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Reading *Playboy* for “the Articles:” An Analysis of the Depictions of Women’s Sexuality in the 1970’s

In the later half of the twentieth century, social and political movements brought a whirlwind of passion to America. The activists of the 1970s were rebelling from their conservative post-war parents and government by running protests for racial equality, the environment, peace, and gender equality. This generation was set on fighting for justice and fixing large scale societal problems. While most of those movements had a great deal of support, the fight for gender equality “hit home”, quite literally, and swept up the nation. Feminists in the early 1900s fought for suffrage, marriage equality and property rights. Beginning in the 1960’s, so-called “second Wave Feminists” argued, “The personal is political,” and demanded the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment), equality in the workforce, reproductive rights, and sexual liberation.¹ The Sexual Liberation Movement fought for equality in the bedroom by attacking the notion that women’s bodies were solely for biological reproduction and not (like their male counterparts) for sexual fulfillment. The dramatic increase in the production of sexual magazines, books, and other literature after mid-century is an index to the change in opinion of women’s sexuality. *Playboy*, in particular, provides one of the best sources for study because it offers a variety of opinions, both from images and articles supplied by the magazine’s producer, to a section where individual readers commented or asked questions. The extent to which second Wave Feminism spurred changes in American perception of female sexuality, can be seen in topics such as, women having sex for pleasure, “single” lifestyle, careers, masturbation, and

pubic hair. A dramatic shift in American attitudes towards female sexuality can thus be measured in *Playboy* magazine articles, comics, advertisements, and opinion columns.

Earlier scholars have directed some attention to changing ideas about women’s sexuality during the 1970s. Alix Kates Shulman, a radical feminist who led a demonstration for the WLM (Women’s Liberation Movement), in her article “Sex and Power: Sexual Bases for Radical Feminism,” argues that there needs to be a movement to create awareness about the problems with current gender roles in order to later abolish these norms. More recently, Sara Evans, in her book *Tidal Wave*, provides a thoughtful analysis on Second Wave Feminism. Evans discusses the events and mental shift that brought about the legislative successes of Second Wave Feminism, but also pinpoints that the failure of the movement was feminists pushing for perfection too hastily, which caused numerous sects of feminism to develop and divide the movement. Authors Susanne Schmitz and Julia Konig, professors at University of Cologne, Germany, in their article “Feminism From a New Perspective: The Single Girl and the Bachelor Phenomena,” highlight the shift from negative to positive opinions of single women. They argue that magazines like *Playboy* that used consumerist culture to endorse the bachelor also needed to encourage the single woman to have a successful image of bachelor lifestyle. Not only was being a single woman more accepted by the end of the 1970s, Anne Ward, in her article “Sex and the Me Decade: Sex and Dating Advice Literature of the 1970s,” argues that there was a radical new lens to view women’s sexuality. She says magazine, pamphlets, and literature moved away

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3 Evans, *Tidal Wave*.
from promoting healthy marriages and moved toward self-exploration and identity formation.\(^5\)

My intervention is to analyze the depictions of women in playboy magazine to better understand the opinion of individuals and the public as a whole during this time and trace the chronological connection these shifts have in accordance with ongoing political events.

Before the Sexual Liberation Movement, the concept that women could have equality in the bedroom by achieving orgasms was overlooked and laughable. The idea that women might not achieve orgasm through vaginal penetration was not well known before the Sexual Liberation Movement. Only in 1970, when Anne Koedt published *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm* did the concept of clitoral orgasm become widespread in American society. In April 1971, a woman wrote to the *Playboy Advisor*, a help column, asking for advice regarding her boyfriend’s unwillingness to perform oral sex. She planned to marry him, but questioned whether or not she was willing to lead a miserable sex life.\(^6\) One can glean a few different insights from her question. First, she is aware that there are sexual techniques that her boyfriend was not employing, but she assumed that had he used alternative methods she might have achieved orgasm. Second, the ability to achieve orgasm is not only on her. Third, that she was entitled to climax too, which was not something women had always believed or knew. In 1967, feminist Alix Shulman and other women in a consciousness-raising group reminisced times they had each faked an orgasm. The women discussed reasons they had been faking orgasms, and came to the conclusion that all the pressure to achieve orgasm had fallen on them, and not their sexual partners. If they could not orgasm it was seen as a personal shortcoming and maybe even


\(^6\) *Playboy*, 1971, 43.
an illness.7

By the 1970’s, anatomy and physiology were no longer esoteric subjects, and feminist asked why has society allowed sexual dissatisfaction for females to continue. Feminists like Koedt pointed out that society feigned ignorance about these subjects because of sexism. Koedt wrote in The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm, “There are, however, social reasons why this knowledge has not been popularized. We are living in a male society which has not sought change in women’s role…”8 An earlier discussion in the Playboy Advisor notes that towards the beginning of the 70s, men were not as open to discussing female orgasm as they were in the latter half of the 1970s. This discussion became more open later in the 70s, and was depicted in one cartoon caption, “I’m a very busy man, Miss Smith. I can’t wait for your orgasm.”9 This cartoon from the November edition of Playboy in 1977, illustrates a man putting on his clothing, while the woman remains naked in bed. By 1977, it appears that women are open enough with their partners to ask them to have a pleasurable experience too. However, it also seems like men have yet to fully accept that their female partner has the same sexual entitlement. While the quote above is from a cartoon and not a declaration of all men, jest is derived from somewhere, and therefore it is likely that this was true of some men in society.

Depictions and descriptions of female orgasm in the latter half of the 1970’s embraced sexual equality in the bedroom. In an advertisement in Playboy titled “Stimula me,” the company is selling ribbed condoms. The rest of the ad speaks to men who are interested in giving their partner, “pleasure she has never dreamed of,” by using a ribbed condom.10 The fact that a ribbed condom is in production and being advertised is very progressive in terms of the Sexual

9 Playboy, November 1977, 127.
10 Ibid., 257.
Liberation Movement. A ribbed condom will stimulate the women during vaginal sex which feminists had declared earlier rarely stimulates women. The production of a ribbed condom shows society’s willingness to increase female pleasure during vaginal intercourse. Furthermore, by advertising ribbed condoms to men from the perspective that they will be able to better pleasure their women implies that men now are actively trying to have their partner achieve orgasm. Similarly, this awareness is evident from a question addressing the *Playboy Advisor* in the same issue. The man tells the *Playboy Advisor* that he has developed ED (erectile dysfunction, which causes premature ejaculation) and believes it is a result of his nervousness to please his wife in bed.\(^{11}\) While ED is never positive, the man’s regard to pleasure his wife is positive. It demonstrates that he recognizes his wife as an equal partner in the bedroom. It is likely that this man has general Anxiety Disorder in addition to ED, but the fact there was anxiety regarding pleasuring his wife means that there is either a personal and possibly societal expectation of him to please his wife. The ribbed condom ad and the story of the man with ED demonstrate that society by the late 1970s was more accepting the female orgasm and aware that equality in the bedroom should be an expectation.

While there is a prominent paradigm shift towards female pleasure in the bedroom, there is a traceable, but less obvious, change in opinion towards female masturbation. This transition is more difficult to notice because there is almost no mention of female masturbation or depictions of it in *Playboy* issues from the early 1970s. From the middle of the 1970s and onward, female masturbation became more prominent in the opinion columns and playmate photo shoots. In the January 1975 issue, a man wrote to the *Playboy Advisor* and asked for slang terms describing female masturbation. Notably, he opened his letter with, “My wife of ten years just discovered

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 4.
the joys of masturbation.” He discussed that his wife had not known about female masturbation until she attended a feminist conscious raising (CR) group. This CR group was likely similar to the one described earlier by Anne Koedt. At this CR group, the instructors taught women in the community about their bodies, and more specifically how to masturbate. Since some women during the 1970s were unaware that they could masturbate or did not know how to, one can infer that not only was female masturbation not part of American sexual culture, the entire notion of female sexual pleasure was missing from this culture. The man continued to ask in his letter for slang terms for female masturbation, and he wrote at the end of his letter that there is a lack of slang terms for it because of “sexual repression,” and that society has never recognized female masturbation. The *Playboy Advisor* concurred and said that in time, when female masturbation becomes more popular, the slang will develop with it.

It is pertinent that in the same *Playboy* issue in 1975 there is a photoshoot titled “A look at legs,” that depicts a woman on the phone and masturbating. The mere existence that there is photoshoot dedicated to female masturbation implies that such activity must have been popular within society, and no longer unspoken. Throughout the latter half of the 1970s, many issues of *Playboy* had pictures of women masturbating. Another example is in the November 1977 copy that had a multi-page photo shoot with a model in different poses ripping off her clothing. In one of the pictures she is tugging on her thong with one hand and touching her nipples with the other hand. Her pose is suggestive of masturbation. One might argue that the photographer made her pose suggestively, rather than explicitly masturbating, to suggest that female masturbation had become more of a fetish than a universal norm. This implies that the photographer believed this sexual activity was a popular fantasy that would entertain the average *Playboy* reader. In essence

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the mergence of depictions of women masturbating suggests that by the latter half of the 1970s female masturbation was discussed, fetishized, and practiced.

Not only was there a shift towards female sexual pleasure over the 1970s, there was also a greater attitude shift that paved way for sexual education and openness to sexual realms that had previously been exclusive to men. The progressive tendencies listed above happened because Second Wave Feminism argued that, “The personal is political,” and therefore female sexuality, which was not discussed during First Wave Feminism, became politicized.13 Women’s movements fought against the double standards towards female sexual activity. In the article titled, “Enlightened Sexuality,” which was printed in 1970, Mrs. Mary Sue McCarthy, a Catholic family life advisor, discussed how teenagers were frustrated with the lack of openness about sexuality with adults. This shyness expressed by adults led to improper notions about sex. She described how some of her students misunderstood how to use birth control, and pleads with adults to prepare their children for sexual experiences.14 Her statements support the idea that in 1970, American society had not embraced the openness of the Sexual Liberation Movement, and the movement supporting birth control. By the late 1970s, there was a stronger inclination towards sexuality, and more specifically denying the double standard towards women. The double standard and its disintegration were depicted in the Playboy article, “Erotica.”15 The author interviewed a few random women on their experience at a strip club for the first time. One woman being interviewed said, “I love this fucking place. I can be crude, I can be lewd, and when I go home I can be a lady”. The male strip club allowed her to break out of the confines of typical female sexual gender roles. She can enjoy watching the performances at a male strip club, even though society might have told her that women would not enjoy that experience as much as

13 Evans, Tidal Wave.
14 Playboy, January, 1970
15 Playboy, June 1978, 50.
men do. However, when she returned home she was expected to again take part in the modern remnants of the Cult of Domesticity, an ideal preached in 19th century America that told women to stay true to four core values: piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. She continues to say, “I thought I would just be embarrassed, but its terrific.” The word “embarrassed,” implies that she was influenced to believe that she would not appreciate something like a strip club because she was a woman. She further describes the club, “On Wednesday night at the Cat, the women outmacho the men.” She describes enjoying cat calling the male strippers, the same way a male might cat all a female stripper. Female strip clubs break down the double standards regarding sexuality that women were held to.

One year later, in 1979, Playboy ran a controversial issue that sparked debate regarding double standards towards women’s sexuality, but this time the “feminists” argued against female sexual liberty. Playboy ran an issue on, “Women of the Ivy Leagues,” where they hired female Ivy League students to pose as the playmates of the month. Feminists on Cornell’s campus furiously protested Playboy’s involvement with their female students, and they also criticized the female students for posing for Playboy. The feminists at Cornell told the models that by posing they were objectifying their bodies, and that leads to rape culture. However, one of the models from Cornell responded in an interview saying, “Women not wanting other women to have the freedom to make up their own minds—that’s what’s really dehumanizing.”

By the feminists at Cornell telling their student body not to pose, they were essentially doing what the patriarchy was doing—telling women what to do with their body. By arguing, “The personal is political,” women have control over their own bodies and there should not be any outsider commanding them how to deal with their bodies.

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16 Playboy, September 1979, 166.
Women in Post-War America gained more control of their bodies not only as a result of the Women’s Liberation Movement, but also from consumerist culture. Authors Susanne Schmitz and Julia Konig, professors at University of Cologne, Germany, in their article “Feminism From a New Perspective: The Single Girl and the Bachelor Phenomena,” explain that consumerist culture extended to sex. The “bachelor,” is the chief consumer of sex—he is a man that practices an Epicurean lifestyle, which prioritizes individual pleasure. As the popular phrase states, “It takes two to tango,” this “bachelor” needs a partner, or the “single woman,” to take part in his hedonistic lifestyle. Therefore, for more people to become sexual consumers, society needed to have a mental shift regarding sexuality to permit “bachelors” and the “single girl,” to exist with less stigma. The authors point out that Playboy magazine can be seen as a tool to promote “bachelor,” culture. In order for “bachelor,” culture to exist, the culture of the “single girl,” was necessary, because the bachelor needs women to sleep with that are unmarried. If the stigma was only reduced for men and not women, there would not be enough women for the bachelor lifestyle to exist. For centuries the idea of a single women was frowned upon, because she women were primarily seen by society as necessarily biological beings for reproduction. Additionally, women were not typically granted access to the work field, and especially not careers that would allow them to be self-supporting. Therefore, in earlier times marriage was a crucial for women that wanted a steady and substantial income. Marriage was a means for women to have food on the table. The new “single woman” crossed political, sexual, and workforce boundaries.

In a Ribald Classic published in Playboy in 1970, the story “The Girl and the Shark,” offers insight into how society viewed the “single girl” in 1970. When the author wrote this

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article, Second Wave Feminists were fighting for equal pay in the workforce and sexual liberation. It was acceptable to have a challenging career in addition to having children, but there was still great criticism directed at women that wanted to focus only on careers. In “The Girl and the Shark,” the main character Lakat, whose village frowned upon her for being unmarried, explains that she would rather ride sharks than wed. In response her male friend Ro-mi exclaims, “Then you do not await a man—you wish to be one.” Instead of Ro-mi claiming that she desires to take part in typically male activities, he tells Lakat that she really just wants to be a man. The implication is not that shark riding should be an activity for both sexes, rather, he is saying that Lakat wishes to be a male because shark riding is a male only activity. This is further supported by her parents’ acceptance of her shark riding activity only after Ro-mi explains that Lakat and him have “coupled.” Before Ro-mi explains that he coupled with Lakat, Lakat’s father scolds her saying, “You are an idiot daughter.” This illuminates his aversion to his daughter activity choice, which was seemingly in place of marriage. The responses from Lakat’s behavior indicate ways people might have responded to the “single woman” lifestyle in the 1970s.

By 1978, women embraced some of the typically male-dominated activities and careers the way Lakat did. However, unlike the reactions Lakat faced from her family and friends, some of these women did not face intense backlash. The Playmate of the Year was asked about having a demanding career and she responded saying, “Eventually I’ll get married and have children. But right now, my career is most important.” Since she can publicly prioritize her career over having a family it suggests that her bosses, family, and friends will not frown upon her prioritization. Had she been concerned about receiving backlash, she likely would not have said what she did to the interviewer. While women took on more demanding careers, it was still a

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19 *Playboy*, June 1978, 165.
new phenomenon and took adjusting from the male side. Men in the 1970s needed to have a mental shift towards accepting and dealing with women who had high paying jobs. An example of this shift can be traced in a letter written to the *Playboy Advisor* in 1979. The man told the *Playboy Advisor* that his “new woman” was busy with her career, and he wanted to spend more time with her, but he did not want to sound like he was whining. The *Playboy Advisor* told him to plan dates. For many in the 1970s this sounds like gender role reversal. However, through this correspondence one can notice that men were learning how to deal with women having intense careers. It is important to note that men, like the man who wrote the letter discussed above, accepted women’s new role in the workforce, it was not rejected. Rather, it was something that they needed to adjust to.

In conclusion, American society became more open to the idea of women having meaningful sexual experiences and women in the workforce over the course of the 1970s. *Playboy* provided strong support for my thesis because the depictions of women’s sexuality in the magazine progressed chronologically. This paper’s analysis of the development of women’s sexuality in the 1970s allows one to contextualize sexual stigmas within history. Understanding the history behind this progression is important because today there is still slut-shaming and other unfair double standards that women face. The more society understands where these stigmas came from and how some successful movements began the process to remove them, then the closer America comes to eradicating in the inequality women are challenged with now.

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Primary Sources
