

Difference, Modesty and Sexuality

by Theodore Plantinga

Why are people flocking to Jane Austen movies nowadays? The Jane Austen phenomenon has caught the attention of Wendy Shalit, who offers us some illuminating comments in a book entitled *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1999).

Shalit observes: "... women all around the country, women who have already had numerous sexual affairs, are descending on nineteenth-century period dramas -- at the cinema, on PBS, anywhere they can catch a glimpse of Jane Austen's *Emma* or *Elizabeth* -- with a kind of religious seriousness that would be comical if it weren't so poignant." [p. 94] But what is the reason for the appeal of these dramas to women who have long lived in a climate that we used to sum up in the phrase "sexual revolution"? Shalit's answer: "We're not flocking to Jane Austen movies because we want the facts, but because we're sick of having the facts shoved in our faces all the time." [p. 25] It seems that many women have had more than their fill of "explicitness" and yearn for a return to old-fashioned romance. They are enchanted by the days when a mere gesture or a carefully chosen phrase was pregnant with romantic possibilities.

Shalit's plea for a resurrection of modesty (note her title) is *not* to be interpreted as a flight from sexuality and romance. Indeed, the "return" she yearns for is intended to facilitate an *enhancement* of sexuality, for the currency called sexuality is steadily being debased in our popular culture and our schools.

It is not my intention to restate Shalit's thesis, valuable as it is in itself. I do commend her fine book to the attention of anyone who reads this page and may be sympathetic to her critique of our culture and its mores. What I propose to do instead is to extend the argument in the direction of the debate about homosexuality. I suspect that Shalit would agree with what I propose to say, but I have not read such agreement spelled out explicitly in her book.

The idea I wish to explore is that there is an interesting connection between heterosexuality and modesty. In brief, I maintain that a society that discourages modesty in the hope of somehow being "open" and "liberated" also -- perhaps unconsciously -- undermines heterosexuality. Without modesty we lose the

erotic. Argues Shalit: "Without modesty, we are lost -- not excited by anything much, and not knowing what the problem is. ... But maybe we're not having fun *because* everything is permitted. Maybe without modesty, we forgot what is erotic." [pp. 180-1]

Some might wonder whether a decline of heterosexuality is really something to be lamented. My answer would be an emphatic yes. But the defense of heterosexuality as a good thing, as what one would wish for people in general, and not just for one's own self, lies outside the bounds of this small essay. Here I only propose to explore the question why proponents of heterosexuality should welcome Shalit's defense of modesty.

Writing about sexuality is difficult because it is so personal: one feels inclined to mention one's own experiences, but such an enterprise would fly in the face of Shalit's call for modesty. Thus I do not plan to lay bare my own sexual history, except to affirm that it is exclusively heterosexual. But I must also take account of the fact that because I am male and have never engaged in "transvestite" or "transgender" activities of any sort, I have not experienced a broad range of human heterosexual experience, as some other males have done. Thus there is the possibility that what I write might seem one-sided or even off-kilter to some readers, perhaps especially heterosexual *females*, whose inner experience of sexuality I can know only at second hand.

The attraction of a normal heterosexual male may be focused on one female who is his partner and lover and wife, but he will probably feel attracted to other females as well from time to time. Attraction itself, while an unfulfilled form of sexuality, has its own value and appeal. And that appeal, in my own experience, is grounded in *difference*. One of the mysteries of sexuality for me is why in the world females would find the male body (mine, or that of any man, for that matter) appealing in the first place. It is *female* flesh that awakens *my* sexual interest. And thus there is in me -- and in most men, I suppose -- a residual, and continuing, and easily awakened interest in the female body, an interest that can be spoiled by *excessive exposure*.

This problem of excessive exposure has a great deal to do with the value of modesty. It is almost as though the immodest are debasing the currency that we call sexual appeal.

A small qualification is needed here. We must make some sort of distinction between immediate, short-term sexual desire and fulfillment, on the one hand, and a deeper desire for a relationship that includes sex but is fueled and supported by love understood in old-fashioned terms as a yearning for a

lifelong union of mind and heart and flesh. It is the latter yearning, which seems to me to be the truly worthy aspiration of the lover, that is especially debased by immodesty.

Now, I am willing to admit that what constitutes modesty in the eyes of one person might not count as such in the eyes of another. What does Shalit take it to be? Some examples of deplorable *immodesty* drawn from her own experience as an undergraduate student at Williams College (she graduated in 1997) can help us understand why she speaks of an "attack on modesty" (p. 43) and identifies modesty as the new taboo.

The following, according to Shalit, is the situation in many colleges and universities today: "At one point, not so terribly long ago, universities used to be on the side of those who wanted to study, and defended them against the pressures of sex. If students did have sex, it had to be furtive. You had to sneak into someone's room or car. Now when your roommate is having sex, *you* are the one expected to sneak around ... you are the one who should be ashamed of yourself for not being sufficiently libertine. You are the one who must 'quietly confess' your taste for sexual modesty, as if admitting some depravity." [p. 62]

Shalit offers us two examples drawn specifically from her days at Williams. The first is the enforced intermingling of the two genders in such everyday matters as bathroom use.

Coed education, nowadays, means much more than males and females attending the same lectures. In her freshman year Shalit discovered that she would be sharing a bathroom with male students. She told her female dormmates that she didn't like the idea: "Immediately one girl smiled condescendingly and wrapped her arm around my shoulder, explaining that she, too, once thought she wouldn't like coed bathrooms, but then 'I became *comfortable* with my body.'" Shalit's response was that she was indeed comfortable with her own body: what caused her discomfort was the prospect of strange men seeing her coming out of the shower (see pp. 86, 233-4).

It is not only females who feel uncomfortable at such enforced intermingling of young men and women. Shalit also discusses the well-known story of a group of five Orthodox Jewish male students who enrolled at Yale University and had such immodesty forced upon them in their living arrangements (see pp. 61-2). They protested on religious grounds, but the university would not listen, as though immodesty were now part of the curriculum.

The Jewish connection is significant. In case you wonder where Shalit learned about modesty in the first place, the answer is simple: from the Jewish tradition. One of the most charming aspects of her book is her account of how she "escaped" sex education (see pp. 16-17, 25), in the belief (amply justified, in my view) that it has the effect of increasing coarse and inappropriate sexual behavior. And its effect is not confined to behavior; such education also shapes attitudes. Shalit laments: "Anyone who's been through the mill of my generation's sex education has trouble understanding why I'm concerned about the things I'm concerned with ..." [p. 25] What the graduates of sex education classes seem to have been told is that sex is "healthy." But what they have also picked up is that sex is "no big deal" (see p. 28).

Both the modesty and the romance that made it enchanting for so many people throughout human history have been banished by the new attitudes. The campaign for a "brave new world" of immodesty has taken the magic and allure out of the sexual attraction between men and women. Shalit calls it the "disenchanting of sex" and connects it with what she calls "sexual brutality" (p. 19). As a result of this coarsening, we now have endless problems with "sexual harassment" and "date rape" and the like. It appears that there are not a lot of gentlemen to be found in the ranks of the young males on campus.

The second Williams College story that taught Shalit that immodesty has become part of the informal curriculum of the modern college and university has to do with the college's coed or mixed wrestling team (see pp. 175ff, 233ff). When she first heard that there was such a team, she couldn't believe it. She expressed her dismay but was reassured by a student who told her that there was "nothing sexual" about a man wrestling with a woman!

Earlier I promised to extend Shalit's analyses into the domain of homosexuality. The connection is not hard to make. Take this business of equality, which nowadays is thrust upon us in all sorts of ways. We are told that men and women are "equal," but what is this supposed to mean in concrete terms?

In good measure, it means that there is no significant difference between the two genders. Gender, in the fashionable parlance of many of today professors and pundits, is merely a "social construct," which we are free to discard once we realize how hollow it is. But what if you are of the old school, so to speak, and actually believe that there are profound differences between the two genders, differences that are not inculcated in our upbringing? Then you are to be pitied, and perhaps reviled as well.

This Shalit found out when she had the nerve to defend what the egalitarians have taken to calling "gender dualism" (see p. 156). When she spoke out on this subject in class one day, she was told that she was an "essentialist." Then followed an interesting exchange with enlightened classmates: "What is an essentialist? I asked my classmates. 'It's someone who believes there are differences between the sexes,' they explained. But aren't there? 'No,' they chorused, quite firmly. The earnest boy behind me tried to help me out, clarifying that 'the whole point is that we're supposed to try to *transcend* essentialism.' But even if I wanted to transcend essentialism, I asked them, shouldn't we first find out what the differences are, so we know what we're supposed to be transcending? No, even to mention 'real differences' is itself essentialist, no matter what your intention is." [p. 87] The printed word was brought to bear on this argument, and Shalit was informed that essentialism is the "heresy" that "there are biological differences between males and females" (p. 87).

Think about it: the flesh of a person of the other gender is fundamentally no different from my own. That's what we are supposed to believe. Well, if that's the case, there is no reason for me to feel more self-conscious in the presence of a female than I would in the presence of another male if I were in a state of undress. Neither, presumably, is there any reason for me to find the flesh of women more enchanting than I find my own or the flesh of other men. And so I must conclude that the anti-essentialist sexual ideology Shalit was battling at Williams College cannot help but promote a homosexual sensibility. It should lead me to ask what is wrong with me for not finding the sight of an admittedly handsome man sexually appealing.

Strictly speaking, what we have here is a defense of *bisexuality* more than of homosexuality. The logic of the antiessentialist position is that one should find one's fellow human beings in general to be possible objects of sexual desire (presumably thoughts of gender identification should not even come into the picture). I am reminded of what Martine Rothblatt wrote *The Apartheid of Sex: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Gender*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995). Rothblatt would like us to stop thinking in terms of people being either male or female.

What is to be said in response to the challenge which Shalit lays before us? On the philosophical level, at least this, that proper sexual desire is deeply bound up with difference. If it is indeed ordained of God himself -- as I believe -- that a man's desire shall be for the woman, and vice versa, it is because the opposite gender is *different* from oneself in a fascinating way that moves us at a level too deep to articulate fully.

How shall we then live, sexually speaking? For one thing, we should preserve the magic of that difference by promoting modesty in all sorts of ways, lest for us, as for so many jaded college students today, sex should become "no big deal." Let us then affirm "essentialism" openly and unashamedly and rediscover what modesty can mean as we enter a new century. Let us hope that men will welcome women in the world of work but still want them to retain their alluring otherness and the modesty that draws us to them ever more.

If I wore a hat, I would tip it in Wendy Shalit's direction for re-opening the subject of modesty in such a marvelous way. Perhaps there are some who still don't understand, who think that modesty could be just another choice some people may make in a pluralistic culture. I will leave it to Shalit to speak the last word to such libertines: "One of my professors ... asked me why I couldn't `just be modest and shut up about it!' The answer is that modesty simply cannot be `just' a private virtue --a `personal choice' -- in a culture where there is such a high survival value placed on immodesty. The choices some women make restrict the choices open to other women. Perhaps this is where liberalism failed, because it claimed society could be simply neutral about individuals' choices, and it never can." [p. 228]