Adventures of the Spirit

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PART III

Spiritual Adventuring by
Other Contemporary Women Writers
Like a number of Fay Weldon’s female protagonists, Felicity Moore of *Rhode Island Blues* is the veteran of several unhappy marriages and a number of pregnancies, including daughters both legitimate and illegitimate, as well as two abortions. She has lived an unintentionally adventurous life, including stretches as the wife of a poor chicken farmer who, inconveniently, had another wife; as a “good-time” girl on a Georgia riverboat; and as the wife of a wealthy, closeted gay man. At times she frets about her physical appearance, particularly when she discovers that she is attracted to a man considerably her junior in age. During the course of the narrative, Felicity rediscovers romance, love, and commitment to her own future as she opens herself to exploration of a new relationship. *Rhode Island Blues* incorporates several fairy-tale motifs, including a wicked stepmother (or two), a figurative prince who frees the figurative princess from her prison, and a happily-ever-after ending.

There is a crucial distinction, however, between Felicity and Weldon’s other female protagonists: she is eighty-three years old. When the novel begins, Felicity feels—after four years of widowhood following the death of her third husband—that life holds few appealing options for a woman her age. She is, as she phrases it, “bored to hell. I keep waiting for something to happen but happenings seem to have run out. Is it my age?” (3). Although she is economically independent, she concedes after suffering a mild stroke that she’s “too old to live alone” (7). Following a conventional script for women of her age and circumstance—but also guided by an auspicious hexagram from the Chinese
book of wisdom, the *I Ching*—she proceeds to sell her house and move to a retirement/nursing home, the upscale Golden Bowl Complex for Creative Retirement in Rhode Island.

Unlike most of the residents of the Golden Bowl,¹ Felicity is far from “elderly” in either behavior or attitude. Not only is she still attractive and attentive to her physical appearance, but she also retains a vital sense of life’s possibilities, despite the attempts of the punitive and ironically named Nurse Dawn, the wicked stepmother of the nursing home, to infantilize residents by undermining their sense of personal independence. Through the unctuous nurse, Weldon directs a healthy measure of satire toward the hypocrisies of retirement “homes.” The tone of the place where residents are known as “Golden Bowlers” (35) is one of relentless cheer, though not without a satirical edge: “We like everyone to be happy, our cups half-full not half-empty” (233). Its philosophy is superficially based on Jungian psychology: residents, who are carefully selected for their robust health and probable longevity, are encouraged to pursue self-improvement and spiritual growth because “the soul needs nourishment as much as does the body” (47). Once they have taken up residence, their families are “encouraged to hand over complete responsibility. Over-loving relatives could be more damaging to an old person’s morale, more detrimental to the Longevity Index, than those who were neglectful” (15). Nurse Dawn cynically observes to herself that “as for Felicity, sooner or later something would happen to bring her to her senses and a proper sense of gratitude. A hip or a knee that needed replacing, arthritis in the hands, a disabling loss of memory, and she would cease to be independent: she would become like everyone else in the twilight of their days, and not think herself so special. Time was on Nurse Dawn’s side: the great advantage the young have over the old” (106).

Ironically, it is only after Felicity gives up living independently that she begins to challenge the implications of Nurse Dawn’s cynical view of old age. At a funeral she attends soon after moving to the retirement home, she is attracted to a thrice-married widower, William Johnson, a man eleven years her junior who also has an unorthodox and colorful personal history. Like women of any age who are drawn toward a new romantic relationship, Felicity must examine her own emotions and erotic feelings and evaluate the authenticity of her suitor’s attentions. Through her growing attraction to William, Felicity recognizes that “what she’d been missing . . . was the consciousness of some secret level of the self where things more important than the rational mind
would ever know took place, to do with the wheeling galaxies and the purposes of the life force” (109). In support of Felicity’s exploration of romance and the degree of control she—or anyone—actually has over her destiny, Weldon interpolates at various points in the narrative views from Carl Jung and the *I Ching* regarding chance, synchronicity, and the relationship between the outer and the inner life. The first instance of synchronicity is the fact that Felicity’s vagrant, estranged stepson, at whose funeral she meets William Johnson, was married to William’s stepdaughter.

Aspects of the inner life are suggested through the “mirror on the wall,” which Felicity first encounters when she moves into the room of a recently deceased resident of the Golden Bowl. Weldon’s presentation of the mirror’s function is key to the novel as a whole: the looking glass may distort what it reflects; additionally, it may reveal inner as well as outer states of the subject reflected from its sometimes duplicitous surface. As Weldon suggests through Felicity’s reflections (in both senses of the word), one can control the meaning of the mirror’s images through a firm grasp of one’s psychic or spiritual identity. The doctor who manages the retirement home is superstitious about mirrors: “supposing the new occupant looked in the mirror and saw the former occupant looking out. . . . [Mirrors] retained memory; they had their own point of view” (17). Indeed, when Felicity first looks into the mirror in her room, she has a brief but disturbing vision of an “elderly man” (72) returning her glance; shocked, she looks away. A second glance into the mirror reassuringly reveals her own image. “That of course was bad enough. You looked into a mirror as a young woman and your reflection looked out at you as one who was old. So what, honestly, was the big deal if the one looking out had changed sex as well? The shock of the stranger in the mirror was with you every time you looked into one. So why worry? . . . Better to conclude that the unexpected face in the mirror was a projection of one’s own fears rather than some occult phenomenon” (72–73).

The uncanny “stranger in the mirror” whose image is quickly replaced by a more familiar one is a phantasm—a psychic projection of something unfamiliar because it is not acknowledged as “self.” As Felicity’s relationship with William Johnson begins to take on the signs of romantic courtship, she distances herself from reflections of her aging body, preferring to regard the mirror as a “magic mirror” that “threw back your soul to you, and not your looks.” Recalling the authoritative looking glass in the fairy tale of Snow White, Felicity
silently pleads, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who deserves love most of all? Me, me, me. Just one last time. Please” (120). She also recognizes the mirror’s variability, a reflection of her own varying states of mind and feelings. Despite the fact that she is chronologically an octogenarian, “It didn’t feel like it, emotionally: apparently you learned nothing when it came to affairs of the heart. You started afresh in folly every time. Look in the mirror, and you always saw something different; sometimes you saw the spirit of yourself, perfectly fresh and youthful: sometimes you saw corrupted flesh” (121). At one point, the mirror reminds her that at her age she would be foolish to regard herself as among “the fairest of them all”; moreover, “if that was what the mirror did ever tell you, everyone hated you: you became wicked witch to Snow White. And besides, it didn’t last: good looks were all anxiety and disappointment: she had given up worrying years ago” (188). Later, as Felicity and William move tentatively toward sexual intimacy, their eyes are truly mirrors into their souls. “He leaned over her, his old eyes looking into her yet older ones, into a mirror which threw back only pleasant sights, livened by the unexpected” (165).

Over the course of the narrative, the changing reflections in the looking glass may be understood to illustrate Felicity Moore’s psychological and spiritual growth. According to Kathleen Woodward, who theorizes a “mirror stage” in old age that is complementary to the Freudian and Lacanian “mirror stage” of infancy, “in the old age our culture has constructed we desire our mirror image to function as does trompe l’oeil, to reveal itself precisely not as what it so shockingly presents to us as ourselves. . . . The I or ego which is developed in the mirror stage of infancy is structured precisely to resist the anxiety of bodily fragmentation. In old age, with one’s position reversed before the mirror, the ego finds it more difficult to maintain its defenses” (68). The reflections in Felicity’s mirror also function as reflectors of the stages of her spiritual growth, evolving from the image of Other—a male “stranger in the mirror”—to Self: a woman who comes to know and act upon her deepest inner knowledge and intuition. Given the Jungian allusions that appear elsewhere in the novel, the male figure may also be understood as the animus, the complementary double/opposite whose integration into the female personality is a necessary step toward spiritual wholeness.5

Only once in the narrative does a mirror reflection unexpectedly lead Felicity to regard not her body image but a mental image—the most painful memory of her life. Significantly, the process of recovering
that deeply buried memory occurs at the point when the relationship between Felicity and William has reached its moment of greatest risk. William has cautioned Felicity that there is something about him that she must know before she responds to his proposal of marriage. He drives her to a Native American–operated casino in the Connecticut woods whose turrets and towers suggest a fairy-tale castle created by Disney. There, he admits to her that this is his other love: gambling.

Instead of reacting directly, Felicity finds her attention drawn inward to the memory of a time shortly before her mother died during the 1918–19 influenza epidemic. Though she cannot remember her mother’s name, she recalls her mother’s mirrored dressing table, which contained several personal items invested with powerful emotional associations. In particular, she recalls her mother’s hairnets, which she would “stretch . . . between her hands and look at the world through them: a fine crisscross of brown between her and reality, distorting it but softening it.” Recalling her mother’s cautionary words that the nets were delicate and could be easily broken, Felicity realizes that she has, until now, forgotten her mother’s name because she had “gone away and left her child without protection. . . . Sylvia, of course, that was her name. Then Lois had taken over and within a day the dressing table was cleared and there was a stepmother in her mother’s bed” (196). In some ways Felicity has continued to view the world through the distorting but softening scrim of her long-vanished mother’s hairnet.

William, noting the tears on Felicity’s cheeks, fears that the revelation of his gambling habit has distressed her. She responds, “I’m crying because my mother died” (196). Psychologically, it is as if the new possibility of love and trust and intimacy has prompted Felicity to allow into consciousness the long-repressed memory of the lost first object of love—the mother who abandoned her through death—and to make peace with the absence that so colored her subsequent life. Much of what happened after her mother’s death was directly related to that incalculable loss, including emotional abuse at the hands of the wicked stepmother who replaced her dead mother in her father’s bed and her rape at the age of fifteen by her stepmother’s brother, whose denial of responsibility was believed while Felicity’s version of events was scornfully dismissed.

Readers learn such details of Felicity’s story incrementally, in part through her own eyes and in part through those of her well-intentioned but at times self-serving granddaughter. Sophia, a thirty-two-year-old film editor based in London, is—like a number of Weldon’s younger
protagonists—in flight from the past but, ironically, far more preoccupied with it than is Felicity. Ambivalently, Sophia both fears emotional commitment and longs for attachment, wishing for the family that she never had. Though she has a tenuous relationship with the Hollywood director of several of the films that she edits, she is reluctant to admit to a significant emotional attachment, telling herself instead that Harry Krassner merely sleeps in her bed after their collaborative work on his film ends each day to save himself the inconvenience of staying in a hotel. Thus, belatedly responding to a request urging her to come to the United States to see her ailing grandmother who has just suffered a mild stroke, Sophia wonders, “Perhaps I had come not so much to rescue Felicity as to escape emotional entanglement” (23).

Sophia’s strategy for distancing herself from emotional experiences is film: not only does she edit films professionally but she also escapes into them, finding them less messy and much more reliable than real life. As she phrases it, “Real life is all subtext, never with a decent explanation, no day of judgement to make things clear” (4). Later, she elaborates on this distinction, claiming that “[r]eal life is unsatisfactory, there’s no resolving anything properly . . . murder doesn’t always out: the only ‘end’ is death. Films at least offer resolutions and answers, and solutions, the boring bits edited out” (153). Pertinently, she is currently working on films with such suggestive wish-fulfillment titles as Tomorrow Forever and Hope against Hope. She often recasts her own and others’ experiences in terms of movie classics in which the outcome is clear.

Like a good film editor, Sophia attempts to splice together and thus reconstruct her family history based on details she uncovers. First, to her surprise, she learns from Felicity—who has determined that she has reached the age where she is “old enough to speak the truth” (1)—that her grandmother had an illegitimate child “before I had your mother. . . . That was in London, back in the thirties. I wasn’t married. That made me a bad girl. They made me keep the baby for six weeks, and breastfeed, then they took her away, put her out for adoption” (53). The orphaned Sophia, curious and longing for other relatives, engages a private detective agency to find out what happened to Felicity’s child. She discovers that the child—her great-aunt Alison, who is now in her sixties—lives in a nursing home near London; incapacitated by Alzheimer’s disease, she can offer Sophia little in the way of family connection or insight. Indeed, real life offers a less satisfactory denouement to this particular strand of family history than would a film version. Having learned the sordid crisis of her grandmother’s adolescence,
Sophia imagines Felicity’s rape by her step-uncle as a “film narrative in [her] head” (156) that concludes with “Cut away to long shot. You know the dismal rest” (157).

Sophia also locates her grandmother’s younger half-sister, Lucy, who is able to supply more details about Felicity’s youth. Through her, Sophia learns that Felicity’s stepmother, Lois, had totally rejected the pregnant Felicity. In a response typical of the time, she blamed the victim, regarding her pregnant stepdaughter as “a moral imbecile . . . dirty, disgusting and lewd.” According to Lucy, Lois threw Felicity out of the house and deposited her at the door of a home for unwed mothers “as if she were an abandoned baby and not an abandoned mother” (158). There, on her fifteenth birthday, Felicity gave birth to Alison and soon afterward gave her up for adoption. As Sophia comments, “the truth turned out to be even more dramatic than I would have dared suppose, and being reported by a seventy-five-year-old out of the memory of the child she once was, had already been conveniently turned into a shaped narrative: a tragedy, as it happened. . . . [A] happy ending for Felicity was not within the scheme of her universe” (144). In an observation that underscores the novel’s fairy-tale motifs as well as its deliberate attention to the constructed “story” of any life, Sophia concludes, “The Fates have a way of doling out the same hand of cards to a woman, over and over. The cackling sisters had decided that Felicity was to get some pretty nice cards sprinkled with a few really nasty ones bound to mess the others up. They sent along a Fairy Godmother to the christening to give looks, charm, energy, courage, wit—then took away her parents, gave her Lucy’s mother Lois for a wicked stepmother, brought Lois’s brother Anton into the household, [and] obliged her to give away her perfect baby” (145).

The other woman who links Sophia to her grandmother is Felicity’s legitimate daughter from her first marriage: Sophia’s mother, Angel, who died by suicide in a mental hospital at the age of thirty-five when her only child was ten. Sophia still nurses a sense of maternal loss and emotional emptiness. She feels as if the “sepulchral figure” of her mad mother “stands between [herself] and Felicity, damming up the flow of family feeling” (2). As Sophia delves more deeply into the secrets of her family history, she discovers other relatives she never knew she had and realizes that her feelings of abandonment are part of a repeating pattern: just as Sophia’s own mother died during her early childhood, Felicity’s mother died of influenza when Felicity was an even younger child.

Later, Sophia discovers still another twist in her tangled family
history: Felicity’s first husband was not the father of her child (Sophia’s mother). Rather, when Felicity married an American GI based in England during World War II, she was pregnant by a folk singer who lived in London’s Soho district. She went to Georgia to live with her American husband on what he told her was his plantation, which in fact was a dirt-poor chicken farm. To add insult to injury, he already had another wife as well as another child. Though Sophia is fascinated by these discoveries about her family history, Felicity wishes that her granddaughter would leave well enough alone rather than dredging up additional details of her painful and at times sordid past.

What prompts Felicity’s orientation toward the present—and the future—is her developing relationship with William Johnson. Others, including Felicity’s former neighbor with the comically ironic name of Joy, are convinced that William is simply a con man and “sponger” (133), the kind of man who preys on susceptible older women and whose real interest is their bank accounts. At times Felicity herself worries about William’s motives, even as—in the habit of a much younger woman—she orders by mail cosmetics, face creams, and lingerie that she hopes will make her appear more attractive. The two meet every day through an arrangement that resembles a secret assignation: Felicity persuades the man who is employed as Joy’s chauffeur to secretly convey William from his retirement home in nearby Mystic, Connecticut, to hers each day while Joy is napping. The brief afternoon visits temporarily elude even the watchful eyes of the grim Nurse Dawn and the staff of the Golden Bowl. In another comic touch, the chauffeur, a Yugoslavian refugee, marvels at the liaison he helps to facilitate: “Only in the United States . . . would the old have health and energy enough thus to complicate their lives. It gave him a sense of future. He might even give up smoking[,] the better to fit in” (119–20).

In William’s loving eyes, Felicity feels herself alive again, even as she recognizes the risk and the impermanence of such feelings: “But while it lasted, how magic was the exhilaration, the exultation, the sense of being properly alive. Just one more time, and this time let me get it right. True love. Could it be that if you just hung round for long enough, your faith intact, it happened? When you least expected it, there it was at last.” By contrast, in the presence of the life-squelching Nurse Dawn, Felicity feels “old and useless again, and slightly dotty, since that was how Nurse Dawn saw her” (124).

The most delicately realized dimension of Weldon’s elder fairy tale is her treatment of sexuality, which she renders with both sensitivity
and genial humor. When Felicity first returns to the Golden Bowl after having met William, she is in such “high spirits” that Nurse Dawn is concerned, fearing that such “inappropriate emotions could indicate the onset of dementia” (103). Later, Felicity ponders the nature of desire at her age, concluding that “lust . . . was not the prerogative of the young: as you got older desire presented itself in a different form . . . as a restless sense of dissatisfaction, which out of sheer habit you had the feeling only physical sex would cure. It was generated in the head, not the loins, the latter these days admittedly a little dried up, and liable to chafing rather than the general luscious overflowing which had characterized their prime” (108).

For three weeks after their first meeting, Felicity and William, separated by a table in Felicity’s room that signifies the “no-man’s land between desire and fear of consequences” (124), “debrief” (129) each other by sharing details of their histories, interests, and tastes. As they move gingerly toward intimacy, Felicity realizes the awkward path they must navigate: “Bad enough at twenty to work out how to proceed from physical distance to physical intimacy: how to move from the chair to the sofa, from the sofa to the bed: fifty, sixty years on and the problem was back again” (130). Along with such strategic difficulties, they must face the limits of their aging bodies. William’s hands are, like Felicity’s own, “wrinkled and liver-spotted” (131).

Further, Felicity wonders whether the “electrical charge” she feels when William first sits next to her can be trusted: “She could be wrong about it: he could be teasing her, manipulating her cruelly. She could be making a fool of herself. Maybe all this was in her head?” Nonetheless, she proposes that they “lie together on her bed” for the innocuous reason that “sitting up straight for so long quite tires [her] out.” Immediately, she feels that she has been too hasty. William, revealing his own anxiety, responds, “I’m an old man. I’ll only disappoint you” (131), and prepares to leave. Ultimately, however, they overcome the almost comic awkwardness of the situation and end up on Felicity’s bed. Remaining fully clothed like timid adolescents on the brink of their first sexual experience, they confide to each other further details of their earlier lives and loves, “flesh touching, albeit the other side of fabric. The denim of his jeans, the silk of her skirt: her legs still long and shapely, the skin no longer taut, blotchy; a blue network of veins beneath the ankles. How much did it matter? What had love ever been about? The spirit or the flesh?” (133). On a later occasion, William’s hand sometimes “strayed to [Felicity’s] breast, to find out more about
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it, and for once she wished she had her former body back: it was as if now the power of her will was obliged to sustain her physical existence and keep proving it: whereas once the body had run off so boldly with the self, taking over: the firm bosom, the bouncy flesh, flying ahead of the will, having to be restrained” (165).

At one point, distressed by her feeling of entrapment not only within the confining and life-denying rules of the Golden Bowl but also within her aging body, Felicity laments, “as you got older the sense that the spirit was incarcerated in the body became more intense. . . . [However], it was not the Golden Bowl which kept you in one place against your will, it was your body, now reluctant to run, jump, and skip” (240). Sex at her and William’s ages, she concludes, must be understood more as “a token of esteem rather than a source of overwhelming physical pleasure. While she wasn’t looking it had ceased to be an all-consuming need” (261).

The fairy-tale romance between Felicity and William has its share of doubts and darker moments. Felicity wonders whether falling in love is simply “a strategy for postponing thoughts of death and the physical and mental decline that led up to it” (245). The decision to marry, a major decision at any age, looms especially large as she ponders what would justify such a commitment for a woman in her eighties. Moreover, like Felicity herself, the reader may wonder how to weigh William’s gambling addiction. Though he claims he knows when to quit, he pursues his compulsive pastime on an almost daily basis. According to him, it is a form of playing with chance, of “rolling with destiny” (199). Felicity, with a generosity of spirit conferred by age, ultimately concludes that she has her own less admirable qualities as well and that William’s gambling is a form of entertainment that does not take anything away from her. Like any other entertainment, “it was all there was left to do, at the close of life. And who cared about the money?” (199). Gambling is simply another form of risk-taking; according to William, “the greater the risk, the higher the reward” (198). Indeed, that view shapes Felicity’s decision to embrace the rare opportunity that life offers her. Welcoming the unexpected “exhilaration of true love” (133) at the age of eighty-three, she feels “lucky,” despite the “share of bad luck that had piled up in the first twenty years” (246) of her life.

The deepest point of Felicity’s spiritual journey is her recognition that her decision to marry William is not only a celebration of the life force but also a door opening to continued inner growth and the
discovery of the elemental meaning of experience, even at—indeed, despite—her advanced age. As she phrases what she has discovered during her romantic courtship with William, “The old understood better than the young that the foundation of the earth was composed of good and evil, no matter how you struggled to see it in terms of money and sex and luck. The trouble was the old had no words, no language, no real remembrance; what afflicted the soul in the end afflicted the body. The old peered out of rheumy eyes, dimmed by too much exposure to the truth, deafened by a lifetime of lies, bent by the burden of guilt. . . . Age itself was evil, and there was no escaping it. . . . But what else can you do? How else express what you have learned of life . . .?” (271).

The names of Weldon’s protagonist, like those of other characters in the novel, amplify the fairy-tale themes: “Felicity” connotes a pleasing manner as well as something that causes or produces happiness, while “Moore” suggests Felicity’s desire to live more fully than is conventionally sanctioned for women of her advanced age. Together these meanings enhance the depiction of a character who is rare not only in Weldon’s fiction but also in contemporary fiction: one who not only can admit to herself, despite her age, that “she did miss being in love” (108) but who emphatically resists the cultural scripts of aging that assume erotic and emotional diminution. In *Rhode Island Blues* Weldon provides astringent reminders of the more conventional view. In particular, Felicity’s envious (and utterly joyless) seventy-nine-year-old neighbor, Joy, offers a jaundiced view of heterosexual relationships. The veteran of four marriages, she has concluded that “men changed on the day you married them: though they always claimed it was you that did” (90). Convinced that she has little control over what comes her way, Joy regards life as “a long road uphill; you travelled in a vehicle driven by others; it was better to appreciate the scenery than to speculate about what was going to happen when you reached the top and looked down the other side. One of Joy’s grandsons played computer games: she’d seen how you could topple down over the edge into a brilliant white nothingness: it had really scared her. These days she saw her own life like this, something almost virtual, perched on the edge of an abyss” (89). Revealingly, Joy is especially critical of Felicity’s romantic relationship with William in particular and with erotic desire in older people in general: “People of that age have no business having sex. It’s too upsetting for those around. . . . It’s shaming, embarrassing and humiliating” (163). By contrast, through Felicity, who is
emotionally rejuvenated and empowered by her willingness to take the risk of intimacy, Weldon suggests that, for those who retain their imaginations along with a measure of wisdom and some flexibility, love knows no chronological limits.

Even the emotionally repressed Sophia is affected by Felicity’s *joie de vivre*. Through Felicity’s story, which she has successfully pieced together, she comes to see that “one tends to write off women in their mid-eighties as simply hanging around until death carries them away. One is wrong” (140). In her head she hears the voice of a benevolent fairy godmother—her grandmother, Felicity—articulating the life-affirming truth that shapes Weldon’s fable: “*Take nothing seriously. It’s all fairy tale*” (312, emphasis in original).

However, there is one last twist to the fairy tale. On her final visit to her grandmother, Sophia makes the error of bringing along her two newly discovered cousins: the adult children of Felicity’s illegitimate daughter, Alison. It soon becomes apparent that Guy and Lorna are far more interested in Felicity’s assets—namely, a painting by Utrillo that she received years before from her wealthy second husband in a divorce settlement—than in the recovery of family ties. Guy asserts to Nurse Dawn his view that it is foolish to leave “a batty old woman in charge of a major work of art, let alone her being in thrall to an unscrupulous gambler” (315). Nurse Dawn, hardly Felicity’s ally, suggests that the best strategy would be to have Felicity declared incompetent so that Guy can be named her legal guardian. It is not surprising that Felicity sees a resemblance between Nurse Dawn and her cruel stepmother, Lois, who had disowned her so many years ago. As she remarks to William, “How strange to meet up with her again, after all this time” (271). Felicity also accurately senses that Guy and Lorna—whom she believes must be the evil Lois’s grandchildren rather than hers—hope to grab her one valuable possession, her Utrillo. She persuades Sophia to help her hide the painting. Together removing it from the wall of Felicity’s room, they wrap it in a quilt and convey it to temporary safety in an empty gardener’s shed outside the retirement home, to be reclaimed at the appropriate time. When Guy and his sister come to the Golden Bowl the next day to visit Felicity, they are shocked to discover that both she and the Utrillo have vanished.

Felicity, more interested in the future than the past, further surprises her own granddaughter by promptly selling the valuable painting. Life itself is a gamble, never more so than at her age: she has decided to take her chances with William. “If she divided the money from the
Utrillo and what she already had into ten, that gave them $400,000 a year to see them out. This was the amount William lost annually, if you averaged out the winning and the losing years. They would spend their days gambling at Foxwoods; and if they lost there would be no sorrow, because they expected to, and if they won they could rejoice” (325).

Sophia, inspired by her grandmother’s spirited escape from the retirement home to elope with William, returns to London with a renewed sense of possibility and expansion in her own life. Over the course of her encounters with Felicity, she acquires at least a modicum of the wisdom signaled by her name and a new orientation that, like her grandmother’s, is more focused on the future than the past: “I saw that I had extra decades to go, more than I thought. Life elongated before me. I saw it in my head as a kind of special effect . . . paleish [sic] green and glowing and stretching into the distance, only slightly uphill: a path. Really there was no hurry to get everything right” (325).

What adds depth and resonance to Weldon’s affirmative exploration of love and romance in her old but far from elderly female protagonist is the position of *Rhode Island Blues* within the author’s own oeuvre. Now in her mid-seventies herself, Weldon is the author of twenty-six novels. Although her more recent narratives focus satirically on the vagaries of love, marriage, sexual infidelity, and wives’ fantasies of revenge, her early novels published during the 1970s depict the hard lives of women during the peak years of courtship, marriage, and childbearing as they endure various aspects of the “female condition.”

A female character in one novel of that period, *Down Among the Women*, laments, “There is nothing more glorious than to be a young girl and there is nothing worse than to have been one” (6). In novels that reflect their moment in the history of unequal relations between the sexes, anatomy is indeed destiny: women have little control over either their bodies or their fates; female friendships are fragile because women are economically and emotionally dependent on men. Yet love is fickle and men are neither reliable nor faithful. As a female character from *Praxis*, another of Weldon’s novels from the same period, representatively phrases it, “We are betrayed on all sides. Our bodies betray us, leading us to love where our interests do not lie. Our instincts betray us, inducing us to nest-build and procreate—but to follow instinct is
not to achieve fulfillment, for we are more than animals. . . . Our brains betray us, keeping one step, for the sake of convenience, to avoid hurt, behind the male” (205–6).

Several decades later, in *Rhode Island Blues*, Sophia—a self-sufficient and economically independent professional woman who is a clear beneficiary of the women’s movement—reflects on the restricted lives of women of her grandmother’s generation, acknowledging that “even a couple of decades into the [twentieth] century only a very exceptional woman could earn a living wage, other than on her back” (144). Regarding her view of female experience in the decades before feminism, Weldon commented to an interviewer:

In the fifties and sixties we women thought if we were unhappy it could only be our fault. We were in some way neurotic, badly adjusted—it was our task to change ourselves to fit the world. We would read Freud, Helene Deutsch, Melanie Klein (these last two at least being moderately relevant to our female condition), bow our heads in shame in the face of our penis envy, and teach ourselves docility and acceptance. As the seventies approached and we failed to achieve these ends, the great realization dawned—we must change not ourselves but the world! It was not we who were at fault, with our mopes and sulks and hysteria and murderous pre-menstrual rages, it was the world. The world was male. It was only natural, living as we did in a patriarchal society, that we would behave in such a way. So we stopped placating (that is to say smiling) and set out, scowling, to change to world. We worked upon that, not upon ourselves. We become radical separatist, lesbian feminists, or subsections of such, and weren’t really nice at all. We stamped hard on male toes, and we liked each other but it was a rare man who liked us. And if he did we despised him for his softness. (“Changing Face” 193–94)

In contrast to virtually all of her earlier female characters, in Felicity Moore of *Rhode Island Blues* Weldon has created an exuberant, risk-taking, *significantly older* woman who dares to follow the dictates of her heart, social norms about old age be damned. One can speculate that, by imagining for the first time a life-affirming protagonist who refuses to feel trapped by either her gender or her advanced age, Weldon has given narrative form to some of her own hopes and wishes—even her fairy-tale fantasies—on behalf of all women who dare to challenge the conventional cultural scripts of aging. More broadly, her novel
succeeds as an attempt to “alter or inflect our experience of aging and advanced old age by changing our representations of it” (Woodward 193). Rhode Island Blues may be a fairy tale, but it is a satisfying one: an exuberant and genially comic narrative of an older woman’s emotional, spiritual, and, yes, sexual liberation. What distinguishes this particular retelling—complete with the rescue of the princess from her prison and from the wicked witch by her prince, along with a happily-ever-after ending—is the reader’s awareness that Weldon has taken the classic tale into decidedly new territory: traditional fairy tales never feature elder (much less octogenarian!) princesses. Fittingly, in a final glance into the magic mirror, Felicity Moore understands what the reflection has been trying to tell her. It offers not only guidance specific to her stage of life but also the moral of Weldon’s tale: “Time’s short. Don’t waste what’s left” (293).

Notes

1. Lest readers assume that the reference is to Henry James’s novel The Golden Bowl, Weldon advises us through Sophia that the original source of the retirement home’s name (though the connection is not mentioned in its brochure) is Ecclesiastes:

   Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,
   while the evil days come not,
   nor the years draw nigh,
   when thou shalt say,
   I have no pleasure in them;
   While the sun,
   or the light,
   or the moon,
   or the stars,
   be not darkened,
   nor the clouds return after the rain:
   . . . and desire shall fail:
   because man goeth to his long home,
   and the mourners go about the streets:
   or ever the silver cord be loosed,
   or the golden bowl be broken at the fountain,
   . . . then shall the dust return to the earth as it was:
   and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it. (35; ellipses in original)

2. According to Jung, synchronicity is a “‘meaningful coincidence’ of outer and inner events that are not themselves causally connected” (226).

3. According to Kathleen Woodward, a phantasm is a psychic representation that “speaks . . . mysteriously to our fears and desires” (176).
4. Interestingly, in her observations about female aging published more than half a century ago, Simone de Beauvoir wrote presciently about the discrepancy between mirror image and inner self: “When one feels oneself a conscious, active, free being, the passive object on which the fatality [of aging or death] is operating seems necessarily as if it were another. . . . This cannot be I, this old woman reflected in the mirror! . . . The woman puts her trust in what is clear to her inner eye rather than in that strange world where time flows backward, where her double no longer resembles her, where the outcome has betrayed her” (649). Similarly, but more recently, Woodward has noted, “The psyche longs for youth, and the body is an insult and an impediment” (188).

5. In Jungian theory, the animus, “the male personification of the unconscious in woman,” may appear in different forms, both positive and negative. “The positive side of the animus can personify an enterprising spirit, courage, truthfulness, and in the highest form, spiritual profundity. Through him a woman can experience the underlying processes of her cultural and personal objective situation, and can find her way to an intensified spiritual attitude to life” (198, 206–7).

6. As she has done elsewhere in her fiction, Weldon has drawn some details for *Rhode Island Blues* from her own personal experience or family history. In her autobiography, *Auto da Fay*, she reveals that her aunt Faith was seduced by her aunt’s mother’s brother when she was seventeen. When the two were discovered together, the uncle was banished from the house, and “Faith was tipped into what would now be called a violent psychotic episode, from which she never recovered. She was locked away, for her own protection and that of others.” Her mother “wiped her daughter from her memory: she went, as they would say now, into denial. It was the shock waves from this tragedy which echoed through the generations to disastrous affect [sic]. My mother lost her sister, ally and friend, the cohesion of the family was gone: the centre could not hold. Free Love, the creed by which the redheaded uncles also lived, is fine in principle but can be tragic in its consequences” (106–7).

7. Nancy A. Walker observes that Weldon frequently uses fairy-tale motifs in her novels—in most instances ironically, to critique the social attitudes that shape and limit her characters’ lives. As she notes, “Weldon’s female characters and narrators are obsessive storytellers, modern Mother Geese who spin tales compounded of truth and lies, and then revise these stories in much the same way as fairy tales have undergone revision over time. . . . There is a clear sense that her characters are immersed in a sea of tales—fairy tales, old wives’ tales, cultural mythologies, lies they tell themselves and others” (10).

8. In *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette identifies the socially constructed “master narrative of aging” (66) as a pattern of thinking in Western culture that has become so collectively embedded and individually internalized in our perceptions of age and aging, particularly for women, that it is difficult to acknowledge or resist. Though she focuses principally on the culturally reinforced “narrative of decline” that negatively colors “midlife,” her observations are valuable for considering the even more limiting scripts that shape expectations for the decades that follow. As Gullette phrases it, “old age in general can be represented as lonely, terrified, boring, sickly, and costly to society. But it is midlife aging that repels women first. Fear of fifty intensifies fear of ninety” (94).
Elsewhere, in “Feminism, Eros, and the Coming of Age,” I explore representations of two older women who find themselves drawn into romantic relationships or infatuations with younger men. However, both Doris Lessing’s Sarah Durham of love, again (1996) and Marilyn French’s Hermione Beldame of My Summer with George (1996) are two decades younger than Weldon’s Felicity. Carolyn Heilbrun has suggested that there are virtually no imaginative scripts for older women that offer “adventure” without “romance.” If there were, “we in our late decades would be able to free ourselves from the compulsion always to connect yearning and sex. If an ancient . . . woman finds herself longing for something new, something as yet not found, must that something always be sex or till-death-do-us-part romance? The reason for the predominance of sexual aspiration, I have decided, is that no other adventure has quite the symbolic force, not to mention the force of the entire culture, behind it” (103).


Works Cited