

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

Ernest Davis

August 2014<sup>1</sup>

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).<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 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

---

<sup>1</sup>This was originally written in August 2014; however, I have from time to time added to it, as I read more, and more examples occur to me.

<sup>2</sup>Of the proposals discussed in this piece, I think only Jack Worthing kneels. There was certainly some kind of convention that the gentleman kneels in making a proposal. In *Vanity Fair*, Sir Pitt Crawley kneels when he proposes to Becky Sharp. In *Bleak House* Mr. Guppy kneels when proposing to Esther Summerson. David Copperfield has a fantasy, when he first meets Dora, of going on his knees to propose to her. In *Little Women*, Alcott remarks of Mr. Bhaer that he could not go on his knees, because they were in the street, and Laurie speaks conjecturally about Fred Vaughn going “properly down on his knees” to propose to Amy. But I doubt that it is a coincidence that, in almost all of these cases, the kneeling or the proposal is either ridiculous, conjectural, or negative; it would seem that few fictional proposals that the lady or reader take seriously involve kneeling. 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.

<sup>3</sup>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.

her 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.

In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens remarkably switches the gender roles, setting it up so that Amy Dorrit proposes to Arthur Clennam:

'I have nothing in the world. I am as poor as when I lived here. When papa came over to England, he confided everything he had to the same hands, and it is all swept away. O my dearest and best, are you quite sure you will not share my fortune with me now?'

Locked in his arms, held to his heart, with his manly tears upon her own cheek, she drew the slight hand round his neck, and clasped it in its fellow-hand.

'Never to part, my dearest Arthur; never any more, until the last! I never was rich before, I never was proud before, I never was happy before, I am rich in being taken by you, I am proud in having been resigned by you, I am happy in being with you in this prison, as I should be happy in coming back to it with you, if it should be the will of GOD, and comforting and serving you with all my love and truth. I am yours anywhere, everywhere! I love you dearly! I would rather pass my life here with you, and go out daily, working for our bread, than I would have the greatest fortune that ever was told, and be the greatest lady that ever was honoured. O, if poor papa may only know how blest at last my heart is, in this room where he suffered for so many years!'

Woozy melodrama, stagy, and over the top, certainly; but I have to confess, one of my favorite successful novelistic proposals. But even here, we don't get to hear what Clennam says in answer.

John Jarndyce proposes to Esther Summerson in *Bleak House* by letter. The letter is described at some length, but not quoted. The proposal is quite strange; he seems to be proposing that their relation should not actually change, just that she should legally be married to him. But perhaps I am overreading it.

It was not a love letter, though it expressed so much love, . . . But he had considered this step anew since our late confidence and had decided on taking it, if it only served to show me through one poor instance that the whole world would readily unite to falsify the stern prediction of my childhood. . . . If I felt that I could ever give him the best right he could have to be my protector, and if I felt that I could happily and justly become the dear companion of his remaining life, superior to all lighter chances and changes than death, even then he could not have me bind myself irrevocably while this letter was yet so new to me, but even then I must have ample time for reconsideration. In that case, or in the opposite case, let him be unchanged in his old relation, in his old manner, in the old name by which I called him.

This is how Esther accepts the proposal, a week after receiving the letter.

I had made up my mind to speak to him now. In short, I had come down on purpose. "Guardian," I said, rather hesitating and trembling, "when would you like to have the answer to the letter Charley came for?"

“When it’s ready, my dear,” he replied.

“I think it is ready,” said I.

“Is Charley to bring it?” he asked pleasantly.

“No. I have brought it myself, guardian,” I returned.

I put my two arms round his neck and kissed him, and he said was this the mistress of Bleak House, and I said yes; and it made no difference presently, and we all went out together, and I said nothing to my precious pet about it.

As soon becomes clear to Esther, and eventually to Jarndyce, this whole engagement, though well-intentioned, is not actually a good idea, and the strange proposal and acceptance are symptoms of that.

The scene where Esther rejects Allan Woodcourt’s proposal, because she is engaged to Jarndyce 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.<sup>4</sup>

The most memorable proposal in Dickens is from Mr. Barkis to Clara Peggoty, “Barkis is willing,” sent as a message through the unaware schoolboy David Copperfield, and reiterated in other indirect forms (“Are you pretty comfortable?”), but Peggoty’s acceptance is off stage. 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 do 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<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>6</sup> 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 four minutes, in the most over-the-top aria in Sullivan; but that is not an option for most people. It is also,

---

<sup>4</sup>Quite aside from the stilted dialogue, the whole scene rubs the reader (me) seriously the wrong way, because obviously Esther should break the engagement with Jarndyce and marry Woodcourt — and, though I may be wrong, I don’t think that’s an anachronism; my guess is that, even in England in 1852, most women in that situation would have managed to do that, and most people would have approved. Aside from anything else, for a young woman to marry an old man whom she loves as a father figure when she and a young man are passionately in love as lovers, is obviously just setting up the three of them for trouble if not tragedy. Eventually Jarndyce has the good sense to bow out, but it would have been much more satisfying if it were her direct choice, rather than being so passive. The scene where Woodcourt is substituted for John Jarndyce as a groom, almost at the altar, is really rather disgusting — practically the Victorian equivalent of the Shakespearean bed trick. Shaw, in one of his writings on Dickens, calls it “indelicate.” (For all Shaw’s carefully cultivated and much trumpeted “modern” view of women, when push actually came to shove, he had a rather charming tendency to revert to being “a gentleman of the old school.” His complaints about the Victorian treatment of women were often that it was not chivalrous *enough*.)

<sup>5</sup>I have recently written a more extensive discussion of the marriages in Gilbert and Sullivan.

<sup>6</sup>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”.

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 nondeterministically. If the Jurymen’s statement in chorus to Angelina, “We love you fondly, and would make you ours” is to be taken seriously as a proposal, it is even stranger, but probably it is better viewed just as an expression of admiration. 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 (perhaps one should say “engaged in chorus”): 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:

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

“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

---

<sup>7</sup>Thanks to my sister Abby for pointing out this example to me.

<sup>8</sup>The 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 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. (There is a detailed account in the Arden edition of *Measure for Measure*.) 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.

while possibly remaining 100% passive (depending on the unknowable of whether she had any part in bringing about the embrace).

In *Framley Parsonage* and *The Last Chronicle of Barset* Trollope uses the trick of having the heroine (Lucy Robarts and Grace Crawley respectively) initially reject the proposal because circumstances make it “impossible”; then, when the impossibility is resolved, the acceptance is more or less automatic. In fact, in *Framley Parsonage* the successful proposal is made by Lord Lufton’s mother, since her opposition has been the obstacle. Lucy’s acceptance is eventually not quite wordless, but pretty close:

“And now I have come here, Lucy, to ask you to be his wife.”

How long they sat together silent, I cannot say; counted by minutes the time would not probably have amounted to many, but to each of them the duration seemed considerable. Lady Lufton, while she was speaking, had contrived to get hold of Lucy’s hand, and she sat, still holding it, trying to look into Lucy’s face, — which, however, she could hardly see, so much was it turned away. Neither, indeed, were Lady Lufton’s eyes perfectly dry. No answer came to her question, and therefore, after a while, it was necessary that she should speak again.

“Must I go back to him, Lucy, and tell him that there is some other objection — something besides a stern old mother; some hindrance, perhaps, not so easily overcome?”

“No,” said Lucy, and it was all which at the moment she could say.

“What shall I tell him, then? Shall I say yes—simply yes?”

“Simply yes,” said Lucy.

The similar situation in *The Last Chronicle of Barset* is handled altogether better: The objection makes more sense (Grace’s father is in danger of going to jail for stealing a check); the suitor Major Grantly handles the proposal himself; and for once Trollope manages a spoken acceptance that is, it seems to me, quite beautiful, though still the syntax is notably indirect:

“If love can make me a treasure, I will be your treasure. And if love can make me rich, I will be rich for you.”

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.

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.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup>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.

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!

[*Long, rather ridiculous, discussion of Bluntschli's wealth as the heir to a hotel fortune.*]

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.

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:

Algernon: 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.<sup>10</sup>

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:

---

<sup>10</sup>The comparable issue of "tu" vs. "vous" in French, "du" vs. "Sie" in German, and other languages that have a familiar and an formal second person, is an even bigger deal, since there is no way of avoiding it.



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.<sup>11</sup>

(I wrote the above paragraph in August, 2014. It was not until July 2018 that the obvious thought occurred to me that *she* calls *him* "Eugene" from the beginning of the play, with no thought on anyone's part that this is strange. To what extent this asymmetry reflects the difference in sex, in age, or in marital status, I can't guess. However, I am sure that in a Jane Austen novel, she would have called him "Mr Marchbanks" and almost sure that that would have been true in a Trollope novel.)

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!") Emma would not, herself, dream of addressing, or referring to, Jane Fairfax by her first name; nor vice versa. Elinor considers Willoughby's use of Marianne's first name to be strong but not decisive evidence that they are secretly engaged.

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). Crawford addresses her as "Fanny" after he has proposed and been rejected; Fanny objects to it; but he persists:

"Yes, dearest, sweetest Fanny. Nay" (seeing her draw back displeased), "forgive me. Perhaps I have as yet no right; but by what other name can I call you? Do you suppose you are ever present to my imagination under any other? No, it is 'Fanny' that I think of all day, and dream of all night. You have given the name such reality of sweetness, that nothing else can now be descriptive of you."

There is one particularly dramatic exception to the rule. 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 in 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.

Close women friends, like Charlotte Lucas and Elizabeth Bennet, do address one another by their first name. Similarly Emma addresses Harriet Smith as "Harriet" though Harriet Smith never ventures to reciprocate; this is a function of their social standing. (Emma clearly does not encourage Harriet to use her first name, but, then, Emma is a ferocious snob. What Austen's other heroines would have done in that situation, I can't guess.) Mrs. Weston addresses Emma by her first name, but not vice versa; this is a holdover from Mrs. Weston having been Emma's governess.

---

<sup>11</sup>My 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."

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:

... 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;

Rather strikingly, in Lord Lufton’s first (rejected) proposal in *Framley Parsonage*, he first calls Lucy Robarts “Miss Robarts” and then “Lucy”, and she responds,

“It must not be Lucy any longer, Lord Lufton; I was madly foolish when I first allowed it.”

But what is striking here is that “allowing” it was any kind of option for her before they were engaged.

In Gilbert, 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 Sangazure”, “Miss Corcoran” (Sir Joseph Porter K.C.B. addresses her as “madam”), “Miss Stanley”, “Miss Maybud”, “Miss Maynard”, “Miss Meryll” “Miss Jellicoe”, or “Baroness”; and Angelina, Patience, Phyllis, Yum-Yum, Gianetta, Tessa, Zara, and Lisa don’t even have last names. (In *Trial by Jury* Edwin and Angelina are called by their first names, with no mention of their last names, even in a court proceeding.) Robin Oakapple addresses Rose Maybud, before they are engaged, as “Mistress Rose,” and she answer “Master Robin”.

*Patience* is more complicated. Patience and Grosvenor address each other by their first names throughout — after all, they have known each other since childhood. She addressed Bunthorne as “Mr Bunthorne” before they are engaged and as “Reginald” once they are engaged. Bunthorne addresses both Patience and the lovesick maidens by their first names (“Angela”, “Saphir”, “Ella”, and “Jane” not “Lady Angela” and so on). So do the dragoons; the only one who uses their titles is Patience. Jane addresses Bunthorne as “Reginald” in soliloquy, but not in direct address. The other maidens refer to the gentlemen as “Mr Bunthorne” “Mr Grosvenor” but address them as “sir”. 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 *An Ideal Husband*, Mabel Chiltern addresses Arthur Goring as “Lord Goring” until she accepts his proposal, as quoted above; he addresses her throughout as “Miss Mabel.” I am not sure why that is authorized; perhaps the presumption is that he has known her since she was a child. In *Earnest* Gwendolen Fairfax and Jack Worthing go back and forth between first name and last in the lead up to the proposal. (There is a bit of this in the excerpt above, and more in the preceding few

speeches.) Algernon and Cecily use each other's first names from the start, because he is posing as her "cousin" i.e. her guardian's brother. (Besides, they have been engaged for three months.) At the start of Act 3, when both women have determined that neither of them is actually engaged to Ernest Worthing, they all revert to last names, until they are reconciled.

In Dickens, the rules are noticeably looser than in Austen and Trollope; less fraught and much more often bent. David Copperfield fantasizes about calling Dora by her first name when he first meets her; when her father breaks up the engagement, he insists on David calling her "Miss Spellow." Harthouse calls Louisa Bounderby "Mrs. Bounderby" until he actually gets to the point of trying to seduce her, when he switches to "Louisa". Mr. Guppy does not call Esther Summerson by her first name even when he is proposing to her. Flora Finching is forever calling Arthur Clennam "Arthur" because they had been engaged, and then correcting herself to "Mr. Clennam" or "Clennam and Doyle" as far more proper. Conversely, Clennam several times addresses her as "Mrs Finching"; she almost always objects and makes him switch to "Flora." 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.)

In chapter 28 of *David Copperfield*, at the dinner that he gives for Traddles and Mr. and Mrs. Micawber, just after moving to London, after he has fallen in love with Dora but is nowhere close to being engaged to her, there is this:

Mr. Micawber took an early opportunity, after that, of hinting, with the utmost delicacy and ceremony, at the state of my affections. Nothing but the serious assurance of his friend Copperfield to the contrary, he observed, could deprive him of the impression that his friend Copperfield loved and was beloved. After feeling very hot and uncomfortable for some time, and after a good deal of blushing, stammering, and denying, I said, having my glass in my hand, 'Well! I would give them D.!'

Somewhat similarly, in chapter 34 (David and Dora have just become engaged in the previous chapter), there is this interchange between David and Traddles:

'My dear Traddles,' said I, 'I am delighted to see you at last, and very sorry I have not been at home before. But I have been so much engaged—'

'Yes, yes, I know,' said Traddles, 'of course. Yours lives in London, I think.'

'What did you say?'

'She—excuse me—Miss D., you know,' said Traddles, colouring in his great delicacy, 'lives in London, I believe?'

'Oh yes. Near London.'

'Mine, perhaps you recollect,' said Traddles, with a serious look, 'lives down in Devonshire — one of ten. Consequently, I am not so much engaged as you — in that sense.'

Under what circumstances it was appropriate for gentlemen to refer to ladies by their first initial, I don't know; I don't remember having run across any cases outside *David Copperfield*.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>I think that there is a lot of *David Copperfield* here because there is in fact more variety of usage than in most other books, in part because so many of the characters have known the protagonist since childhood. But it may just be that I myself know *David Copperfield* particularly well.

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.<sup>13</sup>

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, “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. Mr. Dick, by his own choice, is always known as “Mr. Dick”.

Miss Mowcher addresses Steerforth as both “Steerforth” and “Jemmy”, as well as (in the course of eight pages) “my flower”, “you naughty boy”, “my dear boy”, “you dog,” “my blessed infant”, “my sweet pet”, “my sweet child”, “my pet”, “ducky, ducky, ducky”, “my young friend”, “my tender pupil”, “my darling”, “my chicken”, and “Jocky of Norfolk”. In speaking with David after Emily has run away with Steerforth, she addresses him as “my dear young soul”, “child, child,” and “my good friend” as well as “Mr Copperfield”.

Conversation between women friends is of course much rarer than between male friends in Dickens. Lizzie Hexam and Jenny Wren are “Lizzie” and “Jenny”. Mrs. Gamp and Mrs. Prig are “Betsey” and “Sairah”. 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”.

The case of Agnes Wickfield is complicated. Mr. Micawber and Traddles of course call her “Miss Wickfield”. David addresses her and refers to her as “Agnes” because, as he explains to Dora, they were “brought up together like brother and sister,” or, more precisely, he was a boarder in her father’s house for presumably five or six years. (She always calls him “Trotwood”.) Betsey Trotwood and Dora also call her “Agnes”. Uriah Heep addresses her as “Miss Agnes”, except in chapter 52 (Micawber’s denunciation) where he addresses her as “Miss Wickfield”. In speaking to Copperfield and to her father, he generally calls her “Miss Agnes”; sometimes simply “Agnes”; when he gets carried away, even “my Agnes”. David tries to throw cold water on that familiarity: when David is talking to Uriah Heep in chap. 39, he calls her “Miss Wickfield”; when Heep insists, he changes that to “Agnes Wickfield” (the only time David calls her by her last name). When all is said and done, however, Heep’s use of her first name doesn’t seem to be something that Mr Wickfield or David are actually entitled to object to, however much they dislike it, since Uriah has known her since she was

---

<sup>13</sup>I 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.

a child.

I am not at all sure, how, in Dickensian pairs of married couples who were good friends — David and Agnes Copperfield with Tommy and Sophy Traddles; Alan and Esther Woodcourt with Caddy and Prince Turveydrop — the opposite genders would have addressed one another. Did Agnes and Traddles address one another as “Mr Traddles” and “Mrs Copperfield” or as “Tom” and “Agnes”? In Jane Austen, they would certainly have used the last name; my guess is that the same would have been true in Dickens, but I am not confident of that.

One thinks of Alcott’s *Concord* as more free-and-easy than Trollope’s *Barsetshire*, and I remarked earlier on the March sisters’ straightforward acceptances of marriage proposals. Nonetheless, John Brooke’s proposals to Meg and Mr. Bhaer’s proposal to Jo are the first time that either has addressed the other by their first name. The latter is particularly marked (note that this is *after* Bhaer has called her “Heart’s dearest,” and “Jo” and he has proposed and she has accepted and still Jo, for all her candor and defiance of convention, is hesitant about it and offers to withdraw it; or maybe she’s just being coy):

“Friedrich, why didn’t you...”

“Ah, heaven, she gifs me the name that no one speaks since Minna died!” cried the Professor, pausing in a puddle to regard her with grateful delight.

“I always call you so to myself—I forgot, but I won’t unless you like it.”

“Like it? It is more sweet to me than I can tell.”

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.

The other extreme are married people who address each other by their last names or titles. In Jane Austen this is fairly common and not particularly significant when it does happen: Mr and Mrs Bennet address each other as such (neither first name is ever mentioned); Lady Bertram addresses her husband as “Sir Thomas”; Mrs. Croft addresses hers as “Admiral”; Emma plans to address hers as “Mr Knightley.” In Dickens, as far as I remember, and in Trollope, as far as I’ve seen; it’s a serious sign of trouble. Mr. Dombey in *Dombey and Son* addresses his two wives as “Mrs. Dombey”; Mr. Bumble in *Oliver Twist* addresses his wife as “Mrs. Bumble.” In the *Barsetshire* novels, Mrs. Proudie, a proud, cold person, addresses her husband as “Bishop”.

Esther Summerson continues to address John Jarndyce as “Guardian” even after they are engaged; as I quoted earlier, this is at his specific request in his proposal letter (“let him be unchanged ... in the old name in which I called him.”) One can all too easily imagine that she would have continued doing that even after they were married. This is another sign that this engagement is not actually a good idea.

Anne Strong, throughout her long speech in chapter 45 of *David Copperfield*, addresses and refers to Dr. Strong as “my husband” (once as “my husband and father”); what she called him in situations that were less fraught and more private is anyone’s guess.

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.);

---

<sup>14</sup>I 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.

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.



Mabel Stanley (Megan Weston) accepts a proposal from Frederick (Benjamin Robinson)

*Pirates of Penzance*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6KkHw1EZ4gE>

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



Mabel Chiltern (Susan Hampshire) accepts a proposal from Arthur Goring (Jeremy Brett)  
*An Ideal Husband*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zR\\_WFP1dw5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zR_WFP1dw5E)  
or search YouTube for An Ideal Husband: Jeremy Brett part 6/6