

Subject: The Virtue of Virtue

Date: Thu, 07 Jan 1999 12:50:23 +0200

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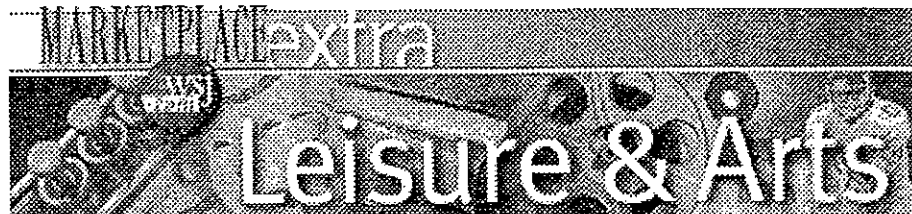
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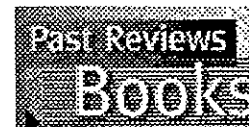


January 7, 1999

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The Virtue of Virtue

By RUTH R. WISSE



Thirty years ago, Betty Friedan unleashed a tidal wave of dissatisfaction in American women, arguing that womanhood was but a "mystique," a construct designed by men and advertised by capitalist markets to keep females in servitude. Applying the Marxist model of class struggle to gender, the women's liberation movement radicalized Ms. Friedan's idea of female oppression and sought equality through a redistribution of power that would break down the "meaningless" differences between women and men.

The remedy proved far worse than the disease. Technological progress had indeed given American women undreamed of opportunities -- by almost eliminating infant mortality, controlling reproduction and easing traditional tasks. But greater choice created its own frustrations, and these could scarcely be assuaged by a politics of resentment.

The modern feminist misdiagnosis, in fact, cost this country dearly. Deprive women of the support of husbands through their child-bearing years and you foster a society of impoverished single mothers. Liberate women from the protection of men, release men from the civilizing restraint of women, and the cry of rape will be heard in the land. Equalize biological opposites by denying their differences and lying becomes a universal principle. The ideology that claimed to champion the feminine cause has doubtless advanced the careers of many individual women, but only by stripping the sex of the security and sanctity it once enjoyed.

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But America is a democratic country, and just as Betty Friedan inspired a revolution, Wendy Shalit can try to undo the damage. Barely out of college, yet already tested in the culture wars, Ms. Shalit draws on her own experience, in the way Ms. Friedan once did, to document how much women have been harmed by the movement that was launched in their name. Her first protest, against co-ed bathrooms, appeared in *Commentary* when she was still an undergraduate. In "**A Return to Modesty**" (Free Press, 291 pages, \$24), her first book, she reasons that the nature of womanhood is particular and very real. This requires restating much that is obvious. But like the child who informs us that the empress is naked, Ms. Shalit may become proverbial for readmitting what has been denied.

Ms. Shalit suggests that the woes besetting the modern young woman -- sexual harassment, stalking, rape and battered self-esteem -- "are all expressions of a society which has lost its respect for female modesty." This disrespect begins with early sex education. When fourth-graders in mixed classes are told that female masturbation is simply part of the natural functioning of the body, and that talking about private parts is "no different from talking about an elbow," they may well infer: "What's really so terrible, after all, in making someone touch or kiss your elbow?" Encouraged to ignore the differences between the sexes, boys who treat girls to their own kind of verbal and physical sparring are ill-prepared for the accusation that they are engaging in sexual violence or harassment.

"A respect for female modesty was a woman's natural bodyguard, invisible and free of charge." The attack on modesty deprives young women of that protection. Once sex is declared unexceptionable, how can a young woman justify to herself, let alone to any man, not wanting to engage in intercourse without love and before marriage? The most poignant sections of this book expose the anxiety of young women who must try to satisfy the "demystified" idea of their nature. If Ms. Shalit's evidence is to be trusted, girls are subject to crueler opprobrium today for their sexual modesty than ever they were for engaging in sex out of wedlock. Their thwarted feminine nature reasserts itself in such "grotesquely distorted forms" as eating disorders and self-mutilation.

Ms. Shalit marshals impressive evidence from philosophers as well as the tabloids to make her case for a return to modesty -- as both a sexual ideal and a strategy for greater pleasure. Whereas exposure neuters the erotic potential of male-female attraction, modesty keeps romantic allure alive. But modesty cannot be simply a private virtue, because few girls have the confidence to withstand the shame that is directed against it. Just as communism, in its insistence that there was no God, felt obliged to destroy the churches, modern feminism feels obliged to destroy the sanctity of sex in order to prove that gender differences are socially determined.

In this serious yet bouncy study, Ms. Shalit insists that she is concerned only with culture, not politics. To prove her own political neutrality, she admonishes "conservatives" for a variety of sins, like ignoring the seriousness of date rape and equating male gentleness with femininity. But the caricature undermines her argument. Modesty cannot be discussed in a strictly cultural context because the attack against femininity was launched in a bid for political power. The assault on modesty must be countered by a competing political ideal that reclaims the virtues inherited from generations past. One suspects that Ms. Shalit knows this and that hers will be one of the strongest voices in the struggle ahead. For the moment, her "discovery of a lost virtue" is gift enough.

Ms. Wisse is professor of Yiddish literature and comparative literature at Harvard University.

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