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Fitzmaurice, S.M. [orcid.org/0000-0002-8804-1987](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8804-1987) (2016) Sincerity and the moral reanalysis of politeness in late modern English: Semantic change and contingent polysemy. In: Chapman, D., Moore, C. and Wilcox, M., (eds.) *Studies in the History of the English Language VII: Generalizing vs. Particularizing Methodologies in Historical Linguistic Analysis*. *Topics in English Linguistics*, 94 . De Gruyter Mouton , Berlin , pp. 173-202. ISBN 978-3-11-049423-5

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110494235>

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Sincerity and the moral reanalysis of politeness in Late Modern English:  
Semantic change and contingent polysemy

1. Introduction

POLITENESS is my Theme—To You I write,  
Who *are*, what *all* would feign be thought, *Polite*.  
This is the Coxcomb's Av'rice, Courtier's Claim,  
The Citt's Ambition, and the Soldier's Fame.  
This interrupt's the wild Projector's Dream,  
And mingle's with the Statesman's deepest Scheme.  
(*Of Politeness*, London, 1738)

The Reverend James Miller, in his epistle to William Stanhope, Lord Harrington, distinguishes his addressee, who he says is polite, from others who would like to be thought so. Politeness means very different things to different men; for the “Coxcomb” it is avarice, for the “Courtier” a claim to patronage, for the lowly shopkeeper (“Citt”) it is ambition and for the “Soldier” it is fame. He implies that politeness is a hindrance to the “Projector” but a necessary consideration for the “Statesman”. So Miller suggests that the types he lists use what each would call *politeness* for rather different purposes. I will demonstrate how Miller is able to identify particular values associated with the idea of politeness with some characters more than with others. I will also show how the complex polysemy of the term *politeness* thrives in the complex, fluid social fabric of eighteenth-century England.

Cultural and social historians have traced the history of the lexicon of politeness from medieval times; Peltonen (2003) examines dueling in the semantic web of courtesy, honour and politeness in Early Modern England, and Bryson (1998) tracks the emergence of civility out of the medieval notion of courtesy in early modern England. Nevalainen and Tissari (2010) have accounted for the ways in which ‘the abstract lexical sets of *civility*, *politeness* and *courtesy* could be understood and represented in terms of conceptual metaphors’ over the course of the period (2010: 134). At the same time, they observe the transition in the dominant cultural discourse as evidenced of the eighteenth century in the Corpus of Early English Correspondence from *courtesy* and *civility* to *politeness*. Langford (2002) offers a detailed account of eighteenth century politeness, which he aligns with three key cultural figures of the period: Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury (Klein 1994, 2002); the *Spectator* periodical (1710-1714); and Philip Dormer Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield, whose *Letters to his Son* (1774) popularised his views. Table 1 below summarises the characteristics of these types.

Langford's types of politeness	Shaftesbury <i>Characteristics of Men and Manners</i> (1711)	Spectatorial <i>The Spectator</i> (1711-1714)	Chesterfieldian <i>Letters to his Son</i> (1774)
Type Characteristics	Cultural ethical approach to political philosophy elitist masculine can be learned code of behaviour realized in reciprocity, equality of conversation	Sociable, public transparent behaviour can be learned property of interaction consideration for others	Individual attribute formal elitist masculine can be learned compendium of manners etiquette
Relationship to sincerity	agnostic	necessarily sincere	not required to be sincere

Table 1: Langford's types of eighteenth-century 'politeness'

Shaftesbury's philosophical conception of politeness, which he located in gentlemanly society, centred on the assumption that men's natural sociability made them capable of ethical virtue and political solidarity. Shaftesburian politeness was regarded as a matter of exclusive aristocratic taste. Because his interests were primarily philosophical, I will not discuss his notion of politeness further here. Spectatorial politeness was the sociable practice of engaging in easy, open conversation with equals in public places such as coffee houses and clubs. In contrast, Chesterfieldian politeness was a matter of aristocratic formal civility, the cultivation of one's personal appearance and manners in order to succeed in society. I have traced the relationships among these types as shifts of meanings that emerge and decline in the period (e.g. Fitzmaurice 1998, 2002a, b, c, 2010).

In this essay, I argue that the semasiological history of the term *politeness* involves parallel and simultaneous shifts rather than one type following another. Instead, aspects of Langford's Spectatorial and Chesterfieldian modes of politeness, co-exist and overlap in the discourse of the period. Their interpretation is complicated by the role of sincerity. And I show that the onomasiological history of the notion of politeness in the period consists of a constantly varying lexicon which reflects the evaluation of politeness as at once positive and negative.

### 1.1. Semantic change and contingent polysemy

Semantic change depends upon two basic assumptions. The first is polysemy, which occurs when 'an expression has more than one distinct but related meaning that is conventionally associated with it' (Fitzmaurice, 2016: 258). The second is that 'semantic change (that is, change in the coded meaning of an expression regardless of its context of use)' is necessarily based upon 'pragmatic change (shifts in the meaning of an expression as it is used in the context of utterance)' (Fitzmaurice, 2016:260). According to Traugott's (2002) invited inference theory of semantic change, a speaker might produce an innovative use of an expression, building its polysemy by conveying a meaning that has the potential to catch on in a particular context. Semantic change then involves the conventionalisation of

the innovative meaning and reanalysis of the expression's meaning regardless of the context of use. The question is how we evaluate in social terms the nature of this changing pattern of polysemy which involves pragmatic strengthening and shifting prominence of pragmatic innovation. I argue that polysemy is structured socially. In other words, although speakers take polysemy for granted, at any particular time, some meanings will be particularly relevant or prominent than others for particular speakers, and those prime meanings will depend upon affective factors such as the speaker's social, temporal, experiential and ideological stance. This notion—contingent polysemy—rests on the assumption that polysemies operate within the broader discourse so that questions of collocation, lexical variation and rhetorical variation all contribute to the discursive context. This complex context then allows us to identify and explore the polysemies of terms and the structure of their contingency.

Crucial to the discursive context in which the term *politeness* is constantly reanalyzed and its various meanings are foregrounded is the concept of sincerity, namely, the identification of feeling with its avowal. However, the notion of sincerity itself is susceptible to variation, resulting in a complex social, moral and linguistic set of uses. What Woodman (1989: 25) labels the “strong cult of sincerity” plays a part in exposing and attenuating the “artifices and insincerities” of the polite world of the eighteenth century. My treatment of the relationship of politeness and sincerity is rooted in the assumption that it is in participants' treatment of one another's behaviour that the basis for evaluating and interpreting that behaviour in social terms as polite, politic, appropriate, etc. lies.<sup>1</sup> Politeness is thus simultaneously politic behaviour for some and polite behaviour for others even as it serves as a mode of conduct, a philosophical system, a commodity for self-advancement, a theory of sociability, for different social actors within the same historical space (see Fitzmaurice 2010; Haugh 2013: 54; Watts 2003: 200).

Key terms like *politeness* have complex polysemies that are structured in terms of the interactants and their discursive contexts. These are indexed in texts that comment on politeness in society, texts that seek to influence the way that politeness works in society as well as texts that attempt to represent the practice and effects of polite behaviour on society (see Fitzmaurice 2015). In this account, I track the ways in which the meanings and connotations of the lexicon of politeness and polite discourse accumulate and vary, contingently, on use and speakers. I argue that the distinctions between Langford's types of politeness summarized in Table 1 are ephemeral rather than categorical; different speakers understand (and use) politeness with the connotations that specific attributes invite depending upon their temporal, experiential and social stance throughout the period.

## 1.2. Sources and evidence

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<sup>1</sup> Haugh (2013: 53) observes that a key issue that has been neglected in im/politeness research is “how participants (and thus analysts) know something counts as im/polite, im/proper, in/appropriate and so on”. In my work tracking the changing meaning of *politeness*, a basic assumption is that participants' reception of and responses to behaviour is critical evidence for the evaluation of that behaviour.

My sources are drawn from *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (ECCO). Key texts are the *Spectator* (1711-1714) and Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son* (1774). Other sources were identified by searching for full-text occurrences of key cultural terms (and their variants) from the historical lexicon of politeness, including *politeness*, *civility*, *complaisance*, *compliment*, *service*, *good nature*, *good breeding*, *affability*, *artifice* and *flattery*. These generated a large corpus of material and ephemeral sources which forms the rich intertextual research context for this study, and from which a number of excerpts were selected for the purpose of illustration. The history of book culture and printing allows us to trace readership patterns by examining the extent to which texts continue to be reproduced and received throughout the period. Information about the producers (and consumers) of these texts (discourses), their socio-economic backgrounds, their social status, and their audiences enriches this evidence. Contemporary documents, including literary sources, popular print and instructional literature, provide the basis for examining how participants engage with the notion of politeness and how they apprehend and interpret its multiple senses. Reading this material closely with an awareness of the pragmatic resonances that the expression and its collocates produce informs the analysis of the contingent polysemy of *politeness*. Direct evidence is the metalinguistic and metadiscursive material that indicates people's stated views and allows us to infer the nature of their fears, anxieties and concerns about politeness as it is identified in linguistic and other forms of behaviour as well as in its material accoutrements. Indirect evidence consists of examples of the linguistic performance of politeness in the speech and writing of characters, fiction in which speech is represented in dialogues and in unprinted manuscript documents, such as personal or familiar letters.

I draw upon these different types of evidence to demonstrate the extent to which aspects of Langford's different types of politeness, specifically Spectatorial and Chesetrfieldian, co-exist and interact in complex ways for different speakers throughout the period. The evidence supports Watts' observation that "[t]he kinds of knowledge projected into the knowledge frame politeness may thus vary, from speaker to speaker, and, on the occasions of its use in social practice, different aspects of that knowledge frame may be made more salient than others" (Watts 2011: 112). In my own terms, the result is a situation of contingent polysemy, in which *politeness* has different attributes and components for individual speakers, depending upon their own identities, experiences and contexts.

In section 2, I argue that in the early part of the century there is a constant tension in the relationship of sincerity to politeness. This tension manifests itself in the evaluation of polite behaviour associated with the *Spectator* as negative or positive depending upon whether it is judged to be sincere or not. The variety of connotations of *politeness* is marked by shifting collocation patterns. In section 3, I argue that in the middle years of the century, Spectatorial and Chesterfieldian types of politeness co-exist as politeness is presented increasingly as a matter of form rather than the sincere consideration of the welfare of others. In this period, the polysemy of *politeness* is structured in particular social and temperamental ways. In section 4, I argue that the impact of the publication of

Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son* in the last quarter of the century is the popularisation of Chesterfieldian politeness as etiquette and manners. In section 5, I argue that in the early nineteenth century, Chesterfieldian politeness undergoes a process of moral rehabilitation which refreshes it for use in middle class English society at the same time that sensibility, the late eighteenth-century reflex of sincerity, loses its own appeal.

## 2. The *Spectator's* sociable politeness and the problem of sincerity

In 1711, Richard Steele devoted an entire *Spectator* paper to the "great and general want of Sincerity in Conversation", quoting extensively from John Tillotson's sermon "Of Sincerity towards God and Man", which was first preached in July 1694 (Bond 1965, 1: 430). Steele introduces the essay by presenting the views of his "Friend the Divine", a description that is rich with the lexicon of politeness. Indeed, as he prepares to point to the offensiveness of insincere flattery in sociable conversation, he highlights a number of keywords that had been associated with the conduct of "politeness" in England since the seventeenth century:

- (1) My Friend the Divine having been used with Words of Complaisance (which he thinks could be properly applied to no one living, and I think could be only spoken of him, and that in his Absence) was so extremely offended with the excessive way of speaking Civilities among us, that he made a Discourse against it at the Club, which he concluded with this Remark, that he had not heard one Compliment made in our Society since its Commencement. Every one was pleased with his Conclusion, and as each knew his good Will to the rest, he was convinced that the many Professions of Kindness and Service which we ordinarily meet with are not natural where the Heart is inclined, but are a Prostitution of Speech seldom intended to mean Any Part of what they express, never to mean what All they express. (Steele, *Spectator* no. 103, Thursday June 28, 1711)

The expressions "Complaisance", "Civility", "Compliment" and "Professions of Kindness and Service" attend the description of the agile, easy marshalling of conversation among social equals at the beginning of the eighteenth century. "Complaisance", borrowed from French in the course of the seventeenth century, at this time refers to the "action or habit of making oneself agreeable; a desire and care to please; compliance with, or deference to, the wishes of others" (*Oxford English Dictionary online*: "complaisance" *n.*). The sense of "civility" that is implied in this quotation is the "behaviour or speech appropriate to civil interactions" (*OED online*: "civility" *n.* 12.a.). This definition is neutral; what makes the "Civilities" offensive to the Divine is the manner in which they are delivered: "the excessive way of speaking Civilities". Similarly, "compliment" (see also *complement* < Latin), a term adopted directly from French at the end of the seventeenth century,<sup>2</sup> refers here to "a

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<sup>2</sup> Although the form "compliment" according to the *OED* (2015: "compliment" *n.*) was adopted at the end of the seventeenth century from French *compliment*, the form *complement*, taken directly from Latin, was in use in the same sense a century beforehand. The *OED* etymology contains the note that "in Old Catalan *complimento*, Spanish *cumplimiento*, there was a special development of use, as in the verb (see *COMPLY* *v.*<sup>1</sup>), giving the sense

ceremonious or formal tribute of (mere) courtesy or politeness paid to one” (*OED online*: “complement” *n.*). In Steele’s essay, these expressions are harnessed for the task of characterising a man’s discourse in negative terms: as extreme, highly marked, as insincere. To explain what *sincerity*—the opposite of what is implied in these terms—consists of, Steele quotes liberally (yet selectively) from Tillotson. For instance, he uses Tillotson to lament the absence of sincerity in the world and its replacement with “Foreign Manners and Fashions”, thereby juxtaposing these with the (now lost) native English virtues of “Plainness and Sincerity”.<sup>3</sup> However although Steele does not quote it, Tillotson’s own definition of sincerity is instructive in helping us understand what Addison and Steele seek to imbue Spectatorial politeness with:

- (2) Of Sincerity as it regards Men; and so it signifies a Simplicity of Mind and Manners in our Conversation, and Carriage one towards another; Singleness of Heart, discovering it self in a constant Plainness and honest Openness of Behaviour, free from all insidious Devices, and little Tricks, and Fetches of Craft and Cunning; from all false Appearances and deceitful Disguises of ourselves in Word or Action; or yet more plainly, it is to speak as we think, and do what we pretend and profess to perform and make good what we promise, and in a Word, really to be, what we would seem and appear to be. (Tillotson 1694: 15)

For Tillotson, sincerity consists of transparency of speech and behaviour. His lexicon of sincerity includes “simplicity”, “singleness”, “constant plainness” and “honest openness”. Its demonstration entails speaking one’s mind (“speak what we think”) and being true to one’s word (“do what we pretend and profess to perform and make good what we promise”). He argues that sincerity consists of one’s being and one’s seeming being identical (“really to be, what we would seem and appear to be”). In order to emphasise the oneness of being and seeming though, Tillotson has to use the vocabulary of dissimulation. Accordingly, he warns against the use of “insidious devices”, “Tricks”, “Fetches of Craft and Cunning”, “false appearances” and “deceitful Disguises” (not being what one appears to be). Indeed, then he uses the language of simulation to specify what sincere speaking and doing entails, namely, doing what “we pretend and profess”, being true to what we “promise”, truly being what “we would seem and appear to be”. Implicit in this disquisition is the place of the interlocutor; in being plain, transparent, honest and open to one’s interlocutor, one is necessarily plain, honest and true to oneself. Tillotson thus argues that sincerity is the identity of feeling with its avowal.

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‘observance or fulfilment of the requirements and forms of courtesy’, which was adopted in Italian in the form *compliment*, and thence passed into French and English. *Compliment* is thus a doublet of *COMPLEMENT n.* (the form directly < Latin). The latter was in use in this sense about a century before the introduction of the French word, which slowly took its place between 1655 and 1715” (*OED* 2015).

<sup>3</sup> “The World is grown so full of Dissimulation and Compliment, that Mens Words are hardly any Signification of their Thoughts; and if any Man measure his words by his Heart, and speak as he thinks, and do not express more Kindness to every Man, than Men usually have for any Man, he can hardly escape the Censure of want of Breeding. The old *English* Plainness and Sincerity, that generous Integrity of Nature, and Honesty of Disposition, which always argues true Greatness of Mind, and is usually accompany’d with undaunted Courage and Resolution, is in a great measure lost amongst us” (*Spectator* 103, Thursday June 28, 1711).

The achievement of sincerity in “Conversation and Carriage towards another” is no easy feat. Indeed, what does one do if one’s true feelings, if given voice, are likely to harm one’s interlocutor? Tillotson anticipates this problem and counsels, “[n]ot that we are obliged to tell every Man our Mind”. Indeed, “[w]e may be silent, and conceal as much of ourselves, as Prudence or any other good Reason requires; but we must not put on a Disguise, and make a false Appearance and empty Show of what we are not, either by Word or by Action” (Tillotson 1694: 15). He goes on to characterise what is “contrary to this Virtue”, namely, “that Complement, which is current in Conversation, and which is for the most Part nothing but Words, to fill up the Gaps, and supply the empty Discourse; and a Pretence to that Kindness and Esteem for Persons, which either in Truth we have not, or not to that degree which our Expressions seem to exhort” (Tillotson 1694: 15). Tillotson uses the antecedent form of “compliment”, namely “complement” (< Latin), to label the routine expression of a greater regard for an interlocutor than the speaker holds. He also uses the noun “pretence”, not in the sense of “assertion” (as earlier) but instead in the sense of “false profession” (*OED* 2015: “pretence” *n.* 5). So Tillotson provides Steele with the ballast to explore what happens to conversation in the absence of sincerity and his counsel arguably informs the construction of Spectatorial politeness.

Indeed, the *Spectator* does appear to shed light onto the ways in which polite behaviour, particularly as it was reflected in conversation, might be cast negatively (as insincere, flattery and artificial) or as positively (as sincere, easy, friendly, accommodating and true). If Addison and Steele treat politeness as a system for the conduct of sociable conversation among equals, and what’s more, as a system that can be learned and practised, they also identify the misuse or abuse of its features. For instance, Addison counts as a critical attribute of sociable conversation, “Good-nature”, namely, “that Disposition of Mind” which “gives a certain Air to the Countenance which is more amiable than Beauty”, “shows Virtue in the fairest Light”, and “makes even Folly and Impertinence supportable”:

- (3) There is no Society or Conversation to be kept up in the World without Good-nature, or something which must bear its Appearance, and supply its Place. For this Reason Mankind have been forced to invent a kind of Artificial Humanity, which is what we express by the Word *Good-Breeding*. For if we examine thoroughly the Idea of what we call so, we shall find it to be nothing else but an Imitation and Mimickry of Good-nature, or in other Terms, Affability, Complaisance and Easiness of Temper reduced into an Art. (*Spectator* No. 169. Thursday, Sept. 13, 1711)

Addison implicitly invokes sincerity as a criterion for distinguishing between genuine good nature (a quality which all people have the opportunity to be born with) and the mere appearance of it, which he labels “good breeding”. “Breeding” is construed in the period as “the results of training as shown in personal manners and behaviour” (*OED online*: “breeding” *n.* 4. 1888). Thus, although the presence of good nature is ideal for sociable conversation, it is not critical. In its absence, Addison asserts, true humanity is replaced by

“Art”: behaviour that is an approximation or the affectation of good nature. If Spectatorial politeness consists of “Affability, Complaisance and Easiness of Temper”, then it is true politeness, marked by the identification of feeling with its avowal. Thus, Spectatorial ‘politeness’ is positive and sincere. However, in the hands of people marked by “a kind of artificial Humanity, which consists of ‘Imitation and Mimickry”, “politeness” can be only the affectation or pretence of [true] politeness.

The *Spectator*’s observations about sincerity and artifice reflect the constant juxtaposition of different interpretations and evaluations of “politeness” in the social sphere. The persistent collocation of the keywords (*complaisance, compliment, civility*) in various contexts, often with new ones (for example, *good breeding, good nature, ease*) invites different evaluations of the brand of politeness discussed. Both Steele and Addison in their *Spectator* pieces distinguish between politeness and behaviour that is artificial, insincere. The literature of the whole century illuminates the ways in which speakers struggle with the fundamental tension between being true to oneself and avoiding falseness to others. Tillotson’s definitive statement on sincerity is never far away from this debate as his sermon is repeatedly reprinted throughout the century, often as a didactic piece collected with other texts for the edification of the young.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Mid-eighteenth century politeness: sincerity, hypocrisy, considerateness, selfishness

By the middle of the century, a number of different meanings of *politeness* co-exist in the universe of English printed discourse. However, the structure of its polysemy is contingent on the stance, identity, gender and social rank of the recipient. In this section, I examine the consequences for the polysemy of *politeness* of the idea that insincerity is a precondition for showing consideration for others, a key function of politeness. Further, politeness was understood to be of benefit or harm, depending upon the position and power of the recipient. So mid-eighteenth-century conversations examine whether politeness is less about concern for others than the concern to be thought well of by others, within a particularly artificial, social milieu.

*The World*, a mid-century periodical in the tradition of the *Spectator*, illustrates the nexus of different interpretations of politeness. Edward Moore, using the *eidolon* of Adam Fitz-Adam, edited this weekly periodical, which included contributors like Lord Chesterfield, Soame Jenyns and Horace Walpole. Like the *Spectator*, *The World* offers instruction as well as entertainment for its readership, the metropolitan middling sorts. Recalling the *Spectator*’s characterization of “good-breeding” as “Artificial Humanity”, *The World* goes further, declaring that politeness is “the art of reducing vice to a system that does not shock society”:

- (4) It is not virtue that constitutes the politeness of a nation, but the art of reducing vice to a system that does not shock society. POLITENESS (as I understand the word) is an

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<sup>4</sup> A late eighteenth century example is the fourth edition of an anthology of excerpts from influential texts, including Tillotson, Addison and Chesterfield. Anonymous (1785).

universal desire of pleasing others (that are not too much below one) in trifles, for a little time; and of making one's intercourse with them agreeable to both parties, by civility without ceremony, by ease without brutality, by complaisance without flattery, by acquiescence without sincerity. (*The World*, No 103, p. 266. 1766)

Adam Fitz-Adam's definition identifies as target qualities of this system the familiar cultural keywords, *civility*, *ease* and *complaisance*, as well as a new quality, *acquiescence*. These are contrasted with qualities that are presumably considered less desirable in achieving agreeable intercourse, namely, *ceremony*, *brutality*, *flattery* and, apparently incongruously, *sincerity*. However, in light of the very limited nature of *The World's* variety of politeness, the order of the juxtaposition of *acquiescence* with *sincerity* makes sense, given the implication that to acquiesce is to accept a state of affairs that may or may not be desirable.<sup>5</sup> If the goal is to smooth the experience of a temporary interaction over trivial matters, then the struggle involved in avoiding "being false to any man through being true to one's own self" is itself to be avoided in favour of acquiescence (Trilling 1972: 5). Adam Fitz-Adam helpfully construes his notion of politeness as fashion or modishness with the help of particular examples of behaviour:

- (5) A clergyman who puts his patron into a sweat by driving him around the room, till he has found the coolest place for him, is not polite. When Bubbamira changes her handkerchief before you, and wipes her neck, rather than leave you alone while she should perform the refreshing office in the next room, I should think she is not polite. When Boncoeur shivers on your dreary hill where for twenty years you have been vainly endeavouring to raise reluctant plantations, and yet professes that only some of the trees have been a little kept back by the late dry season; he is not polite; he is more; he is kind. When Sophia is really pleased with the stench of a kennel, because her husband likes that she should go and look at a favourite litter; she must not pretend to politeness; she is only a good wife. (*The World*, No 103, p. 266. 1766)

Foregrounded in *The World's* piece is the matter of making interaction pleasant for the interlocutor and easy for oneself. Accordingly, the clergyman who "puts his patron into a sweat by driving him around the room till he has found the coolest place for him, is not polite", because his zeal ("brutality") results in discomfort rather than ease for his companion. And the girl who attends to her personal appearance in company shows more concern for the ceremony of the "refreshing office" than for the sensibilities of her companions. These actions are, in *The World's* terms, not polite because they fail to meet the conditions of having "ease without brutality" or "civility without ceremony". The lack of politeness here is based on selfish notions of what is admissible in company. However, there is a different sort of lack of politeness, a variety that is positively viewed because it is motivated more by consideration for the other than for making one's own life easy. So when "Boncoeur", with a white lie, acknowledges the enormous effort expended on a

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<sup>5</sup> Note that the *OED online* gives the following definition of *acquiescence* (n. 2a) "passive assent to, compliance with, acceptance of something undesirable".

project that has yielded scant results, “he is not polite; he is more; he is kind”. And when a woman appears to take an interest in her husband’s dogs regardless of her own fine feelings, “she must not pretend to politeness; she is only a good wife”. These last two examples are marked by consideration for the feelings of the other at the expense of one’s own comfort and further, at the expense of one’s being true to oneself. Subordinating one’s own ease and comfort to another’s feelings takes judgment and subtlety. Adam Fitz-Adam’s examples illustrate the extent to which insincerity, indeed, hypocrisy, is crucial in succeeding in showing consideration for others. Clearly mid-eighteenth-century conversation about politeness questions whether “politeness can be protected from contamination by its close analogue dissimulation” (Davidson 2004: 46). Thus Fitz-Adam slyly includes the absence of sincerity in his definition of politeness, and it is this feature that increasingly marks the hostile reception and negative interpretation of *politeness* for the middling sorts in the middle of the century.<sup>6</sup>

Evidence for the public apprehension and construction of politeness as a mode of fashionable behaviour that is artificial and insincere as well as selfish and egotistical is its treatment in the fiction of the period. Increasingly, writers engage with questions about “women, politeness and insincerity” (Davidson 2004: 46). Mary Collyer’s epistolary novel, *Felicia to Charlotte* (2 vols., 1744-49) is concerned with the difficult navigation of courtship and marriage in the hinterlands of metropolitan polite society. Felicia’s letters contain extended discussions about the nature of reason and judgement, pleasure and passion and virtue and vice in the happiness of mankind.<sup>7</sup> Felicia’s intended and the novel’s hero, Lucius, is a man of feeling as well as reason. Collyer gives Lucius the task of arguing Rousseau’s thesis that “virtue reigns more universally than vice” (99), and that it is possible to see this most clearly by considering “the vices and virtues of all the known world”, including “wild uncultivated nations”. He avers:

- (6) [t]he moral sense, Madam, is a taste for what is amiable; that distinguishing faculty of the mind which makes us *feel*, ----sensibly and strongly *feel*, ---the harmony and discord of actions. It is the touch, the *ear* of the soul; while reason is the *eye* to regulate the exertions of this sympathetic faculty. The moral sense feels instantaneously without waiting for the slow deliberation of the rational powers, to know if it ought to do so: while reason is given us to reign supreme, to examine the fitness of the object by which we are intendered, and to regulate in what manner we must exert our benevolent offices, so as best to render our endeavours subservient to the general good and happiness (Collyer, 1744: 101)

Thus Collyer gives voice to *sensibility*, an increasingly important notion that places feeling, and the intensity of that feeling, at the centre of one’s response to people, events and

<sup>6</sup> Nevalainen & Tissari (2010:141) observe that “*politeness* does not necessarily equal sincerity”, as evidenced in a letter from Bishop Hurd in 1742, where he associates insincerity with a courtier’s politeness. They also quote Trusler’s dictionary in this respect (2010: 142). See below, example 17.

<sup>7</sup> Collyer was foremost a translator. She published *The Virtuous Orphan*, a translation of Marivaux’s *La Vie de Marianne* in instalments in the London Evening Post in 1742. (see Fullard, 2004).

things. In her novel, Lucius and Felicia represent the best hearts and minds and are the touch-stones of feeling and reason: *sensibility*. When Felicia congratulates her friend Charlotte on her match with “the gay, the tender Philario”, willing her to be happy, she uses the opportunity to offer a disquisition on the want of sincerity in politeness, thus:

- (7) You see, Madam, what an awkward creature I would have you. To dare to be happy is a thing so unfashionable, that it may possibly require some degree of resolution to withstand the shock of being thought that dull thing called a *fond wife*; but however unpolite it is to have any degree of affection subsist between those who ought to have the greatest, you have too much good sense to be ashamed of what must now not only be the essence of your happiness, but your highest glory. How strange is it, that a name, a mere sound, and a sound too to which we have no settled meaning, should have such an influence upon mankind, as to make them cancel all the engagements of duty, affection, and happiness; and even forfeit their hopes of a blissful futurity! what bewitching charm! what dire spell! what strange enchantment is contained in the word *polite*, that it should control our very passions, and make us suffer greater pangs of self-denial to become vicious, than would be sufficient to raise us to the highest attainments of heroic virtue!

Felicia’s ruminations on the highly unfashionable state of ordinary happy marriage chime with *The World’s* observation that a “good wife” should not try to be polite. Felicia spends some time marveling at the magical effect on people’s better natures—“duty, affection, and happiness”—of “polite”. Indeed, the primary sense of *polite* for Collyer’s heroine is marked, not by the concern for others, but the concern to be thought well of by others, within a particularly artificial, social milieu. Felicia goes so far as to assert that seeking to acquire the appearance of politeness involves denying one’s own true (better) feelings (*sensibility*) in favour of the artifice and vice of fashion and offers examples to illustrate the extent of the vicious enchantment in *politeness*:

- (8) To be thought *polite*, how many ladies affect vices they have not the least inclination for, and are contented to be fashionably miserable? To be thought *polite*, an old fop, decrepid with years, will keep a mistress, and have the insolence to boast of a thousand vices, which his years, one would think, exempted him from. To be thought *polite*, a man will contemn the too condescending affection of the stupid fool his wife, despise her easy virtue, and at the same time adore an impudent prostitute, who tyrannizes over him, and insults him with impunity. While a lady for the same reason (out of *politeness*) will abhor the nauseous fond wretch her husband. Thus a confused notion of *honour* (another word of the same kind, the letters of which I suppose are a kind of talisman) will make a coward go trembling to destruction and rush with horror into a dreaded eternity. Letter XIII (Collyer, 1744: 143)

What is interesting about Collyer’s moralizing reflection on fashionable *politeness* is the presupposition that for politeness to be noticed, people must demonstrate modes of behaviour and practices that are highly marked, unusual and uncharacteristic of them on

the one hand, and uncharacteristically vicious on the other. Her examples highlight the perception that politeness is associated with forms of behaviour that are beneficial to nobody; not to the people who “would be thought polite”, and not to the people they affect. The subjects themselves do not even incline to the actions they undertake; what drives them is the desire to appear polite to others. It is thus, pressure to perform on a public stage before others who observe and in observing, pass judgement. Collyer thus allows the inference that if politeness is an attribute of particular people from a certain milieu, then the procedure for identifying with and imitating those people consists of taking on their habits and predilections, which include immoral and vicious practices. She also allows the inference that the particular brand of viciousness consists of sexual dalliances for women and ‘gallantry’ for men. Collyer’s treatment of fashionable politeness illuminates the negative valence that the term gathers; she effectively argues that “politeness is a euphemism for something more insidious: politeness means tact, and tact equals lying; politeness means gallantry and gallantry equals adultery” (Davidson 2004: 47).

These pieces of evidence from the middle of the century demonstrate the ways in which the contexts and collocations in which *polite* and *politeness* occur widen to include readers who are predisposed to interpret the expressions as opprobrious in reference and connotation. For *The World* and its readers, *politeness* connotes the facile management of agreeable interaction in superficial and trivial matters. For Collyer, *politeness* connotes the absence of virtue and sincerity in the ordinary relationships that are fundamental to happiness. Both elaborate these meanings through illustrative examples which instruct the reader in interpretation. Thus the middling sorts that make up the mid-century reading public are primed to interpret *polite* as a variety of “good-breeding” associated with upper-class manners, a variety that is anathema to the virtues of sincerity and consideration.

Now around the same time that Mary Collyer was giving the horrors of politeness fictional treatment, Philip Dormer Stanhope, the fourth earl of Chesterfield, was writing to his illegitimate son, Philip, to instruct him in the acquisition of the social graces. The letters reflect an aristocratic perspective on the utility of the components of a refined and polished figure. Politeness, or ‘good-breeding’ in Chesterfield’s lexicon, is cast as an inventory of formal civilities, consisting of linguistic features including forms of address, a preferred lexicon, a preferred manner of speaking that all need to be adjusted and nuanced depending upon the interlocutor. In consequence, the letters indicate a markedly instrumental view of a set of manners that can be enumerated, defined, taught to somebody and applied to any situation. For example, on the conduct of conversation, Chesterfield writes,

- (9) I need not (I believe) advise you to adapt your conversation to the people you are conversing with: for I suppose you would not, without this caution, have talked upon the same subject, and in the same manner, to a minister of state, a bishop, a philosopher, a captain, and a woman. A man of the world must, like the chameleon, be able to take every different hue; which is by no means a criminal or abject, but a

necessary complaisance; for it relates only to manner and not to morals. (Letter LIV; Bath, October 19, 1748).

His advice seems to be perfectly reasonable: he implies that it is natural and appropriate to accommodate one's conversation to the status and identity of one's interlocutor, whether a bishop or a woman. Chesterfield's use of the chameleon, a creature that assumes the hue of the objects that it touches, is an apt illumination of his point as it implies that such adaptation and accommodation is quite natural. So carrying out this work involves *complaisance*: paying more attention to the expectations and desires of the interlocutor than to one's own true attitudes and feelings. For Chesterfield, accommodation is a matter of form (manners) rather than of substance (morals). Strikingly, Chesterfield's list of conversationalists is a social hierarchy defined by the speakers' offices and ranks; from the highest ("minister of state") to the lowest ("captain"). He reserves for his last example, a woman, a creature that is altogether different from the others. Chesterfield's letters to his son include a great deal of instruction on how to treat women and how to seek women's instruction. As for conversing with them, he says:

- (10) Your conversation with women should always be respectful; but, at the same time, *enjoué*, and always addressed to their vanity. Everything you say or do should convince them of the regard you have (whether you have it or not) for their beauty, their wit, or their merit. Men have possibly as much vanity as women, though of another kind; and both art and good-breeding require, that, instead of mortifying, you should please and flatter it, by words and looks of approbation. (Letter XC, 1749)

By advising that one accommodate to one's interlocutor, he renders sincerity redundant or irrelevant. In this extract (10), he advises particular attention to women's vanity, but more, he urges his pupil to persuade his addressee of his regard for their beauty and wit, or (presumably if it is not feasible to do this) their merit. It is in this injunction to please and flatter the vanity of women (and men) that Chesterfield makes clear the distinction between 'art and good-breeding' and sincerity. In the same letter, he discusses the importance of the style adopted in the work of engaging one's interlocutors:

- (11) Upon my word, I do not say too much, when I say that superior good-breeding, insinuating manners, and genteel address, are half your business. Your knowledge will have but little influence upon the mind, if your manners prejudice the heart against you; but, on the other hand, how easily will you DUPE the understanding, where you have first engaged the heart? And hearts are by no means to be gained by that mere common civility which everybody practices. Bowing again to those who bow to you, answering dryly those who speak to you, and saying nothing offensive to anybody, is such negative good-breeding that it is only not being a brute; as it would be but a very poor commendation of any man's cleanliness to say he did not stink. It is an active, cheerful, officious, seducing, good-breeding that must gain you the good-will and first sentiments of men, and the affections of the women. (Letter XC. 1748/9)

He argues that going through the motions, bowing when being bowed to, speaking only when spoken to, “saying nothing offensive to anybody”, in short, “common civility” amounts to “negative good-breeding”. This is not the absence of manners but the perfunctory performance of routine gestures and rules for the interaction with others. He argues that in order to “dupe” people’s “understanding”, it is first necessary to “engage their hearts”. This requires the positive, active and “seducing” practice of manners that distinguishes and sets apart the seducer from everybody else. The keyword encountered here in the context of “politeness”, namely, *civility*, is rendered empty and superficial as it is presented as common, as ordinary. He implies that to make one’s politeness effective and beneficial to oneself takes talent, effort, and self-consciousness. The positive value Chesterfield gives to the performance of respectful, persuasive and flattering conversation in the wider discourse context of the period makes his views susceptible to disapproval by those who rate sincerity more highly than agreeable interaction. Indeed, his notion of politeness consists precisely of what Tillotson abhors, namely the clear distancing of one’s words and demeanour from one’s heart. The extent to which attention to Chesterfield’s particular construction of politeness seems prevalent in the discourse of the mid eighteenth century is evidenced by the fact that writers like Mary Collyer and periodicals like *The World* and *The Connoisseur* devote considerable effort and paper to the discussion of politeness as vice.

The structure of the polysemy of *politeness* in the middle of the century is contingent on the stance, identity, gender and social rank of the recipient. In other words, an individual’s social rank and position and personal attributes (e.g. gender, social rank, age, and attitudes and ideology) prime the individual for a preferred or primary interpretation of *politeness*. In particular, politeness is understood to be of benefit or harm, depending upon the position and power of the recipient. For example, for the middle-aged aristocrat and grandee, Chesterfield (and his pupil son), the primary set of senses is social: it has to do with the acquisition and practice of aristocratic refined manners in speech, comportment and appearance to show one’s best side in appropriate company. In contrast for the working woman novelist, Mary Collyer, the primary associations of *politeness* consist of artifice and pretence in pursuit of fashionable narcissism at the expense of sincerity, sensibility and honesty. For Adam Fitz-Adam and *The World*, the polysemy of *politeness* allows the consideration of degrees of sincerity and degrees of artifice in the achievement of agreeable interaction among different types. This consideration includes aspects of Spectatorial sociable politeness as well as both positive and negative aspects of Chesterfield’s egotistical politeness. Thus the middle of the eighteenth century witnesses the co-existence of multiple senses of *politeness*—polysemy—in the discourse universe. Importantly, not all speakers share or access all of its senses equally. Because individuals’ particular social, personal and affective circumstances are key in shaping their understanding and interpretation, some senses and connotations within the polysemy of *politeness* are more prominent than others.

#### 4. Chesterfield and the codification of politeness as etiquette and good manners

The publication of Chesterfield's letters in 1774 by Philip's widow, Eugenia Stanhope, effectively codified the peculiarly aristocratic brand of politeness that marked the mid-century. The letters' publication created such a furore that it occasioned the coining of the term "Chesterfieldism" as "shorthand for aristocratic delinquency" in the period (Langford 1991: 541). Henry Hodgson used the term in an allegorical piece, *The Analyzer*, about the ways in which envy and politeness overshadow virtue and goodness. Mercury, Jove's messenger,

(12) Finding at length his open efforts were vain, he had recourse to stratagem and of several infernal ingredients, formed two seeds which, unknown to any of the tutelary deities of mankind he sowed near the others, hoping to destroy their effects. These seeds were envy and the whole circle of Chesterfieldism, the effectual destroyers of our peace, and of that sincerity, and those virtues which seem to have been designed for the strongest ties of society, of friendship, and the fruitful source of all that can felicitate human life. (Hodgson, 1778, np)

In a footnote providing a gloss of the term, Hodgson notes, "in the original of this piece, written long before the publication of Chesterfield's pernicious Letters, the seeds were Envy and Politeness". The fact that Hodgson decides to replace "politeness" with "the whole Circle of Chesterfieldism" underlines the extent to which Chesterfield's "system" had invaded the semantic space of "politeness". It is instructive that Hodgson invokes "sincerity" and "virtue" as the victims of Chesterfieldism, recalling Collyer's reflections on the impact of the public understanding of fashionable politeness on what Hodgson characterizes as "the strongest ties of friendship". The question is to what extent Hodgson's response to Chesterfield's letters is more widespread.

In fact, the fiction of the period provides cogent evidence that Chesterfield's brand of politeness was received with dismay and disapproval. In 1777, Samuel Jackson Pratt, using the pseudonym, Courtney Melmoth, produced a satirical novel, *The Pupil of Pleasure*. The story of the seduction of Harriet, an honest curate's wife, by a cynical younger practitioner of Chesterfieldian maxims is set in Buxton, a "place of politeness" as an up-and-coming spa town. Pratt lays out his approach in his preface after presenting a summary assessment of Chesterfield's brand of politeness (viii-ix):

(13) The essence of my Lord CHESTERFIELD'S system seems to be neither more nor less than this: Secure yourself from being blasted, as he terms it, and do whatever you think proper: whatever fancy, passion, whim or wickedness, suggest, only command your countenance, check your temper, and throw before your heart and bosom the shield of Dissimulation, and snatch it—seize it—enjoy it. In regard to women—never surely issued from the press a collection of hints so capable of being turned to their destruction: and the sex ought to be alarmed at their publication (which, however, one of their own sex has ushered into the world) than at anything that ever was pointed at their peace of mind, or purity of character.

The implicitly male addressee of Pratt's preface is offered a summary of Chesterfield's "system", which consists principally of avoiding paying for the pursuit and enjoyment of one's desires by ensuring one is in control. Pratt is far more concerned for the wellbeing of women as the targets of such "passion, whim or wickedness". In the novel, Pratt's villain, Philip Sedley, studies Chesterfield's precepts and applies them explicitly and diligently in his pursuit and subsequent ruin of Harriet. The author asserts the morally blinding effect of upper-class refinement and artificiality. What is self-control and "keeping up appearances" for some is regarded as dissimulation and deception by others. Accordingly, the meanings of *politeness* depend upon the rank, gender and social background of the speaker; to the upper-class man from town, "polite" behaviour is aligned with Chesterfield's precepts and as it benefits him, is to be practised for his own advantage. In stark contrast, for the middle-class woman, possibly from the provinces, "polite" behaviour is to be viewed with wariness and suspicion if it is applied to her with upper-class masculine manners. Compelling (if surprising) support for Sedley's construal of Chesterfieldian politeness is embodied in a novel attributed to one of the most prominent and notorious female members of the *bon ton*, Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire. To the British public, the Duchess epitomized the grand lady of fashion but she also symbolised the apogee of aristocratic vice. In 1779, *The Sylph* was published; an epistolary novel featuring a young woman "unlearned in the polite world" who marries one of Chesterfield's pupils of pleasure. The novel plays with the Richardsonian idea of the provincial young heroine who is snatched up by a man who cannot resist her, only to discover that as soon as they reach Town and enter the *ton*, she is as far removed from virtue and innocence as she is from Wales. In this extract (14), she refers to the need for a 'dictionary of polite phrases' because she is unable to understand the talk of the town:

- (14) I blush twenty times a day at my own stupidity, --and then sir William tells me, "it is so immensely '*bere* to blush;' which makes me blush ten times more because I don't understand what he means by that expression, and I am afraid to discover my ignorance; and he has not patience to explain every ambiguous word he uses but cries, shrugging up his shoulders, *ah! quel savage!* and then composes his ruffled spirits by humming an Italian air. (Devonshire, 1779, 1: 62).

Julia's "stupidity" and "ignorance" arise from her lack of familiarity with the code adopted by her husband, Sir William. He in turn affects frustration at her *gaucheness* (hence her blushing) and her *naiveté* and exacerbates the situation by using the code, which includes French phrases, recalling Chesterfield's advice on conversing with women in example (10). Julia also ruminates on the content of what Sir William represents to her as "polite life":

- (15) [Sir William] may have a high opinion of my integrity and discretion; but he ought in my mind to have reflected how very young I was; and, he scruples not frequently to say, how totally unlearned in polite life. . . . I am following the taste of Sir William; but I am (if I may be allowed to say so) too artless. Perhaps what I think is his

inclination, may be only to make trial of my natural disposition. Though he may choose to live in the highest *ton*, he may secretly wish his wife a more retired turn. How then shall I act? I do every thing with a cheerful countenance; but that proceeds from my desire of pleasing him. I accommodate myself to what I think is his taste; but owing to my ignorance of mankind, I may be defeating my own purpose. I once slightly hinted as much to Lady Besford. She burst out into a fit of laughter at my duteous principles. I supposed I was wrong, by exciting her mirth: this is not the method of reforming me from my errors; but thus I am; but thus I am in general treated. It reminds me of a character in the *Spectator*, who, being very beautiful, was kept in perfect ignorance of every thing, and who, when she made any enquiry in order to gain knowledge, was always put by, with, "You are too handsome to trouble yourself about such things." This, according to the present fashion, may be polite; but I am sure it is neither friendly nor satisfactory. (Devonshire, 1779, 1: 132-134)

Julia has to guess at her sophisticated husband's expectations of her; she wants to please him but it is not obvious to her what she must do and nobody will tell her how to achieve this end. Julia's *Spectator* allusion offers the occasion to review the content of politeness. We infer that its construction as flattery without true consideration of the subject is taken from the *Spectator* critique of politeness in the absence of sincerity, good nature and affability. Cavendish's judgement that keeping Julia in ignorance may be "polite", but that it is neither "friendly" nor "satisfactory" recalls Adam Fitz-Adam's distinction of politeness from true consideration for others. Cavendish (an insider) thus appears to play with the Chesterfieldian use of "polite" to describe the fashionable upper-class metropolitan milieu, what Julia calls the "highest *ton*".

The vain attempt of Cavendish's heroine, Julia, to ascertain the taste of her (vicious but polite) husband and to act accordingly illustrates the enduring perception that the city is the locus of sophistication and vice. Addison describes Sir William's type in his *Spectator* 119 (Tuesday, July 17, 1711) in which he discusses a "Revolution in the Point of Good Breeding, which relates to the Conversation among Men of Mode", noting that whereas once, "[i]t was certainly one of the first Distinctions of a well-bred Man to express every thing that the most remote Appearance of being obscene in modest Terms and distant Phrases",

(16) at present several of our Men of the Town, and particularly those who have been polished in *France*, make use of the most coarse uncivilized Words in our Language, and utter themselves often in such a manner as a Clown would blush to hear. This infamous Piece of Good Breeding, which reigns among the Coxcombs of the Town, has not yet made its way into the Country; (*Spectator* 119, Tuesday, July 17, 1711)

Addison's "infamous Piece of Good Breeding" refers to the behaviour of fashionable city men who had been "polished in *France*", behaviour which seems to persist among metropolitan men for much of the century. Here "Good Breeding" has more to do with a particular form of learned behaviour than Shaftesbury's notion of polite good breeding as

an innate quality of aristocratic men and thus seems to anticipate Chesterfield's use of the term. By the last quarter of the century, then, there is evidence that the *Spectator* remains a source for the evaluation of conversation in terms of politeness as a sociable mode of interaction. At the same time, the notion of polite intercourse as intended to please one's interlocutor even if it means not being true to oneself (complaisance without sincerity) is well established as a tenet of good manners (politic behaviour). Labelling a particular class or group of people and their attributes as "polite" carries other (negative) implications and connotations. The persistent association of "polite society" with "good breeding" results in the application of the term "polite" as a means of (negatively) classifying a particular social group (metropolitan, noble or upper rank males). As evidenced by the critiques mounted by Henry Hodgson and Samuel Jackson Pratt, the middling sorts both envy and fear what they judge to be the moral turpitude of the *ton*, "the politer part of mankind", as they observe them from a social distance.

However, extricated from the life and person of the author himself, Chesterfield's published letters were regarded as recipes for correct and refined speech, the acquisition of accomplishments like dancing, table manners and comportment. For instance, the Rev. Dr. John Trusler "digested and methodised" Chesterfield's letters, publishing them as *Principles of Politeness* in 1775 (producing more than twenty editions thereafter) (Major, 2004). The publication and reception history of Chesterfield's letters illuminates the way in which mid-century "politeness" is realized and received as mere etiquette in the last quarter of the century. Indeed, despite being reviled for the cynical and self-serving notions of politeness and manners elaborated, Chesterfield's Letters were immensely popular.<sup>8</sup> Langford (1991: 542) comments that "much of the 'politeness' printed under Chesterfield's name commended itself to those who sought a guide to the canons of contemporary gentility". According to John Brewer (1997: 183), Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son* was the most popular book classified as *belles-lettres* borrowed by the members of the Bristol library between 1774 and 1784, followed by Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. These borrowers were likely to be members of the city's elites and merchant and trading classes.

The extent to which the social construction of "politeness" shifts to accommodate good manners, whether conducted with sincerity or not, is expressed in a late eighteenth-century guide for "all who would either write or speak with Propriety and Elegance", under the headings "Complaisant, Polite, Well-bred":

(17) *Complaisance* rises from the respect we shew those whom we meet; is sometimes sincere, sometimes not; *politeness*, from the flattering methods we make use of in our behaviour and conversation, and is generally insincere; but to be *well-bred* is to shew the same honours always with sincerity.

*Complaisance* is the characteristic of the lover; *politeness* of the courtier; but to be *well-bred* denotes the gentleman.

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<sup>8</sup> A cursory search of ECCO for editions of Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son* indicate no fewer than ten separate editions published in England, Ireland and America between 1774 and 1797.

We should be *complaisant* without importunity; and *polite* without insipidity. The distinguishing mark of a *well-bred* man is the constant care he takes never to disgust or offend (Trusler 1783: 86).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as a compiler of Chesterfield's letters and as a writer of guides for the edification and education of young people, Rev. Dr. John Trusler presents readings of the keywords *complaisance* and *polite* that are indebted to Chesterfield. He invokes sincerity in his attempt to distinguish among the terms; he presents *politeness* as "generally insincere" whereas being "well-bred" involves performing the same offices, but "with sincerity". *Complaisance*, the term that appears to be most consistently associated with *politeness*, may be sincere or insincere. Trusler attributes these terms to different ranks (of men): the lover, the courtier and the gentleman, and in the process, offers a set of socially nuanced, gendered distinctions. At the same time, by yoking together in this way the figures of the lover, the (Renaissance) courtier and the late eighteenth-century gentleman, he removes the terms from their historical contexts, arguably reinvigorating them for the period.<sup>9</sup>

By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, *politeness* remains contingently polysemous, commanding a number of interpretations and uses for different people. It is persistently used to classify a particular group—metropolitan, aristocratic people, mainly men—and their behaviour: what the *Spectator* had labelled "the politer part of mankind" (*Spectator* 119, Tuesday July 17, 1711). For this "polite" class, identified with Chesterfield's system by the end of the period, *politeness* has positive connotations of self-interest and egotistical advantage. For those outside this class who are the observers, and perhaps the recipients (victims) of this behaviour, like Cavendish's Julia (a product and practice of this peculiarly metropolitan masculine group), *politeness* is vicious and harmful.

However, when dissociated from a particular group of people, and concentrated into a primer designed to instruct young people in the arts of conversation, manners and comportment in company, *politeness* is understood to be positively beneficial and educational. Chesterfield's (amoral) brand of politeness was re-analysed and rehabilitated in the world of the middling sorts so that politeness was recast as manners in moral terms. The evidence for this moral reanalysis lies in the regularity with which "miscellaneous pieces selected from the best English writers" are "disposed under proper heads" in anthologies for the "improvement of youth in reading and speaking" such as that produced by William Enfield (1774). This particular collection included under the heading "Didactic pieces", *Spectator* pieces "On Modesty" and "On Cheerfulness"; an extract, "On Sincerity", from Tillotson, the *Guardian's* "On Honour", and a piece entitled "On the Advantages of uniting Gentleness of Manners with Firmness of Mind", attributed to Lord Chesterfield. This and other examples illustrate that the notion of politeness was constructed as positively beneficial and educational, as a set of virtues that could be acquired to the credit of the subject. Politeness could be construed as and, indeed, became a cover term for good

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<sup>9</sup> See Carter (2002: 337) for discussion of eighteenth-century treatments of the Renaissance courtier.

manners: the collection of *a priori* rules and prohibitions governing the appropriate conduct of social interaction with others.

5. Contingent polysemy and the role of sincerity in the moral rehabilitation of politeness

To test the apparent resolution of the tensions attending the interpretation and practice of politeness throughout the eighteenth century in the distillation of *politeness* as good manners for middle class usage, let's consider one last piece of evidence, provided by Jane Austen. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Austen gives us occasion to reflect on the social good that *politeness*—good manners—can do. In this novel, (true) politeness is, in pragmatic terms, politic behaviour. It consists of behaviour that has content: demeanour, attitude, tone of voice, as well as table manners, decorum, comportment, self-control and good sense. As politic behaviour, it is appropriate both to the situation and to the company. Equally, when speakers demonstrate minimal control of its forms and little regard for the nature of the situation, with negative effects, they are shown to be impolite. In the following example (18), the heroine, Elinor Dashwood, encounters Robert Ferrars whose “gay unconcern” and “happy self-complacency of his manner” cement “her most unfavourable opinion of his head and heart”. She observes the reaction of Robert Ferrars to the news that his brother Edward has secured a clergyman's living to enable him to marry Lucy Steele, a social inferior. Specifically, he bursts into intemperate and in Elinor's opinion, “immoderate” laughter:

(18) Elinor, while she waited in silence and immovable gravity the conclusion of such folly, could not restrain her eyes from being fixed on him with a look that spoke all the contempt it excited. It was a look, however, very well bestowed, for it relieved her own feelings and gave no intelligence to him. He was recalled from wit to wisdom, not by any reproof of hers but by his own sensibility.

“We may treat it as a joke,” said he at last, recovering from the affected laugh which had considerably lengthened out the genuine gaiety of the moment--“but upon my soul, it is a most serious business. Poor Edward! He is ruined forever. I am extremely sorry for it—for I know him to be a very good-hearted creature, as well-meaning a fellow, perhaps, as any in the world. You must not judge of him, Miss Dashwood, from *your* slight acquaintance.—Poor Edward!----His manners are certainly not the happiest in nature.—But we are not all born, you know, with the same powers—the same address.—Poor fellow!—to see him in a circle of strangers!  
(Austen, 1811: 251)

Jane Austen's treatment of her reasonable heroine's response to Robert Ferrars's extreme response appears to owe something to Chesterfield's injunctions to his son about polite behaviour. Specifically, Elinor's demeanour and attitude—her “silence”, her “immovable gravity” and the “look that spoke . . . contempt”—recall Chesterfield's instructions about dissimulation. Elinor demonstrates her command of self-control, of maintaining her composure so that her true feelings may escape detection. Thus Elinor's “look” allows her to express her contempt without actually communicating it to her

interlocutor. In contrast, Ferrars exhibits a distinct lack of self-control in his extravagant behaviour. She waits for Ferrars to recover his “wisdom” through his own “sensibility” (here, the settling of his violent emotions), and allows him to comment on the “joke”, which he does, lamenting that his brother’s “manners are certainly not the happiest in nature”. Ironically, as he declares that his brother Edward lacks “the same powers—the same address”, Robert Ferrars reveals that he himself does not satisfy the expectations of a true gentleman as prescribed by Chesterfield. Elinor practises Chesterfield’s principles of politeness, no doubt mediated by the work of compilers such as Trusler and Enfield, to good effect. She embodies the neutral and measured performance of conversational manners, ensuring she does not reveal her true feelings. In contrast, Robert Ferrars displays the behaviour borne from “his own dissipated course of life”; he represents all that Chesterfield enjoins his son to avoid as a gentleman. Austen thus appropriates key aspects of Chesterfieldian “art” and “good-breeding” and demonstrates how they can be shown to be used virtuously as well as viciously. Tandon (2003: 18) notes that by the time Austen came to write fiction in the late 1780s, she could “not rely on conversational manners as naturally virtuous, binding forces, even as she made dialogue one of her major stylistic and ethical techniques”. He observes that “between the time of *The Spectator* and *Northanger Abbey*...the ‘culture of politeness’ had become more disparate and threatened, bearing diverse and often perverse fruits” (2003: 18). For Austen, then, *politeness* is demonstrably contingently polysemous.

## 6. Concluding remarks:

The universe of eighteenth-century discourse as represented by the texts witnesses the persistence of the construction of politeness in conversational interaction as highly dependent upon the identity of speakers: their social rank and status and, crucially, their gender. Masculine politeness is associated with egotistical civility on the one hand—as evidenced in Chesterfield’s system for male etiquette and its reception—and altruistic sociability on the other—as embodied in the *Spectator* papers. In this regard, women are excluded from the masculine social sphere, as illustrated in the fictional treatment by Mary Collyer and Georgiana Cavendish. However, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, *politeness* comes to be understood as positively beneficial and educational and accessible to women. Chesterfield’s (amoral) brand of politeness was re-analysed and rehabilitated in the world of the middling sorts so that politeness was recast as manners in moral terms. Finally, Jane Austen’s brand of politeness—as altruistic manners finely judged according to situation, space and speakers—establishes the predominant meaning of *politeness* today. As speakers understand *sincerity* as “genuineness of feeling” rather than as “honesty”, it becomes easier to construe and adopt a politeness that is considerateness without having to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of being honest.

The evidence, garnered from a range of eighteenth-century sources, indicates that meanings of the term *politeness* co-exist and compete in a relationship of contingent

polysemy. The structure of the word's polysemy varies according to the speaker, so that particular meanings are more prominent for one person than for another depending upon their historical setting, personal and social identity and experiential stance. Over time, some meanings strengthen and influence the construal of the term while others fall out of use and disappear. The notion of sincerity is a critical component of the specific discursive context in which individuals apprehend the content of polite behaviour and evaluate it as virtuous or vicious. The (semasiological) history of the term *politeness* includes the semantic change of *sincerity*; *politeness* shifts over time from referring to a mode of (honest) sociable interaction to a display of (genuinely felt) personal manners.

The (onomasiological) history of the concept of politeness consists of a shifting lexicon that is reflected in our source texts; in some, the notion of politeness is associated with *breeding*, masculinity and *flattery*, in others, *good nature*, *simplicity* and *openness*, or *selfishness*, *ceremony* and *civility*, and in still others, it is associated with *self-control*, *considerateness* and *manners*. This analysis indicates that the semantic differences between Langford's modes of eighteenth-century politeness are both more ephemeral and more fluid than they seem.

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