

Lord Chesterfield's Choice thoughts to his son

On the Fine Art of becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman



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Three hundred and twenty excerpts from the letters written by the Right Honourable Philip Dormer Stanhope, Fourth Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773), to his son, Philip Stanhope esq; late envoy extraordinary at the court of Dresden: together with several other pieces on various subjects.

Lord Chesterfield's letters were first published in London by Eugenia Stanhope, 1774, in two volumes.

The difference is as great between
The optics seeing as the objects seen.
All manners take a tincture from our own,
Or some discolour'd thro' our passions shown;
Or fancy's beam enlarges, multiplies,
Contracts, inverts, and gives ten thousand dyes.
— Alexander Pope¹

Chesterfield's choice thoughts to his son

- A little learning is a dangerous thing
- Above all things, avoid speaking of yourself
- Abstain from learned ostentation
- Advice is seldom welcome
- Always look people in the face when you speak to them
- Art of pleasing is the most necessary
- Assenting, but without being servile and abject
- Assertion instead of argument
- At the first impulse of passion, be silent till you can be soft
- Attention to the inside of books
- Avoid cacophony, and, what is very near as bad, monotony
- Avoid singularity
- Be neither transported nor depressed by the accidents of life
- Be silent till you can be soft
- Being intelligible is now no longer the fashion
- Better not to seem to understand, than to reply
- Better refuse a favour gracefully, than to grant it clumsily
- Blindness of the understanding is as much to be pitied
- Cheerful in the countenance, but without laughing
- Chit-chat, useful to keep off improper and too serious subjects
- Civility, which is a disposition to accommodate and oblige others
- Command of our temper, and of our countenance
- Common sense (which, in truth, very uncommon)

¹ Pope: *Moral Essays*, Ep. 1, lines 31-36



- Company is, in truth, a constant state of negotiation
- Conceal all your learning carefully
- Conjectures pass upon us for truths
- Conjectures supply the defect of unattainable knowledge
- Connive at knaves, and tolerate fools
- Content yourself with mediocrity in nothing
- Conversation will help you almost as much as books
- Converse with his inferiors without insolence
- Deep learning is generally tainted with pedantry
- Deepest learning, without good breeding, is unwelcome
- Deserve a little, and you shall have but a little
- Dexterity enough to conceal a truth without telling a lie
- Dictate to them while you seem to be directed by them
- Difficulties seem to them, impossibilities
- Dignity to be kept up in pleasures, as well as in business
- Disagreeable things may be done so agreeably as almost to oblige
- Disagreeable to seem reserved, and very dangerous not to be so
- Dissimulation is only to hide our own cards
- Distinction between simulation and dissimulation
- Distinguish between the useful and the curious
- Do as you would be done by
- Do what you will but do something all day long
- Dress like the reasonable people of your own age
- Dress well, and not too well
- Ears to hear, but not sense enough to judge
- Easy without negligence
- Easy without too much familiarity
- Elegance in one language will reproduce itself in all
- Employ your whole time, which few people do
- Endeavour to hear, and know all opinions
- Endeavours to please and oblige our fellow creatures
- Enemies as if they may one day become one's friends
- Establishing a character of integrity and good manners



- Even where you are sure, seem rather doubtful
- Every man pretends to common sense
- Every virtue, has its kindred vice or weakness
- Everybody is good for something
- Everything has a better and a worse side
- Exalt the gentle in woman and man above the merely genteel
- Eyes and ears open and mouth mostly shut
- Few dare dissent from an established opinion
- Few people know how to love, or how to hate
- Few things which people in general know less, than how to love
- Fiddle-faddle stories, that carry no information along with them
- Flexibility of manners is necessary in the course of the world
- Fools never perceive where they are ill-timed
- Forgive, but not approve, the bad
- Fortune stoops to the forward and the bold
- Frank, open, and ingenuous exterior, with a prudent interior
- Frequently make friends of enemies, and enemies of friends
- Frivolous curiosity about trifles
- Frivolous, idle people, whose time hangs upon their own hands
- Gain the affections as well as the esteem
- Gain the heart, or you gain nothing
- Generosity often runs into profusion
- Genteel without affectation
- Gentleness of manners, with firmness of mind
- Geography and history are very imperfect separately
- Go to the bottom of things
- Good manners are the settled medium of social life
- Good reasons alleged are seldom the true ones
- Graces: Without us, all labour is vain
- Gratitude not being universal, nor even common
- Grave without the affectation of wisdom
- Great numbers of people met together, animate each other
- Greatest fools are the greatest liars



- Guard against those who make the most court to you
- Hardened to the wants and distresses of mankind
- Haste and hurry are very different things
- Have a will and an opinion of your own, and adhere to it
- Have but one set of jokes to live upon
- Have I employed my time, or have I squandered it?
- Have no pleasures but your own
- Heart has such an influence over the understanding
- Herd of mankind can hardly be said to think
- Honest error is to be pitied, not ridiculed
- Honestest man loves himself best
- How much you have to do; and how little time to do it in
- Human nature is always the same
- Hurt those they love by a mistaken indulgence
- Idleness is only the refuge of weak minds
- If free from the guilt, be free from the suspicion, too
- If once we quarrel, I will never forgive
- If you will persuade, you must first please
- If you would convince others, seem open to conviction yourself
- Ignorant of their natural rights, cherished their chains
- Improve yourself with the old, divert yourself with the young
- Inaction at your age is unpardonable
- Inclined to be fat, but I hope you will decline it
- Incontinency of friendship among young fellows
- Infallibly to be gained by every sort of flattery
- Information implies our previous ignorance; it must be sweetened
- Information is, in a certain degree, mortifying
- Injury is much sooner forgotten than an insult
- Insinuates himself only into the esteem of fools
- Insipid in his pleasures, as inefficient in everything else
- Insist upon your neither piping nor fiddling yourself
- It is a real inconvenience to anybody to be fat
- Judge of every man's truth by his degree of understanding



- Judge them all by their merits, but not by their ages
- Judges from the appearances of things, and not from the reality
- Keep good company, and company above yourself
- Keep your own temper and artfully warm other people's
- Know the true value of time
- Knowing how much you have, and how little you want
- Knowledge of a scholar with the manners of a courtier
- Knowledge: either despise it, or think that they have enough
- Knows what things are little, and what not
- Labour is the unavoidable fatigue of a necessary journey
- Last beautiful varnish, which raises the colours
- Laughing, I must particularly warn you against it
- Lay down a method for everything, and stick to it inviolably
- Learn to keep your own secrets
- Learn, if you can, the *why* and the *wherefore*
- Led, much oftener by little things than by great ones
- Less one has to do, the less time one finds to do it in
- Let blockheads read what blockheads wrote
- Let me see more of you in your letters
- Let nobody discover that you do know your own value
- Let nothing pass till you understand it
- Let them quietly enjoy their errors in taste
- Life of ignorance is not only a very contemptible, but tiresome
- Listlessness and indolence are always blameable
- Little minds mistake little objects for great ones
- Loud laughter is the mirth of the mob
- Love with him, who they think is the most in love with them
- Loved without being despised, and feared without being hated
- Low buffoonery, or silly accidents, that always excite laughter
- Low company, most falsely and impudently, call pleasure
- Make a great difference between companions and friends
- Make himself whatever he pleases, except a good poet
- Man is dishonoured by not resenting an affront



- Man of sense may be in haste, but can never be in a hurry
- Man or woman cannot resist an engaging exterior
- Man who is only good on holydays is good for very little
- Manner is full as important as the matter
- Manner of doing things is often more important
- Manners must adorn knowledge
- Many are very willing, and very few able
- Many things which seem extremely probable are not true
- Mastery of one's temper
- May not forget with ease what you have with difficulty learned
- May you live as long as you are fit to live, but no longer!
- May you rather die before you cease to be fit to live
- Merit and good breeding will make their way everywhere
- Mitigating, engaging words do by no means weaken your argument
- Moderation with your enemies
- Modesty is the only sure bait when you angle for praise
- Money, the cause of much mischief
- More one sees, the less one either wonders or admires
- More one works, the more willing one is to work
- More people have ears to be tickled, than understandings to judge
- More you know, the modester you should be
- Mortifying inferiority in knowledge, rank, fortune
- Most ignorant are, as usual, the boldest conjecturers
- Most long talkers single out some one unfortunate man in company
- Most people enjoy the inferiority of their best friends
- Most people have ears, but few have judgment; tickle those ears
- Much sooner forgive an injustice than an insult
- My own health varies, as usual, but never deviates into good
- Name that we leave behind at one place often gets before us
- National honour and interest have been sacrificed to private
- Neglect them in little things, they will leave you in great
- Neither abilities or words enough to call a coach
- Neither retail nor receive scandal willingly



- Never affect the character in which you have a mind to shine
- Never implicitly adopt a character upon common fame
- Never maintain an argument with heat and clamour
- Never quit a subject till you are thoroughly master of it
- Never read history without having maps
- Never saw a froward child mended by whipping
- Never seek for wit; if it presents itself, well and good
- Never seem wiser, nor more learned, than the people you are with
- Never slattern away one minute in idleness
- Never to speak of yourself at all
- Never to trust implicitly to the informations of others
- No great regard for human testimony
- No man is distrait with the man he fears, or the woman he loves
- No one feels pleasure, who does not at the same time give it
- Not make their want still worse by grieving and regretting them
- Not one minute of the day in which you do nothing at all
- Not only pure, but, like Caesar's wife, unsuspected
- Not to admire anything too much
- Not tumble, but slide gently to the bottom of the hill of life
- Nothing much worth either desiring or fearing
- Nothing so precious as time, and so irrecoverable when lost
- Observe, without being thought an observer
- Often more necessary to conceal contempt than resentment
- Often necessary to seem ignorant of what one knows
- Often necessary, not to manifest all one feels
- Oftener led by their hearts than by their understandings
- One must often yield, in order to prevail
- Only doing one thing at a time
- Our frivolous dissertations upon the weather, or upon whist
- Outward air of modesty to all he does
- Overvalue what we do not know
- Patience is the only way not to make bad worse
- Pay them with compliments, but not with confidence



- Pay your own reckoning, but do not treat the whole company
- People angling for praise
- People hate those who make them feel their own inferiority
- People lose a great deal of time by reading
- People never desire all till they have gotten a great deal
- People will repay, and with interest too, inattention
- Perfection of everything that is worth doing at all
- Perseverance has surprising effects
- Pettish, pouting conduct is a great deal too young
- Planted while young, that degree of knowledge now my refuge
- Please all who are worth pleasing; offend none
- Pleasing in company is the only way of being pleased in yourself
- Pleasure is necessarily reciprocal
- Pleasure is the rock which most young people split upon
- Pleasures do not commonly last so long as life
- Pocket all your knowledge with your watch
- Polite, but without the troublesome forms and stiffness
- Prefer useful to frivolous conversations
- Prejudices are our mistresses
- Pride of being the first of the company
- Quietly cherished error, instead of seeking for truth
- Read with caution and distrust
- Real friendship is a slow grower
- Reason, which always ought to direct mankind, seldom does
- Receive them with great civility, but with great incredulity
- Recommend (pleasure) to you, like an Epicurean
- Represent, but do not pronounce
- Reserve with your friends
- Respect without timidity
- Respectful without meanness, easy without too much familiarity
- Rough corners which mere nature has given to the smoothest
- Ruined their own son by what they called loving him
- Same coolness and unconcern in any and every company



- Scarce any flattery is too gross for them to swallow
- Scarcely any body who is absolutely good for nothing
- Secret, without being dark and mysterious
- See what you see, and to hear what you hear
- Seeming frankness with a real reserve
- Seeming openness is prudent
- Seldom a misfortune to be childless
- Self-love draws a thick veil between us and our faults
- Sentiments that were never felt, pompously described
- Serious without being dull
- Silence in love betrays more woe
- Singularity is only pardonable in old age
- Six, or at most seven hours sleep
- Some complaisance and attention to fools is prudent
- Something must be said, but that something must be nothing
- Sooner forgive an injury than an insult
- Spare the persons while you lash the crimes
- Steady assurance, with seeming modesty
- Take characters, as they do most things, upon trust
- Take nothing for granted, upon the bare authority of the author
- Take, rather than give, the tone of the company you are in
- Talent of hating with good breeding and loving with prudence
- Talk often, but never long
- Tell me whom you live with, and I will tell you who you are
- Tell stories very seldom
- The best have something bad, and something little
- The longest life is too short for knowledge
- The present moments are the only ones we are sure of
- The worst have something good, and sometimes something great
- There are many avenues to every man
- Thin veil of Modesty drawn before Vanity
- Think to atone by zeal for their want of merit and importance
- Think yourself less well than you are, in order to be quite so



- To be heard with success, you must be heard with pleasure
- To govern mankind, one must not overrate them
- To know people's real sentiments, I trust much more to my eyes
- Trite jokes and loud laughter reduce him to a buffoon
- Truth leaves no room for compliments
- Truth, but not the whole truth, must be the invariable principle
- Unaffected silence upon that subject is the only true medium
- Unguarded frankness
- Unintelligible to his readers, and sometimes to himself
- Use palliatives when you contradict
- Useful sometimes to see the things which one ought to avoid
- Vanity, interest, and absurdity, always display
- Vanity, that source of many of our follies
- Warm and young thanks, not old and cold ones
- We have many of those useful prejudices in this country
- We love to be pleased better than to be informed
- We shall be feared, if we do not show that we fear
- Well dressed, not finely dressed
- What have I done today?
- What pleases you in others, will in general please them in you
- Whatever is worth doing at all, is worth doing well
- Whatever real merit you have, other people will discover
- Where one would gain people, remember that nothing is little
- Wish you, my dear friend, as many happy new years as you deserve
- Wit may create any admirers but makes few friends
- Witty without satire or commonplace
- Words are the dress of thoughts
- Wrapped up and absorbed in their abstruse speculations
- Wrongs are often forgiven; but contempt never is
- You had much better hold your tongue than them
- You must be respectable, if you will be respected
- Young people are very apt to overrate both men and things
- Your merit and your manners can alone raise you



On vice and virtue, haughtiness and humility

Selections from Letter XXX, written by the Right Honourable Philip Dormer Stanhope, Fourth Earl of Chesterfield (1694–1773), to his son, Philip Stanhope esq. [Title and headings by ED. PHIL.]

Bath, 22 February O.S. 1748

Dear Boy,

Great learning without sound judgment carries us into pride and pedantry.

Every excellency, and every virtue, has its kindred vice or weakness; and if carried beyond certain bounds, sinks into one or the other. Generosity often runs into profusion, economy into avarice, courage into rashness, caution into timidity, and so on; — insomuch that, I believe, there is more judgment required for the proper conduct of our virtues, than for avoiding their opposite vices. Vice, in its true light, is so deformed, that it shocks us at first sight; and would hardly ever seduce us, if it did not, at first, wear the mask of some virtue. But virtue is, in itself, so beautiful, that it charms us at first sight; engages us more and more upon further acquaintance, and, as with other beauties, we think excess impossible; it is here that judgment is necessary, to moderate and direct the effects of an excellent cause. I shall apply this reasoning, at present, not to any particular virtue, but to an excellency, which, for want of judgment, is often the cause of ridiculous and blamable effects; I mean, great learning — which, if not accompanied with sound judgment, frequently carries us into error, pride, and pedantry. As, I hope, you will possess that excellency in its utmost extent, and yet without its too common failings, the hints, which my experience can suggest, may probably not be useless to you.

Some learned men, proud of their knowledge, only speak to decide, and give judgment without appeal; the consequence of which is, that mankind, provoked by the insult, and injured by the oppression, revolt; and, in order to shake off the tyranny, even call the lawful authority in question. The more you know, the modester you should be: and (by the bye) that modesty is the surest way of gratifying your vanity. Even where you are sure, seem rather doubtful; represent, but do not pronounce; and, if you would convince others, seem open to conviction yourself.

Speak of the moderns without contempt, and of the ancients without idolatry.

Others, to show their learning, or often from the prejudices of a school education, where they hear of nothing else, are always talking of the Ancients as something more than men, and of the Moderns, as something less. They are never without a classic or two in their pockets; they stick to the old good sense; they read none of the modern trash; and will show you, plainly, that no improvement has been made, in any one art or science, these last seventeen hundred years. I would by no means have you disown your acquaintance with the ancients, but still less would I have you brag of an exclusive intimacy with them. Speak of the moderns without contempt, and of the ancients without idolatry; judge them all by their merits, but not by their age; and if you happen to have an Elzevir classic in your pocket neither show it nor mention it.

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Never seem wiser, nor more learned, than the people you are with.

There is another species of learned men, who, though less dogmatical and supercilious, are not less impertinent. These are the communicative and shining pedants, who adorn their conversation, even with women, by happy quotations of Greek and Latin; and who have contracted such a familiarity with the Greek and Roman authors, that they, call them by certain names or epithets denoting intimacy. As *old* Homer; that *sly rogue* Horace; *Maro*, instead of Virgil; and *Naso*, Instead of Ovid. These are often imitated by coxcombs, who have no learning at all, but who have got some names and some scraps of ancient authors by heart, which they improperly and impertinently retail in all companies, in hopes of passing for scholars. If, therefore, you would avoid the accusation of pedantry on one hand, or the suspicion of ignorance on the other, abstain from learned ostentation. Speak the language of the company that you are in; speak it purely, and unlarded with any other. Never seem wiser, nor more learned, than the people you are with. Wear your learning, like your watch, in a private pocket; and do not pull it out and strike it merely to show that you have one. If you are asked what o'clock it is, tell it; but do not proclaim it hourly and unasked, like the watchman.

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