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DON'T CALL ME "MADAM"

Louis Foley

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The word *madame* is known throughout the world, and everywhere it is pronounced acceptably—except among English-speaking people. It would be said to translate literally as “my lady,” but so-called literal translations are usually only *mistranslations*. Anyhow, the word has no real equivalent in modern English.

Of course everybody thinks he knows the word, and you can't tell him differently. By dint of considerable patient drill you *can* get an average English-speaking person to pronounce it quite correctly—all by itself. Then, as soon as the immediate pressure is removed, he slips back into his old habits of galloping over syllables, hitting about every third one. *Madame* becomes simply “MADm,” or if the person is consciously trying to be “fancy,” it may be “muhDAM” or “muhDAHm.” The one thing certain is that it will not sound like French.

Professor Charles Bruneau used to tell us, in his course on the History of Grammar at the Sorbonne, that the “typical” French word is a word of two syllables. His favorite example was *martyr*. One may wonder whether the professor fully realized how profoundly true his statement was. Perhaps those of us who look at French “from the outside” may be even more struck by that observation. For it appears at every moment in the natural language of French-speaking people from their earliest childhood.

Years ago Gracie Allen told an unforgettable story on the radio. A young French couple were both killed in an accident, leaving a baby only a few weeks old. An American couple adopted the child, and immediately began taking French lessons, “so that they would be able to understand the baby when it would start to talk.”

Now, however absurd the story seems, for anyone who really knows the speech of French children—so infinitely different from that of young Americans—it may seem only a cartoon-like exaggeration, explain it as one will. All the typical childish vocabulary shows the difference unmistakably: *papa, maman, bébé, dodo, lolo, bobo, bon-bon, dada*, and so on indefinitely. Of course all these are pronounced with both syllables equally clear, equally forceful. But see what happens to the ones that long ago came into English: “POPuh,” “MOMuh,” “BAYby,” and the like.

If the good professor had been thinking of Americans, he might

well have used as example the word *madame*. Oh, to be sure, technically it has three syllables—*ma-da-me*—as comes out in singing or in poetry where the rhythm gives value to the “unstable *e*,” as in the well-known song, *Madame la Marquise*, but as pronounced in all ordinary circumstances it serves perfectly to bring out the point.

Long ago for ordinary conversation the English version was telescoped into “ma’m.” For a good while this was the regular mark of politeness to be added always to “yes” or “no” in answering a woman. Then about the turn of the century, “they,” whoever they were, mysteriously spread the idea that it was an old-fashioned habit not really polite any more. Within a few years it seemed to die out entirely, except in certain tranquil regions off the beaten track, and in the usage of individuals who lingered behind the times.

“Sir” was likewise supposed to be old stuff, not “correct” any more, but unlike *ma’m* it subsided only temporarily. Perhaps army discipline, with two World Wars and continuing active service since, had a good deal to do with its survival. Anyone who has had a chance to observe continuously over all that time must have noticed considerably more “sirring,” by people serving the public, than was the case some years before.

What, you ask, took the place of “ma’m”? There *was* no substitute. The only possibility for “politeness,” then—and we are still stuck with it—was to keep continually repeating the lady’s last name with *Miss* or “*Missus*” (*Miz* in the South). But once it is clear which lady you are addressing, it seems downright silly to keep on calling her by name all the time. The polite deference which “sir” so conveniently expresses in English is thus replaced by cumbersome and irrelevant insistence upon the obvious. It shows the sort of thing the illogicality of our usage gets us into.

Not only are most people in this country—or in England—not prepared to *pronounce* “madame” correctly without discomfort, but they do not know how to *write* it. This unawareness shows up regularly and systematically in virtually *all* printing done in either Great Britain or the United States, wherever the title appears. Literally and logically, the “point” is obviously not understood by the publishers of even the most carefully edited of British or American books.

For of course the word is ordinarily abbreviated, not spelled out in full any more than we do with “mister” or “missus.” In genuine French writing or printing, however, no one dreams of putting a *period* after “Mme” because the *end* of the word is not cut off; it is the inside of the word “-ada-” that is omitted.

Meanwhile our hectic anglicization of *madame* into “MADm”—spelled *Madam*, of course, as if the second “a” really meant something—has carried on in curious ways of its own. In one kind of case it still partially reflects French use of *Madame*, though only partially; in addressing a business letter to a married woman whose name you did not know, you could salute her as “Dear Madam.” If you knew her name, it would be “Dear Mrs. So-and-so.”

In nineteenth-century Americanese, a *foreign* teacher of music or dancing, or a clairvoyant or fortune-teller, regularly rated the title of *Madam*. Also it was—and to some extent still is—an appellation for headmistresses of certain schools for girls, though in our time this sounds like a rather stiff affectation, more or less a Britishism.

These special categories were never confused in any way with the meaning which was by far the commonest in this country: the proprietress of a house of prostitution. Here is where our undefinable but expressive definite article shows its power to move ideas worlds away. No one would ever have been likely to say “*the* Madam” in any other sense.

A generation or two ago, when the “oldest profession” was still mainly on an organized basis, before it had largely dissolved into free-lance or amateur operations, a story that was going the rounds seemed very amusing at the time. In those days, before the fashions and cosmetics of the underworld had come to be generally copied by “society,” the professional status was indicated by a woman’s appearance well-nigh as unmistakably as a policeman by his uniform.

Another occupation that was pretty clearly stamped was that of the typical department-store floorwalker. He would be impeccably dressed and extremely polite in an impersonal manner somewhat on the sissy side.

As the story goes, one day two hard-eyed, much-rouged, flashily-dressed female creatures, rather bored-looking, stalked into a store. The floorwalker was promptly on the job. Falling in step with them as they entered, and addressing the one beside him, he inquired obsequiously, “What will it be for you, madam?”

“Towels,” she replied contemptuously, between clinches with chewing-gum.

“What sort of towels, Madam?” earnestly continued the floorwalker.

“What the hell,” she replied, “face-towels, damn you, an’ *quit callin’ me ‘madam’!*”