

Beyond Ophelia Feminism for Girls

by Naomi Sheridan

Cette jeune femme de 17 ans vient de s'éveiller au féminisme par ses propres moyens, après s'être débattue avec son image corporelle, la pression de ses pairs et les autres problèmes aigus liés à l'adolescence.

If you had asked me six months ago if I considered myself a feminist my denials would have been vehement. "No—of course not. I don't think all men are evil." Or, "No—I shave my legs, wear lipstick and a bra." Then in September 2000 I enrolled in women's studies and my eyes opened. After an exhausting, mostly-hellish high school experience, I was finally in an environment that took a critical look at of all the pettiness that was a distressingly significant part of my adolescence. I'd found a place that asked, "Why?" and looked for explanations rather than just accepting the status quo. I'd found my niche. And if this was feminism, then—God help me — I was a feminist. This was a rather shocking revelation to me but the more I read, the more convinced I became that this new label was not a bad thing.

Then when the shock faded I realized that I was angry. All the wisdom, analysis, and empowerment I was finally being exposed to was wonderful, but how much less traumatic could early adolescence have been if I'd been taught women's studies as a child? How liberating that could be! Perhaps the struggle for a sense of self that is so much a part of girlhood would be less traumatic. Maybe the popular metaphor for teenage girls would not be self-destructive Ophelia from Hamlet (Pipher) but rather Katharina from Taming of the Shrew. I know I'd rather be a "shrew" than the crazy ex-girlfriend who drowned herself!

Those of us growing up now are lucky to have many examples of successful women who have made it. Yet we live in a mass-mediated eating-disorder culture. When there are 12-year old bulimics there is clearly some problem. So why do we wait until college to teach women's studies? I think it's a failing of feminism not to gift us with information and support for the new experiences that come with the onset of young womanhood — before we waste our time with fairytale yearnings. It's at least as vital as the pamphlets and talks we get to prepare us for menarche. It is interesting that the physical/biological changes overemphasized that go along with becoming a woman .are overemphasized, while the social and emotional changes are not addressed at all.

Puberty is an awkward time. There are changes beneath the skin we were comfortable in. The playground rules change—and so do our friends. If you have a boy as a friend, you don't dare let it be known or he'll be forever your boyfriend. As if children can't be cruel enough, T. Bosch observes, "Once breasts appeared and "womanhood" commenced, the same eleven-year-old boys I used to pin to the ground were now embarrassed to talk to me, lest we be viewed as a couple" (96).

Traditional gender roles are ingrained into boys and girls at a very early age and both clearly suffer from the stereotypes. A little education in acceptance of the changes would go a long way in alleviating some of the trauma. In spite of a wonderfully caring and understanding mother, I was mortified at the changes in my body and put off dealing with them as late as I could. Only in recent years have I achieved some kind of comfort in my own skin again.

"To feel great about being the center of our own universe, to shout in the face of convention — to enjoy the fun and not worry about responsibility—these are some of the aspects of girlhood we crave" (Orviro 1).

So why are these the aspects that are missing from adolescence? Studies and academic literature confirm what you can see in a simple trip to an elementary school or a junior high: A girl loses her sense of self and personal power approaching and during the teen years.

"As girls hit puberty and are faced with society's expectations for women, their

confusion begins and with it comes the waffling, passivity, demurring and intellectual sabotage stereotypic of the 'girl'" (Wood 2).

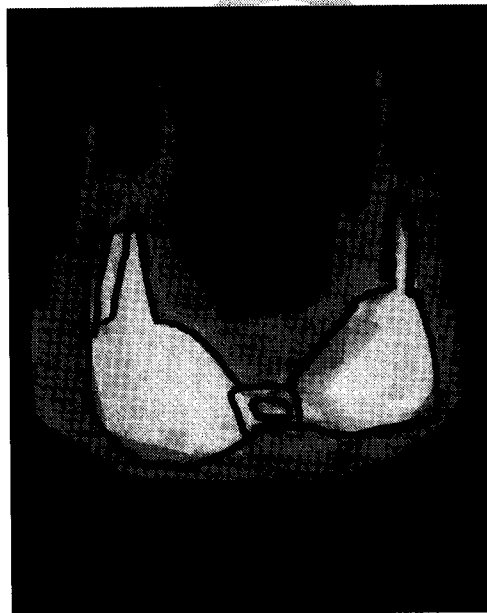
Early adolescence is when young women need to learn to deconstruct the beauty myth, when we need to develop a comfort in our own skin. Instead of being a time of conforming to social expectations and quashing one's own voice in favour of popular opinion, it ought to be a time filled with joyful exploration of what the world has to offer without having to face the world alone. Lack of intelligence or awareness of the double-standards of society is not the issue. Teenage girls are not the inane Lolitas popular culture can make us seem. We know that we're supposed to love and accept ourselves. It's a buzz-phrase, a mantra without meaning. This empty, pithy, blanket statement offers no how or why, like the "just say no to drugs" campaign before it – and was equally (un)successful.

"For most of my life I was waiting for my life to begin. When I was ten, all I wanted was to be 13 so I could be a teenager. When I was 13 I wanted to be 16 ... so I could drive. Then I was waiting to be 18 – so I could vote. Then I had to wait three more years to be 21 – so I could drink. When I was 21, I was waiting for college to be over so my life could finally start..." (Manheim 1).

Subconsciously, there is the expectation that if you're thin enough, sweet enough and patient enough your turn will come for the fairytale. From Disney movies to teen soaps to coming-of-age movies you see the "blossoming" (but not in a physical sense—she's thin!) young ingénue with perfect skin and beautiful hair, popular and smart, who meets the boy of her dreams and lives happily after. This is fiction; but these images do affect our expectations and our sense of self. Pop culture sets up a lot of people – not just young women – for a lot of disappointment. I was among them. Non-conformist by nature, I'd always had these silly images of finding my soul-mate – the one who would see through to my heart so I wouldn't have to "walk alone," the one who would smooth my rough edges down to a beautiful finish. Then came women's studies and I began to appreciate my independence, to celebrate self-determination. The waiting and those ridiculous daydreams were such a waste of time and energy, even in my short life. What about all those who don't learn that lesson until much later in life?

"Images of perfection and various forms of psychological foot-binding ... are imposed on girls at the time when they become young women" (Brown and Gilligan 226). The impact of this conditioning is frightening. How rare is it to find a young woman who didn't grow up playing with Barbie? The movie *Heathers* has the disturbing comment that it is a real friend who will stick her fingers down your throat when you can't bring yourself to do it! Until recently even in so-called young feminist shows all the female characters are gorgeous and waif-thin. (And heterosexual—but that's another topic for another article!) When we are denied a serious education on these issues, is it any wonder that these media images influence us?

"In the old feminism, our mothers fought for the right to choose an abortion. In our generation, we must fight for the right to eat" (Shandler 13). Sadly, it's not just the right to eat I need to fight for. Sometimes I have to fight myself to eat, to fight my friends to make them eat. Sandra Friedman suggests that a possible factor in so many teenage girls starving ourselves is that it can feel like some form of control, or a way of dealing with the maelstrom of adolescence in a "world that devalues women



Jennifer Moreau, "Burning Bra," *Mixed Media, Dimensions*, 2001.

and undervalues the ways in which they interact with the world.” (51)

When I read things like, “My best friend cuts designs into her arms with a razor blade because she finds herself unattractive. I watch my friends fall to sex, drugs, alcohol, their parents’ wishes, their friends’ wishes, suicide” (Black qtd. in Shandler 26), it makes me want to cry, to scream, to demand to know why. Why do young women find a bitter parody of empowerment in slowly destroying themselves? Why are we – a society and, especially, as feminists – accepting this? Why are these victims of despair ending up as statistics and subjects of study and not being seen as the symptoms of the deep-rooted masochism and self-hatred in our society? Alienation and depression are, I think, things every adolescent – male or female – can relate to far more than any of us would wish, and they have a lasting impact on our world-view and self-image. No matter how strong one becomes, how content, the spectre is always there.

When, if, strength comes, it comes in spite of all the negative experiences endured; it comes because of, and fosters, self-acceptance. The “if” is unacceptable. By the time this rebirth of confidence comes a lot of the fun of girlhood has been missed, and the responsibilities of young-womanhood are bearing down. What do you want to do with the rest of your life? Do you want to go to university/college? Have you worked hard enough in school? Can you/your family afford it? And later come questions of children, career and balances thereof. The women’s movement gave us these opportunities for choices; I believe, however, that more could be done with these choices and more girls would take the opportunities if the foundations laid in girlhood were stronger.

“Young feminists are constantly told that we don’t exist. It’s a refrain heard from older feminists as well as in the popular media” (Findlen xiv). We do exist – we’re just hard to find, hard to get to commit to the personal label of “feminist” even if our philosophies certainly belong to the feminist spectrum. The ideals I’ve been exposed to through my study of women’s issues have been truly beneficial to me and have opened my mind a great deal. These revelations, coupled with the pains of adolescence, prompted my desire to see young people (boys as well as girls) educated in a manner that encourages growth, reflections and confidence. At the very least I would like to see children taught to find the personal tools and resources within ourselves to cope with the pains of life and retain a sense of personal identity and dignity. I pray that, should I have children of my own in the future, they would receive this sort of education; for youth does not mean stupidity, confidence is not arrogance and to care is not to be weak. Some advice, I believe my generation could benefit from comes from Shakespeare, himself. “Self-love ... is not so vile a sin as self-neglect ...” So let’s crush that Ophelia image, already!

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