The Historical Journal, 45, 4 (2002), pp. 869–898
DOI: 10.1017/S0018246X02002716 Printed in the United Kingdom

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEWS

POLITENESS AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BRITISH EIGHTEENTH CENTURY*

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ABSTRACT. *Politeness has assumed an important place in recent interpretations of eighteenth-century Britain by historians and historically minded scholars in other fields. The use of politeness as an analytic category has relied on varying assessments of the eighteenth-century semantic associations of the term, which included attentiveness to form, sociability, improvement, worldliness, and gentility. Scholars have used politeness in one or more of these senses to characterize distinctive aspects of eighteenth-century British culture: the comportment of the body in isolation and in social interaction; the material equipment of everyday life; the changing configurations and uses of domestic and public spaces; skills and aptitudes that both constituted personal accomplishment and shaped larger cultural enterprises such as religion, learning, the arts, and science; and important aspects of associational and institutional life. Thus, eighteenth-century Britain was polite in that a wide range of quite different activities have been identified as bearing the stamp of the eighteenth-century meanings of 'politeness'. Furthermore, what made eighteenth-century Britain a polite society was not its horizontal division between polite and non-polite persons but rather the wide access of a range of persons to activities and competencies that contemporaries considered 'polite'.*

Politeness is not a new component in understandings of the British eighteenth century. The idea contributed to that long-standing view of the period as stable, staid, and generally uninteresting. It was politeness, among other things, that Romantics, Evangelicals, and other vanguards of the nineteenth century rejected in reconfiguring their culture for new times.[1] Politeness, however, has recently been undergoing a rediscovery. This is not to deny that, in some quarters, a certain horror still attaches to the prospect of taking politeness seriously. In the United States, this response derives from the way democratic populism grew to

* Versions of this paper have been presented at the Early Modern Britain Seminar at Sheffield University, the British Seminar at the University of Kansas, the Intellectual History Seminar of the Triangle PhD Program in Intellectual History, Research Triangle, North Carolina, and the History Faculty Seminar at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. I am grateful for comments from the audiences at these gatherings as well from A. J. E. Bell, Gregory Brown, Michèle Cohen, V. A. C. Gatrell, Joanna Innes, Steven Schwartzberg, David Shields, Robert Shoemaker, Jay Smith, John Styles, David Tanenhaus, Amanda Vickery, William Weber, Elizabeth White, and Kathleen Wilson.

[1] Muriel Jaeger, *Before Victoria* (London, 1956); Maurice J. Quinlan, *Victorian prelude: a history of English manners, 1700–1830* (London, 1965).

abhor airs and gentility. The dead weight of politeness has hung even heavier on Britain than on America, for in Britain politeness came to occupy a significant albeit contested place in the construction of national identity. As the ghosts of Class Systems Past haunt Britain more than they do the United States, so does the spectre of politeness.

Still, politeness was an important eighteenth-century idiom. Indeed, it was one of the myths of the age, and we have learned much about it from historians of discourse. However, this review is not about its ideological uses,[2] but rather about the way that politeness has been used in current scholarship as an analytical category. Much has been written in the last twenty years about politeness, and the related notions of civility and gentility, in connection with the eighteenth century, and an assessment is in order. One reason to undertake such an assessment is that different disciplines have drawn attention to politeness. The historiography of the eighteenth century is, by now, rich in work about the ways that politeness informed cultural practice because politeness has been emphasized not just by historians but by historians of science, art, architecture, and literature.

A second reason to undertake this assessment is that many different features of eighteenth-century culture have been said to manifest politeness. Certainly, politeness has provided a way for the historian to characterize aspects of bodily comportment and the disciplines of social interaction.[3] However, the use of the term has hardly been restricted to the topic of interpersonal manners. Politeness has been used to interpret, among other things, material and visual cultures, the organization of space, the constitution of social and political identities, the character of intellectual and artistic life, and even institutional structures.[4]

A sceptic might propose that politeness has become an empty term, applicable to almost anything. It is true that, because the term 'polite' is so idiomatic to the

[2] J. G. A. Pocock, 'Virtue, rights and manners: a model for historians of political thought', in idem, *Virtue, commerce, and history: essays on political thought and history, chiefly in the eighteenth century* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 37–50. This essay was originally published in 1981. In the same volume, see 'The varieties of whiggism from Exclusion to Reform', especially pp. 230–9. Also: Lawrence E. Klein, 'Liberty, manners and politeness in early eighteenth-century England', *Historical Journal*, 32 (1989), pp. 583–605; idem, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness: moral discourse and cultural politics in early eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1994); Nicholas Phillipson, 'Politics, politeness and the Anglicisation of early eighteenth-century Scottish culture', in R. A. Mason, ed., *Scotland and England, 1286–1815* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 226–46; and idem, 'Politics and politeness in the reigns of Anne and the early Hanoverians', in J. G. A. Pocock, *The varieties of British political thought, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 211–45. See also several contributions in Gordon J. Schochet, ed., *Politics, politeness, and patriotism* (Proceedings of the Folger Institute Center for the History of British Political Thought, Volume 5; Washington, DC, 1993).

[3] This is the sense in which Helen Berry takes politeness in 'Rethinking politeness in eighteenth-century England: Moll King's coffee house and the significance of "flash talk"', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 11 (2001), pp. 65–81. Berry's essay is an expression of 'dissatisfaction with the paradigm of politeness' elaborated in this review.

[4] An epitome of the cultural range of politeness can be found in John Styles's introduction to the Georgian section of Michael Snodin and John Styles, eds., *Design and the decorative arts: Britain, 1500–1900* (London, 2001), pp. 182–4.

eighteenth century (and so much less apt when applied to the seventeenth or nineteenth century), it can be used as an alternative to the adjective 'eighteenth-century' or, slightly less vacuously, as a way to indicate matters pertaining to a varyingly defined elite. Is politeness, then, anything more than a convenient way to vary one's vocabulary by supplying a bright label for the eighteenth century? A principal goal of this review is to answer this question in the affirmative. It tries to show that politeness as an analytic category has a certain substantive albeit flexible unity.

The usefulness of politeness as an analytical category depends on an analysis of eighteenth-century language. Language and other modes of representation do not float apart from cultural reality but constitute it: they are lived presences, making human activity meaningful. The interpretation of cultural practices depends on an effort to understand what contemporaries understood about them as evidenced in language and other modes of representation.[5] Thus, the uses to which politeness has been put as an analytic category have been premised on a recognition of what politeness meant in the eighteenth century. The difficulty is that politeness was a complex term, and scholars who have used the term to describe aspects of eighteenth-century culture have referred back to varying components of the term's eighteenth-century meaning. In other words, politeness stood for a constellation of meanings, which have offered modern interpreters numerous handles on the period. If politeness has seemed relevant to a wide range of eighteenth-century things and practices, this polymorphous usefulness reflects the variety of senses that the one term conveyed. Another goal of this historiographical review is to make sense of the diversity of practices that have been said to be polite by relating these practices to eighteenth-century meanings of politeness.

The review is organized accordingly. The next section provides a brief account of the semantic dimensions of the term 'politeness' in its eighteenth-century usage. The heart of the paper is an analytic summary of recent work bearing on the question of politeness: it is organized as a taxonomy of the modes of politeness, those historical patterns that give meaning to politeness as an ascription of the period and give content to the notion of polite culture. The review concludes by reflecting on polite society as an analytic category.

This emphasis on the way that eighteenth-century senses of politeness are implicated in modern analytic uses of the term leads to another goal of the review, which is to put polemical pressure on a certain theme in the interpretation of politeness. One of the first to assign analytic prominence to politeness was E. P. Thompson who, having emphasized the cultural polarity of patricians and

[5] Otherwise, winks and blinks are indistinguishable: Clifford Geertz, 'Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture', in idem, *The interpretation of cultures* (New York, 1973), pp. 5–7. Trying to think in the idioms of the past (rather than anachronistically eliding the language of the past with the meanings of the present) is a constant challenge. For some related work, see Naomi Tadmor, *Family and friends in eighteenth-century England: household, kinship, and patronage* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 9–16.

plebs, identified polite culture with the patriciate. Such an identification finds support in more recent work including James Rosenheim's account of the landed gentry in the later seventeenth and eighteenth century and Tom Williamson's account of the landed elite's relation to their land.[6] For Charles Saumarez Smith, however, the boundaries of polite society 'extended well beyond the court into the gentry, the higher levels of London merchants, and the professions'.[7] Indeed, the many recent investigations of the middling sorts suggest a particular link between politeness and middle-class conditions and ambitions.[8] In the words of one scholar, politeness was 'seized upon by a newly prosperous and numerous class of civil servants, army and navy officers, bourgeois and clergymen, even shopkeepers and craftsmen, all anxious to carve out and defend an appropriately respectable niche in the social pecking order'.[9] This range of views raises questions about the social location of politeness: whose culture was the culture of politeness? At what social altitude should it be pegged?

This review does not offer to resolve the question about the correct assignment of politeness to a social level or, more particularly, the discrepancy between patrician and middling pedigrees of politeness, but rather abandons the ground on which that interpretive discrepancy arises. The discrepancy arises from the commonplace that culture is 'a concrete and bounded world of beliefs and practices' belonging to a specific social group.[10] One dubious concomitant of this notion is that culture is a fairly unified and total entity that saturates its members. Another is that stable and fixed relations exist between culture and the social experience of whole groups of people. A third is that the interpretation of culture is a matter of identifying its social provenance, granting, in the words of Roger Chartier, 'tyrannical priority to social organization for the explanation of cultural differences'.[11]

[6] E. P. Thompson, 'The patricians and the plebs', in idem, *Customs in common* (New York, 1991), pp. 16–96, particularly 42–6, 71–2; James Rosenheim, *The emergence of a ruling order: English landed society, 1650–1750* (London and New York, 1998), pp. 174–214, especially 174, 178, 180, 210; Tom Williamson, *Polite landscapes: gardens and society in eighteenth-century England* (Stroud, Gloucestershire, 1995).

[7] Charles Saumarez Smith, *Eighteenth-century decoration: design and the domestic interior in England* (New York, 1993), p. 45.

[8] Peter Earle, *The making of the English middle class: business, society and family life in London, 1660–1760* (London, 1989), pp. 5–12, 31, 69, 74, 76, 85, 87–9, 111, 151–7, 161–6, 178–80, for example; also, the entire chapter about 'Expenditure and consumption', pp. 269–301; Paul Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 1–7 and 61–121.

[9] J. Jefferson Looney, 'Cultural life in the provinces: Leeds and York, 1720–1820', in A. L. Beier, David Cannadine, and James M. Rosenheim, eds., *The first modern society: essays in English history in honour of Lawrence Stone* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 485.

[10] William H. Sewell, Jr, 'The concept(s) of culture', in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the cultural turn: new directions in the study of society and culture* (Berkeley, 1999), p. 39.

[11] Roger Chartier, 'The world as representation', in Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Histories: French constructions of the past* (New York, 1995), p. 548. Aside from Chartier and Sewell, cited above, the perspective in this and the next paragraph is inspired by Robert Brightman, 'Forget culture: replacement, transcendence and relexification', *Cultural Anthropology*, 10 (1995), pp. 509–41, and Jacques Revel, 'Microanalysis and the construction of the social', in Revel and Hunt, eds., *Histories*, pp. 492–502.

In addressing practices and their meanings, this review looks at culture as a composite zone without any claim to unity or totality. Indeed, cultural traits do not inhere in individuals by virtue of their social location but rather are kinds of competence or capacity which individuals may or may not master and of which they may or may not avail themselves.[12] Cultural capacity is like linguistic ability in a polyglot setting, which can be activated by different individuals to different extents, depending on their abilities, needs, and interests. In Roger Chartier's vocabulary, culture is a matter of appropriation.[13] It follows that stable and fixed relations do not exist between cultural traits and groups of people: clearly cultural traits are patterned but the patterns are fluid and unpredictable. The sort of cultural interpretation that is called for here is therefore not a correlation of cultural traits with levels in a social hierarchy but rather an account of what people think they are doing and expressing when they perform actions.

A survey of the work on politeness shows that politeness was an idiom with uses for a wide range of people, including some who were neither aristocratic nor landed nor middling. Of course, politeness was expressed differently by – and had different meanings for – different people in different circumstances, but it also often served as a medium facilitating interaction and access to shared experience. It served purposes of distinction and also of solidarity. The evidence of the historiography itself, laid out in what follows, repeatedly shows the difficulty of pinning polite culture to one social group.

I

It is easy to think of the eighteenth century as a polite age because eighteenth-century people often did so. At its most extensive, 'politeness' described national characters, entire civilizations, epochs of human history. Indeed, what distinguished 'politeness' from 'gentility' and 'civility' – terms that had been in wide circulation long before 'politeness' came to be extensively used from the later seventeenth century – was the simultaneous breadth of its reach and the variety of its referents. By contrast, 'gentility' was primarily useful for identifying traits of an ever more ambiguously defined elite, and, by the eighteenth century, 'civility''s heroic age, when it helped to reorient gentry life in England, was over.[14]

To understand the meanings of politeness, the courtesy tradition provides the best starting-point. According to one of its commonplaces, 'Merit will not do the Work, if it be not seconded by Agreeableness, on which depends all the

[12] Ann Swidler, 'Culture in action: symbols and strategies', *American Sociological Review*, 51 (1986), pp. 273–86.

[13] Roger Chartier, 'Popular appropriations: the readers and their books', in idem, *Forms and meanings* (Philadelphia, 1995), pp. 83–113, and idem, 'From texts to manners, a concept and its books: *civilité* between aristocratic distinction and popular appropriation', in *The cultural uses of print in early modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, 1987), pp. 71–109.

[14] Anna Bryson, *From courtesy to civility: changing codes of conduct in early modern England* (Oxford, 1998).

plausibility of Actions.'[15] The statement makes the distinction between substance and form, between 'Merit' and 'Agreeableness', and it directs our attention to the importance of form. Indeed, consciousness of form, a concern with the manner in which actions were performed, was perhaps the most important component of the meaning of politeness. Proponents of politeness frankly acknowledged the necessity, even the virtue, of social artifice. While they did not reject sincerity outright, they did not recognize the worth of authenticity, a value which appeared later in reaction to the prestige of politeness itself.[16] The polite was associated with decorum in behaviour and personal style. But this consciousness of good form could be extended from actions to things and thus became associated with taste, fashion, and design. As agreeableness seconded merit in persons, so ornament seconded utility in things. Of the many criteria of polite style, one essential trait was simplicity – 'the best and truest Ornament of most Things in Life, which the politer Ages always aimed at in their Building and Dress (*Simplex munditiis*), as well as their Productions of Wit'.[17]

As the courtesy commonplace indicates, the concern with form was cast in terms of social agreeableness. Indeed, a much repeated truism in the courtesy tradition called politeness the art of pleasing, in company and in conversation, 'a dextrous management of our Words and Actions, whereby we make other People have better Opinion [sic] of us and themselves'.[18] Consciousness of form can be manifested in diverse ways, but the standard of politeness insisted that form be co-ordinated with the world of human interactions. This insistence, often articulated as 'according to nature', helped to underpin the value of simplicity as against exaggerations of scale (grandeur, magnificence, sublimity) and excesses of sentiment, insight, or expression (the romantic, the metaphysical, the baroque, the transcendental). Exaggeration and excess were, in the polite model, pathologies of solitude and self-absorption, of which enthusiasm, dogmatism, and fanaticism were particularly significant instances because of their religious, social, and political valence in the period.[19] Politeness was aligned, by contrast, with moderation, mutual tolerance, and the overriding importance of social comity. Such values

[15] Abel Boyer, *The English Theophrastus* (London, 1702), p. 104.

[16] See Marshall Berman, *The politics of authenticity: radical individualism and the emergence of modern society* (New York, 1970), pp. xxii–xxiv, and Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and authenticity* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), pp. 26–52. Polite behaviour was often identified as 'familiar', endorsing a style that was not too formal or ceremonious, although familiarity might also suggest the sort of extra-social intimacy or privacy characteristic of the closest friendships or kinship relations.

[17] Donald F. Bond, ed., *The Tatler* (3 vols., Oxford, 1987), III, p. 195 (Number 230, 28 Sept. 1710, written by Jonathan Swift). On the relation of the useful and the decorative, see Lawrence E. Klein, 'Politeness for plebes: consumption and social identity in early eighteenth-century England', in Ann Bermingham and John Brewer, eds., *The consumption of culture: image, object, text* (London and New York), pp. 363–4.

[18] Boyer, *The English Theophrastus*, p. 106.

[19] Michael Heyd, *'Be sober and reasonable': the critique of enthusiasm in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries* (Leiden, 1995); Lawrence E. Klein, 'Sociability, solitude and enthusiasm', in Lawrence E. Klein and Anthony J. La Vopa, eds., *Enthusiasm and Enlightenment in Europe, 1650–1850* (San Marino, CA, 1998), pp. 153–77.

were concretized in the high esteem for conversation and conversability. The conversational norm evoked a number of criteria for politeness including ease, freedom, liveliness, and, perhaps most important, reciprocity, which reined in the self and its distorting effects.

While the courtesy commonplace said that agreeableness seconded merit, it made clear that agreeableness was what actuated merit: without agreeableness, merit was sterile, unpersuasive, and ineffective. This insistence on effectiveness helps to explain why, in the eighteenth century, politeness was sometimes viewed as the necessary means for bringing out the best in oneself and in others. By being agreeable, it was said, social actors establish a trust that allows them then to tell the truth, to criticize, and to urge reforms on others without offending them. This idea, crystallized in Giovanni della Casa's courtesy book, *Galateo*, had long roots in the courtesy tradition, but it was frequently applied in the eighteenth century. For instance, when John Gay sought to account for the fact that Richard Steele's *Tatler* was wildly popular among the very people targeted by its moral criticisms, Gay noted that Steele 'ventur'd to tell the Town, that they were a parcel of Fops, Fools, and vain Cocquets; but in such a manner, as even pleased them, and made them more than half enclin'd to believe that he spoke Truth'.[20] Thus, politeness was associated with improvement in the sense not just of refinements of style but of moral and other reform. As both David Hancock and Kathleen Wilson have made clear, politeness and improvement were linked in the making of an ethos for middling urbanites.[21]

While the polite individual was the product of cultivation, politeness could, by extension, be applied to social processes of a larger scale. Politeness was, after all, an outcome of polishing, a process that enhanced persons but also collectivities. In this capacity, politeness helped to situate eighteenth-century Britain in time, as a 'polite age', and in place, as a 'polite nation'. In a succession of clubs, the social and intellectual elite of Edinburgh famously adapted the pleasures of polite conversation for the pursuit of public improvement. In Scottish thinking, in particular, politeness was grafted on to schemes of human economic and political development to convey the cultural modernity of commercial polities.[22]

The sterility of merit without good form or sociability was largely a matter of narrowness and limitation; the point of giving merit agreeable form was to allow merit to transcend narrowness into something generally appreciated and capable of effective action in the world. Thus, the alliance of good form with sociability and efficacy produced a polite disposition toward generality, worldliness, and

[20] John Gay, *The present state of wit in a letter to a friend in the country* (London, 1711), p. 13.

[21] David Hancock, *Citizens of the world: London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 279–85, and the elaboration that follows, pp. 285–381; Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 54–83.

[22] On the Scottish Enlightenment link between politeness and improvement, see Nicholas Phillipson, *Hume* (London, 1989), pp. 17–34. On politeness and the Enlightenment, see Mark Girouard, *The English town* (New Haven and London, 1990), p. 86.

urbanity. In John Barrell's treatments of the polite culture of the eighteenth century, the dominance of the gentleman was premised on his exclusive claim to possess a general view of things. It was this generality of perspective that gained him an understanding of the principles of taste, which were deemed universal by Richard Steele, David Hume, Joshua Reynolds, and many others.[23] The worldly disposition of politeness manifested itself in other ways as well. First, while expertise was a form of merit, it was particularly susceptible to the danger of being narrow, bookish, crabbed, or pedantic – terms used to denigrate formally unkempt or socially unattractive kinds of knowledge. As against professionalism, then, politeness was allied with the spirit of the amateur. Second, localism and provincialism were kinds of narrowness. They were thus incompatible with politeness, which was allied with the metropolitan and cosmopolitan and the pursuit of a general culture. Finally, temporal provincialism was opposed to politeness, which often (though not always) was related to the embodiment of good, sociable, and effective form found in the ancient world. The polite then was often a code term for the classical.[24]

Finally, politeness was associated with gentility in the sense of 'that which is characteristic of gentlemen and ladies'. It is well known that the term 'gentleman' had by the eighteenth century become more indeterminate than it had been and was failing to do the work which had earlier been its principal assignment: to distinguish a distinct group of society – marked by pedigree and land ownership – from the rest. However, this semantic indeterminacy of the gentleman fitted well with the ascendancy of politeness. While it was certainly easier for the gentleman of lineage and land to be polite, the individual who lacked those criteria for gentility might achieve or enhance a claim to gentility through his or her politeness itself. To be a gentleman or a lady was, to a noteworthy extent, to make a cultural rather than a sociological claim about oneself. The *Tatler* insisted, 'The Appelation of Gentleman is never to be affixed to a Man's Circumstances, but to his Behaviour in them',[25] and, as David Hancock has put it,

[23] John Barrell, *The political theory of painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* (New Haven and London, 1986), pp. 1–68; idem, 'The public prospect and the private view: the politics of taste in eighteenth-century Britain', in idem, *The birth of Pandora and the division of knowledge* (London, 1992), pp. 41–62.

[24] The Battle of the Books in England was a conflict less between ancients and moderns than between two approaches to the classical world: in one, the ancient world was a domain to be mastered by specialist knowledge; in the other, it was a domain to be acquired as a polite accomplishment.

[25] Bond, ed., *Tatler*, III, pp. 99–100 (Number 207, 5 Aug. 1710). Several essential accounts of the language of social distinction in the period, including the question of gentility, are: David Cressy, 'Describing the social order of Elizabethan and Stuart England', *Literature and History*, 3 (1976), pp. 29–44; Penelope Corfield, 'Class by name and number in eighteenth-century Britain', *History*, 72 (1987), pp. 38–61; Keith Wrightson, 'The social order of early modern England: three approaches', in Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson, eds., *The world we have gained* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 177–202. On the term 'gentleman' in particular, Penelope J. Corfield, 'The rivals: landed and other gentlemen', in N. B. Harte and R. Quinault, eds., *Land and society in Britain, 1700–1914* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 1–31. However, the flexibility and variety with which the term 'gentleman' was deployed comes up in a host of more specific studies: D. Howell, *Patriarchs and parasites: the gentry of South-West Wales in the eighteenth century* (Cardiff, 1986), p. 7; David Hey, *The fiery blades of Hallamshire: Sheffield and*

'a deportmental rather than a hereditary or professional definition of gentility gained currency'.[26]

In sum, then, the semantic resonances of 'politeness' can be organized around the concern with form, sociability, improvement, worldliness, and gentility.[27] Politeness was extensive in reach and formative in effect. Like 'honour' or 'godliness' for earlier periods, 'politeness' helps us map the culture broadly conceived. A good instance of the link between the senses of politeness and the culture which it shaped is the painting genre of the conversation piece. Here, typically, were represented ladies and gentlemen engaged in decorous sociability in worldly settings.[28] However, because the conversation piece was 'a system of representation which showed individuals in their social environment',[29] it not only conveyed the idea that humans were fundamentally and radically social and cultural in character but also provides evidence of the practices of polite society. Individuals were always shown in studied comportments. They were shown surrounded by the material artifacts of daily life. They were represented in social arenas: most often the stagier parts of the domestic environment but also in more public settings. They often conveyed their cultural interests and accomplishments: knowledge of the classics, interest in literature, the passion for music. Occasionally, even, the conversation piece became an occasion for institutional representation.

The next section of this review elaborates this connection between the language and practice of politeness, between the term's semantic resonances and the culture's routines, institutions, and organization. Based on the range of historically minded research, the picture of polite culture that emerges is composite. In what follows, 'culture' is an umbrella for a variety of lesser categories – comportments, equipments, arenas, accomplishments, and institutions – in which the politeness of the eighteenth century assumed its practical meaning.

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its neighbourhood, 1660–1740 (Leicester, 1991), p. 224; G. Nair, *Highley: the development of a community, 1550–1880* (Oxford, 1988), p. 93; J. D. Davies, *Gentlemen and tarpaulins: the officers and men of the Restoration Navy* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 40, 62–3; D. Lemmings, *Gentlemen and barristers: the Inns of Court and the English bar, 1680–1730* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 14–15; Peter Earle, *The world of Defoe* (New York, 1977), pp. 119–32; and idem, *The making of the English middle class*, pp. 6–7; Nicholas Rogers, 'Money, land and lineage: the big bourgeoisie of Hanoverian London', *Social History*, 4 (1979), p. 446.

[26] Hancock, *Citizens of the world*, p. 280.

[27] According to Paul Langford, the meanings of politeness shifted significantly in the middle of the eighteenth century away from the sociable and conversable ideal emphasized here: Paul Langford, 'Manners and the eighteenth-century state: the case of the unsociable Englishman', in John Brewer and Eckhard Hellmuth, eds., *Rethinking Leviathan: the eighteenth-century state in Britain and Germany* (London, 1999), pp. 280–316. Langford also pursues this theme in *English identified: manners and character, 1650–1850* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 175ff.

[28] Though the settings were often domestic, domesticity was shown to be an elevated stage linked to the wide co-ordinates of gentle culture: see Shearer West, 'The public nature of private life: the conversation piece and the fragmented family', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18 (1995), pp. 156–58. On the representation of mutual improvement, see David Solkin, *Painting for money: the visual arts and the public sphere in eighteenth-century England* (New Haven and London, 1992), p. 86, and, on the conversation piece in the context of polite culture, Solkin's entire discussion, pp. 48–106.

[29] Saumarez Smith, *Eighteenth-century decoration*, pp. 70–3.

II

Politeness was, to begin with, an ideal of social behaviour, and there has been much work on the literature of prescription in which this ideal unfolds.[30] However, it has consistently proved easier to chart the discourse of behaviour or to analyse its representation than to assess actual behaviours. There is a lot more to be done in this area by bringing different kinds of evidence into some dialectic with the prescriptive literature.[31]

This reliance on prescriptive literature has not stopped historians from asserting that the rise of politeness involved changes in at least some people's behaviour although the nature of this change is interpreted in different ways. For some, the rise of politeness corresponds to the sort of behavioural transformation now associated in general European history with the writings of Norbert Elias – that is, a civilizing process in which people gained more control over their bodies and brought greater formality to their personal comportments and their modes of interaction.[32] G. E. Mingay refers to 'the transformation of behaviour in polite society' by which he means the remaking of an uncouth and unlearned gentry, of the sort represented in Macaulay's account of the later seventeenth century, into a more refined and knowing lot, of the sort approved by Joseph Addison.[33]

The trouble with this version of behavioural change is that this kind of civilizing had been going on for a long time under the pressure of, among other things, the incorporation of country gentry into local administration and the impact of Protestant moralism.[34] Studies of the county community in the seventeenth

[30] Basic works on the literature of courtesy in the seventeenth and eighteenth century include: George C. Brauer, Jr, *The education of the gentleman: theories of gentlemanly education in England, 1660–1775* (New York, 1959); V. B. Heltzel, *Chesterfield and the tradition of the ideal gentleman* (Chicago, 1925); William Lee Ustick, 'The English gentleman in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: studies in the literature of courtesy and conduct'(PhD, Harvard, 1932), and a series of articles that derive from this research, especially 'Changing ideals of aristocratic character and conduct in seventeenth-century England', *Modern Philology*, 30 (1932–3), pp. 147–66; Fenela Childs, 'Prescription for manners in English courtesy literature, 1690–1760, and their social implications' (DPhil, Oxford, 1984); Anna Bryson, 'The rhetoric of status: gesture, demeanour and the image of the gentleman in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England', in Lucy Gent and Nigel Llewellyn, eds., *Renaissance bodies* (London, 1990), pp. 136–53; and idem, *From courtesy to civility*.

[31] For excellent recent examples, see works by Vickery and Whyman, cited below. Another helpful exercise of this sort is Robert Shoemaker, 'Separate spheres? Ideology and practice in London gender relations, 1660–1740', in Michael McDonald, Muriel McClendon, and Joseph Ward, eds., *Protestant identities: religion, society and self-fashioning in post-Reformation England* (Stanford, 1999), pp. 266–87.

[32] Elias's *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* was published in 1939. It was translated as *The civilizing process* in two volumes: *The history of manners* (New York, 1978) and *Power and civility* (Oxford, 1982). *Die höfische Gesellschaft* first appeared in 1969 and was translated by Edmund Jephcott as *The court society* (Oxford, 1983).

[33] G. E. Mingay, *English landed society in the eighteenth century* (London, 1963), p. 145. Mingay offers a more complicated account of gentry manners in *The gentry: the rise and fall of a ruling class* (London and New York, 1976), pp. 153–8. For Macaulay, *The history of England*, ed. Hugh Trevor-Roper (first published 1848–61; Harmondsworth, 1979), pp. 56–61.

[34] Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes, *The gentry in England and Wales, 1500–1700* (Stanford, 1994). More specifically, J. D. Chambers, *Nottinghamshire in the eighteenth century: a study of life and labour under the*

century make a point of the degree to which a decorous squirearchy did not conform to the Macaulayan image.[35] It still remains to be shown, rather than just asserted, that the eighteenth century saw a quantum change in this process.

A more temporally specific version of what the rise of politeness may have meant for behaviour relates politeness not to increased formality in behaviour but rather to its opposite, a certain measure of informalization. Though such a development defies the expectations of those who identify politeness with stiffness and inauthenticity, the rise of politeness was associated with a revolt against rigidity, solemnity, ceremoniousness, and formality. The formal vocabulary of politeness included key words such as 'easiness', 'naturalness', and 'freedom' and sought to promote an ambience of reciprocity and equality. In other words, the ideal suggested that, within the broad category of gentility, behaviour did not need to indicate, repeatedly and ubiquitously, hierarchical distinctions.

It was this sort of ideal that Beau Nash was advancing when he instituted his famous innovations in the social operations of Bath in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Though imposing disciplines on the body and the tongue was important to Nash, he also aimed to create an environment which relaxed the constant marking of distinctions among the social levels of the elite. He wanted polite persons to mingle in an environment of sociability that would, within limits, downplay social distinctions and encourage the effect of equality.[36] Such sociability did not get rid of social distinctions nor did it create equality. However, it facilitated access of different kinds of people to the same places and allowed interaction among different groups on the basis of a shared set of manners. This regime seems to have held sway at Bath as well as in the myriad imitations through the century of institutions of Bath sociability.[37]

However, access and interactivity of this sort were not confined to Bath or leisure towns. In urban homes, distinctive forms of sociability, different from 'country hospitality', evolved under the rubric of politeness. The urban visit was a polite occasion, distinct from country visiting in length, scope, and purpose. It was bound by rules and expectations though actual practice was a matter of individual tact in the face of particular circumstances.[38] Outside the home, proliferating venues – coffeehouses, assemblies, pleasure gardens, theatres, concerts, and masquerades – provided new sites for polite and heterogeneous

squirearchy (2nd edn, London, 1966), pp. 22–7. Lawrence Stone invokes Elias as well as other factors in speculating on the decline of violence over the long haul: 'Interpersonal violence in English society, 1300–1980', *Past and Present*, 101 (1983), pp. 29–32.

[35] J. T. Cliffe, *The Yorkshire gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War* (London, 1969), p. 81.

[36] Oliver Goldsmith, 'The life of Richard Nash'(1772), in Arthur Friedman, ed., *Collected works of Oliver Goldsmith* (Oxford, 1966), III, pp. 279–398; W. Connely, *Beau Nash: monarch of Bath and Tunbridge Wells* (London, 1955); Girouard, *The English town*, pp. 78–80.

[37] Peter Borsay, *The English urban renaissance: culture and society in the provincial town* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 267–83, especially 274–5.

[38] Susan Whyman, *Sociability and power in late-Stuart London: the cultural worlds of the Verneys, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 87–99.

interaction.[39] Finally, those who have examined rural provincial life in the eighteenth century regard frequent interactions between the landed and the non-landed and among different ranks of the landed as the norm.[40]

Polite comportments characterized socializing, but the interactional protocols of politeness were also folded into other kinds of relationships involving gentle persons. Those who served 'the polite' in any number of capacities were likely to put a premium on polite manners. In D. R. Hainsworth's account of the late seventeenth-century steward, the steward emerges on many occasions as a 'double' for his lord, who was likely to be spending more and more time in London: the steward might be a gentleman in his own right, but, even when he was not, his position imposed on him the adoption of a gentleman's style.[41] Shopkeepers and tradespeople, certainly those who dealt with anyone of polite pretensions, were also well advised to comport themselves in a genteel way. Indeed, instruction in the rules of polite behaviour was purveyed to non-gentle audiences in a range of print media, inculcating a kind of commercial affability to smooth transactions.[42] Domestic servants provide perhaps the most interesting example of those, notwithstanding relatively low origins on the social scale, whose lives were impressed by the standards of politeness. As Soame Jenyns wrote, 'We are obliged to take the lowest level of people and convert them by our own ingenuity into the genteel personages we think proper should attend us.' Masters imposed polite disciplines, to be sure, but servants themselves had many reasons to assimilate themselves to polite culture, beginning with polite comportments but extending, as I will note below, to other kinds of polite expression, such as dressing in polite garb, showing up at polite venues, and absorbing bits of polite literary culture.[43]

This assimilation to polite comportments has been analysed particularly closely in connection with what we might call cultural servants of the polite classes. As the appetite of the wealthier for cultural consumption increased, those who served up culture were required to adopt the comportments of those who sought out their services. According to John Brewer, artists, caught between the demands of the market and the ideals of art, often negotiated this tense area by seeking to acquire 'the polished veneer or emollient manner of the man of leisure'. A polite

[39] John Money, *Experience and identity: Birmingham and the West Midlands, 1760–1800* (Manchester, 1977), pp. 98–102.

[40] Amanda Vickery, *The gentleman's daughter: women's lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London, 1998), p. 195, for an instance characteristic of the pattern explored in subsequent pages; G. N. Evans, *Social life in mid-eighteenth century Anglesey* (Cardiff, 1936), p. 143.

[41] D. R. Hainsworth, *Stewards, lords and people: the estate steward and his world in later Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 3, 13, 23–7, 38–40, among other places.

[42] Klein, 'Politeness for plebes', pp. 369–74.

[43] J. Jean Hecht, *The domestic servant in eighteenth-century England* (originally published 1956; London, 1980), pp. 181–7, 200–28; Bridget Hill, *Servants: English domestics in the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 217–19, 227–8. Jenyns is quoted in Hill, p. 217. Among Hecht's salient though somewhat questionable examples (since the evidence is from a critic in a newspaper) is the alleged practice among a certain class of servants of sending cards for social purposes (Hecht, *The domestic servant*, pp. 214–15).

comportment was an instrument for success. Indeed, 'the importance of genteel and refined manners in securing custom led some artists to embark on courses of self-improvement'.[44] Joshua Reynolds was famous for his affability, 'an example of how people of comparatively modest origins could be almost universally acknowledged to embody contemporary principles of politeness and amiability once the traditional templates for the "well-born" or "well-bred" person had been disseminated within an increasingly public sphere'.[45] In music as well, as Cyril Ehrlich has pointed out, cultural workers had opportunities to move through social boundaries, 'entering rich households to play and teach, sometimes mingling with the company or even achieving a degree of intimacy with one's betters'. These occasions were usually temporary though some musicians managed to enhance their social elevation by a mixture of luck, opportunism, business sense, and attentiveness to manners.[46]

Polite comportments were an interactive medium for persons of differing status, wealth, and function. Another kind of mingling with which politeness has been associated is that of the sexes. In the eighteenth century, writers often traced the rise of politeness to the interaction of men with women.[47] Recently scholars have further developed this insight in two directions. First, they have used it to explore the constitution and reconstitution of gendered identities for both men and women. Politeness was important in the definition of women because of their association with form, taste, and conversation, and it also became important in defining a new kind of gentleman as men were expected increasingly to submit to the social disciplines of politeness.[48]

Second, scholars have tested the theory of a gendered separation of spheres with an investigation of social practice, exploring the range of interactions between men and women that were possible in British society in the eighteenth century. Robert Shoemaker has asserted that women enjoyed more extensive

[44] John Brewer, 'Cultural production, consumption, and the place of the artist in eighteenth-century England', in Brian Allen, ed., *Towards a modern art world* (New Haven and London, 1995), pp. 18–21.

[45] Richard Wendorf, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: the painter in society* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), p. 2. Louise Lippincott makes clear how important adopting the manner and lifestyle of a polite gentleman was for the success of Arthur Pond in *Selling art in Georgian London: the rise of Arthur Pond* (New Haven and London, 1983), pp. 18–54.

[46] Cyril Ehrlich, *The music profession in Britain since the eighteenth century: a social history* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 31–2. A similar point is made in the case of the builder in his relations with the gentleman-architect in James Ayres, *Building the Georgian city* (New Haven and London, 1998), pp. 8–9.

[47] Sylvana Tomaselli, 'The Enlightenment debate on women', *History Workshop*, 20 (1985), pp. 101–24; Lawrence E. Klein, 'Gender, conversation and the public sphere in early eighteenth-century England', in Michael Worton and Judith Still, eds., *Textuality and sexuality: reading theories and practices* (Manchester and New York, 1993), pp. 100–15.

[48] Michèle Cohen, *Fashioning masculinities: national identity and language in the eighteenth century* (London and New York, 1996), pp. 13–78; Philip Carter, *Men and the emergence of polite society, Britain, 1660–1800* (Harlow, 2001). G. J. Barker-Benfield refers to many aspects of politeness without using the actual term in his account of the reform of masculinity in his *The culture of sensibility: sex and society in eighteenth-century Britain* (Chicago and London, 1992), pp. 37–103.

opportunities for heterosocial interaction in towns than in the country.[49] Amanda Vickery's study of women in the counties delineates the rather extensive realm of male–female association provided by the calendars of county administration, sport, and urban leisure (while also making clear their limits).[50]

III

Politeness began as an ideal of behaviour but as such it was intimately related to a range of material accessories. Consumption was an important domain for the actuation of politeness because the spread of consumerism was characterized not just by quantitative increases but by qualitative alterations in the processes and meanings of acquisition. Fashion was by no means an eighteenth-century invention. However, as John Styles notes, during the eighteenth century, 'a significant and possibly growing proportion of [products] (though by no means all) were fashion products, in the sense that their successful sale depended on repeated changes in their visual appearance in accordance with changing metropolitan notions of what was fashionable'.[51] As fashion shaped the objects, so taste defined the consumer. At the same time that taste was undergoing apotheosis as a constitutive element of the gentleman's psyche and identity, it was becoming a competence of ordinary people faced with choice not just in clothing but in a wide range of objects for personal use or household convenience.[52]

A gentleman had to cut a figure, and cutting a figure required, in the first place, clothing.[53] If one accepts the association of politeness with a mitigation of hierarchically formal relations among, at least, some upper part of the population, clothing history provides an interesting parallel. Clothing for men and for women, it has been argued, underwent a significant simplification and informalization in the Restoration decades. The simplification is represented in the basic three-piece suit for men and in the informal, flowing gown (known, among other ways, by the name 'mantua') for women. The effect of this change was to create a more uniform outfit worn by members of the upper orders of society as well as many of the middling sort. As Beverly LeMire has written about such

[49] Robert Shoemaker, *Gender in English society, 1650–1850: the emergence of separate spheres?* (London and New York, 1998), pp. 275–82.

[50] Vickery, *The gentleman's daughter*, pp. 195–284. See also Howell, *Patriarchs and parasites*, p. 190, for an exemplary Welsh case of integrating ladies into a previously all-gentlemen's event.

[51] John Styles, 'Manufacturing, consumption and design in eighteenth-century England', in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the world of goods* (London and New York, 1993), pp. 528, 537–8. For instances, see Evans, *Social life in mid-eighteenth century Anglesey*, p. 143, and Nair, *Highley*, p. 95.

[52] Barker-Benfield, *The culture of sensibility*, pp. 61–4, 205–8; Iain Pears, *The discovery of painting: the growth of interest in the arts in England, 1680–1768* (New Haven and London, 1988), pp. 31–50. The more formal elaboration of the idea of taste is treated in George Dickie, *The century of taste: the philosophical odyssey of taste in the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1996), and R. W. Jones, *Gender and the formation of taste in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 1998).

[53] It also involved wigs, highly expressive of gentility: see Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the head: portraiture and social formation in eighteenth-century England* (New Haven and London, 1993), pp. 112–23.

changes, 'clothing styles conspired to aid the democratization of fashions'.[54] 'Democratization' is an unfortunate choice of word here, since it suggests forms of equality that simply did not apply to fashion, culture, society, and politics in eighteenth-century Britain. However, it was the case that a certain flattening of stylistic variation, a restraint on upper-class sartorial sumptuousness, and a widening access to the concept and practice of fashion occurred. Such widening access helped to underpin the kinds of effacement of social distinction towards which behavioural prescription was aiming.[55]

At the same time, the growth of consumption allowed more people to appear in standard gentle garb. The simplification of clothing itself made clothing more affordable. The rich could still pay a lot for their clothing but the new styles were also more capable of being produced in versions that were more widely affordable. The growth of a ready-made clothing industry and the elaboration of the market in secondhand clothing also helped to diffuse a common genteel style of dressing.[56] So did the servants' perquisite of receiving masters' 'cast clothes' and, indeed, the masters' insistence that their servants be decorously dressed.[57] By the end of the eighteenth century, even working women were likely to own printed cotton gowns. As for the men, according to John Styles, the poor could, when times permitted, aim for a plebeian gentility, witnessed in an old man's reminiscence of his days in the early 1740s as an apprentice stocking maker at Nottingham when 'I made shift, with a little over-work, and a little credit, to raise a genteel suit of clothes, fully adequate to the sphere in which I moved.'[58]

As in the case of clothing, so the consumption of domestic products was on the increase from the later seventeenth century. Though there is less reason now than once to believe in a consumer revolution, the late seventeenth century did witness the appearance of a new set of products among middling groups. Some items, relatively rare in 1675 (including pewterware, silver, mirrors, and books), became more widely available over succeeding decades, while others, virtually unknown in 1675, came into significant use (china, implements for hot vegetable-derived

[54] Beverly LeMire, *Fashion's favourite: the cotton trade and the consumer in Britain, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 1992), p. 8, and, more generally, 1–22, 161–94; Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in eighteenth-century Europe* (London, 1984), pp. 25, 30; Aileen Ribeiro and Valerie Cumming, *The visual history of costume* (London, 1989), pp. 28–31; Anne Buck, *Dress in eighteenth-century England* (London, 1979), pp. 103–13; Earle, *The making of the English middle class*, pp. 19–21, 46, 281–90; David Kuchta, 'The making of the self-made man: class, clothing, and English masculinity, 1688–1832', in Victoria de Grazia, ed., *The sex of things: gender and consumption in historical perspective* (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 54–78.

[55] For a discussion of sartorial and other cultural change among political leaders in keeping with a new ideal of 'unobtrusiveness', Paul Langford, 'Politics and manners from Sir Robert Walpole to Sir Robert Peel', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 94 (1996), pp. 103–25.

[56] Madeleine Ginsburg, 'The tailoring and dressmaking trades, 1700–1850', *Costume*, 6 (1972), pp. 64–9, and idem, 'Rags to riches: the second-hand clothes trade, 1700–1978', *Costume*, 14 (1980), pp. 121–35.

[57] Hill, *Servants*, pp. 66–70, 216–19; Hecht, *The domestic servant*, pp. 115–23.

[58] William Hutton, quoted in John Styles, 'Custom or consumption? Plebeian fashion in eighteenth-century England', in Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the eighteenth century: debates, desires and delectable goods* (London, 2002).

beverages, clocks, pictures, and window curtains, among others).[59] All these products represented improvements in convenience and comfort, involved strong elements of design and fashion, and added to the formal refinement of domestic interiors. Many, especially those related to catering, specifically served the purpose of enhancing sociability within the house. It is reasonable to conclude that the purchase, use, and display of such goods often testified to polite aspirations (though this is not to imply that politeness meant the same thing to all consumers). While demonstrating the degree to which rural areas resisted the consumer novelties of the age, Carl Estabrook's work on material culture in the Bristol area also suggests how extensive was the penetration of polite consumption in the urban areas: aside from statistics showing the high percentage of modest households (assets of £30 or less at probate) with at least some luxury goods, he records numerous instances of individuals of very modest means owning such products from chocolate pots and upholstered chairs to birdcages and musical instruments.[60]

While fashion and taste saturated the world of consumption, certain consumer objects had particularly polite associations. One association was antiquity. As we will see below, polite architectural taste was classical. But classicism marked humbler consumer goods. Neil McKendrick has shown how, in building his pottery business, Josiah Wedgwood exploited the hunger for things classical. According to McKendrick, this hunger had an aristocratic provenance, growing out of the polite classicism of elite education, including the Grand Tour. However, Wedgwood's genius transformed classical designs into an idiom appealing to a much wider market than just aristocrats, even if the prudery of those lower in the social scale necessitated some bowdlerizing in the realization of classical design.[61] Thus, consumer classicism was not just an elite phenomenon.

[59] Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (London and New York, 1988), p. 28. On furniture in particular, Clive D. Edwards, *Eighteenth-century furniture* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 165–74.

[60] Carl Estabrook, *Urbane and rustic England: cultural ties and social spheres in the provinces, 1660–1780* (Manchester, 1998), treats these kinds of products under the rubric of 'luxury goods', a clearly unsatisfactory term, as he recognizes (pp. 131–2). His list of luxury products is: 'pewter, silver and gold items (other than coins); pictures, paintings, and prints; watches and clocks; mirrors; firearms, swords and other bladed weapons; special furniture (desks, scriptores, leather chairs, carpets, tapestries); and all items explicitly identified by assessors as urban or foreign in origin or style' (such as japanned items or Delft plates). The entirety of chapter 6 (pp. 128–63) in Estabrook is informative on the consumption of polite goods in town and country; the specific points mentioned here are on pp. 132–5, 138–40, 148, 156–7n. For the spread of many of these goods to those lower down the economic ladder, Peter King, 'Pauper inventories and the material lives of the poor in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', in Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe, eds., *Chronicling poverty: the voices and strategies of the English poor, 1640–1840* (Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 155–91, especially pp. 176–80.

[61] Neil McKendrick, 'Josiah Wedgwood and the commercialization of the Potteries', in Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (Bloomington, 1982), pp. 107–17. As noted below, the characteristic forms of housing – both the country villa and the urban terraced house – were strongly inflected by classical taste.

Even more widespread was the consumption of things that aided and abetted conversable sociability. On the one hand, traditional forms of sociability were given a new and more polite setting. The fireplace, in or outside the home, had always been a focus of social interaction. In the eighteenth century, the fireplace itself became an object of more intense design attention. Moreover, an explosion of high design items sought to improve or adorn its functions (grates, fenders, guards, irons, brushes and brooms, bellows, coal boxes and scuttles, 'cats', trivets, and more).[62] On the other hand, sociability assumed new forms around new orienting points. Coffee and tea, for instance, were the stuff around which rituals of sociability were constructed inside and outside the household during the eighteenth century, and they demanded particular equipments: as Lorna Weatherill has put it, 'an essentially sociable activity engendered an identifiable material culture'.[63] The map of the social and geographical spread of tea services in households provides a tangible picture of the spread of politeness.[64]

Finally, if consumption was a domain for the actuation of politeness, production had to gear itself to satisfy polite tastes. Neil McKendrick's Potteries, John Money's Birmingham, and David Hey's Sheffield each had a major stake in creating polite products. The design and quality of Sheffield cutlery was refined in response to consumer tastes, and new and more polite products (boxes and buttons, for instance) came to be produced for the same reason. Josiah Wedgwood and Matthew Boulton both took measures to improve the taste of their workers so that the output of their operations better met polite demand.[65] While Wedgwood and Boulton were heroic figures in this process, the fact is that humbler producers making things for humbler markets were also attuned to fashion: 'They simply adapted the broad trend of prevailing London high fashion to the prejudices and pockets of their intended customers. As in many aspects of eighteenth-century industrial innovation, a process of copying combined with small incremental adjustments was the norm.'[66]

[62] Christopher Gilbert and Anthony Wells-Cole, *The fashionable fireplace* (Leeds, 1985).

[63] Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain*, p. 158. On the polite context of these and other ceramic wares, Sarah Richards, *Eighteenth-century ceramics: products for a civilised society* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 94–113, 127–63.

[64] Carole Shammas, *The pre-industrial consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 181–8; Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain*, pp. 43–69. The supply side of tea consumption is covered amply in Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui, *Shops and shopkeeping in eighteenth-century England* (Kingston, Montreal, and London, 1989). See Evans, *Social life in mid-eighteenth century Anglesey*, pp. 33–4, 39–40, 51–68, 143–5, for the arrival of china and tea sets and a variety of other fashionable items in north-western Wales.

[65] Neil McKendrick, 'Josiah Wedgwood and factory discipline', *Historical Journal*, 4 (1961), pp. 30–55; Money, *Experience and identity*, pp. 88–93; Hey, *The fiery blades of Hallamshire*, pp. 122–8, 279.

[66] Styles, 'Manufacturing, consumption and design', p. 543. A parallel appears in the next section of this review. The gentleman architect – a VanBrugh or a Burlington or an earl of Pembroke – wielded classical knowledge as a matter of polite inheritance, but the craftsman was still 'the main figure in the building and design worlds'. In a design universe where classicism of one sort or another was shunting out vernacular style, such non-elite figures had access to polite knowledge though they did not go on the Grand Tour and they did not buy translations of Vitruvius. See Elizabeth McKellar,

IV

At its most grand, equipment becomes a kind of arena. For the rich, 'house building lay at the heart of the construction of social identity'. Those who could afford to build made 'their greatest expenditures on polite display' in their houses, which were expressions of 'individual personalities, social roles and polite strategies'. Nor is it surprising that, when David Hancock's big London bourgeoisie sought an architectural statement for their domiciles, they fixed on the Palladian style.[67] Since politeness was often identified with classical idioms, polite architectural taste was classical. The spread of architectural classicism in the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century has usually been told as the story of an increasingly exacting loyalty to classical rules, a process said to have reached its apogee in the Palladian style. However, the politeness of the Palladian vogue was more than a matter of its classicism since Palladian design was associated simultaneously with the universal rules of taste and with naturalness of design. It was identified also as the embodiment of simplicity, restraint, and good breeding, which brought it further into the plane of politeness.[68]

Elizabeth McKellar has recently challenged the narrative that makes the Palladian the standard for English classicism by examining London development from the Restoration to the early eighteenth century. Though her goal is to see the integrity of a wider range of design strategies than the Palladian-centred narrative has allowed, she affirms the fact that 'buildings below the level of the elite [were] still informed by the values of polite architecture'. Indeed, in the period from 1660 to 1720, she identifies several major variants of polite building as befits a moment before 'a single dominant notion of politeness had been accepted'. While such buildings fulfilled 'the demands of an increasingly commercialized, mass-consumption housing market', they also bespoke a 'cultural consensus' which endowed such polite architecture with 'social acceptability and cultural authority'. Moreover, since, from the start, both gentry and middling sorts occupied these buildings, the style 'cannot … be defined in terms of a distinct social group or culture'.[69]

Palladianism concerned the uniform of the house rather than its function, according to Mark Girouard.[70] But politeness also had a bearing on house function and interior design. Polite sociability made a range of demands on the spatial organization of life, within the household and even more dramatically outside the household. The rise of politeness placed a new premium on decorous conversation and refined display of persons and things. In some respects, this

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The birth of modern London: the development and design of the city, 1660–1720 (Manchester, 1999), p. 3. McKellar treats the transmission of knowledge (including classical knowledge) extensively, pp. 116–87.

[67] Hancock, *Citizens of the world*, pp. 320–1, 334–5, 342–7.

[68] Borsay, *The English urban renaissance*, pp. 235–306; Richard Bushman, *The refinement of America: persons, houses, cities* (New York, 1992), pp. 100ff and the notes; John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530–1830* (Baltimore, 1954), p. 201; David Watkin, *English architecture* (London, 1979), p. 124.

[69] McKellar, *The birth of modern London*, pp. 5, 179, 184, 221.

[70] Mark Girouard, *Life in the English country house* (New Haven and London, 1978), p. 158.

meant a move away from ceremoniousness, formality, and grandeur towards comfort, convenience, and accessibility. In other respects, this meant a new self-consciousness, new demands for kemptness. In domestic and public spaces, there was a new emphasis on facilitating social interaction. Mark Girouard's work on the English country house is restricted in applicability but exemplary in explanatory interest. He has shown how the great houses of the landed elite changed their shape in response to a number of factors: the increased distance between gentlemen and small freeholders, the decline of old-style hospitality, and the demands of new polite sociability. Formal axes within the house gave way to circuits of large rooms, suited for balls, assemblies, and other receptions.[71]

What was the impact of politeness in more ordinary housing? While the interior organization of the urban house was largely fixed in the later seventeenth century, its decoration and convenience continued to be elaborated in relation to the spread of consumerism. (This was true in rural areas as well.) The household was the foremost destination for the consumer goods which were being bought at an increasing rate. Indeed, for many people the domestic environment took on an entirely new character and meaning as it became cleaner, lighter, and more comfortable. Lorna Weatherill has made clear how increases in consumer spending were dedicated to the most conspicuous (what she calls 'frontstage') activities: the domestic setting of people outside the elite became, for the first time, a zone of expressiveness.[72] It also became a more attractive site for family members and friends, men and women, adults and children, to engage in a range of interaction – sociable, pleasurable, decorous, edifying, in a word, polite.[73]

With few exceptions, however, domestic spaces, especially in towns, in the eighteenth century, even for wealthier people, were small and often cramped. They were comparatively limited spaces on which to stage polite display. Thus, the most dramatic spatial associations of politeness concerned the world outside the household since it was often identified with urban life or, to be specific, certain aspects and modes of urban life. John Wood called the town 'the theatre of the polite world', a crystallization of those developments recounted so persuasively in Peter Borsay's *The English urban renaissance*. Though the patterns of change detected by Borsay can be accounted for by economic and a variety of other developments, they cannot be characterized except through the language of politeness.[74] As Borsay lays it out, the politeness of eighteenth-century towns

[71] Girouard, *Life in the English country house*, pp. 181–212. According to Girouard, the big urban house showed similar adjustments to accommodate the ball or rout – the polite sociability of the assembly room adjusted to domestic proportions: Girouard, *The English town*, p. 121.

[72] Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain*, pp. 28, 187–98.

[73] On changes in the domestic sphere related to the consumer revolution, see Barker-Benfield, *The culture of sensibility*, pp. 98–103, 154–61, and Edwards, *Eighteenth-century furniture*, pp. 181–94.

[74] In the early part of his book, Borsay does not rely on the term 'polite' but, as he moves from the physical amenities to the cultural practices of the town, he comes to use 'polite' as the crucial identification for the urban culture that he is describing. Wood is quoted in Borsay, 'Culture, status and the English urban landscape', *History*, 67 (1982), p. 11. See Girouard, *The English town*, pp. 75–100, on the relevance of politeness to eighteenth-century urban developments.

was centrally a matter of the physical environment: innovations in building types or new designs for traditional buildings (whether for housing or other purposes), innovations in organizing the spaces between buildings (streets, squares, overall town design), and improved amenities of this interconnective zone. These changes involved making the town into an arena, or a set of arenas, that looked new and had a wide range of new functions. A new kind of urban life came into existence through this process. Like the Palladian generally, Georgian town design expressed an aspiration to universal principles of design and bespoke an ideal of polite restraint as against the individualism expressed by excess ornamentation. Borsay goes so far as to emphasize the message of social cohesion in this 'gregarious' urban form.[75]

V

The polite remaking of physical environments proceeded in conjunction with innovations in – and elaborations of – activity that proceeded in towns. The relevant activities were those of leisure (rather than work) and consumption (rather than production) organized around the functions of intellectual or artistic culture, sport, and sociability. Infusing all was a strong dimension of display. Though often including aspects of material consumption, these activities were hardly passive since they engaged the energies of the participants and involved strong dimensions of performance.

The consciousness of form marking politeness did not necessarily exclude a concern with substance. Since politeness offered itself as a norm of gentlemanly formation, it extended to forms of knowledge, expression, and taste. The rise of politeness has sometimes been characterized as a shift in gentlemanly interests, specifically, a rejection of learning as understood by seventeenth-century gentlemen. Learned culture among seventeenth-century gentlemen is attested to by the contemporary literature of gentility[76] and documented by historians of English scholarship and of English county communities in the seventeenth century.[77] The most important areas of learned interest in the seventeenth century were history, politics, religion, and, running behind these, natural

[75] Borsay, *The English urban renaissance*, pp. 270–1.

[76] In such works as Richard Braithwaite, *The English gentleman* (London, 1630), pp. 75ff; Henry Peacham, *The compleat gentleman* (London, 1622), pp. 18ff; Richard Allestree, *The gentleman's calling* (London, 1678), p. 16; William Ramesay, *The gentleman's companion* (London, 1672), pp. 7–15. The rise of the association of learning with gentility is treated in Mervyn James, 'English politics and the concept of honour, 1485–1642', in idem, *Society, politics and culture: studies in early modern England* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 375ff.

[77] The connection between gentlemen and the culture of learning is attested throughout David Douglas's classic, *English scholars* (London, 1939); also, Walter Houghton, 'The English virtuoso in the seventeenth century', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 3 (1942), pp. 51–73. For the counties, see Cliffe, *The Yorkshire gentry*, pp. 81–3; C. W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth-century Kent: a social and economic history* (London, 1965), p. 206; Howell A. Lloyd, *The gentry of south-west Wales, 1540–1650* (Cardiff, 1968), pp. 200–5; and Alan Everitt, *The community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640–1660* (Leicester, 1966), pp. 45ff.

philosophy. By comparison, it has been argued that such interests were weaker among eighteenth-century gentlemen, having been supplanted, both as reading matter and as practical activity, by literary and artistic interests.[78] Indeed, according to Keith Wrightson, after 1660, 'the humanist idea of the gentleman scholar gave way to that of the worldly superficiality of the "man of quality"'.[79]

There is some truth to this. However, the notion that some interests were rejected in favour of new interests is simpler and more mechanical than the actuality. What was involved was not the rejection of serious subjects for frivolous ones but rather a new insistence that all subjects submit to the formal and sociable disciplines of politeness.[80] Politeness tended to bring all modes of apprehension – spiritual, cognitive, aesthetic – within the horizon of gentility and cast all such spiritual, intellectual, or creative endeavour as a species of gentlemanly accomplishment. Thus, vast areas of the culture became saturated in their self-representation as gentlemanly domains.[81]

It is hardly remarkable that religion became more polite in the eighteenth century since an important stimulant to the spread of the language of politeness was the socially disruptive impact of religion in the seventeenth century. Sociability and manners in religion were urged as alternatives to enthusiasm and fanaticism.[82] To an extent (and, of course, only to an extent), the language of mainstream Anglican religion came to overlap with that of the polite courtesy book, Christ himself becoming susceptible to representation as 'of a marvellously conversable, sociable and benign temper'.[83] One area of practical activity on which this convergence of religion and politeness had an immediate impact was preaching where, from the Restoration decades on, simple and refined discourse became the vogue. John Tillotson, who embodied this style, was often listed as among the most polite writers of the age.[84] More generally, the Church assimilated itself in many ways to the dominant social order. This was the 'cultural sea-change' in which 'loyalty to the Established Church was to be

[78] Local evidence is available in Philip Jenkins, *The making of a ruling class: the Glamorgan gentry, 1640–1790* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 239, and Peter Clark, *English provincial society from the Reformation to the Revolution: religion, politics and society in Kent, 1500–1640* (Hassocks, 1977), pp. 401–4.

[79] Keith Wrightson, *English society, 1580–1680* (London, 1982), p. 193. A similar tone of lament is evident in Douglas, *English scholars*, pp. 355, 359–60; Houghton, 'The English virtuoso', p. 219; and Lawrence Stone, *The crisis of the aristocracy, 1588–1641* (Oxford, 1965), p. 721. The lament underestimates both the degree to which antiquarian pursuits remained vigorous in the eighteenth century and the degree to which they were a part of polite culture: see Rosemary Sweet, 'Antiquaries and antiquities in eighteenth-century England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34 (2001), pp. 181–206.

[80] This insistence is a major project in the writings of the third earl of Shaftesbury: see Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness*, pp. 27–47.

[81] John Barrell, 'Introduction', *English literature in history 1730–80: an equal, wide survey* (New York, 1983), pp. 32–40.

[82] Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness*, pp. 160–9.

[83] Edward Fowler, quoted in Isabel Rivers, *Reason, grace, and sentiment: a study of the language of religion and ethics in England, 1660–1780* (Cambridge, 1991), I, p. 83.

[84] Rivers, *Reason, grace, and sentiment*, I, p. 49; Henry Felton, *A dissertation on reading the classics* (London, 1713), p. 154.

integrated with civility in religion as well as secular society'.[85] This was a matter not of secularization but of laicization, in which the terms of religion were dictated by a lay elite. Like other members of society, clergymen became more prosperous, a fact which, in turn, drew a higher class of person to the profession. In the country, the rector was often hardly distinguishable in manners, dress, and accoutrements from the local squire. Meanwhile, in towns, clerics 'were just as susceptible as their congregations to the new fashions and fads, just as anxious to be thought "rational", just as eager to partake in the new culture of the polite, with its values of sociability, benevolence and good conversation, and just as suspicious of anything that smacked of "enthusiasm"'.[86]

Intellectual pursuits were also reshaped according to polite standards. For instance, changes in historical writing bespoke not a rejection of historical apprehension but rather a reformulation of the norms for historical writing in accordance with standards of polite expression.[87] The same can be said for philosophical writing.[88] However, the most illuminating evidence for the absorption of polite models within intellectual modes has emerged in the historiography of science. While it has been argued that science after the Restoration declined because gentlemen abandoned it, recent research has invoked the notion of polite science to suggest the conditions in which scientific activity actually prospered in the eighteenth century.[89] The politeness of science was partly a matter of the personnel of scientific investigation. Scientific activity was largely dominated and shaped by gentlemen. Scientific enterprise was marked by the independence and amateurism (rather than specialization and professionalism) of gentlemen.[90] In the exemplary case of Joseph Banks, botanist and president of the Royal Society, John Gascoigne has shown not only the shape of the gentleman-scientist's career but also the integration of science with a gentlemanly social, political, and cultural

[85] Heal and Holmes, *The gentry in England and Wales*, p. 377.

[86] John Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646–1689* (New Haven and London, 1991), pp. 383–4.

[87] Philip Hicks, *Neoclassical history in English culture from Clarendon to Hume* (London, 1996), pp. 10, 13–14, 62–81, 150–5, 172–93, 215–16.

[88] John J. Richetti, *Philosophical writing: Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), pp. 2, 16–20.

[89] On the decline, see Margaret Espinasse, 'The decline and fall of Restoration science', *Past and Present*, 14 (1958), pp. 71–89. The indigestibility of science by polite culture is the point of Steven Shapin's '"A scholar and a gentleman": the problematic identity of the scientific practitioner in early modern England', *History of Science*, 29 (1991), pp. 279–327. However, my point is that science was forced, like other forms of inquiry, to adjust to polite standards.

[90] Roy Porter, 'Gentlemen and geology: the emergence of a scientific career, 1660–1902', *Historical Journal*, 21 (1978), pp. 809–36, especially 811–25; Jan Golinski, *Science as public culture: chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760–1820* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 11–49. At the deepest level, it has been argued, the establishment of an intellectual polity for science was dependent on models of civility: Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the experimental life* (Princeton, 1985). On changing models of authority in medical practice, including a greater reliance on polite idioms: Harold J. Cook, 'Good advice and little medicine: the professional authority of early modern English physicians', *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (1994), pp. 1–31.

order.[91] Moreover, science thrived in institutions, dominated by gentlemen, whether in the capital or in the provinces. Such institutions had close ties with local and national elites and set improving goals that were understood as aspects of the larger politeness of society.[92] Science was also propagated in more accessible venues: public lectures at coffeehouses and other sites were advertised as polite events for polite audiences, both male and female.[93] Such science was even adapted for the home where scientific talk and demonstration, supported by the right equipment, was a device for the polite edification of men and women and the polite education of children.[94] Thus, the literature on polite science reminds us that the label 'polite' or 'gentlemanly' in the eighteenth century denoted not the urge to exclude but rather an invitation for regulated participation by a fairly wide group of people. What is called the popularization of science (and, like 'democratization', this term may generate misleading implications) often proceeded under such banners as 'politeness', 'gentlemenliness', 'improvement', and 'refinement'.

If religious and intellectual activities were inflected by the notion of politeness, even more were artistic and aesthetic ones. According to John Brewer, the attainment of a polite identity in the eighteenth century 'could best be achieved through the medium of literature and the arts'. One of the themes of his magisterial study of the arts in eighteenth-century Britain is precisely the way in which personal ambitions for cultivation created the demand for the explosive enhancement of the provision of culture in the period.[95] Taste was a practical form of judgement and was expressed immediately in connoisseurship and collecting. While it is easy to associate these practices with the most socially prestigious and wealthiest parts of the population, the vast expansion of the market for artistic goods cannot be explained unless similar appetites were present among much wider parts of the population. The affordable engraving demonstrated that polite ideals penetrated the stratum of the middling sort.[96] The same

[91] John Gascoigne, *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment: useful knowledge and polite culture* (Cambridge, 1994).

[92] This is the burden of the groundbreaking pieces on polite science: Arnold Thackray, 'Natural knowledge in cultural context: the Manchester model', *American Historical Review*, 79 (1974), pp. 672–709; Roy Porter, 'Science, provincial culture and public opinion in Enlightenment England', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 3 (1980), pp. 20–46.

[93] Alan Q. Morton and Jane A. Wess, *Public and private science: the King George III collection* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 39–66. On the public lecture as a site for a debate about gentlemanliness (among other things), Simon Schaffer, 'The consuming flame: electrical showmen and tory mystics in the world of goods', in Brewer and Porter, eds., *Consumption and the world of goods*, pp. 489–526.

[94] Alice N. Walters, 'Conversation pieces: science and politeness in eighteenth-century England', *History of Science*, 35 (1997), pp. 121–54.

[95] John Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination: English culture in the eighteenth century* (London, 1997), pp. 59, 97, 106. The proliferation of graphic satire in the eighteenth century was simultaneously critical of and complicit in the polite dominance over many areas of culture: Mark Hallett, *The spectacle of difference: graphic satire in the age of Hogarth* (New Haven and London, 1999), pp. 2, 9–15.

[96] Pears, *The discovery of painting*, pp. 157–206.

holds for the consumption of artistic performance, whether musical or theatrical. Attendance drew in a wide range of persons, from aristocrats to servants.

It was one thing to be a connoisseur and another to be a practitioner. As noted earlier, success in an artistic career depended on the capacity to carry oneself as a gentleman, but it was a vexed issue whether gentlemen should really indulge in the polite arts – performing music or painting and drawing. The theory tended very much to make a gendered distinction between the polite connoisseurship, appropriate for men, and the polite accomplishments, appropriate for women.[97] However, practice was less clear. Teachers of the arts proliferated. Households and towns supported cultures of artistic, musical and theatrical performance, which depended on the participation of a wide range of amateurs.

The impact of politeness is also seen in the print culture. One of the most remarkable features of the proliferation of print from the later seventeenth century is the way in which much of it is inscribed as a gentlemanly and, therefore, I would say, polite zone: either the subject matter is said to be polite or the audience is said to be polite or the authorial voice is said to be polite or the goal is said to be the enhancement of politeness.[98] One important theme in literary treatments of the construction of print culture and the rise of the professional writer in the eighteenth century is the way in which this development occurred amidst a dominant discourse of politeness that was gentlemanly and amateur rather than professional in its emphases.[99] Indeed, Carey McIntosh has recently argued that English prose style itself underwent key changes in the eighteenth century under the impact of the alliance of print and politeness.[100]

VI

One of the most common manifestations of this alliance was the device of 'the club' or 'the Society of Gentlemen'. The club was sometimes represented as an anti-polite domain of narrowness and specialization, but it also was represented

[97] Ann Bermingham, *Learning to draw: studies in the cultural history of a polite and useful art* (New Haven and London, 2000), pp. 183–227.

[98] See, for instance, Margaret Ezell, 'The *Gentleman's Journal* and the commercialization of Restoration coterie literary practices', *Modern Philology*, 89 (1992), pp. 323–40; Michael G. Ketcham, *Transparent designs: reading, performance, and form in the Spectator papers* (Athens, GA, 1985), pp. 11–26; Kathryn Shevelow, *Women and print culture: the construction of femininity in the early periodical* (London and New York, 1989), pp. 43–9; and, although the evidence is largely continental, Anne Goldgar, *Impolite learning: conduct and community in the republic of letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven and London, 1995), pp. 54–114.

[99] Terry Eagleton, *The function of criticism from the Spectator to post-structuralism* (London, 1984), pp. 9–27; Brean Hammond, *Professional imaginative writing in England, 1670–1740* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 8–10, 145–95; Paula McDowell, *The women of Grub Street: press, politics, and gender in the London literary marketplace, 1678–1730* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 6–11, 217–84; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The politics and poetics of transgression* (London, 1986), pp. 80–4; Thomas Woodman, *Politeness and poetry in the age of Pope* (London, 1989), pp. 15–16.

[100] Carey McIntosh, *The evolution of English prose, 1700–1800: style, politeness and print culture* (Cambridge, 1998).

as a prime occasion for the worldly conversation that polishes both manners and minds. Through this representational practice, print purveyed ideals of decorum, sociability, improvement, worldliness, and gentility as they bore on comportments, equipments, arenas, and accomplishments.[101] Certainly in the *Spectator* and in other periodicals, the club was meant to represent the meeting point of diverse social types and viewpoints, a model for a degree of socially heterogeneous socializing of the sort discussed above as an aspect of eighteenth-century comportments.[102] Nor was such heterogeneity a figment of discourse, since it abounded in the visual culture of the eighteenth century as David Solkin has made clear in *Painting for money*.[103]

The representation of clubs in print and visual media reflected a fashion for associating, which was often mediated by the periodicals themselves. The Gentlemen's Society at Spalding in Lincolnshire provides an early and instructive example. It originated in 1709 when a number of local landed and professional worthies sponsored a subscription to the *Tatler* at a local coffeehouse, where they gathered to have each number read to them. The reading was followed by a discussion among the Spalding members of whatever issues were raised in the number. This practice was extended to include presentations on a range of topics from the antiquarian to the philosophical to the polite, all in the name of polite conversability. In the course of time, the circle institutionalized itself, with a set of rules and other organs, including a library and a museum.[104] The Easy Club of Edinburgh, which began meeting in 1712, was also inspired by the whig periodicals. Indeed, in its proceedings and those of many of its successors, Nicholas Phillipson detects the penetration of 'the Addisonian vocabulary': 'Words like "conversation", "friendship", "moderation", "easiness", "taste", "politeness", and "improvement" crop up continually in their records.'[105]

[101] C. John Sommerville, *The news revolution in England: cultural dynamics of daily information* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 146–60 (chapter 12: 'The club image and vicarious community'). Aside from the well-known versions of this device in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, it can be found, in one form or another, in many eighteenth-century publications. In the period from 1688 to 1714 alone, it is evident in, among other publications: *Athenian Mercury* (1691–7) and *Post-Angel* (1701–2), associated with John Dunton; *Ladies Mercury* (1693); *Miscellanies over Claret* (1697–8); *Review* (1704–13), produced by Daniel Defoe; *Monthly Miscellany* (1707–10); *British Apollo* (1708–11); and *Female Tatler* (1709–10).

[102] Copley, 'Commerce, conversation and politeness in the early eighteenth-century periodical', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18 (1995), p. 64; Ketcham, *Transparent designs*, pp. 156, 169; Lawrence E. Klein, 'Property and politeness in the early eighteenth-century whig moralists: the case of the *Spectator*', in John Brewer and Susan Staves, eds., *Early modern conceptions of property* (London and New York, 1995), pp. 221–33.

[103] Solkin, *Painting for money*, pp. 86, 96.

[104] Dorothy M. Owen, ed., *The minute-books of the Spalding Gentlemen's Society, 1712–1755* (Lincoln Record Society, 73, 1981), pp. vii–xvii.

[105] Nicholas Phillipson, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', in Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in national perspective* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 27. Also, Nicholas Phillipson, 'Culture and society in the eighteenth-century province: the case of Edinburgh and the Scottish Enlightenment', in Lawrence Stone, ed., *The university in society* (2 vols., Princeton, 1974), II, pp. 432–46.

The new prominence of the club in representation and in reality was related to the actual decline of the centrality of the university in elite education. For many members of the elite, exposure to the world (including but not restricted to the Grand Tour) seemed a more efficacious route to edification than the universities. According to James Rosenheim, 'the civic knowledge that helped to maintain control of society, and the civility, politeness and refinement that distinguished elite from social inferiors, partly displaced institutional education as attributes of gentility'.[106]

Certainly, there was a proliferation of clubs, associations, and voluntary organizations in the eighteenth century.[107] It is clear that some famous clubs in London rapidly turned exclusive and that in London and in towns many clubs had a socially restricted character by reason of class, occupation, and, certainly, sex. However, the club was also a vehicle for mixed gatherings. As in the *Spectator*'s own club, associations and clubs often brought about the mixing of landowners, rentiers, business people, professionals, and those of artistic vocation. Birmingham, John Money makes clear, offered examples of mixed company engaging in intellectual and other kinds of sociability. Clubs, he wrote, 'provided a bridge between the different ranks of society, and an outlet through which the aspirations of professional men, the ambitions of the middling tradesmen and the hopes of the skilled artisans could find expression and satisfaction' in co-ordination and not in opposition with the traditional elites.[108]

Many clubs and associations were legitimated on polite grounds, as either tools for the enhancement of sociability or instruments of social improvement or efforts to refine the arts or the intellects and tastes of members.[109] Societies were central to the musical life of eighteenth-century London, providing occasions for participatory music-making for their members and/or offering more formal performances by professional musicians. As in other areas of this polite culture, the situation is characterized by the participation of a range of social types. The middling sorts were keen consumers of publicly performed music as well as avid makers of music in their homes. However, aristocrats and gentlemen dominated much of the performance of music in London in a pattern that, far from diminishing, became more prominent as the century proceeded. Some musical

[106] Rosenheim, *The making of a ruling class*, p. 196.

[107] Langford, *A polite and commercial people*, pp. 99–100; Peter Clark, *British clubs and societies, 1580–1800: the origins of an associational world* (Oxford, 2000). For the more obviously 'polite' clubs of London, see Robert Joseph Allen, *The clubs of Augustan London* (Cambridge, MA, 1933).

[108] Money, *Experience and identity*, pp. 98–102. Peter Clark points out that, while some associations were narrowly defined in social catchment, many exercised this bridging function: *British clubs and societies*, pp. 211–33.

[109] This is evident throughout Clark's account, for instance, *British clubs and societies*, pp. 109–15. According to Ann Bermingham: 'one of the most important functions of the Royal Academy was a social one, that is, it provided artists with an elegant and urbane setting – not unlike a gentleman's club – in which they could entertain patrons and repay in kind the hospitality of the gentry and nobility who supported the arts' ('"An exquisite practise": the institution of drawing as a polite art in Britain', in Allen, ed., *Towards a modern art world*, p. 60).

associations were dominated by the peers, others by middling sorts; but in many there was a collaboration of interest.[110] Such institutions were to be found both in the metropolis and in a wide range of provincial settings. In Brewer's *The pleasures of the imagination*, we now have a survey of the institutionalization of culture in the eighteenth century. In Brewer's story, commercial motives are always patent or close to the surface. However, the role of voluntary associations in advancing politeness through the promotion of arts and letters is another theme.[111]

Of course, many societies and institutions had goals with no immediate relation to politeness. Political associations were common. Box societies provided sickness and burial benefits for working town dwellers. Charitable foundations extended aid to the destitute or sick. However, their governance was often gentlemanly, that is, supervised by an alliance of aristocrats and other landed individuals with non-landed professionals and middling sorts in towns. They bespoke an ideological consensus between the middling and the upper orders on key social issues of the day.[112]

These institutions were not only gentlemanly in their governance. As Peter Borsay has shown, the development of charity in the period 'was intimately associated with that of fashionable recreations'. Charity activity was itself a recreation. Moreover, whatever its benefits to its recipients, it could be seen as exercising a refining effect on its practitioners. Finally, it had the general purpose of tidying up the physical landscape in which the polite lived. Borsay illustrates these functions with the General Hospital at Bath, founded in 1742.[113] Hospitals elsewhere were meeting points of social and polite needs. The Foundling Hospital in London was a shelter for the illegitimate but it was also a site for the moral education of visitors, whose sympathies would be aroused and refined by their visit (and, it was hoped, whose purses would thereby be opened). As David Solkin has written, the building had a dual purpose: 'it was to be both an institution for abandoned children and a site for polite assembly, a place to care for and educate the poor and to refine and entertain their social superiors'.[114] This polishing function of the Foundling Hospital helps us to understand how it came to pass

[110] William Weber, *The rise of musical classics in eighteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 143–67; Simon McVeigh, *Concert life in London from Mozart and Haydn* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 6–22; Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination*, pp. 531–72, on John Marsh.

[111] Brewer, *The pleasures of the imagination*, pp. 98–113.

[112] Kathleen Wilson, 'Urban culture and political activism in Hanoverian England: the example of voluntary hospitals', in Eckhart Hellmuth, ed., *The transformation of political culture: England and Germany in the late eighteenth century* (London, 1990), pp. 165–84. Wilson has an exactingly complex view of the way the activism surrounding hospitals both illustrated oligarchical features of the eighteenth century and provided the bases for the class politics of the nineteenth century. An interpretation that emphasizes the bourgeois character of this activity is R. J. Morris, 'Voluntary societies and British urban elites, 1780–1850: an analysis', in Peter Borsay, ed., *The eighteenth century town* (London, 1990), pp. 338–66. See also Paul Langford, *Public life and the propertied Englishman, 1689–1798* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 491–500.

[113] Borsay, *The English urban renaissance*, pp. 296–300. Another arena in which charitable, improving, and civilizing goals combined was the turnpike trust: Hancock, *Citizens of the world*, pp. 302–4.

[114] Solkin, *Painting for money*, p. 160.

that Handel arranged music festivals for the institution's benefit. John Money has shown how this folding of polite motives into charitable endeavour was also imitated at the inception of the General Hospital in Birmingham in 1768.[115]

VII

Polite culture in the eighteenth century was thus manifested in comportments, equipments, arenas, accomplishments, and institutions. These, in turn, are usefully understood as expressing the semantic resonances of 'politeness', namely, a concern with form, sociability, improvement, worldliness, and gentility. Understanding how features of contemporary life bore the stamp of politeness helps us to return to the identity of 'the polite' in eighteenth-century Britain.

'Polite society', I propose, should be used with the same double resonance used by Norbert Elias in his famous account of 'the court society'. For Elias, 'the court society' meant two things, one limited, the other extensive. First, 'the court society' was the society of the court – the personnel, settings, and rigorous interactional practices demanded in a rather narrow social ecology. Second, 'the court society' was the broader society of early modern France in which the royal court, despite its relatively sparse personnel and narrow confines, had a central role and pervasive influence.[116] In thinking about polite society in the eighteenth century, we need a similar, double definition.

For contemporaries, 'the polite' (the expression 'polite society' was not a common eighteenth-century usage) could be found in the upper part of society, and this perception has some analytic value, at least of a heuristic sort, for the modern historian. Gentlemen and ladies could make the best claims to politeness because they had the strongest reasons and were in the best position to pursue politeness. But the very indeterminacy of the categories 'gentleman' and 'lady' suggests the fruitlessness of trying to align politeness with neat social boundaries in society. Polite society included the landed and at least many of the middling sorts, following roughly the contours of the boundary between the propertied and the non-propertied. In this sense, polite society was a formation, internally diverse with respect to wealth, nature of economic resources, status, privilege, and more and yet with a degree of experiential unity based on cultural allegiances.

However, it is important not to map polite society in any mechanical way against the social hierarchy. There are several reasons for this. First, 'the social hierarchy' did not exist in any one unambiguous form since there was plenty of fuzziness, debate, and inconsistency in contemporary estimations of the correct

[115] Money, *Experience and identity*, p. 84.

[116] Elias, *The court society*, p. 42: 'Everything that came from the king's wider possessions, from the realm, had to pass through the filter of the court before it could reach him; through the same filter everything from the king had to pass before it reached the country … Thus the sociology of the court is at the same time the sociology of the monarchy.'

ladder of value in society.[117] In addition, such estimations all evolved during the course of the century.[118] More important, while politeness was roughly correlated with wealth and status, this correlation was complex, uneven, and unpredictable. We have to allow for that significant group within the upper orders of society who failed to embrace – or even rejected – the modes of politeness or who found it easy to fluctuate between polite and impolite habits.[119] We also have to allow for that significant group outside the upper orders for whom politeness had some appeal, interest, or use. This explains why archives reveal examples of the apprentice stocking maker who acquired a 'genteel suit of clothes' adequate to the sphere in which he moved, the Mayfair coachman whose possessions included a volume of the *Spectator*, or the servant of Jonathan Swift who borrowed a volume of Congreve.[120]

The relevant question is not so much 'who were the polite?' as 'who pursued politeness in any of its modes and why?' This reformulation of the inquiry leads to the second and more important resonance of polite society. The survey provided above of the modes of politeness in eighteenth-century cultural practice has been designed, in part, to make clear that individuals did not have to be saturated with politeness but could simply seek to act politely (for the moment), to own something polite or to have a polite experience. This is why it is helpful to think of polite society not as a certain segment of society but rather as the entirety of contemporary society insofar as it was influenced by politeness.

To explain fully why politeness was so useful is beyond the scope of this review. However, it might be suggested that politeness fitted the needs of Britons at a particular conjuncture. It will be admitted by most people that Britain in the eighteenth century was still a hierarchical society in which allegiances and identities tended to be organized locally and vertically. Patronage, paternalism, condescension along with clientage and deference characterized the widest

[117] The notion of 'the social hierarchy' seems to me largely of heuristic value. A social hierarchy exists in modern and developing societies not as a sociological certitude but as an essentially contested terrain. We have to recognize in such complex societies the existence of simultaneous, alternative, and incommensurate schemes of social value.

[118] Two works shedding much light on how the terrain of debate was shifting are Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), and Dror Wahrman, *Imagining the middle class: the political representation of class in Britain, c. 1780–1840* (Cambridge, 1995).

[119] See David Solkin's account of the resistance of some gentlemen to 'the onslaught of Addisonian values' in *Painting for money*, pp. 99–102, and Susan Whyman's instance of John Verney whom, aged and grumpy, asserted 'his Tory country ideology and a masculine resistance to excessive politeness', *Sociability and power in late-Stuart England*, p. 106.

[120] See Klein, 'Politeness for plebes', pp. 362–82. For the apprentice, see n. 58 above. For the coachman, Greater London Record Office, OB/SR 233: Middlesex Gaol Delivery Roll, January 1785 (courtesy of John Styles). For the servant, Swift's *Journal to Stella* cited in Hecht, *The domestic servant*, pp. 216–17. For a somewhat more systematic approach to the reading of servants, which demonstrates the taste for polite materials, Jan Fergus, 'Provincial servants' reading in the late eighteenth century', in James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor, eds., *The practice and representation of reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 202–25.

range of social relations. Traditionally, and long before the eighteenth century, such relations were regulated by standards of civility: the literature of civility in the early modern world was explicitly directed at guiding social dealings with superiors, equals, and inferiors. Such was the society called by Harold Perkin the 'old society', also known as the 'old regime'.[121] However, traditional social arrangements came under constant pressure from prosperity and commercialization which, in turn, enhanced consumption. This society was characterized by rising expectations of material comfort, forms of social mobility, and the appropriation of artifacts and images that mediated economic and sociological fluidity. Prosperity, commercialization, and consumption changed the kind and range of opportunities that Britons had to actualize their identities. Precise measurements and specifications of what people purchased in the way of food, clothing, furnishings and furniture, housing, print, and the range of leisure activities are the beginning of a story that crucially concerns how people wove and rewove the meanings that gave texture to their lives. Politeness was a most important strand in that reworking of meaningful practices. In a world that was both vertically organized and also prosperous and commercializing, politeness proved a highly useful tool for understanding and organizing cultural practices. While politeness's origins were in the hierarchical practices of the past, it proved a flexible device for characterizing and regulating the period's innovations in the forms of sociability, material accoutrements, kinds of spaces, performative opportunities, and institutional organization. It could do this because it was a term with a rich set of meanings that had always been applied to everyday practices. The conjuncture in eighteenth-century Britain of modernizing tendencies within a traditional structure unlocked the concept's full power to shape material culture and social practice.

Thus, politeness was relevant to more elements of the population than those who might most obviously be characterized as 'the polite'. Politeness was of patent importance in helping contemporaries think about social interactions among an elite but it also helped understand interactions between the landed and the non-landed, between gentry and middling, between masters and servants, between shopkeepers and clients, between patrons and artists. Politeness was of obvious importance for characterizing great Palladian mansions and the building of Bath but it also bore on the production of populuxe goods for many consumers and of printed matter for many literate people. Having once governed court culture, it became relevant to a culture characterized with a new richness of domestic expressiveness and a proliferation of settings for public performance.

[121] Harold Perkin, *The origins of modern English society, 1780–1880* (London, 1969), pp. 17–62. I regard J. C. D. Clark's account of 'the social theory of elite hegemony' as illuminating but incomplete: *English society, 1688–1732* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 93–118.