

IDEAS

The Professor and the Madman

If Jill Biden wants to flaunt her Ed.D., who are we to object?

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ALEX WONG / GETTY

Joseph Epstein's record of provocation and self-disgracing is long but not unbroken. To start with something positive: He revived the reputation of one of my favorite style guides, a book by F. L. Lucas that advises writers to avoid writing "in the weary monotone of a fretful midge." Sure enough, he wrote with fearless gusto an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* this weekend, advising Jill Biden, an English professor at Northern Virginia Community College, to stop insisting that people call her "Doctor Jill Biden," which "sounds and feels fraudulent, not to say a touch comic." She is the spouse of the president-elect and earned an Ed.D. in educational leadership from the University of Delaware in 2007.

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Do people with doctoral degrees have the right to call themselves "Dr.?" If they have the right, does exercising that right make sense, in all situations? If Epstein had wanted to investigate these questions, he could have done so without sprouting new feet like a centipede, finding ways to step in rhetorical dog turds in every paragraph. He called Biden "kiddo," perhaps appropriate to a youngster like me but not to a woman much closer to his own advanced age; he demeaned her scholarship without bothering to read it; he suggested that only physicians merit the title, even though (as many, many people have pointed out) it comes from the Latin *docere*, "to teach," and that is what Biden is: a teacher. And so on.



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“Dr.” is the title Biden earned and prefers. What mystifies me is Epstein’s desire to police the use of the title, when he could instead just use it as requested, like a normal person, and contain his disrespect. Without hesitation I use religious titles (“Bishop,” “Dā’ī al-Mutlaq,” “His Holiness”) sacred in other people’s faiths. I call senior government officials by their titles, even if they are despots whose people would not only strip the titles but hang the officials by the neck if they had the chance. I know academics who are frauds, and I call them “Dr.” if they wish. Why not just use the title, even if you think it is bogus?

As Virginia Heffernan, Ph.D., noted on Twitter yesterday, the title might seem worthless for people like Epstein, who get university appointments without it, but it’s valuable for people “like me & Dr. Biden who are mistaken for housewives” (even though most doctorates are, in fact, earned by women). Racial minorities sometimes insist upon “Dr.” for a similar reason. You are more likely to want to be addressed as befits a professor if people have assumed you are a janitor or a common thief, just because of the color of your skin. When I was a student, I took a seminar given by the distinguished literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. (known to intimates as “Skip”). Gates—a world-class charmer who demanded exactly what he was owed—addressed this issue head-on, telling us, “Because this is a small seminar, you may call me by my first name, which is *Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.*”

I spend a lot of time among professors, nearly all of whom have doctorates, and I rarely hear one ask to be addressed as “Dr.” At Oxford, where the professors are all “fellows” of the university’s constituent colleges, the ones who were appointed to their fellowship without receiving a doctorate were addressed in perpetuity as “Mr.” or “Mrs.” or “Ms.,” according to their preference. These titles therefore indicate precocity, above the ordinary “Dr.” The eminent Wittgensteinian Elizabeth Anscombe was always “Miss Anscombe.” There are many endearing stories about academics too bashful to use their earned titles. In London in 1954, as the molecular biologist Francis Crick told the tale, a man calling himself “Willie the gardener” hired himself out to the wealthy as a part-time landscaper. During tea service an astonished guest looked out the window and asked her host what Sir William Lawrence Bragg, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Physics and resident professor at the Royal Institution, was doing in her flower bed.

These stories are charming in an academic bizarro world, where the title “Dr.” is ubiquitous instead of rare. And the strangeness of this milieu only demonstrates the reasonableness of Biden’s use of the title: In a university environment, insisting on it might be pompous; in an environment where such titles are rare—such as before the name of the soon-to-be first lady of the United States—they make more sense.





I suspect that parsing social niceties is, however, not what Epstein was getting at. Addressing Biden, Epstein wrote: “Your degree is, I believe, an Ed.D., a doctor of education, earned at the University of Delaware through a dissertation with the unpromising title ‘Student Retention at the Community College Level: Meeting Students’ Needs.’” Epstein scarcely bothers to disguise his snobbery. I wonder whether he would have complained about calling Biden by her title if her degree were instead a Ph.D., and the dissertation a thousand-page brick, demonstrating mastery of archives, languages dead and living, and a century of secondary literature. His disdain here is, I think, at least as much for the field of “educational leadership” as for Biden’s use of titles per se.

In fairness, an Ed.D. is not a Ph.D., which requires a dissertation that typically takes several years to complete. The Ed.D. dissertation at the University of Delaware is an “Executive Position Paper,” which “identifies a problem of significance to you and your organization, analyzes the problem thoroughly, and develops a feasible plan to solve the problem.” If you spend seven years writing it, you are doing it wrong. Biden’s is 129 pages, including table of contents and footnotes. Many Ph.D. dissertations (ones made of words rather than numbers, anyway) are twice that long. Education schools are a frequent target of the types of writers who show up on the *Journal’s* editorial page, perhaps because of their role as incubators of wokeness. Maybe Epstein disdains Biden’s field. If that is the case, I wish he had said so, and made his case directly rather than boorishly impugning the first first lady to hold a research doctorate of any kind.

Many have noted that the senior Trump administration national-security official Sebastian Gorka goes by “Dr. Gorka,” because he somehow earned a Ph.D. from Corvinus University in Hungary, without raising the ire of the *Journal*. I have read his dissertation and other writings, and I do not think much of them. But he is Dr. Gorka



—and if I had my way, he would be *required* to call himself “Dr.” Better that he be made to own the title. If I earned a Ph.D. by writing a dissertation like his, I would want to hide the degree rather than publicize it, and on my business card it would be a source of recurring cringe to me and others. (“Doctors” whose scholarship is risible tend to be particularly attached to the title, and to wield it because they think it provides the gravitas that their intellects do not.)

If Jill Biden wants to flaunt her Ed.D., who is Joseph Epstein to object? Those letters mean only what they mean. They certainly aren’t more embarrassing than other titles that people use in perpetuity. Ambassadors, I find, tend to call themselves “Ambassador” forever, even if they bought their sole ambassadorship by bundling political donations in Long Island, and the ambassadorship was a year on some speck of an island in a forgotten sea. Roald Dahl mocked people like this in his memoir about boarding school, where one of the cruellest teachers called himself “Captain Hardcastle.” “Even small insects like us knew that ‘captain’ was not a very exalted rank,” Dahl wrote, “and only a man with little else to boast about would cling to it in civilian life.”

When Michael Caine starred in *Sleuth* with Sir Laurence Olivier in 1972, Caine was 39—and not yet a Sir himself—to Olivier’s 65. “How should I address you?” Caine asked. “Lord Olivier,” Lord Olivier replied. “After that I am Larry, and you are Mike.” Life can be simple, if you want it to be.



GRAEME WOOD is a staff writer at The Atlantic and the author of [The Way of the Strangers: Encounters With the Islamic State](#).

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