
The Puffery and Practicality of Etiquette Books: A New Take on Victorian Information Culture

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, nineteenth-century etiquette books have been used by scholars mainly as evidence of conventions of manners and good behavior, supporting an expanding print culture in a new mass market. It is argued here that etiquette books should be re-explored in terms of the emerging information culture of the nineteenth century and that viewed in this light they can be seen to be disseminating information of two very particular kinds different from the traditional maxims of behavior and social decorum associated with etiquette. The first was the very practical type of information they espoused—information that served a functional purpose. The second was the way in which new forms of promotion and puffery about products and changing social expectations were used within etiquette books, embracing the broader information discourse of this period. Together, it is suggested that the Victorians' fascination with information was not limited to early forms of information management or technology but also embraced more sociocultural forms and that information historiography can offer new insights into traditionally overlooked source material.

In 1837, Abraham Hayward, writing for the *Quarterly Review*, observed that one could not fail to notice “a class of productions which are really exercising a widely-spread and by no means beneficial influence on the middle classes of this country” (Hayward, 1837, p. 396). The “productions” of which he wrote were the increasingly popular Victorian etiquette books. While Hayward may not have considered them a beneficial influence (he was hardly the target audience for such publications after all), the very fact that they warranted his consideration in the *Quarterly Review* at all provides some indication that they did have an influence and some sig-

nificance to Victorian society.¹ Traditionally, nineteenth-century etiquette books have been used by scholars mainly as evidence of conventions of manners and good behavior, supporting an expanding print culture in a new mass market. They have also often been dismissed as lightweight and insignificant pieces of the historical record. I would suggest that there is more to them than meets the eye; it is argued here that etiquette books can, and should, be understood in terms of the emerging information culture of the nineteenth century, of the nascent information age, and of the similarly emerging new forms of cultural publication and social expectations that are well recognized as forming part of the Victorian era.

Although such arguments have not been made before using etiquette books as their source material, the notion of re-examining peripheral or seemingly lightweight publications under the auspices of information history is not without precedent. Alistair Black's work on the corporate staff magazine during the first half of the twentieth century (Black, 2010, 2012, 2013) and Mike Esbester's studies into nineteenth century railway timetables and tax forms (Esbester, 2009, 2011) have concluded that such material could provide useful insights previously overlooked by historians. Blaise Cronin and Yvonne Rogers took a rather more antiquated approach in their comparison of the Victorian calling card and the early twentieth-first century "v-Card" (or electronic business signature), suggesting that there were some evolutionary parallels between the two (Cronin & Rogers, 2003). And in her study of the nineteenth-century information revolution, Aileen Fyfe has shown the significance of print culture in the increased availability of information during the Victorian period (Fyfe, 2009). There is scholarly precedent therefore for situating seemingly superficial or ephemeral publications, such as etiquette books, within the broader discourses of information historiography.

The sheer volume of etiquette books published during the nineteenth century indicates their immense popularity with a large, mostly affluent, middle class audience. The popularity and continued commercial success of etiquette books over the century are indicative of their importance in Victorian society, and the scale of their household acceptance makes them a valid and valuable, if somewhat underused, historical tool.

The *Bibliotheca Londinensis* of 1848 covered a list of books published in Britain between 1814 and 1846, and its section on "Morals, Etiquette, Etc" listed over 430 titles published during those years, although this number could be even higher since the classification of the titles was somewhat arbitrary (*Bibliotheca Londinensis*, 1848, pp. 177–181). It was a lucrative business with which to be involved; the publisher Henry Colburn began his career in a circulating library in Conduit Street, but when he died in 1855, he held property worth £35,000, a phenomenal sum by contemporary standards, paid for by the success of his publishing business (*Dictionary of National Biography*, 1992, Vol. II, pp. 254–255). A plagiarism case of

1837, where the author Charles William Day sued the publishers of *Science of Etiquette* for copying large passages of his 1834 work *Hints on Etiquette*, reported that the latter text had sold twelve thousand copies between 1834 and 1837 at “considerable profit” (*Day v. Whitaker*, reported in *The London Times*, July 5, 1837). And as Michael Curtin argues, “the fact that so many different authors and publishers hoped to exploit the market for etiquette is the best evidence that readership was substantial” (Curtin, 1987, p. 41). Therefore while etiquette literature was often “sheer fantasy peddling for profit” (Davidoff, 1973, p. 18), as has been well documented, the very fact that it was as popular as it was gives validity to any investigation as to exactly *what* was being published within them. While we cannot say for sure (despite Hayward’s protestations to the contrary) that Victorians believed or acted upon what they read, we can say that the contents were deemed interesting enough to buy such books in huge numbers across the whole of Victoria’s reign.

Etiquette books, in their most fundamental form, were cultural disseminators of information. Consequently, what information they were disseminating matters, especially in the light of recent scholarship on the Victorian information age (Black, Muddiman, & Plant, 2007; Chandler and Cortada, 2000; Headrick, 2000; Higgs 2004; Standage, 1998; Weller, 2010a; 2010b). In a period where “for the first time there was a move from pre-modern to modern understandings of what constituted information, the ways in which it could be manifested through cultural mediums, and the cultural value it manifested” (Weller, 2009, p. 15), it is possible to see etiquette books as more than simply espousing maxims of good behaviors and social expectations.

Publications concerned with politeness and good manners existed long before nineteenth-century etiquette books, but a certain demarcation can be made between the Victorian etiquette book and that which went immediately before: courtesy literature and silver-fork novels. Neither of these concerned themselves with espousing any practical information to assist their readers, nor did they promote commercial products or publications, in the same way that etiquette books embraced certain forms of practicality and puffery (that is, an exaggerated and subjective statement or commendation for promotional purposes).²

The 1830s witnessed a noticeable change in both the way in which information was disseminated in these types of publications and also the *type* of information included. Stylistically, Victorian etiquette books are generally recognized as beginning from Charles Day’s codified *Hints on Etiquette* in 1834 (Curtin, 1987; Morgan, 1994). Day’s book was laid out thematically, with each section dealing with a particular area of behavior such as introductions, dinners, marriage, smoking, dress, dancing, dealing with trades people, and so on, rather than the prose used by courtesy and silver-fork novels during the eighteenth century and Regency period. Consequently,

when examined simply as vehicles for preaching rules on behavior and manners, Victorian etiquette books can appear to be simplistic and superficial. In appreciating that these genres of etiquette were not simply descriptions of social conventions but also an alternative to the periodical and popular press as cultural disseminators of information, we can gain a richer understanding of both the role they played in nineteenth-century life, and nineteenth-century perceptions of cultural and social information. Indeed, contemporary authors described etiquette books as written “for those who *do not know*” (Day, 1836, p. 3), as “containing full information” (S. O. Beeton, 1876, p. 1), or as “a source of unimpeachable *reference*” (*The Book of Fashionable Life*, 1845, preface), which fed into the “age of information” noted by *The London Times* in 1853 (December 5, p. 6). “Information” as a concept is, of course, subjective, but, as I have argued elsewhere, the Victorians were explicitly recognizing the value of information as a thing in its own right, and as a commodity, something certainly reflected by the growth of business and commercial information during this period (Weller & Bawden, 2005; Weller, 2009). Jacob Soll has shown that information in its own right was essential for nation building in seventeenth century France (2009), and there was also a huge appetite for information exchange during the eighteenth century with the dominance of coffee houses across Europe (Ellis, 2004). Arguably, parts of the middle class Victorian public sphere were embracing information on a more popular level through etiquette books. Whilst such books were significant and popular in their own right with contemporary middle class audiences, they can perhaps offer a different take on what has come to be accepted by scholars as a changing relationship between society and the nascent information age.

While the nineteenth-century periodical, as Winter (2008, p. 19) has noted, “most visibly embodied the commodity form,” the relative popularity of etiquette books for middle class Victorians should not be ignored. As an insight into the rules of behavior for Victorian social mobility, the etiquette book may indeed be, as Michael Curtin suggests, “inconsistent, insignificant, and merely formal” (Curtin, 1987, p. 27). However, viewed against a background of not only an emerging commodity culture but also of an emerging “age of information” (*The London Times*, December 5, 1853, p. 6), where the “Appetite for News” (Wills, 1850, p. 238) was paramount, the types and manner of information dispersed through etiquette books take on a wholly different significance.

This article argues that, based upon a selection of English etiquette literature (defined in a broad sense) published between 1791 and 1898, Victorian etiquette books can be seen as new forms of cultural information discourse, in a period where the nascent information age was beginning to emerge. More significantly, two particular types of information—dis-

tinct from behavioral maxims—can be observed. The first was the way in which such publications were used to embrace new forms of advertising and puffery about products and other publications, in keeping with the broader Victorian commodity culture (Briggs, 1988; Richards, 1991). Second was the extent to which practical, or functional, information was espoused, in contrast to the traditionally perceived maxims of social behavior and decorum associated with etiquette. Occurring alongside the shift “from pre-modern to modern” notions of information (Weller, 2009, p. 15), this suggests that the Victorians’ fascination with information was not limited to early forms of information management or information technology, but significantly, it also embraced much more sociocultural forms.

A “MORE PRACTICAL ASPECT”

One of the most commonly mentioned areas of knowledge disseminated by conduct and etiquette literature of the nineteenth century was that of practical or useful knowledge; information that served a functional purpose, rather than that which described idealized behavior. The introduction to one nineteenth-century encyclopedia suggested that one should “let useful *knowledge accompany* polite literature” to ensure reasoned and informed behavior (Guy, 1832, p. viii). Some etiquette books explicitly referred to the “practical knowledge,” “principles of sanitary knowledge,” or “more practical aspect” they dispersed (S. O. Beeton, 1876, pp. 14, 104; Kemp, 1864, p. xv). Others included very functional tips on how to buy a house, or avoid ill-health as part of the (very) broad spectrum of manners (*Etiquette for the Ladies*, 1837, pp. 15, 23, 46). Nor was the introduction of this type of content limited to the later part of the century when domestic household management was an accepted notion in its own right. The Reverend Dr. John Trusler published numerous works that combined etiquette and practical knowledge on subjects as varied as carving, legislation, buying and selling homes, hiring solicitors, hiring and firing servants, and playing the stock market well before Mrs. Beeton’s book of 1861 (*Dictionary of National Biography*, 1992, Vol. 57; Trusler, 1791, 1819, & 1828). Furthermore, such discussion was not limited to how to behave whilst hiring a servant or dealing with household requirements; rather it discussed the practical “how-to” of what must be done, and in some cases, a referral of where to find more detailed information if it was required. Instruction on the practicalities of hiring servants informed that one should “insert an advertisement [in the newspaper] setting forth the kind of servant required . . . [or that] there are some respectable registry offices where good servants may sometimes be hired” (S. O. Beeton, 1876, pp. 93–95). Other publications detailed contemporary legislation concerning employers and domestic employees. The master or mistress of the house thus knew their rights and responsibilities when it came to

handling their domestics. Etiquette books were therefore a form of practical reference information, despite often being dismissed as containing nothing more than behavioral maxims.

There was, of course, advice on fashion throughout etiquette literature, and the emphasis on clothes and fashion has been much commented upon (Adburgham, 1972; Carlyle, 1831; Hayward, 1837; Mitchell, 1834; Shannon, 2004). However, many etiquette books discussed not only what was fashionable but also gave tips as to what was most practical to wear when considering an individual's height, shape, and coloring. Some etiquette books were explicit in this intention, such as *The Art of Dress; or, Guide to the Toilette: with Directions for Adapting the Various Parts of the Female Costume to the Complexion and Figure; Hints on Cosmetics* (Howard, 1839). Other books included this information as part of the general etiquette of the toilette. It was suggested that large feet could be disguised by wearing dark stockings (S. O. Beeton, 1876, p. 79). Ladies "of short stature should never allow the trimmings of their gowns to trespass halfway to the knee. It *dwarfs* them. . . . Tall women may, however, be allowed somewhat more latitude in this respect." Alternatively, "for increasing the apparent height, nothing is better than a long stripe, *vertical*, of course" (*Etiquette for the Ladies*, 1837, p. 15; *Etiquette for Ladies*, 1857, p. 13). Similarly, "frills, and necklaces, relieve a long neck; but short-necked ladies should avoid every thing that serves to contract the distance between the shoulders and the chin." Or in relation to the arrangement of hair, "large massive features require masses of curl. *Petite* features, on the contrary, admit of the most graceful and fascinating arrangement of ringlets" (*Etiquette for the Ladies*, 1837, pp. 23, 46). Similar tips applied for men where, "as a rule, tall men require long clothes . . . and short men short clothes," and boots, canes, gloves, and scarves all had practical considerations (*The Habits of Good Society*, 1859, pp. 139, 140–159). Color was also an important consideration since your clothes should complement your complexion, skin tone, and eye color (*Etiquette for Ladies*, 1857, pp. 13–14). Such information dispersed by authors of alleged high social standing (of which, more later), and alongside promotional references to specific products, combined to make etiquette books reflective of a more social and cultural information culture, reflective of the emerging "age of information" noted by *The London Times* in 1853.

Contemporary understandings and attitudes toward scientific and medical knowledge also featured prominently throughout nineteenth-century etiquette literature, particularly in their application to personal hygiene or domestic sanitation. Keeping one's person and surroundings clean was a serious matter in the nineteenth century for reasons of both mortality and sociability. "Cleanliness is a duty to one's-self for the sake of health, and to one's neighbour for the sake of agreeableness" (*The Habits of Good Society*, 1859, p. 102). Agreeableness aside, the well-documented

state of municipal sewers, of filthy water supply (often polluted by human feces and corpses), and of overcrowded and dirty streets and housing during the nineteenth century, made personal hygiene an increasing necessity. Information and advice on oral hygiene, sanitary products, and cleanliness of hair, nails, and feet were all dispersed through etiquette books, even down to the advocacy of a Parliamentary Act of 1853 which required universal vaccination against smallpox in England and Wales, with fines levied on people who did not comply (I. Beeton, 1861). Such advice could be more useful than that of the medical professionals of the day; during the 1860s, Dr. Travers of the Bromton Hospital in London advised an expensive tuberculosis treatment of “a patent [*sic*] gas mixture,” to be injected into the patient’s rectum with the expectation that it would reach the lungs and aid recovery (Picard, 2005, p. 191).

At the same time as Dr. Travers was recommending his innovate medical cures, there was a growing interest in, and the professionalization of, dentistry, which was reflected in many etiquette books. *Family Etiquette* explained the physiology of the mouth in detail, describing the number of teeth in the human mouth and each of their medical names (S. O. Beeton, 1876). It also gave instructions on the best ways to brush, and, notably, which “tooth powders” were most recommended. Similar instruction was given for general oral hygiene and fresh breath, an emphasis that again reflected the growing professionalization of dentistry during the nineteenth century. The first dental license was issued in 1860 and one of the pioneers of professionalizing Victorian dentistry, Sir John Tomes, obtained support for an 1878 Act of Parliament that restricted the use of the word “dentist” to suitably qualified persons (Tomes, 1848; Cope, 1957). Interest in and information about such matters were evident throughout etiquette books, which also offered cures and remedies for chapped lips as well as causes and preventions of stale breath—causes including ailments to other parts of the body ranging from the face and the teeth, to the hands and hair (S. O. Beeton, 1876, pp. 81–82, 92). Another book of 1836 recommended brushing your teeth after smoking to avoid bad breath (Day, 1836, p. 35). Medicinal information was also given in *Etiquette for Ladies*, which politely explained this particular benefit of clean teeth:

If you happen to have a toothache, be very particular in using the [tooth] brush after eating animal food; for, when the gums are inflamed, the smallest piece of dead organic tissue adhering to them quickly assumes a state in which it is undesirable that the air expired from your lungs should traverse it on its road to any one conversing with you. (1857, p. 10)

Alternative remedies for toothache included applying “one or two leeches to the gum,” or Mrs. Beeton’s suggestion of taking “a piece of sheet zinc, about the size of a sixpence, and a piece of silver, say [the size of] a shilling; place them together, and hold the defective tooth between them or

contiguous to them; in a few minutes the pain will be gone" (I. Beeton, 1861, p. 1092). The explanation for such relief was that "the zinc and the silver, acting as a galvanic battery, will produce on the nerves of the tooth sufficient electricity to establish a current, and consequently to relieve the pain" (Picard, 2005, pp. 179–180). Such detail reflected the growing Victorian interest in science (Meadows, 2004), but it was a distinct step away from the trivialities of fashion and polite behavior usually associated with etiquette literature. While scientific information was certainly regularly and increasingly disseminated through the periodical and newspaper press during the nineteenth century, it is also evident that the publishers and authors of etiquette books had picked up on this trend, allowing for a level of practical and function detail to filter through to publications such as etiquette books.

As well as oral hygiene, many etiquette books drew attention to cleanliness of hair, nails, and feet. Once more, these were not simply discussions of social niceties but a practical notice of how to deal with physical problems. *Etiquette for Ladies* suggested that "a few ladies are not as careful of their feet as they might be; and it would repay them to think less about their shoes, and more about the little members they cover." The practical recommendation is to "wear *rational* shoes. The make is of more consequence to the eye than the size. . . . Small shoes bring – corns! . . . Thin shoes bring – colds and coffins!" (*Etiquette for Ladies*, 1857, pp. 10, 17). Even the practicalities of removing unwanted hair using depilatories were discussed, with warnings that they must be used correctly since they can cause "extreme danger to the skin" because of their powerful chemical ingredients (S. O. Beeton, 1876, p. 92).

The science of bathing required particular attention since "a large, if not the larger, proportion of disease arises from leaving the pores of the skin closed" (*The Habits of Good Society*, 1859, pp. 103–104). *The Habits of Good Society* proposed that the type of bath taken should depend on the constitution of the individual, with a scientific consideration for the temperature of the water:

The most cleansing bath is a warm one of from 96 degrees to 100 degrees, into which the whole body is immersed. If cleansing alone be the aim, the hotter the water the better, up to 108 degrees. It expands the pores, dives well into them, and increases the circulation for the time being. . . . The cold bath of from 60 to 70 degrees, on the other hand, cleanses less, but invigorates more. It should therefore be avoided by persons of full temperament, and becomes really dangerous after eating, or even after a long rest following a heavy meal. (pp. 104–105)

The health benefits of tepid baths and cold showers were also advocated and were grounded in a certain amount of popular belief—even as late as 1898, cold baths and the benefits of different temperatures of bath water were being extolled in detail (Staffe, 1893, pp. 33–45). Further in-

formation on showers, styles of sponges, and shape and size of bath basins was provided, concluding that when washing with a sponge during bathing, the first body part to be washed should be the stomach since “it is there that the most heat has collected during the night, and the application of cold water quickens at once, and sends the blood which has been employed in digestion round the whole body” (*The Habits of Good Society*, 1859, p. 106). Even calling on acquaintances held digestive dangers on which etiquette books counseled. When tea is taken, if butter has been spread onto bread carefully,

it will be found possible to partake of it without removing the glove, which is frequently a task of some difficulty—in fact, of so much difficulty that, rather than undertake it, the visitor often takes her tea without eating anything; a practice which doctors consider to be very injurious to the digestive organs. (Klickmann, 1898, pp. 74–75)

The proffered solution was for hostesses to provide biscuits that were more easily manageable within behavioral confines, and therefore ensured nourishment was taken with tea.

In addition to personal health information, contemporary understandings of domestic and municipal sanitation were also represented through etiquette books, which were emerging against a background of scientific and medical developments on hygiene and sanitation. While some of the suggestions were clearly “sheer fantasy peddling for profit” (Davidoff, 1973, p. 18), many appeared to be based upon current medical thinking. Some authors cited the findings of sanitation reformers such as Edwin Chadwick, Florence Nightingale, and Dr. William Farr in support of their advice to consider a good “water supply and ventilation” when buying a new home:

Great advances have been made during the last few years in the principles of sanitary knowledge, and one most essential point to be observed in reference to a house is “drainage,” as it has been proved in an endless number of cases that bad or defective drainage is as certain to destroy health as the taking of poisons. (S. O. Beeton, 1876, pp. 103–105)³

Conversely, in Nightingale’s *Notes on Matters Affecting . . . the British Army*, Nightingale includes a section on how to cook hygienically, including recipes and practical information on the safest way to prepare food, showing how scientific and domestic information could be combined (1858; Weller & Bawden, 2006).

Arguably therefore, Victorian etiquette books served a very functional purpose alongside their more superficial role as disseminators of accepted social behavior. They formed part of the emerging “age of information,” circulating practical details of significant medical debate and scientific advances to their middle class audience. Significantly, they also reflected the emerging commodity culture of Victorian England, manifesting how

information itself was becoming increasingly recognized as a form of cultural commodity. As Alan Rauch has shown, in the Victorian period, information of any kind became “a new kind of social and cultural currency . . . important rungs in the social-climbing ladder” (Rauch, 2001, p. 2). That information of this kind had value as a social and cultural currency was evident in the way in which hype, promotion, and puffery were manifest throughout.

“PRINCE PARAMOUNT OF PUFFERS AND QUACKS”

Although the idea of a consumer culture has been traced back to the eighteenth century, the mass market and commodity culture of nineteenth century England saw a burgeoning of consumerism and interest in commercial goods (Briggs, 1988; Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Porter, 1982; Shannon, 2004). More recently, notions of *information* as a commodity in the nineteenth century have also been addressed, most particularly in terms of news, explained by the growth of the popular press and emergence of agencies such as Reuters (Boyce, Curran, & Wingate, 1978; Boyd-Barrett, 1978; Ohmann, 1996; Read, 1992; Storey, 1969; Weller & Bawden, 2005, 2006). Some information scholars have suggested that information also began to emerge as a cultural commodity (Weller, 2008, 2009). The role of puffery, advertising, and promotion within etiquette books, and the way in which this type of information began to be dispersed alongside behavioral maxims, can be seen as an example of what Richards (1991, pp. 5–6) has described as consumer culture ultimately “encompass[ing] the smallest details of Victorian life.”

Scholars such as Catherine Waters have suggested that the Victorian commodity culture was “distinguished by the way in which objects, once detached from those who made them, come to represent qualities of the consumer, and to acquire a sign-value over and above their use-value” (2007, p. 31; see also Richards, 1991). Etiquette, in its very essence, can be understood in these terms. While, as Morgan has argued, “even the business and professional worlds eventually came under the jurisdiction of etiquette” (1991, p. 28), in terms of maxims of accepted behavior, in the first instance, it can be argued that etiquette books themselves to some extent acted as vehicles to disseminate information *about* the spheres of business and commercial products, just as they did so for practical and scientific debate.

In the last decades of the century, etiquette books, alongside “the influence of the press, gossip columnists, and competing centers of prestige, began to raise notorious personalities of uncertain social origins into fashionable prominence” (Curtin, 1987, p. 87). Social gossip and scandal had long been of interest among the upper classes and were often reported within the intimate Society papers, but during the nineteenth century, new notions of celebrity began to emerge aided by the democratization of the

press. Nicholas Dames argues that satirists of behavior such as Thackeray used their fiction to depict the famous showing a “gradual formation of a new category of public experience called *the celebrity*, unmoored from the political or aristocratic underpinnings of older forms of public notoriety and increasingly unlike earlier conceptualizations of fame” (Dames, 2001, pp. 24–25). Dames makes an interesting case for the emergence of public interest in private and personal information about individuals, along with which came ethical issues associated with the collection and dissemination of that information, such as the right to personal privacy. Lady Violet Greville complained that those of true aristocratic birth could be ignored while those of indiscriminate background were “suddenly raised to the pinnacle of fashion . . . [their] toilet appears in every Society paper” (1892, p. 65). Arguably middle class audiences perpetuated etiquette as consumers of societal information, gossip, and a celebrated lifestyle, and etiquette books became a source of promotion and puffery.

In the 1840s there was a flurry of books dealing with court society and being presented (*Court Etiquette*, 1849; *Court Manual of Dignity and Precedence*, 1849; Douglas, 1849; and *The Book of Fashionable Life*, 1845). Appearing just after Victoria’s accession in 1837 and her marriage to Albert in 1840, this emphasis can be seen as an example of opportunism—at the same time as Julius Reuter was using the new technology of the telegraph to relate news of the birth of Victoria’s second son in August 1844, publishers were tapping in to the public interest in the monarchy and combining it with an established market for etiquette (Weller & Bawden, 2006). *The Book of Fashionable Life* knew “of no scene so eminently fascinating as that of a British Court Drawing Room,” describing the rooms, people, furniture, atmosphere, the “splendid ostrich plumes and lappets – the blaze of diamonds” (1845, p. 23). Another spectator, Richard Rush, the minister plenipotentiary from the United States between 1817 and 1825, was quoted in the same publication as describing the scene in similar terms:

The whole . . . was a waving field of feather. Some were blue, like the sky; some tinged with red; here you saw violet and yellow, there shades of green; but the most were like tufts of snow. The diamonds encircling them caught the sun through the windows, and threw dazzling beams around. I cannot do justice to the scene – I cannot describe it. . . . We got down the stairs as we could, through tulle, gold net, plumes, and other glittering entanglements with which beauty obstructed the way. (1833; cited in *The Book of Fashionable Life*, 1845, p. 29)

In his study into the Victorian commodity culture, Thomas Richards argued that Queen Victoria acted as a figurehead for new forms of commodity and advertising, most noticeably after her Golden Jubilee in 1887 (1991, pp. 73–118), but publishers and authors of etiquette books were embracing information about the aristocratic sphere for the purposes of promotion of sales several decades earlier. Information about this other

world had such commercial value that publishers of etiquette books tried as much as possible to add social value to their books by marketing them as being associated with members of the aristocracy. Not least was the use of titled and aristocratic contributors and authors as a means of enhancing the appeal of the books, often exaggerated on the cover and frontispiece to attract attention. One contemporary claimed that publishers paid aristocrats for the use of their names on title pages of books written by others, while Abraham Hayward asserted with disgust that publishers sometime “offer a woman of title fifty or a hundred pounds for liberty to prefix her name to a book” (Hayward, 1837, p. 397). Often authors were anonymous save for descriptions such as “A Lady of Distinction” or “A Member of the Royal Household,” since, as Curtin notes, there was a stigma surrounding etiquette books with which the truly aristocratic may not wish to be associated (Curtin, 1987, pp. 45–49). As a marketing tool however, it seems to have had influence, since so many etiquette books of this period carry such claims, albeit vague ones, about their authors. In such cases, etiquette books also acted to commodify information about the lifestyles of the wealthy and aristocratic that was used as means of persuading readers to select one etiquette book over another. Such practices could increase the desire to read or own publications “by means of its appearance rather than its quality,” and while not new to the nineteenth century, certainly became more widely practiced (Morgan, 1991, pp. 30, 32).

This desire for societal gossip and information was parodied by Charles Dickens in *Nicholas Nickleby* when Mrs. Witterly, having read *The Lady Flabella* looking for descriptions of people and places, confuses the reality of class snobbery with the aristocratic lifestyles she enjoys reading about, on meeting real aristocrats, Sir Mulberry Hawk and Lord Frederick Verisopht (Dickens, 1839; Hughes, 1992, p. 340). Dickens was, of course, an author for the people, and was well known for his observation of contemporary society. Moreover, some cultural critics have argued that Dickens’s depictions of consumer goods in his novels can be linked with the emergence of commodity culture during this period (Roston, 1996; Waters, 2007, pp. 27–28). As Anne Lohrli argues in her study of the Dickens’s edited and highly popular weekly *Household Words*, contemporary discussion of commodities, including those of clothing and fashion, was a significant source of middle class discussion, enough for the publication to consider them as part of the “most important social questions of the time” (Lohrli, 1973, p. 4). Etiquette books were reflecting this trend.

What was being disseminated by conduct and etiquette literature was, supposedly, inside information on the lives of the rich and privileged. It was this that held the commercial value and provided such a strong marketing incentive to publishers and consumers. Social and personal

information was being commodified and dispersed by etiquette in a manner unrelated to the behavioral maxims it also espoused, and was being sold through an accepted medium to an existing audience. This captive audience also allowed for a certain amount of puffery and advertising of products unrelated to traditional notions of behavioral etiquette. Real names, places, and products were often used in the novels, advertising fashionable brands (Hughes, 1992; Morgan, 1991). *Hints on Etiquette* denounced praise of smoking in songs or magazines as “puffs” paid for by the industry (Day, 1836, pp. 35–36). Other authors dismissed fashionable trends in clothing, but in doing so mentioned the names of some of the most popular brands:

His aim seems to be to act as a sort of walking advertiser for the tradesmen employed by him . . . and he evidently longs to tell everybody he meets that his coat is by Staub, his hat by Bandoni, that his bootmaker is Evrat or Hasley, and (above all) that Madame Frederic is his washerwoman. (Hayward, 1837, p. 409)

The emergent middle classes dominated both nineteenth century consumer culture and the audience of etiquette, and they increasingly had the disposable income to spend on commodities. Etiquette was in part used as a vehicle to provide adverting information on products, places, and other books, and became an essential part of promoting, as Morgan writes, “knowledge of, confidence in, and desire for, the plenitude of products seeking public favour” (1991, p. 30). The publisher Colburn was labeled the “Prince Paramount of Puffers and Quacks” by *Fraser’s Magazine* because of what Hughes has described as his tendency to use his publications for “explicit promotion of his products” (Maginn, 1830, p. 320). He also published “keys” to decode the people and events referred to in the more popular novels, providing another money spinner and a deeper layer of information. The works of the Rev. Dr. John Trusler were also littered with promotional references to his other works (Trusler, 1819, 1828). Such marketing was as lucrative for Trusler as it had been for Colburn; he lived in Bath on the profits of his trade as a writer, bookseller, and printer, and subsequently on an estate of his own in Middlesex (*Dictionary of National Biography*, 1992, vol. 57).

By 1848 the number of advertisements throughout the country was four times greater than in 1800, and by the middle of the century, adverts had also become far more ubiquitous in every day life appearing on omnibuses, cabs, railway carriages, even fences and buildings (Briggs, 1988, pp. 15–20; Morgan, 1991, p. 29). Etiquette books held advertisements for other etiquette books (often by the same publisher), self-perpetuating their influence. *Etiquette for Gentlemen* held an advert for the accompanying title *Etiquette for Ladies* that proclaimed:

Ten thousand copies of this little work have been sold in little more than six months! It forms a most useful guide to the inexperienced in their intercourse with society. The rapid and extensive sale sufficiently marks the hold it has taken on the estimation of the Public. Cost is one shilling. (*Etiquette for Gentlemen*, 1838, opening pages)

There were also adverts for *The Hand Book of Phrenology* and *Short Hints on Short Hand*, titles unrelated to etiquette, but all published by Charles Tilt. The aforementioned 1837 *Etiquette for the Ladies*, also published by Tilt, had several pages of ads for other volumes at the end of the text, as did much etiquette and conduct literature (see, e.g., *Etiquette for All* (1861); Humphrey (1897); and Motherly (1859)). Self-promotion for one of Trusler's books on the etiquette of domestic economy suggested the commercial value of the knowledge it contained by promising that "the price only eighteen pence; but it contains information worth more than many pounds" (Trusler, 1819). *How to Behave* of 1898 contained eight pages of adverts for other "useful" books on subjects ranging across cookery, gardening, letter writing, income tax and house duty, palmistry, nursing, history dates, sound, light and heat, electricity and magnetism, how to excel in business, how to excel in study, public speaking, how to dance, grammar, and carpentry and joinery (Klickmann, 1898, back pages). Indeed, as the market for etiquette literature became more saturated and competitive, publishers sought new means of making their publications attractive, and, as Morgan argues, "they were so rendered by means of advertising" (1991, p. 29).

Etiquette books were not only a cultural commodity in their own right, but through their dissemination of information on other products and publications, they also perpetuated the puffery evident in other popular publications that was more widespread throughout the country. To view etiquette books simply as superficial behavioral guides is to remove them from the broader context of an emergent information discourse happening in Victorian England.

IN CONCLUSION

Examining nineteenth-century etiquette books as cultural disseminators of practical information and promotion, or puffery, allows a new perspective on how information was shared and reproduced amongst Victorian middle class audiences. Moreover, it adds strength to the argument that our nascent information age not only had its origins in information technologies and information management, but that it had also permeated rather different cultural arenas, hitherto largely unexplored in information scholarship. Certainly one can argue that such perspectives allow a richer understanding of what kinds of information were being dispersed as part of the wider notion of etiquette, and suggest that such books disseminated information on topics much broader than conventions of be-

havior and good manners, as has long been assumed. Fundamentally, information historiography such as this can shed new light on aspects of human society that have previously been overlooked or dismissed as tools of historical enquiry. Etiquette books should be viewed in terms of the broader information culture that was emerging during the nineteenth century; when Victorian authors wrote of such works “containing full information” (S. O. Beeton, 1876, p. 1), they were perhaps more accurate than they had realized.

NOTES

1. I have defined “etiquette books” broadly here in recognition of the fact that so much of this kind of literature was published throughout the century and much of it covered the same sorts of material, whether or not it had the word “etiquette” in the title. Essentially if a publication was offering advice and “self-help” as to behavior, manners, and sensibility then I have counted it as “etiquette” for the purposes of this article.
2. The word has its official legal origins in an 1893 case, *Carlill v Carbolic Smoke Ball Company* [1893] EWCA Civ 1, but its informal use extends back into the eighteenth century. An enduring example of puffery is the book blurb: see Cronin and La Barre (2005).
3. Nightingale in particular published several works on her return from the Crimea, based on the evidence she had gathered there, the most significant of which were *Mortality of the British Army* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1858); *Notes on Matters Affecting the Health, Efficiency, and Hospital Administration of the British Army* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1858); and, *A Contribution to the Sanitary History of the British Army* (London: Harrison & Sons, 1859).

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