



PROJECT MUSE®

The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom

Tison Pugh

Published by Rutgers University Press

Pugh, Tison.

The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom.

Rutgers University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/57769.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/57769>

Access provided at 1 Apr 2020 17:33 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

6

Conservative Narratology, Queer Politics, and the Humor of Gay Stereotypes in *Modern Family*



With its terse yet instructive title, *Modern Family* (2009–) articulates the provocative claim that television will, at long last, depict a clan reflective of contemporary mores rather than the hidebound traditions of the 1950s.¹ Sitcoms are often accused of an inherent conservatism in their plotlines and structure, so *Modern Family* allows viewers to gauge the tension between a program progressive in its ambitions and the narratological structures that might bend it to an ultimately conservative arc. Many viewers have criticized aspects of this purportedly modern family that they deem regressive, notably the program's depiction of gay couple Mitch and Cam, who, in their flamboyant excess, may appear to represent denigrating caricatures of gay life; this apparent embrace of stereotypes becomes a key reason for dismissing the program's sexual politics as superficial. Yet by conforming to while tweaking the traditional parameters of sitcom narratology, *Modern Family* proves the queer potential latent in the sitcom genre, which invites numerous thematic and structural subversions of the sexual status quo. Deploying yet defanging the satirical edge of stereotype-based humor, the program dismantles the ideological weight of culturally inflected humor, particularly in relation to the long-standing assumption of queer liberalism. Furthermore, in its encoding of anal eroticism as a staple of this modern family's sexual imagination, the program disproves the likelihood

of heteronormativity curtailing the erotic interests of its members; it also demonstrates the humorous potential that arises in resignifying certain erotic desires, hitherto rendered abject by rigid codes of sexual policing, into a source of liberation.

Modern Family tells the story of the extended clan of the Pritchetts, the Tucker-Pritchetts, and the Dunphys. Divorced from his children's mother, Dede (Shelley Long, in a recurring role), wealthy closet manufacturer Jay Pritchett (Ed O'Neill) has married Gloria Delgado (Sofia Vergara), a Colombian bombshell and the mother of mooning romantic Manny (Rico Rodriguez); the fourth season dramatizes the birth of their son Joe. In the series pilot, Jay's gay son, Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), and his partner, Cameron Tucker (Eric Stonestreet), adopt a Vietnamese daughter, Lily (Aubrey Anderson-Emmons). Jay's straight and straight-laced daughter, Claire (Julie Bowen), is married to Phil Dunphy (Ty Burrell), a realtor, trampoline enthusiast, and former college cheerleader, with whom she is raising their three children: Haley (Sarah Highland) is popular and pretty yet struggles academically; Alex (Ariel Winter) excels academically yet struggles socially; and Luke (Nolan Gould) wanders goofily throughout his school and home life. Most episodes consist of interweaving story lines that climax as the three families come together for a dinner, party, or other such event, where escalating tensions dissolve into domestic harmony and mutual affection.

With Claire and Phil's family representing the upper-middle-class, white, suburban, nuclear norm typical of many family sitcoms, it falls to Jay's interethnic marriage to Gloria and, more so, to Mitch's same-sex relationship with Cam to define the program's clan as "modern." Homosexuality is thus necessary to advance *Modern Family's* titular premise, despite the fact that visual depictions of Mitch and Cam's romance are mostly occluded from view. Railing against network television's hesitancy to depict same-sex relationships candidly, some viewers have therefore decried *Modern Family* as ultimately reactionary. Yet the matter is more complicated than simple representation, as Lynne Joyrich presciently cautioned of queer television depictions: "in formulating a politics of representation, we need not—indeed, should not—simply ask for more (more disclosure, more true-to-life drama, more explicit imagery)," noting further that "the explicit revelation of sexuality on commercial television need not explode the logic of the closet."² Truly, a queer couple onscreen need afford little revolutionary potential in itself. Nonetheless, *Modern Family*, through its portrayal of queer lives and through its restaging of the protocols of sitcom narratology, creates a narrative space to challenge heteronormative paradigms while also subverting assumptions about the assumed political sensibilities of sitcoms, whether progressive or regressive. With its queer sensibility demolishing ready referents to liberal or conservative politics,

Modern Family casts a new light on an entertainment genre that many malign as staunchly regressive, and it questions as well the prevailing stereotype of modern-day homosexuality as necessarily politically progressive. More so, if homosexuality alone were insufficient to unsettle *Modern Family*'s treatment of ideological normativity, the ways in which anal and other desires float through its story lines testify to the unruly and carnivalesque spirit of eroticism that quickly deflates the queer fantasies of the family sitcom, even within the protocols of network television and its celebration of the family and children's innocence.

The Conservative Narratology of Sitcoms

"The sitcom is, literally, child's play," declares Jane Feuer, in a provocative statement that she immediately deconstructs, as she acknowledges the simplistic accusation of the genre's ostensible conservatism and then broadens the contours of her analysis. Of the foundations of the conservative view of sitcoms, she observes, "such an argument is based on the fact that the nuclear family is considered an ideologically conservative social unit that supports the status quo of 'family values.' Therefore, to base a sitcom on a nuclear family is to affirm rather than question the status quo."³ Certainly, a steady stream of sitcom criticism argues for an inherent conservatism to the genre, such as Gerard Jones's assessment that "it's a very conservative form," one that "is an expression of the underlying assumptions of the corporate culture that has come to dominate American society."⁴ David Grote posits that the situation comedy rejects the revolutionary potential of other comedic forms because "the principal fundamental situation of the situation comedy is that things do not change. No new society occurs at the end."⁵ Without cultural rebirth, as Grote opines, a soporific, if not deadening, effect is achieved, with any revolutionary flair to the comic form quelled. Saul Austerlitz sees in sitcoms "a profound aesthetic conservatism," although he grants as well its "ingrained desire to shock."⁶ Even in programs whose premises challenge the prevailing status quo, such as *Julia* (1968–71), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77), and *Ellen* (1994–98), critics often see countervailing conservative threads that undercut their progressive aims.⁷ To label an entire narratological structure—rather than particular narratives within that overarching structure—as conservative, however, is to encode political meaning into an empty form that may be adapted in accord with a vast range of desires. Those opposing this perspective would likely argue that form is formative, that structures are structuring, yet I would reply that narratological genres retain an inherent plasticity allowing them to be redeployed in surprising ways irrespective of a clear political affiliation. Even that old shibboleth of the cultural right—"family values"—shifts remarkably in

its meaning if it is allowed to signify the multiplicity of America's families, including its queer ones, rather than a staid vision of the "right" way to be a family (pun intended).

At the outset of this argument, I concede that a tension arises between *Modern Family's* genre and any progressive vision it may advance. This dynamic is evident in the fact that, although the program's title proclaims its modernity, several of its story lines, and thus its ethos, are linked to the honeyed moralism of sitcoms past, particularly to *The Brady Bunch* (1969–74). Like the Bradys, the Pritchetts, Tucker-Pritchetts, and Dunphys travel to Hawaii ("Hawaii") and enjoy a Western vacation ("Dude Ranch"). Phil buys his family a recreational vehicle ("Games People Play"), just as Mike did for the Bradys' trip to the Grand Canyon. Even the mise-en-scène of the Dunphys' living room mirrors the Bradys', with the staircase a focal point for each family. Claire hopes for a portrait to be taken of "the whole extended family . . . in a single-file line down the staircase" ("Family Portrait")—an image that would echo the iconic promotional photographs of the Bradys.⁸ Aligning *Modern Family* with the saccharine *Brady Bunch* would appear to undercut the depiction of modernity promised in *Modern Family's* title—for doing so exhibits a nostalgic yearning for sitcoms of an earlier, ostensibly simpler era—yet the program's homage to the past coexists with a narratology updated for the new millennium.

For it must be noted that the sitcom's basic structure enables its play with numerous discourses, social movements, and historical moments, and Feuer observes as well that "it has been the *ideological flexibility* of the sitcom that has accounted for its longevity."⁹ She adds to this point elsewhere by affirming that even "if the episodic series sitcom was static at the level of situation, it was not so at the level of character."¹⁰ While much narratological theory presumes that characters serve a structural function but that their individual depictions matter little, the critical conversation has turned of late to acknowledge that characters shape form—or at least that they alter the deployment of forms for new purposes. As Susan Lanser explains of much narratology, "the sex and gender (let alone the sexuality) of textual personae have not been graciously welcomed as elements of narratology; they have been relegated to the sphere of 'interpretation,' which is often considered a 'temptation' into which narratology must be careful not to 'fall.'"¹¹ Yet these personae are central to television narration and the story lines framed to accommodate them. Thus, the introduction of a married, gay couple to the standard format of an American television sitcom would at least potentially alter its prevailing rhythms and structures, although this potential would need to be further realized through the characters' shifting of the genre's protocols.

Critical to its innovative narrative structure, *Modern Family* belongs to the pseudo-verité, mockumentary style of sitcom, which traces its cinematic roots to Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run* (1969) and Rob Reiner's *This Is*

Spinal Tap (1984) and became a television fixture in the 2000s with *The Bernie Mac Show* (2001–6), *Reno 911!* (2003–9), *The Office* (2005–13), and *Parks and Recreation* (2009–15). Mockumentaries intermix their unfolding plots with character interviews, as well as subtle indications that the characters realize they are being filmed during narrative scenes, such as raised eyebrows in the camera's direction. Producer Christopher Lloyd declares of *Modern Family's* mockumentary style, "The interviews are a chance to have characters more honestly express things than they might openly do in a scene with someone. So we get a laugh from the contrast between what they're feeling and what they were willing to admit they were feeling in the scene."¹² Given this filming strategy, much of the humor of *Modern Family* emerges in the duplicity of domestic life: family members know they must proceed cautiously when dealing with one another's feelings yet unburden themselves to the camera as confessor. Also, this strategy mitigates conflict among characters, with the audience realizing that although deeper tensions bubble beneath the surface, not every disagreement must then come to a boil.

Congruent with *Modern Family's* minimization of conflict, the structure of most family sitcoms involves only a slight disruption to the status quo and then a comfortable return to normality after a character learns a valuable lesson. *Seinfeld* (1989–98) famously rejected these traditional parameters of sitcom narratology with its production maxim of "No hugging, no learning"—a disavowal of the premises of affection and education that the genre as a whole endorses.¹³ Yet the repeated moralism of most sitcoms bears within it the seeds of its own critique, for the very necessity for characters to continually relearn these little life lessons episode after episode suggests the impossibility of their emotional maturation. If morals fail to cohere within the family unit supposedly learning them, how valuable are they to characters and viewers alike? To label the sitcom genre as inherently conservative thus opens the postmodern paradox of morals unmoored from meaning—which would undermine the conservatism ostensibly at the genre's core.

Certainly, many *Modern Family* episodes end with overt moralizing, as a character speaks in voice-over to apprise viewers of the lessons learned over the preceding twenty-two minutes. Further enhancing the apparent conservatism of this narrative strategy, Jay, in his role as family patriarch, often speaks these voice-overs, such as in the conclusion to "Earthquake," in which he calmly assesses the episode's meaning: "There's nothing mystical about an earthquake. Pressure builds, and it's released. And you just hope there's not too much damage. But it makes you realize what matters. And for me, that's my family." With his touching endorsement of the importance of family, Jay affirms life's value in kinship over all other considerations—a moral appropriate to a family sitcom's ethos, whether of the 1950s or of today. Likewise, "Fears" portrays various characters overcoming their phobias—Manny's and Jay's fear of roller

coasters, Haley's fear of failing her driver's test, Alex's fear of not being asked to the school dance. The episode concludes as Phil intones reassuringly: "Everybody's afraid of something, right? Heights, clowns, tight spaces. . . . Those are things you get over. But then there's our children. Will they fit in? Will they be safe? Those are fears you never get past. So, sometimes all you can do is take a deep breath, pull 'em close, and hope for the best. I mean, things don't always work out, but you gotta love it when they do." As Phil concludes his moral, the episode's narrative action depicts Mitch and Cam, deeply hurt when Lily's first word was "mama," realizing that she is merely mimicking her talking doll. They then quickly recover from the trauma that Mitch described as "every gay father's worst nightmare" ("Fears"). Domestic unity is restored in all homes, and the episode cruises to its tidy ending.

Yet it would be unwise to assume that this concluding narrative strategy, or any homages to *The Brady Bunch*, reinstates a simplistic moralism to *Modern Family*, for many times what appears to be an extradiegetic homily unexpectedly continues the show's plotlines in new directions. The series' pilot inaugurates this tradition, as Jay appears to speak directly to the audience: "We're from different worlds, yet we somehow fit together. Love is what binds us through fair or stormy weather." Given the episode's emotionally charged arguments, including the firestorm that erupted when Jay said of Mitch and Cam's adoption of Lily—"Well, kids need a mother. I mean if you two guys are bored, get a dog"—it appears that he realizes his error and will redouble his efforts to respect his son's family. The program then leaves its voice-over and returns to the narrative present, and viewers see that Jay is reading aloud the poem that Manny wrote for his crush, Brenda ("Pilot"). Thus, to assume that Jay learns a deeper lesson about family depends on the applicability of his words to his plotline, but his words, it is now evident, belong to Manny. This type of "bait-and-switch" moralism, in which the audience is tricked into believing an episode is divulging its didactic lesson only then to see that the moral does not cohere with the narrative action, undoes the assumed connection between words and visuals that television, in most cases, seeks to preserve.

In another instance of an episode's moralism losing its meaning, Mitch, fatigued by Jay's history of homophobia, hesitates to invite his father to join him and his friends for drinks when they unexpectedly encounter him at a bar. As the episode concludes, Mitch apparently voices the episode's moral: "People can surprise you. You get used to thinking of them one way, stuck in their roles. They are what they are. And then they do something that shows you there's all this depth and dimension that you never knew existed" ("Boys' Night"). Cam, however, does not acknowledge the relevance of Mitch's words to recent family events and instead inquires if his partner is talking about Rob Lowe, whose career trajectory went from bad-boy heartthrob in 1980s cinema (*St. Elmo's Fire* [1985], *About Last Night* . . . [1986]) to television roles of

surprising depth (*The West Wing* [1999–2006], *Brothers and Sisters* [2006–11]) and comic charm (*Parks and Recreation*) in the 1990s and 2000s. Another episode concludes with Jay’s voice-over apparently informing viewers of the episode’s deeper meaning: “There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody’s expense but his own.” These words apply well to the episode’s intersecting plotlines, particularly the one of Mitch defeating Lily’s bullying classmate at handball in order to teach him the necessity of sharing, but then viewers see that Jay is reading aloud a passage from *Moby-Dick* (“The Wow Factor”).¹⁴ The segue from Melville’s Ahab and his mad quest for vengeance against a white whale to Mitch’s exploits on his daughter’s playground bespeaks a comic devolution of plotlines, yet it further dismantles the assumed connection between the episode’s moral and the possibility that the characters have progressed in their understanding. With lessons that continually founder at the moment of their enunciation, *Modern Family* delivers the type of Aesopian conclusions standard to family sitcoms yet then tweaks them into meaninglessness. As with the show’s purported conservatism, its morals can be used to accuse it of ultimately reactionary values, yet viewers must then confront its postmodern questioning of axiomatic truths.

Furthermore, to see in sitcom narratology an intrinsic impulse toward political conservatism contradicts the apolitical stances many programs foster so as not to alienate potential viewers. Political readings of family sitcoms, whether they seek to expose a conservative or liberal bias to their story lines, must confront the largely agnostic stances of the genre’s producers, many of whom do not want to risk alienating large segments of their potential audience and therefore prefer to avoid politics altogether—aside from such notable exceptions as Norman Lear, with programs like *All in the Family* (1971–79) and *Maude* (1972–78), and Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, with *Designing Women* (1986–93), among others. As Rob Long, a writer for *Cheers* (1982–93), argues, integrating politically didactic viewpoints within the framework of a sitcom threatens to overburden the format with rhetoric rather than humor: “Using an essentially trivial format to convert the audience to a particular political view is not only condescending and arrogant, it’s also impossible to do and still be funny.”¹⁵ Janet Leahy, whose credits include *The Cosby Show* (1984–92), *Roseanne* (1988–97), and *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007), outlines the necessity of averting moral lessons: “Because just at the moment where it looks like you’re going to preach to people, or take yourself too seriously, you cut out of there with something funny.”¹⁶ This is not to obscure the necessary point that even an apparently apolitical stance might cloak a political stance; that is to say, the decision to stage a family sitcom ostensibly removed from the realm

of conservative versus liberal politics occludes various other spheres (racial politics, sexual politics, the economy) that pierce the suburban bubble of many family sitcoms. Despite this essential caveat, within the political divide of conservative and progressive, many sitcoms eschew direct involvement with issues that could cost them countless viewers.

Congruent with this point, programs that engage with explicitly political issues and figures tend to take the role of “equal opportunity offenders,” skewering sacred cows of the right and left. For example, in *Family Guy* (1999–) Lois warns Peter about Bill Clinton—“That former President Clinton is nothing but a bad influence. I forbid you to hang out with him any more”—as Clinton proceeds to sleep with Lois and then Peter (“Bill and Peter’s Bogus Journey”). The Griffins later travel to Texas and encounter George W. Bush, where they see evidence of his alliance with Osama bin Laden and Satan, as well as his cocaine paraphernalia (“Boys Do Cry”). *Family Guy* travesties presidents of the left and right, aiming for laughs rather than political persuasion. As this issue relates to *Modern Family*, writer and producer Abraham Higginbotham, addressing the issue of Mitch and Cam’s marital status, affirms *Modern Family*’s apoliticism, despite the controversial nature of gay marriage in contemporary America: “We wanted to deal with, what is Mitch and Cam’s relationship to gay marriage—to marriage, in general—without having to be a political episode because I think what’s best about this show is we rarely deal with hot topic social issues” (“*Modern Family* Writers”). Of course, the fact that writers eschew political engagement does not entail that their programs fail to encode political readings, primarily because of the tension between surface and symptom that generates multiple, contradictory readings of the texts at hand, yet it also stresses the ambivalence in these moves, in which they tread lightly on issues about which they may care deeply. A key question, then, in regard to sitcom narratology and its ostensible conservative bent arises in this tension: at what point might the surface of given episodes transcend the symptomology of narrative structure to escape the purported conservatism endemic to this form? And a concomitant paradox emerges as well, as acknowledged previously: form cannot be transcended because it is integral to any given narrative. While acknowledging these complex interrelationships of surface and symptom, I argue that assumptions about the politically conservative meaning of form should not then trump the possibility of meaningful surface transgressions that trigger symptomatic restructuring as well.

As many family sitcoms avoid tackling controversial political issues, many also avoid topical references, for they potentially undermine the genre’s unstated premise of timelessness, as well as threaten future profits in syndication. On this subject Phil Rosenthal, producer of *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996–2005), warns: “Nothing dates a show sooner than a line about Monica Lewinsky,” as he also recalls his ambition for his program’s longevity: “The

show was for CBS, but in the back of my mind, it was for *Nick at Nite*.¹⁷ Topical jokes might succeed during a program's initial run, but as the years pass and future generations join its audience, they bear the potential both to become stale for older viewers and to be incomprehensible to younger viewers—with the program's syndication value plummeting. Iconic moments of sitcoms past illustrate the lasting appeal of humor unbound from temporality: Lucy Ricardo in *I Love Lucy* (1951–57) stuffing chocolates in her mouth as the conveyor belt speeds up (“Job Switching”) or getting drunk while pitching *Vitametavegamin* (“*Lucy Does a TV Commercial*”) remain defining moments in the history of television humor, with this comedy unhitched from its 1950s sociotemporal setting. For the most part *Modern Family* adheres to this formula of timelessness, as the vast majority of its story lines unfold in the present but not a present specifically tied to its years of production. The events of “Door to Door” include Manny selling wrapping paper for a fund-raiser and Cam and Gloria searching for Jay’s lost dog, Stella—plotlines that could have occurred just as easily in the 1950s as in the 2010s.

Modern Family's writers, however, tossed aside such atemporal chronology to address the issue of gay marriage: the fifth season's first episode “Suddenly, Last Summer”—its title riffing on Tennessee Williams's Grand-Guignol play of cannibalism and homosexuality—announces a specific date for its narrative action: June 26, 2013, the day of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Hollingsworth v. Perry* decision, which, by refusing to take up a previously appealed decision, granted gay people the legal right to marry in California. This date also marks the *United States v. Windsor* decision, which struck down the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act and entitled married gay couples to federal benefits. One of the milestone dates of the modern gay rights movement, June 26, 2013, interjects *Modern Family* into a historical moment that subverts its promise of timelessness. By beginning on this day and concluding with Mitch and Cam's marriage, the fifth season casts aside any pretense of apoliticism to join in the celebration of gay rights. Sitcom moralism and timelessness may contribute to the overarching conservatism of the genre as a whole, but *Modern Family* demonstrates the elasticity of generic frameworks in treating modern lives, as it also, through its cheery Brady allegiance, asks viewers to ponder the ways in which earlier sitcoms resisted generic conformity as well.

Gay Stereotypes and Representational Debates

Given *Modern Family*'s narratological investment in recoding moralism and timelessness in its promotion of gay marriage, its repudiation by some queer viewers raises questions about the ethics of representing minorities in popular culture. Television's representation of racial minorities frequently sparks widely divergent and impassioned responses, as evident in the critical histories

of such programs as *Julia*, *The Cosby Show*, and *All-American Girl* (1994–95); so, too, has its representation of gay men and lesbians. Brett Mills explains the frequency of these debates: “If the ways in which representation takes place matter, it’s only because there is seen to be some disparity between the ways media characterises people and how they ‘really’ are. In most cases, problems occur because it’s felt that media portrayals conform to limiting and outdated assumptions about people, based on such characteristics as race, age, gender, nationality, and sexuality.”¹⁸ Owing to this erasure in much mainstream media, members of minority communities hunger to see ourselves onscreen, yet owing to the scarcity of these images, each is imbued with a deeper responsibility, warranted or not, to depict the “truth” of our collective lives.

Depictions of homosexuality in recent Western media have rightly received much criticism, such as Sarah Schulman’s excoriating argument that many such portrayals formulate a “fake public homosexuality [that] has been constructed to facilitate a double marketing strategy: selling products to gay consumers that address their emotional need to be accepted while selling a palatable image of homosexuality to heterosexual consumers that meets their need to have their dominance obscured.”¹⁹ Ron Becker concludes his authoritative study *Gay TV and Straight America* by noting the need to situate “contemporary gay-themed programming . . . within the broader history of America’s straight panic,” for so many network depictions of homosexuality offer a truer depiction of straight America’s discomfort with gay people than of gay people ourselves.²⁰ Even *Will & Grace* (1998–2006), with its breakout success in the 1990s attesting to America’s eagerness for queer story lines, generated a backlash, as evident in Thomas Linneman’s assertion that “*Will & Grace* consistently feminized the gay men on the show, often in potentially harmful ways.”²¹ From the early days of television when homosexuality was occluded from view, to the 1970s when Billy Crystal starred as Jodie Dallas on *Soap* (1977–81), to the 1990s with *Will & Grace* and Ellen DeGeneres’s *Ellen*, and to the present with *Modern Family*, the history of gay television representation inevitably has prompted both celebration and disappointment over each milestone: celebration that queer lives are represented onscreen yet disappointment that many of these depictions seem trapped by tired preconceptions of queer lives.

Along these lines, *Modern Family* has engendered controversy over its depiction of Mitch and Cam. During its early seasons, some viewers registered their disappointment over the apparent chastity of their relationship, in that they were rarely depicted as physically affectionate. Such criticism took the writers and cast by surprise, as evident in Eric Stonestreet’s reaction: “While I appreciated that fans care about our characters . . . I never understood why people put their focus on *Modern Family*, a show that introduced a loving, grounded gay couple on television who adopted a baby, and accused it of being homophobic.”²² The critiques nonetheless poured in: Arianna Reiche

endorses the program's portrayal of "gay main characters who are authentic, sympathetic, universally loved among viewers, and who only very occasionally delve into worn stereotypes" but concludes that "it seems like these 'progressive aspects' of the show are qualifiers to regressive, gender-bizarre messages."²³ Observing the shared core values of *Modern Family* and yesteryear's sitcoms such as *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63) and *The Cosby Show*, Bruce Feiler observes, "Perhaps that's why a study last year listed *Modern Family* as the third-most popular show among Republicans. In its fundamentally conservative vision *Modern Family* turns out to be not so modern after all."²⁴ Out actor Tuc Watkins, known for his roles in *One Life to Live* (1968–2013) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004–12), harshly criticized Cam and Mitch's depiction. "It feels a little bit like the gay equivalent of 'blackface,'"²⁵ he alleged, although later softening his words: "What's happening over at *Modern Family* is not 'blackface.' 'Blackface' is hateful. However, I do believe a stereotype is being perpetuated that can be harmful."²⁶ Christina LaVecchia summarizes such criticisms: "In the end, *Modern Family* delivers a non-normative family that still functions with normative family dynamics. While its conservative play on the family sitcom genre has led to the show's commercial and critical success, it has hindered *Modern Family*'s ability to say 'Sayonara!' to conventional gender and familial roles: the show works because, in actuality, its 'modern' families largely function in ways that ultimately reinforce the status quo."²⁷ For these viewers and critics, *Modern Family* fails to realize the promise of its title, thus faltering in its progressive commitment to present America with a new, queer-friendly vision of itself because of the inherent conservatism of its genre.

Such criticisms are predicated on a rather telling assumption: that sexual modernity, as reflected in the program's portrayal of Cam and Mitch's relationship, and stereotypes conflict. And truly, the history of homosexuality in the United States, writ large, can be seen as the history of gay people's struggles against social and sexual conservatism that wields regressive stereotypes as a particularly toxic rhetorical weapon. Resisting the tyranny of stereotypes, progressive proponents of sexual and gender equality argue instead that sexualities and genders represent hierarchical cultural constructions rather than intrinsic truths, which are then deployed to ascribe social privilege to straight people, particularly men, and to denigrate gay people and women as socially inferior.²⁸ In contrast, conservative political and religious institutions bolster the ideological power accorded to those who adhere to the prevailing norms of sexuality and gender, and they often endorse enduring cultural views about proper enactments of masculinity and femininity. Given these poles of the debate, the very possibility of conservatism coexisting with homosexuality has long been treated as virtually a self-negating paradox of political identity—despite the fact that a significant portion of gay men and lesbians describe themselves as politically conservative.²⁹ Stereotypes, for the most part, identify one's stance

in these debates: those who tear them down fight for queer equality; those who employ them do not.

But if queer theory has been built on the foundation of questioning cultural constructions of social and sexual normativity, and if homosexuality is increasingly seen as within the realm of the culturally normative, the conservatism that some viewers see in the show could also reflect the shifting mores around marriage and queer culture generally. That is to say, as sitcom criticism often hinges on a binary view aligning conservatism with normativity and progressivism with antinormativity, and also identifies the roots of the genre in 1950s patriarchy, it overlooks the subversions of the form in the past and the reimagining of the form in the present. Moreover, with gays winning the right to marriage, some theorists are questioning the rise and repercussions of “homonormativity,” fearing that the queer rights movement will be conservatively co-opted through the perceived threat of coupledness and marriage registries.³⁰ Homonormativity productively complicates the very meaning of normativity, as it upsets any semantic assumption that homosexuality and cultural norms are unequivocally at odds with each other.

Notwithstanding these recent shifts, the gay rights movement—and thus the population of gay people as well—has historically been linked to leftist and progressive politics. As Paul Robinson documents, “Gay Liberation was the third major social eruption, after the civil rights and women’s movements, to emerge out of the dissident political culture of the 1960s. Throughout the following two decades, as gays developed national organizations, the movement continued to be tied to the left. . . . Like blacks and feminists, gays were natural Democrats.”³¹ Robinson accurately assesses the historical link between gay people and the Democratic Party, but his words do raise a question: what is a “natural Democrat”? Any such essentialist assumption denies gay people the autonomy of political affiliation, as it enforces a rigid preconception of philosophical identity tied to the biology of one’s sexual partners. While the right’s harsh resistance to gay rights surely explains much of the affiliation of gays with the Democratic Party, it is also worth remembering the many surprising anomalies that have arisen over the years, such as Dick Cheney endorsing gay marriage before Barack Obama. As most sitcoms reside in a zone of political neutrality—I have no idea whether Carol Brady of *The Brady Bunch* voted for Richard Nixon or George McGovern in the 1972 presidential election because the show was completely uninterested in dramatizing this information—so, too, is it mostly unsurprising that Cam and Mitch inhabit a political gray area. One might suspect that they would have voted for Barack Obama over Mitt Romney in the 2012 presidential election, but it would be idle speculation at best, for the program endorses gay marriage without endorsing the Democrats who fought for it, or condemning the Republicans who fought against

it, or acknowledging the countless examples of those who transgressed their party's platforms.

In many ways, then, *Modern Family* upends the type of political binary operative in so much critical analysis, resulting in a queer vision both of homosexuality and of gender—that is, queer precisely because it allows the infiltration of supposedly conservative elements rather than adhering to the stereotype that would depict Cam and Mitch as “natural Democrats.” Thus, to see a conservative backlash against gay and ethnic characters in *Modern Family* misses the ways in which comic stereotypes function queerly, for it accords a prejudicial valence to identities untethered from political discourse and performing in humorous modes. Of course, this is not to defend stereotypes as a positive force within the wider culture—they are not—but to theorize instead how they work in comic forms and how they register shifting codes of humor. Certainly, some would persuasively argue that stereotypes cannot be emancipated from political discourse, for they function within an ideological system in which one deployment of a stereotype could never be divorced from its wider cultural force. Yet many television programs, in employing humor based on stereotypes, attempt to achieve just this feat. For example, blackface is likely the most odious tradition in the history of American humor, one that has been abhorred for decades and that usually generates a controversy when it emerges, yet *30 Rock* (2006–13) employed this trope in its story lines (e.g., “Believe in the Stars,” “Christmas Attack Zone”), with little outcry ensuing. The show’s treatment of blackface, within its wider context of intelligently probing the state of race relations in America and dismantling racial stereotypes in numerous other instances, attests to the ways in which stereotypical humor, despite its painful history and ideological repercussions, can be carefully recuperated.

Within this recuperative play with stereotypes it is essential to note that *Modern Family* invites gay and Hispanic viewers to enjoy the comic exploits of gay and Hispanic characters, thus observing the distinction between laughing *at* and laughing *with* a minority, or perhaps more accurately, blurring the categories of “laughing at” and “laughing with” so that a sharp distinction no longer holds.³² Still, even if stereotypes are being reformulated, it is undoubtedly true that comic uses of cultural stereotypes register more strongly for minorities than for those in the majority, a phenomenon also evident in bigoted epithets. White people do not feel a similar sting from *honkey* as black people do from the “N-word,” nor must straight people confront their fears of discrimination based on sexual orientation if the term *breeders* is applied to them, as queer people must confront our quite rational fears when we hear *fag*, *dylke*, or *tranny*. As it is simply more difficult to insult straight, white people with epithets, it is also more difficult to apply

cultural stereotypes to them for humorous purposes. Still, Jay's grumpy-old-man crustiness, Phil's perpetual dorkiness, and Claire's pins-and-needles maternal irritability push these characters to the point of caricature. Indeed, a recurring humorous trope hints at Claire's alcoholism to paint her as the stereotype of the alienated suburban mother. Phil tells Claire that he and Dede "had a long talk last night after you and I 'split' that bottle of wine and you 'fell asleep' on the stairs," employing scare-quote fingers around "split" and "fell asleep" to suggest that she drank the entire bottle and passed out. When Gloria says that Claire, who has chipped her tooth, sounds drunk on her Election Day radio interview, Haley counters, "That's not her drunk voice"—which suggests that she has heard her mother's drunk voice numerous times before. Later, after losing the election, Claire says, "I don't know about you, but I could use a glass of wine," to which Luke replies, "Now you're gonna hear her drunk voice" ("Election Day"). The humor of Claire's suburban alcoholism, which never threatens her children or her marriage, depends on a stereotype of the emotionally unsatisfied, suburban housewife—a Stepford wife who drinks away the pain of her existence.

Beyond its treatment of Mitch and Cam's romance, *Modern Family's* depiction of Gloria also raises hackles among some viewers, particularly because both she and Claire are initially depicted as stay-at-home mothers. As James Parker ponders, "The gays are so gay, and Gloria so Hispanic-bosomatic—surely *Modern Family* is simply a reactionary caricature?"³³ Michelle Haimoff laments, "I love *Modern Family*. I want to simply enjoy it. But in 2012, I can't get behind a 'modern family' where a woman's place is only in the home."³⁴ For those who choose to view Gloria as a stereotype, ample evidence abounds, particularly in her accounts of life in Colombia, her birth country. The nation's troubled history with drug cartels inspires black humor, such as her declaration, "I'm Colombian. I know a fake crime scene when I see one" ("Truth Be Told"). In an interview, she endorses the stereotype of the fiery Latina: "And yes, people are allowed their private thoughts, and I shouldn't be so angry. But I am Latin, so I get to feel whatever I want" ("iSpy"). Alongside these lines played for humor, *Modern Family* depicts other characters learning valuable lessons in multiculturalism from her. Jay, realizing his cultural myopia, apologizes to Gloria: "If you said as much about America as I said about Colombia, I'd be plenty ticked off." He then gives her plane tickets to Colombia and declares, "I want to see your village, learn your culture. I love you. I'm sure I'm gonna love where you come from" ("Unplugged"). In sum, *Modern Family* exaggerates ethnic stereotypes—and thus the concern over its ostensibly reactionary bent—yet it does so to stage their simultaneous transcendence. And certainly, Gloria avails herself of stereotypes when they suit her desires, as in the following conversation with Claire:

GLORIA: In my country, it is tradition. When the men are out seeking vengeance, the women stay home and they drink.

CLAIRE: Sometimes I think you just make this stuff up.

GLORIA: Do you want a drink or not? (“Hit and Run”)

Gloria’s ethnicity thus becomes a means for her to advance her ambitions in a primarily Anglo community ignorant of the truth of Colombian customs. For Gloria the dangers of stereotyping are counterbalanced by her wily play with them, as she pursues her desires through the creation of a Colombian heritage unmoored from its reality.

Along these lines, it is certainly true that Mitch and Cam enact certain queer stereotypes, yet even if viewers see them as regressive caricatures of fussy queens, nonstereotypical traits balance out their excess. In an early interview, Cam introduces himself to viewers: “I collect antique fountain pens. I’m quite adept at Japanese flower arrangement—ikebana—and I was a starting offensive lineman at the University of Illinois. Surprise!” (“Coal Digger”). Both effeminate in his passion for flower arranging and masculine in his football playing (and subsequent coaching), Cam simultaneously reinforces and shatters stereotypes about gay men. Moreover, the program explicitly tackles the tendency of straight America to treat gay men not merely as effeminate but as women:

CAMERON: There’s nothing gays hate more than when people . . .

MITCHELL: (joining in) treat us like women.

CAMERON: We’re not. We don’t want to go to your baby shower. We don’t have a time of the month. We don’t love pink.

MITCHELL: You love pink.

CAMERON: No, pink loves me. (“Mother’s Day”)

Performing various and conflicting gradations of masculinity, Mitch and Cam leave gendered binaries collapsed in their wake. As Jacques Rothmann argues, “One need only consider the androgynous performances of Cameron and Mitchell . . . as subtle commentary on the fallibility of binary logic.”³⁵ One might quibble with Rothmann’s description of their gender performance as androgynous and posit instead a continual oscillation between gendered poles; nonetheless, it is clear that these characters surpass the gendered binary and create a vision of homosexuality that seems uniquely true to them rather than to a preconceived vision of gay lives—whether regressive or progressive in its political sensibility. And certainly, one could note as well Mitch and Cam’s blanket use of the word *gays* to refer exclusively to gay men rather than to gay people, as they apparently assume their experiences can be universalized

to all others. Many queer women might find this scene exasperatingly true to life, as Mitch and Cam remain blithely ignorant of their privilege (a charge often levied against conservatives) while debunking long-standing assumptions about gay men (in a mostly progressive scene).

Congruent with this perspective, *Modern Family* depicts Mitch and Cam espousing viewpoints that could be construed as conservative, such as when they discuss their decision that Cam will remain at home to raise Lily:

MITCH: We just felt that it was really important that one of us stayed home to raise her, so . . .

CAM: Yeah, and that's not a judgment on other people's choices. It's just that we happen to be a very traditional family. ("Travels with Scout")

Such scenes, with their tacit endorsement of homonormativity, lead Alexander Doty to lament that "these characters are 'good' gays who keep their 'place at the table' by striving to be just like their straight middle class counterparts, living in a monogamous relationship and building up a (mildly dysfunctional) family with children, a stay-at-home 'mom,' and a working 'dad.'"³⁶ LaVecchia sees in this decision the reinstatement of outmoded gender roles: "Through such portrayals, the show implies that a 'modern' gay family must still identify with and embrace gender-normative roles of breadwinner and caregiver."³⁷ Yet in Mitch and Cam's claim to traditional values, *Modern Family* dismantles the type of binary reasoning that would pigeonhole one type of child-raising as conservative and another as progressive, for despite the 1950s norm of the working father and stay-at-home mother, its sense of modernity refuses to cede privilege to yesteryear's gendered paradigms. Today a parent's decision to remain home with his or her children may reflect conservatism—e.g., in adhering to patriarchal religious and social codes—as it may also reflect a progressive vision of parenthood that enables either parent to step in and out of multiple roles, whether professional or domestic. Mitch comments ironically on Cam's statement of their traditional values: "Mm-hmm. Yes, that's what the disabled lesbian shaman who blessed Lily's room said, too" ("Travels with Scout"). Moreover, Cam later returns to work, admitting that he finds his domestic duties frustrating—which again undoes any consistency with the domestic vision that some viewers find troubling.

Modern Family's treatment of homophobia is similarly ambivalent, for it looms within its imaginary primarily for its humorous potential rather than for presenting the brute force of prejudice against gay people. In light of this theme, many of Mitch's assumptions of homophobia rebound on him and demonstrate instead his heterophobia, for he frequently overreacts to perceived acts of discrimination that do not reflect any antigay intent. When

bringing Lily from Vietnam to their California home, Mitch believes his fellow airline passengers are mocking him and his family when one says, “Look at that baby with those creampuffs.” He self-righteously hectors them about the true meaning of family: “Love knows no race, creed, or gender. And shame on you, you small-minded, ignorant few.” His words trail off as Cam points out that their daughter is, in fact, holding the creampuffs purchased for her snack (“Pilot”; fig. 6.1). Also, when Lily begins daycare, Mitch expects to face discrimination, telling Cam, “We’re going to be judged enough as the gay parents there. I don’t want to be the late ones, too,” as they then discover straight parents warmly welcoming another gay couple (“The Bicycle Thief”). Such scenes could be taken as evidence of *Modern Family*’s disinclination to depict homophobia as a core condition of gay people’s lives, but in line with its apolitical leanings, the crude binary between homophobia and heterophobia lies fractured, with individuals instead learning to grapple with the miscommunications on which humor depends.

Still, even if one views Mitch’s and Cam’s characterizations, actions, and plotlines as simultaneously bolstering and undercutting tired stereotypes about homosexuality, it is certainly true that, as numerous fans have complained, gay desire is visually absent from the screen, for the two men rarely kiss or display physical affection for each other. To explain this absence, the series pilot informs viewers that Jay does not want to see evidence of the men’s



FIGURE 6.1 Mitch interprets homophobia in a woman’s remark about “that baby with those creampuffs,” while viewers see the humor based on the disjunction between the words’ literal meaning and their antigay connotations.

affections, as Mitch explains in an interview: “Uh, my dad still isn’t completely comfortable with this”—he indicates Cam and continues—“He still does this thing . . . where he announces himself before walking into any room we’re in—just to make sure he doesn’t have to ever see us kiss” (“Pilot”). In one of the program’s sharpest ironies, Jay’s profession as a manufacturer of high-end closets contrasts with his son’s need to “come out of the closet” as a gay man, contrapuntally highlighting the ways in which a childhood under outdated modes of masculinity necessitates that the father and son refashion their relationship. In this light, because the series rarely depicts Mitch and Cam’s affection for each other, it aligns its audience members with Jay—in their ostensible desire not to see men kissing, despite the express desire of many viewers to see precisely that.

Responding to these criticisms, the episode “The Kiss” dramatizes Mitch’s reticence to kiss Cam in public. While shopping for clothes, Cam moves to embrace his partner, but Mitch ducks, and Cam soon confronts him: “You won’t kiss me in front of other people because you’re ashamed of who you are.” Mitch attempts to appease Cam, telling him, “I’m not the most demonstrative guy around. But . . . I’m, I’m working on it.” At a family get-together, Cam again approaches Mitch for a kiss, yet again he dodges, and Cam announces to the family: “Mitchell is embarrassed to kiss me in front of other people” (“The Kiss”). Discussion ensues, with Gloria contributing, “Jay doesn’t like the lovey-dovey in public either,” as she berates her spouse: “It’s because of you that your son cannot kiss his own lover.” Cam and Mitch reject the hypersexualization of their relationship—“Don’t say ‘lover,’” Cam interjects, and Mitch agrees, “We don’t like ‘lover’”—because this word would imply the primacy of erotic pleasure over emotional intimacy in their relationship. The conflict is resolved when Jay hugs Claire in the shot’s foreground, with Mitch and Cam giving each other a quick kiss in its background. With a father and daughter’s chaste affection visually privileged in this image, homoerotic affection remains marginalized yet present—and in the staging of this scene, Jay still does not have to see his son kiss Cam (fig. 6.2).

These issues raise the question of how graphically *Modern Family* must depict Mitch and Cam’s sex lives for the program to register as progressive—and to escape the accusation of homophobia—for some viewers, which is further complicated by the purposeful conservatism of their romance. Of the episode “Best Men,” in which Mitch and Cam’s friend Sal (Elizabeth Banks) marries her fiancé after making out with a bartender on the way to the altar, producer Higginbotham avows: “We wanted to turn on its head the conversation where Mitch and Cam are the conservative couple who have to deal with this wild crazy party girl who can have a meltdown an hour before the wedding” (“*Modern Family* Writers”). Thus, with its agnostic political leanings



FIGURE 6.2 “The Kiss” episode shows Cam and Mitch kissing and cuddling together, yet even now Jay does not witness their affection.

and its casting of Mitch and Cam as an instructively conservative, long-term gay couple, *Modern Family* presents a comforting vision of homosexuality for its audiences, one that, in many respects, takes the heterosexual paradigm of marriage as the respected norm. But the confused conflation of marriage with conservatism functions in much the same way as blanket accusations of sitcom conservatism: a genre, I have been arguing, is neither conservative nor progressive but a structural foundation for a story, one that can then be capaciously reimagined for endless permutations, much like the ways in which a marriage represents little more than an agreement between two consenting adults, one that reveals precious little of their political beliefs or any of their amatory practices.

Extending this issue, one could also posit Mitch and Cam’s monogamy as indicative of a conservative stance toward sexuality, albeit while expanding the purview of sexual conservatism to include homosexuality. Certainly, along with their distaste for the word *lover*, Mitch and Cam repeatedly stress the monogamous nature of their relationship. When in Palm Springs for New Year’s Eve, they follow a man into a gay bar but quickly rush back out, embarrassed by what they witnessed inside. Cam states, “Okay, no judgment. Perfectly acceptable lifestyle,” with Mitch chiming in, “Just not for us” (“New Year’s Eve”). During a trip to Las Vegas, and following a series of miscommunications, Mitch and Cam find their friend Langham in their hotel bathtub. Langham gamely inquires, “Both of you? Well, OK,” to which Mitch replies, “No, no. No, not okay. What are you doing here?” (“Las Vegas”).³⁸ Yet by

raising the possibility that Mitch and Cam could engage in a threesome yet choose not to, *Modern Family* alerts its audience to a wide range of sexual possibilities beyond the realm of hetero- or homonormativity.

Does the series' play with Mitch and Cam's child-rearing, marital monogamy, and other such potentially "homonormative" and conservative viewpoints thus construct them as reactionary? For numerous critics, such as Doty and LaVecchia, the answer would appear to be a firm yes, yet in the end it would be rather limiting to foreclose the possibility that these fictional characters could be revolutionarily conservative rather than conventionally liberal. In these and other such scenes, *Modern Family* dismantles the presumption that gay characters should represent exclusively progressive practices, which could in effect be more radical for exploding the binary equivalencies uniting homosexuality with liberalism, despite their historic tethering throughout the decades before and after Stonewall. And while it is certainly true that many of us queers are quite liberal in our politics, to seek a doctrinaire liberalism for queer television characters would ironically bleach them of the individuality and quirkiness necessary for their longevity and appeal.

For Higginbotham the power of Mitch and Cam's relationship arises in its apolitical applicability to heterosexuals as a paradigm to follow: "Straight couples all over this country often identify with and enjoy the neurotic relationship bullshit Cam and Mitch endure together. I love when people approach me with, 'My dad and mom are so Mitch and Cam.' Every time it happens, the broken, freaked-out teenager in me heals a little bit more."³⁹ Within Higginbotham's therapeutic assessment of the characters and their social function, the possibility that straight people will see themselves in gay characters, and thus offer greater acceptance to young gay people, accords a revolutionary power to gay characters who could nonetheless be construed as stereotypically gay and unthreateningly conservative. If conservatism merges comfortably with queerness in these instances, if queerness includes conservatism within its purview, then conservatism is not the monolithically patriarchal force that it once was, and the meaning of gay stereotypes has forever changed. In the end, *Modern Family* proves the radical oversimplicity of much television scholarship and viewer response, for it shreds the poles of conservatism and liberalism on which so much analysis is staked for an oscillating, vibrant, yet rather staid queerness, one awash in clichés and stereotypes that are simultaneously transcended through the reinvention of one of television's oldest and most enduring genres.

***Modern Family* and the Anal Imaginary**

Even if one cedes merit to the allegations of *Modern Family*'s conservative bent, it would be remiss to overlook the program's repeated staging of

anal desires to counterbalance assumptions of heterosexual normativity. As homosexuality was long designated the love that dare not speak its name, so, too, has anal eroticism long been considered beyond the purview of sexual normativity—despite the fact that one need not be gay to indulge in its pleasures. The ostensible shock of anal sexuality arises because of cultural definitions of masculinity that discount the likelihood of men—the penetrators of heterosexual intercourse—allowing themselves to be penetrated, in an erotic abdication of the hierarchical dynamics that fall within the ambit of male privilege. Within the realm of sexual politics, such reversals trigger discrimination and prejudice, resulting in unfathomable repercussions to the lives of real people, but within the realm of humor, such reversals invite ironic and comic revisions to the erotic sphere. Leo Bersani daringly posits the latent power of passive sex for reformulating cultural views of eroticism: “But what if we said, for example, not that it is wrong to think of so-called passive sex as ‘demeaning,’ but rather that *the value of sexuality itself is to demean the seriousness of efforts to redeem it?*” Building on the long-standing denigration of homosexuality as a moribund pursuit because it engenders no children, he further makes the point about anal sex that “if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared—differently—by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death.”⁴⁰ Bersani does not theorize the comic potential of anal sex in his argument, but his suggestive phrasings—“demean the seriousness,” “celebrated”—capture the latent humor always possible when upending hierarchies of desire.

Even today the issue of gay sex appears to perplex some straight people, with countless questions about which partner does what to whom. Foremost, the sexually uninformed fret over the mechanics of two women or two men copulating, with the symmetry of same-sex bodies confounding assumptions based on the asymmetrical coupling of heterosexual intercourse. Such curiosity relies on an insistent ignorance of the answers readily available to heterosexuals as well as gay people: cunnilingus, fellatio, and anal sex (to name the most obvious possibilities). The real question, then, is not how gay people pleasure each other sexually but which partner does what to whom. With heterosexual intercourse, one knows who is the penetrator and who is the penetrated—or, at least, one might assume one knows—but with same-sex relationships this information is occluded from view.

To this end, if *Modern Family*'s audience wonders about the logistics of Mitch and Cam's sex life, they simply enact their friend Sal's long-standing curiosity. When the two men fight over Sal's wedding ring because Cam thinks her impending nuptials will mock the sanctity of marriage, Mitch struggles atop Cam, who bends over defensively. Sal approaches and declares, “Well, this is a mystery solved” (“Best Men”; fig. 6.3). Sal surely knows the myriad enactments of gay sexuality—she refers to Cam as “Big Bear” and



FIGURE 6.3 Mitch wrestles himself atop of Cam as they struggle over Sal's wedding ring. Their positioning, or so she assumes, resolves her long-standing curiosity about their sex life ("Best Men").

to Mitch as "Baby Cub," suggesting her awareness of bear culture ("Great Expectations")—yet this pivotal question of top and bottom has remained unanswered over their many years of friendship. Of course, Sal merely extrapolates the relevance of this happenstance positioning to her friends' sex lives, but her quest for knowledge testifies to the power of the anal imaginary, in that it unleashes tantalizing questions about desire that cannot be readily answered.

Notwithstanding Jay's unquestioned performance of heterosexuality and his enjoyment of its benefits, *Modern Family* repeatedly stages him in positions of anal eroticism—both acknowledged and unacknowledged in the plotlines' narrative action. Foremost, as an avatar of yesteryear's masculinity, Jay embodies the privileges of white heterosexuality, such as when, in an interview, he expresses his nostalgia for yesteryear's social codes: "Man, those were the good old days." Gloria points out to him the limitations of this era—"Yeah, unless you were a woman, black, Hispanic, or gay"—which he acknowledges: "True. But if you were a straight white guy who played football, [you] really couldn't have a bad day" ("Planes, Trains, and Cars"). Surprisingly, then, this epitome of straight male privilege finds himself in an array of homoerotic positions. He and Cam bump butts when changing in a locker room ("Moon Landing"), and when they practice passing off a football in a huddle, Jay bends over his (future) son-in-law, as Cam states, "Perfect. That one kinda hurt" ("Coal Digger"; fig. 6.4). The joke hinges on the unlikelihood of passing off a football to another man causing any pain, whereas anal sex can entail initial discomfort. At the driving range with his friend Shorty, Jay is uncomfortable as his friend



FIGURE 6.4 Jay and Cam pass off the football in “Coal Digger.”

helps him with his swing, as Shorty embraces him from behind and advises him with a double entendre: “If you never relax, you’re never going to get that shaft where it belongs” (“Fifteen Percent”; fig. 6.5). These repeated hints of Jay’s anal eroticism complicate his performance of heterosexuality, for they stage homosexuality as a spectral desire repeatedly arising in his relationships with other men.

Numerous plotlines and scenes likewise thrust Phil into encounters brimming with homoerotic tension. After Jay throws his back out and convalesces in a hammock, Phil falls in with him and explains his apparent erection: “I keep my wallet in my front pocket, so that’s what that is” (“Hawaii”). When Phil helps Cam decorate the Christmas tree, its lights spark suggestively between their crotches, as if their unspoken passion ignites (“Express Christmas”; fig. 6.6). Phil invites his new friend Dave (Matthew Broderick) over for a “man date,” unaware that Dave is romantically attracted to him. Following a series of mishaps, they end up shirtless, and Phil apparently invites Dave to have sex with him: “How about we head up to the bedroom for some half-time festivities?” Dave, emotionally fragile over a recent breakup, kisses Phil and leaves (“Mystery Date”). These scenes rely on Phil’s hapless naiveté and do not suggest his homosexuality, yet they concomitantly depict the precarious position of heterosexuality in *Modern Family*’s story lines. With homoerotic



FIGURE 6.5 Shorty helps Jay with his golf swing in “Fifteen Percent.”



FIGURE 6.6 Phil assists Cam with the falling Christmas tree with their crotches in close proximity in “Express Christmas.” In the moving video, the sparking lights symbolize an unacknowledged erotic tension.

desires percolating throughout its main and supporting characters, the attraction of homosexuality arises in its comic potential to destabilize the ubiquity of heterosexuality within both the clan and their wider culture.

While *Modern Family* stages a spectral anal eroticism for Jay and Phil, it clearly suggests that Claire and Phil enjoy an active sex life—which it visually hints could include anal intercourse. When Haley, Alex, and Luke bring their parents breakfast in bed, they discover them in *flagrante delicto*. Phil explains in the ensuing interview, “Yeah, our kids walked in on us. We were, as they say, having sex,” to which Claire adds: “That’s not a euphemism, Phil. It’s exactly what we were doing. Having sex . . . in front of our children” (“Caught in the Act”; fig. 6.7). While the image is only onscreen for a flash, it is clear that Claire and Phil are positioned “doggy-style,” which at least broaches the possibility of anal intercourse. Furthermore, in response to an interviewer’s prompt of “the thing I can’t believe we got away with,” writer Danny Zuker offers, “The kids walking in on Phil and Claire having sex. More specifically, the position they were in when they were caught having sex. Watch the episode again. It was the funniest choice by a mile, and . . . it was definitely one of the most racy moments we ever put out there.”⁴¹ Of the myriad postures women and men can employ for sexual pleasure, Phil and Claire choose one that both disrupts the missionary position’s privileged status in the normative imaginary and invites questions about the ways in which this long-married couple pursue erotic pleasures. As viewers will likely never know whether Sal is correct in her presumption about Mitch and Cam’s respective positions in bed, neither will viewers likely ever know whether Phil and Claire enjoy anal



FIGURE 6.7 Like Cam and Mitch, Claire and Phil apparently partake of anal pleasures (“Caught in the Act”).

sex. But in raising the question, *Modern Family* resignifies the understood telos of familial sexuality—procreation—into heterosexual pleasures deemed perverse when engaged in by gay people.⁴²

As this modern family pursues erotic delights beyond the standard missionary position, they also acknowledge interfamilial desires, which range outside the committed pairs of Claire and Phil, Gloria and Jay, and Mitch and Cam. Most obviously, Phil has a crush on Gloria, as evident when she, a hairdresser before marrying Jay, offers to cut Phil's hair because she still cuts Jay's: "I guess I could. I do Jay. Why can't I do you?" Phil stammers in reply, "You—you can do me" ("Regrets Only"). Numerous scenes hint that Manny's relationship with his mother borders on the incestuous, such as when he tells his stepfather, who impatiently waits for his wife, "I think you've lost perspective, Jay. You know what I would give to wait around for a woman like that?" Jay replies, "Reel it in, creepy. That's your mother up there" ("The Late Show"). Manny's crush on Haley is apparent when he excitedly asks Jay whether she is coming over for a family sleepover, to which his stepfather replies, "You're related. I will spray you with the hose" ("Great Expectations"). Likewise, Lily's coy greeting of Manny suggests that she has a crush on him ("And One to Grown On"). Jealous over Mitch's friendship with Gloria, Claire climbs in bed with Jay in a scene that grows uncomfortably sexual, as she hypothesizes that her brother seeks Gloria's companionship as a substitute for their mother: "It'd actually be adorable if it weren't so sick." She continues, "I feel like Mitchell is a grown man, he has a child, and he's still working out some psychodrama from twenty years ago. Daddy, can I have a sip of your beer? Thanks." With Jay's beer bottle tellingly positioned at his crotch, Claire reaches for it and drinks, as she then realizes, "Mitch cozies up to Mom. I go running to Daddy" ("After the Fire"; fig. 6.8). Positing Mitch's Oedipus complex while enacting her Electra complex with her father's phallic beer bottle in hand and mouth, Claire embodies the ways in which interfamilial desires blur relationships ostensibly clearly demarcated. This is not to suggest that *Modern Family* portrays actual incestuous undertones to the family's interactions but that normative family desires involve the difficulty of defining normative family desires.

In another comic theme popping up throughout the series that testifies to its unruly anal and erotic imaginary, adult conversations assume a pedophilic register, such as when Cam discusses the musical program he is directing at Luke and Manny's middle school and declares, "Years from now, some of these kids will still be talking about the way I Sondheimized them" ("The Musical Man")—oblivious to the disturbing pun on Stephen Sondheim's name. When Manny needs assistance in flirting with his latest crush, Cam assumes the role of his Cyrano de Bergerac, coaching him over the phone while standing in line at a bakery: "You are the prettiest, smartest, funniest girl in the sixth grade. I know you're only eleven, but I can't stop thinking about you. I've loved



FIGURE 6.8 Claire sips Jay’s beer in bed—with incestuous undertones humming throughout the scene.

talking to you online. I think we should become boyfriend and girlfriend.” As his fellow customers look on in horror, he escalates matters by explaining, “Oh, no, it’s not what you think. I’m talking to a little boy” (“The One That Got Away”). Because Cam was born on a Leap Day, he claims his fortieth birthday as his tenth, and after a small squabble, Mitch consoles him—“In fact, you’re still that sexy little eight-year-old I fell in love with”—as a nearby mother shields her child and walks away (“Leap Day”). Pederastic humor is not limited to the gay characters, and when Manny and Jay go to a local courthouse to get a copy of the boy’s birth certificate—on the day that gay marriage has been legalized in California—their conversation unsettles the joyous couples waiting to be wed:

MANNY: Jay, I’m scared. I’m not sure I want to go through with it.

JAY: We didn’t drive all the way down here for that piece of paper for you to get cold feet at the last second. And what happened anyway? You’ve been looking forward to this day for months.

MANNY: I know, but maybe we should wait until next year. I’m still kind of young to be doing this.

JAY: We’re not waiting. I already paid for you, and your mother signed off. This is happening. (“Suddenly, Last Summer”)

Modern Family does not attempt to redeem pederasty and to position it within the realm of the sexually normative; on the contrary, the shocked reactions of the onlookers in these scenes register their abhorrence for the violations they imagine are being carried out against children. At the same time,

by exploiting the comic line between normative and perverse sexualities, the writers continually foreground the elasticity of sexuality for defining familial relationships. The Pritchetts, Tucker-Pritchetts, and Dunphys pursue desires well within the realm of the normative, as the show has expanded anal eroticism into this purview, yet much of its humor depends on sexuality's ability to destabilize their visions of one another and the ways in which outsiders see this family during chance encounters. Given the wrong words at the wrong time, *Modern Family* proposes, just about anyone can look like a pervert.

“Li’l Dribblers” and the End of the Innocent Child

Despite its provocative story lines, *Modern Family* has generated few controversies concerning its depictions of familial eroticism and children's sexuality. To some degree this could be because its primary scheduled time—Wednesday at 9 p.m. on ABC—lies outside the presumed “family hour” of network programming, as well as the fact that several contemporary shows airing within the phantom construction of the family hour, such as *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–14) and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–), feature risqué sexual humor. Moreover, even as this modern family pushes into the anal imaginary and incestuous and pedophilic humor, and even as it depicts frank discussions between parents and their children about sex, it retains the vision of the innocent child. Gloria, who at one point worries that Manny will never experience sexual pleasure—“The poncho, plus the flute, plus the stupid dance—my son will die a virgin” (“Run for Your Wife”)—also worries that he is growing up too fast and has bought pornography. “Do you think he ordered some movies?” she anxiously asks Jay, who admits the likelihood that he has: “Movies, magazines. Whatever the hell.” Refusing to see her son as a maturing adolescent, Gloria clings to her vision of innocence: “How dare do you say that, Jay? He’s a little boy! He’s just a boy” (“Go Bullfrogs!”). Similarly fearing that Luke has consumed Internet pornography, Claire plans to sabotage her son’s voyeuristic pleasures—“But I am telling him that every time he looks at porn, God kills a puppy”—as she soon laments: “Is it really too much to ask that he stay a sweet, innocent kid forever?” (“Not in My House”).

As mothers fret over their sons’ sexual innocence, Phil likewise worries that Haley will lose her virginity and discourages her boyfriend, Dylan, from escalating their relationship, employing the hackneyed baseball metaphor of sex as they watch a game: “He’s been stuck on second base forever, and I’m pretty sure he’s gonna try and steal third, which is just a terrible, terrible idea. How are you and Haley doing?” (“Come Fly with Me”). In accord with Phil’s wariness over Haley’s sexual activity, the series suggests more than depicts her erotic maturation. In the first season, Dylan sleeps on the floor next to Haley’s bed. She says her parents will think they slept together, but he replies “As

if”—thereby clearly indicating that they have not consummated their relationship (“Airport 2010”). He repeatedly serenades Haley, singing to her, “I just wanna do you, do you” (“The Incident”), and after a breakup he hopes to win her back with the lyrics, “Imagine me naked, I imagine you nude” (“Bixby’s Back”)—words indicating that they have not yet had sex. When Phil realizes that Haley has lost her virginity, and that Claire has guarded this secret for three months, it first appears that he is angry over his wife’s deception, asking her, “So this giant thing happened to our firstborn and you kept me in the dark about it for three whole months?” Claire responds, “I’m sorry. I just wasn’t sure how you’d . . .” as he hugs her in gratitude (“Virgin Territory”). Writer Danny Zuker admits he expected the episode in which Claire sends Haley to college with condoms to generate a controversy—“I was utterly convinced there would be an uproar when the episode aired, but happily I was wrong”—which testifies to the overarching normality of the story line. Zuker further concedes: “Honestly, I don’t think this particular show is harmed by the restrictions of network television.”⁴³ *Modern Family* obliterates the family sitcom’s queer fantasy of children’s innocence yet still showcases its appeal, recognizing the simple fact that as children grow up, most become sexually active adults.

“Li’l Dribblers” is the name of Luke and Manny’s basketball team (“Benched”)—which apparently refers to their youth and the necessary skill of dribbling but which also encodes a slang term for ejaculations that, rather than shooting forth, ooze out. So basketball dribbling becomes a metaphor for sexual maturation, as these “Li’l Dribblers” will presumably grow into manhood and achieve more impressive sexual feats than simply dribbling. In satirizing the familial fetishization of the innocent child, *Modern Family* asks viewers to see domestic sexuality from a new and queer perspective. Whether its depictions of homosexuality are deemed conservative or progressive by viewers, whether its stereotypes are enjoyed as playful statements of a postprejudiced America or denounced as antiquated bigotries of yesteryear, *Modern Family*’s queerness demands that its viewers acknowledge the protean force of sexuality—which, since the appearance of the American family sitcom, has repeatedly restructured the codes of the genre, even when apparently absent from the screen. In myriad ways *Modern Family* envisions the potential of an audience seeking out the queer pleasures possible through the various fantasies encoded in domestic sitcoms—a theoretical possibility explored in the conclusion of this volume.