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Mentioning the Unmentionable: *Sex and the City* and the Taboos about Female Sexuality

That women have long been underrepresented and subjected to gender stereotyping on TV is impossible to deny. Although with recent social changes and more and more TV series being produced for women and by women, traditional non-threatening roles assigned to female characters have become more liberated, one aspect of women's life has consistently been suppressed, and that is female sexuality. As William Leith points out, "We may have equality of the sexes but we do not have the equality of sexual organs" (qtd. in Hunt).

Like most cultures, American culture is essentially phallocentric. What it means is that it is physiology that defines and segregates individuals, and, according to Sharon H. Nelson, "Physiological maleness and masculine gender together define the topmost class in a sexual hierarchy, and the sexual hierarchy becomes the basis and the model for the definition of all power relations" ("Lieder Singen"). The result is the marginalization of femininity and female sexuality, which can be seen not only in cultural attitudes but also in language.

Of course, this phallocentric suppression of the feminine has been transported to the world of television, which is a product of culture. Even though nowadays the viewer is bombarded with explicit sexual images, which are mainly images of sexually appealing women, they usually have little to do with reality. They neither show nor cater to female desire. In her groundbreaking work *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf claims that the representation of women's bodies is heavily censored and "only the official versions are visible" (136). She draws attention to how such imagery works to suppress women's true sexuality.

Feminist critics and theorists have been striving to find an antidote for the misogynistic tendencies characteristic of patriarchal societies. They have analyzed reasons behind them and looked for the possible ways of fighting with the taboos surrounding the female body and sexual behavior. Television, being both the reflection of current social attitudes and a force capable of shaping them, has come under close scrutiny. It has been emphasized that interrogating the existing fictional narratives is not enough. There is a

need to produce narratives challenging the dominant, restrictive portrayals of female identity and sexuality.

The TV series *Sex and the City* can definitely be seen as an answer to this call. Over the period of six years (1998–2004) and within ninety-four episodes, it explored the sex lives of women and largely contributed to the public debate about female sexuality. As a notorious taboo breaker, it touched upon issues which so far had been considered unmentionable. "The way they spoke, and the things they talked about, were revolutionary," says Janet McCabe, a co-editor of a collection of essays *Reading Sex and the City* (qtd. in Wignall). In one of the essays, "Orgasms and Empowerment: *Sex and the City* and the Third Wave Feminism," Astrid Henry likens the series to a "forum about women's sexuality as it has been shaped by the feminist movement of the last 30 years" (66). What exactly is the truth about female sexuality according to *Sex and the City* and its four main heroines? To answer this question, it is necessary to acknowledge that the cultural attitudes towards female sexuality are inseparably linked to the cultural attitudes towards the female body.

Models and Mortals

The conflict central to the representation of the female body in the media, that is the discrepancy between "real" women and the images available, is suggested already in the second episode of the first season of the series. Miranda complains, "What I want to know is when did all the men get together and decide that they would get it up only for giraffes with big breasts.... We should just admit that we live in a culture that promotes impossible standards of beauty" (1:2). Each of the four friends fails to meet these standards in some way: Carrie, too short; Miranda and Samantha, too small-breasted (though, in the case of the latter, it will take eighty-eight episodes to force this idea upon her); Charlotte, too full-hipped. How does the belief that they, in a sense, do not measure up make these women feel? To quote Carrie, it makes them feel "intimidated" (1:2).

The current obsession with beauty as a modern tool of oppression is central to a lot of feminist writing. A very extensive work on the subject is Naomi Wolf's best-selling classic *The Beauty Myth*. She clearly delineates the relationship between beauty and female identity, and discusses the impact of modern, idealized concepts of female beauty on different spheres of women's lives, including sexuality. What she wrote about the images of women's bodies promoted by the pop culture of the 1970s is unfortunately still true:

> The 'ideal' female body was stripped down and on display all over. That gave a woman, for the first time in history, the graphic details of perfection against which to measure herself, and introduced a new female experience, the anxious and minute scrutiny of the body *as intricately connected to female sexual pleasure*. (134; original italics)

Today, digitally improved images of flawless female bodies can be seen virtually everywhere and the pressure to look like a fashion model or a movie star is increasing all the time. Magazines, television, advertising all try to convince women that having a slim figure, perfect skin and even being forever young is only a matter of proper care. That, of course, is a big lie which makes ordinary women feel terribly bad about themselves. In her essay "Foucault, Femininity, and Patriarchal Power," Sandra Lea Bartky writes: "[s]ince the standards of female bodily acceptability are impossible fully to realize, requiring as they do a virtual transcendence of nature, a woman may live much of her life with a pervasive feeling of bodily deficiency" (149). Now, the question is: can you feel sexy if you feel deficient?

When in the seventh episode of the fifth season, entitled *The Big Journey*, Carrie sets off with Samantha on a trip to California, apart from promoting her book, she is determined to satisfy her sexual needs by meeting with Big and "getting laid." Unfortunately, on the way, a huge pimple grows on her cheek. This "tragedy" threatens to thwart the whole plan. "I can't go anywhere with this pimple," she moans (5:7). And when she finally does meet him, she finds him strangely reluctant to have sex. Although the reason for this is that, having read her book, he is for the first time genuinely concerned about hurting her feelings, she develops a silly suspicion that it might be the pimple. Similarly, in the episode entitled *One*, Samantha panics when she finds one gray hair in her pubic hair. Believing that "no man wants to fuck grandma's pussy," she decides to dye it (6:12). It turns orange and eventually she has to shave it all off even though her current boyfriend finds a "full bush" sexy. Showing the problem in a light, comic way, characteristic of the whole series, these episodes nevertheless suggest that a pimple or a gray hair, standing here for bodily imperfection, can govern a woman's sex life by making her uncertain of her own desirability. When discussing the adverse effects of what she calls "beauty pornography," Naomi Wolf claims that "the harm is apparent in the way such imagery represses female sexuality and lowers women's sexual self-esteem by casting sex as locked in a chastity belt to which 'beauty' is the only key" (146). An imperfect female body (for instance an ageing body) is seen as grotesque, and grotesque female bodies are a taboo in Western culture. By showing Carrie and Samantha sitting in a run-down train compartment, the former desperately trying to pop the pimple and the latter

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taking out silicone push ups from her bra, or by showing Samantha fighting with the natural effects of ageing, *Sex and the City* gives the viewer a rare opportunity to have a glimpse of the "unofficial versions" of women and, in a way, challenges this taboo. The fact that, despite the pimple, Carrie and Big eventually have great sex she was hoping for, suggests that perfect beauty need not be a prerequisite for a satisfying sex life. Also, the very idea that you can have a perfect body and keep it forever young is shown as ridiculous. The whole series is full of comic situations showing that it is not ageing itself, but trying to fight with it by all means, such as Botox injections, chemical peels or plastic surgery, that is grotesque as it is doomed to failure. When Samantha puts on glasses (*An American Girl in Paris*, 6:12) or declares she is "forty-fucking-five" and not ashamed of it (6:20), she is definitely more "fabulous" than the orange clown she has turned herself into during her war against one gray pubic hair.

One might of course wonder why instead of cherishing natural female bodily characteristics, patriarchal culture has been forcing women to conform to unnatural rules of femininity. What is so scary about the female body as it is that requires so much effort and pain to hide? What monster lurks underneath this artificial shell? Feminist thinkers have often turned to psychoanalysis for answers. A very interesting discussion of the supposed female monstrosity in relation to the visual medium (the film in this case) can be found in Barbara Creed's book *The Monstrous Feminine*, where she refers to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva defines the abject as something that "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Using examples from the horror genre, Creed writes that these borders may be separating for example "human and inhuman, man and beast… the normal and the supernatural, good and evil… those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not… normal and abnormal sexual desire" (11) but, most importantly, these are the borders that keep at bay everything that constitutes a threat to what Kristeva calls "the self's clean and proper body" (73). Creed takes up Kristeva's argument that due to the female reproductive functions such as menstruation, pregnancy or giving birth, as well as the mother's role in toilet training, the female body is not perceived in the symbolic order as "clean and proper," but rather as abject (Creed 12-14). Following Kristeva, Creed points to the distinction between "the world of the mother (a universe without shame)," where excrements do not cause embarrassment, and "the world of the father (a universe of shame)," which places filth under taboo (Creed 12-13). Consequently, in the patriarchal culture, the female body and its physiologic processes are placed under taboo as well. Showing life from the *woman's* perspective, *Sex and the City* inevitably comes face to face with these taboos as all of them are a natural part of women's everyday lives.

Women Who Are Drying up and the Flow Which just Came to Town

In the episode entitled *The Big Time*, Samantha receives by mail a leaflet advertising products for women approaching menopause. It reads: "sometime in the ten years before menopause, you may experience symptoms including all-month long PMS, fluid retention, insomnia, depression, hot flashes or irregular periods" (3:8). This, of course, sounds really scary and, being a few days late, Samantha is indeed terrified at the very thought that she might be "drying up" as she says. Though, in the end, she gets her period and is obviously very relieved, the "terrible" fate is only postponed. You can run but you cannot hide.

This situation fits in very well into an ongoing feminist debate on how negative attitudes towards exclusively feminine bodily experiences, such as menstruation or menopause, are shaped and perpetuated. In her essay "Medical Metaphors of Women's Bodies: Menstruation and Menopause," Emily Martin offers an interesting analysis of medical writing related to these two physiologic processes. Having looked at a number of scientific texts, for example college books, she comes to the conclusion that the terms used to describe both menstruation and menopause are definitely not "neutral." She sees them as conveying "failure and dissolution" (31). To quote her comment on a recent college text describing the menstrual cycle: "[i]n rapid succession the reader is confronted with 'degenerate,' 'decline,' 'withdrawn,' 'spasms,' 'lack,' 'degenerate,' [again] 'weakened,' 'leak,' 'deteriorate,' 'discharge,' and, after all that, 'repair'" (31). Although she admits it is impossible to question the truthfulness of these descriptions, she objects to the language used as well as to putting emphasis "above all else" (35) on the negative aspects of the processes described. She writes: "I am arguing that just as seeing menopause as a kind of failure of the authority structure in the body contributes to our negative view of it, so does seeing menstruation as failed production contribute to our negative view of it" (29). For contrast, she quotes a description of spermatogenesis in which we can find terms such as "remarkable," "amazing," or "sheer magnitude" (31). Obviously, if we were to apply the same logic as the one used in describing menstruation, we would most likely emphasize that most of what the "amazing" and "remarkable" spermatogenesis produces is simply wasted. It is possible that if menstruation were described in terms of production or renewal instead of failure and degradation, and menopause as "a physiologic phenomenon which is protective in nature—protective from undesirable reproduction and the associated growth stimuli" (Martin 35) and not as "drying up," these two processes would not be objects of shame and fear.

Sex and the City makes an attempt to lessen the anxiety surrounding the two phenomena and to make them more positive and natural. Carrie's immediate reaction to the list

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of calamities mentioned in the catalogue is to make a joke that "On the plus side, people start to give up their seats for you on the bus." Also Miranda is able to see the bright side of menopause: "Well, I for one can't wait for menopause. Do you realize how freeing it will be not to have our periods?" (3:8). She would be happy not to have them; Samantha is happy when she gets it. Either way, it is obviously possible to find a positive side to something that has traditionally been perceived and presented only in negative terms. Certainly, periods can be a nuisance, just as a running nose is, but they are also a natural fact of life which would be less of a trouble if it did not have to be kept a dirty secret. And in *Sex and the City* it isn't. Even the most conservative Charlotte, who still uses the old-fashioned euphemism "I can't wait till the flow stops coming to town," is capable of walking into a cafe with a box of Tampax in her hand and putting it right on the table (3:8). And it is not the end of the world.

Carrie: Pregnant or not, Miranda had needs and decided to stop fighting them

Another exclusively female experience that renders the female body far from "proper" is motherhood and everything connected to it, that is pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. The series devotes a lot of attention to the various aspects of being a mother, for example fertility problems, abortion, unwanted pregnancy and the like. It definitely challenges the view that becoming a wife and a mother is every woman's dream and proper destiny. Of the four friends, only Charlotte is from the beginning determined to get married and have a child. Ironically, while all her efforts are in vain, the career-oriented, cynical Miranda gets pregnant by mistake during a "mercy fuck" with Steve despite the fact that she has a "lazy ovary" and he has only one ball. Within one episode (*Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda*, 4:11) we are confronted with two extremely different experiences of motherhood—both friends make an appointment at the gynecologist's: one to conduct fertility testing, the other to have the "procedure." This is far from the traditional conception of planning a baby and being pregnant as times of bliss. Although, as Astrid Henry points out, Miranda's decision to keep the baby prevents her from breaking "the US TV taboo of depicting abortion," the show is, nevertheless, "incredibly progressive for US TV in its stigma-free discussion of abortion, including the detail that two of the four lead characters have had them" (71).

However, there is something far more revolutionary in the way Miranda's pregnancy is presented and it is related to the main interest of this paper, that is female sexuality.

Bearing in mind the standards of beauty which, as has been mentioned, seem to determine women's desirability, the pregnant body definitely cannot be classified as sexy. In fact, pregnant women have traditionally been perceived in only one dimension: not as *women* any longer but as expectant *mothers*. This reduces a person who still has a variety of needs exclusively to the reproductive function.

Sex and the City, on the other hand, presents Miranda as a complex human being who has lost nothing of her wit and cynicism, and more interestingly, who has lost nothing of her sexual appetite. The following conversation is definitely not a typical pregnant-woman talk we get to hear on television:

> MIRANDA: Is it OK to fuck one guy when you're pregnant with another guy's baby? Is that safe? Could all that poking shake the baby loose or something? No, that's silly. Married couples have sex all the time. But what if it's huge? Could the dick dent the baby?
> CARRIE: Where do you think dimples come from? (*The Good Fight*, 4:13)

Despite all her doubts, Miranda believes that "nothing puts a man off sex like pregnancy," so she is determined to grab her "last chance for sex" before her belly grows. Carrie's words, "Pregnant or not, Miranda had needs and decided to stop fighting them," sound almost like a motto, and are a rare acknowledgement of the fact that being pregnant does not mean a woman stops being sexual (4:13). In fact, as the series shows, it may be the other way round. Being a few months pregnant, Miranda complains to Carrie:

> I'm so swollen and gassy. I am like a floatation device.… I've learnt to control the sound now, but not the activity.…[A]lthough, maybe, it's not that I've controlled the noise as much as my ass is so big the sound is now muffled. Look at my fingers. They're like sausages. I can't even get my ring off. I'm telling you that the fat ass, the farting, it's ridiculous. I am unfuckable and I've never been so horny in my entire life. That's why you're supposed to be married when you're pregnant, so somebody is obligated to have sex with you. I'm undesirable. (*Ring a Ding Ding*, 4:16)

Later that day, she asks Steve if she is ugly and if he would want to have sex with her. Assured that it is safe, "that night, Steve gave Miranda multiple orgasms" (4:16). The message is that, despite all the "side effects" which are culturally considered unpleasant and placed under taboo, a pregnant woman can be both desiring and desired.

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Mrs Morgan: I bet you have a beautiful cunt, dear

In her book *Media Matrix: Sexing the New Reality*, Barbara Creed devotes a whole chapter to discussing the sexual taboos of American society that *Sex and the City* challenges. Most of them are related to different sensual pleasures; however, as she writes, "the most confronting episode in the first series... involved not a sexual behavior but the uttering of the most taboo word on the media –'cunt'" (52). The promotional materials for the episode promised that it would say the unsayable. This, of course, also says a lot about the misogyny of the culture which renders a word describing female genitals the worst possible swearword. A lot has been written on the "cunt" taboo as well as on the general taboo surrounding other words referring to female genitals, like "vagina" or "clitoris." It has often been emphasized that calling a man a "cunt" is offensive because it is a form of verbal castration. According to psychoanalytic feminist theory, castration anxiety is precisely the source of the misogynistic tendencies of patriarchal cultures.

As mentioned before, an interesting study on the subject can be found in Creed's book *The Monstrous Feminine*. One of Creed's most important assumptions with regard to sexual difference is that man fears woman not because she is castrated but because she might castrate. Creed draws such a conclusion on the basis of a careful rereading of Sigmund Freud's writings, particularly the case history of Little Hans. In her view, they constitute a proof that despite clinical evidence, Freud dismissed the possibility that it is the mother and not the father whom the child fears as a potential castrator. To support her claim that man is subconsciously afraid of female castrating genitals, Creed refers to the representation of the monstrous-feminine in myths and legends across a variety of cultures in which "the threatening aspect of the female genital is symbolized by the *vagina dentata* or toothed vagina" (105). Creed writes: "The myth about woman as castrator clearly points to male fears and fantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces. The *vagina dentata* is the mouth of hell—a terrifying symbol of woman as the 'devil's gateway'" (106). In this context, placing the lexicon connected to female genitalia under taboo may be interpreted as an expression of these fears and fantasies.

Feminists have been trying to reverse the negative associations with the female genitals and their names for a long time. There is a whole movement called cunt-power, initiated by Germaine Greer already in the 1960s. The assumption is that a word's suppression is a source of its power. Therefore, women are encouraged to use it, not as an offensive term, but for example as a term of endearment. In Matthew Hunt's comprehen-

sive analysis of the subject entitled *Cunt: The History of the C-Word*, we read: "The purpose of the reappropriation of 'cunt' is to reclaim it as a neutral or even positive anatomical term, replacing its persistently pejorative male usage. This is to return 'cunt' to its original status, to revert to its pre-taboo usage. The word's power can be maintained so long as its taboo is maintained[.]" *Sex and the City* undeniably is an important contribution towards achieving this goal.

In the fifth episode of the first series, *The Power of Female Sex*, we get a chance to see an example of "cunt art" and hear the taboo word a few times. Charlotte decides to organize an exhibition of the latest works of Neville Morgan in her gallery.[1] The eccentric artist invites her to his country house to show her the canvases which turn out to be colorful "portraits" of various women's cunts. He talks about them with sincere admiration and almost religious devotion:

> MORGAN: The canvases you're about to see are what I consider to be the apotheosis of every great idea I've ever had. It's the closest I've ever come to the pure universal God force. The cunt.
> CHARLOTTE: Oh my… They're very powerful.
> MORGAN: Exactly. The most powerful force, the universe, the source of life and pleasure and beauty. (1:5)

Though, as we learn from the voice-over, "Charlotte hates the c-word… Neville Morgan was not a man to be corrected." And neither was his lovely wife, who, serving cookies, warmly encouraged Charlotte to pose for the portrait herself, assuring her she "must have a beautiful cunt" (1:5). It is understood that Charlotte, the shy Charlotte who in a moment of weakness confesses to her four friends that she never looks "down there" because she thinks it's "ugly," (*The Real Me*, 4:2) lets herself be persuaded to become a model. According to Barbara Creed:

> By displacing anxiety through humor, the episode undercuts the force of the prohibition surrounding public utterance of the word 'cunt.' It is spoken many times in the episode, but in a context which, for *Sex and the City*, is atypically asexual. The episode reminds us that the sexual revolution fell short when it came to changing public attitudes about saying the unsayable. (*Media Matrix* 53)

[1] This might be a reference to Judy Chicago's famous *Dinner Party*.

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Miranda: It's my clitoris, not the sphinx!

The obvious result of the cultural censorship of female sexuality is that female desire and pleasure remain a mystery, not only to men but to many women, too. In this sense, *Sex and the City* may be seen as playing an educational role. When watching en erotic scene on TV, Miranda notices: "Look at this. He climbs on top of her and the next thing you know she's coming. No wonder men are so lost. They have no idea there's more work involved" (*They Shoot Single People, Don't They?*, 2:4). Soon, she starts dating a man named Josh, who fails to satisfy her in bed, and she does what many women do so as not to disappoint their lovers—she fakes an orgasm. This can be understood as a metaphor for the way female sexual pleasure is represented in popular culture. It is faked. If it is shown at all, it has little to do with reality. This, of course, is a road to nowhere.

> SAMANTHA: You know, it's really not their fault. They don't come with a manual. If I had a son, I'd teach him all about the vagina.
> …
> MIRANDA: The other night, he told me he really likes that I can come while he's fucking me. How can he actually believe that that's all it takes?
> CARRIE: Because you're faking it! (2:4)

Miranda decides to do herself and the womankind a favor and educate Josh. Unfortunately, a "two-day tutorial with her ophthalmologist had turned love-making into a kind of naked-eye exam," and to reward his efforts she stages a final performance (2:4). Well, old habits die hard. Nevertheless, Miranda takes her fate into her own hands and does not settle for the little he can give her. When she realizes it will not work between them, she says goodbye. "Female sexual pleasure and agency is obviously considered a fundamental right, rather than a privilege" (Wignall).

Miranda: Everybody masturbates

Another taboo around female sexual behavior is masturbation. In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf writes:

> The cultural inversion of female sexuality starts early, beginning with the masturbation taboo. Sexual integrity grows out of the sublime selfishness of childhood, from which sexual giving emerges as generosity rather than submissiveness. But female

> masturbation is also culturally censored.… Scenes of young women's sexual awakening *in themselves* do not exist except in a mock-up for the male voyeur. It is hard to imagine, in a cultural vacuum, what solitary female desire looks like. Women's bodies are portrayed as attractive packaging around an empty box; our genitals are not eroticized *for women*. Men's bodies are not erotized *for women*. Other women's bodies are not eroticized *for women*. Female masturbation is not eroticized *for women*. Each woman has to learn for herself, from nowhere, how to feel sexual (though she learns constantly how to look sexual). (155-156; original italics)

Sex and the City leaves little to the imagination. The women not only engage in pretty frank talk about masturbation but are also shown buying and trying out all sorts of sexual toys. Samantha, being a true expert on the subject, even offers advice to other customers in a shop on which vibrator is best for what. Even the good-girl Charlotte buys herself a vibrator called The Rabbit and actually becomes addicted to it (*The Turtle and the Hare*, 1:9). Presenting masturbation as a common and much desired female sexual behavior, *Sex and the City* pays a tribute to sex-positive feminism promoted by such provocative figures as Betty Dodson, whose first book, *Liberating Masturbation: A Meditation on Self Love* (1974), became a feminist classic. Dodson, with her very rich sexual life, in fact could be seen as a perfect model for Samantha's character.

Are we the new bachelors …or… are we sluts?

Even if a woman somehow manages to stay immune to the workings of the beauty myth and the patriarchal fears, and feels confident enough about her body to engage in a rich sexual life, there is one final blow that might bring her back under control. And that is calling her a slut. In an episode where Miranda learns she has chlamydia, making a list of her former lovers, she comes up with the number of forty-two and begins to feel bad about herself. "I'm a big, dirty, diseased whore," she tells Steve, afraid that the number will scare him (*Are We Sluts?*, 3:6). But, for Steve, the number is fine and from the proud smile on his face we may suspect his number is much, much higher. In an article entitled "Democratic Sex," Betty Dodson states that what she taught women back in the 1970s is to a large extent still true:

> American society operates with a sexual double standard: an unspoken agreement or a wink that tacitly grants men the social approval to be aggressive-independent and sexually polygamous, while women are expected to be non-aggressive-dependent and

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> sexually monogamous. Women are conditioned to play a supportive role and we end up seeking security rather than independence, new experiences and sexual gratification. The way women are conditioned to accept and conform to this double standard is through the withholding of sexual self-knowledge with the condemnation of masturbation, lack of birth control methods [the most visible change] and the threat of being socially ostracized if a woman strays from sexual monogamy.... [A]ny woman who has sex with more than one-man-at-a-time just for pleasure will be labeled a slut or a bimbo. Yet any man enjoying sex with multiple partners is seen as 'a lucky son-of-a-bitch.' He's a respectable bachelor. There is still no word for a single woman who enjoys sex on her own terms.

Carrie's thoughts on the subject are very similar. "Men who have had a lot of sexual partners are not called sluts, they are called very good kissers, a few are even called romantics" (3:6). In another episode, she asks: "Are we the new bachelors?" (5:7). By showing the double standard as obviously unfair, *Sex and the City* implies that it is women's right to enjoy sexual freedom on equal terms with men without being patronized or judged. Astrid Henry writes, "In episode after episode, Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte are not punished for being sexually active; they are not treated as 'fallen women' who must ultimately encounter some terrible fate. Rather, their sexual 'selfishness', if you will, is rewarded and praised, which is highly unusual in either film or TV representations of women's sexuality" (75-76). The four heroines seek independence, new experiences and sexual gratification and they possess sexual self-knowledge. And they are proud of it.

Of course, *Sex and the City* has various shortcomings as a feminist text, one of them being its focus on white, middle-class and heterosexual characters only (Mandy Merck even calls the depiction of lesbian relationships in the series an example of "abjection of female homoeroticism"; 54), but its contribution to the public debate on female sexuality is nevertheless priceless. Referring to a number of issues central to feminist writing, it brought these ideas to general attention. It can serve as a useful springboard for the analysis of how the restrictive standards of beauty and negative attitudes toward the female body result in the suppression of female sexuality. As long as women are conditioned to feel ashamed of their bodies and desires and forced to pursue the elusive ideal of feminine beauty in order to make their bodies docile and non-threatening, they will not be able to fully enjoy their sexual freedom. Although they are attractive, the heroines of *Sex and the City* are not classic, stylized and flawless Hollywood beauties. They have their own inhibitions and uncertainties, and yet all of them manage to have satisfying sex lives, each of them in her own way and on her own terms. They manage to stay con-

vinced of their own worth and their right to sexual agency and pleasure. They actively explore the world of sensual pleasures and the possibilities of sexual fulfillment seem endless and open. To use Barbara Creed's words, "*Sex and the City* argues that if four well-brought up, attractive professional women are prepared to engage in new forms of sexual behavior, it is clear that there has been, or should be, a major shift in levels of public tolerance" (*Media Matrix* 46). It shows that the taboo surrounding female sexuality obviously can and should be removed.

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