Good People Breaking Rules: Etiquette in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Evelina*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Etiquette as, "[t]he conventional rules of personal behaviour observed in the intercourse of polite society; the ceremonial observances prescribed by such rules" (1.c). The purpose of these rules is to allow people to understand the quality of the person with whom they are interacting. By establishing hard and fast rules for interaction, a society is able to weed out the bad apples. At least that is the goal. In *Pride and Prejudice* as well as in *Evelina*, an important distinction is necessitated between those who understand and practice etiquette and those who are truly polite and good-natured. Both of these novels show that the practice of etiquette alone cannot serve as an indicator of personal value.

Evelina understands very little of the rules of polite society. When she attends the dance and is pestered into dancing with Willoughby, she violates the rules by telling him that she had been previously engaged to dance when in reality she had not. When she is caught in her lie, she becomes flustered and unable to speak. This is evident in the addition of the dash into all of her spoken sentences. "I hope not,-- I beg that—I would not for the world—I am sure I ought to—to—" (Burney, 47). These dashes are used to show the vocal breaks that she is making in the dialogue and to show her confused and distracted state of mind. The reason for her agitation is that Willoughby has just alerted Orville to the fact that Evelina has made it seem that she was engaged to dance with Orville during the night. Being caught in this lie, Evelina is trying in vain to find some way to get herself out of the situation. Her intention was simply to avoid dancing with Willoughby and in her attempts to let him down easy, she began to break the rules laid out by etiquette, and once this breech in the rules of the dance was made, Willoughby

knew that he had leverage to manipulate her. Evelina in this instance has no rude or insolent motivation. She simply does not want to dance with Willoughby. Yet, because of the rules of decorum, she ends up looking like a peevish girl who is trying to insult a man that wants to dance with her.

Willoughby serves as wonderful counterpoint to Evelina in this scene. He performs all the necessary forms and deference to Evelina in seeking her hand for the dance, yet does so in a way that makes it clear that he is a rude and insolent man. Evelina writes to Villars,

> The moment we had gone down the dance, I was hastening away from him, but he stopt me, and said that I could by no means return to my party, without giving offence, before we had *done our duty of walking up the dance.* As I know nothing at all of these rules and customs, I was obliged to submit to his directions; but I fancy I looked rather uneasy, for he took notice of my inattention, saying, in his free way, "Whence that anxiety?—Why are those lovely eyes perpetually averted?" (Burney, 44)

Willoughby here is leaning hard on the rules to keep Evelina within reach of himself. It is clear that Evelina no longer wishes to be near him yet he pursues her still, and does so by telling her that she would give offense if she were to leave him. It is interesting that Willoughby takes no ownership over the offense. His words are not that he would be offended or that it would hurt his feelings, but that she can't leave without "giving offense." To whom? How? Why? These things don't matter, the rules aren't personal for Willoughby; they are simply a means for gaining his desires. He is requiring her to submit to an anonymous set of rules that she does not understand. This anonymity is the

grand failure of etiquette. Whereas a person is supposed to demonstrate their better qualities through their understanding and application of the rules of society, Willoughby is highlighting his failings. Highlighting his pride, vanity, and selfishness. Etiquette does not require someone to be concerned for the feelings of others but rather in this instance allows Willoughby to insulate himself from Evelina's feelings by forcing her to follow the rules.

Lord Orville complicates this understanding of the failure of etiquette. He holds himself to all of the highest requirements of polite society and is still able to be a good and amiable person. He shows that the excellent performance of etiquette is not a signifier of a person with no redeeming qualities. There must be a distinction drawn between two types of people here: Those who are able to follow the forms and those who are actually polite. It is clear that Willoughby is able to follow the forms, yet he is not polite. Evelina desires to be polite and is good-natured, yet she has not been taught the forms by which she should act. Orville is the pinnacle of both. He is able to observe the correct ways of acting, and he is also truly polite. This is seen again in the dance scene. When Willoughby is trying to embarrass Evelina in front of him, Orville refuses to expose her as ridiculous. When Willoughby passes her hand to Orville in a way that should make her actions obvious, Orville plays dumb, "'You do me too much honour, Sir,' cried [Orville], (with an air of gallantry, pressing it to his lips before he let it go) 'however, I shall be happy to profit by it" (Burney, 47). And then later when Willoughby is away, Orville says to Evelina, "Be not distressed, I beseech you; I shall ever think my name honoured by your making use of it" (Burney, 48). Orville's good nature shows itself in his detachment from the rules of etiquette. While observing them most stridently

himself, he does not look down on those who do not follow them. Instead, he is gracious when Evelina is in distress and is glad that his name has been of some use is helping her get out of her situation.

In *Pride and Prejudice* this same point is made clear. Etiquette is not an accurate identifier of quality within a person, yet here, instead of value being given to characters simply because of their good nature, value is given for those who think freely. The best example of this is Elizabeth. Almost all of her social interactions include some mode of bending the rules or decorum. In her interactions with Lady Catherine, she refuses to act the way that an inferior should act in regard to someone of superior rank. When she visits Rosings, Elizabeth answers most of Lady Catherine's questions openly but when asked for her age Elizabeth refuses at first to answer. She does eventually reveal that she is not yet "one and twenty" (Austen, 162). When they meet again at Longbourn, Elizabeth again refuses to give in to her demands. After Lady Catherine asks if she is resolved to marry Darcy, Elizabeth says, "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected to me" (Austen, 338). Elizabeth is valued for her determination to secure her own happiness in a way that would maintain her individualism and this is one of the shining moments when she declares that desire.

On the opposite end of the etiquette spectrum in *Pride and Prejudice* is Mr. Collins. He is made all of obedience and following the rules of personal engagement. Collins is made all the more ridiculous by the fact that he alerts people to the fact that he is obeying the proper forms. When is ready to leave Longbourn and return home, he says to Mr. Bennet, "Believe me, my dear sir, my gratitude is warmly excited by such

affectionate attention; and depend on it, you will speedily receive from me a letter of thanks for this" (Austen, 122). It is, of course very polite to send a letter of thanks to someone who has been kind to you, but it is very rare that you would tell someone that they should expect that letter to come soon. Collins is seen as ridiculous for this attention to manners, yet he is also seen as ridiculous in the way that he makes very important decisions to satisfy the wishes of other people. His third reason for marrying Elizabeth is "that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness" (Austen, 103). This particular advice, while serving as the third reason for his coming to Longbourn for a wife seems to be the most important and if not that, is definitely the catalyst. It was this advice that allowed Collins to obsequiously leave Rosings, and had not Lady Catherine sent him to go, he most definitely would not have left.

In *Evelina* and *Pride and Prejudice* systems of etiquette are held to in a rigid fashion, and in dong so they become inaccurate measures of personal worth. These rules for measuring people seem to always fail because they attempt to make very divergent personalities uniform. Etiquette isn't going anywhere though; we just have to remember that sometimes, good people break the rules.

Works Cited

Burney, Fanny. *Evelina*. London: J.M Dent and Sons Ltd, 1920.

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Penguin, 2003.