

# Miss to Mrs: Going, Going, Gone!

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## Mademoiselle — Madame: adjudée!

En anglais, le titre Ms symbolise la féministe. L'auteur le replace ici dans le contexte de notre lutte et en profite pour parler du rapport qui existe entre le langage et la structure sociale.

How many of us, I wonder, can recall our initial response to Ms—that coined appellation that became the mark of a feminist? My own, admittedly, was more negative than positive. The term was cumbersome to use in direct speech and the letters already stood for 'manuscript' and 'multiple sclerosis': Ms wouldn't get off the ground. Fortunately I was wrong. Such a term was absolutely essential to the women's movement.

Semiotics—the study of signs, symbols, and signifiers—may seem far removed from feminism. Language, however, is the symbol system that not only shapes the way we view the universe, but also determines what we are now (and may become) by establishing a framework of categories. Linguists view language as a grid which organizes, categorizes, and systematizes experience. Since language categories are internalized at an early age, we tend to think of them as 'given' and truly representative of the order of things in the objective or natural world.

But different languages re-create the world differently. For example, English has a word 'snow' and some related words—'slush', 'sleet', 'ice', etc. The Eskimo language differentiates more than sixty types of snow, but English-speakers, because their language does not contain the 'signs' pointing to the variety of snow-types, are unable to see them. Similarly, we are unable to distinguish quarter tones in music because the western scale takes a semitone as its smallest unit. We cannot conceptualize anything that is not already present in our language.

The languages of the western world have achieved their present form in patriarchal cultures. The perpetuation of such cultures is dependent upon the male's reproducing himself. Since a patriarchy presumes a class difference we must look at how these sex-based classes are maintained.

In a literal sense man must control the 'means of production' if patriarchy is to continue, and there are two aspects

to this control. First, they must control women, who are the producing agents. That is not enough, however, to ensure that sons will represent their patrilineage. Such certainty is achieved only if men also control language and the cultural categories established through language.

It is no accident that 'person' is defined as male in patriarchal cultures, or that men and women together become collectively male linguistically. Ideologically, men are human beings who produce other human beings through women who are merely the vessels of procreation. Aeschylus put it very well in the *Oresteia*:

The mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows. The parent is he who mounts. A stranger, she preserves a stranger's seed, if no god interfere.

Although the mother may be the agent of the child's natural existence, the father is the sole source of its cultural one. Culturally the mother is a nonentity; she moves from father to husband (and sometimes to son), assuming their name and status in the social system. In a patriarchy it cannot be otherwise.

The introduction of Ms into a world-view that was still largely patriarchal constituted a profound disruption. First, it separated women from their relationships to men both as daughters and as wives, and established 'woman' as a linguistic category in its own right. The new privacy regarding marital status symbolically elevated women to personhood from their previous commodity status in the marriage market where 'Miss' meant 'for sale', and 'Mrs' meant 'sold'. Certainly there are times when one wishes to communicate such information, but it has only been in the past few years that women have been able to *avoid* doing so. Men, the 'buyers' in patriarchal marriage systems, have never required titles that express their marital situation.

Once 'woman' has been established as a conceptual category without reference to man she becomes a cultural entity and is no longer defined solely by her capacity for procreation. As a cultural being she may be the source not only of her offspring's natural identity but also of its cultural one. That is, the child may take *her* name and recognize its own social positioning in relation to her. There is legislation under consideration now that would allow the children in a family to take the name of either parent, or to combine the two in whatever form.

The establishment of legal-status matrilineage will undoubtedly affect social attitudes towards traditional parent/child relationships, and towards the relations of women to men. It will, for instance, render the concept of 'illegitimate children' obsolete, since such a concept can exist only where one's social identity is derived only from the male parent. The child born without access to a patronym in a patrilineal system is an anomaly; there is no language category for such a person, who must therefore be defined as illegitimate.

The term Ms has already made its mark on the western world because its use necessitates a view of women that is apart from their role in marriage. It represents a category of women who were, until recently, invisible because patriarchal languages did not recognize them. Although there have always been women rulers, writers, musicians, painters, poets,

scholars, and business people, they were considered 'illegitimate' in the patriarchal system of classification by that same ideological principle that makes a bastard of a fatherless child (a concept possible in language, but not in biology). Ms has, in short, become the means by which women may publicly declare themselves as mainstream human beings. It is still cumbersome to use and various in its meaning, but whenever it appears on an application form along with 'Mr', 'Miss', and 'Mrs', the women's movement has achieved an important victory.

Think about your first reaction to the term 'Ms'. Then think about the meta-messages the term conveys in everyday usage. Then *use it*: if our language incorporates the concept that women are not a means, but an end in themselves, as human beings, social change must inevitably follow.

## Femmage: Madeleine Gagnon

Monique ROY

Dans chaque numéro de notre revue, nous entendons consacrer un article spécial à une femme par qui notre histoire a été ou sera transformée. Nous sommes heureuses de commencer par Madeleine Gagnon, penseuse, féministe, professeuse, amie.



Madeleine Gagnon

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