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Chapter 4

Failed Friendship and the Negotiation of Exclusion in Eighteenth-Century

Polite Society

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Abstract

The discourses on politeness and friendship in the eighteenth century made clear the expectations of correct social deportment by setting down a code of conduct to which genteel women were supposed to subscribe. Yet few female relationships were able to live up to this ideal. This chapter explores the intersection of exclusion and politeness within elite women's sociability through an instance of failed friendship involving Mary Sharpe (later Beauvoir) and her female acquaintances Mary Hamilton (later Dickenson) and Elizabeth Carter. It examines two series of letters exchanged between Sharpe and Hamilton, and Carter and Hamilton, over an eleven-year period between March 1779 and January 1790. This unusual set of correspondence documents the breakdown of this connection and the exclusion and ostracism that resulted. This case study thus enables exploration of the limits of what could be considered acceptable within the context of female friendship and sociability and shows that politeness was as much a force of division as it was for social unity.

Keywords: politeness; sociability; elite women; failed friendship; Mary Hamilton (Dickenson); Mary Sharpe (Beauvoir); Elizabeth Carter; bluestockings; correspondence

Friendship was part of the tissue of social relations that bound eighteenth-century elite English society together. Social acquaintances relied on a combination of politeness, good manners, civility, and occasional benevolence, to navigate the complex structures of elite social activity. Underlying cultural discussions about the advantages of friendship was the tacit recognition that the company one chose to keep could be dangerous and had to be navigated with the greatest caution. Concerned about the rise of affectation and declining standards of morality, Richard Steele summed up this paradox in *The Spectator* in March 1711, when he remarked that ‘the most polite Age is in danger of being the most vicious’.¹ Indeed, despite their explicit claims for inclusivity, friendship and politeness were also exclusive in their application, operating with an implicit and explicit set of social boundaries, rules, and functions.

This chapter explores the intersection of exclusion and politeness within elite women’s sociability through an instance of failed friendship involving Mary Sharpe and her female acquaintances Mary Hamilton and Elizabeth Carter. It is especially concerned with the ambiguity surrounding conceptions of female friendship in eighteenth-century England. The chapter examines two series of letters exchanged between Sharpe and Hamilton, and Carter and Hamilton, over an eleven-year period between March 1779 and January 1790, to argue that politeness was as much a force of division as it was for social unity.² Neither Mary Sharpe nor Mary Hamilton are especially well-known figures of eighteenth-century society, but they moved in prominent elite social, political, and intellectual circles. In later life, Mary Sharpe attained a degree of renown as a travel writer, and her 1796 journey through revolutionary France with her husband Andrew Douglas is documented in their jointly published *Notes of a Journey* (1797).³ Mary Hamilton, who was

governess to George III's children, was also a well-connected woman. In addition to a close relationship with Queen Charlotte, she was part of an intimate circle of literary friends that included Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, Hannah More, Fanny Burney, Elizabeth Vesey, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Horace Walpole.

Sharpe and Hamilton became close friends through their connection to the bluestocking poet and translator Elizabeth Carter, with whom Sharpe said in 1782 that she 'entered easily into the most enthusiastic attachment'.⁴ Their subsequent friendship was characteristic of the rich exchange and intimacy of close friends. But as this chapter will explore, their friendship was fragile. In 1782, Sharpe reported a visible and 'chilling damp' in her relationship with Carter.⁵ Sharpe's friendship with Hamilton, moreover, ended dramatically in 1789 when Hamilton assured Sharpe that 'with truth & in charity' she would never 'attempt a renewal of acquaintance'. Hamilton also declared to Sharpe – in a provocation to enmity that was quite unusual among eighteenth-century women of their shared social rank – that she would continue to regard her 'as I have done since the year 1783 as one of the many instances of the imperfection and fickleness of human nature'.⁶ This chapter pieces together the circumstances that led to the sudden rupture in this once intimate relationship. In doing so, it demonstrates the fragility of inclusion within women's polite circles.

A great deal of historical work has emphasised the power of politeness in a society based upon personal connections. However, scholars have largely overlooked the consequences of failed friendship. One exception is Soile Ylivuori's recent study of politeness, which has problematised the ideals of polite femininity by drawing attention to the deliberately performative, dissimulative, and hypocritical practices employed by eighteenth-century women in their daily lives.⁷ Ylivuori

aside, historians generally fail to acknowledge the importance of exclusion in shaping female identity. In part, this rests on the nature of the surviving sources. Affection, resulting in the exchange of letters, gifts, favours, hospitality, and compliments, often created the conditions for rich archives of documentary evidence, as demonstrated in studies of female sociability by Amanda Herbert and others.⁸ The exchange of such favours, of course, ceased once a relationship came to an end or lost its intimacy. Letters or artefacts from intimates that held a sentimental value or emotional attachment were also more likely to be preserved over those that reminded an individual (or their descendants) of negative encounters or broken friendships. For these reasons, it is unusual to find collections of manuscripts or other artefacts that enable examination of the dissolution of friendships through the writings of their central actors.

The correspondence documenting the demise of Sharpe and Hamilton's friendship thus provides rare historical evidence of the nature of exclusion and social ostracism in elite women's sociability. That said, Sharpe, Carter, and Hamilton's correspondence presents some methodological challenges. In the first instance, studying just one archival collection brings the risk of atypicality, since every human connection is unique. Accordingly, the causes of the breakdown in friendship between Carter, Hamilton, and Sharpe cannot be easily mapped onto other failed relationships. Second, we cannot read these epistles as straightforward transcripts of the connections between these women, especially because the letters that survive are not representative of a full range of correspondence exchanged between them.⁹ Indeed, although all three women are represented in the surviving correspondence that will be examined in this chapter, the majority of letters were either written by Sharpe or Carter.¹⁰

A third challenge concerns interpreting the feelings and emotions expressed in the letters, and distinguishing ‘art and artifice’ from ‘reality’.¹¹ In this respect, it is important to remember that politeness required feelings of anger and rage to be concealed by expressions of civility.¹² Equally, utterances that appear ‘angry’ in the letters might have been offered by their authors with the intention of being humorous in the context of their relationship, which a modern reader may not easily be able to identify.¹³ These methodological complexities do not, however, render the ideas and expressions presented in the surviving correspondence meaningless, especially as the language deployed by Sharpe and Carter throughout their exchanges with Hamilton were remarkably candid and open.

Although we cannot use the relationships between Sharpe, Carter, and Hamilton to generalise about the failed friendships of other eighteenth-century women, this chapter aims to draw attention to the limits of what could be considered acceptable within the context of female friendship and sociability. Like many letters of the English aristocracy, Hamilton and Sharpe’s letters dealt with every aspect of their lives: ranging from brief messages and compliments, to longer and more substantive epistles addressing subjects such as condolence, gossip, family news, or travel. By employing an approach that focuses on both the theory and practice of failed friendships, this chapter aims to offer some thoughts about the connections between what Phil Withington has aptly termed ‘the micro-politics of social practice’ and ‘the larger structures constituting society’.¹⁴ The discussion will be divided into three sections. The first considers the nature of friendship, sociability, and exclusion at a macro level; exploring the tensions and challenges of polite sociability as conveyed in the didactic and prescriptive literature of the time. The second and third sections focus upon Mary Sharpe and her social circle, using the correspondence she and Elizabeth

Carter exchanged with Mary Hamilton to explore why their friendships came to an end. This will enable consideration of the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and exploration of how the guidance about making and retaining friendships might not always have easily mapped on to the messy reality of women's everyday social interactions.

Friendship and exclusion in eighteenth-century advice literature

Friendships were major social relationships in eighteenth-century England, though their meaning and practice varied markedly from how we might understand them today. As Naomi Tadmor has influentially shown, the importance of friendship for men and women of this period rested on that the fact that being identified as a 'friend' did not just apply to individually chosen and affective friendship. Instead, it designated a range of relationships, which could denote kin and a wide range of non-related associates, such as patrons, guardians, business partners, religious companions, and prospective lovers.¹⁵ The interconnection between intimate affective friendship, kinship, patronage, and other economic and political relationships makes any reading of the place of friendship in women's lives particularly hard to gauge. This is further complicated by the fact that eighteenth-century definitions of friendship encompassed both older and more modern meanings. For example, in the mid-eighteenth century Samuel Johnson reported that a friend was 'one who supports you and comforts you while others do not', suggesting the importance of warm attachment.¹⁶ On the other hand, older ideas of 'instrumental' friendship, that rested on interest and self-advancement, also persisted. Friends of this sort, writes Allan Silver, were always treated 'as if they might become enemies'.¹⁷

Shifting conceptions of friendship during the eighteenth century had particular implications for female relationships, since patriarchal inequalities ensured that they were less likely to be economically instrumental than those of their male counterparts. This enabled them to be more emotionally ‘interested’ and affectionate.¹⁸ Historians of eighteenth-century Britain have generally accepted that women had a central place in the spaces and activities of polite sociability. Many would also argue that female company, and affectionate models of friendship most commonly associated with women, came to encapsulate the ideals of civility and good manners expected of people of quality.¹⁹ In discussions about friendship and politeness, women were generally regarded as more open and sincere in their friendships than men: ‘the naturally polite sex’.²⁰ But the rise of women’s participation in polite spaces and conversations brought with it a range of challenges and ideological questions about *who* could be regarded as ‘polite’ and *what* character traits were to be valorised. It also raised the issue of *how* appropriate behaviour should be regulated and *who* was going to be enforcing it. Defining what constituted exclusive behaviour in eighteenth-century sociability is thus fraught with historical challenges because exclusionary practices could be both physical and conceptual, and depended upon intangible elements such as appearance, personality, good humour, influence, marital status, and age.

Whilst politeness, as Paul Langford has shown, ‘had to be attainable’ and potentially within the reach of all, deciding who to exclude from a polite circle was just as important as including the right people.²¹ At a time when social mobility had the potential to enable those lower down the social ladder to enjoy the wealth and polite status enjoyed by the landed elites, it was important for those at the top of society to retain the lifestyle and appropriate manners that traditionally prevailed among their social class. Put another way, there was a need to differentiate between

everyday civility, and close and intimate personal bonding. This issue was particularly sensitive in metropolitan centres like London where, from the late seventeenth century onwards, the development of new civic spaces, the rise of associational culture, and the growth of cultural institutions brought greater access to spaces for sociability, while also producing a degree of social confusion and ‘masquerade’.²² ‘Politeness was a concept which eased and stabilised the demands of urban living’, writes R. H. Sweet, and it was in such spaces that class barriers were less rigid.²³

Nevertheless, the greater promotion of sociability and civility was problematic because the pursuit of status was deeply embedded in metropolitan life and was complicated by the rise of commercialism. Many scholars draw attention to the individual self-interest and ruthless desire for self-improvement that lay at the heart of eighteenth-century London sociability. Indeed, factionalism, divisions, conflict, and anxiety around strangers all became greater possibilities within a more pluralistic society.²⁴ In printed conduct books and treatises aimed at female readers, the importance placed on regulating public interaction highlights a contemporary preoccupation with the dangers that too much sociability could bring. The perils of polite company certainly coloured the advice that George Savile, Marquis of Halifax, gave to his daughter.²⁵ In this text, published in multiple editions in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, he warned of the frequent occasions when women sought to find fault with one another in order to advance their own credit. But above all, it was ‘complaisance’, or a desire to continually please, that Halifax warned would lead to ‘irrecoverable Mistakes’. He wrote to his daughter that it ‘hath led your Sex into more blame, than all other things put together’.²⁶ Too much civility was thus just as dangerous to a woman’s honour as too little.

Life among the metropolitan elite needed constant maintenance. The ever-changing social landscape of the fashionable elite has been explored by Hannah Greig, who draws attention to the ‘constant state of flux’ among this section of society, who routinely drew in new members and ejected others.²⁷ Linked to this was anxiety about the wisdom of contracting friendships with strangers whose social backgrounds and credentials were uncertain. Impressionable young women (and men) were singled out by many of the conduct-book writers as particularly susceptible to the dangers of urban politeness, and as needing the most guidance on how best to navigate their sociable encounters. The Scottish physician Alexander Monro warned his daughter in 1753 that a ‘dangerous Companion’ threatened the very foundations of civil conversation.²⁸ His private counsel was echoed in other printed advice, such as that by the Scottish physician John Gregory in *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (1776). In this, Gregory spoke of the perils of women’s ‘natural propensity’ for friendship. He remarked that it was common for women like his daughters to ‘run into intimacies which you soon have sufficient cause to repent of’, which had the result of making their ‘friendships so very fluctuating’. One of the greatest obstacles, he noted, was a clashing of interests ‘in the pursuits of love, ambition, or vanity’. For this reason, Gregory recommended that a close relationship with a man could often be less dangerous than friendship with another woman.²⁹

The main reason why so much anxiety surrounded the friendship choices of young women was the potential for dishonour once the relationship broke down. Since women did not have the same legal recourse as men, an elite woman’s reputation could be irreparably damaged if her private thoughts and secrets were exposed. ‘When a close knit Friendship slips the knot, or is violently broken in sunder’, *The Ladies Dictionary* declared, ‘Anger and Hatred ensures all the Secrets on

either side ... are let fly abroad to become the entertainment and Laughter of the World'.³⁰ The betrayal of secrets from a broken intimacy was vividly described by one eighteenth-century tract to be like 'Birds let loose from a Cage, and become the Entertainment of the Town'.³¹

The ultimate concern, then, was the potential danger that a former friend or enemy might pose to a young woman's reputation, and by extension their family, kin, and other acquaintances. Concern about carefully guarded secrets being divulged was also revealed in answer to a question asked of the *Athenian Mercury* in 1692 about '*why the greatest enmity succeeds the greatest Friendship and Amity?*' The reply from the Athenian Society drew reference to the fact that the 'Freedom and Converse' of close friendship made the parties involved 'more open to one anothers abuses, whereas other Persons that were strangers to their Breasts cou'd have nothing to say against them, or at least not half so much'.³² Polite ladies were thus to be selective and exclusive when it came to the choice of their closest intimates, but they were also expected to treat their friends with respect and be tolerant of misdemeanours in established friendships to avoid social rupture. As Vickery has argued, women were expected to be 'self-possessed in social encounters, self-controlled in the face of minor provocations, [and] self-sufficient in the midst of ingratitude.'³³

Although we cannot assume that women (or men) passively absorbed the ideals presented in the didactic literature, the fact that much of the advice was copied between texts and that many of these volumes went through multiple editions suggests that the guidance was accepted as the expected social norm.³⁴ Such texts, moreover, illustrate that polite discourses – largely authored by men – positioned women in a self-policing role, which was presented as essential for women to adopt if they wished to be included in polite society. Accordingly, a woman's inclusion within

particular social circles could be tenuous and subject to a range of competing factors. In attempting to establish the basis for ideal friendship, prescriptive texts taught women that the ability to present and conduct themselves with respectability was essential. They were also to be cautious about the dissembling outward veneer of others.

Mary Sharpe's social circle and the politics of politeness

While guidance provided in prescriptive literature relied on cautionary tales to encourage women and men to conform to a set of higher moral standards, it is clear that many of the problems of female friendship that were discussed in such texts were present in the relationship between Mary Sharpe, Mary Hamilton, and Elizabeth Carter. At the same time, their friendship was complicated by the different ways they understood and applied meanings of 'friendship', as demonstrated in the correspondence they exchanged. Sharpe's status was noticeably different from her female acquaintances, even though she occupied a similar social rank and participated in the same spaces of sociability. Her fragile footing on the rungs of polite society meant that her behaviour was closely scrutinised and, as her letters reveal, even she regarded herself as an inferior rather than equal to her correspondents. Consequently, Sharpe's experience of failed friendship and social ostracism is useful for understanding how exclusionary practices coexisted with the seemingly inclusive acts of politeness and civility that have so often been characterised as markers of the more universal commercial society that was emerging at this time.

Unlike many of her elite contemporaries, Mary Sharpe's access to polite society was not straightforward. She was born in London in 1753. She was the daughter of the wealthy politician and aristocrat Fane William Sharpe, MP for Callington, Cornwall. Details are scarce, but she may

have spent some of her minority in residence with the family of her father's friend Thomas Edwards Freeman, MP for Steyning, West Sussex.³⁵ In many respects, her lineage should have guaranteed her a place among the London elite, since she inherited her father's large fortune and family estate at Hertfordshire when he died in 1771. Yet the circumstances of her upbringing made her integration into polite society challenging. In a short autobiographical letter that Sharpe wrote to Hamilton in 1782, she recorded how she had been forced to endure a solitary existence in her teenage years. Here she recounted that from the age of twelve she was confined to the family's Hertfordshire estate in Enfield Chase, in a state of 'the severest solitude', under the careful watch of her father and an unnamed inimical governess. Her father's death, when she was eighteen, left her 'with a large fortune and without a Friend', and, four years later, in 1775, she fled to London to begin her induction into polite society.³⁶ By contemporary standards, this was a rather late age to be beginning such an introduction.

Sharpe's confinement at the family estate occurred at the crucial stage when most young elite women began their polite education and induction into the institutions of urban sociability. Urban sociability was generally centred on young unmarried women – in their mid-teens to mid-twenties – who benefitted greatly from the spaces and opportunities for interaction provided by towns and cities.³⁷ It was through social visits that young women learned about the rituals of sociability with the support of other members of their sex. The absence of this sort of education would have had a serious impact on Sharpe's ability to perform the sociability expected of a woman of her rank. It could also have affected her ability to find a suitor, since the pressure of making a 'good match' forced many young women into frequent public social interactions with members of both sexes.³⁸

As a friendless heiress seeking access to the polite spaces occupied by the London elite, Sharpe came to rely on the patronage of her father's former-physician Doctor John Fothergill. Fothergill took pity on this vulnerable young woman, and subsequently came to act, as Sharpe put it, as 'the Guide the Guardian Protector, and Friend of my helpless inexperienced youth'.³⁹ Sharpe's priority was to establish a close circle of female friends on whom she could rely for support and patronage. Thanks to Dr Fothergill, Sharpe was introduced to the bluestocking Elizabeth Carter, thirty-six years her senior (Figure 4.1). Carter was an unmarried wealthy heiress who was regarded as an important scholar and socialite in London's intellectual circles. Carter was renowned for promoting female education. She also acted as a patroness of aspiring female writers, including Elizabeth Montagu, Catherine Talbot, and Fanny Burney.⁴⁰ The close connection Carter fostered with Mary Sharpe was thus not out of character, and there were many reasons for Fothergill to consider it suitable to place Sharpe under Carter's tutelage. This type of relationship, involving a more mature social sponsor taking an active interest in a much younger woman's social education, was not unique to Carter and was characteristic of other older women of a similar status.⁴¹ It also demonstrates that the application of 'friendship' at this time did not have to apply to women who were equals. Sharpe's relationship to Carter instead confirms how unofficial power hierarchies operated among members of the female elite. Indeed, Sharpe's descriptions of their connection are indicative of a curious state of both combined friendship and unpaid companionship.

[INSERT FIGURE 4.1 HERE]

Figure 4.1. Elizabeth Carter. Engraving after Sir Thomas Lawrence 1808.

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It was through her friendship with Carter that Sharpe became close friends with bluestocking Mary Hamilton (Figure 4.2). In 1777, not long after their first acquaintance, Hamilton began her employment as governess in the court of George III. Despite Hamilton's royal patronage, the connection she shared with Sharpe seems to have been more akin to modern affective friendship than Sharpe's patron-friend relationship with Carter. Early on, Sharpe and Hamilton embraced the intimacy of their relationship and divulged their secrets to one another. Sharpe was particularly grateful to be treated as Hamilton's confidante on matters relating to her position at court, and took her responsibility to 'keep to myself what you say in "confidence"' very seriously.⁴² Although the nature of these confidences is unclear, it is possible that the trusted secrets to which Sharpe was referring related to a situation that had developed between Hamilton and John Dickenson (Hamilton's future husband) in 1777. As indicated in Hamilton's surviving letters and diaries, she started a correspondence with Dickenson in the hopes of 'advancing ye Intimacy & Friendship so long subsisting between or Families'. Dickenson, however, clearly had a different impression of her intentions, as Hamilton noted that he began 'to alter [his] manner of *expression*' towards her. In trying to manage this delicate situation, Hamilton determined that she would no longer write to Dickenson, in order to avoid him '*mistaking* my meaning'.⁴³ Unfortunately, little is known about John Dickenson other than the fact that he was a year younger than Hamilton and from a lesser aristocratic family: the only son of John Dickenson of Birch Hall, Manchester. Dickenson first proposed marriage to Hamilton in 1780, but she refused. She nevertheless regretted this decision, and when he proposed again in 1784, she accepted.⁴⁴

[INSERT FIGURE 4.2 HERE]

Figure 4.2. Mary Hamilton (later Dickenson). Engraved frontispiece to *Mary Hamilton: Afterwards Mrs. John Dickenson: At Court and at Home* (1925). © Yale Center for British Art. Reference number: DA483 D5 A4 1925 (LC).

Being privy to such intimate information about her friend's thoughts, relationships, and feelings was clearly a great source of pride for Sharpe. In one letter from May 1781, Sharpe acknowledged the 'pleasure' she experienced at being deemed worthy of Hamilton's confidences, despite the fact that Hamilton had 'suffered some painful sensations' in divulging her thoughts and feelings on such matters. The seeming pleasure she took from her friend's misfortunes, Sharpe explained, lay in the fact that sharing them affirmed the special place she held in Hamilton's 'affection'.⁴⁵ On leaving court in 1782, Hamilton lived as an independent woman, dedicating much of her time in London to her female friends until her marriage to Dickenson in 1785.

Sharpe's deep emotional investment in her relationships with Carter and Hamilton is continually present in her extant correspondence, where she frequently reflected on the importance of harmonious friendship. By 1782, she had become so intimate with her patron that she claimed to have 'sacrificed every thing to my feelings for her [Carter]'. She also wrote that she viewed her intimate friendship with Hamilton as a 'sacred union, with so much uncommon worth'.⁴⁶ Though Sharpe's friendship with Hamilton was of a very different nature to her connection with Carter, various evidence in the surviving correspondence suggests that all three women generally conformed to the ideals of polite sociability expected of eighteenth-century women of quality. They enquired of one another's health, discussed works of literature, undertook social visits, breakfasted together, attended important social gatherings, and accompanied one another to the

theatre. They also regularly took the waters at Bath and spent a great deal of time participating in the Spa town's fashionable social life.

In 1779, Sharpe also undertook the valuable role of acting as Carter's travel companion during a tour of western and northern England.⁴⁷ Carter suffered from debilitating headaches, and during their travels Sharpe nursed and cared for her during these frequent bouts of illness. The intimacy and emotional investment Sharpe placed in her alliances was reinforced in March 1780, when she requested a piece of Hamilton's hair 'to make a locket for a bracelet, as a companion to one I have of our dear Mrs Carters'.⁴⁸ The exchange of hair had served as a symbolic gesture of their close love and affection, and suggests that Sharpe viewed her relationship with Carter and Hamilton as inviolable and lasting.⁴⁹

Mary Sharpe and the consequences of failed friendship

The early intimacy of the group's friendship nevertheless faltered over time. The outward displays of intimacy and affection that the women had initially shown to one another became tinged by the challenges of friendship formation, especially when the relationship began to take a more negative turn. A notable turning point came in 1782, when Sharpe agreed to marry the much older Reverend Dr Osmond Beauvoir – twenty-five years her senior – without seeking the consent of her acquaintances. Little is known about Beauvoir or his connection to bluestockings like Sharpe and Carter. All that can be established is that he was Master of the King's School at Canterbury School, which like many institutions of the age would have had links to the Anglican church and thus had connections to London.⁵⁰ Although Sharpe defended the reasons for keeping her engagement with Beauvoir secret, which stemmed from the opposition she had encountered from some of her

relatives, she failed to follow conventional norms, where it was expected that a young woman's 'friends' would act as intermediaries in arranging courtship and marriage.⁵¹ Undue secrecy in conducting marital arrangements, as David Vincent, has argued, was 'mistrusted' because 'it heightened the possibility that inexperienced lovers might make an irrevocable decision unsupervised by their more responsible elders'.⁵² This was demonstrated in the trials of Samuel Richardson's protagonist Clarissa, whose failure to heed the advice of her friends and relatives had damaging and destructive consequences.⁵³ Hamilton had of course disclosed John Dickenson's proposal in 1780, and possibly felt that the failure of Sharpe to discuss her own marital arrangements showed a lack of friendship reciprocity.

Elizabeth Carter opposed the match, as did many of Sharpe's other acquaintances. Sharpe, like Carter, was an heiress who did not need to marry for financial security, and had previously declared that she wished to remain independent and single.⁵⁴ The death of her guardian and former-protector Dr Fothergill in December 1780, however, may have altered her views on marriage. There are hints, for instance, that without her male protector, she may have felt in need of male guidance, especially in overseeing matters relating to her estate. This was encapsulated in a comment Hester Chapone made to Mary Delaney shortly after the marriage, in which she noted that Sharpe may be happier married to Beauvoir than 'in a single life, for she certainly wanted a protector and guide in the management of her large fortune'.⁵⁵ Sharpe also confided to Hamilton that Fothergill's death had made her feel like 'a solitary creature in the midst of this gay world', suggesting that this personal tragedy had altered her views on the need for male companionship.⁵⁶ It is nevertheless evident that her acquaintances did not regard the marriage as a 'good match'. In part this may have been because Beauvoir's fortune, as Master of Canterbury School, was no match for Sharpe's. His

advanced age may also have been a cause for concern. Chapone, diplomatically remarked that she hoped Beauvoir would be ‘an indulgent *father* to her [Sharpe]’, but also noted that the marriage was a ‘union none of her friends could have advised’.⁵⁷

Pursuing a life dedicated to intellectual pursuits rather than domestic responsibility was a hallmark of bluestocking culture. Since Sharpe had previously expressed her wish to remain single, her actions seemed to be defying the reason and virtue that lay at the heart of bluestocking sociability.⁵⁸ Elizabeth Carter had made a conscious decision not to marry in order to preserve her independence, enabling her to continue her intellectual pursuits. It has also been shown that marriage had a profound effect on women’s status and social identities.⁵⁹ As Mark Philp has argued in his study of the middling ranks of London society in the 1790s, women’s social networks and social lives were strongly dictated by their husbands’ professional connections and interests. Few women were able maintain the friendships they had cultivated prior to marriage with the same degree of intensity.⁶⁰ There was thus a great deal of potential for marriage to restrict the sociability and intellectual achievements that bluestocking culture tried so hard to foster.

A great deal of ambiguity remained around the issue of marriages driven by love and passion versus those conducted out of economic interest, as was the question of what a socially acceptable courtship might look like. The Scottish physician, John Gregory, for instance, encouraged his female readers to keep ‘love matters’ a secret from friends because laying ‘the heart open to any person ... does not appear to me consistent with the perfection of female delicacy’.⁶¹ Yet it is clear that Sharpe’s concealment of her intended marriage to Beauvoir was considered beyond the bounds of respectable behaviour by her close female acquaintances. Although there is very little evidence

to ascertain why Sharpe's friends objected to the match, the treatment of some of her contemporaries offer hints about how marriage matters could become problematic at all sorts of levels. Hester Thrale's marriage to her daughter's Italian singing master, Gabriel Piozzi, in 1784 was regarded as troubling by her former-bluestocking associates for a variety of reasons, not least because she was a wealthy middle-aged widow marrying a poor professional musician.⁶² The response of even Thrale's closest friends was harsh. Aside from the unsuitability of the match, it seems that much of the social ostracism Thrale faced rested on the way in which the courtship was conducted, which involved an open display of passion for Piozzi.⁶³ Indeed, a mature woman publicising her passionate feelings caused a general outrage across polite society, and, in contrast to Sharpe's secrecy, Thrale's public display of passion for Piozzi directly contravened the 'female delicacy' advocated by conduct writers like Gregory.

The marriage of Thrale's friend and servant Fanny Burney to Alexandre d'Arblay in 1794 was similarly complex and reveals another layer to the tensions that lay at the heart of courtship among the upper echelons of late eighteenth-century society. Burney, like Mary Hamilton, was employed in the royal household, which meant that she wished to avoid public scandal to prevent falling out of favour with Queen Charlotte. Such a fall from grace would have resulted in the loss of her pension, her sole dependable income.⁶⁴ D'Arblay was a Roman Catholic liberal French emigre, who not only seemed like an unsuitable match on religious and political grounds, but also because his presence in England posed a serious challenge to the English war effort against France. Although her marriage to d'Arblay came as a great surprise to many of her acquaintances, Burney managed to secure the reluctant consent of her father and used her writings as a means of supporting herself financially as she increasingly distanced herself from metropolitan life.⁶⁵

Although Burney avoided the same degree of public scandal as her mentor Hester Thrale, her troubled courtship is revealing of how marriage proved such a problematic issue for well-connected women. It underscores the uncertain grounds on which an elite woman's social inclusion might be lost and friendships broken.

In this light, it is possible to interpret Sharpe's marriage as being perceived by Carter as a betrayal of female self-advancement and friendship. A glimpse of Carter's views on marriage are evident in a letter from February 1783, when she praised Hamilton for putting an end to a match that would have resulted in 'so disproportionate an alliance'. Carter likened such an act to Hamilton's 'bright silver' being sullied as she became 'manacled by Fetters of old rusty Iron'.⁶⁶ It is arguable that alongside the secret courtship, Carter opposed Sharpe's marriage to the elderly Beauvoir on the grounds that interest rather than genuine affection was the prime motivation for the match. Carter's opposition was so strong that Sharpe was forced to confess that 'An unhappy division' had arisen between them since she accepted Beauvoir's offer, which created a 'shadow of a coolness between us'.⁶⁷ Although both Carter and Sharpe insisted that their cooling relationship was temporary, their interaction and communication with one another seems to have entirely ceased after this point. In February 1783, for instance, Carter noted to Hamilton that Sharpe's improper behaviour 'has put an end to our Interaction'.⁶⁸

The reasons for Carter objecting to Sharpe's marriage to Beauvoir are unknown. It is evident that she must have had a personal connection to the Beauvoir family, as she was highly invested in the education and living arrangements of Beauvoir's daughter, Betty, which both Sharpe and Carter reference in their letters to Hamilton.⁶⁹ Although the details of this dispute remain scant, Carter

commented that Betty had gone ‘to her Father to say she sh[oul]d be unhappy to live with me’. This suggests that Carter had intended to educate the young woman herself and resented Sharpe’s complicity in her removal to another household in Bristol.⁷⁰ Carter wrote of these arrangements in July 1782, when she expressed her hopes that Betty’s moral and religious principles would prosper under the tutelage of ‘this excellent Family as I believe them to be’. The family to which Carter is referring is unidentified, but despite her good wishes, this matter was clearly a source of personal consternation. In her letters she said that this had been ‘a severe stroke’ that she had ‘inhumanly been made to suffer’.⁷¹

Given her own solitary upbringing, as well as her lack of close familial female relationships, it is likely that Sharpe was particularly sensitive to Betty’s needs, and respected them, even if they met with disapproval from Carter. Although aware of the context that may have governed Sharpe’s actions, Carter viewed the case as one where she had not been shown proper gratitude and respect, and Sharpe’s actions as akin to betrayal. Carter regarded Betty’s removal to Bristol as evidence that Sharpe viewed her as incapable of providing a suitable education for the young girl. She described the situation as ‘a subject which always stabs me to the Heart’.⁷² That Carter felt entitled to feel such grievance over Sharpe’s choice of education for her stepdaughter suggests that the boundaries of familial relationships and friendship were significantly blurred, for Sharpe – in her position as stepmother to Betty – had no reason to defer to Carter matters about the girl’s education.

The marriage also strained Sharpe’s relationship with Hamilton. Since Hamilton’s views on the matter do not survive, it is only possible to speculate as to why their relationship also broke down. Their cooling friendship can certainly be observed from the decline in frequency of their

communication in the years after the marriage.⁷³ Hamilton was clearly aggrieved by Sharpe's treatment of their former champion and, although she did not directly intervene, she was unequivocal that Sharpe had been in the wrong and felt it was necessary that she 'made overtures to Mrs Carter for a reconciliation'.⁷⁴ Sharpe and Hamilton nevertheless remained in contact after the marriage, and it was to Hamilton that Sharpe divulged the cooling friendship with Carter. Sharpe entreated her friend not to say 'a word ... to any one, nor let her perceive you suspect the shadow of a coolness between us'.⁷⁵

Hamilton, however, disclosed this confidential information to Carter, and petitioned her friend for advice on whether she should continue her acquaintance with Sharpe. This suggests that Hamilton too held reservations about the appropriateness of the match, or at least about the manner in which it came about. Carter responded by defending her own behaviour, describing the breach as 'entirely her [Sharpe's] own operation in every particular', but was also clear that she did not want Hamilton's and Sharpe's friendship to suffer as a result. She accordingly encouraged Hamilton to answer Sharpe's letter, acknowledging that 'I will not endeavour to lessen her in your esteem, or to encourage & heighten my own painful Feelings by dwelling on the Injuries I have received'.⁷⁶ In February 1783, Carter even berated Hamilton for refusing to accept an invitation by Sharpe. 'Though she has thought proper to act in such a manner with me', Carter wrote, 'I have never endeavoured to set any one person against her' and thus 'cannot see why you should not accept of her invitation'.⁷⁷

Carter's active promotion of Sharpe and Hamilton's friendship suggests that she continued to hold her former charge with a degree of affection. Clearly, she was hurt by Sharpe's behaviour and no

longer wished to associate with her, but she evidently did not wish ill on her. Hamilton's friendship with Sharpe, on the other hand, seems to have been more superficial. Although it is unclear why Hamilton had begun to withdraw her intimacy from Sharpe, her correspondence with Carter suggests that she may have had her own reservations about being associated with an unruly female acquaintance. In fact, distancing herself from Sharpe may have been a form of self-inflicted punishment for failing to censure Sharpe's behaviour before the affair with Beauvoir had reached the point of no return. After all, the advice literature of this period advised women against making hasty friendships since all parties could be drawn into scandal through the inappropriate behaviour of their acquaintances. The anonymously published *Young Lady's Companion* (1740), a text that was presented as a letter of advice written to a young girl by her father, offered guidance to the fictitious recipient who had entered into friendship with an individual held in contempt by polite society. The authorial father character explained that choosing a friend implied approval of them, and that a woman making a bad choice should expect to be shunned 'and condemned to pay an equal Share with such a Friend of the Reputation she hath lost'.⁷⁸ Thus the young woman who had failed to correctly police her relationships and exercise the utmost caution when choosing a friend faced a similar degree of social exclusion to her unruly female companion.

Hamilton married not long after Sharpe, but her marriage to John Dickenson in 1785 seems to have received Carter's approval. The match, however, appears to have been far from equal. As already noted, Dickenson was a year younger than Hamilton and he was an heir to a much smaller estate than Hamilton.⁷⁹ Given Carter's praise of Hamilton in February 1783, for ending a match that would have resulted in a 'disproportionate alliance', it is interesting that Hamilton appears to have maintained her status and respectability within their social network.⁸⁰ Hamilton had consulted

Carter and her other female companions about the courtship, which may have given the relationship an air of decorum. Moreover, since Hamilton had been honest about the relationship and open about her regrets of refusing Dickenson's first marriage proposal in 1780, her conduct may have appeared less dissimulative than Sharpe's.

Adding to the increasing cooling of the friendship, Hamilton failed to heed Sharpe's appeal for secrecy in sharing information with Carter that she wished to keep private. This resulted in a great rupture in their relationship, as revealed in a letter from July 1789, when Sharpe made reference to her former friend's 'impropriety' and intrusion 'on my distress'.⁸¹ Patricia Meyer Spacks has shown the important place that carefully guarded secrets held in ideas about privacy in the eighteenth century, and it is clear from this exchange that Sharpe viewed this as a significant breach of trust.⁸² It was Hamilton's failure to remain 'silent on the subject' that Sharpe later blamed for her inability to reconcile with Carter.⁸³ Although Hamilton assured Sharpe of her innocence on this matter, the accusation of breaking confidence was enough for Hamilton to end the friendship.

Secrets were regarded in the contemporary advice literature as 'sacred deposits', and disclosing a friend's confidences to others was an act singled out for censure.⁸⁴ Although Hamilton's breach of Sharpe's confidence was perhaps a greater betrayal of friendship than Sharpe's secret elopement to Beauvoir, no apology from Hamilton was forthcoming. Instead, she made it clear that Sharpe's accusation of her inability to stay quiet about her friends' cooling relationship was a 'rude' and 'ill bred' indictment not becoming for a gentlewoman.⁸⁵ In such a competitive world where social capital was at the centre of a woman's reputation, any accusation of disloyalty could be highly damaging. Charles Allen, for instance, warned in his 1769 work *The Polite Lady* that keeping the

secrets of a friend where the relationship had broken would ‘procure the love and esteem of every one that knows you’. Those who betrayed their former friend’s confidences, on the other hand, would be shunned. Female readers were warned that they would ‘incur the hatred of all the world’ and create ‘a great many enemies’.⁸⁶ Hamilton was obviously deeply perturbed at the indictment of being an unreliable confidante even after the friendship had dissolved. She went on to explain that she would continue to regard Sharpe as she had done ‘since the year 1783 as one of the many instances of the imperfection and fickleness of human nature’.⁸⁷

Although Sharpe’s marriage to Beauvoir precipitated the end of their friendship, a number of underlying tensions presaged its demise. Prescriptive literature presented ideal friendship as carefully selected on the basis of equality and mutual satisfaction, but it is clear that this friendship did not match up to this ideal. Sharpe, who had been left a large fortune on the death of her father, was certainly of a similar social rank to her female acquaintances. Yet, her seclusion from polite sociability during those formative teenage years rendered her socially inexperienced, isolated, and lonely. She was forced to acknowledge that the death of her guardian, Dr Fothergill, in 1780 left her in a state of dependence, in which she was forced to ‘lean on every creature I meet for support’.⁸⁸ This meant that Sharpe never viewed herself as an equal in her friendships with Carter and Hamilton, and was, indeed, never treated as such by her friends.

Connected to this, there were many ways in which hierarchies of power and subordination played out in complicated ways in this web of friendship. Carter, who essentially acted as Sharpe’s sponsor and introduced her to the polite circles of London, took the place of a maternal figure rather than close confidante. In one letter dated 1781, Sharpe described Carter as her ‘dear Mama’,

and it is clear that it was social education, rather than companionship, that was the primary basis of their connection.⁸⁹ Some of Sharpe's comments after the cooling relationship, moreover, are tinged with a slight frustration that she was forced to negotiate her sociability whilst caring for and nursing Carter during frequent bouts of ill-health, to the point where she claimed to have 'sacrificed' her own health and wellbeing 'to my feelings for her'.⁹⁰ Carter was sympathetic to the plight of young women in an intellectual male-dominated world. Yet the power she held over Sharpe affirms that exploitation was as characteristic of relationships between women as it was between men and women. As Ylivuori observes, networks of power did not just exist between men and women. 'Instead, women often found themselves dependent on other women in different and complicated ways.'⁹¹

Carter, a wealthy and unmarried member of the social elite, was clearly a woman who wielded a great deal of power over her female acquaintances. Both Sharpe and Hamilton were ambiguously subordinate to her. Sharpe had a great deal to gain from her association with Carter. Yet, friendship with a young woman whose background was unknown, flouted the very rules of politeness that she herself seems to have advocated. In fact, a criticism Carter made about her acquaintance Mrs Nollekens, who had gained a reputation for not selecting her female acquaintances 'equally well or wisely', suggests that Carter upheld the view of the advice literature that friendship needed to be selective and well-matched.⁹² After the friendship between Hamilton and Sharpe eroded, Hamilton explained that she had been 'solicited' by Carter to make an acquaintance with Sharpe and had subsequently 'entered into a friendship'.⁹³ This level of influence suggests that neither Sharpe or Hamilton were entirely in control of their relationship with one another, or the social acquaintances who surrounded them.

Despite Carter's intervention in Hamilton and Sharpe's friendship, the two women were clearly compatible in terms of their age and social status. Yet, underpinning some of the statements from Sharpe's correspondence to Hamilton is a sense that she felt Hamilton, who was more socially accomplished and experienced, placed lesser value on the friendship than she did. This suggests that there was a whole range of unofficial power hierarchies at play. The deference that Sharpe paid to Hamilton in her letters, where evidence of her sense of social inferiority is most acute, may also have related to Hamilton's position at Court. Indeed, although showing courtesy and respect was a recognised feature of female sociable bonding, Sharpe markedly expressed her thanks for the friendship 'bestowed on me' and 'for permitting me to see you'.⁹⁴

It is possible that Hamilton also viewed the 'friendship' in this way, and deliberately cultivated it as one between a social superior and inferior. We might infer that the uncertain basis on which the relationship was conducted suggests that Hamilton's exchanges with Sharpe were simply displays of civility, deliberately uttered to please Carter. At the same time, it could be argued that following the dissolution of the friendship, Hamilton revised history to suit her personal narrative to lessen her sense of betrayal for herself and her remaining friends by claiming that the friendship had been 'bestowed' on Sharpe rather than mutually entered into. This underscores the tension between the performance of outward courtesy and genuine intimacy between select and exclusive company, as regularly discussed in the conduct literature. In this context, Hamilton's friendship with Sharpe can be seen as a means of enhancing her own friendship with Carter rather than an extension of true friendship to Sharpe.

In a society dependent on credit and small favours, a degree of flattery and dissimulation was necessary to create a sense of bonding and belonging. However, the prescriptive literature made clear that this desire to please was potentially highly dangerous since false flattery and complaisance could easily tip over to hypocrisy. The highest form of dissimulation, as one author declared, occurred when individuals ‘not only cloud their real Sentiments and Intentions, but make Profession of, and seem zealously to affect the contrary: This by a more proper and restrain’d Name is call’d Deceit’.⁹⁵ This critique highlights the tension between the external performance of polite duties and the naturalness and sincerity expected of women of quality.

Given that the foundation of the friendship was uneasy, it is not surprising that Sharpe felt insecure about her acceptance into Hamilton’s circle of acquaintance. There are times when Sharpe apologised for failing to match up to her friend’s expectations, particularly when it came to social visits. In May 1779, Sharpe felt obliged to write ‘by way of penance’ after ‘your accusations of neglect, unkindness, unfriendliness & so forth’, when she was unable to call on Hamilton the previous Saturday morning. The reason for her inability to fulfil her social obligations, she explained, was because her coach was being repaired. She begged for a prompt reply as proof ‘that you are convinced of my innocence’.⁹⁶ Sharpe’s letter clearly did enough to overcome such accusations, but a similar situation arose the following year when she was forced to write again after failing to visit her friend at Eastbourne. She knew this was a matter about which Hamilton would be ‘very much disposed to be angry’. The reason on this occasion was ill health, which made the long coach journey from Deal impossible. Sharpe hoped that her ‘justification’ would prevent her friend ‘harbour[ing] any ideas prejudicial to the sincerity of my wishes to see you’.⁹⁷

In a culture that was conducted through a combination of regular face-to-face interaction and a reliable postal service, it is clear that much anxiety surrounded long-distance friendship. The process of sending and receiving letters, as Vincent has shown, ‘added a layer of anxiety to intimate discourse’. It was never clear whether a delayed reply had been caused by the recipient, the method of delivery, or because the writer had offended the recipient, who had then chosen not to reply.⁹⁸ Hamilton’s epistolary silences were the source of concern for Sharpe, leading to questions about whether her letters had gone missing or if she had done something to offend her acquaintance. Writing from Deal in August 1779, Sharpe requested her friend to write ‘but two or three times just to say how you do and whether you have my letter’, which she had written six or seven weeks ago. This was a matter, she declared, ‘which for a particular reason I very much wish to know’. She playfully threatened that if she were to hear that her friend had received the letter and chosen not to reply, then she would ‘call up all my scolding abilities ... and use them as seems meet on such occasions’.⁹⁹ Although, this threat was entirely in jest, underlying her enquiry was a genuine concern that she had been deliberately ignored by her confidante. This was exacerbated by the fact that she was displaced from the centres of polite sociability in London at the time of writing.

Other components of Sharpe and Hamilton’s relationship were also tinged with a concern that their actions might be misjudged by the other. Both women valorised the sincerity of their friendship, but there was clearly unease about whether the words and actions of the other were genuine. This tension was revealed by Sharpe in a letter dated 24 August 1779, when she expressed her delight at having received a letter from Hamilton. She went on to explain that during her friend’s long silence, she had begun to fear that all of her correspondent’s previous ‘friendly expressions’ had merely been ‘forms of civility’ rather than ‘indications of kind regard’.¹⁰⁰ Her anxiety that

Hamilton's past expressions of kindness were simply affectation reflects the deep-seated concern present in the conduct literature about the falsity and dissimulation inherent in female sociability. As the sex thought to be more naturally predisposed to politeness, women were taught to deny their own thoughts and inclinations, which meant that some level of dissimulation was constantly present in their practice of politeness.¹⁰¹ Sharpe's anxiety thus reflected one of the ambiguities raised by contemporary authors about how to discern natural sincerity from affectation or feigned sentiments.

As Sharpe and Hamilton's relationship took a more negative turn, the delicate balance of reputation on the basis of social inclusion raised issues about who had the upper hand in a dispute and how power could be exercised appropriately. Sharpe, for example, felt shunned in public spaces by Hamilton. In one letter, she accused her friend of failing to visit when she came to Bath two years previously, describing how 'I heard nothing of you ... tho' I passed you more than once in the street'. Sharpe attributed this public shaming to her falling out with Carter, and she blamed Hamilton for her fickleness in being unable to treat her with respect, accusing Hamilton of failing 'to permit the civilities of my friendship and acquaintance' now that she was no longer an 'intimate of Mrs Carter'.¹⁰² She viewed it as unlikely that Hamilton would attempt to renew their friendship when she no longer had Carter as her champion. Hamilton, however, declared that the erosion of their friendship was entirely due to Sharpe's actions. She explained that when she had tried to attract Sharpe's attention from the window of Lady Finch's drawing room, Sharpe had ignored her. She was also agitated by Sharpe's refusal of an invitation to wait on her whilst she was in Bath. Hamilton alleged that her hospitality was continually shunned until 'I never heard anything more from you'.¹⁰³

[INSERT FIGURE 4.3 HERE]

**[IF POSSIBLE, PLEASE CROP THE BLACK AND WHITE RULER ON THE LEFT
HAND SIDE OF THE IMAGE]**

Figure 4.3. Letter from Mary Hamilton (Dickenson) to Mary Sharpe

(Beauvoir) dated 24 August 1789, where Hamilton breaks off the alliance.

© John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, Mary Hamilton Papers,

HAM/1/22/54.

As the friendship unravelled, the smallest lapses in politeness shifted the guilt from one party to the other. Shortly after the death of Mr Beauvoir in 1789, Sharpe was perturbed that her former friend (now Mrs Dickenson) had sent her husband to deliver condolences. Sharpe was suspicious about the timing of Hamilton's attempt to renew their friendship and viewed it as 'glaringly insulting to the memory of my beloved husband'. She was also angered that her former friend had not come in person. She explained that had her housekeeper not had the foresight to turn John Dickenson away, she would 'have been under of giving pain to a stranger, by confessing my opinion of the impropriety of a person who has behaved to me as Miss Hamilton did, intruding on my distress'. Her discontent with Hamilton led her to resolve that as long as she had 'life and understanding' she would accept no attention from anyone whose 'behaviour ha[d] been disrespectful' of her husband during his lifetime.¹⁰⁴

Sharpe's decision to address her former friend as 'Miss Hamilton', rather than by her married name, adds an interesting layer to the deepness of their rupture, since it indicates a lack of respect and deference. Indeed, Hamilton was so disturbed by Sharpe's response that she petitioned Carter

for information on the matter, to which Carter responded that she knew nothing, explaining that ‘there must have been some strange refusal [i]ntended in the delivery of your Civilities to occasion her giving so outrageous a Return to them as you describe’. Hamilton was worried that news of this dispute might have become the talk of the town, yet Carter reassured her that ‘I had heard nothing of it till your letter’.¹⁰⁵ Politeness was thus used as the yardstick for both Hamilton and Sharpe to scrutinise and judge the actions of the other. Whether it was in ignoring one another in public or failing to maintain obligations of social visiting and correspondence, both women drew upon notions of exclusion to dismiss the behaviour of the other as impolite and thus to justify the denial of intimacy.

Conclusion

The discourses on politeness and friendship made clear the expectations of correct social deportment by setting down a code of conduct to which genteel women were supposed to subscribe. The dispute between Mary Sharpe and her female acquaintances thus throws into sharp relief the vulnerability of friendship and the tensions inherent in eighteenth-century ideals of polite sociability. As the didactic literature made clear, women were at once the exemplars of politeness and prone to enter into inappropriate relationships, behaviour, and discourse. Whilst women like Hamilton and Carter saw themselves as having a particular duty to support a young woman lacking a polite education, the relationship they built with Sharpe also reaffirmed her status as a dependent and social inferior. Indeed, Mary Sharpe’s change of fortunes from friendless orphan to bluestocking and then to outcast is indicative of the fragility of inclusion into polite circles, and raises interesting questions about how power was judged and exercised.

Inclusion within polite society could bring women status, honour, and patronage, but it also restricted the agency they could exercise as individuals. Their actions and behaviour were scrutinised by their female acquaintances and, when they were judged to be falling short, they could find themselves subject to gossip, slander, and ridicule. Politeness thus became a mechanism for maintaining norms and served as a benchmark for gauging the failure of female acquaintances in particular contexts. It is clear that marriage and questions surrounding the suitability of the match between Sharpe and Reverend Beauvoir were central to the breakdown of the relationship with Hamilton and Carter, but even before the marriage was proposed, Sharpe's letters are filled with inflections of uncertainty about Hamilton's commitment to their friendship. This insecurity stemmed from her doubts about the authenticity of Hamilton's feelings and is symbolic of the practices of dissimulation spelled out in the prescriptive literature of this period. Though women's experiences could never match up to the ideals set out in such texts, it is nevertheless possible to see the types of activities and behaviours that might disrupt such ideals. The politics and rituals of inclusion and exclusion for eighteenth-century women should thus be seen as a deeply complex and multifaceted phenomenon intimately linked to questions of status, power, and social capital in a highly competitive genteel world.

Notes

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¹ Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, no. 6, 7 March 1711, in Donald F. Bond (ed.), *The Spectator* (5 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), i. 30.

² Manchester, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, GB 133 HAM/1/22/1-54, Mary Hamilton Papers (1743–1826) (hereafter GB 133 HAM/1/22).

³ Andrew Douglas, *Notes of a Journey from Berne to England, Through France. Made in the Year 1796*, part 2 (London, 1797).

⁴ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ GB 133 HAM/1/22/54, 24 August 1789.

⁷ Soile Ylivuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England: Bodies, Identities, and Power* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁸ Amanda Herbert *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 2014); Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), esp. 195–223; and Susan E. Whyman, *Sociability and Power in Late Stuart England: The Cultural Worlds of the Verneys 1660–1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. 87–109.

⁹ This is something that Vickery observed when comparing the correspondence network of Elizabeth Shackleton with the social encounters she records in her diaries. She concludes that letters from kin are over-represented in the archives, whilst other letters from correspondents with whom Shackleton regularly communicated and socialised do not survive. Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter*, 29–30.

¹⁰ The extensive and understudied records of Mary Hamilton's social encounters are documented in 2,474 pieces of correspondence, 16 diaries, and 6 manuscript volumes housed at the John Rylands Library in Manchester. Sharpe's letters to Hamilton form part of this collection. Around 189 of Elizabeth Carter's letters and notes to Mary Hamilton are housed at the Houghton Library in Boston, MA. I have only found one letter written by Hamilton relating to this dispute: GB 133 HAM/1/22/54, 24 August 1789. This was the letter where she ended the relationship.

¹¹ Whyman, *Sociability and Power*, 11.

¹² Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter*, 8.

¹³ Similar complexities are discussed by Sally Holloway in "'You know I am all on fire": Writing the Adulterous Affair in England, c.1740–1830', *Historical Research*, 89, no. 244 (2016), 320.

¹⁴ Phil Withington, 'Company and Sociability in Early Modern England', *Social History*, 32 (2007), 307.

¹⁵ Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 167–72.

¹⁶ James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson, Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales*, ed. by George B. Hill (6 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934–1964), iii. 386–91.

¹⁷ Allan Silver, 'Friendship in Commercial Society: Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Modern Sociology', *American Journal of Sociology*, 95 (1990), 1487.

¹⁸ Instrumentalism and interested and disinterested friendship are explored by Silver in 'Friendship in Commercial Society', 1474–1504.

¹⁹ Lawrence E. Klein, 'Gender, Conversation and the Public Sphere in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds), *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 110–11. See also Whyman, *Sociability and Power*, 4, 93–100.

²⁰ Ylivuori, *Women and Politeness*, 39.

²¹ Paul Langford, 'The Uses of Eighteenth-Century Politeness', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), 314.

²² On the masquerade see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 157–76.

²³ R.H. Sweet, 'Topographies of Politeness', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), 366.

²⁴ See Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 278; Elaine Chalus, 'Elite Women, Social Politics, and the Political World of Late Eighteenth-Century England', *The Historical Journal*, 43 (2002), 677.

²⁵ This title was first published in 1688 and new editions were still appearing in print in the 1790s, which included translations in French and Italian. Kathryn Woods has traced 15 editions of this text in print by 1765. Kathryn Woods,

‘Dismembering Appearances: The Cultural Meaning of the Body and its Parts in Eighteenth-Century Understanding’, unpublished PhD thesis (University of Edinburgh, 2014), 260.

²⁶ George Savile, Marquis of Halifax, *The Lady's New-Years Gift: Or Advice to A Daughter* (London, 1688), 95–125.

²⁷ Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 192–228.

²⁸ Alexander Monro (primus), *The Professor's Daughter: An Essay on Female Conduct* (1739), ed. by P.A.G. Monro, M.D. (Cambridge: P.A.G Monro, 1995), 50.

²⁹ John Gregory [Lord Gregory], *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters. By the Late Dr. Gregory, of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1776), 73–4.

³⁰ N.H., *The Ladies Dictionary; Being a General Entertainment for the Fair-Sex* (London, 1694), 223.

³¹ Anon. [A person of quality], *The Young Lady's Companion; Or, Beauty's Looking-Glass* (London, 1740), 50. This echoed in George Savile's (Marquis of Halifax) view on friendship in *The Lady's New-Years Gift: Or Advice to A Daughter* (London, 1688), 117–8.

³² *The Athenian Mercury*, vol. 6, no. 29, 26 March 1692.

³³ Vickery, *Gentleman's Daughter*, 8.

³⁴ For a good discussion of the ways in which conduct literature was balanced with the demands of everyday life and social station see Ingrid H. Tague, *Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690–1760* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2002), 218–223.

³⁵ Although Sharpe makes no mention of this arrangement in her writings, her father, Fane William Sharpe, made provisions in his will for Mary to reside for the remainder of her minority with Freeman: Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke (eds), *History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1745–1790* (London, 1964 and online) <<https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/sharpe-fane-william-1729-71>>. Accessed 3 October 2019.

³⁶ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

³⁷ Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650–1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?* (London: Longman, 1998), 133.

³⁸ Tague, *Women of Quality*, 72–96.

³⁹ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

⁴⁰ For more on Carter see the entry for ‘Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), poet, translator, and writer’ in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)* (Oxford, 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/4782>>.

⁴¹ Chalus, ‘Elite Women’, 689. Ylivuori also explores this phenomenon in *Women and Politeness*, 57–8.

⁴² GB 133 HAM/1/22/35, South Lodge [Enfield], 28 June 1781.

⁴³ Elizabeth Anson and Florence Anson, *Mary Hamilton, Afterwards Mrs John Dickenson at Court and at Home from Letters and Diaries* (London, 1925), 53. I am grateful to Mark Philp for this reference.

⁴⁴ Lisa Crawley, ‘A Life Recovered: Mary Hamilton 1756–1816’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 90 (2014), 30.

⁴⁵ GB 133 HAM/1/22/34, Bath, 13 May 1781.

⁴⁶ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

⁴⁷ Sharpe’s travels with Carter receives passing mention in Montagu Pennington’s, *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs Elizabeth Carter*, second edition (London, 1808), 457–8. The journey is also referenced in GB 133 HAM/1/22/9, Henley, 17 May 1779; and GB 133 HAM/1/22/10, 11 June 1779.

⁴⁸ GB 133 HAM/1/22/20, Stanhope Street [London], 30 March 1780.

⁴⁹ Sally Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions, and Material Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 81.

⁵⁰ Augusta Hall (ed.), *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany* (6 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1862), vi. 118. Evidence that he was Master of the King’s School is found in the catalogue of the muniments of the hospitals of St Nicholas, Harbledown and St John the Baptist, Northgate, Canterbury. The preface of this was signed by ‘the Revd. Mr. Osmond Beauvoir A.M., Master of the King’s School at Canterbury A.D. 1765’. Lambeth Palace Library, MS 1132, 1765, 1895.

⁵¹ The opposition Sharpe encountered is documented in a letter Hester Chapone wrote to Mary Delaney on 9 November 1782, where she hints that Sharpe’s uncle had tried to prevent the marriage by putting delays in their way. Hall (ed.), *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville*, 119.

⁵² David Vincent, *Privacy: A Short History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 38.

⁵³ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa: Or, The History of a Young Lady* (London, 1747–1748), 21. See also Tadmor, *Family and Friends*, 261.

⁵⁴ She makes reference to this and her ‘friendship’ with Beauvoir in GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

⁵⁵ Mrs Chapone to Mrs Delany, 9 November 1782, in Hall (ed.), *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville*, 119.

⁵⁶ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

⁵⁷ Mrs Chapone to Mrs Delany, 9 November 1782, in Hall (ed.), *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville*, 119.

⁵⁸ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

⁵⁹ See for example Tague, *Women of Quality*, 72–96.

⁶⁰ Mark Philp, *Radical Conduct: Politics, Sociability and Equality in London 1789–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: forthcoming, 2020), 93–122, esp. 100–101.

⁶¹ Gregory, *A Father’s Legacy*, 66–7.

⁶² For more on Thrale’s marriage to Piozzi see James L. Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 203–32.

⁶³ Clifford, *Hester Lynch Piozzi*, 218–20; and Claire Harman, *Fanny Burney: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 168–99.

⁶⁴ Harman, *Fanny Burney*, 236.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 226–46.

⁶⁶ The prospective suitor remains unnamed in their correspondence. Boston, MA, Houghton Library, University of Harvard, bMS Eng 1778, Elizabeth Carer and Hannah More letters to Mary Hamilton, Box 2, fol. 50, Deal [Kent], 6 June 1784 (hereafter bMS Eng 1778).

⁶⁷ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

⁶⁸ bMS Eng 1778, fol. 31, 16 February 1783.

⁶⁹ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782; bMS Eng 1778, fols. 17 and 23, Deal [Kent], 1 July 1782 and 21 September 1782.

⁷⁰ bMS Eng 1778, fol. 16, Deal [Kent], 31 May 1782.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, fol. 18, Deal 29 July 1782.

⁷² *Ibid.*, fol. 23, Deal 21 September 1782.

⁷³ Only 9 letters and notes survive in the period between Sharpe's marriage in 1782 and Hamilton and Sharpe's dispute in 1778, none of which is more than a few lines in length.

⁷⁴ GB 133 HAM/1/22/54, 25 August 1789.

⁷⁵ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

⁷⁶ bMS Eng 1778, fol. 23, Deal [Kent], 21 September 1782.

⁷⁷ bMS Eng 1778, fol. 31, 16 February 1783.

⁷⁸ Anon., *The Young Lady's Companion*, 50–52.

⁷⁹ Crawley, 'A Life Recovered', 30.

⁸⁰ bMS Eng 1778, fol. 50, Deal [Kent], 6 June 1784.

⁸¹ GB 133 HAM/1/22/52, Bath, 31 July 1789.

⁸² Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 15.

⁸³ GB 133 HAM/1/22/52, Bath, 31 July 1789.

⁸⁴ Gregory, *A Father's Legacy*, 66.

⁸⁵ GB 133 HAM/1/22/54, 25 August 1789.

⁸⁶ Charles Allen, *The Polite Lady: Or a Course of Female Education. In a series of Letters, From a Mother to Her Daughter* (London, 1769), 72.

⁸⁷ GB 133 HAM/1/22/54, 25 August 1789.

⁸⁸ GB 133 HAM/1/22/37, Stanhope Street [London], 27 January 1782.

⁸⁹ GB 133 HAM/1/22/9, Henley, 17 May 1779.

⁹⁰ GB 133 HAM/1/22/43, North Parade [Bath], 14 April 1782.

⁹¹ Ylivuori, *Women and Politeness*, 57.

⁹² Quoted in Philp, *Radical Conduct*, 19.

⁹³ GB 133 HAM/1/22/54, 24 August 1789.

⁹⁴ GB 133 HAM/1/22/12, Tunbridge Wells, 24 August 1779; GB 133 HAM/1/22/37, Stanhope Street [London], 27 January 1782.

⁹⁵ Anon., *An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex. In a Letter to a Lady. Written by a Lady*, fourth edition (London, 1721), 102.

⁹⁶ GB 133 HAM/1/22/9, Henley, 17 May 1779.

⁹⁷ GB 133 HAM/1/22/29, Deal [Kent], 20 September 1780.

⁹⁸ Vincent, *Privacy*, 19.

⁹⁹ GB 133 HAM/1/22/11, Deal [Kent], 6 August 1779.

¹⁰⁰ GB 133 HAM/1/22/12, Tunbridge Wells, 24 August 1779.

¹⁰¹ See for example Monro, *The Professor's Daughter*, 21.

¹⁰² GB 133 HAM/1/22/52, Bath, 31 July 1789.

¹⁰³ GB 133 HAM/1/22/54, 25 August 1789.

¹⁰⁴ GB 133 HAM/1/22/52, Bath, 31 July 1789.

¹⁰⁵ bMS Eng 1778, fol. 87, Chapel Street [London], 8 January 1790.