How does a 19th century heroine accept a proposal of marriage?

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You are the heroine of a 19th century novel. It is page 575 out of 600; you have avoided the superficial charms or dangerous schemings of one or more Messrs. Wrong; and you and the reader have gotten through (or skimmed or skipped) plots, subplots, major characters, minor characters, descriptions of scenery, accounts of the Battle of Waterloo, and a digression on the argot of street urchins. At last you have come to the denouement, which the reader and you have been waiting for for at least the last 300 pages (or, perhaps, you would have been waiting for, had you understood the state of your heart). Mr. Right has declared his love for you, in passionate but manly terms, and asked your hand in marriage (though probably neither on his knees nor with an engagement ring in hand). You accept, of course.

But how do you word it? You must somehow manage to be both loving, and even, in a decorous way, passionate, without for a instant ceasing to be perfectly lady-like. This is not easy to do.

Jane Austen, for one, never solved the problem. We know exactly what a Jane Austen heroine says when she is rejecting a proposal — Elizabeth Bennet rejecting Mr. Collins, Elizabeth rejecting Mr. Darcy’s first proposal, Fanny Price rejecting Henry Crawford, Emma Woodhouse rejecting Mr. Elton — these are, indeed, some of the most vivid and famous scenes in her novels. And we know, in some cases, how a gentleman frames a successful proposal — Mr. Darcy’s second attempt, Mr. Knightley’s, Captain Wentworth’s letter. But we never find out, in direct speech, how the lady accepts. Seven heroines, and several minor characters, accept marriage proposals in six novels; and we never hear what words a single one of them uses to do so. Indeed, if I am not mistaken, in Austen’s coy evasion in Emma — “What did she say? Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does” — she (Austen) is actually making fun of her own inability to find a solution that satisfied her.

There are fewer proposal scenes in Dickens than one might expect; keeping them off stage is of course one way around the difficulty. The proposal scenes that he does include have a tendency to fall into woozy melodrama. Perhaps the wooziest is Agnes Wickfield. Agnes does, finally, get to the

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1 Of the proposals discussed here, I think only Jack Worthing kneels. Alcott does remark of Mr. Bhaer that he could not go on his knees, because they were in the street; and David Copperfield has a fantasy, when he first meets Dora, of going on his knees to propose to her; so apparently it was some kind of conventional expectation. Mary Thorne is physically higher than Frank Gresham during the proposal scene, because she is riding a donkey. None of these proposers had a ring ready to present. I don’t know when that became common. I think the only cases in which the gentleman seeks the permission of the parent before proposing to the daughter is John Brooke proposing to Meg March in Little Women and Bluntschli formally asking permission of Major Petkoff in Arms and the Man. Mr. Darcy asks permission of Mr. Bennet after the fact.

2 To what extent it is proper for a lady to express emotion at all is a major issue in Jane Austen; most centrally in Sense and Sensibility, but in the other novels as well. For instance, Emma says, “I have as much reason to be ashamed of confessing that I never have been at all attached to the person we are speaking of, as it might be natural for a woman to feel in confessing exactly the reverse.” Thus, it is natural for a woman to be ashamed of confessing an attachment.
point of accepting (“I have loved you all my life!”) but only after two pages of wholly unnecessary and pointless hysteria (“Oh spare me! I am not myself! Another time!”) entirely at variance with her much usual reputation for calm good sense. In David Copperfield’s proposal to Dora, neither the wording of his actual proposal nor the wording of her acceptance is recorded, though his declaration of love is described at length. There is the rather striking remark that, “I suppose we had some notion that this was to end in marriage. We must have had some, because Dora stipulated that we were never to be married without her papa’s consent,” which, incidentally, is practically the one contentive and sensible thing that Dora ever says. That suggests that David somehow managed to propose without mentioning marriage, or perhaps in later life he simply forgot that he has asked her to marry him.

The scene in *Bleak House* where Esther Summerson rejects Allan Woodcourt’s proposal is pretty much unreadable:

‘O, Mr Woodcourt,’ said I, ‘it is a great thing to win love, it is a great thing to win love! I am proud of it, and honored by it; and the hearing of it causes me to shed these tears of mingled joy and sorrow — joy that I have won it, sorrow that I have not deserved it better; but I am not free to think of yours.’

She and Woodcourt take turns with this noble high-falutin stuff for three more pages. (The scene where Woodcourt is substituted for John Jarndyce as a groom, practically at the altar, is really rather disgusting — practically the Victorian equivalent of the Shakespearean bed trick.)

In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens switches the gender roles, setting it up so that Amy Dorrit proposes to Arthur Clennam, but even there we don’t hear what Clennam says in answer. The most memorable acceptance in Dickens is Louisa Gradgrind’s answer to Mr. Bounderby via her father, “Since Mr. Bounderby likes to take me thus, I am satisfied to accept his proposal,” so we know how a Dickens heroine accepts a proposal from a man she can’t stand.

One way around the problem is to first reject the proposal, then accept it under dramatically altered circumstances. Gilbert is fond of this: Josephine in *Pinafore*; Patience, twice (both Bunthorne’s and Grosvenor’s proposals) in *Patience*; the daughters collectively at the end of *Pirates of Penzance*; Yum-Yum (implicitly) in Mikado. (Similarly, Lucy Honeychurch, in *A Room with a View*, first rejects George Emerson’s proposal, then later accepts it to his father.) Frederick’s proposal in *Pirates of Penzance* — a collective proposal made to a set of girls whom he has met five minutes earlier, in which he argues that they should marry him (a) out of a sense of duty and (b) because they are too ugly to receive any other proposals — is one of the worst proposals in literature; luckily, Mabel is offstage when he delivers it. Her answer, of course, we do get to hear, for about five minutes, in the most over-the-top aria in Sullivan; but that is not an option for most people. It is also, oddly, worded collectively, like the proposal: “Take any heart — take mine.” Phyllis in *Iolanthe* encounters the reverse — a many-to-one proposal instead of a one-to-many — and accepts two of them. Rose Maybud’s acceptance of Richard Dauntless follows her book of etiquette, which advises “In accepting an offer of marriage, do so with apparent hesitation. Avoid any appearance of eagerness.” It would be interesting to know if anyone ever actually wrote such a thing; it seems unlikely, but the Victorians were strange people.

Incidentally, among the many strange engagement situations in Gilbert, surely the strangest is the engagement of the 20 maidens to the dragoons in the back story of *Patience*. The maidens are all engaged to the dragoons, but they seem to be collectively engaged; it has not been decided who, specifically, is going to marry whom. One wonders what that proposal was like.

Trollope, in *Doctor Thorne*, claims to have overheard the following in real life:

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\(^3\)Of course, people in Gilbert are forever doing idiotic things out of a sense of duty, or completely selfish things that they justify as being their duty — it is his favorite word, and not just because it rhymes so nicely with “beauty”.
The couple were by no means plebeian, or below the proper standard of high bearing and high breeding; they were a handsome pair, living among educated people, sufficiently given to mental pursuits, and in every way what a pair of polite lovers ought to be.

Gentleman. ‘Well, Miss —, the long and short of it is this: here I am; you can take me or leave me.’

Lady- scratching a gutter on the sand with her parasol, so as to allow a little salt water to run out of one hole into another. ‘Of course, I know that’s all nonsense.’

Gentleman. ‘Nonsense! By Jove, it isn’t nonsense at all: come, Jane; here I am: come, at any rate you can say something.’

Lady. ‘Yes, I suppose I can say something.’

Gentleman. ‘Well, which is it to be; take me or leave me?’

Lady — very slowly, and with a voice perhaps hardly articulate, carrying on, at the same time, her engineering works on a wider scale. ‘Well, I don’t exactly want to leave you.’

And so the matter was settled: settled with much propriety and satisfaction; and both the lady and gentleman would have thought, had they ever thought about the matter at all, that this, the sweetest moment of their lives, had been graced by all the poetry by which such moments ought to be hallowed.

For all Trollope’s polite demurrals, I don’t think it’s unfair to say that he thinks this is pretty third-rate; one can’t imagine any of his heroes or heroines being so unnovelistic. In chapter 29 he shows us how the thing is done properly. This is Frank Gresham’s second proposal to Mary Thorne. His first proposal, in chapter 6, was rejected because then he was too callow a youth; but since then he has proved himself, rejecting his mother’s and aunt’s insistence that he court the rich (money from trade) Miss Dunstable, (albeit flirting with her too much until she tells him to cut it out); and horsewhipping the cad (son of a tailor!) who jilted his sister; and so now altogether worthy of Mary’s hand. Mary first rejects the proposal (“You should have learnt by this time, Mr Gresham, that your lot and mine are not cast in the same mould”); then, practically fainting with emotion, she is unable to speak at all for three solid pages (“Was he not to her like some god come from the heavens to make her blessed?”); and finally can remain silent no longer (“There was a deep sigh and then came the one word, ‘Oh, Frank!’” — note of course the shift to the first name — see Appendix). And then Trollope cheats; the tête-à-tête is interrupted by Sir Louis Scatcherd, so he does not have to figure out what else Mary Thorne is supposed to say in that situation. Two chapters later, Trollope actually pats himself on the back for having contrived to have her say so little — rather gracelessly, I should say:

No girl could have been more staid and demure, less demonstrative and boastful about her love. She had never yet spoken freely, out of her full heart, to one human being. ‘Oh, Frank!’ All her spoken sin had been contained in that.
In *Barchester Towers* Trollope manages an even more wordless proposal. When Francis Arabin proposes to Eleanor Bold, he says very little, and she says nothing at all. They hug, and he kisses her on the forehead. Actually he doesn’t *ask* her to marry him, he just assumes she will, based on the fact that, earlier in the scene, she was looking at him wistfully and she let him hold her hand.

“Mrs. Bold —” at last he said and then stopped himself. If he could not speak, how was she to do so? He had called her by her name, the same name that any merest stranger would have used! She withdrew her hand from his and moved as though to return to her seat. “Eleanor!” he then said in his softest tone, as though the courage of a lover were as yet but half-assumed, as though he were still afraid of giving offence by the freedom which he took. She looked slowly, gently, almost piteously up into his face. There was at any rate no anger there to deter him.

“Eleanor!” he again exclaimed, and in a moment he had her clasped to his bosom. How this was done, whether the doing was with him or her, whether she had flown thither conquered by the tenderness of his voice, or he with a violence not likely to give offence had drawn her to his breast, neither of them knew; nor can I declare. There was now that sympathy between them which hardly admitted of individual motion. They were one and the same — one flesh — one spirit — one life.

“Eleanor, my own Eleanor, my own, my wife!” She ventured to look up at him through her tears, and he, bowing his face down over hers, pressed his lips upon her brow — his virgin lips, which, since a beard first grew upon his chin, had never yet tasted the luxury of a woman’s cheek.

She had been told that her yea must be yea, or her nay, nay, but she was called on for neither the one nor the other. She told Miss Thorne that she was engaged to Mr. Arabin, but no such words had passed between them, no promises had been asked or given. The prose here is getting a little purple, though I suppose the business about the “virgin lips which . . . had never yet tasted the luxury of a woman’s cheek” seemed a little less strange, not to say tasteless, in 1857 than in 2014. But, anyway, Trollope has succeeded in getting his heroine engaged while possibly remaining 100% passive (depending on the unknowable of whether she had any part in bringing about the embrace).

Rochester’s proposal in *Jane Eyre* is a whole chapter’s worth of back and forth, but once he has finished playing games with her, and she’s convinced that he’s finished playing games, her final acceptance — “Then, sir, I will marry you” — is straightforward enough, though pretty formal.

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4Thanks to my sister Abby for pointing out this example to me.

5The worst case I have run across in literature of a male character simply assuming on the basis of no evidence at all that the heroine will agree to marry him, successfully and with the author’s approval, is the Duke’s decision to marry Isabella, at the end of *Measure for Measure*. His proposal, if one can call it that, is to say, “Give me your hand, and say you will be mine;” she doesn’t *say* anything; whether she give him her hand is not indicated. It is particularly jarring since in acts 2 and 3 Isabella is an extremely strong character — Shakespeare’s heroines in general are not Victorian shrinking violets, of course. It is, I think, the scene in *Shakespeare* that I would most want to change, along the following lines: After the Duke says that, Isabella stares at him silently for a long minute, with a look that starts as astonishment and then hardens into the same fierce disgust that she previously gave to Angelo and Claudio. She then says, first quietly but picking up steam, that she is flattered that he would think of her as a worthy wife and duchess, and that she will be forever grateful to him for saving herself and her brother. However, having seen the irresponsible, pointless, dangerous games he has been playing with them for the last three days, she would not dream of spending a lifetime with him. In fact, to speak frankly, she does not feel safe anywhere in his vicinity, since God only knows what hare-brained shenanigans he will come up with next. Her plan is to return to the convent, complete her novitiate, and take her vows. From that island of comparative sanity, she will pray for him, Angelo, and Claudio, occasionally.

I was pleased to learn, recently, that for the last forty years there has been a performance tradition in which Isabella actually silently refuses the Duke — perfectly consistently with the play, though presumably not what Shakespeare had in mind. I still think that my proposed speech could be good, though, and if any director of revisionist tendencies is interested, I’ll be happy to help work on the iambic pentameter.
I suppose I should check Henry James, but the thought of a Jamesian proposal, some indirect circumlocution in convoluted syntax, is just too depressing.

Louisa May Alcott makes the whole thing so simple that one wonders why there was any problem to begin with: Meg, Amy, and Jo accept their proposals with the words, “Yes, John”, “Yes, Laurie”, and “Oh, yes!” respectively, presumably followed by non-verbal communication.

The proposal at the end of Shaw’s *Arms and the Man* (1894) has a charming ending, and two noteworthy features. First, Bluntschli begins by asking permission of the parents to be considered a suitor, and they give their consent to the marriage before the question is referred to Raina — of course, this is an Irishman’s fantasy of aristocratic manners in Eastern Europe. Second, Shaw/Bluntschli arranges things so that the heroine can, yet again, answer using an indirect wording, with no direct expression of love.\(^6\)

Bluntschli: In that case, Major Petkoff, I beg to propose formally to become a suitor for your daughter’s hand, in place of Major Saranoff retired.

Raina: You dare!

Catherine: Then, Captain Bluntschli, since you are my daughter’s choice, I shall not stand in the way of her happiness. [Petkoff is about to speak.] That is Major Petkoff’s feeling also.

Petkoff: Oh, I shall be only too glad. Two hundred horses! Whew!

Sergius: What says the lady?

Raina: [pretending to sulk]. The lady says that he can keep his tablecloths and his omnibuses. I am not here to be sold to the highest bidder.

Bluntschli: I won’t take that answer. I appealed to you as a fugitive, a beggar, and a starving man. You accepted me. You gave me your hand to kiss, your bed to sleep in, and your roof to shelter me –

Raina: [interrupting him]. I did not give them to the Emperor of Switzerland!

Bluntschli: That’s just what I say. [He catches her hand quickly and looks her straight in the face as he adds, with confident mastery] Now tell us who you did give them to.

Raina: [succumbing with a shy smile]. To my chocolate cream soldier!

Bluntschli: [with a boyish laugh of delight]. That’ll do. Thank you.

But the best acceptances I know of are Wilde’s, with their combination of witty banter with frank enthusiasm. (I’m not sure “passion” is quite the right word.) Gwendolen Fairfax in *Importance of Being Earnest* is great:

Jack: Gwendolen, I must get christened at once — I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.

Gwendolen: Married, Mr. Worthing?

Jack: [Astounded] Well . . . surely. You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.

Gwendolen: I adore you. But you haven’t proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.

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\(^6\)Shaw’s more famous proposal scene, where Ann Whitefield proposes to John Tanner in *Man and Superman*, seems to me much less plausible than any of the proposals here, with the possible exception of Cecily Cardew’s answer to Algernon Moncrieff. It is more hysterical and histrionic than anything in Dickens. Ann faints, for pity’s sake.
Jack: Well . . . may I propose to you now?
Gwendolen. I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr. Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly before-hand that I am fully determined to accept you.
Jack: Gwendolen!
Gwendolen: Yes, Mr. Worthing, what have you got to say to me?
Jack: You know what I have got to say to you.
Gwendolen: Yes, but you don’t say it.
Jack: Gwendolen, will you marry me? [Goes on his knees]—
Gwendolen: Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

Cecily Cardew’s is better, though few women are in a position to follow the example:

Algeron: I love you, Cecily. You will marry me, won’t you?
Cecily. You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.

But the best is Mabel Chiltern in An Ideal Husband:

Lord Goring: Please don’t, Miss Mabel. I have something very particular to say to you.
Mabel Chiltern: [Rapturously.] Oh! is it a proposal?
Lord Goring: [Somewhat taken aback] Well, yes, it is. I am bound to say it is.
Mabel Chiltern: [With a sigh of pleasure] I am so glad. That makes the second to-day.
Lord Goring: [Indignantly] The second to-day? What conceited ass has been impertinent enough to dare to propose to you before I had proposed to you?
Mabel Chiltern: Tommy Trafford, of course. It is one of Tommy’s days for proposing. He always proposes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, during the Season.
Lord Goring: You didn’t accept him, I hope?
Mabel Chiltern: I make it a rule never to accept Tommy. That is why he goes on proposing. Of course, as you didn’t turn up this morning, I very nearly said yes. It would have been an excellent lesson both for him and for you if I had. It would have taught you both better manners.
Lord Goring: Oh! bother Tommy Trafford. Tommy is a silly little ass. I love you.
Mabel Chiltern: I know. And I think you might have mentioned it before. I am sure I have given you heaps of opportunities.
Lord Goring: Mabel, do be serious. Please be serious.
Mabel Chiltern: Ah! that is the sort of thing a man always says to a girl before he has been married to her. He never says it afterwards.
Lord Goring: [Taking hold of her hand] Mabel, I have told you that I love you. Can’t you love me a little in return?
Mabel Chiltern: You silly Arthur! If you knew anything about . . . anything, which you don’t, you would know that I adore you. Every one in London knows it except you. It is a public scandal the way I adore you. I have been going about for the last six months telling the whole of society that I adore you. I wonder you consent to have anything to say to me. I have no character left at all. At least, I feel so happy that I am quite sure I have no character left at all.
Now, that’s the way to accept a proposal! But it does depend on Mr. Right being a good straight man.

Appendix: When the hero or anyone else may use the heroine’s first name

This is a big deal, of course.

Strangely, as far as my reading goes, it is the biggest deal in a quite late work: Shaw’s *Candida* (1894). In act 3 Marchbanks, when left alone with Candida, makes a huge to-do about using her first name (she accepts it quite placidly). A few minutes later, there is the following striking dialogue with Morell:

Marchbanks: When you began your heroics about leaving me here with Candida.

Morell [*involuntarily*]: Candida?

Marchbanks: Oh, yes, I’ve got that far.

This is two acts and about nine or ten hours after Marchbanks has told Morell, “I love your wife”. Apparently calling a married woman by her first name to her husband is a step *beyond* telling him that you love her.7

In Jane Austen, the rules are generally quite strict and pretty rigidly adhered to, and the subject comes up explicitly a number of times. The most serious of Mrs. Elton’s many sins is that she calls Mr. Knightley “Knightley” and calls Jane Fairfax “Jane”. (“There seems no limit to the licentiousness of that woman’s tongue!”) Miss Crawford is pleased when Tom Bertram is out of town, so that she can call Edmund “Mr. Bertram” rather than “Mr. Edmund Bertram”, and she cannot call Fanny by her first name until her brother has proposed to her (though she continues to call Fanny by her first name even after Fanny has rejected Crawford). Elinor considers Willoughby’s use of Marianne’s first name to be strong but not decisive evidence that they are secretly engaged. There is one striking exception: In chapter 12 of *Persuasion*, after Louisa Musgrove has been injured, Captain Wentworth says “Mrs. Charles Musgrove will, of course, wish to get back to her children, but if Anne will stay, none so proper, none so capable as Anne!” He is presumably not actually entitled to call her “Anne” at this point, but is an emotional state and is carried away. What is more remarkable is that none of the other characters seem to react to it. The next sentence is “She [Anne] paused a minute to recover from the emotion of hearing herself so spoken of” but I think that refers to his warmth in general, not specifically to his use of her name.

In Trollope, as both the above examples illustrate, the rules are the same (except that the distinction between “Miss Bennet” for the oldest unmarried daughter and “Miss Elizabeth Bennet” for the rest seems to have gone away) and the use of the first name is if anything even more heavily loaded than in Austen. It can be essentially tantamount to a proposal or an acceptance, and the refusal to allow the use of the first name is a rejection. (Eleanor Bold, in rejecting the proposal of Obadiah Slope, says, “My name is Mrs. Bold”.) In *The Small House at Allingham* Mr. Palliser’s calling Lady Dumbello “Griselda” is essentially a pass at her; she rebuffs it by responding “Mr Palliser” and forbidding him to call her by her first name.

In *Dr. Thorne*, Trollope says that childhood friends, at least those of the opposite sex, switch to the use of the last name on becoming grown up:

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7My grandfather used to tell a story of how someone talking to Solomon Schechter referred to his wife as “Tilly”. Schechter answered, “You didn’t have to say that. You could have said ‘your wife’. You could have said ‘Mrs. Schechter.’ Or you didn’t have to talk at all!” That would probably be from a decade or so after *Candida*. My grandfather’s own closest friend for forty years was Professor Lieberman; and to the end of their lives, they addressed each other, and referred to one another, as “Professor Lieberman” and “Dr. Finkelstein,” never as “Saul” and “Louis.”
... the soft-spoken, half-bashful, but tender greetings of the girls, who now, perhaps for the first time, call him by his stern family name, instructed by instinct rather than precept that the time has come when the familiar Charles or familiar John must by them be laid aside;

In Gilbert, in the plays I’ve read (not quite all), the issue comes up once: Ralph Rackstraw calls Josephine by her first name in proposing to her; I think, that, as with Marchbanks, this is actually a more “audacious” step than telling her that he loves her. Otherwise, it is not an issue. No one in the Gilbert plays either addresses or refers to a young woman using only her last name. No one ever says “Miss Corcoran” (Sir Joseph Porter K.C.B. addresses her as “madam”), “Miss Stanley”, “Miss Maybud”, “Miss Maynard” or “Miss Merrill”; and Angelina, Patience, Phyllis, Yum-Yum, Gianetta, and Tessa don’t even have last names. Robin Oakapple addresses Rose Maybud, before they are engaged, as “Mistress Rose,” and she answer “Master Robin”. It is curious that Gilbert doesn’t make any use of this in the scene where Patience blows hot and cold with Grosvenor; you might think, while blowing cold, that she call him “Mr Grosvenor” and insist as being addressed as “Miss Whatever”, but no.

In Dickens, my impression is that the rules are pretty much the same as in Austen and Trollope, but seems rather less fraught. As far as I can remember, the issue rarely comes up. David Copperfield fantasizes about calling Dora by her name when he first meets her; when her father breaks up the engagement, he insists on David calling her “Miss Spenlow.” Harthouse calls Louisa Bounderby “Mrs. Bounderby” until he actually gets to the point of trying to seduce her, when he switches to “Louisa”. In Great Expectations, Bentley Drummle proposes a toast to “Estella!” and the Finches of the Grove almost come to blows over the question of whether he is entitled to do so. It is adjudicated that this was acceptable if he can prove any degree of acquaintance with her, which he does. But, anyway, this is all in the stag society of the Finches of the Grove; presumably in polite mixed society, different rules apply. (No one in the novel ever actually calls Estella “Miss Havisham”, though Pip does take the trouble to check with Mr. Jaggers that that is indeed her last name. Mr. Jaggers once calls her “Mrs. Bentley Drummle” before she is actually married.)

Eugene Wrayburn in Our Mutual Friend, addresses Lizzie Hexam as “Lizzie” and Jenny Wren as “Jenny” as early as Book 2 Chapter 2, long before he and Lizzie are married; only Jenny Wren’s father ever calls Lizzie “Miss Hexam”. (Bradley Headstone never addresses her by name at all.) This presumably reflects the difference in social class (compare how impressed Liza Dolittle is when Colonel Pickering addresses her as “Miss Dolittle”); nobody seems to think this reflects badly on Wrayburn.

In general men are addressed as “Mr X” by people in general; as “X” by friends (e.g. “Traddles”, “Steerforth”, “Copperfield”); and by the first name by family or friends from childhood. For example, Dan and Ham Peggotty always call David, “Mas’r Davy”. When David is a child, Clara Peggotty calls him “Davy”; when he is grown, she only addresses him by endearments (e.g. “my darling boy”). Emily (whose last name is never mentioned; presumably it is not Peggotty, as her father was Mr. Peggotty’s brother-in-law) never calls David anything until her final letter to him, where she calls him “my dear, my friend”. There are a few unusual usages. In chapter 25 of David Copperfield (David has just moved to London to start work as a proctor), Uriah keeps calling him “Master Copperfield”; the first few times, he corrects himself to “Mister Copperfield” and then gives it up and sticks to “Master”. In the same scene he insists on David calling him “Uriah” (“It’s like the blowing of old breezes or the ringing of old bellses to hear you say Uriah.”) When Steerforth and David meet again, after they’re grown, David always calls him “Steerforth” but Steerforth at various times calls David,

8I presume that when they were children, Emily would have called him “Davy”. However, I can’t guess how she would have addressed him once they were grown. “Mas’r Davy” would be horrible coming from her — it gets to be grating enough from Mr Peggotty and Ham — and “Mr Copperfield” would be awfully cold, so I suppose still “Davy” or “David”, but those don’t exactly sound right either.

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“Copperfield”, “David”, “Davy”, and “Daisy”. Pip and Herbert Pocket call one another “Herbert” and “Handel”; likewise, Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood, in Our Mutual Friend, call one another by their first names.

Conversation between women friends is of course much rarer than between male friends in Dickens. Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren are “Lizzie” and “Jenny”. Caddy Jellyby and Esther Summerson are “Caddy” and “Esther” once the ice is broken. Louisa Gradgrind and Sissy Jupe are “Miss Louisa” and “Sissy”. No direct conversation between Agnes Wickfield and Dora Spenlow is quoted, but they refer to one another as “Agnes” and “Dora”.

There seems to be some indication, though I don’t have a clear proof, that a young man in love sometimes gets to an intermediate state in which the last name is now too cold for his feelings but the first name is not yet permitted, so he avoids using any name at all.

I am making fun of the Victorians but of course the issue has not gone away; the rules have changed and become more complicated. They are somewhat less rigid, in that it would be rare for someone to be seriously offended at being called by their first name, though they might be taken aback. For myself, the issue mostly comes up in email, and my own rules are extremely complicated and not entirely consistent; it depends on my relation with the person (colleague, student, etc.); whether this is the first email or a follow up; whether the addressee is American/Canadian or other; on whether the addressee is about my own age, older, or younger; and on the addressee’s sex. There is no point in elaborating how all these combine. I used to request that students use my first name in addressing me, but now that I am at least two and sometimes three times their age, they may prefer not to, so I leave it entirely up to them (except for doctoral students, because those are considered colleagues); mostly they use the last name.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my sister Abby Davis and my cousin Diana Birchall for helpful suggestions.

9I have been told that this is only true in academia; in other professional circles, the use of the first name would be considered completely inappropriate.
Mabel Stanley (Megan Weston) accepts a proposal from Frederick (Benjamin Robinson)

*Pirates of Penzance*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KkHwlEZ4gE

or search YouTube for Megan Weston sings Poor Wand’ring One