

Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England

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A language

Though "politeness" is a word of attenuated use in the contemporary world, the case was different in early modern Europe, where the prevalence of polite practices was matched by the importance of such words as "courtesy," "civility," and "politeness." According to Norbert Elias, it was the absolutist court, epitomized by Louis XIV's facility at Versailles, that dramatically increased the importance of comportment in European culture and did so much to effect the civilizing of manners.² However, as Marvin Becker makes clear, the elaboration of the discourse of comportment first occurred in Italy as early as the fourteenth century when an "archaic and communal" culture gave way to a "more problematic civil society." Part of this development was "the transformation of a vocabulary of courtesy and fidelity into the more subdued and less heroic idiom of civility."³ The humanists added their own stamp to this "civilizing" enterprise, helping to disseminate it to literate people throughout Europe. In the early modern era, notions of civility were set into action wherever individuals attempted to redesign the communities in which they lived: at courts, to be sure, but also in towns and cities and among the learned, the literate, and the godly.

In later seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, the term "politeness" came into particular prominence as a key word, used in a variety of settings, with a wide range of meanings.⁴ From the first, politeness was associated with and often identified with gentlemanliness since it applied to the social world of gentlemen and ladies. In the Whig periodicals of Queen Anne's reign, "the Politer Part of Great Britain" and the "polite People" were also "the elegant and knowing part of Mankind," "the Quality," and "the better sort."⁵ However, if "politeness" reinforced an elitist ideology, it also served to make distinctions *within* the elite.

Not all gentlemen were polite since "politeness" was a criterion of *proper* behavior. The kernel of "politeness" could be conveyed in the simple expression, "the art of pleasing in company," or, in a contempo-

² Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 2 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, 1982), and *The Court Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983). The two volumes of *The Civilizing Process* (*The History of Manners and Power and Civility*) were originally published in 1939 in Germany; *The Court Society* first appeared in German in 1969. The translator of all these works is Edmund Jephcott.

³ Marvin Becker, *Civility and Society in Western Europe, 1300-1600* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. xi.

⁴ The rest of this section summarizes my article, "The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18 (1984-85), 186-214.

⁵ *Spectator*, No. 13 (March 15, 1711) and No. 218 (November 9, 1711), Bond, I, 59, and II, 349; *Tatler*, No. 39 (July 9, 1709), Bond, I, 281-287.

rary definition, "a dextrous management of our Words and Actions, whereby we make other People have better Opinions of us and themselves."⁶ These formulations indicated the social, psychological and formal dimensions of the term. First, "politeness" was situated in "company," in the realm of social interaction and exchange, where it governed relations of the self with others. While allowing for differences among selves, "politeness" was concerned with coordinating, reconciling or integrating them. Second, it subjected this domain of social life to the norm of "pleasing." The gratification nurtured by "politeness" was psychological, the amelioration of people's senses of themselves and of others. Thus, "politeness" presupposed an intersubjective domain in which the cultivation and exchange of opinions and feelings were involved. Third, "politeness" involved a grasp of form. It was an art or technique, governing the "how" of social relations. "Politeness" concerned sociability but was not identical with it: while human sociability was a primal and original stuff requiring work, "politeness" was a refined sociability, bringing aesthetic concerns into close contiguity with ethical ones. Although "politeness" implied that sociability was enhanced by good form, tension might arise between these principles; for instance, when "politeness" declined into mere formality or ceremoniousness, it could be portrayed as hostile to true sociability.

Similarly, the psychological dimension of "politeness" was laced with complexity. On the surface, politeness oriented individuals towards each other's needs and wishes: it seemed to arise in a generous concern for the comfort of others. In reality, the polite concern for others might be a secondary effect of a far more basic self-concern. Thus, the altruistic or charitable appearance of politeness might conceal opportunistic egoism. Shaftesbury would spend much effort wrestling with the competing manifestations of sociability and egoism in social behavior.

Though "politeness" was by definition the dextrous management of words and actions, words had pride of place, and conversation was the paradigmatic arena for "politeness." Conversational "politeness" was the art of pleasing in conversation, the pursuit of verbal agreeableness. Polite conversation assumed the equality of participants and insisted on a reciprocity in which participants were sometimes talkers and sometimes listeners. It provided an opportunity for self-display at the same time that its norms disciplined self-expression for the sake of domestic peace. It was described as a zone of freedom, ease, and naturalness (though these terms assumed highly qualified meanings in so obviously artificial an activity). Writers on politeness differed about the particular subjects they deemed

⁶ Abel Boyer, *The English Theophrastus* (1702), pp.106, 108. The second formulation was borrowed from La Rochefoucauld.

suitable for conversation, but it is wrong to assume that politics or even religion was excluded by all conversational theorists. Similarly, the degree of seriousness and rationality to be expected in civil conversation varied in different accounts of it.

However, writers on conversation were uniformly generous with their recommendations and proscriptions. Conversants were warned against taciturnity, stiffness, self-effacement, and withdrawal, which starved conversation. They were also warned against excesses of assertiveness and sociability, which killed conversation more efficiently. It was wrong to dominate discussion or push one's opinions too relentlessly. Self-righteousness, self-solemnity, and gravity were odious. To terminate a conversation with dispatch, one needed only be pedantic or magisterial! Finally, affectation, the striving for effect, was noxious to conversation.

Such conversational criteria became, in theory at least, markers of the gentleman's behavior, but they were also found to have a wider relevance, becoming ascriptions of intellectual and literary endeavors. For one thing, "politeness" assumed a role in the classification of knowledge. Expressions such as "polite arts," "polite letters," and "polite learning" could be used to make the broad distinction between humanistic and artistic endeavors, on one side, and philosophical, mathematical and scientific inquiry, on the other. However, "polite" could be used to make more subtle distinctions, for instance, to indicate a "polite" approach to literature as opposed to mere philological criticism.

Such classificatory language was controversial in that it arose within the politics of a rapidly changing landscape of inquiry. As part of its polemical work, the term "polite" was meant to invoke the cachet of the gentlemanly. John Dennis asserted the particular appropriateness of "polite learning" for gentlemen, and the seigneur de Saint-Évremond wrote that he found "no Sciences that particularly belong to Gentlemen, but Morality, Politics, and the Knowledge of good Literature."⁷ Saint-Évremond's trio of concerns came in time to define the perimeters of polite knowledge.

Polite learning was gentlemanly because it did not demand technical or specialist knowledge. Rather, it was generalist in its orientation, tending to the development of the whole person and keeping the person and his

⁷ John Dennis, "The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry," in Edward Niles Hooker, ed., *The Critical Works of John Dennis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1939), I, 204-205; Charles de Margaetel de Saint-Denis, seigneur de Saint-Évremond, "A Judgment upon those Sciences, which a gentleman should apply himself to," in *Miscellaneous Essays* (1692), p.23. This essay was written between 1655 and 1661; see the edition by René Ternois of Saint-Évremond, *Oeuvres en prose* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1962), II, 3. The original of this passage appears in the Ternois edition, II, 12.

Adam Smith and his Theory of Moral Sentiment, the Moral Purpose of Commerce

It is the great multiplication of the productions of all the different arts, in consequence of the division of labour, which occasions, in a well-governed society, that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people.

The Wealth Of Nations, Book I, Chapter I, p. 22, para. 10.

How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it.

The Theory Of Moral Sentiments, Part I, Section I, Chapter I, p. 9, para.1.

The natural effort of every individual to better his own condition...is so powerful, that it is alone, and without any assistance, not only capable of carrying on the society to wealth and prosperity, but of surmounting a hundred impertinent obstructions with which the folly of human laws too often encumbers its operations.

The Wealth Of Nations, Book IV, Chapter V, Digression on the Corn Trade, p. 540, para. b 43.

Every individual... neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it... he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.

The Wealth Of Nations, Book IV, Chapter II, p. 456, para. 9.

How many people ruin themselves by laying out money on trinkets of frivolous utility? What pleases these lovers of toys is not so much the utility, as the aptness of the machines which are fitted to promote it. All their pockets are stuffed with little conveniences. They contrive new pockets, unknown in the clothes of other people, in order to carry a greater number. They walk about loaded with a multitude of baubles, in weight and sometimes in value not inferior to an ordinary Jew's-box, some of which may sometimes be of some little use, but all of which might at all times be very well spared, and of which the whole utility is certainly not worth the fatigue of bearing the burden.

The Theory Of Moral Sentiments (np)