

**ORAL CONCOURS 2013
ANGLAIS - LVII****Can manners maketh a comeback in the modern world?**

Chivalry – alive or dead? According to a new survey, it's not only on a life support machine but there are legions of women queuing to pull the plug. Ninety-two per cent of women wouldn't take a seat that was offered to them by a man. Eighty-nine per cent would refuse help with heavy bags. Even on a cold day, 78 per cent would not take a coat from a man.

So while I thought chivalry was an act of kindness dating back to medieval times, when noble knights led a life of gallantry, honour and courtesy, the researchers of an online sock company have put me right. In fact, chivalry is dark and sinister, a powerful reminder that men believe they are the stronger sex. A man who gives up a seat, pays the bill or walks on the outside of the pavement is actually signifying his belief in gender inequality. And the chap who opens my car door isn't a well-mannered type but someone who is patronising my belief that I am quite hopeless without him, because I am a woman and he is a man.

"Men's standards have slipped so far in recent years that any offer of chivalry from a gentleman knocks a woman off their guard and is viewed with outright suspicion," claims Mark Hall of socked.co.uk.

Yet this doesn't tell the whole story. Because if a man helps me carry my baby's pram down the steps of the station (as many frequently have), he is congratulated for doing the right thing. Why else would we see pregnant women on the Tube wearing "Baby On Board" badges? Why, for that matter, do old women (and men) take a seat proffered to them without so much as a mutter of thanks? Because chivalry hasn't died, it's become codified. Just as Italian women deem it the height of rudeness to be ushered through a door first as a man holds it open, there are different rules for today's acts of modern chivalry.

Benjamin Webb, 33, recently offered his seat to a woman standing near him on a packed Tube. She not only refused it, but took objection because she was neither pregnant nor old. "Neither had occurred to me," he says. "I was simply doing what I'd been brought up to do. But it was an isolated incident. Lots of other women have happily accepted, and I haven't been put off."

Celestria Noel, former editor of *Debrett's Guide to the Social Season*, says she will happily glare at a fit young man on the Tube who has beaten her to a seat, "although I have found that a sort of Margaret Rutherford-like simper gets better results." Noel is also suspicious of men, but for a different reason: "I think they've got more selfish. They like to say that chivalry annoys women, but only because it's a good excuse for them not to put themselves out."

Some people argue that it's a generational thing – Noel quotes a nonagenarian of her acquaintance who still tries to get up out of his wheelchair every time a woman enters the room – but, in truth, older generations have always complained about the youth. There were probably cavewomen bemoaning young yobs who hogged the fire.

Henry Hitchings, whose book *Sorry! The English and Their Manners* is published this week, and who has been berated by a cyclist for helping an old lady with her shopping, believes that part of the difficulty now is keeping up with the changing times. "There are so many new things that we need to have manners about," he says. "It's still not clear, for example, what to do with one's mobile phone at meal times." But he also warns against saying that manners are getting worse, as it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. [...]

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