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The Problem That Has a Name: Ally McBeal and the Future of Feminism

by KATHLEEN NEWMAN

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal.

From the *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments*,
Seneca Falls Convention, 1848

The real truth is that I probably don't want to be too happy or content, cuz then what? I actually like the quest, the search ... that's the fun, the more lost you are the more you have to look forward to.

Ally McBeal, from *Ally McBeal*, 1997

IT IS THE YEAR 2000, 152 years after the Seneca Falls Convention—the convention we use to mark the birth of the feminist movement in America. And what truths do we hold to be self-evident? Do we believe, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frederick Douglass believed, *that men and women are created equal*? Or do we hold other truths to be self-evident—truths like Ally McBeal's declaration that *the quest is the fun*? I ask these questions seriously: while TV rarely offers solutions to our problems, TV can help us name them. What Betty Friedan called the “problem that has no name” thirty years ago, today has several. One of them is Ally McBeal. She is not real, but her anxieties are. And so is the controversy she has provoked.

TV critics groused about the antifeminist implications of *Ally McBeal* during its first season (1997–1998). But *Time* magazine made it official in June of 1998 with a cover that lined up the most unflattering black and white photos imaginable of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem with one vibrant, alluring, color photograph of Ally McBeal. The photographs were grotesquely disembodied—heads only, floating in a black background—and the headline was poised under the head of Ally McBeal: IS FEMINISM DEAD? The implication was that somehow Ally McBeal's short skirts, whining about men, and fantasies about dancing babies represented the death of feminism—the end of the line for a movement that was about to celebrate its sesquicentennial. Calista Flockhart, who plays Ally McBeal, denied that her fictional alter ego represented the demise of feminism: “Ally McBeal is fictional. She doesn't represent anything. She's a TV character.”¹

1. Lynn Snowdon, “Larger Than Life,” *The Scotsman* 15 May 1999: 10+.

Flockhart remained at the center of a media melee later that fall when she arrived at the Emmys in a backless gown that showed very little back indeed. In a photograph that was reproduced on the cover of *People* magazine Flockhart raised an emaciated arm to wave at her fans. Her smile was positively skeletal, perched on a nexus of protruding neck and shoulder parts. This was not just skinny; this was scary—and Hollywood's gossip mongers called her on it: "Besieged by rumors, the embattled star admits she's lost a few pounds but denies she has an eating disorder."² Again Flockhart cried foul, this time saying such accusations hurt her feelings. "I felt special that night [at the Emmys], and it has really hurt my feelings that everyone has held up that picture and said it's shocking, horrible, disturbing."³ But the photograph *was* shocking, horrible, and disturbing; moreover, Flockhart's denial that she did not have an eating disorder was not a convincing guarantee that she didn't.

Flockhart's weight problems have been inevitably linked to her status as the poster child for postfeminism. Ironically, perhaps, in 1992 Flockhart starred in a Lifetime made-for-TV movie about bulimia. If fat is a feminist issue, then so is throwing up after we eat. A recent poll found that only 10% of American women are "completely satisfied" with their bodies. Four out of five said that the bodies of models and actresses made them feel worse about their own.⁴ The cause of these terrible feelings can be traced in part to the rise of the "mocktress" in Hollywood—those models who have become actresses and those actresses who have become models—a trend which has produced a disturbing crop of concentration-camp-esque physiques. While Jennifer Anniston, Laura Flynn Boyle, Gwyneth Paltrow and even Flockhart's costar, Portia d' Rossi, have all come under fire, Flockhart was the first to make the cover of *People* magazine for her skin-and-bones makeover.

Meanwhile, Ally McBeal has become a kind of shorthand—a way of referencing the feminist issues faced by Generation X Chromosome: women, like me, who were born between the early 1960s and the late 1970s. Torn between the more radical, bra-burning feminism of our mothers' generation and the sassy "girl power" rebellion of our younger sisters, we are faced with the problem of reclaiming feminism for ourselves.

In what follows I will explain how *Ally McBeal* became the lightning rod for a debate over the future of feminism. I will confess my own (initial) allegiance to the program, my growing dissatisfaction with it, as well as the lessons I have learned about generational feminism from paying attention to the controversy it sparked. I argue that feminism works better as a movement than it does as an ideology—and that it is anything but dead.

2. Karen S. Schneider, "Arguing Her Case," *People* 9 Nov. 1998: Cover.

3. Schneider, 96.

4. David Goldinar, "Women in Poll: Fat's the Way It Is," *New York Daily News* 24 Aug. 2000: 29.

Becoming a Fan

I MISSED THE FIRST eight weeks of *Ally McBeal* in 1997 because I was auditing a course on the Frankfurt School—that cranky, European cadre of theorists who excoriated American culture at mid-century. However, despite the dire warnings of Theodor Adorno about the dangers of mass culture, once my Monday nights were free I quickly became a fan. I liked the fact that McBeal was smart, sexy, and scattered. I liked her tiny lavender suits, her tendency to smack strangers on the street if they bumped into her by mistake, and her palpable loneliness. As a new professor in Pittsburgh, PA, I found that McBeal's life struck a chord: she was successful professionally, but miserable personally. She had it all—except a man. She knew she was not supposed to want one, and yet she did.

I also liked the supporting characters—McBeal's buxom black roommate, Renée, her openly sexist boss, Richard Fish, and her kooky co-council, John Cage. I never sympathized with her unrequited passion for her childhood-sweetheart-but-now-married-to-somebody-else Billy—he seemed as dumb as toast—but I understood what he represented: the safety of the past, the promise of a conventional future.

Ally McBeal made me realize that my “people”—highly educated, ambitious, heterosexual women in their thirties—were becoming victim to our own unexamined expectations. While I always assumed that I would have a career, I also assumed that I would be married by the age of 25. I finished college. I started graduate school. I dated, but it never panned out. Soon 25 came, and then 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33—with no sign of prince charming. While I was never one of those little girls to dream about my wedding day, when I hit 27 I suddenly found myself wishing for china patterns, bridal showers, and baby-naming books. I did not know where these desires came from; I did not know how to make them go away.

Ally McBeal named these longings and embraced their hypocrisy. When McBeal confessed to her roommate that she hated feeling pressure to get married, and that she really wanted to change society, but that she “just wanted to get married first,” I found myself thinking that the show's writer, David Kelley, had been thumbing through the diary collection I keep next to my bed.

I quickly found that I was not alone. At the height of my fan-aticism I logged onto a few *Ally McBeal* chat groups. In February of 1998 I subscribed to one group for seven hours and received over 100 messages. Here I found men and women talking about their marriages, their break-ups, their business suits, their sexual experiences, and their bible-study groups. They intertwined their discussions of their own lives and *Ally McBeal* in a seamless web, in the secret language of fan-speak. Over e-mail, I learned, everyone is a cultural critic.

But in my brief voyeuristic stint as a chat fan I was also reminded of my favorite cultural critic, Kenneth Burke, who argues that popular culture is “equipment for living.” We use stories and proverbs, he says, as “strategies” for “situations.” For thousands of fans, *Ally McBeal* had quickly become equipment for thinking about love, relationships, sex, and careers—a “strategy” for combating loneliness, boredom at work, and angst over single-womanhood.

By the second season, however, I was losing my ardor for the program—while Calista Flockhart was losing her curves. I applauded her for refusing to wear a padded bra during the second season, which contributed to her incredible shrinking appearance, but I was irritated that her character never seemed to evolve: she was forever dissatisfied, spurned or spurning, and continually stuck on the super-dud Billy. Not that I craved a happy ending, romantic-comedy style, but I did want McBeal to display some movement—some emotional growth—if only to affirm the possibility for change in my own life. Instead she reverted, her body becoming virtually prepubescent. Emotionally she remained stuck in her fantasies, stuck with her therapist who recommended she choose an upbeat “theme song” for her life, stuck with her crush on a man she could never have. (What a relief in the third season when Billy finally got a brain tumor and died.) I briefly transferred my allegiance to Renée, but when she finally had a brief relationship it was also with a married man. Bleh.

The Death of Feminism

MEANWHILE, as my enthusiasm was starting to wane, *Time* magazine was seizing upon Ally McBeal as the death of feminism; or, in other words, as the representative of a nascent, narcissistic, memoir-writing, “me”-oriented, “post-feminist” culture. In a story called “Feminism: It’s All About ME!” Ginia Bellafante complained about the narrowness of the concerns expressed by fictional characters like Ally McBeal and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones*:

[F]eminism at the very end of the century seems to be an intellectual undertaking in which the complicated, often mundane issues of modern life get little attention and the narcissistic ramblings of a few new media-anointed spokeswomen get far too much. You’ll have better luck becoming a darling of feminist circles if you chronicle your adventures in cybersex than if you churn out a tome on the glass ceiling.⁵

Bellafante may have a point—Ally McBeal may be no more a reliable feminist role model than Cinderella—even if they both have excellent taste in shoes. But Bellafante overlooks the fact that Ally McBeal’s problems are in some ways feminist problems: what do we do when we offer women the opportunity to become successful, ambitious, powerful actors in the public sphere without removing our presumption that women are incomplete without a man and natural caregivers?

Bellafante is especially critical of a feminist discourse that is preoccupied with sex. She homes in on Hollywood’s infatuation with *The Vagina Monologues*—a play that features a series of comic/tragic real-life stories about the female private parts. Whoopi Goldberg, Winona Ryder, Glenn Close and Calista Flockhart have all gotten in on the act. But aggressive sexuality might be a legitimate way to liberate women from the idea that fulfillment equals marriage. My mother’s generation, on the whole, found out the

5. Ginia Bellafante, “Feminism: It’s All About ME!” *Time* 29 June 1998: 57.

hard way that this was a lie. Unmarried women in my generation, ironically, long to prove our mothers wrong: if marriage does not equal fulfillment, then for Pete's sake let us get married so we can know for sure.

Meanwhile, to prove further her case that "media-anointed" spokeswomen are shallow, self-centered fools, Bellafante enlists Betty Friedan, who says "all this sex stuff is stupid.... The real problems have to do with women's lives and how you put together work and family."⁶ But then Bellafante turns around and argues that "feminism didn't start in the factory" but rather in "wood-paneled salons" and "suburban living rooms." This erases a powerful history of modern feminism recently unearthed by Daniel Horowitz. He shows that Betty Friedan cut her early feminist teeth in the 1940s as a journalist hired to promote union membership among women workers in the UAW. Modern feminism, it seems, did start in a factory. An auto factory, to be exact.⁷

And here, in fact, is the ground upon which Betty Friedan and Ally McBeal can meet. Modern feminism, like ancient feminism, is still about work: work in the home and work outside the home. The personal and the legal conflicts on *Ally McBeal* are all about what happens when men and women interact in the white-collar workplace. *Ally McBeal* plots revolve around sexual harassment, workplace romance, the legislation of marriage, resentful secretaries, female solidarity, and female back-stabbing. These are the problems of "how you put together work and family," but with a nineties, hyper-professionalized spin.

The Future of Feminism

HOWEVER, EVEN IF *Ally McBeal* addresses feminist issues, I am willing to take Calista Flockhart and David Kelley at their word: Ally McBeal, the character, is not a feminist role model and she was never meant to be. If we are truly in search of feminist role models on television, let's round up Amy Brenneman, who plays Amy on *Judging Amy*, Camryn Manheim, who plays the heavyset, volatile lawyer on *The Practice*, Marge Simpson, Oprah Winfrey, Allison Janney, who plays the White House Press Secretary C.J. on *The West Wing*, and Melina Kanakaredes, who plays Dr. Sydney Hansen on *Providence*. These women are tough, mostly single, good at their jobs, and stoic. Some of them are single mothers, some are too fat or too tall, some are cranky—even bitchy. If backed into a corner, they kick ass. These are women I would follow into battle.

And for me, feminism is a battle. In private moments I might turn to Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones for solace: through them I can feel sorry for myself when no one else is looking. But I do not look to them for a sense of where the next fight is going to be. Feminism, while it is always mired in cul-

6. Bellafante, 58.

7. Daniel Horowitz, "Rethinking Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America," *American Quarterly* March 1996: 1-42.

ture, is ultimately about political, social and economic equality. I am more interested in why Al Gore did not have a woman on his short list for V.P. than I am about cybersex. I am more interested in the fact that women still make 76 cents for every dollar made by a man than I am in how many Cosmopolitans are consumed by the ladies on *Sex in the City*. I am more interested in the fact that child care costs as much as most women make in a year than I am in whether or not “brown” is the “new black” for this fall’s fashion line-up. Culture matters, but it’s not my MTV that I’m crying for: I want my right to choose, my right to organize, and my ERA.

Ultimately, however, I see the recent flap over feminism as a good thing. At least *Time* magazine is still using the word. While I myself was reluctant to use it when I was in college, I now embrace it and urge my students to do the same. In fact, I recently taught a class at Carnegie-Mellon University called “The Feminist 1950s.” In this class I argued that the roots of “second wave” feminism could be detected in the movements of radical, prolabor women activists of the 1930s and 1940s. They organized meat boycotts, trade unions, housewife associations, birth-control clinics, and antiwar demonstrations. Some of them were involved in the short-lived Congress of American Women, a popular-front organization that sought to combine the issues of equal pay for equal work, affordable child care, and civil rights for black women. After pressure from the House Committee on Un-American activities the Congress of American Women disbanded—surviving only from 1945 to 1950.

But in the process of reading the HUAC report on this long-forgotten organization my students became inspired. They were impressed with the number of issues—still unresolved—that the Congress of American Women sought to address. Likewise, I was impressed with my students. Some of them were involved in a campus production of *The Vagina Monologues*. Some of them played brass instruments—and caught flak for being unladylike—in the CMU band. Others ran a Women’s Center radio program on campus. Some were leaders in their student professional organizations—like the Association of Women Engineers. Some of them were thinking about getting married—and they felt bad about it—like they were selling out. Most of them had no thoughts of marriage and children whatsoever. And most of them did not watch television—they were too busy with school. *Ally McBeal* did not have much relevance for their lives. In teaching this class I finally clarified my own views on the future of feminism. If Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and even Gloria Steinem are the “past” of feminism, I see my students as its future. They are still struggling with whether or not to call themselves feminists, but they are willing to struggle for the truth that “all men and women are created equal.” Through them I have realized that feminism is more meaningful to me as a political movement than it is as an ideology. And if *Ally McBeal* has helped me to name the problem, my students have helped me to name the solution. In my students I see the truth—and the life—of a feminist future.