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Anna Clark: Scandal

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In 1813, George, the prince regent of England, tried to prevent his wife, Caroline, from seeing their daughter, Charlotte. George hated Caroline, a buxom, flamboyant, gregarious German princess he had been betrothed to sight unseen. They separated a year after the wedding, a few months after Charlotte was born. Not content with banishing Caroline from the court, George had his ministers investigate her for adultery in 1806. This so-called Delicate Investigation cleared Caroline of adultery but rebuked her for unsuitable behavior for a princess, such as sitting on a couch with another man. But George himself had long been notorious for lavishing taxpayers' money on mistresses, palaces, gambling, horse racing, and banquets. In 1811, he took on more serious responsibilities as regent when his father, George III, finally lapsed into permanent dementia.

The prince regent persisted in his vendetta against his wife and daughter. In 1813, when their daughter Charlotte was seventeen, she began demanding more freedom, supported by her mother. In response, George tried to reopen the investigation into Caroline to prove her an unfit mother. He confined Charlotte to a lodge on the outskirts of Windsor, visited only by her grandmother once a week. Undeterred, Charlotte escaped from Windsor to be with her mother.[1] Crowds cheered the royal princess and jeered at the king. Opposition politicians supported Caroline and Charlotte in Parliament, and public meetings applauded the princesses and denounced the regent.

Today, we often lament that such minor affairs become huge scandals, contaminating the public world of politics with private lives. Sex scandals seem trivial and prurient, unworthy of the attention they excite, in contrast to financial or political scandals, which involve crucial public issues. But this book will concentrate on sex scandals in order to argue for their significance. Scandals force us to question the division between the public and the private. This distinction, of course, is one of the foundations of modern political thought, but as feminists have long demonstrated, it is a shaky one.[2] Sex scandals could become symbols for larger political concerns.

Finally, these scandals could have an impact on politics by triggering political mobilization around these issues.

Sex scandals sustain the public's interest because they reflect a society fissured by disagreements over sexual morality. To incite scandal, after all, is to behave in a scandalous manner, inappropriate to one's social role. But in the eighteenth century, sexual morality was confusing and changing.[3] Old ideas that viewed women as insatiably sexual coexisted with new doctrines of female passionlessness.[4] Many religious people believed in the values of chastity, temperance, and self-control. Others squandered their fortunes on gambling, and took mistresses or lovers as a matter of course. While scandal stereotyped such behavior as characteristic of high society, it cut across class lines: some middle-class people, and many laboring people, formed common-law marriages and drank heavily. Scandal erupted because people could not agree on sexual morality. For some, Caroline behaved just like other aristocratic women by entertaining men alone; for others, this proved her immorality.

Scandals also focused on the question of privacy. In the eighteenth century, the very idea of privacy was fairly new. Many religious people believed that private virtues were the foundation of public life: they believed a good citizen must be a good husband and father. But George's supporters claimed that his private life was irrelevant, that he had a right to private pleasures while enjoying the respect of his public office as regent. This flagrant example of the double standard also exposes the inequity at the heart of the supposed division between public and private. The prince regent flaunted his mistresses but viciously violated the privacy of two women: Caroline and Charlotte. He wanted to seclude his wife and daughter in the home, while he enjoyed public life. Women were to remain in private but had no right to privacy: Caroline's every friendship was investigated. Caroline, however, boldly challenged the double standard.

Rumors and gossip circulate all the time behind the scenes, but they mutate into scandals only when an instigator seizes (or invents) a secret and brings it to the public's attention. The secret becomes a scandal when it triggers a widespread public controversy. This book is concerned with those sex scandals that became intertwined with the politics of the day, when rumors about a political figure's personal life contributed to wider debates. Sometimes scandalous rumors helped to fuel a larger political campaign, but sometimes the scandal itself sparked off a political firestorm. Why do some scandals take off and profoundly affect politics, while other scandalous rumors fail to persuade public opinion? The answer has to do with the instigator's ability to sustain his or her credibility, to use the scandal to symbolize wider political causes and mobilize public opinion.

Scandals raise the question of what politics is really about. Is it a matter of politicians contending for individual or party advancement out of their own ambition, stirring up public excitement with emotion? Or is it a matter of principles, ideals, and policy? Political entrepreneurs can use scandal as a political weapon in their own careers.[5] Instigators of scandal reveal—or invent—sexual secrets at a particular moment, distracting attention from other issues or linking scandals with their own political agendas. In 1813, politician Henry Brougham, who opposed the Tory government, brought Caroline's case before the public in order to gain advantage for his own Whig party. Scandals often seem to exemplify the worst of trivial, sordid, opportunistic politics.

Critics often wish that politics was an idealized realm where rational people discuss important issues; some have envisioned the eighteenth century as such a time, when bewigged gentlemen sat in coffeehouses calmly expounding on political philosophy and members of Parliament spoke with erudition and dignity.[6] In fact, the eighteenth-century political world was just as squalid as our own. Politicians hurled venomous insults at each other, laughed at their enemies, and collapsed in tears on the floor of Parliament; radicals spread scurrilous rumors, and mobs rioted in the streets.

Yet scandal did not necessarily corrupt eighteenth-century politics with trivial issues; in fact, scandal opened up politics by revealing corruption and by making political debate accessible to a wider audience. Scandals can serve as a bridge from one version of politics to another; for instance, opportunistic rumors can inspire interest in larger political causes. Scandal sometimes fuels the democratic process, drawing people into politics, whereas arid, abstract discussions might keep them out.

The instigators of scandal can expose a politician or public figure as motivated not by lofty ideals but by sordid private concerns. In the early nineteenth century, the ruler was supposed to use his influence for the public good, not his personal interest. Reformers portrayed the prince regent as a hypocrite for persecuting his wife for adultery while he demanded that the government grant lucrative offices to the relatives of his mistresses. In doing so, they critiqued the entire system of influence and patronage. How could the monarch's patronage be seen as legitimate if he was secretly controlled by those who manipulated his sexual desires?

Sex scandals can communicate political issues to people usually uninterested in politics because, unlike complicated and hard-to-follow financial scandals, they can be told through familiar stories of broken hearts, broken families, broken marriages.[7] For instance, by confining his daughter to a remote lodge, Prince George resembled the tyrannical fathers of gothic

novels. These stories can also provide symbols for larger political issues. When George began his quarrel with his daughter, many Britons already blamed him for political corruption and high taxes. Reformers claimed that he treated his daughter just as badly as he treated his people; they celebrated Caroline and Charlotte in order to denigrate the prince.

Radicals and conservatives tended to use sex to symbolize wider political issues in somewhat different ways. Radicals equated the ruler's excessive lust and unbridled, unconstitutional power. They feared his private interests and family quarrels would contaminate the public good of the state. Scandalous satires and caricatures also undercut the respect and awe surrounding the monarch; for instance, caricatures depicted the prince regent as a corpulent, half-drunk, blubbery creature unable to focus on affairs of state.[8] For conservatives, sexual affairs threatened to disorder the hierarchy of family, society, and state. For instance, supporters of the prince regent equated Caroline's defiance of her husband with radical challenges to the throne. They caricatured her as a blowzy prostitute all too friendly with the servants.

Scandals had their greatest impact when activists were able to link personal problems with larger political issues and to mobilize public opinion in protest. For instance, people met in London, and indeed all over the country, to write addresses supporting Caroline. The radicals linked Caroline's fate to the persistent problems of corruption, which fattened the rich at a time when the poor suffered under the hardship of war.[9] The freeholders of Middlesex blamed the treatment of Caroline and Charlotte on the "defective state of representation." They opposed "the detestable oligarchy of Great Britain, united in one impenetrable Phalanx, against the Cause of her Royal Mother, [and] . . . the abused People of England."[10] By meeting together in support of a royal princess, they could also discuss the cause of parliamentary reform and criticize the war against Napoleon.

British politicians feared such mobilization. After all, British critics had argued that decadence and immorality contributed to the French Revolution. They had heard of the scandals over Marie Antoinette's lovers and knew that their own ruling elite was vulnerable. Historians have demonstrated that over the course of the eighteenth century, scandals undermined the legitimacy of the French monarchy. Enlightenment writers blamed female political influence for corruption at court and alleged that sexual whims and personal connections determined policy and patronage.[11] As the French Revolution loomed, a flood of private scandals served to discredit the aristocracy in the eyes of the public.[12] Obscene pamphlets stripped the monarchy of its sacred aura by portraying the king, queen, and aristocracy in an amazing variety of sexual combinations. Lynn Hunt has argued that

the very violence and obscenity of these scandalous works made it possible for the revolutionaries to execute the king.[13]

Scandals also played a significant role in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British politics. Of course, the British avoided revolution in the late eighteenth century. Several historians assert that Britain did not fall prey to revolution at that time because it enjoyed a conservative consensus.[14] This book, in contrast, will argue that British society was racked by conflict over how it was to be governed. Scandals in Britain illuminated a central debate of eighteenth-century politics: Should the personal influence of royals and aristocrats determine politics, or should public opinion and the public good shape political action?

On one hand, the idea of the public good shaped the structure of the British government in the eighteenth century. Britain became a strong state through creating efficient institutions such as a powerful navy and a bureaucracy that raised considerable revenue to fund it.[15] Parliament maintained its legitimacy by claiming to represent the people. After 1688, the king was a constitutional monarch who shared his power with Parliament.

Yet personal and familial relationships still structured politics, both literally and metaphorically, which is why scandal was so important. The king retained much patronage power and could choose his own ministers. An aristocratic oligarchy controlled Parliament through family connections and personal influence. The monarchy and aristocracy claimed that when they bestowed patronage, they rewarded merit and knit society together. Indeed, many historians argue that deference upheld the hierarchy of eighteenth-century society.[16]

Eighteenth-century reformers asserted that family dynasties should have nothing to do with politics. Government, they argued, should operate not through personal influence and patronage but on the basis of transparency, reason, merit, purity, and virtue.[17] The very strength of Britain's parliamentary ideal and state bureaucracy made the continuation of patronage and influence more outrageous because it undermined the efficiency of the government. They wanted to open up Parliament so that members would not be chosen because they married into a great family, obtained the favor of a noble lord's mistress, or bribed the voters. If reformers could claim that lust, rather than benevolence, motivated a monarch's patronage, they could undercut his credibility—or perhaps even the whole system.

More specifically, the scandals with which this book is concerned raised several important constitutional issues. According to traditional ideas, the constitution was balanced between king, lords, and commons. But the constitution was partially unwritten, and it could be debated. Three issues

persisted in the eighteenth century: the role of the monarch, the role of Parliament, and the role of the people and public opinion.

The monarchy was always particularly vulnerable to sex scandals because it required the legitimate procreation of heirs through royal marriages. Monarchs also stressed their personal character by using images of the king as father to justify their power. In the seventeenth century, the Stuart dynasty used patriarchal thought to legitimate its claims to absolute rule, buttressed by the theories of Robert Filmer.[18] But personal scandals could undermine the image of the king as a stern patriarch—and the philosophy of absolutism that lay behind it. For instance, rumors circulated that James I bestowed patronage on his male favorite, Buckingham, because he desired him, not because he was meritorious.[19] Sexual scandal played a role in destroying the reign of James II in 1688, when rumors circulated that his Catholic heir was an imposter smuggled into the queen's bed in a warming pan. This scandal contributed to the larger issues of religious conflict, royal sovereignty, and parliamentary power.[20] After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which James II was forced to flee, Britain became a constitutional monarchy.[21] No longer could a monarch easily use the image of king as father to justify absolute power, especially after John Locke refuted Filmer's theories: a king was not a father, he argued, and his subjects were not children but citizens who had a right to consent to their government.

In the eighteenth century, the monarch was supposed to rule in partnership with Parliament, following the law and the public good rather than his own personal inclinations. When George III revived the image of the king as a good father, he wanted to be seen not as an authoritarian, absolutist father but as a nurturing parent.[22] However, radicals used scandal to portray the king as an oriental despot, undercutting the image of the king as father.

The theme of oriental despotism linked scandalous images to a political critique. The early eighteenth-century French philosopher Charles Montesquieu articulated this theory by claiming that oriental despots acted on their passions instead of ruling according to law. This theory outrageously generalized about Asian rulers and contributed to Britain's imperial quest. Montesquieu held up Britain as an ideal constitutional monarchy, in contrast to the horrors of despotism.[23] But Britons also feared that such despotism could infect their own polity. Radicals used sexual scandals to allege that British monarchs, such as George IV, were becoming oriental despots, for instance, when he tried to use Parliament to divorce his wife and when he wielded his power without regard to law. As we shall see, as regent, George fueled the flames of this accusation by building an oriental palace by the sea in Brighton, where he reveled in luxury with his mistresses.

Montesquieu also argued that female political influence could undermine the stability of a state. He wrote that female courtiers enjoyed freedom in European monarchies, but they also had too much power; men had to curry their personal favor in order to get ahead. Female influence therefore undermined the distinction between the public good and private interests. In oriental despotisms, alleged Montesquieu, women were enslaved, but the despot also enslaved himself to lust, spending all his time with his concubines and ruling the government from within his seraglio. As a result, the intrigues of harem women could contaminate the state. Montesquieu warned that European monarchs could become despots, especially if they allowed too much influence to female courtiers.[24] Radicals took up this theme, claiming that the king's mistresses exerted excessive political power. In 1816, for instance, a tract claimed that a "female courtier . . . of an intriguing disposition" influenced the prince regent to push through "many measures which were obnoxious to the people."[25] It was always easy to discredit a politician by claiming he was controlled by a woman, since female political influence never seemed quite legitimate, especially if it was motivated by sex.

The theme of illicit sexual influence could be used to symbolize Parliament's struggle with the monarch. Although the king had the right to choose his own ministers, Parliament might resist his power if he selected a man whom Parliament did not support.[26] The king's opponents could undercut the legitimacy of his ministers by spreading scandalous rumors that they were appointed because of "backstairs influence," "secret influence," or—worst of all—"petticoat influence." As we shall see in chapter 2, radical politician John Wilkes claimed that the king's mother compelled her son to choose her lover Lord Bute as prime minister.

Aristocratic dominance over Parliament could also incite scandal. The general term "aristocracy" included both the nobility and the gentry, accurately reflecting their status as the governing elite.[27] For the aristocracy, the "family" meant the dynasty, which transmitted fortunes, land, and political power.[28] These great families used their wealth and influence to create networks of loyal followers and kin, all defined as part of their dynastic interest. Because family, social, and personal connections were so important, some aristocratic women could exercise political influence through patronage and relationships with powerful men. The peerage (the nobility) controlled the House of Lords, but the House of Commons was supposed to represent the people who elected it. In fact, the landed aristocracy chose many members of the House of Commons. In local areas, they earned the deference of voters through philanthropy and patronage. Aristocratic ladies played an important role in maintaining good relations with constituencies.[29]

Aristocratic dominance coexisted with a strong tradition of electoral independence. In some urban constituencies the electorate represented a cross section of the population, ranging from laborers and artisans to wealthy farmers and merchants. But only 17.9 percent of adult men could vote in the late eighteenth century, most voters had to meet some property qualification, and the lack of a secret ballot left them vulnerable to pressure by landlords and employers.[30] If voters did not defer to great families, candidates could attempt to coerce them with bribery and threats. Voters expressed their resentment at the aristocracy's personal influence by generating insulting rumors during elections (and, of course, rival candidates took full advantage of such scandals). For instance, voters sometimes expressed hostility toward the "petticoat influence" of the ladies who participated in elections.

Scandals inspired debates over the nature and composition of public opinion. Members of Parliament often expressed the traditional constitutional view that the House of Commons was the only legitimate representative of the people.[31] Once they had chosen their representatives, the people did not have the official right to associate or even to discuss political ideas; Parliament could even imprison those who criticized it. Despite this conservative opinion, throughout the eighteenth century, politicians had to recognize that wider public opinion was a significant force. If Parliament did not respond to a scandal by investigating and clearing up corruption, public opinion could claim that it was not serving the public good, and that the people needed to provide an alternative to Parliament to compel political change.

Of course, given the lack of polls, it is impossible to measure accurately shifts in public opinion in the eighteenth century, but the press from that time can give some insight. Scores of newspapers in London and the provinces circulated political news and social gossip as well as reports of commerce and trade, reaching mainly the middle and upper classes. Britons avidly read and debated the latest newspapers and pamphlets in coffeehouses. Caricatures were especially important to scandal because they ridiculed politicians and used sexual and other kinds of symbolism to refer to larger political issues. Middle- and upper-class Britons collected these prints to paste on their walls or compile in albums, to amuse party guests; ruder caricatures decorated privy walls. Laboring people could gaze at caricatures in shop windows; printers produced satirical ballads for them, and after 1800, caricatures began to reach the poor.[32]

The government did not precensor publications, but it, as well as opposition parties, often tried to manipulate public opinion by subsidizing

newspaper publishers and pamphleteers. Politicians could pay to have scandals embarrassing their enemies inserted into newspapers—or suppress scandals with bribes. The government, however, also exercised its power to prosecute publishers for printing libel, sedition, and blasphemy. But many newspapers remained independent.[33] Scandal, especially sexual scandal, could overcome government efforts at censorship or manipulation. Newspapers needed to publish accounts of such scandals or lose circulation, and by persecuting sexual rumors the government spread such embarrassing gossip. Censorship became its own scandal. When newspapers defeated censorship, they expanded freedom of the press.

Who had the right to participate in public opinion? This question was hotly contested, especially from the 1760s onwards. For conservatives, legitimate public opinion would include the nobility, gentry, the very wealthy, and the clerics and intellectuals who associated with them.[34] But the middling sort—hardworking tradesmen, professionals, farmers, and merchants—felt they had the right to express their opinions by voting if they had the franchise, and by demonstrating if they did not. Until the 1790s, they did not often articulate their identity as "middle-class," as a coherent group who deserved rights, but they expressed hostility to the aristocracy.[35] Early in the eighteenth century, middle-class shopkeepers, merchants, and professionals viewed themselves as virtuous, religious, hardworking, sober, and chaste, in contrast to an aristocracy they saw as corrupt, decadent, lazy, and effeminate. Novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* encouraged this view by telling the story of a wicked aristocratic libertine who kidnapped and raped a virtuous, middle-class young woman. Of course, middle-class young men were just as likely as their aristocratic peers to engage in libertine behavior.[36] Yet a gentlemen could use family connections and prestige to escape the consequences of his actions, whereas middle-class men relied on their reputations to gain credit. Middle-class men became frustrated when they found their way to advancement blocked, despite hard work and education, when aristocratic gentlemen could leapfrog over them due to family influence and patronage. Critics often declared that the political virtue of the nation resided in the independent middle class. The aristocratic elites in part held on to power because they acknowledged the validity of middle-class values, protected middle-class property, and encouraged commerce, as Paul Langford notes.[37] Scandals could break apart this tenuous aristocratic connection with the middle class.

Scandals could overcome political apathy and trigger widespread public meetings to demand change. After all, scandals had a long-lasting impact on politics only if they resulted in the organization and mobilization of

public opinion to pressure Parliament. And during this period, people of the middling sort (often together with the more independent, less wealthy gentry) began to organize themselves into associations that gave them an alternative power base to Parliament and local aristocratic control.[38] These associations provided the tinder that scandal could spark into mobilizing public opinion.

Most of the scandals to be described here did not inspire laboring people to organize. Laboring people tended to be more concerned with issues such as food prices, press gangs, enclosure, and wages than with the personal peccadilloes of the great.[39] However, by the end of the story—when George became king and Caroline tried to claim her throne—radical working-class activists linked their political oppression with the queen's marital woes.[40]

The study of scandals can also give us insight into the role of women in the political public. Some historians have asserted that women gained an increasing place in the public sphere in the eighteenth century.[41] Indeed, some elite eighteenth-century women published novels and poetry, a few became successful playwrights, and many enjoyed access to the burgeoning world of public entertainments in the flourishing cities. Some aristocratic women exerted personal political clout through their family and social connections. For those who accepted the aristocratic system of patronage, their clout was perfectly acceptable. But radicals who rejected the system of patronage could raise the cry "petticoat influence" against them. Portraying influential ladies as corrupt and power hungry, they linked traditional ideas of women as insatiably sexual with the fear of female political power. Of course, critics vastly exaggerated female political influence in order to undercut their real targets: the king's power, a political party, or even the aristocracy in general. As an alternative to petticoat influence, some women could exercise intellectual influence instead. By the later eighteenth century, some women claimed the right to participate in politics as reasonable beings acting in the public good. Others wished to replace aristocratic petticoat influence with female domestic influence. However, scandals were often directed at any women who took a political role or displayed personal autonomy.

Masculinity was also an important issue in eighteenth-century scandals.[42] Masculinity, for instance, often symbolized power and authority. However, as conceptions of proper authority changed, so did the masculine images of power: Was the proper man the father, the soldier, the citizen? Radicals could challenge the image of the king as father by celebrating the independent man, whose love of women, wine, and song proved his love of liberty. But conservatives stirred up scandal against libertines, portraying

them as irresponsible scoundrels who attacked the stability of family and state.

Three different ways of thinking in the late eighteenth century generated competing understandings of masculinity and femininity, the public and the private, therefore influencing the different ways people reacted to scandal. One of the most influential political philosophies of the eighteenth century was classical republicanism. Not to be confused with the American political party, these thinkers idealized the ancient Roman republic.[43] As in Rome, they believed that citizens must focus on the public good and actively participate in politics, instead of allowing the monarch to control them. They emulated the *virtù* of the ancient Roman citizen. While related to our modern notion of "virtue," *virtù* derived from *vir*, or masculinity, similar to virility, and connoted strength, courage, and aggression, the virtues of a soldier.[44] Classical republicans celebrated the masculinity of independent radicals who defied the court. Conversely, they accused their enemies of "effeminacy," one of the most common political insults of the eighteenth century. Effeminacy generally connoted self-indulgence in luxury and unmanly behavior. The effeminate man might be accused of associating too much with women, having too many mistresses—and/or engaging in sex with men, which eighteenth-century people termed "sodomy."[45] This self-indulgence, it was feared, could lead to corruption. During the 1750s, effeminacy was also commonly linked with the French influence over the aristocracy and fear of French power.[46] Scandals about homoerotic behavior therefore acquired a wider political meaning.

For classical republicans, scandal resulted when private vices contaminated the public world. Emulating the ancient Roman republic, they believed that citizens must sacrifice their private family interests for the public good.[47] They worried that the private interests of aristocratic personal connections and family-based patronage could corrupt the political world.[48] For them, the public was the realm where disinterested, rational, virtuous men should serve the common good, joining together as equals; the private was the family and sexual relations, governed by hierarchy, emotion, and personal interests.[49] Sexuality tended to represent private, selfish desires that blurred the boundaries between public and private. However, while criticizing the great noble families that dominated court politics, classical republicans believed that independent country gentlemen should lead society, regarding tradesmen and the laboring poor, let alone women, as incapable of political reason.

A competing eighteenth-century philosophy—that of sensibility—focused on the individual's introspection, emotion, and empathy with others,

instead of virile competition.[50] For those influenced by sensibility, scandals proved that the public world of politics was irredeemably tainted and that the basis of morality lay in the private world of the family. The philosophy of sensibility was expressed not in political strife but in novels and poetry. In the tales of sensibility, a sensitive, moral hero would become disillusioned by the corrupt world of politics and retreat to his country seat, where he could serve the public good through philanthropy. People influenced by this philosophy discussed literature and ideas in their genteel salons, but they found politics contaminating. For them, the ideal man was not the belligerent soldier but the domesticated father. The literature of sensibility also developed an alternative ideal of femininity to "petticoat influence": the refined, pure lady who listened intelligently in the salons and penned poetry in her boudoir. However, if women entered politics, they could be scorned as unfeminine.[51]

By the late eighteenth century, the increasing influence of Evangelical religion built upon the ideas of sensibility but intensified its moral message. Evangelicalism was the religion of the heart: searching for an authentic, soulful spirituality, yearning after salvation, experiencing intense anxiety about sin, going out to convert new souls.[52] Some Evangelicals remained within the state Church of England, but others became Dissenters, such as Methodists or Baptists. At first, most Evangelicals focused on spirituality and stayed out of politics; the "world" seemed distracting from union with God. By the late eighteenth century, Evangelicals started to enter politics through the humanitarian movement. In the 1790s, they feared that recurring scandals about the sexual behavior of the aristocracy and royal princes would undermine the social order. They used these scandals to insist that Britain's elite must reform itself, must bring the values of the private world of the family into the public world of politics.

SCANDAL AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY POLITICS

Throughout the eighteenth century, scandals erupted concerning the role of the monarchy, the aristocracy, and public opinion, but until 1763 they failed to pose a serious threat to the political order. How and why were scandals contained in the first part of the eighteenth century, and what changed?

Until George III, eighteenth-century monarchs—Anne, George I, and George II—were relatively weak. This weakness could lead to scandal if they were perceived as controlled by their favorites. For instance, Queen Anne

caused a scandal when she rejected her favorite, Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, a prominent Whig, for Abigail Masham, who was more identified with the Tories.[53] Politicians subsidized scurrilous literature which insinuated that Abigail Masham serviced the queen sexually as lady of the bedchamber.[54] The Tory Mary Delariviere Manley novelized the scandal, using "sexual depravity and licentiousness" to "reflect and underscore the political corruption and dishonesty in the public sphere."[55] However, this scandal involved competition over patronage rather than larger constitutional issues.

When Queen Anne died without an heir, Parliament rejected the Stuart descendants of James II; instead, it turned to the Hanoverian dynasty, a line of Protestants from a small German princely state descended from James I. By choosing an alternative to the Stuart dynasty, Parliament also implicitly turned away from the absolute hereditary right of the monarchy and asserted its ultimate authority to choose a dynasty. As a result, it set a precedent for overseeing the private lives of princes.

Tension remained between the view of the two political parties, the Whigs and the Tories, over the philosophy of the monarchy. The Tories celebrated "church and king"—the established Church of England—and the absolute right of hereditary monarchy, while the Whigs took credit for the Glorious Revolution, stressed the power of Parliament, and allowed somewhat more tolerance for the Dissenters. To be sure, they were not like present-day political parties; instead, they functioned as factions, motivated by the search for patronage as much as or more than principle.

One of the great scandals of the eighteenth century, the South Sea bubble, tainted the regime of the first Hanoverian, George I. The bubble originated when the South Sea Company bought shares of the national debt, expecting to pay for it with vast profits from trade with Chile and Peru. The company parlayed these expectations into a pyramid scheme, aided by bribes to royal ministers and the king's mistresses, and propagandists such as Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe.[56] When the bubble burst, an outcry over corruption erupted; the fickle luck of the stock market was often portrayed as Fortuna, a seductive yet capricious woman.[57]

Robert Walpole stepped in to contain the scandal. Becoming one of the first politicians to function as prime minister, he took charge of the government in 1721 to cover up corruption, restore the financial stability of the nation, and enable the king to control the Commons. Because George I and then George II were both German, oriented more toward their native Hanover than toward England, Walpole found them easy to manipulate. The influence of the king's mistresses and the favor of George II's queen, Caroline of Anspach, helped Walpole control the monarchs he served.[58]

The press tried to spread scandal about Walpole's court politics. Henry Fielding, the novelist, satirized the alliance of Walpole and Queen Caroline as the "Devil Henpecked," the title of his play.[59] Poets imitated the Roman poet Juvenal to attack Lord Hervey, a courtier, as a sodomite or hermaphrodite, implying he sexually submitted to the minister.[60] But Walpole successfully repressed these scandals. He imposed strict censorship on the theater in 1737 and tried to restrict and bribe the press, paying off male journalists by offering them government offices. Although several female journalists had made their living by spreading political sex scandals in the early eighteenth century, the number of female journalists declined as they lost the outlet of party political writing and could not take advantage of government patronage.[61] Female journalists were denounced as "shameless scribblers" of "libelous memoirs" who as women should not be capable "of such malice or impudence."[62] By the 1740s and 1750s, political journalism and rhetoric deteriorated into squabbles among politicians and squalid attacks on individuals, rather than debates over principle.[63]

Walpole modified the character of Parliament by repressing party conflict. He allowed only the Whigs into the government, keeping them dependent on his favor.[64] The Whigs neglected their principles, becoming an oligarchy, a tightly knit network of men "bound to one another by countless ties of family relationship and mutual obligation." They married off their daughters to each other for political advantage and dispensed patronage in offices to solidify support.[65] Walpole emphasized the idea that the monarch (and his ministers) and the great families of Parliament could be trusted to look after the public good of the nation—but the people should have no voice.[66]

The frequency of elections was reduced and the franchise tightened.[67] Over the course of the century, the percentage of the adult male population who could vote declined from 23.9 percent in 1715 to 14.4 percent in 1831.[68] Urban voters expressed their resentment at "private family interests" and corrupt parliamentary politics. But the opposition generally did not call for an expansion of the franchise. Dominated by independent country gentlemen, they failed to organize a deep base among the middling sort of people. The oligarchies deployed their powers of patronage, deference, and repression to reassert their control in provincial towns and London.[69]

By the late 1730s and 1740s, however, the idea of patriotism caused trouble for the government. Patriotism meant support for the British empire, Protestantism, commerce, and property. Some country gentlemen began to ally themselves with merchants and traders to demand an expansion of empire and victories for British power. They stirred up scandal by accusing the

government of incompetence in fighting wars that were necessary for Britain's strength and commercial interests. Public opinion rallied around Admiral Edward Vernon, who defied an incompetent superior, and General John Byng, whom the government falsely accused of malfeasance. Men such as Vernon became militaristic, patriotic, manly heroes whom voters could celebrate while reviling the corrupt, effeminate courtiers of the government. Populist aristocratic candidates could command the votes of those laboring men who enjoyed the franchise and stir up crowds to apply political pressure. The notion of the brave hero defying the effeminate aristocrat deployed a notion of masculine independence that cut across class, as historian Kathleen Wilson observes.[70]

These scandals failed to have a lasting impact for several reasons. The issues they raised could be resolved if the government restored the hero of the scandal, like Admiral Vernon, to his proper place or if justice was served. In elections, charismatic aristocratic leaders could gain popular support against the government without promising any real structural change that would enable more men to vote.

The government distracted attention from these scandals by manipulating the language of patriotism for its own ends. By the 1750s, the prime minister, William Pitt, the elder led Britain to imperial triumphs in the Seven Years' War, gaining popular support for the government.[71] Antiaristocratic protest could be displaced onto anti-French xenophobia.[72] As Linda Colley has brilliantly observed, the government believed that the people should have no voice, but in order to keep power it had to respect the influence of public opinion by stirring up the principle of patriotism.[73] She and other historians assert that this patriotic consensus enabled the government to maintain aristocratic, royal, and clerical domination through the eighteenth century, and even strengthened it after 1760.[74] I will argue, however, that the 1760s was a political turning point.

1763–1821

From the 1760s onward, a series of scandals began to erode the patriotic consensus. Whereas earlier challenges to the royal and aristocratic dominance were limited in scope, late eighteenth-century radicals and reformers sometimes used scandals to demand profound changes in the constitution and the political order. Radicals defined patriotism as loving one's country but opposing the government.[75] The 1760s therefore represented a significant transition in British politics, raising new constitutional issues

concerning the monarchy, political parties, parliamentary reform, the press, empire, and the role of women in politics.

The power of the king became controversial, since the new king, George III, took a more active role. He dismissed the Whig oligarchy and exercised his right to choose his own prime minister in 1763. In 1783, he pressured Parliament to dismiss an incumbent ministry he disliked. These actions stirred up constitutional debate about royal power.

Party politics revived. Deprived of office, the Whigs began to function as an opposition party and to some extent resuscitated their principles. They resented the king's imposition of a prime minister unpopular in Parliament. The Whigs were still composed of shifting factions tied together by both personal and dynastic loyalty, but its radical wing tended to emphasize the power of Parliament and resent the prerogatives of the Crown. Yet they were not egalitarian democrats: they regarded the aristocratic Whig dynasties as the natural representatives of the people. The intensification of party conflict, however, meant that more elections were contested, and more voters could express their opinions.

Radicals went far beyond the Whigs to challenge directly the traditional notion that Parliament was the only legitimate forum for public opinion. They used scandal to savagely criticize both the monarchy and Parliament. As a result, the number of newspapers and their circulation expanded exponentially; the number of caricatures exploded, and they became much more defiant and scornful of politicians and royalty.[76] Censorship was often defeated as an unconstitutional infringement on the liberties of the subject.[77] These scandals also helped initiate huge reform movements and waves of associations demanding parliamentary reform from the 1770s onward. These movements went beyond earlier eighteenth-century criticisms of corruption to demand an expansion of the franchise.[78]

As politics opened up, the role of women began to be questioned. On one hand, radicals often used the image of petticoat influence to attack aristocratic corruption. On the other, more women began writing histories and feminist tracts and even organizing themselves into debating societies. Although a few women had written feminist tracts earlier in the century, the role of women became the subject of widespread discussion only in the 1780s and 1790s. But people debated whether the problem was women's rights or women's influence.

The celebration of empire also became controversial. The American war led some to question the equation of the empire with patriotism; for them, patriotism meant defending the Americans against an oppressive government. As Britain expanded its empire into India, critics used scandal to crit-

icize imperial abuse and exploitation. As a result, imperial ideology needed to be revamped.

This book explores these themes through a series of scandals. Chapter 2 contrasts radical and conservative uses of sexual scandal as a political weapon. It tells the story of John Wilkes, a radical politician who attacked George III's constitutional right to appoint his ministers. Wilkes claimed that sexually voracious women and submissive sodomites controlled the court. The government turned the weapon of scandal against Wilkes by prosecuting him for publishing pornography and expelling him from Parliament. For conservatives, Wilkes's sexual libertinism symbolized the threat his political challenge posed to the hierarchy of British society. Wilkes equated his libertinism with political liberty and defended his right to behave as he wished in private. But he failed to defend the right to privacy of his former ally, renowned historian Catherine Macaulay.

Chapter 3 uses scandal to illuminate debates about women in electoral politics. Recent works have claimed that aristocratic women enjoyed increasing influence over politics in the eighteenth century, most notably Georgiana, the dazzling duchess of Devonshire. However, this chapter will argue that the influence of such women over elections did not advance the interests of women as a whole, only the interests of dynastic aristocratic power. Furthermore, political influence could be a burden for aristocratic women, as is apparent from the tragic story of the countess of Strathmore, whose husband used her family's clout to win an election, but then savagely abused her to seize her fortune. Other women articulated alternatives to aristocratic female influence: women of the debating societies began discussing the possibility that women could vote in elections and serve in offices for the public good, not for their family's interests.

Chapter 4 explores how gendered rhetoric reflected different philosophies of empire through the attempt by Edmund Burke to impeach Warren Hastings, governor-general of Bengal. In an attempt to appeal to a wider humanitarian public, Burke tried to stir up scandal by alleging that Hastings was responsible for the abuse of Indian princesses. Some see Burke as a critic of imperialism, but by portraying India as passive and feminine, he created new justifications for empire. This chapter will also examine why Burke's scandal spectacularly failed. Although we now think of Burke as the dignified founding father of conservatism, many contemporaries ridiculed him as opportunistic and unbalanced, prone to overheated rhetoric and unfounded accusations.

Chapter 5 shows how scandals about private life acquired a new political significance in the era of the French Revolution. Scandals about Marie

Antoinette and the British aristocracy undermined the basis for royal and noble dominance. In response, conservatives tried different techniques to redeem the aristocracy. While Edmund Burke defended Marie Antoinette against scandal and bolstered the aristocracy, moralist Hannah More warned the aristocracy to become true Christians or risk losing their rule.

In chapter 6, I will show that female intellectuals such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More developed very different alternatives to aristocratic petticoat influence: women's rights, or female moral influence. But both become the subject of scandal. This chapter will ask why scandal squelched Wollstonecraft's feminist ideas whereas Hannah More could overcome scandal.

The problem of petticoat influence did not disappear. In chapter 7, I recount the Mary Anne Clarke affair, which exposed the problem of corruption in government patronage. Clarke was the mistress of the duke of York, the king's son and commander in chief of the army. When officers bribed her, he would promote them. After this became public, an investigation revealed that offices were bought and sold not only in the army but also in Parliament and the East India Company. The affair discredited aristocratic patronage, revived the parliamentary reform movement, and impelled the government to begin to clean up corruption.

In chapter 8, I continue this theme by revisiting the Queen Caroline affair, which changed the relationship of the monarchy to public opinion. While historians have looked at this scandal from the point of view of gender and class politics, the constitutional issues it raises have been neglected. In 1820, George IV, notorious for his own adultery, used the House of Lords to attempt to divorce his wife. Even his own ministers thought that he was abusing the constitutional power of the monarch for his own petty, vindictive, personal purposes. This huge controversy generated a debate over the proper role of the monarch: Should he be defended as a symbol of the traditional order of church, king, and empire? Or was his status contingent on his virtue and his service to the people?

Sexual scandals, therefore, can illuminate some of the major themes in eighteenth-century historiography and help change our view of the century. Public opinion was not a unified force united around the empire, but diverse and divided. Conflict, not consensus, characterized the long eighteenth century.