 164. Emphasis in original.

\(^{311}\) Ibid., 189.
This passage reveals much about the Tuesday Club’s attitude toward language, argument, and logic. One is struck first by how blatantly Hamilton contradicts his earlier (lengthy) assertion that these puzzles should be classed as true wit, now dismissing them as a “low and vulgar exercise.” The rest of the Club’s attitude has changed no less quickly; though most of the business of their last several meetings had consisted exclusively of the posing and solving of conundrums and riddles, the motion to “banish” these games passes quickly and unanimously. Beyond a mere willingness to contradict themselves openly, however, the Tuesday Club’s banishment of conundrums also reveals a clever satire of arguments (like Addison’s essay on true wit) which attempt to divide culture into high and low versions. By freely admitting that their sudden change in attitude is due entirely to their “Invention” being “worn thread bare”—in other words, they are out of ideas—Hamilton and the Tuesday Club reveal that those who argue about high versus low culture typically have a stake in that argument. For the Tuesday Club, high culture (the type worthy of the epic language in which Hamilton so clearly revels) is whatever they happen to be interested in at the moment, while anything that they are not interested in is casually dismissed as “low and vulgar.”

It would be wrong, however, to characterize Tuesday Club’s embrace of nonsense and contradiction as a productive critique of accepted modes of sociability and interaction. Hamilton and the Tuesday Club were not interested in proposing a utopian ideal of sociability, but in playfully exposing the contradictions inherent in mainstream assumptions about sociability, such as the fact that it is based primarily on rational conversation. There is something of the Restoration libertine’s nihilism in the Tuesday Club’s attitude as well; the end result of the Tuesday Club’s critiques is that all systems are exploded, and the only guides left for behavior are the fulfillment of one’s appetites and the pursuit of pleasure. Like the Medmenham Monks,
the Tuesday Club followed the Rabelaisian command of “do what you will,” but they also realized that justifying what you have done could be quite a lot of fun as well.

While not as confrontationally contrary as the Tuesday Club, the Medmenham Monks also embraced contradiction and nonsense in ways that interrogated the normal social order. First of all, the Medmenham Monks—like the Tuesday Club—employed parody as a means of interrogating the values of the mainstream social and literary spheres. In John Wilkes and Thomas Potter’s notorious “Essay on Woman,” these writers took Pope’s rationally ordered Enlightenment universe—in which dullness was the ultimate sin—and made sex the new moral center. The “Essay on Woman” both provided intellectual justification for Wilkes’s own libertinism and exposed the faulty logic of the Enlightenment view that rationally is and should be the center of any moral or ethical theory. In addition to this work of literary parody, the very project of the Medmenham Monks also included a fundamental contradiction that called into question many of the precepts of club culture and sociability. The Medmenham Monks were a club designed around the pleasures of sex, pleasures that are, by their definition, intensely individual, subjective, and unable to be shared (except, perhaps, with one’s sexual partner). By making sex—as opposed to rational conversation—the raison d’être of their club, the Medmenham Monks implicitly questioned the rational foundations upon which club culture purportedly stood.

The “Essay on Woman” has a complex history of authorship that belies the crudity of the poem itself. The poem was originally conceived by the Medmenham Monk Thomas Potter not as a satire on Pope, but on Pope’s literary executor, Archbishop William Warburton. Pope’s stock in the literary sphere remained high in the decades after his death, and Warburton capitalized on Pope’s fame by bringing out edition after edition of Pope’s poems, each one filled with
increasingly ornate scholarly annotations courtesy of Warburton. Thomas Potter—who, not coincidentally, was having an affair with Warburton’s much younger wife Gertrude—roamed the same social circles as Warburton, whom he despised and referred to with the pithy appellation “the Pedant.”312 In order to poke fun at Warburton, Thomas Potter composed a burlesque of Pope’s famous *Essay on Man*, including send-ups of Warburton’s pompous annotations. At some point Wilkes became interested in the project as well, fine-tuning Potter’s work on the poem and the annotations and adding several pieces of his own, including parodies of the rest of Warburton’s scholarly apparatus (including the “Advertisment” and “Design” that precede Pope’s poem in Warburton’s editions) as well as parodies of others of Pope’s poems that Warburton had appended to his editions of the *Essay on Man* (for instance “The Dying Christian to His Soul” becomes, in Wilkes’s hands, “The Dying Lover to His Prick”).313 The manuscript of the poem almost certainly circulated at the Medmenham Monks’ meetings, and when Wilkes ordered his private press to print it in 1763 he specifically asked for thirteen copies, leading modern scholars to the conclusion that the private printing was for the enjoyment of the Medmenham Monks (thirteen being one copy for each of the twelve permanent members and one copy for the group’s library).314 Though the printing was aborted after the first two octavo half-sheets (in other words, sixteen pages) of the edition,315 the decision to print even this fragment proved disastrous for Wilkes, as he was prosecuted for libeling Archbishop Warburton.


and the poem was read aloud in the House of Lords (by former Medmenham Monk Lord Sandwich, no less) in an effort to humiliate Wilkes. The effort failed, as Wilkes’ struggles against the Lords’ unfair and shoddily executed prosecution transformed him into a folk hero and made his name synonymous with liberty.

As for the poem itself, its artistic merits hardly measure up to the political hubbub that the poem caused. Much like ambitious works of 18th-century translation and paraphrase such as Pope’s Horatian imitations, the “Essay on Woman” was meant to be printed with the corresponding lines from Pope’s original poem (and Warburton’s original annotations) on each facing page. When the reader refers to Pope’s original one finds that very little has been changed; in most cases the grammar of Pope’s sentences remains intact, with key nouns changed in order to render the poem lewd. Note lines 3-6:

Pope:

Let us (since Life can little more supply
Than just to look about us and to die)
Expatriate free o’er all this scene of Man;
A mighty maze! But not without a plan;

Wilkes/Potter:

Let us (since life can little more supply
Than just a few good Fucks and then we die)
Expatriate free o’er that lov’d scene of Man;
A mighty Maze! For mighty Pricks to scan;\(^{316}\)

The parodies of Warburton’s annotations are little looser, perfectly capturing the simultaneous inanity and pedantry that makes them so obnoxious while pushing the lewdness even further than in the verses. Note how Wilkes and Potter parody Warburton’s rather obvious gloss on the word “wild” in line 7 of Pope’s original:

Warburton:

*A Wild,*--or Garden,] The *Wild* relates to the human *passions*, productive (as he explains the second epistle) both of good and evil. The *Garden*, to human *reason*, so often tempting us to transgress the bounds God has set to it, and wander in fruitless enquiries.

Wilkes/Potter:

The vegetation of Pego [the phallus] is most astonishing; even beyond what we know of American vegetation. It will shoot forth most amazingly, quite on a sudden, especially in a *Hot-bed*, and as suddenly shrink back. It seems of the Nature of certain Electrical Figures, which, after having been in contact start from each other, and can by no human Art, for some time, be brought together again. There is a bastard Plant called Clitoris, much of the same nature, tho’ seldom large; I mean in this country, for at Lesbos it was the formidable Rival of Pego.\(^{317}\)

As is clear from the above two examples, the “Essay on Woman” does not offer its readers complex counterpoints to Pope’s or Warburton’s ideas; rather, Wilkes and Potter’s poem burlesques their targets by showing the arbitrariness of placing one’s moral and metaphysical faith in reason. Is not humanity’s sex drive as natural a pattern of thought as his impulse to investigate the world’s rational, scientific order? If so, then why is rationality lauded while sexuality is denigrated? This is hardly an original question—indeed, it is an argument that one

\(^{317}\) Ibid., 98-99. Emphasis in original.
might expect to be rehearsed by avowed libertines such as Wilkes and Potter—but the deliberate crudity of the “Essay on Woman” adds another level to these satirists’ critique of Pope’s Enlightenment values. As well-educated members of the social elite, both Wilkes and Potter would have been quite capable of constructing at least a passible logical critique of Pope’s ideas, but instead they chose to present themselves as something like mischievous, sex-obsessed schoolboys. Opting out of Pope’s intellectual pissing contests, they recast themselves as vandals spray-painting on Pope’s wall, a stance that underscores the subversion, joy, and excitement that go along with these libertines’ rejection of 18th-century morality.

The libertines that formed the Medmenham Monks interrogated more than just Enlightenment morality, however; they also questioned the very attitudes toward sociability that defined, broadly, the shape of their own organization. Let me explain. Typically, 18th-century clubs gathered in order to perform, as a group, an activity such as conversing, examining antiques, learning about science, or debating the issues of the day. All of these activities are well suited to groups; in most cases, they require several active participants. The Medmenham Monks, however, devoted themselves to the individual, highly subjective pleasures of sex. While sex, of course, can be performed in a group, and the carefree members of the Medmenham Monks may well have experimented with orgies at some point, there is no evidence that group sex was the club’s main activity. Rather, nearly all accounts of the club mention that Medmenham Abbey contained “cells” or closets into which the Monks could take willing ladies.318 The existence of these cells underscores the fact that the club’s most lauded activity—the male’s orgasm during sexual intercourse—fundamentally could not be shared. While no records exist of what happened at the Monks’ meetings, one imagines the group convening,

perhaps engaging in some banter or jesting, and then retiring to their individual cells to participate in an activity that is not in the least club-like. Just as Wilkes and Potter’s parody of Pope’s *Essay on Man* called into question rationality’s status as the universe’s moral and metaphysical ordering principle, the Medmenham Monks’ institutionalization of a fundamentally solipsistic experience (the orgasm) calls into question the very notion of shared experience that club culture implicitly assumed. Few writers catch this contradiction inherent in the Medmenham Monks’ existence, and as I noted in the case of the Tuesday Club above, it would be wrong to interpret the Monks’ activities as some kind of social critique. However, as an institutionalization of the libertine’s characteristic nihilism, the Medmenham Monks’ creation of an “anti-club” makes perfect sense.

As I noted at several points above, both the Medmenham Monks’ and the Tuesday Club’s attacks on mainstream principles of morality and sociability were exuberant, anarchic gestures of defiance. These anarchic acts constituted, somewhat paradoxically, both allegiance to and defiance of the established authorities of the literary sphere. By embracing nonsense, bawdy, paradox, and other illogical or disreputable rhetorics, the Medmenham Monks and the Tuesday Club rejected emerging Enlightenment values of order, harmony, logic, and coherence. In staging this rejection, however, both groups freely appropriated rhetoric, images, and arguments from contemporary satire—including Swift’s deliberate use of nonsense and Fielding’s good-natured embrace of physical pleasures—without a doubt the dominant literary mode of the era in which both groups operated. This tension between the groups’ simultaneous desires to identify themselves as members of and superior to the cultural elite recalls Pope’s and Swift’s similarly fraught relationship to the mainstream literary culture of their day as well as Lord Rochester’s
alternating desire to figure himself as part of and superior to Charles II’s court. Ultimately, though, the efforts of these libertine anti-clubs to question and attack the prevailing social order underscore the futility of the libertine’s gestures of defiance. In patrolling the border region between morality and immorality, sense and nonsense, sociability and anti-sociability, these groups ultimately affirmed the power of the dominant culture that originally drew and subsequently confirmed these borders. As Edward Said argued in “Swift’s Tory Anarchy,” culture has a way of digesting acts of defiance and regurgitating them as signs of allegiance. Thus, while these clubs’ actions may have shocked and provoked their contemporaries, today they are largely considered to be textbook examples of the very club culture they sought to critique.

Epilogue

As I was completing this dissertation, the term “social networking” has been nearly inescapable in our media. However, as I have illustrated, neither Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, nor MySpace pioneered the idea of curating and managing a list of one’s friends. While the years covered in this dissertation—the middle decades of the 18th century—saw a distinct spike in the attention that people in the English-speaking world paid to their social connections, the basic human needs that caused these men and women to form clubs are still with us. As I noted in the introduction, Shaftesbury posited that human beings are herd animals, and as such it is natural for us to congregate and form social connections. Though his analogy is crude and perhaps even offensive to some, recent advances in technology seem to prove him correct. Though the inevitable conservative moralists decry the advancement of technology as harmful and isolating, the most successful new technologies introduced in the past several years (Twitter, Facebook, the iPhone) are the ones that connect us with other people. Just as rabid urbanization forced 18th-century men and women, particularly in London, to find new ways of managing and even conceiving their social relationships, so has technology forced us to revise our ideas of what constitutes a “friend” in our present culture. It is my hope that this dissertation, by exploring how cultural, political, and technological changes altered the 18th-century social world, helps us to respond more thoughtfully—and hopefully more openly—to how our own social relationships have changed in response to similar shifts happening during our own time.

More narrowly, I hope that this dissertation prompts new scholarship devoted to examining the place of clubs and societies in 18th-century literature and culture, particularly in the English-
speaking world. It is surprising that, aside from Peter Clark, no recent social historian has approached club culture in a comprehensive manner. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, by the end of the 18th century voluntary association was the backbone of many people’s social lives; this was particularly true for urban men, who constituted an ever-growing proportion of the world’s English-speaking population. Ample space remains for a study that addresses the influence of club culture with the same wide lens and high degree of thoughtfulness that scholars have devoted to analyzing the influence of books and print culture during the same period. While this study was not conceived with so vast a scope, I hope that this dissertation convinces the reader that 18th-century clubs and societies are a worthy object for further study, not simply because of their social influence, but also because of the remarkable intelligence, wit, and imagination that 18th-century men and women displayed in the creation and management of their private social worlds.
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