FEMININITY
Prologue
Susan Brownmiller
We had a game in our house called "setting the table" and I was Mother's helper. Forks to the left of the plate, knives and spoons to the right. Placing the cutlery neatly, as I recall, was one of my first duties, and the event was alive with meaning. When a knife or a fork dropped to the floor, that meant a man was unexpectedly coming to dinner. A falling spoon announced the surprise arrival of a female guest. No matter that these visitors never arrived on cue, I had learned a rule of gender identification. Men were straight-edged, sharply pronged and formidable, women were softly curved and held the food in a rounded well. It made perfect sense, like the division of pink and blue that I saw in babies, an orderly way of viewing the world. Daddy, who was gone all day at work and who loved to putter at home with his pipe, tobacco and tool chest, was knife and fork. Mommy and Grandma, with their ample proportions and pots and pans, were grownup soup spoons, large and capacious. And I was a teaspoon, small and slender, easy to hold and just right for pudding, my favorite dessert.

Being good at what was expected of me was one of my earliest projects, for not only was I rewarded, as most children are, for doing things right, but excellence gave pride and stability to my childhood existence. Girls were different from boys, and the expression of that difference seemed mine to make clear. Did my loving, anxious mother, who dressed me in white organdy pinafores and Mary Janes and who cried hot tears when I got them dirty, give me my first instruction? Of course. Did my doting aunts and uncles with their gifts of pretty dolls and miniature tea sets add to my education? Of course. But even without the
appropriate toys and clothes, lessons in the art of being feminine lay all around me and I absorbed them all: the fairy tales that were read to me at night, the brightly colored advertisements I pored over in magazines before I learned to decipher the words, the movies I saw, the comic books I hoarded, the radio soap operas I happily followed whenever I had to stay in bed with a cold. I loved being a little girl, or rather I loved being a fairy princess, for that was who I thought I was.

As I passed through a stormy adolescence to a stormy maturity, femininity increasingly became an exasperation, a brilliant, subtle esthetic that was bafflingly inconsistent at the same time that it was minutely, demandingly concrete, a rigid code of appearance and behavior defined by do’s and don’t-do’s that went against my rebellious grain. Femininity was a challenge thrown down to the female sex, a challenge no proud, self-respecting young woman could afford to ignore, particularly one with enormous ambition that she nursed in secret, alternately feeding or starving its inchoate life in tremendous confusion.

“Don’t lose your femininity” and “Isn’t it remarkable how she manages to retain her femininity?” had terrifying implications. They spoke of a bottom-line failure so irreversibly that nothing else mattered. The pinball machine had registered “tilt,” the game had been called. Disqualification was marked on the forehead of a woman whose femininity was lost. No records would be entered in her name, for she had destroyed her birthright in her wretched, ungainly effort to imitate a man. She walked in limbo, this hapless creature, and it occurred to me that one day I might see her when I looked in the mirror. If the danger was so palpable that warning notices were freely posted, wasn’t it possible that the small bundle of resentments I carried around in secret might spill out and place the mark on my own forehead? Whatever quarrels with femininity I had I kept to myself; whatever handicaps femininity imposed, they were mine to deal with alone, for there was no women’s movement to ask the tough questions, or to brazenly disregard the rules.

Femininity, in essence, is a romantic sentiment, a nostalgic tradition of imposed limitations. Even as it hurries forward in the 1980s, putting on lipstick and high heels to appear well dressed,
it trips on the ruffled petticoats and hoopskirts of an era gone by. Invariably and necessarily, femininity is something that women had more of in the past, not only in the historic past of prior generations, but in each woman’s personal past as well—in the virginal innocence that is replaced by knowledge, in the dewy cheek that is coarsened by age, in the “inherent nature” that a woman seems to misplace so forgetfully whenever she steps out of bounds. Why should this be so? The XX chromosomal message has not been scrambled, the estrogen-dominated hormonal balance is generally as biology intended, the reproductive organs, whatever use one has made of them, are usually in place, the breasts of whatever size are most often where they should be. But clearly, biological femaleness is not enough.

Femininity always demands more. It must constantly reassure its audience by a willing demonstration of difference, even when one does not exist in nature, or it must seize and embrace a natural variation and compose a rhapsodic symphony upon the notes. Suppose one doesn’t care to, has other things on her mind, is clumsy or tone-deaf despite the best instruction and training? To fail at the feminine difference is to appear not to care about men, and to risk the loss of their attention and approval. To be insufficiently feminine is viewed as a failure in core sexual identity, or as a failure to care sufficiently about oneself, for a woman found wanting will be appraised (and will appraise herself) as mannish or neutered or simply unattractive, as men have defined these terms.

We are talking, admittedly, about an exquisite esthetic. Enormous pleasure can be extracted from feminine pursuits as a creative outlet or purely as relaxation; indeed, indulgence for the sake of fun, or art, or attention, is among femininity’s great joys. But the chief attraction (and the central paradox, as well) is the competitive edge that femininity seems to promise in the unending struggle to survive, and perhaps to triumph. The world smiles favorably on the feminine woman: it extends little courtesies and minor privilege. Yet the nature of this competitive edge is ironic, at best, for one works at femininity by accepting restrictions, by limiting one’s sights, by choosing an indirect route, by scattering concentration and not giving one’s all as a man would to his
own, certifiably masculine, interests. It does not require a great leap of imagination for a woman to understand the feminine principle as a grand collection of compromises, large and small, that she simply must make in order to render herself a successful woman. If she has difficulty in satisfying femininity’s demands, if its illusions go against her grain, or if she is criticized for her shortcomings and imperfections, the more she will see femininity as a desperate strategy of appeasement, a strategy she may not have the wish or the courage to abandon, for failure looms in either direction.

It is fashionable in some quarters to describe the feminine and masculine principles as polar ends of the human continuum, and to sagely profess that both polarities exist in all people. Sun and moon, yin and yang, soft and hard, active and passive, etcetera, may indeed be opposites, but a linear continuum does not illuminate the problem. (Femininity, in all its contrivances, is a very active endeavor.) What, then, is the basic distinction? The masculine principle is better understood as a driving ethos of superiority designed to inspire straightforward, confident success, while the feminine principle is composed of vulnerability, the need for protection, the formalities of compliance and the avoidance of conflict—in short, an appeal of dependence and good will that gives the masculine principle its romantic validity and its admiring applause.

Femininity pleases men because it makes them appear more masculine by contrast; and, in truth, conferring an extra portion of unearned gender distinction on men, an unchallenged space in which to breathe freely and feel stronger, wiser, more competent, is femininity’s special gift. One could say that masculinity is often an effort to please women, but masculinity is known to please by displays of mastery and competence while femininity pleases by suggesting that these concerns, except in small matters, are beyond its intent. Whimsy, unpredictability and patterns of thinking and behavior that are dominated by emotion, such as tearful expressions of sentiment and fear, are thought to be feminine precisely because they lie outside the established route to success.

If in the beginnings of history the feminine woman was defined by her physical dependency, her inability for reasons of reproductive biology to triumph over the forces of nature that
were the tests of masculine strength and power, today she reflects both an economic and emotional dependency that is still considered "natural," romantic and attractive. After an unsettling fifteen years in which many basic assumptions about the sexes were challenged, the economic disparity did not disappear. Large numbers of women—those with small children, those left high and dry after a mid-life divorce—need financial support. But even those who earn their own living share a universal need for connectedness (call it love, if you wish). As unprecedented numbers of men abandon their sexual interest in women, others, sensing opportunity, choose to demonstrate their interest through variety and a change in partners. A sociological fact of the 1980s is that female competition for two scarce resources—men and jobs—is especially fierce.

So it is not surprising that we are currently witnessing a renewed interest in femininity and an unabashed indulgence in feminine pursuits. Femininity serves to reassure men that women need them and care about them enormously. By incorporating the decorative and the frivolous into its definition of style, femininity functions as an effective antidote to the unrelieved seriousness, the pressure of making one's way in a harsh, difficult world. In its mandate to avoid direct confrontation and to smooth over the fissures of conflict, femininity operates as a value system of niceness, a code of thoughtfulness and sensitivity that in modern society is sadly in short supply.

There is no reason to deny that indulgence in the art of feminine illusion can be reassuring to a woman, if she happens to be good at it. As sexuality undergoes some dizzying revisions, evidence that one is a woman "at heart" (the inquisitor's question) is not without worth. Since an answer of sorts may be furnished by piling on additional documentation, affirmation can arise from such identifable but trivial feminine activities as buying a new eyeliner, experimenting with the latest shade of nail color, or bursting into tears at the outcome of a popular romance novel. Is there anything destructive in this? Time and cost factors, a deflection of energy and an absorption in fakery spring quickly to mind, and they need to be balanced, as in a ledger book, against the affirming advantage.

Throughout this book I have attempted to trace significant
feminine principles to basic biology, for feminine expression is
conventionally praised as an enhancement of femaleness, or the
raw materials of femaleness shaped and colored to perfection.
Sometimes I found that a biological connection did exist, and
sometimes not, and sometimes I had to admit that many scientific
assumptions about the nature of femaleness were unresolved and
hotly debated, and that no sound conclusion was possible before
all the evidence was in. It was more enlightening to explore the
origins of femininity in borrowed affectations of upper-class
status, and in the historic subjugation of women through sexual
violence, religion and law, where certain myths about the nature
of women were put forward as biological fact. It was also instruc-
tive to approach femininity from the angle of seductive glamour,
which usually does not fit smoothly with aristocratic refinement,
accounting for some contradictory feminine messages that often
appear as an unfathomable puzzle.

The competitive aspect of femininity, the female-against-
female competition produced by the effort to attract and secure
men, is one of the major themes I have tried to explore. Male-
against-male competition for high rank and access to females is a
popular subject in anthropology, in the study of animals as well
as humans, but few scholars have thought to examine the pitched
battle of females for ranking and access to males. Yet the strug-
gle to approach the feminine ideal, to match the femininity of
other women, and especially to outdo them, is the chief competi-
tive arena (surely it is the only sanctioned arena) in which the
American woman is wholeheartedly encouraged to contend.
Whether or not this absorbing form of competition is a healthy
or useful survival strategy is a critical question.

Hymns to femininity, combined with instruction, have
never been lacking. Several generations of us are acquainted
with sugar and spice, can recite the job description for “The Girl
That I Marry” (doll-size, soft and pink, wears lace and nail
polish, gardenia in the hair), or wail the payoff to “Just Like a
Woman” (“She breaks like a little girl”). My contribution may
be decidedly unmusical, but it is not a manual of how-not-to, nor
a wholesale damnation. Femininity deserves some hard reckon-
ing, and this is what I have tried to do.
A powerful esthetic that is built upon a recognition of powerlessness is a slippery subject to grapple with, for its contradictions are elusive, ephemeral and ultimately impressive. A manner that combines a deferential attitude with ornaments of the upper class and an etiquette composed in equal parts of modesty and exhibition are paradoxes that require thoughtful interpretation. A strategy of survival that is based on overt concession and imposed restrictions deserves close study, for what is lost and what is gained is not always apparent. By organizing my chapters along pragmatic lines—body, hair, clothes, voice, etcetera—I have attempted a rational analysis that is free of mystification. Coming down hard on certain familiar aspects while admitting a fond tolerance for some others has been unavoidable in my attempt to give an honest appraisal of the feminine strategies as I have myself practiced or discarded them. I do not mean to project my particular compromises and choices as the better way, or the final word, nor do I mean to condemn those women who practice the craft in ways that are different from mine. I offer this book as a step toward awareness, in the hope that one day the feminine ideal will no longer be used to perpetuate inequality between the sexes, and that exaggeration will not be required to rest secure in biological gender.

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