[GENTLEMAN SCHOLAR](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/gentleman_scholar.html)

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Is Chivalry Dead?

A woman scorned me for offering her my seat on the train. Plus: Advice on whether to divorce your hot wife.



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Photo by Christina Paige

*Please send your questions for publication to* gentlemanscholarslate@gmail.com*. (Questions may be edited, or not.)*

*Dear Gentleman Scholar,*

*I was raised to be kind to everyone and, in particular, to women. I've always felt it a distinct duty to stand up on a bus if a lady is standing and to allow the females in a dinner party to order first. This doesn't come from the old-fashioned they're-fragile-and-need-tending argument. It just seems the proper thing to do.*

*However, it seems these niceties are not only going by the wayside, but even are frowned upon. Just recently on Washington, D.C.'s Metro, I stood as a woman approached, uttering some general, "Please" or "Would you like to sit?" I was shocked to receive a quite nasty, "No, I'm quite capable of standing," in response.*

*What's the proper etiquette here? Is chivalry dead? Should I just roll with it?*

*Dan in Washington, D.C.*

Thanks for your letter, Dan. Chivalry isn’t dead. It’s just pretending to be asleep on the F train so that it can plausibly deny that it doesn’t notice the maternity blouse grazing its nose.

To answer your immediate question: Yes, just roll with it. Judge not lest ye be yadda yadda yadda. We all have our off days, and just as it is unduly harsh to condemn a man as a worthless lout for one instance of failing to vacate his subway seat for a visibly pregnant woman, it is inappropriate to judge a woman’s character on the basis of one curt rejection of one attempted courtesy. So, OK, she could have left it at, “No, thank you”—but maybe she was commuting to or from an exhausting long day of being patronized as a little lady and you inadvertently triggered a reaction against belittlement? (Cf. *damsel*[—“from Gallo-Romance domnicella, diminutive of Latin domina ‘lady’](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=damozel)”) It would be most correct to let her nasty tone slide—to conclude the interaction with a mild smile and a short nod and then resume minding your own business.

To complicate the question: I find myself slightly puzzled by your statement that you *stood as a woman approached*. Perhaps this is one of the areas in which my values have been magnificently corrupted by many years of residence in New York City, but I do not immediately stand at the approach of simply any person who seems at a glance to have two X chromosomes. (This position is extremely easy to justify: *You want fair play for* [*Lilly Ledbetter*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilly_Ledbetter)*? Me too! Now excuse me while I sit here reading this magazine article about her.)* I reserve immediate standing for people who are conspicuously disabled, such as those afflicted by the all-too-common condition known as *dealing with toddlers*. I also immediately stand for the elderly and for pregnant women. Elderly pregnant women, however, I leave to fend for themselves. An octogenarian in her third trimester is a tough cookie. This is all to say that you’re a much better man than I—unless you’re a much goofier one who, making a grand show of what should be a small unforced gesture, has the attitude of someone seeking credit merely for giving proper due.

That last point is the crux of the matter. Chivalry is [an institution rooted in the medieval court](http://www.usna.edu/Users/history/abels/hh315/Chivalry.htm), none too distant from that venue where Thomas Becket wondered about doing the right thing for the wrong reason. When offering your seat to a woman, you should not do so in the belief that she owes you a grateful smile. You should not do so with an eye toward earning the silent admiration of the Shady Grove red line. And you certainly should not have in mind a grand scheme to encourage women to wear foxily uncomfortable shoes more often. Some scholars of courtly love suggest that chivalrous acts be performed with the Virgin Mary in mind, but that’s not my bag, and I can top them by supposing that the only person whose pleasure you consider when yielding your seat to a lady is that of the mother who raised you wonderfully.

If this course of action leads you to a path of spiritual renewal, that’d be great. If it leads you to believe that owning an awesome convertible will express your virility to the world better than any eye candy, then adhere to the time-honored midlife-crisis tradition of purchasing an awesome convertible. And if you cannot shake the belief that the world would be a better place if, on your personal drive through life, you had a late-model bikini model riding shotgun, then you are one of the world’s true jackasses and you must accept it as your fate to begin a trial phase of sleeping around. It is not unlikely that some hotties in your area are currently offering 20-percent-off online-booking discounts.

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