

Is Modesty still a Virtue? A Historical Background

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of modesty, its historical and cultural evolution, and its role in philosophical perspectives on life. While modesty is often discussed in terms of sexual relationships and its overlap with aesthetics, there is a theoretical correlation between modest conduct and ways of living, including fashion. Historically, modesty has been studied by sociologists, historians, and psychologists, but its philosophical and theological dimensions are less thoroughly researched. The article addresses the diverse expressions of modesty across fashion, religion, and social trends, emphasizing both spiritual and aesthetic elements. The discussion highlights how modern portrayals of women—often sexualized by media and fashion designers—reflect broader social issues of sexuality, shame, and power. Giorgio Armani's criticism of the objectification of women's bodies is explored as a critique of how fashion influences perceptions of modesty and sexual identity. This is juxtaposed with historical narratives, such as the biblical accounts of Eve and Lilith, which frame women's bodies as sites of both virtue and sin. Philosophical reflections on modesty are enriched through the lens of Stoicism, particularly Seneca's work, which views modesty as a core element of the philosophy of daily living. Seneca's advocacy of outward respectability aligns with social norms while encouraging inner moral distinction. The article contends that modesty transcends religious and patriarchal contexts, embodying broader cultural values of decorum and social morality.

Keywords: Modesty, fashion, virtue, philosophy, daily life

Introduction

The study of modesty deals with questions of sexual relationships and the overlap between aesthetics, philosophy of life, and fashion, both in the past and present. While the roots of modesty and its role in the development of modest fashion are under discussion here, there is a theoretical correlation between them. Both modest conduct and modest clothing have mostly been studied by historians, sociologists and psychologists, which means that philosophical and theological research on this subject remained a neglected field.¹

Modesty can be expressed in various fashion styles, philosophical and religious traditions, rituals, and societal trends, which have developed within multiple historical and social contexts. Some differences are more spiritual than aesthetic, and others are more stylish than ethical. People tend to have a set of assumptions about the nature of fashion, style, and culture and believe that their perspective on actions and etiquette, as well as modest clothing, is part of continuous human evolution. Sexuality and shame are, therefore, one of the most discussed topics related to modesty

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¹ Reina Lewis, "Fashion, Shame and Pride: Constructing the Modest Fashion Industry in Three Faiths", in *The Changing World Religion Map*, ed. Stanley D. Brunn (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), pp. 2597-2609.

and integrity. In an interview, Giorgio Armani expressed his moral indignation at the sexualisation of women's bodies which are constantly exposed as nude or semi-naked by media and designers.² Armani told journalists, "I think it's time for me to say what I think. Women keep getting raped by designers, by us."³ Women are victims of sexual assault, where socio-cultural standardisation and representation of sexualised bodies are more visible, and the rise in abuse and violence against women is detrimental, humiliating and traumatic. Armani added "If a lady walks on the street and sees an ad with a woman with her boobs and arse in plain sight and she wants to be like that too, that's a way of raping her. You can rape a woman in many ways, either by throwing her in the basement or by suggesting that she dresses in a certain way."⁴

Moreover, for the West, the biblical narrative concerning women, canonical and apocryphal, is framed by the account of two scandalous naked women, Eve and Lilith, who reflect a sexual binary of modesty (androgynous beauty) and nakedness (sexual power and extravagance). Lilith, in Jewish texts the "first wife" of Adam, has sexual allure, whereas Eve is modest.⁵ In the myth of Eve and Lilith, in a way, women have lost their dignity and innocence for showing their "private parts." Such examples personalise the archetypes of the gratification of the flesh, of sin, of witches and their fertility, as the cause of original sin, that all human beings - *conditio humana* - are born with an inclination and the free will to be evil. Yet, the moral and social aspects of modesty existed before Christianity and were part of public values in Roman society.

In *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, Letter 5, "On the Philosopher's Mean," Seneca (4 BCE – 65 CE) states that modesty is part of the philosophy of everyday life. The Roman Stoic argues that modesty refers to our fashion code and that respectable attire should be compatible with moral and cultural standards:

Repulsive clothing, unkempt hair, open scorn of silver dishes, a couch on the bare earth, and any other perverted forms of self-display are to be avoided. The mere name of philosophy, however softly pursued, is the object of enough contempt; and what would happen if we were to begin to separate ourselves from the customs of our fellows? Inwardly, we are different in all respects, but our exterior should conform to society.⁶

Seneca's main theme in his letters is the modesty of antiquity, and he describes a variety of human customs and traditions linked to the Latin word *modestia* or *pudicitia*, connoting virtue and chastity. Modesty is also related to the philosophical antithesis of nudity and of being dressed, that is, being covered decorously. When referring to modesty, it goes beyond a matter of religion and patriarchy; modesty itself is associated with an exact sense of strict social purity and sexual morality which mainly pertained to women in late Republican Rome.

² "Giorgio Armani Criticised for Comparing Fashion to Rape", *The Guardian*, 21 February (2020). At: [https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/feb/21/giorgio-armani-criticised-for-comparing-fashion-trends-to-](https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/feb/21/giorgio-armani-criticised-for-comparing-fashion-trends-to-rape)

³ "Giorgio Armani Criticised for Comparing Fashion to Rape."

⁴ "Giorgio Armani Criticised for Comparing Fashion to Rape."

⁵ Marlene E. Mondriaan, "Lilith and Eve – Wives of Adam", *Old Testament Essays*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2005).

⁶ Robin Campbell (trans.), *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 36-38.

Modesty in Ancient Greek and Modern Philosophies

The word “modest” is used widely during the various historical periods from Greek philosophy, through the classic rhetoric of Cicero and Seneca, to Renaissance writings. Modesty comes from the Latin *modestus*, meaning mild, temperate, gentle, and a person of good character and courtesy with delicacy of thought and/ or purity of mind. The root of modesty is also contained in the Latin word *modus*, which means a way, manner, measure, and mode or method, reminiscent of *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi*.⁷ Modesty is also semantically related to courtesy, and it is defined as the absence of any feelings of conceit or vanity which create the idea that one is better than others.

Another interpretation and application of modesty is found in the philosophy of Greece, particularly in Plato and Aristotle’s virtue ethics. In Book IV of the *Republic*, Plato identifies modesty as moderation which is one of the four cardinal virtues - wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice. Similarly, in *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle speaks of modesty as self-control and temperance. In the Aristotelian perspective, modesty also encompasses “practical wisdom or virtue.” The Aristotelian concept of modesty stems from individual actions, deeming modesty and its definition as a fundamental characteristic of human existence. Most of the time, a modest person is praised by others because s/he has done sensible things and lives coherently; a modest person also has a sense of duty. For example, a virtuous individual not only studies and inquiries about what is humble, but by doing so gains modesty, as we do when we do arts; that is, through constructing, designing, and reading, we become builders.⁸

Modesty, moreover, is less than evident in some male-controlled arguments, and some critical analyses of modesty go back to Cicero. In Book 4 of the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, “On the Theory of Public Speaking,” Cicero argues that those people (the Greek writers) who make such assertions about modesty are immature, contradictory, and irrational:

First, then, let us beware lest the Greeks offer us too childish an argument in their talk about modesty. For if modesty consists in saying nothing or writing nothing, why do they write or speak at all? But if they do write something of their own, then why does modesty not keep them from composing, themselves, everything they write? ... I should not venture to say so, yet I fear that in their very pursuit of praise for modesty, they are impudent.⁹

The problem occurs when people themselves claim to be modest. We may agree with Cicero’s position that modesty shows some lack of self-knowledge; as they point out, it is contradictory to say or write about modesty because it is immodest to assert modesty. Nevertheless, we should note, as Kate Wilkinson in and Maud W. Gleason in point out, that the masculine voice in the Roman Republic was firm, strong and powerful rather than gentle.¹⁰ No matter what was said, it had to be

⁷ “Modesty”, *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024 [1989]). At: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/modesty_n?tl=true.

⁸ Nicolas Bommarito, “Modesty and Humility”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018). At: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/modesty-humility/>.

⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Rhetorica Ad Herennium: Book 4. On the Theory of Public Speaking* (South Carolina: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), pp. 5-6.

¹⁰ Kate Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Representation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

said of a real man, a man in his impeccable and deceptive capacity, and rhetorical expression was at the core of elite male education.¹¹ Masculinity was a social and cultural pattern; it was only men who were political advisors, moral thinkers, and orators. The failed orator was contaminated with feminine traits while female speech was quiet, polite, and silent.¹² Gleason considers the Greeks and Romans, and remarks that women were expected to keep their words and voices modestly guarded, because their personalities can be read by their emotions and feelings.¹³ A Roman noblewoman should speak and act with moderation, and, according to Pelagius's treatise *On Virginity*, a virgin should be submissive, exceptional for her modest manners, with a respectable appearance, not speaking too much or to be heard in public.

The fifth century Christian theologian Jerome addresses the conduct of women and how Christian women should live and dress. Jerome tells us what a woman should not be and what she should be. Wilkinson cites the passage from Jerome's *Letter 130 to Demetrias*, which focuses on Demetrias as a woman of noble descent who lived an ascetic and modest life. Indeed, a woman who appears in public, but who does not recognise her beauty, does not expose her chest and neck or nape bared by uncovering her mantle.¹⁴ Jerome writes:

you should choose for your companions staid and serious women, particularly widows and virgins, persons of approved conversation, of few words, and a holy modesty. Shun gay and thoughtless girls, who deck their heads and wear their hair in fringes, who use cosmetics to improve their skins and affect tight sleeves, dresses without a crease, and dainty buskins; and by pretending to be virgins more easily sell themselves into destruction. Moreover, the character and tastes of a mistress are often inferred from the behaviour of her attendants. Regard as fair and lovable and a fitting companion one who is unconscious of her good looks and careless of her appearance; who does not expose her breast out of doors or throwback her cloak to reveal her neck; who veils all of her face except her eyes, and only uses these to find her way.¹⁵

Classical philosophy and theology assert that virtues such as modesty and kindness necessitate being mindful of valued, worthy, and measured appearance, actions, and speech. It is believed that these virtues should be taught to and learned from women. Seneca, in "Moral Letter 11, On the Blush of Modesty," says modesty brings happiness when it creates affection, peace, and integrity to people, and is a sign of wisdom. A respectful person always has a gentle heart. Modesty is also associated with the love of humanity (philanthropy) and is considered a virtue that involves behaving differently and helping others to develop their abilities and interests. For example, a generous person will help others even if they do not know if the others are poor or in need. This does not mean that the person is unwise or less virtuous.

On the other hand, women learnt that helping and having affection for other people is natural and comes from their connection with the feminine Self, or the feminine and maternal side of God. The psychoanalytical scholar Barbara Black Koltuv observes that "[w]omen have lived for a long

¹¹ Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty in Late Antiquity*, p. 91.

¹² Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty in Late Antiquity*, p. 95.

¹³ Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome*, p. 97.

¹⁴ Wilkinson, *Women and Modesty in Late Antiquity*, p. 127.

¹⁵ Philip Schaff (ed.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series II, Volume 6 (1886). At: <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.CXXX.html>.

time in silence and loneliness in a patriarchal culture.”¹⁶ She also adds that friendship and therefore modesty between women is a kind of sisterhood that cures, nurtures, supports, and gives women the humble, open, and mindful trust of others.¹⁷

But what precisely does modesty mean, and how is modesty in contemporary philosophies (aesthetics, ethics) and religions? How have women changed their modest qualities and reputation? If modesty implies humility and altruism, and this attribute is unique to women, we should reaffirm the emergence of feminine values in modesty in our cultures and societies, and address the process of the transformation of modesty from ancient traditions, biblical accounts, and norms that women may experience on their journey, but which can also be personalised and internalised. Today’s dictionaries also define modest as opposed to extreme or excessive, and we cannot grasp modesty without understanding its opposite. Modesty is also seen as the moderation and control of excess, “power over the extremes,” and it works against transgression, but it can be a human capacity for being altruistic, adaptable, and sustainable in the face of various socio-cultural difficulties. This quality of being modest is essentially the archetype of *anima*, femininity, because the power *animus* of man is the idea of the charismatic leader in the patriarchal system. The woman is the mediator of relationships with others, and therefore she is empathetic in thinking, and a channel of peace, gratitude, integrity, and purity.

Several theories find modesty to have a major role to play in human capacity and action, to be mindful of oneself as well as the lives and needs of others. Julia Driver and Irene McMullin both add to this current debate on modesty and virtue. Driver’s suggestion is to ask if modesty is part of virtue, and argues that people underestimate their importance, contributing to a discussion of whether a person can be unaware of their good qualities.¹⁸ A woman should know the process of becoming modest, and determine what modesty means for herself. McMullin suggests that a genuinely modest person should acknowledge that he or she is successful and competent to know how to hide this knowledge from other people in consideration of their feelings. She writes

Modesty is not ignorance of the self or indifference to others but an orientation towards protecting another person from the hurtful lack or loss in feelings of self-worth that may arise from the experience of having a “lower rank.” This orientation arises precisely in response to modest people’s self-*knowledge* regarding where they stand in terms of social ranking. If one did not realize or care how one’s accomplishments and successes might be painful to someone else, one would have no reason to seek to downplay them, but would, on the contrary, simply *enjoy* them.¹⁹

Yet, Mark D. White, an ethical economist asks “What prevents a person who is aware of his or her good qualities from declaring them openly and possibly hurting others’ feelings?”²⁰ He takes McMullin’s modesty theory and applies it to Immanuel Kant’s egalitarian philosophy to explain

¹⁶ Barbara Black Koltuv, *Weaving Woman: Essays in Feminine Psychology from the Notebooks of a Jungian Analyst* (York Beach: Nicolas-Hays, 1990) p. 51.

¹⁷ Koltuv, *Weaving Woman*, p. 53.

¹⁸ Julia Driver, “The Virtues of Ignorance”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 86, no. 7 (1989), pp. 373-384.

¹⁹ Irene McMullin, “A Modest Proposal: Accounting for the Virtuousness of Modesty”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 241 (2010), p. 787.

²⁰ Mark D. White, “Modesty as Respect: You Think You’re Better Than Me? How does modesty relate to respect?”, *Psychology Today* (2010). At: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/maybe-its-just-me-but/201012/modesty-as-respect-you-think-youre-better-than-me>.

how societies and communities aim for equal income resources and wealth. This may pertain to underrepresented groups such as people of colour and women. However, various philosophical works on modesty are broader and focus less on gender roles. They see modesty as a limitation of human potential and self-sacrifice rather than self-fulfilment. Modest people value the other-centred way of life instead of the self-centred mode of living. Driver claims that modesty is compatible with the “virtue of ignorance” when a person lacks self-esteem, and has a low opinion of themselves in some respects.²¹ This is supposedly for people who do not live for themselves (the fulfilment of the self) or prioritize finding a successful career and high status. However, this underestimation of self is a psychological trait, caused primarily by awareness of others who tend to judge and rate a modest individual.²² There are different definitions of modesty, and some other theories identify modesty with humility, but there are also assumptions that modesty is public, while humility is private.²³ Humility is often viewed as underestimating one's abilities, whereas modesty is not.²⁴

Embracing Modesty and Virtue

Contemporary sociological and theological reflections have started to consider the role of women and their contribution to ethics. The involvement of women in ethics highlights the significance of leading a modest life. When we view modesty as a fundamental trait, we can begin to uncover aesthetic, semantic, gender, and political distinctions. Feminist scholarship, such as that of Rebecca Langlands, sees modesty as a measure of morality in society, which can be the consequence of the appearance and behaviour of *pudicitia* (pudor or chastity) in women. This can also lead to a discussion of gender and equality. If women are free and not bound by customs and laws in marriage, travel, and dress, it does not mean that they are moving away from social expectations, norms, and restrictions. Women may or may not choose to do things and make a difference, to use the ability to be polite, to be well-mannered, and to have a man as a companion. This ideal woman who has a sexual relationship with only one man emerged in ancient times.

Livy's *History of Rome, Book 10: The Third Samnite War (Ad Urbe Condita, 303-293 BCE)* describes *Pudicitia* as a goddess worshipped in the *Forum Boarium*, next to Hercules' Temple by Patrician matrons for her virtues and honour.²⁵ Virginia, a patrician woman, was excluded from the sacred rites by the matrons because she married a plebeian. In protest and to advocate for the rights of all poor, unmarried, chaste, and modest women, Virginia established a new temple of *Pudicitia*, the Plebiscite, in her home. The virtuous woman became the symbol of *univira*, who married only once, and was the archetype of feminine modesty. This was also a vital aspect of religious worship in pre-Christianity and Christianity.²⁶ Turtullian in *The Exhortatione Castitatis* reflects on the sexual nature and behaviour of *univira pronuba*.²⁷

²¹ Driver, “The Virtue of Ignorance”, p. 384.

²² Julia Driver, “Modesty and Ignorance”, *Ethics*, vol. 109 (1999), p. 828.

²³ G. Alex Sinha, “Modernizing the Virtue of Humility”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 90, no. 2 (2012), p. 26; Daniel Statman, “Modesty, Pride, and Realistic Self-Assessment”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 169 (1992), p. 438.

²⁴ Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, “The Virtue of Modesty”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1993), p. 240; Bommarito, “Modesty and Humility.”

²⁵ Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 37.

²⁶ Marjorie Lightman and William Zeisel, “*Univira*: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society”, *Church History*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1997), p. 19.

²⁷ Lightman and Zeisel, “*Univira*”, p. 20.

Analysing the issue of modesty in feminist studies, I also concentrate primarily on gender and Renaissance women of Venetian descent for two reasons. The study focuses on gender equality and empowerment. No country has achieved generation equality yet, so it is important to recognize and support the diverse history and culture of female thinkers and authors. United Nations Women's Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, in a press release, "Ahead of International Women's Day," states that "This is not an inclusive and equal world, and we need to take action now to create one that does not discriminate against women."²⁸

There are also several examples of women in the arts and sciences who have been illustrious and skilled, and whom patriarchal literature has ignored and excluded. In response to this we will highlight a few interpretations of the texts of female authors and critical thinkers, such as the Venetian Lucrezia Marinelli, in *La nobilta' et eccellenza delle donne, co' difetti et mancamenti degli uomini* ("The Nobility and Excellence of Women and The Defects and the Vices of Men") (1601) and Christine de Pizan in *The Book of the City of Women* (1404-1405) and *The Book of the Three Virtues* (also known as *The Treasure of the City of Women*, 1405), and other sources. These medieval and early modern writings demonstrated the role played by the term "modesty" in the development of political rhetoric, sexual propriety, and social status. Marinelli's rhetorical skills direct a cogent and broad argument for the excellence of women's intellectual and moral abilities. In *The Nobility and Excellence of Women* the theme of gender equality is queried, even though women are not perceived to be better than men. Marinelli analyses the condition of women, including a thorough analysis of modesty, focused on a patriarchally defined culture and religion, which often portrays women in moral and vital issues negatively, such as lack of respect, depravity and humiliation. Marinelli describes how women have been undervalued for their femininity, asking "why a woman should not be nobler than man and have more excellent purpose than him?"²⁹ She argues that the image of women was disparaged by numerous misogynistic writers, philosophers, and theologians, including Aristotle, Augustine, and Giuseppe Passi. In *Dei donneschi difetti* ("The Defects of Women") (1599), Passi claimed that women have an inherently evil nature, are confrontational, impractical, and weak.³⁰

In philosophy, politics, and religion, modesty has been used as a stereotypical device to tell women how to act, dress, speak, and believe, and this is important because it sets the standards of a hierarchical, patriarchal, and class-dominated society that determines the social structure of dominance and oppression. Women have been portrayed in the shadows of society and classified into good and bad, attractive and ugly, pure and erotic, married with children and without children, rich and poor, and so on. For this reason, women were often accused of misconduct and their virtues were less celebrated. They have been blamed for appearing to be less honourable and deserving than

²⁸ United Nations Women, "Ahead of International Women's Day, new UN Women report warns that progress towards gender equality is lagging and hard-fought gains are under threat", *ECA UN Women* (2020). At: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/press-release-ahead-of-international-womens-day-report-warns-that-progress-is-lagging-0>. See also, United Nations Women, "Take Five: Advocacy is not just about big actions—it is about the small, consistent steps we take together to create a world that's a little better than the one we inherited", *ECA UN Women* (2024). At: <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/take-five/2024/08/take-five-advocacy-is-not-just-about-big-actions-it-is-about-the-small-consistent-steps-we-take-together-to-create-a-world-thats-a-little-better-than-the-one-we-inherited>.

²⁹ Lucrezia Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, ed. And trans. Anne Dunhill (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 53.

³⁰ Stephen Kolsky, "Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Giuseppe Passi: An Early Seventeenth-Century Feminist Controversy", *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 96, no. 4 (2001), pp. 973-989.

men. Women are judged by their clothes, make-up, and jewellery, and they are told how to dress. Considering contemporary women, there is still no strong voice from a female perspective. How are we going to see the social norms and values that we are brought up with?

Marinelli began to undermine traditional views on the virtue and excellence of women by asking questions such as “Why are women less remembered in the philosophical tradition for their critical thinking skills?” And “Why can women not be morally right as thinkers if philosophy and ethics exist?”³¹ She listed a variety of women freethinkers who have made progress in women's rights and values. The first female philosophers of the Platonic School were Amphiclea, Clea, Diotima and Timoxina, who were disciples and members of the Neoplatonist Plotinus. Socrates, who called Diotima a mentor, took part in her philosophy lessons. Theano, the wife of Pythagoras, was philosophically gifted, and a public-school lecturer.³² Hypatia, another thinker and mathematician at Alexandria, presided over the Plotinus School and was a woman of great virtue and modesty.³³ Catherine, the daughter of the King of Alexandria, argued with male philosophers who wanted to accuse her of idolatry, but she was able to win her dialectical debates and philosophical arguments with men.³⁴ Moreover, Marinelli praises “temperate women,” recalling ideas in both Aristotle and Cicero, describing temperance as the moderation of the soul's impulses and the regulation of desires through “the right reason.”³⁵ She gives several examples of these women. In Rome patrician matrons exerted considerable power, although often modestly, behind the veil of wife and mother. The word patrician originally refers to the father, although it refers to a whole social class. Sophronia was a Roman matron, harassed and raped by emperor Maxentius (reigned 306-312 CE), and killed herself with a knife to keep her reputation, and not to defile her body and her dignity.³⁶ A similar case was Monima of Miletus, who did not submit to Mithridates, King of Armenia. Finally, Penelope, who refused all men's demands, lived chastely and modestly waiting for her only man, her husband Ulysses, to return.³⁷

Marinelli also believes that women by nature have beautiful souls, as is seen in their charm and strength, and their natural beauty.³⁸ In contrast, in the second part of the book “On the Men's Defects and Vices,” Marinelli observes men's contradictions and vulnerability and concurs with Cicero's criticism of Greek patriarchal philosophers like Aristotle, portraying them as insecure, infantile, and vulnerable – “all over the place.”³⁹ Marinelli believes that men are eccentric, possess wrathful souls, and are quick to seek revenge.⁴⁰ Aristotle observes in *Politics* Book V that anger is typical of people who lack logic, and therefore overreact to the smallest offence and then explode. He also claims that men were busy outside the city with public and political duties, while women were expected to be modest, cultured, resolute, reliable, and honest, which was considered useful to their husbands and families. Thus, Aristotle's concepts of virtue and modesty are an important

³¹ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 83.

³² Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 85.

³³ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 86.

³⁴ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 92.

³⁵ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 94.

³⁶ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 95.

³⁷ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 96.

³⁸ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 55.

³⁹ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 162.

⁴⁰ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, p. 149.

description of gender roles and polarised behaviours in society, where men, by nature, are more selfish and women are selfless in making sacrifices for the love of others. Marinelli states that:

Even if men were not born beautiful and chaste as women, they spent their money on clothing, and perfume. How many of them dyed their beards when they were old and tinted their hair? Some others, out of vanity and frivolity, wore necklaces, shoes, rings, and clothes made of silk and adorned with gold and pearls or precious gems.⁴¹

While Marinelli and de Pizan were aware of women's lack of representation in literature, they wrote about and promoted women. Given the limited number of women's intellectual works in the ancient world, other sources – in several literary texts by Marinelli and de Pizan – identified and discussed the lives and works of these women thinkers, with a more general emphasis on their valuable contributions to society. They both lived for their own sake, producing numerous works in a variety of forms, from poetry to treatises. They discussed the literary misogyny of their time but also praised the virtues of women. The list of female lead characters and thinkers is a counter-example of womanhood within a patriarchal society.

Many of the ideas that seemed almost outlandish at the time have now become mainstream within feminist studies. Christine de Pizan's *The City of Ladies* is a place where virtuous and intelligent women can live and protect themselves against misogynistic attacks. Three women, the 'Virtues,' are important to the 'City of Women' – embodied as "Reason, Rectitude and Justice" – and they are symbols of the Trinity, cooperating with good intentions and disseminating gender equality, security and peace. She portrays Sulpicia, a Roman noblewoman who lived in poverty and modesty, but more importantly with morals and dignity. This rich woman, surrounded by every comfort, decided to follow her husband and give up all her possessions and luxuries.⁴² According to de Pizan, there are different ways to make moral decisions. Women are equal to men and have the right to education, the freedom to choose how to dress, the ability to take charge of their homes, and the opportunity to participate in public life. Indeed, the Italian Novella d'Andrea, the daughter of Giovanni d'Andrea, a famous canon law scholar, is an example of an educated woman who taught law at a university when her father was busy with other tasks.⁴³ As a means of remedying excessive show, extravagance and pride in one's clothes and manners, de Pizan gives some advice on how to be moderate or modest. She claims that "there is nothing more ridiculous than a person, no matter who they are, dressed in great and excessive pomp,"⁴⁴ adding that "any woman who wants to preserve her good reputation is modest and conservative in her clothing."⁴⁵

The Myth of Modesty and Femininity in Abrahamic Traditions

In the Abrahamic religious traditions, the Queen of Sheba is often portrayed as modest compared to King Solomon, despite having the same status as him. She does not belong to any specific culture

⁴¹ Marinelli, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, pp. 168-170.

⁴² Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 121.

⁴³ de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, p. 140.

⁴⁴ de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, pp.133-134.

⁴⁵ de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, p. 140.

or religion, but today she has become a subject of racial, religious, and social debate in the Western context. The Quran and the Bible depict her as a woman who has learned to follow the modest and respectable conduct of a monotheistic religion based on moral virtue and religious norms. From a postcolonial perspective, the modesty of the Queen of Sheba can be viewed as a new way of thinking that acknowledges marginalized communities and women.⁴⁶ Exploring and defining modesty critically, it might be more beneficial to interpret the modest behaviour of subordinate groups as a provocative response to the politics of dominance and humiliation. The Bible, the Ethiopian *Kebrä Nagast* ("The Glory of Kings"), and the Qur'an all describe the Queen of Sheba as a wise, truthful, and humble woman. They also portray her as a beautiful and strong person who maintained the patriarchal order by satisfying the wishes of Solomon and his God with the wealth of her vast empire. Her empire included modern-day Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Ethiopia. However, according to postcolonial scholar Patrick Taylor this woman's status in these sacred texts appears submissive to the will of God.⁴⁷ Also, the historian Bernard Leeman says that the Queen must conform to the authority of Solomon and his God.⁴⁸

Traditional male scholarship in religion has spoken less about the Queen of Sheba as an important figure in dignity, modesty, and religious pluralism. Her story appears in different religions, and her culture and economy are the result of a magnificent and prosperous civilization. Her empire was very rich, both culturally and financially. During Solomon's time, a woman brought goods into the market, showcasing her cultural and religious beliefs and her innovative entrepreneurship. Not only was she wealthy, but she also outperformed, outmanoeuvred and outsmarted her male counterparts. She is possibly the world's first female ambassador and leader, able to act as a peacemaker and representative of various religions. She was a historically significant woman who used strategy to create power, particularly remarkable for a woman in the geo-political domain or theatre in the old world that relegated women to a hidden life. Moreover, her culture was more inclusive and peaceful than today's Arab-Yemeni society; the relationship between men and women was more equal and less male-dominated.⁴⁹

But why did the Queen of Sheba leave her country with her treasure of gold, silver, and oil, and, being self-sufficient, humbly embark on a long journey to visit another country and ruler?⁵⁰ Koltuv compares Queen Sheba to a few successful women who hold senior positions but only use "their masculine side" to succeed,⁵¹ whereas statistically women are in a lower position in their professions and display "their feminine side" by their modest lifestyle. In my opinion, the reasons that she wanted to visit Solomon may be twofold. First, she was a free trader and independent enough to travel to another country, to deal and talk with a man in the same way a man does; she possessed freedom of thought, intellectual inquiry and confidence. Second, she wanted to learn about another faith, knowledge, and culture. Additionally, her beauty was astonishing, but her

⁴⁶ Marzia Coltri, *Beyond Rastafari: An Historical and Theological Introduction* (Bern: Peter Lang International, 2015), p. 172.

⁴⁷ Patrick Taylor, "Sheba's Song", in *Nation Dance: Religion, Identity, and Cultural Difference in the Caribbean*, ed. Patrick Taylor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 67.

⁴⁸ Bernard Leeman, *Queen of Sheba and Biblical Scholarship* (Queensland: Queensland Academic Press, 2005), p. 74.

⁴⁹ Leeman, *Queen of Sheba and Biblical Scholarship*, p. 66.

⁵⁰ Barbara Black Koltuv, *Solomon & Sheba: Inner Marriage and Individuation* (York Beach, ME: Nicolas-Hays, 1993), pp. 36-37.

⁵¹ Koltuv, *Solomon & Sheba*, p. 47.

appearance, behaviour and manners were modest. In the following passage from *Kebra Nagast*, we see how the Queen was modest, respectful, and willing to learn wisdom from another culture:

Listen to me, my people, and take note of what I say. I desire wisdom and my heart yearns for understanding. I am in love with wisdom, and I am led by the leash of understanding, for wisdom is greater than any wealth, and nothing you will find in this world can compete with it. So, what can you compare it to? It sweeter than honey, and it makes one to rejoice more than wine, and it illuminates more than sun, and it is to be loved more than precious stone. It is a source of joy for the hearth, and a bright and shining light for the eyes. Wisdom is a rich thing: I will love her like a mother, and she will embrace me as her child. I will seek after wisdom, and she shall be with me forever (*Kebra Nagast*, Ch. 24).

Clearly, the Queen of Sheba was a questioning mind, searching for wisdom and truth, and she was a modest person in her demeanour. Her passion for wisdom, and need to learn, demonstrates her sense of modesty and her need for a modest life.

Blackness and Modesty

As seen in religious texts, literature, history, and culture around the world, modesty manifests itself with many faces and hidden aspects throughout history and reflects paradoxes. Every person has a tale to tell others about how they think and live, as they explain the reason for being modest or being low paid. Our society has exposed deep inequalities at the heart of our economy, politics and religions. In some respects, modesty for Driver is not just a kind of virtue of ignorance due to lack of self-confidence; on the contrary, modesty presents because the person is not subject to the recognition of others, and that person is often discriminated against by the mainstream for belief, language, sexuality, and race. The existence of a variety of human races also promotes the notion of different intellectual and moral attributes. The West has always emphasised the classification of different races, placing the White race at the top of the socio-cultural ranking. Black and ethnic minority groups have been in a disadvantaged position and undermined and devalued because of ethnicity and race. Similarly, when the concept of ‘modesty’ is applied to someone or something, we attribute several meanings, including sexually and racially inferior, lacking in confidence, and less confident.⁵² The sexual aspect of modesty, including dress and behavior that presents a non-sexual image appears in different social and racial types of modesty.⁵³

When people define modesty and how it is or should be, they assume that it applies to everyone, and do not take into consideration other beliefs and cultures. Researchers are frequently influenced by a specific research model, leading them to overlook other cultural, religious, and racial perspectives. If we consider modesty as a component of one's cultural, ethnic, and religious community, it follows that a modest individual may have a certain level of self-esteem based on the socio-economic context in which they are situated. A hierarchical mainstream group may overlook a person's abilities and income, leading to the person experiencing social exclusion and a less inclusive environment. Although modesty is often viewed by social scientists as a form of virtue

⁵² McMullin, “A Modest Proposal: Accounting for the Virtuousness of Modesty”, p. 783.

⁵³ Bommarito, “Modesty and Humility”.

stemming from lack of self-confidence, when we engage with modest individuals, we come to understand that modesty involves recognizing and appreciating others through one's selfless conduct and generous speech.

Unfortunately, modest individuals are often judged, discriminated against, and deemed less valuable by others. According to George F. Schuler, a modest person knows that they are good at achieving their own goals, whatever others think about their abilities and skills.⁵⁴ A modest person is aware that certain people do not like their income, nationality, language, gender, and race, and they may be faced with a deficit in everything from cultural, racial and sexual performance to success. If modesty is a matter of being a leader, how can we value the success of a leader to be more authentically modest? The more modest person is more likely to be authentic, so they do what they feel is more natural to them, cultivating their “high skills,” to understand their motivations and goals in life regardless of the pressures of other people’s opinions. Humble people are more authentic as they invest their precious time in relationships with people who do not pay attention to them. Modesty is also a sort of “secret virtue” to be used against a situation where the oppressor makes the poor, the marginalised, and the oppressed powerless. Modesty is the ideological resistance of subordinate groups – their gossip, myths, creeds, songs, and drama – to use anonymity and ambiguity. However, subservient people implicitly submit to the existence of power/ hegemony. Indeed, the Jamaican proverb, “play fool, catch wise,” exemplifies the idea of modesty that expresses the relationship between subordination and domination.⁵⁵

In many cases, LGBTQ, black and ethnic minorities commonly experience living modestly within the mainstream social structure. There is often little societal accountability for racial minorities who have not been able to fully participate in a more integrated and fair society. Robert Staples points out that poverty and systemic inequality tend to affect many ethnic and racial minorities.⁵⁶ Black and ethnic minorities are still excluded by most white people, with traditional values that are part of the conservative, patriarchal and middle-class social model. The social structure of whiteness and patriarchy tends to be visible in a variety of forms affecting minorities with social poverty, prejudice and economic inequality, keeping them from excelling and thriving, even if they appear more modest than others, and remain subordinate to other social ranks. The therapist and writer Araya Baker says that if a modest person achieves success thanks to their merits, people around them may turn out to be envious:

being a modest person who doesn’t flaunt coveted material possessions or status symbols doesn’t necessarily protect you from being targeted. When you possess certain enviable personal characteristics that garner attention traits like charisma, creativity or self-discipline—simply being yourself is enough to make some individuals resent you.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ George F. Schuler, “Why is Modesty a Virtue?”, *Ethics*, vol. 109, no. 4 (1999), pp. 835-41.

⁵⁵ G. Llewellyn Watson, *Jamaican Sayings: With Notes on Folklore, Aesthetics and Social Control* (Tallahassee: Florida A&M University Press, 1991).

⁵⁶ Robert Staples, “Social Structure and Black Family Life: An Analysis of Current Trends”, *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1987), pp. 267-268.

⁵⁷ Araya Baker, “5 Telltale Signs That You’re the Target of Envy: Red Flags of the Green-eyed Monster”, *Psychology Today* (2020). At: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-cultural-competence/202004/5-telltale-signs-that-youre-the-target-of-envy>.

Being modest is part of the inevitable historical process of the oppressed condition in which disadvantaged or marginalised groups have been discriminated against and ghettoised by race, language, religion and sexuality. At the heart of the analysis of modesty and its complexity is the vital importance of debate in understanding how a modest life represents alienation suffered by the oppressed. In modesty, we should encourage thought from different perspectives, improving and bringing together postcolonial and diversity discussions, particularly about race and gender, as modesty is not just an abstract conceptualised term but also a human experience. Besides, modesty should be more written about and be more often expressed by the oppressed, who are in a perpetual state of injustice and self-humiliation.

In the history of human civilisation, Black people - such as ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians - have contributed to human progress with their impressive social organisation and advanced industry and have maintained their traditions with humility and modesty. The West, the White patriarchal race entranced by the beauty and wealth of Black countries, with their majestic buildings, decorated with paintings and sculptures that preceded the Christian period by several thousand years, invaded those countries. When we look at the different theories of modesty, part of what inspires these arguments for modesty and its relationship to social issues is that their study focuses on 'the virtue of ignorance.' However, they fail to recognize that, according to modesty theory, the higher social rank looks down upon the lower social rank, which may suffer from patriarchal-ethnic-racial inferiority and injustice due to its modesty. As Driver and Schuler argue, modesty occurs when a person is either completely ignorant of their successes or has less interest in impressing others with their achievements.⁵⁸ But there is also another argument that stems from the theory of subcultural psychology. In this theory, the subordinate is permissive and humble to tyrannical authority and hierarchy and may humiliate and/or underestimate their true self.

Conclusion

Modesty is a complex cultural construct that intertwines with philosophy, religion, and fashion, reflecting deeper societal values about sexuality and morality. Could modesty be a form of self-humiliation, even if a person is aware of his or her abilities and identity? Are women, black, and ethnic minorities considered modest to undermine their status in such a way that their social position is subordinated to religious beliefs, sexual behaviour, and dress codes? This analysis encourages a nuanced understanding of how modesty, historically framed by figures like Seneca and challenged in modern fashion, continues to shape individual and social identities. The convergence of modesty in conduct, dress, and ethics points to its enduring significance beyond merely aesthetic choices, embedding itself within the philosophical and cultural fabric of humanity.

⁵⁸ Schuler, "Why is Modesty a Virtue?", pp. 838-839.