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Deconstructing the Binary:  
The Undressing of Heteronormativity

*In Some Like It Hot*

*Some Like It Hot* (1959), written by Billy Wilder, has long been regarded as one of Hollywood's classic films. In its time, the theme of drag had not quite reached the level of critical response that it has now. Despite this, the film addresses issues which are still debated today, as seen in Judith Butler's ideas about drag and its naturalizing ability towards gender. Many, Butler included, look at *Some Like It Hot* as a reinforcement of the male/female binary, further separating the two genders and giving superiority to the latter. This, however, is not the view of all critics. Through the analysis of a number of relationships in the film, *Some Like It Hot* can be seen as deconstructive of the male/female binary.

Of the relationships that help to deconstruct the binary of male and female, two can be classified as "homosexual". The first couple is made up of the film's protagonists. Joe and Jerry—played by Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon, respectively—are all along a "happily married couple" (Carver 143). To view them as such certainly breaks any idea that heteronormativity may put forward about marriage being between a male and a female. Despite being a male duo, Curtis maintains the male figure, the husband, while Lemmon assumes a more feminine, or

“wife-ly” role. At the very beginning of their journey as the opposite sex (both men are still distinctly ‘men’), Curtis leads Lemmon, taking him by the hand, asserting his “husband-ly” role in the relationship. Additionally, this is the first direct use of either of the men’s female names, and Curtis, having taken Lemmon by the hand, orders, “Let’s go, Geraldine!” (Wilder, *Some Like It Hot*). Other moments see Curtis making Lemmon’s possessions “their possessions”. In the early moments of the film, Curtis assumes that he is free to spend Lemmon’s paycheck as he wants—on a dog down at the racetrack, for example. Again, towards the end of the film, Lemmon notices a bracelet that he had received as a gift has gone missing.

**Lemmon:** What happened to my bracelet?

**Curtis:** What do you mean, your bracelet? It’s our bracelet.

**Lemmon:** Alright, what happened to our bracelet?

(Wilder, Script, *Some Like It Hot*)

The exchange happens quickly. Curtis doesn’t hesitate when he responds, claiming that “It’s our bracelet”, further emphasizing the role of husband he plays in the duo’s ‘marriage’. To an even further extent, Lemmon readily consents, calling it “our bracelet”. Be careful not to mistake this exchange as enforcing the traditional binary—this couple is still made up of two males and is therefore still deconstructive of any ideas heteronormativity would suggest, especially that a relationship of that sort is only capable between male and female partners.

The next ‘homosexual’ couple is that of “Daphne/Geraldine/Jerry”—Lemmon—and his wealthy pursuer, Osgood. Teller Carver, in his article “Sex, gender and heteronormativity: Seeing ‘Some Like It Hot’ as a heterosexual dystopia” describes Osgood as “the least troubled character in the film; he is rich, knows what he wants, (which in this case is Lemmon’s character) and has no worries...” (Carver 137).

Osgood spends a great deal of time attempting to “woo” Lemmon. For the sake of the plot, Lemmon is placed in a position to go along with Osgood’s advances. Eventually, Osgood, who has been married “seven or eight times” (Wilder, *Some Like It Hot*), proposes to Lemmon. When the time comes for Lemmon to explain to Osgood that they cannot get married, Osgood’s reactions and responses are interesting, and play towards the idea that heterosexuality may not be the norm.

**Lemmon:** ...Osgood, I’m gonna level with you. We can’t get married at all.

**Osgood:** Why not?

**Lemmon:** Well ... in the first place, I’m not a natural blonde.

**Osgood:** Doesn’t matter.

**Lemmon:** I smoke! I smoke all the time!

**Osgood:** I don’t care.

**Lemmon:** I have a terrible past. For three years now I’ve been living with a saxophone player.

**Osgood:** I forgive you.

**Lemmon:** [assumes ethereal, tragic look] I can never have children.

**Osgood:** We can adopt some.

**Lemmon:** [angrily] Osgood, you don’t understand! Uh [takes off wig] ... I’m a man.

**Osgood:** Well, nobody's perfect.

(Wilder, Script, *Some Like It Hot*)

The exchange is a list of reasons why a relationship won’t work between the two men, but Osgood’s simplistic responses, albeit comical in the film, hold a certain truth to them. His line, “Well, nobody’s perfect” touches on a greater human truth, namely that no one can ever live up to the any sort of idealization (Carver 138). It is this logic that seems to say since “nobody's perfect no particular imperfection is crucial, so any two people can make such happiness as is humanly possible” (Carver,139)—any two people, regardless of sex or sexual identity.

Opposite these two “homosexual” relationships are two “heterosexual” relationships. Where as the pairings of Curtis and Lemmon and of Lemmon and

Osgood work to deconstruct what is considered 'normal', the next two couples critique heteronormative relationships and further deconstruct the male/female binary in that way. First is the couple of Sweet Sue and her assistant/band manager, Bienstock. They are a 'normal' pair according to the rules of heteronormativity, made up of both a female and male party. Throughout the film, it is clear that they are "together"—Sue relies on Bienstock and, numerous times throughout the film, shouts his name only to have him comply—and have a specific relationship to them. This however, must be qualified by the fact that they are portrayed in a completely non-sexual way. The two are therefore far from what a heteronormative relationship should be, "as heteronormative romance sets a *sexual* frame around male/female relationship" (Carver 147). Despite first appearances, this couple again works towards deconstructing the normal binary of male and female by contradicting traditional expectations of the roles of the male and female.

The second "heterosexual" couple that appears in the film is that of Curtis and "Sugar", played by Marilyn Monroe. Curtis and Monroe could be, in another film, the epitome of a heteronormative couple. Monroe represents traditional and even stereotypical femininity to a tee, from the swanky jazz music that plays when she is onscreen to the (by late 50's standards) revealing costume choices. Despite this, Wilder writes a script that just won't allow for that "happily-ever-after" couple. Wilder lays this early in the film. Monroe's character has for too long gotten the "fuzzy end of the lollipop" (Wilder). She goes on to recount her relationship history to Curtis:

**Monroe:** You don't know what they're like. You fall for them and you love 'em - you think it's going to be the biggest thing since the Graf Zeppelin - and

the next thing you know they're borrowing money from you and spending it on other dames and betting on the horses -

**Curtis:** You don't say?

**Monroe:** Then one morning you wake up and the saxophone is gone and the guy is gone, and all that's left behind is a pair of old socks and a tube of toothpaste, all squeezed out.

**Curtis:** Men!

**Monroe:** So you pull yourself together and you go on to the next job, and the next saxophone player, and it's the same thing all over again. See what I mean? - not very bright.

(Wilder, Script, *Some Like It Hot*)

Monroe falls into the same repetitive trap of a relationship time after time. At the end of the film, after Curtis has spent significant time and energy into faking his persona a second time as Junior, a wealthy yacht owner, in order to seduce Monroe, the two characters come together as a couple. Yet Curtis is that sax player who Monroe tells us at the beginning of the film she falls for over and over again. Curtis also calls attention to this point at the end of the film.

**Curtis:** You don't want me, Sugar - I'm a liar and a phony - a saxophone player - one of those no-goodnicks you've been running away from -

**Monroe:** I know. (hitting her head) Every time!

**Curtis:** Do yourself a favor - go back where the millionaires are - the sweet end of the lollipop - not the cole slaw in the face and the old socks and the squeezed-out tube of toothpaste -

**Monroe:** That's right - pour it on. (twines her arms around his neck) Talk me out of it.

(Wilder, Script, *Some Like It Hot*)

The most powerful heteronormative couple ends up together, yet seem to be the one most doomed to fail. Wilder has given us Monroe's history with relationships as well as throughout the film has shown us Curtis's inability to be in a stable, healthy relationship. It would seem that their relationship is fated to end the way all of Monroe's relationships have ended. This relationship serves a greater purpose, for "not only are Curtis and Monroe doom-laden characters in relation to heterosexual

romance, but heterosexual romance is thoroughly critiqued in the film by portraying it relentlessly and exclusively as a dystopia” (Carver 148). Again, we see the ‘normal’ relationship as the problematic one. What is to be said for these types of relationships if the only two in the film are both deconstructive of what the heteronormative couple should be? In ways opposite those of the “homosexual” couples of Curtis and Lemmon and Lemmon and Osgood, the “heterosexual” relationships of Sweet Sue and Bienstock and Curtis and Monroe work toward deconstructing what is “normal” about the male/female binary.

The Film presents a number of characters engaged in a number of different relationships. It is through these relationships that *Some Like It Hot* can be analyzed as deconstructive of the male/female binary. Whether it is one of the “homosexual couples” (Curtis and Lemmon or Osgood and Lemmon) or one of the “heterosexual” couples (Sweet Sue and Beinstalk or Curtis and Monroe), they all somehow undermine or deconstruct the superstructure of what heteronormativity decrees. It takes looking past the drag, past the outlandish attempts of Curtis and Lemmon to be women, in order to recognize the ability of Wilder’s film *Some Like It Hot* to deconstruct one of the most engrained and recognized binary.

Works Cited

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