

Eulogy

By Olivia Gagan

Sheila Michaels 1939 ——— 2018

‘The first thing anyone wanted to know about you was whether you were married yet. I’d be damned if I’d bow to them.’

What’s in a name? A lot, as it happens. Sheila Michaels’ name was changed by forces beyond her control multiple times throughout her life: other people’s marriages, other people’s divorces, other people’s feelings about her. It was in part why she became such a passionate advocate for reviving the word Ms, and for women identifying themselves on their own terms.

Born in St Louis, Missouri, as a child Michaels was shuttled between her mother and her grandparents in the Bronx. Her biological father, a civil liberties lawyer called Ephraim London, for many years refused to acknowledge her as his daughter. Instead, she was given her mother’s first husband’s surname of Michaels. After her mother’s second marriage, her surname was changed again, to Kessler.

Michaels was an outspoken, opinionated woman from the start, expelled from college as a teenager for writing anti-segregationist articles for the student newspaper. Embarrassed by Michaels’ activism, her mother would later disown her, prompting another name change—her mother asked her to stop using her husband’s surname of Kessler.

Michaels moved to Manhattan and became a member of the Congress of Racial Equality, an organisation that played a key role in the civil rights movement. It was in New York in 1961, aged 22, where she first saw the word ‘Ms’ on a piece of mail received by her flatmate. At that point, the only common honorifics for women were ‘Miss’ and ‘Mrs’.

She initially thought ‘Ms’ was a typo. It wasn’t—it was simply a way of referring to a female without revealing her marital status which had long fallen into obscurity.

In a 2007 interview with *The Guardian*, Michaels explained why the word caught her attention ‘No one wanted to claim me and I didn’t want to be owned. I didn’t belong to my father or belong to a husband.’

Spotting that letter would be the first of a handful of chance events in Michaels’ life that helped lift ‘Ms’ out of obscurity. It would take a decade of campaigning for her efforts to gain traction: a turning point came in 1971, when Michaels appeared on a New York radio show. During a lull in conversation, she explained why she thought ‘Ms’ should become commonplace. A friend of feminist Gloria Steinem’s was listening and suggested ‘Ms’ as the title for Steinem’s soon-to-be-launched new feminist magazine. Ms launched in 1972. An overnight success, the magazine helped push ‘Ms’ into the public consciousness.

The modern-day re-emergence of the honorific, originally used in the sixteenth century, has faced criticisms: etiquette bible *Debrett’s* called it ‘ugly-sounding’, *The Queen’s English Society* branded it ‘a linguistic misfit’. Nonetheless, the word has been embraced and has persisted. Thanks in large part to Michaels’ work, ‘Ms’ is now in everyday use as the standard prefix throughout English-speaking countries.

Michaels had a rich career beyond reviving ‘Ms’. Over the course of her life, Michaels was by turns an oral historian, a New York City taxi driver, a writer, a restaurateur (she was married to Japanese chef Hikaru Shiki) and a humanitarian. She decided to

live many lives and forge many facets to her identity—perhaps the most impactful of which was her dedication to giving women a name and a status beyond marriage.

