

# THE WELL-BRED TRAVELER

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

Bath, 29 September 1746

I received by the last mail your letter of the 23<sup>d</sup> N. S. from Heidelberg, and am very well-pleased to find that you inform yourself of the particulars of the several places you go through. You do mighty right to see the curiosities in those several places, such as the Golden Bull at Frankfurt, the Tun at Heidelberg, etc. Other travelers see and talk to them; it is very proper to see them, too, but remember that seeing is the least material object of traveling—hearing and knowing are the essential points. Therefore pray let your inquiries be chiefly directed to the knowledge of the constitution and particular customs of the places where you either reside at or pass through, whom they belong to, by what right and tenure, and since when; in whom the supreme authority is lodged; and by what magistrates, and in what manner, the civil and criminal justice is administered. It is likewise necessary to get as much acquaintance as you can, in order to observe the characters and manners of the people; for though human nature is in truth the same through the whole human species, yet it is so differently modified and varied by education, habit, and different customs, that one should, upon a slight and superficial observation, almost think it different.

As I have never been in Switzerland myself, I must desire you to inform me, now and then, of the constitution of that country. As, for instance, do the thirteen cantons jointly and collectively form one government where the supreme authority is lodged, or is each canton sovereign in itself, and under no tie or constitutional obligation of acting in common concert with the other cantons? Can any one canton make war or form an alliance with a foreign power without the consent of the other twelve or at least a majority of them? Can one canton declare war against another? If every canton is sovereign and independent in itself, in whom is the supreme power of that canton lodged? Is it in one man, or in a certain number of men? If in one man, what is he called? If in a number, what are they called—senate, council, or what? I do not suppose that you can yet know these things yourself; but a very little inquiry of those who do will enable you to answer me these few questions in your next. You see, I am sure, the necessity of knowing these things thoroughly, and consequently the necessity of conversing much with the people of the country, who alone can inform you rightly; whereas, most of the English who travel converse only with each other, and consequently know no more when they return to England than they did when they left it. This proceeds from a *mauvaise honte* which makes them ashamed of going into company; and frequently, too, from the want of the necessary language (French) to enable them to bear their part in it. As for the *mauvaise honte*, I hope you are above it. Your figure is like other people's; I suppose you will care that your dress shall be so, too, and to avoid any singularity. What, then, should you be ashamed of, and why not go into a mixed company with as much ease and as little concern as you would go into your own room? Vice and ignorance are the only things I know which one ought to be ashamed of; keep but clear of them and you may go anywhere without fear or concern. I have known some people who, from feeling the pain and inconveniences of this *mauvaise honte*, have rushed into the other extreme and turned impudent, as cowards sometimes grow desperate from the excess of danger; but this, too, is carefully to be avoided, there being nothing more generally shocking than impudence. The medium between these two extremes marks out the well-bred man; he feels himself firm and easy in all companies; is modest without being bashful, and steady without being impudent; if he is a stranger, he observes with care the manners and ways of the people most esteemed at that place, and conforms to them with complaisance. Instead of finding fault with the customs of that place and telling the people that the English ones are a thousand times better,—as my countrymen are very apt to do,—he commends their table, their dress, their houses, and their manners a little more, it may be, than he really thinks they deserve. But this degree of complaisance is neither criminal nor abject, and is but a small price to pay for the good-will and affection of the people you converse with. As the generality of people are weak enough to be pleased with these little things, those who refuse to please them so cheaply are, in my mind, weaker than they.