

“Very Little Wrist Movement”: Rock Hudson Acts Out Sexual Heterodoxy

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Abstract: Hollywood films of the late 1950s obsessed over the idea of virginity, seeking to render it externally through acting style. Generally virginities thus spectacularized are female: male virginity belongs to the man's past. When found, therefore, the male virgin is inevitably established as both a comic figure *and* a fake. Rock Hudson performances remove such assurances, however: in *Pillow Talk* he plays a womanizer *and* a potential virgin. Hudson usually offers a performance dichotomy, with the heterodox sexualities evoked by movement, the traditional male calm and still: *Man's Favorite Sport?* (1964), however, reverses this trope and makes the calm, *experienced*, persona the fake.

Résumé : Les films vers la fin des années 50 étaient obsédés par l'idée de la virginité, cherchant à l'exprimer extérieurement, à travers un style de jeu particulier. Généralement, ces vierges étaient représentés par des femmes : la virginité masculine appartenant au passé d'un homme. L'homme vierge est inévitablement représenté comme un caractère comique et faux. Les performances de Rock Hudson éliminent ces assurances, par contre: dans *Pillow Talk* il joue le rôle d'un joueur qui a le potentiel d'être vierge. Hudson nous offre une dichotomie de performance : les sexualités hétérodoxes sont évoqués par mouvement ; le masculinité traditionnelle est calme, immobile. Mais *Man's Favorite Sport?* (1964) renverse ce trope et fait l'homme calme, expérimenté, l'article truqué.

Keywords: Media/Mass media; Feminist/Gender; History

Introduction

Oscar Levant enjoyed claiming he had been around Hollywood so long, he “knew Doris Day before she became a virgin” (1965, p. 192). Although this can be interpreted as a criticism of the actor, Levant did appear in Day's first film, *Romance on the High Seas* (Michael Curtiz, 1948), in which Day appeared as Georgia Garrett, a wisecracking chanteuse who is no sexual innocent. Levant's mordant comment thus comes from a witness and acknowledges the manipulation required to render Day into this persona: she *became* a virgin. While this remark draws attention to itself by its seeming paradox (virginity is a natural state; virgins are

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not made but, in fact, one is made into a post-virgin), it also adroitly focuses on the gradual “virginification” that froze Day in this persona over time.

I have examined the myth of Day’s aged virgin persona in other writings (Jeffers McDonald, forthcoming, 2007). In this paper I want to appropriate Levant’s bon mot with regards to Rock Hudson, positing that the male star, like Day, underwent a significant shift and, in certain films around the cusp of the 1960s, “became a virgin” too. Hudson’s star persona was transformed in this period, becoming for the first time associated with comedy, and specifically with comic problems about sexuality.

When examined, Hudson’s performances in *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959), *Lover Come Back* (Delbert Mann, 1961), and *Man’s Favorite Sport?* (Howard Hawks, 1964) reveal a nebulousness *heterodoxy*. I use this word because it is easy to see, whenever Hudson performs this trope, what the character he is embodying is *not*: he is not strong, manly, experienced, predatory; embodying none of these things, Hudson is not enacting orthodox heterosexual masculinity as contemporaneously imagined, desired, and projected.

But what the character *is* seems more difficult to define, to be more fluid and changing: possibly homosexual, possibly impotent, possibly virginal. This seems to me a crucial point: that all these categories are so at odds with the then-orthodox view of the mature male’s vast store of past sexual experiences, that the boundaries between them are permeable: the nebulous figure of the mature male virgin thus acts as an unsetler of normative sexual positionings.

This conviction that “real” men were manly, predatory, wolfish, and a man who had not availed himself of the rights and customs of manliness was dissident, worrying, is mirrored throughout American popular culture at this period. Besides being present in novels, films, cartoons, songs, jokes, gossip items, and other material making up contemporary discourse, these gendered assumptions were reinforced by another strand of popular literature: conduct literature. This was the material providing guidelines on correct behaviour and polite manners, whether via the sporadic information offered through advice columns in newspapers and magazines, or in whole collected volumes. Emily Post’s *Etiquette* was one of the most influential and long-lived of these;¹ crucially, although her address is to a female reader, she also stipulates the tenets of correct male behaviour. Rigidly assuming a polarity between the genders, Post comments on the appropriate behaviour and demeanour of each by comparison to the other. Thus, while women are instructed to be quiet and still in public places (Post, 1950), men can—must—move through these with confidence. When it comes to social matters, Post is no less firm: “The man must take the initiative” (p. 80).

In a societal context where gender-appropriate behaviour is everywhere mandated, the idea of a man who abdicates the right, the duty, to “take the initiative” in sex can be seen to be deeply troubling. In thus exploring Hudson’s performances of inexperience, I wish to return the films to their originating societal and historical contexts, in order to appreciate the disruptive potential the heterodox male possessed.

Seeking to return the performances to their extra-filmic contexts, I also want to embed these moments of performed heterodox sexuality within their full nar-

ratives. In this, the paper is unlike Mark Rappaport's witty but somewhat misleading film account of Hudson's passive-male roles, *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* (1992). Rappaport's work uses very brief clips, abstracted from their full movies, to suggest that Hudson's gay identity was never really closeted but always there to be read onscreen, in such moments as those when he dons a ladies' fur coat in *Lover Come Back*, (Delbert Mann 1961) or gets into bed with Tony Randall in *Send Me No Flowers* (Norman Jewison, 1964). By attempting to return such moments to their historicized narratives, however, the full extent of Hudson's performances of a decidedly heterodox masculine sexuality can emerge, which seem far more radical than the momentary acting out of stereotypical "swishiness."

Virginity: Contexts and performance styles

In the early 1960s in American culture, due to the "double standard," male sexual experience was a given; as a 1954 *Playboy* article noted, male attitudes to virginity were radically different from female ones, since each sex began from a different personal relation to the topic:

Most men recognize that virginity is an unpleasant little matter to be disposed of in early life. They appreciate that it's troublesome, a bother, and all things considered, just isn't worth having around. Unfortunately, this important information has been withheld from a large part of our female population. (Smith, 1954, p. 9)

This sense that virginity belongs to a man's past story, while it may be at the heart of a woman's current narrative, appears in films presenting the "virginity dilemma" (Jeffers McDonald, forthcoming, 2006), a short-lived cycle of movies that emerged in the wake of Kinsey's 1953 report on *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. This report scandalously asserted that women had sexual desires, just like men, and, just like men, were not always willing to wait for marriage to indulge them. The figure of the desirous female virgin began to appear across a wealth of popular media in America at this mid-century point, and mainstream movies, empowered by the 1956 relaxation of the Production Code, soon made use of her in a variety of films, both comic and melodramatic.

Operating in these films is a dichotomy of performance styles, dependent on the generic allegiances of the film, which align comedy with an energetic kinetic style of acting and the maintenance of chastity, while linking melodrama with a much more static performance mode in films where virginity might actually be relinquished.

The comic virgin is in possession of an energetic physical presence which, it is tacitly suggested, needs to be channelled into the bedroom; such performances call for a broad, whole-body style of acting, with windmilling arms, pratfalls, and facial mugging. The classic moment for the comic virgin occurs when she breaks something, tears something, falls over, or all of these at once: as when Meg in *Ask Any Girl* (Charles Walters, 1959) drenches her boss (and future husband) with ink in borrowing his pen or Eileen in *Sunday in New York* (Peter Tewkesbury, 1963) has her clothing entangled with that of the man she will eventually marry. By contrast, the maiden who *might* is marked by her unnatural stillness both before and after the deed. Such stasis may wax and wane in its intensity but is usually at its

most extreme and then crucially ruptured at the moment when her decision to yield is made. Thus April in *The Best of Everything* (Jean Negulesco, 1959) seems hypnotized, immobilized, by the seductive ploys of fickle playboy Dexter. When he threatens to end their relationship, however, she makes her choice and it is rendered, finally, in motion: in close-up, her hand darts out to grab his wrist as he moves away. The editing highlights the impact of her sudden kinetic outburst, which seals her fate and can be seen as forecasting and symbolizing the release of sexual energy.

These very brief sketches suggest the ways that virginity was being physically performed by the female actor at this time. The films making up this “virginity dilemma” cycle of the mid-1950s to early 1960s seem to betray an ambivalence about the figure of the female virgin: she is both alluring and threatening, exciting yet provoking anxiety, since she challenges assumptions about the double standard, female sexual agency, and active/passive sexuality.

By contrast, male virginity at the time was not usually the topic of film narratives unless it was justified as present in the very young, as with Johnny in *A Summer Place* (Delmer Daves, 1959), or in the equally young and possibly sexually aberrant hero of *Tea And Sympathy* (Vincente Minnelli, 1956). When an older man was posited as possessing anything other than the traditional male sexual agency and experience, not only were the boundaries between these sexual heterodoxies elided, so that he could be read as impotent, homosexual, or virginal, but this reading was encouraged to be understood as a ruse undertaken for reassuringly normative motives.

For example, two comic versions of the mature heterodox male appeared in 1959. In both *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder) and *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon), the performance of a non-dominant masculine sexuality is clearly signalled as unorthodox, humorous, and fake. In the former, Tony Curtis pretends to be a Shell oil millionaire rendered impotent and potentially still a virgin, while in *Pillow Talk* Hudson invents as an alter ego another oil millionaire who, as the film expresses it, might be “the type who likes to—uh—collect cooking recipes and exchange bits of gossip.” Significantly, not only are these performances either short-lived, as in Hudson’s case, or partial, in Curtis’ (he is also pretending to be a female saxophonist), they are also foregrounded as being solely for the purpose of seduction. Paradoxically, then, the men are at their most priapically heterosexual when pretending the reverse.

Examination of the mature male virgin, using Rock Hudson as an example, suggests that the different acting styles for female virgins can be similarly found in the performance of male virginity. There are significant torsions, however, required of the narratives to allow the enactment of these similar modes: through music and *mise-en-scène*, the films highlight the shifts in acting styles in order to indicate that the performance of virginity is a performance by the *character* as well as by the *actor*.

Hudson: Before and after he was a virgin

In the first part of his career Hudson established a star persona that carried resonances of largeness, dependability, solidity, quietness.² Both publicity stills and

films consistently link Hudson with nature, especially nature on a grand scale, through camera work and framing; narrative details in the films also reinforce this, making, for example, Ron Kirby, his character in *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955), a gardener and tree cultivator. His screen name also, given to Roy Scherer Jr. by his agent, was conceived in terms of the natural and the naturally large, notes Richard Meyer, in an essay that offers an extended consideration of the star's symbolic associations: "Even the patently inauthentic name, gleaned respectively from the Rock of Gibraltar and the Hudson River, was meant to locate him in (and as) an expansive landscape of the masculine" (Meyer, 1991, pp. 259-260).

Richard Dyer, comparing Hudson's performance as Bick Benedict in *Giant* (George Stevens, 1956) with James Dean's Jett Rink, finds the former "still, straight, unfussy, just *there* in the classic manner of Hollywood stars" (Dyer, 2002, p. 162), while Meyer quotes Douglas Sirk's appreciation of Hudson's solidity: "In melodrama, it's of advantage to have one immovable character against which you can put your more split ones" (Meyer, 1991, p. 271).

The connotations of a reassuring bigness and immobility in Hudson's persona, then, were consistently carried in his roles, even though played out across a range of different genres, including supposedly male-oriented genres like westerns and those more female-targeted melodramas, "women's pictures," in which directors such as Sirk could exploit Hudson's stasis as a foil to the nervous energy expressed by the female actors.

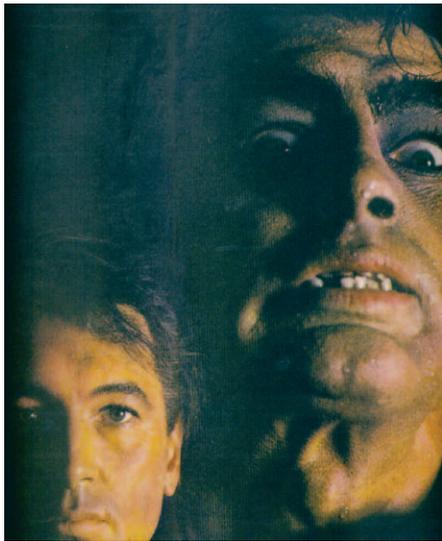
Hudson's usual mode of acting at this time underlines his star persona, expressing itself as and through solidity. A scene from *All That Heaven Allows* provides an example: as he shows Cary (Jane Wyman) around his ruined barn, Ron plants himself in the middle of the room, turning to watch her as she nervously flits from feature to feature, but never seeming himself to be in motion. His reliability, his quiet self-confidence is thus conveyed through controlled stillness in great contrast to her agitated gestures, which are born of and attempt to mitigate her mingled arousal and embarrassment from being with him. As Cary starts to talk to him about the barn, encouraging him to renovate the place, making it a nice home for some nice girl he will one day meet, he looks at her calmly and almost insolently as she nervously chatters on, before clasping her in a masterful embrace.

I posit this as a typical Hudson performance before 1959, the year in which he appeared in his first starring role in a comedy, as hypermasculine womanizer Brad Allen to Doris Day's self-possessed sophisticate, in *Pillow Talk*. Hudson's performance mode was about to change from this embodying of calm fixity, bifurcating so that the usual stasis becomes both partnered and contrasted with a more kinetic bodily style. Beginning with *Pillow Talk*, the sex comedies would repeatedly employ the trope of Hudson's doubled performances, showing his diegetic adoption of a false persona in order to seduce the central female character. With the benefit of hindsight it is hard to resist positing a parallel between what Steve Cohan calls Hudson's "playboy" and "pureboy" personae (1997, chap. 7), repeatedly enacted in these films, and the actor's own doubling as publicly straight and privately gay, as Cohan and Richard Dyer, among others, have noted (Cohan, 1997; Dyer, 2002; Lippe, 1987).

What seems fascinating is that this parallel was not entirely submerged at the time these films were first released: *Life's* 1963 double issue dedicated to the movies includes a photographic essay in which "Today's top film stars" are imagined as their forerunners of the Golden Age of Hollywood ("Big Stars Take Old Roles," 1963). Thus Cary Grant appears as Charlie Chaplin, Paul Newman as Douglas Fairbanks, and Tony Curtis as Valentino. The slight twists given to the personae of the 1960s actors in recasting them as older stars are interesting, but none is as troubling and revealing as Hudson's evocation of John Barrymore, Fredric March, and Spencer Tracy performing the doubled roles of Jekyll and Hyde:

Now see here, Jekyll! Dash it all, as your most trusted colleague and friend, I beg you, before it is too late, to give up these diabolical experiments! Think, man! You are going *beyond*. You are delving into things that no man, not even a physician, has a right to know. Remember, Jekyll, the horrible happenings of 1920, when poor John Barrymore attempted these experiments. And again in 1932, when Fredric March did the same thing. And Spencer Tracy in 1941! I tell you, it's monstrous what you're doing! No, no, Jekyll! Pour out that smouldering liquid! Don't drink it! Stop! STOP! Well, take another sip and change back, or millions and millions of Rock's fans will never forgive you. ("Big Stars," 1963, pp. 66-67)

While the text speaks of the forbidden and aberrant nature of Jekyll's interests ("going *beyond*"; "delving into things that no man. . . has a right to know"; "it's monstrous"), the photographs position Hudson's doubled face within a black space suggestive of the horror genre. Unlike the other stars, who were positioned



Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hudson: The photograph from *Life's* 1963 double issue on the movies.

within clearly filmic mise-en-scène, Hudson's twin faces are isolated emerging from the darkness. Like Barrymore, famously supposed to have conveyed the transformation from inquisitive scientist Jekyll to monstrous released id Hyde without the aid of special effects makeup, Hudson appears to be conveying Hyde's monstrous nature without prosthetics more radical than a little dark eye shadow.

Furthermore, the parallel established between Hudson and the characters he is seen portraying subverts the equation established throughout the rest of the photographic essay. When, for example, Tony Curtis is compared to Valentino, the '50s star's exotic allure, as evinced in early roles such as

Son of Ali Baba (Kurt Neumann, 1952) and *The Vikings* (Richard Fleischer, 1958), is played up; the parallel flatters Curtis by endowing him with some of the silent star's iconic status, but there is no torsion of his persona. With Hudson's literal doubling in the photograph depicting him as both Jekyll, calm but a little menacing, and the sweaty-faced, bug-eyed Hyde, however, the comparison works in a different way.

Hudson is simultaneously imagined as both Jekyll and Hyde, characters, and addressed as the person who is adored by "millions and millions of Rock's fans," the actor himself. Instead of Jekyll and Hyde, Jekyll and *Hudson* become the new pairing, which makes the actor himself the monster, the aberration, and the seeker after experiences which "no man. . . has a right to know."

With Hudson thus fractured into not one but three star forerunners and the two different personae of the Jekyll and Hyde roles, the proliferation of references becomes dizzying. As if somehow aware that *this* casting of a new star in an old vein diverges from the jokey parallels attempted before, the Hudson photo and text are the last comparison the article attempts.

Dyer's article on Hudson (Dyer, 2002) notes that the British tabloid response to the news of Hudson's homosexuality around the time of his announced AIDS-related illness worked to criticize the star for "living a lie," implying his portrayal of "normal" men when he himself was the opposite was a conscious decision to deceive fans. In couching this doubling as "Rock Hudson's Jekyll and Hyde existence" (Dyer, 2002, p. 159), the press articles upheld the association of twin linked, but opposing, even warring, personae that *Life* had hinted at 20 years previously.

Pillow Talk, in initiating this doubling,³ greatly enjoys poking fun at the cornerstones of Hudson's past starring roles and offscreen star persona. In order to woo Day's career woman, Jan Morrow, who hates him as himself, Brad adopts the persona of "Rex Stetson," a gentlemanly Texan oil millionaire. By making Rex a *giant* Texan, the film alludes to both his size and to his former role as Bick Benedict, while spoofing the star's traditional association with nature in an extended metaphoric play with tree symbolism. Exhorted by his best friend, Jonathan, to settle down and get married, Brad conveys his impression of the emasculation that monogamy and family life inevitably ensure:

Before marriage, a man is like a tree in the forest, he stands there, independent, an entity unto himself. Then he's cut down, his branches are cut off, he's stripped of his bark and thrown into the river with the rest of the logs. Then this tree is taken to the mill. And when it comes out, it's no longer a tree. It's the vanity table, the breakfast nook, the baby crib. . . and the newspaper that lines the family garbage can.

While Brad is delivering this anti-marriage monologue, a grand orchestral musical theme plays in the background, conveying the stateliness and majesty of the tree before its castration/felling. The camera angles stress Hudson's height and breadth of shoulders so that he too becomes the mighty tree. Because the film is a romantic comedy and the outcome thus unswervable, the audience knows that Brad's timber will eventually succumb to the axe wielded by Jan's allure. Jonathan is visibly struck by the force of the emasculation image but counters,

“But with Jan, you look forward to having your branches cut off!” and, sure enough, when Brad realizes he loves Jan, he is shown standing with his arms full of cut logs.

Besides spoofing Hudson’s earlier roles, Rex’s Southern origins provide the justification for his behavioural traits. Because he is from the South, where, mid-century American culture had it, extreme courtesy was shown to womanhood by every male who wished to deserve the honour of being a gentleman, Rex naturally forswears the wolfish, grabby tactics that Brad employs in seducing women. This passivity toward women works as socially permissible within the film since Southern culture had that reputation of excessive gallantry. Rex thus embodies a sexuality that is non-threatening in a dual way: non-threatening to Jan because he is not wolfish; non-threatening to society because while not traditionally active, his unpredatory nature is yet endowed with precedent by Southern conventions.

At first this hands-off attitude seems to Jan, well versed in the wiles of men, to be too good to be true, and she waits anxiously for the usual “payoff,” but soon she decides that Rex is a real gentleman and not using courtesy as a ploy. This is of course ironic as the whole persona of Rex is a fraud, and one that is the centre-piece of a very elaborate ploy. Telephoning Jan in his own person, Brad casts doubt on the motivations for the Texan’s extreme gallantry, suggesting either that Jan is not attractive enough for Rex to try anything or, worse, that he may not like women at all.

Although Jan is outraged at this suggestion—“What a vicious thing to suggest!”—it evidently has an impact: in the next scene, where the couple are enjoying an evening in a nightclub worryingly called the Hidden Door, she is observed uncomfortably trying to ask Rex if he finds her attractive. Simultaneously, Rex begins talking about “colours and fabrics and all,” verbally showing interest in recipes and mentioning his mother, while physically exaggerating the crooking of a little finger and the wide eyes of delight at the deliciousness of a dip, in other words, clearly exhibiting overly feminine traits that were contemporaneously intended to indicate homosexuality. Jan, panicking, asks Rex if they are just good friends. The payoff moment has come: the pair agree to go away together for the weekend.

While the film narrativizes why Hudson as Brad/Rex is performing in this way at this point—to lure Jan into sex—and has taken a long time establishing the reasons for and terms of this pose, it is significant that, right from his first comic role, we find the enactment of a heterodox masculine sexuality. It further seems important that, when *Pillow Talk* was such a success that another vehicle with the same three main actors was immediately sought, not only the initial inimical relations of the Hudson-Day couple were repeated, but the source of the comedy was also perceived to inhere in Hudson’s performance of an unorthodox male sexuality.

Lover Come Back (Delbert Mann, 1961) again presents the Hudson character, Jerry Webster, with a hands-off alter ego (“Linus”), requiring Day’s Carol to do all the work in establishing the terms of their relationship. The unofficial sequel upped the ante, however, by removing the Southern component of the disguise, leaving Linus with no socially sanctioned excuse for his excess of gallantry. While the moment at the Hidden Door in *Pillow Talk* very swiftly raises and then abandons the spectre of Rex’s heterodoxy, in *Lover Come Back* this is extended and

culminates in a scene of much longer duration, in which Linus skilfully manipulates the nebulosity of sexual heterodoxy in order to get Carol into bed. In this scene he encompasses and mingles hints of virginity, homosexuality, and impotence to confuse, disorient, and lead on the woman.

In *Pillow Talk*, Rex's sudden performance of a worrying, rather than courteous, lack of interest in Jan was prepared for by Brad's phone call, preparing the audience to expect enactment of overly feminine gestures; Jerry, in the later film, also signals to the viewer that he is about to begin conning Carol in earnest when he performs an exaggerated lean toward the clock to check the time, before announcing his evening is over and he must retire to bed. This marks the borders of quiet-over-dinner-Linus and ashamed-confiding-Linus, whose swift flight around Carol's apartment evokes the mental torment he is going through.

The lengthy scene following, where Carol interrogates, and Linus implies, what his problem is, gives a supreme example of the heterodox male and Hudson's consummate performance thereof. Telling the dumbfounded Carol "I



"Linus" hints that he can "never be married." Rock Hudson and Doris Day in *Lover Come Back*.

can never be married" and thus raising the spectre of homosexuality, Jerry then sinuously modulates the problem afflicting Linus, answering her tremulous "Why not? Why can't you be married?" with responses that differently shape his ailment, from *I'm afraid* (i.e., a virgin) to *Afraid I'll be a failure* (impotent).

These nebulous and fluid categories are highlighted by their enactment through a fluid performance style, also. The habitual stillness of Hudson is gone, the rocklike stolidity that marked his former performance style in the melodramas and westerns, referenced in his "real" persona of Jerry, is abandoned for a physically kinetic style reminiscent of the comic female of the "virginity dilemma" films. As Rex took on physically elaborate gestures for the small scene of heterodoxy in *Pillow Talk*, Linus now flits around Carol's apartment, wringing his hands, fleeing from place to place as she follows, drooping his head in shame at acknowledging his fear of failure. When he tells Carol "I can never get mar-

ried...," Linus' eyes droop and he bobs his head; he briefly challenges her with a glare; he manifests sudden gestures and flights across the room; his thumb strokes his jacket lapel, his fists clench, his jaw works even though he has his back to Carol and she cannot see these particular performance tropes. The audience can, however: his display is for us, the overemphatic lean toward the clock having told us that he is going into performance mode, so that we can discount any forthcoming revelations as part of the ongoing imposture.

Finally, when he has lured her into the spare bedroom and turned the lights out, Linus lets Carol try to reassure him:

Carol: You're a kind, sensitive person.

Linus: But am I the kind of man a woman could love?

Carol: Oh, of course you are!

Linus: But I don't know and it's killing me!

Carol: Linus! Don't do this to yourself! *Any* woman would love you.

Linus: *If only I could be sure of that. . .*

The scene is set for Carol to "prove" to Linus that he can be a "real" man, sacrificing her own virginity on the supposed altar of his. Naturally, the exploding of Jerry's plot occurs in time to prevent this false step. Learning the real identity of Linus, Carol begins her own performance, acting out the part of the experienced woman; "I'm going to give you confidence. . . my sweet, innocent darling. . .," taking him to the beach for a midnight swim and then absconding with his clothes. As the summit of his heterodox interlude, Jerry has to return to his apartment via the only vehicle he can flag down, a fur truck, and sporting the only outfit he can borrow, a ladies' fur coat. Clad thus he is espied by two conventioners previously envious of his many female followers, who now pronounce "he's the last guy in the world I would have figured."

Lover Come Back thus enlarges the impact of the Hudson persona's non-dominant masculine sexuality, taking it outside the arena of direct combat with Day's character to a wider societal milieu where it is the focus of bewilderment. The viewer is encouraged to laugh at the conventioners, as they do not know that the circumstances that have led Jerry to wear a fur coat are conventionally priapic; at the same time, the sight of the burly Hudson in a dainty knee-length swing coat of blonde fur is also supposed to provoke laughter at the various incongruities it represents (big man, small coat; butch man, femme coat; expensive apparel, bare legs and feet; desirable coat, nightmarish situation. . .).

These comedy roles took Hudson to even greater box office and star heights than the previous melodramas, as a result of which he appeared in many more sex comedies in this period; many of these employ some kind of plotting and deception that hinge on Hudson's character enacting this kind of heterodoxy. *A Very Special Favor* (Michael Gordon, 1965) takes the continuum of dissident sexualities to its furthest extent when Hudson's character Paul progressively feigns sex addiction, irresistibility ("I've become a love toy!"), impotence, and finally homosexuality in order to seduce uptight psychologist Lauren (Leslie Caron).

Even when there is no hint of sexual *problems* in the sex comedy, as in *Come September* (Robert Mulligan, 1961), where the obstacle the narrative is struggling to overcome is Robert Talbot's (Hudson's) lack of access to his girlfriend, there is still the implication that there is a flaw in his makeup somewhere. When another character criticizes Talbot, this is achieved in terms that again note his grand scale before suggesting there is something wrong with his virility: looking at Robert, says his butler, Maurice (Walter Slezak) sadly, is "like looking at a magnificent castle. . . *with a weak tower*" (emphasis in original film dialogue).

Despite the emphasis, then, on sexual problems and pretences, observable in Hudson vehicles after *Pillow Talk*, none of the other sex comedies attempts to do what Howard Hawks' 1964 film *Man's Favorite Sport?* radically tries: to keep the disguise plot but make the pretence that of assumed normal masculine prowess. In this sex comedy, a loose and partial remaking, or even self-homage, of Hawks' own screwball classic *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), the usual position the Hudson comedies establish at the outset, with his "real" character the expert, is reversed.

Man's Favorite Sport?

The experienced persona Hudson plays at the start of the film is Roger Willoughby, fishing expert, author of fishing books, and presenter of fishing demonstrations at the department store of which he is the star employee. But fishing expert Roger is a fake: really Roger is a fishing virgin. Lest the association between Roger's fishing and sexual prowess be overlooked, the film goes to extensive lengths to ensure parallels between them. The title song by implication suggests that if Roger does not really know what to do with a fish, he also does not know what to do with a girl; Richard Dyer (2002) notes the tacit parallel between the two skills is furthered by using the word "fish," a slang insult for women. Hawks' film also interestingly borrows *Pillow Talk*'s trope of Southern-style courtesy and manners, although reversing the gender of the character in question, to give Roger a *Texan* girlfriend. Because of her Southern background and resultant code of behaviour, it is implicitly suggested, the girlfriend will not be the usual sexually active partner of a Hudson film character and thus will not be able to tell that anything is "wrong" with Roger. Moreover, Roger's "wrong" girlfriend cannot fish either, and therefore cannot expose him as ignorant of either field of knowledge. The woman who the narrative poses as being right for him, on the other hand, Abigail Page (Paula Prentiss), *can* fish, and, when he confesses his uninitiate state to her, agrees to teach him, showing him what to do with his "rod," etc.

While the film posits Roger as a fishing and sexual virgin, it shares the topical assumption I indicated earlier, finding mature male virginity to be so heterodox that its boundaries become permeable and virginity can therefore shade into any type of contemporaneously perceived sexual aberration: hence the line from the film I have quoted in this paper's title. The obvious double entendre about limp wrists—commonly understood, according to historian George Chauncey (1995), as a sign for the male homosexual in American culture from at least the 1870s onwards—is here both referenced and narratively excused as a point of

fishing technique. Abigail, teaching Roger how to be a real (fisher)man, is thus charged with the duty of preventing further wrist-flapping.

The nebulous, mobile performance style employed in the post-dinner crisis scene in *Lover Come Back*, mentioned earlier, is used again in *Man's Favorite Sport?*, but very significantly in this film it is not put on suddenly to manoeuvre a woman into the bedroom but is the character's natural mode throughout, the one he enacts when alone. A sample scene details how Hudson employs his usual dichotomous performance styles to differentiate his character's real and unreal selves.

In order to uphold the long-term lie that he is a fishing expert, Roger is dispatched by the boss of the department store where he works to a lakeside resort to take part in a fishing competition. Abigail Page, to whom he has confessed his ignorance, agrees to help him, although the pair argue so much that frequently he is often left trying to learn alone, ironically from a manual he himself wrote. In one scene, Roger, in boots and waders, tries fishing from a bank but gets his line tangled in a tree. Before he can attempt to untangle it, the baited line miraculously attracts a fish. Roger reacts to this with mingled anxiety and surprise, falling over backwards, looking around to see if anyone has observed him, then swinging down the tree branch to reach the line and fish. The branch breaks, however, and Roger lands in the lake; eventually struggling back to shore he sees that the fish is still hooked on his line and throws it up onto the bank, where he contemplates it with disgust. A coda shows Roger calmly coming to have the fish weighed for the competition and emerging the front-runner; as the other fishermen congratulate him, his former physical fluidity has been replaced with a more static mode reminiscent both of his playboy sex-experts, Brad and Jerry, and of earlier dramatic roles.



Real heterodox Roger (left) suffers a pratfall while fake Roger (right) is as calm and solid as usual. From 1964's *Man's Favorite Sport?*

So again Hudson can be seen delivering a very mobile, kinetic performance, with double takes, tremulous motion, mugging, clumsiness, and two pratfalls. Interestingly, however, here his performance tropes work to reverse the binary usually operating in his films. The fishing expert is calm, static, rocklike, and fake; the fishing virgin is tremulous, kinetic, and real. As with the scene in *Lover Come Back*, something about the fact that the tiny details of performance are being shown to the viewer alone, in a private moment, gives the behaviour an aura of authenticity: this is not a performance for gain or plot but the "real" Roger.

Richard Dyer, writing on “the authentication of star quality” (1991, pp. 132-140), discusses how certain markers are accepted as indicating the real in a performance. Discussing Judy Garland’s presentation of the song “The Man that Got Away” in *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor, 1954), Dyer distinguishes three qualities that are intended to indicate authenticity: “lack of control, lack of premeditation and privacy” (1991, p. 137). Although it is not my intention here to suggest that the audience is being shown the “real” Rock Hudson in this scene from *Man’s Favorite Sport?*, the same three qualities can be seen to act as guarantors of a similar authenticity for the *character* Hudson is playing. Roger’s feigned skill at fishing is totally absent in this scene: he lacks control of his body, hence the pratfalls and physical mishaps. His clumsy and maladroit responses to the various accidents that befall him make obvious his spontaneity, his lack of premeditation; and finally, as noted above, the camera set-up has assured the viewer that Roger is not overlooked in his antics and therefore can be relaxed enough to “be himself,” knowing he is in private, although outdoors. Lacking the suavity, self-awareness, and audience of the fake fishing expert, the authenticity of real Roger, the fishing virgin, is underlined.

This fact, that the overt pretence is that of the hypermasculine persona and not the inexperienced one, points up the interesting quality inherent in Hudson’s performances of sexuality: they *are* performances, and as this film makes clear, the “normal” masculine role is as much a construct of a particular acting style as the opposing performance of sexual heterodoxies: virginity, homosexuality, impotence. Hudson’s performances use both contemporary modes of virginity-representation in the same characterization, engendering a dichotomy that aligns dominant masculine behaviour with stasis and aberrations with motion but locates them at different moments in the same body. What is missing is any firm alignment of the true with one performance mode and the lie with its opposite, since *Man’s Favorite Sport?* disrupts and denies this by insisting the *real* Roger is the wrist-flapping one and the calm, controlled one is the disguise.⁴

It may seem derogatory of heterodox sexualities to align them constantly with motion in this way, signalling them through physically broad enactments and making them seem “swishy” in the same way as *Pillow Talk*’s Rex during his momentary performance of a motion-filled aberration. It is possible, however, that *Man’s Favorite Sport?* attempts to recruit some kind of acceptance of these diversions from expected norms in the fact that Hudson here enacts a *real* self who is a mature male virgin; and, indeed, in the fact that it is Hudson—handsome, likeable, with a heroic element to his star persona—who is doing the enacting. It can perhaps be seen that Hudson’s dual performances of heterodox and heteronormative sexuality thus unsettle assumptions about *both*, since they insist on sexuality’s performability rather than essence: sexuality is not something you do or are, but something you show, perform, and act out. Hudson’s somatic enactments of both orthodox and heterodox masculinities seem to align with Judith Butler’s (1990) theories about gender acting as a masquerade, a performance behind which there is no “real” truth.⁵ Understood in this way, the three pairs of Hudson characters—Brad and Rex, Jerry and Linus, expert and fishing virgin Roger—can be seen as performances, with no expression of masculinity,

whether experienced, assured, priapic, or shy, faltering, and tremulous, indicative of a reality beyond the performed.

It seems significant that an alternative to normatively enacted masculinity should fully emerge in Hudson's work at the moment of his switch from dramatic to comedic roles in *Pillow Talk*. Perhaps the opportunity to play a non-heroic role for a change, even as a part of a masquerade, appealed to Hudson. Meyer notes, quoting Hicks, that the actor was keen to be given more complex roles during his stint in melodramas, desiring the role of alcoholic and possibly impotent Kyle Hadley, in *Written on the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), rather than the more routine part of Mitch, Hadley's best friend, for which he was cast (Hicks, 1975; Meyer, 1991). In the Rex, Linus, and Roger roles Hudson is given the chance to perform troubled characters, albeit in comic mode. While Brad, Jerry, and fake Roger maintain the heroic hypermasculinity Hudson's star persona connoted, their alter egos permit an exploration of aberrations from this rigid norm, and a *range* of aberrations at that, as virginity shades into homosexuality and impotence.

The coupling of comedy with the new Hudson personae and their introduction of new possibilities of male subjecthood thus relieves some of the tensions and anxieties that otherwise would have been provoked, around the cusp of the 1960s, by non-normative masculinities. Hudson's enactment of sexual heterodoxies is therefore at once specific to its originating historical context, while retaining an importance for filmic representations of masculine sexuality today, precisely because of its methods of enactment. Contemporary romantic comedies can clearly be seen following patterns of both narrative and performance established in these earlier Hudson films. Fascinatingly, too, the assumption of a disguise for priapic purposes remains the motivating factor in the majority of such films,⁶ although positing that normative masculinity as a pose is less frequently assumed.

For example, in *Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, 2005), the two protagonists seduce bridesmaids at weddings through the enactment of behaviour cynically calculated to appear unpredatory: through crying at the beauty of the service, dancing with the littlest flower girl, or making balloon animals and playing with the kids. These performances of emotional good-Joe niceness have been finely calibrated to evoke an aura of difference from the norm, specialness, and marriageability: John and Jeremy are prepared to risk seeming unmanly in the short term because they reap the benefits in the bedroom. By contrast, *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) elects to portray its hero burdened by the performance of normative masculinity: like Roger Willoughby, Andy Spitzer (Steve Carell) presents an anomaly to his society by being a man who has not acted on his rights to sexual experience. Both Roger and Andy are encumbered by having to pretend masculine prowess, and the films' transgressive potential lies in their insistence on the authenticity of the inexperienced persona. Both Andy and Roger, however, are guided by their narratives to change their problematic status: Hudson's enactments of heterodox masculinity thus continue to resonate today because the performance of a normative heroic hypermasculinity still seems to be rigidly required of men.

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Notes

1. First published in 1922, *Etiquette* has regularly been revised and reissued ever since; between the 1950 and 1960 issues alone, there were two other revisions, in 1955 and 1958.
2. Hicks cites *Newsweek* reviewing *Giant*: “[Hudson] is gigantic, relaxed, rocklike-indeed, and right for the part” (Hicks, 1975, p. 275).
3. It would be interesting to pursue the motif of Hudson’s doubling back through his dramatic roles; in *Magnificent Obsession* (Douglas Sirk, 1954), for example, he plays a feckless playboy who reforms and, adopting a different persona, goes about becoming an eye specialist in order to save the sight of Jane Wyman’s character.
4. See Dyer (2002, pp. 165 *et seq.*) for a consideration of this film and its place in the canon of Hudson sex comedies; by contrast, Lippe (1987), citing an earlier version of the article, disagrees with Dyer’s feeling that Hudson’s performance problematizes heterosexuality.
5. Butler’s work has sought to prompt understanding of gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 1990, p. 33).
6. For example, *The Tao of Steve* (Jenniphr Goodman, 2000), *Down With Love* (Peyton Reed, 2004), *Hitch* (Andy Tennant, 2005)—although none of the men pretends to be virginal, homosexual, or impotent, each feigns a nonchalance that is calculated to appear unpredatory and is at odds with the true sexual goal.

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