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Cute, Smart and Confused: Postfeminist Icon or Patriarchal Play?

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Ally McBeal has become an icon of postfeminism, a tongue-in-cheek representative of the modern women. She is fawn-like and vulnerable (Laurence, 1998), yet supposedly resilient enough to withstand the many knocks that she receives as an improbably successful lawyer, improbably because she spends most of her time in a perpetual state of anxiety and insecurity over her spectacularly unsuccessful love life. As a single woman in her late twenties, her biological clock is constantly ticking away (Shalit, 1998), reminding her that true happiness resides in finding her soulmate, an other half that will make her 'whole'. Characterised as 'sassy' and successful, her human frailty manifests itself in a continual interior (and inferior) monologue of self-doubt and self-recrimination. American reviewers have called her the Mary Tyler Moore of the 1990s (Kingston, 1998), an irresistible mix of strength and weakness, a highly polished veneer concealing an equally appealing inner core of cute chaos (Laurence, 1998).

This paper explores the construction of Ally McBeal, originally a television program devised to satisfy the need for more 'women-friendly fare' on television (Shalit, 1998). It questions whether this quirky, soul-searching, women-child celebrates or undermines constructions of womanhood in our so-called postfeminist era. Drawing on an analysis of five episodes of the Ally McBeal television series together with summaries of forty-five episodes, the paper deconstructs the image of Ally McBeal. In doing so, it shows how male constructions of flawed, helpless femininity continue to thrive. Her creator David E. Kelley seemingly delights in dealing out setbacks and chastisements far in excess to Ally's trivial misdemeanours.

During the series Ally endures ritualistic humiliations and indignities, calamities all made comical so that we, the audience, can laugh along with her creator, David E. Kelley. It is widely speculated that Kelley based the series around his wife Michelle Pfeiffer, a rumour that is reinforced by the physical resemblance between the two actresses.

In portraying a woman who is glamorously fragile, irresistibly anxious and in need of being taken care of, Kelley may be revealing more about archetypal male fantasies of womanhood than about the realities of being a woman at the dawning of the twenty-first century. This insidious message of female insecurity and confusion, embellished and almost caricatured in the persona of Ally McBeal, has a largely female audience. Taking a feminist perspective this paper questions whether popular images of single womanhood have devolved into a composite of female self-obsession and frivolous neuroses (Time, 1998), images that are still a patriarchal play on feminine weakness.
REFERENCES


Governing Brands and the Negotiation of Sexual Identities

Benoît Heilbrunn, E.M. Lyon

The objective of this paper is to illustrate the power of contemporary brands in the shaping of sexual roles and identities in occidental societies. Such brands may be said to be ‘governing brands’ in the Foucauldian sense, that is, they impose some kind of guidance or even control on the individual’s self perception as well as on the definition of social roles (Foucault, 1977).

Drawing on examples of current advertisements, the paper shows how these brands, that are especially visible in the perfume, cosmetics and clothing