Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire: Spark of the Women’s Rights Movement

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Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire:  
Spark of the Women’s Rights Movement

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ABSTRACT

The late eighteenth century of Great Britain displayed a society influenced by outside thinkers, such as Rousseau, and dealing with the results of the American and French Revolutions. During this time a young women named Georgiana Cavendish began to break the mold that many aristocratic nobles adhered to for many years. The purpose of looking at Georgiana’s life and short career in politics is to show that women indeed could campaign in a very effective way. Though her campaigning got her friend a seat in Parliament, her exposure to the public during this time caused her and the person she campaigned for to lose some respect in the eyes of the public.

INTRODUCTION

The life of a wealthy eighteenth century British woman revolved around tasks such as running the house, looking after children, and planning societal parties. Aristocratic women began instruction at an early age on the proper social standards. After being indoctrinated in these standards women adhered to them, and they scarcely deviated from the ideal social model. One of many of these aristocratic women was a young noblewoman named Georgiana Spencer. Georgiana Spencer, known later as the Duchess of Devonshire, brought to English high society a new breed of woman. Coming from a well to do Whig family Georgiana married a man she believed herself to be in love with, but in time, she realized there was no love at all. A woman skilled in many languages and well-read in many of the philosophies of the day, in particular Rousseau, tried to find a diversion that would fill the void left by her marriage. She soon found that politics held the key to what
she wanted to do with her life. After being head of a political think tank, Georgiana took a plunge into public politics. During the 1784 British General Election, she started campaigning for a close friend in an era where politics was strictly a man’s world. In spite of rumors and widely published political caricatures, women like Georgiana Spencer Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, paved the way for high class women to be more involved in politics, and not just societal parties. These women stepped outside the normal boundaries of aristocratic behavior and became more involved in political campaigning. In the late eighteenth century, Georgiana Spencer was, in many aspects, the spark of the women’s rights movement that would come full circle almost one hundred years later. Georgiana threw off one of many societal bonds that restrained women not only during this century, but also throughout history.

**BODY**

As with most noble ladies in the eighteenth century, Georgiana had little say over her own marriage. Georgiana’s parents arranged her marriage to the Duke of Devonshire in the hopes of catapulting the Spencer family fully into the political spotlight. The Spencer family lived in Althorp House in Northamptonshire and was very rich thanks to their history of sheep farming, productive business adventures, and a massive art collection;¹ despite being highly regarded in terms of wealth, the family was still new to the realm of the aristocracy. The Spencer family maintained good social and political standing by being involved in the Whig Party. Therefore, it seemed only proper to marry their daughter off to another well respected and honorable Whig noble. William Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire, was the man that the Spencer family found to be a reasonable match for their daughter.² After her parents arranged the match and informed Georgiana, she believed that she would be happy with the Duke. After her marriage into the Cavendish family, Georgiana became part of one of the richest and most influential families in all of Great Britain. However, the marriage that started out well soon became a trap. She had troubles producing an heir, which led the Duke to deprive her of the attention that she wanted and

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² Ibid. 18.
needed, and she began amassing a huge debt within a few short years. Soon Georgiana looked for activities to fill the emptiness within her marriage. First, as reflected by her increasing debt, she took to gambling as a way to escape the pains of her marriage. Second and certainly her most well-known undertaking was the involvement in politics. In the course of her life, Georgiana found politics to be a nice diversion from the dull life she lived as the Duchess of Devonshire. Soon after her marriage, Georgiana found herself thrust into the position as leader of the Devonshire House Circle. The Duchess, as mistress of the house, held parties as a requirement of her duties in being the wife of one of the richest and most influential men within the Whig party. The Devonshire House Circle during the eighteenth century acted as the political and social meeting place for the Whigs. This interaction of societal happenings and public politics is what gave the Devonshire House Circle the status of a salon and put Georgiana at its head. During this time, she was holding weekly, if not nightly, parties at Devonshire House. She made her grand entrance onto the main political stage during the General Election of 1784. During the 1784 election, she gave women a voice in politics by campaigning for Charles Fox, leader of the Whig party and her friend, in the borough of Westminster. Incidentally, the first time Georgiana was in the full political sphere was also the last, the cause of this sudden upheaval can be seen in the publication of political cartoons during the campaign, which damaged her public image as well as Fox’s image as a leader.

In order to gain a better understanding of the complexities of high society in the time of Georgiana Cavendish, and more importantly, why she was divergent from other women during her time, one would need to examine what the life of a noble woman consisted of during this era. During the eighteenth century, there were certain standards that women adhered to in order to conform to societal expectations. One such source for these standards was a cookbook called *The Whole Duty of a Woman Or, an Infallible Guide to the Fair Sex*. The subject of this cookbook was not only the recipes that were common to many English households at the time, but also certain rules and standards adhered to by the best of British nobility, which were located in the front of the cookbook. The topics in the cookbook range from the duties of virgins to the respectable behavior a woman should have towards a drunk. The book mentions the aspects of a woman’s life concerning her role as wife and her duties managing the children and the household. The first part of the duty of a wife showed
how her marriage represented an adoption into her husband’s family.\(^3\) Having married into one of the nation’s wealthiest and most influential families, Georgiana would need to display this sense of duty in a most effective way. It was her job as wife of the Duke, head of the Cavendish clan, to carry on the duties and customs of her husband’s family. The guide also shows what duties a wife had to her husband. The three responsibilities stated in the guide were a duty to his person, his reputation, and his fortune.\(^4\) In the section that pertains to his person, the author makes every attempt to show that love was a most important factor in carrying this duty out. The author states in this passage that, “it is love only that cements the hearts, and where the union is wanting, it is but a shadow, a carcass of marriage.”\(^5\) Even more intriguing, the author says that without love, “it is a bargain and compact, a tyranny, perhaps, on the man’s part, and slavery on the woman’s.”\(^6\) The statements the author put forth in this section indicate that marriage needed an effort of love in order to work. However, as can be seen in history and in the marriage of Georgiana, love was not always a factor when it came to a marriage arrangement. The Whole Duty of a Woman also gave advice with respect to how a woman/wife should run a house. Georgiana was no different from other high society women in that it would be up to her to oversee the running of the Cavendish Houses.

Georgiana needed to show the Cavendish family that she indeed was a woman who would look after her husband’s fortune and reputation. The two sources which describe these ideals are The Duty of a Woman, and a magazine published in 1736 titled Country Magazine. A passage from the Country Magazine titled An Epitaph on a noble lady also described the virtues and actions expected of noble ladies. The author of this little Epitaph described a woman who in his mind makes up the perfect British woman.\(^7\) The author of the Epitaph takes care to mention that this particular woman was also very patriotic during

\[^3\text{The Whole Duty of a Woman: Or, an Infallible Guide to the Fair Sex (London, 1737), 108.}\]

\[^4\text{Ibid. 109.}\]

\[^5\text{Ibid. 109. The author that wrote this text is unknown to us at this time. Therefore, this pronoun is simply used for convenience sakes.}\]

\[^6\text{Ibid. 108.}\]

\[^7\text{The author that wrote this text is unknown to us at this time. Therefore, this pronoun is simply used for convenience sakes.}\]
her life for he says, “A grateful Briton consecrates this stone to hers’ [sic] alone who living could impart a patriot ardour to the coldest heart.” The author indeed showed the reader of the magazine that patriotism is a most worthy virtue to uphold, and again this idea might have had an influence on the upbringing of noble ladies at this time. This patriotism would have been especially important because towards the end of the eighteenth century the American colonies prepared to sever ties with the mother country. The author wrote that this lady was, “Friend to all parties, to all parties true Oft for her Church and King she zealous stood.” From this little glimpse, one can see that this woman was honorable for being completely devoted to the King and Church. Not only was a wife expected to have a devotion to the King and Church but a wife also had a great many other responsibilities. These other responsibilities ranged from taking care of the children to housekeeping, but the Epitaph shows another characteristic that women needed to embrace. This involved charity and kindness. The author of the Epitaph wrote,

But always steadfast for the public Good: For public Good she lavished ov’r her Store, her chiefest glory was to chear [sic] the poor; to glad the Heart just breaking with despair to banish Pain, and Poverty and Care; to sooth in every Breast a various Grief… Partial to none, her Bounty unconfined, generous she live a Friend to most Mankind: so in Return by most she live carefree, to Rich as to the Poor a welcome guest…

In marrying a respectable peer and the Lord High Treasurer of Ireland, Georgiana would have to display this sense of charity and kindness in order to do homage to her husband’s reputation and fortune. After her marriage, Georgiana had the opportunity to demonstrate her sense of charity through her control of the household expenses. Amanda Foreman, one of the foremost biographers of Georgiana, described this idea of managing finances in her biography where, “Heaton, (the Dukes’ advisor) had prepared a list of the household expenses which included the names of the parishioners and tenants who received charity

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9Ibid. 384.
10Ibid.384.
from the estate and whose welfare was now in her trust.”\textsuperscript{11} Georgiana even started a charity school for girls in her early days of being Duchess. Foreman described how this project displayed Georgiana’s sense of charity. Foreman even included a passage from Georgiana’s grandmother who wrote that when Georgiana would generously give children her pocket money she “seemed as glad to give [the coins] as they were to have them.”\textsuperscript{12}

Early on, in the marriage, Georgiana was keen to play her social role, as the dutiful, charitable, patriotic wife, and nothing was more important than the Public Days. Foreman describes how the new Duchess presided over the Public Days at Chatsworth.\textsuperscript{13} According to Foreman, Chatsworth maintained the tradition of holding a Public Day at least once a week. During these Public Days, the Duke and Duchess would open the doors of Chatsworth to the tenants and other respectable strangers. Foreman wrote that, “Georgiana and the Duke stood in the hall wearing their finest clothes, as if attending a state occasion, and personally greeted every guest.”\textsuperscript{14} These Public Days were reminiscent of the old feudal days when vassals and private armies were important to the kingdom. Naturally, Georgiana’s first Public Day caused quite a stir, but after a while, the crowds dwindled.\textsuperscript{15} These Public Days were also important for another reason. During these Public Days, Georgiana would have to interact with people of different rank, and knowing the proper way to approach these people was very important.

Knowing how to portray one’s self to the public in a most respectable manner was the main goal for all noble women in this time. Not only did Georgiana deal with the Public Days at Chatsworth, but she also performed daily tasks, as any other woman would have. \textit{Country Magazine} detailed the day of an average woman and informed the reader of the proper time to perform the daily tasks. The advice given in the magazine article is thorough and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[11]{Foreman, 24.}
\footnotetext[12]{Ibid. 24.}
\footnotetext[13]{Ibid. 23.}
\footnotetext[14]{Ibid. 27.}
\footnotetext[15]{Ibid. 27.}
\end{footnotes}
involved everything from when to wake up, to eating, to advice on evening parties. The activities described as being beneficial to a women’s position in the household were short and concise when listed in the section from Country Magazine. The author of this section recommended a woman rise no later than nine in the morning. During the early times of the morning, the writer seemed to think that this was the time when women should think for he wrote, “At nine stretch your arms, and oh, think when alone.” This phrase would strike a modern person as being sexist; however, this was the mindset of the eighteenth century regarding women. Many men believed that women were not meant to think in public, but were to save their ideas and thinking for the home. Also, the writer of this article approved of drinking by women. The writer states, “After dinner two glasses at least I approve, Name the first to the king the next to your love.” Drinking was always a big part of a party, and in eighteenth-century England, there were no better parties than those of the stately homes in London. Devonshire House served as one of these stately homes and Georgiana held no expense back when it came to the parties. It was at these parties that Georgiana would strengthen her position within the salon and discuss writings by modern philosophers.

Discussions were all the rage in these stately homes. The houses in London seemed to be teeming with new ideas during this time and Devonshire House with Georgiana at its’ head felt very deeply for Rousseau’s’ writings. Many women found the weapon they needed to prove they could campaign in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In Linda Colley’s book titled Britons: Forging the Nation she brings out the meanings of Rousseau’s works and what they meant to eighteenth century women. Rousseau, in his writings, describes how women were just as important to the political machine as men for he states, “the

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16 “Advice to a young Lady,” The Country Magazine: Or, The Gentleman and Lady’s Pocket Companion, December 1736, 635.

17 The author that wrote this text is unknown to us at this time. Therefore, this pronoun is simply used for convenience sakes.

18 Ibid. 635.

19 Ibid. 635.
legislative hallways would grow silent and empty, or become noisily corrupt.” To many this phrase meant since women were so important in the raising of children, the future political leaders, they needed to stay in the home. However, to prove that campaigning was completely within a woman’s sphere women interpreted Rousseau’s writings to show that their campaigning was indeed justified. Colley writes that,

…citizenship had been linked with the possession of land and/or the ability to bear arms- in other words, represented as an overwhelmingly masculine prerogative. By breaking away from this model and stressing instead the connexion between civic virtue and the family, Rousseau, whether he recognized it or not, supplied women with a rationale for intervening in political affairs. These writings of Rousseau’s would have been available to Georgiana, and indeed Colley suggests that these writings did indeed influence Georgiana as well as many others such as Mary Wollstonecraft. Using this interpretation of Rousseau’s writings, Georgiana began securing her position politically and socially within the Devonshire House Circle. The salon would serve as Georgiana’s springboard into politics.

Devonshire House was a well-known Whig political hotbed in London and soon gave rise to its own salon known as the Devonshire House Circle. Georgiana Spencer Cavendish soon became the head of this salon and commanded great respect from the people within. After her marriage in 1774, the new Duchess began a parade of court appearances, which were required during this time. Lady Mary Coke recorded the praises that she had for the Duchess on her politeness and manners while at court and in private meetings. In the presence of the court and other high ranking nobles, Georgiana put to use the upbringing that she received from her mother. She began making connections within the court as well as searching out people who shared her ideologies. Georgiana went to these court and public appearances by herself most of the time because the Duke was preoccupied with

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21 Ibid. 279.
22 Ibid. 279.
other matters. At first, this absence did not bother Georgiana. She was building up a network of relationships within the Devonshire House Circle, at court, and at her social parties, but according to the Honourable Mrs. Boscawen, after the first month it was easy to see that the Duchess was becoming less happy in her marriage and needed something else to fulfill her life. Georgiana started her career at Devonshire House as the hostess for many parties. This position of social hostess that Georgiana held as wife to the Duke would, by the beginning of 1784, develop into her being the political head of the Devonshire House Circle in London. The Devonshire House Circle was where Whig politicians came together to talk about politics, and only the most ardent Whig ladies were allowed into the upper echelon of the Circle. In order to gain access to this top rank of ladies, Georgiana would have to prove herself to other noble ladies, such as the Ladies Jersey and Melbourne, that she was a true Whig and that she could build up connections just like the rest of the ladies. Foreman wrote in her book that Lady Melbourne reigned as leading hostess of the bon ton, which was a gathering outside of Devonshire House. After Georgiana made her entry into the society, she befriended Lady Melbourne, much to her mother’s disappointment. Lady Jersey was one of the newer generations of Whigs. Foreman states in her book that Lady Jersey, “used her irresistible seduction and fascination to wreck the marriages of her friends. According to a contemporary, she was clever, unprincipled, but beautiful and fascinating.” One of the first steps that helped push Georgiana to this top tier was securing a seat in the House of Commons for a friend and burgeoning playwright named Richard Sheridan. Georgiana, with the help of her mother and the Spencer family, was able to get Sheridan a seat in one of the Spencer

24Ibid. 68.  
25Ibid. 137.  
26Foreman, 46-7.  
27Ibid. 47.  
28Ibid. 47. Lady Spencer loathed Lady Melbourne because in earlier years Lady Melbourne shunned Lady Spencer in the bon ton group which Lady Spencer never forgot.  
29Ibid. 47.  
30Stokes, 167.
strongholds, Strafford, thus starting a sort of patron-client system. Georgiana’s actions put her on the track to the top. Other steps that helped her to the top were the almost nightly parties, in which she engaged in discussions on so called “soft” political issues.

The issues discussed in these new salons, as Sarah Richardson describes them, were not “hard” political issues of the day such as reform of the electoral process or economic reform, but were a type of “soft” issues, such as rights for Europeans. Richardson describes the salon as being a place where women dominated the political discussions. Richardson says, “Again, it is British women who viewed women rather than men as the central participants in the arena of salon politics.” This idea of women being more involved in politics was true of Georgiana in the Devonshire House Circle. She soon became enthralled in the political debates that were taking place at her parties and was even more enthusiastic about politics when she would write to her mother. This exchange of letters was also nothing new to the realm of salon politics for Richardson in her article states, “Correspondence networks were crucial to the successful operation of the electoral machine.” These correspondences written by many ladies were sometimes the quickest way to get political information passed onto each other. This point also held true for Georgiana. The Chatsworth Collection has numerous letters sent by Georgiana to her mother, the widow Spencer, about different political actions. In many cases Georgiana wrote to her mother about her nights out at plays. Georgiana wrote in one such case to her mother that, “It was very full and I had several good political fights.” This network of letters would prove essential in the 1784 election, when Georgiana made her full debut. Through her constant efforts to convince the other ladies that she was indeed a true Whig,

31 Ibid., 132.
33 Ibid., 64.
34 Ibid., 66.
35 Foreman, 136.
Georgiana soon become the undisputed leader of the Devonshire House Circle as a way to find purpose and happiness in her all too ill-fated marriage.

After successfully putting herself at the head of the Devonshire House Circle, Georgiana soon made her entrance into public campaigning in the election of 1784. With her charm and beauty, she supported Charles Fox’s reelection to the Westminster seat in the House of Commons. Charles James Fox was a leader within the Whig Party for most of Georgiana’s life. He was a notorious gambler and despised by King George III. In Reid’s book titled Charles James Fox, he writes that, “The King, being consulted, declared it was his fixed and unalterable determination not to be bound hand and foot and put into Fox’s hands, and that rather than submit he would leave the kingdom forever.” Fox held a seat in Parliament in the House of Commons from 1768 until his death in 1806. However, in the 1784 Election Fox’s seat was anything but guaranteed for Reid says, “To replace Fox, the Government backed the popular Admiral Hood, whose election was never in doubt, and Wray. So at the outset the real contest was between Wray and Fox.” During the 1784 election, Fox used his ties with Georgiana to promote his agendas and eventually maintain his seat in the House of Commons. Afterwards, Georgiana retired from public politics, but maintained a strong political influence in her position within the Devonshire House Circle. By allowing her to expose herself to the public in this way, however, the men of the Whig Party created problems, not only for Georgiana, but also for Charles Fox. Women scarcely campaigned in public before for Members of Parliament (MPs), let alone a woman of such high rank. Women of high class usually had at least one place when it came to politics though. This place lay within the family sphere.

Elaine Chalus wrote in her article on elite women that, “Family involvement in parliamentary politics often demanded some degree of participation from women, especially in maintaining family interests at the local level, but just having an MP or a

38 Ibid. 199.
politically active peer in the family had an impact on women’s lives.”39 Chalus states, in this phrase, that women were indeed very much a part of the political machine. In Georgiana’s time, this was no different and as stated earlier she used her influence to get at least one friend elected to a Spencer stronghold. Numerous times before 1784, Georgiana campaigned for her brother George in Northamptonshire, which was satisfactory by her mother’s standards since it was a family issue.40 Indeed, many elite women campaigned for family members. As a matron of the Cavendish family, Georgiana promoted the family interest in many different boroughs. Foreman wrote that, “In the eighteenth century the maintenance of an electoral borough was a family matter; it was part of the estate, as tangible and valuable as land. The Cavendish influence in parliament depended on the number of MPs who sat in the family’s “interest”.”41 It was normal for Georgiana to look after these interests in Derbyshire. She was able to do all the campaigning she wanted to in these districts. These were familial interest areas, in the countryside, and they were not hotly contested boroughs. The issue that made Georgiana more vulnerable is that she campaigned for a non-family member, in a non-family constituency, and in a far less rural area.42 She also made matters worse for herself when she would actually get out of the carriage and talk to people about numerous topics, from how their businesses were doing to giving advice in rearing children. Georgiana quite frequently got out of her carriage to mingle with the common person, which was a risky step to take in one of London’s most democratic boroughs. Foreman refers to these times in her biography of the Duchess for she says, “She not only chatted with voters and argued cheerfully with them, she also took an interest in their businesses and families. She met their wives and children, and became godmother to tens of infants, and impressed the women with her knowledge of such homely

40 Foremen, 143.
41 Ibid. 28. At its height, thirteen MPs owed their seats to the Duke’s financial and political might. Since his brother-in-law the Duke of Portland controlled ten, when the Cavendishs collaborated they presented a formidable faction.
42 Ibid. 153.
matters as nursing and discipline.”43 This aspect of Georgiana showed that she was indeed listening to what the people wanted from their government, and people seemed to think she was the one to talk to in order to make their opinions heard. Even her mother, the Lady Spencer, referred to how approachable her daughter could be during this time. “I delight myself with the Idea that your unaffected good humour, civility and attention to everyone will draw all hearts towards you,” wrote the Lady Spencer to her daughter during the election. Georgiana indeed was a person who could talk to people on a very personal basis, but she also knew that money was king as well. During the 1784 election, it was well noted that when Georgiana visited a store she overpaid for items. Foreman states Georgiana’s actions quite nicely when she wrote,

Georgiana also understood the power of money and she went with her friends from shop to shop making enormous purchases, deliberately overpaying while hinting at the promise of more if the proprietors voted for Fox. A visit to the milliners’ shops in Tavistock Street with Harriet and the Ladies Waldegrave turned into a street party with the shopkeepers hoisting foxskin muffins over their doors as a sign of their support.45 This travelling around Westminster showed that Georgiana feared no one in her campaign adventures. Georgiana maintained her nobility when she was in these places and tried to change campaigning by bringing other women along with her. In this particular case from Foreman’s book Georgiana brought her sister, who hardly left her side during the campaign, and the Ladies Waldegrave, who were important Whig women themselves.46 This showed Georgiana’s tenacity to bring women into the political sphere and use womanpower to win the seat of Westminster for Fox. However, the business of campaigning proved to be more fickle than Georgiana could imagine. During the 1784 election, the Conservative Party had numerous ties with the newspapers and tried to use those ties to tarnish the reputation of the Duchess. Of all the numerous propagandas that circulated in the 1784 election one of the most active and indeed most unscrupulous was that of the newspapers.

43 Ibid. 145.
44 Ibid. 145.
45 Ibid. 145.
46 Ibid. 139.
The newspapers of the time were not about to let this riveting story pass them by, and today there are at least eighty-nine different political prints involving Georgiana that survived from April 1784 alone. The publication of the prints shows how the canvassing done by Georgiana was the attention-grabbing topic of the day. The prints that survive from this election bring out many details that show how far the Conservatives were willing to go to smear the name of Georgiana Cavendish. During the election, there were numerous caricatures, and several of them show the Duchess in a most “indelicate situation”. In Amelia Rauser’s article *The Butcher-Kissing Duchess of Devonshire: Between Caricature and Allegory in 1784*, she looks at several prints to see how printmakers portrayed the figures in the campaign and why they were portrayed this way. One such idea that Rauser focuses on is the idea of virtue. Rauser found notes from a commenter named William Combe, and Rauser composed that, Combe wrote several satires in 1777 that attacked the Duchess for not acting more like the exemplar of Feminine virtue that she could have been to the British public. He claimed that her personal failings reflected on the morality of British Women in general, because the Duchess as one of the highest-ranking ladies in the land was expected to set an example for British femininity. This preview of the Duchess before the election showed that already, to some people, she lacked credibility when it came to being virtuous.

One way the Foxite printmakers wanted to portray Georgiana was as the steadfast figure of British virtue. In earlier prints, makers often depicted a female figure with loose clothes and one breast exposed as the ideal figure of virtue, however, as Rauser states, “Showing her with breast exposed might align her with allegorical virtue, but, especially in the deeply ironic context of the Westminster election, it would also risk an inverted reading as mere personal licentiousness.” The problem posed to the Foxite printmakers was how to take a high ranking Duchess and show her in a positive light when she was doing something that had hardly been done before. Not only did they have to find a way to show Georgiana as a

48 Ibid. 30.
49 Ibid. 38.
vicious person, but they also had to do it in a way that would separate her from the past concepts of virtue. One way in which they did this was by showing her in moderate dress, standing on a figure known as “Scandal”.  

This print known as *The Apotheosis of the Duchess* (Figure 1) was an attempt by Foxite printmakers to bring Georgiana some positive attention.

![The Apotheosis of the Duchess](image)

**Figure 1: The Apotheosis of the Duchess**

The print portrayed the Duchess of Devonshire guided by the two goddesses of Truth and Virtue. The two goddesses shown in the print also seem to hold the Duchess back, showing that they are restraining the Duchess from doing something that is against her rank. The character that portrayed Scandal is slumped underneath Georgiana’s shoe clutching a *Morning Post* newspaper, which was one of the Conservative papers. This meant that Georgiana could indeed overcome the accusations set forth in these foul papers. According to Rauser, “Here, while she is shown in the company of abstractions such as Virtue, she is not herself meant to be one. Rather, she is quite emphatically differentiated from the allegorical women in her costume and pose. Yet the message of an “apotheosis” still characterizes her as almost holy in her virtuousness. There seemed to be no middle ground between the Pittite whore and the Foxite virgin.”

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51 Ibid. 39.
support of the Duchess appeared in May 1784, after the election. Indeed most of the Foxite prints came out after the election in order to try to restore Georgiana’s tainted image. The print titled *Liberty and Fame* \(^{52}\) *Introducing Female Patriotism to Britania* (Figure 2) showed the Duchess escorted to the throne of Britannia herself by Fame and Liberty.

![Figure 2: Liberty and Fame Introducing Female Patriotism to Britania](image-url)

The artist of this print was T. Rowlandson, and in his print, he went much further to show Georgiana as allegorical virtue. Rauser stated in her article that, “the allegories are distinguishable primarily because they display one breast. Yet in his fluid denotation of the image Rowlandson has given the duchess a crisscrossing bodice that almost hints that she as well could take down one side and display a single allegorically virtuous breast.” \(^{53}\) However hard the Foxite printmakers tried to portray Georgiana in a positive light there were always the Conservative- and Government- owned papers that did their best to discredit Georgiana’s name and reputation.

William Pitt the Younger, whom King George III appointed as Prime Minister, began a serious campaign against the Duchess and put a considerable amount of money and effort into printing deceitful, often immoral prints. Prints that portrayed \(^{54}\) Georgiana as a

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53 Ibid. 41.

scandalous harlot constantly circulated in the press. One such print titled *The Poll* (Figure 3) made it harder to show Georgiana as a symbol of virtue since it showed a bare breasted Duchess of Devonshire see-sawing back and forth on a very crude phallic fulcrum.

![The Poll](image)

**Figure 3: The Poll**

However, not only was Georgiana on one end of the see-saw, but there is another bare chested Duchess portrayed also. The Duchess of Gordon was the Conservative equivalent of Georgiana, though the Duchess of Gordon could never equal the fame of Georgiana. This see-sawing in *The Poll* is interpreted by Rauser as a, “spectacle of these women competing for the allegiance of a cheering rabble [which] is emblematized by their pivoting on a giant phallus, symbol of the male public that would decide the election.”

Another popular print that circulated during this time was a poster with faces of Charles Fox and Georgiana split in half and the halves then shown together. This print is called *Cheek by joul or the mask* (Figure 4).

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55 Ibid. 39.
This drastic difference in the faces showed that the two personalities were completely incompatible. This incompatibility with one another symbolized, in the eyes of the conservatives, that politics was a man’s world and that women had no place in dealing with political issues.

Given all this information about Georgiana’s actions in the 1784 election, the practices that tarnished her image the most were in fact her more modern strategies. Forman states in her biography several actions Georgiana performed that made her a target for criticism. The first action was that she brought her own personality to the campaign, which was not commonplace for an elite woman during this time. Second was that because she was campaigning for Charles Fox, who was the “Man of the People”, the designation cast on her as a “Woman of the People” would show her as a prostitute in eighteenth-century terms. The biggest standard in eighteenth-century society that Georgiana upset was the difference between classes. She did this by getting out of her carriage and, as mentioned above, carrying on a conversation with the people, which was unheard of during these

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56 *Cheek by joul or the mask*. Paper etching, 1784 British Museum, London.
times. These factors in the 1784 election seemed in eighteenth-century terms to be too modern, and Georgiana never again openly campaigned in London.57

Georgiana, a vivacious noble lady, gave women a greater voice in politics by becoming more involved in campaigning and directing political affairs at Devonshire House in London. Georgiana turned her unhappiness with her marriage into a career of politics, during which she violated the social norm of eighteenth-century Britain. From becoming the head of the Whigs’ socio-political arena, which was Devonshire House, to her very forward and what some called manly approach to politics in the 1784 election, she moved politics into a position that was more modern than Britain was ready for in the eighteenth century. The empress of fashion could not live forever though; she met her end on March 30, 1806 when she died at the age of 48.58 British society lost the women who foreshadowed the women’s suffrage movement that would come almost one hundred years later. After the death of Georgiana, women would not campaign publicly for another 100 to 150 years. As Britain headed into the Victorian Era, the next generation of noble women followed strict morals and never engaged in men’s business. Georgiana was truly a woman before her time.

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57 Forman, 153-54.

58 Ibid. 370.
Cheek by joul or the mask. Paper etching, 1784 British Museum, London.

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