

*Favouritism, Patronage and the 'Family System' in England, c.1700–1850**

In 1797, the author of 'Parental Partiality. A Tale' warned that 'the evil spirit of favouritism' must be avoided in all families, since it set brothers against brothers, threw sisters 'into a state of warfare with each other' and led to 'innumerable disquiets' in 'families, which might otherwise have been families of joy and love'.¹ To aid instruction, the author offered the exemplary story of Mr Mountford, a wealthy merchant with two sons, who brought up his eldest son, Frank, as a gentleman, while sending his youngest, Harry, into employment. This differentiation was not itself a problem, but Mountford 'deserved a severe reprehension' because he 'was so extremely partial' to Frank. Originally both were 'naturally well disposed lads', but Mountford's preferential treatment of Frank rendered him arrogant and insolent. In contrast, Harry, the subject of his father's neglect, even aversion, thrived in the London compting-house to which he was sent, thanks to his diligence and sobriety. When Mountford died, Frank inherited the family seat, while Harry was satisfied with the 'trifle bequeathed to him'. Mountford's 'capital error' of partiality had a long reach. After a few years, Frank's dissolute lifestyle forced him to sell off the estate and to apply to his brother for relief. In response, Harry 'offered to put him into a way, which would, if he was regular and industrious, enable him to live in a very comfortable, though not splendid style'. At this suggestion of business Frank haughtily replied: 'I will never work for my living; I would not drudge at a desk, like you ... I will do any thing consistent with the character of a gentleman, in order to retrieve my affairs, but no trade, no mechanical employment'. The magnanimous Harry nevertheless provided his brother with an annuity and the instruction to keep within its limits in order to be happy. As the author of 'Parental Partiality' admitted, such warnings against favouritism were so 'frequently made' their repetition was 'tiresome to some readers'. For all the ubiquity of such cautions, however, their wider significance beyond the family has yet to be fully investigated.

For historians of the family, favouritism offers an insight into family dynamics. In his study of early modern siblings, Bernard Capp notes that parents named their 'darlings' in their life-writings, recording the features that singled out such children, typically birth order, beauty or personality.² He also shows that adult offspring identified parental neglect, or the favouring of one sibling over another, as the cause of family conflict.³ By the Georgian period, as Amy Harris's account demonstrates, advice literature cautioned parents to avoid

* I am grateful to those who read this paper as I honed it through various iterations, including William Gibson, Julie Hardwick, Nina Javette Koefoed, Karin Hassan Jansson and Janay Nugent. Thanks also to those who offered questions and comments in response to its conference and seminar paper versions. Special thanks go to Michael Brown, not only for reading it, but also for alerting me to examples, and patiently discussing the subject across two years of development.

¹ 'Parental Partiality. A Tale', in *Interesting Anecdotes, Memoirs, Allegories, Essays, and Poetical Fragments, Tending to Amuse the Fancy, and Inculcate Morality. By Mr. Addison* (10 vols, London, 1794–97), x, pp. 133–42.

² B. Capp, *The Ties that Bind: Siblings, Family, and Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 20–22.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–5.

sibling rivalry by treating all their children with the same love and care, and advised siblings to maintain civil relations despite parental favouritism.⁴ In the nineteenth century, according to Leonore Davidoff, favouritism was an inevitable feature of ‘long families’, which were the product of pregnancies distributed across a woman’s child-bearing life combined with improved survival rates due to declining infant mortality. She notes that parents ‘had little compunction about marking out certain children’ who were favoured or disliked for a variety of reasons including appearance or behaviour, but also the trauma of difficult or unwanted pregnancies, or because of the offspring’s similarities to parents’ siblings or lack of conformity with gender conventions.⁵ Such histories often assume that favouritism and sibling competition were everyday features of large families and when set beside one another can seem to suggest it was fairly consistent over time. What is striking, nonetheless, is that a range of commentators condemned family favouritism across this period, often with increasing force, and in different ways that can be carefully historicised.⁶

This article offers an innovative reading of this changing rhetoric of favouritism as a socio-cultural phenomenon over the period *c.* 1700 to 1850 to reveal that it not only offered a guide for good parenting, but also provided a means to think through social, moral, political and professional relationships. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the ways in which family was used to imagine and reimagine social and political order. Just as commentators deployed the early modern patriarchal household as an allegory for the state, so too were family relations at the heart of revolutionary political discourse in the late eighteenth century.⁷ Family favouritism provided a similar conceptual framework to justify, question or condemn the transmission of authority, status, knowledge, office and place. However, it has yet to be analysed in this broader context and from the perspective of the family. Although historians have examined public disquiet over royal and political favouritism, explored the system of patronage and its supposed demise under the weight of notions of meritocracy, and scrutinised the institution of the family and its centrality to society and economy, for the most

⁴ A. Harris, *Siblinghood and Social Relations in Georgian England: Share and Share Alike* (Manchester, 2012) pp. 83, 84, 85.

⁵ L. Davidoff, *Thicker than Water: Siblings and Their Relations, 1780–1920* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 98, 99–101. For gender preferences, see Capp, *Ties that Bind*, pp. 16–20.

⁶ For examples of early modern published criticism, see Capp, *Ties that Bind*, p. 20. The rest of this article offers examples of condemnation in the period covered.

⁷ For the early modern period, see S.D. Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1988), ch. 2; J. Hardwick, ‘The State’, in S. Cavallo and S. Evangelisti, eds., *A Cultural History of Childhood and Family in the Early Modern Age* (London, 2014), pp. 136–7. The classic text on France is L. Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA, 1992). For an overview, see J. Bailey, ‘Family Relationships’, in E. Foyster and J. Marten, eds., *A Cultural History of Childhood and Family in the Age of Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 28–31. For the language of sentiment and family in political discussion in eighteenth-century England, see J. Barrell, ‘Sad Stories: Louis XVI, George III, and the Language of Sentiment’, in K. Sharpe and S.N. Zwicker, eds., *Refiguring Revolutions: Aesthetics and Politics from the English Revolution to the Romantic Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1998), pp. 75–98. For the use of images of unnatural families in political rhetoric, see D. Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT, 2004), pp. 242–4.

part these bodies of scholarship are separate and address distinct areas of enquiry.⁸ In contrast, this article draws on all these areas to demonstrate that in the period considered these were not different spheres but were inter-connected, typically through family members or the conceptual framework of family relations.⁹ None operated exclusively in the private or public domains, and all were shaped by factors such as property, profession, personal politics and feeling.

Such a new approach, explicitly exploring the intersections between family, patronage and professional and political favouritism, reveals that the institution of the family was both conceptually and practically fundamental to the meta-structure of social, professional and political life, long beyond the early modern period. This is mapped through the changing use of the language of family favouritism over a century and a half and its constellation of associated terms, such as preferment, partiality, impartiality, equality, merit and nepotism, as well as their application to the arenas of family and patronage. The source base is selected deliberately to be extensive, to enable the related terms to be explored across time and different categories of print culture, including published life-writings (memoirs and correspondence), periodicals and magazines, pamphlets, conduct and advice literature, and fiction. These diverse sources offer important insights into the language of family favouritism used in genres from the personal and subjective to the instructional, didactic and moral, to professional and political critical journalism. Qualitative research software was used to code and analyse the different terms associated with favouritism and their contextual usage, in order to achieve representativeness and enable common themes to be identified.

Given the readership and production of these sources, the discourse of family favouritism analysed in this article was that of the middling sort and the genteel, who used it to think about their personal, public and professional identities. It was a rhetoric that especially reflected their material conditions, status and aspirations. This social group had access to property and capital, if somewhat more limited than that available to the social

⁸ A selection of works includes: G. Atkins, 'Religion, Politics and Patronage in the Late Hanoverian Navy, 1780–1820', *Historical Research*, lxxxviii:240 (2015), pp. 272–90; J. Davis, 'Meritocracy in the Civil Service, 1853–1970', *Political Quarterly*, lxxvii (2006), pp. 27–35; R. Grassby, *Kinship and Capitalism: Marriage, Family, and Business in the English-Speaking World, 1580–1740* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 243, 302–4; W. Gibson, 'Patterns of Nepotism and Kinship in the Eighteenth-Century Church', *Journal of Religious History*, xiv (1987), pp. 382–9, at 383; W. Gibson, 'Nepotism, Family, and Merit: The Church of England in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Family History*, xviii (1993), pp. 179–90; C.I. Hamilton, 'John Wilson Croker: Patronage and Clientage at the Admiralty, 1809–1857', *The Historical Journal*, xliii (2000), pp. 49–77; J.H. Elliott and L.W.B. Brockliss, eds., *The World of the Favourite* (New Haven, CT, 1999); P. Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education since the Second World War* (Oxford, 2020); H. Smith and S. Taylor, 'Hephaestion and Alexander: Lord Hervey, Frederick, Prince of Wales, and the Royal Favourite in England in the 1730s', *English Historical Review*, cxxiv (2009), pp. 283–312.

⁹ A pioneering work which addresses the overlapping and connected spheres of family and friendship, encompassing patronage as well as kin relationships is N. Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage* (Cambridge, 2001).

ranks above them, which they sought to manage through the conventional patriarchal mechanisms of inheritance and to display through consumption and taste. The middle classes upheld similarly structurally unequal social and economic hierarchies in order to preserve their position, place and privilege. At the same time, they were sensitive to new cultural movements like sensibility, which prioritised feeling and familial love as markers of refinement, and engaged in demands for political representation, which, at least notionally, was a rhetoric that pursued fairness and impartiality. Thus, they were exposed to a number of tensions in performing, maintaining and advancing their social status. and this article contends that they used the rhetoric of family favouritism to navigate them.

The study is divided into six overlapping, broadly chronological sections. Firstly, it outlines favouritism in the family from its early history to the age of sensibility. In this era, preferment, or the differential treatment of kin was normative and largely considered to be natural, and a component of the system of patronage, the source of professional and personal advancement.¹⁰ Preference was only seen to be problematic in intimate relations where a favoured subordinate's influence over a superior was perceived to threaten or undermine hierarchical relationships. The second section turns to concerns about favouritism in the public sphere in the period *c.*1700 to 1780. In this earlier period, criticism directed at monarchs and courtiers paralleled that aimed at parents and children, focusing on the deleterious effect of favouritism on dynastic relations and its capacity to disrupt power and gender hierarchies. The third section considers favouritism in the culture of sensibility, *c.*1760 to 1832. From the mid eighteenth century, the rise of sensibility placed emphasis upon tender parenting, the nurturing of children's individualised talents, and treating dependants equitably. This shift, it is shown, led favouritism and sibling rivalry to be increasingly identified as unnatural, and attacks shifted to their moral repercussions for society. While it is not claimed that criticisms of favouritism in this era were inherently politically radical, they did facilitate discussions about merit and privilege.

The fourth section focuses on equality and merit in the 'age of reform', *c.*1780–1850, a period when various activists sought to reform institutions including the law, church, parliament, and professions, and to improve the conditions of numerous groups, such as the enslaved, women, and children. It shows that, by the later eighteenth century, condemnation of family favouritism discussed impartiality, 'equality' and personal merit as ways to shape better families and society. These criticisms articulated anxieties that preferential treatment failed to recognise personal merit and the fear that individuals who did not possess sufficient merit or capacities would be elevated over those who did. The threat that parents held the power to favour one individual and neglect others for superficial reasons was extended to patrons. For some social and professional groups, family favouritism therefore became a means to question the system of patronage, and the extent to which its operations recognised or ignored individual merit. For its critics, both personal and social relations would suffer because of partiality. Such matters became ever more pressing from the last quarter of the eighteenth century when the middle classes and professions were constructing new civic,

¹⁰ For the centrality of kinship-based patronage and its role as one of the relationships included in the eighteenth-century term 'friendship' which could extend to unequal relations, see Tadmor, *Family and Friends*, pp. 162, 210, 236.

political and professional identities. The story of the Mountfords, with which this article began, was, after all, a middle-class morality tale, applauding merit, hard work and diligence as the sources of financial and moral capital and condemning unproductive idleness resulting from accidents of birth and partiality. Warnings against favouritism were thus rooted in wider middle-class concerns about the coalescence of power in dynastic hands. Thus, as the fifth section, on nepotism and the ‘family system’ c.1800–1850 explains, attacks on favouritism hardened to question the system of patronage itself, deeply entrenched as it was in kin networks. Preferential treatment, or the advancement of individuals for reasons other than personal ability, was increasingly condemned and framed as nepotism, itself a term rooted in family, and demands made to exclude familial and dynastic advancement from the professional world.

As the evidence presented here shows, the emotional consequences of favouritism for family members were emphasised from the age of feeling onwards. This became yet more acute by the second half of the nineteenth century, when—as the final brief coda on favouritism and the ‘spoiled child system’ suggests—the family as an institution was increasingly conceptualised more as ‘private’ than public and was imagined to be uncoupled from the state. As close family and political connections were theoretically dismantled, from the mid nineteenth century, the notion of the damage that favouritism caused shifted again, turning inward to become a psychological pathology that literally spoiled individuals. By this point, the political and professional connotations of preferment had been lost and it conveyed only notions of parental indulgence that harmed individuals rather than society or state.

I

Preferring one individual over another was a normative practice in familial, social, political and professional life during the long eighteenth century, and was, effectively, the mechanism through which patronage functioned. Georgian patronage appointed men to various professions in the Church, medicine, law, commerce and the armed forces, and to political office.¹¹ It was a system that was intertwined with family, as contemporary meanings of the term ‘preferment’ indicate, encompassing both the selection, favouring or promotion of an individual to an office or position *and* the advancement of a son or daughter in marriage.¹² It was often family members, after all, who pursued positions and places for sons, grandsons, sons-in-law, cousins and nephews and sought profitable unions for them and for their female relatives.¹³ William Wake (1657–1737), for example, provided livings for his three sons, two

¹¹ For a recent extended analysis of patronage in the Church, and consideration of the scholarship on patronage, see D. Reed, ‘Patronage, Performance, and Reputation in the Eighteenth-Century Church’ (Oxford Brookes University Ph.D. thesis, 2019).

¹² ‘preferment, n.’, *Oxford English Dictionary* [hereafter *OED*].

¹³ Atkins, ‘Religion, Politics and Patronage’, pp. 274–5, 278; Grassby, *Kinship and Capitalism*, pp. 243, 302–4; Gibson, ‘Patterns of Nepotism’, pp. 382, 383; Gibson, ‘Nepotism, Family, and Merit’, pp. 179–90; Hamilton, ‘John Wilson Croker’, pp. 49–77; Tadmor, *Family and Friends, passim*. For an example of intermarriage underpinning patronage, see Reed, ‘Patronage, Performance’, p. 55. For the complications of preferment in imperial families with mixed-race children, see D. Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day* (London, 2013), ch. 1.

grandsons, a cousin and a son-in-law during his tenure as archbishop of Canterbury from 1716 until his death in 1737.¹⁴ Family and patronage structures were so deeply entangled that those who had ‘no one to speak for them’, in the form of kin, had to resort to self-recommendation and direct petitioning of patrons, which, even if it retained moral legitimacy in the eighteenth century, was not always successful.¹⁵ In granting preferment, patrons attempted to preserve and advance family interests as well as, in some cases, professional and national ones, along with pursuing status and security.¹⁶ Gareth Atkins observes, for instance, that one of the main reasons the elderly Sir Charles Middleton accepted the role of First Lord of the Admiralty in 1805 was to find preferment for his numerous grandchildren, their father having failed to do so.¹⁷ Similarly, John Wilson Croker (1780–1857), First Secretary of the Admiralty from 1809, favoured his relatives as a patron, creating a ‘Croker family circle’ within the Admiralty.¹⁸

The centrality of kin to the functioning of patronage is also demonstrated by women’s involvement in preferment. Recent studies emphasise that women, through the cultivation of family relationships and sociability, played a critical part in seeking and securing the placement of male protégés, as well as advancing them and young women into suitable marriages.¹⁹ Furthermore, both family and patronage were underpinned by corresponding notions of authority, dependence and reciprocity.²⁰ Similarly, political patronage might be ‘negotiated and understood in terms of friendship’, which drew on familial feelings such as sentiment and reciprocity to define unequal and instrumental relationships.²¹ Those seeking preferment were deferential and stressed the patron’s obligations to them as dependants.²² In return for preferment, recipients offered duty, affection, political, economic, social and

¹⁴ Gibson, ‘Patterns of Nepotism’, p. 383.

¹⁵ W. Gibson, “‘Importunate Cries of Misery’”: The Correspondence of Lucius Henry Hibbins and the Duke of Newcastle, 1741–58’, *The British Library Journal*, xvii (1991), pp. 88, 91, 92.

¹⁶ Gibson, ‘Patterns of Nepotism’, pp. 382, 388; Gibson, ‘Nepotism, Family, and Merit’, p. 180.

¹⁷ Atkins, ‘Religion, Politics and Patronage’, p. 278.

¹⁸ Hamilton, ‘John Wilson Croker’, p. 49 and *passim*.

¹⁹ Elaine Chalus points out that patronage was well suited to women since it was ‘socio-political and non-institutional’ and the family was one of the justifications for their participation, E. Chalus, *Elite Women in English Political Life c. 1754–1790* (Oxford, 2005) p. 18, and chapter 4; M. Finn, ‘The Female World of Love and Empire: Women, Family and East India Company Politics at the End of the Eighteenth Century’, *Gender & History*, xxxi (2019), pp. 7–24.

²⁰ For the ‘heavy mesh of obligations’ see Hamilton, ‘John Wilson Croker’, p. 52 and *passim*.

²¹ Tadmor, *Family and Friends*, p. 236.

²² There was a delicate balance to strike in patronage, where the recipient could be viewed as servile or dependent. For example, see S. Coulombeau, “‘Fill up His Blanks’”: Making Matthew Montagu’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, lxxxix (2018), pp. 537–71.

professional allegiances, loyalty and support.²³ Of course, such expectations of reciprocal exchange of obligations and duty also informed the concept of filial duty.²⁴

Thus, to be favoured and placed in a superior position to other family members was naturalised and accepted in the eighteenth century. Many family members, for instance, were recorded as, or admitted to, having their ‘pets’ or favourite children; notably uncles, aunts and grandparents, whose objects of favour were small children. When Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) wrote his memoir in 1822, for example, he recalled that his grandmother, who had helped care for him from his infancy, ‘indulged me in every thing I had a wish for, or in other words made me a great Pet – I was not to be snubbed (as it was called) do what I would’. This preferment was to his advantage since her savings paid for his apprenticeship. Bewick ruefully commented, nonetheless, that his grandmother’s favour incurred risk: ‘in consequence of my being thus suffered to have my own way, I was often scalded & burnt, or put in danger of breaking my bones by falls from heights I had clambered up to’.²⁵ Although he was writing at a time when favouritism was under ever greater scrutiny, it was her indulgence that he perceived to be the problem rather than her advantaging him over other grandchildren.²⁶ In the early nineteenth century, life-writers often uncritically mentioned that a child was favoured, simply outlining their favourable qualities or actions. In January 1809, for instance, Lucy Gray (1786–1813), daughter of a prominent York lawyer, wrote that her nephew William was ‘a very great favourite with us all’, reporting his charming qualities as sufficient explanation.²⁷ Even while such uses of favourite, or pet, can appear neutral, they offer insights into power dynamics, since, by the later Georgian period when the ownership of domestic pets expanded, the terms were increasingly intertwined. For example, patrons might commission portraits of a ‘favourite dog’, while satire condemning the transfer of power or influence to a subordinate might be framed in terms of pet-keeping.²⁸

²³ Reed, ‘Patronage, Performance’, p. 15. The changing meanings of manly independence over the later Georgian period were informed by patronage, as it was set in opposition to dependent clientage. See M. McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester, 2005), pp. 16–19.

²⁴ J. Bailey, *Parenting in England 1760–1830: Emotion, Identity and Generation* (Oxford, 2012), pp 232–4.

²⁵ *A Memoir of Thomas Bewick, Written by Himself* (Newcastle-on-Tyne, 1862), p. 3. For a short overview of spoiling grandmothers in Victorian literature see, R. Duschinsky et al., ‘“An Extraordinarily Pernicious Influence”: The Discursive Figure of the Spoiling Grandmother before 1937’, *Journal of Family History*, xlv (2020), pp. 158–71.

²⁶ J. Bailey, ‘Paternal Power: The Pleasures and Perils of “Indulgent” Fathering in Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century’, *The History of the Family*, xvii (2012), pp. 326–42.

²⁷ York, Explore York Archives [hereafter EYA], GB 192 GRF/4/4/1, Lucy Gray to her nephew William Gray, Mar. 1809 (folded ‘parcel’ with note on front: ‘Master Gray Ogleforth York by favour of Miss Dikes’).

²⁸ The word ‘pet’ was still tainted by associations from earlier in the century with the royal ‘favourite’: I. Tague, ‘Dead Pets: Satire and Sentiment in British Elegies and Epitaphs for Animals’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, xli (2008), pp. pp. 289–306, at 289, 292, 294; I. Tague, *Animal Companions: Pets and Social Change in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (University Park, PA, 2015), p. 3.

It was when favour had the potential to disrupt family dynamics that it became problematic; hence it was associated with parents, rather than wider relatives. Thus, while Elizabeth Lichtenstein Johnson (1764–1848) happily described one or other of her grandchildren as her favoured pet or a darling, she expressed concern that her granddaughter Mary was ‘too much an idol with both parents’.²⁹ For Protestants, the term ‘idol’ still conveyed notions of a false deity and an object of excessive affection, indicating her view that this favour had dangerous ramifications for their relationships. Notably, few later Georgian parents admitted to a marked preference for one child in their life-writings. An exception was following the death of a child, at which point a parent might confess that they were a favourite. Thus, when Hannah Robertson (1724–1800?) recounted her suffering at the deaths of all her children, in her memoir written in 1791, she observed of her youngest son, perhaps to convey the extremity of her grief: ‘he was my dearest child! – this favourite son was in the silent grave!’³⁰ Indeed, by this stage, such favour led to powerful feelings of guilt. Evangelical parents might believe themselves divinely punished for so favouring a child. Faith Gray (1751–1826), Lucy Gray’s mother, recorded in her diary that the death of her four-year-old son from scarlet fever in 1795, who was a ‘general favourite’ with his parents, was a stroke of punishment for the great grief she had experienced for the loss of her infant daughter fifteen months earlier.³¹ Here we glimpse the complexities of family favouritism emerging; Gray was a mother at a time when, as this article shows, the manifold disadvantages for children and parents of parental partiality were oft reiterated.

The reason why parental favouritism was condemned for much of the eighteenth century was because it threatened conventional power relations, in which parents were located at a higher hierarchical level than their offspring, due to seniority, age and responsibility. The middle-class family had finite resources, including patronage, and favour was distributed according to gender, birth order, marital status, race and health. As such, society recognised that the privileged position of parents afforded them considerable power that could be exploited to the advantage or disadvantage of their offspring through offering or withholding favour. Writing in the 1750s, James Nelson (1710–94) told parents, ‘The Darling is liable to be ruined thro’ Indulgence; the rest, thro’ Neglect and Ignorance’.³² Writers also worried that a favourite child could exert undue power over their parent/s. Other family members, therefore, could have favourites among a family’s children because their favour was less open to abuse. As the next section illustrates, criticisms of favouring some individuals over others in sites beyond the family also focused on its repercussions for social and political order rather than any inherent wrongs in the system itself.

II

²⁹ *Recollections of a Georgia Loyalist by Elizabeth Lichtenstein Johnston, Written in 1836*, ed. A.W. Eaton (New York, 1901), pp. 122, 125–6, 149.

³⁰ Hannah Robertson, *The Life of Mrs Robertson, Grand-daughter of Charles II. Written by Herself* (Derby, 1791), p. 44. For early modern examples, see Capp, *Ties that Bind*, pp. 18–19.

³¹ EYA, GB 192 GRF/5/2 and GB 192 GRF/5/5, diary of Faith Gray, 1811–26.

³² James Nelson, *An Essay on the Government of Children, under Three General Heads: viz. Health, Manners and Education* (London, 1753), p. 208.

Condemnation of favourites and favouritism in the public sphere expressed similar concerns about the respective power of favourers and favourites in the period c.1700–1780.³³ Criticisms of royal and court favourites had long attacked their undue influence over rulers due to their personal allure, enumerating the risks of this rather than offering a critique of the system itself. As Hannah Smith and Stephen Taylor observe, for early eighteenth-century commentators, the favourite risked the wellbeing of the polity and inverted ‘natural’ order, since they could influence the monarch to ignore their other subjects’ needs.³⁴ The notorious figure of the royal favourite remained powerful during the era of parliamentary monarchy, representing tyranny and corruption, causing party-political anxieties, and providing a means to attack relations between a monarch and chief minister.³⁵ The favourite’s dangerous political dimensions were especially magnified in the press and periodicals from the 1760s, when they served as the basis for attacks on the influence of John Stuart, earl of Bute (1713–92) over George III (1738–1820).³⁶ Critics continued to call on the longstanding tropes of favour based on personal attractiveness and the favourite’s abuse of power. In 1763, for instance, John Wilkes (1725–97), writing in the *North Briton*, offered a history of favourites, in order to attack the Earl of Bute. He described the early Stuart monarchs’ favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, as ‘handsome even to profusion’, accusing this ‘foreign favourite’ of possessing a ‘despotic sway’ over James I and Charles I. The other familiar motif was that Buckingham used his power and access ‘like every other favourite, constantly securing to his family and dependants, large reversionary grants of the most lucrative employments’. Such skewed hierarchies, Wilkes declared, must disgust the ‘free-born Englishman’.³⁷ As another writer observed in an essay published in 1767, favouritism, ‘converts the will of the prince into a mere copy of the *favourite*’s inclinations. The ascendant is so strong, that the prince does not know his own mind; he loses his own thoughts among the impressions he is continually receiving from the *favourite*’.³⁸

In this period, discussions increasingly framed favouritism as a system of government. A collection of letters published in the press between 1760 and 1767, for example, included an ‘old manuscript’ on favouritism.³⁹ The writer noted the similarities underpinning favouritism across time: it convulsed a state, shook firm governments and alienated subjects’ affections.⁴⁰ In *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770), Edmund Burke (1729–97) identified political parties and the election rather than selection of

³³ For political favouritism, see Elliott and Brockliss, *The World of the Favourite*.

³⁴ Smith and Taylor, ‘Hephaestion and Alexander’, p. 291.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 285, 291, 294–5. For Sarah Churchill’s status as Queen Anne’s favourite, see R. Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family and Political Argument in England 1680–1714* (Manchester, 1999), ch. 8. Keyword searching in digitised sources shows that the term was far more common from the 1760s.

³⁶ McCormack, *Independent Man*, pp. 84, 86–7, 90.

³⁷ John Wilkes, *The North Briton*, xlvi, 28 May 1763, p. 65, 67, 69; McCormack, *Independent Man*, p. 86.

³⁸ *A New and Impartial Collection of Interesting Letters, from the Public Papers, Written by Persons of Eminence ... September 1760 to May 1767* (2 vols, London, 1767), i, p. 224.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 223.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 224. Also see *The London Chronicle*, 11–13 Aug. 1774.

ministers as a bulwark against the dangers of a system of favouritism: ‘those who recommend themselves to their Sovereign through the opinion of their country, and not by their obsequiousness to a favourite. Such men will serve their Sovereign with affection and fidelity; because his choice of them, upon such principles, is a compliment to their virtue’.⁴¹ Terms such as affection, fidelity and virtue would resonate with the heads of families, as well as patrons, who saw their own reciprocal relationships, obligations and duties in these terms.

The language of royal and parental favouritism was thus often interchangeable. Attacks on royal favouritism often denounced it through the language of the household-family. One writer declared that ‘*Favouritism* is the natural parent of envy and jealousy’, further remarking that it ‘gives the king a master instead of a servant’.⁴² It was the lack of reciprocity that rendered these relations problematic. Samuel Johnson (1709–84) defined a favourite as, *inter alia*, ‘a mean wretch whose whole business is by any means to please’.⁴³ Flattery and obsequiousness were the antithesis of the duty owed to a parent, patron or monarch in return for their care and resources.⁴⁴ Stripped of its relational qualities, the results were either a corrupt family or its macro counterpart, the body politic. Even in the late eighteenth century, after all, fathers were still addressed as rulers who governed over subjects. An essay titled, ‘Proper Objects of Attention in the Master of a Family’, published in 1791, commented on the father: ‘In his family he is a king; and upon his proper or improper management it depends’.⁴⁵ Both royal and parental favouritism evoked dynastic fears, of disrupted hierarchies with dependants raised above superiors, superiors manipulated into unjust acts and behaviour, and the transmission of property and place wrongfully diverted into undeserving channels.

Similarly, commentary on family favouritism also often directly referred to its royal counterpart. The novel *The Favourite. A Moral Tale*, published in 1771, opened with a preface stating: ‘Whether the Father of his people ought to have a favourite, or not; is a question which – I shall not discuss here; because the little work which occasioned this preface, is of a moral, and not of a political nature. Parental, not royal favouritism, is the hinge on which it turns’.⁴⁶ A review of this same novel opened: ‘The favourite here exhibited, is not the favourite of a king, as in these times many persons might suppose, from the title; but the favourite daughter of a termagant mother’.⁴⁷ Clearly, by opening with an allusion to unease around royal favouritism, the author of the novel positioned their hopes for ‘correct’ parental partiality within this broader discourse and noted that it ‘is not confined to persons in any rank, in any station. Those who move in the highest, and the lowest spheres,

⁴¹ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (London, 1770), p. 118.

⁴² *New and Impartial Collection*, p. 225.

⁴³ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755).

<https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php?term=favourite> (accessed 10 August 2021).

⁴⁴ For filial duty, see Bailey, *Parenting in England*, pp. 188–93.

⁴⁵ Thomas Monro, *Essays on Various Subjects* (London, 1790), p. 42.

⁴⁶ *The Favourite. A Moral Tale. Written by a Lady of Quality* (2 vols, London, 1776), i, pp. i–iv.

⁴⁷ *The Monthly Review or Literary Journal Enlarged*, xlv (1771), p. 497.

and those who are placed in the middle walks of life, are equally guilty of it'.⁴⁸ The novelist's emphasis upon favouritism in the family as a moral, rather than political, problem is telling, as is their insistence that it afflicted the middling ranks. Both reflect not only changing conceptualisations of the phenomenon and its dangers, but the extent to which family favouritism was becoming a particular concern for this social group.

III

In the period c.1760–1830, with the flourishing of sensibility, which viewed parenting as a profoundly emotional experience and celebrated a feeling, tender vision of parenthood, concerns around favouritism were increasingly refocused upon its moral and emotional consequences for the family and its members. It came to be described as unnatural, perhaps one of the most stinging rebukes for parents of this era, since the natural law of affection envisioned that parents would automatically love their offspring.⁴⁹ As one author stated in 1755, 'The natural love of parents towards their offspring operates like instinct, without the use of reason, and fills them with an affection and regard for their children proportionable to this trust and confidence'.⁵⁰ William Braidwood (1751–1830), however, lamented that favourites, 'only because they are more beautiful, or sprightly, or for some such foolish reason, are caressed, and respected, and allowed to trample on one who ought to be accounted their equal. Can any thing be more absurd or unnatural?'.⁵¹ This sentiment was taken up in life-writings. In his family history, William Hutton (1723–1815) recounted his brother Samuel's life, observing that the 'parent's favourite is usually the youngest, but the reverse was his lot'. This was due to his father's failings, as he noted: 'My Father had no violent love for any of his children, but the least of all for the last, although deprived of the tenderness of a mother, which ought to have excited compassion'.⁵² The elder Hutton was positioned as an aberration, lacking 'natural' feeling, by a son who proudly presented himself to the world in his memoirs as a tender father.⁵³

This discourse of parental partiality became profoundly moralised, laying the blame on parents' moral and emotional inadequacies.⁵⁴ Favouritism disrupted the concept of instinctive natural affection that operated in a realm beyond reason, for nature itself lay seductive traps for parents. Indeed, much of the guidance aimed at them attributed parental

⁴⁸ *The Favourite. A Moral Tale*, pp. i–iv.

⁴⁹ Bailey, *Parenting in England*, pp. 53–6, 134; K. Barclay, 'Natural Affection, the Patriarchal Family and the "Strict Settlement" Debate: A Response from the History of Emotions', *The Eighteenth Century*, lviii (2017), pp. 309–20; Harris, *Siblinghood*, p. 84.

⁵⁰ [Peter Shaw], *Man. A Paper for Ennobling the Species*, no. 46, 12 Nov. 1755, p. 5.

⁵¹ [William Braidwood], *Parental Duties Illustrated from the Word of God, and Enforced by a Particular Account of the Salutary Influence therein Ascribed to the Proper Government of Children ...* (Edinburgh, 1792), p. 14.

⁵² Llewellyn Jewitt, *The Life of William Hutton, and the History of the Hutton Family* (London, [1872]), p. 35.

⁵³ Bailey, *Parenting in England*, pp. 150–51.

⁵⁴ For the moralised self-identity of the middling sorts more broadly, see M.R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley, CA, 1996); L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago, 1987).

partiality to lack of reason, to irrationality and unjustness; in effect a failure of moral judgement. The essay ‘On Domestic Feuds’, printed in *The Lady’s Monthly Museum* in 1822, listed the causes of favouritism as a ‘kindred resemblance, an arch prattle, a diversity of temper, or any capricious prejudice’.⁵⁵ William Cobbett (1763–1835) covered the same ground as late as 1829, in his advice to fathers, adding to the list ‘being more favoured by nature than the rest’ and ‘the nearer resemblance to himself, that the father sees in the favourite’.⁵⁶ Parents were also cautioned against favouring children due to their birth order. This varied in its form. Both first- and last-born children might be favourites. In a ‘Letter to the Editor’ in *The Lady’s Magazine* in 1804, for example, ‘Priscilla Firstly’ compiled a list of things generally ‘first’; one was the first child who ‘is often spoiled by the indiscreet fondness of the parents’.⁵⁷ Writers understood that one child might be ‘superior in Parts to the rest, or is particularly engaging’, but parents should, like monarchs, be on their guard and exercise reason to withstand such artificial qualities.⁵⁸ As William Braidwood pointed out in his *Parental Duties* (1792), such preference ‘is not founded in justice or reason, but can only be attributed to the whim and caprice of parents’.⁵⁹

The irrationality of partiality was gendered, whether with regard to the favoured or those favouring them. This was well established. In 1756, a correspondent writing to *The Old Maid* deplored ‘the preference in point of affection which too many fathers are apt to bestow upon their sons in prejudice of their daughters ... I am fully convinced that so unjustifiable a partiality can proceed only from pride’.⁶⁰ James Nelson in his *Essay on the Government of Children* (1753) held a slightly different view on the object of gendered favouritism. He observed, ‘Sometimes the Father has his Darling, and the Mother hers; sometimes they both doat [*sic*] on the same Child’; for the most part, though, ‘Mothers are extravagantly fond of the Boys, and either treat the Girls with a visible Indifference, or grossly neglect them, they know not why’.⁶¹ Thomas Monro (1759–1833) even claimed to be able to identify the feminine-gendered, and, therefore, inferior, mode of government which prevailed in family favouritism: ‘Where children are froward, impetuous, and peevish, it may reasonably be inferred that the reins are placed in the hands of the female, and the state is disturbed by favouritism, misplaced indulgences, and irregular discipline’.⁶² This extended an effeminate taint of corruption to male rulers who had favourites and questioned their legitimacy in that position.⁶³

⁵⁵ *The Lady’s Monthly Museum, or, Polite Repository of Amusement and Instruction* [hereafter, *Lady’s Monthly Museum*], xiv (1822), p. 127 (1 Mar.).

⁵⁶ William Cobbett, *Advice to Young Men, and (Incidentally) to Young Women, in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life* (1st edn, 1829; New York, 1833), p. 248.

⁵⁷ *The Lady’s Magazine, or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex ...* [hereafter *Lady’s Magazine*], xxxv (1804), p. 5.

⁵⁸ Nelson, *Essay on the Government of Children*, p. 205.

⁵⁹ Braidwood, *Parental Duties*, pp. 13–14.

⁶⁰ ‘L.C.’, ‘Letter to Mrs Singleton’, *The Old Maid*, no. 11, 24 Jan. 1756, p. 61.

⁶¹ Nelson, *Essay on the Government of Children*, p. 205.

⁶² Monro, *Essays*, pp. 42–3.

⁶³ For condemnation of royal favouritism as a critique of rulers’ character and legitimacy, see Smith and Taylor, ‘Hephaestion and Alexander’, pp. 304–305. The favourite was also

Just as conduct and medical writers accused mothers of over-indulging their children because women possessed less reason than men, periodical fiction also singled out mothers in their admonitions against favouritism.⁶⁴ In ‘The Unnatural Mother from Marmontelle’, published in *The Lady’s Magazine* in 1782, the mother’s usurpation of marital authority was linked to her partiality for one child and the ensuing familial collapse. The daughter of a French Intendant, she had agreed to marriage only on the condition that she had ‘absolute authority’ in her husband’s house. Widowed shortly after and possessing too much power, this ‘unnatural mother’ favoured her eldest son, M. De L’Etang. This had profound moral and emotional consequences for her children. Ruined by her preference, De L’Etang became headstrong, capricious and bad tempered. James Corée, her younger son, was materially neglected, despite being honourable, intelligent and morally sound. Thanks to a lack of maternal support, James left for the Antilles to make his fortune, while the eldest son wasted the family wealth, leaving his mother ill and in debt. As with many such stories, a crisis occurred, and the neglected child returned to the natal home. Tending his mother on her sick bed, James’s moral decency persuaded her that heaven was punishing her for her favouritism. This revelation stimulated her penitence and restored her to good health, a decent living, and appropriate patriarchal oversight since she went to live under James’s care in the Caribbean.⁶⁵ Such cautionary tales signified the failure of authority within the family due to the parent’s ‘feminine’ lack of wisdom and irrationality.⁶⁶

Criticisms of family favouritism in print culture in this era continued to identify its material and socially disruptive consequences. Throughout the period, writers on family favouritism made it very clear that it resulted in parental tyranny, sibling competition and familial disorder. As the author of *Man: A Paper for Ennobling the Species* observed in 1755, being ‘foolishly idolize[d]’ by parents made children inimical to ‘controul [*sic*], admonition, and instruction’.⁶⁷ Nelson noted, ‘Children, by this unequal Treatment, conceive a Hatred to one another, and often to the Parents themselves, which perhaps lasts as long as their Lives’.⁶⁸ Likewise, in their life-writings, siblings blamed familial conflict and fights over property and inheritance on parental favouritism.⁶⁹ Parents were disadvantaged too, as the author of ‘A Mother’s Failings’ cautioned, loving one child above the rest of their children, led to the ‘ruin and destruction of the beloved object, and [the] planting of a thorn in their [the parents’] dying pillows’.⁷⁰ As Nelson pointed out, this had very real familial and dynastic consequences, such as law-suits and rash marriages, any of which could lead to

identified with sodomy, itself inferring passivity, see McCormack, *Independent Man*, pp. 86–7.

⁶⁴ Bailey, ‘Paternal Power’, pp. 332–3.

⁶⁵ *Lady’s Magazine*, xiii (1782), p. 15.

⁶⁶ For a similar tale with a father who favoured one son, see ‘Parental Partiality’ (above, n. 1), pp. 134–42.

⁶⁷ [Shaw], *Man. A Paper for Ennobling the Species*, no. 46, p. 6. Also see Braidwood, *Parental Duties*, p. 15.

⁶⁸ Nelson, *Essay on the Government of Children*, p. 208.

⁶⁹ John Cannon (1684–1743) offers an excellent example, summarised in Capp, *Ties that Bind*, pp. 173–9.

⁷⁰ *Lady’s Magazine*, xv (1784), p. 86.

individual and familial poverty. Indeed, historians of sibling relationships have compiled several case studies of sibling jealousy, competition and rivalry which often made their way into the courts, noting that these warring parties associated their disputes with parental favouritism.⁷¹

In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the condemnation of favouritism and partiality in public and professional spheres, as well as family life, was sharpened by revolutionary political ideologies emanating from America and France. In them the family was fundamental to redefining the individual's relationship with the state and 'unnatural' families served to question political authority. Republican motherhood, citizen-fathers, and fraternal ideals reconfigured republican families, attacked parental authority as a metonym for royal governance, and declared the right of the 'child' or nation to be independent.⁷² Just as with the emotional and often familial framing of revolutionary acts in America and France, accounts warning of the consequences of family favouritism used the language of tumult, violence and disharmony. The author of the 'Duty of Parents to Children' warned that when parental impartiality and balance were lost:⁷³

the foundations of domestic happiness are undermined; strife, division, and animosity, usurp the seats of harmony and peace; and where jealousy and hatred are thus early sown, they generally shoot up in a rank and fruitful harvest of guilt and misery. For, when children find it impossible to please, they will naturally lose all desire of pleasing; where they are contemned, they will contemn; and where they are injured, they will resent. These, and a thousand other ill consequences, which cannot be enumerated here, will flow from a partial distribution of parental tenderness.

An essay in *The Lady's Monthly Museum* in 1822 even drew on the new language of republicanism to strengthen its warnings against the 'cruelty of family partiality', observing that when siblings were 'no longer subordinate to paternal sway, the little community becomes a warring and uneasy republic' and the consequences were of the 'most material and frightful tendency'.⁷⁴

These comments about guilt, misery and resentment show that the emotional and moral toll of favouritism was increasingly emphasised alongside its implications for social and political relations. This is especially evident in the story, 'The Female Reformer by Bob Short/A Mother's Failings', printed in *The Lady's Magazine* in 1784. Despite being a prudent wife, tender mother and 'real' Christian, Amelia Stanhope is too partial towards her eldest daughter. Named after her, the girl 'is daily dressed out so fine, or as some would say, so tawdry, that she is more like a Bartholomew doll than anything else'.⁷⁵ The comparison of the girl to a cheap, brightly painted doll sold at a disorderly fair implies that maternal partiality compromised a daughter's virtue.

⁷¹ Capp, *Ties that Bind*, pp. 2, 173–9; Harris, *Siblinghood*, pp. 83, 86–88, 91, 93.

⁷² Bailey, 'Family Relationships', pp. 28–31; Harris, *Siblinghood*, p. 84; Hunt, *Family Romance*, *passim*; McCormack, *Independent Man*, pp. 94–5.

⁷³ A. M., *Moral Essays, Chiefly Collected from Different Authors* (2 vols, Liverpool, 1796), ii, pp. 80–81.

⁷⁴ *Lady's Monthly Museum*, xiv (1822), p. 128.

⁷⁵ *Lady's Magazine*, xv (1784), pp. 85–6, at 85.

By the early nineteenth century, writers also deployed the personal consequences of favouritism, using its emotional consequences as part of their self-fashioning. Convicted felons referred to parental favouritism as one of the causes of their descent into crime in their last dying speeches.⁷⁶ As the genre of memoirs developed, autobiographers also attributed their personalities and actions to parents' partiality or neglect, and, in some cases, to the resulting sibling competition.⁷⁷ The educator Catherine Cappe (1744–1821), whose memoir was published in 1822, bemoaned parental favouritism and its results for her brother and herself. Part memoir, part didactic advice on raising and educating virtuous children, she used herself and her brother to offer insights. Of her brother, she noted, 'From his infancy, he had been my mother's delight'.⁷⁸ This she saw as one of the causes of his indolence and self-indulgence and failure to find a suitable profession or situation in adulthood. In these ways unwarranted parental partiality became one of the factors writers used to construct subjectivity and self-identity. As the next section shows, for writers reflecting on their lives at the very end of the eighteenth century, and increasingly in the early nineteenth century, it was the unjustness of favour that rankled.

IV

In the age of reform, c.1780–1832, 'equality' and merit shaped discussions of favouritism. When James Nelson pointed out, '[Does it] not often happen, that the greatest Favourite is the greatest Booby?', he alluded to the unfairness of favouritism.⁷⁹ The age of feeling raised the stakes by demanding that love be distributed equally among offspring. Nelson, for example, in the mid eighteenth century, acknowledged that the laws upheld inequity of inheritance in order to advance families, presumably referring to primogeniture, but nonetheless required parents to offset this through equal love:⁸⁰

Parents should by all Means consider, that every Child is equally the Object of their Love and Care; and, by the Right of Nature, equally demands their Protection. The Laws indeed, for the Support of Families and Dignity, have, in some Cases, made an Inequality in the Distribution of Fortune, which must be submitted to: still that does not take off from the Obligation of Parents, nor justify a blind or whimsical Partiality.

For Braidwood, writing in 1792, the favourite would 'trample on one who ought to be accounted their equal'.⁸¹ Similarly, the 1796 publication 'The Duty of Parents' referred to parental love as a scale and warned parents not to act partially in ways that 'destroy that equal balance, which should be ever held with a steady and unshaken hand'.⁸² Although inequity was thus central to debates on family favouritism, the patriarchal family was a profoundly unequal institution in which children's access to benefits and privileges were differentiated according to factors including gender, race, birth order, legitimacy and ableness. Harris

⁷⁶ Harris, *Siblinghood*, p. 86.

⁷⁷ For some examples, see *ibid.*, pp. 86–7.

⁷⁸ *Memoirs of the Life of the Late Mrs Catharine Cappe. Written by Herself*, ed. Mary Cappe (London, 1822), p. 67.

⁷⁹ Nelson, *Essay on the Government of Children*, pp. 205–206, 210.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 208–209.

⁸¹ Braidwood, *Parental Duties*, p. 14.

⁸² A. M., *Moral Essays*, i, p. 80.

identifies this paradox as ‘the push and pull of equality and hierarchy’, which lay at the heart of both family and patronage.⁸³ For example, parents were simultaneously warned that favouring first-born sons was wrong *and* instructed to provide them with greater opportunities than younger sons and daughters.

These tensions are less challenging if we recognise the limitations of ‘equality’ in families, since the concept was only applied to love and care.⁸⁴ Contemporaries did not, on the whole, understand it to mean that individuals were afforded equal access to opportunities regardless of gender, race, wealth, health and class. For example, in his will written in 1793 and proved in 1802, John Clark requested that his wife distribute his estate between their children ‘in as equal proportions as may be’. Harris observed, ‘The phrase “as equal ... as may be” infers that equality was graded on a curve’.⁸⁵ It is therefore more accurate to use the term equitable to convey contemporary meaning wherein, ideally, individuals were awarded opportunities but only those determined by their gender, race, wealth, class and need.⁸⁶ Cobbett was thus advocating equitability rather than equality in his advice for fathers when he recommended that they be fair where property was concerned, but cautioned that this did not translate into equal distribution, because children’s ‘different wants, their different pecuniary circumstances, and different prospects in life’ led to diversity and difficulty in applying general rules.⁸⁷ Of course, the same differential qualities were used to secure patronage.

Merit was one solution to the conundrum of being impartial in a differential society. Until the 1810s, merit was not yet a synonym for personal talent or specific skills and qualifications. It meant, instead, ‘the quality of deserving well, or of being entitled to reward or gratitude’, and it indicated that an individual was honoured or esteemed.⁸⁸ The judicious parent or patron, therefore, could provide equivalency in care in order to avoid partiality *and* reward individual merit, in the sense of personal qualities such as Christian piety and virtue, which facilitated preferment.⁸⁹ Favour in both family and patronage networks, therefore, was acceptable when bestowed on those who deserved it because of their good character and conduct.

The interplay between merit, favour and advancement might be complex in families. In 1783, *The Lady’s Magazine* published a letter from Eliza Willis to the ‘Matron’, Mrs Gray, the publication’s agony aunt. Willis explained that her parents apprenticed her out to a

⁸³ A. Harris, ‘That Fierce Edge: Sibling Conflict and Politics in Georgian England’, *Journal of Family History*, xxxvii (2012), pp. 155–74, at 159, 163.

⁸⁴ Here I use a more specific, constrained meaning of equality. For a usage that is slightly broader see Harris, ‘That Fierce Edge’, pp. 158–9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁸⁶ Later eighteenth-century fiction also tried to navigate the inherent tensions between reconciling primogeniture and treating siblings equitably. Harris, *Siblinghood*, pp. 85–6.

⁸⁷ Cobbett, *Advice*, p. 248. In practice, this may have meant that access to some benefits, such as inherited property, might be reshaped over family members’ lives due to differing circumstances. Harris, ‘That Fierce Edge’, p. 157.

⁸⁸ ‘merit, n.’, *OED*. It was also gendered. For examples of male merit, see *Lady’s Magazine*, xxi (1790), pp. 538–9; for female merit see *ibid.*, pp. 118, 343–4.

⁸⁹ Atkins, ‘Religion, Politics and Patronage’, pp. 280, 281.

business the previous year, ‘for reasons only known to themselves’, despite her father having the means to maintain her independent of any profession.⁹⁰ She submitted to their will,

[with] no great reluctance; for the great attention which was always paid my brothers, by my parents, in preference to me, although I was their elder, gave them no small opportunity of frequently insulting me, even in the presence of our parents; who instead of reprehending them, often smile, and frequently reward their ill-timed raillery with a present, as a mark of their approbation.

Willis’s expectations of what she should receive due to birth order and gender had not been met and so she now sought guidance on whether she should set up business independently at the end of her apprenticeship term to avoid returning home to a ‘miserable’ life.⁹¹ In advising her, the Matron acknowledged that parental partiality was ill-judged, but offered alternative reasons for what Willis perceived to be favouritism. She suggested that Willis did not in fact know her father’s financial means and that she could be mistaken in her belief that her parents favoured her brothers. After all, observed Mrs Gray, the two sexes require different modes of education and, since their prospects in life were distinct, so too were the attentions paid to them. Perhaps, she proposed, Willis’s brother was not as healthy or capable of making his way in the world as his sister, and therefore needed watching with more care. Willis should, therefore, be grateful to have been given the means to gain employment.⁹² Here, merit offset the tension between equity and hierarchy, where the perceived favouritism was the apportioning of reward to each sibling, according to their differential needs and capabilities.

Fictional accounts of favouritism in this period also informed readers that a child’s inner merit, rather than their superficial appeal, should be rewarded. In ‘The Contrast’, a tale about the two daughters of Mrs Bowen, published in *The Lady’s Magazine* in 1790, Louisa, the eldest, was docile, gentle and possessed of ‘great sensibility’; Maria, a year younger, was haughty, envious and discontented. Louisa had been the most beautiful, but at 10 years old, smallpox ruined her complexion while leaving Maria unscathed. Their mother was exemplary in discovering their different propensities and guiding them ‘in the paths of virtue’. However, Mrs Bowen had to suppress her favour for the eldest daughter, Louisa, whose character was so superior that her mother ‘could not help preferring so amiable a child’. Indeed, Mrs Bowen ‘strove to keep down every improper mark of partiality, not without longing at the same time to discover a superior affection for her which she knew she so perfectly deserved’. Maria, on the other hand, stood firm against efforts to improve her, resolutely unpleasant throughout. Her mother’s attempts to persuade her that she should adopt Louisa’s good qualities so that society would find her more agreeable infuriated her.⁹³ She replied to her mother ‘that were she treated as well as Louisa, she should behave as well, but that there was always such a preference given to *her*, that there was no encouragement for her to take any pains to please’.⁹⁴ The story traces the sisters through their interactions with various beaux, ending only with Maria’s early death, martyr to her own disagreeable passions. Louisa gained her

⁹⁰ *Lady’s Magazine*, xiv (1783), pp. 131–2.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Lady’s Magazine*, xiv (1783), pp. 204–5.

⁹³ *Lady’s Magazine*, xxi (1790), pp. 181–3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

reward, a loving husband.⁹⁵ On the one hand, this is a straightforward tale of the triumph and reward of inner virtue. On the other, it acknowledges the difficulties a parent might face in *not* favouring the child whose inner qualities shone through and makes it clear that virtue was the personal merit that brought reward.

The discourse around impartiality and merit extended beyond the family and permeated Georgian public and professional discourse where it was positioned as a bulwark against all types of favouritism. To counter accusations of favouritism, and, thus, corruption in public life, for instance, it was common to state that appointments were impartial. In 1750, the *London Evening Post* published a notice from the trustees of Richmond Grammar School that they were appointing a new master and would ‘make Choice of a Person who shall appear to them to be, in all Respects, the best qualified for so important a Trust, without any Favour or Partiality whatsoever’.⁹⁶ In January 1795, Jackson Barwis (1729–1810) placed an advertisement in *The Sun* directed at the proprietors of India stock, seeking their support for his candidacy for the position of Director of the East India Company affairs. He declared his own merit and promised that as director he would ensure that ‘injurious favouritisms must be destroyed, and impartiality in our contracts and appointments must predominate’.⁹⁷ Such examples expose the extent to which the family was political and politics familial.

Contemporary discussions of patronage also negotiated impartiality and trust since the system’s roots in kinship raised thorny questions about the selection of individuals. Personalised needs and kinship obligations had long been key factors in patrons’ decisions in assigning preferment. One of the reasons patronage, in its form of offering preferment to kin, possessed ‘moral legitimacy’ in the eighteenth century, for instance, was because it was perceived as provision for related dependants. Provision was a socially admired activity and thereby aligned patronage both conceptually and, in some cases, in actuality, with notions of biological and social fatherhood.⁹⁸ John Hume (1706–82), bishop of Oxford, wrote to the Duke of Newcastle in 1762 to explain that he was unable to give the living of Sundon to the duke’s nominee because of his prior promises to serve his ‘relations’: ‘I have nephews provided for and one in particular (for whom I design this living) whose father, a worthy clergyman, is just dropping into his grave. In this case he will leave behind him my sister a widow with ten children’.⁹⁹ In the Church of England, sourcing a living for a nephew ‘married and very slenderly provided for’ was common.¹⁰⁰ William Gibson’s investigation of clerical patronage concludes, therefore, that for the Anglican Church, ‘a natural tension existed in the distribution of patronage between the interests of the kin and those of truth and merit’.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Concluded in *Lady’s Magazine*, xxii (1791), pp. 37–8.

⁹⁶ *London Evening Post*, 28 Aug. 1750, p. 2.

⁹⁷ *The Sun*, 3 Jan. 1795, p. 1.

⁹⁸ For examples of men acting as surrogate fathers in their role as patrons, see Gibson, ‘Nepotism, Family, and Merit’, p. 184. For the acceptance of patronage as a form of provision see *ibid.*, pp. 182–5.

⁹⁹ Gibson, ‘Patterns of Nepotism’, pp. 386–7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

¹⁰¹ Gibson, ‘Nepotism, Family, and Merit’, p. 185.

Naval preferment and postings were also rooted ‘in wide-ranging networks of kinship and mutual obligation’ and offer an example of how this balance was negotiated.¹⁰² The section on naval and military officers in *Enquiry into the Duties of Men* (1794) by Thomas Gisborne (1758–1846) cautioned, for example, that patronage and promotion ‘ought to be considered as a public trust, and exercised with a strict regard to desert’.¹⁰³ Those who promoted ‘a favourite, a friend, or a relation, to a post of which he is unworthy’, betrayed ‘sordid principles or an unskilful judgement; [which] discourages meritorious exertion throughout the service’ and thus laid the nation open to danger.¹⁰⁴ Gisborne was advised by the First Naval Lord Middleton on this section of his work, which may have reflected his views on patronage more generally, and explained that bestowing indulgences on men was fine as long as the practice aligned with the public good, just as bestowing charity should attend to the merit of the recipient. He recommended that the officer must, therefore, ‘allow to virtuous conduct every degree of reasonable weight in the granting of favours, and the distribution of preferment’.¹⁰⁵ The capacity for patrons to assess personal merit, as these justifications hint, was to come under ever more direct attack, utilising the framework of family favouritism.

V

As discussed above, in the eighteenth century, merit was used to denote piety and virtue, a valued temperament or ‘nature’, and personal accomplishments.¹⁰⁶ It is in this sense that merit informed preferment. Studies of eighteenth-century clerical patronage, for instance, argue that merit was interpreted as an individual’s fitness for a living, that is, how far a young man was amiable and esteemed, rather than his specific attitudes or qualifications.¹⁰⁷ Fitness for place thus enabled patrons to justify their actions. In 1827, First Secretary to the Admiralty, John Wilson Croker, told one of his brothers-in-law, ‘I never will recommend any one who is not in my opinion *fit* for the situation in which he is to be placed’ and, his historian notes, thereafter he monitored the performance of his protégés who were often relatives.¹⁰⁸ From the early nineteenth century, however, there was a major shift ‘to ideas of

¹⁰² Atkins, ‘Religion, Politics and Patronage’, pp. 274–5.

¹⁰³ Gisborne, *Enquiry*, pp. 303–4. This is discussed in detail by Atkins, ‘Religion, Politics and Patronage’, p. 280.

¹⁰⁴ Gisborne, *Enquiry*, p. 304.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹⁰⁶ In some ways this echoed the qualities denoted by ‘character’. For the changing meaning of character, see L.M.E. Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore, MD, 2003), pp. 25–6, 130.

¹⁰⁷ Gibson, ‘Nepotism, Family, and Merit’, pp. 186–7. There emerged a debate about the introduction of competitive examinations in the civil service over the extent to which competition could measure morals and character, which were still seen by some as necessary qualities for office. Charles Brodrick, *Promotion by Merit in Relation to Government and Education* (London, 1858), p. 4. For the complexities of the Northcote-Trevelyan civil service reforms and whom they represented, see Goodlad, *Victorian Literature*, pp. 120–23, 134.

¹⁰⁸ Hamilton, ‘John Wilson Croker’, p. 61.

merit as a qualification rather than kinship'.¹⁰⁹ Merit became far more about a set of skills and capabilities that could be assessed through open competition and competitive examination. Hence, favouring one individual over another through familial knowledge came to be considered both unnecessary and suspect.¹¹⁰ The legitimacy of clerical patronage, for instance, was fading swiftly by the early nineteenth century, as the professional classes sought to articulate a new vision of advancement based on a meritocratic ethic. Thus, Edward Sparke, bishop of Ely (1812–36), was mocked in the locality as a rampant nepotist who had given so many livings to his family members that it was claimed travellers could light their way on a dark night in the fens from the number of 'little Sparkes' along the road.¹¹¹

As such, the concept of meritocracy, where power and place were held by those selected for their talent and suitability, rather than wealth or social class, was advanced as superior to patronage. It should be noted, however, that this shift was by no means universal in practice, since inherited privilege remained powerful, and meritocracy for the majority was not reached until the second half of the twentieth century.¹¹² In the later nineteenth century, for example, some bureaucratic organisations still appointed through patronage, although they promoted by merit.¹¹³ Furthermore, notions of meritocracy continued to be shaped by class and gender, and thus retained a hierarchical rather than egalitarian form. Essentially, merit remained a middle-class ideology, which came to be seen as a quality most evident in this particular social group. Moreover, just as gender shaped conceptions of favouritism, it continued to inflect patronage and professional merit. Thus, the latter was naturalised as white, male and middle class, and its opportunities only made available to men at a time when employment opportunities for women were becoming more restrictive.¹¹⁴ Indeed, a study of the Prudential Assurance Company in the 1870s shows that when women were employed as clerks, they were often appointed through patronage themselves, as a way both to increase clerical capacity and to resolve the emerging 'dilemma caused by the clashing of the principle of patronage with that of merit'. Introducing a tier of women who were barred from promotion by merit preserved for men (and elite families) the value of patronage as a form of advancement without violating the notion of merit.¹¹⁵

With the rise of meritocracy still rooted in the structures of family, it is possible to argue that family favouritism shaped emergent discourses of social, professional and political

¹⁰⁹ Gibson, 'Patterns of Nepotism', p. 385.

¹¹⁰ Davis, 'Meritocracy in the Civil Service', pp. 27–35.

¹¹¹ Cited by Gibson, 'Patterns of Nepotism', p. 382; original quote in George William Erskine Russell, *Collections and Recollections* (London, 1898), p. 105.

¹¹² Mandler, *The Crisis of the Meritocracy*, pp. 1, 4. For concerns to reform rather than jettison patronage, see Hamilton, 'John Wilson Croker', p. 55.

¹¹³ E. Jordan, 'The Lady Clerks at the Prudential: The Beginning of Vertical Segregation by Sex in Clerical Work in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Gender & History*, viii (1996), p. 65–81, at 67.

¹¹⁴ For example, see J. Long, 'The Colour of Disorder: Women's Employment and "Protective" Intervention in the Lead Industry in Victorian England', *Women's History Review*, vii (1998), pp. 521–46; S.J. Smith, 'Retaking the Register: Women's Higher Education in Glasgow and Beyond, c. 1796–1845', *Gender & History*, xii (2000), pp. 310–35.

¹¹⁵ Jordan, 'The Lady Clerks', pp. 67, 74–5.

reform. While earlier critiques of favouritism were fundamentally about managing family relations and patronage within existing structures, the nineteenth century saw more radical criticisms that attacked the system itself. Drawing on revolutionary and utilitarian ideals of social relations, radical political discourse deployed new meanings of merit to demand that the family, at least in principle, be removed from the political and professional spheres. Increasingly radicals and reformers attacked patronage, especially its familial underpinnings, reformulating it as nepotism and a source of corruption that undermined political and professional institutions.¹¹⁶ Indeed, the changing connotations of the word nepotism capture the shifting ideas about family favourites.¹¹⁷ Although Samuel Johnson defined nepotism quite simply as a ‘fondness for nephews’, it conveyed popish connotations, which generated anxiety, since it was historically associated with the Catholic Church and illegitimate sons being given the office of cardinal.¹¹⁸ In 1745, Lewis Stephens wrote:¹¹⁹

I hate Nepotism in ye Protestant Clergy, as well as the Popish, grinding Parishioners or Tenants of Chapter-lands, for the sake perhaps of a Worthless Nephew, or even a good one; is buying another man’s luxury & idleness at ye expense of ... honour, wch is too high a price.

As Daniel Reed explains, however, Stephens’s condemnation was focused on pluralists, individuals receiving disproportionate gains, and on undeserving individuals. Indeed, the subject of his attack on nepotism, Bishop Lancelot Blackburne (1658–1743), was criticised especially for failing to serve his family as promised and expected.¹²⁰ Nepotism might thus still be seen in the early nineteenth century as predominantly a misplaced, or thwarted form of parental care or affection. Sydney Morgan (c.1776–1859) for instance, recorded her reluctance to take leave of her sister’s children before departing for the continent:¹²¹

Dear little toddlers! I am sure that nepotism is an organic affection in single and childless women; it is a maternal instinct gone astray. In popes and princes it is a frustrated ambition, a substitute for paternity. It is a dangerous tendency. Aunts and uncles never love wisely, but too well; besides it brings with it responsibilities without authority, and imposes duties without giving rights. And so bye-bye babies!

By the 1810s and 1820s, however, nepotism was viewed far more negatively as ‘a system of succession and patronage which mirrored the corruption of pocket boroughs and aristocratic governance’.¹²² For these critics, family influence resulted in professional incompetence and inadequate postholders.¹²³ The medical profession offers a helpful case study. Thomas Wakley (1795–1862), surgeon and editor of *The Lancet*, singled out nepotism

¹¹⁶ McCormack, *Independent Man*, pp. 163–5.

¹¹⁷ ‘nepotism, n.’, *OED*.

¹¹⁸ ‘nepotism, n.s.’, *Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary*, available at <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php> (accessed 19 June 2024); Reed, ‘Patronage, Performance’, pp. 183–4.

¹¹⁹ Cited in Reed, ‘Patronage, Performance’, p. 184.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 184–5.

¹²¹ Sydney, Lady Morgan (née Owenson), *Passages from My Autobiography* (London, 1859), p. 9.

¹²² M. Brown, “‘Bats, Rats and Barristers’”: *The Lancet*, Libel and the Radical Stylistics of Early Nineteenth-Century English Medicine’, *Social History*, xxxix (2014), pp. 182–209, at 189.

¹²³ Davis, ‘Meritocracy in the Civil Service’, p. 27.

in his endeavour to reform the medical profession along ostensibly more meritocratic lines. In Wakley's view, hospital posts were sites of the production of medical knowledge and sources of medical authority and thus he argued that it was essential to have a system that prioritised talent and opened up medical posts to competition. One of his targets was the surgeon Bransby Cooper (1792–1853), whose inadequate operative performance he exposed in *The Lancet* in 1828 and in his defence during the ensuing civil libel case, brought by Cooper. In both arenas, he drew attention to the fact that Cooper had succeeded to posts vacated by his uncle, Sir Astley Cooper. In one editorial, Wakley scathingly rejected earlier views of merit, commenting that the nephew's good character and familial connection were irrelevant, merely indicative of 'a corrupt system'.¹²⁴

Wakley's attempts to reform the medical profession were informed by 'middle-class values of meritocracy, duty and reward', where talent and ability were the key to promotion. His opponents conformed to an older vision of merit in which character and reputation, informed by familial knowledge and favour, secured a place.¹²⁵ For Wakley, family patronage, now branded as nepotism, reproduced corruption, self-interest and professional ignorance.¹²⁶ In 1829 he remarked that the 'nepotism we should not allow to a pope, we shall not allow to a surgeon', advocating that hospital governors should 'discountenance the family system' in order to avoid 'imbeciles' taking up posts.¹²⁷ By this point, patronage could be seen as an invidious system, problematic because of its rootedness in kin networks and family knowledge. In an article titled 'Family Patronage', published in 1831, Wakley inveighed against a 'family system', which promoted 'favourites', namely men who were related by blood or marriage to office-holders in the medical colleges. His use of family analogies continued when he denounced this as 'the medico-chirurgico-genealogical tree'. Naming the numerous nephews of eminent surgeons admitted to posts, he went on to state that 'such a noxious system of favouritism' repressed scientific inquiry and degraded talent and independence.¹²⁸

It is surely not surprising that these vehement assaults on preferment took place at a time when an upper-middle-class elite was consolidating itself as a homogeneous, exclusive group through the strategy of 'in-marriage'. As Adam Kuper explains, first-cousin and sibling-in-law marriages created 'webs of relationships' that generated patronage and access to capital, and shaped professional advancement.¹²⁹ The tightening hold on professional power of such kinship networks helps explain a rhetorical move from accepting family structures as normative within the functioning of state and professions to attacking dynastic structures and the family system as a corrupt form of governance. Interestingly, it is possible to suggest that Wakley's views were shaped not only by the changing nature and rhetoric of

¹²⁴ Cited in Brown, 'Bats, Rats', p. 196.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 200. For the position of a medical practitioner who held the *ancien régime* views, see James Gregory in M. Brown, 'Surgery, Identity and Embodied Emotion: John Bell, James Gregory and the Edinburgh "Medical War"', *History* civ:359 (2019), pp. 19–41.

¹²⁶ Brown, 'Bats, Rats', p. 207.

¹²⁷ Thomas Wakley, *The Lancet*, 14 Mar. 1829, p. 747.

¹²⁸ Thomas Wakley, 'Family Patronage', *The Lancet*, 22 Jan. 1831, pp. 564–8.

¹²⁹ A. Kuper, *Incest and Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

middle-class family life, but by his experience of the institution itself. A later biographer ascribed his adult career and political stance to his family life, observing,¹³⁰

As a member of a large family he was endowed with a deep sense of what was fair. He obtained his own share of whatever of material enjoyment or comfort was going by favour, for he was the youngest, and could not have extracted it from his elders; but he obtained it because it was freely recognised in Mr. Henry Wakley's house that share and share alike in common goods was the only fair plan.

For Wakley, perhaps, it was this idealised fair family that now offered the best model for the body politic. Such changing conceptualisations of relations between the family and the professional and public spheres, along with different formulations of the role of preference and meaning of merit, led to another rewriting of favouritism, as the next section demonstrates.

VI

By the middle of the nineteenth century, favouritism was increasingly conceived as a threat to the emotional and psychological health of the individual rather than to social, political or professional hierarchies. This was informed by several shifts, not least of which was the introduction of mechanisms to assess individual merit for entry into professional life.¹³¹ Also significant was the positioning, imaginatively at least, of the family as a private and domestic domain, rather than a micro-version of the state.¹³² Demographic shifts were a third factor, wherein family limitation reduced the number of children in some elite and professional families, compressing births into a shorter period of time.¹³³ As Viviana Zelizer has argued, this led to the 'economically useless, emotionally priceless' child, a conceptualisation that reconfigured favouritism.¹³⁴

From the mid nineteenth century, the public and familial discourses of favouritism were disentangled. Thus, when Charles Kingsley discussed patronage in a lecture on urban society he delivered in Bristol in 1857, it was sufficiently distant for him to see it in conservative, nostalgic terms as a prophylactic against modernity. He rhapsodised that in

¹³⁰ S. Sprigge, *The Life and Times of Thomas Wakley* (London, 1899), p. 30.

¹³¹ C.J. Dewey, 'The Education of a Ruling Caste: The Indian Civil Service in the Era of Competitive Examination', *The English Historical Review*, lxxxviii (1973), pp. 262–85; Goodlad, *Victorian Literature*, ch. 4; H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London, 1989).

¹³² This is the ideological rise of 'separate spheres' in the early nineteenth century, which is frequently associated with Davidoff and Hall's, *Family Fortunes*. There has been much debate about the extent to which it was experiential, and how to address its conceptualisation now and in the past, see for example: S. Steinbach, 'Can We still Use "Separate Spheres"?' *British History 25 Years after Family Fortunes*, *History Compass*, x (2012), pp. 826–37; A. Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal*, xxxvi (1993), pp. 383–414.

¹³³ M. Rothery, 'The Reproductive Behavior of the English Landed Gentry in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *Journal of British Studies*, xlviii (2009), pp. 674–94.

¹³⁴ V.A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York, 1985).

Bristol, so he heard, the merchant practice survived whereby boys were taken into families to be trained to business, observing:¹³⁵

That this connection between employer and employed is hereditary, and that clerkships pass from father to son in the same family. I rejoice to hear it. It is pleasant to find anywhere a relic of the old patriarchal bond, the permanent nexus between master and man, which formed so important and so healthful an element of the ancient mercantile system. One would gladly overlook a little favouritism and nepotism, a little sticking square men into round holes, and of round men into square holes.

These intimate bonds, he proposed, for all their, by now, minor faults, led to employees who identified with and honoured their employers' business. For Kingsley, urban society was a site of vice, disease, corruption, even masculine degeneration, so he harked back to the nexus of family and patronage as a moral salve to modern problems.¹³⁶

By this time, commentators still saw family favouritism as an objectionable practice, but their anxieties surrounding it had uncoupled it from a discourse of patronage. The novel *A Family History*, published in 1861, for example, recounted the treatment of a son whose mother preferred his siblings. The author declared that favouritism was tantamount to a parent flinging away their child's love and variously described the act as a 'crime', 'sin' and as a form of 'crucifixion' and a 'martyrdom' for the neglected child.¹³⁷ As this suggests, favouritism was coming to be seen primarily as a pathology of *family* life, not *society*, and its results were focused more upon the neglected or favoured child rather than the broader inequities or disorderly consequences of the 'system'.

Indeed, it seems to have become identified with the language of the spoiled child, a term increasingly applied to the favoured child in the later nineteenth century.¹³⁸ This refocused the repercussions of favouritism onto the child itself, who was seen as damaged by their parents' behaviour. Already in 1806, a contributor to *The Lady's Monthly Museum* referred to the 'spoil'd-child system' in which a child could do no wrong and was thus set on the road to immorality.¹³⁹ The spoiled child was behaviourally damaged, becoming wilful, disobedient and headstrong; in some ways infantile into adulthood.¹⁴⁰ By the mid nineteenth century, these moralising tales illustrated that spoiling and pampering a child allowed the 'corrupt seeds of fallen human nature' to grow unchecked. In them, the spoiled child often

¹³⁵ Charles Kingsley, 'Great Cities and Their Influence for Good and Evil', *Sanitary and Social Lectures and Essays* (London, 1880), pp. 207–208.

¹³⁶ A. Smith, *Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity and the Gothic at the fin de siècle* (Manchester, 2004), pp. 23, 42 n. 12.

¹³⁷ Mary Eyre, *A Family History* (1861), pp. 152–3.

¹³⁸ For a discussion of the problematic association of only children with being spoiled, see A. Violet, 'The Public Perceptions and Personal Experiences of Only Children Growing Up in Britain, c. 1850–1950' (Univ. of Essex Ph.D. thesis, 2018), especially chs. 8 and 9.

¹³⁹ 'Old Woman, No. XCV', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, new ser., i (1806), pp. 50–54, at 51, 52.

¹⁴⁰ For example, see the tale of 'The Smuggler' by G.P.R. James, reviewed in *The Age*, 17 May 1845, p. 62. For the twentieth-century version, see B. Beverly, 'Spoiled Children', *Postgraduate Medicine*, ii:2 (1947), p. 90.

met their end early.¹⁴¹ Drawing on earlier medical advice for parents that warned of the risks of over-indulging children, the ‘disorder of spoiled children’ left such unlucky individuals unwell, with a weak constitution.¹⁴² Increasingly, mental health disorders were identified as an outcome of spoiling a child, and by the early twentieth century this was being explored in emerging studies of psychology.¹⁴³ With this reading, family favouritism had come to be almost entirely separated from its earlier discourse in which it impacted social, political and professional structures, since it was increasingly associated with only children rather than large families.

This article has examined the interrelationships between familial, social, political and professional ideas about favouritism in England to demonstrate that family favouritism was a changing dialogue that offers us new insights into broader relational networks that incorporate but also extend beyond the family. It shows that the cross-fertilisation of discourses over the century and a half between *circa* 1700 and 1850, when favouritism was increasingly challenged and problematised, had extensive repercussions for the domestic, social and professional spheres. Although several issues were identified as emanating from its practice, it was increasingly the very role of the family itself that made it so deeply objectionable to those who articulated a vision of social and professional mobility and advancement based on merit rather than interpersonal relationships and family structures. Until the age of reform, family favouritism was denounced for its risks to familial and then individual honour and morals, and a corrupted social order. From the age of reform onwards, however, the link between the body politic and family was reformulated as concerns about favouritism were directed inward to the privatised family and then to the pathologised individual. As the family system of patronage began to decline so that the family was no longer *overtly* the nexus of placement and promotion and the locus of commercial, professional and political power, concerns about family favouritism turned inward to the individual and psychological narratives of the spoiled child.

This study of family favouritism is also offered as another example of a growing and commendable effort to acknowledge the social, political, economic and professional significance of the history of the family in understanding the past.¹⁴⁴ It is hoped that in

¹⁴¹ This was the fate of ‘Arthur Lawson’ in *The British Mother’s Magazine*, iv (1848), pp. 231–5. For other examples, see Violet, ‘Only Children Growing Up in Britain’, pp. 225–8. Using Ngram, she shows that the period from 1820 to 1900 saw the rise and greatest use of the terms spoiled/spoilt child in print culture, *ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁴² André-Théodore Brochard in 1865, cited in J. Wallis, ‘The Disorder of Spoiled Children’, available at <https://diseasesofmodernlife.web.ox.ac.uk/article/the-disorder-of-spoiled-children> (accessed 19 June 2024).

¹⁴³ Violet, ‘Only Children Growing Up in Britain’, pp. 228–9, 253–4. For the development of psychiatric medicine that addressed the ‘maladjusted’ child and its emotional and psychological difficulties, see J. Stewart, ‘The Scientific Claims of British Child Guidance, 1918–45’, *British Society for the History of Science*, xlii (2009), pp. 407–32.

¹⁴⁴ For some of the scholars who have led this movement, see the work of Katie Barclay, Katie Donington, Margot Finn, Durba Ghosh, Susan Klepp and Daniel Livesay.

delineating the shifting meanings of favouritism, a further case has been made to illustrate why it is vital to place the history of the family at the centre of political and professional histories of the period. It is unhelpful to separate these areas of historical enquiry not only because they all share deep tap roots of dynasty, lineage and kin-based patronage but because family discourses were common to all in rethinking and reformulating practices and behaviours. Indeed, family remains a central discursive force today, as testified by Generation Z's discovery and criticism of nepotism in social media debates around so-called 'nepo-babies' who populate the entertainment industry, sports and politics.¹⁴⁵ As with earlier critiques, it is nepotism's advancement of those without talent and the structural retrenchment of privilege that is attacked.¹⁴⁶ What is clear is that in times of change and crisis, where routes to professional advancement are restricted and people face insecurity and precarity, the family comes to the fore as a contested social, cultural, economic and political force.

London College of Fashion

JOANNE BEGIATO

¹⁴⁵ N. Jones, 'The Year of the Nepo Baby', *Vulture*, 19 Dec. 2022, available at <https://www.vulture.com/article/hollywood-nepotism-babies-list-taxonomy.html>; A. Boulton, 'Westminster's "Nepo Babies" Are Here to Stay - Whether We Like it or not', *Sky News*, 3 Feb. 2023, available at <https://news.sky.com/story/adam-boulton-westminsters-nepo-babies-are-here-to-stay-whether-we-like-it-or-not-12801859> (accessed 19 June 2024).

¹⁴⁶ 'A nepo baby is a child of a famous or successful parent, whose own success is believed to be due to their family connections': *Collins Online Dictionary*, available at <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/nepo-baby>. S. Price, 'Pop Is Awash with Nepo Babies – Lennon and McCartney Are Just the Latest. But Why Aren't They Better at it?', *The Guardian*, 20 Apr. 2024, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/20/>; M. Gill, "'Nepo Babies' Claim Their Parentage Is Overblown. Truth Is, They're Helped all the Way", *The Observer*, 29 Jan. 2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/29/> (accessed 19 June 2024).