

Column: What Kate's baby bump tells us

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My colleague Claire recently introduced her three-year-old daughter to her just-born twin brothers, relocated to the outside of Claire's body just a few hours earlier. Lily regarded her mother's tummy in confusion.

"More babies inside?" she asked.

Lily's confusion was echoed this week by a smirking tweeter, who posted that Kate Middleton's still round belly must be evidence of her knockedup again status.

His comment contrasted with many more observers who celebrated the remarkable "bravery" of a celebrity appearing in public still sporting the unavoidable after-bump that remains when a woman's uterus, abdominal muscles and epidermal layer have been stretched to capacity for months.

Given that our tabloid culture regularly humiliates celebrities for failing to live up to punishingly unattainable ideals of femininity, it's perhaps not surprising that we can't recall another famous woman in recent memory who was willing to face the cameras after giving birth and before starving her body back into regulation appearance.

But the fact that Kate Middleton's display of normalcy is so rare as to be labelled the epitome of courage shows just how far we remain from genuinely celebrating women's bodies.

Western women's willingness to flaunt their baby bumps with form fitting dresses and midriff-baring tops suggests that we've attained a sophisticated level of body acceptance, but other indicators argue a more complicated ambivalence.

Until relatively recently, although becoming pregnant was the main task on a woman's

job description, actually revealing her inseminated state in public was not.

For centuries, capacious caftans and concealing pleats were relied upon to prevent innocent eyes from being perverted by the sight of a protruding belly. Women were literally confined after a certain stage. In the Victorian era, restrictive “maternity corsets” dangerously cinched pregnant midriffs into publicly acceptable form. And as recently as the 1920s, an ad in *Good Housekeeping* magazine targeted expectant mothers with fashions designed to make them “entirely free from embarrassment of a noticeable appearance during a trying period.”

So yes, we've made progress. And I'm among those happy to salute the Duchess of Cambridge for helping to remind us about some of what's required to give life to another human being. But – as much as I wish her post-birth mummy bump were capable of revolutionizing the way we look at women's bodies – I'm not convinced.

Consider that the same news stories that fawned over her daring tummy display also expressed enthusiastic approval of her flawless hair and makeup. Would they have celebrated her quite so eagerly if she had ventured out of the hospital with the exhausted demeanour of one who had just run a marathon and was gingerly shuffling along with swollen feet and thick ankles, suffering from the pain of a torn episiotomy? Given the demands of childbirth, any woman should be permitted such an appearance.

So, duty-bound to emerge, smiling and waving, the day after her own ordeal, to parade before an army of well-wishers and paparazzi, Duchess Kate deserved to benefit from the cosmetic assistance her royalty afforded her.

But don't women who have just given their all to perpetuating the species similarly deserve to be celebrated just for the act of giving birth itself? Shouldn't this indispensable feat alone inspire us to refrain from judging them on whether they've aced the beauty game as well? At the same time, isn't there something distressingly retro about going all gaga over a royal heir in the first place? To be clear, I say this as a doting aunt and newly besotted grandmother who now plans my holidays around the

availability of an 11-month old made fussy by teething.

I have wept in awe at the miracle of my colleague's precious twins, at the sight of my stepdaughter feeding her beautiful son.

But something about the worldwide mania in anticipation of the imminent arrival of this future king seems oh-so King Henry VIII to me. I understand that Ms. Middleton's head was never in danger should she have failed to produce a male child. And it seems clear that her prince married her for love and companionship, rather than for her breeding capacity.

And yet the concentration of attention on her remarkable thinness on her wedding day, the speculation about whether she was eating enough during the pregnancy, the continuing scrutiny of her physical appearance after the fact – remains profoundly discomfiting.

On some level, it feels too much a part of the same social fabric that permits our still mostly male politicians and religious leaders to pontificate about women's reproductive choices. And that allows Julia Gillard, the recently overthrown Prime Minister of Australia, to be castigated for being “deliberately barren.”

Is it too much to ask for a world in which we stop viewing women's value as primarily defined by their bodies' physical presentation and capacity?

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