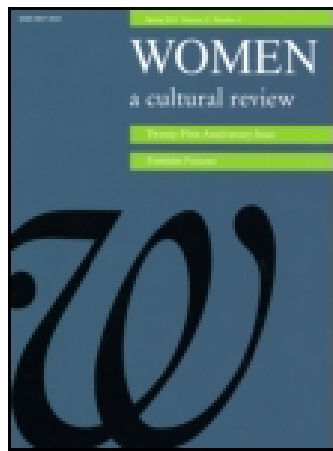


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### The Feminine Mystique: sexual excess and the pre-political housewife

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# *The Feminine Mystique:* Sexual Excess and the Pre-Political Housewife

*Housework seemed an interminable chore to her. She had never liked it, any more than she liked cooking. But she had always done what was necessary. Now even that oppressed her to such an extent that she would often let things go until the last moment, sometimes failing to make up the beds until just before Charlie got home, and letting days, weeks, go by without dusting and vacuuming. The worse the house got the harder it was for her to do anything about it. She wanted to shut her eyes and forget it.*

*And all the time, every day, at every hour and in every imaginable posture she dreamed of Laura. She dreamed of the romance, unfettered with family obligation or dish washing, free of the daily drudgery she so despised . . . (Bannon 1960).*

# T

HIS passage, which describes the sense of anomie experienced by a middle-class American housewife, gives that housewife an outlet for her dissatisfied feelings in the form of lesbian desire. It first appeared in 1960. Betty Friedan would not articulate her 'problem with no name' until 1963. Yet it is Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* that has gone down in history as the text that provided the first analysis of the economic, sexual and psychological problem of the American, middle-class, post-war

housewife. It is seen as the book that galvanized the 'second wave' of feminism and, so, is open to all of the praise and all of the criticism that has been levelled at the movement itself. First published in the United States at the end of 1963, the book predates other publications and political actions that are now popularly thought of as constituting the second wave. Lorraine Hansberry's satirically titled 'In Defense of the Equality of Men' was written in 1961, but didn't reach the public until decades later. The National Organization for Women was founded in 1966. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* was first published in 1969. Women's Action Alliance was founded in 1972 and the National Black Feminist Organization in 1973.

Recent scholarship has placed these events as part of a continuity of feminist activity stretching throughout the twentieth century, rather than as a sudden feminist phenomenon arising out of the post-war world. In particular, Joanne Meyerowitz's collection, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*, documents a diverse array of women-centred political activities that fed into later 1960s feminist movements. Daniel Horowitz's *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* documents Friedan's work in the post-war labour movement and the origins of the materialist nature of her feminist analysis. Horowitz places Friedan alongside the historian Gerda Lerner as second wave feminists whose politics were formed by leftist activism in the 1940s and 1950s. *The Feminine Mystique* clearly does not represent a moment of origin in the way it is popularly thought to. However it does represent an iconic moment in which vast numbers of middle-class American women became actively aware of themselves as gendered beings within a context of work, media and consumption. The continuing value of Friedan's analysis is in its examination of the relationship between femininity and capitalism. However, its resolutely heterosexual worldview causes a peculiar *aporia* around women's sexual agency. As the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay shows, there were writers publishing within this period who were well capable of envisioning a woman as the subject of active desire. Friedan, though heavily critical of Freudian thought, has obvious trouble with models of sexual desire that privilege women. This essay will examine the (hetero)sexual politics of *The Feminine Mystique* and briefly compare it to alternative models of desire that were available in popular texts of the period.

Friedan's study focuses on contemporary women's magazines used as vehicles to advertise a whole new range of manufactured goods aimed at a group of women whose job was to consume: publications such as *Redbook* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. These magazines, and the white,

.....

middle-class women to whom they spoke, formed the subject and much of the research base for *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan analyses hundreds of articles with titles like 'Femininity Begins at Home', 'Are You Training Your Daughter to Be a Wife?' or 'What Women Can Learn from Mother Eve'. What is made immediately clear by her content analysis is that the American economy was heavily invested in notions of sexual satisfaction, romance and the cult of mothering. These ideological concepts, centring on a particular kind of nationalized, racialized and classed femininity, were essential to the marketing of a huge number of goods and services. Friedan develops a kind of conspiracy theory that holds a good deal of water. Her story goes something like this: As a rapidly growing war-time economy adapted to the conditions of peace, middle-class women left war-time jobs, married middle-class men and took up positions as nurturers to husbands and children. (Friedan here articulates the post-war myth, rather than the reality of many women's lives.) At the same time, manufacturers began to dedicate the technology and capital consolidated by the now unnecessary war machine to the manufacture of an increasing variety and volume of products intended for use by the nuclear family living in the suburban middle-class home. The advertising that promoted these products was aimed at the one person in the new post-war economy with access to disposable income and nothing much to do except consume: the housewife. Advertisers saw it as in their interest to keep the middle-class woman in this position and dedicated a whole psychological marketing project to the task. This project was called 'motivational research'.

Friedan painstakingly documents this project and the increasingly co-opted editorial content that went alongside it, by placing her content analysis of women's magazines alongside material from the archives of a group of New York advertising consultants called the Institute for Motivational Research (IMR). The IMR used the theories and methods of behavioural psychology to direct the content of advertising. Friedan charts a change in the editorial content of women's magazines from the years before to the years after the war. 'I found in the thirties and forties that the mass-circulation magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal* carried hundreds of articles about the world outside the home. . . . In the 1950s they printed virtually no articles except those that serviced women as housewives. . . .' (Friedan 1963:51–2). It is here that her thesis becomes apparent. Based largely on a study of documented surveys conducted by the IMR, Friedan unveils what she calls 'the feminine mystique'.

The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity . . . that femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the

creation and origin of life that man-made science may never be able to understand it . . . the root of women's trouble in the past is that women envied men . . . instead of accepting their own true nature, which can find fulfilment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love (43).

The mystique, as Friedan articulates it, is an ideology of female subservience, domesticity and motherhood that closely resembles the nineteenth-century cult of true womanhood in its valorization of passive, nurturing and privatized femininity. Advertisers promoted this image of womanhood in order to keep middle-class women in the home, where their purchases were maximized. Friedan spends the majority of the text relating the ideology of the feminine mystique to a host of social ills. Throughout the book she moves from causal links as obvious as that between housewifery and middle-class women's depression to those as far-fetched as the mothering function being the cause of 'the [male] homosexuality that is spreading like a murky fog over the American scene' (276). The strength of Friedan's analysis is its connection of post-war economies to the organization and ultimate dysfunctional breakdown of the American family and the widespread sense of anomie experienced by white American middle-class women. At this early stage, Friedan's argument exemplifies a characteristic of twentieth-century Anglo-American feminism. She relates the alienation felt by the housewives she studies to their identification with dominant ideals of femininity. Yet there is a distinct difficulty around the concept of femininity throughout the work, namely, the assumption that femininity itself is a kind of trick played on women by patriarchy. There is no room for the kind of radical positioning of femininity that French feminists would develop in the decades to come. Femininity is the cause of women's dissatisfaction, yet it emerges at the same time as a separate, natural category that has been distorted by patriarchal capitalism.

### *The Pre-Political Housewife*

It was a pervasive expression of dissatisfaction, Friedan tells us, that was her first clue to the existence of the mystique and to its inherently dysfunctional character. The first chapter of the book documents the discontent of American housewives, what Friedan calls 'this yearning'. Much like the quote from Ann Bannon above, the expressions of dissatisfaction she documents highlight a sense of anomie, and even of alienation in the classic Marxist sense. One housewife is quoted as saying:

There's no problem you can even put a name to. But I'm desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I'm a server of food and a putter on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I? (Friedan 1963:21).

The connection between work and identity is clear here. Through a formally conducted survey and her own personal connections, Friedan tells us she has heard hundreds of women express this same sentiment. Somehow the *work* they were describing made them feel alienated, without identity and deeply unhappy.

Friedan relates this dissatisfaction primarily to the state of women's education in the United States and the unfulfilled potential of millions of university-educated American women. She sees its symptoms as a series of pathologies within the housewives whose lives and feelings she describes. Friedan reads women's expressions of dissatisfaction and the massive propaganda efforts of advertisers and women's magazine publishers in a way that grants all agency to the publishers. It doesn't seem to occur to her that the expressions of discontent may be the driving force behind the advertising. These expressions of discontent imply an agency that Friedan ignores. Women's dissatisfaction is the driving force—the desire—behind an enormous market potential *and* an imminent mass political movement. Seeing Friedan's work as the origin of the second wave continues her erasure of the power of the dissatisfaction she found already in place.

A widespread and recognizably coherent expression of discontent among an identifiable group of people, and a set of actions taken in response, form the conditions for what Eric Hobsbawm has called the 'pre-political'. In *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy apply the concept of the pre-political to lesbian communities in Buffalo, New York during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. They make the distinction between political actions that 'are part of distinctly defined political institutions' and the pre-political, which involves 'social acts of resistance that haven't yet crystallized into political institutions as opposed to isolated individual acts of resistance' (Davis and Lapovsky Kennedy 1993:390n). Like Joanne Meyerowitz, they demonstrate that political movements of the 1960s arose out of patterns of resistance that were well established, if not institutionalized, in the 1950s.

What is described in *The Feminine Mystique* is a series of resistances, a constant and multi-voiced expression of dissatisfaction that middle-class housewives articulated throughout the post-war period. In reading this dissatisfaction through middle-culture media's attempts to silence and counteract it, rather than privileging the thing itself, Friedan reinscribes the very victimization she seeks to address. Here, as often in mid-century

feminism, women occupy the position of victim while a system of male power is granted all available agency. Women's expressions of dissatisfaction are seen as pathologies rather than as moves towards power. A denial of women's capacity for sexual agency goes hand-in-hand here with a denaturing of women's discontent in general.

### *Femininity v. Humanity*

*The Feminine Mystique* contains a largely sex-negative analysis. Nowhere in the book is the solution to the middle-class housewife's dissatisfaction seen in terms of sexual desire. At a crucial point in Friedan's analysis (in the chapter entitled 'The Sex-Seekers') female promiscuity becomes the unhealthy sign of intellectual repression, but never a remedy for the problem of the housewife's particular 'state of instability'. Rather, sexuality is opposed to 'humanity' in a battle for a woman's body and soul: 'I think this is the crisis of women growing up—a turning point from an immaturity called femininity to full human identity' (Friedan 1963:79).

Friedan means this as a criticism, rather than a synopsis, of Freud's narrative of feminine development. Like popular lesbian writers of this period, Friedan names identity (femininity rather than lesbianism) as the core of the problem for the American middle-class housewife, but again she separates this identity from sexuality. 'The core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity' (77). In a bizarre biological analogy, she likens the situation of the housewife to a contemporary experiment in which young caterpillars were fed a 'youth serum' that kept them indefinitely in the larval state. She goes on to say:

The expectations of feminine fulfilment that are fed to women by magazines, television, movies and books that popularise psychological half-truths, and by parents, teachers and counsellors who accept the feminine mystique, operate as a kind of youth serum, keeping women in the state of sexual larvae, preventing them from achieving the maturity of which they are capable (77).

The passage reveals again a strange relationship to psychoanalytic narratives of femininity—such as that femininity is a form of sexual immaturity—which are seen as dangerous, particularly when popularized, but are also foundational to the analysis. Femininity, according to Friedan, is a kind of trick played on women by a collective conspiracy led by Freud. She opposes it to full participation in an ideal humanity but, at the same time, envisions womanhood as continuing alongside this human

identity. Throughout the first three-quarters of *The Feminine Mystique* Freud is decidedly the villainous authority who has given the post-war oppression of women its ideological framework. As 'the feminine mystique derived its power from Freudian thought' (103), Friedan's critique of the cult of femininity centres largely on an examination of the use of Freudian thought in 'popular magazines and the opinions and interpretations of so-called experts' (104). The 'crisis of growing up' is one that, according to Friedan, middle-class housewives are never allowed to reach. Femininity is a kind of immaturity in which they are kept, and a cycle of dissatisfaction and consumption is the aim of this enforced immaturity. Interestingly, this analysis and its sometimes insightful critique of femininity never lead Friedan to consider alternatives; other than feminine ways of being a woman are never explored. Again, Friedan's housewife is static, trapped in her position of sexual victim. The solution seems to be education and intellectually stimulating work, but this idea isn't fully explored. Even in the concluding chapter, the ramifications of the analysis with regard to positions of gender and sexual pleasure seem not to occur to the author.

What begins as a critique of Freud and the cult of femininity becomes an attack on female sexual expression as a whole. Whereas pulp writers like Valerie Taylor and Ann Bannon, who is quoted at the beginning of this essay, see lesbian sexuality—and female sexual agency *per se*—as the antidote to the alienating work of housewifery, an increasing focus on women's sexual pleasure is seen by Friedan as inextricable from their oppression: 'Under the influence of the feminine mystique, some college presidents and professors charged with the education of women had become more concerned with their students' future capacity for sexual orgasm than with their future use of trained intelligence' (156). The failure of higher education for women is the focus on sexual pleasure, which is inextricable, for Friedan, from the focus on domesticity. The result is a sex-negative stance that equates femininity with the capacity for female sexual pleasure, and both of these with intellectual repression. The women 'had intelligence', she says, 'that special gift which is not sex-directed, but they also had the sex directed attitude that such studies [science, mathematics etc.] were unfeminine' (161). While she can see that the ideology of femininity works to stifle intellectual desires and achievements in women, her heterosexual blindness leaves her incapable of imagining female sexuality in other terms than those of femininity, of separating gender from sex, and from recognizing the instability of both.

Friedan does mention 'a few cries of outrage... from the old-fashioned educators who still believed that the mind was more important



than the marriage bed' (157) and, in so doing, reveals an important underpinning of the ideological structure that informs the book. The opposition of mind to marriage bed, of education to femininity and domesticity, reveals a split between the humanity and the femininity within women. She does acknowledge, quoting Alfred Kinsey, a positive correlation between educational level and sexual orgasm (a debatable statistic, I'm sure) but, though this carefully annotated fact is brought out in support of her argument for women's higher education, it never becomes a part of her analysis. She continues to pose sexuality against a human rights idea of liberation. In discussing the ideology behind Madison Avenue advertising she lets us know that: 'They [the IMR] are guilty of persuading housewives to stay at home, mesmerized in front of the television set, their non-sexual human needs unnamed, unsatisfied, drained by the sexual sell into the buying of things' (228). The vast *sexual* dissatisfaction also expressed by women during this period is occasionally acknowledged by Friedan, but it remains separate in her analysis from the 'non-sexual human needs' around which she formulates her libertarian argument. It becomes, in fact, in her chapter 'The Sex Seekers,' the pathological symptom of the oppression perpetrated under the regime of the feminine mystique.

A housewife's promiscuity becomes a kind of dys-satisfaction, the transference of another kind of desire: the desire for human, as opposed to sexual, freedom. In the chapter entitled 'The Sexual Solipsism of Sigmund Freud' a lengthy discussion of the uses and abuses of the theory of penis envy is provided as explanation for the demonization of women workers. Here, the connection between intellectual deprivation and what might be seen as sexual dissatisfaction is finally made: 'If she secretly despised herself, and envied man for all she was not, she might go through the motions of love, or even feel a slavish adoration, but would she be capable of free and joyous love?' (117). Put together with her sex-negative stance, this acknowledgment of deprivation of love implies a kind of Cartesian dualism, in which love resides, with other universal, non-gendered characteristics, in the mind, and sex, gender and sexuality reside in, or are attached to, the body. Friedan's materialist-feminist analysis, in detailing the relation between systems of gender and consumption, all but approaches what theorists like Monique Wittig were able to do thirty years later. Daniel Horowitz documents Friedan's work on women's issues in the trade union movement in the 1940s and 1950s and her tutelage in Marxist theory from the lesbian Dorothy Wolff Douglas at Smith College (Horowitz 2000). The apparent blindness to issues of class, and of lesbianism, in *The Feminine Mystique* can only be a suppression of understanding. Nevertheless, Friedan's materialist analysis

of the position of the middle-class housewife is clearly influenced by this early historical training.<sup>1</sup> The potential for a cohesive analysis of both the symbolic and material functions of femininity is here, but her reliance on the heterosexual framework leaves her incapable of envisioning the possibilities of female pleasure and positions masculine aim (the search for paid work) as the enemy of female desire.

The criticisms levelled at *The Feminine Mystique* in the years since its publication point mainly to Friedan's utter disregard for the way in which the ideology propagated by post-war middle-brow media, which she so plainly documents, affected the women at whom it was not aimed. Black and Hispanic women, working-class women of all cultures, lesbians and unmarried women, have been held up as casualties of Friedan's disregard, and of the disregard of 1960s feminism as a whole. Indeed the value of such an examination can be immediately recognized. Less remarked is the relation between Friedan's focus on middle-class women and the fact that the marketing systems on which her analysis is based had the same focus. Middle-class women were the focus of *The Feminine Mystique* in part because they were, by and large, the focus of post-war advertising. And they were the focus of post-war advertising because they functioned as a crucial channel for the massive post-war surplus on which the latter twentieth-century American empire built itself. The structures of American economic power depend(ed) on a set of classed and gendered positions.

### *Encore: Housework and the Multiple Orgasm*

For Friedan the suburban house is a perilous bed of sexual over-satisfaction in which nobler 'human' desires are unrecognized and unrealized. The family exists in a sexually charged atmosphere of dissatisfaction in which repetitive domestic tasks form a kind of narrative structure upon which desires are hung, and hung up. Friedan's research reveals that advertisers were not unaware of the relationship between housework and dis/satisfaction. She quotes an IMR survey as concluding that the 'yearning for creative opportunities and moments is a major aspect of buying motivation' (Friedan 1963:214).

The 'problem with no name', Friedan's articulation of the unspecified sense of alienation and desire shared by so many middle-class American housewives, reveals itself to be a huge reserve of market potential. Post-war markets capitalized on the dissatisfaction created in the atmosphere of the suburban home, the site of the majority of surplus purchases. 'No one, not even the depth researchers, denied that housework was endless,

<sup>1</sup> See Horowitz's thorough reading of the papers that document the evolution of Friedan's political and theoretical understanding, housed at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.

and its boring repetition did not give that much satisfaction . . . But the endlessness of it all was an advantage from the sellers' point of view' (217). Friedan identifies two ways in which advertisers were advised by IMR to capitalize on the repetitive dissatisfaction of the housewife. The first was to market 'deep cleaning', to pitch products at the 'guilt over hidden dirt' that a housewife might feel because the 'times of thorough cleaning are the points at which she is most willing to try new products and "deep clean" advertising holds out the promise of completion' (217–18). While daily tasks, with their repetitive undoing, always hold the threat of dissatisfaction, deep cleaning promises a heightened narrative closure that allows the housewife 'completion' satisfaction. A set of narrative structures that parallel, if they do not directly transfer, the sexual begins to rise to the surface here. In the deep clean we find a narrative of desire that is commonly associated with the heterosexual, which narrative theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis, Peter Brooks and Jay Clayton have called a male structure of narrative desire (de Lauretis 1984, Brooks 1992, Clayton 1989). A build-up of 'hidden dirt'/'guilt' is released by the deep clean and offers completion. There is a kind of unified climax narrative here that the IMR and its clients found ripe for exploitation.

The second marketing strategy advised stresses the 'joys of completing each separate task' involved in mundane and repetitive daily routines. There follows a set of passages that Friedan quotes from IMR studies describing the sense of repetitive work and satisfaction experienced by housewives in their daily work of cleaning.

... nearly all housekeepers, even those who thoroughly detest their job, paradoxically find escape from their endless fate by accepting it—by 'throwing myself into it' as she says . . . Losing herself in her work—surrounded by all the implements, creams, powders, soaps, she forgets for a time how soon she will have to redo the task (218).

Housework becomes an endless round of dissatisfaction and release/forgetting. Stability and instability, the alternating forces in an economic model of desire, find themselves expressed through the purchase and use of housecleaning products, which mirrors and exploits the yearning and satisfaction experienced in suburban domestic work. This purchase is heightened by the existential state of sexual/personal dissatisfaction that is the position of the housewife. Here is an alternate narrative structure, a continual round of build-up and release. This cyclical structure defies the climax narrative of the deep clean.

As the IMR study Friedan quotes goes on to discuss the satisfaction achieved in repetitive tasks in the home, the language used to describe the housewife's satisfaction is increasingly figured in terms of desire and pleasure. As the housewife completes her task she 'permits herself to forget for a moment that the sink will again fill with dishes, how quickly the floor will again be dirty'. She 'seizes the moment of completion of a task as a moment of pleasure . . .' (218). A housewife is quoted as saying: 'I like to see things shine. I feel so good when I see the bathroom just glistening.' The advertiser is advised: 'Identify your product with the *physical* and spiritual rewards she derives from the almost religious feeling of basic security provided by her home' (218, my emphasis).

The rewriting of the housewife's active desire (she 'seizes' pleasure) as a 'religious feeling of basic security' represents the overall attempt, present both in Friedan and the passages she's quoting, to reabsorb an unruly desire into a sexual system of work and consumption that does not allow for it. For Friedan the excess of sexual desire is a result of the lack of meaningful work. For the motivational researchers she is quoting, the lack of closure that attends repetitive tasks presents a problem in terms of how one might depict them as satisfying. The heterosexual narrative of deep cleaning, analogous in its writing of desire to the singular narrative event of the male orgasm, needs no mediation and the researchers speak of it with an evident sense of security and satisfaction. The more repetitive tasks, with their suggestion of excessive desire and their lack of narrative closure, require more mediation and admonitions as to how to read them ideologically. The suggestion that a woman's desire might not follow the accepted narrative structure, in which an end offers completion and conveys meaning on the acts that precede it, makes Friedan herself markedly uneasy. She notes that 'Kinsey . . . found that American wives, especially of the middle class, after ten or fifteen years of marriage, reported greater sexual desire than their husbands seemed to satisfy . . . Some seemed insatiably capable of "multiple orgasms"' (267).

Both the work and the sexuality of these middle-class housewives represent a model of desire and dissatisfaction that makes sexualized systems of consumption both problematic and potentially very profitable. The historical moment documented here is one of instability in terms of the relations of capital and consumption to women's sexuality. The ideology that wrote female desire as gender transgressive pathology had begun to break apart as the reliance of the capitalist project on the desires of women became evident. The realization that those desires would not always behave in predictable ways, that they were not

necessarily tractable enough to conform to an overarching narrative model, is evident in Friedan's uneasy dismissal of the very possibility of multiple orgasm (signalled by her use of quotation marks around the term), and in the uneasy attempts of advertising continually to rechannel the dissatisfaction of the housewife.

### *Excessive Desire and Sexual Systems*

It is around this 'kind of orgasm which Kinsey found in such statistical plenitude in the recent generations of American women' (Friedan 1963:267) that Friedan's argument begins to rupture. Evidence of sexual excess in the middle-class home, and particularly in the middle-class housewife, causes her evident and acute anxiety. 'The mounting sex hunger of the American woman has been documented ad nauseam . . . It is not an exaggeration to say that several generations of able American women have been successfully reduced to sex creatures, sex-seekers' (261). The language here invokes the B horror movies of the 1950s and 1960s with their insatiable female monsters. These 'able American women' somehow have their ability impaired by a certain level of sexual desire. Their desire is subject to monstrous growth if left unchecked, and other 'human' desires will be channelled into sexual ones if left unfulfilled. It is around this excessive sexual desire that the logic of Friedan's analysis eventually breaks down. In detailing what she sees as the pathological obsession with sex that imprisons the American housewife, she cites

a psychologist [who] studied every reference to sex in American newspapers, magazines, television and radio programs, plays, popular songs, best-selling novels and non-fiction books. He found [that] from 1950 to 1960 the interest of men in the details of intercourse paled before the avidity of women—both as depicted in the media, and in its audience. Already by 1950 the salacious details of the sex act to be found in men's magazines were outnumbered by those in fiction best-sellers sold mainly to women (262–3).

While Friedan has spent the first 250 pages of *The Feminine Mystique* distancing herself from a set of sexological, sociological and psychoanalytic 'experts', whom she repeatedly invalidates with quotations marks, she is now perfectly willing to join them in the widespread anxiety about 'permissive' and obscene acts of sex. Like other imagined plagues of the 1950s, sex here is formulated as a threat silently lurking and growing in the midst of an unsuspecting American public. But what

Friedan finds to be ‘the most striking new sexual phenomenon’ is ‘the increased and evidently “insatiable” lasciviousness of best-selling novels and periodical fiction, whose audience is primarily women’ (262). The ‘frankly lascivious pages’ of popular novels are a major symptom of the sexual pathology of the American woman. Friedan doesn’t cite a source for this assertion that the audience for pulp novels was primarily women and I have not been able to document it elsewhere. However, her anxiety about the widespread distribution of mass-produced paperbacks is typical of the era. The novels of Ann Bannon, Valerie Taylor and other women describe the same domestic problems Friedan describes. They go on to answer these problems by making women agents of their own sexual desire (and, incidentally, of their own economic destiny). Yet these novels are, for Friedan, a symptom of dangerous pathology.

Though she has obvious trouble conceiving of actual lesbian sex, Friedan is clearly disturbed by the concept of women as subjects of sexual desire. Her disturbance takes a form that seems to define post-war cultural anxiety, namely, anticipatory fear of takeover by a growing and excessive threat that might be lurking unobserved in Middle America.<sup>2</sup> Her relegation of ‘multiple orgasms’ and ‘insatiable’ lasciviousness to quotation marks signals a denial of female desire and a fear of its lack of narrative closure. Male orgasm is the accepted narrative closure of the myth of the heterosexual sex act. It is the end that gives the sex act its purpose and meaning. As repetition renders housework meaningless for housewives, multiple orgasm and insatiability are excesses that rupture the meaning and upset the place of sex in Friedan’s analysis. They appear repeatedly and only in relation to women. In fact, while she employs what we would call gender (she calls it femininity) as an organizing principle in structuring the oppression of women, sex, for Friedan, operates as a threatening excess that undermines the ‘human identity’ of women, rather than as one of a set of organizing principles necessary for the formation of identity and the achievement of satisfaction. Her inability to distinguish sex from gender, and her *aporia* around the function (and the limits) of heterosexuality within capitalist structures, lead to this separation of the sexual from the human and the separation of both of these from the relations of production.

At this point of rupture in *The Feminine Mystique*, at the moment of female sexual excess, there appears, incongruously, the frightening spectacle of ‘the homosexuality that is spreading like a murky fog over the American scene’ (276). I say ‘incongruously’ because it is not lesbianism that arises in relation to female sexual excess, but rather *male* homosexuality. For ‘male homosexuality was and is more common than female homosexuality’ (276). This, the single mention of lesbianism

2 For a discussion of the operations of latency in post-war American culture, see Sinfield 1994.

in the book, invokes the authority of Kinsey, whose information about multiple orgasm has been dismissed with quotation marks just pages before. At the same time the Kinsey figures on male homosexuality, demonstrating that there has been no increase in male homosexual activity over the first half of the century, are mentioned and then ignored. 'Whether or not there has been an increase in homosexuality in America, there has been an increase in its overt manifestations' (275). It seems that, whether or not the statistics support it, the threat of male homosexuality is necessary and even structural to the argument at this point.

The transition from female sexual excess to the 'murky fog' of male homosexuality is the point at which the thread of Friedan's logic breaks. Her narrative, like the multiple orgasm she fears, loses its teleological conveyance of meaning. Following a description of women's physical complaints that she uses to underline the overarching pathology of gender (femininity) in Middle America, she concludes that 'the feminine mystique, with its outcry against loss of femininity, is making it increasingly difficult for women to affirm their femininity, and for men to be truly masculine, and for either to enjoy human sexual love' (269). The multiple uses of the words 'feminine' and 'femininity' here underscore the rhetorical stresses her argument suffers at this point. The feminine in 'feminine mystique' is an ideological tool of oppression, which uses the outcry against the loss of 'femininity', the myth of womanhood, to keep women from 'affirming their femininity', a sort of natural state that complements the natural 'masculinity' that seemingly cannot exist in the presence of this unhealthy femininity. The ideology of femininity that has previously been shown to degrade and dehumanize women now slips into a kind of natural feminine state, the loss of which (analogous to sexual deviance) signals the unhealthy state of women's position in culture. The overdetermined concept of femininity shows acute signs of ideological stress at this point in Friedan's argument.

Just here begins a description of a holiday resort shared by a group of bored housewives who had

no way to make committees or housework expand to fill the time available. But they found a new diversion that killed two birds with one stone, a diversion that gave them a spurious sense of sexual status but relieved them of the frightening necessity to prove it. On this island, there was a colony of 'boys' right out of Tennessee Williams. During the week when their husbands were working in the city, the young wives held 'wild' orgies, all-night parties with these sexless boys . . . though there was of course no sexual contact . . . For like the call girl in Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* who spends a sexless night with the passive homosexual, they were equally childlike in

their retreat from life. And in each other, they sought the same non-sexual reassurance (270).

Devouring sex-crazed monsters have become childlike and incapable of 'real' sex. A distinctly Freudian narrative begins to emerge here and carries on into a series of scenarios that Friedan uses to link unhappy and pathologically feminine housewives with homosexual men. They are connected in the instance quoted above because, 'in each other, they sought the same non-sexual reassurance'. Magazines such as *Redbook*, previously the conveyors of alienating and false ideology, now become sources of 'real life experiences and feelings' (274). Freudian narratives, earlier seen as the dangerous underpinnings of the feminine mystique, are now employed without question when we are asked: 'Is there, after all, a link between what is happening to the women in America and increasingly overt male homosexuality?' (274). For it is the over-feminization of mothers, their pathological immaturity, that has been 'passed on from mothers to sons, as well as to daughters' (275). Several scenarios of male homosexuality being caused by mothers are presented in rapid succession here, mostly depending on a kind of failed Oedipal crisis due to a devouring mother. Eventually, we find that the 'shallow unreality, immaturity, promiscuity, lack of human satisfaction that characterize the homosexual's sex-life usually characterize all his life and interests. This lack of personal commitment in work, in education, in life outside of sex, is hauntingly "feminine"' (276). Femininity is again the unnatural sign of sexual excess, and now it has acquired the dismissive quotation marks that have been used for multiple orgasm and insatiability. Still it is posed against the natural masculinity and femininity of the earlier quote. Mothers must be unnaturally feminine to produce unnaturally feminine sons.

For Friedan this 'shallow unreality' is counteracted by a non-sexual humanity and implicitly by 'real' sex, which remains within a set of naturalized boundaries and conforms to an accepted narrative structure. Her obsessive construction of narratives around male homosexuality represents an attempt to put it, and the female sexual desire that she has transferred on to it, back inside boundaries. The arrival of male homosexuality in the text at all, incongruously coming alongside female sexual excess, represents an attempt to keep desire itself within organized boundaries. Here, heterosexuality disables Friedan's feminist argument. Where novels such as the one I quoted at the start of this essay can answer the problem of the housewife with the quest for sexual subjectivity, Friedan does not conceive of a world in which a woman's excess of sexual desire can be anything but pathological.



Desire is in some sense tractable. It can be predicted, elicited and employed in structures of power. Yet once these structures form around desire, it will always fail to behave inside of them. For a hundred years or so, homosexuality functioned as a safety valve that could relieve the tension caused in capitalist ideologies of the heterosexual family when desire would not behave inside of it. Friedan is caught in the position of needing this safety valve at a moment in culture when heterosexuality is being replaced by female desire and objectification as the motivator for capitalist production. She can see that the desire of the women she is studying is out of bounds, but being unable to imagine lesbian sex or sexuality, indeed female sexual subjectivity *per se*, she resorts to the use of homosexual men. The compulsive use of this safety valve upsets the balanced logic of her argument.

Friedan's materialist-feminist analysis leads her to the middle-class housewife as the centre of the problematics of post-war capitalism, but her heterosexual blindness leaves her unable to step outside of the ideological structure within which the housewife exists. The heterosexual, middle-class housewife differs from other domestic workers, perhaps from most workers, in this sense. The increasing primacy of sexual identity in the twentieth century, ideologies of gender, heterosexuality and romance, and the relative isolation of suburban households structured around the nuclear family leave the housewife in a position in which work, sexual satisfaction and human meaning are all present and tied together in an endless state of suspension. While many post-war lesbian writers addressed this problem of existence by moving towards a mastery of sexual identity, Friedan seeks to oppose the sexualization of identity *per se*. This results in her location of both sexuality and pathology in the housewife herself, rather than in the sexual systems that organize her life.

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