Every day in the Great Hall of one of my schools I ate, or tried to dine, before a large fireplace carved with William of Wykeham's motto, "Manners Makyth Man." In another of my colleges, a Victorian alumnus had endowed a "Manners Makyth Man Award" for that member of the senior class who had shown the most conspicuous improvements in hygiene and moral behavior since his freshman year. It was not the most sought-after prize, but each year a shy recipient did well at the bank. By "manners" Bishop William intended the Greek \( \text{ethe} \), which is the root of "ethics": those habits that shape our very state of being, quite as the Apostle meant – "Evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Cor 15:33).

Real manners are more than etiquette, for they indicate a philosophy of human dignity. The Romans, not in their best years, were threatened by the graceful conviviality of the "followers of Christus" in their \( \text{refrigeria} \), which were free of the vulgarity and sadism that the post-republican empire had come to equate with fun. The early Christians proclaimed the Resurrection surrounded by a Culture of Death that, like our own, could only cultivate morbid manners.

Loss of reverence for life corrupts the mannerly behavior of any age, and what was golden decays into gaudy excess. No social rank has a patent on manners. A Yankee Doodle farmer, conscious of the noblest classical virtues, could laugh at the Macaroni dandy whose dress hid a pox. Dr. Johnson said Lord Chesterton had the manners of a dancing-master and the morals of a whore, but he meant form rather than real manners. When deviancy from the ethos \( \text{becomes} \) the ethos, calling virtue bourgeois, the servant is deprived of his royal dignity as a child of God, and the king is absolved of his duty to revere those he governs. At the age of 16, George Washington copied out his "110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation," which first appeared in a 16th-century manual written by Jesuits who were firm in their association of manners and morals. Washington came to represent the best of the Augustine age and "every body honoured him who honoured every body."

The way people dress and speak and treat one another signals their self-perception. I have seen enough undershirts worn as dress shirts emblazoned with scatological curses, and have heard enough four-letter Elizabethanisms from the mouths of debutantes, and have been to enough receptions with ear-shattering rock music, to know that we are not in a golden age, or even a reduced gilded age, of manners.

John Henry Cardinal Newman defined the gentleman, and perforce the lady, in cadences which have become almost as incomprehensible as the terms "gentleman" and "lady" themselves. "It is almost a definition of a gentleman to say he is one who never inflicts pain." And it is a very good thing to have a double standard: Eve is supposed to civilize Adam, and when a woman is vulgar she shows her man the exit from paradise. In speaking of pain inflicted, Newman speaks of moral care for the consciences of others. The gentleman puts others at ease and "makes light of favours while he does them, and seems to be receiving when he is conferring." He does not slander or gossip, treats his enemy as a potential friend, and is "merciful to the absurd."

This is not the low discourse of modern politics and journalism. So annually we now have the perfect storm of boorishness in the White House Correspondents Dinner. Each year it gets worse, and this year a woman named Wanda Sykes, hired as a comedienne, failed in the useful role of court jester, as she wished sickness and worse on those "traitors" she did not like. The highest officials of our land joined in the harsh laughter and added sexual innuendos. Like the Vandals who ridiculed the archaic Roman senators, they mocked abstinence from vice and dissected virtue as weakness. The cynicism matched Oscar Wilde saying that a gentleman is one who never inflicts pain unintentionally.
Drawing on the fifth-century *Psychomachia* of Prudentius, medieval writers charted kindness among the "heavenly virtues" as a cure for envy, which is a motive for cruelty, and as an antidote to pride, which is the alchemy of disdain. Newman knew, with St. Paul, that classical kindness is only aesthethical moral furniture without the virtue of love (cf. 2 Cor 6:6). But he also knew that uncourteous behavior courts blaspheming the Holy Spirit. When journalists approve crass rants as "just comedy" and its victims as "fair game," and when those in the audience raise their eyebrows instead of leaving the room, they approve the sadism of Petronius and the vulgarity of Rabelais. They shift from Mark Twain, who could disagree without being disagreeable, to Fellini, who relished degradation. For all his populism, Dickens was a rank snob when he said the term "American gentleman" was a self-contradiction. We should not want to prove him right.

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