

Mistresses and marriage: or, a short history of the Mrs

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The word 'mistress' has a multi-layered history. Today, it generally refers either to a woman in an illicit sexual relationship, or, more rarely, to someone who is in perfect control of her art. Both the sexual connotation and the inference of complete competenceⁱ date back to at least the later middle ages. All of the meanings ascribed by Samuel Johnson in his Dictionary of 1755-6ⁱⁱ can also be found in fourteenth or fifteenth-century sources, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Johnson defined a mistress as:

1. A woman who governs; correlative to subject or servant;
2. A woman skilled in anything;
3. A woman teacher;
4. A woman beloved and courted;
5. A term of contemptuous address;
6. A whore or concubine.

Johnson's definitions may be the best example of the astounding variability in words of female address, so many of which (dame, madam, miss, hussy (from housewife), wife and queen, as well as mistress) can mean whore at any time.ⁱⁱⁱ

But today the most common use of the word 'mistress' is of course in its abbreviated form as the title 'Mrs', used almost universally in the English-speaking world today to designate a married woman. For Dr Johnson, one of the few female conditions that 'mistress' did *not* signify was marriage. In the middle of the eighteenth century, 'Mrs' did not describe a married woman: it described a woman who governed subjects (i.e., employees or servants or apprentices) or a woman who was skilled or who taught. It described a social, rather than a marital status – when it wasn't being used metaphorically (Johnson's meaning 4) or contemptuously (meanings 5 and 6).

Mistress is also the basis of another 'title of politeness' (as the OED terms it): 'Miss', which we use to designate an *un*married woman. Miss is almost as old as Mrs as an abbreviation of mistress and, like Mrs, it was applied only to those of higher social status. Unlike Mrs, which has changed from a social to a marital meaning over time, Miss always designated the marital status of being unmarried. But until the eighteenth century it was only applied to girls, never to adult women. Upon adulthood, a Miss became a Mrs, in the same way that today an English boy is titled 'Master' but he graduates to 'Mister' upon adulthood.^{iv} Until the eighteenth century, the only gender difference in the use of these titles was that the male titles shared the same abbreviation as 'Mr', while its pronunciation varied with the age of the male so designated, whereas the female abbreviations as well as pronunciations were different. But in both cases the root word was the same and the two forms of title served the same purpose: to differentiate children from adults.

The historical specificity of honorifics, and the changing use of Mrs and Miss, were explored in some detail in Una Stannard's 1977 book, *Mrs Man*, and there are useful summaries in Casey Miller's and Kate Swift's *Words and Women* (1977) and Jane Mills' *Womanwords* (1989) but these volumes appear never to have been widely read by historians.^v As a result, any woman identified in the historical record as Mistress or Mrs in the period between 1500 and 1900 is normally assumed to have been married unless proven otherwise. And if it is proven otherwise, then Mrs is assumed to have been used to improve respectability.^{vi} (I will leave aside for the moment the problem of historians applying Mrs to any married woman in the period 1500-1900.)

The OED still maintains that the use of Mrs for a single woman was 'a title of courtesy applied, with or without the inclusion of the first name, to elderly unmarried ladies (this seems to have arisen in the late eighteenth century)'. The implication is that the 'courtesy' is to increase the standing of the unmarried woman by putting her on a par with the married woman. In the late nineteenth century when the OED was originally written, this may have been the correct inference. But for the late eighteenth century this is a radical misunderstanding of the term. 'Mrs' was applied

to many 'unmarried ladies', elderly and not elderly, in the late eighteenth century, but the innovation was the extension of 'Miss' from an unmarried girl to an unmarried adult woman in the mid-eighteenth century, specifically distinguishing unmarried from married women by title for the first time. The introduction of a marker on the basis of marital status overlaid the previous marker on the basis of social status, and that shift would have enormous impact on social perceptions of women for the next two hundred and fifty years. In the mid-twentieth century, a reaction against the marital marker produced a new 'title of politeness' in 'Ms', thus essentially restoring the function that 'Mrs' had served for centuries but no longer could since it acquired its association with marriage.

To explain the historical changes, I will go into more depth than Stannard, who was primarily concerned with the ideological implications of nomenclature shift in nineteenth-century America. I will explore the eighteenth-century arrival of 'Miss' as a title for unmarried women, examine the much older use of 'Mrs' as a title for unmarried women of social standing, and consider the pronunciation of 'Mrs' and its association with the full form, mistress.

The arrival of the adult Miss

It is curious that the marking of marital status began not with married women, to signify their subservient legal position, but with unmarried women, who in England enjoyed all the legal rights of a man.^{vii} Several descriptive terms could signify a never-married woman in a tax listing, a will, or a court record: she might be called a maid, a virgin, a spinster, or a singlewoman.^{viii} But until the early eighteenth century there was no form of address to precede her name. Dr Johnson defined 'Miss' as 'the term of honour to a young girl' -- or a whore.^{ix} The OED reverses the order: the first definition, with an exemplar from 1606, is a mistress or kept woman, and '(occas.): a prostitute, a whore'; the second definition, dated from Samuel Pepys' *Diary* in 1676, is a title 'preceding the name of *an unmarried woman* or girl without a higher or honorific professional title' (my italics). But the OED again betrays its Victorian origins here. Pepys clearly used 'Miss' only for girls: they

were 'little Miss' so and so.^x The seventeenth century Miss was, as Johnson says, a girl, not an adult woman. And not just any girl, but one who would become Mrs upon adulthood.

Where Miss was used, it followed the conventions of Mr for sons. Where the father was 'Mr Cibber', his sons were 'young Mr Cibber' or 'Mr Theophilus'. With daughters, the eldest unmarried daughter was 'Miss Cibber' with no first name, the younger daughter was 'Miss Charlotte Cibber', or just 'Miss Charlotte'. When she married she became Mrs Charke, or Mrs Charlotte Charke to distinguish her from any other contemporaries who were also Mrs Charkes, notably her mother-in-law.^{xi} So Parson Woodforde in Somerset in 1767 dined with 'Mrs Betty Baker, her three nieces ... Miss Baker rather ordinary, Miss Betsy very pretty, and Miss Sukey very middling, rather pretty than otherwise, all very sensible and agreeable, and quite fine ladies, both in Behaviour and Dress and Fortunes'.^{xii} This system of last name for the eldest and first name for the younger persists through the later nineteenth century (Miss Browning and Miss Phoebe in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, 1864-6) and into the twentieth (Miss Pinner and Miss Constantia in Katherine Mansfield's 'The Daughters of the Late Colonel', *The Garden Party*, 1922).

But until the 1740s, a girl graduated from Miss to Mrs upon her adulthood or upon the death of her mother, whichever came first.^{xiii} The process of change can be traced in literary usage. In Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1721), Miss still only described little girls. Plenty of ballads were published in the first three decades of the eighteenth century whose titles included 'Country Miss', 'Town Miss', 'Highland Miss', or 'London Miss', as well as multiple editions of Thomas Gordon's *History of Miss Manage* through the 1720s, but these were closer to the derogatory use of Miss as whore. From c.1730 Miss does seem to have been used by swains to address their mistresses (age is unspecified)^{xiv}. In 1731, a notorious French witchcraft trial involving seduction was reported scurrilously both as *Miss Cadriere's Case* and as *A Narrative of the Case of Mrs Mary Katherin Cadriere*. (The woman in question was 21.) The first time Miss is used in a title without salacious intent appears to be Edward Barnard's *Experimental Christianity of eternal advantage. Exemplified*

in the life of Miss Lydia Allen of London, who died November 17, 1740. (London, 1741), but she was just 21 at her death.

It was in the course of the 1740s that Miss came to be applied to unmarried adult women of social standing. In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), the gentry daughters are Miss, but Pamela as a servant and the (also unmarried) housekeeper are Mrs. Similarly in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) the heroine is Miss and her waiting gentlewoman, the unmarried daughter of a curate, is Mrs.^{xv} Sarah Fielding's very popular *Adventures of David Simple* (1744) and *The Governess* (1749) show the same distinction between young gentry Misses and upper servants described as Mrs (waiting woman, housekeeper, governess), all of whom are unmarried. Like the Fieldings' novels, Eliza Haywood's *Female Spectator* (1745-6) is full of Misses with silly-sounding names, and in 1751 she published her influential *History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, although none of her earlier novels use the word (Haywood is a good barometer as she wrote fifty-five novels and plays between 1719 and 1755).

In the *Compleat Letter-Writer* of 1756, Miss was already a common form of address, although as an instruction book it may well have been addressed to teenagers.^{xvi} In the same year, Dr Johnson did not recognise the adult Miss as a usage sufficiently significant for his dictionary. Thirty years later, he was using the term himself, in a way which implies the transition took place in the middle of the eighteenth century. In 1784 he told friends that he had dined the previous night 'at Mrs Garrick's, with Mrs Carter, Miss Hannah More and Miss Fanny Burney'.^{xvii} Eva Garrick was the widow of David, actor and theatre manager, but all three of her women guests were unmarried. Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806) had been Johnson's friend for over fifty years by the time of that dinner.^{xviii} Her position as daughter of a clergyman earned her the title of Mrs, although she was also acclaimed the finest Greek scholar in England and one of the foremost linguists. She was invariably known as Mrs Carter in her lifetime. But Hannah More (1745-1833) and Fanny Burney (1754-1840) were much younger women, and they used the honorific of Miss in the new style. The

mid-century transition in honorifics can be seen in a single person: Johnson's contemporary, companion and housekeeper, the writer Anna Williams (1706-83), whom he called Mrs Williams, whereas his younger friends, like Frances Reynolds and James Boswell, referred to her as Miss Williams.^{xix}

The process by which Miss became a marker that a woman retained as long as she remained unmarried is difficult to understand. Around 1700, a high rate of women remaining unmarried is thought to have given rise to the coinage of the phrase 'old maid' and the colloquial use of 'spinster' to stigmatise elderly unmarried women (as opposed to the occupational or legal use of 'spinster', which continued in tandem with the pejorative use). Concern over a low marriage rate is reflected in the Marriage Duty Acts, which taxed bachelors and childless widowers between 1695 and 1706. But this preoccupation with encouraging marriage seems too far removed in time to have inspired the moniker Miss some half-century later. Its use does not appear associated with any disproportionate increase in the number of women writing or managing businesses, or otherwise being as active in public life as political restrictions allowed. So a demographic driver seems unlikely.

My current best guess for the appearance of Miss on adult women is that it was adopted from the French. The use of honorific titles in France below the aristocracy followed social distinctions in a different way than in England. In the long eighteenth century, French women of the lower middle class were described as 'Demoiselle' regardless of marital status. Only among the upper middle class (those just below the titled and equivalent to the English gentry) were married and single women distinguished by 'Dame' and 'Demoiselle'.^{xx} Was it this style that the fashionable London world of the 1740s grafted onto the older English style? Note that the English usage maintained the older form, Mrs, for the 'lower class' of gentlewomen's servants, whereas the French equivalent was the unmarried form. French was commonly taught in girls' schools, and More and Burney both translated from the French.

The rise of Miss in the eighteenth century has been attributed to the industrial revolution,

and the need of men to know which women were sexually available when large numbers of them left home to work in factories.^{xxi} A much more mundane explanation of marital distinction in female honorifics is that it was a fashion of the mid-eighteenth-century literati that got stuck and became a part of English culture, not without causing some consternation along the way. The appearance of the adult Miss, especially in the form of righteous writers like Hannah More, is all the more striking because of its prior salacious connotation. Miss appears to be one of the very few – possibly the only – word in English describing women which ameliorated its status, from designating whore or little (high status) girl to adorning adult women of fashion. It will require investigation by literary scholars to ascertain more exactly the process of changing usage.

The long-term use of Mrs

The shift from Mrs to Miss was marked but by no means absolute, and even through the first half of the nineteenth century, the use of Mrs to describe never-married women of social standing remained current. So Parson Woodforde in 1783 referred to 'Mrs Goddard an old Maid'.^{xxii} Edward Gibbon (b. 1734), in his *Memoirs* of 1790, called both of his unmarried aunts Mrs, without any clarification for younger readers or suggestion that the title might in this decade imply that the women were married.^{xxiii} And it was not just age that determined his terminology. The much younger Jane Austen (b. 1775) also used Mrs for a maiden aunt as a matter of course in 1792.^{xxiv} Mrs Mary Delany (1700-88) addressed an adult unmarried correspondent as Mrs Frances Hamilton in 1780.^{xxv} Hannah More never married and only ever published under her name alone or as Miss Hannah More,^{xxvi} but engravings of her portrait in the nineteenth century are titled Mrs Hannah More,^{xxvii} and the editor of her posthumous collected works in 1834 also referred to her as Mrs Hannah More.^{xxviii}

This usage in titles corresponded to the 'Madam' or 'ma'am' used in speech throughout Austen's novels and to the present day in the US, and particularly the southern states. Madam was

not uncommon in later medieval and early modern England, used in the same way as Mrs. The OED observes 'traces of a tendency in the 16-17th centuries to address married women as "madam" and unmarried women as "mistress"'. I have not seen enough Madams whose marital status is clear to assess this assertion. It was certainly still in use as a title in the eighteenth century, at least outside London,^{xxix} but increasingly was used only in speech rather than as an honorific. As with Miss, double entendres were ready to hand with Madam: Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* as a girl says that a certain woman 'is a gentlewoman and they call her madam', and refers to madam the mayoress and madam the procuress.^{xxx} Generally, women who in the seventeenth century might have been referred to as Madam or Dame or Goodwife were in the eighteenth more likely to have been titled Mrs.

The use of the term depended on the perspective of the speaker. To Lord Chesterfield, in the mid-eighteenth century, 'If she is Mrs with a surname, she is above the livery, and belongs to the upper servants',^{xxxi} since his own circle of associates did not include women who were merely Mrs. This same system applied at the lowest levels of servant-holding families: in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854-5) the clergyman's wife, Mrs Hale, has a maid cum housekeeper who is called merely Dixon by her employers, but she is Mrs Dixon (she was unmarried) to the housemaid beneath her.^{xxxii} This application of Mrs to unmarried housekeepers continued into the mid-twentieth century to distinguish their social status from the under servants who were called by a surname or, if young, a first name.^{xxxiii}

In the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, the use of Mrs as a purely social marker causes confusion in the other direction. Lady Mary Pierrepont addressed her unmarried future sister-in-law as Mrs Wortley in the first two decades of the eighteenth century.^{xxxiv} The eminent early twentieth-century editor of Mary Wortley Montagu's letters corrected that title to Miss, in case readers might mistakenly think that her correspondent was married. As recently as 2008, the curators of the *Bluestockings* exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery took an alternative

approach, putting 'Mrs' in quotes to indicate an abnormal usage – but without explanation or commentary – when referring to portraits of Elizabeth Carter.^{xxxv} It is difficult to imagine what viewers made of this 'so-called' Mrs, but it appears to reinforce the condescending definition of the OED that Mrs might as a 'courtesy' be applied to 'elderly, unmarried ladies'.

In support of its definition of Mrs as identifying a *married* woman, the OED instances a letter written by Hannah More's friend, Horace Walpole, in 1745 (11 May): 'Just as a woman is not called Mrs. till she is married'. But Walpole's subject here is in fact the defeat of British forces at the battle of Tournay (later Fontenoy), and the full sentence reads, 'We don't allow it to be a victory on the French side: but that is, just as we do not call a woman Mrs. till she is married, though she may have had half a dozen natural children.' He goes on to list the English officers killed.^{xxxvi} Clearly, the correct usage of female honorifics was not uppermost in Walpole's mind at the time that he made his rueful analogy, and this quotation should not be taken as definitive on eighteenth-century etiquette in the matter, in view of the multitudinous seventeenth- and eighteenth-century examples of Mrs applied as a term of social distinction to unmarried women.

The married autobiographer Elizabeth Freke (1642-1714) was Mrs Elizabeth Freke by her own account, while her sisters were Ladies by virtue of their better marriages. But Freke's unmarried niece was Mrs Grace Norton, and her unmarried chief maidservant was Mrs Evans. The rest of her servants and tenants over the years were referred to simply by their christian and family names, or as 'Thom Davy's wife'.^{xxxvii} The woman who sold Freke her newspapers in Norfolk was Mrs Ferrer, of unknown marital status. The elevated social standing that earned the title Mrs could derive either from gentle status or from a woman's business proprietorship. The use of Mrs in its sense of mistress of servants, apprentices and employees became more widespread over the course of the eighteenth century, in an increasingly urbanised, commercial society – in exactly the same way that Mr spread.

This can be seen from a surviving 'census' in the Essex market town of Bocking in 1793.

Among 650 households, fifty were headed by men given the title Mr (9 % of 545 male-headed households). These men were farmers, grocers, millers, manufacturers, victuallers, and other substantial tradesmen. Twenty-five of the women heading their own households were called Mrs (24 % of 105 female-headed households). Of these, nine had no further description and may have been gentry or large landowners. But sixteen women, almost two thirds of all those titled Mrs, were specified as in business: five victuallers, three farmers, two weavers, two of the town's three mantuamakers, a linen draper, a grocer, a cardmaker, and a blacksmith.^{xxxviii} The Bocking listing, like most censuses prior to 1851, did not specify marital status. But it is likely that the women styled Mrs included single as well as widowed women. (By definition, a female household head was either single or widowed. The head of a married woman's household was her husband.) [add should be half and half: Ogilvie/Lockin]

The one Miss in Bocking was the schoolmistress. The choice of Miss appears to have been a matter of personal preference, as in the case of Hannah More. Parson Woodforde refers in his diary to his Oxford sempstress in 1774 was a Miss Hall, and his niece's mantuamaker in 1782 as a Miss Bell, at the same time that other single women are called Mrs.^{xxxix} It is at least likely that this was the tradeswomen's choice rather than the diarist's.

Cities had a greater proportion of people using Mrs – or Miss or Mr -- not only because of their greater wealth, but also their greater trade. Female business proprietors in the eighteenth century were normally only referred to by an honorific in their customers' personal diaries or account books, such as Parson Woodforde's. Mistress was variously abbreviated as Mrs, Mtris, Mrs, Mis or Ms.^{xl} Routine clerical documents did not, as a rule, identify either social or marital status. The records of the London Companies, to which business proprietors in the City belonged, usually referred to women only by their first and last names, in the same way that men were recorded. If a woman's marital status was specified it was most commonly as a widow.^{xli} On the rare occasion when Mrs does appear in London Company records, it is generally clear from the

context that its use designated social and not marital status: for example, the Pattenmakers' Company in 1777 admitted to the freedom by patrimony Mrs Sarah Gibson, daughter of Wm Gibson (she was not married because her name as the same as her father's and her right to the freedom by patrimony derives only from her father, not her father-in-law).^{xlii}

Similarly, clerks recording the payment of taxes -- whether secular authorities like the land tax or parish officers like the poor rates -- rarely noted the marital status of women, at least prior to the mid-eighteenth century. Around 15 per cent of household heads liable to tax were women.^{xliii} Practice in recording social status varied with the individuals doing the recording, for the same person. The milliner Eleanor Mosley paid land tax on her premises in Gracechurch Street to the clerk of her city ward, who never referred to her by anything other than her name between 1737 and when she sold the property in 1752. But the parish clerk who collected the poor rates from her at the same address invariably referred to her as Mrs Mosley. She was unmarried.^{xliv} We may assume that all of the women in tax records were single or widowed, since if they had been married then their husbands would have been liable for payment under the custom of coverture. That same custom, by granting a husband ownership of all his wife's assets, severely restricted the financial freedom of a married woman in business unless she enjoyed the special legal status of a 'feme sole trader'.^{xlv} But strikingly, even in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, businesswomen's own trade cards and advertising often only used a first name and last name, without title or marital status, even where the proprietor was married.^{xlvi}

Into the nineteenth century, single business women like those in late eighteenth-century Bocking, were known as Mrs. One of the better known was Eleanor Coade (1733-1821), who first appeared in business as a linen draper in 1766, bought a ceramics factory on the south bank of the Thames and invented the artificial stone now called Coadestone, in which she cast shatter-proof sculptures and architectural details, which still ornament London (Bedford Square, the Royal Naval College, Buckingham Palace and so forth), as well as other cities around the world.^{xlvii} She was

invariably known as Mrs Coade -- not 'in order to appear more respectable', as her entry in Wikipedia has it, nor because she had ever been married,^{xlviii} but because that was a normal title for a businesswoman, exactly as Mr was the normal title for a businessman.

In the 1850 *Kelly's Directory*, the first national business directory, nearly all women were recorded with an honorific title, and marital status can be checked by reference to the 1851 census. In the Hertfordshire edition of *Kelly's Directory*, 5 per cent of the business proprietors titled Mrs (19 of 360, in Hertfordshire) were single women. These included women in their twenties, as well as older women, so the custom of Mrs designating status rather than marriage was still apparently in use by a few women.^{xlix} In 1881, the census did not regularly record an honorific, but one was applied to some women nonetheless. Even at that date, of 3600 women described as Mrs, over 4 per cent were identified as single. Of 734 single women designated by an honorific, one in four or one in five single women used Mrs rather than Miss.¹

First names

Through the early modern period, where Mrs was used and the woman was married, the title was followed by her own first name and her husband's last name.^{li} The total annihilation of wifely identity which assigned a woman not only her husband's last name but also his first name only appeared around 1800. Again, the OED is incorrect to state (under the entry for Mrs) that 'the insertion of a woman's name after Mrs .. used to occur chiefly in legal documents ... and was otherwise rare, the normal practice being to insert the husband's name'. Its own definition cites numerous non-legal examples of the 'Mrs Mary Smith' form prior to the nineteenth century. The reader will have noted that all of the married women titled Mrs so far named have used their own first name and not their husband's first name: Mrs Elizabeth Freke, Mrs Mary Delany, and so forth.

The earliest example of the 'Mrs Man' form that I have so far found appears in Jane Austen's first published novel, *Sense & Sensibility* (1811).^{lii} There, the appellation 'Mrs John Dashwood'

distinguishes our heroine Elinor's sister-in-law from Elinor's mother, who is also Mrs Dashwood, but with no first name because she is the senior. (This is a variation on this distinction between sisters; Elinor is Miss Dashwood as the eldest daughter and her younger sister is Miss Marianne.) Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Mrs Man style to specify the younger Mrs Dashwood(s) was extended, first within women of a certain rank, from those in a junior to those in a senior position in the family, and ultimately to all married women of whatever rank.^{liii} A prosperous blacksmith like those in Bocking in the 1790s was titled Mr, so his wife was Mrs, but in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860) the reader never knows the personal name of Mrs Joe Gargery; she is Mrs Joe throughout. That usage, ironic as it may be in Dickens, appears to annihilate any identity for a married woman other than a marital one. It is a usage that many women today have experienced personally, often assuming it was a remnant of centuries of subjugation. Having been introduced c. 1800, it was already being challenged in the 1840s by the Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York,^{liv} although it has not entirely fallen out of use even in the twenty-first century.

Pronunciation

The OED gives the pronunciation of 'Mrs' as 'missis', citing John Walker's *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1828 edn) that 'to pronounce the word as it is written would, in these cases, appear quaint and pedantick'. Two issues arise. First, Walker clearly means that the word 'as it is written' is 'mistress'. Neither Walker's *Dictionary* nor Johnson's included a separate entry for Mrs in the way that the OED does: the definition of Mrs was subsumed under that of Mistress. Second, what is meant by 'in these cases'? Walker, in his youth an actor in Garrick's company, published his *Dictionary* in 1791. He followed Johnson's definition of Mistress and went on to say, 'The same haste and necessity of dispatch, which has corrupted *Master* into *Mister*, has, when a title of civility only, contracted *Mistress* into *Missis*. Thus, *Mrs. Montague, Mrs. Carter, &c*, are pronounced *Missis*

Montague, *Missis* Carter, &c.' It is where the word is a title of civility that pronouncing the *t* and the *r* would 'appear quaint and pedantick'.^{lv} But when was Mrs not a title of civility? Had the pronunciation sufficiently diverged at this time that the servants of Elizabeth Montague referred to their 'mistress, missis Montague'?^{lvi} The meaning of the two words is identical but in the first pronunciation it is a position and in the second it is a title of civility.

Mistress, in Johnson's first sense of the word, retained through the eighteenth century the connotation of a woman who governs the house and the servants. In *The Idler* in 1758, Johnson created the character of Betty Broom, a country girl who works as a servant in the city: 'My mistress was a diligent woman, and rose early in the morning to set the journeymen to work; my master was a man much beloved by his neighbours, and sat at one club or another every night.'^{lvii} Mistresses governed not only journeymen and domestic servants but also apprentices female and male. In Eleanor Mosley's apprenticeship indenture of 1718, which took the standard form, she was bound to 'do no damage to her said Mr or Mrs ... the goods of her said Mr or Mrs shall not waste ... hurt to her said Mr or Mrs shall not do ... she shall neither buy nor sell without her Mr or Mrs leave', and so forth.^{lviii} The meaning is clearly 'master or mistress' and it seems unlikely that the pronunciation would have been 'mister or missis' when the linguistic connection between the title 'Mrs' and the mistress of servants or apprentices was still strong.

The earliest phonetic spellings as 'missis' or 'missus' are (according to the OED) in 1790, (J.B. Moreton, *Manners and Customs of the West India Islands*) and 1836 (Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz*). In each example, the phonetic pronunciation is used by a servant of his or her mistress. While the OED does under-represent eighteenth-century writers,^{lix} a search of *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* reveals only two instances of the phonetic usage, in 1752 (Henry Fielding) and 1772 (David Garrick), and both again were used by a servant of their employer in dialect, suggesting that the pronunciation may originally have been an uneducated one.^{lx} Walker's 1791 declaration that to pronounce Mrs with a 't' and an 'r' would 'appear quaint and pedantick'

suggests that the shift from mistress to missis may have occurred in his lifetime (1732-1807). Seventeenth-century sources certainly regularly spell out 'Mistress' as well as using the abbreviated forms.^{lxi} It is possible that pronunciation outside of the metropolises even at the end of the eighteenth century may have been rather more quaint and pedantic than in Walker's London and Dublin. The pronunciation of Mrs as *mistress* or *mizrus* continued into the mid-twentieth century in parts of the American southeast, alongside a lack of distinction between marital states in its application to both married and unmarried women.^{lxii}

Walker's Mrs at the end of the eighteenth century still did not describe or even suggest a married woman, since one of his examples was married (Montague) and the other not (Carter). Since there is no note on changing usage in the 1824 edition of his dictionary (although other minor elements of spelling and expression *were* altered in the definition of Mrs), it may be presumed that still in 1824 the meaning of Mrs had not yet narrowed.

Conclusion

The cause of the shift of Mrs from a social to a marital designation appears straightforward. Over the course of the nineteenth century, titles were democratised beyond the gentry and business proprietors of social standing to include what George Eliot called 'the poorer class of parishioners'. Her fictional charwoman in 1857 was Mrs Cramp, and the gardening odd-job man was Mr Tozer,^{lxiii} a usage which would have been unrecognisable fifty years earlier. As a result, Mrs lost its distinction of social level and retained only its marital meaning, with the exception of upper servants who were still Mrs though unmarried.

The use of courtesy titles remained a matter of contention as well as civility into the twentieth century. In 1953, in the course of a series of letters in *The New Statesman and Nation* instigated by the poet Kathleen Raine complaining that people were too free with her first name, the writer William Empson objected to the use of Miss or Mrs as enquiring too closely into a woman's

marital status:

'the custom of writing (say) "Madeleine Wallace" is a result of the Emancipation of Women. I do not know whether she is married, single, resuming her maiden name after a separation, or simply offering a pen-name; and it is not my business to inquire. ... What would be presumptuous ... would be a demand to know before even addressing her whether she is "Mrs" or "Miss"'.^{lxiv}

Empson attributes the triumph of plain names (first name and last name alone) to the women's movement; Leonard Woolf, in the final contribution to this series of letters, more broadly credits 'economics and democracy'.^{lxv} He may not have been aware that the spread of honorific titles to everyone over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had originally been a democratisation, as well as the reverse impulse to eliminate honorifics. The use of plain names, which has obviously become more prevalent since the *New Statesman* debate, is a return to the early modern usage for ordinary people who were not entitled to the status conferred by Mr or Mrs. But dropping honorifics in favour of plain names was a step too far for 1950s Britain. The alternative title of Ms had been proposed in the US in 1901,^{lxvi} and featured in etiquette and secretarial handbooks in the 1940s to solve the problem that Empson complained of, although it was not widely taken up until the later 1960s and 1970s, when Mrs no longer seemed aspirational to many women, and when direct mail marketing required a more universal form of address.^{lxvii} The use of Ms returned female honorifics to the state which had prevailed for some three centuries before the nineteenth, with the universal Mrs.

The history presented here belies explanations previously offered for the introduction of Ms: that women finally were fed up with being identified with a man, that the identification of women as Miss or Mrs served to inform men of women's sexual availability. Until 1800 Mrs identified neither a woman's male protector nor her sexual availability, and it did so only unreliably in the century following. It turns out that patriarchal control of female sexuality has no need of honorifics

to flourish. This story also belies the attribution of Mrs to unmarried women as a 'courtesy title'. At least until 1800, Mrs was a 'courtesy title' for unmarried women only in the sense that it acknowledged their social standing, and not at all in the sense that it raised them to the same social standing that a married woman would have. The inference of that simple fact is that marriage of itself did not have the significance for female identity that it acquired in later centuries.

To tease apart the multiple strands of Mrs, I have referred to letters and literature, to parish listings, tax records and apprenticeship contracts in order to identify particular meanings over time. The information thus gathered should inform the practice of all historians – demographers as well as biographers and literary historians. In any pre-census population listing, only a handful of women out of hundreds will be identified as 'Mrs' – the women who are independently wealthy, the large farmers, the more prosperous innkeepers and grocers, the milliner or mantuamaker. Most demographers are aware that Mrs was a social status title, but not that the title carried no suggestion of marriage until the nineteenth century, and even then it was not a necessary implication. To this day a married woman who lived before the nineteenth century may be referred to anachronistically in Mrs Man form.^{lxviii} The problem of applying early twentieth-century formulations back into a past with apparently unchanging forms of male domination is encountered in many different contexts because the level of awareness among professionals is so low. So the 1786 portrait of Elizabeth Sheridan, nee Linley (which was exhibited twice in the nineteenth century as 'Mrs Sheridan'), when it was acquired by the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC in 1937 became 'Mrs Richard Brinsley Sheridan'.^{lxix} In 2011, the producers of Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) at London's Haymarket Theatre included the portrait under that title in the programme, apparently unaware of the anachronism. Any playgoer would conclude that that usage was contemporary with the play, and the recent past of the last century obscures the longer-term past.

To recap, I have outlined the pattern of use of mistress and its variants over 500 years. Of Johnson's original meanings of mistress, the most common use of the full length term today is

effectively the last, which Johnson termed whore or concubine, but is more genteelly used now to describe a married man's lover who is not his wife. Otherwise, the full form in Johnson's first meaning of a woman who governs is retained only in the old-fashioned 'schoolmistress', 'housemistress' in private schools, 'postmistress', and the head of Girton College, Cambridge. Mrs was universally used for women of social standing between the fifteenth century and c.1750 in its original sense of a mistress of servants (alongside Madam, Dame and Goodwife). Miss appeared for single women of the gentry and literati c.1750, but Mrs continued for everyone else, including most women in business. Probably around the same time, the pronunciation of Mrs shifted from 'mistress' to 'missis'. Both Mrs and Miss were always used with the woman's own first name, if a first name were required. The Mrs Man form using a husband's first name appeared c.1800 and spread rapidly down the social scale over the next seventy-five years, with the result that Mrs lost its social connotation and retained only the marital connotation that it had acquired over the previous century. Whereas the Mrs Man form was aspirational for some sectors of the population, it was contested from the 1840s in America. Responses in England await investigation. In the twentieth century, Ms was proposed as a solution to two problems: not knowing a woman's marital status; and women not wanting people to identify them by their marital status. Ms thus returned to the original function of Mrs, with one of the many seventeenth-century abbreviations for Mistress.

ⁱ In spite of the equivalence of 'master' and 'mistress', there is no feminine form of 'mastery'.

ⁱⁱ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd edn, vol. 2 (London, 1755-56), [Eighteenth Century Collections Online <http://0-galenet.galegroup.com/catalogue.urls.lon.ac.uk/servlet/ECCO>](http://0-galenet.galegroup.com/catalogue.urls.lon.ac.uk/servlet/ECCO), images 152-3.

ⁱⁱⁱ This observation, I discover, long predates me: in a footnote to the first American edition of Samuel Pepys' *Diary*, Richard, Lord Braybrooke comments, 'It is worthy of remark, that the fair sex may justly complain of almost every word in the English language designating a female, having, at some time or another, been used as a term of reproach; for we find Mother, Madam, Mistress and

Miss, all denoting women of bad character; and here Pepys adds the title of my Lady to the number, and completes the ungracious catalogue.' Google Books: *Pepys' Diary and Correspondence* (Philadelphia, 1855), vol. 3, 454.

^{iv} As we shall see, on this and several subsequent titular points, American English diverges. 'Master' for boys has not survived in America outside of the southeastern states, where other older usages are preserved.

^v Una Stannard, *Mrs Man* (San Francisco, 1977). Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women: Language and the Sexes* (Harmondsworth, 1979; 1st edn New York, 1976), 113-19. Jane Mills, *Womanwords* (London, 1991; 1st edn London, 1989), 162-5.

^{vi} For example, Alison Kay, *The Foundations of Female Entrepreneurship* (London, 2009), 110-111.

^{vii} For a discussion of the significance of single women's legal capacity, see Erickson, 'Coverture and capitalism', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), 1-16.

^{viii} See Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2007) and Amy M. Froide, *Never Married: Single Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005), ch. 2, for the changing use of these terms over time.

^{ix} Johnson, *Dictionary*, image 150. Nathan Bailey's *New Universal Etymological English Dictionary* (London, 1756), image 677 on ECCO, differed slightly: 'a Whore of Quality'. Bailey did include an entry for Mistress.

^x In both the OED citations of the *Diary* for definition 4.a, of 7 March 1665 and 30 November, Pepys was describing an actress. Stannard suggests that actresses retained Miss to a later age than other women. *Mrs Man*, 6.

^{xi} *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Charlotte Charke, (Youngest Daughter of Colley Cibber, Esq)* (London, 1755), in the Constable's Miscellany series (London, 1929).

^{xii} James Woodforde, *The Diary of a Country Parson 1758-1802*, J. Beresford (ed.), (Oxford,

1978), 45. There is no indication of Mrs Betty Baker's marital status in the full five-volume edition of the diary published by the same editor in 1968.

^{xiii} Stannard, *Mrs Man*, 6, says that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu started using Miss in the 1720s, but where this can be checked against the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the woman in question was only 20 or 21 years old. In the first half of the eighteenth century I am aware of only one adult woman entitled Miss, although it is possible she was very young too: a Pembrokeshire farmer whose estate was inventoried in 1715, Miss Mary Elliot, whose odd title is noted by Lesley Davison in her 'Spinsters were doing it for themselves: Independence and the single woman in early eighteenth century rural Wales', in Michael Roberts and Simone Clarke (eds), *Women and Gender in Early Modern Wales* (Cardiff, 2000), 193-4.

^{xiv} As Dublin, 1730: *The Imperious Beauty: A Letter from a Lover and a Friend to Miss S-*.

^{xv} In the same year, Fielding's farce *Miss Lucy in Town* played at Drury Lane in May, using 'Miss' interchangeably with 'Mrs', to describe a married woman in the title and 'business' women in other roles. Austin Dobson, *Fielding* (London, 1883), 90. Stannard, *Mrs Man*, 7, pointed especially to Richardson.

^{xvi} *The compleat letter writer: or, new and polite English secretary. Containing letters on the most common occasions in life. ...* (London, 1756).

^{xvii} Quoted in Norma Clarke, *Dr Johnson's Women* (London, 2000), 2. It was this phrase which galvanised my longstanding curiosity about honorifics into an investigation.

^{xviii} Judith Hawley, 'Carter, Elizabeth (1717–1806)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, [<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.urls.lon.ac.uk/view/article/4782>, accessed 9 Nov 2010].

^{xix} Clarke, *Johnson's Women*, pp. 17, 129-130. William R. Jones, 'Williams, Anna (1706–1783)', and Angela Rosenthal, 'Reynolds, Frances (1729–1807)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online edn, Jan 2008).

^{xx} Personal communication from Laurence Croq, Universite de Paris Ouest Nanterre, based on

her research in notarial records. Abel Boyer's *The Complete French Master for Ladies and Gentlemen* (London, 1756), 169, translates *dame* as Lady and *demoiselle* as Gentlewoman, but this definition is complicated by the fact that whereas Lady is both a status and a form of address, Gentlewoman is only a status and not a form of address in English.

xxi Miller and Swift, *Words and Women*, 114-15.

xxii *Diary of a Country Parson*, 200.

xxiii *Memoirs of my Life*, Betty Radice (ed.) (Harmondsworth, 1984), 54, 61.

xxiv *Catharine* (London, 1996).

xxv *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Delany*, Augusta Llanover (ed.) (1861), vol. 2, 577.

xxvi So far as I can establish from a search of *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*, in contradiction to Stannard, *Mrs Man*, 7, that she was always called Mrs More.

xxvii National Portrait Gallery D14218, D20056, D5299.

xxviii *The Works of Hannah More* (London, 1834), vol. 6, 7.

xxix For example, a 1636 edn of Gerard's *Herbal* was inscribed sometime after 1743 as owned by Madam Legge, who bequeathed it to a Madam Burton. Rebecca Laroche, *Medical Authority and Englishwomen's Herbal Texts, 1550-1650* (Farnham & Burlington, 2009), 84-7.

xxx *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (London, 1721).

xxxi Quoted from *Chesterfield's Letters* (1766), in the OED from Nov. (1932) (modernized text) VI, 2777.

xxxii (Penguin Classics edn, 1986), e.g. 82-3.

xxxiii Personal communication from Brian Palmer, born in 1929, on the families of his parents' and grandparents' generation.

xxxiv *Letters from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu 1709 to 1762*, R. Brimley Johnson (ed.) (London & Toronto, 1906), 12-18.

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- xxxv Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, *Brilliant Women: 18th-century Bluestockings* (London, 2008), 76, and in the exhibition captions.
- xxxvi *Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford, to Sir Horace Mann, British Envoy at the Court of Tuscany*, Lord Dover (ed.) (New York, 1833), vol. 1, 337 [google books] The discrepancy between the letter and the OED wording is verbatim.
- xxxvii *The Remembrances of Elizabeth Freke, 1671-1714*, R.A. Anselment (ed.) (Cambridge, 2001), 74, 98, 192.
- xxxviii Essex Record Office D/P 268/18/2, from the photocopy in the Cambridge Group for Population History Library. The female blacksmith was likely the owner of the business rather than the one wielding the hammer, like the blacksmith in Flora Thompson's memoir, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (1945). In the 1851 census there were 561 female blacksmiths in England. John S. Creasy, letter to the editor of *Local Population Studies* 25 (1980), 59. The fifty 'Mr's were: six victuallers; four millers; three each grocers and wool manufacturers; two each attorneys, bakers, butchers, carpenters, coachmakers, grocers, maltsters, surgeons; a single blacksmith, brewer, bricklayer, brickmaker, exciseman, horsedealer, supervisor, tanner, taylor, upholsterer and waggoner.
- xxxix *Diary of a Country Parson*, 100, 192.
- xl For other examples, see *The Account Books of Gertrude Savile 1736-58*, Mary A. Welch and Marjorie Penn (eds), Thoroton Society Record Series 24 (1965), or *Lady Grisell Baillie's Household Book 1692-1733*, Robert Scott-Moncrieff (ed.), Scottish History Society, 2nd Series, 1 (1911).
- xli Based on my reading of the records of some twenty companies. Only the governing committees of the companies were given honorifics, invariably Mr since women did not serve on these committees.
- xlii Charles Fitch, *History of the Worshipful Company of Pattenmakers of the City of London*

(Bungay, 1926), entry for 26 November 1777.

^{xliii} This is based on two samples from the poor rates for All Hallows Lombard Street in London who were liable to pay poor rates: in 1729 (86 tenants, 16 % of whom female) and 1737 (112 tenants, 14 % female). I have no reason to think that this parish was atypical.

^{xliv} London Metropolitan Archive P69/ALH4/B/058/MS10771, All Hallows Lombard Street Book for the Entry of the Poores Roll 1729-1755, and CLC/525/MS11316/111-156, Ward of Bishopsgate Within, precinct of All Hallows. On Mosley see A.L. Erickson, 'Eleanor Mosley and other milliners in the City of London Companies, 1700-1750', *History Workshop Journal*, 71 (2011), 147-72.

^{xlvi} On the use of feme sole trader status in the eighteenth century, see Karen Pearlston, 'Married women bankrupts in the age of coverture', *Law and Social Inquiry*, 34 (2009), 265-299 and 'What a feme sole trader could not do: Lord Mansfield on the limits of a married woman's commercial freedom,' in *Worth and Repute: Valuing Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Barbara J. Todd, Kim Kippen and Lori Woods (eds) (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2010).

^{xlvii} See the examples in Alison Kay, *The Foundations of Female Entrepreneurship* (London, 2009), ch. 4; Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760-1830* (Oxford, 2006), 59-60, 77-8, 175-6; and Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, 'Selling consumption in the eighteenth century: Advertising and the trade card in Britain and France', *Cultural & Social History* 4 (2007), 145-170.

^{xlviii} For a full list of her surviving work in at least 650 sites, see Alison Kelly, *Mrs Coade's Stone*, (London, 1990).

^{xlviii} It is unfortunate that the only reference to Coade in *British History Online* (Sir Howard Roberts and Walter H. Godfrey, *Survey of London*, vol. 23, 1951, for English Heritage) makes the mistake common before Kelly's monograph of thinking that she was a married woman who had

taken over the business from her husband on his death.

^{xlix} I am grateful to Sophie McGeevor, Cambridge University, for sharing her early doctoral work. The occupations of the single women designated Mrs were not distinctive in relation to the occupations of the women in *Kelly's* as a whole.

¹ Of the total, 156 women were identified as single; and the marital status was not specified for a further 44. Of 610 women titled Miss, 14 (2 %) were or had been married. I am grateful to Xuesheng You, Cambridge University, for sharing his doctoral work on the 1881 census.

^{li} Throughout the eighteenth century, England was the only country in Europe in which married women adopted their husbands' family name. A.L. Erickson, 'The marital economy in comparative perspective', in Maria Agren and A.L. Erickson (eds), *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain 1400-1800* (Aldershot & Burlington, 2005), 11.

^{lii} A search of the publications of of Hannah More, Fanny Burney, Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), Jane West (1758-1852) and Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), undertaken through *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* and *Google Books*, produced no examples of the Mrs Man form.

^{liii} The distinction of the senior married woman in a family in form of address continued into the mid-twentieth century in Boston with the use of 'madam' instead of Mrs (E. Bagby Atwood, 'The pronunciation of 'Mrs.', *American Speech* 25/1 (1950), 10-18) and perhaps elsewhere by other means.

^{liv} Stannard, *Mrs Man*, 3-4.

^{lv} John Walker (London, 1791), *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*.

^{lvi} Elizabeth Montagu, whose name is alternately spelled with an 'e' at the end, was the dedicatee of Hannah More's *Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies*, 3rd edn (London, 1778).

^{lvii} Samuel Johnson, *The Idler*, 3rd edn, vol. 1 (London, 1767), *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Originally published in 1758 as issue No. 268.

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- lviii London Metropolitan Archive COL/CHD/FR/02/469/27.
- lix 'Examining the OED', <http://oed.hertford.ox.ac.uk/main/content/view/93/237/>
- lx Henry Fielding, *Amelia* (Dublin, 1752), vol. 2; David Garrick, *The Irish Widow* (London, 1772).
- lxi Lena Cowen Orlin, 'Temporary Lives in London Lodgings', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 71, 1 (2008), 240 lists several from a parish clerk's record book in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. *The Journal of Giles Moore 1656-1679*, Ruth Bird (ed.) (Lewes, 1970), normally spells it out but sometimes abbreviates as Ms. The accounts of the Earls of Bedford spelled it out in the 1690s: Gladys Scott Thomson, *Life in a Noble Household, 1641-1700* (New York, 1937), 119, 298.
- lxii Atwood, 'Mrs.', 10-18 , and personal communications from Cinthia Stahl on the Ozark Mountain area, and from Kelly Boyd and Lynne Walker (both of the Institute of Historical Research, University of London) on Tennessee.
- lxiii Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, in *Novels of George Eliot* (Edinburgh & London, n.d., Wm Blackwood & Sons), vol. IV, 68 (ch. 10).
- lxiv *The New Statesman and Nation*, 17 January 1953. Madeleine Wallace was an earlier contributor to the exchange, on 10 January. I am indebted to Mark Thompson for this reference.
- lxv *Ibid.*, 31 January 1953.
- lxvi Full credit to the OED here for picking up the original reference from Ben Zimmer's 2009 entry in visualthesaurus.com. The *Springfield (Mass.) Sunday Republican* of 10 November 1901 opined: 'The abbreviation "Ms." is simple, it is easy to write, and the person concerned can translate it properly according to circumstances. For oral use it might be rendered as "Mizz", which would be a close parallel to the practice long universal in many bucolic regions, where a slurred Mis' does duty for Miss and Mrs. alike.'
- lxvii Miller and Swift, *Words*, 113. Mills, *Womanwords*, 163.

^{lxviii} For example, the entry for 7 July 1694 reads 'Mrs Harvey? Williams'. *Roger Whitley's Diary 1684-1697*, transcribed by Michael Stevens and Honor Lewington (2004) *British History Online*.

^{lxix} Correspondence with Anne Halpern, Curatorial Dept, National Gallery of Art. The portrait is by Thomas Gainsborough.