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White lies, polite lies

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Abstract

‘I wish that word fib was banished from the English language, and white lie drummed out after it,’ exclaims Miss Clarendon, a scrupulously honest character in Maria Edgeworth’s *Helen* (1811). Then as now, the prevalent moral view was that lying was a pernicious form of social deception. Politeness, however, frequently demands some such deception, including white lies and discrete omissions. Eighteenth-century authors of advice manuals thus had to walk a fine line between recommending honesty towards oneself and politeness towards others, while novelists grappled with their characters’ attempts to attain or reject a sociable sincerity that proved to be elusive.

A white lie, the OED explains, is ‘a harmless or trivial lie, *esp.* one told in order to avoid hurting another person's feelings.’1 It is thus a peculiarly sociable form of deception, but its harmlessness was doubted already long before the eighteenth century. In his *De Mendacio*, St Augustine condemned all kinds of lies, although he accepted that there were exceptions: he excluded ‘jocose lies’ that are self-evident and uttered without any intention to deceive from his list of lies. White lies, however, are arguably meant to deceive, if for seemingly good reasons. These kinds of lies are encompassed in Augustine’s fifth type, that ‘which is told from a desire to please others in smooth discourse,’ and, as all kinds of lies involving deception, to be avoided, Augustine concluded.2

In his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Samuel Johnson defined the ‘lie’ variously as either a ‘criminal falsehood’, a ‘charge of falsehood’ or simply ‘a fiction’.3 If James Boswell is to be believed, Johnson himself generally used the term rather loosely in his own third sense in conversation, indicating a story that was not strictly accurate rather than a deception. This, however, led him into trouble with those he deeply offended by heedlessly accusing them of having told a lie, however unintentional the offence.4 At the time, being accused of lying was usually considered an affront both for moral and for intellectual reasons: Eighteenth-century moralists poured scorn on liars. Lord Chesterfield’s *Advice to His Son*, purporting to spread the principles of politeness, averred that even the most innocuous-seeming lie reflected negatively on the mental abilities of the speaker and that liars were ‘the lowest and meanest of mankind’.5 A liar was a disreputable character: ‘It is most certain, that the reputation of chastity is not so necessary for a woman, as that of veracity is for a man’ (79). Chesterfield’s liars included even those who told lies to entertain their audience with a good but not quite veracious story (78). Mere embellishments to a good story, told in a sociable setting, were acceptable, he maintained, unless they smacked of vanity, and he was particularly annoyed with those who wanted to be ‘the heroes of their own fables’ (*Ibid*). David Hume similarly made allowances for ‘*humorous* stories’ made up of lies, but warned that those ‘harmless liars, frequently to be met with in company’ who believed themselves to be entertaining were met with ‘universal blame’ instead.6

Moral philosopher William Paley went so far as to warn his readers that seemingly innocuous lies might endanger ‘social happiness’ itself, though he, too, excepted lies that were not meant to deceive anyone, such as ‘fables’ and ‘novels’, and, curiously, ‘a servant *denying* his master’, arguing that ‘in such instances no confidence is destroyed, because none was deposed’.7 Nonetheless, he insisted that once people developed a habit of lying, ‘*white* lies always introduce others of a darker complexion’ (187). He explicitly cautioned against what might be termed sociable lies, or polite lies told in conversation: ‘Much of the pleasure, and all of the benefit of conversation, depends upon our opinion of the speaker’s veracity’ (*Ibid*). The trouble may have been in differentiating a fanciful story from a ‘true’ one, but the teller was considered more to blame than the audience if misunderstandings occurred. Perhaps, too, the sense of humour required to appreciate hyperbole simply did not appeal to moralists.

Fiction was too close to the lie to be generally considered a venial form of lying, especially in the case of women. Contradictorily, advice manuals tried to keep up the fiction that one could be completely honest even in sociable settings. John Gregory cautioned his daughters: 'Have a Sacred regard to Truth. Lying is a mean and despicable vice. – I have known some women of excellent parts, who were so much addicted to it, that they could not be trusted in the relation of any story, especially if [...] they themselves were the heroines of the tale.'8 Samuel Johnson might have been more lenient on these occasions, and from the point of view of sociability, these female story-tellers may have been much more successful with their stories than they would have been in a mere recitation of the facts. However, not only moralists distinguished between stories told to amuse others, and stories told to please one's own vanity (or, as we might say today, face-saving stories).

'The human heart is prone to insincerity', Hester Chapone ominously declared in the *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, and recommended 'strict honesty towards ourselves' (65-66) to avoid all vanity or overconfidence.9 She added a full chapter on 'politeness' but circumnavigated the problem of polite lies and omissions: 'To be perfectly polite, one must have a great *presence of mind* [...] one should be able to form an instantaneous judgment of what is fittest to be said or done' (160-61). Presumably, habit made it possible to evade the truth, without being aware of what one was (not) doing or (not) saying, and thus without a hint of deception. Certain tactfull omissions may not generally fall under the heading of 'lie,' but they, too, clash with the demand to be sincere.10 Again tip-toeing around the issue, Chapone exhorted young women to develop a 'well-bred sincerity' (171), adding that it was acceptable for them to speak their minds or even laugh at people's follies – once the company had left (169).

Jane Austen, by contrast, challenged the prevalent view of advice manuals and frankly admitted that, particularly for women, it was essential to be able to lie in polite conversation. Elinor, the heroine of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), knows how to behave in society – unlike her sister Marianne: 'It was impossible for [Marianne] to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell.'11 Austen sided with the eldest sister, but Elinor's mendacity has been deplored by contemporary critics: George E. Haggery considers her polite lies 'a questionable basis for honest social intercourse'.12 Others, such as Susan Morgan, see Elinor's habits in a more positive light. Unlike Marianne, Elinor avoids hurting other people's feelings, and accepts the inevitable – the social custom of telling lies – only after mature deliberation.13 Yet Marianne, too, had good reasons for her decision not to be polite but sincere: Sincerity, in her understanding of the term, had been seen as a contradiction to social politeness ever since Rousseau's *Émile* (1762).

Other novelists also addressed the problem of being either sincere or polite. The plot of Edgeworth's *Helen* (1811) is propelled forward through the usual three volumes by the aftermath of the seemingly innocuous falsehoods its anti-heroine, Cecilia, asks Helen to tacitly support in order to avoid Cecilia's being found out by her husband. Though duly chastened at the end of the novel, sociable Cecilia, 'well skilled in throwing the ball of

conversation,' relies on the power of flattery throughout, and is a great success in society.[14] By contrast, another character, Miss Clarendon, insists on absolute honesty at all times, but this is shown to be the mistaken view of a social recluse who is content to live somewhere in the countryside with only one trusted friend, her old aunt. Miss Clarendon is incapable of even hearing a polite lie without immediately rebuking the speaker, and thus incapable of participating in polite society. If only in the subtext, Edgeworth pitches the Rousseauesque ideal of sincerity against the polite lie. Even the narrator cannot quite decide whether to celebrate blunt truthfulness as 'bien anglaise' or value the 'French' art of conversational politeness.

Edgeworth's book can hardly be read as a moral injunction to always tell the truth. Sensing that she was on morally difficult terrain, Edgeworth made valiant attempts to point out the dangers of lying. A socialite, aptly named Horace, presents the morally doubtful view: 'how much pleasanter is graceful fiction than grim, rigid, truth; and how much more amusing in my humble opinion!' (181). This opinion is easily refuted by Cecilia's mother, the moral paragon of the story. However, her answer is beside the point: the question was not whether fiction is preferable to fact, but whether veracity makes for good story-telling. The novel also points out that the art of lying requires particular social skills, and vice versa, and that the task of keeping on the straight path between courtesy and sincerity was particularly difficult for a social hostess: she had to civilize her guests by means of politeness and to entertain them by dint of social grace, and that could hardly be done by someone like honest Miss Clarendon.

Paradoxically, polite lies – which require a particular social skill – may also have offered a form of social empowerment for women. For a hostess or guest to withhold the truth in a conversation that is later recited for a different audience, for instance by letter, may be seen as a mark of the speaker's astuteness and enhances the bond with the partner the truth is eventually shared with. What would have been rudeness on the speaker's part at the time may even be turned into a sign of particular openness, or trust, in the recitation of one's real opinions to somebody else. The truly sociable art of lying, however, goes beyond polite lies to include a whole range of conversational skills and even a few tricks: evading an answer, passing on a difficult question to someone else, or keeping one's temper, at least outwardly, so as not to lose face. Sincerity, seen from the position of sociability, may also be seen as a refusal to perform in the role(s) appointed by polite society.

Diaries and journals such as those of Frances Burney or Hester Thrale illustrate occasions on which women used polite lies in conversation. These occasions might be separated into situations that demand a form of negative politeness – omissions and strategies of avoidance, e.g. evading the answer to a question (see Weinrich 117) – and situations that demand a certain kind of performance that is refused, often under cover of sincerity. Being good at using omissions or polite lies meant treading a fine line between acceptable evasion and the accusation of dishonesty, and thus led to a good deal of anxiety and even pre-emptive protestations of honesty in an act of self-defence. Frances Burney, for instance, claimed that 'all that I relate in Journalizing is strictly, nay plainly Fact: I never, in all my Life, have been a sayer of the Thing that is not'.[15] Clearly, though, she considered the reverse – *not* saying the thing that *is* – for the most part permissible in a social context, as a form of politeness that

proved her good breeding. On getting acquainted with a Lady Miller at Bath, for instance, Burney wrote home about how kindly that lady treated her, a budding young author, only to add a cautionary protestation of sincerity to her correspondent (her sister):

> ‘After all this, it is hardly fair to tell you what I think of her, – however, the truth is I always, to the best of my intentions, speak *honestly* what I think of the folks I see, without being biassed either by their civilities or neglect, – & that, you will allow, is being a very faithful Historian.’ (EJL IV, 127)

She then goes on to excoriate poor Lady Miller for trying to be fashionable: ‘all her success is to seem an ordinary Woman in *very* common Life with fine Cloathes on’ (*Ibid.*). Few people could have guessed from her demeanour in public how bitingly critical Burney could be in private. She seems to have adopted Chapone’s concept of ‘well-bred sincerity’, which could be used to secretly indulge in a good laugh about other people’s stupidity while maintaining a façade of polite submission in public. Yet women such as Burney, whose social standing was not quite secured in public, had to carefully weigh the consequences of disobliging social superiors. In society, she was therefore always circumspect: When a ‘booby’ wondered whether Mrs Montagu had written that famous essay called ‘*Shakespeare Moralised*,’ Burney ‘grined [sic] a little, I believe, but turned to Miss Gregory to make the answer.’ Miss Gregory, currently high in favour with Mrs Montagu, duly corrected the speaker, which made her a very valuable companion to Burney, saving her from the difficulty of either showing herself a dunce who did not know that Mrs Montagu wrote on the Genius of Shakespeare, or a female pedant who dared to correct the men (EJL IV, 370).

In her collection of anecdotes and personal opinions, *Thraliana*, Hester Thrale often claimed not to be at liberty to speak openly, or name her sources, a tell-tale sign of the deliberate use of the art of lying.16 It is nevertheless striking to find the acerbic opinions of her friends Thrale openly expresses in it (see e.g. *Thraliana* I, 368). The editor of *Thraliana* in her turn accused Hester Thrale of dissimulating (*Thraliana* I, x), and one such example of dissimulation, at least, is mentioned by Thrale herself:

> ‘I have an odd Power of working myself up into artificial Spirits: one Day […] when I was vexed & frighted out of my Wits […] I remember Boswell dining here: we [Johnson and herself] talked, we rattled, we flashed, we made extempore Verses, we did so much that at last M^{r} Boswell said why M^{rs} Thrale (says he) you are in most riotous Spirits to-day – So I am reply’d I gaily, & actually ran out of the Room to cry – his observation went so to my Heart.’ (Thraliana, I, 415)

As a hostess, Thrale felt she had to perform in public, whatever her private feelings. The performance of politness thus involves not only polite lies and omissions, but some dissimulation, too. Following Norbert Elias, sociolinguist Harald Weinrich asserts the 'corporeal component' of the code of politeness: 'its rules not only impose the wittiest possible use of language but also demand firm control of the polite person's creatureliness' (113). The body may serve as an indicator of social anxiety on such occasions, it is not allowed to be heard as well as seen, or to show its basic functions, such as – in Thrale's case – advanced pregnancy. Besides, unsociable feelings must be repressed at all costs – and may burst out in more private settings. The body, however, is not easily brought to support polite lies, and even Burney did not always think it necessary to repress a grin in society when faced with a more hapless aspirant to polite sociability. Then as now, it is impossible to be both entirely truthful and truly sociable.

1. 'White lie', Oxford English Dictionnary, accessed on 16 December 2022. A fib is defined as 'a venial or trivial falsehood; often used as a jocular euphemism for 'a lie'.

2. Augustinus, 'Lying', in Treatises on Various Subjects, ed. Roy J. Defferrari (Catholic University Press, 1952), ch. 2, p. 54, 86.

3. A 'fib', a 'cant word used by children' according to the lexicographer, could be either a lie or a falsehood ('lie', Samuel Johnson's Dictionnary, accessed on 15 December 2022. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/views/search.php?term=lie.)

4. James Boswell's Life of Johnson: An Edition of the Original Manuscript in Four Volumes, ed. Thomas F. Bonnell, 4 vol. (Edinburgh, New Haven and London: Edingburgh and Yale University Presses, 2020), vol. 4, p. 38.

5. Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, Lord Chesterfield's Advice to His Son. On Men and Manners: or, A New System of Education (Edinburgh, 1775), p. 79.

6. David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals [1751], ed. J. P. Schneewind (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), p. 69.

7. William Paley, The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy, 2 vols., 4th ed. (London, 1787), vol 1, ch. XV, p. 184-85.

8. John Gregory, A Father's Legacy to His Daughters, 3rd ed. (Dublin, 1774), p. 23.

9. Hester Chapone, Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady, 8th ed. (London, 1778).

10. For negative politeness and its connections to lies, see Harald Weinrich, Linguistik der Lüge (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1966).

11. Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, ed. Claudia L. Johnson (New York and London: Norton, 2002), p. 89.

12. George E. Haggerty, Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later Eighteenth Century (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 72.

13. Susan Morgan , 'Polite Lies: The Veiled Heroine of Sense and Sensibility', Nineteenth Century Fiction (vol. 31, n° 2, 1976), p. 201.

14. Maria Edgeworth, Tales and Novels, 10 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1859), vol. 10 (Helen), p. 7.

15. The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney, eds. Lars Troide and Stewart Cooke (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988-2012) vol. III, p. xiv; see also vol. IV, p. 394: 'all I said I think – though all I think to be sure I did not say!'

16. Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale, 1776-1809, ed. Katharine C. Balderston, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), vol. I, p. 433.

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