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Breakfast at Frogmore and Feathers in Portman Square: Women's Property and Elite Sociability

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Sociable Spaces in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Material and Visual Experience

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Sociable Spaces in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Material and Visual Experience

Guest editors:

Valérie Capdeville and Pierre Labrune

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Le Rendez-vous pour Marly. Carl Guttenberg, d'après Jean-Michel Moreau, circa 1777. Musée Carnavalet. G. 188.

Mascha HANSEN

Breakfast at Frogmore and Feathers in Portman Square: Women's Property and Elite Sociability

Elizabeth Montagu began to build Montagu House in Portman Square when a wealthy widow, leaving her married home on Hill Street to take her bluestocking salon to new fashionable heights: visitors admired especially the taste of her so-called feather room. Roughly a decade later, in 1790, Queen Charlotte bought Frogmore near Windsor Castle, her country retreat, which was to be the site of fashionable breakfasts, lavish birthday parties and royal anniversaries. The house as a sociable space is an important aspect of the study of sociability. In this paper, I wish to shed new light on elite women's sociable spaces by looking into their own homes: how did they make use of a domestic sphere built and decorated to their own taste? What do these places have to tell us about women's notions of fashionable sociability at the time, and, by comparison, about their perceptions of the role of their own homes as sociable spaces?

C'est une fois veuve et fortunée qu'Elizabeth Montagu entreprit la construction de Montagu House, sur Portman Square, quittant la maison de Hill Street, où elle avait vécu avec son mari, pour faire de son salon littéraire un endroit très couru : les visiteurs admiraient notamment la décoration de ce qu'elle nommait son « salon aux plumes ». Une dizaine d'années plus tard, en 1790, la reine Charlotte acquit Frogmore, sa résidence à la campagne près du château de Windsor, qui devait accueillir nombre de déjeuners élégants, de réceptions d'anniversaire fastueuses et de commémorations royales. Dans l'étude des formes de sociabilité, les demeures privées jouent un rôle important. Cet article se penche sur les espaces de sociabilités de l'élite féminine, en étudiant les demeures des femmes : comment celles-ci utilisaient-elles un espace domestique construit et décoré selon leurs propres goûts ? Que révèlent ces intérieurs sur la conception qu'elles se faisaient de la sociabilité distinguée de l'époque et, par conséquent, sur leur perception du rôle de leurs demeures en tant qu'espaces de sociabilité ?

"Women's history," Amanda Vickery points out, "has long viewed home as a container of women, […]—a doll's house, a gilded cage, a suffocating prison" (Vickery 3). While houses have always been "spaces for feeling" (Broomhall 6), a part of the emotional sphere of those who

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lived in them, they also offered an entrance to the much broader sociable space of the times, and for the lucky few, an opportunity to shape that space. In the late eighteenth century, houses were built with the sociable ideals of the times in mind: especially the houses of the upper levels of society were meant to display the culture and politeness of their owners as well as literally offering room, indoors as well as outdoors, for polite society to mingle in. It is important to keep in mind that the houses of the well-to-do, especially, were places that allowed access to the public sphere to at least some women. In order to attract members of the public to their homes, hostesses made sure that their houses and grounds would be of interest to visitors by a tasteful display of whatever their wealth and ingenuity had to offer. The display of decorative objects—be they works of art, books or collections of natural specimens—had to be carefully considered in order to achieve the designed effect: a practical invite to be sociable through a visual intake of material culture. Women of the elite had various options to attract visitors to their homes, either to see their collections or to join in their fashionable balls, breakfasts and dinners. Over and above the material side, more ephemeral arts were also practised, including the art of conversation: quite a few elite women took the opportunity to create small-scale salons, entertaining visitors on regular evenings while frequently using the occasion to have a say in the politics of the day (Chalus 688–89). The success of these hostesses would have depended on their social skills—mixing the right people at the right time, being able to defuse tensions and animate a flagging conversation—but their houses, that is, the containers of the sociable spaces they created, the settings on display, should also be considered as a part of that success. Women's role in choosing, decorating, and exhibiting their houses, and thus shaping sociable spaces for themselves and others, needs further research, as does women's house ownership. In this essay, I hope to contribute to this area by comparing two particular houses owned by elite women who had prominent positions in society, Queen Charlotte (1744–1818) and Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800), in an attempt to explore how, and possibly why, these houses were acquired. I will argue that they used their properties to display their personal taste and to create female sociable spaces that would impress both their elite connections and the larger public, who would generally be informed of their parties through the newspapers of the day.

Sociable spaces are ephemeral by definition: people get together in them, talking, making music, reading, perhaps writing or drawing, too, but generally leaving little trace of their meetings, their conversations, or the emotions that passed through the room. By recovering the physical spaces of such meetings at least to some extent, through the records that remain, we may yet catch a glimpse of the impact the spaces women created had on eighteenth-century sociability. Elizabeth Montagu built her elegant town house in Portman Square during the years 1777–81, and Queen Charlotte purchased her estate at Frogmore, half a mile

from Windsor Castle, in two steps in 1790 and 1792. Both women thus acquired their houses when they were already well-settled in their particular roles—as queen consort and prominent bluestocking hostess respectively—and both made the decision shortly after experiencing emotional turning points in their lives: the queen had been shaken by the serious illness of George III and the ensuing Regency crisis in 1788–89, and Mrs Montagu by the death of her husband in 1776. Their houses were thus visible expressions of personal agency and financial ease, but also an opportunity to create new emotional spaces, free from the burdens associated with their married homes, by means of a new house that would, in Montagu's words, "suit all ones humours, & adapt itself to all ones purposes" (Blunt, II:103). These two women were clearly exceptional: both had other estates, and in the queen's case, even palaces, at their command for sociable as well as representative purposes. Nonetheless, they chose to invest in property particularly tailored to their own tastes and preferences, and their example may have inspired less affluent women to create their own sociable spaces. They certainly drew other women into their houses in various ways, whether as visitors or artists, guests or servants, through pleasure, pay or patronage.

It is curious to note that Montagu herself described her house as "certainly a visible object" (qtd in Eger 2016, 1). Outlining the material and visual culture of eighteenth-century salon culture, Elizabeth Eger claims that the bluestocking women lived in a world in which "intellectual women could shine and even dazzle," both metaphorically and literally (Eger 2016, 1). Elite women were well aware of "the connections between reputation and representation" and the ways in which "performance, gender, celebrity, display, image and identity" were linked (Eger 2016, 2). It is in this context of celebrity and display that Queen Charlotte, "the bluestocking queen" (Campbell Orr 2016, 243), created her rural palace at Frogmore, paradoxically both to escape from court life and to display court life in a new, fashionably elegant frame. Frogmore was a splendidly decorated jewel of elite sociability where the royal family celebrated birthdays and indulged in *fêtes champêtres*, entertaining the elite not just of Britain but of Europe. A study of Frogmore shows how the queen used space to enact a more enlightened sociability meant both to dazzle and to involve the public, but also to bridge the gap between impressive royal pomp and a more recent concept of convivial sociability at a time when, according to Habermas, the transition of courtly life into salon culture was taking place (Habermas 91–92). Frogmore succeeded in being both a private and informal place where even a queen could feel at home, and a representative place of a modern monarchy, promising a glimpse of the private life of the royals to the public at large. To create this effect, enormous amounts of money had to be spent, and numerous people had to lend a hand. The same is true of Montagu House, the building and decorating of which occupied hundreds of people over more than a decade (Eger 2010, 75), resulting in a house that was rep-

resentative of the elite levels of bluestocking culture. This is exemplified by Elizabeth Montagu's famous feather room: to create the panels that decorated its walls, countless friends were exhorted to tell their cooks to preserve the feathers of geese and pheasants, and travelling acquaintances were asked to contribute exotic specimens. The room would eventually display both Montagu's own craft and ingenuity as well as, symbolically, the breadth and wealth of the empire Britain was turning into (Tobin 34–35; Blackwell 368).

Queen Charlotte's estate at Frogmore

Frogmore was more than the snug little retreat it has frequently been portrayed as (Campbell Orr 2002, 241): it was a considerable estate that intriguingly served to combine, in Habermas's terms (89), the private, public, and intimate spheres, offering space for all of these at various times. During the mornings, it was used for studying, reading, and writing, but also for needle work, drawing and botanizing. Most of these activities would take place in the intimate sphere of the immediate family, and moreover in a predominantly feminine space, since the queen was usually accompanied by her daughters. Not infrequently, though, a number of guests of both sexes would be included in the domestic circle, especially during the afternoon, and would socialize in a familiar rather than formal atmosphere, indulging in ordinary pastimes which might even include a game of skittles. The queen's purchase of the Frogmore estate is well-documented: the first part—a small house later called "Amelia Lodge" in honour of the youngest Princess, to which were added some neighbouring acres—was bought in 1790. This part of the estate was of substantial size already. The rambling house was fitted up and decorated by the queen and the princesses, who even manufactured the servants' bell ropes themselves. However, the queen's plans to build a new cottage (a "Gothic Cottage" to be designed by James Wyatt, also employed by Mrs Montagu at Sandleford Priory, Berkshire) were dropped when the neighbouring Great Frogmore estate became available together with Frogmore House. According to the deeds (CRES 38/18), "General William Harcourt of St. Leonidas" paid £8,400 for Great Frogmore in 1792, in trust for the queen (see also CRES 38/17, Hedley, 179 and 348–49, n14).

The following description of the house and grounds is taken from a "Valuation of a Leasehold Estate" in the days of Princess Augusta, who inherited it from her mother, but it must have been of similar size before: Frogmore House was a "substantial Brick built Residence [with] two spacious wings," with plenty of rooms to use for sociable purposes, and thirteen bedrooms to house guests in besides, plus various water closets, probably already installed during Queen Charlotte's time (on the prevalence of water closets in country houses, see Girouard 265). There was a "Waiting room with small Billiard table therein; a Drawing room called the Japan room communicating with another, called the Yellow

room, an anti room to each and a Pages waiting room" (CRES 35/161, 6C 1070). The North Wing moreover contained a dining room, a little drawing room and two dressing rooms. The South Wing was reserved for botanical studies and reading, fitted with both a "Principal Library," a "Botanical Library," and a flower pavilion: these, too, would have been the rooms used for informal sociable gatherings (see Girouard 234). The estate was completed by various servants' rooms and apartments as well as outhouses, among which were a kitchen and dairy, a washhouse, a "Brewhouse, a Double-coach-house," a number of stables, mushroom and potato houses, a granary and various hothouses. Even more to the taste of contemporary visitors, the gardens were decorated with a Gothic and an Octagon Temple, a hermitage and a lake, with a boat house suggesting that the lake was frequently used for leisure purposes. Such ornaments chimed in with recent developments in the use of gardens as sociable pleasure sites (Girouard 210).

The queen had already gained some experience in negotiating the terms for estates she wished to obtain at Windsor, (co-)negotiating the purchase of Burford House, later called the Lower Lodge (Hedley 118). She was well-seasoned in the purchasing, building, and furnishing of houses, but her purchase of Frogmore seems to have come as a surprise even to her family (Fraser 131). She would not have bought the place against the King's wishes, but unlike other married women she did not need his permission to buy a house of her own (Blackstone I:iv, 212–13), and she was proud to be able to pay for Frogmore without having to ask the King for extra money, proclaiming that she had paid for her house out of her personal "purse" (Aspinall II:129). The renewal of the lease of the land, granted by a bill in 1807, claimed that the queen had purchased the estates for a sum of £17,200 and had, presumably in addition, "expended the Sum of Twenty thousand Pounds and upwards, in the Erection of Buildings and other substantial Improvements upon the said Premises" (WORK 19/33/1; 1–41). Money was found to pay the fashionable architect James Wyatt to rebuild the larger house (Amelia Lodge was pulled down), Frogmore House, and her vice-chamberlain, Major William Price (brother to Sir Uvedale Price), who re-created the garden in contemporary picturesque landscape fashion, including an artificial lake and a botanical forest for which some 4,000 trees and shrubs were planted (Fig. 1). The queen moreover employed several female artists such as Mary Moser, who was asked to decorate a whole room with her floral designs (later called the Mary Moser room), and Caroline Watson, an engraver (Strobel 153). Inside the house, thus, a fair amount of decorative work was done by women (for a comprehensive history of the queen's activities at Frogmore, see Roberts 216-20).

Fig. 1 – Charles Wild, "Frogmore House: The Garden Front," in *The History of the Royal Residences of Windsor Castle, St James's Palace, Carlton House, Kensington Palace, Hampton Court, Buckingham House and Frogmore*, by W.H. Pyne, 1819. (Wikicommons)

Montagu House

Elizabeth Montagu began to build Montagu House in Portman Square despite being already well-endowed with a house in Hill Street and a rural estate, Sandleford in Berkshire. Montagu, too, had ample experience of dealing with architects and artists in the extensive redecorations undertaken in her marital residences, and when she began the process of building, she wrote to her sister-in-law with the attitude of a seasoned owner-builder who is impervious to the anxious advice of her provincial relatives:

> I neither find any of ye vexation in building, nor ye great amusement others tell me they experience in it. [...] I have not met with ye least disappointment or mortification, it has gone on as fast & well as I expected, & when it is habitable I shall take great pleasure in it, for it is an excellent House, finely situated, & just such as I had always wishd but never hoped to have. (Dec 29th [1779] BL Add. Ms 40,663; A.35)

However, the building did not proceed quite as fast as she had envisioned. In November 1780, she was able to report that her house was "almost but not absolutely ready," since a "disappointment from the Glass Manufactory of some sashes of plate glass for ye great apartment retards things" (21 November 1780, BL Add. Ms 40,663; A.35). In the

meantime, visitors already flocked to the house while it was still under construction, even to the point of impeding progress (Eger 2010, 71). The famous decorations took years to complete, but they were worth it, in Montagu's view, despite all the inconveniences caused: "May was far advanced before all the ornaments, & decorations, & the elegant unnecessaries of my habitation were completed, & before June was expired, these very ornaments, & decorations, were many of them to be papered, & cased up, for fear of Summers Sun, & London dust sh[oul]d hurt them in my absence" (9 July [1782?], ADD MS 40,663, original underlining). Fearful of envy, she modestly presented the result of her own enterprise to be "so convenient and cheerful as a place of retirement" (Blunt II:103). However, Montagu employed artists as renowned as Angelica Kauffmann, and on other occasions claimed that she had created a "Temple of Virtue and Friendship" (Eger 2010, 71). Her parties at Portman Square were considered important enough to be described in several newspapers (Scobie 123). Montagu herself was pleased with her success, and described her house to her correspondents as both a sociable space and a visual object that attracted visitors: "It is much the fashion to go & see my House, & I receive many compliments upon its elegance & magnificence but what most recommends it to me is its convenience & chearfulness" (BL ADD MS 40,663, 2 March [1782]). Even Horace Walpole was impressed by her taste, and specifically mentioned the decorations as being unusual: "it is a noble, simple edifice. When I came home, I recollected that though I had thought it so magnificent a house there was not a morsel of gilding, it is grand […]" (Walpole II:184). Montagu's decision to build came at a price, though, and it was not only the finances which took a toll:

> I may with great truth urge the business & embarrassments that attend at first settling in a new Habitation as my excuse […] half my day is spent in giving directions to some Workmen, urging others to compleat those things for which they have long had directions by that time these matters are discharg'd, the fashionable day begins, & I am to do the honours to the Friends who are to dine with me, or to obey some card of invitation. (ADD MS 40,663, 17 January [1782?], original underlining)

The actual costs of Montagu House (including the lease on the land and the ornamental garden added to it) together with the renovation of her country house, Sandleford, came to £36,000 (Blunt II:120)—equalling the amount the queen had spent on Frogmore. Not for nothing is Frances Burney's Cecilia a neighbour of Mrs Montagu's when staying with the flamboyant Harrels in "one of the most elegant houses in Portman-square" (Burney 1782, 33). Unlike Harrel, however, Mrs Montagu directly paid for all the work she commissioned out of her income: "I could borrow, but writing Eliz. Montagu to bond or Mortgage w[oul]d appear to me a masculine action," she demurred (Blunt II:18).

Impressive town houses had been the privilege of the nobility in the late seventeenth century, but by the end of the eighteenth, members of

the gentry such as Elizabeth Montagu clearly felt that they had to be provided with one, too, whereas less affluent members of the aristocracy often made do with rented houses for the season (see Vickery 136). For all her modest words, Montagu was distinctly proud of her achievement, even if she tried to hide behind some self-deprecating comments: "I changed my mediocre dwelling in Hillstreet to my great House in Portman square, yet alas! I do not find my capacity enlarged, my talents or knowledge increased, my virtues raised or exalted, or my benevolence more extensive" (qtd in Schnorrenberg 297). This connection of house to mind (and morals) is a striking but by no means unusual example of the importance of the home, metonymically proving the capacity of its owner, her social standing as well as her personal worth. On a more practical level, her house was also a useful provision for old age, and she claimed: "A good House is a great comfort in old age and among the few real felicities that money will procure" (ADD MS 40,663, 2 March [1782]) (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 – Montagu House, Portman Square. Edward Walford, *Old and New London*. Vol. 4, London: Cassell, Petter & Galpin, 1878. (Wikicommons)

Sociable Taste

"A certain degree of dignity" was necessary in old age, Montagu claimed, probably to forestall accusations of luxury: her house would provide an open space for virtuous sociability (qtd in Eger 2010, 74). According to Horace Walpole, Montagu's parties were rather of the old-fashioned kind by 1783, since everybody was still expected to drink from shells in the Ossian style (Walpole 29/II:287). Although no account of

the particular salon culture of Montagu House survives, in 1791, *The St. James's Chronicle* celebrated what it claimed to be Montagu's stunning social success, singling out the feather room for special praise: "the walls are wholly covered with feathers, artfully sewed together, and forming beautiful festoons of flowers and other fanciful decorations. The most brilliant colours, the produce of all climates, have wonderful effects on a feather ground of a dazzling whiteness" (qtd in Brett, 9, n.17; for an idea of what such featherwork might have looked like, see Brett 3–5). Noting the similarity between elite women's fashionable shellwork and Montagu's feathery enterprise, Beth Fowkes Tobin points out how difficult it was even for a household of the size of Montagu's to provide enough homegrown feathers (goose or pheasant) to create these pastoral panes (Tobin 34). Montagu's feather room, as Ruth Scobie describes it, was made up of feathers brought to London from all over the world, collected during a whole decade and sown together into panels of Montagu's own design (Scobie 123; Walpole 29/II:287, n.3). Numerous servants were employed who worked these feathers into objects of art, supervised by a female artist, Elizabeth Tull (Eger 2010, 75).

As Amanda Vickery reminds us, mere luxury was considered to be "corrupting and effeminising," whereas "good taste had an affinity with rank, and was supremely exclusive in conception. Knowledge of the rules of design and thorough practice of their application were the essence of taste" (18), and that essence was, frequently enough, conceived of as male (21). Vickery claims that the eighteenth century saw not only the emergence of the notion of taste but also, almost immediately, a corresponding stereotyping of an alleged female preference for the ornamental and decorative (20). Indeed, Horace Walpole's appreciation of Montagu's House at Portman Square seems to imply some belittling of the more usual feminine taste to be found in other places—he lauds the interior for what it is not: "not tawdry, nor larded and embroidered and pomponned with shreds, and remnants, and *clinquants* […]" (Walpole II:184). It is conceivable that Montagu intended her house to show that women were capable of creating tasteful decorations in their own right, and with their own artwork, setting new standards for female taste and countering prevalent clichés. The inside of Frogmore bore a similar stamp: the queen commissioned a fair amount of artwork, too, both from established and less well-known artists, from those patronized by the King and from those she had chosen for herself, giving precedence to areas of art which counted—and mostly still count—as feminine arts: pastel works, needle painting, embroidery, wax works, portraits, miniatures, botanical and floral paintings. Her efforts have largely been forgotten, perhaps because many of the works by women artists that Charlotte commissioned—such as portraits by Mary Benwell and Catherine Read—have been lost, presumably because their style was belittled by later ages (Strobel 87). Her few surviving diaries indicate that she was just as fascinated by questions of taste in home decoration as Elizabeth Montagu.

On visiting "Kitley, the seat of Mr Bastard[']s" during the travels undertaken in 1789 to reach Weymouth, she described the house in some detail, and judged the women's needle-work decorations on display with the eye of a connoisseur: "We saw a most beautifull piece of Needle Work of Mrs Bastard in Darting stich done in Worsted representing Abraham giving up His Handmaid Hagar" (Charlotte 5). Such "domestic handicrafts," typically done by the females of the house, were found in almost every home of the Georgian period, Vickery explains, though needlework based on biblical scenes was going out of fashion, being replaced by drawings and prints (22).

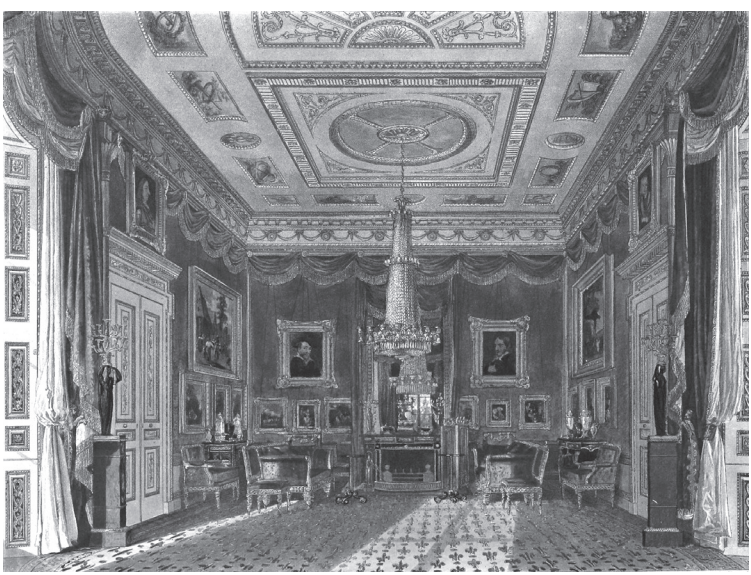

Fig. 3 – *The History of the Royal Residences of Windsor Castle, St James's Palace, Carlton House, Kensington Palace, Hampton Court, Buckingham House and Frogmore*, vol. 3, by W.H. Pyne. 1819. (Getty Research Institute)

Queen Charlotte was also a regular guest at the Duchess of Portland's home, Bulstrode, where she visited together with George III and their children (see Delany 17). Bulstrode seems to have been one of the few places where a kind of "informal sociability" (Campbell Orr 2017, 282) was possible for the royal family, and their shared interest in botany was spurred on by the Duchess's collections in natural history, which must have been on display for visitors, as were the many cabinets that contained them (Tobin 11). Mary Delany describes several such visits, and the difficulties of creating a light-hearted sociability that did not offend royal punctilio (Delany 18–20, 38). Bulstrode may have served as another inspiration to the queen: at Frogmore, she pursued her botanical studies both outside and inside, and she chose this place rather than the other royal palaces to display John Lightfoot's great herbarium which

the King had purchased for her on the death of the botanist. Here she also housed parts of her personal library, which comprised some 4,500 volumes by the time it was sold, and which attracted visitors in its own right. Libraries, too, should be considered as instances of sociable space: "Those who purchased, exchanged, and displayed these works on their shelves participated in a visible sociability among readers of shared tastes and interests," as Susan Broomhall points out (6). Reading was not a pastime the queen pursued in silence or solitude, since she employed a number of readers who would read to her and her daughters in various languages (German, French, English) while she was doing needle-work or having her hair dressed (Fig. 3).

The queen was in fact rarely alone even at Frogmore: her surviving diary entries for 1794 show that she had company most days, and the circle of visitors went well beyond the family. A letter from the queen to Major William Price reveals that more common pastimes were not unknown at Frogmore, and that various people from outside the immediate family circle joined in the fun:

> Grl Cartwright, G. Munster & Yr Friend Grenvil add greatly to our Wednesdays Amusements after Dinner, likewise the Shooting at a Mark with a fine Ladies Set of Bows & Arrows given by C. Taylor, & a Set of Skittles given by the same small & light, all placed in the Barn, which makes a pleasant retreat in all kind of Weather & is very much relished by every body. (30 July 1807, GEO/ADD/2/73)

"My taste," the queen wrote to her son Augustus, "is for a few select Friends whose Chearfullness of Temper & Instructive Conversation will pass the Time away" (qtd in Hedley 180), and instructive conversation she missed sorely at court, or so she told her brother (LHAS 1 July 1783). During the formal Drawing Rooms, conversation was usually limited to a few words that had to be carefully weighed for their possible impact (Ribeiro 171), and the queen may well have bought Frogmore for sociable joys she could not find in the formal atmosphere of Windsor or even Kew: "Frogmore [...] will be less formal," she insisted in a letter to the Prince of Wales (GEO/MAIN/36473). However, Frances Burney, whose extensive experience of sociable London salon conversation and—by then—of Court culture made her an expert judge, diagnosed the queen's problem to be one of educational prejudice rather than lack of conversational means:

> The Queen has a taste for conversation, & the Princesses a good-humoured love of it [...] But what will not prejudice & Education inculcate! They have been brought up to annex silence to respect, & conformity to decorum: to talk, therefore, unbid, or to differ from any but given opinion even when called upon, are regarded as high improprieties, if not presumptions. They none of them do justice to their own minds, while they enforce this subjection upon the minds of others. (Burney VI:47–48).

Salon culture had not yet arrived at court, and it seems unlikely that London-style heated debates with arguments going backwards and forwards, as Burney had known them, would ever have been acceptable in the presence of the royal family. The sociable space the queen created at Frogmore would have mirrored this: Frogmore showed polite elegance and decorum, but did not encourage debate.

Frogmore Fêtes

In 1791, shortly after purchasing the first part of her estate, Queen Charlotte and her daughters actually had breakfast at Montagu House in order to see the famous feather room and the great ballroom, a "must-have" even for an elderly fashionable lady (Blunt II:257; Girouard 194). This was not a simple breakfast in the privacy of Montagu's home: it involved several hundred guests and was reported in the newspapers on the next day (Scobie 123). Breakfasts, by then, could be extended well into the afternoon (Girouard 239). Queen Charlotte's response to Montagu's famous feather room is unrecorded, but she clearly found the idea of a fashionable breakfast inspiring, since she soon offered similar events at her own House at Frogmore. The queen's Frogmore breakfasts must have been a success, since they made their way into Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), probably by means of newspaper reports. Lady Delacour, Belinda's dubious guide to society, has been presented to the queen, and promises a similar treat to her charge: "the Queen is soon to give a charming breakfast at Frogmore, and I am paying my Court with all my might, in hopes of being asked" (Edgeworth 74). Yet Frogmore's *fêtes champêtres* were certainly not events that the heroines of Edgeworth or Austen would have dared to aspire to: they were elite affairs, and meant to dazzle the public.

One of the first great events took place on 8 November 1793, and the queen wrote to the Prince of Wales to request some "glass girandoles" from Carlton House, which duly arrived a few days later. Arranging the display of material objects was an important background activity, one that Princess Elizabeth as Master of the Revels would have been in charge of. The diary of the Windsor gentlewoman Lucy Kennedy furnishes a further account of the preparations for this event (to which she herself did not gain access), which meant hours and hours spent by the female royals and their attendants in creating decorations: artificial flowers that were woven into garlands for the queen's "*own* and Favourite-place" (Kennedy 4). By involving the ladies of Windsor in these preparations, work for which she took care to thank at least Kennedy in person, the queen had gained an interest in the place even among the women of the middling sorts. The ladies seem to have provided similar assistance for another great *fête* given by the queen in May 1795 (Kennedy 21), an event described in detail by William Pyne:

> the lawn in front of the house was covered with sumptuous tents, of various forms and colours, and of considerable dimensions, that formerly belonged to Tippoo Saib [Sultan Tipu, ca.1750–1799], and had been presented to the queen. These were magnificently fitted up, and provided with tables covered with a rich banquet, at which the royal family and nobility dined. (Pyne I:2–3)

It is possible that the Revolutionary Wars made a public demonstration of British splendours necessary, and splendours there were:

> In other parts of the ground there were groups of theatrical and oral performers, equestrians, tumblers, and various assumed characters, to add to the general amusement. The scene was further enlivened by the novelty of a Dutch wake, composed of booths, containing the usual articles that furnish a village fair, as toys, trinkets, &c. These were disposed of for sums at the option of the purchasers, to raise a fund for charitable purposes: hence the innocent gaieties of the fête were made subservient to the cause of benevolence. (Pyne I:2–3)

The newspapers reported that the people of Windsor were sent cards inviting them to mix with the noble guests, and for them, "[a]ctors and actresses in the guise of well-known characters mingled with guests dressed as Savoyards, haymakers, morris dancers and as racers. On the second day, more booths were added and the fair was opened to the general public without the need for a ticket" (Doderer-Winkler 75). According to Melanie Doderer-Winkler, this was in fact a two-day party event thrown to celebrate the Prince of Wales' ill-fated wedding rather than the queen's birthday. Frogmore would soon get embroiled in the quarrels between the Prince of Wales and his wife, Caroline. Already in 1796, the queen carefully informed the Prince of the likely presence of his wife at a Frogmore ball:

> after due Consideration [we] find it more Civil to invite the Princess of Wales upon the Occasion. I thought it right to inform You of it before She knows it which shall not be till Monday as that will give Her Time to prepare Her Dress. […] I hope it will prove a Merry party as the Oranges will be here also & more Company then was originally intended. (24th Sept 1796, GEO/MAIN/36473)

In June 1802, the fact that the queen had again invited the Princess of Wales to a Frogmore fête led to a quarrel between the prince and his mother. Frogmore thus amply supports Amanda Vickery's claim that "homes are implicated in and backdrop to the history of power, gender, the family, privacy, consumerism, design and the decorative arts" (3).

Conclusion: Creating Magic

Enlightenment art was frequently of an ephemeral nature, and particularly so in the context of elite sociability. As Roy Porter notes, "being receptive to enlightened values, [the elites] recognized that their enduring authority must depend upon not might but magic" (267), a magic he claimed was created by means of "a conspicuous show of enviable

lifestyles" based on the possibilities available to a massively expanding consumer culture (267). Magic, for whatever purpose it was used, required art—and much of that art is of the kind that vanishes quickly, art which is consumed or simply discarded at some point, such as artificial flowers. Yet consumption alone does not do justice to the inventiveness of these creations, nor did the magic rely on material wealth alone. Balls, dinner parties and fashionable breakfasts were temporary sociable spaces, involving conversation as well as emotion, and creating this kind of magic was part of the role assigned to elite women, particularly those of the nobility: as Joseph Roach puts it, they learned to "treat [...] the Court as a stage" (164). Even real actors were involved, as theatrical events, too, were offered to dazzle and entertain the public: scenes from Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* were enacted at Frogmore parties (Hedley 234), and in 1805, the queen staged German plays, in German, to which she invited the gentry of Windsor and Eton, including the school boys (Kennedy 56). Another such staging of a German play ended with a popular magic lantern show, a "Phantasmagoria" (Kennedy 57).

Magic was necessary to bridge the social gap between the nobility and the lower sorts even briefly, and some such magic was in full display at Frogmore. Less formal than Windsor, let alone St. James's, Frogmore was ideally suited as a place where even ordinary folks could hope to participate in royal entertainments: for George III's Golden Jubilee on 25 October 1809, the queen invited the tradespeople of Windsor, and the grounds were covered according to the designs of Princess Elizabeth with lamps, magic lanterns, and even an illuminated temporary temple on the lake. When the queen arrived at ten o'clock, fireworks—which were forbidden at the Castle "for Fear of Fire" (Kennedy 104)—started (there was a fire engine at Frogmore), and "on a sudden, and as it were by magic, on the beautiful piece of water opposite the garden front of the house, two triumphal cars, drawn by two sea-horses each, one occupied by Neptune, and preceded by the other with a band of music" appeared (Hedley 234). Frogmore is thus an interesting example of eighteenth-century elite sociability: a nobility which felt obliged to impress the public, meaning that it had to invite that public and tolerate its presence, even to engage it in order to keep it attached to the crown, while at the same time they aimed to keep that public at a certain distance in order to maintain their superiority.

Montagu, too, relied on ephemeral arts to encourage sociability, if of a different kind and for different reasons. The feather works, meant to draw crowds of visitors, soon had to be covered to protect them from the dust. Yet, as Scobie writes, "[i]t is clear that these ephemeral and now-forgotten objects were a means for Montagu to publicize her own status and wealth, and to promote her 'bluestocking' circle within fashionable London society" (Scobie 124), and they certainly fulfilled that purpose. By contrast, it is difficult to surmise whether the conversation at Montagu House proceeded along the old bluestocking lines of the

circle led and guided by Montagu herself—a form of sociable gathering that went out of fashion just then, in the early 1780s, according to Mark Girouard (238)—or to guess how much of it turned on the fine arts, let alone her feather works. Queen Charlotte used Frogmore specifically to avoid the stiff court formality which impeded all conversation beyond a dutiful exchange of small talk, while Montagu may have sought to give her circle a more important standing in society, to present a sociable space fit for a queen to visit. Elizabeth Eger assumes that Montagu mistook her audience for once: "Whereas the original bluestocking meetings at Hill Street had created a uniquely informal space, the grandeur of Montagu House subdued and overawed its visitors" (Eger 2010, 73). And yet, Montagu achieved her personal ambition to be recognized as part of an elite society in her own right, despite her connections to trade. Did female visitors appreciate a particularly female touch, did they see the sociable spaces Montagu and the queen had created as female spaces? No such record remains, and while it is obvious that in general, the sociable spaces that were created everywhere in the country did have a lasting impact on eighteenth-century sociability, a particular effect is much more difficult to prove in the case of individual women's efforts. It seems safe to conclude, however, that both Montagu and the queen were very well satisfied with the sociable spaces they had created, whatever their visitors may have thought of them: as emotional spaces, these houses fulfilled their owners' needs.

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