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OCCASIONAL POLITENESS AND GENTLEMEN'S LAUGHTER IN 18th C ENGLAND*

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ABSTRACT. *This article considers the intersection between polite manners and company in eighteenth-century England. Through the laughter of gentlemen, it makes a case for a concept of occasional politeness, which is intended to emphasize that polite comportment was only necessary on certain occasions. In particular, it was the level of familiarity shared by a company that determined what was considered appropriate. There was unease with laughter in polite sociability, yet contemporaries understood that polite prudence could be waived when men met together in friendly homosocial encounters. In these circumstances, there existed a tacit acceptance of looser manners that might be called 'intimate bawdiness', which had its origins in a renaissance humanist train of thought that valorized wit as the centrepiece of male sociability. This argument tempers the importance of politeness by stressing the social contexts for which it was – and was not – a guiding principle. Ultimately, it suggests that the category of company might be one way of rethinking eighteenth-century sociability in a more pluralistic fashion, which allows for contradictory practices to co-exist. As such, it moves towards breaking down the binary oppositions of polite and impolite, elite and popular, and theory and practice that have been imposed on the period.*

I

One autumn Saturday in 1764, a gentleman by the name of Gervase Leveland rose early and breakfasted with his close friend Jack Potts. Together, they set off for Twickenham where they met another companion, Mr Baillie, before boarding the Turnham Green Coach. The three friends found themselves sharing their coach with another man, with whom they were unacquainted. This 'drole Genius', as Leveland deemed him, became the unwitting source of amusement for the duration of the journey. The hilarity began when the stranger expressed a dread of losing his family watch. In return, Leveland made known his great sadness at the loss of the duke of Devonshire, who had recently

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died while taking the waters in the Austrian Netherlands. 'Pray Sir', asked the stranger, 'what has the Duke lost?' Smiling at his misunderstanding, Leveland informed him that the duke had lost his life. The gasp of surprise with which the gentleman responded triggered a laugh, which the friends battled to suppress. The conversation then turned to highway robbery, as the stranger flaunted his prized tortoise-shell-encased silver watch. He admitted to being afraid of an encounter at gunpoint, but boasted that 'I should be very uneasy to have a Highwayman's death to lay my charge, for I would certainly kill him if I could.' Leveland and his friends could barely 'restrain' themselves from laughing 'most excessively' at this bold assertion. The joke continued as Leveland advised the stranger that the stretch of road on which they were travelling was notoriously dangerous, and that robberies were common even in broad daylight – a fact confirmed by Potts, his friend and partner in crime. Their conversations went on, '& some equally as extraordinary', until they were brought to their journey's end. They then parted company with the stranger before dining at Turnham Green, and according to Levelend, 'very merry we were at the expence of the young fellow who had just left us'.[1]

This anecdote is taken from the diary of Gervase Leveland, a gentleman and the son of a London-based draper. His diary covers the period from July 1764 until October 1765 during which time he lived in London. Much of its content is concerned with accounts of his social life, in particular the time he shared with his friend, Jack Potts. The pair enjoyed a lively round of entertainments, with frequent references to dining and drinking together until becoming 'exceedingly merry'. The incident cited above, however, is particularly useful for illustrating the themes of this article. The story of Leveland's coach trip is one of a struggle to stifle laughter through 'good manners' while remaining in the company of the stranger, only to re-live the trip and exercise their amusement when dining together in private later that same evening.[2] Leveland and his friends behaved differently depending on the level of familiarity shared by the company.

This notion that 'company' could be a category with contemporary significance has recently been explored by Phil Withington. Taking an alehouse encounter from 1673, he argued that individuals in the past understood that social groupings could take on rules and conventions of their own, which were not necessarily determined by larger structures. When interacting, men and women engaged in a 'politics of social participation', in which their actions were shaped – but not dictated – by objective factors such as conventions, uses of space, and modes of discourse, each with expectations attached.[3] Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' offers a useful framework for understanding the way in which individuals think and act differently depending on their

[1] The journal of Gervase Leveland, 13 Oct. 1764, British Library, Add. MS 19140, fos. 33–9.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Phil Withington, 'Company and sociability in early modern England', *Social History*, 32 (2007), pp. 291–307.

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context. Social situations are comprised of a negotiation between objective setting and individual agency: between where and when a person acts, and their own decisions about how to act. 'Habitus' is used to understand this two-way relationship. Systems of perception, thought, and action are acquired subconsciously by an individual over time, and endow them with a level of 'cultural competence' with which they can behave appropriately. In short, 'habitus' is the principle that guides social practices in different domains.[4] It explains why something can be experienced as natural or permissible in one context, when in another it might be unthinkable or outrageous. It is also consistent with Barbara Rosenwein's more recent concept of 'emotional communities' in history, which she proposed as a means to comprehend how a social setting affected emotional responses.[5] People were liable to make different judgements about what was offensive, threatening, or inappropriate depending on their context. Individuals moved from one community to another, adjusting their values and behaviours accordingly.

This article considers how company intersected with polite manners in eighteenth-century England. Through the laughter of gentlemen, it makes a case for a concept of 'occasional politeness', which is intended to emphasize that polite comportment was only expected on certain occasions. In particular, it was the level of familiarity shared by individuals that was the principal factor determining what was considered appropriate. There was unease with laughter in sociability; under codes of polite manners, it was to be carefully controlled and targeted. But a distinction was made between the standard of decorous behaviour demanded when meeting and mixing with unfamiliar acquaintances, and the greater licence to revel in the rude and lewd when in the company of close friends. If politeness was an occasional practice, it might well be asked what ideas underpinned moments of interaction when it was not necessary. Here, it is argued that alongside occasional politeness there existed a tacit acceptance of looser manners among male friends that might be called 'intimate bawdiness'. Its origins can be found in a train of renaissance humanist thought that valorized wit as a centrepiece of male sociability. Exemplified by Thomas Hobbes's lengthy discussion of wit in *Leviathan*, allowance was made for a greater play of 'fancy' when men met together as close acquaintances.

When compared with the attention given to the importance of discourses of politeness, this separate, and more informal, strand of male social identity has been little explored in the eighteenth century. The orthodox narrative holds that, from the early eighteenth century, men were 'increasingly expected to submit to the demands of politeness'.[6] Yet, the tide has been turning against the

[4] Pierre Bourdieu, *Towards a theory of practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 78–87.

[5] Barbara H. Rosenwein, 'Worrying about emotions in history', *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 821–45, at p. 842.

[6] Lawrence E. Klein, 'Politeness and the interpretation of the British eighteenth-century', *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), pp. 869–98, at p. 881.

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hegemony enjoyed by the model of the polite gentleman, as it is challenged from both theoretical and methodological perspectives. Alongside the demands for polite manners there continued a lasting tradition of bawdy forms of gentlemanly sociability. Both of these facets of gentlemanly culture can be incorporated if the company in which politeness was – and was not – a guiding principle is considered explicitly. Given the historiographical interest in the theme of politeness, it is difficult to engage with questions of manners and sociability without it. The concept is retained in this article as a link with these long-standing historiographical debates, as well as recognition of the significant discursive purchase it achieved in the period. The debate, however, may now have reached a tipping point at which the primacy of politeness can be challenged. The prefix 'occasional' is intended to do this by making conceptual space for alternative codes of practice to exist; it opens up the possibility for politeness to be one among many behavioural ideals suited to different contexts. Rather than thinking in dichotomized terms of polite versus impolite, therefore, this article suggests that the category of company might offer a more fruitful way forward. In doing so, it begins to reflect on how eighteenth-century sociability might be cast in a more pluralistic mould. The implications of this argument also feed into questions about the separation of the public and private spheres, the distinction between elite and popular cultures at this time, and how far it is possible to detach the eighteenth century from preceding periods.

What follows begins by considering the rise and fall of politeness as the hegemonic code of gentlemanly conduct in the eighteenth century. One aspect of the debate that has remained underplayed is the extent to which manners were dependent on social context, and hence how a single individual could be either polite or impolite as the occasion demanded. This interplay between conduct and company is developed in the main body of the article through the lens of gentlemen's laughter. The concept of occasional politeness is placed alongside that of intimate bawdiness as a means to understand this flexibility in behavioural practices.

II

The scholarly stereotype of the eighteenth-century 'polite gentleman' can be traced as far back as the early twentieth century. Virgil B. Heltzel's doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago in 1925, for example, analysed the letters of the fourth earl of Chesterfield with a view to understanding his – and more broadly an eighteenth-century – concept of an 'ideal gentleman'.[7] In all, Chesterfield wrote 448 letters to his son, which were intended as guidance for the young Philip on how to make his way in the world as a gentleman. Although not intended for public viewing, they were bought and published by James Dodsley in 1774 and were reprinted in numerous editions under titles

[7] Virgil B. Heltzel, *Chesterfield and the tradition of the ideal gentleman* (Chicago, IL, 1925).

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including *The principles of politeness* and *Lord Chesterfield's maxims*.[8] In 1932, Chesterfield's complete correspondence known to date was published in six volumes under the editorship of Bonamy Dobrée. Since then it has been mined by historians writing on politeness; his remarks on laughter, to which this article will return, are the most frequently cited source by scholars looking for contemporary attitudes towards man's risible faculty.[9]

Chesterfield's connection between polite manners and good breeding was symptomatic of a culture of thought that has been found stretching back into the early modern period. According to Norbert Elias's 'civilizing process', there developed during the Renaissance a concern with the subtlest questions of human interaction, including bodily carriage, dress, facial expressions, and table manners. These outward behaviours were taken as an index to an individual's character and social position. Indeed, polished manners were cited as the characteristic that most obviously separated elite from popular cultures.[10] In 1978, Peter Burke famously argued for an elite 'withdrawal' from popular culture in the early modern period, which was motivated by the 'new and more self-conscious style of behaviour' that made cock-fighting, bear-baiting, fetes, and frolics incompatible with elite sensibilities; their goal was 'to exercise self-control, to behave with a studied nonchalance, to cultivate a sense of style, and to move in a dignified manner'.[11] As Keith Thomas put it succinctly in his article on laughter in Tudor and Stuart England, refinement was crucial to status by the eighteenth century; from then on, 'only the vulgar could go on laughing without restraint'.[12] This rupture between elite and popular cultures fed into the study of politeness. It was argued that, by the eighteenth century, social distinctions were routinely shaped by codes of manners, which became more important in light of the swelling ranks of middling

[8] See, for example, Philip Dormer Stanhope fourth earl of Chesterfield, *Lord Chesterfield's advice to his son* (London, 1775), and idem, *Principles of politeness* (London, 1775).

[9] See, for example, Simon Dickie, *Cruelty and laughter: forgotten comic literature and the unsentimental eighteenth century* (London, 2011), p. 314 n. 131; Robert Evans, 'The humour of history and the history of humour', *Oxford Historian: a magazine for the Faculty of History for Oxford Historians*, 11 (2011), pp. 44–58, at p. 49; Vic Gatrell, *City of laughter: sex and satire in eighteenth-century London* (London, 2006), p. 164; Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing gods weeping virgins: laughter in the history of religion* (London, 1997), p. 101; Quentin Skinner, 'Why laughter mattered in the Renaissance', *History of Political Thought*, 22 (2001), pp. 418–47, at p. 447.

[10] Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process: sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (3 vols., Oxford, 1993), I, *The history of manners.*

[11] Peter Burke, *Popular culture in early modern Europe* (London, 1978), p. 271. See also, more recently, Anna Bryson, *From courtesy to civility: changing codes of conduct in early modern England* (Oxford, 1998); idem, 'The rhetoric of status: gesture, demeanour and the image of the gentleman in sixteenth and seventeenth century England', in L. Gent and N. Llewellyn, eds., *Renaissance bodies* (London, 1990), pp. 136–53; Peter Burke, 'A civil tongue: language and politeness in early modern Europe', in Peter Burke and Brian Harrison, eds., *Civil histories: essays presented in honour of Keith Thomas* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 31–48.

[12] Keith Thomas, 'The place of laughter in Tudor and Stuart England', *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 Jan. 1977, pp. 79–81, at p. 80.

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sorts and a concurrent decline of traditional status markers. Respectability was seen as an aspect of middle-class self-identity, distinguishing them from poorer labouring workers.[13] A more pronounced historiographical emphasis on these middling sorts, and their importance to culture, society, and economy, cast the eighteenth century as a period inhabited by a 'polite and commercial people'.[14]

One of the most important expositions on eighteenth-century politeness is Lawrence Klein's *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness* (1994), which placed the third earl of Shaftesbury at the forefront of the new discursive trend for politeness.[15] Klein was primarily interested in politeness as a discourse of cultural politics. He argued that Shaftesbury's gentlemanly social philosophy was at heart a whiggish political project, but the semantic associations of politeness nevertheless rendered it first as a discourse of manners.[16] The polite was attached to 'decorum in behaviour and personal style' befitting gentility. Governed by the concepts of balance, moderation, and control, it was a form of 'social agreeableness'; the 'art of pleasing' in both company and conversation, which was attached to the gentle classes of men and women.[17] Following Klein, further work expanded on the implications of polite principles for gentlemanly behaviour in the eighteenth century. Fine-grained readings of the discourses of politeness and masculinity teased out their internal tensions. There were concerns about the feminizing of men: inherited from France, politeness carried a 'frenchified' baggage that threatened the polite practitioner's descent into foppery.[18] How to reconcile manly aggression with decorum also proved a thorny issue,[19] while the survival of duelling indicates the continuing importance of traditional codes of honour, together with competitive

[13] Peter Earle, *The making of the English middle class: business, society and family life in London, 1660–1730* (Berkeley, CA, 1989), pp. 5–12. See also idem, 'The middling sort in London', in Jonathan Barry and Christopher Brooks, eds., *The middling sort of people: culture, society and politics in England, 1550–1800* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 141–58; Roy Porter, *Society in the eighteenth century* (London 1982).

[14] Paul Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989).

[15] Lawrence E. Klein, *Shaftesbury and the culture of politeness* (Cambridge, 1994).

[16] On the integration of politeness into political thought, see also Lawrence E. Klein, 'Liberty, manners and politeness in early eighteenth-century England', *Historical Journal*, 32 (1989), pp. 583–605; Nicholas Phillipson, 'Politics and politeness in the reigns of Anne and the early Hanoverians', in J. G. A. Pocock, *The varieties of British political thought, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 211–45; J. G. A. Pocock, 'Virtue, rights and manners: a model for historians of political thought', *Political Theory*, 9 (1981), pp. 353–68. Markku Peltonen has challenged the established association between politeness and whiggism, arguing that politeness was indeed contested, but not along party lines in 'Politeness and whiggism, 1688–1732', *Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), pp. 391–414.

[17] Klein, 'Politeness', pp. 874–6.

[18] Michèle Cohen, *Fashioning masculinity: national identity and language in the eighteenth century* (London, 1996), pp. 42–3.

[19] Elizabeth Foyster, 'Boys will be boys? Manhood and aggressions, 1660–1800', in Tim Hitchcock and Michèle Cohen eds., *English masculinities* (London, 1999), pp. 151–66.

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associations that were potentially problematic to the polite.[20] Nevertheless, politeness remained the dominant paradigm. Perhaps the most sustained exploration of the intersection between manliness and the culture of politeness was Philip Carter's *Men and the emergence of polite society* (2001), which found politeness to be a 'desirable and emulative' form of behaviour and thus accounted for its rise as a model of manliness.[21] Indeed, it was argued that this was truer of the eighteenth century than of previous generations. Alexandra Shepard, for example, concluded her study of early modern masculinity with the assertion that by 1700 polite manners were attached to a higher class of men more firmly than ever.[22]

By this time, however, there was already a historiographical shift away from the connection between refined manners and gentlemanly culture. In the first instance, there had been reconsideration of the dichotomies between elite and popular cultures in early modern England, on which the model of the polite gentleman rests. Burke's original concept of popular culture as static, unlettered, and discrete was questioned both methodologically and theoretically, and there was less confidence that popular culture could be isolated and studied separately from an elite opposite.[23] In this vein, the extent of crossover of ideas and idioms between the upper echelons of society in the eighteenth century and their lower-class counterparts was highlighted.[24] Secondly, historians became more critical of the sources that were used to construct an image of a refined elite culture. For the most part, the case for politeness was built upon prescriptive texts and there has been a reaction against the validity of these sources for accessing the experiences of people in the past. Sources such as these show that interest in manners grew over the period, but they do not reveal the extent to which individuals absorbed this information, still less whether they acted upon it and how far it is representative of their experience.[25]

Consequently, the search for 'real' social practices, rather than contemporary theories of how things ought to be done, brought new sources and approaches into play. These pointed to forms of sociability that were at odds with the model of politeness. Vic Gatrell, for example, used the impolitely lusty output of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century caricaturists as a way to uncover the

[20] Markku Peltonen, *The duel in early modern England: politeness, civility and honour* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 13.

[21] Philip Carter, *Men and the emergence of polite society* (Harlow, 2001), p. 1.

[22] Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of masculinity in early modern England* (Oxford, 2003), p. 252.

[23] Tim Harris, 'Introduction', in Tim Harris ed., *Popular culture in England, 1500–1800* (London, 1995), pp. 1–26; Robert Scribner, 'Is a history of popular culture possible?', *History of European Ideas*, 10 (1989), pp. 175–91.

[24] Jeremy Black, *Culture in eighteenth-century England: a subject for taste* (London, 2005), pp. 130–1.

[25] The validity is questioned by Lyndal Roper in 'Beyond discourse theory', *Women's History Review*, 19 (2010), pp. 307–19; for a defence, see Klein, 'Politeness', p. 871.

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rowdy and ribald lifestyle of much of London's supposedly polite society.[26] This work on visual material was complemented by Simon Dickie's exploration of untapped comic print literature produced in the middle decades of the century. He presented a case for humour that was not just rude, but positively malicious, as men and women 'openly delighted in the miseries of others'.[27] Both Gatrell and Dickie countered the notion that in the eighteenth century Britain developed into a polite and commercial society. Their juxtaposition of po-faced ideas about polite comportment with the unruly laughter of society allowed them to present bold theses centring on 'the gulf between theory and practice'.[28] In theory, the vulgarity of bawdy humour was condemned as evidence of ill breeding; in practice, supposedly polite society chortled, chuckled, and belly-laughed with the best of them. These works did much to blur the distinction between elite and popular tastes in the eighteenth century, and consequently brought the 'impoliteness' of culture to the foreground.

To pit practice against theory, however, perhaps goes too far towards discounting the significance of discourses. Social practice does not disprove or negate the importance of the language of politeness; it adds alternatives to it, since men were influenced both by standards set out in print as well as the behaviour of others.[29] Examples of gentlemanly homosocial encounters are more episodic than prescriptive writings, but they nevertheless reveal a wider culture that offsets the discursive ideal of the 'polite gentleman', and makes it possible to appreciate that different practices were rewarded in different settings. This way of thinking also owes much to R. W. Connell's work on masculinity. By arguing that a 'hegemonic' masculinity dominates at any one time, Connell implicitly left room for other types of masculinity to exist alongside it.[30] These ideas constitute an approach that sits comfortably with an understanding of politeness as an occasional practice.

Historians have not wholly overlooked the contexts of politeness. Klein's historiographical review article from 2002 posed the question, 'whose was the culture of politeness?', and this led historians to think not just about who was polite and where, but also who was impolite and where.[31] Indeed, the final chapter of Carter's *Men and the emergence of polite society* had already demonstrated the possibility for different codes of masculinity to co-exist within the same individual. Attending to 'real life experience', Carter used personal diaries and correspondence to uncover moments when polite men, such as James Boswell, fell short of polite standards. This led him to contend that men could consciously quit polite society for an alternative community, adjusting their behaviour accordingly. Carter argued that masculinity was a 'complex and

[26] Gatrell, *City of laughter*.
[27] Dickie, *Cruelty and laughter*, p. 1.
[28] Gatrell, *City of laughter*, pp. 161–5.
[29] Shepard, *Meanings of manhood*, p. 11.
[30] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1995), pp. 185–203.
[31] Klein, 'Politeness', p. 872; Karen Harvey, 'The history of masculinity, c. 1650–1800', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 296–311, at pp. 306–9.

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fluid identity, configured differently with respect to sex, class and nationality of one's companion, and the geographical location and time of day when meetings took place', although he went no further towards exploring these contexts.[32] Most recently, Karen Harvey has pursued this line to account for a lack of politeness in some male sociable settings. By uncovering the material culture of punch bowls decorated with images of male conviviality, Harvey argued that they point to moments of 'informal sociability', which imply that practice was not always beholden to theories of politeness.[33]

It can be said that informal social encounters are elusive to historians.[34] However, it might also be that male informal sociability has received relatively little attention because it has been obscured by the debate around gendered public and private spheres. Traditionally, it was held that eighteenth-century women were consigned to a life of domesticity in the private sphere, while men monopolized the public sphere of political, economic, and social life.[35] This 'separate spheres' model has since been qualified or rejected on a number of points,[36] but given its framework, it is possible to perceive how moments of male private sociability have been overlooked. Yet private encounters were important to men as well as women. In this respect, the notion of intimate bawdiness is a useful concept, as it signifies not only closeness, but also a degree of privacy between men. Such male private interactions could be conducted through correspondence, or by face-to-face contact, in which intimate groups could meet and mix within spaces of public sociability. It was not so much where, when, or how social interaction took place that determined whether private or public activity was happening, but who was present. In this light, the public–private distinction was not structural, but could be a fluid notion that applied to different times and places, contingent on the shifting nature of company. Moreover, intimate bawdiness highlights that these moments of sociability were often characterized by an indecorous brand of humour and wit. Although it was not a contemporary term like politeness, intimate bawdiness is a useful tool for articulating the consent given to conduct that might otherwise have been considered outside the bounds of civility.

It is worth underlining that this impoliteness was distinct from libertinism, which offers another characterization of 'men behaving badly' in this period.

[32] Philip Carter, 'James Boswell's manliness', in Hitchcock and Cohen, eds., *English masculinities*, pp. 111–30 at pp. 129–30.

[33] Karen Harvey, 'Ritual encounters: punch parties and masculinity in the eighteenth century', *Past and Present*, 241 (2012), pp. 165–203.

[34] Ibid., p. 168.

[35] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987).

[36] Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English society, 1650–1850: the emergence of separate spheres?* (Harlow, 1998). See also Lawrence E. Klein, 'Gender and the public/private distinction in the eighteenth century: some questions about evidence and analytic procedure', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29 (1995), pp. 97–109; Amanda Vickery, 'Golden age to separate spheres?: a review of the categories and chronology of English women's history', *Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 383–414.

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Anna Bryson designated the libertine or rake as an expression of 'anti-civility', which resulted from the social tensions created by manners becoming a marker of status.[37] Associated specifically with aristocratic male vice, lawlessness, and moral laxity, libertine manners were a means for elite men to assert their superiority by openly flouting the ethical aspirations of their middle-class emulators.[38] Such an intention depended on an audience and accordingly the key rakish trait was the 'will to outrage others, rather than simply to enjoy excess'.[39] For Bryson, therefore, libertinism is best understood not as straightforward rudeness, but as a conscious rejection of civil values. As such, it was not truly anarchic, but 'bound to its opposite in an attitude of defiance'.[40] Intimate bawdiness draws attention to something quite different. First, it was not purely an aristocratic practice, but one with wider social presence among the middling ranks for whom respectability and politeness were achieving widespread currency. Secondly, the emphasis on private and familiar encounters means that by nature it was not targeted at an audience of outsiders, whether intended to shock or not. And finally, it does not seek to account for an outright rejection of civil norms; instead, it argues that familiar company could in fact legitimize incivility. Rather than seeing rudeness as 'anti-civility', therefore, intimate bawdiness renders it normative by creating a space within otherwise polite culture.

This article focuses on the specific social contexts of politeness and bawdiness in gentlemanly sociability. Rather than arguing that gentlemen were (or were not) forced to submit to the demands of politeness, company is seen as the factor determining the 'habitus' of a social encounter, and hence what was considered appropriate behaviour. Gentlemen could therefore show considerable flexibility in their adherence to polite standards depending on the familiarity they shared with their companions, as illustrated by the tale of Gervase Leveland's coach trip. The remainder of this article explores this theme through the laughter of gentlemen. Laughter is a useful means to think about questions of polite manners and company for two reasons. First, a commonplace in the growing historiography on humour is that it resists easy categorization. As Gatrell's and Dickie's works cited above, as well as other more recent contributions, have shown, it is a medium through which individuals could cross cultural boundaries, allowing the otherwise polite wilfully to endorse more Rabelaisian festivity.[41] Secondly, laughter attracted considerable contemporary interest, and through gentlemen's ideas and practices, the workings of politeness and wit in company can be explored. Occasional politeness is a useful concept, as it enables broader historiographical issues to be discussed. It allows for the interplay between dichotomies of polite–vulgar, elite–popular,

[37] Bryson, *From courtesy to civility*, pp. 243–75.
[38] Ibid., pp. 243–4 and 261.
[39] Ibid., pp. 246 and 255.
[40] Ibid., pp. 252–3.
[41] Colin Jones, 'French crossings II: laughing over boundaries', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 21 (2011), pp. 1–38.

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public–private, and theory–practice to be uncovered. Rather than ignoring or explaining away potential contradictions, it embraces them. By emphasizing the way in which individuals adapted their behaviour to their social context, it shows how eighteenth-century society can frustrate the binary oppositions that have been imposed upon it.

III

More than twenty years ago, Peter Borsay portrayed an 'orgy of socializing' in the eighteenth century. Meeting and mixing was seen as one of the most commendable activities.[42] While the centrality of sociability to the period is well known, the relationship between laughter and social interaction is less appreciated. For contemporaries, however, it was a fundamental part of sharing one another's company and it was often observed that laughter was a peculiarly social phenomenon. People seldom laughed alone, but rather needed company to set their 'springs of gaiety' into action.[43] Furthermore, laughing was infectious. The tendency to laugh in sympathy with others was noted in philosophical inquiry. For Francis Hutcheson, 'man's frame' was so sociable 'that one merry countenance may diffuse cheerfulness to many'.[44] Towards the end of the century, one writer maintained, 'We may as well think of separating wit from the first of April, or goose from Michaelmas-day, as that we can live at ease without laughter, "the chorus of conversation," and the union of social intercourse.'[45] Laughter was indeed sociable, but sociability came in many different forms.[46] It could be an arranged meeting or a chance encounter, routine or occasional; it could occur between men or women who shared intimate familiarity or distant reserve. Encounters happened at different times and places, and the two parties need not even be present – correspondence allowed for sociability to occur across time and space. Social situations also aimed at different purposes: they could be genial, flirtatious, or friendly, and so on. But laughter was as versatile as social interaction itself: as Samuel Johnson said, 'you may laugh in as many ways as you talk'.[47] Laughter and humour were flexible when navigating social situations and individuals adapted to different circumstances. There was a theory of polite laughter, but behaviour could be at odds with these prescriptions. These instances are explained using the concept of intimate bawdiness, which, it is

[42] Peter Borsay, *The English urban renaissance: culture and society in the provincial town 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989), p. 272 and passim.

[43] Louis Poinsinet de Sivry, *Traité des causes physiques et morales du rire relativement à l'art de l'exciter* (Amsterdam, 1768), trans. Anon., *Essay on laughter, wherein are displayed, its natural and moral causes, with the arts of exciting it* (London, 1769), p. 25.

[44] Francis Hutcheson, *Reflections upon laughter* (Glasgow, 1750), p. 27.

[45] *Olla Podrida*, 26 May 1787.

[46] See also Phil Withington, 'The sociable self', in *Society in early modern England: the vernacular origins of some powerful ideas* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 171–201.

[47] Samuel Johnson (1763), quoted in James Boswell, *The life of Samuel Johnson* (2 vols., London, 1791), I, p. 244.

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argued, demonstrates the lasting importance of traditional forms of male sociability that centred on the association between wit and good fellowship.

Guidance on polite laughter involved two considerations: how to laugh, and what to laugh at. In the first instance, the physicality of laughing could defy the demand for measured bodily conduct. As George II's physician, Dr Peter Shaw, noted, at times laughter was an 'almost irresistible force'.[48] Marin Cureau de la Chambre's account of laughter, written in 1640, was admired in the eighteenth century for its fullness and vitality. Beginning with the depression of the eyebrows, wrinkles, and narrowing of eyelids, Chambre moved on to the contraction of the nose and the elevation of the cheeks and lips, which obliged the mouth to open, displaying the teeth and the tongue in a suspended state. Yet, all of these effects were moderate when compared to the violent exertion experienced in other parts. During the 'outrageous crisis', the whole body – head, shoulders, breast, and sides – convulsed with shaking and twisting, at once 'crumpled together' and 'rent asunder'.[49] Such profuse laughter was considered a weakness, as it was read as a sign of man's inability to command his brutish instincts. This is encapsulated in the notion of a 'horse-laugh': a human reaction, but with animalistic undertones.[50] A 'symptom of rusticity' and a characteristic of the 'rural hoyden', the vigorous bodily convulsions and screwing of the face it occasioned were thought to be physically unseemly.[51] The audible and visible quality of laughter is important. A smoothness of comportment and an ease of bodily motion was thought to be a sign of refinement, an external trait of the inner virtue possessed by polite gentlemen. Only through suppressing extravagant laughter could a gentleman be considered polite.

The second dimension of polite laughter concerned its objects. Laughter was to be both carefully controlled and carefully targeted. Laughing *at* certain objects or people was closely associated with the practice of ridicule. This connection was established from the first philosophical investigations conducted in antiquity. In the Latin language, the verb 'to laugh', *ridere*, is very similar to the verb 'to mock', *deridere*.[52] The legacy of this linguistic closeness can be seen in Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, in which it is possible to trace a circular route from laughter through derision, scorn, and ridicule, before arriving back at laughter.[53] In discussions of civility, the limits and purposes of ridicule had long been subjected to unease and scrutiny. Earlier thinkers had established

[48] *Man*, no. 6, 17 Feb. 1755, p. 4.

[49] Marin Cureau de la Chambre, *Les caractères des passions* (Paris, 1640), quoted in Poinsinet de Sivry, *Traité des causes . . . du rire*, pp. 38–40.

[50] William Brownsword, *Laugh upon laugh; or laughter ridicul'd* (London, 1740), pp. 33–4.

[51] John Calhoun Stephens, ed., '*The Guardian*' (Lexington, KY, 1982), no. 29, 14 Apr. 1713, p. 127. See also Gatrell, *City of laughter*, p. 170.

[52] Quentin Skinner, 'Thomas Hobbes and the social control of unsociability', in A. P. Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra, eds., *The Oxford handbook of Hobbes* (Oxford, forthcoming, 2015). I am grateful to Quentin Skinner for permission to read and cite this chapter.

[53] Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of the English language* (London, 1755).

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that feelings of joy elicited by ridicule were always in part scornful and patronizing, as the objects fit for such treatment were those that were ugly, deformed, or inferior in some way. Thomas Hobbes wrote that 'To be laughed at' is to be 'derided, that is triumphed over'.[54] And most famously in *Leviathan*, he cast laughter as a '*Sudden Glory*', the sneering self-applause that resulted from perceiving oneself in a superior light.[55] In the eighteenth century, the term 'laughing-stock' was defined in dictionaries, and never favourably. For Johnson, one considered as such was simply 'a butt; an object of ridicule'.[56] Uneasiness also came from a theological direction. In Genesis, Abraham laughed with joy on hearing from God that he would have a son. His wife Sarah also laughed, but she lacked faith and her laughter was interpreted as mocking scorn, directed at God.[57] The notion of a breed of laughter that was bound to contempt persisted. Considered as an expression of derision, ridicule jarred with the desire for genial relations.

There were certain objects that were not to be laughed at, but well-targeted ridicule could also be a force for good. Francis Hutcheson likened it to a sharp knife, adding that 'it may do good sense', but only 'in a wise man's hands'.[58] There was a tradition dating back to antiquity that held laughter to be a means of correcting vice, and this idea was still prevalent in the eighteenth century. It is most notable in the contemporary investment in satire, which has been documented in secondary literature.[59] By treating vice to scornful laughter, satire was cast as an important tool for upholding virtue. This principle built on the legacy of Horace and Juvenal, who had cast it as a force for apprehending folly. John Dryden's *Discourse on the nature and progress of satire* (1693) was well known to eighteenth-century writers and, following his lead, it was commonly argued that there was no remedy so effective for curing social ills.[60]

[54] Thomas Hobbes, *Humane nature, or, the fundamental elements of policy* (London, 1684), pp. 54–5. For Hobbes and the classical tradition, see Skinner, 'Why laughing mattered in the Renaissance', pp. 422–44, and idem, 'Hobbes and the classical theory of laughter', in *Visions of Politics* (3 vols., Cambridge 2002), III, pp. 142–76; idem, 'Thomas Hobbes and the social control of unsociability'.

[55] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 1651), p. 27. See also Michael Billig, *Laughter and ridicule* (London, 2005), pp. 50–6; J. Roeckelein, *The psychology of humor: a reference guide and bibliography* (Westport, CT, 2002), pp. 143–7.

[56] Johnson, *Dictionary*.

[57] M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the foot of the cross* (London, 1997), pp. XIX, 17, and 24.

[58] Hutcheson, *Reflections upon laughter*, p. 34.

[59] P. K. Elkin, *The Augustan defence of satire* (Oxford, 1973); see also, Billig, *Laughter and ridicule*, pp. 57–75; Dustin Griffin, *Satire: a critical reintroduction* (Lexington, KY, 1994), pp. 24–7; Barry Sanders, *Sudden glory: laughter as subversive history* (Boston, MA, 1995), pp. 234–43; Werner Von Koppenfels, '"Nothing is ridiculous but what is deformed": laughter as a test of truth in Enlightenment satire', in Manfred Pfister (ed.), *A history of English laughter: laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and beyond* (New York, 2002), pp. 57–67.

[60] John Dryden, *A discourse on the nature and progress of satire* (London, 1693). For eighteenth-century assertions of the value of satire, see, for example, Anon., *An essay on satyr and panegyric* (London, 1764); Anon. *The satirist: a poem* (London, 1771); W. Combe, *The justification* (1778); B. Walwyn, *Essay on comedy* (London, 1782); William Whitehead, *An essay on ridicule*

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The same principle featured in discussions of the act of laughing itself, where it was held that polite forms of interaction could be maintained if those who fell short were castigated with a well-placed snigger. In his *Treatise on polite conversation* (1738), Jonathan Swift maintained that an accomplished scholar of polite sociability would interrupt a grave companion with a witty remark to engage the company in a loud laugh. If he resumed his thread, others would follow suit until the offender was forced to give over. This method of cooperative sabotage to curb a conversational bore was a tactic identified later in the century by Francis Grose in his *Classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue* as 'kittle-pitchering'.[61] Such tedium-evading techniques were sufficiently recognized to earn a place in slang vocabulary. As well as dealing with a 'dull dry tedious story-teller', for Swift laughter was also a pleasant way of diluting the ill-natured effects of 'brangling Disputers'.[62] A 'well-applied Jest' could be a tool in conflict resolution; it could smooth the most violent passions and settle tempers after a disagreement.[63] Laughter was an effective strategy for the maintenance of polite sociable forms; it could be a gentle way of correcting anti-social behaviour. This was perhaps most notably discussed by the third earl of Shaftesbury. His defence of ridicule, outlined in his *Characteristicks of men, manners, opinions, times* (1711), centred on the ability of well-targeted laughter to expose folly and chastise vice, thus triumphing in the values of an urbane and cultivated society. In his words, 'we polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough Sides by this *amicable Collision*'. For Shaftesbury, ridicule was 'a lenitive Remedy against Vice'.[64]

As well as avoiding testy or tedious interactions, polite sociability aimed at inclusivity: all participants should be involved in the conversation. Laughter, therefore, should be shared and not that of a single individual or faction within a group. After being subjected to a practice known as the 'giggle in the corner', one gentleman's diatribe against it serves as a vivid condemnation of exclusive laughter. Arriving at a dinner party, the gentleman found that his female company rose, but rather than greeting him openly, they whispered to each other and appeared to stifle a laugh. They then proceeded to huddle into a corner, entering into 'a private cabal, seemingly to discourse upon points of great secrecy and importance, but of equal merriment and diversion'. Seated at the table, their conversations continued. The man was forbidden from having any share in their diversions, but for the women, 'it was a continued laugh from the beginning to the end of dinner'. The writer's anguish at being so patently

(London, 1743). See also William Frost, 'Dryden and satire', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Literature, 1500–1900*, 11 (1971), pp. 401–16.

[61] Francis Grose, *A classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue* (London, 1785).

[62] Jonathan Swift, *A treatise on polite conversation* (London, 1738), p. xxv.

[63] Georg Friedrich Meier, *Gedanken von scherzen* (Hemmerde, 1744), trans. Anon, *The merry philosopher; or, thoughts on jesting* (London, 1765), p. 10.

[64] Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of men, manners, opinions, times* (3 vols. London, 1711), I, pp. 64 and 128.

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excluded is palpable: 'I seldom dared to lift my eyes from my plate, or turn my head to call for more beer, lest by some awkward posture I might draw upon me a whisper or laugh.' The giggling women were his 'tormentors' and he perceived their joy rising in exact proportion to his misery. He considered their actions deeply wounding to his pride. 'Even a blow from a fair hand conveys pleasure', he lamented, but the battery of 'stolen-glances' and 'half-stifled laughs' he withstood amounted to 'cruel artillery'.[65]

These examples of 'dos and don'ts' in laughter all have one thing in common: placement. Politeness required judgement in order to laugh at the correct moments. So it was that in order to become a 'fine gentleman', Samuel Johnson's 'great labour' was to 'learn to laugh'. He explained:

I had been used to consider laughter as the effect of merriment, but I soon learned that it is one of the arts of adulation, and from laughing only to shew I was pleased, I began to laugh when I wished to please. This was at first very difficult. I sometimes heard the story with dull indifference, and not exalting myself to merriment by due gradations, burst out suddenly into an aukward noise which was not always favourably interpreted. Sometimes I was behind the rest of the company and lost the grace of laughing by delay, and sometimes when I began at the right time was deficient in loudness or in length. But by diligent imitations of the best models, I attained at last such flexibility of muscles, that I was always a welcome auditor of a story, and got the reputation of a good-natur'd fellow.[66]

Polite laughter was not an instinctive anatomical response to the humour of a moment; it was a learned behaviour. It was moderate, well placed, and carefully judged in order to facilitate genial social relations. This is perhaps most evident in Swift's confidence in the 'great importance' of the laughing 'affair'. While accepting that laughter could be 'a natural and involuntary Distortion of the Muscles', he also stressed that there was 'another Cause of Laughter which Decency requires'. Management of the laughing faculties was not to be acquired 'without much Observation, long Practice and sound Judgement', but it was 'undoubted the Mark of a good Taste, as well as of polite obliging Behaviour'. His examples of ideal dialogue contained in his *Treatise on polite conversation* professed to be the result of decades of minutely observed social exchange, meticulously recorded and analysed. In the preface, he recalled how he toyed with the idea of marking the moments within the dialogues when one, two, or all of the company should laugh. His conclusion that it was an unfeasible undertaking is instructive: it would have cluttered the page and increased the size of the volume to such an extent that it was simply impractical.[67] For Swift, laughing was both an essential and recurrent part of polite sociability. Writing in

[65] *Connoisseur*, 2 May 1754. For the 'cruel artillery' of the 'giggle in the corner', see *Olla Podrida*, 26 May 1787.

[66] J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L. F. Powell, eds., *The Yale edition of the works of Samuel Johnson* (23 vols., London, 1963), II, *Idler*, no. 64, p. 199; also quoted in Gatrell, *City of laughter*, p. 159.

[67] Swift, *On polite conversation*, p. v.

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the *Guardian* under the pseudonym Isaac Bickerstaff, he contended that the art of conversation 'never fits easier upon us, than when we now and then discharge ourselves in a symphony of laughter'.[68]

Polite ideas about laughter were at their most severe in one of Chesterfield's missives to his son. The letters were particularly concerned with the art of demonstrating 'good breeding' through decorous behaviour, and cover everything Chesterfield considered 'necessary arts of the world', from dress and habits to selecting suitable company and a wife. He wrote an extensive passage on laughter, which began:

> Having mentioned laughing, I must particularly warn you against it: and I could heartily wish that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live. Frequent loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners: it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry. In my mind there is nothing so illiberal, so ill-bred as audible laughter.

He went on to advise that laughter was 'a low and unbecoming thing'. He took issue with the 'disagreeable noise that it makes, and the shocking distortions of the face that it occasions', which to his mind rendered it one of those 'vulgar awkwardnesses' that were 'most carefully to be guarded against'.[69] In another letter, Chesterfield warned his son that: 'Horse-play, romping, frequent loud fits of laughter, jokes, waggery, and indiscriminate familiarity, will sink both merit and knowledge into a degree of contempt. They compose a most merry fellow; and a merry fellow was never yet a respectable man.'[70] Thus, where politeness was concerned, it was important to avoid lewd topics, and anyone caught laughing at slapstick or other unsophisticated sources of amusement betrayed their simple mind and vulgar thoughts. Genial laughter also required avoiding overly aggressive ridicule and exclusive laughter that was not shared by all members of a group.

Yet, gentlemen can be found behaving out of kilter with these expectations. Take for example another of Chesterfield's letters – this time not addressed to his son. As a young man at his embassy at The Hague (1728–32), Chesterfield exercised his rakish tendencies when writing to his personal friend, a fellow diplomat and prominent womanizer, James Lord Waldegrave. Significantly, the correspondence was not included in Bonamy Dobrée's edited collection of Chesterfield's correspondence; it was only published as recently as 1992. The letters include much that was of professional concern, or in Chesterfield's words, 'what our employments oblige us to'. But they also emphasize the 'friendship and long acquaintance' between the two men and hence the

[68] Stephens, ed., *Guardian*, no. 29, 14 Apr. 1713, p. 128.

[69] Bonamy Dobrée, ed., *The letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope 4th earl of Chesterfield* (6 vols., London, 1932), III, pp. 1114–18 : to his son, 9 Mar. 1748.

[70] Ibid., IV, pp. 1379–82: to his son, 10 Aug. 1749.

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freedom from the shackles of formality that they therefore enjoyed.[71] One of the letters is primarily an inquiry into the sexual conquests of his friend:

If you please then, I will for a moment lay aside, the important affairs of Europe, and enquire a little into your private pleasures; does that manly vigour and that noble contempt of danger still continue? I am informed it distinguish'd itself at Paris; I hope it does so at Vienna too. As I know that both your rammer and balls are made for a German *calibre*, you may certainly attack with infinite success, and I know your fortitude too well to suppose that you will decline the combat, lett the danger be ever so great. So I expect some account of your performances. As for mine they are not worth reciting; you know I never was a great hero; and in this place there are few provocations for courage, and the coldness of the enemy, even damps one's bravery; the warmest thing I have mett with here between a pair of leggs has been a stove; and they have not liked what I putt in the place of it, half so well.[72]

Chesterfield's letter is peppered with sexual allusion and macho military metaphor. Through euphemism, he comments on his own shortcomings and praises Waldegrave for being equipped to handle machinery (i.e. a woman) of a 'German *calibre*'. The stalwart advocate of the principles of politeness, and apparent nemesis of laughter and smutty conversation, was, it seems, friend to both when the company was familiar.

The phallocentric nature of Chesterfield's humour when writing to his friend is entirely consistent with the tone of other bawdy sources of amusement found in the period. The following examples appear in succession on the same page of one jestbook:[73]

A Lady found Fault with a Gentleman's Dancing, and said he straddled too much. *Madam*, said he, *if you had that between your Legs, that I have between mine, you would straddle a great deal more.*

There being once a great Crowd of Ladies barring up the Door of the House of Commons, the Door-Keeper cried out, *Pray, Ladies, fall back, and open to the Right and Left, that the Members may go in.*

A Bishop of Durham had a slovenly habit of keeping one Hand in his Breeches. Rising up once in this Posture in the House of Peers, with some Papers in the other Hand, *I have something*, said he, *in my Hand, to offer for the Benefit of Officers' Widows. –Pray, my Lord*, said the Duke of Wharton, *in which Hand?*

Such causes of laughter were not polite, but in the words of one contemporary, they could certainly 'tickle the fancy' and 'raise a laugh'.[74] But whose fancy would these kinds of jests tickle? Would they raise that laugh among gentlemen?

[71] Chesterfield to Waldegrave, Hague, 12 Oct. 1728, Chewton papers, published in Jeremy Black, 'Anglo-Dutch relations (1728–1732): the Chesterfield–Waldegrave correspondence', *Nederlandse Historische Bronnen*, 10 (1992), pp. 132–62, at pp. 140–1. With thanks to Jeremy Black for drawing my attention to this source.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Robert Baker, *The merry jester* (London, 1773), p. 81.

[74] Meier, *The merry philosopher*, p. 100.

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Simon Dickie has argued convincingly that jestbooks such as these were made for a middle- and upper-class audience, despite often being classed as 'popular' – with all the vulgar connotations this implies.[75] This can be reinforced by returning to Chesterfield. As has already been seen, he advised his son never to be caught laughing, nor to be amused by lewd topics. Nevertheless, in 1773, a jestbook appeared entitled, *Lord Chesterfield's witticisms.* Its preface declared that 'in gaiety and amusement few surpassed his lordship' and professed that it only included witticisms that had been given 'assent' by Chesterfield himself.[76] It seems telling, then, that its contents fall into line with the jests cited above. There are similar puns on 'members', tales of adulterous husbands, and the usual parade of scatology in the form of 'water' and 'wind'.[77]

Another example of a friendly encounter turned indecorous is found in an Englishman's description of his travels in Hamburg. Spending an evening's entertainment in a tavern, he recorded the behaviour of his fellow patrons. The revels of one group were accompanied by 'an almost incessant Laughing' and, upon closer inspection, the tourist found their conversation to consist almost entirely in 'railing at and vilifying one another with the most vulgar expressions'. His friend, who had accompanied him, and was evidently better acquainted with these antics, informed him that 'he who excell'd, and was most ready in such foul-mouthed Language, was the Hero of the Night'.[78] The footnote to this story emphasizes the greater licence that was granted to behavioural standards when spending an evening enjoying good fellowship. Many of the company, who were responsible for their 'Lewdness, Turpitude and Obscenity' were 'far from consisting of Men of so mean Stations of Life'. Quite the reverse: 'there were many among them of great Substance and Reputation; and, among the Rest, the Master of the House, a rigid *Presbyterian*, who would give Place to none, in this Kind of Heroism'.[79] When among friends, even those of an impressive social standing could delight in vulgar wit. Just how far up the social ladder this kind of humour could reach is demonstrated by an anecdote reporting George I's use of a standard pun of mounting women and horses. When 'Mr de Johnston' presented his wife, George commented that if he 'connoissoit aussi bien en cheveaux qu'en femmes il ne pourroit manquer d'etre bien monté'.[80]

This disjuncture between the theory of polite manners and practice of impoliteness has been noticed by historians. Philip Carter interpreted Boswell's episodes of impoliteness as either a behavioural lapse for which he castigated

[75] Dickie, *Cruelty and laughter*, pp. 20–33.

[76] Anon., *Lord Chesterfield's Witticisms* (London, 1773), pp. 1 and 4.

[77] Ibid., pp. 24, 27, 29, and 68.

[78] Anon., *The German Spy: or, familiar letters from a gentleman on his travels thro' Germany to his friend in England* (London, 1740), pp. 293–4.

[79] Ibid., 295.

[80] 'is as well acquainted with horses as with women, he could not fail to be well-equipped', quoted in Jeremy Black, *An illustrated history of eighteenth-century Britain, 1688–1793* (Manchester, 1996), p. 68.

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himself, or as a delightfully conscious rejection of expectations.[81] Although Carter accepts that gentlemen could be impolite, he maintains that they did so with reference to politeness: their behaviour was always framed through an awareness of polite norms. For Vic Gatrell and Simon Dickie, such rudeness is evidence that in practice elites ignored the polite values they espoused in theory.[82] However, it need not be seen as part of a wider divorce of practice from theory, rather it is evidence of occasional politeness and, stepping outside of the politeness paradigm, intimate bawdiness. Explaining apparently contradictory behaviour within a framework of politeness, when it is taken to be a universal concept governing all social interactions, is problematic; but behaviour was sensitive to circumstance. Bringing the nature of company to the foreground poses a challenge to politeness as *the* ideal form of gentlemanly conduct. So rather than claiming to have found people behaving inconsistently, a more subtle interpretation can be achieved by asking 'what was the theory of practice?',[83] or more precisely, what were the theories of practices? Politeness was one option, but there were others with which it co-existed, and that were esteemed when the company shared a level of intimacy with one another.

Writers routinely acknowledged that polite laughter was not necessary at all times. In the context of friendly homosociability, a range of practices outside the normal bounds of politeness were not just sanctioned, they were expected and rewarded. These ideas legitimized sociable forms that can be characterized by intimate bawdiness, and the renaissance humanist investment in wit supplied the intellectual groundwork. From the late sixteenth century, there was a drive for associational life and new forms of urbanity, as society increasingly put a premium on social interactions that were both mutually pleasing and improving. In this context, the exercise of wit was cultivated as the centrepiece of male sociability.[84] The prestige that wit accrued during this period is signalled by the attention it received in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. His laughter-censuring passage, which is quoted above, has become famous – it was certainly known to his eighteenth-century readers[85] – but his meticulous description of the significances of wit provided an important caveat. For Hobbes, wit was an aspect of what he called the 'virtues intellectual', and it was subdivided into two categories: artificial and natural. Artificial wit was that

[81] Carter, *Men and the emergence of polite society*, pp. 163–208 and 210.

[82] Dickie, *Cruelty and laughter*, pp. 2–3; Gatrell, *City of laughter*, pp. 176–7.

[83] Bourdieu, *Theory of practice*, p. 72. This question is also asked in Klein, 'Gender and the public/private distinction', p. 101.

[84] Michelle O'Callaghan, *The English wits: literature and sociability in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2007); see also Adam Zucker, *The places of wit in early modern English comedy* (Cambridge, 2011).

[85] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 27. Hobbes was quoted in the *Spectator*, no. 47, 24 Apr. 1711, which itself became an authority and was still being reprinted towards the end of the century, see for example, William Henry Melmoth, *Modern universal story-teller; or a new picture of human life* (London, 1780); *Public Advertiser*, 9 Sept. 1789.

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acquired through method and instruction, while natural wit could only be gained through experience and living. This category of natural wit was further subdivided into what he called 'good fancy' and 'discretion'. This proved decisive, as from this point it was possible to justify practices that might otherwise have been considered uncivil. 'Good fancy' was associated with ingenuity and mental agility, but 'discretion' was also key. It entailed '*Distinguishing* and *Judging* between thing and thing . . . particularly in the matter of conversation and businesse; wherein times, places and persons are to be discerned'. He continued: in circumstances 'where Wit is wanting, it is not Fancy that is wanting, but Discretion. Judgment therefore without Fancy is Wit, but Fancy without Judgment is not.' That is, knowing how to behave correctly in all contexts was the most important part of wit and hence civility. Consequently, it was possible to indulge in 'fancy', as long as circumstances allowed.[86] Hobbes went on to elaborate upon the specific circumstances in which fancy was allowed to outrank discretion. Of particular relevance for the themes of this article was the first among these – in '*familiar company*' – where he suggested that 'a man may play with the sounds, and equivocal significations of words; and that many times with encounters of extraordinary Fancy'.[87]

Hobbes's passage on wit reflected ideas about adjusting behaviour to context that were conventional within the civility tradition.[88] It also chimed with other contemporary discussions of wit itself. Hobbes's stress on ingenuity is similarly evident in David Abercrombie's statement that 'wit' was an English translation of what ancient scholars had called '*Ingenium*'; it was 'a certain liveliness, or Vivacity of the Mind', which could manifest in words or actions, and amounted to nothing less than 'the Life of discourse'.[89] Abercrombie also concurred on wit's social dimension, arguing that 'Company' was a great 'Promoter of *Wit*'.[90] The common vocabulary in use further underlines Hobbes's place within a wider culture. Most simply, to speak in terms of a 'Fancy', as Hobbes did, was to use a term that was in common currency to denote a joke or spark of wit; several contemporary jestbooks advertised the many 'fancies' that were contained within their pages.[91] More interestingly, a very close parallel of Hobbes lies in

[86] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp. 33–4; see also Phil Withington, 'Intoxicants and society in early modern England', *Historical Journal*, 54 (2011), pp. 631–57, at pp. 651–2; idem, '"Tumbl'd into the dirt": wit and incivility in early modern England', *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 12 (2011), pp. 157–77, at pp. 156–63.

[87] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 34; Withington, 'Intoxicants', p. 652.

[88] Bryson, *From courtesy to civility*, pp. 86, 96, and 104.

[89] David Abercrombie, *A discourse of wit* (London, 1685), pp. 3 and 7.

[90] Ibid., p. 24

[91] See for example Archie Armstrong, *A choice banquet of witty jests, rare fancies, and pleasant novels* (London, 1665); John Mennes, *Recreation for ingenious head-peeces* [sic], *or, a pleasant grove for their wits to walke in: of epigrams 700, epitaphs 200, fancies a number, fantasticks abundance* (London, 1650); Guy Miege, *Delight and pastime, or, pleasant diversion for both sexes consisting of good history and morality, witty jests, smart repartees, and pleasant fancies* (London, 1697).

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Richard Flecknoe's later assertion that wit was '*fixed by* Judgment, *and with a lay of* Discretion'.[92]

By the eighteenth century, Hobbesian observations on tailoring wit to suit an assembled party had become well established, as writers consistently carved out room for manoeuvre by considerations of company. Many tracts that condemned loud and obtrusive laughter in public specifically sanctioned it when among familiar acquaintances. John Hope explicitly argued against Chesterfield's denunciation of laughter on the grounds that there was no reason why polite prudence should continue when enjoying the private company of friends.[93] According to Hope, 'due regard' ought to be paid to 'the difference of customs and manners in the different places in which one resides'.[94] This was consistent with ideas elsewhere. In an edition of the *Female Spectator*, Eliza Haywood allowed that 'where a select Company are met, – where all are of the same Way of thinking ... a round of Wit played off from one to another, will very agreeably pass away an Hour'.[95] While commenting on Johnson's sharp tongue, Boswell confessed: 'O I don't care how often, or how high he tosses me, when only friends are present, for then I fall upon soft ground: but I do not like falling on stones, which is the case when enemies are present.'[96] The contemporary theorist of jesting, Georg Friedrich Meier came to the same conclusion. Observing the prevalence of loose and smutty discourse when a friendly company met together, he was prompted to query 'whether it is not allowable at times to introduce into jests, something that clashes with the rules of decency and good manners'. Although a 'ticklish question', he answered his inquiry in the affirmative, concluding that the generally established rules of good breeding could be waived for a jest appropriate to its context. He surmised that 'what is indecent at one time, is not so at another'.[97] These explanations allow for moments when politeness was not expected; they represent the contemporary acceptance that gentlemen could indulge in mirthful rudeness because refinement was not required among friends in private company. This intimate bawdiness suggests that no matter how significant the rise of politeness and campaigns for the 'reformation of manners', it remained possible – and desirable – for gentlemen to indulge in the sociable practices they had done for generations, even though they fell outside the usual bounds of civility.

This point is further supported by the connection between laughter and male sociable drinking, which again showed continuity with earlier generations. The triumvirate of wit, wine and familiar company was encapsulated in the long-celebrated concept of 'good fellowship'. Applicable to men who could

[92] Richard Flecknoe, *A treatise on the sports of wit* (London, 1675), p. 5.

[93] John Hope (The Leveller), 'His defence of laughter, against Lord Chesterfield's unwarrantable attack', *Westminster Magazine*, Jan. 1775, p. 107.

[94] Ibid., 107.

[95] Eliza Haywood, *Female spectator* (4 vols., Dublin, 1746), II, p. 116.

[96] Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, II, p. 256.

[97] Meier, *The merry philosopher*, p. 101.

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display wit while drinking socially, it acted as a byword for all the values attached to this form of male companionship.[98] A lasting confidence in the virtues of this 'good fellowship' can be found into the eighteenth century. Ned Ward, for example, was an astute social observer of tavern culture. Barely a single aspect of tavern life escaped the record of his pen and there are many accounts of collective male drinking badinage in his most famous work, *The London spy* (1698–1700).[99] Ward, however, was not just a spectator with an eye on diverting his readers; he also admitted to being a keen participant himself, 'As Times go, I think it no great Crime to own, that now and then, when Business will permit, I love a chirruping Glass, in the Company of such Friends to whom my own may be acceptable.'[100] Inclined to enjoy a tipple, it is perhaps fitting that as an older man he made a career in the victualling trade, first as an alehouse keeper in Clerkenwell Green.[101] He then opened the Bacchus tavern in Moorfields, where he reportedly 'afforded his Guests a pleasurable Entertainment' with his 'Wit, Humour, and good Liquor'. His most frequent patrons were a faithful band of High Church Tories – 'Men of his Principles' – and to whom he was reportedly 'very much oblig'd for their constant Resort'.[102] Shortly before his death in 1731, Ward opened the British coffeehouse at the entrance to Gray's Inn, and there made available to his customers all of his humorous works 'bound or single'.[103] Among Ward's closest friends ranked gentlemen wits who also enjoyed a convivial lifestyle in the taverns about town. William King, for example, was a respected lawyer and member of the Doctors' Commons who was born into gentility in the wealthy City parish of St Andrew Undershaft.[104] Yet, this 'Gentleman well descended'[105] was the same Dr King who, according to his publisher Bernard Lintott, 'would write verses in a tavern three hours after he could not speak'.[106] Another two of Ward's companions, Tom Brown and William Pittis, contributed to the volume *Miscellanies over claret* (1697), which was self-professedly the work of 'four or five, some say honest, others foolish, but all say drunken, fellows at the Rose Tavern without Temple Bar'.[107] Moving beyond Ward's immediate circle, there was a collection of jests

[98] Alexandra Shepard, '"Swil-bols and tos-pots": drink culture and male bonding in England, c. 1560–1640', in Laura Gowing, Michael Hunter, and Miri Rubin, eds., *Love, friendship and faith in Europe, 1300–1800* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 110–30.

[99] See for example, Paul Hyland, ed., *The London spy: Ned Ward's classic account of underworld life in eighteenth-century London* (East Lansing, MI, 1993), pp. 13–14, 65–7, and 91–3.

[100] Ned Ward, *Wine and wisdom: or, the tippling philosophers* (London, 1710), preface.

[101] Licensed victuallers register, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), MR/LV/03/003.

[102] Giles Jacob, *The poetical register: or, the lives and characters of all the English poets, with an account of their writings* (2 vols., London, 1723), II, pp. 225–6.

[103] Licensed victuallers register, LMA, MR/LV/05/022; Ned Ward, *To the Right Honourable Sir Humphrey Parsons lord mayor of the City of London* (London, 1730), preface.

[104] Register of baptisms and burials, 1558–1770, Parish of St Andrew Undershaft, LMA, P69/AND4/A/001 item 2.

[105] Jacob, *The poetical register*, II, pp. 87–8.

[106] George Sherburne, ed., *The correspondence of Alexander Pope* (5 vols., Oxford, 1956), I, p. 373 : Nov. 1716.

[107] *Miscellanies over claret* (London, 1697), preface.

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published in 1707, which purported to be compiled by 'a merry society of Gentlemen'.[108] Another pamphlet first published by Edmund Curll in 1723, *Ebrietatis encomium: or the praise of drunkenness*, further implies that this was representative of a wider culture. The tract is divided into various chapters that outline the benefits of drinking. Among 'That wine creates wit', there is also 'That wine acquires Friends', which maintains that the most efficacious means of attaining good company was through taking a 'friendly Bottle' in 'pleasant and delightful Company'. The importance of familiarity between participants is underlined in its 'Rules to be observed in getting drunk.' Second only to 'not too often', is 'in good company', which consisted of 'good friends, People of Wit, Honour, and good Humour'.[109]

It is this culture that underpinned the recently discovered 'Good Humour Club', which met weekly at a coffeehouse in York from around 1725 until the end of the century.[110] Its members comprised local gentlemen professionals or tradesmen. The surviving minute books for the club reveal an organized society with rules, forfeitures, and an exclusive membership, which was committed to celebrating the virtues of companionship and conviviality. Bets placed between club members were invariably made for alcohol, and it was agreed that 'whether a Bowl or Bowls of Punch, or a Bottle or Bottles of Wine &c.' was the stake, it was 'to be drunk in the said Clubb when the said wagers are determined'.[111] The mischievous tenor of these flutters is evident in Mr Garancieres's bet with Mr Fells of 'two Bottles of Port Wine to one' that 'Mr Arthur Ricard will not be the first Married Man of this Club, amongst those who are at present unmarried members'.[112] Another example from 1755 records two members betting five bowls of punch to four that King George II would not obtain a private interview with Frederick king of Prussia 'during the Residence of his Britannic Majesty in Germany, or Yorkshire this summer'.[113] The Good Humour Club was a society of gentlemen companions whose regular meetings hummed to the tune of laughter and sociable drinking. It stands as a peculiarly well-recorded testament to forms of gentlemanly homosociability, which were likely replicated in taverns and coffeehouses across the country.

Ideas about wit and good fellowship gave licence to behaviours that were characteristic of intimate bawdiness, and made it possible for traditional forms of sociability to persist alongside a new model of the polite gentleman. When social context is pushed to the fore, personal railing attacks, bawdiness, and

[108] *The diverting muse; or the universal medley* (London, 1707).

[109] Albert Henri de Sallengre, *Eloge de l'yvresse* (Leide, 1715), trans. Boniface Oinophilus de Monte Fiascone, *Ebriatatis encomium: or, the praise of drunkenness* (London, 1745), pp. 36–7, 47, and 163–4.

[110] Helen Williams, 'The Good Humour Club', British Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies annual conference (7 Jan. 2014).

[111] Minute book, p. 24: 27 Dec. 1744, http://goodhumour.laurencesternetrust.org.uk/minute-book/ (accessed 21 June 2013).

[112] Ibid., p. 25: 22 Jan. 1745.

[113] Ibid., p. 122: 8 May 1755.

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scatology do not have to be seen as transgressive; indeed, as much of the above implies, when among friends, such waggery was more likely to be seen as an accomplishment. This argument is strengthened when set alongside the legacy of renaissance ideas about wit, which prized its mental agility. Certainly, laughter and many of its causes could flout polite manners, but it is important to consider the contexts for which these prescriptions were intended. Politeness was primarily concerned with public sociability. By providing a range of repertoires that could be readily disseminated and practised by all, it facilitated meeting and mixing irrespective of social hierarchies or levels of acquaintance.[114] Such guidance was not intended to instruct individuals on how to interact with their closest intimates. Thus, the proper occasion for telling more racy jests, or raising a glass or two, was among this familiar company. In their intimate bawdiness, gentlemen could, and did, exercise ideas and behaviours that could not be reconciled with polite manners, and nor did they feel compelled to try.

IV

The coach trip taken by Gervase Leveland and his friends, with which this article began, taps into the intersection between politeness, laughter, and company. The way in which the friends suppressed extravagant mirth when with a stranger, only to delight in their fun at his expense once he had left, was characteristic of the eighteenth-century gentleman's transitory observance of polite manners. When determining what was considered appropriate behaviour, the nature of company mattered. This raises a number of points when thinking about polite conduct in the eighteenth century. First, it serves to temper the significance of politeness by emphasizing the social contexts for which it was – and was not – a guiding principle. The polite gentleman was once considered the model for masculinity in the period, but its hegemony has been destabilized in recent years by evidence indicating that gentlemen were, in fact, frequently anything but polite. Occasional politeness accounts for this contradictory behaviour by stressing the contingency of moments of sociability. The place of intimate bawdiness takes this further to highlight that, when men met together as friends, it was often wit and drunkenness that were valorized over and above the ideal of politeness. In this respect, the period showed significant continuities with the practices of earlier generations. While politeness gained significant purchase in the early eighteenth century, old ideas and practices can and do exist alongside new ones. Secondly, then, the concept of intimate bawdiness suggests the value of stepping outside of interpretive frameworks. If eighteenth-century gentlemen could occasionally relinquish their polite standards, historians should be open to this, without feeling compelled to reconcile such episodes into the binary oppositions of polite and impolite, elite and

[114] Klein, 'Politeness', pp. 879–81.

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popular, or theory and practice. Prioritizing social context challenges the primacy of politeness in social interaction in the period, but the concept itself nevertheless achieved widespread currency and should not be discounted. The challenge is to rethink eighteenth-century sociability in a more pluralistic fashion, which allows for multiple and often contradictory behaviours to co-exist. This article has suggested that the category of company might be one way forward. Finally, in terms of methodology, the concept of occasional politeness encourages greater attention to the social remit of cultural ideas. In recent years, the call has grown louder for the integration of social and cultural history in studies of the eighteenth century, since without social categories, cultural values are difficult to interpret.[115] Where gentlemen's laughter was concerned, the decisive role of company in the practice of polite manners indicates that social approaches should indeed play a part in analyses of cultural representations.

[115] Paul Kléber Monod, 'Are you getting enough culture? Moving from social to cultural history in eighteenth-century Britain', *History Compass*, 6 (2008), pp. 91–108. See also Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard, 'What have historians done with masculinity?', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 274–80, at p. 276.

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