

Article

Toasting and gender in Great-Britain in the eighteenth century

Rémy DUTHILLE

ABSTRACT: Historians of eighteenth-century Britain have used toasting as evidence of the construction of socio-political allegiances and signs of dynastic, religious political divides. This presentation examines the construction of toasting norms within the paradigm of politeness, ascendant in the early part of the century and culminating in the ideal of the “polite gentleman”, which may be understood as a model of hegemonic masculinity. Toasting, a ritual of male bonding, strengthened homosocial groups and included some males at the expense of other males and all women. Secondly, this paper explores the dimension of competitiveness and aggression always lurking below the veneer of polite masculinity. Toasting rituals served to channel violence into socially acceptable forms and can be seen as substitutes for duelling or brawling. The third moment of this paper qualifies claims about women’s exclusion, showing they could engage in toasting, in domestic settings but also in some public contexts, especially from the end of the century. Femininity was also increasingly seen as a moderating, civilizing form that would restrain the excesses of all-male drinking.

KEYWORDS: Toasting, Gender, Britain, Masculinity, Violence

In 2013, the Royal Navy replaced the traditional sailors' toast to "our wives and sweethearts" with a gender-neutral toast to "our families". The international press commented that the toast was a very old one and that the modification reflected "cultural changes". The *Melbourne Age* explained: "The practice of toasting 'our wives and sweethearts'—occasionally followed with a bawdy 'May they never meet!'—has long been part of naval culture."¹ This aggiornamento illustrates the gendered nature of toasting and the way standing toasts reflect current gender relations. The Royal Navy toast perfectly functioned within homosocial groups that excluded women and treated them as objects, not subjects of toasting, either seriously, as wives, or on a bawdy or funny mode, as "sweethearts". The toast also universalized heterosexuality since it assumes that the sailors' partners must be "wives". As such it posited a kind of masculinity that implicitly excluded other masculinities: a "hegemonic masculinity", "understood" by Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt "as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue".² Specific institutions such as elite schools or the military typically enforce the idea of hegemonic masculinity,³ which also entails the negation of, or domination over other, "subordinated" masculinities.

The ritual of the Royal Navy was an old and established one, whose origins are unknown except to historians. Such timelessness is part of the ritual's power; it partook somehow of the antiquity of the English constitution and its customs held "from time immemorial". The year the toast was updated, 2013, interestingly, was also the year of the Succession to the Crown Act, which abolished male primogeniture, making it possible for daughters to become queens instead of their younger brothers. The example of the Navy toast shows how an enshrined, time-hallowed practice must change and adapt to new gender relations, just as the established hegemonic masculinity changes too.

Toasting, or raising one's glass and uttering words to honour someone or a cause, has existed in many civilizations and in Britain, this practice certainly existed in the middle ages and the early modern period, with examples to be found in Shakespeare and many sources. This study examines the ways in which, in eighteenth-century Britain, toasting was gendered and in particular mediated hegemonic masculinity. Toasting was certainly not just about gender; historians have shown how toasting constructed socio-political allegiances and functioned as signs of dynastic, religious and political divides. Despite

¹ 'Cheers! Navy Puts Equity to the Toast', *The Age* (Melbourne, 24 June 2013).

² R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender & Society*, 19.6 (2005), 829–859 (p. 832) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>>.

³ Frank J Barrett, 'The Organizational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: The Case of the US Navy', *Gender, Work and Organization*, 1996, 129–42.

the diversity of political opinions, all those gatherings had in common the exclusion of women and the exaltation of some form of masculinity. Recently Valérie Capdeville examined the life of gentlemen's clubs, including toasting rituals, in the context of the formation of a hegemonic masculinity.⁴ Another study that bears on toasting is Charles Ludington's monograph, *The Politics of Wine*, which shows that the choice of wine, in the eighteenth century usually a choice between port and claret, reflected changes in hegemonic masculinity.⁵ Such studies continue work on the making of gentlemanly masculinity in eighteenth-century England carried out by Michèle Cohen, Phillip Carter and others.⁶

The analysis will start with the gendered construction of beverages as background to toasting practices, charting the emergence of polite rituals of toasting. The paper will then explore the dimension of competitiveness and aggression always lurking below the veneer of polite masculinity, showing that toasting served to channel violence into socially acceptable forms but could also unleash it. A final part qualifies claims about women's exclusion and shows that they could also engage in toasting with some autonomy.

The emergence of polite toasting:

The linkage between beverages and gender is significant because toasts were usually drunk in wines like claret in the early eighteenth century, then in port or madeira, wines which were all symbolically masculine. Alcoholic beverages in Georgian England were differentiated according to social status, and they were always subject to monitoring and taxation by the state.⁷ Peasants and workers drank beer while gin was associated with the lower orders in London and urban centres. Wine was reserved to the middling orders, the gentry and the aristocracy. This class axis intersected with gender. Gin had feminine

⁴ Valérie Capdeville, 'Gender at Stake: The Role of Eighteenth-Century London Clubs in Shaping a New Model of English Masculinity', *Culture, Society & Masculinities*, 4.1 (2012), 13–32 <<https://doi.org/10.3149/CSM.0401.13>>.

⁵ Charles Ludington, *The Politics of Wine in Britain: A New Cultural History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁶ *English Masculinities, 1660–1800*, ed. by Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen, *Women and Men in History* (London: Routledge, 1999); Michèle Cohen, *Fashioning Masculinity: National Identity and Language in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1996); Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain, 1660–1800*, *Women and Men in History* (Harlow, England; New York: Pearson Education, 2001); Matthew McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester, UK; New York: Manchester University Press, 2011).

⁷ James Nicholls, *The Politics of Alcohol: A History of the Drink Question in England* (Manchester, UK; New York: Manchester University Press: Distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave, 2009).

connotations because of various flower scents and the smallness of the glasses. In graphic satire, newspapers and pamphlets the stereotypical gin drinker was a bad mother who tippled on gin and neglected her children. Gin sellers were mistakenly thought to be women in majority (it appears in fact that the trade was controlled by men), and public anxiety crystallized on women's gin-drinking.⁸

As for wine, Charles Ludington explained the changes in taste by a logic of aristocratic distinction, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense, explaining that taste was not natural but socially constructed. For Ludington, changes in taste reflected change in the content of hegemonic masculinity. The ideal of gentlemanly politeness,⁹ a French import theorized by the Earl of Shaftesbury and popularized by Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and others, was expressed through taste for high-end, luxury claret (Bordeaux wine). After 1714 (the replacement of the Stuart dynasty by the Hanoverian dynasty) claret started to be eclipsed by port, a wine from Portugal, an ally of Britain in its war against France. Trade policy, differentiated tariffs and patriotism contributed to the rise of port, a patriotic, manly wine. From the 1760s on, port became the wine of choice of not just the English middle-class but also the nobility and the Scots. Ludington ascribes this change to reactions of the ruling élites to the damages inflicted in the wars that had brought them into discredit. The élites adopted port because it was middle-class, and because its ruby colour and high alcohol content made it a manly wine, in keeping with the new 'warrior ethos', a tougher masculinity that was replacing politeness as the pattern of hegemonic masculinity.

The history of toasting paralleled that of beverages, in that the first half of the eighteenth century saw the consolidation of a model of polite drinking, or gentlemanly toasting. In the last decades of the century, however, the "warrior ethos" is not so visible in toasting; another force, that of respectability—to be felt in wine choices after Waterloo with tastes for lighter ports—, was at work and it explains the different role assigned to women toward the beginning of the nineteenth century.

An influential account of the origin of toasting was published in the *Tatler* in 1709.¹⁰ The word toast originally did not mean the practice of drinking someone's health, but the lady that was drunk to. Joseph Addison was aware he was describing a very new development,

⁸ Peter Clark, 'The "Mother Gin" Controversy in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 38 (1988), 63–84 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3678967>>; Jessica Warner and Frank Ivis, 'Gin and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century London', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 24.2 (2000), 85–105.

⁹ On politeness, see in particular: Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Carter.

¹⁰ Richard Steele, 'The Tatler, No.24, 4 June 1709', in *The Tatler*, ed. by Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), I, 187–90.

TOASTING AND GENDER IN GREAT-BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

or at least explaining a new word. In the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the first occurrence of “toast” in the sense of “A lady who is named as the person to whom a company is requested to drink” dates back to 1700, only nine years before the *Tatler* piece.¹¹ Interestingly, the quotation comes from William Congreve’s comedy *The Way of the World*, a play set in the polite world of London. In the *Tatler*, Addison tells an anecdote that happened at Bath in the reign of Charles II (1660–1685), in a similarly fashionable setting:

It happen’d, that on a Publick Day a celebrated Beauty of those Times was in the *Cross-Bath*, and one of the Crowd of her Admirers took a Glass of the Water in which the Fair one stood, and drank her Health to the Company. There was in the Place a Gay Fellow, half fuddled, who offer’d to jump in, and swore, Tho’ he lik’d not the Liquor, he would have the Toast. He was opposed in his Resolution; yet this Whim gave Foundation to the present Honour which is done to the Lady we mention in our Liquors, who has ever since been call’d a *Toast*.¹²

Addison’s account is significant and puzzling for several reasons. He recognizes that no one really knows the origin of the word “toast”, and even its precise meaning (“the Learned differ very much upon the Original of this Word, and the Acceptation of it among the moderns”). The anecdote might be a nice story to explain the emergence of a word of fashionable slang. This reveals a key aspect of toasting in eighteenth-century Britain: it was a constant object of talk and literature, often repeated and commented on in gossip and in print. Addison also presents toasting as an “Institution” and “a formal Order”, urban and courtly in origin, which is very different from simple health-giving. It is very recent and has to be explained to country folks (this is the professed aim of the article). Toasting is clearly a practice of the upper echelons of society (the court and upper reaches of the middling orders), in London and fashionable places like Bath, where the rich took the waters and gambled.

Gender relations are central to this practice, which is a male homage to female virgins. Addison describes toasting as a ceremony through which male participants, while paying homage to some women, exerted their power on them. In the *Tatler*, as well as in the more famous *Spectator*, another periodical edited by Addison and Steele, toasting is placed within the context of the burgeoning, urban public sphere. Male power is exercised through the ceremony of balloting, which is compared to a political choice, “the Choice of a Doge in *Venice*”. The comparison with the Doge may be accounted for by the decline of the doge’s powers in Venice, which became increasingly symbolic and

¹¹ ‘Toast, n.2’, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), p.2 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/202729>> [accessed 29 January 2019].

¹² *The Tatler*, p.188

ceremonial. Though exalted, women do not wield any real power. What Addison describes is similar to the practice of gentlemen's clubs, which followed very strict rules for membership, usually comprising balloting and blackballing. Applicants had to be co-opted by two current members, and during elections, it took one negative vote to reject an application.¹³ This formal symmetry between the election of "toasts" and that of club members places the institution of toasting squarely within the polite culture of gentlemen's clubs.

Male power over women is further symbolized by the use of glasses. Addison mentions ladies' names being engraved on glasses. Indeed, the famous Kit-Cat Club had toasting glasses engraved with verses in the honour of the ladies they drank to, the "toasts of the town". Collections of verse to the toasts of the day were published.¹⁴ Those practices were supposed to pay homage to women; but as Addison notes, the diamond glasses also reminded them of their frailty. Only beautiful young women were toasted; others were cast off. "The Hieroglyphick of the Diamond is to show her, that her Value is imaginary; and that of the Glass to acquaint her, that her Condition is frail, and depends on the Hand which holds her."¹⁵ In other words, men who hold the glass hold also the women in their power because their reputation (and marriage prospects for instance) is in men's, not women's, hands. Already in 1700, the Congreve quotation in the *OED* unkindly mentioned "a decay'd Beauty, or a discarded Tost": the "toasts of the town" (the belles of the day) were unthinkable without the obverse category of the older women or "discarded toasts".

On the basis of Addison's account and other sources, there is good reason to distinguish between healths and damnations, on the one hand (traditional forms inherited from the seventeenth century) and toasting, on the other hand.¹⁶ Healths expressed allegiances (to king, country, party, religious denomination) and damnations expressed antagonism to the enemy side. They expressed unequal relationships to fealty; in the seventeenth century the loyal health to the monarch overlapped with another sacred ritual, that of the Holy Communion.¹⁷ Healths and damnations had not just a religious,

¹³ Valérie Capdeville, *L'âge d'or des clubs londoniens: 1730-1784* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008).

¹⁴ See for instance Charles Montagu, Earl of Halifax, "Verses written for the Toasting-Glasses of the Kit-Cat-Club" (1703); *The Toasters Compleat. With the Last Additions* (London: s.n., 1704).

¹⁵ *The Tatler*, p.189.

¹⁶ Specialists of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century do not draw a distinction. See e.g. James Nicholls, 'Healths, Toasts and Pledges: Political Drinking in the Seventeenth Century', in *The Politics of Alcohol: A History of the Drink Question in England* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 21–33.

¹⁷ Angela McShane, 'Material Culture and "Political Drinking" in Seventeenth-Century England', *Past & Present*, 222. suppl 9 (2014), 247–76 (pp. 248–50) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtt037>>.

TOASTING AND GENDER IN GREAT-BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

but more broadly a magic, even pagan, quality attached to them: healths sent a benediction, damnations a curse as the names implied. Healths and damnations were formulaic and ritual. In the seventeenth century, they upheld the social order but sometimes also contributed to destabilize it because alcohol and foolish or angry talk could cause disorder. Comradeship had a levelling effect and could erode hierarchies and deference. According to Alexandra Shepard, “[t]he only hierarchy unthreatened by men’s drinking rituals was the gender hierarchy” and women were always excluded.¹⁸ This is very true, but women would frequently engage in healthing among themselves, not just at home but also in taverns; this reinforced bonds, especially among neighbours and among women of a similar social standing. There were rules to such women’s drinking: drunkenness was frowned upon, and a woman would not drink to a man.¹⁹

Toasting, for its part, was aristocratic and middle-class, heavily ritualized like healths, but the ritual enabled the performance of a *polite* masculinity (as opposed to plebeian forms). Toasts tended toward sophistication, wit, irony and self-irony. It was highly codified yet often creative and playful, probably because polite masculinity, as defined by Addison and Steele in the *Spectator*, included a strong component of conviviality and the art of conversation.²⁰

Toasting in clubs was particularly codified; it was a choreography orchestrated by the toast-master, in which each participant in turn rose and gave his toast in the club’s prescribed toast list. Valérie Capdeville has shown that clubs provided spaces for the shaping of a new British masculinity that rejected the French model of politeness.²¹ It was a hegemonic masculinity in the sense that it applied to power of men over women, but also to the power of some men over other categories of men whose masculinity was deemed inferior, subordinate. Toasting in gentlemen’s clubs can be understood as a rite of institution in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense. What matters about rites of passage is not the passage from one status to the other, but the line that separates the participants and non-participants. The implications for gender are clear in a ritual like circumcision (Bourdieu’s immediate topic in this passage), but also in toasting: “by treating men and women differently, the rite *consecrates* the difference, institutes it, while at the same time instituting man as man, i.e. circumcised, and woman as woman, i.e. not subject to this

¹⁸ Alexandra Shepard, “‘Swil-Bols and Tos-Pots’: Drink Culture and Male Bonding in England, c.1560–1640”, in *Love, Friendship and Faith in Europe, 1300–1800*, ed. by Miri Rubin, Laura Gowing, and Michael Cyril William Hunter (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 110–30 (p. 126).

¹⁹ Eleanor Hubbard, *City Women: Money, Sex, and the Social Order in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 154–56.

²⁰ On conversation and the polite gentleman: Carter, pp. 61–64.

²¹ Capdeville, ‘Gender at Stake’.

ritual operation.”²² The toast and other rituals (elections, table rituals) initiated men into membership to the club, and therefore functioned as rites of institution, instituting some men as endowed with a superior form of gentlemanly, polite masculinity which other men did not have (and which women could never have). Gentlemen’s clubs are institutions where the insights of Bourdieu (on rites of institution) and Connell (on hegemonic masculinity) converge. Connell notes that “[t]o sustain a given pattern of hegemony” (like the social and cultural hegemony of gentlemen) “required the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women.”²³ In other words, toasting and other rituals excluded women but also served to discipline men—where Connell wrote “police”, eighteenth-century Britons would have said “polish” in the sense of acquiring a genuine politeness, a process which paradoxically entailed some effort and constraint in the research of naturalness and true ease.

Even outside clubs, in private parties at home, toasting was performed in a homosocial environment. Women left dinner after dessert and left men to discuss “masculine” topics and indulge in “masculine” pastimes like drinking, smoking and gambling.²⁴ Abbé Jean-Bernard Le Blanc, a keen observer of English life, has produced a precious testimony of what he called “the ceremony of toasts” in mid-century England.²⁵ As a Frenchman, Le Blanc was sensitive to English particularities and was quick to assign quirks to national characters. Le Blanc commented that the English custom of toasting was born of intemperance and noticed that it was a pretext for drunkenness, which is very frequent in England. His musing about the possible Gothic origins of toasting may also have to do with a notion of the English as northern drunkards like the Germans and the Vikings. He dismisses etymological speculations, which were still current in his time (such as the *Tatler*’s theory about Bath, but he does not mention any). In the toasting ceremony, women’s presence is presented as a constraint that prevents men from giving free rein to intemperance and, most probably, prophane language. This motif of the restraining influence of women recurs throughout the century, but by the last decades it has taken on a positive meaning. As Le Blanc describes it, toasting is a ritual in that it has a compulsory and a grave character. Each man must give a toast that corresponds to

²² Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Rites of Institution’, in *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. by John B Thompson, trans. by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 117–26 (p. 118).

²³ Connell and Messerschmidt, p. 844.

²⁴ Capdeville, ‘Gender at Stake’, p. 17.

²⁵ Jean-Bernard Le Blanc, *Letters on the English and French Nations; Containing Curious and Useful Observations on Their Constitutions Natural and Political*, 2 vols (London, 1747), 1, pp. 326–29.

TOASTING AND GENDER IN GREAT-BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

his social standing; all must drink equally at each toast, and the master of the house acts as toast-master to enforce the rules. The homosocial ceremony displayed a certain egalitarianism, and its harmony was guaranteed by the guests' similar political persuasion. Le Blanc mentions political toasting among ministerial, opposition and Jacobite toasting, suggesting that men of the same party drink their own toasts together; reality was less neat than Le Blanc's picture and there could be strife over toasting in mixed companies and even in the same party. When it comes to gender, what Le Blanc writes of the ceremony of toasting women confirms Addison's affirmations about beautiful toasts and cast-off toasts. The French original, "*une Toste de rebut*" (translated as "*a cast-off Toast*") sounds particularly gross and cruel, suggesting that old women deserved throwing to the garbage bin. A man incurs ridicule if he ventures to toast a faded beauty, which supposes that men must know who the toasts of the day are.

Toasting, masculinity and underlying violence:

The treatment of old women, and less radically, the mocking or disciplining of men who toast them, testify to an undercurrent of violence in an elitist ritual practice based on exclusion. This section explores the dimension of competition and aggression always lurking below the veneer of polite masculinity. My contention, a very simple one that will be borne out by examples, is that toasting rituals served to channel violence into socially acceptable forms and they can replace duelling or brawling. But toasting can also unleash violence. In other words, toasting is ambivalent in relation to violence and it reveals some tensions within the ideal of masculinity, "politeness" being in tension with violence.

Drinking, especially massive amounts of alcohol in a homosocial environment, could provoke violence and fighting with fists or weapons. Verbal violence in the form of insults was also a threat. At this point, Norbert Elias's theory of the "civilizing process" is highly relevant to toasting.²⁶ Dozens of court cases registered in archives, at the Old Bailey in London and elsewhere, articles in the press and scenes in novels testify to the brutality of men's drinking. Yet there was a discourse of "politeness" and "refinement", and later in the century of "civilization", that tried to pacify men, to smooth the rougher edges and to tame natural men into "polite gentlemen". The pitfall was how to avoid the opposite excess, effeminacy, or foppery. Such a lack of manliness passed for the main characteristic of Italy and France, and British gentlemen who travelled there or had prolonged contacts with those cultures were thought to be at risk of losing their manhood. Britain had to find a middle way between barbarity and effeminacy.

Despite examples of women toasting to be discussed later, toasting was first and

²⁶ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994).

foremost a homosocial activity. The ritual kept dinners in order, holding in check the violent impulses of the drinkers. The ritual required a certain set of attitudes that encouraged restraint (for instance by making sure that each guest drank the same amount and waited in turn) and as such, it assuaged drinking. However, it also encouraged competition with other males (about the best toast, the most brilliant one, and outside polite circles, about one's ability of drinking another under the table). Toasting's affinity with the civilizing process has been noted in the case of Germany. It developed in medieval Germany as "an outlet for elite masculine aggression and the display and defence of masculine honour following the decline of the martial forms of medieval chivalry".²⁷ The same may well be true for England, and many episodes throughout the eighteenth century suggest that toasts served either to deflect aggression or to enable it, but replacing daggers with words, and blows with insults.

Toasting and drinking could be disruptive indeed. There was a very thin line between integration and aggression as can be seen if we move down the social scale. Most artisans and manual workers received their wages in taverns. Artisan culture was extremely bibulous; toasting and drinking were compulsory on a daily basis and during certain rites of passage. In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin recounts how he was working at a printer's shop in London in 1725, and when he had just changed workshop his new companions asked him five shillings as "a new Bienvenu, or Sum for Drink."²⁸ Franklin refused to pay what he considered extortionate, but he "was accordingly considered as an Excommunicate" and after two weeks of harassment, despite the support he received from his employer, he finally paid up. This kind of drink money, known under various names such as "footing" or "maiden garnish" was also demanded in prisons (like the Marshalsea and debtors' prisons) and ships, when young men were forcibly pressed into the navy.²⁹ Writing about seventeenth-century England, Rebecca Lemon has coined the phrase "compulsory conviviality". This oxymoron is a very apt expression to describe the way conviviality, supposedly free, voluntary and agreeable, becomes a constraint, and even a way of forcing others.³⁰

²⁷ Michelle O'Callaghan, 'Tavern Societies, the Inns of Court, and the Culture of Conviviality in Early Seventeenth-Century London', in *A Pleasing Sinne: Drink and Conviviality in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. by Adam Smyth, Studies in Renaissance Literature, 14 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 37–51 (p. 44).

²⁸ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. by Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 100.

²⁹ *The unfortunate Caledonian in England; or, genuine memoirs of an impressed young gentleman, in the year 1779. Written by himself* (London, 1781). The narrator has to pay garnish money, which serves for 'drinking confusion to the Magistrates and Constables of London, and success to the American Congress, and the brave General Washington.' (pp. 26–27).

TOASTING AND GENDER IN GREAT-BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Those violent practices often correspond to contests over masculinity, as can be seen in many novels, for instance in Fielding and in Smollett, in scenes in which the toast to a beloved girl unleashes violence. In *Tom Jones* (book VII, chapter 12), the hero finds himself a soldier in the company of officers.³¹ After being banished from his home and losing hopes of marrying his beloved Sophia Western, the daughter of a squire in Somerset, Tom Jones had just joined the Hanoverian army marching off against the Jacobites. Jones was new to military life and, presumably, to toasting. During dinner with the officers, he antagonizes one ensign Northerton. When the round of toasts comes, Jones blurts out the name of Sophia. The company teases him; Northerton claims that Jones's respectable Sophia Western, daughter to a squire in Somerset, is the same as "one Sophy Western [...] that was lain with by half the young fellows at Bath". Tom Jones calls Northerton "one of the most impudent rascals upon earth"; and Northerton knocks Jones senseless with a bottle. The lieutenant, who was also the toast-master and Northerton's superior, collars Northerton and forces him to stay still until his case is judged. The mechanics of toasting, insult and physical violence is at play here. This extract from Fielding shows how toasting can be a volatile situation, when pre-existing rivalry or ill blood can lead to violence if the notion of masculine honour is involved (defending the honour of one's beloved).

A theme that can be found both in literature and in real life (in judicial archives for instance) is toasting contests. They could offer ways for two men to approach each other, make acquaintance tentatively, and break the ice and make friends (if the process is successful). Toasting contests can also appear as fights, as duels by proxy. I would like to introduce an example of each case, a real anecdote from James Boswell's travel diaries, and a fictional toasting contest in a novel by Tobias Smollett.

Boswell's journal for 17 March 1775 illustrates how toasting could be a way for men to test each other when they met for the first time.³² Like so many sources about toasting, this one takes the form of an anecdote that has to be contextualized for the full meaning to be prised open. Boswell is on his way from Edinburgh to London, and he stops at Northallerton in North Yorkshire. Boswell and a stranger toast different politicians, beginning poles apart on the political spectrum with the stranger starting with the mayor of London, and Boswell answering with Lord North. They finally reach an agreement on

³⁰ Rebecca Lemon, 'Compulsory Conviviality in Early Modern England', *English Literary Renaissance*, 43.3 (2013), 381–414 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6757.12012>>.

³¹ Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, ed. by John B. Bender and Simon Stern, Oxford World's Classics, Reissued (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 367–68.

³² James Boswell, *Boswell. The ominous years 1774–1776*, ed. by Charles Ryskamp and Frederick Albert Pottle, The Yale editions of the private papers of James Boswell, 9 (Melbourne; Toronto; London: Heinemann, 1963), pp. 79–80.

the person of Edmund Burke, a reform-minded Whig. The man mentioned a relative of Boswell's, and finally, they "came at night to Wetherby, became a little more social, and had no difference."

What is happening is that Boswell, a Scot, has to remain in the company of an untalkative Englishman. This trait of character was a national stereotype by the late eighteenth century, and Boswell noted it as a national characteristic in the excerpt. Boswell and the stranger find it difficult to break the ice and make further acquaintance because of a lack of sociability on the Englishman's part. A particular English (later British) manliness is playing out here. Interestingly, Boswell cannot trace the stranger's social identity, his social background and finds himself in an uncomfortable, liminal space (Northallerton, a small town near the English-Scottish border). The toasts serve the two men as a way to reach out tentatively and politely. Boswell's toasts reveal his Tory allegiance to the king and the Tory ministry of the day. On the other hand, the stranger toasted "The Lord Mayor of London", who was no other than John Wilkes, the Whig firebrand who had been ostracized for his criticism of the king; as for Sir Watkin Lewes, he was an alderman of London, a radical and oppositional politician like Wilkes. The "toasting contest", as Boswell calls it, was a way for the two men to edge closer until they found some common ground; this happens with the name of Burke, a Whig whom Boswell admired and who must have been sufficiently reformist to be of the stranger's liking. The stranger's toast, "Great men honest, honest men great", signals the agreement. Its symmetrical structure is typical of the commonplace toasts that were found in toast-master's guides. Boswell's concluding remarks that "we became a little more social, and had no difference" suggest that peace was perhaps precarious and the two men could get along for a while as long as they did not mention politics. Toasting, in this extract, seems to me to function as a ritual to accommodate differences and fill the gap in sociability that is typical of dominant English manliness.

A toasting contest could also serve to deflect violence in that it replaces a duel, solving a conflict of honour with ritualized drunkenness, the loser being drunk under the table. This can be seen in fictional narratives like Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random*, which dramatizes the adventures of a young Scot in London and at sea. Very near the end of the novel, the hero finds himself about to be reunited with his beloved Narcissa, whom he wants to marry. One obstacle remains, Narcissa's brother, a boorish, uncivilized drunkard. To be allowed to pay court, Roderick must become friends with him, and therefore he invites him to a toasting contest at his own home. He begins the contest "with a bumper to the health of Narcissa".³³ Since he "had the advantage of drinking small French

³³ Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, ed. by Paul-Gabriel Boucé, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 350.

TOASTING AND GENDER IN GREAT-BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

claret”, he could drink Narcissa’s brother under the table before carrying him “home in an apoplexy of drunkenness.” The drinking contest is one of the trials of masculine strength that Roderick has to undergo to win his Narcissa. In the structure of Roderick’s adventures, it is similar to the brawls, scuffles and duels he went through to prove his worth. The hero’s behaviour here is not that of a polite gentleman because the concept involves moderation (the golden mean) and rules out inebriation. Roderick changes behaviour according to circumstances and company; if he can approach politeness (hegemonic masculinity corresponding to his aristocratic birth), at times he also performs other types of masculinity, which are cruder and look more primitive. The example discussed here is ambiguous because Roderick cheats and drinks less strong alcohol, so the scene can be read as a triumph of cunning over brute force. However, other passages in the novel show that Roderick is keen to fight; in an earlier episode involving another mistress, he was already fighting over a woman, and he regretted that his antagonist threatened to sue rather than challenge him to a duel. Here again the civilizing process is at stake, because Roderick has not internalized the constraints of the state and the concept of the state’s monopoly on violence. He has a high degree of aggressiveness and wants to take justice in his own hands; in other words he is equipped for sixteenth-century society but not for a modern, commercial, legalistic society like eighteenth-century London.

Women as objects and actors of toasting:

In the examples discussed before, women are either absent or pretexts for fights between men. Exclusion, however, was not absolute because women could engage in toasting, in some circumstances, especially at the end of the century. Femininity was also increasingly seen as a moderating, civilizing form that would restrain the excesses of all-male drinking.

The custom in all-male parties to drink to absent women continued well into the eighteenth century, both in England and in Scotland. On the face of it, toasting women was supposed to be a homage paid to them. “For a woman to be a toast”, Judith Hawley argued, “was a dubious honour.”³⁴ Examining early eighteenth-century drinking culture, Hawley contends that “there is a politics and a sexual politics enshrined in the order in which healths are drunk with the monarch at the head and women at the bottom of the drinking order.”³³ She notes, in particular, that when women were toasted their names

³⁴ Judith Hawley, ‘Taste and Toasts in Early Eighteenth-Century Club Culture’, in *Taste and the Senses in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Hans-Peter Wagner and Frédéric Ogée, LAPASEC (Landau Paris Studies on the Eighteenth Century), 3 (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011), pp. 299–318 (p. 313).

were to be found down the list, well below that of the sovereign and male worthies. Indeed, toasting a woman might be a cause of embarrassment or distress to her. It could even be a means of harassing, humiliating and insulting women in a homosocial context that left them no way of defending their reputation. Nevertheless, some anecdotes from the late eighteenth century suggest more fluid gender relations, in situations of mixed-sex drinking, and political drinking to women understood as a real homage.

Toasting could serve to humiliate women. Some men toasted women to take revenge on them or insult them, and the conversation and toast could take on a sexual character, whatever the woman's fault was. A prime example of this is Samuel Johnson's treatment of Catharine Macaulay. Johnson was a stickler for hierarchy and hated republicans. Macaulay, known as "our celebrated female historian" for her republican *History of England*, bore the brunt of his disapproval when he visited her at some point before 1763. He offered to let her footman sit down and dine with them. This was, Johnson told Boswell, a "lesson in the absurdity of the levelling doctrine. She has never liked me since."³⁶ There was no love lost between the two: in 1765, in a company of twelve men (probably Oxford Tories), Johnson "began to be very great; stripped poor Mrs. Macaulay to the very skin, then gave her for his toast, and drank her in two bumpers."³⁷ The stripping, read in conjunction with the earlier discussion on "levelling", suggests the toast was an act of humiliation of one he had levelled to the degree of a prostitute or a promiscuous, common woman. The toast was particularly cruel because the insult did not stay within the immediate circle of the drinkers but circulated.³⁸

However, toasting to women could be a real homage, and even go beyond the necessity of ritual or ceremony. This was the case in the toasting of members of the Royal Family. A reigning queen and princesses were routinely toasted. However, members of the Royal Family were not immune from partisan toasting and marks of disrespect, especially when comparisons were made between them. There are examples of political toasting to a woman royal meant to show her own popularity or the unpopularity of her spouse.

³⁵ Hawley, p. 301.

³⁶ James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. by Robert William Chapman, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 317. Levelling was not a mere metaphor. Macaulay had some sympathy for Levellers like John Lilburne, and she certainly sided with Charles I's opponents: Bridget Hill, *The Republican Virago: the Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay, Historian* (Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1992).

³⁷ Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, p. 344.

³⁸ Boswell's is one of several competing versions of the story in circulation. The anecdote raises the issue of the reporting of toasts through gossip and rumour, which is outside the scope of this article. On this anecdote, see Shane Greentree, 'Mrs. Macaulay's Footman: The Life and Afterlife of an Anecdote', *Clio*, 44.3 (2015), 317–39.

TOASTING AND GENDER IN GREAT-BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

A case in point is Princess Caroline, later Queen Caroline, wife to the Prince of Wales (later George IV). In 1807, a witness noted that “[t]he Prince of Wales’s health was drank in the Common way with[ou]t any particular emotion, but the Health of the Princess of Wales was drank with long continued and singular applause, manifesting most forcibly the public feeling in her favour.”³⁹ The Princess was popular in the eyes of much of public opinion because of the shameful way the Prince, a notorious libertine, treated her, and partly because of the prince’s own unpopularity, so an element of gender relation was involved when crowds toasted her with enthusiasm and toasted him without enthusiasm.

In the family (in the domestic sphere) women, whether married or not, could be toasted without impropriety, if the toast itself was not gross of course. This can be seen in the memoirs of eighteenth-century ladies. An interesting by-product of this custom is the habit of men and women to insert phrases like “we drink your health” in letters to correspondents who live far away. In the early eighteenth century especially, the formula “I drink your health” often appeared in correspondence, as a ritual way for the letter writer to tell the recipient that he or she was not forgotten. The writer often gave details as to circumstances, places, the people they drank with, or the kind of beverage. This reminded the addressee both of the distance, and the affection that still held fast despite the distance. This can be found (among other sorts of correspondence) in correspondence from women from the aristocracy and gentry. Lady Mary Montagu is a case in point, writing from Germany to female correspondents. “Adieu, I am just going to supper, where I shall drink your health in an admirable sort of Lorrain wine, which I am sure is the same you call Burgundy in London”, she wrote from Cologne to “a Lady”. Later, in Brunswick, she similarly writes to “a Countess”.⁴⁰ The mention of beverage both signals the foreign setting, and the common references (the same Burgundy that you could drink in London). It is worth noting that drinking and toasting serves to bond women together, in a domestic setting and in private correspondence (though the public/private distinction breaks down when the correspondence is published as was the case with Montagu). It was appropriate for men to send such tokens of friendship and goodwill to women as can be seen in the correspondence between the Duke of Marlborough and the Duchess of Godolphin for

³⁹ *The Farington Diary by Joseph Farington, R.A.*, ed. by James Greig (New York: George H. Doran, 1924), IV, p. 94.

⁴⁰ Mary Wortley Montagu, *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Written during Her Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa, to Persons of Distinction, Men of Letters, &c. in Different Parts of Europe. Which Contain, amongst Other Curious Relations, Accounts of the Policy and Manners of the Turks. Drawn from Sources That Have Been Inaccessible to Other Travellers*, A new edition, complete in one volume (London: printed for John Taylor, 1790) <<https://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/montagu-letters.html>>. The correspondents’ names are not specified in the correspondence.

instance (e.g. in a letter dated 18 May 1705).⁴¹

At home, women could not only drink toasts, but give them when in a position of authority. James Boswell's wife Margaret was loyal and strong-willed, and she would make herself respected in her house. When John Wilkes attacked Paoli at dinner at the Boswell's home in 1787 Margaret, "with a just warmth, drank his health, declaring her high respect, and desired there might be no more of it."⁴² Margaret could drink Paoli's health in her husband's presence without sense of impropriety. On the other hand, it might be objected that she was defending her husband's admiration for Paoli, and it is easy to imagine eighteenth-century husbands refusing such liberties to their wives.

Women could also drink toasts and be toasts in public places, during election campaigns for instance, although this could be controversial and attract gossip and criticism. Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, famously canvassed voters and drank with them during the 1784 campaign. Another elite woman who sided with the Whigs in the same period was Mrs Crewe, who was toasted at public dinners by party leaders like Charles James Fox. In 1806, Mrs Crewe and many other ladies and gentlemen attended a lavish festivity organized by the Whigs to commemorate an electoral victory in London. On this occasion, the Prince of Wales toasted "True blue and Mrs Crewe" (blue was one of the two colours of the Whig Party). In response she "rose, and proposed another health, expressive of her gratitude and not less laconic, namely, 'True blue and all of you.'"⁴³ The anecdote has remained famous and Mrs Crewe shines through as a witty and polite lady.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, in London and in the provinces, women were increasingly admitted to debating societies and public political meetings. They could be toasted in that context. The Liverpool Independent Debating Society toasted "The Ladies who so numerously attend our Debate, and may our Discussions be as interesting to them, as their presence is gratifying to us."⁴⁴ There were limits to female participa-

⁴¹ "I shall dine with Lord Halifax, where wee shall drink five or six healths to you and your family." John Churchill Marlborough, *The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence. Volume I* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), p. 433.

⁴² James Boswell, *Boswell: the English Experiment, 1785–1789*, ed. by Irma S. Lustig and Frederick Albert Pottle (London: Heinemann, 1986), p. 138; quoted in Irma Lustig, *Boswell Citizen of the World, Man of Letters*. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), p. 236.

⁴³ Nathaniel William Wraxall, *The Historical and the Posthumous Memoirs of Sir Nathaniel William Wraxall, 1772–1784*, 5 vols (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1884), vol. III, p. 350.

⁴⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, 12 April 1816; a similar toast to "The worthy Ladies who so numerously attend our debates." appeared in *Liverpool Mercury*, 7 April 1815. On the Liverpool Independent Debating Society see Barbara Whittingham-Jones, 'Electioneering in Lancashire before Secret Ballot, 2: Liverpool's Political Clubs, 1812–30', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire*, 111 (1960), 117–38 (p. 118).

TOASTING AND GENDER IN GREAT-BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

tion. Women only *attended* the debate: they were spectators; they did not speak and could not vote.⁴⁵ The toast treats them as onlookers and perhaps guardian angels. Women's supposedly softening influence added an element of respectability to debating societies, which could be rowdy and impolite in the eighteenth century. As in the early eighteenth century women were toasted rather than toasters but now this was done in their presence and as a real homage of their role, even if it was limited.

One last example, taken from Frances Burney's diary, shows that women—at least some elite women who were knowledgeable and influential in politics—discussed politics and toasts, far from being excluded or mere passive objects of homages. Fanny Burney made her name as a novelist with *Evelina* (1778), but her position as keeper of the robes, in attendance to Queen Charlotte, gave her prestige and influence. On June 18, 1792, she tells how she spent a day at Mrs Crewe's, who had also invited Edmund Burke and his son Richard. She was much impressed by Burke's reputation and rather apprehended the meeting because of differences she had with him, but the dinner was delightful. Burney notes then that the dessert was served and the servants were gone; this was the moment when women retired and men started their rounds of toasting, but where Le Blanc described men eager to be rid to women, here the ladies stayed, possibly because the dinner was presided over by a house mistress, Mrs Crewe. The conversation inevitably took a political turn because she had invited Edmund Burke, a Whig celebrity famous for his anti-revolutionary pamphlet *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published eighteen months before. Burke's book had polarized the debate and attracted dozens of refutations. His son Richard entertained the company with anecdotes relative to the criticism levelled at this father because he took the defence of the French royal family.⁴⁶ Richard then gave a clearly ironic toast: "here's slavery for ever!" The toast gave rise to laughter and discussion. Mrs Crewe remarked that she wished she could have the toast published in a newspaper. It would probably be misleading to see this remark as a feminist complaint that as a woman she could not do what men could. Rather, Mrs Crewe would probably have enough influence to spread gossip and have the toast published.

What is significant is the suggested continuity between toast, after-dinner conversation and newspaper. In the late eighteenth century and especially when it came to prominent political figures during the sharp ideological battles of the French Revolution, newspapers published scraps of conversation, witticisms, and various pronouncements. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* had popularized the notion that a great man's table talk could, indeed must, be published. Actually, Burke occasionally quoted toasts to confound his

⁴⁵ Whittingham-Jones, p. 135.

⁴⁶ Edmund Burke was often taken for an apostate, because he had defended liberty during the American Revolution and was seemingly defending absolute monarchy and despotism now.

enemies in speeches and pamphlets; conversely, he had been the butt of jokes and toasts.⁴⁷ Mrs Crewe's exclamation was an allusion to the ill-treatment inflicted on Burke. The guests imagine how the press would react to the toast. Burke adds, ironically again: "the toast was addressed to Miss Burney, in order to pay court to the Queen!" Interestingly a woman occupies a situation of power here; Burney was indeed in the employment of the queen and Burke was (falsely, but naggingly) accused of pandering to the Court and having received a pension.⁴⁸ "This sport went on till, upon Mr. Elliot' again mentioning France and the rising Jacobins, Mr. Richard Burke loudly gave a new toast—'Come!' cried he, 'here's confusion to confusion!'" The antanaclasis—repeating "confusion" as damnation in toasts, and as sedition or anarchy—is typical of brilliant eighteenth-century toasts. This example of a polite, spirited, and quick-witted dialogue, like so many others in Burney's diaries, conveys an idea of the flow of conversation, in the course of which guests of both sexes give, drink, and comment toasts. The flow of conversation is different from the protocol of gentlemen's clubs or official ceremonies. Here toasts are part and parcel of the art of conversation—a much-prized polite art in the eighteenth century. In this mixed-gender audience, women have their say and toasting does not seem to serve the purposes of exalting men's masculinity or their dominance over women. That is not to say that in 1792 gender equality was the norm in England, far from it, but there were contexts, pockets, oases perhaps, of relative equality.

Conclusion:

Toasting was essentially a male activity that was supposed to express a masculine identity. It served to exclude women or, rather, to place them in the position of recipients rather than actors, or objects rather than subjects. While strict rules presided over polite toasting (an essential skill of hegemonic masculinity for any man of the élites, or aspiring to this status), in lower social categories toasting was still codified and bound with notions of honour and, again, masculinity. The end of the eighteenth century, however, witnessed some fluidity in polite circles like those frequented by Edmund Burke and Fanny Burney. But toasting, in the context of homosocial drinking, still served as a proxy for violence among men; it could still trigger violence or serve to avoid it (as a ritual of salutation,

⁴⁷ For instance, In *Reflections* Burke wrote disparagingly of "the after-dinner toasts of the Revolution Society" (Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. by Leslie George Mitchell, William Burton Todd, and Paul Langford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), VIII, p. 81.). Sympathizers of the Revolution liked to toast "Thanks to Mr Burke for the discussion he has provoked" (e.g. at the Crown and Anchor dinner on 14 July 1791: *The Times*, 15 July 1791).

⁴⁸ Burke accepted a relatively modest pension in 1794, and this occasioned a barrage of criticism.

TOASTING AND GENDER IN GREAT-BRITAIN IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

recognition or reconciliation). This article has illustrated some of the gender-based logics informing toasting, but has certainly not exhausted the subject announced in its title. It has explored some areas like gentlemen's clubs or political dining in mixed-gender settings, but it would certainly be worthwhile to study institutions nurturing hegemonic masculinity (army and navy; diplomacy). The links between toasting and masculinity should also be further explored in studies of libertinism and sex clubs, pursuing work already published in that field.⁴⁹ Finally, a theoretical tool could yield fresh results: Adam Kendon's gesture theory⁵⁰ could enrich our understanding of toasting and its integration within an overall pattern of masculine repertoire of gesture and performance.

⁴⁷ For instance: Jason M. Kelly, *The Society of Dilettanti: Archaeology and Identity in the British Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2009); David Stevenson, *The Beggar's Benison: Sex Clubs of Enlightenment Scotland and Their Rituals* (East Linton, UK: Tuckwell Press, 2001).

⁴⁸ Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).