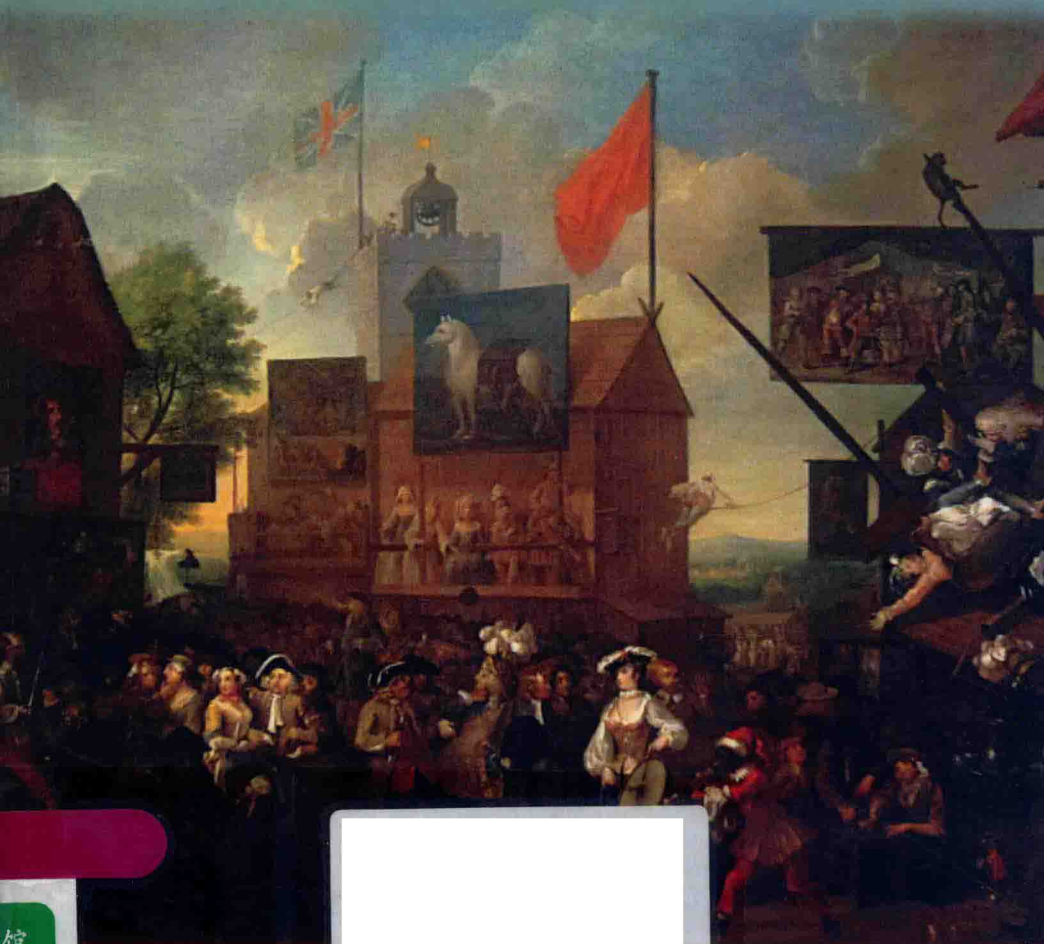


THE 'PERPETUAL FAIR'

GENDER, DISORDER,
AND URBAN AMUSEMENT IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON



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✦ Anne Wohlcke ✦

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✚ Anne Wohlcke ✚

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The expansion of research into the history of women and gender since the 1970s has changed the face of history. Using the insights of feminist theory and of historians of women, gender historians have explored the configuration in the past of gender identities and relations between the sexes. They have also investigated the history of sexuality and family relations, and analysed ideas and ideals of masculinity and femininity. Yet gender history has not abandoned the original, inspirational project of women's history: to recover and reveal the lived experience of women in the past and the present.

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The 'perpetual fair'

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For David

Abbreviations

BL	British Library
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
NA	National Archives
OBP	Proceedings of the Old Bailey
Rep	Repertories of the Court of Aldermen

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Introduction: Making a mannered metropolis and taming the 'perpetual fair'

England hath Fairs and Markets in abundance, and, in general, all Sorts of Means and Conveniencies for Trade. Bartholomew Fair is the greatest in London; indeed there is no great Business done at it, but the City of London it self is a perpetual Fair.¹

(Henri Misson, London, 1719)

In 1738, a caravan containing a collection of wild beasts travelled along Cheapside as it made its way – most likely from Bartholomew Fair in West Smithfield – to Southwark Fair. The showman escorted his cargo through this neighbourhood of merchants, shops, and 'occasional gentlemen', when a wagon wheel broke and animals spilled out of their cages. Businessmen and women were so alarmed that they considered closing their shops, despite it being the noon hour. This threatened disruption to Cheapside, the central commercial street in London, at the peak of the workday was narrowly avoided when the showman collected his animals and proved to the local businessmen and women 'that his Beasts were securely chain'd down'. Once local fears were 'dispers'd [and] a new Wheel [was] fix'd ... the Caravan [was] convey'd safely to Southwark'.² Contradictory forms of commerce existed in early eighteenth-century London.³ This September noonday, London's transient business of peddling curiosities collided with business conducted in brick shops. From the perspective of shopkeepers and city officials, streets free of wild beasts or other dangers were the ideal setting for polite and orderly commerce.⁴

Eighteenth-century London saw the emergence of a thriving commercial network of shops and services, many of which were housed in permanent and, in some cases, grand new buildings in both the City and the newer West End.⁵ Even as London's shops and industries boomed, outdoor commerce thrived along London streets and at the city's many spring- and summer-time fairs. Increased availability of consumer goods and a growing pool of labourers who entered London each day fuelled both transient and fixed industries.⁶ As people continued to recognize opportunities to profit in the mobile commerce of fairs, urban authorities found it difficult to enforce their own preference for one type of commerce above another. This book analyses urban debates regarding the place of festivity in the metropolis. London's fairs were discussed

in city records, sermons, and pamphlet literature. These sources reveal diverse opinions about the roles of commerce and festivity in the city and reflect shifting understandings of what constituted appropriate public behaviour in urban spaces. Arguments about the worth of fairs are often gendered – they reflect understandings and expectations of urban authorities and spectators of what was appropriate male or female urban behaviour, and also demonstrate fears about the containment of festive (and often unruly) masculinity and femininity. An analysis of London-area fairs reveals how the potential of urban spaces and practices to disrupt idealized gender hierarchies and relations attracted city authorities' notice. At the same time, these locations provided participants a venue in which to contest or claim and gather status from idealized understandings of gender.⁷

Festivity was one of the primary attractions of early modern London, which was rich in civic and royal pageantry. The city offered plenty in the way of theatrical and musical entertainment, was full of coffee houses and taverns, and was the site for many spring- and summer-time fairs. Even public punishments, such as whippings or executions, drew crowds.⁸ Festive occasions provided Londoners from all social backgrounds opportunities to express urban identities. Whether structured by civic agendas, as were Lord Mayor pageants, unstructured and impromptu, such as the unchartered Tottenham Court Fair, or coordinated by entrepreneurs providing entertainment for a fee in places such as Sadler's Wells or Ranelagh House, festivity provided Londoners spaces to comment upon, profit from, and interact with each other and their changing urban environment.⁹ Meanwhile, festive London spaces came to represent the overall vibrancy, diversity, and potential of the growing metropolis. Fairs, in particular, represented London in microcosm to many social commentators. Urban festivity drew the types of large crowds only found within Britain in London – men, women, labouring and elite, soldiers and civilians, criminals and religious – all among monsters, rope dancers, hawkers, gingerbread sellers, gamesters, musicians, and actors. Such gatherings demonstrated London's potential and resources that urban officials likely hoped could be harnessed and directed in an orderly fashion, yet fairs were also contrary – they were difficult to contain and embodied disruptive social and cultural potential.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, London's population grew from about 200,000 people to half a million.¹⁰ Most of the growth occurred in suburban areas outside of the City's jurisdiction, but population growth and the expansion of the metropolis meant more than physi-

cal changes to London's urban landscape. This expansion was attended by social and cultural changes, as well. New housing arrangements, patterns of consumption, traffic, and pollution shaped urban experience at all levels.¹¹ The changing spaces of metropolitan London influenced how individuals located 'themselves – mentally and geographically – within the city' during this remarkable period of transformation.¹² Through an analysis of metropolitan fairs, this book explores the ways in which people's use of streets for seasonal festivity changed and gained new significance during a period marked by urban transformation.

Fairs were sites that existed between two worlds. As institutions with medieval and religious origins, they had transformed to largely secular events dedicated primarily to commercial entertainment by the early eighteenth century. Most fairs also crossed social boundaries. Fairs do not fit neatly during a time in which historians argue we see social distancing and a demarcation between 'popular' and elite entertainments. Fairs complicate this narrative because Londoners of all social backgrounds sought diversion at fairs. While eighteenth-century Londoners continued to enjoy the business opportunities and leisure offered at fairs, social commentators were increasingly worried by the possibility that they were unstable events representing a style of commerce and popular practice that was not easily contained. Drawing large crowds and encouraging drinking and a host of other immoral behaviour, fairs seemed particularly dangerous in a city growing faster than could be captured in maps and street directories.¹³ Commentary about fairs and legal attempts to regulate them reveal the larger negotiations undertaken by those who lived within the 'strange mélange of new and old' that London had become by the early eighteenth century.¹⁴

Festive use of city spaces examined within the context of commentary about that use reveals the ways in which particular urban spaces acquired meaning.¹⁵ Men and women of various social backgrounds and ages attended and worked at fairs. There, they utilized fairs in ways that suited their own needs or interests, but did so within a society that ascribed particular gendered meanings to their behaviours at fairs. Social commentary conveyed prescriptions about what men or women 'ought' to do (or not do) at fairs. Men and women carried on in their use of that space, upon occasion revealing that they did understand the gendered significance of their behaviour at fairs.¹⁶ People's use of fair space at times flouted conventional ideas about appropriate use of those spaces, but often it did not. A historical examination of the everyday use of fairs within the context of gendered prescriptions attempting to circumscribe that behaviour provides insight into the way in which spaces became

gendered and how 'gender roles as actually lived were complex interactions of ideas and material circumstances'.¹⁷

Local urban authorities did what they could to curtail fairs, but beyond issuing orders their efforts were largely ineffective. London was governed within the City and Southwark by the Court of Aldermen – a group of men, each elected for life, to lead individual wards established by royal charter. Each year, one Alderman served as Lord Mayor. From among the Aldermen, City magistrates were chosen to hold the sessions of the peace eight times a year. The areas outside of the City were governed by the magistrates from those counties. From the Thames north, the Middlesex magistrates oversaw the metropolis.¹⁸ These two jurisdictions, the City and Middlesex county, both of which saw an increase in fair entertainment, are the focus of this book. Enforcing urban orders and ensuring public safety depended upon constables and night watchmen, who often found this an overwhelming task, especially during times of urban festivity.¹⁹ These men were joined in their efforts by groups of reform-minded Londoners, often members of reforming groups promoting the reformation of manners, who policed city streets informing on any illicit activities they witnessed. Despite official and voluntary urban reform efforts, London festivity continued and became increasingly popular. The struggle among urban authorities, business men and women, and fair-goers, all who continued to partake in this seasonal festivity, was intense. This contestation over festive uses of urban space was instrumental in determining the place, appropriateness, and function of amusement in the 'modern' metropolis.

Dissolute, disorderly, and immoral: Urban festivity and social order

Urban authorities who hoped to preside over a mannered and 'polite' city consistently encountered the everyday reality of the metropolis.²⁰ Eighteenth-century writers such as John Gay wrote about dirty streets peopled with 'clashing wheels, lashing whips, dashing hoofs, hawkers' cries' and the trampling feet of 'crouds heap'd on crouds', and this was during an average London day.²¹ During fairs, streets became even more crowded, dirty, and noisy. City fathers and social critics with idealistic hopes that city streets could be mannered according to their own polite understandings found such notions meant little when juxtaposed against the everyday life of the city. Discourses regarding polite urban behaviour taught that as city leaders controlled their actions and words, and adopted pleasing, clean and fashionable personae, so might other Londoners who

followed their lead. Polite men and women did walk along city streets and even entered fair grounds on occasion. Here, though, they might meet a similar fate to that of the cook, Joseph Underwood, who, while dressed in his finest and helping a female member of his party cross the street, was assaulted by a crowd of unruly men and stripped of his wig, walking stick, and watch.²² Both local and national authorities viewed late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century London as a centre of 'dissolute immoral and disorderly practices', which they believed fairs encouraged.²³ Such practices not only endangered the safety of local inhabitants, they were perceived also to be a national problem. To be sure, polite men and women faced personal dangers when they walked in urban fairs. Here, they became noticeable targets for pickpockets or other criminals, but to authorities the broader and more potent threat was uncontained, impolite masculinity, which threatened London's and the nation's order in ways which were dangerous beyond a few cuts and bruises, the loss of personal property, and damaged pride. This sort of threatening masculinity was not controlled by dictates of politeness, challenged social hierarchy, and was not fully productive because it often involved men who were not regularly employed.

After the English Civil War, London's Great Fire in 1666, which destroyed nearly 80 per cent of the City of London, and the 'Glorious Revolution', government officials in England, both local and national, became concerned with cleaning up, regulating, and ordering city spaces.²⁴ Unruly masculinity encouraged by the temptations of fairs seemed particularly dangerous in the context of England's late-Stuart transitions of power. As 'foreign' rulers, William and Mary faced resistance to their authority as they assumed the English monarchy. When the Roman Catholic Stuart monarch James II was ousted, his Protestant daughter and her Dutch husband succeeded him. Though James II was in France, groups of his supporters, or Jacobites, loyal to him and his heirs, remained in England. Monarchs from William and Mary to the Hanoverians faced the threat of Jacobite plots intended to replace them with James II's heirs, and many times crime and Jacobitism coalesced.²⁵ Highway robbery, smuggling, and poaching were all associated with Jacobitism in the form of 'social banditry', or crime undertaken by 'plebeians motivated by social grievances', instead of necessity.²⁶ In London, this was a special concern, and fairs seemed ideal locations for such rioting. During the summer months, fairs were frequent sites of rowdy criminal activities including theft, rioting, assaults and, in surrounding areas, highway robberies. National authorities were concerned that disorderly public gatherings could easily become locations for Jacobite plotting and social disturbance.

Urban authorities responded to royal decrees to regulate public amusement, but their attention to unruly activities was motivated by an immediate concern with maintaining order. Frustrated authorities realized their limited means of enforcing orders against fairs and festivities continued despite them. Fairs had only been successfully curtailed during plague years, in 1665 and 1666 for example, in the interest of public safety, and they even appear to have continued in a limited version during the Commonwealth.²⁷ With the restoration of Charles II, for whom festivity was not a primary concern, fairs predictably increased in duration and number. Both Bartholomew and Southwark fairs lengthened well beyond chartered days and many new fairs appeared. By the time William and Mary and later, Anne, began to put the brakes on Restoration frivolity, celebrations such as Bartholomew Fair extended two weeks instead of the chartered three days. Reform-minded monarchs issued decrees against disorderly amusements in the hopes that their proclamations would encourage public morality and foster the social and political stability they associated with uncontested Protestant leadership. Legislation issued by the City of London echoed higher royal concerns. From the late seventeenth century, City and county officials issued order after order in an effort to curtail unchecked fairs. Though the orders were sometimes successful, fairs continued and by 1763 it seemed that though the largest 'beasts' of Bartholomew and Southwark Fairs could be tamed (Southwark Fair was abolished), it would be difficult to rid London of this type of amusement. Not only were 'pretend' fairs (or fairs held without charters) springing up in areas of the metropolis, but fair-type amusement was becoming commercialized in the form of tea gardens and pleasure gardens oriented towards all classes of Londoners.

Historiographies of a 'modern' metropolis

London and wider England's politically and socially tumultuous seventeenth century has intrigued historians who look at the city as an example of an emerging modern metropolis, though they debate the extent to which it became modern.²⁸ Some scholars view this period in London's history as one in which events such as political and economic changes, disease, and natural catastrophes worked together to initiate a break with previous social arrangements, architectural styles, and manners. According to this familiar narrative, during the eighteenth century London emerged as a well-populated and commercially influential world centre. As London changed, so too did elite notions about the appropriate use of urban space for amusement. To some observ-

ers, spaces of public amusement represented a threat to more than just industry – customary fair entertainment threatened a delicate social and gender system, something many felt was crucial to the maintenance of order in the burgeoning metropolis.²⁹ As authorities struggled to control the growing London population, they drew from new discourses such as ‘politeness’, as well as religious discourse. A focus on an eighteenth-century ‘break’ with pre-modern society obscures our understanding of the ways in which elite notions of appropriate and productive urban behaviour were informed by long-standing religious beliefs just as often as they were informed by new notions of politeness.

A growing literature examines London’s transition from a medieval to a ‘modern’ metropolis.³⁰ Art historian Elizabeth McKellar’s work *The Birth of Modern London* examines London’s architecture in the period 1666–1720. She traces the development of new building in London especially after the Fire of 1666, although she argues new building projects were already underway before the fire. Her focus on architecture allows her to demonstrate how London’s ‘tightly packed warren of medieval buildings’ metamorphosed into a ‘modern landscape of regularized streets of brick-built properties’.³¹ In the process of following changing architectural styles, McKellar introduces a contemporary human perspective all too easy to ignore when the focus is on buildings. She argues against believing London’s new building style ushered the city easily into the modern world. By populating this new London, McKellar suggests that much uncertainty accompanied the post-Fire building frenzy. London’s inhabitants were particularly worried about the disappearance of open spaces surrounding the city and the types of activities – recreation, food production, military training – these spaces allowed.

Although McKellar’s project (as an art historian) remains urban development and design and is never entirely focused on the culture and society of this changing London, she challenges the idea that London developed into a modern and polite city with little opposition and was accepted by contemporaries as the inevitable conclusion to the Great Fire or as an inevitable product of ‘modernity’. She emphasizes, instead, the tensions accompanying urban development and the mental impact London’s seemingly unfettered urban growth had on the inhabitants of both the city and the larger nation.

Miles Ogborn’s work, *Spaces of Modernity, London’s Geographies 1680–1780*, also focuses on London’s transition to a ‘modern’ metropolis. Ogborn engages with modernity theorists who see a totalizing movement from communal, agricultural, corporately-ordered societies to capitalist, industrial societies composed of people (men) who see themselves as