

Courting Desire and the (Al)lure of David E. Kelley's Ally McBeal

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### Recommended Citation

Baum, Kathleen Kelly. "Courting Desire and the (Al)lure of David E. Kelley's Ally McBeal." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4.1 (2002): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1143>>

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**PURDUE**

UNIVERSITY PRESS <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>>

**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture** 

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 4 Issue 1 (March 2002) Article 4**  
**Kathleen Kelly Baum,**  
**"Courting Desire and the (AI)lure of David E. Kelley's *Ally McBeal*"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss1/4>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 4.1 (2002)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss1/>>

**Abstract:** In her paper, "Courting Desire and the (AI)lure of David E. Kelley's *Ally McBeal*," Kathleen Kelly Baum compares the tropes of desire and the law in David E. Kelley's television series *Ally McBeal* with similar motifs extracted from Lacanian theory. In her study, Baum explores the psychological and social implications of thematic characterizations and situations from the television series' five seasons by engaging Lacan's premise that subjective identity results from an economic relation between self and other -- a relation that is continuously mediated by symbolization and governed by social mores and cultural imperatives. In addition, Baum traces ways in which Kelley's consistent use of intersubjective conflict as a stylistic device in his writing may be interpreted as serving the programming demands of commercial television, but, also, functioning to generate scripts that effectively challenge contemporary culturally accepted gender roles and behavioral models.

**Kathleen Kelly BAUM**

### **Courting Desire and the (Al)lure of David E. Kelley's *Ally McBeal***

Awarded an Emmy in 1999 for Outstanding Comedy Series, writer/producer/director David E. Kelley's "dramedy" *Ally McBeal* has evoked both praise and criticism in a variety of public forums since its premiere on the Fox Television Network in the fall of 1997, including attention in the 29 June 1998 issue of *Time* magazine devoted to an analysis of the current state of the feminist movement. The frequently polemical discussions centering on the series attest to the popularity of this oftentimes politically incorrect television show about a quirky group of lawyers, most of whom are associates of the same law firm in Boston. Interestingly, Kelley formerly practiced law in a Boston firm, and this fact is often alluded to in the media, perhaps as a tactic intended to emphasize the verisimilitude of the juridical milieu represented in *Ally McBeal*.

An intricate, linked network of web sites focusing on the show has been proliferating, many of the sites having interactive components enabling fans to express opinions and exchange ideas with one another in chat-room and message-board formats about current and ongoing situations in the series. One of the most creative and interactive sites is *The Ally McBeal Literature Society* at <<http://www.allyfic.com/fanfiction/>>, an online archive for fan fiction related to the series. There is also a site titled *Welcome to Almost Human's Ally McBeal* at <<http://www.geocities.com/almostangel/allymcbear.html>>, and *Dana's Ally McBeal Page* at <<http://allymcbear.tktv.net/>> is a comprehensive and scholarly reference site for facts about the series, providing plot summaries, lists of the titles categorized according to season and dates of airing, in addition to pertinent information about the actors, characters, and music featured in each episode. It has been an invaluable online reference in the preparation of this article, particularly in regard to identifying the titles of the individual episodes of *Ally McBeal*. In online journals appealing specifically to the legal profession, critical articles about the series have appeared in *Cal Law* at <<http://www.callaw.com/>> as well as in *Picturing Justice* at <<http://www.usfca.edu/pj>> (the latter online journal focuses specifically on issues relating to law and popular culture). Regardless of the forum of discussion, perhaps the most insistent topic concerns the controversy over the way the series depicts women and, not surprisingly, many women are critical of that representation.

Kelley, who, until the series' fourth season, has written all of the scripts, is quoted by Benjamin Svetkey in "Everything You Love or Hate about Ally McBeal," an article appearing in *Entertainment Weekly Online*, as admitting, "I cringe when people ask me how I write women characters ... The truth is, I just write them the same way I write men. I don't distinguish" (Svetkey <<http://members.tripod.com/shockme99/allymcbear01.html>>). Such a comment would appear to privilege the male point of view, and Kelley's reluctance to answer the question of fe/male characterisation throws into question the "truth" of what constitutes a gendered perspective. The same may be said of the rhetorical structure of descriptive commentary such as Twentieth Century Fox's claim that the show is "one of the most compelling and sensitive portraits of a young professional woman ever rendered by a man" (see <<http://www.fox.com>>). On a figurative level, these network comments serve to empower and authorize the point of view being configured in *Ally McBeal*, by first personifying the show in terms of its focus on the character of the professional woman, then associating that persona with a masculinized authorial *voice*. At the same time, because several comments also rely on an allusion to testimony and the legal setting of the series, on a theoretical level they connotatively position the voice within the patriarchal system of cultural codes conceptually embedded in the Lacanian principle of *the Law*, with its symbolic representations of authority oedipally figured in terms of the *Phallus* and the *Name-of-the-Father*. Paradoxically, however, female characterization in the series, because of Kelley's deliberate subversion of gendered subjectivity and his insistence on interpretive ambiguity, tends to deny conventional representation of social roles and social authority. Kelley's admittedly androgynous approach to characterization opens up two intriguing areas of speculation: whether the series imagines contemporary professional women with an intent to be realistic, and whether it deconstructs contemporary social and gender roles.

Public response to Ally, the series' female protagonist, stretches along a continuum that ranges from expressions of cult-like adoration to hostile indignation, with attention primarily being directed at aspects of her personal and professional behavior as well as her physical appearance and attire. In an article titled "Don't Call Me Ally," Lisa Friedman, an Assistant District Attorney in Florida, writes, "When I learned several weeks ago that a significant portion of young females view Ally McBeal as a role model, I think my blood pressure rose to a level never before reached" (Friedman <<http://www.usfca.edu/pj/ally-friedman.htm>>). The irate young barrister later notes, "Ally McBeal's hemline can at times be nothing short of ridiculous. When in the courtroom, she might as well be wearing a sign that says 'Pardon me, I can't think, but check out the legs'" (Friedman <<http://www.usfca.edu/pj/ally-friedman.htm>>). In general, Friedman's comments are representative of the more pejorative types of response from viewers who perceive the character of Ally McBeal as being a depiction of the stereotypically weak, irrational, and emotional female, one who is seemingly inherently incapable of assimilating the codes of professional behavior, and unable to focus on the business at hand because she is continually being distracted by her personal insecurities, especially as a woman. This type of criticism perceives Ally, conceived as role model, to be demeaning of the significant advancements and changes in contemporary social roles available to young women today.

The extreme love/hate polemics of viewer response suggest the series mirrors social role boundaries and codes accurately enough for the audience either to identify with what they see or to feel threatened by it. On one hand, the repeated challenging of normative social expectations pushes the envelope on what might be considered socially acceptable behavior while, on the other hand, it problematizes the choices regarding women's behavioral roles. *New York Times* business and finance columnist Bill Carter identifies the demographics of the target audience for *Ally McBeal* as "younger adults," especially "advertising's demographic sweet spot, viewers 18-49" and the "even more desired subset, 18 to 34" (Carter 1 <<http://www.nytimes.com>>). If, however, young women are currently looking to model themselves after Ally's version of professionalism, perhaps their eagerness to do so suggests the models presented in the professional world today do not represent the way they would like to imagine themselves. Perhaps those roles still demand too much of a capitulation to patriarchal authority and conformity to male-defined behaviors.

Rather than providing images of the ideal professional woman, I would argue that the characters and situations in *Ally McBeal* are imagized in such a way that they parody current role models by deconstructing various notions of contemporary social conventions. It could be argued that the anger expressed by the female Assistant Attorney General, and other critics challenging the series from similar points of view over issues concerning the dictates of professional dress and decorum, is symptomatic of a narcissistic investment in those very same issues. The aggression behind their critical response, in other words, is symptomatic of the emotionally charged, ambivalent, love/hate extremes that Lacanian theory argues is characteristic of desire. In which case, the rhetorical hyperbole of some of the criticism aimed at the series perhaps may be attributed to the degree to which certain women have introjected and naturalized, without question, the same dominant system of values they in turn vilify *Ally McBeal* for embodying, including the arbitrary social code that says human worth, regardless of gender, is predicated on adherence to certain conventions of appearance and behavior. The problem with most critics of the series based on these assumptions is that they seem to take the program too literally. On one hand, the series highlights the complexities of contemporary social interactions, but, on the other hand, it serves to complicate behavioral roles by satirizing those stereotypes and deconstructing the shifting nature of social identity and conventional social boundaries, especially gender roles.

In an introductory interview with Tim Appelo to the book titled *Ally McBeal: The Official Guide* (1999), Kelley identifies the major themes in the series as deriving from the relations of men and women in the workplace, although he also notes that the universal subtext of the program is loneliness, which blurs and crosses all gender and social boundaries. In keeping with this principle, he observes that the characters' identities are necessarily contingent and interdependent. He says, "These people are all in each others' lives. ... So accordingly, each of their lives is, if not a reflection, at least a consequence of all these other people that are around them" (10-11). Thus, the

program may be considered not so much a realistic depiction of men and women in the workplace, but as a postmodernist allegory of intersubjectivity, in which traditional social roles and identity boundaries tend to be defined and redefined in terms of interpersonal relations and conflict. In response to an interviewer's remark that the characters are like billiard balls, bouncing off of each other in unpredictable ways, Kelley responded, "Right. ... And the dynamics shift depending on the recipe of the characters" (11). The major ingredient in that recipe is intersubjective conflict, since such conflict tends to define the characters' identities. Kelley describes his writing technique in these terms, saying "most of my scenes try to find conflict, and if I have a character where there's always conflict churning within, it probably fuels me as a writer" (11).

In a broad and general sense, a writing style grounded conceptually in the notion of continuous conflict, because it suggests that an ultimate resolution might never be achieved, serves the economic demands of serialized narrative characteristic of much of television drama today, in that such indeterminacy allows for a conceivably infinite number of installments, and it entices audience interest. Of course, commercial network television series are invariably linked to product and service advertising, and the so-called lifespan of a series, including its "afterlife" in syndication, is largely determined by the revenue it generates. With regard to the conventions of television narrative and their relation to specific economic considerations, the model of continual conflict correlates with a series' possible success. Practically speaking, the protagonists in weekly television series are subjected to continual displacement of their libidinal attachments to ensure that their desire is unrequited, a basis for interminable emotional (mis)adventure. *Ally* and her cohorts, like many memorable characters in the history of television, are prone to ambivalent feelings and frustration of their innermost desires, especially when it comes to finding lasting love relationships. It would, in effect, be the end of the narrative and the end of her commercial viability as a major character for *Ally* to finally resolve her subjective struggles with her tenuous sense of self, as well as with her imaginative sense of reality, and to succeed in finding romantic fulfillment with one person, as the character seems determined to do. Traditional wisdom in television programming has been that a series in which two romantically linked protagonists wed in the concluding episode of the series' first run tends to do poorly in syndication. This may be the reason why Kelley is quoted in the recent *New York Times* interview as admitting that "The show has not been as strong as we hoped it would be this [5th] season" but says that he had not given thought to a "series-ending episode this season" (Carter 3).

On a more theoretical level, owing in part to the conceptualization of subjectivity as constituted by the perpetually agonistic relation between desire for self-realization and acquiescence to prescriptive social codes regulating this desire, elements of Lacanian theory readily map onto the virtual, imaginative, and emotionally charged reality portrayed in *Ally McBeal*, because *Ally*'s fictive world allusively and suggestively mirrors psychological and social structures and principles that Lacan's theoretical perspective posits as fundamental. The self-reflexive quality of *Ally McBeal*, for example, encourages interpretation of the episodes in relation to a symbolic, or metaphoric "reality" rather than to contemporary cultural conventions and practices in any literal sense. Because of Lacan's tendency to theorize about human psychology and social practices in similar terms, terms in part conditioned by poststructuralist linguistics and existential philosophy, it is tempting to consider the *Ally McBeal* series from a Lacanian view of human subjectivity as being fundamentally alienated, invested in intersubjective desire which is always mediated by symbolic systems that are informed and shaped by communally accepted mores and imperatives (the latter connoted by the Lacanian concept of "the Law"). From this theoretical perspective, then, we may regard the sense of a stable, unified self that forms the core of implicit human desire as a compensatory fantasy, a fictive narrative deriving from repeatedly futile, unconscious attempts to suppress awareness of the essentially vacuous, conflicted nature of individual subjectivity. From a Lacanian perspective, one's sense of self derives from a continually changing and interactive narrative, a virtual, scripted identity that is simultaneously internalized from, and projected onto material reality, as we experience and are shaped by the world into which we are born and in which our lives unfold.

Because of Kelley's predilection for aestheticizing social and personal conflict in a romanticized legal setting, *Ally McBeal* encourages analysis in terms relating to the Lacanian principle of the dia-

lectic between the two poles of Desire and the Law. *Law* in this sense is conceptualized as the realm of the symbolic Other, connoting the system of cultural codes constitutive of subjectivity and gender identity, while Desire may be conceived of as the pattern of continual narcissistic identification and displacement characteristic of socially-regulated self-fulfillment of the ego/object relation, a process in which desire is always being deferred along a chain of significant substitute objects. In simpler and more universal oedipal terms, based on a broad interpretation of the social and literary implications of Lacanian theory, the Law may be seen as whatever acts as a third element with enough cultural authority to intrude in the ego's identificatory investment in its others. According to this theoretical perspective, on a certain level the oedipal structure is symptomatically iterated in signifying systems such as language, the symbolic level on which the roles as gendered, socialized subjects are played out. The sense of self is experienced only in relation to an Other, a relation conditioned by the distancing mediation of symbolism, as we introject and practice the cultural imperative which dictates that self-fulfillment in the other must always be regulated by deferral of that desire. However, in a radically abstract sense, the subject is not imprisoned by that *différance* (Derrida's neologism), but liberated, in the sense that we theoretically should be able to choose to imitate or perform any of the roles available to us through these cultural channels. Identity, in other words, is not fixed.

Kelley's writing in *Ally McBeal* lends itself to analysis in terms of these particular theoretical issues basically because he chooses to explore thematic elements relating to interpersonal, gender-sensitive relationships in a social setting figured in terms of the Law, and the characters and situations he maps in the episodes seem intentionally designed to blur traditionally conceived notions of gender roles and social boundaries. These interpersonal elements, in addition to the conflict model conditioning his writing, may be seen, in effect, to foreground the human struggle to continually negotiate the necessities of personal desire within the normative exigencies of the social environment. Kelley's thematic motifs, plots, and characterizations problematize the contrived and relative nature of "reality," the complicated nature of interpersonal as well as intrapersonal relationships, and most importantly, human desire for self-fulfillment and its frustration. Desire, in the deconstructive, Lacanian sense of the term, and the Law, imagined in *Ally McBeal* with equally Lacanian connotations as the law of social convention, can be read as explicit subtexts recurring in the series.

Psychologically speaking, the subject perpetually remains "a work in progress" -- an evocative phrase that serves as a motif in a fifth season episode of *Ally McBeal*, titled "Blowin' in the Wind" (2002), where one of the thematic threads follows Ally as she considers changing her residence. Ally, in a characteristically serendipitous way, literally runs into a snow-covered sale sign posted on a run-down old house as she is chasing her hat, blown off in a gust of wind, and subsequently purchases the house on impulse. Her friends and colleagues eventually pitch in to help make the old house livable by painting and cleaning the interior while she is away in court arguing a case. A therapist/friend, who sees the dilapidated building before it has been redecorated, confronts Ally with the possibility that the house represents an extension of her ego, suggesting that because of her own conflicted and unresolved psychological issues she unconsciously identifies with a dwelling in need of interminable repairs. From an economic standpoint, given the pressures on the Fox network to do whatever is needed to guarantee that it remain competitive in the advertising market, the old-house and its ongoing renovation could just as well be regarded as tropes for changes in the series that Kelley believes are necessary to sustain the loyalty of the series' viewing audience, an audience that he says, in the context of the *New York Times* interview, has come to expect that Ally keep "moving forward." Kelly continues, "We just have to tell better stories, get Ally to get on with her life" (3). In any case, for Ally and for Kelley, as the title of this particular program implies in its reference to Bob Dylan's classic song, "the answer is blowin' in the wind." That is, self-reflexivity, uncertainty and irresolution are the core of the series.

The series challenges normative social expectations repeatedly, and one physical site where this is most obviously the case is the unisex bathroom, which men and women in the law firm often occupy simultaneously, one of the most talked about and provocative settings of the program. Often transgressions of conventional gender roles and class boundaries are acted out in this an-

drogynous space. Serving as a postmodern psychoanalytic couch, the unisex bathroom represents a liminal space of desire, a site where anything can and does happen, and more than likely one of the characters is lurking in the shadows or just beyond the door to catch every tantalizing secret revealed in the room, such as the firm's secretary Elaine, an unabashed visual predator and sexual adventuress who prowls this arena routinely. Her eroticized aggression is exemplary of another inversion of gender roles, in that her open sexuality confounds male privilege in regard to such behavior. In earlier episodes of the series, she cruises the washroom with video camera in hand, holding it under and over stall doors in order to monitor and document what may be going on behind the partitions, thus functioning ironically and self-reflexively to mirror the implicit voyeurism of the viewing audience, while also serving as an agent of the communal gaze, the Law of the Father in Lacan's sense. Over the course of the series, it has been revealed that Elaine works as a secretary by choice rather than default, having made considerable profit as a successful entrepreneur from the sale of such notorious products as the "face-bra" and the so-called "husband soundtrack CD," a form of wish-fulfillment for unhappy single women. Her values, in a sense, are complicit with those exemplified by consumer capitalism, whereby the boundaries constitutive of the personal versus the public spheres of contemporary culture are fluid in nature, re-apportioned according to profit demands, and representative of the mediated economic relation of suspended desire.

The unisex bathroom functions as a complement to the courtroom scenes. In the courtroom, conflict is mediated through language, but in the unisex bathroom, conflict is often mediated by means of direct, often no-holds-barred physical action and by means of the immediacy of the gaze. In an episode aired during the second season, titled "Seeing Green" (1999) the marriage of two associates in the law firm, Billy and Georgia, reaches a moment of extreme crisis in front of the unisex mirror. After attending a meeting of a male sensitivity group, during which the senior law partner Fish rallies the men with a cry to go home and "reclaim your penises," Billy returns to his office and confesses to his wife Georgia that he has recently come to realize his "ideal woman" is someone willing to forego a career in order to raise their children and attend to her husband's needs. Georgia expresses her extreme displeasure with his transformed persona verbally. As viewers know from past episodes, she wants to become a partner in the firm; therefore, the type of woman Billy is describing differs radically from Georgia's self-image. They run into one another later in front of the mirror in the unisex bathroom where she angrily reacts to her husband's confession, striking him with the back of her hand hard enough to spin him around until his back is turned toward her, at which time she kicks him head-first into the open door of the nearest stall, and he slumps to the floor in a semi-conscious state. She punctuates her actions with the question, "Is that feminine enough for you?"

An important question raised by this scene is how is the audience expected to judge the actions of these two people? Because this is a comedy, do we even need to take what is going on between them seriously? It is interesting to note that, in spite of the obvious subtext of spousal abuse in this scene, but perhaps because of the role-reversal of having Georgia act-out as might be expected of an abusive male, in the weeks following this episode, one of the on-line opinion polls indicated that the number of fan responses were evenly divided as to whether Georgia and Billy would eventually get back together, but no one even mentioned the element of violence in the incident (see *Dana's Ally McBeal Page* <<http://allymcbeal.tktv.net/>>). Many, however, felt Billy was behaving badly and many applauded Georgia for standing up for herself. Rather than getting into the ethical polemics of such episodes, I would like to address the social and psychological implications. While Billy's comments connoted a certain violence, in that they have the effect of figuratively and psychologically "castrating" Georgia, in the sense that those comments served to socially disempower her on one level and, on another level, disrupted the self-image she had invested in him, Georgia's actions and words also violated a physical and personal boundary: both of them transgress the interpersonal boundary implicit in their socially contracted union through marriage. The intensity of Georgia's anger shows that Billy functions in her life primarily as an image of her ideal ego; he represents the mirror of her own identity rather than a subject in his own right, and the surrealistic exaggeration of the scene reinforces the metaphorical implications. In this regard,

it is interesting that as their relationship continues to disintegrate, Billy bleaches his hair blond and Georgia cuts her blond hair extremely short, emphasizing the mirror interrelation going on between these two characters. Ironically, in the episode alluded to previously, Richard Fish's sexist comments about literal penises function as the symbolic Phallus, which, in turn, is insistent in Billy's equally sexist remarks to Georgia; but, although Billy's voice has the desired oedipal effect of disrupting Georgia's libidinal attachment to him, Georgia is nevertheless refusing to capitulate to the Law-of-the-Father in her unwillingness to assume the position expected of her in a patriarchal culture.

This ambiguity of gender roles is typical of the series and it is reflected also in other social boundary issues. Margaret Camaro appeared as a minor recurring character during the second season. Her appearances functioned to problematize gender and social role boundaries being worked out in the courtroom, with much of the humor and satire in each situation deriving from various physical markers serving to code the character as a stereotypical, lesbian butch persona. Portrayed as a sociologist, initially Camaro was called by the law firm as an expert witness to testify regarding the social roles of women at home and in the workplace. On the witness stand she appears physically as a masculinized figure -- portly, square-jawed, thin-lipped, dressed in a menswear-styled, dark colored suit, and sporting close-cropped hair. In an abstract sense, therefore, she testifies from a position of authority about social roles and she speaks in the Name-of-the-Father, with the emotionally detached, patrician inflection connoting objective authority, although she intones the culturally accepted codes of behavior traditionally associated with women perfunctorily. Camaro's identity (her subjective as well as gender identity) and her authority are called into question from the very beginning, however, as Fish teases her about her last name being the same as a type of sports car, and, later, he alludes to her as "an angry lesbian." The irony of the situation lies in the voice of cultural authority being configured as someone from a marginalized and oppressed social group, in terms of the suggested ambiguity of her sexual orientation and gender identity. In the episode titled "Love Unlimited" (1999) she appears as a plaintiff in a lawsuit, a suit she has filed against an HMO because they will not pay for her to be artificially inseminated. The HMO wins the suit, because, they argue, the procedure is elective on Camaro's part; however, the question of her sexual preference looms behind the decision.

In the third season she returns, once again in the role of an expert witness, called to testify about the bonding patterns between mother and child. As it turns out, Camaro resolved her insemination dilemma by adopting a child, and she is now a bona fide mother, so this time she is being represented as speaking from her own experience, rather than from a position of cultural authority, and we are encouraged to perceive her in a different way than in the season before. In a fascinating moment of textual self-reference, Kelley has Camaro say to John Cage at one point, "You call me an angry lesbian and yet you need me to testify to the role of women in the workplace." Within this one character alone, we can see evidence of a continually shifting identity as Camaro enacts various social roles, finally assuming the unexpected role of motherhood, which brings her modest acceptance among the members of the law firm, gauged by their appreciative glances and words, although even that issue remains somewhat unresolved, because she is an adoptive, rather than a birth mother. When the attorneys praise her for her valuable testimony she responds by saying, "Don't butter me up, I'm not a potato" -- a comment that, once again, subtly implies the mutability of identities, and also alludes to the issue of the dehumanizing practice of objectifying human beings through means of labels and cultural stereotypes.

In addition to these deconstructions of conventional social identities, there is clearly also a self-consciously fictive quality to the "reality" depicted in *Ally McBeal*. It is a reality constantly brought into question, for example, by the characters' delusional fantasies and hallucinations, particularly those linked with Ally's own feelings, manifest seamlessly on the visual as well as narrative level of many episodes, sometimes through means of sophisticated computer-generated, but nonetheless cartoon-like imagery, which serves to frustrate viewers' attempts to map the world framed by the law firm of Cage and Fish onto conventional notions of social or material existence. The series in general is marked by its highly intertextual and self-reflexive qualities, including its musical interludes, which make it a kind of postmodern opera. Kelley admits to including many allusions to his



favorite musical as a child, *The Music Man*, for example; so many, in fact, that he appealed to the widow of Meredith Wilson for the legal rights to do so (Appelo 11). Intentionally or not, Kelley's stylistic strategy of structuring the series self-reflexively and intertextually also works to demystify the ambiguous and precarious nature of the cultural authority obtaining in the centering trope of the law, as a social institution, by suggesting it is subject to the permutations and arbitrary displacements characteristic of other forms of cultural production, such as imaginative literature and popular music.

The episode titled "Over the Rainbow" (2000), for instance, plays off of ideas thematically abstracted from the song of the same name, and also loosely alludes to elements of the classic film *The Wizard of Oz* (Warner Studios 1939). Ally and the other associates from the law firm are shown walking down the street together in the final scene, amiably and with an obvious swagger of solidarity, as in a similar scene from the movie in which Dorothy and her cohorts from Oz are embarking down the Yellow Brick Road. The camera pans upward and the scene fades out with the muse of the series, Vonda Shepard, singing "Somewhere, over the rainbow...."

Because of the various intertextual precedents established within the series, I would like to speculate briefly on the possible resonance between *Ally McBeal* and another work of imaginative fiction, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, and, in particular, Disney's adaptation of Carroll's stories in the animated film, *Alice in Wonderland* (1951). There is certainly an obvious phonemic link between the names of the female protagonists in the two narratives, Ally and Alice. In a more significant but abstract way, the ambivalent, decentered quality characteristic of Ally's emotional and professional world finds a parallel in the topsy-turvy reality experienced by Alice after she falls down the rabbit hole to Wonderland. The stuttering John Cage -- a senior partner of the law firm in the series to whom the character Ling repeatedly refers as "the strange little man" -- in size, demeanor, speech impediment, and not least for his inimical courtroom strategy of initiating subtle, but strategically timed disruptions to discredit testimony, is certainly suggestive of the giant Queen of Hearts' diminutive consort, the Red King, who in the film interrupts the hegemonic tirade of his overbearing mate with an appeal that she might grant Alice "a small trial" and allow the young girl the opportunity to testify in her own behalf before having her head cut off as punishment for her insubordinate behavior. There are other associative links to the movie as well. It is easy to imagine Richard Fish as the March Hare who, like his disoriented Disneyesque alter-ego, has a tremendous (sexual) appetite, and speaks what is on his mind at any given moment, without consideration for either the logic behind his words, or for their political correctness. The novel's ambiguous ending, whether Alice is a figment of the Red King's dream or he of hers, is also appropriate to the intersubjective ambiguities of *Ally McBeal*.

Then, too, the notion of the surreal magical mirror as a threshold onto another reality in Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* resonates in the logic underlying episodes in *Ally McBeal* involving a psychological detour into the realm of subconscious desire, figured visually through means of the mirror in the unisex washroom, or through more metaphoric means in Ally's narcissistic hallucinations, when in early episodes she fantasizes herself as singer/minister Al Green, for example (although such fantasies became so clichéd and obsessive, we might conclude, they have been less frequent in subsequent productions of the series). The Red Queen's court in Wonderland and the judicial context depicted in *Ally McBeal* both imply the arbitrary nature of various kinds of cultural and legal codes. When Alice tells the queen she is trying to find her way, the Queen indignantly shouts back at her, "All ways here are my ways!" The overdetermined self-reflexivity of her assertion simultaneously refers back to the liminal space of Wonderland generally, and implies there are an indeterminate number of possible ways to represent social and behavioral roles as well as an infinite number of ways in which they may be interpreted. By analogy, all ways are Ally's ways too in the television show. The chaotic and surreal aspects of the series function to de-center authority within systems of symbolic representation, such as language, and within culturally encoded social roles. In decentering authority, perhaps, they also empower subjective potential, suggesting that when you fall into the looking glass of subjectivity and enter into the realm of the symbolic, language, and social interaction the permutations of desire and the instability of identity

should be perceived as an opportunity for adventure, a liberation of the subject, rather than as a threat to preconceived notions of conventional reality.

Although many of the episodes in *Ally McBeal* ostensibly center around the conflicted relationships between men and women, there are also broad, ideological issues at work behind the representations of gender roles in the series, and these issues are ultimately determinative of value and meaning in cultural discourse in general. As Derrida observes in *Of Grammatology* (1976), "If words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences, one can justify one's language, and one's choices of terms, only within a topic [an orientation in space] and an historical strategy. The justification can therefore never be absolute and definitive" (70; author's comment in parentheses). We may interpret Kelley's intentions as being similar to those of Derrida, when, in the same context as the previous citation, Derrida explains that he intends to render the concept of presence enigmatic by deconstructing the naturalized process through which the movement of differences, or, in his words, the "trace" conditioning language and signification, succumbs to the reductive logic that has its foundations in a metaphysics governed by concepts of being and full presence, logocentrism. As in Derrida's ongoing critique of logocentric thinking, the logic of the supplement as that which signifies lack, or nothing, is, in my analysis of the relation of *Ally McBeal* to the idea of a cultural gaze, an effective descriptive means through which to displace the notion that the cultural gaze -- a generalized notion of the beliefs and practices supportive of judgments regarding meaning and value in society -- occupies a privileged position outside of the frame of reference of a symbolic system based on differential relations. The supplement as lack also analogously opens a discursive space in which to inscribe the decentered structure of Lacanian desire, and to come to a conclusion concerning the relation between subjective desire, the gaze, and *Ally McBeal* as the representational supplement, the intermediary functioning as *the lure* of the cultural gaze, in Lacan's terms.

A lure by definition is illusory, elaborately fictive in character, because by nature it is distinguished by its difference from what it mimics or parodies: "Mimicry" explains Lacan, "reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind" (Lacan 99). The self-consciously fictive quality of *Ally McBeal* parallels the seductive ambivalence symbolized by the idea of the lure. All of the eccentric characters in the series seem to want to come to a sense of being and identity through the other, and the mirror in the unisex bathroom seems analogous to a screen on which, through the process of transference or projection, the characters are able to see their desires play out before their eyes, and by extension, the viewing audience sees theirs play out as well. The series generally entices us into thinking that these conflicted subjectivities can be resolved in the *Other* -- but it also continually postpones that sense of resolution, and in this way the series seems structurally based on a concept of desire similar to Lacan's. As Lacan reminds us, "*Man's desire is the desire of the Other*" (115). This paradoxical structure of desire, unfortunately, is the undeniable truth of subjectivity, at least according to Lacan's theoretical model. In one sense, Lacan suggests that subjective identity is grounded in alienation, therefore conditioned by irreconcilable conflict and characterized by aggressive behavior towards the other in whom one's identity is invested. Consequently, in order to participate in society we must attempt to reconcile ourselves to acting out our aggressive tendencies through symbolic means.

The operation of desire at the level of the imaginary in *Ally McBeal* is manifest in the scenes where Ally hallucinates her identity in terms of a mirror image of the Other, and interestingly, in several episodes from the series' third season, as mentioned previously, the Other is an African-American male, rhythm and blues singer Al Green. A similar binary opposition based on a black/white configuration of the relation between self and other occurs between John Cage and his ego ideal, imaginatively configured in terms of what he perceives to be the masterful, seductive powers of velvet-voiced Barry White, whose face and voice John conjures up in those moments when he wishes to be other than the shy, insecure, emasculated "little man" in the eyes of his colleagues. Although the racial significance of these pairings remains ambiguous, it seems significantly ironic for white, bourgeois, elitist, lawyers to be constructing a sense of identity in relation to African-American males, a social group doubly marginalized, not only within the dominant culture, but within the black subculture as well. Although the significance of the black/white mirror images

in *Ally McBeal* is indeterminate, perhaps Kelley's choice of African-American icons with color-coded last names -- Green and White -- is intended as a satiric deconstruction of the arbitrary nature of racial prejudice.

Another Lacanian concept particularly relevant to the series is that of the gaze. The gaze operates from the position of culture as well as subjectivity, because the subject internalizes it as an effect; therefore, the gaze is not a transcendental symbol, but a process determined by the alienating effects of language and symbolic representation. There is an ensemble scene from the second season episode "Love Unlimited" (1999) that illustrates these structures and how they operate. The scene takes place in the unisex bathroom, where several of the associates, both male and female, including the secretary Elaine, enter the room one-by-one and fall into line behind John, who is strutting and dancing in front of the mirror, to the rhythm of Barry White's song, "You are my Everything" playing in the background. Moving in unison while watching themselves reflected in the circular mirrors over the washbasins, they see, and they represent for the audience, an illusion of unity that serves to support the desire for identity through a fusion with the Other. They each, in turn, put one foot forward with toe pointed, in rhythm with the music. At that point Nell, the young, blonde associate who represents the epitome of beauty, professionalism and confidence, and to whom Fish refers as "the cash cow" -- someone used to entice wealthy clients to retain the services of the law firm -- suddenly enters the unisex bathroom, sees what is going on, and momentarily looks distressed. In the moment circumscribed by her critical stare, we hear the rasp of a record player's needle screeching across vinyl, the music rips to a stop, and the dancers collide with one another, collapsing domino fashion into a disjunctive heap of arms and legs spreading out across the floor. In this psychologically significant instant, Nell functions as the gaze of the Other, and her stare, as Lacan would say, disrupts their communal *jouissance*, because they feel guilty and self-conscious, feelings which serve to fragment their image in the mirror. Of course, as such deconstructive theories suggest, the ongoing but discontinuous processes of identification, alienation in the Other, symbolization, and individuation through which subjective identity is constituted will continue to be repeated with other participants and in other contexts.

The series puts the character and the audience in play, by holding out the lure, or the enticement of there being a space and a time where all conflicts may be resolved, a beyond that is analogous to the romanticized, hypothetical space described in the song "Over the Rainbow" -- where Being may be recuperated. However, like the texts engendered by subjective experience, cultural practices derive meaning from the context of the chain of signification, the social discourse in which they are inscribed and codified. The implication of the relativity of the cultural gaze, conceived of as being positioned behind the veil of symbolic representation, such as the imaginative fiction characteristic of *Ally McBeal*, is, like individual subjectivity, equally discontinuous and always in the process of becoming. This may be considered a liberating idea, because -- although the symbolic order and language are always already in place when we are born, and although we are thrown by chance into a social structure over which we have little, if any control, because the process through which we are transformed as subjects is interactive and reciprocal -- it also suggests that the ideological orientation of the cultural gaze is simultaneously being modified by our participation in its practices, because of the alienating effect of the signifying supplement, an effect that Kelley's *Ally McBeal* radicalizes. One would hope, at least, that perhaps by becoming aware of the relative and arbitrary nature of its normative values, and by creatively manipulating the "screen" of the gaze, we may begin to realize a society based on more equitable values. Then, perhaps, like the employees and clients we encounter at Cage and Fish and Associates in the world of *Ally McBeal*, we may come to share a sense of community despite our individual idiosyncracies, our behavioral and physical peculiarities, beyond the mirrors of our individual identities, in a reality circumscribed by heterogeneity, where relations with the other are grounded in reciprocity rather than reductive subordination.

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