

PEAS & QUEUES

THE MINEFIELD OF MODERN MANNERS



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CONTENTS



To the reader	ix
To begin: an introduction	1
1. At home	11
2. Table manners: eating in	28
3. Table manners: dining out	48
4. Communication	82
5. Out and about	113
6. Travel	138
7. Shoulder to the grindstone	157
8. Having relations	171
9. Little ones	204
10. Breaking up is hard to do	237
11. Buying the farm	249
Epilogue: where good manners are bad	260

TO THE READER



In 1530 when Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote his book on manners, *De civilitate morum puerilium* (On Civility in Boys), he directed his advice to the eleven-year-old son of the Prince of Veere, Henry of Burgundy. The instructions were in Latin. I follow in his footsteps by addressing this volume to a delightful child in my life called Mary. She is eight at present. This is not a book for children, but she and I have had many conversations about manners. Her behaviour is splendid, but nevertheless one day she may need a volume to reach for as matters arise in her life. I hope as she becomes a grown-up that this is it. It is impossible to imagine every type of encounter or situation which a person might face so I have stuck to the most general ones in the order most likely to occur. Although Mary was the inspiration for this book I hope it will also prove useful to anyone not planning to live as a hermit. I have made it easier for her (and you) by not using Latin (very much).

TO BEGIN: AN INTRODUCTION



WHY DO WE NEED GOOD MANNERS?

Nobody knows the age of the human race, but everybody agrees that it is old enough to know better.

Author unknown

Dear Mary

This bit of a book is usually referred to as ‘The Introduction’. It’s the section most likely to be skipped by a reader so you may wonder why the author bothered. If you do just want to crack on with the basics of manners then by all means move along, but if you want to know why you should pay attention to them at all then it might be interesting. At any rate do be polite enough to at least give it a go, seeing as I’ve made the effort to write it.

Sit up straight? How annoying

Two points straight away:

The first thing to say is that basic manners apply no matter where you are or what you are doing. They are even a good idea when no one is watching. Having a code of behaviour will help you know how to react to the unexpected.

The second point is to assure you that manners are not some

new notion invented by the present generation of old fogies to annoy youngsters. The fact is that, on the whole, human beings don't live in isolation from each other nor do they want to. Think how delighted Robinson Crusoe was when Man Friday turned up. If we're not going to live alone on a desert island then we need to find ways to get on. Irritatingly we can't all just do what we like. Imagine the chaos there would be on the roads. Manners are simply an expression of how we manage the tricky art of co-existing. A good starting point for this is to show kindness and consideration to others and every society has and has had some basic notion about this.

Most religions have spent a lot of time working out how you ought to behave and most of them have what is known as

The Golden Rule

For example, the Mahabharata of Hinduism declares, 'This is the sum of duty; do naught unto others what would cause pain if done to you', while the Jewish Talmud instructs 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary' and the Christian Bible follows on with 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'. Sounds a simple plan which, if you follow it, should set you off on the right foot.

MANNERS MAKETH THE MAN (AND THE WOMAN, THE KID, THE DOG . . .)

A man's manners are a mirror in which he shows his portrait.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), German writer

The general notion is that how you are seen to behave says something about the kind of person you are. Worrying about what impact your behaviour has on other people means you are thinking about someone other than yourself. It's not about using the right fork or addressing royalty correctly, it's about doing your best to be a considerate member of the community. We have rules because predictable behaviour can be very comforting. It is nice

to know what to do if you attend an event, which is why there are so many helpful hints about things like formal dinners, works functions, weddings and funerals. These are stages in life which will come up for us all and it's good to have a game plan.

Minding your Ps and Qs

The expression 'mind your Ps and Qs', meaning 'be on your best behaviour', has been around for so long that no one can quite recall where it came from. There are many candidates:

1. It was a foreshortened admonishment to children to remember to say *Please* and *Thank you*.
2. It was a seventeenth-century admonishment for drinkers to keep an eye on how many pints and quarts they consumed.
3. It was an eighteenth-century admonishment for sailors to pay attention to their *peas* (a sailor's pea coat) and *queues* (a traditional nautical ponytail).

I could carry on through history seeking a meaning via the Norman Invasion of 1066, specific reading symbols in Medieval Latin texts or how early printers might easily confuse lowercase Ps and Qs but we have too much to do to get sidetracked. The fact that we don't know the precise origin of the phrase seems appropriate, for 'minding your Ps and Qs' at all is far from an exact science.

Writing the rules

It's important to understand that rules about manners are not laws. They're not really even rules. They are suggestions. You don't have to keep them but you may get along better in life if you do. Over the years there have been many attempts to write down propositions for behaviour to help grease the wheels of the great social machine. Probably the book most responsible for kicking off modern ideas about this was the book I mentioned right at the outset – *De civilitate morum puerilium* (On Civility in

Boys) – which was written in 1530 by Erasmus of Rotterdam. (He also wrote *The Handbook for the Christian Knight* and the rather jollier *In Praise of Folly* in which Folly mucks about as a goddess having been brought up by two nymphs called *Inebriation* and *Ignorance* but sadly we haven't the time.) Quite what it was about sixteenth-century boys in Rotterdam that required a whole volume of suggestions for better behaviour is hard to know, but in the first six years of the book's publication it was reprinted thirty times. The first English version came out in 1532 and from then on it became popular to instruct young people in the basics of civil behaviour.

Erasmus didn't invent the idea of good conduct. You find it written about as soon as you find writing of any kind in history. There is a papyrus in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris from the Egyptian Fifth Dynasty (c. 2414–2375 BC) called *The Maxims of Ptahhotep* which is said to have been written by one of the top officials to King Isesi. It is low on jokes but in it Ptahhotep recommends the sort of behaviour that still seems quite a good idea today – truthfulness, self-control, and kindness to others.

EVOLVING ETIQUETTE

I mention the past but it's critical not to get stuck in it. The way manners are expressed evolves on an almost daily basis. In the twelfth century, for example, it was recommended that one should cough very loudly when entering a house 'for there may be something doing which you ought not to see'. These days it's easier to ring the bell.

The word 'Etiquette' derives from the French word for small labels or tickets attached to bags to tell you what was inside them. In the same way 'Protocol' comes from the Greek *protokollon* which was a sheet glued to a manuscript case to show its contents. Labels or stickers attached to things proclaiming what they were and where they belonged gradually developed into written instructions for how to behave. They would be posted, for example, outside a soldier's billet or lodging to tell him what was

expected. Interestingly, in Danish the word 'billet' means 'ticket' just like 'etiquette'. Those who ran Louis XIV's palace at Versailles used *étiquettes* (little cards) to remind courtiers to keep off the grass or whatever else was considered *de rigueur* in court life.

In fact a lot of the words associated with manners have their origins in the royal courts of the past. The word 'courteous' even has 'court' in it. It starts popping up in the mid fourteenth century and comes from the Old French *curteis* – 'having courtly bearing or manners'. The German word *hübsch* meaning 'beautiful' is descended from *hofesch* with the word *hof* meaning 'court'. Presumably the notion was that only the rich had time to behave really well and the poor should at least aspire to follow their example.

What is and isn't generally acceptable changes all the time. There is a painting by the Dutchman Andries Both called *Hunting lice by candlelight*. It was painted in 1630 and it shows four men engaged in ridding a kneeling figure of unwanted vermin in his hair. This is not a procedure most people today would think of as an acceptable public practice. When I was at boarding school in the late 1970s my headmistress would have had a polite but clear seizure if any one of us girls had turned up in church without white gloves on. Fortunately (although not for the white glove industry) that is a notion which has died a happy death.

There are rules today about Twitter and Facebook which didn't exist a decade ago because neither did Twitter or Facebook. Modes of behaviour need to be examined continuously as we decide which are worth keeping and which need to be updated. That doesn't mean that some rules which have been around for a long time aren't still worth sticking to.

SOCIAL HIERARCHY

*An Englishman's way of speaking absolutely classifies him,
The moment he talks he makes some other Englishman despise him.*

My Fair Lady, Alan Jay Lerner, 1956

Before we get going let me just be very clear that having good

manners has nothing to do with class. Being polite is not the same as being subservient. Fortunately we no longer live in a world where anyone needs to tug a forelock. Respect needs to be earned whatever your background and it is not something anyone should assume they will receive because of their social class. Sadly, there are some who have failed to notice this democratisation of society and who continue to behave as if their class has any bearing on how people ought to treat them.

I have a lesbian friend who came out to her mother who was rather grand. It went better than expected, so with some trepidation my friend went on to describe her girlfriend, Frances.

‘What does Frances’s father do?’ asked her mother.

‘He used to work in a mill,’ my friend replied.

‘He owned a mill?’ said her mother.

‘No,’ explained my friend, ‘he was on the shop floor.’

There was a sharp intake of breath from the mother who, in her most horrified voice, exclaimed ‘Frances is working class?’ The lesbian thing was fine. The class thing was a complete horror.

A class act

So where class is concerned be a little cautious and

1. Never presume you know someone’s background because of their accent

My English accent sounds very ‘posh’ but in fact I am the daughter of a journalist. I don’t come from money, just another country.

2. Don’t presume someone’s accent is linked to their intelligence

Brain power is never measured in vowels.

3. Don’t limit anyone because of the accident of their birth

Oprah Winfrey is sometimes suggested to be the most influential woman in the world. She was born to a single, poor, teenage mum in rural Mississippi.