

History of Courtesy Books in Eighteenth Century England

The eighteenth century was a period of social change in England, with the emergence of a vibrant and diverse middle class. The “middling sort” had long existed, but it was not until the eighteenth century that the middle class established a strong foothold in the English social structure. With the rise of the middle class came a generation of courtesy books that worked to strengthen and stabilize the existing social structure both in terms of socioeconomic and gender status. Courtesy books were written for both men and women, but the books for women were conduct books that more rigidly defined the roles of each gender in the society. Middle class citizens demanded for courtesy and conduct books to help them advance themselves into the elite society. The elites, on the other hand, also called for courtesy books that would help prevent the middle and lower classes from rising to the upper class status. Thus the demand for courtesy books and the obedience of English people to the teachings of those books acted as a cycle to stabilize the definition of gender roles and the stratification of social classes.

In eighteenth-century England, the role of women in society was clearly dictated by courtesy books. Although courtesy books of the Renaissance period were written primarily for elite families, by the eighteenth century “these same books were read by other social groups” like the middle class and even the lower class “to find relevant codes...” (Fritzer 2). These books were therefore often a form of secular sermon for women in the middle and lower classes that warned them of their behavior. Single

women and widows were allowed to run businesses, and women in the elite could own property under the husband's consent. Women in the middle and lower classes, however, remained dependent on their families and, after marriage, their husbands. At most, these women became the domestic servants and apprentices to their husbands, learning the trade to help their husbands in the shops and taverns (Earle 162-163). With the rise of capitalism throughout the century, however, more and more middle and lower class journeymen could afford to set up small businesses. These journeymen went on to work for a master and hence there was no place for the wives of the journeymen to work. On the other hand, men who made a fortune through capitalism could afford to have an idle wife as a sign of wealth and rise of social status. Hence, the majority of women were in a fixed status of dependence on their husbands.

Courtesy and conduct books not only reflected but also encouraged this dependence. Books such as *Instructions for Young Ladies* and *Legacy for Ladies* encouraged learning and condemned ignorance as “a severe mortification and a real evil” (quoted in Fritzer 11) and that, from the *Universal Mentor*, “the mistakes among us... are, that in our girls we take care of their persons, and neglect their minds...” (quoted in Fritzer 11). However, more courtesy books told women not to pursue a broad learning and view an education equivalent to that of a gentleman as wrong and unnatural. *The Young Ladies Conduct* stressed the learning of proper etiquette and manners and benignly neglected learning, while *The Lady's Preceptor* and *The Whole Duty of Woman* discouraged learning by suggesting that women “thrust not after prohibited knowledge; for happier is she who but knoweth a little, than she who is acquainted with too much” (Kenrick, quoted in Fritzer 10). Besides knowledge, the only other way for women to

ascend the social ladder was by marrying to men of higher status, but those who did were ridiculed and criticized by the same conducts books as social ambition and an inappropriate manner for women. It was morally incorrect to “mingle every man with the class that is superior to her, and... to support a gay and splendid appearance utterly inconsistent with her station and circumstances...” (Olsen 17).

Hence, men enjoyed a stable position of superiority in the gender structure until the feminist movement in the twentieth century. Similarly, the elites of England enjoyed a social stability in the eighteenth century. Very few people moved up the class ladder, and those who did either came from the upper-middle gentry or were already office holders or lawyers, both of which offered a similar background as the elites. Very few middle class members advanced into the elite class, and the ones who succeeded were very rich merchants who bought their way into the upper class. These merchants often bought land and seats in the local governments, but often failed to become active members in local affairs and ultimately ended up selling their seats. These “upper class” members were transient, and did not affect the elite class significantly (Stone and Stone 402-405).

Another major reason for the stability of the elite class, as argued by Lawrence and Jeanne Stone, was a “cultural cohesion with the middling sort” (Stone and Stone 408). The middle class, consisting of doctors, architects, musicians, teachers, attorneys, and merchants, to name a few, did not resent the elite as its bourgeoisie counterpart did in France. With the increase in wealth, the middle class came to imitate the elite and aspire “to gentility by copying the education, manners, and behavior of the gentry” or the elite (Stone and Stone 409). In this time period when spa vacations were popular among not

only the elite but the affluent members of the middle class, Richard “Beau” Nash, the manager of Bath, a spa resort, introduced the middle class to the aristocratic manners and code of conduct by mixing the two classes in all social events at Bath (Aresty 132-134). Rank was set aside, and the aristocratic ladies danced with rough squires from the lower gentry and dealers from the middle class. Nash imposed a strict code of courtly and polite behavior from which the country families and middle class participants learned the customs of the upper class. Nash also banned gentlemen from carrying swords, making all gentlemen to be truly genteel and changing the rough behaviors for both the aristocrats and the middle class merchants and dealers. However, once these spa visitors left Bath and returned to London and other urban cities, they immediately separated back into the two classes. The elite lady who danced with the merchant at Bath might pretend not to recognize the merchant when she took a walk in the park with her elite friends.

Observing these changes, the middle class began to demand for courtesy books to teach them the proper manners of the elite (Earle 8). The widely circulated *Rules of Good Deportment* by Adam Petrie, published in 1720, was notable for the deference and extreme modesty directed for the middle class readers (Aresty 135). Petrie was aware of the development of the middle class and set rules that would allow the middle class citizens to separate themselves from the lower class, which ironically also separated the middle class from the elite. Ladies would receive a kiss on the lips by their equals but only a kiss on the cheek from an inferior. *A Present for an Apprentice* by John Barnard (1741) taught middle class men all aspects of behavior and courtesy that would set them apart from their poor counterparts, such as the evils of drinking like the poor and more sophisticated techniques of proposing marriage. *The Rudiments of Genteel Behavior* by F.

Nivelon in 1737 gave textual and graphical illustrations to teach the middle class readers the proper attitude of “studious affectation” and the unnatural politeness to bring the readers away from the lower class and toward the upper class (Aresty 136).

This attitude bound together members of the middle class; their common goal of striving toward the elite status through self-improvement ironically separated them from the elite class, keeping them as the unique middle class. Middle class members yearned to practice the manners and etiquette of the upper class elite, but the courtesy books describing the behavior of the upper class also kept the middle class from completely transforming into the upper class. Peter Earle argues that the middle class was formed because men who were climbing the social ladder could not afford to enter the gentry. Besides the issue of “nobility at birth” that was much emphasized at this time by aristocrats who were born into the elite class, middle class merchants and teachers “needed to work hard and to save [money] rather than spend if they were to improve themselves, so they found it difficult or even dangerous to adopt the behavior of a class characterized by leisure and high spending”, as described in conduct books of the time (Earle 8).

The English elite, in response to the emergence of the middle class, became more aware of the possibility and also used courtesy books as a way to stop the lower and middle classes from advancing to the elite status and potentially threatening the aristocracy. The upper class often ridiculed the poor who tried to advance themselves by learning the elite manners, as courtesy and the appearance of gentility were important in determining one’s status. The importance of manners led the rich and powerful to devote courtesy books to keep the poor in the lower class. Religious leaders such as Bishop

Butler encouraged the rich to keep the poor out of the elite class and see the poor as a special burden because “God has... formally put the poor under the superintendency and patronage of the rich” (Olsen 19). The poor were “subjected to countless lectures and sermons on good work habits, meek religiosity, and the virtue of starving quietly” instead of advancing oneself (Olsen 21). Courtesy books and literature such as “The Rules for the Poor and the Rich”, printed in *The Times* in 1795, were published to keep the poor and the middle class from advancing by placing them firmly in their own systems of incompatible manners and obedience. Some of the “Rules for the Poor” were: “Keep steadily to your work, and never change masters, if you can help it. Be civil to your superiors and they will be kind to you. Be quiet and contented, and never steal, or swear, or you will never thrive” (Olsen 21). Dr. Thomas Fuller also emphasized the importance of the inferiors showing deference to their superiors: “inferiors were likewise expected to show deference through various gestures, depending on the greatness of the people involved” (Olsen 256).

Courtesy books, commissioned or distributed by the elite, sped middle class development and further subjugated women in eighteenth-century England. Men and women of the lower classes advanced their status through economic and technological developments of the Industrial Revolution, and their rise built the demand for courtesy books. Demanded by both the elites and the arising middle class, courtesy books did not permit the majority of these men and women to climb the steps of the social hierarchy and become members of the elite class. Economic development also opened up opportunities for women, yet through the masculine pen of the courtesy book women were kept in the domestic professions and the majority of women remained the inferior

companions to and servants for their families. For both sexes, courtesy books extolled the virtues of good morals yet condemned the crossing of social classes. Hence, due to its increasingly wide distribution, courtesy literature played a major role in the development of the middle class and depiction of gender in eighteenth-century England.

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