

FIVE MINUTES WITH A MASTER OF PROTOCOL

Last fall, one of our colleagues came into the office chortling about the previous evening's episode of *Gossip Girl*. The object of his mirth was not Eric van der Woodson's vibrant highlights or Jenny Humphrey's "fashion" designs, but rather the gross misuse of a royal title -- namely that of a character known as Duchess Beaton. (It was the episode in which Blair tried to kiss up to her British boyfriend's aristo stepmother.) "Everyone knows that the proper way to address a Duke or Duchess is always 'Your Grace,'" the editor told us. "Not 'Duchess This', 'Duchess That!'"

So when we recently received a review copy of a book entitled *Honor & Respect: The Official Guide to Names, Titles and Forms of Addresses*, we were intrigued. The forbidding-looking 552-page tome by one Robert Hickey -- who gives his credentials as Deputy Director of the Protocol School of Washington -- dictates all the nitty gritty details of social and business etiquette and protocol. Hoping this reference book could keep us from such declassé mishaps, we decided to ask Hickey for a few tips. (Perhaps *Gossip Girl*'s writers should take note.)

All this agonizing over protocol and titles -- isn't it archaic in this day and age?

The world may be flat, but people at the top of the pecking order don't think so. So if you're sitting next to a baroness, it would be fun to know what to call her. And wouldn't it be fun to have a good conversation with her? But if you start out acting like a bumpkin, you're not going to get there.

If you are a plain old Mr. or Ms. and would like to add some pizzazz to your name, are there any titles that are easy to acquire?

Remember there was a woman on *Real Housewives of New York* who said she was married to a count? He was a French count, but there's no French king. So in the official world, he's a "courtesy count" -- that means they'll call him a count, but he's really a Mr. You always call the person by the name they decide they want. If you said, "My name is Countess Johanna," I would call you that. But when you left the room I might talk about you.

What's your position on "Ms." versus "Miss"?

I don't know any adult [American] woman now who is not married who wants to be called Miss. But internationally that's not true. Germans, Australians and some Canadians, they use Miss a lot more.

There was a lot of hubbub over what some deemed the Obamas' improper protocol at Buckingham Palace earlier this year. What was your position on the incident?

It was one of the worst protocol mishaps I've ever witnessed. The tradition is not to shake the Queen's hand unless she offers it, but President Obama grabbed her hand and cupped it. Everyone knew he was being warm and gracious, but the truth is that he should have just lightly shaken her hand. You never touch the royal person. That's the reason that she always has a handbag, so she won't have to shake anybody's hand.

What about Michelle's controversial hug?

I bet in Michelle Obama's life, putting her arm around an old woman is a warm and lovely thing to do. But the queen is not an old woman -- she's the queen of England.

If you had one piece of advice for common mortals, what would it be?

I would ask people to do one thing: no adult should ever introduce themselves by just their first name. A lot of young people come off as sort of not serious that way.

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