



THE LANGUAGE OF NINETEENTH CENTURY ETIQUETTE BOOKS

To summarize the basic reason for polite behavior in any time period or situation:

"The true aim of politeness, is to make those with whom you associate as well satisfied with themselves as possible. ...it does whatever it can to accommodate their feelings and wishes in social intercourse."

On Introductions:

"On introduction in a room, a married lady generally offers her hand, and a young lady not. In a ballroom, where an introduction is to dancing, not friendship, you never shake hands -- only a bow. It may perhaps be laid down, that the more public the place of introduction, the less hand-shaking takes place."

All quotations are from *Civil War Etiquette: Martine's Handbook and Vulgarisms in Conversation*. (see bibliography)



BASIC SOCIAL RULES FOR GENTLEMEN

ALWAYS

Wear gloves on the street, in church & other formal occasions, except when eating or drinking

White or cream colored gloves for evening
Gray or other darker colors for day wear

Stand up when a lady enters a room (or your presence in a large room)

Stand up when a lady stands

Offer a lady your seat if no others are available

Assist a lady with her chair when she sits down or stands, especially when at a table or when the chairs are small and light

Retrieve dropped items for a lady

Open doors for a lady

Help a lady with her coat, cloak, shawl, etc.

Offer to bring a lady refreshments if they are available

Offer your arm to escort a lady (with whom you are acquainted) into or out of a building or a room at all social events, and whenever walking on uneven ground

Remove your hat when entering a building

Lift your hat to a lady when she greets you in public (Merely touching the brim or a slight "tip" of the hat was very rude)

Refer to another person by their first name in public

Curse or discuss "impolite" subjects when ladies are present

Leave a lady you know unattended, except with permission

Use tobacco in any form when ladies are present

Greet a lady in public unless she acknowledges you first (see "Always" #12)

Eat or drink while wearing gloves



BASIC SOCIAL RULES FOR LADIES

ALWAYS

Graciously accept gentlemanly offers of assistance

Wear gloves on the street, at church & other formal occasions, except when eating or drinking

NEVER

Refer to another adult by his or her first name in public

Grab your hoops or lift your skirts higher than is absolutely necessary to go up stairs

Lift your skirts up onto a chair or stool, etc.

Sit with your legs crossed (except at the ankles if necessary for comfort or habit)

Lift your skirts up onto the seat of your chair when sitting down (Wait for, or if necessary, ask for assistance when sitting down at a table or on a small light chair)

Speak in a loud, coarse voice



BALLROOM SPECIFICS

REQUESTING DANCES

Gentlemen, it's an honor! Request it as such

Ladies, never refuse one gentleman and accept another for the same dance, unless it was previously promised

ON THE DANCE FLOOR

Gentlemen, lead the lady on and off the dance floor

rise before starting to dance

Gentlemen, always thank the lady for the honor of dancing with her

Ladies, a smile and a nod are sufficient responses to a gentleman's "Thank you"

Never dance with the same partner more than once or, at most, twice in an evening, especially with your spouse

Gentlemen, when at a dance you are expected to dance, and dance frequently, leaving no "wall-flowers" who are willing, and waiting to dance



DINING ROOM SPECIFICS

ARRIVALS & SEATING ARRANGEMENTS

Be punctual for all dinner engagements. Food may not be served before all guests are seated

The host leads the guests into dine with the senior lady (in age or social standing) on his left arm. All other gentlemen follow with a compatible lady on their left arms. The hostess takes the left arm of the senior male guest and enters last

Gentlemen seat the lady they are escorting to their left. All gentlemen remain standing until all ladies are seated

Married couples are never seated together (They are together enough otherwise)

Ladies remove their gloves when they are seated. Gentlemen remove theirs just before seating themselves (gloves were often placed in tail coat pockets - See Social Rules for Gentlemen re gloves)

DINING AND DEPARTURE

The gentlemen are to tend to the needs of the lady on their left, as well as make agreeable conversation with ladies to either side and across the table (size of table permitting)

A lady never serves herself from a buffet line. She informs her dinner partner of her wishes and he brings her plate to her

Basic rules of polite dinner manners apply then as now regarding use of table ware, personal habits, use of table ware, etc.

Some interesting bits of advice for the era:

Gentlemen may tuck his napkin into his collar to prevent soiling his shirt or tie, but ladies should place their napkin in their laps

Do not use your knife to carry food to your mouth or put your knife into your mouth

Do not rinse your mouth out and spit into the finger bowls or water glass

Do not gorge yourself excessively during any one course. Never ask for seconds as all other diners must wait until you are finished before being served the next course

Opinions varied regarding ladies' withdrawal to the drawing room after the meal while the men indulge in port, cigars and masculine conversation. Follow the lead of the host and hostess



SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aldrich, Elizabeth, *From the Ballroom to Hell: Grace and Folly in Nineteen-Century Dance*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Ill, 1991.

Chesterfield's Complete Rules of Etiquette, Dick & Fitzgerald, New York, 1860. (available in facsimile format)

Civil War Etiquette: Martine's Handbook and Vulgarisms in Conversation, R.L. Shep, Mendicino, CA, 1988. (*Handbook* originally published in 1866, and *Vulgarisms* in 1864.)

Hilgrew, Thomas, *Hilgrew's Call Book and Dancing Master*, DaCapo Press, Inc. New York, (originally published in 1864.)

Kasson, John F., *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America*, Hill and Wang (div. of Farrar Straus and Giroux), New York, 1990.

(Other sources were original etiquette books in the presenter's personal collection.)



Updated 9 March 2002 (b)