

THE FEMININE SEXUAL COUNTER-REVOLUTION AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good

Wendy Shalit

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Reviewed by F. Roger Devlin

Wendy Shalit is back. She first came to public attention in 1995 with a hilarious article in *Commentary* magazine about the rise and fall of co-ed bathrooms at Williams College (“A Ladies’ Room of One’s Own,” August 1995). Freshmen of both sexes were to share a dorm, and determined by consensus that separate men’s and women’s lavatories would be unnecessary. In fact, all the girls would have preferred separate facilities, but none wanted to admit it for fear of being thought prudish. One developed urinary tract problems from her reluctance to make use of the co-ed restroom until a point of extreme urgency had been reached. Further investigation revealed that the men were not altogether pleased with the arrangement either. A kind of “Emperor’s clothes” situation had arisen in which a group was imposing something on its members that few or none of them actually wanted.

She came to understand that the sexual revolution as a whole had a similar character: young people were “hooking up” not because they personally desired to but because they believe it was expected of them. The campus feminists pushing casual sex at Williams seemed deeply unhappy. Elsewhere, she met Orthodox Jewish girls—forbidden even to touch their fiancés before the wedding—doing just fine. Braving the shaming tactics of peers and some professors, she wrote a senior thesis on modesty. The project eventually became the book *A Return to Modesty: Rediscovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), an investigation into the nature of modesty, drawing on the Bible, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre’s girlfriend, works of visual

art, popular records, and *Mademoiselle* magazine.

A *Return to Modesty* was greeted with outrage from predictable quarters, such as pornographers and feminists. Baby-boomer reviewers accused her of “trying to turn back the clock,” the *New York Observer* printed a front-page caricature of her dressed as an SS officer, and she received death threats (p. 5). Her nonchalance about this sort of criticism is fittingly expressed by the inclusion in this new book of her personal *apple pie recipe*: a pie in the face of her “bad girl” critics, so to speak (p. 263). Her self-assurance has no doubt been reinforced by the thousands of grateful letters and emails she has received from young women.

The most interesting personal experience she relates involved an invitation, following on the success of her first book, to appear on a PBS program called “If Women Ruled the World.” While preparing to interview her, “the producer began to explain what he wanted me to say: that a certain second wave feminist had saved womankind and that I, as a young woman, was grateful to her.” When she expressed reservations about the woman’s ideas, “the producer began to get impatient: ‘What you’re saying,’ he sputtered, ‘isn’t in the script!’” (p. 19). In the end, she was not interviewed. She came to enjoy the ludicrousness of a male television producer doing a “powerful women” documentary and telling his female interviewees exactly what to say.

Her new offering, *Girls Gone Mild*, is less ambitious than her earlier book, omitting philosophical speculation on the deeper nature of modesty in favor of reportage on social and sexual trends among young women. The work draws on “over 100 in-depth interviews with girls and young women ages twelve to twenty-eight; fifteen interviews with young men; and over 3,000 e-mail exchanges” as well as a fair amount of travel and discussion with professionals of various sorts.

She begins by describing the popular Bratz dolls, with high-heels and lipsticky come-hither looks, now marketed to girls aged seven to twelve. A glossy magazine designed to accompany the dolls asks its young readers to ponder such weighty questions as “Are you always the first in your group to wear the hottest new looks?” and “Do you love it when people look at you in the street?” (p. xvii). For their younger sisters, there is already a Bratz Babyz series—baby dolls with fishnet stockings and miniskirts (p. xv). Such merchandise influences girls’ behavior, of course. One reader wrote to Shalit of

two little girls who live on our street who are maybe five and seven who dress in platform shoes, miniskirts, belly shirts, etc. One day they saw some boys playing baseball on the field near our house and got all dressed up with makeup, purses, etc. to walk down there and show off. (p. xix)

There is now even a word for such children: prostitots. (Shalit does not mention the circumstance, highly suspicious to this reviewer, that widespread hysteria over “pedophiles” has developed simultaneously.)

On the other hand, she reports on girls who have staged successful boycotts (called “girlcotts”) of companies pushing immodest clothing (pp. 224-31). This countercurrent appears to be gathering strength: The rate of virginity among teenagers has risen for ten straight years (p. 75).

This male reviewer’s eyelids got heavy, however, when the author went into the details of staging an amateur “modest fashion show” (pp. 170-72). While no doubt preferable to having girls modeling thongs or Frederick’s of Hollywood negligees, we might better advise them to limit the time and money they spend on personal adornment altogether. How about substituting an event where we dress the girls in barrels with shoulder straps and teach them the uses of various household cleaning agents?

Adolescents who have outgrown their Bratz dolls can move on to *Gossip Girl*, a popular series of novels which Shalit describes as “the Marquis de Sade for teens.” Readers are led to fantasize about having modeling contracts, closets bulging with designer fashions, drawers stuffed with diamond accessories, and complicated love-lives involving a “best friend’s boyfriend.” One female character is described as “not afraid to play dirty to get what she wants” (pp. 181-82). Girls unable to invest the effort required to read the books now have the option of watching the television series.

By way of contrast, the author introduces the reader to “L. T. Meade,” or Elizabeth Thomasina Meade Smith (lived 1854-1914), American author of 280 books for girls, including such racy titles as *A Very Naughty Girl*, *The Rebel of the School*, and *Wild Kitty*. These books were churned out with about the same speed as the *Gossip Girl* novels, but they all contained a moral message. By the end of each novel, writes Shalit, a “character defect was expunged, but the girl’s spirit remained in full force.” The reform often involves the heroine learning to consider the needs of others hurt by her previous self-centered

behavior. Modest as Meade's artistic aims were, her characters *are* distinct: each "naughty" girl is naughty in a slightly different way. The Gossip Girls are more or less interchangeable ciphers compounded of greed, lust, and cunning (pp. 184-86). Homeschoolers take note: you may want to consider passing over Barnes & Noble in favor of an antiquarian shop.

Many of Shalit's anecdotes involve the strange new "generation gap" between baby-boomer parents and their offspring. Those old enough to remember when "the establishment" was a fighting term will be amused to read of rebellious teenage girls who declare "we're the establishment, because nobody else wants to establish things" (p. 60).

The boomers thought—and still think—that courtship rituals and marital fidelity were mere shackles upon healthy desire. So they encourage their own children to do as they please. But the old rules were less shackles than guideposts; the young feel not liberated but lost without them. In other words, being told "do whatever you want!" is unhelpful to adolescents still trying to figure out what they want. Often, their parents' well-meaning encouragement is experienced by them as pressure to engage in sexual behavior they do not truly desire. Girls report having sex with strangers simply in order to "fit in." One teenage boy sobs "I don't think my mom loves me," because she does nothing to prevent his sleeping with an older woman (p. 8).

Commendably, the author devotes space to aspects of popular culture many writers (and possibly some readers of this journal) deem beneath their notice, such as *Cosmopolitan* magazine. She asks rhetorically:

does it even matter what the women's magazines say? "Serious writers" often tell me that "we all know" women's magazines are not to be taken seriously.

I beg to differ. The intelligentsia's dismissal of *Cosmo* masquerades as sophistication but could hardly be more clueless. Perhaps it is necessary to state the obvious: The reason these magazines are available in every supermarket everywhere is that tens of millions of women are buying and reading them. (pp. 82-83)

Indeed, *Cosmopolitan* is the top selling magazine in American college bookstores. It is not too much to call it an important part of an

American woman's education. When the author mentioned to a young, religiously observant woman that some people do not think *Cosmo* should be taken seriously, she "was shocked and drew in her breath sharply: 'Are you kidding me? *Cosmo*? It's, like, the Bible!'"

An editor at *Seventeen* magazine told her:

Honestly, I didn't think much of teen mags before working with one, but I know that girls take *Seventeen* very seriously. Sometimes it scared me to learn just how much girls really looked to the magazine for advice. You wouldn't believe the kinds of questions they would ask—things they should have been asking their parents but couldn't or wouldn't. (p. 83)

In other words, these cheap, mass produced publications command tremendous moral authority with their readership: how well are we to suppose the selection process for editors ensures their ability to measure up to the responsibility?

Women's magazines, in contrast to those marketed to men, contain almost nothing but advice. Men do seek advice, of course, but usually in particular and limited areas where they already have their goal in view. Women are comparatively rudderless. "The one thing I heard over and over" from interviewees, Shalit says, "was how desperate they were for a new set of role models" (p. xi). So much for the independent women feminism promised us.

Indeed, if our natural perceptions were not distorted by forty years of feminist cant about "women leaders," it would be perfectly obvious that most women feel a strong need for guidance, and this is one reason marriage is so important for their happiness. Their rage and frustration with men today is partly due to men's failure to provide them with the loving but firm leadership they require.

Shalit devotes one chapter to profiling young women who are actively speaking out in favor of premarital chastity. It is remarkable that most of them are black. The author notes that black colleges such as Spellman have stricter parietals than elite, mostly white northeastern institutions like the one she herself attended, and that "all the writers who have attacked me, calling modesty an 'elite white' concept, are in fact elite white people" (p. 66). She even slips in some boilerplate about "offensive racist stereotypes" and "the painful legacy of slavery." Readers of this journal are probably aware that such "stereotypes" have

a real biological basis: Africans are in fact less monogamous than Europeans. But the author is merely reporting what she sees when she writes about the prominence of black women in the modesty movement. What could account for it?

Shalit acknowledges that the taboo on honest discussion of race makes this a difficult topic to approach. She found just one sociologist willing to address it, under condition of anonymity. He told her simply: "black women have paid the heaviest price from the sexual revolution in the United States" (p. 72).

Here is my conjecture. It is an old observation that sexual morality is most strict among people of moderate means; looser behavior occurs among the very rich (because they can afford it) and the very poor (because they do not calculate the consequences). The worst possible situation arises when the poor become artificially "rich," by their own standards, through welfare payments. Now, the elite white brats who pioneered the sexual revolution on campuses in the sixties were able to draw upon the capital laboriously built up by parents toughened in depression and war. Low-intelligence underclass blacks, at the opposite extreme, get their babies subsidized by taxpayers; they are actually rewarded for not having a male breadwinner. You will find even less sexual fidelity among them than among white college kids or the Hollywood glitterati. Shalit, however, did not plumb the social depths of the housing projects. The black women she talked with are managing to keep their heads above water, and this group, unsubsidized and in moderate circumstances, has the most to fear from male abandonment. Economic deterioration may eventually present many white women with a similar set of incentives. The criminal behavior of "Family Courts" in systematically rewarding *female* abandonment is delaying this development, however.

One of the many reasons for limiting sexual relations to marriage is that it reduces competition between persons of the same sex, making friendship and trust possible between them. Shalit devotes a chapter to this subject. In a traditional religious community in Israel, she watched women drop what they were doing and dance until they teared up with happiness whenever they learned that one of them was to be married. "The idea of women being truly happy for one another, without any reservations, was new to me and also very moving," she writes (p. 134).

In America, by contrast, popular girls' tee-shirts carry messages like

“Do I Make You Look Fat?” and “Blondes are Adored...Brunettes are Ignored.” Among the motives behind the recent successful “girlcoting” of stores selling such shirts, in fact, is girls’ awareness that they encourage cliques and bullying among themselves (p. 225).

Reportedly, an increasing number of American girls are choosing to socialize only with boys because, as one such girl’s mother explains, “teen girls are often brutally manipulative and mean” (p. 128). Experts report that “girls are committing significantly more acts of violence than they did even one generation ago” (p. 243). The author relates disturbing stories of girls actually driven to suicide by the bullying of their “friends” (pp. 254-55).

Girls may be behaving so badly in part because it is what they are now being taught. The author tells of one mother who was “determined to raise a feminist.” By the time her little girl was two, the nursery school was complaining of her bullying the five year olds (she would jump up in order to hit them). The mother says “I encouraged her to ‘go for it.’” Another female lawyer told her “I am *very suspicious* of telling girls they need to be morally good. That’s sexism right there” (p. 251). She quotes articles from the popular feminist magazine *Bitch* ridiculing selfless and considerate women and unfavorably contrasting them with others who show a “dark side” (p. 241). A certain Elizabeth Wurtzel has written a whole book entitled *Bitch* in which she declares: “For a woman to do just as she pleases and dispense with other people’s needs, wants, demands, and desires continues to be revolutionary” (p. 242).

A highly successful women’s magazine editor has written a book of advice for young wives stating: “Giving, devoting, sacrificing...these are the actions of a good wife, no? No. These are the actions of a drudge, a sucker, a sap.” Instead, women are urged to emulate a wife who threw her husband’s clothes into the garden to teach him not to leave socks on the floor: “he understood I meant it.” Or another who wanted her husband to help with the laundry, and hollered at him: “Are you a f—ing retard that you don’t see me running up and down stairs? Listen to me and stop your bulls—t.” Or another who discovered this interpersonal skill: “Just stand there and start screaming. If you stand there and scream long enough, someone is going to realize that you’re standing in the middle of the room screaming [and ask] ‘Why are you screaming?’” (pp. 245-47).

What could be wrong with men these days that they refuse to

commit?

It is remarkable that a woman with such traditional ideas about marriage, modesty, and feminine decorum never condemns feminism *per se*. Instead, Shalit claims to have perceived a “fourth wave” of the movement characterized by the rejection of pornography and casual sex. This reviewer is not sanguine about the possibility of an eventual *N*th feminist wave coming along to solve all the problems created by waves 1 through (*N* - 1). Shalit does better when she acknowledges that feminism has “become a sort of Rohrschach test: the word itself has become almost meaningless—and can refer to diametrically opposed ideas” (p. 208). The young self-described feminists she quotes do sound extremely confused. They say things like “I don’t think the first feminists wanted us to be more like men” (p. 218) and “feminism has always been about valuing home life” (p. 222). Some are simply using “feminist” to mean feminine (p. 121).

My impression, however, is that a couple things have in fact persisted through all these waves and permutations: an emphasis on “empowerment” for women, and the presumption that men are to blame for most of their problems. In at least this minimal sense, Wendy Shalit might be called a feminist.

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The present reviewer is entirely in sympathy with a return to feminine modesty and the limiting of sexual relations to marriage. But this allows plenty of room for disagreement as to how our society got so far off track and the best means of returning to normal, healthy courtship and monogamy. In particular, the notion that all our problems come from women’s making sex available outside marriage—and, consequently, that a “holding out for the wedding” strategy will make everything right again—deserves a close, critical look. Wendy Shalit’s writings provide a useful occasion for doing this. Her proposals have considerable limitations, in fact, most of which flow from a single source: feminine narcissism and its concomitant unconcern for the masculine point of view.

I wish to be fair, so I will point out that her first book, *A Return to Modesty* (hereafter abbreviated RM), contained glimmers of such a concern. Sexual harassment law, she complained, “treats men like dogs. It says to them, *Down, boy, down!* Don’t do X, because I *say* so” (RM, p.

102). She insightfully noted that women can elicit desirable male behavior through moral authority far more effectively than they could ever impose it through the police power of the state. This is far removed from the usual feminist mentality.

In her new book *Girls Gone Mild* (hereafter GGM), however, the male viewpoint is almost totally disregarded. (She acknowledges the neglect but offers poor reasons for it: GGM, p. 277.) She even describes her indignation at a woman who reminded her, after a long discussion of girls and their problems, that, after all, the boys have feelings too: "I was speechless. Emotional, dreamy girls are a thorn in our side, but when boys are romantic, their every tear is precious" (GGM, p. 90).

My point is not that we should coddle boys; I am simply calling attention to the difficulty Shalit, in common with most women, seems to have with putting herself imaginatively in the place of a male. There may well be an evolutionary explanation for this. Men instinctively protect women because the future of the tribe lies in the children they bear. Women have adapted to this state of affairs, and it colors their moral outlook. They do not spend much time worrying about the well-being of men. Even getting them to cook supper for their husbands is probably a triumph of civilization. Their natural inclination is to let men look after themselves and take their chances in life. At the same time, they count on men to shield *them* from the harsher aspects of reality, and become extremely indignant at any men who fail to do so. In other words, women are naturally inclined to assume that men must take responsibility for everyone, while they are only responsible for themselves and the children. Young, still childless women have no one left to think about but themselves and easily fall into self-absorption. One popular women's magazine is actually entitled *Self*. I would not want the job of promoting a magazine of that title to men.

One aspect of female narcissism is a failure to think in terms of moral reciprocity. For example, here is a male columnist (Fred Reed) praising the intolerance of Mexican women for infidelity: "They can also be savagely jealous, to the point of removing body parts. But for this I respect them. Any woman worth having has every right to expect her man to keep his pants up except in her presence. He owes to her what she owes to him. Fair is fair." This is the way a man thinks. A woman is more likely to think "I get to do as I please and you get to do as I please: fair is fair."

Does the reader suspect me of indulging in a cheap shot here?

Consider, firstly, this passage from Shalit's first book: "many etiquette books, in both England and America, stressed a woman's prerogative to greet a man on the street first, particularly if he was not a close friend. If she chose to greet him, he was obligated to respond in kind, but if she passed him by, there was absolutely nothing he could do about it" (RM, p. 56).

I do not mean to take issue with this rule of etiquette, which may well have a sensible rationale. My point is simply that its one-sidedness does not seem problematic or in need of explanation to Shalit. A man might at least ask whether there is some larger context which explains why, in this particular case, all rights should be with the woman and none with the man.

Secondly, let us consider the more important matter of sexual intimacy. Shalit is, of course, emphatic on a man's lack of all sexual rights before the wedding. Referring to a girl whose boyfriend began "pressuring" her for sex after *eight months* of courtship, her assessment is: "If he's pressuring you for sex, he probably doesn't love you" (GGM, p. 29). Now, courtship is typically an interaction in which the man seeks sexual surrender from the woman and the woman seeks assurance of commitment from the man. Would the author sympathize with a man who reasoned: "if a woman is pressuring me for commitment, she probably doesn't love me?" It does not sound like it: elsewhere, she approvingly quotes a woman who is "mortified" that when girls "hint to their boyfriends about marriage [they] find themselves dumped like garbage" (RM, p. 227). She even refers to the authority of another of her old etiquette books to show that "a young woman could assume that a man wanted to marry her if he simply spent a good chunk of time with her." (GGM, 28) (I'm guessing eight months would count as "a good chunk of time.") In other words, women have the right to expect commitment from men, but men are bad when they seek sexual surrender from women; women's instincts are morally valid but men's are not. (Moreover, Shalit never says a word about the legitimate male fear of divorce, which may well be why the young man in her anecdote was "pressuring" his girlfriend about sex rather than simply proposing marriage.)

An old-fashioned fellow might agree with the author's disapproval of premarital sex, but probably on the assumption that she would at least acknowledge the husband's claims after the ceremony. This assumption would be mistaken, however. Once the couple is married,

the wife's sexual desires and the *duty* of the husband to satisfy them become her exclusive concern (RM, p. 114-15). When she comes across a case of a couple where the man was the party less eager for physical intimacy, her sympathy is once again with the woman; she asks: "if he has no interest in a mutually satisfying relationship, why not just leave?" (GGM, p. 177).

I believe Shalit is by no means unusually narcissistic, as women go. Most do take for granted men's obligation to put women's needs and desires before their own, and thus to feel no particular gratitude when men do so. Many women have no idea, for example, how intense a young man's sexual urges can be, and are not inclined to treat this powerful force of nature with the necessary respect. Shalit never seems aware that men feel "pressured" by their *own* sexual urges, or that a normal, healthy young man who has dated a girl for eight months before making these urges known has already demonstrated a fair amount of self-control.

Lack of a sense of moral reciprocity and of an ability to empathize with men leads many women, in fact, into a kind of schizophrenic attitude toward male desire. Most of the time they complain about how annoying it is and seem to wish it would go away entirely. But they do, of course, want some man to marry them. In other words, men's sexual desires are supposed to be weak enough never to inconvenience women, but at the same time strong enough that they gladly exchange all their independence and most of their income whenever some woman does, after all, decide to take a mate. The *desideratum* would appear to be a man whose natural urges are like a faucet which women could turn on and off at their own convenience.

It is true that actual men fall short of this "dildo ideal," as it might be called. No restoration of feminine modesty is going to change the situation, however, or eliminate the need for women to compromise with men. Children who insist on having everything their own way eventually learn that no one wants to play with them any more; women who follow Wendy Shalit's advice of "waiting and keeping their standards high" may find that the wait lasts all the way to menopause.

When the sexual revolution began, women imagined that the "slavery" of marriage was unfairly standing between themselves and endless erotic fulfillment. Forty years later, many are imagining instead that the availability to men of sex outside marriage is standing in the way of their wedding. "If other women were not sluts," they reason,

“the man of my dreams would be forced to discover *my* true value and come crawling to me with a diamond ring.” One of the interviewees from Shalit’s first book, for example, complains: “after three dates when I wouldn’t sleep with [a certain man], he dumped me, just like that! If you ask me, it’s because it’s way too easy for them. Why should they waste time with a girl like me when they can get it for free?” (RM, p. 104).

Now, how does the woman know this is the reason he “dumped” (stopped courting) her? Never once have I heard a woman say: “I am such a pain in the derriere that after just three dates men are charging for the exit.” Appealing to the supposed universal availability of sex has become a way for women to avoid facing the reality of rejection. Men break off courtships for all kinds of reasons: they may sense that a particular girl might not be faithful, is not careful with money, has too many bad habits, or just plain is not for them. Holding out for wedding rings is not going to solve these women’s problems and allow them to live happily ever after. If we could wave a magic wand and cause extramarital sex to disappear overnight, many women would be shocked to discover that handsome movie stars were still not flocking to their doorsteps with flowers and chocolates.

Indeed, I have heard men remark on the oddity that sex seems to be the only card women have to play in the dating game any more. They do not know how to manage a household, raise children or treat a husband. Instead, like prostitutes, they think entirely in terms of maximizing the return they get on sex. Even Shalit acknowledges an inability to cook at the time of her marriage (that apple pie recipe of hers begins “You will need two frozen premade pie crusts . . .”). A renewed focus on feminine modesty, while welcome, will not by itself prepare young women for their domestic duties. The attitude that “I’m too good to sleep around” in the absence of anything to offer men besides sex may result not in any epidemic of marriage proposals but in widespread spinsterhood enlivened only by occasional readings of *The Vagina Monologues*, the lesbian-feminist play in which women gush over how wonderful their own private parts are.

But let us consider Shalit’s own account, culled from anecdotes and women’s magazines, of the sexual situation women face today. The humble corporate drone who has to fear harassment charges and loss of livelihood if he winks at the girl in the next cubicle will feel like he stepped through Alice’s looking glass when he reads this material.

Here is a realm in which men have reduced women to struggling to see who can offer them the most and the best sex, frantically searching the Kama Sutra for some new position or technique that will manage to gratify their cloyed appetites. The men who inhabit this world are concerned not that women remain faithful, but that they do not become "clingy." *Cosmo* supports them, advising women to scurry out the door immediately after sex for fear of intruding on the Big Important things their man has to do that day which do not involve them—and which may well include a tryst with another girlfriend. "It's sad to see that this is what it's come to" says one woman: "that guys will raise the bar and girls will scramble to meet it. Women just want to know what they have to do to get these guys to fall in love with them" (GGM, p. 176). One young woman explains: "If I don't do whatever [my boyfriend] wants and he broke up with me for some reason, two days from now he'd have somebody else. That's just how it works" (GGM, p. 177). "The men who share these women's beds," says Shalit, "are treated like kings or princes whose authority comes from God himself, whereas the women's own feelings and even their health concerns are restricted in the extreme" (GGM, p. 81). Shalit advises one such woman to "run, not walk, to the nearest exit, trying not to trip over all the naked women on her way out" (GGM, p. 79).

All these stories certainly make it appear that, in the brave new world of the sexual revolution, the man's position is stronger than under monogamy while the woman's is weaker. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. Let me pose a simple question which Shalit never considers. It used to be that there was roughly one girl for every boy; if men now have harems, *where are the extra women coming from?*

The answer is equally simple and obvious. Most men do not have harems, of course, and there are no more women than formerly. *Some* men have harems because women "liberated" from monogamy mate only with unusually attractive men. This situation demonstrates not the weakness of the woman's position but its strength. If the male sex instinct were the primary determinant of mating, the overall pattern would be the most attractive women getting gang-banged.

In order to understand what is really going on, it will be necessary to shine a harsh light on a matter women instinctively prefer to keep under wraps: the female sex drive. Shalit almost never refers to it, and there is even a certain appropriateness about this, since such reticence is part of the feminine modesty she is trying to reestablish. But it means a

veil is drawn over some important circumstances which must be honestly confronted if marriage and the natural family are to be restored as social norms.

When a young girl becomes erotically aware of boys, she is endowed by nature with a set of blinders which exclude the majority of them—including many who can make good husbands—from her sight. What gets a male within her narrow range of vision is called “sexual attractiveness.” What is it?

It is not possible to find out by asking women themselves. They will insist until they are blue in the face that they want only a sensitive, respectful fellow who treats them right. “Intelligence, kindness, personality [and] a certain sense of humor” make up Wendy Shalit’s list of supposedly sought-after male qualities (RM, p. 116). In a passage on the decline of male courtesy she delivers the following ludicrous assertion deadpan: “When . . . a man does dare to open a door for a woman, he is snapped up right away” (RM, p. 156).

When women claim to be seeking kindness, respect, a sense of humor, etc., they mean at most that they would like to find these qualities in the men who are already within their erotic field of view. When a man asks what women are looking for, he is trying to find out how he can get into that field of view. Women do not normally say, either because they do not know themselves or because it embarrasses them to speak about it. The advice they do give harms a lot of lonely men who mistakenly concentrate their mating effort on showing kindness and courtesy to ungrateful brats rather than working to gain the things females actually respond to.

Fortunately, we do not have to depend upon female testimony. It is with women as with politicians: if you wish to understand them you must ignore what they say and watch what they do. Plentiful evidence gathered over a vast range of history and culture leaves no room for doubt: women are attracted to men who possess some combination of physical appearance, social status, and resources.

In the environment in which we evolved, the careful choice of a mate was critical to a female’s success in passing on her genes. If her man was not strong enough to be a successful hunter, or not of sufficiently high rank within the tribe to commandeer food from others, her children might be in trouble. The women who were reproductively successful were those with a sexual preference for effective providers. A kind of erotic “tunnel vision” was selected for, which causes women

to focus their mating effort on the men at the top of the pack—the “alpha males” with good physical endowments, social rank, and economic resources (or an ability to acquire them). Today the female preference for tall men, to give just one example, no longer makes much sense, but they, and we, are stuck with it.

What women instinctively want is for 99% of the men they run into to leave them alone, buzz off, drop dead—while the one to whom they feel attracted makes all their dreams come true. One of the keys to deciphering female speech is that the term “men” signifies for them only the very restricted number of men they find sexually attractive. All the dirty articles in *Cosmo* about “giving him the sex he craves” and “driving him wild in bed” concerns this man of her dreams, who by some amazing coincidence usually turns out to be the man of some other girl’s dreams as well.

During their nubile years, many women are at least as concerned with turning male desire off (i.e., telling the 99% to drop dead) as with turning it on (getting Mr. Alpha to commit): they get more offers of attention than they have time to process. Cunning feminists, many of them lesbians, have exploited this circumstance to the hilt, convincing naive young women they are being “harassed.” Quietly observing the furor over so-called harassment during the past two decades, I wondered how these women could fail to realize that the men of whom they were complaining constituted their pool of potential husbands and that they could not afford to alienate all of them. Clearly, I overestimated their intelligence. And Wendy Shalit does not distinguish herself in this respect either; she uses the term “harassment” as freely and uncritically as any man-hating feminist could wish.

But surely North America’s leading spokesman for feminine modesty would never encourage young women to date simply on the basis of their sexual urges?

Well, let’s see. At one point in her first book she is discussing a woman’s use of the controversial drug Prozac to help her “date calmly.” She then blurts out: “Maybe a woman shouldn’t be dating calmly—maybe it should be dizzying and tailspinning and all the rest. Maybe the floor should drop” (RM, p. 165). What she is describing here is female sexual arousal; it takes an emotional form. Her statement is the precise female equivalent of a man saying: “men shouldn’t date calmly—they should only date young hotties with fantastic legs,

hourglass figures, etc.” What would Wendy Shalit think of that advice?

Now, let me be clear: I do not have any objection *per se* to every woman being able to marry a stunningly handsome, successful man who makes her swoon in blissful passion eternally, yada, yada; I am merely pointing out that the world does not work this way, and men are not to blame that it doesn't.

Moreover, there is nothing in the definition of marriage about the man (or woman) being attractive. That is because the marriage vow lays out the duties of the two spouses. Duty implies possibility. A man usually can, with considerable self-control and sacrifice, remain faithful to a single woman and support her and the children; he cannot become a romance novel hero and turn his wife's life into a perpetual honeymoon.

The traditional answer to the question “how do I get Mr. Tall-Dark-and-Handsome to commit?” is “you probably won't.” These men go fast, and they usually go to the most attractive females. But that does not, of course, guarantee the contentment of these females either: four women walked out on Cary Grant. Part of the folk wisdom of all ages and peoples has been that sexual attraction is an inadequate basis for matrimony.

Monogamy means that women are not permitted to mate with a man, however attractive, once he has been claimed by another woman. It does not get a more attractive mate for a woman than she would otherwise get; it normally gets her a less attractive one. “Liberated,” hypergamous female mating—i.e., what we have now—is what insures highly attractive mates for most women. But, of course, these mates “don't commit”—really, are unable to commit to all the women who desire them. The average woman must decide *between* having the most attractive “sex partner” possible and having a permanent husband. If she were serious about seeking commitment, in fact, the rational procedure would be to seek out a particularly unattractive man, i.e., one for whom there is the least possible competition. This thought seldom occurs to young women, however.

For an ordinary man to mate with a woman, either (1) he must work himself into her field of erotic vision (e.g., by amassing wealth and achieving status—*not* by demonstrating that he is “kind” and “respectful of women”); or (2) she must take off the blinders and widen her own field of vision until it includes him. This latter is what I term the “grandmother effect.” Young women used to be routinely advised

by their elders not to base their behavior toward men upon sexual attraction, despising ordinary men and immodestly throwing themselves at good-looking, high-status men. Most young women concluded from this that grandma was just too old to understand love. But sometimes the advice may actually have had a slight effect. Consider the words to a popular song from 1963:

I always dreamed the boy I loved would come along
And he'd be tall and handsome, rich and strong.
Now that boy I love has come to me,
But he sure ain't the way I thought he'd be.
He doesn't look like a movie star,
He doesn't drive a Cadillac car,
He sure ain't the boy I've been dreaming of,
But he's sure the boy I love.

(By the time the song is over, we learn the boyfriend is living off unemployment checks.)

Shalit is no grandma. Besides telling young women that dating is supposed to be tailspinning, she frequently urges them to maintain “high standards” and speaks with fond nostalgia of the days when a suitor was required to “prove his worthiness” to a woman. This sounds delightful, no doubt, but the effect depends on weasel terms. Romantic young men will want to conceive of the “worthiness” they must demonstrate as a moral quality—as being a gentleman, in fact. Young women are more likely to interpret it to mean that they “deserve” a romance novel hero. To them, “maintaining high standards” will suggest that they should keep their erotic blinders at the narrowest possible setting.

This is not modesty but delusion. The reason men found wives before the sexual revolution was not that they were “worthier” than the date-raping sex-maniacs of today (as many male conservative commentators imply), but because women did not have their expectations formed and their imaginations corrupted by the likes of *Cosmo* and *Gossip Girl*. Popular culture’s message of limitless gratification has got ignorant girls so worked up over sex that Casanova himself would not be able to satisfy them. Our author’s vague talk of “worthiness” and “high standards” does nothing to counteract this tendency, and may reinforce it.

In this book as in her last one, Shalit offers no thoughts about what is to be done with the majority of men who are less than tailspinningly attractive. This, however, is a critical question for any society. It is not simply a matter of hurt feelings. Frankly, no one has ever cared very much about the feelings of such men, as they themselves learn early and well. The reason their sexual situation is a legitimate matter for public concern is that "the devil makes work for idle hands." Poor, low-status bachelors are the most vice, crime, and violence prone group in societies everywhere. No one has ever discovered a better way of employing their time and energies than by making fathers of them. Doing so will, however, involve the immeasurable calamity that certain women will just have to date calmly.

The women the author describes as struggling to get their "sex partners" to commit would be surprised to learn that the indifference of these men to their needs and feelings is precisely paralleled by their own indifference to the majority of men, who remain outside their field of vision. The chief point of distinction, in fact, is that the women's unhappiness is largely the result of their own poor judgment and behavior; the men's often is not.

Shalit, however, speaks as if a man's failure to find a wife were always his own fault. Thus, she writes in an extremely critical vein of men who use pornography as "regressing to infantile sexuality" and "incapable of sustaining an adult sexual relation with a woman" (RM, 53). This is perhaps a reasonable position to take for one who believes men can get wives simply by holding doors open for women. But when women are occupied providing harems to a few highly attractive men, many men will perforce find themselves "incapable of sustaining an adult sexual relation with a woman." It does not follow that there is anything wrong with these men. The fault lies with the women who have abandoned their traditional role of enforcing monogamy. Perhaps one should consider instead whether hypergamous mating and careerist deferral of marriage by young women might not be the principle driving force behind the explosive growth of the pornography industry.

Since the sexual revolution began, plenty of "beta-males" have been tearing their hair out trying to discover what on earth they have to do to make themselves acceptable to the *Cosmo*-girl next door. They hear it said that women do not want to be rushed into sex and are looking for a man to commit. So when a woman does not respond favorably to his

first advances, Mr. Beta reasons that he has to demonstrate his commitment. He will “prove his worthiness” to the angelic creature by being patient, kind, attentive, and respectful—exactly what women claim to want from men. He then gets slapped with a harassment accusation. If the woman is a coworker he will probably lose his job. (Many—perhaps most—employers will fire a man without a hearing upon a woman’s complaint.) The loss of income, of course, does nothing to improve his success with other women.

This pattern may be repeated for many years until, well into his thirties, he unexpectedly finds himself starting to receive come-hither looks from desperate, frustrated, menopausal shrews cast off by more attractive men (or who have divorced such men). Sadly, many men are so lonely that they try to accommodate such women. Then they find themselves on the receiving end of all the resentment against “men” which has been building up in their minds all these years. (Female anger tends to be less focused on the particular person who has caused it.)

There is reason to think such accommodation of women already becoming less common: ordinary men are understandably growing disgusted with cleaning up other people’s messes. They are starting to reason as follows:

We cannot keep resentful, *Cosmo*-addled, STD infected harridans out of our schools, workplaces, or government, but at least we can keep them out of our beds. Let them have the glamorous careers the feminist sisterhood fought so hard to obtain for them. They do not need our paychecks to keep them supplied for a lifetime with pulp romance fiction and magazine articles on “Reversing the Aging Process” or “Seven Kinds of Orgasm and How to have them All at Once.” Everyone makes choices in life and must accept the consequences; they long ago made theirs.

This male sexual counterrevolution—“revenge of the nerds,” you might call it—is likely to end up being more important and effective than Shalit’s exclusively feminine strategy of keeping the knickers up until after the wedding. What good will that do when there is not going to be a wedding?

Men do not have to prove their worthiness to anybody. They are the ones who bear the primary costs of marriage. It is a woman’s

responsibility to prove she is worthy of the privilege of becoming a man's helpmeet and bearing his children. It takes a strict upbringing to form a tiny female savage into such a lady. Today, that form of upbringing is mostly a thing of the past: marriageable women are becoming difficult to find, and the costs of searching for them are getting too high.

A man should never base his self-image on what women think of him in any case, because women's concerns are too materialistic and self-centered. ("He that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife," as St. Paul put it.) The men who have accomplished the greatest things for our civilization have not, by and large, resembled the heroes of women's romance fiction; indeed, they have been disproportionately celibate. Once a man realizes what triggers female attraction, and understands that women's judgments of men are largely rationalizations of this attraction (or its absence), he will not be inclined to overvalue their opinion of him.

I mentioned above that Shalit's writing is strongly marked by feminine narcissism; passivity is a second feminine trait which heavily colors her account of women's experiences.

Men, by and large, are doers. They are expected to go out into the world and accomplish something, to strive for success but accept defeat if they must, and always to be strictly accountable for their actions. Women are different. Consider popular romance fiction, that most feminine of literary genres: its key term is "passion," which implies passivity. A hero simply appears on the scene; the helplessness of the heroine to resist him is strongly emphasized. He sweeps her up in his big, strong arms and carries her off to a realm of endless, blissful feelings. He *does*, while she merely *is*.

Romance fiction is, to put it mildly, inconsistent with the traditional Christian view of marriage, in which a woman freely enters into a covenant and is subsequently held strictly responsible for living in accordance with its terms. The contrast might be expressed thus: the Christian view of womanhood is ethical, while the romance novel heroine is a merely natural being.

The women in Wendy Shalit's anecdotes are of the latter sort: they never seem to *do* anything. They are like romance heroines in passively submitting to whatever some man does to them, except that they always seem to end up miserable.

In *A Return to Modesty*, for a first example, the author describes T-shirts designed by the campus feminists at Williams College bearing such charming messages as "I HATE YOU!" and "Don't touch me again!" One of the shirts read "Why does this keep happening to me? When will this end?" (RM, p. 9). The woman appealing for our attention and sympathy with this message apparently does not perceive herself as an agent at all; bad things (presumably involving men) simply "keep happening" to her.

Or again, Shalit recounts an incautious 1:00 a.m. visit of hers to a summer camp counselor's bedroom when she was a tender fifteen: "One evening, I suddenly *found myself* [my emphasis] one floor above the room in which I usually slept. This room, as it happens, was the bedroom of my instructor. I don't recall exactly the circumstances under which I had alighted there" (RM, pp. 184-85). A man might be tempted to point out that it probably involved putting one foot in front of the other. I do not wish to be too rough on a girl of fifteen, but when thousands of adult women complain about "finding themselves" in bed with men who have no interest in marrying them, it is harder to be indulgent.

The problem with a passive mindset is that it involves an abdication of personal responsibility. Shalit wants our sympathy for the way her female interviewees are treated by their boyfriends, but she carefully avoids mentioning how the men *got to be* their boyfriends. In every case, it happened because the women chose them. The rule of nature is that males display while females choose.

Now let us consider in some detail one of Shalit's unhappy-woman anecdotes which seems to me particularly instructive:

A friend of mine had an affair with her professor when she was 21. She was in his class at the time and madly in love with him; he had no intention of doing anything other than using and summarily disposing of her. I was struck, not that what had *happened to her* [my emphasis] had deeply upset her, but that she felt she had to *apologize*: "this is going to sound really cheesy but, um...I mean, for God's sake, he took my virginity!" (RM, p. 11)

Much as I hate to spoil the effect of the touching melodrama the author conjures up for us here, I believe some comments and questions are in order. First, loss of virginity is not something that simply

“happens to” a woman. Both author and interviewee speak as if the man “took” his student’s virginity like a pickpocket depriving an unwitting victim of a wallet. How exactly was this young lady’s attention occupied while the unspeakable defilement of her innocence was taking place?

Secondly, precisely what is meant by the assertion that the young woman was “madly in love?” Love may be the ultimate weasel term, so for purposes of clarification, let me oppose to the author’s anecdote a short one of my own.

I had occasion recently to make some visits to a nursing home. Most of the residents never receive visitors; they just sit, bound to wheelchairs, waiting for death. Such care as they get is provided by low-wage workers speaking Swahili, Amharic, and a Babel of other tongues. Heaven knows where their children or grandchildren are. But a few cases, I noticed, are different. A man who once navigated bombers past Hitler’s *Luftwaffe* was there, unable to feed himself. Every day his wife appeared and sat by him, patiently spooning the food into his mouth. Was he an “alpha male?” Did he make her swoon with passion? Did he support her any longer? Did he, for that matter, provide her with any benefit at all? No: yet she continued to appear every day for months on end, never complaining, until the day he died. This behavior cannot be explained in terms of rational self interest, and I submit that it might reasonably be called “love.”

But love in this sense cannot be demonstrated to exist in a young woman—not even a newly married one; it requires a lifetime to reveal itself. So no one is in a position to say for sure whether Shalit’s “madly in love” friend was really prepared to stand by the professor “for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health,” etc.—not even the young woman herself. Even if he had married her *en forme*, there is a good statistical chance she would have ended up divorcing him after a few years (blaming him, as unfaithful wives invariably do, for the “breakdown” of the marriage). We simply cannot know.

When the author describes this woman as “madly in love,” however, she is not referring to any active service or sacrifice, but to an emotion. This type of love, especially characteristic of the young, might better be termed infatuation. It is a natural occurrence which always wears off over time. It does not merit the respect we pay to a lifetime of proven marital loyalty.

Shalit’s friend probably experienced the podium effect. When a man

is addressing an audience, it conveys subrationally to the female mind that he has status: he speaks, while others merely listen. The phenomenon has long been known to Hollywood script writers. Many old Cary Grant romantic comedies contain a scene where the heroine watches him addressing an audience. Shalit could probably tell us plenty about the podium effect herself, if she cared to; she mentions "my admiration for my [future] husband after hearing him speak at a Passover seder" (Not after his holding a door for her! [GGM, p. 103]). In any case, the podium effect is a principle reason for the erroneously termed "lecherous professor" situation.

Third and finally, let us consider the assertion that the professor "had no intention of doing anything other than using and summarily disposing of her." While I do not wish to approve of professors fornicating with students, it should also be pointed out that most men do not rub their hands like nickelodeon-show villains and cackle: "Heh, heh! I'm going to use this girl to sate my wicked lusts and then abandon her to heartbreak and ruin!" Going into an affair, a man, like a woman, may not even know precisely what he wants or intends. But experience indicates that whenever a love affair does not work out to a woman's perfect satisfaction (which in practice means always), she will be inclined to foist a tendentious and self-exculpating interpretation upon the events: she "loved" him, while he was "just using" her. One of the reasons for the institution of marriage, I have come to believe, is to prevent women from doing this, to enforce public recognition of the legitimacy of a man's taking a mate. Marriage is what lets men say "it's okay—she's my wife." The sentimental scenario of the heartless cad "preying upon" the wide-eyed girl is dangerous because it appeals so powerfully both to female passivity and irresponsibility, and to the male protective instinct. Without some socially sanctioned form of sexual union, men's protective urges might go into overdrive and we would see them shooting up the town trying to "protect" young women from becoming mothers.

In an earlier essay in these pages, I cited the example of a well-known conservative writer who maintained that professors who "prey upon" female students should (in certain cases) be treated as rapists. This is a radical departure from the Christian view of women as moral agents, and the high status of women in Western society is essentially bound up with such a view. As far as I can see, if we are unwilling to hold women strictly accountable for their actions, we have only one

logical recourse available: a return to the ancient Roman legal doctrine that a woman is a perpetual minor. This would involve an end not merely to contemporary “women’s liberation,” but to an entire legal tradition which has developed within Christendom over centuries. For starters, it means women could no longer be permitted to hold property or enter into contracts. Although demeaning to women and inconvenient even for men, such a system is at least internally consistent. What is both inconsistent and morally indefensible is what feminism and the misguided gallantry of certain male conservatives are now combining to promote: freedom for women to do as they damned well please with blame and punishment for men if the women are not happy with the results of their own behavior.

In sum, I would advise men not to let their tears be jerked too easily by stories of women falling helplessly prey to seduction and abandonment. Ever since the day, well before the dawn of history, when human beings first grasped the connection between coitus and childbirth, all societies have demanded sexual self-restraint from their women as a matter of course. It is a highly suspicious circumstance that the most politically “empowered” women in the history of the world have suddenly turned sexually helpless.

Another expression of Shalit’s feminine-passive pattern of thinking is that, in emphasizing the reservation of sex for marriage, she says almost nothing about *getting* girls married. Her strategy for them amounts to “some day your prince will come.” Since she focuses exclusively upon young women, it is not clear what she would say to the millions of lonely career women who have followed this advice to the letter and “find themselves” being overtaken by menopause still waiting for the tailspinning man of their dreams to appear.

The author quotes with approval a number of allegedly modest young women for saying “I haven’t found anyone worth marrying yet.” This is not self-respect but self-conceit, and I do not buy it. A man picked randomly off the street today would often be as good as whatever bloke such a girl eventually settles for, assuming she manages to settle in time at all.

Another of Shalit’s allegedly modest women says: “I’m abstinent because I have a goal in life. I want to be a doctor or a registered nurse. If I have a baby or something that blocks my goal, I’m not going to be able to achieve that. So being focused and staying in school is my main goal right now.” For young women like this, notes Shalit, “having a

baby symbolizes being ‘stuck’” (GGM, pp. 65-66). The author does not seem to perceive that this is merely feminist careerism and antinatalism as usual, and has nothing to do with modesty.

Women are at the peak of their sexual attractiveness to men in their early twenties for a good reason: this is also the peak of their fertility, which begins a steep, irreversible decline around age twenty-six. Shalit herself apparently delayed marriage until about twenty-eight. In parts of Scandinavia – that vanguard of Western decadence – the average age for women at first marriage has now passed thirty. One of Shalit’s modesty activists had her first child at thirty-seven, and she pooh-poohs the woman’s friends who had warned of the dangers by simply noting that the baby in this particular case was born healthy. Some years ago, a survey discovered that 89% of younger, high-achieving women believe they can safely postpone pregnancy until their forties. In 2002, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine attempted to correct such misconceptions with a campaign of public service ads; the project was abandoned due to opposition from feminist groups.

In the America of the 1950’s – the baby boom – the average age for women at first marriage sank as low as twenty. I emphasize the word “average:” plenty of girls were younger, marrying right out of High School or even before. To this day, marriage at sixteen is legal for girls in all fifty states (with parental consent). During the Christian Middle Ages, a bride was often a bit younger still. Most Americans today have no idea how bizarre their horror at “teenage pregnancy” would have seemed in other times and places.

On a final note, and as a service to *The Occidental Quarterly’s* female readers, I would like to reveal what makes a man commit. It is in fact an extremely simple matter, although carefully unmentioned in women’s magazines: children. A normal man feels morally committed to a woman who is bearing him children he can feel certain are his. The survival of our civilization may depend upon women speedily reacquainting themselves with this ancient and timeless reality.

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