

Will & Grace: Negotiating (Gay) Marriage on Prime-Time Television

KARIN QUIMBY

AS ROBIN MEANS COLEMAN AND OTHER TELEVISION SCHOLARS REMIND us, the situation comedy's "humor relies upon, and is in response to, issues and problems found within the social structure" (4).¹ While most would agree that *Will & Grace* is the first successful gay sitcom on network television, it is, ironically, the question of marriage—and, more specifically, the form and function of male-female intimacy—that fuels the primary anxiety or problem that this show attempts to negotiate.² That is, *Will & Grace* has not yet directly addressed the issue of gay marriage (as the title to this article might seem to suggest), but the show's construction of the relationship between its title characters, Will and Grace (Eric McCormack and Debra Messing), reveals the pressure that the gay marriage issue has brought to bear on the "definition" of marriage, which is currently under hot debate in living rooms and rooms of Congress alike. By acknowledging the significance and primacy of those common and consequential intimacies developed between straight women and gay men, *Will & Grace* responds in part to straight women's dissatisfactions with traditional—marital—definitions of male-female love, commitment, and desire. Because such nontraditional relationships as Will and Grace's often go unrecognized in straight culture and are dismissed at times in gay culture with the "fag hag" appellation, the significant cultural and political work that this television comedy undertakes is the taking seriously of this form of queer affiliation. Indeed, *Will & Grace* is most provocative in the way it takes up Michel Warner's call to eschew the "impoverished vocabulary of straight culture," and

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articulates one of the “lived arrangements of queer life” that deserves our studied attention (116).³

That conventional marriage is under some attack in this sitcom is no more apparent than in the outrageous attitudes of supporting character Karen Walker (Megan Mullally), the only character in the show actually to be wedded during the first four seasons. We learn that Karen has married a rich man exclusively for his money and that she performs the requisite sexual trade-off in a way that defines marriage as merely a sex-for-money contract. This husband never appears on screen, which suggests his utter dispensability except for his role as a source of money. Moreover, Karen is not the least bit interested in the young children who came along with the marriage, and is constantly devising ways to avoid coming into any contact with them. By showing such disrespect for traditional attitudes toward marriage and parenthood, her character delivers the most direct challenge that the show issues to those sacred institutions. Although some have described her as a “diva-bitch,” one might also understand Karen as representing a woman who audaciously turns the tables on women’s usually subordinated position in marriage, and enthusiastically exploits this institution for her own gain.

In contrast to the unqualified denigration of marriage traditions that the character of Karen Walker offers up, the relationship between Will and Grace acknowledges the loving and supportive intimacies that people of different sexual orientations can form. Right from the start of the pilot episode, Will and Grace—although “only” friends—are represented as being so connected that they finish each other’s sentences and draw from a wealth of quirky prior references when playing charades, which suggests the longevity of their relationship and its unique and fundamentally compatible temper. In an appearance on the 2002 Emmy Awards show, Eric McCormack, who plays Will Truman, described the show’s intent: “It’s about a friendship between a straight woman and a gay man. It’s not boyfriend/girlfriend. It’s not girlfriend/girlfriend. It’s something deliciously in between.” Indeed, the primary characters, Will and Grace, represent two people who are navigating their way through a relationship that has no prescribed model in our culture. In this sense, they (or the scriptwriters) are inventing the shape and trajectory of their “in-between” relationship as they go. Michael Warner reminds us that “because gay social life is not as ritualized and institutionalized as straight life, each relation is an adventure in nearly

uncharted territory—whether it is between two gay men, or two lesbians, or a gay man and a lesbian, or among three or more queers, or between gay men and the straight women whose commitment to queer culture brings them the punishment of the ‘fag hag’ label” (115–16).⁴ By developing its popular narrative around the latter form of queer relationship, *Will & Grace* extends the recent trend in film and television narratives that addresses straight women’s desire for relationships with men that exist outside the norms proscribed by the heterosexual contract. In the last few years, films such as *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), *The Next Best Thing* (2000), and, more recently, the cable show *Sex in the City*, feature the involved desires that straight women and gay men often develop.⁵ Could it be that these films and cable TV show, along with the network hit *Will & Grace*, signal the most recent manifestation of straight women’s dissatisfaction with the norms of masculinity and the kinds of relationships that such gendered conventions demand?⁶

Early reviews of the show suggest how this new (to television) form of relationship that Will and Grace dramatize may serve to question normative forms of heterosexual union. Alyssa Katz suggests that Will and Grace’s relationship acknowledges “the value of friendship between men and women that doesn’t lock them into their ordained roles . . . Whatever it is that Grace finds in Will makes him the most important man in her life; his ability to look at her as something other than a sexual conquest can’t be the least of it.” Other reviews of *Will & Grace*, in their attempt to make sense out of the dynamics present in the straight woman/gay man relationship, do so by questioning marriage definitions. Robert Laurence ponders a hypothetical: “If marriage is largely friendship, Grace might be better off married to Will, clearly her true kindred spirit. But there’s that other part of marriage, the sex part, and in that regard they have nothing in common” (E1). Of course, they do have much in common in most other arenas, including their shared attraction to men—but that shared desire is, needless to say, not coherent to a heterosexual paradigm. Also concerned with what position sex occupies in a relationship between a man and a woman, Simon Dumenco from *Us* magazine plugs the comedy as being about “the kind of friendship that’s possible between a man and a woman when sex doesn’t get in the way” (50). Dumenco intimates that the kind of friendship Will and Grace have is one, presumably, that relatively few straight men would be interested in having, as if having sex

with a woman precludes a man from sharing other more “feminine” pleasures with her. Will and Grace’s friendship is the kind that shares the excitement of counting the days until the Barney’s sale, the kind that shares gossip and fashion tips, and, most important, the kind that attends closely to the emotional life of each “partner.” To have such a friendship idealized on prime-time television highlights some of the very qualities straight women often complain are lacking in their relationships with men, qualities of care and nurturing that, when expressed by men in patriarchal culture, are typically denigrated. The popularity of the show suggests just how important to some women such intimate relationships with men are.⁷

One of the perplexing questions that *Will & Grace* raises is that although one of the primary audiences for the show is the young, hip, college-educated urban woman (the very kind of woman Grace embodies), the sitcom still must appeal to a wider and presumably more conservative audience to explain its numerous Emmy awards (including best comedy) and its seventh season on NBC’s prime-time line-up. How can a show that seems to issue such a biting critique of marriage and celebrate gay men as the ideal partners for straight women be so popular with a wide audience of presumably straight-identified spectators who have a certain stake in maintaining the status quo? The answer loudly pronounces itself in the pilot episode.

While it is true that *Will & Grace*’s weekly narratives critique normative social and personal relationships, they simultaneously support a form of relationship that can be interpreted as satisfying narrative and social conventions. To assert this paradox, the writers and producers of the show manipulate representations of Will and Grace’s already ambiguous in-between relationship in a way to make this show palatable to a more conservative audience by “visualizing” what in fact is a queer relationship as a decidedly heterosexual one. John Fiske reminds us that to be popular, television texts must be both polysemic and flexible—that is, they must appeal to more than one kind of audience. The television text can be characterized as being in “a state of tension between forces of *closure*, which attempt to close down its potential meanings in favor of its preferred ones, and forces of *openness*, which enable its variety of viewers to negotiate an appropriate variety of meanings” (84). In this way, television texts are always the site of a struggle for meaning. The pilot episode to the *Will & Grace* series establishes the precise nature of this struggle as one founded in the

conflict over the definition of Will and Grace's relationship specifically, and of the possible shapes of male-female desire more generally.

One of the devices that open up a text to polysemic readings is contradiction, which helps ensure that a show will be popular with a wider variety of audiences. In most cases, the dominant ideology works to smooth out those contradictions "by constructing a 'consensus' around its point of view which represses the contradictions in a text and thus militates against social change" (Fiske 88). This consensus is often accomplished by way of the episode's conclusion, which returns to normality the conflict driving the episode's narrative. The obvious contradiction present in many of the scenes between Will and Grace is the ability to read them simultaneously as a gay man/straight woman dyad *and* as an ideal heterosexual couple. This contradiction surely is resolved by some straight-identifying audiences through the psychic mechanism routinely invoked in response to gay people and gay culture: disavowal. Disavowal, which might be understood through the phrase "I know . . . but all the same," allows some audience members both to acknowledge gay male difference (which is most often represented in the show through the hyperbolic discourse of camp and is enacted through the figure and comedic routines of supporting character "Just Jack" [Sean Hayes]) and to disavow this difference through the heterosexual fantasy that visualizes Will and Grace's eventual coupling. Thus, whereas audiences "know" that Will is gay, many still will choose to believe, to see, or to "know" him to be really heterosexual. The psychic mechanism of disavowal and its varied deployment in support of maintaining the supposed coherence of dominant heterosexual culture is precisely the complex epistemological dynamic that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick illuminated in her groundbreaking book *Epistemology of the Closet*.

Understanding the importance of such a dynamic (to know Will simultaneously as gay and as not gay) to attract and keep audiences who may be somewhat uncomfortable (if also fascinated) with representations of gay life, the writers and producers of the show situate this very dynamic of contradiction or disavowal as central to the narrative, and play it out several times in the pilot episode. In the scene that occupies the final minutes of the pilot episode, we find that Grace has just run out on her wedding and, still clad in her wedding gown, ends up nursing her wounds with Will in a straight bar. Assuming that Will and Grace themselves have just been married, the patrons at the

bar call for a toast by the happy couple, and a kiss. This final scene literally mimics one of the possible reading positions for this show; the straight audience in the bar serves to express all of the normal assumptions attending the glorious moment of marriage. Unable to read the admittedly subtle codes of Will's homosexuality (many have commented on Will's "straight" appearance as one of the most obvious ways of making him "safe" for a more conservative audience), the bar patrons loudly demand the enactment of the heterosexual rituals associated with marriage, and we can observe how easy it is made for audiences to comfortably recuperate Will's gay identity into a heterosexual narrative.

One male bar patron says to Will, "Hey, what about a toast to your lovely new bride?!" The chorus of voices in the background concurs *in unison* with an energetic, "Yea!" Will and Grace look apprehensively at each other for a moment until Will concedes to the demand, apparently deciding that it is easier to go along with the crowd's assumption than to explain the queer nature of their relationship and face the possible repercussions of coming out in a bar full of drunken straight people. So instead, Will raises his glass and says with bravado, "Here's to the ball and chain. If she makes it through the night . . . Ba Bing, I think I'll keep her!" The bar audience laughs in simple, rowdy appreciation, completely unaware of Will's gross parody of heterosexual manhood. Indeed, only by reading Will as gay (which the straight bar patrons clearly do not) can one understand his toast to Grace as a critique of a certain version of straight maleness and not as a humorous endorsement of it. In fact, as we learn earlier in the show, Will urges Grace to reject this very kind of straight man (the kind who high-fives after sex) by advising her to refuse the marriage proposal. Grace's rejection of the straight man at the altar indicates that she does indeed want something different from a man than adolescent sports gestures during sex. Will's toast returns us to this earlier critique of hetero masculinity, and audiences at home (those who choose to) further recognize Will's toast as directly contradicting his real feelings toward Grace; he has no intention of having sex with her, of course, nor does he see her as his property to keep or not. Indeed, his toast serves to contrast those very qualities that Grace finds so appealing in him—his sensitivity and attention to details about her emotional life not the least of them.

Beyond the critique of prosaic hetero masculinity uttered by Will, the nature of Grace's desire for a man like Will is precisely what fuels

her subsequent toast to him. When Grace stands up to toast Will, the tone changes entirely from one of raucous, raunchy heterosex to one that plainly reveals the depth and breadth of her affection for Will. "To my Will" she says, "You are my hero and my soul mate and I'm a better woman for loving you." Like Will's toast, this declaration can be read simultaneously in at least two ways. The straight bar audience responds to it, as no doubt some audiences at home do, with the requisite expression of "Aww . . ." What Grace is in fact expressing, however, is not the standard form of heterosexual marital love, but the intricate desire of a straight woman for a gay man. The use of the term "soul mate" is an attempt to express the profound interiority and "delicious" scope of that love. For those who recognize the complexity of such a relationship (largely the gay men and straight women who love one another), Grace's sentiments give voice and shape to one of the "lived arrangements of queer life."

The complexity of this moment and their relationship is, however, quickly vaporized by the force of the friendly but all too insistent pressure of heterosexual expectation chanted again in unison by the bar audience: "kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss . . ." At this forceful insistence, Grace grabs Will's face and plants a rather long kiss on him. When she finishes, she looks at him and asks, "Nothing? Anything?" Although Will immediately indicates to Grace that the kiss has done nothing to change his sexual orientation (as if it could!), to the straight audience in the bar, as to straight audiences in their living rooms, the possibility (and, as many of my students have claimed, the *probability*) of Will and Grace's eventual coupling is precisely what makes the contradictions and complexities of their queer relationship coherent to a traditional straight-identified audience, and the gay content of the show permissible on prime-time American television.

But the audience for *Will & Grace* that has catapulted it into Emmy award status and renewed seasons cannot be, it seems, as naïve as the straight bar audience presented in the show's pilot episode. To characterize the audience as monolithically straight or gay does not do justice to the far more queer spectator positions that the show actually encourages. It is indeed outside such banal hetero/homo moments that much of the show operates. *Will & Grace*, one might say, exaggerates the usually more coded or subtextual forms of queer desires and pleasures that exist in most, if not all, mass culture productions, as Alexander Doty has convincingly argued. He proposed that "queer

positions, queer readings, and queer pleasures are part of a reception space that stands simultaneously beside and within that created by heterosexual and straight positions" (15). Moreover, "not only can basically heterocentrist texts contain queer elements, but basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments" (3).⁸ Although many self-defined lesbian and gay audiences are devoted to the show especially for its "out" representation of white gay male culture, Doty's theory helps explain how this show (among others) may appeal to straight-identified audiences, especially straight women audiences, who, I am arguing, have much at stake in the show's redefinitions of male-female relationships. Doty articulates the kind of liberation possible when shows like *Will & Grace* produce such queer narratives: "When cultural texts encourage straight-identified audience members to express a less-censored range of queer desire and pleasure than is possible in daily life, this 'regression' has positive gender- and sexuality-destabilizing effects" (4). The audiences for *Will & Grace* seem especially inclined, given the overtly queer nature of much of the material, toward experiencing pleasure through a range of impulses and cultural expressions that are not straight, but at the same time, they may not be strictly gay or lesbian. This dynamic is most obviously represented through the relationships of the straight women (Grace and Karen) to the gay men (Will and Jack) on the show. Indeed, the very popularity of *Will & Grace* emphasizes "just how much everyone's pleasures in mass culture are part of this contra-straight, rather than strictly antistaight, space—just how queer our responses to cultural texts are so much of the time" (15).

Love Will Keep Us Together

That *Will & Grace* explores the contra-straight space of heterosexual women's relationships to gay men as one of its narrative foci is apparent in most episodes, but is addressed specifically in an episode that aired in the second season. In this episode, Grace suffers the anxiety regularly faced by those whose relationships are not socially sanctioned. That it takes until the second season for Grace finally to confront her unconventional relationship with Will in a direct way underscores the show's reliance on the fiction of Will and Grace's "heterosexual" possibilities discussed above.

This second-season episode produces some of the more thoughtful meditations on what relationships between women and men mean if they are not the sanctified ones privileged and supported through the institution of marriage. At the beginning of the episode, Grace runs into an old friend who, like her, had a primary relationship with a gay man when they were in college. Here is how their conversation proceeds:

- Grace: It's been so long! How are you? How's Charlie?
Heidi: Oh, ya know, I don't know. We kind of drifted apart. He moved to San Francisco a couple of years ago, met a guy at a Pottery Barn, had a glass of Chardonnay and . . . poof, instant couple.
Grace: What? You guys were best friends. You did everything together . . . What happened?
Heidi: Nothing happened. You know—gay man, straight woman—it's not like we had anything holding us together, you know like a house or kids. You must have been through something like that with Will?
Grace: Uh, no. We're still together. Roommates, having fun, doing stuff. No offense sweetie, but I know how to keep my gay man (with bravado).
Heidi: Well good for you. I guess you and Will are the exception.
Grace: I guess . . .

This brief encounter suggests, first of all, the commonality of the gay man/straight woman relationship in our culture today.⁹ In this episode, however, Will does not seem to have the same investment as Grace in maintaining the relationship as an exclusive one, and is planning travels and bar nights out with his gay male friends. Grace becomes increasingly panicked that their relationship means nothing within the dominant cultural order (which of course is true) because they do not have the signifiers of institutionalized heterosexuality holding them together—a house and kids. This rather bald rendering of what does hold heterosexual (and, increasingly, homosexual) couples together does nothing less than expose the materialist basis of marriage. But Grace literally buys into this version of commitment and responds to her increasing anxiety over losing Will by having them purchase a piano together which, she explains to him, is designed to help them establish a sense of family.

Grace's panic over losing Will increases as the episode progresses, and the most interesting scene comes by way of the parallel story, starring Karen and Jack, through which Grace's "queer" desire for Will is represented hyperbolically through Karen's queer desire for the gay pornography that Jack has been writing. It is important to note that both Jack and Karen, as supporting characters, operate in the space of excess or hyperbole; they exaggerate the often more mundane characteristics of the lead characters. That is, if Grace's desire for Will in this episode can be read as queer in terms of it existing outside normative structures of a heterosexually defined male-female relationship, Karen's pleasure in the gay porn that Jack is writing exaggerates—and thus makes perfectly queer—this tangle of straight-gay desire. Just as the heterosexual audience in the bar mimicked the very behavior and response necessary for some straight people's pleasure in understanding the nature of Will and Grace's relationship, Karen's excessively erotic response to gay male pornography virtually enacts the kinds of queer spectatorial desires also produced by this show, and thus opens up a space for audiences—especially straight audiences—to identify and desire queerly themselves.

In the following scene, Karen is reading some of Jack's gay porn when Grace arrives and asks to process "the piano situation" with her. It is clear in the scene that Karen is entirely engrossed in reading and responding to the pornography and is not in fact responding to Grace at all, yet Karen's erotic outbursts offer humorous but salient responses to Grace's serious questions about commitment. The scene opens with Karen reading the pornography out loud while "working" in Grace's office:

- Karen: "Like some fantastic farm animal he grunted and whispered: 'Tonight my love you will see the face of God.' Christian closed his eyes and received him hungrily." Lord, this is hot.
- Grace (arriving at the office): Hi, Kar. Do you know if Joe Zavaldi happened to call to say what he thought of my design of the breakfast nook?
- Karen: "He shuttered and screamed out, 'I am reborn!'"
- Grace: I knew the marble countertop would be a big splash. (Pause) Karen, can I ask you something?
- Karen: "Oh yea, give it to me."

- Grace: Well, Will and I bought this piano together and for the first couple of days it was great, but now it just seems like he's bored with it.
- Karen: "Oooh. Ouch."
- Grace: Like last night, he just up and walked out in the middle of our sing-along.
- Karen: "Filthy beast!"
- Grace: Well that's a little strong.
- Karen: "Give it right back to him."
- Grace: You know what? I will! You know he doesn't understand how important this piano is.
- Karen: (with the tempo of their exchange now in crescendo): "That's it! That's the stuff!"
- Grace: If you're going to bring something into your life, you have to invest some time into it.
- Karen: "Yes!"
- Grace: It's a commitment. And that means both people have to be committed to it, right?
- Karen: "Yes. Yes!"
- Grace: I mean, I'm not going to just let him walk away from this. I'm going to protect what's important in my life!
- Karen: "Yes!"
- Grace: Yes!
- Karen: "Yes!"
- Grace: Yes!
- Grace: Thanks for your support Karen. I feel better.
- Karen: (lighting up a postcoital cigarette): Oh. Grace. When did you get here?

This scene's dialogic structure situates the voices on dual registers, which forces the audience to read Grace and Karen's contrary desires simultaneously—for commitment on the one hand, and pleasure and sex on the other.¹⁰ Together, these two voices represent a range of possible desires that straight women may manifest for or about gay men, from raunchy sexual fantasy to devoted companionship. This scene is choreographed in such a way that these contrary desires mix and mingle unpredictably as they rise to orgasmic pitch. Grace's final pronouncement, "I'm going to protect what's important in my life,"

reveals the depth of her love and commitment to Will, but such a traditionally possessive statement of relationship is simultaneously undermined by Karen's commitment to queer sexual pleasure and her utter obliviousness to Grace's presence. So Karen, as the hyperbolic representative of pleasure for pleasure's sake, gets the last word and the last laugh.

This same dialogic pattern returns at the end of the episode, when Grace and Will finally reconcile their own seemingly conflicted desires. By representing Will and Grace's voices on dual registers (one talks while one responds by singing lyrics from a Captain and Tennille song), the narrative again produces an occasion to disrupt and critique dominant ideologies of male-female relationship and desire. To lead up to this scene, Grace plans an "old fashioned piano party," inviting friends over to their apartment so that Will won't feel like he needs to go out to the bar with his gay friends. Things do not go well in general, and when Will accidentally spills the root beer floats (signifiers of old-fashioned family gatherings and values) on the piano (the signifier of wanting to reinvent these same values in this "family"), Grace finally explodes.

- Grace: Oh my God. Oh my God. Look what you did. You ruined it. You ruined everything.
- Will: Grace I'm sorry, but it's just a piano.
- Grace: No it's not. It's more than that, but you don't realize it. Just forget it, just go, just move to San Francisco, and go scuba diving for cute guys in underpants because obviously there's nothing keeping you here.
- Will: Have you been gargling with bong water?
- Grace: We're drifting apart, Will. People do. It happened to Heidi and Charlie. They don't even talk anymore.
- Will: Oh my God, is that what this is all about? Grace, we are always going to be in each other's lives.
- Grace: How do you know that? Huh? Things change. You're going to get a boyfriend. I'm going to get a boyfriend . . .
- Will: . . . Hopefully not the same boyfriend.

- Grace: We're not a couple. We're not married. We don't have kids. What do we have to keep us together?
- Will: (playing the piano now and singing softly) Love, love will keep us together.
- Grace: Don't do that. There are a million things that can pull us in a million different directions.
- Will: Think of me, babe, whenever . . .
- Grace: And then we'll end up talking less and less.
- Will: Some sweet talking guy comes along, singing his song . . .
- Grace: Don't do this. We're talking about our friendship here.
- Will: Don't mess around, you've just got to be strong . . .
- Grace: You know doing this stupid song is not going to take away my concerns, okay?
- Will: Just stop.
- Grace: Stop!
- Will: 'Cause I really love you. Stop.
- Grace: Stop!
- Will: I've been thinking of you.
- Grace and Will Look in my heart and let love keep us together.
(singing together):

This musical conclusion serves to quell Grace's anxiety over the definition of their relationship in a way that seems to wrap up the episode neatly and return the narrative to a position of stasis. However, this conclusion in fact produces several contradictory discourses, effectively maintaining the text's polysemic openness, even at the end, to allow for multiple interpretations. Similar to the dynamic present at the end of the pilot episode, the "love" discourse expressed by Will and Grace seated together on the piano bench and gazing into each other's eyes can be read in a very conventional way: as the romantic love between a man and a woman, a love that would, in its normal trajectory, be expressed ultimately in the decision to marry. In this sense, the ending calls up the embattled definition of marriage, a debate that has swept the country over the last several years in the form of state amendments and federal acts such as DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act), which insist on defining marriage as that which exists exclusively between one man

and one woman. If one ignores the rest of the episode's narrative, one might easily read Will and Grace's final declaration of love for each other as precisely that of a normal heterosexual couple. On the other hand, the notion of love alone keeping a relationship together challenges the definition of relationship that was defined earlier in the show through materialist, or state-certified means—a marriage certificate, a house and a child, or in this case, a piano. However, that this sentiment is conveyed in the year 1999 through a decades-old Captain and Tennille song situates this conclusion most conspicuously within the discourse of camp. Because camp operates through hyperbole, this song itself works through a double articulation that is capable of bearing both the dominant ideology and a simultaneous critique of it. Camp allows for a subversive, or at least parodic, subtext to run counter to the main text, and both "texts" can be read simultaneously by the viewer and her or his disunited subjectivity.¹¹ Thus, Will and Grace's final, musical declaration of love for one another can be read simultaneously as voicing a heteroromantic love *and* a queer love that exists outside that exclusive and exclusionary frame. Still, the question remains at the end: what kind of love will keep Will and Grace together as the unified chanting forces of compulsory heterosexuality attempt to muster all nonconforming forms of love and desire into the circumscribed frame of marriage? What makes the *Will & Grace* sitcom a significant critique of the marriage contract and other normative heterosexual structures is that it often constructs these moments of semiotic excess in which there is too much contradictory desire to be controlled fully by the dominant ideology. It is here in these excessive, contested sites of meaning that heteronormative discourses can be disavowed—for a change.

Saving Grace

However rich and varied the in-between relationship between Will and Grace is, it seems that the writers, and perhaps the audiences of this show, could not sustain the tension into a fifth season of letting love alone keep them together. Thus, the end of the show's fourth season introduced seemingly dramatic changes to the plotline. First, upon realizing how fundamental and intimate their relationship is and feeling as if they may never meet anyone else who can match up, Will and

Grace decide to produce and coparent a child. Had this plot trajectory been borne out (so to speak), it would have continued to produce the familiar dynamic of simultaneously challenging the status quo, this time by defying normative definitions of family on the one hand, and shoring up the *visual* image of Will and Grace not only as a “married” couple, but as a heterosexual “family,” on the other. To understand how potentially unthreatening this visual imaging of Will and Grace as coparents is, one need only consider the alternative: that Will would decide to have a child with another man (a decision that would have, without a doubt, brought Dan Quayle out of retirement). But because this gay sitcom is not really so much about Will’s desires as it is more specifically about women’s desire for a different kind of intimacy with men, it is a bit surprising that the show seems to abandon its search for a model of this kind of male-female affinity when, at the start of the fifth season, it abruptly marries off Grace to another man.

The sudden change in narrative direction from Grace having a baby with Will to marrying a straight man was conducted in familiarly excessive fashion. In a campy postmodern scene of “coitus interruptus,” Grace, on her way to the insemination session with Will, runs into a pole in Central Park and knocks herself out. When she awakens, she sees not a vision of a knight in shining armor, but an actual Jewish doctor on a white horse. This parody of the heteroromantic ideal works to “save” Grace from having a baby with Will and thereby seems to save her from living out a rather more queer life. But the overidealized appearance of this doctor, Leo (Harry Connick Jr.), situates the discourse once again as excessive and camp, and thereby offers up a simultaneous critique of this ideal that positions a woman in need of saving. Yet, despite the potential subversion of the romantic ideal, by constructing Leo as a fairly typical heterosexual man, Grace and Leo’s marriage seems to reproduce precisely that form of heterosexual relationship that this sitcom has spent the first four years challenging. In particular, efforts are made to distinguish Leo’s masculine difference from Will, which include scenes where Leo is unable to contend with Grace’s mood swings. He must call on Will, who obviously knows Grace much better, to assist him. Moreover, Leo’s rejection of the kind of “femininity” that Will and Grace delight in is represented in a later fifth-season episode, when Leo scoffs at a sugary song that is being sung at a funeral while Will and Grace gleefully join in, again distinguishing his masculine difference from Will. These moments of comparison

between Will and Leo operate chiefly to distinguish Leo as a straight man with one thing in particular to offer Grace: sex.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that Grace's marriage to Leo does also save her from the frequent fate of the "fag hag" who, in love with a gay man, often goes without sex. In this sense, the show affirms women's sexual desire. However, that Will has never had an obvious sexual partner on the show suggests the real limits still imposed on representing and thereby affirming gay male desire. Thus, in this sitcom, it is Will who, year after year, must go without. Despite the central role that Grace's marriage would seem to play in the series, soon after Grace and Leo marry, Leo is packed off to do some long-term altruistic medical work in Africa and is thus largely removed from the narrative. During this transition from Grace's unmarried to married status, the foursome (Grace, Will, Jack, and Karen) must renegotiate their relationships to each other as well. The result is several episodes that play on the definition of the family. In one episode, Will and Grace themselves, after enduring a period of estrangement, reunite over their favorite game of charades and rediscover their "homojo"—that is, the quality that makes their in-between relationship significant and primary. In another key episode, Karen responds strongly to Will and Grace's "break-up" and runs away like an abandoned child, forcing Will and Grace frantically to search for her. Once she is found on a city bench, Karen produces the very discourse of a child who is dealing with separating parents. Taking on the personas of such separated parents, Will and Grace embrace and comfort her, telling her that they love her and that they will both still be there for her no matter what. By positioning Karen as the child to a divorced Will and Grace, the episode ironically invokes the fantasy that Will and Grace were always already a married couple. Yet, at the same time, Will and Grace's fluid and enduring relationship to each other and to their "child" Karen suggests rather that their relationship is the kind of queer one that offers up—through camp humor to be sure—the notion that the bonds that establish family are hardly limited to those legitimated through marriage certificates and blood ties. Instead, such definitions of family must include the wonderfully varied "lived arrangements of queer life" that, if taken seriously, can lead our culture to broaden its understanding of how love works to keep us together in ways that move us beyond the limits imposed by the definition of marriage—gay or straight.

NOTES

1. Jane Feuer emphasizes how the problem/resolution format of the sitcom works to allow this genre to address problems in the social structure: "one could say that it has been the *ideological flexibility* of the sitcom that has accounted for its longevity. The sitcom has been the perfect format for illustrating current ideological conflicts while entertaining an audience" ("The Situation Comedy," 70).
2. The show *Brothers* (Showtime, 1984–1989), while also popular, reached a more limited audience because it was on cable.
3. It should be noted here that the "lived arrangements of queer life" includes only gay men and the straight women who love them. Lesbians are one notable absence from the television world of *Will & Grace*. The only time lesbians appeared in the first season, they seemed primarily to convey their dowdy difference from the more beautiful and entertaining white gay men and straight women; they appeared, it seems, only to be ridiculed and expunged from the narrative as inappropriate to the sense and sensibility defining the primarily upwardly mobile urban gay life.
4. In arguing that the gay marriage agenda forecloses the wider possibilities of understanding human relationships and disciplines them into the kind of sanctified dyads that are privileged (economically, politically, emotionally) at the expense of others who do not fit into the licensed form, Warner rightly proposes that straight culture has much to learn from the "welter of intimacies" developed and nurtured by those who fall outside the norm. "Queers should be insisting on teaching these lessons" he says, but "instead, the marriage issue, as currently framed, seems to be a way of denying recognition to these relations, of streamlining queer relations into the much less troubling division of couples from friends" (116).
5. The plots for these films themselves reveal fascinating and different forms of straight female – gay male desire that are too complex to discuss at length here. *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), directed by P. J. Hogan, stars Julia Roberts and Rupert Everett as her gay best friend whose friendship both models the kind of intimacy and understanding straight women desire from men, and helps her sort through her love for a straight male friend who is almost beyond her grasp. *The Next Best Thing* (2000), directed by John Schlesinger, stars Madonna as Abbie, who is tired of failed relationships with straight men and has a one-night stand with her gay friend. When she turns up pregnant, they agree to raise the baby together. Five years later, Abbie falls in love with a straight man and wants to move away with her and Robert's little boy Sam, and a nasty custody battle ensues. *Sex in the City* features a regularly appearing gay man as Sarah Jessica Parker's best friend, with whom she can explore various kinds of queer desires.
6. In addition to figuring gay men as idealized partners for straight women because of the sharing and caring that often mimes that expressed between two women, some have argued that straight women would benefit greatly from the legalization of gay marriage because of the model of equal partnership that gay marriage would provide.
7. That straight-identified women are one of the primary audiences for *Will & Grace* is suggested not only thematically, but also more obviously in the advertisements that target women consumers. The audience demographics of this sitcom seem to fall squarely under the rubric of what Ron Becker called the late 1990s "quality audience." He describes this audience as "upscale eighteen to forty-nine year old adults" who are "hip, sophisticated, urban-minded, white, college-educated, with liberal attitudes, disposable income, and a distinctively edgy and ironic sensibility" (38). Becker goes on to suggest that the television industry has incorporated gay and lesbian material into its prime-time line-ups in order to attract just such an audience. However, the absence of any new gay characters in the fall 2002 line-up suggests that the novelty of the gay character as the signifier of hip attitudes may have already passed.

8. Doty defines queer as well as anyone: "Queerness . . . is a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight" (xv).
9. Indeed, I would propose that most gay men have had, at one time or another, a significant other who is a straight woman.
10. I'm referring here to M. M. Bakhtin's "dialogic" principle, which states that "there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (426). The interaction between Grace and Karen very specifically enacts this dynamic.
11. In her analysis of the gay humor produced in *Will & Grace*, Jane Feuer confirms the centrality of a camp sensibility to the show's popularity. She argues that although the "gay" jokes in the show "can be read and enjoyed on a number of levels, [they] are, in fact, steeped in gay cultural experience. And yet the gender-bending nature of that culture experience seems to have penetrated sufficiently into the mainstream to allow *Will & Grace* to be an equally successful sitcom for gay and straight audiences. Just as in the earlier sitcoms, Jewish humor became American humor; nowadays, it might be that 'queer' humor is American humor, that the 'camp' sensibility long cherished by closeted gay men has now become part of mainstream American humor. Following a definition of camp as a gay sensibility, we can say that queer humor embraces both identification and parody, that it paradoxically combines into one sensibility the most extreme feelings of empathy and the bitchiest kind of detached amusement" ("*Will and Grace*" 72).

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Karin Quimby has taught lesbian and gay studies at Allegheny College and the University of California–Santa Barbara. She is currently an independent scholar. Her articles include "Notes for a Musical History of Lesbian Consciousness," "Unmasking the Homophile in 1950s Los Angeles: An Archival Record," and "The Story of Jo: Literary Tomboys, Little Women, and the Sexual-Textual Politics of Narrative Desire."

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Find out when Will & Grace is on TV, including Series 1-Episode 1: Love and Marriage. Episode guide, trailer, review, preview, cast list and where to stream it on demand, on catch up and download. Series 1 - Episode 1 Love and Marriage. Today 6:30pm - 7pm Sky Comedy. See Repeats. Today, 6:30pm - 7pm. NOW TV Sky Comedy. Friday, 10:30am - 11am. Sky Comedy. Friday, 10:30am - 11am. NOW TV Sky Comedy. ADVERTISEMENT. Share on Facebook. Share on Twitter. Share on Pinterest. "Just Jack" McFarland and his boozy, pill-popping sidekick Karen Walker fill in the foursome that made Will & Grace classic TV and brought primetime to a whole new level of fabulous, while also winning 16 Emmy Awards in the process. With show-stopping guest appearances by Cher, Madonna, Britney, Janet, J-Lo, Ellen, Elton and most every gay icon under the sun, the milestones that Will & Grace hit provided a foundation for all LGBT portrayals on TV today. Download Will & Grace. Every straight girl needs a gay best friend, and interior designer Grace Adler found an ultimate accessory in her lawyer pal Will Truman. It's through this neurotic pair that the show's real stars -- Jack & Karen - come together. Gay besties: Looking back on the show's groundbreaking run, McCormack reflected, 'We've done certain episodes that while they're very much about right now, they will withstand the test of time'. Emotional: After one take in which Will looks back on his empty apartment and closes the door, the director calls out, 'I hate to say it: Cut!' and everyone in the studio breaks out into applause. Will and Grace was a groundbreaking sitcom from the late 1990s, a period in which gay rights were in the forefront of the national media with Clinton's gays in the military fiasco and high profile gay marriage laws enacted in many states. The show depicted the relationship between an gay man, Will and a Straight woman Grace as well as the friendship between them and Will's gay friend Jack and Grace's assistant, Karen. In much of the humor the butt of many of the jokes was Will and his friend Jack's sexuality. Will & Grace: Negotiating (Gay) Marriage on Prime-Time Television. Journal of Popular Culture 38.4 (2005): 713-31. Rowe, Kathleen K. Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess. in Feminist Television Criticism. When Grace gets a marriage proposal, Will risks their friendship by telling her what he thinks. S1, Ep2. 28 Sep. 1998. A New Lease on Life. 7.5 (413). 0. Will Grace has the opportunity to buy the studio that serves as her office space and turns to Will for first-time buyer advice. However, Will's negotiating tactics lead Grace to believe that Will thinks she is incapable of closing the deal and she sets out to prove him wrong. Will and Grace become hooked on a real-life soap opera unfolding in their neighbors' apartment when they begin eavesdropping through the new heating vent in their floor. As Will and Grace live vicariously through the marital infidelities of the downstairs couple, Jack feels neglected and enlists Karen's help in staging a play that drives the message home to his two best friends.