Just What a Young Man Ought To Be: Politeness and easy manners as the infallible passport in Austen’s Pride and Prejudice

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by Ethan Baumgartner

“Mr. Darcy danced only once with Mrs. Hurst and once with Miss Bingley, declined to be introduced to any other lady, and spent the rest of the evening walking about the room, speaking occasionally to one of his own party. His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and every body hoped that he would never come there again” (Austen 40).

In contrast, Mr. Bingley is said by Jane to be “just what a young man ought to be…sensible, good humoured, lively; and I never saw such happy manners! – so much ease, with such perfect good breeding!” (Austen 45), signaling the stress that is put on politeness and manners when referencing a person’s whole being. Manners are habits indicating good breeding, with overtones extending to a person’s moral character. Likewise, arrogance or perceived rudeness are immediately suspected to reveal a less savory moral character, regardless of financial or social status. It should be noted, for example, that no matter how Elizabeth’s character may defy the conventions of her day, she maintains her manners and her politeness, even during her arguments with others. Mr. Darcy’s main defect, then, is a lack of manners, which reveal (or are maybe brought on by) his perceived amount of pride and arrogance.

“Politeness and easy manners are the infallible passport to secure and agreeable and familiar footing among [women]. To individuals of this description their doors are ever open” (Andrews 2).

This portrait by G. M. Woodward (Curtesy 1797) is actually two images on a single plate, satirizing with some remarkable detail the complexity of the manners and politeness that most people were expected to know. The top shows two men bowing to one another at a prescribed angle to indicate their social statues in reference to each other. The bottom shows similar rules for the curtseys of the women and their social relationship. The precise angles of the bows and curtseys may or may not be recorded as numbers within the drawing itself, but the satire of manners shown here is made plain by the lines and facial expressions of the characters.

Andrews, Remarks on the French and English ladies, Dublin, 1783
Austen, Pride and Prejudice, London, 1813
Woodward, Curtesy, London, May 26, 1797

“As they are generally keen and intelligent, and almost always in the upper lift of domestics, they avail themselves with amazing dexterity of every opportunity to render themselves of some significance. As they are extremely attached to their country, and all that belongs to it, they are ever extolling its methods and manners of acting and living, and lose no occasion of introducing them, whenever the least opening offers” (Andrews 36).