

ENGL 121: Cultural Critique: Style as Argument
Professor Kimberly Shirkhani

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Aaron Orbey

Prom King
by Aaron Orbey

I went to prom six times. Moderation was not my thing, though I can't take total credit for the streak. To Jenna, Zoe, Julia, Tarika, Julia, and Sarah, I must have seemed the clear choice, a date even more convenient than I was charming. Some of them had boyfriends from out of town who could not attend the dance, or secretly did not want to. Some had doubts about our prep school's progressive courting rituals, which pressured even the ladies to devise elaborate proposals for actual romantic prospects. All of them had stern fathers, men pleased to see their daughters waltz off with a clean-cut teenager, me, who would give a girl an arm and no more. I was innocuous and chic. I could pin my own boutonniere. I never forgot the corsage. I knew to call to confirm the color my cummerbund should match, and when the reply was pink, I did not blink.

By the time I had a boyfriend, in my senior year, I didn't even think to take him. Harrison went to college in New York. Save the train fare, I said. As much as I wanted to scandalize our chaperones by bringing a guy, striding onto the scene with my hand in his back pocket, I too preferred the symbiotic stability of a platonic date. My girls and I sat back as our classmates frenzied to court each other in grand displays, spray-painting SUVs or unfurling six-foot posters from the Eliot Bridge. On the magical evening, as blushing couples paced along the border of the dance floor, I got provocative with my date, gyrating in mock indecency for everyone to see. We did not know how the night

would end, but we knew how it wouldn't—with sex—and that spared us the stress felt by most of our friends.

Back then, I thought myself special. The one drawback to this distinction was the fear I might be using my female friends to relive a tradition I might otherwise have experienced only once. I loved the attention. Again and again, I got to pose for photos. Again and again, I gorged on the hors d'oeuvres, rode in the stretch limo, romped under the disco ball. Chivalry had croaked so long before that I was never expected to pay for my date's ticket; sometimes, she paid for mine. I rented enough tuxedos to earn discounts at Jos. A. Bank, where each May the same smarmy salesman grinned at me from behind the register and said, "Someone's popular with the ladies." I told him he couldn't even imagine.

Now I am older and see that my circumstance was more commonplace than I knew. I was neither the first nor the last gay teenager to attend every dance. In 2005, Frank Paiva was a senior when he called himself, in the style section of *The New York Times*, "this century's new answer to the last-minute prom date." The awkward cousin, he wrote, was out. Enter the newest trend—the gay best friend.¹

It turns out he's everywhere. Grace had Will in the sitcom named after them. Carrie had Stanford in *Sex and the City*. Julianne had George in *My Best Friend's Wedding*. Rachel had Kurt in *Glee*. Sharpay had Ryan in *High School Musical*. These men shared essential traits. The gay best friend is sassy and fashionable. He is loyal and spunky. He is willing, should the situation demand it, to perform what the girl guide

¹ Frank Paiva, "A Prince Charming for the Prom (Not Ever After, Though)," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/29/fashion/sundaystyles/a-prince-charming-for-the-prom-not-ever-after-though.html?_r=0.

College Candy calls “the fake boyfriend trick,” masquerading as his sidekick’s beau.

Elite Daily has published a list of eight reasons a gay best friend adds more value to your life—if “you,” I presume, are a straight woman—and the list is pithy enough to summarize.² A gay best friend will always support you. He will want to gab about boys. He will be drama-free. He will tell it like it is. He will keep himself clean, dress to impress, double as a shopping partner or as a perpetual plus one—a handsome plus one, to boot.

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that in the 2013 teen comedy *G.B.F.*, three feuding queen bees fight for the attention of their high school’s lone homosexual. Fawcett Brooks, Caprice Winters, and ’Shley Osgood—I’m not making these names up—all pine for a gay prom date, and Tanner Daniels is the only candidate available. (His company, somehow, will help the lucky girl clinch the title of prom queen.) First, the girls identify their gay quarry with the help of a geo-location dating app. Then they out him to the entire student body, bribe him with low-fat iced coffee and clothing, dress him up to conform to their ideal, and end up alienating him from all of his original friends.

Like most films of its ilk, this one would make me cringe if its insight about high school weren’t so shrewd. Viewers who resent the stereotypes, the film suggests, must at least concede their ugly truth. *G.B.F.* offers a convenient abbreviation for—and a curt definition of—the straight teen’s vital accessory. She would have reason to fear if her closest pal shared her sexuality or her gender. Fawcett puts it best when, early in her

² Gigi Engel, “8 Reasons Why A Gay Best Friend Adds More Value To Your Life Than Anybody Else,” *Elite Daily*, August 2016, <http://elitedaily.com/life/culture/gay-best-friends-win/705558/>.

scheme, she voices secret relief to her new friend: “You’re not trying to screw me, like a guy, or threatened by me, like every other girl in school.”³

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Can we blame the poor girl for her presumptuousness? Years before, in a different, better-known American film, it was Harry who insisted to Sally that men and women—straight men and straight women—can’t be friends because “the sex part always gets in the way.” When Sally objected, citing several male pals, Harry suggested she didn’t understand their true intentions. “No man can be friends with a woman he finds attractive,” he said, shaking his head in the passenger seat. “He always wants to have sex with her.”⁴

I hate to say it, but science at least sort of supports his stance. In 2012, a group of researchers at the University of Wisconsin corralled 88 pairs of opposite-sex undergraduates into a laboratory to show that, in general, men and women’s “evolved mating strategies impinge on their friendship experiences.” A follow-up study—this one with 249 adults, many of them married—confirmed that males reported more attraction to their female friends than vice versa and were likelier than women to list romantic attraction as a perk of friendship with the opposite sex.⁵

³ *G.B.F. (Gay Best Friend)*, film, directed by Darren Stein (2013; Santa Monica, CA: Vertical Entertainment), DVD.

⁴ *When Harry Met Sally*, film, directed by Rob Reiner (1989; Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures), DVD.

⁵ Adrian Ward, “Men and Women Can’t Be ‘Just Friends,’” *Scientific American*, October 23, 2012, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/men-and-women-cant-be-just-friends/>.

At least in high school, then, Fawcett might be right to avoid heterosexual young bloods for fear of their come-ons. (Her ex-boyfriend, Hamilton, is a beefy, groping jock.) One could consult similar research to support the queen bee's aversion to jealous girls. *Psychology Today* has suggested that groups of women report more critical views of other women than men do of their male peers.⁶ That tendency starts early on, according to the author, who cites sundry studies. When psychologists Nicki Crick and Maureen Bigbee observed attitudes of aggressive behavior in subjects as young as fourth and fifth graders, they found that while boys victimized each other overtly, girls tended toward relational victimization—subtle salvos in tense friendships, rather than all-out fist fights.

Of course, sources like this smack of imprecision, if not unconscious sexism. It was a man, for instance, who wrote the *Psychology Today* article. On a subject as idiosyncratic as friendship, science might seem an improper authority. And yet, the research speaks. Such narratives have a way of invading our vernacular, of snaking into our psyches and reifying themselves, regardless of their exceptions. “Bros before hoes”—Barney Stinson’s brash proverb from the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*—spoke to a population of men who purported to stick together. It rhymed. It sounded quite nice. The female equivalent—“sisters before misters”—originated only afterward and, in its imitation, felt less convincing, like some flat comeback.

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Most of my friends, or at least my close friends, are female. It was this observation, I will admit, that made me first suspect my sexuality when I was younger.

⁶ Seth Meyers, “Women Who Hate Other Women: The Psychological Root of Snarky,” *Psychology Today*, September 24, 2013, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-is-2020/201309/women-who-hate-other-women-the-psychological-root-snarky>.

I got along better with girls than boys and eventually began to wonder what interests we shared. Didn't Plato praise like-mindedness as a necessity of friendship? I could feign interest in playing video games with Sam, but I preferred to shop with Lana; I could drink and brood with Andre, but I preferred to eat and gab with Jade. A sociologist would attribute this preference to the male deficit model, the relationship theory that suggests most men's expressions of closeness are not just different from those of women, but inferior to them.⁷ The implication there, I believe, is *straight* men, and I derive a strange pride from this exemption. Stereotypes about gay guys aren't generally flattering. But the GBF's traits aren't so bad. I'd rather be a trendy friend, after all, than a closet case or an AIDS patient.

Still, some gay men criticize our representation as "saintly." "When the same portrayal happens again and again," writes Michael Waters, "gay men become reduced to caricatures."⁸ The movie *G.B.F.* casts itself as satire by acknowledging as much. When Fawcett accuses Caprice of foul play in the war to claim Tanner, the second girl seethes in response: "At least I tried to bribe him with sex," she says. "I treated him like an actual human being and not some asexual, neutered little purse puppy." At another point, the GBF himself erupts, telling all three girls they could "focus a little less on how much I match your outfit on any given day and show some concern for my freaking equal rights." When he ends up elected prom king—with Fawcett as his date, although Caprice finds another gay guy and 'Shley goes with her Mormon boyfriend, whose sexuality is

⁷ Julia Wood, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture* (New York: Wadsworth, 1993), 209.

⁸ Michael Waters, "I Might Be Gay, But Please Don't Call Me Your 'Gay Best Friend,' " *MTV News*, January 12, 2016, <http://www.mtv.com/news/2727136/i-might-be-gay-but-dont-call-me-your-gay-best-friend/>.

suspicious—Tanner gets his moment to preach. He chides the crowd for tokenizing homosexuals and chides himself for letting them. Then everyone makes up, plays nice, dances in a dark gymnasium, and the film ends with the kind of campy montage viewers expect.

This conclusion should irk me more than it does. The movie keeps its criticism pretty tame. But I have trouble feeling too cynical about a stereotype that seems, at times, too ridiculous to be real. I for one am happy in my friendships with straight women; if I felt used, objectified, accessorized—you name it—then perhaps my opinion would be different. As it stands, I simply choose not to feel used. And I'm more amused than dismayed by the profusion of online listicles urging girls to find their very own GBFs. Consider this five-step procedure from WikiHow: 1. "Understand that all gay people aren't the same." [That is, some of us have personalities.] 2. "Take your time finding your GBF and look for someone who 'gets you.'" [If you're the type of person who reads guides like this, I surmise I won't be the one.] 3. "Search for your new gay BF in the usual places." [We love gay bars, drag shows, and hair salons, of course, but we also frequent the workplace.] 4. "Develop a relationship that is a two-way street." [If you want me to go to prom with you, you need to bribe me.] 5. "Be prepared to be there for the long haul." [I'm a lot to handle, honey, I know.]

Reading advice like that, I wonder whom I pity more: the stock homosexual or the gal who so desperately depends on him. The only thing worse than being a token is needing one. In *G.B.F.*, at least, Fawcett, Caprice, and 'Shley fight for Tanner not because they have to but because they want to. The ostensible endgame is prom queen, and that's a distinction that spares them some embarrassment. The sadder case is hard to

imagine: a female so strapped for amity that she must prey on a predictable group of gay men, as though they represent her only potential friends.

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There is a term for that, too: the fag hag. It originated even earlier than the GBF to describe hapless women who cling to gay culture. “Describe” might be too nice. “In its most pervasive usage in 1970s-era gay subcultural formations,” write Maria Fackler and Nick Salvato, “the ugly rhyme conjured the stereotype of an often overweight, sexually dysfunctional woman who chose to surround herself with grudgingly welcoming gay men and was thus deemed a tragic interloper.”⁹

If Michael Waters or “Tanner Daniels” thought he had it tough, perhaps he should reconsider. In *G.B.F.*, the only thing that saves Fawcett, Caprice, and ’Shley from such pathetic characterization is their popularity. If they weren’t so perky and glamorous, their plot for Tanner might register as more desperate than it does—and even so, it seems pretty desperate. I would wager that for most viewers, the girls come off much worse than Tanner, whose reluctance to be claimed or categorized humanizes him. At a buzzing teen party, while Tanner’s woosers survey the scene, a drunken dude asks him how he decides who’s the girl and who’s the boy when he’s “getting gay with a guy.” Without a moment’s hesitation, the GBF speaks: “Not an expert, but I think you’re both the boy,” he says. “That’s kind of the point.”

The film, in fact, testifies less to homophobia than to sexism. It pokes at the first. It barely addresses the latter. The explicit slight to the fag is the movie’s main theme. The

⁹ Maria Fackler and Nick Salvato, “Fag Hag: A Theory of Effeminate Enthusiasms,” *Discourse* 34, no. 1 (2012): 59–92, accessed April 4, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41850969>.

implicit slight to his hags is subtler. “What offends me more than anything is the hypocrisy and sexism of it all,” says Tanner’s friend Sofia after learning he is the “undisputed front-runner” for prom king. “If I were to come out as a lesbian, would I all of a sudden be a top candidate for prom queen?” Viewers don’t get to sit with that insight. Soon after Sofia speaks, the scene cuts away to Fawcett, Caprice, and ’Shley, all of whom lack loyal friends because straight men, remember, are helplessly horny, straight women helplessly jealous. Tanner alone has other true comrades, people to carry him home when the dancing ends.

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I was the only openly gay kid in my grade. At the time this afforded me a status I can’t say I resented. Isolation is exceptional. Like I said, I had good pals. I had a boyfriend in college. There was one openly lesbian girl at our school, Caitlyn, who was two years up. When I was a freshman, I remember, she brought a poster to the Commons during prom season to ask a straight girl to the dance. Her name was Shai. They would go, Caitlyn hoped, as friends. The date to-be was sitting with a group of peers when she saw the sign: “I know you’re not a guy,” Caitlyn’s joke read, “but maybe you could give it a try.” Shai stood up, sobbing, and ran to the bathroom, from which she would not emerge all afternoon as her friends lectured Caitlyn on the impropriety of her act. Kids flocked to watch. “You just put Shai on the spot,” said Ami, a glamorous junior with a British accent. “Right on the spot. You’ve got to take the lesbian shit elsewhere.”

Caitlyn didn’t mind. She seemed to have heard it before. She chilled outside by the tables, drinking Gatorade, laughing with jocks she knew on the baseball team. She was a fierce athlete and a good friend. I recall asking her, months later, how the dance

ended up going with someone else. “After that ridiculous debacle,” I specified. She said she did not go. I asked why she didn’t just take one of the boys, and she said, “They had dates.”

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