

Quoth the Mavens: “*Nevermore!*”

© Elizabeth Stewart Clark 2010.

This article may be copied for personal, non-profit, and educational use. For permission for other uses, please contact us at www.elizabethstewartclark.com.

Warning: this article is entirely tongue-in-cheek. Please read with your sense of humor intact, as the tips really are useful.

The Mavens.

Like mythic ravens of old, they pick over the physical details of others, offering putrid morsels of self-effacing advice (unasked for) to those they have recently slain on the battlefield of clothing correctness.

If you’ve not yet met one, you’ve likely heard of them: those nasty “hardcore” women who will tear down anyone, at any time—the self-appointed Matriarchs of Correctness... the “Experts.”

One problem: truly progressive and “hardcore” citizen reenactors don’t normally have the time to be a “Maven.” So if you meet a Maven, they’re not likely to be truly “hardcore.” And, Mavens are also responsible for the perpetuation of quite a few reenactorisms, and sometimes just general cussedness, too.

So let’s take a look at some of the common statements of the *Correcter Than Thou* crowd, shall we?

“Oh, how nice to meet you! Where did you buy that awful dress, dear?? It’s really quite awful, you know.”

Not only is the person rude enough to criticize a stranger in public, but they’re also farb enough to break a scenario to do it! Launching into a litany of a person’s period correctness, or lack thereof, is the ultimate in bad behavior. It immediately takes all participants out of the period, and plops them without ceremony into a modern conversation.

No woman of the 1860s sat around discussing fashion from the viewpoint of 2004; none discussed on-line forums, Simplicity patterns, new repro fabric lines, or any other modern “recreation” topic... and yet, the Mavens are often quick to do it.

My advice? Anyone willing to destroy a scenario just to pick on you, doesn’t likely have much worth listening to. Smile politely, and excuse yourself from the area. You don’t have to respond.

Period cattiness is perfectly appropriate to some scenarios. In these conversations, you’d be discussing the “*absolute daring*” of *that* woman, wearing such a *young* style—and so *faddish*, too, and her the *Minister’s wife*, and not a day younger than 50, to boot!”

Signs You’ve Met a Maven

- She uses explicit statements like “Always” and “Never” when describing most historic things
- She refers to Hollywood movies as “documentation.”
- She rationalizes with “If They’d Had It...”
- She makes personal comments and critiques uninvited
- She looks like a reenactor, rather than like a person from the 1860s.
- She refuses to listen to any new documentation or research
- She refuses to share any hint of sources for her own research

That’s an entirely different bag of cats from “My word, what a horrid dress. What eBay dungeon did that emerge from, dear? Have a funnel cake?”

“I’ve been at it 15 years, dear... I know what I’m talking about.”

Longevity in the hobby has nothing to do with one’s accuracy level. In recent years, I’ve met women at their very first event who are a snood-free head and shoulders above others who’ve been at it for a decade. Even if a person has been involved forever, they may be working with research that hasn’t been reexamined in just as long. A progressive outlook requires that a person keep working at it!

The true test of whether or not a person “knows” things is to take a look for yourself—do they look like a person from the 1860s (or whatever the chosen time period), as compared to original images, garments, and other primary resources?

Generally, the people who *do* know their stuff are also pretty eager to share their new lines of research and resources... outside of the event, so no one has to break the scenario.

“You’ve got to wear a cage... hoops are just too, too, farb, dear.”

Let’s be clear about this: some folks are more concerned about having “name brand” gear than about having the right gear for the impression and scenario. There is nothing inherently more virtuous in wearing a cage crinoline, over a covered cage (hoop) crinoline. Both exist in the 1860s. Both are used. Both



Find more free articles and projects in the Compendium at www.thesewingacademy.com
Email for “tech support” with your historic clothing projects or research questions, or visit us on-line at www.thesewingacademy.org.

come in a wide variety of shapes, styles, and construction methods. Both have the potential to be accurate, and both have the potential to be inaccurate. There's more to the topic than a simple pronouncement by the Mavens.

For instance, either one would be "farb" for a woman portraying a share-cropper's wife on Wednesday. Her skirt support is most likely petticoats alone. For church on Sunday, she might have a hoop or cage... usage can vary!

Both cages and hoops have the potential to be worn poorly—at a circumference of 180", for instance, or reaching clear to the ankle, or without any underskirts over it to soften the line.

Cages can be easier to maneuver than a hoop; hoops can be more supportive of delicate dresses that might otherwise cave a bit between steels, even with underskirts.

Accuracy depends on being suited to your impression, to the season, to your activities, and to the scenario—and that's not a One Maven Fits All situation.

"Use a flounced hoop, dear, and you can skip all those petticoats."

Well, not really. The Maven who says this is merely lacking in understanding of how the "system" works with period clothing. You don't need to argue. Simply respond with a polite, "Thanks for the suggestion. I'll keep that in mind." It's astonishing what wrath that one reply can turn away. Practice the phrase. If she persists in offering distracting advice, repeat it in the same polite, friendly tone of voice. After three or four rounds, she'll usually leave you be.

"Maker X is the ONLY source!"

Usually, a group will have favorite sources. Some of these will be good sources. Some will not. There are very few items for which there is only one maker. Other makers may have greater or lesser quality, greater or lesser cost, et cetera. Listen to the recommendations politely, then do your own investigation, and see if Maker X can satisfy your own needs for accuracy.

"If they'd have had it, they'd have used it, dear!"

Perhaps. But they *didn't* have it, so they *didn't* use it, and the rationalization fails right there. You might be surprised how many Mavens are perfectly willing to call you out for a fabric they don't approve, but won't hesitate to recommend upholstery fringe, Velcro, and sergers, on the basis of "it just makes sense, dear."

In this same category are the Mavens who insist no woman would have voluntarily worn a corset, and that you don't really need one, anyhow, or that every woman had a 19" waist, and it

was a sign of the repression of women. Such pronouncements indicate a Maven steeped in 20th century fetish pop-psych, rather than the actual 19th century practices.

A truly progressive mind-set tries to figure out the logic of what was indeed used, rather than rationalizing modern logic into a period situation.

Do not let the pronouncements of self-proclaimed Mavens discourage you. Never, ever resort to rudeness or anger toward a Maven. It will give you unsightly facial wrinkles. Your best option is to research for yourself, do your best to apply it, and smile, smile, smile!

Maven Handling 101

1. **The Understanding Smile of Death:** Use this polite but slightly frosty smile when the Maven has been rude enough to break the scenario or make uninvited personal comments. It's rather like looking politely away when a small child wets themselves in public; calling attention to the mishap is more distressing than the mishap itself. Combine with:
2. **Get Thee Hence:** There is no shame in fleeing evil. Remove yourself from the Maven's vicinity. Depriving a Maven of her victims/audience is perhaps cruel to her in the short term, but is a sanity-saver in the long term.
3. **"I'd Like Some More, Please":** In situations where doing so would not break the scenario, do as young Oliver Twist: extend your empty bowl of porridge toward the Maven, and request sources and documentation for her statements. Do it sincerely and politely, but do not do it in a silk dress—the resulting splutters of indignation are apt to be juicy.
4. **The Spanish Inquisition:** Yes, it's true... no Maven expects it. Pepper the Maven with truly sincere questions, and plumb the depths of the Maven's knowledge. Some do have interesting tidbits of actual information, and you might as well gain something from an unpleasant experience.



© Elizabeth Stewart Clark 2010.

This article may be copied for personal, non-profit, and educational use. For permission for other uses, please contact us at www.elizabethstewartclark.com. Find more free articles and projects in the Compendium at www.thesewingacademy.com Email for "tech support" with your historic clothing projects or research questions, or visit us on-line at www.thesewingacademy.org.