



Manchester University Press

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Chapter Title: Comedy, gender and sexuality

Book Title: Laughing matters

Book Subtitle: Understanding film, television and radio comedy

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Published by: Manchester University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt1vwmt8.13>

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## **PART II**

### **Themes, effects and impact of comedy**



## 8

# Comedy, gender and sexuality

In this chapter we focus on the ways film and television comedy have presented gender and sexuality. These subjects cross over in more ways than one.

Gender is an issue of difference and difference has continually proved difficult for human cultures to negotiate. Patriarchal culture, that is, society which is structured in order to give the male sex many advantages over the female, has only gradually been revised in western nations and its biases still remain in place. The self-interest that informs the continuance of patriarchal power has its ultimate grounding in the difference between the sexes which must, therefore, be rigidly defined. Sexual difference is regulated and reinforced culturally by the societies in which we live: men are supposed to act in a masculine way, women in a feminine way. But while biological sex is, by and large, fixed, gender is culturally constructed *as if* it were both natural and fixed. In fact these artificial distinctions can be questioned, as Judith Butler argues: 'If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders' (2006: 9). The addition of gender, the attempted association of a set of characteristics to sex, can be seen as a somewhat blatant imposition. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us: 'gender and genitals we have always with us; but ... the meanings and substance of gender and genitals are embodied in times and institutions' (1985: 47).

Patriarchal society's institutions and rules actually shift and adjust over time, in order to maintain hegemony, while continuing to imply a timelessness to their authority. As such they have always been ripe for comedic exploration. The ancient tradition of males performing female roles on stage illustrates the ambivalence of these rules. In Ancient Greek theatre (as well as Shakespearian theatre) men played the female roles because the gender roles assigned to women were such that they were not allowed to act on stage (i.e. were banned from performing anything other than the role society assigned them), but successful imitations expose the artificiality of the particular construction of femininity. Such conventions survive in pantomime with its

dames and principal boys and were a device regularly drawn on in music hall, familiar to players from that tradition such as Stan Laurel (see Sanders 1995). Drag performances cause laughter by contradicting the supposed essentialism of gender. In British comedy, dressing as a woman was the mainstay of Arthur Lucan as Old Mother Riley and this tradition has established performers like Norman Evans, Danny laRue, Barry Humphries (as Dame Edna Everage) and Paul O'Grady (as Lily Savage), and has been a resource for television sketch comedians from very varied backgrounds, from Dick Emery and Les Dawson to the performers of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The League of Gentleman* and *Little Britain*. Drag offers a carnivalesque exception to the everyday norms of gender performance, but one which is ambivalent and which ultimately denies permanent conditions (just as carnival shows that there is an alternative to the status quo while returning to it). In mainstream film comedy drag is rare but memorable, including examples in *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Tootsie* (1982), *Mrs Doubtfire* (1993) and *Big Momma's House* (2000). In each case there is considerable effort made to stabilise the (hetero-) sexuality of the central character (see King 2002: 141–2). However, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), a smaller film with three male characters in drag, had more room to allow a range of sexualities. Yet, as Butler says: 'no correlation can be drawn ... between drag or transgender and sexual practice, and the distribution of hetero-, bi-, and homo- inclinations cannot be predictably mapped onto the travels of gender bending or changing' (2006: xiv–xv). Gender is performance but sexuality is practice.


Recent examples of cross-gender performance in British sketch comedy include female comics French and Saunders playing fat old men lusting madly after anything in skirt (see Williams 1998: 161), Reeves and Mortimer's middle-aged Geordies in donkey jackets concerned with bras and paranoid about slights to their bust size ('Are you sayin' I've got nowt?') and *Little Britain's* 'lady' Emily Howard played by David Walliams as a contemporary transvestite in eighteenth-century costume forever giving the game away by succumbing to the temptations of stereotypically male activities.

These examples all present one gender apparently fascinated by the other but adopting their perceived characteristics badly. Drag performance challenges the audience as to what is the correct reaction to the mixed signals of men performing as women and women performing as men. While it may elicit numerous responses, for it to be outright comic it appears essential that the performance is less, rather than more, convincing. Cross-dressing might 'only' be an indicator of the comic nature of the performance in many instances, but the laughter it produces is nevertheless ambivalent. What exactly are we laughing at? Alexander Doty suggests that: 'as a genre comedy is fundamentally queer, since it encourages rule-breaking, risk-taking, inversions and perversions in the face of straight patriarchal norms' (1995: 334). Cross-dressing for comic effect is an exemplar of this aspect of comedy, revealing patriarchal

society's obsession with gender and sexuality, and problematising its supposed certainties about masculinity and femininity. To examine what comedy tells us about Anglo-American attitudes to gender and sexuality, we focus initially on the representation of femininity in film romantic comedy, picking up on the genre after the Second World War. From there we move on to discuss masculinity, and representations of sexuality in film and television comedy.

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### Following up: comedy in drag

 Drag demonstrates that one gender can perform as another, but consider how particular examples vary in how they play this comedically. Is male–female drag a celebration of male adaptability or a joke at the expense of male limitations? What is it about undermining the conventions of gender that is funny?

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### Femininity as represented in film romantic comedy

We have discussed in [Chapter 3](#) the development, conventions and industrial context of the romantic comedy as established in the 1930s and continued into the early 1940s. Here we follow its later development, focusing on its particular portrayals of femininity in the postwar period.

After the Second World War women who had worked during wartime were encouraged back into the home, and film comedy and its romantic sub-genre both reflected and encouraged these changes. The retrenching of conservative attitudes to gender (see [Glitre 2006: 93–8](#)) is illustrated in the caricaturing and infantilising of women in their comedic representations. In *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) the three female leads play models (that is, they are for looking at) on the make who scam their way into an expensive furnished flat to use it as a base in their quest for millionaire husbands. Although this sounds enterprising, all three characters are written as mercenary and dim, even stupid, though the calibre of the stars playing them (Lauren Bacall, Betty Grable and Marilyn Monroe) tends to dignify them. Bacall, in particular, has a vocal delivery so urbane that she is capable of making virtually any line sound as though it were witty.

*How to Marry a Millionaire* was a prestige picture and the first comedy in Cinemascope, which explains its unlikely eight-minute orchestral overture and the gratuitous scenes which suit that format (planes landing, mountain snowscapes and model parades). The key sequence, however, is the one in which Grable's character, Loco, is recruited into the scheme. The other girls are broke and they invite her up as long as she can feed them on the 25 cents she has and whatever else she can use her sex appeal to acquire. The guy who helps her, pays for and carries up her groceries is the handsome Tom

Brookman (Cameron Mitchell) whom Schatze (Bacall) immediately dismisses as strictly petrol pump attendant material. The film then shows him returning to the office building he owns, so undercutting Bacall's wisdom. But, despite this, the film doesn't question what her character outlines to her co-conspirators: marriage 'is the biggest thing you can do in life' and 'If you don't marry you haven't caught him, he's caught you'. What it does undermine is 'It's your head you've got to use, not your heart'. Following her head, Schatze almost marries an elderly, widowed Texan millionaire J.D. Hanley (William Powell), but finally gives in to Tom Brookman and marries him, despite still thinking he works as a petrol pump attendant. When he pays for their greasy spoon reception meal of hamburger and onions she faints at the sight of his wad. So do the other girls, though they have ended up with a forest ranger and a short-sighted tax dodger after their excursions with a married millionaire and a fraudster. The intent of the film appears to be to remind us that monetary or class considerations are less important than compatibility. Brookman identifies Schatze as 'strictly a hamburger and onions dame' early on, she just has to realise it, and the man who fits her is *symbolically* a millionaire. Through their *literal* demands the film portrays its female characters as both mercenary and dumb, full of unreasonable expectations that prevent their own happiness. The film's most memorable gag is Monroe's Pola displaying herself, gorgeously dressed in a magenta satin gown, in multiple reflections in a nightclub 'powder room' then walking into a wall as she tries to leave because she won't wear her spectacles, believing they make her look plain. It is a surprisingly direct correlation of the link between the male gaze of the camera and the punishment of its subject and marks a considerable change in attitude from *It Happened One Night* (see [Chapter 3](#)) which punished the viewer's representative.

Ed Sikov, writing about the comedies of the 1950s in *Laughing Hysterically*, sums *How to Marry a Millionaire* up in two words, 'slick, forced' (1994: 3), while he focuses instead on an auteur-based grouping of films (from Hawks, Hitchcock, Wilder and Tashlin). He is right to argue for the importance of the comedies of the decade, and its romantic comedies are hugely revealing about contemporary attitudes to gender. Sikov is also right to see 'patriarchy in protracted decline' during the 1950s, lashing out (1994: 244) with what can be a shocking degree of misogyny.

Kathleen Rowe (1995) highlights representations of women from the 1930s to the 1990s and traces key roles which manage to avoid the patriarchal stereotypes of unattainable virgins and madonna figures on the one hand and threatening monsters or femmes fatales on the other. She calls these non-stereotypes 'unruly women': 'the unruly woman often enjoys a reprieve from those fates that so often seem inevitable to women under patriarchy, because her home is comedy and the carnivalesque, the realm of inversion and fantasy where, for a time at least, the ordinary world can be stood on its head' (1995: 10). This is a concept we shall return to, but the 'problem' of such female

independence is a constant in mid-twentieth-century comic representations of femininity.

Historical hindsight allows us to see short, recurring cycles within cinema and television comedy in which the sexualised, unconventional woman appears as an uncanny being who needs to be tamed through romance and domesticity. The 1940s films such as *I Married a Witch* (1941), *One Touch of Venus* (1948) in which a statue comes to life, the British film *Miranda* (1948: see Ashby 2000) and *Mr Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948), both featuring mermaids, all show female protagonists as both supernaturally attractive but inhuman. In the 1960s US television offered fantasy sitcoms such as *Bewitched* (1964–72), which played out the logic of *I Married a Witch* with witch as housewife, and *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70) (see Chapter 5). Later still, the film *Splash!* (1984) successfully returned to the mermaid and *Weird Science* (1985) resurrected the perfect artificial woman. The representation of gender difference as supernatural is, of course, not the only way to confront it. Film as a medium may be seen to provide invariably iconic images of glamorous and untouchable female sexuality precisely in order to police this power.

Laura Mulvey argued in her seminal 1975 essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1993a) that Hollywood cinema constructed women as passive, to-be-looked-at, presented for the pleasure of the male viewer. There has been much debate and extension of this essay (including Studlar (1988), Doane (1987) and Mulvey (1993b)), but its utility here extends only as far as its relevance to film comedy. Rowe (1995) shifts away from Mulvey’s Lacanian analysis of melodrama and looks at the implications of ‘the genres of laughter’ for her model of spectatorship. Rowe wonders, for example, if laughter is structured, like the male gaze, at female expense or whether enjoying comedy requires a female audience to engage in ‘transvestitism’ (1995: 6). Because Mulvey’s original essay seeks to promote an alternative (Mulvean) cinema as a necessary antidote to mainstream cinema it homogenises that mainstream as part of a single male cultural psyche. The exclusion in Mulvey’s argument that gives most concern here is that of the self-awareness of sophisticated filmmakers and performers. The male gaze revealed by psychoanalytic criticism is an artistic or narrative convention within a business practice which, it is argued, has developed and been adopted because it fits in with the psychology of patriarchal culture. This doesn’t allow for individual filmmakers and participants seeing the conventions and exploiting or subverting them. Mulvey counters with: ‘However self-conscious and ironic Hollywood managed to be, it always restricted itself to a formal *mise en scène* reflecting the dominant ideological concept of the cinema’ (1993a: 113). But this tends to fix mainstream Hollywood product as though it were a constant restatement of a position rather than an ongoing negotiation with patriarchal hegemony.

Mulvey’s argument suffers from what Butler calls ‘the totalizing gestures of feminism’ (2006: 18) compounded by its use of critical psychoanalysis which,



as Sedgwick complains, 'seemed to promise to introduce a certain becoming amplitude into discussions of what different people are like – only to turn, in its streamlined trajectory across so many institutional boundaries, into the sveltest of metatheoretical disciplines, sleeked down to such elegant operational entities as *the mother*, *the father*, *the pre-oedipal*, *the oedipal*, *the other* or *Other*' (1990: 24). It is one thing to discuss cultural psychology, but occasionally the slippage is too great; to state that *the unconscious* is 'formed by the dominant order' (Mulvey 1993a: 112) is a step too far. Certainly the dominant order determines much that is to be repressed within the unconscious but not specific contents or drives.

Sikov draws out the ambivalence with which the female stars were depicted in the film comedies of the 1950s. He shows how in the musical romantic comedy *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) the male characters remain peripheral and dull and how the two stars at the centre (Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe) are both fetishised and powerful in their performances as mercenary women. Another take on the plot of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is *The French Line* (1954), a cheaper RKO musical comedy in which Russell is an heiress travelling incognito and being courted by Gilbert Roland. Money isn't the issue here, putting it aside is: Russell is a proactive female character seeking to be valued for herself. Though the Code prohibited costumes that showed cleavage, the spectacle of the show numbers nevertheless focuses on the female form. The film's strap-line was 'JR in 3D: It'll knock both your eyes out'. The Catholic Legion of Decency found the film offensive, even after Russell's pelvic thrusts were hidden behind obtrusive scenery. The number 'Looking for Trouble (If Trouble Looks like a Man)' is a downright violent expression of female sexuality (which the hero largely misses through being elsewhere, on his way to the scene). Even if the mechanical gaze of the camera may continue to fetishise Russell, the male gaze of the audience has different responses available. Sikov, drawing on Studlar (1988), shows how such imagery goes beyond Mulvey's argument about the spectacle of women being held by the male gaze to avoid the psychological threat of castration. Female sex symbols of the 1950s such as Jane Russell or, in Sikov's prime example, Jayne Mansfield in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957) are the source of numerous gags focusing on the breasts as signifiers of gender. Sikov adds pre-Oedipal (pre-gendered) identification and the concept of 'the breast as screen' to Mulvey's ideas, emphasising the ambivalent experience of 'joy/terror'. In the 'pleasurable blurring of ego boundaries in the cinema' we see that:

Just as babies enjoy a psychic fusion with the mother as they nurse, so do the limitations of adult object relationships melt away under the authority of the screen's images in general and the image of Mansfield's breasts in particular. Following this psychological model, the men [in the film sequence] not only want Jayne sexually; they want to be Jayne sexually, presexually, at any phase sexually. (Sikov 1994: 219–20)


Comedy films such as the ones mentioned are very conscious of the power of the look, and even highlight its impact. We do not have to accept Sikov's argument in its entirety to recognise that there are at least alternative psychoanalytic readings of audience reactions. In other words, a comic text can often prompt a whole different set of responses to the depiction of gender difference on screen.


Female sexuality (encoded in the female form) becomes not uncanny as in some texts but 'excessive and implausible' in the comedy performances of Marilyn Monroe, 'like Mae West before her' (King 2002: 140). Rowe (1995: 179) sees these two stars as 'antithetical versions of the blonde sex goddess', the brassy, quipping West contrasting with the rich vulnerability of Monroe (178). While West's knowing sexuality exasperated the advocates of the Production Code in the early 1930s, the ambiguous levels of self-awareness of Monroe's characters allowed her to succeed in the 1950s and remain an icon long beyond the period (see Dyer 1998). Yet all the female sex symbols of the decade, including Monroe, Russell (who wears a blonde wig to impersonate Monroe in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*) and Mansfield, rode to fame on the crest of 1950s hysteria about gender. Their desirability and its power become simultaneously threatening and ridiculous because a comedic context both recognises the power and defuses the 'threat' of female sexuality with 'it's only a joke'. Looking at representations of women of all ages Laraine Porter argues:

While masculinity is also understood as a construct, this is understood as the norm, with femininity a perverse deviation. Mocking the woman is also a way of disavowing her threat to masculinity, to freedom, to control, to order – all that masculinity holds dear and needs to maintain in order to shore itself up against all odds. (1998: 93)

Putting women on a pedestal and knocking them off because, on closer examination, they are not men is the game described here. Yet the fetishisation which is meant to constrain the uncanny power of female sexuality reckons without the humanity of its subjects. None of these comedic performers is ultimately contained by the camera. The destabilising effects of comedy on the boundary between spectator and subject (see discussion of on-screen glances in the work of Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers during Chapter 2) mean that while appearing on screen enmeshed in numerous patriarchal discourses (visual, narratorial, historical, cultural, psychological) they are still understood to be (or have been) people who cannot be fully assimilated within those discourses. This is not to deny that the constructions of femininity offered in classical Hollywood cinema are not severely limited or to suggest that the female body is not fetishised and exploited. Yet a restatement of Mulvey's argument in the context of film comedy must recognise that a female star's iconicity is not merely a product of the camera, but depends both on the qualities of the individual actor and on investment in it by an audience composed of individual male and female spectators each with their own particular responses.

### Following up: gender on screen

 To what extent do Laura Mulvey's ideas about the male gaze of the camera hold true for comedy films made during the classical Hollywood period?

 In what ways is comedy used to address gender in films such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *The French Line*, *The Seven-Year-Itch* (1956), *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956) and *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter??* Is it a disguise, a provocation or a safety valve?

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### Hollywood romantic comedy on the rocks

The film romantic comedy in the 1950s and early 1960s was still a genre that could challenge the Production Code, quite literally in the case of Otto Preminger's *The Moon Is Blue* (1953), which was released successfully without Code approval (it featured the words 'virgin' and 'mistress'). Such challenges helped shift the focus of the genre from 'romance' to 'sex'. Yet, as sexual and gender politics changed at an increasing rate, the romantic comedy still figured 'sex' as wedlock and children (though alternatives were increasingly acknowledged) and women's independence as a problem (seemingly for both genders). The key to making a successful romantic comedy for producers remained the balancing of a star couple that somehow reflected the times. Doris Day with any significant male star (Cary Grant, James Garner, Rock Hudson) turned out to be the key ingredient as she became the most successful female star at the box office from 1959 to 1964, playing a variety of roles in films that offered audiences a knowing, risqué approach to the genre.

In the first of these hits, *Pillow Talk* (1959), co-starring Rock Hudson, Day plays glamorous unmarried interior designer, Jan Morrow, opposite Hudson's promiscuous songwriter, Brad Allen. They share a party telephone line (meaning they can overhear each other's calls) and argue over the phone about its usage, establishing a bitter relationship. However, once Brad has seen Jan he decides to pursue her, disguising his real identity under the name 'Rex Stetson'. The risqué nature of *Pillow Talk* may be virtually invisible behind its surface gloss for audiences today, but, properly considered, the title track and the song Day sings on the soundtrack over the journey to a secluded Connecticut cottage ('I'm yours tonight ... possess me, make love to me') show that Jan's desire for sex is as pronounced as Brad's (see Glitre 2006: 173–4; McDonald 2007: 53–4). Even though the couple's convergence of interest promises consummation, the Production Code dictates that the film cannot deliver since they cannot be together until the predatory and dishonest aspects of Brad's 'Rex Stetson' identity have been exposed and he has been punished for



8 Doris Day and Rock Hudson, the glamorous stars of *Pillow Talk* (1959).

it. Women's increasing independence and, in particular, Jan's job appears to offer opportunities to accomplish this. When Brad tries to re-establish contact with Jan, as himself, as a client, she can revenge herself by a grotesque redesign of his bachelor pad. When he makes clear he has changed his ways, cutting off all his other relationships for Jan, and attempts to storm out leaving her to her vindictive makeover, she uses his (frankly sinister) remote door-locking device to keep him there. It is Jan's knowledge and her choices that allow 'the process of compromise' (Glitre 2006: 176) to be completed.

The progressive elements in the context of the romantic comedy genre drawn out here were not, however, identified as the key to the success of the formula as further Day romantic comedies appeared. In *The Thrill of It All* (1963) Day plays Beverley Boyer, a mother of two married to an obstetrician (who delivers babies) played by James Garner. It is a comedy of remarriage as she gets (unsought) very well paid advertising work and this undermines his role as breadwinner. In one sequence the couple have been at odds and are about to be reconciled but Beverley hasn't had the chance to tell her husband about the swimming pool her employers (a soap company) have installed in their back yard as a reward. Once Dr Boyer has driven his car into the pool, their discussion cannot go well. There are still the single beds that had become Hollywood custom, and talk of children is still the only legitimate way to talk about sex. He distinguishes between her money and 'our money' – the house-

hold is his, financially, and anything else is topsy-turvy – yet she makes more money than him, is more famous than him (she appears on billboards) and is clearly very good at her job. The film is unable to resolve these problems by its end and cops out. In setting up Dr Boyer as an obstetrician the film partially allows him to beat women at their own game and, unconvincingly, Beverley decides to have another baby. The romantic comedy genre is being renegotiated here. The wife (and the woman), economically viable on her own in a time of virtually full employment, must nevertheless maintain her marriageability. In the 1960s, with the availability of the pill, sexual freedom for women outside marriage was much easier. *The Thrill of It All* shows audiences that a woman can do without a man but implies it is better to sacrifice that option by insisting on marriage, home and children. Clearly, this is a weak message placed against the questioning of masculinity continuing to be ‘the norm’ implicit in the rise of feminism that would increasingly impact on gender relations in Britain and the US. After nearly a decade repetition, and the inability to continue to adapt in the face of changing times, meant that the Day series began to pall. Romantic comedy was struggling to keep up with social change and box-office returns for the genre as a whole diminished over the decade.

### The romantic comedy since new Hollywood

The final collapse of the Production Code in 1966 also brought about a crisis of faith in the genre that had come to prominence in the wake of its imposition. An exception and huge box-office hit (see Krämer 2005) was *The Graduate* (1967), starring Dustin Hoffman and Ann Bancroft, a perverse New Comedy that blames older women for independent female sexuality and has its hero flee with Bancroft’s on-screen daughter (see Rowe 1995: 195). With greater freedom to challenge taste and old taboos, filmmakers were once again interested in more anarchistic forms. The 1930s screwball comedy began to gain nostalgic appeal as its anarchistic style was recognised as relatively radical after the fare of the previous two decades, and there were attempts at updated versions such as *What’s Up Doc* (1974) with Barbra Streisand and Ryan O’Neal. In 1979 Brian Henderson (2001), somewhat prematurely, contemplated the end of the romantic comedy genre and lamented the abandonment of the Code which left filmmakers nothing to work around. It was Woody Allen who showed what could be done in the changed circumstances with *Annie Hall* (1977), and the phrase used to describe it, ‘nervous romance’, has been used to designate romantic comedies of the period (though MacDonald (2007) prefers ‘radical romantic comedy’). In Allen’s reworking of the genre there are a number of alterations; the film is named after the female lead character, and narrated from the male lead’s point of view, implicitly acknowledging a level of subjectivity. Increasing elements of drama are added along with elements of postmodernity, too, but more significant is the increased realism of the film

which doesn't happen in a glossy never-neverland but (largely) in New York, a city the director knew well. *Annie Hall* accepts that a relationship is a two-way process, a negotiation between adults. It isn't the be-all and end-all of life, and children and marriage are not the only outcome worth having. And this is just as well because the obstacles in the way are legion and very real: from personal neuroses to career development to simple matters of timing. As a result the film adds an extra Boy loses Girl to the end of the classic Hollywood formula, yet it does so while being very funny including humour in the form of traditional one-liners, formal and postmodern reflexivity, and slapstick moments ranging from lobster hunts to inopportune sneezes. *Annie Hall* won almost all the Oscars that *It Happened One Night* had except best actor, but then Allen had two anyway (Director and Screenplay, shared with Marshall Brickman). The potential of the genre to speak to audiences (and critics) clearly remained. Yet *Annie Hall* is somewhat exceptional.

Mainstream Hollywood filmmaking took longer to recuperate the genre. It was beginning to do so in the late 1980s with a rash of varied approaches, many of them studied in detail in Evans and Deleyto (1998). A key film in this cycle is *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) about the title couple (Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan) whose long-running acquaintance eventually becomes a romance after we have seen the couple reacting to other lovers in their lives. The high concept (one-line plot issue) is about whether men and women can be friends rather than potential sexual partners; the film argues that it depends on the circumstances and, more importantly, on the individuals. The film homes in on identity as the key factor, with both characters taking up positions about what it means (or ought to mean) to belong to a particular gender, and then being taken beyond that position through contact with a single individual. The key scene, the equivalent in several ways to *It Happened One Night's* hitch-hiking scene, is Sally's public imitation of an orgasm in a restaurant. While consciously pushing at the boundaries of the mainstream, the scene manages, bizarrely, to stay on the right side of taste by being a simulation in an inappropriate context. The butt of the joke (and the motivation for the performance) is Harry's misplaced confidence in his sexual performance. The restaurant location removes any shades of grey by bringing the fake orgasm under scrutiny in a situation where it can only be entirely false. This fake/real ambiguity forms the basis of the 'I'll have what she's having' gag that tops the scene, testifying to the effectiveness of the performance and the rarity of what it imitates (you can't buy those in a restaurant). Krutnik (1998: 32-3) points to this simulation as part of the acknowledged 'lie' of post-nervous romances but the meaning, in the context of the film, that Harry cannot know whether he is a good lover or not, is so emphatically put that Sally really wins an argument for the first time. This may be partially counteracted by the expression of sheer pleasure on Sally's face after she and Harry have made love (it's not aimed at him and there would be no need for her to fake it), but it is also there as



a contrast to Harry's troubled expression caused by fear that sex has ruined the relationship. He need not worry. In this film: '[s]ex is ... only a metaphor for a more profound intimacy that requires learning' (Williams 2001: 353). Yet marriage is still the way this intimacy is figured as Harry and Sally are added to the series of staged and scripted documentary-style interviews with married couples that separate the film's 'chapters'.

*Pretty Woman* (1990) is a second example of Hollywood's return to the genre at the end of the 1980s. It stars Richard Gere as corporate raider Edward Lewis and Julia Roberts as prostitute Vivian Ward who, despite their individual specialisms in financial transactions, get together emotionally in the end. In their own ways both characters are hardened professionals, as Edward observes: 'We're such similar creatures, you and I, we both screw people for money.' Their coming together is a reciprocal process. With the Production Code abandoned nearly a quarter of a century before the film's release, sexual innocence is no longer desirable: sexual knowledge is key (Radner 1993: 62). Vivian is an object of exchange but on her terms. Sex, again, is not the problem; it is a given. What this couple need to work towards is intimacy. As in *Bringing Up Baby* and many early comedies, the key point of contact is the lips: Vivian doesn't kiss clients. This is sufficiently clear for her 'I love you' that follows her kiss with Edward to be redundant. Similarly, Edward's rehabilitation from raider to businessman (no longer wanting revenge on his dead father) is signalled when the senior financial rival (screwball romantic comedy stalwart Ralph Bellamy) says, 'I find this hard to say without sounding condescending but ... I'm proud of you.' As Edward draws patriarchal approval, all his worst characteristics are embodied in his lawyer, Phil Stuckey (Jason Alexander), who believes that Vivian's profession gives him the right to attack her (see Rowe 1995: 199). In the end the rich man, a prince among men, fulfils Vivian's fairy-tale fantasy, what her street friend (Laura San Giacomo) calls 'Cinda-fuckin-rella', by coming to collect her in a white limo (for which read white horse). 'And what happens when the Knight has rescued the princess?' he asks. 'She rescues him right back' is the reply. In fact, she has already done so; *Pretty Woman* begins with Edward in a borrowed car he can barely control lost in downtown LA at night in a nightmare-like scenario. Vivian gives him directions, drives, takes control of the stick shift gears he can't operate. It is through Vivian that he learns to make something other than money in his business (perhaps an implication of making babies). *Pretty Woman* accepts the sexually knowledgeable woman but redirects her towards sexual monogamy, which remains the cultural norm. What Edward gives her in return is the spending power that brings out her true worth. The film works because it succeeds in offering a dual address relevant to a late 1980s audience. It combines a successful romance with a prostitute – a male fantasy, prohibited under the Code – with the familiar romantic comedy fantasy of how to marry a millionaire; a wealthy, cultured man. As Krutnik (1998: 30) points out, the film itself recognises that 'This is

Hollywood' rather than reality and the genre has a new self-consciousness about the reciprocal compatibility between genders, though it stops short of *Annie Hall's* clear subjectivity.





Such self-awareness is embedded in *Notting Hill* (1999), in which one half of the romantic couple is Anna Scott, a Hollywood film star who earns \$15 million per picture, played by Julia Roberts. The logical conclusion of this self-reflexivity is two film stars in love as in *America's Sweethearts* (2001). Calculated to build on the success of 1994's *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (see Mather 2006 for context), *Notting Hill* presents the concept 'Film star falls in love with ordinary person' in its most acceptable configuration, that is, so as to empower the female character. Nevertheless, it is Hugh Grant playing William Thacker, a diffident, floppy-haired middle-class British travel bookshop owner, who more closely inhabits his regular star persona. The problems created for the couple are plausibly developed in Richard Curtis's script as the relatively ordinary meets the high-profile ('My whole life ruined because I don't read *Hello* magazine'). Though the woman sets the pace, the final choice is left to the man, as Anna comes into William's bookshop to apologise for summarily dropping him twice previously and offering a gift (which turns out to be an original Chagall painting) and herself. From his side, such an offer is clearly a fantasy made real, but it is equally fantasy from Anna's side as she aspires to an ordinariness that she cannot will for herself, despite her money and industry clout, and can only ever attain in fiction. Though she tells him 'The fame thing isn't really real, you know', William baulks and refuses. In the following inquest scene William's (overly numerous) support network sympathise with his decision but flatmate Spike (Rhys Ifans), bursting in late and initially unaware of the party line, reacts with 'You daft prick', conflating idiocy and male sex. Compelled to replay the previous scene and repeat Anna's line that she is 'just a girl, standing in front of a boy, asking him to love her' the nakedness and risk of *any* profession of desire, from anyone, becomes apparent to all present, along with William's folly. Catching up with Anna during a press conference, William must, even more publicly, confess he is a 'daft prick' and that his romantic, and indeed phallic, destiny lies with her. Anna's spoken response is framed for the pack of journalists, but Julia Roberts's sustained scintillating smile tells us all we need to know. A final scene shows the couple relaxing in a private park packed with kids, unnoticed and undisturbed, she pregnant and he reading fiction (*Captain Corelli's Mandolin*), an urban idyll. It seems that the star has what she wants – ordinary pleasures, normality –but a slight awkwardness remains as the situation of an empowered female character earning \$15 million a picture is treated as anomalous, something preventing her happiness. Like Ellie Andrews in *It Happened One Night*, Anna Scott solves her problems with the right man, wherever she finds him, which involves stepping outside of her privileged world.



Tamar Jeffers McDonald suggests we are now in the era of the ‘neo-traditional romantic comedy’ in which the certainties of the past are presented ‘as if movies like *The Graduate* and *Annie Hall* never existed’ (2007: 85–6). Given its current lack of invention, the future of the genre might appear to be in doubt but Kathleen Rowe makes a telling point: ‘The very conventionality of its message suggests that it endures in art because it speaks to powerful needs to believe in the utopian possibilities condensed on the image of the couple – the wish for friendship between women and men, for moments of joy in relationships constrained by unequal social power’ (1995: 212). For patriarchy to continue it has to offer a place for its female subjects, though it often appears do so with bad grace, both in the past and in the present by stressing the perils of remaining ‘uncompromised’ or, rather, single. Independent female sexuality is something patriarchy has always feared, and such fears are reflected in screen comedy. Some contemporary neo-traditional romantic comedies appear little interested in sex (McDonald 2007: 97–8), because its availability is not a contemporary issue. In fact recent examples such as *Knocked Up* (2007), *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008), *No Strings Attached* (2011) and *Friends with Benefits* (2011) follow on from *Pretty Woman* in suggesting sex first, romance afterwards. Sex itself no longer compromises a woman, but ‘romantic comedy [still] depends on the melodramatic threat that the lovers won’t get together and that the heroine will suffer the fate of becoming a spinster or marrying the wrong man’ (Rowe 1995: 110) as for example in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001) (see Chambers 2009). Romantic comedy remains about the core issue of negotiating gender differences to reach that all-important real right and true relationship. Its comedic resilience is invariably about challenging the societal assumptions and conventions that impact upon that negotiation while acknowledging, in the end, its necessity.

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### Following up: femininity in romantic comedy

-  Taking a particular example from Doris Day’s run of hit romantic comedies made between 1959 and 1967, consider the extent to which the female roles are progressive or retrogressive.
-  How do the post-classical romantic comedies of the 1970s negotiate the discrepancy between their generic concern with romance and the availability of sex?
-  How seriously can we take obstacles to partnership in Anglo-American romantic comedy’s default affluent middle-class settings?
-  How much (or how little) nostalgia do contemporary examples of the genre appear to have for earlier examples?


## Femininity in other forms of comedy


Clearly, it is problematic that the chief comedy representation of the female sex on film occurs in a genre that specifically pairs its participants off with men. These are the terms in which patriarchal society conceives women to be significant, and outside of this format it seems women are 'on their own' and therefore suspect (see Chambers 2009). Unsurprisingly, given that most gender-based humour has come from men disparaging women, feminist writers have paid increasing attention to this rather striking imbalance. Arguing that comedy theory can make depressing reading for women, Frances Gray notes that 'misogyny is inscribed in some definitions [of comedy], and where this is not so there is a bland assumption that the experience of both sexes is identical' (1994: 13–14). The deficiencies in masculine-dominated comedy theory have largely been matched by the abundance of masculine-dominated films and broadcast programmes on radio and television. Arguably, even those shows which feature women performers at their centre, from *I Love Lucy* in the 1950s, *Roseanne* in the late 1980s, *Absolutely Fabulous* in the 1990s to *Sex and the City* in this century, have tended to inscribe women in terms of feminine excess which renders them as both 'absurd and liberated' (Chambers 2009: 167). Kathleen Rowe's (1995) discussion of exceptional female comedy performers, from Mae West in the 1930s (see also Curry 1995) to Roseanne Barr in the 1990s (see also Karlyn 2003), identifies them as 'unruly women' refusing societally approved standards of femininity. Such figures are all too rarely seen, especially on the big screen (see Chapter 10 for a discussion of Whoopi Goldberg's film career), but the more domestic television screen has offered a number of opportunities for female comic performers, despite the fact that much of its comedy remains male-dominated. Outside of key sitcom roles (see Chapter 5 and Feuer 2001), however, performers who might fit the tradition Rowe identifies are more difficult to track. The following is an outline sketch of some significant players in British television. Victoria Wood has had a long successful career, mainly on her own terms, as singer, record-breaking stand-up, sketch show auteur and award-winning actress (see Medhurst 2007: 178–186). Wood's workplace sitcom *dinnerladies* presents a diverse female cast in a patriarchal factory environment, with her own character, Bren, visited by her distinctly unruly decrepid fantasist mother Petula (Julie Walters). Jo Brand, with her combination of the aggressive and the domestic ('The way to a man's heart is through his hanky pocket with a breadknife' quoted in Littlewood and Pickering 1998: 301), stands out as a panellist and performer. Though her unwieldy stand-up/sketch show *Through the Cakehole* (1993) ran for only one series, her self-penned hospital comedy drama *Getting On* (2009–10) has won awards. Caroline Aherne contributed to *The Fast Show* (1994–97), starred in *The Mrs Merton Show* (1995–98) as the titular impish interviewer, and acted in and co-wrote *The Royle Family* (1998–2000), all significant contributions to the

development of television comedy in this period. Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders have had long running-television success since 1987 in their irregular sketch show (*French and Saunders*) and in some of their solo vehicles, though it was a toned-down Dawn French who starred as title character in the sitcom *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994–2007). A genuinely unruly woman-centred sitcom, *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992–2002) with Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley as promiscuous drink- and drug-abusing London fashionistas, has proved impossible to use as a template across the Atlantic. More recently Catherine Tate produced four series of her successful self-titled sketch show (2004–7), featuring unruly characters young and old, before taking up higher-profile acting work. The performers who make it to the mainstream need to be exceptionally industrious and inventive, often originating material for themselves, but the unruly woman's performer can, it seems, achieve popularity. Other recent performances inflected with this archetype include Ruth Jones's Nessa in *Gavin and Stacey*, and *Green Wing* characters Sue White (Michelle Gomez) and Joanna Clore (Pippa Haywood). Julia Davis's monstrous Jill Tyrrell in *Nighty Night* and Miranda Hart's blundering romantic alter-ego in *Miranda* probably represent the outer and inner limits of the unruly woman in relation to mainstream success. The female leads of *Pulling* (2006–9), including Sharon Horgan's Donna who refuses marriage for a messy life of drink and casual sex, are somewhere in the middle, yet this is a sitcom made for a small channel (BBC3) which, despite American interest, has so far been unable to translate into a series there. Unlike some of the performers who embody her, the unruly woman character is, by her very nature, excluded from general acceptance for she remains disruptive of and hostile to the dominance of masculinity and its discourses.

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### Following up: unruly women on television

 In what ways do contemporary female television performers play with and/or subvert gender stereotypes? Do expectations based on gender assist or obstruct the work of female writers and performers?

 To what extent are female-led television comedies in longer narrative formats ambivalent about the possibility of romantic fulfilment for their characters?

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### Masculinity

Though we now turn to explicitly focus on comedy representations of masculinity, this is a topic that has not been invisible in much of the foregoing since the formula of the romantic comedy film, despite its perceived female focus,

provides masculine role models as well as feminine ones. We can briefly return to a previously used example of romantic comedy to illustrate this.

In *Pillow Talk* discussions about the nature of manhood take place between Brad and Jonathan Forbes (Tony Randall), who also knows Jan. Together they suggest that a bachelor like Brad is a tree in the forest who will be cut down and turned to lumber by marriage, clearly implying that marriage is a symbolic castration. In so doing they 'highlight the inherent ideological contradiction' between an image of masculine social dominance and romantic fulfilment in domesticity (see Glitre 2006: 171–2). At this mid-point of the film Brad wants Jan and not marriage. Innuendo about masculine performance occurs when Jonathan packs Brad off to his house in Connecticut because of the deception Brad has been practising on Jan (and because he covets her himself), little imagining that Brad has engineered it so that Jan will accompany him. The wealthy Jonathan has power over Brad because he is paying him \$200,000 to write a musical and, to emphasise this, Jonathan packs a fistful of pencils and numerous musical notation sheets 'just to make sure you'll do plenty of scoring up there'. The dialogue is perfectly justified by the plot but the innuendo is there for the audience to read in and all the funnier because the sheer amount of scoring implied would be superhuman. Yet, as we have seen earlier, both soundtrack and character motivation suggest Jan is equally keen to consummate her relationship with 'Rex' outside of (though as a prelude to) marriage. As surrogates for all their audiences' desires, perhaps superhuman scoring is what we expect from well-matched star couples, though it must take place (off-screen) when an acceptable compromise between the characters has been reached.

Though *Pillow Talk* is a thoroughly conservative film in many ways, and masculinity, in its traditional guises, is still manifested powerfully, its flaws are also being measured. Brad responds to Jan's hostile makeover of his flat by carrying her out of her bed and through the New York streets to inspect it. Male star carrying female star presents as fact that men are stronger and implies that it counts for something, and, since no one attempts to prevent this abduction, indicates that patriarchal authority is on Brad's side. Overall, however, the film shows that the active co-operation of women is essential: Jan uses Brad's remote door-locking device (which she has retained) to prevent him leaving the flat. What allows Jan to capture the new Brad is this element of old Brad that remains. To return to the film's tree metaphor, successful compromise requires that not all the limbs be lopped off. Romantic comedy, a genre often thought of as having a feminine focus, addresses both genders in its audience.

A second major sub-genre within film comedy that we have already spent some considerable time discussing is that of the largely male-focused comedian comedy (see Chapter 1), in which the comedian character struggles to conform to society. Very often part of the comedian comedy's plot will at

least resemble that of the romantic comedy, with significant sections (and indeed whole films) keyed to the comedian's performance of masculinity. In fact in these elements of comedian comedy, unlike romantic comedy, the obstacles to the union of the couple are not social and psychological blocks but the hero's poor performance of masculinity. When (and if) the comedian comedy hero is united with a female partner at the end it is generally much more perfunctory or comic than the romantic success that closes the romantic comedy because comedian comedy interprets masculinity, much more widely than simply its relation with the opposite sex. In his original development of the comedian comedy genre, by concentrating on single comedian examples from the 1940s and 1950s, Steve Seidman (1979/1981) implicitly suggests that it is a more conservative genre than a wider historical sample would indicate (see Jenkins 1992: 11). For example, the comedy pair or team dynamic is an inherently more anarchistic version of the comedian comedy which gives opportunities to show alternative versions of masculinity, and its comedians are thus less likely to achieve successful or unambiguous masculinity than the individual comic. Even the work of some of the leading comedians of the period, such as Bob Hope and Jerry Lewis, has a different dynamic in their films with partners. Hope and Bing Crosby's parodic *Road* movies (see Chapter 6) particularly engage with ideas of masculinity (see Cohan 2003) and Lewis's initial pairings with Dean Martin have a different character to his later, solo work where he does not have Martin's easy masculinity to bounce off (see Bukatman 1991). Since the split of Martin and Lewis in the mid-1950s, we see an eclipse of the comedic pair in film (for reasons we shall discuss below). Meanwhile, the personas of successful individual comedian comedy stars have continued to present inept versions of masculinity since the New Hollywood of the 1960s.

Woody Allen's screen persona in his early starring roles of the late 1960s and into the 1970s (see Kaminsky 1985: 165–6) draws heavily on Bob Hope's solo appearances as a cowardly lothario from the 1940s (see Chapter 6). *Play It Again Sam* (1973) particularly focuses on earlier models of masculinity (Humphrey Bogart) and Allen's character's inability to conform to them. Steve Martin's early starring film roles from the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *The Jerk* (1979) and *The Man with Two Brains* (1983), also exemplify problems with masculinity. Later leading comedian comedy performers include Robin Williams in the 1980s (see Matthews 2000), Jim Carrey in the 1990s (see Drake 2003), with Adam Sandler then Ben Stiller bringing us roughly up to the present day. Operating after the end of the classical Hollywood studio system, all these performers have taken opportunities to play against type during their careers, sometimes successfully, but all of them also have a comic persona which they can return to that, however many performative skills are associated with it, does not epitomise stable 'normal' masculinity. Inept performance of masculinity is the comedian comedy's stock-in-trade. Excessive performance

of masculinity, ultra-masculinity, can also be funny as in *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2005) with Will Ferrell. Getting the pitch of masculinity wrong, by the prevailing standards of the day, is an ongoing matter for anxiety (and therefore for comedy) because it clearly impacts upon the ability of the individual to find a place within society. Anxieties about the practice of masculinity, almost invariably seen in terms of male heterosexuality, are built into the following contemporary example.

### Performing masculinity

The *American Pie* series (1999–2003) is a trilogy of films centring on a group of teenagers undergoing rites of passage. This is a typical set-up for film with gross-out elements (see [Chapter 9](#)). The audience are placed in a privileged position in the hierarchy of sexual knowledge during these films: whether they've experienced these rites or not, they haven't made – or won't be able to make – more embarrassing blunders than the central character, Jim (Jason Biggs).

In the first film, *American Pie* (1999), four male friends enter a pact to have their first full sexual experience on or before their high school graduation (the fact that it will be heterosexual literally goes without saying). In *American Pie 2* (2001), which is our main focus here, they build on their discovery that there is more to sexual activity than the act of sex itself and confront the problem of finding what is right for them within the wealth of sexual possibilities on offer in contemporary society. The four get back together after their first year in university for 'twelve weeks of immortality' while renting a lakeshore property over the summer with Stifler (Seann William Scott), the crass and foul-mouthed jock from the first film who becomes the fifth member of the group. Stifler is an important additional carry-over because he is beyond the anxieties of the others, and his claims ('I got screwed 23 times last year') throw into relief their intervening experiences; Kevin (Thomas Ian Nicholas) can't get over his high school lover Vicki (Tara Reed); Oz (Chris Klein) is continuing a long-distance relationship with his prom date Heather (Mena Suvari); and Finch (Eddie Kaye Thomas) still seems devoted to the memory of his sexual encounter with 'Stifler's Mom' (Jennifer Coolidge). The mainspring of the comedy is, however, Jim whom Stifler tells 'You're the only guy I know whose dick needs an instruction manual'. In the first film, obsessed by finding out what 'third base' (contact with a vagina) felt like, he ended up being caught by his father (Eugene Levy) making out with his mom's apple pie. The Oedipal angle is not accidental. Jim cannot take control of the phallus.



The first film also has him inadvertently broadcasting his first attempts at sex with Czech exchange student Nadia (Shannon Elizabeth) over the internet. Not only is he sabotaged (twice) by premature ejaculation as his fantasy is about to become true but *everyone* knows about it (even his family: 'it came



up at a PTA meeting' his father notes). Jim's successful sexual experience at the end of the first film was short-lived and is described in the second as being 'with a flute fetish band geek who used me then dumped me after the prom'. In the second film, seeking to improve the masturbation which is again the staple of his sex life, Jim attempts to use a lubricant while watching a pornographic film and accidentally glues one hand to his penis and the other to the incriminating videotape, clearly labelled 'Pussy Palace'. These further misadventures mark – quite literally – his failure to move on from auto-sexuality and to escape Oedipal bonds as his predicament leads to Jim being arrested by the police and escorted through the emergency medical treatment by his father. Though played for cringe-making laughs, his injuries nevertheless set up a brake on his renewed relationship with Nadia and, in order to delay consummating things with her until he has healed (rather than explain the glue mishap), Jim pretends to be in a relationship with his former lover, band geek Michelle (Alyson Hannigan). Michelle coaches him in the niceties of kissing and bra removal and identifies his major problem: 'You're so uptight'. Anxiety over masculine performance affects Jim's relationships with women and leads him to obsess about Nadia. Michelle asks: 'What's the big deal with Nadia? She's like 50,000 times more attractive than most girls, but it's just sex' (i.e. something she is equally capable of delivering). Jim needs to understand, in order to negotiate masculinity as an individual, that sexual fulfilment is not dependent on finding some ideal figure but on discovering what works. Finally, Jim realises 'I am a band geek – I just never joined the band' and abandons Nadia for Michelle. The film does not entirely reject fantasy in favour of reality (as we shall see below), but it does indicate that in the heterosexual economy even inept geeks are catered for, as emphasised by the continuation of Jim and Michelle's romance into matrimony in *American Pie: The Wedding* (2003). Having imposed particular gender differences on its subjects – both male and female – patriarchal hegemony must then show how the difficulties it creates can be overcome, and contemporary comedies such as the *American Pie* films reflect that ongoing negotiation.

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### Following up: performing gender

-  Evaluate the performance of masculinity by a sample of male film comedians and the performance of femininity by a sample of female film stars in comedy films from the same period. How much comedy is generated by falling short in the performance of gender roles? How much comedy is generated by excessive performance? How much narrative emphasis is devoted to opposite sex relations. How much to same-sex interaction?
-  How much do the comic elements of romantic comedy film (or romantic elements in comedian comedy films) assist or disrupt the

screen couples in generating on-screen chemistry? To what extent are the supporting characters required to provide humour?

### Masculinity, homosociality, homosexuality

Given the disheartening lack of flexibility in screen representations of heterosexuality in comedic texts, the prospects for those groups not sharing dominant paradigms of sexuality cannot be optimistic. However, once we understand that gender definitions are constructed, then it becomes clear that valuations of sexuality which follow from them are also open to question. Patriarchal culture, according to Adrienne Rich (1994), operates a system of 'compulsory heterosexuality' in which men must desire women and women must desire men. The existence of homosexuality disrupts the supposedly clear-cut definition of genders and gender roles and problematises the whole system. As the following quotation suggests, this disruption meets resistance:

Advice on how to make sure your kids turn out gay, not to mention your students, your parishioners, your therapy clients, or your military subordinates, is less ubiquitous than you might think. By contrast, the scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large. (Sedgwick 1990: 42)

This is a conflict that humour and comedy attempts to negotiate and needs to continue negotiating by reason of the fact that even today there are groups for whom homosexuality does not, should not or can not exist. The presence of homosexuality continues to deny the reductive, licensed 'compulsory heterosexuality' still sought for in many conservative sectors of western society (most insistently on the religious right). In England and Wales, for example, male homosexuality was illegal until 1967 and the pursuit of full and equal legal recognition is ongoing, as is resistance to it.

The history of the use of the terms 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' (see Sedgwick 1990: 10) reveals that the latter term predates the former and its appearance thus required both the definition of 'heterosexuality' and its social redefinition. Once again, we see that the insistences of patriarchal culture are imposed upon a more fluid reality. As Sedgwick points out: 'categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions – heterosexual/homosexual in this case – actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation' (1990: 9–10). Homosocial (same-sex) interaction is privileged in the everyday functioning of contemporary patriarchal society but that society insists that this must never become homosexual interaction. In classical Hollywood cinema, generally, the more overt the character's homosexuality, the more negative their narrative rewards, as Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (1987) shows, and there still is comedy that continues to follow this actively homophobic tradition. Part of the way this is accomplished is through



ridicule, which is used ‘to draw a firm line between “us” (straight men who are devoted to each other) and “them” (queer men who have sex with each other)’ (Medhurst 2007: 112). The ancient Greeks found it perfectly possible to support a patriarchal system in which homosexuality was also part of everyday life without compromising masculinity (see Sedgwick 1985: 3–4), but not current patriarchy. In homophobic comedy gay men are perceived as threats to masculinity, and the effects of homosexuality are a symbolic castration or feminisation (literalised as effeminacy in the crudest representations). These are myths which attempt to shore up and stabilise a patriarchy troubled by the fact that individuals won’t be told what their sexuality should be. Our culture still attempts to prescribe what is ‘allowed’ within masculinity and, to this end, there is a strand of comedy that mocks male homosexuality and implies that it approaches what is the ultimate weakness in this worldview: femininity. Again this is a particular cultural construction: ‘The virility of the homosexual orientation of male desire seemed as self-evident to the Spartans ... as its effeminacy seems in contemporary popular culture’ (Sedgwick 1985: 26–7). Having decided that homosexuality is a defective version of masculinity, homophobic culture prescribes against it by representing it as effeminate. Yet, in order to be condemned, homosexuality must be acknowledged to exist.

While male homosexuality wasn’t able to be the centre of a mainstream film, let alone a romantic comedy, prior to its legalisation, this is far from indicating that homosexuality was unknown or invisible in film, television and radio. You just had to know where to look. For example, in the camp argot ‘Polari’ used by Julian and Sandy (Hugh Paddick and Kenneth Williams) in BBC radio’s *Round the Horne* (see Chapter 4) or, in fact, at Kenneth Williams’s performances in any media which show him, stalled on the brink of actively being gay. Tragic though this seems to have been for Williams in his personal life, it is the key to his success as a performer, since this is exactly the position which generates the most humour, as Mark Simpson argues:

the official point of these connotations is not to affirm or proclaim homosexuality but to raise the spectre of it so that it can be dismissed ... The ‘ticklishness’ and the discomfort these images of queerness produce is always released (and denied) in laughter: How *absurd* it all is, thank god, the audience says aloud by laughing, and how absurd of me to think that there was anything funny *peculiar* about this, it says to itself, wiping the tears from its eyes. (1998:139)

This ambivalent position is exactly the one taken up by various comedians, especially pairs, from Laurel and Hardy to Morecambe and Wise. In so doing they shift the homosocial continuum into realms that the less innocent in the audience (male and female) realise are awkward and to be avoided. Vito Russo (1987: 72–4) claims that certain film texts mark Laurel and Hardy as gay while Charles Barr (1967: 57) had already pre-empted and refused this reading. An example cited by both is *Their First Mistake* (1932) in which Laurel and

Hardy's closeness breaks up Hardy's marriage and, having adopted a child (too late) to save it, they stray into a bizarre infantilised version of parenthood in which gender is irrelevant as they share a bed and care for a child. When Laurel instinctively latches on to the child's bottle their masculinity is shown as nothing more than a playground pretence. We laugh that they get it wrong, but also, perhaps, we laugh with recognition since their childlike innocence questions what we have (been made to) become. In rejecting patriarchal norms of behaviour, we once again see comedy drawing on:

the audience's nostalgia for the easy and less repressed pleasures of infantile sexuality, which are innocent only of Oedipus and sexual differentiation, not of sexuality itself. Male comedy duos play with queerness because they exist in a space which pretends not to know what 'homosexuality' is, or at least where this diagnosis doesn't apply since 'heterosexuality' doesn't really exist here either. (Simpson 1998: 144)

Arguments about whether any particular male comedy team are or are not representing themselves as gay on particular occasions miss the point – the point being that the argument can take place only because the protagonists of such comedy 'are not [straightforwardly] *straight*' (Simpson 1998: 144). As Doty suggests:

the queerness of comedy consists of far more than the humorous representation of queerness ... Although you could argue that most comic gender and sexuality rule-breaking is ultimately contained or recuperated by traditional narrative closure (as it attempts to restore the straight *status quo*), or through the genre's 'it's just a joke' emotional escape hatch, the fact remains that queerness is the source of many comic pleasures for audiences of all sexual identities. (1995: 334)

Awareness of the 'queerness' of comedy allows for cross-gender readings, a certain sympathy for female characters for example, and a more advanced understanding of the mutability of gender roles than straight society would allow itself. Such 'queer readings' offer ways of interpreting gender and sexuality as represented in mainstream texts that can be defined most broadly as 'non-straight' (Doty 1998: 149). We shall return to the queerness of comedy at the end of the chapter, but some discussion of how mainstream US comedy approaches homosexuality follows, beginning in the late 1950s.

Once more we return to *Pillow Talk*. When Brad manipulates Jan over the telephone by ridiculing her romance with himself as 'Rex', he suggests her Texan may not be the man she thinks he is, effectively implying Rex is gay (no such term is used) in order to embolden Jan to prove the opposite. This ploy is one of rich irony from later historical perspectives when it became clear that Rock Hudson (Brad and 'Rex') had always been gay but had concealed it throughout his long film career. From this perspective *Pillow Talk's* coda sequence, after the ideal couple have been matched, is particularly interesting. 'Six months later' Brad Allen is going to tell Jonathan of the legitimate

triumph of his virility (Jan is pregnant). Here a bizarre running gag, in which an obstetrician with an office on the same corridor as Jonathan has become convinced Brad is able to bear children, pays off with Brad being dragged away by the deluded doctor and nurse. The idea of the pregnant man was later played for laughs by Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Junior* (1994) when medical science made the possibility somewhat more plausible and artificial insemination was generally understood. In *Pillow Talk* the joke is peculiarly contorted; there's no mistaking Rock Hudson for a woman in disguise and a man who can have a baby would be a biological freak but behind this is the implication that a man who could get pregnant would also have to be a man who ... had sex with men. The joke is partly the implausible gullibility of these medical professionals, but the film also smuggles in, through a joke far more bonkers than the rest of the film, the homophobic idea of male homosexuality as comic because it is, by reason of the impossibility of its producing children, non-viable. It is also significant that this is the film's last gag and that therefore its consequences can't be followed through, a positioning which is significant in the next film we consider.

*Some Like It Hot* (1959), rated by AFI members the funniest film ever, is a beautifully made comedy that gets nearly all its laughs by playing with gender as the two male leads (Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon) join an all-female band in drag to get out of 1920s Chicago and the dangers of being witnesses to a fictionalised St Valentine's Day Massacre. It isn't a film directly about transvestitism or homosexuality; we understand who, and what, everyone is under their disguises. But it is a film that is subversive of gender stereotypes, showing how much of gender is really performance. The key role, which makes every aspect of the film work, is the character Jerry (Lemmon) who counterpoints his buddy Joe (Curtis) each step of the way but, in terms of masculine status, is clearly second fiddle (or rhythm section to Joe's lead sax). Without Jerry we have one man in drag and a very different film. King points out the significance of Jerry's 'less stable anchorage' in masculinity (2002: 136) and Jerry fulfils the comedian's role in the comedian comedy as the individual trying (and struggling) to fit in. While Jerry is stuck with his female persona and courted by serial-marrying middle-aged playboy Osgood Fielding III (Joe E. Brown), Joe adopts another level of disguise as 'Junior' of Shell Oil through which he is able to romance Sugar (Marilyn Monroe), the band's star. In the end, still fleeing gangsters, Joe and Jerry use the only escape route they have left, leaving the resort in Osgood's speedboat as the latter expects to be eloping with Jerry's female alter-ego, Daphne. After her surprising goodbye kiss from Josephine, Sugar joins them and the four leave in the boat. Joe and Sugar start kissing in the back (providing the conventional romantic comedy closure), leaving Jerry and Osgood in the foreground as the other couple. Jerry comes up with a sequence of excuses for not going through with the marriage, each of which Osgood airily dismisses. Finally Jerry gives up and pulls off his wig with the

line 'Aww, what's the use? I'm a man!' to which Osgood replies, unphased, 'Nobody's perfect'.

One of the great closing lines in movies, this is, in Sikov's opinion, 'openly gay' (1994: 146–7). It's certainly possible to read it otherwise, simply as the culmination of Osgood's blasé nature, but Sikov's is certainly an important and significant critical reading, a point made clearer when Sikov shows a number of commentators contorting their arguments to eliminate its possibility. At the very least, the acknowledgement of the existence of homosexuality after two hours of a film treading very carefully around the issues of men in drag and steering its way to a heterosexual resolution offers the audience a sort of comic relief. Jerry's final line of the film is one of despair; unlike Joe he hasn't got the girl – the goal prescribed for him by conventional masculinity. To read the line again, 'What's the use [of anything]? I'm a man!' Jerry finds nothing but unhappiness in his assigned gender role of masculinity; he has enjoyed some of being feminine but can't keep the pretence up any longer. It isn't him. He's a man and, seemingly, one doomed to failure and unhappiness. Yet Osgood doesn't mind: 'Nobody's perfect'. Nobody and no-body, even with the hyperfeminine, 'jello on springs' Monroe on board. Having ridden out Jerry's list of deal breakers, this is just one more: Osgood is willing to do without marriage, without fatherhood and, speaking the unspeakable of the time, without heterosexuality. They can have fun anyway. The joke depends on the delivery; *of course* what Osgood implies is perfectly possible, entirely reasonable and everything that stands behind Jerry's objection *doesn't matter*. After thoroughly problematising gender, the conclusion is wonderfully apt; marriage, the culmination of institutionalised heterosexuality, is not to be an impossibility for any relationship. It is not so much a coming out as a coming home; a comic and a gay ending. It's probably the best that any predominantly heterosexual culture could offer a gay audience and Sikov is right to defend it as such (1994: 148).

Nevertheless, rather than adding entertainingly positive depictions of homosexuality to their attractions, mainstream comedy films have remained largely ambivalent about gay characters. Though, as Robin Wood says, 'It seems at times that no '90s comedy is complete without at least one gay character, however minimal' (2001: 410), the central roles remain stubbornly heterosexual. The gay romantic comedy has yet to score a mainstream box-office success even though Ang Lee's debut *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) was its year's most proportionally profitable film. *The Birdcage* (1996) successfully features a gay couple but the plot is driven by the needs of the younger generation and the potential in-laws, all of whom are straight. But if mainstream entertainment still resists placing homosexual desire centre stage, it is now at least willing to look at other possibilities. The often camp confidant character – epitomised by Tony Randall in *Send Me No Flowers* (1964) (see Glitre 2006: 177–9) – is given a new spin in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) where Rupert Everett's openly gay character is the alternative when Julia Roberts's character contemplates losing

her straight male best friend, Dermot Mulroney, to Cameron Diaz. Everett's character is far more charming and funny and promises a lot of dancing for her future. Wood describes 'Everett's ironic detachment [as] the perfect representation of the intelligent gay man surviving (and even flourishing) within a heterosexual dominated social milieu, belonging but never *quite* belonging' (Wood 2001: 413). This is a positive representation but, perhaps because it undermines the conventional pieties of the romantic comedy plot (heterosexual marriage), it has not yet been much imitated. For other gay characters there have been very slim pickings in terms of narrative rewards, illustrating that a particular set of rules still operates for their representation: 'the straight relationships are "serious" (even when comic) and the gay relationships are comic (even when "serious")' and gay characters in comedies since the 1980s (Wood's example is *Happy, Texas* (1999)) are 'rendered "safe" by the film's overall tone' (2001: 410).

A recent example of this is *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007) starring Adam Sandler (Chuck) and Kevin James (Larry) as firefighters who pretend to be a gay couple in order to secure a pension benefit for Larry's children. In tacitly approving gay partnership the film continues the acceptance of homosexuality seen in Sandler's films (Wood 2001: 414–18), but neither star's character is gay, or becomes gay, and both are carefully positioned as heterosexual: Larry's wife is dead, Chuck is a womaniser who, in getting to know a woman while posing as gay, finally falls in love (a common trope). The film makes clear that the central characters of a mainstream Hollywood comedy, especially stars with established everyman personas, cannot be gay. Chuck and Larry begin the climactic trial trying to prove they are gay but end up by affirming that they aren't, even though they love each other, while making clear it's OK if other men do want to be gay. Homosexuality belongs, the film seems to insist, at the margins, and with a peculiar logic the film ends with the civil partnership of the most macho black fireman (Ving Rhames) and the impressionable Hispanic fireman (Nicholas Turturro) whose recognition of their sexuality has come through Chuck and Larry's pretence of being gay. While comedy seems able to approach homosexuality more readily than other genres, Hollywood seems far too embedded in patriarchal culture to ever totally commit, even in jest.

The same pattern is basically clear on US television. In the rare instances there is a recurrent gay character they are not allowed to challenge the heterosexual status quo. Though Billy Crystal played a gay character in the ground-breaking spoof sitcom *Soap* (1977–81), the character was also found to have fathered a daughter. Rendering gay characters safe is key to the success of the sitcom *Will and Grace* (1998–2006). Will (Eric McCormack), the gay central character, shares an apartment with old friend Grace (Debra Messing) in a way that makes them look like a heterosexual couple, in other words allowing the reverse of a queer reading to occur (see Provencher 2005: 178).

Physical affection is expressed between Will and Grace rather than between male gay characters despite the promiscuity of gay friend Jack (Sean Hayes). While it is easy to expect too much from a network show and to undervalue the effects of the presence on American television of a gay-themed sitcom, the frustrating lack of actual representation shows both how the hegemonic grip of patriarchy on mainstream entertainment continues to contain homosexuality.

### Out of the closet: an example of homosociality/homosexuality in mainstream Hollywood comedy

Mainstream Hollywood's ongoing ambivalence towards male homosexuality can also be seen in *American Pie 2*. In a key sequence the five central male characters (see above) are working as housepainters to fund the rental of their lakefront property. One of them, Stifler, becomes obsessed with the idea that the two women living in the house they are painting, Danielle and Amber (Denise Fay and Lisa Arturo), are lesbians. Finch advises, 'It is possible for women to hold hands and not be gay' and suggests Stifler is homophobic but Stifler nonetheless dives in through an open window and begins his search for 'lesbian artefacts'. He finds 'a big blue rubber dildo' and runs around the house waving it in a state of such excited confusion that when Jim and Finch go in to extract him he can't remember where he found it. His first response to the question 'where did you find it' is: 'Finch's ass'. The idea of female homosexuality clearly has a confusing connection with the male variety and in these circumstances the phallus doesn't necessarily mean what Stifler wants it to mean. Moments later, the three are hiding in what turns out to be the wrong bedroom, with Jim under the bed and Stifler and Finch literally in the closet together, spying on Danielle and Amber who are trying on bikinis. 'Stop touching me!' Stifler hisses. 'I'm not touching you' Finch responds but backs away, looking down. Finch's erect penis is always in the wrong place for Stifler, inside his mother, for example, in the series's most recurring gag. Yet here the potential homosexual implications of their intimacy are offset by the voyeuristic scenario. The hiding trio are eventually discovered and are threatened with a 911 call before the women decide to 'mess with them' by pretending to be lesbians. The price the women exact, however, is 'you go, we go'. In order to earn the stimulation of viewing lesbian activity the trio must offer them comparable male interaction. Equating male and female homosexuality in this way is rare in mainstream culture.

Rather as in the comedies of the 1950s there is a high level of hysteria in this sequence. Arousal, rather desperately connected to the women performing lesbianism, is counterpointed for the males by disgust they supposedly feel for each other's bodies. Every time the women say 'Now it's your turn' the boys mistakenly imagine heterosexual interaction is called for. Finch so wants to see



the show on offer that he will let a freaked-out Stifler 'touch his ass' because he is 'comfortable with his sexuality'. Later, Jim and Stifler are compelled to kiss – properly – and then proceed to argue about the quality of the other's kiss and whether or not the other was 'trying'. Jim's exasperation at hearing yet again that he is a lousy kisser and his confusion about whether Stifler has any right to judge given the circumstances are exemplary instances of the way the scene breaks down the normal boundaries of homosocial interaction.

As if to assist the audience, the sequence has a male Greek chorus of short-wave listeners. The other members of the painting team, Oz and Kevin, are looking in through the window and, by walkie-talkie on CB setting, convey the scene to the whole of the (male) neighbourhood. The groups shown listening are a cross-section of American society: the clientele of a fast food store, denizens of a sheriff's office, a barbecuing middle-class father and a redneck trucker who converses with his dog, Cooter. Not only does this last character encourage Stifler to 'squeeze his ass, boy, you'll like it', he later describes Danielle and Amber as sounding like 'those two transvestites we picked up in Biloxi'. With Danielle and Amber soon taking control of Jim's walkie-talkie (another symbolic castration) the complexity of the representation is further increased, and cannot be indefinitely sustained. For the trio in the bedroom the show comes to an end when Amber and Danielle want to see mutual male masturbation and Stifler offers to 'take one for the team' as the recipient. At this point Jim and Finch freak out and flee the scene shouting 'put that thing away'. The (unseen) appearance of a real penis has ended the fantasy.

The scene in the bedroom has the male characters all mixed up, shifting from their view of women as objects to themselves as objects for female entertainment and their contact shifting from homosocial to homosexual. It would certainly be possible to argue that their subjection to the female gaze is emasculating and results in unpleasure but the effect is actually much more complex. By destabilising the conventions of what the protagonists will engage in to gain sexual stimulation the scene erases boundaries that patriarchal culture wants to be clear cut. Afterwards, the male group seem deeply troubled by the preceding events and everything in what would otherwise be an ordinary evening seems loaded with other meanings. Holding up some cards Kevin asks the others 'who wants to play some Asshole?' When Jim demurs it is to watch 'the game' on television; American football being the kneejerk signifier of acceptable homosociality (as indicated by Steve Martin and John Candy when they wake up entwined together having been forced by circumstances to share a bed in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1989)). Kevin responds awkwardly 'I just wanted us to do something together'. When Stifler returns he is determined to stamp out the sudden awareness of the homosocial-homosexual continuum. He dishes out porn videos to everyone and states: 'Just so there's no confusion; Santa Porn has brought us some heterosexual entertainment.' But even his resolve is weak as his customary

way of answering the phone now needs a caveat: 'Stifmeister's palace of love – straight love.'

The film is ultimately assiduous in putting to bed this whole issue in its final party scenes. There Stifler meets Danielle and Amber again, discovers they are not lesbians ('we never said that') and, like Finch, claims he is comfortable with his sexuality; comfortable enough to touch every male ass in the room and kiss everyone if it will give him a chance with Danielle and Amber. His narrative reward is to bed them both and thus exorcise homosexuality from the film while establishing exactly where the acceptable boundaries of homosociality are. The series's timid flirtation with homosexuality continues in *American Pie: The Wedding* where the flamboyant gay character, Bear, has a dancing contest with Stifler then (blink and you'll miss it) gets up to dance with the increasingly marginalised Kevin at the wedding reception. In its way *American Pie 2* is remarkably willing to play with sexuality because it remembers that homophobic, patriarchal culture constantly needs to define boundaries, and knows too that the licensed play of comedy is where such concerns can be brought to the surface with least apparent risk (see Medhurst 2007: 112).

### Lesbianism and comedy

Doubly excluded from patriarchal culture, female homosexual relationships face hostility and rejection and this is also a feature of their representations within that culture. Historically, lesbian characters are seldom explicitly present in comedies. Partly this is to do with censorship, and partly it is because of the predominance (after the end of the Production Code) of grotesque and/or erotic presentations of lesbianism within non-comedic film (*The Killing of Sister George* (1969), *Performance* (1971)). Suspicion of the male gaze of the camera is difficult to circumvent in this case. Screen presentations of lesbianism are ambivalent because there is potential titillation for the male voyeur in being able to see what may be regarded as perverse and otherwise impossible for the male to experience, as we've seen in *American Pie 2*. Furthermore, the lesbian couple may offer twice as much visual appeal along with the voyeuristic attraction of removing male 'competition' from the on-screen scenario.

Yet lesbianism is a topic which, because it makes male heterosexuality superfluous, implicitly undermines all patriarchal values. In comedy that is not expressly homophobic, this undermining occurs fairly swiftly from the first mention of the subject. For example, the stand-up comic Eddie Izzard's line in which he claims to be 'a lesbian trapped in a man's body' taps into knowledge of the fantasy appeal of lesbians to men, as well as the language used by transvestites and pre-operative transsexuals about their conditions, to present him as a man fascinated by the female but rejecting what is involved with masculinity. In so doing he denies what patriarchal culture insists about the



appropriateness of conventional masculinity for pursuing women and, in the process, wishes away exactly what patriarchal culture tells men to value – the phallus. It is a particularly effective gag in that – however much it is or isn't in earnest – it feeds Izzard's early comedic persona as someone unwilling to play by gender rules, yet the starting point from which the joke is introduced is masculinity. Williams (1998: 157–8) notes London's 1990s lesbian cabaret scene and interviews Amy Lamé, whose claim to be 'a gay man trapped in a lesbian body' superficially mirrors Izzard's remark but actually has very different reference points, reaffirming her sexuality but laying claim to a particular sensibility and acknowledging its relative recognition within culture. As Smelik (1998: 139) records, lesbianism has even been underrecognised within feminism.

Positive representation of lesbianism in a comedic on-screen narrative depends largely on women in the entertainment industry leading the way. The key text here is the American sitcom *Ellen* (1994–48), in which the star, Ellen DeGeneres, eventually came out. After a funny but more conventional first season DeGeneres altered the set-up and moved her character towards making a revelation about her sexuality, on screen and off, that was groundbreaking within mainstream American television. Ellen's televisual coming out was widely welcomed on the mainstream left and resisted by the right but it has also been condemned as insufficiently political in its presentation of lesbian identity as clear-cut and safe, positioned in binary opposition to female heterosexuality as 'latent, preexistent and natural' (Peterson 2005: 168, 172). Being *the* lesbian representative on television formed an impossible challenge; it is obvious that no one person or character can represent an entire group. The series ultimately found being funny and being positive about life as a lesbian somewhat difficult since sitcoms tend to focus on romantically unsuccessful characters and while this worked fine for quirky, ambivalent Ellen it clashed with her celebratory coming out. Like male homosexuality, lesbianism should not be reduced to a single approved version but understood as 'a space of overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual definitional forces' (Sedgwick 1990: 45). The necessary raft of lesbian sitcoms to represent this diversity seems unlikely, especially given a couple of less successful attempts (*The Ellen Show* (US 2001–2); *Rhona* (UK 2000)), but the drama series *The L Word* (US 2006 to present), offering a wider range of characters, seems to be making progress (see Akass and McCabe 2006).

Independent films focusing on lesbian characters exist but very few are comedies capable of shifting paradigms. *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001) is an interesting attempt though McDonald (2007: 80–81) judges that 'it marginalises the very sexuality it sets out to showcase' when the title character Jessica finds a heterosexual partner. It may seem invidious to revisit *American Pie 2* yet again on this subject especially when, as we have seen, its lesbians turn out not to be lesbians at all, but this is par for the course as Wood briefly notes (2001: 412). However, there is something telling going on in the 'you go, we go'

scene. At the risk of using a theoretical sledgehammer to crack a nut, Judith Butler's essay on 'The Lesbian Phallus' describes the ambivalent results of the scene perfectly:

When the phallus is lesbian, then it is and is not a masculinist figure of power; the signifier is significantly split, for it both recalls and displaces the masculinism by which it is impelled. And insofar as it operates as a site of anatomy, the phallus (re)produces the spectre of the penis only to enact its vanishing, to reiterate and exploit its perpetual vanishing as the very occasion of the phallus (1993: 89)

It is Amber and Danielle literally holding the phallus, symbolized by the big blue rubber dildo, that puts the women in charge when they find the boys in the bedroom. Yet they are also actresses in lingerie who also have a legion of devoted male listeners in the chorus overhearing the exchanges on short wave radio. In the fast food restaurant a cook responds to the first mention of the word 'lesbians' over his microphone with 'Lesbians?' and Oz supplies a key phrase for the visually disadvantaged listeners, 'Hot lesbians'. In other words, lesbians who fit conventional ideals of feminine beauty. This is the type of lesbian that male fantasy is concerned with, irrespective of whether or not actual lesbian desire co-occupies the space or not. The result is that it is apparently acceptable for women to play in the area of homosexuality in a way that is not acceptable for men, especially when they perform such play for men. It is a literal phallus – Stifler's penis – that breaks Amber and Danielle's spell over Jim, Finch and Stifler and it is its bearer who ultimately beds them. After the boys have run away, Amber and Danielle announce to their 'devoted listeners' that they are continuing and ask 'where's that dildo?', bringing a collective cheer from their in-film audience. Not only is the lesbian phallus in action excluded from the screen but, ultimately, lesbianism is allowed to exist only as male fantasy. If it were real, of course, those same troubling flaws in patriarchy's definitions of gender and sexuality which have recurred throughout this chapter would once again be brought to the foreground.

Though Queen Victoria is (apocryphally) thought to have believed female sexual relationships to be impossible, it is just as revealing that her male functionaries were incapable of convincing her that it was. Similarly, contemporary mainstream culture – still dominated by men, whether comfortable with or trapped within their male bodies – finds it impossible to imagine what love between women could really be like. Luckily, however, for those more imaginative than Queen Victoria, there are many opportunities for lesbian and/or queer readings of ostensibly straight female-centred comedies, as Doty (1998; 2000; 2003) shows.

### Conclusion: the queerness of comedy

What we've seen in this chapter suggests that comedy texts constantly revisit the issues of gender and that this recurrent interest is sufficient to underpin both the perennial genre of the romantic comedy and numerous comedian comedies and gross-out films focusing explicitly on gender roles. At the same time we have noted comedy texts identifying and making comic observations about the mutability of gender roles by including comedians in drag and scenarios that present, albeit temporarily, gay and lesbian alternatives to straight, patriarchal norms. What remains to be done here is to show the continuity between comedy's abiding fascination with gender and sexuality and its refusal to allow them to be defined and bounded in the clear-cut way that the discourses of patriarchy insist upon.

This is where queer reading comes in. While queerness is an umbrella term for 'gayness, lesbianism, and bisexuality' (Doty 1998: 149), and can be defined both more broadly and more narrowly than this, queer reading is not reserved for audiences defining themselves as queer, nor does it depend on reading through the prism of queer theory (from Butler, Sedgwick and others). Queer reading consists of the reader consciously or unconsciously stepping outside singular and narrowly defined boundaries of gender and sexuality.





It is probably easy enough to see why lesbian viewers of the comedy musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* might find particular enjoyment in the strength of the relationship between Dorothy and Lorelei, despite the normative, heterosexual outcomes of the movie, or why some gay men might enjoy the American Olympic team's physical displays in that film, but: '[q]ueer positions, queer readings, and queer pleasures are part of a reception space that stands simultaneously beside and within that created by heterosexual and straight positions' (Doty 2000: 345). Doty's account of his own changing relationship to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and queer readings of it (2000: 343, 340-1) illustrates that it is an easy step for males to identify with the female characters and that screen paragons of masculinity rejected as images for identification can be reappropriated as images of desire. Queer readings are live to the possibilities of cross-gender identification and queer identification for audiences who would refuse to see themselves as queer. These might range from straight male viewers finding the Dorothy/Lorelei relationship the most interesting aspect of the film to identifying with Dorothy's unsuccessful interplay with the self-regarding male athletes, to female identification with male characters (not so easy in this particular film) whether their masculinity is questioned or not. Simply put, queer readings refuse to see categories of gender and sexuality as fixed when it comes to our relationship with on-screen characters.

Arguments about the extent to which queer readings intersect with the intended meanings of the filmmakers are largely irrelevant, and especially so when the comedic tone and/or humour of the text depends on the ability

of comedy to destabilise boundaries. The key point is that: 'Queer readings aren't "alternative" readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or "reading too much into things" readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along' (Doty 2000: 345). In the potent combination of sympathy, empathy, suspension of disbelief and identification with a range of subject positions that takes place when we consume comedy texts the destabilisation of fixed categories of gender and sexuality is one of the key sources of laughter.

Film narratives, which identify one outcome for the characters and scenario they establish, may ultimately be less rich sources of queer readings than the repetitive sitcom which is able to return to its characters and premise to accumulate a wealth of possibilities. Doty (2003) shows how female/female relationship in television sitcoms can be read queerly, focusing on *Laverne and Shirley*, and suggests these reinterpretations of the homosocial also work for many other texts. In fact, given the difficulty and sometimes crippling responsibility of the 'gay' comedy text to be representative, as we have seen earlier in relation to *Will and Grace*, texts which are not explicitly concerned with non-straight relationships but which allow for queer readings make a more inclusive range of interpretations accessible. For example, *Big Bang Theory* (2007–), a sitcom about four nerdy science graduates and the on-off girlfriend of one of them, constantly makes capital out of the deficiencies in masculinity the male characters reveal in relation to the opposite sex when they struggle to set aside their individual idiosyncrasies and the obsessional pieties of their shared subculture. Queer reading of this show is not just the preserve of its gay audience that recognises it as 'gay adjacent' but is as much a factor in its success with its total audience as its fascination with heterosexual relationships. Even *Big Bang Theory's* senior production stablemate *Two and a Half Men* (2003–) is open to queer readings. It centres on a household without women in which one adult character is domestic and emotional (Jon Cryer), one slovenly and incorrigibly promiscuous (Charlie Sheen / Ashton Kutcher), and the character of the son (Angus T. Jones) constantly evaluates the adults as male role models. While the explicit premise is to place deficient and excessive versions of masculinity side by side in a domestic setting, being live to the possibility of reading one or both the adults as gay means the humour of their accidents and entanglements is enhanced. When it comes to comedy's relationship with gender and sexuality, whatever the explicit answers and outcomes, there are always alternatives, and always have been.

### Following up: the queerness of comedy

-  What difficulties prevent romantic comedies from escaping 'compulsory heterosexuality'?
  -  How explicit is the recognition of the importance of homosociality in screen comedy? Do comedy films and television programmes reinforce or undermine the distinction between homosocial and homosexual relationships?
  -  Taking specific examples of film or television comedies, evaluate the depiction of non-heterosexual characters. What forms does any marginalisation take?
  -  Do queer readings of comedy texts supplement or improve on conventional, straight readings? Are they more, or less, live to the humour of comic situations?
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### Recommended reading

- Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Peter William Evans and Celestine Deleyto (eds), *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.
- Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994.
- Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995.