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**NETWORKS OF SOCIABILITY  
IN ALLAN RAMSAY'S *THE FAIR ASSEMBLY***

*Rhona Brown*

In 1723, Allan Ramsay (1686-1758) published *The Fair Assembly, A Poem*. In these seemingly simple, laudatory verses celebrating the beauty of Edinburgh's aristocratic ladies, Ramsay engages with a number of controversial contemporary debates, thereby subtly betraying his own sympathies. At the heart of these debates is the Assembly, a weekly social gathering of the city's elite in the newly-established Assembly Rooms off the High Street. At these gatherings, young, aristocratic women could meet young, aristocratic men and marriage matches could be made; they could engage in strictly monitored dance and polite conversation. A letter from Miss Stuart of Donibristle to Mrs Dunbar at Muirton of 28 January 1723 describes a typical evening:

They have got an assembly at Edinburgh where every Thursday they meet and dance from four o'clock to eleven at night; it is half-a-crown the ticket, and whatever tea, coffee, chocalate, biscuit, etc., they call for.<sup>1</sup>

An earlier Edinburgh Assembly, in 1710, had, according to James H. Jamieson, been inspired by an English model, "after Queen Anne went to Bath in 1703 to take the waters" and "a most famous assembly was established there" (Jamieson, 42). The newly-constituted Assembly of 1723, however, was a particularly Scottish institution which faced particularly Scottish challenges. Moreover, the Bath Assembly had been presided over by a "celebrated man of fashion," Richard "Beau" Nash (1674-1761) (Jamieson, 42). Edinburgh's 1723 Assembly, by contrast, was managed by five "Directresses": Lady Margaret Maule (née Hamilton), Countess of Panmure (c.1668-1731); Elizabeth Hay (née Seton), Lady Drumelzier (b.1668); Margaret Hamilton (née Hamilton), Lady Orbiston (b.c.1666); Katherine Pringle (née Johnston), Lady Newhall (d.1755) and Anne Dalrymple (née Horn), Lady North Berwick. Women were at the

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Jamieson, "Social Assemblies of the Eighteenth Century," *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, 19 (1933), 31-91 (42).

helm of this prominent sociable enterprise and, according to Katharine Glover, it was “the first time in Scotland that women had occupied such a formal, public social role.”<sup>2</sup> Some of the ladies’ familial connections linked them to the Jacobite cause, and the Assembly’s emphasis on dancing and conversation made it a target for Presbyterian preachers, who saw it as a den of “public or promiscuous amusement.”<sup>3</sup> This essay analyses the networks of Edinburgh’s 1723 Assembly, as revealed through Ramsay’s poem of the same year. It investigates the public debate which raged around the Assembly’s morality, as well as the family connections of its Directresses. In its contribution to these debates, Ramsay’s ‘Fair Assembly’ gives a complex perspective on the battle for the meaning of “improvement” in early Enlightenment Edinburgh.

Ramsay’s first publication of “The Fair Assembly,” dated 28 June 1723, coincided with news of the Assembly’s establishment.<sup>4</sup> He specifies that the poem is “in the Royal Stanza,” with a note to explain the name:

So called, being invented by *James* the First, King of *Scots*, whose incomparable Poem in these Measures will be admired as long as Images justly represented give Pleasure in flowing Numbers and sonorous Rhyme (*Fair Assembly*, 5).<sup>5</sup>

Ramsay’s poem on the Assembly and the women who manage and attend it is thus given the authority and stately respect of Rhyme Royal, a stanza form now known to have been originated by Chaucer, but which was in Ramsay’s time thought to have been the invention of James I of Scotland (1394-1437), author of *The Kingis Quair*. Ramsay’s invocation of royal prestige prepares the ground for a poem on the aristocratic and moral authority of the Assembly’s Directresses, but also sets the foundations for a different kind of authority: that of the House of Stuart, symbolised historically by James I, and in the eighteenth-century present by the Assembly. Certainly, for Robert Chambers, Ramsay’s open support for the Assembly was linked to his semi-concealed Jacobitism:

Ramsay was secretly a Jacobite, openly a dissenter from the severe manners and feelings of his day, although a very decent and regular

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<sup>2</sup> Katharine Glover, *Elite Women and Polite Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011), 95.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh; or Sketches and Anecdotes of the City in Former Times* (Edinburgh: printed by William Chambers for Robert Chambers, 1824 [-1826]; rpt. Edinburgh: Chambers, 1996), 44. Prefatory matter quoted from this edition is cited by page number below parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Allan Ramsay, *The Fair Assembly, a Poem* (Edinburgh: printed and sold at the Mercury, opposite to the Cross-Well, 1723). Cited below parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Ramsay’s is a variation on the seven-line Rhyme Royal stanza, with an eight-line stanza and an alternative rhyme scheme.

attender of the Old Church in St Giles's. He delighted in music and theatricals, and ... encouraged the Assembly.<sup>6</sup>

Ramsay's placing of himself as pro-Assembly in a poem composed in a significant literary form of pre-Union Scotland which was created, as he supposed, by no less than a fifteenth-century Stuart monarch, was a confident move by an established poet which revealed, rather than concealed, his political and moral sensibilities.

The 1723 edition of *The Fair Assembly* features two epigraphs on its title-page. The first, credited to "Millæus," reads: "*Jacobethia virgo/Inchoat, & gestu cantum comitante figurat,*" which is translated in the second epigraph: "*Miriam* presiding o'er the Female Throng, / Begins, and suits the Movement to the Song."<sup>7</sup> The epigraphs invoke the Biblical authority of Exodus 15:20: "And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dances." Miriam's dance after the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, while the pursuing Egyptians drowned, may have had political resonance, but it was also frequently referenced by historians of dance, as in the comment that "the leader of the dance was she who first started it, generally a person of high rank, like Miriam."<sup>8</sup> The feminisation of "Jacobus" brings Rhyme Royal and, by implication, the Stuart cause to the forefront, while the virgin's gesturing encourages deeper reading than the surface text would suggest, as well as consideration of the symbolism of dance. Ramsay's apt motto thus establishes a trio of authorities to which his poem will defer: pre-Hanoverian Scotland, the morality of high-ranking females, and dance as a positive and Biblically-endorsed pursuit, all of

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<sup>6</sup> Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Antonius Millieus, S.J., of Lyon (1574-1646), *Moyses Viator* (orig. 2 parts, Lugduni [Lyon]: J. & P. Prost, 1636-1639; Dillingaeg [Dillingen]: J. Caspar Bencard, 1680), Lib. VI, 163. Ramsay's probable source for both the Latin original and the English verse translation was John Weaver, *An Essay towards an History of Dancing* (London: Tonson, 1712), 60-62; Ramsay footnotes Weaver's *History on Fair Assembly*, 7. The same English translation was used by many later writers, as in, e.g., G.M.S. Chivers, *The Dancer's Guide* (London: T. Dunham, 1821), 108; *The Young Lady's Book: A Manual of Elegant Recreations, Exercises, and Pursuits* (London: Branston, 1829), 398-99; and W.B. Hart, *Hart's Defence of the Art and Practice of Dancing ... with a Few Words to the Rev. F. Close and the Denouncers of our Rational Amusements* (Cheltenham: for the Author, 1847), 23. I am grateful to Linda Knox and Steven Reid at the University of Glasgow for initial assistance with the Latin epigraph.

<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Lilly Grove [Elisabeth Johanna de Boys Grove, later Lady Frazer], *et. al., Dancing, ... with musical examples [Badminton Library of Sports and Pastimes]* (London: Longmans, 1895; new impr., 1907), 26.

which are key concerns of the poem and of the fierce debate on the merits and demerits of Edinburgh's new Assembly.

Ramsay's 1723 edition of *The Fair Assembly* also features a warmly supportive Dedication "To the Managers, Right Honourable Ladies," though this was not retained when the poem was reprinted in Ramsay's subscribers' edition of his *Poems* (1728). He begins by congratulating them for bringing improvement to Scotland through sociability:

How much is our whole Nation indebted to your Ladyships for Your reasonable and laudable Undertaking to introduce Politeness amongst us, by a chearful Entertainment, which is highly for the Advantage of both Body and Mind, in all this is becoming in the Brave and Beautiful; well forseeing that a barbarous Rusticity ill suits them, who in fuller Years must act with an Address superior to the common Class of Mankind; and it is undeniable, that nothing pleases more, nor commands more Respect, than an easy, disingaged and genteel Manner (*Fair Assembly*, 3).

While, as demonstrated below, the Assembly's opponents would take issue with its ability to "improve" manners, Ramsay welcomes the Assembly's potential to increase "Politeness" in the city. Moreover, his description of ideal manners as "easy, disingaged and genteel" recalls the central concerns of Edinburgh's Easy Club, founded in 1712, of which he was an original member. The Easy Club prized relaxed or "easy" manners and trained its young male participants in the acquisition of the attributes and appellation of "gentleman." Ramsay's poem "The Gentleman's Qualifications" (1721) states that its members' shared aim is "to walk by Virtue's Rules" (l.54) and to attain their desired title through carefully monitored sociability, reading and conversation:

The Vote was carried thus, That easy he  
Who should three Years a social Fellow be,  
And to our *Easy Club* give no Offence,  
After *Triennial* Tryal, should commence  
A Gentleman, which gives as just a Claim  
To that great Title, as the Blast of Fame (ll.44-49).<sup>9</sup>

If an Easy Club member attended for three years without giving "Offence," he assumed the title of "Gentleman." In its publications, debates and central concerns, Murray Pittock has argued, the Easy Club was, like the Assembly, associated with Jacobitism.<sup>10</sup> In Ramsay's *Weltanschauung*,

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<sup>9</sup> "The Gentleman's Qualifications, as debated by some of the Fellows of the Easy Club, April 1715," in Burns Martin and John W. Oliver, eds, *The Works of Allan Ramsay*, 6 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1945), I: 199-201.

<sup>10</sup> Murray G.H. Pittock, "Were the Easy Club Jacobites?," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 17.1 (1990): 91-94.

then, sociability—for men and women, equally—is associated with a coveted “easiness” of manners, which is the companion of gentility and virtue. The unspoken part of this equation of improvement is Jacobitism: just as the Easy Club lauded Jacobite icons, most notably Archibald Pitcairne (1652-1713), so too the Assembly became a symbol of “easiness” in the face of Presbyterian persecution. In Chambers’s view,

Everything that could be called public or promiscuous entertainment was held in abhorrence by the Presbyterians, and only struggled through a desultory and degraded existence by favour of the Jacobites, who have always been a less strait-laced part of the community.<sup>11</sup>

In his Dedication, Ramsay does not summon English icons of sociability, such as Bath, but utilises the Scots vernacular in his defence of the Directresses’ sociable enterprise:

What can be more disagreeable, than to see one with a stupid Impudence saying and acting Things the most shocking amongst the Polite, or others (in plain Scots) blate and bumbaz’d, fyking how to behave, conscious of their own Want of Breeding, sit upon Nettles all the Time that their ill Luck throws them into good Company (*The Fair Assembly*, 3).

Although in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries vernacular Scots became associated with the working classes, Ramsay makes no such class differentiation in addressing his “Right Honourable Ladies.”<sup>12</sup> His description of uncultivated Scots as “blate and bumbaz’d,” or sheepish and bewildered, emphasises his belief in the primacy of Scottish language and culture, while his use of Scots is unapologetic: he does not question that his aristocratic dedicatees will comprehend his meaning. According to Glover’s reading of the Dedication, the “improvement” brought about by the Assembly would be accomplished by imitating English models; she argues that

Scots who had not been brought up to understand the specific manners and behaviours associated with such spaces would be at risk of coming across as awkward when called upon to frequent them in future—for instance, when visiting London.<sup>13</sup>

Glover’s assumption that “refined” manners, and therefore models of improvement, were to be sought from London does not fit comfortably with *The Fair Assembly*. Ramsay makes no appeal for Anglicisation in his

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<sup>11</sup> Chambers, *Traditions of Edinburgh*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> See John Corbett, Derrick McClure and Jane Stuart Smith, “A Brief History of Scots,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scots*, ed. John Corbett, Derrick McClure and Jane Stuart-Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 1-17.

<sup>13</sup> Glover, *Elite Women*, 7.

Dedication or poem: his cherished authorities are those of pre- rather than post-Union Scotland, while his poem is in Scots. It is not that Scots require “improvement” through Anglicisation, but rather that uncultivated manners are refined through imitation of the “Patterns” provided by the Directresses (*Fair Assembly*, 4). In Ramsay’s world-view, “improvement” comes from within Scotland, rather than from without.

Ramsay continues in astonishment that the Assembly has opponents: “’Tis amazing to imagine, that any are so destitute of good Sense and Manners, as to drop the least unfavourable Sentiment against the FAIR ASSEMBLY” (*ibid.*). His rhetorical strategy is to expose foolish extremes of thought in debates surrounding the Assembly, which are dismissed as ridiculous in the context of easy gentility and reasonable improvement:

The Church has been, and in many Countries is the chief Place for Assignations that are not warrantable. Wine, one of Heaven’s kindly Blessings, may be used to one’s Hurt. The Beauty of the FAIR, which is the great Preserver of Harmony and Society, has been the Ruin of many. Learning, which assists in raising the Mind of Man up to the Class of Spirits, has given many a one’s Brain a wrong Cast. So Places design’d for healthful and mannerly Dancing, have, by People of an unhappy Turn, been debauch’d by introducing Gaming, Drunkenness and undecent Familiarities. But will any argue from these, that we must have no Churches, no Wine, no Beauties, no Literature, nor Dancing? Forbid it Heaven! (*ibid.*).

All things can be used for good or ill, argues Ramsay, while the Directresses’ example “must be improving and beneficial in every Respect” (*ibid.*). The motives of his “Right Honourable Ladies” remain unquestioned, while those who oppose them are good-naturedly but firmly dismissed via the shared “reasonable” virtue of Ramsay and his dedicatees. Nevertheless, the holograph manuscript of the poem is more forthright in its rejection of Presbyterian concerns about the Assembly:

The Greatest Reason I heard once a merghite advance for his hatred at dancing was that the Deel & Witches shake a foot at their midnight meetings and that the said black gentleman leads the Ring with a Candle in a particular socket and wonderfull it is to think hou a candle should burn with its head down in such a windy place, while he is cutting a caper with his Cloven Cloots – let the wisdom of this Reason answer for its veracity.<sup>14</sup>

*The Fair Assembly*’s progress from the salty honesty of the manuscript, through the forthright allusions of its first publication to the subtlety of the subscribers’ edition of 1728, which lacks the Dedication and epigraphs, is

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<sup>14</sup> *The Fair Assembly*, holograph manuscript, National Library of Scotland: NLS MS 567, note at l.109.

characteristic of Ramsay's approach. He may seek a wide audience for his collected edition and therefore curtail his criticism of Presbyterian rigidity and irrationality, but the history of the poem from manuscript to print demonstrates his satirical motivations.

*The Fair Assembly* begins with Ramsay defining his intended audience: "Now *Caledonian Nymphs*, attend, / For 'tis to you I sing" (ll. 7-8).<sup>15</sup> His advice to "the fair Daughters" and "rising Generation" of contemporary Scotland, addressed in his preface, is that dancing is positive for body and mind: "'Tis Dancing can do mair alane, / Than Drugs frae far away" (ll. 21-22). Ramsay provides two bolstering footnotes to support this argument (*Fair Assembly*, 7 n.). The first, from John Locke (1632-1704), states that dancing gives children "much becoming Confidence and Behaviour" which "raise[s] them to the Conversation of those above their Age."<sup>16</sup> The second is from the dancer, ballet master, choreographer and pantomime author, John Weaver (1673-1760):

It is certain, that for want of a competent Knowledge in this Art of Dancing, which should have been learned when young, the Public loses many a Man of exquisite Intellectuals and unbyass'd Probity, purely for Want of that so necessary Accomplishment, Assurance.<sup>17</sup>

For Ramsay, as for his chosen authorities, dancing is not mere entertainment, but serves as a means by which young people can improve their health and confidence. Dancing allows them to dispense with awkward rusticity to attain easiness and assurance, thus improving their ability in conversation; in turn, conversation engenders "improvement" of manners, as per the example of the Easy Club. In Ramsay's formulation, the Assembly enables personal improvement which engenders, by extension, national improvement.

Ramsay's attention now turns to the Presbyterian clergymen who spoke out in virulent opposition to what they saw as "promiscuous entertainment." Their objection is, according to Ramsay, absurd: not only is dancing Biblically endorsed in the example of Miriam, so too is the marriage, or "haly Wedlock Bands" (l.44), facilitated by the Assembly. For Ramsay, "when equal Pairs, / Together join their Hands" (ll.41-42), "Hell's

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<sup>15</sup> Quotations from Allan Ramsay, *Poems, Volume II* (Edinburgh: Thomas Ruddiman, for the Author, 1728): 195-205, the text used in Martin and Oliver, II (STS, 1953): 129-135, and *Collected Works of Allen Ramsay: Poems*, ed. Rhona Brown (forthcoming); line numbers to STS and CWAR are given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>16</sup> John W. Yolton and Jean S. Yolton, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, [Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke] (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989; repr. 2001), 125. Ramsay's reference to Locke comes from Weaver, as in n. 7, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Weaver, as in n. 7 above, 24.



doctrine dung" (1.41). Moreover, states Ramsay's footnote (p. 9 n), the Bible's "first Command" is "*Dixit et Deus, Fætificate, augescite & implete terram*" (*Fair Assembly*, 9 n.), or, according to Genesis 1:28 in the English bible, "And God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth."

Ramsay's knowing reference to "Hell" shows him engaging directly with contemporary writings against the Assembly. Glover states that Lady Margaret Maule, a leading Directress,

informed her husband that the assembly was railed against by the Presbyterian ministers, and it was soon condemned in print in a lengthy pamphlet which summarised assemblies as 'dishonourable to GOD, scandalous to Religion, and of dangerous Consequence to Human Society' (Glover, 7).

There were indeed many condemnations of the Assembly. "On one occasion," according to Chambers, "the company were assaulted by an infuriated rabble, and the door of their hall perforated with red-hot spits" (Chambers, 44). A contemporary Presbyterian commentator, Patrick Walker, drew parallels between the Assembly and previous institutions:

Some years ago we had a profane, obscene meeting called "The Horn-order": and now we have got a new assembly and publick meeting called "Love for Love," but more truly, "Lust for Lust"; all nurseries of profanity and vanity and excitements to base lusts.<sup>18</sup>

The Horn Order, initiated by the third Earl of Selkirk, had aroused hostility as, in Chambers's words, "a species of masquerade, in which the sexes were mixed, and all ranks confounded" (Chambers, 173; cf. Jamieson, 34-35).

If Presbyterian critics connected the perceived promiscuity of the Horn Order to the Edinburgh Assembly, they may also have been aware of familial connections between the organisers of both ventures: the most prominent of the Directresses was Lady Margaret Maule, Countess of Panmure, whose father, William Hamilton (formerly Douglas, 1634-94), was styled first Earl of Selkirk following his Roman Catholic father's (short-lived) decision to give Douglas a Protestant education.<sup>19</sup> John Hamilton, third Earl of Selkirk (1664-1744), the man responsible for the Horn Order, was the son of William Hamilton and so Margaret Maule's brother. Moreover, the husband to whom Margaret Maule writes complaining of Presbyterian opposition may also have attracted their ire. James Maule, fourth Earl of Panmure (1658/9-1723), an active Jacobite

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<sup>18</sup> Patrick Walker, *Six Saints of the Covenant: Peden, Semple, Wellwood, Cameron, Cargill, Smith* (2 Vols), (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1901), Vol. 1, 160-61.

<sup>19</sup> See Rosalind K. Marshall, "Hamilton [formerly Douglas], William, third duke of Hamilton (1634-1694)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

and anti-unionist, was in 1723 at the time of the Assembly exiled in France. Maule had

proclaimed the Pretender (James Stuart) as James VIII and III at Brechin and raised a regiment of foot which numbered 415 men and fought at the battle of Sheriffmuir on 13 November ... In January 1716 he entertained James at Brechin Castle, and following the collapse of the rebellion in February he escaped to France.<sup>20</sup>

Shortly afterwards, he had been attainted, and his lands were not reclaimed by the family till 1764. A knowledgeable Edinburgh audience would have been aware of these connections, which set a key Assembly Directress and, by extension, the Assembly itself, in opposition to their critics on moral, religious and, potentially, political grounds.

Anti-Assembly propaganda was also to be found in contemporary conduct-books. Adam Petrie's *Rules of Good Deportment* (1720) had opposed Weaver's and Ramsay's view that dancing builds confidence and improves manners:

The reading of lewd Books, keeping of bad Company, and promiscuous Dancing, are Incendiaries of Lust. By this Means Persons suck in Poison; they live in infectious Air, and plot their own Ruin. They dart Poison to the Heart through the Avenues of the Senses, and convey Death to their Souls. These are the Devil's Tools he uses to work Men into Destruction, and into everlasting Chains of Darkness.<sup>21</sup>

Both Petrie and Walker condemn dancing as an incitement to lust. For Walker, the "incendiary" to "ruin" is not only dancing itself, but the ways in which women choose to dress at such gatherings:

Some years ago our women deformed their heads with cockups; and now they deform their bodies with hoops or fardingales, nine yards about, some of them in three stories, very unbecoming in women professing godliness, more fit for harlots.<sup>22</sup>

Arguably, at the heart of Walker's criticism of the Assembly lies the offensive managerial role of women. Glover asserts that the Directresses

seized the opportunity to transpose their private, domestic role as hostesses into the public setting of the Edinburgh Assembly rooms, where ... they presided over a company consisting of both women and men (Glover, 95).

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<sup>20</sup> Stuart Handley, "Maule, James, Fourth Earl of Panmure (1658/59-1723)" in *ODNB* (2004).

<sup>21</sup> Adam Petrie, *Rules of Good Deportment, or of Good Breeding, for the Use of Youth* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1720), 112.

<sup>22</sup> Walker, *Six Saints*, 160.

The Assembly brought the sexes together in a sociable space to indulge in dancing, but it also allowed women with questionable fashion sense and problematic political connections to preside over men in a new and, for its opponents, vexatious collision of private and public worlds.

Ramsay's *The Fair Assembly* describes such adversaries as "Sourocks, hafflines Fool, haf Knave" (l. 125), emphasising their irrationality, unscrupulousness and peevish perversity. In dismissing their concerns, he again cites Biblical authority:

Your Hearts! said I, trowth I'm to blame,  
 I had amaist forgotten,  
 That if ye to nae sic Organ claim;  
 Or if ye do, 'tis rotten.  
 A Saul with sic a throwless Flame,  
 Is sure a silly Sot ane;  
 Ye scandalize the human Frame,  
 When in our Shape begotten (ll.129-36).

In another Biblical allusion, this time to Genesis 1:27 ("So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female he created them"), Ramsay reminds the Assembly's opponents that "scandalizing" the "human frame" is akin to scandalising God. Moreover, Ramsay is no stranger to the debate on female dress. While Walker condemns hoops and fardingales as clothing for harlots, Ramsay's *The Scriblers lash'd* (1718) had ridiculed such criticisms as carnally-fixated gibberish by the

Weak, Frantick, Clownish, and Chagreen,  
 Pretending, prompt by zealous Spleen,  
 T' affront your Head-dress, or your Bone-Fence,  
 Make Printers Presses groan with Nonsense (ll.42-46).<sup>23</sup>

Such criticisms are ill-judged, according to Ramsay, particularly when his attention in *The Fair Assembly* returns to the Directresses:

Sic as against th' *Assembly* speak,  
 The rudest Sauls betray,  
 When *Matrons* noble, wise and meek,  
 Conduct the healthfu' Play:  
 Where they appear, nae Vice dare keek,  
 But to what's good gives way,  
 Like Night, soon as the Morning Creek,  
 Has usher'd in the Day. (ll.185-92)

Ramsay's description of the Directresses monitoring their attendees' moral behaviour is not mere panegyric. John Ramsay of Ochtertyre gives a first-

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<sup>23</sup> *The Scriblers lash'd* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1718), 4-5; in Martin and Oliver, I: 83-89.

hand account of Margaret Maule's intolerance of drunken conduct at the Assembly:

Lady Sarah Bruce told me that she was one night at the assembly, when the Countess of Panmure, one of the first and most spirited of the lady directresses, observing her nephew, the Earl of Cassills, flustered while paying his compliments to her, rose from her chair, and taking him by the hand, said, 'Nephew, you have sat too late after dinner to be proper company for ladies.' She then led him to the door, and calling out, 'My Lord Cassills' chair!' wished him good-night.<sup>24</sup>

Margaret Maule's willingness to chastise a member of her own family for bringing disrepute to the Assembly demonstrates that Ramsay was not merely flattering the Directresses as potential patrons. Indeed, the Assembly would develop an increasingly charitable bent. Jamieson notes that, in the 1720s and 1730s,

great efforts were being made to promote the industries of Scotland, and there appears to have been a widespread desire amongst patriotic society ladies to make use of the fabrics manufactured in this country (Jamieson, 45).

The Assembly therefore stipulated that attendees should dress in linen of local manufactory. In addition, "one of its objects was the provision of help for the poor and the sick in Edinburgh" (Jamieson, 42). The Assembly's moral and social guidance was, therefore, accompanied by charitable advice and even instruction in patriotic consumerism. Accordingly, Ramsay ends his poem on a note of gratitude to the Directresses for improving Edinburgh's manners and for their charitable acts:

Dear *Ed'nburgh*, shaw thy Gratitude,  
 And of sic Friends make sure,  
 Wha strive to make our Minds less rude,  
 And help our Wants to cure;  
 Acting a gen'rous Part and good,  
 In Bounty to the Poor:  
 Sic Vertues, if right understood,  
 Shou'd ev'ry Heart allure. (ll.193-200)

Only those who do not "right understand" the functions of the Assembly could, according to Ramsay, criticise its organisers' motivations.

Opponents of the Assembly may have been fierce in their condemnation, but the more moderate voices such as Ramsay's won the day; by the 1750s, Edward Burt could write that "the Ministers lost Ground to their great Mortification, for the most Part of the Ladies turned Rebels to

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<sup>24</sup> John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, *Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1888), II: 62.

their Remonstrances, notwithstanding the frightful Danger.”<sup>25</sup> One of the loudest voices in defence of the Assembly was, however, a hybrid of Scots and French. James Freebairn's *L'Eloge d'Ecosse, et des Dames Ecossoises* is a French language text in tribute to the Assembly and its female attendees, published in Edinburgh in 1727. Freebairn's text follows Ramsay's in its dedication to the Directresses of the Assembly, whose “Illustrious Blood” the author looks to “with deep reverence.”<sup>26</sup> He echoes Ramsay in his gratitude that they have “taken the Young Nobility of this country under your wise protection; that you have led them with prudence and consummate wisdom (Freebairn, v). Ramsay is Freebairn's model, too, in his presentation of the Assembly as an ornament of national pride: “Of all the Passions which occupy the Heart of Men there has been no more powerful, more natural, nor more universal; than the love of their country” (Freebairn, 1).

Freebairn also addresses himself to male readers who have seen the world, “gentlemen, who after having seen and toured several foreign countries, are better able to form a sound judgement of things” (Freebairn, 6). In his implicit dismissal of small-minded local objections and his choice to write in French, Freebairn's *L'Eloge* reflects the hybridity of the Assembly. As Edward Topham would later write,

Besides minuets and country-dances, they in general dance reels in separate parts of the room; which is a dance that everyone is acquainted with, but none but a native of Scotland can execute in perfection.<sup>27</sup>

The Assembly's choice dance, the minuet, “originated in France in the latter part of the seventeenth century and was fashionable for much of the eighteenth century.”<sup>28</sup> In Edinburgh, the juxtaposition of the imported minuet with Scottish dances created a heavily programmed sociable evening with a Scottish-European flavour. Freebairn commented that the fathers of Edinburgh's fashionable young women

spare no expense, to perfect them in all the exercises suitable to their sex, like Music and Dance, so we see arriving here, every day, the best dressed Italian Masters for Music and the most famous Masters of Dance, of which France can boast (Freebairn, 42).

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<sup>25</sup> Edward Burt, *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his Friend in London*, 2 vols (London: S. Birt, 1754), I: 235.

<sup>26</sup> James Freebairn, *L'Eloge d'Ecosse, et des Dames Ecossoises* [*The Praise of Scotland and the Scottish Ladies*] (Edinbourg: for the author, 1727), iv. Translations are my own.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Topham, *Letters from Edinburgh in 1774 and 1775* (London: J. Dodsley, 1776; repr. Edinburgh: Mercat, 1971), 351.

<sup>28</sup> “minuet, n.,” OED Online. June 2020.

Rather than looking to Bath for their models of sociability, Freebairn's account shows Edinburgh's young people looking to Europe.

Aside from its Dedication and patriotic representation of Scotland, Freebairn's *L'Eloge* is largely a laudatory list of descriptions of the Assembly's beautiful attendees, such as this remark on two Directresses, Margaret Maule and Margaret Dalziel: "The whiteness of their breasts surpasses that of the snow, and rubies seem to languish compared to the redness of their cheeks and their lips" (Freebairn, 22-23). Nonetheless, the text is powerfully reflective of the Jacobite networks behind the public façade of the Assembly. Freebairn was related to Robert Freebairn, the Jacobite printer and bookseller who was "Printer to the Queen for Scotland 11 August 1711," and was "Printing for the Pretender's army under the Earl of Mar."<sup>29</sup> According to Annette Hagan, Freebairn "joined Mar, but fled the country after the Rebellion's failure, only to return to printing in Edinburgh by the 1720s."<sup>30</sup> There is some doubt, however, as to James's exact connection to Robert. Freebairn's sociable networks included membership of the Royal Company of Archers. James Balfour Paul records that in 1734 at the Company's annual contest for the Edinburgh Arrow, James Freebairn, "one of the members of the Company... made a present to the Council of a French dramatic poem, composed by him."<sup>31</sup> Freebairn is described as "a teacher of French in Edinburgh," while the poem is entitled "La Parade des Archers Ecossois—poem dramatique, adressé au très haut et puissant prince Jacques, Duc d'Hamilton et Brandon" (Balfour, 74). The timing of this composition, as well as the similarity in French diction between Freebairn's poem on the Royal Archers and *L'Eloge* allows safe assertion that he was author of both. Significantly, too, Freebairn's poem on the Archers shows him moving in the same circles as Ramsay, who in 1743 would be "admitted an honorary member ... and appointed Bard to the Company" (Balfour, 62). While Paul asserts that James Freebairn was Robert Freebairn's son, Stephen Brown suggests the two Freebairns were brothers.<sup>32</sup> In either case, the author of *L'Eloge* was linked to Scotland's leading Jacobite printer for whom,

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<sup>29</sup> "Robert Freebairn," *Scottish Book Trade Index*, consulted 16 November 2016: <https://data.cerl.org/sbti/002598>.

<sup>30</sup> Anette Hagan, "The Spread of Printing," in Stephen W. Brown and Warren McDougall, eds, *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland, 2: Enlightenment and Expansion 1707-1800* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 112-117 (114).

<sup>31</sup> James Balfour Paul, *The History of the Royal Company of Archers: The Queen's Bodyguards for Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1875), 286. I am grateful to Professor Murray Pittock for alerting me to this publication.

<sup>32</sup> Paul, *History*, 286; Stephen W. Brown, "Making a Scottish Market for French Books," in Brown and McDougall, 214-220 (215).

according to Kelsey Jackson Williams, “the Neo-Latin canon and Jacobitism went hand in hand.”<sup>33</sup> Certainly, James Freebairn’s own publications demonstrate his pro-Stuart sympathies. As well as his *A New French Grammar* (1734) and *L’Eloge*, Freebairn published a *Life of Mary Stewart, Queen of Scotland and France* (1725), a translation of a sympathetic French language biography of the Stuart queen who at the beginning of the eighteenth century was still only beginning to be treated as a Jacobite icon. Freebairn’s defence of the Assembly is comparable to Ramsay’s in its warm support of the Directresses’ “improving” impulse in the face of Presbyterian hostility.

As outlined above, Chambers saw the Assembly as a convenient Jacobite symbol for Ramsay, which would partially reveal his political sympathies. It is certainly the case that many of the Directresses had family connections which would align them with Jacobitism. Margaret Maule’s family network has already been delineated. Her father William Douglas, third Duke of Hamilton, though educated in France, had been instrumental in the proclamation of William and Mary, in 1689, and achieved an “almost viceregal state,” in part from his marriage to “Scotland’s greatest heiress,” Anne Hamilton (1632-1716), third Duchess.<sup>34</sup> Margaret Maule’s own marriage to a Jacobite activist was, Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson have suggested, both “a dynastic alliance, but ... also a marriage of minds.”<sup>35</sup> After James Maule’s support for the Jacobite cause led to his exile and the forfeiture of his estates, Margaret Maule became, in 1717, “beneficiary of an act of parliament which provided maintenance for her as if her husband was already dead.”<sup>36</sup> After Maule died, Margaret’s brother-in-law, Harry Maule of Kelly (1659-1734), also an exiled Jacobite, succeeded the Earldom, despite the fact that both he and his brother had been stripped of their honours.

Elizabeth Hay, Lady Drumelzier, was another Directress with significant Jacobite connections. She was the daughter of Alexander Seton, Viscount Kingston (1621-91), a nobleman and soldier who had studied at the French Jesuit College of La Flèche and who, to “avoid subscribing the solemn league and covenant ... went in 1643 to the Netherlands and on returning to Scotland some eight months later was excommunicated in Tranent church.”<sup>37</sup> Seton commanded anti-covenanter troops at the

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<sup>33</sup> Kelsey Jackson Williams, *The First Scottish Enlightenment: Rebels, Priests and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 261.

<sup>34</sup> Marshall, “Hamilton [formerly Douglas], William,” *ODNB*.

<sup>35</sup> Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson, eds, *Early Modern Women Poets 1520-1700: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 527.

<sup>36</sup> Handley, “Maule, James, fourth earl of Panmure.” *ODNB* (2004).

<sup>37</sup> John J. Scally, “Seton, Alexander, first Viscount Kingston,” *ODNB*, 23 (2004).

Pentland Hills in 1666 and at Bothwell Bridge in 1679. Elizabeth Hay's brother, James Seton (1667-1726), third Viscount Kingston, was attainted in 1716 and spent 1717-18 in Italy.<sup>38</sup> Her husband, William Hay of Drumelzier (1649-1734), was the son of John, first Earl of Tweeddale.<sup>39</sup> Their son, William Hay (1706-60), was a Captain in the Austrian service who spent 1725-41 in Italy with the Jacobite court. He met Ramsay's son, the portrait painter Allan Ramsay junior, and his travelling companion Alexander Cunyngham (later Dick) in Rome in November 1736, and may have been a member of the Jacobite lodge from 1736-37; he was killed at the Battle of Torgan.<sup>40</sup>

Margaret Hamilton, Lady Orbiston, was the daughter of Sir Archibald Hamilton of Rosehall, Lanarkshire.<sup>41</sup> Her brother was Sir James Hamilton, second Baronet (1682-1750), Member of Parliament for Lanarkshire between 1710 and 1715 and, thereafter, 1735-50. As David Wilkinson points out, James Hamilton did not take up arms with the Jacobites in 1715 or 1745, and was "inactive" as an M.P., but

Hamilton's connexions were Jacobite. He was listed both as a "worthy patriot" who helped to detect the mismanagements of the previous administration and as a "Tory patriot" who opposed the continuance of the war.<sup>42</sup>

After his death and that of his brother and successor, Hugh, the baronetcy and estate passed to Margaret Hamilton and subsequently to her son, Archibald Hamilton of Dalzell. Her husband was James Hamilton of Dalzell, eighth of Orbiston, whose ancestor John Hamilton, third Earl, "accompanied Queen Mary to the Battle of Langside, where he was killed on May 13th, 1568."<sup>43</sup> Margaret Hamilton also had connections to

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<sup>38</sup> "Seton, James (1667-1726), 3rd Viscount Kingston," in Murray Pittock and Vivien Williams, eds, *Officers of the Jacobite Armies* (database): <https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/research/researchcentresandnetworks/robertburkestudies/ourresearch/jacobiteofficersdatabase/thedatabase/s/>.

<sup>39</sup> Bernard Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain and Ireland*, 5th ed. (London: Harrison, 1875), 605.

<sup>40</sup> "Hay, William (1706-60)," in *Officers of the Jacobite Armies*.

<sup>41</sup> John Burke and John Bernard Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Extinct and Dormant Baronetcies of England, Ireland and Scotland*, 2nd ed. (London: Scott, Webster, & Geary, 1841), 624.

<sup>42</sup> David Wilkinson, "Hamilton, Sir James, 2nd Bt (1682-1750) of Rosehall, Lanark," in D. Hayton, E. Cruikshanks, and S. Handley, eds, *The History of Parliament, 1690-1715, G-N* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1715-1754/member/hamilton-sir-james-1682-1750>.

<sup>43</sup> Patrick Hamilton Baskerville, *The Hamiltons of Burnside, North Carolina: And Their Ancestors and Descendants* (Richmond, VA: Ellis, 1916), 44.



Margaret Maule, brought closer by the latter's position following her husband's exile. One of the most valuable parts of the Maule estate was Brechin Castle; Margaret Maule therefore "leased the Castle and sold the contents to Lady Orbiston to prevent their confiscation along with the estates by the Crown."<sup>44</sup>

Katherine Pringle, Lady Newhall, was the daughter of an unknown Johnston of Hilton. She was married to Walter Pringle, Lord Newhall (c.1664-1736), a leading Scottish judge. Pringle could be described as a Scottish Patriot Whig; his niece, Katherine, was the wife of the poet and Jacobite army officer William Hamilton of Bangour (1704-54).<sup>45</sup>

The fifth 1723 Directress was misidentified by Jamieson as Marion Dalrymple, daughter of Sir Robert Hamilton of Presmennan and cousin to Margaret Hamilton, Lady Orbiston.<sup>46</sup> That Marion was the first wife of prominent judge and politician Sir Hew Dalrymple, first baronet, Lord North Berwick (1652-1737), and therefore the first Lady North Berwick, but she had died in c.1710. The Lady North Berwick involved in the Assembly was, therefore, Dalrymple's second wife, Anne, whom he had married in 1711. Hew Dalrymple's own political sympathies are clear: "he sat for the burgh of North Berwick in the last Scottish parliament before the Union of 1707" and was "an enthusiastic supporter of the Union."<sup>47</sup> His second wife's family connections are more nebulous. Anne Horn was daughter "and heir of John Horn, Esq. of Horn Castle, and Westhall, in Aberdeenshire."<sup>48</sup> As evidence that the Aberdeenshire Horns had Jacobite connections, Alistair Tayler and Henrietta Tayler cite from the Aberdeen Sasines a James Horn whose death date is unknown, with a son John "of Westhall" in 1712, who "was a Jacobite in 1715 and was alive and active in 1745."<sup>49</sup> This latter John is unlikely to have been Anne's father, but may have been a brother or cousin. Anne Horn's familial connections may be murky, but it is clear that her family were engaged in and supportive of the "improvement" engendered by Edinburgh's sociable associations.

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<sup>44</sup> On Brechin Castle, see Historic Environment Scotland:

<https://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/GDL00070>.

<sup>45</sup> A.H. Millar, rev. Anita McConnell, "Sir Walter Pringle, Lord Newhall (c.1664-1736)," in *ODNB* (2004).

<sup>46</sup> Jamieson, 89; Sir Robert Douglas of Glenbervie, *The Baronage of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Bell & Bradfute, 1798), 465.

<sup>47</sup> J.D. Ford, "Dalrymple, Sir Hew, first baronet, Lord North Berwick (1652-1737)," in *ODNB* (2004).

<sup>48</sup> John Burke, *A General and Heraldic Dictionary of the Peerage and Baronetage*, 5th ed. (London: Henry Colburn, 1838), 355.

<sup>49</sup> Alistair Tayler and Henrietta Tayler, *Jacobites of Aberdeenshire and Banffshire in the Rising of 1715* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1934), 132.

The complex networks emanating from the sociable hub that is the Edinburgh Assembly of 1723 demonstrate the difficulties of sociability and the diverse definitions of “improvement” in early Enlightenment Scotland. Read through the lens of Ramsay’s *The Fair Assembly*, the Assembly is a place of closely regulated sociability, overseen by revered and aristocratic Directresses. In this context, Ramsay laughingly dismisses the concerns of the Presbyterian preachers who damned its attendees and organisers to hell. For Ramsay, the Assembly is categorised alongside such sociable Edinburgh institutions as the Easy Club, the Royal Company of Archers and, by inference, the theatre; it is lauded for its ability to improve manners and sophistication, and to introduce coveted “easiness.” In Ramsay’s view, the Assembly improves not by imitation of English models, but by following internal “patterns” and emulating the Directresses. In fact, if external examples are sought at all, they are sought from Europe via French and Italian teachers of dance and music, rather than from London or Bath. Ramsay gives the Assembly a Jacobite tinge through his choice of epigraphs, his setting of himself against the rigid condemnation of its Presbyterian opponents, his veneration for the Directresses and his faith in their ability to guide the “rising Generation.” In Chambers’ nineteenth-century account, the Assembly is remembered as a symbol of Jacobite resistance to the hellfire severity associated with Presbyterianism. Certainly in some ways the Assembly was aligned with Jacobite networks. Margaret Maule, Elizabeth Hay and Margaret Hamilton had clear connections with significant Jacobite figures, close relatives attainted and in exile, or family estates confiscated in 1723. Despite these setbacks, they were able to establish and maintain the Assembly, which remained a mainstay of Edinburgh sociable society for decades to come.

There is an epilogue to the story told through *The Fair Assembly*. Even if, as Chambers has asserted, Ramsay was only “secretly” a Jacobite, his description of one of the beautiful ladies of *The Fair Assembly* contains a Jacobite symbol which could be deciphered by knowledgeable readers:

Yet is the sprightly *Belle*  
 As active as the egypt Bees,  
 Wha rear the Waxen Cell;  
 And, place her in what Light you please,  
 She still appears hersell (ll.173-75).

This appears to be a straightforward portrayal of an attractive Assembly-goer who is “hersell” in every situation, but Ramsay’s use of the bee symbol is decidedly unconventional in depictions of female beauty. While bees often feature in other ways in early eighteenth-century writing, from Isaac Watts to Bernard Mandeville, as emblems of industry or political organisation, they occur in Jacobite material culture as emblematic of

rebirth and restoration, referring both to Vergil's fourth Georgic and to the Biblical account of Samson in Judges xiv.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, in his 1728 edition of *Poems*, situated a mere twenty pages before *The Fair Assembly*, is Ramsay's "Ode on the Marriage of the Right Honourable George Lord Ramsay and Lady Jean Maule."<sup>51</sup> This poem celebrates the union of Lord Ramsay, "the apparent Chief / Boast of the *RAMSAYS Clanish Name*" (ll. 1-2) and Jean Maule, the daughter of the exiled Harry Maule of Kelly and niece of Margaret Maule. Here, Ramsay's own lineage joins that of the key Directress of the Assembly and the Maules' Jacobite pedigree:

The *RAMSAYS!* *Caledonia's* Prop;  
 The *MAULES!* struck still her Foes with Dread:  
 Now joyn'd; we, from the Union, hope  
 A Race of Heroes shall succeed (ll. 13-16).

The Edinburgh Assembly withstood the condemnation of its opponents in the name of improvement, becoming a symbol of easy sociability. If it was associated with Jacobitism, the Assembly attracted attendees from across the political and religious spectrum. The networks revealed by Ramsay's *The Fair Assembly* demonstrate that the social enterprise was supported "by favour of the Jacobites"; indeed, Ramsay's implicit hope is that the "rising Generation" will, through the improving example of Maule and others, deliver "A Race of Heroes."

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<sup>50</sup> See Murray Pittock, *Material Culture and Sedition: Treacherous Objects, Secret Places* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 160. Cf. also Grant R. Francis, "Jacobite drinking glasses and their relation to the Jacobite medals," *Proceedings of the British Numismatic Society*, 16 (1921): 248-282 (275-276); George W. Bullamore, "The Beehive and Freemasonry," *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, 36 (1923): 219-233 (233); J.E.S. Tuckett, *Ars Quatuor*, 36 (1923): 237-240 (240).

<sup>51</sup> Martin and Oliver, II (1953): 104-5.