ABSTRACT

Leigh Ann Wheeler, Advisor

This dissertation considers how heterosexual women’s sexual pleasure was negotiated in the popular and underground press in the 1970s, focusing particularly on two virtually unexamined parts of U.S. culture: sex magazines for women and woman-authored underground comics. Publications such as Playgirl, Viva, and Foxy Lady reveal essential differences between sex magazines for men and those for women, particularly how each type of publication addressed its readers through editorial content as well as advertising and marketing. Through the marketing of male centerfolds for women, women were asked to consider their sexual appetites for men’s bodies as equivalent to those of heterosexual men for women’s bodies. This project argues that sex magazines for women offered an evolving narrative of sexual liberation that was intrinsically wedded to, and in constant conversation with, the women’s movement. Playgirl and its competitors strategically embraced some of the tenets and language of the women’s movement while generally refusing to support the movement as a whole. This dissertation examines how the visibility and cultural influence of the women’s movement encouraged male magazine publishers to employ women editors as spokespersons. These women wrote often of sexual liberation, but they avoided engaging in any systematic critique of male power in society or heterosexual relationships.

The final chapters take a broader view of the publishing industry and women’s sexuality in the 1970s. They examine representations of women’s sexuality in woman-
authored underground comics, publications with titles such as *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin*, and the impact of these representations on sexual culture in the United States. It argues that woman-authored underground comics exemplify approaches to sexual imagery and women’s sexuality that emerged out of feminist consciousness. The authors of these comics negotiated their own brand of feminist sexuality and their work is indicative of what is possible when women’s bodies are oriented as the center of women’s sexual universe. The concluding chapter examines the ways in which the model of female sexuality proposed by *Playgirl* continues to engage with and influence discussions of women’s sexuality and the place of sexual imagery in U.S. culture.
For V.P.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would not have been completed without the support of many individuals and institutions. Financially, I was assisted with a twelve-month non-service fellowship through the American Culture Studies Program and the Graduate College at Bowling Green State University. Additionally, my research at the Kinsey Library and Archives at Indiana University was made possible through the Katzner and BGSU Bookstore Grant for Graduate Student Research. My research and writing also benefitted from the input of scholars I met at the 2007 Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth, which I was able to attend with the help of a professional development grant from the American Culture Studies Program. Special thanks to Nancy Down and the staff of the Browne Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State University for help using their collection. I am especially indebted to Liana Zhou, director of the Kinsey Library and Archives, and her wonderful staff who so graciously hosted me for a week and introduced me to the Lyn Chevli Collection.

I owe many thanks to those who read and commented on my work over the many years this project has been in progress. Thank you to the members of the Writing Visual Culture research cluster at the Institute for the Study of Culture and Society at Bowling Green State University: Allie Terry, Erin Labbie, Jolie Sheffer, Kim Coates, and Kelly Watson, all of whom offered useful comments on my dissertation proposal. Special thanks to the members of my dissertation writing group, Erin McKenna Mignin and Don Eberle, for their feedback on early versions of this project. Finally, I want to acknowledge Jean House for her fast and professional editing and proofreading on the final version of this dissertation.
I owe a great deal of gratitude to the many friends and family that have supported me before and during the process of writing this dissertation. Special thanks to my mother, Belinda Gwinn, who instilled a love for reading and learning in me early in my life. My gratitude is also extended to my father, Toney Roberts, who never stopped asking about how my big project was going. Thank you to Derrick Miller for his continued love and support. I also offer thanks to Katie Peel and Amy Schlag for being incredibly loyal and supportive friends, and especially to Katie for all of her help with proofreading and editing this dissertation. Finally, to my friend Scott Gust I extend my warmest gratitude for years of patience, advice, and support.

I also wish to thank the members of my dissertation committee who each helped in his or her own way to usher this project to completion. Special thanks to Don McQuarie, former director of American Culture Studies Program, for providing guidance and support for me through my many years as a graduate student. Thank you to Vicki Patraka for all of the walks and talks in City Park. It is hard to imagine my life without your friendship and laughter. Words fail. Thank you to Bill Albertini, whose insights and professionalism while defending my proposal and my dissertation defense brought much needed clarity. To my advisor, Leigh Ann Wheeler, I extend gratitude for sticking with me and this project. Dr. Wheeler has always exhibited an unwavering enthusiasm for my work and I am a much better scholar and writer for having worked with her.
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Introduction: Centerfold Sexuality for Women

The controversial 1993 PBS television adaptation of Armistead Maupin’s novel *Tales of the City* (1978), a fictional take on life in San Francisco in the 1970s, opens with its heroine, Mary Ann (Laura Linney), dropping in on an old high school friend, Connie Bradshaw (Parker Posey). Mary Ann is astonished at the swinging single lifestyle that Connie is leading in San Francisco. Connie’s apartment is littered with books such as *More Joy of Sex* and *The Sensuous Woman*, and sex magazines such as *Playboy*, *Playgirl* and the *Playboy* spin-off *Oui*. As the Bee Gees’ hit “Jive Talkin’” plays on the radio, Connie casually picks up a copy of *Oui* that describes a “co-ed bathhouse” with “the world’s cleanest orgy.”1 Mary Ann asks her if she has ever been to a bathhouse, to which Connie responds “no, but I wouldn’t rule it out.”2

The mere fact that Connie has access to this information is remarkable to Mary Ann. Along with the sexual self-help books, Connie also has an assortment of men’s and women’s lifestyle magazines on display on her coffee table. These items act as set pieces of a particular cultural moment but also mark Connie as a sexually “liberated” woman of the 1970s. Whether Connie ever plans to patronize the co-ed bathhouse or participate in an orgy, the open display of these magazines designates her as a woman “in the know,” a woman with sexual information and ample opportunity to act on it if she so chooses. The scene works to separate Connie’s character, a woman who left rural Ohio eight years ago, from Mary Ann, who just left Ohio and is fascinated with San Francisco but wary of the new sexual freedoms she finds there. We can also see from this scene that erotic lifestyle

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1 “Episode One,” *Tales of the City*, DVD, directed by Alastair Reid (1993; Acorn Media, 1994).
2 Ibid.
magazines were part of a larger project; they were part of how Connie went about constructing her own “liberated” sexual identity through popular culture. While the *Tales of the City* mini-series is not an archival text, this scene does indicate how important the sex magazine was as a staple in women’s popular culture in the 1970s, becoming part of many women’s everyday lives. In addition, as a close examination of the editorial pages and marketing of such magazines reveals, Connie was the poster girl for the “playgirl”, a woman who craves fun in the form of sexual experience and is not shy about declaring so publically.

This dissertation focuses on a virtually unexamined part of U.S. culture, the sex magazine for women. Until now, little has been written about these publications or the women who edited them. Indeed, *Playgirl* stands in stark contrast to *Playboy* in the amount and quality of critical attention it has received. *Playboy*, one of the most recognizable sex magazines for men, has long been the subject of popular media and academic assessments of its cultural meaning and influence. Most recently, the documentary *Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist, and Rebel* (2009) imagines *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner as a liberal icon who fought the government, feminists, and the religious right in the name of sexual freedom. The documentary even goes so far as to credit Hefner with helping to foster racial harmony by featuring African American musicians on his syndicated television show *Playboy’s Penthouse* (1959). Historian Elizabeth Fraterrigo offers a more critical assessment of Hefner’s influence in her book *Playboy and the Making of the Good Life in Modern America* (2009). Fraterrigo writes that “*Playboy* magazine played a significant role in defining an alternative, often
controversial, and highly resonate version of the good life” for men.³ Her account echoes others in arguing that Hefner’s magazine was about much more than just naked flesh and that its editorial content set *Playboy* apart from other publications that offered photos of naked women. Fraterrigo writes that “the magazine actively engaged in a project of refashioning gender, often overtly, sometimes implicitly, for which nude pictures served as just one important element.”⁴ *Playboy*, according to Fraterrigo, presented a vision of a swinging single life for heterosexual men steeped in an “ethos of consumption.”⁵

*Playboy* served as an obvious model for *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women such as *Viva*, *Venus*, and *Foxy lady*, but these publications also differed from *Playboy* in significant ways. While they shared *Playboy*’s centerfold feature and its focus on lifestyle and consumption, the ways they “refashioned gender” and offered images of “the good life” for women set them apart from publications for men. Like *Playboy*, which helped men negotiate shifting gender roles in the post-World War II period, *Playgirl* and its competitors assisted women as they coped with the emergence of second-wave feminism in the 1970s. Sex magazines for women such as *Playgirl* and its competition offered women sexual information and presented fantasies of sexual agency and experience within the context of the feminist movement. This project argues that what these publications offered in the 1970s was an evolving narrative of sexual liberation that was intrinsically wedded to, and in constant conversation with, the women’s movement. Editors of sex magazines for women were negotiating what they

⁴ Ibid, 11.
⁵ Ibid, 7.
assumed to be the popular “center” of the movement at any given moment, strategically embracing and challenging it to serve their own marketing goals.

What narratives of sexual liberation did these magazines offer to heterosexual women in the 1970s and how did they change over time? How did magazines such as *Playgirl* address women as consumers of sexual material? How did they imagine their audience through their rhetoric and marketing strategies? How did discourses of sexuality, sexual liberation, and gender equality outside these magazines influence each magazine’s content? Answers to these questions shed new light on women’s relationship to explicit imagery even as parts of the women’s movement organized against sexually explicit images they called pornography. Thus, this dissertation assumes that the fantasy world of sex magazines is never just about creating an imaginary world of images but is always firmly embedded in the social and historical realities outside the pages of the publication. Any attempt to prescribe liberation also delineates limits.

A close examination of the editorial pages of these publications maps the complicated relationship *Playgirl* and its competitors had with the women’s movement and also reveals that sexual explicitness had a place among popular feminist representations in the early 1970s. In addition, this project examines woman-authored sex comics of same period (1970s), which also exhibited a remarkable level of sexual explicitness but narrated a vastly different version of sexual liberation for women, one closely associated with the women’s health movement. Each publication offered an alternative form of feminism, and each tapped into the energy and promise of the sexual revolution and the women’s movement and translated both into narratives of sexual liberation for women in the 1970s. The limits of liberation and sexual agency for women
were explored in the 1970s, and one of the key locations this exploration took place was in sex magazines for women and in woman-authored underground comics. Contrasting these two types of publications, reveals how the rhetoric of revolution and liberation entered commercial culture as well as its counterculture. These publications offer two very distinct cultural locations where women’s sexual pleasure was negotiated in the public sphere, and they help make visible the possibilities and inevitable limitations of women’s experience of pleasure and agency. Finally, they reflect the complicated relationship women had with sexuality and sexually explicit material at a time of promise and tumult in U. S. women’s history.

Both sex magazines for women and underground comics were products not just of the women’s movement, but also a more permissive sexual culture. The 1970s and early 1980s are often referred to as the “golden age” of pornography, a time when both print and film pornography expanded into new markets in a more liberal cultural and legal climate in the United States. As pornographic representations grew more explicit, the industry became an increasingly visible part of U.S. culture. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the multitude of pornographic magazines that filled magazine racks and newsstands early in the decade. Erotic lifestyle magazines, called “sex” or “skin” magazines at the time, were certainly not new inventions—Playboy had been around for nearly two decades by the early 1970s—but their prevalence as a part of the American cultural landscape was never greater. Beginning in the early 1970s, Playboy faced stiff competition from more explicit start-ups such as Penthouse and Hustler, and in 1973 the publishing industry introduced the first sex magazine for women, Playgirl. In the early 1970s, magazines were putting a major emphasis on the “new” role of women in society
and in sexuality in particular.\textsuperscript{6} The \textit{Columbia Journalism Review} reported in 1974 that “magazines, more than the daily press, mirror the mood, the mores, and the faddish tastes of society.”\textsuperscript{7} The fastest growing faddish magazines of the year, the publication reported, were “the nudity books,” the newcomer \textit{Playgirl} among them.\textsuperscript{8} In the previous year, “treatment of sexual subjects became even more explicit,” the publication reported, “with such subjects as orgasms and erections becoming commonplace even in relatively restrained publications.”\textsuperscript{9} The movement towards more explicit nudity, according to the \textit{Columbia Journalism Review}, might have a silver lining: “it may ultimately so satiate juveniles of all ages with photos of breasts and genitals that they will occasionally read and think of other matters.”\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Playgirl} was launched during a period when sexual knowledge and experience for women, particularly within popular culture, became shorthand for female autonomy. The publishers of \textit{Playgirl} and other sex magazines built upon the “single-girl” persona developed by \textit{Cosmopolitan} magazine’s remarkably successful editor Helen Gurley Brown and copied Brown’s 1972 experiment by creating a nude male centerfold for women. A liberated lifestyle represented by the availability of soft-core pornography for women, what this project calls “centerfold sexuality,” was staunchly defended within the pages of sex magazines for women as a skeptical public decided what to make of the development. The connection between this material and sexual equality for women was reiterated endlessly by publishers, editors, and the press as part of their evolving

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
narratives of sexual liberation during the early 1970s. Women, as editors and contributors to sex magazines, played a major role in the rhetorical justification for women’s interest in male nudity. Through their capacity as spokespersons for these publications, they worked to attach symbolic value to the production and consumption of explicit material made especially for women.

These publications managed to challenge one major issue at the heart of the sexual revolution: the gender divide and the sexual double standard regarding expectations for women’s and men’s sexual behavior. *Playgirl* and its competitors disconnected heterosexual women’s sexuality from reproduction, domesticity, and monogamy. Perhaps most importantly, these magazines symbolically challenged the idea that men actively pursued sex while women were only passive recipients of men’s sexual attention.

*Playgirl* reached its popular and financial zenith in the 1970s, and began to suffer a decline in the 1980s that led to its diminution from a uniquely successful magazine to just another pay-per-view website in 2009. In the latter part of the 1970s at the same time that conservative social and political forces were beginning to coalesce into a powerful movement against the perceived excesses of the decade, these publications began to question the depth of women’s interest in male nudity. *Playgirl* and its competitors were undone at least in part by the limitations of the “playgirl” persona, an identity that had as much to do with beauty and shopping as it did with nude men, the decline in influence of the women’s movement and the shifting mood of the public toward pornography in general. The period this project covers allows us to see the “playgirl” identity reach its pinnacle and chart its decline as it lost female readership in the 1980s.
Foucauldian Sexuality

One of the most compelling cultural developments of the twentieth century was the “sexual revolution.” The increasing influence of sexual liberalism in the 1960s and 1970s certainly brought sexuality into public discourse, but historians and cultural theorists disagree on the forms the revolution took and its overall lasting impact. Rather than approaching the sexual revolution as a myth that must be proved or disproved, this project treats the period as a time when a variety of sexual narratives and identities competed for public attention.

For cultural studies scholars, Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* is a natural starting point for thinking about the creation and circulation of sexual knowledge. His work has altered the ways in which we think about history, sexuality, and the flow of power through social and cultural discourses. Foucault explains the historical production of “sex” as an artificial concept that hides power relations, and his project seeks to examine the experience of sexuality in modern Western culture. As American studies scholar Bruce Burgett explains, Foucault was “concerned not with real-life things called ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality,’ but the way those concepts have come to structure contemporary thinking about political relations among bodies, sensations, appetites, and pleasures.”¹¹ Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Burgett concludes, aimed to historicize “not just the diverse meanings of sex and sexuality, but also the categories themselves.”¹² These categories are powerful ways of organizing sexual knowledge in historically specific ways. One example offered by Foucault is the

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¹² Ibid.
“discovery” of sexual “aberrations”—such as homosexuality. The homosexual became an object of study for medicine and psychiatry, and in so doing became a personage rather than a set of behaviors. With the invention of homosexuality, social subjects began to be marked by both their sexual orientation and gender.

Foucault investigates the process through which individuals are produced as sexual subjects. According to Foucault, sexuality must be examined as a constructed category rather than a natural state. This project considers the “playgirl” as a discursive project, a constructed category located in a very specific historic and cultural context where the feminist movement became one of the key rhetorical ingredients for understanding the “liberated” sexual identity offered to women via *Playgirl* and its competition.

Foucauldian theories of sexuality help us to understand this particular moment in women’s sexual history, a period that resulted in the production and proliferation of new sites for sexual discourse for and about women. The concept of a “playgirl” in the 1970s became one of the categories for heterosexual women as sexual subjects, a category marked by sexual orientation and gender, but also infused with political implications. This project explores the rhetorical process through which the “playgirl” archetype was created and the ways in which it changed over time. In short, the “playgirl” is a fascinating discursive construction, and Foucault’s focus on discursive power in the development of what we call sexuality has shaped my approach to these publications.
That the “playgirl” identity emerged in the 1970s was no accident. In seeking to understand it, we must seek to understand the historical and cultural moment in which it developed. As American studies scholar Paul Lauter argues, historicizing is key to understanding a cultural artifact in context.\textsuperscript{13} As Lauter suggests, historicizing means that scholars should focus less on the formal qualities and structures of a text or a material object and “more on why it emerges as it does in its particular moment, how the forms of production, distribution, and consumption materialize—what forces, social, economic, aesthetic, technological, have come together to produce this thing in this place at this time?”\textsuperscript{14} In the service of properly contextualizing the concept of the “playgirl” and the overall project of sex magazines for women in the 1970s, this project will briefly consider the decades developing historiography.

Thinking about the decade of the 1970s has developed tremendously during the last thirty years, with interest in the period producing a wide array of scholarship across a variety of fields, particularly during the last ten years. In his 2006 book on the decade, historian Edward Berkowitz identified three distinct schools of thought on the 1970s.\textsuperscript{15} The “nothing happened, me-decade” school of historians wrote close to the events of the era and “proclaimed the existence of a lazy, apathetic, narcissistic, self-absorbed seventies.”\textsuperscript{16} A later school of thought holds used the excesses of liberalism in the 1970s

\textsuperscript{13} Paul Lauter, \textit{From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park: Activism, Culture, and American Studies} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 15.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
as a means of exalting the conservative revival of the 1980s. In this view, the 1970s were instructive as to the limits of social and political liberalism and the 1980s brought a moment of clarity after a long hangover. The most recent scholarship on the 1970s, however, makes the decade out to be an important era in its own right, but exactly why the 1970s were important and for whom is a matter of debate.\(^\text{17}\)

Berkowitz observes that writers on both sides of the political divide now “transform the seventies into the period that best explained the emergence of modern America.”\(^\text{18}\) For the conservative David Frum, those “strange feverish years” of the 1970s brought about real and permanent social change.\(^\text{19}\) The 1970s left behind a country that was “more dynamic, more competitive, more tolerant; less deferential, less self-confident, less united; more socially equal, less economically equal; more expressive, more risk averse, more sexual; less literate, less polite, less reticent.”\(^\text{20}\) Other historians see the changes the decade brought about in a more consistently positive light. Feminist chroniclers including historian Ruth Rosen look back at the 1970s with reverence. “Those years”, Rosen writes, were “arguably the most intellectually vital and exciting ones in the history of American women.”\(^\text{21}\) Like most scholars writing about the 1970s in the past ten years, Rosen writes that she was “appalled that pundits had already packaged the decade,” largely ignoring “the birth of a revolution that would irreversibly transform American culture and society.”\(^\text{22}\) If it had seemed to earlier (male) historians like nothing had happened it was largely because of their frame of reference. For

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
\(^{18}\) Ibid, 6.
\(^{19}\) David Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70’s: The Decade That Brought Us Modern Life (For Better or Worse)* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xxiv.
\(^{20}\) Ibid.
\(^{22}\) Rosen, xiii.
women, the decade was pregnant with possibility, and the publications examined here took advantage of this new period of promise by attempting to rewrite women’s sexuality. Examining sex magazines for women and woman-authored underground sex comics helps to focus more attention on women’s struggles with sexual agency as well as explicit imagery in the 1970s. In fact, it is impossible to get a clear understanding of the sexual culture of the decade and its evolution without them.

Scholars who have attempted to chronicle the 1970s have found it impossible to discuss the decade and its influence without noting the explosion and influence of sexual imagery. As historian Phillip Jenkins observes of the 1970s, “sexual mores changed not just in terms of private behavior but also in public discussion and display. The new sexual frankness can be traced through the pornography industry, which expanded during the 1970s as censorship standards relaxed.”23 After debating the definition of obscenity for decades, in 1973 in the case of *Miller v. California* the U.S. Supreme Court established a strict definition of “obscene” material but the decision also provided accused pornographers with many legal loopholes.24 The decision left police and prosecutors frustrated as the liberalization of sex laws made their work difficult to impossible.25 Free from the threat of prosecution, pornographers published more explicit material.

Communication Studies scholar Elana Levine’s recent work on how network television translated the new sexual culture of the 1970s into popular culture suggests three theses that also apply to sex magazines for women during the same period. First,

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
because television “typically-endorses dominant ideologies of social identity” such as gender and sexuality, it “supported the dominance of heterosexuality over other orientations,” shying away from the fully revolutionary. Second, in terms of the sexual revolution, “it made the new more familiar and the potentially radical safe.” Third, television “limited popular conceptions of sexuality to the kinds of thoughts, feelings, practices, and identities that are readily adaptable to market logics, excluding other ways of living and knowing.”

Television, much like sex magazines for women, was a “key cultural reference point” for the dissemination of sexual information to the masses in the 1970s. The limits the medium placed on the depiction of sex were highly influential in the way the public understood the changing sexual landscape. In the 1970s, the three major television networks moved past merely suggesting sex to actually showing characters (even teenagers) engaging in sex. As Levin points out, however, these characters were often punished for indulging, shielding the networks from any accusations that they condoned this sort of behavior. Television broadcast networks also debated broadcasting X-rated films, airing ads for condoms, and using live models to sell lingerie; all were rejected. All told, the story of sex on television in the 1970s is significant as much for what was not shown as for what was.

Sex magazines for women in the 1970s contained a level of visual and editorial explicitness that the medium of television could never replicate due to the fact that

26 Ibid, 5.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid, 10.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid, 43.
31 Ibid, 12.
television is a broadcast medium; in their selective treatment of female sexuality, sex magazines for women shared many of television’s limitations. The economic pressure of catering to advertisers framed and limited both television and magazines with regard to sexual imagery and themes. More radical conceptions of sexuality in the 1970s, particularly nonheterosexual sexualities, were marginalized both on television and in the pages of sex magazines for women. Finally, *Playgirl* and its competitors offered little in terms of racial and ethnic diversity in their representations of sex. Like sex on television, as revolutionary as the concept of these magazines might have been, they often reinforced the status quo.

Similarly, this project is informed by recent scholarship in cultural studies that has begun to address the impact of the women’s movement on images of women in 1970s culture. In the introduction to a collection entitled *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s*, editor Sherrie Inness writes that the scholars in the volume are interested in how popular culture shaped women’s roles in the 1970s, the impact of the women’s movement on popular representations of women, and the introduction of new role models for women. Inness argues that movies, television shows, and magazines reveal “important lessons about how feminist ideas were made palatable to a large audience” and that examining popular media is “vital for understanding social change in the 1970s.” Inness concludes that some media sources helped advance feminist issues, “while others sought to limit their impact.” Contributor Elyce Rae Helford’s essay on the film *The Stepford Wives* (1975) is particularly applicable to this work on sex

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33 Ibid, 5.
34 Ibid, 6.
magazines for women in the 1970s. Helford writes that the film “negotiates the media’s cooptation of some of the primary principles of second-wave feminism.”35 Like The Stepford Wives, Playgirl and its competitors capitalized on the popularity of the women’s movement while generalizing and even sometimes trivializing its goals and potential. The film’s exploitation of popular elements of 1970s feminism in many ways mirrored the work of sex magazines for women. Their approach was always to present a limited and selective version of feminism to their female audience.

In the 1970s, Playgirl and its competitors took the liberal feminist goal of inclusion and equality in male-dominated institutions and applied it to the landscape of sex magazines. Sex magazines for women were certainly not alone in this. As American studies scholar Beth Bailey has argued, “throughout the 1970s, in American public life, women’s liberation was frequently conflated with the sexual revolution.”36 According to Bailey, men’s inquiries into whether or not a woman was “liberated” almost always had sexual rather than political implications.37 The mainstream media, Bailey writes, “treated women’s liberation and sexual freedom interchangeably.”38 From this confusion emerged an identity, the playgirl. In the pages of Playgirl, the sexually free woman of the 1970s was reconfigured utilizing a term that had most often been used in a derogatory way toward women. This term was used to actively contest the sexual double standard and allowed heterosexual women a positive sexual identity.

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
Playgirl and its competitors were, of course, only one part of a larger cultural movement toward fully integrating women into the sexual revolution in the early 1970s. Scholars have worked to survey this phenomenon but have yet to include sex magazines for woman in any meaningful way. However, other literature of the period has been examined for its contributions to the evolution of sexual thought. Jane Gerhard’s Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought provides a history of the intersections between feminist sexual politics and twentieth-century American sexual thought. She writes that across the cultural landscape “sexuality came to be linked to identity and utopian visions of a better way to live.”39 Gerhard examines everything from Freudian psychology and radical feminist sexual theory to the feminist fiction of Erica Jong. She argues that Jong’s Fear of Flying, published the same year Playgirl made its debut, “helped make sexual freedom synonymous with feminism.”40 Gerhard concludes that “conflicts about sexuality for many women—about what they wanted from sex, about what they had learned about themselves (and men) by learning about sex, about what counted as ‘real’ sex—laid the groundwork for what would become their feminism.”41 This dissertation examines the ways in which editors of sex magazines for women made this connection for their readers: that the playgirl identity was not just a sexual identity but a version of popular feminism available for women in the 1970s. These editors wrote about what counted as liberated sexual expression and how explicit sexual material for women could be an expression of heterosexual women’s sexual self-determination. They worked rhetorically

40 Ibid, 8.
41 Ibid, 3.
to move women away from sexual “repression” toward a liberated future with nude centerfolds for everyone.

Feminism in Popular Culture and Magazines as Rhetorical Texts

Through the work of cultural studies scholars and feminist historians the umbrella under which materials can be considered “feminist” texts has been broadened. Popular culture has provided a terrain where women’s longing for equality in the home, the workplace, and in romantic relationships can come across in blatant and sometimes surreptitious ways. Popular culture provides a place where tensions between women’s ambitions and their political and social limitations can be examined. Media studies scholar Susan Douglas finds feminist inflections in the popular music, television, and advertising of the decades following World War II. More recently, historian Jennifer Scanlon has reconsidered the life and work of Cosmopolitan editor Helen Gurley Brown and has argued for a place for Brown among feminist icons of the last century. Similar to other pieces of popular culture at the time, magazines such as Playgirl explicitly connected themselves rhetorically to the women’s movement and in doing so are best understood through the lens of that movement. In fact, the tremendous initial appeal of the magazines is otherwise difficult to explain.

Communication studies scholar Bonnie Dow’s Prime-Time Feminism provides an excellent model for examining how cultural and social movements are mediated in

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popular culture. Dow examines how popular television shows since the 1970s—*The Mary Tyler Moore Show, One Day at a Time, Designing Women*—have done important cultural work in representing feminism to the American public by defining what it meant to be a liberated woman in the specific cultural moments in which they appeared.\(^{44}\) Dow’s work attempts to “understand how feminist rhetoric and events were absorbed, structured, and represented in media discourse for public consumption.”\(^{45}\) This project approaches sex magazines for women in much the same manner, asking how the magazines act as channels for mass-mediated cultural attitudes toward the sexual revolution, women, and feminism. Both television and sex magazines for women are offering “visions of what feminism ‘means’” within the context and constraints of their medium.\(^{46}\) Like Dow’s, this project acknowledges that representations are not random but are the direct results of a series of rhetorical choices made by cultural producers. They are an attempt by these producers to make sense of the lived experience of the audience. Following Dow’s lead, this project understands *Playgirl* and its competitors as rhetorical texts, one of the key locations where female sexuality was defined for a specific audience in the 1970s. Doing so requires consideration of not only the message in context but the medium as well.

Unlike the television programs that make up Bonnie Dow’s study of cultural feminism, Amy Erdman Farrell’s work on *Ms., Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism* tackles a popular icon of the feminist movement itself, a magazine that attempted to bring the movement to thousands of women every month.

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\(^{45}\) Ibid, xvi.

\(^{46}\) Ibid, 5.
In doing so, Farrell speaks to the rhetorical uniqueness of magazines as a form of media. Unlike television situation comedies, popular magazines have a more selective and narrow audience, the ability to adapt their offerings more quickly to reader feedback and developments in the world outside, and the ability to speak with one voice and engage specifically with current events and issues through their editorial pages. *Ms.* attempted to forge an oppositional politics within commercial culture, taking care to bring feminist standpoints to everything from editorial content to advertising copy. Whereas *Ms.* operated as the popular face of feminism in the 1970s, *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women operated as popular embodiments of heterosexual women’s sexuality. Both operated as outlets for a cultural conversation that was at once timely but also fluid. Like *Ms.*, *Playgirl* reflected and mediated the culture outside the magazine. Of course, *Playgirl* and its competitors often eschewed taking concrete political stances and had their own definition of what being a liberated woman entailed. The editorial message of these magazines was often at odds with that of *Ms.* in that they saw the women’s movement as merely a means for understanding the liberating potential of its explicit offerings, while *Ms.* existed primarily to inform and motivate women into feminist activism. For sex magazines for women, the women’s movement provided context, for *Ms.* the movement was its reason for existence.

This dissertation is a work of cultural history, and as such, it draws methodology broadly from cultural studies and media studies. As a work of cultural studies, it is concerned with sex magazines for women as cultural productions and seeks to explore their relationship to power. As a work of media studies, it is interested in the specificity of magazine media and its discursive relationship with its audience. Thus, this project
will engage the sex magazine for women first through discourse analysis, focusing on the larger cultural conversations with which these magazines engaged. More specifically it will employ rhetorical analysis, focusing on efforts to use written and visual language to influence and shape the thoughts and expectations of an audience. This project understands discourses as culturally and socially produced ideas containing texts and representations. Cultural discourses represent structures of knowledge. Through discourse analysis one can best examine and expose these structures and locate the discourses within wider historical and cultural contexts. This project is particularly interested in how language and rhetoric is used to shape our understanding of reality, in this case, understandings of sexuality.

This project examines Playgirl and its competitors (other sex magazines for women such as Foxy Lady, Venus, and Viva) using content analysis and archival research. It avoids trying to analyze audience reception and instead focuses on how the magazines as texts constructed their imagined audience. The analysis asks, “What do these texts seem to assume their audiences want and need?” It seeks to uncover the implicit assumptions that shaped these publications. This analysis will speak to how sex magazines for women were crafted as offerings within a specific historical and cultural moment, paying particular attention to the relationship between text and context. The analysis of woman-authored underground sex comics at the conclusion of this project works to provide a stark contrast: a woman-authored text offering a very different response to the very same context. The sex comics work to underscore the limitations of the commercial sex magazines in translating a coherent narrative of sexual liberation.
Essential to this undertaking is the understanding that magazines are particular forms of knowledge production that involve complex intertextual relations between written and visual texts. The process of mediation is a politically charged one involving the selecting and shaping of information to create a range of cultural meaning. The publishers and editors of sex magazines for women brought their own perspectives, anxieties, and commercial concerns to bear on issues of women’s sexuality. As a form of cultural mediation, *Playgirl* and its competitors can be said to be involved in prescribing and shaping the erotic imagination. This project will address the texts themselves as sites around which notions of liberated sexuality, heterosexuality in particular, are produced and negotiated.

Due to the fact that *Playgirl*, the only remaining sex magazine for women in publication at the time research for this project began, has no archives from the 1970s and 1980s, primary research material was limited to newspaper and magazine accounts about this period and the magazines themselves. The first four chapters rely heavily on the magazine and alternative newspaper collections in Bowling Green State University’s Browne Popular Culture Library as well as periodicals from the author’s personal collection. The fifth chapter, on underground comics, draws heavily from original art and personal correspondence from the Lyn Chevli Collection at the Kinsey Institute Library at Indiana University and the author’s personal collection of underground comics.

Chapter One, “The Single Girl Gets a Centerfold: 1972,” examines the publication of actor Burt Reynolds’ nude centerfold in the April 1972 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, which marked a dubious milestone in the mainstreaming of explicit imagery for women. Women clamored for the issue of the popular women’s magazine,
which had been revived by the successful author and editor Helen Gurley Brown in 1965, for a look at what was billed as the first “nude male centerfold” for women. The centerfold was an offshoot of Brown’s single girl lifestyle and an important precursor to the playgirl archetype that sex magazines would develop. This chapter argues that the Reynolds centerfold and the media coverage around it was an embodied the common tendency in the early 1970s of popular culture and social movements to use nudity to express rebellion against the status quo. For women, this meant seeking symbolic gender equality and reciprocity by having their own nude male centerfold. The rhetoric used to justify this approach and to sell the centerfold to *Cosmopolitan* readers is indicative of a shifting sexual marketplace and a longing for greater sexual agency for women.

Chapter Two, “The Playgirl Ethos and the Strategic Rhetoric of Sex Magazines for Women: 1973-1976,” examines the birth of sex magazines for women, publications inspired by the *Cosmopolitan* centerfold, that built their identities around turning the nude male centerfold into a monthly feature. This chapter examines the strategic rhetoric of the female editors of these magazines and how it was used to shape the idea of sexual liberation for women around the concept of male nudity. This chapter argues that rehabilitating the largely derogatory term “playgirl” and recasting it as an affirmative, even aspirational, archetype for sexually liberated women was key to their rhetorical project. This chapter also asserts the that enormous media and marketing emphasis put on the power and influence of the female editors and staff, worked to downplay the influence of male publishers that were financing these magazines. The women editors of *Playgirl* and its competitors took to their editorial pages to further define and refine the playgirl lifestyle for their readers. Here we see the beginnings of an evolving narrative of
sexual liberation for women in the editorial pages and media coverage of these new magazines. Their strategic embrace of the language of the women’s movement and their testimony of their own enjoyment of the genre worked to justify their offerings to a skeptical public.

Chapter Three, “Sex and the Married Woman: Rewriting Playgirl: 1976-1984,” uses recently published political and cultural histories of the late 1970s and early 1980s to contextualize changes in the editorial rhetoric at Playgirl and Viva. This chapter argues that changes in the social and political culture and reactions to their offerings caused both magazines to question the basic premise of their publications, male nudity for women. At the same time, Playgirl and its sister publications, Playgirl Advisor and Playgirl Couples, were slowly becoming clearinghouses for sexual information for committed heterosexual couples rather than publications that celebrated swinging singlehood for heterosexual women. The overall emphasis was now geared toward improving sexual technique for committed couples, not valorizing casual encounters. This rhetorical shift was a response to a more conservative political and social climate. As the 1970s came to a close, Playgirl began to shift its rhetoric from speaking of women’s “liberation” to calling for more “freedom.” As the 1970s gave way to the 1980s, we see a diminishing presence of women on the editorial page. In fact, in the early 1980s Playgirl’s editorial page was taken over by a man for the first time in its history and the magazine found a new rhetorical source of repression in the form of the new Reagan administration. This phenomenon again points to a major shift in the editorial and marketing strategy of sex magazines for women. Playgirl moved from defining itself in tandem with the women’s movement, something that required the voice of a female editor, to defining itself in
opposition to a conservative political environment, which the male publisher was able to do without relying on a female editor.

Chapter Four, “Selling Liberation: Commodity Feminism and the Beauty Myth in Sex Magazines for Women: 1973-1985,” considers the visual rhetoric in the advertising content of sex magazines for women. Examining *Playgirl’s* quest for advertisers and the visual rhetoric of advertising accepted offers a broader picture of the contradictions inherent in the playgirl image. This chapter argues that far from pure sexual liberation, the advertising environment in sex magazines offered potential “playgirls” a type of *consumer citizenship* that promised social belonging and a satisfactory sex life, but with the price of body work, bodily anxiety, and endless consumption. This chapter engages feminist scholarship about the beauty industry and the female body to examine advertising trends within sex magazines for women and their impact and influence on the rhetoric of these publications. Here, the “playgirl” is as much a consumer identity as it is a sexual identity. The advertising environment in sex magazines for women, while sharing the magazines’ editorial focus on heterosexual coupling, often bluntly undermined the messages of sexual liberation that the magazines offered women readers.

Chapter Five, “Irreverent Eroticism: Sexuality in Woman-Authored Underground Comics: 1972-1978,” explores a counter-cultural alternative to sex magazines for women. Beginning in 1972, the very same year *Cosmopolitan* published the first male centerfold, woman-authored underground comics with titles such as *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin* began boldly exploring “sex from a woman’s point-of-view.” Using a complete collection of comic art and *Tits and Clits* creator Lyn Chevli’s own correspondence archived at the Kinsey Library, this chapter examines these underground comics as an
oppositional response to the centerfold sexuality found in sex magazines for women. These publications, produced concurrently with *Playgirl* and its competitors, provide a stark contrast in their approaches to sexuality and the body as well as their relationship to commercial culture. Like *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women, they portrayed women as sexual agents but allowed for a wider variety of ages, races and sexual orientations. They visually positioned the female body as the center of female sexuality, as a pleasure center, rather than focusing on male sexual organs or objects of desire. As argued in this chapter, this focus was more in keeping with the feminist movement, the women’s health movement in particular, which was seeking to demystify the female body through publications such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973). These comics embraced a raunchy form of feminist humor that the authors hoped would break through the mythology surrounding female sexuality that considered women passive and reticent. Taking no advertising, these comics actively mocked the commercial culture and beauty standards that defined the “playgirl” lifestyle. Indeed, *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin* often embraced the abject and grotesque aspects of corporality, rejecting the fantasy world of beauty imagery and sculpted bodies for more “human” and “honest” portrayals of sex. However, this approach to female sexuality offended members of the women’s movement as well as local censors.

To conclude, Chapter Six, “Centerfold Sexuality and the Cultural Legacy of Sex Magazines for Women,” briefly examines the legacy and influence of sex magazines for women. It considers why the “playgirl” approach to sexuality continues to find its way into popular representations of female heterosexuality such as the popular HBO
television series *Sex and the City* and how the existence of *Playgirl* continues to influence discussions of pornography and “raunch culture” even today.
In July 1973 *Newsweek* magazine ran a cover story featuring a photograph of a young, smiling, blonde woman in a hot-pink bikini. She stands beside a pool with a drink in her hand and looks directly at the camera. Behind her, a young couple, also in swimsuits, lies on beach towels, talking to one another as they sip wine (figure 1.1). Above this image is the title of the cover story, “Games Singles Play.” Readers of *Newsweek* might have drawn several conclusions from this cover photo. They were safe to assume that women were front and center in this new game and that the representation of the single woman in the American popular imagination was changing. The author, Harry Waters, writes, “within just eight years singlehood has emerged as an intensely ritualized—and newly respectable—style of American life.” 47 Underlying this observation is the unstated fact that, whereas bachelorhood for men had long ago been rendered acceptable, even stylish, via magazines such as *Playboy*, a glamorous heterosexual single life was now being extended to women as well. As journalist Betsy Israel notes in her book on single life for women *Bachelor Girl: The Secret History of Women in the Twentieth Century*, by the 1970s, “single women would emerge as among the most economically and socially significant of all the onetime shadow population groups.” 48 “Being single,” she argues, “like being openly gay, would finally lose any lingering taint of ugly character weakness, any hint of pathology, and come to seem an

entirely viable way to live.” In addition to putting a beautiful female face on the happy, well-adjusted single, the Newsweek cover story also underscores the growing interest in marketing the single life to women in the 1970s and the primacy of magazines to that undertaking.

By the early 1970s the numerous “girlie,” or sex magazines (such as Playboy), which were aimed at a male audience and featured nude female centerfolds, were one of the most visible popular culture embodiments of men’s greater sexual license. One means through which women’s magazines in the 1970s could address, however symbolically, women’s demands for greater sexual equality was to offer women images of nude men to counter this pornographic inequity. This examines how the women’s magazine Cosmopolitan, long a staple in advice and guidance for young, single women from the U.S., legitimated and marketed the first nude male centerfold. This chapter argues that the story behind the nude centerfold of Burt Reynolds, which was printed in Cosmopolitan in 1972, helps explain the beginning of a push to sell the single girl (and even her married sisters) images of nude or nearly naked men and why this trend flourished at this particular moment in U.S. history. The Burt Reynolds centerfold proved to be a timely extension of Helen Gurley Brown’s “single girl” philosophy; however, the tensions exposed in the making of the centerfold speak volumes to the many complexities and limitations in pursuing sexual equity with men through nude male centerfolds. Despite Brown’s and Reynolds’s competing visions of the project, the resulting centerfold was a publicity boon for both. In the end, Brown’s creative marketing of male nudity ushered women’s sexual liberation into popular culture,

49 Ibid.
sparking a publishing phenomenon that would produce an entirely new genre of literature: sex magazines for women.

Long before Brown asked Reynolds to pose for *Cosmopolitan*, she had presided over a successful redemption of the single girl with her book *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) and her successful revamp of *Cosmopolitan* in 1965. Brown’s “Cosmo Girl,” like the woman in the bikini on the cover of *Newsweek*, is beautiful and confident in her single status. In the pages of *Cosmopolitan*, being a single and independent woman is portrayed as fun and exciting, rather than a sad precursor to spinsterhood. Brown’s magazine was only part of a larger cultural trend toward positively reimagining single life for women. Historians John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman recall that, while working class youth at the turn of the twentieth century had “sustained a sexual subculture rooted in commercialized amusement,” the unmarried youth of that era had “elicited pity, scorn, or fear from the middle class who sought to control their behavior and made them the object of reformation efforts.”

By the late 1960s, however, times had changed and “young adults of the middle class were glamorized; they embodied the unspoken fantasies of a consumer society extended to the sphere of sex.” By 1973, that fantasy had coalesced into the image on the cover of *Newsweek*; being single was sexy, being sexy was crucial, and this cultural shift inspired publishing entrepreneurs across the country.

By 1973 the single life for women had acquired its own sets of rules and norms. As the *Newsweek* story “Games Singles Play” indicates, women, influenced by the images of swinging and satisfying single life swirling around them in the popular culture

51 Ibid.
of the early 1970s, were coming to terms with how they should feel about the sexual freedoms popular culture insisted were theirs for the taking. At least some women seemed to require help navigating the new single life, and plenty of industries were providing guidance for a price. “Games Singles Play” chronicles the exploding singles scene in the United States, especially noting growth in singles-only institutions: apartment complexes, cruises, resorts, dance clubs, and dating services. The article is peppered with photographs of singles events: scantily clad singles lounging around pools, huge dance parties, organized mingling at meet-and-greet events. The article takes note of what it calls the “singles entrepreneur,” those willing to court and market to the growing unmarried population, wielding an annual spending power of $40 billion. 52

In fact, by the time Newsweek, a mainstream national news magazine, reported on the singles trend, Cosmopolitan and numerous smaller magazines had already been packaging lifestyle options to singles. Historians D’Emilio and Freedman point to this moment, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when “Friday editions of city newspapers were sprinkled with classified ads” announcing singles events and “publishers threw together guidebooks for the unattached.”53 One such publication mentioned in the Newsweek article was Single, a lifestyle magazine for both sexes that focused on the singles scene and purported to offer advice for “unmarried, widowed, divorced and unattached” heterosexuals. While this eclectic conglomeration of heterosexual singles proved difficult to address as a whole, single heterosexual women turned to a familiar source for this advice, women’s magazines. Long a source of lifestyle information and relationship advice, women’s magazines stepped up to provide guidance, sometimes

53 D’Emilio and Freedman, Intimate Matters, 304.
frank and graphic, on issues of sexuality. In fact, a year before the Newsweek article, Cosmopolitan, the best-selling magazine for young women, in an attempt to remain the vanguard on matters of sexuality featured its first nude male centerfold.

This chapter examines this cultural turn in women’s magazines, the trend toward using nude male bodies in conjunction with sex and lifestyle advice for women in an ostensible effort to promote symbolic gender equality. This trend was influenced by the rhetoric of the women’s movement, the explosion of sex and pornography in the popular culture of the 1970s, and called for greater egalitarianism between the sexual license men enjoyed and the lesser license afforded to women. The road toward the first male centerfold began with what Barbara Ehrenreich calls the “feminization of sex”: women’s navigation and innovation within a sexual marketplace dominated by men beginning in the early 1960s and continuing throughout the 1980s.54 Ehrenreich cites the unmistakable assertion of the teenage female libido following the appearance of the Beatles as an important marker in twentieth-century sexual history.55 In addition, she charts the “battle for orgasm equity” in the 1970s as a time when “heterosexuality itself was about to be redefined.”56 According to Ehrenreich, the dawn of new “postmedical” sex manuals such as Sensuous Woman (1969), The Joy of Sex (1972), and Our Bodies, Ourselves (1973) heralded a democratization of sexual discourse that slowly began to include attention to women’s pleasure.57 The latter, written by women for women, was the first to take women’s own experiences as relevant data.

55 Ibid, 6.
56 Ibid, 74.
57 Ibid, 90.
Revisions to the sexual marketplace, attitudes about sex, advice about sex, and images of sex became an important part of feminist thought and activism in the 1970s. As historian Jane Gerhard notes, many members of the emerging second wave of feminism saw sexual pleasure as empowering, writing that “while pleasure did not mean the same thing to every woman, it nonetheless became synonymous, briefly, with liberation.” Gerhard speaks to revisions in the 1960s and 1970s of what she calls “twentieth century American sexual thought,” arguing that during this time, particularly for women, “sexuality came to be linked to identity and utopian visions of a better way to live.” Understanding oneself as a sexual being and asserting sexual self-determination were seen as matters of political importance. In the 1970s, women’s sexuality became a key issue within the larger movement toward women’s liberation.

Prior to the 1970s, many women participated in the sexual revolution by catering to the sexual desires of men. According to historian Ruth Rosen, the sexual license brought on by the greater availability of birth control and more liberal sexual norms in the 1960s led in great part to women’s sexual exploitation. In what she calls the “male sexual revolution,” women were coerced into sex by males pressuring them to adapt to changing sexual mores by agreeing to more sexual activity. Women, particularly those involved in the civil rights and anti-war movements, were pressured to “put out” for movement men. Failure to do so often resulted in particular women being excluded from these organizations. A member of Students for a Democratic Society remembers that,

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59 Ibid, 4-5.
60 Ibid, 6.
62 Ibid, 145.
“part of the myth was that male sexuality, unlike female romanticism, was based on real, honest, animal lust, and women would have to learn to be as free as men and everything would be fine.” Many feminists rejected this model. As historian David Allyn notes, feminists in the early 1970s were beginning to attack the iconography of sex in mass culture, iconography that they believed catered to men. In 1971, two female students at Princeton University entered a male undergraduate’s dorm room and slashed his nude pinups. The women were tired of the atmosphere of sexual objectification in the building and felt the student, “known for papering his room wall to wall with *Playboy* pinup foldouts,” was an embodiment of the problem. The dissatisfaction with the male model of sexual liberation led women, both inside and outside social movements, to look elsewhere for answers and redefine female sexuality on their own terms.

Meanwhile, the popular culture of the 1970s touted a sexual revolution that was fighting sexual repression and advocating that people should “let it all hang out” for sexual freedom. Women in particular were encouraged to free themselves from antiquated notions of female passivity and propriety in relation to sexuality and embrace sexual agency and expression. These popular culture avenues for speaking about sex—getting sexual advice and tips from sex manuals, magazines, explicit romance novels, and adult films—provided opportunities for women to compare their sexual experiences with others while exploring and experimenting with new desires and fantasies. They offered women in the 1970s new outlets to express their sexuality in increasingly explicit and public forums. Indeed, in the 1970s the dissemination of sexual advice and eroticism for

63 Ibid, 146.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
women became intertwined with public entertainment in a variety of venues, and the stigma attached to women seeking sexual information and even erotic images was rapidly eroding.

Women’s Magazines, Women’s Liberation, and Women’s Sexuality

Magazines can be ephemeral, disposable entertainment or parts of an archive compiled by consumer-collectors. They may be purchased from a street vendor, at a local drugstore, or via mail-order subscription. Magazines may be stored away in closets, hidden under beds, or proudly displayed on coffee tables. In other words, ways of consuming magazines and their level of meaning to any given reader are difficult to measure, but their sheer flexibility as a form of media and their popularity as a means of disseminating sexual information to women in the early to mid-1970s make them meaningful objects of inquiry for scholars of sexual culture.

Due in part to their tremendous influence on the ways women viewed their roles in society, as well as their own bodies and sexuality, women’s magazines were a target of second-wave feminist thought and activism. Images of women and domesticity in women’s magazines play a major role in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan, a former contributor to women’s magazines, nevertheless took on the women’s magazine business’s advertising and editorial content that insulted women and created a false ideal, a “feminine mystique” by which women judged themselves and others. Indeed, Friedan accuses “the society and culture—the media, science, psychiatry,
education, social sciences—of a mass conspiracy to limit the lives of women.”

According to Friedan, the feminine mystique crushed women’s spirits and limited their opportunities because these magazines kept women from seeing themselves as anything but wives and mothers.

More recent scholarship, such as historian Joanne Meyerowitz’s “Beyond the Feminine Mystique,” has refuted many of Friedan’s claims in regard to women’s magazines of the post-World War II period. Meyerowitz finds that popular women’s magazines of the period did not merely glorify domesticity as Friedan claimed, but often focused positively on women’s achievements outside the home in the arenas of labor, politics, and community activism. In addition, Nancy Walker’s *Shaping Our Mother’s World: American Women’s Magazines* (2000) and Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1991) paint much more nuanced pictures of the sorts of identity categories and choices women were offered in women’s magazines as well as how these publications became influential and important pieces of women’s culture. Walker notes, for example, that femininity and domesticity were highly contested ideals in women’s magazines. Indeed, the content of magazines represented a complex terrain for the aspirations and anxieties of women in the decades prior to Friedan’s book. Most recently, Naomi Wolf writes that women’s magazines appear to offer “wise advice, tested by experience, of an admirable older female relative.” “The voice of the magazine,” Wolf asserts, “gives women an invisible female authority figure to admire and obey, parallel to the mentor-protégé

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69 Ibid.
relationship that many men are encouraged to forge in their education and on the job, but which women are rarely offered anywhere else but in their glossy magazines.”

Women’s magazines, in Wolf’s eyes, “cater to that delicious sense of female solidarity.” Seen in this way, whatever messages and concerns the magazines chose to embrace set the agenda for women’s understanding their place in the world around them. However, despite their complexity and because of their importance in women’s lives, women’s magazines continued to be targets for feminist activism and intervention in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In 1968, women’s magazines such as Cosmopolitan were thrown into a “Freedom Trash Can” along with bras, girdles, curlers, and wigs during a protest outside the Miss America Pageant. The beauty ideals promoted in Cosmopolitan placed it among other “instruments of torture” feminists sought to discredit during this famous feminist action. According to Ruth Rosen “the Miss America Pageant seemed to sum up everything these women rejected: woman as spectacle, woman as object, woman as consumer, woman as artificial image.” These feminists compared the competition to a cattle auction and displayed posters depicting a female body portioned off like various cuts of meat, claiming that magazines like Cosmopolitan encouraged women to submit their own bodies to a very similar version of scrutiny, fragmenting the female form in a quest to find flaws for which the magazine could offer solutions in the form of merchandise and advice. Cosmopolitan was among the list of products organizers of the

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid, 159.
1970 Women’s Strike for Equality urged women to boycott, but for some activists simply trashing or ignoring women’s magazines was not enough.76

The 1970 feminist sit-in at *Ladies’ Home Journal* illustrates the growing animosity toward the mixed messages, male control, and crass consumerism of women’s magazines. This feminist action garnered much media attention and was organized to do just that. Activist Karla Jay recalls, “over cups of coffee and countless cigarettes, women from across the New York feminist community hatched a complicated and well-oiled plot to bring the revolution to the world of magazine publishing and to its readers.”77 In many ways *Ladies’ Home Journal* was an easy target: it was the only women’s magazine being edited by a man, John Mack Carter, and more important, perhaps, its content had not yet responded to the women’s movement.78

The women scoured back issues of the *Journal* and compiled a list of grievances. The *Journal*’s focus on the lives of rich and famous women such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Elizabeth Taylor were noted, as were advice columns such as “Can This Marriage Be Saved?”79 In the latter, the woman was always blamed and was exhorted to make any necessary adjustments to her relationship herself. The feminist activists’ verdict was simple: the *Journal*’s content encouraged women to envy other women, dismissed women’s discontent in the realms of marriage and sex, and endlessly suggested that consumption was the key to feminine contentment and domestic bliss.80

76 Deborah Siegel *Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Women to Grrls Gone Wild*, (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 52.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid, 115.
In May 1970, feminists with media cameras in tow crammed into the office of the editor. The women demanded, among many other things, that an issue of the Journal be devoted to feminist concerns and be authored by movement women. Twelve hours later they emerged from the editor’s office with the promise of their own issue, which was the only real concession made by the magazine. Karla Jay recalls:

We started more and more to appeal to his capitalist self-interest—how much money he would make on a women’s liberation issue. We started to stand behind the money instead of the rightness and inevitable power of our cause. We appealed to his bourgeois instincts instead of to our needs, demands, and revolutionary ideals.81

As the activists predicted, the Journal’s circulation rose dramatically along with its embrace of feminist concerns. This negotiation between revolutionary ideals and capitalist reality was playing out in a variety of women’s magazines in the 1970s, and movement women were torn between publicizing their ideas and holding fast to their ideals.

Ms. magazine offers one of the best examples of this tension between movement feminism and consumer culture. Ms., which began publication in the winter of 1972, represented the mainstreaming of feminism in the early 1970s, creating what American studies scholar Amy Erdman Farrell calls “popular feminism.”82 “Ms. did not so much as repudiate the genre of mass market women’s magazines as try to revise it; a rhetorical move from ‘us girls’ in the mainstream women’s magazines to ‘we sisters’ in Ms. marked

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81 Ibid, 119.
this transformation.\textsuperscript{83} Ms. was neither a typical women’s magazine nor a radical feminist newsletter; rather it was something in between. It aimed to cover feminist issues in-depth and eschew the beauty and fashion focus of other women’s magazines, going as far to refuse advertising products it considered sexist. Many feminists applauded the opportunity to get the feminist message out to more women than ever before, but detractors felt the magazine was “co-opting” feminism by making it part of commercial media culture. Ms.’s success encouraged other magazines to think about how they might use the popularity of feminism and feminist ideas to sell magazines. As the 1968 Miss America protest, the 1970 Ladies’ Home Journal sit-in, and the birth and success of Ms. illustrate, the women’s movement was becoming a social and cultural force with which women’s magazines had to contend or negotiate in order to be considered relevant in the 1970s. But just how these periodicals went about the “process of revision” modeled by Ms. and to what end was varied and fascinating. For many publications, popular feminism meant adding a liberationist twist to women’s sexuality, and for this twist they took their cues from the popular culture of the decade.

In the early 1970s, various media, such as adult films, began to address women’s sexual pleasure as a theme. The poster for the immensely popular adult film Deep Throat posed the question, “How far does a girl have to go to untangle her tingle?” Not very far it would seem from all of the material aimed at addressing this and every other sexual issue facing women in the early 1970s. Explicit features such as Behind the Green Door (1972), Deep Throat (1973), The Devil in Mrs. Jones (1973), and later Insatiable (1980) dealt with women’s sexual satisfaction as a theme (at least on the surface), and such

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, 7.
features saw more women and heterosexual couples patronizing adult theaters.⁸⁴ Television, in its own way, began to deal with sex and titillation in its situation comedies, made-for-TV movies, and soap operas, the latter of which became much more sexually explicit in the early 1970s to appeal to younger female audience members. At the same time, romance novels had a revival of popularity, and as Janice Radway discussed in her early work on the genre, this revival was also largely due to their embrace of more sexually explicit material.⁸⁵ All of these developments were not lost on the most pioneering and successful women’s magazine editor at the time.

Helen Gurley Brown and Feminism

While feminists trashed *Cosmopolitan* in 1968, its new editor, Helen Gurley Brown, presided over one of the greatest turnaround stories in magazine publishing history. In 1965 she took a failing general interest magazine and turned it into United States’ most profitable women’s magazine. Since the publication of her famous and scandalous bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), Brown had been espousing sexual pleasure for women outside the bonds of monogamy and marriage. She took her “have-it-all” advice and glamorous vision of women’s sexuality to her job at the helm of *Cosmopolitan*. As the editor of the once-conservative *Cosmopolitan* Brown continued promoting the very frank discussion of sexuality she had begun with her book. The

⁸⁴ In her autobiography, *Ordeal* (1980), the star of *Deep Throat*, Linda Lovelace, claimed to have been beaten, manipulated, and raped before and during the production of the film by her then-husband Chuck Traynor. In the 1980s Lovelace renounced her pornography career and became a spokesperson for the feminist anti-pornography movement.

mystique of the glamorous single life for women was the fuel to *Cosmopolitan*’s fire. As one journalist put it at the time Brown, “took the sex out of the girlie magazine and put it in a magazine for girls.”

As British feminist scholar Janice Winship points out, although sixty percent of *Cosmopolitan*’s readers were married, “the feel of the magazine is single.” While Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* offered the pleasures of bachelorhood to married men, Brown brought the “celebration of singleness” to women of every marital status. No longer would a reader have to search through pages of copy about fashion and household advice to find a discreetly placed article on sexuality; *Cosmopolitan* offered sexual titillation from cover to cover. Both the images of busty models on the cover and the racy blurbs promising advice about sex and dating signaled a new kind of engagement with sexuality in women’s magazines, and despite feminist calls to boycott her magazine Brown saw portraying women as active sexual agents in their own right as a worthy form of feminism as well. In 1970 Brown proclaimed herself a supporter of women’s liberation and proved her dedication to the cause by publishing several feminist articles including an excerpt from Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) in the November 1970 issue of *Cosmopolitan*.

It is difficult to overestimate the reach and influence of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and Brown in the early 1970s. Media scholar Laurie Ouellette casts Brown as one of the key female figures in the sexual revolution, analyzing Brown’s early advice to women as

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88 Ibid, 106
“a cultural discourse that managed some of the social and economic tensions of the 1960s and early 1970s, while also offering certain women the symbolic material to enable them to think about themselves as historical subjects in new ways.”90 According to Ouellette, Brown offered her working-girl readers a mixed bag: “The cultural discourse Brown articulated legitimated sexism and the capitalist exploitation of women’s labor, while simultaneously expressing hardships and desires in a voice that spoke to an expanding class of pink-collar women.”91 Through the highly commercial medium of *Cosmopolitan*, Brown spoke to these women’s desire to be more active agents in their own lives, whether at home or in the workplace.

Sexuality studies scholar Julie Berebitsky argues that Brown’s advice altered the way both women and men saw the sexual atmosphere of the workplace: “Brown directed women to seek professional advancement, and she tied women’s sexual freedom and sexual opportunities directly to their place in the workforce. She also urged women to use gender and, to varying degrees, sexuality for their own gain.”92 By acknowledging their sexuality in the office environment, Brown felt women could use sexual tension in the workplace to their advantage. All told, in the eyes of these two scholars, Brown’s conception of women’s desire for men was for material gain, and sexuality was more often a tool than a source of pleasure. As astute as both Ouelette and Berebitsky’s observations about Brown’s many interventions into sexual politics are, both overlook the contributions Brown made in revising American sexual thought surrounding erotic material for women, and neither take Brown’s brand of feminism very seriously.

90 Ibid, 359.
91 Ibid, 360.
Historian Jennifer Scanlon, author of the first biography of Brown, argues explicitly for Brown’s place in the pantheon of influential second-wave feminist thinkers. Brown’s “Horatio Alger version of feminism” focused on female achievement and independence. “Brown’s particular approach,” Scanlon writes, “linked her not only to other members of her generation but also to successive generations of women, through a philosophy of feminism compatible with both capitalism and popular culture.”

Brown’s feminism was wedded to the needs of capitalism and consumption but also translated to the mentality of working women that had always made up a majority of her audience. Through her magazine, Brown engaged women who were not looking for and would probably never join an organized women’s movement. Scanlon writes, “throughout the women’s liberation era, Brown recognized that large numbers of women wanted a role model rather than a movement, a friend rather than a political mentor.”

She was also savvy enough to know that even the most liberated women could not live outside the pressures of beauty and consumer culture. Unlike many movement feminists, Brown “would advocate working within the system rather than trying to change it, manipulating the rules men wrote rather than attempting to rewrite the rules altogether.” This is the way Brown approached women’s place in the world, including the way she approached the topic of women’s sexuality.

Here again Brown differed from traditional feminists in that she “viewed women’s sexuality in the context of capitalist exchanges.”

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93 Scanlon, Bad Girls Go Everywhere, xi.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid, xiv.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid, 30.
98 Ibid, 170.
Scanlon writes, “Brown would create, market, and further a female sexual marketplace in which both the inequities and the pleasures of a liberated sexuality within a capitalist system would become apparent and open to negotiation.”99 Brown believed in individual versus collective change, and within the pages of *Cosmopolitan* she “put forward her version of feminism, which was most often cultural rather than political.”100 In her magazine, Brown would create a playful and positive representation of women’s sexuality, in stark contrast to the cries of exploitation coming from the women’s movement in the late 1960s and 1970s.101 Brown’s playful negotiation with the rules of sexuality came into stark relief when she angled for Reynolds to become her magazine’s first nude male centerfold. Brown’s decision to place a nude male centerfold in her magazine in 1972, largely ignored by her biographer and cultural scholars studying her life and magazine, set the stage for the even more explicit sexual images for women that followed. Brown’s decision would have a profound effect on the sexual marketplace she created, changing and expanding it further than she would ever have imagined.

Brown Finds Burt

Reynolds originally agreed to pose as a nude *Cosmopolitan* centerfold when he met Brown on *The Tonight Show* in early 1972. While engaging in an on-air conversation about sexism, Brown cornered Reynolds by proposing that he pose nude in her magazine. With some hesitation, he finally conceded. In an August 1972 interview with *After Dark* magazine, Reynolds justified his decision to pose for *Cosmopolitan*:

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid, 186.
101 Ibid, 171-172.
The only kick I got out of the whole thing was that I was sending up Playboy, which I hate desperately. It’s a masturbatory magazine under the guise of being a sophisticated male journal. A man can buy Playboy and stroll out with his head held high, and go to the john and jerk off and nobody thinks anything. But the same man goes in and says, “Let me have a copy of Boob, or Crotch, or Screw,” and he has to put them in a brown paper wrapper or buy a copy of House Beautiful to wrap them in.¹⁰²

Reynolds’s comments indicate the degree to which Playboy operated to legitimize and mainstream explicit material for men, and Reynolds’s centerfold, appearing in the most successful magazine for young women at the time, had a similar impact. In Reynolds’s 1994 autobiography, My Life, he expresses regret at having posed, but at the time he writes, I “truly did feel that it would be amusing to give women an alternative to the silicone pinups they had tolerated their husbands hanging on the refrigerator and over the tool bench for ages.”¹⁰³ He suggests that he was tricked, that he had thought posing would be a joke, and that in conversations with Brown, he had suggested a specific comical context for the centerfold. In his autobiography, he remembers:

On the back of the foldout, I told them I wanted to underscore the Playboy takeoff with a photograph of me pushing a grocery cart. I’d list my favorite colors, hobbies, books, and be quoted saying “I’m looking forward to becoming an actress.” But I got screwed.¹⁰⁴

Reynolds’s means of countering *Playboy* contrast starkly with the methods being employed by those active in the women’s movement. While Reynolds intended to lampoon the *Playboy* centerfold, feminist groups were using different methods. For instance, there was a “nude-in” at Grinnell College in Iowa protested campus recruitment of women to pose for *Playboy*.105 Some members of the Women’s Liberation Army admitted to defacing and pouring glue on issues of the magazine.106 Despite both Reynolds’s and feminist activists’ feelings about *Playboy*, Brown determined to make her own feminist statement, one of reciprocity, using Reynolds’s image. She wished to give women a serious male centerfold of their own, and the sensation created by the *Cosmopolitan* centerfold sent a message to magazine publishers: women would seek out and pay for nude male centerfolds. The message was clear: when the Reynolds centerfold issue sold 1.5 million copies, selling out instantly in most places, the stage was set for even more male nudity to come.107

*Cosmopolitan*’s centerfold feature was prominently heralded on the cover of the April 1972 issue, with a banner declaring “At Last a Male Nude Centerfold: The Naked Truth About Guess Who!!” (figure 1.2). Despite her boldness in asking Reynolds on national television to pose nude in her magazine, in her editorial column for the issue, Brown assured her readers that neither she nor any of her female *Cosmopolitan* staff went to the centerfold shoot. She writes, “Francesco Scavullo took his picture, (none of us girls went to the session).”108 Here Brown underscores the notion that a woman’s place was not yet in the photographer’s studio, as a producer of explicit images; rather she and

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105 Siegel, *Sisterhood Interrupted*, 33.
the “girls” should be consumers, reading *Cosmopolitan* and enjoying their new centerfold in private. Part of the difficulty Brown encountered in selling the centerfold to her readers was one of propriety. She had to convince her readers that while nice girls might not take dirty pictures they are certainly allowed and even encouraged, to look at them. This was *Cosmopolitan*’s model of female sexual liberation, wrapped up (or unwrapped) in a single image. It was essential that this new feature not come across in the wrong way; after all, the centerfold was part of Brown’s campaign to update the Cosmo Girl for the new decade.

On the page immediately preceding the Reynolds centerfold feature, Brown placed an entire page of further justifications, instructions, and context. The piece, entitled “Cosmo’s Playmate of the Year!—Why?” began by stating:

Some people, (mostly men past fifty!) thought our idea a perfect scandal. Women, they blustered, are not turned on by nakedness in a man. Indeed, nice girls would be bound to shield their eyes from such a sight in shock or even disgust.  

*Cosmopolitan* begged to differ: “the girls we know think men’s bodies are wonderful, and find a good-looking man wearing only his taut, tightly muscled skin a pleasure to gaze upon.” This page insisted that gazing upon naked men was a pleasure women had been denied, and it was high time to rectify that injustice. According to Cosmopolitan, nude images of men had been withheld because of “stubborn vestiges of outdated tradition.” This inequity could be turned around, the article argues, if “they” (presumably men), would just ask a few women what they wanted. “Until recently,” the

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110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
piece argues “those in control of publications have been men, who thought only of pleasing their brother men, and neglecting the visual appetites of us equally appreciative girls.” 112 Hidden among all the italics is the notion that women needed more control, not only of publications like *Cosmopolitan*, which was unique with its female celebrity editor and largely female staff, but also possibly in producing sexually pleasing visual images. Brown’s success in convincing Reynolds to pose and her control of the context in which the centerfold photo was taken and presented gave her control of the rhetorical situation. There is also a strain of sisterhood in this narrative of sexual liberation. With the centerfold on the following page, women were balancing the scales, righting a wrong while also satisfying their unspoken and perhaps unknown, desire for nude males. Finally, the quotation equates the female’s appetite for sexually stimulating images of the opposite sex with that of men.

While the piece goes into great detail to describe women’s desire for images of men, it is also careful to qualify such interest as a natural, healthy appetite: “women are, of course, becoming more and more candidly sexual—no, that does not mean promiscuous, just lusty and honest in their appetite for and appreciation of attractive men.” 113 According to this logic, women had been coy about their objectification of men, as close contact with too many flesh-and-blood naked men could sully a girl’s reputation; but now *Cosmopolitan* was giving women license to go after a man for more than just his money or connections. Going further, the author also argues that the only place that male nudes could be found previously were in “quasi-homosexual publications” and possibly *National Geographic*. *Cosmopolitan* changed all of that by

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112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
providing an image that was properly vetted and packaged for exclusively female consumption. Because the Reynolds centerfold appears in *Cosmopolitan*, the reasoning asserts, one can be assured that it is not tainted by perverse sexuality or mere scientific or ethnographic pursuit. It has been done in good taste, like the classical male nudes mentioned in the piece, Michelangelo’s *David* and Rodin’s *The Thinker*. However, Reynolds’s hand shields his genitals in the centerfold, making his pose more modest than either of the above mentioned classical works of art (figure 1.3).

The Reynolds centerfold certainly challenged traditional feminine notions of propriety, and provided transgressive opportunities for women to possess, circulate, and consume an image of a naked man; however, *Cosmopolitan* asked the image to do a tremendous amount of cultural work, reversing years of objectification of women by men. At the center of the written piece preceding the centerfold, and in Reynolds’s comments about it, is the idea that the centerfold itself provides reciprocity for all of the women of the world who are tired of being considered sex objects. The piece traces this unease with objectification, expressed by the feminists at the Miss America protest, as merely a reaction to not being permitted to “return the compliment,” as the piece in *Cosmopolitan* suggests. It is as if within the discursive space of the magazine, Brown and *Cosmopolitan* believe that putting the occasional male centerfold in their publication balanced out the objectification of women in countless “girlie” magazines every month. This is indeed a heavy burden for any one image to bear.

Brown was faced with the task of selling a nude centerfold for women to a possibly skeptical public, which is strikingly similar to a challenge faced by *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner. While Hefner’s nude “playmates” were ubiquitous by 1972, they
were not such an easy sell when the magazine launched twenty years earlier, in 1952. Hefner, too, had to overcome the notion that looking at nude photos of women in magazines was shameful. As author Gay Talese relates, “prior to Playboy, few men in America had ever seen a color photograph of a nude woman, and they were overwhelmed and embarrassed as they bought Playboy at the newsstand.” 114 Hefner countered this anxiety about female nudes and their past association with tawdry underground publications, by filling his magazine with reprints of classic literature and articles on current events written by some of the most well-known writers of the day. But most importantly, Hefner made sure his centerfold was not intimidating. Playboy “presented a nude woman who appeared to be sexually approachable” and made sure that each reader could picture himself with her.115 In addition to the centerfold photograph, each Playboy Playmate of the Month had a written profile as well; this filtered information concerned the supposed interests, attitudes, and activities of the Playmate. Two critics writing in 1974, Richard Kallan and Robert Brooks, argued in relation to these profiles that “the rhetoric of that curriculum vitae argues two themes: the Playmate is available and she is morally admirable. Our view is that for two decades these motifs have functioned to legitimize the nude centerfold.”116 They go on to argue that “the Playmate was never sophisticated but always portrayed as a simple innocent. Therein lay her mystique.”117 When asked what they were looking for in men, the Playmates never insisted they be handsome; indeed, most often their vague descriptions could match any male reader of the magazine.

115 Ibid.
117 Ibid, 329.
It was the Playmates’ girl-next-door looks and approachability that led to a wider audience for Playboy, and a mainstreaming of photo-realistic female nudity in men’s magazines. This mainstreaming led to one of Playboy’s greatest successes: the ability to sell in most ordinary newsstands and drugstores, taking the sex magazine out of the seedy, beneath-the-counter, adult bookstore category. In contrast, Brown already had the best selling young women’s magazine in the country with distribution in nearly every drugstore and supermarket, so her centerfold borrowed from, even as it modified in meaningful ways, Hefner’s proven formula.

Despite Reynolds’s stated intention to mock the conventions of Playboy by having Cosmopolitan compile a humorous and contrived biography for him, Brown opted to do just the opposite. Accompanying the Reynolds centerfold is a brief article about Reynolds and his girlfriend at the time, Dinah Shore. The copy observes that Reynolds “seems to prefer established celebrities” and the caption under a photo of the couple walking outside and holding hands reads “for the past six months Burt and Dinah have been like coffee-and-cream.”118 This portion of the Reynolds feature seems to preclude female readers’ easy identification with him as a potential playmate; indeed, he is marked by his inaccessibility to the average Cosmopolitan reader. Unlike the monthly Playmate profiles in Playboy, Cosmopolitan’s first centerfold was decidedly taken. In order to have a chance with Reynolds, a woman would have to work hard to be somebody, a bootstraps ethic that fit nicely with Brown’s Cosmo Girl philosophy that any girl could have it all if only she had the tenacity and the right wardrobe. Shore was 56 at the time of the centerfold, twenty years older than Reynolds. The implicit message was that

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Shore could use her talents and charm to snag a young movie star, with the right advice and opportunity perhaps Cosmopolitan readers could too.

Yet readers also appeared to be interested in the effect, if any, the centerfold phenomenon had on Reynolds and Shore as a couple, and in examining what the enthusiastic reception of the centerfold meant for women. In fact, Modern Screen devoted an entire feature article in 1974, two years after the infamous centerfold, to uncovering why Reynolds posed, why Dinah let him, and what it all had meant. The author pondered how Dinah really felt about “sharing a beloved partner so intimately with the world” and how the couple must have had to “explore the possibilities, reasons, and effects of such flamboyant exhibitionism individually and as a couple.”

“How could some amount of anguish not have been involved?” the author asks. Reynolds admitted to the author that he had asked Dinah for permission to pose and would have backed out if she had objected. The whole relationship must be “all tuned in in some modern way to the feminist movement,” the author concluded. She went on to ponder what the centerfold phenomenon meant to women. “Perhaps this kind of attitude has to do with the eagerness of some women to rectify the years of ogling men and ‘skin’ magazines,” she mused, “putting men in the inferior position of ‘object’ may be an overzealous way of demanding reparations, and for feeling for the first time ‘superior’ or in control.” As this Modern Screen cover story makes evident, even two years after its original publication, Reynolds’ centerfold remained one of the most talked about, and thought about, popular culture phenomena of the early 1970s.

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119 Helen Reed, Modern Screen, April 1974: 39.
120 Ibid, 41.
121 Ibid, 78.
122 Ibid, 78.
Other than portraying Burt as a difficult catch, elements of the Reynolds

*Cosmopolitan* centerfold both echoed and deviated from *Playboy*’s first centerfold. Hugh Hefner’s first centerfold, Marilyn Monroe, set the standard for *Playboy*’s vision of female sexuality. In his book *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), film theorist Richard Dyer discusses the Monroe centerfold. Prior to *Playboy*, the pinup, he argues, “was indeed a disreputable form, associated, quite correctly, with the dirty talk of men’s locker rooms and toilets.” The image of Monroe used for the *Playboy* centerfold had origins in this disreputable world. It was a recycled image, taken from a nude calendar called Golden Dreams, a project Monroe had posed for in 1948 during her modeling days, long before she became an established actress. The calendar had been “displayed in factories, garages and truck stops across the nation.” Dyer claims it was Monroe’s reaction to the initial scandal her unearthed photo produced that underscored the playful naturalness of the style of sexuality that she (and *Playboy*) represented that recontextualized the image. When asked what she had on when the obviously nude photo was taken, Monroe responded, “I had the radio on.” Going further, Monroe used a more populist appeal to defend her posing for the calendar “I don’t want to be just for the few, I want to be for the many, the kind of people I come from. I want a man to come home after a hard day’s work, look at this picture and feel inspired to say, Wow!” This aspect of Monroe’s persona, her accessibility, is commented upon repeatedly by Sarah Churchwell, professor of American literature and culture, in her critical study of the multitude of Monroe biographies, *The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe* (2004). She notes author Norman Mailer’s comment that

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126 Monroe quoted in Churchwell, 214.
he did not think Monroe should be married because she “belonged to all men.” 127 Comments like these, Churchwell asserts, imply that Monroe “was a shared cultural commodity, that she was, as [popular recording artist] Elton John knew, ‘our Marilyn Monroe.’” 128

Monroe’s guiltless response bled over into the attitudes of the men who were reading Playboy. There was nothing wrong, nothing “unnatural,” about men looking at beautiful nude women. If Monroe, who was voted top box-office star by film distributors in 1953, appeared in the magazine, then who could tell men that it was not permissible? Monroe’s response to the scandal, combined with the Playboy philosophy, that sex was natural, an issue of personal freedom, and could be enjoyed by nice girls right along with men, worked to create a new context that rescued Monroe’s centerfold image from its “disreputable” working-class roots. In this way it glossed over anxieties about both sex and class. In the same vein, Brown had a nude photo of another established box-office star and argued for her working-girl readers’ right to view it without guilt. It was now not only permissible for nice girls to enjoy sex, but also to think of men as sex objects, and it was thus permissible for men to be photographed for that express purpose. Going further, Brown’s first centerfold in Cosmopolitan established a precedent for women editors to control the presentation and context for such images in magazines for women.

Certain differences are apparent in the two centerfold images, however. In contrast to Monroe’s ease with nudity, Reynolds’s comments on his own centerfold photo shoot underscore his discomfort with his own nudity. Details within the image itself confirm a little of this discomfort, such as the awkward placing of his hands between his

127 Mailer quoted in Churchwell, 215.
legs to cover his genitals. But most telling is Reynolds’ description of the environment during the photo session. In his autobiography he recalls being drunk and that the photo studio was “as cold as the Arctic.”129  “Men don’t hold up to well in cold air,” Reynolds explains, and he complains that each of the male photographer’s assistant “seemed so gay his hair was on fire.”130 Reynolds’s obvious discomfort during the production of his centerfold (it was too cold and queer) stands in bold contrast to Monroe’s complete ease with being photographed nude. Reynolds was also upset over his inability to be totally in control of his own image. More than a year after the Cosmo centerfold, he told Playgirl editor Marin Milam, “you will never know the pressures I’ve had after the centerfold came out. . .I was so fed up, tired and angry at what was happening—the idiots who didn’t get it.”131 But what Reynolds really had trouble with was relinquishing control of his image to the Cosmopolitan community: Brown, her staff and readers and critics. These people together ultimately would contextualize his centerfold. What becomes clear from Reynolds’s comments is that he did not see his centerfold the same way the magazine and the public did: as an offering to women. Reynolds had hoped to make a joke out of Playboy and its Playmates, but Brown eschewed the rhetorical situation Reynolds proposed and created one of her own. As future chapters of this project will indicate, her decision would have cultural resonance far beyond the pages of Cosmopolitan.

As Dyer notes, much of what Playboy did in its pages “seems an attempt to integrate its sexual freedom into suburban white-collar life.”132 This statement is true, at

129 Reynolds, My Life, 174.
130 Ibid.
132 Dyer, Heavenly Bodies, 39.
least in its application to men in the 1950s. For men in the United States, Playboy magazine, as well as its centerfold, was not necessarily something to hide; rather, it was something they could have on the coffee table. So if Monroe provided the perfect vehicle for expressing the Playboy project of “liberating” male sexuality, what do we make of Cosmopolitan’s centerfold for women? Reynolds provided a seemingly harmless sex object, a famous actor and former football player, for women to display as they wished. By consuming and displaying the centerfold Cosmopolitan readers connected with the times: the centerfold became a material manifestation of the women’s movement and the sexual revolution.

The Legacy and Influence of the Burt Reynolds Centerfold

Reynolds’ reputation as a sex symbol was cemented by the centerfold, and it forever became part of his star persona. In his autobiography and elsewhere, he has accused the centerfold of hurting his career and causing fans and critics alike to take his work less seriously.\textsuperscript{133} Reynolds also complains that the image was reproduced endlessly, on key chains, floor mats, coasters, pillow cases, wallpaper, T-shirts, and panties.\textsuperscript{134} He was not paid to pose in Cosmopolitan, nor did he make any money off of any of the licensing of his centerfold image. Two years after posing he estimated he had lost out on $4 million after refusing to engage in profit sharing with Cosmopolitan.\textsuperscript{135} However, this is not to say that Reynolds has not profited indirectly from his centerfold

\textsuperscript{134} Reynolds, My Life, 175.
or that he was not complicit in keeping his reputation as a male centerfold and sex object in the public eye.  

In October 1972 a book entitled *Hot Line: The Letters I Get... and Write* was published. In the book Reynolds reprints some of the thousands of letter he had received from his fans along with “16 pages of sexy new photos” of himself (figures 1.4 and 1.5). The photos show Reynolds in various states of undress and surrounded by several attractive young women. Based on his opinion of the *Cosmopolitan* centerfold, these photos, showing him in a football jersey and under (rather than on top of) a bearskin rug with four women, seem to be images Reynolds might have preferred to the centerfold. The book can be interpreted as an attempt on the part of Reynolds to attempt to regain control of his image. The shots in the book are more relaxed and playful than the *Cosmopolitan* centerfold and also work to heterosexualize the display of male flesh with the inclusion of images of women fawning over Reynolds. In the text of the book, Reynolds responds to letters from both women (and a few men) interested in him and his centerfold. One woman put her thoughts into a poem:

**A Verse for Sexy Burt**

Your name is a bedroom word.

To every itching, twitching bird.

From sixteen to sixty each feminine fan.

Goes ape when she beholds your marvelous can.  

Indeed, if we take the book at its word, women from eighteen to seventy-eight wrote letters to express their sexual attraction to the star, but a great many also mentioned how

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136 Reynolds appeared (fully clothed) on the cover of the December 1974 issue of *Playgirl* and reprints his *Cosmopolitan* centerfold (taking up an entire page) in his 1992 autobiography.

they used Reynolds and his centerfold to get a reaction from their male partners. There is a letter from one woman who habitually left her husband in bed alone so she could watch Reynolds on television and another from a woman who writes of “salivating over the fold-out” while teasing her husband about how his body did not measure up to Reynolds’. Numerous women wrote letters describing jealous husbands and unmet sexual desires, but (perhaps more telling) they used the centerfold as means of starting a conversation with their husbands and partners about their sexual desires and needs. For many women, the centerfold opened up a line of communication to express themselves, often for the first time, as desiring men’s bodies.

*Cosmopolitan*’s decision to put a male centerfold in its magazine was a way of bolstering its reputation as a provocative and relevant women’s magazine. It was a way of bringing notoriety and a sexual edge to the magazine and its editor, who was even at that time many years older than the readers. Brown’s shocking revelation in 1962 that single women could and should have a sex life was not particularly shocking in and of itself by 1972. Strategically, a nude male body in the pages of Brown’s magazine was a sure way to grab headlines, sell magazines, and keep her single-girl rhetoric updated for the 1970s, but it also went far in legitimating the practice of nude male centerfolds for other publications to come.

Certainly, opportunities for women to gaze upon men’s bodies in magazines were not unheard of in popular culture prior to *Cosmopolitan*’s centerfold. Shirtless “beefcake” shots of popular male film stars appeared in movie magazines in the 1950s and 1960s. What had changed was the license Brown and her magazine gave women to

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acknowledge and even fight for their right to enjoy a nude male centerfold. As Richard Dyer points out about the time before the Reynolds centerfold:

though male sex appeal had long been a marketable commodity, it was still an oddly unspoken one. If a man was attractive to women, it was generally discussed in terms of qualities of personality that were only in part to do with how he treated women. . . Women showing an active sexual interest in men were generally labeled, popularly and psychoanalytically, as predatory or neurotic.\textsuperscript{139}

\textit{Cosmopolitan}'s centerfold suggested a predatory gaze for women, one that scrutinized the male anatomy for the sheer pleasure of it. While the movie magazine beefcake shots almost always had their subjects engaged in some sort of activity, chopping firewood or boating, to attempt to justify their partial nudity, \textit{Cosmopolitan}'s centerfold simply presented a naked, prone male with no need for pretense. Not only that, the centerfold brought female sexuality to the fore as a topic of conversation between women, between sexual partners, and in the media.

\textit{Cosmopolitan} exploited women’s enthusiasm for sexual information and portrayed women as desperate for erotic images of men (in the copy that accompanied the centerfold that insinuated women might have searched through \textit{National Geographic} and gay publications for images of naked men). The magazine seemed to answer a need by providing a means through which women could fit the consumption of sexually explicit images of men into their daily lives. Because women’s desire for explicit images was placed on par with men’s, the use of explicit images takes on an air of symbolic egalitarianism, even reciprocity. \textit{Cosmopolitan} continued to periodically place nude male centerfolds in its pages in the 1970s: entertainer John Davidson and Cleveland Browns

\textsuperscript{139} Dyer, \textit{Heavenly Bodies}, 53.
fullback Jim Brown in 1974, and Arnold Schwarzeneggar in 1977. This new form of visual culture, the male centerfold, was destined to have an impact on the entire genre of women’s magazines in the 1970s. Janice Winship observes, “Cosmo itself continued to thrive on the sexual reputation that first gesture established.”¹⁴⁰ Through the centerfolds, women’s sexual liberation had been embodied in ways that both increased its visibility and limited its impact. In the pages of Cosmopolitan women were offered a legitimate space to contemplate their own desires, but at the same time those desires, which had the potential to be directed in any number of directions, were largely being directed back toward the male body and were still constrained by prescriptive norms related to gender.

Researchers must continue to question the terms by which women were assimilated into the sexual revolution as well as the possibilities and limitations of the cultural offerings aimed at them. What for feminists were real political questions about men’s regulation of the terms of women’s access to their own sexuality became largely economic questions and marketing concerns for women’s magazines. This chapter has offered, through a re-examination of the sexual philosophy of Brown and a close reading of her Cosmopolitan centerfold, an example of the soft-core sexual liberation narrative that would make its way into magazines for women in the early 1970s. In the world of these magazines, all lifestyle choices and decisions emanated out of women’s heterosexual desire and objectification of men. Put another way, after years of busty female Cosmopolitan covers and features encouraging women to objectify themselves as well as other women, the beginning of a process whereby women became intelligible as sexual subjects through their consumption of images of nude men is seen. The bestselling Cosmopolitan centerfold issue offered opportunities for women to express

¹⁴⁰ Winship, Inside Women’s Magazines, 107
their interest in sex publicly. Lining up to buy the centerfold issue of *Cosmopolitan* offered women the feeling of pursuing and objectifying men for a change, the significance of which should not be underestimated. These publications brought the nude male into popular culture in a new way, through the scrutinizing eyes of millions of American women. In this way it was an opportunity for both liberation and demystification.

Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the later introduction of sex magazines for women did not emerge from a vacuum but is instead part of a complex media matrix attempting to make sense (and money) out of the liberationist narratives circulating through culture in the 1970s. As historian David Allyn observed of the nude males in women’s magazines, “the goal was to create the allure of sexual radicalism in order to maximize profits.”

In the years ahead, magazine publishers would stretch the commercial appeal of the male centerfold to its limit, and as the radical allure attached to nude male bodies on display for women waned so did enthusiasm for sex magazines for women. But for a time in the early 1970s, the *Cosmopolitan* centerfolds set the tone for women’s sexual fantasy and desire. Its publications shaped an entirely new genre of women’s magazines.

*Cosmopolitan*’s centerfold invited a multitude of ordinary working women into the sexual revolution and gave them a visual representation of what sexual liberation for women might *look like*. These women, many of whom might never have read a feminist manifesto or attended a consciousness-raising session, were offered these nude centerfolds as a visual embodiment of the sexual liberation they had been hearing so much about. Of course, *Cosmopolitan*’s idea that the magazine had liberated (with its

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centerfold) a hidden cache of female desire and fantasy certainly had its limits. As Janice Winship has observed, “it is illusory to think that hidden away behind our inhibitions is our ‘true’ sexuality and freedom. Sexuality is as culturally constructed and learnt as is the language we speak.”¹⁴² The first *Cosmo* centerfold is but one example of the cultural construction of female sexuality, however, as future chapters will make clear, female sexuality in the early 1970s was a complex amalgam, responding to social movements, commercial pressures. In the case of the Reynolds centerfold we have seen how it was influenced by the whims and egos of celebrities of both genders. All of these forces converged here at the beginning of a struggle to attempt to make what was largely a male institution, magazine pornography, speak to American women.

The next chapter will examine how the women’s magazine industry responded to *Cosmopolitan*’s nude male centerfold. Specifically, it will examine how sex magazines for women (including popular titles such as *Playgirl*, *Viva* and several others) tried to turn what was in many ways a marketing gimmick into a monthly feature, cementing the nude male centerfold into the popular consciousness in the 1970s. Indeed, these sex magazines took sex out of the margins of traditional women’s magazines and made it the center of the female reader’s universe. Each publication was a variation on a common theme, crafting a soft-core vision of female sexual agency and desire. The ultimate “single girl,” Helen Gurley Brown, had shown them how.

Chapter Two


By 1973, the movement of pornography into mainstream culture, exemplified by the introduction of male nudity into Helen Gurley Brown’s *Cosmopolitan*, was spreading. The previous chapter discussed how Brown used the Burt Reynolds centerfold to augment the single-girl identity and lifestyle that had fueled the success of *Cosmopolitan*. This chapter will discuss how the strategic rhetoric of female editors of sex magazines for women continued to shape the idea of sexual liberation for women around the concept of male nudity. They built on Brown’s “single-girl” and introduced the playgirl archetype. This chapter will chart the rehabilitation of the term *playgirl* and its redefinition in the pages of sex magazines for women. In the pages of these magazines, the editors recovered the term playgirl, which had long been associated with women as passive sex objects, and re-imagined it as an active term used to describe heterosexual women as liberated, independent, and stylish sexual agents. In order to sell their magazines to women, however, these publications had to de-emphasize the role of male publishers in shaping the publications and play up the influence and expertise of female editors and staff. In short, this chapter argues that having women as spokespersons for these publications was an important part of the rhetorical strategy for selling the playgirl to the public.

This chapter considers the first three years of existence of sex magazines for women, a time during which publications came and went but the message they all embraced endured. It examines the editorial strategies editors used during this time to establish the playgirl as a new archetype for the sexually liberated woman. The editors’
use of feminist terminology was ubiquitous, yet their embrace of feminism was never complete; they all broached the women’s movement cautiously and selectively. They went about their rhetorical project of crafting sex magazines for women by strategically bending the ideas of liberation and equality to fit their commercial goals while establishing a new magazine genre to meet the needs of the “new” woman of the 1970s. In the hands of these editors, sex became not just an event, but a lifestyle, closely wedded to the tenor and terminology of the times. This phenomenon can best be described as the “playgirl ethos.”

The editors of sex magazines for women were almost always women and they competed with one another to incorporate their liberated insights into sexual culture and took on the task of selling male nudity to women in the news media and in their magazines. This chapter explores the logic and rhetoric involved in their articulations of the playgirl lifestyle. These women never failed to couch their offerings in terms of liberation, freedom, and greater equity with men, all familiar language from the women’s movement. Throughout the 1970s, the editors of sex magazines for women wrote passionately about their concern with sexual violence and their support for greater opportunities for women in the workplace. They also gave a tremendous amount of space to editorials and articles supporting the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), as discussed in the following chapter. Like many movement feminists, the editors of sex magazines for women saw equality in the bedroom as intrinsically linked to equality in the workplace and freedom from sexual violence and exploitation. However, as will be seen in Chapter 4, the narrative of liberation offered by these magazines was bound from
its very beginning by the market orientation of the magazine industry, an extremely competitive and decidedly consumption-oriented enterprise.

In the years following 1972, *Playgirl* magazine and its competitors, magazines with titles such as *Viva*, *Foxylady*, and *Venus*, infused heterosexual female sexuality with a new sense of agency, cosmopolitanism, and explicitness and used sexuality to frame a new identity for women: the playgirl. Being a playgirl meant breaking away from traditional sexual mores represented by their mothers and grandmothers, and embracing a new “liberating” world of sexual information, agency, and male nudity. Each magazine imagined its readers as minor variations on a particular type: the sexually liberated women of the 1970s. This newly conceived archetype wanted monthly installments of sexually oriented information and entertainment in a format that had become a staple of heterosexual male culture two decades earlier. Indeed, by the time these new titles for women emerged, the sex magazine was already a well-established genre. For the women who edited sex magazines for women, it was an inherited genre with codes, conventions, and narratives they would have to adapt to a female audience. *Playgirl* and its competitors faced the difficult task of seeking to subvert traditional female sex roles through imitating a traditionally male form of sexual expression.

By the early 1970s, male sex magazines were a mix of imitation and market segmentation. *Playboy* had introduced variations on its theme of the “Girl Next Door” by introducing *Oui*, which featured the “continental sisters of Brigit Bardot” and *Club*, which featured English girls “with a slight taste for fetish, leather boots, and whips.”

Beginning in 1969, *Playboy* and *Penthouse* were locked in competition with one another

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in what the media dubbed the “pubic wars.”\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Penthouse} was the first to show women’s pubic hair in 1970, with \textit{Playboy} following suit nine months after.\textsuperscript{145} In 1974, publisher Larry Flint’s \textit{Hustler} exceeded them both in explicitness with his battle cry “Think Pink.”\textsuperscript{146} In the meantime, \textit{Players} (1973) magazine was launched to appeal exclusively to black men.\textsuperscript{147} With a format almost identical to \textit{Playboy}, it was supposed to be “Playboy in basic black,” selling young black males “the good life” complete with “bad pads, fine cars, wine” and a black female centerfold.\textsuperscript{148} Ironically, in this milieu of increasing competition and explicitness in the men’s sex magazine market, titles for women would be required to justify their very existence, to both their detractors in the media and their potential female readership.

Sex and “Loose” Lifestyles in the 1970s

Sociologist Sam Binkley’s work on lifestyle publications in the 1970s, while not explicitly mentioning sex magazines for women, is incredibly instructive in placing \textit{Playgirl} and its competitors in context. Sex magazines for women were a part of what Binkley calls a “new way of experiencing the sensual world” in 1970s publishing, relating experience to “new ways of self-understanding.”\textsuperscript{149} In short, in the 1970s, the political world of the immediate post-war period was shifting into a more self-styled politics of the individual. The personal was the political, and the sex magazines of the

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{147} Celeste Durant, “Edits Magazine Aimed at Black Men: The Ms. is a Connoisseur of Female Nudes,” \textit{Los Angeles Times} November 26, 1973: Section II Page 1.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
period reflected this shift toward personal liberation and lifestyle. Sex magazines became part of what Binkley describes as the “loose lifestyle,” one in which liberated individuals were:

empowered to make choices over aspects of their lives that squares, unreflective and constrained by habit, took only for granted. Related through metaphors of eruption, epiphany, and release, the loose life dwelled in the textures of everyday life and the minutiae of personal experience.150

The idea of a loose life proved highly adaptable, and made its way easily into the realm of popular culture, particularly when applied to the theme of sexuality. Binkley reports that in the bedroom, couples strove to overcome their inhibitions through open marriages and swingers’ parties, expressions of heterosexuality that were markedly “looser” than in decades previous.151 Binkley asserts that all forms of publications emerged to educate and sell the loose lifestyle:

Lifestyle publications, as essentially storytelling vehicles, provided the ideal medium both for the transmission of a lifestyle ethic from an underground fringe to the middle-class mainstream, and for the shaping of traumatic change into the purposeful narrative of self-loosening.152

Through this process, seemingly revolutionary ideas, including sexual liberation for women, gained legitimacy and mainstream acceptance through popular culture. The editorial content of sex magazines for women emphasized self-loosening and liberating aspects of the publications, making the magazines an interesting mix of sexual discourse and gender-specific lifestyle marketing. Working together with advertising, the editorial

150 Ibid, 3.
151 Ibid, 4.
152 Ibid, 9.
content gave structure to sexual liberation narratives. This structuring of sexual liberation through strategic rhetoric is on display most distinctly through the playgirl ethos, a sexual and consumer lifestyle for heterosexual women that reflected the spirit and culture within which it emerged and attempted to seamlessly meld consumer and personal freedom into one monthly, soft-core pornographic package.

Binkley argues that the much more explicit sex manuals, pornographic films, and sex magazines in the 1970s worked not only to loosen attitudes about sex but also to claim the authority to talk about sex from health experts, who had for decades dominated the public discussion of sexuality. Men and women in the United States were encouraged to look for sexual information and identities outside the realm of expert discourse at a time when popular culture was saturated with explicit sexuality as never before. The medical experts were replaced by mentors, such as the editors of sex magazines for women. These editors and their contributors, who became self-appointed sexual experts, made their publications into clearinghouses for sexual information, combining sexual expertise and pornographic realism. The representation of sexuality became more experiential, while at the same time inextricably bound up in discourses of lifestyle, individual style, fashion, and aesthetics. Sexuality in the popular culture of the 1970s became more an expression of the authentic, individual self, rather than merely a private expression of marital love, and the persona of the playgirl was the perfect coalescence of this trend as it related to women. In the early years of sex magazines for women, re-imagining and redefining the term “playgirl” would prove to be a crucial first step in attempting to sell the genre to women.

153 Ibid, 172-173
The Problems with “Playgirl”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a playgirl as “a girl or women who devotes her life to the pursuit of pleasure.”\(^{154}\) It also cites an older and “rarer” usage, dating back to the late nineteenth century, a *play-girl* or *actress*.\(^{155}\) The etymology of the word, what it has come to mean and how that has changed over time, is key to understanding the difficult task that the sex magazine *Playgirl* faced in adopting the term. The word *playgirl* had a negative connotation due to its use in unsavory popular culture artifacts including playing cards, pulp novels, men’s magazines, and low-budget films. In fact, the first magazines to include playgirl in their titles were not intended for women but for men. A publication carrying the title *Playgirl* that appeared in the mid-1950s, and seems to be a low brow version of *Playboy*, calling itself “The World’s Greatest Girlie Magazine” (figures 2.1 and 2.2). Men’s magazines with titles such as *Las Vegas Playgirl* and *Parisian Playgirl* also appear to have taken their inspiration from *Playboy* and other men’s sex magazines (figures 2.3 and 2.4). These magazines used the term *playgirl* to indicate women, possibly even sex workers, who are sexually available to men. In many of these depictions, the women are showgirls, women who make a living showing off their bodies. These representations played off the oldest definition of *playgirl* that indicates an actress or female performer and mixed it with a more modern definition, a woman who devotes her life to pleasure.

In the popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s, playgirls in the form of the scheming chorus girls, seductive secretaries, and alluring nightclub singers were sources


\(^{155}\) Ibid.
of sexual temptation for married men. The playgirl was the “other woman,” a sexual
temptation and often a girl “on the make.” This definition applies to the film *Playgirl*
(1954), in which Shelly Winters plays a nightclub singer whose lover is a married man.
The tagline for the film reads, “there was a price tag on her kisses, and trouble was never
so cheap” (figure 2.5). The implication is that men’s association with her could mean a
ruined reputation and possibly the loss of a respectable family life. The film operates as a
morality tale, warning of the trappings of urban life, complete with worldly and
undomesticated women. On film, as in men’s magazines, playgirls were often associated
with the underworld. For example, in the film *Playgirl After Dark* (1960), Jane
Mansfield plays a chorus girl named Midnight Franklin, who finds herself in the middle
of a battle between two male nightclub owners (figure 2.6). The playgirl’s motivations
and morals are dark and suspect, as her name implies. She is not a “nice girl” and cannot
be trusted or respected. The playgirl often operated in an environment of male
exclusivity and privilege, as suggested by the tagline on the *Playgirl After Dark* poster,
which promises to reveal “the secrets of the intimate key clubs.”

Even in bigger budget films for major studios in the early 1960s, playgirl
characters did not fare much better. In *Butterfield 8*, for which Elizabeth Taylor won an
Academy Award in 1960, her party girl character dies in a fatal car crash. Two years
later in director Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) when a playgirl socialite played by
actress Tippi Hedren pursues a potential sexual partner back to his home town, disrupting
the supposed “natural” order of heterosexual courtship, she and the entire town around
her are besieged by bloodthirsty birds. As journalist Gail Collins observes of the period,
“in the movies, unmarried women who were sexually active were punished with a life of lonely solitude or sudden death.”

In another popular culture product, the pulp novel, the playgirl used her sexuality not for pleasure, but primarily for financial gain. The cover of the pulp novel *Office Playgirl* (1960) underscores this aspect of the pre-1970 “playgirl” (figure 2.7). The cover depicts a scheming secretary, a shapely blonde woman, adjusting her stockings just outside the office of her middle-aged male boss. The tagline reads, “she wanted all the fancy things money could buy—and she was willing to pay the price.” The gold-digging element is also on display on the cover of another pulp novel entitled *Playgirl* (1964). Here, a Marilyn Monroe look-alike is seen alone on a bed rubbing a new fur coat over her naked body (figure 2.8). The tagline reads, “Linda learned early in life that nice little girls never get mink.” The playgirls in these two instances are more than ready to play the role of a man’s plaything for a financial reward, and the second cover indicates that the mink coat, not the sexual encounter used to procure it, is most likely the source of the woman’s enjoyment.

In the morality tales often associated with playgirls, in both films and pulp novels, their sexual promiscuity is often portrayed as a prelude to a violent end. For instance, the cover of one pulp novel, *Murder of the Park Avenue Playgirl* (1947), includes the tagline, “one man too many had the key to 219 Park Avenue,” indicating that women who afforded men too much sexual access could find themselves targets of male violence (figure 2.9). It was only in the 1970s that the playgirl was given the keys to her own sexuality, via sex magazines for women. She was promised her freedom and the same

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sexual license afforded to men. The new playgirl was redefined as a sexual agent in her own right, armed with her own income and a variety of men to choose from. The 1970s playgirl enjoyed sex just as much as men did and pursued it for her own pleasure. She shifted from being the object of sexual entertainment to being a consumer of it.

*Playboy v. Playgirl*

This chapter will demonstrate that *Playgirl* and its competitors in the sex magazine market worked to redefine the pleasure-seeking heterosexual female archetype, marking the playgirl as an active sexual agent instead of a passive sexual object (actress and showgirl), eschewing its former largely negative connotation for a seemingly revolutionary and celebratory new one. In the pages of these magazines, heterosexual women could learn new ways of thinking of themselves as sexual agents. Four of these magazines—*Playgirl, Venus, Viva,* and *Foxylady*—illustrate the shifting archetype of the playgirl.

In the early 1950s, *Playboy* magazine faced a similar problem with the word chosen for its title. The word *playboy,* prior to the 1950s, also had negative connotations, but Hugh Hefner and his staff used the magazine’s editorials and promotional material to redefine the term in their favor. In the mid-1950s *Playboy* was building and sharpening its brand. The first step in this process was banishing the negative connotations associated with its name. As Ray Russell, *Playboy*’s executive editor in the mid-1950s recalled:

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We liked the title well enough, but we also felt that *Playboy* had a 1920s F. Scott Fitzgerald sound to it, a ne’er-do well, a wastrel. I used to write the subscription pitches, and in early 1956, Hefner and I decided we should use one of them to decontaminate the name ‘Playboy’ and give it more respectability. We wanted to get over the Tommy Manville image, stress good breeding, fine wines, theater, and all that shit. In doing that, we sort of firmed up the Playboy concept by being forced to think what the word meant to us. I ended up writing a capsulated concept of the magazine, a kind of *Playboy* platform.158

The “decontamination” and redefinition of *playboy* took several years and continued into the next decade, but the inside back cover of the April 1956 issue of *Playboy* is worth examining closely, as it relates to the beginning of this process:

What is a Playboy? Is he simply a wastrel, a ne’er-do-well, a fashionable bum?

Far from it: He can be a sharp-minded young business executive, a worker in the arts, a university professor, an architect or an engineer. He can be many things provided he possesses a certain point of view. He must see life not as a vale of tears, but as a happy time, he must take joy in his work, without regarding it as the end all of living; he must be an alert man, an aware man, a man of taste, a man sensitive to pleasure, a man who—without acquiring the stigma of voluptuary or dilettante—can live life to the hilt. This is the sort of man we mean when we use the word playboy. Does this description fit you? If so, we imagine you will agree that *Playboy* belongs in your life.159

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158 Ibid, 36.
159 Ibid, 37.
As seen here, the redefinition of *playboy* had two interrelated purposes: first, to banish negative connotations associated with its name and, second, to project an image of professionalism, success, and aspiration onto its readers. The Playboy is a man who enjoys pleasure, but not to a fault like the “voluptuary.” Nor are Playboys amateur enthusiasts, like the “dilettante.” The ideal *Playboy* reader is not only a professional and a pleasure-seeker but a consumer of the good life, as is implicit in the quotation above, and explicit in the pages of *Playboy* magazine. He is not just any consumer but one whose consumption is channeled in the right direction, guided by taste, and informed by personal style. Playboys had not only the means to consume, but the taste to make informed decisions as consumers. The “certain point of view” the Playboy shares with his brothers is one oriented toward sex as part of a larger, pleasurable, consumer lifestyle. As one chronicler of *Playboy*’s history points out, Hefner “helped to channel, civilize, and control change; and not only in matters of sex, the fountainhead of his reputation, but in style, taste and thought.”\(^{160}\)

*Playgirl* and its competitors would seek to situate themselves similarly. Just as Hugh Hefner sought to channel men’s interest in sex during the postwar 1950s, *Playgirl* and its competitors channeled the egalitarian ethos and revolutionary language of the women’s movements into their own project of redefinition. Upon beginning publication in 1973, *Playgirl* adopted the tagline “The Magazine for Women” very similar to *Playboy*’s “Entertainment for Men” for its cover. Later, it changed its tagline to the even more similar “Entertainment for Women.” So similar was the title of the Los Angeles-based *Playgirl* to that of *Playboy* that Hefner and *Playboy* sued *Playgirl* publisher Douglas Lambert for copyright dilution. *HMH Publishing Co. v. Lambert* 482 F.2d 595.

\(^{160}\) Ibid, xviii.
(9th Cir. 1973) was specifically directed at the Playgirl nightclub owned by Lambert (in operation years before the magazine was published), but by the time the decision was issued it had much further-reaching implications. The case was settled in favor of Lambert, ruling that the two nightclubs in question, the Playboy chain of clubs and the much smaller Playgirl club in Los Angeles., were different enough as to not confuse the public. While both of the clubs featured female go-go dancers, (the Playgirl club would later add male dancers) the Playgirl club interior looked nothing like the Playboy clubs and did not use anything like Playboy’s famous bunny logo in marketing itself. This decision paved the way for Lambert and Playgirl to continue to use the Playgirl name for the club and, perhaps more importantly, for the new magazine. From this point forward, Playgirl, despite of the court’s ruling, would continue to benefit from its similarities to, and the name recognition of, Playboy. In working for decades to build its brand and name recognition, Playboy had laid the groundwork for Playgirl, but the publisher, editor, and contributors of the new magazine had to finish the task of selling the playgirl to a female audience.

Redefining “Playgirl”

The playgirl ethos became part of a larger cultural narrative of sexual liberation for women in the 1970s. The ethos drew its relevance from the feminist movement and the sexual revolution, and the magazine couched its lifestyle offerings comfortably in the familiar mass-mediated consumer culture that already existed in regular women’s magazines. We can see the development of this ethos over time by looking at the variety
of magazines that included *playgirl* in their titles as well as looking at *Playgirl’s* competitors in the sex magazine market. Before the 1970s, playgirls were associated with questionable morals, sexual manipulation, and opportunism, but by the late 1960s the term was being rehabilitated, taking on new and different meaning in the popular imagination.

The first known magazine for women entitled *Playgirl* was published out of New York and was completely unrelated to the magazine that came to bear that name for nearly four decades. This *Playgirl* debuted in 1965 by marketing itself as “America’s Exciting Magazine for the Chic and Modern Bachelorette!” (figure 2.10). This publication looks much more like *Cosmopolitan* than the sex magazine for women that would later share its name. With a beautiful white woman’s face on the cover, it promises information about a “9 Day Diet,” “Playgirl Hairstyles,” and other “informative features on beauty, charm, exercise, and diet.” It certainly uses sex to titillate, with features on the “No Bra Bra,” the “Topless Craze” and “Campus Immorality,” but its editorial style can best be summed up by a feature entitled “How To Make Men Like You.” The magazine does not include a centerfold, nor does it pretend to be instructive about sexual technique. Instead, it focuses on romantic love and interpersonal relationships: one article asks, “Romantic Love: Is it Passé?” In short, the 1965 *Playgirl* offers beauty, diet and exercise as the means of procuring a partner, but this “sophisticated magazine for bachelor girls” is just a shadow of what would follow.

In January 1973, another magazine entitled *Playgirl*, published out of Indianapolis, Indiana, and also unrelated to the long-running Los-Angeles based *Playgirl*, debuted with a bold cover photo of a naked male torso (figure 2.11). The cover model, a
hairy white male, poses with his jeans provocatively unbuttoned and is emblazoned with the magazine’s motto: “For Women’s Enjoyment.” *The Louisville Courier-Journal* described the cover model as wearing “bluejeans that look as if they might drop at any second.”¹⁶¹ The cover photograph signaled a bold new direction in women’s magazines, using male nudity as a marketing device to appeal to women. In contrast to the 1965 publication, this *Playgirl*’s visual sex appeal is bolder and clearly focused on the eroticized male body. The centerfold, a nude photo of race car driver Mike Hiss, continues the male nudity theme, but a strategically placed helmet obscures Hiss’s genitals. William Hartford, the magazine’s publisher, promised his publication “will be suggestive at times, but there will be no pornography.”¹⁶² True to his word, the only racy portions of the magazine are the cover and the centerfold. As Hartford put it he was merely “gambling that there is a void in reading material for women who want something a bit more risqué than the *Ladies Home Journal*.¹⁶³ Hartford cited *Cosmopolitan*’s successful Burt Reynolds centerfold as his primary inspiration for his magazine *Playgirl*, aimed at women 18–40.¹⁶⁴ He expected the magazine to be a success even though he did not expect women to express their enthusiasm over the new issue publicly.¹⁶⁵ Hartford’s print order for the first issue was one million, “the largest order for any new publication in the last ten years,” he claimed.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Ibid.
¹⁶³ Ibid.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid.
In her editorial for this first issue, *Playgirl* editor Carol Herring St. Francis attempted to enunciate the focus and philosophy of her magazine, the beginnings of the playgirl ethos:

Women everywhere are awakening to a new dawning of awareness. They are seeking in the dimness of reality their identity and are tripping over liberation and sexuality. Only after stepping over those stumbling blocks can they awaken into becoming complete persons. *Playgirl* magazine believes that woman is a beautiful (inner beauty), intelligent, sensual person. Our concept of a Playgirl is not one that plays with life, but rather one who enjoys life to the fullest. She is a complete person and does not need liberation. A woman who is fulfilled is already liberated.\(^{167}\)

Here, St. Francis imagines women “stumbling” over liberation and sexuality, yet she also casts aside women’s need for liberation. St. Francis’ confusing editorial seems to be, at least in part, an attempt to avoid the political implications of the term *liberation* and an effort to replace it with something more fun. Later she argues for the naturalness of female sexuality, but also paints a picture of the sexual landscape of the 1970s as a world out of balance:

Yes, we know a woman is sexy. But then, so is a man. A woman enjoys looking at a sexy man; it is only natural. A woman’s sexuality is natural often without her even being aware of it; a motion of her body, a look in her eye, the tilt of her head, her smile. It is a subtle part of a woman. Yet there are those who are exploiting and distorting female sexuality until it is no longer a natural thing. It is becoming so wearisome to pick up a magazine and read how to become a female

\(^{167}\) Carol Herring St. Francis, “Editorial”, *Playgirl* (Indiana) January, 1973: 2
siren or the only way to have fulfillment is to find a lover for the weekend. Just as pollution is slowly destroying the beauty of nature so is the pollution of sexual exploitation destroying the natural beauty of sex.\textsuperscript{168}

In St. Francis’ opinion, her magazine would help bring balance back to the sexual landscape, and key to that task was the inclusion of a nude male centerfold. At first glance, it may seem ironic that a magazine with such a bold embrace of male nudity could speak out so forcefully about sexual exploitation, but when understood in the sense of bringing balance, returning things to their natural order, and offering reciprocity to women, this rationale is more understandable. St. Francis explains that looking at sexy men is a part of “becoming aware of yourself as a woman.”\textsuperscript{169} In this spirit of awareness and renewal, the magazine chose the Ankh, an Egyptian symbol of life, superimposed over an open eye, as its trademark.\textsuperscript{170} St. Francis explains that the eye “is the window of the soul. Total awareness comes through the eye as does communication.”\textsuperscript{171} St. Francis’ statements, as well as her choice of the Ankh and open eye as symbols for the magazine, pointed women towards a more visual approach to their sexuality.

St. Francis’ word choice reveals much about how she saw her magazine’s relationship to feminism. St. Francis eschews the politically loaded term \textit{liberation}, preferring the more philosophical “total awareness.” The magazine as a whole seems to studiously avoid embracing feminism. In fact, the first issue includes a critique of \textit{Ms.} Magazine, calling it “depressing.”\textsuperscript{172} \textit{Ms.}, in the author’s opinion, offered no “hope for a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Carol Herring St. Francis, “Editorial”, \textit{Playgirl} (Indiana) February/March, 1973: 4.
\item \textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{172} Harriet Simpson Arnow, “Critique of the August, 1972 Issue of \textit{Ms.”} \textit{Playgirl} (Indiana) January, 1973: 8.
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\end{footnotesize}
lifting of the dour skies under which woman, as portrayed in the magazine, appears to live.”173 Elsewhere in the first issue is an article by a male psychologist entitled “Woman’s Liberation Good or Bad.” He writes that the “rhetoric” of feminist “activists” placed women “in a very poor light.”174 He concludes that feminists were now suffering from a backlash from the “majority of American women who already consider themselves liberated, fulfilled, and happy without the need of headline-making, hostile, anti-male talk.”175 “In any extremist or radically-activist movement,” he writes, “there is a danger of losing more than is accomplished.”176

A final example of the Indiana-based Playgirl’s aversion to movement feminism is a cartoon from the second, and final, issue (figure 2.12). The cartoon depicts a woman admiring a pinup of Olympic diver Mark Spitz that she has just nailed to the wall. An angry feminist, dressed in large glasses and a T-shirt displaying a female symbol and a fist, walks by and comments that the other woman is a “Female Chauvinist Pig!” This cartoon, much like the other features in the Indiana version of Playgirl, underscores the difference between the goals of the magazine and the perceived goals of the feminist movement. Man-hating feminists, it seems, could never embrace the adoration of the male body Playgirl used as its primary selling point. The representation of the feminist, who is not the implied reader of the magazine, is unattractive and unfeminine in contrast to the woman admiring the male pinup. And while some feminists might share the rather ambiguous goal of “self-awareness” that St. Francis, the editor, espoused, they most

173 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid.
likely were not seeking it in the hairy torso of a pinup, or so the magazine would have us believe.

*Playgirl* saw men as a gift to women; this view is reinforced in the cover image for the second issue, a photograph of another nude male torso, this time holding a red heart-shaped box to obscure his genitals (figure 2.13). A woman’s well manicured hands, with red fingernails and a ring with the Egyptian Ankh symbol, reach around from behind the man and appear to be about to open the box. The provocative cover image brought media attention to the publication, not all of it positive.  

In her second and final editorial Carol St. Francis took on critics of the magazine, citing a Kentucky newspaper’s unflattering take on the new publication and defending *Playgirl*’s use of male nudity. St. Francis felt that the article and the quotations from local women included in it were unfair:

> How unfair judging sight unseen, and yet what a perfect example of what was mentioned in January’s editorial about the exploitation of sex. A man’s bare chest and a nude centerfold tastefully posed and it becomes raw sex; yet men and women lie around on the beach and at poolside exposing more than what is shown in this magazine. What is the difference, other than that one is exploited and distorted?

St. Francis then relates a trip she took the previous summer to an art museum in Spain, where she saw “many paintings by the great artist, El Greco.” One painting in particular, entitled “Saint Martin and the Beggar,” made a deep impression on her

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178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
because of its use of male nudity.\textsuperscript{181} Describing the work, St. Francis recalls, “upon the horse sits St. Martin who has a narrow green cloth draped across his lap, one end of which comes down and twists across the mid section of a nude man. The man’s chest, his waist, and his legs are exposed.”\textsuperscript{182} She argues that the image had been reproduced in many books, including some housed in high-school libraries.\textsuperscript{183} “The bare chest and exposed body of this great masterpiece is not considered a sex picture,” she exclaims, apparently seeing little or no difference between the aims of the Spanish master and the goals of her monthly magazine.\textsuperscript{184} St. Francis write that women can think for themselves without newspaper reporters telling them how to react to \textit{Playgirl}: “when a partially clad man appears in a magazine, it is not for the newspaper or other media to assume, without knowing the content, that it is an inane sex magazine.”\textsuperscript{185} In the very same issue in which her editorial appeared, \textit{Playgirl} offered its own masterpiece, a centerfold with two nude men, Jim and John Hagar, biological brothers and country music musicians from the television series \textit{Hee Haw}. The Hagars posed nude together next to a wooden fence surrounded by bales of hay, with only a guitar and some creative posing to obscure their genitals.

The Indiana-based \textit{Playgirl}’s crusade for greater appreciation for male nudity came to an abrupt halt after only two issues. It ceased publication for reasons unknown, only to be replaced a few months later by a Los Angeles magazine using the same name and a similar premise. As newer, better-financed, and longer-running sex magazines for women appeared, it became increasingly difficult for them hold an antagonistic

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
relationship with feminism. Indeed, the women’s movement, along with the voices of women editors and staff, would all become rhetorically valuable as the effort to sell male nudity to women continued in earnest.

“And Now, a Skin Magazine for Women”

In June 1973, the long-running *Playgirl* magazine that is known today began publication with Douglas Lambert, a successful Los Angeles nightclub owner, as publisher. Lambert envisioned a magazine for women that mirrored *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, a lifestyle publication for women with sexual advice, erotic stories, sexually oriented cartoons, and a nude centerfold. The Los Angeles-based *Playgirl*’s first issue sold 600,000 copies, selling out in its first week on the newsstands. 186 By January 1974, Lambert could claim circulation of more than 2 million.187 In comparison, at the same time *Cosmopolitan*’s circulation was 1.2 million, while *Ms.* magazine’s circulation was 300,000.188 *Playgirl* tapped into something that women in the early 1970s felt they wanted or needed. The astounding circulation figures would indicate that *Playgirl* was providing something women were not getting in traditional women’s magazines, even *Cosmopolitan*. *New Times* called *Playgirl* the “fastest growing magazine in the history of publishing.”189

189 Ibid.
As the first issue hit newsstands, Lambert told the *Los Angeles Times* that *Playgirl* was all part of “the great sexual equalization process.”

“If men can have skin magazines like *Playboy* and *Penthouse,*” he mused, “why can’t women?” Lambert later told the *New Times* that he came up with the idea for *Playgirl* after seeing the Burt Reynolds centerfold in *Cosmopolitan.* When Lambert saw Reynolds and “saw what a winner that was, it came to me, *that’s* what women want.”

Going further Lambert explained:

> If a woman says to me she wants to see a man’s smile, his eyes, I say, “Don’t lie to me—you want to see a man’s dong, that is if you’re normal.” You take Presley or Tom Jones on stage and watch where the women in the audience are lookin’. They’re lookin’ right at the guy’s dong. That’s all.

When asked if *Playgirl* had a “*Playgirl Philosophy,*” Lambert responded that it did indeed. “Some people say it’s nude, lewd and crude for a woman to want to see a naked man” he observed, “if that’s not a male chauvinistic attitude, I don’t know what is.”

Going further, he argued to the female reporter:

> The reason women have hangups, is because when I was 14 my daddy threw his arm around me and said “Come on son, I’m gonna get you laid.” And he took me down to the local whorehouse. He didn’t do that to my sister. And *that’s* why women have hangups.

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191 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
194 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
The astonished reporter was then told that a “woman wants the same things I want. Health, happiness and sex. Every girl wants to be a Playgirl. You want it, too.”

Pressed on exactly what he meant by a playgirl, Lambert continued, “she wants to be cheerful, have sex and the luxuries of life; she doesn’t have to be a drudge.” Needless to say, the New Times reporter came away less than impressed with Lambert and his magazine, calling Playgirl “utter crap.” It would soon become apparent to Lambert and the rest of the magazine’s management that it might be best if he allowed female editors to address the media. After the New Times article, Lambert rarely directly addressed the media or Playgirl’s readers.

From its very first issue, Playgirl had a complicated relationship with the women’s movement. Even as Lambert extolled his publication as “an outer ripple” of the feminist movement, the Los Angeles Times noted that Playgirl’s first issue, with its “old-fashioned catch-your-man advice,” had “a few sisters of the liberation . . . yukking it up over the magazine’s aphrodisiac recipes for crushed pomegranates and candlelight.” In the Times’ estimation, the women’s movement and Playgirl held few things in common. Meanwhile, within the Playgirl staff, which was composed mostly of women, staffers were quite varied in their stated relationships with feminism. In early publicity about the magazine, Playgirl emphasized the role of the women on its staff, and in turn these women frequently referred to the women’s movement, sexual liberation, and their own enjoyment of nude male bodies. Their embrace of male nudity and their visions of how sexual liberation operated were models for the women reading, or thinking of

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197 Ibid.
198 Ibid.
199 Ibid.
reading, *Playgirl*. In the early years of the magazine, three women in particular modeled a “liberated” approach to sexual material and held, to varying degrees, a suspicion of feminism. These women—*Playgirl* contributor Marcia Borie; the magazine’s first editor, Marin Milam; and *Playgirl*’s centerfold coordinator, Toni Holt—all helped craft an approach to male nudity that *Playgirl* hoped other women would adopt.

In *Playgirl*’s first issue, contributor Borie authored a meandering three-page attempt to define exactly what a playgirl was. “Every PLAYGIRL is liberated to the extent to which she allows herself to feel free,” Borie writes, “Free of past guilts. Free of sexual hang-ups. Free of self-doubts. Free. That one word—above all others—is the key to PLAYGIRL.”

“As a PLAYGIRL,” she continues, “you are, of course, totally honest with yourself in a variety of areas. For example, you understand your own basic needs. You readily admit you enjoy sex. Enjoy looking at the male body.” On the subject of the women’s movement Borie writes:

“...To be a PLAYGIRL does *not* automatically make you a member of a movement. A PLAYGIRL most definitely is not a groupie. A PLAYGIRL does not require a collective gathering of “sisters in arms” in order to feel secure. As a PLAYGIRL, you do your own thing . . . Self-concern . . . Self-confidence . . . Self-improvement . . . Self-esteem . . . These four cornerstones of your individual personality take precedence. But always, you maintain a respect for causes and organized movements which do have their rightful place in the 1970s. They are not necessarily the essence, or the center of a PLAYGIRL’S life.”

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202 Ibid, 10.
203 Ibid.
In Borie’s estimation, the women’s movement and its dependence on female solidarity stood in stark contrast to the Playgirl model of liberation, which imagined women standing alone, possibly surrounded by men, finding self-esteem and identity in this environment rather than in female-dominated consciousness-raising groups and organized activism. Borie’s playgirl was a lone ranger, a woman apart, ready to reap the benefits of the women’s movement and possibly cheer from the sidelines, but without having to throw her own weight behind it. Borie’s playgirl would not be tied down to one man or to an organized movement for social change. She continues:

In our milieu, the need to cling to any group means merely to exchange one set of chains for another. So, with all due respect and fondness for the Ms.’s of the world—those more magnificent ladies who have blazed a trail for all of us—we say, “Godspeed.” We are with you in spirit. But all of those things which you are into are not necessarily the things which we may wish to pursue . . . PLAYGIRLS are first and foremost individuals. Each of us will evolve a personal philosophy and lifestyle which is most pleasing to us on our own unique level.204

Borie’s manifesto is a perfect example of Binkley’s notion of a loose lifestyle philosophy. The playgirl she imagined did not need the support of a group (that is not the well from which the playgirl drew her strength and self-esteem) nor did she need a set of rules to guide her behavior. In Borie’s view, the women’s movement was not inherently bad, but it might present potential entanglements that would inhibit the playgirl’s pursuit of pleasure and self-fulfillment. To Borie, the women’s movement, complete with its own publication, Ms., provided what amounted to a competing narrative. An organized movement of women might also inhibit the one thing a playgirl did need, the essential

204 Ibid, 10-11.
ingredient to the recipe: men. “You deserve a look at today’s most exciting males,”
Borie writes, “men such as those you desire . . . Men you wish to reach out to—and touch
. . . Be with . . . Experience . . . LOVE in any manner which is most pleasing to the
individual you.”  Borie’s playgirl was a pleasure-seeking body and emotionally self-
sufficient: “there should be developed within you a reservoir of strength” she writes.
To Borie, liberation was easy: “I am liberated because that is the way I choose to live. I
am a PLAYGIRL . . . and I love being one, because in the process of becoming a
PLAYGIRL—I have set myself free!”

Borie’s colleagues at Playgirl, Milam and Holt, gave the women’s movement a
bit more credit. Milam came to the attention of Lambert when she wrote a profile of
actress Cloris Leachman for Playgirl’s first issue. Lambert was impressed. He
considered Milam’s piece to be well crafted and the best in the issue, so he hired her as
editor. Milam told the Los Angeles Times that Playgirl existed “to answer the needs of
today’s woman.” “Men’s entertainment magazines,” Milam explained, “have been
around a long time and women have been dusting around them on coffee tables and
shoving them intro drawers. Well, this is 1973. We’re sort of turning the tables and I
think it’s good.” Here, Milam argued for Playgirl in terms of sheer egalitarianism. In
other words, the magazine should exist simply because a male version already does.

205 Ibid, 11.
206 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
209 Charles Powers, “And Now, a Skin Magazine for Women” Los Angeles Times May 11, 1973: Section
IV, 1.
210 Ibid.
Playgirl, according to Milam, was a magazine for “free women,” but she stopped short of calling it feminist.\textsuperscript{211} While she noted that the magazine planned to do a “hard hitting article on abortion,” Milam eschewed the issue of feminist politics by asking, “Why does a magazine for women have to take a stand on everything? Why should we say we are for this or against that? Is it necessary?”\textsuperscript{212} Milam’s attitude is typical of the editors of sex magazines for women, who borrowed freely from the feminist lexicon but refused to be bound by any sort of feminist orthodoxy. This strategic rhetoric allowed them to tap into the energy of the women’s movement but not be judged by its standards. With one foot in the movement and the other decidedly outside of it, sex magazines for women hoped to take advantage of the freedom and flexibility of both worlds.

Alluding to the magazine’s complicated relationship to movement feminism, Milam observed, “I’m not going to ignore the women’s movement. I mean I think there’s a place for a magazine like Ms. and there’s a place for Playgirl. I respect Ms. as a publication, but I bet their staff is really going bonkers over Playgirl.”\textsuperscript{213} A few months later, when asked about Playgirl, Ms. editor–in–chief and publisher Patricia Carbine declined to comment on the magazine’s success, except to say that she did not expect much in the way of competition from Playgirl.\textsuperscript{214}

The first issue of Playgirl, as the Los Angeles Times noted, was like traditional women’s magazines with its inclusion of fashion and recipes; however, it also included a nude male centerfold.\textsuperscript{215} Milam defended the issue’s content, arguing that magazines can

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{215} Charles Powers, “And Now, a Skin Magazine for Women” Los Angeles Times May 11, 1973: Section IV, 1.
be “sophisticated” and still have recipes.216 “I like cooking, pomegranates and candlelight,” Milam argued. “I also like the centerfold.”217 And she argued that she was not alone in her appreciation. “For years,” she commented, “women have been told that they’re not supposed to like to look at men’s bodies, but now most are not ashamed to admit that they do.”218

Milam was frequently sent out as an ambassador for *Playgirl*, speaking about her work on television and radio programs and in person at venues as varied as the Westside Jewish Community Center in west Los Angeles219 and the Orange County Advertising Federation.220 Throughout her public appearances and interviews, Milam always maintained that she was simply an average woman. In her first editorial, she assured her readers, “I’m a woman, like you, who appreciates men, who loves life, enjoys sex. I laugh, cry, feel, care. Isn’t it nice that we’re finally admitting it?”221 Later, in a 1976 profile for the *Los Angeles Times* she pointed to her relative lack of experience in the publishing industry before she agreed to edit *Playgirl*.222 Unlike most magazine editors, who regularly undertook internships in New York, Milam had to learn the ropes herself.223 Looking back on that experience Milam noted:

I’m not burdened with their prejudices, their insecurities, the peer-group pressure that dominates the New York scene. I care about the readers but I don’t care

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216 Ibid.
217 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
about what the editor of another magazine thinks of *Playgirl* or, for that matter, of me.\textsuperscript{224}

Fashioning a persona of the everywoman, Milam insisted that her lack of pretensions made her a better editor: “I see myself as really a rather ordinary person. Lacking a tremendous ego or flaming ambition, I might never qualify as a flashy editor.”\textsuperscript{225} Milam saw herself as similar, in many ways, to her readers:

> Coming out of the Midwest, brought up to think in terms of reasonable expectations, I can relate to the ongoing process of change in women. I see myself as a moderate feminist, and I project the moderate views of our readership.\textsuperscript{226}

During her five–year tenure at *Playgirl*, Milam simultaneously defended her moderate approach to feminism along with the explicitness of her magazine:

> To advocate for women’s rights does not necessarily mean extremism in anything. A feminist doesn’t have to wear paratrooper pants and rush around burning bras. She might recognize there are wrongs involving some men, but she realizes it’s o.k. to be sexually inclined toward men. What I’m trying to show with the articles and centerfold is that women have a total range of interests.\textsuperscript{227}

In Milam’s interviews, she often found it impossible to avoid talking about *Playgirl* and feminism in the same sentence. She argued that it was the intersection of several social and cultural phenomena that made *Playgirl* the success it was in the 1970s. “It took the impact of *Cosmo*, the women’s movement and the sexual revolution of the 60s to open

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid.
the doors,” Milam concluded.  228  In her view, Playgirl merely rounded out the range of offerings any woman of the 1970s would want in a magazine.  229

Milam was the arbiter of taste for Playgirl: she understood that male nudity was essential for the unique identity of the magazine. Therefore, Milam emphasized her own taste and how it influenced the treatment of male nudity in the magazine, but she also underscored that her taste was carefully aligned with that of her readers. “Some people still have a problem with male nudity,” she told the Los Angeles Times, “but evidently our readers do not, or we’d be the first to hear about it. At the same time, I recognize there’s a fine line between what’s aesthetic and what’s lewd.”  230  Milam, along with her female editors and staff, established and maintained that line in Playgirl. Milam assured the Los Angeles Times that she was careful to “monitor everything that goes into the magazine. I don’t want Playgirl to be raunchy or offensive.”  231

Milam was not alone in imposing her tastes and opinions on the readers of Playgirl. Playgirl’s centerfold coordinator, Toni Holt, was open about the influence of feminism and bold in her defense of male nudity. In an interview with The New York Times, she credited the sexual revolution and the women’s movement for her job, which involved selecting the men who would appear nude in Playgirl’s centerfolds.  232  Holt, then a thirty one-year-old former actress, gossip columnist, and syndicated talk show host, found and interviewed the centerfolds.  233  In early issues of Playgirl, she was often photographed interacting with the centerfolds, looking on as they showed her their

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230 Ibid.
231 Ibid.
233 Ibid.
homes, their cars, and their hobbies. This is one major difference between *Playgirl*'s centerfold feature and those found in men's magazines such as *Playboy*. The Playmates in *Playboy* are never seen frolicking around with men, something that would appear to interfere with the available girl-next-door fantasy the magazine promoted. Perhaps because of her past work experiences, Holt’s profiles read like breezy fan magazine copy, but they also serve another purpose: she was a mediator, making women comfortable with the idea of monthly installments of male nudity.

“Don’t call it beefcake!” Holt warned the reporter for the *The New York Times* in 1973. “We don’t pose men as sex objects. We think of it more as something of social value.” Pontificating on the “healthful” aspects of *Playgirl*’s offerings, Holt told the *Times* that “a psychiatrist in San Francisco said on television recently that *Playgirl*’s centerfolds were terribly healthy for women because they gave a chance to view a nude male openly, with nothing secretive about it.” Holt laughed when the reporter reminded her that women, “because of their cultural conditioning,” are not supposed to enjoy looking at male bodies. Holt responded:

Ha! Twenty years ago, when you walked down the street with a girl friend and saw an attractive man, you might not have said anything. But now you turn around and say, “God, isn’t he gorgeous!” Times have changed.

Holt’s comments indicate that this new freedom to admire men, which supposedly found its ideal outlet in *Playgirl*, meant turning a secret indulgence into a public declaration. For women, buying the magazine meant keeping up with the times and liberating oneself

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234 Ibid.
235 Ibid.
236 Ibid.
237 Ibid.
from past sexual inhibitions, the process of self-loosening described by Binkley. Holt’s embrace of male nudity, her involvement in procuring and presenting it served as an example of the loose lifestyle for women.

Holt was careful to point out that she was interested in the whole man, not just his body. In her interview with *The New York Times*, she assured the reporter that when choosing a centerfold, she looks to the eyes first and foremost.\(^{238}\) “If someone has dead eyes,” she said, “no matter how good his body is, I won’t choose him. I believe the eyes are the mirror of the soul and that everything else is secondary.”\(^{239}\) Physical perfection was not necessary, Holt said, because “some of the most fabulously handsome men in the world aren’t in proportion. Take Richard Burton. His physique isn’t in proportion, yet I’d love to have him as a centerfold.”\(^{240}\) Holt’s comments reflect *Playgirl’s* emphasis on personal taste, even as Holt and Milam imposed their tastes on the thousands of *Playgirl* readers. In addition, her comments carefully balanced her insistence that women like to look at beautiful men with the caveat that those men should have souls as well.

*Playgirl’s* choice of an entertainment reporter to act as centerfold coordinator along with Holt’s comments to the press suggest that the magazine expected to host male celebrities as centerfolds, something *The New York Times* referred to in its profile of Holt. Noting that so far “males who have agreed” had been “show business types: Lyle Waggoner, George Maharis, Gary Conway, Fabian, Fred Williamson and the latest, Mr. November, Don Stroud,” Holt boasted to *The New York Times* that 75 percent of the men she contacted agreed to pose, though she had been turned down by Bob Hope and Johnny

\(^{238}\) Ibid.
\(^{239}\) Ibid.
\(^{240}\) Ibid.
Carson.241 “Some are so eager to pose they contact me,” she said; however, assuring The New York Times that she had the final say, she continued “so far, I haven’t used any of them. They haven’t been good enough.”242

Holt, a relatively well-known celebrity at the time, provided women readers someone to identify with. She was a bubbly, outspoken exemplar of the playgirl. Holt’s ability to wrangle male centerfolds, her claims to have male celebrities throwing themselves at her, and her power to turn them down as “not good enough” all suggested a shift in the sexual power dynamic. It was a way of assuring potential Playgirl readers that things were not as they were twenty years ago. Women were told that they were free to pursue men, whether in the pages of Playgirl or on the streets of their cities and towns. Playgirls, including Holt, had the power to accept or reject sexual partners based on their own standards of attractiveness.

From her perch behind the editor’s desk, Milam wrote monthly installments and revisions of the Playgirl ethos. Her editor’s column most often listed the magazine’s accomplishments and plugged the features for that month’s issue of Playgirl, but occasionally she also reported on the state of sexual liberation, specifically women’s thirst for what Playgirl offered. She reported in her column in August 1973 that 99 percent of readers who had submitted letters to the editor and answered questionnaires were “asking for more of the male nude.”243 Two months later, she reported that Playgirl was now printing 1.6 million copies per month.244 “Women undeniably have a new

241 Ibid.
242 Ibid.
cause, *Playgirl*” she writes. “I can safely say that *Playgirl* stands alone when it comes to the attention paid to the needs and desires of its readers,” she wrote a month later.

And Milam and her associates at *Playgirl* made it clear that what women wanted were nude men. In addition to the nude offerings inside the December issue, *Playgirl* gave women a gift-wrapped nude man on the cover (figure 2.14). A fully clothed woman appeared on the cover as well, unwrapping this holiday gift. Inside, Milam wrote that today’s woman is “thoroughly feminine, active, involved, male-loving, independent,” but Milam still studiously avoided using the word *feminist* in her editorial column. Could a magazine—or an editor—that gift-wraps men for female consumption be feminist?

In the May 1974 issue, Milam finally took on the question of feminism on her editorial page:

> For me, the word has been so abused, so misused, as to become a noose around the neck of the movement itself. “Most women,” as Marge Godfrey puts it, “want the game but not the name.” For me, it’s simple. If you think feminist means anti-male, if you think feminist means an aggressive bitch in wingtips, then I’m not your run-of-the-mill feminist. On the other hand, I’m in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment: I’m concerned with the beleaguered widow who pays a hell of a price; I’m concerned about the divorced woman trying to convince her bank that she deserves credit. I’m concerned about day care centers, and not being ripped off by the AMA or the federal government. *I’m also concerned about men.*

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245 Ibid.
Personally, I wish we’d stop harping about sex objects and concern ourselves with improving sexual relations.\textsuperscript{248}

It was not only the feminist moniker that gave Milam trouble, she was also uncomfortable with the feminist term \textit{sister} and preferred \textit{Mrs.} to the term \textit{Ms.}\textsuperscript{249} Here we see Milam’s strategic rhetoric at work, insisting on imposing her own definitions, and setting her own limits within feminist thought. The independent spirit of the playgirl would resist forging alliances with other women (sisters), with whom she might be competing for a male’s attention. Ambivalence about that topic of sexual objectification was virtually a prerequisite for her job as \textit{Playgirl} editor. Milam realized that she was a woman in a unique position, both rhetorically and literally. In the magazine’s first anniversary issue she wrote that when \textit{Playgirl} debuted the year before, “all hell broke loose” and she found herself “an instant curiosity.”\textsuperscript{250} She wrote that the press asked her to comment on everything from “feminism to fellatio, and of course, my philosophy.”\textsuperscript{251} She responded that, “The latter is simple. I believe in freedom: Social. Political. Economic. Domestic. Mental. Spiritual. Sexual. Beyond that, I think philosophers should philosophize.”\textsuperscript{252}

Milam’s stance on this issue stood in stark contrast to that of \textit{Playboy} editor Hefner, whose “Playboy Philosophy,” begun in 1962, ran 250,000 words through twenty-five issues of his magazine.\textsuperscript{253} Writing his philosophy took up most of Hefner’s time for two years and “exposed him to a barrage of sneers and ridicule” from the media as he

\textsuperscript{248} Marin Milam, “Editor’s Column” \textit{Playgirl} May 1974: 9.
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{250} Marin Milam, “Editor’s Column” \textit{Playgirl} June 1974: 9.
\textsuperscript{251} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid.
pontificated about everything from the rights of an individual in a free society to the problems with organized religion.\textsuperscript{254} Writer Tom Wolfe, who visited Hefner during this period of frenetic composition, remarked that “the Philosophy imputes deep moral purpose to his enterprises, legitimizes them.”\textsuperscript{255} Milam, perhaps because of the negative press Hefner received and the controversy feminism was currently stirring, was more reticent to espouse an entire world view but in her position did find it necessary to legitimate \textit{Playgirl}'s offerings. Many had found Hefner’s philosophy “preachy, didactic, combative” and “eager to foster controversy,” and Milam, obviously seeing many of these same traits in feminist thought, wanted to avoid Hefner’s fate.\textsuperscript{256} She saw herself as a mediator of ideas, not an originator of her own philosophical progeny, and, after all, being a playgirl was supposed to be about having fun. However, the times within which \textit{Playgirl} emerged practically insisted that feminism be integral to the \textit{Playgirl} project.

According to historian Carrie Pitzulo, feminism played an influential role in the history and development of \textit{Playboy} years before the launch of \textit{Playgirl}. Pitzulo writes that \textit{Playboy} took a progressive stance on women’s rights throughout the 1960s and 1970s and was adamant in its support of abortion rights.\textsuperscript{257} Evidence of Playboy’s support for select women’s issues could be found in the magazine’s articles and editorials as well as in the philanthropy of the Playboy Foundation, which contributed thousands of dollars to reproductive rights organizations before \textit{Roe v. Wade}.\textsuperscript{258} In addition to its support for abortion, the Playboy Foundation also financially supported the American

\textsuperscript{254} Ibid, 112-113.
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid, 115.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid.
Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and efforts to fund daycare centers for working mothers. All of this support leads Pitzulo to the conclusion that “Playboy’s gender politics, while complex and contradictory, were much more woman friendly than previous historical accounts have acknowledged.” By the early 1970s, she writes, Playboy “served as a regular, progressive, and mainstream forum for discussions of women’s expanding role in society.” This begs the question, why would Playboy spend money and devote editorial space in support of a social movement that was largely antagonistic to the magazine?

Pitzulo provides three reasons, all of which are applicable to Playgirl as well, that Playboy “needed to support liberated womanhood.” “Ideologically,” she concludes, “the hedonism central to the Playboy lifestyle would not have been possible without women free to live and love as they liked.” The bachelor lifestyle, Pitzulo writes, was contingent upon a man’s ability to attract “women of his own social and economic rank.” Secondly, Playboy needed to address the women’s movement “because they saw their magazine as a serious journalistic vehicle.” Finally, Playboy readers insisted the magazine deal with feminism. “Men and women alike write letters to Playboy airing their diverse views on the subject,” Pitzulo reports, “and they challenged the magazine to do the same.”

Much like Playgirl’s Milam, Playboy editor Hefner saw two versions of feminism. “One was a supposedly rational and mainstream faction that promoted liberal
goals like antidiscrimination laws,” Pitzulo writes, “and the other was an extreme and militant version that allegedly wanted to overturn heterosexuality.” 267 Just like Playgirl, in the 1970s “Playboy balanced precariously between support for liberal feminism and hysteria over the challenge posed by more militant feminists.” 268

By the time Playgirl took on the subject of women’s sexuality in 1973, the subject was already politically charged and feminism was already a staple in the most popular sex magazine for men. Playgirl owed more than just its name to Playboy; Playboy had formally addressed feminism in its editorial pages since as early as 1970. 269 Playboy had been using its own strategic rhetoric to embrace feminist causes that were central to its philosophy. Playboy supported women’s issues that implicated men, including reproductive rights, access to daycare centers, and equal pay in the workplace. As this chapter and the next will demonstrate, much like Playboy, Playgirl and its competitors also embraced some elements of feminism—largely those with the largest amount of popular support—while dismissing others. Milam and the other female editors of sex magazines for women used the agenda-setting power of their positions to frame feminism within their magazines’ own set of concerns, concerns that always included possibly offending readers, advertisers, and distributors. By the time Milam celebrated her magazine’s first anniversary, the editors of other sex magazines for women, inspired by Playgirl’s success, found themselves in a similar rhetorical push and pull with both the topic of male nudity and a rapidly evolving women’s movement.

267 Ibid, 262.
268 Ibid, 263.
269 Ibid, 269.
Venus: Entertainment for the Contemporary Woman

The initial success of Playgirl spawned a host of imitators, each hoping to put their own unique spin on the sex magazine for women while tapping into the common theme of the playgirl. The first such publication was Venus, which began with an initial press run of 350,000.270 In a full-page letter published in the first issue of Venus, six months after the launch of Playgirl, Frank Iszak made his pitch for women’s freedom to look at nude men and sexually oriented material. “The modern American woman,” he writes, “is no longer willing to accept male-dominated notions of what she should and should not like to read.”271 That said, Iszak touts the fact that Venus was managed by women, “unlike many so-called women’s magazines.”272 In his letter, he introduces Tink Anderson, chair of the magazine’s board of directors, “a woman whose forthright vision is responsible for the birth of Venus.”273 Seemingly having learned his lesson from witnessing media coverage of publisher Lambert’s heavy-handed influence in the rollout of Playgirl, Iszak belabored his point, “Venus is edited by women for women” and his female editors “know what appeals to them” because they had spent many hours “in conversation with women of diverse backgrounds and interests.”274 “That knowledge” he concludes “cannot be imitated by a male editorial staff or, for that matter, by a male publisher.”275 Iszak’s comments reflect continued anxiety about who had the power to control the editorial and photographic content of sex magazines for women. With the

272 Ibid.
273 Ibid.
274 Ibid.
275 Ibid.
available evidence it is impossible to discern precisely how much editorial control the editors of sex magazines such as *Venus* had and how much belonged to the male publishers who financed these ventures and signed the paychecks. What is important to note for the purposes of this project is that across the board it was deemed necessary that it always *appear* as if women were in control; that their voices were being heard through the editorial pages and when choosing the content for the magazines.

*Venus*, like *Playgirl*, shared its title with a sex magazine for men from the 1950s (figure 2.15). It was the task of *Venus* editor Dot James, a former schoolteacher, to redefine the name *Venus* for her female readers. In doing this, she called upon Greek and Roman mythology. “The Greeks,” she wrote, “had a name for her—Aphrodite. And the Romans called her Venus. To both, she was the Goddess of Love, the feminine embodiment of that most creative, satisfying and elusive human emotion.” Much like the *Cosmopolitan* centerfold the year earlier and the Indiana-based *Playgirl*, which compared the male body to ancient statuary and works of fine art, James reached back to mythology to call upon an essential and timeless feminine essence to sell her magazine. James went on to remind her readers that the essence of Venus has a new meaning in contemporary times: “All little girls grow up; Venus is no exception. And now that she’s come of age, watch out! She’s more sexually liberated than ever, has a fine eye for a well-endowed male, and still wants you to know of her many ways of making love.” Hence, the modern Venus would relish the naked men and sexual instruction that James’s magazine provided.

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278 Ibid.
Venus’s first issue included two nude male pinups, Tony Harris, an African American professional football player for the San Francisco 49ers, and Max Hill, an older white Australian. This could certainly be seen as an attempt to trump Playgirl which had not yet included an African American centerfold. Playgirl seemed unwilling to risk upsetting its position as the most successful sex magazine for women so it did not push boundaries of race. Upstart Venus had nothing to lose by experimenting with an African American pinup, however, the magazine did not let the Harris centerfold stand alone. Venus was able to have an African American as one of the choices, but not the only choice of sex object. This reticence on both the part of Playgirl and Venus to show men of color as their pinups of the month makes clear the limits of exactly how “loose” the playgirl style of liberation was in terms of race.

Features on sensual massage groups and “erotic films” rounded out Venus’s first issue. Many women, James writes, “are inordinately curious about erotic films” so Venus covered the topic in a series of articles including a discussion of pornographic films produced by a woman named Charlene Webb, a defense of the pornographic film industry by actress Linda Lovelace, and a how-to guide for going to a pornographic movie. Venus’s decisions to include two pinups of different races and its assertions about women as audiences for pornographic films boldly tested the limits of the genre of sex magazines for women. Echoing the words of her publisher, James writes that her modern-day Venus is “no longer Daddy’s Little Girl; she’s got ideas of her own. No father, husband or lover is going to tell her, any more, what should turn her on when she picks up a magazine or picks out a mate.”

In James’s view, buying and reading Venus

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279 Ibid.
280 Ibid.
was both a female birthright and an expression of newfound independence, a chance to break with a male-dominated past while communing with a timeless feminine essence.

James used her second editorial to continue to tout *Venus*’ innovation and success, writing that the magazine and its readers were on “the cusp of a new era.”281 “Both Venus and you,” she writes, “are at the thresholds of doors that have been closed to women for far too many years . . . Venus is moving right with you into the heretofore taboo area of female sexuality.”282 Recalling the well-known consciousness-raising sessions of the ongoing feminist movement, James writes that a member of her staff “will be talking directly to you through *Venus* . . . over the next three months we’ll be conducting a rap session in every metropolitan area of the United States with but three goals in mind—to seek your viewpoint, to learn your direction, to understand your desires.”283 James’s editorial, referring to *Venus*’s market research as “rap sessions” and a *Venus*-sponsored rock concert as a “happening,” attempted to tap into the language and energy of both the women’s movement and hippie countercultural movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. They were designed to link what were essentially corporate marketing activities to contemporary countercultural social movements. However, the core of what *Venus* offered was essentially the same loose sexual ethic offered by its competition. In the latter part of her second editorial James plugs a “kinky” “Who’s Your Favorite Nude Dude” contest where men would be judged by an all-woman panel who would “evaluate those handsome, well-endowed devils none of us can do without.”284 Treating men this way, James argues, was an expression of women’s

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282 Ibid.
283 Ibid.
284 Ibid.
freedom to judge men the way men had always judged women. Anything less, one advertisement for the magazine reminds us, would be promoting a “double standard.”

By James’ third editorial, in the January 1974 issue, she felt the need to discuss the philosophy of the magazine. “Lots of people have asked me what the philosophy of VENUS magazine is,” she writes. In response, James concedes that “those of us on the editorial staff aren’t much given to philosophizing—today’s rationale too often becomes tomorrow’s constriction. We prefer to hang loose to report—and comment on—what’s happening.” Here James exhibits a point-of-view similar to that of Playgirl’s Milam, a disdain for philosophizing and a penchant for rhetorical flexibility. However, James did see fit to outline “some definite goals” for the magazine:

One is to illustrate that a woman is not a passive receptacle whose sexual raison d’ etre is to discharge an onerous duty as quickly and as fecundly as possible. Sex is fun. It feels good. And every woman has as much right to that good feeling as a man does. So we applaud Woman as Sexual Being.

And we applaud Woman as Human Being, in all her infinite and myriad permutations. So a second goal of VENUS magazine is to project an image of women as vital, intelligent, interesting, reasonable, aware, responsive, and varied creatures of the realm.

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285 Ibid.  
288 Ibid.
Also, we see Woman as Equal Being—entitled to no more, but certainly no less, than is offered to her male companions in this society. Which brings me to the second old saw: “Women are inferior to men.” Sad to say, this kind of factitious reasoning can still be overheard—as it was by me—at cocktail parties.

But as Tennyson wrote, “the old order changeth, yielding place to the new . . .” We at VENUS are looking forward to the New Year and to the dawn of a new era which will find such words as superior and inferior, master and slave, dominant and passive, giving way to genuine, affectionate, and egalitarian partnership terms.289

James’s third editorial on what she calls the “New Sexuality” ran alongside features on the “white slave trade” and a woman’s firsthand account of drug addiction entitled “Hooked on Heroin—The Nightmare of a Woman Addict.” This issue, like others of Venus, blends the lofty musings of the editor with the much more sensational offerings that sell magazines; heralding a “New Era” and a “New Sexuality” while dependent on sexy bylines and titillation.290

The move toward greater titillation is also visible in Venus’s cover photography. Whereas its first two issues offer soft focus photography of fully clothed heterosexual couples, romantic and sentimental images of love rather than lust, photography that would feel at home on a greeting card (figure 2.16), its final two issues display a dramatic shift toward the pornographic and decadent. The January 1974 issue features a nude couple covered only with confetti and streamers and surrounded by empty champagne.

289 Ibid.
290 Ibid.
glasses while the February issue displays a fully nude male seated in an armchair, a fully
clothed woman at his feet (figure 2.17). In contrast to the first two issues, which featured
clothed couples nearly kissing, staring into one another’s eyes, the final two issues
feature nude men who are gazing outward with eyes locked firmly on the viewer—the
women in this images are now merely adoring accessories. This shift from romantic love
to carnal lust signals Venus’s attempt to mirror Playgirl’s covers. At the time, Playgirl
featured nude or nearly nude men and passionate heterosexual couples on its cover.

In her final editorial, in Venus’s February 1974 issue, James returned to the topic
of egalitarian relationships when she reminds readers of “Valentine’s Day on the
fourteenth and Susan B. Anthony’s birthday on the fifteenth.”291 James humbly suggests
that her readers “celebrate your lover on the first and yourself—and womanhood—on the
second.”292 James’s suggestion belies a merger that all sex magazines for women were
attempting to force, the celebration of womanhood and liberation with the appreciation
and consumption of the nude male body. The difficulty in doing this is on full display in
Venus, where the editor’s column can wax poetic about female liberation and
egalitarianism and then adopt a cover depicting a woman seated adoringly and
submissively at a man’s feet. Venus ended publication with its February issue, offering
no explanation to its readers. The New York Times marked Venus’ demise in the summer
of 1974 by noting that it no longer had a listed telephone number.293 However, by that
time a stronger and more experienced competitor had already set out to overtake Playgirl.

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292 Ibid.
“Viva la Difference!”

When the first issue of Playgirl hit newsstands, Penthouse magazine publisher Bob Guccione took aim directly at Lambert’s magazine. In the previous four years, Guccione’s Penthouse had been significantly cutting into Playboy’s circulation and profits, and with Viva, his forthcoming title for women, he hoped to do the same to Playgirl. Scoffing at Playgirl’s nudity he quipped; “that stuff is insulting to the intelligence of women . . . it’s like putting on a man’s suit, decorating it with lace and calling it a woman’s suit.”

Guccione said elsewhere that he considered male centerfolds “trite and contrived” and that he thought women responded more to the “real life approach, pictures of honest people artistically presented.” However, Guccione was destined to learn the lesson that Lambert and every other male publisher of a sex magazine for women had learned. The media would be skeptical of a male publisher telling women what they ought to want sexually.

“Viva la difference!” reads promotional material for Guccione’s Viva, promising that the upcoming publication would be “drawn from the rib of Penthouse.” Guccione asserted his magazine for women would “represent a return to romanticism.” Going further, he promised that Viva “won’t offend the women’s lib people, unless we’re talking about fanatics.” The staff of Newsweek, where Guccione’s prophetic comments appear, were not as convinced, noting that at the time, all of Viva’s senior

298 Ibid.
299 Ibid.
editors were men. That was “not likely to charm Gloria Steinem into any right-on endorsement. Nor is Guccione’s own personality apt to inspire confidence among even moderate women’s libbers.” Newsweek then cites Guccione’s boastful prediction that *Viva* would reach double the circulation of *Cosmopolitan* (then 1.6 million) in just two years. Despite Guccione’s bluster and biting commentary about *Playgirl*, his comments sound strikingly similar to *Playgirl* publisher Lambert’s as he launched his magazine.

When *Viva* made its official debut with the October 1973 issue, critics in the media revisited the issue of women on the staff. *Time* magazine reported that only eight of the twenty-three authors contributing to the first issue were women. “Even a solid advice article on how women can protect themselves from VD,” the *Time* article reports, “is written by a man.” In addition, two other articles, on aphrodisiacs and male sexual fantasies, were also authored by men. Beyond these concerns, *Time* notes that the fifteen-page nude spread with a couple on a nude picnic shows “total female nudity, but surprisingly, the man is as carefully shielded as Marlon Brando in *Last Tango in Paris*.” Another pictorial, of a handsome young boxer, was equally coy: “beautifully done” *Time* reports, but “marred by self conscious cropping of poses in the locker room and shower.” Finally, *Time* notes that essentially the same staff that published *Penthouse* put *Viva* together. Guccione’s heavy footprint was made apparent in other

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300 Ibid.  
301 Ibid.  
302 Ibid.  
304 Ibid.  
305 Ibid.  
306 Ibid.  
307 Ibid.  
308 Ibid.
ways as well. As the magazine’s first issue was going to press, two senior staffers—the executive editor, Arno Karlen and the managing editor, Phyllis Seidel—resigned, “complaining that Guccione repeatedly changed almost every page weeks after the closing deadline.” With negative publicity like this, it did not take Guccione long to begin to use the women on his staff, much as *Playgirl* did, to try to shift the tone of the media narrative about the magazine and sell the idea of male nudity to the public. *Viva* followed *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women by scaling back the role of its male publisher in promoting *Viva* and extolling the power and influence of its new female editor and staff. From this point on, both inside and outside in the press, *Viva*’s new managing editor, Bette Jane Raphael, and new editor in chief, Kathy Keeton, were assigned the difficult task of repairing the magazine’s reputation after a spotty initial rollout.

In 1974, *Viva*’s new managing editor, Raphael, a former editor for *McCall’s* magazine, gave an interview to the *Louisville Courier Journal* in an attempt to clear up some of misconceptions about the magazine and sell the idea of male nudity. The *Journal* article began by pointing out that *Viva*’s publisher, Guccione, “has a reputation among feminists as a first-class male chauvinist pig.” Raphael responded by noting that for a chauvinist pig, Guccione gave women at *Viva* “a lot of power.” Contradicting assertions made in the *Time* article from a year earlier, Raphael assured the *Journal* that Guccione did not interfere with the editorial content. She also pointed out that *Viva*’s editor, Keeton, was among the highest paid female executives in the country,

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309 Ibid.
311 Ibid.
312 Ibid.
313 Ibid.
with an annual salary of $300,000. Left out of this story was the fact that Keeton was also the longtime girlfriend of Guccione.

The Journal article reports that magazines like Viva “added a few dimensions” to publications for women. In addition to the traditional advice and household tips, new magazines for women insisted that “today’s woman should also be liberated and a fantastic sex partner.” In the interview, Raphael held herself up as a model for the Viva woman. “I feel I’m representative of the Viva woman” she says, “someone who is out there trying to make herself a full and total a human being as she can, looking at all life-styles and making choices, loving men and loving work.” Comparing Viva to its competitor, Playgirl, Raphael observed that Viva “recognizes women as sexual beings and does not treat them like sex kittens.” In addition, Raphael argued that unlike Viva’s competition, she believed “Viva does not talk down to women nor does it present a militant feminist view.” That being said, Raphael insisted that Viva covered a wide range of issues of interest to women including “grassroots feminism, open marriages, [and] bisexuality,” and she spoke of looking forward to an upcoming issue that would feature “a discussion among prominent feminists of the myth of female masochism.” She also noted the November 1974 issue of Viva, which would include a special report on rape, was proof that Viva was attuned to feminist concerns and issues.

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314 Ibid.
315 Ibid.
316 Ibid.
317 Ibid.
318 Ibid.
319 Ibid.
320 Ibid.
321 Ibid.
Defending *Viva*’s explicit male nudity, Raphael insisted that she would not apologize for it.322 “There are women out there” she stated, “who are starved for libido fuel.”323 “No one ever thought that women even wanted to look at [male nudity],” Raphael reported, “but our letters prove differently.” 324 She continued: “it was always thought that men were the voyeurs and women, the exhibitionists. But that’s not true. There are a lot of exhibitionist men out there trying to get into the magazine.”325 She cited the number of women who wrote to *Viva* asking that their boyfriends be featured nude in the magazine and the many men who wrote letters to *Viva* with descriptions of their own “fantastic” bodies, often including pictures to reinforce their assertions.326

Finally, when asked about feminists’ “vigorous attacks” on *Playboy* magazine, Raphael argued that the feminist objections were not with the *Playboy* nudes, “but the whole philosophy that women are there to be used and conquered.”327 She admitted that *Viva* makes sex objects out of men, but then qualifies her statement by saying that being a sex object “is part of what a man is, just like it’s part of what a woman is. What we object to is when that is what she is in total.”328 Raphael concludes that the most vigorous attacks *Viva* had endured had been from men who were “offended” by the magazine.329 She noted that she often found herself defending *Viva* to groups of men at cocktails parties: “They don’t like the theory of what is good for the goose . . . they don’t know what to make of it. They’re offended, and some are threatened.”330

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322 Ibid.
323 Ibid.
324 Ibid.
325 Ibid.
326 Ibid.
327 Ibid.
328 Ibid.
329 Ibid.
330 Ibid.
seems to argue that the sexual objectification in *Viva* helps work toward feminist goals (as she understood them) of gender equality. Most telling, however, is her insistence that one of the magazine’s most important accomplishments is that its content upsets and threatens many men who were uncomfortable with the sort of equal-opportunity objectification that *Viva* purportedly provided.

“The Male Nude Turn-On and Other Matters”

A more coherent editorial philosophy for *Viva* began to coalesce only after publisher Guccione installed his girlfriend Keeton as the magazine’s editor. Keeton had been listed on *Viva*’s masthead as associate publisher since its inception in October 1973 but was not listed as editor until July 1974. She did not author an editorial until a month later, in the August issue. Before that time, a host of men, beginning with Guccione, authored *Viva*’s editorials, which were entitled “The First Word.” As previously stated, Guccione became the target for a host of criticism about the amount of male influence in the magazine. It was perhaps this pressure, along with sales lagging behind rival *Playgirl*, that influenced him, after nearly a year, to let a female editor have “The First Word.” It became Keeton’s task to flesh out *Viva*’s version of the playgirl, outline the magazine’s take on sexual liberation, and comment on the male nudity that had come to define the women’s sex magazine genre.

In her first column as editor, Keeton gets right to the point, attacking the magazine’s critics and writing that, “these critics maintained that there was no real female readership to be found for a sexy, forthright, new women’s magazine and that even if
there was, women were not capable of responding to visual and intellectual erotica with pleasure."³³¹ Keeton asserts that critics were skeptical of Viva because it was published by Penthouse International and would therefore be male oriented.³³² According to Keeton, nothing could be further from the truth. “Half of the Penthouse executive staff is made up of women,” she argues, and Viva was inspired by “thousands upon thousands of letter from female readers of Penthouse” who wrote, requesting a magazine of their own.”³³³ After Keeton argues that Viva was meeting an existing need for women readers, she describes the Viva woman:

*Viva* celebrates the erotic lives of millions of young women who are loving, sensual, and free. *Viva* appeals not to the feminist or the traditional housewife, but to that curious mix—the new woman . . . the woman who is sexually liberated but does not hate men; the woman who wants to live independently, but with her man.³³⁴

Here, *Viva* mimics *Playgirl’s* man-loving mantra, a viewpoint that both publications felt might possibly put them at odds with some feminists. Keeton continues: “*Viva* is not a magazine concerned with ideology—it is a magazine concerned with change. It is a magazine that enjoys being unpredictable and provocative.”³³⁵ In Keeton’s opinion, one reminiscent of Borie’s column in the first issue of *Playgirl*, feminist ideas about sexuality were neither flexible enough nor interesting enough for the Viva woman. But inasmuch as Keeton seems to argue that feminist critiques of traditional heterosexual relationships went too far, she promises to support egalitarian relationships, writing that “maybe we

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³³² Ibid.
³³³ Ibid.
³³⁴ Ibid.
³³⁵ Ibid.
can find new, loving ways to live together as men and women without surrendering or subordinating our individuality.”336 Here, a Viva woman’s independence is defined as freedom from the sexual strictures of feminism, which Keeton defines as man hating and too ideological.

In her next editorial, Keeton defines sexual liberation. Sexual liberation, she writes occurs “between men and women” and means “behaving freely in the most intimate way and feeling good and unashamed about the results.”337 She reminds her readers that “we have everything to gain by exploring and redefining our sexuality—not only for ourselves, but for women and men everywhere.”338 Pointing out that she and her readers had their work cut out for them, Keeton writes:

It is pretty obvious that before we can truly be liberated, we must learn an awful lot more about ourselves and our men; we must be in touch not only with our bodies but with the whole network of emotions and feelings from which our sexuality evolves.339

According to Keeton, among the ranks of those seeking liberation in the pages of Viva were “college students, career girls, and young marrieds.”340 Many of these readers were “beginning the exciting process of self-liberation by admitting sexual hang-ups that were routinely camouflaged until a comparatively short time ago.”341 In Keeton’s view, Viva was part of the solution, providing a “uniquely honest and courageous open forum” for the “many female voices demanding to be heard.”342 Concluding, she writes, “I want

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336 Ibid.
338 Ibid.
339 Ibid.
340 Ibid.
341 Ibid.
342 Ibid.
women to feel they can express, free of censorship, any fear, opinion, attitude, or personal experience they like in these pages.”\(^{343}\) Not surprisingly, one of the first subjects Keeton discussed in her forum was women’s responses to male nudity.

In an editorial entitled “The Male Nude Turn-On and Other Matters,” Keeton reflected on *Viva*’s one-year anniversary, noting in particular the “terrific response we’ve gotten to our male nude pictorials.”\(^{344}\) “There has been a growing demand for them despite outraged comments from some quarters,” Keeton reports.\(^{345}\) She continues: “We knew from past experience that men like to look at pretty female bodies. What we weren’t sure about was whether women feel the same way.”\(^{346}\) Citing the recent shift in the explicitness of male nudity, Keeton recalls:

> There have always been movie star pinups taped to bedroom walls. There have always been beefcake shots of muscle men. Girls have always sent away for eight-by-ten glossies of men like Sinatra and Elvis, because they exuded the optimum of glamour and primitive sex appeal. In the past, women were supposed to be turned on by sexual suggestion, by erotic innuendo rather than by deed, and yet today we are discovering that women are frankly, boldly, and actively fascinated with sex in *all* of its aspects. They *enjoy* looking at the male body.\(^{347}\)

Why had it taken so long for women to discover this enjoyment? Keeton writes that until recently women “weren’t free to admit our enjoyment, or even given the opportunity to look at male nudity in photographs.”\(^{348}\) Speaking to the sheer variety of visual “turn-

\(^{343}\) Ibid.
\(^{345}\) Ibid.
\(^{346}\) Ibid.
\(^{347}\) Ibid.
\(^{348}\) Ibid.
ons” women find in male nudes, Keeton cites that some readers had “written that they are turned on by men’s faces, by their smiles, or by the curve of their legs.”349 For other women, it was the hands, the buttocks, “or—quite simply—the size and shape of his penis.”350 “Man’s spirit must shine through in our photographs,” Keeton concludes, as if she were channeling Playgirl’s centerfold coordinator, Holt: “That is one of our goals. We must not exploit men as simple, mindless sex objects; we are out to reveal men in a delightful and erotic manner.”351 As Keeton became outspoken on a wide range of issues from male impotence (December 1974) to the lack of gender equality in the United Nations (January 1975), she turned the pages of Viva magazine into women’s guidebook for a more liberated life and in the process helped redefine female sexuality for the 1970s. The narrative of sexual liberation she established in Viva needed the women’s movement for its initial push but was suspicious of the movement in regard to how it might radically change gender roles within heterosexual relationships. Viva used its editorials, features, and publishing capabilities to advocate on behalf of some women’s issues. Boldly going where Playgirl editor Milam had feared to tread, Keeton advocated strongly for a topic close to her heart, sexual assault and rape. Keeton saw the issue as crucial to the liberation of women and within her purview as editor of a sex magazine for women. The way the issue was treated in the pages of Viva is indicative of the complicated relationship sex magazines for women had with the larger women’s movement.

349 Ibid.
350 Ibid.
351 Ibid.
Following a special issue on rape (November 1974), Viva, via Penthouse’s publishing arm, produced an entire book on the topic. Outrage: The Viva Rape Letters (1974) was a bound volume composed of letters written to the magazine in response to a survey on sexual assault. The survey and the letters provided an outlet for victims of rape to express their experience of sexual assault. Viva released its volume on rape a year before feminist Susan Brownmiller published Against Our Will (1975), considered to be the first comprehensive history of rape ever published. Viva’s account relied more heavily on the lived experience of rape, by both men and women, first hand accounts that made a timely companion piece to Brownmiller’s. In addition to the rape letters, Outrage included a study on rape by sociologist Pauline Bart and interviews with rapists who shared their feelings and motivations surrounding the crimes they committed. By including the personal statements of victims of sexual assault, Outrage reflected tactics already in use by radical feminist activists who were using details of women’s personal lives to forge feminist politics. It is also important to note that in its editorial pages Viva stopped short of attributing the issue as a problem associated with systemic male dominance, radical feminists’ signature approach to rape activism.

Viva took up the issue of sexual assault in conjunction with a broad-based feminist coalition that had already taken up the issue. In fact, feminist scholar Maria Bevacqua argues that anti rape activism in the early 1970s is an example of coalition-

353 Ibid.
building that blurred ideological lines that divided the women’s movement and bridged barriers between white feminists and African American feminists. Bevacqua notes that the issue first became a central concern for women’s liberation “by way of the consciousness-raising sessions of 1970”. Rape prevention and advocacy drove self defense classes at the Feminist Karate Union in Seattle, Washington in 1971 and the establishment of the first rape crisis center in the United States in Washington, D.C., in 1972. In 1973, two groups, the Women’s Anti-Rape Coalition (WARC) and New York Women Against Rape (NYWAR), formed in New York to raise public awareness of the issue. By the time Viva took up the issue in 1974, anti rape activism in the U. S. had taken on a variety of forms that attacked the problem from legislative and policy angles, “all the while challenging attitudes and beliefs that supported rape culture.”

The dust jacket for Outrage asserts “the extraordinary realization that rape is less a crime of sex than one of violence—that it is the element of conquest which men seek and not simply sexual release.” In the forward to Outrage, Kathy Keeton declares a “rape emergency” and, as Brownmiller would do in Against Our Will a year later, argues that rape had a long and complicated history. “Down through history there have been countless individual rapes as well as mass rapes by invading armies,” Keeton writes, citing an incident in Bangladesh in 1972 when 20,000 women were brutally raped by West Pakistani soldiers. Additionally, Keeton cites rape as something that happens

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354 Ibid, 163-164.
355 Ibid, 165.
356 Ibid, 166.
357 Ibid, 168.
358 Ibid, 166.
361 Ibid.
among family members and within white-collar environs, upending the stereotype of the lone woman attacked by a criminal or a stranger.\textsuperscript{362} \textit{Outrage} is careful to point out the social and sexual implications of rape. Women’s disinterest in sex and inability to trust men after a sexual assault had tremendous implications for heterosexual relationships, the center of \textit{Viva}’s world. This lingering effect is underscored in the final chapter of the book, entitled “Rape Doesn’t End With a Kiss,” authored by Bart. Bart writes that “it is clear from the statistics and from letters that if there were a plot to destroy male–female relationships in this country, particularly sexual relationships, then such a plot would include having a maximum number of women raped.”\textsuperscript{363}

\textit{Outrage}, taken in its entirety, foreshadows Brownmiller’s conclusion in \textit{Against Our Will} that rape is not merely a crime but a systematic process of demoralization perpetrated by men primarily against women. With its timely exploration of sexual assault, \textit{Viva} reflected the concerns of the broad-based coalition of anti rape activists within the women’s movement. As a sex magazine for women, \textit{Viva} added a unique voice to this conversation and in doing so wedded itself to the feminist zeitgeist. Keeton writes in \textit{Outrage} that “now at last, women have begun writing and talking openly about rape, organizing conferences, forming rape crisis centers, and protesting laws adverse to victims.”\textsuperscript{364} \textit{Against Our Will}, however, caused Keeton to back away from her staunch position on the root causes of rape.

Following the publication of Brownmiller’s \textit{Against Our Will}, Keeton used her editorial perch to take shots at the feminist author, accusing her of “doing our cause more

\textsuperscript{362} Ibid, 10.
“I’d thought that most movement leaders had finally accepted men as allies,” she writes, but then Brownmiller and her book “began a crusade to argue that women and men cannot share mutual respect and love because their relations are all based on men’s power to rape the female.” In her view, the book “threatens to destroy gains of the women’s movement by preventing women from drawing on inner resources and by alienating many from the entire movement.” In Keeton’s opinion, Brownmiller had gone too far in her book, turning a serious social and criminal problem into a systemic problem with heterosexual relations as a whole, a conclusion Keeton was not inclined to accept.

For a magazine such as *Viva*, which was based on eroticizing heterosexuality, the implications and popularity of Brownmiller’s book were a real threat. “It frightens me,” Keeton writes, “that the book may have the effect of frightening many women to the point where their newly emerging lifestyles are threatened.” One of the “newly emerging lifestyles” Keeton saw as imperiled was the very one keeping her publication afloat, that of the sophisticated and male-worshipping playgirl or “Viva woman,” a lifestyle that provided a space within which *Viva* and other sex magazines for women were necessary. While it is certainly possible that Keeton disagreed with Brownmiller on intellectual terms as well, but she clearly saw Brownmiller as a threat to her magazine and other sexually oriented material. “As off base as I find the book and its author,” she concluded, “I would never propose that either be censored, although Susan Brownmiller

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366 Ibid.
367 Ibid.
368 Ibid.
feels that material she dislikes should be kept off the air and out of bookstores.”369 Speaking to Brownmiller’s alleged censorious threat, Keeton asserts, “I’m not arrogant enough to assume that I know what should be printed for the good of the public. Apparently Brownmiller is.”370 Keeton’s concern was not without grounds; just a few months before her column appeared, feminists began protesting outside theaters showing *Snuff*, a film they claimed eroticized torture.371 In addition, the first of a number of anti-pornography groups began organizing in 1976—Women Against Violence Again Women (WAVA W), which would be followed by Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPAM) in 1977 and finally a group co-founded by Brownmiller, Women Against Pornography (WAP) in 1979.372 All of these groups would play a crucial role in highlighting pornography as a feminist issue, but in doing so they all threatened the image of the liberated *playgirl* and her lust for male nudity by calling into question women’s relationship to explicit material. All of this occurred even as sex magazines for women made that relationship the key ingredient for marketing themselves to women.

It is clear that *Viva* trumped *Playgirl* in its early advocacy for feminist causes, but in other matters it found itself following *Playgirl’s* lead. Visually, beginning with its cover, *Viva* initially sought to distance itself from *Playgirl* by featuring headshots of women (figure 2.18). The first glimpse of nudity (female) appears in June of 1974, followed by a nude male–female couple a month later in July (figure 2.19). Subsequent covers slipped into the *Playgirl* formula of showing male–female couples, but when *Playgirl* shifted gears and began to feature headshots of men (October 1974), *Viva* 

369 Ibid.
370 Ibid.
followed two months later with a similar cover image (December 1974). Cover images of men or heterosexual couples were a necessity to establish what sort of magazine it was. By the time *Viva* began publication, the success and visibility of *Playgirl* had already come to define the image of a sex magazine for women in the mind of the consumer. Any competitor was following its lead both visually and rhetorically.

*Foxy lady: Entertainment for Women*

Another notable competitor aiming to tap into the playgirl ethos was *Foxy lady*, which began its first editorial in the January 1975 issue by declaring, “this is truly the nude era.”373 *Foxy lady*, according to *The New York Times*, “was designed to look as much like the already successful *Playgirl* magazine as possible.”374 The press run for the first and second issues was 500,000 copies each.375 The male publishers were veterans from *Gallery* and other sex magazines for men, while the female editor, Susan Lentini, was a former *Playboy* bunny.376

Lentini used her first editorial to examine and defend the continued cultural significance of sex magazines to women’s sexual liberation. Harkening back to the arguments of other editors, she defended the sex magazine for women as an embattled genre. Lentini asks, “can it be possible that censorship of the nude male form should be the last inhibition to be shed in our sophisticated media?”377 Lentini states that some of

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375 Ibid.
376 Ibid.
the public may be tired of nudity, noting that over the course of the previous year the “rebellion of streaking” had faded in and out.\footnote{Ibid.} Citing her competition in the women’s sex magazine market, she asserts “you have been culturally prepared for FOXYLADY by other women’s magazines. FOXYLADY is another approach to attitudes that have evolved from this new consciousness.”\footnote{Ibid.} What did Foxylady have to offer that was new? “We will not dwell on subjects that have been discussed to the point of redundancy,” Lentini writes: “We will promote a more contemporary social viewpoint as we celebrate the advantages of being female in the ’70’s. The time has come to use your sexual politics to make yourself happy . . . and we will tell you how.”\footnote{Ibid.} In this last sentence Lentini finds the very pulse of the women’s sex magazine phenomenon . . . her comment reflects the 1970’s focus on personal fulfillment over mass political movements, the triumph of the personal over the political. What advantage is there in working for the collective good if one is not personally fulfilled? This question, which has been at the heart of Borie’s Playgirl piece . . . found a new home in the pages of Foxylady. The magazine, like its predecessors, promised to be a guidebook for women’s sexual fulfillment, “the ultimate combination of femininity and liberation.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Lentini’s subsequent editorials offered her little opportunity to expound upon her vision for the magazine because with the November 1975 issue, Foxylady was sold and she was replaced. Foxylady’s new owners hired a new editor, billed only as S. Chamberlin (a woman’s photograph appears above the editorial). The new editor’s editorial cites the new publisher and promises that differences would undoubtedly emerge

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
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\end{itemize}
as time goes on. 382 “We intend to produce a magazine a little more polished, a little more 
urbane and feminist than its predecessor,” she writes, and “we trust our publication will 
make a serious name for itself as a truly superior product.” 383 This “more polished” 
feminist product never emerged, as the November issue was Foxylady’s last.

Foxylady’s cover images shifted over time, and (much like Venus before it) the 
magazine borrowed heavily from Playgirl. Foxylady tended to display more and more 
of the male body as time passed. The first issues, January and March 1975, used close-up 
head shots of young, white men. Playgirl, clearly established by 1975 as the most 
commercially successful sex magazine for women, was almost exclusively using 
identical close-up headshots. Later issues of Foxylady, in May and August 1975, employ 
men stripped to the waist in photos that feature the chest and abdomen. Foxylady’s final 
issue, November 1975, under new management, was the first to feature a couple, both 
stripped to the waist, on the cover. Playgirl, its brand image already clearly established, 
could afford to exclude displaying nude or semi-nude men from its cover, while its 
competition, seemingly, could not. The competition, in order to establish themselves as 
sex magazines, could not afford to appear as anything less. Nude men, so crucial to the 
genre of sex magazines for women, made their way to the covers as a promise to readers 
of what was contained within.

As this chapter has made clear, the formula used to attract women to sex 
magazines and keep them interested in consuming them was more complicated than 
simply augmenting the features of the women’s magazine with images of nude men. It 
involved deploying a rhetorical strategy that made sense of the magazines’ offerings in a

383 Ibid.
way that spoke to women’s concerns and dispositions. It meant developing a whole new discourse concerning what it meant for women to be sexually liberated in the 1970s and meant redefining the term *playgirl*. The new playgirl was a pleasure-seeking, self-sufficient sexual agent. The new playgirl ethos emerged from the concerns and spirit of the time, which for women was largely encapsulated in the women’s movement. In short, largely due to the particular moment within which sex magazines for women appeared, feminism became the frame through which the media and many potential readers made sense of them. Unlike the women’s movement, which offered philosophical understandings of the structure of society and the systemic devaluation of women’s contributions to it, the playgirl ethos merely tapped into the feeling of the moment, the unique spirit of the early 1970s. Although early attempts to sell sex magazines to women actively avoided the women’s movement, even appearing hostile toward it as the Indiana based *Playgirl* did, later editors of sex magazines for women eventually accepted the feminist frame for their publications. Sex magazines for women did not speak *for* the women’s movement however; they spoke *through* it. The magazines used the movement’s lexicon but adapted it to their own logic. They drew from its power but offered only strategic and episodic support for its causes. When feminist views of culture threatened their views, as with Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will*, editors went on the defensive and were dismissive of what they felt was the shift in the women’s movement toward a more radical worldview.

Sex magazines for women went about the work of crafting their strategic rhetoric by handing the editorial reigns over to women and publicizing this fact. This shift limited the public role of powerful male publishers and required that they laud the influence,
intuition, and sometimes even the salaries of female editors and staff of sex magazines for women. These publications hired women to work as photographers and copywriters, appropriated the language of liberation, and sold the notion that what they were offering was a break from the past and a glimpse into the sexual expression of the future. In these magazines, editors and contributors appealed to classical art for historic proof that male nudity was timeless and beautiful just as Brown and her staff at Cosmopolitan had when they presented the first nude male centerfold for women. Sex magazines for women appealed to simple reciprocity and egalitarianism to argue for women’s right to view male nudity. Female editors and staff repeatedly offered personal testimony of their own appreciation of male nudity. They defended their magazines against any detractors who questioned their logic, intentions, or taste. Finally, sex magazines for women insisted that they were an embattled genre, victims of a sexist culture and years of female sexual oppression and inhibition.

*Playgirl, Venus, Viva,* and *Foxxylady* accelerated the discussion of female sexuality in popular print culture. For example, *Redbook,* a women’s general-interest magazine, which told *The New York Times* in 1974 (via an unnamed source) that it did not consider *Playgirl* and *Viva* to be competition for readers or advertisers, nonetheless added a new column by William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, the husband-and-wife team of sexologists, and a questionnaire on sex practices in the October 1974 issue. After polling 100,000 women, the editors reported that “women are becoming increasingly active sexually and are less likely to accept an unsatisfactory sex life.”

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Playgirl and Viva pushed other women’s magazines to embrace women’s sexuality more boldly and encouraged women to treat sex as more central to their own lives. As sex became the shorthand for liberation, women’s magazines had to follow or risk looking horribly outdated. Their efforts to capture the constantly shifting center of the women’s movement in the early 1970s led to some rhetorically creative uses of feminist language and some marked shifts in positions such as Keeton’s attack on Brownmiller’s Against Our Will after the publication of Outrage.

In early 1976, both Playgirl and Viva had yet to see the conservative turn in the road. The second half of the 1970s would test the flexibility of both magazines’ editorial rhetoric and their abilities to adapt to shifting social and cultural trends while still insisting on a place for women’s sex magazines. With relative ease, Playgirl translated its looser lifestyle from the early 1970s into sexual expertise for monogamous couples in the more culturally conservative late 1970s and early 1980s. Viva was not as successful. The next chapter explores how the rhetoric of sex magazines for women negotiated the conservative backlash against feminism in the late 1970s. This shift included questioning male nudity, the very feature that made the magazine newsworthy in the early 1970s.
Chapter Three


The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which seemed certain to become law when it was approved by Congress in 1972, languished in the ratification process by the Bicentennial summer of 1976. The ERA, the most visible of all issues associated with feminism and women’s rights, was feeling the brunt of cultural and political backlash against feminism and other perceived excesses of the 1970s. By the end of 1975, Phyllis Schlafly had created the Eagle Forum, an organization that bound together conservatives against the ERA.386 In 1977, Schlafly and other antifeminists infiltrated a series of state and national “International Women’s Year” conferences, including the 1977 National Women’s Conference in Houston, seeking to challenge feminist positions on the ERA as well as abortion and gay rights.387 As historian Marjorie Spruill asserts, “after 1977, national politics would be increasingly polarized and gender issues would be at the heart of the dispute.”388 Debates about proper gender roles, however, were only one of many examples of conservative backlash.

The religious right made its presence known in national politics during the 1976 presidential election. Both evangelicals and sex magazines played an unexpected part in the 1976 election, when presidential candidate Jimmy Carter submitted to an interview by *Playboy* magazine for an issue that hit newsstands a few weeks before the election. The interview was reportedly an attempt to make Carter seem like “less of a weirdo” after he

387 Ibid, 71.
388 Ibid, 72.
had spoken publicly about his personal relationship with Christ.\footnote{Berkowitz, \textit{Something Happened}, 108.} In the interview, Carter discussed lust in his heart and “used such racy expressions as ‘screw’ and ‘shack up.’”\footnote{Ibid.} Conservatives were appalled by Carter’s interview.\footnote{Peter N. Carroll, \textit{It Seemed Like Nothing Happened}, 204.} \textit{Playboy} is known for its gutter approach to life, and its whole philosophy comes right from the barnyard,” a leading pastor of the Southern Baptist Convention commented.\footnote{Ibid.} He concluded that he and others were “not convinced Carter is truly in the evangelical camp.”\footnote{Ibid.} \textit{Newsweek} magazine proclaimed 1976 as “The Year of the Evangelical,” a designation that “underscored a phenomenon that was already well under way.”\footnote{Ibid.} As historian Paul Boyer argues, “one cannot begin to understand the sea change in American political culture in the 1970s without grasping the centrality of religion to that transformation.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Under the shadow of this shifting political and cultural landscape, the two remaining sex magazines for women, like the rest of the country, struggled with their identities. How would \textit{Playgirl}, a publication reliant upon the women’s movement and the loose lifestyle of the early 1970s to define its offerings, survive the increasing influence of Christian conservatism? How would sex magazines for women navigate the declining primacy of the women’s movement in the United States? Who/What would define a “postfeminist” \textit{Playgirl}?

In the summer of 1976, citizens of the United States were busy celebrating the country’s Bicentennial. As historian Peter Carroll remembers, “Americans approached
the nation’s two hundredth birthday with the ambivalence of tourists dipping their toes into shark infested waters.”396 Amid all of the fireworks and speeches commemorating the country’s 200th anniversary, debates raged about how to remember the past and how to forge into the future. “The Bicentennial return to the past was part and parcel of the search for self that characterized much of 1970s culture,” historian Christopher Capozzola observes.”397 By 1976, journalist Tom Wolfe had already christened the 1970s the “me decade.”398 As the remainder of the 1970s played out, however, the looser life message that had dominated the beginning of the decade was losing its popular appeal, undergoing escalating attacks by a host of conservative cultural and political forces. By mid-decade, critics of the perceived “excesses” of the 1970s were making themselves heard and finding larger audiences for their messages. *Playgirl* and *Viva*, publications which had found inspiration in the idea of a looser life for women, were suddenly rethinking their rhetorical appeals.

The late 1970s proved to be a time of experimentation and reinvention for *Viva* and *Playgirl*, the two remaining sex magazines for women. They questioned the very foundations on which they had established themselves. At the dawn of 1976, *Playgirl* and *Viva* held firmly to the rhetoric they had borrowed from the women’s movement and used their editorial pages to sell male nudity to women and advocate for the ERA. After *Viva* editor Kathy Keeton and *Playgirl* editor Marin Milam embraced the ERA, each for their own stated reasons, the paths of these two publications diverged. Each magazine

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experimented with different approaches to women’s sexuality and finally came to some
dramatic conclusions about the future of their publications. In the summer of 1976,
however, they each took a bold step and publically questioned the logic of including male
nudity in their publications. *Viva* eliminated male nudity altogether while *Playgirl*
conducted a poll and decided to keep the feature. The strategic link between feminist
rhetoric and male nudity, however, had begun to unravel. By the end of the 1970s, only
*Playgirl* would survive to define the genre of sex magazine for women. In 1977, *Playgirl*
briefly embraced feminism more wholeheartedly than ever, replacing Marin Milam with
a much younger woman and self-proclaimed feminist, Joyce Dudney Fleming. After this
brief foray into feminist activism, however, *Playgirl’s* new publisher, Ira Ritter, moved
the publication in a new direction.

As this chapter will argue, *Playgirl* renegotiated the playgirl identity under
Ritter’s leadership to be more amenable to the more conservative period of the late 1970s
and early 1980s. The playgirl archetype proved flexible and able to navigate shifts in
American culture, such as the rise of cultural and political conservatism in the late 1970s
and early 1980s, through strategic rhetoric. During this period *Playgirl* focused less on
the loose lifestyles of the early 1970s and more on offering its sexual expertise to
committed couples. In the late 1970s the cover of *Playgirl* offered fully clothed celebrity
couples, de-emphasizing the male nudity it had become famous for. *Playgirl* also
launched two sister publications, *Playgirl Advisor* and *Playgirl Couples*, which shared
*Playgirl’s* emphasis on couples and whose covers objectified the female body as much or
more than the male body. This chapter argues that Ritter worked rhetorically through the
editor’s column to recontextualize the playgirl within the postfeminist culture of the early
1980s. After 1978, Ritter had all but eliminated the female editor position at *Playgirl*, taking over editorial duties himself. Editorials he wrote in the early 1980s avoided using feminist language such as *liberation* and opted for a philosophy of “personal freedom” instead. In Ritter’s hands, *Playgirl* imagined itself to be a progressive cultural force in the 1980s even as it became largely unhinged from its feminist roots.

As this chapter makes clear, through shifting social and cultural climates in the 1970s, *Playgirl* loosened and then restricted the amount of sexual license it allowed for women. Indeed, during these turbulent years we see *Playgirl* at its most revolutionary and at its most reactionary. In the pages of *Playgirl* in the early 1980s, freedom for women was no longer dependent upon a women’s liberation model. After years of flirtation with feminism, *Playgirl* abandoned its reliance on female editors and along with them any use of feminist rhetoric. This postfeminist *Playgirl* was remarkable for its return to a powerful-publisher model and for its objectification of the female body on the covers of its publications after years of reliance on the supposed power and promise of the nude male body. In short, at the close of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, *Playgirl* presented a much less decadent and libertarian face by including more and more writing about committed couples and marriage. Finally, this chapter argues that as the Christian conservative movement coalesced into a stronger political force in the 1980 presidential election and beyond, *Playgirl* also forged a new rhetorical approach and took on the Reagan administration and conservative Christians directly through its editorial page.

In 1976, as *Playgirl* and *Viva* contemplated the future of their publications, the culture around them depicted women struggling with their own identities. The most
popular television character in 1976 was the depressed Mary Hartman from the Norman Lear series *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman.*[^399] The series was a “funky parody of the hopelessness of daytime soap operas.” Its title character was a homemaker frustrated by the collapse of moral authority as she “experienced the absurdity of a world without meaning.”[^400] Mary, like many women in the mid-1970s, knew she had outgrown the gender stereotypes of the past but found herself spiraling toward an uncertain future and searching for a new identity. *Viva* and *Playgirl* found themselves in a similar position as the rhetoric they had used to establish their magazines as liberating outlets for sexually free women three years earlier risked sounding stale and dated by 1976.

Popular film and music of the period reflected similar unease and uncertainty. In addition they also showed signs of increasing reticence toward the looser lifestyles magazines like *Viva* and *Playgirl* had initially advocated. Popular media representation in 1976 told a story of a culture lost and hung over from excess. *All the Presidents Men* (1976) rehashed the Watergate scandal of the recent past while *Network* (1976) offered what historian Bruce Schulman called “an acid report on the nation and the prospects for the future.”[^401] A popular science fiction film, *Logan’s Run* (1976), portrayed a dystopian future where citizens of Earth enjoy lives of hedonistic abandon until they reach the age of thirty, when they are executed to prevent overpopulation. In the film, citizens never marry; instead, they order dates and sexual encounters using a computer, while spending their days partying at discos and arcades and getting plastic surgery. The film’s negative view of sexual excess and the worship of youth seemed to comment directly on the

[^400]: Ibid.
singles culture of the “me decade.” In popular music, themes of excess thrived. In December of 1976, the Eagles released *Hotel California,* the album was a meditation on the perceived decline of the United States into materialism and decadence: “The imagery of desperation, panic and imprisonment amid the fountains of champagne, medieval gluttony, and sexual deviants and lines of cocaine on the mirror dominate much of the album.”402 In the Bicentennial year, popular culture was ripe with images of a dream gone wrong. Across the board, Americans began to take a second look at their freedoms, sexual and otherwise, and wondered if they had gone too far.

**Viva, Playgirl, and the ERA**

By 1976, with their competitors out of business, *Playgirl* and *Viva* were left to define the genre of sex magazines for women and their relationship to movement feminism. Rhetorically, in 1976 both magazines still held strong to the language of the women’s movement while often lamenting the movement’s leadership and tactics. *Playgirl* editor Marin Milam and *Viva* editor Kathy Keeton used their editorial pages to confront one of the defining issues of the women’s movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s: the ERA. They were not alone. In July 1976, thirty-five women’s magazines produced special issues on the ERA.403 The stakes for *Playgirl* and *Viva,* however, were different. Their unqualified support for the amendment was a natural extension of the way their respective magazines saw the world and women’s place in it. Milam and Keeton both felt the amendment was intrinsically bound to their goal of equality in

402 Ibid.
heterosexual relationships, which would only come about by making men and women truly equal partners. In addition, both women felt that the women’s movement was not working hard enough to connect feminist issues to the lives of ordinary women.

In a 1976 editorial entitled “Different But Equal,” Viva editor Keeton poses a question to her readers: “does the women’s movement have the right to commit suicide?” Writing that all who were concerned with women’s welfare had to answer no, Keeton asserts, “we may hold different opinions on methods and ultimate goals, but we can all agree on one point: the movement must continue and it must flourish.”

Key to keeping the movement alive, in Keeton’s opinion, was the success of the ERA. The ERA, at the time the editorial was written, had just been defeated in the New York and New Jersey legislatures, and Keeton blames feminist rhetoric and elitism in the movement’s leadership for the failures and delays in moving the amendment toward ratification. In her opinion, the women’s movement’s failure to value the contributions of housewives and mothers was hurting the ERA. These and other “suicidal tendencies” (such as back-stabbing, name-calling, and other divisive tactics within the movement) were turning ordinary women against the ERA. It was important now, Keeton writes, to “get back to the roots of the women’s liberation movement—to the time when it held values relevant for most women, not just extremists.” The movement would do this by keeping the focus on equality in pay, job opportunities, and education,

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405 Ibid.
406 Ibid.
407 Ibid.
408 Ibid.
409 Ibid.
410 Ibid.
things that, Keeton asserts, would help all women. Bringing the topic back to heterosexual relationships, the primary focus of her magazine, Keeton proposes that “different but equal” must be the rallying cry of women because “there isn’t anything wrong—no there is everything right!—with loving a man, and men must be our equal partners in gaining equality under the law.” Keeton’s comments outline her fear that the face of the amendment had become that of militant feminists, possibly lesbians, and this hurt the amendment’s chances to help “ordinary” women. As with her stated opinions on other feminist issues such as rape, Keeton saw hers as the voice of common sense, a more moderate voice in what she saw as an increasingly radical and divided women’s movement.

For Milam, the roots of the ERA fight were firmly embedded in the workplace. In contrast to Keeton, Milam gives less credence to divisions within the women’s movement and instead appeals to a sense of fairness and common sense. In her column in the August 1976 issue of Playgirl, she introduces the first in a series of articles on “today’s working woman” and reports that “women working full time earn 57 cents to every dollar earned by men and of all workers earning less than $100 a week 71% are women.” Milam writes that she is angry at the status quo, and going further, writes that all of the talk about the bad economy and the American free enterprise system was “all jingoistic rhetoric” and suggests that politicians “shove it.” “While Washington spends millions of dollars on a ton of red, white and blue crepe paper and tuba polish so we can celebrate our glorious Bicentennial,” she writes, “[w]e still don’t have an

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411 Ibid.
412 Ibid.
414 Ibid.
amendment to our Constitution that ensures equality under the law to all people regardless of race, religion or sex.” 415 After describing her own hardscrabble childhood, hard-working parents, and struggle for success, Milam concludes, “I am a wife, a daughter, a sister, a professional woman, a political independent. I have a sense of human worth I’m willing to fight for, a sense of humor I’d probably perish without.” 416 To Milam, the ERA was just plain common sense, although her “Midwestern ideals” kept her from becoming “the total reactionary my anger at our political, social and sexual hypocrisy demands.” 417 Milam continued to insist that she was “everywoman,” but in her view the average woman was at risk of being pushed to the brink by inequality in the American workplace.

The July 1978 issue of Viva ran an ad for an ERA poster, a photograph of a young waitress with a tray full of food in one hand. 418 With her free hand, she points out at the viewer, and the copy reads: “Opportunities Are Not Equal, Women Need ERA.” 419 One month later, in August 1978, Keeton issued an “E.R.A. Alert” via her editorial page, writing that the amendment was “in serious danger” and that its death “can and must be prevented.” 420 In service to the cause, Keeton printed the entire amendment in her editorial along with names of members of the U. S. House and Senate who could be contacted in order to extend the ERA’s deadline for ratification. 421 “Perhaps by the time you read this,” Keeton writes, “three more states will have ratified, or Congress will have extended the ERA deadline. I fervently hope so.” She reiterates her call to action by

415 Ibid.  
416 Ibid.  
417 Ibid.  
418 Advertisement “Opportunities Are Not Equal” Viva July 1978: 96.  
419 Ibid.  
421 Ibid.
writing, “but hoping will not make it come true. It is time to fight for our beliefs. We have come this close. We shall not stop until we have won.”

The ERA, having won an extension from Congress in 1978, again became the topic of a September 1978 *Viva* editorial, in which Keeton suggests that the Miss America Pageant would be an excellent venue to encourage awareness and popular support of the ERA. “Imagine,” she writes, “what a powerful if not practical political statement the pageant directors could have made had they simply announced that, this year, none of the fifteen as yet non-ratifying states would be allowed to participate in the final pageant.” “Or,” she suggests, “if that is asking too much imagine how enlightening it would be if, just before the judges were about to cast their final ballot, the five finalists were simply asked to state their individual opinions regarding the proposed amendment.” Keeton writes that she deplores the “fantasy world” into which the pageant usually pulled both the participants and the audience: “where life is simple and women do not bother their pretty little heads with such difficult concerns as sex, drugs, birth control, abortion, or discrimination; where a woman’s worth is still measured by her ornamental value.” It is not that Keeton wants the Miss America Pageant disbanded, as some feminist protesters ten years earlier had demanded; in fact she concedes that the pageant offered very real opportunities to young women to travel and meet women from different backgrounds. She simply feels that an institution such as the Miss America Pageant should be more actively involved with “the real needs and concerns of today’s

422 Ibid.
424 Ibid.
425 Ibid.
426 Ibid.
427 Ibid.
women.”428 The pageant, she concludes, “is a dream mired in the past. And it is a measure of how far we have come that we can now relax and enjoy the pageant for its unique nostalgic value and laugh at the past we have left so far behind.”429 In Keeton’s view, the pageant must either change for its own sake or risk being ignored, a prophecy that has been fulfilled in recent years as ratings for the pageant television broadcast have fallen sharply. Her view of the pageant is not altogether unlike the image of women her magazine endorsed: she was not against women using their appearance to their advantage, but she insisted their intelligence ought to be considered in equal measure. In much the same way that Keeton used her position as editor of sex magazine for women as a platform to advocate for women’s issues, she saw no reason why the Miss America Pageant could not do the same.

“On Past and Future Changes”

As Keeton and Milam advocated action on the ERA, their magazines were experiencing identity crises. While the ERA promised to bring women’s equality under the law, by 1976 Playgirl and Viva began to question the bedrock assumption upon which their publications were founded: that sexual equality for heterosexual women meant gazing upon nude men. Much like the ERA, the hopefulness and fanfare with which male nudity was introduced by sex magazines for women in the early 1970s had given way three years later to indecision and ambivalence.

428 Ibid.
429 Ibid.
The first indications of changes in *Viva*’s policy toward male nudity appear in Keeton’s April 1976 editorial entitled “On Past and Future Changes.” She begins by stating that *Viva* is very personal to her, “sometimes a friend, sometimes a sister, sometimes a child,” and that she sees change in the magazine in human terms: “first there is birth; then self-definition; and now there’s growth.”\(^{430}\) In Keeton’s stated opinion, the process of growth for *Viva* means retaining the particular strengths that made the magazine “important and unique,” such as the “artistic excellence, the noted reviewers and essayists, and the candor about sensuality.”\(^{431}\) As far as changes at the magazine, Keeton notes that “perhaps the most obvious at first will be a change in our erotic photography.”\(^{432}\) “With tastes developing so rapidly,” she argues, “it’s difficult to predict what is going to interest women, but in our opinion it won’t be explicit male nudity.”\(^{433}\) Here, Keeton argues that women had merely outgrown the need for male nudity; however, her comments also indicate that male nudity had not been the long-term draw that magazine publishers thought it would be. “For too long,” Keeton writes, “publishers have relied solely on what they think women want.”\(^{434}\) She cites the fact that *Viva* was currently conducting focus groups and other “research activities” to determine the “real interests of today’s working woman.”\(^{435}\) At the same time, Keeton asserts that nobody would be calling *Viva* a prudish: “sensuality will merely be expressed in new and different ways.”\(^{436}\) In the service of keeping the magazine sensual, *Viva* retained its erotic stories and features on sexuality while phasing out male nudity. Keeton explained

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\(^{431}\) Ibid.

\(^{432}\) Ibid.

\(^{433}\) Ibid.

\(^{434}\) Ibid.

\(^{435}\) Ibid.

\(^{436}\) Ibid.
her decision to a newspaper reporter, this time theorizing that male nudity emasculated men. “Traditionally,” she explained, “all women have looked for security, provision of a home and protection in men. Nudity strips them of that role; there’s nothing more helpless than a man without his knickers.” Here, Keeton’s shift in rhetoric could not be more apparent, as she argued that there is nothing liberating for either men or women in looking at a nude and “helpless” man. With one editorial, Keeton managed to undo years of rhetorical work that she and other editors of sex magazines for women had undertaken when they argued for male centerfolds for women.

A few months passed without male nudity, but Keeton felt the need to address the issue once more, devoting her entire August 1976 column to the subject. The column, “The Last First Word on Male Nudity,” answered reader mail (both favorable and unfavorable) that was “flowing in” about the magazine’s elimination of male nudity. Some readers found the change a welcome relief, Keeton reports, grateful to not have to purchase a sex magazine in public. One letter that was critical of the change, however, read in part: “I actually cried when I heard about the change in erotic photography. I thought that Viva handled the male nude with taste—to accept this sudden change is not going to be easy.” After excerpting a few more unfavorable letters, Keeton reiterates her own enjoyment of the magazine’s past erotic photography and reasons that readers have a right to know exactly why the decision had been made in the first place. In doing so, her original rationale for jettisoning the male nudity shifts. “Advertisers didn’t

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439 Ibid.
440 Ibid.
441 Ibid.
want their products near the photos,” Keeton reports.442 “They instructed us to place their ads in pages far away from the pictorials. And that wasn’t far enough for many who stayed out of Viva altogether.”443 Readers, too, played a role, she argues, as many reported that they were embarrassed to be seen with Viva in public and “their enjoyment of our articles was diminished by photos they found distasteful.”444 In addition, and perhaps most importantly, many supermarkets and drugstores, places where Keeton argues women buy most of their magazines, intransigently refused to stock Viva.445 Returning to women’s supposed distaste for male nudity, Keeton resorts to science, citing a study that showed women were “consistently less approving of nudity in magazines than men are. This holds true for every age group.”446 On a more anecdotal level, Keeton writes that many women she had spoken with felt that “males look silly—vulnerable and self-conscious—posing without their clothes on.”447 “It was a novelty for a while,” she concludes, “but the pictorials became somewhat heavy and unreal.”448 There was an option for women who still wanted to see nude men and women together, Keeton writes; they could read Viva’s sister publication, Penthouse, which boasted a “20 percent female readership.”449

Wrapping up, Keeton writes that after the sexual revolution and the women’s movement, “we will never go back to the old morality, but if women still don’t accept male nudity, they probably never will.”450 Keeton had reached the same conclusion.

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442 Ibid.
443 Ibid.
444 Ibid.
445 Ibid.
446 Ibid.
447 Ibid.
448 Ibid.
449 Ibid.
450 Ibid.
many other women had by the late 1970s: that grafting women’s liberation onto the sexual revolution did not necessarily give birth to a greater female interest in male nudity. Both retail outlets and women readers, though perhaps for different reasons, rejected *Viva’s* effort to wrap soft-core pornography in advocacy for women’s rights. Keeton concluded that it was the nudity, not the advocacy, which had to go. Even while espousing her own enjoyment of male nudity, Keeton finally capitulated that interest in nude men was not enough of a draw and too much of a liability to remain a feature in *Viva*. The rhetorical backpedaling concerning the removal of nudity at *Viva* was an attempt to explain why the magazine had failed to turn a profit since its first issue had hit newsstands three years earlier. In the end, dropping the nudity from the magazine did not help *Viva* attract more ad revenue or readers. The magazine published its last issue in January 1979 without earning a profit either with or without nude men. The question of whether women enjoyed looking at nude men in the form of a male centerfold, however, continued to loom large at *Viva*’s more commercially successful rival, *Playgirl*.

Polls and Advisors

A few months after *Viva* announced plans to eliminate male nudity, *Playgirl* released the results of a poll it commissioned to gauge women’s interest in photographs of nude men. On June 6, 1976, the results of the poll were announced to the media at the Beverly Hilton in Los Angeles by the woman who conducted the poll, Veronica Elias of the Center for Sex Research at California State University. While representatives from the media viewed a slideshow of the X-rated photographs used in conducting the poll,

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Elias’s husband, who assisted in the poll, explained the sample used. The 537 women polled ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-nine and were selected from five metropolitan areas: New York, Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles. The women were drawn from “every walk of life: housewives, clerks, attorneys and government workers.” As the results were announced, Playgirl editor Marin Milam looked on, having promised reporters beforehand that if women’s reactions were negative (she pretended to not know the results yet herself), the magazine would stop carrying pictures of male nudes. Elias announced the following findings:

When the women were asked to list their reactions to photographs of nude men, 26.1% said they enjoyed looking at them “a great deal,” 35.7% said they enjoyed looking at them “somewhat,” 22% said they enjoyed looking at them “a little” and 11.7% said they didn’t enjoy looking at them “at all.” Slightly more than 4% of the women were undecided.

The poll—and the publicity it generated—helped Playgirl renew its rhetorical premise, that women and men were more alike in their desire for sexual imagery than conventional wisdom usually allowed and that expressing this equity could be a liberating experience for women. Playgirl’s claims were now “scientifically” validated, even as Viva was itself resorting to science to support the opposite view. While the poll seemed to reinforce business as usual at the magazine, however, it also signaled impending changes at Playgirl. The editors of and contributors to Playgirl had to adapt the playgirl archetype.

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452 Ibid.
453 Ibid.
454 Ibid.
455 Ibid.
456 Ibid.
to the changing times, and the Center for Sex Research poll was just an introduction to an era of the sexual “expert” in the pages of *Playgirl*.

Less than two months after the poll results were announced *Playgirl* launched a sister publication, *Playgirl Advisor*, a sexual digest similar to *Penthouse Forum* (figure 3.1). *Playgirl Advisor* was *Playgirl*’s attempt to evolve into clearinghouse for sexual advice and compete with the successful *Penthouse Forum*. *Playgirl Advisor* was much more text-based than its flagship publication, and its sexual self-help format reflected *Playgirl*’s instincts that no matter what their polls suggested, their readers demanded more from the magazine than the centerfold alone could provide. *Playgirl Advisor* offered sexual advice and erotic stories, answered letters from readers, and featured articles on sexual “hot topics” such as “The Swinging Scene” (December 1976), “Living Unmarried in a Married Society” (February 1977) and “Male Bordellos for Women” (March 1977). As these examples illustrate, the *Playgirl Advisor*’s features still celebrated a swinging sexual lifestyle, and the visual material in the publication did the same. This material stands in stark contrast to what *Playgirl* would offer just a few years later.

Instead of a centerfold *Playgirl Advisor* included a “photo fantasy” that featured a heterosexual couple in a soft-core vignette. The sparse text used to set the scene often pointed to the transitory nature of these interludes: Tim and Susan “met at a party . . . she managed to slip away. He followed. There were no words.”457 In a later issue, the copy to another photo fantasy asks, “How can the girl on the block meet the handsome stranger who lives next door?”458 Of course a solution is proposed: “Sara asks for a cup of

458 “Getting to Know You” *Playgirl Advisor* March 1977: 45.
sugar—Tony decided to give her more than that.” As these examples illustrate, *Playgirl Advisor* continued the swinging, strangers-meet, multiple-partner sexual archetype that sex magazines for women thrived on since their inception but with one major caveat: men had resumed their earlier as sexual agents who were pursued by women.

At the time of the *Playgirl Advisor*’s launch in 1976, publisher Douglas Lambert reported that it “needed an individual whose credentials bridge the academic world and the real world.” *Playgirl Advisor*’s editor, Joyce Dudney Fleming, fit the bill, as she was someone who, in Lambert’s words, “devoted her career to transplanting the impersonal world of professionals into human terms.” Fleming had a Ph.D. in psychology and zoology and was a practicing sex therapist “in the Masters and Johnson tradition.” In addition to her academic credentials, she was also a former editor of *Psychology Today* magazine. Her credentials established her as an experienced editor, in contrast to *Playgirl*’s editor, Milam, who had frequently touted her own inexperience. Fleming was not every woman; she was a sex expert, a sex educator, and a mediator for what Douglas Lambert hoped would be a more “academic” conversation about sex. Fleming wrapped the same soft-core visual offerings and eyebrow-raising features into a new package of scientific and therapeutic legitimacy.

In *Playgirl Advisor*’s first issue (August 1976) Fleming explained further the thinking behind the new publication, which she claimed would break taboos and start important conversations about all aspects of sexuality. “Right now,” she wrote,

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459 Ibid.
461 Ibid.
462 Ibid.
463 Ibid.
“many of us are convinced about the need for a new perspective on sex and on sexual relationships.”

It was “time to talk about what has been forbidden. Time to experience what had been denied. Time to celebrate our sexual birthright.”

Going further, Fleming explained:

You see, although we believe that sex is perfectly natural, we do not believe it is naturally perfect. Not in a society like ours that tries to equate sex with sin.

Getting rid of all those silly sexual scripts is tough, but well worth the effort.

Finding the sexual lifestyle that is right for you is tougher, but even more rewarding.

Fleming’s editorials tackled issues such as venereal disease and sex education for teens (September 1976) as well as the “prejudice and hypocrisy” of the nation’s sodomy laws (November 1976). Fleming spoke out in favor of sex surrogate therapy (April 1977), eliminating incest statutes (December 1976), and lifting prohibitions against nude beaches (June 1977), and she argued for the dignity of transvestites (February 1977) and transsexuals (May 1977). Unlike Milam, whose editorials often merely listed the features in any given issue of *Playgirl*, Fleming jumped right into the topics in each issue, offering controversial opinions on what some would consider the margins of the average U.S. woman’s sexual universe.

Meanwhile, in *Playgirl*’s flagship publication, Milam’s editorial page exhibited signs that she might be tiring of towing the line for the liberated lifestyle the magazine had become famous for, the type of swinging sexual license Fleming embraced. She

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465 Ibid.
466 Ibid.
finally professed that the *Playgirl* lifestyle did not have to be about variety. She writes in the February 1976 issue:

I have come to the conclusion, after nearly three years with *Playgirl* during which time I’ve communicated directly and indirectly with a mass audience, investigated changing lifestyles, and discussed findings with varied groups of people from coast to coast, that the majority of men and women in this country see sexual liberation—especially as it pertains to women—in terms of impersonal sex and lots of it. Sex without commitment, sex at times without benefit of introduction.

I think it rather sad, only because it reduces our struggle for individual freedom to the lowest common denominator.

I am not, of course, addressing myself to the vast question of sexual liberation, which concerns itself with a patriarchal system of centuries of domestic, political, spiritual and sexual suppression, but rather to one fraction of the total inequity: the misapprehension of female sexual expression. For all of our progress and supposed enlightenment, we are still blessed virgin or damned whore.\(^{467}\)

Milam claims to be frustrated that the larger culture was unable to make room for the playgirl without seeing her as a swinging sex fiend. Milam’s frustrated proclamations betray a key weakness of the *Playgirl* ethos: in the popular imagination, the playgirl did not connote images of moderation. The consumption of *Playgirl*’s centerfolds and an appreciation of *Playgirl*’s sexual advice did not, in itself, connote promiscuity. Milam writes, “I resent the premise that the world of sexual freedom is presumably open only to those young men and women who will experiment from puberty to senility with all forms

of sexual expression, to only those interested in swinging or in open marriage.”

As Milam’s column continues her writing appears more and more at odds with the lifestyle Playgirl was presenting on its cover and in its features. Playgirl often used cover photographs of young, white women surrounded by two, three, or four men. And Playgirl Advisor, soon to begin publication, would celebrate on its editorial pages exactly the sort of sexual experimentation and exploration that Milam bemoaned. “I think we are stagnating,” she writes, “still sitting around trying to decide whether women like to look at male nudes, questioning the female editor of a sexually oriented magazine because she doesn’t wear hip-high boots or carry a whip. What are we fighting for? Frequency of coitus or so-called inalienable rights?”

By 1976, it was clear that Milam was challenging the very Playgirl ethos she had helped sell to the public just a few years earlier.

“The Illumination of Liberation” and Freedom Papers

In July 1977, roughly a year after Playgirl announced its poll results, the magazine was purchased by Ira Ritter, the advertising executive vice president of the magazine. Ritter bought Playgirl at a time when both its advertising rates and circulation were down. Ritter was responsible for many changes at Playgirl, including editorial innovations involving its advertising (discussed in the next chapter). This chapter examines Ritter’s installation of a new editor for Playgirl, the significant

468 Ibid.
469 Ibid.
471 Ibid.
changes he oversaw concerning the magazine’s cover images, and his decision to insert himself into the magazine’s editorial page in the early 1980s.

Milam’s final editorial, for *Playgirl’s* May 1977 issue, encouraged readers to welcome her successor, Fleming, the editor of *Playgirl Advisor*. Fleming brought to *Playgirl* the same editorial brio she had exhibited in the pages of *Playgirl Advisor*. She also politicized *Playgirl*’s editorial page as never before. Fleming’s first editorial for *Playgirl*, in the magazine’s fourth anniversary issue, began by looking at the magazine’s past:

> Most Americans were amazed, of course. They always are when someone takes their favorite fantasy—freedom—seriously. The debate was hot and heavy. While they tried to decide if any woman *really* wanted to live her own life, millions of Playgirls set out to do just that. In the illumination of liberation, we could see that it didn’t matter if you were married or not, or if you worked inside your home or outside of it. The bottom line was being your own woman, living your own life.

That simple truth caused a complex set of reactions. Many people were threatened by the changes it implied. First they tried to pretend no woman desired an independent life that included the right to enjoy looking at a man’s (Oh Horror of horrors!) naked body.

Since *Playgirl* was selling several million copies each year, that argument soon dissolved and was replaced with a more vigorous putdown: “Playgirls are lightheaded floozies who only think about sex.” Nice try, but no banana.473

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In Fleming’s estimation, *Playgirl*’s sales figures alone legitimated its continued presence in popular culture; yet, at the same time, the specter of “many people” who were out to get *Playgirl* continued to situate the act of looking at the magazine as a revolutionary one.

In her first column, Fleming relates her own enjoyment of the magazine during her graduate school years, an act which drew the indignation of her colleagues.474 “We have proven the fallacy of their thinking,” she writes.475 “We have proved independence can be part of femininity. We have shown that women can love themselves and still love others. We have forced them to accept our definition of ourselves.”476 Here, Fleming’s rhetoric is reminiscent of Marcia Borie’s first attempt to define the playgirl four years earlier: the playgirl was free because that was how she had chosen to live her life. In Fleming’s editorial, she asserts that the continued existence of *Playgirl* had proven Borie’s definition. “Four years ago we could barely stand on our own two feet,” Fleming writes “now we’re learning to fly.”477 Fleming’s tone is one of renewal and reinvention: “we have redesigned to focus more closely on the lives of Americans during these exciting and challenging times,” she writes “this month we’re taking off with a new focus on Playgirls and the Playgirl experience. I hope you’ll be on the first flight.”478

The changes were apparent on *Playgirl*’s editorial page and elsewhere throughout the magazine. Fleming tackled the issue of pay discrimination in her second editorial, writing that “equal pay for equal work is a joke in this country” and citing several recent million-dollar sex discrimination cases.479 Fleming saw advocacy as having a natural

474 Ibid.
475 Ibid.
476 Ibid.
477 Ibid.
478 Ibid.
479 Ibid.
place in the playgirl universe, and she even viewed *Playgirl’s* past through this lens.

“Throughout her life, *Playgirl’s* position, like that of many women’s magazines, has been anti-discrimination,” Fleming writes. 480 “She has supported the fight for equality through the Equal Rights Amendment and other strategies meant to redesign the American institutions that dump on women. Now it is clear that this calm, rational approach yielded insufficient results.” 481 Fleming then quotes the film *Network*’s famous line, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going take it any more.” 482 She also announces what she describes as a “new weapon” meant to “expose a bastion of sexist discrimination” each month, the “Hot Box.” 483 The Hot Box’s first victim was a spokesperson for then-President Carter who, when asked why the administration had not hired more women, responded that men were not comfortable working with women. 484

Fleming returned to the ERA debate for her August 1977 editorial, reporting that neither Schlafly nor any other anti-ERA spokesperson would speak to *Playgirl*. 485 One woman told Fleming that she only spoke to Christian groups, and *Playgirl* did not qualify. 486 In addition to the ERA debate, Fleming launched a new *Playgirl* symbol and a new feature on women’s issues in the August issue. The August cover featured a young, attractive blonde woman wearing the new symbol, a likeness of the Statue of Liberty, on a red T-shirt along with the logo “I’m Free” (figure 3.2). A caption beside the smiling woman’s head reads: “Think She’s Free? We Don’t!” Inside Fleming explained the new *Playgirl* symbol. Speaking of Lady Liberty, Fleming writes, “the woman who

480 Ibid.
481 Ibid.
482 Ibid.
483 Ibid.
484 Ibid.
486 Ibid.
symbolizes freedom for an entire country is beginning to do the same for the women who live in that country.”  Fleming decides that “a more feminine rendering of our Statue of Liberty was the right symbol to represent the freedom of American women—the freedom they have now and the freedom they seek.”  Playgirl’s more feminine rendering of the statue is sleek and slender with softer facial features than the original. Explaining Playgirl’s version of the statue, Fleming writes: “She has friends who want American women to share the exhilaration of her spirit. We’ll be spreading that spirit across this country, starting with the ‘Playgirl Freedom Papers’ a series of reports on the state of feminine freedom.”  Each article in the Freedom Papers, Fleming reports, “will tell Playgirls about the barriers that restrict their freedoms, and how to overcome them.”

The first Freedom Papers report was devoted to the topic of sexual freedom and addressed the issue in depth with “ripped from the headlines” examples to illustrate each point as did each of the three subsequent installments. In addition, a section entitled “What You Can Do” offered addresses of appropriate places to write and petition for change. Citing examples where women lost their jobs due to their sexual activity, Fleming wrote, “when women express their sexuality outside of a marriage relationship, they meet strong disapproval. There are a number of situations where women can (and do) lose their jobs because of heterosexuality non-marital sex.”  Fleming concluded her first installment of the Freedom Papers by imploring Playgirl readers: “DO SOMETHING. Emotional support is not enough. Making changes will require the

488 Ibid.
489 Ibid.
490 Ibid.
active interest of those who want to see things be different. Look this list over and see
where you can get started.\textsuperscript{492}

With Fleming at the helm, the playgirl could no longer be conceptualized as a
woman who stood aside and merely applauded the work of feminist activists. Fleming
called upon her readers to take immediate action to ensure the sexual freedoms her
magazine celebrated were protected. Here was the first indication that “playgirl”
behavior might have detrimental consequences for a woman’s livelihood, career, and
educational plans. Fleming also insisted that the playgirl lifestyle involved advocacy for
the sexual freedoms of all women. She declined to use the words “feminist activism,”
but Fleming’s rhetoric certainly encouraged women to behave as activists. Her advocacy
went beyond the ERA; it encompassed the enforcement of Title IX (September 1977),
and it included speaking out against sexist representations of women in the media
(October 1977). In the November 1977 issue, which featured an imagined female
president on its cover (figure 3.3), Fleming offered her final installment of the Freedom
Papers on the topic of women in politics. She asked readers to raise their level of
political awareness, particularly about issues affecting women, to support organizations
such as NOW (National Organization for Women) and WEAL (Women’s Equity Action
League), and to consider running for office themselves.\textsuperscript{493}

Fleming’s time as \emph{Playgirl} editor was short. In an unexplained turnover, her
successor, Barbara Cady, took over the editorial column even before the final installment
of Fleming’s Freedom Papers had been published. While it is purely speculation,
changes made after Fleming’s departure indicate that she may have been ousted for

\textsuperscript{492} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{493} Joyce Dudney Fleming, “A Woman’s Place is in the House—and the Senate” \emph{Playgirl} November 1977: 15.
overstepping in her calls for activism in *Playgirl*. Under the new editor’s tenure, gone were Fleming’s activist editorials, Hot Box feature, and Freedom Letters. *Playgirl’s* version of Lady Liberty also disappeared. Cady, who had been a senior editor at *Playgirl* for some time, used her first editorial to reflect on what it was like to edit a sex magazine for women. Cady writes that she often fielded inquiries about her work from others in the publishing industry, mostly from those who worked for men’s magazines such as *Playboy*, about how her position might endanger her “professional reputation.”

Cady writes:

> The message behind some of my friends’ concern (they all consider themselves fairly “liberated” and politically “progressive”) was clear. It’s okay to exercise one’s literary muscles in magazines that show in living color parts of the female anatomy that are usually accessible only by X-ray, but it’s not all right to do the same in a magazine that features—also in living color—*male* nudes.

Cady’s acquaintances in the publishing industry believed that the selling point for *Playgirl*, male nudity, had the potential to soil her reputation. Cady chose to fall back on the reciprocity argument to defend herself and *Playgirl*. As we have seen previously, the comparison between male nudity in fine art and male nudity as presented in sex magazines for women has been made numerous times by editors of and contributors to the genre. Cady commented that conventional wisdom insisted that the male nude had to be presented only as art, and she felt there was a gender bias at work. She writes:

> Women have known for a long time that society has apparently sanctioned *any* display of the nude female form used to any end (pun intended)—from the

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495 Ibid.
artistic, to the erotic to, well, the appalling. But any display of the nude male form is acceptable only for the sake of “Aht.” Heaven forbid Michelangelo’s David, or worse, a Redford-in-the-buff should be the object of women’s sexual admiration or, even more unthinkable, their sexual fantasies.\footnote{Ibid.}

While Cady’s predecessors saw the need to try to justify the beauty and timelessness of male nudity by resorting to art history, Cady found it silly to make such distinctions. In her stated opinion, Playgirl merely offered to women a small dose of what was available to men in massive quantities. The need to make a detailed rhetorical argument for it had passed. In many ways, Cady’s work had already been done by those who came before her. While sexist assumptions still plagued Playgirl’s editor and disparity still existed between the representation of female and male nudity in sex magazines, Playgirl no longer had to insist on its place in the world. This move away from the symbolic importance of the female editor to justify a sex magazine’s existence became even more evident when Playgirl eliminated its monthly editorial page altogether in 1978. In a sense, Playgirl’s longevity and continued commercial viability did away with the necessity for an editorial penned by a female editor each month. In the case of Playgirl, U.S. culture had been sold on the idea of a sex magazine for women. In the late 1970s, when a few short-lived competitors emerged (Eve (1977), Ultra: For the Ultimate Woman (1977), and For Women Only (1979)), these publications followed Playgirl’s lead and included no editorial to contextualize the male nudity offered. At Playgirl, in just a matter of a few years, the role of the editor shifted from that of feminist firebrand to a state of utter extinction. The editor’s role in mediating feminism for the female audience of Playgirl was over. The continued viability of Playgirl was contingent on
offering material remaining relevant for the time, and for *Playgirl* feminism had lost its relevance as a rhetorical tool by the end of the 1970s. In late 1979 and into the 1980s, as the social and cultural climate in the United States shifted to the political right, *Playgirl* adapted by becoming more focused on offering sexual advice to monogamous couples while at the same time defining itself editorially against the new religious right.

*Playgirl* Meets the “Purity Movement”

At the end of the 1970s, *Playgirl* launched a sister publication akin to the previously discussed *Playgirl Advisor* but with a decidedly different editorial tone (figure 3.4). In the first issue of *Couples* (December 1979), the publication’s editor, Melody Sharp, wrote that “this is the best of all possible times to launch a magazine dedicated to enriching relationships between men and women.”

497 Why was the time so ripe for *Couples*? Sharp explains that with so many marriages “falling apart like so many freshly baked croissants” the editors of *Couples* “feel that the more traditional relationship is still a compact couple.”

498 She concludes by asking readers to send along their sex-oriented questions, writing “that’s probably why magazines exist in the first place—to be a quiet friend and to answer those needs.”

499 *Couples*’ first issue included features with titles such as “Learn to Fantasize” and “How to Ask for Sex,” advice on how to “Turn Your Man Into a Sexual Athlete” as well as a quiz designed to answer the question “Are You Meant for Each Other?” It contained no photographic nudity but offered advice on such matters as “What Your Kids Should Know About Your Sex Life.”

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498 Ibid.
499 Ibid.
*Playgirl Couples* presented a stark contrast to the swinging couples and multiple partners featured in *Playgirl* and *Viva* just a few years earlier and even *Playgirl Advisor*. Gone were the “photo fantasies” of men and women randomly meeting and engaging in sex only for pleasure’s sake. The assumption behind *Couples* and its features was that those reading the magazine needed practical advice on how to make their already existing committed relationships work. Whether readers were married or committed to a long-term relationship, *Playgirl Couples* assumed they might have children and sex might not be at the top of their list of priorities. Sex was still portrayed as fun, but in the pages of *Playgirl Couples* it was imagined as a private pleasure for committed couples, not a recreational activity for swinging singles. *Playgirl Couples* offered neither the brazen sex of the earlier *Playgirl* nor the scientific veneer of the *Playgirl Advisor*. As a close look at *Playgirl Couples* shows, this was a more conservative incarnation of *Playgirl*, responding to an increasingly conservative social climate.

Historians John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman write that “by the end of the 1970s, conservative proponents of an older sexual order had appeared.”500 These opponents of sexual liberalism intended to “stem the tide of change and, indeed, to restore sexuality to a reproductive marital context.”501 As the 1970s ended, they write, “the latest in a long line of purity movements took shape.”502 These movements set out to promote traditional values by opposing pornography and gay rights.503 Ronald Reagan, who took full advantage of the conservative Christian movement in his effort to win the White House, warned that America was “losing her religious and moral bearings”

501 Ibid.
502 Ibid, 345.
503 Ibid.
and that sex had become “casual and cheap.” The conservative movement looked toward pornography and other cultural developments of the 1970s as the source of these “casual and cheap” sexual attitudes, and *Playgirl*, a product of the loose and permissive 1970s, took notice.

From the end of Barbara Cady’s tenure as editor in late 1978 until the early 1980s, *Playgirl* generally went without an editorial page. What took its place in the early 1980s was “Opening Lines,” simply a rundown of features in the issue, written by executive editor Dianne Grosskopf. Occasionally, however, *Playgirl* publisher Ira Ritter would take over that space with an essay on a single topic, most often politics. Ritter’s essays appeared most often at the beginning of each year and on *Playgirl*’s anniversary in June. In January 1981, Ritter writes that the events of the 1980 election “came back to slap supporters of women’s rights in the collective face.” Ritter is tired of what he calls “a piecemeal approach to the acceptance of women as equals.” Even though the tone of the piece is serious, Ritter was never one to miss a chance to congratulate his own liberal standpoint or plug the uniqueness of his magazine. He writes that when applied to *Playgirl* “the term ‘revolutionary’ is not an exaggeration.” He writes of his struggles to keep *Playgirl* on the racks of reluctant retailers, and compares this to women’s struggles for equality. In Ritter, *Playgirl* had found a new spokesperson, a male one, and this shift reflects a change from the 1970s, when a female spokesperson was essential to a woman’s magazine’s credibility. Ritter presented himself as a man sensitive to the concerns of women, and he saw this quality alone as enough to establish his credentials

504 Ibid.
506 Ibid.
507 Ibid.
508 Ibid.
as a spokesperson for women’s equality. Inasmuch as *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women had defined themselves as cultural revolutionaries working alongside the women’s movement in the 1970s, *Playgirl* also took the opportunity to cast itself clearly in opposition to the conservative tide of the 1980s.

Having entered the new and more conservative decade, Ira Ritter took the opportunity to congratulate himself and *Playgirl* in the June 1981 issue, which celebrated the magazine’s eighth anniversary. On the cover of this issue was the man who started it all, Burt Reynolds. In his editorial, underneath a quote from feminist icon Susan B. Anthony about “cautious, careful people” being unable to “bring about reform,” Ritter writes:

> After eight years of publishing an innovative, controversial magazine, we at *Playgirl* take heart in Susan B. Anthony’s words. In our effort to bring you a sexually enlightened editorial format, we chose to reject the old social mores and taboos against male nudity for female entertainment. In this endeavor we have taken many chances and risks, and as in all human strivings, we have stumbled. We’ve learned from our mistakes, however, and despite the obstacles, *Playgirl* has emerged as one of the most successful women’s magazines on the market today.

> In the year to come, you can expect more personal profiles, top celebrity interviews, informative articles, and, of course, many more exciting photographic features, *Playgirl* style. To entertain you is our first priority.

Ritter, however, was not content to simply entertain. In the midst of a conservative revival in the U.S. he meant to use the editorial page of *Playgirl* to analyze the election of
Ronald Reagan and the impact this development might have on both *Playgirl* and its readers. He continues:

But to keep you informed is our obligation, and as part of that commitment, we are of course concerned with the changes the past election year has brought to the United States. From the Reagan administration, the Moral Majority, the prolifers, and the Phyllis Schlafly anti-ERA crusade, we see a major attempt to create a shift in American attitudes. *Playgirl* is very concerned about this new wave of hard-line conservatism. It means a tougher struggle for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. It means that a whole host of economic issues important to you, our reader, are threatened: jobs, equal pay, pensions, Social Security, and day-care centers. As Publisher of *Playgirl*, I promise that we will not bow down in the face of such adversity, but will continue in an earnest attempt to bring about reform. *Playgirl* will keep you plugged into the current of events and, as always, will provide you with a publication that reflects your needs, beliefs, fantasies, and goals.\(^{509}\)

As Ritter’s editorial suggests, *Playgirl* had found a new way to stay relevant by identifying a new foil in the conservative Reagan administration. Just as feminism had made *Playgirl* meaningful and seemingly timely when it began in the early 1970s, the Moral Majority and the more conservative turn in national politics kept *Playgirl* “revolutionary.” It was this shift, from using the liberal women’s movement for inspiration to using the specter of a rising conservative movement as a foil, which worked to disguise *Playgirl*’s feminist past. In many ways Ritter’s quest to “bring about reform” without feminism changed the way the public perceived his magazine and it’s past.

\(^{509}\) Ira Ritter, “Eight Years is Not Enough” *Playgirl* June 1981: 8.
Through the editorial page, Ritter and *Playgirl* were working to remain a progressive social force for women without being explicitly feminist.

Ritter returned frequently to champion personal freedom and criticize conservative politicians and the religious right from the editorial page of *Playgirl*. He writes in 1982 that “this country was founded by people fed up with governments telling them how to run their lives,” and he is disappointed that in recent congressional elections “a number of champions of personal freedom fell to defeat.”

Ritter blames libertarian losses on “a small group of evangelists,” whom he compares to terrorists. “Now you might ask what the heck a bunch of religious people are doing concerning themselves with politics,” Ritter writes. “Well, they’ve decided the way to convert America to their brand or morality is to elect congressmen and senators who will legislate those beliefs into each and every home in America.”

Ritter states that he believes the problem stems from “a conglomeration of people who are military hawks, anti-ERA, anti-abortion, and anti-anything that’s not their own oddball brand of Christianity.” Clearly, Ritter felt that *Playgirl* was among the things this group would oppose.

In June of 1982 he rails against what he calls “American reactionaryism” and attempts by religious organizations to “legislate morality.” “Does this alarming phenomenon mean a reversal of the triumphs we’ve worked so hard for?” Ritter asks. “We at *Playgirl* don’t think so.” Ritter goes on to write that he believes his readers, like him, have not abandoned the fight for personal freedom and believes “it’s the

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511 Ibid.
512 Ibid.
513 Ibid.
515 Ibid, 9.
government’s job to protect the borders and clean the streets—and let us live our lives as we choose to.”

He promises that *Playgirl* will remain devoted to “winning and re-winning—battles waged against personal freedom.” In Ritter’s hands, *Playgirl*’s editorial policy took on a sort of siege mentality. He warns in late 1982 that “political forces had made threatening moves in the areas of birth control and social programs, as well as with religious, personal property and women’s rights.” For a publisher who sees himself and his magazine as socially and culturally progressive, Ritter feels that when it comes to women’s rights, “it is absurd that women should have to do anything to ensure something so basic.” Unfortunately, Ritter writes, that was not the case in the early 1980s.

For all of Ritter’s rhetoric against the conservative tide, however, *Playgirl* developed a strategy to ride it out while at the same time railing against it from the editor’s desk. In other words, the magazine was shaped by the conservative turn even as it challenged it. Both the magazine’s cover and its features began to reify a healthy sexual relationship between committed couples rather than celebrating sex with a variety of partners. By the late 1970s, the same reticence was reflected visually as *Playgirl*’s covers consistently depicted fully clothed heterosexual couples in romantic rather than overtly sexual poses. In 1979, *Playgirl*’s look went even more mainstream. Its cover models were replaced by celebrity couples such as Michael Douglas and Jane Fonda (April 1979) or Meryl Streep and Dustin Hoffman (November 1979), promoting film projects. When full or partial nudity was featured on the cover of *Playgirl* publications it

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516 Ibid.
517 Ibid.
519 Ibid.
was most often female. *Playgirls* comfort in objectifying women on the covers of its publications speaks to the greater comfort both men and women have with the bearing of the female body as opposed to the male body. Male nudity, perhaps, while remaining the defining feature inside the magazine, was deemed too controversial to appear on the cover in a much more conservative political climate.

The focus on the healthy heterosexual couple took on the same focus in *Playgirl’s* many spin-off projects in other media. In its first foray into video production, *Playgirl Presents: Sexual Secrets* (1983), *Playgirl* provided a guide to sexual technique for couples. The introduction asks viewers to “put away your old attitudes and behaviors and make room for new ways to understand, explore and most of all enjoy your sexuality.”

In the video, several white heterosexual couples are interviewed by two female sex therapists and asked to talk about their relationships and demonstrate their sexual techniques. A great deal of emphasis is placed on romance, with a voice over telling viewers that romance “propels one to taste the mystery and thrills of sex” and was a vital part of “the art of making love.” The couples in *Sexual Secrets* talk to the therapists about the role sexual fantasies play in their intimate relationships and how thoughts of sex with others can enhance the sexual experience of committed couples. Couples are taught to masturbate together, and a demonstration segment includes a close-up shot of a woman masturbating, wedding ring clearly visible.

*Playgirl* also produced a VHS video version of its magazine entitled *Playgirl on the Air* (1984) complete with audiovisual versions of *Playgirl*’s regular features: fantasy sequences, fashion, celebrity interviews, and, of course, three male “video centerfolds.”

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521 Ibid.
522 Ibid.
It too exhibits a heavy emphasis on couples and romance. The introductory sequence, illustrated with past covers of *Playgirl*’s print edition, promises that “in the next hour, the magazine that has changed the nation will come to life in your home.”523 *Playgirl* used the *On the Air* video to insist on its place in American culture, reminding Americans that it had been around for over a decade and that it had made a positive impact on women’s sexual lives. Going further, the video insists that *Playgirl* had “changed the nation.” The video’s producers interviewed men and women, many of them couples, and asked them to comment on camera about topics such as the appeal of *Playgirl* and “what makes a man sexy?”524 The couples, from various ages and races, put faces to the *Playgirl* reader, and their seemingly effortless comments on the magazine’s significance acted to legitimize *Playgirl*’s past and present.

Committed couples were also the cornerstone of a study the magazine commissioned, conducted by the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality. The study became the book *Sex and the Married Woman* (1984). *Playgirl* editor Diane Grosskopf compiled the results and authored the book. In the introduction she wrote that “the married woman’s sex life has been neglected” and the book was an attempt to remedy that.525 The book was intended to address the “myths” concerning marital sex, including the notion that “passion ends at the altar.”526 Again, *Playgirl* touted its alliance with academic experts, writing that the Institute was the first graduate school in the world to award graduate degrees in sexology.527 In contrast to the *Playgirl* of the early 1970s, Grosskopf felt that it was the sexual variety within a relationship that was key to a happy

523 *Playgirl on the Air* VHS, (U.S.A. Home Video, 1984)
524 Ibid.
526 Ibid, viii.
527 Ibid.
“In order to keep a relationship strong, healthy and exciting,” she writes, “we need to continually explore and share new thoughts and feelings about our sexuality.”

Playgirl’s focus on the heterosexual couple fit broader cultural trends as a wide variety of media, most notably national news magazines, marked the conservative turn in sexual politics in the early 1980s.

The cover of Time magazine in April 1984 said it all: “Sex in the ’80s: The Revolution is Over.” The cover image is a take on the story of Adam and Eve, a cartoon illustration of a nude couple sitting under an apple tree, serpent twined around the tree’s trunk. All three look terrified and cower as the tree appears to vibrate while multitudes of apples fall from the tree. The cover story reports that many Americans were “rediscovering the traditional values of fidelity, obligation and marriage” and notes that since the late 1970s “weddings and births are up, divorce is down.”

Looking back to the 1970s, the author observes that, “in the sexual arena, self-fulfillment converted almost every sexual itch into a sexual need.” The 1980s, the article argues, would be much different.

The Time article concludes that some of these innovations in the realm of sexuality survived the beginning of the new decade and were absorbed into culture while others were not. The author notes that sex magazines continued to become more explicit and were still widely available, but practices such as open marriages and group sex had been “firmly rejected.” Using Playgirl as a cultural barometer, we can see this same sort of shift in the magazine’s content, away from explicit displays of sexuality on its

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529 Ibid.
530 John Leo, “The Revolution is Over” Time April 9, 1984: 74-75.
531 Ibid, 76.
532 Ibid, 83.
cover and toward the cultural mainstream via fully clothed celebrity couples. The marginal sexual practices such as swinging and group sex had virtually disappeared from the Playgirl universe. As the Time article insists, most Americans were “stubbornly committed to marriage and the traditional idea that sex is tied to affection or justified by it” and they found that when sex was “cut off from emotions [. . .] the rest of life seems empty, unacceptable or immoral.”533 Playgirl, the only remaining sex magazine for women at the beginning of the 1980s, already reflected these rising doubts about casual sexual relationships. Rather than eliminate nudity from its pages altogether, as rival Viva had, Playgirl instead sought to reframe its offerings in a package that suited the more conservative climate. Playgirl aimed to prove that the playgirl approach to sexuality—women enjoying male nudity and taking a more active role as sexual agents—did not necessarily have to be exercised outside of a committed relationship, even a marriage.

The excitement and fun Playgirl offered women in the sexual arena, the magazine argued, was broadly applicable to enhancing both heterosexual women’s and men’s sex lives.

“A Decade of Progress at Playgirl”

As Playgirl marked ten years of publication, Ritter penned an editorial. Looking back at “A Decade of Progress at Playgirl,” his essay covered some familiar territory. He writes:

Ten years ago this month, Playgirl pioneered a magazine that is very much part of the sexual revolution for women. Since that time, major changes have occurred—

533 Ibid.
in women’s sexuality and lifestyles—meaning more and more options and more and more choices to make.  

Here Ritter situates *Playgirl* as more indebted to the sexual revolution than the women’s movement. He mentions “major changes” in women’s lives without crediting the women’s movement for those changes. He continues:

At the beginning of the decade, the social climate was so repressive that it was assumed it was somehow “wrong” for women to have the same healthy curiosity about men’s bodies that men have shown for women’s. It’s you, our readers, who have proven that Playgirl truly is a women’s forum by making it one of the most powerful and influential on the market today. We would like to thank you for this support on the occasion of our tenth anniversary.  

Here again Ritter actively avoids using the term *liberation* to describe the repressive social climate where it was wrong for women to be curious about men’s bodies and he exhibits no misgivings about a male publisher presiding over a “women’s forum” like *Playgirl*. Ritter even goes as far as to restate *Playgirl’s* philosophy in non-feminist terms:

Our philosophy at *Playgirl* has been to encourage you to explore the full range of your personal freedom. We won’t dictate anything. Every month we offer you alternatives in fashion, health care, lifestyle, coping with life. We also try to entertain you, make you laugh—and help you make the system work for you. Social pressures that are seemingly trying to legislate morality still exist, embodied by an alarming trend toward hard-line conservatism. At *Playgirl*, we’re

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535 Ibid.
determined to resist negative pressure, pressures that would confine personal growth and development, with hard-hitting stands on current events and women’s issues.

It is our promise to keep you informed on every aspect of the modern world—from sexuality to politics—so that you can make your own choices, rather than have them made for you by some legislator in Washington. It is our hope to grow as a magazine by continuing the dialogue and promoting understanding between women and men in the years to come.

So here’s to the next ten years of Playgirl, in which we hope to promote the growth of all people’s personal rights to be and do what they hope and want.536

Ritter played the part of cultural myth-maker with ease, claiming Playgirl’s place in the sexual revolution for women but carefully avoiding words such as “liberation” in favor of “personal freedom.” Ritter’s avoidance of feminist language and his presence as a man on the editorial page of a magazine for women sent a strong message that the work of the women’s movement was largely done. This attitude was typical of the mass media of the early 1980s and indicative of what feminist media scholars call postfeminist culture. As they have noted, postfeminism, broadly defined, “encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated.”537

“What appears distinctive about contemporary postfeminist culture” media scholars

536 Ibid.
Yvonne Trasker and Diane Negra note, “is precisely the extent to which a selectively defined feminism has been so overtly ‘taken into account’ in order to prove that it is no longer needed.”  Ritter’s editorials, when he writes of Susan B. Anthony, work in this way to relegate feminism to the past and to render the project of the women’s movement complete. In Ritter’s estimation, *Playgirl* could continue as a “women’s forum” without a female editor. Postfeminist culture’s focus on individualism and female agency, and its attempts to commodify feminism via the figure of the woman as an empowered consumer, fit well with the already established playgirl archetype. *Playgirl* was now a symbol of the women’s movement’s success.

*Playgirl*’s grounding in the postfeminist culture of the early 1980s also worked to de-gender Ritter’s political activism. In Ritter’s opinion, women were no longer reticent about the male nudity that *Playgirl* offered, but both women and men might be impeded by a new threat, governmental intervention into explicit publications. The greatest threat to the playgirl was no longer *within* (libidos in need of “liberation) but was coalescing outside in the political sphere. In a postfeminist world the largest threats to sexual freedom came from a more conservative political climate. In contrast to *Viva*, which cited women’s disinterest in male nudity and advertiser reticence as threats to its future, *Playgirl* located the threat firmly in the hands of moralizing social forces and the government. The desire for political and cultural change that Ritter expressed in the pages of *Playgirl*, concerns which had as much to do with protecting the future of *Playgirl* as it did with ensuring the rights of women in the U.S., were successfully couched in terms of a liberal politics that was not dependent on the women’s movement.

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538 Ibid.
539 Ibid, 2.
In short, reading the absence of feminism from the editorial pages of Playgirl in the early 1980s is just as crucial as noting the presence of feminist rhetoric and engagement with feminist issues in the early 1970s. Each indicates a selective use of feminism and the women’s movement, the former seeking to tap into its power and the latter seeking to cannibalize its past.

Throughout the 1970s, Playgirl shifted from picturing women on the prowl in the early part of the decade to reimagining its reader seeking out sexual expertise for memorable encounters with a monogamous partner at decade’s end. Playgirl successfully navigated a path through the feminist backlash and questions about whether women wanted a magazine featuring naked men. While keeping its defining feature, the centerfold, unchanged, Playgirl successfully shifted its editorial stance and cover images by the end of the 1970s and moved into the 1980s as a place for sexual advice for couples. Offering better sexual technique for committed couples, particularly married ones, worked to drastically change the swinging image of the playgirl the magazine had employed in its first years in print.

The late 1970s was the apex for Playgirl’s use of feminist rhetoric and calls for activism. Playgirl’s experiment with an activist editor was brief, however, and its decision to jettison feminist language from its editorial page soon followed. Playgirl initially responded to the conservative turn in American culture by toning down the sexual imagery on its cover and redirecting its resources toward the goal of instructing committed heterosexual couples on sexual technique. Following the 1980 election, Playgirl shifted its rhetoric from one calling for female sexual liberation to one that was fighting against conservative political forces in the name of “freedom.” This rhetorical
move renewed *Playgirl’s* sense of purpose as it moved into the more culturally and politically conservative 1980s. In addition, in the eight-year period between 1976 and 1984, the authority and necessity for a female editor slowly withered. What had been such an important element of selling male nudity to women in the early 1970s was rendered obsolete as *Playgirl* became essentially postfeminist. *Playgirl’s* publisher Ritter joined many others in the media in the early 1980s in assuming that the feminist movement has run its course and he was content to pay homage to it only in the past tense.

In the end, *Playgirl* lasted well into a period when many in the media were reporting the death of feminism’s second wave. One of the magazine’s greatest rhetorical accomplishments might be that the key role the language and issues of the feminist movement played in selling the male centerfold to a skeptical public have been largely forgotten. The next chapter shifts from examining editorial content to focusing on the advertising content of sex magazines for women. The last two chapters have demonstrated the varied ways in which sex magazines for women negotiated with the feminist epoch created by the second wave. The next chapter will consider how the advertising in these same publications used the women’s movement to create new marketing appeals best described by the notion of “commodity feminism” as advertisers re-imagined the “playgirl” as a largely consumer identity.
Chapter Four:


The previous three chapters charted the evolution of the strategic rhetoric used to sell the nude male centerfold feature to women: from the article accompanying Helen Gurley Brown’s first male centerfold in Cosmopolitan in 1972, to the shifting “feminist” frames that Playgirl, Viva, and other sex magazines for women used to market male nudity to women in the early 1970s, to the postfeminist rhetoric employed by Playgirl publisher Ira Ritter in the early 1980s. These chapters have focused on the editors and the editorial content of these publications. It is important to note, however, that one function of editorial content is to create and maintain an inviting space for advertising and sustain the attention of a specific readership for advertisers’ messages. Pleasing readers as well as advertisers can often be a delicate balancing act. In fact, the complex interplay between editorial content and advertising content is one of the defining features of magazines. Because generally at least half of a magazine’s pages are devoted to advertisements, neglecting to discuss them their nuanced relationship to editorial content in a project seeking to understand the rhetoric of magazines would be to dismiss more than half of what defines the genre.

This chapter examines the advertising content in sex magazines for women. Specifically, it addresses the often blatant conflict between editorial rhetoric and advertising content. While the editorial content of sex magazines for women often claimed that these publications sought to pursue gender equality and sexual liberation, the advertising content more often than not reinforced beauty standards that amplified sexual difference and insisted on traditional notions of femininity. Taken together, the message
to female readers was that potential playgirls should appreciate undressed men, but they should display equal passion for dressing fashionably and looking beautiful. In fact, although the fashion pages of *Playgirl* and *Viva* frequently featured nude men and fully dressed women, this juxtaposition only served to convey a more powerful message that men were naturally beautiful while beauty was more elusive for women, requiring shopping, beauty treatments, dieting, and exercise.

Previous chapters have shown that the editorial content of *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women mined movement feminism for themes and language to sell their publications, making sexual liberation into something one could buy into through the purchase and consumption of a magazine. The advertising content took this a step further, however; it relied on the notion of *commodity feminism*, the process by which advertisers sought to connect the language and goals of the women’s movement to a variety of corporate products. This process made the quest for the playgirl lifestyle, for sexual liberation, into a never-ending shopping spree. In previous chapters we have seen how the editors of *Playgirl* and *Viva* occasionally used their editorial pages to call for feminist activism. In contrast, the brand of commodity feminism employed by advertisers had no cause other than consumerism according to its feminist critics. Advertising content put *Playgirl* and its competitors in yet another feminist battlefield: beauty culture and its host of meanings to women. As argued in this chapter, in their attempts to sell the publications to advertisers, sex magazines also sold out their women readers, and when the advertising is considered alongside the editorial content a more complex picture of the *Playgirl* and *Viva* brands appears: one riddled with irony and hypocrisy.
This chapter first considers the development of a consumers’ republic in post-World War II United States and the extension of the idea of consumer freedom to include the changing role of women and feminism. Next, it consider communication studies scholar Robert Goldman’s idea of commodity feminism, the notion that feminism could become a commodity, that gender equality could be bought and sold, and feminists could become yet another market segment. Finally, it examines how Playgirl and other sex magazines for women used their fashion and advertising pages to create brand identities for themselves influenced by the development of commodity feminism. Much like the editorial content discussed in previous chapters, the types of advertising these publications accepted and the ways in which sexual freedom and liberation were integrated into the advertising copy for a variety of merchandise helped establish and maintain unique identities for sex magazines for women. This chapter argues that this advertising environment sent female readers a mixed message, at once asserting women’s sexual freedom while also reiterating the responsibilities of traditional femininity: beauty, attractiveness, and heterosexual availability. The use of nude men on display in the fashion pages and advertising campaigns made clear to women that having “the good life” without men meant little. Nude men were an essential part of the Playgirl tableau and the playgirl lifestyle. The advertising environment in sex magazines for women also placed heavy emphasis on the importance of women’s femininity and sexual attractiveness, however. For women, beauty and fitness were sold as prerequisites to heterosexual coupling. As argued here, even heterosexuality itself was endlessly fetishized and commodified in increasingly creative and surprising ways in the advertising pages of Playgirl and its competitors.
The Woman’s Universe Expo 1973

An event that took place during *Playgirl*’s first six months of publication provides an example of the forced marriage that was taking place between feminism and commercial culture in the early 1970s. In a November 22, 1973, article entitled “Exhibiting the Liberated Lifestyle,” the *Chicago Tribune* reported on the first annual Woman’s Universe Expo, an event billed as a “mixture of fashion, beauty, feminism and social concerns.”\(^{540}\) Ads promoting the expo, an event organized by and for the Chicago business community, touted it as a “celebration of today’s lifestyle,” a lifestyle that included women’s appreciation of nude male bodies (figure 4.1). Among the 250 exhibitors was *Playgirl* magazine, a then newly established sex magazine for women, which brought along male models (clothed for the event) to display to visitors. Indeed, along with the vast array of cosmetics, fashion shows and career seminars were representatives from *Playgirl*, passing out buttons and copies of the magazine, giving away door prizes, and displaying four of their most recent male centerfolds in the flesh. An article in *Playgirl* about the expo emphasizes the four male centerfolds who would be on hand to autograph posters of their centerfold photograph “for all women.”\(^{541}\) Representatives also would be handing out sample issues and *Playgirl* buttons, and “some of the world’s handsomest men” would be on hand to take subscriptions\(^ {542}\) (figure 4.2). In addition, door prizes were given away from a variety of *Playgirl* advertisers, such as Windjammer Cruises, Diamint jewelry, Phone-Mate answering machines, and


\(^{542}\) Ibid.
In the context of the expo, the consumption of commercial products was billed as liberating right along with the consumption of male bodies. At the 1973 Woman’s Universe Expo, the *Playgirl* centerfolds working the room were essential elements to a well-rounded and fully liberated woman. The melding of consumerism and sexual liberation found in the expo was reproduced every week in the pages of sex magazines for women. The Woman’s Universe Expo, much like *Playgirl* and its competitors, is a very public example of the fusion of fashion and lifestyle with feminism and liberation in the commercial culture of the 1970s.

Even the expo’s organizers expressed apprehensions about this merger. The business venture group that put the Woman’s Universe Expo together, Ed Hassan and Associates, which was composed of seven women and two men, noted that “there are people out there who are ready to yell exploitation.” Perhaps nervous about feminist activist “zaps” like the *Ladies Home Journal* sit-in and the 1968 Miss America protest, the investors were careful to assure their exhibitors and their anticipated 200,000 guests that they would not be “intimidated by activist women’s right groups.” This tension begs the question: if the organizers saw their expo as “feminist” and their offerings for women as some form of “liberation,” why were they so concerned with feminist activists interrupting it? The answer may be found in the shifting definitions of sexual liberation and feminism circulating through commercial culture in the 1970s. In as much as *Playgirl* and its competitors used feminism and the notion of “liberation” to sell male

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545 Ibid.
nudity in a new way, advertisers were hard at work using the same language to give a new face to women’s consumerism.

The Woman’s Universe Expo is indicative of how women’s sexuality, specifically the portion that included gazing at male bodies, became closely associated with the notion of liberation in the 1970s and how sexual liberation became enmeshed with other aspects of “lifestyle,” such as cosmetics, makeup, and fashion. This fusion of explicit sexual imagery, fashion, and liberation on display at the expo was also evident in the advertising content of Playgirl and other sex magazines for women. Much like the editorial pages, the advertising and fashion pages of sex magazines for women were eager to link their offerings with “liberated” female consumers. This linkage involved varied attempts to translate feminist language into marketing appeals for a variety of consumer products.

The Woman’s Universe Expo is the perfect example of how sexual liberation was inserted into an already established universe of women’s consumer culture. This connection between sexual liberation and fashion and beauty was further underscored by the advertising inside the magazine for luxury items like fur coats and traditional feminine products such as perfume and cosmetics. Also prominent in all sex magazines for women were ads for vaginal douches, bust enhancers, weight-loss schemes, and vaginal tightening exercises. In this way, heterosexual women’s sexuality was organized around luxury items for the body as well as uniquely female “enhancements” that promoted sexual objectification and worked to foster bodily anxiety in readers. Playgirl, along with the organizers of the Woman’s Universe Expo, was interested in selling the newly sexually liberated women of the 1970s “the good life.” In this sense, Playgirl was
again following the lead of *Playboy*, which had successfully engaged in lifestyle marketing for decades prior to the 1970s but had done so by carefully avoiding bruising the male ego as it crafted a brand of consumerism men could participate in.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, *Playgirl* had built a strong brand identity around its message of sexual liberation and freedom that it used to sell a variety of merchandise to women. In doing so, *Playgirl* sought to emulate *Playboy*, which had successfully “styled its sexuality as an all-encompassing lifestyle that included fashion, design, and fine dining.”*546* *Playgirl*’s image of equality and liberation was undermined by the same limitation that hindered *Playboy*’s full embrace of feminism: both publications depended on embracing sexual difference and the valorization of femininity.*547* *Playboy* and its founder Hugh Hefner, who supported some feminist causes but “wanted women to look like women,” paved the way for a similar attitude at *Playgirl* and its competition.*548* While all of these publications offered alluring images of single life, *Playgirl* and its competition advertised to their readers quite differently and offered much different merchandise than *Playboy*. These differences were primarily based on gender and *Playboy*’s unwillingness to project anything but masculine perfection in its editorial and advertising content. According to historian Elizabeth Fraterrigo, *Playboy*’s lifestyle features “allowed readers to envision an upscale, masculine identity based on tasteful consumption.”*549* Fraterrigo’s work on *Playboy* seeks to examine the role of the magazine in “mapping consumption as the terrain on

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547 Ibid, 263.
548 Ibid.
549 Ibid.
which status claims were staked” for men.\(^{550}\) As this chapter makes clear, while *Playboy* “showcased a world of fashionable attire, gourmet food, sports cars, and exotic vacations,” many of the regular advertisers in *Playgirl* and its competition were far from tasteful.\(^{551}\) After decades of unsuccessful attempts by advertisers and marketers to cultivate masculine consumption prior to the 1950s, *Playboy* represented a major success.\(^{552}\) In contrast, *Playgirl* and its competitors marketed to women and because consumption already had a “feminine taint” their main charge was parsing how to advertise to the playgirl.\(^{553}\) In the end, while the advertising and fashion pages of sex magazines for women differed aesthetically from other women’s magazines, all featured advertising that worked to provoke feelings of anxiety and distress over the female body. In stark contrast, material that might cause such bodily anxiety among male readers was explicitly forbidden by *Playboy*. This chapter argues that the ways in which attention to “lifestyle” and femininity took root in the advertising pages of sex magazines for women had tremendous implications for the playgirl ethos that the editorial pages celebrated. When the playgirl is considered in both her editorial and advertising incarnations, an image of a much less independent, less self-confident and less liberated woman emerges. In many respects, in the advertising pages of sex magazines for women being a playgirl begins to looks more like an obligation rather than a choice. This obligation, however, was always presented as an extension of consumer “freedom,” an idea already several decades old.

\(^{550}\) Ibid, 12.
\(^{551}\) Ibid.
\(^{552}\) Ibid, 8.
\(^{553}\) Ibid.
“Commodity Feminism” in the Consumers’ Republic

The sponsors of the Woman’s Universe Expo were not the first to link consumerism with ideals of freedom and equality. After World War II the U.S. economy was largely built upon manufacturing, and consistent consumer demand was crucial to long-term success. Buying new goods fueled the economy and ensured a promising future for the country. Historian Lizbeth Cohen argues that the “landscape of mass consumption” in post-World War II America was infused with patriotic ideals, creating a “consumers’ republic.”554 The consumers’ republic is defined as “an economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption, both in terms of material life and the more idealistic goals of greater freedom, democracy, and equality.”555 In this framework, consumers bought more than just goods and services, they bought into complete lifestyles, and purchasing goods became a politicized process. Since the post-war years, the equation of consumer free choice with political freedom has taken on slightly different inflections with each new decade.556 For women, it might have been about freedom to participate in public life or the workforce, but in the 1970s this choice was imagined by Playgirl and its competition as sexual choice.

Cohen writes that by the early 1970s a flurry of market segmentation occurred to ensure continued consumer demand, and this segmentation resulted in a new commercial culture “that reified—at times even exaggerated—social differences in the pursuit of

555 Ibid, 7.
556 Ibid, 126.
Market segmentation lent marketplace recognition “to social and cultural divisions among Americans, making ‘counter cultures’ and ‘identity politics’ more complex joint products of grassroots mobilization and marketers’ ambitions than is often acknowledged.” Market segmentation worked to establish and exploit differences among women based on age, race, class, and lifestyle. At the same time “individuals gained more opportunity to express their separate identities through their choices as consumers.” Seen in this way, the playgirl lifestyle could be purchased through consuming sex magazines for women, and further augmented and solidified by patronizing the advertisers endorsed by those same publications. The editorial content’s connections between the playgirl lifestyle and greater equality for women certainly worked to imbue its advertising offerings with the same qualities: greater freedom and equality for women. The identity of the playgirl, the source of much rhetorical work in the editorial pages of Playgirl and its competitors, found further elaboration in the fashion and advertising pages of sex magazines for women.

Just as in the editorial pages of sex magazines for women, feminism played a key part in crafting the playgirl identity in the fashion and advertising pages. Due to the amount of space devoted to advertising content and its use of compelling visuals, the version of feminism and sexual liberation embraced by advertisers threatened to subsume the editorial version. Lizbeth Cohen highlights the feminist movement as a model of how “subcultural protest could inspire new strategies of market segmentation” and contends

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557 Ibid, 309.
558 Ibid.
559 Ibid, 309-310.
560 Ibid.
that marketers turned the women’s movement into a new market segment.\textsuperscript{561} Cohen writes that women soon became a new market “for everything from douches appropriate for ‘Women’s new freedom’ to a feminist television character named Maude.”\textsuperscript{562} Cohen concludes that “though marketers sometimes misjudged what would appeal to the feminist consumer, the women’s liberation movement at least inspired them to try to turn feminist defiance into consumer compliance.”\textsuperscript{563}

In the early 1970s, \textit{Ms.} magazine struggled with the perils that come with negotiating a feminist approach to commercial publishing. As feminist scholar Amy Erdman Farrell points out, even in the preview issue, “we can begin to see the ways advertisers could colonize—and commodify—the women’s movement, and the magazine, through the ads they created.”\textsuperscript{564} Fashion ads in the magazine portrayed the “\textit{Ms.}” women as just another fashion trend, much as the advertisers in sex magazines for women had.\textsuperscript{565} These advertisements, Farrell writes, “also drew on some of the most compelling themes evoked by feminism—equality, freedom, personal transformation, and sisterhood—to justify a consumer ethic [. . .] a common tactic in these advertisements was to acknowledge the women’s movement, then to offer some specific consumer product as the solution to women’s problems.”\textsuperscript{566} \textit{Ms.} created a “stringent advertising policy” that only accepted ads that treated “women as people,” and the magazine promised to reject ads that were either “downright insulting” or “harmful.”\textsuperscript{567} When feminist slogans and ideas were used to market harmful products, \textit{Ms.} would often

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{561} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{562} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{563} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{565} Ibid, 36.
\textsuperscript{566} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{567} Ibid, 84.
\end{flushleft}
object. Editor Patricia Carbide famously rejected the “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby” Virginia Slims cigarette campaign after failing to convince the company to change its slogan, resulting in the loss of a lucrative account.\textsuperscript{568} Other potential advertisers saw the magazine as a “cause” rather than a “marketing opportunity.”\textsuperscript{569}

*Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women struggled to find and retain advertisers in the 1970s. As discussed later, this struggle was not because of stringent advertising policies, but instead related to advertiser reticence about the magazine’s sexual content, something *Playboy* also struggled with in its early years. In *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women, the idea of consumer feminism was further fragmented and finessed to add a sexual twist to women’s freedom and independence. The fashion and advertising pages of sex magazines offered women new ways to think about themselves as sexually free heterosexuals. Much like the playgirl archetype itself, this process of advertising products for the sexually free women was greatly indebted to the idea of commodity feminism and the Single Girl persona so closely associated with *Cosmopolitan* magazine.

Key to understanding advertising and its relationship to feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s is the concept of commodity feminism. Cultural studies scholar Bill Osgerby, who has done the more recent work on this topic, points to advertising in women’s magazines of the late 1960s as examples of what communication studies scholar Robert Goldman calls commodity feminism.\textsuperscript{570} Goldman argues that commodity feminism is the process by which advertisers “connect the value and meaning of

\textsuperscript{568} Ibid, 86.
\textsuperscript{569} Ibid, 89.
women’s emancipation to corporate products.”

Feminist discourse is thus “co-opted into the market and feminism is reduced to a simple ‘attitude’ or lifestyle that can be purchased in a perfume, a designer outfit or a sleek sports car.” Goldman sees the commercial market rerouting (and thus depoliticizing) feminism “into the logic of commodity relations.” Osgerby, however, sees the process of commodity feminism as much more nuanced than does Goldman.

In looking at advertising from the period, Osgerby discusses the 1968 Virginia Slims advertising slogan “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby” and argues that the new Virginia Slims brand was set apart from the competition “by being pitched toward what was perceived as a propitious, new consumer market—young, independent and upwardly-mobile women.” The Virginia Slims advertising campaign, the very same one rejected by Ms., Osgerby writes, was just one example of “wider shifts in popular visual representations of femininity in America during the 1960s.” “Across the fields of advertising, film and TV, and other non-visual popular culture,” Osgerby asserts, “the period saw the emergence of a new configuration of femininity—the young and cosmopolitan ‘Single Girl.’” The same Single Girl created by Helen Gurley Brown and celebrated in the pages of Cosmopolitan magazine each month was having a profound impact on the tone and content of advertising for women. In the world of the Single Girl, women’s everyday existence was set aside for “a lifestyle whose credo emphasized individual pleasure and personal ‘liberation’ through commodity

571 Goldman quoted in Holloway and Beck, 215.
572 Ibid.
573 Ibid.
574 Ibid.
575 Ibid.
576 Ibid.
consumption.”577 The *Playgirl* and *Viva* fashion pages used an identical strategy when photographing their consumer fantasies but incorporated nude men into the liberated lifestyle.

Osgerby concedes that the notion of this “new” femininity was largely a media construct, “an imagined ideal generated in wily marketing campaigns.”578 He writes of the Single Girl archetype:

Representations of the swinging Single Girl were not simply a vehicle for a manipulative ‘false consciousness.’ The world of the 1960s’ Single Girl was a realm of fissures and contradictions that offered spaces where (at least some) women were able to engage meaningfully with the cultural shifts taking place around them, rejecting dominant feminine ideals of family centered domesticity in favour of a sexually confident feminine identity focused around the pleasures of modern leisure and personal consumption.579

Osgerby argues for a direct connection between the 1960s’ Single Girl and later sex magazines for women.580 “Both *Playgirl* and *Viva*” he writes, “included a higher quota of sexual content than *Cosmopolitan*, though they shared the penchant for personal independence and consumer hedonism that characterized the Single Girl ethos.”581 As we shall see, the sexual content in *Playgirl* and its competitors was not limited to the centerfold and editorial pages, but also to the advertising pages, making these pages one

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577 Ibid.
579 Ibid.
580 Ibid, 214
581 Ibid.
of the key locations in the visual culture of the 1970s where women were, as Osgerby
states, “engaging meaningfully with the cultural shifts taking place around them.”

On the topic of the commodification of feminism, historian David Allyn observes
that it occurred in tandem with the commodification of sexual freedom in the 1970s.
He writes, “what was new in the early seventies was paying for sexual freedom—that is,
paying for the opportunity to experience the wonders of sexual liberation, to be part of
the sexual revolution.” This opportunity was possible because commercial culture
insisted that sexual liberation was something that one could obtain by buying a book or
subscribing to a magazine. Allyn concedes that *Playboy* and *Sex and the Single Girl* had
commercialized sexual freedom in earlier decades, but “the process of commodification
took on a whole new dimension in the early seventies as product after product promising
sexual liberation entered the market.”

The fusion of feminism with sexual liberation in the 1970s is clearly visible in the
case of Revlon’s “Charlie Girl.” In the winter of 1973, several months after the launch of
*Playgirl*, market researchers at Revlon came up with a new fragrance called Charlie that
was meant to “celebrate women’s liberation.” Revlon represented the fragrance in ads
with “a confident and single working woman who signs her own checks, pops into
nightclubs on her own, and even asks men to dance.” Less than a year into its launch,
Charlie became the best-selling fragrance in the United States.

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582 Ibid, 210
583 David Allyn, *Make Love, Not War, The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History* (New York: Little,
584 Ibid.
585 Ibid, 229
204.
587 Ibid, 205.
588 Ibid.
launched nearly a dozen knockoffs including Max Factor’s Maxi ("When I’m In the Mood, There’s No Stopping Me") and Chanel’s Cristalle ("Celebrate Yourself"), each featuring “heroines who were brash, independent, and sexually assertive.” These ads flooded women’s magazines in the 1970s, including sex magazines for women, and drew their currency from women’s greater independence and sexual assertiveness.

In the 1970s, sex magazines for women strengthened the connection between consumerism and the myth of greater sexual freedom and gender egalitarianism. Included in discussions and definitions of gender equality for women in the 1970s was the freedom for women to choose from a variety of sexual partners and to pursue and enjoy sexuality, as men had generally been allowed for so long. Advertising in sex magazines for women attempted to turn heterosexual orientation into a lifestyle choice, even a fashion statement, ascribing new meaning to heterosexuality in the form of consumer identity. Heterosexuality, so crucial to the playgirl persona and the brand identities of sex magazines for women, was commodified by these publications specifically in a series of jewelry advertisements throughout the 1970s that are examined later in this chapter. *Playgirl* and its competitors offered greater sexual equality for heterosexual men and women through consumerism.

“A Stimulating Selling Environment”

Finding and keeping advertisers for sex magazines such as *Playgirl* often proved to be a challenge to their publishers and advertising directors. Throughout the 1970s, *The New York Times’* advertising pages chronicled the ups and downs of this undertaking.

589 Ibid.
The New York Times reported in May 1973 that the inaugural issue of Playgirl included a mere thirty-two pages of advertising. After the launch of its first issue, Playgirl began selling itself directly to advertisers in The New York Times. An advertisement from July 1973 touts the “phenomenal distribution growth” of Playgirl and it plans to increase its print run to one million issues in August 1973. The advertisement presents evidence of Playgirl’s “acceptance” by its intended audience by citing the 70,000 questionnaires completed and returned by readers and many thousands of letters the magazine received imploring Playgirl to “give us more [male nudes] please.” The advertisement also reiterated that Playgirl is “edited by women for women” and reports that “PLAYGIRL delivers exhilarating editorials for women who love men.” “Fulfilling an entertainment void,” the advertisement concludes, “the magazine provides a stimulating selling environment for advertisers.” The nude male centerfolds were publicity magnets for the magazine. Playgirl took on the subject of its nude centerfolds directly in the advertisement, stating that “the celebrities appearing in the four-page foldouts (Lyle Waggoner, George Maharis, Gary Conway) are being editorialized by newspapers and television across the country.” The high sales figures, audience interest, and uniqueness of Playgirl’s offerings, the advertisement argues, made it an exciting place to advertise.

Playgirl’s impressive sales figures were featured in another advertisement a few months later, in September 1973. The full-page ad reads “They said it couldn’t be

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592 Ibid.
593 Ibid.
594 Ibid.
595 Ibid.
The advertisement includes a photo of a young woman standing behind an attractive man, beginning to remove the man’s T-shirt. The shirt reads “2,000,000,” the new print run for *Playgirl*. Advertising copy below reads, “The first in publishing history. You needed us …and we were there!” The advertisement, touting *Playgirl* as the “fastest growing magazine in the world,” seems to be aimed at both women readers and advertisers. The magazine, represented by the image of a sexually forward female, offered itself as a necessity to women in the 1970s and advertisers looking to make headway with that demographic.

Still, *Playgirl* and its rival, *Viva*, faced an uphill battle in their quest for advertisers. By the early 1970s, both publications were discovering what *Penthouse* and *Playboy* already knew: “a good number of advertisers still consider it bad for their corporate image to be in one of the so called ‘skin books.’” In the 1970s, *Playboy* was frustrated that it was unable to attract lucrative advertising from some of the world’s major corporations including Coca-Cola, Gillette, and General Motors, who were not convinced the magazine was an “appropriate medium.” In July 1974, *The New York Times* reported that “despite advertiser reticence in certain areas,” including cosmetics, *Playgirl* “has been in the black since its first regular monthly issue in June 1973.” *Playgirl* and *Viva* shared many of the same advertising accounts. Advertisements for cigarettes, alcohol and perfumes were ubiquitous in both magazines as they are in magazines of most any kind. *Playgirl* and *Viva* did carry some advertising for major

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597 Ibid.
600 Miller, 237
cosmetics companies such as Maybelline and Revlon, and both magazines were able to attract advertising for the occasional piece of small household electronic equipment.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *Playgirl* and *Viva* experienced their greatest successes in attracting advertising for sexual aids and accessories. In 1973, advertisements for sexual aids and accessories appeared throughout *Playgirl*, but beginning in 1974, they were mostly relegated to the back of the magazine in a section entitled “Playgirl Boutique,” which was renamed the “Erotic Boutique” in 1975. *Viva* called its counterpart “The Company Store.” Among advertisements for silk and satin sheets, condoms, and adult-oriented board games like “Strip-Tac-Toe” and “Bumps and Grinds” were ads for record albums with “Music to Make Love By.” Ben-Wa balls (used for sexual stimulation) and ginseng (for sexual stamina) were sold adjacent to nipple blush and edible underwear. *Playgirl* even advertised a brand of disposable panties, called Flings, that were worn once and then thrown away. The playgirl had many options in planning for sexual abandon. Frederick’s of Hollywood was a frequent advertiser in both *Playgirl* and *Viva*, and the retailer offered crotchless panties and vibrators along with their signature lingerie. Ads for waterbeds appeared in both publications along with mirrors to go over the beds, and in *Playgirl* readers could order a pink sheet set with a nude image of centerfold Peter Lupus or soap shaped like the male genitalia. With these examples, it is easy to see the ways that sex made its way into sex magazines; however, outside the “Erotic Boutique,” a sexual lifestyle made its way into advertising for a variety of seemingly nonsexual merchandise. Both *Playgirl* and *Viva* proved adept at putting a unique sexual spin on a number of traditional women’s magazine staples, like the fashion pages. Indeed, in the
fashion pages of both publications, *Playgirl* and *Viva* developed a signature style that hinged on using nude men to sell clothing to women.

“The Beat is Bare”

Within the pages of *Playgirl* and its competitors, the use of male bodies to sell a variety of products to women and the crossover of pornographic imagery into advertising aimed at women began an entire decade earlier than timelines suggested by other scholars of advertising and visual culture. From their very beginnings, *Playgirl* and *Viva* used men’s bodies to put their signature mark on their fashion and advertising pages. Communication studies scholar Rodger Streitmatter points to a 1983 Calvin Klein underwear ad featuring Olympic pole vaulter Tom Hintnaus as the beginning of male bodies being used as sex objects in advertising for women. 602 Hintnaus was posed lying stretched out on his back, a position that accentuated his “well-defined chest, his muscular arms and legs, his flat stomach, and his flawless facial features bronzed to perfection.” 603 At the time, the early 1980s, executives from Calvin Klein assured the public that the ad campaign was aiming for women, who bought 70 percent of all men’s underwear at the time. 604 “Regardless of who was looking at them,” Streitmatter writes, “partially nude men were soon being used to sell a wide range of products.” 605 Similarly, feminist author and activist Naomi Wolf points to the early 1980s as a time when the conventions of “high class pornographic photography” crossed over to be used to sell

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603 Ibid.
604 Ibid, 121.
605 Ibid.
products to women. The fashion pages of *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women certainly warrant a re-examination of these conclusions. Readers of *Playgirl* and *Viva* would have been familiar with the use of male nudity in marketing to women because it appeared in nearly every issue in 1973 and 1974.

*Playgirl’s* first fashion spread offers a taste of exactly what set the magazine apart from other offerings for women. In *Playgirl’s* first issue, fashion designer and critic Richard Blackwell (or Mr. Blackwell, perhaps best known for his annual “Worst Dressed” list) authored a six-page fashion spread, entitled “The Textures of Love,” featuring his creations. In addition to the photographs, Blackwell offered written advice on how a playgirl should choose and wear clothing. The five photos featured a beautiful blonde female model dressed in several elegant evening gowns, and in nearly all of these photos she is photographed with a nude male at her side (figures 4.3 and 4.4). In the fashion spread, the nude male lovingly nuzzles the fully-clothed woman, holds her hand, embraces her around the waist, and several times appears to be about to kiss her. In most of the photographs, the woman seems distant and obviously uninterested in the man. Here we see the world *Playgirl* chose to imagine for its female readers: a life of luxury only made complete with beautiful nude men. He is necessary set dressing for the playgirl lifestyle.

This visual presentation of fully clothed women with male nudes would become a staple in sex magazines for women and a familiar calling card for *Playgirl*. This arrangement was yet another visual reinforcement of the reciprocity promised by *Playgirl*’s centerfolds and editorials: the objectification of men for the pleasure of

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women. Readers recalled the practice of including fully clothed women with nude men in the February 2007 issue of *Playgirl* when two female readers wrote in asking for *Playgirl* to reinstate this type of pictorial. A reader named Jane Kayne wrote:

> My mother was an original subscriber to *Playgirl* back in the 1970s. I still have many of the early issues of your magazine. At the time, it was common to see a fully clothed female with a nude guy in a pictorial. For my mother and also myself, this concept was very liberating and sexy. The women in the pictorials appeared empowered, dominant and in total control.

While photographs of fully clothed women enjoying the company of nude men certainly challenged the visual representation of sexuality in the 1970s, reversing the typical *Playboy* scenario of well-dressed men surrounded by undressed women, the practice was not without its complications. In fact, all too often these images came with a shopping list and instructions for women from advertisers.

The accompanying text of Blackwell’s fashion spread in some ways complicates Jane Kayne’s and her mother’s interpretation of the practice of using nude male models alongside fashionably dressed female ones. Rather than seeing the model in his fashion spread or the readers of *Playgirl* as “empowered, dominant, in total control,” Blackwell asserted that “a PLAYGIRL has acquired taste.” Taste in clothing and lifestyle, Blackwell seems to argue, must be cultivated at the feet of style masters such as himself.

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608 Ibid.
609 Ibid.
“A truly alluring woman,” Blackwell writes, “always tries to express who she is, what she represents by the way she dresses.”\textsuperscript{611} According to Blackwell, “a PLAYGIRL dresses and grooms herself to match the mood of the moment [. . .] as a PLAYGIRL you need not necessarily possess a perfect body-beautiful. But always, you give the illusion of beauty.”\textsuperscript{612} Even with the nude male in all but one of the photographs, Blackwell cautioned his female readers about showing too much skin:

As a potentially sensual woman, be careful about over-exposure. A man really does prefer a woman who challenges his imagination. A woman suggests her giving-loving femininity by the way in which she covers her body, not the extremes to which she reveals it.\textsuperscript{613}

Blackwell’s logic implies that while the male in the photos is a natural beauty, a woman’s beauty and sexual attractiveness must be cultivated and calculating. A woman is only “potentially sensual” the playgirl, he seems to insist, is not born but must be made. The playgirl lifestyle can only be cultivated by acquiring the right things. “Now, lovely ladies,” Blackwell concludes, “the challenge is yours. No matter what your budget, you can be well-dressed. Well-groomed. Beautiful.”\textsuperscript{614}

Each month, \textit{Playgirl} continued to offer women beauty and grooming advice, and the magazine continued to use the nude male body to display clothing and accessories for women in increasingly creative ways. One fashion spread, entitled “The Beat is Bare,” displays photos of a variety of dresses, pants, and tops on a female model superimposed over images of a naked body of a muscular man (figures 4.5 and 4.6). Photos of the

\textsuperscript{611} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{612} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{614} Ibid, 81.
clothing model and descriptions of her clothing are scattered over the man’s torso. His pubic hair is exposed in most shots, indicating that he is totally, rather than partially, undressed. His face is never fully shown, adding to the objectification of the male model. The minimal copy is playful and suggests travel: “I declared war on boredom, hopped the Grand Funk Railroad, crossed America and blew my bread in Chicago!” Travel was a typical theme in fashion spreads in women’s magazines of the early 1970s, according to Bill Osgerby. He explains that fashion photography of the period often emphasized action and movement, escapism, and freeing women from typical domestic scenes. In “The Beat is Bare,” both the clothing and the copy suggests using fashion as a means of building a swinging lifestyle and invoke connections with 1970s celebrity culture; referring to some of the styles on display the copy reads, “when I heard that Bianca Jagger bought one—and Mick, and Liza, and Barbra and Melany—I just had to . . .” Osgerby notes similar themes of “jet-set excitement and carefree hedonism” in Cosmopolitan features and photospreads. Yet, also embedded in the Playgirl fashion spread is what appears to be a search for male approval as the copy written over the man’s naked body asks, “Do you prefer on or off the shoulder?” This blending of consumer and sexual desire became a Playgirl staple, yet the playgirl often seems to be seeking to please someone other than herself.

The ubiquity of male nudity was highlighted on the cover of the December 1973 issue of Playgirl that featured a fully clothed woman unwrapping her Christmas gift, a

615 “The Beat is Bare” Playgirl August 1973: 57.
616 Holloway and Beck, American Visual Culture, 212.
617 Ibid.
619 Holloway and Beck, American Visual Culture, 212.
nude man. Also included in the issue was a fashion spread entitled “Holiday Under Wraps.” The six-page spread depicts a holiday party with three well-dressed white women being waited on by three nude white men (figure 4.7). The naked men pour drinks, present gifts, clean up wrapping paper, and light the women’s cigarettes and candles. Again, the female models are fully clothed and seem to be only partially aware of the presence of the naked men. Instead they pose, whisper to one another, and admire one another’s jewelry and gifts. The female models never look directly at the men but often look directly at the camera and one another. Their expressions appear to convey to the reader a sense that, “this is the life; wouldn’t you like to come join us?” Copy to the side of the photographs describe the outfits and accessories. One photo of the three female models admiring a gift with a naked man in the background holding more unwrapped packages is captioned, “Glittering backdrop. Baubles around your neck. Chrome and silver balls. Expectation in your eyes. Gifts in his hand. For you.” The nude male models in this spread are meant to be accessories themselves: they are meant to set the scene, wait on the women, and desire them in their stylish party clothes. Here, in a reversal of convention, women are the active agents, and men are the passive objects hoping for attention. “Holiday Under Wraps” presents the image of playgirls who have made it, attaining all of the luxury and trappings of female agency, agency that now included the ability to choose, use or completely ignore men. It is important to note that the scenario just described is not one of gender equality, a goal stated repeatedly in the editorial content of sex magazines for women, but one of dominance of one gender over another. Fashion spreads with fully clothed women and undressed men found reciprocity by reversing the traditional gender of the undressed object and the fully dressed subject.

Playgirl’s fashion pages depicted women in “a world apart,” separate from children or other familial obligations. In the early 1970s, Playgirl and Viva mimicked Cosmopolitan’s “heady cocktail of sexual freedom and stylish consumerism” while adding their own pornographic twist to the mix in their fashion pages.622 The nude men, just like the trendy clothing and accessories in the fashion spreads, were the equivalent of “modern style” in the early 1970s, and also worked to distinguish the fashion pages of sex magazines for women from traditional women’s magazines. Viva’s fashion pages displayed this same tendency by using the male body as a strategic accessory.

“Strategic Accessories”

Viva, like Playgirl, used the male body as a canvass for advertising to women. In a September 1974 feature entitled “Finger Tips,” two extreme close-ups of a hairy male torso are covered with the manicured hands of a female model (figure 4.8 and 4.9). The female model’s hands appear to be caressing the man’s stomach and using her brightly polished, manicured nails to slowly make her way below his navel. The model’s hands are accessorized with rings and a bracelet. The feature instructs women to “keep a man at arm’s length—but not for long. Treat him to the exquisite torture of your lithe, lacquered nails being dragged slowly across his bare back, or (better yet) inside his thighs.”623 “Of course,” the copy continues, “such delightful foreplay demands the right

622 Holloway and Beck, American Visual Culture, 209.
equipment.”\textsuperscript{624} The copy goes further by explaining to the reader what should be bought to accomplish the look, a prerequisite to the erotic foreplay the feature recommends.

\textit{Viva} later took on such topics as pubic hairstyles (August 1974) with full-color examples, dyed and sculpted, in a five-page spread. “The beautification of the body,” the feature concludes, “knows no bounds.”\textsuperscript{625} The October 1975 issue offered further advice for “decorating those erogenous zones” in a six-page spread that recommended nipple makeup for the breasts to make them “doubly fascinating” with a “rosy glow” and recommendations for the inner thigh which could be decorated with “garters, fragrant oils, and tattoos.”\textsuperscript{626} As this example demonstrates, sex magazines for women not only used male nudity to add a signature touch to their fashion pages but went a step further and used fully exposed women to create consumer demand for products to beautify and accessorize the most intimate parts of the female body. In this way, female nudity in \textit{Viva}’s fashion pages worked to create more locales for beauty intervention, a task that now had even fewer boundaries.

To contrast \textit{Viva}’s treatment of the male body with its treatment of the female body, it is crucial to take a look back at how its editorials were arranged alongside its advertising. Throughout 1973–1974, \textit{Viva} ran a feature called “The Last Word” in the back of the magazine. It was an essay by influential thinkers and celebrities of the day. In November 1973, “The Last Word” was an essay by feminist author Germaine Greer on the beauty of the natural breast, which encouraged women to embrace the uniqueness and asymmetry of their breasts.\textsuperscript{627} The essay is preceded by two full-page ads for bust

\textsuperscript{624} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{625} “Hairstyles” \textit{Viva} August 1974: 90.
\textsuperscript{626} “Touch Points: Decorating Those Erogenous Zones” \textit{Viva} October 1975.
\textsuperscript{627} Germaine Greer, “The Last Word,” \textit{Viva} November 1973: 139-140.
enhancers. This is but one of many such ironic juxtapositions in *Viva* and other sex magazines for women, where editorial content was directly undermined by advertising messages.

In the pages of *Viva*, nude men were just another luxury item for women. In a November 1974 fashion spread, for instance, *Viva* mimicked *Playgirl*’s convention of the clothed woman and the naked man. The spread, entitled “Love Lives,” features a woman in a fur coat and pearl earrings and necklace. Behind her, a naked man nuzzles her head and bites the string of pearls around her neck (figure 4.10). The copy reads, “a different look for every lover...because you dress the part, and with superb style. Never a foil for him, you take the lead...using clothing like these as strategic accessories to a marvelous sense of drama and fun.”628 The copy suggests that both parties are playing roles, facilitated by their clothing or lack thereof, but it is the woman’s prerogative “to take the lead.”629 Clothing enabled women to enjoy their sexuality in various and mutually satisfying ways, all they needed were a few “strategic accessories.”630 The spread suggests that women “wear next to nothing...and don’t forget the pearls.”631 This spread, and the others mentioned previously, illustrate the forced marriage between women’s sexuality and consumer culture that took place in sex magazines for women. The messages these features sent to women were mixed. Women were encouraged to enjoy their liberated sexual agency but repeatedly reminded that they had to dress the part. For the playgirl, having the man was her right but remembering to wear the pearls was her responsibility.

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629 Ibid.
630 Ibid.
631 Ibid.
While the fashion pages imagined female reciprocity and agency in heterosexual relationships, creating imaginative spaces where women could envision themselves as glamorous sexual beings, the regular advertising pages left less room for imagination. Gone were the images of nude men. Gone were the empowering slogans from the editor’s column. The advertising pages of *Playgirl* and its competitors reminded women of their responsibilities to be not only beautiful, but also thin, toned, and odorless. By the 1970s, women’s magazines had been exacerbating women’s anxieties about their bodies and capitalizing on these anxieties for years, but the sex magazines for women exploited women’s quest for attractiveness to even more bizarre and intimate levels. In their pages, the quest for beauty was compounded by even more pressing concerns: one’s success at the game of beauty had consequences for one’s ability to exercise sexual agency. If the fashion pages reduced women’s sexual agency to shopping choices, then the regular advertising pages tried to reduce women to a cluster of anxieties about their bodies and appearance.

Feminist scholars have long criticized consumer culture, the beauty industry, and the sometimes unattainable standards they set for women. As Lynn S. Chancer notes, “beginning with Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* and then later in works including Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex*, and Ti-Grace Atkinson’s *Amazon’s Odyssey*, one finds beauty treated not as an independent topic but as inseparable from a *broader feminist worldview*.”632 In her treatise on beauty, *Femininity* (1984) Susan Brownmiller argues that to be a woman means an “obsessive concentration on the minutiae of her physical being,” encompassing concerns about weight, hair, skin,

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and clothing. More recently, in *Backlash*, Susan Faludi (1991) cites a survey by the Kinsey Institute showing that American women have more negative feelings about their bodies than women in any other culture. Finally, Naomi Wolf (1991) writes about what she calls “the beauty myth,” which, “like so many ideologies of femininity, mutates to meet new circumstances and checkmates women’s attempts to increase their power.” In contrast to these views, historian Kathy Peiss has pointed to the many ways beauty culture—which emerged out of businesses largely built and organized by women themselves—brought women together in pursuit of a common goal and provided opportunities for women to become entrepreneurs by capitalizing on women’s social networks and habits. The beauty trade these women developed around the turn of the last century did not depend on advertising, a business that has historically had few women practitioners but a tremendous impact on women’s lives. If beauty culture, as Peiss defines it, is a system of meaning created by women, advertising helped to divest women of the power to make that meaning.

For Wolf, the influence of the beauty industry and beauty standards has profound implications for women’s sexuality. She asserts that “the beauty myth hit women simultaneously with—and in backlash against—the second wave and its sexual revolution, to effect a widespread suppression of women’s true sexuality.” To Wolf, the struggle over beauty and its meaning is simply about power. “The qualities that a

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637 Ibid, 5.
638 Ibid. 6.
given period calls beautiful in a woman,” she writes, “are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable: The beauty myth is always prescribing behavior and not appearance.”640 In *Playgirl* and its competitors, while the male centerfold was the fantasy, the reality was that women themselves had profound responsibilities in the bedroom, responsibilities tied to the beauty myth.

*Playgirl* gave even the most traditional trappings of femininity a new sexual twist. For example, in several issues in 1973, *Playgirl* ran a full-page advertisement for Carnival wigs (figure 4.11). The bold copy described the product as “The love in, live in wigs guaranteed to arouse his masculine desires!”641 The advertisement offers wigs in three colors and two styles, the “Playmate” or the “Temptress.”642 “If you’ve always pictured yourself with an instinctively seductive, sensual aire,” the advertising copy reads, “we’ve got what it takes to make even your wildest dreams come true!”643 Carnival wigs offered “a provocative collection of allure-styles that will all but dare him to run his fingers through your silken-soft luxurious ‘hair.’”644 This advertisement is but one example of many that attempted to tap into the playgirl ethos to sell beauty products to women. The advertising copy did not just promise to enhance a women’s beauty or provide a convenience: it promised to facilitate her erotic fantasies and make her a more alluring lover. It promised that the product would coax her lover’s touch, not to the woman’s body but to the fetishized “hair” on the “Playmate” or the “Temptress.” With names given to their products, Carnival wigs even promised women the experience of

642 Ibid.
643 Ibid.
644 Ibid.
being “the other woman” with their husbands or lovers. This appeal seems to be directly at odds with the editorial conception of a playgirl who can pick and choose men at will.

“How I Turned My Marriage into an Affair”

The contrasts between the editorial playgirl and her advertising incarnation continued in the realm of feminine hygiene. In addition to the typical advertisements for Massengill and Summer’s Eve douches, and one product called Inner Rinse, *Playgirl* and *Viva* frequently ran ads for feminine hygiene “systems.” One of these types of advertisements was for Finesse, the Feminine Hygiene System (figure 4.12). In the November 1973 issue, the advertisement appears just one page after one of Marin Milam’s editorials on women’s liberation. The female model in the ad explains to readers how “I turned my marriage into an affair.”645 The copy tells of the woman’s worries with vaginal odor. She had tried douches and vaginal deodorant, but continued to feel unsure of herself, “not just during the day at work. But at night, too, with my husband.”646 During one of her gynecological visits, her doctor “showed her a pretty little appliance called Finesse.”647 She explains, “Finesse is a motor-driven appliance that lets you douche comfortably on the commode in about 60 seconds.”648 The appliance was “a lovely way to feel feminine and attractive before intercourse.”649 The testimonial continues, “now I feel fresher, and cleaner with a new freedom and femininity . . . now I can relax and enjoy myself as I never have before. I’m every bit as attractive

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646 Ibid.
647 Ibid.
648 Ibid.
649 Ibid.
as I feel.” As this advertisement copy makes clear, the definition of “freedom” used in Playgirl’s editorials failed to translate into the advertising copy used elsewhere in the magazine. Women needed a machine, albeit one that is “pretty enough to leave out in the bathroom,” to feel attractive, feminine, and free to tap into that sexual liberation true playgirls enjoyed. According to the testimonial, using the machine made her feel like a whole new woman, and the woman’s husband seemed to feel the same way. Similar devices were advertised in Playgirl and Viva through the 1970s. One device called Aqua Fem even seemed to promise women sexual pleasure while using it because it “made douching a thrill.” In addition, the advertisement promised that Aqua Fem would ensure the women using the product would “be kissing clean all over.” Advertisements for feminine hygiene systems were only one of many in sex magazines for women that spoke to women’s relationships to what was considered the most intimate parts of their bodies.

The recommended interventions into women’s bodies did not stop with douching. Another full-page advertisement that frequently ran in Playgirl, was for a device called Gynetone (figure 4.13). The image in the advertisement is of a young woman and her male partner. The advertising copy warns, “many women suffer a loss of muscle tone in the thighs and vagina, beginning at fairly early age for a variety of reasons. As a result, a less exciting and satisfying sexual life can occur.” Gynetone was “a new instrument”

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650 Ibid.
651 Ibid.
652 Ibid.
654 Ibid.
that was developed to “strengthen the muscle of the inner thigh and vagina.” A similar product advertised by *Playgirl* in 1974 was The Gynetic Exerciser, and the advertisement featured a testimonial from a customer that read, “I thought I’d never be able to fulfill my potential as a woman.” The copy reported that 60 percent of participating women’s mates or husbands “felt there was a definite and noticeable improvement in vaginal muscle tone which greatly enhanced their sexual enjoyment.” Advertisements like these, which used sexuality as the selling point, seemed to fit with the theme of sex magazines for women, but they also worked against the messages of sexual liberation and empowerment that the editors worked hard to establish. The messages these ads sent to women conflicted particularly with the line of thinking that *Playgirl* first set forth in its early issues, that women had all of the sexual power they needed, if only they would reach out and grasp it. Nowhere in the editorial philosophies discussed in the previous chapters did *Playgirl*, *Viva*, or any other sex magazine for women insist on “internal cleansing” or even lingerie, jewelry, or fashionable clothing. But the multitude of advertisements these same publications accepted argued that only by deodorizing, strengthening and tightening the vagina could a woman live out her sexual potential. In fact, these advertisements played right into some of Western culture’s anxieties and myths about the female body.

In examining women’s relationships with their bodies, media studies scholar Laura Kipnis observes, femininity “hinges on sustaining an underlying sense of female inadequacy.” The trappings of femininity, Kipnis argues, are constantly at odds with

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656 Ibid.
658 Ibid.
the goals of feminism, “which wants to eliminate female inadequacy, to trounce it as a patriarchal myth, then kick it out of the female psyche for good.”660 Femininity “revolves around the anxiety of female defectiveness to perpetuate itself.”661 Within the media, Kipnis argues, “between truckloads of instruction, the endless guidance, the chirpy ‘helpful hints,’ perpetuating insufficiency is clearly the objective.”662 “Pick up a current issue of any women’s magazine,” she instructs, “and contemplate the sheer magnitude of anxiety about something on display.”663 Femininity and feminism “continue to battle it out, nowhere more than within women’s relations to their bodies, which is to say, within the entirety of female self-relation.”664

Nowhere is this battle between feminism and femininity more intense than in the realm of contamination taboos or cultural beliefs about women’s cleanliness. Kipnis writes, “all through the history of civilization, in cultures the world over, accusations of dirtiness have constantly been leveled at women.”665 Cultures worldwide have believed that “women are somehow polluting, that female bodies, especially when menstruating, are dangerous to men’s health and often to other entities, like crops and livestock, too.”666 “The vagina is frequently associated with rot and decay, a gateway through which evil enters the world,” Kipnis reports. “In fact, the entire female body is frequently seen as a source of dangerous contagion, subject to bizarre taboos and superstitions, many of which persist into the present.”667 For examples of this taboo’s modern incarnations, Kipnis

660 Ibid.
661 Ibid, 8.
662 Ibid.
663 Ibid, 11.
664 Kipnis, 7.
665 Ibid, 84.
666 Ibid, 114.
667 Ibid.
points to the white-on-white motifs used in tampon and sanitary napkin commercials.\textsuperscript{668} The ads are not so much selling a product as they are selling the idea of purity. The marketing of feminine hygiene systems and vaginal exercisers perpetuate these deeply embedded cultural fears about women’s bodies and exacerbate women’s anxieties about their sexuality.

At the same time that \textit{Playgirl} encouraged women to embrace their inner sexual desires, it was advertising feminine hygiene machines and douches that promised “internal cleanliness.”\textsuperscript{669} Again, the placement of the ads creates a counterpoint to the magazine’s support of feminist issues. In the August 1976 issue of \textit{Playgirl}, directly across from an editorial in support of the ERA was an ad for Massengill douche promising “freshness” in seconds.\textsuperscript{670} Meanwhile, Germaine Greer’s recently published best-seller \textit{The Female Eunuch} (1971) “encouraged women to taste their own menstrual blood and accept their own bodily odors.”\textsuperscript{671} \textit{Ms}. magazine editors refused to accept advertising for feminine hygiene deodorants, as it violated their policy against products that were “insulting” or “harmful” to women.\textsuperscript{672} While \textit{Ms}. magazine “consistently worked to find advertisements that mirrored the feminist philosophy of the editorials and articles,” \textit{Playgirl} and other sex magazines for women exhibited none of these concerns.\textsuperscript{673} \textit{Playgirl} and other sex magazines for women operated under a very different philosophy; they had built their identity on the reverent worship of nude male bodies and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[668] Ibid, 116.
\item[672] Farrell, \textit{Yours in Sisterhood}, 84.
\item[673] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
were more concerned with carrying advertising that continued that theme rather than engage in gate-keeping to forward a feminist philosophy.

Every imaginable item that could be offered in the shape of a penis found its way into the advertising pages of *Playgirl* and *Viva*. An advertisement for “the Perfect Pacifier” in the November 1974 issue of *Viva* offers a “superbly crafted penis cast in solid sterling silver” which “makes an ideal relaxer, something to replace your cigarettes or thumb.” 674 Indeed, the female model in the ad is holding the product up to her lips. It was “a fetching piece of jewelry that lets people know where you’re at.” 675 The primacy of the penis is confirmed by a similar piece of jewelry offered in the January 1976 issue of *Viva* by a company called Family Jewels. The “miniature replica of the male organ” was available in both sterling silver and 18-karat gold and billed as “perfect as a gift or a reminder.” 676 This advertisement, which literally infantilized adult women and “reminded” them of the proper object of their devotion, perfectly encapsulates the translation of the playgirl archetype into an advertising philosophy for *Playgirl* and *Viva*, where devotion to men always trumps the goal of sexual agency for women.

In addition to these “reminders,” advertising in *Playgirl* and *Viva* suggested that women were expected to mediate men’s cosmetic and sexual shortcoming with delicacy and sensitivity. *Playgirl* frequently ran advertisements for Detane, a climax control for men, as well desensitizing sprays for the same purpose. In addition, *Playgirl* and *Viva* ran advertisements for a vitamin for men’s hair loss called Head Start (figure 4.14). The advertisement pictures a beautiful female model running her manicured nails through the thinning hair of a much older man. “Don’t tell him Head Start is a baldness preventative”

675 Ibid.
the ad copy recommends, “Just tell him it’s the best hair conditioner money can buy. He’ll find it a lot easier to swallow.”677 Here it is suggested that women should find ways to carefully and gracefully, even manipulatively, work to address men’s physical shortcomings so as not to bruise their egos.

It is worth noting that since its beginnings in the 1950s, Playboy eschewed any advertising that would breed insecurity in its male readers. Playboy founder Hugh Hefner went without advertisers in early issues rather than take advertisements from “body builders,” which would hurt the image of his magazine by insinuating that the bodies of Playboy readers were not adequately attractive to women.678 Playboy “established strict standards for advertising respectability,” and advertisements in “bad taste” were out.679 Hefner also refused to take advertisements from hair restorers, opting to get by on the cover price of the magazine alone until he could rope in upscale menswear and other advertisers that enhanced, rather than damaged, the Playboy image.680 This situation allowed Playboy to be very selective with its advertisers, protecting its carefully groomed image and, most importantly, the egos of its male readers. A brand that aspired to be associated with elegance and affluence had no place for anything that detracted from that, promoted men’s anxiety, or deflated male egos. The Playboy enjoyed sex and materialism but unlike the playgirl, needed none of the self-improvement and cosmetic enhancements. In a rare instance where an advertisement in Playgirl and Viva suggested men might need cosmetic enhancements of their own, women were encouraged to broach the subject delicately. The advertisement for Head

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Start encouraged women to coddle and cajole the men in their lives into using the very products *Playboy* found to be in “bad taste” for its readers. The advertiser seemed to feel that the product was best sold to men indirectly, through the women in their lives, so magazines such as *Playgirl* had the responsibility for the beautification and sexual attractiveness of both genders.

“Her Mommy’s a Real Playgirl Type”

By spring of 1975, *Playgirl* was looking to clean up its image to attract better quality (and less sexually oriented) advertising, such as automobiles and quality consumer goods. In April 1975, the magazine ran a display advertisement in *The New York Times* picturing a demure young woman holding a bouquet of flowers to her face. The advertisement boldly proclaims that “1.6 million of our women readers are mommies.”681 The advertisement was intended to sell the *Playgirl* readers and consumers to potential advertisers. The copy reads “she’s the woman of the Seventies. Aware, bright, self-asserting, and more affluent than ever before. She already knows what she wants and how to get it.”682 The advertisement explains that the “Playgirl woman chooses mostly to be married, so if you’re out to sell to today’s young woman, you’d better look for her in Playgirl.”683 The advertisement cites some of *Playgirl*’s more reputable advertisers, including Colgate-Palmolive, Maybelline and, Revlon, in hopes of attracting others.684 “We’d like you to join them” the advertisement implores,

682 Ibid.
683 Ibid.
684 Ibid.
“after all, you’ve got a story to tell, and a product to sell, and we’ve got women who want to buy.” The ad worked to establish the typical Playgirl reader as an affluent, yet average, woman, a woman who might even have a husband and children. The copy and the image were designed to avoid any suggestion of sexual deviance. It does not focus on women desiring male nudity, and it does not mention nudity or male centerfolds. Instead the advertisement touts feature material “covering such topics as politics, fashion, sports, travel, culinary side-trips, health, the arts, personal beauty, books, movies, and music” and notable contributors such as Gore Vidal and Tennessee Williams. By 1975, it was becoming clear that the male nudity and celebration of sexuality that had brought Playgirl so much attention from the press was becoming a liability when the magazine needed to attract advertisers.

Nine months later, in January 1976, Playgirl’s executive vice president, Ira Ritter, announced that he was “doing something about the environment” in the magazine, and he promised to “ban ‘erotic’ advertising” from Playgirl. The New York Times called the decision a “fairly brave move” since “that kind of advertising was responsible for about 30 percent of last year’s $3 million ad revenue.” “The ban will include advertising for films, books, devices, and non-birth-control pills, but not condoms” Ritter told the Times. A few months later, The New York Times spoke to the wisdom of Ritter’s decision, writing that “one of the many problems that the people in this field face in attracting reputable national advertisers is the quality of advertising they currently

685 Ibid.
686 Ibid.
687 Ibid.
688 Ibid.
689 Ibid.
attract,” calling it “pornographic.” Ritter acknowledged a few weeks later, while publicizing a promotional media blitz to attract new subscribers, that potential advertisers “are paranoid about the male centerfold.” After Ritter’s erotic advertising ban, Playgirl was left with “over five pages of cigarettes advertising,” with the rest of the advertising pages devoted to “the looks-improvement type—bust developers, weight reduction, wrinkle removing.” He estimated that his decision would mean a “$1 million annual loss of revenue” for the magazine. Along with his ban on erotic advertising, Ritter also insisted that women dominate the cover of the magazine and nudity be curtailed throughout. Ritter’s decision reflected his strategy to create a more inviting atmosphere for traditional women’s magazine advertisers: perfume, cosmetics, and clothing, by de-emphasizing the sexual nature of the magazine and reminding both advertisers and readers that Playgirl was a magazine for women. In November 1979, when Playgirl was “troubled by reports that it had a high male readership” and in order to “convince advertisers that they will be reaching women,” Ira Ritter reported independent research that 84.4 percent of new orders for Playgirl were coming from women. “I believe this information, once and for all, dispels the myth about our readership,” Ritter said. It seemed that to Ritter the only stigma worse than being labeled a sex magazine was being labeled a sex magazine read by homosexual men. Both distinctions were perceived to have a negative impact on attracting advertisers. By the time Ritter was

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692 Ibid.
693 Ibid.
696 Ibid.
reporting the results of his readership research, however, sex magazines for women had already been working to keep the focus on heterosexual coupling, editorially (as the previous chapter argues) and in the advertising pages.

“Jewelry for the Practicing Heterosexual”

Playgirl and other sex magazines for women went to great lengths to keep the focus on heterosexuality, not only on the covers of their publications but also in the advertising pages as well. One shining example of this is an advertisement appearing in Viva throughout 1973–1974 (figure 4.15). The full-page advertisement, selling “Jewelry for the Practicing Heterosexual,” shows a young, white, heterosexual couple, who are nude, embracing and kissing. Around their necks are matching gold chains with skeleton-key shaped pendants, the top of which is in the shape of the sign for the female gender. The chains and pendants, marketed directly from Viva Products, are “for you and your man.” The jewelry could be a private expression of devotion between a couple, or (if worn outside the clothing) a very public declaration of heterosexual identity and sexual interest. The skeleton key symbol itself was taken from Viva’s sister publication Penthouse, a symbol the Penthouse magazine and brand still uses today. The key symbol denotes exclusivity and membership while at the same time representing heterosexuality. Though the female symbol dominates the top of the key, a small version of the male symbol is embedded in the bit of the key, at the bottom of the pendant. It is important to note that the male symbol is located at the bit, the point of the

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698 Ibid.
key that actually makes it work, symbolically unlocking the door of sexuality for women, and more literally analogous to the physical act of heterosexual sex.

The *Viva* pendants were only one of many products that sought to reify and commodify heterosexuality in sex magazines for women. An advertisement in rival *Foxylady* offered a pendant for each sign of the zodiac, each depicting a heterosexual couple in a different sexual position (figure 4.16). The pendants, “designed by a famous voyeur, with a penchant for astrology,” were reportedly the result of a “detailed study of the heavenly bodies in close conjunction.”699 This offering, an offshoot of the resurgent interest in astrology in the 1970s, was yet another opportunity to commercialize heterosexual coupling. “Are you as sexy as your sign?” the copy inquires.700 Two months later, *Foxylady* carried an advertisement for “Symbolic Loves Charms” depicting a topless heterosexual couple (figure 4.17). Between the woman’s bare breasts a silver charm hangs from a silver necklace, a cast of the male genitalia, and on the man’s chest a similar cast of a pair of female breasts hangs from a similar silver chain. Much like the zodiac pendant, these pieces left little doubt about the wearer’s sexual orientation or interest in sex. In *Playgirl*, readers could choose a similar keychain or necklace in the shape of the male sexual anatomy.701 Finally, an advertisement in the November 1975 issue of *Foxylady* announces a “remarkable new work of art,” the “A Touch of Love” pendant (figure 4.18). The pendant was advertised as “a gift of beauty, enhanced by the luster of your very private, personal expressions of love.”702 The full-page advertisement shows a fully clothed couple on the beach holding hands, while the product depicts a

700 Ibid.
nude couple, the man’s head in the woman’s lap. The pendant allowed couples to “immortalize your sentiments in finest sterling silver” and were offered in a “his and hers” package including two matching pendants. These pieces of jewelry go beyond being mere oddities: they are historically specific pieces of heterosexual iconography. They are indicative of the ways in which heterosexuality is deployed as a normative discourse in popular culture.

In examining the history of the concept of heterosexuality, feminist sociologist Chrys Ingraham has observed that heterosexuality is a socially and culturally constructed sexual identity.703 As Ingraham argues, “as we socially and culturally create sexual behavior identities as organizing categories, we elevate relations of the body above all other terms for human interaction—mind, heart, soul, values and so on. Sexuality or sexual behavior becomes the dominant category enabling and disabling a commodity culture that proclaims the primacy of sexuality.”704 She concludes, “sexuality and sex issues serve as the currency through which a host of exchange relations and social priorities are established.”705 Through all the talk of sexual liberation within the culture of the 1970s, the primacy of heterosexuality and its necessity in organizing an ideal reader–consumer identity for sex magazines for women becomes apparent when looking at these advertised pieces of jewelry. As odd and amusing as the pieces may appear today, they firmly convey the ideological messages that organize heterosexuality and maintain gender relations within it. These offerings also provide evidence that the events of the sexual revolution had raised awareness and visibility of possible alternatives to

705 Ibid, 3.
heterosexuality (bisexuality and homosexuality) to such a degree that advertising one’s heterosexuality seemed necessary. Without the clear presence of other choices, the impetus to insist on one’s “practicing heterosexuality” would not seem to be necessary. No matter what changes the social and cultural shifts of the decade affected on marriages and families, it is apparent that even in sex magazines the primacy and stability of institutionalized heterosexuality was still something to be celebrated, and even bought and sold. Then, as now, heterosexuality as an institution served important societal interests as well as commercial ones. For sex magazines for women heterosexuality was a key component of their image and brand.

Branded

Each of the sex magazines for women discussed in this chapter offered branded merchandise, clothing and other merchandise that had the name and logo of the magazine on it. Most often the offering was a T-shirt, but Playgirl was adept at branding a multitude of items, from calendars, playing cards, cigarette lighters, key rings, tote bags, and beach towels to pajamas, panties, and bed linens. Viva marketed lighters and a line of lingerie. The items not only provided free publicity to Playgirl and Viva but were private (and sometimes public) expressions of identity for the women who bought and used them. The Playgirl panties and pajamas may only be seen by a lover, but the Playgirl tennis equipment and dresses were meant for public display. The branded items, like Playgirl and Viva magazines, were intended to express sexual freedom. The branded items marketed by Playgirl and Viva were similar to the types of promotions Playboy
used on college campuses in the 1950s, when they took subscriptions and sold ceramic
cufflinks with the bunny logo to college men who wore them to “flaunt their loyalty to
the magazine and to thumb their noses at society.”706  Like *Playboy* in the 1950s and
1960s, *Playgirl* and *Viva* were selling rebellion and sexual freedom in the 1970s, only to
women.  One branded item that stands out as a prime example is the red liberty *Playgirl*
t-shirt advertised throughout 1977 (figure 4.19).  The item is significant for several
reasons, the first being that a model appears on the cover of the August 1977 issue
wearing one.  Inside the August issue is a full-page advertisement selling the T-shirts
titled “Free to be . . . a Playgirl!”707  The copy reads, “Lady Liberty of old has been
redesigned for us but still stands for equality, freedom and opportunity.  Today’s Playgirl
is prepared to fight for these time-honored values for all women everywhere.  Stand up
and be noticed when you wear our newest T.”708  By ordering a T-shirt women could
“make [her] own declaration of independence.”709

Another full-page advertisement for a variety of *Playgirl*-branded products reads,
“you are a very special lady…and you know it!”710  (figure 4.20) The items in this
advertisement were intended to be seen and to send a message.  The advertisement,
selling everything from jumpsuits and panties to T-shirts and cigarette lighters, reminds
readers that “wherever you go, whatever you do, PLAYGIRL helps you look good, feel
good and say it up front and sexy!”711  Some five years after its inclusion in the Woman’s
Universe Expo, the *Playgirl* brand had come full circle from one simply selling

708 Ibid.
709 Ibid.
711 Ibid.
magazines to one branding a variety of merchandise with its message of sexual liberation. Many of Playgirl’s branded offerings were wedded to the beauty myth, with its emphasis on weight loss and exercise, however.

Playgirl’s emphasis on weight loss is on full display in its efforts from 1978–1979 to market its own weight loss plan, the Playgirl Diet, consisting of protein powder and vitamin and mineral supplements (figure 4.21). “What have you got to lose?” the advertisement asks.712 “Even if you are only four pounds overweight you owe it to yourself” the advertising copy argues.713 “Do yourself and someone you love—a favor” the copy implores.714 The Playgirl Diet promises “a totally new you!”715 In contrast to the variety of other Playgirl products that merely adorned the body, the diet set out to transform the body, and Playgirl did not stop with a diet plan. To further underscore the importance of weight loss, in 1981 Playgirl launched a sister publication dedicated to weight loss and fitness called Slimmer (figure 4.22). A full-page advertisement for the new magazine appeared in the June 1981 issues of Playgirl. The cover of Slimmer was dominated by photos of young, slender actresses such as Victoria Principal from the popular television show Dallas and Katherine Bach from The Dukes of Hazzard.716 Slimmer promised “fun-to-follow exercises” and a “fast food calorie guide”717 Slimmer provided both diet and fashion advice, promising to “improve what goes into your body

712 Playgirl Diet ad, Playgirl May 1978: 23.
713 Ibid.
714 Ibid.
715 Ibid.
716 Slimmer ad, Playgirl June 1981.
717 Ibid.
and what goes on your body.”⁷¹⁸ “Subscribe to Slimmer,” the ad argues “you have nothing to lose (except those extra pounds!).”⁷¹⁹

*Slimmer* was not the only *Playgirl* brand extension to tap into the health and fitness trend of the early 1980s. In 1985, with one of its forays into video media, *Playgirl* tapped into the aerobic exercise trend by producing its own video workout, *Hunkercise* (figure 4.23). The *Hunkercise* video, advertised heavily in *Playgirl*, fused the signature *Playgirl* feature, the male centerfold, with the goal of female fitness. “You’ve seen them in the pages of *Playgirl*,—now work out with them” the advertisement explains.⁷²⁰ The video used former *Playgirl* centerfolds “the world’s most perfect men” as fitness instructors to guide women through a program for “slimming, trimming, health and beauty.”⁷²¹ The video promised that “Steve Rally, *Playgirl*’s 1985 Man of the Year, and his fellow Super-Hunks will put you through your paces.”⁷²² “Spend an hour with the hunks,” the advertisement for the video suggests and, “your body will never be the same!” With *Hunkercise*, women work to become ideal specimens for attracting men’s attention while the “hunk” instructors are there to guide them and remind them of their goal. The men were already “perfect,” but the women were works-in-progress. The video is a reminder of how, by 1985, *Playgirl* had shifted with the culture around it from fashion spreads in the early 1970s where nude men were women’s birthright, to *Hunkercise* 1985, where “hunks” were still the main attraction but also guides for transforming the female body into an image of physical perfection. Men’s attention now had to be earned not just by careful attention to beauty and fashion but also by hard

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⁷¹⁸ Ibid.
⁷¹⁹ Ibid.
⁷²¹ Ibid.
⁷²² Ibid.
physical workouts on the part of the playgirl. By the mid-1980s, *Playgirl* had become more of a clearinghouse for self-help rather than a bastion of sexual liberation.

The significance of *Playgirl’s* weight loss and exercise products can be examined in terms of feminist scholarship. In her book *Unbearable Weight*, feminist scholar Susan Bordo argues that these messages of reduction and fetishization of thinness can be taken “as a metaphor for the correct management of desire.” Images of “unwanted bulges and erupting stomachs” are metaphors “for anxiety about internal processes out of control—uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse.” Bordo looks at the pursuit of beauty as a “normalizing” discipline, where the “normalizing power of cultural images” promotes female subordination. Advertising messages that encourage reshaping the body, Bordo argues, “gradually changing our conception and experience of our bodies, a discourse that encourages us to ‘imagine the possibilities’ and close our eyes to the limits and consequences.” “In the pursuit of slenderness and the denial of the appetite,” Bordo writes, “the traditional construction of femininity intersects with the new requirement for women to embody ‘masculine’ values of the public arena.” The image of the playgirl and the messages in these magazines’ advertising pages represent this intersection, this double bind, perfectly. The playgirl archetype is intended to mimic a stereotypically male approach to pursuing sex while still maintaining all of the trappings of femininity (e.g., youthfulness and thinness). In *Playgirl*, women were encouraged to indulge their appetites for sex and male centerfolds while at the same time reducing their own bodies to fit a narrow beauty standard.

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724 Ibid, 189.
725 Ibid, 275.
726 Ibid, 39.
As previous chapters have made clear, what defined one as a playgirl in the editorial pages was being sexually *active* with men, while the many advertising examples in this chapter depicted that what confirmed femininity was being sexually *attractive* to men. In 1970s U.S. culture, to fail at heterosexual coupling was to fail at being female. The fashion pages of *Playgirl* and *Viva* offered elements of the playgirl ethos, featuring women as active sexual agents and men as sex objects, but the pull of the market tempered any real liberation with the trappings of femininity and the beauty myth. Attempts to integrate nude men into the fashion and advertising pages did nothing to dampen the message that women had to engage in beauty work and body work to earn men’s attention. Seen as a whole, the sheer intrusiveness of the technologies aimed at women’s bodies and the advertising copy that took direct aim at the female sexual anatomy is overwhelming. It becomes difficult to see women’s bodies as sources for their own pleasure when the messages from the advertising pages assert that their bodies are instead sites of constant body work and beauty interventions.

Granted, women have been and currently are bombarded with appeals from other media to weight lose and exercise, what this chapter makes clear is the fact that sex magazines for women were laced with these messages from their very beginnings and that they sexualized the pursuit of beauty and fitness. In a place where women were encouraged to lose themselves and indulge their fantasies, commercial culture was busy reiterating damaging ideologies and embedding the most retrograde anxieties. Due to the proximity of the weight loss and beauty advertising to the editorial content, sexual fantasies are easily conflated with goals of exercise and weight loss. In sex magazines for women, the hunger for sex could be satisfied only by the self-denial that comes from
obsessive diet and exercise and the quixotic pursuits of bust enhancements and cellulite reduction. In the end, these ads do not celebrate women’s sexual agency and enjoyment of men’s bodies but rather are more concerned with the mastery and control of the female body and all of its perceived flaws. Men’s bodies are revered, while women’s bodies are always the subject of a multitude of body projects. The advertisements were not concerned with rewriting the rules for heterossexual coupling, but rather repacking heterosexuality to sell a variety of products. In many ways *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women represented a new way of selling, concerned with building a brand rather than emboldening and liberating its female readers.

Commenting on the troublesome merger of movement feminism with the commercial demands of publishing, Amy Erdman Farrell observes that the history of *Ms.* magazine “points to the incompatibility of commercialism and social movements.”727 She writes, “while advertisers may have found parts of the feminist dream conducive to marketing, however, they needed to ignore or whittle away other parts less amenable to their purposes.” Advertisers in *Playgirl* and its competitors operated in a similar fashion with regard to women’s sexual liberation. Women’s sexual freedom was defined and commodified based on the demands of consumer culture. The problem occurs when a “desire industry” emerges that plays on the already culturally embedded anxieties women have about their bodies and standards of beauty. The needs of the marketplace trumped women’s needs for a magazine to celebrate and chronicle their sexual freedom. While *Playgirl* and its competitors facilitated the worship of male bodies, they encouraged female readers to develop antagonistic relationships with their own. As has been argued in this chapter, the advertising content of sex magazines for women offered sexual

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liberation narratives that were more in tune with the needs and impulses of the consumer marketplace than those of women. Feminism was treated as a theme or market segment rather than understood as a systematic critique of male-dominated culture and the playgirl was treated more as a sexual ornament than a sexual agent.

After examining the many limitations placed on sexual discourse in commercial magazines, the next chapter examines a noncommercial alternative to sex magazines for women, the woman-authored underground comic. These publications amount to nothing less than a sexual counter-public when compared to sex magazines for women. These publications began in 1972, the same year the first nude male centerfold appeared in Cosmopolitan, yet their version of sex from a woman’s point-of-view was strikingly different from the centerfold sexuality proposed by Playgirl and its competition. By defying commercial representations of women’s “liberated” sexuality such as those put forth in Playgirl and Viva, several woman-authored underground comics broke new ground in addressing the theme of women’s sexuality. These publications, comics with provocative titles like Tits and Clits and Wet Satin, intentionally pushed the barriers of conventional good taste. They were initially intended to answer sexist male-authored underground comics but went much further. As the next chapter argues, these underground publications reflect many of the concerns of the women’s health movement in the 1970s and share many similarities with one of the better known results of that movement, the book Our Bodies, Ourselves (1973). Taking no advertising, these comics openly mocked the beauty standards perpetuated by commercial culture. The women who created these comics used narrative and humor to promote women’s acceptance of their bodies and their sexuality, as well as elements stigmatized by commercial culture as
utterly unsexy, such as menstruation and aging. In addition, these comics actively questioned the attractiveness and adequacy of men’s bodies as sex objects. The women artists who collaborated to create these comics had full control over story and visual elements as well as distribution, in contrast to the female editors of Playgirl and Viva, who operated under male publishers and the constraints of a competitive commercial publishing industry. These comics offer a glimpse of what sexual discourse was possible when women’s creativity operated unconstrained by the conventions of commercial publishing, and women were able to negotiate feminism and its implications for women’s sexuality for themselves without regard to the concerns of the consumer marketplace.
Chapter Five


The previous four chapters have examined the evolution of a particular narrative of heterosexual women’s sexuality. This narrative of sexual liberation was conceived to sell a particular magazine feature, the nude male centerfold, and a particular type of magazine, sex magazines for women, to an often skeptical public. The time in which this particular liberation narrative developed practically insisted that the women’s movement be taken into account within it. As the second and third chapters of this project make clear, the conception of feminism embraced by Playgirl and its competitors was never static. Instead, definitions of feminism and decisions to embrace any feminist issue were conducted strategically, based on the needs of the publication and the publications’ reading of the popularity and influence of the women’s movement at any given moment. The very public and commercial nature of the magazine industry and the broad female audience these publications sought placed additional limitations on their representations of women’s sexuality and their embrace of feminism. The previous chapter explored some of the limitations placed on sex magazines for women by advertisers whose messages often alienated women from their bodies and fueled feelings of sexual anxiety instead of providing opportunities for sexual liberation. These advertising messages worked to dampen the already limited and compromised version of female sexuality and feminism these magazines preached in their editorial pages.

This chapter takes a broader view of the marketplace of ideas around women’s sexuality in the 1970s. It examines representations of women’s sexuality in the underground press, particularly woman-authored underground comics, and the impact of
these representations on sexual culture in the United States. These underground comics not only offer alternative ways of conceiving women’s sexuality but also expose a wealth of female creativity and feminist humor that has not been appreciated for its contributions to sexual thought and expression in the 1970s. The ways in which these publications conceive the female body and its experience of sexual pleasure, the ways in which these publications mock commercial culture and its power over women’s bodies, and the ways the authors are able to connect issues of sexuality to the burgeoning women’s health movement make them ideal objects of study for those seeking to understand how women’s sexuality was brought into public discourse during this period.

As this chapter argues, woman-authored underground comics stand as examples of approaches to sexual imagery and women’s sexuality that emerged as a result of feminist consciousness. These publications did not use feminism as did sex magazines for women; they were a form of feminism in practice. The authors of these publications, with titles such as Tits and Clits and Wet Satin, brought with them an awareness of the interconnectedness of women’s health to issues of women’s sexuality. The authors of these underground comics negotiated their own brand of feminism based on their belief in the power of humor and creativity to tackle some of the women’s movement’s greatest challenges. Their inspiration came from the experiences and stories of real women whose lived experiences they valued. Women-authored underground comics serve as excellent examples of feminist activism, feminist humor, and feminist creativity. Most importantly, however, they are indicative of what is possible when women’s bodies are oriented as the center of women’s sexual universe and the sexual experience and
knowledge of other women is valued over narratives that cast individual women as sexual agents, as was the case with sex magazines for women.

The underground press exploded in 1965 when new offset printing technology made newspaper and comic production affordable to the masses.\textsuperscript{728} That year, underground newspapers such as the \textit{Los Angeles Free Press}, the \textit{Berkeley Barb}, and the \textit{East Village Other} began publication with pages full of antiestablishment content. Two years later, underground comic books such as \textit{Zap Comix} gained huge popularity by challenging the conventions of traditional comic books. The percentage of these publications that was produced by and for women was very small, but the examples that exist are valuable in offering an oppositional reading of women’s sexual culture in the 1970s. As in other alternative publications, material produced by women was created to be an oppositional cultural force with a unique voice and aesthetic. When woman-authored underground comics dealing with sexuality began to emerge in the early 1970s, they faced resistance from within underground publishing, from police due to their sexual content, and from some feminists who were offended by the explicit sexual material being produced by other women. Nevertheless, these unique publications sought to redefine female sexuality in direct opposition to the approach taken by sex magazines for women such as \textit{Playgirl} and \textit{Viva}.

As the work of historian Mari Trine illustrates, sexuality was a key concern within leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s as well as and the many underground publications associated with these movements. Both leftist freedom movements and the women’s liberation movement were concerned with sex as a vehicle for liberation and

cultural resistance. Trine considers the underground press as part of a discursive community, “an expression of a youth culture that was politicized.”\textsuperscript{729} Her work clearly demonstrates that “sexual liberation became most typically invoked in Movement culture through depictions of female nudity.”\textsuperscript{730} The debates these depictions evoked within underground and movement circles is quite telling when considering the context and reasoning behind the birth of woman-authored underground comics. Some underground newspapers acknowledged that sexism existed within their pages. The \textit{Chicago Seed} conducted an “internal critique” of its content and issued an apology for carrying a popular underground cartoon that was “male-dominated.”\textsuperscript{731} The \textit{Chicago Seed}, however, was the exception to the rule. Most underground publications were not so introspective in regard to instances of sexism. As Trine observes, underground newspapers and comics were altogether too willing to depict women as “beautiful, young, and consistently willing to have sex with men of every age and description.”\textsuperscript{732} Ironically, the underground press consistently criticized the mainstream media’s “commercialization of sexuality and concomitant commodification of human beings” even as they consistently made sex objects out of women in every issue of their publications.\textsuperscript{733} This treatment outraged many radical women, and objections escalated and became more decidedly feminist between 1968 and 1970.\textsuperscript{734} As with most other media, a noticeable disparity between the depiction of nude females and nude males existed in underground publications. Instances of male nudity were rare, and when they

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\textsuperscript{730} Ibid, 16.
\textsuperscript{731} Ibid, 90.
\textsuperscript{732} Ibid, 92.
\textsuperscript{733} Ibid, 99.
\textsuperscript{734} Ibid, 101.
\end{flushleft}
did appear the male genitals were almost always obscured by the creative framing of photos, foliage, carefully placed graphics, or women’s hair and bodies.\footnote{Ibid, 152.} Trine reports that when male genitals were on display in an issue of an underground publication the issue was more likely to be subject to censure.\footnote{Ibid, 122, 155.} In addition, some underground readers believed that erections were “obscene, as well as ugly, and argued that they should not be printed.”\footnote{Ibid, 153.} In fact, male readers actually wrote and complained about seeing male nudity.\footnote{Ibid.} Female bodies, underground publishers concluded, were “steady revenue-producing devices and usually didn’t cause any trouble with legal officials.”\footnote{Ibid, 155.} As feminist concepts were increasingly used to challenge depicts of nudity in underground publications, however, women inevitably pointed to the paucity of male nudes.\footnote{Ibid, 147.} As Trine writes, “this blatant disparity in papers that claimed to be celebrating sexual liberation for everyone became the subjects of the earliest feminist criticisms of the underground press because it was a clear example of inequity that was almost impossible to defend.”\footnote{Ibid.} Playgirl and other sex magazines offered a solution to this inequity for mainstream audiences, but women involved in the alternative press would offer a much different solution.

\textit{Tits and Clits} and \textit{Wet Satin} were sex magazines in their own right but with an entirely different format and openly oppositional politics from \textit{Playgirl} and other glossy commercial publications. Woman-authored underground such as \textit{Tits and Clits} and \textit{Wet Satin} mocked the conventions of sex magazines for women, including their glossy,
romantic depictions of sex and worshipful treatment of the male body. *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin* encouraged women to be aggressive, assertive, and demanding, rather than accommodating and seductive. They actively questioned men’s behavior and the attractiveness and adequacy of what men’s bodies had to offer sexually. They encouraged women to embrace their own bodies as a primary location for pleasure, rather than focus on men as sex objects. This material was not a form of soft-focus sexuality; it was raw, crude, and often abject in nature. The sarcasm laced with anger and frustration, exhibited in these publications offers a stark contrast to the carefree playgirl image offered elsewhere in more mainstream sex magazines for women. With their grassroots, homegrown quality and fiercely independent woman-only authorship, *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin* exhibited a level of complexity and nuance on the theme of women’s sexuality that *Playgirl* and *Viva* never came close replicating. These publications merge feminist sexual politics into original narratives, minus any advertising, to create unique and personal snapshots of women’s sexuality in the 1970s. These were versions of the women’s sex magazine that were truly authored by women rather than just edited by a female editor at the behest of a male publisher.

Despite their oppositional stance, one aspect these alternative publications had in common with *Playgirl* and *Viva* was the underlying theme of women in the 1970s as seekers of sexual information. The way this quest for knowledge played out, however, was quite different in woman-authored undergrounds. This chapter argues that woman-authored underground comics broke with the culture of sex magazines in a number of ways. The feminist heroines these underground comics imagined were reliant upon other women as sources of knowledge and support on matters of sexuality and the body. They
were not suspicious of other women or the women’s movement, nor were they dependent on consumerism as the playgirl archetype was. These publications embraced the corporality of the body and dealt explicitly with issues of sexuality, reproduction, menstruation, and aging. Unlike sex magazines for women, the content of woman-authored underground comics was not about decorating and accessorizing the female body as a means of gaining the attention of men but about embracing the female body as a source of knowledge and pleasure.

The Rise of Underground Comics

With the publication of *Zap Comix* in 1968, underground comics (often spelled with an x) started a print revolution of their own.\(^{742}\) Within five years more than three hundred titles appeared under the umbrella of underground comics, and the presses that printed them could not keep up with demand.\(^{743}\) The provocative and often highly personal comic artwork produced during the late 1960s and 1970s has now made its way into auction houses in New York and Europe.\(^{744}\) What began as a form of disposable underground culture meant to challenge the status quo at the time they were first published continues to challenge the imaginations of collectors and researchers with their countercultural insights into some of the most important debates of the 1960s and 1970s, including the sexual revolution.

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\(^{742}\) The “x” signifies the x-rated material underground comics often dealt with, including sex, drugs and occasionally violence. This project will use “comic” or “comics” unless quoting a source that uses the alternate spelling.


\(^{744}\) Ibid.
Underground comics began as a response to the Comics Code, which regulated the themes and content of mainstream comic books. The need for a code, or rating system, in the comic book industry came about after psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham wrote *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1953, a book connecting the violent and sexual content of comic books with juvenile delinquency. Senate hearings and public outcry led comic publishers to form the Comics Code Authority (CCA) as a self-censoring body. The CCA seal on the cover of mainstream comics assured parents that the content was child-friendly, and most distributors would not carry titles without a CCA seal.745 Underground comics offered an adult alternative to the sanitized and childish world of mainstream comics dominated by the likes of DC, Marvel, and Disney. Underground artists were inspired by the mainstream comics they had read in their youth but rebelled against the formulaic work and self-imposed censorship that defined the medium by the 1960s. As one underground comic artist, Jack Jackson, stated, “underground comix developed out of the Sixties counterculture movement as an alternative to the type of comic books being offered by the big companies like Marvel and DC. We tried to appeal to the hippie audience that could find nothing about its lifestyle in other media of the time.”746 As Dez Skinn writes in his history of underground publications, “through their instant accessibility by telling stories in pictures, comix became the perfect vehicle for a new way of thinking, a powerful tool not only to break the sex taboos, but also to present entire lifestyle manuals to the nascent peace and love generation.”747 Because they ignored the Comics Code, underground comics were able to deal with adult themes and controversial topics that could not be addressed in traditional

746 Jackson quoted in Skinn, 19.
747 Ibid, 10.
comics and were often grotesque and satirical in their treatment of taboo subjects. Underground comics could be more sexually graphic, both topically and visually, than sex magazines for either gender could. Underground comics not only had to buck the system with their content, which was filled with sex, violence and drug use, but also with their systems of distribution. Underground comic artists had to find alternative ways to finance, print, and distribute their work. Instead of a Comics Code seal, the covers of underground comics carried some of the same cryptic, titillating, and humorous warnings as sex magazines, such as “For Adults Only” or, occasionally, “For Adult Intellectuals Only.” In 1969, Robert Crumb’s *Jiz Comics* included its own logo mocking the Comics Code Authority with a seal representing the fictitious SPA or “Smut Peddlers of America.” In addition, many underground titles also included inside-cover warnings to dealers (“Dealers are instructed not to sell this book to minors”), while mail-order customers were often asked for an age statement indicating that the purchaser was over the age of eighteen. Because of their potentially offensive content, underground comics were often available only via person-to-person sale, mail order, or in “head shops,” stores that specialized in drug paraphernalia and other countercultural merchandise.

Underground comics, like many other countercultural publications, were largely male-dominated enterprises. In, *A History of Underground Comics*, one of the earliest histories of underground comics, first published in 1974, Mark James Estren, the author,

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749 Ibid, 119.
acknowledges that underground comics were “bastions of male chauvinism.” Trina Robbins, one of the few female underground comic artists, remembers that, “underground comics in the 1960s were an almost exclusively male field.” As revolutionary as the male underground cartoonists may have believed they were, they understood little about the goals and concerns of the women’s movement, and their content reflected this.

Robbins recalls male cartoonists reacting to the perceived threat of feminism by “drawing comix filled with graphic violence directed toward women. People—especially women people—who criticized this misogyny were not especially welcome in this alternative version of the old boy’s club and were not invited into the comix being produced.”

Lyn Chevli, another female comic artist, wrote that she and her business partner, Joyce Farmer, “loathed the macho depiction of sex” in underground comics, so they sought to provide the same raunch but with a different perspective. Chevli speculated that, “anyone nervy enough to read an underground comic in the first place, expects and demands to be shocked.” “Being shocked and entertained at the same time,” she wrote, “can be a highly politicizing process. It pulls the myths out of your brain and makes room for more dynamic and humanizing thought processes to take place. As most of us know, sex is a very political business. All we want to do is equalize that by telling our side.” Telling women’s side of the story in underground comics meant working with other women artists to change the sexual politics of their chosen medium, but the overarching raunchy style that defined the genre had to remain the same. Writing on her

751 Ibid, 127.
752 Trina Robbins, From Girls to Grrlz: A History of Women’s Comics from Teens to Zines (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999), 85.
753 Robbins, From Girls to Grrlz, 85.
755 Lyn Chevli letter to Dorwar bookstore, November 14, 1978, Kinsey Institute Library and Collections, Bloomington, Indiana, Lyn Chevli Collection (hereafter LCC), Box 1, Folder 30.
756 Ibid.
collaboration with Farmer on what would become *Tits and Clits*, Chevli writes, “our canniest instincts led us to the conclusion that whatever we did, it had to be funnier, filthier and all around better than what the good ’ole boys were doing or it would bomb.”

Comic strips and characters played important roles in bringing feminist ideas to the masses. Comic artist Trina Robbins was part of a women’s collective that decided to produce its own comic called *It Ain’t Me Babe* (1970). The title was taken from a San Francisco feminist newspaper, the very first publication of its kind in the country. In the pages of this comic, classic female cartoon characters from Wonder Woman and Olive Oyl, to Betty and Veronica, had their consciousnesses raised and decided to stand up against male oppression. Two years later, in 1972, when *Ms.* magazine launched its first stand-alone issue, it featured Wonder Woman on the cover. So scarce were women cartoonists in the early 1970s that “Mary Selfworth,” a comic strip appearing in early issues of *Ms.* magazine and credited to a female artist named Vincenza, was actually drawn by the male Marvel cartoonist Vince Coletta. By the early 1970s, cartoons and comics had already become an established way of making feminist ideas palpable to the public, but while *It Ain’t Me Babe* and *Ms.* used well-known female comic characters to deal with the theme of sexism, it took a few more years for women to develop vehicles exclusively for tackling the issue of female sexuality in underground comics. When they did so, they created their own unique female characters that were composites of women the authors encountered in real life.

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757 Lyn Chevli, untitled, undated manuscript, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
Sex Comics for Women

Comic book writer, publisher, and self-described “smut queen” Chevli, and her business partner, Farmer, began publishing the underground comic *Tits and Clits* in 1972. Under the banner of Nanny Goat Productions, they wrote and published what is purported to be the first underground comic series created completely by women and for women. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s they published the sexually graphic comic series *Tits and Clits*, among other titles. Coming out of the underground comic scene and tapping into the irreverent tradition of underground and free-press publications in the 1970s, Chevli and Farmer pioneered a humorous and often raunchy approach to female sexuality that challenged standard narrative approaches to women’s involvement in, and responses to, the sexual revolution. Rather than simply reversing sexism or replacing men with women as sex objects as *Playgirl* and *Viva* often did, *Tits and Clits* dealt with feminine fantasy in a way that had not appeared in graphic story form. Harassed by the police for producing obscenity and chided by hard-line feminists for being “counter-revolutionary,” Chevli and Farmer boldly navigated the underground comic business and the world of sexually explicit print, both almost universally dominated by men. They tapped into one of the most culturally central topics of their time: women’s sexuality. Women’s sexuality as a theme had been mistreated and exploited not only by the mainstream media but also by male underground cartoonists who frequently drew, as one male artist recalls, “gleeful renditions of rape and mutilation.”

While both historical and critical attention have been paid to sexual content in the work of male underground cartoonists such as R. Crumb, the influence of sex comics for

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women in the sexual discourse of the 1970s has been largely ignored. In the past ten years, however, female comic artists have been recognized for their contributions to the production of underground titles that took on sexuality as their primary theme. Most recently, a collection authored by comic historians Tim Pilcher and Gene Kannenberg Jr., which focused specifically on the history of erotic comics, has contributed to a greater popular understanding of women’s contribution to erotic comic art.761 According to Pilcher and Kannenberg, female underground artists responded to the extreme violence and misogyny in male-authored titles by “banding together under the second-wave feminist ideology” and engaging in a “comic book backlash.”762 Using women’s lived sexual experience as inspiration, comics such as Tits and Clits and Wet Satin subverted the idealized and romanticized images of female sexuality found in sex magazines for women that appeared in the 1970s. After finding other attempts to address women’s sexual experience, particularly sex magazines such as Playgirl and Viva, comic artists Chevli, Farmer and Trina Robbins decided to create their own titles.

Rather than taking a cue from existing sex magazines for women, which revered men as sexual objects worthy of worship, sex comics for women often ridiculed men for their sexual ignorance and for failing to live up to women’s expectations and desires. Sex comics for women also expanded the narratives of women’s sex lives beyond narratives of romance, seduction, and copulation, to include threats of sexual violence, harassment, contraception, and menstruation. As Pilcher and Kannenberg observe, “sex was an important component of these women’s comix, but it was a very different type of sex

762 Ibid, 162.
than portrayed by their male counterparts. The stories were about female empowerment, not relying on men.”

Sex comics such as *Tits and Clits* and later, *Wet Satin*, also freed themselves from the codes of photographic realism and the marketing concerns that bound mainstream sex magazines for women. As a genre of graphic art, their chosen medium was inexpensive to produce and distribute and thus allowed for greater latitude of sexual expression, but in assuming a female interpretation of a male-dominated genre for women they faced many of the same challenges as *Playgirl* and *Viva*.

**Creation and Reception of *Tits and Clits***

*Tits and Clits* confronted male oriented sex comics head-on by using imitations of their visual style to challenge their sexual politics. An image on the inside cover of *Tits and Clits* #3 (1977) illustrates this imitation perfectly (figure 5.1). The image is of a naked man with an electrical cord attached to his backside. The cord is plugged into an electrical outlet and the man has an erection with what appears to be electrical sparks emanating from the tip of his penis. This image mimics the now-iconic cover image from the first issue of *Zap Comix* (1967), a milestone in underground comics (figure 5.2). On that cover, a naked male character is similarly plugged into an electrical outlet; however, he is curled up in a fetal position and his genitals are obscured as the electrical charge surges through is body. The man’s speech balloon exclaims that *Zap* is “the comic that plugs you in.” The images connote different senses of being “turned on.” The caption on the *Tits and Clits* version asks, “Have you ever sought love but come to a stale mate?” The “Master Charge” offers “all the benefits of a warm body combined with the best features of a vibrator.” The parodic take on the *Zap* cover taps into male insecurities

763 Ibid.
about sexual performance and creatively objectifies the male body by literally turning the man into a human dildo or vibrator. It also implies that the male body, as is, is an inadequate sex object and requires technological intervention.

It was precisely Chevli’s and Farmer’s ability to break the traditional boundaries of women cartoonists, who had been relegated to mainstream romance comics in past decades, which caught the attention of readers. The cover image of *Tits and Clits* #1 illustrates an invasion of male territory, the men’s room, with a woman barging in to borrow toilet paper and a man being startled mid stream at a urinal (figure 5.3). Chevli wrote that the cover image “dealt with the bathroom; the place that women clean up, and men read comics in.”764 A woman storming into this space is the perfect image to encapsulate what *Tits and Clits* represented to Chevli and Farmer: a hostile takeover. Chevli recalls that “the decision to be vulgar rather than high class rose out of sheer ignorance. Neither of us was much of a comics fan, but at the time we started, I owned a bookstore, sold undergrounds, and was impressed by their honesty.”765 Chevli found the lack of women’s voices in underground comics disconcerting, however: “they gaily ripped the culture to shreds, but I found the testosterone level in them so offensively high that I got together with my partner, Joyce, and we decided to create a feminist version of an underground comic.”766 Sex was chosen as the focus for Chevli and Farmer’s comic, and the pair was “determined to produce a radical, gutsy book so we settled on the theme of female sexuality as our subject matter. Figuring that was one area which was guaranteed to shake people up.”767

764 Lyn Chevli, untitled, undated manuscript, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
766 Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Feminist Comix-Humor,” undated, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
767 Ibid.
Chevli and Farmer knew that the majority of the readers of underground comics were male, and in order to survive their raunchy title would have to entice male readers along with their target audience, women. Chevli writes, “what we decided to aim for was a title and cover which would appear to be traditional underground tease, but would not compromise our feminist morality. In other words, we wanted to fool the boys into thinking they were buying some really hot stuff, and then sneak up on them with our content, mingled with laughs.”

In this way, Chevli and Farmer worked to insert a feminist message into a traditionally male institution and found sex to be the most effective way in. In this way, *Tits and Clits* again contrasts with *Playgirl* and *Viva*, which only used feminism rhetorically as a way to sell sex magazines to women, not as the political and philosophical underpinning for their publications. The heroines of *Tits and Clits*, recurring characters with names such as Mary Multipary and Fonda Peters, were represented as feminists and provided with a supportive community of sisters (both biological and chosen). In short, Chevli’s and Farmer’s heroines displayed as much passion for their feminist community as they did for men and sex.

The first issue of *Tits and Clits* caused a stir even in the already sex-saturated world of the alternative press. A review in *The California Ball*, a sex tabloid used to reviewing sexual material, is worth quoting in its entirety:

This is by far one of the most fucking insane comic books I’ve ever read. Written by two wiggled out chicks in Laguna Beach, it is sexual, funny, sharp, bitter, disgusting and sick. If you think you are cool, if you think there is nothing around that can still shock you, try reading this little epic. It blew my mind (what little there is left of it) and just turned my fucking head upside-down. This comic is

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768 Lyn Chevli, untitled, undated manuscript, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
perverse in only a way that a woman can create perversions. Sheeeit, really wiggy.

Subject matter in this book includes such things as cunt dribble, Kotex chewing dogs, knee fucking, the Blueberry Yogurt Douche and Cosmic Orgasms. What more can I tell you? What more would you want to know? The Porn-O-Graph fell off my desk when I gave it this book. Make up your own mind for a change. Buy the damn book and freak out. Remember, nobody can make a dirty book like a woman can make a dirty book.769

*Tits and Clits* was distinct, perhaps, because Chevli and Farmer found their inspiration for their comic heroines in everyday life, and they were attempting to cater to both a male and female readership, as opposed to sex magazines for women that aimed at an entirely female readership. By one account, *Tits and Clits* was consumed by “feminists, curious bystanders, and the furtively horny alike.”770 Chevli’s and Farmer’s aim to convey their sexual politics to both men and women readers further sets *Tits and Clits* apart from commercial sex magazines for women, which were working hard to appeal to women only as a new market for the sex magazine genre.

The first issue of *Tits and Clits* was infused with what one comics historian calls a “mordant sense of self-mockery.”771 An article in the *Berkeley Barb* in August 1973 chronicles the first issue of *Tits and Clits*. It notes that the characters Chevli and Farmer created were composites of the variety of women the pair met while working as

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769 *The California Ball*, issue #4, January 25, 1974, LCC, Box 5, Folder 90.
771 Ibid.
counselors in a local free clinic. In this way, Chevli and Farmer were privy to the lived experience of numerous women’s sex lives, including women’s satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the sexual revolution. The article, however, mentions that feminists were critical of *Tits and Clits* because it did not present women in a heroic way but instead made them look stupid. To be certain, the characters in *Tits and Clits* have flaws. They often find themselves in compromising positions, and they sometimes make poor choices. Chevli and Farmer, though, believed that their characters’ flaws made them human. As the *Berkeley Barb* reported of Chevli and Farmer, “they were not interested in the type of polemic which would advocate some ideal of womanhood, nor were they interested in the theory of that radical wing of feminism which defined all men collectively as the enemy. There are no dehumanized steely-eyed superheroines or super-heros in *Tits and Clits*. So, despite no attempts at creating “realistic” imagery in the pages of *Tits and Clits*, the characterization was realistic and resulted at least in part from Chevli’s and Farmer’s involvement with the women’s health movement.

The Women’s Health Movement and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*

Recent scholarship has added to our understanding of the scope, methods, and impact of the women’s health movement, both work describing the movement as a whole and work done on specific artifacts such as the emblematic and widely read *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973). Historian Ruth Rosen writes that although the women’s movement in

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773 Ibid.
774 Ibid.
the United States began by emphasizing women’s “sameness” with men, the women’s health movement “refocused attention on those female experiences that made women unique.”775 What made women’s experience unique was the treatment they often received from male physicians. Through the movement, which traces its beginnings to the late 1960s, women concluded that they were often infantilized and left out of decisions made about their own bodies.776 As journalist Gail Collins writes, “for generations, women had been American doctors’ best clients and abused guinea pigs.”777 Rosen considers the women’s health movement to be “one of the most important and successful accomplishments of second-wave feminism,” and through the movement women came to have a “visceral understanding of women’s secondary status.”778 The movement toward more dignity and empowerment for women in the examination room sparked campaigns to train more women physicians and re-educate male physicians and created a women-oriented health movement.779 Portions of the women’s health movement met with resistance from male physicians and in some cases with law enforcement officials as well.780 Some activists taught women to give themselves pelvic exams, and this practice led to the arrest of Carol Downer in 1972 for practicing medicine without a license.781 Downer had assisted a woman in the insertion of a speculum and suggested yogurt for a yeast infection.782 Rosen concludes that “the women’s health

777 Ibid, 166.
778 Rosen, The World Split Open, 175.
779 Ibid, 176.
780 Ibid, 177.
781 Ibid.
782 Ibid.
movement sometimes turned women into feminists.”  This was the case with Chevli and Farmer. Their experience listening to the concerns of women as clinic volunteers sparked their interest in issues of women’s sexuality and health, and the stories their women patients told them provided material for their comic art. In their use of women’s stories and experiences and their focus on women’s bodies as a source for understanding women’s sexuality, *Tits and Clits* had much in common with the bible of the women’s health movement, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

Women’s stories were very important to the women’s health movement and to many of the pamphlets and books it produced. As Collins writes of one of the movement’s most influential texts *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, “lessons on anatomy and basic biology were interspersed with personal testimony, offering the reader the comforting sense that whatever she was feeling or was worried about had happened to someone else before.”  Historian Wendy Kline writes that the struggles the members of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective (BWHBC), the collective that produced *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, endured in attempting to maintain a collective ethos “challenges us to rethink the organizational and geographic boundaries of feminism.”  Many of the stories in the book emerged from consciousness raising sessions where “the sharing of personal stories led to a ‘click’—a sudden recognition and clarity that sexism lay at the root of their struggles.”  The original manuscript that became *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was first published in 1970 under the title *Women and Their Bodies*, and copies sold for 75

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783 Ibid, 178.
786 Ibid.
cents. The similarities do not end there. As Kline argues, the connection between readers of Our Bodies, Ourselves and its authors was maintained not only by including personal accounts but included ongoing correspondence with readers, a method Chevli and Farmer would replicate in their titles. This connection between women readers and women authors “enabled readers to experience consciousness raising at their own kitchen tables” and meant that readers “did not have to join a feminist organization or a self-help group to recognize their oppression in the stories of others.” Chevli, Farmer, and other women who used the medium of underground comics to turn their anger into activism and art hoped to foster a similar connection with their audiences.

Independent scholar Scott McCloud’s work on comic art helps us understand how Chevli and Farmer used the medium to connect with their readers in the 1970s. McCloud describes cartooning, the act of creating comic characters, as a form of “amplification through simplification.” According to McCloud, cartoons create a unique form of intensity through their simple story and visual style. He argues for the universality of cartoon imagery, the idea that the more abstract a comic representation is, the more people it could be said to describe. This quality, he argues, makes it easier for readers to insert themselves into the situation or story. McCloud writes, “the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled . . . an empty shell that we

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787 Ibid, 66.
788 Ibid.
789 Ibid, 73.
792 Ibid.
inhabit which enables us to travel into another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it.” Chevli’s and Farmer’s comic strips were populated by amplified composites of women they had met and stories they had heard. This is perhaps the very phenomenon that disturbed some readers of *Tits and Clits*. Not only were readers of *Tits and Clits* compelled to take on a female subjectivity, but it was a female subjectivity that was often abject, much like sexuality in its male-authored underground counterparts. Some feminists at the time might rather have seen themselves as flawless heroines, while male readers might not have wanted to consider menstruation and sexual harassment as part of sexuality at all. Following McCloud’s line of thinking, comics such as *Tits and Clits* had the potential to be powerful consciousness-raising tools for both women and men, forcing both to deal with the humorous, frustrating, messy, and often unsexy elements of human sexuality.

By the time Chevli and Farmer began work on *Tits and Clits* #3 (1977) they decided to make it an anthology, including work from other female artists. By this time they had created four titles themselves and felt their creative energy waning. The anthology method was already in practice in most underground comic titles, including titles for women; in fact, most feminist comics in the 1970s were anthologies. Chevli recalled, “we hit upon the idea of producing an anthology, using the talents of several cartoonist friends. This would mean that all we had to do was produce a cover, maybe do a couple of strips, then edit the thing to conform to our concept.” Even though they were not creating all of the comic strips themselves, Chevli and Farmer exerted all of the editorial control over the *Tits and Clits* series. Chevli’s personal papers include rejection

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793 Ibid, 36.
794 Lyn Chevli, untitled, undated manuscript, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
letters written to women comic artists who sought to contribute to later issues of *Tits and Clits*. Chevli responded to one artist, Dot Butcher, by writing: “Sorry again. Interesting idea, but just not funny enough. Sure wish I could draw a luscious female figure the way you do though.”

She went on to tell Butcher, “what we want is: female sexuality, satire with a point of view, and plenty of humor.”

*Tits and Clits* #4 reported that Chevli’s and Farmer’s Nanny Goat Productions distributed “a delicious selection of comix featuring many of the best women cartoonists in print today” and promised both “sex education” and “locker room humor.” This formula sustained *Tits and Clits* as a successful underground title from 1972 until it ceased publication in 1987.

Sex Comics for Women and Sexual Discourse in the 1970s

A close examination of some of the comic strips from the two multi-issue sex comics for women in the 1970s, *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin*, which is discussed later in this chapter, demonstrates how their creators used the universalizing quality of comic characters and comic storytelling to speak to their experiences of women’s sexual culture in the 1970s. In addition, the women who created these titles also changed the ways the theme of sex was treated narratively and visually in underground sex comics, mirroring, at times, methods and approaches employed by early editions of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

The connections between women’s sexuality and the women’s health movement are made clear in one of Chevli’s and Farmer’s earliest comics. In “The Menses is the Massage!” one of Chevli’s and Farmer’s favorite heroines, Mary Multipary, spends

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795 Lyn Chevli to Dot Butcher, March 22, 1979, LCC, Box 1, Folder 30.
796 Ibid.
twelve pages learning how to make her own tampons out of natural sponge. Mary shares her knowledge with her girlfriends, and they get together to craft their own sponges over cans of beer. They even discuss how they will explain the sponges to male partners. After creating and trying out their sponge creations, they dance around the living room singing “No more cotton! No more hooks! No more boxboy’s knowing looks!” Mary’s girlfriends thank her for “a truly thigh quivering experience.” In another comic, “Fonda Peter’s Vaginal Drip,” another frequently appearing heroine, Fonda Peters, spends weeks seeking treatment for a vaginal infection only to find a creepy doctor, an even creepier pharmacist, and little help for her problem. It is only when she phones a girlfriend who tells her to use yogurt to treat her infection that she is finally cured in time to attend a swingers’ party she has been invited to attend. The similarities between the experiences of these characters and women who were reading the personal accounts of other women in Our Bodies, Ourselves is striking. Both Tits and Clits and Our Bodies, Ourselves sought to contextualize the health and medical advice given to women by other women within a universe of women’s real-world experiences. Women’s sexuality and health were intrinsically intertwined and in ways that had yet to be explored in other print venues. Like the scenario just described in Tits and Clits, early editions of Our Bodies, Ourselves warned against many of the products marketed to women that it considered unsafe, including colored toilet paper and feminine hygiene sprays. In addition, Our

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798 Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer, “The Menses is the Massage,” Tits and Clits #1, Nanny Goat Productions 1972, 12.
Bodies, Ourselves harbored a deep suspicion of the healthcare system in the early 1970s.\textsuperscript{800}

In the two Tits and Clits strips described earlier, heterosexual women find that sisterhood is the best answer to those seeking solutions to a variety of menstrual and sexual health issues. Homemade tampons prove to be a better fit and a cheaper solution for handling a period and the medical profession is ineffective; in the “Vaginal Drip” strip, the doctor’s pills are not effective and the pharmacist, who knows yogurt to be the best cure, withholds this information. These strips underscore the fact that, for women, sex often involves weeks of planning and preparation and often means dealing with a commercial culture and a medical establishment that is ill-equipped to deal with women’s sexuality in meaningful ways but instead works toward stigmatizing women’s sexuality.

Tits and Clits often included issues of menstruation in sexual situations, visiting the issue in such cartoons as “Hymn to a Hemorrhage.” The heroine, suffering without a tampon while in the woods, makes do with a “slightly used Kleenex” and remarks at the end of her ordeal, “menstrual flow is just about the same as semen, only it’s a prettier color.”\textsuperscript{801} This was an obvious swipe at all of the representations of semen that found their way into underground sex comics created by men. For instance, one title created by R. Crumb in the late 1960s even carried the title Jiz. Farmer contributed a comic strip dealing with menstruation to another sex comic for women published in 1976, Wet Satin (a publication discussed in more detail later in this chapter). The story, “A Mature Relationship,” features a middle-aged couple with a fetish for menstrual blood (figure 5.4). In this strip, the affectionate husband’s erotic investment in his wife’s menstrual

\textsuperscript{800} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{801} Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer, “Hymn to a Hemorrhage,” Tits and Clits #2, 1976.
flow (he enjoys performing cunnilingus during her period and removing and replacing her feminine napkins and tampons) marks him as a sexual progressive. His attraction to what many men consider an abject bodily function flatters his wife, Maxine. She explains to her exuberant husband after sex that she is lucky because he is able to “turn a ‘curse’ into a blessing, delighting in my natural rhythms.”

To Maxine’s husband, Dennis, her period is an expression of her womanhood and thus highly erotic. The punchline is that Maxine is far past menopause and has long been using minced chicken livers to substitute for her lost menstrual flow, a ruse her husband seems to be aware of. Again, Farmer asserts that menstruation is an essential and often overlooked element to of female sexuality, and something that could, and perhaps ought to be, embraced by couples.

Further connecting menstruation with sexual pleasure, on the back cover of Tits and Clits #1 Chevli included a phony advertisement for a product called the Dildomaid, meant to both clean and pleasure the vagina. The ad copy reads: “Hi Gals! What’s your problem? Gotta dripping pussy? Smelly quim? Messy uncontrollable periods? Do you just plain stink ‘down there’?” The ad offers a product “guaranteed to change every monthly bummer into the epitome of ecstasy . . . Dildomaid sucks, churns and vibrates. It cleans you out, turns you on and gets you away from the family.” In Chevli’s imagination, there was no need to hide feminine hygiene; in fact, her parody seems to question the “need” for it altogether. In the realm of fantasy, of course, the parody speaks to women’s need for both solitude and sexual pleasure while underscoring the

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804 Ibid.
absurdity of some of the feminine hygiene devices that were being offered in many sex magazines for women at the time.

One of Chevli’s and Farmer’s boldest images of menstruation, however, is the cover of the second issue of Tits and Clits (figure 5.5). In this image, a woman notices she has leaked menstrual blood on the American flag that she is wearing around her waist. She examines the stain and notes, “I leaked. But its [sic] on the red stripe.” Published in 1976, the year of the U.S. Bicentennial, Chevli and Farmer not only insisted on a place for menstruation in sexual discourse but also linked it to national identity. Wrapping their menstruating heroine in an American flag on the cover of the revival of Tits and Clits seems as much a political choice as an artistic one. Comic historians Tim Pilcher and Gene Kannenberg see the cover image of Tits and Clits #2 as a defiant move on the part of Chevli and Farmer and a swipe at authority after their experience with being charged with obscenity (an episode discussed in more detail later in this chapter). Chevli’s private correspondence, however, offers another possible interpretation. When asked why Tits and Clits seemed to dwell on menstruation, Chevli replied:

Menstruation occupies a lot of time in women’s sexual life, it was a theme which had not been dealt with, and since there is so much mythology surrounding it we felt that it should be given fair time. Most people don’t realize that menstruation is a part of women’s sex life, but it is, even though it’s hidden. 

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806 Chevli letter to Dorwar Bookstore owners, Nov. 14, 1978, LCC, Box 1, Folder 30.
With its focus on menstruation, *Tits and Clits* honed in on a uniquely feminine aspect of sexuality, and turned it into a centerpiece of sexual discourse. *Tits and Clits* embraced the raw corporality of the female body and attempted to infuse it with erotic power.

Chevli and Farmer also insisted that both young and old bodies offered erotic potential. Several comic strips dwell on the sex lives of middle-aged and elderly couples. In “Maxine and Dennis Visit the Much Touch Spa,” an older married couple take off for a visit to an “X-rated summer camp,” each hoping to find sexual fulfillment with other partners. The couple find total acceptance among the other couples of various ages at the retreat, swapping partners and taking part in a group orgy (figure 5.6). During the orgy, one nearly bald older man with a pot belly cries out with glee, “I’ve been here all day and nobody laughed at me!” In another comic, “Courting,” a middle-aged man full of insecurity about his age, double chin, gut, dental work, and lack of a flashy car finds sexual ecstasy and total acceptance from a much younger woman. In these two examples, it is the males who are exposed as insecure about their bodies and looking for acceptance from women. This bucks the trend of the always young and beautiful couples that appeared in sex magazines for women and, additionally, reverses the bodily anxieties the contents of those magazines created through their douche advertisements and diet shakes. In *Tits and Clits*, it was men who yearned for approval and acceptance from women.

In addition, in some of Chevli’s and Farmer’s comics women learned the pleasures of sex with a much older man as well. In “An Oldie But Goodie,” the young and beautiful Fonda Peters is courted by a much older man in an elevator. She agrees to

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807 Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer, “Maxine and Dennis Visit the Much Touch Spa,” *Tits and Clits* #2, 1976.
808 Ibid.
have dinner with him, although “he’s at least a hundred years old.”809 At dinner, she finds her date charming, his dance skills impressive, and, later, his sexual technique “cosmically exquisite” despite his “slight prostate problem.”810 And in spite of her partner’s repeated trips to the bathroom due to his prostate problem, the couple has one “tender exchange of bodily fluids” after another.811

Older women, too, found acceptance in the table-turning world of *Tits and Clits*. In “Golden Oldie,” a strip contributed by cartoonist Miriam Flambe, three women sitting on a bench by the ocean spy an attractive, shirtless, “gorgeous young stud.”812 The women, one youthful, one middle-aged, and one an “old lady,” each seem to crave attention from this young, attractive man.813 In the end, the old woman sitting on the bench and knitting takes the young stud home with her. Elsewhere, Chevli and Farmer lampooned mainstream culture’s obsession with young female bodies in their “Aging Grace Kit,” designed to make “young, beautiful and shallow” project an image of an “older, more experienced women whom the modern ‘with it’ guy demands”814 (figure 5.7). The faux advertisement offers a “basic kit” that includes wrinkles, age spots, teeth yellower, grey hair dye, and flabby thighs.815 This advertisement mimics the makeover mentality in women’s magazines but subverts traditional beauty norms and calls attention to the tremendous amount of body work the average woman is expected to engage in to appear sexy by the standards created by women’s magazines. The sexual narratives in *Tits and Clits* insist men find women sexy “as is”: when the woman in the “Courting”

810 Ibid.
811 Ibid.
813 Ibid.
815 Ibid.
cartoon forgets to brush her teeth before sex, instead of being repulsed her male partner
remarks on how she’s “exquisitely natural” with “no hang ups.”

Arguably, the libidinous license offered to older women goes to the extreme in
one cartoon advertising a “Virgin-of-the-Month-Club” (figure 5.8). This parody
advertisement features the April Virgin-of-the-Month, Pete, a fourteen-year-old high
school freshman who is “looking for an older woman to teach him a few things.” The
fictional club offers a newsletter outlining “How to recognize virgins! How to seduce
virgins! How to deal with virgin’s [sic] parents!” While this joke might offend many
with its suggestion of clearly illegal behavior, it also might be read as an appeal for a
generation of men produced through a female sexual pedagogical model, where sexual
knowledge is transferred from older women to younger men. This shift might make
young men as aware of women’s sexual needs as they are of their own. This sexual
apprenticeship proposed in this representation might supercede the means through which
boys often learn about sex, including exchanging stories with other boys and exposure to
pornography. Chevli’s cartoon also turns the tables on the very common cultural
phenomenon of sexualizing teenage girls and fetishizing female virginity. The phony
advertising’s ability to shock readers calls attention to the prevalence and pervasiveness
of the same sort of behavior that is too often expected and tolerated in older men.

The issue about which Chevli and Farmer were most adamant was women’s
unfettered access to sexual knowledge and experience. In a particularly daring strip
entitled “Fuller Bush Person” (the title is a take on the classic door-to-door Fuller Brush
salesman), a saleswoman driving a “clitmobile” goes door-to-door offering sexual advice

818 Ibid.
along with vibrators and other sexual aides (figure 5.9). The saleswoman educates women one-on-one, doling out advice on the latest sexual aides. She promises one customer, “no more tedious clit twiddling on weekdays or compulsory cunnilingus on Saturday night . . . I recommend our starter kit with a 4 inch vibrator which prevents primary male jealousy.”\textsuperscript{819} Later, explaining what she does for a living, the saleswoman states that, “in spite of the medical establishment and the church, the sexual revolution did take place, but it left a lot of people puzzled. Since I know a lot about sex and needed a job I decided to go for broke and start my own business.”\textsuperscript{820} She goes on to state that there is more demand for her services than she can handle alone. In the comic strip “Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Being Horny,” the fantasy is of a massage parlor dedicated to women only (figure 5.10). Heroine Fonda Peters visits the Golden Change Massage Parlor and is treated to a bath and massage from an African American “hunk,” pleasured all over her body by two men using vibrators, stimulated by a myriad of spouting water fountains, and treated to champagne before being ravished by three men at once.\textsuperscript{821} Her male attendants are completely beholden to her, promising her “anything you desire is yours . . . you have only to tell us what you want.”\textsuperscript{822} After her many sexual encounters, she joins her male attendants in a bacchanalian feast. As these examples illustrate, women in the pages of Chevli’s and Farmer’s comics shamelessly seek out sexual information, sexual aides, and even sex workers. They ignore the stigma traditionally attached to women engaging in such behavior and appear to do so not to “get even with” men but because they find sexual pleasure in it themselves.

\textsuperscript{819} Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer, “The Fuller Bush Person,” \textit{Tits and Clits} #2, 1976.
\textsuperscript{820} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{821} Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer, “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Being Horny,” \textit{Pandora’s Box Comix} #1, 1973.
\textsuperscript{822} Ibid.
The two strips just described engaged head on with the issue of how women’s sexual pleasure could be negotiated in an era of feminist activism and awareness. The approach Chevli and Farmer took to the issue reflected the work of other feminists who took on women’s sexuality as an opportunity for both activism and entrepreneurship. In her memoir about her involvement in the women’s movement, Dell Williams, founder of Eve’s Garden, the first sex store exclusively for women, writes of her motivation to start her own company in 1974.\footnote{Dell Williams, \textit{Revolution in the Garden: Memoirs of the Gardenkeeper}. (Los Angeles: Silverback Books, 2005), 162.} Williams writes of the feelings of guilt and shame she felt when she bought her first vibrator, a Hitachi Magic Wand, at a Macy’s department store in 1971.\footnote{Ibid, 147.} Williams decided to use her experience to create a business that catered to women much like the heroine in the “Fuller Bush Person” comic. Williams’s business was a direct result of her involvement with the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and her attendance and participation in a women’s sexuality conference sponsored by the chapter in 1973.\footnote{Ibid, 148.} The conference offered women-only workshops on topics as diverse as “Creating a New Sexual Identity” and “Overcoming Inhibitions” to “Tantric Sex and Yoga.”\footnote{Ibid.} At the conference, Williams met sex educator, artist, and author of the book \textit{Liberating Masturbation} (1974), Betty Dodson. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship.\footnote{Ibid, 149.} Dodson presented a slide show at the 1973 conference entitled “Creating a Female Genital Esthetic.”\footnote{Ibid, 151.} As Williams recalls, the slide show was a “lovingly curated museum show of full-color, larger-than-life-sized slides of various vulvas, a parade of pussies—young pussies and old pussies,
dark purple pussies and blush pink pussies, bushy pussies and bare pussies, pussies engorged and pussies in repose."  

In the talk accompanying the slides, Dodson spoke of masturbation as a primary sexual lifestyle and extolled the beauty of the female anatomy.  Williams extended this approach when she opened Eve’s Garden, and in her memoir she connects her decision directly to the women’s movement: “To me it was clear and vivid: among all the issues that the women’s movement had to address in order for my gender to achieve the freedoms so long withheld from us, the most vital was that we wrest control of our own bodies away from anyone but ourselves.”

This approach is diametrically opposed to the style of sexual pleasure proposed by *Playgirl* and its competitors, where the male body was worshipped for its beauty. Like Williams, Chevli and Farmer centered their discussion of female pleasure around the female body, but they also acknowledged that women faced historic and systemic challenges in establishing agency over their bodies.

While Chevli and Farmer were unmatched in creating feminine sexual utopias, not every *Tits and Clits* comic was utopian. *Tits and Clits* frequently dealt with sexual violence. In “Getting Yours,” *Tits and Clits* contributor Rocky Trout imagines a woman being intimidated and pursued by two very persistent males. When she cannot outrun her tormentors, the woman, who turns out to be a witch, uses a magic spell to strip the men naked in a public park and sever their penises. In an earlier piece by Chevli and Farmer, “The End of the World: A Stark Drama,” a post-apocalyptic heroine, Mary Multipary, is forced to have sex with the last man on Earth, even though he has, by her estimates, a

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829 Ibid.  
830 Ibid.  
831 Ibid, 160.
The aggressive “Lastman” forces himself on Mary, insisting that it is her duty to help him repopulate the earth, stating:

I am an extremely powerful man capable of making wise responsible decisions. You, on the other hand, are merely a dependent, soft little pussycat who obviously needs guidance. You are also probably overly tense due to denial of your basic sexual drives so a little good fucking, followed by a natural pregnancy ought to keep you happy and tractable for about 9 months as well as allowing me to fulfill my healthy masculine appetite—so come on sweetie let’s fuck with a vengeance!

To which Mary replies (in a thought bubble):

“Suffering sphincters! I finally get laid and it’s by a guy with a dwarf dick and the mentality of a micromorph! Fortunately . . . it’s the right time of the month for my rhythm pattern, my dalkon shield and diaphragm are both in place. I’ve taken my pills regularly . . . and . . . I’ve managed to slip a finger protector over his pathetic penile member without detection . . .”

Despite Mary’s precautions, she becomes pregnant. When she begins to give birth she asks for Lastman’s help. The caption above the scene explains the situation: “Blood, feces, amniotic fluid, urine and other assorted products of the human system gently glide out of Mary’s orifices as she has her first contraction.” Of course Lastman is disgusted; he vomits and runs for his life, leaving Mary to deal with it herself.

Though comic in its exaggerations, this episode of sexual violence and abandonment could speak to the experiences of many women. Mary has to settle for the

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833 Ibid.
only man she can find (the last man on Earth). He cares nothing about her sexual satisfaction, much less her emotional needs, and he leaves her while she is giving birth to the child she conceived with him. The tone of *Tits and Clits*, however, was never completely dark. Chevli and Farmer took every opportunity to use their humor and imagination to lighten the tone of their comic. In “The First Day of Spring,” the very same character, Mary, stops in a barren field to urinate. Her urine causes several disembodied penises to sprout from the ground and pleasure her. This fantasy speaks to the quandary many heterosexual women found themselves in during the 1970s—how to explore their own sexuality independently while dealing with men who could often be coercive, misogynistic, and even violent. “The First Day of Spring,” like many other comics in *Tits and Clits*, imagines sexual pleasure free of complications and obligations. Indeed, in “The First Day of Spring” the heroine is even able to experience the pleasure of the male sexual anatomy without the man attached.

Chevli and Farmer liked to imagine erotic solidarity among feminist-minded heterosexual women, where the common purpose was sexual education and experience free of silly beauty standards, bodily shame, and other “hang ups,” including ageism, sexual violence, and intimidation. This idea of erotic solidarity is best conveyed in the cover art for *Tits and Clits* #3, where three women of various ages and races march arm-in-arm with hordes of other women towards the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. (figure 5.11). The women have their vibrators held high as they chant “We Shall Overcome,” giving new meaning to a well-known civil rights movement tune. This image sent a powerful message to both male and female readers of *Tits and Clits*: heterosexual women were “coming out” and publicly demanding sexual pleasure.
Chevli and Farmer often used the covers of their comics to make bold statements about the diversity of women’s pleasures and the relationship between feminist consciousness raising and issues of sexuality. The cover of one title, *Pandora’s Box*, features a rap session between three women with radical feminist texts stacked beside them on the floor (figure 5.12). One of the women says to the others, “Sisters we have got to start thinking BIG!” The joke lies in the fact that, in thought bubbles above their heads, two of the sisters are thinking about male and female genitals, while the other is thinking about cake. This image illustrates that, for Chevli and Farmer, attitudes about sexuality were difficult to separate from one’s political convictions and that even committed feminists often had sex (or dessert) on their minds. To Chevli and Farmer, issues of sexuality were not necessarily a distraction from larger feminist goals. Instead, sexuality was a productive tension, a fact of life, and part of being a heterosexual woman. And while feminist responses to *Tits and Clits* (discussed later in this chapter) questioned this particular vision of erotic solidarity, Chevli and Farmer subscribed to it wholeheartedly. To Chevli and Farmer, humor was key to translating feminist ideas for consumption by the larger public, and to these comic artists sex was nothing if not humorous. When Chevli was asked if she thought she was reinventing comics with her style of humor, she responded that she and Farmer were not inventing anything, and had “made some mistakes, but that only means we have been willing to take some risks which a lot of people are frightened of.” She continued, “you have to take risks if you are going to go beyond the traditional boundaries set in life. I think women especially are prone to take the safe way. That is our training, but we don’t have to accept it.”

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835 Lyn Chevli to Dorrwar bookstore November 14, 1978, LCC, Box 1, Folder 30.
836 Ibid.
Chevli’s statement points again to the overwhelming difference between her work and that of editors of sex magazines for women. As editors of commercial magazines, even ones that meant to challenge convention, *Playgirl* and *Viva* sold a version of women’s sexuality that took fewer risks than Chevli and Farmer did, so as not to scare away the advertising that sustained their publications.

*Wet Satin: Women’s Erotic Fantasies*

Part of going beyond the traditional boundaries set for women meant expanding women’s erotic imagination, and Trina Robbins’ sex comic for women went about this task visually. In a two-issue anthology entitled *Wet Satin: Women’s Erotic Fantasies* (1976, 1978) Robbins and her fellow comic artists, including *Tits and Clits* creator Joyce Farmer, dealt with such topics as group sex, bondage, interracial sex, and drug use. Best known for its struggles to find a printer due to its sexual content (discussed later in this chapter), *Wet Satin*’s contributors displayed a variety of visual styles, perspectives, and points-of-view when approaching the theme of women’s sexual fantasy. *Wet Satin*’s first cover features a blonde woman in a skin-tight red jumpsuit and black knee-high boots riding on a skateboard, eating a banana, and reading Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* (figure 5.13). She is headed straight for a doorway where a Marlon Brando look-alike with a ripped undershirt and steely gaze blocks the doorway.837 Robbins’s image blended a classic male sex symbol with a sexualized image of a 1970s liberated woman, Brando with his animal-erotic appeal colliding with an equally staunch

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837 Marlon Brando played the rough and sexual character Stanley Kowalski both in the Broadway version and the 1951 film adaptation of Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire.*
symbol of liberated female sexuality. The collision Robbins depicts here was inevitable, a personification of brute, violent, masculine sexuality from the earlier half of the century coming face to face with the image of sexually liberated femininity from the latter half. In many ways, the comic itself was a symbol that women were staring conventional male-identified sexuality in the eye and challenging it.

Perhaps most striking about *Wet Satin* is the way its contributors experimented with new methods for graphically depicting female sexual pleasure. Despite being described by its first printer as pornographic, it is interesting to note how the cartoons in *Wet Satin* stray from traditional pornographic aesthetic. Shelby Sampson’s “Nose Fuck” features a heterosexual couple’s night of cocaine use turning a woman’s body into a vast terrain of pleasure (figure 5.14). Along with the couple’s drug-altered state comes a sexual subjectivity, with the woman demanding sexual pleasure and her body becoming a map with “tongue trails” around multiple erogenous zones. Lee Marrs similarly offers new ways of imagining female sexual stimulation and orgasm in her strips “Flight or Fancy” (figure 5.15) and “Floating” (figures 5.16 and 5.17). “Flight or Fancy” features a woman dreaming of copulating with a bird-man and being brought to orgasm by the creature mid-flight. Later, in “Floating” another of Marrs’s heroines, while sunbathing on a raft, dreams she is pursued underwater by her male lover and ravished below the surface of a lake. Marrs’s work is a marked attempt to render the invisible aspects of female sexual pleasure visible, to express the interiority of it rather than focusing, like so much pornographic material does, on mechanical external penetration. Sex is depicted as a total body experience, with sensation radiating to every inch of the female body. All of these examples show female graphic artists wrestling with new visual language to express
a uniquely feminine sexual aesthetic, remapping the sexually responsive female body. Along with *Tits and Clits*, *Wet Satin* braved new territory in addressing women’s sexuality in underground comics. Even as titles such as *Wet Satin* and *Tits and Clits* challenged conventional representations of the female body and female sexual pleasure, however, they also attracted the attention of censors and elicited criticisms from fellow feminists.

“I Won’t Be a Good Girl!”: Attempts to Silence Sex Comics for Women

The work of Chevli and Farmer made the underground comic world take notice. *Tits and Clits* also drew unwanted attention from a very different group, however: the local police. After the release of *Tits and Clits* #1 in 1972, Chevli and Farmer became part of an obscenity investigation involving the Laguna Beach Police Department and the Fahrenheit 451 bookstore. An undercover officer purchased a copy of *Tits and Clits* along with other underground comic titles at the bookstore before arresting the store’s owners. The owners were charged with exhibiting and possessing for sale obscene material. When Chevli and Farmer heard that they were being sought by the police, they hid their inventory of 40,000 comics with friends. The threat of the police investigation was very real. Chevli and Farmer faced “the possibility of a year’s imprisonment and fines of $10 per copy, plus the loss of their homes, livelihoods, and

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839 Ibid.
840 “Right to Read Threatened in Laguna,” Orange County Chapter Southern California American Civil Liberties Union Newsletter February 1, 1974 Vol. III Number I, LCC, Box 5, Folder 90.
custody of their children.” The Laguna Coalition, a local community group formed to support the Fahrenheit 451 bookstore owners, gathered 1,400 signatures in support of the bookstore in a city of 15,000 residents. In addition, bumper stickers distributed by the group, reading “NO CENSORSHIP IN LAGUNA,” began to appear on cars all over the city. It took two years and the intervention of the Laguna Coalition and the ACLU for the Orange County district attorney to announce in 1974 that he was dropping all charges against Chevli, Farmer, and the bookstore. Recalling the episode later, in 1978, Chevli writes that “my firmly held conviction is that all busts are politically motivated, whether it’s Larry Flint or us. That is to say that the type of material being busted is of minor importance. The real issue is power and money. There are ways of protecting yourself though, and even if it’s no perfect guarantee, we do everything we can to lessen the chance of getting busted.” Because of the investigations, Chevli and Farmer used pseudonyms for the next several years, Chevli calling herself Chin Lyvely and Farmer calling herself Joyce Sutton. In addition, in a further attempt to lessen their exposure to legal trouble, they temporarily changed the title of their comic until the obscenity charges were dropped. Pandora’s Box Comix (1973) was Nanny Goat Productions’ first foray back into sex comics after the Fahrenheit 451 bookstore bust and was dedicated to the U.S. Supreme Court. Hanging over this dedication on the inside cover is a large image of an obstinate young girl in pigtails throwing a tantrum on the floor. The copy

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842 Ibid.
843 “Right to Read Threatened in Laguna,” Orange County Chapter Southern California American Civil Liberties Union Newsletter February 1, 1974 Vol. III Number I, LCC, Box 5, Folder 90.
844 Skinn, Comix: An Underground Revolution, 145.
845 Lyn Chevli to Dorrwar bookstore Nov. 14 1978, LCC, Box 1, Folder 30.
846 Both women appear to have stopped using these pseudonyms by 1977 with the publication of Tits and Clits #3
847 Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer, Pandora’s Box Comix #1, 1973.
below the image reads “I WON’T BE A GOOD GIRL.” This caption could just as easily apply to Chevli and Farmer, who, despite the title change, had no intention of cleaning up their content.

Farmer later stated that they felt their creativity stifled by the ordeal. In 1988, Farmer recalled, “deep inside me, fear still censors my brain before my fingers begin to pirouette.” In the world of underground comics, the battle against censorship had to be fought over and over again as reprints of past issues caught the attention of the police. In a 1976 letter to pornographic film actor Harry Reems, who was facing federal obscenity charges at the time for performing in the film *Deep Throat*, Chevli expresses her sympathy and explains why she and Farmer sent a check for $14.20 for his legal defense fund:

We are very much concerned about what happens to you because we have come close to being in the same position and it is not pleasant. As a matter of fact I almost got busted in San Francisco at the book fair in October where I collected the money for you. Fortunately, the media, some lawyers and other exhibitors put pressure on the parks department who backed down, not wanting to appear foolish.

Chevli’s assumed kinship with Reems is interesting in light of the very different work the two were involved in, but clearly Chevli was concerned that if the obscenity case against Reems was successful, it could hinder her own ability to speak openly about sex. Like many who were concerned with the case, Chevli was worried about the far-reaching free

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848 Ibid.
849 The inside cover also refers to *Pandora’s Box* as the comic formerly known as *Tits and Clits Comix*.
851 Ibid.
852 Lyn Chevli to Harry Reems, November 4, 1976, LCC, Box 2, Folder 46.
speech implications of Reems’ case. It was perhaps the fact that someone merely appearing in a film deemed obscene could be prosecuted and possibly imprisoned that troubled Chevli. As an author, artist, and distributor, she could be held liable for any obscenity prosecutions involving her comic titles. No matter the very different intentions of their contrasting sexual representations, Reems and Chevli could be treated similarly under the law. Chevli’s letter to Reems illustrates that years after the Fahrenheit 451 book store bust, the specter of another possible obscenity prosecution continued to threaten Chevli and Farmer. Because Chevli and Farmer depended on do-it-yourself distribution, and with more and more bookstores shying away from underground comics, they played a relentless cat-and-mouse game with authorities everywhere. In 1985, a judge in England ordered the destruction of approximately 550 copies of *Tits and Clits* 1, 2, and 4.853 Of course, these efforts at banning Chevli and Farmer’s work, like the case against Harry Reems, only seemed to add to their notoriety.

Despite the threat of censorship from the local police, the most immediate impediment to the success of *Tits and Clits* was the problem of distribution. Feminist publishers refused to distribute Chevli’s and Farmer’s work, although their company, Nanny Goat, helped distribute a number of feminist comics, running ads for them alongside their own titles.854 To offer one example, in 1977, Women in Distribution, a feminist publishing cooperative, returned sample copies of *Tits and Clits* to Chevli and Farmer on the grounds that the comics were “offensive and heterosexist.”855 Chevli recalls, “we have negotiated at length with feminist distributors, and the final word from them was that their customers, feminist retail bookstores, were disgusted with our

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854 Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Feminist Comix-Humor,” undated, page 5, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
855 Letter to Nanny Goat Productions from Women in Distribution 1977, LCC, Box 1, Folder 36.
material and refused to carry it. We had this opinion confirmed for ourselves when several stores ordered direct from us and returned the books for the same reason.\textsuperscript{856} Although their publications were created by two self-proclaimed feminists, feminist bookstores remained reticent about Chevli and Farmer’s treatment of sexuality.

It is crucial to remember that this response to \textit{Tits and Clits} took place during a time when lesbians were asserting themselves within the women’s movement. In the years prior to the cooperative’s dismissal of \textit{Tits and Clits} as “heterosexist,” lesbian feminists and lesbian separatists were imagining alternative relationship models for women that went beyond the heterosexual norm. This took time, however. Historian Ruth Rosen notes that between 1967 and 1970 few lesbians involved in the women’s movement felt secure enough come out.\textsuperscript{857} In 1970, however, a group of women calling themselves “Radicalesbians” started recasting lesbianism as a political choice.\textsuperscript{858} Members of the Radicalesbians disrupted the Second Congress to Unite Women in 1970 and distributed copies of an essay entitled “Woman-Identified Woman.”\textsuperscript{859} Within the essay, the group insisted that only with women “could feminists integrate their emotional, political, and sexual lives. Only with women could feminists discover emotional freedom and sexual satisfaction.”\textsuperscript{860} Rosen notes that by 1972 “a ‘gay-straight’ split affected nearly every women’s liberation group.” Lesbian separatists went further and argued in some cases for lesbians to completely separate not only from men, but also from the nonlesbian women’s movement, a point-of-view best exemplified in the book \textit{Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution} (1973). By the mid-1970s, lesbian organizations and

\textsuperscript{856} Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Feminist Comix-Humor,” undated, page 5, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
\textsuperscript{857} Rosen, \textit{The World Split Open}, 167.
\textsuperscript{858} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{859} Ibid, 167-168.
\textsuperscript{860} Ibid.
publications proliferated. It was into the environment of greater awareness of lesbian issues and lesbian sexuality that *Tits and Clits* was deemed unacceptable for the cooperative to distribute.

Chevli’s and Farmer’s relationships with feminist bookstores and publishing houses were so strained that they were shocked when they received praise from inside feminist circles. *Tits and Clits*, however, did garner praise from at least one lesbian feminist publication. In a letter from the late 1970s, Chevli seemed to have given up on getting any positive recognition from feminist groups or distribution in feminist bookstores. Then Claire Noonan, a representative from *Pointblank Times*, a lesbian feminist newspaper in Houston, Texas, wrote to Chevli and Farmer about her enjoyment of *Tits and Clits*, Chevli responded:

Thanks very much for your vote of confidence regarding our comics. Much to our despair, we have become increasingly alienated from some of our lesbian sisters, who have taken a dim view of our rampant heterosexuality, which we think is a valid point of view (heterosexuality that is). Because of this alienation we have made no effort to encourage sales to feminist bookstores, or get reviews in feminist publications. Do you think your readers would be offended by our work?861

Chevli went on to ask Noonan if it would do any good to advertise in the *Pointblank Times* or if they would be open to reviewing *Tits and Clits* in order to open a dialogue with readers of the newspaper and get feedback.862 It is unclear from examining Chevli’s correspondence if this exchange ever happened. The lack of support from feminist

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861 Lyn Chevli to Claire Noonan, May 28, 1978, Box 1, LCC, Folder 32.
862 Ibid.
publications and publishing houses was a major source of disappointment and frustration for Chevli and Farmer, but the fact that factions of the feminist movement and the police were out to suppress their work only seemed to embolden both women. Chevli saw herself fighting the establishment, side by side with other sexual outlaws such Harry Reems. Meanwhile, she was misunderstood by the feminist movement, which was one of the original sources of her inspiration for her comic book project.

*Tits and Clits* was not the only sex comic for women that struggled against censorship and suppression. As stated previously, underground comic artist Robbins took on female sexual fantasy in her two *Wet Satin* anthologies. Like Chevli and Farmer, Robbins felt it was time to take the reins from male cartoonists and for women to “explore our own eroticism on the comics page.” She recalls that, “*Wet Satin* provided an exhilarating experience for the women who worked on it, giggling as they drew. For a book with a single theme (sex), the stories were amazingly varied.” *Wet Satin* ran into trouble when the regular Midwestern printer for Kitchen Sink Press (a large West Coast publisher of underground comics) declared the first issue pornographic and refused to print it. This refusal struck Robbins as odd, “considering that the same printer had printed an all-male sex book published by Kitchen featuring such an obscene cover it had to be covered with plain white paper before it could even be distributed.” The printer insisted that the all-male sex book, *Bizarre Sex*, was satire, while *Wet Satin* was serious and therefore objectionable. It seemed there just was not enough humor in *Wet Satin* to render the discussion of women’s sexual fantasies digestible for some men in the

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863 Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrls*, 94.
864 Ibid, 94-95.
865 Ibid, 97.
866 Ibid.
867 Ibid.
underground publishing community. *Wet Satin* was finally picked up by another press, Last Gasp, and printed in more liberal San Francisco, but as Robbins remembers, “when we had to go through the same problem with the second issue, putting out a comic about women’s sexuality became too much of an uphill battle, and the second issue was its last.”868 It is unclear what types of issues the second publisher, Last Gasp, had with the second issue of *Wet Satin*.

Ironically, long before her own trouble with “discriminating” printers, Robbins had defended her fellow male underground cartoonists from feminist critics. Responding to the members of an unnamed women’s liberation organization who confronted underground comic artist Harvey Kurtzman for his “Little Annie Fanny” comic strip at a 1970 Alternative Media Project conference, Robbins said, “I wish there were two different names for the organization; then *they* could call themselves Hostile Women’s Lib and I could call myself Friendly Women’s Lib and I wouldn’t have to waste so much time apologizing for *them* and saying (and hating myself for sounding so Liberal and Uncle Tom), we’re not all like that.”869 She concluded that “they were wasting their breath and attacking the wrong people. (But I can just imagine the overreaction-type thinking that goes with being horrified by the porn in one comic and therefore hating *all* comics.)”870 Here, Robbins expresses the sentiment of many women involved in producing underground comics. These women found that the best method for confronting sexism both inside and outside the underground comic scene was to produce and distribute their own comic art. Their comic art also expressed a uniquely feminine form of sexual liberation. The results left reviewers stunned and facilitated the creation

868 Ibid.
869 Ibid.
870 Ibid.
of unlikely alliances. Al Goldstein’s *Screw* reviewed Robbins’ comic and raved that “the humor in *Wet Satin* is another welcome change from other undergrounds . . . What might have been a tedious and boring look into the sexual psyche of ‘liberated’ women turns out to be a series of clever, satirical, and entertaining cartoon strips.”871 The biting humor in sex comics for women was often unexpected because of its creators’ associations with feminism, a movement that conventional wisdom considered humorless.

Robbins joined Chevli, Farmer, and a host of other feminist-minded cultural producers in advocating a sexual ethos that included a tremendous amount of latitude for the sexual expressions of both men and women, predating what would come to be known as sex-positive feminism. Chevli in particular felt that no sexual issue was off-limits. She felt that sexual liberation for women was about having difficult conversations about the absurd state of sexual politics while calling attention to women’s unique experiences of sexuality, something that she felt required a healthy sense of humor.

Lyn Chevli on Sexual Humor and Feminism

A series of undated manuscripts among Chevli’s personal papers in the Kinsey Institute Archives outlines her thoughts on the importance of her work, her frustrations with feminist criticisms of it, and the special place feminist humorists ought to play in the women’s movement. These manuscripts may be draft portions of the autobiography she

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871 Quoted in Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrls*, 97.
was marketing to publishers in the mid-1970s. In two essays, “Feminist Comix-Humor” and “Humor in Feminist Culture,” and another untitled manuscript, Chevli reflects on the unique, necessary, and neglected work feminist sexual humor can perform. Chevli covers a variety of topics within the theme of feminist humor, from its potential for reconciling opponents and building community, to providing cathartic release and creating vibrant forms of sexual discourse.

These manuscripts are an excellent source for examining Chevli’s and Farmer’s intentions as they created comics. Chevli writes that she and Farmer wanted “to cut through the mythology surrounding female sexuality, feeling that it was a destructive force.” Chevli found herself perplexed that more feminists did not share her sense of humor. She felt that feminists were unable to laugh at themselves or laugh along with her over the absurdity of the state of sexual politics in the 1970s. She wrote, “I do not ever want to write satire without retaining my feminist integrity, but when confronted with literal minded examinations of my political awareness, taken out of context, I am struck orgasmless. Some of us have to take a broad look at the situation and lighten up our style. This is the job of the humorist, who, without rancor or personal attack puts all groups under the reducing glass and whales away.” Here, Chevli is frustrated specifically with the inability of some feminists to see her unique contribution to the feminist project or to applaud her talent as a humorist, a calling which she viewed as just as important to building a feminist future as other feminist political activists, writers, and journalists. Angry at the dismissal of her underground sex comic work by some feminists

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873 Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Feminist Comix-Humor,” undated, page 2, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
874 Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Humor in Feminist Culture,” undated, page 1, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
she writes, “the problem, I think arises when a special group decides they are offended without seeing the satirist, reviewer or editor in perspective. So a piece of work is lifted out of context, vilified, stomped on and made a great deal of fuss over with little attempt to relate it to the whole.” Growing frustrated that the work she created with Farmer was being taken out of context, Chevli wrote of her belief that feminist thinking lacked nuance on the subject of humor, and decried this sort of thinking as an “anachronistic, male-identified and terribly limiting” type of “tunnel vision.” In her opinion, the feminist zeitgeist required new ways of approaching gender injustices. Laughing at these misfortunes was not necessarily dismissing them but could also be a way of broadcasting them to a broader audience. Well-crafted feminist humor, in Chevli’s thinking, could do the same amount of cultural work as the most biting and spirited political manifesto.

Feminists who criticized other women and their creative work especially infuriated Chevli because they undermined the diversity of opinions, subject positions, and talents that brought the feminist movement strength. She writes:

If we continue to scorn housewives, whores, bisexuals, closet dykes, diesel dykes, lesbian separatists, feminist socialists, Republicans, Democrats, members of NOW, Minnie Mouse aficionados or Cosmo pussycats, we are in trouble. Our strength is in our numbers and if we don’t have the sense and the courage to try to reach women who disagree with us, something is being hindered. Ourselves. Humor, Chevli felt, could draw out and then transcend differences among women.

Complaining about the seriousness of some feminists and defending her use of raunchy sexual imagery and themes, Chevli writes:

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875 Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Humor in Feminist Culture,” undated, page 2, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
876 Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Humor in Feminist Culture,” undated, page 3, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
877 Ibid.
There can be no denying the vulgarity in our work, but that is a virtual
requirement for a successful underground comic. In fact we often make the flip
statement that we guarantee to offend every reader at some point in each book.
This is the nature of that medium. The unfortunate part about that is that, women
especially, were disgusted by our blatant treatment of female sexuality; when one
of our prime concerns was to lessen the revulsion.  

Chevli acknowledged that women’s discomfort with raunchy feminist humor was
complicated but felt that the most important component of this discomfort was fear. She also urged feminists to examine their discomfort. “Everyone,” she writes, “is afraid
of something, and frequently the humorist delves into these areas in an effort to dissipate
panic . . . most of us have been raised to feel shame about our bodies and our
reproductive apparatus, but how can we change these attitudes if we are not prepared to
laugh about them?”  

Humor, in Chevli’s eyes, was a defiant tool in battling sexual
shame and could be the start of a productive conversation about female sexuality. She
writes:

I want to be able to write freely about the subject I know best, being a woman,
and trust that if I am doing a piece of satire it will not cause the feminist
movement to wither and crumble . . . it is my contention that more humor coming
from within the movement will strengthen it; for if we kid ourselves we have the
luxury of the first laugh which makes it easier to dismiss the feeble jokes of

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879 Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Feminist Comix-Humor,” undated, page 6, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
880 Ibid.
detractors who try to perpetuate our victim status. Strong individuals and groups are quick to laugh at themselves.**881**

When encountering hostility from feminists about their work, Chevli writes that instead of reacting with hostility, she and Farmer “began to recognize the rigid and humorless for what they are—frightened people who need the support of a strictly outlined ideology, people who cannot make spontaneous judgments themselves concerning anything outside the confines of their ideology.”**882** Chevli acknowledges, however, that some method of evaluating the worth of feminist cultural production must exist. She writes that a feminist humorist “should not be above criticism, but she should be allowed the creative freedom to delve into all areas of our lives and not be handed the restrictions of a political speech writer.”**883**

In the midst of firebombed abortion clinics, oppression of lesbians, and the struggle with the ERA, what feminists really needed was a good laugh.**884** “That is precisely why we do need a good old tit-jiggling laugh once in a while” she writes. Going further, she states:

We need to take our pain, turn it into something positive, and be able to laugh together over the foibles of being a feminist, because it is difficult and potentially destructive to try to maintain a constant level of dedicated political passion . . .

feminists are expending vast amounts of energy to create a new culture that is

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**881** Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Feminist Comix-Humor,” undated, page 7, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.

**882** Ibid.

**883** Ibid.

**884** Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Feminist Comix-Humor,” undated, page 8, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
rich, varied, humane and useful. Humor is a necessary and vital adjunct to that culture.\textsuperscript{885}

Chevli believed that feminist humorists, with their power to create rejuvenating laughter and their ability to address taboo sexual topics in a lighthearted way, ought to be respected as a valuable contribution to the feminist movement. Chevli wanted to serve the movement in the way she was most able. She writes:

I am not part of the movement because I like to go to parties where they serve cute little canapés and have sexy, charismatic speakers. I belong because I want to help create powerful new culture, and if I am responsible I must use my abilities as a writer to do that. Through the use of humor we can enrich the culture, depolarize the disparate factions within the movement, encourage more women to join us, and act as a vehicle to educate those outside our culture.\textsuperscript{886}

In Chevli’s opinion, in order for humor to work as a tool for the feminist movement, feminist critics would have to stop admonishing the work of humorists like Chevli before they had a chance to be heard.

In her correspondence, Chevli always insisted that feminist critics of women’s sexual humor be specific in their critiques. She wrote a letter to the feminist newspaper \textit{Off Our Backs} in response to another letter that had been printed in that paper from a reader criticizing the book \textit{Titters}, a 1976 paperback collection of women’s humor that dealt with sexuality. Chevli writes that the previous letter writer “neglected to specify exactly what she thought was exploitative and sexist about the book. This intrigues and frustrates me . . . I find this irresponsible correspondence and criticism. I want to know

\textsuperscript{885} Lyn Chevli, manuscript entitled “Feminist Comix-Humor,” undated, page 8, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
\textsuperscript{886} Lyn Chevli, untitled, undated manuscript, LCC, Box 1, Folder 9.
what ticked her off.” In the letter, Chevli fell back on her conviction that cries of
exploitation and sexism, particularly when leveled at other women humorists, should be
measured and specific. Chevli herself had written a review of Titters in which she
expressed “mixed feelings” but “tried to be concrete with my praise and my criticism.”
She was sensitive about critiques of feminist sexual humor because she frequently found
herself defending her own work against similar charges from feminists. Chevli reminded
the readers of Off Our Backs that she thought Titters was an important book even “if all it
does is provoke controversy and incite the masses.” Concluding, she wrote that she
would be pleased if the woman with the objections to Titters would reply to her letter,
“because I think the issue of women’s humor is a vital one and deserving of a
dialogue.” Facilitating this conversation on the place of humor in feminist culture and
arguing for the importance of being able to laugh in the face of the absurd inequities
women faced in the arena of sexuality was Chevli’s life’s work.

Confessions of a Smut Queen: Sex Comic Creator as Sexual Maverick

In addition to her feminist commitments, Chevli also was aware of the potentially
useful publicity and possible income that could be generated from exploiting her status as
a feminist outsider and an embattled cultural producer. In the mid-1970s, when she
began to market an autobiography to publishers she relied on her identity as the author of
the first sex comic for women, a woman victimized by obscenity law, and one with an
irreverent sense of humor. In a 1975 letter that touted the success of the company she

887 Lyn Chevli letter to Off Our Backs, January 13, 1977, LCC, Box 1, Folder 10.
888 Ibid.
889 Ibid.
founded with Farmer, Nanny Goat Productions, Chevli offered a sense of the scale of *Tits and Clits* as well as insights into her efforts to brand herself and Farmer as cultural mavericks:

Joyce and I wrote, drew, published and distributed the three books entirely on our own. Our print runs are 20,000. Large by underground standards, yet *Tits and Clits* was sold out and had to be reprinted just a year after publication. There was no advertising of any kind. To date we have sold over 70,000 books, which isn’t bad for two simple housewives.\(^890\)

Chevli recognized the potential of her own success story. She was not just interested in selling comics but also invested in casting herself in the role of a maverick feminist willing to buck the status quo on issues of sexuality. In a letter to Doubleday Publishing, she attempted to interest the company in a manuscript about her life and work. She wrote:

Joyce and I are an unlikely pair of Smut Queens. She is 36 years old. I am 43. We both come from conservative middle-class backgrounds and have teen-aged children. She grew up in Los Angeles, I in New England. We are articulate women who consider ourselves mature, sophisticated feminists. We are rampantly heterosexual but our reputation as Smut Queens causes an ambivalent society to avoid us on occasion, and seek us out on others. We have experienced the phenomenon of male groupies. We have taught university classes. We have gained a sense of our power and an understanding of our limitations. It has been

\(^{890}\) Lyn Chevli to Doubleday Publishing, May 17, 1975, LCC, Box 1, Folder 2.
an enormously exciting experience of mutual and separate growth, pain and
liberation.891

The working title of Chevli’s memoir/autobiography was *Confessions of a Smut
Queen.*892 She promised to document her “numerous adventures connected with our
dubious activities, often hilarious social commentaries on the mixed-up life in our
times.”893 In addition, Chevli intended to chronicle the creative process behind the
creation of *Tits and Clits,* and she promised details on “how we almost got busted, the
week we ran away from home, how Smut Queens entertain the State Department and
sundry other breathtaking and heartstopping adventures.”894 Chevli signed her letter with
a closing she frequently used for correspondence with men, “may your gonads never
wither.”895 Here we can see Chevli relishing the near bust, an event that she felt elevated
her into the pantheon of underground comic artists such as R. Crumb, whose work was a
frequent target of police raids throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. Chevli’s files are full
of rejection letters for her proposed book, and the sixty-four-page manuscript mentioned
in the letter could not be found in complete form.896

Chevli’s attempts to market herself and her story continued into the late 1970s. In
a 1976 letter to McGraw Hill, Chevli sought to interest the publishing house in an
updated version of her life story entitled *Comic Chic,* a two-hundred-page manuscript she
described as “an account of my first three years as an author–artist–publisher of

891 Ibid.
892 Ibid.
893 Ibid.
894 Ibid.
895 Ibid.
896 Dated and undated essays and manuscripts that may be draft portions of this proposed autobiography are
used throughout this chapter.
alternative comics for women.” Chevli describes her work as “witty, iconoclastic and soft-core feminist” and suggests that her autobiography could be augmented by drawings and photographs. Chevli boasts that she and Farmer are expanding their business because they are finding so much demand for their work and writes that “a substantial women’s market is building and institutions seem endlessly fascinated by us.”

Chevli’s appeal for a public platform for her life story came at a time when numerous stories of feminist heroes and “first woman stories,” news stories of the first women to be employed in a number of male-dominated occupations, were staples in newspapers and magazines. At this time, the news media made celebrities out of a few feminists, angering others whose contributions were not being acknowledged, especially those who saw the women’s movement as a nonhierarchical, democratic movement with no leaders. In the end, Chevli had to settle for speaking through her comic art alone; as back issues of Tits and Clits are reprinted to this day, though, her irreverent sense of humor and comic imagination continue to provoke thought on issues of women’s sexuality.

In order to appreciate Chevli’s and Farmer’s contributions to sexual thought in the 1970s, their use of raunch and the abject must be considered. In her work on pornography and fantasy, Bound and Gagged, media scholar Laura Kipnis includes a chapter on Hustler magazine entitled “Disgust and Desire: Hustler Magazine” that is useful in understanding the work of Chevli and Farmer. In this chapter, she discusses

898 Ibid.
899 Ibid.
901 Reprint editions of Tits and Clits are available through Last Gasp Press.
how *Hustler* violated the conventional codes of the sex magazines that came before, pushing the boundaries of “good taste” that held even in the world of heterosexual pornography, introducing what she deemed the “Hustler” body, a body that had “an interior, not just a suntanned surface” and was “insistently material, defiantly vulgar, corporeal.” In addition, the *Hustler* body is described as a “gaseous, fluid-emitting, embarrassing body, one continually defying the strictures of social manners and mores . . . a body threatening to erupt at any moment.” Kipnis argues that “Hustler’s insistent, repetitious return to the imagery of the body out of control, rampantly transgressing social norms and sullying property and properties, can’t fail to raise certain political issues.” Going further, Kipnis argues that “pornography can provide a home for those narratives exiled from sanctioned speech and mainstream political discourse, making pornography, in essence, an oppositional political form.”

This chapter has argued that alternative media, such as underground comics created by women to address female sexuality in the 1970s, developed a subversive form of discourse on women’s sexuality. They challenged the paradigm that commercial sex magazines for women established, with their focus on glorifying the male body and beautifying the female body. In many ways, the oozing, secreting, bleeding bodies in *Tits and Clits* mirror those in *Hustler*. Underground comics created by women, with their de-romanticized depiction of sex, menstrual blood, semen, feces, and aging bodies, dwell on the abject as much as *Hustler*. Both featured bodies out of control, seeking pleasure, indulging in their raw corporeality. As Kipnis observes:

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903 Ibid, 132.
904 Larry Flint quoted in Kipnis, 133.
905 Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged*, 123.
Symbolically deploying the improper body as a mode of social sedition also follows logically from the fact that the body is the very thing those forms of power under attack—government, religion, bourgeois manners and mores—devote themselves to “keeping in place.” Control over the body has long been considered essential to producing an orderly workforce, a docile populace, a passive, law-abiding citizenry. Just consider how many actual laws are on the books regulating how bodies may be seen and what parts may not, what you may do with your body in public and in private, and it begins to make more sense that an out-of-control, unmannerly body is precisely what threatens the orderly operation of the status quo.906

Woman-authored underground publications such as *Tits and Clits*, with all of their low humor and grotesque, out-of-control bodies, offended both members of the feminist movement and the police in addition to challenging the status quo within the male-dominated world of underground comics. The bodies in *Tits and Clits* were most often not bodies meant to be pleasing to the eyes, like a nude centerfold, but images and situations meant to be troubling and seem out of place.

Even within their limited reach, woman-authored underground comics expanded the parameters of discourse around women’s sexuality in the United States. The alternative press provided a noncommercial outlet for creative, feminist women to speak about sex in explicit and graphic ways and opportunities to respond to the limited and limiting sexual outlets they were otherwise being offered. Freed from the constraints of commodity feminism that limited *Playgirl* and *Viva*, woman-authored underground comics eschewed glamorous depictions of sexuality for characters and scenarios that

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906 Ibid, 134.
spoke to real women’s lived experiences. *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin* worked to offer a vision of women’s sexuality more complete than the whitewashed, airbrushed hedonism offered in sex magazines targeting heterosexual women at the same time. In *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin*, narratives of female sexuality derived from the artists’ political convictions.

In many ways Chevli’s and Farmer’s work mirrored the approaches to the female body taken by the authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. As feminist scholar Susan Wells recently observed in her recent work on *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, “the collective based its politics on the universality of women’s embodiment: since all women inhabited female bodies—in a sense, are female bodies—a woman’s understanding of her own embodiment would support her political commitment to all other women.” In this way *Our Bodies, Ourselves* faced many of the same limitations as *Tits and Clits* did. As Wells notes, “identity politics insisted that women did not all experience embodiment in the same way and so questioned the universalism of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.” The very real concerns that lesbians raised about the heterosexual focus on Chevli’s and Farmer’s work was similar to lesbians and women of color who questioned the Boston Women’s Health Collective’s notion of unmediated female solidarity. Despite these limitations, however, much of Chevli’s and Farmer’s work, like *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, valued self-exploration and “encouraged the sensation of touching, viewing, or otherwise manipulating one’s own body.”

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908 Ibid.
909 Ibid.
910 Ibid, 12.
The story of alternative sex publications such as *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin* adds diversity and nuance to the highly mythologized feminist “sex wars” of the late 1970s and early 1980s, showing a diversity of thought on explicit material among feminist artists early in the 1970s. Feminist opposition to the type of sexual discourse found in these publications also adds complexity to later feminist organizing against pornography in the late 1970s. As members of the women’s movement decided what sort of representations could be considered feminist and which sexist, they also set the stage for a larger debate that would split the movement by the early 1980s.

Chevli’s and Farmer’s troubled relationship with some factions within the feminist movement came about in large part due to their failure to adhere to the standards of propriety many feminists expected from feminist cultural producers. As Kipnis has argued, disgust can operate as a mechanism of class distinction, but in this case it also delineated the expectations of many feminists from the irreverent and disruptive elements of the alternative press. To Chevli, who frequently referred to the “honesty” and “humanizing” qualities in her work, the corporeal body was a much more tangible battlefield to the average woman than the philosophical musings of movement feminism. The publications discussed in this chapter point to the complex cultural conversations that women were undertaking about their own access to (and production of) sexually explicit material. In the opinion of women creating these underground publications in the 1970s, strong women and feminists could not afford to have delicate sensibilities, especially in matters involving sex. Nice girls, they seemed to say, finished last and often gave up sexual pleasure. As Chevli asserts in her letter to *Off Our Backs*, when criticizing the creative work of other feminists, one should take special care to parse out exactly what
offends and disgusts, questioning where and why these feelings appeared. The raunchy and humorous narratives in *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin* consistently point to women’s yearnings for alternatives to the commercial sexual culture being offered to them, their desires for greater access to knowledge about sex, and the beginning—much earlier than previously thought—of a popular feminist discourse on the place of explicit material for women in heterosexual culture.

**Conclusion**

**Centerfold Sexuality and the Cultural Legacy of Sex Magazines for Women**

This concluding chapter examines some of the ways in which the centerfold model of female sexuality proposed by *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women continues to engage with and influence discussions of women’s sexuality and the place of explicit sexual imagery in U.S. culture. Previous chapters have examined how, beginning with the work of Helen Gurley Brown, women’s magazines and the women who edited them went about heterosexualizing singlehood for women in the United States. Instead of imagining women who chose to remain single as sexless or strange and possibly sexually aberrant, *Cosmopolitan, Playgirl,* and *Viva* made the single girl and later the playgirl into someone to be envied. Through the liberation narratives developed in the editorial pages of sex magazines for women, singlehood for women was imagined as a time when sexual freedom could be an expression of personal freedom and lifestyle. Through the marketing of male centerfolds for women, heterosexual women were asked
to consider their sexual appetites for men’s bodies as similar to those of heterosexual men for women’s bodies. Sex magazines for women offered readers the fantasy of sexual agency and of sexuality unencumbered by the demands of families and concerns of reproduction. It was sexuality that was divorced from domesticity and obligation, and was instead a type of sexuality made to resemble a perpetual vacation with exotic locales, beautiful bodies, and fabulous attire and accessories. In the pages of sex magazines for women, the excitement of singlehood was even extended to women who might be coupled or even married. *Playgirl* and its competitors offered a type of vicarious experience of the single life that was similar to what magazines such as *Playboy* offered to men.

Of course, sexual agency for women cannot simply be spoken into existence, nor does sexuality exist in a cultural and historical vacuum. As many feminists were arguing at the time of the emergence of sex magazines for women, issues of sexual politics were intrinsically linked to issues of women’s equality, safety, and health. As this dissertation has argued, *Playgirl* and its competitors strategically embraced some of the tenets and language of the women’s movement while often refusing to support the movement as a whole. Indeed, these publications acknowledged that issues such as sexual violence and equity in the workplace were connected to sexual liberation for women. The embracing of these issues, however, even the Equal Rights Amendment, did not lead to any sustained, systematic critique of male power in society or heterosexual relationships.

The women’s movement, however, did have a tremendous influence on how sex magazines for women chose to position themselves in the public’s imagination. This dissertation has shown how the visibility and cultural influence of the women’s
movement influenced the use of women editors as spokespersons for sex magazines for women. The women’s movement made the participation of women in marketing the magazines’ offerings essential, and women’s power and influence within these publications was constantly touted in the press as well as within the pages of the magazines themselves. Hiring women as editors and writers was a way of legitimating the marketing of explicit sexual material to women, and readers were meant to adopt the editors’ and writers’ enlightened and liberated attitudes toward male nudity. As has been made clear, in the more conservative late 1970s and early 1980s, the necessity for a woman as editor disappeared for the last remaining sex magazine for women, *Playgirl*, as the male publisher took over the editorial page and argued for *Playgirl’s* place as a progressive voice in a postfeminist society.

Finally, it has been argued that the commercial nature of sex magazines for women, and particularly the types of advertising these publications accepted, cooled the already lukewarm version of feminism espoused in the editorial pages and fostered anxiety about the female body and female sexuality. In short, being a playgirl was too often divorced from real feminist inquiry and was frequently reduced to a new form of consumerism. The previous chapter, however, examines noncommercial alternatives to sex magazines for women: woman-authored underground comics. These publications, while just as sexually explicit, often mocked the male body instead of putting it on a pedestal. As has been argued, titles like *Tits and Clits* and *Wet Satin* were more directly connected to the goals of the women’s movement, and, in the case of Lyn Chevli and Joyce Farmer, found their inspiration in the women’s health movement. In the pages of these underground comics, the experience of women’s sexuality was oriented on the
knowledge and experience of the female body. These publications embraced the
corporality of the body and their approach to female pleasure was much more aligned
with the goals and methods of feminist sex pioneers such as Betty Dodson, who imagined
woman-centered approaches to sexuality.

This concluding chapter argues that remembering the story of sex magazines for
women as well as woman-authored underground comics is crucial because how the
sexual past is remembered influences how the state of sexual politics is perceived in the
present and how the future of sexuality is imagined. This chapter will examine how the
playgirl, as a narrative trope, continues to engage the national conversation about
women’s sexuality and the role of explicit sexual representations in U.S. culture. In
contrast to the cultural moment when Playgirl first appeared, in today’s sexually charged
cultural landscape, the notion that heterosexual women—or anyone else for that matter—
languish without access to explicit sexual imagery now sounds absurd. There are, however, real
questions that persist about the nature of the sexual marketplace and women’s roles
within it. When considering these questions, it is useful to look first at recent occasions
when Playgirl took the opportunity to once again call upon its feminist past as a useful
narrative device.

In a 2005 collection of essays written by women in the adult entertainment
industry, Naked Ambition: Women Who Are Changing Pornography, then-Playgirl editor
Jill Sieracki writes about her work in the previous few years, revamping Playgirl to reach
a broader, more contemporary readership. Her essay covers some familiar territory and
engages with debates and issues addressed by her predecessors in the business of
producing sex magazines more than thirty years earlier. In part, Sieracki uses her essay
to dispel some familiar myths about Playgirl, including a rumor that all of the editors and staff were actually gay men using female pseudonyms. Discussing her own comfort level with male nudity, she writes that she “hadn’t particularly wanted to see penises, let alone on a daily basis” but eventually came to enjoy her work, male nudity included. Sieracki concludes that her work did indeed occasionally “turn her on,” and she reassures readers that “we have a vast corporation of women working tirelessly to put out Playgirl month to month.” Sieracki acknowledges some awareness of the magazine’s history, stating that “Playgirl had had its peaks and valleys—like the high times in the ’70s when it was Girl Power and equal sex for the sexes, and James Caan, John Travolta, and Paul McCartney were cover guys.” Part of Sieracki’s task at Playgirl at the dawn of the twenty-first century consisted of arranging celebrity interviews to reinvigorate the publication. “I want to think that the men we choose to feature and the articles we write give you a little extra naughtiness that makes you feel sexier for having read the issue,” she writes. “I’m proud to be a ‘playgirl,’” she concludes, one “who’s gotten comfortable with nudity, is smarter about what’s sexy, a little more adventurous than I was three years ago, and who feels I am just getting better with age.” Here Sieracki echoes many of Playgirl’s past editors when she writes of her pride in being a playgirl and her own journey toward appreciation of male nudity as a “turn on.” Just as women had been advised in the 1970s, women in the new century could “feel sexier” with the

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912 Ibid.
913 Ibid, 15.
914 Ibid, 14.
915 Ibid.
916 Ibid, 19.
917 Ibid.
“extra naughtiness” *Playgirl* provided. For Sieracki and many of her predecessors, simply purchasing and reading *Playgirl* was a subversive activity.

Despite Sieracki’s efforts, *Playgirl* magazine struggled to stay profitable. The January/February 2009 issue was purported to be *Playgirl*’s last. In its final years, *Playgirl* was run by a skeleton crew of three female editors and “a whole horde of unpaid interns.”

Despite this unskilled staff, the magazine ended with a healthy readership of 600,000 copies per issue and distribution in more than three dozen countries but woefully inadequate advertising revenue. The new editor-in-chief of *Playgirl*, Nicole Caldwell, insisted on reiterating *Playgirl*’s feminist sincerity and cultural influence until the very end. In what was meant to be her final editorial, Caldwell waxes nostalgic about *Playgirl*’s past, recalling that “thirty-five years ago, a new magazine promised to provide women (and a few salacious men) with adult entertainment delivered alongside provocative articles on politics, gender issues, beauty secrets, and sex tips.” She notes that *Playgirl* had to reinvent itself with each new decade, “struggling to place itself in an ever changing world with increasingly varied ways of getting information” and enjoyed success despite “fierce adversity.”

Caldwell writes that many women discovered what a naked man looked like via *Playgirl* but also learned about topics such as “circumcision, abortion rights, rape, powerful career women, blow jobs, orgies, open relationships, abuse, independence and masturbation.” She thanks her readers for teaching her what it means to be a “strong, powerful, sexy woman” and writes that she has faith that “a

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921 Ibid.
922 Ibid.
movement celebrating the sex lives of women won’t be reduced to a few pages in *Cosmo.*”

With those words, *Playgirl* had seemingly come full circle; its birth was inspired by *Cosmopolitan,* yet in the end it was survived by *Cosmopolitan.* “We wait with anticipation,” Caldwell concludes, “for the next bright wave, a truly feminist outpost where we can get our jollies off, and learn a thing or two while doing it.”

In an interview with *The New York Times* in late 2008, Caldwell was more forthcoming about the demise of *Playgirl.* When starting as the editor a few years before, Caldwell and her fellow editors had hoped to “bring *Playgirl* back to its roots, back to a time when the magazine covered issues like abortion and equal rights, interspersing sexy shots of men with work from writers like Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates.” In its final years, under Caldwell’s editorship, *Playgirl* strove to stay sexy and relevant, running articles about campaigns to remove toxic chemicals from cosmetics and problems with Amsterdam’s red-light district. “The kind of stuff we were peddling was about what women wanted,” Caldwell said. In her opinion, the demise of the magazine was “a real blow for feminism” because *Playgirl* was “the only magazine that offered naked men to women.”

There were, however, many in the media who still wanted to dismiss women’s interest in *Playgirl.* What ensued was a debate about how the magazine ought to be remembered. In yet another interview, this time with the Fox News Channel in 2008, Caldwell took questions from the male host, who insisted that the publication had

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923 Ibid.
924 Ibid.
926 Ibid.
927 Ibid.
928 Ibid.
“morphed into a gay magazine.” In response, Caldwell conceded that while there was definitely a gay audience, “the philosophy of the magazine was to appeal to women” and the editorial content, including beauty and advice columns, reinforced that the magazine had “always focused on the ladies.” It is unknown whether Playgirl’s gay male readership increased from the late 1970s and early 1980s until 2009. Caldwell argued that Playgirl’s gay audience was being more blatantly appealed to on the magazine’s website, Playgirl.com, which was slated to continue after the print version ceased publication. Playgirl.com includes no editorial or external advertising content. Rather, it is a pay-per-view site with visual content only and anonymous, digital distribution the site allows anyone (including gay men) to access content without having to encounter editorial and advertising content aimed at heterosexual women.

While Playgirl had long been accused of having a gay male readership—since its beginning in the 1970s—only in the last decade of the magazine’s existence did Playgirl acknowledge this readership. This acknowledgement was done not through editorial content but through advertising content aimed at an explicitly gay male audience. In the magazine’s final years, gay pornographic websites were sold full-page advertisements. These types of advertisements, relegated to the back of the magazine, might have been taken as a last resort to try to keep the magazine profitable but also served as passive recognition of Playgirl’s gay male readership.

Disagreements between the staff and the publisher over the format of the print version of Playgirl had developed in the years prior to its announced demise. Caldwell

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930 Ibid.
931 Ibid.
932 Ibid.
and the other *Playgirl* editors had long struggled with their publisher, Blue Horizon Media, which put out several hard-core sex magazines. Blue Horizon, according to the editors, pushed them to fill *Playgirl* with “more nudes and fewer words.”\(^{933}\) In the end, *Playgirl* was slated to die a natural death, the way most magazines do, when its ad revenues dried up. Caldwell and the other editors openly wondered how the magazine could survive with the limited quantity of ads *Playgirl* ran near the end.\(^{934}\)

In their comments during the last five years of *Playgirl*’s existence, both Seiracki and Caldwell seemed concerned, like the editors in the 1970s, with controlling the cultural narrative associated with *Playgirl*. They were both involved in developing a narrative that would connect the magazine with the women’s movement and give it social and cultural significance. Seiracky and Caldwell were adamant that the magazine appealed to heterosexual women, and both repeated their own journey toward acceptance and enjoyment of male nudity. In her final editorial, Caldwell writes that “nothing beats sneaking glimpses of *Playgirl* while lying in bed at night, in intimate settings as you curl up with a piece of erotic fiction or some scandalous spread of a certain Centerfold.”\(^{935}\) Like their predecessors, Seiracki and Caldwell sought to strategically situate *Playgirl* as a guilty pleasure for heterosexual women, even as that pleasure was threatened with extinction. Finally, Caldwell rhetorically positions the death of the magazine as a “real blow to feminism.” Inasmuch as the editors of sex magazines for women in the 1970s were careful to guide the public’s perception of their magazines as feminist offerings, Caldwell sought to intervene in the same way to control the readership’s memory and

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\(^{934}\) Ibid.

\(^{935}\) Nicole Caldwell, Letter from the Editor, *Playgirl* January/February 2009, 7.
perception of *Playgirl* as the publication came to an end. In Caldwell’s hands, if the magazine could not be literally taken back to its profitable glory days, it would at least be situated there rhetorically. However, outside of Caldwell and Sieracki’s rhetorical work, as *Playgirl*, the last sex magazine for women, seemingly ceased publication, what is the legacy of the genre? What part does the history of these publications play in understanding the sexual landscape of the present, and how does it influence imagining women’s sexuality in the future?

The Cultural Persistence of Centerfold Sexuality

Only time will tell if the flicker of the computer screen or some other form of sexual expression can or will replace *Playgirl* with its male centerfolds, but its influence on popular culture is still very apparent. In the June 2008 feature on “Hot Bachelors” in *People* magazine, actor Mario Lopez re-created Burt Reynolds’ 1972 bearskin rug pose from *Cosmopolitan*, the inspiration for *Playgirl* and its competitors. Lopez quipped that his mom would “dig” his posing “because when that Burt Reynolds shot came out, that was her time.” Lopez’s comment relegates appreciation of the Burt Reynolds centerfold to the realm of nostalgia, the stuff of his mother’s fantasies, but he relished recreating “one of the sexiest poses in history.” Lopez’s recent pose targets two audiences, an older one that appreciates the original Reynolds centerfold and a younger one that merely appreciates the display of Lopez’s body. The appeal of displaying men, particularly male celebrities, in this way that was once so revolutionary, now seems

937 Ibid.
timeless. This timeless quality is largely the work of advertising, which has taken up the trade in displaying men’s bodies in the last several decades.

In her 1999 book, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private*, feminist scholar Susan Bordo comments on the legacy of the Reynolds centerfold and the use of male nudity in advertising. “By today’s standards that centerfold certainly doesn’t look like much” she writes, “the fact that it was regarded as such a breakthrough is a good indication of how revolutionary the mere suggestion of unclothed penile regions was in those days.” Arguing that the centerfold did indeed represent a “cultural turning point,” Bordo explains, “it wasn’t only (or even primarily) feminism that was responsible, though.” “As the politically oriented rebellions of the sixties gave way to the sex-and-lifestyle conceptions of liberation in the seventies,” she explains, “men’s bodies began to be drawn into the ever widening vortex of late-twentieth-century consumerism.” With the advent of the male centerfold in the early 1970s, “the representational frontiers of the male body expanded,” Bordo writes. “Geographically, it now included a southern hemisphere.” Bordo concludes that “consumer culture had discovered and begun to develop the untapped resources of the male body.”

It is important to note that the other historic “sexy poses” Lopez recreates in *People* are from 1980s and 1990s advertising and film, signaling the greater abundance of male bodies on sexual display in popular culture in the media landscape of the past few decades. Bordo, however, largely ignores the work of women or the influence of

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939 Ibid.
940 Ibid.
941 Ibid.
942 Ibid.
feminism in bringing forth this change. Bordo argues that it was male fashion designers who took the lead in legitimating the mainstream consumption of male bodies in their advertising, selling clothing and consumer goods to men, with films later following suit. This assumption ignores the ways in which female fashion editors, in women’s sex magazines such as *Playgirl*, *Viva*, and others, used the male body to sell clothing and other elements of “lifestyle” to women.\(^943\) Bordo argues that with the advertisements of designers such as Calvin Klein and Gucci displaying the naked or near-naked bodies of men beginning in the 1990s:

> Feminists might like to imagine that Madison Avenue heard our pleas for sexual equality and finally gave us ‘men as sex objects.’ But what’s really happened is that women have been the beneficiaries of what might be described as a triumph of pure consumerism.”\(^944\)

The same could be said of the fashion pages of *Playgirl* in the 1970s, in which pure consumerism offered up naked men to sell clothing, accessories, and beauty treatments to women long before Bordo noticed them in the pages of her *New York Times Magazine* in 1995.\(^945\) Bordo charts a “cultural genealogy” for the images of lean and chiseled male bodies advertising Calvin Klein underwear, arguing that such representations can be “traced largely through gay male aesthetics.”\(^946\) Bordo is only half correct. Clearly experiments with using the nude male body to sell clothing have a much earlier, much more nuanced, and arguably more heterosexual history than Bordo acknowledges. As has been argued here, *Playgirl* and *Viva* experimented with using nude male models as

\(^{943}\) Ibid, 168.  
\(^{944}\) Ibid, 179.  
\(^{945}\) Ibid, 168.  
\(^{946}\) Ibid, 179.
human “fashion accessories” to help sell clothing to women as early as 1973. Such an approach was a natural extension of their signature feature, the male centerfold, but also served to introduce the nude male into the milieu of magazine advertising. This introduction was initially done, as this dissertation has made clear, for the pleasure and enjoyment of women readers. It is important to acknowledge the diversity of ways the nude male body has been used within visual culture in the United States. Any effort toward examining how women’s pleasure is negotiated within the public sphere requires clearly remembering how the process has evolved over time. It is significant that *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women have only recently begun to be appreciated for the ways in which they re-imagined women’s sexuality in the 1970s.

**Remembering *Viva***

With its dual focus on consumerism and fashion and its innovative visual style, it is no surprise that *Viva* is remembered most fondly by the fashion industry. The fall 2006 issue of the fashion magazine *V* voiced its appreciation for *Viva* in a two-page feature entitled “Heroes: *Viva.*” The author, Michael Martin, calls *Viva* an “iconic sex magazine for women” with “articles that weren’t trashy, men who were macho and natural and a design that made most magazines look like mimeographs.”

Martin notes that *Viva*, “the big-budget dirty magazine that time forgot,” debuted with “an allegedly political purpose” and a print run of one million copies. Indeed, *Viva*, like *V*, a magazine which also pushes boundaries in design, separated itself from the rest of the sex magazines for

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948 Ibid.
women with its superior art direction and articles. “Viva knew just how much prurience and how much flash to borrow from its slutty older brother, (Penthouse),” Martin explains, “and yet it was class all the way—gauzy elegance with a hint of disco decadence bubbling underneath.” Moreover, “the production values were huge, and everyone looked like they were having a great time.” Given these features, Martin concludes that whatever pornography was in the 1970s, Viva was not it. “Viva stands as a testament to the best of its era, natural bodies, managed decadence, and the idea that sex was fun and liberating.” Comparing Viva to its rival, Playgirl, he writes:

While Playgirl was more adept at selling advertising and posting profits, Viva, which may have managed decadence but never quite managed to make a profit in its six years of publication, seems to be treasured all the more because it was unsuccessful. Martin notes several times that Viva never made money, but he asserts, “sometimes it seems the best things never do.” As Martin’s comments illustrate, the most striking legacy of sex magazines for women are the ways in which they attempted to market male nudity—the packaging and editorial justifications involved in this effort—rather than their actual centerfolds or commercial success.

In addition to recognition from the fashion industry, Viva has also received some belated appreciations from contemporary feminists. The third-wave feminist magazine Bitch, in an article entitled “La dolce Viva: The Best Dirty Magazine You Never Read,”

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949 Ibid.  
950 Ibid.  
951 Ibid.  
952 Ibid, 45.  
953 Ibid.  
954 Ibid.  
955 Ibid.
remembered *Viva* to an entirely new audience of young feminists. Hailing it as a “superlative example of ’70s publishing” as well as “an unexpectedly potent document of second-wave feminism,” author Andi Zeisler cites *Viva* editor Katy Keeton’s support for the women’s liberation movement.956 She specifically notes editorials in which Keeton “reminded women that equality in politics, the labor force and personal relationships was crucial and worth fighting for.”957 Wrapping the magazine in further feminist nostalgia, Zeisler remembers *Viva* contributors such as feminist film critic Molly Haskell and feminist journalist Caryl Rivers along with sex educator Betty Dodson and feminist author Joyce Carol Oates.958 Stylistically, Zeisler notes, *Viva*’s “design was classy, with artful covers and a logo whose art deco type would later show up at the iconic Studio 54.”959 She mentions profiles of female photographers and articles on a transvestite nightclub performance as further proof of a feminist sensibility throughout *Viva*, and she concludes that *Viva* was “a little outrageous, yet always gracious.”960 Here, Zeisler, speaking from the perspective of feminism’s third wave, finds no reason to dismiss or reject *Viva* based on its graphic sexual content. She places *Viva* directly under the umbrella of feminist culture, ironically a place *Viva* never fully occupied in the 1970s. In the 1970s, feminist publications were overwhelmingly silent about *Playgirl* or *Viva*, but here a feminist publication goes out of its way to discuss a sex magazine that ended publication several decades ago. There is a significant reason why *Viva* was remembered by *Bitch*, but not appreciated as “feminist” in the 1970s: the generational divide between

957 Ibid.
958 Ibid.
959 Ibid.
960 Ibid. 32.
961 Ibid, 33.
the third wave and the second wave and the greater latitude third-wave feminists grant for sexual expression. Sexual expression became a politicized minefield for members of the second-wave women’s movement. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the “porn wars” split the women’s movement over the issue of pornography and left wounds that for many feminists of that generation have yet to heal.

_Playgirl_ and the “Porn Wars”

Years before the launch of _Playgirl_ and _Viva_, with their editorial pages steeped in feminist rhetoric, factions within the women’s movement had already begun to protest against pornographic magazines. Indeed, women’s activism against sexual material has a storied past that predates the turn of the last century.\(^\text{961}\) However, during the second wave, beginning in the late 1960s, feminists began to target men’s sex magazines, _Playboy_ in particular, with activist “zaps.” _Playboy_ became, as author Thomas Weyr puts it in the title to a chapter in his book on the history of _Playboy_, “a target of outrage.”\(^\text{962}\) For instance, during the 1968 protest at the Miss America pageant, issues of _Playboy_ found their way into the “freedom trashcan” as representations of a sexist male culture.\(^\text{963}\) A few months later, in 1969, feminist activists made their way inside the

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\(^{963}\) Ibid.
Playboy mansion in Chicago and placed anti-Playboy stickers on paintings in the ballroom.\textsuperscript{964}

We can trace the beginnings of more formal organizing around the antipornography issue in the 1970s back to the founding of Women Against Violence Against Women in 1976. The founding of WAVA\textsuperscript{W} and other antipornography groups was a major shift toward a sustained and organized effort against the entire pornography industry. This effort was fueled in part by the writing of prominent feminists within the movement. By 1976, as journalist Laurence O’Toole recalls, “the work of writers such as Susan Brownmiller, Robin Morgan and most famously of all, Andrea Dworkin, started to offer porn as a pressing matter.”\textsuperscript{965} Explicit material created for and by women, however, was largely ignored during the apex of the “porn wars” in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In some ways this lack of attention is not surprising. As historian Andrea Friedman writes in her history of obscenity battles in New York City in the first half of the twentieth century, antiobscenity activists have always been careful to choose their targets carefully.\textsuperscript{966} “Indeed,” Friedman writes, “we can learn a good deal about the meaning of anti-obscenity campaigns by paying attention to the forms of sexuality that they did not target.”\textsuperscript{967} Historically, at least in New York City, uncontrolled male sexuality and homosexual content were targets. In the 1970s, because antipornography feminists like Catharine MacKinnon argued that pornography was produced under conditions of inequality based on sex, using abused and underprivileged women, \textit{Playgirl}...
and *Viva* did not fit easily into the frame provided by antipornography feminists.968 MacKinnon, along with Andrea Dworkin, “sought to change the legal definition of pornography from an obscenity standard, which appealed to the public morality, to that of the subordination of women.”969 The visual scenarios created by sex magazines for women, with active women and often naked and subordinate men, hardly enhanced antipornography arguments framing women as victims of the genre. In addition, the playgirl archetype of women as aggressive sexual agents and the female editors’ success in framing their offerings as proto-feminist both work toward explaining the exclusion of *Playgirl* and *Viva* from feminist discussions on the effects and dangers of pornography. Antipornography feminists were careful to target pornographic representations that would be objectionable to most women. By its very design, the sexual material in *Playgirl* and *Viva* hardly fit the bill.

This oversight does not mean that women’s sex magazines played no part in the feminist “porn wars.” In fact, these publications might help to engage some of the pressing concerns within the pornography debate. Feminist scholar Carole S. Vance—a participant in the controversial 1982 conference at Barnard College, “Towards a Politics of Sexuality”—posed a number of questions addressed by this dissertation:

Are male and female sexual natures essentially different, or the product of specific historical and cultural conditions? Has women’s sexuality been muted by repression, or is it wholly different from men’s? Should feminism be promoting

968 O'Toole, 49.
maximum or minimum differentiation in the sexual sphere, and what shape should either vision take?970

The events of the golden age of sex magazines for women, the 1970s, and their successes and failures, engage each of these questions in a variety of ways. The emergence of *Playgirl* and *Viva* created a dialogue both within and without the publications about the similarity between women’s sexual nature and men’s. In addition, as we have seen, the theme of sexual repression, and women’s liberation from it, appeared frequently in the rhetoric and narratives used to promote sex magazines for women. Women’s sexual repression was used to explain why women had never had a sex magazine of their own, why some women had misgivings about consuming male nudity, and why the magazines themselves were liberating forces within women’s sexual culture. Finally, *Playgirl* and *Viva* offered one answer to the question of whether feminism should be promoting a maximum or minimum differentiation in the sexual sphere. Because sex magazines for women changed the gender of the central feature of men’s sex magazines, the centerfold, their “role reversal” version of sexuality for women at first glance appeared to be built around a minimum amount of differentiation. As examples throughout this dissertation have shown, however, changing the gender of the centerfold did little to challenge the power dynamic already in place for women in the realm of sexuality. Most strikingly, selling the feature to women required a different narrative than those used to market sex magazines such as *Playboy* to men. In the pages of *Playboy*, readers have not seen a social movement equivalent to the women’s movement being used as philosophical

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justification for consuming pornography. Men were not promised that consuming *Playboy* would lead to greater gender equality and sexual equity with women.

Anticensorship feminists have worked to underscore the diversity of thought on the issue of pornography within the women’s movement. Attorney Nadine Strossen, former president of the American Civil Liberties Union, in her book, *Defending Pornography* (1995), cites Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1971), the Boston Women’s Health Collectives’ *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973), the beginning of Shere Hite’s study of women’s sexuality in 1972, and Betty Dodson’s *Liberating Masturbation* (1974) as examples of a thriving pro-sex tradition in the early 1970s.\(^{971}\) Strossen argues that the modern women’s movement “considered sexual liberation to be an essential aspect of what was then commonly called ‘women’s liberation.’”\(^{972}\) She considers antipornography feminism to largely hinge upon stereotyping women as victims. She writes, “this constitutes a fundamental reorientation from the conception of women that animated feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, when ‘assertiveness’ was the watchword.”\(^{973}\) In effect, part of the argument of anticensorship feminists is a debate about how to remember the feminist past. *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women, with their uses of feminist rhetoric and their embrace of an assertive female archetype, help to shore up Strossen’s version of feminism’s close relationship to the goals of sexual liberation in the early 1970s. In addition, *Playgirl* and *Viva* offer visual examples of attempts at what Strossen calls “sexual egalitarianism,” representations within which women initiate sex.

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972 Ibid, 115.
973 Ibid, 117.
men seem content with that arrangement, and women are “voluntarily, joyfully participating in sexual encounters with men on an equal basis.”

Shades of the “playgirl” ethos have also found their ways into other attempts to enunciate a prosex, anticensorship, feminist philosophy. In *XXX: A Woman’s Right to Pornography*, feminist scholar Wendy McElroy’s argues for the merits of pornography from what she calls a “much-neglected tradition within the movement: individualist feminism.” This tradition of a feminism which springs from the individual rather than a movement sounds altogether like *Playgirl* contributor Marcia Borie’s very first attempt to write a “playgirl philosophy” in 1973. McElroy’s application of individualist feminism seems to spring directly from the playgirl ethos. She writes that her book “seeks to provide pornography with an ideology. It gives back to women what anti-pornography feminism has taken away: the right to pursue their own sexuality without shame or apology, without guilt or censure.” McElroy goes further, arguing that “historically, feminism and pornography have been fellow travelers on the rocky road of unorthodoxy.” In her view, feminism and pornography are natural constituents because both “call the traditional institutions and assumptions of sexuality into question” and both “flourish in an atmosphere of tolerance, where questions are encouraged and differing attitudes are respected.” “Not surprisingly,” McElroy writes, “both feminism and pornography are suppressed whenever sexual expression is regulated.” In McElroy’s view, it is no coincidence that *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women

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974 Ibid, 162.
976 Ibid.
977 Ibid, 54.
978 Ibid, 55.
979 Ibid.
emerged alongside the second wave of feminism. In her eyes, the fate of both the women’s movement and pornography in society are indicative of the health of democracy in the United States.

Playgirl in the 1980s

Of course, debates about pornography and its place in American culture have also taken place outside the feminist movement. Two years after he authored his dire predictions about his readers’ choices being legislated from Washington, (discussed in Chapter Three), Playgirl publisher Ira Ritter found solid reasons to fear the Reagan Administration. The final report of Reagan’s Attorney General Edwin Meese’s Commission on Pornography, published in July 1986, pointed to what it deemed to be harmful effects of pornography. The report was, in part, a response to the perceived shortcomings of the prior Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in 1970, originally commissioned by President Lyndon Johnson, which had largely exonerated “obscenity” and “erotica” for having a role in crime.\textsuperscript{980} On the topic of sexually explicit magazines, the 1986 Final Report acknowledges that “in recent years variations aimed at a female audience have also appeared, but the genre remains largely directed at men.”\textsuperscript{981} In the chapter devoted to pornographic magazines, Playgirl is not mentioned among the 2,325 separate titles listed in the report, but the report did include a much smaller title, Play


Guy, which catered specifically to gay men. Any assumptions that Playgirl was somehow exempt from the pornography debate, however, were premature.

While the official report produced by the attorney general seemingly ignored sex magazines for women, it affected Playgirl all the same. In June 1986, a month before the report was published, more than 8,000 convenience stores across the country removed adult magazines from their shelves. These actions were a response to letters from the attorney general’s Commission informing the retailers that they “had been identified as being involved in ‘the sale or distribution of pornography’ and would be listed in the commissions report.” Other stores were responding to boycotts and picketing “mainly by church groups and sometimes women’s organizations.” In the purges, stores made no distinction between material aimed at women and that aimed at men, and Playgirl was pulled from the shelves along with Playboy and Penthouse by major retail chains such as Rite Aid, 7-Eleven, and Circle K. By October 1986, The New York Times was reporting on a “recession” in the X-rated industry, noting declines in revenue across the adult industry. The article reports that Playgirl was “reorganizing its finances under Chapter 11 bankruptcy” and that circulation for the magazine had fallen 60 percent from its high in 1973. The article reports that the total number of retail outlets that had dropped explicit magazines was now at 17,000, nearly doubling in less than six months. To be sure, changes in the adult industry related to delivery of content—

982 Ibid, 398.
984 Ibid.
985 Ibid.
986 Ibid.
988 Ibid.
989 Ibid.
notably competition from video and cable TV—can account for some of these developments but government policy and antipornography activism certainly played a significant role as well.

*Playgirl* eventually reorganized under Chapter 11 and was sold, but it was never again the publication it once was in terms of circulation or cultural influence. Its continued existence did provide fodder for the ongoing pornography debate, however. There was evidence that at least some antipornography feminists had begun to lump *Playgirl* together with men’s sex magazines, much as retailers had. In 1989, a letter was published in *The New York Times* in which Kirsten Stoppleworth of Women Against Pornography responded to a talk by then-*Playgirl* editor Nancie Martin.990 The talk, entitled “Do You Want to Be a Sex Object?” was given at Great Neck North High School in Long Island.991 Stoppleworth chided school officials for allowing Martin to speak and writes that “the editor of *Playgirl* is blind to the tragedy of objectification and its role in sexual abuse.”992 “Since when is objectification unique,” she writes, “since when is it educational?”993 Stoppleworth insists that those who educate young people must “engender respect for their bodies as part of their individuality, not as detached sexual commodities.”994 Although not engaging directly with the visual content of *Playgirl*, Stoppleworth seems to indicate that the publication engaged in the same sort of “objectification” she and her group objected to in male-oriented pornography.

Historian Shelia Jeffreys is one of the few antipornography feminists to engage *Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women directly. In her book *Anticlimax: A*

991 Ibid.
992 Ibid.
993 Ibid.
994 Ibid.
Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution (1990), Jeffreys sees Cosmopolitan and Playgirl as attempts by a male-dominated media establishment to “eroticise the single woman.”995 Jeffreys argues that women in the early 1970s were pressured to adopt a male model of sexual liberation and were meant to “imitate male sexuality and become efficient, aggressive sexual performers.”996 In addition, Jeffreys maintains that men cannot be sex objects in the way that Playgirl and other sex magazines intended.997 Playgirl and its competitors exhibit a “failure to grasp the politics of the process of objectification.”998 Jeffreys explains:

The problem with objectifying men for the consumption of women is that it is not sexy. In heterosexuality the attractiveness of men is based upon their power and status. Objectification removes that power and status. Naked beefcake is not a turn-on for women because objectification subordinates the object group.999 In an egalitarian society, Jeffreys explains, objectification would not exist and “eroticized dominance would be unimaginable.”1000 According to Jeffreys, “the selling of the idea of pornography to women . . . is a more sophisticated and effective way of bolstering male power.”1001 As polemical as Jeffreys’ take on the sexual revolution is as a whole, her comments about the problems with objectifying men sound strikingly similar to the observation by Viva editor Kathy Keeton that men simply looked powerless without their pants on, and powerlessness in a man was anything but sexy. Both women’s comments point to an irrefutable fact that plagued sex magazines for women: nude male centerfolds

998 Ibid.
999 Ibid.
1000 Ibid.
1001 Ibid, 260.
were not the equivalent of nude female centerfolds. To insist that they were is to deny the crushing power that gender plays in sustaining traditional heterosexual sex roles.

At the same time that *Playgirl* stood as an example of continued inequality in the sexual marketplace to antipornography feminists including Jeffreys, the existence of the magazine seemed to embolden some foes of antipornography feminists. In 1991, a law student named Hans Bader attacked an anti-pornography op-ed piece in *The New York Times* authored by feminist attorney Catharine MacKinnon.1002 According to the author, MacKinnon’s piece “exudes the prejudice that permeates feminist legal theory.”1003 Ms. MacKinnon seeks legal remedies for females, but not for male victims, violating men’s right to equal protection,” the student writes.1004 “Pornographic consumption is not limited to men” he argues “*Playgirl* has 600,000 subscribers, while I, a man, never purchase pornography.”1005 Going further, he asserts that MacKinnon had displayed the same “sexist bias” in 1983 when an antipornography ordinance she authored “banned pornography depicting women, but not pornography depicting men.”1006 Similar defenses of pornography employing *Playgirl* can be found. A bookstore owner in the Pentagon in 1994 responded to calls for him to remove *Penthouse* and *Playboy* from his shelves because they were degrading to women by arguing that his bookstore had sold *Playgirl* in the past.1007 In 1995, Nadine Strossen, then-president of the ACLU, warned that sweeping new sexual harassment legislation banning sexual expression from employment and educational settings would lead to charges that “the sale of sexually

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1003 Ibid.
1004 Ibid.
1005 Ibid.
1006 Ibid.
oriented magazines such as *Playboy, Penthouse*, and *Playgirl* constitutes sexual harassment of female employees and customers.”

Again, all sexual material was lumped together without regard to whether it was directed at women or men, and women alone were seen as the victims of the display and sale of such publications. We can see from these examples that, long after the feminist “porn wars,” *Playgirl* continued to play a role in debates around pornography. *Playgirl* offered, via an egalitarian argument, a foundation to attack antipornography feminists, but at the same time it was also subject to the same threats of legal action that plagued *Playboy* and other sex magazines for men.

“Playgirls” and “Raunch Culture”

In her 2005 book decrying women’s involvement in what she calls “raunch culture,” a culture in which average women and girls imitate strippers and porn stars, feminist journalist Ariel Levy joined a chorus of others, including journalist Pamela Paul, in lamenting the increased sexualization of popular culture. Levy writes that “many conflicts between the women’s liberation movement and the sexual revolution and within the women’s movement itself were left unresolved thirty years ago. What we are seeing today is the residue of that confusion.”

Levy cites young women’s participation in the “Girls Gone Wild” series of soft-core pornography videos and women’s enthusiasm for *Playboy* magazine as indications that female sexual liberation today has become “one

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1008 Nadine Strossen, *Defending Pornography*, 133.
Incoherent brand of raunch feminism.” In a chapter entitled “The Future That Never Happened,” Levy cites past feminist support for reproductive rights, rape advocacy, and a host of other sexual issues and bemoans the lack of support on these fronts from young feminists: “Only thirty years (my lifetime) ago, our mothers were ‘burning their bras’ and picketing *Playboy*, and suddenly we were getting implants and wearing bunny logos as supposed symbols of our liberation.” Levy sees a “generational rebellion” responsible for a generation of feminists who embrace *Playboy*, even though their mothers and grandmothers had picketed the magazine. Levy wonders why young women who would describe themselves as feminists would dress, talk, and behave in ways she deems “raunchy,” celebrating their sexuality in ways she sees as male-centered. Levy’s survey of feminist history, however, ignores the legacy of sex magazines for women and their prescription for sexual liberation, which as this project has demonstrated, was literally and figuratively “male-centered.” In addition, as this dissertation has shown, many feminists including Chevli and Farmer, chose to create their own images and narratives to celebrate women’s sexuality, many of which fall safely into the category of raunch but are also forms of feminist activism that seek to empower women in their pursuit of sexual pleasure. In the case of the current debate over the increased sexualization of culture in the United States and others concerning women and explicit material, a broader view of feminist history, one that includes elements of “consumer feminism” as well as representations from underground comics authored by women, would add nuance. A larger memory of the past would help both cultural producers and cultural critics engage more meaningfully with women as potential consumers, or

1010 Ibid.
1011 Ibid, 3.
1012 Ibid, 74.
producers, of explicit sexual material. “Why can’t we be sexy and frisky and in control without being commodified?” Levy asks in her book. Chevli and Farmer’s *Tits and Clits* provided one historic answer to this question; other creative women holding feminist values will offer many more in the future.

*Playgirl* and other sex magazines for women allowed for the vicarious experience of the “single life” for heterosexual women, no matter their marital status. This vicarious enjoyment of the single life and the strong connection between female sexuality and commodity consumption continues to appear in popular culture. Most recently, the popular HBO television series *Sex and the City* (*SATC*, 1998-2004) and its two film adaptations (2008 and 2010) speak to the continued currency of “commodity feminism” and its connection to female sexuality. The initial appeal of the show and the source of much controversy was the fact that the main characters approached sex “like men” and often discussed their sexual encounters amongst themselves in graphic detail. The escapades of the four lead female characters, both sexual and retail, are followed by a largely female viewing audience. The lead characters are financially independent and often sexually aggressive, but at times it is difficult to gauge which pursuit, shoes or sex, elicits the most passion and fantasy from the four *SATC* leads. The series’ central character, writer Carrie Bradshaw, often wears a *Playboy* necklace around her neck and in one episode is seen carrying a handbag made from an early 1970s issue of *Playgirl*, reducing the magazine to a pure expression of style over substance. The most obvious limitations to this version of feminist sexuality, just like the playgirl version, is that it makes feminism something one can literally buy into. This lifestyle is inherently exclusionary, leaving out all women who do not have the budget, body, or even interest

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1013 Ibid, 43.
to keep up with the style and beauty standards upon which such an identity depends. This barrier makes the fulfillment of the playgirl dream, for most women, more aspirational than inspirational.

In the last thirty-five years, explicit sexual material has emerged as a key area of concern for feminist and cultural studies scholarship. The rhetoric used to sell sex magazines for women still exists as a powerful cultural narrative in the United States. The fact that both consumers and scholars so often fail to see the complexities of sexual fantasy and sexual agency and continue to approach sexuality using a male-dominated paradigm is as troubling now as it was when the publishing industry first introduced sex magazines for women. Looking at explicit sexual material is one of the central means by which one can learn how our society thinks about gender and sexuality. As American studies scholar George Lipsitz observes, “the reach and scope of commercial culture in contemporary society requires us to develop new and better theories about the relationships linking entertainment, consumption, and social identities.”

This dissertation has examined the means used to contextualize and market sex magazines to heterosexual women in the 1970s, as well as the playgirl identity that was integral to this effort. It has focused on the historically specific rhetorical appeals used to create a narrative for women’s enjoyment of male nudity and their adoption of a playgirl lifestyle. This project has helped underscore the fact that explicit material is historical and rhetorically situated communication. In addition, it has brought into stark relief the limitations built into selling sexual liberation to women while remaining a profitable part of a highly commercial publishing industry. Finally, this project has focused on the

reasons for the limited success of the “sex magazine for women” genre: that the genre, while selling itself as feminist, was unable to account for the complexities of years of lopsided sexual politics and gender-based beauty standards. Women in the 1970s were inclined to take a look at the mutual objectification offered by these publications but historically found them lacking, as did advertisers. Liberating women from the sexual politics of the past takes more than liberating a few men from their clothing in the pages of a magazine. Those in the adult industry seeking to “feminize” pornography would have to go beyond these limitations to successfully speak to heterosexual women as a market segment.

Women and men in the United States are still in the process of reconciling feminism with sexuality. In the forward to an anthology entitled *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* (2002), scholar Jane Gallop writes that what she likes about bringing feminism and sexuality together is that “each term challenges the complacencies in the other.”¹⁰¹⁵ She writes that “people who want to get rid of sexuality for the sake of their feminist politics and people who want to get rid of feminism so they can feel good about sex are choosing artificial comfort over the uneven path of conflict.”¹⁰¹⁶ The preceding chapters have offered clear examples of attempts to reconcile feminism and sexuality that meet with varied degrees of success. Although, this work is a historical snapshot of a few particular publications, these publications exhibit ways of approaching women’s sexuality that continue to influence the sexual landscape of American culture. The playgirl version continues to have traction: after a year’s hiatus, *Playgirl* returned with a special Winter 2010 issue featuring Levi Johnston,

¹⁰¹⁶ Ibid.
the boyfriend of former U.S. vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s daughter Bristol.

Beyond the intermittent print version, Playgirl.com and Playgirl TV, a subscription-based cable network, continue to provide adult content under the “Playgirl” name. Finally, it is important to understand the historic commercial and cultural influences contributing to current understandings of heterosexual women’s sexuality, and this understanding should go beyond mere nostalgia. Appreciating the diversity of thought on the issue historically will inevitably help scholars as well as cultural producers conceive of new ways of reconciling feminism with sexuality.

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FINGER TIPS

Keep a man at arm’s length—but not for long.
Treat him to the exquisite torture of your lithe, lacquered nails being dragged slowly across his bare chest, back, or (better yet) inside his thighs.
Of course, such delightful foreplay demands the right equipment: sleek, sizzling, sensuously long fingernails.
If yours fall short, read on.
According to Nena Rico of Nails by Nena, the first thing you must do to nurture fantastic or soon-to-be-fantastic fingernails is cultivate new hand movements.
Practice searching through your handbag for keys or lipstick with the eraser end of a pencil, using the thumb and index finger to extract the desired object.
Never dial (except in dire emergency) with your finger—use a plastic phone dialer, ball-point pen, or mascara wand.
Push elevator buttons with your knuckle; manipulate light switches with knuckle or side of hand.
Pick up small things without using nails.
Wear gloves for driving, gardening, and cleaning.
To keep nails healthy and flexible (not brittle), massage often with lotion or oil.
Dig fingernails into the flesh of a fresh orange or lemon to soften tips and bleach skin.
Always let polish “set” thoroughly before relaxing your fingernail vigil; twelve hours is required.
Shape ends of nails according to outline of base of nail: oval, square, or round, but never pointed.
Examine nails daily for weak spots to prevent breakage; reinforce with paper overlays when necessary. Polish goes on top—no one will ever know.
A well-cared-for manicure will last two weeks. Apply a clear coat of polish when needed to fill in scratches and dents.

For this manicure we used:
Cutex Herbal Oily Polish Remover
Cutex Cuticle Remover
Cutex Emery Boards and Orange Sticks
Cutex Cuticle Oil
Nail Polish: Helena Rubinstein
Strong & Glossy, “Laquered Poppy,”
Projective Nail Color:
Charles of the Ritz,
“Princess Path.”
All jewelry by M. & J.
Savitt
Photographs by Jean-Marie Gouaux
Fig. 4.10: Fashion feature entitled “Love Lives” in *Viva*, November 1974
The love in, live in wigs guaranteed to arouse his masculine desires!

If you've always pictured yourself with an instinctively seductive, sensual air...we've got what it takes to make even your wildest dreams come true! A provocative collection of allure-styles that will all but dare him to run his fingers through your silken-soft, luxurious "hair." They're both wonder-working modacrylic...in a scintillating selection of colors. Put one on...and swing with the best! $25.00 each.

CARNIVAL FASHIONS, 1 East 39th Street, New York City, N.Y. PG 11

Please send me:
Playmate in ____________________ (color) ____________________ (color)
Tempress in ____________________ (color) ____________________ (color)

CHECK COLOR:
#1 Jet Black
#2 Dark Brown
#6 Medium Brown
#8 Light Brown
#12/22 Medium Frost
#16 Blonde
#1B Off-Black
#33 Dark Auburn

Each wig you select will be completely styled and sent to you in a vinyl tote mounted on a head form—free with each wig purchased.

NOTE: For exact match, send hair sample. I enclose my money order for $25 in full payment. Carnival Wigs will pay all postage charges. Send C.O.D., I enclose $10 deposit. I will pay balance to the postman, plus postage charge when delivered.

NAME (Please print) ____________________

ADDRESS ____________________ ____________________

CITY ____________________ STATE ____________________ ZIP ____________________

Fig. 4.11: Advertisement for Carnival Wigs in Playgirl, November 1973
Fig. 4.12: Advertisement for Finesse Feminine Hygiene System in *Playgirl*, November 1973
In 1947, a gynecologist, working with exercises to improve bladder control in females, found that many women, because of these exercises, also had greater strength and tone of their vaginal muscles. In many instances, this increased, and consequently improved and heightened their pleasure in sexual intercourse.

Many women suffer a loss of muscle tone in the thighs and vagina, beginning at a fairly early age for a variety of reasons. As a result, a less exciting and satisfying sexual life can occur.

Based on the original findings a new instrument has been developed for use in an isometric exercise program to strengthen the muscles of the inner thigh and vagina. Gynetone.

Gynetone is not inserted. It is used externally. You need not disrobe to use it. There is no electricity, no wires. It is completely safe. And best of all, Gynetone takes approximately one minute a day to use.

The purpose of the Gynetone program is to increase the tone and voluntary control of the inner thigh and vaginal muscle groups and to increase sexual enjoyment. For the woman...and her partner.

In testing the Gynetone system, in addition to certain objective results such as controlled measurements of voluntary vaginal muscle contractions, the following subjective information was gathered from women taking part in the testing:

Question: Have you noticed any difference in intercourse after using the instrument for the ten-day program?

Results: 98% of the patients stated that intercourse was improved and more enjoyable.

Question: Has your husband noticed any difference in the tightness of your vagina during intercourse?

Results: 60% of husbands felt there was definite improvement.

Question: Are you aware of improved control of your vaginal muscles?

Results: 90% felt there was greater control and strength of their vaginal musculature.

Question: Are you aware of improved inner thigh tone?

Results: All patients felt this muscle group was stronger after the exercise program.

These results were so overwhelmingly positive that Gynetone will guarantee that, if you use the Gynetone as directed, you will achieve greater sexual enjoyment in 10 days, or your money will be refunded.

Think for one minute about the time it takes to use Gynetone — of what the benefits could mean to you. Will there ever be a better way to invest one minute of your life each day?

Gynetone is not inserted. It is used externally. You need not disrobe to use Gynetone.

Regular Price $1795
Special Introductory Price $9.95

Innovative Medical Services
1791 Wac Krombega
Anaheim, California 92801

Please RUSH me my Gynetone and instructions for its use. I understand that there will be nothing else to buy and that if I do not achieve satisfactory results in 10 days, I can return everything to Gynetone and receive my money back.

I want to take advantage of the Special Introductory Offer. I enclose $9.95 plus $1.00 for postage and handling. (Calif. residents add 6% sales tax: $10.55)

☐ Cash ☐ Check ☐ Money Order
No C.O.D. is accepted
Shipped in plain wrapper

Name ____________________________

Address ____________________________

City __________________ State ______ Zip ______
Don't tell him Head Start is a baldness preventative. 
Just tell him it's the best hair conditioner either of you could buy. 
He'll find it a lot easier to swallow. 

A disorder that could be correctable. 

After nearly two years of testing, results show that Head Start can arrest balding, condition hair —and in some cases new growth has actually begun. 
The catch? Just one. Like most good things for your body, including dieting, you have to do it conscientiously and continuously over a period of time. 
Do him a favor. Do yourself a favor. Start using your head. And your mouth.

Until now the best hair conditioner and baldness preventative went on your head. Now it goes in your mouth. 
Let's be honest with ourselves. Any thing you rub on, pour over, or spray in your hair to prevent premature baldness is at best temporary and at worst sheen with docility. 
The secret actually comes from within. With the kind of proper nutrition that comes from a well-balanced diet. 
A steady diet of fresh fruits, fish oils, hoki, raw vegetables, and other super foods that give hair the vitamins, minerals and protein it needs to be the healthiest are not enough. Unless you have the stomach to kill three pounds of calves' liver at a sitting. 

Head Start is a vitamin and mineral compound designed to help just one part of your body. 
Your hair. 
Go ahead. Keep taking your multiple vitamins. They have a job to do. But that job isn't Head Start's. 
Head Start's job is to keep your hair from starving to death. 
Unfortunately as we grow older (as we must) the tiny capillaries start to break down and the top of the head is the first place they start to go. When they break down they are no longer able to carry blood to the roots of your hair. In fact, every frizz you see is one of the first signs that your hair is not only damaged —it's dying.

Cosmetic Laboratories developed Head Start to supplement your diet with just the vitamins and minerals (in megadoses) that major nutritionists believe are responsible for healthy hair in men and women alike. 

Head Start actually causes vasodilation in your scalp. Opening capillaries which could not be reached by massage or any means. Even a proper diet cannot do this. Ordinary commercial vitamin compounds will not keep your hair alive. Only Head Start has the proper vitamins and minerals in the right doses for the healthiest possible hair.

Is Head Start an effective baldness preventative? 
There's nothing mysterious about baldness. It occurs for the same reason that dry, unconditioned hair does and it's not limited to men. You'd be surprised at how many well-groomed women in couture dresses hide thinning hair beneath a wig. 
In fact 7,000,000 women in America today suffer from a hair and scalp disorder.

No matter what condition your hair is in, Head Start can help. You have nothing to lose but your hair by waiting. If you act now you can take advantage of our special introductory offer in the coupon below. Frankly, we're selling Head Start faster than we can make it. So send your coupon today. Our present supply is limited. Your satisfaction is unconditionally guaranteed. Try Head Start for 30 days. If you feel that the results are unsatisfactory—and you be the judge—return the unused portion and we'll return your money.

New Head Start Shampoo, with enzyme treated protein, and Vitamin E helps keep your hair on the road to recovery. 
It would be a shame to use a shampoo that would leave your hair dry and brittle after all that effort. Head Start Shampoo is a mild protein shampoo containing 10 conditioning ingredients plus enzyme treated protein and Vitamin E. We guarantee it to be the best protein shampoo on the market. 
Again, supplies are limited. So order today.

This offer is limited. Order as soon as possible.

Special introductory offer. 
$2.00 off on your first order of Head Start. Plus a free booklet on proper hair care.

Please send me _______ bottles of Head Start at $7.95 (reg. $9.95) plus $1.50 for handling. If I am not satisfied, you agree to return my money.

Head Start Shampoo.
Please send me _______ bottles of Head Start Shampoo at $4.00 per bottle. If I am not satisfied, you agree to return my money.

Name __________________________
Address __________________________
City __________________________ State _______ Zip _______

Address: COSMETIC LABORATORIES
P.O. Box 7040
Atlanta, Georgia 30309

Please no C.O.D.'s

Fig. 4.14: Advertisement for Head Start in Playgirl, November 1973
Fig. 4.15: Advertisement for “Jewelry for the Practicing Heterosexual” in *Viva*, November 1973
Fig. 4.16: Advertisement for “Zodiac Love Pendants” in Foxylady, January 1975
Fig. 4.17: Advertisement for “Symbolic Love Charms” in *Foxy lady*, March 1975
Fig. 4.18: Advertisement for the “Touch of Love” pendant in *Foxy Lady*, November 1975
Fig. 4.19: Advertisement for Playgirl Liberty T-shirt in *Playgirl*, August 1977
Fig. 4.20: “One-of-a-kind casual” advertisement, Playgirl, August 1978
Fig. 4.21: Advertisement for the Playgirl Diet in *Playgirl*, May 1978
Fig. 4.22: Advertisement for *Playgirl* spinoff *Slimmer* in *Playgirl*, June 1981
Fig. 4.23: Advertisement for a *Playgirl*’s *Hunkercise* video in *Playgirl*, October 1985
Figs. 5.1 and 5.2: Back cover of *Tit's and Clit's* #3, 1977 and cover of the first issue of *Zap Comix*, 1967
Fig. 5.3: Cover of *Tits and Clits* #1, 1972
Figure 5.4: Joyce Farmer’s “A Mature Relationship,” from *Wet Satin* #1 (1976)
Fig. 5.6: “Maxine and Dennis Visit Touch Much Spa,” from *Tits and Clits* #2, 1976
Fig. 5.7: Back cover of *Tits and Clits* #2, 1976
Fig. 5.8: Back cover of *Pandora’s Box*, 1973
Fig. 5.9: “Fuller Bush Person,” from Tits and Clits #2, 1976
Fig. 5.10: “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Being Horny,” from Pandora’s Box, 1973
Fig. 5.11: Front cover of *Tits and Clits* #3, 1977
Fig. 5.12: Cover of *Pandora’s Box*, 1973
Fig. 5.13: Cover of *Wet Satin* #1, 1976
Fig. 5.14: “Nosefuck,” by Shelby Sampson, in *Wet Satin* #1, 1976
Fig. 5.15: “Flight or Fancy,” by Lee Marrs, in *Wet Satin* #1, 1976
Fig. 5.16: “Floating,” by Lee Marrs, in *Wet Satin* #2, 1978
Fig. 5.17: “Floating,” by Lee Marrs, in *Wet Satin* #2, 1978