

Rank Offences

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first published in
MD Magazine
Sept 1988, 115-123

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Some time ago a lawyer acquaintance told me with mingled annoyance and amusement about a complaint from a fellow lawyer. My friend had addressed a letter to his colleague omitting the “Esquire” or “Esq.” after the addressee’s name. Serious offense was taken. It was the newest of news to me that lawyers claimed title to “Esquire” as designating their profession, but when I asked another lawyer how long this had been the case, he replied, “As long as I can remember.”

This came as a surprise to me, since I have had any number of letters addressed to me with “Esquire” after my name as a substitute for “Mr” before it, and I am no lawyer. The more conservative British or Irish individuals, firms, or institutions have used and may still use this nicety without at all intending to convey a sense of the person addressed being in a specific profession.

But it is no surprise that people take seriously whatever title they are entitled to. This is as true in egalitarian societies as it is in countries still cherishing vestiges of aristocracy. In Sweden, which manages to combine aspects of a socialist democracy and a monarchy in one homogeneous package, people are so conscious of their titles that, I am told, they list them in the telephone book as a matter of course, even when the titles are of no conceivable use to the person using the directory. If you are looking for a physician or dentist, then an M.D. or D.D.S. after a name is an assurance that the individual has the expertise you require. But if the owner of the telephone number has a Ph.D. in philosophy or ornithology, it does not seem especially helpful to list it in the telephone book. (It does have a place in, say, a university directory, of course.)

It is clear that what is at stake here is not helpfulness, but status. It seems characteristic of our species, like so many others, that we display whatever distinctions we can find to set ourselves off from our peers. Imagine, for example, a society where an assembly-line hand earns as much as a university professor or the conductor of a symphony orchestra. If it’s not salary but a university degree that differentiates you from your fellow citizens, then that is what you are going to proclaim. “If you’ve got it, flaunt it.”

Doctors in the House

If you've not got it yourself, sometimes marrying it may suffice. In Germany, at least, the wife of a doctor is sometimes addressed as *Frau Doktor*. (I'm not sure how this works when *Frau* is the doctor.) In American academe, where doctorates abound, practice differs. If you teach at a major University or prestigious college where nearly everyone on the faculty has a doctorate in his or her discipline, it is considered a little obtuse to refer to yourself or to address a colleague as "Doctor." But at smaller colleges where the degree is less common, use of the title is correspondingly more common.

In fact, academic titles possess a set of conventions all their own. The male teacher in English elementary and secondary schools has been addressed as "Sir" as relentlessly as any officer in the armed services. Among many younger children "Sir" became a noun in its own right, so that an expression like "our sir," meaning "our teacher," gained currency as illustrated by the title of a novel written by schoolteacher Edward Braithwaite: *To Sir with Love*.

Titles could be as important to the upwardly mobile in New England as in old England. This was neatly pointed up in a scene from a Public Broadcasting System miniseries called "Three Sovereigns for Sarah." Commissioners investigating the propriety of the Salem witchcraft trials at the petition of some colonists asked the first petitioner if he was to be addressed as "Mister" or "Goodman" (as in the title of Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown"). The young man assured them that he had risen to the rank of "Mister," though it was not clear how. His aunt identified herself as "Goody" (i.e., "goodwife"), like Goody Cloyse in Hawthorne's story. She presumably had not risen to the rank of "Mrs."

These days of course, in certain widening circles, "Mrs." and "Miss" are no longer considered a rank but a disparagement, apparently because they reveal more about their possessors than does the male counterpart, "Mr." So "Ms." seems to have replaced both "Mrs" and "Miss" in written addresses and salutations, but one doesn't hear it spoken much, except among the more self-conscious radio or TV announcers and interviewers.

Youthful Mastery

In my distant youth, “Master” was the written designation on an address to a young man up to about the age of 16 or 18. It always struck me as pretentious, but one did it because it was not yet considered acceptable simply to put the lad’s name on the envelope without some kind of title. Somehow an unadorned name took on the nuance of a social affront. After all, don’t you still start your letters, both personal and business, with “Dear”? The letter would seem somehow brusque without it, and we use it even if we are writing to someone who may not be dear at all. But at least now, when writing to adult friends young and old, male and female, I have taken to omitting all the clutter of honorific titles. It has become socially acceptable to do so, and I certainly omit the “Master” when writing to young friends and relatives.

Like “Sir” for men, “Ma’am” seems still to be going strong. I have not heard “Madam” in a long while, but that is perhaps because I do not frequent the posher stores in which, I have some notion, it remains in favor for the same reason that it flourished in Chaucer’s day. The poet observed that the ambitious wives of skilled tradesmen in 14th-century London thought “it is full fair to been ycleped madame” (It is very nice to be addressed as “Madam”). I suppose that back then “madame” felt a little closer to its French original *ma dame*, “my lady.” Clearly the tradesmen’s wives of Chaucer’s day had much in common with our lawyer — they craved their due title of respect. Nothing much changes when it comes to human vanity.

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