

MANNERS

Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773)
to Philip Stanhope (1732–1768), his son

Spa, 25 July 1741

I have often told you in my former letters—and it is most certainly true—that the strictest and most scrupulous honor and virtue can alone make you esteemed and valued by mankind; that parts and learning can alone make you admired and celebrated by them; but that the possession of lesser talents was most absolutely necessary towards making you liked, beloved, and sought after in private life. Of these lesser talents, good breeding is the principal and most necessary one, not only as it is very important in itself, but as it adds great lustre to the more solid advantages both of the heart and the mind. I have often touched upon good breeding to you before, so that this letter shall be upon the next necessary qualification to it, which is a genteel and easy manner and carriage, wholly free from those odd tricks, ill habits, and awkwardnesses which many very worthy and sensible people have in their behavior. However trifling a genteel manner may sound, it is of very great consequence towards pleasing in private life, especially the women, which one time or other you will think worth pleasing; and I have known many a man from his awkwardness give people such a dislike of him at first that all his merit could not get the better of it afterwards. Whereas a genteel manner prepossesses people in your favor, bends them towards you, and makes them wish to be like you. Awkwardness can proceed but from two causes—either from not having kept good company, or from not having attended to it. As for your keeping good company, I will take care of that; do you take care to observe their ways and manners, and to form your own upon them. Attention is absolutely necessary for this, as indeed it is for everything else; and a man without attention is not fit to live in the world. When an awkward fellow first comes into a room, it is highly probable that his sword gets between his legs and throws him down, or makes him stumble at least; when he has recovered this accident, he goes and places himself in the very place of the whole room where he should not; there he soon lets his hat fall down, and in taking it up again throws down his cane; in recovering his cane, his hat falls a second time, so that he is a quarter of an hour before he is in order again. If he drinks tea or coffee, he certainly scalds his mouth, and lets either the cup or the saucer fall, and spills either the tea or coffee in his breeches. At dinner, his awkwardness distinguishes itself particularly, as he has more to do; there he holds his knife, fork, and spoon differently from other people, eats with his knife, to the great danger of his mouth, picks his teeth with his fork, and puts his spoon into the dishes again. If he is to carve he can never hit the joint, but in his vain efforts to cut through the bone scatters the sauce in everybody's face. He generally daubs himself with soup and grease, though his napkin is commonly stuck through a button-hole and tickles his chin. When he drinks, he infallibly coughs in his glass and besprinkles the company.... His hands are troublesome to him when he has not something in them, and he does not know where to put them; but they are in perpetual motion between his bosom and his breeches; he does not wear his clothes, and in short does nothing, like other people. All this, I own, is not in any degree criminal; but it is highly disagreeable and ridiculous in company, and ought most carefully to be avoided by whoever desires to please.

From this account of what you should not do, you may easily judge what you should do; and a due attention to the manners of people of fashion, and who have seen the world, will make it habitual and familiar to you.

There is, likewise, an awkwardness of expression and words most carefully to be avoided,—such as false English, bad pronunciation, old sayings, and common proverbs, which are so many proofs of having kept bad and low company. For example: if, instead of saying that tastes are different and that every man has his own peculiar one, you should let off a proverb, and say, That what is one man's meat is another man's poison; or else, Every one as they like, as the good man said when he kissed his cow—everybody would be persuaded that you had never kept company with anybody above footmen and housemaids.

Attention will do all this; and without attention nothing is to be done: want of attention, which is really want of thought, is either folly or madness. You should not only have attention to everything but a quickness of attention, so as to observe at once all the people in the room, their motions, their looks, and their words, and yet without staring at them and seeming to be an observer. This quick and unobserved observation is of infinite advantage in life, and is to be acquired with care; and on the contrary what is called absence, which is thoughtlessness and want of attention about what is doing, makes a man so like either a fool or a madman, that for my part I see no real difference. A fool never has thought; a madman has lost it; and an absent man is, for the time, without it.