

"Girlfriends of the Court"

Amicae Curiae

[boobs](#), [bosoms](#), [breasts](#), [cleavage](#)

Who Controls Women's Bodies?

In [Advocacy](#), [Community](#), [media](#), [women](#) on **February 19, 2012 at 3:48 pm**



http://amicaecuriae.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/ursula_andress_as_honey_ryder_crop.jpg

My Body. My Business.

In my last post (<http://amicaecuriae.com/2012/02/12/i-know-what-boys-like/#more-935>) on Amicae Curiae in response to an article (<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/the-booby-trap-20120211-1syoi.html>) by Bettina Arndt, I described the way in which women were objectified in media whether or not they displayed their breasts. It seems however that the media's obsession with breasts is not going to go away.

In mainstream media, on Twitter and on Facebook, the last week or so has seen a constant stream of the kind of mixed messages and double standards that represent society's view of women's bodies. {read on}

[Samantha Brett](http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life/blogs/ask-sam/the-great-cleavage-conundrum-should-men-look-if-its-on-display-20120215-1t5cx.html) (<http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life/blogs/ask-sam/the-great-cleavage-conundrum-should-men-look-if-its-on-display-20120215-1t5cx.html>) in the Sydney Morning Herald suggested that a cleavage exposed in the workplace 'often gets [a woman] ahead of the men she's long been trying to compete with'. In fact, according to Ms Brett, exposing cleavage is better for your career than a PhD. This advantage it seems, accounts for the increase in numbers of women having surgical breast augmentation.

On the other hand, this month has seen protests both [here](http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/national/milking-it-aussie-mothers-protest-facebook-for-removing-their-breastfeeding-images/story-e6freooo-1226262035543) (<http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/national/milking-it-aussie-mothers-protest-facebook-for-removing-their-breastfeeding-images/story-e6freooo-1226262035543>) and

overseas (http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/facebook_bans_breast-feeding_photos.php) against Facebook's ban on pictures of women breastfeeding. Apparently breastfeeding pictures are OK,

'just as long as there's no "exposed breast" that doesn't feature the child actively nursing. In other words, if there's no suckling, there's no posting.'

The question of the appropriateness or indeed lawfulness of exposing ones breasts seems to be an ongoing problem for the gatekeepers of our moral well-being. The 2003 expulsion of Victorian Labor MP Kirstie Marshall (<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/03/12/1047431086236.html>) from the House of Parliament illustrates the challenge for women of participating in public life while feeding a newborn.

But in the last week it is not only breasts continuing to exercise the minds of our moral gate-keepers. In Australia, Mamamia (<http://www.mamamia.com.au/news/vaginas-are-being-photshopped-oh-yes-they-are/>) [warning – not safe for work] took the cover of the latest Sports Illustrated (swimsuit edition) to revisit the issue of the Australian Censorship Board's policy on vaginas. The requirement to digitally reconstruct women's genitalia in depictions of women in media have, it is claimed, misrepresented what is 'normal' in women's bodies. This coincides with an increase in the number of women having labiaplasty. (I am still recovering from the idea that the government has a vagina policy.)

We protest at genital mutilation elsewhere, yet accept it in Australia as a consequence of laws designed to 'tidy up' and 'improve' the appearance of women's genitals.

In the US, Virginia (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/post/is-virginias-ultrasound-bill-the-future-of-abortion-regulation/2012/02/18/gIQAzqgvLR_blog.html) became the latest state to pass laws mandating a vaginal ultrasound for women seeking a termination of their pregnancy. (The bill is yet to be signed into law by the Governor.) Some have argued that such a procedure is justified on the basis that women had already made the decision to be 'vaginally penetrated when they got pregnant' (http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2012/02/virginia_ultrasound_law_women_who_want_an_abortion_will_be_forcibly_penetrated_for_no_medical_reason.2.html) and that the 'vast majority of abortions are lifestyle decisions' (<http://gawker.com/5886027/virginias-ultrasound-law-would-require-forcible-penetration-for-women-seeking-abortions>). The law has been described as government sanctioned rape (http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2012/02/virginia_ultrasound_law_women_who_want_an_abortion_will_be_forcibly_penetrated_for_no_medical_reason.html).

Where does all this leave women and their bodily integrity?

John Stuart Mill wrote in 1859:

The likings and dislikings of society, or of some powerful portion of it, are thus the main thing which has practically determined the rules laid down for general observance, under the penalties of law or opinion. (John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*)

The status of women's bodies as represented in the media and through our laws, illustrates this thesis.

Do you agree?

Guest blogger Kate Galloway (http://www.jcu.edu.au/law/staff/JCUDEV_002672.html) teaches law at James Cook University. You can follow her blog at Curl (<http://katgalloway.blogspot.com/>), and on twitter at @KatGalloway (<https://twitter.com/%21katgalloway>).

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