

# Reinventing Privilege: The New (Gay) Man in Contemporary Popular Media

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□ – *In recent years, the gay man/heterosexual woman couple configuration has become a genre unto itself in mediated popular culture, resulting in unprecedented mainstream visibility for gay men. Major mainstream films, such as My Best Friend's Wedding, Object of My Affection, and The Next Best Thing, showcase this combination as their centerpiece, as does the highly rated prime-time network situation comedy, Will & Grace. In this essay, I assess this particular performance of gay identity in order to discern what qualities render it – as presented in this configuration – not only acceptable but popular, given the heteronormative sensibilities that characterize the mainstream audience to which it is directed. I argue that, in these texts, homosexuality is not only recoded and normalized in these representations as consistent with privileged male heterosexuality but is articulated as extending heterosexual male privilege. In so doing, blatant sexism is reinvented and legitimized, and gay male identity simultaneously is defined by and renormalizes heteronormativity.*

**A**ccess to the media historically has been restricted, arguably severely, by controlling interests – in the case of the United States, especially, this has meant corporate owners of the media invested in maintaining a political, social, cultural, and economic status quo in which they have thrived (e.g., Fiske, 1987, 1989; Gitlin, 1986; Hall, 1980; Poster, 1990). Although these controlling interests are no less a factor today, the explosion of mediated technologies as well as the postmodern context in which they are occurring

and to which they are simultaneously contributing has resulted in a cacophony of media content, suggesting that the presence of alternative ideas does not represent the implied political threat that it once did. Indeed, it is no longer unusual to apprehend the representations of marginalised groups in the conventional media of the status quo. However, the rendering of those messages invites serious consideration given their context; many scholars have noted that apparently emancipatory messages and representations may, in fact, function to reify dominant discourses (see, e.g., Cloud, 1992; Condit, 1989; Dow, 2001; Harms & Dickens, 1996; Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001).

An interesting contemporary intersection of disenfranchised groups and the mainstream popular media is rele-

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vant to the issue of homosexuality. As Walters (2001) states, “there is no doubt that gays and lesbians have entered the public consciousness as never before” (p. 3). But visibility, as she and others (e.g., Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001) caution, is no guarantor of legitimacy; Gross (2001), echoing the concerns noted above, argues that

when previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda. And they are mostly white, mostly middle-aged, mostly male, mostly middle and upper-middle class, and overwhelmingly heterosexual. (p. 4)

An additional layer that complicates the increased visibility of gay men and lesbians in mainstream popular media is the constitution of the audience, which is by definition mainstream and presumed heterosexual, not least by virtue of the fact that its “acceptance” of said representations is consistently featured as at stake (e.g., Capsuto, 2000; Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001; Russo, 1981; Walters, 2001). Although interpretation is always contingent upon the location of the audience, because the quest for legitimacy is grounded in the assumption of a mainstream audience at least imbued with heteronormative sensibilities, my interest is in how contemporary mediated representations of gay characters address that audience.

In this essay, I am interested in representations of homosexuality that have proven successful with and palatable to contemporary, mainstream audiences of popular mediated fare. In particular, I examine the popular configuration of the gay man and the straight woman in order to discern

what qualities render this performance of homosexuality not only acceptable but popular, given the heteronormative sensibilities that characterize the mainstream context in which they occur.<sup>1</sup> I argue that, in these texts, homosexuality is not only recoded and normalized as consistent with privileged male heterosexuality, but it is articulated as extending heterosexual male privilege. In so doing, blatant sexism is reinvented and legitimized, and gay male identity simultaneously is defined by and renormalizes heteronormativity.

Historically, representations of gay men and lesbians in the mainstream US media have been sparse and selective (see, e.g., Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Gross, 1994, 2001; Gross & Woods, 1999; Russo, 1981). Although “homoerotic images and behavior were used as comic devices” (Fejes & Petrich, 1993, p. 397) such as cross dressing and role reversals, “as expressed onscreen, America was a dream that had no room for the existence of homosexuals . . . . And when the fact of our existence became unavoidable, we were reflected, onscreen and off, as dirty secrets” (Russo, p. xii). When presented in mainstream film or television until quite recently, gay characters were almost exclusively portrayed negatively, as either villains or victims (Gross, 1994). In both capacities, they were rendered as problems to be solved and almost always reflected gendered stereotypes that characterize gay men as effeminate and lesbians as masculine.

Attendant to the emergent gay rights movement in the 1970s, although standard negative tropes did not disappear, mainstream film and television began to feature more positive portrayals of gay characters (Capsuto, 2000; Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001;

Walters, 2001). By the 1990s, the representation of gay men and lesbians in the popular mainstream media became *de rigueur* for film and even obligatory for television fare. Major box-office hits like *Philadelphia*, *The Birdcage*, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything!* *Julie Newmar*, and *In & Out* featured sympathetic gay protagonists, and the gay secondary-but-permanent character became a staple of the majority of mainstream television dramas and situation comedies, including, for example, *NYPD Blue*, *Chicago Hope*, *ER*, *Mad About You*, *Roseanne*, *Spin City*, and *Friends*. This television trend ultimately culminated in prime-time shows that featured lead gay protagonists in dramas like *Melrose Place* and *Dawson's Creek* and, more prominently, in the situation comedies *Ellen* and *Will & Grace*.

As many critics have argued, however, the “chic” visibility of gay men and lesbians in the mainstream media is not unproblematic (Capsuto, 2000; Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001; Keller, 2002; Walters, 2001); Walters notes that “we may be *seen*, now, but I’m not sure we are *known*” (2001, p. 10, italics hers). Nearly all of these portrayals skirt the realities and implications of homosexuality by desexualizing the characters – i.e., by almost never depicting them in romantic or sexual situations (e.g., Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001). Some of these representations, as in *Personal Best*, depict homosexuality “as a temporary interruption in the flow of heterosexual life” (Gross, 2001, p. 74). More common themes are that, first, gay characters are presented devoid of gay social and political contexts (e.g., Brookey, 1996; Dow, 2001; Walters, 2001), thus capable of being wholly grafted onto established heterosexual communities and contexts; and second, that their presence is used as a

catalyst for heterosexual characters’ growth and understanding (e.g., Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2001; Dow, 2001; Walters, 2001).

Brookey (1996) has argued that the acceptability of many of these representations is contingent upon the degree to which they support an established “economic and ethnic hierarchy” (p. 41). He avers that *Philadelphia*’s protagonist, Andrew Beckett, is ultimately rendered sympathetic not because he is a victim of homophobia but because he is a “white male and a successful lawyer” who, furthermore, is motivated by family concerns – homosexuality in the film thus is assimilated as “formed around a [heterosexual] family unit” (p. 47). Indeed, this pattern is apparent in nearly all of mainstream media fare that features gay characters, such that “gay identity is made legitimate only through assimilation into the dominant heterosexual gestalt” (Walters, 2001, p. 18) – a gestalt that, Brookey would assert, is fundamentally configured upon economic and raced agendas (1996, p. 55). Similarly, in her analysis of the *Ellen* coming-out episodes as an example of contemporary gay visibility in the mainstream, Dow (2001) argues that “heterosexism governs *Ellen*’s representation as well as the production of the truth of her sexuality: what it will and will not mean, how it does and does not matter” (p. 131). Dow contends that this is accomplished primarily by a resolute refusal in those episodes to acknowledge, much less address, the political contexts and constraints of homosexuality; rather, “gay identity [is constructed] as primarily, if not exclusively, a personal and relational concern” (p. 134). The depoliticization of *Ellen*, attendant to her “girl next door” persona (Walters, 2001, p. 86) – a persona that arguably is

coded by the same sort of privilege that Brookey describes – established her viability in a heterosexual and heteronormative community.

Related to this dynamic is the second theme: that gay characters, when presented, are seen through the eyes of and function as catalysts for the development of heterosexual characters. For instance, Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2001) address the problematic ways in which the gay, cross-dressing characters of *To Wong Foo* collectively raise the consciousness of the populace of a small, Midwestern town, a feat that culminates in the deification of those vessels of understanding and, the authors argue, ultimately reinforces their marginalization. Walters (2001) speaks to the same issue as relevant to the gay character of Carter on the situation comedy *Spin City*, noting

the centrality of *heterosexuality* to homosexuality. Gayness is seen through the eyes of confused heterosexuals, struggling with their own reactions and feelings. While I applaud the attempts to reckon with heterosexual fears and homophobia, I am afraid that this focus can further marginalize gay people, set them aside as *vehicles* for straight enlightenment, much in the way that people of color serve as *avenues* for white understandings of race. (pp. 104–105, italics hers)

Although representing gay characters as instrumental to straight enlightenment does invest them with some degree of political significance, that significance, ironically, has nothing to do with them; it functions instead to enrich and strengthen specifically heteronormative social and political sensibilities. Thus, the high degree of gay visibility that characterizes contemporary popular media is further qualified; as Fejes and Petrich (1993) have argued, “while the blatant negative stereotypes of the past no longer con-

sistently occupy daily media content, the more subtle images of heterosexually-defined homosexuality are equally damaging to affirmative gay and lesbian identity and politics” (p. 412).

### **Generic Representations: The Odd Coupling**

Sympathetic gay characters thus are no longer a rarity in the contemporary mediascape of popular culture, even if their representations are problematic. Of particular interest to me are the patterns that these contemporary representations assume in an effort to make themselves palatable to a mainstream audience that is presumed heterosexual and is largely endowed with heterosexist sensibilities.<sup>2</sup> These patterns may well place very specific conditions on the definition and evolution of mainstream perceptions of gay identity and politics, even beyond those identified by Fejes and Petrich (1993), for example. One such pattern that has enjoyed considerable success in recent years is the gay man/straight woman configuration featured as the primary or lead “couple.” Jacobs (1998) writes that “the gay-man/hetero-gal duo has become the pop-culture relationship du jour, the screwball comedy match for the millennium, a safe, lucrative way to package gay characters for the heartland” (p. 20). Although she also recognizes the ways in which this configuration renders the representation of gay (male) characters more palatable to mainstream audiences, Walters (2001) suggests that the formula may also “allow for an actual engagement with gay and lesbian sexuality and identity and, importantly, a reckoning with the interactions between hetero and homo worlds and desires” (p. 166). My goal in this

essay is to examine just the ways in which these interactions are negotiated. To this end, I analyze three films and one television program that reflect the popularly received gay man/straight woman formula – namely, the televised situation comedy, *Will & Grace* (1998–present), and the films *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Object of My Affection* (1998), and *The Next Best Thing* (2000).

The gay man/straight woman configuration is epitomized by the immensely popular television situation comedy, *Will & Grace*. Touted as the heir to the trail that *Ellen* blazed (e.g., Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001),<sup>3</sup> *Will & Grace* debuted in 1998 as part of NBC's fall lineup for the new season. It was aired in and continues to occupy the prime-time, 9:00 p.m. (ET) slot on Thursday night, which has been NBC's strongest night for several years (Adalain & Schneider, 2000); this suggests that the network anticipated a positive reception by its targeted mainstream audience. The network was correct in its assumption; the show has enjoyed considerable success with that audience, consistently drawing the highest ratings in its time slot since its inception and often securing the highest ratings as compared to all other television shows (Adalain & Schneider, 2000). Set in New York City, the plot of *Will & Grace* revolves about two best friends: Will Truman (played by Eric McCormack), a gay male attorney, and Grace Adler (Debra Messing), a straight female interior designer. Also featured regularly as part of the show's ensemble cast are its secondary lead characters, who have their own very close friendship: Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes), a gay male friend of Will's, and Karen Walker (Megan Mullally), Grace's heterosexual female secretary.<sup>4</sup> Plots of the

show, of course, vary from week to week but typically are consistent with standard sit-com fare – quirky behaviors, silly misunderstandings, embarrassing peccadilloes, and so forth. Indeed, Battles & Hilton-Morrow (2002) argue that it is just these “familiar situation comedy genre conventions of romantic comedy” that make homosexuality “safe” for mainstream audiences (p. 101).

Also a romantic comedy, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, released in 1997 by TriStar Columbia, was very well received by the public, grossing \$286.9 million at the box office (www.worldwideboxoffice.com). In the film, Julianne “Jules” Potter (played by Julia Roberts) is a heterosexual woman whose (second) best friend and confidante is her editor, George Downes (Rupert Everett), a gay man. Jules learns that her ex-boyfriend and best friend, Michael O'Neal (Dermot Mulroney) is getting married, and she reacts badly, recalling a vow that they had made some years before to the effect that they would marry each other if they were both still single at a certain point in time. She convinces herself that she is and always has been in love with Michael and sets out to break up the wedding; George is at her side through most of her escapades during the film, posing as her fiancé through much of it.

In 1998, 20th Century Fox released *Object of My Affection*, starring Jennifer Aniston, one of the cast members of the very popular network (NBC) situation comedy, *Friends*; her attendant popularity and celebrity have assured her a loyal and extensive fan base, thus making her an attractive casting option to major film studios. This film fared relatively well in theaters, earning \$45.8 million in box office returns (www.worldwideboxoffice.com). The

film centers on the relationship between Nina Borowski (Aniston), a heterosexual woman, and George Hanson (Paul Rudd), a gay man. When George's relationship with his partner ends, he becomes Nina's flatmate and they become best friends. Nina, who is in a relationship with which she is not entirely happy, ends that relationship when she becomes pregnant and decides to keep the child. She asks George to help her raise the child; at first reluctant, he ultimately agrees. Nina falls in love with George, however, and becomes increasingly possessive of him and intolerant of his homosexuality.

*The Next Best Thing* was released in 2000 by Paramount. Although it was not a huge success, grossing \$15 million at the box office ([www.worldwideboxoffice.com](http://www.worldwideboxoffice.com)), it did enjoy some popularity with the public; certainly, Paramount's investment in the film suggests that the studio anticipated its success. In the film, Abbie Reynolds (played by Madonna) is a heterosexual woman whose best friend is Robert Whittaker (Rupert Everett), a gay man. One night, intoxicated, Abbie and Robert have sex; Abbie soon discovers that she is pregnant and decides to keep the child. Both agree that the one-night stand was a mistake (as well as a marked aberration in Robert's case), but they decide to raise the child together, living in the same household. This works until Abbie falls in love with a man whom she wants to marry and with whom she may decide to relocate. Robert is very angry about the threat this poses to his relationship with their son, and this puts a tremendous strain on Robert and Abbie's relationship.

Each of these texts features the same core configuration of a gay man and a heterosexual woman who are best

friends, even if particular relational dynamics vary according to plot. Also, each film or television program is mainstream – solidly situated in popular culture and directed to mainstream audiences – and is billed as a comedy or as a romantic comedy. Apprehending this configuration and its mainstream context as a rhetorical genre, I want to assess the rhetorical dynamics that characterize it and identify whether and, if so, how it is successful in affording greater social acceptance of sexual alterity as defined by social convention.

### **“Heterosexualizing” the Gay Man: The First Subtext**

Analysis of this generic pairing of gay men and heterosexual women in contemporary popular media reveals two distinct subtextual layers that work together to naturalise heteronormativity. The first and most accessible of these endows the gay male characters with decidedly conventional heterosexual signifiers, as established by the broader discourse of mainstream popular culture: the relationship between these men and their heterosexual female best friends is coded as romantic, and the lead gay male characters are contrasted with highly flamboyant, outrageously stereotypical gay male characters who function as foils against which the leading men emerge as more traditionally masculine and, thus, more consistent with mainstream tropes of heterosexuality.

#### *Romance Afoot*

Walters (2001) describes the gay man/straight woman genre as “wannabe partners whose sexual ori-

entations are at odds” insofar as it represents a new take on the story of star-crossed lovers that “raises the stakes for the would-be lovers” (p. 166). Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) note that the configuration offers the “‘ultimate twist’ on the delayed consummation trope” (p. 92) that Scodari (1995) identifies as core to the classic, mainstream (i.e., heterosexual) romantic comedy genre. Indeed, in each of the texts, the gay male leads conform precisely to mainstream, heterosexual romantic comedy conventions in which straight male leads are “handsome, muscular, and physically fit” as well as, without exception, white and upper-middle class (e.g., Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002, p. 90; Brookey, 1996). While gay men certainly can be characterized by these traits, noteworthy is the fact that this is the only performance of homosexuality available in these configurations. As such, the range and complexity of gay (and lesbian) identity is obfuscated, and “acceptable” gay identity is limited to that which most closely approximates heteronormative conventions of masculinity.

In *Will & Grace*, of course, a romantic dynamic is prominent in the relationship between lead characters Will and Grace. As several shows have established, Will and Grace met each other in college, prior to Will’s coming out – to himself and others. Will and Grace dated, and the hour-long episode that recounts this phase in their relationship establishes the seriousness of this romance: Will’s growing discomfort notwithstanding, he proposes marriage to Grace, who is very much in love with him. When he does come out, Grace, her heart broken, breaks off all contact with him for over a year. This early romantic relationship, significantly, is posited as the premise

of their relationship in the series, not least as evidenced by frequent references to their romantic liaison in various episodes; as such, Will’s sexual identity as constructed on the show includes a definite heterosexual component.

Although Will and Grace resume a relationship as best friends following their breakup and the ensuing hiatus, the romantic subtext of their relationship persists. For instance, the pilot episode features Grace standing up her fiancé at the altar, primarily due to Will’s objections, and celebrating her decision, in her wedding dress, with Will at a local bar where the patrons assume that they are the “happy couple.” Neither Will nor Grace dispels this notion; in fact, upon the urging of the crowd, they kiss deeply. Although Will confirms that he felt “nothing,” notably, this is in response to Grace’s hopeful, “Anything?” Irrespective of Will’s response, the discursive codes of a traditional, heterosexual romantic relationship are blatant in this scene: she has left her fiancé for Will, she is depicted as a happy, blushing bride in his presence, and they both are aware of and explore themselves the romantic potential of their relationship. Furthermore, throughout the series, Will is referred to by other characters as Grace’s husband: for most of the series, they cohabit, they are very close, and they spend a great deal of time together, far more than with the romantic partners that drift into and out of their lives.<sup>5</sup> Recently, Will and Grace have explored having a child together, which further serves to frame them as a conventionally heterosexual couple in tandem with the romantic pretext that frames their relationship. The entire premise of the show is that their emotional intimacy is far greater than any of their other relationships,

and this relationship is the most important in their lives.

In *My Best Friend's Wedding*, too, the relationship between Jules and George is endowed with romantic features. In the opening scene, in fact, she acknowledges his suitability as a romantic partner, describing the man she believes herself to be in love with to George as "like you, only straight." Jules and George are very close to each other; he is her confidante, and she reveals herself to him emotionally as she does to no one else. Similarly, in the course of the film, George braves his fear of flying twice to come to her aid, symbolic of his love for Jules. Throughout much of the film, George poses as Jules's fiancé in part to make her former lover and best friend (engaged to another woman) jealous. In this capacity, the romantic subtext of their relationship is optimized. At the rehearsal dinner, George "ad libs" his meeting Jules, waxing eloquent as to her astounding beauty and his passionate love for her, and in a clever double entendre, he notes that their love is like a "Doris Day/Rock Hudson extravaganza." George's courting of Jules under this pretext takes on epic romantic proportions. As her fiancé, he serenades her in front of a full restaurant, whose patrons all chime in for this tribute to the fair Jules, charmed by this "perfect" young couple and the obviously smitten young man. Notably, in the final scene, which takes place at the wedding reception of Jules's best friend, as she is sitting alone reflecting sadly on her lonely, single status, George calls her, commenting on her "radiant beauty" in very precise terms. She realizes that he must be able to see her, and he narrates – in very culturally traditional, romantic terms – the scene unfolding: "she moves through the

room, searching, searching, where can he be ... the crowds part [she sees him], and suddenly, there he is, like a jungle cat, sleek, stylish ... and then the music begins to play ... ." At this point, clearly arranged by George, the band begins to play the same love song with which he serenaded her, and he takes her in his arms. The scene fades out on their dancing happily to this love song at the wedding reception. This scene, as well as others throughout the film, is rife with highly traditional heterosexual codes. As with Will, George's heterosexual qualifications are intact by virtue of his posited potential romantic relationship with Jules, even if his homosexuality is not entirely dispelled.

*Object of My Affection* heterosexualizes George, the gay male character, in much the same way. Nina and George's relationship also is characterized by great emotional intimacy, and this intimacy takes on a romantic quality. This is established, for instance, by virtue of their taking dancing lessons together, where the teacher and other students assume that they are "a couple," and being depicted dancing to old, culturally popular love songs (featuring heterosexual romantic love), in the style of old romantic films, both in the context of the class as well as alone in their apartment. Indeed, one such scene fades into a scene from an old, romantic Gene Kelly film featuring Kelly's character and his (female) "love interest" dancing to the same music. Once Nina becomes pregnant with her soon-to-be ex-boyfriend's child, she asks George to help her raise the child because "you're home to me." This heightens the romantic subtext as it configures Nina and George, already cohabitating, as parents-to-be, and their relationship takes on the very traditional heterosexual hallmarks as-



sociated with that scenario: they pick out baby clothes together, they hold hands everywhere they go, often set to romantic, heterosexual love songs. In fact, Nina falls in love with George, and her behavior toward him consequently casts their relationship as romantic. George, too, exhibits behaviors that appear to reciprocate Nina's romantic love for him: he frequently caresses Nina's face and neck, he tells her that he doesn't miss men when he's with her, and he comments on her beauty in a sexual context as he discusses his first lover, a woman. This latter revelation has great significance for Nina, and thus the film, in terms of his potential ability to "switch teams." Although sexual encounters alone are hardly a sure indicator of sexual identity, George's early heterosexual experience, in the context of other actions and behaviors in the film, becomes coded as evidence for his potential, perhaps latent heterosexuality.

Although George ultimately states that he does not want a romantic relationship with Nina, the final scene of the film, set four years later, retains a traditional heterosexual romantic sensibility. Nina has established her friendship with the father of her child, but they are not romantically involved, and although she is dating a man, the nature of the relationship is portrayed as impermanent. Similarly, George's relationship with his partner is portrayed as highly unconventional – the partner already has a partner who is aware of and accepts George – and thus likely to be perceived as less than stable. George and Nina remain very close, and George is clearly a fixture in Molly's (Nina's daughter) life. As various people depart from the scene, which follows Molly's school play, Nina, George and Molly are the only three who remain, and they walk

down the street together, holding hands, creating a traditional, heterosexual family tableau. Although none of these features obviate George's homosexuality, the particular ways in which they are coded, especially in relation to each other, cultivate an interpretation of heterosexual romantic potential for Nina and George's relationship.

In *The Next Best Thing*, Robert and Abbie's relationship has a romantic edge to it, as well. Again, Robert and Abbie are exceptionally intimate emotionally; they are best friends, and she confides everything to him. Of course, the fact that they have sex blatantly evokes the specter of a romantic relationship, given that sex and romance, especially in the context of emotional intimacy, are discursively linked in mainstream popular culture. However, other romantic signs are evident in the relationship, as well. For example, Robert caresses Abbie's face, stating that she's the most beautiful woman he knows: "I can't imagine a man letting a woman like you slip through his fingers," he says gently to her. In one scene – notably, the prelude to their sexual encounter – they dance intimately together to old 1930s love songs, she in a dramatic evening gown, he in a tuxedo, strikingly evocative of old Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films, icons of heterosexual romance. Once Abbie and Robert decide to raise the child together, of course, the hallmarks of heterosexual domesticity abound: they are "Mummy and Daddy" to their son, Sam, and the three are depicted in countless family photos – again, constituting a specifically heterosexual family tableau. Abbie and Robert's relationship takes on qualities of an "old married couple" as they are featured stumbling around their son in the kitchen in the

morning, discussing school with him, and talking to each other in the bathroom as they shower and prepare for their days. Abbie, like Nina in *Object of My Affection*, feels increasingly threatened by Robert's homosexual lifestyle even if she does not consider herself in love with him.

When Abbie meets and falls in love with Ben, the codes that describe the fallout to her and Robert's relationship are equally reminiscent of a traditional, romantic heterosexual relationship, albeit one that is on the rocks. Robert deliberately tries to make Ben feel uncomfortable on first meeting him, and he makes borderline snide comments to Abbie about Ben – behaviors easily construed as jealousy in the conventionally heterosexual context of Abbie and Robert's domestic arrangement. When faced with the prospect of Abbie and Ben moving away, Robert becomes furious, and Abbie and Robert embark on an intense and bitter custody battle over Sam. Again, this scenario is articulated as the typical fallout of a marriage gone sour. Even though the custody battle creates a huge rift between Abbie and Robert, the final scene, again, seems to resurrect the heterosexual framing of their relationship. Abbie, initially furious at Robert's attempts to see Sam, ultimately relents. Silhouetted against the sunset on a wide boulevard, she approaches Robert: "I miss you; I miss *us*," he says to her. They embrace, and Abbie lets Sam out of the car: "Go have dinner with your father," she says to him.

In each of these cases, the gay male/straight female relationship is presented with clear romantic overtones, not least by virtue of male characters' static conformity to the conventions of white, middle-to-upper-middle class, heterosexual masculinity

in mainstream popular culture (e.g., Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Brookey, 1996). All of these texts either establish a past or present romantic relationship or (in every case) implicitly posit the potential for one. Coupled with the fact that these men are very infrequently depicted in homosexual or even homosocial relationships – and if they are, those relationships are usually revealed as lacking in comparison to the easy simpatico characterizing their primary relationships with the heterosexual women – these depictions render the male characters' gay identities ambiguous and potentially pliable. The portrayals suggest that gay men are fully capable of "doing" heterosexuality, and while this is not necessarily a misrepresentation of gay men, the fact that this malleability is the *premise* of their sexual identities in these texts is highly problematic. The fact that only the gay characters' sexuality is presented as variable contributes to this problem; straight characters are never represented as engaging in or legitimately exploring the possibility of homosexual practices. Accordingly, these texts satisfy heteronormative desires that posit heterosexuality as unambiguous and constant, and homosexuality thus becomes the discursive practice by which heterosexuality is renormalized.

### *The Foil Factor*

The second means by which the gay male lead characters in this generic configuration are heterosexualized is via their juxtaposition with outrageously flamboyant, stereotypical gay male characters. These secondary characters serve as foils against which the lead characters emerge as more

conventionally masculine and thus more consistent with gendered heteronormative sensibilities that equate masculinity with male heterosexuality (e.g., Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Gross, 2001; Keller, 2002; Walters, 2001). Thus, the flamboyant foil ultimately renormalizes heterosexual conventions. In *Will & Grace*, the character of openly gay Jack is clearly Will's foil in this respect; although Will does, on occasion, exhibit stereotypically feminine behaviors (see Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002), Will nonetheless "provides the norm of masculinity against which Jack's gayness is defined" (p. 91). Jack speaks in a relatively high voice, which he often uses to "gush" or to shriek, and his mannerisms and expressions are often conventionally feminine, entirely consistent with the established cultural discourse that assumes that feminine behavior in a man is indicative of homosexuality. For instance, he is often shown applying face creams and makeup to himself, filing his nails, and being obsessed with his looks, clothes, hair, and weight. His mannerisms include tossing his hair in a decidedly feminine fashion as if it were very long (it is not), crossing his legs and sitting very primly with his hands clasped on his knees, and fluttering his eyelashes at a man he considers attractive. He and others frequently allude to his effeminate nature: he comments on his efforts to maintain his "girlish figure," Will refers to him as "Puff Mommy," and others will refer to him as a "lady" when addressing him and a group of other men.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Will is conventionally masculine; although vanity does characterize him to a certain extent, it is a vanity highly consistent with contemporary, middle-to-upper class heteromascularity – as epitomized, for instance, in *GQ* magazine

and in Ralph Lauren advertisements. In any case, his vanity is at a far remove from the preening, feminine sort that characterizes Jack. Certainly, Will's mannerisms and expressions are largely consistent with traditionally masculine behaviors – he is stoic, he drinks milk from the carton, puts his feet up on furniture, and so forth. He is also a successful and wealthy man, consistent with the privileged identity that Brookey (1996) argues is a condition of mainstream audiences' acceptance of gay characters. This is in sharp contrast to Jack, who is notoriously unsuccessful (eternally unemployed) and lives off his friends. Notably, Will is often the one who snidely comments on Jack's femininity; although the two are friends, the comments are not delivered kindly. Indeed, much is made of the fact that Jack and Will find each other repulsive insofar as potential romantic prospects, and an entire episode was devoted to their mutual disgust at the (misunderstood) prediction of a psychic that they would be together. These dynamics all function to distance Will from Jack in the program. They could not be more different, and because Jack's stereotypical gay identity essentially comprises his entire character, the differences between the two may well be construed as relevant to sexuality such that Will reads as at least not as gay as Jack, and perhaps not even "really" gay. As Gross (2001) notes, "[Jack] provides the missing evidence that Will is indeed gay: focus groups on whom the program was tested often failed to identify Will as gay, but never misread Jack" (p. 179).

In the films, these foils also are present in various ways. If they are not always featured as prominently, I submit that they nonetheless play a significant role in distinguishing the

gay male leads from what is culturally presumed to be “typical” gay men. In *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, this pattern is established in two ways. First, as Jules and Michael and Kimmie (Michael’s fiancé) enter a karaoke bar, a man is onstage singing “I Am Woman.” His gestures and mannerisms are conventionally feminine; he sways back and forth, clutching the microphone with both hands, tossing his head about and swinging his hips. Although this scene is seemingly incidental, it nonetheless serves as a referent in the larger discursive context of sexuality that frames this narrative, and the extreme differences between this man’s apparent femininity and George’s relative masculinity – established largely by his bourgeois status, success, and wealth – are thrown into sharp relief. Second, George himself exhibits very over-the-top, feminine mannerisms when he and Kimmie meet for the first time. So pleased is she to meet him, Jules’ alleged fiancé, that she is extremely effusive, throwing her arms around him and kissing him, shrieking and jumping up and down, and George mimics these extremely stereotypical feminine behaviors. Although this may seem to contradict the argument that this functions as a foil, the conspicuousness of this performance – given that George’s “real” persona is articulated otherwise as exclusively suave, dapper, handsome and sophisticated – establishes it as just that: a performance (see, e.g., Shugart, 2001). The fact that this interchange ends with George’s delivering a sharp slap to Kimmie’s rear end effectively frames the performance, distinguishing between her “authentic” femininity and affirming his masculinity and attendant distance from the stereotype of effeminacy.

Conspicuous performance as a foil also is featured in *The Next Best Thing*.

Early in the film, Robert decides to take matters into his hands to retrieve Abbie’s key from her recently departed ex-boyfriend. To this end, he dresses very effeminately – in pink and lavender, wearing a beret, a silk scarf around his neck, very large sunglasses, a tight short-sleeved shirt unbuttoned to his navel, skin-tight three-quarter striped pants, and high heels – and he behaves accordingly, swishing into the man’s studio in front of his colleagues, tossing his head, and cocking his hip provocatively. In essence, he poses as the man’s lover in order to embarrass him in front of his colleagues. What is telling about this scene is that when he leaves the studio to rejoin Abbie, who is waiting for him in the car, he is desperate to remove his clothing, tearing it off of him as he leaves the building and tossing it into the street, grunting in disgust as he does so. Robert is distinguished from “other” gay men and their trappings in a variety of other ways, as well. In the first place, he works for two older gay men, partners, whom he and others refer to as “the most evil queens in Christendom.” These two are stereotypically flamboyant in their mannerisms; they shriek, they make “catty” remarks to each other, and they share a passion for showtunes and musicals. When they attempt to engage Robert on this latter issue, he responds, “Don’t ask me, I’m afraid I flunked gay history,” again clearly differentiating himself from them and, thus, “the” gay lifestyle. Robert’s rejection of these stereotypically gay trappings is thus registered and recorded in the context of the film. Robert also is shown in the presence of his gay male friends from time to time in the film, but rather than provide dimension and texture to his character and to representations of queerness, these scenes similarly func-

tion to juxtapose Robert against those other men. This is primarily accomplished by virtue of the fact that several of the men are HIV positive or have AIDS; although this arguably contextualizes Robert in a gay lifestyle, I would submit that it also renders him as relatively “whole” and “normal” just as it simultaneously conflates the virus with homosexuality. As such, his “normalcy” may well contribute to an interpretation of his character as a feature that distinguishes him from other gay men and, thus, complements if not accommodates other heterosexualizing features of his representation. Noteworthy as well, the one serious relationship that Robert has ends because his partner is unable to accept Robert’s familial obligations to Abbie and Sam – Robert is thus construed as rightly prioritizing the traditional heterosexual family, as opposed to other gay men who counsel him otherwise. The gay men (including his performed character) in this film against whom Robert is showcased thus effectively function as foils for his relative masculinity.

In *Object of My Affection*, George also is contrasted with a stereotype of gay male sexuality, although the stereotype is not strictly feminine in this case. At one point, hoping to “get him back into the game,” George’s brother, a physician, sets him up on a blind date with a colleague of his. George meets him in a bar, and when he arrives, he is taken aback by the man’s appearance; he is large and very burly, wearing jeans, a large leather belt, and a singlet under a leather jacket replete with belts and chains. Although his physical appearance thus is not feminine, it nonetheless is evocative of another classic stereotype of gay masculinity – the ultra-masculine leather “butch.” Caressing George’s

face, he gushes, “Look at you, you’re adorable! I mean, your brother’s cute, but you’re irresistible! You look like a peach!” Clearly to George’s chagrin, he comes on very strongly and George does what he can to fend him off, as he does the next two times he encounters him by chance. In this case, the man’s extreme, butch masculinity is contrasted with George’s relative “normalcy,” and it is posited as strange and disturbing, especially in conjunction with his quasi-feminine overtures to George. His gender and thus sexuality are suspect. George, in contrast, is presented as consistently masculine by virtue of his traditional role as protector and partner in Nina’s life.

The foils that appear in each of these cases further the heterosexualization of the gay leading men, which is already largely established via noted conventional codes of heterosexual romance. Consequently, the men’s homosexuality is rendered as either secondary, incidental, qualified, or nominal, not only by virtue of the fact that their primary, profoundly intimate relationships are with women but that they are far removed from the stereotypical gay lifestyle as represented in the cultural mainstream and as manifest in the secondary gay characters. More to the point, their removal is voluntary. Their discomfort with, revulsion regarding, and ultimate rejection of that lifestyle, as articulated via the foil characters, is definitively established and serves as an additional premise for the conclusion that heterosexuality is at least within their grasp if not in their natures.

In critiquing the representations of these contrasting gay men and their responses to each other, I do not presume essential or “authentic” gay sentiments or sensibilities; rather, my

intent is to demonstrate that this static, generic foil configuration effectively reinforces heteronormative discourses that are predicated on acceptable heterosexual performances. Indeed, the foil operates at a larger level such that “familiar” (to mainstream audiences) homosexuality (e.g., Keller, 2002, p. 125) – becomes the means for renormalizing heteronormativity. This is not simply a function of the outrageous, extreme dimensions that the secondary gay male characters assume, although this is one half of the equation; rather, heteronormativity is restabilized against the conventionally heterosexual performances that the gay male leads engage. Walters (2001), speaking specifically to the interplay between Will and Jack, asserts that “both are integrationist images . . . . If Will is the perfectly integrated gay man through his recognizability to straights (like them and one of them), then Jack is also perfectly integrated though his recognizability as the charming, narcissistic, witty, flitty fag next door” (p. 108). That most of these gay men are not depicted as part of a larger gay community – and Robert, the one who is, is contrasted sharply with a very narrow depiction of that community – further enhances this function; the simple juxtaposition of the approximately straight and outrageously flamboyant gay men in a relentlessly straight world codes heterosexuality as a default performance, endorsed and enacted even by relatively sensible gay men.

### **Doing Patriarchy One Better: The Second Subtext**

The heterosexualization of the gay male lead characters in the generic configuration of gay men and hetero-

sexual women does much to lay the groundwork for acceptance into the cultural mainstream of these particular representations of gay men and, by extension, their particular lifestyles. However, I submit that the noted strategies of heterosexualization only partially secure entrée for these gay men into the dominant heteronormative culture. After all, even if their homosexuality is narrowly construed via these tactics, it is not eradicated or even camouflaged – it remains the ostensible premise of their identities, which would seem to at least qualify their acceptance by and popularity with mainstream audiences. I argue that their entrée into heteronormative culture is ultimately guaranteed by strategies apparent in a second, subtler subtext, one that features increased sexual access to, license with, and paternalistic control of women, all of which accordingly reframe gay male sexuality as an extension of heterosexual male privilege predicated on control of female sexuality.

#### *Sexual Tension*

Although sexual interactions and activity between the gay male characters and their heterosexual female counterparts arguably could be construed as manifestations of and further evidence for their speculative romantic relationships, I think that, in general, they are better apprehended and understood as a separate subtext, for two reasons. First, with very few exceptions, the sexual activity depicted between the characters is unilateral: gay men are represented as having sexual access to and license with their heterosexual women friends, but the women are not depicted as having truly reciprocal privileges. Second, this

sexual behavior is most appropriately understood in conjunction with the paternalism that constitutes the overarching theme of these characters' interactions as much of the behavior occurs in the context of the men somehow controlling or managing these women. With two possible exceptions that are clearly framed as aberrant, these sexual interludes are not depicted as erotic, much less mutual, as would be expected in the context of a romantic relationship.

In *Will & Grace*, Will has considerable sexual access to and license with Grace; as a minor but not insignificant example, they frequently kiss each other. Grace also dresses and undresses in front of Will – indeed, he often dresses her. Although he will ask her advice on clothes from time to time, we (including Grace, presumably) almost never see him in his underwear, which in any case consists of large, roomy boxer shorts, unlike Grace's lacy, "sexy" lingerie. In one episode, after much discussion with and demonstration for Will, Grace purchases a water-filled brassiere in order to appear more voluptuous to an old high-school crush. Inevitably, in accordance with the laws of situation comedy, the brassiere springs a leak, which necessitates Will having to stand behind Grace with his hands over her breasts to staunch the leak. In another episode, Jack has become intrigued by the proportion of fat to muscle in his chest; under some pretext, he and Will both end up fondling Grace's breasts. Although she is fondling theirs as well, she is centered in the scene so that we can clearly see her being fondled; furthermore, the cultural significance of the fondling of female breasts has far greater import with regard to sexuality and sexualization than the fondling of male breasts. Will

and Grace also are often shown in bed together in various states of undress, discussing various matters. Notably, Will is often shown as irritated in these encounters, devising ways to get Grace out of his bed, as she has entered unbidden by him. The bed, of course, functions as a sexual signifier in conjunction with their states of undress; in this discursive context, the fact that Grace is forcing herself upon Will lends itself to an interpretation that Will has unlimited sexual access to Grace – it is simply a matter of *his* choice.

In *My Best Friend's Wedding*, George's sexual access to and license with women is established in much the same way that Will's is – via the use of subtle sexual signifiers that notably contextualize him as the controlling party. Again, as with Will and Grace, George and Jules routinely kiss each other on the lips when they greet or take their leave, a behavior typically associated with sexual intimates. Jules and George spend time in bed together, discussing her plot to break up her best friend's wedding, she in a state of undress, he fully clothed, symbolically endowing him with greater control and greater access and her with greater vulnerability and availability. On two occasions, as well, George slaps women sharply on the rear. In both cases, the slaps feature sexual significance in terms of access, especially given that neither woman is his sexual partner. It is intimate, typically sexualized play between adults, and the fact that he is the one slapping – not the women – establishes him as in control of that symbolic sexual act. Furthermore, the public context of that behavior as well as the fact that he and Kimmie have just met when he slaps her speak volumes in terms of sexual license. Such behavior is under-

stood culturally as private and even then a bit risqué (suggestive as it is of sex games), and George's easy, unimpugned practice of it in a public context suggests that he has license where others do not. Finally, George also is the object of desire of Kimmie's cousins-cum-bridesmaids; described to Jules by Kimmie as "slutty" nymphomaniacs, their attraction to George is registered, if only briefly acknowledged. Collectively, these events cultivate an impression of George as having unregulated sexual access to all of the young, attractive women in the film – if he so desires. The fact that he does not pursue this privilege is inconsequential and, indeed, cultivates a perception of him as sexually in control.

Similarly, in *The Object of My Affection*, George has sexual carte blanche with Nina, even if he does not act on it. In a pattern that continues throughout the film, his access to her is established when he first becomes her flatmate: Nina surreptitiously leaves her bedroom in the middle of the night, where her boyfriend, Vince, lies sleeping, when she hears George in the kitchen. Dressed in their bedclothes, they whisper and confide in each other as her boyfriend sleeps. When Vince is not around, Nina and George watch television together in her bed, again dressed in their bedclothes. In one such bed scene, they talk about sex – cultivating a sexually charged context – and George reveals that his first lover was a woman, much to Nina's surprise and curiosity. He playfully tweaks his description of this woman to fit Nina's description, further sexualizing the encounter. When she realizes what he is doing and swipes him with a pillow, he tosses her down on the bed, tickling her as she screams delightedly. The sexual connotations

of this interaction are clear, and his control – narrative and figurative – over Nina is established. The most blatantly sexual encounter between Nina and George comes out of another such bedroom scene; a pregnant Nina asks George, "Do you think most married couples are as happy as we are?" "I hope so," responds George. They kiss affectionately, as they often do, but Nina then deepens the kiss and begins to make love to George, unbuttoning his shirt, kissing his neck and working her way down his torso as she begins to unzip his pants. They are interrupted by the telephone, which prompts George to push Nina aside. In this scene, Nina is the active party and George, although clearly aroused, is entirely passive; however, his sexual control over Nina is not compromised, as established by his disengagement from her to answer the phone and by his unwillingness to resume after the telephone call, her overtures notwithstanding. Ultimately, George is positioned as able to choose whether or not he allows Nina to be sexual with him. That she is available and accessible to him – even pregnant with another man's child – is never in question and speaks of his considerable sexual license with her.

Finally, in *The Next Best Thing*, Robert also enjoys sexual access to and license with Abbie, even if he only acts on it once; this is well established both prior to and following their explicitly sexual encounter. As with the other couples, much of this is established symbolically via kissing, Robert's slapping Abbie on the rear, and numerous scenes in bed. Certainly, the fact that Abbie and Robert actually have sex at some point in the film legitimizes Robert's sexual access and license. Significantly, the fact that it is *his* access and license is established insofar



as he is clearly constructed as the person in control of their activity: “*You kissed me,*” claims Abbie, implying her complete passivity and receptivity to his advances. When Abbie attempts to pursue the possibility of a future sexual relationship immediately following the event, Robert makes clear his disinterest and even dismay at the prospect. Abbie is portrayed as ready and willing, then and later, an interpretation cultivated by her jealousy of his later partners. Robert’s access and license is regulated only by him.

In each instance, the gay male characters in these configurations are articulated as having unlimited sexual access to their heterosexual female counterparts and, sometimes, other peripheral female characters as well. Furthermore, these men are portrayed as having great sexual license. Evidently due to their homosexuality, they can touch women with impunity in inappropriate ways and inappropriate contexts – this may entail overt, very intimate sexual touches, public contexts, or access to women who would conventionally be construed as sexually unavailable. This consistent pattern, I argue, cultivates a perception of gay male sexuality as an extension of heterosexual male privilege; the access and license portrayed in these representations is tantamount to a degree of sexual entitlement that is, notably, no longer readily available to heterosexual men. The actions and behaviors that are characteristic of these gay men’s interactions with straight women are precisely those that have become the chief signifiers of sexual harassment by straight men in the workplace and, often, in other contexts as well. Accordingly, in this respect, these gay men function as the guardians of male sexual prerogative.

### *The Dad Factor*

Another, powerful theme that characterizes the interactions between the gay male and heterosexual female characters in this configuration is paternalism, a dynamic that may appear at first blush to be inconsistent with sexual access and license but, in fact, the two are intricately intertwined.<sup>7</sup> In each instance, the women are portrayed as childlike, silly, and cute, as well as irrational and emotional, often given to hysteria; these actions and behaviors are always juxtaposed with those of the men, who are depicted as stable, mature, rational, and responsible. The overarching dynamic driving the relationship in this configuration is parental, manifest most often in the female characters seeking or needing guidance and direction from their male counterparts: “the new leading men are emotional Gibaltars, forever steadying their zany dames ... seems the wise gay man is fast replacing the old hysterical-femme-down-the-hall stereotype” (Jacobs, 1998, p. 24). This dynamic is not a novel one in mediated popular culture; to the contrary, it arguably constitutes the basis for most mainstream representations of male/female romantic relationships, historically and today, as suggested by situation comedies ranging from *I Love Lucy* to *Friends* and films from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* to *Sleepless in Seattle*. However, the relationship between the women and men in the configuration under review is ostensibly not romantic; consequently, in the context of and in conjunction with the gay male characters’ unilateral sexual access to and license with the heterosexual female characters, this relational feature functions to secure a representation of gay male sexuality as not only consistent with

but uniquely positioned to enforce patriarchal control of female sexuality.

In *The Next Best Thing*, the paternalistic quality of Robert and Abbie's relationship is established within the first three minutes. Arriving home to find her boyfriend packing his things, before she even reveals her presence, she calls Robert, upset and on the verge of tears, asking him what she should do. He gives her precise instructions, which she proceeds to implement exactly as he has directed. Furthermore, many interactions feature Robert scolding Abbie: when she is out of sight in the home of friends for whom Robert is housesitting, he says sternly, "Don't touch anything!" and later, "Whatever you're doing, put it down!" in a distinctly parental tone. When Robert and Abbie have sex, Robert immediately chastises Abbie: "I can't believe you let this happen," he remarks, in spite of Abbie's claim that it was Robert who was control of the situation but simultaneously confirming her passivity. Later, Abbie begins dating Ben almost immediately on the heels of Robert's unsolicited advice to start dating again, even though she clearly states her preference not to do so. Even as that relationship develops, Robert's paternal attitude persists. When Ben comes to collect Abbie on their first date, Robert greets him at the door as a father might, proceeding even to ask the standard, stereotypical questions a father might ask his daughter's date. When Ben returns Abbie home that evening, Robert is portrayed observing their embrace through the curtains of the darkened living room, and as she enters the house, he interrogates her about the date. Although the tenor of their relationship changes once Abbie begins to align her life with Ben's, Robert's paternal hold over Abbie re-

mains constant. When Ben spends the night and is discovered by Sam, Robert and Abbie's son, Robert marches into Abbie's bedroom and reads them both the riot act, delivering the rules of their engagement in no uncertain terms and brooking no argument. Abbie's moving out and taking Sam without telling Robert – he comes home to an empty house – illustrates further her relatively immature reactions in the face of anticipated punishment. Similarly, as Robert and Abbie grow further apart, she becomes less able to make reasonable decisions, as demonstrated by her highly emotional and even hysterical scenes. She is insecure and inconsistent in her decisions, alternatively revealing information to her lawyer that can hurt Robert but halting court proceedings that are evolving in her favor when it inevitably becomes fodder for legal argument. She is finally restored to reason only at the end of the film when she gives in to Robert's desire to see Sam. Throughout the film, Abbie is configured as dependent upon Robert's direction, whether meted out as guidance or force or construed as eminent reason; without it, she is hopelessly impetuous and indecisive.

In *Object of My Affection*, as well, George assumes a paternal role in Nina's life. This is most evident when Nina becomes pregnant. Revealing this first to him, she begs him to "tell me what to do." Although he says he is reluctant to do so, he does end up telling her that she must not hide this information from Vince, her boyfriend: "You can't do that to Vince," he states firmly, proceeding to tell her that she ought to tell Vince and "give him a chance" to prove himself. Nina takes his advice, even in spite of her own desires and good reasons, and when George later concedes

that she was right and offers to take her up on her suggestion – that he be the father of her child rather than Vince – she immediately ends her relationship with Vince. This paternal dynamic is evident in other ways, as well; George is very protective of Nina, commanding her not to lift heavy objects, for instance, and telling her that “I don’t want you traveling so late on your own” when she endeavors to return home from out of town earlier than planned. Illustrating further this parental quality of their relationship, he takes to calling her “kiddo.” Nina appears to relish and even solicits this sort of attention from George; she calls him frequently, often emotional and hysterical about something, and he calms her down. Indeed, she asks him to call to check up on her. During one such phone call, when she is out of town, she begs him to curtail his own out-of-town plans so that she can come home, even though his presence is not required for her to return. George’s command of Nina’s welfare also is apparent when Nina and Vince argue over Nina’s ending their relationship: George is present and physically steps between Nina and Vince, even though Vince is not physically threatening Nina. George clearly assumes the role of father/protector in Nina’s life, assuming responsibility for her physical welfare and directing her as to the most reasonable courses of action in her life: Nina, indeed, is rendered virtually immobile in this relationship; she is passive, reactive, and deferential to George’s greater wisdom and insight.

*My Best Friend’s Wedding* features a similar paternalistic dynamic. Jules is portrayed as immature and childish, not least by virtue of her stubborn, selfish resolve in attempting to break up Michael and Kimmie’s wedding

due to a misplaced territorialism she feels regarding Michael. She frequently becomes hysterical or throws tantrums when things do not go as planned, and she always calls on George to “Help me!” in these cases. George, in contrast, is depicted as consummately mature, sophisticated, and reasonable. He commands her to “Pull yourself together!” or variations on that theme. Throughout the film, George advises her to let go of her “silly” plan, to accept defeat gracefully, and to relinquish whatever hold she feels she has on Michael as well as whatever fantasy she harbors about him. When she asks, in a very childlike voice, what will happen if she takes his advice, George responds omnisciently and assuredly, “He will marry Kimmie and you will go on with your life.” When George flies to Jules’s side to comfort her after a foiled attempt, he finds her hung over – another indication of her lack of self-control – and stumbling about in her bedclothes, wearing a facial mask that she had forgotten to remove. As she chatters on about what has happened, she sits, pliant, as he wipes her face, much as a parent would a child, uttering noises of disapproval as he listens. In a later scene, Jules calls George in a panic, unsure of her scheme, screaming, “Tell me what to do!” George becomes very abrupt with her, scolding her in no uncertain terms to “Grow up and take responsibility!” In the last scene, after Jules has taken George’s advice and realized the error of her ways, George notes approvingly, “Good girl, I’m proud of you,” sealing the nature of their relationship. George is the voice of reason in Jules’ life; furthermore, his reasonableness in this film is specifically directed toward effectively ending Jules’s romantic pursuit of Michael. In contrast, George’s

relationships, past and present, are only alluded to, never the subject of discussion, much less Jules's advice. In essence, George's character is portrayed as having powerful, unilateral influence over Jules's life, especially her love life, an influence that Jules not only responds to but welcomes and even seeks.

Paternalism also strongly characterizes Will and Grace's relationship on *Will & Grace*. In fact, most weekly plots revolve about Grace finding herself in some sort of predicament, often of her own making, which she then proceeds to exacerbate via her childish responses. Inevitably, Will steps in, either at her request or in spite of protestations, to either resolve the situation or advise her as to the appropriate action. This is especially evident in plots regarding Grace's romantic relationships; she always desires Will's approval even if she sometimes rebels against it, and – notably – he almost never approves, for one reason or another. Indeed, she does not marry her fiancé primarily because Will finds him so offensive and inappropriate. Will also frequently tells Grace what to wear, advises her regarding her work, and reels her back in when she becomes angry or out of control. Accordingly, when Grace has a problem, she always calls on Will for advice. For example, when a neighbor steals a music box, Grace confronts her in a childish and even violent manner, spewing immature insults, and it is up to Will to calm her down and reason with her. Similarly, when Grace's uncle leaves her his dilapidated and nonfunctional car, Grace insists on keeping it, at great cost to herself, for sentimental reasons. Will, the voice of reason, urges her to "be realistic" and sell the car. Grace also needs Will to shop with her because not only does she

need his advice, but she will get out of control around clothing sales and only he can manage her. In one such episode, her partner at the time, feeling left out by Will and Grace's closeness, attempts to take Will's place in this regard, but he is unable to exercise the control and guidance that Will can provide. Gratefully conceding defeat, he turns her over to Will. Significantly, Grace has no such control over Will; he rarely wants or needs her advice, and when she offers it, he typically rejects it. Although in one episode Will is embarrassed by the fact that he is dating a much younger man and takes pains to prevent Grace (and others) finding out, he ends his relationship not because of her response but because of his own inability to relate to the young man. In general, Will's relationships are mentioned in passing, and Grace's reaction to them typically is not registered on the show. In contrast, the intense "processing" of Grace's relationships with Will (who provides input and direction) and the eventual, inevitable dissolution of those relationships are primary fodder for the show.

Paternalism is a key dynamic in the popular generic configuration of the gay man and the heterosexual woman. As demonstrated in these texts, its evidence and prominence in the gay man/straight woman configuration establishes that gay men are able not only to access but to reify and even reinforce patriarchal paternalism. Indeed, I argue that these texts suggest that gay men "do it better" than heterosexual men, given that much of their control over these women is relevant precisely to their relationships with other men. Furthermore, these gay men are articulated as the otherwise ideal partner against whom the women – and the audience – measure

their romantic prospects. It is at this point that the gay men's paternalism, rather than being contraindicated, intersects with their sexual access to and license with straight women, and their control over these women ultimately – either directly or indirectly – manifests in their control over female sexuality. Gay men are thus constructed as capable of controlling female sexuality more effectively and efficiently than the designated heterosexual male heirs of patriarchy. The straight women in these pairings are construed as sexually available to gay men in a way that they are not to straight men, and they also are configured as dependent upon and reactive to gay men's direction in a way that they are not with straight men.

### **The Price of Privilege: Consequences and Implications**

A number of scholars (e.g., Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Dow, 2001; Gross, 2001; Keller, 2002; Walters, 2001) have cautioned that the increased visibility of gay men and lesbians in the mainstream media does not necessarily confer social legitimacy. I share these concerns, and my analysis of the gay man/straight woman formula so prevalent in the contemporary popular media suggests that they are well founded. The popularity of that configuration rests on a number of features that function to render the gay man palatable to, consistent with, and even a champion of the very heteronormativity to which he ostensibly poses a threat. These features are manifest primarily in subtexts that function to articulate gay male sexuality as congruent with heterosexual masculinity and heterosexual male privilege. Furthermore, that privilege

is coded as conventionally desirable; in each of these cases, the gay subject is not only male but white, middle-to-upper class, and socially as well as professionally accomplished, which Brookey (1996) notes are important conditions for increased gay visibility in mainstream media.

However, the issue at stake here is not merely one of assimilation, as the representation of gay identity as entailed in this configuration has implications that extend beyond simple conformity to a heterosexual male ideal. After all, these are *homosexual* men in these roles, a fact that, if diffused in the ways I have described, is nonetheless the fundamental premise of these texts. As such, it cannot be claimed that the consequences of pairing these men with straight women are identical to those resulting from a pairing of straight men with those women. Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002), for instance, have noted that even though Will (of *Will & Grace*) bears a remarkable resemblance to an idealized straight man, his character is drawn, in some respects, “in opposition to heterosexual masculinity” (p. 90). For instance, a “best girlfriends” dynamic between the gay men and the straight women characterizes, to varying degrees, each of the texts I have examined here, which accounts for much of the emotional intimacy that contributes to the romantic nature of the relationships – although as I have argued, specifically heterosexual markers for that intimacy invite its interpretation as romantic. Certainly, the fact that these men, no matter how much sexual license and access to straight women they have, do not take advantage of it cannot be overlooked. For all practical purposes, they are characterized as impotent by virtue of their homosexuality.

It is at this point that the political significance of the straight woman in these configurations is realized. A closer look at these women on their own terms reveals the extent to which they constitute almost parodic stereotypes of women: they are, without exception, needy, vulnerable, and hopeful, and they are often predatory, as well, in terms of their barely camouflaged, sometimes overt desire for their gay male best friends. The trope of women making unwise romantic choices is familiar to mainstream audiences, one enhanced by the fact that, at least sexually, no one needs women less than gay men do – a point that adds fodder to my argument that these representations revolve largely around control of women and their sexuality. The “frustrated romance and thwarted desire” angle on which these representations turn serves further to camouflage or at least render secondary the emotional and psychological needs that do constitute the intimacy of these relationships, thus confirming the women’s relatively insignificant status beyond their function as defining agents of male sexuality.

Indeed, the women’s sexual availability to these men is the currency on which gay male sexuality is ultimately traded. Positioning women as unconditionally sexually available to these gay men renders them similarly available to the audience in ways they would not be otherwise (given contemporary awareness of conventional sexist practices as performed by straight men) insofar as the sex play between the characters is coded as “safe.” This dynamic, in fact, serves a dual purpose. First, the specifically sexual stereotype of these women effectively counterbalances any effeminacy in the gay men, thus ensuring that they do not stray too far from the ideal of

heterosexual masculinity and thus risk alienating the audience. Second, the presentation of these women for the scopophilic pleasure of the audience permits viewers to engage in/witness sexual play with the women, thus sparing them from having to engage in/witness sexual play between gay men – indeed, these women distract the men from their homosexual proclivities. That sexual play with women occurs courtesy of and vicariously through the gay men also is highly relevant, rendering the men conduits for heteronormativity – they function as surrogates for precisely the sexist sex play that many straight men are conditioned to idealize. Accordingly, these representations function not only to control female sexuality but to control gay male sexuality, as well.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, the gay male characters in the gay man/straight woman formula manifest heteronormative masculinity – that is, they are projected embodiments of that sensibility – and their sexuality is distilled as the strategy via which heterosexual male privilege is enacted and heteronormativity is renormalized. But this strategy is dense and complex, predicated on a potent alliance between sexism and homophobia, and its implications are profound. Sexual access to women – not simply by men but by mainstream audiences – is reinvented and legitimized in these configurations. Women are portrayed as not simply being available for but as desiring sexist treatment by men who are gay or, at least, sufficiently queered to thwart accusations of sexism. By the same token, affording gay male identity legitimacy by virtue of its sexist prowess similarly overwrites homosexuality. The implications for women are that sexism is cast as only a vestige of conventionally defined straight men, sug-

gesting that sexist practices by gay men – or less rigidly masculine men – “don’t count,” thus renormalizing sexism under a host of “exceptional” circumstances. The implications for gay men are that the price of privilege is sexism, a fact that necessarily defines them by their heteronormative sexual relationships with women. The gay men in these configurations thus become patriarchal allies – rather than adversaries – in efforts to naturalize and reproduce heteronormative politics.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I have elected to examine exclusively in this essay classically mainstream representations of the gay man/straight woman configuration in a primetime network situation comedy and films released by major motion picture studios. It is worth noting, however, that alternative representations of this configuration in particular and gay men and lesbians in general are available in other media outlets, such as independent films and cable programming, and those portrayals may or may not reflect the dynamics I have noted in this analysis. The fact that much cable programming – like HBO and Showtime – is becoming increasingly “mainstream” also is notable and will certainly have implications for the changing representations of queerness in the contemporary popular media.

<sup>2</sup>Bordo (1999) has argued that the “new” gay men available in contemporary popular culture offer a “fresh image ... a glamorous new image of manliness, from the ‘margins’ of masculinity” (p. 26). Although I concur with Bordo that these men “‘queer’ representations of masculinity” (p. 26), I am not convinced that those representations play the same way for gay audiences as for heterosexual audiences. Gay male sexuality indeed is central to these representations, as Bordo posits, but, I submit, as a strategy rather than as a subject position or even a more generic identity; rather, it becomes a mechanism by which heteronormativity is renormalized.

<sup>3</sup>While the differences in audience reception of *Ellen* and *Will & Grace* are significant and have implications for this essay, they are not central to it. Gross (2001), Keller (2002), and Walters (2001) argue that *Ellen* became “too gay” for TV, leading to its cancellation just one season after *Ellen*’s coming out, whereas *Will & Grace* “compromises with the dominant culture in many important ways” (Keller, p. 123). I would argue further that the established heteronormative narrative that is largely predicated on male sexual license and privilege is theoretically more able to accommodate gay male sexuality than truly lesbian sexuality (as opposed to eroticized “lesbian chic” [Capsuto, 2000] representations of women together presented for the pleasure of an implied male viewer). Lesbianism, after all, is premised on a rejection of male sexual control, the cornerstone of heterosexual politics. Furthermore, the threat implied by such rejection typically is read as hostile by a mainstream audience imbued with heteronormative sensibilities, rendering a lesbian character less sympathetic and likable for such an audience (see, e.g., Walters, 2001). In other words, the differences between the representations of gay men and lesbians are highly gendered.

<sup>4</sup>The relationship between Jack and Karen arguably warrants analysis as well in terms of its (hetero)normalizing functions, realized not least by the intimacy, shared outrageous sensibilities and behavior, and high degree of sexual play that characterize it. However, because their relationship does not follow precisely the same generic pattern as those of the other “couples” examined in this essay, I have elected not to attend to it here. For further discussion of how the characters of Jack and Karen play in the context of *Will & Grace*’s relationship, see Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) and Keller (2002).

<sup>5</sup>Contributing to the “heterosexualization” of Will’s character is the fact that he is, compared to Grace, largely dateless, virtually celibate since the end of his long-term relationship with the never-seen Michael. Indeed, Will’s lack of a (gay) love life is a running gag on the show that functions to distance him further from a gay community and, thus, diffuse his homosexuality (e.g., Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Brookey, 1996; Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001).

<sup>6</sup>Several authors (e.g., Gross, 2001; Jacobs, 1998; Keller, 2002; Walters, 2001) have noted that the character of Jack may well function very differently for non-mainstream audiences (i.e., those not imbued with heterosexist sensibilities), and especially for gay audiences; Jacobs notes that “‘by having

Will, we earned the right to have Jack' ” (p. 23). Other critics concur: “He is the embodiment of camp humor, the representation of gay sensibilities” (Keller, pp. 124–125), the “subcultural doppelganger who gets all the good lines” (Walters, p. 100).

<sup>7</sup>For discussions of the ways in which paternalism and sexualization of women coexist, see, e.g., Kaplan (1990) and MacKinnon (1987, 1989).

<sup>8</sup>An example that appears to support this argument is the fact that the only gay man/straight woman configuration in popular mediated culture to fail with mainstream audiences was the CBS situation comedy *Some of My Best Friends*, clearly modeled on *Will and Grace*. Although the “foil” factor was very much in evidence on the show, as was the “dad” factor to a lesser extent, the straight woman in this case was the sister of the gay male character, thus rendering impossible any acceptable means by which the show could configure a romantic relationship between the two, much less sexual access to her on his part. The fact that the show also featured a straight man as the gay man’s roommate also probably introduced a less comfortable dynamic in the context of conventionally heterosexual mainstream sensibilities by making it more difficult to avoid the specter, if not the reality, of homosexual play.

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