Introduction

When *The Beauty Myth* was first published, more than ten years ago, I had the chance to hear what must have been thousands of stories. In letters and in person, women confided in me the agonizingly personal struggles they had undergone—some, for as long as they could remember—to claim a self out of what they had instantly recognized as the beauty myth. There was no common thread that united these women in terms of their appearance: women both young and old told me about the fear of aging; slim women and heavy ones spoke of the suffering caused by trying to meet the demands of the thin ideal; black, brown, and white women—women who looked like fashion models—admitted to knowing, from the time they could first consciously think, that the ideal was someone tall, thin, white, and blond, a face without pores, asymmetry, or flaws, someone wholly "perfect," and someone whom they felt, in one way or another, they were not.

I was grateful to have had the good luck to write a book that connected my own experience to that of women everywhere—indeed, to the experiences of women in seventeen countries around the world. I was even more grateful for the ways that my readers were using the book. "This book helped me get over my eating disorder," I was often told. "I read magazines differently now." "I've stopped hating my crow's feet." For many women, the book was a tool for empowerment. Like sleuths and critics, they were deconstructing their own personal beauty myths.

While the book was embraced in a variety of ways by readers of many different backgrounds, it also sparked a very heated debate in the public forum. Female TV commentators bristled at my argument that women in television were compensated in relation to their looks and at my claim of a double standard that did not evaluate their male peers on appearance as directly. Right-wing radio hosts commented that, if I had a problem with being expected to live up to ideals of how women should look, there must be something personally wrong with me. Interviewers suggested that my concern about anorexia was simply a misplaced privileged-white-girl psychodrama. And on daytime TV, on show after show, the questions directed to me often became almost hostile—very possibly influenced by the ads that followed them, purchased by the multibillion-dollar dieting industry, making unfounded claims that are now illegal. Frequently, commentators, either deliberately or inadvertently, though always incorrectly, held that I claimed women were wrong to shave their legs or wear lipstick. This is a misunderstanding indeed, for what I support in this book is a woman's right to choose what she wants to look like and what she wants to be, rather than obeying what market forces and a multibillion-dollar advertisersing industry dictate.

Overall, though, audiences (more publicly than privately) seemed to feel that questioning beauty ideals was not only unfeminine but almost un-American. For a reader in the twenty-first century this may be hard to believe, but way back in 1991, it was considered quite heretical to challenge or call into question the ideal of beauty that was, at that time, very rigid. We were just coming out of what I have called "The Evil Eighties," a time when intense conservatism had become allied with strong antifeminism in our culture, making arguments about feminine ideals seem ill-mannered, even freakish. Reagan had just had his long run of power, the Equal Rights Amendment had run out of steam, women's activists were in retreat, women were being told they couldn't "have it all." As Susan Faludi so aptly showed in her book *Backlash*, which was published at about the same time as *The Beauty Myth*, *Newsweek* was telling women that they had a greater chance of being killed by terrorists than of marrying in mid-career. Feminism had become "the f-word." Women who complained about the beauty myth were assumed to have a personal shortcoming themselves: they must be fat, ugly, incapable of satisfying a man, "feminazis," or—horrors—lesbians. The ideal of the time—a gaunt, yet full-breasted Caucasian, not often found in nature—was

assumed by the mass media, and often by magazine readers and movie watchers as well, to be eternal, transcendent. It seemed important beyond question to try somehow to live up to that ideal.

When I talked to audiences about the epidemic of eating disorders, for instance, or about the dangers of silicone breast implants, I was often given a response straight out of Plato's *Symposium*, the famous dialogue about eternal and unchanging ideals: something like, "Women have always suffered for beauty." In short, it was not commonly understood at that time that ideals didn't simply descend from heaven, that they actually came from somewhere and that they served a purpose. That purpose, as I would then explain, was often a financial one, namely to increase the profits of those advertisers whose ad dollars actually drove the media that, in turn, created the ideals. The ideal, I argued, also served a political end. The stronger women were becoming politically, the heavier the ideals of beauty would bear down upon them, mostly in order to distract their energy and undermine their progress.

Some ten years later, what has changed? Where is the beauty myth today? It has mutated a bit and, thus, it bears looking at with fresh eyes.

Well, most satisfyingly, today you would be hard-pressed to find a twelve-year-old girl who is not all too familiar with the idea that "ideals" are too tough on girls, that they are unnatural, and that following them too slavishly is neither healthy nor cool. *American Girl* magazine, aimed at nine-year-olds, discusses the benefits of loving your body and how misguided it is to try to look like Britney Spears in order to be happy. Junior high schools bring in eating-disorder lecturers and post collages of destructive beauty ideals in their hallways. I would say that when what started as an outsider's argument becomes the conventional wisdom of a Girl Scout troop, it is a sign of an evolution in conciousness. The time was right; girls and women were ready to say no to something they found oppressive. This is progress.

In spite of this newly developed media literacy, however, I've also noticed that it is now an increasingly sexualized ideal that younger and younger girls are beginning to feel they must live up to. The notorious Calvin Klein ad campaigns eroticized sixteen-year-olds when I was a teenager, then eroticized fourteen-year-old models in the early nineties, then twelve-year-olds in the late nineties. GUESS Jeans ads now pose what look like nine-year-olds

in provocative settings. And the latest fashions for seven- and eight-year-olds re-create the outfits of pop stars who dress like sex workers. Is this progress? I doubt it.

Any number of high school and college projects I have seen—ranging from a CD about "looking perfect" to a senior thesis about the African American beauty myth as it relates to hair—have analyzed media images of women and have taken apart ideals. Even pop culture has responded to women's concerns: take the TLC music video for the song "Unpretty," for example, which shows a woman tempted to have breast surgery simply to please the demands of a boyfriend but who then decides against it. Yet while *The Beauty Myth* has definitely empowered many girls and women easily to critique mass culture's ideals, there are many ways in which that one step forward has been tempered by various steps back.

When this book was first written, in 1991, silicone breast implants were routinely inserted into women's bodies, and pornography was influencing popular culture in such a way that women were newly anxious about the size and shape of their breasts. If it seems odd that an anxiety, such as one about breast shape, for example, can arise and flourish among millions of women at once, think about how powerful sexual imagery is. Because of the new influence of pornography on fashion, millions of women were suddenly seeing "the perfect breast" everywhere and, consequently, started to worry about their own, naturally "imperfect" breasts. The phenomenon persisted until the focus of the beauty myth moved on to the next anxiety. Many women responded to this new breast ideal by scheduling breast implant surgery, while advertisers for the surgery became a new ad market for women's magazines, which, as a result, ran one uncritical "puff piece" after another on breast operations. When *The Beauty Myth* raised the alarm about silicone's—and the surgery's—side effects, there was very little general awareness of its dangers.

Now, more than a decade later, silicone's dangers have been all too thoroughly documented. Breast implant manufacturers were faced with substantial legal action, and thousands of articles exposing the dangers of silicone implants have been published since the mid-nineties. By the year 2000, silicone breast implants had been taken off the general market. Again, not coincidentally, these days one rarely reads about breast-size anxiety. Why? Because increased scrutiny of the procedure has led to legal action, which closed down the expanding market for breast implants. There is no longer an ad budget driving

magazine articles about breast-size anxiety, articles that once fed that anxiety and created even more demand for the product.

That is the glass half-full.

Now, the glass half-empty. The influence of pornography on women's sexual sense of self—which was just beginning to take hold at the time this book was first written—has now become so complete that it is almost impossible for younger women to distinguish the role pornography plays in creating their idea of how to be, look, and move in sex from their own innate sense of sexual identity. Is this progress? I do not think so.

When this book first came out, general public opinion considered anorexia and bulimia to be anomalous marginal behavior, and the cause was not assumed to be society's responsibility—insofar as it created ideals and exerted pressure to conform to them—but rather personal crises, perfectionism, poor parenting, and other forms of individual psychological maladjustment. In reality, however, these diseases were widely suffered by many ordinary young women from unremarkable backgrounds, women and girls who were simply trying to maintain an unnatural "ideal" body shape and weight. I knew from looking around me in high school and at college that eating disorders were widespread among otherwise perfectly well balanced young women, and that the simple, basic social pressure to be thin was a major factor in the development of these diseases. The National Eating Disorders Association confirms National Institutes of Health statistics in pointing out that 1 to 2 percent of American women are anorexic—between 1.5 and 3 million women—and that, of these, sufferers typically became anorexic in adolescence. NIH also notes that the death rate for anorexia, .56 percent per decade, is about *12 times higher* than the annual death rate due to all causes of death among females ages 15 to 24. Anorexia is the biggest killer of American teenage girls. I knew, from personal experience and from looking at women all around me, that eating disorders were a vicious cycle: Starving or vomiting became addictive behaviors once you started. I knew that the social expectation to be so thin as to be unlikely to menstruate was a sick ideal, and that you often had to become sick to conform to it. Disordered eating, which was undertaken to fit a disordered ideal, was one of the causes of the disease, and not necessarily, as popular opinion of the day held, a manifestation of an underlying neurosis.

Now, of course, education about the dangers of obsessive diet-

ing or exercise is widespread, and information about eating disorders, their addictive nature, and how to treat them is available in every bookstore, as well as in middle schools, doctors' offices, gyms, high schools, and sororities. *This,* now, is progress.

Yet, on the down side, those very disorders are now so widespread—and, in fact, almost destigmatized by such intense publicity—that they have become virtually normal. Not only do whole sororities take for granted that bulimia is mainstream behavior, but models now openly talk to *Glamour* magazine about their starvation regimes. A newspaper feature about a group of thin, ambitious young women talking about weight, quotes one of them as saying, "Now what's wrong with throwing up?" And "pro-an" Web sites have appeared on the Internet, indicating a subculture of girls who are "pro-anorexia," who find the anorexic look appealing and validate it. This is definitely *not* progress.

When the beauty myth was analyzed in the early nineties, the ideal was, as I have noted, quite rigid. Older women's faces were almost never portrayed in magazines, and if they were, they had to be airbrushed to look younger. Women of color were seldom shown as role models unless they had, like Beverly Johnson, virtually Caucasian features. Now, there is much more pluralism in the myth; it is now, one can almost say, many beauty myths. A seventeen-year-old African American model, with African features and dark skin, is reported in the *New York Times* as being the face of the moment. In the same vein, Benetton ads feature models in a rainbow of skin hues and with a myriad of racial and ethnic features. A fiftyish Cybill Shepherd is a cover girl, and the adored plus-size model Emme hosts E's *Fashion Emergency.* Women of color feel freer to wear traditional ethnic hairstyles and clothing in professional settings, and the straightening comb is not the obligatory burden it was in the early nineties. Even Barbie has been redesigned with a more realistic body type and now comes in many colors. Looking around, there is a bit more room today to be oneself.

There is also more consumer protection against the worst assertions of the beauty industry than there was in the days when this book first appeared. Today, anti-aging creams, for example, can no longer make absurd claims for their products, as they did a decade ago. Ten years ago, cosmetics companies regularly declared that their youth creams "erased" signs of age, "restructured" skin on a "cellular" level, and "renewed" tissue "from within"—all of which are physically impossible, since their ingredients were not able to penetrate the epidermis. This misrepresentation went so far that the Food and Drug Administration finally took action. Ten years ago, too, as a result of the cosmetic companies' ad pressure, women's magazines rarely featured the faces of women older than twenty-five, and you seldom saw the least hint of a wrinkle. On another front, the Federal Trade Commission cracked down on the diet-program hype of the nineties. They alerted diet programs that they must not misleadingly promise permanent weight loss results without sufficient studies to back up those results. Consumer advocacy even took a weight-loss pill called Fen-Phen off the market for causing heart-related fatalities.

Consumer and FDA action saved women money, but it also sparked a new, more stress-free era for women worried about their age. Now, since ad pressure is driven less by anti-aging creams than by the new spending power of older women, the fastest-growing segment of affluent consumers in the nation, women's magazines, TV shows, and even Hollywood filmmakers have discovered that there is a plethora, not a dearth, of fabulously charismatic women over forty to glamorize. Because of the aging of our role models, women of any age seem somewhat less paralyzed about the dreaded approach of their fortieth or even fiftieth birthdays, and it is no coincidence that women today by no means equate aging with the immediate erasure of their identities as vibrant, sensual women, worthy of love and high style. The influence and prevalence of "plus-size" models in the fashion and cosmetic industry is growing rapidly. Women of color are some of the most admired of fashion icons.

So has beauty-myth pluralism taken the day? Not by a long shot. The beauty myth, like many ideologies of femininity, mutates to meet new circumstances and checkmates women's attempts to increase their power. Kate Betts confessed, in the *New York Times* Style section, to having removed accomplished actress Renée Zellweger from the cover of *Vogue* because she was "too fat" after having gained some weight—that is, having become the size of the average woman—for her role in *Bridget Jones's Diary;* newspapers speculated that model Elizabeth Hurley was fired as Estée Lauder's spokeswoman because, at thirty-six, she was "too old"; and the average fashion model now is even thinner than were the Amazons of the eighties and nineties.

Nor does the beauty-myth mutation stop with women, although with men, it is driven less by cultural backlash and more by simple market opportunity. As I predicted it would, a male beauty myth

has established itself in the last decade, moving from inside the gay male subculture to the newsstands of the nation, and hitting suburban dads with a brand-new anxiety about their previously comfortable midsections. Today, Minoxidil has joined the toothpaste in the suburban guy's bathroom cabinet. Parallel to the increase in women's economic and social power, the power gap between the sexes has continued to close, dislodging men from their ages-old position as arbiters, rather than providers, of sexual attractiveness and beauty. Inevitably, a vast market for Viagra opened up. Male fashion, health, and grooming magazines have taken off. Male cosmetic surgery use has hit record highs. Men are now a third of the market for surgical procedures, and 10 percent of college students suffering from eating disorders are men. Men of all ages, economic backgrounds, and sexual orientations are more worried—some a bit, others more substantially—than they were just ten years ago. Is it progress when both genders can be commodified and evaluated as objects? Only of the most double-edged kind.

If one can draw one firm conclusion, it is that ten years later, women have a bit more breathing space to do what I urged them to do at the end of *The Beauty Myth*—to make the beauty myth their own. Today, many women have a sense of a measure of freedom to dress up or down, put on lipstick or take it off, flaunt themselves or wear sweats—even— even, sometimes to gain or lose weight—without fearing that their value as a woman or their seriousness as a person is at stake. Not too long ago, we did not make these choices without a bit more trepidation. Incredible to think of now, a decade ago too many of us were asking ourselves, "Will I be taken seriously at work if I look 'too feminine'?" "Will I be listened to at all if I look 'too plain'?" "Am I 'bad' if I gain weight? 'Good' only if I lose every ounce?" If women no longer think this way—or, if they at least know that there is something terribly wrong if they are forced to think this way—it is testimony to the power of an idea in the minds of a lot of women at once; proof of their ability to create lasting change and even a bit more freedom.

You have the power to take that freedom further still. I hope that you use this book in a whole new way—one that no one but you has thought of yet.

Naomi Wolf

New York City, April 2002

The Beauty Myth

At last, **after a long silence, women took to the streets. In the two decades of radical action that followed the rebirth of feminism in the early 1970s, Western women gained legal and reproductive rights, pursued higher education, entered the trades and the professions, and overturned ancient and revered beliefs about their social role. A generation on, do women feel free?**

The affluent, educated, liberated women of the First World, who can enjoy freedoms unavailable to any women ever before, do not feel as free as they want to. And they can no longer restrict to the subconscious their sense that this lack of freedom has something to do with—with apparently frivolous issues, things that really should not matter. Many are ashamed to admit that such trivial concerns—to do with physical appearance, bodies, faces, hair, clothes—matter so much. But in spite of shame, guilt, and denial, more and more women are wondering if it isn't that they are entirely neurotic and alone but rather that something important is indeed at stake that has to do with the relationship between female liberation and female beauty.

The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us. Many women sense that women's collective progress has stalled; compared with the heady momentum of earlier days, there is a dispiriting climate of confusion, division, cynicism, and above all, exhaustion. After years of much struggle and little recognition, many older women feel burned out; after years of taking its light for granted, many younger women show little interest in touching new fire to the torch.

During the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty. During the past five years, consumer spending doubled, pornography became the main media category, ahead of legitimate films and records combined, and thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal. More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves *physically*, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers. Recent research consistently shows that inside the majority of the West's controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret "underlife" poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control.

It is no accident that so many potentially powerful women feel this way. We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth. It is the modern version of a social reflex that has been in force since the Industrial Revolution. As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it waned to carry on its work of social control.

The contemporary backlash is so violent because the ideology of beauty is the last one remaining of the old feminine ideologies that still has the power to control those women whom second wave feminism would have otherwise made relatively uncontrollable: It has grown stronger to take over the work of social coercion that myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity, and passivity, no longer can manage. It is seeking right now to undo psychologically and covertly all the good things that feminism did for women materially and overtly.

This counterforce is operating to checkmate the inheritance of feminism on every level in the lives of Western women. Feminism gave us laws against job discrimination based on gender; immediately case law evolved in Britain and the United States that institutionalized job discrimination based on women's appearances. Patriarchal religion declined; new religious dogma, using some of the mind-altering techniques of older cults and sects, arose around age and weight to functionally supplant traditional ritual. Feminists, inspired by Friedan, broke the stranglehold on the women's popular press of advertisers for household products, who were promoting the feminine mystique; at once, the diet and skin care industries became the new cultural censors of women's intellectual space, and because of their pressure, the gaunt, youthful model supplanted the happy housewife as the arbiter of successful womanhood. The sexual revolution promoted the discovery of female sexuality; "beauty pornography"—which for the first time in women's history artificially links a commodified "beauty" directly and explicitly to sexuality—invaded the mainstream to undermine women's new and vulnerable sense of sexual self-worth. Reproductive rights gave Western women control over our own bodies; the weight of fashion models plummeted to 23 percent below that of ordinary women, eating disorders rose exponentially, and a mass neurosis was promoted that used food and weight to strip women of that sense of control. Women insisted on politicizing health; new technologies of invasive, potentially deadly "cosmetic" surgeries developed apace to re-exert old forms of medical control of women.

Every generation since about 1830 has had to fight its version of the beauty myth. "It is very little to me," said the suffragist Lucy Stone in 1855, "to have the right to vote, to own property, etcetera, if I may not keep my body, and its uses, in my absolute right." Eighty years later, after women had won the vote, and the first wave of the organized women's movement had subsided, Virginia Woolf wrote that it would still be decades before women

could tell the truth about their bodies. In 1962, Betty Friedan quoted a young woman trapped in the Feminine Mystique: "Lately, I look in the mirror, and I'm so afraid I'm going to look like my mother." Eight years after that, heralding the cataclysmic second wave of feminism, Germaine Greer described "the Stereotype": "To her belongs all that is beautiful, even the very word beauty itself . . . she is a doll . . . I'm sick of the masquerade." In spite of the great revolution of the second wave, we are not exempt. Now we can look out over ruined barricades: A revolution has come upon us and changed everything in its path, enough time has passed since then for babies to have grown into women, but there still remains a final right not fully claimed.

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary: Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless.

None of this is true. "Beauty" is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.

"Beauty" is not universal or changeless, though the West pretends that all ideals of female beauty stem from one Platonic Ideal Woman; the Maori admire a fat vulva, and the Padung, droopy breasts. Nor is "beauty" a function of evolution: Its ideals change at a pace far more rapid than that of the evolution of species, and Charles Darwin was himself unconvinced by his own explanation that "beauty" resulted from a "sexual selection" that deviated from the rule of natural selection; for women to compete with women through "beauty" is a reversal of the way in which natural

selection affects all other mammals. Anthropology has overturned the notion that females must be "beautiful" to be selected to mate: Evelyn Reed, Elaine Morgan, and others have dismissed sociobiological assertions of innate male polygamy and female monogamy. Female higher primates are the sexual initiators; not only do they seek out and enjoy sex with many partners, but "every nonpregnant female takes her turn at being the most desirable of all her troop. And that cycle keeps turning as long as she lives." The inflamed pink sexual organs of primates are often cited by male sociobiologists as analogous to human arrangements relating to female "beauty," when in fact that is a universal, nonhierarchical female primate characteristic.

Nor has the beauty myth always been this way. Though the pairing of the older rich men with young, "beautiful" women is taken to be somehow inevitable, in the matriarchal Goddess religions that dominated the Mediterranean from about 25,000 B.C.E. to about 700 B.C.E., the situation was reversed: "In every culture, the Goddess has many lovers. . . . The clear pattern is of an older woman with a beautiful but expendable youth—Ishtar and Tammuz, Venus and Adonis, Cybele and Attis, Isis and Osiris . . . their only function the service of the divine 'womb.'" Nor is it something only women do and only men watch: Among the Nigerian Wodaabes, the women hold economic power and the tribe is obsessed with male beauty; Wodaabe men spend hours together in elaborate makeup sessions, and compete—provocatively painted and dressed, with swaying hips and seductive expressions—in beauty contests judged by women. There is no legitimate historical or biological justification for the beauty myth; what it is doing to women today is a result of nothing more exalted than the need of today's power structure, economy, and culture to mount a counteroffensive against women.

If the beauty myth is not based on evolution, sex, gender, aesthetics, or God, on what is it based? It claims to be about intimacy and sex and life, a celebration of women. It is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power.

The qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers

desirable: *The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance.* Competition between women has been made part of the myth so that women will be divided from one another. Youth and (until recently) virginity have been "beautiful" in women since they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance. Aging in women is "unbeautiful" since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken: Older women fear young ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all the female life span. Most urgently, women's identity must be premised upon our "beauty" so that we will remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air.

Though there has, of course, been a beauty myth in some form for as long as there has been patriarchy, the beauty myth in its modern form is a fairly recent invention. The myth flourishes when material constraints on women are dangerously loosened. Before the Industrial Revolution, the average woman could not have had the same feelings about "beauty" that modern women do who experience the myth as continual comparison to a mass-disseminated physical ideal. Before the development of technologies of mass production—daguerrotypes, photographs, etc.—an ordinary woman was exposed to few such images outside the Church. Since the family was a productive unit and women's work complemented men's, the value of women who were not aristocrats or prostitutes lay in their work skills, economic shrewdness, physical strength, and fertility. Physical attraction, obviously, played its part; but "beauty" as we understand it was not, for ordinary women, a serious issue in the marriage marketplace. The beauty myth in its modern form gained ground after the upheavals of industrialization, as the work unit of the family was destroyed, and urbanization and the emerging factory system demanded what social engineers of the time termed the "separate sphere" of domesticity, which supported the new labor category of the "breadwinner" who left home for the workplace during the day. The middle class expanded, the standards of living and of literacy rose, the size of families shrank; a new class of literate, idle women developed, on whose submission to enforced domesticity the evolving system of industrial capitalism depended. Most of our assumptions about the way women have always thought about "beauty" date from no earlier than the 1830s, when the cult of domesticity was first consolidated and the beauty index invented.

For the first time new technologies could reproduce—in fashion plates, daguerreotypes, tintypes, and rotogravures—images of how women should look. In the 1840s the first nude photographs of prostitutes were taken; advertisements using images of "beautiful" women first appeared in mid-century. Copies of classical artworks, postcards of society beauties and royal mistresses, Currier and Ives prints, and porcelain figurines flooded the separate sphere to which middle-class women were confined.

Since the Industrial Revolution, middle-class Western women have been controlled by ideals and stereotypes as much as by material constraints. This situation, unique to this group, means that analyses that trace "cultural conspiracies" are uniquely plausible in relation to them. The rise of the beauty myth was just one of several emerging social fictions that masqueraded as natural components of the feminine sphere, the better to enclose those women inside it. Other such fictions arose contemporaneously: a version of childhood that required continual maternal supervision; a concept of female biology that required middle-class women to act out the roles of hysterics and hypochondriacs; a conviction that respectable women were sexually anesthetic; and a definition of women's work that occupied them with repetitive, time-consuming, and painstaking tasks such as needlepoint and lacemaking. All such Victorian inventions as these served a double function—that is, though they were encouraged as a means to expend female energy and intelligence in harmless ways, women often used them to express genuine creativity and passion.

But in spite of middle-class women's creativity with fashion and embroidery and child rearing, and, a century later, with the role of the suburban housewife that devolved from these social fictions, the fictions' main purpose was served: During a century and a half of unprecedented feminist agitation, they effectively counteracted middle-class women's dangerous new leisure, literacy, and relative freedom from material constraints.

Though these time- and mind-consuming fictions about women's natural role adapted themselves to resurface in the post-

war Feminine Mystique, when the second wave of the women's movement took apart what women's magazines had portrayed as the "romance," "science," and "adventure" of homemaking and suburban family life, they temporarily failed. The cloying domestic fiction of "togetherness" lost its meaning and middle-class women walked out of their front doors in masses.

So the fictions simply transformed themselves once more: Since the women's movement had successfully taken apart most other necessary fictions of femininity, all the work of social control once spread out over the whole network of these fictions had to be reassigned to the only strand left intact, which action consequently strengthened it a hundredfold. This reimposed onto liberated women's faces and bodies all the limitations, taboos, and punishments of the repressive laws, religious injunctions and reproductive enslavement that no longer carried sufficient force. Inexhaustible but ephemeral beauty work took over from inexhaustible but ephemeral housework. As the economy, law, religion, sexual mores, education, and culture were forcibly opened up to include women more fairly, a private reality colonized female consciousness. By using ideas about "beauty," it reconstructed an alternative female world with its own laws, economy, religion, sexuality, education, and culture, each element as repressive as any that had gone before.

Since middle-class Western women can best be weakened psychologically now that we are stronger materially, the beauty myth, as it has resurfaced in the last generation, has had to draw on more technological sophistication and reactionary fervor than ever before. The modern arsenal of the myth is a dissemination of millions of images of the current ideal; although this barrage is generally seen as a collective sexual fantasy, there is in fact little that is sexual about it. It is summoned out of political fear on the part of male-dominated institutions threatened by women's freedom, and it exploits female guilt and apprehension about our own liberation—latent fears that we might be going too far. This frantic aggregation of imagery is a collective reactionary hallucination willed into being by both men and women stunned and disoriented by the rapidity with which gender relations have been transformed: a bulwark of reassurance against the flood of change. The mass depiction of the modern woman as a "beauty" is a contradiction: Where modern women are growing, moving, and expressing their individuality, as the myth has it, "beauty" is by definition inert, timeless, and generic. That this hallucination is necessary and deliberate is evident in the way "beauty" so directly contradicts women's real situation.

And the unconscious hallucination grows ever more influential and pervasive because of what is now conscious market manipulation: powerful industries—the $33-billion-a-year diet industry, the $20-billion cosmetics industry, the $300-million cosmetic surgery industry, and the $7-billion pornography industry—have arisen from the capital made out of unconscious anxieties, and are in turn able, through their influence on mass culture, to use, stimulate, and reinforce the hallucination in a rising economic spiral.

This is not a conspiracy theory; it doesn't have to be. Societies tell themselves necessary fictions in the same way that individuals and families do. Henrik Ibsen called them "vital lies," and psychologist Daniel Goleman describes them working the same way on the social level that they do within families: "The collusion is maintained by directing attention away from the fearsome fact, or by repackaging its meaning in an acceptable format." The costs of these social blind spots, he writes, are destructive communal illusions. Possibilities for women have become so open-ended that they threaten to destabilize the institutions on which a male-dominated culture has depended, and a collective panic reaction on the part of both sexes has forced a demand for counterimages.

The resulting hallucination materializes, for women, as something all too real. No longer just an idea, it becomes three-dimensional, incorporating within itself how women live and how they do not live: It becomes the Iron Maiden. The original Iron Maiden was a medieval German instrument of torture, a body-shaped casket painted with the limbs and features of a lovely, smiling young woman. The unlucky victim was slowly enclosed inside her; the lid fell shut to immobilize the victim, who died either of starvation or, less cruelly, of the metal spikes embedded in her interior. The modern hallucination in which women are trapped or trap themselves is similarly rigid, cruel, and euphemistically painted. Contemporary culture directs attention to imagery of the Iron Maiden, while censoring real women's faces and bodies.

Why does the social order feel the need to defend itself by evading the fact of real women, our faces and voices and bodies, and reducing the meaning of women to these formulaic and endlessly reproduced "beautiful" images? Though unconscious personal anxieties can be a powerful force in the creation of a vital lie, economic necessity practically guarantees it. An economy that depends on slavery needs to promote images of slaves that "justify" the institution of slavery. Western economies are absolutely dependent now on the continued underpayment of women. An ideology that makes women feel "worth less" was urgently needed to counteract the way feminism had begun to make us feel worth more. This does not require a conspiracy; merely an atmosphere. The contemporary economy depends right now on the representation of women within the beauty myth. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith offers an economic explanation for "the persistence of the view of homemaking as a 'higher calling'": the concept of women as naturally trapped within the Feminine Mystique, he feels, "has been forced on us by popular sociology, by magazines, and by fiction to disguise the fact that woman in her role of consumer has been essential to the development of our industrial society. . . . Behavior that is essential for economic reasons is transformed into a social virtue." As soon as a woman's primary social value could no longer be defined as the attainment of virtuous domesticity, the beauty myth redefined it as the attainment of virtuous beauty. It did so to substitute both a new consumer imperative and a new justification for economic unfairness in the workplace where the old ones had lost their hold over newly liberated women.

Another hallucination arose to accompany that of the Iron Maiden: The caricature of the Ugly Feminist was resurrected to dog the steps of the women's movement. The caricature is unoriginal; it was coined to ridicule the feminists of the nineteenth century. Lucy Stone herself, whom supporters saw as "a prototype of womanly grace . . . fresh and fair as the morning," was derided by detractors with "the usual report" about Victorian feminists: "a big masculine woman, wearing boots, smoking a cigar, swearing like a trooper." As Betty Friedan put it presciently in 1960, even before the savage revamping of that old caricature: "The unpleasant image of feminists today resembles less the feminists themselves than the image fostered by the interests who so bitterly opposed the vote for women in state after state." Thirty years on, her conclusion is more true than ever: That resurrected caricature, which sought to punish women for their public acts by going after their private sense of self, became the paradigm for new limits placed on aspiring women everywhere. After the success of the women's movement's second wave, the beauty myth was perfected to checkmate power at every level in individual women's lives. The modern neuroses of life in the female body spread to woman after woman at epidemic rates. The myth is undermining—slowly, imperceptibly, without our being aware of the real forces of erosion—the ground women have gained through long, hard, honorable struggle.

The beauty myth of the present is more insidious than any mystique of femininity yet: A century ago, Nora slammed the door of the doll's house; a generation ago, women turned their backs on the consumer heaven of the isolated multiapplianced home; but where women are trapped today, there is no door to slam. The contemporary ravages of the beauty backlash are destroying women physically and depleting us psychologically. If we are to free ourselves from the dead weight that has once again been made out of femaleness, it is not ballots or lobbyists or placards that women will need first; it is a new way to see.

Culture

Since middle-class women have been sequestered from the world, isolated from one another, and their heritage submerged with each generation, they are more dependent than men are on the cultural models on offer, and more likely to be imprinted by them. Marina Warner's *Monuments and Maidens* explains how it comes about that individual men's names and faces are enshrined in monuments, supported by identical, anonymous (and "beautiful") stone women. That situation is true of culture in general. Given few role models in the world, women seek them on the screen and the glossy page.

This pattern, which leaves out women as individuals, extends from high culture to popular mythology: "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only the relations of men to women, but the relation of women to themselves." Critic John Berger's well-known quote has been true throughout the history of Western culture, and it is more true now than ever.

Men are exposed to male *fashion* models but do not see them

as *role* models. Why do women react so strongly to nothing, really—images, scraps of paper? Is their identity so weak? Why do they feel they must treat "models"—mannequins—as if they were "models"—paradigms? Why do women react to the "ideal," whatever form she takes at that moment, as if she were a non-negotiable commandment?

Heroines

It is not that women's identities are naturally weak. But "ideal" imagery has become obsessively important to women because it was meant to become so. Women are mere "beauties" in men's culture so that culture can be kept male. When women in culture show character, they are not desirable, as opposed to the desirable, artless ingenue. A beautiful heroine is a contradiction in terms, since heroism is about individuality, interesting and ever changing, while "beauty" is generic, boring, and inert. While culture works out moral dilemmas, "beauty" is amoral: If a woman is born resembling an art object, it is an accident of nature, a fickle consensus of mass perception, a peculiar coincidence—but it is not a moral act. From the "beauties" in male culture, women learn a bitter amoral lesson—that the moral lessons of their culture exclude them.

Since the fourteenth century, male culture has silenced women by taking them beautifully apart: The catalog of features, developed by the troubadours, first paralyzed the beloved woman into beauty's silence. The poet Edmund Spenser perfected the catalog of features in his hymn the "Epithalamion"; we inherit that catalog in forms ranging from the list-your-good-points articles in women's magazines to fantasies in mass culture that assemble the perfect women.

Culture stereotypes women to fit the myth by flattening the feminine into beauty-without-intelligence or intelligence-without-beauty; women are allowed a mind or a body but not both. A common allegory that teaches women this lesson is the pretty-plain pairing: of Leah and Rachel in the Old Testament and Mary and Martha in the New; Helena and Hermia in *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream; Anya and Dunyasha in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard;* Daisy Mae and Sadie Hawkins in Dogpatch; Glinda and the Wicked Witch of the West in Oz; Veronica and Ethel in Riverdale; Ginger and Mary Ann in *Gilligan's Island;* Janet and Chrissie in *Three's Company;* Mary and Rhoda in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show;* and so forth. Male culture seems happiest to imagine two women together when they are defined as being one winner and one loser in the beauty myth.

Women's writing, on the other hand, turns the myth on its head. Female culture's greatest writers share the search for radiance, a beauty that has meaning. The battle between the overvalued beauty and the undervalued, unglamorous but animated heroine forms the spine of the women's novel. It extends from *Jane Eyre* to today's paperback romances, in which the gorgeous nasty rival has a mane of curls and a prodigious cleavage, but the heroine only her spirited eyes. The hero's capacity to see the true beauty of the heroine is his central test.

This tradition pits beautiful, vapid Jane Fairfax ("I cannot separate Miss Fairfax from her complexion") against the subtler Emma Woodhouse in Jane Austen's *Emma;* frivolous, blond Rosamond Vincy ("What is the use of being exquisite if you are not seen by the best judges?") against "nun-like" Dorothea Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch;* manipulative, "remarkably pretty" Isabella Crawford against self-effacing Fanny Price in Austen's *Mansfield Park;* fashionable, soulless Isabella Thorpe against Catherine Morland, unsure of herself "where the beauty of her own sex is concerned," in Austen's *Northanger Abbey;* narcissistic Ginevra Fanshawe ("How do I look to-night? . . . I know I am beautiful") against the invisible Lucy Snow ("I saw myself in the glass . . . I thought little of the wan spectacle") in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette;* and, in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women,* vain Amy March, "a graceful statue," against tomboyish Jo, who sells her "one beauty," her hair, to help her family. It descends to the present in the novels of Alison Lurie, Fay Weldon, Anita Brookner. Women's writing is full to the point of heartbreak with the injustices done by beauty—its presence as well as its absence.

But when girls read the books of masculine culture, the myth subverts what those stories seem to say. Tales taught to children as parables for proper values become meaningless for girls as the myth begins its work. Take the story of Prometheus, which appears in Sullivan Reader comic-book form for third grade American children. To a child being socialized into Western culture, it teaches that a great man risks all for intellectual daring, for progress and for the public good. But as a future woman, the little girl learns that the most beautiful woman in the world was man-made, and that *her* intellectual daring brought the first sickness and death onto men. The myth makes a reading girl skeptical of the moral coherence of her culture's stories.

As she grows up, her double vision intensifies: If she reads James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* she is not meant to question why Stephen Dedalus is the hero of his story. But in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—why did the light of description fall on her, and not on any other of the healthy, untutored Wessex farm girls dancing in circles that May morning? She was seen and found beautiful, so *things happened to her*—riches, indigence, prostitution, true love, and hanging. Her life, to say the least, became interesting, while the hard-handed threshing girls around her, her friends, not blessed or cursed with her beauty, stayed in the muddy provinces to carry on the agricultural drudgery that is not the stuff of novels. Stephen is in his story because he's an exceptional subject who must and will be known. But Tess? Without her beauty, she'd have been left out of the sweep and horror of large events. A girl learns that stories happen to "beautiful" women, whether they are interesting or not. And, interesting or not, stories do not happen to women who are not "beautiful."

Her early education in the myth makes her susceptible to the heroines of adult women's mass culture—the models in women's magazines. It is those models whom women usually mention first when they think about the myth.

Women's Magazines

Most commentators, like this *Private Eye* satirist, ridicule women's magazines' "trivial" concerns and their editorial tone: "Women's magazine triteness . . . combines knowing chatter about blowjobs

with deep reservoirs of sentimentality." Women too believe that they transmit the worst aspects of the beauty myth. Readers themselves are often ambivalent about the pleasure mixed up with anxiety that they provide. "I buy them," a young woman told me, "as a form of self-abuse. They give me a weird mixture of anticipation and dread, a sort of stirred-up euphoria. Yes! Wow! I can be better starting from right this minute! Look at her! Look at *her*! But right afterward, I feel like throwing out all my clothes and everything in my refrigerator and telling my boyfriend never to call me again and blowtorching my whole life. I'm ashamed to admit that I read them every month."

Women's magazines accompanied women's advances and the simultaneous evolution of the beauty myth. During the 1860s and 1870s, Girton and Newnham Colleges, Vassar and Radcliffe, and other institutions of higher education for women were founded, and, as historian Peter Gay writes, "women's emancipation was getting out of control." Meanwhile, the mass production of beauty images aimed at women was perfected, and *The Queen* and *Harper's Bazaar* were established; the circulation of Beeton's *English Women's Domestic Magazine* doubled to fifty thousand. The rise in women's magazines was brought about by large investments of capital combined with increased literacy and purchasing power of lower-middle- and working-class women: The democratization of beauty had begun.

Magazines first took advertisers at the turn of the century. As suffragists were chaining themselves to the gates of the White House and of Parliament, the circulation of women's magazines doubled again. By the teens, the era of the New Woman, their style had settled into what it is today: cozy, relaxed, and intimate.

The magazines, other writers have shown, reflect shifts in women's status: Victorian magazines "catered to a female sex virtually in domestic bondage," but with World War I and women's participation in it, they "quickly developed a commensurate degree of social awareness." When the male work force came back from the trenches, the magazines returned to the home. Again in the 1940s they glamorized the world of war-production paid work and war-effort volunteer work. "The press cooperated," writes John Costello in *Love, Sex and War, 1939–1945*, when "the

War Manpower Commission turned to . . . Madison Avenue to boost its national campaign to attract first-time women workers." Glamour, he claims, was a main tool in the enlistment campaign then, just as the beauty myth today serves government and the economy.

As women responded and undertook men's higher-paid work, a new sense of competence and confidence emboldened them. At the same time, writes Costello, advertisements "attempted to preserve the socially acceptable feminine image of women war workers." A Pond's cold cream ad of the time read: "We like to feel we *look* feminine even though we are doing a man-sized job . . . so we tuck flowers and ribbons in our hair and try to keep our faces looking pretty as you please." Costello quotes a cosmetics company's advertisement that admitted that while the war could not be won by lipstick, "it symbolizes one of the reasons why we are fighting . . . the precious right of women to be feminine and lovely." In the face of a great social upheaval that was giving women responsibility, autonomy, state-run child care, and good money, the advertisers needed to ensure that there would be a market left for their products. Costello notes that "it was not just the advertisements . . . magazine articles focused the ladies' attention on the need to keep their FQ (Feminine Quotient) high." The magazines needed to ensure that their readers would not liberate themselves out of their interest in women's magazines.

When the men were demobilized, Western economies faced a crisis. In the United States, the government needed "to counter fears that American soldiers would return to an employment market saturated by women." To its dismay, the Manpower Commission realized that they had been wrong in their hopes that they could exploit women's labor as a stopgap: "Behind the scenes, male-dominated bureaucracies were casting post-war plans on the assumption that most of the women would meekly return to their ageless mission as wives and mothers. But they were wrong." Very wrong: In fact, 61 to 85 percent of women, a 1944 survey found, "certainly did not want to go back to housework after the war." What the commission saw in that decided response from working women was the threat of returned veterans thrown out of work in favor of lower-paid female workers, which would lead to political unrest, even a repeat of the Depression. The year after

the war ended, the magazines swung again—more exaggeratedly than before—back into domesticity, and three million American and one million British women were fired or quit their jobs.

Though many writers have pointed out that women's magazines reflect historical change, fewer examine how part of their job is to determine historical change as well. Editors do their jobs well by reading the *Zeitgeist;* editors of women's magazines—and, increasingly, mainstream media as well—must be alert to what social roles are demanded of women to serve the interests of those who sponsor their publication. Women's magazines for over a century have been one of the most powerful agents for changing women's roles, and throughout that time—today more than ever—they have consistently glamorized whatever the economy, their advertisers, and, during wartime, the government, needed at that moment from women.

By the 1950s, the traditional women's magazine's role was established: "In psychological terms," writes Ann Oakley in *Housewife,* "they enabled the harassed mother, the overburdened housewife, to make contact with her ideal self: that self which aspires to be a good wife, a good mother, and an efficient homemaker. . . . Women's expected role in society [was] to strive after perfection in all three roles." The definition of perfection, however, changes with the needs of employers, politicians, and, in the postwar economy that depended on spiraling consumption, advertisers.

In the 1950s, advertising revenues soared, shifting the balance between editorial and advertising departments. Women's magazines became of interest to "the companies that, with the war about to end, were going to have to make consumer sales take the place of war contracts." The main advertisers in the women's magazines responsible for the Feminine Mystique were seeking to sell household products.

In a chapter of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* entitled "The Sexual Sell," she traced how American housewives' "lack of identity" and "lack of purpose . . . [are] manipulated into dollars." She explored a marketing service and found that, of the three categories of women, the Career Woman was "unhealthy" from the advertisers' point of view, and "that it would be to their advantage not to let this group get any larger . . . . they are not the ideal type of customer. *They are too critical.*"

The marketers' reports described how to manipulate housewives into becoming insecure consumers of household products: "A transfer of guilt must be achieved," they said. "Capitalize . . . on 'guilt over hidden dirt.'" Stress the "therapeutic value" of baking, they suggested: "With X mix in the home, you will be a different woman." They urged giving the housewife "a sense of achievement" to compensate her for a task that was "endless" and "time-consuming." Give her, they urged manufacturers, "specialized products for specialized tasks"; and "make housework a matter of knowledge and skill, rather than a matter of brawn and dull, unremitting effort." Identify your products with "spiritual rewards," an "almost religious feeling," "an almost religious belief." For objects with "added psychological value," the report concluded, "the price itself hardly matters." Modern advertisers are selling diet products and "specialized" cosmetics and antiaging creams rather than household goods. In 1989, "toiletries/cosmetics" ad revenue offered $650 million to the magazines, while "soaps, cleansers, and polishes" yielded only one tenth that amount. So modern women's magazines now center on beauty work rather than housework: You can easily substitute in the above quotes from the 1950s all the appropriate modern counterparts from the beauty myth.

If the ads and commercials are a "clear case of *caveat emptor,*" Friedan concluded,

> the same sexual sell disguised in the editorial content is both less ridiculous and more insidious. . . . A memo need never be written, a sentence need never be spoken at an editorial conference; the men and women who make the editorial decisions often compromise their very own high standards in the interest of the advertising dollar.

That is still true.

Nothing structural has changed except the details of the dream. Betty Friedan asked:

Why is it never said that the really crucial function . . . that women serve as housewives is to *buy more things for the house*? . . . Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives. . . . It would take a pretty clever economist to figure out what would keep our affluent economy going if the housewife market began to fall off.

When the restless, isolated, bored, and insecure housewife fled the Feminine Mystique for the workplace, advertisers faced the loss of their primary consumer. How to make sure that busy, stimulated working women would keep consuming at the levels they had done when they had all day to do so and little else of interest to occupy them? A new ideology was necessary that would compel the same insecure consumerism; that ideology must be, unlike that of the Feminine Mystique, a briefcase-sized neurosis that the working woman could take with her to the office. To paraphrase Friedan, why is it never said that the really crucial function that women serve as aspiring beauties is *to buy more things for the body*? Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that they will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring "beauties."

"Clever economists" did figure out what would keep our affluent economy going once the housewife market began to fall off after the second wave of women's advancement sparked by Friedan's book: The modern form of the beauty myth was figured out, with its $33-billion thinness industry and its $20-billion youth industry.

In the breakdown of the Feminine Mystique and the rebirth of the women's movement, the magazines and advertisers of that defunct religion were confronted with their own obsolescence. *The beauty myth, in its modern form, arose to take the place of the Feminine Mystique, to save magazines and advertisers from the economic fallout of the women's revolution.*

The beauty myth simply took over the function of Friedan's "religion" of domesticity. The terms have changed but the effect is the same. Of the women's culture of the 1950s, Friedan

lamented that "there is no other way for a woman to be a heroine" than to "keep on having babies"; today, a heroine must "keep on being beautiful."

The women's movement nearly succeeded in toppling the economics of the magazines' version of femininity. During its second wave, clothing manufacturers were alarmed to find that women weren't spending much money on clothing anymore. As middle-class women abandoned their role as consuming housewives and entered the work force, their engagement with the issues of the outer world could foreseeably lead them to lose interest altogether in women's magazines' separate feminine reality. And the magazines' authority was undermined still further with the fashion upheavals that began in the late 1960s, the end of haute couture and the beginning of what fashion historians Elizabeth Wilson and Lou Taylor call "style for all." Would liberated women read women's magazines? What for? Indeed, between 1965 and 1981, British women's magazine sales fell sharply from 555.3 million to 407.4 million copies a year. The magazines' editors and publishers could foresee their traditional hold on women being loosened by the winds of social change.

High-fashion culture ended, and the women's magazines' traditional expertise was suddenly irrelevant. The Feminine Mystique evaporated; *all that was left was the body*. With the rebirth of the women's movement, *Vogue* in 1969 offered up—hopefully, perhaps desperately—the Nude Look. Women's sense of liberation from the older constraints of fashion was countered by a new and sinister relationship to their bodies, as, writes historian Roberta Pollack Seid, "*Vogue* began to focus on the body as much as on the clothes, in part because there was little they could dictate with the anarchic styles." Stripped of their old expertise, purpose, and advertising hook, the magazines invented—almost completely artificially—a new one. In a stunning move, an entire replacement culture was developed by naming a "problem" where it had scarcely existed before, centering it on women's natural state, and elevating it to *the* existential female dilemma. The number of diet-related articles rose 70 percent from 1968 to 1972. Articles on dieting in the popular press soared from 60 in the year 1979 to 66 in the *month* of January 1980 alone. By 1983–84, the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* listed 103 articles; by 1984,

300 diet books were on the shelves. The lucrative "transfer of guilt" was resurrected just in time.

That "transfer of guilt" that rescued the women's magazines gained power from the caricature in the mainstream media of the heroines of the reborn women's movement, a caricature that had been done to death for over a century, always in service of the same kind of backlash; the 1848 Seneca Falls convention for a female Bill of Rights provoked editorials about "'unsexed women,'" writes Gay, which insinuated that they had become activists because "they were too repulsive to find a husband. . . . These women are entirely devoid of personal attractions." Another antifeminist publicist he quoted characterized them as a "hybrid species, half man and half woman, belonging to neither sex." When a supporter, Senator Lane of Kansas, presented a petition for the franchise on behalf of "one hundred and twenty-four beautiful, intelligent and accomplished ladies," another editorial protested that "that trick . . . will not do. We wager an apple that the ladies referred to are not 'beautiful' or accomplished. Nine out of ten of them are undoubtedly *passé*. They have hook-billed noses, crow's feet under their sunken eyes. . . ." A doctor reacting to feminist agitation characterized such "degenerate women" by "their low voices, hirsute bodies, and small breasts." According to Gay, "Feminists were denigrated as failed women, half-men, hens that crow . . . humor magazines and hostile legislators everywhere broadcast a frightening picture of appalling masculine harridans haranguing the House of Commons."

As soon as women of the 1960s spoke up, the media took on the dreamwork demanded by the vital lie of the time, and trained the beauty myth against the women's appearance. The reaction to the 1969 protest against the Miss America pageant set the stage. Coverage focused on signs reading, THERE'S ONLY ONE THING WRONG WITH MISS AMERICA—SHE'S BEAUTIFUL and JEALOUSY WILL GET YOU NOWHERE. Soon, *Esquire* was profiling Gloria Steinem as "the intellectual's pinup" and *Commentary* dismissed feminism as "a bunch . . . of ugly women screaming at each other on television." *The New York Times* quoted a traditional women's leader saying, "So many of them are just so unattractive." The 1970 march down Fifth Avenue was interpreted by the *Washington Star* as important for having

"retired the canard about women's libbers being ugly," as reporter Pete Hamill hadn't "seen so many beautiful women in one place for years." Norman Mailer said to Germaine Greer before their famous debate at City Hall, "You're better looking than I thought." Headlines read, WOMEN ARE REVOLTING. Women took in the way the movement was being depicted, and the caricatures did their work.

Though many women realized that their attention was being focused in this way, fewer fully understood how thoroughly politically such focusing works: In drawing attention to the physical characteristics of women leaders, *they can be dismissed as either too pretty or too ugly*. The net effect is to prevent women's identification with the issues. If the public woman is stigmatized as too "pretty," she's a threat, a rival—or simply not serious; if derided as too "ugly," one risks tarring oneself with the same brush by identifying oneself with her agenda. The political implications of the fact that *no woman or group of women*, whether housewives, prostitutes, astronauts, politicians or feminists, can survive unscathed the no-win scrutiny of the beauty myth are not yet reorganized in their full dimensions so the divide-and-conquer dreamwork was effective. Since "beauty" follows fashion, and the myth determines that when something female matures it is unfashionable, the maturing of feminism was crudely but effectively distorted in the lens of the myth.

The new wave of post–women's movement magazines gained ground from the anxiety that such caricature provoked in achieving women. Nonetheless, the new wave—initiated in 1965 by the revamped *Cosmopolitan*—is indeed revolutionary compared with the earlier service magazines that Friedan had attacked. Their formula includes an aspirational, individualist, can-do tone that says that you should be your best and nothing should get in your way; a focus on personal and sexual relationships that affirms female ambition and erotic appetite; and sexualized images of female models that, though only slightly subtler than those aimed at men, are meant to convey female sexual liberation. But the formula must also include an element that contradicts and then undermines the overall prowoman fare: In diet, skin care, and surgery features, it sells women the deadliest version of the beauty myth money can buy.

This obligatory beauty myth dosage the magazines provide elicits in their readers a raving, itching, parching product lust, and an abiding fantasy: the longing for some fairy godmother who will arrive at the reader's door and put her to sleep. When she awakens, her bathroom will be full of exactly the right skin-care products, with step-by-step instructions, and palettes of exactly the required makeup. The kindly phantom will have colored and cut the sleeper's hair to perfection, made over her face, and painlessly nipped and tucked it. In her closet she will discover a complete wardrobe arranged by season and occasion, color-coordinated and accessorized on shoe trees and in hatboxes. The refrigerator will be full of miniature vegetables, artfully displayed in prepared gourmet meals, with Perrier and Evian water virtuously ranged. She will deliver herself into a world of female consumer apotheosis, beyond appetite.

The extreme contradictions between the positive and negative elements of the magazines' message provoke extreme reactions in women (in 1970, *The Ladies' Home Journal* was the target of an angry all-woman sit-in). Why do women care so much what the magazines say and show?

They care because, though the magazines are trivialized, they represent something very important: women's mass culture. A woman's magazine is not just a magazine. The relationship between the woman reader and her magazine is so different from that between a man and his that they aren't in the same category: A man reading *Popular Mechanics* or *Newsweek* is browsing through just one perspective among countless others of general male-oriented culture, which is everywhere. A woman reading *Glamour* is holding women-oriented mass culture between her two hands.

Women are deeply affected by what their magazines tell them (or what they believe they tell them) because they are all most women have as a window on their own mass sensibility. General culture takes a male point of view on what's newsworthy, so that the Super Bowl is on the front page while a change in child care legislation is buried in a paragraph on an inside page. It also takes a male point of view about who is worth looking at: Of fifty years of *Life* magazine covers, though many showed women, only 19 of those were not actresses or models; that is, not there because of their "beauty" (indeed, true to the beauty myth, in the case of

Eleanor Roosevelt, almost every interviewer makes a reference to her famous "ugliness"). Newspapers relegate women's issues to the "women's page"; TV news programming consigns "women's stories" to the daytime. In contrast, women's magazines are the only products of popular culture that (unlike romances) change with women's reality, are mostly written by women for women about women's issues, and take women's concerns seriously.

Women react so strongly to their inconsistencies since they probably recognize that the magazines' contradictions are their own. Their economic reality is that of an individual woman writ large: They reflect the uneasy truce in which women pay for scope and power with beauty thinking. *Women's magazines themselves are subject to a textual version of the PBQ.* Like its readers, the magazine must pay for its often serious, prowoman content with beauty backlash trappings; it must do so to reassure its advertisers, who are threatened by the possible effects on women's minds of too much excellence in women's journalism. The magazines' personalities are split between the beauty myth and feminism in exactly the same way those of their readers are split.

Are the magazines trivial, degrading, and antifeminist? The beauty myth is; the editorial content by now, wherever it can escape the myth, decidedly is not. Many women who care about women's culture are drawn to tap in to this one stream of female mass consciousness, whether as editors, writers, or readers. The magazines' editorial content changed beyond recognition, for the better, after the rebirth of feminism. Twenty years ago the activists who demonstrated at the offices of *The Ladies' Home Journal* offered a utopian list of article ideas: Instead of "Zsa Zsa Gabor's Bed," they proposed "How to Get an Abortion," "How and Why Women Are Kept Apart," "How to Get a Divorce," "Developments in Day Care," and "What Our Detergents Do to the Rivers and Streams." And it happened: One recognizes each of these once-extreme suggestions as the typical fare of the new wave of women's magazines.

What is seldom acknowledged is that they have popularized feminist ideas more widely than any other medium—certainly more widely than explicitly feminist journals. It was through these glossies that issues from the women's movement swept out from the barricades and down from academic ivory towers to blow

into the lives of working-class women, rural women, women without higher education. Seen in this light, they are very potent instruments of social change.

The feminist content in these magazines is of a level that could not have been imagined in Cecil Beaton's *Vogue* or in the *Redbook* targeted by Betty Friedan: Articles regularly run on abortion, rape, woman battering, sexual self-expression, and economic independence. Indeed, criticism of the beauty myth is found in them more often than anywhere else. For example, *Glamour:* "How to Make Peace with the Body You've Got"; *She:* "Fat Is Not a Sin"; *Cosmopolitan:* "What Should We Do About Pornography?" *Glamour* again: "The Appeal of Real Women," ("Make way for the smart-mouthed actresses who get the man without being gorgeous . . . whose sex appeal comes from energy, snappy banter, smartness, rather than statuesque bodies or great looks.") Even the articles that deal with emotional states and personal relationships, those most often ridiculed, are not ridiculous when one considers how communities are held together through this "emotional housework" that women are expected innately to know how to do.

When the emphasis is on the "mass" part of their appeal, the women's magazines' political importance grows clearer. Many books and journals have brought issues from the women's movement to the minority: middle-class, educated women. But the new breed of women's magazines are the first messengers in history to address the majority of women, those who are struggling financially, to tell them they have a right to define themselves first. They point out ways for them to get power: to study martial arts, to play the stock market, to take charge of their health. These magazines run women's fiction, profile female achievers, and discuss women-related legislation. If only in terms of making enough space to cover women's political and cultural experience, the most lightweight women's magazine is a more serious force for women's advancement than the most heavyweight general periodical.

They also provide a rare platform, through letters, serialization, and changing contributors, for woman-to-woman debate. Because they are the only place for women to find out what's going on in the other world—the female reality so fleetingly acknowledged by "serious" journals—women's intense love-hate reaction to them makes sense. In these respects, the magazines' role should be seen as very serious. For a mass female culture that responds to historical change, they are all that women have.

No wonder that women resent the elements of their format that follow repetitive formulas. No wonder it disturbs them when their magazines seem servile to the degrading economic bottom line of the beauty myth. Women's magazines would not provoke such strong feelings if they were merely escapist entertainment. But in the absence of mainstream journalism that treats women's issues with anything like the seriousness they deserve, women's magazines take on a burden of significance—and responsibility—that would otherwise be spread out over half the "serious" periodicals on the market.

But women's magazines do not simply mirror our own dilemma of beauty being asked as an apology for new scope and power. They intensify it. Even their editors worry that many readers have not learned how to separate out the prowoman content from the beauty myth in the magazines, whose place is primarily economic.

Unfortunately, the beauty backlash is spread and reinforced by the cycles of self-hatred provoked in women by the advertisements, photo features, and beauty copy in the glossies. These make up the beauty index, which women scan as anxiously as men scan stock reports. It promises to tell women what men truly want, what faces and bodies provoke men's fickle attentions—a seductive promise in an environment in which men and women rarely get to talk together honestly in a public setting about what each really desires. But the Iron Maiden they offer is no direct template of men's desires, any more than beefcake photos tell the whole truth about women's desires. The magazines are not oracles speaking for men. Indeed, as one study found, "our data suggest women are misinformed and exaggerate the magnitude of thinness men desire . . . they *are* misinformed, probably as a result of promotion of thinness in women through advertising in the diet industry." What editors are obliged to appear to say that *men* want from women is actually what their *advertisers* want from women.

The magazine's message *about the myth* is determined by its

advertisers. But the relationship between the reader and her magazine doesn't happen in a context that encourages her to analyze how the message is affected by the advertisers' needs. It is emotional, confiding, defensive, and unequal: "the link binding readers to their magazine, the great umbilical, as some call it, the trust."

The myth isolates women by generation, and the magazines seem to offer them the wise advice, tested by experience, of an admirable older female relative. There are few other places where a modern woman can find such a role model. She is taught to dismiss her own mother's teachings about beauty, adornment, and seduction, since her mother has failed—she is aging. If she is lucky enough to have a mentor, it will be in a professional relationship, in which these intimate skills are not part of the training. The voice of the magazine gives women an invisible female authority figure to admire and obey, parallel to the mentor-protégé relationship that many men are encouraged to forge in their educations and on the job, but which women are rarely offered anywhere else but in their glossy magazines.

The voice encourages that trust. It has evolved a tone of allegiance to the reader, of being on your side with superior knowhow and resources, like a woman-run social service: "Many cosmetics companies are on hand to help"; "We know how to make a difference. Let our beauty specialists guide you step by step." The magazines provide actual services, listing help lines, offering readers' polls, giving women tools for budgeting and financial information. These combine to make the magazine seem to be more than a magazine: They make it appear to be a mix of extended family, benefit agency, political party, and guild. They make it look like an interest group with the reader's best interest at heart. "A magazine," says one editor, "is like a club. Its function is to provide readers with a comfortable sense of community and pride in their identity."

Because people trust their clubs and because this voice is so attractive, it is difficult to read the magazine with a sharp eye as to how thoroughly ad revenue influences the copy. It is easy to misread the whole thing—advertisements, beauty copy, images of models—as if it were a coherent message from the editors telling women, "You should be like this." Some of the harm done by the

magazines to women comes out of that misunderstanding. If we could read them in a more informed way, we could take the pleasure and leave the pain, and the magazines, with different advertisers, could do themselves the justice that they deserve in providing women with the only serious mass-market women's journalism available.

Women also respond to the beauty myth aspect of the magazines because adornment is an enormous—and often pleasing—part of female culture. And there is almost nowhere else where they can participate in women's culture in so broad a way. The myth does not only isolate women generationally, but because it encourages women's wariness of one another on the basis of their appearance, it tries to isolate them from all women they do not know and like personally. Though women have networks of intimate friends, the myth, and women's conditions until recently, have kept women from learning how to do something that makes all male social change possible: How to identify with unknown other women in a way that is not personal.

The unknown woman, the myth would like women to believe, is unapproachable; under suspicion before she opens her mouth because she's Another Woman, and beauty thinking urges women to approach one another as possible adversaries until they know they are friends. The look with which strange women sometimes appraise one another says it all: A quick up-and-down, curt and wary, it takes in the picture but leaves out the person; the shoes, the muscle tone, the makeup, are noted accurately, but the eyes glance off one another. Women can tend to resent each other if they look too "good" and dismiss one another if they look too "bad." So women too rarely benefit from the experience that makes men's clubs and organizations hold together: The solidarity of belonging to a group whose members might not be personal friends outside, but who are united in an interest, agenda, or worldview.

Ironically, the myth that drives women apart also binds them together. Commiserating about the myth is as good as a baby to bring strange women into pleasant contact, and break down the line of Other Woman wariness. A wry smile about calories, a complaint about one's hair, can evaporate the sullen examination of a rival in the fluorescent light of a ladies' room. On one hand,

women are trained to be competitors against all others for "beauty"; on the other, when one woman—a bride, a shopper in a boutique—needs to be adorned for a big occasion, other women swoop and bustle around her in generous concentration in a team formation as effortlessly choreographed as a football play. These sweet and satisfying rituals of being all on the same side, these all-too-infrequent celebrations of shared femaleness, are some of the few shared female rituals left; hence their loveliness and power. But, sadly, these delightful bonds too often dissolve when the women reenter public space and resume their isolated, unequal, mutually threatening, jealously guarded "beauty" status.

Women's magazines cater to that delicious sense of impersonal female solidarity, now, compared with the high-water mark of the second wave, so rare. They bring out of the closet women's lust for chat across the barriers of potential jealousy and prejudgment. What are other women really thinking, feeling, experiencing, when they slip away from the gaze and culture of men? The magazines offer the electrifying feeling that women are too seldom granted, though men in their groups feel it continually, of being plugged in without hostility to a million like-minded people of the same sex. Though the magazines' version is sadly watered down, women are so deprived of it that it is powerful even in a dilute concentration. Each reader, Mormon housewife in Phoenix, schoolteacher in Lancashire, conceptual artist in Sydney, welfare mother in Detroit, physics professor in Manhattan, prostitute in Brussels, au pair in Lyons, is dipping into the same bath of images. All can participate in this one way in a worldwide women's culture, which, though inadequate and ultimately harmful, is still one of the few celebrations of female sexuality in solidarity that women are allowed.

One sees the "perfect" face differently with this in mind. Its power is not far-reaching because of anything innately special about the face: Why that one? Its only power is that it has been designated as "the face"—and that hence millions and millions of women are looking at it together, and know it. A Christian Dior cosmetic vision stares from a bus at a grandmother drinking a *café con leche* on a balcony in Madrid. A cardboard blowup of the same image gazes at the teenage Youth Training Scheme worker setting

it up in the local pharmacy in a village in Dorset. It glows over a bazaar in Alexandria. *Cosmopolitan* appears in seventeen countries; buying Clarins, women "join millions of women worldwide"; Weight Watchers products offer "Friends. More friends. Still more friends."

The beauty myth, paradoxically, offers the promise of a solidarity movement, an Internationale. Where else do women get to feel positively or even negatively connected with millions of women worldwide? The images in women's magazines constitute the only cultural female experience that can begin to gesture at the breadth of solidarity possible among women, a solidarity as wide as half the human race. It is a meager Esperanto, but in the absence of a better language of their own they must make do with one that is man-made and market driven, and which hurts them.

Our magazines simply reflect our own dilemma: Since much of their message is about women's advancement, much of the beauty myth must accompany it and temper its impact. Because the magazines are so serious, they must also be so frivolous. Because they offer women power, they must also promote masochism. Because feminist poet Marge Piercy attacks the dieting cult in *New Woman*, therefore the facing page must give a scare sheet about obesity. While the editors take a step forward for themselves and their readers, they must also take a step back into the beauty myth for the sake of their advertisers.

Advertisers are the West's courteous censors. They blur the line between editorial freedom and the demands of the marketplace. The magazine may project the intimate atmosphere of clubs, guilds, or extended families, but they have to act like businesses. Because of who their advertisers are, a tacit screening takes place. It isn't conscious policy, it doesn't circulate in memos, it doesn't need to be thought about or spoken. It is understood that some kinds of thinking about "beauty" would alienate advertisers, while others promote their products. With the implicit need to maintain advertising revenue in order to keep publishing, editors are not yet *able* to assign features and test products as if the myth did not pay the bills. A women's magazine's profit does not come from its cover price, so its contents cannot roam too far from the advertisers' wares. In a *Columbia Journalism Review* story captioned "Magazine Crisis: Selling Out

for Ads," Michael Hoyt reports that women's magazines have always been under particular pressure from their advertisers; what's new is the intensity of the demands.

Women's magazines are not alone in this editorial obligation to the bottom line. It is on the increase outside them, too, making all media increasingly dependent on the myth. The 1980s saw a proliferation of magazines, each competing wildly for its piece of the advertising pie. The pressure is now on newspapers and news magazines: "Editors are facing a harder time maintaining their virginity," says the editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*. Lewis Lapham, editor of *Harper's*, says that New York editors speak of "the fragility of the word" and "advise discretion when approaching topics likely to alarm the buyers of large advertising space." "The American press is, and always has been, a booster press, its editorial pages characteristically advancing the same arguments as the paid advertising copy," he writes. According to *Time*, modern media management now "sees readers as a market." So publishers must seek upscale advertisers and apply pressure for upscale stories. "Today, if you had Watergate, you would have to check with the marketing department," says editor Thomas Winship. The *Columbia Journalism Review* quotes the former editor of *The Boston Globe:* "'Magazines are commodities, commodities are there to sell goods, and the competition these days is ferocious.' He admits that now he too is heavily dependent on fashion ads. 'We used to have a silken curtain between advertising and editorial, but no more.' For years now, some publishers have gone out of their way to attract advertisers by creating what advertisers regard as a favorable editorial atmosphere." John R. MacArthur, editor of *Harper's*, believes, writes Hoyt, that "editing for advertisers" will destroy what makes magazines valuable: "an environment of quality and trust." Soon, if this trend continues unchecked, there will be few media left that will be free to investigate or question the beauty myth, or even offer alternatives, without worrying about the advertising repercussions.

The atmosphere is thronged with more versions of the Iron Maiden now than ever before also because of recent changes in media organization that have intensified visual competition. In 1988, the average person in the United States saw 14 percent more TV advertising than two years before, or 650 TV messages a week as part of the total of 1,000 ad messages each day. The industry calls this situation "viewer confusion": Just 1.2 of the 650 messages are remembered, down from 1.7 in 1983; the advertising business is in a growing panic.

So images of women and "beauty" become more extreme. As advertising executives told *The Boston Globe*, "You have to push a little harder . . . to jolt, shock, break through. Now that the competition is fiercer, a whole lot rougher trade takes place. [Rough trade is gay male slang for a sadistic heterosexual partner.] Today, business wants even more desperately to seduce. . . . It wants to demolish resistance." Rape is the current advertising metaphor.

In addition, film, TV, and magazines are under pressure to compete with pornography, which is now the biggest media category. Worldwide, pornography generates an estimated 7 *billion* dollars a year, more, incredibly, than the legitimate film and music industries combined. Pornographic films outnumber other films by three to one, grossing 365 million dollars a year in the United States alone, or a million dollars a day. British pornographic magazines sell twenty million copies a year at 2 to 3 pounds (about $3.20 to $4.80) a copy, grossing 500 million pounds a year. Swedish pornography earns 300–400 million kronor a year; a sex shop there offers some 500 titles, and a corner tobacconist, 20 to 30 titles. In 1981, 500,000 Swedish men bought pornographic magazines each week; by 1983, every fourth video rented in Sweden was pornographic; and by 1985, 13.6 million pornographic magazines were sold by the largest distributors in corner kiosks. Eighteen million men a month in the United States buy a total of 165 different pornographic magazines generating about half a billion dollars a year; one American man in ten reads *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, or *Hustler* each month; *Playboy* and *Penthouse* are the most widely read magazines in Canada. Italian men spend 600 billion lire on pornography a year, with pornographic videos representing 30–50 percent of all Italian video sales. Pornography worldwide, according to researchers, is becoming increasingly violent. (As slasher filmmaker Herschel Gordon Lewis said, "I mutilated women in our pictures because I felt it was better box office.")

To raise the level of pressure once again, this image competi-

tion is taking place during worldwide deregulation of the airwaves. In its wake, the beauty myth is exported from West to East, and from rich to poor. United States programming is flooding Europe and First World programs flood the Third World: In Belgium, Holland, and France, 30 percent of TV is American-made, and about 71 percent of TV programs in developing countries are imports from the rich world. In India, TV ownership doubled in five years and advertisers have sponsored shows since 1984. Until a decade ago, most European TV was state-run; but privatization, cable, and satellite changed all that, so that by 1995 there could be 120 channels, all but a few financed by advertising, with revenues expected to rise from $9 billion to $25 billion by the year 2000.

America is no exception. "The networks are running scared," reports *The Guardian* [London]. In ten years (1979–89), they lost 16 percent of the market to cable, independents, and video: "The result is a glitz blitz."

With *glasnost*, the beauty myth is being imported behind the Iron Curtain, as much to constrain a possible revival of feminism as to simulate consumer plenty where little exists. "*Glasnost* and *perestroika*," says Natalia Zacharova, a Soviet social critic, ". . . seem likely to bring Soviet women contradictory freedoms. Glamour will be one of them." Her remark was prescient: *Reform*, Hungary's revealingly named first tabloid, read by one in ten Hungarians, has a topless or bottomless model on each page. *Playboy* hailed Soviet Natalya Negoda as "The Soviets' first sex star." Nationalist China entered the Miss Universe contest in 1988, the year the first Miss Moscow competition was held, following Cuba and Bulgaria. In 1990, outdated copies of *Playboy* and women's glamour magazines began to be shipped to the Soviet bloc; we will be able to watch the beauty myth unfold there in utero. Tatiana Mamanova, a Soviet feminist, responding to a question about the difference between the West and Russia, replied, "The pornography . . . it's everywhere, even on billboards . . . [it] is a different kind of assault. And it doesn't feel like freedom to me."

Censorship

In the free West, there is a good deal that women's magazines cannot say. In 1956 the first "arrangement" was made, when a nylon manufacturers' association booked a $12,000 space in *Woman*, and the editor agreed not to publish anything in the issue that prominently featured natural fibers. "Such silences," writes Janice Winship, "conscious or not, were to become commonplace."

Those silences we inherit, and they inhibit our freedom of speech. According to Gloria Steinem, *Ms.* lost a major cosmetics account because it featured Soviet women on its cover who were not, according to the advertiser, wearing enough makeup. Thirty-five thousand dollars worth of advertising was withdrawn from a British magazine the day after an editor, Carol Sarler, was quoted as saying that she found it hard to show women looking intelligent when they were plastered with makeup. A gray-haired editor for a leading women's magazine told a gray-haired writer, Mary Kay Blakely, that an article about the glories of gray hair cost her magazine the Clairol account for six months. An editor of *New York Woman*, a staff member told me, was informed that for financial reasons she had to put a model on the cover rather than a remarkable woman she wished to profile. Gloria Steinem remembers the difficulty of trying to fund a magazine beyond the beauty myth:

> With . . . no intention of duplicating the traditional departments designed around "feminine" advertising categories—recipes to reinforce food ads, beauty features to mention beauty products, and the like—we knew it would be economically tough. (Fortunately, we didn't know *how* tough.) Attracting ads for cars, sound equipment, beer, and other things not traditionally directed to women still turns out to be easier than convincing advertisers that women look at ads for shampoo without accompanying articles on how to wash their hair, just as men look at ads for shaving products without articles on how to shave.

As she put it more wearily in a later interview in *New Woman*, "Advertisers don't believe in female opinion makers." Steinem believes that it's the advertisers who've got to change. And she believes they will, though perhaps not in her lifetime. Women need to change too, though; only when we take our own mass media seriously and resist its expectations that we will submit to still more instructions on "how to wash our hair" will advertisers concede that women's magazines must be entitled to as wide a measure of free speech as those for men.

Other censorship is more direct: Women's magazines transmit "information" about beauty products in a heavily self-censored medium. When you read about skin creams and holy oils, you are not reading free speech. Beauty editors are unable to tell the whole truth about their advertisers' products. In a *Harper's Bazaar* article, "Younger Every Day," opinions on various antiaging creams were solicited only and entirely from the presidents of ten cosmetics companies. Cosmetics and toiletry producers spend proportionately more on advertising than any other industry. The healthier the industry, the sicker are women's consumer and civil rights. Cosmetic stock is rising 15 percent yearly, and beauty copy is little more than advertising. "Beauty editors," writes Penny Chorlton in *Cover-up*, "are rarely able to write freely about cosmetics," since advertisers require an editorial promotion as a condition for placing the ad. The woman who buys a product on the recommendation of beauty copy is paying for the privilege of being lied to by two sources.

This market in turn is buoyed up by another more serious form of censorship. Dalma Heyn, editor of two women's magazines, confirms that airbrushing age from women's faces is routine. She observes that women's magazines "ignore older women or pretend they don't exist: magazines try to avoid photographs of older women, and when they feature celebrities who are over sixty, 'retouching artists' conspire to 'help' beautiful women look more beautiful; i.e., less their age."

This censorship extends beyond women's magazines to any image of an older woman: Bob Ciano, once art director of *Life* magazine, says that "no picture of a woman goes unretouched . . . even a well-known [older] woman who doesn't want to be retouched . . . we still persist in trying to make her look like she's

in her fifties." The effect of this censorship of a third of the female life span is clear to Heyn: "By now readers have no idea what a real woman's 60-year-old face looks like in print because it's made to look 45. Worse, 60-year-old readers look in the mirror and think they look too old, because they're comparing themselves to some retouched face smiling back at them from a magazine." Photographs of the bodies of models are often trimmed with scissors. "Computer imaging"—the controversial new technology that tampers with photographic reality—has been used for years in women's magazines' beauty advertising. Women's culture is an adulterated, inhibited medium. How do the values of the West, which hates censorship and believes in a free exchange of ideas, fit in here?

This issue is not trivial. It is about the most fundamental freedoms: the freedom to imagine one's own future and to be proud of one's own life. Airbrushing age off women's faces has the same political echo that would resound if all positive images of blacks were routinely lightened. That would be making the same value judgment about blackness that this tampering makes about the value of the female life: that less is more. To airbrush age off a woman's face is to erase women's identity, power, and history.

But editors must follow the formula that works. They can't risk providing what many readers claim they want: imagery that includes them, features that don't talk down to them, reliable consumer reporting. It is impossible, many editors assert, because the readers do not yet want those things enough.

Imagine a women's magazine that positively featured round models, short models, old models—or no models at all, but real individual women. Let's say that it had a policy of avoiding cruelty to women, as some now have a policy of endorsing products made free of cruelty to animals. And that it left out crash diets, mantras to achieve self-hatred, and promotional articles for the profession that cuts open healthy women's bodies. And let's say that it ran articles in praise of the magnificence of visible age, displayed loving photo essays on the bodies of women of all shapes and proportions, examined with gentle curiosity the body's changes after birth and breast-feeding, offered recipes without punishment or guilt, and ran seductive portraits of men.

It would run aground, losing the bulk of its advertisers. Magazines, consciously or half-consciously, must project the attitude that looking one's age is bad because $650 million of their ad revenue comes from people who would go out of business if visible age looked good. They need, consciously or not, to promote women's hating their bodies enough to go profitably hungry, since the advertising budget for one third of the nation's food bill depends on their doing so by dieting. The advertisers who make women's mass culture possible depend on making women feel bad enough about their faces and bodies to spend more money on worthless or pain-inducing products than they would if they felt innately beautiful.

But more significantly, that magazine would run aground because women are so well schooled in the beauty myth that we often internalize it: Many of us are not yet sure ourselves that women are interesting without "beauty." Or that women's issues alone are involving enough for them to pay good money to read about if beauty thinking is not added to the mix.

Since self-hatred artificially inflates the demand and the price, the overall message to women from their magazines must remain—as long as the beauty backlash is intact—negative not positive. Hence the hectoring tone that no other magazines use to address adults with money in their pockets: do's and don'ts that scold, insinuate, and condescend. The same tone in a men's magazine—*do* invest in tax-free bonds; *don't* vote Republican—is unthinkable. Since the advertisers depend on consumer behavior in women that can be brought about only through threats and compulsion, threats and compulsion weigh down the otherwise valuable editorial content of the magazines.

Women see the Face and the Body all around them now not because culture magically manifests a transparent male fantasy, but because advertisers need to sell products in a free-for-all of imagery bombardment intent on lowering women's self-esteem; and, for reasons that are political and not sexual, both men and women now pay attention to images of the Face and the Body. And it means that in the intensified competition to come, if no change of consciousness intervenes—for women's magazines cannot become more interesting until women believe that we ourselves are more interesting—the myth is bound to become many times more powerful.

And then the further the magazine guides the reader on her positive intellectual journey, the further it will drive her at the same time down the troubled route of her beauty addiction. And as the experiences along the way become ever more extreme, the stronger will grow women's maddening sense that our culture has a split personality, which it seeks to convey to us through a seductive, embarrassing, challenging, and guilt-laden quid pro quo between dazzling covers.