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The discourse of manners and politeness in Restoration and eighteenth-century drama

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The eighteenth century is often referred to as the age of politeness, and the term *politeness* has been argued to be a key term in a variety of settings at this time. This paper sets out to investigate the discourse of politeness and, more generally, the discourse of manners during this period and the period leading up to it (1660 to 1790). It focuses on the vocabulary used in talking about manners and politeness and on the way this vocabulary is used in actual interactions. In a first step, it investigates several large corpora and what they can tell us about the development of the vocabulary of manners and politeness before it zooms in, in a second step, on a more detailed investigation of three comedies of the period: Aphra Behn's *The Town-Fop: or Sir Timothy Tawdrey* (1676), Sir Richard Steel's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer, or The Mistakes of a Night* (1773). A close reading and a careful analysis of the discourse of manners and politeness, and crucially the discourse of violations of manners and politeness, in these three plays reveals a significant shift from a preoccupation with honour and reputation in the Restoration period to the politeness of a good character in the early eighteenth century and finally to a concern for polished and somewhat superficial manners in the late eighteenth century. The three comedies thus mirror in a detailed and nuanced way what the development of the vocabulary of manners and politeness suggests in a broad-brush perspective on a much larger scale.

Keywords: manners, politeness, Restoration drama, eighteenth-century drama, Aphra Behn, Richard Steel, Oliver Goldsmith

1. Introduction

Manners and politeness are very elusive concepts that defy any easy classification or definition, but they are clearly intimately related. In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* uses the term "politeness" in its definition of "manners" and the term "manners" in its definition of "politeness". It defines "manners" as "A person's social behaviour or habits, judged according to the degree of politeness or the degree of conformity to accepted standards of behaviour or propriety" and as "Polite or refined social behaviour or habits" (OED, Third Edition, "manner", n., sense 6a and 6b, in plural); and it defines "politeness" as "Courtesy, good manners, behaviour that is respectful or considerate of others" (OED,

Third Edition, “politeness”, n., sense 3a). But beyond this somewhat deceptive equation of politeness with good manners things get more complex, and it is a difficult to establish a common denominator of what a speech community considers to be good manners or polite, especially if we are interested in a historical speech community.

This article sets out to explore this question at a period in the history of English that is particularly relevant for issues of good manners and politeness, i.e. the eighteenth century, which has been described as the age of politeness. Klein (1994: 3) considers the term “politeness” to be a key word for the eighteenth century.

> 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. (…) 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 contemporary definition, “a dextrous management of our Words and Actions, whereby we make other People have better Opinions of us and themselves.” (Klein 1994: 3, 4)

Klein’s definition already highlights some important aspects of the term “politeness” in the eighteenth century. There seems to be a strong social component because of the term’s association with gentlemanliness. The term also had a moral dimension pertaining to proper (moral) behaviour, and it had a dimension of pleasing actions that would hide less pleasing underlying motives. They would make other people have better opinions than would otherwise be warranted.

It is the aim of this paper to explore the linguistic evidence that can be found for these dimensions. The focus will here be on the period from 1660 to 1790, beginning with the Restoration of the English monarchy and ending with the French Revolution. Thus, it covers most of the eighteenth century, in which manners and politeness had such a special place in English society, as well as the decades leading up to it. And it ends with the beginning of what literary theorists call the Romantic period (see Baines 2004).

In a first step, my investigation will focus on the vocabulary of good manners and politeness. I want to find out how the repertoire of politeness terms developed throughout this period. Which terms were particularly frequent, and which were less so? It turns out that the term “politeness”, in spite of its undoubted significance for the period, was not a particularly frequent term. And in a second step I zoom in on small-scale case studies of three comedies first performed in London during the period under investigation. These are Aphra Behn’s *The Town Fop* from the Restoration period, Sir Richard Steele’s *Conscious Lovers* from the first half of the eighteenth century and Oliver Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer* from the second half. In these case studies, I explore the different ways in which the characters talk about manners and politeness and about deviations from manners and politeness, and I am particularly interested in the way in which these discourses changed from one play to the next.

2. The vocabulary of manners and politeness

Figure 1 provides a first bird's-eye view of some of the relevant vocabulary from the eighteenth century until today. *GoogleBooks Ngram Viewer* is an interesting tool because of its vast dimension of 361 billion words of text from the 1500s to 2000 (see Michel et al. 2010). However, the view is also blurry because it is not possible to eliminate false positives or to access the context of individual hits, since the database does not consist of the original running texts but of indexed ngrams of up to five running words.

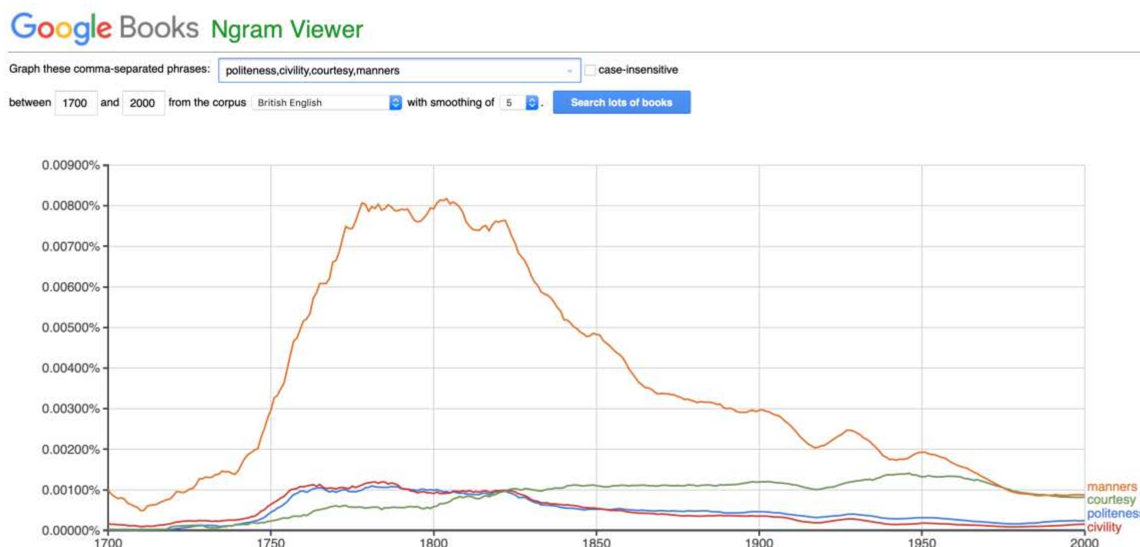

Figure 1. Frequency of the terms *manners*, *courtesy*, *politeness* and *civility* from 1700 to 2000 (GoogleBooks Ngram Viewer).

Figure 1 is dominated by the term *manners* because at its maximum it is about eight times more frequent than the other terms. It shows a very marked increase during the eighteenth century from about 0.001 to 0.008 per cent (i.e. from about 10 to 80 instances per million words). But a careful look at Figure 1 reveals that the terms *politeness* and *civility* show a very similar increase in the middle of the eighteenth century, albeit on a lower level. They increase from less than two to about 10 per million words. The term *courtesy* also shows an increase but somewhat later. It continues to increase gradually until about 1950, while the other three terms start to decline in the first half of the nineteenth century. From this first wide-angle perspective, it appears that something must have happened at around the middle of the eighteenth century to give these terms an increased prominence.

Figure 2 is based on *ARCHER, A Representative Corpus of Historical English Registers*, a multi-genre corpus which covers four centuries from 1600 to 1999 and contains about 3.5 million words. For this figure the same four terms served as a starting point, except that in this case, the search was extended to include closely related forms (i.e. the terms *civil*, *polite* and *courteous* in Figure 2 also include *civility* and *civilities*, *politeness* and *politely*, and *courtesy* and *courteously*). Their frequencies per 10,000 words are shown for the eight half centuries from 1600 to 1999.

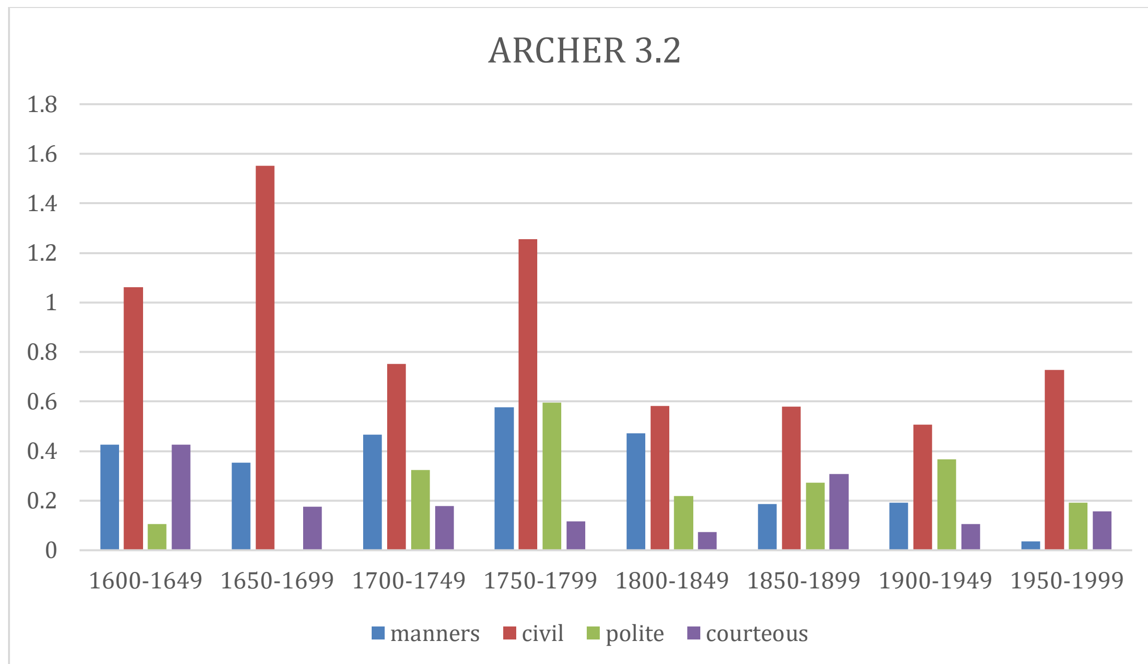

Figure 2. Frequency of sets of politeness terms (per 10,000 words) across eight half centuries from 1600 to 1999 (ARCHER 3.2).

There are some striking similarities and differences to Figure 1 above. First of all, the term *manners* does not stand out as more frequent than the other terms. It is the term *civil* and its related forms that stand out as more frequent. It appears that in the genres represented in ARCHER, *civil* seems to be a relatively important term in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The term *polite* and its associated forms show a similar increase throughout the eighteenth century as in Figure 1 above. They start from just a few instances in the entire seventeenth century to about 0.3 per 10,000 words in the first half and 0.6 in the second half of the eighteenth century. The overall developments of the *civil* set and the *courteous* set do not show very clear trends.

Figure 3 is taken from a study by Nevala and Sairio (2017), which is an extension of Nevalainen and Tissari (2010). They focus on the eighteenth century and use a more coherent single-genre corpus, i.e. the eighteenth-century Extension of the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC), which contains a little more than two million words. They investigate not only politeness terms, such as *civility*, *politeness* and *respectability* but also terms of discord, such as *disgrace*, *mortification* and *shame*. The figure plots not only the nouns, such as *civility* or *shame* but also the related adjectives and adverbs, i.e. *civil*, *civilly*, *ashamed* and *shameful(ly)*, etc.

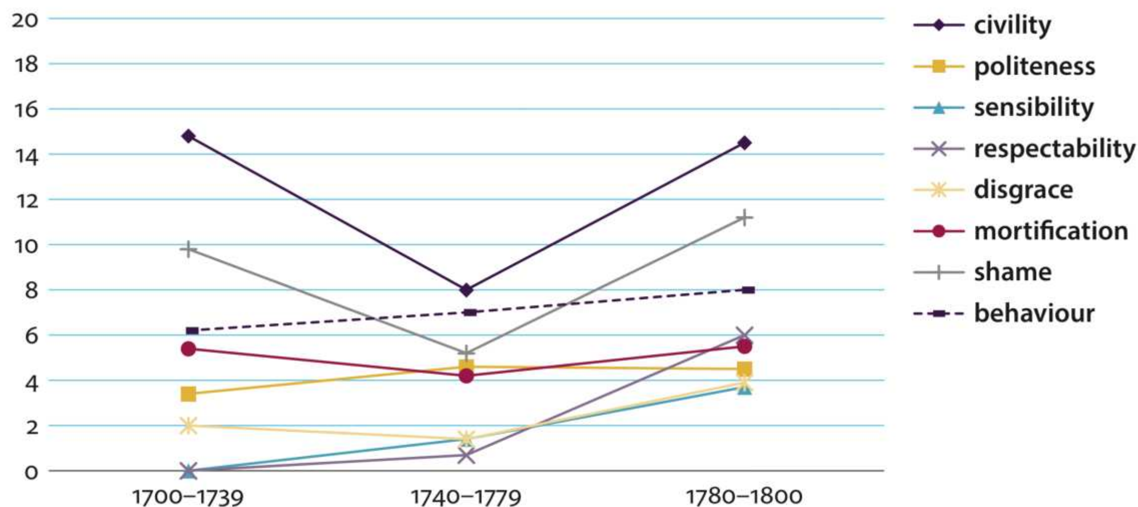

Figure 3. Relative frequencies of politeness and discord words in CEECE (per 100,000 words) (Nevala and Sairio 2017: 116).

Figure 3 plots the relative frequency of the eight sets of politeness and discord terms in three periods of the eighteenth century. The *civility* set is clearly the most frequent in all three periods. It appears to be between two and three times as frequent as the *politeness* set, which corresponds roughly to their relative difference in Figure 2 above, even though the diachronic development cannot be compared easily across the two figures because they use different subperiods. The most prominent set ranking below *civility* is one of the discord words, i.e. *shame* and its related forms. This clearly makes the point that people concerned with civility and politeness also had to talk about the opposite and the negative effects of a lack of civility and politeness.

Figure 4 is based on the data in the *Corpus of Late Modern English Texts* (CLMET 3.0), which comprises a total of about 34 million words of running text ranging from 1710 to 1924. It is about ten times as large as ARCHER, but it covers a shorter period of only three centuries, from 1710 to 1999. For this figure the texts have been put into quarter centuries according to the metainformation provided for each text (see Diller, de Smet and Tyrkkö 2010). The data for the years before 1725 is not included because there are only four files and less than 150,000 words for this subperiod.

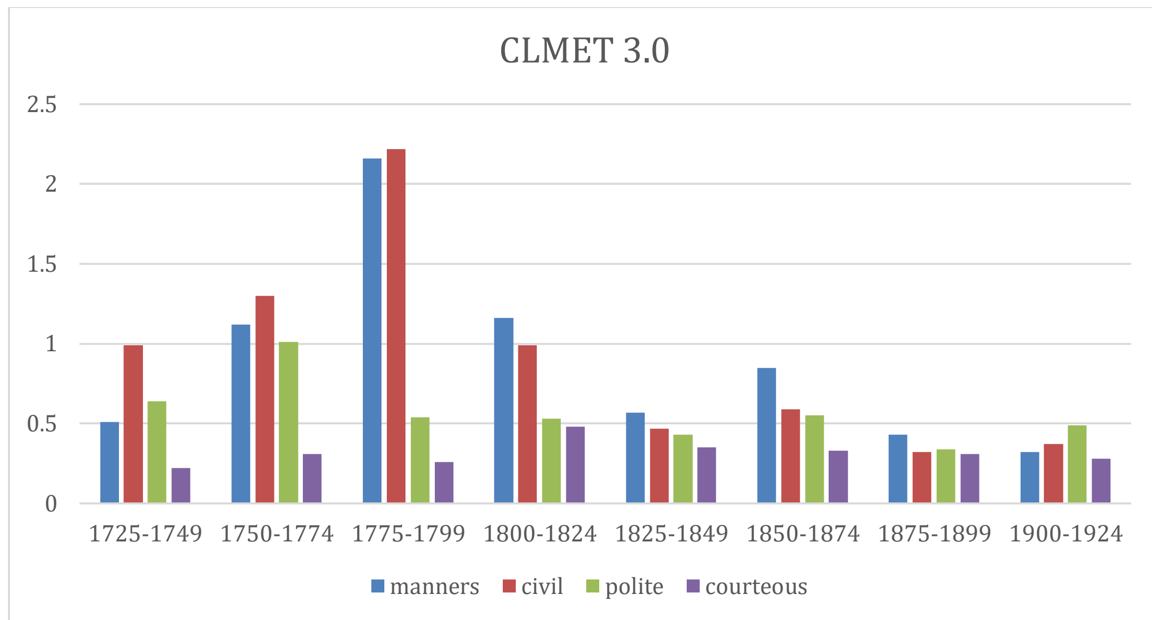

Figure 4. Frequency of sets of politeness terms (per 10,000 words) across eight quarter centuries from 1725 to 1924 (CLMET 3.0).

The frequency figures for the terms *civil*, *polite* and *courteous* in Figure 4 again include relevant morphological variations of each term. This may partly explain why the large difference between the frequency of *manners* and the other three terms that could be observed in Figure 1 is not in evidence in Figure 4. The development here is much smoother than in Figure 2 (ARCHER). The term *manners* and the *civil* set increase in use throughout the eighteenth century and decline in the following two centuries, while the *polite* set peaks somewhat earlier, in the third quarter of the century.

It is, of course, possible that the clearer lines of development are due to the larger size of CLMET 3.0. All the terms included here show relatively low frequencies. For ARCHER this means that there are often no more than a handful of attestations per time period, especially in the first three half centuries, i.e. from 1600 to 1749. In this situation, a few texts with idiosyncratic vocabulary usages can seriously distort the overall picture. In CLMET 3.0, this is less of a problem with three or more million words per time period.

Figure 5, finally, focuses in on a very small convenience sample of English plays. Here, too, single texts can potentially distort the picture, but this corpus has the advantage that it is more coherent because all texts are plays, and they are split into time periods that make sense from a literary point of view. Table 1 lists the plays according to the date of their first performance into the three periods: Restoration, Early and Late Eighteenth Century. The dividing line between the early and the late plays is 1737, i.e. the date of the Licencing Act of 1737, which brought in much stricter government control and censorship on theatres in the United Kingdom.

Table 1. The composition and size of the sample corpus.[1]

Date	Author	Title	No of words
1667	Behn	Plays	150,166
1675	Wycherley	Plays	326,878
1676	Etherege	*Man of Mode*	28,495
Total	Restoration		505,539
1700	Centlivre	*Perjured Husband*	14,973
1703	Centlivre	*Stolen Heiress*	17,592
1709	Centlivre	*Busie Body*	23,878
1722	Steele	Plays	143,462
Total	Early 18th century		199,905
1770	Foote	*Lame Lover*	14,157
1772	Goldsmith	*She Stoops to Conquer*	22,953
1775	Sheridan	*Rivals*	27,997
1777	Sheridan	*School for Scandal*	30,457
1781	Macklin	*Man of the World*	23,949
Total	Late 18th century		119,513
			824,957

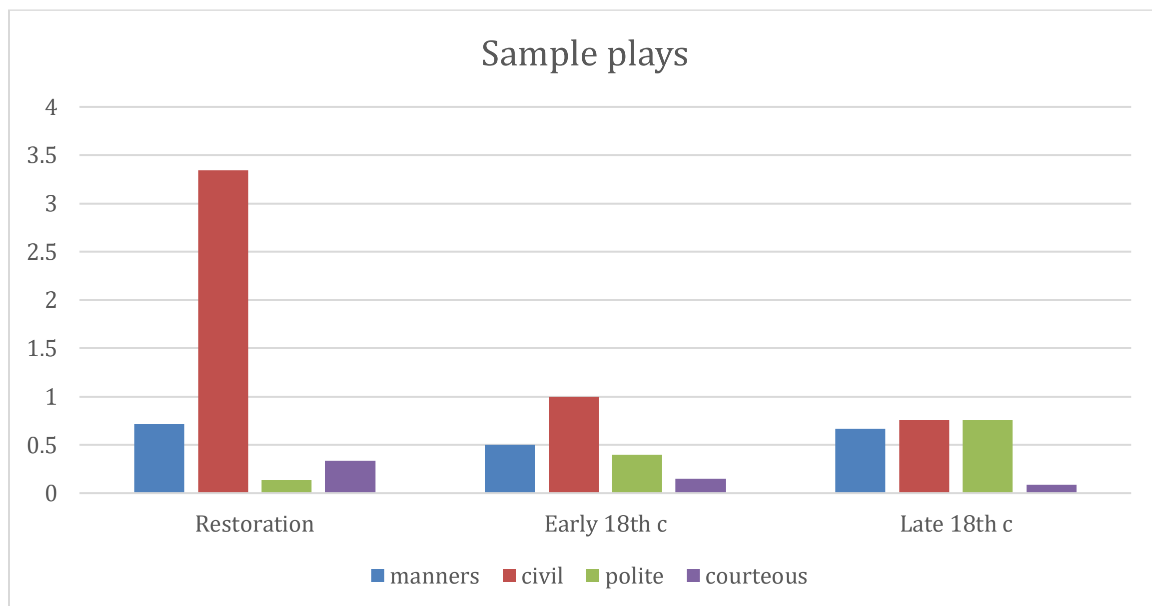

Figure 5. Frequency of sets of politeness terms (per 10,000 words) across three literary periods from 1660 to 1790 in a convenience sample of plays.

[1] The editions used for this sample corpus were all taken from Project Gutenberg. The designation “Plays” indicates that an entire collection of plays was included for a particular author.

In spite of the small size and the convenience nature of this sample corpus, the results confirm and reinforce the developments gleaned from the previous figures. The *civil* set stands out as far more frequent than the others, at least in the Restoration period. The *politeness* set shows again a distinct increase over the three periods in spite of the fact that it does not appear to be very frequent overall. The *courteous* set decreases somewhat, and the term *manners* does not show a clear line of development.

The above look at several different corpora covering the period under investigation has made it evident that it may be misleading to consult just one corpus. The corpora differ in terms of size and composition, and they offer different time spans to capture the development of the frequency of individual lexical sets. The terms under investigation here turn out to be not particularly frequent. This may be surprising given the comments by cultural and social historians, who have pointed out, for instance, the importance of the term *politeness* for the eighteenth century. But there is considerable evidence that the frequency of the term *polite* and its related forms increase very noticeably throughout the eighteenth century. In the next section, therefore, I want to change the focus of the investigation to a close-up of three selected plays and the interactions of their characters.

3. The discourse of manners and politeness

The plays chosen for these case studies are not only a product of their times but also very individual works of art by three very different authors. However, they also have some striking similarities. They are all comedies, and they all deal with similar social problems: the socio-economic significance of marriage and the parental interventions in young people's desires to marry according to their hearts. They are Aphra Behn's *The Town-Fop; Or, Sir Timothy Tawdrey*; Sir Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers*; and Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer, or The Mistakes of a Night*. All three plays were first performed in London, *The Town-Fop* in 1676, *The Conscious Lovers* in 1722, and *She Stoops to Conquer* in 1773. In all three plays, the male hero and his best friend are intent on marrying young ladies of their choice but there are complications. The older generation, represented by father, mother or uncle, have different marriage plans for the younger generation. In each case there is also a third young gentleman who, with the support of the older generation, wants to or is contracted to marry one of the two young ladies. The proposed and desired marriages have important financial implications in the form of dowries whose sizes depend on the choice of the marriage partner and the older generation's approval or disapproval of the intended nuptial ties. After a series of tribulations, involving various conflicts, ranging from verbal disputes to brawls and even duels, between the two friends on the one hand and the third man on the other, all the entanglements are resolved. The young lovers get their desired wives, the older generation recognises their errors of judgement and is delighted to give their consent, and the third gentleman is happy to marry another wife (Sir Timothy in *The Town-Fop*) or to escape unscathed either because the dowry turned out to be smaller than anticipated (the coxcomb

Cimberton in *The Conscious Lovers*) or because he never wanted to marry the bride intended for him in the first place (Tony Limpkin in *She Stoops to Conquer*).

In spite of the similarities of the basic constellation, the unfolding events and the cast of supporting characters in the three plays differ considerably. Aphra Behn's *Town-Fop* is a Restoration comedy, which includes a prostitute as one of the main characters. One of the central scenes of the play even takes place in a brothel. Richard Steele's *Conscious Lovers* is designed to provide a contrast to the licentiousness of Restoration comedy and to set a good example of honourable behaviour. And Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, written almost exactly one hundred years after *The Town-Fop*, is a comedy of manners. It shifts its scene away from London and into the country. But all three plays – in one way or another – thematise manners and the propriety of behaviours. They distinguish between proper behaviour and behaviour that is the object of scorn, ridicule and censure. This cannot only be seen in how the characters behave but also in the way they talk about manners and the propriety of behaviour, and such talk is not restricted to the main characters or the characters of higher social classes but even the servants seem to be preoccupied with such questions. As Lindsay (1993: xxiv) puts it for Richardson's *Conscious Lovers*, "even the back-chat among the servants is governed by notions of loyalty and propriety".

Aphra Behn's *Town-Fop* opens with a scene in which Sir Timothy Tawdrey, the eponymous town-fop of the play and third gentleman in the basic constellation of characters outlined above, declares his intent to marry Celinda Dresswell and in the process disparages her brother.

(1) SIR TIMOTHY Hereabouts is the House wherein dwells, the Mistriss of my heart; For she has money Boyes, mind me, money in abundance, or she were not for me – the Wench her self is good natur'd, and inclin'd to be civil, but a Pox on't – She has a Brother a conceited Fellow, whom the world mistakes for a fine Gentleman, for he has Travell'd, talks Languages, bows with a *bone meine*, and the rest, but by fortune he shall entertain you with nothing but words ——
SHAM Nothing else? ——
SIR TIMOTHY No — He's no Countrey Squire Gentlemen, will not Game, Whore, nay, in my Conscience you will hardly get your selves Drunk in his Company – He Treats A-la-mode, half Wine, half Water, and the rest – But to the business, this Fellow loves his Sister dearly, and will not trust her in this lewd Town, as he calls it, without him, and hither he has brought her to marry me. (*Town-Fop*, 1.1.1–14)

He describes Celinda's brother, called Friendlove, in terms that establish a contrast between his own assessment and that of the world. The world apparently approves of Friendlove's character because he has travelled and knows languages, but Sir Timothy disapproves of him because he does not engage in what are presumably Sir Timothy's own favourite pastimes; gaming, drinking and using the services of prostitutes. Thus, in this opening scene, Sir Timothy characterises not only Friendlove but also himself. He uses two French phrases in his remonstrations, "*bone meine*" and "A-la-mode", which further characterise him because "using French unnecessarily was a sign of a coxcomb" (notes to line 1.1.152).

In the second scene of the first act, Sir Timothy unabashedly woos Celinda, who, however, is in love with Bellmour. He even produces a letter written by her father, who wants him and Celinda to be married the next day. Bellmour, who is also present, is enraged and turns against Sir Timothy, and Sir Timothy mocks Bellmour in terms that again blatantly clash with more standard evaluations of good behaviour.

(2) SIR TIMOTHY Oh I had forgot, thou art a modest Rogue, and to thy eternal shame, hadst never the Reputation of a Mistriss — Lord, Lord, that I could see thee address thy self to a Lady —— I fancy thee a very ridiculous Figure, in that posture, by Fortune.
BELLMOUR Why Sir —— I can Court a Lady —
SIR TIMOTHY No, no, thou'rt modest; that is to say, a Countrey Gentleman; that is to say, Ill-bred; that is to say, a Fool by Fortune, as the World goes. (*Town-Fop*, 1.2.231–238)

Sir Timothy, the town-fop, clearly turns the normal evaluations upside down, but his characterisations or rather "accusations" nevertheless reveal what must have been important criteria of character evaluation of the time, with gaming, drinking and prostitution as key elements. And in fact, in act four, when Bellmour has been forced against his own wishes and vows to marry Diana, he sets off together with Sir Timothy to a brothel in order to drink, play cards and meet prostitutes. His uncle's insistence on his marriage to a woman he does not love drives him to the extremes of the wrong kind of behaviour.

In this play, the discourse of proper behaviour is mainly concerned with such features of character, and, in fact, the terms *manners*, *politeness* and *courtesy* do not occur at all. Instead it is the terms *honour* and *reputation* that stand out with frequent occurrences (24 and 11, respectively). Extracts (3) and (4) are relevant examples.

(3) BELLMOUR My **Honour**! And my **Reputation**, now!
They both were forfeit, when I broke my Vow.
Nor cou'd my **Honour** with thy Fame decline,
Who e're prophanes thee, injures nought of mine.
This night upon the Couch my self I'll lay,
And, like Franciscans, let th' ensuing day
Take care for all the toils it brings with it,
Whatever Fate arrives, I can submit. (*Town-Fop*, Act 3, Scene 2, lines 321-328, emphasis added)

In extract (3), Bellmour bewails his own misery. He has been forced by his uncle to marry Diana in spite of the fact that he had already exchanged vows with the woman he loves, Celinda. On their wedding night, he confesses to Diana that he cannot love her because he already loves another, and the scene finishes with this heart-breaking appeal. Breaking the vows has ruined both his honour and his reputation. He leaves the scene to team up with Sir Timothy to visit a brothel.

The terms *honour* and *reputation* are not only used by the main characters of the play. Sir Timothy, the town-fop, keeps Betty Flauntit, a prostitute, as his mistress, and Flauntit, too, appears to be concerned about her reputation and honour. In extract (4), taken from the brothel scene in act 4, Mrs Driver, the bawd, announces new customers who are

Bellmour and Sir Timothy in disguise. Flauntit demurely appeals to her reputation and honour in spite of the fact that she "recreates herself a little sometimes" as she prudishly puts it.

(4) DRIVER Truly Mrs, *Flauntit*, this young Squire that you were sent to for, has two or three persons more with him that must be accommodated too.
FLAUNTIT *Driver*, tho' I do recreate my self a little sometimes, yet you know I value my **Reputation** and **Honour**. (*Town-Fop*, Act 4, Scene 2, lines 244–248, emphasis added)

In the end everything is resolved. The unhappy marriage contract between Bellmour and Diana is revoked. Bellmour is allowed to marry his beloved Celinda, and Diana is married to Celinda's brother Friendlove. Even Sir Timothy, the town-fop, gets a wife, Bellmour's sister Phillis, and a suitable dowry to make him happy.

Richard Steele's *Conscious Lovers* has been classified as a sentimental comedy (Novak 1979; Hynes 2004). It was designed to set a good example to the audience by presenting exemplary characters and by avoiding the licentiousness, debauchery and immorality of Restoration comedy. Stele's aim was to improve the theatre, and in his preface to the play, he expresses his hopes that "it may have some effect upon the Goths and Vandals that frequent the theatres, or a more polite audience may supply their absence"; he does not aim for the laughter of his audience but for "a Joy too exquisite for Laughter" (Steele [1993]: 68). In this play, the two lovers are Bevil Jr. and his friend Myrtle. They are in love with Indiana and Lucinda respectively, but Bevil's father, Sir John Bevil, wants his son to marry Lucinda, the daughter of the rich merchant, Mr Sealand. Mrs Sealand, at the same time, wants her daughter Lucinda to marry Cimberton, a coxcomb (see also Jucker 2016, 2020).

The play opens with a scene in which Sir John Bevil talks to his servant Humphrey about the marriage that he has arranged for his son and Lucinda, and in the course of their conversation they also talk about manners and appropriate behaviour.

(5) SIR J. BEVIL Let me see, Humphrey; I think it is now full forty years since I first took thee to be about myself.
HUMPHREY I thank you, sir, it has been an easy forty years; and I have pass'd 'em without much sickness, care, or labour.
SIR J. BEVIL Thou hast a brave constitution; you are a year or two older than I am, Sirrah.
HUMPHREY You have ever been of that mind, Sir.
SIR J. BEVIL You knave, you know it; I took thee for thy gravity and sobriety, in my wild years.
HUMPHREY Ah, sir! our manners were form'd from our different fortunes, not our different age. Wealth gave a loose to your youth, and poverty put a restraint upon mine. (*Conscious Lovers*, 1.1, p. 75)

Sir John Bevil wants to share his personal fears about the planned marriage with his servant and, therefore, stresses the long acquaintance they have had with each other. Humphrey has been in Bevil's service for four decades, but it seems that their perspectives on these years differ somewhat. Humphrey does not contradict his master on the issue of their respective ages but diplomatically concedes to his master's opinion on the matter.

However, when Bevil mentions Humphrey's "gravity and sobriety" at a time when he himself still was "wild", Humphrey implicitly disagrees with reference to their different manners. Manners, it turns out, are a matter of wealth. Where Sir John Bevil could afford to be wild, Humphrey had no choice but to put up with soberness and moderation. For Humphrey manners are very much class-based. They are not a matter of free choice but a matter of economic opportunity.

The next extract is taken from act 3. Mrs Sealand has plans for her daughter that differ not only from her daughter's but also from her own husband's. She wants to marry her to the coxcomb Cimberton because of his considerable wealth. For Cimberton, the marriage is above all a business deal that he negotiates with Lucinda's mother, and Lucinda herself is no more than an inconvenient commodity that is part of the deal. Enraged, Lucinda storms off, but Cimberton is not perturbed.

(6) CIMBERTON No harm done – you know, Madam, the better sort of people, as I observ'd to you, treat by their lawyers of weddings (*adjusting himself at the glass*) and the woman in the bargain, like the mansion house in the sale of the estate, is thrown in, and what that is, whether good or bad, is not at all consider'd.
MRS SEALAND I grant it, and therefore make no demand for her youth, and beauty, and every other accomplishment, as the common world think 'em, because she is not polite.
CIMBERTON Madam, I know, your exalted understanding, abstracted, as it is, from vulgar prejudices, will not be offended, when I declare to you, I marry to have an heir to my estate, and not to beget a colony, or a plantation. This young woman's beauty, and constitution, will demand provision for a tenth child at least. (*Conscious Lovers*, 3.1, p. 113)

Mrs Sealand concedes Cimberton's point that the bride is no more than a mansion house in the transaction of an estate, and in this context, she adds as an excuse for the lack of accomplishments of her daughter that she is "not polite". From this description it becomes clear that politeness here is not a feature of a specific action on a specific occasion, but it is a persistent feature of a person, a feature that makes all the difference between a person that Mrs Sealand and Cimberton would be prepared to accept as their equal and one who is merely a slightly inconvenient commodity in a wedding contract. Even her beauty is something that Cimberton uses against her. It will be responsible for a larger number of children than he actually needs, and, therefore, it stands to reason that the dowry needs to take that into account even if his bride is not "polite".

In extract (7), it is the fathers who discuss a marriage contract. Sir John Bevil desires to sign the contract as soon as possible to marry his son off to Mr Sealand's daughter, Lucinda, but Mr Sealand suspects (correctly, as it happens) that Bevil Junior is romantically involved with a different lady, and he is not taken in by Sir John Bevil's protestations about his son's impeccable character. He is not convinced that Bevil Junior will mend his ways from what he perceives as his current less-than-virtuous life. Bevil Junior has been seen in public to talk in a somewhat familiar way to another lady, and this is sufficiently suspicious. What is more significant in this passage, however, is how Mr Sealand, a rich merchant, compares Sir John Bevil's social class to his own. The merchants have grown in importance only recently, and according to Mr Sealand they are as honourable as the gentry, "as you landed folks", and ironically he adds that they are "almost as useful". The gentry are

brought up "to be lazy". They do not trade except in some trifling matters, such as some hay or an ox. This contrasts with the industriousness of the merchants, and, therefore, he concludes industry must be dishonourable.

(7) SIR J. BEVIL My son, Sir, is a discreet and sober gentleman –
MR SEALAND Sir, I never saw a man that wench'd soberly and discreetly, that ever left it off – the decency observ'd in the practice, hides, even from the sinner, the iniquity of it. They pursue it, not that their appetites hurry 'em away, but, I warrant you, because 'tis their opinion, they may do it.
SIR J. BEVIL Were what you suspect a truth – do you design to keep your daughter a virgin 'till you find a man unblemish'd that way?
MR SEALAND Sir, as much a cit as you take me for – I know the town, and the world – and give me leave to say, that we merchants are a species of gentry, that have grown into the world this last century, and are as honourable, and almost as useful, as you landed folks, that have always thought your selves so much above us; For your trading, forsooth! is extended no farther, than a load of hay, or a fat ox – You are pleasant people, indeed; because you are generally bred up to be lazy, therefore, I warrant you, industry is dishonourable.
SIR J. BEVIL Be not offended, sir; let us go back to our point. (*Conscious Lovers* 4.2, p. 124)

Sir John Bevil's answer makes it clear how Mr Sealand's utterance is to be understood. Mr Sealand is offended by the offer of a son-in-law whose social virtues are questionable, especially because the offer comes from a member of the gentry who think they are much more honourable than the hard-working merchants.

Oliver Goldsmith's comedy of manners, *She Stoops to Conquer*, finally adopts quite a different perspective. The integrity of the characters is no longer a major issue. It is the way they behave in public, their manners, which matters. The main character, Young Marlow, suffers from a split personality. In the presence of ladies of his own standing he is bashful, shy and timid, and does not manage to engage in any meaningful conversation. With women of a lower social standing, however, he is entirely transformed and does not hesitate to converse with them or even pursue them.

At the opening of the play, Marlow and his best friend Hastings are on their way to visit Mr Hardcastle, whose plan is for his daughter Kate to marry Marlow. However, Tony Limpkin, the third man, plays a practical joke on Marlow and Hastings so that they get lost on the way. They arrive at Hardcastle's house, but they are led to believe that it is an inn, and, therefore, they take Hardcastle to be the inn-keeper rather than the owner of the house and the father of the intended bride. It is this basic misunderstanding about the identity and social status of the interactants that leads to clashes about manners. What would be normal behaviour for a host seems very rude if done by an inn-keeper. In extract (8), Marlow expresses his exasperation to his friend Hastings about the inappropriate behaviour of the "inn-keeper".

(8) MARLOW The assiduities of these good people teize me beyond bearing. My host seems to think it ill manners to leave me alone, and so he claps not only himself, but his old-fashioned wife, on my back. They talk of coming to sup with us too; and then, I suppose, we are to run the gantlet thro' all the rest of the family. (*She Stoops to Conquer*, Act 2, p. 353)

The passage states clearly what kind of behaviour Marlow expects from an inn-keeper. The host and his wife apparently follow him around and they even suggest joining their guests for dinner. This, in his view, is clearly not good manners on behalf of an inn-keeper. He wants to be left alone and to his own devices. Servants are not to intrude and impose themselves on him. In the previous scene, the exasperation was mutual. Marlow demanded to be informed of the menu for dinner, expressed his unhappiness about the choices on offer and enquired about the suitability of his room. He even asked his servant to liberally drink beer in an attempt to provide some additional business for the assumed inn-keeper.

Hardcastle's frequent asides in the scene make it clear that he finds Marlow's behaviour deeply insulting. The problem is a clash of manners, and they clash because of the mistaken identities. From passages such as this it can be deduced that here manners are a code of behaviour in the sense of etiquette, and these manners have to be adjusted carefully to the social role of the addressee and the relationship between the speaker and the addressee.

In extract (9), Mrs Hardcastle talks to Hastings. Mrs Hardcastle has already been portrayed as being interested in the latest fashion from London in contrast to her husband, who much prefers the quiet life in the country. When she has a chance to talk to one of the visitors from London, she seizes the opportunity to bring up the topic of London.

(9) MRS HARDCASTLE Well! I vow, Mr Hastings, you are very entertaining. There's nothing in the world I love to talk of so much as London, and the fashions, though I was never there myself.
HASTINGS Never there! You amaze me! From your air and manner, I concluded you had been bred all your life either at Ranelagh, St. James's, or Tower Wharf.
MRS HARDCASTLE O! sir, you're only pleased to say so. We country persons can have no manner at all. I'm in love with the town, and that serves to raise me above some of our neighbouring rustics; but who can have a manner, that has never seen the Pantheon, the Grotto Gardens, the Borough, and such places where the Nobility chiefly resort? All I can do, is to enjoy London at second-hand. I take care to know every tête-à-tête from the Scandalous Magazine, and have all the fashions, as they come out, in a letter from the two Miss Rickets of Crooked Lane. (*She Stoops to Conquer*, Act 2, p. 357–358)

She loves to talk about London, but she has to admit that she never was there herself. Hastings responds by teasing her. On the basis of her manners he assumed that she must have been raised somewhere in London. The first two places he mentions were fashionable places; Ranelagh Gardens, which was frequented by the aristocracy, and St James's, a district around St James's Palace. Tower Wharf, however, was apparently a much less fashionable district east of the City (Lindsay 1993: 534). Mrs Hardcastle acknowledges the teasing ("sir, you're only pleased to say so"), but she does not pick up on the mocking implications of the last suggestion. Manners, according to her, are restricted to city-dwellers and people who have visited the fashionable attractions of London. There might be some additional ironic twists in the places that she picks as examples. The Borough, for instance, according to Lindsay (1993: 534), was no longer as fashionable as it used to be. By the time Goldsmith wrote this play, it was already inhabited by tradesmen and manufacturers. Mrs Hardcastle still thinks herself above the rustics in the neighbourhood because she takes a very active interest in what goes on in London, even if her information derives from the *Scandalous Magazine*, which "printed accounts of sexual liaisons in high

society, illustrating each report with an engraved 'tête-à-tête'" (Lindsay 1993: 534). In this passage, manners are not only an adherence to the rules of etiquette as in extract (8) above, they are also a distinguishing criterion between the fashionable aristocracy of London and everybody else.

In extract (10), finally, Marlow thematises his own gross, albeit accidental, deviation from good manners. At long last, the deception has been resolved. He realises that he is not in an inn, that his host is not an inn-keeper and that the bar-maid whom he brazenly pursued is actually the daughter of the house and his potential bride.

(10) MARLOW (…) There again, may I be hang'd, my dear, but I mistook you for the bar-maid.
MISS HARDCASTLE Dear me! dear me! I'm sure there's nothing in my *behavour* to put me on a level with one of that stamp.
MARLOW Nothing, my dear, nothing. But I was in for a list of blunders, and could not help making you a subscriber. My stupidity saw everything the wrong way. I mistook your assiduity for assurance, and your simplicity for allurement. But its over – This house I no more shew *my* face in.
MISS HARDCASTLE I hope, Sir, I have done nothing to disoblige you. I'm sure I should be sorry to affront any gentleman who has been so polite, and said so many civil things to me. I'm sure I should be sorry (*pretending to cry*) if he left the family upon my account. I'm sure I should be sorry people said anything amiss, since I have no fortune but my character. (*She Stoops to Conquer*, Act 4, p. 378, italics original)

At this crucial point, Kate Hardcastle must try to keep her potential husband from running away from his own shame and embarrassment about the perpetrated blunders. He had blundered – in his own eyes – because he behaved towards social equals, his intended bride and his intended father-in-law, as if they had been servants, a bar maid and an inn-keeper. Kate played the role of the bar-maid to let him overcome his inhibition with women of his own social status. She had to stoop in order to conquer, as the title of the play suggests. But she has to keep his interest in her in spite of the fact that he now knows who she is. And again, it becomes clear how much depends on the appearances of the outward behaviour. Marlow misinterpreted her behaviour because he thought she was a bar-maid. She refers to his "politeness" and the "civil things" he said to her. The reference is ambiguous. It can refer to what he said to her when he addressed her as a lady, which was very little. Or it can refer to what he said to her when he thought she was a barmaid and tried to seduce her. But in either case, what she says about "politeness" and "civil things" seems to have more than just a touch of irony to it. She is playing a game at this point, and even the distress that she expresses at his imminent departure is mainly displayed for effect, as the stage direction, "pretending to cry", suggests.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The results of the previous two sections complement each other in interesting ways to provide a more comprehensive and more nuanced picture of the notions of manners and politeness and how they developed from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth century. The various corpora consulted for the vocabulary study were unanimous in highlighting the eighteenth century as an important period for the development of the key terms *manners*, *civil*, *polite*, *courteous* and their derivatives, not because of their overall frequency, which appears to be relatively modest, but because of their remarkable increase leading to a peak in the late eighteenth century.

The three plays of the case studies are too short to allow for a valid comparison of the frequencies of the relevant politeness vocabulary but even they provide some indication that these frequencies changed throughout the period under investigation. While the expressions *honour* and *reputation* characterise *The Town-Fop* and to a lesser extent *The Conscious Lovers*, it is the expression *manners* which increases its frequency. *Civil* and *polite* also increase, even though there are no more than a few instances even in *She Stoops to Conquer*. Table 2 provides an overview.

Table 2. Frequency of politeness terms (including morphological variants; per 10,000 words) in the three plays under investigation.

	manners	*civil*	*polite*	*courtesy*	*honour*	*reputation*
Town-Fop	0.00	0.41	0.00	0.00	9.93	4.55
Conscious Lovers	0.39	0.39	0.78	0.00	9.33	0.78
She Stoops	1.75	0.88	1.31	0.00	5.70	0.88

These values should not be overrated because they are based on relatively few actual hits, but they show a clear increase of the term *manners* and the term *polite* with its derivatives. *Civil* and its derivatives increase slightly while the term *honour*, which is altogether much more frequent than the others, clearly decreases, as does the term *reputation*.

Such a quantitative perspective on lexical items is based on the assumption that the frequency of use of a particular term somehow reflects the importance of the designated concept in the text or texts that are included in the corpus searches, but it does not tell us in any detail how these concepts were evaluated and how they were used. In order to find out how people used these terms, a more detailed look is required in the form of a macro-lens case studies.

A close reading of selected passages from these three comedies provides a more nuanced understanding of the developing conceptualisation of the essentials of proper behaviour and the significance of manners. Aphra Behn's *Town-Fop* is a product of the Restoration period, when the theatres had only recently opened again. The play foregrounds concerns for good characters, honour and reputation. Gambling, drinking and prostitution are depicted as the main evils, but even Betty Flauntit, the title character's mistress and prostitute, is concerned about her own reputation and honour, while the terms *manners* and *polite* do not even occur in this comedy.

This forms the backdrop to the eighteenth century's concern for politeness and good behaviour or good manners. Richard Steel's *Conscious Lovers* was explicitly designed to set a good example against the licentiousness of Restoration comedy. His characters are

concerned with manners and politeness, but these are understood to be part of the personality.

In Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*, finally, the concept of manners takes centre stage leading to the qualification of the play as a comedy of manners. Manners are not so much part of the personality anymore but a set of outward behaviours that have to be adjusted carefully to the situation and the addressee. The manners that are appropriate in addressing an inn-keeper are entirely different from the manners that have to be shown towards the private host and father of the main character's bride-to-be. At this point we can see a clear dissociation of manners from morality. They have turned into an etiquette, a code of behaviour prescribed, for instance, by a conduct book.

The two complementary approaches outlined above also bring together different sets of theoretical assumptions. A focus on the quantitative development of vocabulary items presupposes that these items have some inherent core meanings, which allows a comparison across different contexts and time periods. A focus on specific uses of these items in specific scenes of specific plays, on the other hand, highlights their discursive nature. The terms get their meaning – at least to some extent – from how they are used by whom and to whom, and how the addressee reacts. The analysis has shown that a reliance on inherent politeness values of specific linguistic expressions is not sufficient. It needs to be supplemented by a careful analysis of the discursive negotiations of politeness values in actual contexts.

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