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Polite Social Practices in 18th-century Scotland
Place and Role of Elite Women

Abstract: This article explores the role and influence of elite women in 18th-century Scotland, focusing on their engagement with polite social practices during the Scottish Enlightenment. The Scottish Enlightenment, characterized by its integration of various disciplines and emphasis on both theoretical and practical knowledge, was a period of significant cultural and intellectual development. Central to this movement was the concept of politeness, which shaped the social interactions of the elite and played a crucial role in their personal and societal advancement. Elite women were integral to the social fabric of this era, participating in mixed-gender activities and shaping the cultural landscape through their involvement in social gatherings, education, and print culture. Despite being formally excluded from public office and direct political power, these women exercised significant influence through social networks, family ties, and patronage, subtly navigating the political and intellectual currents of their time. The study highlights how these women, while adhering to socially accepted norms, found ways to circumvent formal exclusions, thereby contributing to the broader cultural and political life of Scotland. Their participation in polite sociability not only facilitated their integration into elite society but also played a vital role in the broader program of social improvement that characterized the Scottish Enlightenment. This article underscores the complex interplay between

gender, power, and politics, revealing how elite women helped shape "The Golden Age" of Scotland through their engagement in polite social practices.

Keywords: Scottish Enlightenment, Scottish social vision, polite society, elite women, social practices, cultural refinement, polite sociability, education and print culture

The Scottish Enlightenment, flourishing from approximately 1730 to 1800, stands as a distinct and influential intellectual movement marked by its comprehensive integration of various disciplines, practical orientation, and profound impact on modern social sciences. This era is characterized by its focus on the development of human and natural sciences, laying the groundwork for modern social sciences, driven by a cosmopolitan society of knowledge.[1] This integration promoted a synergy between theoretical and practical knowledge, emphasizing the practical application of intellectual endeavors to enhance society.[2] This article explores the role and influence of elite women in 18th-century Scotland, focusing on their engagement with polite social practices during the Scottish Enlightenment.

In the 18th century, Scotland experienced significant developments in social practices, particularly among the elite. The concept of politeness was central to the social elite, embodying good manners, reason, tolerance, and the improvement of the mind through social interaction, especially conversation. Politeness in this context went beyond mere etiquette, it encompassed a broader cultural ideal of civility, sociability, and self-improvement.[3] Elite society, often referred to as "the polite", was expected to embody these vir-

[1] See Roger L. Emerson, "Science and the Origins and Concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment", *History of Science* 26 (1988): 333–366; Craig Smith, "The Scottish Enlightenment, unintended consequences and the science of man", *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 7(1) (2009): 9–28; Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Social science and Human Flourishing: The Scottish Enlightenment and today", *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 7(1) (2009): 29–46.

[2] Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 15.

[3] Peter Borsay, "Politeness and Elegance: The Cultural Re-Fashioning of Eighteenth-Century York", in: *Eighteenth-Century York: Culture, Space and Society*, ed. Mark Hallett et al. (York: University of York, 2003), 8.

tues, which were seen as essential for both personal development and the advancement of society as a whole. Social spaces such as assembly rooms, drawing rooms, and theaters became the hubs of this polite society, where men and women mingled, discussed, and refined their manners and intellects.[4] This period, renowned for its contributions to various sciences, also offered significant insights into education, connecting it with moral psychology and political theory concerning commerce, corruption, and the civilizing process. Scottish Enlightenment thinkers believed that a thriving commercial society required not only economic prosperity but also the cultivation of virtues through proper education and moral psychology.[5]

Social Vison in the Scottish Enlightenment

In the Enlightenment era, the reference point for individuals shifted from being solely centered on nature or God to encompassing the community in which they lived. This period emphasized building identity based on interpersonal relationships and the social context. This shift highlights the increasing importance of social constructs and human interactions in forming personal and collective identities.[6]

Ryan Patrick Hanley[7] presents the social vision of the Scottish Enlightenment as a comprehensive approach to societal development, integrating educational theory with moral psychology, political theory, and the civilizing process. This vision is deeply rooted in the intellectual currents of the Scottish Enlightenment and aims to balance material progress with moral and in-

[4] Katharine Glover, "Elite Women and Polite Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland", in: Katharine Glover, *Elite Women and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 3–23. This work provides a comprehensive analysis of the social roles and practices of elite women during Scottish Enlightenment.

[5] Berry, *The Idea of Commercial Society*, 25.

[6] Krzysztof Wawrzonkowski, "Dobre towarzystwo – rozwój smaku estetycznego w dobie Oświecenia", in: *Znaczenie filozofii Oświecenia. Człowiek wśród ludzi*, ed. Barbara Grabowska, Adam Grzeliński, Jolanta Żelazna (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2016), 303.

[7] Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Educational Theory and the Social Vision of the Scottish Enlightenment", *Oxford Review of Education* 37(5) (2011): 587–602.

tellectual excellence. At its core, the social vision centers on a nuanced understanding of human flourishing that combines the pursuit of material wealth with the achievement of moral excellence. This dual focus seeks to reconcile commercial success with virtuous living, promoting a society that values both economic prosperity and ethical integrity.

It is not surprising that education was a central theme in the Scottish Enlightenment, seen as a means to cultivate both intellectual and moral virtues. Educational theorists like George Turnbull, David Fordyce, and Henry Home, Lord Kames, advocated for comprehensive education that prepared individuals for participation in a society while fostering virtues necessary for public and private life. Turnbull, in particular, emphasized the importance of liberal education in developing moral and virtuous citizens suited for modern society. His works, particularly *Observations upon Liberal Education*,[8] argue that education should cultivate both intellectual and moral virtues to mitigate the vices of society. Turnbull believed that sociability and mutual dependence were natural to humans and essential for societal cohesion. He posited that a well-rounded education should correct false associations between ideas, particularly the conflation of happiness with material wealth, and instead promote a balanced pursuit of moral and intellectual development.

David Fordyce's educational theory, outlined in *Dialogues Concerning Education*,[9] stressed the cultivation of virtues necessary for active participation in society, focusing on practical engagement rather than mere academic contemplation. Fordyce highlighted the role of sympathy in social interactions and the potential for its corruption through improper associations. His educational goals included redirecting selfish passions towards socially beneficial virtues like justice and fidelity.

Henry Home, Lord Kames, in his *Loose Hints upon Education*,[10] underscored the importance of cultivating the heart and natural passions to coun-

[8] See George Turnbull, *Observations upon Liberal Education* [1742], ed. Terrence O. Moore, Jr. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003).

[9] See David Fordyce, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas D. Kennedy (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, [1754] 2003).

[10] See Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Loose Hints upon Education* [1781], 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1782).

teract the corrupting influences of society, advocating for early intervention in education to instill virtues of moderation and self-command, alongside promoting active virtues such as beneficence. This theory aimed to balance the restraining virtues necessary to curb material excesses with the active virtues that encourage positive social contributions.

The Role of Women in Polite Sociability

The Scottish social vision also includes the active participation of women in educational and social spheres. Their involvement in mixed-gender activities, such as dancing assemblies, balls, plays, concerts, and tea visits, was considered essential for acquiring the refined behavior that defined polite society. These activities were not just for entertainment; there were opportunities to forge beneficial social connections and display polite accomplishments. Women, such as the Countess of Panmure,[11] who was instrumental in the establishment of Edinburgh's assembly rooms, played a pivotal role in promoting and sustaining these spaces.

However, the participation of women in these social activities was not universally accepted. Conservative elements within society, particularly the Presbyterian ministers, often opposed these developments, viewing them as potentially corrupting. Despite this resistance, women continued to engage in these social practices, asserting their place in the public and intellectual life of Scotland. Figures like David Hume[12] acknowledged the importance of women in polite society, noting how their presence could elevate the manners and morals of those around them. He argued that the company of virtuous women could significantly contribute to the cultivation of manners and the moral improvement of men. In his essay "The Rise of Arts and Scienc-

[11] Glover, "Elite Women and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Society", 7.

[12] "What better school for manners, than the company of virtuous women; where the mutual endeavour to please must insensibly polish the mind, where the example of the female softness and modesty must communicate itself to their admirers, and where the delicacy of that sex puts every one on his guard, lest he give offence by any breach of decency?". David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995; first published 1741–1777), 134.

es", Hume noted that in ancient times, women were seen as entirely domestic figures, excluded from polite society. He contrasted this with the contemporary view, where women's participation in polite society was considered essential for the refinement of manners and the promotion of civility. Hume believed that the presence of women in social settings encouraged men to behave with greater decency and politeness, as the delicacy and modesty of women served as a model for men to emulate. He suggested that the mutual endeavor to please in mixed-gender company could "polish the mind" and enhance the moral character of society. Still, Hume's view was not without its limitations. His emphasis on the role of women in polite society was often framed within a context that upheld traditional gender roles. While he acknowledged the importance of women in promoting social and moral improvement, he also implied that their value was largely tied to their ability to influence men positively through their presence and behavior. This perspective reflects the broader attitudes of the time, where women's roles were often seen in relation to their impact on men rather than as independent contributors to intellectual and cultural life.

Education and Print Culture

The upbringing and education of elite women were designed to prepare them for their roles in polite society. From a young age, girls were trained in the arts of conversation, manners, and other social skills necessary for their participation in sociability. This preparation was believed to enhance their capacity to contribute to the intellectual and cultural life of their social circles.

Girls from elite families were primarily educated at home by their mothers or female relatives, focusing on domestic skills such as needlework, cooking, and household management, which were passed down from generation to generation. This early education also included basic literacy, with girls being taught to read from the Bible and learn their catechism, emphasizing the importance of religious and moral instruction. As the century progressed, the education of girls became more formalized, with an increasing emphasis on accomplishments that were considered essential for a polite lady. These in-

cluded dancing, music, and learning French, which were taught by professional masters in towns like Edinburgh. Writing, arithmetic, and household accounting were also part of their education, often taught by specialized tutors. Writing, in particular, was emphasized not just for its practical utility but as a means of cultivating a polite and graceful expression, both on paper and in conversation. Many girls were sent to towns or cities, such as Edinburgh or London, to further their education and to be introduced to polite society. This practice was often seen as a crucial step in their social development, providing them with the necessary skills and connections to take their place in elite society. Boarding schools, though controversial among the highest ranks, became increasingly popular, especially in prestigious locations like London, where girls could learn from the best masters and be immersed in the cultural life of the city. The purpose of this education was not only to equip women with the skills needed to manage a household but also to prepare them for their roles in polite society, where they were expected to exhibit refinement, intelligence, and social grace. Nevertheless, it was also clear that the education of women was often directed towards benefiting the men around them, with their own intellectual development sometimes seen as secondary.[13]

Another sphere we should mention here were new opportunities for intellectual engagement and social interaction for women, which were possible through access to books. Unlike earlier periods, where women's access to books was limited and their knowledge often derived from conversation rather than personal reading, the mid-18th century saw a significant shift, with women having much greater access to a variety of books, including works by prominent authors like Pope, Addison, and Swift. Elite women began to enjoy unprecedented access to a wide range of printed materials, contributing to their participation in the broader cultural and intellectual movements of the time. Reading became an integral part of what it meant to be a polite and refined woman. The activity was closely associated with the ideals of the Scottish Enlightenment, which emphasized improvement, sociability, and the cultivation of reason. Women were not only consumers of literature

[13] Katharine Glover, "Education and Upbringing", in: Katharine Glover, *Elite Women and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 24–49.

but also active participants in the dissemination of ideas, often sharing books among friends, engaging in discussions, and even producing written works themselves. This engagement with print culture allowed women to transcend the boundaries of their immediate social circles, connecting with a broader community of readers and thinkers.

Access to books, however, was not uniform across all women. Wealth and family background played significant roles in determining one's access to literature. While some women had extensive personal libraries or could borrow books from family collections, others relied on the growing number of circulating libraries and booksellers. Despite these differences, reading was a common pastime among elite women, who often read a mix of religious texts, moral literature, and, increasingly, novels. The novel, in particular, became associated with the female reader, though it was also the subject of controversy, with concerns about its impact on young women's minds. Reading was not only a solitary activity but also a social one. Women often read aloud to family members or friends, and their interpretations and discussions of texts were important aspects of their social interactions. For example,[14] the Fletcher sisters and their friends were known for reading together and discussing what they read. This practice was not just a way to pass the time but also a means of intellectual engagement and social bonding. Such group reading sessions helped to foster a sense of community among women and allowed them to refine their tastes and ideas in a supportive environment, with women having much greater access to a variety of books, including works by prominent authors like Pope, Addison, and Swift. This communal aspect of reading reinforced social bonds and contributed to the intellectual life of the time.

Polite Sociability Activities

As previously noted, polite sociability in 18th-century Scotland referred to the structured and regulated social interactions within elite society. The

[14] Katharine Glover, "Reading and Print Culture", in: Katharine Glover, *Elite Women and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 57.

spaces where these interactions occurred, such as drawing rooms, assembly rooms, and theaters, were carefully regulated environments where proper manners and polite conversation were cultivated. These settings allowed women to assert their social presence and contributed to their education in the customs and expectations of polite society. Women were considered the "Sovereigns of the Empire of conversation" as David Hume[15] noted, highlighting their influential role in shaping the behavior and morals of those around them through polite discourse. Their participation in these social practices was seen as essential for the moral and cultural improvement of society. The act of hosting and participating in social gatherings, especially tea parties, placed women at the center of these polite activities, where they could subtly exert their influence and uphold the standards of civility expected in elite circles. Notwithstanding, polite sociability for women was not without its challenges. The pressure on women to conform to these social norms and to maintain their reputations was significant. They had to navigate a complex social environment where their behavior was constantly scrutinized, and any deviation from accepted norms could lead to gossip and social ostracism. Despite these pressures, women in 18th-century Scotland found in polite sociability a space where they could engage with the intellectual currents of their time, contribute to the cultural life of their society, and exercise a degree of social agency that was otherwise limited in their lives.

It is worth noting that central to this period were the specialized societies, associations, and clubs,[16] which not only served as platforms for the exchange of ideas and scientific debates but also functioned as venues for social gatherings. In Scotland, particularly in university cities like Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Glasgow, such associations were exceptionally numerous and active, forming the foundation of intellectual life. The collaboration and discussions within these groups had a significant impact on the individual achievements of their members. On the philosophical stage, figures such as David Hume,

[15] Katharine Glover, "Polite Sociability: Space and Social Practices", in: Katharine Glover, *Elite Women and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 84.

[16] See Mark C. Wallace, Jane Rendall, ed., *Association and Enlightenment: Scottish Clubs and Societies, 1700–1830* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2021).

Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, and Alexander Gerard were particularly prominent. In this way, societies of such diverse natures could play an important role in supporting and advancing the ideas and goals of the Enlightenment.

Nicholas Philipson[17] argues that the most characteristic institutions of cultural life in Edinburgh during the 1720s and 1740s were precisely these clubs and higher education institutions. These societies allowed scholars from various fields to exchange ideas, present new concepts, and learn from one another, which was crucial for the development of Enlightenment thought in Scotland. The associations also differed in terms of their membership policies. Some had an open character, allowing participation by both men and women, amateurs, scholars, craftsmen, and farmers, while others were more exclusive, limited only to their specific professional or academic group. It is essential to examine how access to societies, associations, and clubs functioned from the perspective of elite women.

Analysing the population of 'enlightened' Scots, Emerson argues that women constituted only a small percentage. While there were certainly ladies involved in cultural life and interested in serious reading, such as the wife of Lord Kames, the majority were either not interested in or simply did not have access through participation in associations to Enlightenment ideas and theories, and were more inclined towards literature or religious writings.[18]

One of the primary criteria for club membership was gender. Essentially, until 1800, women were excluded from full membership under normal terms. In Edinburgh and Dundee, women were, similar to London, allowed to participate in mixed discussion clubs, but they were not permitted to engage in debates. The first association in Scotland where women were granted full rights of participation, including the right to vote, was the Pantheon Society of Edinburgh, starting in 1755.

A space where women could engage socially without the need to fight for their rights was in charity associations, where women were typically allowed

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[17] Nicholas Phillipson, "Towards a Definition of the Scottish Enlightenment", in: *City and Society in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Paul Fritz, David Williams (Toronto: Hakkert, 1979), 133.

[18] Roger L. Emerson, "How Many Scots Were Enlightened?", in: Roger L. Emerson, *Essays on David Hume, Medical Men and Scottish Enlightenment: Industry, Knowledge and Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2016), 39–48.

to participate. In the 1780s, voluntary associations began to be established, featuring open membership, more formal meetings, and goals related to fundraising or supporting a particular institution. These associations often had lists of patrons, transparent structures, and a clear organizational framework. The underlying premise was tied to the need for improvement, whether for the community, the city, or the nation, and they frequently invoked Scottish national identity. In Edinburgh, during the period between 1780 and 1810, there were 34 societies, two-thirds of which had this very character.

Influence of Elite Women

When analyzing the role of women in Enlightenment Scotland, their influence on politics cannot be overlooked. Though formally excluded from public office or voting, women played significant roles in shaping the political landscape through social networks, family ties, and patronage. Women from politically connected families were expected to manage and maintain the family's political interests, often through social interactions and personal influence. Their political engagement was often indirect but nonetheless significant, shaping the political landscape through social networks, family ties, and patronage. Women from politically connected families were expected to manage and maintain the family's political interests, particularly at the local level. This was often done through social interactions and personal influence. For instance, Margaret Steuart Calderwood[19] was heavily involved in managing her husband's campaign for a parliamentary seat, demonstrating that women could play active and decisive roles in family politics. She saw no issue in admitting her involvement, which was driven by personal and family interests rather than formal political ambitions. The social spaces of the time, such as tea gatherings, assemblies, and social visits, were also politicized. Women used these opportunities to gather and disseminate political information, secure support for their family's political causes, and influence

[19] Katharine Glover, "Politics and Influence", in: Katharine Glover, *Elite Women and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 124.

the decisions of male relatives and associates. The Fletcher sisters, for example, were deeply embedded in the political networks of their time, using their social connections to introduce influential figures like David Hume to powerful patrons such as the Duke of Argyll.[20]

Women's influence extended beyond mere social niceties; they were expected to act as "brokers" in the patronage system that underpinned Scottish political life. This involved managing petitions and requests for favors, often leveraging their relationships to secure jobs, pensions, or political support for friends and family. Elizabeth Halkett's role in smoothing over tensions between her father and the Scottish literati, or Lady Milton's efforts in aiding her family's political allies, highlight how women's "softer" qualities were perceived as advantageous in navigating the complexities of political influence.[21]

Conclusions

The presented study underscores that although many public forums remained formally off-limits to women, they still found ways to circumvent these exclusions through socially accepted behaviors and activities. Polite sociability, particularly mixed-gender interactions, was central to the elite social fabric and had a significant impact on women's lives. From a young age, girls were prepared for their roles in polite society, learning the manners and social skills necessary to navigate elite circles. Elite women in 18th-century Scotland were far from passive in political matters. While women were generally excluded from direct political power, their participation in the political sphere was accepted and even expected within the context of family and social obligations. They played critical roles as confidantes, advisors, and agents, using their influence to shape political outcomes behind the scenes. Their involvement was an essential part of the broader social and political fabric, highlighting the complex interplay between gender, power, and politics during the Scottish Enlightenment. Women's participation in polite so-

[20] Ibidem, 118.
[21] Ibidem, 110–138.

ciety also extended their influence into other public spheres, including politics and the broader cultural life of the Scottish Enlightenment. They also engaged with the intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, demonstrating that their exclusion from formal spaces of discourse did not isolate them from the cultural processes of the time.

In conclusion, elite women, through their engagement in polite social practices, played a crucial role in integrating themselves into the social, cultural, and political life of 18th-century Scotland. Their involvement was an essential part of the broader social and political fabric, contributing to the shaping of "The Golden Age" of Scotland, reflecting the broader cultural values of the Scottish Enlightenment, which sought to cultivate a society characterized by rational discourse and mutual improvement.

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