

**BEYOND TRASHINESS:  
THE SEXUAL LANGUAGE OF 1970S FEMINIST FICTION**

By Meryl Altman<sup>1</sup>

*Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. "Stop!" cried the groaning old man at last, "Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree." (Stein 3)*

*In rapidly changing societies all generations are transitional. (Breines 24)*

I came to the *Third Wave Feminism* conference at Exeter intrigued, but unsure, what its name could mean, and admittedly something of a skeptic about the whole idea of “waves” and generations within twentieth-century US feminism. Having watched an acrimonious debate unfold over the previous year on a widely-read women’s studies listserv (wmst-1), I had concluded that self-identified second and third wavers look at one another in a series of distorting mirrors; it is unsurprisingly difficult to specify an ideological content or program for either, or rather, it is all too easy to stick labels on the Other generation, but the Others will not wear them. Everyone seems to end up feeling misrepresented or caricatured. Was the metaphor of a “wave” meant to name a historical period in which, if one happens to be a certain age at a certain time, one has no choice but to swim? Or, is a “wave” a set of principles and commitments, to which a person of any age might freely subscribe at any time – or might choose not to subscribe? An interesting blur develops between historical location and individual thought, between cultural situation and intellectual agency. I am unsure, in other words, whether what is being described is a large-scale historical and cultural shift, or a conscious intellectual intervention into that shift and, if so, whether on the level of content, argument, method, or style. Then too, many who speak of “waves” seem to be asserting some sort of link

between a change in academic discourses (perhaps animated by the professionalized demand for originality, novelty and “progress”) and a cultural change in the world outside the academy; but the nature of this link is often vague and underspecified.<sup>2</sup>

My own reading, as my epigraphs suggest, is that the conflicts between feminists we are seeing are terribly important, but they are not new; that generational conflict is not binary, but perennial; and, that the metaphor of waves is a convenient shape into which flow all sorts of local distresses and arguments that are really about other things, such as institutional and cultural legitimacy, money, sexuality, and power. Or maybe it is just that I am 43; which makes me what? Wave 2.5? So I came out during the sex wars and got my Ph.D. during the theory wars, and none of it seemed like a restful or boring ebb or trough at the time. Less solipsistically (and setting aside the question of whether “solipsism” marks me as an ungrateful third wave daughter, or a blinded second wave liberal), I have been working on Simone de Beauvoir and the 1950s, which presumably would be waves 1.8 and 1.9 respectively.<sup>3</sup> How helpful is this sort of periodization really? Bronwyn Winter has asked whether the notion of waves makes *The Second Sex* a non-wave, which seems somehow a counterintuitive thing to say about the most concretely influential theoretical text of the twentieth century. The effect of such periodization on Beauvoir’s reception would seem to repeat the mother-blaming and lack of acknowledgement that characterized Beauvoir’s reception in the 1970s and 1980s. It is also increasingly clear from historical scholarship that a traditional view of the 1950s – e.g. that the only waves women made back then were in washing machines – is not particularly accurate and does not help to answer the question of where second wave feminism came from (see Breines; May; Meyerowitz). Alison Jaggar has remarked that

what she calls the “dominant narrative of second wave feminism” (that is, the second wave as seen from the crest of the third) is first of all unfair, but also “impedes research.” My own gut sense is that the question one ought to ask about a feminist idea is not how old is this idea, but is it a good idea? How much does it explain? What does it leave out? Who will it benefit and who will it harm? What will it help us do? And yet, we do want to be able to talk about feminist history, in terms of both changes and continuities. That feminist discourse has changed in my adult lifetime is uncontested: one comes across something and thinks, “I wouldn’t write that now.”<sup>4</sup>

The question I started with was simple: how did feminism become a mass movement in the US? It is common and interesting to study the beginnings of second wave US radical feminism as the history of a few important groups (mostly located in New York, Boston and Chicago) and the canon of a few influential theoretical and polemical texts and anthologies. But I also wanted to look at popular, mass-market forms that may have been less ideologically “pure” than Kate Millett or Robin Morgan and less aesthetically marvelous than Adrienne Rich, but that nonetheless carried the edge of feminist revolutionary thought into millions of homes. I have focused mainly on a trio of novels that sold extremely well to crossover audiences in the early 1970s: Alix Kates Shulman’s *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (1972), Marge Piercy’s *Small Changes* (1973) and Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973). Taken demographically, my three writers are hardly “representative” of American women generally, since all three are Jewish, all three began and abandoned Ph.D.s, and all three are importantly connected not just with New York, but in fact with one neighborhood, Manhattan’s Upper West Side. And yet sales figures, at least, would argue that the novels of women’s experience they produced do

represent something of a wider phenomenon, a cultural texture or cluster of possibilities, something that did tap a national mood, or perhaps help to create one.

The novels that interest me bear clear and datable marks of the practice of “consciousness-raising” – by which I mean simply a belief in the liberating potential of speaking openly about women’s lives, starting with one’s own and moving outward to connect with others. “If one woman told the truth about her life / the world would split open” (Rukeyser 482).<sup>5</sup> They are autobiographically-based, but they are novels, not memoirs, and that seems important because they would be memoirs now.<sup>6</sup> Like the nonfiction feminist writing of that period, they also bear the marks of inspiration by existentialism and Beauvoir. But it seems to me likely they reached mass audiences less because they were explicitly feminist (though they all are) and more because they were also novels of the (hetero)sexual revolution. That is, they included lots of explicit heterosexual lovemaking, described from the women’s point of view, and were forthright and clear that sexual satisfaction was important to women as well as men, that this was a reasonable and normal expectation – albeit an expectation often frustrated, either in the short or long term. To borrow a dichotomy from a later wavelet: the novels that interest me often work with something that is neither “pleasure” nor “danger” exactly but somewhere in between – perhaps “unpleasure,” or “displeasure,” is the right term, or perhaps one should speak of a search for fulfillment (physical, but not just physical) that is not simply a search for the happy ending of traditional marriage. How could a heroine think her way out of patriarchal femininity and yet keep a space to be sexual, heterosexual, in a female way?

All three novels, including Jong’s, were genuinely feminist and serious in their day,

and perhaps even in ours, not just because the authors said so, but because certain topoi emerge:

- the routine harassment and abuse of girls by boys, and women by men, which is considered normal: *e.g.* in *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* little boys gang up on the female protagonist to pull down her pants, and “friends” from the football team trick her into getting into a car and then force her to touch one boy’s penis; marital rape scenes; employers and mentors expecting sexual favors;
- an explicit awareness that it is very difficult to be worrying constantly about how you look and simultaneously do anything else at all well;
- a conflict between the heroine’s erotic and ambitious wishes, and an awareness that one will not be permitted to satisfy both;
- a wish not to marry, knowing it was a trap, but somehow marrying anyhow;
- the expectation that one would both arouse and police desire;
- a guilt about masturbation and other forms of sexual self-expression;
- an emphasis on sexual disappointment and male inadequacies, which is described in graphic detail;
- an awareness and critique of other forms of oppression, including class and race, with analogies made to the condition of women.

In general, revelations of the existence and the possibilities of female desire were bound up with a detailed unpacking of the US culture of femininity as a set of experiences of profound humiliation and shaming, with an indictment of the US educational system with its double messages and double bind, and also with a critique of expert discourses, especially of Freud but not exclusively – Shulman also indicts Watson’s behaviorism and

the child-rearing advice of Doctor Spock.

Yet, in all three cases there was enough humor, and enough sex, to avoid the usual labels of “grim” or “shrill.” Take, for example, this passage from *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, describing what is quite lucidly labeled as a marital rape:

“You belong to me. You’re my wife,” he mumbled into my neck, at once proclaiming his strength and my duty.

“Stop it,” I said. I tried to shake him off my shoulders, but he hung on, squeezing my nipples in his fingertips. I began to struggle in earnest. His breath on my neck made me very nervous. “Please, Frank, no fair.”

“Please, Frank, no fair,” he mimicked, adding, “bitch!”

I tried to stay calm. He was very angry. Daddy. As I hesitated to use my nails on his wrists he pushed me onto one of the beds and deftly pinned my wrists over my head. With a wrench of his head he shook his glasses off; they dropped to the floor. I had a picture of myself as a comic-book victim, strangling on my own bra, which was flopping around my throat, and I felt an almost uncontrollable urge to laugh. But Frank looked so helpless without his glasses, dewy-eyed and unfocused, that bitch or no, I struggled not to laugh at him. Controlling my own impulse to be cruel, instead I said, “I’ll scream!”

“Scream then,” he mumbled. And, transferring both my wrists to one of his hands for an instant, he prepared with a minimum of undressing to rape me.

There was no way out...to the accompaniment of my finally unsuppressible laughter, off we went on our last trip together (16-17).

The narrator here certainly is, or is becoming, a “second wave feminist” – note the Sylvia

Plath reference; and, while Shulman deprives her heroine of the consciousness-raising circle of friends among whom she wrote the novel, the rape is clearly labeled a rape. Still, this hardly sets out a cookie-cutter or simpleminded “victim feminism,” to use the term third wave critics sometimes apply to (what they see as) second wave politics.<sup>7</sup>

Piercy’s *Small Changes* is in a way the most “politically correct” and the most earnest of the three novels, a weaving together of several lives rather than a first person quasi-memoir. The book opens with working-class Beth looking at herself in the mirror on her unhappy wedding day: “It isn’t me, isn’t me. Well, who else would it be, stupid? Isn’t anyone except Bride: a dress wearing a girl” (12). We follow her out of that stifling marriage and away from her family’s restrictive expectations through a Cambridge hippie scene, and a satisfying self-discovery as a member of a women’s theatre group and commune. Meanwhile Miriam, the upper-west-sider and red diaper baby, liberates herself sexually and intellectually, becoming both a “free woman” and a creative scientist, only to be trapped (we hope temporarily) by marriage to “Mr. Right.” And Dorine, a near-casualty of the sexual revolution, is helped by both of them out of her status as general commune doormat and “house whore” to a healthy life of work and struggle. A central scene involves the three women sharing childhood hurts and secrets in an informal consciousness-raising session, naming the pain of growing up female and moving toward defining themselves on their own terms.

And yet what is surprising, these many years later, is how much steamy sex the book contains (good and bad) and how complex and twisty the individual stories are: liberated Miriam ends up married to the wrong guy who is about to dump her with two small children; and, Beth has some unfinished sexual business with Miriam’s old lover

Jackson before she takes off underground with her lover Wanda and Wanda's children, running from the law. When Beth asks Miriam about her first sexual relationship (with Phil), she says: "It was all the doors in the world opening at once!"(89); and, as Piercy shows us in a long and very erotically detailed flashback, it certainly was.

Looking only at the list of topoi above, one could think that these books would not be well-reviewed or well-received now, simply because they would be "too (second wave) feminist" – not that problems like rape and bullying are now unheard of, but simply that tackling them head-on in fiction has become passé. But, when published, instead of being criticized as being over-programmatic or politically correct, all three writers (especially Jong) suffered the opposite problem of being labeled unserious, trashy, even pornographic. While they suffered from this, they also benefited: in the same way that one might "turn" the word dyke, or queer, against the labelers, they were setting aside embarrassment and sharing the humiliation, as a step toward disarming and undoing it. The feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky has argued that shame is the basic condition of femininity – patriarchy's way of keeping women in their place (*passim*). Foregrounding this shame then, being "shameless," may be the only way of disarming it. If the choice was between shame and depression on the one hand, and anger on the other, the answer was clear.<sup>8</sup>

By flirting with the risk of being labeled "trashy books," these texts carved out what I would argue was a radical terrain of subjectivity for women as they sought individually and collectively to reject a 1950s' medicalized vocabulary ("frigidity," "promiscuity," "masculine protest") and to discover their own sexual language. My title here is "beyond trashiness" – another choice might have been "taking trash seriously."

*Fear of Flying* probably poses the hardest case for a redemptive reading since what most people remember is the fantasy of the “zipless fuck.” Cover art shows an airbrushed naked woman emerging from behind a full frontal zipper, and the cover copy says that this is the book “for every woman who ever dreamed of living her sexual fantasies...for every man who still believes women ‘don’t think like that’.” But lavish as the fantasies may be, the book itself is a cold shower. In the end, life does offer Isadora Wing exactly her fantasy – the zipless fuck, a stranger on a train – and she is disgusted and rejects it, because it looks and feels like rape. As Jong herself says in the twenty-first anniversary introduction: “The sexual *acts* in *Fear of Flying* are neither very many nor very ecstatic. They tend to fizzle in disappointment. The bedroom becomes a revolving stage for a comedy of errors” (xiv; emphasis in original). And the novel, if one actually reads it, bears this out: a number of the men are impotent, insensitive, violent; Isadora’s first husband hurts her, and so on. The question of “women and what they are like” (*i.e.* sexual) is pretty well contextualized and situated within the paradox of patriarchy. For example, the scene where Adrian Goodlove grabs Isadora’s ass and calls her a “cheeky cunt,” “leaving her underpants wet enough to mop the streets of Vienna” (26-27), is sandwiched between one flashback in which she finally walks out on the sexist analyst who keeps accusing her of refusing to accept being a woman, and another in which she has a fight with her sister Randy, who keeps telling her she is a failure because she has no children even though she has published two books of poems.

Both of these scenes – the confrontation with the Freudian and the confrontation with the family – recur vividly in the three novels I am looking at here, as well as throughout the period. A recurrent and devastating critique of psychoanalysis, and of the

would-be normalizing effect of the traditional family, is coupled with a tremendous self-consciousness about the question of “plot,” of the scripts, all of which are inadequate, available to women, taught by life but also importantly by literature. *Fear of Flying* in particular is a first stage piece of “gynocritics,” all about the problems of becoming a woman writer and finding one’s own voice. These novels provide an analysis that coincides with a set of perfectly “respectable,” contemporaneous works of literary criticism that tended to have titles like “The Self Conceived.”<sup>9</sup> “How would it feel to be the heroine of your own life?” – the phrase was Jill Johnston’s (38), but women were exploring it in many genres. Millett stayed in the English department at Columbia University long enough to finish her dissertation, which was published as *Sexual Politics* in 1970; Jong dropped out of the same department and wrote *Fear of Flying*, which made many of the same points, with many of the same intertextual references, at times in the same earnest and heavy-handed way.

Having named the early 1970s as a heroi(ni)c watershed moment, let me point out that much of this was not exactly new. As early as 1962, Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* had not only included what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls “the first tampax in world literature” (10), but many other sorry little incidents which recently prompted a friend’s students to ask: “why are all the men in this book sexually dysfunctional?” And then there is Mary McCarthy who, like Lessing, refused the label “feminist” with a great deal of energy, but who nonetheless wrote about what we now call “the body” in a way that generated tremendous hostility from men, and led both Shulman and Piercy, among many others, to acknowledge her as a foremother (*The Group* appeared in 1963, the same year as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*).<sup>10</sup> *The Second Sex* itself contains a

monumental catalogue of bad sexual experience, marriages that are rapes, and a tremendous attention to frigidity which, by the end, comes to seem like a principled stance (Altman “La Femme Frigide”). Maybe this connection would have been easier to see at the time than it is now, as the cover of *Fear of Flying* has a naked body with a downwardly mobile zipper, while the original US cover of *The Second Sex* shows a crouching, naked woman enveloped in a yellow haze, and was marketed as a trashy drugstore paperback.<sup>11</sup>

A “trashy book,” a “woman’s novel” – there has been some slippage in these categories. Clicking on *Fear of Flying* in the *New York Times* Index provides several long, angst-ridden sessions on what women’s writing is and what it means to be a woman writer, including a symposium (Robertson) and a long meandering screed by Norma Rosen. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued that “dirt is matter out of place” (35). The same may be true about dirty books, where so often an anxiety about sex, women, and gender turns into an anxiety about genre – that is, about what sort of books can be written, and by whom, for whom, within what borders, policed by whom, and how.

Ironically enough, academic feminist critics have certainly been forthright and funny in pointing out this sort of trashing-as-trash as an unsuccessful way of stopping women’s mouths. And yet, they, that is to say we, have not been exempt from it either. Whether a desire to be taken seriously as scholars has informed the flight into theory of the last few decades might be an interesting question to explore. At the first meeting of the first feminist class I ever took (a graduate seminar at Columbia in the early 1980s), the eminent second wave feminist critic who was teaching it announced that “we were not going to spend the semester talking about whether women should shave their legs.”

Fair enough, but were the aridity and “theoreticism” (Moi xv) of literary criticism in the decade that followed not a defense mechanism against “femininity,” much as “physics envy” may have motivated the quick ascendancy of the (old) New Critical paradigms in the middle of the century?<sup>12</sup> Anyhow, to stop being ashamed about this, to stop policing ourselves and one another, might be good, or at least interesting. Maybe men were right to be anxious. A book becomes a bestseller because it meets some sort of widespread cultural need. The books discussed in this article provided enough satisfaction for enough people’s emotional needs that they crossed over to mainstream audiences. Did they then cross back as well perhaps? Might their popularity and financial success have empowered not just writers, but also readers who shared the heroines’ doubts, angers and humiliations?

My argument here is informed by Janice Radway’s ethnography of women who read popular romances in *Reading the Romance*. Radway’s enormous methodological contribution was that she looked not just at what texts say but at what they do, and how they function in the lives of women readers. Women, she says, have “use[d] traditionally female forms to resist their situation *as women* by enabling them to cope with the features of the situation that oppress them...romance reading creates a feeling of hope, provides emotional sustenance, and produces a fully visceral sense of well-being” (12; emphasis in original). Radway argues convincingly that romance books function like a drug, to supply what is missing in the housewife’s daily environment – escape and excitement, but more importantly a nurturing and understanding man who needs the heroine and yet is still strong; some form of imaginary compensation for the reader’s real-life emotional labor. Also important is the process by which the hero is transformed from a brutish,

mysterious enemy into someone who can love and be loved, understand as well as be understood.<sup>13</sup> The readers in Radway's sample do not like having conventions violated, but she suggests that some subversions sneak in anyhow – the most subversive point in her view being the utopian idea that maleness can be cured, that the strong silent type can also be nurturing and loving, and that the feisty, plucky heroine can have him.

However, Radway does not provide a redemptive reading in “rescuing” the romance:

Does the romance's endless rediscovery of the virtues of a passive female sexuality merely stitch the reader even more resolutely into the fabric of patriarchal culture? Or, alternatively, does the satisfaction a reader derives from the act of reading itself, an act she chooses, often in explicit defiance of others' opposition, lead to a new sense of strength and independence? (15)

Early feminist literary study had in its methodological bag two moves: to take texts that appeared to be conservative and show that they hid subversive possibilities; or, to take texts that claimed boldly to be subversive and transformational and show that they in fact maintained the status-quo – my own early work on self-help books of the sexual revolution is an example of the latter (1984). By refusing to specify one or the other, Radway foregrounded the Big Unanswerable Question: what is resistance, what is agency?

What does this have to do with my trio of 1970s feminist novels? I am not suggesting exactly that these books *are* romances, merely that they were read in the same way, with the kind of excited identification Rachel Brownstein describes feeling behind the door of her parents' bathroom whether she was reading Jane Austen or Georgette

Heyer (5; 29). In order to work as “women’s fiction,” these novels needed to supply some amount of what the romance provided, but to work as “feminism” they also needed to be more connected to reality, in the form of ironic analysis. They are pessimistic and skeptical compared with Radway’s romances, but they are not quite willing to settle for life without love.

So we find ourselves very much in the position of Radway’s romance readers, following Beth, Miriam, Sasha and even Isadora with the suspense of melodrama: “Run, Beth, Run!” “Oh no, Miriam! Look behind you! Don’t listen to that shrink, he’s the baddie!” We care about Beth and Miriam, we identify, we want them to find love and, especially if we are young, we read in search of clues. Will it be Jackson? Will it be Phil? In short, these feminist novels provide many of the satisfactions of the romance genre while still delivering the warning about over-dependence (as in the last section of *Small Changes*, “Another Desperate Soprano,” which shows us Miriam’s husband’s secret girlfriend as yet another bearer of fantasy and delusion), but also sketching the revolutionary hope – Dorine asks the fugitive Beth, when will we see you again?: “‘When we win,’ Beth said very softly, ‘we’ll *all* sit down at the table’” (522; emphasis in original). In Radway’s account, romance functions to contain and manage anger where the true, raw feminist work will generate it. But, a novel cannot *end* on a note of pure analysis and still be a novel. It has to offer the satisfactions of narrative, such as pleasure in identification and the sense of an ending – even when the ending is sad (like Miriam’s) or even, as in *Fear of Flying*, when the writer plays self-consciously with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary conventions and pretends not to decide. Love, sex and marriage cannot simply not matter. They are (for novels, as perhaps still often for

women) matters of life and death.

How then can one distinguish between feminist novels about love and sex and the other sort of women's novels about love and sex? It may not be easy. Perhaps to be feminist, the novel must propose a collective, rather than a merely individual, solution.<sup>14</sup> People may also read novels to find a community, so that they function as a long-distance consciousness-raising group, spreading feminist ideas far beyond the angry corridors of SDS conferences and the living rooms of the Upper West Side. But love problems do tend to be individual, and where an ending does sketch a political solidarity, as in Piercy's *Small Changes* and *Braided Lives*, there has to be a happy or unhappy ending to the love plot as well, if only alongside it.

But then one must admit that Harlequin romances and other forms of "ChickLit" (such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*) can affirm a community, even build a consensus about "women and what they are like," in a rather non-transformative direction. One can join Bridget's interpretive community, for example, by acquiring cookbooks or coffee mugs, participating in chat rooms, or simply using the novel's characteristic slang terms among one's friends. Not exactly a sign of "postfeminist decline," however, since one can go back to 1972, the same year as *Memoirs of An Ex-Prom Queen* was published, to Gail Parent's novel *Sheila Levine is Dead and Living in New York*, which also made the charts. Parent's heroine, the Bridget Jones of her day and place (which happens to be New York's Upper West Side), ends up botching her suicide and discovering, "I don't want to die, I want to date!" (224). So much for chronology.

One might play with terms and try calling novels like *Bridget Jones* and *Sheila*

*Levine* “feminine” novels, and the others feminist novels. But what then does one do with the claim (made most forcefully in advice literature such as Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider’s *The Rules*, but implicit in *Bridget Jones* and other ChickLit) that feminine manipulateness is, and should be, a conscious feminist act, because feminism is about Women Getting What We Want, and what we want is...marriage and a happy ending. More to the point, this would understate what makes the two sorts of works similar, that is, the dependence of both on romance plots. It would be very tricky to draw any kind of generic or formal distinction between the novels we call feminist and the “other” kind of women’s novels.

This paradox is resonant with Foucault’s argument that “resistance is never in a position of exteriority with respect to power...there is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it” (95; 101). One may be depressed about this, but also notice that it does offer a potential opening to intervene in mass and popular culture in a broad-based way. Cora Kaplan has observed that every form of feminism gives hostages to the femininity of its day. She was writing about Mary Wollstonecraft, but the point holds more generally. With all its scathing criticism of women’s magazines, of the way in which they limit and trap housewives, Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* reads like something out of a woman’s magazine, which is not surprising, since she started writing it for *Redbook*. Like Catharine Beecher a century before her, Friedan elaborated a feminism from well within her culture’s comfort zone. The whole question of “fulfillment” was a 1950s question, not just from women’s magazines but from sociology, as Wini Breines and Elaine Tyler May have shown – “be yourself” was a key component of beauty advice and admonition. Shulman’s quite

revolutionary “A Marriage Agreement” was also published in *Redbook*, though not without a struggle (see Shulman “A Marriage Disagreement”). Marcia Cohen has pointed out the mutual, if uneasy, interdependence of feminists and feminine writing, noting for example that when feminists occupied the offices of the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1970, one article in the issue they were protesting against had been written by Gloria Steinem.

So, not two discourses, but one discourse deployed in two, or multiple, directions: *maybe that is why it worked*. Another interesting parallel would be the love-hate relationship between second wave lesbian-feminism and the lurid pulp lesbian novels of the 1950s and early 1960s, which provided lesbian visibility at the price of re-inscribing social exclusion and juridico-medical condemnation.<sup>15</sup> Maybe political change has often been accomplished by texts that sit uneasily on the border between “good books” and deplorable trash. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which blended treacly sentimentalism, the cult of motherhood, and hysterical melodrama, seems to have mobilized nineteenth-century Americans against slavery in a visceral way that Lincoln’s eloquence never could. Then again, in 1977, only a few years after the novels I have been discussing, the narrator of Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (another disappointed English Ph.D.) would express Kaplan’s insight, but inside out: “Women are trying hard these days to get out from under the images that have been imposed on them. The difficulty is there is just enough truth in the images that to repudiate them also involves repudiating part of what you really are” (296). One last thought to complicate wave history: French’s book belongs chronologically to the early second wave period, and book and author certainly suffered the same stigmatization as “trash.” But, *The Women’s Room* also documents a

felt generation split between the narrator, a housewife in the 1950s who returns to graduate school after her divorce, and the new generation of women (hippies, lesbians, radicals) she meets there. Also, though, French's bitterly elegiac retrospective framing of her narrative of transformation tempts me to call it a *postfeminist* work: "because in a way it doesn't matter whether you open doors or close them, you still end up in a box...there's Mira with all her closed doors, and me with all my open ones, and we're both miserable" (11). As Marilyn Hacker put it in a different context, "the sin we are / beset by is despair" (59).

Now, Beauvoir said there would be days like these. She said the issue was not so much whether women were happy, but whether they were free – that is a pretty important distinction, but (as she also noted) Americans have notorious trouble telling the difference. The three novels under discussion use romance plots, trashy plots, by taking them seriously – and they have to do this to explore what Beauvoir would have called women's complicity with what Friedan labeled the "feminine mystique." "Better," stronger heroines would not have provided the same sort of insight into the ways women are split and betray themselves and one another; this is an insight from which "we" are still recovering, that is, from which we are still backing away.

So what, finally, are the political lessons for a "third wave" reading of "second wave" feminist fiction? Firstly, that sweeping generalizations and grand historical periodizations are not particularly persuasive. I am mostly calling here for a conscious attention to historical detail, irony, and paradox, a cautiousness about what used to be called "totalizing master narratives" that would see crashing conflicts between contrasting "waves" as animating every local eddy. Secondly, that deploring popular

culture, or mass culture, is counterproductive – hardly a new insight, but one which bears repeating since the forms of popular culture change quickly. Thirdly, that feminism did happen, and did make a difference, in ways for which we all should be grateful. The world of the ex-prom queen and Isadora Wing is in many ways a “world we have lost.” Things really have changed enormously since the days when “jobs for women” were listed separately in the classified, when “yes, but can she type?” was the first question asked of top graduates, when a woman could be told she could not study science because there were no ladies’ rooms in the labs. But fourthly, that feminism still has some pressing and unfinished business. The sorrow and the irony and the anger of these works still resonate for readers of all generations and ages. As Shulman wrote in the introduction to the 1997 edition of *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*:

So here is my dilemma as *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* turns twenty-five: shall I rejoice that the novel, steadily in print since 1972, remains sufficiently alive to the times as to warrant a new, celebratory edition? Or should I bemoan the conditions that keep its social satire current? Shall I think of this birthday party for *Prom Queen* as a personal triumph or a political defeat?  
(ix).

Changes in the personal and sexual realm have not kept pace with, or followed on from, changes in economic arrangements, as one had thought they would; and the promise of liberation – described ironically by Foucault as the promise that “tomorrow sex will be good again” (7) – has not been fulfilled for many people. In fact, much as feminists seem to have abandoned the novel for the memoir, we seem to have left behind the concept of sexual freedom, the horizon of the future sketched by Beauvoir, Morgan and Rich, the

fantasy of liberation that fueled novels like these and with them the mass movement of second wave feminism.

I propose we look again.

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<sup>1</sup> Director of Women's Studies and Associate Professor of English, DePauw University, US. <<http://www.depauw.edu/acad/women/maltman/maltman.htm>>

<sup>2</sup> In these respects, attempts to catch a third wave upon the sand remind me of the now-stale question of postmodernism: nobody could ever say, at least not to my satisfaction, when modernism ended and postmodernism began, though there was a definite sense that one was "cool" and the other was not.

<sup>3</sup> This article has its origin in an attempt to problematize the notion of the second wave from the other end. I have been working on a book about Beauvoir and the roots of feminism in the 1950s, in which I discuss writers such as Doris Lessing and Mary McCarthy who would never join or embrace "feminism," but who were tremendously important to many women who would, not least because of their powerful and explicit depictions of bad sex. I look at fiction less to advance claims than to communicate cultural textures, but my underlying question – what kind of work created the conditions for broad-based social change? – should point to some implications for the way in which we write and organize now.

<sup>4</sup> Lessing, writing in 1962, attributes this to her character Anna writing in 1957 (narrative time). Then, in a 1971 introduction, Lessing described feminism as about to become irrelevant. Perhaps, as Michèle le Doeuff has said, "the woman question...always presents itself to the conscious mind as the question-which-has-already-obviously-been-settled" (3) and feminism is the movement that always announces itself as already obsolete: e.g. both *The Second Sex* and Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* say so.

<sup>5</sup> These lines from Muriel Rukeyser's "Käthe Kollwitz" first appeared in 1968. Rukeyser's words also furnished the title of an influential collection of feminist poetry edited by Louise Bernikow in 1974; more recently the title has been appropriated by Ruth Rosen for a history of second wave feminism. See Altman (2002b) for further discussion of Rukeyser's context and reception.

<sup>6</sup> The same autobiographical, psychological and social material that gave us poems and novels would now almost inevitably express itself in "memoir" – in fact both Shulman (1995; 2000) and Piercy (2001) have recently added to the publishing boom in this genre, a boom not confined to feminists. This issue deserves fuller exploration than I can give here. Somehow "women" and "fiction" were still as inextricably entwined in the 1970s as they had been for Woolf. If this has changed, why?

<sup>7</sup> In fact, the scene may owe something to the (ex-)marital (near-)rape scene in McCarthy's *A Charmed Life*.

<sup>8</sup> Le Doeuff remembers a slogan of French women's liberation: "nous mourrons de n'être pas assez ridicules" ["we do not dare to be ridiculous enough and this may kill us"] (84).

<sup>9</sup> This is the subtitle of Helene Moglen's *Charlotte Brontë*.

<sup>10</sup> Jong describes her book as an answer to Norman Mailer and Philip Roth, but Mailer and Roth had already written in angry answer to McCarthy.

<sup>11</sup> Cover blurb from a 1962 Bantam paperback edition described *The Second Sex* as: "the most penetrating, frank, and intimate book ever written about Woman...a Frenchwoman, who never loses sight of the needs and desire of both sexes, has used her artistry and erudition to explore woman in each of her many dimensions. Her fresh, frank, penetrating approach and highly original and stimulating conclusions have produced a book that overwhelmed reviewers."

<sup>12</sup> It might be even simpler. Alfred Kinsey supposedly answered the question "what is a nymphomaniac?" with "someone who is having more sex than you are." It is possible that a trashy book is simply a book that is selling better than mine.

<sup>13</sup> A fair amount of the sex in romance novels is bad too – a lot of it is rape. Of the three writers discussed here it is Piercy, oddly enough, who comes closest to the romance genre, since she believes in and shows good heterosexual sex, and shows that men can change and be better. Piercy has also written utopian fiction, and has a romance writer as one of the heroines of her WWII epic *Gone to Soldiers*.

<sup>14</sup> This was suggested to me by Debbie Cameron in a recent communication.

<sup>15</sup> To explore this properly would require another article. But it has struck me that the reviews of

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pulps which “Gene Damon” (Barbara Grier) published in *The Ladder* are very similar to the newsletter Janice Radway’s main informant provided to romance readers, and served a similar function: namely, bringing readers together by defining the limits and the aesthetics of the genre in a two-way dialogue of acceptance and resistance to what publishers provide (see Zimet; D’Emilio).

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