

THE HISTORY OF THE HANDSHAKE¹

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Studying the history of the handshake is a fascinating research challenge.² Everyday salutations between friends and acquaintances are usually taken for granted and not recorded for posterity. Nonetheless, forms of greeting are significant indicators of interpersonal encounters, throwing light on the social dynamics of familial, gender, class and age-related behaviours. As a subject, the history of salutations falls within the history of gesture – a growing field.³ The sources are, admittedly, scrappy. But there are sufficient fleeting references in novels, plays, letters, diaries, and travelogues to people meeting and parting for a composite picture to be – slowly – reconstructed.

The handshake itself is expressive of an egalitarian relationship, as least at the moment when the two hands meet. As a style of salutation, it differs completely from the traditional deep bowing and curtseying, which display deference from the ‘lowly’ to those on ‘high’.⁴ In those circumstances, the individuals do not touch one another. Over time, however, the traditional styles of greeting were attenuating. The deep bow from men was slowly turning into nod and brief touch of hand to head; the deep curtsey from women was translating into a quick bob. Yet the long eighteenth-century in Britain saw not only change – but change within change. A completely new style of greeting, in the form of the egalitarian handshake, was quietly emerging alongside the older salutations. Hence by the eighteenth century

in Britain, friends and acquaintances had a changing repertoire of potential greetings, which they could use in different circumstances.

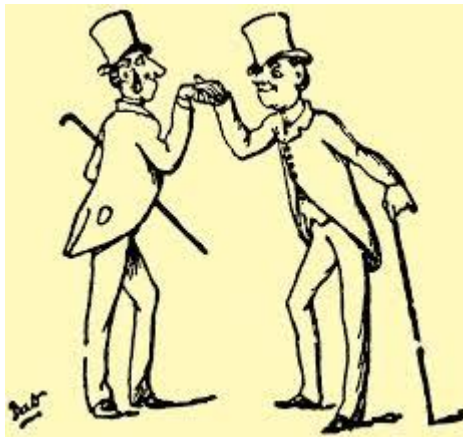
One fictional example conveys the intimacy implied by the handshake. A fearlessly ‘modern’ young woman encounters a young man at a crowded London party. She is Marianne Dashwood, the embodiment of ‘sensibility’, in Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). He is the errant Willoughby, who has abruptly ended their unofficial courtship. Marianne immediately holds out her hand, signalling that she views him as an intimate friend. He avoids her gesture. Marianne then exclaims ‘in a voice of the greatest emotion: “*Good God! Willoughby, what is the meaning of this? ... Will you not shake hands with me?*”’. He cannot avoid doing so, but he drops her hand quickly. After the exchange of a few words, Willoughby quickly leaves ‘with a slight bow’.⁵ He has rejected her publicly. Their contrasting body language says it all.

Touch between a young man and an unrelated young woman was and is particularly powerful socially when it is comparatively rare. Songs to this day record its potential for excitement, from the Beatles; ‘*I Wanna Hold your Hand!*’ (1963) to Jess Glynne’s ‘*Hold my Hand*’ (2015). And earlier Shakespeare, as ever, was aware of these niceties. So the ardent Romeo understands the intimacy implied when he takes Juliet’s hand in a dance, as does she: ‘*And palm to palm is like holy palmer’s kiss*’.⁶

Even more definitively, a couple unite their hands in a Christian marriage ceremony; and today a secular ritual of ‘hand-fasting’ (with pagan origins) is adopted in some variants of humanist weddings. The intention is clear. ‘*Taking someone’s hand in marriage*’ is a symbol of good faith, confirmed by the exchange of rings which remain visible on the hand. These are public signals of personal commitment. An earlier poetic expression also offered an endgame variant, in the form of a final handshake. Michael Dayton’s *Sonnet LXI* (1594) which starts ‘Since

there's no help, come let us kiss and part' invites the parting lovers to: '*shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows*'. Directly touching the other person adds a particular solemnity to the exchange.

At the same time, the handshake was also acquiring a clear set of commercial connotations, which equally indicate a pledge. When two traders agree upon a contract, they indicate consent to the deal by a handshake. However unequal they may be in wealth and commercial status, at this point they are equals. Their mutual pledge constitutes a 'gentleman's agreement' – upheld by personal honour. The same etiquette applies in making a bet. Reneging upon a wager, which has been confirmed by a handshake, is viewed as particularly heinous.



Variations in styles of shaking hands are here caricatured as two Victorian gentlemen are shown as almost dancing their mutual greetings; from www.etiquipedia.blogspot.co.uk/2013/10, consulted 11 Oct. 2014.

Styles of daily greetings tend to change relatively slowly and imperceptibly. In eighteenth-century Britain, the handshake was most common among men of similar middle-ranking social position. Merchants used it, as did young radicals like Wordsworth and Coleridge among their friends in the 1790s. By contrast, upper-class polite society tended to stick with the traditional bowing and curtsying; and they certainly expected signs of due deference from those socially 'below' them. Meanwhile, handshaking was rare among workers whilst engaged in

‘dirty’ trades, because people in grimy jobs usually tried to contain rather than to spread the dirt. Nonetheless, the emblem of two clasped hands appeared proudly on various trade union banners, as a pledge of workers’ solidarity.

Not all onlookers were happy with the change in styles of greeting. For example, in 1828 an anonymous critic of *The Follies and Vices of the Age* grumbled at the growing popularity of handshaking, including between men and women.⁷ It seemed overly familiar. One further reason for some snobbish hostility, among polite society in Britain, was the association of this custom with the republican USA. After 1776, its usage there became routine. It was relatively democratic and egalitarian (though freemen did not shake hands with the enslaved). But some critics found the American cross-class and cross-gender handshake unhygienic and bodily intrusive. So in 1832 the English novelist and social commentator Frances Trollope complained, as ‘the near approach of the *gentleman* [intended ironically] was always redolent of whiskey and tobacco’.⁸

Ultimately, however, the snobs were slowly being routed. Old-style bowing and curtsying was slowly disappearing, although polite hat-wearing gentlemen may still doff their hats to ladies. Meanwhile, handshaking continues to spread as a social salutation. In the course of the twentieth century it has become quite widely (though not universally) adopted for international use, as a compromise between styles of greetings which incorporate touch and those which do not. Yet there are still so many variants. Bear hugs; air kisses; fist humps; high fives; rubbing noses. Human ingenuity is endless. Nonetheless, it remains the case that, whatever the style of salutation, body language always provides ways of signalling the rejection as well as the endorsement of trust and friendship.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ This short report summarises research presented in a lecture to the Conference on New Directions in Eighteenth-Century Studies, held on 2-3 November 2019 at East China Normal University, Shanghai, China. It includes and updates material given an early outing in PJC BLOG No.46 (Oct. 2014): see <https://www.penelopejcorfield.com/monthly-blogs/>.
- ² See P.J. Corfield, 'From Hat Honour to the Handshake: Changing Styles of Communication in the Eighteenth Century', in P.J. Corfield and L. Hannan (eds), *Hats Off, Gentlemen! Changing Arts of Communication in the Eighteenth Century/ Arts de communiquer au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2017), pp. 1-30; also available in www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/Pdf40.
- ³ M. Braddick (ed.), *The Politics of Gesture: Historical Perspectives (Past & Present suppl. 4, 2009)*; J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg (eds), *A Cultural History of Gestures: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge, 1991).
- ⁴ P.J. Corfield, 'Dress for Deference & Dissent: Hats & the Decline of Hat Honour', *Costume: Journal of Costume Society*, 23 (1989), pp. 64-79; also available in www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/Pdf8.
- ⁵ J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), ed. R. Ballaster and C. Lamont (2003), pp. 167-8.
- ⁶ W. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* (1st perf. 1597), Act 1, sc. 5. A palmer was a Christian pilgrim, returning from the Holy Land bearing palms to indicate a successful journey.
- ⁷ Anon., *Something New on Men and Manners: A Critique of the Follies and Vices of the Age ...* (Hailsham, Sussex, 1828), p. 174.
- ⁸ F. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), ed. R. Mullen (Oxford, 1984), p. 83.