

# **'What are we to expect from women?': Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire and Female Canvassing during the 1784 Westminster Election**

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## **Abstract**

Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire was one of the most celebrated political women of the eighteenth century. Her canvass for Charles Fox in the Westminster Election of 1784 was hugely successful, and yet led to condemnation in the popular press. This article will consider the nature of these critical reports, and the motivations behind them, based on the premise that the involvement of elite women in politics in the 1780s was otherwise normative, within certain boundaries.

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Although popular (mis)conception would have it that women had little to no involvement in politics before the suffrage movement of the nineteenth century, the reality is much more interesting and complex. In the eighteenth century, elite aristocratic women were positively encouraged to take an active role in familial political engagements. The form this took, however, would vary from woman to woman, depending on her marital status, property ownership and interest in the business of politics itself. In her comprehensive *Elite Women in English Political Life*, Elaine Chalus defines the roles open to politically minded women at this time as ranging from confidante to advisor, from partner to political hostess.<sup>1</sup> Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire, embodied all these categories and surpassed their boundaries through her charm and political aptitude. As this article will elucidate, many commentators on the Westminster Election of 1784, both contemporary and modern, have argued that Charles Fox's success was largely owed to the Duchess. It was her political acumen that was ultimately to prove problematic and led to her vilification in the press, based on three key premises: her sexuality, gender and class. I intend that the two artefacts I present here will explore and elucidate the reasons for this. Both are, at varying degrees, critical of Georgiana's involvement in Fox's campaign, and both focus on her gender, sexuality and high status as imperative to her electioneering success. The first, a satirical print by William Dent, of 1784, entitled *The Dutchess Canvassing for her Favourite Member*, shows Georgiana canvassing for votes, implicated in a sexual embrace with a butcher. Here she stands accused of using her sexuality to garner popularity for Fox's cause, and this denunciation would follow her throughout the election and beyond. *History of the Westminster Election*, published by J. Hartley five months after the election itself, is a more sympathetic account. His anthology is full of anecdotes, newspaper reports and commentary on the election, and although it presents a more varied view of the Duchess, remains critical of her involvement in the campaign.

Georgiana became Duchess of Devonshire in 1774, and for the rest of her life she devoted herself to Whig politics, coming to take on a senior role within the party. As leader of the *ton*, the aristocratic social elite, politics was a part of her everyday life. She involved herself in the inner workings of government, and was invigorated by political discussion, writing to her mother in February 1784, 'I give you, I think, a little political lesson ev'ryday'.<sup>2</sup> Unlike many of her contemporaries - elite women who were limited to a local and familial involvement in politics - Georgiana had a wide influence, and was quite as capable and charismatic, if not more so, than many of the male politicians in her circle. She was heavily involved in the Whig party throughout her adult life, but it was

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Chalus, *Elite Women in English Political Life, c. 1754 -1790* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2005), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, *Georgiana: Extracts from the Correspondence of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, ed. by The Earl of Bessborough (London: John Murray, 1955), p. 75.

the Westminster Election that would create a lasting impression in the national press - not only of the Duchess herself, but also of outwardly political women. This was one of the first times an election had such a national scope, and satirical depictions of Georgiana would reach far beyond their London demographic, becoming the stuff of myth regarded as truth. The Westminster electorate was made up of 18,000 voters, a huge sum for the time, and was comprised of a wider spectrum of society than the usual landed elite. That Westminster was hotly contested between Charles Fox, Sir Cecil Wray and Admiral Lord Hood, ensured that this was one of the few elections in which public opinion truly mattered, and the conclusion was not at all foregone.<sup>3</sup> The press was to play an important role in the formation of popular opinion, and the extremely public nature of this particular election, in which the allegiances of the middle and merchant classes were 'up for grabs', suited Georgiana's own celebrity and particular talents. Her charm and mass appeal were to prove essential to Fox's campaign, and would be the deciding factor in his success. It was to prove a double-edged sword however, and after enduring harsh criticism in the Pittite press, it would be the last time Georgiana was to canvass in public. After this point it would become harder for women to engage in politics on such a large and public scale. Increasing restrictions would culminate in the Reform Act of 1832, which would legally disenfranchise all women and formally exclude them from the vote.

Following the Westminster Election, the public political space would increasingly become the preserve of men, while restriction to the private sphere became the norm for women. Although a full discussion of this issue falls outside the parameters of this article, it is relevant to note that the most influential scholarship on this matter was put forward in Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. This text aligns public with masculine action and the private homestead as inherently female and irrational. However, recent scholarship has disproved that such spaces were so rigidly gendered at this time, and in reality the distinction between public and private in the eighteenth century was much more fluid and complex.<sup>4</sup> Even supposedly private acts, such as letter writing, could have public repercussions. It is not until the nineteenth century that this distinction would become more fixed. Chalus and Montgomery have argued that during the 1780s women's involvement in politics was normative and largely accepted, and yet when they 'outperformed the men they were ostensibly supporting', as did Georgiana, they 'drew upon themselves the ire of satirists'.<sup>5</sup> Elite and aristocratic women were regular participants in the election process, but were always required to remain within certain boundaries. It is when a woman was perceived to step outside these confines that she was vilified in the press and public opinion. The majority of publicly political women were able to participate without the same amount of media attention Georgiana was subjected to. The Duchess writes in a letter to her mother in April 1784, 'It is very hard they should single me out when all the women of my side do as much.'<sup>6</sup>

As Georgiana crossed boundaries from private to public, she ingratiated herself with the common man whilst canvassing for votes. The newspapers were thus filled with lewd poems and satirical prints, sexualising her involvement in Fox's campaign. Her popularity was becoming problematic and was far surpassing that of Fox himself - surely, the Pittite press argued, this could only be as a direct result of her supposed use of sexual favours in exchange for votes. *The Countryman's Frolick; or Humours of an Election* noted in a poem published three days before the polls closed, that when it came to

<sup>3</sup> Amanda Foreman, *The Political Life of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire: 1757-1806* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 1998), p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on Habermas' conception of the spheres with specific regard to eighteenth-century female politicians, see Christina Parolin, *Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London, 1790-c.1845* (Canberra: Am E Press, 2010); Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writing in England 1780-1830* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Krista Cowman, *Women in British Politics, c.1689-1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Chalus and Fiona Montgomery, 'Women and politics' in *Women's History, Britain, 1700-1850: An Introduction*, ed. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Routledge, 2005) (217-259), p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> Duchess of Devonshire, 1955, p. 79.



political tool in the 1780s. Male politicians would kiss voters' wives as a matter of course, and Chalus argues that even elite women would be expected to partake during election season. She notes that this would be, 'usually as part of their duty to their husband's political interests.'<sup>9</sup> Here however, Georgiana canvasses not for a familial connection, and is not passive in the exchange. Dent presents her as the active party – it is she who instigates the sexual action depicted in the image.

While the primary message of the piece is one of sexual immorality, it is also, essentially, one of class. The Duchess stands tall and prominent, towering over the butcher. She is of higher status, and therefore stands from a position of height. As Lord Surrey on the far left persuades the chimney-sweep that Fox will reduce the price of 'Gin and Porter', the sweep replies, 'tho' I live but in a hogstye, I'll give him a Plumper.' The message is clear: Georgiana's status, and that of the lady behind her, is aristocratic, while the men she canvasses are lowly. Evidently the smear campaign was brought against the Duchess, not only for her supposed sexually immoral behaviour, but because she would dare to go out into the streets and mix with the common man. *The History of the Westminster Election* tells us that Georgiana, 'canvassed the different alehouses of Westminster in favour of Mr Fox.'<sup>10</sup> Whether or not she actually took to the taverns and kissed in exchange for votes is immaterial, what so shook contemporary society is that she would violate the rigid boundaries of her class to breach the lower class space and ingratiate herself with men of low rank. Generally whilst canvassing, women were expected to remain within their carriages, and speak to voters from inside;<sup>11</sup> the carriage remained a protective barrier and signifier of high status. It was not, however, acceptable for these women to walk amongst the common man on the street. Lewis notes that 'a canvasser was essentially putting herself in the position of asking voters for a favour', and that Georgiana was, in effect, allowing herself to be in the power of working-class men.<sup>12</sup> This could never be acceptable and provoked much of the outrage in the popular press at her involvement.

Although Dent's print is indicative of the presentation of Georgiana in the popular press at this time, we cannot take it as wholly representative of the common view. As John Brewer posits, 'the assumption that political prints provide an unrefracted image of political life produces its own distortions.'<sup>13</sup> Although much of what was written about Georgiana in the papers (primarily *The Morning Post*) was negative at this time, there was an alternative (Whig) view that would credit the Duchess for much of Fox's success. Lewis notes that the more explicit prints of Georgiana, 'can be interpreted only as an attempt to stop her canvass.'<sup>14</sup> This argument would suggest that the primary reason for Georgiana's vilification in the press was because she was winning the election for Fox. In his *The History of the Westminster Election*, J. Hartley insists that, 'All advertisements relative to the Westminster Election should be in the Duchess of Devonshire's name. She is the candidate to all intents and purposes.'<sup>15</sup> Although *The History* presents a critical view of Georgiana's political actions, it is a more nuanced account than Dent's print and is often in her favour. Hartley positions himself as a 'Lover of Truth and Justice', in direct opposition to the writers of the Morning Papers.<sup>16</sup> His text was published five months after the close of the election, in October 1784: the publication of this anthology so many months after the event is indicative of the draw which the election and, indeed, Georgiana held over the public imagination.

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<sup>9</sup> Chalus, 2005, p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hartley, *History of the Westminster Election* (London: J. Debrett, 1784), Eighteenth Century Collections Online, p. 228.

<sup>11</sup> Chalus, 2005, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> Judith S. Lewis, *Sacred to Female Patriotism: Gender, Class and Politics in Late Georgian Britain* (London, Routledge, 2003), p. 134.

<sup>13</sup> John Brewer, *The Common People and Politics: 1750s – 1790s* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1986), p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> Hartley, p. 254.

<sup>16</sup> Hartley, p. xi.

Having Georgiana's name attached to a newspaper article, book or item of clothing, would guarantee sales. Although Hartley takes to criticising the Duchess on a political basis, her appearance is a constant source of attraction. Georgiana was well known for her fashion, and took to using her clothing as an effective campaign tool, wearing fox fur and the colours of the Whig party. Hartley reads into this further and when Fox's standing in the polls was at a particularly low point, he notes that 'Her Grace was dressed in a black riding habit, probably lamenting the hopeless condition of the party.'<sup>17</sup> Every aspect of her appearance and behaviour was under intense scrutiny and, according to Hartley her actions were the prime topic of conversation through all sections of society. He describes one incident in which the Lord of the Back Stairs presented Georgiana's conduct during the election to the Queen as 'extremely wrong.' The Queen retorts, 'I admire her spirit and friendship, and sincerely wish that there was even half the truth and worth in the nobility that surround the throne.'<sup>18</sup> So much of what was written about Georgiana surrounding the election was fabrication, but in this instance, the matter of its veracity is not important. That Hartley aligns the Queen with Georgiana lends an air of respectability to her political action that had previously been stripped by the Pittite press.

Hartley shames the accounts of Georgiana in the morning papers as 'wretched', and yet her gender is problematised in his own text in a much similar way. As we have already seen, much was made of Georgiana's own political acumen, and contemporary reports were to intimate that she was essentially the candidate for Westminster, and not Fox. Her behaviour was therefore masculine and a betrayal of her own sex. For Hartley, women cannot be held up to the same standards as men with regards to canvassing, and he asks, 'what are we to expect from women?'<sup>19</sup> For him, women's femininity should exclude them from the canvass; although Georgiana is celebrated for her beauty and position in society, she is mocked for her political contribution. To be political is not compatible with 'that feminine modesty, and unassuming delicacy which form the characteristic of an amiable woman'.<sup>20</sup> Staunch advocates of the Whig cause failed to be deterred by Hartley and Dent's critique of their star supporter, and Fox would go on to use such critiques to his advantage, calling attention to the gender of his canvassers.<sup>21</sup> Contrary to electoral convention, Fox chose to split his canvassers by gender, and through his campaign focus on the beauty of the women in his camp. This tactic therefore inverted the attack the Pittite newspapers posed against Georgiana as a female electioneer. Lewis notes that Pitt had been mocked by the Whigs for his supposed asexuality, and Fox used the beauty of his female canvassers to 'attack Pitt's manliness, or rather the perceived lack thereof.'<sup>22</sup> This strategy was to prove successful, and as the polls closed on the 17 May, Fox gained his seat with 6,233 of the votes.<sup>23</sup>

In their presentation of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire variously as sexually promiscuous and masculine in her canvass, both Dent's print and Hartley's anthology are indicative of the prevailing views of political women in the eighteenth century. They form part of a dialectic that surrounded the Westminster Election, regarding the problematic role of elite women in the English political process. As this article has explored, women were generally accepted in the political arena, with strict conditions as to their involvement. Dent's print and Hartley's *History* focus on three key themes regarding her canvass: namely, that she was selling her body for votes, that she was Fox's mistress and that she was betraying the female sex through her actions.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the criticism directed towards Georgiana and any other woman at the forefront of politics at this time, could be categorised into gender, sex and class. As long as a woman did not

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<sup>17</sup> Hartley, p. 227.

<sup>18</sup> Hartley, p. 352.

<sup>19</sup> Hartley, p. 227.

<sup>20</sup> Hartley, p. 227.

<sup>21</sup> For more information on this point, see Lewis, pp. 140-143.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> Duchess of Devonshire, p. 82.

<sup>24</sup> Foreman, p. 111.

challenge the *status quo* in these areas, her political activity would be considered normative, and even applauded. It is because Georgiana surpassed the generally accepted female role, and was so successful in her position, that she was so heavily criticised. Yet, despite these vicious reports of Georgiana in the press, she was roundly praised for her contribution to the Whig cause. In a debate that took place after the election entitled, 'Is it consistent for the female sex to interfere at elections?', the motion was carried in the affirmative, supporters naming Georgiana as evidence of their argument.<sup>25</sup> Her charisma, political acumen and sense of duty to the Whig cause would ensure her place as their foremost supporter, and as the most successful female politician of the eighteenth century.

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<sup>25</sup> Hartley, p. 352.

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