

# Speech and Noise at the Westminster Elections

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THE WESTMINSTER ELECTIONS were a focus of national interest in the late eighteenth century. The behavior of the people was seen as a gauge of public opinion; and the conduct of the hustings, a measure of the national temper. Proximity to the houses of Parliament blurred the identities of the constituency and the nation, and the extensiveness of the franchise peculiar to Westminster gave it a strong claim to represent a more inclusive public than other districts. Westminster was a scot-and-lot borough, where in theory at least all men eligible to pay local rates—or, according to some, only those who had in fact paid the rates—over the preceding six months could vote. But the Westminster electorate was more capacious, more inclusive, even than other scot-and-lot constituencies. Marc Baer, in his recent study of the borough, estimates that “three out of every four male householders could vote, including many plebeians.”<sup>1</sup> John Almon, political journalist and bookseller, commented in 1783 that “Westminster is the place, where the right of election comes nearest to the proportion of all persons having a right to vote. Every housekeeper there has a right to vote for members of parliament; and if there are two, or more partners, (even ten or a score) in the same house, they have all a right to vote for the *same premises*. This is pretty general.”<sup>2</sup>

This did not of course mean that those they voted for were representative, in some ideal democratic sense. Thomas Oldfield observed that though the “right of election” in the borough was “popular and free,” the people rarely had the opportunity to exercise it freely.<sup>3</sup> Westminster was notorious for the enormous expense of its electoral campaigns, and a handful of aristocratic

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Baer, *The Rise and Fall of Radical Westminster, 1780–1890* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3.

<sup>2</sup> John Almon, *Free Parliaments: or, a Vindication of the Parliamentary Constitution of England; in answer to Certain visionary Plans of modern Reformers* (London: J. Debrett, 1783), 70.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Oldfield, “Westminster,” in *An Entire and Complete History, Political and Personal, of the Boroughs of Great Britain*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: B. Crosby, 1794), 1.384.

landlords exercised great power.<sup>4</sup> But it did mean that political meetings there attracted large and vocal crowds and were often both very lively and, handy as their location was for the newspapers, fully reported. Charles James Fox, who was one of the two members of the House of Commons elected for Westminster from 1780 till his death in 1806, recognized that his constituents enjoyed an unusual degree of knowledge of their representatives and their government, reminding them that “you, who live near the scene of the action, who surround the Court, and who daily see and know the reality of parliamentary proceedings . . . you will know a man before you elect him, and elected, you can see him, hear him, and prove him.”<sup>5</sup> He suggested that the electorate of Westminster could deal more immediately with their representatives than any other group of voters; and that they could know him and judge him on the basis of their uniquely mundane and intimate purview of his behavior.

It is this unusually familiar or even intimate relation between Westminster politicians and the people they hoped to represent that is the basis for this essay. Most of the electors, as well as the unfranchised people of Westminster, had their best chance to communicate as a group with their representatives when public meetings were called or during elections. I want to look first at a meeting of the Westminster electors held on February 14, 1784, and attended by Fox and the opposition representative for the borough, Sir Cecil Wray, as well as by their friends and supporters. I want to use the opportunity this occasion provides to explore the extent to which the engagement between the people and their representatives was mediated by a discursive opposition between noise and speech—between noise, which might be understood as hostile or supportive, and speech, which was apparently valued less for its content than its charming or abrasive delivery—and I want to consider some of the ways in which graphic satire reflects on this binary. The focus of this paper, then, is not on the complex political allegiances at stake in these elections, or even the larger issues of political discourse that they raise, but on participation in the rites of citizenship through nonverbal interventions, or at least on the possibilities of recording the engagement of the unfranchised with more explicit political exchanges. For those noisy interventions, I suggest, were necessary to the public performance and function of electoral politics.

The meeting of February 14 was thoroughly disorderly, and as a result it was widely reported. It acted as a foretaste of the many colorful and much-discussed confrontations that characterized the elections that began a few weeks later. It was assembled in Westminster Hall, where a platform had been erected for the speakers—a stage referred to as a hustings although there was no election, perhaps because the meeting was intended at least ostensibly as an opportunity to gauge the opinions of the electorate. Different accounts agree that the hall was not large enough for the crowd that collected; neighboring avenues were choked with multitudes anxious to be admitted. At the least, in more conservative estimates, twenty people had to wait outside.<sup>6</sup> In the press of the crowd it seems that the platform collapsed, or was torn apart, and the speakers were unable to make themselves heard. Fox and Wray had to agree to separate their supporters, Fox departing with his to nearby Palace Yard, where he delivered his speech from the window of the King’s

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<sup>4</sup> See Baer’s useful introduction, “Commencement: The Boundaries of Politics,” in *Radical Westminster*; and also Almon’s comments, in *Free Parliaments*, 70–71.

<sup>5</sup> From the report of Fox’s speech in Palace Yard in *A Full and Authentic Account of the Whole of the Proceedings in Westminster-Hall, on Saturday the 14th Feb. 1784; at a general meeting of the Electors of Westminster Convened by Public Advertisement* (London: J. Stockdale, 1784), 24.

<sup>6</sup> See *Morning Chronicle*, February 16, 1784; and *Full and Authentic Account*, 20.

Arms. His opponents commented wryly that it was the only time he was likely to find himself in those arms, as a result of his obstruction of the king's policies and plans.

The way the disorder of the meeting was represented illuminates the significance of noise to the occasion. The most succinct account is given in the *Morning Chronicle*, where two accounts were published that, the paper observed, were supplied by persons "clearly of opposite parties," though the publisher refrained from endorsing either. The more Foxite of the two described the occasion as a "numerous and respectable meeting of the Electors," which was disrupted only by the behavior of a mob hired by Wray and his friends. It reported that Fox on his entrance was greeted with the "loudest and most general marks of applause" and called to chair the meeting. Fox was then physically attacked with a stink bag, and as he reeled from its noxious effects, Wray's followers attempted to seize the chair by force. The reporter claimed that the "repeated bursts of applause" from Fox's supporters might then have restored "a little order" had not Lord Mahon intervened and signaled to the mob, who tore up the hustings with their bare hands, and, he added, "with every act of violence and outrage, raised such a clamour and uproar, as rendered it impossible for Mr Fox to be heard," obliging him to retreat to Palace Yard.<sup>7</sup>

In this account, then, the applause of Fox's supporters is a force for order and a form of electoral endorsement. It is "the general voice" of the people, which expresses the "general suffrage of his constituents" for his leadership. Those who disrupt it with their "clamour and uproar," in contrast, are described as a "set of fellows, who from their appearance and conduct, could not possibly be voters," as though their noise disenfranchised them. The reporter attributes almost Orphean powers to Fox's "plain and manly eloquence," arguing that his detractors had resolved that he should not be heard because his speech would impress with irresistible conviction. The attack with the stink bag is represented in the caricature published by Thomas Cornell on February 27 as a dose of sneezing powder, which contains characteristics, for example, "Cromwell's ambition," and policies, such as the India Bill, that had caused Fox's popularity to plummet in recent weeks, and which deprives him of articulate speech and reduces him to helpless convulsions (fig. 1). But according to the reporter, when he regains the power to address his supporters outside the hall, they are again transformed into the "numerous and respectable body of his constituents" who attend to his oratory with "the most respectful attention" as well as applause.<sup>8</sup>

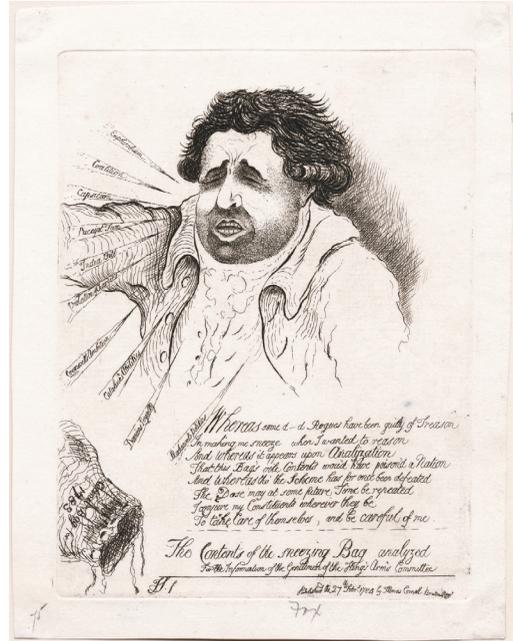
The scene the Foxite reporter describes in Palace Yard suggests that depicted in another print, which shows a dignified and perhaps saddened Fox framed in a window just above a group of well-behaved and apparently gentlemanly supporters who seem to be gazing up at him in rapt attention (fig. 2). In some Foxite accounts, the audience who followed Fox to the King's Arms was reported to be about six thousand strong, and perhaps more enthusiastic than respectful. The *Morning Herald* reported that his speech was interrupted by "torrents of applause"; that the electors took the horses from his carriage and drew it and him up Parliament Street, along Pall Mall, and up St. James's Street to Devonshire House, accompanying it "with the most heartfelt and universal inclinations of applause we ever saw exhibited" and "huzzaing and plaudits" for the "fair ladies" who signaled their approbation from the windows of houses along the way.<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps this larger and more diverse crowd that is indicated in another print of the Palace Yard speech, where representatives of various trades make up the most visible rank of the crowd, with

<sup>7</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, February 16, 1784.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Morning Herald*, February 16, 1784; also *London Chronicle*, February 14–17, 1784.

**FIGURE 1** *The Contents of the sneezing Bag analyzed For the Information of the Gentlemen of the King's Arm's Committee* (London: Thomas Cornell, February 27, 1784). Private collection.

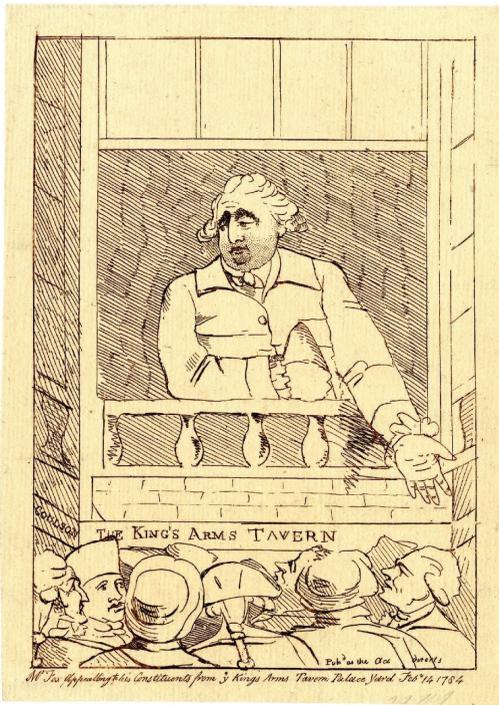


on the right the bald-headed figure of Sam House, the publican, who had been a keen supporter of John Wilkes but was by this time a prominent campaigner for Fox (fig. 3). Fox is again shown framed by the window of the King's Arms, but now more securely elevated above the crowd, who still seem to be listening attentively.

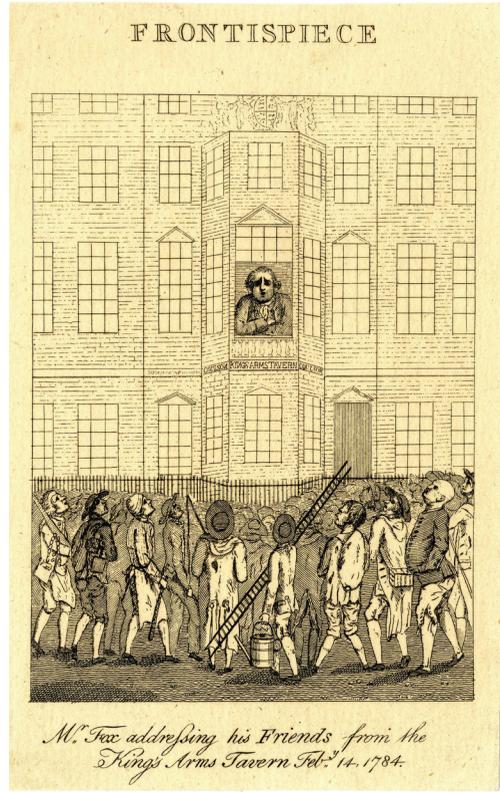
More curious, for the purposes of my discussion, is a print of Fox speaking at the King's Arms that is one of a series produced over the course of the subsequent election battle by the printmaker and publisher William Dent, playing on Fox's name, as satirists commonly did, and representing his associates as geese (fig. 4). It is a crowded image, in which Fox again appears at the first-floor window of the King's Arms, but here the front of the public house is largely made up of windows from which the caricature heads of Whigs who were present at the occasion, such as Earl Derby, Edmund Burke, Sam House, and Jeffrey Dunstan (the hawker and sometime informally appointed "Mayor of Garrett"),<sup>10</sup> are joined by supporters who were not in fact there, such as the Prince of Wales and Mary Robinson—their heads peer out on the ends of the snaky necks of geese. In the foreground march parades of more geese with caricature heads, one holding a flag with an image of Cromwell (with whom Fox was frequently associated because of his attitude toward the king) and the slogan "Fox for ever."

In representing Fox and his supporters as animals, Dent's print might seem to align itself with the account of the events at the meeting of February 14 advanced by Fox's opponents, Cecil Wray and his Pittite supporters. Their account claimed that Fox had arrived to find himself supported by only a tiny minority of those in the hall, and completely unable to make himself heard over the "hootings, hisses, catcalls, and other discordant tokens of disapprobation," which "obstructed every effort" he made "to captivate the multitude with his eloquence." According to

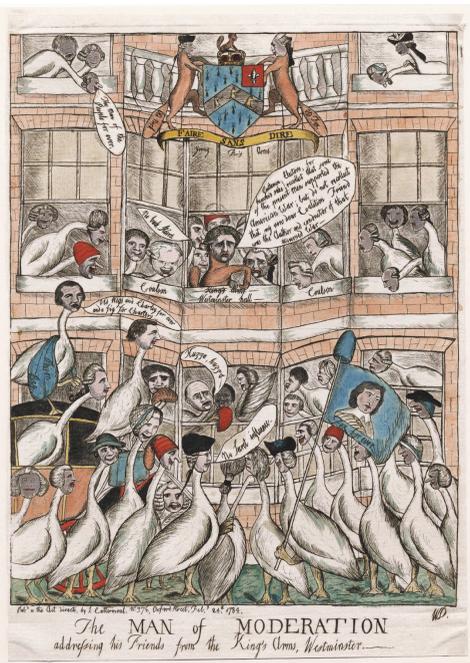
<sup>10</sup> See G. F. R. Barker, "Dunstan, Jeffrey (1759?–1797)," rev. Anita McConnell, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed March 18, 2016, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy.york.ac.uk/view/article/8289>.



**FIGURE 2** Mr Fox Appealing to his Constituents from ye Kings Arms Tavern Palace Yard Feby 14 1784. BM Satires 6421, ©Trustees of the British Museum.



**FIGURE 3** Mr Fox addressing his Friends from the King's Arms Tavern Feby 14, 1784. BM Satires 6423, ©Trustees of the British Museum.



**FIGURE 4** William Dent, *The Man of Moderation* addressing his friends from the King's Arms, Westminster (London: S. Cattermoul, 24 Feb. 1784), BM Satires 6422

this version of events, acclamation and the silence of “utmost attention” were reserved for the speeches of Wray and others, such as Lord Mahon and John Jebb, who at the time saw in the young Pitt their best hope of achieving parliamentary reform, while the electors expressed their anger with Fox by refusing him the right to speak. With Fox, they suggest, the voters engage almost entirely in nonverbal forms of communication, so that the occasion was for him “like addressing the tumultuous ocean.” Though he “again and again attempted, and entreated to be heard,” they would not “hear him speak” and drove him from the hall “amidst the GROANS and HISSES of everyone, except his *immediate friends*.”<sup>11</sup> In Thomas Hastings’s allegorical parody *The book of the Wars of Westminster* the people in the hall “mimic the Owls, and the Serpents, by howling aloud, and hissing.”<sup>12</sup> A song describing his humiliation claimed that Babel was nothing compared to the “gabble” of the “rabble” in Westminster Hall, and that even when he retreated to Palace Yard, the crowd continued to respond to him physically rather than verbally:

Upstairs he ran whilst the snow-balls came thump to him:  
There talked from a window, the croud turn’d their rump to him,  
And there were as rude as in Westminster-hall.

In the song Fox’s supporters are also represented as animals, though here they are not geese. Some of them are huntsmen, who “saddle Sam House, and the rest of his ponies.”<sup>13</sup> Dent’s image is more directly echoed in the Pittite election ballad “The Fox and Geese, or, a late House of Commons in Westminster,” where the geese are the dupes of a fox that changes his principles to suit his circumstances.<sup>14</sup> A subsequent caricature, *Geese Triumphant or Fox in the Dumps* (fig. 5), published on February 26, shows Fox denied entrance to the back stairs of the treasury by the Pitt at his feet, apparently to the relief of the geese. In another, *The Ganders addressing the Lion, to have the Elephant remov’d*, the geese are led by Fox and Lord North, his coalition partner (figured as a bear), to address the king.<sup>15</sup>

The reports of the meeting in Westminster Hall on February 14, then, might suggest that if the Westminster electorate had a voice, other than when they were voting, it was subject to manipulation, just as it seemed plausible for either side to represent the people as no more than a hired mob of ruffians. The speech of the crowd is usually represented as nonverbal, apart from occasional cries of simple phrases such as “Off, off” or “Down with him,” but it can nevertheless articulate rational support and suffrage, though it could also be understood as the threatening cries of animals. That opposition, however, is further complicated by the manner in which the crowd is addressed. Exceptional powers are attributed to Fox’s public speaking. Even the *Whitehall Evening Post*, which was hostile to both Fox and the coalition, admitted that he had once been a speaker “who, Caesar-like, could command the attention of surrounding multitudes;

<sup>11</sup> *Full and Authentic Account*, 18–19, 38; and see also *Johnson’s British Gazette*, February 15, 1784.

<sup>12</sup> [Thomas Hastings], *The book of the Wars of Westminster: from the fall of the Fox, at the close of 1783, to the 20th day of the third month, 1784; on which William the conqueror celebrated the Third Grand Lent festival, at the London: An oriental prophecy, with notes critical, poetical, chronological, and historical, from the ancient Ethiopic Ms. of Nergalsharezerneborabmagshamgar, lately found in the Cottonian Library, translated literally into English, as far as the idioms of the two languages would admit, by Archy Macsarcomica, F.R.S.* (London: B. Cornwell, [1784]), 18.

<sup>13</sup> *Westminster Hall. A new song. To the tune of Langolee* ([London?], [1784?]).

<sup>14</sup> *The Wit of the Day, or the Humours of Westminster. Being a Complete Collection of the Advertisements, Hand-bills, Puffs, Paragraphs, Squibs, Songs, Ballads, &c. Which have been written and circulated During the late remarkable Contest for that City. Faithfully compiled by A Clerk to a Committee* (London: J. Debrett, 1784), 108–9.

<sup>15</sup> *The Ganders addressing the Lion, to have the Elephant remov’d* (1784), BM Satires 6449.



**FIGURE 5**  
*Geese Triumphant or Fox in the Dumps*  
 (London: S. Neele, February 26, 1784).  
 Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

who could attract the eye of every beholder, and charm the listening vulgar into silence.”<sup>16</sup> Carl Moritz, who heard him address the Commons in 1782, commented that it was “impossible for me to describe, with what fire, and persuasive eloquence, he spoke.”<sup>17</sup> His speech is attributed an almost magical power to charm its audience, which allowed his supporters to claim that he had been prevented from speaking at the meeting in the hall because, as the Foxite *Morning Chronicle* noted, “His enemies were aware, that all the effects of calumny and detraction, must have vanished before the conviction of that plain and manly eloquence, which had so often triumphed in the cause of truth and liberty.”<sup>18</sup> Fox himself relished a large audience, believing that his talents thrived in its presence—he claimed that “the more numerous the Electors, the more attention I am heard with”—and that his opponents had been obliged to resort to “clamour and an hired mob” to suppress “what they were afraid to hear.”<sup>19</sup> His eloquence seems to have possessed a seductive quality, which was given prominence in the association of his election campaign, from March 1784, with the active participation of women canvassers. The Duchess of Devonshire was of course the most prominent (a print published by Hannah Humphrey on April 1 showed her enjoying a pint of ale with Sam House),<sup>20</sup> but reports on his campaign repeatedly comment, satirically or favorably, on the support that women of different ranks gave him. In, for example, *The Humours of Covent Garden*, published on April 8, 1784, where Fox is shown speaking from the hustings, though without any magical silencing effect, women are prominent in the riot, as is a banner marked “The Woman’s Man for ever” (fig. 6); several prints showed the women and sex workers

<sup>16</sup> *Whitehall Evening Post*, February 14, 1784.

<sup>17</sup> *Travels of Carl Philipp Moritz in England in 1782. A reprint of the English Translation of 1795*, intro. P. E. Matheson (London: Humphrey Milford, 1924), 56.

<sup>18</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, February 16, 1784.

<sup>19</sup> *Full and Authentic Account*, 25.

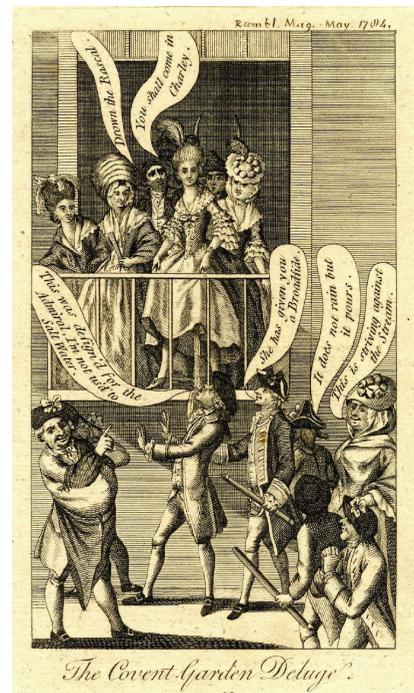
<sup>20</sup> See *The Election Tate à Tate* (London: Hannah Humphrey, April 1, 1784), BM Satires 6487.

of Covent Garden supporting him in suggestive ways (fig. 7); and notices claiming to give him the backing of the women of Westminster appeared on the front page of the *Morning Herald*.<sup>21</sup>

**FIGURE 6**  
*The Humours of Covent Garden or Freedom of Election* ([London], April 8, 1784). BM Satires 6511, ©Trustees of the British Museum.

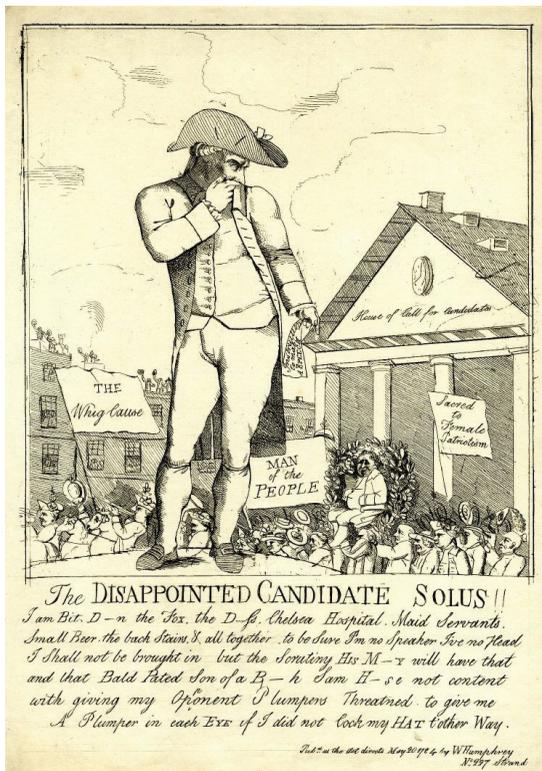


**FIGURE 7**  
*The Covent Garden Deluge* (1784). BM Satires 6611, ©Trustees of the British Museum. The image shows the Duchess of Devonshire urinating on Cecil Wray.



<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the notice, signed "THE WOMEN OF WESTMINSTER" and headed "LOVE and LIBERTY! FREEDOM and FOX!", that appeared on the front page of the *Morning Herald*, April 10, 1784. It read: "Ye friends of these dear names, exert yourselves at [t]his trying moment. If ever our smiles were your delight; if ever the blessings of Liberty were an Englishman's pride, support a cause on which Our happiness and Your own security equally depend! Remember You are called now forth to defend the cause of love and LIBERTY!—Assert Your own Rights—Defend Ours!"

Cecil Wray, in contrast, seems to have preferred to let his friends speak for him. In the caricature published by William Humphrey on May 20, 1784, by which time Wray knew his candidacy had been unsuccessful, he was shown as a diffident and disappointed youth, hand over mouth, clutching a piece of paper marked “Instructions to make a speech” and lamenting in the caption, “To be sure I’m no speaker I have no head” (fig. 8). Moritz heard him speak at the Westminster hustings in 1782 (when he had been elected without opposition)<sup>22</sup> but made no comment on his style other than to remark with admiration, “The moment he began to speak even this rude rabble became all as quiet as a raging sea after a storm; only every now and then rending the air with the parliamentary cry of *hear him! hear him!*” An attentive silence is its own kind of compliment, but Moritz is quick to explain that he sees the behavior of the audience on these occasions as a marker of how, in “this happy country, the lowest and meanest member of society . . . unequivocally testifies the interest which he takes in everything of a public nature.”<sup>23</sup> In contrast to his account of Fox’s performance in the House of Commons, he seems here to imply that what is wonderful about the audience is their willingness to listen attentively whatever the quality of the speaker’s performance. Wray himself, in the account of the meeting of February 14 published by his supporters, contrasts his performance with that of Fox, explaining apologetically that “I speak the language of my heart—I do not boast the gift of eloquence.”<sup>24</sup> He implies that there is something suspicious about Fox’s oratorical gifts, and perhaps something unfair about



**FIGURE 8** *The Disappointed Candidate Solus!!* (London: W. Humphrey, May 20, 1784). BM Satires 6590, © Trustees of the British Museum. The text gives Wray’s reflections: “I am Bit. D-n the Fox. the D-ss. Chelsea Hospital. Maid Servants. Small Beer. the back stairs. & all together. to be Sure I’m no Speaker I’ve no Head, I shall not be brought in but the Scrutiny of HIS M-Y will have that and that Bald Pated Son of a B-h Sam H-se not content with giving my Opponent Plumpers Threatned to give me A Plumper in each EYE if I did not Cock my HAT t’other Way.”

<sup>22</sup> In 1782 Wray was elected without opposition and with Fox’s support following the elevation to the peerage of Admiral Rodney, the former representative.

<sup>23</sup> *Travels of Moritz*, 62, 63.

<sup>24</sup> *Full and Authentic Account*, 30.

the advantage they have in the past given him—a suggestion that may be alluded to in representations of Fox as Milton's fallen Satan.<sup>25</sup>

Fox's talent for public speaking was central to the success of his campaign. This points, I suggest, to a significant difference between textual and visual accounts of the events of 1784. Dent's caricature of Fox's address from the King's Arms manages to use animal references with a perhaps surprising degree of neutrality. The fox and geese work more as a simple and obviously recognizable visual language than as a biting satirical tool. We might, I suppose, see the dignity of geese as maintained by their ability to speak, here and in the caricature of *Geese Triumphant*. In this image their goosishness does not seem to detract from the Foxite sentiments contained in their speech bubbles. Fox, of course, hardly appears as a figure of probity, hypocritically urging his audience of "Gentlemen, Electors," to forget his government partner Lord North's support for the ruinous American War. But Dent might perhaps have seen little to choose between Fox, shackled in what was seen as an unprincipled coalition with North and linked with the recent unpopular measures of the receipts tax and the India Bill, and the king's pack, gagged by secret influence and whipped on with royal prerogative, as he represented it in *The Fox Hunt* from January 29, 1784.

In *The Fox and Geese Triumphant* (May 21, 1784) (fig. 9), which Dent produced at the end of the election campaign, the successfully reelected candidate is shown with a human head above a fox's body astride the figure of the Prince of Wales as a goose, while the Duke of Norfolk brandishes a banner showing a coat of arms resembling that of the city but with geese rampant around it and the motto, "A pliant conscience." There are no speech bubbles, and it is clearly no compliment to represent the prince in this way, but the image nevertheless seems mocking rather than viciously hostile. In November 1790 Dent published an image, *The Return to the Political Ark* (fig. 10), perhaps drawn by Richard Newton, depicting politicians of different stripes winding in assorted pairs and animal guises across the page to enter the Ark of Parliament, which is afloat



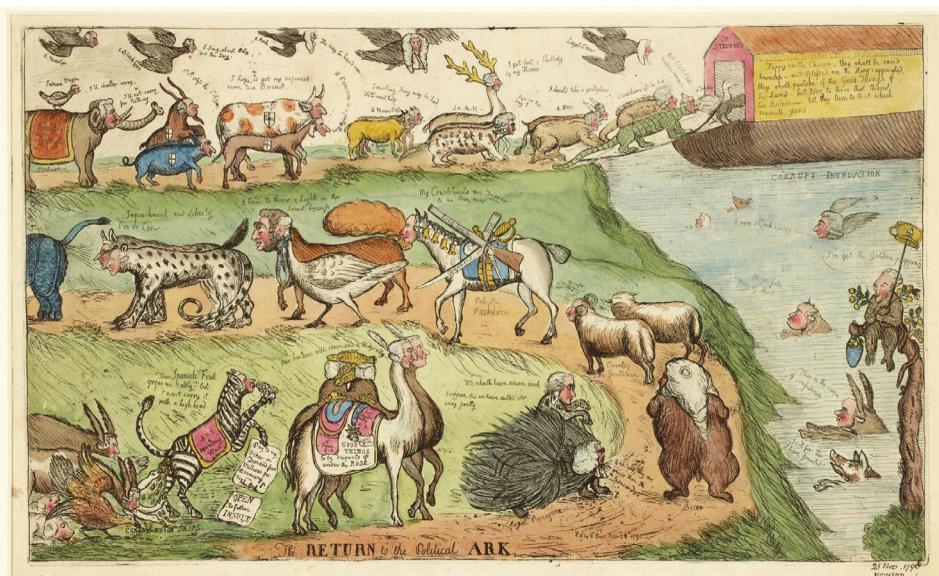
**FIGURE 9**  
William Dent,  
*The Fox and  
Geese Triumphant*  
(London: J. Brown,  
May 21, 1784).  
BM Satires 6593,  
©Trustees of the  
British Museum.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., BM Satires 6392, 6482.

upon a flood of corruption. Each politician, lawyer, or nabob, whether Whig or Tory, Pittite, Foxite, or neither, gloats over the means of adding to their personal fortune that election success has made available to them. It suggests the extent to which Dent's work was ecumenical and evenhanded in its contempt for politicians, all of whom here take some animal form, often one involving a play on their name or a reference to established caricatural identity. But overall the image is playful, the reference to Noah's flood suggesting children's toys rather than divine vengeance. The animal noises that silence Fox at Westminster Hall seem much more threatening, and perhaps more directly disruptive to the nature of the relation between the politician and his constituents or to the subsequent electoral process, than do visual representations of politicians or their supporters as animals. Nonverbal noises reduce the exchange between electors and representatives to a confrontation over which Fox seems unable to exert control and from which he can only distance himself by flight. But it is also a form of expression over which the crowd seems to lack control, as it seems indeterminate in its significance and open to manipulation in the representations of either camp. The notion that Fox thrived on engagement with mass audiences, while Wray apparently did not, suggests Fox's confidence in the charming powers of his own eloquence, but to work their spell, his speech needed to be heard.



I want to turn now to some of the later meetings held during the period in which Fox was an elected representative for Westminster, to provide some further context for the issues I have raised. For to some extent the structure of relations among the candidates themselves, and between them and the crowd, is clarified in subsequent years. For nearly four decades after 1780 one of the elected members for Westminster was consistently a high-ranking naval officer. Fox, of course, was the other representative from 1780 till 1806, and the constituency was also a favored battleground for independent candidates who exploited the unrivaled opportunity it gave them



**FIGURE 10** [Richard Newton?], *The Return to the Political Ark* (London: William Dent, November 24, 1790). BM Satires 7682, © Trustees of the British Museum.



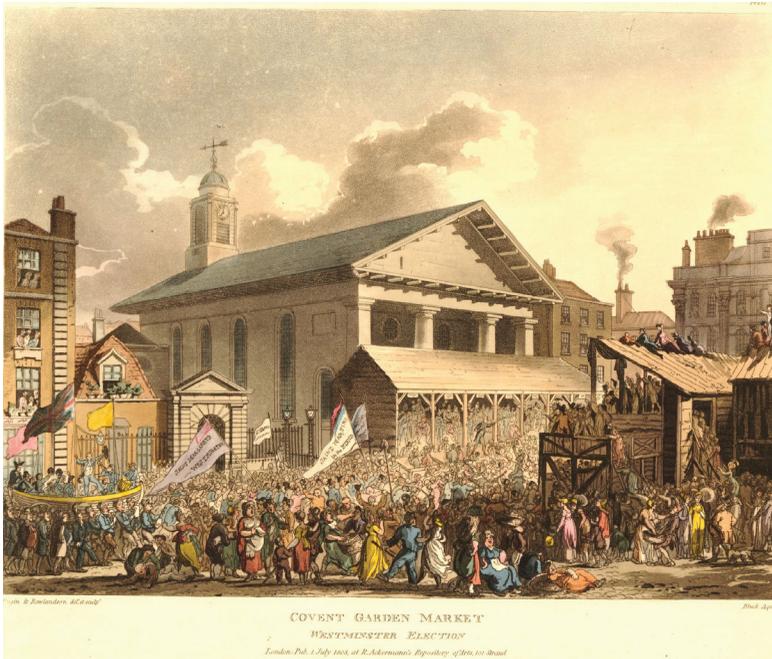
**FIGURE 11**  
William Dent, *The Coalition Candidates receiving the Free suffrages of the Electors* (London: W. Dent, June 16, 1790). BM Satires 7652, ©Trustees of the British Museum.

to oppose with maximum prominence and audibility the control of parliamentary representation by a small elite. Marc Baer comments, “Opposition to oligarchy defined Westminster’s role in the late Georgian polity,” adding that in this respect “radicals considered the borough an exemplar, [while] their enemies thought it dangerous.”<sup>26</sup>

William Dent’s print of 1790 *The Coalition Candidates receiving the Free suffrages of the Electors* (fig. 11) can be seen as an attempt to give visual expression to the responses of the Westminster crowds to their candidates. It is ironically reminiscent of the Foxite report from the *Morning Chronicle* that I mentioned earlier, which took the “general voice” of the crowd at the meeting in February 1784 to be the expression of their “general suffrage,” and it suggests both the violence that was a common feature of the hustings and the ritual humiliation to which politicians could be subject. Moritz, in his account of the hustings in 1782, admired the respect with which politicians treated their audiences. He wrote: “In the area before the hustings, immense multitudes of people were assembled; of whom the greatest part seemed to be of the lowest order. To this tumultuous crowd, however, the speakers often bowed very low, and always addressed them by the title of *gentlemen*.”<sup>27</sup> He suggested that the crowd included many who were probably not entitled to a vote, but that even the most obviously unenfranchised members of the public, such as women and children, took a keen interest in the speeches and, he wrote, “bear a part in the great

<sup>26</sup> Baer, *Radical Westminster*, 7, 8.

<sup>27</sup> *Travels of Moritz*, 61–62.



**FIGURE 12** John Bluck, after A. C. Pugin, Thomas Rowlandson, *Covent Garden Market, Westminster Election* (London: R. Ackerman, July 1, 1808). © Trustees of the British Museum.

concerns of their country.”<sup>28</sup> Newspaper advertisements and reports from all parties repeatedly claimed that opponents drew their support from the unenfranchised—from servants, foreigners, or bands of hired ruffians. The crowd often included large numbers of sailors, present in support of the naval candidate rather than because they were entitled to a vote, and it was a regular feature of the pantomime of the hustings for them to bring a boat into the arena, as they can be seen doing in Pugin and Rowlandson’s representation of *Covent Garden Market, Westminster Election* for Ackerman’s *Microcosm of London* (1808) (fig. 12). These sailors, or rented mobs disguised as sailors, as others claimed, were accused of perpetrating much of the violence that seemed inevitably to accompany elections. And though newspaper reports often suggested that the violence was the work of paid gangs, activities such as daubing with mud the insignia that identified the coaches of aristocrats may also have been a means for parts of the crowd to make their opinions felt. The use of the barrage of noise, preventing candidates from addressing the electorate effectively, could also be understood as a tool that made the voice of the people, including the unenfranchised, both audible and effective, perhaps the expression of a kind of “free suffrage,” as Dent’s satirical image suggests. It might be understood, in the terms suggested by Bruce Buchan, as the medium of a dialogue that enables the crowd to engage with the discourses of the political process to which they might otherwise be at best marginal.<sup>29</sup>

All the candidates seem to be silenced by the vociferousness of the crowd from time to time, but those who seem most frequently to suffer this fate, and who seem also particularly ill-equipped to deal with it, are the naval officers. For the naval candidates were conspicuously inarticulate. John Horne Tooke, who stood as an independent candidate for Westminster in 1790 and 1796, liked to claim that his opponent, Admiral Gardner, spoke against his own candidacy

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>29</sup> See Bruce Buchan, “Civility at Sea: From Murmuring to Mutiny,” in this issue of *Republics of Letters*.



**FIGURE 13**  
 R. Dighton, *The Westminster Watchman Guarding the People's Property* (London: Robert Dighton, November 20, 1798).  
 BM Satires 9687, ©Trustees of the British Museum.

whenever he opened his mouth. The auctioneer John Graham, who stood as an independent in 1802, enjoyed begging the crowd to hear Gardner ostensibly in the hope that he was about to withdraw from the poll.<sup>30</sup> In a thoughtful article on the election contest of 1796, Timothy Jenks suggests that naval officers were at a disadvantage because they had to begin their careers before most gentlemen had completed their education, and this may well have been the case.<sup>31</sup> But the *Morning Post* at least seemed to suspect that Gardner found some pleasure in the fact that the heckling of the crowd removed from him any need to prepare his speeches, regarding the “usual tumult of the mob when he speaks” with the “most good humoured indifference.”<sup>32</sup> And certainly Gardner could afford to be indifferent, for, as was the case with all the other naval officers with ministerial backing, his return for the borough was inevitable. Foxite and independent candidates chided him for his failure to attend Parliament or speak in debates there, as is indicated by a beautifully drawn image from November 1798 by Robert Dighton, himself a Westminster elector. But Gardner simply claimed to be fulfilling his duties at sea and relied on the popular appeal of his naval victories (fig. 13).

<sup>30</sup> *Morning Post*, July 9, 1802.

<sup>31</sup> Timothy Jenks, “Language and Politics at the Westminster Election of 1796,” *Historical Journal* 44, no. 2 (2001): 419–39.

<sup>32</sup> *Morning Post*, July 8, 1802.





**FIGURE 15** Robert Dighton, *The Westminster Election scene outside St. Paul's* (1796). Watercolor on paper. Museum of London.

what the paper took to be an unprecedented “mountebank exhibition of oratory.”<sup>34</sup> Gardner’s speeches, in contrast, were represented as embarrassingly bad. When Horne Tooke’s collected speeches for the election of 1796 were published, the publisher, Ridgway, explained in the prefatory advertisement that Gardner’s friends would be grateful that his were not included, because a “*literal copy*” of them could only provoke “*ridicule and laughter*.” But the publication of Horne Tooke’s speeches is a significant indication of the importance of the electoral process for him. His speeches were regularly received with prodigious applause, copies of them were widely distributed during election meetings—the woman in the center foreground of Dighton’s print *Elections of 1796* (fig. 15) is selling or distributing Fox’s speeches, and the older woman on the right may have Tooke’s—and lengthy extracts from them appeared in newspapers, even where they were presented as matter for hostile comment. While the formal contest may have been a foregone conclusion, as the repeated reelection of Fox and his naval opponent makes clear, and though the theater of Fox’s virtuoso speechmaking in contrast to the relative inarticulacy of whichever admiral was on show might seem predictable, at the hustings themselves the exchanges between the candidates and the crowd, and in particular between the independent candidate and the crowd, suggest something more interesting.

Beyond the formal business of the poll, for those who perceive themselves to be excluded from its procedures of representation, such as the independent candidate who cannot expect to gain a seat and the crowd of those who are unenfranchised or do not have the freedom to choose their candidate, the occasion provides an opportunity for an exchange that is audible. Although it may not always be articulate, that exchange may shape political debate in indirect, unacknowledged, or even illegitimate ways. The relation between elite and popular politics in the decades I have looked at was changing rapidly and deeply, and it involved many contradictions. The crowd, in its various characters, that so frequently prevented Admiral Gardner from speaking at the Westminster hustings, in drowning out his voice mirrored his failure to represent or speak for

<sup>34</sup> *Gazetteer*, June 2, 1790.

them. It also mimicked, in a potentially satirical form, the process that enabled him to get elected without having to show qualities suitable to the role. In Dighton's representation of the hustings of 1796, it is not the respectable, black-hatted electors who engage with the candidates and bring energy to the electoral process but the mixed crowd who seem actively involved whether or not their gender or social station may enable them to vote. By participating as they did in the electoral process at the hustings, the crowd could also be perceived to establish that the process could not function effectively without them. A