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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Politeness

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NUMB. 1.

The SPECTATOR.

Non fumum ex fulgore, fed ex fumo dare lucem
Cogitat, ut fpeciofa dehinc miracula promat. Hor.

To be Continued every Day.

Thurfday, March 1. 1711.

Mots-clés

Résumé

In the eighteenth century, the term 'politeness' became a powerful, if controverted, tool for thinking about and understanding social order and also for modelling and scripting social experience. Among an array of contemporary norms for social interaction, it provided one idealized vision of sociability, though practice often fell short of the ideal. Theorists disagreed about the fundamental psychology underlying politeness: whether it embodied a human capacity for virtue or it was a sophisticated expression of human egoism. In either case, the attractiveness of politeness grew out of contemporary developments in urban living, class aspiration, print culture and consumption patterns.

Politeness was a key word in eighteenth-century Britain, and its meanings were actualized in many areas of social practice. It was an ideal of sociability but certainly not the only one, and, of course, as an ideal, its execution was often short of its aspirations. Even as an ideal of sociability, politeness implied competing versions of the social self. Finally, the word expanded in its referents beyond the domain of sociable interaction to encompass many areas of human life.

Although one can identify earlier uses of 'polite' and 'politeness', these words began to appear more frequently in English texts in the later decades of the seventeenth century. Prior to that, words such as 'courtesy' or 'civility' conveyed ideals of sociability. The rise of the term 'politeness' was founded on translations of the French *politesse* though it took on a life of its own in English.

Politeness was a norm of social interaction, identified at its core with 'the art of pleasing'. It was premised on social awareness, a recognition of others which directed one to restrain one's own needs and desires in order to attend to others: such social discipline was what conduced to pleasant and effective social interactions. However, this other-orientation was susceptible to two quite different interpretations. On the one hand, the art of pleasing might be seen as a form of generosity and kindness: a version of social virtue. On the other hand, the art of social pleasing might be seen as a tool of a demanding self, which, in order to acquire the esteem of others, controlled its expressions – a form of self-constraint that was instrumental for the deeper and larger ambitions of the needy self.[1]

The latter view was explored most thoroughly in English by Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733). Very much building on French traditions of moral psychology, this Dutch physician traced all (or most) human attempts at virtuous self-restraint to an impossibly demanding self: in his view, politeness was a kind of refined egoism.[2] However, a number of Englishmen, Mandeville's exact contemporaries, sought to anchor politeness in real virtue. In their periodicals, the *Tatler* (1709-1711) and the *Spectator* (1711-1712, 1714), Richard Steele (1672-1729) and Joseph Addison (1672-1719) recurred frequently to the moral potential of politeness.[3] On a more exalted literary and philosophical plane, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), developed politeness into a model of gentlemanly accomplishment and actualization.[4]

Why did politeness become so attractive an ideal? It was useful in helping writers and their readers to understand and manage a number of changes that were becoming more conspicuous from the later seventeenth century into the eighteenth century. The traditional landed elite was spending more time in towns, which were developing in response to this change and also to the evolving aspirations of middling urban people. Famously, novel venues, often commercial in foundation, were appearing and creating new spaces of sociability (the coffeehouse being a premier example); likewise, new institutions (varieties of club and society) were proliferating.[5] A feature of these venues and institutions, noted by contemporaries, was the co-presence of diverse strangers. The norms of politeness were

aimed at mediating differences, whether those of gender, social level, religion, politics, or geographical origin, to name a few. Politeness sought to overcome tensions, often concomitant on difference, with mutual acquiescence and tolerance, freedom and discipline, ease and decorum. Much discussion of politeness focussed, in particular, on the management of conversation in a way that would be pleasurable and productive.

These changes, reinforced by others such as the expansion of print culture and indeed of all manner of consumer items as well as the new political conditions of the post-1688 polity, conduced to the spread of the idea of 'the public'.[6] The rise of 'the public' put pressure on traditional elitist cognitive ideals: learning of all sorts, it was said, needed to be wrested from male coteries and rendered accessible to a wider segment of literate people, both male and female. This was an explicit goal of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* and the numerous periodicals that followed in their wake throughout the century; it was also implicit in Shaftesbury's attempt to equip gentlemen with philosophy as a sign of their politeness. The criteria of polite social interaction were applied to the communication of learning: the ease, simplicity, elegance and pleasure of polite conversation became normative for a wide range of oral and printed forms.

This is not to deny that the eighteenth-century British public sphere was full of contestation though, as many asserted at the time, Britain was more polite, in every way, than it had been in the era of religious and political disruption that had preceded. 'Polite religion' had supplanted the 'zeal', 'fanaticism', 'enthusiasm' and 'superstition' of the previous period (though the battle against these enemies continued). At the same time, evangelical religious initiatives, from John Wesley (1703-1791) on, were often critical of the worldliness, materialism and superficiality of polite ideals.[7] Also, while politeness provided a programme of cultivation for many of the elite, the middling and the urban productive groups (not to mention, domestic servants), the ideal had no resonance with the majority of the labouring population. Indeed, even among the polite classes, the performance of politeness could be contingent on place and occasion.[8]

When did politeness lose its hold on British literate culture? Certainly, strands of politeness remained alive long after 1800, whether they were denominated 'politeness' or translated into new terms such as 'civilization' and 'culture'.[9] However, the performative character of polite social interaction was challenged in the second half of the eighteenth century by new emphases on sincerity and authenticity: 'sensibility' built on politeness but also pointed in new directions, both with respect to social norms and to intellectual and cultural aspirations.[10] The accessibility of polite learning remained an important aspiration but ideals of expertise, professionalism and specialism began to displace the generalist and gentlemanly norm of intellectual culture.

1. Lawrence Klein, 'The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness', Eighteenth-Century Studies (vol. 18, n° 2, 1984-1985, p. 186-214).

2. E. J. Hundert, The Enlightenment's Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

3. Michael G. Ketcham, Transparent Designs: Reading, Performance, and Form in the Spectator Papers (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985).

4. Lawrence Klein, Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

5. Peter Borsay, The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

6. John Brewer, The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997).

7. For instance, George Whitefield's The Polite and Fashionable Diversions of the Age, Destructive to Soul and Body (London: 1740).

8. Kate Davison, 'Occasional Politeness and Gentlemen's Laughter in Eighteenth-Century England', Historical Journal (vol. 57, 201), p. 921-945.

9. Marjorie Morgan, Manners, Morals and Class in England, 1774-1858 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994).

10. Philip Carter, Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660-1880 (Harlow: Pearson, 2001).

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The Spectator, no. 433 (17 July 1712) by Joseph Addison.

Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), lines 197-304.

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