

A new sexual revolution

by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [March 3, 1999](#) issue

By Wendy Shalit, A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue. (Free Press, 291 pp.)

It was probably at least a decade ago, while I was teaching at Oberlin, that a young African-American woman-I'll call her Tonya-who had been a student in several of my classes told me she was leaving school, at least for a year. I knew her quite well and was in fact her academic adviser, so we talked for a while about her decision. Her reasons were largely personal. Of the black students at Oberlin, considerably more were female than male-a circumstance that many of the males were quick to take advantage of. If one woman would not give them what they wanted sexually, another would. Tonya was depressed by it all, saw little chance of it changing, and wanted to get away.

I was not about to try to argue her out of it, but I could not resist-since I did know her well-offering an observation. "You know, Tonya," I said, "there is a way to solve this problem. It's what we used to call the marriage ethic-no sex outside of marriage. If you and the other black women were to get together and agree among yourselves to live by that principle, you'd be in control and things would change." She looked at me, laughed (but a little sadly), and said, "Well, it would never work."

Perhaps not. But Wendy Shalit makes at length-and with wit and learning-the case for such an attempt. A recent graduate of Williams College, Shalit must, I suspect, have attracted some attention there, since it's clear that she was already formulating this defense of (sexual) modesty during her college years. She writes well, has read widely, has a keen sense for the fault lines in an argument, and is willing to buck the prevailing tides. Although this is in some respects a young woman's book written for other young women, I wonder if we ought not be recommending it to young men. They might learn from it some important lessons about masculine character and conduct in our culture.

Although the argument is, perhaps necessarily, a little repetitive at places, Shalit's case is developed in three stages: "the problem," "the forgotten ideal" and "the

return." There are many ways to formulate the problem our culture has created for itself, but one of the simplest is to say that we have lost the capacity for embarrassment. Even that formulation doesn't get it quite right, however. We haven't lost this capacity; we have deliberately subverted it.

Shalit notes that a great deal of sex education to which young children are subjected has as its point the disenchanting of sex-teaching that "it's no big deal." But it is a very big deal indeed, and the result of this disenchantment has not, Shalit thinks, been good for women. "A society that has declared war on embarrassment is one that is hostile to women." Men know what they want from a woman, and, if it's no big deal, there's no reason they shouldn't get it.

If men are brought up, as today's boys are, believing that girls always want the same thing they do from sexual encounters, and that it's evil and sexist to assume otherwise, then they are that much more likely to be impatient and uncomprehending of a woman's "no." Female modesty gave men a frame of reference for a woman's "no." Without that frame of reference, but instead taught from day one that women are always as ready to receive advances as they are eager to make them, the modern male always takes a "no" as a personal rebuke. That is why women today must link arms, charge down campus in their anti-date-rape rallies, screaming "No means no!"

The courtesies and rituals of conduct that the mothers of Shalit's peers fought to be rid of, she and, it turns out, some like-minded members of her cohort would dearly love to reclaim. "Maybe treating all women respectfully was not subordinating, after all, but precisely a way of conveying that they were not mere property-that they didn't have to be 'owned' by one man to deserve respectful treatment." But we have come to the point where an unattached woman, without a male companion, is thought to be fair game-available to all. Hence, the newly independent woman turns out to need a man around to feel secure in public. "Lovers are now desired not necessarily to give one's life meaning, but rather in the way you might desire a zoo keeper."

In such a world, Shalit finds it unsurprising that so many young women fall victim to eating disorders or even to the increasingly prevalent practice of cutting oneself. If hers is in some respects an argument against what feminism has become, she does

not-as some women of her generation have, to the delight of some men-reject the language that sees women as victimized by our culture. Thus, for example, she takes date-rape seriously and does not want to argue that women must simply take responsibility for their sexuality.

What is needed is a cultural shift that restores female modesty and, along with it, male obligation. "The need is not for nonsexist upbringing, but for precisely a good dose of sexist upbringing: how to relate as a man to a woman." Hers is not so much a question of what the law should require as "the question of what kind of women, and what kind of men, we become." Our culture has tended to tell young women that they must see themselves either as victims of patriarchal oppression or, in order to avoid that, must become more like men. Modesty, Shalit wants to suggest, offers a different and better choice for women who are tired of these alternatives.

What is the forgotten ideal of modesty that we need to restore? It isn't easy for Shalit to define, though it is quite easy for her to illustrate. Coed bathrooms, now so common in colleges and universities, to which she herself objected as an undergraduate, are an apt illustration of the loss of modesty-all justified, of course, in terms of becoming "comfortable" with one's body. More generally, what modesty does is create a "delay" in the relation of men and women. Through dress and behavior a woman says "wait." She withholds something of herself until she finds a man to whom she truly wishes to give herself-once and for all. This delay, in turn, inspires a man "to become worthy of her." It transforms lust into love.

Although Shalit does not emphasize the point, we should note also the educational significance of this delay. Such sublimation of desire is, she suggests, vastly underrated by our society. When we do not see desire simply as something to be satisfied or satiated, it draws us on into philosophical wonder. "The world is . . . enchanted. Every conversation, every mundane act is imbued with potential because everything is colored with erotic meaning. . . . Maybe instead of learning to overcome repression, we should be prolonging it." Plato, of course, knew this well, and we need only read the *Phaedrus* to remind ourselves that, for him, philosophy, love of wisdom, is sublimated eros. Coed bathrooms are, no doubt, just one sign that most college administrators have not read Plato with the care that Shalit has.

The return to modesty that Shalit seeks-a veritable sexual revolution of its own, as she realizes-will not be easy. She must, to some extent, take the low road in argument here-appealing to us in perhaps the only way likely to persuade. Modesty

is, she argues, actually more erotic. When nothing is left to the imagination, when there is no delay between desire and satisfaction, when sex is no big deal, sensuality itself is ultimately undermined. "The persistence of sexual modesty challenges and ultimately refutes the equation of the libertine with the erotic, because those who are returning to virtue are doing so for precisely sensual reasons."

But there is more to be said for modesty than just that it will make sex better. Shalit is devastatingly direct in her discussion of the effects of a "divorce culture" on her generation-even on those who come from happy, intact families. One can never be sure or safe, never confident that one's parents will always be together. How to escape from such insecurity? By taking the commitment of marriage far more seriously. "Not having sex before marriage is a way of insisting that the most interesting part of your life will take place after marriage, and if it's more interesting, maybe then it will last." Shalit's world, at least, is one in which many unhappy women feel compelled to settle for something less than this. She will not.

The problem, of course, is that it is hard for one person to live in ways that are not touched and shaped by the larger patterns of her culture, and ours is still a culture unfriendly to modesty. Shalit tells us that in 1994 she rushed off to see the new movie version of *Little Women*, only to discover that our hidden cultural censors, fearful of anything that does not cohere with prevailing orthodoxy, had expunged one of "the best lines" in the story, when Marmee says: "To be loved by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman; and I sincerely hope my girls may know this beautiful experience." Shalit shows how, even in the face of such cultural pressures, a surprising number of young women are reclaiming the ideal of modesty-and often returning to traditional religion in order to do so. But she realizes that it will be hard for individual women to accomplish much on their own and that what we need is "a real cultural shift."

Society must support a woman's choice of modesty; hence, it cannot be just a "private virtue" or a "personal choice." Shalit seems to have read not only Plato but also Aristotle with care. Good ethics is almost impossible in a badly ordered society. "Perhaps this is where liberalism failed, because it claimed society could be simply neutral about individuals' choices, and it never can."

In the face of our own badly ordered society, what are women with Shalit's insight to do? Shalit advocates a return to what she calls "the cartel of virtue." "In the past, women secured the chances of lasting love by forming a kind of cartel: they had an

implicit agreement not to engage in premarital or extramarital sex with men. This made it more likely that men would marry and stay married to them."

Shalit is pleased to quote a small newspaper item from the *Williams Free Press* that after her graduation-in May 1998, Williams College was planning to renovate two dormitories in order to provide separate bathrooms for men and women. "It appears that Wendy Shalit '97, whose article in *Reader's Digest* condemning the bathroom situation garnered Williams dubious distinction in the national spotlight, will finally be avenged." A small triumph for modesty-and, if this book gains the readership it deserves, there may be still more.