

Dear Prudence: The Fall and Rise of the Wise Woman

Late night. After drinks. Men. Women. Hot tub. No suits.

Why not? That's what he thought.

No way. That's what she thought.

He called her a *prude*.

She objected. *Modest*, she suggested. And kept her clothes on.

As any woman who's ever been called a prude can attest, it's a highly insulting pejorative, right up there with priss and goody-two shoes. According to Wikipedia, a prude is "a person who is described as being overly concerned with decorum or propriety. They may be perceived as being uncomfortable with [sexuality](#), [nudity](#), [alcohol](#), [drug use](#) or mischief."

No wonder my friend deflected the label. No wonder last week she found herself processing the experience with other women on a "girl's night out." No wonder the women called me to see if I'd write a column about *prudes*.

Good news, gals. It's not so bad. In fact, literally speaking, prude means good. But like certain other lovely words (*gay*, for instance), it's been hijacked by prejudice and transformed into a slur. Prude has a praiseworthy past. It comes from the Late Latin, *prōde*, "advantageous," which derived from the verb *prōdesse*, "to be good." This is also the origin of our words *proud*, *improve*, *provenance* and *approve*.

So where did things go wrong?

France.

Mais oui, it all started just fine. A *prudomme* was "a man of experience and integrity," and by extension a *preude femme* was a strong woman. The French later shortened the phrase to *prude*, meaning "a wise woman." Overall, the sense was that a prude was a woman of high moral quality. She was linked to profit, wisdom and integrity.

But, as the "American Heritage Dictionary" Usage Panel observes, "sometimes a woman could be too wise, or, in the eyes of some, too observant of decorum and propriety."

Of course, a woman is often accused of not being "decorous" enough, and it's easy to imagine someone inveighing against a woman who ripped off her clothes and jumped into the tub, labeling her a *hussy* or *floozy* (or any number of raunchy synonyms). Sometimes you're just dammed, whichever side of the hot tub you're sitting on.

The transition from honorific to affront had already occurred by 1704, the date when the word was first recorded in English. But linguistic transitions take time. In the 1800s, Archbishop Trench, a distinguished clergyman and etymologist, was still protesting the word's unfortunate reversal as an act of common cynicism.

Words can be like mirrors, especially when they are held up to us. And sometimes those reflections can be quite painful. Prude is one of them.

I recall a few lines from a poem by 12th century poet Kabir, in which he writes,

*If a mirror ever makes you sad
you should know
that it does
not know
you.*

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Word Woman

I admire my friend for having the presence to rename the moment—to hold up an alternative string of syllables as a mirror she was more comfortable standing in front of. Modest. From Latin *modus*, a measure, as in “keeping oneself within measure, well regulated.” Nice reflection.

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