

ALLY MCBEAL AND THE PROBLEM OF
POSTFEMINISM

By
Kristen Gagne

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INTRODUCTION

In 1997, the Fox network asked David E. Kelley to create a show that would attract viewers away from Monday night football and appeal to a female audience (Pozner 2). A short time later, *Ally McBeal* hit the television screen. Since its first season, the public's reaction to the main character, Ally, has been so intense as to provoke debates about her impact on the women's movement. Some call her a "postfeminist role model," and the "icon of 90's feminism," while others find that she is a depressing reminder of how much work the women's movement still has to do (Pozner 1).

Ally is a single, Harvard-trained lawyer whose life is all neurosis all the time. This is a woman who throws tantrums at the slightest provocation, hallucinates about dancing babies, pines after ex-lovers, and prefers the pursuit of marriage to the pursuit of social change. As she says in one episode, "if women wanted to change society they could do it. I plan to change it. I'd just like to get married first." She thinks her real life will begin when she is married with children; those things are the sole focus of her life. We rarely see her doing any real professional work. Instead, she remains obsessed with her pursuit of a male companion.

Judging by the show's popularity, it seems that David E. Kelley has tapped into the hearts and minds of white, middle-class, heterosexual, thirtysomething, female America. Due, in part, to its hit status, there has been an intense media focus on *Ally McBeal*. In fact, the show is so popular that there are websites, official guide books, and even a clothing line all dedicated to *Ally McBeal*. By virtue of all the attention the show receives, it seems evident that many women emulate her, which would not be a problem if *Ally McBeal* did not seem more like a backlash *against* feminism than a feminist show. The female characters share some prefeminist desires. For example, they devalue their careers and prefer to put most of their energy into searching for the perfect man instead. Ally and the other female characters on the program are not exactly what you would call positive

representations of women, since so much attention is focused on what (or, more precisely, who) is missing from their lives.

Ally McBeal has been referred to as a comedy-drama. As such, it blends some elements of the thirty minute situation comedy with elements of an hour-long drama. *Ally's* audience is similar to that of a soap opera. In the same way a soap opera is difficult to simply jump into, someone tuning in for the first time will be a bit lost and will have to watch several episodes before they understand all of what is going on. The regular audience feels a bond with Ally, whom they identify with, and they become interested in what happens to her from week to week. Part of what makes this show enjoyable is that it can be riotously hilarious at times. Who would not be amused by a character that throws her shoes at people when she is angry? It's funny when Ally acts out in inappropriate and misdirected ways, but there is a danger in this humor: it detracts, or at least obfuscates, the true message and meaning of many situations. At the very least, it portrays a woman as being immature.

As a genre, the situation comedy has ideological potential. It is linked to social commentary and negotiates social change by making the actions of a character seem silly, rather than significant or challenging to dominant ideological standards. Ally's tantrums are a good example of how women can be made to look like foolish little girls instead of competent professional women. Sitcoms usually operate within an actual or metaphorical family relationship, which leads to the reiteration of familial roles such as mother, father, child, etc. In *Ally McBeal*, we see the same sort of familial roles that we find in the sitcom. Bonnie Dow, author of *Prime Time Feminism*, says that the working-woman sitcom "is a good example of the perseverance, in the public sphere, of gender role expectations developed in the private sphere" (38). She goes on to say that "the reliance on a family model means that workplace sitcoms never really escape family/gender politics as they superficially seem to do" (38). Therefore, while shows like *Ally McBeal* may seem to escape traditional gender

roles and expectations, what they really do is *reproduce* them. As Dow says, “a nuclear family metaphor often replicates rather than questions family politics” (38).

Ally appears to challenge the patriarchy in ways that threaten its power, but her challenges are in reality not much of a threat at all. What goal would capitalistic ideology have for women today? Since capitalism cannot survive without unpaid domestic labor, it follows that women are being encouraged to continue functioning as domestic workers even as they expand work outside the home pursuing jobs and careers. It seems suspicious that Ally prefers marriage to social change—after all, whose interests are being served when a successful, professional, young woman feels that her real life will be lived out in domestic bliss? Why can't she seem to expand as a *lawyer*, taking on new cases, learning how to litigate, and meeting with success in the courtroom on her own terms? We do not see too many scenes like that—if any at all.

A great many young women, mostly in college or beginning a career, identify with Ally. They are at the point in their lives when they are trying to make sense of what it means to be an adult woman, one who is trying to find her niche in society. As a representation of this demographic, Ally calls out to them and appeals to their hopes, desires, frustrations, fears, etc. Sadly, Ally regrets having gone to law school at all and wishes she had gotten married first: “So here I am, the victim of my own choices, and I'm just starting.” This seems like a good way to preserve our existing social structure—if women are taught to want it *all* then the existing gender roles are preserved, only expanding and changing just a little bit. Ally is a woman who feels like a victim of her own choices rather than a victim of larger social problems. This character never questions *why* she feels like she has made the wrong choices. She just laments her current lifestyle. Her problems are highly individualized.

Nearly a decade after Susan Faludi published *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, I am detecting some evidence that this backlash is still going on. *Ally McBeal* seems like a

1990's/twenty-first century version of the 1980's backlash against feminism that Susan Faludi's book describes.

Ally has been referred to as a "postfeminist icon." There are not many differences between postfeminists and antifeminist backslashers. As Dow puts it, "the primary difference between postfeminists and antifeminist backslashers is the latter's unwillingness to allow for positive effects of women's liberation" (93). She goes on to say: "for backslashers, women's liberation was a mistake—for women and everyone else" (93). Postfeminists, on the other hand, think good has been done, but that enough was enough, and that it is now time for reconciliation. They assume women's right to work, but also to mother. One strong thrust of the antifeminist backlash has been to stress the primacy of women's traditional gender roles as wives and mothers. They also argue that deviation from the path of motherhood and wifedom leads to a sense of displacement, and disconnection from the self, with consequences ranging from mental illness to the destruction of masculinity. In other words, the backlash believes that what the original feminists fought for is actually *bad* for women.

Backslashers and postfeminists converge in the belief that there are fundamental differences between men and women that cannot and must not be ignored. Not only do they call for a return to traditional gender roles, but as Dow describes it, postfeminists believe that "the victimization of women is exaggerated and/or all in feminists' minds, and that feminist orthodoxy is disempowering women by encouraging them to see themselves as victims" (205).

Come the nineties, certainly an era of postfeminism, feminists noticed, as Faludi does in "I'm Not a Feminist but I Play One on TV," that "these women take the opposite tack of the young women who preceded them. Their slogan is 'I am a feminist but...—as in 'I am a feminist, but...I don't believe women face discrimination anymore; I don't see any reason for women to organize politically; I don't think the pay gap, sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, or just about any

other issue feminism has raised are real problems; I don't see why we even need to bother with gender analysis anymore; and on the whole, I find feminists to be little more than victim-mongering conspiracy nuts" (34). Concisely, this is the predicament of the woman of the nineties, as the postfeminists see it. It is a questioning of motives and of goals. Essentially, postfeminists argue that women have really "made it" and that there is no need for the feminist movement any longer.

One central concern for feminists in the 1970's was the nuclear family and women's role within that structure. Problematizing and exploring that role would help lead to an understanding of "woman" as a social category or sexual class, and it was hoped that bringing these issues to the forefront and discussing them would lead to positive social change. It was in the raising of these important questions that actual progress forged ahead. The goals feminists had in mind, for example, had to do with restructuring family dynamics to allow more room for shared responsibilities between men and women.

At this point, we should branch our discussion off into exactly what is the difference between feminism and post-feminism. To narrow down the focus, this paper will concentrate definitions of feminist/post-feminist issues to those that relate specifically to the T.V. show *Ally McBeal*. These issues include sexuality, the workplace, and relationships. These are not the only issues touched on by the show, but they are the three most frequently addressed. In addition, sexuality, the workplace, and relationships are three of the major issues that feminists and postfeminists have very different opinions about.

The political issues taken up by earlier feminists do not figure into *postfeminist* discourse. In fact, postfeminism retreats from an analysis of sex/gender/class/race/sexuality systems and instead chooses to emphasize self-reliance and a sort of rugged individualism. As Dow sees it, the postfeminist construction of "individual lifestyle solutions" implies that masculinist behavior and discourse does not need to be altered (93). In fact, the issue of male behavior is almost completely

ignored by postfeminists. From a postfeminist standpoint, patriarchy escapes responsibility for women's oppression. The responsibility belongs to the 1970's feminists who the postfeminists see as the ones who ruined women's lives rather than improved them.

It may be argued, as Dow does, that this attitude is consistent with postfeminist internalization of negative stereotypes of feminists. According to her, postfeminists assumed that adopting feminist attitudes would worsen, rather than improve, their lives, by lowering their chances for heterosexual romance and marriage. Lisa Hogeland agrees: fear of feminism, she says in "Fear of Feminism: Why Young Women Get the Willies," is shaped "by fears both of lesbians and of being named lesbian by association . . . fear of feminism is shaped by the institution of heterosexuality" (19). This fear is not present in feminism, but it *is* in *postfeminism*. Dow cites Ryan, another feminist who states that "many women see feminism as irrelevant or even threatening to their personal lives . . . For younger women . . . there is a high level of agreement with feminist goals in combination with a weakening perception that there is still a need for feminist activism" (110). Hogeland goes on to say that "young women may believe that a feminist identity puts them out of the pool for many men, limits the options of who they might become with a partner, how they might decide to live" (20). The fear of being alone and never finding a mate because one identifies oneself as a feminist is what makes young women stray from feminism or reject it altogether. Hogeland attributes this rejection of feminism to the way "our culture allows women so little scope for development, for exploration, for testing the boundaries of what they can do and who they can be, that romantic and sexual relationships become the primary, too often the only, arena for selfhood" (19).

What can be seen here is the postfeminist shift of focus from sexual politics (as the explanation for the problems and possibilities in women's lives) to one of personal choice. In other words, if a woman is not happy with both career and family, her unhappiness is a direct result of the *choices* that she has made, rather than the structure of the *society* in which she lives. The media seem to

voice this same opinion and offer polling data to support a need to return to more traditional gender roles and values as a defense. For example, a 1989 *New York Times* poll stated that 48% of women felt they “had to sacrifice too much for their gains” and “respondents of both sexes cited children and family life as the primary casualties” (Dow 91). When polls focus on how women are coping with such things as juggling work and family life, the underlying assumption is that it is *still* a woman’s responsibility to have and care for a husband and children. This attitude just reinforces and encourages conventional sexual politics, making established gender roles seem natural and inherent, rather than socially constructed. The problem here is that instead of meeting issues head on, as feminists tended to do, postfeminists *retreated* from sexual politics.

First and second wave feminists made it a point to question gender roles and sexual politics. Those questions were perhaps the most threatening aspect of the feminist movement because they directly challenged patriarchal ideology and the status quo. According to Dow, postfeminist rhetoric *supports* the status quo and “demonstrates the still powerful romanticization of heterosexuality, the nuclear family, and motherhood as well as the disappearance of sexual politics” (91). In “Substantial Women,” Margaret Marshment concurs, saying: “while the law may no longer prevent women from entering certain professions, it might still be argued that if women are predominantly defined as naturally belonging to the domestic sphere, this could function just as effectively to prevent them from seriously pursuing careers” (126). Faludi, in “I’m Not a Feminist but I Play One on TV,” describes the arguments of major postfeminist writers like Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *Who Stole Feminism?* and Katie Roiphe, author of *The Morning After*, as asserting that “sufficient progress has been made and that now should be a time of back-patting and ‘reconciliation with men’” (32). Postfeminists, says Faludi, “aren’t encouraging women to pursue social change, and they certainly aren’t asking men to change. It is a no-risk feminism for a fearful age: just post your achievements, make nice with men, and call it a day” (33). Faludi argues that “while the Roiphes and

the Sommerses claim to be going against the cultural grain, they are really auditioning for the most commonly available, easiest parts to get in the pop culture drama: the roles of the good girls whose opinions are dutifully in line with prevailing prejudice” (37).

Part of the key of any analysis is perspective, and analyzing a TV show like *Ally McBeal* is no exception. When dealing with perspectives on and perceptions of media, an important concept that must be addressed is spectatorship. This thesis shall draw on ideas from Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Janey Place’s “Women in Film Noir,” and Christine Gledhill’s “Pleasurable Negotiations,” to help address the issue of spectatorship. Mulvey’s essay discusses the interweaving of erotic pleasure in film, its meaning, and the central place of the image of woman (587). Her essay is useful for examining the ways in which the visual image of a woman on the screen is used to flatter the patriarchal ego and its unconscious. Place examines ways in which visual media depict women’s sexuality. She describes how women are defined in relation to men and demystifies the myth of the sexually aggressive woman. Her work is helpful in exploring how female sexuality is portrayed on *Ally McBeal*. Mulvey comes right out and flatly states that her goal is to destroy all of the pleasure we get from mainstream film by analyzing the ways in which women are objectified. It is this author’s opinion that it is neither necessary nor fruitful to destroy *all* pleasure through analysis.

While I find many parts of Mulvey’s and Places’ essays very attractive, I also agree with Christine Gledhill, whose complex argument employs the concept of “negotiation,” which “implies the holding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give-and-take” (67). For Gledhill, meaning is neither “imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience” (68). Gledhill feels that while the thoughts of theorists like Mulvey and Place are very useful and that their “ideas are powerful in their attempt to explain alternate misogyny and idealization of cinema’s female representations, they

offer largely negative accounts of female spectatorship. They suggest colonized, alienated or masochistic positions of identification” (66). She feels that “the textual possibilities of resistant or deconstructive reading exist in the processes of the mainstream text” (67).

Like Gledhill, it is not my opinion that women sit passively absorbing all they see on the television; instead, I believe that we resist those things that we find problematic about a text and take pleasure from the parts that we like. This is a key concept to the negotiation theory of spectatorship, as introduced above. However, it may happen that certain attitudes and assumptions are so ingrained that it does not even occur to us that they might not be true—they are never questioned, never threatened. For example, without knowing it, we may fall into a dominant cultural reading, since it is a default position that we take when we are not vigilant. Clearly, not all viewers are constantly prepared to disagree with what they see on their TV screens, and this can be a subversive yet powerful force in determining beliefs and opinions.

This thesis is divided into three inter-related chapters, each dealing with a major theme on *Ally*. Throughout the thesis, I examine aspects of *Ally McBeal* from a feminist perspective, arguing against the postfeminist solutions to women’s issues—solutions the show seems to offer as viable if not necessary. The result will be a questioning of those “attitudes and assumptions” spoken of earlier: a focus on what the show promotes as natural, innate, or ordinary beliefs and opinions, and how these promoted paradigms of thought agree or conflict with feminist/postfeminist ideology.

The first chapter, “Jezebels, Femmes Fatales, and the Good Girl” explores female sexuality as it is portrayed on the show. Our dominant culture gives female sexuality an amazing amount of power. It is assumed that a woman’s sexuality is dangerous to men. The dominant culture tells us that women have the ability to emasculate men, whether they simply reject their sexual advances or try to seduce them. *Ally McBeal* taps into these existing ways of viewing women, particularly with regard to their sexuality.

A good example of how the women on the show are punished for their sexuality can be seen in an incident that occurs while Renee is on a date. In “The Inmates/Ax Murderer” (4-27-98), after a very sexually charged date, Renee is nearly raped and it is portrayed as completely her fault. After Renee physically defends herself and is subsequently punished for it, the underlying message is that she is not the victim here—*he* is. It was Renee’s aggressive sexuality that got her into trouble. In the same episode, Ally’s boss, John Cage, is seduced and subsequently emasculated by another sexually aggressive woman.

According to Faludi in *Backlash*, “the media, the movies, the fashion and beauty industries, have all honored most the demure and retiring child-woman... with a pallid visage, a birdlike creature who stays indoors, speaks in a chirpy small, voice, and clips her wings in restricting clothing” (70). This description fits Ally perfectly; for instance, she frequently wears skirts that are way too short to ever be considered appropriate work attire, never mind appropriate for a courtroom. In “It’s My Party” (10-19-98) she was even held in contempt of court for insisting on wearing these miniskirts. When Ally finds herself attracted to a man, there is usually some visual gag to demonstrate her attraction. Sometimes, like in “The Inmates/Ax Murderer” her head turns into that of a drooling St. Bernard. It is really quite gross when Ally finds herself sexually attracted to someone.

This chapter also explores issues related to race and physical appearance. Renee, the only regular black character on the show, sits on the edge of several different stereotypes of black women. As described above, she is most commonly portrayed as a hypersexual and lascivious woman. Her sexual aggression is a contrast to Ally’s more subtle ways of attracting men. Renee’s physical appearance is also a contrast to Ally’s—in fact, they are opposites. Ally is slender and girlish. Renee, on the other hand, is voluptuous and womanly. Not only do they differ physically, they contrast each other in other ways as well. The two women come from dissimilar backgrounds, and they have different personalities. Even though he has created two diverse characters, Kelley avoids

addressing racial issues. In fact, Ally and Renee have *never* acknowledged the fact that they are from two different races. They have not recognized that their lives are different at all. Kelley has been proudly saying that he is “color blind.” This is problematic because he treats race as if it were not an issue. In this way, he only helps to facilitate racism. Being “color blind” may sound politically correct, but by not interrogating and exploring racial issues, Kelly is not helping to fight racism and raise awareness.

Chapter number two, called “Playing Dress-up: A Little Girl in an Old Boy’s Club,” deals with Ally’s behavior in the workplace. Ally is rarely seen doing any *real* work and frequently plays the child or the bumbling idiot. About half of all the scenes in the show take place in court and at the law offices of Cage and Fish. This is a little odd because the show is supposed to be about this single, working woman, but we don’t see her working all that often. When she is in the office, she does not really work; instead of going through files and reading large volumes of legal proceedings, she deals with personal issues. When we finally do see Ally work, she usually is not very professional. She makes inappropriate comments and throws tantrums. Her arguments in court often bear a striking resemblance to what is going on in her personal life. It is interesting that she usually wins her cases despite her outlandish behavior—somehow she is rewarded in the end.

A good example of Ally’s professional behavior can be seen in “The Inmates/Ax Murderer,” when one of Cage and Fish’s biggest clients has allegedly just hacked her husband to death with a hatchet. The show opens with Ally shrieking and passing out at the crime scene. Her childish behavior gets worse as she calls her client “the killer.” She becomes obsessed with murder mysteries, succumbs to anxiety, and falls down recurrently. She is reluctant to take the case because she is afraid that she will lose her innocence from dealing with criminals. She expresses her preference for “soft core” law. This is in stark contrast to her male colleague who is excited to work on the biggest and most important case of his career—a *murder* case.

In “Theme of Life” (3-9-98), Ally expresses her fear that she will be exposed as a fraud. She feels like she is not a real attorney and she defers her tougher cases to her bosses very frequently. She brings her personal life into the conference room. Her skirts are too short, she is easily distracted and she has dated several of her clients. Ally admits to feeling like a little girl in the conference room—“a little girl playing in an old boy’s club.” Ally is clearly a woman who has little professional confidence or sense of boundaries. It is almost like she just goes to work so she can wear her designer outfits and get attention. In fact, in “Those Lips that Hand” (4-19-99), a comment she makes to John is very telling. While trying to cheer him up, she says “John, we’re not pathetic. Come on. I mean, look at my outfits. And you, you’re a great lawyer.” She obviously does not put much value on her professional aptitude.

My third chapter, “Dependence and Competition: Comic Romance and the Betrayal of Sisterhood,” analyzes the concepts of marriage and family through the eyes of Ally McBeal. This chapter also addresses relationships between the women on the show. Ally and most of the other female characters are obsessed with finding a mate. Ally, in particular, feels that her real life will not be lived out at work, but rather at home with her future husband and children. Her desire to find a man is what defines her. Perhaps one of the most screamingly desperate moments that Ally has had occurs in “Being There” (5-4-98) when she finds out that Billy, (the man she is in love with, the one who got away) and his wife Georgia (a friend of Ally’s) are expecting a baby. Ally is unable to handle the news and acts out in various ways. She has trouble focusing on anything but Georgia’s pregnancy. She has her secretary spy on the couple, and she even hallucinates that the entire office is doing a song and dance number to “Wedding Bell Blues.” She tells Billy that she finds him rude for getting Georgia pregnant. It sure seems like poor Ally does not feel like a whole person without a mate: she practically goes off the deep end when she hears that her ex-boyfriend is expecting to be a father!

The women on the show are sometimes catty and very critical of one another. It seems that the only time they connect is when they are gossiping. Because Ally and the other women on the show are all separated from one another, there is no real sense of female solidarity. With very few exceptions, each woman is left to deal with her own problems by herself. By not showing women dealing with their problems together, as a group, social challenges and hardships are individualized and isolated. From this point it is easy for a particular woman to feel that her problems are of her own making, and due to her own actions or thoughts, rather than arising from society itself. This alienation is postfeminism at work. It is unsurprising that a woman in this position would seek the consolation of a man who can satisfy her emotional needs, and it is precisely this kind of man that Ally seeks, sometimes quite desperately.

CHAPTER I

JEZEBELS, FEMMES FATALES, AND THE GOOD GIRL

The dominant culture sees female sexuality as dangerous to men; whether a woman is seducing a man or rejecting him, her sexuality has the power to emasculate him. Shelia Ruth, author of *Issues in Feminism*, says that “the images of women in our culture are fraught with contradictions” and reminds us that “ambivalence toward a whole range of real and alleged female powers (birth, menstruation, seduction, intuition) expresses itself in a subliminal patriarchal belief that women have a great deal of ‘big magic,’ very much worth having but destined to go awry if not controlled and subdued” (107). In our culture, women are frequently punished for expressing or acting on their sexual desires. It is no different on *Ally McBeal*. The show taps into existing ways of viewing female sexuality.

The media play a large part in how we come to understand our positions in society and how we are expected to behave according to whatever social groups and categories we fall into. We learn lessons from the trials and tribulations of television characters. Sometimes we even learn what we should *buy* and what we should *look like* from the television. As we know, the media often represent people in terms of stereotypes. There is not much room for transcendence of these stereotypes if there is no evidence presented to combat or contradict assumptions about the identities of people in certain social groups. Television, and the mass media in general, capitalizes on these stereotypes, particularly stereotypes concerning gender and race. Capitalizing on stereotypes has a lot to do with patriarchy; the media’s different branches are run by an elite group of white men who have interests to protect. Truly, these men control society; they are subtle and insidious, but nonetheless powerful. In our culture, (as well as in any relationship of dominance) those who subordinate women define women.

In her essay, “Women in Film Noir,” Janey Place examines how visual media portray female sexuality. She points out that “women are defined in *relation* to men, and the centrality of sexuality in this definition is a key to understanding the position of women in our culture” (35). She goes on to argue that “the primary crime the ‘liberated’ woman is guilty of is refusing to be defined in such a way, and this refusal can be perversely seen (in art, or in life) as an attack on men’s very existence” (35). Even though Place’s essay focuses on the virgin/whore binary in film noir, much of her analysis applies to other visual media as well.

Place tells us: “our popular culture functions as myth for our society: it both expresses and reproduces the ideologies necessary to the existence of the social structure” (35). She explains that “the myth of the sexually aggressive woman (or criminal man) first allows sensuous expression of that idea and then destroys it. And by its limited expression, ending in defeat, that unacceptable element is controlled” (36). A woman is allowed to play out the role of a liberated, sexually aggressive person on screen, but depicting her downfall—showing that her aggression isn’t a good idea—insures (as Place says) that it won’t happen in real life: “It is clear that men need to control women’s sexuality in order not to be destroyed by it” (36). As a result, we are shown what happens to a woman who does not conform, cautioning us about the consequences that would happen in real life.

An important issue is “how are we shown?” Place describes how “the meaning of any film image is a complex function of its visual qualities (composition, angles, lighting, screen size, camera movement, etc.), the content of the image (acting, stars, iconography, etc.), its juxtaposition to surrounding images, and the context of the narrative” (42). All of these characteristics come together to describe the complete experience of viewing the film. Place argues that the characteristics can be used to demonstrate power: “the strength of these women is expressed in the visual style by their dominance in composition, angle, camera movement and lighting” (45). Yet, for Place, what power

it grants it can also take away: “the ideological operation of the myth (the absolute necessity of controlling the strong, sexual woman) is thus achieved by first demonstrating her dangerous power and its frightening results, then destroying it” (45). The underlying message here is that the woman’s aggression and sensuality is inappropriate to her station as a woman. Any man must be very careful to control and repress his sexuality around women, lest it consume and destroy him.

Popular culture has a tendency to create stories in which male fears are materialized in the figure of the femme fatale. This sexually aggressive woman must be destroyed, for she represents a danger to the males around her. The femme fatale is not passive, and does not merely respond to the needs and desires of men—on the contrary, she is usually concerned solely with her own best interests. The opposite female archetype, as described by Place, is the good girl: “she offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities” (50). She is very passive and static and is usually only present to support and nurture the hero. She asks for nothing in return but his happiness. If the good girl can support one man, then she can also support patriarchy in general. Her opinions can be obediently in line with prevailing prejudices and assumptions, and her actions can be directed at perpetuating patriarchal values.

The television show *Ally McBeal* treats women’s sexuality in an ambiguous and confused manner. It makes assertions about what women are entitled to, but then turns around and takes its assertions back. The show tries to control women’s sexuality by making an example of “femmes fatales” who are sexually aggressive. As an example, it is striking how the character Renee resembles Janey Place’s woman in film noir. Renee is the only continuing black character on *Ally*. She is almost always portrayed as a “spider woman” with her “strong, dangerous, and above all, exciting sexuality” (Place 36). Renee wears very tight clothing that accentuates her quite large breasts. When she is not doing her day job as a deputy district attorney, she moonlights as a nightclub singer. Renee is intimidating to men, and she often goes after a man she is interested in with striking vigor.

Renee's Date

A good example of how women on *Ally McBeal* are punished for their sexuality can be seen in an incident between Renee and her date, a man named Rivers. In the episode "The Inmates/Ax Murderer," after a very sexually charged date complete with lots of wine, close dancing, and flirting, Renee brings Rivers up to her apartment at the end of the night. He expects to have intercourse with her, but as he advances, Renee repeatedly tells him to stop touching her. After saying "no" several times, Renee slaps him in the face. He then slaps her back, telling her never to hit him, which she promptly responds to by giving him a roundhouse kick to the head, which knocks him out. Ally comes home to find Renee kneeling over him. He is taken away in an ambulance. Place argues that "the iconography of violence (primarily guns) is a specific symbol...of her unnatural phallic power" (45). Renee is a trained kick-boxer; instead of holding a weapon, her unnatural power is located in her body. Perhaps this makes her twice as dangerous as your average femme fatale since she does not even need an external weapon to hurt someone.

The attempted rape scene is shot mostly from a third person position. The action is like a dance: he makes a move, Renee refuses, he advances again, Renee refuses, and then someone gets hurt. The sequence edits back and forth quickly from behind their shoulders, without stopping to look at things from either character's direct perspective. With all this vacillation, it does not seem as if viewers are being positioned to side with either one of them. They each get an almost equal number of camera shots; as a matter of fact, Renee has thirteen and Rivers has eleven. We are not truly encouraged to identify with anyone until Ally comes in, whereupon the camera looks down at Renee from exactly where Ally is standing; however, when the perspective shifts and Renee looks up at Ally, the camera is not where *she* is. Viewers are left open, without a concrete vantage point, until Ally comes in, and then, suddenly, we are positioned solidly and unambiguously with her.

As the EMT wheels Mr. Rivers out on a stretcher, Renee closes the door.

Ally: Well, Renee

Renee: He got all aggressive.

Ally: I know but...

Renee: But what?

Ally: But what are you thinking bringing him here? You barely know the guy!

Renee: He's a patent lawyer. How dangerous could he be?

Ally: Even so.

Renee: Even so what? I can't bring a guy home for coffee without expecting to be mauled?

Ally: I am saying that you can lead a man by the penis, but that's the wrong way to tame him.

Renee: You're defending him.

Ally: Of course I'm not defending him. I am talking about you!

Why are viewers supposed to identify with Ally and not Renee? The obvious reason is that the show is not about Renee. By virtue of the fact that the show is named after Ally, viewers are aware that she is the primary character to be identified with. However, there is also the fact that Ally represents the good girl who follows patriarchal rules for appropriate female behavior; essentially, she is not the femme fatale that Renee is. As Place points out, "it is clear that men need to control women's sexuality. The dark woman of film noir had something her innocent sister lacked: access to her own sexuality (and thus to men's) and the power that this access unlocked" (36). In other words, Renee was dangerous and had to be controlled.

In the scene above, Ally is the voice of reason, the dutiful daughter of patriarchy. Ally, it could be said, is standing in the white male position. Viewers are situated in much the same way as classical Hollywood film positions its viewers, a position which Mulvey describes as one where "the man is on the right side of the law, the woman on the wrong" (593). She continues, describing how

“subjective camera from the point of view of the male protagonist draw the spectators deeply into his position, making them share his uneasy gaze” (593). In the direct confrontation between Renee and Rivers, neither’s eyes are used as the point of view. The dichotomy is not between Renee and Rivers directly, but rather between Ally and Renee.

Viewers compare Ally to Renee and are encouraged to see that Renee is the dangerous deviant. Ally has something to teach Renee about how women should behave. In *Killing Rage*, bell hooks explains that “while superficially appearing to present a portrait of racial and social equality, mass media actually work to reinforce assumptions that black folks should always be cast in supporting roles in relation to white characters. That subordination is made to appear ‘natural’ because most black characters are consistently portrayed as always a little less ethical and moral than whites, not given to rational and reasonable action” (115). It is clear that black women still stand apart from white women. They are still treated as inferior outsiders.

Renee is being objectified by Ally, and Ally is looking at the situation dispassionately, not considering that Renee could have been raped had she not stopped the guy in his tracks by hurting him. Ally focuses on Renee’s behavior and not his, but the truth is that if he had heeded Renee’s protests, he never would have been hurt in the first place. How could his injuries be Renee’s fault? Patriarchal logic would answer my question by saying that Renee is responsible for her date’s sexual response to her. Since she initiated by being “provocative,” anything that results from his attraction to her is her fault. If she didn’t want to have him all over her, she shouldn’t have gone out in the first place, or she shouldn’t have worn such a tight blouse or pants. The patriarchy would say that Renee was obviously “asking for it” and that she acted inappropriately by trying to fight him off after tempting him.

The police that arrest Renee for assault the next morning represent the patriarchal order. The situation with Renee is nothing new and the outcome is predictable. As Place states, “the *femme*

fatale ultimately loses physical movement, influence over camera movement, and is often actually or symbolically imprisoned by composition as control over her is exerted and expressed visually” (45). This is exactly what happens to Renee. Ironically, she is a deputy District Attorney and works very closely with the police. As a result, they do not cuff her when they come to arrest her. However, deputy D.A. or not, Renee must be punished for rebelling and defending herself against her date’s sexual advances. As someone who knows the law and knows her rights, it seems odd that Renee does not charge Rivers with attempted sexual assault. That option is not even mentioned. The resounding message is that Renee is not the victim here—*he* is. The idea that a woman’s behavior tempts men, rendering them incapable of controlling their sexual urges, is perpetuated and reinforced in the treatment of Renee’s near date rape and subsequent incarceration. According to this scenario, rape victims are responsible for their own victimization. Ally, always the good girl, agrees with the patriarchal notion that a woman’s aggressive sexuality gets her into trouble. Indeed, she even ends up admonishing her friend for tempting Rivers:

Ally: The guy was wrong with what he did, but if you don’t take some of the responsibility here, there is something wrong there too.

Renee: Thank you. I’m always here for you and your problems which go on and on and on, but when I need a little support...?

As if the police charges and her friend’s disapproval were not enough punishment for Renee, the next episode, called “Being There,” shows her being brought before the court and sued by the man she assaulted. Ultimately, she avoids prosecution, but not before her entire sexual history (as well as her roommate, Ally’s) is scrutinized before the court. Renee’s attorneys (Ally and John Cage) remind her that she has no defense to speak of, and it is only their skill in the courtroom that will eventually get the case dismissed. When she asks if she could take the stand to defend herself, John

says: “You’d make a lousy witness. You’re hostile...they have a wonderful case and if we chose to put on a defense we might reveal that we don’t have one.”

All things conspire to make Renee out to be the heavy in this situation. Her problem is not seen as a larger social issue, but rather her own individual issue. No one is on her side; no one but Renee is outraged at what is happening to her. Even she is not convinced that she was right, and eventually, under the onslaught of popular opinion, admits that she was wrong:

Ally: It wasn’t self-defense! Now, when are you going to admit that? You weren’t protecting yourself! You hit him out of anger, you beat him up, you almost killed him! This wasn’t self-defense for a second! Now, Renee, you have a problem.

Renee: I’m not going to sit here and listen to you tell me I have a problem!

Ally: Yes you do! I am your best friend and you are going to hear this from me! Now, this sex as a power thing and the way you joke about finding your esteem in your breasts, there’s truth in that and you walk around trying to intimidate men with your sexual aggressiveness and the only guys who respond are the ones you end up with and those are the guys we both know you don’t want. Sexy Renee, look at her strut. Isn’t she fun? It isn’t fun...the reason John Cage didn’t put you up on that stand is that he knows you don’t get it, and *you need to get it, Renee!*

A short time later, Renee admits to Ally that, “Everything you said is true...this thing that happened in here with Rivers, I’ve been waiting my whole life for it. I just thank God I’m ashamed of it.” At this point, any space *within* the narrative that resistant viewers could have occupied completely disappears when Renee gives in, because there is no one left to further the cause. Gledhill says that “the viewing or reading situation affects the meanings and pleasures of a work by introducing into the cultural exchange a range of determinations, potentially resistant or contradictory, arising from the differential social and cultural constitution of readers or viewers – by

class, gender, race, age, personal history, and so on. This is potentially the most radical moment of negotiation, because it is the most variable and unpredictable” (70).

Of course, viewers do not always restrict themselves to being within the narrative; there are other options for reading and negotiating this scene. For example, viewers can stand in opposition to the whole thing by refusing to participate in the narrative at all. One could also watch the scene and construct an alternative to it. A woman may choose to become a different person to enjoy the story and may wind up separating herself from the woman who is sitting there watching the display. In other words, she may choose to reject those parts of herself that object to what she is viewing, and, in doing so, allow herself to better enjoy what she’s watching on the screen. Viewers can also ignore Renee’s recovery and focus instead on how she was before the incident. They may want to remember her as the autonomous and confident woman she used to be. As Janey Place would argue, viewers can ignore the femme fatale’s demise in order to celebrate her power (54). Others may choose to place themselves outside the pleasure in watching while some may abandon any sort of interrogation, analysis or critique. Sadly (and this is a key point), *no one* on the show explicitly questions why Renee should be ashamed of defending herself. No one is outraged that Renee is punished for being assertive and defending her own body. Ally serves as the voice of the patriarchy here, trying to invalidate Renee’s sense of things and to get Renee to see that she was at fault. By treating her as an equal partner in this near-rape, she is no longer a victim. Ally is the good girl, and Renee is the dangerous deviant in this scenario. Viewers are encouraged to look down on Renee.

The situation seems like a cautionary tale: it suggests that sex is a power that women abuse, or do not know how to handle. It gets them into trouble when they try to use it. Women are being discouraged from acting on their sexual impulses. They are being warned about what could happen if things get out of control, and they get angry and attempt to defend themselves. The message is

that men need to have power over women's sexuality; after all, look what happens when women are allowed some control over their own bodies: men get hurt.

What we have here is also a matter of a white woman judging a black woman's sexuality. Renee, the only black regular character on the show, sits on the edge of several different stereotypes of black women. She is most commonly portrayed as a hypersexual and lascivious woman. Renee moonlights as a nightclub singer who sings sexy songs in very tight dresses. She dances with several men at once on the dance floor and sticks her bosom out to make herself feel more confident. At work, Renee wears very low cut suits that show a lot of cleavage. The show's fourth season shows Renee with breasts so big that she looks like a caricature and her blouses are tighter and lower cut than ever. She nearly forces men to ask her out—she makes it seem like going to bed with her would be a sure thing if they would take her out on a date. Her sexual aggression is a contrast to Ally's much more subtle ways of attracting men.

Renee's physical appearance is also a contrast to Ally's—in fact, they are almost complete opposites. Ally is thin and childlike, with practically nonexistent breasts, fine features, stringy light brown hair, green eyes and light skin. Renee, on the other hand, is an ample-breasted, medium-dark skinned, wild kinky-haired woman with African features. The two women provide contrast and structure, and are inherently juxtaposed by virtue of their living together as roommates. Collins points out that “blue-eyed, blonde, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—black women with classical African features of dark, skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair” (79).

Patricia Hill Collins observes that “black women's portrayal as the Other persists. Particular meanings, stereotypes, and myths can change, but the overall ideology of domination itself seems to be an enduring feature of interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression” (78). Diane Richardson describes how, “historically, black women have been portrayed as highly sexed,

lascivious and promiscuous” (155). Richardson also says that the racist notions about black women’s primordial sexuality rest on the assumption that black people—women in particular—are closer to nature, and more animalistic (155). The treatment of Renee is reminiscent of the dominant ideology of the slave era, which fostered the creation of four interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of black women. These images or stereotypes are the *Mammy*, the *Matriarch*, the *Welfare Mother* and the *Jezebel*. For Collins, each of these reflects a way in which the dominant class can subordinate the black woman through her sexuality (80). Collins explains that the Jezebel image started in the slave era, with the “sexually aggressive wet nurse” (Collins 80). She plays the whore, the sexually aggressive woman, the central nexus of elite white male images to control black womanhood. As Collins describes it, “Jezebel’s function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men typically reported by Black slave women” (77).

Despite the characters’ contrasting backgrounds, personalities and appearances, Kelley manages to steer the dialogue away from racial issues. In fact, Ally and Renee *never* talk about the color of their skin, or about ways in which their lives differ. In her book, *Killing Rage*, bell hooks explains how “most television shows suggest via the liberal dialogues that occur between white characters, or racially integrated casts, that racism no longer serves as a barrier” (111). Kelley has stated that he is “color blind,” which may seem politically correct, but by treating race as a non-issue, he only helps to perpetuate racism—awareness is not raised one bit. Ally’s relationship with Renee could provide a forum, or fertile ground, for feminist consciousness-raising between a black woman and a white woman; they could compare differences and similarities in their experiences. As bell hooks says in *Killing Rage*, “for the most part television and movies depict a world where blacks and whites coexist in harmony although the subtext is clear; this harmony is maintained because no one really moves from the location white supremacy allocates to them on the sex-race hierarchy” (113).

Sadly, the show's creators, who seem to prefer a more stereotyped approach to Renee, continually neglect this possibility.

Renee is a deputy District Attorney, but her experiences as a black woman in a male dominated profession are neglected in virtually all storylines. This would be a great opportunity to explore black women's experiences, as they live both apart from and within dominant culture, but the writers of this show assume that racism is over, and that Renee's being black has absolutely nothing to do with her life. This fact corresponds with the Mammy stereotype. The Mammy is the faithful and devoted black female domestic servant who is dedicated to the nurturance of the white family. Likewise, Renee's main function on the show is to bring Ally back to earth and scold her for being such a lunatic. She serves as a mother figure to Ally, and, indeed, in most scenes where we see Renee, she is at home, supporting Ally in her latest crisis. This is not something that is specific to *Ally McBeal*; as hooks argues in *Killing Rage*, "mass media consistently depict black folks either as servants or in subordinate roles, a placement which still suggests that we exist to bolster and caretaker the needs of whites" (114). Ally is very rarely seen giving Renee any support or nurturance in return. Therefore, not only does Renee fit the Jezebel image, but she fits the Mammy image as well.

In "Theme of Life" we see the two images conflate when Renee counsels Ally on how to avoid getting nervous when she is around a man she likes. She tells Ally that she locates her esteem in her bosom when she is nervous, because that is what men go for first. She then advises Ally to do the same:

Renee: When I'm nervous I just stick my breasts out.

Ally: Excuse me?

Renee: Not really, but in my mind. Men go for my breasts before they get to know me, so, to feel more self-confident, I just locate my esteem right there in my bosom. It's stupid but it works.

Therefore, we see that not only does she support Ally and give her advice, but she also locates her power in her sexuality and encourages Ally to do the same. This is what patriarchy would like to do—control black women by giving them a sort of exoticized, evil or threatening power through their sexuality, and, in doing so, obfuscate white male desire for the black woman by blaming it on the black woman's hypersexual nature. This power is perceived as threatening to men and has been used to justify black women's subordination. Perhaps this is what some black women have internalized, having been told for generations that they are very sexually dangerous. Perhaps this is what she has to share with the white woman: the use of sexuality as a power to manipulate men. After all, this is the only form of power black women are allowed to possess or use in this culture. It would seem that racism is still an issue since these stereotypes are so present and accepted by mass culture. Perhaps society as a whole has internalized these ideological assumptions, and still sees them as natural truths about black women. A better approach to the character of Renee, in my opinion anyway, would be for her to locate her power in, well—I don't know—her *mind* maybe?

In a scene from "The playing field" (3-16-98), with Ally's therapist, Dr. Tracey, who is played by Tracey Ullman, we see Renee on the dance floor, breasts prominently projected in the faces of several men dancing around her. Tracey points out Renee's behavior as a positive thing, saying that Renee knows how to use her sexuality as a power to get what she wants. In this scene, it appears that Renee wants sexual attention from many men:

Tracey: You can't stand being liked for your sex appeal and you can't stand *not* being liked for it. Look at your friend out there. Now *she's* in charge. She uses her sex appeal as a power—she knows she's got it, she uses it, and she gets what she wants!

Ally: And that makes us stronger, using sex as a power?

Tracey: Of course sex is a power, and it's ours! The problem with you is you just assume it's the man's playing field when it's ours.

Therefore, white women are encouraged right alongside their black counterparts to be sexual and locate their esteem in their bodies. As Richard Dyer, author of “White” sees it, one of the most available models of femininity in classic Hollywood film is that of what Ethel Mannin describes as the “superfemale” (56). This “superfemale” is excessively ambitious and smart for the docile role that society has decreed she play (56). However, Dyer agrees with Mannin, and says that the feminine and flirtatious “superfemale” turns her energies on those around her “with demonic results” (56). This is a bit sketchy to me—whose interests are being served when women are to think of sex as a key to power and success? Who would be more than happy to be manipulated sexually by a woman sticking her breasts out? Umm, could it be...heterosexual men?

I think that many black women would resist identifying with many aspects of Renee’s character. The first and most obvious reason to reject Renee would be the fact that her character is written and created by a white man. She is also a subordinate character and she is more of a stereotype of a black woman than a realistic representation of one. As bell hooks says in her book *Black Looks*, “Conventional representations of black women have done violence to the image. Responding to this assault, many black women spectators shut out the image, looked the other way, accorded cinema no importance in their lives” (120). Obviously, we need a new model of black womanhood.

Postfeminist discourse tries to convince us, as Katie Roiphe does in *The Morning After*, that “feminists are institutionalizing female weakness” (74). According to postfeminists, one way that feminists are encouraging women to see themselves as victims is in their treatment of rape. Roiphe says, “everyone agrees that rape is a terrible thing, but we don’t agree on what rape is” (54). She feels that everyone is different and that “there is always a gray area in which someone’s rape may be another person’s bad night” (54). Roiphe charges feminism with making a big deal out of rape. She says that trying to empower women by warning them about rape and giving them strategies to

protect themselves against attacks is just encouraging women to be afraid of men, afraid to go out at night, and afraid to trust anyone.

Roiphe argues that “if date rape is as destructive as many feminists would have us believe, if women’s lives really are *always* shattered by physically or emotionally forced sex, or intoxicated sex, then rape does become a crime comparable to murder” (74). The situation with Renee closely resembles postfeminist discourse on the topic of date rape. As Roiphe sees it, “the question is not whether people pressure each other, but how that pressure is transformed in our mind and culture into full-blown assault” (69). Postfeminists would see *both* Renee and Rivers as victims of feminist discourse. Renee, they would say, has been brainwashed by feminists into thinking that any unwanted sexual attention is equal to rape, which she must defend herself against. They would say that poor Rivers was on the receiving end of all the fear and anger (born of feminist ideology) that Renee had built up over the years. Remember that Renee admitted to Ally that she had been waiting her whole life for what happened with Rivers and that she was glad she was ashamed of it.

Roiphe goes on to say that “‘rape’ becomes a catchall expression, a word used to define everything that is unpleasant and disturbing about relations between the sexes” (80). Feminists, on the other hand, insist that “no means no” and that any further unwanted sexual advances can be considered to be rape. Postfeminist rhetoric mirrors antifeminist sentiment that places the blame on the victim for being misguided or overly sensitive in her interpretation of a man’s affectionate overtures. It sounds a lot like a backlash against the gains that feminists have made in the fight against sexual assault. Roiphe calls for more of us to distinguish between rape and “bad sex” (82).

Susan Faludi describes postfeminist writers like Katie Roiphe and Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *Who Stole Feminism?* as women who are trying to win fame and notoriety for themselves instead of trying to fight for womankind. Faludi argues that “while the Roiphes and Sommerses claim to be going against the cultural grain, they are really auditioning for the most commonly

available, easiest parts to get in the pop culture drama: the roles of the good girls whose opinions are dutifully in line with prevailing prejudice” (37). One might even say that they are auditioning for the part of Ally McBeal.

John and Myra

In another incident, we see how one woman’s sexual advances hurt and humiliate one of Ally’s bosses, John Cage. In the episode “Girls Night Out” (10-30-00), John defends a female client named Myra. A male employee who worked with Myra is suing her for sexual harassment. Apparently, the employee had engaged in intercourse with Myra on several previous occasions until, one day, she made a sexual advance toward him and he quit his job, saying that he was sexually harassed. While he was on the stand, he called her an “unabashed sexual predator.” Myra, when it becomes her turn on the stand, defends herself this way:

Myra: Since I was about sixteen almost every man I’ve ever met has wanted to sleep with me.

Renee: And you’re proud of that.

Myra: I’m proud that I’ve never used it as currency, yes. But, when I meet a man who I want to be with, I have no problem asking just like I’ve been asked thousands of times and just like all those times I’ve been free to say no—so are they.

John: That was an excellent response. I’d like my client to repeat it just in case any of the jurors missed it.

Clearly, Myra has no problem making sexual advances. She seems very self-confident and comfortable around men. That night, Myra seduces John in his office. The following day in court, in his closing statement, John defends Myra passionately:

John: Women have been sexually victimized for hundreds of years. Men haven’t. Men are physically dominant. Women aren’t. Women battle daily the bigotry of being reduced

to sexual objects. Men don't. It's different. And here's the other reality: we may all want to be too politically correct to admit it but when a woman like that sexually propositions a man like me, uh, him, do we really think of him as harassed? ... He is in here rolling the dice with this ridiculous lawsuit because he figures you'll condemn her, not because he was really harassed. Please! He knows you know he wasn't. But because he also knows sexually forward women are scorned by this society. The man is Don Juan. The woman is a slut. The guy is prolific. The woman is a tramp. We do not approve of women who want sex.... This country puts the scarlet letter on women who lead with their libidos. We discriminate against them...

John says all of this very angrily, with passion and seriousness as he denounces the way society treats women. Later, when he asks the client out on a date, she rejects him, saying that she was just looking for a good time in bed and not a relationship. This rejection hurts and humiliates John terribly. This woman is portrayed as emasculating John in two ways. First, she seduces him into making a pro-feminist argument in court. Second, she rejects him, which is humiliating and emasculating because men are supposed to have the power to control the course of a relationship, not the other way around.

Myra has taken the masculine role. She is another version of the film noir spider woman or femme fatal that Janey Place describes. She is sensual, active and ambitious. Instead of wanting to steal John's money or kill him, she takes his masculinity. Place points out that for the femme fatale, "independence is her goal, but her nature is fundamentally and irredeemably sexual in film noir. The insistence on combining the two (aggressiveness and sensuality) in a consequently dangerous woman is the central obsession..." (46). Even though *Ally McBeal* is not film noir, some of the elements of the dangerous woman are present and active, and Myra was certainly one of them.

Viewers love John. He is a quirky and adorable character who would never hurt anyone. He takes great pains to see that feelings are spared and that anyone who comes to him for help and advice receives his best assistance. John stutters and has nervous ticks. He is very quirky and his insecurities around the opposite sex are endearing and charming. John actually has to pretend that he is Barry White in order to help work up the courage to even approach a woman to ask her out on a date. No one is as sweet and innocent as John. When a character like Myra comes along and hurts him, viewers will turn around and hate her. She makes some good points about feeling free to ask men to go to bed with her. However, when she hurts a man like John, everything she says goes out the window and she is seen as simply a bitch and a slut. Myra is set up to look vicious. John is hurt to make Myra and women like her seem predatory and dangerous. As Place says “self-interest over devotion to a man is often the original sin of the film noir woman and metaphor for the threat her sexuality represents to him” (47). Since she was aggressive and sensual, Myra’s character was not allowed to simply enlist the services of the law firm of Cage and Fish; instead, her character had to be portrayed in such a way as to have negative connotations and motives as well.

Ally’s crushes

Of course, Ally’s perpetual loneliness is not due to her lack of passion: when Ally finds herself attracted to a man, there is usually some visual gag to demonstrate her infatuation. Sometimes, like in “The Inmates/Ax Murderers,” her head turns into that of a giant, drooling St. Bernard. Other times, a gross-looking wet tongue rolls out of her mouth and hits the table or runs down to the floor. When Ally is attracted to someone, you can pretty much count on something disgusting happening. Of course, no one but the viewer is privy to the quick, fantastical scene as it flashes by.

If there is no sight gag, then Ally is punished in some other way. Sometimes she is terribly embarrassed, other times the man sees through her and forces her to admit she was flirting. Ally

often blunders a seduction attempt by falling down or saying the wrong thing. On other occasions, Ally is rejected, abandoned, or blown off. In “The Inmates/Ax Murderer” Ally meets a handsome young attorney named Bobby Donnell for the first time. As he and his partner come out of the elevator at the law offices of Cage and Fish, Ally happens to be rushing by and smashes into Bobby. Papers fly into the air and Ally falls to the floor. As Bobby helps her up, he introduces himself to Ally. Ally stutters and introduces herself as “Ally Donnell...ah, ah, McBeal, Ally McBeal.” The scene goes by so quickly that it is easy to miss some of the more subtle things that happen. Almost all of this is shot from a third person perspective. The only person we seem to be positioned with is Bobby’s partner, Eugene. Eugene looks down his nose at Ally. His look can be explained by the fact that he is reluctant to work with Cage and Fish because he thinks all the lawyers there are crazy. In his eyes, this incident with Ally falling down and introducing herself as Ally Donnell is just another fine example of the sort of lunatic behavior that goes on at this firm. He looks at her with suspicion simply because she is a lawyer at Cage and Fish. Eugene’s reaction to her may also serve as a way to cue the audience that her behavior is comical or strange, just in case they were unsure.

From the viewer’s perspective, Ally seems foolish, fumbling, childish and klutzy. Eugene clearly thinks she is, but even though we agree with his assessment, we are not positioned with him. Viewers know that he simply does not understand how the folks at Cage and Fish operate. We know that he is confused because if we side with Eugene, then we are forced to judge Ally. If we occupy that position, then we are also being judged as the wrong audience for the show. We slide out of Eugene’s position and instead, pass judgment on *him* for not understanding the crazy behavior at Cage and Fish. In this way, spectators are positioned with Ally, but not through camera angles.

This is a television show that is difficult to follow if you do not view it regularly. Viewers need to know the characters pretty well in order to notice some of the more subtle jokes and to fully appreciate the story lines. It is almost like a soap opera in that it requires regular viewing and some

level of emotional investment from its audience. Fans of the show are positioned with Ally and identify with her in situations like the one described above because they know her so well. Viewers understand Ally and know what she is thinking. When she has an attractive single guy standing in front of her (and we know that she is constantly husband hunting) we also know that she is nervous and planning her wedding even as she introduces herself to him. The humor in this situation comes from the fact that she makes a fool of herself. Who has not looked silly in front of someone they had been trying to impress? However, the underlying message is that she is being too eager and should have just stayed quiet.

Bobby seems intrigued by Ally, maybe even enchanted by her. Perhaps her physical appearance distracts him from her odd behavior. However, he is easily distracted from Ally when Richard, Ally's boss, swoops in. Bobby almost forgets to acknowledge that Ally is still standing there. Ally is not invited into the conference room and the three men go off together to do business. Laura Mulvey says: "The presence of a woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (589). Ally is a more active presence in the scene with Bobby Donnell than simply a silent entity—it would be hard to stop the action more effectively than slamming into someone and acting like an idiot. Bobby has an enraptured look in his eye as he gazes down at her, so, apparently, she was successful at capturing his attention.

Inevitably, Ally is punished for getting her hopes up about a possible male companion. When she makes the first move and kisses Bobby Donnell in "Being There," she is punished with rejection. He puts her on what she calls "lay away" and explains to her that he is not looking for a relationship right now. Ally pouts and walks off with her head down. In a recent episode called "The Last Virgin" (11-20-00), Ally dates two men at the same time. She is punished for not being monogamous by the plot device of having the men be father and son, a coincidence that leads to a

very embarrassing situation for all involved. The father and son actually decide to compete for her attention and pressure her to choose which one she wants to date, and this causes problems in all three of their relationships. Of course, the show frames the situation as being completely her fault. She was irresponsible and sluttish enough to try to date two men at once and now must face the consequences of a damaged relationship between a father and son. Sadly, the show does not point out how unfair it is of the men to force her to choose between them in the first place. After all, Ally is pretty innocent in all of this since she had no idea they were related, and it is certainly acceptable male behavior to date multiple women concurrently.

When a man could be “the one,” Ally fantasizes about being a bride, sometimes seeing herself as a mannequin in a wedding gown as she walks by a store window or trying on the man’s last name. Ally’s relationships are often disappointing and she behaves pathetically when they are over; it is all part of her punishment. Throughout the second season, Ally hallucinates about a dancing baby. In the third and fourth seasons, she resorts to throwing tantrums and being very erratic when her heart inevitably gets broken.

Whenever Ally behaves more like Renee (which is to say, being forward with men, asking them out on dates and generally not guarding her “virtue”) she is turned down quickly. Both Ally and Renee manage to get the attention that they crave, but it is fleeting and only temporary. Janey Place’s essay describes how women are allowed to play the temptress on screen and then punished for their behavior by the end of the story. This is done as a way to try to avoid having it happen in real life. If men and women watching the show see what happens to women when they deviate from accepted female norms, then the hope is that both sexes will do their best to prevent it from really occurring.

On *Ally Mc Beal* and in society in general, a woman who is comfortable with her sexuality is seen as a slut. A woman's sexual desire is thought of as grotesque and a woman who makes the first move with a man is inappropriate. The show does nothing to counteract this popular belief.

Physical appearance

According to Faludi in *Backlash*, "the media, the movies, the fashion and beauty industries, have all honored the demure and retiring child-woman...with a pallid visage, a birdlike creature who stays indoors, speaks in a chirpy small voice, and clips her wings in restrictive clothing" (70). Faludi's description suits Ally in many ways. The actress that plays Ally McBeal is skinny and child-sized. She is even thinner than most fashion models and actresses, and has been accused of being anorexic by the tabloids and some entertainment magazines. She has the "pallid visage" that Faludi speaks of, and she is a "birdlike creature who stays indoors." Ally has even explicitly stated that she has the "good sense to stay out of the sun" because it causes wrinkles.

Ally demonstrates what Mulvey refers to as "to-be-looked-at-ness" (589). This is when "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (589). Women in the media are often chopped up and displayed like meat in a butcher's window. It happens on television all the time, so often that it is barely even noticeable. It is a commonplace occurrence. *Ally McBeal* does not do anything to change the objectification of women. You would think that things would be different since the show is directed at a female audience, but it is not, because women are accustomed to looking at other women from a man's perspective. We are encouraged to look at each other as a bunch of body parts. We are even encouraged to look at *ourselves* as a bunch of parts. One scene in an episode shows the women in Ally's firm sitting in a row in court with their legs crossed and their hands in their laps. The camera is positioned under the table so that the audience can see their legs all in a row. In another scene, we see a close up of Ally's legs coming down the stairs at work. She is looking through some papers, but we do not notice the

papers. In this scene, as Mulvey would see it, “traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator...” (590). Ally is not functioning as an active character: she is a mere object despite the fact that she is working.

Ally is known for her long and lean legs and she frequently wears mini-skirts that restrict her professional success. She has been admonished for her attire on numerous occasions: In “It’s My Party” she was even held in contempt of court for insisting on wearing such short skirts to work—she couldn’t possibly be a very good lawyer from a jail cell. Ally’s legs are occasionally the topic of conversation between men and women on the show as well as in entertainment magazines. It seems that folks would much rather talk about her legs and her little outfits than her politics.

In this way, Ally and the female characters on the show are objectified. There are close ups of their legs and other camera shots that show body parts, without showing faces. The women on the show wear sexy outfits, and are very attractive, thus posing an even stronger temptation for men. This level of temptation provides a powerful motivation to punish and control these women. How dare they be smart, beautiful, *and* comfortable with their sexuality?

In short, the show makes frequent attempts to harness and control the female characters’ sexuality by punishing and humiliating them when they step out of line. None of the characters are above these repercussions, and there are absolutely no alternative outcomes portrayed.

CHAPTER 2

PLAYING DRESS-UP: A LITTLE GIRL IN AN OLD BOY'S CLUB

In 1963, with the publication of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, millions of American housewives found a way to describe the dissatisfaction they felt with their domestic lives. Friedan's book set off a change in our culture and helped to start the second wave of feminism. It documented how many women's lives were unfulfilling because they were restricted to working at home, raising children and taking care of their husbands. Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Gregg Lee Carter point out that for the white middle-class, "the dreams of many young women were to have a house in the suburbs with a two-car garage and a white picket fence, and to be caring for the family on a full-time basis" (xiii). This dream of being a housewife was so prevalent, say Hesse-Biber and Carter, that the dissatisfaction women experienced seemed to be what Betty Friedan calls 'a problem with no name'" (xiii).

The white middle-class women who *did* work in those days usually occupied very low-paying secretarial and clerical positions. Some women kept their jobs until they got married and they certainly were not expected and did not themselves expect to work after they had children. Back then, no one considered the possibility that women might want or need advanced degrees, special training, or a chance to get ahead—after all, they were all eventually going to become housewives. As Hesse-Biber and Carter point out, "the assumption was that the father would provide the economic means to support this traditional lifestyle, which was the model of family life that young girls aspired to" (xiii).

After Friedan's book and the change in consciousness it created, life began to change for American women. Second wave feminists fought hard to win the right to equal opportunities, advancements, and rewards for performance at work. They battled over gender discrimination and

made sure that laws like the 1962 Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the 1962 Civil Rights Act were enforced to prevent women from becoming victims of workplace sex discrimination. Second wave feminists tried to change the cultural attitudes concerning women's ability to do "men's work" and struggled to help women gain equal access to professional employment.

What we have today is evidence that the hard work done by second wave feminists was successful, at least to some degree. As Hesse-Biber and Carter describe it, "today in our classrooms are the daughters and granddaughters of women from the feminine mystique decade. Many do not appear to be bound by the traditional role of housewife" (xiv). Hesse-Biber and Carter have also found that:

Female students around the country report that they expect to have careers in the professions and management, and that they look forward to good pay, high status, and rapid advancement. Few students report that they expect at age 40 to be working as a secretary or clerk with a low ceiling on pay and no chances for promotion. They expect to go on for an advanced degree. They intend to work hard and assume that in doing so, they will be rewarded with rank and earnings commensurate with their education, training, and ability. (xv)

Clearly, the women's movement still has work to do. For example, even with all the progress the women's movement has made, on average women still make only about 70 percent of what men do (Hesse-Biber and Carter 87). Susan Faludi asks that if women have made so much progress, then "why are nearly 75 percent of full-time working women making less than \$20,000 a year, nearly double the male rate... Why does the average working woman's salary still lag as far behind the average man's as it did twenty years ago?" (xiii). It looks a lot like gender discrimination and sexual harassment continue to be problems for women and it is still assumed that even if a woman *does* work outside the home, she shoulders all the domestic responsibilities. Hesse-Biber and Carter tell

us that “what most studies seem to confirm is that the division of labor in the household is far from equitable” (180). It is even thought that professional women automatically conduct themselves in a very gendered way. They are assumed to be the nurturers—the emotional, empathic and sensitive workers in the office. Margaret Marshment points out in her essay, “Substantial Women,” that for women who contravene gender stereotyped behavior there may be difficulties in a culture that “defines femininity in terms of passivity, gentleness and powerlessness, and has available negative stereotypes for women who transgress this definition—bitch, virago, etc.—in other words, non-feminine women” (35).

The Atmosphere at Cage and Fish

The atmosphere at Cage and Fish is very unrealistic. Ally is an associate there, but she never seems to be too concerned with making partner. As we know, law firms hire associates with the understanding that if they do not make partner in a few years, they lose their jobs. Of course, they hire more young lawyers than they have partnership positions, so it is certain that at least a few people will be without permanent jobs. This situation normally makes for an intensely competitive environment. Certainly, lawyers under that kind of pressure would not pass cases off to one another and support each other when the going gets tough, right? Well, where Ally works, no one seems to care about making partner, particularly not Ally. Instead, what we have is an office full of young attorneys who share cases, trade cases, go to one another for advice, date each other, and go out dancing together every night after work. They are a very tightly knit group; they behave more like a family than a law firm. In fact, the only competition that goes on in Ally’s workplace is between the women who are competing for men—not promotions.

The cases that Cage and Fish take on are usually relationship-oriented. They deal with many traditional “women’s issues”: broken hearts, husband/boyfriend/wife stealing, divorce and other marital battles, sexual harassment, broken friendships, romantic betrayal, and so on. Most of their

cases involve sexual harassment, but Cage and Fish do not usually defend established sexual harassment laws. Instead, it is usually argued by Cage and Fish that sexual harassment laws make women look like victims and just provide a way for litigious and opportunistic women (and some men) to take advantage of an unnecessary body of laws.

We rarely see Ally doing any real work. If the show is supposed to be about a professional woman, why is it that we never see her doing any work? Half of all the scenes in the show take place in court and at the law offices of Cage and Fish. When she is in the office, she usually runs around gossiping, or friends stop in to visit her, or she abuses her secretary, or deals with personal issues. In court, as Ginia Bellafante points out, “she manages to work references to her mangled love life into nearly every summation she delivers” (2). Ally throws tantrums, physically attacks strangers as well as colleagues, and dates her clients. Michael Epstein states: “for Ally, the law and lawyering is an outlet for her emotional turmoil and her sexual fantasy” (38). Yet, even though she puts little effort into her cases and behaves like a fool in court, she somehow manages to win. Bellafante concurs, saying that “when Ally gets any work done, how she keeps her job, why she thinks it’s OK to ask her secretary why she didn’t give her a birthday present—these are all mysteries” (2). Nothing in Ally’s world makes sense; Epstein tells us that “proudly, she declares herself and her profession to be ‘anti-sense’” (38).

Ally McBeal compared to Mary Richards

Ally McBeal has been compared to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the standard by which many “single working woman” shows are still being judged today. In the 1970’s, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* certainly had political potential. In her book, *Prime Time Feminism*, Bonnie J. Dow includes a detailed analysis of *Mary Tyler Moore*. She describes how the show “created important parameters for future television discourse representing feminism” (26). These parameters include a focus on working women, the depiction of women’s lives without male partners, and the living of a “feminist

lifestyle.” As Dow states, “at the very least, *Mary Tyler Moore* liberated single-woman sitcoms from narratives dominated by husband hunting, charming incompetence and/or troublemaking, or widowed motherhood” (34). “After less than a season,” states Philip Kingston, “Ally McBeal is firmly installed as the Mary Tyler Moore of the Nineties, save that Ally would never wear sensible shoes to the office. Where Mary fought on the seventies feminist frontier, Ally tries to tell a dirty joke to the guys” (1). *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is considered to be the first television show that featured the influence of the feminist movement, and it trained audiences to see the white, working, heterosexual woman as the paradigmatic form for feminist representation.

There are many disparities between Mary and Ally; if Mary Richards was the feminist icon of the 70’s, Ally is the postfeminist icon of the 90’s/2000’s. The two shows represent a continuation of the same cultural theme: Mary riding the crest of the feminist movement, and Ally detailing its ebb in the postfeminist era. The characteristics they have in common show us that there is indeed a backlash against the women’s movement evident in *Ally McBeal*. Surprisingly, there are aspects of Ally that are not as feminist as some of the characteristics of Mary Richards.

Dow points out that “even when a woman fills a ‘man’s’ job, she does not cease to be a woman, and the gender role expectations that are a part of every woman’s life, to varying degrees, do not disappear” (38). These gender role expectations dictate that a woman be a child-like, nurturing, submissive, supportive, and sensitive helpmate to men. Dow uses specific examples from episodes of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to demonstrate how the creators blended “new woman” with “domestic woman” by turning the “woman’s place” from a matter of location to a matter of function. For example, Mary’s function at work was quite gendered, as she spent a lot of time nurturing, negotiating, facilitating and submitting her own needs and desires to keep her workplace “family” together. Dow argues that “within her family of co-workers, Mary functions in the

recognizable roles of idealized mother, wife, and daughter—roles familiar from decades of reinforcement in popular culture generally and sitcom specifically” (40).

Unlike Mary, who plays the wife/mother/daughter role in her workplace family, Ally plays the child-like character, prone to emotional outbursts and impulsive actions. She physically attacks her co-workers, makes announcements about her personal life at conference meetings and often finds herself in trouble and in need of rescuing by her boss, John. Mary’s boss, Lou Grant, was a paternal figure, but Mary had roles other than Lou’s “daughter.” Ally’s *primary* role at work is that of the child. Dow describes Mary’s relationship with Lou this way: “the paternal role that Lou Grant plays in relation to Mary Richards and her submission to his authority on both personal and private matters demonstrate the perseverance of patriarchal relationship patterns in *Mary Tyler Moore*” (41). In this way, Ally and John’s relationship is very similar.

In “Those Lips that Hand,” Ally makes a rather disturbing comment to John. In an effort to comfort him she says, “John, we’re not pathetic. Come on. I mean, look at my outfits. And you, you’re a great lawyer.” She does not put much value on her professional life and she clearly sees John as an authority figure. There is some paternalism implicit in the way they interact. She focuses on her superficial qualities while paying John a professional compliment. She frequently defers her tougher cases to John—remaining on the case, she relinquishes her control and lets John do the work.

Dow goes on to say that “Mary consistently seeks Lou’s approval and goes to him for advice on personal and professional matters while Lou, in turn, guides and protects her” (41). *Ally McBeal* shows the same pattern, and neither character seems to want it to change. In fact, there is a strong familial bond between Ally and John and they seem to fall into their roles naturally. For example, in “Making Spirits Bright” (12-14-98), Ally hallucinates that a unicorn is standing in her office. John is the first person she goes to when there is a crisis in her life, and this is no exception. He senses that

she is seeing something and having her hallucinations again and he counsels her. Ally admits to believing in unicorns and all they represent and swears that the ones she has seen in her lifetime are real. She has even petted unicorns before. She wonders if she is just being silly since everyone else seems to think that she's nuts for having such romantic and fantastical notions in her head. John's words to her are gentle and encouraging: "The world is no longer a romantic place. Some of its people still are, however, and therein lies the promise. Don't let the world win, Ally McBeal." John's paternal advice encourages Ally to stay innocent and romantic.

Ally's two male bosses, Richard Fish and John Cage, frequently bail her out of the countless uncomfortable situations that she creates for herself. Sometimes Renee comes to her rescue, but she usually has John and/or Richard with her. The show suggests that it is only natural that the men would handle the legal stuff even though Ally and Renee are both lawyers. In scenes when Ally is being rescued, it seems that the audience is being positioned to identify with John and Richard to look down on Ally. She is usually pouting and being very bitchy with them after a few hours in jail.

Ruth Shalit, in her essay entitled "Ally, Dharma, Ronnie and the Betrayal of Postfeminism," describes the new working girl shows such as *Ally McBeal*. To these women, "a job is a lifestyle accoutrement, a crisp stratagem to make themselves more attractive. Ally McBeal is 'a good lawyer,' she just had to follow her boyfriend to law school" (Shalit 3). Didn't Mary Richards start her career to get away from her boyfriend? That's quite a difference in motive, especially when looked at from a feminist perspective: "TV's first generation of single-girl adventurers preached that you could be single and still be a whole person; that you didn't need a husband to have a complete life" (Shalit 2). Ally, on the other hand, just hears her biological clock tick-tocking away and she does not take her job nearly as seriously as Mary Richards did. Her anxiety about being unmarried and childless even causes her to hallucinate about a dancing baby: "it's not just a baby, Renee. It dances, it wiggles, it struts around." It taunts her and distracts her even as she attempts to articulate an argument in

court. Essentially, Ally is far from feeling that she has a complete life. If the central question in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was “will she make it on her own,” the question in *Ally McBeal* is “will she ever make it to the altar?”

Ally's Insecurities

Ally often feels inadequate, as she does in “Theme of Life.” She feels like she is not truly cut out to be a lawyer, and that eventually her incompetence will be revealed: “this is kind of a real case Renee, with a real client. I am representing a doctor, and I think that I’m afraid that I’m going to be exposed as a fraud, like I’m not a real attorney. And I really think that I’m losing my mind and I can’t lose my mind right now.” Ally seems to insist on seeing herself as a confused schoolgirl, saying she feels like “a little girl playing in an old boy’s club.” In one episode, she refuses to participate in a meeting with the partners and a client in the conference room, informing Richard, her boss, “I have a problem in conference room meetings. I just get insecure...I feel like the clients look at me like a little girl.” When asked to defend an accused prostitute, she exclaims, “I can’t go to criminal court. I’m afraid of criminals.” She states, “I like being a mess. It’s who I am.” Her emotional tumult defines her. In “One Hundred Tears Away” (10-20-97), even her secretary, Elaine, says “she’s two-thirds of a Rice Krispie Treat. She’s already snapped, and crackled, and she’s ready for the final pop.” On the other hand, Mary was the calm, collected mother figure, working hard to keep everyone happy. Mary would get upset at the unwitting (and also sometimes witting) misogyny of Lou Grant, but instead Ally blandly accepts sexism, saying: “we’re women. We have double standards to live up to.”

Ally’s colleagues frequently attempt to use Ally’s femininity for their own ends. After Ally informs Richard that she doesn’t want to participate in a particular meeting, Richard explains that she will be there “as estrogen.” Her mission will be to flirt with the opposing lawyer, who is a lesbian, and the male opposing counsel, who is a womanizer. “In a pinch,” says Richard, “I was

hoping you could flirt with both.” She protests because, of course, she is afraid to go into the conference room. A sight gag shows Ally envisioning herself as a little girl, shrinking into a great big conference room chair.

Ally does not play the role of the child with John exclusively; in “The Inmates/Ax Murderer,” one of Cage and Fish’s biggest clients has allegedly just hacked her husband to death with a hatchet. The show begins with Ally shrieking and passing out at the crime scene. When her client appears, Ally exclaims “there’s the killer!” and, shrieking, runs out of the room. The next scene shows Ally and Billy, another lawyer in the firm, talking with the client, who is behind bars. While the client tells her story, Ally sits wide-eyed half behind Billy, biting the shoulder of his sport jacket. One would think that since this is her biggest case Ally would want to behave like a grown up—but, no, of course, Billy is the grown up because Billy is a *man*. He is excited and looking forward to the challenge, whereas Ally is concerned that she will lose her innocence from dealing with criminals. She behaves strangely around the client: she is jumpy, falls down a lot, and calls her client “the killer.”

Ally becomes obsessed with old murder movies. She watches them in her office and if someone walks in, she screams in terror and falls down. When Billy asks her what she is doing, she says she is “trying to desensitize [herself] to murders so that [she] can become a better lawyer.” Billy explains that lawyers sometimes have to deal with ugly things. Ally asks “Why? Why? Why can’t we just stay tucked away in our little sheltered...” She cups her hands and asks, “What is so great about the real world?” She explains that she prefers “soft core” law and that even though this is the biggest case they have ever had, she does not want it. Are there lawyers in real life who need to have the nature of their jobs explained to them? I do not think so. Ally is set up to look like a wimpy naïve girl rather than a powerful and courageous professional.

Sexual Harassment Laws and Ally McBeal

The show frequently exploits the perceived conflict between femininity and professional success. For example, here is a conversation between Ally and a client:

Mr. Little: Tell someone who cares and send in the lawyer, will you?

Ally: I am the lawyer.

Mr. Little: Dressed like that? Well, tell your boss I want pants. And while you're at it, tell him to throw in a penis.

Sexual discrimination rears its head! Apparently, Mr. Little does not believe that one could be a good-looking woman (one who wears skirts even) and still be a good lawyer. Yet, Ally does not always seek protection through the law from these kinds of attacks. Instead, she agrees with the postfeminist belief that sexual harassment laws overprotect women, and end up making women look like victims. Ally herself is a victim of sexual harassment. In the first episode, called "Pilot" (9-8-97), Ally is sexually harassed by a senior partner named Jack Billings. The scene unfolds from the harasser's point of view and takes place in a very plush law firm library. We watch as Ally, standing on a high stool, reaching for a volume on a top shelf, does not notice the sneaky man approaching her from behind. He quickly plants both his hands on her buttocks, squeezing hard. Ally shouts "hey!" and stumbles in her high heels. The scene is stretched out: the approach, the assault, the spinning around, and the deep expression of surprise and violation in Ally's eyes. The scene is played over and over again later in the show and in other episodes as Ally relives the experience. Ally sues Mr. Billings, but in a subsequent episode, she puts herself in the line of fire again. She makes a last minute decision to be co-counsel in a case because she wants to distract the lawyer on the other side. Of course, that lawyer is Jack Billings. Ally explains that she's doing it to "distract him a little bit... My being at the table—Jackie boy loses focus." Ally's plan is successful and Billings is forced to settle. Using sex to distract an opponent is not an accomplishment to be proud of. It is

dysfunctional and reflects poorly on Ally as a person and as a professional. It is hypocritical of her to resist Billings' objectification and then use that very objectification as a means to an end. Clearly, Ally does not take sexual harassment laws seriously, yet seems very willing to take advantage of them when it suits her. This is in agreement with her boss's position, which is the basis for an argument he makes in court:

Richard: Your honor, personally, I hate sexual harassment laws. The original force behind them was disgruntled lesbians who felt they weren't given an opportunity to get ahead.

Judge: Excuse me? Disgruntled lesbians? Lesbians started sexual harassment laws?

Richard: Along with ugly women who were jealous because pretty girls got all the breaks in the workplace. If you look at the majority of women who bring these suits: ugly. A buzzard flies through the room—they point...my cause of action is premised on the notion that women are victims, they need special help. When you look at the evolution of these sexual harassment laws, what we're really saying is that women should qualify under the federal disabilities act: they are less able; they cannot cope with romance in the office place; they cannot contend with having to do a job and have a man smile at them. It's too much. The laws of our society are here to protect the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society—She's a woman; protect her!

This is an incredibly sexist argument, and, during the scene, most of the characters appear to be very uncomfortable. Nevertheless—and this is the key point—*no one* in the courtroom objects, and no one seems to offer any rebuttal, at least not then and there.

In "Compromising Positions" (9-15-97), a man named Ron Cheanie, a prospective client that Ally is supposed to snare over drinks, asks: "have you ever used your sexuality to gain a business

advantage?” Ally says no, but it occurs to her that Richard assigned her to be Cheanie’s date precisely because he plans to use her sexuality to catch a new client. Ally thinks: “I’m involved in the very thing we’re having a conversation about. I’m basically a call girl.” Ally wonders why she bothered going to Harvard Law School, but instead of leaving, she decides to stay on her date. Cheanie confesses that he does not really have any questions about the firm. He admits to Ally that he just wanted to be alone with her. In her head, Ally thinks, “pig.” However, when she takes a good look at him, she decides that he is somewhat cute. After drinks, Ally lets him kiss her. Later on, Ally tells Renee that “I saw a piece of cute meat, and I said to myself, you only live once: be a man!”

In the following episode, called “The Kiss” (9-22-97), they have a second date. However, contrary to Ally’s expectations, Cheanie does not kiss her at the end of the date. Ally has been reading *The Rules*, a book that advises women on how to land a husband. Her book tells her not to kiss on the first date if she ever hopes to get married. At the end of her date with Cheanie, she was willing to forget the advice. “I can give him a little kiss,” Ally says to herself, “nothing slutty in that.” To her dismay, Cheanie dodges her face—big mistake. Ally is enraged, and asks “Why can’t he be a man and just paw me a little? I’m a sexual object, for God’s sake. He couldn’t give me a little grope?”

Ally responds to her disappointment in a passive aggressive manner. She decides to turn the associates at Cage and Fish against their new client and she finds a professional use for the kiss that troubled her. She tells her colleagues, “I don’t think that we should accept this client. I’m not comfortable representing him...I don’t even want him in these offices.” After the firm dumps Cheanie, he confronts Ally. He asks her what is going on and is clearly confused, saying “I thought we were getting along, next thing I know Richard Fish is turning down my business.” Ally says “You’re just going to have to take my word on this. It’s not going to work out...I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” “ You want me to leave?” Cheanie asks. “No,” Ally says to herself. “Yes” we

hear her say to him. The insinuation that she was harassed was just another one of her quirky, neurotic defense mechanisms—quite removed from reality.

In yet another episode, John advises Georgia (soon to be another lawyer at Cage and Fish) not to pursue a sexual harassment case: “Like it or not, you would be unhireable. That’s not a real word, I use it anyway which should give you an idea of how severely it applies. You can make a point for womankind or you can do what is probably best in your own self-interests.” Georgia pursues the case anyway and wins. Sadly, she finds that she is indeed unhireable. John and Richard offer her a job and she accepts, and ends up working there along with her husband Billy. The way this situation is handled is very ambiguous. On the one hand, John seems sympathetic to her case, but still discourages her from seeking the protection of sexual harassment laws. Georgia ignores his advice but her victory is bittersweet as she finds that John was right. This is yet another example of how the show will recognize a feminist issue and then quickly undercut it.

The episodes dealing with sexual harassment laws make the point that they are ludicrous and go too far. Postfeminists like Katie Roiphe have much to say in support of *Ally McBeal*'s stance on sexual harassment. Roiphe says that feminists are being too sensitive about sexual advances. She feels that “feminists are creating their own utopian visions of human sexuality” and that “unwanted sexual attention is part of nature” (87). For Roiphe, sexual harassment laws spell trouble because they “serve to reinforce the image of women as powerless” (90). She feels that these laws are too broad and allow individuals to interpret their experiences too loosely. Roiphe argues that, “something that makes one person feel uncomfortable may make another person feel great” (91). This woman also argues against date rape in much the same way, saying that one person’s rape is another’s bad night. The problem with her position is that she denies the validity of labeling an experience as a rape. She makes rape sound like a personal problem instead of a serious issue for all women.

Ally McBeal on Discrimination

In “Mr. Bo” (1-22-01), Ally is asked to represent a woman named Jerri Hill, the owner of a company that is being sued for discrimination. The company, a public relations firm, fired their receptionist, Ms. Pip, for being overweight. Ally tries desperately to get out of taking the case, but Richard forces it on her. The client wants Ally to represent her because she heard that Ally is “a good attorney with an excellent grasp of the superficial.” Ally rolls her eyes and reluctantly accepts the case. Later, she argues the case this way in court:

Ally: You needed to drop five or you would be let go. Did she actually say that?

Ms. Pip: Right to my puffy face.

Ally: So, you were given a warning then.

Ms. Pip: When was the last time somebody told you to diet?

Ally: I don't think that we need to get personal here.

Ms. Pip: I hate it when thin people think they know what we go through. If their butt is a tad big they think they know what it's like to have a weight problem.

Ally: My butt is not a tad big!

Ms. Pip: If it were should you be fired for it?

Ally: That's not the point!

Ms. Pip: What is the point?

Ally: I have contour! Let me see *your* ass!

Ally easily gets wrapped up in an argument with Ms. Pip and takes things personally. Clearly, she is not very concerned with being a professional lawyer here. She is more concerned with whether or not *her* butt is big. Ally goes back and forth with herself about this issue and decides that it is probably a no-win situation.

The unfair treatment Ally's client showed Ms. Pip does bother Ally enough to ask her boyfriend, Larry, for some advice:

Ally: You think its ok that people get hired and fired based on whether they're attractive or not?

Larry: Ally. You work at Cage and Fish.

Ally: And?

Larry: Ah. Humm. Its extremely well known: Richard Fish only hires babes.

Ally: I beg your pardon?

Larry: You didn't know this. It's practically in your firm's resume. You ever see your firm's resume?

Ally: No! Richard Fish does not hire based on, on, on, on...

Larry: You, Ling, Nell, Georgia, it's quite a calendar.

Ally: Where did you hear this?

Larry: It's out there. Guys want to work there because it's filled with hot women. It's like being a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader.

Ally just smiles, gritting her teeth before the show breaks for a commercial. The next day at work, she demands to see the firm's resume. Richard has a sexist explanation for his actions:

Ally: "Our lawyers have legs to stand on?" Richard! I'm going to ask you one more time. Did you hire me based on my looks?

Richard: Ally, did we know each other in law school?

Ally: Not...Really.

Richard: Did I interview you for this job? Did I ask to see your references or a transcript?

Ally: No.

Richard: So, all I had to go on was looks! Why bite the hand that wants to touch you?

Ally: So, this has nothing to do with my ability as a lawyer?

Richard: What ability? I'm still looking for that. Kidding. Ally, you, Ling, Nell, you're smart. You wouldn't be here if you weren't, but you have to remember; people hate lawyers. Clients think their lawyers are only out to screw them, it's just easier if they're being screwed by a beautiful woman.

Ally: I can't believe this.

Richard: Don't tell me you don't use your looks every day! You wake up each morning you pull out the lip-gloss, the rouge, the blush, and what for? To brush up your intellect?

Again, Ally just smiles, grits her teeth and quietly closes the door to Richard's office. She explains to her secretary: "I may have an education, but I got my job as Richard's trophy." Later on that day, her closing argument in court reveals the way she feels about the conditions of her employment: "I just found out that I got my job based on my appearance: my pretty face, my slender legs, the perfect contour of my *buttocks*. Does that make me proud? No. But it *is* the reality."

She does not exactly strike a blow for womankind here. She simply accepts the way things are—after all, in this situation, she is the one benefiting from it. What she *could* have done instead of accepting the situation is quit her job or confront Richard more forcefully about it. Perhaps she could have sued him for sexual harassment; after all, he did ask her why she wants to "bite the hand that wants to touch [her]." Maybe she could have got the rest of the attractive female employees of Cage and Fish to walk out with her or protest in some way. The point is that she could have done any number of things, but she chose to accept her circumstances. In doing so, she also accepts them for the millions of viewers watching at that very moment.

Ally compared to other working women on television

Ally McBeal is commonly categorized as a comedy-drama. It is a hybrid form of entertainment that has some elements of a typical half-hour situation comedy combined with the

characteristics of an hour-long drama. Since the show contains elements of both kinds of television programs, it makes sense to examine both a drama and a sitcom for comparison with *Ally*. There are not many shows currently on during prime time that focus on a single woman in the workplace and cater to the same twenty to forty-year-old white middle-class heterosexual professional female audience. The ones that do exist are problematic. Bellafante points out that the problem with *Ally* and characters like her is that “they are presented as archetypes of single womanhood even though they are little more than composites of frivolous neuroses” (3).

Veronica Chace from NBC’s situation comedy, *Veronica’s Closet*, is a good example of the kind of fussed over, neurotic glamour girl that we find all over our televisions. She is a forty something divorcee who is the president of a huge company comparable to Victoria’s Secret. She behaves like a teenager and is constantly looking for someone to date and someone to comfort her. Veronica’s preoccupation with sex seeps into her work. For example, when an employee messes up a press release, Veronica is not upset. Instead, she just checks him out, saying, “He is so pretty!” Another executive, Olive, says “don’t you just want to put him in a blender with a frozen banana and drink him like a smoothie?” Is this feminist? No, not really. All it is is a bunch of women standing around ogling men the way men usually ogle them. Not only is Veronica obsessed with sex, she also has a terrible body-image problem. In one episode, Veronica is approached by a toy company that wants to use her as a model for a new healthy body image role model doll. Veronica is thrilled until she sees the doll’s first run in a playgroup test. The children strip her naked, put a harness on her and put her in front of a wagon. By the end of the episode, she convinces the toy manufacturer to abandon the dolls. She exclaims “I know I should change the world! But right now, I just want to change my ass!” It is sad to see a female CEO of a company portrayed as such a shallow and insecure person. This just proves that *Ally* is not alone in her neurosis.

Dr. Sydney Hansen from NBC's hour-long drama, *Providence*, is a much more positive representation of a single professional woman. Sydney is a former plastic surgeon who once practiced in Los Angeles. She decides to leave her successful practice to live with and care for her father and two grown siblings after her mother's death. After some soul searching, Sydney decides that she would like to try practicing family medicine. She works very hard to raise funds to set up a walk-in family clinic. Much of the show is devoted to what goes on in her clinic. We see her protecting her patients, who are mostly women and children, saving lives, and taking very good care of all who come into her office. Sydney takes her job very seriously; she is confident and professional at all times. She is also her own boss. Unlike Ally, Sydney even manages to keep her personal and professional lives separate. Sydney does date, but it is not her main focus in life. Her relationships with men come second to her career.

One way in which *Ally McBeal* and *Providence* are similar is that there are fantasy sequences in both shows. When Sydney has a problem, she usually dreams that her dead mother comes to her and helps her solve it. Sometimes her dreams are comical, but they always help Sydney and provide her with some insight into her true feelings and desires. In contrast, fantasy sequences in *Ally* are usually manifestations of her neuroses. The distinction makes a significant difference because Sydney's fantasies usually have to do with dilemmas that come up at work and are normal, healthy ways to work out her problems. Ally's fantasies are usually a result of some sort of deficiency in her mental health. She cannot handle her life, therefore she hallucinates and makes a fool of herself.

Even though Sydney is a more feminist character, she still performs gendered duties. Remember, she left her successful career in order to come home and replace her mother. She takes care of her father and her two adult siblings, not to mention her sister's young child. *Providence* depicts a single working woman trying to juggle her complicated family life and her professional life. Sydney is also a variation of the same old domestic woman that we have seen for years. She just has

the compounded responsibility of taking care of patients at the clinic during the day and dealing with her family's ceaseless troubles at night. Sydney left her career as a plastic surgeon. Plastic surgery is a very individualistic, self-focused thing. It is also a very competitive field; folks really tend to shop around for a good plastic surgeon. It is a job traditionally held by men because it focuses on the individual and because it is highly competitive. In addition, when operating on a woman, Sydney may be helping her patient to become more attractive to men. On the other hand, family practitioners are a little easier to come by. Often, family doctors take care of families, not just individuals. Sydney's choice to move away from plastic surgery and into family medicine is a switch to a more appropriate career for a woman in our patriarchal culture. Taking care of families is a more sex-specific role for Sydney.

Veronica Chace is an *Ally*-like character, more so than Sydney. She is horribly insecure, needy and childish. It is a miracle that someone like her would be able to build and maintain a multi-million dollar company. In fact, it is a wonder how she could ever even hold a job, considering her atrocious behavior. What is also problematic about Veronica is that she is in the business of helping women become more attractive sexual objects for men.

Providence and *Veronica's Closet* (the latter is no longer on the air) are among the few shows that have appeared within the same time period as *Ally McBeal* that are comparable to *Ally McBeal*. This puts a lot of pressure on *Ally*, since she is among the few depictions of a single working female on television. Is this the best we can do? These shows all offer fairly limited definitions of femininity and reproduce some familiar myths and stereotypes. Instead of reproducing myths and stereotypes, we should be depicting women in a wide range of roles and experiences.

However, perhaps the real limitation here is not so much in the supplied established definitions of femininity, but rather in the lack of opportunity to transcend them. Gledhill states, "The object of attack should not be identity as such but its dominant construction as total, non-

contradictory and unchanging. We need representations that take account of identities—representations that work with a degree of fluidity and contradiction—and we need to forge different identities—ones that help us to make productive use of the contradictions of our lives” (72). It seems natural that living a dynamic, fulfilling life would require one to continually reevaluate one’s roles and identities, and that is precisely what is completely absent from these media portrayals of women. Indeed, Gledhill points this out too: “This means entering socio-economic, cultural and linguistic struggle to define and establish them in the media, which function as centers for the production and circulation of identity” (72). If the representations present in media lack the “fluidity” and “contradiction” of reality, then work and “struggle” must be undertaken to rectify the situation and ensure consistency.

What would postfeminists say?

The postfeminist standpoint would say that *Ally McBeal* is a great representation of the single working woman. Michael Epstein’s view of *Ally* is what I would call a postfeminist look at the show. In his essay, Epstein claims that *Ally McBeal* is a feminist show because “it is not the story of a lawyer struggling to succeed in a male-dominated judicial system that marginalizes emotion, intuition, and sexuality” (29). The women on *Ally* are allowed to express their inherently feminine insecure, intuitive, and emotional natures. They aren’t asked to behave like professionals and relate to the law: “for Ally, the law is an outlet in which she expresses herself emotionally, intuitively, and, yes even sexually” (29). Epstein thinks that these are good things and, like postfeminists, works on the assumption that men and women are inherently different, that women are naturally emotional and sensitive, etc.

Epstein admires David Kelley’s ability to “present lawyers as existing in a world where there is no distinction between the personal and the professional or between emotion and reason” (36). Huh? I thought that professionals were supposed to keep their personal lives separate from their

lives at work. Not Epstein—he feels that “the expression of emotional turmoil is what this show is primarily about. By making Ally McBeal a lawyer, creator David Kelley provides the show’s characters with a professional environment that only intensifies that turmoil” (37). For Epstein, it is to Kelley’s credit that “the glossing of distinctions between private thoughts and public responsibility also extends to the types of cases that Ally takes on” (37). Epstein points out that “in Ally’s world, it’s the quality of her deeply emotional relationships with others that count, not the applications of law” (38). He thinks it is good that “Ally McBeal is a lawyer who wears her heart on her sleeve, allows her emotions to determine how she will pursue a case, and to define the nature of her relationships with her colleagues” (38).

From a feminist standpoint like Bellafante’s, Ally McBeal represents how “much of feminism has devolved into the silly. And it has powerful support for this: a popular culture insistent on offering images of grown single women as frazzled, self-absorbed girls” (2). Bellafante points out that we are supposed to identify with “the most popular female character on television” and take her problems seriously, which is not a good thing because “Ally McBeal is a mess” (2). Bellafante compares Ally to other real life “quintessentially self-absorbed” postfeminists like Katie Roiphe and Camille Paglia who focus their intellectual energy on chasing sex instead of thinking about social change (3). Bellafante asks: “is Ally McBeal really progress? Maybe if she lost her job and wound up a single mom, we could begin a movement again” (4).

Jennifer Pozner has some fairly scathing things to say about Ally. She calls her a “shallow, bratty, willful adolescent with an adult woman’s career, a supermodel’s miniskirts, and a high school girl’s dating anxieties” (3). Pozner informs us that “most single, working women actually manage to live functional, productive lives while struggling to support and define ourselves as independent beings...At the very least, unlike Ally, we manage not to fall down daily under the weight of our insecurities” (3).

Judging by the treatment that the show gets in the media, it seems like the majority of people like to see working women portrayed as what *Esquire* magazine calls “do-me feminists.” “Do-me feminists” are hypersexualized, nymph-like creatures who wear sexy clothes to the office and use their sexuality to gain professional advantages. The media also prefer to see adult women stay in traditional female roles. As we have seen, Ally plays the child at work and her entire firm spends a good deal of time comforting and cajoling her. There really is not much room for Ally to expand as a lawyer with all these people hovering over her, trying to protect her from herself and the world. The scary part about all of this is that postfeminists find her to be a wild success and think it is great that the law provides Ally with an outlet for her sexual and emotional energy.

In summary, there is precious little evidence presented on the show to demonstrate Ally’s aptitude as a lawyer. Her arguments in court seem to be incredibly correlated to her personal life, which is probably the only reason she can come up with something resembling an effective argument and continue to win cases. Her character wins by virtue of a great deal of luck—not skill—yet this does nothing to encourage her to expand her legal proficiency. Postfeminists see no problem with her portrayal, instead actually championing her as an icon of professional womanhood.

CHAPTER 3

DEPENDENCE AND COMPETITION: COMIC ROMANCE AND THE BETRAYAL OF SISTERHOOD

In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* articulated what she called "the problem that has no name." The problem was that white middle class women found their lives horribly boring and unfulfilling. As youngsters, women of Friedan's generation focused their aspirations on finding a good husband. As Stephanie Coontz points out, "there were not many permissible alternatives to baking brownies, experimenting with new canned soups, and getting rid of stains around the collar" (34). Women never talked about how unfulfilled and hopeless they felt because they assumed that they were the only ones who felt so trapped. After all, it was thought that marriage and motherhood were what women naturally wanted most. Coontz describes how a successful 1950's family "was often achieved at enormous cost to the wife, who was expected to subordinate her own needs and aspirations to those of both her husband and her children. In consequence, no sooner was the ideal of the postwar family accepted than observers began to comment perplexedly on how discontented women seemed in the very roles they supposedly desired most" (36). Friedan's book helped women to locate their problems in society rather than within individual women. *The Feminine Mystique* provided the impetus needed to start a feminist revolution.

During the second wave of feminism, feminist leaders insisted that women need not marry in order to live happy and fulfilling lives. Many women, like Kate Millett and Gloria Steinem, stood up and said that they didn't believe in marriage, that it was bad for women and totally unnecessary to their happiness. As a result, young women began to stop dreaming of the house in the suburbs and started considering the fact that they might actually be happy and successful as single women with jobs and careers. For once, marriage did not seem like the only option. Sadly, the lifestyle choices that previous generations of women fought so hard to win are lost on Ally.

Kelley has stated that Ally is not a “hard” or “strident” woman. It seems that he prefers to see Ally as a softer, thinner, more kittenish feminist for the millennium. Much has been made of the fact that he tries to capture realistically a professional woman’s hopes and dreams. It is rather curious that he has that goal in mind since Ally would rather be at home baking cookies than at work taking depositions. We do not know much about her professional life because the show is almost entirely devoted to her personal problems. Viewers are left to assume that she does practice law, but we just do not get to see it. Kelley has captured what looks more like the post World War II backlash against women in the late 1940’s. In 1947, a best-selling book called *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* gave women the advice to stay home. As Susan Douglas describes it, the authors, Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg, told women that “feminists—meaning any women who thought there might be more to life than baking cookies and administering rectal thermometers—were ‘neurotically disturbed women’ afflicted with the much-dreaded ‘penis envy’...the only healthy woman was one who followed her biological destiny and procreated on a regular basis” (47). Douglas goes on to describe how Farnham and Lundberg told women that “women who wanted to step out of the confines of the kitchen and the bedroom were sick, sick, sick” (48). The idea that the unmarried woman is destined to suffer from a variety of neuroses persists even after the second wave of feminism changed the way women think about their lives. Elayne Rapping, author of “You’ve Come Which Way, Baby?” says that in the 1980’s, women were given permission “to retreat to the worst pre-sixties attitudes and behaviors and still ‘succeed’ financially and romantically” (21). In addition, in the 1980’s, there was an onslaught of self-help advice books for single women. These self-help books include works like Margaret Kent’s *How to Marry the Man of Your Choice*, *Smart Women/Foolish Choices* by Melvyn Kinder and Connell Cowan, and Susan Page’s *If I’m so Wonderful, Why Am I Still Single?* Ally has even read *The Rules* by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, a 1990’s best-selling guide to finding, keeping, and marrying the man of one’s choice.

Instead of blaming a society still in need of change, these books point to the individual woman as the source of her problems. This is a reversal of what books like *The Feminine Mystique* tried to do for women. Susan Faludi says these self-help books “delivered a one-two punch” as they “knocked down the liberated woman, commanding that she surrender her ‘excessive’ independence, a mentally unhealthy state that had turned her into a voracious narcissist, a sterile cuckoo” (336). Faludi goes on to describe how “in an era that offered little hope of real social or political change, the possibility of changing oneself was the one remaining way held out to American women to improve their lot” (337). So, once again women are stranded, without any sense of solidarity or recognition that their confusions, challenges, and frustrations belong to many other women as well. In reality, it is not that they are all crazy—they are the victims of larger social prejudices against them—but this fact is not widely publicized. In her book, *Women Watching Television*, Andrea Press states that “fiction and nonfiction television alike are clearly more able to represent politics as a function of personality than as a product of social structure or collective activism” (39).

Feminists tried to change the way women thought about themselves and others by disturbing the discourse of romance (male/female sexual and romantic interactions) and focusing on relationships with other women instead. These relationships include mother/daughter, and female friendships, but also the idea of sisterhood. The concept of sisterhood recognizes that women as a class are oppressed and that despite any differences among us, our collective subjugation is what we have in common. It is what unites us all. The idea of sisterhood is quite a change from the traditional romance discourse. In romance discourse, women compete with one another for male attention. Relationships with other women do not matter because women are not potential lovers and husbands. It seems that Ally McBeal re-centers the romance discourse since her relationships with other women are anything but central to her life. Rather than finding comfort and support in her interactions with other women, she finds competition and distrust. Perhaps she would not be as

neurotic if she had some good friends to talk to. Her separation from her coworkers would be more understandable if they were competing for jobs rather than men.

Ally McBeal's neuroses basically stem from the fact that she is getting older and is not married yet. She seems like the kind of woman that the self-help books of the 80's tried to "help," the neurotic bachelor girl that cannot seem to avoid obsessing over her single status. Maureen Dowd describes Ally as a "self-involved persona" who represents "a repeal of classical feminism" (A-19). Instead of continuing second wave feminism's message about women's independence, television (and society in general) appears to be engaged in a thinly disguised backlash against those ideals. What seems to be happening is that folks are engaging in some sort of rhetoric of choice—an implication that women are the victims of their own choices, rather than larger social problems. Elspeth Probyn calls it "choiceoisie" and says that "the emergence of the discourse of 'choiceoisie' strikes me as one of the problematic objects of my generation...this choiceoisie is no choice..." (154).

Probyn sees what she calls "an interesting conjuncture of discourses that are re-positioning women in the home" (148). She describes how "in many ways these homes correspond to different visions of generations of feminism, a sort of 'vulgarization' of feminist discourse" (149). In her essay, Probyn illustrates how television shows like *thirtysomething* offer us a "postfeminist vision of the home to which women have 'freely' chosen to return" (149). *Ally McBeal* has been compared to *thirtysomething*, and I believe that the comparison has merit; after all, Ally would gladly return to the home if she could just find herself a nice husband. *Thirtysomething* is Ally's dream—what she is waiting for and suffers without. The difference between *Ally* and *thirtysomething* is that *Ally* mentions feminism and feminist ideas and the other show apparently did not. Even though *Ally* talks about feminism, feminist beliefs are still othered since the show engages in postfeminist discourse and aligns itself with new traditionalism. As Probyn points out, "this recentering of women in the family

and the home constitutes an important conjunctural moment” (150). Even though Ally is not married with children, she is certainly obsessed with both. I feel that she is qualified to be included in what Probyn describes as “a new and active articulation of successful women who want more” (150). Ally *does* want more—she insists that her career is not enough, and that it is not where her real life will be lived out. For her, her life is incomplete and unfulfilling. Yet what more could she possibly want? She has a great job, several friends, a nice home, and a spacious new office with a picture window view of downtown Boston. She should be happy with all that she has achieved and acquired in her life. If Ally were a man, she would probably be feeling pretty good about herself right about now, feeling proud of her accomplishments. Perhaps she would be dedicating herself to her work, trying hard to make partner and push her career forward. However, since Ally is female, it seems impossible in the world of the show for her to take her job seriously.

As Probyn says, post-feminism is centered on the idea that “the world is a crazy place and you have to fight for yourself but at the end of the day you can always go home” (151). Ally walks home from work alone with sad music playing and tears running down her face because all she has to go home to is Renee. It is not specifically stated, but viewers know what is being implied—she is terribly lonely. What is missing in Ally’s life is a family of her own; the absence of a husband and children consumes her. Gledhill points out that “language and cultural forms are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or challenge, to confirm, negotiate or displace, definitions and identities. In this respect, the figure of woman, the look of the camera, the gestures and signs of human interaction, are not given over once and for all to a particular ideology—unconscious or otherwise. They are cultural signs and therefore sites of struggle...” (72). Looked at in this light, the active viewer will call into question how much of Ally’s unhappiness and loneliness is a product of how she actually feels, and how much she has been taught to feel, or if indeed there is any difference

at all. Gledhill's analysis offers us the concept of Ally's tearful walk home being not only a commentary on Ally herself, but also on the society in which Ally exists.

Ally's views about love and marriage

As we have seen, Ally does not value her career very much at all. Instead, she values finding romance much more than anything else. In a scene from "Love Unlimited" (1-18-99), Ally is accosted in a busy hallway by a woman named Laura Dipson. We see just how hostile Ally is to any suggestion that she may be focusing on the wrong things.

Laura: Ally! Ally McBeal! Hi. I'm Laura Dipson, pleasure. I'm the executive vice president for women for progress, a pleasure. I have splendid news: you have been nominated for this year's 1999 role model in the category of professionals.

Ally: I beg your pardon?

Laura: Working women, you're a role model! Now, we're going to plan to publish this in next week's magazine.

Ally: I don't want to be a role model.

Laura: Well, that's very sweet, but I'm afraid you really have no choice. Anyway, it'll be wonderful—you'll love it. We are going to have to make a few adjustments in the way you dress, and we're really going to have to fatten you up; we do not want young girls glamorizing that thin thing.

Ally: Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a second! Who are you?

Laura: I told you, Laura Dipson, a pleasure. Now, my sources tell me that you feel an emotional void without a man. You're really going to have to lose that if women are going to look up to you.

Ally: I don't want them looking at me at all!

[LAURA THEN PINS ALLY UP AGAINST A WALL AND GETS IN HER FACE.]

Laura: Don't be pissy! You're a role model, and you'll do what we tell you to do! Now you can start by dropping that skinny, whiney, emotional slut thing and be exactly who we want you to be—nothing more; nothing less. Can you do that pinhead?

[ALLY ROARS AND BITES OFF HER NOSE.]

The scene with Laura Dipson seems like an outright attack on a feminist response to the show, with Laura representing an antifeminist caricature of the feminist collective. Her problems with Ally are similar to problems that feminists would take issue with. Perhaps Laura is meant to represent 70's feminists who would critique the show's representation of femininity and feminism—remember Kelley's comment about Ally not being “hard” and “strident” like the feminists of the 60's and 70's? This woman comes on rather stridently, pushing her way through a crowd to reach Ally. Laura seems to be an anti-feminist estimation of the kind of feminist that is concerned with media representations of women and sexual politics. She is worried with what young girls idolize and she wants Ally to shake her codependent tendencies. I say that Laura is an anti-feminist caricature of a feminist because she is presented as a large, mannish, pushy and aggressive person. She is not unlike the popular depiction of feminists as ugly, hairy, castrating bitches.

Ally provides a sharp contrast to Laura in that Ally's feminism is more like narcissism. Ally is hyper-sexualized and obsessive. She does not want to be a role model precisely because she is only interested in herself and not in other women. She feels no sense of responsibility to womankind, only to Ally. She has even said that her problems are bigger than everyone else's *because they're hers*. This is certainly a long way from the feminists who fought for the rights of *all* women.

The next cinematic transition reveals that this scene is a dream, but it seems very real since Ally is wearing the same outfit. There are no usual dream sequence cues for viewers, except at the end, when the two women's voices start to echo. Ally admits to John that “I want somebody I can be totally weak with. Somebody who will hold me and make me feel held. I think I crave some sort

of dependency.” She goes on to describe a dream in which she was on the cover of *Time* magazine as “The Face of Feminism.” She says “feminism” with a sneer, as if she hates it.

Indeed, Ally does crave dependency. She believes in it so completely that she even uses it as part of her closing argument in court. In “Those Lips, That Hand” she tells the jury:

I'd like to tell you that today's my birthday and every time I have a birthday I get these panic attacks of under achievement, like my life is a big empty sack. The District Attorney, who knows me best by the way, last night, she called me hopeless, *twice*. That I have to take issue with. I am not a person without hope. In fact, sometimes I wonder if hope is the only thing I've got going. The thing that I hope for most, and I'm embarrassed to admit it, is emotional dependence...who would actually wish for that kind of weakness? I do. I want to meet, fall in love with, and be with somebody I can't bear to be without.

Ally seems to be clinging to some sort of childhood or adolescent fantasy in which she falls madly in love with Prince Charming and gallops off into the sunset to live happily ever after. No matter how she may become frustrated with her search for the perfect man, she still refuses to let go of her romantic ideals. In fact, she holds on to them even tighter. Just when she seems to lose her faith, a friend advises her to keep her dreams alive and get back out there to keep searching. Either that or her therapist advises her to find a theme song, one that makes her feel powerful. “What is Ally's theme song?” you might ask. It's “Tell Him,” a song that Susan Douglas calls “prefeminist” because even though the persona in the song is making the first move, it is to pledge her undying love to the guy (161).

We are all familiar with the idea that the stories women are told as children poison our minds into believing that if we sit by and wait for Prince Charming to show up we will eventually be rewarded. Susan Douglas describes the fairy tale heroines that many women grew up with: “there were the good and wonderful girls, the true princesses, the ones we were supposed to emulate...”

(28). Certainly, Ally McBeal did not miss the messages those fairy tales gave her. In a conversation between Ally and Renee, we see the two women identifying the same problem, but not looking past it to solve it:

Ally: That is the last bridesmaid's dress I ever wear.

Renee: Until the next wedding.

Ally: Sometimes, Renee, it feels like we're the only ones who aren't getting married.

Renee: We are.

Ally: Seriously Renee, what's this thing women have about getting married? Why do women...

Renee: We're brainwashed—first stories we hear as babies: Snow White, Cinderella, all about getting the guy, being saved by the guy. Today it's Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Pocahontas—all about getting the guy.

Ally: So basically, we're screwed up because of...

Renee: Disney.

In "Girls Night Out" (10-30-00), Ally breaks up with Brian, her boyfriend of six months, because "the sex is really bad." The next day, during the firm's usual morning check-in conference, Ally announces that the "first meeting of the Cage and Fish Women's Bar Association" will take place in her office and asks the women at the firm to join her. Of course, Richard is worried and asks "what's this about? The ERA? Title IX? Douche?" Ally hits him and leaves the room.

In Ally's office, the following conversation takes place between Nell, Ling, Renee, Georgia and Elaine:

Ally: We're pathetic.

Renee: Why are we pathetic?

Ally: Because, Renee, we all agree that a having a personal life is more important than having a professional life, and yet we devote every single waking moment to work, either here or at home. I mean, how can we possibly expect to have the same kind of success personally that we do professionally if we don't put in a fraction of the time or effort?

Nell: Well, I don't prioritize a personal life. I don't even want one.

Ling: You can't sour on men Nell, just because of one bad relationship with the funny little man.

Nell: It's not that. I mean, what's the goal? To get married? Yuck! Half of them end in divorce the other half end up with children. Is that what we want? To have your breasts swell up with milk so some crying, sniveling baby can suck them dry so they'll sag in perpetuity like two big wet mounds of tissue with nipples with no hint of their original character.

Ally: This meeting isn't about motherhood. It's about recognizing that life is a little more rich with a partner.

Nell: I don't agree it needs to be a man. Women make better partners for everything except for sex and that's for sex. Yuck!

Georgia: What's your point, Ally? Do you have one? Or... not?

Ally: Not. Not exactly yet. We want to meet good eligible men. I thought what I would do is talk to a good eligible man and try to ascertain how he would feel about meeting good eligible women.

Ling: Do you know an eligible man, and if so why aren't you throwing yourself at him as we speak?

Ally: We are resolved to becoming proactive. Meeting adjourned!

Richard's question about the women's possible concerns demonstrates that he takes them more seriously than they take themselves. He thinks they may be talking about the Equal Rights Amendment, Title IX (which calls for equal access to jobs and schooling), or douche. His comment about douche is just another example of how sexist and disgusting he can be. He reduces women to smelly vaginas here and gets a very predictable reaction: Ally hits him and leaves the room. This is what usually happens when Richard says something awful: people behave like they are disgusted and appalled, but no one ever *seriously* confronts him. In fact, his sexist opinions are usually upheld later on in the show when characters demonstrate the very same sexist notions that fly from Richard's mouth. It is as if he says things aloud that most men simply keep to themselves. For another example of how this happens, remember his views on sexual harassment from the previous chapter. He said that sexual harassment laws were pushed by ugly women who were tired of seeing attractive women get promotions. A while later, we find out that Ally got her job because she was attractive. She accepts the fact and moves on rather than confronting him about it. She proves that attractive women get jobs and overlooks what could be construed as sexual harassment.

What is also problematic about the scene above is that Ally says that they devote all their time to work and none to their personal lives. This presents a maddening contradiction because viewers rarely see these women doing any work at all! Life at Cage and Fish, as far as the viewers can tell, consists solely of gossiping and competing for men, not working. This is just another demonstration of the discrepancy between what viewers are shown and what characters say. Viewers seem to be encouraged to take Ally at her word and assume that she does eventually get to work. I would hope that most viewers would notice this contradiction and feel angry or frustrated by it. That frustration comes from the fact that regular viewers know that the show is almost entirely dedicated to exploring Ally's personal life. It would be nice to see her do some actual work instead of just

carrying file folders around while she socializes with her pals. It is insulting that the writing would have us assume that she does do work even though we as viewers have rarely witnessed it.

It seems like the women in Ally's life do not really share Ally's nostalgic marriage and family fantasy to the same extent. Nell, for example, seems to resist the idea entirely, while, for the moment, the others seem to be going along with Ally.

Ally and her female co-workers

As stated earlier, one of the central values held by feminists is that of solidarity and sisterhood among all women. Susan Douglas argues that "of all the concepts and principles that feminists advanced, none was more dangerous to the status quo than the concept of sisterhood" (224). A meeting for the "Cage and Fish Women's Bar Association" sounds pretty impressive, like they might actually have some sort of important society-changing mission in mind. Sadly, the only time the women in Ally's life can come together is for the purpose of engaging in a manhunt. In this particular episode, there happens to be enough men to go around, but in other cases the women are forced to compete with one another and their friendliness will prove to be only temporary. They are not uniting to fight social injustice against womankind and they have no common enemy. Eventually, the discourse of romance will resurface, replacing that of sisterhood, and they will become each other's enemies.

The idea that women should unite against a common problem is certainly lost on *Ally McBeal* as the women rarely get along, and spend the bulk of their time making catty remarks. In "Girls Night Out," when Ally shares her proactive man-meeting plan with the others, some mean-spirited jokes fly around:

Nell: Don't you feel ridiculous stooping to something like this?

Elaine: I'm up for it!

Nell: Oh. What a shock! You probably bought new knee pads.

Ally: Georgia? You haven't weighed in yet. Are you back out there looking?

Georgia: Oh. Absolutely! That's how I met your father!

Ally: Oh, Yeah. Thanks for reminding me.

Ally cannot seem to treat Elaine with any real respect and she is generally hostile toward her. Elaine wears too much perfume and cheap outfits, and is always looking for attention. The female attorneys treat her poorly and her presence is tolerated in the way one would tolerate a little sister tag along. She often has doors slammed in her face by associates in the firm. She is scolded like a child and treated like a nuisance. This conversation with Ally characterizes how she is treated in terms of her appearance:

Ally: With all due respect, you sort of walk around with uppity breasts and the hair flips aren't the most subtle—your perfume, you could be flammable. Now what if somebody shut you down as a safety hazard, how would you feel then?

Elaine: That was with all due respect?

Ally is hardly the only one who degrades Elaine; this conversation with Nell further demonstrates the disrespect Elaine is shown. This very harsh insult leaves Elaine speechless:

Elaine: I'm sure you must have some talents, however hidden.

Nell: Oh I do, it's called focus. With concentration, I can pretend the little people in the world don't exist. Too bad I'm not focusing now. This is why I don't get along with secretaries—amounting to nothing makes you hostile.

Admittedly, Nell is not very nice to *anyone* in the firm, and Elaine is no exception, but she is *particularly* harsh and mean to Elaine. Again, this illustrates that there exists quite a strong division (and lack of sisterhood) between the women on the show.

Ally and Ling can be heard growling at one another like dogs when they pass by in the office. Here is a sample of the way they interact from "Mr. Bo":

Ally: (to Richard) You want me to argue that it's ok to hire somebody based on looks?

Ling: What else is there?

Ally: Ling, why don't you go somewhere and pluck an eyebrow, or at least draw one on?

Ling: Back when you were attractive you didn't mind being judged on looks alone. It's amazing how principle pops up with wrinkles.

Ally: Ya know Ling, I've never challenged a girl to a fight before.

Ling: But since a black eye could be an improvement...

Ally: Ok, lets go!

Richard ends up having to pull Ally and Ling apart.

In "Civil Wars" (4-5-99), Ally, Georgia, Nell and Ling have a disagreement about how to handle a particular case. The four women insult one another and eventually resort to hair pulling and hitting until they find themselves in a pig-pile catfight in the bathroom. In their squirming heap of long hair, short skirts and high heels, Ally is on top, bashing Georgia's head into the floor while pulling Nell's hair. The whole scene is eventually broken up, but not before Ally winds up with a cut above her eye and a trip to the hospital. Douglas asserts that depicting women in catfights is important "to demonstrate as simply and vividly as possible that sisterhood [is] in fact, a crock of shit" (224).

Ally tries to tolerate Elaine and Georgia. She calls them her "friends," but then she can be caught backstabbing or insulting them. Ally tries to tolerate Elaine because she is her secretary and also because she makes Ally feel better about herself. Ally's education and her seemingly superior charms and talents have helped her to steal many things from Elaine. She has taken a boyfriend from her and she has also won several dance contests, as well as a chance to sing backup for Tina Turner. Poor Elaine always comes in second when she competes with Ally. As a result, Elaine feels inferior to Ally, who sometimes makes feeble attempts to comfort her so-called friend.

Our heroine tolerates Georgia because she is Billy's wife and Billy wants them to be friends. Ally would betray Georgia in an instant if Billy were interested. During the first two seasons, in the early part of the show's history, Ally spends a considerable amount of time hating Georgia for being with Billy. Even though they are supposed to be friends, their relationship is often very tense and uncomfortable. That is, until Nell comes to work for the firm. Here is a woman even more beautiful and talented than Ally and Georgia. What is worse is that Nell, in order to break the ice, often makes jokes about wanting to have an affair with Billy. The two immediately band together against Nell, find they have a common enemy, and become better friends for it.

Nell and Ling, who are truly the very best of friends, inspire feelings of outright hostility in Ally and the rest of the women at the office. They are probably treated with such contempt by the other female characters because they truly like one another and tend to have a healthy relationship. That is something the others are not familiar with. They are also the only two characters that are a bit ambivalent about marriage, which means that they do not devote every waking moment to lamenting their single status. Of course, in the world of the show, this means something must be wrong with Nell and Ling, hence the need to marginalize them as cruel, cold, emotionless, conniving bitches. While Nell is played by a blond-haired fair-skinned woman, Ling is portrayed by an Asian actress. Some aspects of Ling's character can be described as classic stereotypical representations of Asian women, which is to say, she exhibits a sort of dangerous dominating sexuality, an exotic sensuality. At the same time, she continually pursues her goals of power and money.

Aside from the brief and half-hearted lesbian encounter Ally had with Ling (a simple kiss done out of curiosity and soon forgotten), they usually express nothing but disdain for one another. Their dislike for one another is usually based on some sort of beauty contest. Nell competes with Ally for John's attention. She is jealous that Ally and John understand one another and that she

cannot truly get into John's head the way that Ally can. Even when John and Nell were dating, he usually went to Ally when he needed a friend.

It seems that all of Ally's relationships with women, except for the possible exception of Renee, are based on competition for male attention. She competes with Georgia for Billy's attention, and she competes with Elaine for dates and public recognition. Ally competes with Nell for John's attention and with Ling for attention in general. Even Ally's relationship with her mother is one in which the two women strive for her father's affections.

Curiously alone in the world, Ally has no siblings and very little contact with her parents. One of the major themes of the show is urban loneliness. Most of the characters are single and all of them are lonely in some way. It fits that Ally should also be lonely and alone in the world. It makes her friends and coworkers that much more important as they replace her biological family. During the third season, Ally's parents are introduced for only two episodes. In those episodes, we find out that Ally was always "daddy's little girl" and that her mother was jealous of their relationship. She explained to Ally that she resented her and felt left out of the family because Ally and her dad were so close. Ally's parents' relationship suffered to the extent that her mother even had an affair to make up for the love that Ally usurped from her. As a result, Ally and her mother are not very close at all. When Ally calls her parents, she asks to talk to her dad instead of her mom. Apparently, Ally and her father are still very close. The show naturalizes this family dynamic as the characters treat the situation like it is perfectly normal.

Her family situation explains a lot about why she cannot seem to have a good relationship with other women. It also explains why she seems to put such a high premium on male attention. If she grew up competing with her mother, of course she would naturally extend that spirit to her relations with other women. Since she was so close to her father, it makes sense that she would view

her relationships with men as being deeper and more important than anything else in her life. Her relationships are based on competition (in the female case) or dependence (in the male case).

Ally's Relationships with Men

The one great love of Ally's life is Billy Thomas. This is the guy who Ally followed to law school. The two were childhood sweethearts and broke up when Billy met Georgia at law school. Ally *never* recovered from the break-up and still thinks of Billy as "the one." She has often been the source of Billy and Georgia's marital problems as her constant presence at work causes tension between the otherwise happily married couple. Having known one another for most of their lives, Ally and Billy share a special bond of friendship that survived the end of their romantic relationship. Much of Ally's life (before Billy's character was written out of the show) focuses on Billy and Georgia and the pain and loneliness she feels when she sees them together.

In "Being There" (5-4-98), a rumor goes around Cage and Fish that Georgia might be pregnant, and Ally is of course very distraught. We find her in the bathroom violently kicking in stall doors. Billy comes in to find her on the floor in a heap.

Billy: Hey! You ok?

Ally: It didn't hurt that door. I kick it all the time.

Billy: I feel like I should apologize or something.

Ally: What for?

Billy: I don't know. If things were the other way around I might...

Ally: Why do you keep saying if things were the other way around? They're not the other way around! I don't want things to be the other way around. I happen to be very happy with all of my happiness ahead of me. See, I live my life as one big Christmas Eve and it makes me happy, happy, happy! And if I seem upset it's just that I, I, I, I find you rude!

Billy: Rude?

Ally: Yes. Rude. You wanna marry somebody else? Fine. You want you and me to work in the same firm? Fine. You wanna bring her in here? Fine. But to get her pregnant? That's rude! And I am concerned for your child! It's tough enough to grow up in this world with any sense of manners. What chance does your child have with two rude parents?

Billy: Ally. I'm sorry.

Ally: Why do you say sorry? I don't even *care*.

Later on, Ally hallucinates that the whole office is a giant chorus line dancing to "Wedding Bell Blues." Once again, Billy finds Ally behaving strangely in the bathroom. This time, she is dancing wildly—making high kicks and flailing her arms and head about with her imaginary chorus line behind her when he comes to check on her. After she has calmed down, she asks: "Is there any chance it's not hers?" She tells Billy that "I am happy for you. It's just that when you left back then, I prayed to myself, 'well, at least let me get married first and if not, then at least let me have children first and if not at least let me *die* first.' I'm just nervous that I'm gonna go one for three."

What is interesting about the scene described above is Ally's dance number. As Laura Mulvey tells us, "the musical song and dance numbers break the flow of the diegesis" (589). Mulvey explains how "traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (590). Mulvey goes on to state that "a woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no-man stand outside its own time and space" (590). Ally's dance certainly does freeze the action as it turns the office into a chorus line. However, somehow it does not manage to affect the flow of the

story or make it seem unbelievable. Ally just seems like an object in a side-show, something thrown in to amuse viewers. Ally's performance demonstrates that the show is really very conventional in that Ally's main function is to be looked at.

Larry is the second biggest love of Ally's life. Recently, he was forced to choose between staying in Boston to be with Ally and moving back to Detroit to be with his young son. Ally encourages him to leave, saying that he is a father before he is anything else. This is quite a mature move for her, but subsequent episodes show Ally taking the separation very badly. After only a week, Ally has begun to hallucinate again. In "Reach Out and Touch" (2-12-01), she thinks that Barry Manilow is stalking her. She even drops a case on the day of trial, saying that she really can't handle it with everything that is going on with Larry:

Ally: Well, long distance relationships, they've certainly been known to work.

John: Absolutely!

Ally: Besides, I have to concentrate on this silly little annulment case, which I'm late for. Ya know what John? Could you do it for me?

John: Doesn't it start today?

Ally: Yes. But, um, truthfully I don't think that I'm going to be able to handle a case about a broken relationship right now.

John: But, I'm in depositions on the Burke matter. You really don't think you can do it?

Ally: Well, I don't. I'm, I'm, sort of um, I'm hallucinating a little.

Richard: Hallucinating how?

Ally: That's not important.

Richard: Ally. Ally, you're asking another lawyer to take over your case on the day of trial!

Ally: Well, Ling has been second chair and she's completely...

Ling: I'm not ready!

Richard: John!

Ally: Oh, look! Now I have never, ever, ever asked for myself to be removed from a case before, but I'm, well, I'm a little fragile and I...

Richard: What kind of hallucinations?

Ally: Well, I've been seeing Barry Manilow.

Richard: You're off the case. Ling...

The whole office is prepared for her to be a mess and everyone makes themselves available for her should she have a break down. As Richard tells her, "I was just going to extend our support in your newfound loneliness. Ally, we're all here for you."

Why Ally isn't married

For whatever reason, it is impossible to show Ally devoted to her work. Perhaps this is because Ally as a lawyer is not very important. As we know, her male-seeking behavior takes priority and she would rather compete with other lawyers for male attention rather than for professional accolades. Perhaps we do not see Ally differently because Kelley cannot imagine a woman who devotes herself to her work and takes her career seriously. It seems that Ally exists more as an object for the male gaze than she does as a full, well-rounded character. In fact, Ally is portrayed as grotesque when she steps out of line and behaves as something other than an object. Remember the example from previous chapters of how Ally turns into a drooling St. Bernard or has a giant wet tongue roll out of her mouth when she sees a man she is attracted to. These fantasy scenes are meant to put Ally back in her place. After all, an object exists to be looked at and not to do the looking itself. The desires that Ally has are very stereotyped. Even though most of the show revolves around her wishes, they do not matter much because she is an object, and objects do not have relationships in which their subjectivity matters. Ally is never fulfilled because she is always moved back to the objectified position. Looking at the way that the women on the show interact, it

is obvious that they crave superficial attention and want to be successful objects. Clearly, these women are not the creations of a feminist.

Ally McBeal and Dr. Freud

Ally seems to be structured as a family romance with Ally's life resembling Freud's female Oedipal process. As we know, the Oedipal process is meant to get the child ready to enter society. When it comes to females, the girl child turns away from her mother because she desires a penis. She realizes that both she and her mother are castrated. This leaves the girl with no choice but to desire to possess her father. She realizes that she cannot have him and decides that she wants a sexual union and a child with her father. The girl realizes that she cannot have her father's child and seeks a substitute who can give her a baby. The baby, for her, represents the phallus. Applied to Ally McBeal, the Oedipal model works rather well. She competes with and turns away from her mother, she asks for her father when she calls home, and all she wants is a husband and a baby. The Oedipal process explains her dissatisfaction with her career because a career is not a substitute for a phallus. Freud also helps us understand why we see so many unhappy women on the show who are totally focused on relationships with men. Ally's failure at relationships with men is not such a mystery when we consider the fact that she wants the *baby* more than anything else. That is why she could not wrap her mind around Georgia being pregnant. Ally was able to let Billy marry and have intercourse with another woman. When there was the possibility of a baby, she just could not bear it, saying that Billy was "rude" for getting his wife pregnant. Ally does not need other women and has competitive relationships with them.

Ally seems to keep suggesting that relationships with women do not really matter and that relationships with men should be top priority. Feminist critics have been saying for years that there are only two endings for a woman's story. She can either get married (comic romance) or she can die (tragic romance). Interestingly, as much as *Ally* seems to reinforce the family romance and marriage

plot, the show also seems to critique it in some ways. For example, there are no happy marriages on *Ally McBeal*. The only marriage that does exist at all is the one between Georgia and Billy, and their otherwise happy marriage was constantly threatened by Ally's presence, eventually ending when Billy developed a brain tumor, started behaving like a sexist jackass and then dropped dead suddenly. Other marriages depicted on the show are broken ones. Most of Cage and Fish's clients are there for an annulment or a divorce.

Even though the show sometimes critiques marriage, it is over-ridden by Ally's single-minded pursuit of a husband. Ally is absolutely committed to the romance plot. This kind of contradiction and ambiguity characterizes the show. It is constantly doubling back on itself and undercutting its own assertions. Perhaps by showing only flawed marriages, viewers are being set up to repeatedly share Ally's desires. Ally dreams of having a perfect relationship and is always thought of (by other characters on the show) as a hopeless romantic. She wholeheartedly believes in fairy tale romance and is holding out for her Prince Charming. If she never gets what she wants, it keeps her and the audience invested in her fantasy.

It is clear that Ally cares little for her female friends. The notion of sisterhood that women in the seventies fought so hard to promote seems to be completely lost on Ally. What replaces it is the regressive sense that other women are the enemy.

CONCLUSION

My goal for this thesis has been to analyze the specific ways in which *Ally McBeal* participates in an anti-feminist backlash and incorporates and/or reproduces the ideology of postfeminism. The idea that the media is promoting a refutation of many of the empowering ideals of feminism has many negative ramifications. With regard to shows like *Ally*, “the danger is not in enjoying them but in mistaking them for something more than the selective, partial images that they are” (Dow 214). Gledhill warns us that the market cannot resist tapping into groups with newly emerging public self-identity. Eventually, the life-styles and identities of these groups are turned into a commodity. They are modified and turned into products suitable for the status quo, and as such, are easily mistaken for something other than “selective, partial images” of femininity (Dow 214).

The average age of a Fox network viewer is approximately thirty-five years old, by far the lowest average age of all the major networks (*Access Hollywood*, 03-17-01). As Dow points out, “mass mediated feminism is as much about marketability as ideology,” and the bottom line is that *Ally McBeal*, as a show and as an individual character on that show, sells well (204). Gledhill agrees that freshness is a key selling point for the media: “the media appropriate images and ideas circulating within the women’s movement to supply a necessary aura of novelty and contemporaneity. In this process, bourgeois society adapts to new pressures, while at the same time bringing them under control” (71). The show is hip, fashionable, and young, and it is popular in today’s world to take pot shots at feminism.

Actually, it has *always* been popular to attack feminism, but our current society seems to be particularly vicious. Dow points out: “in the public discourse of the 1990’s, feminism appears to be entering yet another period of reckoning, one similar to the emergence of postfeminism in the 1980’s” (203). In the case of *Ally McBeal*, the show’s popularity may be due to this resurgence of

postfeminist ideology. Dow calls what the postfeminists promote “media-friendly feminism” and states: “television entertainment has hedged its bets by representing feminism through the lives of white, middle-class, heterosexual women” (207). She also points out that the postfeminist writers like Roiphe, Paglia, and Sommers, are “privileged, well-educated, white women, and they clearly presume their target audience to be much like themselves” (203). What better way to reach this target audience than to make a show about a thirty-something, petite, female, white law-school-graduate who had a dysfunctional family life and can think of nothing besides landing a husband to fall into the arms of? The very premise of the show targets an audience very much like the largest proponents of postfeminism. Ironically, these women reaped the most rewards from the feminist uprising of the 60’s and 70’s, and have since turned their backs on the very movement that made their own possible. The sisterhood felt by the feminists of the 60’s and 70’s has been replaced by the postfeminist individualism. This is the feminism of what Dow refers to as “enlightened self-interest” and I believe that *Ally McBeal* is its perfect representation (212).

When I began this project, I had some ambiguous feelings about *Ally McBeal*. I enjoyed the show to a large extent because I could identify with Ally. She appealed to my hopes, desires, frustrations, and fears. She seemed to reflect who I was (or thought I was) as a white, middle class, heterosexual, educated woman. The situations she found herself in amused me, and made my life seem a little more normal and ordinary—by laughing at Ally, I was laughing at myself. I remember that when the show first came out, I reserved a date with my best friend for “Ally night” every Monday and would look forward to it all week long.

Back then, I called myself a feminist and had a basic understanding of what the word meant. I had taken women’s studies classes in college and thought that I knew what a feminist was, what it meant to be a feminist. I thought that Ally was a feminist because she was a lawyer. That was all I based it on. After all, it takes a lot of courage and self-discipline to make it through law school, and

the right to have a career is something feminists fought hard for. Here was a sympathetic character who had lived up to those expectations of earlier feminists, taking a position in a successful law firm, forging ahead in her own, freely-chosen career path, and standing on her own two feet—or so it seemed.

Over the years, after getting to know Ally, my opinion began to change. I began to think that maybe my hero was not so good after all. Here is a woman who is so emotionally disturbed that she hallucinates. Ally does not even want to be a lawyer, she just followed her boyfriend to Harvard! “Is this a feminist?” I asked myself. I was willing to accept Ally as an imperfect and conflicted character, just like many of us. My original intent for this thesis was to demonstrate just how confused young women are today. Here we are, receiving messages from our mother’s generation while at the same time, pre-sixties rhetoric is still circulating around us. Which is it? Who should we be? I wanted to try to answer those questions through *Ally McBeal*. At this point, it was not as if I thought we should emulate her, but rather that she had some answers to my questions.

Now, after working on this thesis, interrogating the show and challenging my own beliefs, I have come to the unexpected conclusion that I really do not like *Ally McBeal* anymore. After examining some central beliefs that the show works on, I have come to realize that it is really very conventional and regressive. There truly seems to be a backlash against feminism and *Ally* is the perfect example of how thinly veiled and prevalent it is. All it took was for me to dig just a bit below the surface to reveal how poisonous the show really is for women. Due to the popularity of Ally McBeal, the show has a particular influence over the thoughts and beliefs of millions of viewers. Though the feminist backlash is just below the surface, looking back at how my own opinion changed I was somewhat shocked at how I had previously been so blind to it. It is certainly conceivable that, had I not undertaken this show as the subject for a thesis, I never would have had

my eyes opened to many of the implied messages broadcast over the Fox network every Monday night.

One of my major difficulties with the show is the lack of the viable option of a different gender paradigm. Nell and Ling seem to have a more traditionally feminist perspective on marriage and family (which is to say, they actually question how much it will improve their lives), but they are portrayed as women preoccupied with the other things in their life, as if the rest of the cast, as well as the audience, believes that they are truly missing out on what really matters. They are cast in such a light as to make them seem emotionless. This is an excellent example of how every alternative to postfeminist viewpoints that *does* get presented is somehow discredited as a means to personal happiness.

Another major issue I have with the show is based on Gledhill's concept of identity and representation. She feels that a final and stable model of representation should never be achieved, for it is in the construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction of identities that actually provides the greatest gains. In this way, the show does not offer any opportunities for personal growth or development. Instead, Elaine is always a slut for attention, Ally is always pining away for her imaginative husband, Ling and Nell are always asking why anybody would want to get married and have kids, Richard is always making sexist remarks and harassing women and never getting called on it, and so on. The characters are perpetually trapped in static, stereotypical roles, never really challenging themselves or their paradigms or even those of others.

However, there is light at the end of the tunnel: Gledhill's concept of negotiation offers an important tool for analyzing the creation of meaning, for it takes into account the space between the media product and the viewer. Viewers are not simply clean slates that record anything and everything presented to them: "the concept of negotiation allows space to the play of unconscious processes in cultural forms, but refuses them an undue determination. For if ideologies operate on

an unconscious level through the forms of language, the role of the 'other' in these processes is not passively suffered" (71). Active viewers will constantly consider themselves in relation to the show, providing perspective, and thus allowing them the option to generate alternatives to the postfeminist ideals presented by the show itself. If the feminist ideals of the 60's and 70's are to survive in the face of shows like *Ally McBeal*, it will be due to the ability of the viewers to negotiate a relationship between what they see on the show and what they believe to be true of women and femininity in general.

Some additional areas of interest that were outside the scope of this paper would be issues of race and class. As hinted at in the discussion of Renee's total lack of racial issues, Kelley has stated that he is "color blind," which may sound politically correct, but is, in actuality, contributing to the persistence of racism. Elaine is repeatedly degraded based on her class within the context of the show as a secretary. Another fruitful area of exploration might be how the show stereotypes sexual preference and deviations from the norm. By looking at how homosexuality is dealt with on the show, in particular Ally's interactions with Ling and other women, it may become even more evident that the show promotes heterosexuality, and how it goes about doing it. A couple of episodes dealt with a transsexual (male becoming a female) who dated a member of the law firm, ultimately ending with the dissolution of their relationship.

It would be also be interesting to compare *Ally* to feminist influenced shows other than *Mary Tyler Moore*, like *Cagney and Lacey*, etc. In such a comparison, specific focus should be placed on the degeneration of the feminist principles present in the earlier shows that is lacking in the present-day incarnation. I hope that this paper has gone some way toward describing how *Ally McBeal* deviates from feminist perspectives and ideals. A fruitful comparison could therefore be made in order to illustrate the shift from a generation that questioned social issues of race/class/gender to one that

retreats from an analysis of those issues, instead placing sole responsibility on the individual. A television show like Ally McBeal is only possible in this postfeminist new millennium.

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