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# JOHN WILKES AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

STEPHEN CARRUTHERS\*

## ABSTRACT

*Based on the absence of a substantial political philosophy and a scandalous reputation, modern assessments of John Wilkes have tended to marginalise his role in the development of radical political ideas in England in the 1760s and 1770s. This evaluation is reassessed in the context of an analysis of Wilkes's collaboration with Charles Churchill on the North Briton and his political writings of the period, in particular his Introduction to the History of England (1768). Furthermore, Wilkes enjoyed extensive and prolonged contact with the leading continental philosophes of the period, and in particular d'Holbach, Diderot, Suard, Helvétius, and Chastellux, which is reflected in their correspondence and political writings. Wilkes was a cosmopolitan figure whose political thought, while rooted in Lockean ideas, was convergent with that of contemporary philosophes and justify considering him as a principled defender, in his public life, of liberterian rather than libertine values.*

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## INTRODUCTION

‘During the 1760s, parliamentary and popular politics in England became much concerned with the affairs of John Wilkes, a jovial adventurer who did not pretend that his derisive defiance of the ruling class was intended to do much more than win him a place within it.’<sup>1</sup> This view is representative of the marginal influence attributed to Wilkes in the development of radical political ideas in the 1760s and 1770s; in part based upon a negative view of his character and motives, but also on the difficulty of situating his political ideas into any of the recognized intellectual frameworks for the period and from the polemical and ephemeral nature of his writings.

For these reasons, the views of modern historians and those of contemporaries on Wilkes’s significance have diverged: Boulton, for example, limits his analysis to the writings of Burke, Junius, and Johnson on the Wilkite campaigns of 1769 to 1771 on the grounds: ‘Wilkes in 1770 was interested primarily in John Wilkes; it was left to others to debate the issues and principles raised by his earlier activities’.<sup>2</sup> Burke’s assessment of Wilkes in 1770 in *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* was quite different:

When therefore I reflect upon this method pursued by the Cabal in distributing rewards and punishments, I must conclude that Mr. Wilkes is the object of persecution, not on account of what he has done in common with others who are the object of reward, but for that in which he differs from many of them: that he is pursued for the spirited dispositions which are blended with his vices; for his unconquerable firmness, for his resolute, indefatigable, strenuous resistance against oppression.<sup>3</sup>

This article aims at narrowing this divergence by exploring aspects of Wilkes’s intellectual background which assist in explaining the contemporary resonance and impact of his political discourse and justify locating his concept of liberty within the mainstream of continental Enlightenment thought. In the first section, the academic literature on Wilkes’ role in the development of radical politics in the 1760s and 1770s is reviewed and assessed by examining the key contribution Wilkes’s collaboration with Charles Churchill made to the development of his political agenda and rhetoric and the

diversity of intellectual influences revealed in his Introduction to the uncompleted *The History of England*. In the second section, Wilkes's association in exile with leading *philosophes* is examined through their correspondence and writings on the English political system and civil and political liberties. In the third section, the role of Wilkes's libertinism in the development of his political ideas and reputation is considered. In conclusion, Wilkes is situated as a political figure integrated into Enlightenment culture of the 1760s and 1770s whose political campaigns and writings in defence of civil and political liberties were based on principles shared by many of the leading *philosophes* of that period.

## I

It is generally accepted that whatever the skills Wilkes undoubtedly displayed in the field of political propaganda and agitation his motives were tainted by personal defects of character and opportunism which undermined his contribution to the emergence of radical political ideas in the late 1760s and the 1770s. Robbins in her study of Real Whigs, whom she identified among Wilkes's contemporaries as including Catherine Macaulay, Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, and James Burgh, regarded Wilkes as a 'rake' and, with Chatham and Charles Fox, as 'believers in what might be described as high-class rabble rousing'.<sup>4</sup> Christie also questions Wilkes's character and motives at the time of his Middlesex electoral triumph in 1768: 'A penniless adventurer, of infamous personal character, a criminal facing an as yet undetermined sentence, Wilkes had, through whatever means, achieved what he regarded as a first step to salvation';<sup>5</sup> and is equally doubtful about the sincerity of Wilkes's support for representational reform in his speech of 21 March 1776: 'Wilkes's motives at the time may well be suspect. Within a few months he had gained in the House a reputation for levity and insincerity. It is probable that he was more concerned for his own popularity than for the cause of reform, and he seems to have taken care that a full, polished version of his speech should be available for publication.'<sup>6</sup>

Brewer accords a more central role to Wilkes, arguing that the political issues he raised: 'constituted a frontal assault on the politics of oligarchy, and thereby threatened the political *status quo*'.<sup>7</sup> He attributes Wilkes's success not to demagogy, since Wilkes was a poor public speaker, but to his ability as 'a propagandist whose skills fell little

short of genius'<sup>8</sup> and to the identification in the public mind of his own person with the 'abstract notion of liberty'.<sup>9</sup> However, Brewer also argues 'it is a not altogether implausible notion to see Wilkes both as a court jester and a lord of misrule',<sup>10</sup> and he accepts the assessment that Wilkes's 'political creed does not seem to have extended far beyond the furtherance of his own immediate political interests'.<sup>11</sup>

Colley, indeed, questions Brewer's view that 'the debate on America, the parliamentary reform movement, and what one contemporary styled the 'Wilkomania' of the 1760s, marked the emergence of focussed radicalism in Britain':<sup>12</sup>

For the great mass of British people the only novel and emotive focus of the 1760s was John Wilkes himself. But while Wilkes' publicity style and individual *élan* were inimitable, his long-term political impact was minimal. Few plebeian Wilkites translated their support for the man into an abstract and durable commitment to political or social change.<sup>13</sup>

Pocock, while sharing the general view of Wilkes's character and motives, sees the Wilkite movement as a significant contributor to the debate over parliamentary representation:

It is certain that the rhetoric of virtue and corruption had for some time introduced into British political discourse the notion that the corrupt state of the representation of the 'people' or 'kingdom' - for which it was as easy to blame 'the influence of the Crown' as that of the aristocracy - was at the forefront of the problems of political society. It was an achievement of the Wilkes agitation to re-inject this issue into pamphlet literature and popular meetings;<sup>14</sup>

Kramnick, in opposition to Pocock whom he argued placed Wilkes 'in the tradition of country and civic humanism',<sup>15</sup> supports a resurgence of the Lockean intellectual tradition in the period of the Wilkite campaigns: 'Lockean ideas made a dramatic and decisive comeback in the 1760s and 1770s. In Locke far more than in Bolingbroke and his ilk, the unenfranchised middle class and especially the Protestant

Dissenters found intellectual authority and legitimacy for their radical demands'.<sup>16</sup> He argues Wilkes should be located within this tradition, citing as evidence Wilkes's speech of 21 March 1776 where he adopted the term 'fair and equal representation' contained in paragraph 158 of Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*.<sup>17</sup> However, Kramnick's thesis that the 'talented and industrious Protestant Dissenters played the decisive role in transforming England into the first bourgeois civilisation'<sup>18</sup> leads him to downplay Wilkes's importance in the link he establishes between reformers such as Cartwright, Burgh, Price, and Priestley with Lockean thought: 'This bond becomes evident when the focus is shifted from Wilkes to more respected and learned reformers'.<sup>19</sup>

In order to provide an intellectual context within which these views on the significance of Wilkes's contribution to the development of radical ideas can be assessed, Wilkes's collaboration with Charles Churchill is first examined to show how it radicalised Wilkes's political vocabulary and popularised his political agenda and then the political ideas underlying Wilkes's Introduction to his unfinished *The History of England from the Revolution to the Accession of the Brunswick Line* are analysed.

Wilkes's political career started with his election as MP for Aylesbury in 1757 under the patronage of the Grenville family, and in particular Lord Temple;<sup>20</sup> but the split of William Pitt and Lord Temple with George Grenville in October 1761 over war with Spain prompted Lord Temple, then in opposition, to fund Wilkes in establishing the *North Briton* in June 1762.<sup>21</sup> Wilkes enlisted the help of Charles Churchill to produce the paper and Churchill wrote at least six issues,<sup>22</sup> and this collaboration, described as 'one of the major works of political literature to appear between 1760 and 1790',<sup>23</sup> marked the beginning of the radicalisation of Wilkes's political ideas. Churchill, a well-educated but impecunious priest who had achieved overnight literary success as a theatre satirist with *The Rosciad* (1760), was a fellow member of the Hell Fire Club.<sup>24</sup> Wilkes encouraged<sup>25</sup> Churchill to turn to political satire which, principally inspired by Wilkes's cause and directed against his political enemies,<sup>26</sup> he produced prolifically and successfully until his death in October 1764. This collaboration, marked by a deep and genuine friendship, also revealed an extraordinary identity of political outlook and literary style. Two aspects of their shared political rhetoric were of particular importance for Wilkes in establishing a distinct and popular political identity and rebutting the

attacks of the political establishment: prizing independence against patronage and using invective to attract popular interest and sympathy.

On independence as a virtue, Lockwood has pointed out: 'Churchill willingly portrays himself as a creature of the public, the main distinction for him being the one between those who are attached to the public interest, hence independent, and those who are the slaves of a private interest, such as patronage.'<sup>27</sup> In *Independence* (1764) Churchill asserts the value of his independent status as a poet against the corrupt and unmerited position of nobility:

By Him that made me, I am much more proud, More inly  
satisfied, to have a croud point at me as I pass, and cry, -  
that's He- A poor, but honest Bard, who dares be free  
Amidst Corruption, than to have a train of flick'ring levee  
slaves, to make me vain of things I ought to blush for;<sup>28</sup>

In 1763 Wilkes expressed similar sentiments in a letter to Earl Temple of 1763 relating details of his duel with Lord Talbot:

I was a private English gentleman, perfectly free and  
independent, which I held to be a character of the highest  
dignity, that I obeyed with pleasure a gracious sovereign,  
but would never submit to the arbitrary dictates of a fellow  
subject, a lord steward of his household, my superior indeed  
in rank, fortune and abilities, but my equal only in honour,  
courage, and liberty.<sup>29</sup>

Wilkes's political propaganda was, together with his association of himself with liberty, principally to be based around this theme of the independent citizen struggling against a corrupt government,<sup>30</sup> and together they made a powerful appeal to his electoral supporters among the shopkeepers of Middlesex who would ensure his successes in 1768 and 1769.<sup>31</sup>

Churchill deployed invective to great effect in the *North Briton* and in his satirical poems directed against Wilkes's opponents. In *An Epistle to William Hogarth* (1763) he combined personal invective with political propaganda for Wilkes:

VIRTUE, with due contempt, saw HOGARTH stand, the  
murdr'ous pencil in his palsied hand. What was the cause of  
liberty to him, Or what was Honour? Let them sink or swim,  
So he may gratify without controul The mean resentments  
of his selfish soul. Let Freedom perish, if, to Freedom true,  
In the same ruin WILKES may perish too.<sup>32</sup>

Wilkes employed invective not only to attack political opponents but also to expose hypocrisy; as against his prosecutors in the House of Lords over *The Essay on Woman*: 'Besides it is not given to every man to be as *pious* as Lord Sandwich, or as *chaste*, yet as *potent*, in and out of the marriage-bed, in all thought, word, and deed, as the *Bishop of Gloucester*.'<sup>33</sup>

The development of a common political rhetoric and literary style by Wilkes and Churchill between 1762 and 1764 enriched Wilkes's political vocabulary and increased its popular resonance and through the *North Briton* and Churchill's political satires established his public identity. During his exile he made use of these skills in a series of polemical writings, such as *A Letter to the Worthy Electors of the Borough of Aylesbury, in the County of Buckinghamshire* of 22 October 1764 and *Letter to the Duke of Grafton* of 12 December 1766, which enabled him to retain public interest<sup>34</sup> and contributed to his electoral success at the Middlesex election on his return in 1768.

Wilkes's voluminous political writings have generally been viewed as 'printed ephemera'<sup>35</sup> rather than presenting an intellectually coherent political philosophy: there is for example no modern edition of Wilkes's writings. Wilkes failed to complete his most ambitious project, *The History of England from the Revolution to the Accession of the Brunswick Line*, which he had worked on fitfully during his exile, and only published the *Introduction* in 1768. Otherwise his political writings were limited to issues of the *North Briton* and multiple editions of his speeches, addresses, correspondence and other political tracts.<sup>36</sup> However, a study of the *Introduction* does indicate some of the principal strands and sources of Wilkes's political thought at the time which, while strongly influenced by the writings of Locke,<sup>37</sup> also evidence independent views on issues of religious toleration which may have been influenced by the frequent discussions on atheism and deism at the coterie Holbachique.<sup>38</sup>

For his intellectual sources on the theory of government, Wilkes enigmatically wrote: ‘The most valuable books we have on the subject of government are posterior by near half a century to the beginning of James I’s reign. Locke and Sidney are still later.’<sup>39</sup> Since James I acceded to the throne in 1603, Wilkes is probably referring to Hobbes’s works *De Cive* and *Leviathan*, both published in London in 1651. He may also be referring to Harrington’s *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, published in 1656.<sup>40</sup> For foreign works, Wilkes refers to Grotius’s *De jure belli ac pacis* (1625), which he praises as ‘the most original, profound and accurate, of all the productions of modern times on the power of the sovereign and the subject’,<sup>41</sup> and quotes approvingly from book eleven, chapter five of Montesquieu’s *Esprit des Loix* on the English constitution.<sup>42</sup> Politically, Wilkes presents in the *Introduction* a traditional Whig view of the Revolution of 1688:

*The Revolution* is the great area of English liberty. From this most auspicious period, freedom has made a regular, uninterrupted abode in our happy island. The rights of the crown and the people were then expressly ascertained, and acknowledged by the three branches of the Legislature. The disputes of prerogative, of privilege and of liberty subsided ...<sup>43</sup>

On prerogative, he follows Locke’s analysis in *The Second Treatise of Government* (1689):<sup>44</sup>

It began then to be generally remarked among us, that the first idea not only of political institutions, but even of society, was the happiness of the various individuals collected together, and that no further power could be meant to be given to the head, but what was for the good of the whole body politic.<sup>45</sup>

However, Wilkes demonstrates his support for religious toleration by his comments on the 1689 Toleration Act:

It has proved a firm bulwark against the fury of bigots and enthusiasts, though a philosophical mind must object to the unjust shackles, which tyranny has forged, of all

subscriptions, creeds, tests and oaths. I except that single oath or affirmation, which no well-meaning citizen can scruple, of a legal obedience to the civil governor ...<sup>46</sup>

He does not follow Locke's arguments against religious toleration for papists in *An Essay Concerning Toleration* (1689)<sup>47</sup> in his criticism of William III: 'The prejudices he had imbibed against the Roman Catholics and his conduct towards that sect, seem to prove that his principles of toleration, and freedom of thought, did not proceed from a mind deeply tinctured with sound philosophy, or zealous for the primary rights of mankind.'<sup>48</sup>

The *Introduction* illustrates the difficulties in locating Wilkes's political thought within any one of the historical paradigms for the period. Wilkes's reticence on the Civil War and *interregnum*<sup>49</sup> supports Robbins's view he was not a Real Whig; while his emphasis on the 1688 Settlement and his view that 'we may justly regard its continuance as too precarious, its security as ill established',<sup>50</sup> do not, notwithstanding his reference to 'the generous principles of our Magna Carta',<sup>51</sup> easily situate Wilkes within the reform movement identified by Christie as acting 'within a general conceptual framework - the appeal to the model in the past - which in pattern was essentially medieval'.<sup>52</sup> Nor does the *Introduction* provide evidence Wilkes was operating within the republican tradition of civic virtue derived from the works of Machiavelli and Harrington.<sup>53</sup>

However, the *Introduction*'s evident debt to Lockean ideas and Wilkes's more liberal views on religious toleration lend support to Kramnick's view that Wilkes formed part of the 'radicalization of Lockean liberalism'.<sup>54</sup> Kramnick's approach provides an appropriate framework for explaining the genesis and popularity of Wilkes's ideas and propaganda amongst his core electoral supporters - which Rudé has identified in his analysis of voters in the Middlesex elections as constituting the majority of 'merchants, tradesmen and manufacturers of every kind'<sup>55</sup> - since he situates Wilkes's ideas firmly, but not exclusively, in the firmament of the rising bourgeoisie rather than in nostalgic country ideology.<sup>56</sup> It is the argument of the next section, however, that an analysis of Wilkes's association with the *philosophes* is also critical in assessing the development of his political thought and his place in the cosmopolitan world of the Enlightenment.

## II

The term *philosophes* is employed here in the sense elucidated by Lough:

The whole outlook of a *philosophe* will be based on reason; thanks to this guide he can think matters out for himself, discard all prejudices and reject completely authority and tradition. In religion this is bound to lead him to abandon orthodox Catholic beliefs, but whatever his final attitude may be - whether he be deist, agnostic, or atheist - He will proclaim the virtues of toleration and denounce fanaticism and intolerance wherever they appear. The *philosophe* will examine critically the society in which he lives and the government of the day, attacking all forms of tyranny and unnecessary restrictions on freedom, particularly that on freedom of the press.<sup>57</sup>

Of the *philosophes* discussed by Lough,<sup>58</sup> those having connections with Wilkes included Voltaire, Diderot, d'Alembert, Helvétius, d'Holbach, Morellet, Raynal, and Chastellux. Wilkes was introduced to many of the *philosophes* through his friendship with d'Holbach who had been a fellow student at the University of Leiden<sup>59</sup> and whose weekly dinners at his Parisian home he frequented from 1763 to 1767. Kors has identified regular members of d'Holbach's *coterie* during this period as including d'Holbach, Diderot, Grimm, Le Roy, Marmontel, Raynal, Roux, Saint-Lambert, Suard, Chastellux, Morellet, Naigeon, Galiani, and, intermittently, Helvétius.<sup>60</sup> British contemporaries of Wilkes who also attended included David Hume, Adam Smith, Robert Walpole, Lord Shelburne, and David Garrick.<sup>61</sup>

Wilkes's excellent French<sup>62</sup> and literary connections facilitated his friendship with the *philosophes* whose interests were as much literary as political. The range of topics discussed at the *coterie* is indicated in a letter by Alessandro Verri of 26 November 1766:

They began by debating the stature of Voltaire, whom d'Holbach denounced as "jealous and nasty." From there

the conversation moved on to the quarrel between Hume and Rousseau. Wilkes was present, and he moved the discussion to the English political situation. Following this, Marmontel recited a poem about Venus which he had recently composed. From literary topics the coterie turned to an exploration of the implications of so great a scientist as Newton having commented on the Apocalypse. He was very impressed, Verri wrote, with Grimm's observations. What most astounded Verri, however, was a talk with d'Holbach in which the Baron argued before the coterie that religion was the principal source of man's sufferings, and that the idea of God, being the source of all religion, had to be eliminated from moral concerns.<sup>63</sup>

Through these evenings and other contacts with the *philosophes* Wilkes participated in the cosmopolitan culture of the 1760s:

However diverse the problems of the various parts of Europe were, they found a common language and centre in the France of the sixties and in the extraordinary intellectual life there. It was in these years that thinkers began to reproach philosophy for its abstract quality, and yet it was this very quality which enabled the new ideas to penetrate and spread beyond national frontiers and overcome differences in social structure.<sup>64</sup>

In order to assess the extent of Wilkes's participation in this intellectual life, his relationship with d'Holbach, Diderot, Suard, Helvétius, and Chastellux will be examined in the context of their correspondence and writings on the English political system.

The Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) had inherited great wealth which enabled him to act as host to the *coterie* but his prolific writings, and in particular the virulently atheist *Système de la Nature* published in 1770, were throughout his life 'published in the strictest anonymity'.<sup>65</sup> The exact extent of Wilkes's knowledge of d'Holbach's authorship is uncertain but since all but one of his philosophical works were published

after 1766, by which time their friendship was cemented, it is reasonable to concur with Wickwar's assessment: 'Through the medium probably of Wilkes, Shelburne and Shelburne's librarians, his [Baron d'Holbach's] writings must have been known to many of the earliest leaders of the British movement for radical reform in Church and State.'<sup>66</sup>

D'Holbach's political ideas were contained principally in *La Politique naturelle* and *Le Système social*, both published in London in 1773, and *Ethocratie ou le Gouvernement fondé sur la Morale*, published in Amsterdam in 1776.<sup>67</sup> D'Holbach visited England in 1765 and returned, as Diderot related to Sophie Volland, disenchanted: '*Il est parti pour ce pays, prévenu; il y a reçu l'accueil le plus agréable, il y a joui de la plus belle santé. Cependant il en est revenu mécontent*'.<sup>68</sup> His disillusionment is reflected in his caustic analysis of the British constitution as riven by faction and corruption in chapter six of *Système sociale*:

*D'ou l'on voit qu'un Peuple ainsi gouverné doit nécessairement être entraîné dans des factions éternelles, vivre dans une défiance et des allarmes continuelles; il doit craindre le pouvoir, le crédit et les artifices d'un Monarque ambitieux ou d'un ministre adroit. Il doit craindre la complaisance des Grands pour ce Monarque qui est la source de leur propre grandeur. Il doit craindre la perfidie des Représentans qu'il charge de ses propre intérêts, et que tant de causes peuvent séduire. Enfin il doit craindre sa propre folie*<sup>ii</sup>.<sup>69</sup>

The criticisms developed by d'Holbach in *Système sociale* are similar to those addressed by Wilkes in the principal political writings of his exile: *A Letter to the Worthy Electors of the Borough of Aylesbury, in the County of Buckinghamshire* (1764) where he set out a defence of the *North Briton* No. 45 and attacked the illegal seizure of the *Essay on Woman*; and a *Letter to the Duke of Grafton* (1766) defending himself against

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<sup>i</sup>Trans.: He left for this country well versed; he received a most gracious welcome and was in the best of health. Yet he returned discontented.

<sup>ii</sup>Trans.: In consequence, a people governed in such a manner must necessarily be caught up in incessant factions, live constantly in defiance and threat of danger; it must fear the power, credit and tricks of an ambitious Monarch or a skilful minister. It must fear the complaisance of the Nobility for this Monarch who is the origin of their own prestige. It must fear the treachery of the Representatives whom it entrusts with its interests, and which can be led astray for so many reasons. Finally it must fear its own stupidity.

Chatham's verdict on him as 'an impious criminal, that sets at defiance his God, his King, and country'.<sup>70</sup> In the *Aylesbury* letter, Wilkes strongly criticises the venality of the members of parliament, who should be the 'steady friend of liberty', accusing them of surrendering their prerogatives to the crown and fears 'they meet to forge fetters for themselves and posterity';<sup>71</sup> an attack echoed by d'Holbach when he writes on the consequences of the House of Commons being elected for seven years: '*Ainsi ces Représentans peuvent, sans courir aucun danger, trahir les intérêts du peuple et vendre sa liberté au Monarque*<sup>iii</sup>.'<sup>72</sup> In his *Letter to the Duke of Grafton*, Wilkes penned an unflattering picture of the earl of Chatham, who had accepted a pension and peerage in 1766: 'Private ambition was all the while skulking behind the shield of the patriot';<sup>73</sup> a point generalised by d'Holbach: '*Le patriote Anglois n'est communément qu'un ambitieux qui fait des efforts pour se mettre en place des ministres qu'il décrie; ou bien un homme avide qui a besoin d'argent, ou bien un factieux qui cherche à rétablir une fortune délabrée*<sup>iv</sup>.'<sup>74</sup>

Although the close friendship of d'Holbach and Wilkes in this period meant their views on political issues were well known to each other, the political ideas of d'Holbach the philosopher and Wilkes the political activist were never likely to be concordant. D'Holbach was a believer in gradual reform based on the guiding light of reason which is '*ni séditieuse ni sanguinaire*<sup>v</sup>,'<sup>75</sup> and was deeply distrustful of the mob, writing in *Ethocratie* of the English in terms implicitly critical of the activities of the Wilkite mobs: '*Ce n'est point être libre que de troubler impunément le repos des citoyens, d'insulter le souverain, de calomnier des ministres, de publier des libelles, d'exciter des émeutes, etc. Ce n'est point être libre que de pouvoir effrontément braver la décence*<sup>vi</sup>.'<sup>76</sup> While Wilkes was no supporter of mob violence,<sup>77</sup> his political successes in the Middlesex elections of 1768 and 1769 depended on adopting popular tactics d'Holbach repudiated.

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<sup>iii</sup>Trans.: Thus these Representatives may without running any risk betray the interests of the people and sell its liberty to the Monarch.

<sup>iv</sup>Trans.: The English patriot is often only an ambitious person who strives to put into office ministers he denounces; or else a greedy man who needs money, or else a man of faction who is seeking to re-establish a ruined fortune.

<sup>v</sup>Trans.: Neither seditious nor bloody.

<sup>vi</sup>Trans.: Freedom never consists only in disturbing without fear of punishment the peace of the citizens, in insulting the sovereign, in slandering ministers, in publishing libels, in inciting riots, etc. Freedom never consists only in being able brazenly to challenge propriety.

Diderot (1713-1784), as principal editor of the *Encyclopédie* since 1747, was perhaps the most influential member of the *coterie* by the time Wilkes met him there in March 1763.<sup>78</sup> His political writings at that time consisted principally in two contributions to the *Encyclopédie: Autorité Politique* (1751) and *Droit Naturel* (1755). His political education was developed between 1760 and 1770 at d'Holbach's, '*Le texte courant de nos causeries rue Royale, déclare-t-il en 1762, c'est tantôt la politique, tantôt la religion*'<sup>vii</sup>,<sup>79</sup> and during this period four articles on politics in the final ten volumes of the *Encyclopédie* published in 1766 have been attributed to him: *Pouvoir, Puissance, Représentants*<sup>80</sup> and *Souverains*.<sup>81</sup> Diderot's views on the English political system were more nuanced than d'Holbach's, and in *Observations sur le Nakaz* (1774) he took a more positive, albeit cynical, view:

*Si le droit de représenter s'achète, le plus riche sera toujours le représentant. S'il n'achète pas, le représentant sera a meilleur marché. Je suis quelquefois tenté de croire qu'il en est en Angleterre de la vénalité du représentant comme de la vénalité des charges en France : deux maux nécessaires*<sup>viii</sup>.<sup>82</sup>

Diderot expressed similar views in *Entretiens avec Catherine II* (1773) and in his polemical contributions to Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes* (1780).<sup>83</sup> His views on Wilkes in his correspondence have been summarised, a little too harshly, by Vernière:

*Lorsque John Wilkes, mis hors la loi, se réfugie en France, en décembre 1763, il accueille avec curiosité ses critiques du parlementarisme anglais; mais il n'est pas dupe de ses fougades. Wilkes est à ses yeux moins un héros politique que l'amant généreux de Flaminia. Il l'appelle "Gracchus", suit avec sympathie les campagnes du North Briton et*

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<sup>vii</sup>Trans.: The recurrent themes of our discussions at rue Royale, he declared in 1762, is sometimes politics, sometimes religion.

<sup>viii</sup>Trans.: If the right of representation is to be bought, the richest will always be the representative. If it is not to be bought, the representative will be cheaper. I am sometimes tempted to believe that the venality of the representative in England is much the same as the venality of taxes in France: two necessary evils.

*l'élection du Middlesex, mais le classe avant tout parmi les originaux de son bestiaire*<sup>ix</sup>.<sup>84</sup>

On political issues at least, Diderot's letters suggest he treated Wilkes as a more substantial and influential figure. In a letter of 2 April 1768 Diderot congratulated Wilkes on his success at the Middlesex election:

*L'unanimité peu commune avec laquelle les électeurs ont voté en votre faveur est une preuve incontestable de leur impartialité. La corruption, l'intrigue et les manoeuvres clandestines, si communes dans les élections, n'ont pas eu place dans la vôtre. L'amour de la liberté enflammait toutes les poitrines et dictait le suffrage des électeurs indépendants ... Votre conduite calme et paisible vous fait un honneur infini, et vos principes généreux et patriotiques rendront votre nom immortel ... L'Europe sera surprise de votre patriotisme et de votre succès; ou plutôt elle admirera l'un et se réjouira de l'autre*<sup>x</sup>.<sup>85</sup>

Diderot's respect for Wilkes persisted, as demonstrated by a letter of June 1776 on the American revolt: *'J'ai lu avec une grande satisfaction les différents discours que vous avez prononcés sur l'affaire des provinciaux. Je les ai trouvés pleins d'éloquence, de dignité et de force*<sup>xi</sup>'.<sup>86</sup>

Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard (1733-1817) was perhaps the most urbane of the *philosophes* and his sociability and 'unproductive affability'<sup>87</sup> is reflected in his frequent correspondence with Wilkes between 1764 and 1780, following their meeting at

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<sup>ix</sup>Trans.: When John Wilkes, an outlaw, took refuge in France in December 1763, he listened with curiosity to his criticisms of English parliamentarism; but he was not fooled by his caprices. In his view Wilkes was not so much a political hero as the generous lover of Flaminia. He calls him 'Gracchus', follows with sympathy the campaigns of the North Briton and the Middlesex election, but above all classifies him among the eccentrics of his bestiary.

<sup>x</sup>Trans.: The rare unanimity with which the electors have voted in your favour is an incontrovertible proof of their impartiality. Corruption, intrigue and secret manoeuvres, so common in elections, played no part in yours. The love of liberty enflamed every breast and dictated the votes of the independent electors ... Your calm and peaceful conduct does you infinite honour, and your generous and patriotic principles will make your name immortal ... Europe will be surprised by your patriotism and your success; or rather she will admire the former and rejoice over the latter.

<sup>xi</sup>Trans.: I have read with great satisfaction the various speeches you have made on the issue of the colonists. I found them full of eloquence, dignity and force.

d'Holbach's in 1763.<sup>88</sup> Suard made his reputation as a translator of William Robertson's *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* and essays by David Hume,<sup>89</sup> and as a journalist editing, jointly with the Abbé Arnaud, the *Gazette de France* and the *Gazette Littéraire de l'Europe*. Wilkes collaborated on the *Gazette Littéraire*, contributing in 1764 articles on the English poets William Mason and Charles Churchill.<sup>90</sup> Suard visited London in 1768, 1773, and 1776 and was a well-informed and critical follower of English political affairs.

Suard's correspondence to Wilkes, '*empreintes d'une estime et d'une cordialité réciproques*<sup>xii</sup>,<sup>91</sup> demonstrate that Wilkes's political career on his return to England in 1768 was closely followed by members of the *coterie* and that Wilkes maintained extensive contacts with foreign literary figures<sup>92</sup> and publications.<sup>93</sup> Although Suard was generally a supporter of Wilkes and his campaigns, including through his editorship of the *Gazette de France*,<sup>94</sup> he could also be critical of Wilkes; in particular for his attacks on the Scots, whom Suard greatly admired, in Wilkes's *Letter to the Worthy Electors of the Borough of Aylesbury*,<sup>95</sup> and for his disputes with John Horne which resulted in the break-up of the Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights in 1771.<sup>96</sup>

Suard shared similar liberal political views to Wilkes as shown in his letter of 13 April 1771 on the conflict Wilkes and the City had engaged with the house of commons over the reporting of parliamentary proceedings:

*... l'affaire actuelle du privilège de la chambre basse me paroît exactement le parallèle de celle des general warrants, mais celle ci est bien autrement importante. J'espère que vous vous en tirerez avec le même honneur pour vous et le même avantage pour la liberté publique. Peut être est il utile qu'il existe dans les différentes branches de la législation de ces pouvoirs vagues et illimités ... mais ce seroit un bien plus grand mal de tourner contre le peuple des pouvoirs arbitraires qui n'ont pu et ne doivent être exercés que pour le plus grand bien du peuple. C'est une grande folie que d'oser les opposer à une loi*

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<sup>xii</sup>Trans.: marked by reciprocal esteem and cordiality.

*fondamentale, au principe même de la constitution, surtout pour les objets frivoles et dans un moment où la liberté publique se croit en danger. Toutes les fois qu'une pareille question sera portée en jugement solennel chez une nation libre et digne de l'être il faut bien qu'elle se décide en faveur de la liberté*<sup>xiii</sup>.<sup>97</sup>

Suard's letters also reveal the attitude of the *coterie* to Wilkes's brand of popular politics, which as Suard explained in a letter of 25 April 1769 was far removed from the world of the ancien régime:

*On a toutes les peines du monde à la concevoir à Paris; à chaque nouvelle résolution de la chambre basse contre vous, on vous croit perdu; à chaque nouvelle entreprise de votre part, on craint qu'une lettre de cachet ne vous ferme la bouche. Notre public ne sait guère que c'est un peuple libre*<sup>xiv</sup>.<sup>98</sup>

The ambivalence of the *coterie* is demonstrated in Suard's letter to Wilkes of 13 April 1768 on the riots following Wilkes's election at Middlesex on 28 March, when the French ambassador was asked to drink a glass of porter to 'Wilkes and Liberty':<sup>99</sup>

*Je voudrais bien aussi qu'on ne fit pas boire malgré eux les ambassadeurs qui n'ont pas soif. Nous avons bu ici à votre santé et tous vos amis auroient pris volontiers les cocardes bleues, s'il en eut été besoin. Je suis chargé de vous faire*

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<sup>xiii</sup>Trans.: The present matter concerning the privilege of the House of Commons seems to me to be exactly the parallel of that over general warrants, but of much greater importance. I hope you will emerge from it with the same honour for yourself and the same advantage for public liberty. Perhaps it is useful that there exists in the different legislative branches such vague and unlimited powers.... But it would be a much worse evil to turn against the people arbitrary powers which could and should only be exercised for the greatest good of the people. It is the height of folly to use them against a fundamental law, the very principle of the constitution, especially for frivolous purposes and at a time when the public liberty believes itself to be in danger. Every time that such a question is brought for solemn judgement before a nation which is free and worthy of that freedom it should be decided in favour of liberty.

<sup>xiv</sup>Trans.: We have the greatest difficulty in getting to grips with this in Paris; at each new resolution of the Commons against you, we believe you to be lost; at each of your new undertakings, we fear that a *lettre de cachet* will close your mouth. Our public hardly knows what is a free people.

*des compliments de d'Holbach, d'Helvétius, de Saurin, de  
notre cher abbé, de tout ce que vous aimés ici*<sup>xv</sup>;<sup>100</sup>

Suard then continued that Grimm, somewhat unexpectedly in view of his later career as a correspondent for royalty throughout Europe,<sup>101</sup> also supported his success: '*Vous savés que ce qu'il hait le plus après Dieu c'est les Rois, et il vous regarde comme un héros de l'athéisme politique*'<sup>xvi</sup>.<sup>102</sup>

Kors cites Suard's letter as evidence that 'nothing could be further from the truth' than that 'the coterie holbachique was seeking to further the cause of Wilkes in England, perhaps as a part of some broader plan of incitement to radical change' and concludes: 'No one submerged himself in the coterie holbachique'.<sup>103</sup> However, while it is clear that the repressive political situation in France required the members of the *coterie* to be extremely circumspect in publishing their opinions,<sup>104</sup> their correspondence with Wilkes shows they felt able to express their political views more freely and there is no reason to believe that Suard was being disingenuous when he expressed their support for Wilkes, as in a letter of 28 November 1768: '*Tous vos amis de la Rue Royale ont beaucoup d'empressement d'apprendre la suite de vos aventures et vous ne devés pas douter du sentiment qui les anime*'<sup>xvii</sup>.<sup>105</sup>

Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715-1772) was a wealthy former tax farmer who had made his reputation with the controversial philosophical work *De l'esprit* (1758) and he was a member of the coterie d'Holbachique.<sup>106</sup> In a letter to his wife of March 1764 from England, he pities Wilkes in exile:

*Il semble qu'on abandonne le pauvre M. Wickles et qu'on  
brize en luy l'instrument dont on s'étoit servis; il y a  
beaucoup a parier qu'il ne retournera plus en Angleterre. Il  
n'est ni mon amy ni mon ennemy, et j'ai pour luy les*

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<sup>xv</sup>Trans.: I would also like that one did not force ambassadors who are not thirsty to drink. We drank here to your health and all your friends would willingly have taken the blue cockades, if it would have been necessary. I am asked to pass on greetings from d'Holbach, d'Hélvétius, Saurin, our dear Abbé, from all who liked you here.

<sup>xvi</sup>Trans.: You know that what he hates most after God is Kings, and he considers you a hero of political atheism.

<sup>xvii</sup>Trans.: All your friends of the rue Royale are very eager to learn how your adventures developed and you should not be in doubt as to the feelings which motivate them.

*sentiments que l'humanité inspire pour les  
malheureux*<sup>xviii</sup> 107.

However, by 24 December 1765 Helvétius was entertaining Wilkes at his house with Hume, Morellet, and Raynal. The two men to judge from their correspondence seem to have had an acerbic friendship: at the beginning of January 1767 Helvétius wrote to Wilkes: *'Mon cher precepteur des rois, vous qui avés de si mauvais ecoliers, qui êtes exilé dans ce monde, qui serés damné dans l'autre, et à qui la posterité doit une statue ...*<sup>xix</sup>,<sup>108</sup> while Wilkes wrote to his friend David Garrick on 17 January 1767: 'I love a Frenchman d'un certain age, when he is retired from business with a good pension and a good cook. Helvétius is now often of that set.'<sup>109</sup>

However, in their analysis of the English constitution they shared a strong belief in the importance of political liberty and public opinion. In *De l'homme*, published posthumously in 1773, Helvétius wrote:

*Il n'est point a Londres d'ouvrier, de porteur de chaise qui ne lise les gazettes, qui ne soupçonne la vénalité de ses représentants et ne croie en conséquence devoir s'instruire de ses droits en qualité de citoyen. Aussi nul membre du parlement n'oserait y proposer une loi directement contraire à la liberté nationale. S'il le faisait, ce membre, cité par le parti de l'opposition et les papiers publics devant le peuple, serait exposé à sa vengeance. Le corps du parlement est donc contenu par la nation. Nul bras maintenant assez fort pour enchaîner un pareil peuple. Son asservissement est donc éloigné*<sup>xx</sup> 110.

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<sup>xviii</sup>Trans.: It seems that the poor Mr. Wilkes has been abandoned and that having used him as an instrument he is to be discarded; there is every chance he will not return to England again. He is neither my friend nor my enemy, and I hold for him the sentiments which humanity inspires for the unfortunate'.

<sup>xix</sup>Trans.: My dear preceptor of kings, you who have such bad students, who is exiled in this world, who will be damned in the other, and to whom posterity owes a statue ...

<sup>xx</sup>Trans.: There is not a single worker, nor porter who does not read the newspapers, who does not suspect the venality of his representatives and does not believe as a result in the necessity of instructing himself in his rights as a citizen. Thus no member of parliament would dare to propose a law directly contrary to the national liberty. If he did so, this member, cited by the opposition party and the public papers before the people, would be exposed to its vengeance. The body of parliament is thus contained by the nation. No arm is now strong enough to fetter such a people. Its subjection is thus far off.

Wilkes, in a letter of 7 November 1770, also emphasised the important role of public opinion: 'I have, Sir, a real pleasure in finding out, and following, the opinion of the people. I will through life be faithful to their cause. I firmly and sincerely believe the voice of the people to be the voice of God. I wish always to hear it clear and distinct. When I do, I will obey it, as a divine call, with spirit and alacrity, fearless of every consequence, and dutifully submitting my own private opinions.'<sup>111</sup>

In *De l'homme* Helvétius also praised the freedom of expression protected by English law: '*En Angleterre, comme en Portugal, il est des grands injustes, mais que peuvent-ils à Londres contre un écrivain? Point d'Anglais qui derrière le rempart de ses lois ne puisse braver leur pouvoir, insulter à l'ignorance, à la superstition et à la sottise*<sup>xxi</sup>'.<sup>112</sup> The value of press freedom was equally esteemed by Wilkes in his *Letter to the Worthy Electors of the Borough of Aylesbury* of 22 October 1764: 'The *North Briton* did not suffer the public to be misled. He acknowledged no *privileged vehicle of fallacy*. He considered the *liberty of the press* as the bulwark of all our liberties, as instituted to open the ideas of the people, and he seems to have thought it the duty of a political writer to follow *truth* wherever it leads.'<sup>113</sup>

The chevalier de Chastellux (1734-1788) participated in the *coterie* from 1764 to 1780<sup>114</sup> and was the author of *De la félicité publique* (1772) and *Voyages dans l'Amérique Septentrionale* (1786), a copy of which was in Wilkes's library at his death.<sup>115</sup> Chastellux met Wilkes at d'Holbach's<sup>116</sup> and on 30 March 1768<sup>117</sup> travelled to England at the time of the tumult following Wilkes's election victory at Middlesex on 28 March and his imprisonment on 27 April.<sup>118</sup>

Chastellux's letters to Wilkes at this time are further evidence of the mixed reaction Wilkes's brand of popular politics aroused in the *philosophes*. On his arrival, he informed Wilkes in a letter of 28 March 1768: '*Le baron d'Holbach et toute sa société étoient fort occupés de vos affaires*<sup>xxii</sup>;<sup>119</sup> but the difficulty of tracking Wilkes down and the violence following his electoral success made him pleased to leave London, as he declared on 9 April:

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<sup>xxi</sup>Trans.: In England as in Portugal, there are powerful unjust men, but what can they do in London against a writer? There is not a single Englishman who cannot behind the rampart of his laws confront their power, affront ignorance, superstition and stupidity.

<sup>xxii</sup>Trans.: The Baron d'Holbach and all his circle were very caught up with your activities.

*Le numero 45<sup>120</sup> est devenu simbole misthérieux à qui tout le monde rend homage ... Je vais, mon cher ami, quitter votre voisinage pour prendre un air plus paisible. Savés vous que vous avés laissé dans ce pays cy une contagion pour les combats singuliers: plaignés moi de n'avoir fait que pour la triste discipline d'un régiment ce que vous avés fait pour l'exemple et la liberté d'une nation<sup>xxiii</sup> .<sup>121</sup>*

By the time of Chastellux's return to London, Wilkes had been imprisoned which led Chastellux in a letter of 28 May to declare in admiration:

*J'étois dans les provinces lorsque vous avés pris le partit de placer votre liberté dans les fonds publiques. Cette action a été grande et noble, digne en tout d'une âme comme le votre. Sans doute que ce sacrifice que vous avés fait de la liberté à la liberté rachètera celle de tous vos concitoyens à peu près comme les trois jours qu'une certaine personne a passés dans le tombeau ont arraché des millions d'âmes à une mort éternelle<sup>xxiv</sup> .<sup>122</sup>*

However, this admiration fell short of visiting Wilkes in prison since: '*On dit que vos liaisons avec les françois donnent à parler a vos ennemis ...<sup>xxv</sup> ,<sup>123</sup>* but he assured Wilkes of his support: '*croyés qu'il ne faut être ny anglois, ny du partit de l'opposition, mais seulement homme d'esprit et de société pour dire avec plaisir Wilkes for ever<sup>xxvi</sup> .<sup>124</sup>* The support of Chastellux, 'a devotee of the highest aristocratic salons',<sup>125</sup> notwithstanding the popular disturbances, showed that Wilkes's personality and political

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<sup>xxiii</sup>Trans.: The number 45 has become a mysterious symbol to which everybody pays homage. I am, my dear friend, leave your neighbourhood to take a more peaceful air. You know that you have left in this country a contagion for remarkable combats; pity me for having only done for the sad discipline of a regiment what you have done for the example and liberty of a nation.

<sup>xxiv</sup>Trans.: I was in the provinces when you decided to put your liberty into the public domain. This action was great and noble, in all worthy of a soul such as yours. Without doubt this sacrifice which you have made of liberty for liberty will redeem that of your citizens almost like the three days that a certain person spent in the tomb snatched millions of souls from eternal death.

<sup>xxv</sup>Trans.: It is said that your liaisons with the French give ammunition to your enemies...

<sup>xxvi</sup> Trans.: Believe that it is neither necessary to be English, nor of the opposition party, but only a man of spirit and society to say with pleasure *Wilkes for ever*.

activities attracted the sympathy of *philosophes* across a wide range of social and professional backgrounds.

Wilkes's connections extended beyond these *philosophes*: he knew Grimm, d'Alembert,<sup>126</sup> Morellet, the *Abbé* Galiani, Raynal, Marmontel, Roux, and Saint-Lambert. Wilkes even visited his most admired French author Voltaire<sup>127</sup> during his stay in Geneva from 29 July to 22 September 1765.<sup>128</sup> Voltaire was sufficiently impressed to include a brief reference to Wilkes in his revised article on *Government* published in *Questions on the Encyclopedia* (1771-1774): 'It is only for Mr. Wilkes to weigh in the balance of his English scales those at the head of the human race.'<sup>129</sup>

The admiration and esteem expressed for Wilkes by such a diverse group of *philosophes*, not known for their idle flattery, establishes that he was a person with substantial political views that commanded respect. On many issues such as religious toleration and freedom of thought and of the press, his views were similar to those articulated by the *philosophes*.<sup>130</sup> During the 1760s and 1770s, Diderot, Helvétius, and d'Holbach published political works which contained a discussion of English government either directly or by way of illustration<sup>131</sup> and it does not seem improbable that their discussions with Wilkes assisted them in developing their views. These contacts and discussions in turn would have impacted on Wilkes by broadening his intellectual horizons<sup>132</sup> and provided him with moral and intellectual support during his exile and subsequent political campaigns.

### III

Wilkes's libertinism has significantly contributed to his rakish reputation and such a view was undoubtedly shared by a number of contemporaries such as Burgh and Price who were otherwise sympathetic to his political causes.<sup>133</sup> However, Salisbury has also argued that Wilkes's used his libertinism to further his political goals: 'Wilkes identified in mid-eighteenth-century polity, a zone of discomfort which he sought to aggravate with the ideological instruments of the libertine Whig tradition to which he saw himself the heir.'<sup>134</sup> The discussion here will not engage with the debate on the history of the concept of libertinism,<sup>135</sup> nor Wilkes's position within the libertine tradition, but will

be limited to advancing the view that the role Wilkes's libertinism played in the development of his political ideas and public identity should not be given undue weight since it was not an issue he chose to defend in public but was forced upon him by his political opponents. Furthermore, libertinism was not peculiar to Wilkes but shared or at least tolerated by many contemporaries, including some of the *philosophes* with whom he associated, and it would be misleading in this cosmopolitan context at least to characterise Wilkes by reference to his libertinism rather than his libertarian principles.

Wilkes did not set out to portray himself as a libertine in public. The obtaining of a copy of the *Essay on Woman* by his political opponents in 1763 was part of their campaign against him over publication of the *North Briton no. 45* and was probably the result of duplicity by his printer Michael Curry.<sup>136</sup> It was never the intention of Wilkes that the parody of Pope's *Essay on Man* should have anything but a limited private circulation.<sup>137</sup> The fact that he was able to exploit its disclosure to expose the hypocrisy of his political opponents<sup>138</sup> and nevertheless retain the support of his urban freeholder electors<sup>139</sup> is a testament to his political skill but should not obscure the fact his sexual libertinism was not an issue he chose to exploit. In a reply dated 15 May 1771 to a letter of John Horne,<sup>140</sup> Wilkes made this clear:

‘I do not mean, Sir, to be impertinent enough to a public, whom I respect, to descend to those particulars of private life, in which they are not interested, either to accuse you or to defend myself. The frailties, of which I have repented, I will not justify. I will not even plead with Horace, ‘Nec lusisse pudet, sed non incidere ludum;’ but I hope to redeem and bury in oblivion every past folly by great and virtuous actions, by real services to my country.’<sup>141</sup>

He was, however, prepared to defend his civil rights as he made clear in his *Letter to the Worthy Electors of the Borough of Aylesbury* of 22 October 1764:

... I will always maintain the right of private opinion in its fullest extent, when it is not followed by giving any open, public offence to any establishment, or indeed to any individual. The crime commences from thence, and the

magistrate has a right to interpose, and even to punish outrageous and indecent attacks on what any community has decreed to be sacred. In my own closet I had a right to examine, and even to try by the keen edge of ridicule, any opinion I pleased.<sup>142</sup>

In *Letter to the Duke of Grafton* of 12 December 1766, Wilkes developed this libertarian defence by arguing for a person's right of privacy against the search of private papers under a general warrant which threatened:

... not only his own safety and property, but what will come still more home to a man of honour, the security, the happiness of those with whom he is most intimately connected, their fortunes, their future views, perhaps secrets, the discovery of which would drive the coldest stoic to despair, their very existence possibly, all that is important in the public walk of life, all that is dear and sacred in friendship and love.<sup>143</sup>

The second point is that Wilkes from his student days frequented circles where libertine views and behaviour were prevalent. G.S. Rousseau has shown that at the University of Leiden in 1744 Wilkes was part of a libertine group centred around Andrew Baxter<sup>144</sup> which 'linked up with an affiliated homosocial club in Leiden that included LaMettrie, Akenside, and d'Holbach'.<sup>145</sup> On his return to England, Wilkes's friendship with the reprobate Thomas Potter led to membership of the Knights of Saint Francis of Wycombe and licentious visits with Charles Churchill to Sir Francis Dashwood's Medmenham Abbey.<sup>146</sup> After the furore over *An Essay on Woman*, this private libertinism became public and gave Wilkes a reputation which his subsequent escapades with Corradini and various courtesans cemented.<sup>147</sup>

However, the negative perception of Wilkes this reputation created among dissenting Ministers and polite society in England was not reflected among his philosopher friends in Paris. D'Holbach had in his youth been part of a 'homosocial club'<sup>148</sup> and Chastellux wrote of his fellow *philosophes*: '*Raynal, Helvétius, Galiani et d'autres gens qu'on célèbre sont les plus immodérés des libertins, et leur métaphores*

*préférées, au cours des conversations, sont empruntées au langage des pires bordels*<sup>xxvii</sup>.<sup>149</sup> Suard, who made arrangements for the education in Paris of Wilkes's illegitimate son John Smith, also showed in his correspondence his relaxed sexual attitudes, relating the following salacious gossip to Wilkes in a letter of 9 December 1772: *'Que dites de Voltaire qui vient d'avoir une bonne fortune à ferney. Il a couché avec une femme, et le lendemain il a eu trois évanouissements qu'il avoit mal mérités*<sup>xxviii</sup>.<sup>150</sup> Diderot, who experienced similar amorous disappointments, wrote to Wilkes at the beginning of June 1776:

*Au milieu du tumulte public, portez-vous bien; soyez gai; buvez de bons vins; et lorsqu'il vous prendra fantaisie d'être tendre, adressez-vous à des femmes qui ne fassent pas soupirer longtemps. Elles amusent autant que les autres; elles occupent moins; on les possède sans inquiétude, et on les quitte sans regret*<sup>xxix</sup>.<sup>151</sup>

In such company, Wilkes's libertinism was unlikely to have shocked.

#### IV

Only one country was absent from this array of 'Enlightened' thinkers in the sixties and seventies, and that was England.... no 'parti des philosophes' was formed in London, and so could not claim to guide society. The struggles which did take place (one only has to recall 'Wilkes and liberty') are not those of a nascent intelligentsia. Even the English giant of the Enlightenment, Gibbon, was not only closely linked with continental culture

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<sup>xxvii</sup>Trans.: Raynal, Helvétius, Galiani and others who are celebrated are the most unrestrained libertines, and their favourite metaphors, during conversations, are taken from the language of the worst brothels.

<sup>xxviii</sup>Trans.: What do you say about Voltaire who has just had a piece of luck at Ferney. He slept with a woman, and the following day he had three fainting fits which he hardly deserved.

<sup>xxix</sup>Trans.: In the middle of the public tumult, bear up well; be in good spirits; drink good wines; and when it takes your fancy to be tender, address yourself to women who do make one sigh for a long time. They amuse as much as the others; they take up less time; one possesses them without worry, and one leaves them without regret.

but remained an isolated figure in his own country, a solitary figure... English radicalism, too, was born around 1764, but it exhibited very different characteristics from the philosophy of the continent.<sup>152</sup>

This view of English political culture as essentially parochial, as opposed to the cosmopolitanism of the Scottish Enlightenment during the same period,<sup>153</sup> is challenged by the evidence for the intellectual and social cosmopolitanism of Wilkes who personified English radicalism for much of this period and whose ideas on political and civil liberties converged with those of the leading *philosophes*.

The diversity and cosmopolitanism of Wilkes's intellectual background and associations also challenges the traditional interpretation of Wilkes as a rakish figure motivated principally by self-interest. When Wilkes's political ideas are examined in the context of his collaboration with Churchill, his *Introduction to The History of England* and other political writings, and his association with the *philosophes*, a more principled and consistent view emerges. Wilkes shared the intellectual commitment of the *philosophes* in favour of civil and political liberties and his campaigns for freedom of the press, freedom of election, and publication of parliamentary debates<sup>154</sup> reflected that commitment.

Finally, the view which sees a clear connection between Wilkes's libertinism and politics,<sup>155</sup> while it gives a fuller account of Wilkes's rich intellectual background,<sup>156</sup> overemphasises the role of libertinism in the development of Wilkes's political identity. His libertinism, while it was a trait which he shared with Churchill and many of the *philosophes* with whom he associated, was incidental to that identity. Libertinism was an issue raised by his political opponents and, while he defended the right to privacy and liberty of private opinion by reference to libertarian principles, he did not seek to defend libertinism. Wilkes was by political conviction a libertarian not a libertine.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, 'Political Thought in the English-speaking Atlantic, 1760-1790: (i) The imperial crisis', in J. G. A. Pocock, ed., *The Varieties of British Political Thought 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 246-282, at p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (Westport, Conn., 1963), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Langford, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (2 vols., Oxford, 1981), ii, p. 298.

<sup>4</sup> Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthmen* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), pp. 322-323.

<sup>5</sup> Ian. R Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvil, and Reform: The Parliamentary Reform Movement in British Politics 1760-1785* (London, 1962), p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> J. Brewer, *Party ideology and popular politics at the accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 164.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Colley, 'Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism before Wilkes', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 31 (1981), pp. 1-19, at p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Pocock, 'Political Thought in the English-speaking Atlantic', at p. 256.

<sup>15</sup> Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), p. 170.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.172.

<sup>17</sup> David Wootton, ed., *John Locke, Political Writings* (London, 1993), pp. 173-174.

<sup>18</sup> Kramnick, *Republicanism*, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>20</sup> Peter D. G. Thomas, *John Wilkes, a friend to liberty* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 5-9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Grant, ed., *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill* (Oxford, 1956), p. xv.

<sup>23</sup> Pocock, 'Political Thought in the English-speaking Atlantic', p. 254.

<sup>24</sup> Grant, ed., *Poetical Works*, p. xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Churchill sent Wilkes drafts of many of his poems for comment and Wilkes assisted the poet Robert Lloyd in preparing for posthumous publication the second volume of Churchill's poems: see Grant, *Poetical Works*, p. xxii.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xvi-xix.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Lockwood, *Post-Augustan satire: Charles Churchill and satirical poetry, 1750-1800* (Washington, 1979), p. 162.

<sup>28</sup> Grant, ed., *Poetical Works*, pp. 418-419.

<sup>29</sup> *Letters to and from Mr. Wilkes, Vol. I* (1779), pp. 24-25. Only one volume published.

<sup>30</sup> Brewer, *Party Ideology*, pp. 169-170.

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- <sup>31</sup> Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, eds., *The House of Commons 1754-1790: The History of Parliament* (3 vols., London, 1964), i, p. 332.
- <sup>32</sup> Grant, ed., *Poetical Works*, p. 224.
- <sup>33</sup> *Letters to and from Mr. Wilkes*, p. 215.
- <sup>34</sup> Brewer, *Party Ideology*, p. 167.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-173.
- <sup>37</sup> At his death, Wilkes' library contained a nine volume edition of Locke's works: Seamus Deane, ed., *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons, vol. 8, Politicians* (London, 1973), pp. 127-177.
- <sup>38</sup> Alan Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie: An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton, 1976), pp. 41-81. In a letter of 26 May 1767 Wilkes replied to his printer's concerns he might adopt French Catholicism: 'I do not think France is a country of much religion ... I have no fears for his religion, for I know him and *Paris*, where he generally resides. No *faith* remains there, ...': *Letters to and from Mr. Wilkes*, pp. 268-269.
- <sup>39</sup> J. Wilkes, *The History of England from the Revolution to the Accession of the Brunswick Line* (1768), p. 9.
- <sup>40</sup> A 1737 edition of which Wilkes had in his library at his death: Deane, ed., *Sale Catalogues*.
- <sup>41</sup> Wilkes, *The History*, p. 31.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- <sup>44</sup> See Wootton, *John Locke*, pp. 344-345.
- <sup>45</sup> Wilkes, *The History*, p. 10.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- <sup>47</sup> Wootton, *John Locke*, pp. 202-204.
- <sup>48</sup> Wilkes, *The History*, pp. 27-28.
- <sup>49</sup> Wilkes only notes that Cromwell 'gave a temporary calm to the nation': *ibid.*, p. 13. He did, however, refer to Milton's 'Defence of the People of England and other valuable tracts': *ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- <sup>52</sup> Ian R. Christie, *Myth and Reality in Late Eighteenth Century British Politics and Other Papers* (London, 1970), p. 19.
- <sup>53</sup> For an analysis of this tradition, see Pocock, 'Political Thought in the English-speaking Atlantic'.
- <sup>54</sup> Kramnick, *Republicanism*, pp. 43-44.
- <sup>55</sup> George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study* (London, 1983), p. 84.
- <sup>56</sup> Kramnick, *Republicanism*, p. 172.
- <sup>57</sup> John Lough, *The Philosophes and Post-Revolutionary France* (Oxford, 1982), p. 4.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>59</sup> When Wilkes left Leiden in 1746 d'Holbach wrote: 'I need not tell you the sorrow our parting gave me ... In vain philosophy cried aloud; nature was still stronger, and the philosopher was forced to yield to the friend. Even now I feel the wound is not healed.'

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Therefore no more of that. Hope is my motto.’: W. H. Wickwar, *Baron d’Holbach: A Prelude to the French Revolution* (New York, 1968), p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie*, pp. 11-34.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-112.

<sup>62</sup> ‘... vous aimés les vers et vous connoissés à merveille notre langue;’:

G. Bonno, ed., ‘Lettres Inédites de Suard à Wilkes’, *Modern Philology*, 15 (1932), pp. 161-280, no. 50.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>64</sup> Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 129.

<sup>65</sup> Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie*, p. 13. Wilkes’s library contained the sale catalogue of the books of d’Holbach’s library, which contained over 3000 volumes (Kors, *D’Holbach’s Coterie*, p. 13), and his *Catechisme de la Nature*, edited and published posthumously in 1790 by Naigeon: Deane, ed., *Sale Catalogues*.

<sup>66</sup> Wickwar, *Baron d’Holbach*, p. 113.

<sup>67</sup> René Hubert, *D’Holbach et ses Amis* (Paris, 1928), p. 213.

<sup>68</sup> Lough, *The Philosophes*, p. 32.

<sup>69</sup> J. Boulad-Ayoub, ed., *D’Holbach, Système social* (Paris, 1994), p. 299.

<sup>70</sup> Thomas, *John Wilkes*, p. 44.

<sup>71</sup> *Letters to and from Mr. Wilkes*, p.199.

<sup>72</sup> Boulad-Ayoub, ed., *D’Holbach*, p. 297.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>76</sup> Lough, *The Philosophes*, p. 35.

<sup>77</sup> Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*, p. 196.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Vernière, ed., *Diderot, Oeuvres politiques* (Paris, 1963), p. 50.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

<sup>80</sup> As Vernière has pointed out, the political views of Diderot and d’Holbach were very similar and he refers to the possibility that d’Holbach was the author of *Représentants*: see *Oeuvres politiques*, n. 1, p. 25; this is also the view of Lough, *The Philosophes*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>81</sup> Vernière, ed., *Oeuvres politiques*, pp. 23-27.

<sup>82</sup> Lough, *The Philosophes*, p. 36.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37,

<sup>84</sup> Vernière, ed., *Oeuvres politiques*, p. xxiv.

<sup>85</sup> Roger Lewinter, ed., *Oeuvres Complètes de D. Diderot* (15 vols., Paris, 1969-1973), vii, pp. 657-658.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, xi, p. 1143.

<sup>87</sup> Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton, 1994), p. 141.

<sup>88</sup> G. Bonno, ed., ‘Lettres Inédites de Suard’, at p. 162.

<sup>89</sup> Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty*, pp. 145-176.

<sup>90</sup> Bonno, ed., ‘Lettres Inédites de Suard’, no. 2 and no. 4.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

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<sup>92</sup> Suard informs Wilkes in his correspondence of visits to England of Chastellux in March 1768 (ibid., no. 18) and the *Abbé Morellet* in April 1772 (ibid., no. 40).

<sup>93</sup> In a letter to Wilkes of 3 September 1776, Suard wrote: '*Il me paroît que vous connoissés mieux nos livres nouveaux que moi même.*': ibid., no. 53. Examples of works Suard sent and discussed in his correspondence with Wilkes included, in June 1764, Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois* (ibid., no. 5); on 30 October 1772, *Le Bonheur* by Helvétius, published posthumously with a preface by Saint-Lambert, and Voltaire's *Epître à Horace* (ibid., no. 42); and, on 20 September 1773, *A Eulogy to Jean Baptist Colbert* by Necker (ibid., no. 49). Wilkes sent Suard copies of Churchill's poems by letter of 29 July 1769 (ibid., no. 26); and was asked by Suard in a letter of 27 March 1774 to obtain works for other French writers, such as Condorcet (ibid., no. 50).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., no. 8.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., no. 33.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., no. 36.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., no. 24.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas, *John Wilkes*, p. 76.

<sup>100</sup> Bonno, ed., 'Lettres Inédites de Suard', no. 18.

<sup>101</sup> Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie*, pp. 197-198.

<sup>102</sup> Bonno, ed., 'Lettres Inédites de Suard', no. 18. In a letter to Wilkes of 19 October 1771, Diderot wrote: '*Monsieur et très honore Gracchus, avez-vous vu mon ami Grimm? Avez-vous bu la santé de vos amis de Paris? - Je crois que non. Attaché à son prince, il lui aura été difficile d'approcher sa lèvre de la coupe séditeuse d'un tribun du peuple.*' Lewinter, ed., *Oeuvres Complètes de D. Diderot*, ix, p. 1123. Grimm was in London with the prince of Hesse-Darmstadt: ibid., ix, n. 2, p. 1123.

<sup>103</sup> Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie*, p. 102.

<sup>104</sup> Thus, in a letter to Wilkes of 9 December 1772, Suard refused as too dangerous Wilkes's proposed topics for a French correspondent: '*Votre moutarde de Durham n'est pas à notre usage; nos maîtres ont le né si délicat qu'ils trouvent celle de Dijon souvent trop forte*': Bonno, ed., 'Lettres Inédites de Suard', no. 43.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., no. 21.

<sup>106</sup> Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>107</sup> A. Dainard, J. Orsoni, D. Smith and P. Allan, eds., *Correspondance générale d'Helvétius, 1761-1774* (4 Vols., Toronto, 1981-1998), iii, no. 519.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., no. 614.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., no. 617.

<sup>110</sup> Lough, *The Philosophes*, p. 30.

<sup>111</sup> *The Controversial Letters of John Wilkes, Esq., the Reverend John Horne and Their Principal Adherents* (1771), pp. 7-8.

<sup>112</sup> Lough, *The Philosophes*, p. 237.

<sup>113</sup> *Letters to and from Mr. Wilkes*, p. 192.

<sup>114</sup> Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>115</sup> Deane, ed., *Sale Catalogues*.

<sup>116</sup> Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie*, p. 26.

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- <sup>117</sup> See Suard's letter to Wilkes of 13 April 1768: Bonno, ed., 'Lettres Inédites de Suard', no.18.
- <sup>118</sup> Thomas, *John Wilkes*, pp. 74-82.
- <sup>119</sup> G. Bonno, ed., 'Lettres Inédites de Chastellux à Wilkes', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 12e année (1932), pp. 619-623, at p. 620.
- <sup>120</sup> Referring to issue No. 45 of the *North Briton*.
- <sup>121</sup> Bonno, ed., 'Lettres Inédites de Chastellux', p. 621.
- <sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622.
- <sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 622. Bonno refers to such suspicions voiced in Horace Walpole's correspondence: *ibid.*, n. 5, p. 622.
- <sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 623.
- <sup>125</sup> Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie*, p. 112.
- <sup>126</sup> D'Alembert wrote to Voltaire on 26 May 1768: '*Que dites-vous du train que fait Wilkes en Angleterre? Il me semble que le despotisme n'a pas plus beau jeu dans ce pays-là que la superstition.*': L. Moland, ed., *Voltaire, Oeuvres Complètes* (54 vols., Paris, 1877-85), xlvii, no. 7267.
- <sup>127</sup> In his *Letter to the Earl of Bute* of 15 March 1763 Wilkes refers to Voltaire as 'that amazing French genius': *Letters to and from Mr. Wilkes*, pp. 158-159. Wilkes was also hoping to meet Jean-Jaques Rousseau, whom he also admired, on this visit to Geneva: a letter of François-Henri d'Ivernois of 20 August 1765 to Rousseau mentions a possible visit by a Mr. Liotard, who had promised Wilkes, '*qui veut avoir une douce querelle avec monsieur Rousseau*', to bring him along: R. A. Leigh, ed., *Correspondance complète de Jean Jacques Rousseau* (52 vols., Oxford, 1965-1988), xxvi, no. 4597. See for Wilkes's admiration of Rousseau, n. 6 to the same letter, at p. 236.
- <sup>128</sup> Thomas, *John Wilkes*, p. 60.
- <sup>129</sup> David Williams, trans. and ed., *Voltaire, Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 49 .
- <sup>130</sup> See Lough, *The Philosophes*, pp. 180-224.
- <sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-54.
- <sup>132</sup> At his death, the sale catalogue of Wilkes' library included - in addition to a substantial collection of classical works, erotica, Italian operettas, and English political writers - works by d'Alembert, Chastellux, De Staal, Grotius, Hélietius, d'Holbach, and Voltaire: Deane, ed., *Sale Catalogues*, pp. 127-177.
- <sup>133</sup> John Sainsbury, 'Wilkes and Libertinism', in Syndy M. Conger and Julie C. Hayes, eds., *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 26 (1998), pp. 151-174, at pp. 167-168.
- <sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.
- <sup>135</sup> See James G. Turner, 'The Properties of Libertinism', in Robert Purks Maccubbin (ed.), '*Tis Nature's Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality during the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 75-87.
- <sup>136</sup> Thomas, *John Wilkes*, pp. 38-39.
- <sup>137</sup> See A. Hamilton, *The Infamous Essay on Woman, or John Wilkes Seated Between Vice and Virtue* (London, 1972).
- <sup>138</sup> Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*, p. 36.
- <sup>139</sup> Namier and Brooke, *The House of Commons*, i, pp. 331-335.
- <sup>140</sup> In a letter of May 1771, Horne had written to Wilkes: 'It is not my intention here to open any account with you on the score of private character: in that respect the public

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have kindly passed an act of insolvency in your favour.’ *The Controversial Letters of John Wilkes*, p. 27.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>142</sup> *Letters to and from Mr. Wilkes*, p. 209.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 259-260.

<sup>144</sup> Baxter dedicated his philosophical work *Inquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul* to Wilkes and on his deathbed addressed Wilkes on 29 January 1750 a final philosophical reflection: ‘The end of God’s punishing us ... is our final happiness’: *ibid.*, p. 274.

<sup>145</sup> G. S. Rousseau, ‘The Pursuit of Homosexuality in the Eighteenth Century: “Utterly Confused Category” and/or Rich Repository?’, in Maccubbin, ed., *Unauthorized Sexuality*, pp. 132-168, at p. 157.

<sup>146</sup> Charles Chenevix Trench, *Portrait of a Patriot: A Biography of John Wilkes* (London, 1962), pp. 24-26.

<sup>147</sup> Sainsbury, ‘Wilkes and Libertinism’, pp. 158, 168.

<sup>148</sup> Rousseau, ‘The Pursuit of Homosexuality’, p. 157.

<sup>149</sup> A. Dainard, J. Orsoni, D. Smith and P. Allan, eds., *Correspondance Générale d’Helvétius*, iii, n. 3, p. 35 (trans.).

<sup>150</sup> Bonno, ed., ‘Lettres Inédites de Suard’, no. 43.

<sup>151</sup> Lewinter, ed., *Oeuvres Complètes de D. Diderot*, xi, pp. 1143-1144.

<sup>152</sup> Venturi, *Utopia and Reform*, p. 132.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>154</sup> Brewer, *Party Ideology*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>155</sup> G. S. Rousseau refers to: ‘... the freethinking antinomian Wilkes, who equated liberty with licence, and freedom with libertine ethics’: ‘The Sorrows of Priapus: anticlericalism, homosocial desire and Richard Payne Knight.’, in G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (eds.), *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 101-153, at p. 122.

<sup>156</sup> Sainsbury examines this background, and in particular Wilkes’s connection with English deism, in: ‘Wilkes and Libertinism’, pp. 154-155.