

Hey, Girls, 'Modesty' Is Bullshit



EXPAND

The Merriam-Webster English Dictionary defines "opening your article with a quote from a dictionary" as "the most bush-league garbage move of all time"—but that's because it's mainly used by pimply baby boys in red states who want you to know how *personally wounded* they are by the existence of Black History Month. In *some* cases, consulting a dictionary can be legit instructive. Like right now, when we have young women running around proselytizing about "modesty" in the name of women's lib. Um, ladies, no.

Let's [consult the dic.](#)

modesty (n.)

1530s, "freedom from exaggeration, self-control," from *M.Fr.* *modestie* or directly from *L.* *modestia* "moderation, sense of honor, correctness of conduct," from *modestus* "moderate, keeping measure, sober, gentle, temperate," from *modus* "measure, manner" (see *mode* (n.1)). Meaning "quality of having a moderate opinion of oneself" is from 1550s; that of "womanly propriety" is from 1560s.

This is what "modesty" means. The key points here are "correctness of conduct" and "womanly propriety." If we're looking at the concept of modesty in the non-humble sense, it is a gendered term. It means adhering to a paternalistic and historically oppressive moral code. It means "know your place." It means that certain behaviors are "appropriate" for a

woman and others aren't—not for a human being (we're not talking about murder or dog-marriage here), but for a *woman*. It means that ladies need to be covering up their tittayz.

Ladies. You do not need to be covering up your tittayz.

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I assume, if you're reading this, that you are most likely a human being with eyeballs in a head on top of a torso with nipples on it sitting on ... [Read...](#)

Now, that doesn't mean that you need to be showing them off and wagging them about in church, or splitting the difference by sort of intermittently flashing them like a strobe light. It just means that *you get to do whatever you want with them*, regardless of any and all 400-year-old notions about "womanly propriety." Barring public nudity laws (which are [also kind of silly](#), but whatevs), the idea that society can tell you how much of your body to reveal or hide implies that *your body does not belong to you*. The concept of modesty is proprietary and patriarchal and ancient. I'm pretty sure that even the most hardline anti-feminist can admit who owned women's bodies in the 1560s, when the term came plopping out of the etymological birth canal. Hint: it wasn't women.

Anyway, that hasn't stopped the city of South Pasadena from declaring December 3-7 "Modesty Week" (oops, guess you missed your chance to wear your high-necked chemise with your most dour stomacher!), in response to [one high school student's pro-modesty crusade](#):

Saige Hatch, 15, launched the South Pasadena High School Modesty Club in September to combat the proliferation of short shorts, miniskirts and bare midriffs. Hatch blames popular culture and peer pressure for sexualizing women and girls.

"Women have fought for their rights, liberty, and honor more in the past 200 years than in all recorded history," reads a statement on the club's website, www.modestyclub.com. "Our bright, heroic women are being made the fool. A fool to think that to be loved they must be naked. To be noticed they must be sexualized. To be admired they must be objectified."

Fine, fine, yes, sure, fine. Sounds pretty good so far. I am against the hypersexualization and objectification of teenage girls, and I don't love it when I come downstairs and find my 11-year-old stepdaughter watching *The Real Housewives of Gonorrhoea Island* or whatever. I've done my share of railing against gratuitously "sexy" Halloween costumes. I get it. Also miniskirts are gross because *your vagina touches the chair!!!* Unfortunately, further research into the philosophy behind Hatch's Modesty Club makes it clear that this isn't some thoughtful, progressive anti-objectification thinktank—it's more like the South Pasadena High School Slut-Shaming Club, or the South Pasadena High School Uphold the Patriarchy Club. Great.

The club asks girls to pledge they will "wear shorts and skirts at knee length," "shirts and dresses that cover my stomach, lower back, breasts and shoulders" and "not ask, persuade, or allow a boy to do anything with me that will jeopardize the code of chastity."

Boys have less to worry about, but are called on to keep "a neat and clean appearance" and "maintain the utmost respect and honor for the virtue of girls."

F-PLUS. CLICK.

To be very clear, I don't have a problem with these kids wearing turtlenecks and having a club and doing whatever the ding-dong they want (I'm trying to work clean here—Hatch's brother made headlines a few years ago for starting a No Cussing Club, no joke). They seem like sweet kids, and I'm sure their motivations are honest and heartfelt. But I take issue with puritanical standards of female chastity and virtue (which are deeply tied up in conservative religious rhetoric—Hatch, perhaps not coincidentally, is a cousin of Orrin Hatch) being *publicly validated by city officials*.

Obviously "modesty" has shed some of its patriarchal baggage in the long, slow slog toward modernity, but it's fair to say that it's fundamentally intertwined with the concept of women-as-property. "Oh no! Don't let other people see my stuff, because then the stuff will get gross and lose its value!" Cover your goodies, ladies, because everyone knows the menfolk are too busy thinking about man stuff—like winning hella bread, and being *all of the presidents*—to restrain their penises from homing in on your holes like hungry little dowsing rods.

The idea that the onus is on women to "preserve" their chastity by not "tempting" men—instead of on men to stop themselves from taking it forcefully—is a fundamental imbalance in our society that creates tangible problems for women every day. And it's coupled with the idea that women who DO "give up" their lady-flowers (and maybe even enjoy it) are somehow tainted and less valuable than women who wear knee-length skirts. However subtly, the word "modesty" is pregnant with all of that meaning (sluuuuuuut!!!). "Modesty" is about *men*, not women—it's no coincidence that patronizing bullshit like this ["Guys on Modesty" Pinterest page](#) is a thing:

Guys on Modesty is a male perspective Blog on the subject of modesty. We aim to redefine modesty from a negative virtue—a long list of don'ts—to a positive: A way of living that woman aspire to be.

That is the purest distillation of "modesty" I can think of. Couldn't have said it better myself. Just like with the Modesty Club, it's the intent and the context that matter. Wearing a high Peter Pan collar is not objectively problematic (and some of the dresses on the "Guys on Modesty" page are fucking cute, goddamnit). The problem is the implication that there's a "right" way to be a woman, and that men—anonymous, strange men on the internet, no less—have some say in what that "right" way looks like. And I'm very sorry, "Guys," but my only "womanly duty" is to myself.

I have no beef with the kids, regardless of how misguided I think their reasoning is. I only take issue with the adults who indoctrinated these girls into the idea that their personal worth is tied up with their "purity" (notice that no such rules apply to the boys—they're only asked to *try* to not sully the precious womenfolk). The idea that women's bodies are some

kind of exceptional holy commodity undermines equality in a million ways—from access to reproductive health care (hey, how 'bout you cover my vagina the same way you cover *the rest of everyone else's body*?) to the fact that 2012 is a banner fucking year in the America household because we've elected *20 whole lady-senators* to the United States Senate (we can't elect any more or there'll be menses blood all over the Senate chamber!). There is nothing wrong with wearing a modest blouse. There is something wrong with wearing a modest blouse because some dinos told you it is your "womanly duty."

I want my kids to understand that they have value beyond their sexual capital—that they shouldn't dress just to titillate (at least until college, or whenever *that phase* happens), but they don't need to hide under baggy smocks like their knees and shoulders are some sort of irresistible garden of penis-witchery. They get to live their lives for *themselves*. Not in thrall to some ancient notion about the commercial value of unsullied vaginas.

I am a person. I'll dress the way I want and act the way I want, and if I want to show all of my boobs that is not an invitation or a justification to rape me. And the fact that I had sex out of wedlock does not make me tainted or virtueless or lower my "value" in any way, any more than it lowers some horny little dude's "value." So fuck these kids' parents and *especially* fuck the city of South Pasadena. Because if any of you really give a shit about women's safety, then how about you make it "Don't Rape Women Week" in South Pasadena? Or encourage your earnest little kids to start an "End Sexual Violence Club"? ...No? Just "Cover Up, Ladies, You're Making the Rapists' Erections Cry Week"? 'Kay, then. 'Kay. Bullshit.