**A Modest Proposal**

Ladies, it's time to put some clothes back on.

by Nancy French, *Philadelphia CityPaper*, June 2005

In the past few weeks, I've seen more breasts than David Hasselhoff. I've seen regular cleavage (due to plunging necklines), side cleavage (due to seductively large arm holes) and even butt cleavage (due to an apparently widespread mirror shortage). And that was just on Walnut Street.

The topic of modesty sounds so hopelessly schoolmarmish in this sex-saturated world that it's easy to dismiss. Just the word conjures up images of Victorian pantaloons and flannel underwear. However, modesty is a forgotten virtue that could benefit modern society — especially this month as the temperature increases and the amount of clothing naturally decreases. But this practical peep show is not good for anyone, especially women and girls.

Why?

First, it automatically introduces a sexual element to all interactions. For decades, feminists have correctly decried how some men see females as merely a collection of body parts. But judging from what some professional women wear to work, you'd think they get their fashion tips from Hooters and their tight-fitting clothes from Babies R Us. I don't care how smart you are, it's just plain hard to concentrate on the latest economic numbers when a co-worker's nipples are poking through her spaghetti-strapped shirt. Now, don't misunderstand. There are times when sexual tension and interaction is appropriate. But not when working, buying coffee from the local street vendor or picking up your kid from kindergarten.

Secondly, immodesty is ultimately less erotic than restraint. Most men will concede that a slim ankle peeking out from a well-cut skirt is much more alluring than casually overexposed body parts. That's because femininity plus a little reticence is as intriguing and enduring as Mona Lisa's smile — much sexier than silicone-enhanced double D's. Far from being an unfair double standard, this gives women power. It lets us control access to our bodies instead of yielding that access to every construction worker and corner creep on the street. And it enhances the eroticism of finding a potential mate, because nothing is more alluring than that ultimate seduction. (With the casual nature of sexual conquests these days, there's no seduction necessary.)

Lastly, this lack of restraint teaches our young girls the wrong lessons. Last year, my daughter got a flirtatious-looking "Bratz" doll out of a Happy Meal which had makeup, enormous pouty lips and an exposed midriff… evidently from the McDonald's Skank-Ho collection. In fact, some of these dolls come in "club" gear complete with short skirts, studded jewelry and thigh-high boots. (These make Barbie look like the doll equivalent of Janet Reno.) The only thing missing from the package is a miniature STD test kit.

Author Wendy Shalit argues in her groundbreaking book, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, that the so-called "sexual revolution" robbed young girls of a sense of self-worth. She writes that the erosion of modesty promotes promiscuity, and that "every single study" reveals that "low self-esteem is correlated with early intercourse for girls." From highly sexualized dolls to sex education in elementary school, young girls are being pressured relentlessly to overcome their natural bashfulness, stealing their innocence well before they're able to understand the complexities of sexuality — before they're even able to take the training wheels off of their bikes.

In the more "sexually repressed" past, women expected honor, charm and a commitment before men had the privilege of intimate body knowledge. Now it seems women give this away at the first introduction, forfeiting the advantages of a permanent relationship and family.

In a time when thousands of women suffer from body image problems and eating disorders, it's time to take back the power we've so easily given away in the name of "sexual freedom." Modesty is really about putting yourself out of reach of men who aren't prepared to treat you with respect.

But let's not confuse prudery with modesty. Prudery is an aversion to intimacy with anyone. Modesty is in fact prudery's opposite. As Shalit acutely observes, "neither the promiscuous person nor the prude can be moved or touched by anything."

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