

Why We Should Bring Back 'Ma'am' and 'Sir'

The ever winsome Rachel Maddow won kudos last week for her response when a New Jersey congressman [called her "sir"](#) on the air.

"It's all right, I answer to both," she said, laughing, after Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., a Democrat from Paterson, quickly corrected himself with a "ma'am."

The exchange is notable for two reasons: First, that it could take place at all in a society in which courtesy titles are rapidly becoming extinct, and second, that Maddow did not pounce on the exchange as a teachable moment for cultural dinosaurs who are uncomfortable with the advent of the genderless society. Yes, it has come to this: Someone answering to both "sir" and "ma'am" is a win for conservatives today.

That's because the titles have all but disappeared everywhere but the military, legislative bodies and the South. In New England, where my southern-born children attend excellent public schools, my fourteen-year-old daughter has been asked by her peers "Why do you say that?" when she says "Yes, ma'am" to me or a teacher. They react as if she's speaking Klingon, or Gullah. Actually, they would likely understand Klingon better.

The resistance has seeped into her consciousness, so much so that my daughter doesn't like saying "Yes, ma'am" when answering questions posed by her Boston-area pediatrician. "I don't want her to think I'm weird," she says, when I correct her after the appointment.

Since when has it been weird to be polite?

Unfortunately, as Harper Lee taught us, in some circles, it's been weird to be polite for a half-century or more. During the trial scene in Lee's classic book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Mayella Ewell refuses to answer Atticus Finch's questions "as long as you keep on mocking' me."

To which he quizzically replies, "Ma'am?"—unwittingly repeating the offense of speaking to her with respect.

Mayella Ewell, of course, is not the only person to famously bristle at being called "ma'am." [Sen. Barbara Boxer did so in 2009](#), castigating Brigadier General Michael Walsh of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for calling her "ma'am" instead of "senator."

The ma'am-haters are correct to object when the title is meant to diminish. But in driving it wholesale from the vernacular, we are raising children who have no tool of language with which to convey respect. And never seeing respect in action, they're less likely to have it at all.

Women who object to the title, saying that "ma'am" makes them feel old (and we all know that getting older is the ultimate sin in American society) are partially responsible for the demise of this small civility. And they're fully responsible for what's arisen in its place: "Miss," which is utterly patronizing to women of a certain age, and factually incorrect for those who are married. It could be considered demeaning if it weren't so silly.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, which bills itself as "the definitive record of the English language," defines "ma'am" as a term of respectful or polite address used for a woman and notes the word's seventeenth-century origins as an address for female royalty. How modern American women came to view it as an insult is anybody's guess, but Scout Finch gives us a clue when puzzling over why Mayella Ewell took such offense on the stand.

“I wonder if anybody had ever called her ‘ma’am’ or ‘Miss Mayella’ in her life; probably not, as she took offense to routine courtesy.”

Unfortunately, the day is coming when no one will make the mistake of calling a TV commentator either “sir” or “ma’am” because the generation now coming of age believes a clipped “No” or “Yes” is all that is required of them, no matter the title, education or age of the person to whom they are speaking.

Our only hope is that HBO’s *Game of Thrones*, when it returns this summer for its seventh season, has a serious impact on the common language. Save me the “miss” when “ma’am” gasps its last breath, but I’m totally down with being called “Your grace.”

This [article](#) was republished with permission from Acculturated.

Image Credit: [Movie Clips](#), YouTube