Minding Our Manners

Reading *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620-1790* by C. Dallet Hemphill is somewhat akin to watching a ballet: you know that a lot of pain and practice had to go into making such a complex performance appear so simple and fluid. *Bowing to Necessities* is indeed a history of manners, but manners are about much more than taking a bow, as Hemphill makes clear from the beginning. Manners, she states, offer historians "a new perspective on society -- a street-level panorama of how contemporaries thought society was organized, how power was actually distributed, and how larger changes in cosmology, polity, or economy were being acted out in every day life" (p. 4). Hemphill investigates manners advocated in written works, and diaries and letters that record how they were (and were not) observed, to define and clarify dominant shifts in Anglo-American performance of age, gender, and class from British colonialism to the eve of the Civil War.

Hemphill breaks her study into three distinct periods and clarifies the main differences between them with apt section titles. In "Hierarchy, manners in a Vertical Social Order, 1620-1740," Hemphill argues that conduct guides illustrate the steep hierarchy of British colonial society that persisted even as people lived in "social and material equality" (p. 8). Colonists strove to fortify class divisions between men; manuals and sermons gave significant attention to appropriate behavior between superiors and inferiors. "Puritan leaders were obsessed with deference because the world was changing in a way that threatened their authority," particularly in the New World (p. 15). At the same time, sex superseded class; women were to defer to men regardless of their respective positions on the social scale. Hemphill also demonstrates that, despite later nostalgia for a forgotten respect for the elderly, prescriptive literature put a higher premium on respect towards the middle-aged.

In Part II, "Revolution: An Opening of Possibilities, 1740-1820," Hemphill suggests that the middle-class codes of behavior often connected with the rise of industry actually began appearing in this period, as conduct guides and etiquette books
(many of them now written in North America) became pre-occupied with emphasizing equality between citizens. Hemphill finds that this is when women’s place in the hierarchy begins to shift, so that now class trumps gender (i.e., a higher class woman now expects the deference of a lower-class man). In the third and final part of the book, Hemphill investigates manners during the Antebellum period in “Resolution: Manners for Democrats, 1820-1860.” She clarifies how manners were used to suggest equality at a time when inequality was becoming the greater norm. In fact, polite gestures such as “Ladies first” appear to be conciliatory prizes for the women and elderly left behind in the crush for real civil, political and economic rights. The clear organizational structure of the book makes it read like the classic essay writ large: an introduction that maps out the arguments and methodology, before pursuing that pattern step by careful step towards a conclusion that reaches beyond the subject at hand. In the end, Hemphill masterfully weaves secondary literature, primary research and theory (mercifully free of jargon), into a tapestry rich in minute detail but with an eye towards larger shapes and color.

Although many historians use conduct and etiquette guides to investigate other topics, there are surprisingly few works that focus on manners alone. On the surface, John Kasson’s *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (1990) would seem to overlap with Hemphill’s project once she turns to the nineteenth century. After all, both works focus primarily on prescriptions for middle-class behavior in northeastern urban culture. But Hemphill is interested in changes in manners between her three time periods, and consistently focuses on age, gender and class, while Kasson is truly interested in urban life. Hemphill thoroughly explores the world of manners, while Kasson relies on conduct guides as a springboard for other topics. Hemphill takes what appears to be a similar topic and relies on many of the same sources, but goes in another direction—emerging with corroborating but also excitingly different results. Kasson’s work has its own strengths, but if one wants a thorough reading of manners that draws upon social and cultural theory, one should read *Bowing to Necessities*.

All of that said, I do have my criticisms of this book. It could have been shorter; Hemphill, like most historians determined to win the point, overbuilds the foundation supporting her house. That’s fine in the unlikely event of a scholarly hurricane, but it loses points for style. Be forewarned, however, that you must be careful if you choose to skip over seemingly superfluous examples, because Hemphill’s extensive use of theory has her embedding precious gems in unlikely places. Also, although Hemphill supports her rather exciting argument that middle-class performance came into vogue with commercial rather than industrial capitalism, I wanted a clearer indication of how she defined and dated commercial capitalism. Finally, a pet peeve: I am tired of histories of northeastern urban American claiming to speak for all of the nation (thus reinforcing for the zillionth time the hegemonic power of the Northeast). Hemphill gives a good argument for why she does not address manners in the south; I am not saying that she should have written a different book. I just want the title to correspond with what is between the covers.

Nevertheless, *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620-1790* is a wonderful book that I highly recommend to scholars of American culture. The book will be a favorite among cultural historians for obvious reasons, but will also prove useful for those focusing on class, gender, aging and childhood in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Given its topic, the book may interest the lay reader, but it has enough sophistication to satisfy scholars looking for theoretical analysis, as well.
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