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Sonam Pelden

*Edith Cowan University*, [s.pelden@ecu.edu.au](mailto:s.pelden@ecu.edu.au)

Elizabeth Reid Boyd

*Edith Cowan University*, [e.boyd@ecu.edu.au](mailto:e.boyd@ecu.edu.au)

Madelena Grobbelaar

*Edith Cowan University*, [m.grobbelaar@ecu.edu.au](mailto:m.grobbelaar@ecu.edu.au)

Kwadwo Adusei-Asante

*Edith Cowan University*, [K.adusei@ecu.edu.au](mailto:K.adusei@ecu.edu.au)

Lucy Hopkins

*Edith Cowan University*, [lucy.hopkins@ecu.edu.au](mailto:lucy.hopkins@ecu.edu.au)

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Article

# Ladies, Gentlemen and Guys: The Gender Politics of Politeness

Sonam Pelden <sup>\*</sup>, Elizabeth Reid Boyd, Madalena Grobbelaar <sup>\*</sup>, Kwadwo Adusei-Asante and Lucy Hopkins

Affiliation 1 School of Arts & Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup WA 6027, Australia; e.boyd@ecu.edu.au (E.R.B.); k.adusei@ecu.edu.au (K.A.-A.); lucy.hopkins@ecu.edu.au (L.H.)

<sup>\*</sup> Correspondence: s.pelden@ecu.edu.au (S.P.); m.grobbelaar@ecu.edu.au (M.G.); Tel.: +61-863045671 (S.P.)

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**Abstract:** Are there ladies and gentlemen in the 21st century? Do we need them? In the 20th century, lady became particularly unpopular with second wave feminists, who preferred ‘woman’. Gentleman was seen as similarly politically incorrect: class, race and culture bound. Following previous research on the word lady, we explore here some current evocations and debates around these words. We consider how the more casual, etymologically gendered term ‘guy’ has been utilized for men and women, and how it functions to reflect and obscure gender. While the return of the lady might be considered a consumer fad, a neo-conservative post-feminist backlash, or nostalgia for an elite ‘polite society’, it also offers an opportunity for a deeper discussion about civility as part of a broader conversation that is gaining impetus in the Western world. Politeness is personal and political. Whilst evidence for a comeback of the gentleman is limited, we critically consider the re-emergence of the lady as reflecting a deeper desire for applied sexual and social ethics. Such gender ethics have global, social and cultural ramifications that we ought not to underestimate. The desire for a culture of civility is gaining momentum as we are increasingly confronted with the violent consequences of a culture without it.

**Keywords:** gender politics; ladies; gentleman; guys; ethics; culture; class

## 1. Introduction

Are there ladies and gentlemen in the 21st century? Following previous research on the return of the word lady (Reid Boyd 2012), we explore here some current evocations and debates around these words. Lady became particularly unpopular with second wave feminists, who preferred ‘woman’. Gentleman was seen as similarly politically incorrect: class, race and culture bound. Here, we explore whether the lady and gentleman are back, why they went away and what their future might be. We consider how the more casual, etymologically gendered term ‘guy’ has been utilized for men and women, and how it functions to reflect and obscure gender. While a return of the lady and gentleman might be considered a consumer fad, a neo-conservative post-feminist backlash, or nostalgia for an elite ‘polite society’, it also offers an opportunity for a deeper discussion about civility as part of a broader conversation about a new humanism that is gaining impetus in the Western world. Politeness is personal and political. We critically consider the re-emergence of the lady and the gentleman as reflecting a deeper desire for applied sexual and social ethics. Such gender ethics have global, social and cultural ramifications that we ought not to underestimate. We contextualize this discussion within diverse feminisms and masculinities and the ongoing exploration of gender-free terms and their value and utility. The complications of past and current usages of gender, class and race-laden terms and their diverse understandings, locations and stereotypes make this an interesting and important issue as the desire for a culture of civility is gaining momentum given that we are increasingly confronted

with the violent consequences of a culture without it. It is within this context that we reengage with these traditional gender labels as part of the ongoing semiotic struggle and why we must not shirk from it (Sotirin 2012; Wade and Ferree 2015).

## 2. Ladies, Gentlemen, and Guys: Contemporary Representations

### 2.1. *The Lady: Past and Present*

The word lady has its historical roots as a title of nobility, as the female equivalent of a lord as well as of a gentleman, though these have been and remain asymmetrical word pairs (Bebout 1995). As such, the word has traditionally been a marker of social class, linked to dominant, often British-based, upper-class behavior, including being 'of gentle birth' and/or a 'gentlewoman'. However, there were a number of shifts and changes in its international meanings during the 20th century. Reid Boyd (2012) evidenced contemporary representations of the word as recruitment, rebellion, re-growth, resistance, subversion and spirit. While caution is due, she argued against trivializing the return of the lady, suggesting instead that the lady's return was a manifestation of both feminist activism and the feminine imaginary.

Bebout (1995) summarized the uses of the word lady as (1) a euphemism for woman, and a marker of being an adult female; (2) in contrast to woman, used to trivialize or humor its referent; (3) to imply the absence of sexuality, whereas woman implies its presence; (4) to distinguish from woman by the traditional attributes of so-called gentility and (5) to split feminist and feminine ideals, with feminist ideals being equated with the word woman, and feminine ideals being equated with the word lady (1995).

Spender (1980) made the point that, in contrast to the word lord, the word lady has undergone a process of democratic leveling. This slippage in status, with concurrent derogatory connotations, is found in other female titles, such as *dame* (i.e., being a 'swell dame' as opposed to being of equal social rank as a baronet) *madam* (a name given to a woman who runs a brothel, a slur which has not affected the equivalent male form of respectful address, *sir*), and *mistress* (which has an almost exclusively sexual connotation, as opposed to the still forceful title *master*) (Miller and Swift 1976, Spender 1980).

While the word lady was not disassociated with birth or breeding in England, in the US it was seen as due to the "grandiloquence of courtesy" that the terms lady and gentlemen extended to all women and men (Lakoff 1973). It is also a form of patronage, such as the use of the modifier 'lady doctor' to separate female physicians from their male counterparts and, as such, lower their status (Lakoff 1973; Spender 1980). Bebout (1995) has further suggested that lady has maintained or even increased its tendency to be used euphemistically as a mark of lower job status in the last decades of the 20th century (1995). Being called a lady, in this context, might be seen as a doubtful compensation for lower paid work or conditions.

While she has a white, Anglo-Saxon heritage, the lady also became a bastion of black middle class female propriety and is deeply embedded in cultural imagination as a moral icon with impossible standards of respectability (Thompson 2009). The traditional courteous and genteel links of the word lady to upper class norms and courtesies has also resulted in the usage term 'ladylike' as a descriptor of dominant class and gender approved associated ways of behaving and speaking. Spender (1980) asserted that there is a misogynist rationale behind the insistence that women talk in a 'lady-like way'. She cited Lakoff (1973) as pointing out that when a woman talks like a lady, she is simultaneously both on a pedestal and patronized. She may not be taken seriously, leading to a double bind: a woman is damned if she does not behave or 'talk like a lady' but dammed if she does.

During the second wave of feminism, lady became a pejorative term. 'Women' or even 'wimmin' was a word that projected ideas of freedom, equality and release from oppression. Lakoff (1973) argued that the class-bound word lady was no mere euphemism for the word woman. Rather, the word was seen as frivolous and demeaning: "if, in a particular sentence, both woman and lady might be used,

the use of the latter tends to trivialize the subject matter under discussion, often subtly ridiculing the woman involved" (1973). 'Ladylike' language was also both used by and used regarding women with the function to disempower, discriminate and objectify them. There was an expectation of women and girls to talk like 'ladies'; to refrain from crude speech and obscenities. In the 1960s and 1970s, in the rejection of the term, many feminist women were insulted if a man treated her as a 'lady'. Not being ladylike became core to the feminist cause: "it is the very concept of ladylike they oppose" (Spender 1980).

Yet in the late twentieth century, a change was marked in the use of the term. In 1999, Meier noted the return of the word lady as a signifier of possible social change, pointing to the use of the term in different contexts (Meier 1999). Meier's fin de siècle predictions have proven to be largely correct. In the 21st century, some recognizable faces of the prim and proper lady have re-emerged, but more surprisingly there are new and subversive representations in a range of media and pop culture usages, such as the names of performance art/singer Lady Gaga and UK singer Lady Sovereign. There are also hugely popular Ladyfests in the UK, US and Europe—multimedia events run by radical youth movements who have appropriated the term 'lady' ironically but also as a form of grown up 'girl power' and a way of challenging stereotypical assumptions about lesbians and feminists as unladylike and crass. Representations in media include discussions regarding the changing meaning of the term lady; Friedman (2013) notes in an article titled "Hey 'Ladies': The unlikely revival of a fusty old label" that the term lady "splits the difference between the infantilizing 'girl' and the stuffy, Census-bureau cold 'woman'". In response to the interpretations by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, Zimmerman (Friedman 2013) adds that the term has been repurposed in a number of ways which reduces the sting that feminists objected to. Context is important, and in some ways using lady is preferred, as she asserts: "Woman has this heaviness which sounds old". Similarly, Groskop (2015) lists musicians, television series and documentaries, and new fashion creations spouting terms such as "ladylike luxe", "ladylike" ranges and "lady" lingerie.

Reid Boyd (2012) suggested that "the word lady is still being used to distinguish upper class gentility, as a marker of an adult female and to imply the absence of sexuality. But the term has broader significance, especially when its current uses are considered in combination. The word can no longer be considered as feminine versus feminist. Instead, it is performing as both—as a moniker for traditional femininity as well as radical feminism. It is acting as a personal identifier and as a collective force. It is calling up both feminist activism and the feminine symbolic. It is no longer being utilized as cultural versus natural. . . . It is breaking down old divisions between gender, class and race."

That the term lady is capable of straddling such social and political extremes is an indication that a cultural shift is taking place.

## 2.2. The Gentleman: Past and Present

Gentlemen have not always been 'gentle'. The gentleman has long held problematic attitudes towards women. Further, the gentleman, tucked up in his cozy club, has not always been attuned to cultural, ethnic or sexual difference. Nor as the 'rich man at his castle' has he always recognized the plight of 'the poor man at his gate' regardless of a gentlemanly sense of *noblesse oblige*. But a gentleman could be poor—and still be a gentleman. His was a powerful class construction, not merely an economic one. There were other signals to his social status, such as his voice, his clothing and his manners.

In etymology, the English word had specific uses:

"the word often meant any man above the social rank of a yeoman, including the nobility, but it was sometimes restricted to those who bear a coat of arms but not a title; in U.S., "man of property, not engaged in business or a profession" (1789). The English word from the beginning also had a special sense; "nobleman whose behaviour conforms to the ideals of chivalry and Christianity," and *gentleman* came to be used loosely for any man of good

breeding, courtesy, kindness, honour, strict regard for the feelings of others, etc. Eventually, in polite use, it came to mean a man in general, regardless of social standing" (Hawkins 1986).

The connection to chivalry is worth noting here. Chivalry began in Europe, primarily in France and Spain. The word is Middle English, and comes from the Old French *chevalerie*, meaning knight. Chivalry is a system of morals and ethics, and the nineteenth century Leon Gautier developed the Decalogue, or the 'Ten Commandments of Chivalry'. But there are other ideas about what chivalry really meant. The poet Tennyson summed it up as "... Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the King" (Staines 1982). Chivalrous knights were 'Christian soldiers' and their code of conduct fused Christianity with military customs.

Chivalry was part of masculinity; however, masculinity cannot be regarded as a monolithic and immutable state, but rather as a way of being that changes as the state or society changes (Horrocks 1997). Masculinity as a social construction is better conceptualized as 'masculinities' in the plural, to accommodate historical and social constructions. Chivalry came to form part of a gentlemanly masculinity in the old regimes that valued kinship obligations as well as family and personal honor. Yet this same chivalrous masculinity also encompassed an authority that contained the capacity for violence. Moreover, simultaneous and varied masculinities can operate within the same society, and even the same 'gentleman', each one having a distinct social function. As Horrocks notes, "... in British society, class and gender intersect in complex and interesting ways: one finds the aloof masculinity of the public school elite, the aggressive masculinity of certain working-class men, and the 'respectable' demeanour of others" (1997). It calls to question Dickens's view that 'once a gentleman always a gentleman' (Dickens 1836), when the same football hooligan is found to have a 'respectable' and 'gentlemanlike' job during the week.

Chivalry was also about the respect of women. "There was never a time when women were more frequently made the subject of verse, nor worshipped with greater devotion, than the age of chivalry" (Prestage 2005). Knights sought to demonstrate their worth by living true to the values of chivalry, which included piety, honor, valor, gallantry, courtesy, chastity, and loyalty. Similarly, this was a time when a gentleman would make it his duty and pleasure to be a slave to some lady; no other time period in history afforded the 'passion of love' more ardent study or expressive language (Prestage 2005).

In the 21st century, times have become ever more unsettling and confusing for the gentleman (Pease and Camilleri 2001; Stafford 2008). The contemporary gentleman is tangled between complex world views, changing family structures, roles and relationships. The gentleman of today has transformed in the face of a confluence of forces shaping social sensibilities and meanings constituted by the dramas of everyday life (Ball 1970). As Graham Norton the Irish comedian puts it: "the gentleman of today is fraught with dangers" (BBC 2017). To appropriate an absolute conception of the gentleman today is complex; it does not fit a particular rhetorical construction or interpretation. The gentleman "is deployed in a wide variety of conversations and issues from many different mouths. As a word, a concept, a referent, a signal in social discourse, a recognisable hierarchical marker, it is completely destabilised; blurred by multiple contextualization" (Tanner 1986).

Yet while the gentleman appears in many different guises, his silhouette is still recognizable. He might be equated with the nameless iconic Mr Big from *Sex and the City* (Bushnell 2004): a fictional character who is tall, handsome, rich, and emotionally unavailable; a traditional Gentleman, Mr Big is the modern day Mr. Darcy, the aloof romantic hero from *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen 2003). The gentleman today may not be required to conform to the 'elite gallant' (Stafford 2008) who rode horses, nor expresses class and gender through "dandyesque constructions of masculinity" (Mintler 2010), but he is, arguably, always recognizable in his appearance as a romantic hero.

From the realms of Camelot, sensibilities of Jane Austen, moods and temper of Shakespeare, exquisite playboy world of Frances Scott Fitzgerald and much more, the gentleman continues to negotiate between bravery and respect (Stafford 2008). Today, there are also numerous guides to the ways of being a gentleman that include instructions on mannerisms, dress etiquette and communication (Bridges 2012; James 2016). The gentleman today is still expected to be charming

and polite (Morago 2004). For some, “There is no higher accolade than to call a man a gentleman”, where gentleman can range from a man ‘wearing his learning lightly’ to ‘having tricks to entertain children’, and indeed to the quality eclipsing them all of being as kind and supportive as possible (Foster 2015). In public at least, the moral code of civility and politeness never escaped the varied constructions of the gentleman. So, coupled with the “pose of a man who feels isolated and threatened within a society he loathes” (Feldman 1993), the gentleman today must self-preserve, self-present and contribute productively to the society in which the gentleman prevails, emerging as ethical and moral being despite the oversupply of identities and forms. Although the terms lady and gentleman have historic social, cultural and political significance, lady evidences a change connected to facets of personal identity and appears to have wider global range, whereas gentleman appears to still be tied to personal behavior, such as etiquette and fashion, and is more limited in global range with a leaning towards the romantic heroes of old.

### 2.3. *The Guy: Past and Present*

Coming from the man’s name Guy, and the Latin Guido, the name gained notoriety due to Guy Fawkes and the failed Catholic gunpowder plot to regain control of Protestant England by blowing up the London Houses of Parliament on 5 November 1605. This event, and the fate of Guy Fawkes, are still celebrated in the UK on Bonfire Night, also known as Guy Fawkes Night, when ‘guys’, clothed effigies made of straw, are thrown into a flaming bonfire. The shabby, outworn clothing used for guys led to the term being used to mock a person of strange appearance or shabby dress, thus by the early nineteenth century, being called a guy was originally an insult used to ridicule (Volokh 2015; Carey 2016). According to Carey (2016), the meaning of the term guy broadened to denote a man by the mid-19th century, before it was accepted as an informal, gender-neutral vocative or term of address, especially in the plural ‘guys’ (McLennan 2004). In the mid-twentieth century the term guy became of casual/popular use in the US, as part of the gendered pair ‘guys and dolls’. Dolly/Doll also came from a female name (Dorothy) as well as being a toy. Being called a ‘great guy’ equaled being called a ‘doll’ (e.g., ‘she’s a ‘doll’. ‘Dolls’ became terms for tranquilizers given to women in the 1960s (Susann 1966) but dropped out of parlance with second wave feminism.

Guys can also be paired with ‘girls’ or ‘gals’. ‘Girls, girls, girls’, wrote Mackenzie Wark in his preface to Susan Hopkins’ *Girl Heroes*: “They’re everywhere-on TV and in the movies, in magazines and on the Internet (Hopkins 2002). They invariably look good; but some do more than merely look good. They think and act. They solve problems and they kick ass”. During the nineties, the all-girl music band The Spice Girls were heralded as the new post-feminist style, and claims were made about this exciting new force in popular culture and how it would empower women. Girls, however, are the name for children, and the risk was that being an adult girl risked infantilization. Whereas guys are grown-ups, as opposed to boys, in the proper biological use of the term, girls are not. Dunham (Dunham 2012–2017) US TV series ‘Girls’, focused on young women in their twenties, and highlighted the nuances of being feminist girls.

There are two critical opposing positions on the use of the phrase ‘guys’ or, commonly, ‘you guys’. There are those who argue that the term ‘guy’ reflects gender and should be avoided, and others who regard it as gender neutral in some contexts. Commentators who argue that the phrase ‘guys’ should not be used generically to refer to males and females assert that the term is etymologically masculine and therefore gendered. This standpoint draws on the eponymical connection of the colloquially masculine expression to Guy Fawkes. Drawing on an analogy between the meaning schema of guy, man, and he, some authors argued that all three terms exhibit similar patterns of gender bias (Clancy 1999; McLennan 2004). Peevology, the study of things that people do not like to be called, also supports this perspective. In this regard, MacKean (2010) argues that when used to address a mixed gendered group, the phrase ‘you guys’ may make some women feel overlooked or ignored, particularly if the person is the only woman in a group being addressed. Concerns about ‘guys’ being sexist, gender biased and decreasing the confidence of women have been noted in the

literature (Hall and Sandler 1984; Lundeberg 1997). Classrooms and workplaces, waiters at service centers, and video games have been identified as avenues where the gendering of guys is prevalent (Lundeberg 1997; McLennan 2004; MacKean 2010; Volokh 2015; Carey 2016; Thomas and Lupton 2016).

David Morrison, the Chairman of the Diversity Council Australia, is one of the notable champions of the 'Stop you guys' campaign. In 2016, the former Army Chief launched an ad campaign #WordsAtWork in which he advised Australians to desist from using offensive terms in the workplace, one being the term "guys" (Tynan 2016). During an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the retired Lieutenant General claimed that he had stopped using the term guy because of its inherent gender biasness and admonished Australians to do same. The 2016 Australian of the Year is quoted as stating that:

It's a proven fact that more diverse workforces create more diverse thinking and are more productive, more effective . . . One way you can engender that kind of environment is to be careful about how you speak to other people, talking to them with respect and listening to their views with respect . . . Exclusive language, gender-based language or inappropriate language, has as much a deleterious or disadvantaged effect as something where you're saying something blatantly inappropriate to another human being (Ryall 2016).

David Morrison's views were challenged by several commentators, many of who argued that the term 'guy' is gender-neutral and not offensive (Ryall 2016). The 'guy is neutral' supporters argue that the term is completely entrenched and become the standard informal way to address a group that both genders present. Mr Morrison's ad campaign received mixed reaction. Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, was among the critics of the campaign. She argued that: "I don't think we should try and interfere with the freedom of speech in this country to a point where people are too concerned about day-to-day conversations".

Media commentaries on Australia's senior most female minister's remarks suggested that Mr Morrison's ad campaign was over-stretched. Dr Catherine Travis, a language expert with the Australian National University, shared the views of Miss Bishop, arguing that while she supported the campaign to remove inappropriate words from workplaces, the inclusion of the term 'guys' was rather trivial. Travis argued that the phrase 'you guys' had become accepted as an all genders inclusive term. Travis' analysis reflected the views of other commentators (McLennan 2004) who regard the term guy as an apparently gender-free term or decidedly polysemous, and that it actually obscures gender—it is a man's name, so it functions like the universal 'man' and supposedly included 'woman' (Carey 2016).

The debate on the appropriateness or otherwise of the expression 'you guys' notwithstanding, there seems to be a general consensus in the public for a non-stigmatizing term for addressing a mixed gender group. While some argue that there is a dearth of alternatives, others have proposed, terms such as 'ladies and gentlemen', 'folks', 'y'all', 'yiz', 'you, and 'youse' (Carey 2016; Tynan 2016). Tellingly, each of the suggested designations has also been found to have many limitations and, therefore, may be no better. While the search for a suitable alternative term for respectfully addressing a mixed gender group goes on, there is a need to brace for another masculine expression that is fast creeping into public lexicology for addressing a mixed gender collection of people, 'hey dudes' (MacKean 2010; Carey 2016).

### 3. Engendering Politeness in the 21st Century

The focus on terms of address in times past in this paper is useful in tracing how ideas of 'courtesy, 'chivalry' and 'gallantry' have shaped and been shaped by gender politics and the discursive construction of the identity of lady and of gentleman across the centuries. As the meaning and use of these terms have changed, and perhaps been replaced by the apparently 'neutral' term guy, how do these terms function in contemporary society, and what can they tell us about gender politics and social politics more generally? With 'politeness' itself a concept that is losing traction to more politically savvy terms such as 'respect', how sit the gallant gentleman, the courteous lady, and the free and

neutral guy in the 21st century? How are these terms to be positioned within the politics of politeness? How do these terms make visible or conceal the hierarchies of gender, power, class embedded within notions of politeness in the 21st century?

Perhaps the most politicized of these terms, the 'lady's' recent political revival signaling a resistance to traditional inscriptions of what it means to be ladylike suggest that this term still holds political resonance. Yet it is no longer a term implicated in a specter of politeness, but a charged moniker that challenges the interlocutor to think critically about the categories of lady, woman, girl, queer, and seeks to undermine those traditional associations of behavior, identity, and sexuality (Halberstam 2012). The lady demands respect, but through the creation of her own identity, rather than through the limited prism of gendered norms. Just like Lady Gaga, she throws off the mantle of convention, while she calls for attention to be paid to her new way(s) of being female/male in society. In turning old conceptualizations on their head, the contemporary 'lady' works to make visible and challenge the vestiges of class privilege and gendered conventions of politeness and identity. She thumbs her nose at the restrictive conventions of politeness.

The gentleman and the guy have received no such politicization: though the gentleman may be "blurred by multiple contextualisation" (Tanner 1986, p. 109), and as such a more diverse creature than previously imagined, his identity rests largely within the bounds of convention. While the gentleman does not derail the masculine as the contemporary lady seeks to untie the feminine, the gentleman does allow for a certain 'gentleness' to be included within a hegemonic masculine identity. However, in doing so he does remain within the vestiges of politeness, if not respect. Where the lady's revitalization is making her more visible, the gentleman becomes less visible by the day. Perhaps his gentleness is making him less accessible in a hyper-masculine world.

The guy, that insidiously gendered, 'gender-free' term, hinges on the neoliberal politics of contemporary society, attempting to walk the line of androgeny. However the guy's gendering continues to function as that of 'man' in the early 20th century: a gendered marker that renders invisible the woman. In subsuming the subject of the woman in its embrace, the 'guy' does neither the work of politeness nor that of respect, but places the burden of existence on the woman in the group.

If the highly visible lady and the little-seen gentleman are no longer fitting for society, how then, do we engender politeness in the 21st century? What is the contemporary language of politeness? If respect is our contemporary reinvention of politeness, can (or do) the lady and gentleman command respect again?

#### 4. Conclusions

Ladies and gentlemen are terms that come from past imagination. They are being re-imagined today. In our consideration here of the current developments of the terms, we found that while the word lady is being used more widely and in different contexts, the word gentleman is not being taken up in the same way. 'Guy' has not made a gender-neutral replacement.

As women's and human rights are eroded worldwide, it might seem frivolous or fanciful to be reviewing or reviving terms such as lady and gentleman. We suggest that rather than focusing upon them as gendered terms, we focus upon the general qualities they evoke. Both lady and gentleman have their roots in gentility and gentleness. These words have their roots in genus: our shared humanity.

Perhaps it is time to generate the respect humanity accords to explore the power of gentleness as a collective force. This can be situated in what Julia Kristeva has called the new humanism: "This new humanism," writes Kristeva (2014), includes "interaction with others—all the others—socially marginalised, racially discriminated, politically, sexually, biologically or psychically persecuted others". This new humanism can be considered a life stance that affirms the autonomy, dignity and worth of each human being and each one's right to freedom—a freedom well-matched with others' rights (Humanist Perspectives). Such full humanism is only possible if we immerse ourselves in the imaginary, in the experience of 'the other'.



To reach for human potential in the 21st century, it is incumbent upon us to dream our way into a new reality.

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