Introduction

The subject

Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury, is often assigned an important role in having shaped the interests and ideas of a wide range of eighteenth-century writers, in Britain and on the Continent. This role has several facets. He is perhaps best known as a sentimental moralist whose insistence on natural sociability and a moral sense was highly influential among ethical writers. He is also well known as a deist of a strongly anti-ecclesiastical bent. Moreover, his interest in the arts has made him an object of study by those concerned with the histories of philosophical aesthetics and criticism.

This study presents Shaftesbury as a political writer. He has not been entirely ignored from this standpoint, but scholarly attention has focussed on a brief spell in the 1690s when he was closely associated with a circle of advanced Whigs in which radical religious and political ideas flourished. It is symptomatic of the lack of attention to Shaftesbury’s political concerns that there has been little attention to the ideological significance of his major work, Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, of 1711. One objective of this study is to provide a political analysis of this important text.

My intention, however, is not simply to draw attention to another side of Shaftesbury, since I follow Joseph Rykwert’s suggestion that the fundamental matrix of Shaftesbury’s thought was socio-political: his moralism, his deism, and his aesthetic interests were all harnessed to a political project. Moreover, far from being an exercise in Whig radicalism, that project was nothing less than the legitimation of the post-1688 Whig regime. As, in his view, the Revolution had definitively established the dominance of gentlemen over English society and politics, so it ushered in an era of gentlemanly culture, the norms and content of which he was attempting to envision.

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But a close look at Shaftesbury is more than an opportunity to reassess his particular historical place. Since, as I argue, the centerpiece of his complicated project was his notion of politeness, he becomes an important guide to his era. The language of politeness was, of course, a major idiom in the eighteenth century, entering into a wide range of discussions. Moreover, the eminence of this idiom reflected defining characteristics of eighteenth-century society and culture. Recent scholarly interest in the history of manners and the development of the public sphere as well as long-standing efforts to understand the social and institutional organization of old regime societies have combined to move such topics as civility and politeness nearer the foreground of scholarly concern in the early modern period. The study of Shaftesbury's writings opens perspectives on cultural institutions and practices of the eighteenth century, helping us to see what politeness was intended to convey and what historical circumstances it was intended to conceptualize.

Shaftesbury’s Characteristicks was one of several works during the reign of Queen Anne in which politeness assumed a classic form: it need only be remembered that, within weeks of the publication of Characteristicks, the Spectator began its extraordinarily influential run. Whereas Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, in the Tatler and Guardian as much as in the Spectator, used the resources of print culture to disseminate polite moralism to a broad audience, Shaftesbury was, much more, the philosopher of politeness, aiming at an intellectual and social elite.

Nonetheless, Shaftesbury’s opinions had resonance and exercised considerable persuasiveness through much of the eighteenth century. Characteristicks was an immediate success and went through at least ten editions in Britain between 1711 and the 1790s. It is well-known that, in the name of egoism, Bernard Mandeville attacked the Shaftesburian account of natural sociability and that, in the name of a polite Christianity, George Berkeley attacked Shaftesbury’s deism. Whatever weaknesses in Shaftesbury’s thought Mandeville and Berkeley exposed, the fact that Shaftesbury provoked such deep critiques suggests that he was, in fact, influential. And, of course, Shaftesbury had his followers. There were numerous Shaftesburians in England, but, more significantly, Francis Hutcheson was inspired by Shaftesburian ideas, passing them to numerous Scottish writers. In short, Shaftesbury needs to be taken seriously because the eighteenth century did so. The rest of this introduction sketches briefly the idiom of politeness and its relation to the general historical setting before returning to an account of Shaftesbury’s career and the manner in which the argument of this book unfolds.
Introduction

A language

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

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

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


5 Spectator, No. 13 (March 15, 1711) and No. 218 (November 9, 1711), Bond, I, 59, and II, 349; Tatler, No. 39 (July 9, 1709), Bond, I, 281–287.
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rare definition, “a dextrous management of our Words and Actions, whereby we make other People have better Opinions of us and themselves.” These formulations indicated the social, psychological and formal dimensions of the term. First, “politeness” was situated in “company,” in the realm of social interaction and exchange, where it governed relations of the self with others. While allowing for differences among selves, “politeness” was concerned with coordinating, reconciling or integrating them. Second, it subjected this domain of social life to the norm of “pleasing.” The gratification nurtured by “politeness” was psychological, the amelioration of people’s senses of themselves and of others. Thus, “politeness” presupposed an intersubjective domain in which the cultivation and exchange of opinions and feelings were involved. Third, “politeness” involved a grasp of form. It was an art or technique, governing the “how” of social relations. “Politeness” concerned sociability but was not identical with it: while human sociability was a primal and original stuff requiring work, “politeness” was a refined sociability, bringing aesthetic concerns into close contiguity with ethical ones. Although “politeness” implied that sociability was enhanced by good form, tension might arise between these principles; for instance, when “politeness” declined into mere formality or ceremoniousness, it could be portrayed as hostile to true sociability.

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

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

* Abel Boyer, The English Theophrastus (1702), pp.106, 108. The second formulation was borrowed from La Rochefoucauld.
suitable for conversation, but it is wrong to assume that politics or even religion was excluded by all conversational theorists. Similarly, the degree of seriousness and rationality to be expected in civil conversation varied in different accounts of it.

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

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

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

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

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social relations in view. It fixed knowledge in a firm ethical and social grid, flagged by such key words as “judgment” and “taste.” Polite learning was also the stuff of gentlemanly conversation. What was inimical to politeness in learning was aspersed as “pedantry.” This label was a social category since it damned its object as lacking qualities of a polite gentleman.8

This sort of language was easily moveable from discussion of kinds of subject matter to kinds of literary manner. Literary politeness served as an umbrella for a range of stylistic and critical campaigns. The central trait of stylistic politeness was sketched by a writer who observed that “Study makes a greater Difference between a Scholar and an ignorant Man, than there is between an Ignorant Man and a Brute: but the air of the World yet makes a greater distinction still, between a Polite and learned Person. Knowledge begins the Gentleman, and the Correspondence of the World compleats him.”9 The amalgamation of gentleman and scholar became a virtual paradigm of polite writing.

This ideal assigned conversation an exemplary role in written discourse, requiring that a polite text be not only gentlemanly but specifically conversational. As early as John Dryden, conversation was identified as perhaps the most important component of literary refinement.10 In his writings, Dryden sketched a process of conversationalization that later writers would restyle as literary politeness. Not surprisingly, a language of gentlemanly social behavior was imported into discussion of texts. Since a true gentleman would bring to his writing all the knowledge and grace that he applied in all aspects of his life, good writing had precisely those qualities that the polite gentleman had. For John Hughes, “a free Air and gentile Motion” characterized the mental life of the gentleman. For Henry Felton, the gentleman’s style had “inimitable Grace,” “Delicacy and Civility.”11

“Politeness” was applied to all sorts of expressive forms, validating comparison among literary and intellectual genres, but its applicability did not end there. Its further aggrandizement was bolstered by its classici-

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8 See Steven Shapin, “‘A Scholar and a Gentleman’: The Problematic Identity of the Scientific Practitioner in Early Modern England,” History of Science, 29 (1991), 279–327. However, where Shapin emphasizes the irreconcilability of learning and gentlemanliness, I see learning being regulated by standards of gentlemanliness.

9 Saint-Evremond, Miscellaneous Essays, p.206. This essay is not recognized as a genuine Saint-Evremond text and does not appear in the Terino edition, cited above.


zation. The language of "politeness" could bear the burdens of literary classicism since ancient writings were said to be the epistle of "politeness." Moreover, "politeness" was used to characterize classical culture generally. Saint-Evremond gave a lead to the conflation of the polite and the classical by locating among the ancients a precedent for his polite trivium of ethics, politics, and literature: "every one knows that Greece has given to the World, the greatest Philosophers, and the greatest Legislators: And one cannot deny, but that other Nations have taken from thence all the Politeness they have had." The classicization of "politeness" bolstered the term's potency as a mode of cultural generalization and correlated it with the terms of classicist historicism.

The capacity of "politeness" to provide conceptual organization to various forms and levels of social and cultural life made it a mode of cultural discourse. Such a cultural discourse, generalizing about the moral features of individuals and groups as such features were embodied in practices, issued in estimations of "manners," "mores," "characters," and "characteristics." "Politeness" coordinated description and prescription, allowing a writer to perform verbal acts, of considerable complexity, in which the past and present of expressive forms were used for ideological purposes. It enabled a moralized and politicized view of culture of the sort that has been more commonly examined in the nineteenth century than in the eighteenth. The writings of the third earl of Shaftesbury were an exemplary instance of this sort of discourse.

Tracing the expansion of the range of "politeness" produces a map of a rich semantic world, about which two related generalizations can be made. First, "politeness" infused great tracts of discussion with a social register. As refined sociability was the sociability of gentlemen, so its spread extended the range of the gentlemanly. The spread of "politeness" from discourse to discourse reflects the appropriation of the world of social, intellectual and literary creation by gentlemen: it witnessed the remaking of the world in a gentlemanly image.

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15 Another Whiggish cultural ideologist, contemporary with Shaftesbury, whose works would reward examination, was John Dennis (1657–1734).
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Second, where “politeness” went, the model of refined sociability was likely to follow. Social agreeableness became a way of comprehending the values that informed not only social interactions and conversation but the range of cultural expressions and, indeed, manners in general. While the language of “politeness” could be used in the various ways just explored, it also brought these different objects into one interpretive scheme. The premises, criteria, and standards of this scheme can be most easily grasped as expressions of an idealized vision of human intercourse, peopled by gentlemen and ladies, sited in the drawing room or coffeehouse, engaged in intelligent and stylish conversation about urbane things, presided over by the spirit of good taste. “Politeness” evoked this scene of refined sociability, with its rules and participants, as against scenes in which sociability was distorted or neglected. The vision of decorous, gentlemanly sociability was embedded and implicit in the language of “politeness.” Thus, the language of “politeness” acted as a master metaphor which brought to bear in different areas of discourse the expectations and standards of this vision.

Indeed, these scenes of sociability and the characters who inhabited them recurred throughout Shaftesbury’s writings. Sociability was not just an abstract idea for him but a repeated figure, through which the self, philosophy, moral behavior, writing, and culture could be understood. Images of refined sociability and its opposites – unsociability and distorted sociability – recur in Shaftesbury’s writing. As chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate, he used them to characterize the social stances available to the philosophic gentleman in company and, by extension, to taxonomize the basic discursive situations in society. In turn, as indicated in chapter 6, the figure of sociability informed the ideal of writing to which philosophy might aspire. Moreover, Shaftesbury saw an analogue between different forms of sociability and different institutional arrangements for culture. Thus, chapter 8, 9, and 10 show Shaftesbury using the figure of sociability to organize his politically motivated assessments of contemporary cultural institutions.

A setting

The argument at the heart of Shaftesbury’s cultural politics was that, while the Church and the Court had traditionally dominated English culture to its detriment, post-1688 England and post-1707 Britain had the opportunity to create a new public and gentlemanly culture of criticism. Thus, he was using notions of sociability and politeness to attack the Tory loyalty to Church and Court in the name of a new Whiggish culture. There is an irony in this that Shaftesbury himself recognized. As we will
see in chapter 7, his project depended on his ability to reassign the cultural associations of the two parties, shifting the guardianship of culture from the Tories to his own party, with its Country, Puritan and radical associations.

The irony is that Shaftesbury’s project relied on discursive tools that had developed throughout the Restoration decades in cooperation with the very institutions, the Church and the Court, that he would come to attack. The shock of the mid-seventeenth-century civil breakdown reverberated long after 1660, defining the subsequent decades by a project of restoration. Since restoration involved reposing the authority of traditional institutions over society and culture, the repressiveness of Charles II’s regime should not be underestimated. At the same time, the period saw the search for new or renewed disciplines of society through which order would be encouraged without repressive force. Chapters 8 and 9 of this study explore the way in which the themes of sociability, civility, and politeness entered discussion of religion and monarchy during the Restoration period. The availability of these idioms was one important context for Shaftesbury’s writing.

However, Shaftesbury was not simply seeking to capture some Tory ideological resources for use by the Whigs or to replace Tory control of traditional institutions with Whig control: he was not interested in a culture organized around a Whig Church and a Whig Court. Rather, he was trying to envision the shape of discourse and culture in new ways, and this endeavor was premised on specific social and institutional developments in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England.

In this respect, Shaftesbury’s project was like that of Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. Indeed, these renowned Whig cultural ideologists were all participants in a significant larger development: politeness was becoming a dominant paradigm, offering the scene of gentlemen in polite conversation as a model for discursive and cultural activity and authority. This model functioned in two ways. It offered a way to conceptualize complex and erratic social phenomena, giving them normative shape and direction. At the same time, it served as a blueprint for social and cultural creation, authorizing specific forms of activity and distributing authority in prescribed ways. Thus, this study of Shaftesbury is only introductory to a larger attempt to define an era of English cultural history corresponding to a “long” eighteenth century. On the one hand, this cultural era was post-courtly and post-godly (meaning neither “secular” nor “secularized” but “within a regime in which religion has been subjected to new political and intellectual disciplines”). On the other, it was pre-professional, pre-meritocratic, and also, in a sense, pre-industrialist (that is, “prior to the moment at which the English developed a sense that their industrial
character was highly problematic"). What defined this era was its polite-
ness, which, as we have seen, conveyed ideas of the urbane, the amateur,
the conversational, and the gentlemanly. Politeness was central to
mapping not just cultural ideology in the eighteenth century but also the
era’s characteristic forms of cultural organization and practice.

The pressure for this new paradigm came from a number of directions,
but perhaps most tangibly from shifts in gravity among England’s discurs-
ive and cultural institutions. Notwithstanding the project of restoration,
both the Court and the Church were declining as centers of discursive and
cultural production. The rise and decline of the English Court as such a
center has only been interpreted in segments, but it is clear that the decline
was a phenomenon of the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth.16
As for the Church, the overwhelming lesson of seventeenth-century
history for the English mind was the need for religious sentiment and
ideology to be under psychological and intellectual discipline and for
religious institutions to be firmly under civil control.17 The later seven-
teenth century and the early eighteenth did not see a decay of the religious
spirit but rather its rigorous submission to social and civil discipline. This
process weakened the Church’s presumption of authority over discourse
and culture. The best evidence for this is the decline in prestige of the
English universities in this period and their abandonment by the English
elite.18

However, another force was creating a demand for a new cultural
paradigm: the new patterns of urban development in the later seventeenth


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