



Forms of address: Reading between the lines

Citation

Rotundo, Barbara. 1979. Forms of address: Reading between the lines. Harvard Library Bulletin XXVII (3), July 1979: 349-358.

Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37364313>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Forms of Address: Reading Between the Lines

Barbara Rotundo

FOR YEARS it has been customary to look down upon the Victorians as cold and priggish men and women with abominable taste in art and architecture. This was as true for American Victorians as for the English, whose ruler, Queen Victoria, supplied the name for the century.

Today their art and architecture is experiencing a great revival. The ornate furniture that the flapper era considered outrageous has become antique and valuable. The prettified portraits and sentimental, story-telling pictures now sell at auctions for fabulous sums. With soaring costs of new construction, people find that renovating nineteenth-century row houses is a sound investment, while the flimsy, money-saving construction and dull architecture of many modern apartments make remodeled Victorian buildings with solid walls and variety in rooms and windows much sought-after rentals. Towns and cities from Kingston, New York, to Georgetown, Colorado, have found that people will go out of their way to enjoy the Victorian ambience for shopping or spending a weekend. In the ultimate accolade, Disney World in Florida utilizes Victorian architecture to create its popular dream world.

Because our taste has changed, Victorian buildings and artifacts are now acceptable, even desirable. Is it perhaps time to reassess our beliefs about the chilling propriety and didactic morality in the personal lives of the Victorians? Was the pious righteousness a public face only? Were they as cool and correct at home as at church or work? Were they hypocrites?

If we are to make a reassessment, we must look at the evidence that originally led us to the conclusion that Victorians were joyless and unduly moral. What survives of their individual lives? Have we based our beliefs on mere hearsay?

One obvious source for our impression is the surviving stiffly-posed photographs. Solemn, rigid, glaring straight at us, these people could never have been merry, loving, and forgiving. But we do them an in-

justice if we forget the conditions of early photographs (and daguerreotypes too). Long exposures were necessary, especially in artificial light, and the pictures became stylized as photographers learned which poses were easiest to maintain. In the earliest days there were even unseen headrests to freeze the position of the head. No wonder they seem rigid and unhappy. A studio portrait was a very different matter from a modern snapshot. It was the medium that caused the stiffness, not necessarily the personality or character of the sitters.

Probably the most important source for our impression is the written word. We have learned a lot from the books they wrote about their own times, both novels and non-fiction. But books must be used with caution, since published material is obviously intended for a public audience. Facts may have been rearranged or suppressed, and imagined events may have been created to convey the desired proper impression — proper impressions and proper moral lessons were the approved goals for Victorian books. For a true picture of their personal lives and their individual feelings, we must turn to their letters.

The nineteenth century poured out an extraordinary quantity of letters. If we today devoted to correspondence the time we spend on the telephone — the modern substitute for writing — we still could not find enough hours to write the frequent, lengthy letters that Victorians took for granted.

There were a number of reasons for the surge in letter writing. Literacy increased, inexpensive paper became available, and the postal service grew cheaper and more efficient. In 1843 it cost 18½¢ to send a letter from New York City to upstate Troy and more to send it a greater distance.¹ By 1851 the postage for a prepaid letter sent up to three thousand miles was 3¢.² As for efficiency, a host like the publisher James T. Fields could easily gather a last-minute party for an author staying in town just overnight. He could write his invitations in the morning, confident that the guests would receive them in time to make plans for attending that evening.

The primary source for the examples and conclusions drawn on these pages is the thousands of letters that poured in and out of the most important Boston publishing firm, Ticknor and Fields, and the correspondence among the many authors they published beginning about

¹ Wayne E. Fuller, *The American Mail* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 61.

² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

1850. Any other network of friends and acquaintances, any other center of population like Philadelphia, New Orleans, or even "frontier" Chicago, would have yielded similar results. (I read the personal and official correspondence of a few Western politicians as a kind of control and found exactly the same patterns.) Ticknor and Fields served many popular and important men and women whose letters have been preserved in research libraries like the Houghton as well as published in books. Thus a focus on this one firm provides abundant and easily obtained evidence for establishing the patterns of usage.

The proper, formal tone of letters even between good friends may at first discourage readers in a search for warmth and humanity in the Victorians. The very beginning of the letter, the form of address used for the salutation, may bother modern readers because Victorians did not approve using first names freely. In fact, they felt first names belonged to the private, personal home life, and would have been shocked by the frequent public use of the familiar form in twentieth-century life.

Victorians fervently believed that the home was the shrine of the family and a sanctuary from the threatening and competitive world. Loving acceptance warmed the home and had to be protected from prying outsiders. Even long-lasting friendships or close business association did not warrant the use of first names that belonged to the sacred hearth.

Scholars have paid little attention to forms of address.³ There seem to be just two instances in literary criticism. In "Trollope's Forms of Address," George Watson shows the subtleties of characterization that Trollope achieves by having characters shift their forms of address.⁴ R. W. Chapman includes a brief discussion of Jane Austen's use of such forms in an appendix to his special edition of *Pride and Prejudice* (2nd edition, 1926).

Sociolinguists have also done some work in the field in recent years.

³ This paper is concerned with the beginnings of letters, not endings. A recheck supported my earlier impression that there are no special patterns in closings. However, attention to endings did reveal personal patterns. For instance, Henry James always signed his name in full or used his initials even in letters to his family or friends he addressed as "dearest." The exception came after their father's death when he started signing letters to his older brother with first name alone. In a silent tribute of love and appreciation, he continued signing "Henry" in letters to William's widow.

⁴ George Watson, "Trollope's Forms of Address," *Critical Quarterly*, XV (Autumn 1973), 219-230.

Much of the sociolinguistic concern is with what they call T and V, symbols for the familiar and formal pronouns derived from the French "tu" and "vous." Conventions controlling T and V reveal much about family and class structure in a society. In the seventeenth century, Quakers used "thee" for everyone at a time when English still differentiated between "thee" for servants and children and "you" for equals and superiors. Modern usage shows a quicker move to T and wider "solidarity" in which both speakers use the T instead of the social inferior using the V.⁵ The most amusing example is the report of French mountaineers that they automatically move to mutual "tu" as soon as they climb above a certain altitude.⁶

More in line with this paper is an essay by Roger Brown and Marguerite Ford, "Address in American English."⁷ Their source material includes contemporary American plays, field observations, and questionnaires. They show that current practice (as we all know) is pretty much limited to title and last name (T+LN) or first name (FN). I have found nothing on usage in American English in the last century, nor have I found any research based on letters, surely as valid a source as plays and novels.

Here are the patterns used consistently in the nineteenth century. The most formal level is the same as modern usage: "Dear Sir" or "Dear Mr. Bryant." The nineteenth century created a slightly more friendly level by adding "my": "My dear sir" or "My dear Mr. Dana." The third step eliminated the title, "Dear Dickens," while another possibility was adding "my" to the salutation, "My dear Howells." Sometimes "Dear Friend" was used in place of either of the last two. These were the only forms available to most correspondents.

⁵ Roger Brown and Albert Gilman, "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeck (New York: Wiley, 1960), p. 261.

⁶ One strand of usage that is not discussed here is the pattern for servants. Social rank rather than sex, age, or acquaintance established these non-reciprocal patterns. It is my impression (as much from novels as other historical evidence) that greater social mobility in the United States made for a more relaxed usage than in England. William Dean Howells' *Landlord of Lion's Head* shows a young woman who was both "servant" and "social peer." It was also customary for young men to work their way through college, at manual labor if necessary, from colonial days. Englishmen easily lost their social bearings in these American situations. One indication of this is the frequency of comments about English visitors insulting people by the way they addressed them.

⁷ Roger Brown and Marguerite Ford, "Address in American English," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, LXII (March 1961), 375-385.

The exceptions to last-name formality derived by and large from childhood. Those who were friends when young continued to use first names. Relatives of the same generation, even if not close, usually employed first names, but might add the title as for an older generation. Louisa May Alcott addressed her second cousin, Mrs. Fields, wife of the publisher, as "Dear Cousin Annie." Sometimes aunts and uncles were given the relationship title and the last name rather than the first. Mrs. Henry Adams' use of "Uncle Tappan" is as formal as "Mr. Tappan." At other times the uncle's first name became the aunt's as well. Fanny Longfellow addressed her father's sister-in-law, Mrs. Samuel Appleton, as "Aunt Sam."

Men who had been close friends as young men, especially if bachelors together, kept first names: the writers Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Bayard Taylor, early companions in Bohemian New York, were Tom and Bayard to each other. On the other hand, Longfellow and Hawthorne, who were classmates but not close friends at Bowdoin College, addressed each other as "Dear Hawthorne" and "Dear Longfellow."

The younger generation, of course, always used title and last name for their elders. Adults who had known a younger generation as children usually continued to call them by first name as they grew up, sometimes adding a "Miss" before a woman's first name. However, some shifted to the last name as a subtle compliment. Thus Mrs. Fields had been hostess to the elder Henry James and his wife when "Billy" and "Harry" were students, and she called the young men by their family nicknames. When they grew up to be William James the psychologist and Henry James the novelist, she dropped the first names and referred to each as "Mr. James." In a similar change, Longfellow, who had addressed letters to his friend Charles Sumner with such salutations as "Dear Carlos" and "Dearest Charles," adopted "My dear Senator" or "My dear Sumner" after Sumner became an important Senator and spokesman for the anti-slavery movement.⁸ Interestingly enough, between 1851 and 1853, while he was feeling his way to the new formality, Longfellow frequently skipped the salutation completely.

Since careful, ceremonious patterns make moderns uncomfortable, it is a relief to report that Victorians considered ludicrous, just as we

⁸ This change was pointed out by Lawrence Buell in his review of Longfellow's *Letters*, ed. Andrew Hilen in *New England Quarterly*, XLVI (June 1973), 296-298.

would, an early episode in the life of Governor Andrew. When the boy who was to become the famous Civil War governor of Massachusetts went off to attend Bowdoin College, he promptly wrote home, beginning the letter "Dear Father" and ending "Yours affectionately." His father returned the letter with a reprimand that it should have been written "Honored Sir" and closed with "Your dutiful son."⁹

Another circumstance to remember about the nineteenth century is that letters were often intended for a wide audience of family and friends. If the writer was visiting exotic places or was gifted and fluent, the letters might circulate extensively. Charles Eliot Norton wrote his sister from India with confident assurance, "I have written an account to Anna Ticknor in a letter which you will see."¹⁰ Anna was his cousin and could be counted on to share the letter with the whole family.

While Henry James was abroad in 1869, his father circulated the son's letters among an impressive circle of friends. In response to his father's report, the future novelist admits to his brother being "terrifically agitated by the thought that Emerson likes them."¹¹ Since young James had then published only a few reviews and short stories but Ralph Waldo Emerson was internationally famous, the agitation and pride were justified.

Fame and the chance that a letter might eventually be published also had a sobering and formalizing effect. This consideration was undoubtedly involved in Longfellow's shift from "Carlos" to "Sumner," and it would have influenced a number of the other correspondents under study. However, the very fact that they believed the public would be disturbed if two old friends, for instance, called each other by first names shows how deeply the importance of propriety was embedded in their culture and their consciousness. The belief was too firmly and consistently held for a twentieth-century observer to call hypocritical any action in accord with it. Hypocrisy involves a lack of sincerity, the playing of a false role. Modern readers may find Longfellow and his friends conventional, stiff, even a little dull, but certainly not insincere.

⁹ Henry Greenleaf Pearson, *The Life of John A. Andrew* (Boston: Mifflin, 1904), I, 5.

¹⁰ Charles Eliot Norton, *Letters* (Boston: Mifflin, 1913), I, 47.

¹¹ Henry James, *Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, I (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1974), 179.

Most of the examples we have looked at so far represent the correspondence of men. Women were exceptions to many patterns, as might be expected from the Victorian attitude that valued female innocence and frigidity, expected women to be helpless, and kept them in legal bondage. A typical difference was that women moved quite readily to first names in friendships begun at any period in their lives. Of course women and children shared the traits of innocence and helplessness, and both belonged in the home where first names were natural.

In the nineteenth century address *across* sex lines was very formal. Men and women used titles in addressing each other with rare exceptions. Longfellow and his publisher were close friends, and after his second wife died, Longfellow relied on Mrs. Fields for domestic advice and always kept her informed of his plans and family news. Yet the dozens of informal notes that passed between them always began "Dear Mrs. Fields" and "Dear Mr. Longfellow."

The woman had the power of dispensation. That is, she could take the initiative to ask the man to call her by her first name, although most women would have felt that such a suggestion on their part would be improperly daring. The man was not ordinarily free to make the move, but Victorian novelists heightened the excitement of a proposal scene by having the hero shift from "Miss" to first name — an effect completely lost to worldly twentieth-century readers.¹²

At the end of their lives (when the unvoiced assumption was that they were beyond the temptations of sex and similar dangers) an old friend might ask to call a woman by her first name. In 1895, when he was 62, the Shakespearean scholar H. H. Furness asked if he might address Mrs. Fields, also 62, by her first name because, he boldly confessed, he always thought of her as Annie.¹³

In another exception, women were never called by last name alone and they were not supposed to adopt the masculine prerogative of calling a man by his last name alone. It is interesting to watch the nineteenth-century liberated woman breaking this unwritten law. Even before she wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" during the Civil War, Julia Ward Howe was considered an important poet, and she quite agreed with that general opinion. She addressed her publisher as "Fields" whenever she was peeved with him, which was most of the time. Eventually she left Ticknor and Fields, a rare instance of their losing an author. In the 1870s Mrs. Howe joined the woman's rights

¹² Watson, p. 219.

¹³ Unpublished letter in Huntington Library.

movement and took a position of leadership on both the state and national levels. Thus she proved by public actions the feminism earlier indicated by her use of "Fields" with no title.

More revealing is the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who did not approve of the woman's rights movement and said so in various published writings. Mrs. Stowe let money slip through her fingers and could never believe that it was all spent, yet she drove a hard bargain and demanded every possible penny for the writing she did after the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. (After her husband died in 1886, she offered his obituary to the *Atlantic Monthly* for \$100.¹⁴) She too would use plain "Fields" when he refused her demands.

Writing in 1927, Constance Rourke pointed out that in Stowe novels the men were weak while the women were strong and independent. Mrs. Stowe may have said that women should stay in their proper domestic sphere and rely on men to take care of them, but in creating her novels she unconsciously betrayed a completely different bias.¹⁵ The use of the last name alone in her correspondence is an additional reliable sign that, whatever her public statements, Mrs. Stowe's instincts were feminist.

References to people followed the same patterns as address with one exception: wives could refer to their husbands by last name without title. Because decorum required a formal reference and most women used the "Mr.," social commentators have concluded that most Victorian women called their husbands by title and last name even in private. There is little evidence for this, once allowance has been made for the conventional patterns. Most women correspondents writing to family and intimate friends referred to their husbands by first name or nickname. The correspondence between husbands and wives and the relatively few surviving love letters also make nonsense of the last-name myth.

The use of nicknames was one of the primary ways of indicating friendship or intimacy within the expected formality. Sometimes these names were puns; at other times they referred to personal traits or functions. In family letters, Julia Ward Howe referred to her husband as "Chev," short for "Chevalier." (Samuel Gridley Howe, pioneer in work with the blind and mentally retarded, had fought in the war for Greek independence and among his other romantic accomplishments was superb horsemanship.) In writing to friends, Mrs.

¹⁴ Unpublished letter in Houghton Library.

¹⁵ Constance Rourke, *Trumpets of Jubilee* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), pp. 133f.

Stowe called her theological scholar husband "my Rabbi." After Thomas Bailey Aldrich and his wife moved to the small village of Ponkapaug outside Boston, Sarah Orne Jewett often addressed them as the Duke and Duchess of Ponkapaug. Many people, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, punned on the name "Fields" by substituting "Meadows." John Greenleaf Whittier, the shy Quaker bachelor, felt he could address letters to "Angel Meadows" with complete propriety, whereas writing "Annie Fields" would apparently have been indiscreet.

Puns and teasing in the body of the letter were important ways to express friendliness. During the summer when Longfellow was composing *Hiawatha*, he wrote to Fields from Newport, asking for \$100 on account. "You naturally ask 'on account of what?' I shall answer — I shall tell you — on account of my extremely liberal expenditures in this place."¹⁶

While this kind of word-play may strike us as childish or not very witty, it certainly shows friends trying to amuse each other and proves that our Victorian ancestors were far from grim and joyless. As further proof we should acknowledge that an age that produced the classic comic writer, Mark Twain, surely knew how to laugh.

As might be expected, Mark Twain's letters were full of jokes and quips. Interestingly enough, instead of subduing competition with his inexhaustible and exuberant humor, Twain seemed to challenge and bring out the best in his friends. After Aldrich moved to Ponkapaug, he innocently wrote to Twain requesting a picture to hang on the wall of his new study. For weeks Twain sent a picture every day, ending with twenty copies of a portrait, each in a separate cover, all delivered on New Year's Day, 1875.

A passage from the flurry of protesting letters sent to Hartford (this one purportedly from Chief of Police T. Bayleigh) contains the seed of Twain's traumatic Whittier birthday dinner speech. In the letter "Chief Bayleigh" advises "that person" not to send any more letters because the Ponkapaug Post Office is about to be blown up. "R.W.E., H.W.L., O.W.H., and other conspirators in masks, have been seen flitting about the town for several days past."¹⁷

¹⁶ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Letters*, ed. Andrew Hillen, III (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1972), 493.

¹⁷ Ferris Greenslet, *The Life of Thomas Bailey Aldrich* (Boston: Mifflin, 1908), p. 115.

About two years later, at the birthday dinner, Mark Twain told a story of three drunken rogues who duped an innocent miner in his mountain cabin. The men claimed to be Emerson, Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, the same trio Aldrich had used. Twain was careful to show that the tramps were not the men they claimed to be. Holmes had a slight build in real life, but Twain described the drunken claimant as very fat. Despite the precautions, Twain realized that he was not hearing the roars of laughter to which he was accustomed (although his memory of being received in cold silence is simply not true).¹⁸ Tortured by guilt for having insulted the sacred deities of American literature, Twain later wrote apologies to Emerson, Longfellow, and Holmes. Longfellow and Holmes immediately sent back reassuring notes. Emerson's daughter wrote to explain that the speech had made no impression on her father because his memory was failing in his old age. In a typical touch of Victorian delicacy, Ellen Emerson addressed her letter not to Mark Twain, whom she had never met, but to his wife.¹⁹

Does her absurd action seem the last straw? Do we despise the Victorians for their ridiculous caution about proper conduct? No. We can laugh at Ellen Emerson's circumspection, but we cannot despise the basic action — her consideration for Mark Twain, who craved forgiveness. She compassionately answered that appeal, even though she sent the absolution by way of his wife.

What have these glimpses of Victorian correspondence disclosed about the personal lives of the Victorians? Men and women in the nineteenth century certainly valued proper conduct and believed in setting a high moral tone with their writings and their actions. Such standards may not be particularly congenial to twentieth-century taste, but they are not hypocritical, not despicable. A modern observer may interpret their formality as coolness, but a closer acquaintance reveals that Victorians were warm and friendly and perhaps even more considerate about privacy and personal feelings than their liberated, worldly descendants.

¹⁸ Henry Nash Smith, "That Hideous Mistake of Poor Clemens's," *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN*, IX (Spring 1955), 145-180.

¹⁹ *Mark Twain's Letters*, arranged with comment by Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper, 1929), I, 318.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

HUGH AMORY, Rare Book Cataloguer in the Harvard College Library, is the author of a Columbia University dissertation, "Law and the Structure of Fielding's Novels," and of several articles, including contributions to the January 1977 and April 1978 issues of the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN. During 1980-81 he will pursue research on Fielding and other subjects as Munby Fellow at Cambridge University.

RALPH W. FRANKLIN, who teaches at Whitworth College in Spokane, wrote a dissertation on Emily Dickinson at Northwestern University, and his *The Editing of Emily Dickinson* was published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 1967. He is now preparing a facsimile edition of the Dickinson fascicles, which will be published by the Harvard University Press in 1980.

MASON HAMMOND, Pope Professor of the Latin Language and Literature, *Emeritus*, and Honorary Associate of Kirkland House at Harvard, is a member of the Harvard Class of 1925 and the author of many books and articles, including the contribution to the July 1978 HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN which he supplements in this issue.

PHILIP HOFER, Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts in the Harvard College Library, *Emeritus*, has contributed to seventeen previous issues of the HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN, most recently in January 1979. In July 1968 the BULLETIN published an article about him by Peter A. Wick.

LEO M. KAISER, Professor of Classical Studies at Loyola University of Chicago, has contributed editions of Harvard Latin orations to four previous issues of the BULLETIN (January 1973, July 1974, October 1976, and October 1978) as well as to several other periodicals.

BARBARA ROTUNDO, Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York at Albany, wrote her dissertation at Syracuse University on Mrs. James T. Fields; she contributed "Mount Auburn Cemetery: A Proper Boston Institution," to the July 1974 HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN.

MERTON M. SEALTS, JR., Henry A. Pochmann Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin, is an author and editor; one of his books, *Melville's Reading* (1966) was originally serialized in the BULLETIN, and the January 1978 issue included an article of his on Melville.

ELEANOR M. TILTON, Professor of English at Barnard College, is the author of *Amiable Autocrat: A Biography of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes* (1947), and she edited T. F. Currier's bibliography of Holmes (1953) as well as The Cambridge Edition of Holmes's *Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).