

Margaret Don't Do It...

(Published *The Independent*, June 2nd 1999).

Dear Phillip,

As you probably know, I'm replacing you as agony columnist for Woman's Journal in September. I'm in a bit of a muddle as to whether I'm doing the right thing. One or two medical colleagues say they are shocked by all the latest tabloid publicity though I welcomed the opportunity to explain how much my sex life has improved since my horrid divorce. It's such a relief that 'you know who' can't come on the phone telling me to shut up and stop talking about him. Having completely laid his ghost, I can't wait to inform your readers how they must do the same thing with their men. You do agree that this latest move is for the best, don't you? You're such an understanding chap, I had to let you be the first to know. It's ripping news, isn't it?

Yours ever, Margaret (Cook)

Dear Margaret,

You must be joking...

News that Margaret Cook is NOT joking but intends to join the ranks of the nation's agony aunts is going to do little but harm. First and foremost to herself. The good doctor is clearly in the throes of the most bitter personal resentment against her ex-husband. Maintaining a high public profile and continuing to give insensitive interviews about his sexual adequacy, heavy drinking, personal rudeness (the usual litany) is going to prove highly damaging to those nearest and dearest - her new lover, her two sons, her much loved mother-in-law Granny Cook besides having impact on Robin and Gaynor. I wonder if the hidden, unconscious agenda is actually to see the man dismissed from office and his new marriage broken? That's how it looks to the dispassioned outsider.

Highlighting just one of these likely consequences, I for one would not want to be in the shoes of new lover Robin Howie despite public praise of his erotic prowess because it must surely cross anyone's mind that Margaret Cook's motive for trumpeting has as much to do with her past sexual arrangements as any new improved ones. Comparisons like this are odious, Margaret. They reduce your new boyfriend to a prize show performer. If you can't see this you can't 'read people' and won't realise what needs protecting in your new correspondents' lives.

Of course, compensatory boasts are endemic in letters from readers (especially those I fear you are now likely to attract in droves) and I guess your response will be simply to say "more power to your elbow". There may even be a sub-text to you entire column which could be summarised as "if in doubt, kick him out" whereas what is really needed from a problem columnist is an ability to promote caution, "sleeping on it", reframing the problem, seeing the bigger picture.

I wouldn't suggest we need writers who have never lived, suffered or been run over by the wheel of fortune. But we certainly don't need people pontificating at the moment when the wheel is still revolving and pinching hard as it is with you. Sure, readers need to be able to identify with a fighting spirit. They want some on-the-page optimism and encouragement. But they also need an objective listener, the village friend, not an ambitious professional with a diagnostic bent who doesn't seem to realise that emotional intelligence begins with knowing when to leave well alone. (Why don't you stop talking about your private life in public, Margaret, just as a matter of interest?)

Then we come to the trade itself. Yes, I know agony columns are good for a snicker by those who hate the "counselling" approach and by those with emotional problems to conceal. But I have to testify that most of those who write the pages are a fine collective body of men and women, we all know one another and we attempt to be respectable and responsible. I've been a professional counsellor for many years but I still carry £1 million insurance to cover even my magazine and newspaper opinions. You can be sued - had you thought of that, Margaret? - because sometimes people are 'daft' enough to take the advice you will now be asked to dispense.

Let me be honest. I am a BIT miffed you've nicked my column before I had QUITE finished with it but I'm up to confessing this. It's not the first time it's happened. I was talking to Virginia Ironside yesterday about our hope that you did appreciate all the vagaries of this new career. Should your new editor, Elsa McAlonan, fail and fail, so perhaps will you. Let me share with you some of this inside experience.

I arrived for work one day on a Nameless National Newspaper (called the "Daily Star") to pen my weekly spot "By Phillip Hodson, The Man Who Understands", only to find myself replaced during a coffee break by Miss Diana Dors who had suddenly become "The Woman Who Understands". As far as the new Rugby-playing editor from New Zealand was concerned, my bust just wasn't big enough. Then again, when a woman did get to become the editor of a Sunday tabloid, asking me to write the problem page, her decision was vetoed by the late Great Debtor Captain Bob Maxwell on the grounds that...my bust just wasn't big enough.

For 18 months, I turned up as the BBC's mid-morning Agony Uncle but when transmission transferred from Manchester to Birmingham my contract did not because "we essentially see your job as being done by a woman". I was hired for a year by breakfast tv who rang me to say in the first three months of the show I'd surpassed their every expectation. But I was being replaced by a woman because "...the new programme director feels the need of one".

I was then hired by the (female) editor of another Sunday tabloid with a circulation of umpteen million and for two years happily penned 100 columns to a uniformly positive postbag. Guess the next bit, Margaret! Editor gets chopped and the new testosterone-thruster in charge gives me permanent leave of absence because he's noticed I'm not a woman and is prepared to flush his proprietor's wedge down the river putting things "right".

In fact, I'll write that even more precisely. The exact phrase was "The editor feels it desirable to have the column fronted by a female". Had I been on PAYE I could have sued the company for out-and-out sexual discrimination.

Please note there is no hint of self-pity in this piece. I understand I am not owed a living, least of all in tabloid hell, and while problem pages demonstrably do some good and spread knowledge, there IS a price. We rarely get our therapeutic tentacles on the rest of the publication. If I start to write sensitively about "gender confusions" on the back page of a newspaper you can bet the News Desk will be leading up front with "Pervy poofers in gang-bang terror" in six-inch counterpoint. Or as I once said to lovely Deidre Sanders of the over-sexed Sun - "Don't you answer the problems on page 9 caused by pages 1-8?"

My complaint is more than the personal. We really do need a two-way take on sexism. It's not enough to let women become Chief Constables. We also need to let men become nursery nurses and agony uncles. The nation needs more male role models - not fewer - who are seen to be toiling with emotions. So, Margaret, I trust you DO understand why I worry that you have no idea what you've let yourself in for and why I cannot agree that yes, another woman is just what's needed in this job.