

Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain, 1660-1800

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Even the most self-pitying modern man, besieged on all sides by the forces of emasculation and objectification (at least if he believes our Sunday newspapers), must think themselves lucky not to be forced to practise the difficult art of eighteenth-century manliness. While a six-pack, a sensitive way with children and the ability to 'communicate', when combined with a six figure salary and a side line in laddish bonhomie will satisfy the most stringent of modern critics, their eighteenth-century counterpart had to navigate the treacherous waters of 'politeness'. When to cry in public, how many flourishes to add to every bow, how to be well dressed without being a fop, and most difficult of all, how to be sure that you felt 'politeness', felt the sentiments it was meant to encompass to your very soul, were just a few of the conundrums which exercised eighteenth-century men. And while modern men have recourse to the well stocked shelves of their local newsagent, groaning with glossy magazines which recycle month by month the same old articles on exercise, skin care and sexual technique, eighteenth-century men had to be satisfied with the writings of John Locke, Addison and Steele, Hume, Samuel Johnson and Adam Smith. Fortunately, we are now possessed of a growing and increasingly sophisticated literature on eighteenth-century manliness which has begun to make sense of this complex landscape of gender definition. Philip Carter's contribution to this literature is both timely and important.

Carter charts the content of a new genre of advice literature and cultural guides from its origins in the writings of Locke and pre-eminently in *The Spectator*; describing the attempt to refashion Englishmen (and in its early incarnations at least, politeness is a resolutely English rather than British phenomenon), into a new hybrid beast. This new zebra of a man was to be of easy conversation, and of polished (but not affected) manners. He was to be able to interact comfortably with both men and women, with both the high and low born. He was to be learned, without being pedantic, and able to discuss a wide range of topics, without

committing the cardinal sin of expressing a strongly held opinion. He was Mr Spectator.

Carter dissects this new breed, describing its urban haunts, and the internal contradictions that plagued normal men's attempts to acclimatise to its habitats. In the process he gives us perhaps our clearest statement of what it was to be 'polite' in the early eighteenth century. Extending the work of historians such as Lawrence Klein and Michèle Cohen, Carter explores the role of women in the construction of politeness, and the extent to which the category of the polite gentleman was at odds with the older construction of the Court and the tradition of courtly manners, and the increasingly demanding character of the 'Citt'. In the process, Carter draws our attention to a range of issues which are of wider interest to historians of the period. The practise of politeness, for instance, particularly in the coffeehouse, is central to the creation of Jürgen Habermas' 'public sphere'. Carter's exploration of the problems associated with expressing political and religious views in a 'polite' manner sheds new light on the tensions that accompanied political discourse in this formative period. More than this, his explanation of the role of manners helps to re-insert a sense of class and social division into a historical discussion which has too often been characterised by an apparent blindness to the boundaries which defined the 'public sphere'.

Similarly, Carter's exploration of the character of the 'fop' addresses directly a large literature on the history of homosexuality which has taken contemporary complaints about fops and foppery as evidence of the centrality of effeminate homosexuality to the construction of a new sexual regime. Historians such as Randolph Trumbach have placed concerns around effeminacy at the centre of a meta-narrative in which sexual self-identity and homophobia drive the creation of 'modern' sexual categories. By explaining the complex inter-relationship between the all-important role of women in the creation of politeness (a theme most fully explored by Michèle Cohen), and the dangers of effeminacy that this role presented to men, Carter blows apart the easy conflation of foppery and molly house culture. In the process the eighteenth-century fop is exposed as a primarily literary concoction, emerging from the Restoration stage, whose characteristics included a perhaps surprising heterosexual adventurism, in combination with the more familiar characteristics of vanity and behavioural precision. Carter's reassessment is both welcome and long overdue.

But, perhaps the most significant historiographical contribution made by this book, lies in its discussion of the development of 'sentiment' as a central facet of politeness. In a comprehensive and illuminating discussion of the debate surrounding the fourth earl of Chesterfield's, *Letters to His Son* (1774), and a further direct analysis of the evolution of the notion of the 'sentimental', Carter charts the gradual development of the requirement that, not only should men behave politely, but that they should do so at the behest of a tender inner feeling. In the process, the apparently absurd debates that pre-occupy so many eighteenth-century writers about when to cry in public and how to appear at the opera and at a funeral are made intelligible. And a central link between early forms of politeness and the later extremes of Romanticism is made manifest.

This discussion is particularly important as it provides a bridge between a narrative that has been explored largely in relation to literary criticism, and the development of a parallel set of ideas in an historical context. The notion of the internalisation of the self, and the rise of the autobiographical subject are core themes in the history of the novel. What Carter provides is a means of linking that development to the actual behaviour, beliefs and writings of individual men. The demands which sentimental politeness made on individual men was that they should become 'men of feeling', should interrogate their motivations, and treasure the nub of emotion which lay inside them. While the fourth earl of Chesterfield might be satisfied with a concept of politeness that was restricted to the self-serving enactment of a dumb show of manners, the vast majority of commentators from the mid-century onwards were certain that the only forms of behaviour which could be truly trusted were those which sprang from an internally consistent, vigilantly examined and obsessively practised self-hood. In other words, politeness came to place new demands on the individual psyche, and provided a template within which men struggled to articulate an emotional, as well as behavioural landscape. Carter's examination of politeness and its emotional dynamic could well stand for a historically consistent psychology of the eighteenth-century, middling sort, male mind. In the process, he helps explain why literary critics find in this period a new kind of individual, newly engaged in the project of

secular naval gazing. It helps explain in relatively concrete historical terms, how an 'internalised self' and 'autobiographical subject' might be created, and why they should appear when they did.

Three quarters of the book is taken up with an examination of the literature produced to guide men through the troubled journey to polite manliness. In this project Carter is extremely successful, but perhaps the most enjoyable section of the volume comes in the final quarter in which the lives and personal writings of Dudley Ryder, John Penrose and James Boswell are painstakingly dissected. Ryder and Boswell are, of course, familiar figures in the pantheon of the polite, but the addition of a study of the less well known John Penrose, along with an approach which highlights the sense of self-construction and anxiety suffered by these men, helps to shed new light on the process of growing up male in the period. And as Penrose is a mature and gouty fifty when he commits his thoughts to paper, these studies also begin to give us access to the very different meanings of politeness for the young and the middle aged.

What emerges is the extent to which individual eighteenth-century men really did worry about their behaviour. They interrogated their emotions in a way reminiscent of the religious self-obsession of a previous century. Now, however, the focus of their anxieties was how to dress and how to cry, how to chat amiably, and how to interpret affect and eschew affectation. If they appear occasionally absurd and pathetic, this can not take away the real and visceral fear that emerges so strongly from these studies - the fear of appearing, or rather of *being* a booby and a fop.

In its own terms, therefore, this is a tremendously successful study, which provides a newly consistent story for male manners in this period. It unpicks a difficult literature, and gives it a new consistency, packaged for a broader historical audience. But for this reader it did something more, something that was perhaps not intended by the author, or at least is not treated directly by him. Much of the discussion is couched in general terms, avoiding specificities of class and locale (although the author is well aware of the limited audience for the literature he uses). At the same time 'politeness' as described here must be seen as a part of the creation of a new class identity that was directly driven by the specific economic and social imperatives of eighteenth-century urban life. The values which underpin politeness are as much about power as they are about personality. The ability to appear comfortable in all types of company can be read as a facet of command as well as sociability; while the profound desire to avoid foppery reflects the need to display wealth to one's social inferiors (and hence claim authority) without becoming an object of their derision. In other words, the story of polite male manners is not simply one concerned with a self-serving gentry, but illuminates the sharp boundaries of power and authority which were being reconstructed in this period. As much as being about the self, the topic of this volume is the creation of a group of people who could be comfortable ruling their wives, their estates, their country, the Empire.

At the same time, this material also seems to have specific implications for a more defined political history. The linking of a code of manners, and later a 'code of being', to the coffeehouse and drawing room at least implies an important role for these forms of behaviour in the creation of a new kind of political nation. This is a nation in which the 'public sphere' is influential in government decision making, and in which a hierarchy of politeness (and hence authority) can be mapped onto the patchwork quilt boundaries which make up the eighteenth-century British state. The growing authority of Scotland in the later eighteenth century, for example, must in part be seen as a reflection of the success of Scotland's writers in defining manliness and behaving accordingly. While the relative insignificance of Wales in this same period can in part be ascribed to the extent to which it was impossible to be both polite and Welsh.

What is implied by the history of politeness is a larger narrative of historical development in which the state and class (defined in both cultural and economic terms) are in the throws of profound change. If historians have yet to fully contain the subtle inter-relationships that characterise the developments of culture, class and power in this period, Philip Carter's work helps provide an important strand in the story.

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