

EN4/6733: Eighteenth Century Literature
Spring 2011, TR 9:30-10:45
Professor: Peter DeGabriele

The Polite Eighteenth Century



Politeness was one of the great cultural achievements of the eighteenth century. It was celebrated by satirists, journalists, philosophers, historians, poets, playwrights, and novelists as a sign of the highest cultural sophistication. Indeed, for many writers, politeness was the essence of civilisation itself, the foundation of moral virtue, and a necessary part of religious observance. Like any cultural ideal, however, politeness was also a site of contested representation. Writers argued over what constituted “true” politeness and how to differentiate it from hypocrisy; over whether politeness really created great conversation or whether it simply led to the repetition of dull platitudes; over whether politeness promoted virtue, or whether it in fact stripped all action of any moral meaning. In this course, we will look at debates over politeness in all the literary genres mentioned above in order to understand how this concept came to define eighteenth-century culture. We will read satire by Swift and Pope, journalism by Addison and Steele, philosophy by Shaftesbury and Berkeley, theatre by Gay and Sheridan, as well as a selection of essays, novels, and poetry.

During the semester, you will write bi-weekly reading responses, compose two short essays and sit for two exams: one midterm and one final.