

# Females, usherettes and actresses

**T**HE article on ladies and women provoked a stack of response on a range of issues. Firstly, why is Helen Clark referred to by the media as Miss rather than Ms? The Prime Minister has consistently indicated that she abhors titles of any sort (including Prime Minister), and prefers to be addressed and referred to simply as Helen Clark, but if a title is unavoidable she prefers Miss, unlike Jenny Shipley (the first woman PM) who preferred Mrs.

Why do people generally use woman doctor rather than female doctor? As a number of correspondents have pointed out, we can freely choose between woman pilot and female pilot, woman astronaut and female astronaut. Since there is no difference in meaning, the preference for woman doctor must be simply a matter of usage.

It is interesting in this context to note that man pilot and man astronaut sound rather odd. The most obvious explanation is that man is the unmarked form and so the word man seems redundant when the underlying assumption is that these occupations are typically filled by males. But since male astronaut does not seem so peculiar, it can't be as simple as that.

Some correspondents argued that the reason for the preference for woman doctor is that female is an adjective and woman is a noun. This raises the interesting issue of how we decide what part of speech a word "really" is. Sometimes we get clues from the word's form, so the -ful at the end of wonderful allows the dictionary maker to classify it as an adjective, and the -ment at the end of entertainment signals it is a noun. But many words, such as swim or walk, don't give us explicit clues, and so it is only when they occur in phrases that we can identify their function



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as nouns or adjectives or verbs. So we can say "the female of the species is more flexible" (where female functions as a noun) and a female judge (where female functions as an adjective), just as we can say a woman is generally

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there (noun) and a woman judge (adjective). Is it the case that woman is displacing female in its adjectival function? We don't have enough evidence yet, but the hypothesis is certainly worth investigating further.

The other examples that people asked for comment on seem somewhat dated: metermaids, chambermaids and landgirls. Do people still refer to metermaids (the Beatles' "lovely Rita metermaid" is now almost certainly well into her 60s). In New Zealand, Rita would be a traffic warden or parking warden. And chambermaids are now room attendants or room service attendants, or even housekeepers. Landgirls are labelled by their role, eg shepherd or stationhand, and are certainly no longer identified by gender. And as for washerwomen, I guess they may now be called launderers, who work in laundrettes.

Which brings me to reflect with pleasure on the evidence (from our analysis of comparable data over the last 30 years) that those trivialising -ette and -ess suffixes — which seem to suggest someone who is not to be taken seriously — are decidedly in decline. Karl du Fresne is in a minority here with his outmoded view that this suffix simply distinguishes a male from a female (Curmudgeon; *Dominion Post* March 4). The suffix -ette generally describes a smaller version of the real thing: laundrette, mari-onette, kitchenette, maisonette.

So an usherette must be a diminutive usher? And who could treat seriously someone labelled as a poetess or authoress? I am confident that Jenny Bornholdt and Fiona Kidman would regard such labels as insults undermining their professional status. The suffix suggests to many listeners and readers that males are the norm, the "real thing", and females are add-ons, deviants, lesser in some way.

It is interesting that actress seems to be fighting a rearguard action. One reason for this may be a deliberate choice by some women (such as Barbara Ewing) to attempt to make women in their profession more visible. Again this is a real conundrum: do you choose the (formerly exclusively) male term and broaden it to include females, or do you assert the fact that women can do this too? Should we refer to Zena as a hero or a heroine?

And, just by way of a postscript, isn't it great that the wonderfully non-sexist, succinct and distinctively Australasian term postie has rendered the terms postman and postwoman redundant.

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