

## REVIEW

**Marilyn Morris, *Sex, Money & Personal Character in Eighteenth-Century British Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. xiv 257.**

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In 2014 the British media was transfixed by the story of the French president Françoise Hollande's affair with the actress Julie Gayet, gleefully reporting nocturnal assignations on mopeds. News anchors grilled French commentators on the subject, but found to their bafflement and annoyance that they didn't care. French people apparently cared about Hollande's chequered record in office, but not about his private life. As Marilyn Morris notes in her impressive new book, public obsession with the private lives of public figures, and the sense that virtue in both arenas goes hand in hand, is a peculiarly Anglo-American phenomenon. Morris's previous work on the evolution of the British monarchy suggested that 'the family life of the monarch first became a subject of national interest during the latter part of George III's reign' (p. ix). As the Clinton- Lewinsky scandal hit in the 1990s, Morris says that she began to wonder whether this was a wider issue for politicians and public life, since many Americans still cite 'moral values' as the deciding criterion when electing public figures. *Sex, Money & Personal Character* is the culmination of two decades' work on this theme.

Morris offers a broad-ranging survey of political mores from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, focusing in particular on attitudes towards marital fidelity, domesticity, homosexuality and financial responsibility. The first half of the book surveys the whole period and subsequent chapters focus on themes within it. Morris aims to 'bridge the chasm between models of high and popular politics' by exploring both how the domestic idiom was broadcast to society at large, and the impact that it had on the lives of Members of Parliament (p. 16). Much of the focus is internal to the court and the parliamentary classes, however. A chapter on the 'views from peripheries of the political world', for example, takes in the perspective of commentators like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: as we now know, women of the elite were part of politics' social world and had considerable agency within it. Perhaps because the middle classes are not the main focus of the book, Morris departs from the usual narrative of the rise of bourgeois domesticity. As she argues, 'George III and Queen Charlotte's efforts to promote morality at court and in the kingdom at large only went so far' (p. 6). Within the small world of elite male politics, a reputation for 'clubbability', swapping mistresses, borrowing money, gambling and drinking could be an asset; whereas 'spotless domesticity could make a man appear potentially censorious, less accessible personally, and lacking in a sense of fun and daring' (p. 84).

When Morris began this project, the research field of gender (and especially masculinity) in Georgian politics was a fairly compact one. Nowadays it is a huge area, and the overview she offers here is probably the best currently available. *Sex, Money & Personal Character* is essential reading for anyone working in the field and is an accessible introduction for anyone who isn't. If I had a criticism, it is that I was left wondering *why* these issues were so important in the British context. What was it about

the political culture of the day – or the social order or the gender system – that made personality and moral reputation so important? And why the shift in the late eighteenth century? Commentators such as Dror Wahrman have identified fundamental changes to the nature of personal identity around the 1780s, and accounts of Georgian Britain from Morris's side of the pond usually make much more of the fallout from the American War, as critical attention focused on the moral fitness of the ruling classes. Much that was implied in the narrative could therefore have been spelled out. As a study of how the personal is political, however, Morris has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the century that is responsible for so many of our modern attitudes.