

19. Putting the Feminine Back into Feminism

I remember back in college—when I was admittedly rather naive with regard to gender politics—someone asked a friend of mine whether she considered herself a feminist. I was surprised to hear her answer “no.” After all, she certainly seemed like a feminist to me. She was independent, intelligent, career-minded, pro-women’s reproductive rights. She regularly stood up for herself and was keenly aware of the disparity between how certain professors treated her and how they treated her male counterparts. When she was asked why she didn’t identify as a feminist, her reply was, “I like being a girl.” She went on to explain that she enjoyed, and even felt empowered by, being feminine. And in her experience, those who openly embraced the label “feminist” often displayed a condescending attitude toward her femininity.

Granted, this idea—that feminism and femininity are in opposition to one another—has often been fostered by those who wish to undermine feminism. For several decades now, feminism’s opponents have attempted to dissuade women from the movement by repeating two (seemingly contradictory) sound bites: that feminists are “man-haters” (read: “homosexual”) while simultaneously “wanting to be men” (read: “masculine”). While one cannot underestimate the negative effect that this antifeminist propaganda has had in turning feminine and heterosexual women away from feminism, we would be doing ourselves a great disservice if we didn’t also acknowledge the fact that many feminist have supported the idea that femininity is artificial and incompatible with feminism.[1] This anti-femininity tendency may represent the feminist movement’s single greatest tactical error. It’s high time we rectify this mistake by purposefully putting the feminine back into feminism.

Origins of Femininity

Before we can engage in an in-depth discussion about femininity, we must first accurately define the word. In its broadest sense, femininity refers to the behaviors, mannerisms, interests, and ways of presenting oneself that are typically associated with those who are female. Thus, the first thing we must acknowledge is that femininity is a collection of heterogeneous traits. This is an important point to make, as femininity is often assumed to be a monolithic entity—i.e., a “package deal” of gender expressions, traits, and qualities that inevitably bundled together. The fact that individual feminine traits are separable is evident in the fact that some women are verbally effusive and emotive (qualities that are commonly considered feminine), but not particularly feminine in their manner of dress. Reciprocally, some women who dress very femininely are not very effusive or emotive. Still other women exhibit both or neither of these qualities. It must also be mentioned that these and other feminine traits are not unique to women, as individual men can (and often do) exhibit them.

The fact that feminine traits are not female-specific, and that they are separable from one another is far too often brushed aside when people try to answer the question that unfortunately drives most discussions about femininity: namely, what produces feminine expressions in people? Those who wish to naturalize femininity will often describe feminine traits as though they are bundled in a single biological program that is initiated only in genetic females. Such claims gloss over the many people who have exceptional gender expressions (i.e., feminine traits in males and masculine traits in females) in order to fully subsume femininity within femaleness. On the other hand, those who wish to *artificialize* femininity often characterize it as though it were a unified social program designed to shape women’s personalities and sexualities via a combination of social norms, constructs, and conditioning. The assumption that femininity is one entity makes it easier for those who favor such social explanations to “prove” that femininity is artificial. After all, one needs only to make the case that certain specific aspects of femininity are clearly “man-made” and

vary from culture to culture in order to extrapolate that *all* aspects of femininity are social in origin. Similarly, by showing that certain aspects of femininity are socially imposed on girls and women, one can claim that femininity *as a whole* is unnatural, or it would not have to be enforced at all. What should be clear by now is that the presumption that femininity is a singular program tends to foster an overly simplistic, all-or-none dichotomy between biological and social explanations for gender differences. It allows those who wish to naturalize femininity, and those who wish to artificialize it, to wave away any evidence that appears inconsistent with their model.

Once we let go of the concept of monolithic femininity—and with it, the either/or ideology that plagues nature-versus-nurture debates about gender—it becomes rather apparent that individual feminine traits arise from different combinations of biology and socialization. For instance, during my transition, when I first began to be perceived as female on a regular basis, I was surprised by how often male strangers told me to smile—“Cheer up, things can’t be all that bad,” they’d say. Needless to say, I found these remarks condescending, as nobody dared to tell me that I should smile for them back when I was perceived as male. However, despite my determination not to conform to the suggestions of patronizing strangers, I nevertheless found that, over time, I stopped hearing such comments. Obviously, something had changed. Maybe on an unconscious level, I learned to smile more without realizing it. Or maybe it had to do with another defense mechanism that I’ve learned since living as a woman: making eye contact with strangers less often than I did when I was male, which significantly reduced occurrences of strange men harassing me. These behaviors, which are often considered feminine because of their prevalence in women, seem to originate as an unconscious response to negotiating one’s way through the world as a woman. In other words, they appear to be primarily or exclusively social in origin.

Other aspects of femininity that are clearly social in origin include what I call “feminine fashions”—i.e., qualities that have only recently become associated with, or symbolic of, femininity. For example, these days it’s common for people to view being thin

as a feminine trait. While femininity and thinness have become almost synonymous in contemporary Western culture, women who were more full-figured “”were considered the feminine ideal in past eras. Similarly, today most of us grow up believing that pink is undoubtedly the most feminine of colors. In the early 1900s, however, it was more common for people to associate pink with boys and blue with girls.[2]

While some feminine traits are predominantly social in origin, others appear to be greatly influenced by biology. One feminine biological trait is being in tune with one’s emotions. Virtually all transsexuals transitioning in the MTF direction report an increased intensity in the way that they experience emotions once they begin taking estrogen; those in the FTM direction report the opposite effect upon taking testosterone. Thus, emotional intensity definitely has a biological basis, as it is greatly influenced by adult hormone levels.

Of course, feminine traits that arise from our adult hormonal makeup are relatively easy to categorize as biological, as one can experience the corresponding changes firsthand via hormone therapy. In contrast, other feminine traits that have biological inputs—such as those that may be hardwired into our brains from birth—are more difficult to discern. Two possible examples of this include feminine aesthetic preferences and ways of expressing oneself. Evidence that these tendencies may be hardwired comes from the fact that they typically appear very early in childhood and often in contradiction to one’s socialization (both for children whose parents attempt to raise them in a unisex or gender-neutral fashion, and for boys whose families actively and aggressively steer them away from feminine expression). This indicates that some aspects of feminine verbal and aesthetic expression precede and/or supersede gender socialization. Further, the fact that some feminine male children will often continue to express these exceptional traits well into adulthood despite a lifetime of social conditioning to the contrary shows that these traits cannot be adequately explained by social mechanisms. While feminine verbal and aesthetic expression can surely be influenced or exaggerated by social forces, I would argue that these traits are also driven by intrinsic and deep-seated inclinations that are likely to be the result of biology.

Given the way that others have distorted biology to justify sexist behaviors and norms, I can understand why some feminists would be hesitant to admit that biology has any role in producing or contributing to behavioral gender differences. However, the idea that gender differences arise solely from socialization and social norms is highly problematic, in that it assumes that our minds are blank slates with absolutely no intrinsic or instinctual gendered or sexual tendencies. This harkens back to views forwarded by extreme behaviorists like B. F. Skinner, who argued that human beings are merely a product of their social conditioning. Such views have since been thoroughly refuted by other work in the fields of psychology and biology. Such behaviorist models are unable to explain how any gender system comes into being in the first place, and how (once it is established) anyone can come to transcend or challenge it. As with those models that assume that gender arises directly and expediently from sex chromosomes or hormones, behaviorist models of gender fail to accurately account for the vast gender and sexual diversity in the world.

While I believe that certain aspects of femininity have biological inputs, it would be foolish for us to presume that we can fully tease apart the social from the biological: to assume that we can know precisely what biological pathways lie at the root of feminine and masculine behaviors, or to claim to know why or how they evolved. Given the overwhelming number of social variables involved, any researcher who claims to approach human gender expression from a purely biological perspective practices speculation rather than science. Furthermore, I reject the sophomoric biological models of gender that are often proposed in pop psychology and pop science, which often naively portray genes, hormones, and neurons as though they were switches that are simply turned “on” in one gender and “off” in the other. In reality, these aspects of biology are complexly regulated and greatly influenced by an individual’s unique genetic and environmental background. This is particularly true of the brain, where neural structure, connections, and activity are constantly being altered and modified in response to new experiences. Biology inevitably produces a broad spectrum of

potential combinations of behavioral tendencies in people, making that spectrum compatible with the vast natural diversity we see in human gender expression.

Sexist Interpretations of Femininity

Throughout the rest of this chapter, when I refer to “femininity” or “feminine traits,” it should be understood that I’m talking about a heterogeneous, non-female-specific collection of traits that each have a unique biological and/or social origin. In fact, the only quality that all feminine traits share is that they all tend to be associated with women (albeit not exclusive to them). This point becomes highly relevant once we begin to consider how feminine traits are interpreted by others. Indeed, the ongoing and hotly contested debates over whether femininity and masculinity are biological or social in origin have, in my view, served primarily as a distraction from a far more pertinent issue—namely, what meanings, symbolism, and connotations do we assign to different gender expressions? While I disagree with the notion that gender expression itself is entirely social in origin, I do believe that the way we perceive and assign values to feminine and masculine behaviors is primarily, if not exclusively, a social affair. In our male-centered culture, two forces most often shape our interpretations of femininity (as well as masculinity): oppositional and traditional sexism.

Oppositional sexism functions to legitimize feminine expressions in women and to delegitimize feminine expression in men (and vice versa for masculinity). So while all people are capable of expressing feminine traits, oppositional sexism ensures that such expressions will appear natural when produced by women and unnatural when produced by men. In addition to creating the perception that female femininity is “real” and “right” while male femininity is “fake” and “wrong,” oppositional sexism may also influence the “doing” of gender expression. Exceptional gender expressions are regularly dismissed, even stigmatized, in our culture, which may lead some people to hide or curb their own gender-variant behavior, further exaggerating the assumed, apparent differences between the two sexes. In these ways, oppositional sexism creates the assumption that feminine traits—which occur in

members of both sexes—are inexorably linked to female biology, and therefore, to one another.

Traditional sexism functions to make femaleness and femininity appear subordinate to maleness and masculinity. This is accomplished in a number of ways. For example, female and feminine attributes are regularly assigned negative connotations and meanings in our society. An example of this is the way that being in touch with and expressing one's emotions is regularly derided in our society. While this trait has virtually nothing to do with one's ability to reason or to think logically, in the public mind, being "emotional" has become synonymous with being "irrational." Another example is that certain pursuits and interests that are considered feminine, such as gossiping or decorating, are often characterized as "frivolous," while masculine preoccupations—even those that serve solely recreational functions, such as sports—generally escape such trivialization.

In addition to placing inferior meanings on feminine traits, traditional sexism also creates the impression that certain aspects of femininity exist for the pleasure or benefit of men. Take, for example, the concern for, or a desire to help, others. While those who have this quality of empathy or altruism often express it toward all types of beings (i.e., children and adults, strangers and friends, animals and humans), it's often recast in women as a maternal, "nurturing" quality that is meant to be directed primarily toward one's family. Thus, this thoroughly human trait has been twisted into the expectation that it's women's "natural" duty to take care of their male partners and children, and to carry out the bulk of family and domestic chores.

Another example of this phenomenon is the way that feminine self-presentation is often framed as though it solely exists to entice or attract men. This assumption denies any possibility that those who are feminine might wish to adorn themselves for their own benefit or pleasure. After all, feminine self-presentation tends to highly correlate with a more general desire to surround oneself with beautiful or aesthetically pleasing objects and materials—whether 'in decorating one's home or adorning one's body. The idea that this

trait exists primarily to pique men's interest seems unlikely to me, as most straight men I know seem rather disinterested in the way their homes are decorated, and often are completely oblivious when their female partner dons a new outfit or hairstyle. It's safe to say that most heterosexual men are far more interested in women's physical bodies than they are in the clothing and accessories that cover them. The idea that feminine self-presentation exists primarily to attract heterosexual men is further undermined by the fact that femme dykes dress in a feminine manner despite their disinterest in attracting men. And some gay men also dress very femininely despite the fact that the gay male community has a history of idolizing and fetishizing hypermasculine images and bodies rather than feminine ones. As someone who's not interested in attracting men, I often enjoy dressing femininely; I simply feel more alive and self-empowered when I do. Whenever people (male or otherwise) assume that women who dress in a feminine manner do so in order to elicit male attention, it always sounds like a slightly toned-down version of that arrogant claim that women who dress provocatively are somehow asking to be raped. Clearly, it's the idea that feminine self-presentation exists for men's benefit that is oppressive to women, not the acts of self-presentation themselves.

The issue of feminine self-presentation also brings up another way in which feminine traits are undermined: They are often cast as being dependent on masculinity and maleness. This sentiment seems to be projected onto virtually all aspects of femaleness and femininity. It can be seen in the way men are often cast as the "protectors" of women, either because they are typically physically stronger or because women are seen as being "emotionally frail." The stereotypic and mythic image of the damsel in distress who requires a masculine man to save her seems to impart an air of helplessness, fragility, and passivity onto virtually all aspects of femininity and female sexuality. Such connotations seem to heavily inform both the materiality and symbolism of certain feminine fashions. They also help foster a predator/prey mentality regarding sexuality, where femininity becomes conflated with being receptive and sexually passive, while masculinity is synonymous with penetration and sexual

aggressiveness. This, of course, denies the reality that women are often sexual initiators and that both parties are invariably active during the act of sex.

Indeed, the fact that helplessness, fragility, and passivity are merely meanings projected onto female bodies and feminine expressions (rather than qualities that are “built into” femaleness and femininity) becomes obvious when we imagine what would happen if, instead of centering our beliefs about heterosexual sex around the idea that the man “penetrates” the woman, we were to say that the woman’s vagina “consumes” the man’s penis. This would create a very different set of connotations, as the woman would become the active initiator and the man would be the passive and receptive party. One can easily see how this could lead to men and masculinity being seen as dependent on, and existing for the benefit of, femaleness and femininity. Similarly, if we thought about the feminine traits of being verbally effusive and emotive not as signs of insecurity or dependence, but as bold acts of self-expression, then the masculine ideal of the “strong and silent type” might suddenly seem timid and insecure by comparison.

Together, the mistaken belief that femininity is inherently helpless, fragile, dependent, irrational, frivolous, and so on, gives rise to the commonplace assumption that those who express femininity are not to be taken seriously and cannot be seen as legitimate authority figures. While such assumptions regularly undermine feminine people of both sexes, they often have a greater net effect on women, because traditional sexism targets female bodies as well as feminine expression, and because traditional and oppositional sexism act together to put women in a double bind: If a woman acts feminine, she will be delegitimized by traditional sexism, and if she acts masculine, she will be delegitimized by oppositional sexism.

Feminist Interpretations of Femininity

Now, I will address how two different contemporary feminist movements—unilateral feminism and deconstructive feminism—have reacted to the sexist devaluing of

femininity in society. My focus on only these two broad movements is not intended to purposely ignore other branches of feminism, but rather to illustrate two major general trends in feminist perspectives on femininity.

Several of the most influential branches of feminism that arose during the 1960s and 1970s may be described as falling under the umbrella of *unilateral feminism*, in that they viewed sexism as a straightforward matter of women being oppressed at the hands of men. One of the canonical writings of unilateral feminism is Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which focuses on the malaise that affected many middle-class women during the 1950s and 1960s as they gave up careers to become housewives and to raise families.[3] Friedan co-opts Sigmund Freud's phrase "Feminine Mystique" to describe the popular belief at the time that women could only be happy if they fully immersed themselves in femininity. Friedan discusses femininity in relation to what she calls the "housewife trap"—the expectation that middle-class women should become full-time homemakers, a role she believed stifled women's emotional and intellectual growth. To make her case that femininity is a trap (rather than something many women naturally gravitate toward), Friedan spends much of the book discussing the ways in which companies, advertisers, the media, psychiatry, and others actively manipulate women into buying into feminine trappings. *The Feminine Mystique* was a rather narrowly focused book, in that it only dealt with issues that affected middle-class American women, and with those aspects of femininity that are associated with the "housewife trap." But it helped reinforce a notion that would appear repeatedly throughout unilateral feminism—that femininity (or at least certain aspects of it) is an artificial, man-made ploy designed to hold women back from reaching their full potential.

Looking back at unilateral feminist writings, one finds that sexism is often described as arising from a patriarchal system that kept women oppressed via two interrelated tactics: 1) placing belittling meanings and assumptions onto women's bodies, and 2) coercing women into femininity, a program that was seen as inherently stifling and which fostered (or was

the product of) women's subservience and subjugation to men. Thus, unilateral feminists viewed the oppositional sexism faced by women as part of traditional sexism. Because masculinity was viewed primarily as a position of privilege, oppositional sexism against male-bodied people remained obscured. Indeed, the very idea that a man might find masculine expectations restrictive seemed as nonsensical to many unilateral feminists as a rich person complaining about being oppressed by their own wealth.

The unilateral feminist notion that women were coerced into femininity was further facilitated by the growing use of the sex/gender distinction, which differentiated between one's sex (which arose from biology) and gender (which arose from one's environment, socialization, and psychology).[4] This gave unilateral feminists the theoretical means to challenge the traditionally sexist messages projected onto women's biology and bodies while ignoring or disavowing the negative messages associated with femininity. In fact, it's clear that many influential unilateral feminists believed that qualities such as helplessness, deference, and passivity were essentially "built into" feminine expressions and practices.[5] In other words, these feminists not only failed to challenge sexist interpretations of femininity, but often accepted those interpretations at face value.

While unilateral feminists almost universally agreed that some or all aspects of femininity enabled sexism, they differed in the proposed solutions for countering it. For example, liberal feminists (such as Friedan) worked within the existing system to try to gain equal access to previously male-dominated areas (particularly professional and leadership positions), often promoting a "women can do anything men can do" philosophy. Implicit in this strategy is the assumption that certain masculine-associated qualities and interests were natural and desirable for women to strive for, whereas the reciprocal feminine qualities were not. Radical feminists argued that women's oppression would only end by entirely rejecting both masculine and feminine gender roles—which were seen as being inexorably tied to men's "oppressor" and women's "oppressed" statuses—and instead adopting a more "natural" androgynous disposition. Cultural feminists took a more essentialist position,

arguing that men and women were inherently different, and had distinctive innate traits; for example, men were inherently destructive and oppressive, while women were creative and nurturing. While cultural feminists certainly embraced some feminine traits—even characterizing them as superior to their masculine counterparts’ traits—they were careful to portray such traits as arising from a woman’s “natural” womanliness rather than from “artifactual, man-made femininity.”[6]

The notion that sexism can only be overcome if women work to become more masculine, more androgynous, or more “naturally womanly” all artificialize femininity by assuming that one’s gender expression is easily malleable, and can be reshaped according to one’s politics. Such one-size-fits-all approaches falsely presume that femininity is monolithic, ignoring how significant differences in class, culture, and biological predisposition gives rise to a vast diversity of feminine expressions and perspectives.[7] Because many unilateral feminists refused to accept this diversity in female gender expression, they often developed rather belittling views of women who were unabashedly feminine, characterizing them as having their minds colonized, being “ego repressed,” and not a “whole person.”[8] Some unilateral feminists called femininity a “slave status,” equating it with masochism, comparing it with Stockholm syndrome, and believing that it existed only to “communicate a woman’s acceptance of her subordinate status.”[9] Women who engaged in feminine beauty practices were perhaps the biggest target of such criticism, as they were accused of donning “symbols of oppression,” being manipulated by “thought control,” alienating themselves from their own bodies, and taking part in “self-imposed passivity.”[10]

Of course, one of the biggest caveats in the unilateral feminist argument that femininity is artificial and only exists to oppress women is the fact that some people who are assigned a male body and are socialized male also express femininity. Perhaps sensing that feminine gay men and MTF spectrum trans people brought unilateral feminist’s antifemininity theses into question, many of them developed vehemently disdainful

attitudes toward these groups. Interestingly (and not coincidentally), the unilateral feminists who have been most outspoken in deriding feminine gay men and trans women also tend to have the most openly hostile attitudes toward femininity in general. For example, Mary Daly, who referred to feminine women as “painted birds” and portrayed feminist women such as herself as being “attacked by the mutants of her own kind, the man-made women,” was similarly resentful of transsexual women (who she called “Frankenstein’s Monsters”) and drag queens (who she compared to whites playing “blackface”).^[11] Germaine Greer, who has referred to feminine women as “feminine parasites,” has written multiple transmisogynistic screeds, one of which assails trans woman Jay Morris for her “obsession with femininity.”^[12] And Sheila Jeffreys, who believes that femininity “is the behavior required of the subordinate class of women in order to show their deference to the ruling class of men,” has argued that MTF transsexuality and gay male femininity arise exclusively from sexual masochism.^[13] Thus, the anti-gay-male, anti-trans-woman sentiment that persists today among many unilateral feminists has its roots in their traditionally sexist views of femininity.

Many of the unilateral feminist positions that I’ve discussed so far have been challenged with the rise of *deconstructive feminism* in the 1980s and 1990s. Deconstructive feminists, while varied in their backgrounds and approaches, share the belief that the category “woman” is socially constructed and therefore doesn’t exist independent of the societal norms and discourses that bring it into being. Therefore, instead of working to end sexism by highlighting the ways that women are “oppressed” by men (as unilateral feminists had), deconstructive feminists set out to deconstruct our very notions of “woman” and “man,” exposing the assumptions and expectations that enable sexism. They describe “man” and “woman” as being situated within a binary gender system that permeates every nook and cranny of our society, infusing itself into our language, traditions, behaviors, and the very way we think about ourselves and others. This binary gender system assumes that men are masculine and aggressive and attracted to women, who are feminine and passive. If one fails

to adhere to these assumptions in any way—for instance, if you are an aggressive woman or a feminine man—then you automatically become unintelligible within this system and are therefore marginalized.

Deconstructive feminism differs from unilateral feminism in a number of important ways. First, unlike unilateral feminism, which focuses almost exclusively on traditional sexism, deconstructive feminism focuses primarily on oppositional sexism. In a sense, deconstructive feminism subsumes traditional sexism into oppositional sexism, as it typically depicts the “othering” of “woman” as an inevitable by-product of that identity being binary-paired to “man.” Because this relationship privileges oppositional sexism over traditional sexism, deconstructive feminists have been influential in both feminist and queer theory. Deconstructive feminists also differ from unilateral feminists in that they do not subscribe to the sex/gender distinction, but instead argue that our notions about “sex” are just as socially constructed as our notions of “gender.”

While deconstructive feminism differs from unilateral feminism in many ways, it shares its predecessor’s tendency to make gender expression seem artificial. This is often accomplished via *gender performativity*, a concept developed by Judith Butler to describe the way in which built-in expectations about maleness and femaleness, straightness and queerness, are constantly imposed on all of us. Butler uses the term “performativity” to highlight how feminine and masculine norms must constantly be cited. She uses the example of the child who becomes “girl” by others at birth: She is given a female name, referred to with female pronouns, given girl toys, and will, throughout her life, have her “girlness” cited by others in society.[14] Butler argues that this sort of reiteration “produces” gender, making it appear “natural.” However, many other deconstructive feminists have interpreted Butler’s writings to mean that one’s gender is merely a “performance.” “If this is true, then one can challenge sexism by simply “performing” their gender in ways that call the binary gender system into question; the most often cited example of this is a drag queen

whose “performance” supposedly reveals the way in which femaleness and femininity are a “performance.”[15]

While unilateral feminists typically view femininity in exclusively negative terms, deconstructive feminists believe that femininity is context-dependent: it can be “good” (when it is used to subvert the binary gender system) or “bad” (when used to naturalize that system).[16] In other words, deconstructive feminism only empowers and embraces queer expressions of femininity, while straight expressions of femininity are typically portrayed as reinforcing a sexist binary gender system. Thus, both deconstructive and unilateral feminism share the belief that: 1) femininity is not a natural form of expression, but rather one that is socially imposed; 2) most women are “duped” into believing that their femininity arises intrinsically rather than due to extrinsic forces such as socialization or social constructs; 3) people who are “in the know” recognize that gender expression is artificial and changeable, and thus they can purposefully adopt a more radical, antisexist gender expression (e.g., androgyny, drag, etc.); and 4) because feminine women choose not to adopt these supposedly radical, antisexist gender expressions, they may be seen as enabling sexism and thus collaborating in their own oppression.

The Ramifications of Artificializing Femininity

So why has the artificializing of femininity become a preoccupation for many feminists over the last several decades? I believe that it has to do with the fact that many of the women who have most strongly gravitated toward feminism are those who have found traditional feminine gender roles constraining or unnatural. In many cases, this is due to their own inclinations toward exceptional forms of gender expression. Because their personal experiences with femininity felt uncomfortable and contrived in comparison with their experiences with androgyny, masculinity, or other gender expressions (which they found more liberating and empowering), they mistakenly projected their own experience and perspective onto all other women. While not necessarily done maliciously, this

extrapolation was nevertheless an act of gender entitlement, one that denied that any diversity in gender expression might exist among women arising out of their very different class, cultural, or biological backgrounds and predispositions. By arrogantly assuming that no woman could be legitimately drawn toward feminine expression, these feminists permanently relegated femininity to the status of “false consciousness.”

The feminist assumption that “femininity is artificial” is narcissistic, as it invariably casts non-feminine women as having “superior knowledge” while dismissing feminine women as either “dupes” (who are too ignorant to recognize they have been conned) or “fakes” (who purposely engage in “unnatural” behaviors in order to uphold sexist societal norms). This tendency to dismiss feminine women is eerily similar to the behavior of some lesbian feminists in the 1970s who arrogantly claimed that they were more righteous feminists than heterosexual women because the latter group was, “fucking with the oppressor.”^[17] It is an extraordinarily convenient tactic to artificialize, and even demean, an inclination (such as femininity or heterosexuality) when you personally are not inclined toward it. Indeed, this is exactly what straight bigots do when they dismiss queer forms of gender and sexual expression as “unnatural.” Once feminists stoop to the level of policing gender and start inventing etiologies to explain why some women adopt “unnatural” feminine forms of expression, there’s little to distinguish us from the sexist forces we claim to be fighting against in the first place.

While femininity is in many ways influenced, shaped, and enforced by society, to say that it is entirely “artificial” or merely a “performance” is patronizing toward those for whom femininity simply *feels right*. Indeed, one would have to have a rather grim view of the female population to believe that a majority of us could so easily be “brainwashed” or “coerced” into enthusiastically adopting an entirely contrived or wholly artificial set of gender expressions. In fact, it seems incomprehensible that so many women could so actively gravitate toward femininity unless there was something about it that resonated with them on a profound level. This becomes even more obvious when considering feminine

folks who exhibit no desire whatsoever to fit into straight society, such as femme dykes (who proudly express their femininity despite being historically marginalized within the lesbian movement because of it) and “nelly queens” (who remain fiercely feminine despite the gay male obsession with praising butchness and deriding “effeminacy”).[18]

The idea that “femininity is artificial” is also blatantly misogynistic. While a handful of theorists in the field of gender studies have more recently begun to focus on how masculinity is constructed, the lion’s share of feminist attention, deconstruction, and denigration has been directed squarely at femininity. There is an obvious reason for this. Just as woman is man’s “other,” so too is femininity masculinity’s “other.” Under such circumstances, negative connotations like “artificial,” “contrived,” and “frivolous” become built into our understanding of femininity—indeed, this is precisely what allows masculinity to always come off as “natural,” “practical,” and “uncomplicated.” Those feminists who single out women’s dress shoes, clothing, and hairstyles to as artificial necessarily leave unchallenged the notion that their masculine counterparts are “natural” and “practical.” This is the same male-centered approach that allows the appearances and behaviors of men who wish to charm or impress others to seem “authentic” while the reciprocal traits expressed by women are dismissed as “feminine wiles.” Femininity is portrayed as a trick or ruse so that masculinity invariably seems sincere by comparison. For this reason, there are few intellectual tasks easier than artificializing feminine gender expression, because male-centricism purposefully sets up femininity as masculinity’s “straw man” or its scapegoat.

As feminists, it’s time for us to acknowledge that this scapegoating of femininity has become the Achilles’ heel of the feminist movement. While past feminists have gone to great lengths to empower femaleness and to tear away all of the negative connotations that have plagued women’s bodies and biology, they have allowed the negative connotations associated with femininity to persist relatively unabated. Nothing illustrates this better than the fact that, while most reasonable people see women as men’s equals, few (if any) dare to claim that femininity is masculinity’s equal. Indeed, much of what has historically been

called misogyny—a hatred of women—has clearly gone underground, disguising itself as the less reprehensible derision of femininity. This new version of misogyny, which focuses more on maligning femininity than femaleness, can be found everywhere. It can be seen in our political discourse, where advocates for the environment, gun control, and welfare are undermined via “guilt by association” with feminine imagery as seen in phrases such as “tree huggers,” “soft on crime,” and pro-“dependency”—where male politicians who exhibit anything other than a two-dimensional facade of hypermasculinity are invariably dismissed by political cartoonists who depict them donning dresses.[19]

This new misogyny still very much undermines women, and it accomplishes this in several ways. First, the majority of feminine people are women, so by default they make up the largest class of those who are targeted by antifeminine sentiment. Second, our concept of femininity doesn’t merely affect how we “do” our own gender expression—it is also an expectation or assumption that we project onto other people’s bodies and behaviors. Therefore, while an individual woman may purposefully eschew femininity in her appearance and actions, she cannot escape the fact that other people will project feminine assumptions and expectations upon her simply because they associate femininity with femaleness. In her book *Why So Slow?: The Advancement of Women*, Virginia Valian makes a strong case that what has come to be known as the “glass ceiling”—the fact that women, regardless of their skills and merits, tend not to advance as far in their careers as similarly qualified men—is best explained by the fact that all people project feminine assumptions and expectations onto women and masculine ones onto men.[20] This, of course, favors men, since masculinity is by default seen as “strong,” “natural,” and “aggressive” while femininity is seen as “weak,” “contrived,” and “passive.” Therefore, until feminists work to empower femininity and pry it away from the insipid, inferior meanings that plague it—weakness, helplessness, fragility, passivity, frivolity, and artificiality—those meanings will continue to haunt every person who is female and/or feminine.

Feminists' past privileging of femaleness over femininity has also enabled misogynistic acts that target men who have feminine traits to remain unnoticed and unarticulated. For example, when a gay man ridicules another gay man for being too "flamboyant" or "effeminate," he may be accused of harboring "internalized homophobia"—a nonsensical turn of phrase to describe someone who is openly gay and has no problems with masculine gay men. Isn't this form of antifeminine discrimination better described as misogyny? Similarly, straight women who regularly pair up with macho guys who treat them poorly, yet won't consider dating a "nice guy," might be described as harboring "internalized misogyny." Again, isn't this better described as a form of externalized misogyny directed at men who display qualities that are considered feminine?

Some feminists (particularly unilateral feminists) will no doubt have a negative knee-jerk reaction to my suggestion that we extend our understanding of misogyny to encompass effemimania—our societal obsession with critiquing and belittling feminine traits in males. However, as I have argued in past chapters, effemimania affects everybody, including women. Effemimania encourages those who are socialized male to mystify femininity and to dehumanize those who are considered feminine, and thus forms the foundation of virtually all male expressions of misogyny. Effemimania also ensures that any male's manhood or masculinity can be brought into question at any moment for even the slightest perceived expression of, or association with, femininity. I would argue that today, the biggest bottleneck in the movement toward gender equity is not so much women's lack of access to what has been traditionally considered the "masculine realm," but rather men's insistence on defining themselves in opposition to women (i.e., their unwillingness to venture into the "feminine realm").

Until now, the typical feminist response to men who fear being associated with the "feminine realm" can be paraphrased as "*Get over it!*" Such an attitude is naive, as it fails to take into account the fact that male femininity is perceived very differently from female femininity. If femininity in women is already seen as "artificial" and "contrived," then

oppositional sexism ensures that femininity in men is exponentially artificial and contrived. While a handful of feminists have recognized this fact—that male feminine expression tends to evoke levels of contempt and disgust that far exceed that which is normally reserved for female masculinity or femininity—most have unfortunately chosen to ignore or dismiss misogyny when it targets those who are male-bodied.[21] By doing so, these feminists have become enablers for one of the most prevalent and malignant forms of traditional sexism.

The greatest barrier preventing us from fully challenging sexism is the pervasive antifeminine sentiment that runs wild in both the straight and queer communities, targeting people of all genders and sexualities. The only realistic way to address this issue is to work toward empowering femininity itself. We must rightly recognize that feminine expression is strong, daring, and brave—that it is powerful—and not in an enchanting, enticing, or supernatural sort of way, but in a tangible, practical way that facilitates openness, creativity, and honest expression. We must move beyond seeing femininity as helpless and dependent, or merely as masculinity's sidekick, and instead acknowledge that feminine expression exists of its own accord and brings its own rewards to those who naturally gravitate toward it. By embracing femininity, feminism will finally be able to reach out to the vast majority of feminine women who have felt alienated by the movement in the past. By doing so, it can also reach out to non-females (whether male and/or transgender) who regularly face effemimania or transmisogyny, but who have not been able to seek refuge or have a voice in the feminist movements of the past. Indeed, a feminist movement that encompasses both those who are female and those who are feminine has the potential to become a majority, one with the strength in numbers to finally challenge and overturn both traditional and oppositional sexism.