Manners and Southern history: the terms nestle as sweetly together as honey and biscuits,” says University of North Carolina history professor John F. Kasson at the opening of his essay on southern etiquette (Kasson 152). To an extent he is right: in popular mentality manners are an intrinsic part of southern culture and identity. The extent to which southerners of the present and past take manners seriously demonstrates how heavily the concept weighs on the southern sense of self and how they wish their culture and history to be perceived by others. However, the unique history of the South, that history of slavery and discrimination, reveals a flip-side to the Southern preoccupation with manners and raises a challenging question: how could this culture which so prides itself on hospitality and courtesy simultaneously have such a deeply rooted history of cruelty? The answer lies in the nature of civility as an institution. Manners are a tool for a society, a means to the end of civility. Thus, manners reflect the desired order of the society in which they originate. However, when a society sees a certain type of politeness or manners as a goal instead of the path to that goal, the civility of that society can easily become abusive and repressive. As seen in examples from the South, properly functioning democracies must find the correct balance of etiquette and mutual respect in order to avoid the dramatic dangers of either an utter dearth of manners or an oppressive overabundance of them.

The unique and even admirable nature of southern ideals of courtesy is not to be disregarded. Kasson’s overall analysis of southern manners is somewhat critical, but he is quick to add the disclaimer that “the notion that southerners possessed a special—and superior—set of manners is both venerable and enduring” (Kasson 152). News blogger Robert S. Siegel makes a similar claim in his article on the Virginia governor’s declaration of “Confederate History Month.” Siegel states that “there is something special about Southern manners and courtesy that the rest of the nation, much of the world, could learn from.” It would be unfair to offer a criticism of one of the most respected and entrenched aspects of a society without acknowledging the positives. Stephen L. Carter, the William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Law at Yale, states that manners are of crucial importance to a functioning democracy, and I agree with him. In his book, *Civility*, Carter does an excellent job demonstrating the dangers of a casual disregard for manners: alienation, mistrust, and abuse.

However, Carter’s conclusions fall short in that they do not adequately address the dangers of a disproportionate focus on manners. This is not to say he does not make a good effort. In *Civility*, Carter highlights the unrealities of an idealized past in very straightforward terms, concluding that “the common claim that there was a ‘golden age’ in which America was more civil than today is rather shaky” (48). He goes further with statements on the illusory nature of a uniform, more civil American past, saying “perhaps it needed to be shattered—but not, I think, with such thorough fury” (53). In my view, it is here where Carter’s argument for a balanced system of manners does not go far enough. He also theorizes that “having abandoned the illusion of commonality we have adopted an even more dangerous illusion: that social norms are not important and thus we can do what we like.”

### Sense, Sensibility and Southern Civility

*by Alex Batchelor*

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notion that a lack of common respect for one another is somehow more dangerous than the social ills that may potentially result from a disproportionate focus on manners tips Carter’s scale off balance, and balance is what is important. The danger is equal from both an overabundance of etiquette and an utter lack of it.

The rampant idealization of Southern history is a perfect illustration of this. In *Myth, Media, and the Southern Mind*, University of Arkansas historian Stephen A. Smith asserts that “the first rhetorical myth of the South was based on the theme of cavalier origins, the notion that the South had been settled by scions of European nobility who came to the South and established the Tidewater aristocracy” (13). Smith illustrates how this mythological foundation to southern identity, which harkens back to feudal Europe, served to justify and reinforce the rigid social hierarchy that the southern plantation system was based upon. Transplanted from a legendary past, the values and chivalric manners of this fictionalized origin story explained the nature of southern society to itself and “redeem[ed] their society in their own eyes as a continuity of tradition rather than admit the guilt and accept the scorn of the rest of the world” (Smith, 14).

The tendency to use an idyllic past to gloss over the problematic elements of the South continues into the present day. The nostalgia of the white South’s troubling blind spot for the cruelties of the history they so celebrate is deeply troubling. Robert S. Siegel demonstrates the way this mentality can distort history southerners perceptions in his criticism of Virginia Governor Robert McDonnell’s idealization of the past. Responding to Governor McDonnell’s allegation that “slavery was not important enough to be included” in the observation of Confederate History Month, Siegel submits that “slavery was a major issue the founders fought over while writing the Constitution. Failure to settle the issue at the Constitutional Convention led to the War... It is analogous to ignoring the Iron Curtain in a declaration on the Cold War.” The tendency to romanticize a mythic past rather than carefully examine history in full with its virtues and problems alike is a real and troubling one. It has lead to problems in the past, and left unaddressed it has the potential to do so again.

The romanticization of southern history lead to many problems, most notably the perpetuation of civil rights difficulties in the South after the Civil War. In a sense, Jim Crow evolved out of the southern sense of proper etiquette. Kasson purports that “precisely because good manners have been such a central part of southern identity, within the South they have also become a point of invidious comparison, tension, and division” (153). If southern etiquette is rooted in a mythic sense of chivalry, then a proper social hierarchy is indelibly a part of that legacy. The manners of the mythic South so venerated by southerners today were only extended to white people. Carter’s insistence that a lack of manners is more dangerous than a misguided preoccupation with them is untenable for this reason: oppression can and has resulted from this preoccupation.

The historical inequalities of the Southern system create real problems for those who would equate manners with civility itself. Smith highlights this eloquently by noting “there were no black planters living in the fabled white-columned mansions, there were no black belles in hooped skirts on the verandas.... the old myth had absolutely no meaning for blacks, and it held meaning for very few whites” (62). The idealized South of popular myth, as immortalized by *Gone with the Wind*, gave clout to the white South’s vested interest in maintaining their identity by holding on to as much as they could of the old social structure. Kasson describes how “the great effort of southern whites after emancipation was to establish new codes of racial dominance and deference to replace those of the old slave South” (156). The traditions of southern manners in the end were “preserved and defended, in the last resort, by the doctrine of white supremacy” (Kasson 158). For these reasons, the idealization of southern manners and mores offer a perfect illus-
tration of what can take place when manners alone become the goal of a society rather than the means to achieve that goal.

Problems arising from the misplaced emphasis on manners are also evident in Southern class divisions within races. Manners were an important distinguisher of class for rich white elite, which has a vested interest in maintaining a social stratification that favored them over a less wealthy majority. Matt Wray is a professor of sociology at Temple University. In the introduction to his book *Not Quite White*, Wray describes a process of identity establishment by asserting that "we can end up with various forms of political solidarity based on identity—which because social groups attain solidarity at the expense of other groups, through, for example, stigmatization, can also result in exclusions and inequalities" (8). Wray’s fundamental contention is that the advantages of wealthy whites in the South were reinforced by their use of manners as a marker of dichotomous identity between themselves and poor whites. By applying the label of “white trash” based on the criteria of manners, wealthy whites were able to draw this distinction when the more obvious color difference was unavailable. Wray observes that "the historical situation of poor whites has always been one of ambiguity and liminality, attributes shared by the identity—white trash—so frequently ascribed to them" (17). This marginalization of poor whites through misapplied civility is exactly what was needed for the elite to maintain the hierarchy. The distinction in manners created a glass ceiling for poor whites in southern society.

The difficulties resulting from these distinctions have not vanished with time. In a commentary on white trash as portrayed in popular culture, Journalist Tralee Pearce of the Toronto *Globe and Mail* notes that the stereotypes conveyed with the term “white trash” still result in tensions, especially when the term is thrown around in popular media. Pearce attempts to be impartial; the reactions he describes in his article are diverse, ranging from humor to offense, but it is clear that the repercussions of civility applied to the enforcement of a social structure are long-lasting and problematic.

The damages wrought by these stereotypes can also be deeply personal. Writer Dorothy Allison comments that what she calls “the politics of marginalization” encourage victimized groups to hate themselves as much as they are hated by others. Allison has firsthand familiarity with this type of hardship: she writes that she “grew up poor, hated, the victim of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and I know that suffering does not ennoble. It destroys” (36). As a poor white person growing up in the South, Allison felt keenly the betterment of others at the expense of her own social class. She too placed the blame squarely on the misguided notion that such stigmas were necessary to maintain a desirable social order. Her claim is that “the horror of class stratification, racism, and prejudice is that some people begin to believe that the security of their families and communities depends upon the oppression of others” (35). In this statement, Allison hits the nail of misplaced manners squarely on the head. When manners are used as a marker of desirable and undesirable persons rather than behaviors, inequality inevitably results and true civility becomes impossible. Rightly, Allison includes the marginalization of poor whites and the flaws of racism in the same example. Both are unjust social practices made possible by a misuse of the social tool of manners. The South once again provides a powerful example of the potential of civility to be misapplied for social ill.

If the idealized South and its mythic origin demonstrate the dangers of misused manners, than the Civil Rights movement of the twentieth century reveals how Southern manners can bring balance and civility to society. In tracing what he believes to be the downfall of widespread civility back to 1965, Carter holds the Civil Rights movement up as a model of how civility was transformed in the United States by being broadened (38). What Carter perceives as the end of civility came when America transitioned from Norman
Rockwell illusions of a unified identity to the realities of our own internal differences. To his credit, he stresses that this is not a bad thing, only that it went too far (53). Carter holds Martin Luther King up personally when he focuses on how “the civil rights movement wanted to expand democracy, not destroy it, and King understood that uncivil dialogue serves no democratic function” (24), yet he insists in the next chapter that when civility was expanded, it shattered American identity and left nothing in its place (53). However, I don’t think that the Civil Rights movement can be used to underscore the fall of widespread civility, precisely because of how civil the movement was in its success. The use of the Southern ideal of manners as a weapon against an oppressive social order represents a major victory for civility. Stephen A. Smith sees the civil rights movement not as the destruction of American identity, or even Southern identity, but as the creation of a new myth with which to define it. “King’s advocacy of nonviolent protest,” Smith writes, “full civil and political rights, and the brotherhood constituted his personal goals, and these became central themes of the new cultural myth of equality” (68). Far from leaving Southerners without an identity, King used manners themselves to replace a culture of oppressive hierarchy with one of acceptance and diversity.

In providing an example of manners used positively, Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership of the civil rights movement shows that civility can be used for good or ill, like any other tool. Kasson submits that “manners, so frequently the weapon of choice by the powerful in a social duel, could at times be dexterously used against them” (153). The civil rights movement broadcast to the entire nation the dichotomy between the Southern portrayal of itself and the realities of oppression for those on the negative end of that system of etiquette. It also provided an example of the civility that can be accomplished when manners are applied properly. Kasson continues that “southerners, white and black, have always known, in ways that many Americans from other regions have not, that far from trivial, manners... are often a matter of life and death” (153). The South needed to see an instance of manners applied equitably in order to grasp the true nature of their warped system of civility and to understand what that system indicated about the mythic past they held on to so tenaciously.

From a modern perspective, Siegel observes that “there is something about The War Between the States, the Civil War, that brings out pride in southerners. I don’t know exactly what it is about the war that brings out that pride, but I do know that for most, that something is not racism” (Slavery). In working to turn manners back on those who had wielded them oppressively for so long, the civil rights movement helped to move the focus of southern identity off of racial division and cruelty and instead to focus on a system of manners applied to everyone, while still being mindful of the dangers of not doing so. Siegel reflects this more egalitarian southern identity when he states that “the fundamental relationship of slav-
ery to the War cannot and should not be ignored. Most people seem to understand that quite well.” Siegel shows that manners applied correctly can help uphold the values that Carter supports so adamantly while maintaining self awareness lest the dangers of repression derived from fixating on civility for its own sake.

The uniqueness of southern history and culture provide us with a perfect illustration of the need for balance by demonstrating the ways manners can be used positively and negatively as a tool for society. The lessons of the South do not hold for the South alone. Basic human nature never changes, and so civility’s dependence on properly applied manners never goes away. It is important for people of any democracy to recognize the dangers of a system of etiquette that takes advantage of a particular group as well as the dangers of an etiquette system that does not exist at all. Moderation is the wisdom to take advantage of an opportunity while avoiding excesses. When manners are applied in moderation, the values of equality and shared identity necessary for a functioning democracy are upheld.

Works Cited


