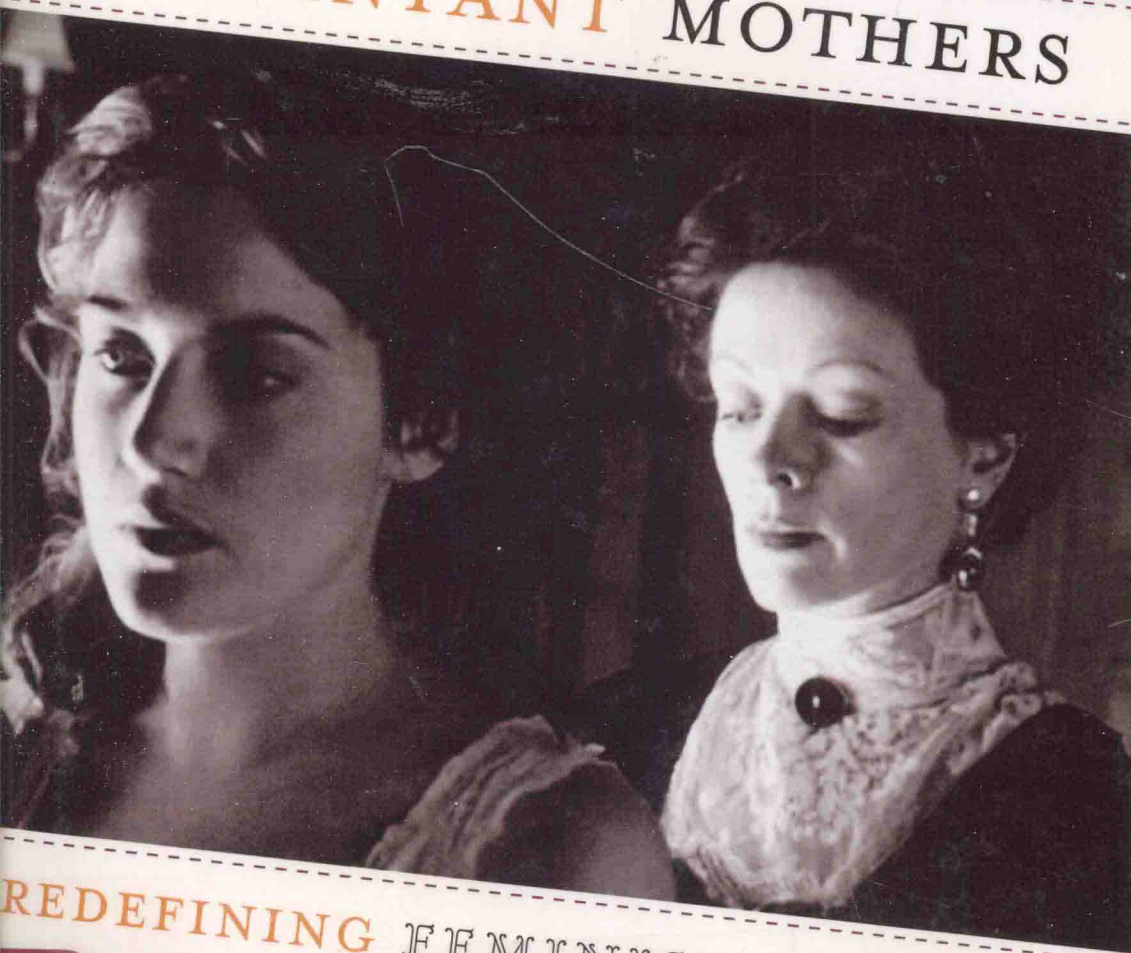


UNRULY GIRLS

UNREPENTANT MOTHERS



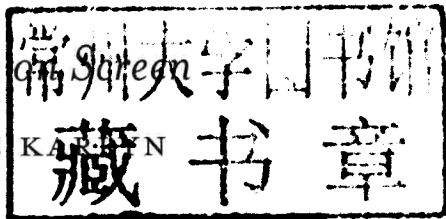
REDEFINING FEMINISM ON SCREEN

KATHLEEN
ROWE KARLYN

UNRULY
GIRLS,
UNREPENTANT
MOTHERS

Redefining Feminism on Screen

BY KATHLEEN ROWE KARRIN



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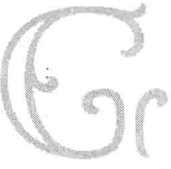
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UNRULY
GIRLS,
UNREPENTANT
MOTHERS

FOR MY DAUGHTERS

Elizabeth Rowe,
Miranda Rowe Harper, and
Helen Rowe

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Introduction

BAD MOTHERS, ANGRY GIRLS

Everything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source, the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor. —HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

Oh, Mother, shut up. —ROSE TO HER MOTHER RUTH, IN *TITANIC*



ONE OF THE EMOTIONAL turning points of the 1997 blockbuster *Titanic* occurs soon after the ship's collision with the iceberg that will sink it within hours. In a scene of escalating panic and chaos, Ruth (Frances Fisher), the mother of the film's headstrong protagonist Rose (Kate Winslet), urges her daughter to join her in a lifeboat quickly filling with other members of the upper class. Rose is revolted by her mother's snobbery and yearns to remain with her newfound love Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio), a frisky young fellow traveling in steerage. She pauses, fixes her gaze on her mother, then refuses with a resolute, "No, Mother." In doing so, she turns her back not only on her old life but also, in all likelihood, on life itself rather than follow the path laid out for her by her mother.

The film has dramatized her choice with the laserlike clarity of melodrama: Jack stands for innocence, art, freedom, and love, and Ruth stands for all that the film vilifies—the weight of convention, especially on women, but more important, the oppressiveness of the class structure symbolized by the opulent excesses of the ship. The film validates Rose's moment of self-definition

by enabling her to survive the disaster and live a long life, rich in adventure. Jack becomes the sacrificial lamb who rescues her first by instilling in her his zest for life, then by giving up his own life for her.

Titanic's reviews were mixed, to say the least. Some praised it for its unabashed romanticism, extravagant special effects, and return to the lost grandeur of Hollywood's Golden Age. Others welcomed it as a respite from "shallow postmodern irony" (Lubin 1999, 10).¹ Still others slammed it for its anachronisms, dialogue clunkers, and melodramatic flourishes. (Billy Zane, for example, wearing eyeliner and costumed in black, plays Rose's upper-class fiancé Cal in a performance evoking the dark-cloaked, mustache-swirling villains of the earliest melodramas.) But there is no question that the film was an extraordinary phenomenon, both a prestige pic and super-expensive blockbuster with an array of statistics as impressive as the ship that was its subject. It was the most expensive movie ever made and won eleven Academy Awards, including best picture. It uniquely positioned itself for a global market by opening in Tokyo, then demonstrated record-breaking worldwide appeal.²

Clearly the film captured the historical moment of its release, and in several interesting ways. First, it spoke to the enduring power of melodrama to move audiences, especially during a period—four years before 9/11 shook the emotional core of the United States—when the tone of movies tended more toward postmodern irony. *Titanic* celebrated emotion, moral certainties, and spectacle in a nostalgic package recalling old Hollywood's epic romances, such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965).

Titanic also signaled something new: the rising power of teen girls as a demographic group to be reckoned with. This power, a likely legacy of feminism's Second Wave, was recognized by cultural critics and named variously "Girl Power" or "Girl Culture," after the terms used by riot grrrls and then the Spice Girls. The film's unexpected box office success was credited to its teen-girl fans, who came in groups to theaters for multiple viewings. Critics and the fans themselves attributed the film's teen-girl appeal to Leonardo DiCaprio's star power. However, the character of Rose, who dominates the narrative, offered an image of femininity particularly suited to the times. With her feisty rebelliousness, she evokes the tradition of female unruliness I mapped in my first book, *The Unruly Woman*. Yet with her faith in romantic love and individual freedom, she also embodies the contradictions of postfeminism, a phenomenon associated with young women who have benefited from the gains achieved by feminism's Second Wave, but often disavowed the movement itself, or redefined it in ways that are not always clear to their mothers.³



Titanic's Rose (Kate Winslet) rejects her mother's offer of safety to take her chances with Jack. A protagonist for the postfeminist era, Rose puts her faith in individual freedom and romantic love.

If *Titanic* pointed to something new, it also recalled something old, an enduring ambivalence about mothers, motherhood, and mother-daughter relations that dates from the earliest myths of Western culture and persists into media today. Since the late 1990s, motherhood has become an increasingly charged site on which unresolved conflicts about ideologies of gender, race, and class collide.

Consider the new "momism," a cultural trend that surfaced in the 1990s and purports to celebrate motherhood, but by making mothers subservient to their children rather than their husbands. Judith Warner describes this pursuit of perfect mothering as the road to "perfect madness," the title of her book on modern motherhood.⁴ This new "mommy mystique," which is very much a white, middle-class phenomenon, ties good mothering to consumerism. It also recalls Betty Friedan's concept of the feminine mystique, or the bondage to which women unthinkingly submitted, especially during the 1950s, a time since associated with *Stepford Wives*. The very term "mom" infantilizes mothers by naming them with a term of address used by children. It also figures in the so-called "mommy wars," which have encouraged women to turn their frustrations toward each other rather than toward the social institutions that continue to fail mothers and families.

Titanic is a rare example of a major film focalized around a woman's point of view. Indeed, Rose's subjectivity, often conveyed through the powerful

form of voice-over, anchors the film, conveying not only the story of her life but also that of the *Titanic*, one of the defining events of modernity. However, even though the film encompasses the span of her long life and includes her granddaughter in its frame story, Rose's voice is always that of the daughter, the girl who in taking Jack's name refuses to keep the name her mother took and who makes a life for herself as Jack's widow. Through narrative and visual means, Ruth is relentlessly aligned with Cal in opposition to her daughter's happiness, and we never hear her story.

Finally, *Titanic* is a story about a historical event, told with a certain awareness of the act of remembering and recording the past, thus telling us something about the pull of history even in an age noted for its historical amnesia. As such, it resonates with the struggles of a new generation of women to place their own lives and priorities in relation to those of the generations that preceded them. The girls who came of age during a decade of Girl Power generally considered feminism to be dated and irrelevant to them. And the feminism that emerged in the 1990s, generally called the Third Wave, occurred in the context of intense debates about the relation between the past—especially the Second Wave—and the present. As Astrid Henry has argued in *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism*, feminism, for better or worse and perhaps inevitably, has understood itself and its history in generational terms through use of the metaphor of the mother-daughter relation, which she refers to as the “matrophor.”⁵ More often than not, the matrophor has created deep fissures within feminism as both an activist movement and as a now-institutionalized body of knowledge.

This book takes as its starting point the ambivalence around mothers that persists in widely consumed forms of popular culture today, not only in such award-winning films as *Titanic* and *American Beauty* (1999) that are aimed at mass audiences, but in films and television shows directly targeting young female audiences, from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) to *Clueless* (1995), *Scream* (1996), and *Mean Girls* (2004). My purpose is to consider the ways feminism has absorbed this ambivalence when, in renewing itself, it has distanced itself from the generations that preceded it, thereby replicating that very misogyny it wishes to eradicate. What does it mean that Rose's vibrant, unruly independence can come only by repudiating her mother? At the same time, to what extent do older feminists widen generational gaps through their own failures to understand new models of femininity and feminism that in fact may be expressions of unruliness for a new age?

The issue of motherhood has haunted Western feminism from its outset, in its struggle to free women from a biological determinism that links female bodies to reproduction. Indeed, ideologies of femininity are nowhere more intensely charged than around motherhood.⁶ Concerns about the dangers of essentialized identity categories (such as “woman” or “mother”) have caused feminists, especially after the Second Wave, to be wary of universalizing terms that can minimize or conceal the differences among us. This retreat, however, has coincided with a turn in the political sphere toward social conservatism that has increasingly challenged feminism to face and name the injustices suffered by poor women and working women of all classes and races. Many of these women are mothers and carry a disproportionate share of responsibility for the oldest and youngest among us. The feminist struggle for social transformation and justice can only benefit from our continued willingness to think about the institution of motherhood, and to reflect on and strengthen our generational connections.

Feminism's Mothers, Teen Girls, and Popular Culture

The 1990s might well be remembered as the decade of Girl Culture and Girl Power. New phrases began sounding in the air and new images surfacing in the media, changing the face of popular culture in a decidedly more youthful and female direction.⁷ This change had already been anticipated by the rise of shopping malls in the 1980s as a place where young people congregated, and the related spread of multiplexes showing movies catering to young audiences.⁸ In 1994, Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* helped put the issue of teen girls on the national cultural agenda. Indicting our “media-saturated culture” for “poisoning” our girls, the book sold 1.6 million copies.⁹ In cinema, teen girls created surprise hits out of not only *Titanic* but also the low-budget romantic comedy *Clueless* and the slasher parody *Scream*. *Clueless*'s success was followed by a television spin-off and a wave of romantic teen flicks, and the cult around *Scream* led to two sequels and the parody *Scary Movie* (2000), with its own sequels (2001, 2003, 2006).

On television, more programming than ever began featuring teen-girl protagonists in situations ranging from the everyday (*Felicity* and *Dawson's Creek*) to the fantastic (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, based on a 1992 movie of the same name). In music, phrases such as “Girl Power,” first articulated by the underground riot grrrls, moved into the mainstream with the international if short-lived

phenomenon of the Spice Girls, adored by very young girls, if reviled by almost everyone else. "By sheer bulk," according to one studio executive, "young girls are driving cultural tastes now. They're amazing consumers."¹⁰ Girls now control enough money to attract attention as a demographic group. This may or may not represent an advance in terms of girls' actual social power, but it does indicate that cultural producers are taking them seriously.

That hasn't necessarily been the case, however, for people with far more compelling personal and political stakes in understanding young women: their mothers, their teachers, and feminist thinkers in general. During the 1990s, academic feminists began to examine the relation between feminism and youth cultures, but these investigations focused more often on alternative, independent, and subcultural venues, such as riot grrrls, than on mainstream popular culture.¹¹ Like Mary Pipher, educated and liberal-minded adults from widely differing backgrounds have more often felt a deep unease about the connections between girls and popular culture, especially youth-oriented genre films and TV.

Let me cite a few examples. During the emergence of Girl Culture in the 1990s, I spoke many times to academics and other professionals who work with girls about the ways such media icons as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena the Warrior Princess, and the Spice Girls challenge familiar representations of femininity by affirming female friendship, agency, and physical power. While my audiences were usually entertained by my examples, many could not see past the violence, overt sexuality, and commercialism in the clips I showed and were troubled by my argument. Similarly, mothers in my classes acknowledged that they battled with their daughters over their tastes in popular culture. *Scream* was a particular flashpoint. Despite its influence among teen girls, these women discouraged or even forbade their daughters from watching it, and they certainly avoided watching it with them.¹²

These responses speak to real fears about the effects of popular culture on young people, and to sincere desires to protect girls from those effects. More important, however, they stand as poignant examples of missed opportunities for women of my generation—the "mothers" of contemporary feminism, or feminists of the Second Wave—to learn more about our daughters and to mend or at least better understand some of the rifts that divide us. For, despite the preferences of many educated adults for more refined examples of culture, choosing Jane Austen's *Emma* over Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*, or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* over Wes Craven's *Scream* trilogy, popular culture infuses the



Media icons such as Xena (Lucy Lawless) challenge normative femininity by affirming female friendship, agency, and physical prowess.

world in which today's young women live, and the face of feminism today, for better or worse, is being written across media culture. Over the years, *Time* magazine has heralded the end of feminism on numerous occasions, but the cover of its June 29, 1998, issue was especially suggestive. The image depicted succeeding generations of American feminism with the faces of Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem in black and white, followed by Ally McBeal, TV's most popular female character that year, in "living color." The headline "Is Feminism Dead?" suggested that if feminism lives, it does so in the fictionalized characters of popular culture.

The tension I've observed between mothers and daughters on the issue of popular culture resonates elsewhere in the U.S. feminist movement today. On the one hand, since the 1990s, "Girl Power" and "Girls Kick Butt" have become familiar phrases on magazine covers, bumper stickers, and T-shirts, one sign of the ways the Second Wave has changed the world our daughters are growing up in. On the other hand, feminism itself seems most evident as a

structuring absence for middle-class young women attempting to define their identity. "I'm not a feminist, but . . ." has become the most ubiquitous reference to feminism today, heard in university classrooms, the popular press, and a wave of recent books on contemporary feminism.

Brought up during a period of social conservatism, young women are reluctant to identify themselves with any political movement and instead are more likely to place their faith in free-market individualism. This resistance to thinking collectively, however, has serious consequences at a time when collective action remains necessary not only to advance feminist goals in an age of globalization but to protect its still-vulnerable achievements in the areas of abortion rights, affirmative action, education, and healthcare, not to mention maintaining a social safety net for poor women and the families of illegal immigrants.

Thinking collectively requires both real and imaginative models of productive relationship, which have been hard to come by for girls and women in both high art and popular culture. Sisterhood was the rallying cry of the Second Wave, and while representations of sisterhood or female friendship have begun to appear with more frequency in popular culture, the mother-daughter bond, a key model of female connection, remains invisible and unexplored.¹³ With a few important exceptions (including the *Alien* films, especially the second and fourth, *Species II*, and a handful of more recent examples), movies dispatch mothers with a vengeance, relegating them to sentimentality (*Stepmom*), hysteria (*American Beauty*), monstrosity (*Titanic*), or mere invisibility (*Rushmore*).¹⁴ As a result, girls have been hard pressed to imagine what female collectivity might look like among women of their own generation or across time. Sentimentalizing sisterhood as an ideal is not the answer, especially when that ideal obscures real differences among women and the power differentials that accompany those differences. However, without models of common goals and action, the ideology of free-market individual power can and does thrive.

Women who care about the next generation of girls need to learn more about the popular texts they're drawn to, whether they are *Sex and the City* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the *Twilight* books or MTV. Productive conversations about the future of the feminist movement must take place on the terrain of popular culture, where young women are refashioning feminism toward their own ends.¹⁵ As Australian feminist Catherine Lumby argues, "If feminism is to remain engaged with and relevant to the everyday lives of women, then