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“Having it Ally”: Popular Television (Post-)Feminism

Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read

Introduction

The popular prime-time US television series Ally McBeal has been at the centre of debates about, and important in defining, what it means to be a “liberated woman” in the late 1990s. In this paper, we explore the programme’s position in relation to shifting, historically specific configurations of the relationship between feminism and femininity. We argue that the show can be usefully understood in relation to a specific formulation of the term “postfeminist” emerging in recent work by British feminist media and cultural studies scholars. There is a growing body of research on television perceived to be “postfeminist” (see Serafina Batthrick 1984; Camera Obscura 1994–5; Bonnie J. Dow 1996; Amanda D. Lotz 2001; Judith Mayne 1997; Elspeth Probyn 1990). To begin, we want to situate Ally McBeal in relation to key arguments about the development of postfeminist prime-time programming made by Dow (1996) in order to suggest the ways in which Ally McBeal—the show and the character—are representative of a new moment in the history of feminism.

Dow sets up three modes of postfeminist US prime-time television of the 1980s and early 1990s, in which she argues that engagement with feminist politics can be found. With regard to the first—the hybrid “professional serial drama” (e.g., L.A. Law)—she argues that while it is here that the impact of second-wave feminism can be more keenly felt, the main conflict for female characters is between career and personal happiness (1996: 97–8). She also suggests that the same conflict underpins the situation comedy Murphy Brown (featuring a female television news anchor by the same name)—the “personification of postfeminism.” The show suggests that professional success and personal happiness are mutually exclusive, as are feminist and feminine identities, neither of which are “complete” alone (1996: 145).

The second mode Dow refers to as “postfeminist family television” (e.g., thirtysomething). This mode offers an idealised vision of family life and working motherhood, and an underlying assumption that feminist goals have been achieved, and that women can happily “have it all.” Thirdly, Dow argues that the “sisterhood” show Designing Women, which despite and partly through its “feminine” setting has a clear feminist agenda, offers a “postfeminist nirvana” where women have the best of both worlds (1996: 107). Through its blurring of the boundaries between home and work, Dow argues that it undermines patriarchal capitalism, a system which “insists on keeping separate, gendered, and differently valued” the two spheres (Alexander Doty 1993, cited in Dow 1996: 108). The show also suggests that feminist women might not necessarily fit
the negative stereotype of the “masculinised” second-wave feminist which underpins postfeminism. This is also the case, she argues, in Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman, which values the extension and use of private, “feminine” skills in the public realm. Like Designing Women, this show works against stereotypes through the representation of its central female character as both “feminist” and “feminine.” Dow values challenges to stereotyped representations of powerful feminist women and she also supports the integration and deconstruction of discourses of private and public. However, “traditional femininity” remains a problem for her. She negotiates this difficulty through the construction of an acceptably “feminist femininity,” epitomised in her discussion of the operation of traditional “women’s talk” in Designing Women as a prototype of feminist consciousness raising (1996: 105).

In many ways Ally McBeal, in its representation of a white, middle-class, single, successful, professional woman in her late twenties/early thirties making her way in a man’s world and looking for love and mental health, sits happily within Dow’s category of postfeminist professional serial drama. We believe that the show is distinctive, however, in that it does not centre on a conflict between career and personal life, but instead on the struggle to hold them together. Indeed, as our analysis demonstrates, in Ally McBeal, personal and professional life is highly integrated. The distinction and conflict between public and private and feminist and feminine identities is irrevocably deconstructed and integrated, in a way which Dow suggests elsewhere in the book is potentially subversive of both stereotyped representations of feminism and the gendered division between public and private (1996: 121). Ally has a successful career, but her personal life, unlike Murphy Brown’s, is filled with warmth and friendship as well as loneliness and struggle. Ally McBeal offers a clear engagement with the politics of second-wave feminism and yet the feminist credentials of the show and its successful yet vulnerable (anti-)heroine have been repeatedly called into question, precisely, as we argue below, because of the way in which these binaries are contested by the show.

Ally McBeal has perhaps generated more column inches than any other television show of recent years. The debate the programme has engendered in the press centred largely on whether Ally McBeal is a role model or heroine for women in the 1990s. The headline of a review in the British “mid-market” tabloid newspaper, the Daily Mail, in the show’s first season asked, “Should this mini-skirted neurotic be a role model for the 90s?” (Lina Das 1998: 15). Journalists in the broadsheet newspaper, the Independent on Sunday, similarly asked, “Is Ally McBeal a nineties heroine? Or a grotesque creation of male fantasy?” (Kate Le Vann and Glenda Cooper 1998). As these headlines suggest, it was the programme’s combination of feminine discourses (the construction of Ally as a mini-skirted male fantasy) with feminist discourses (Ally as a feminist role model)—in the words of Suzanne Moore (1998), the programme’s attempt to “have it both ways”—that was often deemed problematic. More often than not, the conclusion reached was that “Having it Ally doesn’t work” (David Aaronovitch 1998).

Nevertheless, the very fact that the debate was cast in such terms suggests that there was some engagement with feminist issues going on in the programme. The incident that served as a focus at the beginning of the first season was Ally’s resignation from her job after a senior colleague sexually harasses her (she
is then hired by Fish, Cage, and Associates, the law firm where she works throughout the series to date). This locates the programme within a broadly feminist framework. As we discuss in more detail below, many of the subsequent legal cases dealt with on the programme have a feminist origin. Indeed, the programme’s depiction of a single, independent career woman would not have been possible without the changes brought about by second-wave feminism in the 1970s. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the programme is inconceivable without feminism. However, discussions of the programme in the UK and US press tended to read it as either a backlash text or as an articulation of a postfeminist sensibility and thus as a disavowal of feminism.

As this suggests, and as Amanda D. Lotz has observed:

Confusion and contradiction mark understandings of feminism in US popular culture at the turn of the 21st century. Surveying the terrain of both feminist theory and popular discussions of feminism, we seem to have entered an alternate language universe where words can simultaneously connote a meaning and its opposite. (2001: 105)

In what follows, we attempt to address this “confusion and contradiction” with reference to *Ally McBeal* in two key ways: firstly, through an analytical survey of the contradictory ways in which understandings of (post-) feminism were mobilised and constructed in discussions of the show in the UK press, and secondly, through an analysis of the contradictions that inform the show itself and its attempt to “have it all.” In many respects, then, our project is similar to that of Lotz and we would direct the reader to her excellent overview of the trajectory of feminist forms in US television and of US feminist television criticism. However, while the definitions and distinctions Lotz teases out in relation to understandings of postfeminism are undoubtedly invaluable, we nevertheless have some disagreements with her arguments and approach. Below we outline these disagreements in some detail and, in so doing, hope to point up the situated, local nature of our reading of *Ally McBeal* by locating it within what we believe to be an important shift in feminist theorizing of popular culture developed in recent British work on (post-)feminism and popular culture.

Our first challenge to Lotz, then, concerns her oversight of this work. In other words, while Lotz attempts to distinguish between US and UK understandings of postfeminism, discussion of the latter only references a small proportion of the extensive work of one British feminist, Angela McRobbie. In so doing, Lotz overlooks a significant and growing body of work in both British media and cultural studies and British film and television studies on postfeminism. The work of Charlotte Brunsdon is crucial here, not only in terms of its contribution to debates about feminism and television (1997, 2000), but also in its influential contribution to British debates about postfeminism (see Brunsdon 1997). Along with the work of McRobbie (1993, 1994, 1996, 1997), Brunsdon’s research in this area has influenced recent studies by British feminists writing on post- and popular feminism (see Joanne Hollows 2000; Rachel Moseley 2002; Jacinda Read 2000). This, then, is another position, complementary to those set out by Lotz in her survey. It is in this respect that we offer a situated reading and critique as a necessary addendum and corrective to Lotz’s arguments.
There are two further points of divergence between Lotz’s arguments and our own. Firstly, Lotz argues that postfeminist texts “deconstruct binary categories of gender and sexuality, instead viewing these categories as flexible and indistinct” (2001: 116). However, she does not extend this argument to the binary opposition between feminism and femininity which informed much early second-wave feminist thought and which, we will argue, also informed, in a simplified and stereotypical form, the reception of *Ally McBeal* in the British press. Indeed, Lotz argues that “the figures of transgendered, transexual, and bisexual individuals illustrate the way culturally created categories including woman, man, heterosexual, and homosexual can be contested” (2001: 116). We would add to this that the identity “feminist” is also culturally constructed and therefore equally open to contestation in postfeminist texts. As Hilary Hinds and Jackie Stacey have observed:

The figure of the feminist has been widely represented in the British media for so long as to have become one of the most familiar symbols in the contemporary political landscape and cultural imagination. Whilst the mainstream press continues to circulate the stock-in-trade clichés of bra-burners and ruthless career-driven superwomen, these stereotypes increasingly operate in tension with a broader media discourse about a potential compatibility between the previously polarised categories of feminism and femininity. (2001: 153)

As Hinds and Stacey highlight in an endnote (2001: 171 n.2), the shifting relationship between feminism and femininity in popular culture and the way in which this relationship is no longer understood or represented as necessarily in conflict has been a central focus of the work of the British feminists referenced above. In particular, it has informed their understanding of postfeminism. This brings us on to our final engagement with Lotz’s arguments.

As the subtitle of our paper suggests, it is the popularly available meanings of feminism, the way in which terms such as feminism and postfeminism, and the identities associated with them, are constructed by and circulate within popular discourses that interests us and other British feminists working in the area. As Lotz observes: “Currently, the general populace mainly encounters postfeminism in articles that appear in magazines such as *Time*, where postfeminism is ill-defined and the reader is left to assume postfeminism implies anti-feminism, or after feminism” (2001: 114). Lotz’s project, then, is to identify a more precise academic/theoretical definition of postfeminism that can then be mapped on to popular forms. For us, however, these popular articles are important precisely because it is here, in popular discourses, rather than academic/theoretical ones, that the “general populace” mainly encounters feminism and postfeminism. As such, it is these popular discourses, rather than academic/theoretical ones, that inform both the construction and reading of popular texts such as *Ally McBeal*. It is therefore essential to unpack the way in which these terms operate in such discourses rather than simply dismissing them as “ill-defined” (or stereotypical). Indeed, we would argue that feminism is never available in some pure or unmediated form. The distinctions Lotz draws between theoretical/authentic/real and popular definitions of feminism/postfeminism are therefore rather artificial. For example, the popular definitions of postfeminism Lotz identifies in the quote above are broadly coincident with some of the understandings of postfeminism she identifies in the work of US feminists, particularly that of
Andrea L. Press (1991) and Tania Modleski (1991). This suggests that the relationship between popular and academic understandings of postfeminism is more complex than she is willing to allow for. Consequently, her attempt to identify a theoretical or authentic model of postfeminism which can then be mapped on to popular forms risks being read as a reductive “attempt to establish a fit between [popular] forms and a pre-existing agenda” (Yvonne Tasker 1991: 95).

In contrast, British work on postfeminism has understood the relationship between feminism and popular culture to be more complex and contradictory than a simple mapping of theoretical positions (equated with a “real” or “authentic” feminism) on to popular texts. Inasmuch, it has contested the tendency to privilege feminism as an authentic “outside” of popular culture which can make political interventions into it. Thus, rather than positing an authentic feminism which exists outside of popular culture (and can be mapped on to it), we explore the ways in which popular culture (specifically, one television programme and newspaper reviews of it) functions as one of the sites on, through, and against which the meanings of feminism are produced and understood. It is for this reason that we offer a discussion of newspaper reviews of Ally McBeal, rather than a discussion of postfeminist theory, as the discursive context for our analysis of the programme. Moreover, since it is the British critical and political context which informs our reading of Ally McBeal, viewed on British television in Britain, we have chosen to focus specifically on the debate about feminism the show engendered in the British press. In this respect, our approach has affinities with Julia Hallam’s discussion of Working Girl in which she uses British newspaper reviews to locate the film “within feminism’s contemporary discourses of femininity” (1994: 186). Within this context and the context of British work on postfeminism, we explore how such discourses structure and inform the ways in which terms such as postfeminism and backlash are circulating and being understood within the public and popular sphere. Moreover, following Hallam, we go on to explore the ways in which the relations between the popular press, popular texts, and consumption might serve to explicate “the pleasure relationship between female audiences and the images of women they consume” (1994: 188).

**Ally McBeal as a backlash text**

Feminists have identified the 1980s and 1990s as a period of backlash against feminism. One of the ways in which this backlash worked was by suggesting that it was feminism, particularly its manifestation in the single, childless, career woman, rather than women’s continuing inequality, that was making them unhappy. Thus, across a range of media texts there were claims that “Professional women are suffering ‘burn-out’ and succumbing to an ‘infertility epidemic’. Single women are grieving from a ‘man shortage’... childless women are ‘depressed and confused’ and their ranks are swelling ... unwed women are ‘hysterical’ and crumbling under a ‘profound crisis of confidence’” (Susan Faludi 1992: 1–2). The message of Ally McBeal, many argued, was similar. Lina Das, writing in the Daily Mail, for example, argued that the programme “taps into neuroses—or perceived neuroses—of the single, childless, thirtysomething career woman” (1998: 15). Similarly, Sharon Churcher of the Mail on Sunday claimed that “the series aims to show that childlessness is such an unnatural
state that it can turn even the most high-powered career woman into a helpless obsessive” (1998: 43). Suzanne Moore, on the other hand, argued in the Independent that the programme suggests “that successful working women are inevitably unhappy beings who just need a good man to pull themselves together again” (1998).

Certainly there is much to support such a reading in the series itself. Ally is, after all, by her own admission, “a mess” who is rarely shown to be happy or fulfilled. This unhappiness can be traced back to a flashback in the first episode in which Ally decides to choose her career over her true love Billy. Back in the present day, as Ally stares wistfully out of the window of her office, her voiceover gives this flashback a distinctly backlash gloss. She says, “So here I am, the victim of my own choices.” Moreover, it can be argued that Ally’s single status is shown to have turned her into an hysterical neurotic who, because she has repressed her femininity and maternal instincts in favour of a career, hallucinates a dancing baby. Clearly these hallucinations are intended as a manifestation—as Ally’s best friend, Renée, points out—of the relentless “tick, tick, tick” of Ally’s biological clock. Although Ally explicitly rejects this interpretation of her hallucinations later in the same episode (“Nothing’s ticking in me, I don’t tick”), the slogan that advertises the series—“Single, successful, falling apart”—certainly seems to support the backlash reading. In other words, it suggests that feminism in the shape of a career and independence have not brought Ally happiness or fulfilment. Only a good man, it is implied, can do that.

**Ally McBeal as a postfeminist text**

If the backlash reading argued that Ally is shown to have pursued feminist goals at the expense of feminine ones, the postfeminist reading suggests that Ally is too feminine to be truly feminist. Thus Sharon Churcher argued in the Mail on Sunday that:

> While early feminists assured women that their happiness depended on making choices, with the recommended path being a career that allowed one the “freedom” to live unfettered by a husband or family, [Calista Flockhart] is a so-called “post-feminist.”

> Post-feminists are all for having a career. But they say a woman is incomplete unless she indulges her ‘natural’ urges to use her femininity at every opportunity—in the boardroom as well as the bedroom—to land a mate. Women who try to compete with men on their own terms will end up single, unloved and fraught with the sort of neuroses that purportedly make Ally a bag of barely controlled nerves. (1998: 43)

Reviews of the programme in the press thus emphasised Ally’s clothes and appearance, particularly her mini-skirts, in order to argue that the programme was not feminist but instead, in the words of Lina Das, an “affront to women’s rights” which has “upset feminists” (1998: 15). Das’s Daily Mail review is particularly indicative of this kind of argument: “Thirtysomething Ally is a successful lawyer—although you wouldn’t guess it from her improbably short skirts and impossibly complicated love life” (1998: 15). In Das’s review, then, the signifiers of femininity (short skirts, heterosexual romance, the obsession with
appearance) are represented as in conflict with the signifiers of feminism ("successful lawyer," high-flying career).

What links both the backlash reading and the postfeminist reading as they were articulated in the British press, therefore, is a belief that femininity and feminism are mutually exclusive, that you cannot be feminine and feminist. An excess of one of these characteristics must inevitably be at the expense of the other. Thus for Glenda Cooper, writing in the *Independent on Sunday*, Ally’s excessive femininity, articulated through her excessively short skirts, is inextricably linked with her lack of feminist credentials. Says Cooper, “Her skirts have more depth than her character—and they are rising to an ‘eye-popping 14 in.’ (I quote) in the next series, so goodness knows where her IQ will end up” (Le Vann and Cooper 1998). Thus, for these writers “having it Ally doesn’t work” because “having it all,” understood within the context of a popular conception of second-wave feminism (which saw femininity as the root of women’s oppression), more often than not means giving things up (the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual romance).

Indeed, the constant references to “traditional feminists,” “early feminists,” and “radical feminists” in Sharon Churcher’s (1998) review should, we think, alert us to the periodisation at work here—a periodisation which was given a telling visual expression in a June 1998 *Time* cover story. The cover featured a row of black and white photographs of the faces of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem (Ginia Bellafante 1998). At the end of this row of some of the key activists and thinkers of first- and second-wave feminism was a colour photograph of the face of Calista Flockhart, bearing the caption “Is Feminism Dead?” The contrasting use of black and white and colour photography here served not only to give Anthony, Friedan, and Steinem an ominous deathly pallor, but to suggest that these figures somehow represented an “authentic” (black and white realism) feminism and Flockhart a Technicolor travesty.

Here, then, postfeminism is operating as “a journalistic or popular periodisation in which ‘women’s lib’ is somehow over in the mid-1980s” (Brunsdon 1997: 85). In this way, such understandings of postfeminism function to “reduce[s] all feminisms, and their long histories, to that one 1970s movement” (Brunsdon 1997: 102), a movement which is, moreover, understood as structured by the opposition between feminism and femininity. What we want to suggest is that both this popular periodisation and the opposition on which it depends, nevertheless, offer useful ways of understanding the articulation of popular television postfeminism in *Ally McBeal*. In other words, if Ally McBeal is postfeminist, it is not because she represents the death of feminism, but because she represents a period that is post-1970s feminism. Ally’s popular articulation of this post-1970s feminist moment, we would argue, is particularly apparent in the way in which she, and indeed the programme itself, represents a re-evaluation of the opposition between feminism and femininity which informed much 1970s feminist thought. Clearly, the grouping of three feminist activists/theorists against a television personality also raises the issue of the “celebrifying” of feminism and thus points towards the way in which the postfeminist moment, as we understand it, is also a popular feminist moment.¹

Indeed, given the programme’s scant disregard for many of the central tenets of 1970s feminism, it is not really surprising that veteran 1970s feminists such
as Elaine Showalter should dislike Ally and describe her as “an anorexic self-indulgent little munchkin” (cited in Jenny McCartney 1998: 38). Showalter’s 31-year-old daughter, however, loves the show (1998: 38); and this, after all, is at whom the programme is aimed—the lucrative 18–34 female market, a generation that has grown up taking for granted the feminist victories won by their mothers and thus for whom feminism exists at the level of popular commonplace rather than at the level of theoretical abstraction. This is a generation who have found that despite the best efforts of feminists, you cannot just wish femininity away, relegate it to the dustbin of history as the bad “other” of feminism. This is a generation for whom “having it all” means not giving things up (the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual romance) but struggling to reconcile our feminist desires with our feminine desires. In other words, as Angela McRobbie has argued:

The old binary opposition which put femininity at one end of the political spectrum and feminism at the other is no longer an accurate way of conceptualising young female experience. Maybe it never was. It is no longer a question of those who know (the feminists, the academics) against those who do not, or who are the “victims” of ideology. (1993: 409)

Yet, as we hope to have shown, this opposition repeatedly informs reviews of Ally McBeal and perhaps finds its clearest expression in British journalist Natasha Walter’s discussion of the programme. Walter’s argument rests on contrasting the tough, power-dressed, successful women—figures such as Ripley (Aliens) and Sarah Connor (Terminator 2)—who were the heroines of 1980s film and television with what she describes as the “anti-heroines” of 1990s popular culture—figures such as Bridget Jones and Ally McBeal. The latter women are, in Walter’s words, “distinguished more by [their] worldly failures than [their] successes, and ... [are] looking, usually unsuccessfully, for love” (1999: 5). This contrast between the tough heroine of the 1980s and the “accident-prone anti-heroines” of the 1990s generates a familiar set of oppositions: toughness versus softness, career versus romance, success versus failure, and ultimately, yet implicitly, feminist versus feminine.

A comparison with the press reaction to another female television lawyer of the 1990s, Anna, from the British television series, This Life, is revealing of what might be partially at stake here. As Kate Le Vann points out, in a rare defence of Ally McBeal, “it seems unfair that the same dress-sense that made This Life’s Anna strident and ballsy makes Ally a subservient wimp” (1998). Indeed, the similarities between Anna and Ally do not end with their profession and dress-sense; both also spend a large proportion of their time pining for lost loves (Miles and Billy, respectively). There are, however, important differences both in the visual portrayal of Anna and Ally and in the televisual conventions employed by each series. Firstly, despite similarities in dress-sense, Anna has a certain hardness, a certain toughness, inscribed in both her physique and her characterisation. Although both actresses are slender, Anna’s body is hard, angular, and boyish while Ally’s is vulnerable, soft, and “ girly” (which is often expressed through a lack of physical co-ordination). While Ally is slight, Anna is tall; while Ally’s hair is long and feminine (and often curly in series three), Anna’s is short and masculine. While Ally is softly spoken, Anna has a brusque Scottish accent. Finally, while Ally is so clean living
she cannot even bring herself to take a prescribed anti-depressant, Anna drinks, smokes and takes illegal drugs. Anna, in short, is one of the boys, and for a generation of women who have grown up (misguidedly) thinking this is what feminism is all about, Anna clearly makes a better role model than Ally.

The second difference lies in the televisual conventions employed by each series. In other words, while This Life relies on a “gritty,” “rough,” realist aesthetic, consisting largely of hand-held and moving camera, which is seen as typically “British,” Ally McBeal relies on fantasy sequences, special effects, and a “glossy,” “sanitised,” “Hollywood” aesthetic. That such aesthetics can be seen as not only nationally specific, but also gendered masculine and feminine, respectively, suggests that British reviewers’ distaste for the programme’s sexual politics was inextricably bound up in their distaste for its (feminine) aesthetics. For example, in a review that explicitly set itself within the debate about the cultural hegemony of US television, Peter Paterson of the Daily Mail described Ally McBeal as an “embarrassingly twee exercise in whimsy, with Ms. Flockhart’s highly-mannered style of acting setting my teeth on edge, and storylines bolstered by cute little fantasy scenes purporting to illustrate our heroine’s true feelings” (1998: 53). As we discuss below, it is on a complex terrain between fantasy and reality that the show negotiates the relationship between feminism (realism) and femininity (fantasy).

Despite differences in emphasis, then, reviews of Ally McBeal in the British press constructed a reading of the show that was committed to understanding the programme in a way that contributed to and maintained a historically specific opposition between feminism and femininity. As we have suggested, it is within this context that the production and consumption of the show needs to be understood. The opposition and its construction in the media, for example, informed the programme’s appeal to a generation of women who are rejecting “a particular image of the feminist which they associate either with an older generation or else with a stereotypically unfeminine image” (McRobbie 1993: 409). Yet, while responses to the show offered by women interviewed for a Channel 4 documentary, McBeal Appeal (1999), were clearly informed by this opposition between feminism and femininity, they ultimately constructed negotiated readings of it. For example, singer Vonda Shepherd argued that “just because you want to get married and have kids doesn’t mean you’re not a feminist.” British television presenter, Mariella Frostrup, claimed that “Ally is as much a feminist as any woman working today and trying to combine all the different roles.” If Ally McBeal is understandable in terms of such oppositions, then, it is in the way in which it can be seen to deconstruct them by attempting to hold together the apparently incompatible. Indeed, we would argue that it is in this attempt to “have it all,” to deconstruct the opposition between feminism and femininity, that the particular appeal of Ally McBeal lies. When feminists criticise the show for appealing “to angst-filled twenty and thirtysomethings, instead of the beginning of a new sexual revolution,” then, we think they are missing the point (Churcher 1998: 43). If Ally appeals to angst-filled twenty- and thirty-somethings it does so because it effectively dramatises the problems, struggles, and contradictions facing contemporary young women. A famous scene from the series in which Ally tells Renée that if women got together, they could change the world for the better perhaps best illustrates this.
Ally goes on to insist that she really does want to change the world, but then adds, “I just want to get married first.” *Ally McBeal* is thus television that speaks to certain women (middle class, professionals) about their experiences of being female, feminist, and feminine in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In what follows, we want to explore the show’s first two seasons as representing a significant shift in the terrain of prime-time television feminism. *Ally McBeal* is a contradictory show which, like its heroine, wants to “have it all” in a number of ways. To illustrate this, we investigate the three key tensions which structure the show in its “postfeminist” negotiation of them: firstly, the tension between feminism and femininity (including the way in which the show addresses feminist themes and issues within the context of an overarching feminine address); secondly, tensions between fantasy and reality; and finally, tensions between public and private.

If the popular articulation of the opposition between feminism and femininity informed the consumption of the programme by its viewers, it also informed the construction of the programme by its producers. Official discourses surrounding the programme studiously avoided claiming the show as feminist. Instead, the preferred description was “politically incorrect” and “an equal-opportunity offender” (Tim Appelo 1999: 6). However, the programme itself was adept at incorporating the discourses and debates that it generated in the press into individual episodes, often appearing to quote from them almost verbatim. For example, in one episode, Ally tells a client, “I am the last person who should be giving advice of the heart to anybody. I mean look at me? I am a strong, working career girl who feels empty without a man. The National Organization for Women, they have a contract out on my head.” In another episode, she tells Renée, “You know, I had a dream that they put me on the cover of *Time* magazine as ‘The Face of Feminism.’” In this way, *Ally McBeal* has been quite self-conscious in its mobilisation of discourses around the “posting” of second-wave feminism in response to its often vituperative critical reception in the media.

In a more sustained way, though, the show has engaged directly with key issues of second-wave feminism, raising these in what is clearly a “postfeminist” context. In other words, the show offers a set of representations which come after, but which are not necessarily opposed to, the values of 1970s feminism. On the contrary, *Ally McBeal* offers a dramatisation of the coming together of “traditional” feminist values with a historically and materially different experience of being young and female. This raises questions about the continued relevance of feminism to the lives of its central female characters and offers an exploration of the tensions and contradictions of being female, feminine, and feminist. The show consistently addresses issues that have traditionally been of concern to the women’s movement, including female sexuality; the consequences for women of choosing family over career; the tyranny of feminine self-presentation. Issues of equal opportunities in the workplace and sexual harassment predominate in the legal cases in each episode, and also structure the inter-personal relationships of the show’s central professional community.

At the same time, the show repeatedly signals the potential difficulties faced by Ally and her colleague-friends in confronting the issues raised by the legacies of 1970s feminism that they enjoy—for instance, increased sexual freedom and the foregrounding of female desire and successful careers. The show engages repeatedly with the myth that “a sexually attractive woman cannot have
credibility.” Ally can mobilise sexual power as a way of fending off a suitor’s unwanted attentions by pretending to be a lesbian. However, the moments where Ally and Georgia, and Ally and Elaine kissed were signalled as key moments of titillating viewing in the advance marketing of the programme on British television trailers. Similarly, at the beginning of the second season, Ally’s lesson to Georgia in how to really enjoy the first coffee of the day was given through the analogy of dissatisfying sex and how to take control and guarantee pleasure. This sequence was, however, presented mainly through extreme close-ups of the two women’s mouths licking the foam from the cups to the sounds of their signs of enjoyment, inter-cut with close-ups of Billy and Richard as voyeurs looking on with jaws dropped. Again, this moment was used by Channel 4 to trail the second season of *Ally McBeal* on British television. At such moments, the double bind of the postfeminist position can be keenly felt—female pleasure on female terms foregrounded is always open to patriarchal recuperation. It is Ally’s right to wear skirts as short as she likes, but it will be seen as professionally inappropriate because it is sexually provocative. While we learn in the first episode that Judge Hopkins is “not hot on pants suits for women,” it is also suggested that while Ally has a right to dress as she pleases, her short skirts also mean that she is collaborating in this kind of outdated sexism. At the same time, Ally objects to being used for her looks: being required to “smile at people,” and to “hav[e] a drink to get ahead.” Women also look at and use men as sexual objects, and the show has Ally feel guilty about acting (sexually) “like a man.” At the same time, the contradictions of the postfeminist position are addressed in the context of “girly” pleasures of female companionship and feminine adornment, and desires for love, romance, marriage, and children.

**Feminism and “serious hair”**

The opening sequence of the very first episode is significant for the way in which it juxtaposes “Ally then” with “Ally now.” As a lovelorn law student, Ally had long, wavy hair. As the memory fades back to the present day, we notice that Ally has “got serious”—her hair is straight, sleek, shorter—and she wears a business suit. In later seasons, Ally’s hair returns to its “natural” wavy state, at the point where the show begins to cast serious doubts about her mental health.\(^2\) Equally, Ling criticises Judge Cone—“Whipper”—for not having serious hair (hers is big, blonde, curly, and teased). While the show is self-conscious about its feminist agenda, it has equally drawn upon problematic social discourses such as the association between femininity, softness, and lack of professionalism, to subtly indict its female characters in later seasons. The show has been uncertain of its own position, and this uncertainty is repeatedly articulated through such tensions and contradictions. This, then, is the first key tension addressed in the show: holding on to a feminist position in a world where both feminism’s battle is understood to be won, but in which conventionally feminine pleasures and attributes are valued by its female characters and some members of its audience.

The second key tension of the show is in the complex space between reality and fantasy, and closely related to this, the profoundly postfeminist re-configuration of the distinction between public and private. Despite the show’s generic alliances with fantasy (through, for example, the use of the structures of
the musical and of special effects) and the critique of the show’s lavish visual style, supporters interviewed on McBeal Appeal (1999) discussed their viewing pleasures by recourse to discourses of realism. Partly what we are doing here is exploring the ways in which recourse to the fantastic is used to articulate the real through the external and public expression of Ally’s subjectivity and emotional landscape. Despite the media critique of the show in relation to feminism and ideas of realism, Ally McBeal seems to speak to something about a particular experience of being female, feminine, and feminist, single, successful and thirty-something in the late 1990s. In what follows, we explore that interpellation.

**Ally McBeal: Television for (Liberated) Women**

*Ally McBeal* is clearly constructed and positioned as programming with an address to a female viewer. This is a very precisely imagined female viewer: modern, “liberated,” single, professional, and feminine. It attempts to reach this audience in a number of ways:

- in its address to feminist themes and concerns;
- through its position in the British television schedule;
- through the positioning of the text by interstitial material such as sponsorship sequences and advertising selections; and
- through the organisation of the *mise-en-scène*.

While it could be argued that the show reproduces the exclusions of liberal feminism in its individualist agenda and focus on traditional white, middle-class femininity, in later seasons, which we do not discuss here, the show extends its range of representations. In so doing, it encourages the “rejection of the monolithic definitions of femininity or feminism, allowing multiple opportunities for female identification” (Dow 1996: 119).

UK television’s Channel 4 had as its original remit in the early 1980s to commission and “publish” programming that would explore new areas aesthetically, break with convention, and cater to previously under-addressed audiences. Wednesday night on Channel 4 was for a period regarded as “girls’ night.” *She’s Gotta Have It*, an upbeat fashion programme for “real women,” aired at 8:00 p.m. and explored the pleasures and pains of fashion, shopping, and beauty culture. *ER* followed for a long time at 9:00 p.m., with *Ally McBeal* at 10:00 p.m. Late night programming included *Sex and the City* and the British anthology series *Love in the 21st Century* (both of the latter, like *Ally*, addressing issues of love, sex, and work—the difficulties of having it all—in the lives of thirty-something women). *Ally McBeal* was for a period sponsored by the financial company Egg. The pre-credit sponsorship trailer represented the perceived addressee of the show—a thirty-something professional, single woman in a smart business suit rushing home after work to her fashionable urban apartment which, nevertheless, had a girly edge with flower-filled window boxes and pastel decor. Later, BeMe.com, an online magazine for women, sponsored the show. The sponsorship trailer featured phrases like “be single,” “be wild,” “be gay,” accompanied by images of “liberated” women expressing those edicts as well as the words, “Be whatever you want to be.” Commercial breaks similarly are an indicator of the perceived addressee of the show.
Many advertisements (e.g. Ikea, Carphone Warehouse) centred on the romantic formation of the heterosexual couple in conjunction with ideas about what it means for women to be independent: living alone, furnishing one’s own home, owning a car and a mobile phone.

Perhaps the most significant and interesting way, however, in which Ally McBeal announces itself as television for liberated women is through its sustained inscription of a female subjectivity and feminine emotional landscape at the heart of the show. John Ellis has argued the following in relation specifically to the public service remit of the new landscape of British television and the series Absolutely Fabulous:

Drama and entertainment derive their power from their displaced working through of current and perennial anxieties ... Television is often at its best in this process when it does not confront social problems directly, and does not seek to articulate a particular position in a programmatic way. Here, finally, [in Absolutely Fabulous] is a feminist sensibility expressed in a way that allows a broad range of people to enter into it without quite knowing what it is ... The series lets us into the emotional complexes of its characters; it allows us to experience, within a situation comedy format, what women feel like in a public role, women aggressively uncertain about the nature of their identities. (Ellis 2000: 87–8)

This is also the power and the nature of the address of Ally McBeal.

The show’s feminine address is achieved formally in a number of ways. Firstly, it is accomplished through the conjoined use of voice-over, music, and the visual expression of Ally’s inner thoughts and feelings. These are expressed through fantasy sequences that, while they often use special effects, nevertheless are not signalled as manifestly unreal, but instead as emotionally real. The opening of the first episode of Season One establishes a number of key themes and introduces the textually rich articulation of Ally’s interiority. We are introduced to Ally as she stands at her office window, looking out over the city—a position to which the series returns her repeatedly. Over this image, Vonda Shepherd, the singer in the downstairs bar who sings Ally’s feelings in the series, sings, “The boy next door.” We also have access to Ally’s thoughts through an interior monologue, which sparks memories of her youthful relationship with Billy, the relationship which frames the series as a whole, and which has brought Ally, initially, to the legal profession. The visual representation of Ally’s memory is magical, romantic, and sexual. In general, Ally’s heart and mind are accessible to the viewer in a literalised, visceral, and visually seductive way, and the representation of her subjectivity is multi-layered and engaging. The audio-visual organisation of the show is determined largely through its heroine’s subjectivity. When she discovers that Billy works at her new firm, for instance, there are three cuts in to closer shots of her face to represent her shock, followed by a shot of her being crushed by a giant ball. In the same episode, she imagines how she would look with larger breasts, and in the mirror they grow before her, and our, eyes. When Ally feels under siege, she imagines herself, and we witness her, swimming through the office, suddenly entirely underwater, to get to her own room, while voices and sounds are accordingly distorted.

The use of music, predominantly classic love songs presenting simple, romantic myths, is a pertinent signifier of Ally’s subjectivity. Vonda Shepherd’s voice is used to represent Ally’s inner, emotional life through song in a visceral
way. The simplest way in which music functions as an expression of character in this way is through the device of the theme song which psychotherapist Tracey has suggested as a way of beating depression, and in this way the show's musical format is given a realist, narrative explanation. Ally's choice is "Tell Him." As a way of further signalling music as an expression of her character, we hear it start, get scratched, and begin again, in accordance with her mood, facial expression, and the action—for instance when she is interrupted while dancing to the music which, while in her head, we are privy to. It is the fact that there is an artful confusion between diegetic and non-diegetic music in the series that makes Ally's inner world so powerfully present to the viewer. Where songs begin non-diegetically over images of Ally, for instance, they will often become diegetic in a shift through dissolve to the bar, or vice versa, which makes Ally's emotional presence concrete, immediate, and all pervasive.

Furthermore, as the show has progressed through the first and second seasons, other, male, characters have increasingly shared Ally's worldview. Senior legal partners John Cage and Richard Fish are the most significant instances of this. When Fish "hears the bells" as he prepares to go into court, so do we. Cage hears the bells and Barry White when he psyches himself up for professional and sexual encounters. The suggestion is that while the emphasis on an emotional landscape is perceived as feminine, it is not essentially so. Dow has argued that "to achieve equality in the private sphere would require further adjustment from men, an issue mysteriously absent in postfeminist rhetoric" (Dow 1996: 94). In Ally McBeal, that adjustment is made at the audio-visual level of the text. The harmonisation of the outside world (if it can still be described as such) with Ally's inner life is not limited to those she is close to. After deciding her theme song with Tracey, she walks along the street hearing it in her head, and we hear it with her. As she stands at a crossing in a crowd of people, bouncing slightly to the music in her head, the crowd gradually joins in, moving in unison to the music, until they all dance across the street together. While Ally initially finds this disturbing, by the end of the sequence she feels validated. Furthermore, this sequence is not coded visually as a hallucination; rather, it is coded as real. This sequence is a key example of the way in which fantasy and the real are made indistinct in Ally McBeal.

The mise-en-scène is also organised around Ally's consciousness, and the world is presented as a function of Ally's character in less immediate ways. Ally is often caught with her back to camera, looking out of the window over the night-time cityscape, which is in a number of ways represented as not quite her own space. In these moments, her body seems to lose its materiality, and her reflection in the window, while privileged in the shot, is hardly there: she disappears against the view of the big city—perhaps an expression of her sense that she is a little girl in an old boys' world. Each episode is punctuated by what are ostensibly establishing shots of Boston. There are two main kinds; the first consists of sequences of helicopter shots of the Boston skyline, often at night, which dissolve into each other. These sequences express a powerful sense of restlessness, constantly changing direction, never landing, always "up in the air." The other kind of establishing shot used throughout each episode is a sharp camera tilt up from street level at the face of the Cage, Fish, and Associates building or at the courthouse, to the space of the scene to follow. The effect of this repeated shot is to suggest a vertiginous shift, a sense of imbalance coming
to rest, high above the ground. In conjunction with the final sequences of each episode which often see Ally walking home alone through the wet, sparkling city streets, we are offered a dynamic, if slightly off-kilter, mise-en-scène. This functions as a representation of Ally’s relationship to life, love, her job, and the city: often up in the air, always coming down to earth, and the sparkling lights which illuminate her walk home always suggesting hope.

In all of these formal ways, the mise-en-scène privileges Ally’s inner world, experience, and emotions, and expresses the tensions she experiences in life and at work. As a character, Ally has a softness and vulnerability that is not weakness and ineffectuality. She is smart, professional, and she has a powerful emotional life. She wears soft jerseys and jeans, sweat suits and pyjamas as well as the suits she refers to as “my outfits,” which combine short skirts with more typically “power dressed” jackets. This could be understood as a postfeminist version of 1980s power dressing, in which power is understood in relation to self, rather than “Other.”

The third key tension of the series is thus the blurring of the hierarchical and gendered division between private and public, personal and professional. In its repeated articulation of new spaces in which previously discretely held positions—feminist and feminine, professional and personal—are conjoined, it can be argued that the show reconfigures the rallying cry of 1970s feminism—“the personal is political”—in a distinctly postfeminist manner. While she may not be “tough enough” in terms that are male-defined (she cannot tell a dirty joke, unlike Renée who is tough and sexy), she is strong enough to acknowledge and accept her emotional vulnerabilities—“I am human, I am temperamental, I am guilty”—and Ally almost always wins her cases. Significantly, she does this most often through applying the logic of her personal life to her professional role. Cases are often won by asking the jury to empathise, to apply their own experience to the case under consideration. Similarly, she solves problems in her personal life through using and making connections with her professional life. For example, in one episode she uses her closing speech, about the sanctity of marriage despite the lure of an old girlfriend, to argue that Billy and Georgia should be together. In Ally McBeal the personal and the professional are continually shown to be inextricable, and this is therefore expressive of a popular postfeminist sensibility as we understand it.

The unisex toilet in the Cage, Fish, and Associates office (which is more like a shared flat than an office) is a key, literalised instance of this concern within the show. The unisex literalises questions of equal opportunities in the work place and the interweaving of the personal and the professional, the private and the public. Conversations are overheard that impact on both personal and professional relationships. The traditionally private, gendered space is broken down and conflict created in the process. Yet the unisex toilet is also a utopian space within the show: the site of musical numbers and fantasy sequences that offer a temporary palliative to those conflicts.

Entertainment and utopia

Writing about the ideological function of entertainment, Richard Dyer (1977) has argued in relation to the musical that it offers utopias, “temporary answers
to the inadequacies of the society which is being escaped from through entertainment” (Dyer 1977: 6) by suggesting how it might feel if things were better, rather than what it would look like. Dyer discusses the ways in which musical numbers can be understood to offer utopian resolution to the conflicts expressed in the narrative, through their embodiment of the following categories of feeling: abundance, energy, intensity, transparency, and community. He also suggests that entertainment produced under capitalism will only provide utopian answers to problems that it constructs as real, excluding, for instance, issues of class, race, and patriarchy.

While it is the case that moments of musical utopia are frequently undercut in a very self-conscious fashion (Ally skips along the street singing “When the red, red robin goes bob, bob bobbing along” only to be brought to a halt by a girl crying on the kerb), Dyer’s model offers a useful way to approach the use of music and musical numbers in Ally McBeal. The use of music in the show functions in a very straightforward way in relation to the categories of transparency and intensity, particularly in the use of song to communicate Ally’s emotional life to the viewer. Similarly, music is used to express the same values between characters: while the show often focuses on competition between women and on male/female relationships, it also places great emphasis on the value of female friendship. An episode that centred on Renée’s use of sex as a weapon ends with the camera moving in on Ally and Renée asleep in bed together. Over this scene, Vonda Shepherd sings “I’ll be there,” the lyrics taking on new relevance for a woman–woman friendship: “If you should ever find someone new, you know she’d better be good to you ‘cos if she doesn’t, then I’ll be there”. Music and communal song and dance are frequently used to bring people together in the show, resolving conflict through the foregrounding of community (people just “know” the words and the dance steps). Judge Happy Boyle’s memorial service is one such moment. Both the unisex toilet and the downstairs bar at Cage, Fish, and Associates regularly feature in this way, either through an episode ending with everyone on the dance floor, or at times of celebration, through characters singing for each other. On one such occasion, Elaine and Renée’s rendition of “I’m a woman” is a particularly interesting example of numbers offering moments of utopian feeling. The lyrics suggest the possibility of womanhood as a complex and idealised conjunction of a multiplicity of female identities: sexual, domestic, and so on, as a palliative for the narrative’s frequent focus on the question of women’s incompatible social roles and Ally’s own desire to “have it all.” The world of Ally McBeal is in a way presented as profoundly utopian through the refusal to distinguish between reality and fantasy. At the same time, however, precisely because of that confusion between fantasy and reality, both narrative struggle and utopian resolution have the same status, and the show thereby highlights its inability to offer satisfactory solutions to the problems it poses: this is as good as it gets.

In its repeated articulation of new spaces in which previously discreetly held positions—feminist and feminine, professional and personal—are held together, it can be argued that Ally McBeal suggests a new position in relation to the “backlash” reading repeatedly offered around the show. Ally may be “the victim of [her] own choices,” as she says at the beginning of Season One—choices which feminism has offered her. However, while the show addresses the conflict between career and personal life, Ally’s ongoing struggle is not to choose one
over the other. As she states explicitly a number of times, she wants to have it all:

I had a plan. When I was 28 I was gonna be taking my little maternity leave, but I would still be on the partnership track. I would be home, at night, cuddled up with my husband reading “What to Expect When You’re Nursing” and trying cases. Big home life, big professional life, and instead, I am going to bed with an inflatable doll, and I represent clients who suck toes. This was not the plan.

The series dramatises the difficulty of that position, without rejecting it as an impossible aim. It represents the struggle. It expresses the frustrations despite, and perhaps because of, its utopian project. When Ally says she feels like she’s “a little girl playing in an Old Boys’ Club,” when we see her shrink in her chair as she makes a point powerfully and successfully, we have an articulation of the fact that feminism’s fights have not been won. In its rich, complex, and appealing mise-en-scène, it offers us a female subject who admits problems without rejecting feminism as the cause, and it shows us the world through her eyes. It combines an address to traditional feminist concerns in theme and narrative with an address to the new conditions of women’s lives in the 1990s, and does not attempt to impose any idea of appropriate female feminist identities: “I like being a mess—it’s who I am,” argues Ally. In the first two seasons, at least, the show allows her be. Perhaps, as Dow suggests, young women have resisted the identity “feminist” as it is popularly constructed precisely because they see it as irrelevant to the material conditions of their lives (1996: 92). By contrast, Ally McBeal “encourages rejection of the monolithic definitions of femininity or feminism, allowing multiple opportunities for female identification” (1996: 119) in its dramatisation of the tensions and contradictions experienced by many young working women. This is at the heart of the show’s appeal.4 It sees the choice between personal life and professional life for women today as unrealistic, and articulates the tensions of living in the world where most of us do in fact reside, where they are mutually pervasive and impossible to separate. The pleasure of Ally is one of recognition, of the struggle, but not the impossibility, of “having it Ally.”

Notes
1. For a discussion of celebrity feminism, see Jennifer Wicke (1994).
2. In later seasons, Ally’s mental health is brought seriously into question through the extension of her inner world to Billy, which is then explained as a symptom of the brain tumour that kills him.
3. Mary Ann Doane (1987), in her study of the woman’s film of the 1930s and 1940s, suggests that a central female protagonist and the inscription of and access to her subjectivity is a key marker of the genre.
4. Dow makes this point in relation to Designing Women, but the extension of the ensemble cast in Ally McBeal in later seasons offers similar opportunities.

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