

Zitierhinweis

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I don't really like my friends—they're people I work with, and our job is being popular.

—Veronica, *Heathers* (1988)

I saw Cady Heron wearing army pants and flip flops, so I bought army pants and flip flops.

—Girl, *Mean Girls* (2004)

What does it mean to be not only the most powerful and the wealthiest, but also the most culturally significant, the most fashionable, the most popular people of all? How does such a group operate? How do individuals get into, stay in, operate within, and get ejected from such a group? In *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London*, Hannah Greig takes these questions seriously and answers them as regards London's *beau monde* during the 18th century. She convincingly argues that fashionability was anything but frivolous. In the process, she also demonstrates how and why we should read material culture; reconfigures political history and its sources; and challenges some arguments about the rise of social mixing in the 18th century.

The Beau Monde is an excellent book. Greig's prose is sparkling and accessible, never overly technical or forbidding to the non-specialist. *The Beau Monde* is also a beautiful book, with lovely illustrations and smooth glossy paper that should appeal to a general interested audience as well as to historians. The book makes significant contributions in a number of fields. Unsurprisingly, given its topic, it contributes to the history of the aristocracy, taking its place alongside the work of Elaine Chalus, Judith S. Lewis, and David Cannadine. It is also an important work of gender history; like Chalus and Lewis, Greig presents a wealth of evidence that many aristocratic women, though technically disenfranchised, were politically engaged and worked alongside their husbands, who sat in the House of Lords or the House of Commons. Perhaps more surprisingly, *The Beau Monde* is an important work of political history – even though it has only one chapter on Parliament. This is indicative of Greig's approach. Greig emphasizes that the social status of the *beau monde* was always inextricably bound up with its political status, and that 'social politics' (the invaluable term was coined by Elaine Chalus) are politics. Finally, *The Beau Monde* contributes to the growing but still quite new field of the history of material culture. Wherever it is possible, Greig recovers and interprets material culture: wall sconces, fabrics, sartorial details, jewels. This approach is extremely important and remains newer than it sounds – while material culture has gotten a lot of attention from historians in the past ten years, and while there are certainly very fine examples of historians using it (1), material culture remains difficult to recover, and just as important, difficult for most historians to interpret profitably. Here Greig's book is a model. Greig is admirably precise in her definitions and her claims. Her definition of the *beau monde* is very precise, taking up most of the introduction (though even that is not enough; there is also an appendix that consists of a 25-page 'supplementary essay' on contemporary uses of and meanings of the term). She never makes her claims larger than they can be, as for instance when she notes that the group of people she is talking about is very small, a few hundred per year, a few thousand over the whole long 18th century (pp. 17, 23). Furthermore Greig has been extremely thorough in her research. She adeptly and appropriately builds on the work of scholars working across a wide range of topics. She uses a wide range of contemporary printed works, such as the admission price lists for the Vauxhall Gardens and the 'most beautiful' lists from the *Morning Post* and the *London Chronicle*. She has also done an amazing amount of old-fashioned legwork in the archives, relying most heavily on widely-dispersed manuscript sources that relate to and were produced by the aristocracy and those who served them and which now are archived in country houses all over England.

The book is comprised of six chapters, plus introduction, conclusion, and the substantial appendix-essay. The introduction begins compellingly, with a description of the bustle of London's West End every autumn during the long 18th century. Greig describes houses being opened, furniture aired, candlesticks polished, grocers and confectioners and wine merchants and jewelers and hairdressers and tailors put on notice. The effect is that of an establishing shot of a film, perhaps no surprise given that Greig has worked as a film consultant. Having

sucked us in, the introduction delineates the topic – ‘the cultural life of the *beau monde* as expressed within and through the London season’ (p. 3) – and the plan to:

scrutinize the ‘world of fashion’ to understand the connections that structured it, the practices that defined it, and the roles, responsibilities, and experiences of its most rarefied members (p. 27).

Following this the bulk of the introduction is concerned with defining and delimiting the *beau monde*. They were that group of high-ranking peers and their relations who possessed not only title and wealth but also urban-based social and cultural authority gained via fashion, consumption, and public display. Her subjects, then, were an elite within an elite, and as such a very ‘tiny minority of the eighteenth-century population’ made up of perhaps three to four thousand people between 1690 and 1840 (p. 19).

The first chapter, on the *beau monde*’s relationship to fashion and material expression, is one of the most interesting, in part because of Greig’s skilled readings of material culture. In this chapter, Greig explores the ways that members of the *beau monde* ‘shared [an] identity forged through material goods’ (p. 46). (She returns to material culture in chapter five, in a detailed discussion of such beauty-enhancing products as beauty patches, pearl-based powder, and mouth plumpers (pp. 172–5). She uses the correspondence of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, and his wife Anne, to move the current scholarship on consumption away from the moment of purchase. Greig argues that:

it was the life of an object *after* purchase – its application, use, and attribution to particular owners – rather than just its allure at the point of sale’ (p. 36, emphasis added) that was of cultural importance. The chapter then takes diamonds as its fascinating case study. Greig explores the ways that during the 18th century diamonds became the highest-status jewels, and uses personal and business accounts to reveal that diamonds were constantly being adjusted, reset, reconfigured, exchanged, shared, and borrowed in a complex system of social and political semiotics. The fashionable were more likely to reset an existing stone into a new piece of jewelry or clothing, or to borrow from a relation or friend, than they were to purchase a new stone. One result was the maintenance of exclusivity: even those *nouveau riche* who could buy diamonds still could not buy the connections that were such a crucial aspect of *beau monde* diamonds (p. 62).

Chapter two is on the *beau monde*’s movements through two types of urban spaces of leisure: pleasure gardens (Vauxhall and Renelagh) and West End theatres. Greig establishes that members of the *beau monde* appeared at these sites frequently and in ways that were ritualized, public, and a form of work. While many historians have argued that that gardens and theatres provided opportunities for meaningful social mixing – because they had relatively affordable tickets, and because many classes of people went to them – Greig effectively demolishes this argument. Greig points out that while tickets to these spaces were within the budget of some gentry, middle-class, and even working-class families, that these people were able to attend only rarely – perhaps once in a season, as a long-anticipated treat, barely affordable and then only if the pricey food and drink were avoided or if the seats were less desirable. In contrast, the *beau monde* went to the gardens and theatres several times per week, sat in the best boxes, and indulged in food, drink, and other extras without worry. Their particular form of attendance was completely different from that of others. In addition, she reveals that proximity did not mean intimacy; in fact it often meant quite the opposite. Members of the provincial gentry or urban middle-class may have gone to the pleasure gardens in hopes of spotting the fashionable, but spotting is very different from engaging with. Meanwhile the fashionable, at these putatively public spaces, went with, for, and to meet one another; they kept to specific areas and routes and did not associate with the populace. Urban sociability was not for mingling; it was a way of consolidating, advertising, and benefiting from prestige and networks.

Chapters three and four, about the *beau monde*'s relationship to the royal court and to Parliament, are the most traditionally political chapters. Chapter three focuses on the ways that outfits worn to court broadcasted political decisions. It makes a contribution to 18th-century political historiography by arguing (alongside Linda Colley and in contrast to G. M. Trevelyan) that both royals and court were, in fact, politically important (104–9). While the sources she cites on the irrelevance of the court are not recent, the perception of the lumpy Hanoverians as somehow sidelined from elite political culture persists and is worth challenging. When we turn to Parliament in chapter four, Greig expands on the important work of Elaine Chalus (2). Most readers will be unsurprised to learn that the culture of the *beau monde* incorporated politics. But Greig goes further, revealing that letters between aristocratic wives and husbands (traditionally seen as sources for history of gender or of the aristocracy but not of politics) are in fact rich sources for political history, however high or narrowly construed.

In chapter five, Greig unpacks the notion of beauty. Acknowledging that beauty is always socially constructed, she argues that when women of the *beau monde* were judged for their beauty, physical and aesthetic concerns were secondary. Greig cites several charts, published in 1776 in the *Morning Post* and the *London Chronicle*, in 1780 in *The Man of Pleasure's Pocket Book*, and in 1793 in the *Gazeteer and New Daily Advertiser* and *Woodfall's Register*, that graded women of the *beau monde* on various attributes (the Duchess of Devonshire always scored at or near the top) (pp. 168, 184). But these scales, Greig points out, were structured with surprisingly little weight given to physical attributes, and with points awarded for things we no longer see as relevant to 'beauty' such as wit, sense, and principles. Beauty, then, was social, and published lists of beauties were not assessments of prettiness: they were acknowledgements of particular women's social status and public profile.

The sixth and final chapter explores the means by which the boundaries of this exclusive club were policed. In the first part of the chapter Greig looks at those who were exiled from the charmed circle, who were almost always sexually transgressive women. Following an adulterous affair that resulted in an illegitimate child, Lady Sarah Bunbury lived in exile in a small country cottage for 12 years; she ultimately remarried and reentered society, but never regained her former status (pp. 197–203). The Duchess of Devonshire faced the same problem – an adulterous affair made evident by a pregnancy – though she fared better, retaining her husband's support and reentering society more fully and after only two years abroad (pp. 213–15). But Lady Susan Fox Strangeways – exiled for marrying an actor – was never able to reenter society in spite of efforts by both the couple and her family (pp. 212–13). In the second part of the chapter, Greig looks at two fascinating imposters, Marmaduke Davenport Esq. and James Molesworth Hobart, who were able to briefly pass as members of the *beau monde*. She stresses, though, that both men were able to fool only the bankers and merchants who served the *beau monde*; they would not have been able to fool members of the *beau monde*.

If I have one quibble regarding this book, it is that Greig could have done a bit more trumpeting of the larger implications of her work. She does this occasionally regarding her innovative use of source material, as when she notes that important evidence regarding elite political culture has been 'long hiding in plain sight' in personal correspondence that historians of high politics usually ignore (p. 155). But Greig could have done more in this regard. If, as she says, the *beau monde* was a tiny elite-within-an-elite, then why should readers who do not already care about the *beau monde* care about the *beau monde* – or about this book? Greig's precision in her terms, and her forthrightness about how small the *beau monde* was, are admirable, and will surely work to preclude some obvious and tedious criticism. However at times it seems that she is working too hard to emphasize how small her group is, allowing readers to wrongly infer that her subject is narrow. This elite, while extremely small, was also extremely influential in fascinatingly multivalent ways; the introduction, indeed the whole book, could emphasize this more. A number of excellent

answers to these questions are (as I hope this review has made clear) implicit in the book, but an explicit discussion would have been nice.

Overall, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* is a fascinating study that deserves a wide readership. Greig's masterful integration of gender, politics, space, and material culture should serve as a model for fellow and future scholars.

Notes

1. For the best example see J. Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2008).

2. For her most recent publications on elite women and politics see E. Chalus, "'Ladies Are Often Very Good Scaffolding': women and politics in the age of Anne", in *British Politics in the Age of Holmes: Geoffrey Holmes's 'British Politics in the Age of Anne' 40 Years On*, ed. Clyve Jones (Oxford, 2009) and *Elite Women in English Political Life, c.1754–1790* (Oxford, 2005).