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You Can't Spell Feminist without the "Femme": An Analysis of *Legally Blonde*

Early 2000's nostalgia has taken over, and Y2k inspired fashion, media, and aesthetics are back in style. Ally Feiam for The Trend Spotter states, "The early 2000s were very experimental, and with Gen Z and Millennials welcoming a nostalgia for the era, it was only a matter of time before the style came back" (2021). While I love the idea of velour tracksuits, crimped hair, and shimmery eyeshadow coming back around, I also know that like low-rise jeans, not everything from the 2000s has aged well. For my media critique, I investigated the 2007 homophobic train wreck of a film, *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry*, and this week I am going back even further into trendy Y2k nostalgia and celebrating the iconic 2001 film, *Legally Blonde* directed by Robert Luketic and story by Amanda Brown.

I recognize that *Legally Blonde* is a controversial film selection for the media celebration assignment, as it has been highly debated on whether or not the classic film qualifies as a "feminist movie." In our course reading "Why the Bechdel Test Fails Feminism" by Anna Waletzko for the HuffPost, she argues that although *Legally Blonde* passes the Bechdel Test, it falls short of being considered a feminist portrayal of gender. When a classmate of mine additionally used her discussion post to point out the lack of feminism in *Legally Blonde*, I knew I had to re-watch the beloved film with a set of fresh eyes. *Legally Blonde* tells the story of Elle Woods, a rich, privileged white sorority girl that adheres to societally constructed perceptions of

feminine beauty with her bright blonde hair, love for pink, passion for fashion, and her journey of attending Harvard Law School to win back her ex-boyfriend Warren. While the film undeniably has issues in terms of racial diversity and inclusivity, it still stands up as an example of media that inspires young women to value community, loyalty, and collaboration over competition with other women. Elle Woods, played by Reese Witherspoon, succeeds in her educational and career goals by believing in her self-worth and refusal to be dismissed in a sexist and patriarchal culture that denies femininity from being seen as a form of power. Elle Wood's satirical performance of stereotypes, privilege, and femininity work to tell a story of female empowerment and community building that dismantles societal limitations placed upon women to be passive sexual objects that lack agency and bodily autonomy over their appearance perceptions. *Legally Blonde* comically portrays femininity as loyal, kind, and powerful, which I believe is a narrative that society should continue to celebrate, even 20 years later.

The first act of *Legally Blonde* sets the context and tone of the whole film, hyper-fixating on the traditional tropes of the "rom-com" genre. Elle Woods is presented as a purposeful exaggeration of femininity and privilege. She dons pink in almost all of her outfits, she is the president of her sorority, Delta Nu, and she initially pursues her law degree because of a breakup with her boyfriend, Warner. While some may argue Elle's character serves as a misrepresentation of women, this is the very intent of the first act: to expose the audience's preconceived notions regarding femininity. The film expects its audience to adopt the idea that femininity is meek, submissive, thoughtless, and easy to disregard. *Legally Blonde* purposely plays into the patriarchal misconceptions many viewers would have and satirically mirrors the society. However, the first act also established the importance of the female community as Elle's sorority bonds together to assist in her acceptance to Harvard Law School. The women of Delta Nu were

the most supportive of Elle's decision and are continuously shown helping her study for the LSAT's, help her film her admissions video, and cheered her on through her acceptance.

Although the film intends to invoke the bias against stereotypical femininity that is ingrained in our society, especially regarding sorority women, it also extends the notion that a female-based community can be influential in building a woman's success. It should also be noted that Elle earned 179 out of 180 points on her LSATs, participated in multiple extracurricular activities, and was involved in philanthropy and volunteering throughout college before attending Harvard, showcasing her academic success prior to law school. The movie establishes Elle's qualifications while still constructing the patriarchal frame it is using to mirror society as her application to the university is debated by the Harvard committee, AKA a group of white men that are shown justifying Elle's choice to wear a bedazzled bikini in her application video by bringing up her 4.0 GPA and LSAT scores. Here, the film directly calls out that an attractive woman's value has to be confirmed by outstanding exceptional success and achievement that continues to be deconstructed throughout the remainder of the film.

Elle Woods is a character meant to be an overt representation of stereotypical femininity. When most media depicts women who embrace femininity to fail in a male-dominated scenario, she thrives. Elle's stereotypically feminine qualities are used as her strength in the film, subverting the audience's expectations. Yes, *Legally Blonde* stereotypes women, but it does so *intentionally*. In "The Role of Stereotypes" by Richard Dyer, he states that stereotypes "do not only, in concert with social types, map out the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none" (Dyer, 1999). *Legally Blonde* highlights overtly feminine stereotypes, such as Elle's love for bright colors, self-grooming, and well-coordinated fashion, as the boundaries that Elle must overcome. The film

establishes the stereotype of the "dumb blonde bimbo" only to subvert them in the end, breaking free of society's imposed boundaries on the value of traditionally feminine interests and ways of thinking. At the end of the film, Elle Woods is asked by a client (and past sorority sister) to represent her during a critical court proceeding. When Elle enters the courtroom wearing a bright pink and rhinestone ensemble, the other lawyers and judge dismiss her expertise, knowledge, and ability based on her glamorous appearance and blonde hair. Elle's sorority sisters join the scene offering cheering remarks, and her colleague/love interest Emmet is shown using his male privilege and credentials to defend Elle's ability to proceed with the trial. While stumbling at the beginning of her cross interview with the witness, Elle is ultimately able to use her knowledge of hair care and beauty to discredit the witness's previous statements and wins the case. Not only is Elle's femininity questioned as a barrier to her ability to practice law in this scene, but it showcased how her love for stereotypically gendered knowledge was valuable to success.

As T. E. Perkins directly states in 'Rethinking Stereotypes,' "to refer 'correctly' to someone as a 'dumb blonde', and to understand what is meant by that, implies a great deal more than hair colour and intelligence. It refers immediately to her sex, which refers to her status in society, her relationship to men, her inability to behave or think rationally, and so on. In short, it implies knowledge of a complex social structure." (as cited in Dyer, 1999, p. 2). Throughout the film, it is not only that Elle Woods' expertise gets questioned, but she is continuously sexualized. However, *Legally Blonde* takes a less common approach to its dissection of the male gaze. The film and its characters are aware of the presence of the male gaze, as most women are, but prioritizes the female perspective on its existence. This movie was not made for men (even the DVD box is bright pink and would scream "Girls' night!" if it could talk), it's written by women for women. The scenes that depict feminine sexuality, like the iconic "bend and snap" salon

scene, do so in ways that highlight the power and self-love that can come from embracing your sexuality and femininity. Since *Legally Blonde* looks to display the story and characters through the feminine perspective it aligns more heavily with the idea of the female gaze. Stefani Forster explains that the female gaze is “about making the audience feel what *women* see and experience”, and this film invites women to see their value and reinforces the benefits of female camaraderie (Forster, 2018). Additionally, *Legally Blonde* acknowledges the power that a woman’s femininity and sexuality can hold when she uses them herself with consent. Elle uses the societal misconceptions against her and analytically understands how her interactions are perceived. She showcases the way a young girl can intellectually perceive, evaluate, and change her social circles and reinforces the power of female intuition without subjecting Elle to the one-dimensional “hot girl” archetype.

Beyond Elle’s representation of femininity, *Legally Blonde*’s is able to represent a range of female archetypes. After Elle gets accepted into Harvard to win back her ex-boyfriend Warren, she meets Vivian. Vivian serves as a contrast to Elle’s character by representing a conservative, serious, and academically ambitious woman that doesn’t care much for beauty. Vivian, played by Selma Blair, is introduced as Elle’s competition, both for Warner’s hand in marriage and career opportunities. She creates a caricature as the film’s mainstage bitch, a word I use with supreme intentionality as it encompasses the societal connotation of Vivian’s character. The preppy, “mean girl” initially does everything in her power to suppress Elle’s success and becomes representative of a woman’s hostile view towards her female peers. Vivian goes out of her way to cement the distance between her and Elle, an illustration of women othering themselves for acceptance to a male-dominated society. When Elle and Vivian are both accepted to the prestigious internship with their sexist and predatory professor, Vivian begins to see the

value in the community and support that creating female alliances can provide in male-dominated spaces. The female support between the characters is tested momentarily when their professor, Callahan, sexually harasses Elle, who immediately rejects his advances and calls him out for being a “pathetic asshole”. Sadly, Vivian assumes the worst of Elle and slut shames her as she exits the building. When Vivian learns the truth about the situation she immediately apologizes for her ways and is shown realizing the importance of believing and other supporting women. Although the sentiment “believe women” is used often today, *Legally Blonde* pushed pro-feminist rhetoric surrounding sexual assault years before the Me Too movement would come to fruition.

Legally Blonde is not a film without faults. The cast is incredibly white-washed, with only a few moments of racial diversity, including the "Bend and Snap" scene that showcases women of color participating in a dance sequence to showcase how everyone can feel attractive in their body. The only other racial representation in the film is that the judge presiding over Elle's court case is a black woman. The dismal lack of diversity is troubling, and the film should have included more BIPOC individuals in the casting decisions. Additionally, while the film showcases a character arc between Vivian and Elle's relationship, Elle is never closely shown as bonding with the lesbian law student in her study group, Enid. Elle and Enid have little dialogue together, despite being two of three female law students focused on in the film and their interactions are always negative. Enid's sexuality creates an othering of queer women as unable to form meaningful friendships with heterosexual women that is never resolved in the film. Despite the film's flaws, it's overall message of female empowerment, breaking gender stereotypes, and embracing femininity as a form of power meaningfully diverted the male gaze and contributed to showcasing how media made for women can be wildly successful. The

massive hit of the 2001 film *Legally Blonde* helped establish a legacy that impacted a generation of women to find value in themselves rather than a man and taught women that there is strength in uplifting and empowering other women. So, the next time someone questions Elle Woods' stance on feminism, make sure they first take the time to unpack and overcome their own internalized misogyny towards femininity, for as the film shows, we are stronger together.

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