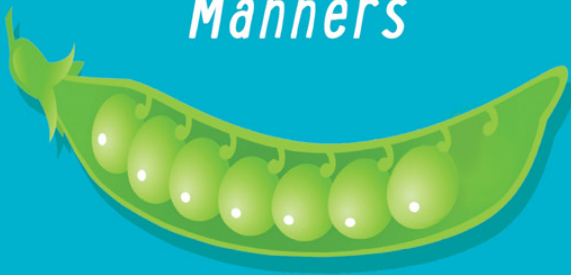


# PEAS & QUEUES

*The Minefield of Modern  
Manners*



SANDI  
TOKSVIG

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## PEAS & QUEUES

### THE MINEFIELD OF MODERN MANNERS

SANDI TOKSVIG is a well-known broadcaster for both television and radio, hosts *The News Quiz* on BBC Radio 4 and is a regular panellist on BBC television's general knowledge quiz, *QI*. She has written more than twenty books including fiction and non-fiction for both adults and children, most recently the Boer War novel, *Valentine Grey*, and is a regular columnist for *Good Housekeeping* magazine. In September 2012 her latest play *Bully Boy* was the opening production for London's first new theatre in thirty years, the St James. Sandi is the Chancellor of Portsmouth University.

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Super-Saver Mouse

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THE MINEFIELD OF MODERN MANNERS

SANDI TOKSVIG

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*for Mary*

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## **CONTENTS**

To the reader

To begin: an introduction

1. At home

2. Table manners: eating in

3. Table manners: dining out

4. Communication

5. Out and about

6. Travel

7. Shoulder to the grindstone

8. Having relations

9. Little ones

10. Breaking up is hard to do

11. Buying the farm

Epilogue: where good manners are bad



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## 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).

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## **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

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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.*

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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).

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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.

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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

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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.

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## 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.'



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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.

### **A quick but classy aside**

Dame Barbara Cartland was one of the most prolific Romantic novelists of all time. She did not begin her life with a title. Her mother ran a dress shop. Dame Barbara, however, perceived herself as a cut above. When she was interviewed

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on Radio 4's *Today* programme by Sandra Harris she was at her most condescending. Asked by Ms Harris if she thought class barriers had broken down in Britain, Dame Barbara replied, 'Of course they have or I wouldn't be sitting here talking to someone like you.'

#### **4. Don't be a snob**

This applies not just to those who think themselves in a higher class bracket but to those from the 'working' class too. It is terrible when a privileged person is arrogant but it is equally unpleasant when someone from a poor background believes that they alone have the right to know what it is to suffer.

#### **5. Do remember the sixteenth-century French writer, Michel de Montaigne**

Michel is claimed as the Father of Modern Scepticism which I'm not sure about, but he did quite rightly point out: 'However high a man sits, he still sits on his own arse.'

#### **The upside of manners**

The fact is you will do better in life if other people like you and find you are a pleasure to have around; if you know how to behave. A study by Barbara Griffin, a psychologist at the University of Western Sydney, has shown that bad manners are bad for business. It makes sense. If managers are rude to their staff then no one feels particularly inspired to work hard. If business people are rude, their customers will take their custom elsewhere.

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If you find it hard to think about others then you may bear in mind that consideration for your fellow man may also be best for you. A friend of mine was a doctor at the A & E department of a large hospital. One night he was running to work and was desperate to be excused. The pubs were just closing and he ran into one to ask the landlord if he might use the facilities. 'No,' said the landlord and very rudely told him to go away. My friend explained that he was in some pain and was desperate but nevertheless the landlord threw him out. A few hours later, early in the morning, my doctor friend was called to attend a man who had broken his leg. He pulled back the curtain to a cubicle to reveal the same pub landlord. My friend smiled. He examined the man's leg. 'It's definitely broken,' he said, 'you must be in some pain. I bet you want my help but I am very busy.' My friend said he was ashamed but he made the man wait. The moral of the story? Being nice for its own sake is best, but if you can't manage that then be nice because you never know when you might need some help yourself.

## **AN ARIA OF ATTITUDE – THE TOP Cs OF MANNERS**

Consideration

Common sense

Context

Comfort

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In this book I have tried to cover situations which might arise during the general course of your life. I can only hope that I am able to provide a helpful thought. Please accept that I may be wrong in some instances (although it would be poor behaviour to make me feel bad by pointing it out). It is, of course, not possible for me to cover everything, but the plan is to lay down some basics and to make you think. After that, like a tenor singing Verdi, you need reach for your Top Cs to see you through.

The first is 'Consideration', but after that you need to remember 'Common sense' and 'Context'. Be kind, be sensible and remember that not everyone thinks or feels the way you do. Manners are there to be interpreted and common sense should always prevail. It may be considered rude to bang a perfect stranger on the back, but not if they are choking to death. We should also recall that manners change according to cultural context. What is polite to us may seem the height of bad manners to the Masai farmer whose behaviour in turn might shock the Chinese businessman who could easily upset the French drag queen who ... oh, you get the picture.

The final C is 'Comfort'. In any given situation the aim of good manners should be to make as many people feel as comfortable as possible. I think probably the greatest lesson in good manners I ever heard was told to me by the photographer, Patrick Lichfield. Patrick was a member of the British aristocracy and one night in Copenhagen he was invited to have dinner with the Danish King, Frederick IX. In those days a gentleman wore a shirt with no collar, on top of which was placed a separate stiff shirt front, a detachable collar and stiff cuffs. Patrick was a little impecunious and had

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no clean shirt. Instead, he simply put on the shirt front and cuffs underneath his dinner jacket. No one would have known but, as luck would have it, it was a particularly warm evening and after the meal the gentlemen gathered to have brandy and cigars. As they sat down the king declared that the men ‘might remove their jackets’. Patrick was mortified. He knew that manners dictated he should do as the king asked but he had no shirt on. Ready for the social disgrace he removed his jacket. The king took one look at him and immediately said, ‘Splendid idea! Shirts as well’ and promptly removed his shirt. Soon all the men were sitting bare-chested and Patrick was made to feel as though nothing untoward had occurred. How delighted I am that it was a Dane who behaved so well.

## **WHERE TO BEGIN?**

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players*

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (1599/1600)

When the Russian theatre director, Konstantin Stanislavski, developed his techniques of acting he talked a lot about the ‘circles of attention’. He developed a concept of three basic circles which actors should adjust their performance to – a small, very intimate one in which we live alone or with our nearest and dearest; a medium one in which we interact with our friends and associates; and a large public one where we encounter everyone else. These circles exist in everyday life and we learn manners so that we know how to behave on each of the various stages on which we play out our existence.

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Usually we take our first steps within the smallest circle, so let's begin at home.

Are you ready? Off we go.

Much love  
Sandi

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## 1: AT HOME

*Home is where the heart is.*

Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79), Roman author

Dear Mary

I like the word ‘home’ partly because it has Nordic roots. The Danish equivalent is ‘*hjem*’ and it just means where we live. It’s a small word for something that means so much. For many of us the word ‘home’ represents the place where we grew up. If you’ve ever been away and been ‘homesick’ then you know what a powerful feeling you can have about your particular spot on earth. The fact that the quote above was written by a man in toga times shows yet again how little humans have really changed over the centuries. Of course, it’s worth bearing in mind that Pliny never married or had children so he may not have known what a noisy, crowded place a home can be.

Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* knew that there was ‘No place like home’ and ideally it’s the place where everyone should be at their most relaxed. This might lead you to think that it is the one location where you don’t need to worry about manners. In fact the opposite is true. The people with whom you share your living space are those with whom you live most intimately, whether it’s your family or your flat- or housemates. You need to respect each other and be thoughtful, or pretty soon everyone will be wishing

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they were living alone. How and where you live changes as you grow but the basics apply throughout your life. Even if you do live alone you are unlikely to escape having neighbours and certain rules still help everyone rub along.

Some homes are more packed with people than others, but everyone is entitled to some privacy. What you'll find is if you allow your nearest and dearest a little private space then they are more likely to do the same for you. We all have moments when we would like to be alone so there are some simple ways forward. Ideally you start with having respect for...

## **THE FAMILY HOME**

### **1. Each other**

It's the old 'do as you would be done by' leitmotif of manners. Parents often go on about wishing their children had more respect, but it may be that they haven't considered what a two-way street that is. Respect is something you earn. Losing your temper and shouting at those you live with is rarely a good way forward. Very little is ever achieved. Be thoughtful and attentive to everyone in the home and you will find that they will be thoughtful and attentive back. That means parents listening to the kids as well as vice versa.

That doesn't mean the kids shouldn't consider.

### **2. Age and experience**

Annoying, I know, but quite often people who have been around for a few years have learnt a thing or two. Advice



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