

FROM SEXISM TO FEMINISM: ARGUMENTS OF DEFINITION IN *A RETURN
TO MODESTY AND GIRLS GONE MILD*

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Chapter 2. The Rhetoric of Definitions and the Definition of Feminisms in the 90s	10
Chapter 3. “ <i>A Return</i> ” to Limitations: Arguing for Real Definitions	39
Chapter 4. “ <i>Mild(er)</i> ” Criticism: Arguing for Founders’ Intent	67
Chapter 5. Modesty for the Masses: Implications and Conclusion	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY	97

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“Never give up. No, never give up. If you’re looking for something easy you might as well give it up.” –Cat Power

Chapter 1

Introduction

In 1999, Wendy Shalit, a twenty-three year-old Williams College graduate, argued for something rather unheard of in a culture saturated with scantily clad pop stars and promiscuity. She states in *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* that young women today are not in need of more liberation, but rather a “good dose of sexist upbringing.”¹ Offering more than just a provocative catchphrase, Shalit stands by this conservative ideology. She warns that American women not only face higher rates of rape, depression, and lower self-esteem than in years past, but also claims that “we have lost sight of what is truly beautiful in women,” mostly because female modesty is roundly denounced as sexist and repressive to women.² Women can only benefit, Shalit argues, when they accept the sexist view that they are uniquely compromised by the ethics of the sexual revolution and embrace sexual modesty as the only answer to solving the problems that feminism simply cannot fix.³

As she argues for sexism, she also denounces feminism and feminists for misleading women. For instance, she rejects the views of feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Andrea Dworkin, and Judith Butler, who argue that differences between men and women are socially constructed.⁴ They define sexism as a repressive power; yet, as she claims, it is their ideology that really harms women, as “any page of *The*

¹ Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 153.

² *Ibid.*, 143.

³ *Ibid.*, 39-57, 106-17, 226-23.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38, 87, 107.

Second Sex or *The Feminine Mystique* [contains] more misogyny than in the writings of Aristotle and Norman Mailer combined.”⁵ In order to halt the misogyny rampant in American culture, Shalit argues that women need to stop acting like men and start nurturing their femininity.⁶ Not only should they embrace their natural femininity, but if they start covering up and stop giving in to the hook-up scene, women are going to bring about honorable changes in men as well.⁷

Shalit’s book received a fair amount of support and attention,⁸ yet also elicited some reviews which were extremely opposed to Shalit’s argument for sexism.⁹ Shalit’s second book, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It’s Not Bad to Be Good*, was released in 2007 and is a startling departure from *A Return to Modesty*. Shalit made a tactical decision in *Girls Gone Mild* to appropriate a former enemy, feminism. This marks a radical rhetorical shift in three respects. First, she claims modesty is fourth-wave feminism, a new wave of “nice

⁵ Ibid., 142.

⁶ Ibid., 237.

⁷ Ibid., 146.

⁸ "Modern Girls and the Modesty Movement," *National Public Radio* (2007), "Girls Gone Mild?," *ABC News*, July 20 2007, "Teen Girls Embrace a New Fashion Trend: Modesty," *Hannah Sampson McClatchy Newspapers*, 25 October 2007, "Modesty Zone," <http://www.modestyzone.net/>, "Modestly Yours," <http://blogs.modestlyyours.net/>, Pia Catton, "A Modest Rebellion," *The Wall Street Journal Online* (2007), Tamala M. Edwards, "Modestly Provocative," *Time*, March 1 1999, Florence King, "A Return to Modesty," *National Review*, January 25 1999, Gilbert Meilaender, "A New Sexual Revolution: The Case for Modesty," *Christian Century*, March 3 1999, Paula Rinehart, "Losing Our Promiscuity," *Christianity Today*, July 10 2000, Zenya Sirant, "Girls Gone Mild," *Flare*, December 1 2007, Lauren F. Winner, "Proud to Be Modest," *Christianity Today*, January 10 2000, Randall Patterson, "Students of Virginity," *The New York Times*, March 30 2008, George F. Will, "Modesty Is Sexy. Really.," *Newsweek*, February 1 1999.

⁹ Thomas J. Gerschick, "Book Reviews," *Men and Masculinities* 2, no. 4 (2000), Jonah Goldberg, "Conservatism without History," *Reason Magazine* (1999), <http://www.reason.com/news/show/30981.html>, Kim Phillips-Fein, "Feminine Mystiquers," *Nation* 268, no. 12 (1999), Katha Pollitt, "Bookend; the Solipsisters," *New York Times Book Review* 1999, Wendy Shalit and Cathy Young, "Should Women Be More Modest?," *Slate.com* (1999), <http://www.slate.com/id/18420/entry/18424/>, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Victoria's Secret," *Commonweal* 126, no. 4 (1999).

girls” revolting against the immodest “bad girl” message of a culture that glorifies *Girls Gone Wild*, sluts, and alcohol-blurred hookups.¹⁰ Second, she differentiates the “fourth wave” from second and third-wave feminism, designating these feminisms as harmful. Finally, Shalit completely drops the advocacy of sexism.

The author who declared, “the need is not for nonsexist upbringing, but for precisely a good dose of *sexist* upbringing”¹¹ seems vastly different from the one who said eight years later, “feminism is clearly alive for young women,” so much so that she speculated, “a new fourth wave of feminism really will take off.”¹² For Shalit to commit this rhetorical about-face not only appears to be contradictory, but also seems as though it would cause her audience to completely discredit her. Yet, just the opposite happened: not only did Shalit gain wide acclaim for her first book, but her audience was even more receptive to her second work, responding with reviews that may have still questioned her argument, but were not anywhere as harsh as the response to *A Return to Modesty*. As criticism for *Girls Gone Mild* was far less severe than that of *A Return to Modesty*, this bewildering success is the impetus to this study: an effort to understand the rhetorical strategies by which Shalit argued for modesty in *A Return to Modesty*, how she shifted her argument in *Girls Gone Mild*, and what barriers it overcame.

I contend that Shalit subtly altered her rhetorical strategy in order to overcome barriers within her audience that limited her audience for *A Return to Modesty*. She

¹⁰ Wendy Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good* (New York: Random House, 2007), 3-18, 25-30.

¹¹ Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, 153.

¹² ———, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good*, 235, 36.

changed her strategy from arguing for real definitions to arguing for what I call founders' intent. Whereas real definitions hold that there is an objective reality, true "essences" which can be known through language, arguing for founders' intent shifts from an abstract, immaterial focus to an appeal to an original or prototype rooted in a particular time and place as the standard authority; in this case, first wave feminism. This shift in focus is the critical difference between arguing for real definitions versus founders' intent. Both strategies, however, operate to redefine via dissociation, a strategy by which a rhetor must redefine a word by arguing that the common understanding of a word is erroneous and misleading. Consequently, she or he will argue for what a word means with recourse to the standard and authority of the original. In doing so, Shalit was able to overcome some of the criticism and limitations to her initial argument for her second book. My analysis not only attempts to explain the strange success Shalit has enjoyed, which I believe she achieved through argument for founders' intent, but also informs rhetorical theory, in that it illustrates the strategic advantages inherent within arguing for founders' intent, versus arguing for real definitions.

Review of Literature

To date, there has been no scholarly examination of Shalit's work aside from a book review of *A Return to Modesty* in the journal *Men and Masculinities*.¹³ This review was no different than other popular press reviews of the book, as it was mostly critical of Shalit's views of history and men, but not entirely unsympathetic to her

¹³ Gerschick, "Book Reviews."

argument. Shalit's work prompted a considerable amount of popular coverage, and reviews coming from both renowned critics and anonymous readers provide valuable insight in the examination of Shalit's texts. On one hand, reviewers have scathing criticism for her views of gender and historical representations, while some have also commended her ability to dissect cultural constraints facing women who supposedly live in a liberated society. Tracing the criticism that followed her books reveals considerable barriers Shalit seems to have responded to when she wrote *Girls Gone Mild*. I draw upon these reviews in assessing her argumentative strategies in chapters three and four.

Examining Shalit's work is important not only because she is an unlikely popular figure, but her work also informs rhetorical theory, specifically concerning arguments of definition. Several scholars are particularly helpful to my study: David Zarefsky, Edward Schiappa, Chaïm Perelman, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. Their work on arguments for real definition lays the theoretical groundwork for this project and is particularly useful for my examination of *A Return to Modesty*. Arguing for real definitions is similar to, but distinctly different from the strategy that Shalit employs in *Girls Gone Mild*, a strategy that calls for the development of new theory. In developing the theoretical principles behind arguing for founders' intent, I look largely to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca and Robert Natelson. These authors offer the elements which serve as a framework for examining the advantages and limitations of arguing for founders' intent, as they are extremely helpful.

Methodology

Several questions arise in response to Shalit's work: how does she argue for sexism? How does she seek to make it attractive to a secular audience? How does she appropriate feminism after taking an anti-feminist stance? In order to find an answer to these questions, I completed a rhetorical analysis of *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild*. This necessitates some clarification: within this thesis, I assess Shalit's rhetorical strategies, not her ideology. My objective is to foreground Shalit's arguments and the strategies behind them with little, if any, critical commentary. As I read *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild*, I found myself in complete agreement with some of Shalit's views and in complete disagreement with others. However, I do not entertain questions such as, "what are the repercussions of this ideology," "who is excluded," "what are the assumptions of this argument?" Engaging these questions and further investigating Shalit's ideology promises to be a rich area of development, given her conservative position in a *Girls Gone Wild* society. I do believe that her ideology could be quite liberating for some; however, much of Shalit's rhetoric gives me pause, if not grave concern, as to whether or not these ideas could be extremely harmful to others. In any case, I refrain from making any sort of judgment as to whether Shalit is offering a panacea or placebo for women today.

This study will illuminate her primary argumentative strategies, how her arguments attempt to negotiate the barriers to her work, as well as demonstrate the limitations therein. This method is an appropriate answer to the question posed by

Shalit's rhetoric: why does she appropriate a former enemy, feminism, for her defense of modesty and how does she do so? With a careful study of each text, I contend Shalit shifted her rhetorical strategies to overcome criticism of her first book, and in doing so, garnered far less opposition to *Girls Gone Mild*. She accomplished this by arguing for founders' intent, versus arguing for real definitions as she did in *A Return to Modesty*. Shalit argued in *A Return to Modesty* that sexism, not feminism, is really liberating and did so by drawing upon the practices of conservative religion.

However, she changes her strategy in *Girls Gone Mild*: feminism, which she had previously vilified, is now a stand-in for her ideology of modesty. In order to align modesty with feminism, Shalit argues for founders' intent: the first wave feminists best represented the spirit of feminism, as they based their arguments for women's rights in moral values. Shalit recognizes that these values are being revived in "fourth-wave feminism" a new kind of feminism that returns to the first wave. She then seeks to dissociate second and third-wave feminism from liberation, and casts these ideologies as antithetical to the original purpose of feminism. By making feminism congruent with, rather than opposed to, her interpretation of modesty, Shalit is able to appropriate a former enemy for her own means, overcoming much of the criticism she faced with *A Return to Modesty*, and is able to reach a much wider audience than when she advocated for sexism through conservative practices.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter two, “The Rhetoric of Definitions and the Definition of Feminism(s) in the 90s,” lays out the theoretical framework and historical context of this work. In the following chapter, “*A Return to Limitations: Arguing for Real Definitions of Sexism and Modesty*,” I examine Shalit’s argument for real definitions within *A Return to Modesty*. In order to advance her defense of modesty, Shalit attempts to dissociate sexism from its negative connotations, arguing that sexism is truly liberating for women as she gives examples from history and conservative religious traditions. However, it becomes evident from the audience reviews that this argumentative strategy had severe limitations. If Shalit wanted to overcome these limitations, she had to adapt her argument. Investigating her new strategy within *Girls Gone Mild* is the focus of my fourth chapter, “‘*Mild(er)*’ Criticism: Arguing for Founders’ Intent.” While Shalit seems to be arguing for real definitions as she did in her previous book, analysis reveals a critical difference in strategy, which I deem arguing for founders’ intent. Shalit appropriates feminism and uses “fourth-wave feminism” as a label for her ideology of modesty. To do so, she claims that the first wave of feminism, which struggled for the dignity and humanity of women through modesty and activism, is the best way to achieve liberation for women. The fourth wave of feminism has revived this standard of the first wave, and compared to the potentially dangerous ideologies of the second and third wave, is the best way for women to achieve liberation and equality. In “Modesty for the Masses: Implications and Conclusion,” the fifth and final chapter of my thesis, I examine how this case

study of Shalit's work not only helps to explain her curious success, but also examines the theoretical implications of arguing for founders' intent.

Chapter 2

The Rhetoric of Definitions and the Definitions of Feminism(s) in the 90s

Shalit's main argumentative strategies concern definitions. Within *A Return to Modesty*, Shalit is largely focused on dissociating negative connotations from modesty in order to argue that what is perceived as sexist is in fact truly liberating for women as opposed to predominant feminist ideologies. In *Girls Gone Mild*, she is concerned with defining a new wave of feminism and dissociating second and third-wave feminism from liberation. Discussions of real definitions from Zarefsky, Schiappa, and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are particularly relevant for my critique of her first book. However, this scholarship cannot fully account for Shalit's argumentative strategy within her second book. For this reason, I develop a theory of argument for founders' intent.

Just as a review of scholarship on definitions is necessary for this project, situating Shalit's work in a larger historical context is also helpful. Providing a brief sketch of what third-wave feminism was at the time of Shalit's writing is not only helpful in determining her ideological position, which was often diametrically opposed to many popular-press feminist writers, but is also a vivid illustration of the larger definitional wars over feminism going on at this time. Part of the reason why Shalit is able to appropriate a former enemy is because, at this time more than any other, feminism lacked a clear definition. While some writers, such as bell hooks, were very upset that feminism had become devoid of meaning, others saw this as a

way to be inclusive of a multiplicity of lifestyles and viewpoints. More specifically, Shalit directly engages and debates particular feminist ideologies in *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild*. Popular-press feminist authors such as Camille Paglia, Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, and Christina Hoff Sommers are most pertinent to Shalit's work, as these are the authors whose ideas Shalit challenges with her defense of modesty, but they were also arguing for a particular definition of feminism. The intent is to situate Shalit's rhetoric by examining the discourse which served as both exigency and enemy within *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild*.

The Rhetoric of Definitions

The primary means through which Shalit argues for sexism, modesty, and fourth-wave feminism is through definition. I contend that the less critical reaction to Shalit's second book can be credited to a shift in argumentative strategies between her two books. In *A Return to Modesty*, it is clear that she is arguing for real definitions. Real definitions are claims to the true essence of something. For example, as Shalit argues for the real definition of sexism, she works to dissociate sexism from negative connotations and associate it with positive ones representative of what she claims sexism truly is, a key strategy in arguing for real definitions. While it seems as though she is continuing to argue for real definitions in *Girls Gone Mild*, instead, Shalit changes her strategy to argue for founders' intent. This strategy rejects the notion of true essence. For example, feminism simply does not have a single true definition; when Shalit was writing, feminism could be "anything." However, Shalit gains ammunition for her case when she argues that the whole point of feminism is

liberation for women, as best exemplified by the first-wavers. From this interpretation of first wave feminism, Shalit concludes that her ideology of modesty is the best way to achieve liberation, rebellion in the way the founders of feminism intended. By holding up the first wave feminists as women who embodied empowering modesty, Shalit argues that fourth-wave feminism carries on this standard of liberation for women.

Shalit continually frames her arguments in *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild* in terms of asserting what sexism, modesty, or feminism means; however, she seeks to find the meaning of these contested terms through different strategies. First, I discuss the strategy of real definitions, which function to further an essentialist argument through dissociation. It is important to recognize the limitations that scholarship holds to be inherent within arguments for real definition, as well. It is because of these limitations that Shalit may have chosen to modify her strategy. Therefore, I offer a theory of argument for founders' intent in order to account for the argumentative shift between *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild*, a strategy which is in part responsible for negotiating the rhetorical limitations of her first book.

More than just a *de facto* explanation of meaning, definitions “themselves are arguments,” as Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca offer.¹ Similarly, David Zarefsky states, “a persuasive definition is a non-neutral characterization that conveys a positive or negative attitude about something.”² Most importantly, “all those who

¹ Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame, [Ind.]: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 213.

² David Zarefsky, "Strategic Maneuvering through Persuasive Definitions: Implications for Dialectic and Rhetoric," *Argumentation* 20, no. 4 (2006): 404.

argue in favor of a particular definition want it, through some slant or other, to influence the use which would probably have been made of the concept had they not intervened.”³ While definitions can mean the way a word is used, or how a word should be understood in a particular case, I am concerned with the rhetoric of real definitions, or essentialist definitions; that is, definitions that purport to offer the “true” meaning, versus a common but false understanding of a word.

The idea that there are true meanings is a very old one. Plato’s *Phaedrus* is noted for the allegory of Ideal Forms, and it is “the belief that words are somehow related to essences of Ideal Forms [that] fuels the search for definition; therefore, a real definition of a word is the one that accurately depicts what is ‘essential’ about a word’s referent.”⁴ Belief in Ideal Forms begets the “language of essentialism” which “refers to linguistic habits that reflect and depend on metaphysical absolutism,” that things, values, or ideas somehow have “essences that are knowable ‘in themselves.’”⁵ Despite the influence of postmodernism, the search for true meaning has not been completely abandoned. In his investigation of Supreme Court cases over the definition of golf, and debates over what constitutes a living person, Schiappa states, “the language of essentialism and metaphysical realism persists in the social arenas outside of the confines of professional philosophy.”⁶ Thus, the struggle to bring these real definitions into being can be identified in many political conflicts today, such as the definition of marriage.

³ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, 213.

⁴ Edward Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 36.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 43.

Shalit focuses her argument on a search for the real definitions of sexism and modesty. When I refer to “real definition,” I operate with Schiappa’s understanding that it is an effort “to define things rather than words, that is, facts of essence rather than facts of usage.”⁷ It is clear from Shalit’s argument for sexism that she must contend with “competing answers to questions of the form ‘What is X?’”⁸ Questions about the real nature of things are often prompted by a rift in understanding. For example, “when someone feels that the ‘proper’ meaning of the word is no longer correct,” it may prompt the introduction of “novel definitions.”⁹ Schiappa explains that these novel definitions come into play “when a person feels that the dominant mundane definition (formal or informal) is wrong or unhelpful,” and in offering a novel definition, he or she hopes to “change other people’s understanding and linguistic behavior away from the conventional patterns and toward new behaviors and understanding.”¹⁰ Of course, novel definitions could very well be an attempt to get at what the word “really is,” seeking to correct erroneous usage in order to reflect more accurately what “the defining qualities of the referent ‘really’ and ‘objectively’ are.”¹¹

Naturally, arguments of this kind bring together conflicting ideas, and one struggling for a real definition must employ “dissociation” as part of their argumentative strategy. Schiappa’s explanation of dissociation is further elaborated within *The New Rhetoric: a Treatise on Argumentation*. Chaïm Perelman and Lucie

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 35.

Olbrechts-Tyteca explain that someone arguing for a real definition must reestablish “a coherent vision of reality,” which entails wrenching loose the erroneous meaning from the word.¹² This is critical in that “reality is governed by the principle of noncontradiction and cannot simultaneously, and in the same relationship, have and not have a given property.”¹³

Perelman and Tyteca employ “term I” and “term II” in order to explain dissociation. “Term I” represents the “apparent, to what occurs in the first instance, to what is actual, immediate, and known directly,” in other words, what would be a common, but erroneous meaning of a word. The “real definition,” understood as “term II,” must then be contrasted to “term I” and in doing so, gets “rid of the incompatibilities that may appear between different aspects of term I.” It is the interplay between these two terms that creates dissociation:

Term II provides a criterion, a norm which allows us to distinguish those aspects of term I which are of value from those which are not; it is not simply a datum, it is a *construction* which, during the dissociation of term I, establishes a rule that makes it possible to classify the multiple aspects of term I in a hierarchy. It enables those that do not correspond to the rule which *reality* provides to be termed illusory, erroneous, or apparent.¹⁴

¹² Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, 126.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

In comparison between the two, it is term II that stands as “normative and explanatory,” such that it is “possible to retain or to disqualify the various aspects under which term I is presented.”¹⁵ Of course, since “term II is never known directly,” this “attempt to communicate it discursively may be regarded as a definition of the term, that is, an expression of the criteria that will enable us to determine it.”¹⁶ As Schiappa states, arguing for a real definition “breaks X into two referents: X is really Y; it only appears to be not-Y.”¹⁷ In other words, a rhetor’s efforts to define the real meaning of a word must not only entail dissociating erroneous connotations from a word, but also associating a word with its “true” meaning.

This effort to realign the audience’s understanding via dissociation to the rhetor’s vision of a real definition is not without problems. Scholars point out that essential definitions are often troublesome because they fail “to account for the variability of human experience,” and so the “linguistic absolutism fails to account for partiality of language.”¹⁸ It would be incredibly difficult to persuade an audience, especially as diverse an audience as the readers of Shalit’s work, to agree on a single definition of sexism, feminism, or modesty. As much as one may try to dissociate a term from a particular meaning, there are still limits to the meaning that a word may

¹⁵ Ibid., 128.

¹⁶ Ibid., 445.

¹⁷ Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*, 37.

¹⁸ Edward Schiappa, *Defining Reality : Definitions and the Politics of Meaning* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 41.

conceivably have.¹⁹ Another pitfall of real definitions is the potential of fallacy. As Schiappa states, when a rhetor “uses dissociation to contrast one definition with an inferior one, there is an important sense in which the defense of the ‘realness’ of one’s definition is circular,” that is, after having defined what X *really* is, “then of course rival definitions merely represent what X merely appears to be.”²⁰ Given the limitations of arguing for real definitions, immense variation in audiences, and risk of circular argument, Schiappa contends that arguing for real definitions should be abandoned for arguing what a word means in a particular context or in a utilitarian sense, such as what definition would best serve the interests of the audience.²¹

These were precisely the pitfalls that Shalit encountered in response to *A Return to Modesty*. Even though many had praised the book, it also elicited criticism that could not be ignored. Shalit’s efforts to dissociate sexism with negative connotations simply failed with a good portion of reviewers. Therefore, if Shalit was going to persist in her defense of modesty, she had to find a strategy that would overcome these limitations, a strategy which I believe is a modification of, but distinct from, argument for real definitions.

Argument for Founders’ Intent

It seems as though whenever questions over the Constitution arise, be it over the right to bear arms, the separation of church and state, or the definition of marriage, “founders’ intent” or “original intent” becomes a common refrain for those

¹⁹ David Zarefsky, “Definitions,” in *Argument in a Time of Change: Definitions, Frameworks, and Critiques*, ed. James F. Klumpp (Annandale: National Communication Association, 1997), 4.

²⁰ Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*, 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

arguing for a conservative position. The same argument also appears in Parliamentary debate when the interpretation of a resolution is called into question: the government or opposition team may contend that their definition of a contested resolution is in-line with what they offer as the original authority and therefore should be the preferred definition. I borrow the term “founders’ intent” from these contexts. Although arguing for founders’ intent is nothing new, the rhetorical maneuvers committed when one argues for founders’ intent have not been fully articulated within existing theory. Furthermore, examining this argumentative appeal in context of Shalit’s work is particularly informative to rhetorical theory, as I believe her use of this strategy aided her in overcoming limitations to her initial argument for real definitions in *A Return to Modesty*.

Argument for founders’ intent is similar to, but critically different from, argument for real definitions. The distinction to be made is this: real definitions argue for essences; that is, maintaining that there is a true “ideal” form of X. However, when one argues for founders’ intent, she or he does not hold to such absolutes. Instead, given the ambiguity of language, a rhetor will argue that X was best embodied by a material origin, which set the standard for all Xs to follow. This material origin may be understood as a prototype, the original of a particular object, or the example set by the founders. In this case, according to an understanding of what the founders believed X to be or enacted through practices, a rhetor will then argue what current practice can best meet this understanding.

I do not believe that current scholarship fully articulates the strategy that Shalit employs within *Girls Gone Mild*. However, I would maintain that some preexisting concepts are useful and aid in my construction of this theory. Primarily, arguing for founders' intent entails granting authority to a particular origin, an idea which is discussed within *The New Rhetoric*. For example, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe locus of essence as a focus not on a "metaphysical attitude which affirms the superiority of the essence...but the fact of according a higher value to individuals to the extent that they embody this essence."²² Whereas real definitions would hold to more abstract conceptualizations, locus of essence has a much more material focus. In other words, an Angus heifer judged at the county fair is not going to be awarded Grand Champion because she is the Ideal Angus heifer, but rather because she comes closest to the standards of the Angus breed compared to all the competing Angus heifers present in the same arena, or, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca might declare, she wins because she exhibits a "superiority" which "best incarnates the essence."²³ Despite the claims of over-confident 4-Hers, an Ideal Angus heifer will never exist because there would be no way to compare all the Angus heifers that are living or have ever lived, nor would it be possible for there to be complete agreement as to which beast best incarnates this standard. However, given a set of preexisting standards of the Angus breed, individual animals may be subjectively judged as close representations of these standards.

²² Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, 94.

²³ *Ibid.*, 95.

Within arguments for founders' intent, this locus of essence is joined to a locus of quality. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca conceptualize locus of quality as that which regards an original source as "a higher reality, as a model, as determining the extreme possibility of a line of development."²⁴ Again, one who argues for locus of quality would assert that the first of X set the standard for all subsequent Xs. For example, in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, arguments for the ordination of women are often countered with St. Paul's exhortation in I Corinthians 14:34 for women to be silent and submissive in church. This debate over women's ordination centers on the question, "What is a pastor?" This denomination places utmost importance on the precedents set by the early church or Martin Luther, so many argue women's ordination would be inconsistent with the way that worship services were first conducted. A high value is placed on maintaining tradition, striving to remain consistent with the original example. Anything new is not innovation, but rather a deviation from the original. Arguments for founders' intent combine both this focus on essence and quality, as it fixes a material origin as both the authority and the standard for all subsequent manifestations.

Arguing for founders' intent entails not only fixing a material origin as authority and deducing the standards implicit therein, but also entails some interpretive footwork. Just as the Lutheran church cannot worship *exactly* as the early Christians did, founders' intent assumes a measure of non-literal interpretation. This is never more evident than within the argumentative appeals concerning the

²⁴ Ibid., 97.

interpretation and/or execution of the Constitution. Even during the time of the Founding Fathers, there were debates concerning founders' intent. For example, a treason case from the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals in 1782 found all eight judges rejecting arguments for literal interpretation of the state constitution, instead deciding that "the 'spirit' (underlying intent) of the constitution should govern."²⁵ A judge on that case "argued for construction 'according to the spirit and not by the words of the constitution,'" which seems to reflect an understanding that following a document or original example to the letter is impossible. Instead, one must seek to deduce the underlying purpose, which relies upon more material, contemporary understanding.²⁶

I contend that arguing for founders' intent is a fusion of these three principles: locus of essence, locus of quality, and non-literal interpretation. First, operating from founders' intent means to acknowledge that the principles expressed by a material origin should be a standard for all subsequent manifestations. However, these principles should not be interpreted and practiced literally, but must be achieved in a fashion fitting the times. Second, arguing for founders' intent employs dissociation in shifting an audience's understanding from an erroneous definition to one aligned with what a rhetor contends was the original definition. Third, while using dissociation to alter an audience's understanding makes founders' intent similar to real definitions,

²⁵ Robert G. Natelson, "The Founders' Hermeneutic: The Real Original Understanding of Original Intent," *Ohio State Law Journal* 68, no. 5 (2007): 1250.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 1251.

arguing for founders' intent means to reject material attainment of perfection, or, in other words, a rejection of Platonic, idealized language.

As illustrated by a case study of Shalit's work, I articulate a theory of argument for founders' intent based on elements within Perelman and Olbretsch-Tyteca and Natelson's work. Shalit strategically aligned feminism with modesty, yet she could not proclaim "modesty is feminism!" given her previous anti-feminist stance, to say nothing of the ideological clash between modesty and other third-wave feminisms that could hardly be called modest. So, Shalit utilized a strategy of arguing for founders' intent. When arguing as such, one seeks first to first designate a material origin as authority and standard; in this case, Shalit appeals to first wave feminism as the best incarnation of feminism. Second, one must determine the standard set by the original or underlying "spirit;" in *Girls Gone Mild*, Shalit argues that liberation for women and activism is the spirit undergirding feminism, something vividly enacted by the first wave feminists' activism and moral standards. Finally, given an interpretation of founders' intent, one argues the best way to enact that in a contemporary way, as Shalit argues that her ideology of modesty is the best way to achieve the original intentions of feminism. Given the argument for founders' intent, one may also compare this to competing ideologies, stating that they are not consistent, or at least are not as beneficial, just as Shalit argues that second and third wave feminists have advocated some very un-liberating practices.

While the limitations to this kind of argumentation might seem similar to arguing for real definitions, arguing for founders' intent is in fact far less restrictive in

that it allows for greater ambiguity and can be more inclusive of a larger audience. In making this shift, Shalit was able to get away from the restrictive understanding of modesty she argues for in *A Return to Modesty*, and while still maintaining her conservatism, she made modesty much broader and more accessible to her audience by constructing it as the best means to achieve the principle objective of feminism, women's liberation.

The Struggle for Definition in Third-wave feminism

Perhaps part of the reason why Shalit resorted to arguing for founders' intent is due to the state of feminism at the time she wrote. The second wave movement of the 1960s and 1970s had largely dissipated by the 80s, and feminists and non-feminists alike were wondering what feminism had done or failed to do, and what, if anything, was left to do for the women's movement. The late 80s and 90s were a strange time for feminism, in that a paradox arose: increasingly diverse ideologies were presented as "feminism," yet fewer women identified as feminists. This paradox is evident with the literature at this time, which reveals three overriding concerns. First, feminism was losing its definition, or rather, fraught with too many definitions. Second, even though definitions of feminism were multiplying, fewer were identifying themselves as feminists. Finally, because fewer identified as feminists, those who did perceived that feminism was in crisis. While uniting people around a single definition of feminism at this time was unthinkable, it also opened up the possibility of anyone defining feminism as whatever she or he wished it to be. It is

precisely this principle that many popular press feminist writers, such as Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, Naomi Wolf, and Christina Hoff Sommers, took advantage of in offering their take on “what is feminism?”

Feminism has always been notoriously difficult to define.²⁷ Writer and journalist Rebecca West stated in the early twentieth century, “I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.”²⁸ This pithy saying pinpoints the long-standing problem with feminism: most seem to understand the “gist” of feminism, but a unified definition has always proved elusive. Exactly what those sentiments may be has varied immensely over the history of the feminist movement within the United States, and also been a source of much contention within the movement.

While navigating feminist ideologies is daunting, theorists have tried to offer some general definitions. bell hooks has defined feminism as “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression,” but this definition is far from the only one.²⁹ As Chris Beasley states, “concise definitions of feminism clearly presume that all the varieties of feminist thought are perceived to have some common ground—that is, women have had and continue to have a rough deal because of their sex.”³⁰ She goes on to explain that “feminists obviously do not concur on why ‘the deal’ for

²⁷ bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), 4.

²⁸ Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 1999), 2.

²⁹ hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 1.

³⁰ Chris Beasley, *What Is Feminism? An Introduction to Feminist Theory* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 1999), 28.

women was and is rough, whether different women might receive different ‘deals’ or about what might be done to alter their situation.”³¹ At best, feminism is “a kind of empty shell into which may be poured any number of different concerns, details and explanations.”³² In rhetorical studies, Karen Foss, Sonja Foss, and Cindy Griffith filled this “empty shell” definition in several ways. For instance, some forms of feminism “focus on the concept of equity, with a goal of reorganizing society on the basis of equality for the sexes in all areas of social relations,” while other feminists desire “alternative social systems and ways of being in the world—ways that are grounded in women-centered principles and values.”³³ They also recognized that feminism could mean eliminating discrimination and oppression for “people of color, people with disabilities, people of different ages and socioeconomic classes, and lesbians and gay men,” or even ecofeminism, which blends feminism with environmentalism.³⁴

Judith Butler reflected on this debate in *Undoing Gender* when she said, “no one stands within a definition of feminism that would remain uncontested,” in part because of the arrival of “postfeminism” in 1985.³⁵ “Postfeminism” first appeared in Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics* and was really intended to refer to a method of feminist deconstruction, but quickly gained (an erroneous) definition as the “end of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Foss, Foss, and Griffin, *Feminist Rhetorical Theories*, 2.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 174.

feminism,” as though feminism had somehow lost its relevance.³⁶ Moi may not have intended “postfeminism” to be utilized in this way, but it seemed to resonate with the larger culture. As Rhonda Hammer noted, “in light of a rapidly multiplying number of women writers who call themselves ‘feminist’ and then systematically present antifeminist arguments, the very word *feminist* is losing its meaning.”³⁷

It was not so much that feminism was losing its meaning, but had more to do with the vastly different ideologies that were co-opting feminism, to the dismay of some. For instance, bell hooks noted that “lifestyle feminism ushered in the option that there could be as many versions of feminism as there were women.”³⁸ As hooks understood, this was a move that took the political activism out of feminism, and so “no matter what a women’s politics, be she conservative or liberal, she too could fit feminism into her existing lifestyle.”³⁹ hooks also cited Carmen Vazquez, who wrote in 1983, “we can’t even agree on what a ‘Feminist’ is, never mind what she would believe in and how she defines the principles that constitute honor among us...so long as it gets you what you want, feminism in America has come to mean anything you like, honey.”⁴⁰ Compare this criticism to Rebecca Walker, who perceived this free-for-all feminism as a boon when she stated in 1995, “there was no one correct way to

³⁶ Misha Kavka, "Feminism, Ethics, and History, or What Is The "Post" In Postfeminism?," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 21, no. 1 (2002): 29.

³⁷ Rhonda Hammer, *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism: A Critical Feminist Perspective* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 24.

³⁸ hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 5-6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory : From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed., South End Press Classics (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 18.

be a feminist, no seamless narrative to assume and fit into.”⁴¹ For this time, it seems as though it was easy to be a feminist when it could be modified to describe nearly any given lifestyle.

While feminism could be made to suit, identifying as a feminist seemed to lose its appeal during this time. “To make a fuss about sexual injustice is more than unfeminine,” observed Susan Faludi, “[feminism] is now uncool,” because “it lacks ‘style.’”⁴² This is not, she asserted, because women believed that social justice had been achieved, but because “they themselves are beyond even pretending to care.”⁴³ This blasé attitude, she believed, may “deal the most devastating blow to American women’s rights.”⁴⁴ This attitude was confirmed later in Naomi Wolf’s *Beauty Myth*, where she quoted a fashion magazine editor as saying, “Young women... ‘absolutely don’t want to be known as feminists because ‘feminism is not considered sexy.’”⁴⁵ Scholarly research further confirms this observation, as several studies have examined the decreasing support and identification with feminism at this time.⁴⁶

The increasing unwillingness to identify as feminist led to a perception that the feminist movement had lost momentum. Division and faction had always been

⁴¹ Rebecca Walker, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), xxxi.

⁴² Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown, 1991), 72.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*, 1st Anchor Books ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 283.

⁴⁶ Joan K. Buschman and Silvo Lenart, "I Am Not a Feminist, But...": College Women, Feminism, and Negative Experiences," *Political Psychology* 17, no. 1 (1996), Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, "The Myth of Postfeminism," *Gender and Society* 17, no. 6 (2003), Pia Peltola, Melissa A. Milkie, and Stanley Presser, "The 'Feminist' Mystique: Feminist Identity in Three Generations of Women," *Gender and Society* 18, no. 1 (2004), Verta Taylor, "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance," *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 5 (1989).

part of the feminist movement and was nothing new in the late 80s.⁴⁷ But the multiplicity of definitions and lack of solidarity at this time was new and disturbing. Simply, as hooks stated, “this way of thinking has made feminism more acceptable because its underlying assumption is that women can be feminists without fundamentally challenging and changing themselves or the culture,” and without impetus for radical change, “feminist politics is losing momentum because feminist movement has lost clear definitions.”⁴⁸

The feminism of the 80s and 90s is almost always discussed as ill-defined, increasingly something with which people did not identify, and a movement that was flagging considerably. But its allegedly slump-like state did not mean that there was a lack of discourse about feminism. In fact, the third wave ushered in a series of highly publicized, hotly-debated feminist (and sometimes antifeminist) tomes. It was this media-fueled, polarizing rhetoric that Shalit was both a part of and challenging when *A Return to Modesty* was released in 1999. In what follows, I examine some of the more prominent voices of this discussion, particularly the ones Shalit mentions in *A Return to Modesty*.

Popular Voices in the Third Wave—Redefining the Undefinable

Shalit’s work did not exist in a vacuum. From the late 80s onward, the feminist conversation was fraught with disagreement. With a fractious ideology, under constant deconstruction, uniting people under a monolithic definition of

⁴⁷ hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

feminism was impossible. However, the fractured nature of feminism did not prevent feminism from being a popular topic.

Shalit's book came at the end of a decade's worth of provocative works on feminism. There were many popular press books discussing feminism during the 90s, but as hooks noted, it did not necessarily constitute a healthy discourse. If anything, she believed the attention and heated debate generated at this time were mostly "a marketing ploy to advance the opportunistic concerns of individual women while simultaneously acting as an agent of antifeminist backlash by undermining feminism's radical/revolutionary gains."⁴⁹ Rhonda Hammer quoted hooks when she claimed, "Wendy Shalit garnered enormous publicity and media attention for her 1999 antifeminist treatise *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* through what could be described as a cunning orchestration and transmutation of the 'catfight' scenario into a self-serving art form."⁵⁰ hooks noted that the popular "feminist" writers of the time were "all white," mostly "from privileged class backgrounds," "educated at elite institutions," and conservative, a criticism applicable to Shalit.⁵¹ Given the narrow standpoint, hooks questioned the function of the feminism popular at this time, as it *de facto* marginalized the concerns of "working-class white women, poor white women, and all women of color,"⁵² therefore divorced from "active struggle and engagement" necessary for bettering the lives of women.⁵³ She argued, "as with any other 'hot' marketable topic, feminism has become an issue that can be

⁴⁹ bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 74.

⁵⁰ Hammer, *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism: A Critical Feminist Perspective*, 15.

⁵¹ hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, 74-75.

⁵² ———, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 44.

⁵³ ———, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, 92.

pimped opportunistically by feminists and anti-feminists alike.”⁵⁴ Therefore, since “patriarchal-dominated mass media is far more interested in promoting the views of women who want both to claim feminism and repudiate it at the same time,” the likes of “Camille Paglia, Katie Roiphe, and...Naomi Wolf” succeeded in generating much talk of feminism, but avoided exercising any active feminist practice.”⁵⁵

Shalit engaged these very authors within her own work. There are a number of issues discussed throughout these books, each author with her own particular definition of feminism, but I believe the two issues that are most critical for understanding the context of Shalit’s work are discussions of “backlash” and the sexual ethics of the time. First of all, the notion of “backlash” seems to frame much of the discussion of feminism at this time. That is, many perceived that there was a regression in the feminist movement, either by losing potency or with flagrant attempts to “turn back the clock” on the women’s movement. This perception often prompted these writers to “revamp” feminism by offering a new definition, a new take, which would re-energize the movement. Second, popular press feminist books were concerned with making sense of the sexual revolution, either in that the authors perceived it had not gone far enough, or as others suggested, had perhaps gone too far. These arguments are important for understanding Shalit’s work, as these are the positions which she typically refutes, the definitional battlefield where she wages war in defense of modesty.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Susan Faludi's book, *Backlash*, could be considered the first in the kind of popular feminism books that would span the 90s. Like others to follow, she claimed that feminism was in jeopardy, regressing to anti-feminist or misogynistic forces. Over five hundred pages in length, she argued that a very un-radical force was taking shape within popular culture, from newspaper articles to movies, an overarching "backlash" to feminism. She argued this backlash happened in two ways: first, that feminism had succeeded and equality had been won, and second, all that equality was making women very unhappy. For instance, she said, "Women have 'made it,' ... Women are so equal now, lawmakers say, that we no longer need an Equal Rights Amendment."⁵⁶ Conversely, the gains women had won were, in fact, sour grapes: for instance, the "Professional women are suffering 'burnout' and succumbing to an 'infertility epidemic,'" while "single women are grieving from a 'man shortage.'"⁵⁷ This, Faludi argued, was the hallmark of a backlash, that "women are unhappy precisely *because* they are free," "enslaved by their own liberation."⁵⁸ Such messages marked a large-scale "attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women."⁵⁹

Backlash rhetoric essentially worked by "poisoning the well." Whenever there is a "perception—accurate or not—that women are making great strides," backlash arises from "men grappling with real threat to their economic and social well-

⁵⁶ Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, ix.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, x.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

being.”⁶⁰ So, in order to combat the “perception” of women’s advancement, those working within popular media sought to point out the shortcomings of feminism and forsake it in favor of more traditional roles. In a statement that seems to warn of Shalit’s work about ten years later, Faludi warned that backlash rhetoric demands “that women ‘return to femininity,’” wherein society returns “to a fabled time when everyone was richer, younger, more powerful.”⁶¹ Naomi Wolf picked up the same theme a few years later, when she claimed that the “beauty myth” was the backlash to feminism, that is, a backlash “that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement.”⁶² This “beauty myth” continued to hinder feminism; as she noted, “women breached the power structure,” but “eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty.”⁶³ In effect, the individualistic ideology of feminism from this time could not match the antifeminist “beauty myth” that stalled further progress.⁶⁴

However, the backlash theory was not without criticism. A conservative critic, Christina Hoff-Sommers lumped *Backlash* and *Beauty Myth* together as “two impassioned feminist screeds” that offered “conspiracy theories” as an explanation to the contemporary woman’s problems.⁶⁵ She claimed that the primary aim of these “popular books” was to spread a message “of humiliation, subordination and male backlash [to] bolster the doctrine of a bifurcated society in which women are trapped

⁶⁰ Ibid., xix.

⁶¹ Ibid., 70.

⁶² Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*, 10.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 282.

⁶⁵ Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism? : How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 227.

in the sex/gender system.”⁶⁶ The problem with this argument was, Sommers contended, that “no reasonable person in this day and age could be expected to believe that somewhere in America a group of male ‘elders’ has sat down to plot ways to perpetuate the subjugation of women.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, Sommers argued that Faludi and Wolf perpetrate a belief not only in a group of sinister males “plotting and planning their next backlash maneuvers,” but “it is women themselves who ‘internalize’ the aims of the backlash, who, unwittingly, do its bidding.”⁶⁸

Whether or not “backlash” to feminism was being carefully engineered or not, this was part of the perception that feminism was fragmenting and had somehow failed to do what was promised. Shalit responded to this sentiment within her two books, but the dominant and driving force of her work was her solution to a culture in the aftermath of a sexual revolution. Shalit set her argument in contrast to two ideological camps: those who believed that the sexual revolution did not go far enough in liberating women from constraining stereotypes, and those who believed that it went too far and consequently created a culture threatening to women. As stated earlier, Shalit’s work engaged a number of popular authors, those being Camille Paglia, Naomi Wolf, and Katie Roiphe, each of whom offered her own form of feminism to counteract “backlash” forces.

Camille Paglia was a particular target within Shalit’s argument, for obvious reasons. In several highly-publicized books, Paglia contended that the feminist

⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 227.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 228.

movement had made a wrong move in trying to neutralize the power inherent within sexual relationships; as she said, “sexual equality before the law—the first great goal of modern feminism—cannot so easily be transferred to our emotional lives, where woman rules.”⁶⁹ She contended that the “special protections” for women under the law were “infantilizing and anti-democratic,” as well as the “overregulation of sexuality,” an obvious reference to anti-pornography and sexual harassment laws and debates popular at this time.⁷⁰ “Feminists,” as Paglia’s argument went, “grossly oversimplify the problem of sex when they reduce it to a matter of social convention: readjust society, eliminate sexual inequality, purify sex roles, and happiness and harmony will reign.”⁷¹ This is ultimately a battle that cannot be won, as they “have set themselves against nature. Sex *is* power. Identity is power.”⁷² So while feminists desired to neutralize power relations between the sexes within the court system, the work place, and in the bedroom, Paglia pointed out that the hierarchical natures of men and women cannot be regulated.⁷³

Drawing upon Western art and pornography, which “show us the real truth about sex,” Paglia sought to define feminism as that which celebrates the *femme fatale*, a woman who acknowledged, and to an extent, exploited the sexual differences between men and women.⁷⁴ She called for a “revamped feminism,” wherein “the lady

⁶⁹ Camille Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps: New Essays*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), ix.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, x.

⁷¹ ———, *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁴ Paglia, *Vamps & Tramps: New Essays*, ix.

must be a tramp.”⁷⁵ By this she meant that the “‘nice’ girl, with her soft, sanitized speech and decorous manners, had to go.”⁷⁶ Instead, a new kind of woman was needed to revive feminism, that of the powerful, sexual woman. Paglia argued to “reclaim the Whore of Babylon,”⁷⁷ and bring back the “vamps and tramps,” the “tough-cookie” feminist to counter “the smug self-satisfaction and crass materialism of yuppie feminism.”⁷⁸ In Paglia’s view, feminism is a celebration of the sexual power of women, a power which comes from rejecting the “nice” and taking on the archetype of *femme fatale* as a way of changing relations between the sexes.

While Paglia might have labeled Naomi Wolf a proponent of “yuppie feminism,” Wolf carried a similar message of rejecting prescribed stereotypes and urging sexual freedom. Within her two books, *The Beauty Myth* and *Promiscuities*, Wolf echoed Paglia’s message that feminism needed a definitional facelift. Where Paglia aimed to do this in a more public, political way, Wolf wanted to change feminism by altering the way women privately perceived their bodies and sexuality. Wolf said, “women my age and younger have inherited a sexual script, derived from both the feminist and the sexual revolutions, that is by now out-of-date.”⁷⁹ While the sexual revolution provided greater access to family planning and education, “we still did not inherit a culture that valued and respected female desire.”⁸⁰ Wolf sought to offer a solution in her books by both exposing the ways in which female sexuality is

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., x.

⁷⁸ Ibid., xii.

⁷⁹ Naomi Wolf, *Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1997), xviii.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

appropriated and what women can do in order to reclaim their sexuality. Above all, Wolf promoted tolerance and an individualistic approach: “a woman wins when she feels that what each woman does with her own body—unforced, uncoerced—is her own business.”⁸¹ In reclaiming her sexuality, a woman must be unapologetic in her pursuit of pleasure:

Let’s be shameless. Be greedy...Wear and touch and eat and drink
what we feel like. Tolerate other women’s choices. Seek out the sex
we want and fight fiercely against the sex we do not want.⁸²

By doing so, Wolf, like Paglia, believed this would upset the dominant stereotypes and conceptions of femininity.

In contrast to the views of Paglia and Wolf was an ideology that found the sexual revolution much more problematic, as found in books by Katie Roiphe. Roiphe, in direct opposition to the laissez-faire views of sexuality, found such ethics to be lacking; as she said, “our ecstatic individualism...urges us: *Please yourself. Express yourself. Fulfill yourself.*”⁸³ However, Roiphe recognized that these structures, while imposed and moralistic, provided a meaning and definition to sex. As she pointedly realized after a one-night stand, “it came to me, with a surprising rush of disappointment, that no one cared,” concluding that “the ease with which we can now slip in and out of intimacy, the sheer convenience of it, is not as desirable it

⁸¹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*, 290.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 291.

⁸³ Katie Roiphe, *Last Night in Paradise : Sex and Morals at the Century's End*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1997), 189. Italics in original.

might once have seemed.”⁸⁴ Roiphe’s books centered around what Wolf would call “the harder-to-talk-about experiences of the ambivalent slut.”⁸⁵ For instance, while not opposed to the sexual revolution, Roiphe uncovered the ambivalent tensions experienced by those who were “sexually liberated” without providing any real solutions. She recognized the sorry state of casual sex and keenly desired social limitations,⁸⁶ but also described her disgust at the born-again virgin working as secretary for Beverly LaHaye and the Concerned Women for America.⁸⁷ While she never offered a solution to these problems, Roiphe’s work serves as the question that Shalit attempts to answer in her defense of modesty.

As bell hooks may have rightly assessed, many of these writers gained massive notoriety through their incendiary claims and definitions of individualistic feminism. Their attempts to offer a solution, or at least get to the root of the problems facing American women, dominated popular feminism. While vastly differing in their ideas, they all contained a common thread: re-defining feminism and sense-making in the aftermath of the sexual revolution.

Conclusion

Two years before *A Return to Modesty*, Roiphe noted the irony of sexual culture: “Being free from the rigid values of social convention no longer means going home with a man you meet in a bar or hiding birth control pills in the cotton depths of your underwear drawer. In resisting the pressure to be carefree and defying the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Wolf, *Promiscuities: The Secret Struggle for Womanhood*, xviii.

⁸⁶ Roiphe, *Last Night in Paradise : Sex and Morals at the Century's End*, 31.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 182.

seductive authority of their peers,” it is the virgin that has become the true rebel.⁸⁸ It was this topsy-turvy world, the rebellious virgin, that Shalit would seize upon and gain immense publicity. Like her counterparts within third-wave popular feminist discourse, Shalit had to navigate difficult terrain when she began writing *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild*, full of shifting and expanding definitions of an eroding movement, and with any brand of feminism on shaky ground, staking out a position based on essential nature of men and women as Shalit did within *A Return to Modesty* was a bold move, a strategy which would have considerable bearing on her later writing.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 185.

Chapter 3

“A Return” to Limitations: Arguing for Real Definitions

In the introduction of *A Return to Modesty*, Shalit offers several personal anecdotes which all indicate that these are troubling times for women. In one story, she recounts listening to friend of hers tell of an affair she had with a professor. Shalit is puzzled by her friend’s fumbled attempts to verbalize her feelings, struck “that she felt she had to *apologize* for the fact that [the affair] had deeply upset her.”¹ In listening to her friend, she states, “it occurred to me that in an age where our virginity is supposed to mean nothing, and where male honor is also supposed to mean nothing, we literally cannot explain what has happened to us.”² From this she concludes, “we can no longer talk in terms of someone, say, *defiling a virgin*, so instead we punish the virgin for having any feelings at all. Nevertheless, although our ideology can expunge words from our vocabulary, the feelings remain and still cry out for someone to make sense of them.”³ Her purpose in *A Return to Modesty* “is to restore this lost moral vocabulary of sex,” an argument which she consistently frames in terms of essentialized gender roles as enacted within older, simpler times and conservative religious traditions.⁴ The problems that plague “the modern young woman,” she contends, indicate a loss of “respect for female modesty.”⁵ While she acknowledges that there are many women who exercise modesty in their private lives,

¹ Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, 11.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ *Ibid.* Italics in original.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

“no woman has ever attempted a systematic defense of modesty.”⁶ Up to this point, Shalit posits that “many of the men who have written about sexual modesty have either attacked or defended it for reasons that strike [her] as false.”⁷ Her writing proposes to be a middle ground, one which takes into account “the claims of the feminists” that violence, rape, anorexia, and objectification are very real problems.⁸ However, she also invites feminists “to consider whether the cause of all this unhappiness might be something other than the patriarchy,” as she claims that misogyny can very well flourish without the benefit of patriarchy.⁹ Furthermore, her “purpose is not to suggest to provocatively dressed women that they need to cover up,” which “would be absurd.”¹⁰ Instead, “this book is for the woman who is forever asking herself in public ‘Do I look OK?’ Who cannot think or talk of anything other than ‘*Do I look OK?*’”¹¹ By writing, Shalit desires to restore modesty as a cultural value and practice for the benefit of those who are unhappy and uncomfortable with contemporary sexual ethics.

Shalit’s strategy in this book entails arguing for a real definition of modesty by dissociation, which consist of several moves. First, she vilifies feminist ideology as harmful to women. Second, she argues that popular definitions of sexism and modesty are misleading. Third, she offers a real definition of sexism and modesty, an understanding which is more empowering to women than feminist ideology. While

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 72.

¹¹ Ibid.

this strategy of dissociation resonated with some, it is evident that it also created considerable rhetorical limitations, ones that Shalit would later have to overcome in her second book, *Girls Gone Mild*.

Dissociating Feminism from Liberation

Throughout *A Return to Modesty*, Shalit chronicles the problems facing the modern woman. These problems range from very serious issues such as rape¹² and eating disorders,¹³ to the complaints found in popular magazines, such as self-consciousness¹⁴ and unhappy romantic relationships.¹⁵ In her argument, Shalit seeks to dissociate feminism from positive connotations. She argues that feminist thought is now infused within contemporary culture, yet women are facing a whole new set of problems.¹⁶ In particular, she claims that the brand of “equal opportunity” feminism has worked against the interests of women. As Shalit describes it, feminist ideology that seeks to make the sexes “equal,” promote androgyny, and eliminate sexual difference between men and women is at the root of the troubling culture that men and women face.

Most would not associate feminism with misogyny, yet in Shalit’s defense of modesty, she seeks to do precisely this. This misogynistic feminism is to be found in the views of both academic feminist writers and the popular authors mentioned in the previous chapter.¹⁷ Shalit claims that feminist writers, ranging from Mary

¹² Ibid., 9, 10, 40-44.

¹³ Ibid., 58-60.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21-22, 70-73.

¹⁵ Ibid., 26-38.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7, 8, 9, 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 38, 87, 107.

Wollstonecraft to Camille Paglia, are misogynistic, as far as they seek to deny or erase the essential feminine traits of women.¹⁸ If one searches “any page of *The Second Sex* or *The Feminine Mystique*,” he or she is “bound to find more misogyny than in the writings of Aristotle and Norman Mailer combined—sexist as they might have been, at least these men never called women ‘parasites,’” a reference to Simone de Beauvoir’s work.¹⁹ Similarly, Shalit repudiates Andrea Dworkin’s claim that “‘man’ and ‘woman’ are fictions, caricatures, cultural constructs.”²⁰ Shalit believes the critical trap of contemporary society is that it posits a liberated woman must reject the femininity that has restricted her in the past, as behaving in a masculine fashion is the only way to establish equality.²¹ Feminism, claims Shalit, holds that strict gender constructions are no longer the rule.²² For example, she cites Judith Butler, who “criticizes ‘feminists’ for even claiming to support the ‘fictive’ category called ‘women.’”²³ Popular ideology contends that gender should be fluid and free, yet women are not as free as one would think. Shalit claims, “you can be a bitch, you can be a slut, you can sleep around as much as you want, and you can pretend to be a man, but you’re not allowed to be *this*,” meaning a feminine, modest woman.²⁴ Many women of Shalit’s generation grew up hearing, “*Just because you’re a woman*,” meaning that biological sex should not restrict a woman from becoming what she wants to be, but as Shalit queries, “what is meaningful about being a woman? Rosie

¹⁸ Ibid., 53-54, 111, 38, 67, 69.

¹⁹ Ibid., 142.

²⁰ Ibid., 107.

²¹ Ibid., 44, 107.

²² Ibid., 231.

²³ Ibid., 87.

²⁴ Ibid., 88.

the Riveter was riveting only because she didn't usually rivet, and now that so many Rosies do, we most long to know what makes us unique again."²⁵

In Shalit's view, the ideology of anti-essentialism plays out to a large extent in the writings of Camille Paglia, Naomi Wolf, and Katie Roiphe, the popular authors against whom Shalit positions herself. For instance, Shalit comments on the common thread of androgyny present in these works. Paglia encourages women to be tough and "take your blows like men."²⁶ The *femme fatale* that Paglia promotes in *Vamps and Tramps* is a gritty, strong woman, the antidote to the repressed, boring housewife.²⁷ Yet, despite the fact that "a fatal woman is *the* thing to be," Shalit argues that becoming an "'active' female sexual predator...typically trivializes some other woman's suffering," again, indicating that this is an inherently misogynistic ideology.²⁸

Similarly, Naomi Wolf urges women to give up pretenses at goodness and "explore the shadow slut who walks alongside us."²⁹ Shalit counters this by arguing that "it is the very codes of conduct which the 'antiessentialists' attack—the ones that modesty inspires—that are in fact a woman's protection against rape."³⁰ She is adamant that women were damaged by the sexual revolution, which some feminists have even recognized as true.³¹ The deconstruction of gender roles in society was

²⁵ Ibid., 137. Italics in original.

²⁶ Ibid., 138.

²⁷ Ibid., 167.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁰ Ibid., 112.

³¹ Ibid., 192. "Indeed, the feminist Sally Cline now refers to the sexual revolution, in retrospect, as the 'Genital Appropriation Era.'"

supposed to be liberating, yet many women struggle to reconcile internal feelings with societal expectations.³² Shalit points out the confusion and disappointment that supposedly results from third-wave feminist ideology and offers the example of Katie Roiphe, who is “upset that the doorman didn’t flinch when she left someone’s apartment in the morning,” and so “the sad, incredulous question is the same: Don’t you guys care about us at *all*? No, nobody seems to. Nobody says a word.”³³ These ambiguous and troubling feelings indicate to Shalit that the androgynous ideology promoted by feminism is ultimately disappointing if not dangerous, never really delivering on promised liberation and never really responsive to the biological and essential qualities of women.

Shalit also offers examples from popular magazines that indicate the failure of feminist ideology. Even when trying to behave in a masculine fashion, women cannot stop the naturally feminine tendencies from surfacing: “The myth of sameness, instead of helping to cure the insecurity, seems to fuel it,” Shalit remarks about *Cosmo*, which encourages women to engage in promiscuity but still contains stories of women who remain desperately needy in their romantic relationships.³⁴ Shalit is skeptical of claims that women can enjoy casual sex as much as men, and she cites several popular magazine articles that appear to bolster her claim. One article, called “Women Who Have Sex with Lots of Men,” proudly featured women who appear to need no romance in their sex lives, to which Shalit dryly adds, “how convenient for

³² Ibid., 215.

³³ Ibid., 202. Italics in original.

³⁴ Ibid., 107.

them that they are made this way.”³⁵ Especially since most of the women within the article seemed to hold regrets about their promiscuous past, Shalit presents this as further evidence that women cannot be as masculine as they want. Shalit would contend that this dismay and confusion over contemporary sexual ethics are the results of an ideology that is contradictory to human nature; as she states in the introduction of *A Return to Modesty*, “although our ideology can expunge words from our vocabulary, the feelings remain and still cry out for someone to make sense of them.”³⁶ In all of these examples, Shalit is attempting to prove that what is commonly understood as liberation—feminism, sexual revolution, and androgyny—does not seem to be so. Yet, Shalit cannot simply let that stand. If she had denounced feminism as un-liberating, she must provide a way to repair reality, which is accomplished by offering liberation as the true definition of sexism and modesty.

Dissociating Sexism and Modesty from Repression

Feminism, in Shalit’s view, is a dead end, a solution that is unresponsive to the essential character of women.³⁷ If women want to escape misogyny, dreary hook-ups, and eating disorders, they will not find a solution within feminism. Instead, Shalit advocates for sexism through a “return to modesty.” She claims, “Modesty is our way out. For women who are tired of being told they must be either men or victims, modesty offers a new choice.”³⁸ This ideology of modesty is rooted in sexism, that is, recognition of fundamental differences between men and women:

³⁵ Ibid., 92.

³⁶ Ibid., 12.

³⁷ Ibid., 105.

³⁸ Ibid., 139.

“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*.”³⁹

In order to argue for a real definition of sexism, Shalit had to first dissociate negative connotations from sexism. To do this, she brings to light the negative attitudes, but then points out the flawed understanding that these attitudes lead to. For example, she notes “today it is even thought to be sexist for a father to give away his daughter on her wedding day. That, we are told, is a concession to the view that ‘women are property.’”⁴⁰ Shalit then contrasts these attitudes with the observations of psychologist Mary Pipher, who finds that the “only clients who have escaped the standard litany of self-mutilation and eating disorders are the girls who are not sexually active—usually the ones who come from strict families with ‘paternalistic’ fathers.”⁴¹ Pipher wonders: “‘*Why would a girl raised in such an authoritarian, even sexist, family be so well liked, outgoing and self-confident?*’” from which Shalit deduces, “maybe it’s not so terrible, after all, to have someone feel he has a stake in your upbringing. A young woman is lucky, I think, if she has a ‘paternalistic’ father.”⁴² Despite the common understanding that sexism is bad, Shalit is attempting to offer counter-examples that redefine sexism as something that is beneficial to women.

She continues to dissociate negative attitudes about sexism through other examples, such as an excerpt of a 1890s girl’s diary, wherein this young woman

³⁹ Ibid., 153. Italics in original.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 8. Italics in original.

wrote that she is resolved “to think before speaking,” and “be self-restrained in conversations and actions.”⁴³ These aspirations could easily be called sexist, and have been, as she cites John Stoltenberg’s argument: “Her charity, her mercy, her grace (not for nothing have men personified all those abstractions as female in legend and art!) are in fact the emblems of female subordination to rapist ethics.”⁴⁴ While Shalit makes a rather sweeping claim that this is now “accepted dogma,” she then asks, “but if charity, mercy, and grace are all deleted, what remains of womanhood?”⁴⁵ Only vulgarity, apparently: “We said that it was sexist to suggest womanhood meant something more than just breasts and lipstick, and now we are left wondering why we are stuck with just breasts and lipstick.”⁴⁶

In Shalit’s view, real womanhood includes the eternal quality of modesty. “We have lost sight of what is truly beautiful in women,” and mostly because female modesty is roundly denounced as sexist and repressive to women.⁴⁷ As she points out, contemporary images of womanhood have focused on the temporal. While it is sexist and archaic to speak of eternal qualities of womanhood, Shalit counters this by attacking current manifestations of womanhood, “breasts and lipstick,” as the real danger to women, the truly repressive ideology. She argues this point most clearly in a passage attacking the sexual revolution:

The sexual revolution seems to have failed mostly because it ignored the differences between the sexes—specifically, the importance of

⁴³ Ibid., 142.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 143.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

female modesty. When it failed, when women began to discover that they were uniquely compromised by a sexual free-for-all, there was an attempt to restore order. Women's liberation may have been a valiant attempt to restore that order, but it, too, failed because it was reluctant to consider the importance of natural modesty, and held that all differences we observed were the result of oppression.⁴⁸

Sexism, in Shalit's view, is not repressive, but really a recognition of the essential differences between men and women; without the benefit of this understanding, women are left unprotected and oppressed by the very ideology that claims to liberate them. With these arguments, Shalit seeks to destabilize sexism as solely negative. By showing proof that sexism can be empowering as enacted through modest practices, she opens up rhetorical space for sexism as positive.

Arguing for Real Definitions of Sexism and Modesty

By arguing for real definitions, Shalit not only had to argue for what sexism is not, but also what sexism truly is. By redefining sexism as something positive, rather than oppressive to women, this permits Shalit to offer modesty as an alternative to harmful feminist ideology, an alternative "for women who are tired of being told they must be either men or victims."⁴⁹ If sexism is the theory, then modesty is the practice: that is, if one believes that men and women have essential differences, then modesty is an exercise of this belief.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Richard Weaver noted that a “true conservative is one who sees the universe as a paradigm of essences,” an observation that is clearly evident within Shalit’s argument.⁵⁰ Consistent with a conservative worldview, Shalit argues for real definitions as she defines modesty in terms of abstract essences; specifically, modesty is the essence of womanhood. One of the first definitions of modesty that she offers is that modesty is that which “makes womanliness more a transcendent, implicit quality,”⁵¹ much like the German notion of the “‘eternal feminine’ [which] gives women the enduring power to spiritualize mankind.”⁵² Modesty is also natural, a trait which is instinctive, rather than acculturated, to women.⁵³ Oddly enough, even Shalit’s arch enemy, Simone de Beauvoir, believed that modesty was natural, and Shalit quotes from her extensively in her attempt to define modesty as natural to women: “There will always be certain differences between man and woman; her eroticism, and therefore her sexual world, have a special form of their own...Her modesty is in part a superficial acquirement, but it also has deep roots.”⁵⁴ As much as modesty is a natural quality of women, modesty is also both erotic and innocent.⁵⁵ As Shalit explains, “modesty damps down crudeness, it doesn’t dampen down *Eros*. In fact, it is more likely to enkindle it.”⁵⁶ If “modesty is the proof that morality is sexy,”⁵⁷ then it stands to reason that “sexual modesty is a virtue,” and as Shalit

⁵⁰ Richard M. Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1953), 112.

⁵¹ Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, 97.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 118-43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 171-93, 244.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

predicts, it may also become “a virtue for an increasing numbers of us because it’s a way of affirming our essential innocence.”⁵⁸ All of these definitions reflect Shalit’s belief that modesty is the essential quality of womanhood. She defines it in terms of a Platonic, idealized language, invoking “the eternal feminine,” instinct, and even describes it using the Greek word for erotic love, *Eros*. All of these arguments are an attempt by Shalit to move her audience’s understanding of modesty from what she believes is a misguided understanding to an understanding of what modesty truly is.

Even though she argues modesty is an abstract essence of woman, Shalit never advocates for a set of rules dictating dressing or decorum. While Shalit may not offer a clear guide, she relies heavily upon conservative religious and historical examples to further her argument that modesty is truly liberating for women. In order to dissociate sexism from negative attitudes, Shalit takes religious practices which may be recognized as sexist and repositions them as practices that recognize and protect the essential natures of women and men, therefore offering sexism as something that can be positive, even liberating. For example, she offers the words of a Jewish woman who states, “I’ve heard people say that the no-sex-while-the-wife-is-menstruating rule is sexist, because it comes from thinking women are unclean,” but the separation that this practice creates results in “the mystery and newness of a love affair” between her and her husband, something that helps to keep their marriage healthy.⁵⁹ She also offers several examples and testimony from Islamic women, like one “20-year-old Muslim woman who does not consider herself to be oppressed or

⁵⁸ Ibid., 244.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 220.

repressed in the least,” and argues that Islamic dress prescriptions for men and women are meant to “prevent our natural feelings for the opposite sex from overpowering our logic and dictating our behavior,” a liberating practice.⁶⁰ Shalit also offers another example, from the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, which reported that fundamentalist Islamic women regard veiling as ““liberating modesty,”” and that “the black veil is the Islamic equivalent of an American business women’s pinstriped, bowtied business suit.”⁶¹ In all these examples, ostensibly viewed as sexist, Shalit refutes that women who engage in these practices are far more liberated than their liberal counterparts. Thus, through these examples, sexism should not be rooted in the negative connotations that it typically has.

After offering a definition of what sexism and modesty truly are, Shalit contends that adhering to sexist beliefs is more liberating for women than contemporary feminist ideology; after all, Shalit’s foremost argument is “modesty is powerful,”⁶² *the* solution to the frustration and anxiety felt by many women.⁶³ To prove this, she seeks to redefine modesty as a powerful force, which she does by dissociating modesty from meekness and redefining it as a force that protects women from men and also has the potential to change society.

Shalit is clear that women have very little defense against cultural pressures to be sexual at a very young age. Dr. Mary Pipher confirms this view, as “girls are pressured to be sexual regardless of the quality of relationships...they are worried that

⁶⁰ Ibid., 218.

⁶¹ Ibid., 224.

⁶² Ibid., 223, “Modern Girls and the Modesty Movement.”

⁶³ Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, 9, 47.

they will be judged harshly for their bodies and lack of experience.”⁶⁴ Shalit also points out that the expectations to be hyper-sexualized are carried on in the prescriptive relationship advice offered by books like *Vamps and Tramps*⁶⁵ and popular magazines which advise women to be promiscuous.⁶⁶ Offering modesty as an alternative lifestyle for her audience, Shalit empowers women to define their self worth in terms of dignity and integrity,⁶⁷ in contrast to popular culture, which remains fixated on women as sex objects.⁶⁸

Modesty is responsive to the internal nature of women, versus contemporary culture which seeks to appropriate women’s bodies for men’s desires. Shalit believes that a common misconception about modesty is a denial of the sexual. She alludes to the erroneous dictionary definition, “modesty is ‘damping down of one’s allure,’” yet, Shalit believe this definition of sexual modesty is “seriously misunderstood”⁶⁹:

If you think that women are basically stupid creatures, then you can easily accept this definition because it means that for thousands of years women were behaving and dressing ways that made them unappealing...But if you think that women are smart, then you know that there has to be more to the story of modesty than this. If you give women credit for being intelligent creatures, you trust them and assume that they wouldn’t have put up with dressing and acting in a

⁶⁴ Ibid., 226.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 178.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 74, 91, 92, 107, 79.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 84.

certain way for so many thousands of years unless it had some meaning for them.⁷⁰

Rather than modesty as a repressive force, Shalit redefines modesty as an active force, more concerned with deferring sexual pleasure until a more opportune moment rather than repressing it.⁷¹ Modesty is not a meek sense of shame concerning sex or the body, but a persuasive tool.⁷² This argument functions to address two barriers: first, that modesty denies sexuality, and secondly, that modesty is meekness. First of all, modesty, with its antiquated suggestion of repression, is really not prudish at all. As Shalit explains, modesty acknowledges the sensual nature of women, and in doing so, negotiates barriers her audience may have about the sexist (in the negative sense) implications modesty bears. Furthermore, Shalit makes modesty attractive by constructing it as a persuasive and protective force. It is not meek, but a powerful assertion of a woman's worth: a modest woman is "not available for public use."⁷³ Because modesty allows a woman to be assured of her worth as a woman, modesty's power extends beyond just self esteem.

Modesty recognizes not only self worth, but modesty also protects a woman against rape and harmful relationships. In the face of sexual harassment lawsuits, rape, serial hook-ups, and the hypersexualized depiction of women in the media, Shalit asks, "how can we expect men to be honorable when a large number of women

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 223.

⁷³ Ibid., 131.

consistently send them the message that they do not have to be?”⁷⁴ Clearly, it is up to women: they can do something about the way they are viewed by contemporary culture. If women want chivalrous behavior from men, women must be the instigators, not through aggressive demands, but by decent, modest behavior which inspires male honor.⁷⁵ If women want safety and security in their workplaces, social gatherings, and in the street, feminine modesty and the subsequent masculine respect for it is her protection against rape and harassment.⁷⁶

While protection from rape is a major argument as to why modesty is powerful, Shalit also argues that women must adopt modesty in acknowledgement of the masculine predilection for promiscuity.⁷⁷ She cites a 1994 study that found men would ideally like eight sexual partners over two years, but women desire only one sexual partner. Furthermore, the men claimed they would sleep with a woman after only a week’s acquaintance, as opposed to women, who said they would need a minimum of several months before sleeping with a man.⁷⁸ Shalit believes there is such a thing as male modesty, which “seems to involve moderating one’s sexual activity and generally reserving it for one’s beloved.”⁷⁹ While she is a bit vague as to what male modesty is, she is more confident in claiming that male honor must be inspired by feminine sexual modesty.⁸⁰ Male honor exists in opposition to female

⁷⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 149.

modesty, but cannot exist in opposition to something that is not there.⁸¹ Therefore, it is up to the woman: by guarding her sexuality through modesty, she will be rewarded with an honorable partner who will respond to her need for commitment, or until that time, she will be avoiding the heartache and trouble that comes from unfulfilling relationships.

In Shalit's view, agency unequivocally resides with women to be modest ladies in the first place, which will transform males into men. Shalit seeks to empower women to do something about the threats they face. If men will take what they can get, Shalit explains it is up to women to exact the treatment they feel they deserve. Therefore, if modesty has such power as not only to deflect the threat of rape, but turn men into the gentlemen that women crave, the solution Shalit offers overcomes a considerable cultural barrier her audience faces. Shalit points out how unhappy women are with the ethics of contemporary relationships, hook-ups and casual sex.⁸² By explaining how modesty functions in protecting women, Shalit creates an attractive solution: modesty is attainable for any woman, and modesty grants agency to a woman in protecting her body as well as her heart.

Furthermore, the power of modesty can effect immense societal change, especially if women decide to band together in support of modesty. Shalit argues, "if we are ever going to reduce the survival value there is in immodesty, there must be not five or six women following this or that arbitrary rule, but a real cultural shift. We must decide as women to look upon sex out of wedlock as not such a cool thing, after

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 27-30, 36, 92, 236.

all, and recreate the cartel of virtue.”⁸³ With this “cartel of virtue,” Shalit seeks to empower women within her audience as a whole. They, who are all too familiar with woman-hating, backstabbing games since youth, must come together and behave collectively instead of competing with one another.⁸⁴ Especially in a culture where nearly everything is permitted, the prescriptive nature of modesty must be protected by more than just a few individuals.⁸⁵ Redefining modesty as not just an individual virtue, but something that demands to be protected by all women within a society will help to create a larger sense of community and increase the survival rate of modesty. Therefore, employing this “cartel of virtue” is empowering for Shalit’s audience, as they need not think that they are alone in their pursuit of modesty. Certainly, there is strength in numbers, and when modesty is assaulted from all sides, Shalit works to create a sense of support and solidarity in order to decrease the anxiety about being modest in an immodest world.⁸⁶ In all of these arguments, Shalit is correcting what she believes to be an incorrect understanding of modesty. Rather than meekness, she contends that modesty is a powerful force, one that can correct the problems that feminism has yet to fix.

Limitations of Arguing for Real Definitions

Shalit sought to correct what she perceived as misunderstandings by offering definitions of sexism and modesty that she believed were reflective of their true essence. This did resonate with some reviewers. For example, George Will, who

⁸³ Ibid., 231.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 226.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 228.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 231.

wrote an enthusiastic review of *A Return to Modesty* in *Newsweek*, called the book an “insouciant manifesto for mature eroticism” which is “much more ambitious than the banal political agendas of contemporary feminism.”⁸⁷ Elizabeth Powers, who reviewed the book in *Commentary*, stated that Shalit has “preternaturally sharp eyes and mind,” and “has seen deeply into female nature, and into the malaise of a generation.”⁸⁸ However, arguing for real definitions bears some inherent limitations. One of the biggest limitations of arguing for real definitions is that “there is no way to escape the historical contingency of any particular definitional proposition,” meaning that “the belief that a particular definition captures the ‘real’ nature of any given X is inextricably linked to a number of related beliefs that are held in a particular historical context.”⁸⁹ In other words, arguing for real definitions can potentially be perceived as circular argumentation, “cherry picking” certain traits without recognizing that they are interconnected to other circumstances. Much of the criticism of *A Return to Modesty* illustrates precisely this objection. Reviewers tended to focus on three particular issues where dissociation was not strong enough to change audience’s beliefs: Shalit’s conceptions of feminism, historical context, and illustrations of modesty.

The first rhetorical limitation Shalit faced was her treatment of feminism. Perhaps the most embittered criticism of *A Return to Modesty* is found in the reviews that attack Shalit’s representation of feminism. Some reviewers perceived that Shalit

⁸⁷ Will, “Modesty Is Sexy. Really..”

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Powers, “Back to Basics,” *Commentary* 107, no. 3 (1999).

⁸⁹ Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*, 168.

sided with feminists, stating as Mark Satin did, that although Shalit was deeply embedded in conservative journalism, “the book isn’t Conservative Diatribe #35 against feminism.”⁹⁰ In fact, he continues, *A Return to Modesty* acknowledges “that ‘the feminists were right’—many young women really are suffering from anorexia or bulimia, and date rape is a lot more common than you think.”⁹¹ However, other reviewers did not perceive Shalit as sympathetic to feminists at all. As Sharon Krum wrote, Shalit “lines up Naomi Wolf, [Camille] Paglia, [Katie] Roiphe and [Gloria] Steinem among others like ducks in a shooting gallery, [and] takes aim at them all.”⁹² These ideological attacks puzzled some reviewers, like Belinda Yandell, who did not “understand Shalit’s perception of feminism and equality. Where does she get the idea that equates equality with the right to be rude and crude?...I thought feminism meant, ‘don’t respect me because I am a woman but because I am a unique and valuable individual.’”⁹³ Other reviewers perceived that she was diametrically opposed to feminism, stating that Shalit’s “antifeminist appeal to women to give up sex and work for the good of the culture is a cynical, inherently conservative effort to silence a real political question—what kind of society is best for human beings?—and replace it with a vision of domestic utopia.”⁹⁴ Clearly, Shalit’s attempts to associate feminism with harmful ideology did not ring true for many reviewers.

⁹⁰ Mark Satin, “Modest Women, Honorable Men,” *The Radical Middle Newsletter* (1999), http://www.radicalmiddle.com/x_shalit.htm.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Sharon Krum, “Safe Our Sex,” *The Guardian* (1999), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1999/apr/01/gender.uk>.

⁹³ Amazon.com, “Belinda Yandell,” *Amazon.com* (2000), <http://www.amazon.com/review/R382UDGKAIXA70>.

⁹⁴ Phillips-Fein, “Feminine Mystiquers.”

As stated earlier, one arguing for real definitions runs the risk of ignoring historical context. The conservative “return” to a golden past proves to be the second major limitation to this work. By advocating for female sexual modesty, Shalit claims that the problems women and men endure today will go away; after all, “none of [her]grandmother’s friends are anorexic”⁹⁵ and dressing modestly will prevent harassment and induce respect (with three exceptions).⁹⁶ However, this ideology of conservatism clearly did not resonate with all of Shalit’s audience. Reviewers of *A Return to Modesty* were particularly concerned with Shalit’s historical interpretations. “I suppose,” said “Homeschooling Single Mom,” “if you are a privileged, formally educated and sheltered white girl the way Shalit is, it might seem like ‘all women’ got treated as ‘ladies’ before the 1950s, but anyone who has made even a brief survey of women’s history can easily write that notion off as utterly laughable at best, and heinously insensitive at worst.”⁹⁷ Another anonymous review stated that “the world can be a sad place for women who did not have the kind of privileged upbringing that Ms. Shalit crows about incessantly, as if her own luck was a mark of virtue.”⁹⁸ As with other reviewers, Shalit’s perceived lack of battle wounds discredited her in the war for modesty, portraying her as cut-off from a larger cultural reality.

⁹⁵ Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, 143.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 218-38. The exceptions come on page 223, where Shalit offers an excerpt of a news article, which tells the story of a young Muslim woman who adopted hijab but stopped wearing it after a month due to sexual harassment, effectively contradicting her whole argument. Two other similar examples are also within this excerpt.

⁹⁷ Amazon.com, “Homeschooling Single Mom,” *Amazon.com* (2005), <http://www.amazon.com/review/R176FVBH4LHMNR>.

⁹⁸ ———, “Anonymous,” *Amazon.com* (1999), http://www.amazon.com/review/RUOWD5Q563UOV/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

Reviewers also were bothered by her conceptualization of modesty. What Shalit offers as paragons of modesty wins her considerable disapproval, most reviewers questioning if modesty of ages past was as widespread as Shalit presumes or if it would be so suitable for today. Emily Eakin commented on Shalit's call for recreating the "cartel of virtue," which must be made to "sound less like voluntary house arrest."⁹⁹ She continues by adding that "there is no evidence that women were happier about their sexual lives—or more free of rape—in the pre-sex-ed days of Jane Austen."¹⁰⁰ Katha Pollitt, in a *New York Times* book review, was especially critical of Shalit's methods of proof for modesty. Shalit claimed that respect for modesty was once so high that, as Alexis de Tocqueville remarked, "American women could safely go anywhere alone."¹⁰¹ Pollitt continues:

Using the same cut-and-paste approach, one could just as easily prove that antebellum American men showed far less respect for women's modesty than men today. After all, slave owners routinely and legally violated their slaves, brothels flourished and the age of consent in most states was 7.¹⁰²

Pollitt speculates that perhaps there is a connection "between the veneration of some and the degradation of others. Shalit wants women to be madonnas—but can you have madonnas without whores?"¹⁰³ Others also maligned Shalit's fixation with the Victorian. As Phillips-Fein remarked, "[Shalit] thinks romantic love used to be

⁹⁹ Emily Eakin, "Maids of Honor," *New York Times Book Review* (1999).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Pollitt, "Bookend; the Solipsisters."

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

‘beautiful and true’ but has been corrupted by a selfish, competitive individualism.”¹⁰⁴ Shalit’s is foolishly “fixat[ed] on Victorian-era marriage,” as she fails to recognize that even then, marriage was “far from being the epitome of romance, [and] was often just a business deal under another name.”¹⁰⁵

Jonah Goldberg’s criticism echoed that of Pollitt and Phillips-Fein, as he stated, “[Shalit] may pine for an age of long skirts, quaint courtship rituals, modesty pieces, and Talmudic injunctions against touching, along with every other cultural barrier that ever has been erected between the sexes. But,” he argues, “she pays no homage to the historical contexts that created them.”¹⁰⁶ While he does pick up on the different conditions that women faced like other reviewers, Goldberg contends that Shalit misreads the past as a prescription rather than a suggestion: “Ancient wisdom is a vital guide for reform, not a replacement for it...If modern society suddenly adopted calling cards and modesty pieces, it would not enjoy an instant moral restoration. It would be hobbled with kitsch.”¹⁰⁷ Likewise, Barbara Defoe Whitehead observed that the customs past Shalit offered in her advocacy for modesty were tied to other cultural systems. For instance, the closely monitored courtship of earlier decades largely disappeared because “young adults are living away from home as singles,” never mind that many women now marry in their mid- to late-twenties.¹⁰⁸

The third rhetorical limitation of *A Return to Modesty* is Shalit’s ill-fitting examples of female modesty. While Shalit argued that veiling is not repressive,

¹⁰⁴ Phillips-Fein, "Feminine Mystiquers."

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Goldberg, "Conservatism without History."

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Whitehead, "Victoria's Secret."

headscarves are not exactly equated with anything resembling liberation to most in a Western secular audience. Some noted Shalit's ambiguous definition of modesty could serve as an advantage, as Sarah Hinlicky observed, "Shalit never hones in on one strict definition of [modesty], but rather than being a flaw, this is the great strength of her argument, one that permits all kinds of women in all kinds of situations to appreciate the value of what she is saying."¹⁰⁹ While Shalit relies on a number of interpretations of modesty, particularly "the Jewish modesty laws," the emphasis she places on modest appearance "is the logical corollary of an internalized ethic of sexual restraint. Hence the very sensible connection between sexual modesty as a social virtue and sexual morality is a religious one."¹¹⁰ While this seems to contradict Schiappa's assertion that arguing for real definitions is inherently limiting, it would indicate that this argument could very well work for an audience who already operates from a belief in objective reality, predisposed to the conservative views on gender that Shalit supports.

However, for other reviewers, the abstract definition of modesty was not a winning feature of Shalit's argument. Another anonymous reviewer from amazon.com wondered, "should women be wearing bathing suits or burqas?"¹¹¹ By his or her reckoning, "the book did little to address these difficult cultural issues other than to leave one to wonder" what modesty looks like in a secular Western society.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Sarah E. Hinlicky, "The Sexual Counterrevolution," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life*, no. 91 (1999).

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Amazon.com, "A Customer," *Amazon.com* (2000), <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2RZ6Z5VIS27SH>.

¹¹² Ibid.

Other reviewers echoed this criticism, as one reviewer observed that “Shalit spends 300 pages trying to convince us that men will stop being so disrespectful if we would only dress more modestly, and then regales us with a tale of a young man sending this newly modest girl harassing notes about what he’d like to do to her because her modesty is so sexy.”¹¹³ This disadvantage also turned into a slippery-slope for other reviewers. In a highly publicized Slate.com debate between Cathy Young and Shalit, Young pointed out that choice, beyond just virginity or promiscuity, should be available to women. But “you [Shalit] don't really trust young women with that choice; like children, they must be protected from themselves by external prohibitions. (It must warm your heart to read about Arab women whose male relatives kill them for sexual transgressions: Now, there's a way to reinforce a girl's resolve to say no!)”¹¹⁴ While Shalit responded that “this is exactly the kind of rhetorical overkill that you deplore when committed by feminists,” it was not an isolated criticism, either. Tara Zahra from *The American Prospect* sensed a disjuncture between Shalit’s call for a return to modesty and liberal democracy:

Shalit says she would like to be “young ladies” more often. As in, “Young lady, what are you doing? Young lady, where are you going?” But—based on her own precocious career—she presumably doesn't want this to extend to “Young lady, you don't belong at this school,” or “Young lady, you will marry that man.” Shalit seems not to realize that

¹¹³ ———, “Miss Bella,” *Amazon.com* (2001), <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3KFF5DWOQ4KNF>.

¹¹⁴ Shalit and Young, “Should Women Be More Modest?.”

these strictures lie only slightly further down the continuum toward ceding all freedom of choice. Full membership in a liberal democratic society means women need to take on ...not just choice, but the *responsibility* that comes with choice.¹¹⁵

These arguments suggest that Shalit's conception of modesty may conflict with a women's role in a liberal democracy. Some conceptions of modesty have no place in contemporary America, or simply cannot exist because limitations that once kept women confined to certain roles are now gone. This was evident in many reviews, as people questioned Shalit's absolute position on modesty's power, often pointing out that modesty is not always an unequivocal message of female empowerment, or that Shalit tends to ignore the male contribution to interaction between the sexes.

Critics also pointed out that modesty does not always send a message of empowerment. Barbara Defoe Whitehead noted that Shalit seemed to present a black-and-white notion of modesty, one that overlooked the multiplicity of ways that modest behavior may be read, for instance, "as passivity or stupidity. Girls with downcast eyes are sometimes overlooked or underestimated. And modesty can lead to misplaced shame and silence."¹¹⁶ Echoing Goldberg's criticism, Whitehead argued that "modesty is a frail defense against male sexual aggression and misconduct which is why it has always been surrounded by legal sanctions, social controls, and cultural codes, most of which have now been repealed."¹¹⁷ Other reviewers noted a critical

¹¹⁵ Tara Zahra, "The Antifeminist Seduction," *The American Prospect* (2002), http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_antifeminist_seduction.

¹¹⁶ Whitehead, "Victoria's Secret."

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

weakness in Shalit's defense of modesty. As "Sabrina's Mom" noted, "her tactics sound like victim-blaming, and cannot be universally applied. In 2006, a 20-year-old Orthodox woman in Lakewood was abducted and raped. That same year, a predator was molesting young girls in the Orthodox Jewish neighborhood of Borough Park. In both cases, the victims were quite modest," which may give a reader pause as to Shalit's assertion that modesty grants unqualified power.¹¹⁸ For these reviewers, Shalit's attempts to redefine modesty as powerful simply fell flat, unable to overcome the experiences of these people who knew all too well that modesty cannot always win.

In many instances, the dissociation between modesty and repression was not strong enough to persuade the reviewers to adopt Shalit's understanding. By ignoring historical context, "cherry picking" the elements that she felt reflected the true nature of modesty and sexism, Shalit's argument failed to resonate, limiting her audience to those who were already sympathetic to her views.

Conclusion

Clearly, Shalit faced considerable limitations to her argument in *A Return to Modesty*. She sought to "restore the lost moral vocabulary of sex" through a conservative strategy of arguing for real definitions of sexism and modesty. In her attempts to vilify feminism, dissociate sexism and modesty from negative connotations, and redefine them as protective and powerful, her readers perceived that Shalit wrongly maligned feminism, ignored historical context, and overestimated

¹¹⁸ Amazon.com, "Sabrina's Mom," *Amazon.com* (2008), http://www.amazon.com/review/R98LB7LJGZ3OC/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

the power that modesty has to offer. For all these limitations, though, Shalit's work continued on in a very different way, as she co-opted a previously vilified term, feminism, for her own cause. While Shalit's rhetoric in *A Return to Modesty* did pose considerable limitations, it was not so limiting that it would prevent her from redefining sexism as feminism, a move which proves extremely advantageous to her argument.

Chapter 4

“*Mild(er)*” Criticism: Arguing for Founders’ Intent

In the introduction to *Girls Gone Mild*, Shalit is worried, and it is not difficult to see why. Exactly what kind of society do we have, she wonders, when hyper-sexualized Bratz Babyz dolls are marketed to toddlers, porn stars Ron Jeremy and Jenna Jameson have a pre-teen fan base, and Hello Kitty is emblazoned on thongs?¹ Her problem with these phenomena is not so much that it is “inappropriate” for a young girl to be wearing clothing more suited to someone who charges by the hour, but it is all indicative of a larger cultural trivialization of sex: “There is no longer any mystery or power to sex—it is just expected that everything will be sexual, and so nothing is.”² Yet, despite the shock and despair, Shalit’s primary purpose for *Girls Gone Mild* is to highlight a new cultural shift, as evidenced by certain young women who seem to embody Shalit’s ideology of modesty. She says:

We are living through a unique cultural moment, society moving on two tracks simultaneously...the STDs, the violent music, the oversexualized dolls all seem to be getting worse; and yet despite this—or perhaps because of it—a rebellion is already under way. Obviously, part of the reason I’ve written this book is that I was inspired by talking with these young women.³

¹ Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good*, xv-xvii, xxi, xxiv-xxv.

² *Ibid.*, xxi.

³ *Ibid.*, xxv.

These young women she features “chose to rebel...against cultural messages to be ‘bad.’”⁴ The importance of their rebellion lies in Shalit’s belief that “we need new role models.”⁵ That is, if today’s young women are “to have meaningful choices and genuine hope, the ‘wild girl’ or ‘bad girl’ cannot seem like the only empowered option.”⁶

In doing so, Shalit also hopes to further what she believes is a rebellion already underway. After all, “the direction society takes depends on you, the reader: what we value and what we devalue.”⁷ Hopefully, a reader will adopt what Shalit claims is the heart of “fourth-wave feminism”: women should “be taken seriously for their brains and not their bodies.”⁸ At the very least, Shalit invites the reader to consider that “maybe the good girl isn’t so bad, after all,” by offering a positive portrait of what she believes is a new wave of feminism.⁹ If one does not actively take part in this new “fourth-wave feminism” Shalit hopes to “persuade just one person inclined to make fun of the ‘good girl’ to reconsider his or her scorn.”¹⁰ Her purpose is not all that different from *A Return to Modesty*: she maintains a conservative position as she seeks to reveal the major problems facing young women and the hazards of some feminist ideologies, while offering modesty as a better solution. However, her strategy for achieving this is remarkably different.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 279.

¹⁰ Ibid., 210.

In a departure from *A Return to Modesty*, Shalit appropriated feminism and aligned it with modesty within *Girls Gone Mild*. This was no easy task, given her previous anti-feminist stance. In order to do so, she utilized an argument for founders' intent. First, Shalit redefined modesty as "fourth-wave feminism." This entails looking to the first wave of feminism as the authority and standard of what feminism should be. Shalit argues that the principles practiced by the first-wavers are a guide for these new fourth wave feminists. Second, just as fourth-wave feminism is feminism as it was intended to be, Shalit further argues for the primacy of this definition by dissociating second and third-wave feminisms from liberation. Finally, as Shalit designates a material source, first wave feminism, as the authority and standard for her advocacy of fourth-wave feminism, arguing for founders' intent also entails abandonment of idealized language, which is evident in the absence of arguments for sexism and the essential nature of women, which had been previously featured in *A Return to Modesty*.

Defining "Feminism's (Mild) Fourth Wave"

While Shalit's purpose for *Girls Gone Mild* was essentially the same as *A Return for Modesty*, she argues for modesty in a very different way. The major difference between *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild* is her appropriation of a former enemy, feminism, into what she calls the fourth wave of feminism, which is equated with her ideology of modesty. In Shalit's own words, she recognizes the power to be had within feminism, and that the time is right for redefinition. She observes: "though leaders of the feminist movement—and their opponents—might

like to portray it as a settled question, in fact the meaning of feminism is up for grabs right now. The ground is rumbling, and the ideological fault lines are shifting...”¹¹ Shalit’s further discussion of feminism indicates that she recognizes the “empty” nature of the word:

I came to see that feminism had become a sort of Rorschach test: The word itself has become almost meaningless—and can refer to diametrically opposed ideas—and yet hearing what feminism means to others is still interesting and can tell you a lot. Some people use the term to signal that they care about the dignity of women. Others use it to indicate that they want to fight the very notion of being dignified at all. Usually to the youngest feminists, the idea of decency is tremendously appealing. Whereas to the older ones, it is the chief problem.¹²

Clearly, Shalit recognizes the potential of feminism. “The word itself has become almost meaningless,” indicates a power vacuum and rather than blending in with other third-wave feminisms, she chose to call into being a new wave, one that draws upon original feminism.

Since Shalit has appropriated “fourth-wave feminism” as a stand-in for modesty, it is important to understand how she argues this position. First, Shalit distinguishes this fourth wave of feminism by implicitly designating the first wave as both the original authority and standard of liberation for women. Second, she argues

¹¹ Ibid., 206-07.

¹² Ibid., 208-09.

that the “guiding spirit” of feminism was originally about liberation for women through moral principles and activism. Third, Shalit claims these new fourth-wavers are aligned with the spirit of first wave feminism, and are happier, more fulfilled, and empowered because of it.

Chapter eight, entitled “Feminism’s (Mild) Fourth Wave,” is largely dedicated to recognizing what Shalit believes is a new (old) kind of feminism enacted by young women all over the country.¹³ These young feminists differ radically from their second and third wave predecessors, as they seem to enact Shalit’s argument for modesty:

Their beliefs tend to distinguish them from the third-wave feminists who are usually quoted in the media. The fourth-wavers question pornography instead of wishing to star in it. They are more likely to be fans of Florence Nightingale than Nina Hartley. They are most taken with earlier feminists, the nineteenth-century women who were temperance advocates as much as suffragists. The suffragists argued that women should own property and have the right to vote precisely so that they might improve society with their moral perspective and their feminized heroism. The early feminists also believed in the sacredness of sexuality...so do these young women.¹⁴

Based on this observation, Shalit concludes, “feminism is clearly very much alive for young women, but it is a feminism that makes the leadership uneasy. For it is not as

¹³ Ibid., 204.

¹⁴ Ibid., 218-19.

reflexively ‘bad-girl’ as it once was, and its focus on personal dignity and on sex being sacred will mean the biggest shakeup of feminism since Seneca Falls in 1848.”¹⁵

Rather than being another kind of feminism within the third wave, this new wave is drawing upon the original principles of feminism. Shalit points to the women, actions, and critical moments of the first wave: “Seneca Falls in 1848,” “Florence Nightingale,” “temperance advocates,” suffrage and property rights. Of course, the battles of the first wave are over: women have the right to vote, own property, and divorce. However, the “guiding spirit” of first wave feminism is still very relevant and sorely needed in today’s society. Shalit perceives that the first wave was rooted in moral principles, a critical point onto which she latches her conceptualization of modesty: “Some would say the original intention of the first wave of feminism was precisely this: for women to be taken seriously for their brains and not their bodies.”¹⁶ Just as modesty values the internal qualities of women versus “breasts and lipstick,” these fourth-wavers seem to be doing precisely this in their protest against societal expectations that reduce women to their sexuality.

Building on this tension between older and younger generations, Shalit states, “feminist leadership tends to be vehemently opposed to the very moral message that the younger feminist espouse.”¹⁷ She offers the example of Katha Pollitt and her daughter Sophie Pollitt-Cohen to demonstrate this radical shift in feminist thinking.

¹⁵ Ibid., 235.

¹⁶ Ibid., 210.

¹⁷ Ibid., 235.

Whereas Katha Pollitt vehemently attacked *A Return to Modesty*,¹⁸ Shalit points out that Pollitt's daughter Sophie seemed to concur with Shalit about the disparity of the sexual revolution. Using excerpts from Sophie's diary, published in 2006 as *The Notebook Girls: Four Friends, One Diary*, Sophie "realizes that the boys' immaturity cannot be separated from the girls' willingness to provide sexual favors to those boys."¹⁹ Shalit points out that younger girls are not taken with the sexual exhibitionism promoted in the third wave and are questioning whether liberation is really the outcome of promiscuity. Like the first wave of feminism, they hold to the sacredness of sexuality and the importance of moral behavior.

As she describes these young women, she says, "I came to think of these younger feminists as part of a fourth wave," because they are so different from second and third wave feminists.²⁰ The break between older and younger feminists is a reflection of a shift in values. She states:

The battle for the soul of feminism goes on. As I traveled around the country, I found that when girls did identify as feminists, they did not identify with the official leadership. The younger feminists I encountered wanted a sharp departure from the "sex-positive" or pro-porn feminism of years past. They wanted a movement that stressed dignity.²¹

¹⁸ Katha Pollitt, "The Solipsisters," *The New York Times*, April 18 1999, Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good*, 209.

¹⁹ Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good*, 210.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 218.

²¹ *Ibid.*

This dignity which Shalit sees in the fourth wave is a reflection of what the first wave feminists enacted in their fight for suffrage, legal rights, and temperance. The first-wavers fight to assert the equality of women has resurfaced in the fourth-wavers attempts to reclaim a dignified image of women in the media.

By pointing to the first wave of feminists as the guiding standard for feminism, Shalit signifies a shift, a new wave in feminism that revitalizes activism based on moral arguments. In contrast to the third-wavers' attempt "to smooth over contradictions within feminism...the fourth wave is stressing activism again."²² Shalit points out Léa Clermont-Dion, a young woman from Quebec, who "wants young women to rethink 'what it is to be a liberated woman.'"²³ Like the modest philosophy Shalit advocates, young women like Léa agree that the sexual revolution and its aftermath are not at all liberating. Léa stated, "We have to speak to young people about intimacy and love, not just performance," and this is not something that should be done by just anyone, but through "education campaigns [which] must be run by young people and not by 'moralizing adults.'"²⁴

"Moralizing adults" and "rebellious good girls" have clashed on other issues, as well. Shalit uses, among others, the examples of the Girlcott girls and Pure Fashion shows to further her case. All of these, she argues, show a younger generation of women who are questioning the attitudes of their elders and actively opposing them through morally-grounded arguments and activism. For example, the Girlcott girls

²² Ibid., 224.

²³ Ibid., 220.

²⁴ Ibid., 221.

were a group of young women from Pennsylvania who, in late 2005, decided to “girlcott” a series of T-shirts sold by Abercrombie & Fitch featuring sayings such as, “Do I make you look fat?” and “Who needs brains when you have these?”²⁵ In October of that year, they staged a protest against the retailer, which generated nationwide attention and quickly resulted in the shirts being pulled from inventory.²⁶ When a few of the Girlcotters went to meet with Abercrombie & Fitch executives, they were told that the shirts were meant for the “intelligent girl” who could sport a sense of irony and fun.²⁷ However, these young women were not about to be told off. “Abercrombie had hoped to portray those who didn’t get the joke as unsophisticated, but this didn’t sit well with the girls, and especially not with Rebecca [Adelsheim]: ‘It’s like if you’re sophisticated, you’ll be able to present yourself that way. But really, who is the joke on? Ultimately the joke is on the girl.’”²⁸ Clearly, these Girlcotters believed that the shirts did not respect or edify women in any way, and they managed to successfully challenge the retailer by voicing their opinion.

Shalit offers another example of good girls behaving badly, rejecting notions of what elder generations dictate in favor of a more dignified standard of behavior. Pure Fashion shows, teen fashion shows featuring modest clothing modeled by “happy, healthy-looking girls,” was started in 1999 by Challenge Club, a leadership organization for teenage girls.²⁹ Shalit writes, “ironically, in 2001, at about the time the Pure Fashion Movement was getting off the ground, the political theorist Katha

²⁵ Ibid., 224.

²⁶ Ibid., 225.

²⁷ Ibid., 229.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 146.

Pollitt was predicting that nothing like it could ever happen: ‘...the realities of modern life ensure that there will be no massive ‘going back’ to premarital chastity and buttoned-up cardigans as envisioned by professional virgin Wendy Shalit.’”³⁰ As these shows have continued to grow in popularity and spread across the country,³¹ it is only further evidence that “boomers like Pollitt seem to expect young women to dress revealingly, and this expectation gets annoying after a while.”³² “Because they have real goals to achieve,” young women who participate in these shows don’t “want fashion to be the beginning and end of her self-definition.”³³ Shalit argues this rift between the older and younger generations of women is evidence of the failings of second- and third-wave feminism.

These girls, and others like them, are the “rebellious good girls.”³⁴ “Perhaps,” Shalit speculates, “a new fourth wave of feminism really will take off, led by teen feminists such as Léa Clermont-Dion and the Girlcott girls. It will be a movement that is pro-women but at the same time holds up high sexual standards...perhaps when these young women are older, they will simply cease to identify as feminists because the leadership cannot accommodate them.”³⁵ By arguing for founders’ intent, Shalit has appropriated a former enemy, feminism, and aligned it with modesty. Rather than being subsumed under current feminist ideology, these young women

³⁰ Ibid., 147.

³¹ Ibid., 146.

³² Ibid., 147.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 189.

³⁵ Ibid., 236.

signal a clear break, seeking to enact the liberation in a way that would have won the approval of the modest first-wavers.

Dissociating Second and Third-wave feminism from Liberation

With this appeal to the founders of feminism, Shalit argued that the fourth-wavers were getting back to the original spirit of feminism: liberation with dignity. However, in doing so, Shalit also had to show why other feminisms were not able to meet this standard. As in *A Return to Modesty*, Shalit seeks to dissociate feminism from liberation, and show that it is really inadequate and unresponsive to the problems that women face. As feminism is now part of her defense of modesty, she is now more focused in her criticism than before. This time, it is the feminism espoused by second- and third-wave feminists that threatens modesty. Ultimately, the ideology offered within second and third-wave feminism cannot achieve liberation for women because they reject the moral principles of the first wave.

The feminists who emerged in the 1960s “were hostile to the idea of modesty or ‘hang-ups,’ which they perceived as a tool of patriarchal oppression.”³⁶ While there were feminists opposed to pornography, Shalit claims, “they invariably said their problem was that porn ‘discriminated’ against women or that porn was ‘hate speech’—never that it violated our dignity as human beings.”³⁷ These second-wave feminists are still around; many in leadership positions tend “to be vehemently opposed to the very moral message that the younger feminists espouse.”³⁸ This is a

³⁶ Ibid., 213.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 235.

problem because what second-wave feminists want cannot be achieved, in Shalit's view, without advocating for what second-wave feminists have fought against for years. She explains:

[O]n the NOW website, one of the "misconceptions" supposedly leading to a bad body image is "the notion that women embody goodness and purity." This is a standard feminist line. Yet the site also puts forth another view, that it is against "the sexualization of girls' bodies at a very young age." Well, there is a real tension between these two beliefs. If you want to fight the sexualization of girls' bodies and you want to do it effectively, then you have to allow for a concept of wholesomeness and a certain internal focus.³⁹

If second-wave feminists have immobilized themselves through their own ideology, third-wave feminism does not offer women much more. For example, their attempts to "undermine gender stereotypes" by embracing "public sexuality" through pornography or CAKE parties⁴⁰ fail to impress "men—untroubled by having anything to prove—[who] seem to be hanging on to a basic modicum of modesty."⁴¹ If anything positive is to be said about "fluffy, 'girlie' feminists" typical of the third wave, it is that they "are tolerant in both directions, something that can hardly be said

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 213-17.

⁴¹ Ibid., 215.

of their predecessors,”⁴² like Germaine Greer, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan, who vehemently attacked marriage, motherhood, and housewives.⁴³

This third-wavers’ respect for different beliefs “was a refreshing development for feminism,” which “just may be what opened the door to younger women [with] their more traditional concept of keeping sexuality significant.”⁴⁴ Still, though, as the “third-wavers continue to advocate a public, crude sexuality and younger girls feel oppressed by how public sexuality is,” an ideological rift which puts these two generations on “an inevitable collision.”⁴⁵ The third wave advocacy of a public sexuality cannot be reconciled with the fourth wave values of morality and modesty.

In order to strengthen her case for fourth-wave feminism, Shalit dissociated second- and third-wave feminism from liberation. She focused on the inadequacy of second- and third-wave feminism, arguing that it has been unresponsive to the needs of women. This strategy enabled Shalit to redraw the grounds from which she argues for modesty. Furthermore, even though third-wave feminism is tolerant of most forms of feminism, these new feminists cannot be accommodated within the third wave. By dissociating second and third-wave feminism from liberation, Shalit offers the fourth wave of feminism as the best way to achieve liberation as the first wave intended.

Abandoning Sexism and Essentialism

Within this new book, Shalit had to overcome multiple objections to her argument. As stated in chapter three, *A Return to Modesty* offered a very provocative

⁴² Ibid., 223.

⁴³ Ibid., 222.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 223-24.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 218.

answer to women's problems, in that society is in need of a "good dose of sexism." This was defined as an essentialist understanding of men and women's natures, and evidenced through practices that are rooted in this understanding, such as modest dress or various religious practices. In doing so, Shalit hoped to redefine sexism as a positive, rather than an oppressive, force.

This argument, which was central to her first book, is absent in *Girls Gone Mild*. Shalit completely drops the use of sexism as part of her argument. In the entire book, it is referenced three times, always in the context of quotations from others. In these instances, sexism bears the negative connotations that Shalit worked to correct in *A Return to Modesty*, but here, she does not seek to dissociate sexism from this repressive definitions. For example, "Instead, our public debate always ends in semantics. Katie Roiphe dismisses coeds who say they feel 'defiled' and 'I long to be innocent again.' (She says these women are using 'an outdated, sexist vocabulary.')⁴⁶ Another example: "'Give me something to scream about!' is just what Abercrombie & Fitch did for twenty-four young girls after releasing a line of female T-shirts containing this sexually charged phrase along with some other sexist and racist messages, including, 'Who needs brains when you have these?'"⁴⁷ Finally, "Giving me a withering look, a forty-two-year-old lawyer barks, 'I am *very suspicious* of telling girls they need to be morally good. That's sexism right there!'"⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 231.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 51.

Shalit does not argue for sexism at all in *Girls Gone Mild* because sexism is fundamentally incompatible with feminism, a conservative argument that would be at odds with the progressive rhetoric offered through “fourth-wave feminism.” As stated in chapter three, Shalit seeks to associate sexism with liberation through conservative religious practices, such as Jewish or Islamic traditions. But without these religious examples, arguing for sexism as a positive becomes very difficult, especially when employing a vocabulary of feminism. As Shalit has adopted feminism within *Girls Gone Mild*, advocating for sexism would seem to be a rhetorically incompatible strategy. It is also important to note that Shalit no longer relies upon abstract, idealized language. In *A Return to Modesty*, she described modesty as a reflection of true womanhood: a natural instinct that is a reflection of innocence and *Eros*. Yet this language of transcendent womanliness is absent from *Girls Gone Mild*. Since arguing for a real definition of modesty is no longer the issue for Shalit, this Platonic language no longer is appropriate in arguing for fourth-wave feminism.

Overcoming the Limitations of *A Return to Modesty* and the Limitations of Founders’ Intent

Shalit’s assessment of our culture in *Girls Gone Mild* resonated well with many reviewers. As Deborah Siegel noted, her *bubbe* [grandmother] would have said in response to *Girls Gone Mild*, “what’s there to disagree?”⁴⁹ Indeed, in the face of mild critique and diverse support for *Girls Gone Mild*, it would seem as though Shalit’s argument for founders’ intent was a strategic move that made her argument

⁴⁹ Deborah Siegel, "Unrequited Love: Musings on *Girls Gone Mild*," *The American Prospect* (2007), http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=unrequited_love.

far more palatable to her audience. *Girls Gone Mild* overcame two major limitations of *A Return to Modesty*: first, by arguing for modesty through fourth-wave feminism she was able to make it more appealing to a wider audience. Second, by abandoning the transcendent language of real definitions, reviewers could not accuse her of essentializing women.

Whereas the conservative religious examples Shalit employed within *A Return to Modesty* did not appeal to many reviewers, her appeal to first wave feminism seemed to resonate as an appealing conceptualization of modesty. Many reviewers were enthusiastic about these new fourth wavers. Like one reviewer on amazon.com stated, “this ‘fourth-wave feminism,’” is a “much better, truer, and healthier feminism than what we have seen in the past few years,” and is something that she could readily identify as.⁵⁰ Another reviewer responded to the promise of liberation within fourth-wave feminism, saying that choosing modesty in the face of contemporary sexual ethics “incur[s] the ridicule and wrath of one’s peers and of many soi-disant [so-called or pretended] feminists” such that the idea of liberation becomes a mockery.⁵¹ If this is a “truer” version of feminism, Shalit certainly seems to have struck a chord in offering modesty as feminism. Even though, as one reviewer remarked, Shalit is an “Orthodox Jew,” the book is “written to the general population,” indicating that her religious beliefs are evident, but are not the sole

⁵⁰ Amazon.com, "J. Ping "Dangermom", " *Amazon.com* (2007), <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1V6JS1300AUO2>.

⁵¹ ———, "Elizabeth Barlett 'Liz'," *Amazon.com* (2008), http://www.amazon.com/review/R3LCE8O4PRRDOJ/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

source for her argument.⁵² Another reviewer noted the same; Shalit's "perspective is inherently religious and conservative, but [appreciated that] this book makes sense," regardless of religious or political bent.⁵³ Another reviewer, "Grace Leigh," remarked on this broad appeal, stating, "Shalit is clearly in tune to today's trends and the mindset of our nation's young women...[she] not only inspires young women to take on more positive roles in their own lives, [but] she provides them with the means and the motivation to do so."⁵⁴ Obviously, modesty as fourth-wave feminism resonated beyond cultural or religious constraints.

The second limitation that Shalit overcame is noticeable only in its absence. As stated earlier, Shalit abandoned her advocacy for sexism, along with the essentialized, Platonic language she used to describe modesty. Reviewers of *A Return to Modesty* questioned Shalit's stereotype of women and the power of modesty to prevent rape and sexual harassment (see pages 60-66), a reaction to the idealized language with which Shalit described modesty. However, by redefining modesty in her appeal to the founders' intent of feminism, she was able to skirt the trap of Platonism, in that "metaphysical absolutism fails to account for the variability of human experience."⁵⁵ By redefining modesty not as a transcendent quality of women, but rather as the "guiding spirit" behind the first wave of feminism, Shalit's argument

⁵² ———, "Kelsey Hough "Book Lover"," *Amazon.com* (2008), http://www.amazon.com/review/R2VYXIC9URJDYL/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

⁵³ ———, "Anna," *Amazon.com* (2008), http://www.amazon.com/review/RTLUV3SX4NWGS/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

⁵⁴ ———, "Grace Leigh," *Amazon.com* (2007), http://www.amazon.com/review/R23Q9B900YLBHT/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm.

⁵⁵ Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*, 41.

gained a material substance, one that resonated with reviewers far more than the immateriality she had previously arguing for in *A Return to Modesty*.

Some of the issues that reviewers had with *A Return to Modesty* seemed to have evaporated with *Girls Gone Mild*, not to mention the distinct lack of the fiery criticism that often defined reviews that followed *A Return to Modesty*. However, like arguing for real definitions, it is important to note that the same strategies utilized when arguing for founders' intent also proved to be limitations to her argument. First, Shalit's attempts to dissociate second and third-wave feminism from positive connotations did not resonate with some reviewers. Second, critics believed Shalit was "cherry picking" her examples to best suit her case. Finally, some reviewers found that Shalit's advice for fourth wavers seemed to be far too mild for the rebels Shalit was trying to encourage.

The first rhetorical limitation was Shalit's inability to fully dissociate second and third-wave feminism from liberation. Shalit places much of the blame upon second- and third-wave feminism, but as Siegel said, "Blaming feminism for the evil *du jour* is a lazy reflex, a formula so familiar that by now it's cliché."⁵⁶ "Caricaturing feminist leaders, overestimating the strength of the "feminist establishment," allowed Shalit, in the opinion of this reviewer, to ignore the wide varieties of feminists and feminism, and construct third wavers as "sex-positive" or "emotionally repressed."⁵⁷ Siegel ruminated on this schism Shalit constructs between fourth-wave feminism and older feminists, saying, "At 38, I sometimes identify as third-wave, and

⁵⁶ Siegel, "Unrequited Love: Musings on *Girls Gone Mild*."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

I have yet to collide with one of Shalit's rebellious young good girls. But would said meeting really constitute such a clash? Her good girl and I would likely agree on much.”⁵⁸ Another reviewer, Jennifer Howard, also noted that Shalit had a perception of older feminists that was not rooted in reality. “These are the good ladies,” she observed, “who run organizations such as NOW and who have fought for years to give women the same chances as men—not, as Shalit would have it, just the chance to sleep around like men.”⁵⁹ By pitting second and third-wave feminism constantly against fourth-wave feminism, some reviewers felt that Shalit misrepresented feminism and missed an opportunity to build alliances between the factions.

Laura Kipnis criticized Shalit for citing feminist as the troublemakers, “who persuaded women to sleep around,” but, she continues, “it turns out that the blame for bad sex goes to bad mother carting around antiquated ideas about liberation.”⁶⁰ “It’s Shalit who really delivers a spanking to mom,” because these women, who grew up with the sexual liberation of the 1960s, now have daughters of their own, they’re passing irresponsible ethics on to the next generation.⁶¹ Shalit’s attempt to “blame this hypersexual culture on lenient Boomer parents” was not persuasive for Siegel either, who argues that “in the world of *Girls Gone Mild*, permissive Boomer parents are lumped together with third-wave feminists to become the dread ‘them,’ the dark side of the moral universe.”⁶² This split between boomers and their progeny is a

⁵⁸ Siegel, "Unrequited Love: Musings on Girls Gone Mild."

⁵⁹ Jennifer Howard, "How to Be Good," *The Washington Post*, 5 August 2007.

⁶⁰ Laura Kipnis, "Lust and Disgust," *Harper's Magazine* 315, no. 1888 (2007).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Siegel, "Unrequited Love: Musings on Girls Gone Mild."

rather incredible situation for these reviewers, who do not see a parent-child conflict as Shalit does.

Once again, some reviewers found Shalit's reasoning circular, proving to be the second major limitation to her argument. As Tim Challies observed, Shalit drew "upon over 100 in-depth interviews and thousands of email exchanges with women from ages twelve to twenty eight," from a variety of ideological and religious backgrounds.⁶³ But despite the volume of material, reviewers often expressed skepticism as to their representative nature. For instance, Jennifer Howard asked, "how real is the sexed-out, *I Am Charlotte Simmons* world Shalit describes?"⁶⁴ She agrees that sex is certainly ubiquitous, as Shalit points out, but in her use of studies, she neglects to discuss their methods; therefore, "as long as they support [Shalit's] conclusions, they must be sound." Sarah Hetherington makes a similar observation in her careful review. "Shalit does describe very skillfully the 'self-actualization through badness' that she sees as subtly encoded by popular culture," she said, but "Shalit's choice of examples is uneven."⁶⁵ When she "clumsily lumps [an] egregious case of criminality together with much more useful examples...the result of the juxtaposition is to make the more effective parts of Shalit's argument difficult to swallow."⁶⁶

⁶³ Tim Challies, "Book Review - Girls Gone Mild," *Challies.com* (2007), <http://www.challies.com/archives/book-reviews/book-review-girls-gone-mild.php>.

⁶⁴ Howard, "How to Be Good."

⁶⁵ Sarah Hetherington, "Burn the Pie," *National Review Online* (2007), <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=YjA0MWM0MjVhMWM3Yzc5ZmQ2YTlhNmI5ZmNlYjFhNW> M=#more.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Hetherington observed that while the sexualization of women in the pages of *Jane* is one thing, comparing this to criminal sex cases involving minors is another.⁶⁷

Elizabeth Nickson also doubted whether this new feminism was really as large as Shalit portrayed, or in fact if it really was a new kind of feminism.⁶⁸ Just as Katha Pollitt criticized *A Return to Modesty* (“...she declares a modestynik ‘epidemic’ and invites the reader to wonder, ‘Why would so many young women be adopting modesty as the new sexual virtue?’ So many? How many? Ten? Ten thousand?”),⁶⁹ Kerry Howley suspected that Shalit might be inflating numbers to further her argument in *Girls Gone Mild* and goes so far as to say, “This would seem to be Shalit’s modus operandi: Choose an unusually sexually progressive pocket of American culture, declare it indicative rather than exceptional, and launch a heroically irrelevant crusade for change.”⁷⁰ Other reviewers also suspected that Shalit’s interviewees were “hand-picked to embody certain pre-programmed extremes,” as reviewer Ellie Reasoner on amazon.com suspected, but this did not prevent her from being persuaded by other arguments that Shalit made.⁷¹ Kipnis was also dubious of the novelty of this fourth wave of feminism. “Shalit says there’s a grassroots modesty campaign under way,” a movement that she started, an “embattled

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Nickson, "The Return of the Virgin," *The Globe and mail* (2007), http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/Page/document/v5/content/subscribe?user_URL=http://www.theglobeandmail.com%2Fservlet%2Fstory%2FLAC.20070714.BKMILD14%2FTPStory%2F%3Fquery%3Dwendy%2Bshalit&ord=82004825&brand=theglobeandmail&force_login=true.

⁶⁹ Pollitt, "Bookend; the Solipsisters."

⁷⁰ Kerry Howley, "Toward a More Humble Modesty," *Reason Magazine* (2007), <http://www.reason.com/blog/show/121067.html>.

⁷¹ Amazon.com, "Ellie Reasoner," *Amazon.com* (2007), <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2YHX0D8W94WVB>.

heroine” fighting for modesty.⁷² But, she asked, “how embattled can she be when her views are the official views of the current administration?”⁷³ If feminism is supposed to subvert dominant structures, this congruency shared with conservatives may lose her credibility, as it did in the eyes of some reviewers.

Finally, the advice Shalit had for young readers provided the third rhetorical limitation to her work. If this “fourth-wave feminism” is supposed to be “the biggest shakeup of feminism since Seneca Falls in 1848,” the modesty she advocated did not always seem consistent with revolutionary liberation. While Shalit was writing ostensibly to inform as well as encourage young women, “the author steadily undermines her own purpose,” noted Hetherington, “beginning with the book’s very title.”⁷⁴ While it is obvious that Shalit is spoofing the infamous “Girls Gone Wild,” but by simply replacing “wild” with “mild,” Shalit “loses focus and persuasiveness.”⁷⁵ In effect, Shalit limits her ability to build upon modesty as a truly powerful force. Hetherington observed, “so wary is Shalit of borrowing terms from women’s liberation advocates of the 1960s that she misses the opportunity to emphasize building self-esteem apart from—rather than in simple opposition to—such detrimental influences as *Girls Gone Wild*.”⁷⁶

Similarly, Pia Catton, a *Wall Street Journal* reviewer, said that “*Girls Gone Mild* loses some of its own force when it moves from reportorial survey to advice and

⁷² Kipnis, “Lust and Disgust.”

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Hetherington, “Burn the Pie.”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

advocacy.”⁷⁷ Her review noted that the “how to” advice sections at the end of each chapter, aimed at instructing young readers in confronting liberal parents or modest fashion, may not have packed the punch Shalit intended, especially “A Recipe for Pleasing With Integrity,” which gave a recipe for homemade apple pie. This did not strike Catton as especially powerful, as “one would certainly like to see a return to time-honored ideas of goodness...But something is needed beyond such self-help advice and spirited cheerleading.”⁷⁸ Shalit responded directly to this criticism, stating that the recipe was “a joke!”⁷⁹ Joke or not, Hetherington observed that this example was “not only unfunny, but also disappointing, and will serve as Exhibit A for those who want to dismiss Shalit’s point of view,”⁸⁰ as it did for Kerry Howley, who stated, “I would almost certainly be more impressed with scolds if they stuck to baking pies.”⁸¹

Despite these reservations, it is clear that these criticisms were couched in milder language and far less severe than those that were elicited by *A Return to Modesty*. Shalit clearly negotiated many of the limitations that arose in response to *A Return to Modesty*. By basing her argument for modesty in a principled defence of first wave feminism, she could offer modesty as a new wave, a new rebellion for women.

⁷⁷ Pia Catton, “A Modest Rebellion,” *Wall Street Journal - Eastern Edition* 249, no. 146 (2007).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Wendy Shalit, “Why I Write,” *The Good Girl Revolution Blog* (2007), <http://blogs.girlsgonemild.com/2007/06/test.html>.

⁸⁰ Hetherington, “Burn the Pie.”

⁸¹ Howley, “Toward a More Humble Modesty.”

Conclusion

In a sense, Shalit's purpose for *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild* was one and the same. She sought to show that popular forms of feminism failed to grant empowerment and promote modesty as a better option, or at least another option, as a curative for the ills facing women today. However, her rhetorical strategy in *Girls Gone Mild* marks a radical departure. Whereas she had first advocated for a return to the modesty of yesteryear by arguing for real definitions in *A Return to Modesty*, Shalit redefined modesty within a revolutionary and progressive women's movement by arguing for founders' intent in *Girls Gone Mild*. Whether or not this was a choice made in direct reaction to the hard-hitting criticism of *A Return to Modesty*, it is certain that this choice was strategic and advantageous, as criticism for *Girls Gone Mild* was, quite frankly, just that: mild.

After analysis of these two works and audience reactions, it becomes clear that Shalit is nearly always operating through some mode of redefinition. In *A Return to Modesty*, she invites the reader to consider sexism not as repressive, but *really* as understanding men and women in terms of their essential qualities. Modesty is not meekness, but *really* empowerment. Later, in *Girls Gone Mild*, she says modesty is feminism as the first wave intended. With this in mind, I will spend the final chapter assessing this strategy in context of the argumentative theory of definition.

Chapter 5

Modesty for the Masses: Implications and Conclusion

In a rather serendipitous last line of *A Return to Modesty*, Shalit writes, “I don’t see why our parents should get to have a monopoly on sexual revolutions.”¹ Of course, it is difficult to have a revolution in a Western society when advocating for sexism. As one of her informants stated in *Girls Gone Mild*, “both feminist groups and conservative groups are limited in terms of how much they can help young people”: feminism seems to have embraced the very misogyny that it is supposed to fight, and conservative attempts to restore decency would “be immediately discredited.”²

Perhaps Shalit realized that if she wanted a revolution, she needed a vehicle for her argument that had the potential to be revolutionary. By arguing for founders’ intent, Shalit seems to have found a way to negotiate the “definition-less” state of feminism and her belief in the essential character of women. Despite the ostensible performative contradiction of maligning and then appropriating feminism for her defense of modesty, it appears to have garnered a favorable response from her audience. Arguing for founders’ intent served as a fitting rhetorical strategy in overcoming limitations to *A Return to Modesty* for several reasons. First, given the fractured feminism of the time, appealing to the first wave of feminism gave Shalit a

¹ Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, 244.

² ———, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good*, 237.

principled means by which to appropriate feminism. Because feminism is so fragmented and can now conceivably be practiced in almost any fashion, Shalit could have appealed to the tolerance of the third-wave feminisms to include modesty as just another feminism. However, because her conceptualization of modesty is so different from the dominant “bad girl” feminism that she construes as second and third wave, Shalit would have weakened her position if she had simply tried to make modesty just another part of the third wave. Shalit chose to appropriate feminism using founders’ intent, in that modesty achieves liberation consistent with the practices and aims of first wave feminists. Even after three waves of feminism, Shalit viewed the first wave as the authority and standard of women’s liberation. The activism and moral standards of the first wave feminists displayed, in Shalit’s understanding, a “superiority” which “best incarnates the essence” of women’s liberation.³ That, in part, is what separates the fourth wave from previous feminisms. In calling modesty “fourth-wave feminism,” Shalit aimed to appropriate the authority of the original feminist movement, as well as draw a distinction between these feminists and those who identify as second or third wave.

Second, arguing for founders’ intent gave Shalit’s ideology a material, versus abstract, locus. Within her first book, modesty is defined through the ideal abstract: modesty is the essential character of woman, her innocence, feminine vulnerability, and eroticism. In order to represent this, Shalit strove to demonstrate how sexism and modesty were much more beneficial for women than what some feminists offer as

³ Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, 95.

liberation through examples from history and conservative religious practices. However, despite her efforts to dissociate negative connotations from sexist practices, headscarves are not liberating to a secular Western audience. As evident from the reviews, her audience simply could not divorce these practices from the cultures they are a part of, contexts that are viewed as very un-liberating to a large part of Shalit's audience. By arguing for founders' intent in *Girls Gone Mild*, Shalit was able to root her conservative ideology in American history and in a movement associated with liberation. Rather than focus on the ineffable essences of womanhood, Shalit's focus shifted to something much more concrete: a particular incarnation of feminism, as enacted by real people. If, Shalit argues, feminism is about women's liberation, one must ask what liberation really looks like. Is it the woman stripping for the *Girls Gone Wild* crew during spring break who best enacts feminism, or is more like the moral crusades of the first wave feminists who fought for legal and civic recognition of personhood? While today's woman has the right to vote, the right to own property, and the right to be bad, the right to be good must be reclaimed. Whereas Shalit had previously rooted liberation in some rather extreme examples of Islamic veiling, Jewish law, and conservative customs of times past, by relying upon the first-wavers' fight for suffrage, civic recognition, and temperance, she was able to present an example that was liberating in a secular sense, yet still embodied her conservative conceptualization of modesty. In effect, modesty was transformed to fit the masses, making it much more accessible to audience who may have been unfamiliar with, or hostile to, sexist conservative religious practices.

As stated earlier, arguing for founders' intent is similar to, but critically different from, arguing for real definitions. Arguing for founder's intent is different from real definitions in that it holds that the ideal is not an immaterial essence or nature, but instead based in a material origin. The focus on the first wave of feminism helped to ground Shalit's defense of modesty in a real time and place and also gave her a vocabulary that resonated with a secular audience. However, arguing for founders' intent also bears some similarities to arguing for real definitions, similarities which are evidenced in the limitations of this strategy. Criticism was far less severe to *Girls Gone Mild*, but some of the criticism was grounded in the same language as before. In a sense, Shalit continued to argue for an ideal. The search for an ideal, even a material one, may lead to the perception that the rhetor has ignored counterexamples or has over-idealized the locus of quality or essence. Thus, when arguing for real definitions, as when arguing for founders' intent, there is a risk that an audience may view the rhetor's examples as "cherry picking," selectively choosing examples to fit their definitions. Accusations of circular reasoning were evident in reviews for both *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild*. A rhetor's efforts at dissociation may also fail for an audience, another criticism that arose in response both books. When arguing for real definitions or for founders' intent, a rhetor must dissociate what he or she believes is a misunderstanding from a particular word: "X is really Y; it only appears to be not-Y."⁴ If dissociation is successful, those old connotations will be abandoned in favor of the rhetor's argument. When Shalit argued

⁴ Schiappa, *Defining Reality: Definitions and the Politics of Meaning*, 37.

for a real definition of sexism, she encountered the same resistance as when she tried to argue that second and third wave feminist ideology are not really in-step with what feminism should be. Her conceptualization of headscarves as liberating or third-wave feminism as oppressive simply did not resonate with some members of the audience. Similarly, demonizing second and third-wave feminisms in broad strokes through stereotypes did not reflect the views of some in her audience.

Future Research Directions

This thesis encompasses a considerable amount of material, and I believe that my examination of Shalit's work offers a satisfying solution to her paradoxical success. While my work covers much of Shalit's material, there is even more room for further analysis. I examine the development and evolution of Shalit's argument over the course of her two books, which I believe extends even further. In July 2008, a paper-back edition of *Girls Gone Mild* was re-released with a different title and cover photo. Although there were no significant changes to the text, the change in title and cover photo may represent Shalit's appropriation and modification of feminism even further. Whereas both *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild* depict a woman holding an apple, the cover of the new edition depicts a young woman boldly leaping against a blue sky. Furthermore, the title changed from *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good* to *The Good Girl Revolution: Young Rebels with Self-Esteem and High Standards*. While small, I believe this change is a response to the criticism Shalit received, as far

as becoming more consistent with the feminist argument she adopted in *Girls Gone Mild*.

Also, I believe there is an argument to be made about the visual rhetoric of these three books. The cover pictures of both *A Return to Modesty* and *Girls Gone Mild* seem to offer a strikingly similar argument: “Eve” holding the apple. Examining the connotations and representation of ideology within the choice of these pictures would offer another perspective to Shalit’s argument, one that I think is an attempt to reflect the shift from sexism to feminism that occurs within the text.

In the middle of *Girls Gone Mild*, Shalit states, “Today it’s fashionable to malign the modest woman as a ‘pleaser’ of the ‘patriarchy,’” adding that the typical criticism includes accusations of “pliable, obsequious, sycophantic, servile.” However, she wonders, “how pliable can modesty be,” especially when it means setting limits and high standards for oneself?⁵ This argument is constant throughout both *Girls Gone Mild* and *A Return to Modesty*, but it is the way in which she chose to argue for this position, though, that differed wildly. It is one thing to frame this argument within conservative rhetoric: portraying a modest woman as one who rejects contemporary “feminist” society and reverts to strict religious practices or pining for long-gone Victorian customs. And as Shalit surely understood, it is something else to frame modesty as a very feminist idea: a rebellious recovery of first wave feminism that recognizes the individuality and dignity of women.

⁵ Shalit, *Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good*, 203.

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