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No Fats, No Femmes: An Examination of the Value of Masculine Performance
Within the Gay Male Community

“The thing you need to know is it’s all about sex” (*Queer as Folk*, 1). This first line from the pilot episode of Showtime’s drama *Queer as Folk* identifies sex as the main concern of the gay male community. I suggest rather that the thing you really need to know is that it’s all about masculinity and performing gender roles. Although sex does play a big role in the gay male community, masculinity is a role that is much more complex, and much more difficult. Filing through profiles in online gay chat rooms, it is not difficult to find the headline “No Fats, No Femmes.” This headline suggests that the person on the other end of that link is not interested in talking to anyone who does not have masculine looks or mannerisms. As a result of patriarchal gender roles, the definition of masculinity within the gay male community follows a strict set of guidelines. By examining definitions of patriarchy and gender identity, and by using the show *Queer as Folk* to examine the application of gender roles within the gay male community, we can see how patriarchy perpetuates itself through the behavioral and visual performance of masculinity in this subculture.

Patriarchy and Gender Identity

In order to begin this analysis, it is important that I first define the word 'patriarchy' as I use it in this argument. In her book *Learning for a Diverse World*, Lois Tyson defines patriarchy as "any society in which men hold all or most of the power" (86). Power, in this case, relates to the ability to influence others and form moral and ethical belief systems. American society perpetuates the power of patriarchy by socializing boys as masculine, dominant and aggressive, while forming girls who are feminine, weak and submissive. This allows men to hold the power within patriarchal society and reinforce the gender roles that allow them to maintain a higher level of influence in society. According to Tyson, "patriarchal men and women believe that anyone who violates traditional gender roles is in some way unnatural, unhealthy, or even immoral" (86). By using these gender roles as methods of conditioning people in society, patriarchy enforces the ideas of male masculinity and female femininity onto new generations, reinforcing the dichotomous relationship between genders. However, these gender roles leave little space for alteration, making it difficult for individuals with alternate gender identities, such as some members of the gay community, to fit into society.

At this point it is also necessary to discuss the importance of gender identity within this patriarchal social structure. Judith Butler describes this concept in her book *Gender Trouble*: "Inasmuch as 'identity' is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of 'the person' is called into question by the cultural emergence of those 'incoherent' and 'discontinuous' gendered beings" (17). Here, Butler analyzes how people form identity based on the social concepts of sex,

gender and sexuality. By referring to this opposing group of gendered beings as ‘incoherent’ and ‘discontinuous,’ terms which show a deviation from the norm, she highlights the idea that there are strict rules governing gender identity which the members of this group do not follow. Since being homosexual conflicts with the stabilizing concept of heterosexuality, gay men fall into Butler’s category of incoherent and discontinuous gendered beings. So, referring back to Tyson’s description, patriarchal men and women would reject gay men on that basis that do not conform to traditional gender roles. Thus, this threat of rejection necessitates the staged performance of masculinity in order for gay men to fit into the American patriarchal society which grants more power to dominant and aggressive men.

Behavioral Performance of Gender Roles

Although it is difficult to identify, masculinity is a very complex performance of the typically male patriarchal gender role. In the second episode of *Queer as Folk*, the character Emmett, a flamboyant and feminine gay man, states: “Well I could be a...a...real man if I wanted to. You know, just lower my voice, stop gesturing with my hands, make sure my face is expressionless [...] talk about *nailing bitches and RBI’s*” (*Queer as Folk*, 2, emphasis added). The final part of this statement indicates the actor’s change to a lower tone of voice. This change elicits the idea that a lower tone of voice, along with the lack of hand gestures or facial expressions are characteristics attributed to masculinity. Also, the actor’s change in voice and tone shows the shift into the performance of masculinity. Director Russell Mulcahy uses this shift in behavior as a comedic juxtaposition of feminine and masculine roles resulting in a scene where the

character's masculinity is clearly staged. Interestingly enough, it also exemplifies the belief that failing to participate in this performance of masculinity means that the person is not a 'real man,' suggesting that feminine gay men are not really men at all.

According to Beth B. Hess and Myra Marx Ferree, editors of the book *Analyzing Gender*, being a 'real' man or woman means being "without elements socially defined as belonging in the other category" (16). So, patriarchal gender roles would not define Emmett as a 'real' man because he does not regularly conform to the guidelines of male masculinity. Since Emmett must actively perform masculinity, rather than have it come to him naturally, patriarchy does not socially define him as belonging in the category of 'real' men, thus alienating him from other patriarchal men in society.

This definition of a 'real' man through masculine nonperformativity, the idea that masculinity is a natural state of being for men rather than a performance, is one that Judith Halberstam refutes in her essay "Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance." By examining female impersonations of masculinity in drag king performances, Halberstam shows the artificial nature of gender. She claims that "white men derive enormous power from assuming and confirming the nonperformative nature of masculinity" (431). She argues that men gain power through the assumption that masculinity is natural for men, natural in this sense meaning that it is genuine and authentic rather than being staged as a performance. This naturalness gives power to men in a patriarchal society because it makes masculinity seem like the 'right way' for men to be. Additionally, in this view, since men are more in tune with the natural way of being, their 'natural masculinity' gives them more reason to hold the power in society. However, Halberstam refutes this idea with her argument:

“If the nonperformance is part of what defines white male masculinity, then all performed masculinities stand out as suspect and open to interrogation. For example, gay male macho clones clearly exaggerate masculinity, and in them, masculinity tips into feminine performance.” (431)

If masculinity were really nonperformative, then there would be no need for these exaggerated performances. The existence of these exaggerations exposes masculinity as a performance of gender, thus threatening the ‘natural’ masculine claim to patriarchal power by showing the artificiality of all gender performance. Relating this back to *Queer as Folk*, Emmett’s exaggerated act of masculinity should not set him apart from other men because, although they do it more subtly, even ‘real’ patriarchal men act out their gender role through the performance of masculinity. However, since men derive so much power from the assumed naturalness of masculinity, as Halberstam notes, the fact that Emmett clearly stages his masculinity rather than conveying it in a more natural way sets him apart from other patriarchal men, making it more difficult for him to assimilate into the dominant culture of masculine heterosexual men.

Lois Tyson furthers the discussion of masculine performance in discussing Gay and Lesbian Theory. Tyson writes:

In contemporary America, sexual relations with, or even desire for, a same-sex partner define a man as gay. However, in white, working-class, American culture at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as in some Latino cultures, a man who has sex with another man is still defined as a heterosexual as long as he assumes the masculine role: as long as he penetrates but is never penetrated by his partner and as long as he behaves in a dominant, aggressive, traditionally masculine

manner. (118)

According to Tyson's definition, masculinity involves being dominant and aggressive, terms which correlate with the idea of having power to influence and control others. The key point here is the idea of the performance of masculinity as a determiner of heterosexuality. The fact that society was, at one point, willing to overlook a person's sexual acts in determining his sexuality and willing to focus primarily on how well he performs his dominant masculine gender role, shows the extent to which patriarchal society values masculinity over sexual identity.

Interestingly, Tyson's idea of engaging in same-sex erotic situations being excusable 'as long as he penetrates but is never penetrated' transfers to the gay community as exhibited in *Queer as Folk*, reinforcing patriarchal standards of masculinity. In episode 2, when discussing rumors about the sexual activity of a romantic interest, Emmett claims, "turns out, he's a big nelly bottom. [laughs] Uh, so discouraging. Are there no real men left?" (2). Referring to the other character as a bottom means that he is penetrated during sex. Furthermore, the term 'nelly' has a connotation of femininity and weakness, suggesting that being penetrated during sex equates to feminine gender performance and therefore a failure to perform masculinity. Even though the character he discusses is very visually masculine, Emmett questions whether or not there are any real men left, suggesting that men who are penetrated during sex are not real men. This correlates to Tyson's idea in that the definition of masculinity involves dominant behavior and penetrating rather than being penetrated, setting up masculinity as a behavioral performance rather than an attribute that simply goes along with being male. Based on Emmett's performance of and ideas about masculinity, the

viewer can see how the patriarchal value of masculinity creeps into the gay community, reinforcing gender roles in a subculture that is based upon the acceptance of alternate sexualities and gender identities. The existence of these strict gender roles within this subculture makes it even more difficult for people who fall in the grey area between masculinity and femininity to find acceptance within the community.

Even within the gay community, as displayed in *Queer as Folk*, patriarchal standards of masculinity appear. In one scene, in response to being referring to as ‘obviously gay’ Emmett asks, “Are you accusing me of being obvious?” (*Queer as Folk*, 2). To be ‘obviously gay’ in this case translates to the failure to perform masculine gender roles. The fact that he considers this an accusation shows how much these characteristics are rejected by society. To ‘accuse’ someone suggests that they have acted in a way that society considers wrong or bad, so to ‘accuse’ someone of being obviously gay through failing to perform masculinity reinforces the idea that, even within the gay community, men should be masculine. Performing femininity rather than masculinity sets Emmett up as one of Butler’s ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings because he does not adhere to his societal gender role, showing patriarchy’s method of rejection as a way of perpetuating those gender roles.

In his book *The American Man*, Joseph Pleck comments on the differentiation in male power based on sexual orientation. He writes, “Our society uses the male heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy as a central symbol for *all* the rankings of masculinity, for the division on *any* grounds between males who are “real men” and have power and males who are not” (424). Pleck’s argument that male power is differentiated by sexuality relates back to *Queer as Folk*’s example of the accusative nature of calling

someone 'obviously gay' because it puts that person in the position of having less social power than a heterosexual male based solely on his ability to perform masculine gender roles. Since patriarchal men use the differentiation between heterosexuality and homosexuality as a grounds for division within society, heterosexual men gain more power in patriarchal society, as previously mentioned by Tyson, by deeming homosexuality unhealthy, unnatural, or immoral. Emmett's failure to act the part of masculinity results in society ranking him as apart from those "real men" that Pleck refers to, who have power, and casting him as one of Butler's 'incoherent' beings who lack social power. Therefore, this patriarchal ranking and stratification of men perpetuates homophobia and makes it more difficult for people to fit into society if they do not act out the gender roles assigned to their sex.

Visual Performance of Gender Roles

In addition to the behavioral performance of masculinity, the visual aspect of the male body also has a part in this gender role. Thinking of the physical body as a visual representation of gender role performance exposes gay male body image as a costume in the performance of masculinity. Tyson states that traditional gender roles define men as "naturally rational, strong, protective, and decisive" (87) and describe women as "naturally emotional (which, in a patriarchy, usually means irrational) weak, nurturing, and submissive" (87). So, men who evaluate their partners based on how well their physical appearance matches their gender roles would value women who appear weak, submissive, and in need of protection or men who are strong, muscular and protective. Thus, the body becomes a kind of costume in the performance of these gender roles,

setting strict guidelines on what men and women should look like as well as how they should act.

Examining *Queer as Folk* shows how the male body can be a costume in the performance of masculinity. For example, in Episode 2 of *Queer as Folk* the character Justin claims, “His body, God his body was so amazing! I could see every muscle!” (2). The fact that Justin venerates the body of his partner and specifically his use of the word ‘God’ in that veneration show the value that he places on the visual aspect of the male body. Justin’s emphasis that he could ‘see every muscle’ shows that he greatly values physical appearance. Furthermore, it also shows that muscles are a valuable asset to the male body, creating a list of physical characteristics that qualify as masculine. Since men are supposed to be strong and powerful, according to patriarchal standards, gay men seeking masculine partners give extra appreciation to the musculature of the male body because it is a visual representation of that strength and power. This reverence of the male body and the masculinity that it represents perpetuates patriarchal ideas of male power and strength, thus alienating those who do not physically appear masculine.

In her study, “Sexual Orientation and Prevalence of Body Dissatisfaction and Eating Disordered Behaviors: A Population-Based Study of Adolescents,” Simone French examines the reasons why these visual performances of gender are so important. She states that “[men] tend to evaluate potential romantic partners on the basis of physical appearance to a greater extent than do women” (124). Much like Justin’s reverence for the muscular body of his partner in *Queer as Folk*, men who select partners based on their appearance condition their potential romantic partners to exhibit these visual performances of gender roles in order to appear more attractive. At the cost of

being unable to attract a male partner, gay men and heterosexual women must appear as physical representations of patriarchal gender roles. This tendency of men to judge the visual aesthetic of their partners allows patriarchal men to have the power to influence their partner's self esteem, putting more pressure on the other partner to perform visually, thus casting body image as a costume in the performance of gender.

Some might argue that this kind of objectification does not apply to the relationship between two strong patriarchal men; however, Joseph Pleck refutes that argument, showing that men also tend to stratify themselves within society. He states that "in addition to hierarchy over women, men create hierarchies and rankings among themselves according to criteria of 'masculinity'" (424). One of these criteria of masculinity is body image and appearing masculine. As it pertains to the gay male community, this results in some gay men setting the standards of visual masculinity ever higher, making the ideal masculine costume even more difficult to attain. By stratifying themselves based on these criteria of masculinity, gay men exhibit the value of visual masculine performance within patriarchy.

The visual performance of masculinity through body image is one of the most predominant forms of hierarchy within the gay male community, as exhibited in *Queer as Folk*. For example, in the second half of the pilot episode, while the characters Emmett and Ted exercise at the gym, Emmett says, "See that number in the red shorts?" to which Ted responds, "I could work out for a hundred years and never look like that" (2). The image of the man that they discuss in this scene has large muscles and a very defined body, highlighted by the fact that he is shown doing bicep curls, which exaggerates his musculature. In this scene, director Russell Mulcahy conveys Pleck's idea of hierarchy-

formation in the context of the gay male community. By showing the less visually masculine character Ted, as portrayed by Scott Lowell, in contrast to a man who more resembles the ideal masculine physique, Mulcahy shows the stratification based on visual masculine performance. When Ted voices his insecurity by saying that he would ‘never look like that,’ the audience sees how he ranks himself below this other man based solely on his appearance.

Keeping this idea of hierarchical stratification in mind, it is necessary to explore the effects it has on the gay male community. Referring back to Simone French’s article on body image dissatisfaction, she states that “twice as many homosexual as heterosexual males reported having a poor body image (27.8% vs. 12.0%)” (123). French explains this by stating that gay men are more inclined than heterosexual men to have poor body image because of “the degree to which [they] experience sexual objectification by their romantic partners” (124). Since gay men have other men as romantic partners and men tend to value the visual performance of gender roles more than women do, gay men tend to experience a greater feeling of objectification by their sexual partners than heterosexual men. So, in reference to Pleck’s argument about the stratification of men based on criteria of masculinity, this method of objectification within the gay community acts as a way of boosting men who exhibit more desirable visual masculine traits. However, it also acts as a method of alienating those who do not meet the standards of visual masculinity, casting them down to the lower ranks of a community that is supposed to be based on accepting alternate gender identities.

Another way that body image works as a representation of masculinity is through the celebration of male genitalia, which works as a symbol of power within patriarchy.

In her “Queer Patriarchies, Queer Racisms, International” Heidi Nast writes, “the symbolic and practical power of the womb and procreation were often superceded in ancient Greek societies by practical and symbolic hypervaluation of maleness, expressed in some rural areas in ritual celebrations of penis fetishes” (838). Ancient Greek patriarchal societies valued masculinity and displayed this ‘hypervaluation of maleness’ through celebrations of the penis—a physical representation of maleness and masculinity. By focusing on the symbolic power of the penis, rather than that of the womb, the roots of patriarchy steered societal power away from women and towards men. Using the penis as a visual and physical representation of patriarchal power, the celebration of the penis has transferred into the gay community as well, reinforcing the desire for physical masculinity in the form of body image.

Director Russell Mulcahy depicts the value of visual masculine performance in *Queer as Folk* using different levels of scene when discussing the character Ted. In the second episode, Mulcahy creates a scene where Ted sits at his desk, watching pornography on a gay website. The model on the website has very exaggerated visual masculine features, such as visible abdominals, broad shoulders, and large muscles. The image of Ted staring at the screen is accompanied by the voice-over of the narrator, Michael, claiming “it has been so long since he’s had sex with someone he didn’t download, he’s forgotten that all those perfect bodies and perfect faces aren’t real, that no one’s really there, that they’re just shadows” (2). There are three levels to this scene. On the first level, there is the model on the website. He performs visual masculinity through his exaggerated masculine physique, but also through the fact that he is paid to perform for the website. His sexualized performance of masculinity is quite literally a role that he

plays in this sense, where he acts out his masculinity for payment. The second level of scene is Ted watching the video on the website. The fact that Ted uses this image as a method of sexual gratification shows how internalized his desire for masculinity is. He values the visual strength and musculature as well as the symbolic power of the penis, exposing his internal desire to achieve the masculine ideal. Finally, the third level of scene comes about when the narrator claims that all these perfect bodies and faces that Ted is looking at aren't real. By having Michael refer to these images as 'only shadows,' Mulcahy conveys the idea that these performances are not representations of people, but of exaggerated gender roles that have been over-sexualized as a method of reinforcing the power of masculinity within patriarchy; thus, perpetuating patriarchy through the strict implementation of gender roles. Furthermore, the depiction of the characters in this show, pursuing masculinity through visual performance as well as seeking it in their partners, highlights the desire to achieve or maintain masculinity, without which they would be cast out of patriarchal society.

Within the gay male community the consequences of failing to exhibit masculine mannerisms could result in accusations of being a 'nelly' or being 'obvious' or even more abruptly, being feminine, which would cast any man out of his patriarchal power seat. So contrast to the opening line of *Queer as Folk*, the thing you need to know is that it is not all about sex; it's about performing masculinity. By examining the behavioral and visual performance of masculinity within the gay male community, in the context of patriarchal gender roles, it is clear that patriarchal society requires masculinity even from homosexual men. Examining Showtime's drama series *Queer as Folk* relates the power of masculinity in the gay male subculture to the dominance of masculinity in American

society. By setting standards like “No Fats, No Femmes” gay men exhibit the visual and behavioral performances of masculinity. With that in mind, it is clear that we must always be aware of the unspoken power of masculinity within patriarchal society.

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