

## ABSTRACT

### They Won't: Analyzing Queerbaiting and Compulsory Heterosexuality in Popular Television

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Queerbaiting has become an increasingly common practice in entertainment media. Television shows contain romantic and sexual subtext between two characters of the same gender without these two characters ever becoming involved in the narrative. This baits queer audiences into believe that such a show will offer them proper representation without ever delivering more than substandard representation. Scholars in the field of rhetoric, and in general, have left this phenomenon woefully underexamined. Using close reading and tropological analysis, I analyze *Rizzoli and Isles*, *Supernatural*, and *Stranger Things* as three instances of queerbaiting that assist in operationally defining queerbaiting, illustrating the impact of the practice, and finally modify popular understandings of queerbaiting to be more inclusive of gender identity. Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality provides the best explanation for why queerbaiting happens and can offer new ways to analyze these texts to uncover queerbaiting when it occurs.

They Won't: Analyzing Queerbaiting and Compulsory Heterosexuality in Popular Television

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Representation in popular media has been a contentious issue for oppressed groups as long as media has existed. For the queer community, representation has been a slow fight, but a battle that queer individuals appear, at least superficially, to be winning. GLAAD, an organization that tracks the media representation of queer characters in television and movies, noted that representation of queer individuals in broadcast television, cable television, and stream services continues to increase at a slow, and not always steady, rate.<sup>1</sup> The quality of such representation also continues to improve. Though GLAAD notes that the majority of queer characters are still cisgender white men, representations of women, people of color, and trans individuals are improving, and GLAAD was able to count non-binary and asexual characters for the first time in its latest report.<sup>2</sup> These findings would seem to indicate that both the quality and quantity of queer representation in the media are improving.

While representing a greater range of sexualities and gender identities is certainly a step in the right direction, it is not enough for such characters to merely exist. A character who is queer black woman character can still be used to reinforce negative stereotypes about queer black women. Representation is not simply a box that networks can check; critics must consider the quality of representation of such characters. This thesis takes up the question of quality by using rhetorical criticism to analyze the metrics of queer representation. In particular, the rhetoricity of queerbaiting will be the focus of this study. By queerbaiting, I refer to a common media practice wherein characters have

often appeared on shows in a way that evokes queerness but remains vague enough for audiences to deduce their own conclusions. For queer audiences, a character's sexuality becomes just ambiguous enough to bait such audiences into believing they will be adequately represented. For homophobic audiences, the ambiguously queer character is often used to shore up the audience's fear of queerness. This multifaceted approach is a unique rhetorical approach, one worthy of serious study.

The idea that queer audiences can be lured to shows with potentially queer characters is a relatively recent, though growing discussion. Popular television shows, such as Warner Brother's *Supernatural* and BBC's *Sherlock* have been taken to task on a variety of platforms for what audiences call queerbaiting.<sup>3</sup> As queerbaiting is a relatively recently coined term, there is no standard definition as of yet. The term originated on the micro-blogging website, Tumblr. The earliest reference available to the term comes from this blog wherein the user defines queerbaiting as,

What happens when a series wants to attract a queer audience without alienating their homophobic/transphobic audience. They introduce a character that queer people can relate to. They use the details and feelings common to queer people's lives to make it very obvious to anyone who is queer, that the character is also queer. They know that because there is very little queer representation in media, queer people are going to latch onto this character, and therefore latch onto the series. However, they never let the character actually come out. When the homophobic/transphobic part of the audience starts to realize that the character is queer, the writers add something to reassure them that no, of course the character is straight. Often, this takes the form of a character who is clearly portrayed as gay suddenly entering a straight relationship, but that is not the only way it can play out.<sup>4</sup>

While this explanation is not concise, it does encompass many of the key aspects of queerbaiting on which I will build my analysis. First, characters that queerbait perform as queer. This could be through a variety of means, including visual aspects of character design, queer humor, or romantic tension with another character of the same gender.

Second, there is a consistent neglect within the show's narrative to confirm the character as queer. This may simply be silence in the dialogue of the show, but it may also include overt, often humorous, lines of dialogue about or from the character that poke fun at the idea of queerness. This creates a sort of liminal space in which characters are easily read as queer but are never confirmed to be queer. My thesis will examine queerbaiting as a rhetorical strategy through a close reading and tropological analysis of the network and streaming television shows *Rizzoli and Isles*, *Supernatural*, and *Stranger Things*. I argue that this analysis can contribute to rhetoric's understanding of the ways media and tropes are used in nuanced ways to oppress queer individuals. I will also use queer theory to supplement traditional approaches to rhetoric.

### *Justification and Research Questions*

In creating a more complex understanding of the ways heteronormative tropes operate within media, there are several types of questions this thesis must answer: questions about the basic idea of queerbaiting as a rhetorical tactic, questions about the ways different types of queer identities interact with queerbaiting, and questions about the consequences of queerbaiting for queer individuals, queer theory, and rhetorical theory.

The first set of questions my thesis deals with must establish an understanding of queerbaiting. This introduction contains elements key to defining queerbaiting (a queer-performing character is never canonically confirmed as queer), but an operational definition is the best way for us to not only understand queerbaiting as rhetoricians, but to then begin to unpack its impact. Simply, the best way to establish some beginning parameters for what constitutes queerbaiting is by taking a quintessential example. I will



use *Rizzoli and Isles* as that example. Homoerotic tension is created between the two main characters, Jane and Maura, via dialogue and narrative structure which never amounts to a romantic or sexual relationship between the two characters.

After addressing basic questions about the nature of queerbaiting, it is necessary to analyze how current understandings of queerbaiting are insufficient, particularly in the context of gender identity. Popular definitions of queerbaiting have almost exclusively revolved around sexual identity instead of including gender identity. I argue that portraying a character as ambiguously gender fluid or trans has the same effect as portraying a character as ambiguously gay or bisexual. Trans individuals have historically been excluded from queer movements and conversations about queer rights. Rhetoricians have opportunities to intervene in such discussion with analysis that includes and focuses on trans individuals. I will use the show *Stranger Things* to examine what queerbaiting in terms of gender identity looks like. Eleven's character design invites audiences to read queerness onto her, despite her having little agency in the way she looks and her character engaging in classic heteronormative tropes. I will argue that this is best illustrated by the number of feminist or queer website and news sources that proclaim Eleven is a queer character.

Finally, the impact of queerbaiting is something this thesis must examine. This can best be done by examining social media posts about queerbaiting and fan debates about the queerbaiting in certain shows to qualitatively assess what queerbaiting in a show does to queer individuals. *Supernatural* has attracted large amounts of fan attention in terms of queerbaiting. Even more mainstream news sources have reported incidents of fans "calling out" the show for queerbaiting. This has created a unique clash between

those better versed in queerbaiting and those less educated about the concept. This is not to suggest that every fan theory proves a show queerbait. Rather the problem arises through a show's representation of characters. As I will illustrate by analyzing these fan debates, the harmful effects of queerbaiting go beyond the effects felt from the show itself. Fans are often attacked for feeling as though two characters could potentially be queer. They are told they are delusional or projecting onto these fictional characters. These discursive strategies are familiar tools for heteropatriarchy and maintain its power. Examining these specific instances in the context of rhetoric has potential for both queer theory and rhetoric.

### *Method*

The method I argue best fits my analysis is a close reading and analysis of tropes within the texts mentioned above. My use of close reading mirrors the way Michael Leff's theory of close reading evolved over the course of his career. I want to begin with some fidelity to Leff's original ideas about the text "speaking" for itself and then moving to explain the context of these shows using queer theory.<sup>5</sup> I believe this method allows for the best analysis of structural issues that remains true to texts. Leff argues this as well, saying, "In other words, contexts always enter into interpretation, and because contexts are theoretically indeterminate, they cannot be formalized and subjected to standards extrinsic to the ground of a particular rhetorical exchange."<sup>6</sup> I will demonstrate in this section both how I will use close reading and expand on the contexts rhetorical scholars must operate in for more complete analysis.

Leff's theory of close reading certainly developed over the course of his career. Close reading is, at its core, about fidelity to the text. If shows like *Rizzoli and Isles*

queerbait, that should be obvious by looking at the show and its context. The role of a rhetorician is not, then according to Leff, to create meaning from a text, but merely to point the meaning out with explanation of its implications. This become particularly important when discussing queerbaiting; one of the biggest charges of deniers is that the queer aspects of characters and their relations are invented by viewers. Pointing to evidence within the text can help combat the charge that queerbaiting has been made up by viewers. Close reading can also assist in developing theory; queerbaiting, as discussed in the literature review, is not something academics are analyzing. Leff's theory emphasizes the use of "exemplars or touchstones" in developing theoretical knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Leff later develops this theory, juxtaposing close reading with hermeneutics, or perhaps describing close reading as a kind of hermeneutic. Leff indicates that, "The hermeneutic strategies of the rhetor are not just there to be plucked out of a text; to locate and assess them, I must engage in interpretive work..."<sup>8</sup> Rhetorical scholars must engage in interpretive work while maintaining fidelity to the text.

I argue, additionally, that close reading requires recognition of larger patterns within a text. These larger patterns are the tropes a text both utilizes and reproduces; they "are the names given to the logic of representation such that metonymy is a relationship of condensation or displacement while metaphor can identify similarity or substitution."<sup>9</sup> Tropes are the logic a text relies upon and exhibits to an audience. Examining the logic of queerbaiting is crucial to developing a theory that assists us with identifying examples. Furthermore, queerbaiting exists within a larger heteronormative logic; analyzing tropes in queerbaiting serves as the best way to understand how queerbaiting acts as a heteronormative strategy. In a more popular or literary and less rhetorical sense, tropes

are also particularly useful in analyzing media. Tropological analysis in this popular sense is certainly related, though not perhaps not perfectly identical, to tropological analysis performed in rhetoric. Tropes, however, are nearly always rhetorical. They act as a template or logical shortcut in the stories we tell. They have become cultural enthymemes in media. Laclau notes in his analysis of hegemonic structures that tropes play a critical role in constructing the hegemon's reality.<sup>10</sup> Tropes circulated in cultural narratives construct specific realities, which makes tropes themselves important to analyze.

Close reading and tropological analysis, of course, requires some intervention on the part of the critic, as Leff acknowledges.<sup>11</sup> As rhetorical critics, it is imperative that tropes be analyzed through an intersectional lens, both for richer analysis and to attempt to correct the biases of the critic. A variety of rhetorical scholars have analyzed how vital intersectional analysis is to shield against divide and conquer strategies and an adequate analysis of the strategies different forms of oppressions utilize. In her analysis of two activist groups near the U.S.-Mexico border, Karma Chávez notes that the queer activist group consisting largely of white individuals receives quite a few more donations but does less coalitional labor than a migrant activist group of largely individuals of color.<sup>12</sup> On a more interpersonal level, leaders of both organizations often talk about the necessity of challenging the assumptions of their organization members, be they whitewashed or heteronormative ideas.<sup>13</sup> Dunn's analysis of queer monumentality reveals a similar problem for queer women. Lesbians have largely been ignored in terms of monumentality in favor of white cis gay men.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Dunn argues that when queer women are represented "most extant lesbian monuments predate the queer monument project

altogether or ignore its existence, apparently remembering these women in spite of their sexualities, not because of them.”<sup>15</sup> This leaves lesbians out of larger portions of public memory, discounting their work in furthering queer movements. These instances all illustrate the need for intersectional analysis; often those at the intersections of oppression will be left behind by normative or mainstream politics. Analysis of queerbaiting must seek out examples that deal with more than just cisgender gay white men.

### *Understanding Queerbaiting*

Queer theory is crucial for understanding novel modes of rhetoric, including new forms such as queerbaiting. There have been some instances of scholars using queerbaiting to analyze media, specifically different iterations of *Sherlock Holmes*. Unfortunately, neither of these pieces seek to develop a theory of queerbaiting nor explore the way heteronormativity utilizes queerbaiting as nuanced tactic of oppression.<sup>16</sup> The general lack of scholarly engagement with the concept of queerbaiting makes it necessary that I relate queerbaiting to larger ideas within queer theory. The framing lens I borrow from is Rich’s compulsory heterosexuality. According to Rich, heterosexuality is compulsive given how heterosexuality is demarcated as normal, whereas homosexuality, particularly lesbianism, is marked as anywhere from non-existent to aberrant, relegating queerness to an Otherized status.<sup>17</sup> This creates the expectation within society that individuals are straight unless otherwise specified. Heterosexuality is the default; queerness, the deviant. Queerbaiting as a rhetorical act takes this larger assumption and uses it to frame characters in media. The act of queerbaiting requires the presumption that all characters are straight until the audience is told otherwise. Heterosexuality is the default setting for characters in media. Explicit narrative events or dialogue must

proclaim the character's queerness before general audiences will even consider the possibility that a character may not be straight or cisgender. Characters are automatically written as heterosexual; it requires conscious choice for writers to create a queer character. This encourages straight audience members to read all characters as straight while queer audiences, starved for representation, are encouraged to look for queer qualities in characters.

Queer theory also supplies a lens for understanding the power dynamics at work in this subject/object relationship between the normative cisgender heterosexual and the deviant queer. There are a few ways that queer theory can offer important rhetorical insights. The primary three I wish to focus on here are queer theory's attention to liminal subjects, questioning the stability of subjectivity, and interrogating the materiality of subjectivity. Each of these can offer insight to further develop a theory of queerbaiting in addition to assisting in understanding the impact of queerbaiting on queer subjectivity.

First, queer rhetorical scholarship studies liminal texts, a positioning that speaks to the liminal position of queerbaiting. Using Turner's theory of liminality offers a way to destabilize traditional categories of just about any variety by positioning the queer as something between discreet groupings and understanding.<sup>18</sup> LeMaster explains liminality well, "Liminality refers to an in-between positionality where the margins of difference are blurred and manipulated in ways that scripted interactions are rendered seemingly unstable or inarticulate."<sup>19</sup> Such a framework, of course, operates from the assumption that destabilizing such categories is beneficial. Rendering categories "unstable" or "inarticulate" is crucial for queer individuals. The primary threat to queerness is normalization, an attempt to cram individuals into socially constructed categories that do

violence to queer individuals. Liminality as a framework allows those critiquing texts to argue whether or not said texts succeed in destabilizing traditional categories.

Liminality is crucial to understand and explain the ways texts relate to audiences, particularly in challenging cultural norms. In his examination of *Let the Right One In*, LeMaster argues that liminality's importance in rhetoric "resides in the text's ability to offer audiences new ways to view a given text, as well as the self, in relation to dominant culture. Rhetorically then, liminality makes visible spaces that 'challenge the heteronormative regime [where queer bodies] are 'free' to perform gender and sexuality without fear of being qualified, marginalized, or punished.'"<sup>20</sup> This creation of liminal spaces is not only beneficial for queer individuals, but the reading of texts through liminal lenses can offer new perspectives for audiences that may otherwise hold heteronormative views. LeMaster gives an example directly from the film, noting, "we see how the audience can become an active participant in resisting normalizing judgment by merging and interacting with liminal characters" often through making the villain the one who is attempting to cram queer bodies into traditional categories.<sup>21</sup> Villainizing the character acting as a metaphor for heteronormativity places the audience in the position of rooting for queer characters over those that seek to normalize them. Liminality, thus, can be particularly helpful when examining whether a character is an example of queerbaiting. Often times, characters that audiences interpret as queer occupy a liminal space of some sort.

Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, however, examine the way that queer liminality can be appropriated toward neoliberal goals, as one might argue that characters used for queerbaiting occupy a liminal space. Again using Turner's theory, Westerfelhaus and

Lacroix observe that the queer Fab Five from the television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* are granted a liminal license to “playfully exploit, in a popular culture context, the dramatic and homoerotic tensions arising from the sexual teasing and boundary testing that have been important in the relational dynamic of gay and straight men.”<sup>22</sup> Queerness is, very literally, entertainment. The audience watches the Fab Five perform queerness within specific boundaries set by the show for laughs. This use of humor is common in queer culture, but takes on a much more sinister task when used in a show that packages and sells queerness. It commodifies queerness as “the inclusion of humor traditionally associated with gays gives the series a veneer of Queer authenticity that serves the heteronormative purpose informing the series’ ritual formula. Fostering the perception that Queer Eye is authentically Queer helps hide the fact that it promotes values at odds with the full and open expression of Queer sexuality.”<sup>23</sup> Audiences get to laugh at stereotypes of queer men and believe they are an ally while the conclusion of the show always requires the banishment of the Fab Five up to their loft, leaving the heterosexual couple free of queer invasion.<sup>24</sup> This is a particularly proximate issue when discussing queerbaiting. Queerbaiting relies on characters occupying a type of liminal space; they are canonically straight, but exhibit a variety of queer behaviors or markers. Queerbaiting characters lack liminal aspects in the sense that shows use a variety of tactics to categorize them as straight, but they are liminal in the sense that they are not properly straight, thus open to interpretation.

Queer theory also calls into question the stability of subjectivity to examine how queer individuals are denied their subjecthood in a myriad of ways. I argue that this is, in large part, due to the performative nature of identity. Identities are socially constructed



performances that have material consequences for individuals. Bennett argues, “Far from a simple form of self-expression, the performativity of identity stresses an ambiguous reiterative power of discourse to produce and control subjects.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, subject formation requires a thorough analysis of rhetorical tropes when discussing the particularities of oppression. Oppression is, simply put, a way to deny subjecthood to an entire category of individuals. Understanding any marginalization thus requires analysis of the strategy being used to deny said subjecthood. While queerbaiting is certainly not the only way queer individuals are denied subjecthood, it is certainly one way that cultural myths about the supposed illegitimacy of queer sexuality are perpetuated.

Discourse has been used to deny subjecthood to queer individuals in a host of ways. One particularly good example would be the way queer bodies have been framed as a national security risk by state discourse. Through rhetoric and associated policies, the United States has somehow been able to connect sexuality to a propensity for treason. As early as 1947, legislation was introduced to keep queer individuals from holding positions in the government, developing into a “Lavender Scare” rooted in the belief that queer individuals would divulge state secrets to enemy (communist) governments.<sup>26</sup> This pattern has repeated itself a number of times, including a particularly noteworthy example with Chelsea Manning. Manning’s whistleblowing was met with vitriol from a variety of sources, some even going so far as to say she ought to be the example used when justifying policies like “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” which force queer individuals in the military to hide their identities.<sup>27</sup> Hamilton Bean argues that such rhetoric creates a no-win situation for queer individuals; either one is pathologized by the military industrial complex, or one is folded into a violent nation state that oppresses other

individuals.<sup>28</sup> This framing of queer bodies as risk is an oft cited argument from those who excuse queerbaiting. They often argue that queer subtext is better than something more overt because the threat of queerness would get an overtly queer show cancelled.

Chávez's work also illustrates the ways that subjects and identities are rhetorically constructed, and thus unstable. Using Muñoz's theory queer utopianism, which seeks out ephemeral utopian futures for queer bodies in contrast to the violence of the present, Chávez examines queer migrants and the intersection of queer politics and immigration politics.<sup>29</sup> She uses the lived reality of queer migrants to develop a more nuanced theory of queer utopias indicating, "By understanding queer as orienting us not toward the 'not yet' but rather toward coalition, we find a vital alternative to both inclusionary and utopian politics."<sup>30</sup> Alternatives to traditional, normative modes of activism are essential. Inclusionary politics will never be inclusionary for everyone; ideas about citizenship automatically exclude undocumented individuals and are molded to exclude many queer individuals.<sup>31</sup> These alternatives, however, cannot forgo material resistance against oppressive structures. Chávez's framework of coalition creates a tool for rhetoricians and queer theorists to understand rhetorics of resistance through coalitional lenses which aim to fight against normative politics while maintaining engagement in everyday struggle. A focus on the everyday can assist rhetoricians in understanding the impact of queerbaiting; it affects the lived reality of queer individuals.

Third, queer theory also interrogates the materiality of subjectivity. One of the best ways to illustrate this is to examine the way marginalized groups use queer rhetoric for a variety of tactics that defend against oppressive structures. Coalitions, for example,

are often held together by rhetoric. After studying two activist groups, one migrant and one queer, Chávez even argues,

Wingspan and CDH have attempted to build unlikely connections by reframing and negotiating difference in order to shift the nature of what politics can be. Such coalitions and alliances, and the public discussion of them, are especially crucial in the current political milieu, where homonationalism and the pitting of white queers against people of color, including queers of color, manifests regularly.<sup>32</sup>

Discourse is critical to not only building coalitions between disparate groups, but to actively combat strategies of homonationalism. Tactics like this are critical to queer individuals dealing with various intersections of oppressive regimes in their daily lives. Larger structures of homonormativity specifically rely on discourse to perpetuate themselves; tactics that rely on discourse must be part of material struggles against such structures. Queerbaiting happens through heteronormative and homonormative discourses. Tactics to resist it, then, must also deal in discourse, which rhetoric scholars are in a unique position to accomplish. Queerbaiting itself is a polyvalent strategy which evolves depending on the rhetoric used to deploy it. Rhetorical scholars are best equipped to interrogating these particularities and, when done through a queer lens, prescribing solutions for those resisting queerbaiting.

Coming to the rhetorical act of queerbaiting from a lens of compulsory heterosexuality thus allows critics to understand how characters in the media are constructed. The work of queer theory, namely attention to liminal subjects, the stability of subjectivity, and the materiality of subjectivity, then affords rhetoricians the tools to critique texts that engage in queerbaiting. These tools are complex, as is the rhetorical act of queerbaiting. The invitation for audiences to see all characters as straight by default is achieved in a variety of ways. Certainly, destabilizing notions of subjectivity is key in unpacking this notion of compulsory heterosexuality. Moreover, such complex tools are

required to tackle the issue of queer representation in the media. If queer subjects have the power to destabilize notions of subjectivity, then how these subjects are represented as the potential to either empower or pacify them.

### *The Problem of Representation*

Examining a particular type of representation, such as queerbaiting, requires a broader examination of representation itself. As the introduction of this paper argues, representation is not simply a box next to which one may check “Yes” or “No.” Coming from a queer theoretical perspective, representation presents a variety of problems for both rhetorical scholars and queer individuals. Representation, particularly in the media, can be a form of homonationalist assimilation, an attempt to pacify radical queerness by offering piecemeal solutions to the denial of queer subjecthood. By putting some or certain queer individuals (usually white cis gay men) on television or in movies, the media can be portrayed as inclusive without including the radical queer bodies that threaten to destabilize its notions of subjectivity. This pacification is a neoliberal divide and conquer strategy; its intent is to create divisions among a given groups so as to encourage the group to fight itself rather than the power structures at the core of the group’s oppression.<sup>33</sup> Assimilation into normative structures will never be accessible for some queer individuals, such as queer migrants or queer individuals with HIV.<sup>34</sup> Thus the attempt to assimilate white cis queer bodies becomes a method to divide and conquer queer individuals. Chávez argues that a borderlands method has the potential to combat such divides. She argues, “The borderland is a queer space, and in the language of “Undoing Borders” a queer orientation centers on the “gray” areas of politics and identity. Gray politics refuse divide-and-conquer strategies and insist on building critique

and change from the complex interstices among nation-states, groups of people, and issues."<sup>35</sup> Critiques of queerbaiting must take into account that the subjects they deal with are generally white; demands for adequate representations that avoid queerbaiting must also take other intersections into account.

This issue of misrepresentation is certainly not a new one for queer theory. Like rhetoric, the discipline has historically consisted of the work of straight, white, cisgender men. In correspondence with Chávez, several authors writing at queer intersections discussed this issue, particularly in terms of race and trans issues. Trans individuals are often excluded from larger movements with normative ideals as trans individuals, by virtue of their existence, call into question heteronormativity's essentialist link between sex and gender. This should create a kind of "dissatisfaction" with queer movements and analyses.<sup>36</sup> Sandeep Bakshi in particular notes, "precolonial history and practices of representation become significant in orientating our postcolonial presents and futures. For instance, trans-communities in pre/ colonial India were not systematically stigmatized as in contemporary times."<sup>37</sup> White colonialism is responsible for introducing heteropatriarchal concepts about the gender binary into indigenous communities. An analysis that lacks an intersectional perspective will likewise miss such crucial context. Examining pre-colonial practices can provide starting points for formulating tactics to deal with oppressions unique to colonialism.

Frames of queer intersectionality become particularly important when examining television. Bennett contends that television is a significant rhetorical outlet for challenging norms. He maintains that mediums involving private spaces ought to be examined, "As a medium, television penetrates the home, allowing people to watch

programs anonymously, with differing economic commitments and social investments than when they are in theaters.”<sup>38</sup> This allows individuals to consume media that either creates or affirms a variety of problematic beliefs. Such an argument is certainly also applicable, however, to movies as streaming services like Netflix and Hulu make it easier for individuals to view movies privately, in much the same manner as they might watch a television show. Examining television shows and movies as popular mediums allows critics to scrutinize messages which are widely distributed to audiences, permeating any aspects of their lives. It can also allow critics to speculate about the opinions of audiences. Television shows must be popular to continue being produced; one can look at ticket sales while a movie is in theaters and draw conclusions about the likelihood of others viewing it in a private setting at a later time. The messages about marginalized groups contained within a popular piece of media allow critics to make substantiated claims about the views of large segments of society. This allows individuals to section off their mockery of queer sexuality to the privacy of their own homes where they need not be held accountable.

This wariness of representation via mediums in private spaces ought to be magnified due to the ways texts are constrained by institutions. For a text to be widely circulated, it must follow certain rules which make it intelligible. The scripts that make queer individuals intelligible often portray them as dangerous,<sup>39</sup> diseased,<sup>40</sup> ignorant,<sup>41</sup> or in stereotypical roles as effeminate sidekicks.<sup>42</sup> This does not, however, leave such texts entirely without use. Heteronormative and homonormative texts ought to be circulated alongside critiques of these texts. This is a technique that queer theorists and rhetoricians in academia often use to make theoretical arguments with concrete examples. Edelman

used infamous activist Larry Kramer to equate those queer men accusing their own community of perpetuating HIV with conservatives who proclaimed HIV to be retribution for queer sexuality.<sup>43</sup> This served to both critique the rhetoric of those in the queer community or claiming to be queer allies while simultaneously increasing the circulation of Edelman's scholarship. Such a process certainly does not place homophobia shows in the "win column" for queer individuals, but can at least provide opportunity for critique. Queerbaiting is one of these opportunities; critiques of queerbaiting must take the opportunity to examine that particular lack of reciprocity present between straight and queer couples in media.

What is curious is that queer critique of television within rhetoric specifically remains a small part of rhetorical work done about queer issues. Many scholars tend to focus on historic individuals or public memory, which are certainly worthy pursuits. A focus on private media, however, can also yield important results. Westerfelhaus and Lacroix demonstrate this in their critique of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. They note that *Queer Eye* is often lauded by general audiences as a leap of progress in terms of queer representation, particularly due to the veneer of authenticity given to the show by its use of queer humor and homoerotic undertones.<sup>44</sup> Westerfelhaus and Lacroix argue, however, that this type of rebellion is best described as a mediated ritual of rebellion. Rather than being a genuine threat to the heteronormative social order, *Queer Eye* gives a "liminal license" to the Fab Five to perform queerness within certain bounds with the same messages about the unnaturalness of queer sexuality and the eventual relegation of queerness to the periphery.<sup>45</sup> This neoliberal appropriation of queer bodies is often left without being criticized by the general population because it is viewed as a "step in the

right direction.” A focus on television shows and movies from the perspective of queer rhetoric is necessary to uncover some of these rather insidious forms of oppression.

### *Criticizing Queerbaiting*

Queer theory supplies rich theoretical background that has allowed rhetoricians to examine queerbaiting as a strategy of a heteronormative social order. The impact of queerbaiting is has been well articulated by popular media pieces discussing queerbaiting: it makes queer sexuality a joke. Queerbaiting relies on fans to desire two characters to enter into a relationship; this is a common practice for fans of any show, whether their desired pairing is straight or queer. Queerbaiting, however, then takes away any seriousness from a desired pairing, portraying queer relationships as something that could never really be expected within the series.<sup>46</sup> This represents queer sexuality as a whole to be something laughable or far-fetched, negating the lived experiences of queer individuals.<sup>47</sup> Such poor representation also becomes a substitute for genuine queer characters; actual representation is supposedly impossible, thus queer audiences are left with little more than a punchline.<sup>48</sup>

Queerbaiting as a criticism has the potential to reveal non-reciprocal aspects of portrayals of straight and queer characters in television. A common criticism when someone argues a particular show has engaged in queerbaiting is that the characters involved are *obviously* straight and that no one could possibly believe otherwise. This has lead those critiquing the phenomenon to compare similar shows accused of queerbaiting to other shows within similar genres that depict romances between two characters of different genders. What quickly becomes obvious is that the behaviors between members of each couple are strikingly similar: they playfully banter, are put in sexualized



situations, or have scenes separate from the rest of the cast in which their bond is developed. The only difference is that pairing which eventually become canonical romantic partnerships are not queer.<sup>49</sup> Couples that are accused of queerbaiting often engage in the same behavior as their straight counterparts without their relationship ever culminating in a sexual or romantic encounter. This becomes a type of social gaslighting; not only are queer people mocked for their sexuality, they are also told that anything queer they see in a mainstream show is all in their heads.

The context of television becomes particularly important here. Most mainstream television shows, movies, books, video games, or other medium for entertainment involve romantic or sexual encounters between characters. This means audiences are quite adept at seeing the patterns leading up to romantic encounters, like other characters making jokes about such a relationship, emotional connections between the couple, and countless other behaviors. Heteronormativity positions such behaviors between two characters of the same gender as innocuous for most audiences. The compulsion to drive out any queer possibilities is so automatic that general audiences cannot even fathom their favorite characters as queer unless they are, for all intents and purposes, slapped with a sign that says, "I'm gay!"<sup>50</sup> This accounts for a significant amount of the pushback against those who critic popular shows for queerbaiting; most audiences think queerbaiting does not happen because they do not think about queerness existing.

That said, even the way the pieces in popular media and the few pieces in academia critique queerbaiting as a practice could use some critique of their own. This project aims to correct some theoretical mis-steps activists and academics have made. One particularly glaring problem is that critics only focus on potential queer

relationships.<sup>51</sup> They should rather focus on anytime a character could potentially be queer and then is either never confirmed as queer or canonically confirmed as cisgendered and straight. Previous focus on queer relationships is certainly understandable; it is, after all, much easier to point to signs of a budding queer relationship between two characters to prove a character could be queer. This, however, essentializes queerness into only sexuality. Gender identity is an important queer issue, one that is ignored not only in media, but in many mainstream queer movements.<sup>52</sup> Having a character adopt particular markers in their presentation can also mislead audiences into believing that the character will be queer or at least gender non-conforming. This has the same effect as using queer relationships to bait audiences; identities outside the gender binary are made into a joke or a fashion statement.

Scholars who critique queerbaiting have also focused strongly on intention, to the detriment of understanding the practice. Many of these critics offer definitions of queerbaiting, but these definitions imply it is something writers or producers do intentionally to attract a queer audience. Authors may use subtle words like “teases” to imply this, or they may explicitly state that queerbaiting is purposeful.<sup>53</sup> Judith Fathalla’s definition, one of the few offered in academic work, exhibits this characteristic, “Queerbaiting may be defined as a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility.”<sup>54</sup> Making claims about the intent of creators is incredibly difficult in any scenario and often simply impossible. It is also irrelevant. One need not prove

creators did something problematic on purpose to demonstrate something problematic was done. Queerbaiting still has the same impact, regardless of the creators' intent.

### *Organization of Thesis*

My thesis consists of five chapters: an introduction, three chapters of analysis, and a conclusion. The first analysis chapter will be a close reading and tropological analysis of the network television show *Rizzoli and Isles*. I have chosen this show to represent a quintessential case of queerbaiting. I believe the show uses romantic tropes and sexually suggestive dialogue to have the two main characters, Maura and Jane, perform aspects of queerness without being queer themselves. This will require an examination of the tropes used in movies and television shows to tell the audience that two characters are going to become romantically involved in addition to brief exploration of the ways queer characters are coded as such. These tropes will then be compared to the interactions between Maura and Jane to argue that, if one does not operate under the assumption that everyone is straight, the dynamics of their relationship telegraph a queer romantic relationship. Such a romance, of course, never happens in the show itself, but always seems as if it is about to. This section of analysis seeks to argue that queerbaiting is not simply all in the heads of audience members.

The second chapter of analysis will be a close reading and tropological analysis of the network television show *Supernatural*. This chapter will be focused less on the content of the show itself and more about rhetoric surrounding the series. This will aim to make the impact queerbaiting has very explicit. Queer fans that argue two characters of the same gender ought to be together are met with massive amounts of homophobic ridicule by both other fans and, in the case of *Supernatural*, members of the cast.

*Supernatural* is also a particularly troubling case as one of the actors playing half the queerbaiting duo gave hints in interviews that suggested the two characters might end up together. Queer audiences are told these relationships exist only in their imaginations, despite substantial evidence to the contrary, which can have a structurally detrimental impact on perceptions of queer identity.

The third chapter of analysis will be a close reading and tropological analysis of the streaming television show *Stranger Things* as well as fan reactions to the show. In this chapter, my goal is to illustrate what queerbaiting can look like in terms of gender identity, and most discussions of the strategy rely exclusively on sexuality for examples. While sexuality is certainly an important aspect of queer identity, it also certainly is not all-encompassing of the reasons people identify as queer. Trans identity is often less represented in not only the media, but in the fields of queer theory and rhetoric. Building an analysis of queerbaiting must include trans identity to truly explore the complex ways in which queer individuals may feel baited by a particular piece of media. This can leave a representation-starved demographic with shows that are “close enough” at best, which encourages networks and streaming services to end the pursuit of quality queer characters. Such an analysis will require me to build on the discussion of queer coding I will begin in the first analysis chapter.

In the conclusion, I will summarize the distinct arguments made in each chapter as well as relate these arguments to one another. I will revisit the romantic tropes used in television shows, as well as the ways these tropes are played off when two characters of the same gender are involved. I will also summarize the changes that ought to be made to

our understanding of queerbaiting. Finally, I aim to discuss how rhetoricians ought to proceed when discussing media representation of queer individuals.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Rizzoli and Isles

#### *The Gayest Straight Women on TV*

The first example of queerbaiting I wish to examine is the crime drama, *Rizzoli and Isles*. The show aired from July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010 to September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016 on TNT.<sup>55</sup> TNT indicates, “*Rizzoli & Isles* follows Boston detective Jane Rizzoli and medical examiner Maura Isles, complete opposites and good friends who solve crimes and bust some of Boston's most notorious criminals.”<sup>56</sup> The show re-conceptualized the buddy-cop genre with crime show drama. The show’s premiere was much anticipated and drew an initial audience of 7.6 million viewers.<sup>57</sup> It was the top primetime new original series (by total viewers) for that year.<sup>58</sup> *Rizzoli and Isles* maintained its popularity until the series finale in 2016; the finale was the “most-watched entertainment show on cable for the week of Sept. 5-11.”<sup>59</sup> The show reached millions of people over the better part of a decade. Additionally, the show received four awards over the course of its run for both its acting and production.<sup>60</sup>

The show often generated lesbian overtures between the two leads and its popularity meant these overtones did not go unnoticed. Quite a few pop culture pieces about the show discuss “Rizzles,” a name the fan base created for a hypothetical Rizzoli-Isles pairing. The support these pieces use draws from both evidence in the show as well as from the actresses. The possibility of their romantic relationship even spurred media commentary. One writer for the *L.A. times* wrote,

The first season of TNT's crime drama "Rizzoli & Isles" featured an episode with the title "I Kissed a Girl." Its stars, Angie Harmon and Sasha Alexander, played on a softball team, shared some intimate dinners, drank wine over candlelight and hopped into the same bed for girl talk. But this is not a gay show. Series creator Janet Tamaro described Harmon's Rizzoli and Alexander's Isles as a "power couple" — the center of a buddy drama, one that broke cable ratings records in its debut run and returns for its second season July 11. But the women are not together, as in *together*.<sup>61</sup>

Stanley's thoughts characterize quite a few of the popular culture pieces written about the show. What's more, such speculation about Rizzoli and Isles's sexuality is rather mainstream; the above quote comes from the *L.A. Times*. In other words, discussions of the show's queerbaiting tactics were mainstream.

Some media critics sought to disprove the idea that the two title characters had been put in some sort of romantic context. Many argued that Western standards of friendship often devalue physical touch or other kinds of closeness, which is detrimental to our ideas of friendship. One media critic indicates she began watching the show to disprove arguments about queerbaiting.

Why do women always have to be sexualized, whether they're straight or gay? Why can't they just go to work and, you know, work? Maybe they're just friends! Nothing wrong with that! I was going to pontificate on all these lovely points, but then I watched the show. And I've got to say, if the second season is any indication, maybe everyone's just stating the obvious.<sup>62</sup>

She has been persuaded by the series itself, as opposed to other authors that sought to prove the show used queerbaiting. Authors that attempt to prove the show does queerbait use a variety of evidence based in the show. Some have even taken screenshots from the show to provide visual evidence, either moments of long touching or the title characters staring at each other's breasts.<sup>63</sup> Queerbaiting in *Rizzoli and Isles* has become painfully obvious to both those that originally bought the claim and those that wanted to refute the idea.

Other popular culture pieces draw evidence from the show's marketing or interviews with the actresses. For example, the promotional poster for the fourth season depicts Rizzoli and Isles handcuffed together smiling at the camera.<sup>64</sup> Angie Harmon, the actress who plays Rizzoli, indicated during an interview during the show's run that the crew was more than aware of all of the fan speculation about a romantic or sexual relationship between Rizzoli and Isles, "Harmon also recently said that they do sometimes play up the are-they-or-aren't-they angle for viewers. 'Sometimes we'll do a take for that demo .. I'll brush by [Maura's] blouse or maybe linger for a moment,' she told After Ellen."<sup>65</sup> The actresses even reference the "ship"<sup>66</sup> on their social media, either by calling each other pet names like "pumpkin," or using hashtags like "Rizzles."<sup>67</sup> This is all followed by a swift denial from those on the show that the characters are queer, "'I hate to disappoint, but these characters are straight,' Harmon insisted."<sup>68</sup>



Figure 1: Promotional poster for season four



I will argue that *Rizzoli and Isles* is one of the clearest cases of queerbaiting we have. The content of the show as well as outside factors, like interviews with the actresses, point towards queerbaiting. Understanding the specific ways this show utilizes queerbaiting is the goal of this chapter. I will use close reading of the show to pick out quotes or situations I believe constitute queerbaiting and explain how they operate through tropological analysis. Additionally, as discussed in my first chapter, I believe Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality is the best starting point for understanding queerbaiting. In this chapter, I will also expand on this explanation using her theory of the lesbian continuum with *Rizzoli and Isles*.

#### *Queerbaiting in a Uniquely Lesbian Case*

Queerbaiting is a maintenance strategy for heterosexist structures. Historically speaking, lesbians have occupied a uniquely deviant position in American society. In a heteropatriarchal society, women have no ownership, not over their physical bodies, their intellectual labor and creativity, and certainly not over their own sexuality. In a heteropatriarchal society, women and their sexuality exist for the pleasure of men. Any performance of sexuality deemed "improper" or without men as the focus becomes culturally deviant, and ergo punishable.<sup>69</sup> In her analysis, Rich notes that society's punishment of lesbian sexual deviancy has often extended beyond overtly romantic or sexual interactions; women's friendships have also often been a target of heteronormative structures.<sup>70</sup> Heteropatriarchal society is structured such that scrutinizing every aspect of women's lives serves as a basis for that society's power. Rich identifies eight core tenants of patriarchal power: denying women their own sexuality, forcing male sexuality upon women, exploiting women's labor, control of women's children, physically confining

women, objectifying women in male transactions, restricting women's creativity, and denying women access to large portions of society.<sup>71</sup> Queerbaiting as a strategy maintains the first, second, and eighth tenants of patriarchal power.

Denying women their own sexuality can take a variety of forms. Rich identifies clitoridectomy as perhaps the most extreme example of this; it is the infliction of bodily harm to decrease the capacity for pleasure during sexual encounters.<sup>72</sup> In the same paragraph, Rich also identifies "pseudo-lesbian images in the media and literature" as a method of denying women their own sexuality.<sup>73</sup> This is not to say that genital mutilation and misrepresentation of lesbians in the media are the same thing, but rather that they function toward the same end. Denying women their own sexuality serves as a way to objectify women; women's sexuality is not for women, it is for men. Queerbaiting serves this end. It dismisses the possibility of queer women's desire as unnecessary or implausible. Rich notes that this perspective is a primary goal of compulsory heterosexuality, "The bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible."<sup>74</sup>

Rich's second tenant, forcing male sexuality upon women, likewise falls on a spectrum of violence. Rape is the most obvious example, but Rich includes other acts such as "the socialization of women to feel that male sexual 'drive' amounts to a right," are also part of this larger heteropatriarchal strategy. Such societal assumptions are eerily similar to excuses made today for those accused of sexual assault, like Brock Turner and Justice Brett Kavanaugh.<sup>75</sup> This 'boys will be boys' rhetoric cements the idea that men have little control over their sexual desire, constructing all heterosexual contact,

including assault, as “natural” or inevitable. Rich indicates that this intrinsically violent idea is sold to us through the “idealization of heterosexual romance in art, literature, the media, advertising, etc.”<sup>76</sup> Heterosexual relationships become the default in public life, excusing criticism of queer relationships in public and private life. It seems reasonable to use tired, heterosexist tropes because the idea of queer relationships is presented as ludicrous.

Rich’s eight and final tenant of patriarchal power argues that heterosexism is maintained by withholding women “from large areas of the society’s knowledge and cultural attainments.”<sup>77</sup> This can mean not educating women at all to keep them out of positions of power, relegating any power to spheres deemed appropriately frivolous, or “the ‘Great Silence’ regarding women and particularly lesbian existence in history and culture.”<sup>78</sup> Thomas Dunn notes this pattern in the memorializing of queer individual. He finds that most memorials for queer individuals are about men or a queer collective. Very few center queer women, and those that do often fail to identify the women as queer. These monuments are, “apparently remembering these women in spite of their sexualities, not because of them.”<sup>79</sup> This erasure of lesbians from cultural archives also presents them as unnatural or (in the case of queerbaiting) laughable. Erasure becomes particularly damaging as it idealizes heterosexual relationships. Even in a relatively light-hearted show, like *Rizzoli and Isles*, idealizing heterosexuality against a queer, deviant counterpart through queerbaiting serves to reproduce these ideas about the “natural” position of gender in a violent order while scrutinizing the gender and sexual performance of its two main characters. This violent order requires the sexual subjugation of women and the erasure of queer bodies.

Rich offers an alternative to this violent order, which she deems the “lesbian continuum.” She notes, “I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range – through each woman’s life and throughout history – of women-identified experience...”<sup>80</sup> Cracking the edifice of a heteropatriarchal society requires more than just sexual liberation; it requires a cultural shift in the way we view the personhood of women. Rich argues, “If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support ... we begin to grasp the breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of lesbianism.”<sup>81</sup> Much of the maintenance of heteropatriarchy requires the erasure of women, particularly lesbians, from history and culture. Forefronting lesbian existence in a positive way, thus, has broad liberatory potential.

*Rizzoli and Isles* comes close to this ideal in a variety of ways. Rizzoli is shown confronting and overcoming workplace misogyny. Rizzoli and Isles have a genuine friendship that is never complicated by stereotypical cattiness, but rather confronts real issues friends must go through together. Isles remains proud of her stereotypically feminine tastes in spite of the criticisms she receives from other characters. Each of these might individually or when combined create an excellent representation of the lesbian continuum. Perhaps that is what is, from a critical perspective, so frustrating about *Rizzoli and Isles*. The show includes aspects of good representation before queerbaiting a representation-starved audience. Such a pairing of feminist characteristics with sexist ones is nothing new in our media. *Cagney and Lacey*, a show in the same genre as *Rizzoli*

*and Isles*, also suffered constant criticism from traditionalists, who thought the show was too queer, and from progress queer groups, who were angry when the show began feminizing Cagney and Lacey. *Cagney and Lacey* attempted to slip in feminist messages, but ultimately recreated the same sexist stereotypes it sought to dispel.<sup>82</sup> *Rizzoli and Isles* suffers from the same problem. It is clear the show included feminist scenes and events, but ultimately relied too much on heterosexist tropes to form its characters. To understand this queerbaiting in the context of a viciously heteropatriarchal society, we must examine the tropes present within the show.

### *Lesbian Buddy Cops: Troves of Tropes*

As discussed in my introductory chapter, analysis of rhetorical tropes in media are a key component in identifying instances of queerbaiting. To that end, I will connect *Rizzoli and Isles* to other tropes in media to identify what the audience is told about characters in the show. Tropes give us information about characters and their relationships. In the case of *Rizzoli and Isles*, tropes in the show, especially involving the two title characters, would indicate that Rizzoli is individually queer and will eventually become romantically involved with Isles. I believe there are three broad categories of tropes that support this: generic lesbian tropes, tropes about sexual encounters, and tropes about couples in television. Tropes about lesbians establish Rizzoli's individual queer identity. Tropes about sexual encounters and couples establish that Rizzoli and Isles ought to become a couple, or at least that it is more than reason for the audience to expect them to become a couple. These expectations are queerbaiting; the audience has more than sufficient reason to believe that not only is at least one of these characters queer, but that she become romantically involved with another woman on the show.

*Rizzoli and Isles* fits into the “buddy cop” genre of show, or perhaps is attempting to be a unique spin on a buddy cop show. While earlier examples were certainly in circulation, the genre, and its tropes, became a real cinema favorite in the 1970’s and 1980’s.<sup>83</sup> The buddy cop duo was, and still is, an “odd couple,” or a couple with striking differences which often present a point of conflict in their relationship, as in the original *Odd Couple* play. Examples of this genre include *Lethal Weapon*, *Hawaii Five-0*, *The Mentalist*, and *Cagney and Lacey*. *Cagney and Lacey* stands out as a particularly useful example as it was one of the first popular buddy cop shows to feature two women as its leads in 1981.<sup>84</sup> Actress Meg Foster was even kicked off the show due to fear that she was too aggressive and may be perceived by the audience as a lesbian.<sup>85</sup> *Rizzoli and Isles* certainly follows in the footsteps of *Cagney and Lacey*: Rizzoli is a tomboy who loves sports and hates pink; Isles is a fashion forward femme who took special yoga lessons to wear heels anywhere comfortably.

What’s more, the buddy-cop genre has expanded well past the “two detectives” formula represented by the above examples. There are a host of variations, but *Rizzoli and Isles* fits particularly well into the “cop and a scientist” flavor. Often times, a primary point of conflict between the two leads in a buddy-cop are the characters’ opinions about regulations. There is usually a “by the book” detective juxtaposed with a “loose cannon,” a character who breaks regulation when they feel it is for the greater good. The “cop and a scientist” variant still uses divergent problem-solving methods to achieve the same end; the cop is the brawn and the scientist is the brains, as seen in shows like *Bones* or *Fringe*. *Rizzoli and Isles* fits this trope incredibly well. We are told by other characters that Detective Rizzoli “leads with her heart” more than once, and she certainly dives into

dangerous situations without concern for her own well-being. This creates conflict between her and Isles, as well as between her and her mother on the show. Dr. Isles, the head medical examiner of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, is so wedded to facts that she will often not speculate about anything involving the case without incredibly clear evidence. The characters joke more than once about Isles refusing to give the obvious answer, particularly about the murder weapon, without an autopsy first.

*Rizzoli and Isles* also exemplify another key aspect of the buddy-cop genre: stark differences in social location. Philippa Gates notes that these differences are typically racial; the genre will often partner a white character with a character of a different race, though the black and Asian buddy pairing also gained quite a bit of popularity.<sup>86</sup> It could be argued that Rizzoli and Isles check this proverbial box via ethnic differences; Rizzoli and her family are stereotypically Italian, and Isle's birth father is the head of the Irish mob in Boston. Certainly, given the historic animosity between Irish and Italian immigrants to the United States, the show could use this ethnic difference as a point of overcoming for its characters. *Rizzoli and Isles*, however, uses class as the primary juxtaposition between the social locations of its title characters. Rizzoli comes from a blue-collar family. Jane Rizzoli herself does not actually have a college degree. She entered the policy academy right out of high school. Isles, however, comes from an exceedingly well-educated white-collar family. She, both her adoptive parents, and her birth mother all have doctorate degrees, either Ph.D. or M.D. She even goes so far, in one episode, as to insult her adoptive father because he lacks her more prestigious medical degree. This class disparity acts as a more primary point of conflict between the two characters.

One particularly salient example is the fifth episode of the first season when the victim-of-the-week is a member of a wealthy, prominent family in Boston, a family to which Isles is well-connected.<sup>87</sup> When Rizzoli and Isles go to interview the family, Rizzoli is prepared to ask hard questions about the murder. Isles, on the other hand, chastises Rizzoli for a lack of tact. Once the two return to the police station, their conflict escalates. Rizzoli accuses Isles of a lack of loyalty, “Well I’m sorry I’m not as educated as you and your deluxe friends. Thanks for the support by the way.” Rizzoli even charges Isles with rushing the autopsy, something out of character for the meticulous mortician. Isles explains that the governor wanted to expedite the process, to which Rizzoli responds, “Did you have a nice chat? Maybe tonight you can attend the opera with some senators and then afterward you can go out on the veranda and smoke big wads of hundreds.” This then turns into an argument about status in the city writ large. Isles attempts to defend the victim’s family, saying, “The Fairfields helped build this city.” Rizzoli responds, “My grandfather was an iron worker. He helped build this city.” The two are, of course, able to overcome the bulk of the conflict, an essential element of the buddy-cop genre.

All of these factors, the two title characters as an odd couple, a cop and scientist, and from divergent social locations, cements *Rizzoli and Isles* as a buddy-cop show. Gates notes, however, that while buddy-cops might have characters that represent more diverse backgrounds, the oppressive assumptions about these characters are rarely challenged.<sup>88</sup> *Rizzoli and Isles* has been set in a genre with a reputation for having minority characters that do not subvert dominant narratives about those characters. This



is not to say that individual works cannot subvert their genre to make new arguments. Unfortunately, *Rizzoli and Isles* does not.

*Rizzoli and Isles* fails to challenge the heteropatriarchal assumptions made about women, especially queer women, in media. It is through the use of these tropes that the show communicates queer sexual identity to the audience. In 2016, the last year that *Rizzoli and Isles* aired, women made up approximately 44% of the regularly occurring characters on primetime broadcast television. As reported by GLAAD for 2016, “Of the 71 LGBTQ characters counted, 12 (17 percent) are lesbians, 16 (23 percent) are bisexual women, and three (four percent) are straight transgender women.”<sup>89</sup> Television already lacks proportional numbers of women and queer women represented in media. Thus, the deployment of harmful tropes about queer women is especially problematic; any poor representation will make up a statistically higher portion of total representation. Heteropatriarchal lesbian tropes are ubiquitous in all types of media. A few that are immediately relevant to my analysis include the lipstick lesbian (*Isles*), the butch lesbian (*Rizzoli*), pretending to be gay (a story arc in the show), and all lesbians wanting children (another story arc in the show).

The lipstick lesbian is a stereotypical category of lesbians who exhibit overly feminine traits. These traits often become jokes other characters make about said lipstick lesbian. *American Horror Story*, *House*, and *Pretty Little Liars* all have canonical lipstick lesbians as characters. These characters are a much safer choice for queer representation in the media as they do not subvert gender stereotypes, unlike other lesbian characters.



Figure 2: Lipstick lesbians

Lipstick lesbians are also far more likely to be shown engaging in queer romances on screen, often for the pleasure of the male gaze. When lipstick lesbians are part of an established couple, it is often with a butch lesbian, creating another sort of odd couple.

The butch lesbian is the lipstick lesbian's foil. She presents far more masculine, usually because of her attire choices. She will sometimes have short hair and be taller or



Figure 4: Butch Lesbians



Figure 3: Jock Lesbians

more muscular. *Orange is The New Black*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Game of Thrones* all have side characters that are butch lesbians.<sup>90</sup> The butch lesbian trope can also be expanded with the jock lesbian and cop lesbian tropes. The jock lesbian is a

lesbian who likes sports, or a character who is suspected of being a lesbian because she likes sports. Not all sports make a character a good candidate for the jock lesbian trope. Stereotypically feminine performance sports like gymnastics or figure skating do not fit the trope. Sports like basketball and soccer are far more likely to produce speculation about a character's sexuality. Softball and baseball, of course, are the most quintessential of the sports a jock lesbian can enjoy. *The L Word*, *Golden Girls*, and *Friends* are all examples of shows that feature jock lesbians, or make references to jock lesbians. Dana Fairbanks, one of *The L Word's* primary characters, is a professional tennis player.<sup>91</sup> In *Golden Girls*, there are quite a few references to lesbians and tennis.<sup>92</sup> On *Friends*, Carol, Ross's ex-wife plays both lacrosse and golf.<sup>93</sup> Finally, the cop lesbian is also a common spin on the trope. The cop lesbian is often more masculine as a virtue of her job, as police work requires stereotypically masculine traits (like aggression) and attire (like a police uniform or suit for detectives). *Law and Order: SVU*, *NYPD Blue*, and *White Collar* all have cop lesbian side characters at various points.<sup>94</sup> Olivia, one of the leads on *Law and Order: SVU* is also often mistaken for a lesbian on the show.<sup>95</sup>



Figure 5: Cop lesbians

The “pretending to be gay” trope applies, conversely, to straight characters. Characters usually pretend to be queer to deter a suitor. The suitor is generally undesirable and highly persistent, as in the following examples. In *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Weeds*, and *The Office*, primary or often-recurring secondary characters pretend to be gay at some point usually to deter a romantic interest often with highly detestable qualities. In *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Raymond tells his girlfriend’s father that he is gay because he finds her annoying; Nancy, the protagonist of *Weeds*, pretends Celia is her girlfriend instead of an undercover cop so that dealers will not be suspicious of Celia; in *The Office*, Ann tells her long term boyfriend she is gay to break up with him. This trope is particularly problematic because it plays queer identity for laughs via the “hilarious” notion that any of these characters could actually be gay. It also plays women’s autonomy for laughs as it is usually the only way to deter the suitor and often is unsuccessful for women. It also makes a joke out of a particular pairing of characters. The “pretend to be gay” trope may also be an extended joke over several episodes, reminding the audience what this queer pairing might look like.

Finally, I want to outline the “lesbians all want kids” trope, though *Rizzoli and Isles* is not a quintessential example of the trope. “Lesbians all want kids” usually involves an established lesbian couple who attempt to acquire sperm to have a child through desperate means that rarely involve the proper channels for purchasing another person’s bodily fluids. *Queer as Folk*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Hannibal* all have subplots that involve “lesbians all want kids” at some point. In *Queer as Folk*, Lindsay and Melanie ask a friend of theirs who makes particularly questionable choices to donate sperm. Abby asks one of the main male protagonists for his sperm in *NYPD Blue*. Margot steals her own

brother's sperm in *Hannibal*. In *Rizzoli and Isles*, the trope is played with instead of simply followed. Rizzoli's pregnancy arc involves similar ideas about her and Isles raising a child together, which is pretty queer. All of these tropes, in different ways, communicate queer identity to the audience.

### *The Gayest Straight Women on TV*

In this section, I aim to connect the above outlined tropes with their relevance to the show in the context of queerbaiting. The queerbaiting in *Rizzoli and Isles* can be broadly categorized into parts of the text that establish an individual queer identity for Rizzoli or that make reference to the two as a couple.

One of the things that makes *Rizzoli and Isles* such an illustrative example of queerbaiting is that the show, through tropes, gives Rizzoli an individual queer identity,



Figure 6: Jane Rizzoli

independent of her other half. Some of this dialogue is about Rizzoli's gender presentation, which is often masculine. Some of this is certainly a function of her profession, but there are other instances in which she discusses her distaste for

traditionally feminine attire, like dresses. In season two, episode five, Isles must wear Rizzoli's clothes because Rizzoli needs something nice to wear to an interview (and Isles's clothing is always quite fashionable). When Isles returns so the two may switch clothes back, she remarks, "I got hit on twice! By women!"<sup>96</sup> Ignoring the ludicrous idea that these two women wear the same size clothes, this quote further establishes that Rizzoli looks like a lesbian. It is not just that the audience *may think* she looks like a lesbian, the show explicitly communicates that she looks like a lesbian. What's more, when one "looks like a lesbian," they look like a butch lesbian. Rizzoli also fits into the jock lesbian trope. More than once, an episode starts with a grizzly murder before it cuts to Rizzoli playing a sport of some kind, either with her family or with her colleagues. Episode two of the first season establishes this pattern, and Rizzoli's athletic preferences, early on. She is playing baseball with the rest of the officers from her unit.<sup>97</sup> This establishes that not only does she present like a butch lesbian, but she enjoys the same activities that certain subsets of butch lesbians (jock lesbians) enjoy. While these tropes are certainly problematic in their own right, the purpose of illustrating them in this paper is to determine whether it is reasonable for the audience to believe Rizzoli is a lesbian. Both of these tropes, in the case of *Rizzoli and Isles*, help establish the reasonable expectation that Rizzoli is a queer character. This is how queerbaiting works. The show establishes the reasonable expectation that a character is queer and then makes queer identity a joke, invalidating the lived experience of real queer people.

There are also a variety of instances in which Rizzoli is either called a lesbian, or poses as a lesbian. In the same episode as the baseball game, Rizzoli visits a home to interrogate a suspect. The suspect's wife, who does not have the most positive outlook on

law enforcement, calls Rizzoli a “skinny, grease ball, dyke detective.”<sup>98</sup> This, again, affirms that Rizzoli looks butch lesbian, but in a far more direct fashion; she is very directly being called a dyke. This also uses the lesbian cop trope as an insult towards Rizzoli. In episode six of the first season, the show takes this a step further by having Rizzoli pose as a lesbian to go undercover in an episode not so subtly titled, “I Kissed a Girl.”<sup>99</sup> Finally, Rizzoli also affirms her desire for a queer relationship (as a joke) when her then-boyfriend, Casey, cleans and cooks for her, indicating, “I always wanted a wife.”<sup>100</sup> These episodes all present the possibility that Rizzoli could be queer before laughing at that possibility. This is queerbaiting par excellence. This is the primary way queerbaiting works to maintain the second tenant of patriarchal power. Rizzoli’s potential queer identity is, at best, hilarious and, at worst, a character flaw. Shallow lesbian tropes, then, become some of the only representation available for queer women in media. This maintains harmful societal ideas about queer women, communicating to both queer women and all other viewers that queer women are not real people, but a loose collection of character defects. This kind of dehumanizing rhetoric then justifies violent rhetoric and actions against queer people.

The other broad category of tropes which queerbait in *Rizzoli and Isles* create the impression that the two title characters will become romantically involved. These examples can be grouped in three ways: tropes that indicate sexual interest, couple tropes, and explicit references to “Rizzles.”

Scenes that indicated sexual interest between Rizzoli and Isles include those that rely on the logic of tropes and those that are simply visual. In the first episode of the series, Rizzoli is being hunted by a serial killer she has had a run-in with in the past. She

takes shelter at Isles's house where the two lay in bed together discussing a variety of topics.<sup>101</sup> Lying in bed together and talking as sexual connotations all on its own, but the two are then interrupted by a male FBI agent, Gabriel Dean, invoking a common trope in pornography where two women are interrupted by a man. Dean has visited to give Isles a file. While Isles speaks with him, Rizzoli spies on them from the bedroom door. This has two potential implications: either that Rizzoli's presence at Isles's house must be kept secret, or Isles's conversation with Dean must be kept from Rizzoli. The first possibility is nonsensical. The show establishes that Rizzoli and Isles have been friends for a while, so why would it matter that Rizzoli was staying at Isles's apartment? Dean is a trusted colleague, assisting them in the capture of the serial killer. There is no reason for Rizzoli to hide in the bedroom from the FBI agent. This would only make sense if she and Isles were keeping fraternization a secret. The second scenario is highly reminiscent of someone who has unrequited romantic feelings spying on their love interest during a conversation with a romantic rival. The implication, in either scenario, is that Rizzoli and Isles have unspoken interest in one other, which would lead the audience to a similar conclusion.

This episode is also not the only time Rizzoli and Isles share a bed. In "I Kissed a Girl," the episode which involves Rizzoli going undercover in a lesbian bar, she and Isles sleep in the same bed by accident.<sup>102</sup> Such an event would have copious sexual undertones had it happened between a man and a woman character. Rizzoli even stares at Isles as the two of them fall asleep. The series also ends with Rizzoli and Isles in bed together.<sup>103</sup> Rizzoli has just been accepted as an instructor in the FBI. Lamenting having



to live so far from one another, they agree to take a month off before Rizzoli begins her new job to visit France together. Just the two of them.

“I Kissed a Girl” also features a scene particularly queer scene where Rizzoli is posing as a patron at the aforementioned lesbian bar and Isles there as a server for backup. Ignoring the fact that the head medical examiner of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is unlikely to be good backup in a dangerous situation, during Rizzoli’s flirtatious interaction with the suspect, Isles drops off some drinks and puts her breasts far closer to Rizzoli’s face than would be typical in a similar social situation.<sup>104</sup> The exchange was so absurdly sexual that a *Buzzfeed* article about how queer the show is included this meme of the scene:<sup>105</sup>



Figure 7: Rizzoli staring at Maura Isle's breasts

This scene was not be the last strange breast interaction between the two title characters. In the thirteenth episode of the second season, Rizzoli receives an invitation to her high school reunion. Isles convinces her to go on the condition that they go together.<sup>106</sup> When putting on nametags, Rizzoli rather nonchalantly puts Isle’s name tag right on her breasts.

Not only is that not where anyone would wear a nametag, but it is uncommon for straight women in television (or in life) to so blatantly touch other women's breasts in a public setting. Westerfelhaus observes similarly odd behavior in the show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. He notes that the "Fab Five," our queer eyes, often touch the straight men they makeover in the show, often far past the point of comfortability for these men.

Westerfelhaus describes this as a sort of liminal license given to queers; generally taboo things, like gay men touch straight men, are allowed as long as certain boundaries are observed, like "no kissing the straight men."<sup>107</sup> *Rizzoli and Isles* acts with a similar liminal license. These particularly sexual examples about Rizzoli touching Isles's breasts would typically be taboo behavior, but is allowed as long as the characters are never expressly confirmed as queer. The behavior, and by extension queer sexuality, is merely entertaining. It does not threaten the heteronormative status quo.

The second broad category of "Rizzles" queerbaiting are times the show invokes "couples tropes" between the two characters. Using these tropes communicates that not only is there homoerotic tension between Rizzoli and Isles, but romantic tension as well. Drawn out romantic tension, sometimes over seasons of a series, is common practice. It gives writers a "will-they-won't-they" subplot which can effectively keep audiences interested in the development of the relationships between characters. In the eighth episode of season one, Rizzoli and Isles have a very romantic comedy-esque moment where Rizzoli is teaching Isles to shoot a gun.<sup>108</sup> When I say "romantic comedy-esque," I am referring to the scenes in a variety of romantic comedies where one of the characters (often the man) is teaching the other (often the woman) some skill and does so in an inexplicably handsy manner. This same sort of exchange transpires as Rizzoli (the butch)

sits closely to Isles (the lipstick), places Isles's hands on the gun, and adjusts Isles's shoulders and arms for proper form. Such a scene would indicate that two characters will become romantically involved, even outside the romantic comedy genre.

*Rizzoli and Isles* also uses tropes often reserved for established couples. For example, the two bicker like a couple more than once. In one scene, Rizzoli and Isles are driving to a crime scene and argue about how to get there, similarly to the way couples often argue about driving in media.<sup>109</sup> In another, Isles steals Rizzoli's French fries, paralleling common jokes in media about girlfriends stealing their boyfriends unhealthy snacks.<sup>110</sup> Isles even goes so far in another scene to "nag" Rizzoli about eating healthier, namely kale, due to Rizzoli's family history of high cholesterol.<sup>111</sup> These are not common behaviors between friends in media. They are far more common between couples in media. Rizzoli's mother even goes so far at one point to use techniques she learned in couple's therapy in an attempt to repair a rift between Rizzoli and Isles.<sup>112</sup> Such use of tropes repeatedly revisits the idea that Rizzoli and Isles are practically a couple, but not officially a couple, creating a palatable view of queer women. While Rizzoli and Isles's relationship certainly falls along Rich's continuum, it also invokes the tenants of patriarchal power analyzed earlier. It allows for the possibility of romantic or sexual desire between two women without ever fulfilling the promise made by these tropes. Rhetorically, this posits women's romantic and sexual desire as not for themselves, but for others.

Our final general sort of category are points of dialogue that explicitly imply that Rizzoli and Isles are romantically or sexually interested in one another. These examples range from humorous to quite genuine. The humorous comments are often short quips or

one-liners. For example, in the first episode, when Rizzoli is in Isles's apartment, and Isles gets into bed with Rizzoli, Rizzoli muses, "Are we having a sleepover, or is this your way of telling me you're attracted to me?"<sup>113</sup>

There are quite a few lines throughout the series that paint a similar picture. As previously discussed, Rizzoli pretends to be gay on the show more than once. These episodes, unsurprisingly, also contain a fair amount of sexual innuendo between Rizzoli and Isles. During "Sailor Man," the episode in which the two pretend to be dating to deter a man interested in Isles, there is a significant amount of time in the first and second act during which Isles expresses interest in Giovanni, the mechanic. Rizzoli knows Giovanni and does not believe Isles ought to date him. Isles says she finds him interesting, to which Rizzoli responds, "But I'm interesting, and you don't want to sleep with me." Isles is silent and looks at Rizzoli. Rizzoli then exclaims, "Do you?"<sup>114</sup> In a romance arc between Rizzoli and Casey, a military man, there is a time where Casey is living with Rizzoli. One day, Isles walks into their apartment unannounced to find them kissing in the kitchen. Rizzoli then quips, "Perfect timing! We wanted to have an orgy, but we're one person short."<sup>115</sup> As a final example, one episode involves a fish as evidence, which dies during the course of the episode. Rizzoli jokes early in the episode about the fish liking her. Once she has discovered Isles dissecting it, she questions, "Is that the fish that kept swimming toward me? The cute one?" Isles replies, "Yes," to which Rizzoli retorts, "You killed him, 'cause you were jealous!"<sup>116</sup>

All of these jokes use "Rizzles" as the context, making fun of this queer pairing. It scoffs at the idea of a "Rizzles," to the point where the idea is hilarious. This reveals something particularly important about queerbaiting. In order to make fun of this couple,

it must be a plausible idea. These jokes would not make sense if “Rizzles” was truly so outlandish. They would just seem like poor non-sequiturs. Queerbaiting, in this way, acknowledges the legitimacy of queer audience’s feelings. It can only operate from the assumption that the two characters in question would make a sensible queer couple. This is a prime example of Rich’s first tenant, the denial of women their own sexuality. By creating these jokes, it mocks lesbian sexuality as ridiculous, implying that queer women’s sexuality is ridiculous because women’s sexuality is for men. Often, these jokes are in relation to or response to a man character. In the example with Casey, Rizzoli jokingly expresses desire for Isles in relation to Casey. As long as their desire is for the pleasure of a male character, it becomes acceptable. Such jokes become normal on the show, playing into Rich’s second tenant, the forcing of men’s sexuality or sexual desire onto women. In the Giovanni example, the audience is supposed to believe Giovanni’s male entitlement is funny. We are also supposed to laugh at the fact that Isles must lie to him about her relationship to deflect his pursuits. Her lie is not even successful, and Giovanni requests to join their sexual encounters, again playing to the male fantasy of lesbian sex. Thus, the potential sexual relationship between Rizzoli and Isles becomes a collection of tropes centering male desire.

While all of the above examples are humorous in nature, *Rizzoli and Isles* has very genuinely romantic moments between the title characters. For example, in the same episode where Rizzoli goes undercover at a lesbian bar, Isles muses, “I wonder what kind of women we would like if we liked women.”<sup>117</sup> This expresses a sincere curiosity about the possibility of a romantic relationship between Rizzoli and Isles. These lines also span the series, though are certainly not as ubiquitous as the joke lines. During the Rizzoli’s

pregnancy arc, Isles accompanies her to a birthing class. When asked why, Isles responds, “Because of my love and devotion to you above all else?”<sup>118</sup> Part of Isles’s character is that she lacks understanding of some social conventions, like sarcasm. She is authentically confused at the idea that she would, in some world, not attend Rizzoli’s birthing class. This kind of mix of uncertainty and devotion is expressed later when a new coworker of theirs says, “You two have a unique relationship, don’t you? I’m still trying to figure it out.” Isles responds by saying, “Me too.”<sup>119</sup> The characters in the show are well aware that Rizzoli and Isles’s behavior cannot be explained by a simple “best friends” title. This type of sincerity is also an important part of Isles’s character; the show constantly jokes about lying giving her an allergic reaction. Isles’s earnestness extends beyond simply not being able to lie to people. She also forms deep bonds with those closest to her. During the last season, to cheer Rizzoli up, Isles takes her hands and proceeds to talk about all the things she loves about Rizzoli.<sup>120</sup> The show seems just as interested in what “Rizzles” would look like as the fans. This becomes all the more disappointing when the two never become a couple.

### *Conclusion*

Not only does *Rizzoli and Isles* employ tired tropes about queer women to give its characters their “personality,” but the show also contains interactions between these characters that audiences would rightfully understand as paving the way for a queer couple. The sexual tropes, romantic tropes, and explicit dialogue from the show are all examples of queerbaiting. Julie D’Acci noted over twenty years ago that the mere presence of women in media is not enough; as long as women are represented poorly, their presence in media serves to reinforce tired, violent stereotypes.<sup>121</sup> The same is true

for all oppressed groups in society, and queerbaiting is a particularly insidious example of this. The characters themselves are less characters than a collection of tropes about queer people. These “queer” characters, then, do not ever even identify as queer or engage in queer relationships. Such misrepresentation perpetuates negative ideas about queer people in the tropes that are used as well as with inter-audience interactions concerning the media in question.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Supernatural

#### *Don't Feed the Trolls*

In 2005, the first episode of *Supernatural* aired. The story centers on two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who hunt and protect everyday people from supernatural monsters. The show is now on its fourteenth season (and has already been renewed for a fifteenth), which is particularly impressive for its genre. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ended after eight seasons; *Charmed* ended after eight seasons; *True Blood* ended after seven seasons. *Supernatural* has also won its share of awards, including five People's Choice Awards, which are awards voted on by the general public. It has become the CW's longest running show and one of the longest running primetime shows.<sup>122</sup> The awards *Supernatural* has won, Favorite Sci-Fi/Fantasy Show (three times) and Favorite Network TV Drama, indicate that it is a popular show to which a lot of people are exposed.<sup>123</sup> The fifth People's Choice Award that *Supernatural* has received is perhaps even more telling in terms of the audience's perceptions: Favorite TV Bromance for the relationship between Dean and an angel named Castiel.<sup>124</sup>

Beginning as a serial "monster-of-the-week" show, *Supernatural* started introducing angels into the plot as part of a great war between the angels and the devil during season four. One such angel was Castiel, who had a particularly soft spot for the Winchester brothers, even going so far as to disobey his orders from heaven and become a fallen angel, cut off from heaven's support, for their sake. Fans began to "ship," Dean and Castiel based on interactions between the two they felt hinted at romantic interest.



Such a relationship lead to accusations toward *Supernatural* of queerbaiting.<sup>125</sup> Many fans felt as though *Supernatural* was purposefully hinting at a relationship between Dean and Castiel, or “Destiel,” that they never intended to come to fruition to intentionally string queer fans along and increase viewership for the show.<sup>126</sup> Intentional or not, the queerbaiting in *Supernatural* not only generated additional poor representation for queer people in the media, but became fodder for hostile, often homophobic, fans to demean *Supernatural*'s queer audience.

In this chapter, I will briefly examine *Supernatural* as an instance of queerbaiting, but I wish to focus on the effects this rhetorical address has in fans' discussions with one another. To me make my case, I will closely read articles written about the queerbaiting in *Supernatural* and then analyze the comments on these articles. The discussions are, in general, hostile. Both those in support of and opposed to the article use incredibly aggressive language. Those opposed group, however, often uses homophobic devil terms to construct their arguments. This is not to say that each person in the comments section who disagrees with the article is homophobic. Quite the contrary, some offer constructive criticism about the content and approach of the article. The presence of those using anti-queer rhetoric, however, has a uniquely violent impact for the article's queer audience. Articles that discuss queerbaiting draw queer audiences as evidenced by those in the comments claiming queer identity.<sup>127</sup> Articles that discuss queerbaiting also attract people with violently anti-queer ideas or opinions as evidenced by those in the comments spouting incredibly homophobia ideals. My goal is not to forgo structural analysis in favor of pointing fingers at individuals. Rather, I analyze the way that structural conditions, like compulsory heterosexuality and queerbaiting, set the stage for

interpersonal forms of violence. In other words, the comments sections allow me to consider the relationship between structural heteronormativity, the practice of a show, and the way audience members respond to both.

Poor on-screen representations juxtaposed with vicious homophobic fans of *Supernatural* creates a terrible dichotomy for queer audiences. They can say nothing, either about queerbaiting itself or in response to homophobic rhetoric, while they deal with the substandard representations within the show, a representation that may deny their subjecthood. They can also speak out, which results in more violent rhetoric. Such a silence/violence dichotomy is impossible for queer individuals to navigate; no matter the course of action, queer individuals face increased violence. This silence/violence dichotomy is created by queerbaiting within mainstream shows such as *Supernatural*. The reason these articles and comment sections exist in the first place is because of the queerbaiting in popular television shows. Of course, there would still be homophobic individuals if *Supernatural* had never queerbaited. My argument, rather, is that a unique space is created when queerbaiting occurs. This space can look like the comment sections I will analyze in which homophobic or problematic frameworks are used to silence queer people or it can look like the silence of queer people. Neither is acceptable.

### *Examining Supernatural*

*Supernatural* is perhaps not as obvious of a case of queerbaiting as *Rizzoli and Isles*. Much like *Rizzoli and Isles*, however, the evidence for *Supernatural*'s queerbaiting is both in the context of the show and from external forces around the show. As previously mentioned, attempting to assign motive to producers or writers is irrelevant. The impact of queerbaiting is quite real, whether or not the creators of a show know what

they are doing. *Supernatural* does, however, provide perhaps the best case to argue that producers and writers do know that they are making jokes about queer pairings with the cast. Creator intent is something worthy to speculate about not because it is some sort of smoking gun proving queerbaiting in *Supernatural*, but rather because it adds to the impact that queerbaiting has on audiences. *Supernatural* as a show regularly acknowledges and is even critical of its fans. The most consistent is through a character who can (sometimes) see the future named Chuck. Chuck uses his ability to see the lives of Sam and Dean to write a book series called *Supernatural* which follows the brothers within the show. Episodes involving Chuck often poke fun at the show. For example, at a convention a fan of the book series dressed as a villain from the first season inquires how the protagonists manage to lose their weapons at every opportunity.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to the light-hearted jokes about the show itself, these episodes with Chuck also tend to poke fun at the fans of *Supernatural*. Becky is the quintessential and, in series, very literal fan girl. She is a rather blunt metaphor for fans of the series. Becky is a fan of the book series within the show, and was introduced to Sam and Dean by Chuck. She is obsessive, even to the point of making Sam highly uncomfortable with her sexual advances.<sup>129</sup> Becky's relationship to the books and obsession with Sam is not the only time Chuck is used as a narrative tool to complain about *Supernatural's* audience. During the season five finale, he laments, "Endings are hard. Any chapped-ass monkey with a keyboard can poop out a beginning, but endings are impossible. You try to tie up every loose end, but you never can. The fans are always gonna bitch. There's always gonna be holes."<sup>130</sup> Chuck is complaining about both the fans of his book series and the real *Supernatural* television series. This type of audience interaction becomes

increasingly common. In the subsequent season, Castiel breaks the fourth wall to interact with the audience by look at the camera saying, “Let me tell you my story.”<sup>131</sup> Not only do the characters on the show interact with the audience during the show’s runtime, but through social media. In 2014, the show’s producers asked fans to tweet questions to the cast and crew with the hashtag “#AskSupernatural.” These nods to the audience both in the show and real life make it clear that the creators of the show pay attention to and engage their fans.

Such interactions make the comments from actors on the show particularly compelling evidence that the creators are aware they have created a homoerotic relationship between Dean and Castiel. Misha Collins, the actor who plays Castiel, did an interview before the eighth season of *Supernatural* began. There are two questions that stand out in terms of queerbaiting,

**Cas and Dean. They’re a continual source of speculation, fan fiction, pornography...** [bolded in the original text]

Yep. I’m just always gratified that I’m in some small way contributing to any kind of pornography. It warms the cockles of my heart. Words chosen carefully.

**Is there a particular emphasis on that relationship this season? Or is it just fighting together in Purgatory and desperate circumstances and all that?**

The scripts that I’ve seen so far have been dealing very much with that relationship between Dean and Cas. Whether that’s going to be the most significant or a very significant thread throughout the season, I’m not sure, but my speculation is that yes, it will be fairly [important].

Each of these questions would be indicative of queerbaiting independently, but the two of them together asked in quick succession certainly connects the innuendo to a genuine relationship between Dean and Castiel. Collins acknowledges the fans who desire a relationship between the two, and then immediately answers the next question talking about a significant relationship between the two of them. If we were talking about

straight characters, these characters would have almost certainly formed a relationship, even if it were short-term, as narrative drama often demands. Collins's interview, additionally, is especially important to consider because of the ire it has drawn from fans. When fans do discuss the queerbaiting in *Supernatural*, many who do not think *Supernatural* queerbaiting simply blame Misha Collins. Such fans often ignore textual evidence from the show and even going so far as to suggest he ought to be fired to quiet discontent from "Destiel" fans.<sup>132</sup>

In addition to the expectations built by Misha Collins's interviews, there is also textual support for a romantic relationship between Dean and Castiel. Shortly after Castiel became a regularly occurring character he begins to bend orders for the Winchester brothers. At one point, a different angel comes to meet with the brothers and there are a few episodes where they do not see Castiel. When he returns, the Winchester brothers question his absence and he says, "My superiors were beginning to question my sympathies."<sup>133</sup> This clearly indicates he has uniquely compassionate relationship towards the brothers, far more compassionate than the rest of heaven's forces. This, of course, does not necessarily indicate he has romantic tension with Dean. A couple of seasons later, Sam asks Castiel at one point if Dean is his favorite. Castiel replies, "Dean and I do share a more profound bond."<sup>134</sup> This helps make the case that not only is Castiel attached to the Winchesters, he has a particularly strong relationship with Dean. This relationship is also reciprocal. At one point, Castiel lies to the brothers about the death of a demon named Crowley. It is revealed that Crowley is not dead, and the rest of the main cast stops trusting Castiel, except for Dean. Dean continues to trust Castiel when no one else does, signifying that Dean also has a soft spot for Castiel. Dean often is less willing

to believe his own brother. For example, when Dean gets pulled out of Hell (by Castiel), he immediately distrusts Sam for fear Sam has been using psychic powers granted to him by a demon. Sam denies the accusations, but Dean still disbelieves him. Dean trusts Castiel more than any other character.

The show has clearly identified Dean and Castiel as particularly close and its self-reflexive understanding of its fans underscores that the coupling has bromance undertones, if not operates as explicit queerbaiting. Fans certainly have taken up this debate and demonstrate ways the use of queerbaiting may shape audience understandings.

### *God and Devil Terms Feed the Trolls*

As identified in my introductory chapter, I have used close reading to analyze the texts in this thesis. During my reading of the following comments sections, I discovered the prominent use of god and devil terms by commenters. For Richard Weaver, “God terms” are terms which carry an ultimate sense of hierarchal superiority, while “devil terms” are worthy of definitive scorn.<sup>135</sup> Weaver admits that devil terms are particularly tricky for the rhetorical scholar as, “one cannot explain how they generate their peculiar force of repudiation. One only recognizes them as publicly-agreed-upon devil terms.”<sup>136</sup> This is, to some extent, inevitable in a world structured by symbols. Some words do not necessarily have to be negative, but they are nevertheless. Thus, in my analysis of these comments, I will focus on popularly held or historic meanings instead of what something could mean, in line with a close reading. This better allows the text to speak for itself. Devil terms rely on a measure of self-evidence requiring one to take those words at face value instead of through a lens that might be more favorable to the person making the

comment. In short, we cannot give those using devil terms the benefit of doubt. We can only look at what they said, particularly the terms they chose.

A particularly poignant example Weaver uses of a god term is the word “fact,” indicating, “Today when the average citizen says ‘it is a fact,’ ...he means that he has the knowledge to which all other knowledges must defer.”<sup>137</sup> Often, commenters treat their ideas and opinions as fact, as undisputable. This belief gives them license to proclaim that anyone who disagrees with them must be unintelligent, mentally ill, or malicious, as I will demonstrate in the following section. Weaver, however, continues, “Possibly it should be pointed out that his ‘facts’ are frequently not facts at all etymological sense; often they will be deductions several steps removed from simply factual data. Yet the ‘facts’ of his case will carry with them this aura of scientific irrefragability, and he will likely regard any questioning of them as sophistry.”<sup>138</sup> Weaver’s prediction holds astonishingly true with the comments I will analyze. This is the fundamental problem with god and devil terms: they are designed to stifle disagreement and discourse. Such an echo chamber leaves no room for the grievances of queer audience members.

### *Never Read the Comments*

Because *Supernatural* is such a popular show, it has a large and serious fan following. Some of those fans have already written about the queerbaiting in *Supernatural*, but they have done so in a far more public arena: online.<sup>139</sup> Most of these website formats allow readers to comment. Since queerbaiting is not a cut and dry phenomenon in any context, public articles criticizing a popular TV show draw a lot of ire from those who do not believe the show queerbait. This brings them into conflict with those that do believe the show queerbait and these discussions get incredibly

hostile, magnifying the impact of queerbaiting. Emily Roach acknowledges this troubling phenomenon in her article about queerbaiting across a variety of shows in different genres.<sup>140</sup> The issue with this article, and other popular articles, is that there is no evidence offered of these discussions, the author simply asserts that they happen. To add to an understanding of queerbaiting as phenomenon, evidenced analysis of these discussions is critical. Queerbaiting itself, as discussed in my introduction and first chapter, can convey the message that queer people and queer relationships are a joke. As Roach notes, however, the interpersonal interactions between people in these comments sections are, well, personal. They involve very direct insults towards the authors of these articles and the other people in the comments. That kind of aggressiveness, especially when couple with the homophobia displayed by some of these commenters, has the potential to be incredibly emotionally violent.

I have taken two comments sections of articles which focus on proving that *Supernatural* queerbaiting, an *Advocate* and a *TV Guide* article. Both of these articles were written in 2014 in anticipation of the tenth season of *Supernatural*, though the *TV Guide* article was published after season ten had already begun. Both reference the same interview with Misha Collins described earlier in this chapter, the #AskSupernatural event, and textual evidence from the show to support their arguments. These are also good examples to look at because they come from different sides of the fan spectrum. The *Advocate* serves a largely queer population, whereas *TV Guide* is frequented by more members of dominant groups. These groups do meet in the comment sections of both articles, and it is evidenced by the number of comments they receive. The *Advocate* article had over 180 comments and the *TV Guide* article has over 2,000. A lot of these



comments are incredibly hostile. This anger comes from both those who agree and disagree with the article, but I will focus on the anger from those who disagree with the article. Not only do these comments demonstrate a lack of understanding of queerbaiting, but they are also combined with sexism and homophobia.

Quite a few of the comments from those who disagree with the articles' premise present misunderstandings with what exactly queerbaiting is. Some cite statements made by Jensen Ackles, the actor who plays Dean Winchester, who is adamantly opposed to the "Destiel" ship.<sup>141</sup> This may certainly seem like a reasonable argument as those who argue that *Supernatural* does queerbait, including myself, use Misha Collins as an example of people on the show perpetuating the idea. Part of the nature of queerbaiting, however, is the mixed messages. It is the mixing of romantic subtext with a lack of canon confirmation. The two actors who play Dean and Castiel sending different messages about the pairing only serves to obfuscate the show's intent. What's more, the intent of the show does not matter, as discussed in my introduction.

Other commenters have made the argument that there is no canon proof of Dean being interested in a man, indicating, "All of his documented romantic relationship on the show are with women"<sup>142</sup> This also misses the point of queerbaiting accusations. In both *Rizzoli and Isles* and *Supernatural*, the characters in question are unable to maintain long-term relationships with a different gender. Rizzoli, Isles, and Dean all experience a variety of love interests over the course of their respective shows. Their relationship with a best friend of the same gender, however, is constant. The fact that Dean has a lot of sexual encounters with women on the show does not negate the homoerotic subtext between him and another character of the same gender. It only adds to the perception that

this character is meant to be with someone of the same gender instead of all of these other men or women they cannot maintain their relationship with. One of the other reasons main characters on television shows go through so many romances is to add to the drama of the show. As soon as a couple becomes canon on a drama show, it's likely they will not remain a couple, or will face significant strain. Dean's relationships with women do not foreclose the possibility of a relationship with a man because he cannot, for drama's sake, remain with anyone for forever.

Another common argument offered by the articles' detractors is that there are other queer characters on the show. The core of this argument is that the show cannot be homophobic or have a representation issues because there are other queer characters on the show. The most popular example is of Charlie (Felecia Day), a lesbian technology specialist who assists Dean and Sam on a variety of adventures. Commenters argue, "You can't say that they don't want to show gay people onscreen because we have Charlie Bradbury."<sup>143</sup> According to Felecia Day's IMDb page, she was in 10 episodes of *Supernatural*, the most of any openly queer character.<sup>144</sup> That said, there are 303 episodes of *Supernatural*. Charlie is in just over 3% of all the show's episodes. Misha Collins is in 128 episodes, or around 42% of the show. Castiel was not even introduced until season four. He provides a far better opportunity for representation than a character we see every three to four out of a hundred episodes. It is also worth noting that Castiel is still alive in the series and Charlie is dead, but that's not something those arguing on a 2014 article could have known with certainty. This argument is also entirely irrelevant. Simply because another queer character exists does not negate queerbaiting that could be

happening with other characters. Simply because a show has representation does not absolve it from criticism.

There are a series of comments that also deny the possibility of queerbaiting without using and incorrect understanding, but that rely on other heteronormative assumptions. One such strain of comments hold that Dean's character is somehow inherently heterosexual. "He is the best guys guy and masculine man I have ever seen..." and he "drinks whiskey and beer, [and is] always working on his car..."<sup>145</sup> The idea that personality characteristics (such as preferences for particular types of alcohol or vehicles) mark someone as straight or queer attempts to assign traits to people based on a combination of gender and sexual orientation. Such characteristics are the foundation of the trope of the "man's man," the idea that straight men just like particular things and gay men cannot like these things. Such heteronormative gender roles attempt to cement the idea that queer people are somehow inherently different from straight people. Notions of difference are a necessary prerequisite to homophobic behavior. In order to believe queer people are somehow lesser, queer people must first be different. Additionally, it's often stereotypically masculine traits that are assigned to straight men and stereotypically feminine traits that are assigned to gay men. A core aspect of patriarchal masculinity is the rejection of the feminine.<sup>146</sup> This serves to punish queer people for their sexual preferences and gender expression as well as to further dehumanize queer men. Queer men are abhorrent because they are more like women. Assuming Dean is straight because he exhibits stereotypically masculine behavior is a core problem with compulsory heterosexuality. Heterosexuality becomes self-evident in personality traits or hobbies that have nothing to do with sexuality.

Even more interesting than the above comments, which attempt to disprove the show queerbaits, are arguments that either accidentally or intentionally admit queerbaiting occurs. Some commenters acknowledge the show itself queerbaits, though from their comments it is often clear that they misunderstand the intricacies of the term. Commenters using these arguments often dismiss the textual support for “Destiel” as jokes, arguing, “They aren’t Queer baiting they are actually mocking slash fans...”<sup>147</sup> Rather than disproving the argument that *Supernatural* queerbaits, these serve as further evidence. Even those who have not noticed the romantic subtext between Dean and Castiel have at least noticed the jokes about them. As discussed in my introduction and previous chapter, hinting at the potential for queer identity and then turning that hint into a joke is a core mechanic of queerbaiting. Queer audiences are given the hope that they might be properly represented before they are then pointed to and laughed at for even considering the possibility that a character might be queer. Other fans fitting into this general category argue that Dean and Castiel’s relationship is nothing more than subtext, saying, “The writers throw in subtext because they know that the fans like it.”<sup>148</sup> Of course, arguments about the creators motivations or intentions are speculation and irrelevant. The idea, again, is textbook queerbaiting. Keeping queer relationships to the realm of subtext is inadequate representation. Subtext plays with the idea of queer identity and queer relationships without validating them. It also indicates that even fans who dislike “Destiel” can recognize the subtext between Dean and Castiel. This is not something that is just “in the heads” of viewers who want to see “Destiel” made canon.<sup>149</sup>

Another group that accidentally admits queerbaiting is happening are a group of commenters blaming Misha Collins.<sup>150</sup> These arguments are essentially that there is no

queerbaiting, except when Misha Collins does it, “The only queerbaiting that is going on, is the crap that comes out of Collins mouth in stupid interviews like the ones mentioned above.”<sup>151</sup> If, for the sake of argument, we assumed there was no other evidence to suggest *Supernatural* queerbaiting, a lead actor on the show hinting at a relationship between two characters would be more than sufficient to create the kinds of mixed signals discussed earlier. This is not an argument against *Supernatural*'s queerbaiting tendencies. This demonstrates a lack of understanding of core attributes of queerbaiting, which is why I believe further analysis of the phenomenon is crucial.

The remaining groups of comments I wish to discuss are those that are directly confrontational with either the author of the article or others in the comments. These are often the comments that become overtly homophobic. The first group accuses those discussing queerbaiting of delegitimizing other, more important issues for the queer community.<sup>152</sup> Some make accusations about appropriating queer rights issues, “Hijacking a legitimate and important social issue in an attempt to bring your fanfiction into life is disgusting,” while others use this argument as a way to dismiss critics, “So they go about calling everyone that doesn't see what they see as homophobes and queerbaiters.”<sup>153</sup> The premise behind both of these types of comments is that those discussing queerbaiting are not earnest in their criticism of homophobia or heteronormativity. This strategy attempts to vilify critics by ascribing selfish motivations, discrediting the core argument about queerbaiting. Such disparagement adds to the types of comments positing critics as delusional, which I will discuss below.

Another popular way to attempt to discredit these articles is through false analogies or comparisons. Perhaps the most predictable of these are claims of “reverse

homophobia” or “heterophobia.”<sup>154</sup> Troublechan5’s comment perhaps best epitomizes these, “That’s the most heterophobic comment I have ever, \*ever\* heard...Can you imagine the outrage if heterosexuals were here demanding a gay couple cease?”<sup>155</sup> Arguments that rely on this “reverse oppression” logic have become increasingly common despite their documented inaccuracy.<sup>156</sup> This is an invocation of homophobia as a devil term. Even if large aspects of society still oppress queer people, the word “homophobia” has become a devil term. This commenter mirrors the structure of the word and just replaces the prefix to invoke the same idea. If someone accepts the premise behind such comments, it takes queerbaiting analysis from incorrect to immoral. It establishes a moral high ground for those defending against queerbaiting criticism.

Some take this moral high ground to incredulous levels. Two users even compare it to conversion therapy, “I also believe that you trying to turn Dean gay or bi to suit your ship is just as wrong as someone trying to turn me into a straight person. Ever hear of that movement by the Christian right where they attempt to turn gay and bisexual people straight?...It’s also the same thing you’re doing by insisting that a straight man is bisexual;” “...you’re like those folks that think they can ‘cure’ their gay relations or that being gay is just a phase.”<sup>157</sup> This compares analysis of a text with holding a queer youth against their will to “convert” them. These are in no way equivocal actions. Such claims obfuscate the nature of agency. Fictional characters cannot make choices. They do not have agency. All of their “choices” are made for them by writers or producers. Analyzing a fictional character’s choices cannot take away their agency because they are not real. Conversion therapy is real and it is psychologically and physically violent for real queer

individuals. Comparing a textual analysis of a fictional character with forcing a real person to endure real violence is ludicrous.

The other false equivalence that stands out is the comparison to “Wincest,” another ship for Sam and Dean Winchester.<sup>158</sup> This is particularly disturbing as these commenters are equating queer relationships with incest, “First they wanted incest now they want sex between a male angel and an obviously straight human?” or, “Can’t the same be said of Sam and Dean?...Yet, ‘the fans’ are not asking the show to take responsibility for that. What’s the difference?”<sup>159</sup> Here, incest is used as a devil term to demonize queer relationships. Incest is understood in modern society as universally deplorable. Comparing queer relationships to incest is to create the illusion that these are equally condemnable actions.

While the above categories rely on heteronormative assumptions, the far more concerning comments are those that directly insult or shame the author of the article or other commenters. These comments involve direct cruel or homophobic remarks, which epitomizes the interpersonal violence oppressive structures incentivize. A lot of this is directed specifically at the author of the *TV Guide* article, Sadie Gennis.<sup>160</sup> These comments range from the generically rude, “You dear writer are a moron...Grow up, please,” to the slightly sexist, “Shut up bitch the show is not queer baiting and Sadie is wrong [and] she sucks too,” to the unfortunately ableist, “This Sadie person is a headcase, nutjob, etc.”<sup>161</sup> This is a prime example of what happens when people speak out about queer issues and social issues in general. They are met with incredibly personal attacks. The particular flavors of these personal attacks are justified by a heterosexist

society. Using “bitch” as a way to devalue someone’s argument only works if “bitch” is an agreed upon devil term to denigrate women and their ideas.

Describing the author as crazy serves as a devil term to discredit her, but this ableist idea has a unique intersection for women and queer people. Psychology has been used to justify the oppression of both women (hysteria) and queer people (sexual orientation disturbance) by implying both groups are “crazy,” or lack an understanding of “facts” and reality.<sup>162</sup> Such insults also extend to other commenters.<sup>163</sup> These comments often posit that critics are both “crazy” and unintelligent or cruel, “They’re a very small crazy idiotic bunch of loud mouths...They are rude and nasty.”<sup>164</sup> The *Supernatural* fandom even has a derisive moniker for “Destiel” shippers: “Destihellers.”<sup>165</sup> This term is particularly interesting as it has become a sort of in-group devil term. It is a word invented to carry all the connotations that one finds amongst those who believe that “Destiel” shippers are hateful, stupid, crazy people. It is the summation of hostility from those who think that charges of queerbaiting are laughable. Such a practice is a common way to make everyday life more difficult for oppressed groups. “Dyke,” “tranny,” and “fag” are still popular ways to attempt to disparage queer people. This is not to say that calling someone a “Destiheller” and calling someone a “tranny” is the same thing, but rather to indicate that commenters are using tactics borrowed from oppressive structures to enact interpersonal violence.

Insults intended to question the reliability of critics are also often combined with charges of deviance.<sup>166</sup> These comments directly call those who ship queer pairings “sick” and “perverted.” This kind of rhetoric is familiar. Historically speaking, queerness has often been described as deviant, or perverted in some way.<sup>167</sup> The compulsion to



heterosexuality is rooted in the idea that queerness is somehow unnatural. Charges of deviance are at the core of the silence/violence dichotomy queer audiences are faced with when queerbaiting occurs. Claiming those who can see Dean and Castiel as a couple are perverse is how other commenters put a moral referendum on those they disagree with. It constructs queerness itself as sick, without the typical caveats and smokescreen. This makes the homophobic insults hurled at critics that much less surprising, but no less problematic. One commenter, Jena H, gets to the core of this issue when discussing conventions around *Supernatural*, "...so the fact that talk of homosexuality is banned at conventions is a bad thing?? What about young people (kids, young teens, etc.) who go to these conventions???" They and their parents have the right to attend and not have to deal with discussions they're not comfortable with. Get over it!!!"<sup>168</sup> This comment and others put straight comfortability over queer subjecthood.<sup>169</sup> It is more important that homophobic people are comfortable than that queer people are treated like people. The alternative presented by Jena H is to treat queer people as pariahs, as some sort of hushed conversation topic too scandalous for public venues.

Jena H's comment is only one example of the homophobic comments that pepper these articles.<sup>170</sup> Some of these comments are hostile to identities outside the gender binary, "That is why they claim there are about 50-60 different genders, sexual orientations, and so on,"<sup>171</sup> while others are more focused on sexual orientation, "I had a such a good opinion of bi and gay people, thanks for destroying it for me."<sup>172</sup> Some of them even stumble upon the heart of problem with queerbaiting, "It's called joking around. Haven't you ever implied your friend was gay to get a laugh out of them? People think it's funny..."<sup>173</sup> In the minds of these commenters, queer people are at best a joke.

If queer people are a joke, they are unworthy of respect. One does not have to take queer people seriously. When queer people recount instances of homophobia, they need not be listened to. One commenter explicitly holds that queer people are not worthy of representation because there are not enough queer people, “If you actually care about equality, then one should not demand to be disproportionately represented in media.”<sup>174</sup> Finally, one commenter expressly indicates they do not believe queer people ought to have any standing in civil society, “It’s no wonder nobody takes gays seriously...Go back into the closet until you’re ready to act like adults and accept that the goddamn world does NOT in fact revolve around you and your love of taking it in the ass.”<sup>175</sup> Not only are queer people and their oppression a joke to these commenters, but asking for representation is somehow selfish or childish.

Selfishness and childishness also extend to the commenters touting what I’ll call the “snowflake” philosophy; they believe that the world has become too sensitive.<sup>176</sup> This is exactly what it sounds like, “People are getting sick of the PC crap constantly being shoved down their throats.”<sup>177</sup> These comments fit a similar theme as those concerned with the comfort of straight people. They have reduced heteronormativity to a lack of comfort for queer people and then asserted that their own comfort is more important. Such comments also assert that those concerned with queerbaiting are simply not tough enough to endure the real world, that they are whining like children. This infantilization acts to further discredit critics.

Infantilization runs contrary to a string of comments concerned with what I’ll call “the gay agenda.” Quite the opposite of childishness, these comments (often from the same “snowflake” commenters) hold that queer people and critics have some sort of

scheme or plot to ruin television.<sup>178</sup> Some of these hold that critics of *Supernatural* could not really be fans, but rather are just pretending in order to critique the show, “People latch on, pretend they care about the show/book/whatever itself, and then proceed to demand that it change to fit with their social agenda. This is why they are often referred to by the derogatory term, ‘social justice warriors.’ They exist to be angry and push social agendas.”<sup>179</sup> Other commenters have clearly given the situation a lot of thought and have developed conspiracy theories surrounding such an agenda, “First, they go scouting around for shows that the LGBTQXYZLMNOP industry feels doesn’t meet their standard. Then they send people to the conventions and bait the actors and directors over their sexuality and their homophobia and then, I suspect, tell the producers that this type of harassment and baiting will continue until they start stuffing the show with gay characters.”<sup>180</sup> Something striking across all of these different types of comments is the perpetual contradictions, even within the same comment. Queer audiences and critics are somehow simultaneously childish and evil masterminds. Commenters simply use any queer stereotype to attempt to discredit otherwise logical arguments.

Queerbaiting is one of many facets of heteronormativity that sets the stage for interpersonal forms of violence. In the case of *Supernatural*, the wildly popular show draws on wildly dedicated fans. This means that will do whatever necessary to try to improve the show, and fans that will do whatever necessary to attacks the show’s perceived detractors. The comments on articles leveling criticism against *Supernatural* for queerbaiting use homophobic devil terms, punishing queer audience members for speaking out. These comments exhibit a lack of understanding in some cases, which makes discussing queerbaiting all the more important. In other cases, however,

commenters use devil terms to compare critics against every negative queer stereotype possible. These devil terms and modes of argument discredit critics by comparing them and their arguments to universally deplorable actions. Such clash between queer audience members and critics with ignorant or hostile homophobia is made possible by the queerbaiting in *Supernatural*. Certainly, there would still be homophobic individuals without *Supernatural*, but the queerbaiting in the show sets the stage, forcing critics to speak out and thus experience the hateful comments that follow.

### *Conclusion*

Queerbaiting significantly hurts queer audiences. Representation for queer people in television is already severely lacking. Queerbaiting then tells queer audiences that their identity is a joke. They are a punchline for society. This is incredibly dehumanizing. It also invites an audience response that becomes incredibly homophobic. If a show jokes about queer identity, queer people can say nothing and continue to be dehumanized. They can also attempt to individually or collectively speak out to solve the problem. Once they speak about the problem, those with heteronormative or homophobic views then feel encouraged to respond. When someone who vocally supports an oppressive structure interacts with a marginalized person affected by that structure, they are bound to be hostile. Queer people are caught in this silence/violence dichotomy. If they say nothing, they are dehumanized by the show. If they saying something, they are dehumanized by other fans and often still by the show. There is no winning when a show uses queerbaiting strategies.

Queerbaiting also creates a unique ambiguity about a character's identity. Whether or not a character is queer or has been coded as queer becomes the subject of a

debate. This means that not only are people's existing homophobic tendencies brought into the argument, but the commenters attempt to refute those who believe *Supernatural* does queerbait often rely on hostile or heteronormative arguments. If someone uses textual evidence to support their argument, those who are less adept at textual analysis are left with few options to stubbornly support their point. They can either indicate that those events did not occur, which results in calling their opponents stupid or delusional, or they can indicate that critics are interpreting those events incorrectly, which results in calling their opponents stupid, delusional, or malicious. Queerbaiting by virtue of its ambiguity incentivizes homophobic people to be vocal about everything from thinking queer people are crazy to there being some sort of grand gay agenda to ruin television. In each of these cases, queer people are forced to say nothing about homophobic practices in media and society, or be met with the absurd and heteronormative views of these other commenters.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Stranger Things

#### *Trans Identity and Queerbaiting*

On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Netflix aired the first season of its original series, *Stranger Things*. The show takes place in small town Hawkins, Indiana in 1983. The first season follows three, primarily distinct plotlines: the children, the teenagers, and the adults. The events of the series are catalyzed by Eleven, a middle-school-aged girl with supernatural telekinetic and telepathic abilities who accidentally tears open a hole to another dimension which exists parallel to their own while being experimented on in a secret government facility in Hawkins Lab. Eleven escapes, but a monster the characters come to call the Demogorgon comes through the gate and begins the hunt the people of Hawkins. Will Byers, a middleschool student, disappears first. His friends, Mike Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, and Dustin Henderson, attempt to search for him, but find Eleven instead. Meanwhile, the adults' search for Will cause conflict with Hawkins Lab. Joyce Byers, Will's mother, runs into the Demogorgon herself. Jim Hopper, Hawkins chief of police, is skeptical of her story until he finds the gate in the basement of the lab. The teenagers attempt to fight the Demogorgon. Nancy Wheeler, Mike's older sister, and Jonathan Byers, Will's older brother, cross paths as Nancy searches for her friend, Barb, who has already been killed by the Demogorgon. Nancy finds the monster outside her boyfriend's, Steve Harrington's, house. She later describes the beast to Jonathan, who realizes it matches his mother's description. Nancy and Jonathan resolve to kill the Demogorgon. They are later joined by Steve, but in the end, only Eleven has the power to defeat the

monster using her supernatural abilities. She disintegrates the beast, but disappears. Joyce and Jim make a deal with the government agents to access the gate and rescue Will.

*Stranger Things* has been a hit with both audiences and critics.<sup>181</sup> *Stranger Things* was the third most-watched Netflix original at the time it aired.<sup>182</sup> The series still holds a 94% approval rating on *Rotten Tomatoes* by both critics and audiences.<sup>183</sup> The American Film Institute even put *Stranger Things* on their top ten list for 2016.<sup>184</sup> The show also received Emmy nominations for Best Drama, Best Supporting Actor in a Drama, Best Supporting Actress in a Drama, Casting for a Drama Series, Original Main Title Theme Music, Sound Editing for a Series, Main Title Design, and Single-Camera Picture Editing for a Drama Series.<sup>185</sup> The show continues to grow in viewership. The *Stranger Things 2* season premier was watched by 15.8 million people within three days of its release.<sup>186</sup> The Netflix original has become quite a popular phenomenon.

A variety of factors seem to point toward *Stranger Things* being a step forward in terms of queer feminist representation of characters. Several websites that serve primarily queer or feminist audiences make this claim.<sup>187</sup> Were this accurate, the representation on the show would be quite significant. As discussed in the introduction, queer representation has become a quantity game instead of a quality game, and even the quantity of queer characters is still incredibly low. A step towards quality would be highly significant. However, *Stranger Things* does little to subvert heterosexist stereotypes about women and queer individuals in media today. In addition, I argue that *Stranger Things* performs a unique type of queerbaiting, distinct from the form discussed in chapters two and three. This is followed by an examination of the arguments some have made for *Stranger Things* being a queer feminist show followed by my analysis as

to why I believe these authors have been baited. Most of these arguments do not account for queerbaiting as a concept, and thus miss the reasons for why *Stranger Things* is just another example of poor representation. I will then examine other queer aspects of *Stranger Things*, focusing on the Upside Down and Barbara. This, too, only baits queer audiences into believing they will be more fully represented.

### *Modifying Queerbaiting*

*Rizzoli and Isles* and *Supernatural* are classic cases of queerbaiting, deploying tropes around sexual tension and romance between two characters of the same gender. *Stranger Things* performs a similar sort of liminal queerness, but through gender identity instead of sexual orientation. The effect of having a character perform ambiguously gender queer is similar if not the same as having characters perform a “will-they-won’t-they” queer romance. The issue with defining queerbaiting solely in terms of queer relationships between two characters is that this centers queer as sexuality and eschews queer as gender identity. Queer audiences may be baited with either, thus both should be part our understanding of what constitutes queerbaiting. This is particularly important as trans and genderqueer individuals are even more poorly represented than other queer groups. In its annual report, GLAAD noted that 2016-17 was the first time they were even able to count non-binary individuals, but trans and non-binary individuals still only make up about 17% of the queer characters on television.<sup>188</sup> Any impact poor representation has on the queer community as a whole is magnified for trans and non-binary people, as are presently acutely underrepresented.

Trans activism and advocacy has a complicated relationship with mainstream queer rights movements. Trans identity in and of itself complicates gay male identity or



lesbian identity as these have historically relied on both gender and orientation; a lesbian is a woman who sleeps with women.<sup>189</sup> This idea is complicated if the idea of a woman is complicated, which is precisely what gender queer identity does. Complications like this are made particularly interesting as the medical industry began its study of gay and lesbian identity by conflating them with trans identity. “Early sexologists and their contemporaries commonly assumed that homosexuality was epitomized by females who seemed to want to be men and by males who seemed to want to be women.”<sup>190</sup> As queer activism progressed, trans individuals were often excluded or ostracized by gay and lesbian activist leaders for a variety of reasons. During the late twentieth century, much of gay activism was focused on inclusion, and some feared trans individuals presented too great a disruption to heteronormative society.<sup>191</sup> Trans activists, however, have long participated in the grassroots work necessary to fight for both inclusive and revolutionary strategies towards mitigating queer oppression.<sup>192</sup> As rhetorical critics, we cannot continue to develop theories of heteronormativity and strategies to combat it without an insistent look at the unique relationship between aspects structural heterosexism and trans identity.

### *The Queer Feminist Case for Stranger Things*

*Stranger Things* has been praised from a feminist perspective and such arguments have some merit. For instance, the show features women characters that seem more empower than others, despite the patriarchal confines surrounding them. The audience is encouraged to identify with Joyce Byers, all while her son, ex-husband, and Jim Hopper attempt to gaslight her. They all attempt to convince her that she is “crazy,” or that she does not understand the things she sees. In the first episode, Hopper is sure that Will is

with Joyce's ex-husband, Lonnie, despite Joyce's insistence that he cannot be because Lonnie has not been around in years.<sup>193</sup> Later on, Joyce's phone is electrocuted when Will attempts to communicate to her from the Upside Down. Hopper writes it off as the storm, even after Joyce points out that the occurrence is exceptionally "weird."<sup>194</sup> Lonnie even tells her after he shows up at the house that everything she has experienced is, "...in her head."<sup>195</sup> Joyce is both grieving and intelligent, and she attempts to take action and has her own plot line. Despite how impossible it would seem to anyone in the situation, Joyce figures out that she can communicate with Will via electronics.<sup>196</sup> Eleven's trauma is treated as something serious instead of brushed off as a plot hook like most violence against women in media. She deals with this trauma through flashbacks as opposed to it being an event that the show rapidly moves on from.<sup>197</sup> Karen Wheeler, the seemingly classic suburban wife, knows how to pick a lock with a bobby pin.<sup>198</sup> Nancy Wheeler is so determined to get vengeance for her friend that she is willing to fight an interdimensional monster.<sup>199</sup>

None of these characters, however, represent an adequate departure from the problematic status quo. Joyce is unable, despite her best efforts, to help Will until the men in her life begin to believe her.<sup>200</sup> Karen seems more focused on her daughter's sex life than her daughter's missing friend.<sup>201</sup> Nancy is so worried about her relationship with Steve that she leaves her best friend to walk to her car alone, even after her little brother's friend has gone missing. She tells Barb to go home by herself to spend more time with Steve.<sup>202</sup> This is not to say that woman characters must be perfect, but rather that the stereotypes these characters reinforce are particularly sexist. This is especially true of

Eleven, the pre-teen with strange powers. Often lauded for subverting heteropatriarchal tropes, Eleven is not the stark departure from the status quo fans want to believe.

### *Eleven as Feminist: Not Quite*

While Karen, Joyce, and Nancy are all characters people point to when arguing that *Stranger Things* is a feminist show, Eleven takes center stage in many justifications. Some argue that Eleven's revolutionary potential as a character lies in her abilities. Certainly a significant part of her character, Eleven's telekinetic and telepathic powers save the day. She is the only one capable of dealing with the various villains throughout season one. She breaks bullies' arms, murders the secret government agents who held her captive, and vaporizes the Demogorgon.<sup>203</sup> She undoubtedly fits the heroine role. Some claim that she is a particularly good heroine because she is both powerful and vulnerable.<sup>204</sup> Unfortunately, Eleven's power does not absolve her from tired tropes about women with powerful supernatural abilities. It is clear that Eleven's emotions play a significant role in her power. Some of her largest bursts of power are when she is upset, like when she screams at her reflection.<sup>205</sup> While it could be contended that this is a new take on women's emotions as power rather than a weakness, this is not quite the case. Eleven's emotions cause her to lose control of her powers; when Lucas and Mike get into a fist fight, El screams and knocks Lucas back with an unnecessary amount of force, causing him to pass out.<sup>206</sup> This indicates her emotions get the best of her. There is nothing revolutionary about the idea that women are controlled by their emotions. While some might argue that this is a more a function of her age than her gender, an analysis of the group's personality traits reveals that, in this show, a lack of emotional control is a personality trait, not a function of age, which I will discuss next.

In addition to examples of Eleven being control by her emotions, she is also a Smurfette. This is mentioned only briefly, or glossed over entirely by those critiquing the show.<sup>207</sup> “The Smurfette Principle” was a phrase coined by feminist essayist Katha Pollitt in 1991. It refers to the phenomenon of having a group of masculine protagonists accompanied by a single feminine one. This trope is incredibly widespread throughout media, found in movies, television shows, and video games.<sup>208</sup> Pollitt indicates that the message this trope conveys is crystal clear, “Boys are the norm, girls the variation; boys are central, girls peripheral; boys are individuals, girls types. Boys define the group, its story and its code of values. Girls exist only in relation to boys.”<sup>209</sup> Boys in such groups are all permitted to have their own personalities, whereas girls are often just “the girl.” Despite Mike, Dustin, and Lucas all being somewhat stereotypical “nerds,” they each have very distinct personalities.

Mike is the leader, full of confidence and a bit of hero complex. He is the president of the Hawkins Middle AV club. As the only other members seem to be the rest of our middle school boy protagonists, this gives him a position of authority in the friend group. He is the Dungeon Master during their Dungeons and Dragons game, a position of both narrative and mechanical authority in the game. Mike is also the only character wants to help Eleven at first; both Dustin and Lucas are too scared. He’s also the most willing to confront the group’s mutual bully, Troy. Mike lashes out and pushes Troy after he and his crony mock Will’s presumed death after the school’s assembly for Will. He also jumps into the quarry when Troy is threatening Dustin with a knife. Such actions portray Mike as brave and compassionate, though not necessarily always the brightest.<sup>210</sup>

Lucas is stubborn and fiercely persistent in his fight against “the bad men.” In the first scene we see the boys, they are in the midst of a Dungeons and Dragons combat sequence. During the fight, a powerful demon lord called “Demogorgon” enters, surely spelling doom for the boys’ characters. As a wizard, Will is faced with the choice between casting an offensive fireball spell or a defensive protection spell. Lucas insists he cast the offensive spell, even going so far as to call him a “pussy.” He later calls Dustin a “sissy” the first time the trio is out looking for Will in the rain and Dustin wants to go home. Lucas is also a bit more practical than the others. The second time they go to look for Will with Eleven, they realize they will need supplies. Lucas brings binoculars (“from ‘Nam”) and an army knife (“also from ‘Nam”). While Lucas is often portrayed as an aggressive character, he does not lose control the way Mike and Eleven do. It is Mike that starts a physical altercation with Lucas. Lucas is also less trusting. Lucas is the first person to suspect Eleven when their quest to find the Gate to the Upside Down via its electromagnetic disturbance goes awry as their compasses lead them in circles. Eleven has been tampering with the compass needles using her telekinetic abilities, and Lucas is the only one who realizes it. This brings Lucas into a lot of conflict with his friends, but he remains loyal to them.<sup>211</sup>

Dustin is the diplomat; he is cautious, logical, and a little goofy. In the aforementioned Dungeons and Dragons combat, Dustin insists Will ought to cast the defensive protection spell to shield his wizard from Demogorgon because he knows Will must roll a thirteen or higher on a twenty-sided die to successfully hit Demogorgon with a fireball and does not like those odds. Dustin also wants to turn back the first time the boys are out searching for Will, pointing out that Will may have disappeared because he

“ran into something bad” and the boys have “no weapons or anything.” When they venture out the second time with Eleven’s help, Dustin brings snacks instead of weapons or surveillance equipment. Dustin is also the one who convinces Mike he should apologize to Lucas. He knows they have a better chance of beating “the bad men” if they are all together.<sup>212</sup> Dustin demonstrates a great deal of emotional maturity throughout the first season.

Even Will is given something of a personality, even as he spends most of the first season trapped and unable to adequately communicate with most of the cast. We know Will is indecisive, artistic, and a hard worker. When the boys are playing Dungeons and Dragons, Will does not know whether to cast fireball at the Demogorgon or a protection spell. He even tells Mike the truth about his bad die roll after Lucas tells him to hide it. His disappearance is met with some disbelief by even his own friends because they just assume he went to school early, something he often does. In one of Joyce’s flashbacks, we see he has skillfully drawn his Dungeons and Dragons character with crayons.<sup>213</sup> We also know he is incredibly resourceful. Will survives alone in the Upside Down for days; he is taken (or perhaps runs there, it is unclear) in the first episode and escapes detection until the end of the seventh episode. That’s approximately a week in an alternate dimension running and hiding from a highly advanced predator.<sup>214</sup> Will is given significant dimensions to his character despite his absence from the main timeline of the show.

Eleven has barely any personality apart from her trauma. She has barely any voiced lines, likely because she is afraid to speak to strangers after being raised in a laboratory. Her moments of emotional vulnerability often involve horrific flashbacks.

One of her core character traits seems to be that she yearns for a feminine childhood she was denied, which I will analyze more later. One could perhaps say she is loyal as she is willing to take on the Demogorgon for her friends, but it makes sense that she is incredibly loyal to the only people who have ever treated her like a human being. Even Eleven's biggest mantra, "friends don't lie," is adopted from the gang of boys she joins.<sup>215</sup> As such, Eleven is a Smurfette—an add on character to a show about pre-teen boys.

Some might argue that the use of the Smurfette Principle is intentional, a subversion of 80's character tropes. *Stranger Things* is a "throwback" show, which could put the show in a unique position to take tropes from media in the 1980's and subvert them. The show appears to have attempted this in several places, as previously mentioned through Joyce's experience with gaslighting and the show's treatment of Eleven's trauma. Eleven does not, however, represent a subversion of the Smurfette principle. Slapping some telekinetic powers on a feminine character with incredibly little personality does not subvert the trope. Using a sexist trope as a reference is still using a sexist trope. This does not negate Eleven's Smurfette status. In this way, Eleven is not yet a feminist character or a subversive in any way. Some still insist she is subversive as she embodies or portrays queerness.

#### *Eleven as Queer: Not Quite*

A lot of audience members have interpreted Eleven as a queer character, some even going to far as to call her a "queer avenging angel."<sup>216</sup> There is very little in the dialogue of the show to indicate Eleven is a queered character, but the potential that we do see may come from her being misgendered. Eleven is misgendered during the first

season, both accidentally and purposefully. After her escape from the laboratory where she has been held captive, Eleven seeks out civilization and food. She stumbles on a dinner owned by a man named Benny. When Benny first sees Eleven stealing food, he stops her, grabs her by the shoulders, and shouts, “You think you can steal from me, boy?”<sup>217</sup> Troy is the second person to attempt to discipline Eleven for her gender presentation, but he does so intentionally. This is after a confrontation between Mike and Troy at school, where Eleven used her abilities to hold Troy in place and cause him to urinate himself.<sup>218</sup> Seeking revenge, Troy and his friend James find Mike and Dustin as they search for Eleven. When Troy threatens Dustin with a knife, Eleven shows up to save them, and breaks Troy’s arm.<sup>219</sup> While at the police station describing Eleven to Hooper, Troy says, “Her head’s shaved. She doesn’t even look like a girl.”<sup>220</sup> These moments ostensibly harken to queer thematics, but do so only obliquely. Eleven’s queerness is nowhere near definitive, but there may be just enough for queer audiences to see a bit of themselves in the way other characters treat Eleven.

Another argument for Eleven’s queerness is her otherness in trauma.<sup>221</sup> It is unclear if Eleven’s powers are a function of her mother’s involvement with government experiments or some other factor, but they do result in Eleven being taken from her mother as an infant.<sup>222</sup> Once taken, Eleven is tortured and experimented on until she escapes.<sup>223</sup> While queer audiences are certainly no strangers to trauma, Eleven’s situation is not a uniquely apt metaphor for heteronormative oppression. On the contrary, the thing that marks Eleven are her telekinetic powers. She is encouraged, even forced, to use these powers by a secret government agency that wishes to use her as a weapon. Dr. Brenner is even proud when she murders two workers that attempt to put her back into an isolation



cell.<sup>224</sup> Eleven's powers are obvious and weaponized. By contrast, the thing that marks queer bodies, gender identity and/ or sexuality, is something expected to remain hidden. Conversion therapy camps and legislation outlawing homosexuality around the world make it clear that, whether government sanctioned or not, queerness is never something to be out in the open. This idea is exemplified in Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality discussed in the introduction and first chapter. The compulsion toward heterosexuality is because queerness is something that is presented as other to normative prescriptions.

The most obvious and perhaps the most compelling argument for Eleven's queerness is her appearance. Eleven is often shown with a shaved head, and typically wears neutral or masculine clothing, with one rather significant exception. Some authors have asserted such sartorial posturing is because Eleven is gender non-conforming.<sup>225</sup> To call her gender non-conforming, however, assumes Eleven had the agency to choose her appearance. As a function of the aforementioned child kidnapping, experimentation, and torture, Eleven's flashbacks often show her having very little control over her life. The organization who kidnapped her keeps her in a small cell and locks her in an isolation cell when she does not perform the way they want her to. They force her to spy on U.S. enemies and, eventually, to contact the Demogorgon, creating the Gate that lets the monster through.<sup>226</sup> Her haircut is likely out of utility; Eleven is often shown with various electrodes attached to her head, presumably to monitor brain activity, as she crushes cans and refuses to kill cats with her mind.<sup>227</sup> Eleven also does not select an outfit at any point during the first season of *Strange Things*. She is first shown in a hospital gown, which Dr. Brenner had her wear while she was captive.<sup>228</sup> Benny then gives her an oversized shirt

after he finds her stealing his food.<sup>229</sup> Her next two outfits are both given to her by Mike, Dustin, and Lucas. The first is a set of Mike's clothes after they find her in a storm looking for Will; the second is Nancy's dress given to her as a disguise so she can be snuck into their school.<sup>230</sup>

Nancy's dress is the glaring exception to Eleven's typically gender-neutral or masculine attire. This may actually be Eleven's queerest moment. After all, the reason she is put in the powder pink dress and blonde wig is so that she might blend in at the middle school and access the radio there in order to contact Will.<sup>231</sup> In essence, she wears the dress to pass. Queer individuals often make deliberate clothing choices to pass as straight in spaces that might be hostile to them, as Eleven changes her performance for a place that might be hostile to her.<sup>232</sup> It appears, however, that Eleven's preference is actually for the traditionally feminine attire. When she first looks in the mirror after donning the wig and dress, she expresses "pretty."<sup>233</sup> This is not the first time Eleven expresses a desire for traditional femininity. When Eleven sees a photo of Mike's sister, Nancy, she also indicates Nancy is "pretty," saying nothing about any of the rest of the pictures of Mike's family.<sup>234</sup> While not always wearing dresses, Nancy's appearance is full of traditionally feminine markers, particularly her hair and makeup. At one point, Eleven is alone in the Wheeler house and ventures into Nancy's room. She seems fascinated by a variety of traditionally feminine things, like a music box and a corkboard with pictures of Nancy and her friends.<sup>235</sup> The slow, almost sad tempo of music gives the audience a sort of tragic sense of nostalgia for Eleven's lost childhood, for all the "girly" things she never got to experience.

A potential argument for Eleven evolving into a queer character would be her removing the wig.<sup>236</sup> After she telekinetically pushes Lucas, Eleven flees into the woods. She sleeps outside, and her dress and wig become dirty. The wig in particular becomes largely unwearable. Eleven stops to look at her reflection in a pool of water and adjust the wig, but she cannot make it look the same. Frustrated and hurt, she tears it off and screams, sending a telekinetic lash across the surface of the lake.<sup>237</sup> This would indicate that Eleven does not tear off the wig in some sort of defiant queer becoming. Rather, she sees a reflection she did not choose and would rather have the wig. She chooses the feminine presentation. There is nothing necessarily wrong with women choosing feminine presentation, but it is no way some leap forward for queer representation in media.

The show's ambiguous treatment of Eleven's gender non-conformity is also form of queerbaiting, and audience interpretations of Eleven as queer are encouraged by said queerbaiting. Eleven, at first, hints at fair representation. While Eleven's character does not have the agency within the story to choose the way she looks, the show's designers and writers did choose how she was presented. It is certainly uncharacteristic of feminine bodies in media to have shaved heads, and in the first scene the audience sees Eleven, Benny has difficulty discerning her as a girl. This has the potential to speak to queer audiences in highly specific ways. Not only does Eleven look a little queer, but she also experiences heteronormative individuals attempting to script normative ideals about gender presentation onto her. It is understandable why queer audiences would see the potential for representation in Eleven. However, this representation fades when the queer aspects of Eleven's character are narratively explained away. This is not to suggest that

characters who defy traditional gender norms should not exist on television. Rather, the problem arises when a character is just queer enough to bait the audience into thinking they will be represented. She is then paired off with Mike. While Mike does not represent dominant forms of masculinity, his imparting of values onto Eleven is an example of the way women are expected to accept the values of men.<sup>238</sup> Mike is also the one who dresses Eleven in traditionally feminine clothing. This is certainly necessary for Eleven to pass in their heteronormative school. It is also similar to Rich's theory of the ways women are controlled in society. Compulsion towards heterosexual relationships with men are enforced in a variety of ways, but one of these ways is controlling the way women present so as to be pleasing to men.<sup>239</sup> As soon as Eleven steps out of Nancy's room after her makeover montage, Mike immediately says, "Pretty," followed by a pause before he says, "Good. Pretty good," so as not to embarrass himself in front of his friends.<sup>240</sup> Eleven's lack of agency, lack of emotional control, and Smurfette status reinforce tired tropes about women and use of her character as queerbaiting certainly makes her character poor queer representation.

Ultimately, the ambiguity of Eleven is just enough for queer audiences to find the potential for representation in the media. Those hopes are quickly dashed. That is, the narrative, the assembled cast, and the practices of other women characters on the show all re-position Eleven's potential queerness back into heteronormative thematics. Such queerbaiting, then, only functions to lure audiences to the show who may be buoyed by inclusive representation. All the while, the show can tell the same stories about women as characters, without even the most basic understanding of queer life or representation.

### *The Upside Down and the Closet*

Some might say there is other queer potential in *Stranger Things*. Perhaps the best argument for queer metaphor in *Stranger Things* is the Upside Down, that dimension full of darkness, decay, and death.<sup>241</sup> It is a plane of existence that runs beside the everyday of Hawkins, Indiana, always there but never seen. Being in the Upside Down is a lot like being in the closet; everything is a shade grayer and no one really sees you. This is compounded by the first named character death in *Stranger Things*: Barb. Despite her lack of screen time, the audience has coded or argued that the show has coded Barb as a lesbian.<sup>242</sup> Her gender presentation is certainly less feminine than other female characters in the show, but her death is what really, “sets off our Dead Lesbian Alarms.”<sup>243</sup> Even if Barb is not sexually attracted to Nancy, their relationship can certainly be found on Adrienne Rich’s lesbian continuum. The lesbian continuum describes relationships between women that offer protection or support from the heteropatriarchal structures which do violence to women.<sup>244</sup> Nancy explicitly tells Barb she must come to Steve’s house party to protect her and to prevent her from, “doing anything stupid.”<sup>245</sup> Barb is there to act as a buffer between her friend and male desire. Nancy later changes her mind and tells Barb to walk home by herself so that Nancy can have sex with Steve. Barb is then attacked by the Demogorgon and dragged into the Upside Down where she dies alone, screaming for Nancy. Not her mother, or her father, or a boyfriend, but Nancy.<sup>246</sup>

This death, in a cold dark place no one can see, turns the Upside Down into both closet and coffin. While certainly an apt metaphor, this is not a uniquely positive representation of queer individuals in terms of their personhood. Neither Barb’s character nor her death challenges or subverts stereotypes, but merely illustrates about painful

realities queer individuals are already too familiar with. Barb, perhaps our queerest character, is killed in the first three episodes. It reduces queerness to a two-dimensional story about pain and suffering as opposed to allowing queer characters to be actual complex people.

### *Conclusion*

Gender identity must become a factor in discussions of queerbaiting and formulating a theory of queerbaiting. Eleven is given gender non-conforming markers, and then written to choose gender conforming ones, communicating that normative gender presentation is desirable. She is then scripted with a host of problematic tropes about women instead of a real personality, making her character that much more dissatisfying in term of her potential for queer representation. Trans individuals already deal with critically low representation in media. Exacerbating that problem through queerbaiting creates an exceptionally poor form of representation where trans individuals are stuck with characters that represent aspects of their experiences without ever actually being trans.

This analysis of *Stranger Things* also highlights another way that queerbaiting works. Though queerbaiting is usually applied to romantic relationships in media, as seen in my earlier analyses, this chapter underscores the ways *potentially* queer characters are deployed to nod toward inclusive representations that never fully actualize the possibilities therein. Instead, Eleven is a ruse—a Smurfette that only supports the other characters and yearns for traditional femininity. That baiting, then, only entrenches the problems of media representation and fails to progress even the most rudimentary measures of inclusivity.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Concluding Thoughts

#### *Evolving Resistance*

This thesis has sought to establish a more concrete theory of queerbaiting while illustrating the impact it has on audiences. *Rizzoli and Isles* illustrates a quintessential case of queerbaiting. Jane Rizzoli is designed with cop lesbian tropes.<sup>247</sup> On more than one occasion, she is either mistaken for queer or must pretend to be queer.<sup>248</sup> She has been coded as queer through a variety of tropes. Additionally, she has an unusually close relationship with Maura Isles. Their relationship is past the point of best friends, which other characters on the show acknowledge.<sup>249</sup> Yet, Rizzoli and Isles are never confirmed to be queer within the narrative of the show. Their burgeoning romantic affiliation hints at good representation for queer audiences. They can see characters having the same experiences and struggles that they do in their own lives only to then be told it is hilarious that they might identify with Rizzoli, or think that she's like them. Only the compulsion toward heterosexuality can explain how all of the queer coding in *Rizzoli and Isles* can be ignored. The compulsion is a core tenant of heterosexism, the ideology that props up larger oppressive structures.

Queerbaiting is a direct maintenance of compulsory heterosexuality by restricting women's sexuality, forcing men's sexuality upon women, and keeping women (especially queer women) out of media archives and cultural memory.<sup>250</sup> By making a joke of queer sexuality, particularly lesbian sexuality, queerbaiting communicates that

women's sexuality is not for themselves or other women, but for men.<sup>251</sup> Men's sexuality is then forced onto women via situating heterosexuality as the default for society.<sup>252</sup> This naturalizes sexual violence; men forcing their sexuality on women is viewed as natural or inevitable. Queerbaiting is also a unique way to exclude queerness from the archive of mediated representations.<sup>253</sup> For jokes about queerness in shows to work, they must first acknowledge queer potential in characters. These characters are then given a liminal license for their queerness, as long as it is never confirmed and does not anger the viewers.<sup>254</sup> Such liminal posturing leaves queer potential ambiguous at best, which ultimately re-entrenches the heteronormativity of the same characters.

I have also illustrated the impact that queerbaiting has on audience members. With *Supernatural* as a case study, we can see that discussions between audience members with different perceptions of Dean and Castiel's relationship can turn hostile and even homophobic. Queerbaiting sets the stage for this. By leaving characters or relationships ambiguous, shows the queerbaiting create space for debate about the identity of their characters. These debates encourage patronizing and heteronormative rhetoric. Often, arguments to "prove" a character is straight rely on insulting critics by insinuating that they are or directly calling them stupid or delusional.<sup>255</sup> These particularly ableist insults have historically been used against women and queer individuals to deny credibility to them and their experiences.

Additionally, commenters make frequent use of devil terms to discredit critics. They create hateful monikers for those who disagree with them and even compare queer relationships to things like incest.<sup>256</sup> The creation of unique devil terms is often something that happens as a result of oppressive structures. Commenters are mimicking



the way that marginalized people are treated in everyday life. This serves to further discredit critics. The nature of devil terms is that they have been deemed nearly universally objectionable by a given culture, which makes critics and their arguments universally objectionable with little reasoning past bad analogies. Devil terms are also rhetorically violent; they are designed to be hurtful. Such rhetorical violence becomes justified under this logic. Violence against queer individuals and other oppressed groups is acceptable because they have done something objectionable, and they are objectionable by virtue of the devil term used in the first place.

I have also argued for a modification to the way we currently understand queerbaiting. Presently, queerbaiting analysis is centered only on sexual preference instead of on gender identity as well. In *Stranger Things*, Eleven is assigned a variety of markers that leave her gender identity ambiguous for a large part of the season. She has a shaved head, which is not at all common for women in media, and she is dressed in neutral or masculine clothing. Other characters even misgender her throughout the course of the show.<sup>257</sup> These presentation markers and misgendering are part and parcel to the trans and gender queer experience in our heteronormative world, thus leading audiences to believe that Eleven will perhaps be a trans or gender queer protagonist. This is not the case. Eleven begins to don traditionally feminine markers, and even seems sad when looking at the evidence of Nancy's traditionally feminine upbringing. Traditional gender roles become desirable in place of non-traditional ones. As Rich notes, this is one of the ways that women are controlled by a heterosexist society. Deviation from traditional gender norms is undesirable and punishable. Queerbaiting is evidence of a continuously heteronormative society. It recycles heterosexist tropes and pairs them with aspects of

genuine queer experience to create the initial perception of representation for queer audience members. This impacts the everyday life of queer individuals as they consume media.

Presently, the literature is not discussing queerbaiting in terms of compulsory heterosexuality. This framework offers the best explanation for why queerbaiting happens. One of the primary factors in queerbaiting is the assumption that all characters are straight until the audience is explicitly told otherwise. This assumption becomes a major premise in the large joke about the character's potential queerness. We, the audience, must agree that this character is obviously straight before it can be "funny" that they possess queer characteristics. It is funny that Rizzoli is often mistaken for a lesbian because she looks like a lesbian. It is funny to imply Dean would ever have romantic feelings for a man because of all of his other "manly" characteristics. If one does not watch with the assumption that all characters are straight, these characteristics, along with textual analysis, would simply open up the possibility that these characters are queer.

There is also a severe lack of focus on gender identity in queerbaiting literature. Nearly every critic, from those published in peer-reviewed journals to those on blog sites, focus on romantic or sexual interest in another person as examples of queerbaiting. This pattern is not new; trans identity have long been excluded from queer movements and discussions. That has to change. As we develop a theory of queerbaiting, we must look at instances that revolve around gender identity as well. On a pragmatic level, repeating the same mistakes that queer activists have made for decades leaves us with an incomplete analysis and, thus, incomplete strategies to combat heteronormative structures. On an ethical level, the exclusion of trans individuals is fundamentally antithetical to the

substance of queer critique. Queer theory and critical queer analysis are aimed at breaking down binaries that are foundational to the oppression of queer individuals. Creating functional binaries within queerness only serves to recreate oppressive structures.

It is also imperative that critics discussing queerbaiting shift their focus away from the intent of writers, producers, or actors. The intention of these groups is irrelevant if queerbaiting happens in the text. Whether or not they bait audiences on purpose, the impact is the same. The comments sections of these *Supernatural* articles illustrate the effects queerbaiting can have regardless of author intent. It creates a new context for interpersonal violence. Additionally, ambiguously queer characters or characters who are queer in trope alone become a poor substitute for real representation. Networks and platforms have demonstrated that if they can get away with very little or bad representation for marginalized groups, they will. We must continue to demand better of media.

To further develop our understanding of queerbaiting and its relationship to heterosexism and interpersonal violence, rhetorical critics must analyze more cases of queerbaiting. This thesis is only three examples from an ever-expanding entertainment industry. Streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon continue creating original content, adding to the seemingly endless number of television shows and movies already available for consumption on network television. Without persistent criticism, this media will only continue heterosexist tropes. Queerbaiting demonstrates that not only are networks and platforms unwilling to do away with these tropes on their own, but the use of heterosexist tropes is evolving in new and insidious ways. While I am not

suggesting that the lone critic has the potential to change a large studio, it is imperative that we create the theoretical tools necessary to understand the ways tropes evolve and are used in new ways to maintain the same oppressive structures.

It is also important to note that each of the characters discussed in this thesis are white. This is partially because characters of color face their own representation issues. Approximately 40% of characters on primetime shows are people of color.<sup>258</sup> This makes queerbaiting with characters of color slightly less likely. There are fewer of them. That said, stereotypes about people of color would seem to make them more susceptible to being written for queerbaiting. Black women are often masculinized in society, so it would make sense for them to be prime candidates for portrayal ambiguous lesbians. Asian men are often feminized in society, so it would make sense for them to be prime candidates for being featured as ambiguous gay men. It would seem to stand to reason that characters of color would also be involved in queerbaiting audiences and this area demands more considerably research.

Continued focus on media representation, particularly media participating in queerbaiting, is important for rhetorical scholars. Without attending to media that participates in queerbaiting, there is no standard to invent new ways of being. Heterosexist structures are continuously evolving. Tactics to resist these structure must also discern new modes of being for marginalized groups, but this is not possible without relentless examination of the new and insidious forms structural oppressions take. Additionally, queerbaiting will only further alienate marginalized people. I have made the effects of queerbaiting clear, and if it allowed to continue, queer people and representation of queer people will stagnate and reproduce rhetorical violence

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Where We are on TV ’17-’18,” GLAAD, 2017, 6.
- <sup>2</sup> “Where We are on TV,” 6-14.
- <sup>3</sup> Sima Shekari, “Television Has A 'Bury Your Gays,' Queerbaiting, And LGBTQ Representation Problem,” *Huffington Post*, June 30, 2017.  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/06/30/queerbaiting-bury-your-gays-tv\\_a\\_2300500](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/06/30/queerbaiting-bury-your-gays-tv_a_2300500).
- <sup>4</sup> Lan Remple. “An Explanation of Queer-Baiting and Why it’s a Problem.” November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012. <http://atlanxic.tumblr.com/post/36720884625/an-explanation-of-queer-baiting-and-why-its-a>.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael C. Leff. *Rethinking Rhetorical Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy: The Living Art of Michael C. Leff*. E.d. Antonio de Velasco, John Angus Campbell, and David Henry. Michigan State University Press (2016).
- <sup>6</sup> Michael C. Leff. “Hermeneutical Rhetoric.” *Rethinking Rhetorical Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy: The Living Art of Michael C. Leff*. E.d. Antonio de Velasco, John Angus Campbell, and David Henry. Michigan State University Press (2016): 308.
- <sup>7</sup> Michael C. Leff. “Textual Criticism: The Legacy of G.P. Mohrmann.” *Rethinking Rhetorical Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy: The Living Art of Michael C. Leff*. E.d. Antonia de Velasco, John Angus Campbell, and David Henry. Michigan State University Press (2016): 250.
- <sup>8</sup> Leff, “Hermeneutical Rhetoric,” 309.
- <sup>9</sup> Leslie A. Hahner. “Chapter One: Public Culture and the Americanization of Immigrants.” *To Become an American: Immigrants and Americanization Campaigns of the Early Twentieth Century*. Michigan State University Press (2017): 23.
- <sup>10</sup> Ernesto Laclau. “Chapter 4: The Politics of Rhetoric.” *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*. New York: Verso (2014): 70-71.
- <sup>11</sup> Leff, “Hermeneutical Rhetoric,” 313.
- <sup>12</sup> Karma Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities*, University of Illinois Press (2013): 139-141.
- <sup>13</sup> Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics*, 124-126.

- <sup>14</sup> Thomas R. Dunn. "Whence the Lesbian in Queer Monumentality? Intersections of Gender and Sexuality in Public Memory." *Southern Communication Journal*. 82 (2017): 203-204.
- <sup>15</sup> Dunn, "Whence the Lesbian," 204.
- <sup>16</sup> Hannah Mueller. "A Questionable Bromance: Queer Subtext and Fan Service and the Dangers of Queerbaiting in Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* and *A Game of Shadows*." *Gender and the Modern Sherlock Holmes: Essays on Film and Television Adaptations Since 2009*. McFarland and Company Inc. (2015); and Judith Fathalla. "Moriarty's Ghost: Or the Queer Disruption of the BBC's *Sherlock*." *Television & New Media*, 16 (2015).
- <sup>17</sup> Adrienne Rich. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Journal of Women's History*. 15 (2003): 12-14.
- <sup>18</sup> Benny LeMaster. "Queer Imag(in)ing: Liminality as Resistance in Lindqvist's *Let the Right One In*." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*. 8 (2011); and Robert Westerfelhaus and Celeste Lacroix. "Seeing 'Straight' through Queer Eye: Exposing the Strategic Rhetoric of Heteronormativity in a Mediated Ritual of Gay Rebellion." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 23 (2006).
- <sup>19</sup> LeMaster, "Queer Imag(in)ing," 107.
- <sup>20</sup> LeMaster, "Queer Imag(in)ing," 118.
- <sup>21</sup> LeMaster, "Queer Imag(in)ing," 118.
- <sup>22</sup> Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, "Seeing 'Straight' through Queer Eye," 432.
- <sup>23</sup> Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, "Seeing 'Straight' through Queer Eye," 434.
- <sup>24</sup> Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, "Seeing 'Straight' through Queer Eye," 437.
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