

not address in her book) must be cautious not to confuse feminist collectivity with sameness, or the process will be bungled. But our sheer numbers and common rejection of the present violent hierarchical way of the world should be enough to unite us in the transformative work that has to be done.

A recent personal experience is an appropriate enough expression of this idea: On the return flight from a package-deal holiday in January, I grieved with the woman who sat beside me. Her fifteen-year old daughter and the daughter's closest friend had fallen subject to the demon lover. They were victims of a terrorist's bomb in Tel Aviv two months earlier. Her daughter survived, the friend did not.

The connectivity is there, the transformation awaits us.

## THE BEAUTY MYTH

Naomi Wolf. Mississauga: Random House of Canada, 1990

By *Patricia Bishop*

Publication of *The Beauty Myth* has sparked interest from a variety of quarters. Beginning with those venerable patriarchs of the British newspaper world, *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer*, in September 1990, and moving to this continent slightly later, Naomi Wolf's book has struck a responsive chord with different audiences.

The talk show venue was quick to take note of Wolf's effort, and the author has appeared on television throughout North America. The book seemed to have a cogent feminist message. I was as eager as anyone to read it as soon as I could get a copy. Having now done so, I am sorry to report that the work is more hype than substance, and that it can be read as a feminist text only with some difficulty and a lot of human kindness.

To be blunt and to use its own metaphors of choice, *The Beauty Myth* is all glitz and no gold. It starts out well enough, but conceptually it can't deliver. The author proposes to analyze how contemporary western notions of beauty conspire to reinforce patriarchal domination of our society. She postulates a feminist backlash and credits both the ideology of beauty and the beauty industry with creating and

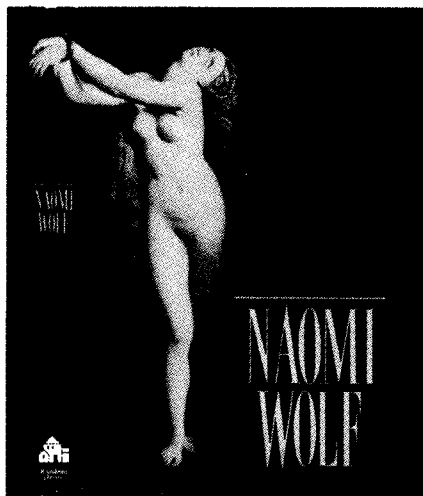
maintaining women's inequality in the 1990s.

Wolf asserts that there is no western conceptualization of beauty *qua* beauty. In an extremely facile discussion of beauty, Wolf argues that medieval notions of beauty were undeveloped to the point of unimportance, that before the Industrial Revolution (where: in England, France, Germany, all of Europe?) beauty was not an issue in marriage and that women were valued for their work skills.

She excludes the aristocracy from this generalization, but even so, it is tenuous at best. Political and economic observations deny this. Moreover, Wolf's hypothesis ignores centuries of poetry, literature and art, from the frescoes of the early Italian Renaissance and the sculptures of the great Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals of Europe to the vernacular art of the Dutch and Flemish schools of the 17th century.

Wolf's thesis notwithstanding, almost everyone has a notion of beauty, and of course it is culturally driven and informed by social class and gender norms, but it still exists. Try to convince a three-year-old to wear something which "looks funny" and you'll see what I mean. The basis for rejection will be based on a practical application of an idea of beauty.

I dwell on this example at some length because it illustrates the sweeping generalizations which appear throughout the book and which have to be questioned. Pulchritude has strong cultural meanings, and I hoped this study would elucidate them for me. Instead, beauty is only a convenient verbal springboard for a look at the beauty industry, cosmetic surgery and eating disorders.



To facilitate her discussion, Wolf coins the term "Professional Beauty Qualification" (PBQ), which is her equivalent of the American phrase 'bona fide occupational qualification.' Her point is that beauty, as defined by fashion magazines and upper class male élites, has become a job requirement. She does not, however, mean beauty. She means changing male notions of female attire, deportment and make-up, such that beauty is a fiction in the eye of the male beholder or enforcer, and quicksand for the woman trying to achieve it.

In addition to the annoyance of encountering these meaningless initials throughout the chapter on work, readers have the further trial of an analysis which ignores key facets of the socialist and feminist critique of work. Wolf assumes that the group for whom she is speaking, all women in the workforce, is a monolithic entity. She assumes women have accepted and internalized the silly "PBQ," and that they act and dress accordingly.

The author does not see major resistance, ideological or otherwise, and she does not search for examples that might contradict her theory. She doesn't attend to the travails of poor working women, and she does not discuss the reality of discrimination for lesbian women. I believe she assumes a male model of career success and that ambition is pretty well always a good thing: women simply need to be able to take it somewhere.

She does not examine pay and employment equity, the female job ghetto, the issues of child and elder care, family responsibilities, housework and sexism. The chapter on violence concentrates on cosmetic surgery and eating disorders, largely disregarding sexual harassment, child abuse, rape and family violence.

Wolf demonstrates that a "dress for success" strategy won't secure a place in the boardroom when gender discrimination is the real obstacle. The fallacy in her reasoning occurs when she posits that obeisance to a beauty myth causes the discrimination instead of merely reinforcing it.

There are insights in *The Beauty Myth*, and the writing is at times compelling. The chapter on hunger concentrates on anorexia nervosa and ignores the hunger problems of poor women and children and the grotesque marketing of food in North America. Nevertheless, as an auto-



Naomi Wolf

biographical story of socially-approved starvation, it is informative and often moving.

The strengths of the book would have made a good article, and perhaps part of the problem is that Wolf set very wide parameters for her subject. Yet a book on the etiology of women's inequality in contemporary society which downplays capitalism, technology, biology, reproductive roles, religion and social conformance in favour of beauty as the controlling factor, is bound to be inadequate. For all its ostensible seriousness and urgency, this is a superficial analysis of women's place in society. Women are not the sum of their accoutrements.

## THE LOONY-BIN TRIP

Kate Millett. Don Mills: General Publishing, 1990

By Patricia Bishop

At least two versions of this story are possible. The reader ponders a sad but predictable narrative of manic-depressive psychosis during the summer of 1980 in an artists' colony in upstate New York. Alternatively, the narrative is a political thriller wherein a sane but wild and outrageous writer attempts to escape confinement in a mental institution. She won a famous insanity trial in St. Paul years before the action of the story occurs but has to prove her sanity over and over.

The social interpretation excites the imagination and the political consciousness far more than the medical one, and it is the version preferred by the author herself. The evidence, however, lies be-

fore the reader and as in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, one is free to choose either version. What makes this process of judgement interesting is that the story is not a work of fiction.

Millett presents a no-holds-barred picture of herself during the summer that changed her life. It is not a flattering portrait. She is as "high as a kite," as her psychiatrists so delicately describe it. What might be called ecstasy or a moment of being or a Joycean epiphany is instead classified as mania, and everyone knows there's nothing artistic in that.

The forty-five-year-old feminist challenges her young apprentices, who have joined her farm for the summer. They are there to experience a feminist, lesbian paradise of sorts, but they are also there to perform back-breaking construction, woodworking and plumbing. It is never spoken, but the feeling lingers that these university students have been recruited as cheap labour whose hard work will build up Millett's equity in a rustic farm property.

Millett, however, sees that she has opened her home and prized retreat to uncouth youths who trample mud over her Persian carpet, misuse her farm implements and disrespect her person. Meanwhile, her lover Sophie thinks she discerns signs of incipient madness in Millett's increasing euphoria, irritability, loquacity and spendthrift actions.

The trigger for these perceptions is not, however, behaviour; it is expectation. Sophie and Kate have mutually decided that Kate should discontinue taking lithium, a psychotropic medication which the author has been ingesting on prescription for over six years. The side effects make her increasingly worried; there are the omnipresent hand tremors, the bane of an artist, there are the possibility of permanent kidney damage, the constant thirst and dry mouth. Moreover, there is the ever-present feeling of being "fuzzy" at the edges, of not experiencing the full range of human emotions.

Millett yearns "to be whole" again. Her task is impossible in an environment in which moodiness, anger, talkativeness and expansive gestures such as rescuing unwanted horses from slaughter are interpreted as psychopathology.

Friends and family become increasingly uneasy and begin to insist that Millett return to an acceptance of her "mental illness," as indicated specifically by a return to lithium. Millett refuses. Doubt-

less she is a difficult woman encountering some difficult times; it is entirely speculative whether lithium would help her in the sense that she wants to be helped.

Friends and family will not take no for an answer. They and a quickly recruited psychiatrist importune her to agree to voluntary hospitalization; when she demurs, her cohort of friends, led by a card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union, calls an ambulance and the police and try to have her hauled off as she screams helplessly in the Bowery street. Luckily for Millett a police officer supports her civil rights and prevents her from an involuntary confinement.

She is not so fortunate in Ireland. The culmination of a series of misadventures is forced hospitalization in an insane asylum in southeast Ireland not far from Shannon. This institution is a home for the powerless and the dispossessed. Millett winds up there thanks to the intervention of a civil-liberties lawyer who consulted with her friends in New York.

Millett is held incommunicado under a psychiatric regime which appears to have nothing to do with healing and everything to do with destruction of personality, resistance and the sense of self. It is a penal colony and Kafka could not have described it better. Millett is drugged against her will with powerful overdoses of lithium, Thorazine and Prolixin. She is denied writing paper and not even permitted one phone call. She fears that she could be housed there, forgotten, for the rest of her life. She thinks she might even become mad in this place of torture and deprivation.

Irish women friends locate her and with some trouble manage to have her transferred to a Dublin institution, wherein a psychiatrist immediately certifies her sane. She is free. She returns home to New York and enters a period of grief over the loss of her friends and her lover. Her estranged husband wants a divorce. Most significantly, she is unable to write, to draw, to sculpt. Psychiatrists say she is clinically depressed, and now she wants lithium because she cannot imagine surviving otherwise.

Millett starts taking lithium and months later during the course of psychotherapy she emerges from her depression. Whether there is a causal relationship between the lithium and the lifting of the depression or not, Millett is trapped in a Pascal's wager; she is not about to tempt the fates again.