

5-5-2017

Questions of the Pink Dress: Gender Representation and Perception in Turn-of-the-Century Chick Flicks

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THESIS SUMMARY

This thesis began as a desire to investigate a small window of time that I believed had been overlooked in terms of feminist film, especially when it comes to popular cinema, the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. The initial project included three films: *Clueless* (1995), *Miss Congeniality* (2000), and *Legally Blonde* (2001). There were many more films that warranted attention, but due to my desire to complete a qualitative analysis over a quantitative one, I had to narrow my list down. I chose these films because I saw a link between Cher from *Clueless* and Elle from *Legally Blonde* and how these two blondes were portrayed as ditsy, yet empowering somehow. I added in *Miss Congeniality* because Gracie serves as a protagonist on the other end of the femininity spectrum in many ways. All three films also include a makeover narrative, which is something I would focus on more if I were to expand this paper. I decided to focus on how gender is portrayed and received in each of these films (keeping in mind the historical context and writings of third-wave feminism).

However, since I had to narrow down my movie list to such a minute selection, the divide between *Clueless* and the other two films in both content and time (Cher was a teen to Elle and Gracie's adulthood and the issue of gender representation was less pronounced) seemed too great of a gap to close in the space of this paper. So, weeks before my defense I decided to cut the portion focusing solely on *Clueless*. Effectively whittling my timeline of five/six years into a space of less than a year during the turn-of-the-century. I began to see the protagonists of the two films on a spectrum: Gracie a tomboy to Elle's girly persona and they both were forced to change themselves and their appearances in order to do their jobs. While this is a simplified description, I saw two

women, seemingly opposites, struggling with the same thing: how can I express my own brand of femininity or gender expression as a woman in the patriarchal culture of my workforce.

So, through many reiterations the paper began to show the shape of a more critical analysis of these films and how problematic their representations of empowered women are in many ways. During my defense the heart of the conflict was exposed through discussion. While these women find self-empowerment at the end of their narratives, this sense of accomplishment rings false because empowerment is an effect of systematic change, which is lacking in both films. In a neoliberal vein, the audience is being attracted and placated by the appearance and shine of feminist ideals while also being shown institutions whose very structure makes the protagonist have to fight for that empowerment. Without structural change that benefits all women and people of color, Elle's triumph in the courtroom (with her knowledge of beauty culture) might feel good, but it means nothing in the long run. Gracie might begin to understand the complexities of her fellow contestants, but for her transformation to stick internally it also had to remain externally through the trappings of make-up and brushed hair.

So, I will leave you with one question: what does it say about our society that these are representatives for feminism and female empowerment in popular culture?

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twenty-first century two chick flicks entered the scene featuring comedic commentary on expectations of gender representation. Although the blanket genre “chick flicks” often is considered “a disparaging term that diminish[es] the significance of women-oriented cinema,” its loose criteria of having “a primary appeal to female viewers...concentration on issues relevant to women, and...focus on a female protagonist” apply to both films (Hollinger 221). The term “women’s films” could be used instead, or even “romantic comedy” (despite a lack of focus on the love narratives), but since the two films, *Miss Congeniality* (Petrie, 2000) and *Legally Blonde* (Luketic, 2001), subtly defy some negative connotations surrounding conventionalized femininity and the women who participate in it, reclamation of the term chick flick seems apropos. Also the audience of chick flicks is just as underestimated as an audience (as Elle is as a protagonist) and gendered as the term and the films. In fact, a precursor to the films, Amy Heckerling’s 1995 cult classic *Clueless*, “challeng[ed] the popular opinion that a film whose core audience was teen girls wasn’t financially lucrative” (Hunting 145). The two films discussed in this paper assert the power of girls as consumer. Both films targeted the market of women, younger women in particular, and both were box office successes and spawned sequels (more for *Legally Blonde* with a third film and a Broadway musical).

The two films were written partially or entirely by women screenwriters and deal with women thrust into worlds where their gender identity is not accepted. Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock) is a tomboy and FBI Special Agent ordered to go undercover in a beauty pageant. Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) is a California sorority girl who gets

into Harvard Law School in order to win back her ex-boyfriend, Warner Huntington III (Matthew Davis). While Gracie tries to shed her more masculine ways in order to fit in with her competition, Elle adopts a less ostentatious feminine demeanor in order to be taken seriously as a graduate student. While Gracie negotiates her gender identity to include more feminine aspects, her real growth comes from dismissing prejudices she had developed towards her more conventionally feminine counterparts. Elle, on the other hand, must endure very similar prejudices Gracie has exhibited to other women and learns to proudly wield her femininity despite what others may assume or expect of her..

An important consideration to keep in mind while reading this paper is the idea that gender is performative. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler has written, “Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through *a stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 519). In essence, this is to say that there is nothing inherent, nothing biological, about gender that makes it what it is. Gender identity is dependent on several aspects ranging from historical conditions to geographic location and is formed through repetition and affirmation by society. So, when I reference masculinity or femininity in the chapters below, neither are terms meant to have fixed or essential meanings, although they may draw from traditional assumptions middle-class Americans might hold. Instead, my discussions of gender focus on how they are performed in each film.

Both of the films present a narrow view of femininity. More often than not, issues of race, class, and gender non-conformity are ignored. Both protagonists are white, educated women whose struggles with their own performances of gender (whether it be

depicted as too masculine or too feminine) are often stereotyped or simplified for the sake of comedy or easily digestible characters. Elle, at first glance, embodies the caricature of a ditzy sorority girl as she enters into the equally caricatured world of snooty, East Coast intellectuals. Gracie “exemplifies the stereotype of the woman working in the male-dominated world of law enforcement. She is geeky, snorts when she laughs and has a poorly kept appearance” (Ezzedeen 247). For both, the conclusion of their stories offers some form of negotiation between what their respective films define as masculine and feminine traits, but conventions often trump ambiguity. Gracie ultimately adopts some of the habits she once spurned, like make-up and basic grooming. The film suggests she must adopt some feminine traits in order to get her happily ever after with her love interest and her career. Elle saves the day in court with her knowledge of hair care, showing that her unique knowledge of beauty culture is not useless, but one can assume that not every case can be solved with this specific arsenal. In fact, Elle flounders slightly in her questioning of Chutney Windham (Linda Cardellini), her witness, before she recognizes the breach of the “simple and finite” rules of perm maintenance. So, while Elle triumphs and harnesses her intelligence, the audience is still invited to identify her most strongly with her appearance-obsessed knowledge. And even though both women prioritize their careers over their love lives, the happily ever after of both films include finally obtaining their respective love interests. However, despite the many reductive qualities of both works, the satirical nature of comedy and the involvement of female writers produce inspiring female protagonists whose gender becomes an asset in male dominated fields, instead of a detriment.

When looking for connections between the films one need look no further than their posters, which bear a striking resemblance to one another. Both posters feature their lead actress in the foreground wearing a pink dress and both feature an item that is associated with male dominated professions. With *Legally Blonde*'s poster Elle holds large, leather bound books assumedly for her law classes (Image 1) and in *Miss Congeniality*'s poster, Gracie's gown's slit reveals a gun holster and her pageant sash reads "FBI" (Image 2). Both films explore the world of women in male dominated fields and as evidenced by these advertisements, the result allows for the retention and celebration of qualities that are painted as wholly feminine. For example, Elle holds a pink, fluffy pen in her hand on the poster. This not only serves as an aid to help audiences characterize Elle's aesthetic, but also shows how she is bringing a depreciated girliness to the patriarchal world of the law and academia. Gracie, somewhat in opposition, takes the wardrobe of a pageant queen and places her own spin on it with combat boots. While this poster announces another representation of femininity that does not rely on conventional depictions, Bullocks's bare leg on display in her figure-hugging gown and her perfectly tousled hair accompanying the accessories of law enforcement present them in an undeniably feminine package.

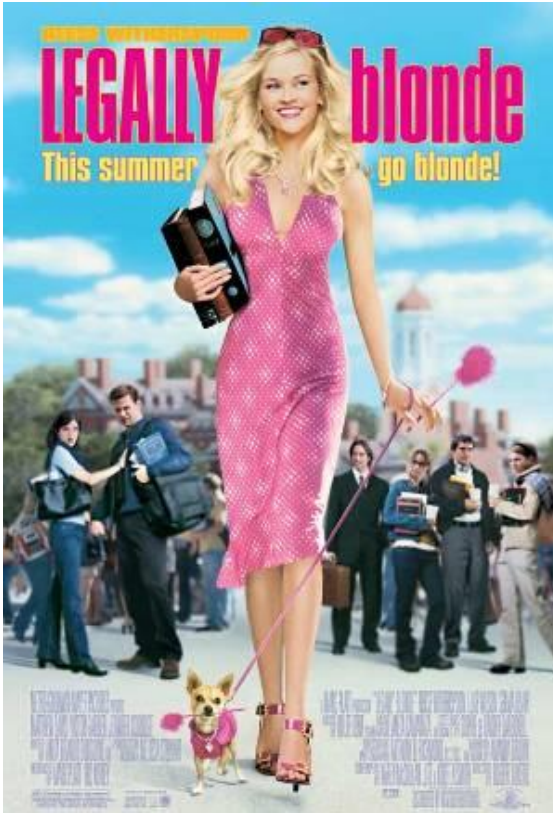


Image 1



Image 2

This thesis utilizes feminist theory in conjunction with existing scholarship on the films to analyze representations of gender, specifically those of conventional femininity enmeshed with patriarchal institutions and expectations. With chapters focusing on each of the films in question, it argues that the films utilize tenants of third-wave feminism to insert empowering themes into stories that are flush with patriarchal influences¹.

¹ While this film focuses on excavating the feminist leanings in the movie, one cannot ignore the neoliberal elements present in the films. Both movies present a pleasing picture of female empowerment that appease female consumers desperate for positive women role models and narratives enough that they do not question the real dearth of institutional equality and change in the film.

CHAPTER 1: *Miss Congeniality*

In *Miss Congeniality*, Special Agent Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock) must shed her tomboy ways to go undercover at the Miss United States pageant as a fictitious Miss New Jersey, Gracie Lou Freebush, in order to catch “The Citizen,” a killer targeting the pageant. After a brief glimpse into Gracie’s childhood struggles with gender conformity, the audience witnesses her adult hostility towards what it means to be a woman in society. Through her work as an FBI agent and her undercover role in the pageant, the film shows how the conventional codes of masculinity and femininity both impose their own brand of constraints on the women who operate within them, and how despite the animosity engendered between different kinds of women a camaraderie can still manifest, like when Gracie briefly disregards institutional expectations and embraces the wildness and undefined quality of individuality.

The film, which opens with a flashback of young Gracie Hart (Mary Ashleigh Green) rescuing a male classmate from bullies and being rejected for her show of strength, develops a negative connotation around conventional femininity after Gracie’s negotiation of gender roles is met with contempt. The first glimpse at the film’s young protagonist comes when she emerges from behind the *Nancy Drew* novel she is reading on the playground, foreshadowing her future foray into law enforcement and linking it already with her gender. Gracie puts her book down in order to observe an altercation on the playground, revealing that she is dressed in a long sleeve red, white, and blue shirt and a pair of jeans. This ensemble by itself would not necessarily denote a non-conforming gender expression, but when she joins the crowd of other kids you can see that the other girls shown in frame are all sporting some form of pink in their outfits and

the boys are wearing variations of red or blue. The patriotic color scheme further foreshadows her future career as an FBI agent, but also forms a link between the film's brand of masculine expression and nationalism.² When Gracie displays a sense of justice when she confronts the bully on behalf of the male victim it further places her amongst the boys. She attacks verbally first by responding to the bully's threat of, "If you weren't a girl, I'd beat your face off," with "Yeah? If you weren't a girl, I'd beat your face off." The bully uses the term "girl" as a clear segregating factor, dividing the masculine activity of fighting from the fairer sex. The blocking of the scene supports this divide by having Gracie physically separated from the fight by the ladder of a play structure. Yet, as she delivers her line she comes from behind the ladder and enters the arena alongside the boys. The bully indignantly responds, "You're calling me a girl?" Gracie answers with "Yeah, you called me one." To Gracie, the word "girl" becomes an insult, easily divorced from her own identity. "Girl" is not about designated sex, but instead becomes synonymous with physical weakness and bystander nature, a trait Gracie's cannot identify with. While it is one thing for Gracie to detach herself from gender roles, when she places doubt on the bully's masculinity, he engages Gracie in the physical aspect of the fight. He feels the need to assert his manliness. However, Gracie continues to fight expectations by easily defeating the bully. She dodges his fist and causes him to injure himself, subduing him and formally claiming dominance, ending the fight with a low angle shot from the bully's point of view. Although, the fight establishes Gracie's

² Gracie, who is often grouped with men and identifies herself largely through her work, is fueled by a sense of justice, which is painted in opposition to the placating nature of the conventional pageant women who robotically state their wish for "world peace." Gracie's rough and tumble nature (often linked with conventionally masculine as emphasized by her clothing in the opening scene) prompts her to wish for "harsher punishments for parole violators." The active agent (or the masculine agent) who wields the gun and protects the defenseless women believes in an active sense of justice, something often linked with patriotism and nationalism.

physical dominance, her subsequent rejection by the victim of the bully sets the tone that women in the film are not only expected to be separate from the male sphere, but they are strongly associated with weakness. Gracie obviously defies those expectations and this flashback might show why Gracie ended up in a male-dominated profession.

The childhood sequence establishes girls and women as passive or lacking agency and informs the audience why Gracie would reject such a dynamic. The film continues to strengthen this association with scenes where Gracie ends up on the unwelcome side of the power dynamics of objectification. In one notable scene, a large group of male agents (and Gracie) gather around a computer while the head agent on the Citizen case, Agent Eric Matthews (Benjamin Bratt), decides which female agent will go undercover. The computer program they use digitally places doll clothing on full-body nude photos of agents. The digital clothing is both hyper-feminine and sexualized. The sequence is reminiscent of Cher Horowitz's computer program in the opening scene of *Clueless*, where she can place outfits from her closet onto an avatar of herself. However, instead of the female being the creator and viewer of the simulation, she becomes the object, controlled and gazed upon by men. Laura Mulvey wrote in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly" (Mulvey 19). Mulvey acknowledges the power dynamic implicit in scenes where the woman becomes the object of a voyeuristic male agent. During this scene Gracie's suit is stripped away on the screen and a bathing suit slowly materializes down her body, forcibly revealing her body, all the way down to her bare legs. The focus on her is based on her

appearance not recognition for her work. So, when Gracie responds to Agent Matthews' explanation on why women would want to participate in the pageant with, "It's like feminism never even happened. Any woman that does this is catering to misogynistic Neanderthal mentality," it make sense. She has negative associations with an institution that profits on and exemplifies the socially castrating aspect of womanhood, drawing on the idea that the woman's lack of a protruding sexual organ has been seen as a symbol of her lack of agency and ability to assert themselves in society.

Through her statements and, especially, her appearance at the beginning of the film, Gracie assumes the role of the masculinized female, the androgynous and empowered woman who sees femininity as a (societally constructed) weakness. She dons the overly large and rumpled business suit, untailed so any hint of a feminine physique would be covered. She is deemed "Dirty Harriet" with a walk you "haven't seen [...] since Jurassic Park." Gracie's appearance becomes characterized by wildly un-brushed hair shoved into a ponytail, shunning a key symbol of womanhood, and a general slob-like quality. Gracie's femininity is completely denied verbally several times, most notably when she calls into question whether or not her assignment to go undercover as a contestant is a "woman thing" and Matthews responds: "Don't kid yourself. Nobody think's of you that way." Not only is she thought of as one of the guys, she does her best to distance herself from most anything feminine, going home at night to eat a Hungry Man frozen dinner and practice on her punching bag. She performs the latter action to Salt-n-Pepa's "None of Your Business," which features the lyrics, "If I want to take a guy home with me tonight/ It's none of your business/ And she want to be a freak and sell it on the weekend/ It's none of your business." The song's confrontational refrain

emphasizes the combative action of Gracie punching, while also recognizing and refusing the policing of the female body. So, Gracie's messy apartment and appearance are a visual protest against the usual expectations the patriarchal world has imposed on women to maintain a picture perfect presence at all times. If women and their spaces are objects designed for objectification and not for living, Gracie will have none of it.

However, as much as Gracie integrates herself in the masculine world of the FBI, Gracie is largely ignored in favor of the other men in the bureau, showing how even masculinized women fall below men in a patriarchal culture, instead of attaining the status of equals. In a scene where the police team discusses what their first moves should be in the Miss United States pageant operation, Agent Matthews begins by addressing the room with the pronoun, "gentleman," a gendered term that already excludes Gracie and the one other woman in the room. In fact, Gracie stands up and away from the conference table and the other female agent sits in a chair on the outskirts of the room (often at the edge of the frame or off-screen), while the men congregate around the table, the central hub of action. Gracie proceeds to single-handedly plan the operation while moving to stand behind Matthews, still not assuming the power position, but her ideas are only heard when voiced by Matthews. The film signifies who truly is the brain behind the operations when Gracie moves to stand behind Matthews at his seat at head of the table. Matthews actually follows his approval of her ideas with phrases such as "Now *I'm* thinking," replacing Gracie's involvement and maintaining his power in the process. So, even though the film maintains the power structure, through the blocking it exposes the hypocritical nature of the male-dominated work force.

During Gracie's transformation scene where she is groomed for her role as a pageant contestant by a professional beauty team, both the worlds of masculinity (FBI) and femininity (pageant personnel) police her, emphasizing how both visually disparate genders channel patriarchal expectations about the female form. Gracie bridges the gap between her masculine identity and the new feminine appearance transforming from the disheveled agent to the coifed bombshell in a makeover montage where Victor Melling (Michael Caine), her pageant coach, prepares her for her pageant debut. The scene includes two distinct entities inhabiting the same space: the pink clad beauty minions working to strip Gracie of her "imperfections" (wielding their beauty tools like surgical instruments), and the suited-up FBI agents playing with their guns, a blatantly phallic charged image. Gracie is the singular third subject who tries to maintain her spot in the brotherhood of the FBI and her identity as a non-conforming female, attempting in the midst of her makeover to continue eating the meat-filled sandwiches laid out for the team. However, she is forced to subsist on a celery stick, deprived due to her duty both as a beauty contestant and as an FBI agent. Matthews speaks for Gracie, although he has not had to make similar personal sacrifices, "Nobody said this job was easy." However, his comment is made comical as he luxuriously takes a bite of one of the large sandwiches. Gracie's body is the one being policed. The culmination of the makeover is a reveal scene shown in slow motion, allowing the audience (and Matthews) time to peruse Gracie in a revealing purple, mini dress with hair blowing in the wind. The film implies that to be able to effectively do her job (as an FBI agent, as a woman) Gracie needs the heels and the made-over face. A glimmer of Gracie's discomfort with the trappings of her new look remains when she trips in the unfamiliarity of her heels.

As Gracie's undercover assignment commences, she undergoes more training exercises designed to fulfill the expectations placed on the women performing in the pageant, revealing the absurd brand of performance expected of these women. One such scene happens late at night as an exhausted Gracie (she has not slept in two days) works with Victor, practicing walking down a staircase in a floor-length navy blue gown, a new uniform replacing her old suit. Victor's instructions stay along the vague, ethereal lines of, "You don't walk, you float." The ridiculous request alludes back to when earlier he asks Gracie to "glide" instead of walk, another unreasonable action. The standard the women in the pageant are being held up to exposed as impossible. Women are no longer humans, but puppets in the guise of angels. After trying and failing to complete the action, Gracie must remove the comical amount of armor and guns she has stashed up her dress, handing them to Victor. The action symbolizes her need to remove all conventionally masculine elements of herself in order to comply with the wishes of the feminine world of the pageant. So even though she is not wearing her armor, she is confined by the restrictions of her gown. One controlling sphere takes the place of the other. Feminists have historically tried to expose and protest the controlling nature of pageants.

Miss Congeniality explicitly references the relationship between feminists and beauty pageants, which have a rather complex history³, the knowledge of which reveals

³ It is a history that has roots in cinema as well. One of the most notable examples is a film made by two women filmmakers, Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley, *Schmeerguntz* (1965-66). This experimental collage film utilizes acquired footage of an unnamed beauty pageant along with cut-outs from magazines of the 1950s, showcasing the focus on, and objectification of, women's physicality. The film intercuts pop images with footage of women throwing up, cleaning up baby poop, and cleaning drains and toilets coloring the former footage with social commentary on the reality behind the expectation of womanly perfection. The footage of the beauty pageant focuses primarily on the swimsuit competition portion with women lining up to be judged, while voiceovers of the contestants speaking about the importance of a college education play. This is reminiscent of how the contestants at the fictitious Miss United States

the constraints of the pageant as an institution. During the real 1968 Miss America pageant a large group of feminists gathered in Atlantic City “not to put down Miss America but to attack the male chauvinism, commercialization of beauty, racism and oppression of women symbolized by the pageant” (Dow 132). During this infamous protest, feminists in attendance tossed certain gendered items they felt imprisoned them into a “freedom” trashcan—like make-up, high heels, and bras (Dow 130). The original intention was to light the can on fire, but due to safety concerns of lighting a fire on the boardwalk, they desisted (Dow 131). Despite the lack of actual fire, however, the idea of feminists burning bras took off and spawned a simultaneously liberating and derogatory image of radical, “ugly” feminists who spurned traditional femininity while simultaneously claiming their sexuality (Dow 134). The contestants in *Miss Congeniality* embody a few historical factors that the 1968 feminists protested. The film echoes the historical critique, “that the pageant encouraged women to be ‘inoffensive, bland and apolitical’” (Dow 132). During the swimsuit portion of the competition, there is a sequence of shots that show a succession of contestants answering the question, “What is the most important thing our society needs?” Contestant after contestant answer with the idealistic, vague, and apolitical answer of “world peace.” Gracie distinguishes herself from the bunch when she breaks the chain with an answer spoken from her law enforcement background, “That would be harsher punishment for parole violators, Stan.” Even though she says the answer with a perfectly rehearsed smile and convivial tone, she is met with confused silence until she caves and continues on with “And world peace,”

pageant prefer the term scholarship competition (perhaps to garner the respect and validation for their participation), but the competition focuses on their beauty and not their knowledge, just as the sequence from *Schmeerguntz* places the focus on the women in swimsuits (shown over and over), and not on any sign of their mental capabilities.

which earns a raucous applause from the audience. Harmlessness and apolitical notions are rewarded, even when the question opens up the possibility of diverse and nuanced answers. While the film does not speak of this history, it does provide an answering counterpoint to Gracie's feminist concerns with an old school representative of pageants.

Due to Gracie's embodiment and vocal support of feminist ideals, her relationship with Kathy Morningside (Candice Bergen), the pageant director, serves as the film's most direct means to activate a conflict between feminists and pageant people. When Gracie has caused a spectacle during one of the preliminary rounds of the competition by jumping off the stage after a man with a (smoking) gun, Ms. Morningside rebukes Gracie with the fact she has "been fighting all my life against [Gracie's] types, the ones who think we're a bunch of worthless airheads. You know who I mean. Feminists. Intellectuals. Ugly women. I refuse to give in to their cynicism." This diatribe speaks to the misrepresentation of the feminists' protest, that they were born of jealousy or contempt instead of an act meant to support the contestants' rights and dignity. And it is important to consider how some contestants find some form of empowerment or confidence in the pageants (even though their very make-up objectifies and demeans them). Why else would they defend them if they believe they are being used by the structure? However, Gracie's merciless mocking of the whole process throughout the film does speak to the cynicism Ms. Morningside mentions. Ms. Morningside is actually introduced in the film in a scene where she asserts a position of authority over Gracie. While discussing the merits of the pageant and its winners, she stands from her desk chair in front of a mural for the competition, effectively imposing an image of a crown on her head. While Gracie derides the etiquette markers enforced on the women at the pageant

to make them be more ladylike (like the difference between “yeah” and “yes”) Ms. Morningside feels the need to assert authority, validating her life work when confronted with someone who mocks it. The emphasis on the speech distinction simultaneously reiterates the vision the audience has of Gracie, as informal and brusque (an agent of a new age individual growing further away from old school etiquette rules), while also showing how Ms. Morningside’s control of such brashness might be a subtle verbal battle against what she sees as an antithesis of her pageant (something damaging to the civilized and intelligent image she tries to enforce).

Gracie’s closest friend in the competition, Cheryl Fraiser (Heather Burns), Miss Rhode Island, provides an example of damages the restraining notions of conventional femininity, as conditioned by patriarchal structures, can create. Cheryl serves as a foil to Gracie’s initially hyper-masculine character as an ultra-feminine woman who has always lived within a world similar to the pageant. Cheryl and Gracie bond at night in Gracie’s hotel room over non-fat hot chocolate (another sign of body policing in women’s lives) and Cheryl’s garb is reminiscent of images of Doris Day—queen of harmless, apolitical feminization—from the 1960s with her hair in colorful curlers, primping for the next day, with a shortened nightie and robe, both in soft pastels. Cheryl divulges to Gracie that the reason she does not fulfill her dream of twirling batons made of fire stems from the fact that her “parents really don’t like anything ostentatious.” The presence of a nuclear family often correlates with a patriarchal power structure that would be invested in preserving the timidity of the women in its midst in order to perpetuate the system. Cheryl exhibits that meekness cultivated by conservative parents who did not want her to dance with flaming batons. The scene continues to show Cheryl’s self-doubt when she

tells Gracie she believes Gracie will win because she is, “so nice and so smart and so sensitive,” implying that she believes she herself does not possess those traits, an unusual statement since Cheryl is more outwardly nice and sensitive than any of the girls in the pageant. The viewer is shown a more aggressive picture of Cheryl later in the film; when Matthews uncovers old pictures of her participating in protests with a known radical animal rights group, with an ugly snarl on her face and holding a sign reading “No Fur No Way!” Even Cheryl’s participation in protest seems apolitical, for a cause that most people can get behind, protecting sweet, innocent animals. Despite this divergence (that is never explained by Cheryl herself), Cheryl does not transform into a rebellious figure against the system that made her. She is still a product of her upbringing, but the added nuance to Cheryl’s character becomes instrumental to Gracie’s realization that these women in the pageant hold depths. Cheryl might be a paragon of what Gracie finds distasteful about women’s role in society, but her kindness and aspirations to stretch her boundaries gives her some personality.

In order, ultimately, to renegotiate her ideas of gender, Gracie has to first briefly escape the worlds of masculinity and femininity controlling her life during the pageant in the film. After she learns about Cheryl’s not so squeaky clean past, Matthews tasks her with uncovering more about Miss Rhode Island because they now believe she is “the Citizen.” One effect of this request is Gracie removing her surveillance equipment in order to have some productive “girl talk.” This effectively removes the symbolic male representative from the scenes that follow, and with it the presence of male expectations and judgments. Gracie enters the pool area with a pizza and beer passing the other contestants on exercise machines and filing their nails, compulsively maintaining their

appearance even during leisure time. Cheryl is the only exception. After a previous flub during the Q&A portion of the program she sits by the hot tub forlornly. Gracie offers the pizza to all the girls, but they incredulously refuse citing calorie count. With Gracie's goading of "First step pizza, second step flaming batons," enticing Cheryl with an image that connotes freedom to her, Cheryl caves, quickly followed by all the other contestants. By frantically grabbing slices of pizza the women are finally appeasing their appetites regardless of the pressures of the pageant (a temporary suspension of body policing). With this action as well as the removal of male scrutiny, both the domineering codes of femininity and masculinity are seemingly suspended for the moment.

During the absence of the institutions that govern their lives, the girls revert into a relatively primal state that suspends gender expectations and allows them to bond as individuals. After pizza and beer, the girls are shown at a rave with Cheryl and Gracie pounding rhythmically and frenetically on a drum splattered with neon paint. The drum imagery conjures associations of base instinct and unguarded action. By letting themselves become uninhibited, the girls lose all notions of how to obediently play into the system (they are drinking, eating and dancing seemingly without worrying about their appearance in the dark club) and are communing with one another sans competition, if only for a moment. During this scene, Cheryl also reveals some more inclinations to disobedience and wildness when she tells Gracie about how she once stole red underwear. While the action is quite tame, it seems rebellious once she reveals her mother referred to them as "Satan's panties." The terminology once again implies and emphasizes the traditional religious family Cheryl must have grown up in, and her liberation from it.

The wildness displayed during the girls' night out opens up the door for more courageous actions, most notably during the scenes of the final pageant event. After Gracie reminds her she is a "wild woman," recalling imagery from the rave, Cheryl finally realizes her one voiced desire in the film, to perform her baton act with fire while doing the "sexy dance." Miss New York, one of the few African American contestants, declares her lesbianism to the crowd when she is eliminated, very briefly providing a voice to two minority groups⁴. After Gracie's original talent gets unintentionally sabotaged, with the aid of Matthews she demonstrates basic self-defense helping to arm all women watching, showing a brief foray into structural, large-scale change (even though the need for such a lesson shows the flaws in society).

The night morphs into small displays of the uniqueness of women when unconfined by restrictions, and it culminates in Gracie's answer portion of the Q&A section, as transcribed, below.

Stan: As you may know, there are many who consider the Miss United States pageant to be outdated and antifeminist. What would you say to them?

Gracie: I would have to say, I used to be one of them. And then I came here and I realized that these women are smart, terrific people who are just trying to make a difference in the world. We've become really good friends... For me, this experience has been one of the most rewarding and liberating experiences of my life.

The reprieve granted by connecting with the wildness of their womanhood helps Gracie acknowledge that the other contestants are not just their smiling faces and bland answers,

⁴ This scene also seemingly pays homage to Vanessa Williams, the first African American winner of the Miss American pageant who later resigned her title after *Penthouse* published nude photos of Williams with another woman (Dow 137).

but individuals with personal strengths. To Gracie and the viewer's total surprise we learn in the final event, for example, that Cheryl's "field is nuclear fission with a minor in elementary particles." This tidbit of information undermines Cheryl's initial representation as a flat character, exposing briefly the internal merits of the contestants, whether they are physically conventionally feminine or not.

However, ultimately Gracie and her contestants cannot exist fully outside of institutional expectations. The film ends with Gracie, who has been re-established as a tomboy from her childhood, retaining some of the affects of femininity in the form of make-up and better grooming. In the words of one scholar, "This hardheaded, conditioned agent overcomes the burdens of her career to relish her own beautiful femininity and win the affection of a superficial male co-worker: a happy ending by contemporary U.S. standards" (Senda-Cook 18). The film interjects and transforms the ugly duckling protagonist into a reformed swan who gets the man and is accepted as a part of a world she was so wholeheartedly opposed to only days before. However, a more nuanced reading of the scene might show, "the heroine's final public speech [is] a balancing act of romantic desirability and professional success that suggests the direction that romantic comedy is heading in the twenty-first century" (Hersey 153). Gracie's transformation includes many conventional aspects, however there is an argument that the show of female friendship and support shown in the final shot with Gracie surrounded by her new friends subtly defies the romance-centered narrative and sets the stage for more breaks in convention in the future.

CHAPTER 2: *Legally Blonde*

The story of Elle Woods, Valley Girl turned Harvard Law grad, has been said to be the “ultimate exhibition of girl power” (Radner 66). Even though this sentiment comes from the two screenwriters of the film, Karen McCullah and Kirsten Smith, their opinion has been reiterated time and again since the film’s release in 2001, like in an article published in May 2016, “19 Times Elle Woods From ‘Legally Blonde’ was Downright Inspirational” (Nahar). The underestimated “dumb blonde” begins her journey chasing after her ex-boyfriend, but quickly shows her determination and intelligence when she is accepted to Harvard Law School, eventually rising through the ranks of naysayers to ultimately win a case in the place of her predatory law professor. Lacking societal obstacles in the form of class and race, Elle’s deficiency becomes her conventional femininity, something highly linked in the film with consumer culture. Although her femaleness, denoted most famously by her blonde hair, hinders Elle’s progress with her relationships and professional life, often due to the objectification associated with the female form, the film simultaneously fashions it as a strength propelling her forward with female relationships and a triumph for women.

The film constructs Elle’s brand of femininity as something conventional, and quite contrived within the film’s mise-en-scene, manifesting in a veritable explosion of pink and heteronormative romantic aspirations. The audience’s introduction to Elle does not include her face. In fact, the shot that opens the film is a close-up of her shiny, thick blonde hair with the title in neon pink scrawled across the screen. Immediately Elle’s blondeness and adherence to traditional femininity define her. The following scene is a tracking shot through the Delta Nu sorority house where the girls largely wear pink, and

the ones who are not sporting the rosy hue are still chicly dressed. One room of the house contains some of the sisters working out, with pink weights no less, focusing attention once again on their physical appearance. While being shown glimpses into the daily life of this Southern California sorority house, the audience is also shown footage of Elle excitedly primping for her dinner date with her boyfriend, Warner Huntington III (Matthew Davis), who she believes will be giving her an engagement ring, something that warrants an anticipatory card signed by all of her sorority sisters. The shots of Elle are piecemeal, showcasing her perfectly styled visage and highlighting her love of pink and heart imagery, both of which are historically linked to conventional femininity. However, “there is a consciousness about the performance of femininity explicit in the film, marking a third-wave attention to the knowingness of this performance and an often ironic nod to the conventions of American beauty” (Radner 70). The fact that the film is so gratuitous with the placement of frills and brand name products during Elle’s introduction suggests that they are consciously displaying the prevalence of commodity culture in young, affluent women’s lives. It shows a self-awareness of beauty culture and its conventions while simultaneously disregarding its pitfalls and making it a defining (if a bit confining) feature of the film’s heroine.

If Elle serves as a representative of conventional femininity, she becomes an everywoman symbol due to her overt connection with gender over any other category of identity. Even though Elle means “woman” in French, it must be noted that Elle serving as a representative for any significant portion of women is problematic and quite unrealistic. Elle, along with most of the women in the film, is white and assumedly affluent. Although her unexpected admittance to Harvard speaks to her intelligence and

determination, her snap decision to go to an expensive Ivy League for personal, and not professional, aspirations shows that her “education is a luxury rather than a necessity” (Radner 67). Paradoxically, Elle’s whiteness (and the privilege it affords) prevents her from representing all women and their experiences, but “the mobility of [her] whiteness” (Naranch 46) helps her effortlessly occupy a variety of spaces from Harvard to a Southern California sorority house where she is exposed to a wider range of experiences and people, allowing a more developed (but still limited) worldview. The removal of any socioeconomic obstacles for Elle has been said to make her “offer a more inclusive form of femininity” (Radner 64). When the viewer does not have challenges of class and race thrown into the equation, it is easier to focus on her gender and the struggles she faces due to being a woman. So, while Elle’s experience is not universal, she shows that even the most privileged women face prejudice (to a lesser degree generally) associated with their gender. However, one cannot expect all of the women in the film to subscribe to Elle’s brand of femininity, but her love of beauty culture helps provide a common ground that crosses societal boundaries, sorority girls are not the only women with an interest in consumer culture.

The one nod the film makes to an intersectional understanding of gender is through the lower class Paulette Bonafonte (Jennifer Coolidge) and the inclusive environment of the beauty salon, even though the accepting space shows the objectifying nature of beauty culture. After Elle has been run out of one of her first law classes and subsequently learns that the woman who caused her banishment is Warner’s new fiancée, she goes to seek solace in the world she knows well, the world of beauty culture. Elle’s process of integration into her new town, “is aided, in significant measure, by the beauty

parlor and the ‘female’ knowledge, camaraderie, and transcendence of difference [the beauty salon] provides” (Scanlon 321). The beauty salon serves as a feminine oasis where women of every race and class gather and bond over their mutual observance of beauty rituals. The space housed several women of color throughout the film and Elle’s presence in a run-of-the-mill salon with cheesy décor like seashell nail trays show the range of socioeconomic backgrounds present. This space connects Elle to her best friend in the film, Paulette, who noticeably occupies a lower socioeconomic status as a manicurist to Elle’s position as a burgeoning lawyer. In the space of the beauty salon the inhabitants, “privilege ‘feminine’ over ‘female’”(Scanlon 321). Anyone who subscribes to beauty culture is welcome, including the inclusion of a supposedly gay man stereotypically depicted through his own subscription to beauty regimes with long, golden locks that match the golden material of his apron and shirt.⁵ A notable example of the bonding that is facilitated by the environment occurs when Elle teaches the patrons at the salon the “bend and snap,” the maneuver she uses to attract male attention. During the scene several women of varying status, from a heavy-set black woman to a pregnant white woman, leave their separate spaces and join over their (humorous) performances of the dance. However, one cannot forget that their bonding activity centers on being the object of a man’s gaze, on women using their bodies in a display of what Mulvey would call “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Even in a space where these women are trying to revel in a culture of their own, one cannot forget the ever-present hand of patriarchal culture that

⁵ Having the only man present be a stereotypical gay man really does not break the mold in any way, however. His performance is even more feminine and contrived than Elle’s. It would be interesting to see if someone who did not outwardly or flamboyantly perform his or her gender enters the salon. This might be most evident when Professor Stromwell, the austere law professor, enters the space. However, her make-up in the scene is quite conventional (noticeably pink lips and eye make-up), which is not so different from Elle herself.

exploits women and objectifies them for their own form of self-expression. By having the women perform the bend-and-snap as a fun, unifying activity, the film foregrounds the objectification of women's beautifying practices, but does so in a humorous manner that does not invite critique from the audience.

As evidenced by the central hub of a beauty salon, the film fashions a link between traditional femininity and consumer culture, creating an environment where viewers underestimate Elle and her Delta Nu sisters. Elle's immersion in commercial culture defines her in the film immediately crafting an image of a dumb blonde with too much focus on her appearance. In the opening shots of the Delta Nu house the camera makes sure to focus on some the minutia in Elle's room, noting her impressive stack of *Cosmopolitan* magazines and her Clairol blonde hair dye in particular. In advertising the film, salons over the nation were dyeing people's hair blonde for free (Radner 65). Elle's love of certain products and brands sometimes borders on the obsessive, like when she refers to *Cosmopolitan* as "the bible" later on in the film. *Cosmopolitan* functions much like the bend-and-snap in that it is another way women learn how to look their best, oftentimes with a man in mind, but with the face of self-empowerment and agency. And in many ways, consumer culture is her aid providing her with the answers she needs, but in other ways it reemphasizes her status as a "dumb blonde." In fact, "Elle and her friends are repeatedly marked by their studied participation in beauty culture, and at the beginning of the film this same identity also marks Elle as "slightly dimwitted although kind" (Scanlon 321). A shop owner believes she can rip Elle off when she is out shopping for her dress for her dinner with Warner. As Elle discusses with her friends Margot (Jessica Cauffiel) and Serena (Alanna Ubuch) what color she should wear with

seriousness, Elle loudly states she wants to look, “bridal, but not like I expect anything.” The shop owner is then shown ripping a sale’s tag off a dress and telling her coworker there is “nothing [she] loves more than a dumb blonde with daddy’s plastic.” The film places Elle in a superficial and underestimated light by having her focus so seriously on something seemingly inconsequential like signature colors and the ability to project her expectations of her proposal, while simultaneously appearing unsuspecting. The initial set-up of Elle as silly and ditsy because of her adherence to consumer culture allows for her later success based on the same knowledge to imbue a stronger sense of empowerment in the narrative. She is underestimated and when she proves people wrong it only serves to strengthen the subtle feminist gestures of the film. Also, the third-wave specifically addresses girly consumer culture.

This compliance and reliance on commercial culture, however, does not have to be mutually exclusive with a feminist mind frame. Baumgardner and Richards, authors of the third-wave novel *Manifesta*, coined the term “girlie feminism,” sometimes referred to as “lipstick feminism,” about women who subscribed to conventional representations of gender, specifically in terms of heterosexuality and abidance to commodity culture. “Girlie [feminism],” which is defined as valuing traditional female qualities and pursuits that have garnered negative press, “says we’re not broken, and our desires aren’t simply booby traps set by the patriarchy” (Baumgardner, Richards 136). So, whether or not Elle identifies as a feminist (the word is never used in the film⁶), her lifestyle should not be

⁶ Although the film does feature a fairly explicit stereotype of a feminist with the character of Enid, whose focus on arbitrary and ridiculous grievances like with the term semester (and its root with the word semen) functions simultaneously as one of many caricatures presented at Harvard, but also helps serve as an exaggerated contrast to Elle’s own exaggerated feminine presence. Baumgardner and Richards write on this dichotomy, “In the same way that Bety Friedan’s insistence on professional seriousness was a response to every woman in an office being called a girl, this generation is predestined to fight against the equally rigid stereotype of being too serious, too political and seemingly asexual” (137). The film can be seen as a

written off as a symptom of patriarchal brainwashing. Elle, as already mentioned with discussions of the beauty salon, finds companionship and solace away from her woes (often caused by a man in some respect) with her adherence to conventional standards of beauty, and her journey does not feature reconciliation with the man who used her west coast consumerist image as a reason to break up with her. *Mainfesta* asserts “Using makeup isn’t a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze” (136). Instead, it is painted as a valid form of self-expression used to display personality and not subservience to a patriarchal standard. However, even though there is no inherent quality of make-up that garners male attention, there is a historical precedent and connotation behind these symbols of femininity that cannot be ignored. In some ways the wearer’s intention does not matter because perception does not have to alter. In her introduction to the seminal compilation of third-wave essays, *to be real*, Rebecca Walker writes a call-to-arms: “Rather than judging them as unevolved, unfeminist, or hopelessly duped by the patriarchy, I hope you will see these writers as yet another group of pioneers, outlaws who demand to exist whole and intact, without cutting or censoring parts of themselves: an instinct I consider the best legacy of feminism” (Walker xxxv). So, whether or not the film criticizes Elle’s adherence to a culture structured in many ways by objectification or champions her freedom of expression, Elle’s girly performance shows us how the link is forged to “girlie feminism” and the message of reclamation and inclusivity linked with it.

The film uses the climactic court case scene as an empowering example of Elle using her knowledge of beauty culture that typecasts her as the “dumb blonde” to win the case and establish her intelligence. As stated in the introduction of the paper, however,

comically exaggerated embodiment of this conflict. However, it must be noted that Elle also rebels against being seen as a girl (and a sexual being) at work, and it is a persistent problem that does not solely belong to those of the second-wave.

while this scene ends in success it is quite unlikely Elle can make a living as a lawyer who only solves cases with beauty know-how, but works as a statement validating Elle's gender expression because she is able to win with the knowledge that caused many people to write her off initially. Elle's knowledge of certain beauty and fashion standards, only enhanced by her degree in fashion merchandising for which she has a 4.0, helps her display her seemingly superficial knowledge as a tool in another context entirely. When Elle makes her debut in court cross-examining the daughter of the murder victim, Chutney Windham (Linda Cardellini), she is able to reveal Chutney as the real murderer, and not Elle's client Brooke Windam (Ali Larter), the wife of the deceased. Elle forces Chutney into an accidental confession by wielding her knowledge of beauty rituals like forensic evidence, "Because isn't the first cardinal rule of perm maintenance that you are forbidden to wet your hair for at least twenty-four hours after getting a perm at the risk of de-activating the ammonium thiglycolate?" Chutney's alibi that she was in the shower cannot hold because her perm is still intact and since she was not in the shower, she would have been able to catch Brooke red-handed. The audience can only assume that Elle and her unique knowledge have been able to crack the case, and she only got to that point of power by showing the naysayers, "You're about to see just how valuable Elle Woods can be."

Elle's hostile relationship with Warner's new fiancée, Vivian Kensington (Selma Blair), starts off as a cautionary tale of women pitting themselves against one another encouraged by patriarchal ideals, but ends as an (simplified) narrative of the benefits of female friendship. Vivian and Elle first meet on the first day of classes without any knowledge that their lives are linked through their mutual affection for Warner. In the

amphitheater style classroom, Elle sits on the first row using a heart-shaped notepad in place of a computer. The heart-shaped notepad serves as a visual reminder of how Elle does not fit into the world of Harvard. It embodies her girly persona and isolates her. Vivian, on the other hand, sits farther up and effectively blends in with the rest of the class in their neutral business casual. These initial shots formally show how the film is positioning Vivian so that she appears to feel superior to Elle, denoted by how she has the higher ground that allows her to look down on Elle, and she willingly uses that power to validate herself. Later she uses the knowledge that she has Warner's engagement ring to do the same thing. While Elle definitely puts more noticeable effort into being cordial to Vivian, she also propagates the hostility between the two when she judges Vivian by standards conforming with her own preferences. When telling Paulette about Vivian, Elle notes that Vivian wears Warner's Harry Winston ring on her "bony, unpolished finger." With this statement, Elle subtly makes a link between value and appearance by implying Vivian does not deserve Warner because of her lack of beauty regime. By having these two women pitted against each other, vying for one man's attention, they create an inhospitable environment that continually maintains patriarchal ideals like equating value and appearance or assuming one form of identity expression is more valid than another.

The pair progress, however, when they both, along with Warner, win a spot on an emergency legal defense team and Elle shows how "female friendships are presented as sustaining and a source of support" (Naranch 45). During this time, Elle's hard work ethic and respect towards their client show Vivian that her merits not only transcend her feminine expressions, but are also a product of them. When Elle refuses to reveal Brooke's alibi because she "can't break the bonds of sisterhood," Vivian starts seeing the

benefits a sisterhood can provide (such as loyalty) that her relationship with Warner, who urges Elle to “think about yourself,” cannot. Warner shows his willingness to break alliances over potential reward. Clearly interested in experiencing female friendship of this level, Vivian goes to Elle’s room one night under the guise of retrieving the deposition for the case, and when she goes to leave, she waffles in place unwilling to leave. Vivian makes the jump into some gossip, and eventually sits on Elle’s bed, making herself comfortable, and the two girls laugh and create an intimate space where they can poke fun at the men in their life. Although they hit a bump in the road when Vivian mistakenly believes Elle compromises her morals by sleeping with their law professor Professor Callahan (Victor Garber), using her sexuality for professional gain, Emmett Richmond (Luke Wilson), Callahan’s associate and Elle’s new love interest, sets her straight and her belief and support in female friendship returns. Both she and Elle realize neither of them needs Warner dragging them down, and the film ends with non-diegetic text reading, “Vivian dumped Warner. She and Elle are now best friends.” The presence of female friendship allows these women the freedom and the wisdom to not rely on male romantic relationships as their sole source of validation. So by reconciling misconceptions two incongruent women band together and show the potential of positive change in female lives with strong female relationships.

Warner, Elle’s reason for going to Harvard, serves as a counterexample of female friendship by placing personal gain and image over the women in his life, often using them as status symbols to further his own image. The exposition of the film focuses mainly on the build-up and aftermath of Elle being dumped by her college boyfriend, Warner. The audience can understand Elle’s assumption that she is about to receive a ring

instead of a dismissal at dinner when Warner takes her to a dimly lit restaurant where he orders them a bottle of champagne and flowers adorn the table. Warner begins to detail his plans for his future. He begins with his transition to Harvard, which he marks as a “different world” clearly divorcing his current world of fun with Elle in SoCal with the more “serious” environment of an Ivy League school. Visually this split is evident. Even though he and Elle are set at an intimate two-person table, Warner wears a pseudo-suit of dark colors, which are congruous with Harvard’s color scheme and aesthetic in the film, while Elle vividly stands out in a hot-pink dress embellished with eye-catching zigzags, clearly symbolizing a more ostentatious West Coast persona. Warner then states his future plans to run for office, displaying a clear desire for power directly linked with the perpetuation of the patriarchal framework of society that uses women as accessories highlighting one’s moral and family-oriented stances. Warner wants to belong to a world that would most likely reject Elle in favor of a more modest display of femininity. Or in his words, “If I’m going to be a senator, I need to marry a Jackie, not a Marilyn.” Which, both women mentioned are feminine in their own regard and gorgeous, but Marilyn (and by extension Elle) is marked by the unapologetic sexuality implicit in her appearance. (Something not conducive with a serious political career for both Warner and JFK.) So, when Elle asks Warner about the break-up, “Is it because my boobs are too big?” The answer essentially is yes. The deceptive nature of the dinner shows Warner as a man who feels privileged to a woman’s attention, and wants to enjoy the bounty of her affection until he no longer has any use for her, aptly described by him as “dicking around.” Now that his period of fun being led around by his sex drive is done, so is their relationship. Through the continued use of his childish nickname for Elle, and later Vivian, “Pooh-

bear” right before and even right after the break-up, the film colors Elle’s girliness with a naivety that patronizing male agents can (and will) use against her. In fact, Professor Callahan uses her sweet and trusting nature to try to obtain sexual favors.

Through an act of sexual harassment, Professor Callahan, Elle’s law professor and eventual boss, causes Elle to doubt her self worth and momentarily believe the negative comments directed towards her throughout the film. His privilege manifests most potently when he offers Elle a spot in his coveted summer internship program in exchange for sexual favors. The scene parallels the restaurant scene with Warner in many ways. Callahan’s office transforms into an intimate space for two with the door closed and dimly lit. Even Elle’s outfit is reminiscent of her pink dress, just more professional with a pink button-up shirt and the zigzagging from her original dress now present in her tights, signifying Elle’s ongoing attempt to transform into a “Jackie,” although the presence of the hot pink shows she cannot squash her “Marilyn.”⁷ However, the situation becomes an antithesis to the beginning of the film. Elle does not want the coerced intimacy of the moment. Callahan forces the sexual context into the situation when he moves from his removed position of power leaning up against his desk into the chair adjacent to Elle’s space. His sexual advances become quite explicit when he crosses the boundary between the chairs and places his hand suggestively up her leg as he asks, “How far will Elle go?” In this scene her beauty becomes an asset to the male authority figure present, not a liability like with Warner, but her attractiveness still works against her because it attracts unwanted sexual attention. Elle’s beauty remains linked to

⁷ This introduces another facet to the Jackie/Marilyn, and even Elle/Vivian divide, and that is the idea of self-expression channeled mainly through clothes and one’s appearance.

sexuality, and that link often works against Elle. The woman exists in the patriarchal world for the man and his pleasure despite her own intentions and wishes.

While the males in her life have reduced Elle down to “blonde hair and big boobs,” highlighting her appearance in a reductive way, it takes her sole female professor, Professor Stromwell, entering her oasis of supportive femininity, the beauty salon, to “integrate [Elle’s] two dual identities—her beauty and her brains” (Scanlon 323). Placing her professor, whose cropped haircut and subdued business suits serve as a contrast to Elle’s own personal style, in the film’s feminine oasis serves as visual proof that femininity can be expressed in a multitude of nuanced ways. Intelligence and self-sufficiency are not mutually exclusive with caring about one’s physical appearance. Professor Stromwell chastises Elle’s acceptance of others opinions of her with, “If you’re going to let one stupid prick ruin your life, you’re not the girl I thought you were.” Professor Stromwell not only reveals her assumptions of Elle are ones based on internal aptitude rather than appearance-based judgements, she simultaneously reduces the men in their lives to their body parts much like they did to Elle. Once Elle has received this pep talk and both Vivian and Brooke are made aware of Professor Callahan’s transgression towards Elle, the scene has been primed for Elle to make her move.

The final court scene makes Elle’s victory in the legal case a symbolic victory for women in the face of the patriarchal establishments that use their gender against them. As soon as Elle enters the courtroom donned in a head-to-toe pink ensemble, she wrestles control away from Professor Callahan with the help of her client, Brooke Wyndham (Ali Larter). The scene then becomes the inverse of most cinematic depictions of a courtroom where men dominate the space because women have overtaken a majority of the active

positions. The defendant, prosecutor, judge, and witness are women (the judge an African American woman no less). Men occupy the secondary and supportive roles. Even the two reporters shown closest to Elle after she wins the case are female. Even though one of the women is sentenced to jail time for murder and one is the flabbergasted prosecutor, what matters is that they are occupying their role at all. It is a brief foray into representation, however simplified and problematic.

CONCLUSION

“To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life. **It is to search for personal clarity in the midst of systemic destruction, to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them...**I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the third wave.”

-Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave”

This quote comes from Rebecca Walker’s definition of the “third wave” of feminism in *Ms. Magazine*, and her insights on what feminism should be resonate with messages of the film and show how some gestures of the film follow the influences of third wave feminism.

Elle must navigate the patriarchal world of Harvard that uses her performance of gender, a decidedly girly one, against her. She cannot join a study group because it is for “smart people” only, even though Elle was accepted to Harvard just the same as everyone else. The spokesperson for the group adopts Elle’s chipper, valley-girl voice when she rejects her, clearly establishing a connection between Elle’s performance of femininity and her perceived intelligence. Conversely, the film ends with the image of Elle entering the final court scene as primary legal counsel confidently displaying her pink dress. No longer are pink and girliness a liability in the film because they help her win the case. Elle finds “clarity in the face of systematic destruction” aimed at destroying all vestiges of her individuality so she either adheres to the dark color scheme of lawyers, or accepts that her femininity means she is subservient (to men) in the workplace. She has to get the coffee or perform sexual favors for advancement.

Elle builds a network of support from the women in her life, which eventually includes her nemesis, Vivian. The film begins with Vivian and Elle at odds over Warner, so that we can see the evolution of them joining “in sisterhood when often [they as women] are divided.” While the patriarchal symbol of Warner and institutional education inspire a competitive spirit between the two, both find more happiness after they support one another. Limitations include, but not limited to: Vivian fetching coffee for Callahan over Warner and Elle expected to perform sexually for progression in her career. By bonding, Vivian is able to escape self-serving Warner. Although the system has its faults because Vivian is so willing to believe Elle plays into the system by “seducing” Callahan (deliberately misleading Vivian about the merits of sisterhood) so she can get ahead.

In *Miss Congeniality*, the scene of Gracie’s childhood encourages the audience to make connections between conventional femininity and a lack of agency. In the process of straddling the worlds of the pageant and the FBI, Gracie “understand[s] power structures with the intention of challenging them,” if only subtly. The women in the film have been placed into a role of objectification, controlled by patriarchal institutions that police women’s bodies. However, the film has opened the audience’s eyes to the ridiculous nature of these expectations, but also neglects giving the women a voice for structural change so they can escape/challenge these expectations. Gracie maintains some of the aspects of her makeover and Cheryl’s insecurities are not erased by performing with fire, which is shown when she cries over Gracie stealing her crown at the end. The film does introduce nuances to the women who are at first seen as automatons who subscribe to a culture that subjects them. After bonding with the other women and experiencing a reprieve from institutional worlds, and their expectations of masculinity

and femininity, Gracie develops a more complex understanding of the contestants' personalities. And by ignoring her love interest in the final scene in favor of embracing her new friends, Gracie does not let the prejudices engendered by patriarchal culture sway her. It is a subtle protest narratively, but the film opens our eyes to the power structures that govern performances of femininity. So, while both films mostly ignore some important third-wave issues like intersectionality, they do have feminist undertones that are rooted in the third wave.

Both films also use comedy and a heaping dose of stereotypes in order to make social critiques on how women are viewed and treated in the workplace. Elle becomes a representative for conventional femininity and must learn to overstep the pitfalls typically associated with her representation (i.e. assumptions of her stupidity and sexual harassment from her boss) and harness her unique attributes to win a court case with her knowledge of hair care. While her method seems limited and still largely limits her character with her participation in beauty culture, her story serves as a message that a woman's femininity (whatever that means to them) need not be a liability in their workplace and can in fact be an asset. Gracie enters into the pageant looking at the women similarly to how the other students and faculty looked at Elle as she drove up to Harvard decked in pink with an inflatable water bowl filled with bottled water for her lapdog. Gracie is placed on the other-end of the stereotyping spectrum, as a judgmental non-feminine feminist. However, prejudices are eventually dropped and she develops affection for the women, especially when she sees their personalities beyond the façade of the pageant. Gracie renegotiated prejudices result in her adoption of a physical form of femininity with make-up and a well-tailored suit. So, the film seems to say that a

reconciliation between Gracie and her previous negative thoughts around the pageant must be resolved with a physical renegotiation of her own gender identity, which goes against Gracie's characterization throughout the film.

Despite the many problematic aspects of the two box-office hits, both propagate messages of acceptance and empowerment among women and provide social commentary on the performance of gender identity in the workplace. However, what does it say about our society that these glimmers of empowerment are the representatives of feminism in popular culture? Films that push empowerment, but not structural change?

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Changing the Face of Feminism*. Anchor Books (1995): xxix-xl.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you first and foremost to Dr. Susan Courtney who put in countless hours trying to push me into finding this paper's path. You showed me how endless revisions and hard cuts can transform a piece into what it needs to become. Thanks also go to Dr. Greg Forter who took on the position of Second Reader with no hesitation and asked me hard questions that opened my mind to future possibilities. Thank you to the Honors College for providing me with this opportunity for growth and for setting me on a pathway where I have gained many new skills and connections. And last, but not least, thank you to all my friends and family who encouraged me through the late nights and who might actually read this paper.