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Courtship Anyone?

Help From an Old Story

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Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass

Anyone interested in improving relations between men and women today and tomorrow must proceed by taking a page from yesterday. For today's tale regarding manhood and womanhood is, alas, both too brief and hardly edifying. True, as they multiply taboos on speech and gesture, our sexual harassment police emphatically prescribe how not to behave toward the opposite sex. But outside of certain strongly religious communities, we have no clearly defined positive mores and manners that teach men how to be men in relation to women and women how to be women in relation to men. What instruction there is for relations between the sexes is largely gender-neutral: respect the other person's freedom, avoid sexist speech and unwanted advances, be sincere, sensitive, and caring. Even the prominent descriptions of pairing-off are neutered and unerotic: people have a relationship, not a romance, with a partner or a significant other, not a lover or a beloved. In our increasingly androgynous age, our sexual speech and mores are designed to fit all couples, homo- and heterosexual, and all manners of intimacy, serious or frivolous.

Though maleness and femaleness are natural facts, manhood and womanhood are, as fashionable opinion insists, culturally constructed norms, at least to some degree. It is no accident that the meaning of being a man or being a woman has been radically transformed in a society that celebrates freedom and equality, encourages individualism and autonomy, rejects tradition, practices contraception and abortion, sees marriage as a lifestyle, provides the same

education and promotes the same careers for men and women, homogenizes fathers and mothers in the neutered work of “parenting,” denies vulnerability and dependence, keeps mortality out of sight, and raises its children without any sense of duty or obligation to future generations. The roots of these cultural ideas and practices lie deeper than the sexual revolution, feminism, and the sixties, and it is naive to think that we can easily reverse their influence with some newly designed mores and manners, like the return of ballroom dancing or single-sex dormitories or romantic ballads, welcome though these changes might be. Truth to tell, most of us would not want to roll back the clock even if we could, and we certainly don’t want to abandon modern liberal democratic society, equal opportunities for women, or the easier ways of life made possible by the scientific-technological project. This means that even conservatives are looking for reform on the cheap, a revival of good sense and decency in the relations between the sexes without sacrificing any of the privileges and luxuries of modern life.¹ We strongly suspect this is impossible.

But even if no one can prescribe a good remedy, we are no longer in denial about whether the patient is sick. In the last half-decade we have witnessed the rise of discontent, mainly among women, with the present arrangements between the sexes. Many women, and some men, are revolted by the hook-up culture and are looking for alternatives: they want real intimacy, they want enduring relationships, they want marriage. The popularity of the best-selling advice books,

¹ For an analysis of the causes of the demise of courtship and dating, and why it matters, see Leon R. Kass, “The End of Courtship,” *The Public Interest*, Winter, 1997, 39-63.

The Rules and *Mars and Venus on a Date*, the recently published books by Wendy Shalit on modesty and by Danielle Crittenden on what our mothers didn't tell us, and the college-campus project to "Take Back the Date" just begun by the Independent Women's Forum are important signs that many people—again especially women—are eager for lasting relationships with the opposite sex based on romance and mutual respect, fidelity and friendship. Whether they know it or not, what they want is a revival of some form of courtship, with established modes of speech and deed whose goal is marriage.

Anyone interested in developing new mores and manners pointing toward marriage needs to understand what these mores once were, and, even more, what they were trying to achieve. In addition, young people need to acquire the sensibilities, tastes, and skills in reading character that can help them find and judge prospective mates—something they once gained from the study of fine literature and which they can never hope to learn from watching *Seinfeld* or *Ally McBeal*. To explore the now lost practices of courtship, and to encourage the relevant sensibilities, we several years ago offered a seminar on the subject at the University of Chicago. We were moved to do so after two decades of observing, with growing sadness, the frustrations and disappointments of our students and former students as they passed through the decade of their twenties failing to find the life-partner they longed for or the private happiness that is based on lasting intimacy. The success of our seminar, in which we read and discussed selections mostly from old books, inspired us to prepare an anthology of readings on courting and marrying,

designed to help people of marriageable age become more thoughtful about what they are and should be doing.²

Among the most helpful readings for these purposes is Erasmus' Colloquy on courtship (written in 1523), a compressed dramatic enactment in which Erasmus is depicting not so much what was happening in his day as what he thought ought to happen. It provides a useful mirror in which we can both see the deficiencies of our situation, and, at the same time, look for basic principles of courtship that might still be necessary and desirable today. By reviewing and commenting on major portions of the Colloquy, we seek to show, by example, how pondering old texts can contribute to the search for positive manners and mores, especially in an age where none are available.

On first or even second reading, Erasmus' Colloquy will no doubt strike most modern readers as quaint or irrelevant, at best. We hope to demonstrate why it can and should be taken seriously, not because it offers a pattern readily importable to modern times, but because it addresses, whether we recognize them or not, what are still the most important issues: (1) How to transform brutish sexual appetite into human loving? (2) How to make a manly man interested in marriage and attached to his children? (3) How to help a woman negotiate between her erotic desires and her concern for progeny? (4) How to enable men to find and win, how to enable women to select and hold the right one for lasting marriage? (5) How to locate the relations of men and women in the larger contexts of human life—familial, political, religious? More up-to-

² The anthology will be published by Notre Dame University Press later this year.

date mores and manners that do not come to terms with these issues will not get the job done.

The Colloquy should command our attention also because it illustrates what may be the central truth about sexual manners and mores: it is women who control and teach mores.

Pamphilus and Maria meet in the evening in the vicinity of Maria's family home, probably neither by prior arrangement nor entirely by chance. Pamphilus (whose name means "all-loving" or "loving all") appears at first to be a foolish, moon-struck lover, quite beside himself in love. Although it later will emerge that he is willing to marry, Pamphilus is eager to win Maria (named after the Virgin) here and now, and he presses his suit—in speech and manner—after the conventions of love poetry. Maria, by contrast, appears from the start to be utterly sensible and self-possessed; witty, sharp, and charming, she almost immediately assumes control. She will direct the conversation from the conventions of love poetry to the conventions of marriage. The beginning establishes both the tone and the starting points of the courtship.

PAMPHILUS. Hello—you cruel, hardhearted, unrelenting creature!

MARIA. Hello yourself, Pamphilus, as often and as much as you like, and by whatever name you please. But sometimes I think you've forgotten my name. It's Maria.

PAMPH. Quite appropriate for you to be named after Mars.

MARIA. Why so? What have I to do with Mars?

PAMPH. You slay men for sport, as the god does. Except that you're more pitiless than Mars: you kill even a lover.

MARIA. Mind what you're saying. Where's this heap of men I've slain? Where's the blood of the slaughtered?

PAMPH. You've only to look at me to see one lifeless corpse.

MARIA. What do I hear? You speak and walk about when you're dead? I hope I never meet more fearsome ghosts!

PAMPH. You're joking, but all the same you're the death of poor me, and you kill more cruelly than if you pierced with a spear. Now, alas, I'm just skin and bones from long torture.

MARIA. Well, well! Tell me, how many pregnant women have miscarried at the sight of you?

PAMPH. But my pallor shows I've less blood than any ghost.

MARIA. Yet this pallor is streaked with lavender. You're as pale as a ripening cherry or a purple grape.

PAMPH. Shame on you for making fun of a miserable wretch!

MARIA. But if you don't believe me, bring a mirror.

PAMPH. I want no other mirror, nor do I think any could be brighter, than the one in which I'm looking at myself now.

MARIA. What mirror are you talking about?

PAMPH. Your eyes.

Pamphilus opens by greeting Maria not by name but as "you cruel, hardhearted, unrelenting creature": he finds her cruel because she is hard-hearted, and hard-hearted because she is unrelenting. From the man's point of view, the woman's crime in love is her steadfast refusal to yield to a wooer's importunings. Indeed, after Maria greets him by name and playfully reminds him of her own, Pamphilus sees in her name not the Virgin but the pagan deity Mars: Maria appears to him not merely unrelenting but positively warlike, martially aggressive in defense of her virginity.

Maria's lighthearted defense and skillful repartee soon make Pamphilus blush ("You're as pale as a ripening cherry") and then embarrassed by this involuntary self-revelation ("Shame on you for making fun of a miserable wretch!"); blushing and embarrassment are good signs, indicating that a man seeks not only a woman's acquiescence but also her esteem. Yet even in this respect Pamphilus remains self-absorbed. In looking at Maria's eyes, he literally and

figuratively sees only himself. Trafficking in his own poor wretched, lovelorn state, he seems as much in love with love as he does with Maria.

Despite her steady resistance, Maria is obviously attracted to Pamphilus—just listen to the way she eggs him on—but, serious in her playfulness, she never forgets who she is or what she wants, not only here and now but also especially hereafter. Exploiting his ardor and her self-restraint, she employs her considerable wit to bring Pamphilus round to seeing things from her point of view.

- MARIA. . . . But how do you prove you're lifeless? Do ghosts eat?
- PAMPH. Yes, but they eat insipid stuff, as I do.
- MARIA. What do they eat, then?
- PAMPH. Mallows, leeks, and lupines.
- MARIA. But you don't abstain from capons and partridges.
- PAMPH. True, but they taste no better to my palate than if I were eating mallows, or beets without pepper, wine, and vinegar.
- MARIA. Poor you! Yet all the time you're putting on weight. And do dead men talk, too?
- PAMPH. Like me, in a very thin, squeaky voice.
- MARIA. When I heard you wrangling with your rival not long ago, though, your voice wasn't so thin and squeaky. But I ask you, do ghosts even walk? Wear clothes? Sleep?
- PAMPH. They even sleep together—though after their own fashion.
- MARIA. Well! Witty fellow, aren't you?
- PAMPH. But what will you say if I demonstrate with Achillean proofs that I'm dead and you're a murderer?
- MARIA. Perish the thought, Pamphilus! But proceed to your argument.
- PAMPH. In the first place, you'll grant, I suppose, that death is nothing but the removal of soul from body?
- MARIA. Granted. . . .
- PAMPH. Then you won't deny that whoever robs another of his soul is a murderer?
- MARIA. I allow it.
- PAMPH. You'll concede also what's affirmed by the most respected authors and endorsed by the assent of so many ages: that man's soul is not where it animates but where it loves.

- MARIA. Explain this more simply. I don't follow your meaning well enough. . . .
- PAMPH. Men seized by a divine inspiration neither hear nor see nor smell nor feel, even if you kill them.
- MARIA. Yes, I've heard that.
- PAMPH. What do you suppose is the reason?
- MARIA. You tell me, professor.
- PAMPH. Obviously because their spirit is in heaven, where it possesses what it ardently loves, and is absent from the body.
- MARIA. What of it?
- PAMPH. What of it, you unfeeling girl? It follows both that I'm dead and that you're the murderer.
- MARIA. Where's your soul, then?
- PAMPH. Where it loves.
- MARIA. But who robbed you of your soul?— Why do you sigh? Speak freely; I won't hold it against you.
- PAMPH. Cruellest of girls, whom nevertheless I can't hate even if I'm dead!
- MARIA. Naturally. But why don't you in turn deprive her of *her* soul— tit for tat, as they say?
- PAMPH. I'd like nothing better if the exchange could be such that her spirit migrated to my breast, as my spirit has gone over completely to her body.
- MARIA. But may I, in turn, play the sophist with you?
- PAMPH. The sophisticress.
- MARIA. It isn't possible for the same body to be living and lifeless, is it?
- PAMPH. No, not at the same time.
- MARIA. When the soul's gone, then the body's dead?
- PAMPH. Yes.
- MARIA. It doesn't animate except when it's present?
- PAMPH. Exactly.
- MARIA. Then how does it happen that although the soul's there where it loves, it nevertheless animates the body left behind? If it animates that body even when it loves elsewhere, how can the animated body be called lifeless?
- PAMPH. You dispute cunningly enough, but you won't catch me with such snares. The soul that somehow or other governs the body of a lover is incorrectly called soul, since actually it consists of certain slight remnants of soul— just as the scent of roses remains in your hand even if the rose is taken away. . . .
- MARIA. Now don't begrudge an answer to this, too: do you love willingly or unwillingly?
- PAMPH. Willingly.
- MARIA. Then since one is free not to love, whoever loves seems to be a self-

murderer. To blame the girl is unjust.

PAMPH. Yet the girl doesn't kill by being loved but by failing to return the love. Whoever can save someone and refrains from doing so is guilty of murder.

MARIA. Suppose a young man loves what is forbidden, for example another man's wife or a Vestal Virgin? She won't return his love in order to save the lover, will she?

PAMPH. But *this* young man loves what it's lawful and right, and reasonable and honorable, to love . . .

First, Maria attempts to turn Pamphilus' attention away from his poetic flights of fancy by encouraging him to take stock of his concrete, living self. To his insistence that his soul has fled his body, she repeatedly calls attention to his own evident embodiment and animation. To his claim that she is responsible for his suffering, she makes him confess that he loves willingly, reminding him of his free agency ("Then since one is free not to love, whoever loves seems to be a self-murderer."). When he then protests that the girl kills not "by being loved but by failing to return the love," she cunningly asks: "Suppose a young man loves what is forbidden, for example, another man's wife or a Vestal Virgin? She won't return his love in order to save the lover, will she?" Pamphilus is compelled, for the first time, to acknowledge that love must bow before what is licit and honorable: "But *this* young man," Pamphilus barks, "loves what it's lawful and right, and reasonable and honorable, to love."

But Pamphilus quickly backtracks: "and yet he [i.e., Pamphilus the licit lover] is slain." When he next adds to the crime of murder (that is, of not returning his love) the charge of poisoning or sorcery (that is, displaying her charms), Maria denies all responsibility, cleverly pointing out that the witchcraft must be in the eye of the beholder, since only he is smitten by her look. Summoning all his manly wit and ardor, Pamphilus proceeds to bring Maria before the

high court of Venus. Borrowing from the tragedians of old, he wants her to recognize the monstrous erotic woes that might befall someone who rejects the love of a worthy suitor, such as himself. Warning her that Eros might punish her by fixing her own passionate attachment on a hideously ugly, bankrupt, and beastly man, and insisting that he as a lover should be rewarded for loving, he concludes with a dire warning and a plea: “Don’t provoke Nemesis; return your lover’s love.” We have reached a major turning point in the courtship.

PAMPH. Then don’t provoke Nemesis: return your lover’s love.

MARIA. If that’s enough, I do return it.

PAMPH. But I’d want this love to be lasting and to be mine alone. I’m courting a wife, not a mistress.

MARIA. I know that, but I must deliberate a long time over what can’t be revoked once it’s begun.

PAMPH. *I’ve* thought it over a very long time.

MARIA. See that love, who’s not the best adviser, doesn’t trick you. For they say he’s blind.

PAMPH. But one who proceeds with caution is keen-sighted. You don’t appear to me as you do because I love you; I love you because I’ve observed what you’re like.

MARIA. But you may not know me well enough. If you’d wear the shoe, you’d feel then where it pinched.

PAMPH. I’ll have to take the chance; though I infer from many signs that the match will succeed.

MARIA. You’re a soothsayer too?

PAMPH. I am.

MARIA. Then by what auguries do you infer this? Has the night owl flown?

PAMPH. That flies for fools.

MARIA. Has a pair of doves flown from the right?

PAMPH. Nothing of the sort. But the integrity of your parents has been known to me for years now. In the first place, good birth is far from a bad sign. Nor am I unaware of the wholesome instruction and godly examples by which you’ve been reared; and good education is better than good birth. That’s another sign. In addition, between my family—not an altogether contemptible one, I believe—and yours there has long been intimate friendship. In fact, you and I have known each other to our fingertips, as they say, since childhood, and our temperaments are pretty much the same. We’re nearly equal in age; our parents, in wealth, reputation, and rank.

Finally—and this is the special mark of friendship, since excellence by itself is no guarantee of compatibility—your tastes seem to fit my temperament not at all badly. How mine agree with yours, I don't know.

Obviously, darling, these omens assure me that we shall have a blessed, lasting, happy marriage, provided you don't intend to sing a song of woe for our prospects.

MARIA. What song do you want?

PAMPH. I'll play "I am yours"; you chime in with "I am yours."

MARIA. A short song, all right, but it has a long finale.

PAMPH. What matter how long, if only it be joyful?

Maria, who has all the while been waiting for the just right opening, sees it and moves right in. When challenged to "return your lover's love," she responds coolly and almost offhandedly, "If that's enough, I do return it." Nothing more rankles a man bent on a genuine victory than too easy or casual concession, and so it is with Pamphilus. "But I'd want this love to be lasting and to be mine alone," he insists, and adds, in a first-time confession, "I'm courting a wife, not a mistress." "I know that," Maria replies, again offhandedly, pretending that she had assumed all along that marriage was uppermost in his mind. Maria has gotten Pamphilus' speech to move from the realm of love to the domain of marriage, seen as the home of enduring and exclusive attachment ("love . . . lasting and . . . mine alone"). She next turns him into matrimony's leading defender. By obliging him to make the case for marriage, through addressing her feigned reservations and genuine concerns, she deftly compels Pamphilus to show whether and why he is in fact a suitable husband.

She begins by insisting on the need for careful deliberation if one is interested in lasting marriage: "But I must deliberate a long time over what can't be revoked once it's begun."

Pamphilus, taking the bait, confidently steps forward to show his apparent superiority in

thoughtfulness: “I’ve thought it over a very long time.” In response, Maria sets the hook: “See that love, who’s not the best adviser, doesn’t trick you,” or, in other words, prove it.

In a lovely ironic twist, Pamphilus, in order to satisfy his own desire for victory, must now explain to Maria why she ought willingly, indeed, ardently, to accept him as a husband. In doing so, he not only explains that his love of Maria is based on esteem and regard—“You don’t appear to me as you do because I love you; I love you because I’ve observed what you’re like”—but, more importantly, he defends, over and against Maria’s objections, the very things that Maria, all along, deems lawful and right, reasonable and honorable: exclusive love, marital permanence, children and family ties. Pamphilus is made to enumerate the signs that promise marital success: her good birth and good education, the friendship of their respective families, their own lifelong and intimate acquaintance, similar temperaments, equal age, and, especially, the likelihood of friendship based on compatible tastes.

Maria, still suspecting that he is moved mainly by her looks, forces him to face the threats that disease and old age pose to her beauty:

MARIA. Maybe I’ll seem different to you when illness or old age has changed this beauty.

PAMPH. Neither will I always be as handsome as I am now, my dear. But I don’t consider only this dwelling place, which is blooming and charming in every respect. I love the guest more.

MARIA. What guest?

PAMPH. Your mind, whose beauty will forever increase with age.

MARIA. Truly you’re more than a Lynceus if you see through so much make-up!

PAMPH. I see your thought through mine. Besides, we’ll renew our youth repeatedly in our children.

Pamphilus makes a double response to her concern about fading beauty: more than its “dwelling place,” he says first, he loves her mind, “whose beauty will forever increase with age”; and he adds, second, “[b]esides, we’ll renew our youth repeatedly in our children.” In this crucial second remark, Pamphilus, speaking no longer of “I” but of “we,” tacitly concedes their mortality and confesses a desire for children, indeed, for “our children.”

But though these remarks are music to her ears, Maria does not let on that she is pleased; on the contrary, she makes explicit, for the first time, the ever-latent theme of her threatened virginity:

MARIA. But meantime my virginity will be gone.

PAMPH. True, but see here: if you had a fine orchard, would you want it never to bear anything but blossoms, or would you prefer, after the blossoms have fallen, to see the trees heavy with ripe fruit?

MARIA. How artfully he argues!

PAMPH. Answer this at least: which is the prettier sight, a vine rotting on the ground or encircling some post or elm tree and weighing it down with purple grapes?

MARIA. *You* answer *me* in turn: which is the more pleasing sight, a rose gleaming white on its bush or plucked and gradually withering?

PAMPH. In my opinion the rose that withers in a man’s hand, delighting his eyes and nostrils the while, is luckier than one that grows old on a bush. For that one too would wither sooner or later. In the same way, wine is better if drunk before it sours. But a girl’s flower doesn’t fade the instant she marries. On the contrary, I see many girls who before marriage were pale, run-down, and as good as gone. The sexual side of marriage brightened them so much that they began to bloom at last.

MARIA. Yet virginity wins universal approval and applause.

PAMPH. A maiden is something charming, but what’s more naturally unnatural than an old maid? Unless your mother had been deflowered, we wouldn’t have this blossom here. But if, as I hope, our marriage will not be barren, we’ll pay for one virgin with many.

MARIA. But they say chastity is a thing most pleasing to God.

PAMPH. And therefore I want to marry a chaste girl, to live chastely with her. It will be more a marriage of minds than of bodies. We’ll reproduce for the state; we’ll reproduce for Christ. By how little will this marriage fall short of virginity! And perhaps some day we’ll

live as Joseph and Mary did. But meantime we'll learn virginity; for one does not reach the summit all at once.

MARIA. What's this I hear? Virginity to be violated in order to be learned?

PAMPH. Why not? As by gradually drinking less and less wine we learn temperance. Which seems more temperate to you, the person who, sitting down in the midst of dainties, abstains from them or the one secluded from those things that invite intemperance?

MARIA. I think the man whom abundance cannot corrupt is more steadfastly temperate.

PAMPH. Which more truly deserves praise for chastity, the man who castrates himself or the one who, while sexually unimpaired, nevertheless abstains from sexual love?

MARIA. My vote would go to the latter. The first I'd regard as mad.

PAMPH. But don't those who renounce marriage by a strict vow castrate themselves, in a sense?

MARIA. Apparently.

PAMPH. Now to abstain from sexual intercourse isn't a virtue.

MARIA. Isn't it?

PAMPH. Look at it this way. If it were a virtue per se not to have intercourse, intercourse would be a vice. Now it happens that it *is* a vice *not* to have intercourse, a virtue to have it.

MARIA. When does this "happen"?

PAMPH. Whenever the husband seeks his due from his wife, especially if he seeks her embrace from a desire for children.

MARIA. What if from lust? Isn't it right for him to be denied?

PAMPH. It's right to reprove him, or rather to ask him politely to refrain. It's not right to refuse him flatly—though in this respect I hear few husbands complain of their wives.

Maria here strategically exploits the major weapon in her arsenal, her chastity. By linking the loss of her virginity not to the satisfaction of erotic desire but to procreation, she compels Pamphilus to become simultaneously a respectful defender of her chastity and a proponent of the proper reason for its sacrifice. Pamphilus is made to argue for the superiority not of eros but of its procreative fruit. Once he does so, Maria herself aggressively turns the tables and makes Pamphilus speak to the matter of eros in the face of lost maidenhood: "*You answer me* in turn: which is the more pleasing sight, a rose gleaming white on its bush or plucked and gradually

withering?” Translation: Will you still love me once I have yielded, once I am an aging mother, no longer a virginal maiden?

Maria’s remark makes clear that chastity has been her prime concern not because she lacks sexual desire; on the contrary, the ardor with which she argues utterly belies her seeming coolness. Neither does she esteem her virginity because, as she suggests, “it wins universal approval and applause,” nor because “it is a thing most pleasing to God”—these opinions she puts into the mouths of others (“they say . . .”); also, she very readily accedes to Pamphilus’ rejoinders to both these points, and she even accepts his implicit argument about the goodness of sexual pleasure. Rather, as one can see fully only at the end, her virginity is in the service of satisfying her own erotic longings.

As the Colloquy moves to a close, Maria forces Pamphilus to address certain genuine and enduring worries about married life: loss of liberty, economic hardships, the cares of childrearing, the risks of losing a child or of raising bad children. In all his answers, which we will not here rehearse, Pamphilus speaks the speech of strong, confident, and responsible manhood, willing and able to undertake all the risks of family life in the service of virtue and holiness. He concludes:

PAMPH. . . . We’ll try, therefore, to be good ourselves. Next, we’ll see that our children are imbued from birth with sacred teachings and beliefs. What the jar is filled with when new matters most. In addition, we’ll see that at home we provide an example of life for them to imitate.

MARIA. What you describe is difficult.

PAMPH. No wonder, because it’s lovely. (And you’re difficult too, for the same

reason!) But we'll labor so much the harder to this end.

MARIA. You'll have tractable material to work with. See that you form and fashion me.

Maria, in so many words, appears to have accepted his suit. But she keeps her composure. Pamphilus begs for her pledge; she refers him instead to seek the consent of their parents.

PAMPH. But meanwhile say just three words.³

MARIA. Nothing easier, but once words have flown out they don't fly back. I'll give better advice for us both: confer with your parents and mine, to get the consent of both sides.

PAMPH. You bid me woo, but in three words you can make success certain.

MARIA. I don't know whether I could. I'm not a free agent. In former times marriages were arranged only by the authority of elders. But however that may be, I think our marriage will have more chance of success if it's arranged by our parents' authority. And it's your job to woo; that isn't appropriate to our sex. We girls like to be swept off our feet, even if sometimes we're deeply in love.

PAMPH. I won't be backward in wooing. Only don't let your decision alone defeat me.

MARIA. It won't. Cheer up, Pamphilus dear!

PAMPH. You're more strait-laced toward me in this business than I should like.

MARIA. But first ponder your own private decision. Judge by your reason, not your feeling. What emotions decide is temporary; rational choices generally please forever.

PAMPH. Indeed you philosophize very well, so I'm resolved to take your advice.

Even though he has spoken well to her in private, Pamphilus must back up his promising speech with courageous deed. He must acknowledge the claims of parents and tradition and demonstrate before sober judges that he is serious about marriage and its public status. He must swallow his pride, going as a petitioner, while displaying by this very act his manly ability to protect and

³ "I am yours." In canon law, the exchange of such a pledge, in the present tense, was regarded as binding and accepted as a valid marriage, whether spoken publicly or privately.

provide for their daughter. Understandably, he seeks encouragement for his task; she urges him (and no doubt also herself) to be rational. Pamphilus presses Maria for a goodnight kiss as a token. Maria repairs again to the subject of chastity:

MARIA. . . . Farewell, Pamphilus darling.
 PAMPH. That's up to you.
 MARIA. I bid you good night. Why do you sigh?
 PAMPH. "Good night," you say? If only you'd grant what you bid!
 MARIA. Don't be in too great a hurry. You're counting chickens before they're hatched.
 PAMPH. Shan't I have anything from you to take with me?
 MARIA. This scent ball, to gladden your heart.
 PAMPH. Add a kiss at least.
 MARIA. I want to deliver to you a virginity whole and unimpaired.
 PAMPH. Does a kiss rob you of your virginity?
 MARIA. Then do you want me to bestow my kisses on others too?
 PAMPH. Of course not. I want your kisses kept for me.
 MARIA. I'll keep them for you. Though there's another reason why I wouldn't dare give away kisses just now.
 PAMPH. What's that?
 MARIA. You say your soul has passed almost entirely into my body and that there's only the slightest particle left in yours. Consequently, I'm afraid this particle in you would skip over to me in a kiss and you'd then become quite lifeless. So shake hands, a symbol of our mutual love; and farewell. Persevere in your efforts. Meanwhile I'll pray Christ to bless and prosper us both in what we do.

This final exchange reveals Maria's understanding of her own womanhood: "I want to deliver to you a virginity whole and unimpaired." Maria deliberately holds back, it seems, precisely because she knows what she most desires and what it really means to give herself to her beloved, body and soul. For her, virginity is not an empty heroic or Mars-like pose; neither is it an image of divine purity. It is important because it both represents and makes possible the

serious, wholehearted, exclusive, unconditional, unsullied, lifelong attachment she most desires; we may even say, because it enables her to achieve her highest aspiration.

The Colloquy ends with Maria encouraging Pamphilus to persevere while she herself will seek divine blessing for their endeavors.

Let us quickly recapitulate 10 important elements of the courtship exchange: (1) he must demonstrate concern for her esteem; he must make himself admirable, not merely attractive; (2) he must woo concretely, “embodiedly,” and personally; love cannot remain a lofty, spiritual quest, indifferent to ordinary life; (3) he must see that he woos freely, not only from desire but also by choice, thus displaying in advance the free will by which he will later voluntarily bind himself in marriage; (4) he acknowledges the rule of what is lawful and right, reasonable and honorable; (5) he expresses the wish for exclusiveness, permanence, fidelity—for marriage, not an affair; (6) both he and (especially) she need to be deliberate: to evaluate character, to look for what could support and enhance their desire for lasting union; (7) both he and she must be mindful of the transience of bodily beauty; (8) both, but especially he, need to show concern for children and evince devotion to their well-being; (9) both need to be aware of the costs and risks of married life—in terms of decreased liberty, diminished wealth, and the pains of loss, grief, and disappointment—and show themselves ready to bear them; and, finally, (10) he must stand up before, and stand up to, the older generation, seeking parental consent, establishing links to the larger familial world and to the past, acknowledging that marriage is not

just a private matter between the lovers. The manners and mores of courtship teach the lovers that eros, for all his glory, is not the highest authority.

Stepping back from the Colloquy, let us review courtship looking for general themes and possible generalizations. Unlike earlier mores that regulated relations between the sexes by paternal authority, religious edict, and arranged marriage, courtship takes erotic love of man for woman as its starting point, but seeks to discipline and direct it toward monogamous marriage. Erasmus' effort was in fact one of the earliest attempts to establish such marital mores, opposing not only arranged marriage but also the two non-marital ideals, the romantic ideal of love poetry, the celibate ideal of the Church. Part of the discipline of erotic love comes from explicit and self-conscious confrontation with certain deep truths that, as we have seen, are embedded in the mores of courtship, truths regarding the promises and perils of sexual desire and erotic love, regarding human neediness and human freedom, regarding finitude and the longing for eternity, regarding marriage as a vehicle to life's higher possibilities. Courtship enables both man and woman to make clear the meaning of their own sexual nature, while elevating that nature by clothing it in the ceremonial and customary world of ritual and sanctification.

By holding back the satisfaction of sexual desire, courtship uses the energy of romantic attraction to foster salutary illusions that encourage admiration and devotion; functioning as ideals, they in turn inspire conduct worthy of admiration and devotion. At the same time, courtship provides opportunities for mutual learning about one another's character, manners, and

tastes. It enables man and woman to discover whether they can be friends, not merely lovers, and whether they have enough in common and enough mutual regard to sustain a union even when the erotic ardor of youth subsides. By locating wooer and wooed in their familial settings, courtship teaches the couple the intergenerational meaning of erotic activity and prepares their parents to accept their own new station, no longer in the vanguard of life. The process of courting provides the opportunity to enact the kind of attentiveness, dependability, care, exclusiveness, and fidelity that the couple will subsequently promise each other when they finally wed. For all these reasons, one does not exaggerate much in saying that going through the forms of courtship provides early practice in being married—a very different kind of practice, for a very different view of marriage, than the practice now thought to be provided by premarital cohabitation. Therefore, when they work well, the mores of courtship provide ample opportunity to discover how good a match and a marriage this is likely to be. In addition, as the natural elements of love between man and woman become a path to marriage, these elements are shaped by courtship into marriage's more than natural foundation. Courtship, a wisely instituted practice, is meant to substitute for any lack of personal wisdom.

But this summary ignores the important sexual asymmetry of courtship, well represented in this colloquy. The roles are sexually distinct: the man woos, the woman is wooed, and each quite self-consciously takes up the appropriate part. Initiative apparently belongs to the man, and, at least superficially, he takes the more active role. Pamphilus is in love, not just in lust and while this makes him vulnerable to poetical exaggeration and prone to fantastical excess, his love

indicates his capacity to look beyond himself, to be moved by more than selfish calculation, to risk ridicule, rejection, and failure. A lover—unlike a significant other—is fit for the adventure of marriage; he is not a fellow who plays it safe. In contrast to the calculating contractual partner, having given himself to the tempests of eros, he is much more likely to be able to promise “in sickness and in health,” “for better and for worse.” In the lover, sexual desire is sublimated and attached to an idealized beloved; his desire is inflamed by, and his eros is focused upon a particular woman, whom he wants exclusively to possess and enjoy. Because she resists, his eros is enhanced by being linked to his pride, by his desire for victory, especially for a victory gained not through force but through her willing submission granted by his winning her esteem. As Allan Bloom remarks (in commenting on Rousseau’s treatment of the same subject in *Emile*):

Even the most independent-minded erotic man becomes dependent on the judgment of a woman, and a serious woman, one who is looking not only for an attractive man but for one who will love her and protect her, may be the best possible judge of a man’s virtues and thus be regarded even by the most serious man as the supreme tribunal of his worth.

(*Love and Friendship*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, p. 104)

The correlative of manly ardor is womanly modesty, her reticence, her sexual self-restraint. This is the *sine qua non* of courtship and, we submit, the key to sound manners and mores regarding manhood and womanhood. It is this that makes manly wooing necessary, it is this that makes woman appear more desirable and worth winning, it is this that thereby spurs his ardor and inspires his winning speech and conduct. It is feminine modesty that turns men into

lovers—not mere sex partners—and that gives the physically weaker sex the more commanding power of judgment and selection. To the extent that she can keep him somewhat unsure of and hence, more eager for, her return of his affection, she helps form on his side the exclusive attachment that she seeks and that is implied in her modestly “saving herself for marriage.” No man would truly give his heart permanently to a woman of easy virtue or to one whose submissiveness he can take for granted.

Modesty not only spurs a man to love; equally important, it defends a woman against the hazards of her own considerable erotic desires. She has more at stake in sex than does the man. Even in our age of female contraception and easy abortion, pregnancy remains a concern mainly for women—indeed, arguably, more so than ever albeit for different reasons: the law now lodges responsibility and choice regarding pregnancy and childbirth entirely with her; in consequence, men are no longer under social pressure to marry a woman should she become pregnant with or give birth to his child. But, contrary to popular prejudice, female chastity in the past was not mainly contraceptive in intent, rooted only in fear of unwanted pregnancy. On the contrary, it was intended to serve the woman’s positive procreative interest in the well-being of her (as yet unborn) children by securing for them in advance a devoted and dependable father, who would protect and provide for them. The “reproductive strategy” (to use the term of sociobiologists) is to attach the man exclusively and permanently to the woman through erotic love and to make him thereby also love and care for her—their—children. Women who think of themselves as potential wives and mothers, and who act accordingly, are much more likely to get men to think

and act as prospective husbands and fathers. Sexual self-restraint enables a woman to find, hold, and win a man who is not only attractive but who is serious about life, serious enough to bind himself freely to the risk-filled adventure of marriage—and, implicitly, fatherhood—as the price for satisfying his erotic desires for her. In addition, her chastity before marriage gives the man confidence that she too is serious about sexual loyalty and fidelity, and, therefore, that the children she will bear for him to rear will be only his own.

But sexual modesty and chastity awaiting marriage are not just strategically sound and psychologically important. They are also an emblem of the unique friendship that is the union of husband and wife, in which the giving of the heart is enacted in the giving of the body, and in which the procreative fruit of their one-flesh bodily union celebrates their loving embrace not only of one another but also of their mortal condition and their capacity self-consciously to transcend it. There is no substitute for the contribution that the shared work of raising children makes to the singular friendship and love of husband and wife. Precisely because of its central procreative mission, and, even more, because children are yours for a lifetime, this is a friendship that cannot be had with any other person. Uniquely, it is a friendship that does not fly from but rather embraces wholeheartedly the finitude of its members, affirming without resentment the truth of our human condition. Not by mistake did God create a woman—rather than a dialectic partner—to cure Adam's aloneness; not by accident does the same Biblical Hebrew verb mean both to know sexually and to know the truth—including the generative truth about the meaning of being man and woman.

Courtship is centrally a matter for the courting couple, for the young man and his maid. But, as the Colloquy makes clear, it takes place in cultural and social settings that—when they are sound—give it shape, support its goals, and even provide larger horizons for the fulfillment of the couple’s erotic longings. Larger family ties provide enriching links with ancestors and social networks of belonging. The married pair defines itself as a node joining separate lineages and as a link between generations. The establishment of a home for the rearing of decent children also gives man and woman a growing stake in matters political and a deeper interest in and greater openness to matters religious. Others speak of the need to imposing top-down religiously based duties on man and woman to make the marriage work. We would rather point out the bottom-up ways in which marriage and especially parenthood may lead people toward the divine. The miraculous gift of new life, the astonishing power of parental love for children, the humility one painfully learns in trying to rear them, and (especially) the desire to give them not only life, but also a good way of life open husband and wife to our most serious concern for the true, the good, and the holy. Parental love for children leads once wayward sheep back into the fold of church and synagogue. It holds out the possibility for the sanctification of everyday life, even in modern times.

Two final comments. We are aware that many will find this talk about courtship and female chastity quaint at best. People will insist, perhaps rightly, that most women will never wish to return to the mores of an age that knew not female contraception, late marriage, and

careers for women. Our critics would like to believe that female chastity, or at least marked sexual self-restraint, is not necessary for sensible manners and mores regarding sex, marriage, and family. We suggest that the burden of proof lies with them to show how the important functions that courtship and modesty once performed can be accomplished in their absence,

Classical courtship was, in fact, a manifestation of the true power of women as women, residing in their modesty. Men were the visible actors, but the serious woman was in command. This implies that the possibility of restoring sensible sexual mores, pointing toward marriage, lies mainly with women—to be sure, only if a majority of women reassert the powerful virtue of self-restraint. Their willingness to exercise their power of reform depends, of course, on whether they think that a fulfilling marriage and motherhood are of primary importance in their life. Everything depends on whether modern young women—including modern conservative women—will see things this way.

Working Paper #69
Part II

A Response to Courtship Anyone?
by David Bosworth

Council on Families
Institute for American Values

RESPONSE TO "COURTSHIP ANYONE?"

by Amy and Leon Kass

By way of a very brief summary: this fascinating paper is grounded in some presumptions about the current state of relations between the sexes, based in part on the authors' experience with college-aged students. As someone whose job it is to read thousands of pages of student written fiction each year, I can confirm those presumptions. Young adults live in a kind of post-sexual liberation, post-AIDS, post-divorce culture state of joyless hesitation. Students are at once sexually active and emotionally cautious, even suspicious. Still sensitive to any infringement on their right to behave as they do, they are beginning at least to frankly admit an unhappy confusion as to how to behave. Their dilemma arises out of their simultaneous desire for and fear of intimacy, and, as the authors astutely note, that fear emerges from an almost total absence of positive models that might instruct them in a genuine intimacy. What these students are actually longing for, the Kasses insist, is a form of courtship and so they provide an historical model.

In their analysis of Erasmus's colloquy, the authors examine and endorse a series of beliefs that they admit many contemporary readers may find quaint or controversial: that the end of sexuality should be life-long marriage; that the primary goal of life-long marriage should be the raising of children; that men and women have distinctly different sexual natures; that, as child-bearers, women are still more at risk and so still have more at stake in the establishment of life-long marriages; that a primary challenge to the establishment of such marriages is the domestication of the male sexual drive; that the woman, through a

strategic withholding of sexual favors, should direct that drive toward the full range of familial commitments. The analysis ends with a renewed endorsement of female sexual modesty, even chastity, and then challenges critics to imagine an alternative that fulfills the domesticating functions that such modesty, formally enacted within the ritual of courtship, once supplied. (This is a challenge, I believe, that the council must consider very seriously.)

Two things I especially admire about this paper. First, the historical approach. It is very important to step back on a subject as intense and personal as sexuality to gain perspective. And, as I shall examine in much more detail shortly, the historical period selected seems to me particularly revealing.

Second, as the paper notes and Leon Kass's earlier essay argues convincingly, this problem is not an alien imposition but a native occurrence, emerging from or allied with some of the fundamental ideals, practices & achievements of American culture. To name just a few such linkages: gender-neutral approaches to sexuality do have a philosophical relation to democratic egalitarianism; the allied phenomena of increases in premarital sex and delayed marriage are clearly by-products of reliable birth control and the economic liberation of women -- which most of us would consider social progress; and, finally, the vaunting of promiscuity is deeply allied with the triumph of the marketplace mentality -- not only the market's direct use of sexuality in its advertising but its underlying and extraordinarily crude moral compass that more (profit, efficiency, sexual activity) must equal better (a wealthier, healthier, happier humanity.) This warning by the Kasses serves two salutary purposes. It forewarns us how difficult any

solution is likely to be; and it forbids us from defining the problem as somehow theirs and not ours.

In so much as this paper initiates a whole field study, I take that my job as respondent is to provide a context for both the paper itself and how such a study might proceed -- which I will now attempt to do in various ways.

On a parochial note, I will observe that this topic really logically follows the council's soon to concluded study of maturity in America. We can take the disappearance of courtship as yet one more example of the loss of those formal rituals -- organized ordeals -- that not only mark the transition into responsible adulthood but make that transition navigable.

On a temperamental note, expanding the Kasses' endorsement of modesty from matters sexual to matters intellectual, I want to suggest that any subject as important and as inherently mysterious as sexuality should be approached with humility. Emerson wrote that "our admiration of the antique is not admiration of the old but of the natural." By which he meant that we should revere (what we now call) the canonical past not out of some status seeking ancestor worship, or edenic rapture, but to clarify what is positively lasting or universal in human nature. What complicates this observation enormously, however, is that humanity's most unique feature is its capacity to amend the natural with technological, social and ethical artifacts. Paradoxically phrased: we are beings for whom the artifactual is natural, which leaves us with the perpetual problem of determining what is permanent and what is plastic in the human circumstance. That problem haunts and humbles -- and should haunt and humble -- any honest discussion of sexuality in contemporary America.

Three things about the colloquy should be acknowledged from the start: that it is written at a specific moment in Western history; that the ritual courtship it defines is itself a "social construction," an artifact or artifice emerging out of that moment; and finally that, in its day, this social construction is a new and even radical one -- while it might seem quaint to us now, it would have seemed queer or offensive to the most traditional minds of its own era.

The historical moment is that the pivot point between the medieval and the modern that we call the Renaissance. To simplify drastically: the fundamental social dilemma of that moment was how to accommodate the eruption of individualism occurring across the Continent. For multiple reasons, there was a new kind of consciousness evolving, at once intellectually empowering (witness the great artistic achievements) and ethically dangerous (witness the "discovery" of the Machiavellian mind). The dual and daunting project facing the West was how to democratize spiritual, economic, and political life, while civilizing this newly empowered individuality with the habits of communal regard and self-restraint. The successful projection of freedom into the landscape of society depended on the successful internalization of virtue into the mindscape of individuality, for the loosening of external social discipline (that is, the formality of medieval Europe's fixed roles) would only spin into anarchy without the acquisition of an inner and yet communally accountable discipline (that is, the sovereignty of moral self-control.)

The ultimately "happy" resolutions of this dilemma were the now familiar social constructions of Protestant spirituality, democratic polity, and a free market economy, (most easily

combining in the American colonies). But these would take centuries of strife to finally evolve. What we see in Erasmus's colloquy, I believe, is a relatively early attempt at civil compromise on this problem of individual liberty in the particular arena of sexuality. At once (and paradoxically) radical and reactionary, it adopts a specific model of "social construction" that will be repeated through the next century: what I call, perhaps inelegantly, the Backhoe Solution.

A backhoe is a kind of mini-steam shovel which even as it reaches forward to dig must also grasp the ground behind it in order to prevent itself from toppling forward into its own excavations. Its very advancement depends, in other words, on a compensatory retrenchment. Balance is achieved not through a placid Golden Mean, but rather through the tense balancing of two extremes. It is a solution designed to fit times of dramatic change and deep contradiction such as the collision between medieval communalism and modern individualism in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Clear examples of this backhoe solution at the same approximate time (16th and 17th centuries) were the metaphysical style of poetry and the more radical versions of Protestant spirituality. By dramatically stressing the private relationship between the individual and God, the singular fate of the single soul, the Puritan, for example, simultaneously endorsed the new individuality even as he defined it as especially corrupt or fallen. Radically freed from the old ecclesiastical order, this single soul was also bound to the predeterminations of Divinity and to an especially severe ethical discipline. Individuality was, oddly, advanced even as its potential ethical excesses were strictly contained.

In the colloquy we see a somewhat milder version of the backhoe solution. What is "radical," what Erasmus's backhoe advances, are precisely those two features which the Kasses' emphasize: first, the frank admission and discussion of sexual desire; and second, Maria's sovereignty, not only her right to choose but her competency and control, the empowerment of her individuality and, most radical of all, of her female individuality. What remains "reactionary" is the slate of choices she actually but freely selects which, in fact, strongly endorse the then traditional definition of female virtue: sexual modesty and chastity before marriage, and, in a particularly revealing touch, a revival of the ritual of parental consent.

While Maria's sovereignty is very real here, it is also, we need to note, severely circumscribed. Erasmus's social construction for mating has colonized a brief but very crucial period of empowered free choice for women: the selection of one's spouse. The free decision, once made, becomes irrevocable, however. It is precisely this sense of irrevocability that seems to drive the very caution which the Kasses' carefully analyze and clearly admire. "Once words have flown out they don't fly back," Maria says -- and she's right. These moments of elaborated hesitation and intense testing are followed by an essentially irreversible commitment. Marriage can be entered freely but not exited freely. Divorce is a rarity, economic freedom for women largely non-existent, reliable birth control centuries away. Whatever we may think about the natural differences between men and women, the importance of caution for Maria is also and clearly much intensified by the particular historical context -- the web of social constructions -- in which she finds herself.

Again, this pattern of licensing a brief freedom followed by

strictly bounded and lasting commitment fits the central dilemma of the day: that is, how to introduce or endorse individual freedom without risking social anarchy. It is a pattern that also deeply characterizes Puritan spirituality, with its theological emphasis on a new kind of covenant -- contracts which, freely entered, become strictly irrevocable. In a perfect parallel to Maria's situation, congregations in the new American settlement, for example, were granted the license to choose their preacher -- but not the authority to remove him after he had been selected. Once the words had flown out they couldn't fly back.

The Kasses' selection of Erasmus's colloquy seems especially apt because I believe that we find ourselves in the midst of a similarly radical historical transition, a new pivot whose duration and destination remain obscure, from the modern to whatever finally comes after modernity. (I hesitate to use the word post-modern given all its current connotations.) The usefulness of Erasmus's model, however, shall be limited if we accept it too literally -- if, avoiding Emerson's advice, we admire the antique instead of the natural; if we fail to acknowledge and ponder the crucial differences between his time and ours. For although we also live in an era of dramatic change, we don't find ourselves at the birth of individualism but something more like its deliquescence in extremity. The crucial dilemma of our time is how to re-communalize without fully forfeiting our current traditions of personal free choice. Our problem is not how to make a space within the stability of medieval social forms to accommodate individual freedom, but how to make a space within the so-called "creative destruction" of the marketplace for stable and meaningful human relationships -- for at their core the rituals and values of the marketplace

mentality, while extraordinarily productive materially, are inhospitable to the ideals that ground lasting communal commitments.

Questions:

On the subject of human sexuality what is permanent and what is plastic? In particular, using Emerson's terms, which elements of Erasmus's ritual are natural and which are merely antique artifacts of his time? Have factors such as the proliferation of reliable birth control (under the woman's control), the political liberation of women, and the (in part) economically driven delay in the average age of marriage so permanently altered the situation that Maria's heightened caution is no longer either feasible or necessary? Are we in one of those rare and truly revolutionary periods -- such as fifth century B.C. Greece, or 16th and 17th century Europe -- when definitions of morality are radically changing?

If we try to imagine a new social construction for courtship, a new ritual or organized ordeal that both supplies the guidance the Kasses admire and fits our times, which contemporary elements would it drawn on? After all, contrary to the romantic's self-congratulatory view of creativity, no social construction, no human artifice -- whether a poem or a ritual -- arrives ex nihilo. Even as he amended them, Erasmus drew on the ideal of courtly love and the Church's ideal of chastity, neither of which are strongly present in our society.