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‘Send in the (gay) clowns’: *Will & Grace* and *Modern Family* as ‘sensibly queer’¹

First submission: 29 November 2012

Acceptance: 20 August 2013

Initial representation of sexual minorities reified gay lifestyle as synonymous with deviancy (Seidman 1996: 6), courtesy of news programmes or documentaries. Several depictions, whether comical or dramatic, led to an outcry from conservative and gay groups alike, protesting the stereotypical depiction of gay men as “a joke” (Burgess 2011: 178), a theme which would continue until the present day. This article provides a queer theoretical critique of two situation comedies, *Will & Grace* (Kohan & Mutchnick 1998) and *Modern Family* (Levitan & Lloyd 2009a), and their representation of gay men. Primary emphasis is placed on the dualistic use of comedic satire to either reinforce heteronormativity or exemplify the permeable nature of the supposed rigidity of the heterosexual/homosexual binary logic (Fuss 1991; Namaste 1996).

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- 1 ‘Send in the clowns’ is the title to one of the songs from Broadway lyricist Stephen Sondheim’s *A little night music*.



Acta Academica
2013 45(4): 40-83
ISSN 0587-2405
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Ellen DeGeneres paved the way for representation of sexual minorities on television, in general, and in the US, in particular, when she became the first lesbian character on prime-time television to “come out” in the series *Ellen* (1994-1998) (Moore 2008: 19). Originally depicted as uninterested in dating of any kind, a producer of the show recommended that she should get a puppy, and as result the ‘coming out’ episode was titled ‘The puppy episode’ (Meem et al. 2010: 353). Media frenzies erupted months prior to the episode’s airing. She appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*; consented to an interview with news anchor Diane Sawyer, and even appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline, “Yep, I’m gay” (Meem et al. 2010: 353). Regardless of its infamy, the show only lasted one more year. This was attributed to an emphasis on homosexual themes as well as its lacklustre quality (Dow 2001: 128). Whatever the reasons, it provided the basis for an unprecedented number of gay and lesbian televised representations which would emerge in the years to follow (Gomillion & Giuliano 2011: 330). These included *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), *The L Word* (2004), *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) and *Modern Family* (2009). Current shows including, among others, *American Horror Story*, *Glee*, *The Good Wife*, *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Shameless* (2011) include gay and lesbian characters in their weekly episodes (GLAAD 2012: 3).²

Although these shows attempt to eradicate labels of homosexuals as “ill people, child molesters, and serial killers” (Burgess 2011: 177), they are subject to criticism. Schulman (1998: 146) argues that Western media create a “fake homosexuality [...] to facilitate a double marketing strategy: selling products to gay consumers that address their emotional need to be accepted while selling a palatable image of homosexuality to heterosexual consumers that need to have their dominance obscured” (see Davies 2008: 193). Netzhammer & Shamp (1994: 92) comment on the fact that these economic needs of television networks override political efforts to question taken-for-granted heterosexual truths in society, which results in retaining rather than violating dominant societal norms (Davidson 2012: 2; Davies 2008: 193; Linneman 2008: 586). Consider Halperin’s (1995: 29)

2 The Gay and Lesbian Association Against Defamation.

analysis of DeGeneres' current lacklustre discussions of her sexual orientation in *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*:

[t]o 'closet' one's homosexuality is also to submit oneself to the social imperative imposed on gay people by non-gay-identified people, the imperative to shield the latter from the knowledge of one's homosexuality so much as from the necessity of acknowledging the knowledge of one's homosexuality.

Although *Modern Family* and *Will & Grace* may be typified as subtle commentaries on the supposed stereotypes associated with sexual minorities, representations may prove ambiguous to the untrained eye. Take, for example, Pratt's (2008: 139) explication of the lesbian-oriented show *The L Word* as forum for escapism from previous depressing representations of lesbian women, on the one hand, and its fictitious "un-gay-looking" characters who seek to conform to and "speak to" a middle-class, presumably heterosexual television audience, on the other (see Davies 2008: 189). Cilliers (2008: 338) exemplifies this when noting,

[f]ilm analysis suggests that when minority groups do attain visibility, the manner of that representation will reflect the biases and interests of those elites who decide on the public agenda.

To him, representation means "to symbolise, stand for, to be an example [...] of, or to stand in [...] for something", whether real or imagined (Cilliers 2008: 332).

The objective of this article is to perform a twofold and/or dualistic queer theoretical reading of the two situation comedies, *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) and *Modern Family* (2009). Queer theory, as postmodern theoretical paradigm, contests the minoritising logic (Warner 1993: xxvi) which posits homosexuality as subservient sexual orientation to its supposed normal or dominant heterosexual counterpart.³ Its proponents highlight the inherent diversity, fluidity and plurality which characterise sexuality (Tong 2008), as opposed to modern theories, including lesbian and gay studies, which emphasise an adherence to, what Seidman terms, a "gay sensibility" (Seidman 2002). This assumes an assimilationist, essentialist, stereotypical and stable homogenised image of particular sexual minority groups, including gay men (Jagose 1996: 31). The dualistic objectives of this article draw

3 See Butler 1991: 13; Fuss 1991: 2; Sedgwick 2008: 1; Stein & Plummer 1996: 133.

on two meanings associated with queer theory, including the queer contestation and/or disassociation with the supposed rigidity of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, in general, and identity categories such as 'gay', in particular, and, secondly, the potential denaturalisation of the centrality of heteronormativity as opposed to homosexuality. The dualism will be explicated by in-depth content analyses of the two shows, based on three interrelated categories, which could be arranged along a continuum, or organised as distinct binaries. These include the gay woman versus the gay man, the gay 'fag-hag' versus the gay 'dude', and the gay diva versus the gay jock.

Pertaining to the first objective, Plummer (1998: 612) argues that social scientists should acknowledge these so-called "messiness" associated with the noted diverse and plural configurations of gender and sexual orientation, rather than homogenising specific categories or groups as binary opposites. This thought underscores Weeks' assertion that "[t]he recognition of 'sexual identities', in all their ambivalence, seems to be the precondition for the realization of sexual diversity" (Weeks 1985: 210). I will argue that, through the use of comedic satire, the two shows underline the confluent, permeable and continuum-based nature of the socially constructed boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality, where principles associated with, among others, 'hegemonic masculinity' (see Connell 1987) are evident in both groups and not solely exhibited by heterosexual men. As such, situation comedies may be viewed as either providing an escapism (Thompson 2009: 40) or being "invested heavily in social conscience" through timely satirical comments, scrutiny and ridicule of taken-for-granted 'truths' or ignorance (Berman 1987: 18). It engenders the "ability to produce social scorn or damning indictments through *playful* means and, in the process, transform the aggressive act of ridicule into the more socially acceptable act of rendering something ridiculous" (Gray et al. 2009: 12). Against the background of this article, satire results in, what Cooper refers to, as "culturally intimate humor [which] draws on the folkways and lore of a particular culture for its comic inspiration [... and] both affirms and mocks cultural stereotypes" (Cooper 2003: 514). This happens through an exaggeration of gay male stereotypes, on the one hand, and the "ridiculous" importance ascribed to heteronormativity, on the other.

The second of the two objectives, however, highlights the potential danger in making use of comedy, particularly if the representation of sexual minorities were to be decoded uncritically. This recalls the use of comedy to obtain and retain superiority in relation to a specific person or group (Lynch 2002: 433). The superiority theory on the use of comedy basically argues “that people laugh outwardly or inwardly at others because they feel some sort of triumph over them or feel superior in some way to them” (Meyer 2000: 314). In so doing, the status quo is kept intact, since those who embody “inferior [behaviour] are censured by laughter” and establish a united front among uncritical viewers by “implying that ‘the others’ are somehow irrational or inferior” (Meyer 2000: 315, 323). If this were to be the case, the shows may be interpreted as universal projections of what it means to be gay as opposed to being heterosexual (see Epstein 1998: 135, Stein & Plummer 1996: 130). This may engender a rhetoric of post-identity politics, in which sexual minorities are “scapegoated for exaggerating” stereotypical gay sensibilities in relation to heterosexuality, and in effect reducing the significance of identity politics (see Rockler 2006: 467).⁴

Several gender and sexuality theorists have commented on the ritualised repetitions of certain ‘performative’ acts which serve to guide sexual actors towards the appropriate ‘gendered’ and ‘sexual’ behaviour in a given context.⁵ Four episodes of *Will & Grace* that include sexual scripting (Gagnon & Simon 1974) as basis for the manner in which gay men may and should supposedly ‘do’ and ‘use’

4 It is worth noting that the lack of an inclusive intersectional representation of diverse sexual minority groups, as it relates to class, ethnicity or race, further exacerbates a monolithic and homogeneous image of the contemporary gay male (see Halberstam 2005: 223). This is attributed to the fact that the gay male protagonists in *Will & Grace* and *Modern family* represent a privileged, middle-class and individualised Whiteness, rather than epitomising inherent differences within the gay community (see Fouts & Inch 2005: 42; Peters 2011; Rockler 2006). I acknowledge the importance of an intersectional critique as one of several principles of queer theory, but based on the limited space afforded, the primary emphasis centres on the noted denaturalisation of heteronormativity, and the disassociation of queer theory with the stability and rigidity of identity categories. Consult Rockler’s (2006) content analysis of the television series *Friends* (1994-2002), as example of this.

5 See Butler 1993: 234; Ingraham 2002: 74; Jackson & Scott 2010: 61; Johnson 2009: 66; West & Zimmerman 2002: 43.

gay, will provide the overarching theme (see Dowsett et al. 2008: 131, Johnson 2009: 66; West & Zimmerman 2002: 43). These episodes emphasise the constant dependency of scripted gendered and sexual performances on assessment and subsequent approval, courtesy of external social actors, through interpersonal scripting within a larger cultural scenario (Simon 1996: 41).

The most recent content analyses in the Gay and Lesbian Association Against Defamation (GLAAD) (2012) report on televised representation of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community on American television networks, uncritically embraced the networks' 'inclusionary' tendency towards sexual minorities. Given a binary logic of sexual orientation, this could further reify 'the homosexual' as separate and potentially stereotypically subordinate sexual "species" (see Foucault 1978) or personage. The two series provide the basis for Fuss' (1991) reference to the inside/out logic as engendered paradox, since it explicates the reason why the realisation of an exclusively queer diversity, plurality and non-subordinate gay 'otherness' is near to impossible in contemporary society. Since Fuss builds on Derrida's (1998: 244) concept of supplementarity, which presupposes a reciprocated interrelationship of two orientations, one dependent and the other independent (see De Lauretis 1991), a content analysis of *Will & Grace* and *Modern Family* underscores the fact that heterosexuality persists as independent and homosexuality as dependent social (and sexual) category in contemporary society, regardless of queer critique directed towards the fallibility of heteronormativity.⁶

In addition to the overarching thematic usage of *Will & Grace*, *Modern Family* will be incorporated as a current representational forum guided by the blueprint left by the former. Cognisant of theoretical critique based on the 'westernised' foci of this article, rather than an African or South African impetus, two reasons serve as rationale for the pre-eminent focus on American television. First, although one could argue that *Will & Grace* may not necessarily have had as much of an impact since ending in 2006, the influence of new media such as online instant videos on Amazon.com, online purchases of DVDs (see

6 See Butler 1990; De Lauretis 1991: iii; Sedgwick 2008: 1; Stein & Plummer 1996: 135; Warner 1991: 26.

Pratt 2008: 138), syndication which allows for continuous broadcasts on American television, and South African satellite television stations such as Sony Entertainment, as well as several citations in recent academic analyses of queer representations in new media, make it all the more appropriate to include it as an overarching example of rationalisation of the late modern gay identity.⁷

Secondly, research has emphasised the influence of Western media on developing countries such as South Africa.⁸ Examples of South African LGBTQ representation have been scarce. Shows such as *Egoli* (1986-2010), *Generations* (1993), *Hard Copy* (2005-2006), *Isidingo* (1998) and *Society* (2007) have differentially dealt with the subject matter of gay and lesbian lifestyle. The latter three shows mostly focused on lesbian representation, whereas gay male representation, along a further non-intersectional line pertaining to racial and ethnic integration, characterised all of these shows (Monamodi 2009). Gay men, in *Egoli*, *Isidingo* and *Generations*, were depicted as either desexualised, struggling with their sexual orientation or merely progressing through a stage of sexual discovery, only to later identify as bisexual and not 'monosexually' gay (see Gammon & Isgro 2007: 165). As such, South African audiences may be all the more likely to identify with any given representation of being gay, either by finding similarities or idealising the protagonist, or through a wishful identification which has the viewer intensely desiring certain features of the characters as to emulate their behaviour (Gomillion & Giuliano 2011: 332).

As noted earlier, this article provides a critical theoretical contemplation of the potential conflation of the divergently diverse, yet homogeneous characteristics ascribed to the two protagonists in both shows, as per the first and second objective of the article, respectively.

7 See Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002; Beirne 2008; Cooper 2003; Linneman 2008; Quimby 2005; Dow 2001: 124.

8 See Altman 1996: 78; Coon 2012; Levine 1998; Warren 1998.

1. Setting the scene: *Will & Grace* and *Modern Family* as empirical background

Will & Grace centred on the lives of four principal characters – the gay protagonist Will Truman, a successful and career-driven lawyer living in New York City, and his best friend Grace Adler, an interior designer whom he met while studying at Columbia University in the early 1980s (Kohan & Mutchnick 1998). Originally a couple, Will ultimately came out to Grace and since then, they have retained a close-knit bond. Other principal characters included the flamboyant gay Jack Masearland, an actor/singer/choreographer, and Grace's shallow socialite personal assistant Karen Walker. Originally touted as 'gay', Meem et al. (2010: 354) were of the opinion that "the visual representations told a fairly heterosexualized story". This led to Lyttle's proclamation that, regardless of more gay and lesbian representations (Meem et al. 2010: 355),

[i]n a few years' time, we will look back [and p]eople will cringe [...] The thing about camping it up [is that] it's gone from being subversive – without it we wouldn't have a gay liberation – to being a norm on TV. Gay culture is not all about that stereotype. It's like gay men are only acceptable if they play the court jester.

As a result of such views, the four-part 'Fagmalion' episodic-arc is appropriate for analysis.⁹ Since Jack described 'becoming gay' as a kind of process, "Homo wasn't built in a day," and "Making someone gay is hard. I don't know how my mother did it!" (Janetti 2002), these episodes will serve as overarching guide to the discussion of the rationalisation of the modern gay identity (see Jackson & Scott 2010: 56). Each of the four episodes centres on the manner in which a dualistically explicit, yet implicit social construction and subsequent performance of the 'homosexual role' takes place (see Butler 1990; 1993; McIntosh 1968: 192). Will and Jack provide a kind of blueprint for Karen's cousin Barry, in becoming gay. The first of the episodes, 'Fagmalion Part 1: Gay it forward' (Poust & Kinnally 2002a), introduces

9 'Fagmalion' served as reference to Alan Jay Lerner's Broadway musical 'Pygmalion', in which English Professor Henry Higgins attempts to turn working-class florist Eliza Doolittle into a 'lady'. In the *Will & Grace* comedic adaptation, Will and Jack seek to turn Karen Walker's cousin Barry 'gay', through the necessary tutorage into stereotypes held about gay male sexuality in modern Western society.

the viewer to Barry who just came out of the closet, but who does not know 'how to be gay'. Karen enlists Will and Jack to 'gay it forward', a variation on 'paying it forward', for as Jack notes, "we senior gays have a responsibility" towards those who wish to learn, to which Barry replies, "There's so much to learn" (Poust & Kinnally 2002a).

The title of Part Two, 'Attack of the gay clones' (Janetti 2002), highlights the generalised guidelines the 'senior gays' will provide to Barry in all likelihood to retain and maintain his gay manhood (see Alvarez 2009: 99-100). Part Three, 'Bye, Bye, Beardy' (Herschlag 2002), provides the finishing touches in becoming gay - Barry is "plucked and tucked" to resemble the ideal gay man before being introduced to the gay community at the Lesbian Gay Human Rights Gala. Part Four, 'The guy who loved me' (Lerner 2002), involves the first steps associated with gay romance.

An analysis of several episodes of the first three seasons of the American-produced *Modern Family* complements the analysis of *Will & Grace* (Levitan & Lloyd 2009b). This is done to explore the similarities and differences associated with the two, since both present us with two gay protagonists as part of their ensembles. The show centres on three 'modern' families in America linked through familial ties. We have the traditional nuclear family of Claire and Phil Dunphy and their three children Alex, Haley and Luke; the gay couple Mitchell Pritchett and Cameron Tucker and their adopted Vietnamese daughter Lily, as well as Claire and Mitchell's father Jay Pritchett, who is married to a much younger Columbian woman, Gloria. Her son from a previous marriage, Manny Delgado, lives with them.

2. 'Homo wasn't built in a day': 'fagging' the gay male in contemporary society¹⁰

The content analysis of *Will & Grace*, as overarching thematic guide, will be demarcated as three interrelated categories which characterise the representation of gay male characters. These could be interpreted as either situated on a continuum, or organised as opposing binaries - the gay woman versus the gay man, the gay 'fag-hag' versus the gay 'dude', and the gay diva versus the gay jock.

10 Janetti (2002).

2.1 The gay 'woman' versus the gay 'man': a case of effeminacy or masculinity

The contradictory relationship evident in overcompensation in effeminacy and masculinity underlines the gendered nature of the four gay male characters in the two shows. Pertaining to effeminacy, Battles & Hilton-Morrow (2002: 89) argue that the original medical debates, courtesy of, among others, practitioners Magnus Hirschfeld and Karl Ulrichs (Tamagne 2010: 168), are reinforced in the depiction of gay men as overly more effeminate than masculine. The character of Jack refers to the attendees of the Lesbian and Gay Rights Gala as "the crème-de-la-crème of the crème-de-la-femme" (Herschlag 2002). Much of this has been a recurring theme in Hollywood representations of gay men over the past century, which manifests a passive adherence and internalisation of gay men as gendered inverts (Epstein & Friedman 1995; Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002: 90). It implies that there is a clear incongruence between the biological sex, socially constructed gender ideal and subsequent sexual orientation, as per the *cisgender* model (see Meem et al. 2010). Many younger gay boys experience (or experienced) malicious taunts based on their supposed effeminacy, weakness or inferiority because of their sexual orientation.¹¹ As such, they attempt to ascribe to a hegemonic masculine ideal in society through excessive body consciousness, but only manage to attain a distorted version of this, since their sexual orientation still falls short of the ascribed ideal (Connell 1987: 186; Fejes 2000: 114).

A preoccupation with body image ensues, something akin to ancient Grecian culture's reverence of athleticism and male beauty, as well as Achilles's (1998: 177) reference to the "fickle" nature of the visible gay male culture. Drummond (2005: 292) notes that, based on their supposed difference in mainstream heterosexual society, gay men need to "pass" as heterosexuals based on contextual constraints or demands. To do this, they project a muscular, not frail and feminine physique (Levine 1992: 353). This serves to recount what Wood (2004: 53) refers to as the "history of gay beauty", mostly dominated by the importance ascribed to a muscular appearance to avoid identification as effeminate gay male. Schnoebelen (2001: 31)

11 See Plummer 1996: 71; Savage & Miller 2011; Siconolfi et al. 2009; Wood 2004: 44.

argues that “gay men who wish to abide by culturally conceived doctrines of beauty will shape, tuck, and rearrange their bodies. All of these procedures, again, support the importance of the youthful, muscular ideal within the gay culture”.

In several episodes of *Will & Grace*, Jack refers to Will as “my big fat friend” and his “thinning hair and spreading thighs” (Arkin 2004; Marchinko 2000) or even as “repulsive”, “hideous” and someone from whom everyone “flees” (Poust & Kinnally 2002a) and “an elderly gay man with a pouchy tummy and unappealing personality. Why wouldn’t you be in pain?” (Lizer 2002). Duncan (2007: 333) argues that gay men’s subjection of themselves to excessive emphasis on appearance creates unachievable physical objectives (see Gabriel 2005; Higginbotham 2005; Poust & Kinnally 2002a). In briefing a hairdresser on Barry in the third part of ‘Fagmalion’ (Herschlag 2002), Will and Jack mirror such expectations:

Jack: Your next one Barry isn’t here yet. But we’ll be making his decisions for him.

Will: He’s 35. Just came out of the closet, and we’ve been working over the last three weeks to get him ready for the HRC gala tonight. I hear what you’re saying. Tonight? Are you mad? He should have been here a week ago for time to set. That’s Hair 101.

Jack: Yeah. But we had a dilemma. You see, his body was in worse shape than his hair. So we sent him to a fat farm.

(To which Will starts to giggle)

Will: He thought he was going to a spa. Isn’t that great?

Jack: Anyway, this is how we want his hair cut. Chunky, but not too chunky.

Will: Piecey, but not too piecey.

Jack: Gay, but not too gay.

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Will: We want him to be cruised in Chelsea, but not beat up in Brooklyn.

(Barry enters the salon upset)

Barry: This whole day has been a disaster. D...I...SASTER! I came from the fat farm you call a spa, and what do I do? I eat a muffin!

(To which both Will and Jack gasp)

Sure, I spit most of it into a trash can like you taught me. But I accidentally swallowed a few crumbs. And God help me, maybe a nut!

(Walking away from the two, he looks into a mirror)

I look awful! My hair is never gonna look good. It's stringy and ugly! And I'm fat!

Jack: That was a little much.

Will: What a drama queen. Our little boy is growing up!

Jack: I'm so proud of him.

Will explicates their rationalised justification associated with physical appearance when, after his telephone conversation with Barry prior to the gala, he emphasises the importance of such a makeover by informing Grace that he “created a guy who is too hot for him to date” (Herschlag 2002), likening himself to Dr Frankenstein and Henry Higgins, and gay Barry (as his creation) to Frankenstein’s monster and Eliza Doolittle, respectively. During their task allocation preceding turning Barry gay, Will takes on responsibilities such as the socialisation into gay culture and history, whereas the more ‘sexually-charged’ Jack is placed in charge of Barry’s body. Jack instructs Barry, “No pecks, no sex,” upon which Barry enquires, “Are you gay guys only about bodies and faces?” “Absolutely not,” Jack replies, “we’re only about bodies,” a thought reinforced later when Jack recommends gym exercise after midnight, since “you are not ready for peak cruising hours” (Janetti 2002). Other examples which highlight the importance of body image include Jack joining Will’s gym in ‘Will works out’

(King et al. 1999); his attempts to impress a possible male suitor at the gym by using heavier weights in ‘Stakin’ care of business’ (Wrubel 2001), and even submitting himself to Botox in an attempt to retain his youth (Poust & Kinnally 2002b). This is complemented by Jack’s request to his fellow acting student Russell to take off his shirt to put his chiselled muscular features on display (Gabriel 2002; Poust & Kinnally 2002a); his reference to the “three not so wise but sexy men” in decorating a *Barney’s* window for Christmas in New York (Kightlinger 2001), and an expectation to “get serious with at least five guys” during a lesbian and gay benefit (Herschlag 2002). Even after having endured Will and Jack’s ‘gay boot camp’ of sorts, Barry himself concedes that he needs only to apply for a new credit card in order to afford new clothes and shoes, to which the two ‘clones’ remark, “You know what this means? Unrealistic body expectations. Choosing fashion over comfort. Living beyond your means. Boy George! I think [he’s] got it!” (Janetti 2002).¹²

One episode, in particular, definitely invites a queer theoretical interpretation of the importance ascribed to male muscular beauty. In ‘The fabulous Baker boy’ (Angelo 2004), Will is determined to curtail Karen’s lavish spending habits and sets out to fire her pastry chef. Upon arrival at her mansion, he meets an exotic looking man who, we learn later, regards all beings as merely sexual, having had sexual intercourse with Karen and her maid Rosario. Their banter depicts Will’s immediate attraction to Edward, who is dressed only in a white vest:

Will: Dear God. Tell me you’re not Pastry Chef.

Edward: Yeah [...] Forgive the appearance, I don’t like to be constrained by clothing. If the Health Department let me, I’d bake in the nude.

Will: Maybe you should send the Health Department a picture. They might make an exception. I’m Will Truman, Karen Walker’s attorney [...] There’s no easy way to say this.

12 An adaptation of Henry Higgins’ remark on Eliza Doolittle’s efforts, “By George, I think she’s got it!”.

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(Will is interrupted by Edward who puts his finger in Will's mouth)

Edward: Taste this.

Will: [T]hat is the perfect combination of sugar, lemon zest and finger.

(Edward reaches out to touch Will's left shoulder, leaving a white baking flour handprint on Will's suit)

Edward: Somebody works out. I thought lawyers were supposed to pass the bar, not lift it.

Will: I'm dirty and I don't even care [...] It smells so good in here, I'm only here five minutes and I can eat everything in sight.

Edward: For me the joy isn't in the eating, it's in the baking. Here.

(Edward reaches out and places both of Will's hands on the cake roller, gently accompanying Will in the motions of rolling out the dough)

That's it. Put your body into it.

(Will engages in a thrusting-like movement alongside Edward, clearly intoxicated by Edward's exuberant sexual energy)

You're very good at this. You've ever needed something before?

Will: Never more than I do now.

Will resembles a more masculine hegemonic male, akin to his heterosexual male, which Connell (1992) would identify as a "very straight gay". His clothing comprises a suit and tie, he is emotionally reserved, financially autonomous and stable, a kind of father figure to Grace and Jack and career driven (Linneman 2008: 586). Nonetheless, respondents in a study by Linneman (2008: 587) still thought Will to be effeminate, based not on his appearance or behaviour, but rather on his sexual orientation and, as in this scene, effeminately coy and submissive. Such an argument links to Dowsett et al.'s (2008) work on 'doing gay'. Linneman (2008: 586) argues that one should differentiate between a gay man's purposeful effeminate actions, which as a result are based on the agent's own decisions, whereas gender is also done

to him, based on the feminisation of the gay social actor to mirror his sexual orientation (Linneman 2008: 584), a thought echoed in work done on the conflation of one's gender category and sexual orientation, thus one necessitating the other. This implies that, being male, one should be masculine and, by implication, heterosexual (Plummer 1996; Savage & Miller 2011). As such, Will and Mitchell's sexual orientation becomes more difficult to categorise; this may, in fact, call for a more abstract-like queer interpretation.

In contrast to the clearly effeminate flamboyancy of Jack and Cameron, Will and Mitchell still retain and project a degree of hegemonic masculinity to assimilate into the heterosexual world, exacerbated by Will's short-lived engagement to Grace (Greenstein 2000). While they were in college, Mitchell mistakenly believed that he fathered a child with an ex-girlfriend (O'Shannon & Wrubel 2010) and a lapse in judgement led Cameron to think that a heterosexual woman would be sexually attracted to him (Levitan 2011). Both Will and Mitchell are desexualised (Linneman 2008:599; Shugart 2003: 69) and manifest "new masculine, asexual" (Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002: 92) projections of a gay man, much of which could be incorporated into Altman (1982: 147), Epstein (1998: 148), Jagose (1996: 3) and Weeks' (1986: 15) reference to the continued adherence to an assimilationist and essentialist model and ultimate 'exotification' of the gay male.

The desexualisation characterises Mitchell and Cameron's relationship. During the first season of their show, they attend a playgroup for Lily, prior to which Mitchell requests Cameron to 'tone it down', in order for them to fit in, something his paisley pink shirt may not ensure. Cameron obliges but remarks, "You want to fit in and not terrify the villagers [...] Sure, khaki and a Polo-shirt, let people rather think that we are two straight golfing buddies who decided to have a kid together" (O'Shannon 2009). On Valentine's Day in both seasons, they are either taking care of Jay and Gloria's son Manny, or competing to determine who of the two of them is the object of Mitchell's assistant's affection, respectively, while their heterosexual counterparts play out romantic courtships (Collins 2009; Zucker 2010a). Mitchell develops the hypothesis of desexualisation when he refuses to engage in displays of public affection with Cameron, a cause directed towards his non-emotive heterosexual father Jay (Higgenbotham 2010).

The exotification and feminisation of gay men are also applicable to Jack and Cameron as more stereotypical flamboyant, fickle and overly sexualised gay men. Jack epitomises emotional and financial dependency on both Will and Karen (Gabriel 2005), a lack of responsibility based on, among others, his decision to reconnect and hire a childhood babysitter to take care of him (Kightlinger 2003), sexual proclivity and promiscuity and an obsession with male beauty (Gabriel 2002; Poust & Kinally 2002a; 2002b) and female entertainers (Linneman 2008: 586). This is done to better compare or disassociate Will's more normative masculine portrayal of a gay man in relation to Jack's gayness, a thought exemplified by Gairola (Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002: 91) when he refers to the fact that "Will and his other friends poke fun at Jack's campiness, thus drawing a distinction between their 'straighter' seeming gayness and Jack's overt queeniness". The effeminacy of Jack serves as subtle reference to their more passive and comfortable adherence to unspoken or unscripted expectations of gay men in contrast to Will's career-oriented, success-driven and 'normative' gay male.

One could partly apply these arguments to the effeminate and feminised nature of Cameron in *Modern Family*. Cameron contradictorily displays a dualistic and contradictory propensity for both masculinity and femininity. In terms of the first, Cameron's masculine skills are on display in several episodes, where he opts to build a princess castle with Jay based on Mitchell's perceived inadequacy to do so (Wrubel 2010); fixing Jay and Gloria's faulty electronic gate (Zucker 2010b); driving a huge moving truck (Zucker 2011), and participating in pigeon shooting alongside Phil and Jay, whereas Mitchell is encouraged to lounge by the swimming pool (Corrigan et al. 2011). As former professional clown, a creation called 'Fizbo', Cameron re-imagines and reconfigures the classic 'gay clone' of the 1970s into the comical 'gay clown' of the 2000s (Alvarez 2009). In his everyday life, as alluded to, Cameron manifests effeminacy based on conscious attempts and is also subjected to having his conflated gender and sexual orientation 'done to him' by a kind of external feminisation (see Linneman 2008). In wearing his clown costume, he is afforded the opportunity to reclaim his manhood in a scene in which he defends Mitchell from a brutish heterosexual man at a gas station. This scene leaves one to consider how, in contrast to

an also visible Levi, leather and fitted T-shirt wearing gay ‘clone’ of the 1970s, the colourful, loud and gregarious performative caricature of Fizbo, the clown, may in fact be the dominant mode of projecting (and protecting) his subordinate manhood in clear visibility to a supposed “blessed” heterosexual “other” (see Butler 1990, 1993; Segal 2007: 56; Rubin 1993: 12).

Another, less visible reclamation of his evident masculinised traits is his sport references. In the episode entitled ‘Coal digger’ (Lloyd 2009), the following banter between the non-sportive Mitchell and footballer Cameron is evidenced.

Interview¹³

Cameron: I collect antique fountain pens, I’m quite adept to Japanese flower arrangement and [... was a] football player. Surprise!

(Cameron continues to explain the importance of mascots for football teams, to which Mitchell replies)

Scene

Mitchell: They wear ascots?

(Cameron progresses to paint his face half blue and half black for the game to be watched at Jay’s)

Cameron: Is it straight? (Referring to the lines on his face)

Mitchell: I’m not sure what you are right now.

(While watching the game, Mitchell makes a flawed recommendation on what the team should attempt to do)

Jay: Get out of here!

(A request Mitchell takes literally)

13 These interviews are presented as personal reflections of the characters on the particular scenes of which they form part, as if they were engaging in a conversation with the television audience.

Interview

Mitchell: My interest in football ended as suddenly and dramatic as the climax of *West Side Story*. I'm a musical theatre fan.

Cameron: Surprise!

This exchange underscores the questions raised concerning the varied interests gay men may display, but which are traditionally associated with heterosexual men. It also contradicts references to gay men as not being as proficient in sports, as evident in *Will & Grace*'s 'Field of queers' (Palmer 2002), in which Jack signs up both himself and Will for a gay soccer team, which exacerbates the recurring theme of gender and sexual orientation conflation (Plummer 1975: 135). In their exchange, 'camp'-like references on colour, clothing and potential relationships outweigh emphasis on the sport itself which, in Cameron's case by contrast, is the dominant factor:

Will: Forget it. I don't do sports. Sure, I'll flip through a *Sports Illustrated* when it's already in the bathroom and I'm already happy to see it. But that's where I draw the line.

Jack: Gay soccer isn't sports silly. It's cute guys in shorts running around kicking balls. It's a gay bar on Astro-turf.

Grace: You know ... you should do it. You might meet someone, and you do like the way your legs look in shorts.

Will: I really do. But ... soccer? What colour are the uniforms?

Jack: Powder blue with white accents and lemon piping.

Will: Cotton?

Jack: Cotton-poly blend. Very shiny. A lot of movement.

Will: Oooh, I can wear my tinted lenses. I'm in.

In adopting a queer reading, Plummer (1998: 612) recommends a focus on the "messiness of the field", rather than merely skimming

the stereotypical surface.¹⁴ Karen stresses this notion in the second of the ‘Fagmalion’ episodes, when she confronts Will and Jack about not moving fast enough in aiding Barry to become gay: “[Y]ou’re supposed to help him be gay, but you didn’t finish. The poor boy is so confused. He’s sitting at home on the couch watching football in a spandex weensy” (Janetti 2002). Cameron’s “messiness” and conflation of masculine and feminine traits exemplify his complementary feminine attributes. These include an emphasis on intense parenting and care lavished on Lily (Chupack 2011); a preoccupation with entertainment (Broadway musicals, children’s birthday parties) (Corrigan & Walsh 2010; Ko 2010), and a love for divas (O’Shannon 2009). Such a reciprocally contradictory merger between masculine and feminine traits denaturalises and destabilises the supposed tenacious bases and borders of heterosexuality as dominant gendered and sexual institution, always contestable and at risk of gay men who permeate its inner “charmed circle”.¹⁵ Dyer (1981: 62) further demarcates this mutually interdependent relationship in arguing that “[b]y taking the signs of masculinity and eroticizing them in a blatantly homosexual context, much mischief is done to the security with which ‘men’ are defined in society [...] If that bearded, muscular beer-drinker turns out to be a pansy, however are you going to know the ‘real’ men anymore?”

Jay’s insecurities of being married to a much younger Gloria also exemplify the feminisation of Mitchell and Cameron’s relationship when he states (Lloyd 2009):

Jay: You guys, you’re basically like women. You look at
 guys. So what do you think? Would you check me out?

(Mitchell immediately makes his discomfort known)

Cameron: You’re smokin’ hot!

Although an extension of Jay’s ignorance on gay matters who, for example, announces himself before entering a room in which Mitchell and Cameron already are, to avoid witnessing “anything gay going on” (Levitan & Lloyd 2009b), his question signals an interest

14 See Nardi 2002: 52; Richardson & Munro 2012: 46; Roseneil 2002: 29; Sedgwick 2008: 25.

15 See Butler 1991: 23; De Lauretis 1991: iii; Jagose 1996: 3; Namaste 1996: 198; Rubin 1993: 12; Sedgwick 2008: 1.

and level of comfort pertaining to interaction with gay men. This is never more evident than in the episode 'Boys' night out' (Levitan & Richman 2010). In this instance, Mitchell and Cameron spend an evening at a restaurant with their friends Pepper, Longines and Crispin. Jay happens to be at the same restaurant, and regardless of Mitchell's protest of having him join them, since Jay "doesn't know I'm *this* gay", an evening of movie references and singing of show tunes ensues. This perceived comfort does, however, not necessarily translate to a later episode in which Jay and Cameron take up a very competitive game of racket ball (Wrubel 2009b). The following transpires while they are getting dressed in the male locker room:

Interview

Jay: For me it's a locker room. For him [Cameron], it's a showroom.

Scene: A chiselled and tanned man walks by in a towel with Cameron looking very impressed. He sees that Jay wears boxer shorts.

Cameron: Boxers, that's a surprise. I just always pictured you as a tidy-whitey guy.

Jay: The next time you picture me, leave the underwear out of it.

(Standing with their backs to one another, both take off their underwear and unbeknownst sit down at the same time - their buttocks connect)

Jay: What the hell was that?

Cameron: Our butts pressed against each other.

Jay: They didn't press, it was glancing. Stop talking about it.

Cameron: This can't be your first moon landing?

Jay: You've got a name for it?

Cameron: You got off easy. At least it didn't happen after a shower. We call that a splash-down.

Jay: Enough!

A later episode introduces the viewer to an exchange between Jay and Cameron's father Merve on whether Cameron or Mitchell should be regarded as the 'husband' or 'wife' and, contemplating the original ease associated with traditional gender role allocation, as evident in Jay's words "[e]very time I start to feel comfortable with this thing, some new parts come along I need to wrap my head around [...] We have two sons. And they're gay for each other" (O'Shannon et al. 2011). Such depictions in both shows may serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, we are made aware of implicit shame and increased levels of self-reflexivity experienced by the more 'masculine', 'conforming' gay characters of Will and Mitchell (and to a certain degree, Cameron) (Downs 2006: 76; Jackson & Scott 2010: 130). On the other hand, Jack and Cameron exhibit camp characterisations of gay masculinity which serve as proof of their comfort level pertaining to their sexuality. Although such depictions may be read as probable threats to heterosexual masculine ideals, they may also, through comedy, not only reaffirm stereotypes associated with heteronormativity and the gay sensibility, but also satirise such exaggerated portrayals of homosexuality, as ignorant (see Dyer 1981; Linneman 2008: 587; Shugart 2003: 72).

Cameron, in particular, embodies the explicit feminisation directed towards gay men in *Modern Family*. Two particular episodes are of value in this instance - 'Benched' (Zucker 2009a) and 'Mother's Day' (O'Shannon & Wernick 2010). After resigning from his law firm, Mitchell seeks to exemplify what Johnson and O'Connor (2002: 170) define as an androgynous and egalitarian work allocation within same-sex families, with Cameron taking on a part-time job at a greeting-card shop, while he ponders his future (Lawson 2009). Jay refers Mitchell to a golfing friend of his who might offer him a job. Not wanting to hurt the other, based on both men's perceived happiness with their switched roles, they overtly downplay the opportunity. But the interviews highlight different views.

Interview

Mitchell: I'm losing my mind! As much as I love Lilly, which is more than life itself, I am not cut out to be a stay-at-home dad. But it's Cameron's turn to be out in

Rothmann/'Send in the (gay) clowns'

the world interacting with other grown-ups, while I stay at home plotting the death of Dorothy Explorer.

Scene

Cameron: (To Mitchell) I'm loving our life!

Interview

Cameron: (Very melodramatic) I'm in a really dark space! Being away from my Lily is literally torture. And I can't pressure Mitchell. But I really, really, really just want him to just get a job so I can go back being a stay-at-home dad slash trophy wife.

Ultimately, Mitchell takes the job. In a later episode, Cameron's reference to being a "trophy wife" manifests his effeminised gay male performance. In 'Mother's Day', Cameron is interpreted as portraying Lily's mother, a view perpetuated by Mitchell. In the morning, Mitchell brings Cameron breakfast in bed:

Scene

Mitchell: Today is your day. All day.

Cameron: Today? Today's my day?

Mitchell: Something's happening.

Cameron: It's Mother's day. You're bringing me breakfast in bed on Mother's day. You think of me as Lily's mother. I'm your wife. I'm a woman!

Interview

Mitchell: What? As if I could treat my partner as a woman.

Flashbacks

Mitchell: (to Claire on new curtains in Lily's room) Well, **Mrs. Pritchett** loves to shop!

(to a colleague when calling Cameron from the office) The **wife's** not gonna like this!

Scene (continued)

Mitchell: (to Lily holding balloons outside the bedroom door)
Scratch the balloons, **she's**¹⁶ in a mood!

(On their way to the Mother's Day party in the park, Mitchell enquires about the direction)

Scene

Cameron: I'm a woman. I have a terrible sense of direction!

Interview

Cameron: There's nothing gays hate more than when people treat us like women. We don't want to go to your baby shower. We don't have a time of the month. We don't love pink.

Mitchell: You love pink!

Cameron: No, pink loves me.

At the party, one mother says to Cameron, “[N]ice to have the husbands around to help, right?”. Cameron is then encouraged to take a picture alongside the other mothers. The feminisation evident in *Will & Grace* and the foregoing scenic depiction with female pronouns also comes to the fore with one of the heterosexual fathers calling Cameron a “honorary mom”, as well as referring to him as one of the “ladies” or “gals”. Such referrals serve to normalise Cameron’s role as mother for their heterosexual friends, whereas his own negative interpretation of this comments on how his supposed incongruent gender is ‘done to him’ (see Linneman 2008). Regardless, Mitchell expresses that they merely represent a new kind of family, which mainstream heterosexual society cannot adequately comprehend. He attributes his view of Cameron as the mother to the qualities of warmth, nurture and support he daily exudes with Lily, something which, according to Mitchell, is not necessarily a bad thing, and does not make him “less of a man” (O’Shannon & Wernick 2010). As such, we note how negotiation of gender roles is afforded on a micro-scale

16 Bold emphases added.

within the relationship between the gay couple, whereas the larger heterosexual matrix reinforces stereotypical role allocations to gay couples in a possible attempt to align their own arrangements with those of sexual dissidents (Butler 1993; Johnson 2009: 66).

Associated with this relationship between heterosexual women and their feminised gay counterparts, is the importance associated with friendships brought to the fore by such pairings in society.

2.2 The 'fag-hag' versus the gay 'dude': girlfriend or boyfriend?

In contrast with the depictions of Grace and Karen, Bartlett et al. (2009: 235) argue that the 'fag-hag' was traditionally associated with unattractive, overweight women seeking the attention of gay men. It is interesting to note in this regard that such a link may result in heterosexual men finding women all the more unappealing, since they may take on certain characteristics associated with gay men, resembling a more 'bitchy' than 'sex siren' nature, exacerbated by an exaggerated degree of flamboyance, eccentricity and flirtation (Shepperd et al. 2010: 205). The term has thus come to be interpreted as insult by some, but for others, it denotes something more positive (Moon 1995: 488; Rumens 2011: 126). In this instance, the heterosexual woman will serve as best friend, confidante or as mother/sister in the lives of gay men (Castro-Convers et al. 2005: 49; Moon 1995: 488).

Several episodes of *Will & Grace* provide references to the importance ascribed to the strong emotional bond between the show's namesake characters. These include 'Seeds of discontent' (Marchinko et al. 2000), in which Will's former college friend asks Will to father a child with her, met with outrage by Grace because, as Karen notes, "You're mad because she stole your B-plan [...] Let's face it, there is not one of them with whom you'll consider having a baby," with reference to Grace's former boyfriends. Grace is also confronted with this fear of being replaced in 'Grace replaced' (Palmer 1999) when her work keeps her from spending time with Will, resulting in him making friends with a female neighbour. Grace is reminded of the disposable nature of her relationship with Will in 'An old-fashioned piano party' (Marchinko et al. 2000). In this instance, a chance meeting with a former female college friend, whose bond with a gay

man disintegrated, highlights the vulnerability of her friendship with Will. Grace to Will, “[T]hey hardly talk anymore, he just upped and moved away.” Will replies, “Good for him, what did he have holding him here?”. Grace then buys a piano to facilitate a stronger bond and more time spent with him. Against this background, Battles & Hilton-Morrow (2002: 94) and Shugart (2003: 72) note that Will and Grace are ‘coded’ as a romanticised heterosexual couple, a relationship in which both find the noted necessary emotional intimacy without a physical sexual relationship (Quimby 2005: 715). In the episode ‘Coffee and commitment’ (Barr 2000), the four main characters are invited to a same-sex civil union ceremony for their friends Joe and Larry. Will is presented as the traditional heterosexual husband to Grace’s wife. He pays for the dinners, dry-cleaning, gas for the car, and the wedding gift. During the wedding ceremony, at which they are requested to read a poem as part of the vows of Joe and Larry, Will vocalises disdain with their relationship, “It’s always Will and Grace. Will and Grace buy the present. Will and Grace do the speech. We cordially invite Will and Grace. Why don’t they ever say Will and Guest?”.

Yet, upon reading the poem, they are “caught up in this reading designed to commemorate a marriage. Once they finish they turn to each other and confess their love to each other, each uttering the statement ‘I do’” (Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002: 94). In so doing, the mainstream heterosexual audience is deferred from the probable threat posed to the traditional institutions of family and marriage by same-sex unions, and focus is placed on the harmless ‘fag-hag’ relationship between Will and Grace (Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002: 94), a thought current US vice-president Joe Biden has recourse to in his support of same-sex marital unions (GLAAD 2012: 3), since it emulates its heterosexual counterparts, one could cynically assume. Thus, regardless of their divergent sexual orientations, these two main characters never consummated their loving relationship, but retained their intense connection throughout the series, even with the introduction of Will’s love interest Vince during season seven, and Grace’s husband Leo in seasons four to eight (Hughes 2008: 42). As such, much of the show’s success was based on its framing by the writers’ as romantic comedy with predictable circumstances to which viewers could relate, something which previous shows such as *Ellen* did not do (Hughes 2008: 42). By doing this, Will was, in fact, desexualised

and deprived of a same-sex relationship, and heterosexual gendered and sexual oriented socialisation was kept intact.

By contrast, his relationship with his best friend Jack is characterised by a lack of meaningful intimacy or sexual attraction, as in the relationships both share with their boyfriends (Cooper 2003: 517). Although this may be read as positive statement on the possibility of a non-sexual bond between gay men, it may, in fact, also underline sexual attraction between men as perverse, if permitted (Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002: 94). Where Will is afforded a relationship during the third season with sports newscaster Matt, their pairing is presented as more of a male-bonding experience than a sexual relationship (Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002: 94). Only later, during the show's seventh and eighth seasons, police officer Vince is introduced as love interest. However, even in this instance, the constant experiences of current and previous shame, overcompensation, effeminacy and preoccupation with appearance overshadow the intricate possibility of a stable homosexual union (Warfield 2002).

In contrast with Will and Grace, Jack's "unconditionally self-involved", flighty, and "very gay" nature, serves as a definite distinction with the more meaningful relationship shared between Will and Grace (Cooper 2003: 517). Jack, however, is complemented by his own heterosexual female counterpart, Karen. As assistant to Grace, she is described as a "rich, shallow socialite who devotes most of her time to drinking, shopping, and other self-indulgences" (Cooper 2003: 517). Typified as the 'gayest' of all the characters, ironically, Karen serves to critique several heterosexual institutions. Her constant fondling of Jack, several kisses shared with Grace as well as gay cultural and camp references lead Cooper (2003: 519) to characterise her approach to sexuality as "flagrant, [...] smirky, gleeful [...] and [brazenly] aplomb". This is evident in her marriage to the never-seen billionaire Stanley Walker, a union viewed as more of a contract and transaction than a blessed and loving marriage. In addition, she is unable to remember that she has two stepchildren, that their names are Mason and Olivia as well as what they look like, especially the younger son Mason, whom she refers to as "the fat one" or "little Buddha" (Greenstein 2000). What sets *Will & Grace* apart from other situation comedies is the self-centred and shallow "preoccupation with appearance, Karen's campy disposition and Jack's uninhibited ostentatious tricksteresque

displays”, which mocked perceived heterosexual morality, in general, and Will’s lack of ‘gayness’, in particular (Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002; Cooper 2003: 518-9). In so doing, they seek to transgress any boundaries purported by a heteronormative society.

This was evident in their attending a conversion group of gay men and lesbians wanting to ‘go straight’. Upon meeting the attendees, Karen notes, “Good lord, look at these people. Just because they stopped being gay doesn’t mean that they have to stop having taste,” commenting on their appearance. Her words signify Hancock et al.’s (2000: 21) assertion that postmodern perceptions of human appearance, based on consumer capitalism, have come to be reflected in the phrase, ‘to look good is to feel good is to be good’. The coupling of Jack and Karen, unlike that of Will and Grace, provides an unapologetic emphasis on Seidman’s (2002: 275) “gay sensibility” as well as camp, colourful, consumer and outrageous gay lifestyles (see Cooper 2003; Morrison 2011). Both couplings are depicted in three particular references in ‘Fagmalion’. The first takes place between Will and Grace in his bedroom when she provides him with her choice of four different outfits for her to wear to the HRC gala. Their discussion points to the reciprocation of support between them. Will has to select an outfit that will not “arouse the lesbians [but] turn on the gay guys”. “This one’s slitty. This one’s slutty. This one’s titty. This one’s booty. Here’s some accessories and lingerie. Mix and match. Enjoy” (Herschlag 2002).

The second reference to this relationship takes place during the gala at which Karen bids on a dinner during the silent auction for her “best gal pal, Jack Maseearland”. The third example underscores the possibly romantic attraction the heterosexual woman may share for gay men. When a clean-shaven and buff Barry enters the gala upon which Grace remarks, “He’s hot!”, Jack then reiterates, “The final test. Grace finds him attractive. He’s gay all right!” (Herschlag 2002). Throughout the eight seasons of the show, Grace and Karen reaffirm their attachment to their respective ‘gays’. In ‘An old-fashioned piano party’ (Marchinko et al. 2000), Grace notes, “I know how to keep my gay man,” and she reaffirms her commitment to gay men on Jack’s talk show in the season eight episode, “I second that emotion” (Janetti 2005), and tells an interested young man during a dinner that she could not remember him from when she was younger, because

“[b]ack then I was only into guys who slept with guys” (Bradford 2003). Regardless of their inherent difference, both couplings still perpetuate the importance and stability of heteronormativity, based on Will and Grace’s emphasis on the stability and emotive connectivity of heterosexual couples, on the one hand, and Jack and Karen as evident examples of having the superficial, commodified, comical, silly and, by implication, non-threatening gay lifestyle as separate sphere from the higher erotic levels in the bureaucracy of sexuality, on the other (see Cooper 2003; Rubin 1993).

In *Modern Family*, both positive and negative interpretations are provided in terms of the ‘fag-hag’ phenomenon. The most obvious pairing is that of Cameron and Gloria. In ‘Starry night’ (Zucker 2009b), Cameron regards the two of them as perfect together on paper, “One spicy, curvy diva,” to which Mitchell replies, “and Gloria.”¹⁷ Cameron describes her as “fabulous” and wants to establish a stronger bond characterised by enjoying lunch or shopping sprees together, a theme elaborated on later during season three (Levitan 2011). During this episode, Cameron flirts with an unsuspecting heterosexual woman who, unbeknownst to him, welcomes his advances, not because of her sexual attraction to him, but based on her need for a gay best friend. As she clearly elaborates, following his confession of being gay, “I mean I know you’re gay [...] It’s obvious [...] The way you talk, and walk. You’re theatrical hand gestures. [...] I want a gay friend. Someone I can dish with, give me guy advice. I can shop with [...] Go see Julia Roberts movies together” (Levitan 2011).

In a later episode entitled ‘Me? Jealous?’ (Karlin 2011), Mitchell and Cameron stay with Jay and Gloria during a week in which their house is fumigated. Both Cameron and Gloria welcome the additional time together, something which results in subtle warfare between the two (Karlin 2011). In a later reflection during the interviews of both,

17 It is worth noting that the show, in general, and this quote, in particular, also provide examples of stereotypical depictions of Latin American women. The character of Gloria, for example, is over the top, loud, “curvy” and passionate about her family and life (see Valdivia 1998: 406). Regardless, she forges a synergy with Western cultural standards while simultaneously creating an exaggerated ‘otherness’ as “counterpoint to the principal [...] operations”, akin to other Latin American female characters on television (refer to Valdivia 1998 for additional examples) (see Lopez 1991, quoted in Valdivia 1998: 406).

Cameron ascribes much of his hostility towards Gloria to the fact that she would make a wonderful mother for Lily, something that left him quite jealous. This is, in fact, a recurring theme, since an episode entitled 'Fears' in season one had Mitchell and Cameron mistake Lily's request for her doll Molly, as her calling their paediatrician 'Mommy' (Levitan 2009). Gloria, on the other hand, felt insecure with Cameron's perfection around the house. They engage in a humorous, yet original choreography of preparing dinner to the sound of Latin music, which reflects Cameron's earlier reference to him and Gloria as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. In so doing, the television audience is afforded a 'sigh of relief', since the status quo of the stereotypical straight woman/gay man relationship is kept intact, and the mere fact that Cameron expressed jealousy of the supposed traditional female propensity for care further exemplifies the contributions only a mother can make to the life of a child (see Cottle & Dixon 2007: 254; Pruett 2000: 116).

The final theme associated with 'being gay' underlines a choice between culture and sport.

2.3 The gay diva versus the gay jock: Broadway or sport?

In the first and third instalments of 'Fagmalion', Barry is introduced to the importance of diva worship. Attending a gay bar, Will encourages Barry to pursue another man, to which the latter replies, "He's out of my league. He's an all-star; I'm barely in the minors." Upset by Barry's baseball reference, Will responds, "Sports? Again? What did I tell you to do when these thoughts come into your head?". Barry, "Judy, Liza, Barbra, Bette [...] These are names I shan't forget" (Janetti 2002). Even Grace, dismayed at having to climb up a flight of steps to reach the HRC gala to only be met by another set, exclaims,

Grace: Did they put this here so the queens can make an entrance?

(Jack literally slides into the room at the top of the staircase)

Jack: Hello girls! Dolly's back in town.

(He then dramatically descends the stairs)

I'm gonna go work it.

'Dolly' refers to the protagonist in composer Jerry Herman's stage play (and later film) *Hello, Dolly!*, which starred Carol Channing and Barbra Streisand, respectively. Paxton (2011: 1) describes a diva as someone "strong, fearless, powerful [...or] arrogant, demanding, bitchy". Being a diva may also involve performative attempts at confidence, defence, contestation and struggle (Paxton 2011: 1). Through musical performances, much like gender performance, divas underline the inherent complexity associated with the narratives of gender and sexuality. They may dramatise and even disrupt taken-for-granted notions of social and sexual selves. Paxton (2011: 2) argues, based on his own experiences as an openly gay man, that the space of diva "creates a space that not only encourages us to ask questions about what *is*, but also what *could be* in a fight for queer equality". Based on the fact that gay men have very few male cultural heroes, they turn to female singers and actresses to fill this void, the most prominent being classical examples such as Judy Garland and Bette Davis, to later contemporaries such as Cher, Patti LuPone, Liza Minnelli, Bette Midler and Barbra Streisand (Altman 1982: 154), and current trendsetters such as Lady Gaga (Paxton 2011). Halperin (2012: 405) does, however, caution attempts to homogenise all of these women in order to attain "a few general truths, a universal cultural grammar". Although gay men may display a penchant for the melodramatic, "larger-than-life" personas or mirror the pain and struggles of these entertainers, one needs to decipher the precise reasons as to why gay men deem certain female entertainers as cultural role models (Halperin 2012: 405).

According to Altman (1982: 154), these women embody qualities of gay men who suffer deprivation based on their sexual orientation within a heterosexist culture. Classic Hollywood depictions provided gay men with

a vehicle for expressing alienation from our surroundings and linking up with the utopian homosexual community of our dreams, a sophisticated 'artistic' society inhabited by Norma Desmonds¹⁸, who, while breakfasting at Tiffany's, spoke a type of

18 Norma Desmond is American director Billy Wilder's ill-fated Hollywood siren in his 1960 Academy Award-winning film *Sunset Boulevard*, starring Gloria Swanson and William Holden. The character later resurfaced in Andrew Lloyd Webber's Broadway musical *Sunset Blvd.*, starring Glenn Close in the lead role.

English heard only in the back lots of MGM and Twentieth Century Fox (Harris 1996: 168).

Since gay men clearly identify with these women who, in many respects, have persevered through their own adversities as women in a patriarchal and heteronormative entertainment industry (Paxton 2011: 13), they, in turn, seek to ‘masculinise’ these women, whether in the latter’s personal or professional capacity (Harris 1996: 170). This serves as direct contradiction with earlier references to the perceived effeminacy of gay men, since gay diva worship rather implies “swaggering machismo [... in which] the celebrity’s strength as a therapeutic corrective of his own highly compromised masculinity [is used ...] to counteract their own sense of degradation” (Harris 1996: 170-1).

Diva worship even represents a kind of ‘self-worship’, since concerts by Judy Garland in the 1950s and 1960s, among others, brought together a plethora of gay men and women, who sought to commonly identify with others on a public level based on their shared identification with the artist’s own struggles and renditions of songs with which they themselves identified. Actress Debbie Reynolds, starring in the role of Grace’s mother, Bobby Adler, recalls Garland’s influence in an episode in which she attempts to create a romantic atmosphere for Will and his suitor, when she asks Grace, “To what do the guys make out to these days? Is it still Judy?”. Upon asking the question, she mirrors Garland’s poster pose for her 1940-film *A star is born*, a pose emulated by Jack himself for his ‘Jack 2000’ one-man show (Herschlag 1999; Poust & Kinnally 2000). In an episode in which Will has ‘erotic’ dreams about Grace, he asks Jack whether he also dreams of women occasionally, to which Jack replies, “Yes, Judy, Barbra, Liza, Bette” (Barr 1999). Halperin (2012: 405) quotes Dyer’s (1986) reference to Garland’s “combination of strength and suffering” as apt justification for her “gay appeal”.

Modern Family also includes such examples. Lady Gaga’s influence as ‘Mother Monster’ and her close-knit relationship with her fans, to whom she affectionately refers as her ‘little monsters’, provides one of the most indelible examples of LGBTQ activism by a mainstream prolific entertainer in contemporary society (Paxton 2011: 18). Mitchell alludes to her influence in two episodes. Cameron’s love

for divas comes to the fore in his passion for photography, using their adopted Vietnamese daughter Lily as his model (Wrubel 2009a). He recalls taking pictures of Lily dressed like pop icons such as Madonna. When Mitchell confronts Cameron about Lily's newest configuration, he asks,

Mitchell: Why is our daughter dressed as Donna Summer?

Cameron: She is not Donna Summer. She is clearly Diana Ross from the RCA years. How's daddy not seeing that?

(As part of their interview, Mitchell notes that Lily has been dressed as every diva but Cher)

How can I forget Cher? That's embarrassing.

Mitchell: *That's* embarrassing?

During a play date for Lily, one mother criticises actress Meryl Streep's performance in the musical *Mamma mia!* Cameron's irritation with the woman is made abundantly clear when he states in his interview, "Meryl Streep can play Batman and still be the right choice. She's perfect, whether she's divorcing Kramer, wearing Prada. Don't even get me started on *Sophie's choice*, I get emotional just thinking about it" (O'Shannon 2009). Other examples range from Mitchell's reference to his father walking in on him and seeing him "doing *the* most embarrassing thing a boy could do – dancing to Madonna's *Lucky star*" (Levitan & Richman 2010) as well as the names he gave to his pets, 'Flyza Minnelli' and "Zsa Zsa Gaboya" (Lawson 2009).

3. Concluding remarks: a 'minoritised messiness' as precondition for diversity

The preceding discussion clearly indicates that the taken-for-granted dominance ascribed to heterosexuality frames both objectives of this article. It leaves one to consider the necessity of retaining a homogeneous characterisation of gay male sexuality, on the one hand, in order to acknowledge the inherent differences and similarities within and between homosexuality and heterosexuality, on the other (see Weeks 1985).

In terms of the first, which centred on the permeable boundary between the supposed rigid heterosexual/homosexual binary, the

analysis of the two shows reflected the inherent “messiness” of gay male sexuality (see Plummer 1998). Although the latter may comprise principles associated with a “gay sensibility” (Seidman 2002), it also re-contextualises features, thought to be exclusively heterosexual, into the realm of homosexuality. One need only consider the androgynous (see Johnson & O’Connor 2002) performances of Cameron and Mitchell, in this regard, as subtle commentary on the fallibility of the binary logic. Through their subtle satirical and culturally comedic commentary, both shows exaggerate features associated with the noted sensibility, in order to exemplify the ignorant stereotyping that sexual minorities may suffer at the hands of heterosexuals. In so doing, it reaffirms Fuss’ (1991) inside/out logic as influential, since it assumes a constant interplay between a heterosexual and gay sensibility as part of the inherent gendered and sexually oriented performances of both.

The second objective, however, noted how the shows may facilitate the creation, maintenance and reinforcement of a homogeneous assimilationist model of tokenisation, the heterosexual/homosexual binary and the clichéd reference to the ‘otherness’ stereotype (see Herdt 1997: 179), in which one’s sexual orientation becomes the master status that ordains the existence of sexual minorities. This means that the inclusion of gay characters in mainstream and niche programming may be done in an effort to tokenise a much-needed minority group in order to avoid the alienation of groups of individuals who have come to be viewed as groups with higher levels of disposable income, on the one hand, and those who display high levels of claims to entitlement of their basic human rights through equal representation on television, on the other (Malan 2011). A recent comprehensive analysis, courtesy of GLAAD (2012) in the US, of LGBT representation on mainstream and cable television repeatedly noted the importance of ‘inclusion’, ‘inclusionary’ or ‘inclusiveness’, which further perpetuates the centrality of heteronormativity in contemporary society. This is extremely cumbersome, since neither seeks to question or challenge the perceived ‘blessed’ nature of the heterosexuality in the virtual domain of television. It rather reinforces Derrida’s (1998) reference to supplementarity, since individuals are constantly reminded to distinguish themselves from whom- or whatever they are not.

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