

# The Atlantic

## Let's Give Chivalry Another Chance

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*It's been unfairly maligned as sexist, but women and men alike would benefit from bringing it back.*



### College Humor

This past spring marked the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic. On April 14, 1912, as the ship was on its maiden journey from Southampton, UK, to New York City, it hit an iceberg in the North Atlantic. About three hours later, it sank. Three-quarters of the women on the ship survived; over three quarters of the men, by contrast, died. In Washington DC, there is a [memorial to these men](#). The inscription on it

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reads: "To the brave men who perished in the wreck of the Titanic...They gave their lives that women and children might be saved."

About a year ago, a group of today's men were tested the way that the men on board the Titanic were. When the cruise ship Costa Concordia hit a rock and capsized off the coast of Isola del Giglio, Tuscany, last January, men pushed women and children out of the way to save themselves. One Australian woman on board [reported](#) at the time:

The people that pushed their way on to the boat were then trying to tell them to shut the door, not to let any more people on the [life] boat after they had pushed their way on...We just couldn't believe it—especially the men, they were worse than the women.

This contrast is indicative of a larger trend—the decline of chivalry and the rise of boorish behavior among men. According to a [2010 Harris poll](#), 80 percent of Americans say that women are treated with less chivalry today than in the past. This is a problem that all women—especially feminists—should push back against.

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After the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, which insisted on the equal treatment of women in all domains of life, feminists dismissed chivalry as sexist. They still do. A [new study](#), published in the feminist journal *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, questions the entire enterprise of male chivalry, which, in an Orwellian flourish, it calls "benevolent sexism."

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Chivalrous behavior is *benevolent* because it flatters women and leads to their preferential treatment. But it is *sexist* because it relies on the "[gendered premise](#)" that women are weak and in need of protection while men are strong. "Benevolent sexism," Kathleen Connelly and Martin Heesacker of the University of Florida write in the study, "is an ideology that perpetuates gender inequality." They advocate interventions to reduce its prevalence, even though, they found, chivalry is associated with greater life satisfaction and the sense that the world is fair, well-ordered, and a good place.

Charles Murray, the libertarian social scientist at the American Enterprise Institute, summed up the study with tongue-in-cheek, [writing](#) "the bad news is that gentlemanly behavior makes people happy." He goes on to ask, "When social scientists discover something that increases life satisfaction for both sexes, shouldn't they at least consider the possibility that they have come across something that is positive? Healthy? Something that might even conceivably be grounded in the nature of Homo sapiens?"

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In an interview, Connelly tells me that despite Murray's points, the problem with chivalry is that it assumes "women are wonderful but weak." This assumption of female weakness puts women down, Connelly says.

Perhaps because of women's ambivalence about chivalry, men have grown confused about how to treat women. Will holding doors open for them or paying for the first date be interpreted as sexist? Does carrying their groceries imply they're weak? The breakdown in the old rules, which

at one extreme has given rise to the hookup culture, has [killed dating](#) and is leaving a lot of well-meaning men and women at a loss.

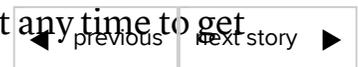
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Historically, the chivalry ideal and the practices that it gave rise to were never about putting women down, as Connelly and other feminists argue. Chivalry, as a social idea, was about respecting and aggrandizing women, and recognizing that their attention was worth seeking, competing for, and holding. If there is a victim of "benevolent sexism," it is not the career-oriented single college-aged feminist. Rather, it is unconstrained masculinity.

"We should have a clear notion of what chivalry is," [argues Pier Massimo Forni](#), an award-winning professor of Italian literature and the founder of the Civility Institute at Johns Hopkins. "It was a form of preferential treatment that men once accorded to women generations ago, inspired by the sense that there was something special about women, that they deserve added respect, and that not doing so was uncouth, cowardly and essentially despicable."

Chivalry arose as a response to the violence and barbarism of the Middle Ages. It cautioned men to temper their aggression, deploying it only in appropriate circumstances—like to protect the physically weak and defenseless members of society. As the author and self-described "equity feminist" Christina Hoff Sommers tells me in an interview, "Masculinity with morality and civility is a very powerful force for good. But masculinity without these virtues is dangerous—even lethal."

Chivalry is grounded in a fundamental reality that defines the relationship between the sexes, she explains. Given that most men are physically stronger than most women, men can overpower women at [any time to get](#)



what they want. Gentlemen developed symbolic practices to communicate to women that they would not inflict harm upon them and would even protect them against harm. The tacit assumption that men would risk their lives to protect women only underscores how valued women are—how elevated their status is—under the system of chivalry.

A story from the life of Samuel Proctor (d. 1997) comes to mind here. Proctor was the beloved pastor of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church. Apparently, he was in the elevator one day when a young woman came in. Proctor tipped his hat at her. She was offended and said, "What is that supposed to mean?"

The pastor's response was: "Madame, by tipping my hat I was telling you several things. That I would not harm you in any way. That if someone came into this elevator and threatened you, I would defend you. That if you fell ill, I would tend to you and if necessary carry you to safety. I was telling you that even though I am a man and physically stronger than you, I will treat you with both respect and solicitude. But frankly, Madame, it would have taken too much time to tell you all of that; so, instead, I just tipped my hat."

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Some women are trying to bring back chivalry. Since 2009, for instance, a group of women at Arizona State University have devoted themselves to resuscitating gentlemanly behavior and chivalry on a campus whose social life is overwhelmingly defined by partying, frat life, and casual sex. Every spring for the past three years, these women have gathered for the "[Gentlemen's Showcase](#)" to honor men who have acted chivalrously by, for example, opening the door for a woman or digging a woman's car out of several feet of snow.

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The event has spread to campuses nationwide. Its goal is "to encourage mutual respect between the sexes," Karin Agness tells me in an interview. Agness is the founder and president of the Network of Enlightened Women, the organization that hosts Gentlemen's Showcases at colleges each spring.

"The current framework is not generating healthy relationships," Blayne Bennett, the organizer of ASU's first Gentlemen's Showcase, [has said](#). "I believe that chivalry provides the positive framework to maximize the overall happiness of men and women."

Women, she said, "want to be treated like ladies."

Bennett and her fellow chivalry advocates have the right idea. "If women give up on chivalry, it will be gone," Sommers tells me. "If boys can get away with being boorish, they will, happily. Women will pay the price."

If feminists want to level the playing field between men and women, they should find common cause with traditionalist women, like those at ASU, on the issue of chivalry. Both groups are concerned with how men treat women. They just differ in what that means: Feminists want men to treat women as equals; traditionalists want men to treat women like ladies. Are the two mutually exclusive?

Chivalry is about respect. It is about not harming or hurting others, especially those who are more vulnerable than you. It is about putting other people first and serving others often in a heroic or courageous manner. It is about being polite and courteous. In other words, chivalry in the age of post-feminism is another name we give to civility. When we give up on civility, understood in this way, we can never have relationships that are as meaningful as they could be.

If women today—feminists and non-feminists alike—encouraged both men and women to adopt the principles of civil and chivalrous conduct, then the standards of behavior for the two sexes would be the same, fostering the equality that feminists desire. Moreover, the relations between the sexes would be once again based on mutual respect, as the traditionalists want. Men and women may end up being civil and well-mannered in different ways, but at least they would be civil and well-mannered, an improvement on the current situation.

Through a tragic event that occurred last summer, our nation was jolted into recognizing chivalry's enduring power. During a screening of the *Dark Knight*, a deranged gunman opened fire in an Aurora, Colorado, theater, murdering twelve innocent people. Three men, all in their twenties, were in the audience that day with their girlfriends. When the shots rang out across the theater, these men threw themselves over their girlfriends, saving the women's lives. All three of the men died.

At the time, Hanna Rosin [noted](#) that what these men did was "deeper" than chivalry. It was heroic. I agree. But heroism and chivalry share a basic feature in common—the recognition, a transcendent one, that there is something greater than the self worth protecting, and that there is something greater than the self worth sacrificing your own needs, desires, and even life for. If we can all agree that the kind of culture we should aspire to live in is one in which men and women protect and honor each other in the ways that they can—and not one in which men are pushing past women and children to save their own lives—then that is progress that women everywhere should support.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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