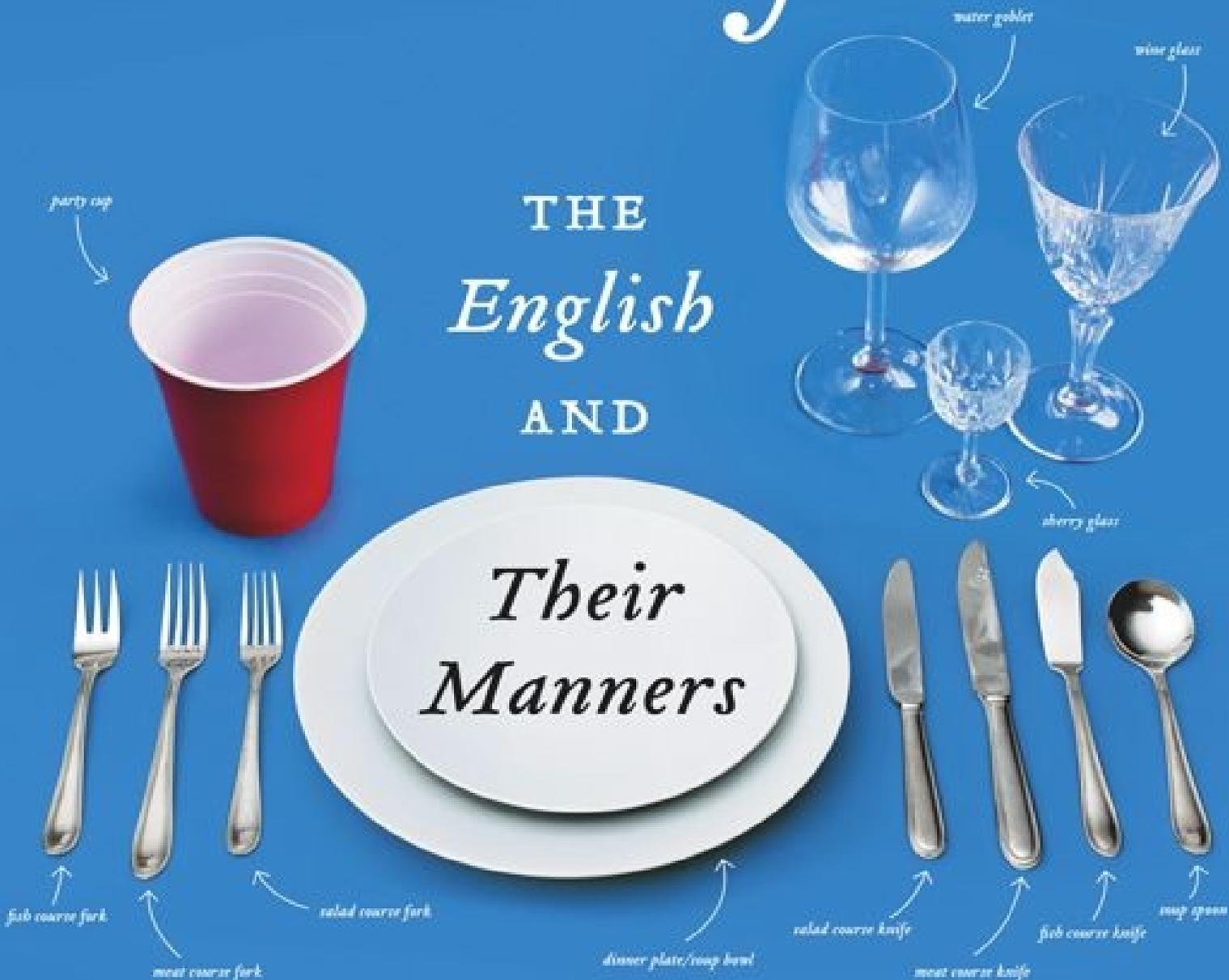


Sorry!

THE
English
AND

Their
Manners



Henry Hitchings

Author of *The Language Wars*

SORRY!

The English and Their Manners

HENRY HITCHINGS

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

NEW YORK

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A note on the text

In quotations, spellings have been adjusted to conform to modern readers' expectations. I have also standardized the spellings of names.

The stars' tennis balls
or, a short introduction from an unusual angle

In 1977 an eighteen-year-old American skipped his high school graduation to play tennis in Europe. Although an amateur, he competed against professionals – thrilling fans and maddening traditionalists with his prickly, passionate attitude. Even to people for whom tennis was of little interest, his behaviour seemed at once scandalous and magnetic. Two decades later a sociologist, E. Digby Baltzell, would assess the player's impact in his book *Sporting Gentlemen*. This had had a rather more catchy working title: *John McEnroe and the Decline of Civilization*.

Tennis mattered a lot to me when I was a child. Each summer I would go square-eyed watching Wimbledon. In the first couple of years that I was able to follow it, I registered McEnroe's sulky petulance, and registered also how violently it was at odds with the coolness of his great rival, Björn Borg. I liked Borg, the doleful-looking Swede who reputedly slept surrounded by his racquets, and was encouraged in this preference by my parents.

McEnroe was considered a disgrace because he flouted the norms of a sport steeped in tradition, showed no regard for authority, and always insisted that he was right, even when (and partly because) such insistence was guaranteed to be futile. His technique disclosed his angsty nonconformity. In a review of one of the player's televised matches, Clive James observed that McEnroe gave the impression of 'serving around the corner of an imaginary building'; his service motion, apparently developed to prevent back pain, seemed consonant with paranoia. Meanwhile his demeanour was 'as charming as a dead mouse in a loaf of bread'.¹ A further source of outrage was McEnroe's appearance: his air of dishevelment (wild hair, sloppy socks, a mystifying lack of muscle tone) meant that he looked like a dabbler, at a time when tennis was embracing the bland ruthlessness of professional sports management. McEnroe's manners grated. His defiance stemmed from a hatred of anything that seemed phoney; he suffered not from a lack of sensitivity, but from a tendency to be hypersensitive in situations where he was meant to be stoical.

Borg and McEnroe suggested two distinct ways of experiencing the world, two distinct ways of greeting fortune and misfortune. Borg was the embodiment of restraint and politesse, averting his gaze from his own excellence, whereas McEnroe was the embodiment of ... well, of what E. Digby Baltzell considered calling the decline of civilization.

The choice between these two figures and their attitudes was presented to me explicitly. Neither was English, but I saw the drama of their rivalry in an English setting, and it spoke to an English audience. Here were two approaches to life: the mannerly and the unmannerly. One player kept his feelings locked up; the other expressed them continually. One had eliminated all trace of intimacy from his behaviour; the other was forever admitting us to an intimate place we didn't want to go.

Yet now the choice between Borg and McEnroe feels different: we find McEnroe's conduct authentic, even courageous, while Borg's seems that of an android. In his autobiography, *Serious*, McEnroe writes that 'Where money and publicity meet, there's always excitement, but good behaviour is rarely part of the mix. Manners are the operating rules of more stable systems ... I thought tennis had had enough of manners. To me, "manners" meant sleeping linesmen at Wimbledon, and bowing and curtsying to rich people with hereditary titles who didn't pay any taxes.'²

To McEnroe, as to many people, the notion of manners seems old-fashioned and starchy, and it also means something divisive, corrupt, shamefully unquestionable – and quintessentially English. The manners of every society encode a particular view of the world. They can be understood as a system for producing a sense of togetherness or minimizing a sense of not-togetherness. But in the pantheon of national stereotypes, *English* and *manners* go together like *French* and *romance* or *German* and *efficiency*.

In the pages that follow, I examine English manners. I also examine Englishness. It therefore seems appropriate to say something about the words *English* and *British*. The distinction between them is one that English people often fail to observe; in the eyes of the Scottish and Welsh, it is much clearer. Britain is a political construct; the Act of Union in 1707 joined England, Wales and Scotland as 'one united kingdom by the name of Great Britain'. This construct, which blurred traditional divisions, was strengthened by a reaction against all that was encountered overseas. As a political concept, 'Britain' has worked, but at root the people of England, like the people of Scotland and Wales, feel that while 'British' may be the name for *what* they are, it is not *who* they are.

Because I have Welsh and Scottish antecedents as well as English ones, I call myself British. Yet to foreigners I undoubtedly seem deeply English. Some years ago, on a trip to Japan with students from a dozen other countries, I referred to myself as a European and was mocked for doing so by my generally charming companions. As one Belgian member of the group put it, 'The English really are not Europeans.' 'I'm not English,' I countered. The response was a chorus: 'Oh yes, you are.' What did Englishness mean to these citizens of Sweden, Portugal, Austria and Greece? Mainly it consisted of belligerence, xenophobia and crudeness, leavened by a chummy warmth. 'We like the English,' said one young woman from Barcelona, 'and we know you like us. But you're still, you know, different – the English, he's partly a friendly person who's polite and easy, and partly a guy who likes football and beer and is really loud.' It meant something to my companions to think of me as English, and when I said I was

British I was regarded as invoking a technicality.

To speak of English manners, rather than of British ones, is to recognize something visceral. As I investigate this, in the chapters that follow, I also discuss manners in general. I could hardly not, for, as I shall show, the sources of many of our ideas to do with manners are not English at all. Manners are neither an English invention nor a modern one. A global history of the subject would reach back at least as far as the twenty-fifth century BC, when the Egyptian vizier Ptahhotep issued a set of maxims about appropriate behaviour. It would take in the Chinese thinker Confucius, the Roman statesman Cicero, the great compendium of Jewish lore known as the Talmud, and Abu Hamed Mohammad ibn Mohammad al-Ghazali, a scholar who almost 1,000 years ago wrote about *adab*, the code that provides Muslims with a model of respectfulness. The coverage of medieval Europe might start with Thomasin of Zerclaere, an Italian who produced a didactic poem about manners around 1215. Writing in German, Thomasin offered guidance on matters such as where to look when riding a horse (upwards, rather than at one's legs), and advised young men not to step on benches and women not to look over their shoulders.³

Guides to manners have not always begun as reactions to bad behaviour – attempts to halt social decline – yet implicit in every such work, and explicit in most of them, is an anxiety about slipping standards or a belief that tighter codes of conduct need defining. Today it is common to remark that the little civilities that make life bearable are vanishing, that people from whom you expect flawless behaviour instead act rudely, that conflict is more common than rapport. We seem to be inundated with stories of degeneracy: politeness is expiring. Thus, for instance, the *Daily Mail* in April 2008 reported a new study claiming that bad manners were the biggest problem facing society. Behaviours cited as giving especially grave offence included spitting and swearing.⁴

Complaints of this kind will strike a chord with readers who feel that the present moment is one of unique discourtesy. But here is a snippet from a report published by penal reformers in 1898: 'The tendencies of modern life incline more and more to ignore, or disparage, social distinctions, which formerly did much to encourage respect ... [and it] is frequently asserted, that the manners of children are deteriorating, that the child of today is coarser, more vulgar, less refined, than his parents were.' Here is the churchman Robert Wallace in 1758, summing up an attitude prevalent among his contemporaries: 'There being now nothing in our constitution to give due check to our bad manners, their natural consequences must have their full effect, and we run the greatest risk of going to destruction.'⁵ And here is Baldassare Castiglione in 1528, in a book that would enjoy great popularity among English readers, condemning as an 'error' the tendency whereby 'nearly all praise the past and blame the present, revile our actions and behaviour and everything which they themselves did not do when they were young, and affirm, too, that every good custom and way of life, every virtue and, in short, all things imaginable are always going from bad to worse.'

I hope to avoid the error described by Castiglione, developing a true sense of the

past, the present and their relationship. My book's structure is chronological, but sometimes I cut away from the main narrative to explore a subject such as table manners that belongs to no one historical moment. I have also canvassed the opinions of a few experts in the field – by which I mean complete strangers, people with whom I fell into conversation on the bus or while waiting in a queue. Here, for instance, are the views of Tia and Misha, teenage girls I met at the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre. Tia: 'Manners is just another word for respect. And respect has to be *earned*.' Misha: 'How do you *earn* manners?' Tia: 'You *learn* them.' Misha: 'You *said* you earn them.' Tia: 'Like fuck I did.' And then to me, Tia: 'Sorry about this, man.'

Sorry. Lynne Truss says in her 2005 book *Talk to the Hand* that the word is 'near extinction'. Although that is not my experience, its force has diminished, and often today it does not express sorrow, penitence or even regret. It can be powerful when incorporated into a sincere apology, but when it stands alone may seem hollow – a punctuation mark, with a weight no greater than a comma, in the everyday discourse of selfishness. According to a report in the *Daily Telegraph* in September 2011, the average Briton says 'Sorry' eight times a day. The very existence of that report is worthy of remark: a lot of the time manners are treated as a minority concern, but they are guaranteed to interest the many readers of conservative newspapers such as the *Telegraph* and the *Mail*. It is apt that the *Telegraph* uses Old Testament terms when noting: 'That's 204,536 times in threescore years and ten.'⁶

The readiness of the English to apologize for something they haven't done is remarkable, and it is matched by an unwillingness to apologize for what they have done. This puts me in mind of an essential paradox that I have observed: the English are polite, and they are also rude. Extreme rudeness and elaborate politeness both stem from feelings of unease; they are different techniques for twisting one's way out of discomfiture.

Paradox will come up again and again in this book. A few examples: The English are proud of their stoicism and resilience, though often in practice they are hypochondriacs. 'Mustn't grumble,' the English say straight after grumbling, and in circumstances where complaint is not only justified but necessary. (The stiff upper lip, that fabled image of restrained English fortitude in the face of adversity, seems to be American in origin.) The English advertise their simplicity, yet many of those who do so take pleasure in English culture's tangled mysteries. Although they like forming committees, even like the idea of sitting on them, they hate committee meetings. The English catchphrase 'I know my rights' belies a state of affairs in which legal rights are convoluted, and in which litigation is slow and costly. The very people who display greatest pride in the English past know nothing of their own families before their grandparents.

A final example, before we are borne back into that past: the people who speak most emotionally about the decline of manners, and who rejoice most in the sanctity of their understanding of what English manners are, rarely express any curiosity about the origins of those manners or the authority and rationale on which they rest. But

perhaps that isn't a paradox at all.

'I'ma get medieval on yo ass'
manners in the age of chivalry

When Marcellus Wallace in *Pulp Fiction* threatens another character with the words 'I'ma get medieval on yo ass', we have a pretty good idea what he means. He is likely, we sense, to wield some daunting instruments of torture; he specifically mentions pliers. The line works because it is unexpected yet not incongruous; the popular image of the medieval world involves a passion for violence – jousts, swordplay, beheadings, witch-burnings. This is an incomplete view, but it is fair to say that in medieval England violence was considered an unavoidable part of life. In the case of the trial by ordeal, which used a painful test to determine the guilt of an accused individual, violence was even carried out in the name of justice.

It was because of all this violence, rather than in spite of it, that manners mattered. A man surrendered his weapons when he visited equals or superiors. The way he greeted them was important in establishing his trustworthiness and creating rapport. He exercised care when eating in their presence. He would do what he could to maintain a clean, respectable appearance; that might not be much, but he would be aware that his face, hair, teeth and hands ought to be clean. This was not because of a concern with germs (it was only in the nineteenth century that the relationship between microbes and disease was established). Rather, it was because physical cleanliness was understood as a sign of spiritual cleanliness.

Let's for a moment project ourselves into this world. If you live in thirteenth-century England, your home is draughty and smoky. Unless you are rich and can sleep in a bed on linen sheets, you will be obliged to slumber on a clay floor strewn with rushes that have become ingrained with filth. Sleeping has in any case not yet been privatized; you are likely to share your space at night with other people, some of whom you would prefer not to be near. You may well receive visitors in your bedroom; in many houses, the bedroom is a busy place throughout the day. You may also share your bed with a stranger. Inhibitions are low, which is in some ways a good thing, but you see an awful lot of other people's dirty, blemished bodies. You blow your nose directly into your hand; the handkerchief will not be introduced into polite use, by Richard II, until around 1384, and will still be rare 200 years later.

Imagine a world in which you have no light in the evening save that of firesides, torches and candles, expensive to maintain in great number and perpetually hazardous. It's not just that you don't have electricity; you don't have matches, and make fire

using a flint and steel. Your windows, instead of being glazed, may be covered with parchment or a cow's stretched-out placenta. And you have no pillows, cutlery, nightclothes, curtains or mattresses – never mind the internet, aeroplanes, telephones, refrigeration, combustion engines and, for that matter, form-fitting bras. Today some people relish camping, which they see as a return to natural and simple ways, but they for the most part have sleeping bags lined with down or thermal microfibres and are in vented tents that resist even the heaviest rain.

Imagine not having access to a bath or shower – or a flush lavatory, toilet roll and toothbrush – and needing constantly to disguise foul odours (including that of your own body) with perfume. It's easy to say 'Yes, yes, of course', and you may have experienced such privations on your travels (a chic slumminess or an all too real ruggedness), but imagine it fully: a life, a whole life, of grime. In a world without detergents, people did what they could to make themselves and their surroundings clean. Monks and monarchs had decent facilities; Edward I had running water in his bathroom, and Edward III had a number of bathrooms built and even had hot running water in some of them.¹ Others were less fortunate. Some medieval citizens could go to public baths, which were associated with bad behaviour and disease, and some could make use of ponds and rivers. But, while it was normal to wash one's hands several times a day, total immersion was rare. Water was something to use cautiously. People were less disturbed than you would be by the presence of lice and the pervasive aroma of shit. Until the late fourteenth century, urine was used to thicken cloth during its manufacture. Into the seventeenth century bad smells, though regarded as capable of harming the brain, were associated not with poverty, but with the bustle of urban progress; in the towns, unlike in the country, it was hard to get rid of bodily waste.

In this dangerous and largely rural world of feudalism and superstitions, the Church was vitally important. Ideas about manners grew out of religious teachings, in which manners were an expression of moral absolutes. As the subject began to be examined in greater detail, accounts of mannerly behaviour incorporated traditions that had developed in the monasteries. Treatises on self-discipline were no longer just for monks. Gradually manners took on a distinct identity, independent from religion. They were a terrestrial matter, not an ethereal one, and were touched by the particular demands of three different (but not easily separable) value systems: courtliness, courtesy and chivalry.² Their powerful convergence was manifest in a practical concern with acceptable and unacceptable behaviours at court, a distaste for excess and a desire to maintain systems of social status.

In medieval England, works expounding this concern explicitly assumed a noble and male coterie of consumers. One example was the twelfth-century Latin poem *Facetus* (essentially meaning 'polite man'), which presented a selection of maxims from which a youthful audience could learn basic courtesies. Also known as *Urbanus*, this didactic work is something of a hotchpotch, on the one hand rehashing the Ten Commandments and on the other warning about the dangers of accepting hospitality from someone who has red hair. A man should be careful about what he tells his wife,

and yet should speak well of women, for speaking ill of them is a rustic habit. Mothers-in-law should be treated generously. If handling an object you are thinking about buying, you should do so gently. You should always choose a travelling companion with care and not cast him aside without a very good reason.

There was an English audience for the Latin text of *Facetus*, but there were also English translations of it, and soon there were derivative works setting out dicta about table manners, conversation, personal appearance and social life. In one form or another, *Facetus* was consumed in schools for more than 200 years, fading from use only in the early sixteenth century. Narrower in focus but similar in temper was the thirteenth-century Latin poem usually known by its opening words, ‘*Stans puer ad mensam*’ (loosely, ‘The child at the table’). This short work, sometimes attributed to the scholarly bishop Robert Grosseteste, was several times translated into English, most notably by John Lydgate, whose version became popular after being printed by William Caxton around 1476.

A businessman rather than a scholar, Caxton was keen on publishing what he knew would appeal to readers. ‘*Stans puer ad mensam*’ was hardly the latest thing, but it was enduringly useful, providing young boys with rigorous guidance about conduct at table: slouching and scratching were condemned, as were shuffling, finger-wagging and the slurping of soup. Caxton also translated a book by the Augustinian friar Jacques Le Grand; *The Book of Good Manners* was intended to help ‘the amendment of manners and the increase of virtuous living’. Lydgate for his part produced a widely disseminated poem, *The Dietary*, which presented moderation in the intake of food as desirable and as part of a more general personal moderation that was beneficial not just to the individual, but also to society at large.

The titles of these books are either prosaic or impenetrable, so it is interesting to come across *The Babees Book*, which sounds half twee, half provocative. Dating from about 1475, this was ‘a little report of how young people should behave’ addressed to young men of royal blood. It advises that they should stand ‘as still as a stone’ in the presence of their master, make eye contact with anyone who speaks to them, and avoid drinking while they have food in their mouths. Hand-washing matters. When eating, one’s face should register appreciation of the food.

Works of this kind were precursors of modern manuals of etiquette. The word *etiquette* was not introduced into English until the eighteenth century, but the essential idea of etiquette was present: a code of conduct existed, and with it came the idea of self-control as a virtue. In the mid-fifteenth century John Russell, an usher in the service of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, produced the *Boke of Nurture*, a guide to standard practices in Humphrey’s household. This gives general directions: a man shouldn’t claw at his back as if looking for a flea, pick his nose or allow droplets to fall from it, belch, exhale over his superiors, or fiddle with his codpiece (the flap that covers and accentuates his genitals). By implication, becoming cleaner and shielding from view the less attractive parts of yourself enhances your sense of the integrity of your body.

These guides established a sense of what constituted correct behaviour in the presence of the king or another potentate. They were concerned with what we would now think of as public conduct. Today we identify more clearly a difference between the public and the private, and between the manners of these two domains. What we do in public is more formal than what we do at home. Partly this is because we in public present an ideal version of ourselves that we've assembled at home. Partly it is because in our private lives we define the boundaries of what's acceptable. In public, we often assume roles in which we are expected to show particular skills and behaviours; a certain poise is required. In intimate situations we feel able to give vent to a greater variety of behaviour – more emotion and more truth. Privacy allows us to test our ideas, share confidences, and lay aside the masks we wear the rest of the time (at our places of work, for instance). The contrast here is between the segmented and the diffuse, between expectation and exemption. We might assume that this is universal, but it isn't: at the risk of oversimplification, one can say that in India, Russia and Japan, public behaviour is in many respects less formal than behaviour at home.

In the Middle Ages the distinction between public and private was less clear. Although it had been drawn in Roman law, in Britain it was largely meaningless. Philippe Ariès has claimed that 'until the end of the seventeenth century, nobody was ever left alone': isolation was nigh on impossible.³ Social life was certainly dense for medieval citizens; while they were capable of thinking in terms of trespass and nuisance, and sometimes spoke of them with a strong sense of grievance, what we would now think of as privacy – choosing to keep only the company we have selected – had negative connotations, if any. Solitude, which is in any case different from privacy, was associated with monks and hermits. Where we would speak of the private, it was usual to speak of the hidden or the secret. The word *privacy* itself would not gain currency until the seventeenth century, and even then was still sometimes muddled with the noun *privy*, a term for the genitals that had been used by Geoffrey Chaucer in the 1370s.

In medieval societies, the smooth running of what we would call public life was achieved to a large degree (perhaps surprising to us now) through the symbolic effects of gesture. Facial expressions were remarked upon less than they are today; instead it was mainly the body that was examined – for signs that supported words, undercut them, or took their place. Ritual gesture was crucial to expressions of homage, deference, loyalty, piety, petition, penance and kindness. We may think of gesture as inherently demonstrative, but in a more concertedly gestural society the work of gesture could be circumspect. For every vigorous breast-beating there were dozens of less showy acts. A hand held up while an oath was sworn was a means of symbolizing one's submission. Going down on one knee, rather than both, was a way of holding back a certain amount of one's honour. In general, kneeling was associated with receiving and acknowledging benefits. Placing one's hands between the hands of one's overlord – not an unnatural thing to do – could be a sign that one recognized one was completely at his command. Other gestures had deprecatory effects: crossing one's

legs was a mark of insouciance, while briefly closing the eyes could indicate contempt.⁴ Overdoing any of these gestures could be a form of usefully ambiguous insult. By convention, when walking with a person one recognized as one's social superior one was expected to keep him on one's right and stay a pace behind him. The powerful fourteenth-century landowner Roger Mortimer attracted comment when he breached convention by walking ahead of the king (Edward II).

We still understand that placing someone on our right – which mainly happens at table – is an honour. This is merely one among the many polite behaviours that have antique explanations. Allowing one's superior to ride on one's right, for instance, made it easier for him to draw his sword, should the need arise; now one does it without any thought of swords and sheaths. Tipping one's hat is either a reduced form of uncovering one's head – an ancient mark of respect – or a relic of the practice of opening the visor of one's helmet so that the face could be seen. Firing an artillery salute is an announcement of trust: you respect your visitor's intentions and believe you can afford to discharge your weapons, showing both your own lack of hostility and your feeling that the visit is one for which you do not need to be armed.

Early guides to conduct specified ways in which one could, metaphorically speaking, disarm oneself. In due course, these principles of courtesy percolated down through society. But while writers on manners have tended to assume that good practices trickle down, often people seeking to climb the social ladder have reached up for them. The moment codes of behaviour are written down, they become accessible to people who have previously had only a limited, second-hand knowledge of them.

The process by which this has happened across Europe was the subject of groundbreaking research by Norbert Elias. A German sociologist of Jewish descent, Elias moved to Britain in 1935 to escape Nazi persecution. In 1939 he published his book *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*. It was not a good time to be making claims for the progress of civilized behaviour, and Elias's reputation bloomed only after the publication of an English translation of its first volume, under the title *The Civilizing Process*, in 1969.

Elias identifies the spread of civilization as a growth of inhibition. Being civilized is a matter of constraining natural impulses. To use the language of Sigmund Freud, we reconcile the pleasure principle with the reality principle: our desires are tempered by the demands of the world at large. Manners can be interpreted as symptoms of repression; when one views society from above, as if watching time-lapse footage shot from a hot-air balloon, collective repression looks useful, but to the individual it may seem a frustrating denial of life's zing and zest. It requires us to make sacrifices, conceal passions and hold back urges. In addition, it involves empathy. Self-control and empathy were not invented by Europeans of the early modern period (roughly 1500 to 1800); they existed already, but were now amplified. Self-discipline, exercised and toned a bit like a muscle, was a characteristic of the rising European bourgeoisie. Feelings of shame and repugnance became more common. As this happened, behaviour that had once seemed acceptable became problematic: for instance, you had

to be much more scrupulous about disposing of your bodily waste, whether it was a question of blowing your nose discreetly or retreating to a special room to urinate.

The process Elias describes was not slick. But, with hindsight, its direction is clear. Aggression was dampened. The power of the monarch and his court increased. As London became more established as England's social and political centre, and as it became more clear that the court was the centre of power, so there developed a society in which different groups' functions and obligations were at once more sharply defined and more densely interwoven. Elias argues that the royal court stood at the heart of the social networks that initiated and maintained the civilizing process. The control of weapons was centralized, and so was the control of the people chosen to wield those weapons. Laws were stiffened: as a result, when people travelled, they no longer expected to have to fend off physical attack. Right across western Europe an upper class of knights was superseded by a more peaceable, literate upper class of courtiers.⁵

This transition – warriors to courtiers – was not absolutely decisive, as the categories were not mutually exclusive. Yet as the formal apparatus of government developed, the authoritarian state monopolized large-scale violence. Away from state-sanctioned wars, fatal acts of violence became much less common; crimes against the person diminished (outside the home, though perhaps not within it), and property became the main target for criminals. Increasingly, the authorities stigmatized violence and punished those who engaged in it.

As society became better regulated and safer, it seemed reasonable to think beyond the short term, to avoid doing now what would be likely to cause pain or displeasure in the future. More complex social relationships in any case made it more important to exercise foresight. Adolescents were recognized as a distinct group, in need of tutelage and supervision, and various means were found to control adolescent masculinity. Among these was popular entertainment, such as theatre, which allowed violent fantasies to be indulged – harmlessly, it was for the most part believed. As casual day-to-day violence receded, so sensitivity to threats and evidence of violence increased. By the middle of the seventeenth century there was a strong aversion to the sight of blood.⁶ In defence of even the most passionate convictions, courtiers were likely to spill not blood, but ink.

Many of the basic principles of mannerly behaviour have existed, in a pretty stable form, since before this transition from warriors to courtiers. What's changed more has been the things we have to be mannerly *about*. Medieval courtesy books were preoccupied with table manners, almost to the exclusion of any other subject. In medieval England, the feast expressed an ideal image of society. The rituals that organized a feast were essential to the occasion's rewards. The Bible established the value of feasting (the Last Supper being just one of many biblical feasts), and medieval ideas of social behaviour, no matter how secular in appearance, were coloured by religion. Feasts were occasions to display social cohesion; leftovers could be given to the poor, who could be expected to pray for the souls of their benefactors.

Petrus Alfonsi, a Jew from Andalusia who converted to Christianity and served at

the court of Henry I, wrote in a little book of wisdom he called *Disciplina Clericalis* that one should not speak with one's mouth full, allow crumbs to fall from one's lips, or lunge for the bread before any other food has reached the table. Henry's household propagated many ideas about good behaviour, and one young man who spent time there went on to be King David I of Scotland, whose innovations included a scheme to give tax rebates to those of his subjects who learned to consume their food more elegantly.

Daniel of Beccles, probably a member of the court of Henry II, was another who provided a wealth of advice for those attending feasts. In his Latin poem known as *Urbanus Magnus* or *Liber Urbani*, he wrote that while eating one should not put one's elbows on the table or play with one's cutlery, and one should never lick one's greasy fingers or speak with one's mouth full. He also emphasized the need for watchfulness and restraint as one sought to maintain peaceful relations with one's fellow citizens. One shouldn't attack an enemy while he is defecating, should avoid sharing secrets with one's wife, and ought to look towards the ceiling when belching.

Table manners, central to these medieval guides, remain important, and are interpreted as representing in miniature a person's whole repertoire of manners. They enable us to take a thin yet flavoursome slice of someone's character. In the nineteenth century it was alleged that the surest test of English people's table manners was to observe them in the act of eating asparagus, artichokes, oranges and grapes, while those of Americans could be assessed on the evidence of how a pie was consumed. The manner in which one eats peas has traditionally been subjected to similar scrutiny. It is sometimes alleged that candidates for fellowship at the exclusive Oxford college All Souls are served a fruit tart at dinner; those examining them watch to see what they do with the fruit's inedible pits. To quote a Victorian proverb: 'Every meal is a lesson learned.'

In the title of the *Liber Urbani* there is a clear sign of where Daniel of Beccles expected to find good manners. *Urbs* was the Latin for 'city', and in Latin culture it was usually understood to mean before all else Rome. *Liber Urbani* was literally a 'book of the city' – of city life and city ways. We now inevitably see a link here to the word *urbane*. This entered English in the sixteenth century; around 1600 *urbane* began to connote not just city manners but specifically an elegant form of manners. In 1623 Henry Cockeram published a dictionary in which he defines the adjective *urbane* as 'civil' or 'courteous'. By contrast, rusticity has conventionally been identified with a lack of manners, and the use of *rustic* in that sense began at around the time that *urbane* was beginning to denote courtesy. To this day, accounts of manners and guides to the subject tend to concentrate on what happens in urban life. Rural manners get less coverage, either because they are assumed not to exist (once the standard view) or because it is harder to find them documented (now the more credible explanation).

Urbanity in medieval England did not reach far. Even in the places it did reach, it could not blot out the norms of a world full of physical dangers.⁷ War was an almost constant feature of life. England in the twentieth century was much less violent than

England in the fourteenth century – about 95 per cent less so, according to the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker. The medieval English were familiar with torture, cruel spectacles and capital punishment. Religious faith, often presented today as a great bulwark against chaos, did not make them safe.⁸ But deep religious feeling was the norm. Although not everyone was pious and the clergy were often an object of animosity, medieval Christians, living at a time when terrestrial life was hard and there were few diversions to entice their attention, were intent on doing whatever they could to achieve salvation.

One apparent path to salvation was the Crusades, a series of experiments in colonialism that were informed by penitence yet ended in butchery. When Pope Urban II delivered the sermon at Clermont that led to the First Crusade, he turned a request for mercenaries from the embattled Byzantine emperor into a vision of armed pilgrimage. The ensuing conflicts with pagans and heretics were understood not only as a religious mission, but also as an opportunity for what we might today call personal development.

When we think of manners in this context, we think of chivalry. The word *chivalry* has been cheapened; today it calls to mind either knights protecting damsels in distress – which is the stuff of fairy tales – or a man helping a woman off the train with her heavy bag – something quaint, banal, perhaps problematic, and the cue for a joke about how this kind of thing is dying out or a retort about its being patronizing. But we know that chivalry once meant something more than this. Originally it was a collective term for knights who were ready for battle, typically mounted on horseback.

If it is a twentieth-century cliché that ‘The age of chivalry is dead,’ it is to the nineteenth century that we can trace the notion that chivalry is all about little courtesies. Sir Walter Scott’s ballads and his novels with medieval settings fuelled an enthusiasm for reviving feasts and tournaments, as well as the (supposed) spirit of the Middle Ages. More remarkable was Kenelm Henry Digby’s *The Broad Stone of Honour* (published in 1822 and later expanded), which originally set out to provide ‘rules for the gentlemen of England’. Digby claimed that chivalry ‘disposes men to heroic and generous actions, and keeps them conversant with all that is beautiful and sublime in the intellectual and moral world’.⁹ Those inspired by Scott and Digby expended their efforts on acquiring the physical trappings of medieval Englishness, yet the business of reclaiming chivalry, even in this limited fashion, was seen as a means of recovering from the frivolity and moral laxity of the Regency period (1811–20). It was amid this rather fanciful rearmament that the adjective *chivalrous* became a term to denote what the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* calls being ‘disinterestedly devoted in the service of the female sex’. It was at this time, too, that *chivalric* caught on as an alternative to *chivalrous*: *chivalric* was more strongly associated with real knightly qualities, *chivalrous* with an ideal and polished image of the halcyon days of gallantry.

The image of chivalry as a veneer of ceremony trivializes what was in the Middle Ages a serious code and a vocation with its own visual language (the heraldic insignia