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Trouble on Screen

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Working Girls, From Ally McBeal to Rebecca Bunch: the Evolution of the "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" on Screen

Anaïs Le Fèvre-Berthelot

PLAN

TEXTE

1 In 1997, Ally McBeal, the title character of the Fox TV show (*Ally McBeal*, Fox, 1997-2002), banged her head on her office door while repeating "I have my health." Over the course of the following seasons, this initial assertion was regularly questioned, as Ally always seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown brought about by her complicated love life. Yet, Ally was never diagnosed with any specific trouble; her emotional distress, anxiety, and hallucinations were mostly dismissed as quirky manifestations of post-feminist femininity, as the white Harvard-educated lawyer tried to balance her love life and her career.

2 Two decades later, another show featured a mentally unstable thirtysomething female lawyer who had trouble getting over her ex and fantasized about people breaking into song. From 2015 to 2019, Rachel Bloom played Rebecca Bunch, aka the "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend" of a CW musical series she co-created and co-wrote (*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, The CW, 2015-2019). At the beginning of the series, upon seeing a billboard for butter emblazoned with the words, "When was the last time you were truly happy?" Rebecca quits her job in New York to go meet her teenage crush. In the third season, she is diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) and the fourth season focuses on her journey to live with her diagnosis, find balance

and purpose. Both creators of the show, Rachel Bloom and Aline Brosh McKenna, clearly wanted to channel the heroine's perspective through comedy rather than to make Rebecca's mental health the butt of the series' jokes (Bradley), and critics and fans alike have praised *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* for its portrayal of mental illness (Doyle; Bradley; Bastién).

3 Comparing *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* allows for an analysis that covers a period of twenty years and major social and economic evolutions: *Ally McBeal* aired on Fox at the beginning of the post-network era; it gathered between 9 and 14 million viewers in the United States; out of 112 episodes, 110 were written or co-written by the show's creator, David E. Kelley and the show has gained cult status in part thanks to its use of popular music. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* was written by a team of diverse writers led by Bloom, who talks about her mental health issues very openly. The CW picked it up after Showtime turned it down and the show became part of the small network's efforts to distinguish itself from its competitors. The network kept the show on the air for four seasons even though it garnered less than one million viewers each week and had one of the smallest audiences of network TV. The deal between The CW and Netflix allowed subscribers to access entire seasons eight days after the season finale first aired. The musical numbers from the show were available on YouTube both on The CW's channel and on Rachel Bloom's where some videos gathered up to 5 million views. These elements point to evolutions in the modes of production and consumption of audiovisual entertainment that have had an impact on the diversity of representations – in terms of gender, race, sexuality, and mental health – offered on TV shows.

4 As Stephen Harper points out in his book, *Madness, Power and the Media*, "mental distress has always been –and continues to be– constructed both 'negatively' and 'positively' in Western culture." (Harper 1) Yet, research on the representations of mental distress in media and popular culture mostly stresses the negative images of "madness" conveyed by television and film. Characters suffering from mental distress often are secondary characters who do not have a job or steady relationships; studies also point out that, especially in crime dramas, they are more likely to commit violent crimes or to be victims of crime (Ma).

5 Many scholars of media representations of mental distress embrace a cultivation theory approach (Gerbner et al.) that insists on the role of television in fostering "stable, resistant, and widely shared assumptions, images, and conceptions" of mental distress in real-life (Gerbner et al.). There is little difference between the conclusions drawn by Otto Wahl in his 1992 literature review (Wahl, "Mass Media Images of Mental Illness") and those of Zexin Ma who analyzed 41 studies published in the early 21st century to "investigate how media portrays people with mental illness, what effects they have on the public, and how to use media to reduce stigma effectively." (Ma 91) For the past two decades, most research has concluded that, because of the lack of depth of mentally ill characters, the tendency to depict them as violent, and the emphasis on bizarre symptoms, "media still contribute to the mental illness stigma." (Ma 101)

6 However, in keeping with cultivation theory, some argue that media could be also used as a tool to reduce this stigma. For instance, Hoffner and Cohen conducted several studies to determine fans' (Hoffner and Cohen, "Responses to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder on Monk among Series Fans") and viewers' (Hoffner and Cohen, "Portrayal of Mental Illness on the TV Series Monk") responses to the representation of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in *Monk* (USA Network, 2002-2009). They concluded that a parasocial relationship with the main character was "related to lower OCD stereotypes and lower social distance from people with OCD" and "for respondents with OCD, a stronger parasocial relationship was associated with the belief that watching the series had helped them deal with having OCD." (Hoffner and Cohen, "Responses to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder on Monk among Series Fans" 663)

7 In *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*, Otto Wahl lists TV shows that feature characters who suffer from mental distress, from depression to split personality (generally wrongfully associated with schizophrenia) and from OCD to psychopathy. Examples from that list show that, in the 1990s, such characters were often secondary and they generally conformed to negative stereotypes:

> *Baywatch*: A psychopathic murderer who has escaped from prison takes Stephanie and Summer hostage in a lifeguard tower. […]

> *Cagney and Lacey*: Cagney and Lacey pose as prostitutes to trap a psychotic. […]

> *Cheers*: Diane fears she's being followed by a deranged actor released from a mental institution. […]

> *Doogie Howser, M.D.*: On Christmas Eve, Doogie gets sidetracked by a schizoid patient who thinks he's Santa Claus. […]

> *Magnum, P.I.*: A Vietnam veteran suffering from psychological problems murders a beautiful surfer. […]

> *Seinfeld*: Hypochondriac George gets advice from a "holistic" healer for his claimed heart attack. […] (Wahl, Media Madness 180–88)

8 Recently, with the emergence of the antihero as a central figure of post-network series, more and more shows have offered more nuanced and varied portrayals of characters suffering from mental distress. Tony Soprano's struggle with depression in *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), or Carrie Mathison's bipolar disorder in *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-2020) are good examples of this change. More recent shows also come to mind, such as the adult animated series *BoJack Horseman* (Netflix, 2014-2020) whose title character suffers from depression and addiction, or *Lady Dynamite* (Netflix, 2016-2017) in which Maria Bamford is recovering from a severe mental breakdown. Shows like *Elementary* (CBS, 2012-2019) that turns Sherlock Holmes' addiction into a central element of the plot, or *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015-2019) that depicts a superhero suffering from PTSD, offer new takes on old characters and suggest that mental health can be treated with more depth in the post-network era (Lotz, The Television Will Be Revolutionized).

9 Yet, the results of Dr. Stacy Smith's team at USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's content study of the most popular 50 TV series from the 2016/2017 season show that the situation is still very unsatisfactory. According to the study, mental health issues are underrepresented: while 18.9% of the US adult population is affected by mental health conditions, only 7% of TV characters struggle with mental health issues. (Smith et al. 4) "25% of TV characters with mental

health conditions were shown acting violently; [...Out of 86 TV characters] three were shown taking medication and 20 were in some form of therapy". Not only are mental health issues underrepresented, when they are portrayed, it often is in a stigmatizing manner that does not accurately represent possibilities of treatment and does not show characters seeking and getting support.

10 In this context, both *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* stand out as network shows because of the importance they give to mental health conditions in their narratives. This chapter aims at comparing the two shows to see how the treatment of mental distress in female characters points to gender dynamics and how it can contribute to challenging the norm. It argues that broader issues of identity and social norms are at stake in the representation of mental distress in female heroines.

11 This study relies on an analysis of the opening credits and several sequences from the two series (mostly musical numbers explicitly meant to convey the characters' states of mind) to provide first an overview of the representations of mental distress offered by both shows. It then analyzes the relation between gender oppression and representations of mental distress in women and examines how *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* dealt with these tropes thanks to original uses of music. A second part focuses on the contexts in which the shows were produced and how political economy and identity politics can influence representations of what is and is not "normal" behavior. Finally, the analysis offers a brief foray into the reception of the representation of mental distress in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* by looking at a limited sample of online reactions posted below YouTube videos of musical numbers from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* dealing with mental health issues as a preliminary for further investigation on this particular aspect.

Representing mental distress in *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*

12 *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* are ensemble shows that mostly take place at law firms, workplaces usually associated with strict conventions and norms, which makes them the perfect environment to question those norms. In both shows, the title characters are new recruits and their arrival quickly exposes the quirks and inadequacies of their co-workers, clients and friends. The shows stand out in their use of artificial forms to tackle marginal behaviors and appearances: voiceovers, musical numbers, fantasy sequences, sound effects, etc. are used to question how representations are built and how imaginations are shaped.

13 In *Ally McBeal*, senior partner John Cage's eccentricities do not lead to a diagnosis but earn him the nickname of "funny little man": his nose whistles; he hears bells and Barry White; he has a stutter that he controls by saying "Poughkeepsie"; he uses squeaking shoes to destabilize other lawyers and a remote control to flush the toilet before use because he likes "a fresh bowl". Despite his talent in the courtroom, Cage is often mocked and his masculinity is questioned more than once by other characters. If members of the main cast often do not fit the stereotypes of people working at a law firm (Elaine and her inventions, Ling and her multiple side businesses, Richard and his "Fishisms"), there is a clear difference between the treatment of the protagonists and that of the secondary characters. Many clients and other secondary characters suffer from various conditions that lead to their being stigmatized. These characters are often stereotyped and presented in a disparaging manner. They are called "nuts," and "weirdos" while the main characters are generally uncomfortable around them. It is true that, more often than not, the narrative seems to encourage empathy towards these characters. But, because of the show's narrative structure, they appear for one episode only and mostly serve as foils for the main cast. The show does not give itself time to dig into the characters' relationships. Thus the social and political dimensions of these characters' situ-

ations are never developed and their struggles are mostly used for comic effect. In addition, the visual presentation of these secondary characters often objectifies them and produces a freak show effect that simply reinforces the white, privileged and only slightly neurotic norm embodied by the main cast.

14 What is really striking – and disturbing – about *Ally McBeal* is the way in which all sorts of non-normative appearances and behaviors are bundled up together in one wide casting net of stigma. The best example of this is in Season 3, Episode 14, when Cage and Fish represent four persons fired from their jobs for being "oddballs" (AMB, s03e14): one of the clients is a Black transvestite or transgender woman (the show seems to confuse the two); one man has OCD; the third one is presented as nerdy, mostly because he wears a necktie, and the last one is an obese White woman. In line with the show's celebration of eccentricity, the episode suggests that these people are treated unfairly by society and it closes on a victory parade gathering all the "oddballs" who attended the trial. However, the four employees are discriminated against for very different reasons. During the trial, shots of the courtroom show that every day more people whose physical appearances do not match the standards of Western capitalist society are attending in support. In the end the plaintiffs lose in court and the norms they all subvert in various ways are never challenged. The parade launched by John relies on the idea that "sometimes there is triumph in the battle alone" but the episode does a poor job of sorting out the power relationships at play in this battle. The parade is an escapist performance that closes on a fade-to-black after which these particular "oddballs" are never to be seen again. More will come and also be othered by the visual spectacle that is often made of them. Overall, the succession of cases involving people who are often hastily diagnosed or simply singled out as "wackadoos, but nice ones" (AMB, s03e14) because they challenge social norms related to gender, behavior, or physical appearance suggests a freak show that acts as a counterpoint to the eccentricities of the main characters. While the show often questions social norms as well as the boundaries between reality and fantasy, guest stars and supporting characters are the only ones who –because of diagnosed mental health issues or simply of personal quirks– really have to deal with the consequences of challenging the "real world".

Because these characters are rarely present for more than one episode, the audience is not given the possibility to contextualize their troubles or to relate to them: secondary characters dealing with mental health issues are used for comic effects or to provide a commentary on the main characters, but their issues are rarely taken seriously.

15 *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* also presents a gallery of characters dealing with a variety of mental health issues: Greg is an alcoholic, as is his father; Nathaniel's mother attempted suicide when he was a child; Paula's youngest son has OCD and ADHD; Bert also suffers from BPD although he was previously misdiagnosed with schizophrenia... In part because these characters are not guest stars but regulars, their issues are woven into the narrative in a less dramatic way than in *Ally McBeal*. Over the course of four seasons, the show tends to destigmatize mental distress because it suggests that most people have to deal with mental health issues at some point in their lives. At the same time, it does not shy away from the complex personal issues faced by the characters, nor from the social and political questions that might underlie their troubles. These can be tackled over the course of several episodes.

16 For instance, Greg's alcoholism becomes a central element of the narrative at the beginning of the second season. The character re-emerges after being forced to confront his addiction because of a DUI arrest, but his problem is hinted at several times in the first season, as Greg is told by other characters of events that occurred when he was drunk. The writers spoke "to mental health experts and [had] people who have been in recovery come speak to the writers' room." (Gallagher) and this deliberate approach allows for a more nuanced representation of the disease. With "Greg's Drinking Song" (CEG, s02e02), a parody of an Irish drinking song in which Greg explains what he used to do when he drank (including puking on his cat, trying to fly airplanes and having sex with a bush), the show suggests a way that comedy can be made out of serious issues without relying on stigmatization, by letting the characters speak for themselves. The sequence points out the – mostly masculine – culture that encourages drinking, but mainly stresses the personal dimension of the character's struggle. Greg's alcoholism is presented as a general coping mechanism, not as the result of whatever other characters

might have done since the show's beginning. This gives more depth to the character and allows his recovery to become central in his development. It is worth pointing out that this is not done at the expense of comedy or form. The main contribution of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* from this perspective is that it shows how adopting a more inclusive approach can be an opportunity for formal and aesthetic innovation.

Crazy women and gender oppression – "You do/don't want to be crazy"

17 US TV shows generally represent mental health conditions as individual troubles, anchored solely in one's neurobiology or past. The social, economic and political factors that partly determine mental distress are generally left out of the narrative. While this is mostly the case for race and class in both shows, gender is clearly presented as one of the factors of the heroines' troubles both in *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*.

18 Ally and Rebecca act irrationally because of their quest for romantic love and the shows suggest that this behavior is encouraged by popular representations of women. Both shows are specific in the way they associate mental health conditions with issues of gender; they point to the relations between the heroines' issues and their condition as women. This is rarely done in shows that focus on male heroes suffering from mental distress – for instance BoJack Horseman's depression and addiction are not depicted as gendered issues. Although there is little research on the issue of the gendering of mental illness representations, there is a gender bias in the perception of people with mental health conditions that benefits women: studies suggest that news stories tend to provide more objective and sympathetic representations of mental illness when women are concerned while articles about men are more negative (Whitley et al.). More generally, mental health conditions in women are seen as less threatening to society and they are often explained and sometimes justified by women's personal history. This is visible in news media but also in fiction: "female soap opera characters are also

depicted in ways that suggest that their mental illness is a response to relational trauma." (Quintero Johnson and Miller 224) These representations are anchored in gender and they are likely to evolve based on the way gender issues are perceived at a given point in time.

19 Gender differences in mental illnesses are well-documented: Clarke and Miele point out that several theories can explain "gender differences in the expression of emotion and mental illness." (Clarke and Miele 2) These theories are all anchored in the symbolic, social and economic construction of gender: basically, men and women are encouraged to process their emotions in different ways and their mental health conditions are interpreted and treated differently. For instance, Johnson and Miller suggest that in the media, violent acts perpetrated by women with mental health issues are more likely to be framed in terms of social oppression and thus "reify the notion that violence committed by women is reactionary." (Quintero Johnson and Miller) As far as popular representations are concerned, the gendered association of women with heightened emotions is a trope of female-centered series. But it is a double-edged trope.

20 The association between mental illness and the oppression of women can support a sexist or a feminist perspective, as women's psychological distress can be read either as proof of their inferiority or as a result of their systematic oppression. Contemporary representations of female characters suffering from mental distress build on this tradition and play with it as they question the gender norms that tend to produce personality disorders: in a patriarchal society, normal, rewarded behavior is masculine behavior while behaviors and attitudes culturally coded as feminine, such as stronger emotional responses for instance, are more likely to be seen as pathological. Such representations are also shaped by the society that produces them. For instance, the success of media discourse about therapy and individual empowerment may have consequences in the definition of social norms and identity. Similarly, the evolution of the representation of gender issues in mainstream media between the late 1990s and today, is likely to have an impact on the way gender and mental illness are associated. Recent evolutions in the industrial structure of audiovisual entertainment, such as the rise of SVoD platforms, the new strategies of networks, the emergence of web series, and the growing number of production companies owned by women have all

opened doors to new content creators who promote more inclusive and diverse narratives. In addition, the rise of feminist criticism of popular culture in academia but also among fans, and the spread of intersectional feminist ideas and discourses online through a variety of media play a role in creating space for less stereotyped representations.

21 In a way typical of the post-feminist discourses[1] that dominated mainstream media in the US in the 1990s, *Ally McBeal* first suggests that the problems the heroine faces come from being dissatisfied with her life as a single professional woman[2]. The pilot makes it clear: it all started with Billy, the love of her life, and Ally is "the victim of her own choices." (AMB, s01e01) The reception at the time focused on Calista Flockhart's extremely thin silhouette and on her short skirts – Ally appeared as the face of the death of feminism on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1998 and was described as "a ditsy 28-year-old Ivy League Boston litigator who never seems in need of the body-concealing clothing that Northeastern weather often requires" (Bellafante). Ally's appearance sexualized the character and undermined her professional skills in the reception of the show; it contributed to her characterization as an unhappy single woman rather than a successful professional with a strong support system. This is in line with Faludi's analysis of the media backlash against feminism that emerged in the 1980s. (Faludi)

22 Yet, some of Ally's symptoms are clearly gendered. For instance, she sees her breasts or lips grow bigger when she looks in the mirror suggesting that the character has internalized the male gaze. In the first season, Ally starts to worry about her so-called "biological clock" and hallucinates a dancing baby. The baby first appears in a dream but then Ally hears him running around her room and tries to tackle him (for real) arguing that if she can "throttle him in her imagination then she can make him go away in her imagination". The episode concludes with Ally confronting her guilt of having had a one-night stand and her fear of being childless by dancing happily with the baby (AMB, s01e12). The heroine's thoughts and feelings are conveyed visually and the viewers are privy to her perspective and this fosters empathy. The viewers are encouraged to side with Ally, to be part of the group that embraces the illusion and the fantasy, and possibly also the notion that motherhood is the key to Ally's happiness. A few

episodes later, when the dancing baby comes back, Ally ends up kicking a child because she thinks she is hallucinating and she wants to break the spell (AMB, s01e18). Most of this episode centers on power relationships between women and men, both in the workplace and in romantic relationships; it promotes an apolitical perspective according to which it is really just up to women to seize power. And of course, if they do not or if they complain that they cannot do whatever they want, something is wrong with them.

23 In the post-feminist perspective adopted in the show, Ally's troubles are not taken seriously because they are presented as the results of the unrealistic expectations set by liberal feminism and by Ally's refusal to live in the real world, a man's world. Ally is always caught in a double bind: she is either too much (too loud, too eccentric, too selfish, too crazy) or not enough (not big enough, not sexy enough, not warm enough).

24 One of *Ally McBeal*'s specificities is the way in which it conveys Ally's mental distress by representing what goes on in the heroine's head on screen with visual effects and through a voiceover: Ally is thrown into a garbage bin when a man dumps her; she is crushed by a boulder or hit by arrows when her heart is broken; she becomes tiny when she feels shy, and thanks to the voiceover, the audience is privy to her thoughts. But, soon the visual tricks are not used simply to literalize common emotions. When Ally starts to hallucinate babies and unicorns, when she feels like she is swimming across her office or sees all her colleagues or the court turn into musical numbers, the viewers also have access to her visions. The fact that Ally is sometimes unable to tell the difference between her fantasies and the real world proves that these visions are not simply the result of her fertile imagination and yet, this is how the show presents them since it never addresses them as real symptoms of gendered mental distress.

The Mad Woman and the Music

25 *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* suggest that music, and especially popular music, can help people cope with the challenges encountered in the real world and with the emotions they create. Songs allow the characters to make sense of what is happening to them and process their emotions by referring to tropes conveyed by

popular culture and dominant narratives. But while *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* deals with these tropes tongue-in-cheek, *Ally McBeal* mostly uses music and popular culture to promote a romanticized vision of mental distress. In several episodes, Ally hears and sees Al Green sing to her; after Billy's death, she is pursued by Gloria Gaynor singing "I Will Survive" (AMB, s03e17). Greg Smith argues that in *Ally McBeal*'s "narrative system, the ability to hear the music is a sign of sanity, a sign that the person is still vitally alive. The point is to be receptive to the power of music without being subject to it, to use the discourse of pop music for one's own purposes, to choose the right voices to listen to." (Smith 45) But Ally does not always get to choose: she does not have control on what she hears or on when she hears it and she is subjected to the cultural injunctions conveyed by the music.

26 In the case of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Rebecca clearly does not always listen to the right voices either. Many musical numbers show how various genres of popular music convey unhealthy messages and how they have shaped Rebecca. What is at stake in the series is her ability to detach from those stories and create her own. As both shows suggest, music can be both a symptom and a cure.

27 The opening credits for the third season of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* spell out the double bind perpetuated by popular culture: women should be crazy in love but not "crazy in the head". Combining four musical genres (country, pop, rock, and rap), the credits point out how popular culture conveys the notion that there is "good crazy": the madness associated with romantic and physical passion and "bad crazy": the unhinged vengeful type of madness. And yet, popular entertainment shows that the line between the two is easy to cross. The romantic narrative can justify everything. This is what the credits for season 2 mock. In a Busby Berkeley-like number, the song suggests that the irrationality of love justifies Rebecca's irresponsible actions. The heroine sings "I'm just a girl in love / I can't be held responsible for my actions", but her words eventually take on a completely different meaning at the end of the season, when they are revealed to be the plea Rebecca's mother made to stop her daughter being thrown in jail after she set fire to her lover's house. Seasons 2 and 3 explore the negative consequences of popular narratives and social injunctions that limit women's aspirations to being fulfilled and

defined by somebody else. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* literalizes the popular tropes of romantic, heterosexual love to underline their toxicity and it thus leads towards a different happy ending, one that does not rely on a heterosexual happily ever after.

28 Both shows conclude with the notion that the heroines do not in fact need a man to be happy or balanced. Rebecca is shown on stage, about to perform a song she wrote and telling all her new friends in West Covina how much she loves them and that she has found herself: "It's about how, when I'm doing that, when I'm telling my own story, for the first time in my life, I am truly happy. It's like I just met myself — like I just met Rebecca" (CEG, s04e17).

29 As the shows end, the heroines' monologues suggest that the craziness is over because they finally know who they are and what they want. *Ally McBeal*'s finale is more bittersweet, as the heroine declares, as she walks away from her friends, "Looking backward, many of the saddest times of my life turn out to be the happiest, so I must be happy now. This is going to be good, why else would I be crying?" (AMB, s05e22). Still, Ally is doing better than in the pilot; she is no longer the victim of her choices and the series offers a twist on the traditional love story: it turns out that Ally did not need a man to take care of her, she needed a child that she could take care of. Ally does not find peace in a traditional heterosexual romance but in her newly-formed relationship with the ten-year-old daughter who suddenly barged into her life (courtesy of a forgotten egg donation). Motherhood, another typically feminine role, replaces romance as the solution to Ally's troubles. Seventeen years later, the end of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* presents a heroine who finds balance, not in marriage or motherhood, but in creative work[3]. Rebecca's happiness is not dependent on somebody else. Even though the four seasons and the series' finale insist on the importance of being surrounded by supportive friends, the show ends with Rebecca standing up alone on stage, having found her voice, even if it is probably off-key.

30 I agree with Greg Smith when he writes that, "the broad narrative of *Ally McBeal* boldly asserts the advantages of clinging to madness and illusion" (Smith 135) but I disagree when he argues that choosing to represent and celebrate "eccentricity" is simply a trade-off in favor of "beauty" or aesthetics over politics. (Smith 200) The decision not

to explore the political dimension of exclusion and personal struggle is not just an aesthetic choice; it is a political one. The world Ally has to navigate is deeply sexist (she quits her former job in the pilot because she was sexually assaulted by a senior partner) and conveys the message that a woman is never complete without a man or a child; her quirks, fantasies and her musical world testify to this but the way they are treated dismisses the political and systemic dimensions of the constraints that weigh on the character. In its efforts to gather a larger audience, the show does not really question the trope of the incomplete woman and in the end Ally's troubles still seem to stem from her apparently irrational desire to have it all. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* looks for factors beyond Rebecca's personality to explain her issues. Doing this allows the show to embrace madness and illusion knowingly, not as an escape or a crutch but as a way to make sense of the world, and maybe change it, since it is presented as a social construction that can be influenced by the stories we tell.

The importance of being earnest about mental health in comedy

31 The way *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* have tackled issues related to gender and mental health can be explained in part by looking at the industrial context in which they were produced. *Ally McBeal* aired on Fox in the 1990s, a time when Fox was still the fourth network in a market dominated by the "Big Three". This position of outsider made Fox more willing to take risks and broadcast shows that defied conventions. Thus, *Ally McBeal* was not the typical Boston lawyer show and it allowed the network to stand out.

32 The situation was similar with *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and The CW. The CW is a mixed venture of CBS and TimeWarner and results from the fusion of UPN and The WB. The CW thus became the fifth network in a post-network era when the competition came not only from cable but also increasingly from online contents and SVoDs. From its beginnings, the network relied on narrowcasting, branding, and transmedia to attract and keep a very specific share of the audience (Le Fèvre-Berthelot). In this increasingly competitive context, less normative content could be supported by the network's executives because it could help set the network apart. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* was

among the shows that allowed The CW to be praised for its female characters who "are a little bit square, and who still get to be challenging, flawed, and surprising. [...] women [who] don't have time for certain kinds of drama, yet [whose] adventures are so often crisply entertaining." (Ryan) The fact that The CW kept a show that had some of the lowest ratings of network TV on the air for four seasons points to major economic and industrial changes that have allowed for the emergence of more nuanced representations. Since the aim no longer is to appeal to the broadest possible audience but to catch the sustained attention of smaller segments of the audience on multiple platforms, it becomes possible for shows to tackle more complex issues in depth and sometimes to adopt more polarizing political stances since the shows' dependence on advertisers has evolved as well. Beyond the representation of mental health, this evolution is also visible in the progressive treatment of political and gender issues (workplace equality, abortion, bisexuality, gender identity, etc.) in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* compared to the much more politically neutral approach of *Ally McBeal*.

33 When focusing on the representations of mental health issues, the difference between the romantic outlook of *Ally McBeal* and the critical perspective of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is visible in the way treatment and diagnoses are dealt with. According to Greg Smith, *Ally McBeal* "both participates in and satirizes the therapeutic conception of romance" because even though Ally keeps on seeing therapists to solve her romantic problems, she also clings to the symptoms that therapy is expected to cure (Smith 135). While Smith makes a strong case that therapy eventually allows the character to grow and "come through her psychological trials with her faith in romance intact" (Smith 139), I would argue that overall mental health is never taken seriously and that Ally's troubles are mostly presented as funny quirks or inadequacies that can be fixed if the character just grows up. This is linked to the spectacle that is made out of Ally's hallucinations for example; it is also made obvious by the fact that Ally's many therapists are as bizarre and eccentric as their patients: One sings during sessions, calls Ally nuts and plays a laughing soundtrack when her patients say something stupid (Tracey, played by Tracey Ullman); another gives out pills like candy from a change dispenser; the last one is a former lawyer who insists on taking Ally's hand when he

needs to convey something to his patient. It all makes for efficient comedy, but in the end, Ally's symptoms are mostly narrative props meant to comment on the character's vision of romance. Wahl points out that, "a common complaint of mental health advocates about mass media is that psychiatric labels are often used incorrectly and serve to misinform and confuse viewers." (Wahl, Media Madness 14) In fiction, writers rarely offer a diagnosis, which allows them to use symptoms however they might fit with the plot. This is what happens in *Ally McBeal* both in the portrayal of main characters and in that of guest stars. The show does push narrative and aesthetic boundaries, and this was made possible by the freedom granted to David E. Kelley by a network that tried to distinguish itself from the Big Three. Yet, in terms of representation of gender and mental health, the show still relies on stigmatizing stereotypes.

34 The perspective and the writing process were radically different in the case of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. Aline Brosh McKenna explains that, when the shows tackled sensitive issues, whether it was Greg's alcoholism as mentioned above, or Darryl coming out as bisexual, or Rebecca's diagnosis, the writers consulted professionals and people who were directly concerned by those issues to "make [their] depictions of really specific stuff as real and grounded as [they] can" (quoted in Gallagher). Rebecca's diagnosis thus does not come out of the blue: starting from the idea that Rebecca suffered from mental distress, the writers sent their script to several psychiatrists so that they would offer a diagnosis (Bradley). Then, they made sure that the descriptions of BPD and of the treatment were accurate. The careful and respectful approach adopted by the writers can also be explained by the fact that Rachel Bloom herself suffers from anxiety and depression (Mahaney) and that "both co-creators have intimate knowledge of people with borderline personality disorder" (Bradley). The depiction of mental health issue in the show is clearly shaped by Bloom's belief that the stigma around this kind of distress and the pain it causes can be lifted by talking about it and normalizing it (Depression, Anxiety and What I Would Tell #MyYoungerSelf | Rachel Bloom).

35 The show is quite clear that the diagnosis is not an end *per se*; it is a tool that can help the character live a healthier life because it is the basis for treatment. In the series' fourth episode, Heather presents

Rebecca's case in her psychology class. While Heather argues that her neighbor "doesn't fit into any of the categories of your little book" (meaning the DSM, the manual that classifies mental disorders), her professor argues that Rebecca seems to suffer from a number of classifiable disorders but Heather does not want to "label her" because she "just wants to be her friend". In Season 3, Episode 6 ("Josh is irrelevant") Rebecca recovers from a suicide attempt and is diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). The musical number that precedes the announcement of her diagnosis insists on the feeling of belonging associated with the right diagnosis. The song is a clear reference to the "I Want" songs that allow musical theater characters to convey what they are searching for and why (fans cite "The Wizard and I" from *Wicked* and "You and Me (But Mostly Me)" from *The Book of Mormon* as possible sources). In such songs, the character's elation is suggested through rising melodies and crescendos, as is the case here. Clearly, Rebecca's expectations are high: she has seen multiple therapists and been misdiagnosed several times and the diagnosis is not presented as a source of stigma but as something that can open "a whole new future of possibilities" (CEG, s03e06)[4]. Yet, the BPD diagnosis actually comes as an anti-climax since the disorder has no easy fix. Seasons 3 and 4 thus show Rebecca dealing with her disorder and its consequences. The diagnosis has not solved everything, but it has put the protagonist on a new path.

A detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis of viewers' reactions and a survey would be necessary to rigorously assess the reception of Rebecca's behavior and diagnosis, especially among people living with BPD, but a quick look at comments posted on YouTube videos of three musical numbers that focus on Rebecca's mental health (the one that precedes her being diagnosed with BPD, s03e06; an ode to the "darkness" that has accompanied her for so long, s04e12; and the Emmy-winning number claiming that "anti-depressants are so not a big deal," s04e13) suggests that, for many viewers, the show and these particular musical numbers offer an accurate and relatable representation of mental distress.[5] The personal tone of the comments below these videos is striking. Next to more expected remarks on the performances or on the show more generally, many comments address the viewers' personal histories, including their diagnoses, the way depression manifests in their lives (and in two instances the

name given to their personal "darkness" after Rebecca baptized hers Tyler), and sometimes how the show has encouraged them to either seek a diagnosis or ask about medication options:

> Thank you thank you thank you for making this show. I think my life might have been changed thanks to this episode. I hope it is. I always knew I was off and I had no idea why or how or what it was. I didn't know if I was crazy or just quirky. I never knew there was a list you could look up to see if you match the issues this have. I've never seen a therapist or was treated for any mental health issues and even though I thought something about me was off, I didn't know where to start to find out. So I when to my psychiatric consultation today and the jury is still out, but I might have general anxiety disorder. If there is a thing that's real and treatable and I'm not just a panicked worrywart then that changes so much. I don't think I would have ever known that or tried to address this without watching this episode. Thank you so much. (racheldoesstuff, The Darkness - Feat. Rachel Bloom - "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend")

37 A significant number of comments, including from people with BPD or other mental health issues (comments mention depression, anxiety, autism, ADHD, bipolar disorder, etc.) express gratefulness for the show and its creators for depicting mental distress in a relatable manner. For instance, a commentary with close to 300 likes on "A Diagnosis" states,

> I wanna thank you for this episode. I also have borderline personality disorder, been diagnosed 15 years ago, and daytherapy free for 14 years. I liked that you gave accurate description of Borderline (psychiatrist talk) so you did your research on this topic. And since there is such a stigma about it, it is refreshing to see it done seriously but also with a sense of humor. I will be looking forward to see Rebecca go into therapy and how she will rebuild her life after the diagnosis. (racheldoesstuff, A Diagnosis - Feat. Rachel Bloom - "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend").

38 While for some the depiction of Rebecca's struggles "hits too close to home" and can be triggering, what often comes out of the comments is the validation of their experiences that viewers find in the show's representation. Some health professionals or people suffering from

BPD also say that the show is useful to help other people understand what this disorder is about.

39 The comments on "Anti-Depressants Are So Not a Big Deal" fall into three main categories: those gushing about the performance and its similarity to the opening number in Damien Chazelle's *La La Land*; those that appreciate the way the song removes the stigma around prescribed drugs and those that worry that the song is a dangerous apology for antidepressants. Some comments lead to extended debates about the risks of unsupervised or inadequate medication. In these, people who have knowledge of the show often insist on the context to undermine claims that the number is just propaganda for Big Pharma interests. Instead, they point to the show's awareness that pills are not an easy fix but one element in Rebecca's complex path to live with BPD. Most negative comments are not based on the narrative or the character but the video's message taken out of context, whereas viewers who are able to provide narrative context are usually appreciative of the message conveyed by this number (racheldoesstuff, Anti-Depressants Are So Not A Big Deal - Feat. Michael Hyatt - "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend"). This particular video is interesting because it shows how efficient the musical number is in eliciting deep personal engagement and structured debates about serious issues. Overall, this brief overview suggests that in keeping with a cultivation theory approach, the show contributes to encouraging less stigmatizing images and representations of mental health issues that can have an impact in real life.

Conclusion

40 Looking at representations of mental health issues from a gender perspective stresses the sexist tropes associated with these images. Gender norms imply that many behaviors coded as feminine are deemed abnormal, excessive or irrational and this has often led to the pathologization of women. Both Ally McBeal and Crazy Ex-Girlfriend play with this double-edged trope of the excessive woman who fails to control her emotions. They do so by using music and other audiovisual tricks to convey the protagonists' states of mind, but they do not apprehend the political dimension of such representations in the same way. *Ally McBeal* is quite typical of the post-feminist

perspective that tends to dismiss political readings of the main character's situation; despite conveying a superficial message of acceptance and celebration of quirkiness in an often sanitized and too-rational world, the show also trivializes mental distress, using symptoms haphazardly to celebrate the eccentricities of a group of privileged white characters who do not suffer professional, social or economic consequences related to their behavior. The same apolitical approach is adopted when looking at gender oppression: the characters are presented as the victims of their own choices without really taking into account the multiple injunctions that weigh on them. Twenty years later, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* tackles the ambiguity head-on by reminding the audience that its very title "is a sexist term" in the opening credits (Season 1) and by offering a more nuanced portrayal of the characters' struggles. Looking at viewers' online reactions suggests that this portrayal can have a positive impact on the representations of mental health issues and BPD in particular and help lift the stigma around these issues.

41 The differences between *Ally McBeal* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* result from the evolutions of the industry and of society in the past twenty years, evolutions that have allowed for new voices to convey new gender norms in the media and therefore new representations of mental distress. In addition to the arrival of fresh talent made possible by the restructuring of the industry, the re-emergence of feminist discourses and the rise of intersectional perspectives online and in the media have created higher standards for the representation of marginalized groups. The evolution of the representations of mental distress between these two shows points out that fair and inclusive representation should not be put in opposition to creativity and that humor does not have to rely on oppressive tropes.

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NOTES

1 Post-feminism can be understood from three perspectives (Nurka): as a conservative reaction to feminism, as the intersection of feminism and postmodernism (Brooks), or as a media discourse celebrating the success of liberal feminism while blaming educated rich White women's issues on the "excess of feminism".

2 The literature on post-feminism in the media highlights the ambiguity of this concept that both dismisses feminism and supports its core values (Dow; Lotz, "Postfeminist Television Criticism"; Tasker and Negra; McRobbie; Morin).

3 About madness and creativity in a feminist perspective, Gilbert and Gubar write, "before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy, however, she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her 'inconsistancy' and —by identifying her with the 'eternal types' they have themselves invented— to possess her more thoroughly." (Gilbert and Gubar 16–17) The comments on popular culture and cultural discourses conveyed in CEG certainly echo this description of the situation of 19th c. women writers.

4 The lyrics here echo the "I Want" song from Disney's *Aladdin*: "A Whole New World".

5 This sample includes over 1700 comments posted below the YouTube videos of "A Diagnosis", "The Darkness", and "Anti-Depressants Are So Not a Big Deal". The comments were collected on July 24, 2020, the sample includes 387 comments on "A Diagnosis", 242 comments on "The Darkness" and 1119 comments on "Anti-Depressants…".

RÉSUMÉS

English
The association between madness and the oppression of women is a trope of narratives focusing on women which can support a sexist or a feminist

perspective —women's psychological distress being either a proof of their inferiority or a result of their systematic oppression. Contemporary representations of female characters suffering from mental distress build on this tradition and play with it as they question the gender norms that tend to produce personality disorders. Such representations are also shaped by the society that produced them and, in this case, the emergence of "therapy culture" (Füredi 2004) may have political consequences for the meaning conveyed by the shows. Comparing *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (The CW, 2015-2019) allows for an analysis that covers two decades and major social and economic evolutions to adopt a social and historical perspective on the representation of female characters suffering from mental health issues in US TV series. This chapter aims at comparing the two shows to see how the treatment of mental distress in female characters points to gender dynamics and how it can contribute to challenging the norm. It argues that there are broader issues of identity and social norms at stake in the representation of mental distress in female heroines.

Français

La folie et l'oppression des femmes sont souvent associées dans les récits centrés sur des personnages féminins. Ce lieu commun peut soutenir une perspective sexiste ou féministe –la détresse psychologique des femmes étant soit une preuve de leur infériorité, soit le résultat de leur oppression systématique. Les représentations récentes de personnages féminins souffrant de troubles mentaux s'appuient sur cette tradition et en jouent, en remettant en question les normes de genre qui tendent à produire des troubles de la personnalité. Ces représentations sont également façonnées par la société qui les a produites et, dans ce cas, l'émergence d'une « culture thérapeutique » (Füredi 2004) peut avoir des conséquences politiques sur les représentations. Comparer *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) et *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (The CW, 2015-2019) permet de mener une analyse qui couvre deux décennies et des évolutions sociales et économiques majeures pour adopter une perspective sociale et historique sur la représentation des personnages féminins souffrant de problèmes de santé mentale dans les séries télévisées étatsuniennes. Ce chapitre vise à comparer les deux séries pour voir comment le traitement de la détresse mentale chez les personnages féminins renvoie à des dynamiques marquées par le genre et peut contribuer à remettre la norme en question. Des questions plus larges d'identité et de normes sociales sont en jeu dans la représentation de la détresse mentale chez les héroïnes.

INDEX

Mots-clés

télévision, États-Unis, genre, santé mentale, représentations, réception

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