Allie McClaskey

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(Hetero)sexualizing the Detective, the Physicist, and the Angel: Heteronormativity in Pop Culture Television

Introduction

According to Irene Adler in BBC's *Sherlock*, "brainy is the new sexy." Sherlock Holmes is one of the most intelligent characters ever created; by Irene's reasoning, then, he must also be one of the sexiest. However, Sherlock Holmes, in his many incarnations, has never been exceptionally "sexy": Arthur Conan Doyle wrote him as a serial bachelor, a tall and spindly man who solved mysteries and categorized tobacco ash (Doyle). Yet, in 2010's *Sherlock*, the character has been made physically attractive. Holmes is now a young, fit man with curly dark hair, clear blue eyes, and defined cheekbones. Upon seeing him walk onto the screen, I could not help but give a sharp intake of breath. In *Sherlock*, the sleuth has now become doubly appealing to some: not only does he display his usual brilliance, a trait many admire in a potential mate, but Sherlock is now also physically desirable.

Yet, this physical change is not the only one Holmes has undergone. A common theme of television in recent years is rampant sexual expression, as sex has become "a mechanism for selling goods" (qtd. in Porfido 174). In Sherlock's case, this sexual expression is heterosexual. Similar characters to Sherlock – Dr. Sheldon Cooper of *The Big Bang Theory* and Castiel of *Supernatural* – have also undergone such an evolution: both men initially displayed little to no sexual preference before ultimately being paired in romantic relationships with women.

In giving characters who before had expressed no sexual orientation a sudden heterosexual preference, *Sherlock*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Supernatural* become prime examples of heteronormativity at work in pop culture television. Heteronormativity, according to sociologist Karin Martin, is the "mundane, everyday ways that heterosexuality is privileged and taken for granted as normal and natural" (qtd. in Myers and Raymond, 168). It is the assumption that an individual is heterosexual until proven otherwise. With this worldview, the performance of gender roles becomes intertwined with heterosexuality: "straight" men are typified as being masculine and sexually active with members of the opposite sex (Myers and Raymond 168). In the case of Sherlock, Sheldon, and Castiel, however, this definition of manhood becomes problematic.

Initially, none of these characters portrays a heterosexual sexual expression; how, then, could they be considered "straight" and comply with a heteronormative worldview? They could not, and thus they were heterosexualized. This heterosexualization is typified across all three characters as an interest in women (via flirtation or investment in the emotional or physical well-being of the opposite sex) where there was none before, and as sexual control in or dominance over their interactions with women. Sherlock Holmes', Dr. Sheldon Cooper's, and the angel Castiel's sudden interest in women demonstrates just how pervasive heteronormativity is in television. Television, in turn, continues to reinforce heteronormativity, leading to feelings of inadequacy and frustration for members of both the queer and non-queer communities alike.

Heteronormalizing Holmes

Sherlock Holmes' heteronormalization comes in the wake of over a century of established sexual non-preference. In one of the first Sherlock Holmes novels in 1890, Arthur

Conan Doyle writes Holmes as bachelor, one so tied to his work that any expression of emotion – love, mainly – would disrupt solving a case. In *The Sign of the Four*, Doyle makes Sherlock's stance on sexual expression quite clear: "… love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true cold reason I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgment" (Doyle 140). Holmes thus views love and marriage as hindrances to the clarity of his reasoning. This ambivalence towards the opposite sex – or rather, sex period – is echoed even in Holmes' interactions with Irene Adler, the fabled female of Sherlockian lore. Adler is the only person to ever outwit Sherlock, leading the detective to refer to her solely as "*the* woman." Though this moniker could be viewed as a sign of reverence or attraction, Watson affirms that Holmes did not feel "any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler." In fact, the only reference to romantic feelings on the part of Holmes in the entirety of the story involving "*the* woman" comes when Doyle speaks of Holmes' fondness for detective work, saying he was "deeply attracted" to criminology (Doyle 145).

Thus, Arthur Conan Doyle clearly established Holmes as a man not interested in the emotion of love and the physical intimacy it would bring. When Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss adapted the original Holmes stories for a modern audience, they initially followed Doyle's lead. However, by the show's second season, the title character of *Sherlock* begins to display sexual tendencies – and heterosexual ones at that.

The first episode of *Sherlock* reinforces Doyle's cues about Holmes' sexuality. In "A Study in Pink," John Watson and Sherlock sit in a restaurant, staking out a location for the appearance of a suspected serial killer. The waiter refers to John as Sherlock's date twice, a label Sherlock ignores, too busy eyeing the street to see if the murderer appears. John, however, assures the waiter both times that he is not romantically involved with Sherlock. This exchange

makes John curious about Sherlock's sexual preferences. He presses Holmes for more information:

> JOHN: You don't have a girlfriend, then?
>
> SHERLOCK: (*looking out the window*) Girlfriend? No, not really my area.
>
> JOHN: (*pauses*) Oh, right. Do you have a boyfriend? Which is fine, by the way.
>
> SHERLOCK: (*looks at John*) I know it's fine.
>
> JOHN: (*smiles*) So, you've got a boyfriend?
>
> SHERLOCK: No.
>
> JOHN: You're unattached, just like me. Fine, good.
>
> SHERLOCK: John, um, I think you should know that I consider myself married to my work, and while I'm flattered by your interest-
>
> JOHN: (*interrupts)* No.
>
> SHERLOCK: (*continuing*) I'm not really looking for anything.
>
> JOHN: No, no, I'm not asking, no. …I'm just saying, it's all fine.

This scene very firmly establishes Sherlock's state of mind in regard to sexuality. Like the romantic connotations Doyle gave to Sherlock and crime-solving in *The Sign of the Four*, the 21st -century version of Holmes is "married" to his work and is even so absorbed in it as to overlook the waiter's erroneous assumption about Sherlock and John's relationship. Furthermore, John – and thus the show's writers – assures Sherlock that were he to express sexual interest in the form of homosexuality, this would be "fine." Both Sherlock and the writers' stance on Holmes' sexual expression changes, however, in just two episodes' time: with the second season-premiere of *Sherlock*, Holmes is not only sexualized, but *hetero*sexualized.

To move Holmes in a heterosexual direction, the episode "A Scandal in Belgravia" establishes that Holmes is not only sexually neutral, but also sexually inexperienced. When being informed of the case involving Adler, Sherlock learns that Irene is a dominatrix. "Don't be

alarmed," his older brother Mycroft tells Sherlock. "It's to do with sex." "Sex doesn't alarm me," is Sherlock's sharp reply. "How would you know?" the elder Holmes retorts ("A Scandal in Belgravia"). Mycroft is clearly implying that Sherlock is a virgin. Being the detective's brother, it is relatively safe to take Mycroft's word for it and assume that up to this point, Sherlock has displayed little to no sexual inclinations. Holmes' silence in the face of his brother's taunt is very telling as well – as John later points out, Sherlock will "outlive God trying to have the last word" ("Scandal"). Yet here, he has nothing to say, perhaps confirming that what Mycroft implies is truth.

However, this sexual innocence is substantiated only to be torn down over the course of the episode. Following the exchange between Sherlock and Mycroft mentioned above, Sherlock proceeds to look through photos of Irene's website. She being a dominatrix, the shots are a collection of her in risqué clothing and provocative poses. Sherlock flips through them slowly at first, and his eyes widen and he swallows when looking at a shot of Irene in a sheer, black lace top ("Scandal"). This could be a sign that Sherlock is uncomfortable with nudity, had he not moments before been willing to walk out of Buckingham Palace absolutely naked. Thus, his reaction to the photos can only be interpreted as arousal.

In his first interaction with Irene, Sherlock again displays signs of heterosexual attraction for the woman. After conning his way into her home, Sherlock is confronted by a nude Irene; Holmes stops speaking mid-sentence upon seeing her. He seems mesmerized as she approaches him, maintaining eye contact with Adler the entire time. Just moments later, Sherlock again proves that he is under Adler's spell. She inquires as to how a recently-deceased man had been murdered. When Sherlock deflects her question, she strikes up a conversation with Watson; Irene then states that "brainy is the new sexy." At this, Sherlock answers her previous query at once.

Normally very succinct in his speech, he responds to Irene so quickly as to garble his words. He recovers a moment later to his usual assured tone, going on to hint at obscure facts about the murder that he alone has inferred ("Scandal"). Sherlock's reactions to Irene and her nudity mark the beginning of his heterosexualization. Upon seeing her naked, Sherlock stops speaking and can only stare; lust for the female body is archetypical of the heterosexual male. Sherlock's slurred speech and subsequent "showing off" are the usual actions of a straight man in the presence of a woman to whom he is attracted. Sherlock likes Irene, and wants to impress her with his braininess – for she will then think that he is "sexy."

From this point on, the show cements the idea of Sherlock's attraction to Irene. A few months after their initial encounter, Sherlock learns that Irene has been killed. Her death clearly affects Sherlock, as confirmed by other characters on the show. As John recounts, Holmes "[plays] sad music, doesn't eat, barely talks… I'd say he was heartbroken." After Sherlock identifies Irene's body, Mycroft attempts to console him by stating that "caring is not an advantage." Sherlock soon learns, however, that Irene was not actually murdered but had instead faked her death. Though he does not greet the news with an abundance of emotion, the viewer can discern that Holmes is happy Irene is alive. She had sent him 57 text messages (most of them flirtatious) before her "death," but Sherlock does not respond to any of them until the day he learns of her trick – replying with a simple "Happy New Year – SH" ("Scandal"). Sherlock's displays of remorse, acknowledged as they are by other characters in the show, prove that Sherlock was smitten with Irene from the moment he saw her naked body. This roots the detective's sexual preference in heterosexuality. Sherlock's subsequent interaction with Irene via text message demonstrates that he is still interested in her – and, after supposedly losing Irene, Holmes leaps at this second chance to interact with her further.

Sherlock establishes his feelings for Irene through both emotional investment in her well-being as well as flirtations. We first see that he wants to protect Irene from the villains hunting her, and he has kept her valuable camera phone safe. Sherlock also flirts heavily with Irene on two occasions, making their sexual tension palpable – enough so that John acknowledges it. In the first instance, Sherlock attempts to trick Adler into revealing the password for her phone, a trap she evades. They compliment each other's wits, and then the two stare at each other. John finally interjects "Hamish!" They look at him, and he explains: "John 'Hamish' Watson. If you were looking for baby names." A few moments later, Irene presents Sherlock with a code she has been unable to crack, teasing for him to "impress a girl" and kissing his cheek. Eager to deliver, Sherlock cracks the cipher in less than five seconds. Irene, staring at Sherlock, finally proclaims "I would have you, right here, on this desk, until you begged for mercy twice." At this blatant sexual overture, Sherlock – a probable virgin who had earlier gulped nervously upon seeing suggestive photos – now displays no fear and instead stares back at Adler for a full five seconds. ("Scandal").

These two exchanges illustrate not only how sexualized Sherlock and Irene's interactions have become since their first encounter, but also that Sherlock is comfortable with this sexualization and even partakes in it. *He* initiates flirtations, *he* maintains eye contact, and *he* stands in close proximity to Irene when speaking to her. At this point, Holmes is well and truly the archetypical heterosexual male, engaging in sexual banter with a woman in whom he is interested.

However, some viewers of *Sherlock* might argue that the events at the end of "A Scandal in Belgravia" are proof that Sherlock's outward displays of affection are merely a charade. Irene's aforementioned camera phone contains top-secret information that Mycroft – as an

employee of the British government – wishes to obtain. From this perspective, Sherlock only acts interested in Irene to assist his brother. Indeed, the detective dismisses any possibility of a relationship between him and Irene, or between him and anyone else for that matter. “Sentiment is a chemical defect found in the losing side,” he states. “Never let [your heart] rule your head.” Finally, he tells Irene “I’ve always assumed that love is a dangerous disadvantage – thank you for the final proof” (“Scandal”). Sherlock here reiterates what Doyle had previously written about the character – that love compromises the faculties and can only lead to defeat.

This begs the question – was Sherlock really heterosexualized into feeling anything for Irene? Or was it all an act? Regardless of what Sherlock may have told Irene about love, the episode’s denouement a few scenes later ultimately proves that the detective does care for her. The viewer is told that Irene was killed by a terrorist sect shortly after her phone was confiscated. Mycroft and John – believing Sherlock to have cared for Adler – instead tell the detective that she is safe in a witness protection program. Sherlock, in spite of his earlier comments about sentiment, keeps Irene’s phone and proceeds to look through the texts he and Irene exchanged once he is alone in the room. He walks to a window and stares outside. The scene cuts to Irene on her knees, about to be beheaded. The screen then fades to black… and cuts back to Irene. The camera focuses on her executor, who is Sherlock in disguise! He tells her to be prepared to run, then begins swinging a saber. The viewer is then returned to Sherlock’s window in Baker St., the man chuckling at the memory. “The woman,” he says, before turning to place Irene’s phone in a drawer. He pauses before closing the drawer, his face now serious. In a softer voice, he repeats “*the* woman,” closes the drawer, and returns to looking out the window (“Scandal”).

This final scene, above every other in the episode, confirms Sherlock’s heterosexualization. Not only does he elect to play the knight in shining armor for the damsel in

distress, but his tone and mannerisms in "Scandal"'s last moments hint at the detective's true feelings for Irene. He is clearly happy to have been able to rescue her, and this giddiness then turns to thoughtfulness as he looks at Irene's phone and places it in the drawer. Of note is Holmes' emphasis of the word "the" when referring to Adler. His sentence is left unfinished – Irene is *the* woman in what regard? The only woman Sherlock ever cared for? Perhaps the first person with whom Sherlock had sex? While it is ultimately up to the viewer to draw any final conclusions, the detective's actions and speech throughout "A Scandal in Belgravia" dictate that these final assumptions are firmly rooted in the idea of Sherlock being a heterosexual male.

Dr. Sheldon Cooper: from Ignorant to Interested

Sherlock's heteronormative journey is paralleled in Dr. Sheldon Cooper of the *The Big Bang Theory*. Introduced in 2007, Sheldon initially views the world and especially emotion with a clinical, scientific detachment – for example, he almost always refers to sex as "coitus." While his three male friends cycle through girlfriend after girlfriend, Sheldon is unattached and expresses no interest in changing this (*The Big Bang Theory Fan Site*). Indeed, when woman are sexually interested in Sheldon, he is either ignorant of or uninterested in their attentions.

This characterization is established on two occasions. In season two of the show, a female graduate student named Ramona praises Sheldon for his recent theoretical work and offers to bring him dinner to his apartment. Sheldon accepts (*Big Bang*). He did not once think Ramona was hitting on him; Sheldon responds to her praise of his intelligence only. Then, in a season three episode, Raj coerces Sheldon into going on a double date. Raj hopes to "score" with his date but is afraid he will be unable to do so on his own; he convinces Sheldon to pair up with his date's friend, Martha. After the outing, the four return to Sheldon's apartment and Raj and his

date begin making out; Sheldon and Martha, meanwhile, sit on the couch across from them chatting. Martha watches Raj and her friend with an air of longing, clearly wanting to do the same thing with Sheldon. Sheldon, however, remains oblivious: he announces it is getting late, bids Martha good night, and retires to his room. Later, Martha knocks on his door and asks if she can "hang out" in Sheldon's room. Sheldon admits her, announces he will sleep in Leonard's room, and finally leaves Martha without a second glance (*Big Bang*).

Whether because of ignorance or ambivalence, Sheldon's escapades with Ramona and Martha prove the physicist wants nothing to do with a heterosexual relationship, physical or otherwise. This is corroborated by both the show's creators and other characters on *The Big Bang Theory*. The executive producers of the show, Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, themselves confirmed Sheldon's neutral stance on sexual expression. According to Lorre in a 2010 interview, Sheldon "has chosen not to play the relationship game." Prady echoes this, stating that Sheldon "made [a] choice that works and... that is where he finds his passion" (qtd. in Ausiello). Likewise, Sheldon's friends are mystified by any woman's interest in him, proving that Sheldon has never shown sexual inclinations in their presence. The following conversation is confirmation of this:

> PENNY: So, what's Sheldon's "deal"?
> LEONARD: What do you mean?
> PENNY: You know, like, what's his *deal*? Is it girls, guys, sock puppets?
> LEONARD: Honestly, we've been operating under the assumption that he has no "deal."
> PENNY: Oh come on, everybody has a deal!
> HOWARD: Not Sheldon.

Heterosexual reproduction thus off the table, Howard and Leonard then go on to explain their theories for the process by which Sheldon would one day procreate: either through mitosis or metamorphosis ("The Cooper-Nowitzki Theorem"). This is a dichotomous reaction on the part of

Leonard, Penny, and Howard: though they recognize Sheldon's uniqueness and avoid pigeonholing him into the categories of heterosexual or homosexual, heteronormativity is ultimately impressed upon the viewer by the simple fact that Sheldon must have some "deal" in regard to sexuality. In fact, his sexuality is stigmatized by their assumptions that it must be some form of cellular or insect reproduction. To combat this "deviance," Sheldon was ultimately heterosexualized just a few months after the above interview with Prady and Lorre, when he meets Amy Farrah Fowler – the woman who was first his friend who was also a girl, but who now is his girlfriend.

Though Amy and Sheldon meet as the result of a joke Howard and Raj play on him – they sign him up for a dating site without his knowledge – Sheldon's sexual neutrality initially remains unchallenged. "All forms of physical contact, up to and including coitus, are off the table," Amy tells Sheldon during their first meeting (*Big Bang*). Sheldon finds this stipulation to his liking, and the two begin a platonic relationship. However, it is only a matter of time before Sheldon begins to exhibit heterosexuality in regard to Amy. He comes to care for her emotionally, and this interest slowly develops into a physical one.

In the early stages of their relationship, Sheldon remains physically uninterested in Amy but does develop an emotional attachment for her: the two "break up" briefly and to console himself, Sheldon adopts several cats. They then reconcile and continue a friendship marked by caring and jealousy on the parts of both Amy and Sheldon. When Amy goes on a date with another man, Sheldon is unexpectedly jealous. He crashes Amy's date and admits that the thought of her seeing other people causes him discomfort. He decides he wants to "alter the paradigm of [their] relationship." Cautioning her that nothing would change between them "physically or otherwise," Sheldon asks Amy to be his girlfriend, and she agrees (*Big Bang*).

That Sheldon experiences jealousy in regard to Amy proves that he cares for her on an emotional level. However, he still does not desire to share a physical relationship with her. Indeed, when Amy once kissed him, he replied with a simple "fascinating"; on another occasion, when Amy desired they French kiss or have sex, he instead agreed to cuddle with her – and only because she is upset (*Big Bang*). As the series wears on, however, Sheldon's stance on physical intimacy changes.

Officially established as boyfriend and girlfriend in season five of the show, Sheldon slowly begins to express physical heterosexuality in regard to Amy. By the season's end, he holds her hand – the first time Sheldon initiates physical contact with Amy. Midway through the sixth season, he cares for a sick Amy: he rubs Vicks on her chest, not only showing emotional investment in her wellbeing but also physically touching her. Then, in a landmark episode, Penny asks Sheldon his plans for his and Amy's future. Though Sheldon points out that he has been "uncomfortable" with physical contact all his life, he is "working on" this aspect of his personality. The idea of becoming physical with Amy? "It's a possibility," Sheldon confirms (*Big Bang*). The chance of an expression of physical heterosexuality for Sheldon thus established, the show wastes no time in moving towards this eventual outcome.

The first major step in heterosexualizing Sheldon comes in season six. The gang is playing a game of Dungeons and Dragons when Penny suggests that Sheldon and Amy's characters "do it" in the game, since that's "not happening anytime soon." Amy, upset that the group regards her and Sheldon's relationship as a joke, leaves the room. When their friends send Sheldon to console Amy, the character takes his first steps towards heterosexuality. Speaking almost with hesitation and avoiding eye contact (mannerisms typical of mixed embarrassment and desire), Sheldon points out to Amy that not acting out the effects of the love spell between

their D&D characters would be playing the game incorrectly. The two then proceed to have virtual sex, their imaginary characters removing each others' armor and kissing each other on the lips ("Love Spell"). That Sheldon initiates this tryst proves that despite his character's protestations about sex and other touching, it is the heteronormative writers of *The Big Bang Theory* who are really in control. This fact is illustrated perfectly in a season seven episode, where they firmly situation Sheldon in a heterosexual role.

Midway through season seven of the show, Amy arranges for a Valentine's Day getaway for her and Sheldon. The trip is by train; knowing how much Sheldon loves them, she hopes the ride will put him in a good enough mood that the two can enjoy a romantic weekend. When he learns of Amy's trickery, Sheldon initially reacts in the manner of his usual sexuality-eschewing self: Well, if you want 'romance', let's have 'romance'!" He proceeds to mock the staples of a romantic evening. "Oh look, there's wine, mmm!" he jeers before taking a hasty gulp; Sheldon next singsongs "now let's gaze into each other's eyes" and makes a bug-eyed face at Amy. Not yet done with his tirade, Sheldon muses "Let's see, what's next. Oh, kissing's romantic!" He then bends over to kiss Amy, meaning to mock it in his haughty rant. However, after a few seconds, something in Sheldon changes. He straightens his body and steps toward Amy, even placing his hands on her hips. The two are joined for an entire eight seconds before Sheldon slowly pulls away ("The Locomotive Manipulation").

This gesture, more than the virtual sex of Dungeons and Dragons or the simple fact of having a "girlfriend", proves that Sheldon has become a heteronormalized, heterosexual male character. The erotic game of D&D between Amy and himself is begun by Sheldon; heterosexual men are typically expected by society to be sexually confidant and in control. Then, it is only in the kiss with Amy that *he* initiates that Sheldon actually enjoys the act. His body language in the

scene is typical of any heterosexual male engaged in a kiss, betraying just how much Sheldon likes this physical contact with Amy. Up to this point, he had stated numerous times that such an act with his girlfriend was not unfeasible. With this first foray into intimacy, sex is only so far away. Like it or not, the pseudo-asexual Sheldon was heteronormalized and given a girlfriend, sealing the deal with a kiss.

Dens of Iniquity: Castiel and Heterosexuality

A third character who bears mentioning in the discussion of television's heteronormativity is Castiel of *Supernatural*. First appearing on the show at the beginning of its fourth season, Castiel – also called Cas – is the angel. He is initially shown to be a single-minded warrior of God, more concerned with following Heaven's orders or battling evil than pursuing relationships (*The Winchester Family Business*). Indeed, Castiel's sexual ambivalence is an aspect of his species.

When angels are introduced to *Supernatural*, the creatures are established as soldiers who follow God's word. Anna, an angel who fell and assumed a human body and life, remarks that one of her favorite things about humanity was the ability to have sex – implying that angels are either incapable of having it, or at the very least abstain from it. Dean echoes this, nicknaming the angel Uriel "junkless" and taunting that he's "like a Ken doll." A future episode confirms that angels can couple with humans while possessing a vessel, producing the half-angel, half-human nephilim; however, such offspring are considered abominations (*Winchester*). Angels ultimately view sex (with humans, at least) as forbidden. It is thus in Castiel's nature to be uninterested in sex, or at the very least view it with disdain.

Following the social cues of his kind, Castiel is not shown displaying any kind of sexual interest until over a year after his introduction to *Supernatural*. In a season five episode, Dean and Castiel plan to confront an archangel but expect they will not survive the encounter. The night before, Dean inquires about Castiel's bucket list: "Dude, come on, anything? Booze, women?" At the mention of the opposite sex, Cas looks up at Dean quickly and then away, anxiety written all over his face. Shocked that Cas is possibly a virgin, Dean prods further and asks if he's ever been with a woman or an angel. During this questioning, Cas fidgets and looks anywhere but at Dean, clearly uncomfortable with the topic. "I've never had the occasion, okay?" he finally says. Bemused, Dean resolves that he will not let Castiel die a virgin, and the two head to a brothel ("Free to Be You and Me"). This scene is marked by several instances of heteronormativity, all perpetuated by Dean. He first assumes that Castiel, had he had any sexual experience, would have done so with a female human or angel. Dean, being a central character and one with whom the viewer is more familiar, is the lens through which the show and this scene are viewed. His heteronormative assumptions coupled with this first mention of Castiel and sexuality, then, give viewers little choice but to also assume and accept that Castiel is "straight." In the space of a single scene, the subject of Castiel's sexuality is at once broached and heteronormalized before it is finally resolved to be given a heterosexual consummation.

Interestingly enough, though, Castiel's character initially resists heteronormalization. At the brothel, both his body language and his conversation betray anxiety and even terror. Sitting in a booth with Dean, Castiel breathes heavily, eyes darting around as he swallows often and nervously. "This is a den of iniquity. I should not be here," he tells Dean. When a prostitute approaches their table, Cas has trouble meeting her eyes and cannot speak to her; he then gulps down half a glass of beer in one sitting. The show itself acknowledges Castiel's reluctance, Dean

warning Cas “don’t make me push you,” before the angel heads to a back room with the woman (“Free”). The character clearly does not want to go through with this act of intimacy. That his hesitance is first played for laughs and ultimately ignored speaks to the power of heteronormativity.

Cas does manage to escape the episode without being heterosexualized – with the knowledge his angelic grace gives him, he comments on traumatic events in the prostitute’s childhood, resulting in him and Dean being thrown out of the establishment (“Free”). In fact, Castiel is not to display any hints of sexual expression again until the show’s next season. At that time, however, the character is much less opposed to being heterosexualized.

In an episode appearing midway through season six of *Supernatural*, Castiel is shown to be watching heterosexual porn, presumably for the first time. He is puzzled and fascinated by it: “If the pizza man truly loves this babysitter, why does he keep slapping her rear?” he asks Dean. While Cas is not viewing the film for pleasure – watching it simply because “it was there” – his body is aroused by the sexual imagery, enough so that Dean notices and comments (“Caged Heat”). This scene is very heteronormative. Most importantly, it has absolutely nothing to do with the narrative of the episode and advances the plot in no way: it is simply included so that the fact of Castiel’s heterosexuality may be drilled into the viewer once again. Though this angel is a sexually naïve virgin, he still watches (straight) porn and manages to be turned on by it, an end result that would be the case for most heterosexual males. In fact, Cas’ watching porn exists not only to re-establish the character’s heterosexuality first hinted at in season five, but also to reinforce this preference, serving as the impetus for heterosexual actions in a later scene in the episode.

Near the end of "Caged Heat," Castiel, the Winchester brothers, and a demon-turned-ally named Meg are being chased by Hell Hounds. Meg, being a demon, is the only one of the group that can actually see the monsters and offers to stay behind to hold them off. She then pulls Castiel into a kiss, using it as a distraction to extract an angelic weapon from his coat. Cas does not seem affected by the kiss, his eyes remaining open and his back straight. Once Meg pulls away, however, Castiel stares at her and then quickly swings her around, pressing her into the wall for a more passionate kiss – with his hands in her hair, the touch lasts for several seconds ("Caged"). As before with his watching porn, the act of Castiel kissing Meg serves the story in no way other than to reinforce his heterosexuality. Meg's initial kiss served its purpose, with her retrieving the angelic weapon she needed to fight the Hell Hounds. When Castiel kisses her back, however, he is only confirming himself to be a masculine, heterosexual male: it is only when he as a man is sexually in control that Cas enjoys the act of kissing a woman (much like Sheldon and Amy's kiss on the train); Cas further asserts his male dominance by pinning Meg against a wall for the kiss. That this act of physical intimacy is in the same episode in which Cas glowers at demons and calls them "abominations" speaks to the power of heteronormativity: a heterosexual man will often be sexually attracted to a pretty woman, even if he dislikes her or her beliefs.

For the next several seasons, Castiel engages in few displays of sexual expression, the most prominent not coming until season nine in 2013 (*Winchester*). In this season, Castiel has been turned into a human. Leading up to the season premiere, producers, writers and the actor playing Castiel himself excitedly discussed Cas' storyline now that the character is no longer an angel – one of the biggest topics on everyone's mind being the fact that Castiel could (and

would) now be able to lose his virginity to a woman (Byrne). This heteronormative response is ultimately played out in the episode "I'm No Angel."

The third episode of season nine of *Supernatural* sees a human Castiel adapting to mortality, sex with a woman being one of his first experiences in his new life. He is homeless and is taken in a by a young woman named April; while she is bandaging a shoulder wound Cas has sustained, April leans in to kiss him. Cas is not initially an active participant in the kiss and keeps his eyes open – but only at first. He finally closes his eyes, leaning into the touch and bringing his arms up to cradle April's sides ("I'm No"). Heterosexual norms dictating that a straight man is sexually dominant in his relations with women, Cas does not enjoy this form of intimacy until he exerts some form of control: mirroring his manhandling of Meg, Castiel in this case holds April with his hands.

The next shot of the two has them in bed together, clearly post-coitus, and with a few lines of dialogue Castiel's heteronormalization is completed. April asks Cas to comment on their tryst. "There are no words," he tells her, prompting April to verify "So, that was okay?" "Very much so," is Castiel's reply. He then queries April, "Um, what I did, that was, um… correct?" The scene then ends with April asking Cas what he plans to do next in his life. "More of this, I hope," he responds with a grin before leaning in to kiss April, rolling over so that he is on top of the woman ("I'm No"). Despite his hesitant beginning, Castiel clearly enjoys having sex with April. He worries about his sexual performance, as some straight men do; his hopes for the future betray just how sex-obsessed he is, as the typical heterosexual male is often shown to be. Castiel's final act in the scene is once again to establish dominance over a woman, moving April underneath his body. With these verbal and physical responses, Cas embodies the role of a heterosexual male that heteronormativity requires.

With the loss of his virginity to a woman, Castiel has been heterosexualized and heteronormalized. Going from a character who in season five could not speak to a woman about sex to a character in season nine who clearly wishes for more of it – becoming the quintessential "straight" male – Castiel illustrates how powerfully heteronormativity is at play in *Supernatural*.

Vehicles of Conveyance: the Reaches of Heteronormativity

In discussing heteronormativity in pop culture television, the vehicle of its conveyance must also be explored. No one can deny the overwhelming presence of the media in our daily lives, and television is a particularly powerful and far-reaching medium. By the age of 18, a person has spent more time watching television than doing anything else besides sleeping; reflecting this fact, 98% of all U.S. households own a television (Levina et. al 741). Indeed, sociologist Giovanni Porfido calls television "the most powerful and ubiquitous of cultural apparatuses" (164). Yet we do not watch television as passive consumers. Some view television as educational and representative of real life (Levina et. al 741). Others use the medium as a "gym workout for personhood": when viewers identify themselves with the heroes and villains they see on screen, they are simultaneously negotiating and articulating their own identities (Porfido 167). As a means of entertainment and self-articulation, television cannot be matched.

Yet besides wielding the power of identity-formation, television and mass media are also determinants of public discourse. Through agenda setting and the spiral of silence, the media determines not how we think but what we think about. With agenda setting, information gatekeepers (editors and reporters, for example) first determine what items or stories are presented in mass media; this then determines what subjects are popular in the public discourse. The media is the dominant architect of the pictures in our heads, and the public reacts to these

constructed images and not actual events (Sanchez). In the case of the spiral of silence, when an individual believes a perspective on an issue to be the prevailing one, he or she is then reluctant to express an opposing opinion for fear of being isolated from the majority. With no dissenting views being expressed, society assumes there is no resistance to the majority; the prevalent view continues to be accepted as the norm and any who disagree have an even greater incentive to remain quiet, completing the spiral (Levina et. al 740). Agenda setting presents a heteronormative ideology; the spiral of silence then ensures that this presented viewpoint is perpetuated.

With such forces as agenda setting and the spiral of silence at work in the media, it is ensured that the heteronormative viewpoint comes to be a prevalent stance in society. The ubiquity of television and the wide viewing audience it reaches impress heteronormativity on the populace. When Sherlock, Sheldon, and Castiel are heterosexualized, agenda setting guarantees that such topics as these characters' girlfriends and heterosexual sex lives will be discussed by viewers; those who oppose their heterosexualization or who theorize that the three are of a different sexual orientation than "straight" are repressed through the spiral of silence. But besides a simple lack of variety in sexual expression and character relationships depicted on television, this overwhelming dominance of heteronormativity in shows such as *Sherlock*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Supernatural* has several negative effects: it stigmatizes asexuality, excludes queer viewers from self-articulation in a televisual medium, and ultimately reinforces heterosexism and homophobia.

Heteronormativity's Negative Effects

While heteronormativity by default stigmatizes any non-heterosexual sexual expressions, *Supernatural*'s practice of heteronormalization particularly disparages those who identify as asexual. In the case of Castiel, his ultimate expression of heterosexuality – sex with a woman – comes only on the occasions in which his character has been turned into a human (or very nearly so). Besides the aforementioned episode "I'm No Angel," the character is depicted as practically mortal in a possible future timeline in the episode "The End." This version of Castiel has lost nearly all his angelic Grace, and to cope he turns to drugs, alcohol, and orgies with apparently all-female participants (*Winchester*). That the act of sex only occurs when Cas' character is "human" troublingly equates sexual expression with humanity. By this logic, those who do not partake in straight sexual activities – such as asexuals – are thus not fully human. In a post entitled "Supernatural Equates Humanness with Sexuality," asexual blogger Ace echoes this view, calling it a "highly problematic" message on the part of the *Supernatural* writers. Ace was "disappointed" by this stigmatization of asexuality; the blogger cannot be alone.

Heteronormativity also leads to the non-representation of the queer community on television. This means that this group is deprived of a key experience of television viewing: the aforementioned practice of self-articulation. With heteronormativity holding such sway in the depiction of characters' sexualities and relationships, queer expressions are few and far between in the annals of television. As Porfido (also a member of the queer community) explains, this means that "queer people have been denied the visual possibility of self-formation" (167). This denial in turn leads to self-hatred and feelings of isolation for members of the queer community (Porfido 168). In tandem with this, heterosexual viewers are deprived of the opportunity to better understand queer people (Porfido 175). This is a critical point with potentially harmful consequences for all members of society.

If queers are not represented on television, if heteronormativity continues to be reinforced, any current stigmatization the queer community faces will only be perpetuated through two very harmful societal constructs: heterosexism and homophobia. As theologian Yolanda Dreyer explains, both mirror heteronormativity (6). Heteronormativity simultaneously presupposes and enforces the norms of heterosexuality and a gender binary, resulting in heterosexism: the belief that the heterosexual form of loving has an inherent superiority to all others, and that this form of loving should be the only acceptable orientation (Dreyer 6, 5). This ideological system subsequently "denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes" non-heterosexual behaviors and identities (qtd. in Levina et. al 739). At its base form, heterosexism is prejudice toward queers. By dint of agenda setting and the spiral of silence, the mass media perpetuates heterosexism through either queer non-representation or negative representation. In the case of *Sherlock*, *The Big Bang Theory*, and *Supernatural*, the possibility of a non-heterosexual character is eliminated, and queers are simply not represented at all. On the other side of the spectrum, the mass media often stigmatizes queers when it does portray this group (Levina et. al 740). While heterosexism furthers prejudice towards queer people, it more importantly leads to homophobia.

Going hand in hand with heterosexism, homophobia is the consequence of a society of gender binaries. Any who deviate from the accepted, entrenched heterosexual norm are condemned for their differences and punished for this deviation in a number of ways (Dreyer 6). Homophobia leads to verbal abuse and violence towards queers; it even results in the internalization of homophobia in some members of the queer community, causing feelings of shame and self-loathing (Dreyer 7, 11-12). Yet homophobia does not only impact the queer community: as Dreyer explains, this mindset creates a culture of non-tolerance for *any* type of

diversity (15). Clearly, homophobia hurts nearly everyone in society. In a homophobic arena, anyone who differs from the ideal representation of heterosexuality will be treated with disdain and aversion. This applies not only to queers but to everyone else, from the tomboyish female to the theatre-loving male.

Conclusion

Clearly, the heteronormativity reflected in pop culture television has lasting, negative influences on attitudes and actions for both queers and non-queers alike. For the cycle of suppression of and violence toward queers to end, there is a call for their increased representation in television: for while the issues of heterosexism, homophobia, and non-representation in the televisual medium are harmful, they are not beyond remedy. The improved visibility of queers in the media would challenge prejudices (Dreyer 11). It would also afford queer people the "fulfillment of their basic visual rights" through not only having their lifestyles represented on-screen, but also by allowing them to partake in the self-identification process that is offered to heterosexuals in abundance (Porfido 175). Bringing about this increased visibility in television, however, is an uphill battle.

The current state of queer representation on television in both the United States and the United Kingdom is disappointing. A 2006 survey of 168 hours of primetime BBC programming yielded only 38 minutes of gay references, of which a mere six minutes were positive gay references (Porfido 171). Meanwhile, GLAAD's annual assessment of LGBT characters in primetime American television reported the 2012-2013 season to have the highest-ever percentage of LGBT representation: a whopping 4.4% (Kane). Though queers and queer characters have made progress in their appearances on television – as evidenced by Ellen

DeGeneres' talk show and the homosexual couple Cam and Mitchell on the very popular show *Modern Family* – the results of GLAAD's survey demonstrate that queer representation in the media still leaves much to be desired. The queer community, as a facet of the society in which we all live, deserves positive and ample screen time in the annals of television. Heteronormativity is the final barrier to this vision of queer representation in television. As long as the heteronormative viewpoint is in place, characters like Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Sheldon Cooper, and Castiel, who show the inklings of a non-heterosexual orientation, are fated to be heteronormalized.

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