



❧ MODERN POLITENESS ❧

Henry Brooke, Pennsylvania, 1726

By the 1720s, urban social life in British America bore more resemblance to today's cosmopolitan scene than to colonial town life of fifty years earlier. With more wealth, security, and leisure, white colonists formed a myriad of cultural associations — conversation (and drinking) clubs, subscription libraries, science discussion groups, women's "tea tables" and literary salons, and the egalitarian repartee of coffeehouse and tavern society. "For the most culturally sophisticated early Americans, Society was an ideal," writes literary historian David Shields. "It named that community in which one found insight, pleasure, and emotional fulfillment through conversation and cooperation." Yet excessive aspirations to "society" could trivialize a person's goals and pursuits. In this poem, "Modern Politeness," the Pennsylvania poet Henry Brooke satirizes a young man's pursuit of culture. As Shields points out, the protagonist, Young Dapper, "questions the adequacy of politeness as the superintending ideal of character formation."¹

Young Dapper once had some pretense
To Mother Wit, and Common Sense;
And had he but apply'd those Parts
To sciences, or useful Arts,
Religion, Med'cine, Law or Trade,
Lord, what a Figure had he made!
But all his Stars contriv'd in Spite
That he should only be Polite.
Only Polite, What's that, you'll say?
Observe him, and he'll show the way.
A Modish Suit, with Sword on Thigh,
A Wig, and how to comb and tie;
To drink, to drab, to toast the Fair,
A brisk decisive tone and Air,
Are the first Rudiments: and these
Dapper acquir'd with so much Ease
As rather Nature seem'd than Art,
So sudden he commenc'd a Smart.
What follows next? To dance and sing;
Is that so difficult a Thing?
Not so to Dapper's application,
Who boasts in each so good a fashion,
That He, who (as Epigram makes known)²
So Daphne danc'd, and Niobe,
As that a Stock, and this a Stone
Hardly so lifeless seem'd as he;
Nor t'other celebrated Head
Who sing the Rival Screech Owl dead.
(Tho' Fame hath blabb'd their worth's so long)

Excell'd his manner, or his Song.
Must the Proficient read and write?
For reading, tis not so polite,
It spoils the Features; and beware,
A thoughtful, or Scholastic Air:
But easy writing, Or to write
What any may with Ease indite
A flow of words dispos'd for Sound,
And Periods Numerous and Round:
The Subject trifling News and Chat,
Good sense apart, no matter what,
A dash of [—] here and There,
Have such a Charm for modish Ear
As merits Dapper's strictest Care:
And he (as Envy must confess)
Hath master'd with great Success.
So — but what Topics for Discourse?
Oh Heavens, how plenteous is the Source!
'Tis to have all the names by Rote
Of Lords and Commoners of Note,
To tell long Stories, wrong or right,
Of Robert's twain, the Peer and Knight.
Of Swift's inimitable Fancies;
And how his Highness bows and dances.
On Church and Parsons to declaim,
And call 'em by a filthy Name.
Praise Toland; sneer at Orthodox,
Creeds, Bubbles Mysteries and the Pox,
Laugh at the City's awkward Pride,

National Humanities Center, 2009: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. In David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 95-97; permission pending. Some spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Shields, p. 95.

² Epigrams from *The Greek Anthology*. Daphne: nymph; nature goddess. Niobe: a mortal turned into a block of stone after gods murdered her children.

And without Ear or Art decide
 Betwixt Faustina and Cuzzone,
 What gaming Ladies pledge for money,
 What reigning Toasts in Order tell,
 Who buys a Post, a Vote who sell.
 Talk of the Play, the Opera, Park,
 And what diversions there when Dark?
 All these, and Twenty thousand more
 Made but a part of Dapper's Store.
 How but a Part! Pray what's the whole
 Mark for he's reaching at the Goal.
 His grand Ambition was in short,
 To view the worst side of a Court.
 He comes, he sees, and nobly fir'd,
 Snatches the Palm so long desir'd,
 Mounts the Professor's Chair, and thence,
 With a becoming Negligence;
 From Vulgar prejudice set free,
 Rings o'er the Changes on these Three,
 Detraction, Bawdy, Blasphemy.
 Oh! inexhaustible supply
 Of wit, oh Fountain never dry!
 Oh matchless Dapper! Rising Name,
 Consign'd to everduring Fame!
 How surely did thy Stars contrive!
Thou'rt the Politest Thing alive.



Thou'rt the Politest Thing alive.

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 Observe him, and he'll show the way.
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 A Wig, and how to comb and tie;
 To drink, to drab, to toast the Fair,
 A brisk decisive tone and Air,
 Are the first Rudiments: and these
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Portrait of a Gentleman, ca. 1770, miniature portrait by Henry Benbridge (American colonial portraitist), water-color on ivory in gold-colored locket set with garnets. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.