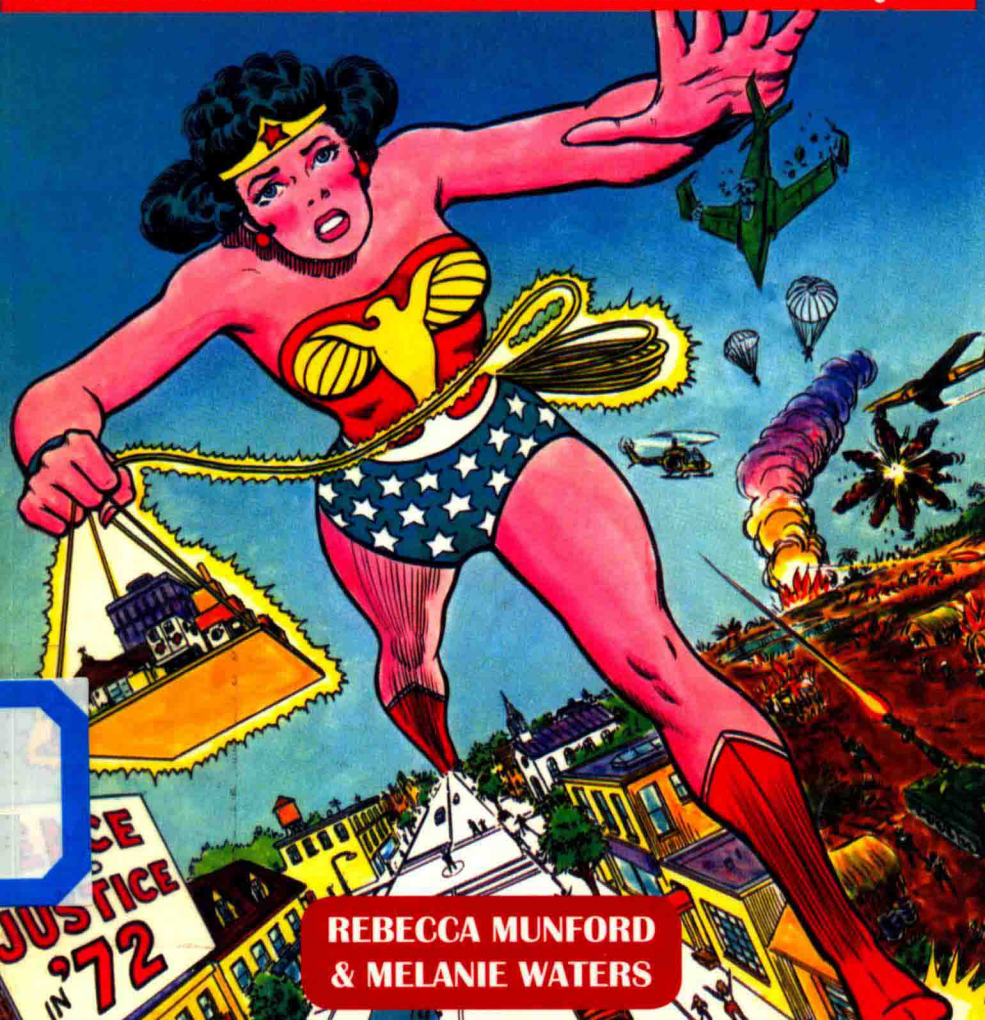
FOREWORD BY IMELDA WHELEHAN

FEMINISM & POPULAR CULTURE

INVESTIGATING THE POSTFEMINIST MYSTIQUE



REBECCA MUNFORD
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Rutgers University Press
New Brunswick, New Jersey

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Munford, Rebecca, 1975-
Feminism and popular culture: investigating the postfeminist mystique / Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8135-6741-9 (hardcover : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-0-8135-6653-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-0-8135-6742-6 (e-book)
1. Feminist theory. 2. Feminism and mass media. 3. Women in popular culture. I. Waters, Melanie, 1979- II. Title.
HQ1190.M86 2014
305.4201--dc23
2013030559

A British Cataloguing-in-Publication record for this book is available from the British Library.

First published in the United States 2014
by Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey

First published by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd in the United Kingdom

Visit our website: http://rutgerspress.rutgers.edu

Manufactured in Great Britain

Foreword

Imelda Whelehan

As I write this foreword I am also preparing a lecture for a Gender Studies course about the legacy of radical feminism. Many of the resources I use to get myself back in the radical feminist mood are ghostly impressions of the past, battered old copies of *Ms.* and *Spare Rib*, photocopies of ephemera retrieved from archives and libraries. As I handle them and try to make out the fading print, I am reminded of the originals I copied, themselves ghostly purpled Roneo-ed versions of someone's hand-typed notes – a form of reproduction common when I was at school in the 1970s, but alien and incomprehensible to most of today's readers. So much radical and socialist feminist second wave knowledge lies in these faint and ageing pieces of paper. Those lucky enough to gain access to archives containing women's liberation newsletters will know the feeling of handling something falling apart, often mis-stapled or unpaginated, and full of typos. Such artefacts hint at the once material presence of the writer(s), time-poor and bashing out their thoughts on old manual typewriters with unreliable ribbons before taking them to the streets, consumed with a sense of their urgency and relevance. I pick up a few I have copied, but when were they written? Such was the rush to share these ideas that some do not even have dates: all that mattered for women's liberation was the here and now.

My computer screen acts as a window to the past as I watch *A Woman's Place* (1971), a documentary that shows footage from the Oxford Ruskin conference in 1970. Grainy black and white images show well-spoken men being asked about the crèche they are running while the women have their conference. Asked if they would perform this service again, the answer is very much in the negative – perhaps one glimpse of 'women's work' is enough to raise the male consciousness. The graininess makes the scenes ghostly and unreal as does the content which the scenes depict – children playing seem to weave through the furls of smoke from the cigarettes being smoked by the men. And this is the biggest jolt of all – my contemporary self is momentarily shocked at seeing a room full of children while adults unselfconsciously smoke their cigarettes. This single huge change in social mores underscores the fact that this is an alien world; these people are ghosts. As I switch DVDs to *Town Bloody Hall* (1979), Betty Friedan hoves into view in the audience during the question period of the 1971 New York Town Hall debate on women's liberation, reconstructed as a documentary by Don Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus; Germaine Greer looks out of place, as if she meant to attend a ball but got hijacked into this strange angry place. Friedan is dead now, of course, and as I write it is 50 years since the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). This ancient but inspirational book is still constantly in print, but I wish I could conjure the ghosts of those dead feminists like Friedan and Adrienne Rich; and also the spectres of the youthful pasts of Greer and others to convey to my students what women's liberation meant for them. I imagine a group of radical feminists enjoying a chaotic sit-in at the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1970. Apparently over 100 women occupied the (male) editor-in-chief's office demanding he be replaced by a woman, more black editorial workers to match readership, a daycare centre for working mothers and the elimination of degrading advertising, as well as the publication of articles on women's liberation (see Echols 196). Ultimately the editor negotiated with only a few women from this larger group, and all they got was a pull-out section on women's liberation. As

I imagine this bustling editorial office, in my mind the scene is blended with the retro-nostalgic images of the TV series *Mad Men* (2007-) with be-suited secretaries servicing thrusting young men.

My contemporary position (sitting in my office in the Southern Hemisphere thinking about and teaching Gender Studies) and my historical position (as a child of feminism, but without a feminist mother) makes imagining these spectres important, and it represents the spaces I fill where my memory cannot stretch. I use film footage, photographic stills, illustrations and gobbets of radical feminist writings to help stir my students' imaginations in place of asking them to remember, which is impossible. Their reality is that of 'postfeminism' and most of them have a sense of what that might mean, or at least what it means for them. Beyond the visual and other aids I provide they will surf the internet and find all kinds of bits and pieces from which they can further construct a notion of feminism, cut off from its historical anchor. They may find that a '*Mad Men* aesthetic' overlays more authentic mental images of the 1960s, as the recent furore over Faber's new cover for Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) suggests. This fiftieth anniversary edition shows a woman fixing her make-up; the lower part of her face is all that is visible, with the angle of the compact mirror reflecting more of the face from below. The garish reds and pinks of the background, the compact and the woman's heavily-rouged lips clash with a hint of a green dress, recalling *Mad Men* and generic chick lit covers simultaneously.[1] While Faber has defended the cover as an attempt to sell Plath to a new generation of readers, a tension remains: is the young woman's 'performance' of femininity overlaid with postfeminist knowingness, or does this illustration trivialize and undermine the feminist message that many found in Plath's only published novel?

This volume begins with a discussion of feminism's first foray into the mass media with the publication of *Ms.* magazine in 1972, when some among the women's liberation movement moved away from the position that all publicity is bad publicity to an intervention in the form of this glossy feminist organ which

engaged with consumer culture the better to reach the women as yet untouched by radical politics. It had a mixed reception from a feminist perspective: radical Kathie Sarachild welcomed its publication, describing it as 'a molotov cocktail that looked like a martini' (qtd in Echols 154), only later to dismiss it as liberal feminist patriarchal collusion. A magazine that deployed the tools of the mass media with a glamorous spokesperson at its head was always going to be easy prey in a movement which was sceptical of feminist 'celebrity', or any initiative that essentially required the 'master's tools' to make it work. In selecting this title, *Feminism and Popular Culture*, Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters are both courting trouble by reminding us of the tense relationship between feminism and the mass media, and summoning the spirit of an age not long past where purity of motive and deep suspicion of patriarchal power structures necessitated long and fraught struggles over how to deliver a popular but political feminism.

It would be fair to point out that these second wave pioneers did not entirely succeed in their project, and the rocky career of *Ms.* is testimony to the opposing pulls of gender politics and mainstream publishing. Because of its early and troubled decision to take advertising,[2] *Ms.* is an evocative place to start the discussion of feminism and popular culture; it crystallizes the essential contradictions of such an encounter whilst announcing the birth of 'popular feminism', writ large, as the authors so acutely note, on the body of Wonder Woman. Feminism, it is suggested here, is 'undead' (p. 8); and this certainly accords with my own view, arrived at through nearly a quarter of a century of feminist teaching and research, of feminism's unfinished business. Moreover, feminism via *Ms.* channels a Wonder Woman with her superpowers restored to their former glory, rescuing her from the fogs of the feminine mystique.

This volume's focus on a 'hauntology' of feminism is offered as an antidote to the forgetful and partial impressions of feminism that emerge from postfeminist discourses of gender. Images of housewives, career women and the never-ageing 'girl' pervade

popular culture as seeming testimony to the lack of need to be original in popular cultural depictions of femininity. Yet there is always a flaw in the glass, a breaking through of a feminist consciousness, which threatens to destabilize the postfeminist certainties about what women want. For years critics of postfeminist discourse have been filleting popular culture, and calculating the losses and gains for feminism in contemporary representations of women, but recently one senses weariness, and even a renewed surge of anger. As Angela McRobbie notes, feminism is the unspeakable shade now, 'a monstrous ugliness which would send shudders of horror down the spines of young women today, as a kind of deterrent' (2009: 1). These spectres of a feminism betrayed leave McRobbie hungry for a return to materialist analyses of the impact of popular culture on women in order to further explore the ways it obscures women's cultural and political victories; she also recognizes the urgent need to explore the possibility that postfeminist popular culture, itself a commodified, politically empty feminism, gives the female consumer all the 'feminism' she requires. As Rosalind Gill suggests, perhaps not enough of this valuable work has, over the years, formulated its aim 'as an understanding of contemporary sexism' (2011: 64). Charlotte Brunsdon has already identified the phenomenon of the 'feminist ur-article' in which '[s]econd-wave feminism is remembered and demonized, as personally censorious, hairy and politically correct' (2005: 112). She asserts that such articles (claiming she is guilty of writing them herself) tend to put writers on the side of the work of popular culture against which the model feminist in the critic's head is positioned as out of touch – as one of those 'censorious feminists who will not let [the critic] like the story and its iconography, that is, the accoutrements of femininity' (113).

The joyless, tutting feminist who Brunsdon characterizes as summoned only to be demolished by the feminist 'ur-article' is the misremembered straw figure who is replaced as the restrictor of meaning and choice in the practice of 'othering feminism', lest we find out something unpleasant about our contemporary

relationship to popular culture. Pleasure is embraced, but somewhere in history pleasure and feminism became antithetical. This volume, by clearly identifying the postfeminist project as one of serial forgetting, enables a thorough consideration of what is lost, as well as reminding us that second wave feminism's core project was in remembering and acknowledging the realities of the lives of contemporary women, and of reminding them that life might be otherwise. It did the job so well during the late 1960s and 1970s that a significant number of women were joining political groups, cheerfully identifying as feminist and demanding more appropriate images of their own lives in the popular domain. Cast in this light, feminism's historical authenticity is contrasted to the persistent fictions of postfeminism, nowhere more starkly than on the cover of *Time* magazine, discussed in this volume, where TV character Ally McBeal is portrayed in full colour against the monochrome agedness of feminism's past.

Feminism and Popular Culture refuses this narrative, whereby feminism is read backwards through the likes of Ally McBeal, offering a historically grounded and enthralling account of feminism's legacy within the popular. It reminds us of the essential tensions between feminism and popular culture and acknowledges that although popularity and accessibility were the aims of the second wave, the popular was imbued with the voice of the father, especially in the realm of representational practices that wrought continued violence on the female body. Rather than re-enacting feminism's flaws and absences it recalls those moments of analytical clarity that haunt contemporary postfeminist narratives. In doing this there is also an acknowledgement of a deepening undercurrent of anxiety and doubt within feminist studies of popular culture. Much research has worried over the staples of postfeminism – Buffy, Bridget, Madonna, *Sex and the City* and, more recently, Gaga, *Mad Men* and *Twilight* – but this book anatomizes the shifts within postfeminist culture itself and the gathering gloom of retreatism and domestic entrapment which gestures back through second wave feminism's rediscovery and rereading of Charlotte

Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). As is noted in this volume, the postfeminist Gothic, so prominent in recent popular cultural representations, has drifted into a state of selective amnesia. It forgets about the models of 'power feminism' that dominated the genre in the 1990s, and instead reverts to a default positioning of its female heroines as victims. The 'victim' feminism portrayed by writers such as Naomi Wolf as the mentality that blocked the progress of women to equality is the other ghost of the past that cannot rest. Regrettably, Wolf herself has had cause to rethink the modalities of power feminism, in relation to her own experiences, in her later work.

The increasingly visible and unmistakably feminist spectres that can be found on the surfaces of postfeminist narratives act as palpable projections of the anxiety of critiques of postfeminism, while, as these authors note, 'popular culture returns again and again to the same retrograde configurations of female identity' (p. 103). As problematic as Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* may be, it is perhaps timely to review 50 years of second wave feminism to consider whether the 'postfeminist mystique', as these authors describe it, resonates with Friedan's analysis. If, as Friedan declares, the feminine mystique suggests that women's core destiny lies in the appropriate display and fulfillment of their femininity, the most troubling aspect of the postfeminist mystique is that it is ultimately focused on the same goal, a goal it can only realize by positioning feminism as the madwoman in the attic, the illegitimate other of femininity as described by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their classic 1979 feminist rereading of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). But, like Bertha Mason, feminism is too disordered and unpredictable to be contained so easily; and where there are ghosts, there is the sense of a previous, perhaps more legitimate, occupier.

Acknowledgements

We are especially grateful to Philippa Brewster at I.B.Tauris for her unerring faith in this project and her patience in awaiting its completion.

Thanks are also due to the librarians at the Women's Library, the Feminist Archive North at the University of Leeds, the New York Public Library, the British Library, the Library at Northumbria and the Arts and Social Studies Library at Cardiff University for their support and assistance during the researching and writing of this book, as well as to *Ms.* magazine for kindly allowing us to use their iconic Wonder Woman as our cover image. Thanks, too, to Stacy Gillis for her involvement in the initial planning and administration of this project. Hannah Wilks also deserves a special mention for her copy-editing.

We would like to extend our gratitude to those friends and colleagues at Cardiff University and Northumbria University with whom we have discussed this book; these exchanges have been an ongoing source of inspiration and have helped us to shape and modify many of our ideas. We are especially indebted to Paul Crosthwaite, Ann Heilmann and Tomos Owen for their perceptive and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this book, and to members of the Gendered Subjects research group at Northumbria University for their advice and support. Particular thanks go to Imelda Whelehan, whose input and insights have enhanced this work immeasurably.

This book could not have been written without the help and encouragement of our friends and family, and it is to them this book is dedicated. Thanks, then, to Roberta, Alan, Kath, Tom, Bob, Les, Judith, Keith, Jen, Matilda, and especially to Tomos, Paul and Poppy.

Contents

Introduction

Wonder Women: 'All the world is waiting for you'

'Wonder Woman for President'. This demand, emblazoned in scarlet above the arresting image of a colossal Wonder Woman storming through main-street America, heralded the arrival in 1972 of a new feminist magazine on news-stands across the United States. *Ms.* magazine, co-founded by feminist journalist and activist Gloria Steinem, featured articles on abortion, domestic violence, pornography, housework and national politics and represented a vital intervention in mainstream media coverage of the women's movement by providing an explicitly feminist account of its aims and activities to a mass readership. In providing a link between women's glossy magazines and feminist political periodicals, the format of *Ms.*, writes Imelda Whelehan in *The Feminist Bestseller* (2005), 'aimed to counteract the more pernicious effects of the mass media in the US by offering a more reliable account of Movement activities and of issues of importance to women' (59). A public emissary of feminist perspectives, *Ms.* soon became, 'like the acronym NOW, a verbal symbol of the women's movement' (Cohen 325; qtd in Whelehan 59); as co-founding editor Letty Cottin Pogrebin puts it, the *Ms.* authors translated a 'movement into a magazine' ('HerStory' para. 2). Reproducing the outward format

of traditional women's glossies and framing its debut appearance in such a clearly demarcated space of popular culture, the magazine represented an attempt to mobilize the commercial marketplace for political ends. As Amy Erdman Farrell chronicles in *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism* (1998), in making an ally out of capitalism, *Ms.*

> worked to disrupt cultural hegemony from the inside, to fashion a new representation of women, and of women's magazines, within the context and the constraints of the commercial market. [...] The strength of this 'new magazine for women' was its ability to be both a women's magazine, which had a place on the battlefield of existing women's magazines, and a resource within the women's movement, a mass circulation text that could connect women to a national community of feminism. (16)

The magazine's dual identity facilitated the dissemination of a feminism that could not only coexist with, but was enabled by, consumer culture. Its launch in the early 1970s, announced by the formidable body of Wonder Woman, thus marked a seminal moment in the evolution of 'popular feminism'. That is, *Ms.* articulated the possibilities and potential of a mode of feminism that was 'popular' in terms of both its communality and its cultural location.[1] This was a mode of feminism that was, nonetheless, 'unpopular' for those detractors who deemed its alliance with the commercial marketplace to be tantamount to political betrayal (see Farrell 15).

The tensions and ambivalences underlying the 'double identity' of *Ms.* are self-consciously referenced through the provocative reincarnation of the iconic 1940s comic book figure of Wonder Woman on the cover of its first regular issue. Making her preview appearance in issue #8 of *All Star Comics* at the end of 1941, and becoming a recurrent feature of *Sensation Comics* in January 1942, Wonder Woman became the subject of her own comic in the summer of that year, charged with the task of entering 'a world torn

by the hatreds and wars of men' to 'fight for liberty and freedom and all womankind' (Marston and Peter 11). While Wonder Woman's unequivocally gendered mission was overtly resonant with the political aims and concerns of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, her protean identity over the preceding 30 years – from 1942 to 1972 – indexes the shifting and potent relationship between femininity, female agency and popular culture. More particularly, her burdened body acts as a stage for the dialectical relationship between feminism and femininity that continues to haunt popular discourses of female agency. Reading Wonder Woman's body becomes, in Mitra C. Emad's analysis, 'an exercise in swinging between the binaries of women's physical empowerment (and sexual freedom) and representations of a body in bondage, lassoed into submission, sometimes by her own power' (956).

An active participant in and advocate of America's involvement in World War II in her early comic book issues, Wonder Woman embodied a mode of female empowerment and independence opened up by the wartime economy and exemplified by the Rosie the Riveter campaign. Issues of *Sensation Comics* in 1943 depict Wonder Woman accompanying American marines in an attack on Japanese forces and persuading young women to get involved in America's war effort, placing this model of emergent female power in a national and patriotic context.[2] The post-war backlash against women's education and professionalism, however, saw Wonder Woman's retreat back into the domestic sphere and the realms of heterosexual romance. In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (1991), her seminal anatomization of a regressive and chameleonic media discourse that blames feminism for creating 'a generation of unhappy single and childless women' (17), Susan Faludi identifies Wonder Woman as a casualty of media accounts of the dangers of education and work, both of which were 'stripping women of their femininity and denying them marriage and motherhood', not to mention causing them 'mental instability' (72). While post-war magazine fiction was representing careers for women in 'a more unattractive light [...] than any time since the

turn of the century', on the pages of the comic books 'even the post-war Wonder Woman was going weak at the knees' (73). In her introduction to *Wonder Woman* (1995) Steinem similarly bemoans how, 'like so many of her real-life sisters in the post-war era of conservatism and "togetherness" of the 1950s', Wonder Woman 'had fallen on very hard times' (14). By 1949, Wonder Woman was well and truly domesticated through her subordination to narratives of 'romantic adventure' that saw her helpless and simpering in the arms of Captain Trevor. This narrative diminishment was further consolidated in the 1950s: while the January 1956 issue (#79) depicted the 'untamed' Wonder Woman miniaturized to the size of an ant, the October issue that same year (#85) continued the superhero's Lilliputian adventures by depicting her diminutive body in a glass bottle.

It was in 1968, a landmark year of feminist reappraisal, that Wonder Woman (under new editorial control) underwent her most significant transformation. Divested of her Amazonian superpowers, and demoted to a fashion-conscious spy girl, the 'New Wonder Woman' appeared on the cover of the October 1968 issue (#178) dressed in a mini-dress and thigh-length black leather boots. Wonder Woman's reincarnation coincided with the New York Radical Women's protests against the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, which took place that September. The demonstration received front-page newspaper coverage, generating an unprecedented amount of media attention for the women's liberation movement (see Faludi, 1991: 99). Part of the demonstration famously involved setting up a 'freedom trash can' into which were tossed the 'instruments of torture' that constituted traditional femininity – such as girdles, bras, false eyelashes, high heels, make-up and women's magazines (Morgan 585). This rejection of 'woman-garbage' symbolized a denunciation of feminine constraints and a refusal of the fetishized female body. Yet from this repudiation of fashion and dress rose one of the most resilient caricatures of second wave feminism: the figure of the 'bra-burner'. Bras, it seems, were not even burnt during the