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Tom and Jerry: Performative Queerness in Action

Animated cartoon shorts are a classic hallmark of American popular culture. America has produced Disney, the Looney Tunes, and Cartoon Network, an entire television channel devoted to cartoons. *Tom and Jerry* may be one of the most famous productions. This is certainly a work that is generally not viewed as a cultural production reflecting queer theory, and surprisingly, this is true. *Tom and Jerry* does not reflect the normative or critical aspirations of the field, but it does inflect them. This is to say that it uses the ideas and structures of queer theory but not towards progressive ends. I will first justify my choice of *Tom and Jerry* and my ability to subject it to this kind of reading and then drawing upon the performative theories of Judith Butler present a queer analysis of the animated shorts. My central conclusion is *Tom and Jerry*, through ironic detachment, subverts normalized gender and sexuality structures through performance or theatrical play.

Tom and Jerry was the creation of William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, two American animators working at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). Together these animators produced 114 shorts between the years of 1940 and 1958 (“Tom and Jerry’s 75th Anniversary”). *Tom and Jerry* features a cat, Tom, and a mouse, Jerry, who are caught in an endless chase. It always seems that Jerry is able to outwit Tom, and in the process, a massive amount of violence is dealt between the characters. It appears though that they are not able to live without each other. This is evident in their displays of kindness between one another spread throughout the series. This concept of a “cat chases mouse” provided a solid foundation for the creation of hundreds of animated shorts and movies. Production of the animated series was taken up by various animators following the Hanna-Barbera era. This analysis exclusively uses material produced from the show’s original run. I will note that there is room for further analysis of the entire series as a whole and how

themes may have changed throughout its years of production, which stems up until this day.

Queer texts are all around us whether we want to acknowledge this fact or not. Hidden within existing canons of all cultural productions a queer analysis lurks. One could try and dispute the validity of such claim by arguing a queer reading was not within the author's intent, but author's intent and queer reading share no *necessarily* causal, relationship. Teresa de Lauretis articulates this segmentation clearly when addressing her own work stating, "interesting as it might be to speculate on the relation between the queerness of an authorial persona and the queerness of her or his writing – a relation by no means to be taken for granted – it is the latter that concerns me" (de Lauretis 243). The same is true of my endeavor here. The focus is explicitly on the produced cultural material and while there are always creeping authorial presences, I am not concerned with Hanna and Barbera's sexuality nor do I believe that it is even my place to make such a consideration. While this choice may be viewed as a limitation to my analysis, it is a limitation I willingly accept.

Another point of justification for doing a queer reading of *Tom and Jerry* is the methodology or presumptions associated with postmodernism in criticism. Postmodernism and the linguistic turn have been disruptive. New readings challenge and critique existing canons and allow for fields like queer theory to interject into new genres and forms. This notion is summarized best in the introduction of Sedgwick's "Epistemology of the Closet" when she states in her sixth axiom, "The relation of gay studies to debates on the literary canon is, and had best be, tortuous" (Sedgwick 48). My reading of *Tom and Jerry* will hopefully be torturous to the canon and even queer theory. The utilization of postmodern theories to analyze *Tom and Jerry* will reveal new ways in which cultural productions can be subversive while not being progressive. Furthermore, the medium of animation may be unique in what it can yield that other

forms of media cannot. Paul Wells describes the uniqueness of animation stating, “the cartoon operates as a potentially non-regulatory or subversive space by virtue of its very artifice, and the assumed innocence that goes with it” (Harrison et al. 16). The creative potential and process that goes along with the production of an animation may be lacking in other medias. Animation thus opens new avenues of inquiry and investigation. This multiplicity of readings associated with the postmodern stands as one of the strongest justifications for my endeavor.

Tom and Jerry lacks any rigorous literary analysis. The series has been investigated by various scholars in the fields of art, animation, and popular culture, but the kind of academic reading I present here is absent. The most relevant example comes from Elledge’s edited collection *Queers in American Popular Culture* in an essay titled “We’ll Have a Gay Old Time!”: Queer Representation in American Prime-Time Animation from the Cartoon Short to the Family Sitcom” by Jo Johnson. The essay takes a brief but direct look at Jerry’s gender. Regarding past readings of Jerry, Johnson writes, “Jerry’s eyes are enlarged, and the eyelashes exaggerated, adhering to the artistic traditions of animated femininity” (Elledge 249). Johnson begins with a brief review of the aesthetic investigations of Jerry. Most research up to this point has been focused on the actual art and how it projects different gender representations. This critique does not go far enough though and stops short of fully understanding the narratives at work in the series. This is not to suggest that we toss the aesthetic to the side. My reading moves towards the following consideration: “*Tom and Jerry* symbolizes the perpetual conflict between cat and mouse, but also the constant shift in gender boundaries displayed by the varying representation of masculine and feminine signifiers” (Elledge 249). The keyword in this quote is “signifier”. A reading of performativity in an animated production must intersect with any consideration of the aesthetic sphere. Johnson’s essay begins to go down this path with their

description of “gender-bending” in animated productions, but it is incomplete. Paul Wells’ publication *Understanding Animation* represents the other side of the coin. Specifically in regards to *Tom and Jerry*, Wells believes that there is “heterosexual love sustained by Jerry’s occasional feminization” (Elledge 249). Furthermore, Wells writes that there is “a possibility of a homo-erotic sub-text and, indeed, notions of cross-species coupling and the blurring of gender caused by cross-dressing” (Wells 208). Wells pushes even farther into the direction my project seeks to go though, as I will further elaborate, I reject the notion that there can be homoerotic subtext let alone a heterosexual love narrative.

The last item though that setups up my analysis also comes from Wells eloquently stating, “momentary performances which demonstrate that the definition and recognition of gender representation is in flux” (Wells 206). From this quote the following words need to be pulled and examined: momentary, performance, and flux. All the points of transgression I will describe occur in moments. They come together in a single instance to create a successful performance with “flow”. As a viewer, this successful performance, in a reflexive manner, demonstrates itself as performance but does not result in any progressive moral or sentiment. This is the basic analytical framework for the following analysis. The previously described investigations have served as a vital basis for the development of my examination, but they fail in being only concerned with ontological aims. My investigation works through a clearly outlined epistemological framework of performance to dissect and understand the gender performativity in *Tom and Jerry*.

To conduct my analysis, I have combed through a great number of *Tom and Jerry* episodes to select key moments. Central again to my analysis is the notion of the “momentary”. Not only is this construction of my analytical framework but the way the animated short genre

functions within itself is momentary. The original series of *Tom and Jerry* was composed of episodes usually nearing runtimes of only 9 minutes. As a result, there are not scenes to examine; instead, artifacts for analysis are quick moments of action. This is the nature of animation, but it is enhanced by *Tom and Jerry*'s slapstick comedy. The environment that characters are in is one of constant theatrics and performance. They are constantly engaging with different constructions of identity specifically at times with performances of gender. This environment is a space of constant playing of unoriginal ideals, 'a copy of a copy' to use Butler's words. The performances are copies of cultural identities in mass popular culture and heteronormative structures.

This is how the characters act, through copies of identity, cultural images. The characters are in a sense aware of the unoriginality or the performance of gender. They actively use it to subvert victory towards their ends (which is another question in itself). One of the most prominent examples of this consciousness exhibited by the characters is in episode 21 "Flirty Birdy" (1945). The moment transpires as such: Tom is about to eat Jerry inside of a sandwich when it is snatched away by a large, muscular bird. Tom attempts to get him back but is tossed away by the bird. Tom falls into some clothing making him look like an "Indian chieftain" when he stands up. His face is suddenly struck with the expression of a good idea when he notices this. He reappears using the clothing to make himself look like a bird with long lashes, lipstick, walking with a sway and twist, and wearing a gown. This is the performance of an attractive feminine bird. He does this to win over the heart of the masculine bird to steal Jerry back. The key point is Tom's performance is successful. It allows the story to have a "flow" where the other actors accept it. He can trick the Bird into letting his guard down and stealing Jerry. Regarding this situation, let us recall: "momentary performances which demonstrate that the definition and recognition of gender representation is in flux" (Wells 206). While the

performance Tom does is successful and a moment of flow is shared with the other actors, it questions the meaning of what gender is; it puts it into flux for the viewer, the audience. It transgresses the normalized construction of gender. This is probably the most central point to my entire analysis.

I wish to add further samples from the series to support my argument. The first example is fairly exemplar of a purely gender-based situation but there are themes of sexuality which further disrupt the normalized structures. In episode 009 “Sufferin’ Cats” (1942), the moment transpires as such: Jerry is running through the house away from Tom, and in their fighting, Jerry is flung outside through the window. He runs away to the back of the house where he runs into another cat. Suddenly Tom shows up. Jerry being afraid of Tom kisses the other cat in order to win him over to protect himself from Tom. The other cat accepts this and fights Tom. It seems that gender is irrelevant, and it is just such sexual attention that can win these characters over. They pay no mind to the strict heteronormative constructions. Anyone who has read discussion over this will recall the argument favoring the idea Jerry is female. In the blog *The Daily Ping*, an article was published entitled “Gender Analysis of Tom and Jerry”. The author argues that “Jerry was either a lesbian or a male cross-dressing as a female” (The Daily Ping). They describe various reasons why, providing scene examples that demonstrate that Jerry is a girl and their sexual actions demonstrate her heterosexuality. (Or Jerry is a cross-dressing gay man). What this fails to see is how the characters utilize a performative aspect to their entire being. Jerry’s gender cannot be classified because Jerry’s gender strongly transgresses normalized order through their actions. Jerry and Tom both do this via the performative method. Proof of this is in episode 06 “Puss ‘n Toots” (1942). The moment transpires as such: Tom dresses up all nice with his hair wet down and whiskers curled, like a true gentleman. He does this in order to impress the new

cat staying over at his home. She is powdery in her fur color and adorned with vibrant bows. A fight ensues eventually between Tom and Jerry. At the end of the episode, Jerry changes his appearance in the same way that Tom did, copying his performance, to impress the feminine cat. Here we see Jerry dressing up like a masculine figure rejecting any concrete notion of what Jerry's gender is in comparison to examples proving Jerry is female. The whole sense of sexuality and gender are imitated through performance. The acknowledgement of this performance is a postmodern response. The utilization of such resembles Butler's remarks on drag: "Drag constitutes the mundane ways in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies all gendering is a form of impersonation and approximation" (Butler 313). My conclusion in a way is that there is a kind of drag performance being employed by the characters or creators, and this is a crucial aspect to what the characters do. The difference is, while we think of Butler as being critical and pushing for normative ends, a queer imaginary or space was certainly not what the creators probably had in mind. The series is known for having racist and misogynistic characters and themes. These are very problematic and deserve attention. *Tom and Jerry* is not a critical queer project but a queer reading can still occur. (In some ways, my reading may even seek to expand the notion of queerness by treading into the field of performance studies). This conception, because it places the characters' gender and sexuality in a space of transit and all over spectrum imitation, does not allow for a categorization to take place. We cannot describe their sexualities as heterosexual and homosexual or their gender as male and female. Therefore, I reject the statement by Wells describing the sexual subtext of their relationship on the grounds that any such categorization simply cannot be made.

Taking both of these readings into account I hoped to have demonstrated there are clear queer processes taking place in *Tom and Jerry*. This is best demonstrated through the utilization

of performativity by the titular characters to meet their ends. These characters use performance in a way that is characterized by Butler's statements on drag. Furthermore, the ends in themselves are not in service to any "moral good". The ironic detachment that I have previously referred to comes from the fact that, while there seems to be queer processes present in the *Tom and Jerry* series, they do not necessarily work towards progressive aims. In a sense, the series utilizes the logic of postmodernism, but it does not work in service to positive, normative ends. This provides a unique reading of the series, and in some ways, challenges the notion of a queer reading. To end on a more Lacanian note: Individuals desiring for identity, personally and socially, will always fail to meet the idealized version of it; this is a cultural *jouissance*, our current moment's eternal cat chases mouse.

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