



'Betty Friedan: a Tribute'

by Melissa Dearey
University of York

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Introduction

1.1 For some commentators, it would seem that the occasion of Betty Friedan's death earlier this year provides an ideal opportunity for remembering her infamous pugnacity and reigniting old debates over who rightfully holds the title of "founder" of the Women's Movement. Certainly, as Friedan herself admitted in her memoir *Life So Far* (2000), she could be a difficult person to get along with, to put it mildly. And while she was justifiably proud of her contributions to the Women's Movement, she was always deeply unhappy with the title of "mother" of the Women's Movement with which she was designated from early on, often doing her best to distance herself from this dubious role. The long-standing tendency among some of her generation to downplay her overall influence by, for example, emphasising her nature as a bully particularly toward her women colleagues, her defence of the family, her concern for the rights of men (as well as women) and appeal for the inauguration of the feminist "second stage" by calling for the end of feminism as it had hitherto been conceived (e.g. by Germaine Greer (2006), Camille Paglia (2006), and Judith Hennessee (1990)). This contrasts quite starkly with what has been recognised as the inherent radicalism of her writings by feminists of latter generations (e.g. Susan Faludi (1993), Naomi Wolf (2006) and Natasha Walter (2006)). This leads us to wonder precisely what the nature of her contribution to feminism and contemporary cultural life in general is, and also to ponder how the eulogising process within the feminist community takes shape. Is niceness the mark of a feminist leader/icon, or the extent of her radicalism? How are we to critically evaluate the contribution of such a woman to a presumably unitary historical movement of such characteristic diversity?

1.2 Such arguments over founder status and personality have always functioned as distractions for those who might wish to detract from the contribution of certain individuals to any movement, serving at least to obscure or at least quell debate on other more pertinent issues. While it is true that no single person can claim to be the founder of contemporary feminism or the Women's Movement, neither should personality nor politics be a bar to the feminist pantheon. But how are we to assess the value to society at large of a life and body of work? I suggest that such disagreements and controversies over the person of Betty Friedan and the impact of *The Feminine Mystique* and her other writings are founded on a fundamental misunderstanding of the complex interrelationship of her life with her work. If we resist the temptation to view Friedan as a bully, reactionary or turncoat, and *The Feminine Mystique* in particular as what it was purported to be—a social scientific study of the state of feminism in post-war America—we get a very different picture of her seminal and ongoing contribution to contemporary feminism. If we rather read her life and the lives of the women she encountered as told through *The Feminine Mystique* as a groundbreaking and eponymous work of collective and individual women's life writing, its meaning and importance in the feminist canon become much clearer and less the object of self-righteous indignation on the part of her unimpressed colleagues. As the younger generation of feminist like Natasha Walter and Susan Faludi point out, the significance of Friedan's work is born out by the fact that, on re-reading *The Feminine Mystique*, it seems that little has actually changed.

1.3 On this reading, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) comprises a challenging and original amalgamation of the symbolic representations of women's life narratives in post-War American society. As an ostensibly social scientific study based substantially on auto/biographical data, *The Feminine Mystique* has from the beginning caused not just uproar and controversy, but additionally a number of reflexive problems particularly for feminist readers. As a work of social science, it is severely hampered by Friedan's application of a collection social psychological approaches popular in the 1950s to interpret the experiences and lives of the women she interviewed, especially in view of the fact that these theories lacked any substantial concept of gender and hence was seriously flawed in terms of any critical potential in dissecting the social composition of the "woman question" as this was understood at the time.

1.4 But *The Feminine Mystique* is much more than its structure as a scientific study might indicate. As a work of women's life writing, its residual meaning as a canonical feminist text is less easily dismissed. Like other auto/biographical texts of its type, *The Feminine Mystique* uses innovative practices of life writing to initiate widespread cultural and epistemological change in a way that is observable in similar texts from the beginning of the modern period (Descartes' *Discourse on Method* being another case in point). As with these other seminal texts, the complex and contradictory representations of the individual lives within these works is probably best understood as auto/biography, that is to say, as a kind of fabular narrative of women's reality and developing consciousness, as distinct from objective representations whose authenticity value rests on factors such as factual verification. As such, such writings don't so much record the empirical details of the personal history, nor do they represent "fictional" stories about the epic lives of the people concerned in the mode of entertainment. Rather than conforming to our ideas of historical or literary discourses, auto/biographies (at least of this type) perform a decidedly sociological function. This is observable in the stylised, to use Stephen Gaukroger's (1995) term, portrayal of the life narrative in these texts, and its rhetorical function in *persuading* readers of the necessity for widespread social change. In addition, part of the function of these auto/biographies is to recall from memory some of the dominant attitudes of the past which are, upon reflection for their audiences, no longer the "natural" and accepted phenomena of social life they appeared to be prior to the appearance of these texts.

1.5 Hence the prominence within many obituaries of Friedan of her overall contribution in the form of a destroyer of myths about femininity in general and women's purported happiness in domesticity (e.g. Solnit, 2006; Pollitt, 2006). In the case of *The Feminine Mystique*, this entailed the recording of dominant social attitudes toward women at the time as recorded, for example, in women's magazines and other forms of popular cultural opinion in light of what it actually felt like for these women to live in that kind of society. Some eulogists dismiss Friedan's accomplishment of this through her reliance on "junk data" (Seligman, 2006: 44) or data which are as unfamiliar to contemporary women as the lives described in the novels of Jane Austen (Pollitt, 2006), but perhaps they miss the point. Friedan's exploration of what were up to then the unarticulated stories of the widespread suffering and systematic destruction of American women via the conceit of the "problem with no name" made the process of articulating such stories possible on a vast scale. Through the exploration of the meanings, emotions and other interior experiences invested in the symbolic language used by the women Friedan interviewed and by Betty Friedan herself, she helped "bring to narrative", in the phraseology of Paul Ricoeur, a new social reality. Though some of these stories might seem naive or even unacceptable to many readers now (feminist or otherwise), their power and empowering qualities as significant moments in the transformation of many "ordinary" women's private lives into the proper subject matter of politics is hugely important.

1.6 Having said this, there is no doubt that Betty Friedan's considerable output of what can be regarded as auto/biographical writings—spanning the four decades from the publication of her first book *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 to her autobiography *Life So Far* in 2000—continue to pose a number of problems for feminist and auto/biography scholars interested in keeping in step with current trends of thinking on either subject. For one thing, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) would appear to epitomise the feminist "instrumental text", being the first to be emblazoned with the epithet "This book changes lives", a slogan that is virtually synonymous with second wave feminism and the emerging "Women's Movement" of the 1960s and 1970s.

1.7 Though there are many feminist academics who have challenged what they consider to be the mythology of such instrumental texts (e.g. Wilson, 2001; Peel, 2002), there are plenty of reasons to suggest that *The Feminine Mystique* did change women's lives, and on a massive scale—this book sold nearly 3 million copies in its first three years in print and was widely translated; subsequently, Betty Friedan became a household name, and not just in the United States. At public events, she was regularly approached by women who testified to the dramatic effect *The Feminine Mystique* had on their lives. But despite this phenomenal success, things have not been entirely rosy in the feminist garden, and a lot of the trouble is blamed on this book. At the time of its publication, Susan Brownmiller dismissed the whole phenomenon surrounding Friedan's style of protest and *The Feminine Mystique* as "hopelessly bourgeois" (Brownmiller in Hennessee, 1998), while Elaine Showalter recalls how she and her fellow middle class academics felt at the time that Friedan "...seemed to have in mind women different from me" (Banner in Showalter, 2001: 269). A generation later, in her book *Backlash* (1991), Susan Faludi identifies *The Feminine Mystique* as a radical work of feminist thought, while Friedan's biographer Judith Hennessee (1998) considers it to be a pre-emptive backlash against radical feminism of any hue.

1.8 Such ambiguity can be put down to the fact that *The Feminine Mystique* was and is a complex text, frequently contradictory in its ethical, political and theoretical interpretations of the lives of the women Friedan interviewed for the book, not least in its proposed solutions to the "woman question" reiterated as the "problem with no name". Put in context, each of the above interpretations of *The Feminine Mystique* is justified: Friedan was in the main only concerned with white, middle-class "housewives", so the whole enterprise was very bourgeois. At the same time, women who were in paid employment and who also genuinely enjoyed looking after their families and nice homes in the suburbs were the ones who Friedan claimed did not suffer from the "feminine mystique"—the myth of female fulfilment in a life of total domesticity—and it was these "working" wives and mothers who were the ones she offered up as exemplars of modern womanhood for the full-time "desperate housewife" to emulate, thus many feminist academics and other professional women would not have been Friedan's targeted audience. *The Feminine Mystique* was radical insofar as it had in its sights full-scale social change concerning the social norms of being a woman, but reactionary in that it continued to define the role of "woman" as a classically feminine heterosexual/wife/mother for whom caring and domesticity within the ambit of family life are still the preferred vocational expectations (Oakley, 1974). It was consequently also reactionary in some of its treatment of the stories of women's lives told to her in trust and anguish over the many gleaming coffee tables in those immaculate suburban livingrooms; in hindsight, it is perhaps unlikely that many of these women would have been so forthright with her had they known how some of them would be portrayed as in

the later chapters of *The Feminine Mystique*. But perhaps it is considered most reactionary in its resolute defense of the social institution of the family.

1.9 When we think of 1950s American society, the family does not immediately spring to mind as an institution which was under threat or particularly in need of defending. But this is precisely what Friedan detected in her sensitivity to the zeitgeist of post-war American society: the disintegration of the American female psyche she claimed to have experienced herself and witnessed in other women all around her in the suburbs of New York. To her, this was a critical situation which she was convinced would ultimately lead to the disintegration not just of the family, but of society as a whole as it was then known. For Friedan, the irony was that women's lives were being systematically destroyed in the supposed interests of preserving family life. In response to this, *The Feminine Mystique* featured prominently in the emerging challenges to the hegemonic idea of a civil society during the 1960s, problematising the discursive construction of "woman" into what would eventually become a militant political identity, be she married with children and comfortably middle class. As auto/biography, *The Feminine Mystique* portrays certain iconic images of women that functioned as key mechanisms in these types of text to achieve the massive cultural changes in which they played a central part, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. Such elemental textual tropes of womanhood articulated in *The Feminine Mystique* (e.g. the comfortable concentration camp survivor, the nagging harridan, the "desperate housewife" as sexual predator, the "have-it-all" working wives and mothers) deserve closer scrutiny and analysis, without necessarily being occluded by the temptation to proffer an evaluative opinion on Friedan's personality or fundamental role as founder in place of this central task. What is of more interest to me as a feminist is how these images of women were told, how they worked in the broader cultural narratives of change operative at the time, and what they mean for us now as narrative representations of womanhood and femininity. The formulation of such questions itself justifies the contribution of Friedan's writings to the continuing work of feminist research.

1.10 In addition, it is crucial to examine more closely the overall structure of this genre of life writing and how the symbols used worked within such a historically distinctive narrative of woman's subjectivity. It is arguable that the foundationalism and functionalism against which Friedan railed so vociferously, far from forming the antithesis to her version of modern women's auto/biography, arguably carried within them the seed of their own demise in the form of auto/biographical discourse (evocative of Foucault). Auto/biography as a classically male discursive form and autobiographical writing as a traditionally masculine pastime made possible by the unpaid work of women was and is essential to the functioning of these texts at the social level. As the site of resistance to oppressive political systems of power and identity, such texts function as subjective frameworks within which to imagine other social possibilities and finally to persuade an adequate number of people of the need to inaugurate cultural change. While it is currently fashionable for many feminists and historians to pour scorn on such a liberal and pragmatic agenda developed by Friedan and communicated through such a conventional form of discourse, the radicalism of such a political agenda then and now has something to recommend it in view of the alternatives which after so much time seems in many respects to be simply more of the same.

1.11 *The Feminine Mystique* represents a challenging if disjointed composite of auto/biographical vignettes nested in other scientific theories (mostly in the form of social psychology), to promote a particular moral social institution (a conception of the family informed by American and Jewish cultural values) and also to initiate widespread social change through a stylised reconstruction of the life story. Then again, so too do the reactions of her contemporaries to the live(s) represented in this text meet with a similar combination of admiration, disdain and disbelief (e.g. Faludi, 1991; Hennessee, 1999; Horowitz, 1998, respectively). These remarks are intended to indicate some of the similarities of structure, reception, and purpose of this type of sociological autobiography, to use Robert Merton's (1988) designation, and its importance to the evolution of modern epistemological systems, moral institutions, and mechanisms for manageable (perhaps in its way radical, if certainly not anarchic) cultural change. In the pursuance of this objective, Friedan's overwhelming reliance on the auto/biographical "I/we" to communicate the most important ideas of such commentators serves two rhetorical functions, indicating that these texts were fundamentally intended: (i) to gain widespread public *acceptance* for the theses contained within them and (ii) to promote the sense of *identification* with the reader by constructing a new secular use for the hitherto religious practice of *meditation*, where the reader is intended to "give months, or at least weeks..." to thinking about these matters "...before going further" (Descartes cited in Dauler Wilson, 1978: 5). It was the need to encourage women to consider these issues and then go further which Friedan always had in mind; despite what has been criticized as her personal need to remain the centre of attention, this objective should not be forgotten.

1.12 While this shift of attention may downplay the significance of Friedan's rudeness to her peers, it doesn't let her off the hook in terms of her debt to her subjects as portrayed biographically in *The Feminine Mystique*. Such problems emanating from the tendency to conflate scientific, literary and rhetorical discourse to the single category of language (auto/biographical or otherwise) in human scientific reasoning are especially apparent from the feminist and constructionist standpoints. In her book *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (2000), the political philosopher Lois McNay (2000) describes her deep concerns about how such accounts of the real, everyday life experiences of ordinary people are commonly used by social scientists to exploit the convergence of material with symbolic conceptions of corporeal identity, that is, the different types of stories about embodied experience that can be told and how these are subsequently understood in their specific theoretical contexts over time. McNay claims that the main problem with recent feminist work on such texts is that, following the linguistic or post-structuralist turn, it has gravitated toward a narrowly constructed symbolic conception of these experiences of embodiment. She concludes that this bias ironically favours the demands of abstraction, generality and theory construction at the expense of material social reality. In this sense, "...difference is understood principally as instability within meaning systems and not, in more sociological terms, as the differentiated power relations constitutive of the social realm" (McNay, 2001: 14). Consequently the hegemony of the symbolic in such auto/biographical writing impoverishes the material

references to the public social world by emphasizing the private realm of individual and “interiorized” experience, thus denying or simply ignoring the “real” material nature of social oppression and exploitation. If true, this must be regarded as a devastating critique of symbolic language in auto/biography epitomized by Friedan. But, the question is, is this a fair criticism of auto/biography, given the consensus on its essentially rhetorical construction as merely a system of tropes (de Man, 1979)? Would the derogation of symbolic language in favour of more empirical or referential language in auto/biography really satisfy the feminist desire to expose and articulate in auto/biography real, material social oppression? Would a more scientifically reliable version of *The Feminine Mystique* have done more for women?

1.13 These are serious questions which lead us to briefly consider the topic of Friedan’s treatment of her auto/biographical subjects, and moreover of feminism’s continuing revision of the concepts of subjectivity and agency in the context of a feminist social theory and the construction of a feminist literary canon. This is especially important in view of feminism’s long-standing commitment to recover the marginalized experiences of women and other oppressed groups in the first instance in order to redress the inequalities underpinning these life narratives. If part of this remit is to proscribe the use of language/tropes in the auto/biographical text to serve the higher interests of feminist theory, then the problem of subjectivity, agency and language—the constituents of auto/biographical writing—become more urgent concerns. In view of what Christine Battersby (1998) has called the innately paradoxical nature of the female subject-position, within which the possibility and indeed desirability of a feminist metaphysics of identity comes into question. Though these are bigger issues, what is imperative in the present circumstances is the need not to give in to the temptation to obscure or paper over these uncomfortable and unpleasant contradictions in feminist writing, nor to discount them in light of lesser concerns such as personality or status.

1.14 Yet as Battersby (1998) and McNay (2000) contend, the notion of a female subjectivity is a possibility still worth exploring. The feminist turn to subjectivity—the classic domain of Cartesian foundationalism—reflects a renewed interest in the sociological concept of agency in view of the transformations to social and economic structures following widespread changes to the status of women over the last 40 years, thanks, in part, to books like *The Feminine Mystique*. The effects of these processes and the restructuring of gender relations in the everyday lives of women and men over this period may or may not have made the old patriarchal model of gender inequality based on male domination and female submission obsolete. As with Enlightenment thinking, this however does not mean that the aspects of gender restructuring are unambiguously positive or liberating for either women or men; on the contrary, McNay points out that the situation with regard to the structuring of autonomy and constraint for the individual in contemporary society have become extremely complicated and difficult to negotiate, “...emerging along generational, class and racial lines where structural divisions amongst women are as significant as divisions between men and women” (McNay, 2000: 1-2). Though there is no denying that these issues were among Friedan’s many blind spots, at the same time, such limitations should not detract from the significance of her contribution to women’s lives as the subject of personal politics or the legacy of women’s writing as the creative site of female subject representation. Nor should these considerations excuse commentators (feminist or otherwise) from their duty to evaluate the contribution of the figures of the past in a rigorously critical and impartial way which does not reify or reject the needs or practices of previous generations of women writers like Betty Friedan in light of contemporary values.

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