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Anna Clark. *Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the British Constitution.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 328 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-11501-6.

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Scandalous

In the sixty years between about 1760 and 1820, a series of political scandals involving accusations of sexual and moral malfeasance, usually involving people in high places, riveted the British reading public. Anna Clark's excellent new book argues that these scandals were not trivial, as people often think. Instead, they transformed the political process. She shows how gossip and tittle-tattle, once regarded as the province of unthinking readers (of unrespectable newspapers) and unintellectual women, had a significant impact on isolating corruption, reforming the English constitution and democratizing politics. She begins by asking this question: "Why do some scandals take off and profoundly affect politics, while other scandalous rumors fail to persuade public opinion" (p. 2)? She arrives at her answer by looking at scandals beginning with the radical John Wilkes and ending with the debate surrounding Queen Caroline more than half a century later. Her sources are the newspapers, pamphlets, and parliamentary oratory of the era; she is also in command of a wide secondary literature on the history of gender and politics.

John Wilkes has long been a familiar figure in British political history. He was a radical of the second half of the eighteenth century who became associated with the demand for a wider representation of British men in Parliament. He became a popular hero after he published criticism of the government, was pursued for libel, escaped to France, and returned to be repeatedly elected to the House of Commons for Middlesex. Clark's new reading of Wilkes's case shows his whole story to be shot through with debate about the proper roles of men and women. She emphasizes the degree to which Wilkes and his radical sympathizers deployed a gendered political language in which it was manly and admirable to be an independent member of a debating chamber like the House of Commons, but effeminate and despicable, even sodomitical, to be a minister dependent on court favor. Hence, she has married women's history to the history of political thought, revealing how ideas about proper gender roles were tied up with notions about the ideal state.

She also has a chapter on aristocratic women who campaigned actively for parliamentary candidates in the 1770s and 1780s. Clark sees this as no particular triumph for women, however. It may have advanced the inter-

ests of the Whig aristocracy, but as for women, it merely rendered them more vulnerable to scandal and popular disapproval.

The attempted impeachment of Warren Hastings, governor general of India after 1773, is another chapter of British political and intellectual history renewed and revivified in Clark's rendering. Edmund Burke led the parliamentary attack on what he termed Hastings's misgovernment of India and stirred popular interest by alleging sexual misconduct. In this instance, the attempt to create a scandal backfired, as, in the absence of more persuasive evidence, the case against Hastings dwindled away into voyeurism and ineffective titillation.

Clark has chapters on the debate both for and against the French Revolution in Britain. She shows how issues such as the predominance of royal and aristocratic influence, both in England and in France, could be recast as scandals about Marie Antoinette or aristocratic libertinism. This inspired heretofore underrepresented groups to take an interest and demand their say in political affairs. Thus, personal scandal could serve as the entry level for women, as well as middle- and working-class citizens, to demand greater participation in political debate. She also shows that it was not just the issues that were debated, it was the persons debating those issues that require greater attention from historians. The works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Catherine Macaulay, and Hannah More all demonstrate the extent to which women took part in serious discussion, on both sides of the issue, about whether it was time for a French Revolution in Britain.

Clark's last chapter, on George IV's attempt to divorce Queen Caroline, has been more studied recently, not least by Clark herself in other works; but her penultimate chapter on Mary Anne Clarke, is perhaps her best. She narrates the story of how the king's brother, the duke of York, who was commander in chief of the Army, allowed his mistress to profit by selling commissions to officers who sought promotion. When she fell out of favor with the duke, she tried to use his letters to blackmail him. He resisted her attempts and the government ruthlessly pursued, as libelous, newspapers that hinted at the corrupt ways in which rich officers had bribed the duke's mistress in exchange for quick advancement in their careers. However, when she got a member of Parliament to stand up for her and investigate her case, the government could no longer resist an enquiry. The result of the scandal was a growing consensus that promotion in the officer class ought to be via merit (although this did not come in as law until the 1870s) and that members of the royal family should not exercise unsupervised or illegitimate influence over political affairs. Mary Anne Clarke herself emerges as an immensely attractive personality. When she was called before the intimidatingly all-male House of Commons to give evidence, she asked why the attorney general was insulting her by not removing his hat. When her opponents tried to discredit her by bringing up her checkered romantic past, she expertly evaded the question by saying this was beneath the dignity of the House. She was a star and she knew it. Moreover, as Clark justly points out, the scandal that surrounded her sale of commissions led to an eventual consensus that the old constitution, including the relations of Crown and Army to Parliament, needed to be reformed.

Clark's conclusion is that these scandals had an impact. When scandals about private affairs could be used to symbolize wider political and public problems, they could literally take off and be used to improve the political system. She shows how scandals were perhaps most influential in opening up the press to wider and more volatile public debate. Official censorship proved more difficult and was seen as less legitimate as time went on. She also shows how writers and artists conveyed the scandals, at the beginning of her period, to the public through satire, whereas at the end satire was mixed with melodrama. Melodrama, as a literary genre, gave the scandals more "bite" because it could provoke "sorrow and anger, pity and empathy, shame and guilt," in a way that satire could not (pp. 218-219).

Clark expects her historical actors to be making progress toward a modern goal of perfect freedom for women, homosexuals, and other groups derided in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scandals. If they fail to make adequate progress, she disapproves. In other words, she sometimes judges them by standards which they could not have always experienced or understood. For example, she thinks Catherine Macaulay erred when she did not develop a modern feminist analysis until late in her career. Similarly, Wilkes failed when he did not extend his insistence on the privilege of doing what one liked in private to women and to sodomites. Today most of us would like to guarantee everyone the right to do what they like in private so long as it harms no one else, but was that a concept actually in use and available to Wilkes?

Clark condemns Burke because he "contributed to emergent racial stereotyping and helped rationalize the empire by depicting the Indians as powerless creatures

who needed to be rescued" (p. 98). It sounds as if she would be happier if he had read and acted upon the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. Similarly, Burke is a bad guy because he "strengthened the rationale for an empire that denied Indians self-determination" (p. 111). National and ethnic self-determination was a priority of Woodrow Wilson's era, but was it of Burke's? Is this not judging the historical actors by modern standards rather than by using their own terms and frame of reference?

It is fine that Clark's sympathies in this book should be with those who were often derided and certainly underrepresented in the old constitution, but reading her book one sometimes feels as if Clark is herself writing a dissenting tract for consumption in some cold Northern chapel. For example, she writes of the Prince Regent that "he prided himself on his patronage of the arts, but he also squandered thousands at the racetrack and indulged in low brothels" (p. 178). She wants us to share her indignation that his income was "at least one thousand times the income of an artisan" (p. 178), but he spent some of that on what are now the glories of the British capital and the British state. The beauty of Carlton House Terrace, the elegant sweep of Regent Street, the handsome rebuilding of Windsor Castle are all living results of the prince's patronage of the arts. They are enjoyed these days much more by artisans than by aristocrats. When the current government, including its leader of the House of Lords, Baroness Amos of Brondesbury, a black woman born in Guyana who has risen through the ranks of the Labour Party, entertains state visitors at Windsor, they dine on magnificent SÃÂ¨vres porcelain acquired by George IV. Such a dinner, both the plates and the personnel, represents the richness and the complexity, the grandeur and the living malleability of what was once an empire, but has evolved into something rather different. Reading Clark's book, one feels as if she would have been happier if the monarchy had been abolished, and the SÃÂ¨vres smashed a long time ago.

However, the strengths of this book far exceed the weaknesses. I learned a lot from it, especially about the negative ways in which radicals and liberals could tar the court with accusations of sexual abnormality, while they reserved sexual virtue for themselves. After reading this book, no one can doubt that scandal was a cause of historical change in the period. Clark's maturity and versatility as a historian are also strikingly put into evidence by this enviable book.

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