

# The Battle in Every Man's Bed: *Playboy* and the Fierce Feminists

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I was a feminist before there was such a thing as feminism. That's a part of the history very few people know.<sup>1</sup>

—Hugh Hefner, founder of *Playboy* magazine

IT MAY SEEM OBVIOUS THAT *Playboy* and the women's movement would come to blows by the early 1970s. Indeed they did throughout the previous decade. In 1962 journalist and future feminist leader Gloria Steinem went undercover to work briefly at the Playboy Club in Chicago as a "bunny" waitress.<sup>2</sup> Writing for *Show* magazine, she claimed poor working conditions and sexual harassment of women. Six years later in Atlantic City, New Jersey, radical feminists denounced the "Unbeatable Madonna-Whore Combination" promoted by *Playboy* and the Miss America pageant that was held there annually.<sup>3</sup> Many feminists decried *Playboy's* use of centerfold "playmates" and bunnies as objectifying and degrading.

Despite these oft-cited critiques, *Playboy* took a progressive stance on women's rights throughout the 1960s and 1970s and was particularly vocal in support of abortion. Evidence of this position can be found in the magazine's articles and editorials as well as in the charitable donations of the Playboy Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the magazine, which contributed thousands of dollars to abortion rights organizations before *Roe v. Wade* overturned antiabortion laws in the United States. In addition, the Playboy Foundation provided the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

<sup>1</sup> Wil S. Hylton, "Hugh Hefner," *Esquire*, June 2002, 100.

<sup>2</sup> The first Playboy Club was founded in Chicago in 1960 as a restaurant and nightclub. The popular clubs, in which patrons were required to be key-holding "members," then sprung up across the United States and overseas. The clubs were particularly noted for their "bunny" waitresses, who wore tight, revealing costumes in the manner of one-piece bathing suits, bunny ears, and white furry tails.

<sup>3</sup> "No More Miss America," in *Takin' It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 483.

with funds for its work on women's rights and helped fund day-care centers for working mothers, all indications that *Playboy's* gender politics, while complex and contradictory, were much more woman friendly than previous historical accounts have acknowledged.

Most feminist critiques of *Playboy* understandably tend to focus on the centerfolds, and scholars seem to agree that the playmates represent the objectification and degradation of women. For instance, historian Bill Osgerby writes that *Playboy* "was a pantheon to the sexual exploitation of women," while Maria Elena Buszek accuses *Playboy* of "casual misogyny."<sup>4</sup> Numerous other observers of the past fifty years, both lay and academic, have already noted the sexist nature of the magazine. The point is certainly well taken, but *Playboy* offered America more than just pictures of naked women. The magazine hosted important discussions about women's liberation. Nonetheless, there has been very little consideration of the ways in which, apart from its centerfolds, *Playboy's* words and money may have contributed to the growth of feminism. Indeed, by the early 1970s the magazine served as a regular, progressive, and mainstream forum for discussions of women's expanding roles in society.

The publication needed actively to support liberated womanhood for several reasons. Ideologically, the hedonism central to the *Playboy* lifestyle would not have been possible without women free to live and love as they liked. In earlier generations middle-class men had patronized prostitutes and working-class women and thus "protected the purity of women of their own class."<sup>5</sup> But according to the *Playboy* philosophy, the bachelor lifestyle depended upon the man's sexual desirability to women of his own social and economic rank. If the bachelor had to pay for sex, then his image as a playboy would be compromised. Similarly, if the Victorian double standard

<sup>4</sup> Bill Osgerby, *Playboys in Paradise: Masculinity, Youth and Leisure-Style in Modern America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 145; Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 244. Scholarly studies on *Playboy*, particularly its treatment of masculinity, do exist, but most are brief considerations or are included as part of broader studies. These works, many of which inform this essay, take their cue from Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983), in which she argued that the magazine offered "a coherent program for the male rebellion" against familial commitment and breadwinning obligation in the 1950s (50). Recent studies include James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Joanne Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-20th Century U.S.," *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 9–25; Beatriz Preciado, "Pornotopia," in *Cold War Hothouses: Inventing Postwar Culture from Cockpit to Playboy*, ed. Annmarie Brennan, Beatriz Colomina, and Jeannie Kim (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 216–85. There is little recent work that focuses on *Playboy's* treatment of womanhood apart from the centerfolds; David Allyn, however, includes a discussion of this topic in his larger work on the era (*Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution, an Unfettered History* [Boston: Little, Brown, 2000], esp. 21–22).

<sup>5</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 133.

continued to constrain women's sexuality, then the bachelor would lack the ultimate validation of willing and able sexual partners.

Professionally, Hefner and his editors needed to address the feminist movement because they saw their magazine as a serious journalistic vehicle. *Playboy* covered other important cultural and political trends of the sixties, including the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the emerging drug culture. If it had failed to discuss women's liberation, critics would have accused the magazine of not taking the needs and concerns of women seriously. This neglect would also have bolstered feminist criticism of *Playboy* and further demonized Hefner in the eyes of many American liberals. Lastly, many *Playboy* readers demanded that the magazine deal with the question of feminism. Men and women alike wrote letters to *Playboy* airing their diverse views on the subject, and they challenged the magazine to do the same.

A cynic might say that progressive gender politics merely served the needs of the randy playboy, for liberated womanhood would mean greater sexual satisfaction for men, and legalized abortion would free men from the constraints of fatherhood. In fact, these issues were consequences of the broader sexual revolution and the women's movement. But in a 2006 interview Hefner calls the accusation "pathetic" and insists that "*Playboy* was there from the beginning, before feminists even had their voice, fighting for birth control and abortion rights; . . . they couldn't be more wrong."<sup>6</sup> Longtime senior editor Nat Lehrman, in a self-congratulatory echo of these sentiments, claims that *Playboy* "came out on [these] important feminist issue[s] before the feminists had figured out what their issues were."<sup>7</sup> Hefner's and Lehrman's comments are an obvious exaggeration, particularly regarding the history of feminist activism.<sup>8</sup> Their defensiveness suggests that they were still unable to comprehend the feminist criticism of their magazine forty years after the fact but nonetheless saw themselves as women's political ally.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh M. Hefner, interview by the author, 3 November 2006, Playboy Mansion West, Los Angeles.

<sup>7</sup> Lehrman worked at *Playboy* from 1963 to 1987 in various capacities, including as senior editor and president of publishing, and he helped to found and operate the Playboy Foundation. As editor, Lehrman was in charge of all articles that dealt with human sexuality. The quotation is from Nat Lehrman, taken from personal notes and recollections that he had drawn up for an autobiography of Hugh Hefner that was never completed. The notes were given to the author in an e-mail dated 19 June 2006. Lehrman repeated this statement in an interview with the author on 23 June 2006.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the history of twentieth-century feminism see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987); Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2001); Leila J. Rupp and Verta A. Taylor, *Survival in the Doldrums: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1945 to the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Indeed, *Playboy* employees who worked at the magazine during the sixties insist that the dominant political philosophy of the editors, writers, and staff was liberal and in some cases radical.<sup>9</sup> Hefner's political views, spelled out in editorials in the period, show a man committed to liberalism. Hefner supported civil rights and the separation of church and state and was opposed to the war in Vietnam. From his perspective and the perspective of most of his editors, support for women's liberation was a natural outgrowth of his other political positions. By 1970, however, Hefner perceived two versions of feminism. One was a supposedly rational and mainstream faction that promoted liberal goals like antidiscrimination laws, and the other was an extreme and militant version that allegedly wanted to overturn heterosexuality. Hefner's simple dichotomy failed to comprehend the diversity of the feminist movement, which included not only these two poles but also a wide range of activism that combined varying goals, agendas, and priorities.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of a generally progressive inclination, though, *Playboy* published numerous articles with a definitively misogynist tone, particularly in the 1950s and early 1960s. Some of the most notable were a series of articles by the antifeminist author Philip Wylie. Wylie is best known for his 1942 book, *Generation of Vipers*, in which he coined the term "momism," the supposedly pervasive brand of domineering womanhood that crushed male strength and autonomy. The historian James Gilbert documents a close professional association between *Playboy's* editorial director, A. C. Spector, and Wylie.<sup>11</sup> Gilbert's work highlights both Hefner's and Spector's efforts to encourage Wylie to contribute antiwoman diatribes for the magazine, even goading him with potential topics. Wylie performed on cue three times between 1956 and 1963. Through him *Playboy* readers were introduced to the theory of "womanization."<sup>12</sup> Like momism, womanization was the belief that nagging, parasitic women were sapping the virility of American men. The notion was predicated not only on a

<sup>9</sup> Author interviews with longtime *Playboy* editors Jim Petersen, 2 February 2006, Evanston, Ill.; Barbara Nellis, 4 May 2006, Chicago, Ill.; Arlene Bouras, 22 June 2006, New York City; and Nat Lehrman, 23 June 2006, New York City.

<sup>10</sup> The women's movement grew to include activists and organizations that had various and often competing agendas, including the politics of race, sexual orientation, class, motherhood, etc. Ruth Rosen has provided one of the newest histories of second-wave feminism in *The World Split Open*.

<sup>11</sup> A. C. Spector was hired at *Playboy* in 1956 and worked there until his death in 1972. He originally made a name for himself with a best-selling book, *The Exurbanites*, that was a critique of postwar American suburban life. Spector is often credited with bringing a sense of refinement, particularly regarding its literary style, to *Playboy*. See Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 189–214.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Wylie's articles for *Playboy* were "The Abdicating Male and How the Gray Flannel Mind Exploits Him through His Women" in the November 1956 issue; "The Womanization of America" in September 1958; and "The Career Woman" in January 1963.

supposed rampant rise of female social domination but also on a dangerous swapping of gender identity.<sup>13</sup>

Hefner was fixated on womanization. In a 1964 editorial he argued that a breakdown of gender distinction in America had resulted in an "asexual society," which was certainly not a welcome outcome for a man like Hefner whose empire depended on an embrace of sexual difference.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Hefner could support feminism only up to the point where it critiqued feminine beauty or heterosexuality. He wanted women to look like women (according to the playmate standard), and he wanted men to continue to have the traditional thrill of the sexual chase. As competing visions of feminism emerged during the late sixties, *Playboy* balanced precariously between legitimate support for liberal feminism and hysteria over the challenge posed by more militant feminists.

Hefner now sees the early feminist critique of his magazine not as a valid grievance but as an "antisexual element within the women's movement." He insists that the radical view of him "is confused, is really truly not thought out," but also that this confusion is "for understandable reasons"—not because he believes that the playmates may have reasonably been interpreted as sexist or degrading but rather, he says, because the feminists who targeted his magazine shared in the repressive Puritan heritage of America.<sup>15</sup> Claiming the moral high ground, Hefner saw himself as a champion of sexual liberation for all and not as a purveyor of patriarchy. He interprets the feminist critique of his magazine as a critique of sexuality itself.

Hefner and many of his editors saw no contradiction between their personal stance on feminism and *Playboy's* nude centerfolds. One senior editor, Murray Fisher, put it bluntly: "The magazine . . . is an intelligent magazine. It is also interested in tits and ass. So are men. . . . *Playboy* didn't think one more important than the other, nor see any contradiction between them."<sup>16</sup> Hefner says: "The suggestion that somehow you can have a society that celebrates sexuality and then feels demeaned by images of sexuality is bizarre."<sup>17</sup> Hefner refuses to consider the dilemma that so many feminists have seen—that when the images are only of women, the supposed celebration of sexuality is really a privileging of heterosexual male desire.

<sup>13</sup> *Playboy* published a roundtable discussion on womanization in 1962. See Gilbert, *Men in the Middle*, 211–12; and Allyn, *Make Love, Not War*, 21–22.

<sup>14</sup> The *Playboy* Philosophy, installment 19, originally published in December 1964, quotation taken from a bound collection of the editorials done by *Playboy* magazine staff (Chicago: HMH Publishing, 1963–64), 166.

<sup>15</sup> Hefner, interview.

<sup>16</sup> Murray Fisher began at *Playboy* in 1960 after working in public relations at NBC television studios in New York City. The quotation is from Thomas Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise: The Playboy Vision of America* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 173.

<sup>17</sup> Hefner, interview.

Long-time editor Barbara Nellis, a self-identified feminist and civil rights activist in the sixties, now takes a different and decidedly more lighthearted view of the centerfolds than Hefner or, for that matter, many of his critics. To the extent that the pictures may have been inconsistent with feminism, Nellis says that she never considered them anything more than “silly,” and she feels that Hefner was not worthy of feminist “demonization.” Nellis suggests that the playmates might be viewed from a variety of perspectives. While most feminists considered them degrading, for women like Nellis the centerfolds were merely playful if immature expressions of commercial sexuality. At the height of the women’s movement, however, Nellis recalls that many of her liberal friends criticized her for working at *Playboy*, though she never thought of the magazine as sexist. Nellis simply viewed her job as a great opportunity to meet important people, including, as we will see, feminist leaders like Betty Friedan.<sup>18</sup>

The modern feminist movement, commonly known as “second-wave” feminism as opposed to the “first wave” of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had its popular roots in part in the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. The best-selling book pointed to a malaise that gripped suburban women who, trapped by the limitations of traditional marriage and motherhood, were unable to fulfill their intellectual and creative potential. The book, as well as a 1963 U.S. government report on the status of women, inspired the founding of the U.S.-based National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. In the mid-1960s, however, the women’s movement was still in its infancy, with activists working for legal reform through NOW and college women in activist organizations like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) developing a feminist consciousness and challenging male leadership. The year 1968 marked a change in the movement. The push for women’s rights took on a national character and gained increasing attention in the popular culture. At the same time, many activists began to embrace a more radical agenda focused on liberation, in which the “goal . . . was to revolutionize consciousness and culture, not to reform law and public policy.”<sup>19</sup> Eventually, the movement would embrace a wide range of ideals, including the politics of orgasm, “self-help gynecology,” and women-only communes.<sup>20</sup>

From the early years of women’s liberation, *Playboy* was a consistent target of protests and picketers for its “perpetuation of degrading stereotypes of women.”<sup>21</sup> Hefner biographer Russell Miller writes: “[Feminists] infiltrated the Playboy Mansion in Chicago and plastered the paintings in

<sup>18</sup> Nellis, interview.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women’s Eyes: An American History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 635.

<sup>20</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 148–50 (on orgasm), 176–77 (on “self-help gynecology”), 249 (on communes).

<sup>21</sup> DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women’s Eyes*, 636.

the ballroom with anti-*Playboy* stickers. Demonstrations took place outside Playboy Clubs and at Grinnell College in Iowa, [where] half a dozen male and female students stripped during a visit by a *Playboy* representative."<sup>22</sup> One Grinnell woman declared: "We protest *Playboy's* images of lapdog female playthings with idealized proportions. . . . The *Playboy* bunnies are an affront to human sexual dignity."<sup>23</sup> Despite Hefner's perception that militant feminism was the thorn in his side, activists from various points on the feminist spectrum targeted *Playboy*.

By the end of the sixties, women's liberation had become a vast, diverse movement demanding the attention of the nation and also of *Playboy*. An early acknowledgment of the emancipated woman appeared in "The New Girl," a playful essay by Beat poet and writer John Clellon Holmes, published in January 1968. Described as "an appreciative appraisal of the emergent modern female, . . . self-emancipated, unabashedly sexy, charmingly individualistic and a joy to the men in her life," Holmes favorably contrasted the new womanhood with the "masculinized" women of first-wave feminism and called this new movement "postfeminism." As the country sat on the cusp of the exploding women's movement, he pronounced that "feminism . . . is dead." Indeed, he wrote, the American woman had already "entered into an equality with men, psychic as well as legal, in which she can at last discover and develop a uniquely individual *and* a uniquely feminine personality."<sup>24</sup>

The emancipated woman conceived by Holmes was not his invention. In fact, she had appeared in *Playboy* some years earlier in the form of Helen Gurley Brown. The magazine embraced the version of liberated femininity that Brown articulated in her 1962 book, *Sex and the Single Girl*, which celebrated the traditional dance of heterosexual seduction but also called for women's economic independence and their sexual and reproductive freedom.<sup>25</sup> Touting her book as "the unmarried woman's guide to men,

<sup>22</sup> Russell Miller, *Bunny: The Real Story of Playboy* (New York: Plume Books, 1984), 180.

<sup>23</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 163.

<sup>24</sup> John Clellon Holmes, "The New Girl," *Playboy*, January 1968, 178-81, 182, 186.

<sup>25</sup> In *Make Love, Not War* Allyn sees *Playboy's* inclusion of Wylie's writings, particularly "The Career Woman," as an indication that *Playboy* and thus Hefner did not support Helen Gurley Brown's version of financially independent womanhood. Reflecting the magazine's often contradictory approach to femininity, however, there is also evidence to the contrary. For example, *Playboy* featured an article on women and employment by Brown, "Sex and the Office," in July 1964. While James Gilbert shows a "literary friendship" between Spectorosky and Wylie, archival evidence suggests a similar relationship between Spectorosky and Brown (letters from Brown to Spectorosky dated from 1963 to 1972, from a collection of letters that were auctioned by Christie's, December 2003, copy in possession of Playboy Enterprises, Inc., Chicago, Ill., no box or other identifying number). In support of Brown and *Cosmopolitan*, Spectorosky shared *Playboy's* prized list of "profile writers" and fees with her in 1967, some of the highest in the industry (Brown to Spectorosky, 31 January 1967, *ibid.*). Hefner confirms an alliance with Brown (Hefner, interview).

careers, the apartment, diet, fashion, money and men," Brown in a sense repackaged the *Playboy* lifestyle for women.<sup>26</sup> Hefner says that after her book was published, Brown came to him and offered "to start a magazine that would be the female version of *Playboy*." Because his company was putting all its money into the Playboy Clubs that were springing up across the country, however, and struggling to keep his own new magazine, *Show Biz Illustrated*, afloat, he was unable to begin a new project.<sup>27</sup> Instead, Brown went on to become editor of *Cosmopolitan*, where she remade the magazine in the image of *Playboy*.

Through her book and later through *Cosmopolitan*, Brown insisted upon women's economic independence and reproductive choice. She rejected the sexual double standard, yet she still embraced heterosexual seduction and femininity. A year before Betty Friedan published her feminist call to arms, Brown challenged the traditional notions of feminine sexual passivity and financial dependence. When it hit the market in 1962, *Sex and the Single Girl* became a best seller.<sup>28</sup> Brown's version of women's liberation echoed the style of *Playboy*: "I think a single woman's biggest problem is coping with the people who are trying to marry her off! . . . The single woman, far from being a creature to be pitied and patronized, is emerging as the newest glamour girl of our times." Like Hefner, she celebrated the differences between the sexes: "Being sexy means that you accept yourself as a woman . . . with all the functions of a woman." She focused on women's relationship to money, too, but took an approach that combined independence with traditional stereotypes of women: "Being smart about money is sexy. It is part of the attractive American career-girl image—being able to reconcile a checkbook, having something to *reconcile*, being able to pay your own way (only don't you dare!)." <sup>29</sup> Brown gave America a female version of Hefner with which to contend.

*Playboy's* alliance with Brown was natural, and in April 1963 the magazine published an interview with the newly famous author. Just as *Playboy* had styled its sexuality as an all-encompassing lifestyle that included fashion, design, and fine dining, Brown argued that "part of a single girl's arsenal of sex appeal is her apartment and her clothes and the fact that she can give an intimate little dinner." While her entire book was premised on sexual liberation, she noted in her interview that "I'm not for promiscuity. . . . I just know what goes on. And I know it isn't the end of the world when a girl has an affair." Many of her views reflected the attitude *Playboy's* writers had been promoting for years: "I do think there's too much of this falling hopelessly, hideously, horribly in love because you've been to bed with a

<sup>26</sup> Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl* (New York: Random House, 1962), front cover.

<sup>27</sup> Hefner, interview.

<sup>28</sup> Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 68.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl*, 4–5, 65, 105.

man. Because of our mores in this country and our conscience-stricken girls, they feel that any man they sleep with must be the . . . one that they marry."<sup>30</sup> Challenging the sexual double standard, Brown undoubtedly contributed to a changing culture that increasingly accepted women's active sexuality.

Despite Brown's frivolous writing style, she had important things to say. She told *Playboy* that she had hoped to include in her book a section on contraception and abortion but that her publisher refused: "I get a lot of mail about how to keep from having a baby. . . . It shouldn't be that much of a problem. . . . [American abortion laws need] overhauling. . . . It's outrageous that girls can't be aborted here." It would be two years before the U.S. Supreme Court would extend privacy rights even to cover the use of contraceptives in *Griswold v. Connecticut* and ten years before the same right was interpreted to include abortion, but these issues were being addressed in *Playboy* by a best-selling female author. In her interview Brown lauded independent, fun-loving femininity, while at the same time she fell back on old stereotypes. She discussed the use of female sexuality as a "very strong weapon" for manipulating men. At the same time she attributed such a need to larger gender inequities in the world, "If all things were equal, . . . if men and women held the same jobs and got the same things out of being married, then I think it would be wrong."<sup>31</sup> Brown said the purpose of her book was to convince women that they were not powerless either sexually, socially, or economically.

Brown's version of femininity—sexy but not clingy, independent but not remote—remained the preference of *Playboy* throughout the decade. The feeling was mutual, as Brown expressed enthusiastic support for *Playboy* in personal letters to its editorial director, Spectorosky. Brown repeatedly told Spectorosky that as editor in chief of *Cosmopolitan* she valued the "training" she had received from him and from *Playboy* and that she was "inspired and impressed" by the magazine. Calling it one of "the good things of life," Brown submitted letters to the editor for publication in *Playboy*. She praised it for acknowledging the way that "women really *are* . . . as interested in sex as men are, if not more so."<sup>32</sup>

In 1968, five years after Brown's interview in *Playboy*, Holmes's piece on postfeminism was published. In the intervening years Brown's single girl had been replaced by a new and much more politically charged version of emancipated womanhood. Though Holmes's article addressed feminism,

<sup>30</sup> "Playboy Interview: Helen Gurley Brown," *Playboy*, April 1963, taken from the *Playboy* online archive, the *Playboy* Cyber Club, available online at <http://cyber.playboy.com/members/magazine/interviews/196304/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Helen Gurley Brown to A. C. Spectorosky, 31 January 1967, 10 February 1971, 11 March 1966, and original letter to *Playboy* for publication in the Letters to the Editor column from Helen Gurley Brown regarding the article "Venus Defiled" by William Iverson, 16 June 1966 (in auctioned letters; see note 25).

it lacked any sense of political urgency and apparently ruffled few feathers. Celebrating modern womanhood as a "joy," Holmes, like Brown a few years earlier, presented a fantasy of nonthreatening, sexy, and fun female liberation. Believing that most sexual inequities had been relegated to history, he assumed there was little reason to worry about the changes that might accompany a gender revolution.

By 1970 *Playboy* could no longer afford such lightheartedness. Feminists picketed outside the *Playboy* offices and Hefner's mansion in Chicago, which was called "a bastion of male supremacy and commercial exploitation of women as 'sex objects.'" "You think that Hugh Hefner and *Playboy* don't exploit women?" asked one protester. "I'll believe that when I see Hefner walking the streets of Chicago with a bunnytail tied to his rump," she added, referring to the Playboy Clubs' bunny waitresses.<sup>33</sup> In that same year a twenty-year-old California activist, Meg McNelly, said of the playmates in a *Los Angeles Times* essay: "It occurred to me this was the big male idea, that a girl is supposed to be beautiful and only for his pleasure, and that she shuts up for life."<sup>34</sup> Protesters at the 1968 Miss America Pageant likewise targeted media like *Playboy*, while Gloria Steinem called the *Playboy* lifestyle "boyish, undeveloped, anti-sensual, vicarious, and sad."<sup>35</sup> Radicals also stormed the stage of *The Dick Cavett Show*, disrupting an appearance of Hefner with shouts of "Off the pig!"<sup>36</sup> In 1970 Hefner received a death threat from a militant women's group that called itself the Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell (WITCH). The handwritten note read, "h.h.—Wherever you go; Whatever you do; The Black Hex of Death is upon you."<sup>37</sup> As the women's movement expanded, criticism of Hefner, the playmates, and the bunnies became an ever more common refrain. The seriousness of these complaints, death threats notwithstanding, showed that many feminists apparently saw *Playboy's* portrayal of women as a problem on par with pay differentials and lack of reproductive rights.

At the same time, pressure from *Playboy's* own readers to address the women's movement increased as Forum letters discussing feminism began to appear regularly. Such letters served an important role in *Playboy*. By the late 1960s the magazine had several letters columns, which operated as an ongoing dialogue between Hefner and his readers (including many

<sup>33</sup> "Antibunnies Jeer at Hefner Peace Bash," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 1970, 20.

<sup>34</sup> "New Front in Battle of Sexes: Campus Women Want to Liberate Betty Coed," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 1970, 3.

<sup>35</sup> "No More Miss America," in Bloom and Breines, *Takin' It to the Streets*, 483; Gloria Steinem, "What *Playboy* Doesn't Know about Women Could Fill a Book," *McCall's*, October 1970, 76.

<sup>36</sup> "Women Militants Disrupt Cavett Show with Hefner," *New York Times*, 27 May 1970, 95.

<sup>37</sup> From the private archive of Hugh M. Hefner, housed at the Playboy Mansion West, Los Angeles. My thanks to Hefner's historian and archivist, Steve Martinez, for making a copy available to me.

detractors). These columns helped to make Hefner appear accessible, while they gave the impression that readers were participating in the world of *Playboy*.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, a letter published in *Playboy* might be read by an audience of millions.<sup>39</sup> Readers like Michael Sharwood-Smith of Sweden demanded the serious consideration of feminism in the popular magazine. He wrote: "As a constant reader of your magazine . . . I believe that intelligent men must support [feminism]. I suspect that a lot of women read *Playboy* and I would like to hear their opinions on this issue."<sup>40</sup> Myra A. Josephs, a Ph.D. from New York, agreed: "I would like to see *Playboy* . . . discuss this subject. . . . [Its] readers should be informed."<sup>41</sup> Such letters indicate that readers saw *Playboy* as an appropriate vehicle to "inform" its audience about the growing movement for women's liberation. The magazine still celebrated masculine hedonism and still contained naked centerfolds. Nonetheless, in an era of rising feminist consciousness, many readers thought that *Playboy* had a duty and a right to lead a discussion of changing femininity.

In 1970 Hefner decided it was time for his magazine to articulate a position on feminism, though the stance would ultimately be as controversial within the company as without:

Though we are opposed to the destructive radicalism and the anti-sexuality of . . . militant feminism, our position on women's rights . . . is as consistently liberal as our position on all human rights. We've been crusading for a long time for universal availability of contraceptives and birth control information, as well as for the repeal of restrictive birth control laws. . . . Likewise, we reject the Victorian double standard. . . . We are also opposed to the traditional stereotype that relegates women to domestic drudgery. We . . . believe that any woman who wants to shun the homemaker's role for a career, or who wants to combine both, should have the opportunity to implement that decision. . . . We believe

<sup>38</sup> The letters columns included the Letters to the Editor (begun in 1954), which were typically comments on the magazine itself; the Advisor (begun in 1960), which was a question-and-answer column on everything from fashion to cigars to sex; and the Forum (begun in 1963), which was inspired by the so-called *Playboy* philosophy and dealt specifically with current affairs and politics. It is impossible to verify the authenticity of every letter published. No doubt editors chose to publish letters that would further the goals of *Playboy*. I am aware, from archival documents and interviews, that letters were occasionally altogether invented by editors. This deception was usually done to raise an issue to which Hefner wanted an opportunity to respond or address. However, there is ample evidence in the company archive, confirmed by interviews with various editors, that most letters were legitimate. While there is no official collection of letters in the archive at this time, I came across various letters from readers as well as monthly company reports on letters received. Other historians, notably Joanne Meyerowitz, have relied on similar published letters as historical evidence; see Meyerowitz, "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material."

<sup>39</sup> *Playboy* would reach a peak sale of over seven million issues in 1972. See Gretchen Edgren, *The Playboy Book* (Singapore: Taschen, 2005), 444.

<sup>40</sup> Forum letter, *Playboy*, January 1970, 64.

<sup>41</sup> Forum letter, *Playboy*, April 1970, 60.

women ought to be given equal pay for work of equal value. . . . We believe that many distinctions, apart from the purely physical, do and should exist. . . . This leads us to conclude that there should be distinct social roles for men and women.<sup>42</sup>

Hefner reduced the complexity of feminist thought to a divide between mainstream feminism that supported civil liberties and individual choice and a radicalism that supposedly called for an overthrow of heterosexual norms; he fully supported the former and was totally opposed to the latter. However, it was Hefner's hostility toward the militant version of feminism rather than his support for the liberal platform that motivated him in 1969.

An article by the journalist Julie Baumgold in *New York* magazine in June gave Hefner a model on which to base his magazine's approach to the supposed antisexualism of radical feminism.<sup>43</sup> The piece ridiculed the twelve ultraradical organizers who comprised the group known as the Boston Female Liberation Movement. Baumgold noted the women's "denim work-shirts, . . . schizoid language, . . . [and] calloused heels" and characterized them as man and baby hating. She argued that the women were working for "the destruction of the family" and called the organization a "revolt of damaged women."<sup>44</sup>

Hefner applauded the piece. In July 1969 he requested for *Playboy* a "satirical piece" on radical feminism, which he referred to as the "super-feminist movement."<sup>45</sup> In the pages of *Playboy* this label for feminism meant the brand that shunned traditional femininity and heterosexual seduction and included organizations like Female Liberation Cell-16, whose members were noted for their masculine clothes, heavy boots, and short hair and who were ridiculed by *Playboy* for "[demonstrating] the karate blows and kicks designed to keep objectionable men in their place."<sup>46</sup> According to a longtime editor, Jim Petersen, *Playboy's* staff felt "defensive and angry" at what was perceived as the "rage" of the militants who were thought to advocate female separatism, the avoidance of heterosexual sex, the "abolition of marriage, the transfer of childrearing from the home to communal centers, and the elimination of all sex differences in clothing, education, home life, politics, and manners."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Forum editorial response, *Playboy*, April 1970, 60.

<sup>43</sup> Hefner to Spector, memorandum, 30 January 1970, box 61, 1970 H-K, folder 3, A. C. Spector Papers, Playboy Enterprises, Inc., Chicago (hereafter cited as ACS Papers).

<sup>44</sup> Julie Baumgold, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby," *New York Magazine*, 9 June 1969, 27-32.

<sup>45</sup> Memorandum on "Articles for *Playboy*," Hefner to Spector, 17 July 1969, ACS Papers.

<sup>46</sup> Morton Hunt, "Up against the Wall, Male Chauvinist Pig!" *Playboy*, May 1970, 95-96.

<sup>47</sup> Jim Petersen, interview with author, 2 February 2006, Evanston, Ill. Petersen served as editor at *Playboy* in various positions, for the Advisor column from 1973 to the mid-1990s

A magazine whose existence depended upon heterosexual desire could not tolerate so radical a challenge to the traditional rules of seduction. *Playboy's* support for feminism had its limits, but it was not just *Playboy* that celebrated femininity and sexual difference.

Though the women's movement was often stereotyped by the standards of the vociferous and the militant, many feminists embraced conventional feminine beauty and chose not to reject heterosexuality, sometimes creating tension among activists. *Playboy* critic Gloria Steinem, for example, was disparaged by some feminists as a "media-anointed, telegenic leader" and resented for her "beauty and glamour," while other women felt ostracized from the feminist movement because they had relationships with men or, conversely, with women.<sup>48</sup> In contrast to feminists who criticized *Playboy*, journalist Ellen Willis thought objectification had its benefits: "I didn't understand all the outrage about being treated like a sex object. I was angry because I'd always been rejected by men for being too smart, too intelligent. I *wanted* to be a sex object."<sup>49</sup> So *Playboy's* support for female beauty and heterosexuality was not inherently incompatible with some forms of feminism. The context of that support, however, through the promotion of nude female bodies in a men's magazine, tainted Hefner's version of liberation in the eyes of many feminists.

Several months after Hefner's request for an article on the superfeminists, the editorial director, Spectorosky, expressed reservations about Hefner's recommended approach. Aware of the magazine's precarious position in an era of rising female consciousness, Spectorosky argued:

I think it would be a grave error for our first piece on the subject to attack the irrational extremists, and to be satirical, unless we give a very fair shake to the real problems that intelligent, rational, thinking women are concerned with. I can imagine no publication that is in a more sensitive position in this matter. We get criticism enough, from young men as well as women, for what they claim is our anti-feminist, women-as-objects stance, and for our Playmates and Bunnies. If we just put down the whole feminist thing in a contemptuous, superior, amused, or one-sided way, it will make us look square and dated.<sup>50</sup>

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and for the Forum from 1987 to 2003. He continues his association with *Playboy* as a writer and editor for many of its in-house publications, such as *The Century of Sex: Playboy's History of the Sexual Revolution, 1900-1999* (New York: Grove Press, 1999). See also Hunt, "Up against the Wall," 96, 102.

<sup>48</sup> Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 216 (on Steinem), 164-75 (on debates about women's sexuality). While these were legitimate issues among feminists, the media often focused on attractiveness and sexual orientation as a way of trivializing the movement; see Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 227-28.

<sup>49</sup> Allyn, *Make Love, Not War*, 166.

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum on "Feminist Article" from Spectorosky to Dick Rosenzweig, 15 December 1969, ACS Papers.

The managing editor, Jack Kessie, agreed, calling the proposed satire “a disaster.”<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, Hefner’s appeal for a satirical piece gave way instead to a serious article commissioned to the journalist Susan Braudy.

Braudy was chosen for the piece because Hefner and his editorial team believed that a woman would have better access to feminist gatherings. Lehrman initially contacted other journalists to write the article, including Gloria Steinem, but he found no takers. Braudy was eventually approached through a New York agent with connections to a *Playboy* editor.<sup>52</sup> When Braudy’s manuscript appeared, it profiled only the most extreme elements of the feminist movement. She focused on organizations like Redstockings, whose members often embraced what they called “no sex strikes” and female separatism, and the equally radical WITCH, whose leader, Robin Morgan, helped organize the 1968 Miss America protest in Atlantic City, where radical feminists “assaulted the seaside city” and threw “symbols of ‘female oppression’ . . . into a ‘Freedom Trashcan.’” Morgan pointed out that while WITCH had not yet advocated a separatist agenda (she herself was married and had a son), she was still willing to confront men “with [her] karate-trained body and other deadly weapons.” Even more militant, according to Braudy, was Roxanne Dunbar, the leader of the thirty-five-member Cell-16 of Boston, whom Braudy described as “the radical limits for feminists.” Braudy claimed that Dunbar “read Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and walked out on her husband and a child with a birth defect.” Cell-16 hoped in turn to “[masculinize women] through karate lessons, masturbation, celibacy, and rejection of women’s traditional roles.”<sup>53</sup>

Though Braudy’s piece focused on militant feminism, she did include a brief mention of NOW as a “conservative and pragmatic” alternative to militancy whose leader, Betty Friedan, “[didn’t] believe in fantasy radicalism.” While Braudy pointed out the “divisions” among these various groups, she ultimately concluded that “what unites the feminists is stronger than what divides them. Although some feminists shrilly confuse sex with sexual roles, many of their criticisms of American society are serious.” Braudy warned that the revolution’s “battleground will be the business, home, and bed of every man in the country.”<sup>54</sup>

When Braudy filed the article in December 1969, controversy erupted among *Playboy* editors. An unusual flurry of company memos traces the

<sup>51</sup> Memorandum on “Super-feminist Movement” from Jack Kessie to Spectorsky, 12 December 1969, ACS Papers. Kessie had been an executive editor at *Playboy* since 1955 (Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise*, 32–33).

<sup>52</sup> Steinem did not respond to Lehrman’s request. Braudy had been working as a freelance writer for *New York* magazine and the *New York Times* when *Playboy* contacted her (Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise*, 226).

<sup>53</sup> Susan Braudy, “Women’s Liberation Movement,” manuscript, ACS Papers, 11–16, 17–19.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 21–22.

debate over the piece.<sup>55</sup> Concern centered on Braudy's treatment of the radical fringe of the feminist movement. Some editors argued that the magazine needed to publish a more balanced and objective report; supporters of the Braudy piece were not convinced that *Playboy's* readers would be interested in anything less than a challenge to extreme feminism.

The article offended several women editors. An associate editor, Julia Trelease, was asked by Kessie to comment not only on Braudy's piece but also on whether she thought *Playboy* should print a report of the feminist movement at all. Trelease strongly believed that the magazine should only deal with the issue if it were "a serious piece, not a snide put-down, but what [the movement is] really all about. If we can't do it right, I'd rather not see us do it at all." She argued that Braudy "puts too much emphasis on radical groups rather than conservatively constructive associations such as Betty Friedan's NOW. . . . I think we should concentrate on the two most important causes of the modern female's inequality—conditioning from childhood, and our historically-male-dominated society."<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Pat Pappas, a staff member, thought the piece was a sensational and dishonest account that ignored the "real problems" facing contemporary women.<sup>57</sup> The copy chief, Arlene Bouras, found the article "offensive" but thought that it would suffice for the pages of *Playboy*.<sup>58</sup> The associate cartoon editor, Michelle Altman, thought it "strange" that although the magazine was publishing a piece on feminism, "every effort that is made in print to establish the fact that *Playboy* feels that women are not exploitable sex objects is methodically and automatically negated by the photo features we run (if nothing else); we seem to have a wide chasm of hypocrisy running down our backs. However, if we are going to run it, I think we should present the 'movement' more fairly than these first few paragraphs do."<sup>59</sup>

The men on the *Playboy* staff were split. A memo, probably from senior editor Michael Lawrence, bluntly stated opposition to the piece: "I think the . . . movement has serious, sweeping and legitimate grievances . . . and a positive program for reform—but the way this author has handled the subject makes the whole thing sound quixotic, irrational, extremist and basically destructive."<sup>60</sup> In contrast, the associate articles editor, Arthur Kretchmer, found the article "a good journalistic account of the doings

<sup>55</sup> I describe the reaction as "unusual" because I found no other article from documents in the company's archive from the period of the 1960s and 1970s to have elicited so much editorial discussion.

<sup>56</sup> Julia Trelease to Jim Goode, memorandum, 11 December 1969, ACS Papers.

<sup>57</sup> Pat Pappas to Jack Kessie, memorandum, 11 December 1969, ACS Papers.

<sup>58</sup> Arlene Bouras to Jack Kessie, memorandum, 11 December 1969, ACS Papers.

<sup>59</sup> Michelle Altman to Pat Pappas, memorandum (n.d., but probably from 11 December 1969), ACS Papers.

<sup>60</sup> The memo is simply signed "M" but was most likely from Lawrence. Michael Lawrence to Jim Goode, memorandum, 5 December 1969, ACS Papers.

and thinking of the new feminists. . . . I don't think there is an ideological problem—we are accurately reporting, not supporting; and Brady makes clear that these women are a minority. . . . I'm for the piece."<sup>61</sup> The senior editor, Nat Lehrman, considered himself a supporter of women's rights but was hostile to militant feminism. He favored Brady's arguments but felt certain changes in the essay were needed. He said that the basic premise of the piece was on target but that Brady needed to include more of an analysis of radicalism rather than merely reporting militant statements and allowing the "dykes" to "hang themselves." Lehrman argued: "If anybody should examine these premises, it's us."<sup>62</sup> He later amended his original memo by pointing out that Brady dealt only with the "radical fringe" and not with the "really important issues of the movement." *Playboy*, Lehrman said, simply needed to spell out this distinction to make the piece fair.<sup>63</sup>

By early January 1970 news of the debate had reached Hefner, who for many years had isolated himself and worked almost exclusively from his nearby Chicago mansion. Reacting to the controversy with frustration, Hefner insisted he did not want an objective report, as several of the supporting memos deemed the article, but rather a "devastating piece that takes the militant feminists apart."<sup>64</sup> Hefner argued that it was the radical faction of the movement that was dominating the political discussion. He wrote:

What I'm interested in is the highly irrational, emotional, kookie trend that feminism has taken in the last couple of years. These chicks are our natural enemy and there is . . . nothing we can say in the pages of *Playboy* that will convince them that we are not. It is time to do battle with them and I think we can do it in a devastating way. . . . [Militant feminists] are rejecting the overall [roles] that men and women play in our society. . . . Now this is something clearly to which we are unalterably opposed. . . . The society they want is an asexual one. We believe women should have truly human roles in society, and that each individual . . . should be able to explore the broadest aspects of their nature. . . . We certainly agree that a woman's place is not in the home, that a woman should enjoy a career, that she should not be limited with many of the old-fashioned, traditional notions relative to a double standard in sex, etc.<sup>65</sup>

In the end, some changes to Brady's article were requested.

Brady was called into the *Playboy* offices to deal with the changes the editorial staff had demanded. According to *Playboy* biographer Thomas Weyr, Brady was shocked to the point of tears that the editors had been so displeased with her work; she thought she had given them what they

<sup>61</sup> Arthur Kretchmer to Jim Goode, memorandum, 11 December 1969, ACS Papers.

<sup>62</sup> Nat Lehrman to Jim Goode, memorandum, 11 December 1969, ACS Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Nat Lehrman to Jack Kessie, memorandum, 16 December 1969, ACS Papers.

<sup>64</sup> Hefner to A. C. Spector, memorandum, 6 January 1970, ACS Papers.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

wanted.<sup>66</sup> After a day full of criticism, Braudy was left alone in Nat Lehrman's office to make changes to her piece. There she happened to see Hefner's irate memo. She surreptitiously copied it, and in May 1971 she published an article in *Glamour* magazine that lambasted *Playboy* for the incident, saying that Hefner's memo revealed "what [he] felt in his heart of hearts [about the women's movement]."<sup>67</sup>

In the meantime Spectorsky drafted a new plan that would have had Braudy's piece run alongside what he called a more "analytical" (meaning "critical") article by the journalist Morton Hunt.<sup>68</sup> However, Braudy eventually declined to sell her work to *Playboy* for publication, so the magazine was left with Hunt's article alone.<sup>69</sup> Hunt had contributed a piece on psychoanalysis to *Playboy* in October 1969 and had published several books on modern women and relationships, including *The Affair: A Portrait of Extra-Marital Love in Contemporary America*.<sup>70</sup> Spectorsky reported to Hefner that Hunt's piece would "incorporate the more ludicrous antics and statements of the radical feminists. More significantly, the article will analyze the entire question of the shifting male and female roles. . . . Hunt will also examine the existing evidence about male and female differences; and he'll spell out our beliefs, as suggested in your memo."<sup>71</sup> On 30 January Hefner responded:

I feel that we have here, potentially, an article of considerable importance to us . . . because it is a new area of social controversy in which *Playboy* can be a significant spokesman. . . . We are not taking the wholly conservative, traditional position. . . . We recognize that women have been an oppressed second-sex. . . . We want to play heavily on the asexual and actually anti-sexual aspects of the new feminism, since that is an area that our own readers would find particularly interesting.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, in May 1970, nearly a year after Hefner had first requested the article, *Playboy* published its major piece on the feminist movement, entitled "Up Against the Wall, Male Chauvinist Pig," written by Morton

<sup>66</sup> Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise*, 227–33.

<sup>67</sup> Susan Braudy, "The Article I Wrote on Women that *Playboy* Wouldn't Publish," *Glamour*, May 1971, 246. *Playboy* biographer Russell Miller tells a different version of the story. He wrote that it was a secretary at *Playboy*, a "covert feminist sympathizer," who copied the memo (*Bunny: The Real Story of Playboy* [London: Michael Joseph, 1984], 181). However, Lehrman recalls that it was in fact Braudy who copied the memo. He feels that Miller's version is inaccurate (e-mail correspondence to the author, 12 August 2006).

<sup>68</sup> Spectorsky to Hefner, memorandum (apparently unsent), 7 January 1970, ACS Papers.

<sup>69</sup> Memorandum probably sent from Lehrman to Spectorsky, 8 January 1970, ACS Papers.

<sup>70</sup> Spectorsky to Hefner, memorandum, 9 January 1970, ACS Papers; Playbill, *Playboy*, May 1970, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Spectorsky to Hefner, memorandum, 9 January 1970, ACS Papers.

<sup>72</sup> Hefner to Spectorsky, memorandum, 30 January 1970, ACS Papers.

Hunt. The article criticized those women the magazine described as the “man haters [who are doing] their level worst to distort the distinctions between male and female.” Like Braudy’s article, the piece opened with a description of militant feminists as aggressive, ugly, and mannish. Hunt seemed to throw his support behind mainstream feminism in the first half of the piece. He provided a brief history of the American feminist movement from its beginnings in 1848 through the winning of the political franchise for women to the discontent articulated by Betty Friedan. He drew a distinction between the “millions” of women who supported the feminist movement to varying degrees and the “few hundred extremists” who were supposedly mobilizing for a separatist revolution. Hunt argued that radical feminists supported “the withering away of heterosexual desire and heterosexual intercourse.”<sup>73</sup> He acknowledged the legitimacy of much of the historic sweep of the women’s movement, and he took seriously the debate over whether sex roles were culturally constructed or biologically determined, acknowledging that both factors played an important part in creating contemporary standards for women’s behavior.

Even when Hunt cited what he considered to be the ridiculous ravings of militants, he occasionally managed to take them seriously. “One is tempted to dismiss such women too easily as frigid or Lesbian,” he wrote. “One is tempted to say, condescendingly (and probably incorrectly), that all they really need is to get soundly laid. In any event, either way of dismissing them is only an *ad hominem* attack.” Granting that women were struggling for basic human rights, he went on to highlight various statistics on pay differentials based on sex, education discrimination, and the inequities of what was then called pink-collar labor (jobs dominated by women) and noted that the movement was a “major drive by American women, the Labor Department, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to give women an even break in the job market.”<sup>74</sup>

Ultimately, however, Hunt’s piece on the “fiery feminists” ended as a celebration of traditional gender roles and sexual difference. He said that gender difference “feels good, and is productive of well-being” and that it is “deeply gratifying to male and female alike. It is complementarity [*sic*] . . . that makes heterosexual love, both physical and emotional, so necessary and so fulfilling.” Though Hunt admitted that a woman was “quite capable of performing nearly all the kinds of work men do,” he said, “as long as she’s childless, there’s no reason she should not do so and on equal terms with men.” He noted, however, that “it might not be the best thing” for a premenstrual woman to pilot a jet. Hunt assumed that most women do not prioritize work but rather “love and marriage.” He argued that “it is only reasonable” that men should be the heads of families and their primary breadwinners and that women, as the primary caregivers, should accept “a secondary part

<sup>73</sup> Hunt, “Up Against the Wall,” 95, 96, 206.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 104, 96.

in the world of work and achievement in order to have a primary part in the world of love and the home." While the piece was framed as a critique of radical feminism, Hunt departed from his initial focus on militancy with a reaffirmation of separate spheres (men rule the public domain, women the private), a stance that cut at the mainstream feminist movement, too. Hunt pronounced as the greatest crime of militant feminists their total denial of the innate differences between men and women, and he ridiculed their rejection of feminine attire, hairstyles, make-up, and the "subtle cues and incitements men and women offer each other."<sup>75</sup> As editor Jim Petersen maintained in a 2006 interview, the foundation of *Playboy* was based on the difference between the sexes.<sup>76</sup> As such, a militant feminism that sought to eradicate those distinctions, at least as Hunt defined it, could not be supported in the pages of the magazine.

From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century and considering the ultimate social rejection of the militant feminist agenda, Hunt's challenge to radical feminism was not merely the restatement of a uniquely *Playboy* position. Of course, the magazine had its very existence at stake in the differences between men and women, for what would be the use of *Playboy* if women could not be considered the sexual complement to straight men? If women rejected long hair, make-up, and sexy clothing in favor of "polo shirts, . . . mountain boots, . . . [and] cropped locks," what would men find when they unfolded the center pages of the magazine each month?<sup>77</sup>

Readers imagined various scenarios. In the fourteen letters chosen for publication in a following issue of *Playboy*, nine were from men, although the monthly readers' letters report stated that most of the responses to the article were from women.<sup>78</sup> The report noted, however, that "all" letters had "the conviction that the women's liberation movement merited the attention [*Playboy*] gave it." Outlining "highlights" from the letters, staffer Carole Craig noted that the majority of responses were critical of Hunt and supportive of the feminist movement. One reader said: "You pride yourselves on promoting progressive causes and individual freedom, but [why] do you stop short when it comes to an essential ingredient of the *Playboy* world—women?"<sup>79</sup>

Of the letters published, eight were critical of feminism and six supported it, so in comparison to the letters reflected in the report, *Playboy* chose to

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 207–8, 209, 206.

<sup>76</sup> Petersen, interview.

<sup>77</sup> Hunt, "Up Against the Wall," 95.

<sup>78</sup> The readers' letters report was compiled each month and distributed to *Playboy* editors as a summary of reader response to the elements of each issue.

<sup>79</sup> Of the fourteen letters published, only five were from women. This proportion is in contrast to the readers' letters report, which states that "a predominantly female, very vocal, readership responded" to the article. The quotation is from page 6 of the report and is unattributed. Hugh M. Hefner Papers (cited hereafter as HMH Papers), Reader Services, 1970 (box number missing).

represent more evenly both detractors and supporters of feminism. The magazine's editors likely used the letters in this way to further articulate their own ambivalence about the movement. For example, reader Alan Stone's letter appeared in the magazine. "When the militant feminists start their guerrilla insurrection," he wrote, "I will have no trouble blasting them." Mary Weiner's letter likewise blamed feminist discontent on the women themselves: "If women would seize the challenge [of self-fulfillment], instead of sitting around and feeling sorry for themselves, they could have rich and happy lives." Some published letters disagreed with Hunt's conclusions. Ed Gittelsohn argued that "letting a man write an article on women's liberation is just another example of *Playboy's* male-dominated, sexist, family-based, militarist, capitalist philosophy that is expressed throughout the magazine." Feminist sociologist Jesse Bernard wrote in to say that while Hunt recognized the economic inequalities endemic to society, he failed to grasp their underlying cause: "Sexism is the unconscious, taken-for-granted, unquestioned, unexamined, unchallenged acceptance of the attitude that the world as it looks to men is the only world. . . . It is because Hunt is so unconscious of his own sexism and his own prejudices that he is able to regard women's liberation as both ridiculous and threatening."<sup>80</sup> Bernard's reaction to Hunt's refusal to take seriously the feminist critique of established gender roles highlights the dilemma facing *Playboy*. By 1970 it would have been difficult to argue blatantly against equal pay in a liberal magazine, and so Hunt's article supported that part of the feminist cause. Many individuals, however, including some of the women who wrote to *Playboy*, steadfastly clung to traditional notions of beauty, domesticity, and seduction. Like Hefner and Hunt, they refused to reject conventional femininity. It is not hard to see why Hefner and his fans might feel this way—if such a rejection were taken up on a massive scale, the *Playboy* world would come crashing down.

It is significant that such a lively debate about women's liberation could take place in the pages of *Playboy* and that all sides of the debate were represented, even if skewed in favor of *Playboy's* position. It demonstrates that Americans on various points of the political spectrum saw *Playboy* as an appropriate place to debate women's liberation. Throughout its history, the letters columns were an important part of the magazine and occupied a number of pages each month. At least as important as the articles themselves, readers' letters acted as a "teach-in" of sorts (as readers of the seventies would have said) on contemporary issues. Had many *Playboy* readers thought to question their own views on gender, as Bernard suggested? One cannot say for sure, but it is worth repeating the fact that *Playboy* was bringing such issues to their attention. The lesson was an important one, because many Americans were apparently still relatively unfamiliar with feminism. A February 1970 *Los Angeles Times* article felt the need to define the movement for

<sup>80</sup> Letters to the Editor, *Playboy*, August 1970, 7–8.

its readers as "the newest activist movement brewing . . . across the nation. It's called the New Feminism or Women's Liberation, but what it boils down to is Woman Power."<sup>81</sup> In these early days of the movement, a woman like Bernard, though clearly no fan of the magazine, took it seriously enough to respond to pieces like Hunt's.

*Playboy's* own editors reacted to the Hunt piece, too, causing more internal office debate. The book editor, Mary Ann Stuart, sent a memo directly to Hugh Hefner in which she outlined her objections to the article. She argued that although Hunt appropriately acknowledged the tension between "socially prescribed" and "psychobiologically determined" gender roles, she pointed out that Hunt ultimately reinforced the primacy of traditional roles for the sexes. "While the article purports to put down extremists who are damaging an admittedly just cause," she said, "it instead manages to throw out the just cause." She added that while *Playboy* "has so diligently fought to free both men and women from sexual repressions, inhibitions and insecurities, it is disappointing to read . . . [women] discover that in order to obey the desires of their bodies and emotions, they have to settle for second-rate careers." Stuart, like Hefner and other editors, perceived a special place for *Playboy* in the changing culture: "To fulfill its role in the sexual revolution, I should hope to see *Playboy* encourage men and women to work together constructively in creating viable alternatives to the traditional sex roles—new roles that give them both . . . more freedom of choice and real human equality."<sup>82</sup> Stuart believed that *Playboy* had an important "role" to play in the shifting sexual landscape. Regardless of what the centerfolds may have represented, Stuart thought that the magazine had the potential to influence, for better or for worse, the course of the feminist movement. Since the magazine was one of the most widely read publications of its day, she was probably right.

The senior editor, Lehrman, reacted to Stuart's memo with his own take on the Hunt piece. He disagreed with Stuart's assertion that Hunt had "relegated women to the household." He understood Hunt as having said "essentially that in this society in this day the most satisfying solution for most women is a combination of career and home."<sup>83</sup> Hefner played referee to Lehrman's and Stuart's volley of opinions in another memo dated 23 June 1970 in which he put forth a view of feminism drastically different from the one he had presented in the earlier memo. Hefner sought to clarify "*Playboy's* official position on female emancipation." After months of controversy, Hefner said, he agreed that he ultimately had "reservations"

<sup>81</sup> "New Front in Battle of Sexes: Campus Women Want to Liberate Betty Coed," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 February 1970, A1.

<sup>82</sup> Stuart to Hefner and Lehrman, memorandum, 8 April 1970, box 135, 1970 Lehrman-L Misc., folder 4, HMF Papers.

<sup>83</sup> Mary Ann Stuart to Hefner and Lehrman, memorandum, 8 April 1970, box 135, 1970 Lehrman-L Misc., folder 4, HMF Papers.

about Hunt's piece. He claimed to share Stuart's position. He disagreed with Lehrman's argument that Hunt merely pointed out that *most* women *want* to forgo a successful career in favor of motherhood; Hefner supported Stuart's view that Hunt had inappropriately presented this scenario as the most desirable option. His memo read:

As Mary Ann suggests . . . [Hunt] implies that [being a mother and homemaker] is necessarily superior and to be recommended (though *Playboy* has always emphasized the importance of individuality in other areas of activity) . . . [and] that women who choose one of the alternative life styles he has listed are not "normal." . . . We would never suggest that a man who preferred bachelorhood to marriage was abnormal; why treat a woman any differently in this regard? . . . I think we should have concluded our article with the recommendation that a more truly free, humanistic, rational, society should offer both sexes a wide range of choices in establishing their identities as individuals. I agree with Hunt that "the eradication of all sex-role differences would be disastrous for mankind" . . . but that doesn't mean that women shouldn't be allowed the same opportunity to explore their individuality. . . . *Playboy* should emphasize a wide variety of sexual roles that are compatible, complimentary [*sic*] and constructive, as an aid to establishing a more permissive, personally stimulating and rewarding society.<sup>84</sup>

Lehrman says that he was "furious" at Hefner's about-face.<sup>85</sup> When confronted with the conflicting memos over thirty-five years later, Hefner stood by his criticism of what he perceived to be the antisexualism of radical feminism but said that he "intentionally" used provocative words in his memos to make his point. Regarding the second memo, in which he contradicted Lehrman's view and expressed full support for liberal feminism, Hefner simply said: "I guess I was not the chauvinist pig I was supposed to be."<sup>86</sup>

Actually, Hefner was right. He was not the "pig" that many critics have made him out to be, but he is also not the feminist that *he* said he was. Throughout this period Hefner supported the political, reproductive, and economic rights of women, and he argued against the sexual double standard. These were important issues for second-wave feminists, too. Still, Hefner also supported the privilege of men to define and demand narrow standards of beauty in women, and he celebrated men's ability to pursue as many women as possible in their own hedonistic self-interest. The contradictory memos reflected the tension over feminism not only in

<sup>84</sup> Hefner to Lehrman and Stuart, memorandum, 23 June 1970, box 135, 1970 Lehrman-L Misc., folder 4, HMH Papers.

<sup>85</sup> Lehrman, interview.

<sup>86</sup> Hefner, interview.

the magazine and among the staff but also within Hefner himself over the competing visions of feminine emancipation with which the entire country was grappling.

Though the Hunt article caused great controversy within *Playboy*, it was not the magazine's only attempt to deal with the topic of feminism. In March 1970 Barbara Nellis was hired at *Playboy* to work in its merchandising department. A recent graduate of Syracuse University, Nellis was soon promoted to the editorial department, where she eventually became a director of research. Nellis had been politically active through the 1960s in the civil rights and antiwar movements. She was put in charge of organizing a panel discussion among feminist leaders for the magazine. Since the early 1960s *Playboy* had published a series of roundtables on various topics, and while many male editors were "annoyed" by the feminist critique of *Playboy*, they saw the women's movement as a relevant subject that needed to be covered. In a 2006 interview Nellis maintained that Hefner "didn't get" the feminist anger over his centerfolds, and she argued that his inability to do so was linked to his isolation in the fantasyland that was the Chicago mansion, where he spent nearly every moment of his time: "In his world, no one was angry."<sup>87</sup>

In her attempt to put together a feminist panel for *Playboy* Nellis contacted Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, writer and activist Germaine Greer, feminist leader Gloria Steinem, and several members of the radical Redstockings organization. The panel would have brought the women together to debate issues relevant to the movement, and their discussion would have been published in *Playboy*. Nellis insisted in her interview that the women had less objection to appearing in *Playboy* than they did to debating each other for the benefit of *Playboy*. She argued that many of the feminists she had talked to were willing to appear on their own in the magazine, especially if they could debate Hefner, but they were uncomfortable talking *to each other* in such a forum. Germaine Greer had this objection, for example: "I am afraid that *Playboy's* record vis-à-vis feminists does not inspire confidence. I am particularly uninterested in being contrasted with other feminists."<sup>88</sup> Nellis argued that "everybody's response" was more or less the same. They appreciated the reach of *Playboy*, and many wanted to confront Hefner, but they would only do so apart from other feminist leaders.<sup>89</sup> The panel never took place.

Eventually, *Playboy* granted Germaine Greer a solo stage, and "the ballsy author" spoke to the magazine in an interview in 1972.<sup>90</sup> According to

<sup>87</sup> Nellis, interview.

<sup>88</sup> Greer to Nellis, dated 1971, from the personal collection of Nellis.

<sup>89</sup> Nellis, interview.

<sup>90</sup> "Playboy Interview: Germaine Greer," *Playboy*, January 1972, taken from the *Playboy* online archive, the *Playboy* Cyber Club, <http://cyber.playboy.com/members/magazine/interviews/197201/>.

Lehrman, who conducted the interview, the pair remained friends for years afterward; he noted with a broad smile, "I liked her." Greer had made an international name for herself in 1970 with her best-selling feminist sexual manifesto, *The Female Eunuch*. She represented neither the liberal feminism of NOW in its relatively conservative legal approach nor the most extreme activists who rejected femininity and heterosexuality altogether. Nonetheless, Greer was brash, sexy, and outspoken. Lehrman referred to her as a "feminist who like[d] men."<sup>91</sup> The editorial remarks that accompanied the interview stated that men could read Greer's book and "not feel compelled to burden themselves with guilt for the crimes against women discussed therein. . . . She recognizes that the sexual polarities of society have been so locked in by economic, political and historical factors that it is pointless . . . to blame either sex."<sup>92</sup> Here was a version of feminism that *Playboy* could happily support. Greer's appearance in *Playboy* was an important example of the ways in which the magazine engaged some elements of the women's movement and brought feminism to its readers.

In the interview Greer, like Hefner, criticized strands of "antisexualism" in the movement. To prove the point that Greer was different, Lehrman noted in his comments about the interview that "she doesn't hide her randiness, often turning her head to look at a passing man and commenting about him in the way men generally do about women. This shouldn't be surprising, since she has described herself as a female chauvinist pig when it comes to sex." Greer's appearance in the magazine signaled that it was possible for *Playboy* and leading feminists to sit together at the same table and engage in debate. More importantly, it showed that some mainstream activists could see a silver lining around the cloud of *Playboy's* chauvinism. Greer acknowledged that as a feminist she would be criticized for talking to *Playboy* but said that she wanted to reach out to the magazine's large readership and added that she felt that *Playboy* was "trying to go in a decent direction."<sup>93</sup> She criticized the centerfolds for being "excessively young" and generally unrealistic. She wondered what effect these pictures had on men's expectations of women:

Thanks to your youthful image of female sexuality, [a man is] not expected to fuck his seamy old wife anymore. . . . It's not just the Centerfold I disapprove of. It's all the other images of women in *Playboy*. . . . There's no connection between the breasts you show and satisfactory sexual activity. And you display girls as if they were a commodity. . . . Why should women's bodies be this sort of physical fetish? Why can't their bodies just be an extension of their personalities, the way a man supposes *his* body is?<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Lehrman, interview.

<sup>92</sup> Greer, interview, online archive.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

For the most part, published letters to the editor praised the interview. Dan Stern, a sociologist at Ohio University, wrote in to applaud the magazine for its "courageous publishing venture, since most of her criticisms of [*Playboy*] are deeply insightful." A woman from the Buffalo Feminist Party criticized Greer for condemning *Playboy's* "subliminal" sexist message, noting that Greer "has . . . overlooked the many positive steps *Playboy* and the Playboy Foundation have taken toward a re-evaluation of American society and mores."<sup>95</sup> Here was a women's activist who embraced *Playboy*. The reader saw the sum of the magazine as greater than its (nude) parts.

Apparently, Greer was compatible enough with the *Playboy* philosophy and considered comfortable enough to its readers because she gave a repeat performance in the magazine in 1973, contributing an article on rape. In "Seduction Is a Four-Letter Word" Greer argued that rape happened not only on dark, isolated streets but also in marriages, on dates, and at work. Calling rape a "national pastime," she lambasted the American justice system for neglecting and degrading victims while protecting perpetrators—at least the wealthy white ones. Notably (especially for the pages of *Playboy*), Greer also labeled as rapists men who used "phony tenderness or false promises of an enduring relationship" to bed their dates.<sup>96</sup> Lehrman suggested the piece to Greer but admitted that he did not intend the article to focus on such a provocative take on seduction.<sup>97</sup> Greer railed against the misogyny that she said created both rape and sexual exploitation more generally. Speaking directly to *Playboy* readers, she declared: "If you do not like us, cannot listen to our part of the conversation, if we are only meat to you, then leave us alone."<sup>98</sup> Carrying the banner of second-wave feminism, Greer pointed out that sex was political and public and warned readers that the tide of the sex wars was shifting. The feminist antirape movement was just beginning in 1973, but *Playboy's* readers were already being educated on the subject by a leading feminist.<sup>99</sup>

Readers took up both sides of the fight. Colette Nijhof of NOW wrote in: "Congratulations for having published Greer's article on rape. I believe the article can do much to help our work in revising all laws governing statutory and forcible rape." Jill Johnston, a self-described "Lesbian at large" and a writer for the *Village Voice*, was puzzled. "I don't know why *Playboy* would encourage such an intelligent, enlightened and sophisticated view of rape and seduction in apparent contradiction to its own philosophy," she claimed. "I guess the article is for women, really, so congratulations for printing it." Shawn Thomson of California was outraged: "If I wanted to

<sup>95</sup> Letters to the Editor, *Playboy*, April 1972, 12–14.

<sup>96</sup> Germaine Greer, "Seduction Is a Four-Letter Word," *Playboy*, January 1973, 82, 164.

<sup>97</sup> Lehrman, interview.

<sup>98</sup> Greer, "Seduction," 228, emphasis in original.

<sup>99</sup> The antirape movement would be greatly influenced by Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, published in 1975.

read the militant rantings of a feminist bitch, I would buy feminist magazines. If *Playboy* is to become a sounding board for women's lib, say so and I will simply quit reading it."<sup>100</sup>

Regardless of the reaction of some of its readers, the editorial page of the same issue declared Greer an "articulate and intelligent spokesman (-woman? -person?) for women's rights." The editors apparently gave their blessing to her views, noting that "she scores telling points in an argument that may be new to our readers."<sup>101</sup> Still, Greer's politicization of sex was not all that new to *Playboy's* fans. Hefner had been politicizing sex for years without describing it in such terms. He had argued against repressive laws and moralities since before he founded *Playboy*, and there were positive implications of that appeal for both sexes in Hefner's ideology.<sup>102</sup> As Thomas Weyr argues, "More than Kinsey, more than Masters and Johnson, more than the sex manuals of the day, [Hefner] made a mass audience aware of sex as a social issue . . . of both individual and collective concern."<sup>103</sup> Of course, Greer and Hefner had very different motivations. Hefner campaigned for a kind of liberation, to be sure, in his call for the free expression of sexual desire, but Greer recognized the often damaging implications of Hefner's world and, for that matter, of much of American culture to women.

Readers continued to debate the women's movement throughout the early 1970s. Their letters spoke to the contradictions found in the magazine and showed that even many supporters of feminism saw *Playboy's* treatment of womanhood as complicated. Some readers felt that the greatest paradox was the magazine's espousal of liberal politics coupled with what many saw as its objectification of women. In 1972 Joan Siegel wrote: "I'm a member of a women's lib organization, but I'm also a wife. I pick up my husband's copy of *Playboy* every month and regularly read one of the few departments I find morally acceptable: The *Playboy* 'Forum.'" She continued: "In spite of the subliminal sexist message that permeates the rest of your magazine, I must admit that your 'Forum' words on the subject of feminism are basically sound. . . . Bravo, *Playboy*."<sup>104</sup> Another female reader likewise admitted that she respected the politics of The *Playboy* Philosophy and Forum but wished the magazine would acknowledge "its bias where women's liberation is concerned."<sup>105</sup> These letters show that contemporary observers saw the potential in *Playboy* to offer a useable version of sexuality to both men and women. The

<sup>100</sup> Letters to the Editor, *Playboy*, April 1973, 11-12.

<sup>101</sup> Playbill, *Playboy*, January 1973, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Hefner spent one semester studying sociology in graduate school at Northwestern University in 1950 (Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise*, 19). He wrote a paper entitled "Sex Behavior and the U.S. Law," in which he argued that if all sex laws still on the books were enforced, most Americans would be prosecuted (copy of this paper from Hefner's personal archive at Playboy Mansion West provided by Steve Martinez).

<sup>103</sup> Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise*, 207.

<sup>104</sup> Forum letter, *Playboy*, January 1972, 48.

<sup>105</sup> Forum letter, *Playboy*, December 1970, 88.

magazine may not have lived up to that potential or even wanted to, but, as the women's movement reached a critical mass, many progressive Americans saw *Playboy's* gender politics as something more than sexist.

Hefner also put his money where his mouth was when it came to supporting feminist causes. His help was accomplished through the Playboy Foundation, which was founded in 1965 as the philanthropic arm of the magazine. The foundation's contributions focused on three areas: "the protection and extension of civil rights," "the modernization of laws pertaining to sex, drugs, contraception, abortion and censorship," and "support of research in the fields of human sexuality and population control."<sup>106</sup> The foundation was created to help bring about the social and political philosophy that Hefner had laid out in his rambling editorial series of the previous three years. The series, known as The *Playboy* Philosophy, ran from December 1962 to May 1965, with a few extra installments published over the next year whenever Hefner was re-inspired. At least as early as April 1965 Hefner was planning to devote an entire installment to the topic of abortion, though he lost interest in the series, and it abruptly ended before he wrote that segment.<sup>107</sup> Still, the foundation contributed money to feminist causes such as the legalization of abortion, access to contraception, and the establishment of daycare centers. The 1973 *Annual Report* noted that the foundation "assists in legal actions aimed at repealing restrictive abortion laws and it had aided individuals threatened with prosecution under state abortion statutes." The report also added that the foundation had assisted "research groups working on morning-after pills and once-a-month birth-control pills."<sup>108</sup>

As the seventies began, the question of reproductive rights would become a central concern to most feminists. Like the larger women's movement, the abortion rights movement had reached a peak by the early 1970s, even while it had been active in a limited capacity since the early 1960s. Activists like Patricia Maginnis worked at the local, often underground, level to educate women on how to obtain safe abortions. Abortion was being discussed in the popular American press by the mid-1960s, though the movement for abortion rights was still in its infant stages. *Playboy* published its first statement in support of the legalization of abortion in its December 1965 Forum. Readers increasingly contributed their thoughts on the issue, including many women who wrote in to explain why they had sought abortions.<sup>109</sup> In May 1967 *Playboy* called upon readers to write to

<sup>106</sup> The Playboy Foundation *Annual Report*, *Playboy*, January 1973, 57.

<sup>107</sup> Hefner to Michael Laurence, memorandum, 30 April 1965, box 54, 1965 D-Editorial, folder 6, HMH Papers. In this memo Hefner stated explicitly that he planned to devote a *Playboy* Philosophy installment exclusively to the issue of abortion, but there are other references to this intent, though slightly less explicit, at least as early as February 1964.

<sup>108</sup> The Playboy Foundation *Annual Report*, *Playboy*, January 1973, 57.

<sup>109</sup> By the mid-1960s the national debate over abortion was expanding and gaining more attention in the media. Additionally, contraceptive advocates had a major victory in 1965 with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Griswold v. Connecticut*.

their congressmen and demand abortion reform. Readers responded with a flood of letters; the majority were in favor of reform.<sup>110</sup> To one letter from a woman who described her guilt and shame over an abortion she had as a teenager *Playboy* replied: "It is our hope that a general increase of openness and honesty about sex, more adequate sex education for teenagers, . . . and a liberalization of abortion laws will spare other girls from experiences such as yours."<sup>111</sup>

With growing public debate, as evidenced in *Playboy* and throughout the culture, the abortion rights movement became truly national in scope in the late 1960s and particularly by 1970, when various states, including California, Colorado, and New York, had begun to expand access to abortion.<sup>112</sup> By that time the Playboy Foundation had for several years been working to expand access to contraception and abortion by providing abortion advocacy groups with funding.<sup>113</sup> Birth control activists like Bill Baird and others also used the Forum to publicize abortion services.<sup>114</sup> Though *Playboy* was officially a men's magazine, activists clearly thought it an appropriate place to address the reproductive needs of American women.

As the debate over abortion reached a cultural peak, the issue claimed a significant number of pages in *Playboy*. In September 1970, for example, the magazine ran a piece by a Dr. Robert Hall, an outspoken advocate for the legalization of abortion, entitled "The Abortion Revolution" and described as "a doctor's chronicle of the bitter and continuing battle to abolish our obsolete laws against terminating pregnancy."<sup>115</sup> In September 1971 *Playboy* included "A Special 'Playboy Forum' Report" to aid women who sought to obtain abortions. In the report the magazine surveyed changing state abortion laws but ultimately concluded that recent progress had stalled: "The holy war to protect the 'right to life' of the fetus gets into high gear—and American women are the victims." The piece provided contact information

<sup>110</sup> Forum, *Playboy*, August 1967, 35–37.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>112</sup> Beginning in 1967 eleven American states had begun to liberalize their abortion laws, expanding access under certain conditions and giving momentum to the movement. See DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 647; and Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 158.

<sup>113</sup> In March 1970 the foundation contributed \$10,000 to the Chicago Clergy Consultation Service on Problem Pregnancies. The consultation service was created to counsel "desperate" pregnant women. Women who telephoned the service would be greeted by a recorded message that told them the contact information for counselors from whom they could find out where to obtain a safe abortion. Calling it a "humanitarian . . . project," the Playboy Foundation avoided prosecution for aiding in illegal activity by specifying that the consultation service must not use foundation funds to "[violate] . . . existing abortion laws" but rather "only for research and/or lobbying, or anything . . . that is legal" (Lehrman to Dick Rosenzweig, memorandum, 27 January 1970, box 135, 1970 Lehrman–L Misc., folder 4, HMH Papers).

<sup>114</sup> Forum letter, *Playboy*, June 1971, 185. Baird's work in pharmaceuticals had taken him to a New York City hospital, where he witnessed the death of a woman from an illegal abortion. He then devoted his life to making contraception legal and accessible. For more on Baird see Allyn, *Make Love, Not War*, 35, 263–64.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Hall, "The Abortion Revolution," *Playboy*, September 1970, 112.

for prochoice organizations such as the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL), founded in 1969, and offered guidance on how "to obtain an abortion," which included practical information such as phone numbers for abortion consultation services in various states, and for states without such hotlines *Playboy* listed national organizations like Planned Parenthood. Information regarding obtaining abortions overseas was also included.<sup>116</sup> Further updates on legal battles surrounding abortion and other related issues were featured monthly in a portion of the Forum called "Newsfront."

*Playboy's* unwavering stance on abortion caused some readers to condemn the magazine. James Nichols of Cincinnati wrote to *Playboy* and described a letter, published in the *Washington Post*, from a woman who had regretted her abortion. Nichols chastised *Playboy* and other supporters of legalization: "May you live to regret your words as much as this woman regrets her abortion."<sup>117</sup> Los Angeles resident Richard J. Green described the "evil in killing the human fetus. . . . Once a nation becomes callous and indifferent to the importance of human life . . . there may be no hope for human life."<sup>118</sup>

After the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of a woman's right to an abortion in the 1973 case *Roe v. Wade*, *Playboy* celebrated the decision and the role it saw itself as playing in changing the social dialogue surrounding the issue. An editorial published a few months after the ruling noted that "*Playboy* joined many national and local organizations in the effort that climaxed in the U.S. Supreme Court abortion decision" and that already "in 1965, 'The *Playboy* Forum' opened a dialog with *Playboy's* readers on abortion," while "the Playboy Foundation began assisting the right-to-abortion movement in 1966." The editorial also spelled out clearly the relationship between abortion rights and the *Playboy* philosophy more generally: "The Court's decision . . . holds out hope for changes in other areas in which the law infringes on individual rights and liberties."<sup>119</sup>

It was not just on the issue of abortion that *Playboy* worked toward feminist goals. Future Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg, then a representative for the American Civil Liberties Union's Women's Rights Project, acknowledged in a 1973 letter to the Forum her gratitude for the Playboy Foundation's contributions to the fund and asked for more.<sup>120</sup> In the early seventies the Playboy Foundation also supported the League of Women Voters, Chicago's Citizens Committee for Victims of Rape, the National Conference of Woman and the Law, and the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>116</sup> "The Abortion Backlash: A Special 'Playboy Forum' Report," *Playboy*, September 1971, 77. A similar guide had been published in *New York* magazine on 28 September 1970.

<sup>117</sup> Forum letter, *Playboy*, November 1972, 84.

<sup>118</sup> Forum letter, *Playboy*, September 1972, 60.

<sup>119</sup> Forum editorial, *Playboy*, May 1973, 71.

<sup>120</sup> Forum letter, *Playboy*, August 1973, 52.

<sup>121</sup> Weyr, *Reaching for Paradise*, 241.

For many feminists, however, *Playboy's* philanthropy could only go so far. Controversy erupted, for example, when in 1971 the Playboy Foundation offered legal support to NOW. Instead, NOW asked for one night's profit from all Playboy Clubs. The organization publicized its request in order to put pressure on *Playboy*, but Hefner refused to go along, calling it "crude extortion." NOW's leaders went on to declare that "no amount of money would compensate for the low rating of the source. . . . To accept money from the [Playboy Foundation] would only contaminate us."<sup>122</sup> The conflict prompted Barbara A. Townley to write to the magazine and state: "I'm wholeheartedly in favor of women's rights, but I don't think Hugh Hefner even remotely resembles the Antichrist. . . . Thanks for your offer to help. Perhaps when the women's movement . . . starts going after the real dragons, we can get together."<sup>123</sup> At the height of the second wave of the women's movement, *Playboy* continued to inspire controversy.

*Playboy's* stance on abortion rights and feminism in the magazine and through its foundation paralleled the growth of the women's movement in the U.S. national consciousness. There can be no doubt that while Americans themselves were waking up to the demands being made by feminists, *Playboy* magazine served as a progressive channel of debate over women's liberation. Hefner believed, and still believes, that he was in the vanguard of sexual emancipation for both men and women. Though the politics of his magazine fell short of a truly feminist agenda, *Playboy* nonetheless contributed to the cultural negotiation of newly emerging femininities. Despite some critics' claims to the contrary, the magazine did not resist or even lag behind the liberal American mainstream in its support for women's rights. As debates within the movement demonstrated, feminists themselves questioned the appropriateness of traditional notions of femininity and cultural customs of sexuality in a changing social and domestic landscape. Regardless of Hefner's motivations for supporting feminist causes such as access to birth control and abortion, women's activists shared many of his goals, and those feminist causes were promoted to his readership along with the centerfolds.

Whatever the imprint *Playboy* has left on the collective memory of American culture, reducing its treatment of femininity to a discussion of objectification, as many critics have done, obscures the complexity and contradiction of the magazine. Certainly, much of the traditional critique is valid. In its insistence on conventional gender difference, *Playboy* refused to acknowledge the political challenge to its centerfolds, and in fixating on the radical minority of feminists, as he often did, Hefner missed an opportunity to focus his readers' attention on the broader liberal wing of the movement

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Forum letter, *Playboy*, June 1972, 70-72.

and might have thus reduced the feminist rage against his magazine. But at the height of *Playboy's* popularity people really did read it for the articles. Alongside the visual messages of female objectification that Hefner may have sent, he also sent equally potent messages of liberal activism that could not have been lost on many readers. Letters that supported *Playboy's* position as a progressive publication demonstrated that contemporaries often saw the magazine as a whole package, one that served up not only titillating centerfolds but also important political agendas. Indeed, as the women's movement emerged as a national force in the late 1960s, *Playboy* positioned itself as a supporter of civil liberties for all regardless of gender, and as sexuality became part of the public debate, it also became political.

Today, the traditional trappings of femininity of the sort exhibited and promoted in *Playboy* magazine still hold sway over most heterosexual men's conception of what is appealing in women. Hefner's fear that radical feminists would destroy all differences between the sexes and, according to him, all the fun of sex never came to pass. In fact, the tide of militant feminism that called for a radical restructuring of gender and sexual relations ebbed in the 1980s, but American culture continues largely to embrace Hefner's version of seduction; it remains what he called the "romantic boy-girl society."<sup>124</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Hefner to Spector, memorandum, 6 January 1970, ACS Papers.

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