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*Sex, Girls, and Feminist Rhetoric*

In order to comprehend rhetoric the best bet is to have a comprehensive history of the subject with various different definitions by various different theorists, and just decide a preference and go from there. Whether that preference lies with Aristotle or Plato, this text is operating under the assumption that rhetoric is the art of discourse with aims of persuading an audience a specific way, regarding a specific situation. That is just the problem though-- when looking through the history of rhetoric the only history available is of men telling other men how to engage in discourse with an audience of men. Although throughout the ages rhetoric has adapted to the different movements such as modernism, existentialism, and postmodernism; a movement that does not just work in tangent with rhetoric, but that becomes a part of it is feminism. Feminist theory challenges, adopts, re-evaluates, and uses rhetoric itself and rhetoric's evolution. Television programming is a prime example of a medium that is driven by men, for men and the never-ending hegemony that comes from patriarchy. The relationship between feminism and rhetoric guides one towards an identity; thus, in dissecting the rhetoric within the HBO television shows *Sex and the City* and *Girls* in addition to the the rhetoric surrounding these shows, the question to be answered is-- are these shows feminist?

Carrie Bradshaw express that "(A man) was like the flesh and blood equivalent of a DKNY dress. You know it's not your style but it's right there, so you try it on anyway" ( *Sex and the City*: Sn. 1, Ep. 3), while Hannah Horvath exclaims, "I just want someone who wants to hang out all the time, thinks I'm the best person in the world, and wants to have sex with only me" (*Girls*: Sn. 1, Ep. 4). Strictly speaking in regards to feminism the postmodernist development of

*Sex and the City* and *Girls* can easily be tied to third wave feminism and liberal feminist ideologies. These shows reclaim a woman's sexuality by unabashedly accepting it and also recognizing that wearing makeup and heels, and talking about pop culture can be empowering without making a person any less of a feminist or any more of one (Valenti 173). However, while these shows can correlate with feminist ideologies it does not intrinsically make them feminist works. Similarly, both shows have fallen victim to the same criticism that besotted first wave feminism in that it is pretty much exclusively white, privileged middle to upper class women all of the time (Scott 1). Does the preface that both *Sex and the City* and *Girls* center around four women living in the New York metropolitan area concurrently sifting through love, life, and a career make these shows applicable to feminism alone or even just more succinctly relevant to each other?

Before addressing the rhetoric within these shows, first one must address the endless amounts of rhetoric surrounding them. Despite the fact that these shows capture the women at different stages during their life, the *Sex and the City* ladies with established careers attempting to establish a love life, and the women of *Girls* attempting to establish who they are. There are numerous amounts of articles and texts that beg the question, "Is *Sex and the City* feminist?" The 2007 book *Full Frontal Feminism* by Jessica Valenti has a chapter called "*Sex and the City* Voters My Ass" which challenges the categorization of women by a single television show. In contrast *Girls*, in many ways the antithesis of *Sex and the City*, was inundated with pre-debut buzz and hype lauding it as some sort of feminist television manifesto. Ultimately this is addressed through art critic and cultural historian John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*:

The essential way of seeing a woman, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in quite a different way from men--not because the feminine is different from the masculine, but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him. (272)

Multiple studies conducted throughout the 1970's analyzed popular media depictions of women found that women tended to be depicted in subordinate roles, whereas men were depicted in roles of authority (Watkins and Emerson 152). Interestingly even forty-plus years after women demanded to be treated as equal citizens, television shows that revolve solely around women are still a novelty. Effectively, the critical and consumer response is to latch on to representation that contrasts the norm. *Sex and the City* and *Girls'* target audience is women; therefore, because women lack media specifically targeted towards them, they project and crave adequate representation that they are unable to obtain elsewhere. Thus, the story is born. There are headlining stories revolving around whether or not shows about women are feminist because there are not shows solely about women in the marketplace, let alone feminist ones. The argument being that any representation is not positive representation.

Seemingly, one of the biggest arguments surrounding these shows and their connection to feminism is the way that the actors look. While *Sex and the City* does focus on portraying thirty something single women, it is attacked for showing model-esque fashion forward women deemed unrealistic. In juxtaposition is *Girls*, whose ostensibly main connection to feminism is the lead character's description as an ordinary looking, average shaped girl. Feminism argues that appearance is a necessary realm of discussion because of *Objectification Theory* which suggests that women and girls typically acculturate to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves (Fredrickson and Roberts 173). Due to the media's ever increasing influence in our daily lives, the argument is that the internalization of the perception of others, primarily male, can lead to self mutilation and bodily harm. Furthermore *Objectification Theory* poses, "bodies exist within social and cultural contexts, and hence are also constructed through socio-cultural practices and discourses" (174). Thus the physical portrayal of these women are

important because the audience judges how their bodies should look through what culture has established as the standard, which in this society is television and movie actresses. Moreover, if in modern day society we are relying heavily on television as a medium of rhetoric, the visual portrayed to the audience is an integral part thereof. It may be critical to realize that while the four characters in *Sex and the City* were created for women to relate to, the actresses themselves were cast because their appearance adheres to the most subtle and deniable sexualized evaluation which is enacted through the male gaze (175). Meanwhile Lena Dunham, the lead actress in *Girls*, is portrayed personably and physically transmittable to a female audience with her depiction as a cupcake eating, awkward sex having, average sized early to mid-twenties woman.

In order to address the stereotypes that are perpetuated throughout *Sex and the City* and *Girls* it is first appropriate to address the tropes that these shows establish in their main characters. *Sex and the City's* four main characters are Carrie Bradshaw, Charlotte York, Miranda Hobbes, and Samantha Jones with each woman falling into a caricature in the first season. Carrie is the free-spirit and free-thinking columnist who essentially represents the everyman character. For example in episode three after a complete dating mess she states, "I'm beginning to think I'm not the marrying kind," connecting to the feeling that many women face when they reach their mid thirties and have failed to meet their 'Mr. Right.' Charlotte is a college educated and successful art dealer who is almost prudish and self consumed with the desire and life purpose to find a husband, in episode six of season one Charlotte illustrates her prudish ideals in regards to first dates, " Wait a second! I thought you were serious about this guy, you can't sleep with him on the first date." Miranda, a lawyer, is epitomized in season four episode one when she is discussing Charlotte's problems in her sex life, "It's all about control. If he goes up there, there's gonna be a shift in power. Either he'll have the upper hand or you will. Now

there's a certain camp that believes whoever holds the dick, holds the power..." Miranda is predominantly portrayed as the most opinionated of the group, often chastised for being 'married to her job' and a 'man hater'. Samantha's sexual confidence and free-loving spirit is addressed in episode 6 of the first season when she says, "A guy could just as easily dump you if you fuck him on the first date as he can if you wait until the tenth," she runs her own Public Relations firm and refuses to buy into the idea of marriage.

Judith Butler asserts in *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* that gender is socially constructed, and that gender performance and gender identity is established through recognized discourse (2). Rhetorically, these character sketches are being constructed as legitimate personality traits by society with the one question, "Are you a Carrie, Miranda, Samantha, or Charlotte?" Society has adopted the exaggeration perpetuated by television characterization and is projecting it onto the lives of real, live, breathing and feeling women. Butler ascertains that the body is merely a blank slate that is inherently designed for a incessant manifestation of possibilities routed in the dramatic (3). Therefore, since the audience's identity is not already previously established, culture (in this case television and the media) is dictating that the audience follow the set guidelines in order to form a semblance of a self. *Girls* addresses the rhetoric surrounding *Sex and the City* directly through the character of Shoshanna Shapiro, a naive NYU student who is an avid fan of *Sex and the City*, who even goes so far as to have a poster of the first movie in her room.

Shoshanna's attachment to the show is so meta in that it immediately addresses the critics and audiences that proclaim *Girls* as the next *Sex and the City*, due in part to Butler's claim of performative acts, and rejects it. One article summarizing the series manages to simultaneously cast off the comparison of the two shows whilst describing the main character of Hannah by

stating, "You might call her the 'Carrie' of the clique" (Kizer 1). Shoshanna even goes so far as to articulate the rhetoric formed by viewers of *Sex and the City* when describing her British cousin and roommate Jessa Johansson in the Pilot episode of the series, "You know you're funny because you are definitely like a Carrie with like some Samantha aspects and Charlotte hair. It's like a really good combination." In Shoshanna's statement she is inadvertently addressing the ridiculousness that these categorizations create, because they are caricatures of people, thus it is impossible to completely embody just one of them. Although *Girls* desires to disaffiliate from *Sex and the City*, it unconsciously sets itself up to the same rhetoric through loosely the same tropes established in its four main characters. Hannah is the directionless writer everyone can relate to, Marnie is the straight-laced career girl, Shoshanna is the youthful hopeless romantic, and Jessa is the uncontrollable sexpot. While it remains to be seen if the rhetoric of *Girls* evolves in the same way, one might assess that it would be pretty interesting to be called a "Shoshanna."

Moreover, Alison Bechdal, a social commentary cartoonist and author, developed what is now known as the Bechdel Test, which has now become the standard in which feminist critics judge television, movies, books, and various other forms of media in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* in 1985. The 1985 strip had an unnamed female character that said she only watched movies if it followed three requirements: (1) it has to have at least two women in it, (2) they have to talk to each other, (3) about something besides men ("The Rule"). In the pilot episode of the series *Girls* easily passes the Bechdel Test, because all four of the female characters engage in at least one conversation with another woman, without talking about men.

An would be when best friends Hannah and Marnie Michaels talk in the bathroom:

Hannah: Are you gonna leave your towel on?

Marnie: (laughs) Yes.

Hannah: But I never see you naked and you always see me naked, when it should actually be the other way around.

Marnie: You are beautiful. Shut up.

Hannah: I don't need that. I need to see your boobs.

While this conversation may seem mundane and irrelevant to the story it actually sets up a familiar and legitimate relationship between two women onscreen, establishing a connection and a history that exists beyond the realm of boyfriends.

The Bechdel Test is slightly harder to establish in *Sex and the City* because the premise of the show does revolve heavily around the main characters sex lives, which involve men. However, it can be argued that it completely engages in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's idea of 'conscious raising.' In other words it is a mode of interaction that is modified to the rhetorical problem of feminist advocacy of which in small, leaderless groups women are encouraged to express their personal feelings and experiences (128). *Sex and the City* religiously displays meetings between its four female leads where they discuss what is going on in their daily lives, and although they do often talk about their sex lives that includes dialogue about men, the topic almost exclusively revolves around the women's own sexuality and own experience. The first episode of the series lays down the groundwork for this when the four women meet for lunch and ponder whether or not women can have sex like men:

Samantha: Look if you're a successful saleswoman in this city, you have two choices.

You can bang you head against the wall and try and find a relationship or you can say screw it just go out have sex like a man.

Charlotte: You mean with dildos?

Samantha: No. I mean without feeling.

...

Samantha: Sweetheart this is the first time in the history of Manhattan that women have had as much money and power as men. Plus the equal luxury of treating men like sex objects.

Miranda: Yeah, except men in this city fail on both counts. I mean they don't want to be in a relationship with you, but as soon as you only want them for sex they don't like it. All of a sudden they can't perform the way they're supposed to.

Carrie: Oh come on ladies, are we really that cynical? What about Romance?

Charlotte: What are you saying... that you're just going to give up on love? That's sick!

These women have a conversation, each giving time for others to express their opinions while expressing their own with no actual judgment with against their peers. Is that not inherently a feminist principle?

Coincidentally in the pilot episodes of both series, both appear to revolt against Feminine Mystery that Simone de Beauvoir establishes in *The Second Sex*. The idea of an essence of femininity brought forth from the idea "that like all oppressed, woman deliberately dissembles her objective actuality; the slave, the servant, the indignant, all who depend on the caprices of the master, have learned to turn toward him a changeless smile or an enigmatic impassivity; their real sentiments, their actual behavior, are carefully hidden" (1270). *Sex and the City* and *Girls* proposes that these women are not defined by the hegemony imposed by patriarchy, they are not a mystery. They are open and honest and what you see from them is what you are going to get. In a conversation with Big, Carrie fesses up to her beliefs on the sexual stereotypes of men and women,

Carrie: Right now I'm researching an article about women who have sex like men. You know, they have sex and then afterwards they feel nothing.

Mr. Big: But you're not like that?

Carrie: Well, aren't you?

Mr. Big: Not a drop. Not even a half of a drop.

Carrie: Wow! What's wrong with you?

Although Carrie faces opposition from Big on her ideals, she holds firm to her beliefs not submitting to a subordinate role. She does not execute the role she is expected to perform, but instead fulfills her own unique identity. Similarly *Girls* implements this idea when Hannah, is forced to confront her boss and turn her unpaid internship into a paid one:

Hannah: Hello Alistair. Hello.

Hannah's Boss: You seem eager.

Hannah: As you know I have been working here for over a year.

Hannah's Boss: Has it been that long? Well, you are an invaluable part of our operation.



Hannah: Which I recently learned means very valuable, a opposed to not at all valuable. And I wanted to let you know that my circumstances have now changed and I can no longer afford to work for free.

While Hannah's situation may not have been voluntary, she confronted a system in which she was blatantly expected to remain at unpaid level in an effort to achieve her goal. As de Beauvoir reiterates the myth of a woman is a luxury. The more tangible the relationships, the less they are idealized (1271). Carrie and Hannah represent that strength and resistance that come from the perpetuated Feminine Mystery.

Television seriously forces us to think about culture, not so much as a system of meaning, but as something that provides material that is then inserted into socially differentiated knowledge and discourses (296). Therefore, one person cannot merely make the argument that something is feminist or not. It depends on an individual's own ideals regarding feminist theories on whether *Sex and the City* or *Girls* are in fact examples of feminist works. However, as this text is functioning under the ideologies of Bechdel, Campbell, and de Beauvoir the consensus that through the rhetoric implored in these shows that they are both examples of post modernist feminist representations.

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