The defeat of the nerds: masculine 'redemption' in the millennial romantic hommecom

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The Defeat of the Nerds: Masculine "Redemption" in the Millennial Romantic HommeCom

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The Defeat of the Nerds:
Masculine "Redemption" in the Millennial Romantic Homemecon

By
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................. 1  
Introduction ............................................................................................................. 2  
Chapter 1: A Brief Critical Overview of the American Romantic Comedy Genre ................. 8  
Chapter 2: The Millennial Romantic Homemecom ...................................................... 15  
Chapter 3: Close Reading of *Wedding Crashers* (2005) ........................................ 28  
Chapter 4: Close Reading of *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* (2005) ................................. 51  
Chapter 5: Close Reading of *Knocked Up* (2007) .................................................... 73  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 88  
Works Cited .......................................................................................................... 91  
Appendix ............................................................................................................... 96  
Vita ....................................................................................................................... 106
Abstract

This thesis will examine the filmic conventions and ideological implications of the current reigning mode of the romantic comedy genre: the romantic hommecom (more popularly referred to as “romcoms for boys”). The romantic hommecom essentially centers one or more male characters within a neo-traditional romantic comedy—a mode typically associated with female audiences—infused with elements of the male-centered gross-out or buddy comedy. This current strain of the romantic comedy genre builds on previous generic conventions, but the romantic hommecom is primarily concerned with moving the supposedly immature and irresponsible single male away from his homosocial bonds and/or unconventional lifestyle, and “elevating” him to his proper role in patriarchal society through a monogamous heterosexual relationship. This masculine “redemption,” however, typically comes at the great expense of female subjectivity and is ultimately of questionable value to all parties involved.

My argument then provides close readings of three romantic hommecons—Wedding Crashers (2005), The 40-Year Old Virgin (2005), and Knocked Up (2007)—all of which have been particularly important in working out the generic conventions and defining the ideological anxieties within this contemporary, dominant mode of romantic comedy. My critical position maintains that the millennial romantic hommecom is an anxiety-ridden, conservative response to the increasingly destabilized state of white, heterosexual masculinity. The objective of these films is not to offer progressive resolutions to these issues, but to mystify them, along with their larger social contexts, through the irresistible spectacles of gross-out humor and compulsory “happy endings.”
Introduction

As a child who grew up idolizing Disney princesses, as a teenager shamelessly obsessed with the ill-fated, epic romance that was James Cameron’s *Titanic* (1997), as a disillusioned young woman with a penchant for reciting *Annie Hall* (1977) quotations, and now as an ardent feminist and film scholar struggling to reconcile the nagging guilt that comes with enjoying more than the occasional “chick flick,” I declare my undying love—or shall I say need—for Hollywood romance, especially the romantic comedy. Regardless of their “guilty pleasure” status, when it comes to romantic comedies I essentially feel the same way Linda Williams feels about another “feminized” genre which actually underpins the romantic comedy—melodrama. Williams contends that “the worse thing we can do to melodrama is to condescend to it. The next worst thing we can do is to ignore it” (309). While I do embrace radical feminist critiques on the demeaning, stifling implications that the dominant social construction of heterosexual, romantic love and marriage have traditionally meant for women (and to a different extent, men) in a patriarchal, capitalist society—the same negative implications which naturally work their way into mainstream filmic representations—a part of me admittedly thrives on the implicit egalitarian and transcendent possibilities of romantic love (straight and queer) for women and men, and the cinematic moments when these possibilities are realized, however fleetingly.

My problem is thus not with the idea of monogamous, heterosexual, romantic love, but with the genre’s ideological insistence that heterosexual coupledom is the only meaningful, acceptable, and enjoyable mode of human existence, especially when it is finally contained in state-sanctioned marriage. In addition, the genre often conveys the
disturbing notion that to somehow go without seeking or achieving this effortless, glamorous, and eternal panacea implies failure, unworthiness, and shame. Even in keeping these qualms in mind, however, I have found lovely, at times even socially progressive instances of sincere, mutually transformative and pleasurable romantic relationships in romantic comedies like *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *The Awful Truth* (1937), and *The Apartment* (1960). More recently, however, I have noticed that in the current, dominant mode of the romantic comedy genre—the romantic “hommecom”—romantic, heterosexual love has become much less of a mutually transformative adventure or emotional luxury and more of a forced social obligation.

In the summer of 2007, my long-term relationship with the American “romcom” took a severe blow from which it may never recover. Our rift began the day I went to see Judd Apatow’s hyped up romantic comedy, *Knocked Up*, with one of my endearingly vulgar, lifelong male friends. *Knocked Up* is essentially about a beautiful, successful woman, Alison (Katharine Heigl) who discovers she is pregnant after a one-night stand with Ben (Seth Rogen), an immature, unemployed slob. For some unstated reason, Alison decides to continue with the pregnancy and she and Ben attempt to force a romantic relationship before the baby is born. I can recall laughing hysterically throughout the entire screening with my friend and leaving the theater feeling rather happy and satisfied—I did, for once, get my money’s worth of laughs. Over the next few days, however, I became mentally worn down with gripes over the film’s blatant sexism and alarmingly reactionary impulses. Then, of course, came the feminist guilt. How could I have possibly enjoyed such a repulsive, offensive film? How could I have possibly laughed at the sexist and homophobic humor and smiled at the ending montage of baby-
pictures? How could this possibly be the year 2007 when the word “abortion” cannot be uttered in a film brimming with “f-bombs” and penis jokes, topped off with close-up shots of a baby-crowning? How could a capable woman like Alison possibly settle for a sloppy man-child like Ben? What, exactly, is a slacker-stoner like Ben getting from a mature, uptight woman like Alison? I actually felt a lot like Alison the moment she discovers Ben’s naked, hairy, flabby ass in her bed the morning after their sloppy-drunk one-night stand: dirty, regretful, and wondering why he’s still here.

The genesis of the following critique is rooted in my subsequent efforts to deduce why I had initially enjoyed Knocked Up and to figure out what was happening to the romantic comedy genre I thought that I knew and secretly loved. I realized, along with other film critics such as Tamar Jeffers McDonald and the New Yorker’s David Denby, that Apatow’s Knocked Up was part of a growing trend in the late 1990s and early millennium that has since become the dominant mode of the romantic comedy genre. These films, including Wedding Crashers (2005), The 40 Year-Old Virgin (2005), Superbad (2007), Old School (2003), Hitch (2005), I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry (2007), and Good Luck Chuck (2007) have been popularly dubbed as “romcoms for boys,” but I prefer McDonald’s term, the romantic “hommecom”—with “homme” being French for “man” and “com” as short for comedy. The romantic hommecom essentially infuses elements of the male centered gross-out or buddy comedy with the female-oriented neo-traditional romantic comedy. The two contradictory generic modes, however, never exactly fuse. Instead, they sit uneasily beside one another, as the outrageous humor of the male comedy spaces initially veils, and then gives way to, the conservative governance of the neo-traditional mode. The romantic hommecom’s
primary concern is not with romantic love, sexual fulfillment, or stimulating conversation, but with moving the uncoupled, underachieving male away from his arrested development and homosocial bonds to his proper position in the dominant social order. This process of masculine “redemption” is begrudgingly achieved via a committed heterosexual relationship and all too often at the expense of the female characters—the unfortunate vehicles responsible for this excruciating procedure.

In an effort to first place the millennial romantic hommecom within the context of the American romantic comedy genre, my analysis begins with a brief critical overview of the genre, primarily influenced by McDonald’s thorough critical examination in his book, Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre. McDonald cites the screwball comedy, sex comedy, radical romantic comedy, and neo-traditional romantic comedy as major subgenres that reflected, as well as influenced, their contemporary social and political contexts. While building on these past generic conventions, my overview of the millennial romantic hommecom seeks to expose and critically examine the rampant ideological contradictions and conservative impulses behind its distracting, largely misogynistic and homophobic, gross-out humor.

My analysis is generally organized according to the developing conventions and recurring tropes within the films’ celebrated male comedy space, the female-oriented romantic comedy space that gradually takes control, and then in their uncomfortable interactions and resolutions. The male comedy space, for instance, is characterized by its outrageous humor, promiscuous (hetero)sexuality, juvenile antics, and intense male homosocial bonding. Although the narrative initially revels in the perverse sanctuary of the male comedy space, the male characters must eventually forsake this “irresponsible”
realm in order to take up their proper role in the dominant social order, as represented by the neo-traditional romantic comedy portion. This “feminized” space prefers heterosexual love to sex, and monogamous heterosexual coupledom to the individual or homosocial bonds. It is then the unhappy duty, and sole purpose, of the central heroine to stimulate and supervise the hero’s reluctant trajectory from male infantilism and bachelorhood to responsible adulthood and monogamous, heterosexual coupledom. The results, however, of the heroines’ burdensome labor are often admittedly unsatisfactory and problematic for both parities involved.

Following my critical overview of the romantic hommecom are close readings of three films that have been particularly important in defining the conventions and ideological framework outlined above: *Wedding Crashers* (2005), *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* (2005) and finally, *Knocked Up* (2007). *Wedding Crashers* tells the story of Jeremy (Vince Vaughn) and John (Owen Wilson), two long-time best friends who shamelessly “crash” weddings in order to have one-night stands with women. While they do eventually realize the error of their juvenile ways and get coupled off with a pair of upper-class sisters, the John and Jeremy duo essentially remains the central “couple” in the film. *Wedding Crashers* is thus considered important for its treatment of the male homosocial bond, which the film works out in ways that are both liberal and reactionary. Judd Apatow’s *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* catalogs Andy’s (Steve Carell) redemption from his blissful, solitary state of arrested development and celibacy to his eventual role as husband, father, and entrepreneur. *Virgin* stands as such a crucial film within the current romantic hommecom cycle because it is so explicitly about contemporary crisis in heterosexual masculinity—specifically about the failure of the single adult male to take
up his proper role in the social order. I then conclude with *Knocked Up* as a paragon for the romantic hommecom, as it most literally embodies the trend’s blatant ideological contradictions and narrative conventions, particularly the unhappy quest for masculine redemption at the expense of its heroines.

My argument ultimately contends that as a disenchanted, anxious response to the increasingly destabilized state of white, heterosexual masculinity, the millennial romantic hommecom aims to mystify relevant issues of gender and sexuality through humor and compulsory “happy endings.”
Chapter 1: A Brief Critical Overview of the American Romantic Comedy Genre

Since the romantic comedy genre’s golden age of the 1930s, with the short-lived exception of the radical romantic comedy trend in the 1970s era, the mainstream American “romcom” has essentially followed the same basic plot formula: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back in a compulsory “happy ending.” Although the dominant ideology of romantic love has not undergone any significant changes, hence the immortal salience of the “boy meets girl” formula, Tamar Jeffers McDonald observes that “our tolerance of the uncertainties pertaining to love seem to have done so” (109). As Frank Krutnik notes, romantic comedies must then engage in a complex negotiation between generic conventions and “the shifting priorities and possibilities of intimate culture and...the broader cultural, social and economic spheres that organize its forms and meanings” (16). While the romantic comedy genre has been critically neglected and even degraded because of its obvious lightheartedness and hackneyed formula, as well as its close association with female audiences, Geoff King proposes that these films are thus “particularly effective vehicles for ideology” (as quoted in McDonald, 16) because their ostensible triviality wards off critical interrogations of their implicit ideology.

For instance, the romantic comedy genre routinely presents heterosexual, romantic love as an all-encompassing, all-fulfilling, transcendent force, which then becomes inevitably eternalized in an orchestra-accompanied kiss and an implied or visibly state-sanctioned marriage. While this particular construction offers an appealing fantasy for many people, Virginia Wright Wexman contends that it presents the troubling, ever-growing contradiction “between the concept of romantic love as an intense, all-consuming passion that is by its nature short-lived, and its status in the modern world as
the cornerstone of lifelong, monogamous marriage” (8). Hence, the central couple’s story must end with the spectacle of a white wedding or a long-awaited, romantic reunion, before they actually embark on the comparatively mundane routine (or perhaps drudgery) of married life (McDonald, 13). Actually, the genre’s rejection of a logical, cause-and-effect narrative structure implicitly recognizes the implausible and contradictory nature of this romantic ideology. For instance, in her critical analysis of the genre Kathrina Glitre points out that the romcom’s tendency to employ a “dual focus narrative,” a device which attempts to give the hero and heroine equal positive weight, undermines the cause-and-effect progression because it instead leads to “patterns of simultaneity, repetition, parallelism, and comparison” (15). Furthermore, the romantic comedy’s signature use of the predictable “happy ending,” where the couple, no matter how hopelessly mismatched and antagonistic, is finally united, is often clearly “determined by generic convention, rather than narrative logic” (Glitre, 16). While Brian Henderson prematurely declared the death of the genre in his 1978 article, “Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?,” because of the era’s seemingly irrevocable social changes, such as soaring divorce rates, the rise of the single parent, and the political and social impact of feminist and gay rights movements, the genre has, for better or worse, enjoyed a revitalization in recent decades while still precariously clinging to its ostensibly antiquated ideology.

In fact, it can be asserted with confidence that no mainstream American romcom has successfully demonstrated that “monogamous coupledom is an outmoded concept” (McDonald, 13). While monogamous coupledom is indeed a challenged, but by no means an “outmoded” concept in contemporary culture, the genre has consistently demonstrated a tenacious inability, or blatant refusal, to endorse any alternative modes of
human connection and individual fulfillment. The popular screwball comedy subgenre of the 1930s and early 1940s, for instance, has been credited for embracing the period's social upheaval as an opportunity to critically explore and reinvent romantic relationships, and yet these films essentially served to "validate marriage at a time when the institution was threatened" (Rowe, 125). As a response to soaring divorce rates and the Depression's disturbance of traditional gender roles, the screwball attempted to rework the heterosexual couple by matching the hero and heroine in wit, capability, playfulness and desire, and thus proposed that, with the right partner/playmate, marriage could also be a fun, enjoyable, and perhaps even an egalitarian, enterprise. Prior to the endearingly antagonistic screwball couple's final union, however, these films, particularly those which Stanley Cavell deems "comedies of remarriage," would often associate marriage with misery, entrapment, and boredom for both men and women. For instance, in *The Awful Truth* (1937), Jerry (Cary Grant) and Lucy (Irene Dunne) become dissatisfied with their marriage and call upon their unhappily married, "henpecked" lawyer to assist with their divorce proceedings. Through their continued, increasingly playful, interactions during Jerry's court ordered visitations for their pet dog, as well as through their individual engagements to "wrong" partners, Jerry and Lucy learn to play together, rediscover their desire for one another, and decide to renew and re-consummate their marriage during the film's final frames.

Beneath the genre's charming niceties and endearing lovers' spats, however, McDonald notes that "at the heart of every romantic comedy is the implication of sex, and settled, secure, within-a-relationship sex at that" (13). Similar to the screwball, the sex comedy subgenre of the 1950s also emphasized mutual sexual desire and satisfaction
for its central couple, as long as this sexuality was confined in a marriage-track relationship. By restricting sexuality to secured heterosexual relationships, the sex comedy sought to resolve its limited, gendered view of heterosexuality that placed men and women in a perpetual, sexual struggle. While the screwball films attempted to equalize the expressed sexual desire of men and women (and in some cases, as in *The Lady Eve* [1941], even give the heroine the higher ground), the sex comedy essentially read women as uptight prudes who were holding out until marriage and men as virile playboys overeager for sex before or without marriage. Sex comedies such as *Pillow Talk* (1959) and *Lover Come Back* (1961) acknowledged (but not necessarily approved of) the idea that women could have successful careers and postpone marriage and motherhood. Similarly, the male characters could subscribe to the plush bachelor lifestyle popularized by *Playboy* magazine instead of retreating to the rugged wilderness or fulfilling the traditional roles of breadwinner, husband, and father. However, these films’ insistence on monogamous coupledom and its narrow understanding of heterosexuality often curtailed the liberal potential of these new lifestyle options.

The short-lived radical romantic comedy trend during the socially turbulent 1970s era, however, dared to embrace more unconventional modes of sexuality, shifting gender roles, and even the possibility of an open, or perhaps melancholy, ending for the central couple’s story. While the radical romcom is not exactly “radical” in the true sense of the term (i.e. something that is explicitly set against the dominant ideological system), it is, as McDonald notes, ultimately characterized by a distinct “self-reflexivity” in matters of sex, gender, romance, and its place as a film text within the romantic comedy genre (67). McDonald goes on to say that “as romantic comedies, they want to bring about the happy
union of a woman and a man; as modern films, they have to show themselves to be beyond the naivety that such uncomplicated couplings rely on” (69). Indeed, in Woody Allen’s quintessential radical romcom *Annie Hall* (1977), Alvy (Allen) and Annie (Diane Keaton) each experience multiple sexual and romantic partners, their own moments of personal growth, and highs and lows in their relationship with one another. Although they ultimately end up as friendly acquaintances rather than lovers, the film’s closing montage of their past, happier moments, the final lingering shot of the empty street where they part ways, and Annie’s haunting rendition of “Seems Like Old Times,” evokes an unmistakable nostalgia and yearning for the mystical romance and happy ending it wants to disavow. While radical romcoms like *Annie Hall* and *The Graduate* (1967) may frankly grapple and experiment with issues of gender, sex, and romance, they do not fully embrace the era’s progressive social change when it comes to romantic love—instead they seem to mourn the ostensible loss of such classically romantic, “happily-ever-afters.”

In his widely cited 1978 article, Henderson declared that sexual advances such as the birth control pill, the rapidly increasing acceptance of premarital sex and cohabitation, as well as loosened censorship regulations, would render the romantic comedy obsolete precisely because the genre’s existence depended upon the central couple’s postponement of sex until the final frames. Interestingly enough, however, as popular perceptions of gender roles, sexuality, marriage, and the family become increasingly destabilized, the genre’s romantic fantasy of everlasting, all encompassing love becomes less attainable but perhaps more desirable precisely for its seeming effortlessness and miraculous results—apparently many of us still do, as Alvy Singer’s final poignant lines of *Annie*...
According to McDonald, since the 1980s, the "neo-traditional" romantic comedy has emerged as the dominant mode of the genre. Born out of the New Right era and its reassertion of religious and family values, the neo-traditional romantic comedy is characterized by its re-emphasis on the "boy meets girl" cliché, compulsory heterosexuality, and the notion that the united couple's story will end once they officially wed or commit to a lasting, monogamous relationship (McDonald, 86).

As the successor of radical romantic comedies, which were ultimately characterized by an open self-reflexivity, the neo-traditional romantic comedy keeps the realist social mise-en-scene of these radical films, but it rarely faces up to "the actual problems of forming a lasting relationship in contemporary society" (McDonald, 86). In contrast to the radical era, open-endings have become unacceptable and frightening for the neo-traditional romcom. Furthermore, the wedding has become a frequent narrative spectacle and selling point (i.e. Wedding Crashers [2005], Wedding Planner [2001], American Wedding [2003], The Wedding Date [2005], My Big Fat Greek Wedding [2002]), and sex is represented as meaningful and truly enjoyable only within a committed relationship. While these films cannot afford to appear wholly naïve to shifting cultural practices, changing gender roles and contemporary attitudes towards sex and romance, they offer mere lip service to concerns like the inevitability of romantic disappointments, the fluidity of sexuality, and the dismal state of marriage, "only to confound them with the perfect romance it then produces for its [increasingly

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1 Alvy recalls an old joke about a man who tells a psychiatrist that his crazy brother thinks that he is a chicken. The psychiatrist asks why he does not turn his brother in and the man replies, "I would, but I need the eggs." Alvy then says that this is essentially how he feels about romantic relationships, "they're totally irrational, and crazy, and absurd," but we keep going through them because "most of us need the eggs."
incompatible] protagonists" (McDonald, 86). The inherent male anxiety over the threatened, patriarchal conventions of romance, sex, marriage and family within this current neo-conservative political climate has become especially evident in the millennial, male-centered, neo-traditional romantic comedy—also known as “romcoms for boys,” or “hommecom,” as McDonald refers to them.²

² As a more succinct term for “romcoms for boys,” the term “hommecom” combines the French term “homme,” meaning “man” with “com” as short for “comedy.”
Chapter 2: The Millennial Romantic Hommemcom

Although the romantic comedy is usually female-centered (with the exception the radical romantic comedy trend), as women have traditionally been defined primarily by their relationships with men, McDonald notes that the genre’s “myth of perfect love appeals to both sexes” and that the romantic comedy consistently “demonstrates that both women and men have to change and adapt to deserve love” (17). Dubbed by New Yorker critic, Anthony Lane, as “the taming of the Shrek,” (88) the millennial romantic hommemcom builds on the previous genre trends but is ultimately less concerned with the enchanting romance, mutual transformations and/or sexual satisfaction, and even the political inquisition that characterized earlier trends, than it is with moving the supposedly immature, irresponsible single male away from his homosocial bonds or unconventional individual lifestyle, and “elevating” him to his proper role in patriarchal society via a committed heterosexual relationship and/or fatherhood.

For instance, in the late 1990s, popular films like As Good As it Gets (1997) and Big Daddy (1999) embraced this concept of masculine redemption via romance and responsibility. Big Daddy, for example, demonstrates the redemption of a perfectly content, lazy, man-child (Adam Sandler) who is thrust into fatherhood and a committed relationship with an accomplished female lawyer, and who also becomes a successful lawyer himself by the end of the film. This male-centered trend continued to build momentum in the millennium with the animated hit Shrek (2001), which softened a grumpy, self-isolated ogre with the love of a princess. There were also lower profile comedies like The Tao of Steve (2000) and About a Boy (2002), the latter which features Hugh Grant as a freeloading, egotistical playboy turned surrogate father and devoted
boyfriend. The comedic elements of this narrative grew increasingly raunchy with more recent productions like *Old School* (2003) and *Anchorman* (2004), both starring Will Ferrell as an irresponsible goof and the latter produced by the current reigning king of the romantic hommecom, Judd Apatow.

In the summer of 2005, Apatow co-wrote and directed *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*, which dragged the virgin “geek,” Andy (Steve Carell), away from his happy world of action figures and videogames into marriage and surrogate fatherhood, then sex, and entrepreneurship. Andy’s promiscuous, often blatantly misogynistic, male buddies also repudiate their juvenile behavior and are officially coupled by the end of the film. Also in the summer of 2005, the widely popular *Wedding Crashers* starred Vince Vaughn and Owen Wilson as two childish best friends and divorce mediators who shamelessly crash weddings in order to get laid with no strings attached, only to realize the error of their immature ways and to be officially paired off with beautiful debutantes. As a follow up to *Virgin*, in the summer of 2007 Apatow delivered *Knocked Up*, starring the recurring hommecom actor, Seth Rogen, as Ben—a lazy, carefree stoner who “knocks up” the beautiful and successful Alison (Katherine Heigl) and is forced to “grow up” and become a suitable partner, provider, and father. Apatow then kept the romantic hommecom momentum going with *Superbad* (2007), a tale of two best friends and perhaps would-be male lovers, Seth (Jonah Hill) and Evan (Michael Cera), on a doomed mission to get drunk and have sex with girls before they go off to separate colleges.

In what seems to be emerging as the dominant mode of the dwindling romantic comedy genre, these romcoms for boys essentially center one or more male characters within a neo-traditional romantic comedy—a mode typically associated with female
audiences—infused with elements of the male oriented teen gross-out comedy or buddy film. Much like the central heterosexual couples in these films, however, this arranged marriage of gendered generic trends seems forced and lacking in any meaningful connection or chemistry. These films function more as binary narratives with begrudging, albeit critically interesting, interactions that often work out in contradictory, illogical, and at times, reactionary ways. Since the primary goal of the romantic hommecom is to remove male characters from their nonconformist lifestyle and “uplift” them to their proper place within mainstream society, the neo-traditional romantic comedy space often ends up defeating and rejecting rather than absorbing the sex-obsessed, and in certain ways, more liberal male comedy space. Interestingly enough, however, because the nearly thirty-year old, neo-traditional mode of romantic comedy has grown ideologically musty and thematically redundant in the face of increasingly jaded audiences, it is precisely the fresh shock value of the male-centered comedy elements that is most heavily publicized and popular with mainstream audiences and critics (mainstream reception does of course have a tendency to foreground male-oriented productions as opposed to so-called “chick flicks”). 

While McDonald notes that the male gross-out comedy’s “accent on physical urges and bodily emissions seems currently to offer the best opportunity for a departure from the sterility affecting the dominant generic form,” (111) I feel that this opportunity for departure has yet to be fully realized in the millennial romantic hommecom. Rather than departing from the dominant, neo-traditional mode of the genre, the films’ outrageous humor, captivating leads, and moments of social disarray often merely serve to veil their more conservative impulses towards relevant cultural anxieties—particularly
those regarding the contemporary flux of white, heterosexual masculinity. While these millennial romcoms for boys are presently unable and/or unwilling to deliver anything truly progressive, I believe the ideological anxiety, and progressive potential, teeming beneath the hairy beer guts, the blank, giggly heroines, the overwhelmingly misogynistic and homophobic humor, and the white-wedding resolutions deserves serious critical analysis.

Romantic hommecomms have already developed conventions and recurring tropes within their male comedy and romantic comedy portions, as well as in their uneasy interactions and resolutions. For instance, these films typically begin by first reveling within an eccentric, yet captivating, male comedy space—a space inhabited by a somehow (extra)ordinary male or male pack (i.e. a forty year old virgin) and characterized by its unapologetic indulgence in outrageous humor, degeneracy, male infantilism, and intense male homosocial bonding which critics sometimes refer to as “bromance.” Unlike most of their preceding screwball, sex comedy, and neo-traditional romcom heroes, the male inhabitants of this quirky, carefree space are not conventionally attractive, suave, ambitious, or notably wealthy. Nor are they especially intelligent, or culturally and politically aware like their radical romcom predecessors. Instead, they are more likely to be described, both intertextually and extratextually, as politically devoid, awkward, vulgar, juvenile, pudgy, geeks, schlubs and losers—albeit “with heart.” However, within the confines of male comedy spaces, and to a lesser extent, within the

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3 The term “bromance” is a combination of “brother” and “romance” and describes the intense admiration and connection one straight male has for another. The term essentially functions as a way to separate the “good” or desirable homosocial from the “bad” or undesirable homosexual.
films' comparatively square romantic comedy spaces, these quirky hommecom heroes tend to embrace their “Jew-fros,” “man-boobs,” voluntary infantilism, and other so-called flaws with touches of pride and/or self-deprecating humor—for, according to Richard Dyer, “humor can touch on male fears about the inability to live up to what penises claim for them” (33).

It is perhaps the combination of this sustained infantilism and masculine insecurity that allows hommecom heroes to occasionally ridicule or repudiate overt displays of conventional machismo, form more openly compassionate homosocial bonds, and at times seem like kinder, gentler options for prospective female partners—hence the recurring “with heart” afterthought tag from mainstream viewers and critics. Furthermore, while romantic comedy spaces require the hommecom heroes to abandon the perverse sanctuary of the male comedy and engage in some sort of conventional, heterosexual self-improvement, they are miraculously “rewarded,” either despite of or because of their quirks, with the committed affections of conventionally beautiful, successful, and mature hommecom heroines, who seem all too complicit in reducing themselves to empty shells for the ambiguous purposes of masculine redemption. What is even worse, the fruits of their sacrificial labor to “rescue” these men from their seemingly blissful states of arrested development and homosocial bonds are, at best, of ambiguous value to both the woman and the man.

These free-flowing male comedy spaces essentially function as an asylum against the entrapment and domesticated civilization traditionally represented by women, but ultimately imposed by patriarchal American capitalism, for masculinity—even in its more non-conventional modes—has meant freedom (Ehrenrich, 286). As David Greven
notes, boyhood in particular “remains a period of romantic idealization in American culture” (15). In Greven’s examination of contemporary, American teen comedies and its new modes of masculinity, he contends that male friendship serves as a social model “underpinned by the demands of two key compulsory aspects of American manhood: the successful pursuit of marriage, a metonym for heterosexual relations, home, family, and work, and the successful formation of same-sex ties in the homosocial sphere” (15).

Although these somehow lovable schlubs receive romantic attention from women normally considered “out of their league,” there is often sufficient evidence (i.e. the ad infinitum penis jokes) to suggest that these “boys just want each other” (Denby, 59).

Indeed, as TIME critic Belinda Lubscombe casually observes, “[i]t’s notable that while there’s a black hole where romantic [heterosexual] love used to be, man love is all around. . .this is the kind of sacrificial, I’ll-do-anything-for-you-love that we associated with young [heterosexual] lovers” (67). Lubscombe’s fellow TIME critic, Richard Corliss, takes this observation even further, and asks, particularly to hommecom kings Judd Apatow and Seth Rogen, why they cannot just “do the honorable thing and tell the world they’re gay,” adding that “it would save them a lot of time wasted pretending their movies are about young men growing up and finding the right young woman. . .and save movie critics from having to find new ways of saying, about their maxi-raunch comedies, ‘oh, but at heart they’re really sweet’” (1). While Corliss’s suggestion may offer a practical, even progressive, solution to the romantic hommecom’s troubling contradictions, this almost exclusively white “man love” is currently unable to flourish within the policed confines of the mainstream romantic hommecom.
In his article “Post-Closet Television,” Ron Becker attributes the recent television bromance phenomenon, or rather “queer straight masculinity,” to the increased visibility of openly gay characters in a “post-closet” cultural climate. While Becker works primarily within a television context, I find his argument applicable to the romantic hommecom film:

If normative masculinity has long been haunted by the specter of the gay other [disciplined by the always closet-able nature of homosexuality], then the belief that the closet is gone might “liberate” straight masculinity in certain ways. By way of a comforting slippage, the naïve belief that gay men can be out becomes the reassuring assumption that they are out. In this way, the banal ubiquity of television’s openly gay guys supports the illusion of a post-closet world where all men who are gay are out, and any man who isn’t out is obviously [and securely] straight—otherwise they’d be out.

While it is often true that these male, homosocial bonds constitute the most intense and heartfelt relationships in the current cycle of romantic hommecons and temporarily provide alternative, “queer” spaces for men within this especially tenacious romantic comedy genre, Greven adds that these same sex intimacies, “are always informed—i.e. curtailed—by the threat of homosexual ardor or eroticism” (15). Although the hommecom’s process of masculine redemption is largely contingent upon disintegrating or weakening the male homosocial bonds with the assumption of heterosexual marriage and/or fatherhood, it is done so with a significant, melodramatic twinge of “if only” regret. For example, during the final scene in Apatow’s Superbad (2007), best friends Evan and Seth regretfully gaze at one another as their respective girlfriends lead them off in separate directions. The romantic hommecom thus engages in problematic negotiations between normative modes of masculinity, male identification, and homoerotic desire, often suppressing the implicit threat of homoeroticism through homophobic humor, the
degradation of gay characters and the homosexual experience, the bawdy obsession with heterosexual sex, and forced heterosexual coupleings.

In accordance with the romantic hommecom's inherent contradictions, "the homosocial in these films militates against, yet also relentlessly strives towards the procurement of boy-girl sex" (Greven, 16). From a conventional standpoint, it makes sense that as a corollary to the romantic comedy's shift towards a male center these films have downplayed the more syrupy, "feminine," romantic elements of the genre and re-emphasized sex—but not necessarily mutual sexual fulfillment. For instance, the romantic hommecom initially celebrates rapturous, promiscuous sexuality and the importance of sexual fulfillment (usually for both men and women), and much of the films' humor and positive critical responses are derived from these outrageous portrayals of (hetero)sexuality. Greven, however, rightly notes that male-centered comedies often "incorporate as much sexual perversity and transgression [into these male spaces] in order to make their ultimate evacuation of the perversities and transgressions total" (21).

Indeed, as the romantic hommecom's heady male comedy romp gives way to the neo-traditional mode, sex becomes distinguished as something immature and "not a lot like love," (McDonald, 98) which is mature, moral, and supposed to be more satisfying than unbridled sex. Thus, the films' initial, more liberated approach towards heterosexuality is often disavowed by the final frames (at least for the central characters) and replaced with monogamous, coupled sex—or in some cases, as in Knocked Up, sex is simply rendered irrelevant.

Furthermore, just as homophobic humor and behavior is often used to repudiate accusations of same-sex desire while preserving straight male intimacy and masculinity,
the hommecom hero often engages in misogynistic humor and behavior to remove the threat of intimacy with a woman—i.e. engulfment—from their heterosexual interactions, thus reducing the woman’s subjectivity in the process. (Lyman, 156). This anxiety-ridden, misogynistic streak is especially evident in the films’ treatment of aggressive, sexually demanding women who not only intimidate but also repulse the hommecom heroes with their “excessive” desires and are always relegated to either secondary, or inconsequential roles within the narrative. Thus, in the romantic hommecom’s vigilant efforts to preserve the male homosocial bonds and masculine freedom within the “overpowering,” romantic comedy spaces, I would agree with Greven that “[w]hite male friendship becomes a self-contained realm, ruthlessly policing the intrusion of any foreign element, racial, or sexual” (16) and exacerbating relevant issues of gender, sexual, and racial difference. And yet, these divisive efforts essentially prove futile once the film pivots into the neo-traditional romantic comedy territory, as the heroes must ultimately (at least superficially) succumb to their conventional, adult male responsibilities via the transformative power of the “right” woman’s love.

It is unsurprising then, that even the so-called “right” women in the romantic hommecom receive negligible, and at times downright bitter, narrative treatment—they are, as Greven astutely summarizes, “symbolically powerful and narratively powerless” (19). For instance, as neo-traditional romantic comedies, these films must at least acknowledge certain social changes that have been absorbed into the dominant hegemony. Hence, the “postfeminist” romantic hommecom heroine is permitted to be

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4 Postfeminism is a highly contentious term. For my argument, I adopt Pamela Aronson’s interpretation of the term, as the “simultaneous incorporation, revision, and
self-assured and self-sustaining. As the films' “right woman,” she is mature, conventionally attractive, motivated and accomplished in her career, interested in sex but not explicitly insistent on her sexual fulfillment because if she were, she would be relegated to secondary or “wrong woman” character status within the romantic hommecom context. Furthermore, unlike her sassy, quick-witted screwball predecessors, the central hommecom heroine is comparatively bland, blank, and muted. On the other hand, the secondary female characters, such as Debbie, the sharp-tongued sister in Knocked Up, or Gloria, the sexually adventurous sister in Wedding Crashers, have considerably more spunk. The central heroine also has an inexplicable, saintly tolerance for these ostensibly unworthy hommecom schlubs and swindlers, as she dutifully accepts the unhappy task of “uplifting” these reluctant boys into mainstream, adult heterosexual manhood. In short, she is meant to laugh with the underachieving hero and at his jokes, not make her own, just as she is meant to guide the hero through his epiphanies and not experience her own. Indeed, as Mark Rubinfield concludes in his examination of the American romantic comedy genre, “the love that heals men often hinders women” (152).

In addition to being deprived of personal growth and meaningful subjectivity, as well as bearing the burden of masculine “redemption,” the hommecom heroine is also deprived of the sanctuary of intimate homosocial bonds. Unlike the tightly knit male pack, relationships between women (especially mothers and daughters) in the romantic hommecom are rare, short-lived, and more likely characterized by antagonism and indifference rather than love and admiration. While the romantic hommecom may

‘depoliticization’ of feminism [which] indicates that worldviews include more feminist principles while being less explicitly feminist” (906).
ultimately deem male homosocial bonding as immature, albeit fun and precious, it
denounces the traditional perception of close female bonding as a serious threat to the
dominant patriarchal order and as something that must be eradicated. This eradication of
the female bond is most vividly illustrated in *Knocked Up*, when Ben kicks Alison’s
sister Debbie out of the delivery room and the narrative has Alison move out of Debbie’s
house and into Ben’s apartment. At a most basic level, this male fear is rooted in the idea
that close female bonds, particularly those involving both identification and desire, render
men useless—sexually and otherwise. Within the context of the romantic hommecom,
however, I believe there is ample evidence, without the impeding threat of close female
bonding, to suggest that these men are already rather useless to independent women—and
they would prefer it that way.

The men, of course, initially revel in their voluntary “uselessness” because it
offers a refuge from the domesticated civilizing process represented by the hommecom
heroine, but they adopt more self conscious, anxious responses to their seemingly
pathetic shortcomings as well as misogynistic streaks once they (either accidentally or
unwillingly) venture into the neo-traditional romcom territory. As expected, much of the
humor in these films is derived from the male’s awkward, at times even excruciating,
adjustment from their male comedy comfort zones of bongs, porn, action-figures and
bromance to the intimidating “feminine” realm of marriage, love-making, parenthood,
work, and personal hygiene—although not necessarily in that order. However, this is
also the space where the melodramatic underpinnings of the romantic comedy emerge.
More specifically, this is where the boy snaps under the pressure of his redemption
proceedings and temporarily loses the girl, and/or this is where the one boy may lose the other boy(s) for good, as he acquiesces to the demands of “true love.”

As the male and female leads in the current wave of romantic comedies become increasingly unlikely, mismatched, and jaded, romantic hommecoms must resort to generic conventions rather than politically and culturally informed logic to justify the couple’s union. While the levels of plausibility vary from film to film, the ever-mystical force of true love, as embodied within the vacant hommecom heroine, is offered as the only diegetic explanation for these heterosexual couplings, and thus, for the hommecom hero’s epiphanies of self-improvement. Although certain elements of these male epiphanies are commendable, particularly the repudiation of misogynistic language and behavior, the romantic hommecom all too often equates redemption with state-sanctioned marriage, a “prize” which cannot possibly justify the narratives’ significant downgrading and burdening of the hommecom heroine.

While so much of the romantic hommecom is structured around gender difference, Diane Negra points out that current media trends, such as the romantic hommecom, practice a “perverse spirit of gender egalitarianism” (Negra in “Where the Boys Are”) when it comes to the uncoupled adult male. Indeed, within the specific context of the romantic hommecom, men are placed in a similar “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situation so unfortunately familiar to the female heroines of romantic comedy and melodrama. Unsurprisingly, this twisted attempt at “democratic” gender relations does not garner empathy and understanding between the characters, but only intensifies existing mutual resentments and stifles any real progress. While the romantic hommecom may address issues of romance, sexuality, and gender, it does not
endorse any revelatory resolutions for such persistent struggles around these topics or provide feasible alternatives to the romantic comedy genre’s narrow, unyielding status quo. Hence, I maintain that the millennial romantic hommecom is an anxiety-ridden, conservative response to the increasingly destabilized state of white, patriarchal masculinity and the related crises in heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family. The objective of these films is not to offer progressive resolutions to these issues, but to mystify them, along with their larger social contexts, through the irresistible spectacles of gross-out humor and compulsory “happily-ever-afters”.

Three romantic hommecons in particular—The Wedding Crashers (2005), The 40 Year-Old Virgin (2005), and Knocked Up (2007)—have been particularly important in working out the generic conventions and defining the ideological anxieties outlined above. What follows are close readings of these films (all of which received considerable box office success and attention from mainstream critics) that attempt to reveal and critically examine the contradictions, ambiguities, and social panic found within the most important type of contemporary romantic comedy—the romantic hommecom.
Wedding Crashers, directed by David Dobkin, was released in July, 2005 and according the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com), went on to become one of the top grossing films of the year. The film is set in Washington D.C. and features Jeremy (Vince Vaughn) and John (Owen Wilson), two long time best friends and divorce mediators who shamelessly, albeit quite skillfully, “crash” upscale weddings in order to have one night stands with an unexplained surplus of naïve female guests, who are apparently so sexually aroused by the idea of marriage they throw “all inhibitions to the wind.” During “wedding season,” Jeremy and John alter their personas and subscribe to a wedding crashing doctrine established by the “innovator,” Chazz (Will Ferrell)—a forty-something year old man who lives with his mother and seduces grieving women at funerals. These rigid rules ultimately value loyalty and commitment to the fellow crasher and are designed to preserve this carefree, “irresponsible” lifestyle of perpetual bachelorhood, rapturous heterosexual sex, and boyish camaraderie. However, when Jeremy and John manage to crash a high-profile society wedding, where the bride happens to be the daughter of a powerful politician, Secretary William Cleary (Christopher Walken), major rules are broken as John falls in love with the Secretary’s other daughter, Claire (Rachael McAdams), who is practically engaged to the hyper-macho Sac (Bradley Cooper).

While John continues his pursuit of Claire at the dysfunctional Cleary estate, Jeremy is eager to escape the clutches of Claire’s sister Gloria (Isla Fisher), an aggressively sexual and possessive “stage-five virgin clinger,” as well as the unwanted affections of Todd (Keir O’Donnell), Cleary’s eccentric, gay son. Naturally, Jeremy
becomes increasingly frustrated with John and his total disrespect for the sacred rules. When Sac discovers John and Jeremy’s true identities and wedding crashing agenda, the two are violently ejected from the estate. John becomes severely depressed after losing Claire and discovering that Jeremy and Gloria have secretly continued their sexcapades and plan to wed. He tries to replace wedding crashing with Jeremy with funeral crashing with Chazz, only to realize the error of his irresponsible, juvenile ways and the value of his friendship with Jeremy. During Jeremy and Gloria’s wedding ceremony, the boys reconcile, John professes his love for Claire and she accepts, Jeremy punches Sac, and the two couples drive off together to crash another wedding—except this time there will be no promiscuous sex involved, as John and Jeremy have “grown up” and, at least superficially, subscribed to heterosexual monogamy.

*Wedding Crashers* was not only the most lucrative of all the millennial romantic hommecomings, but critics tend to credit the film with launching—and setting the standard for—the romantic hommecom’s appealing combination of the male-centered buddy or teen comedy, with its raunchy humor and bare-breast obsession, and the romantic comedy’s (or chick-flick’s) charm and sentiment. More specifically, *Wedding Crashers* launched the general romantic hommecom pattern of reveling in the strange, carefree silliness and raunch of the male buddy comedy spaces, and then repudiating these spaces as immature, irresponsible, and undesirable within the romantic comedy space. Although critics overwhelmingly preferred the male comedy elements to the more “femininized” and conventional romcom plot shift, I think the film as a whole uses the two modes in interesting ways that are both reactionary and liberal in terms of gender, sexuality, and relationships—most significantly in its use of Jeremy and John as the central couple in
both the male comedy and romantic comedy spaces. For in true “bromantic” fashion, *Wedding Crashers* has the “boy-meets-loses-wins-back-girl” formula accompanied, and arguably overshadowed by, the “boys-have-lose-regain-each-other” formula.

While the film ends on a conventional note of marriage, it opens with Jeremy and John mediating a particularly nasty, and totally gender stereotyped, divorce case between a philandering husband and a pill-popping wife, who apparently would not “express herself sexually” in the marriage. Interestingly enough, the only way John and Jeremy can get this ex-couple to quit arguing and proceed with the divorce is to conjure up memories from their wedding reception. When the tension eases, Jeremy then confidently pronounces that the “real enemy here is the institution of marriage—it’s not realistic, it’s *crazy*” and suggests that his clients go get some “strange ass” and enjoy their liberation. These lines capture the essence of the first half hour or so of the film, which revels in this strange, male space of the Jeremy and John duo, characterized by their strong, boyish homosocial (and quite possibly homoerotic) bond, elaborate masquerade performances, anti-marriage/monogamy dogma, and unapologetically promiscuous heterosexuality.

After the film cuts away from the divorce hearing, Jeremy’s female secretary delivers the sleeping bag he requested for John’s annual birthday sleepover. While she initially dismisses the prolonged continuation of this seemingly juvenile tradition as “creepy,” she revokes her comment once Jeremy explains that John’s parents died in a car crash a month before his seventeenth birthday and ever since then, he has never let John spend another birthday night alone. She then calls Jeremy “sweet” and offers to set him up on a date with a female friend, but he rejects her offer with a rapid tirade on the awkward uselessness of dating, leaving her tongue-tied and stunned—a typical response
for a woman in the millennial romantic hommecom, as the sharp-tongued, quick-witted women of the screwball era have become absent or are significantly downplayed in these romcoms for boys. Furthermore, critics such as David Denby have observed that hommecom hero Vince Vaughn in particular has consistently displayed “a dazzling motormouth velocity, but he has never worked with an actress who can keep up with him” (59). Judging by his motor-mouthed rant, Jeremy clearly has much more interest in sleeping over at John’s than finding a steady girlfriend, and while the idea of two adult males having birthday sleepovers is not exactly “creepy,” the tradition exemplifies their problematic, albeit humorous, arrested development and the intimate nature of the sleepover itself creates an underlying homoerotic vibe within their unusually close friendship. Regrettably, Wedding Crashers never shows the John and Jeremy sleepover, but a more recent romantic hommecom and bromance, Judd Apatow’s Superbad (2007), has best friends Evan (Michael Cera) and Seth (Jonah Hill) profess their love for each other, cuddle close together in a warm embrace, and lovingly tap one another on the nose during a sleepover. The film, of course, attempts to neutralize the homoerotic potential embedded within this sleepover scene (and throughout the entire film) through humor and, most emphatically, by coupling the boys off at the end with girlfriends. The film then has these heterosexual couples head in different directions before sending the boys off to separate colleges.

With their employment of playful masquerade, charming lovers’ spats, and arguably mutual growth, John and Jeremy can be read as a millennial re-invention of the screwball couple. Although their homosocial bond eventually becomes problematic within the neo-traditional romcom territory, the more sensitive, gentler type of
masculinity exemplified in their relationship is held up against more traditional displays of machismo. For instance, John and Jeremy actually use male homosocial bonding as a way to crash weddings without arousing suspicion and to attract women. During the film's wedding crashing montage (perhaps the most popular and memorable sequence in the entire film) and in isolated moments throughout the rest of the film, John and Jeremy are seen enthusiastically hugging, caressing, or even kissing (older) male guests as a phony gesture of friendship and kinship. They also wear fake Purple Heart medals, which here becomes a symbol of male homosocial experience, in order to have other men buy them drinks at the bar. In addition, they are frequently shown engaged in hysterical, friendly laughter with other male guests, but even amid all of this collective merriment, their most sincere laughter and affectionate gazes are reserved for one another.

The female guests—who are all supposedly intoxicated by the idea of marriage as well as by the free champagne—seem instantly and hopelessly attracted to John and Jeremy's displays of sensitive masculinity. In addition to dancing with flower girls and grandmas, entertaining children, and sporting artificial tears during the nuptials, John and Jeremy divulge painful stories about some male homosocial bonding experience (i.e. war, mountain climbing) that always end with the death of "a lot of good men." The women, of course, are instantly aroused by their sad, brave tales of brotherhood and visible displays of vulnerability. In contrast to their masquerade as sensitive, pitiful "pussies," however, the film soon moves into an exciting montage of masculine, heterosexual conquést.

Set to the prolonged crescendo in the quintessential wedding reception song, "Shout," the montage features clips of John and Jeremy predatorily mounting a series of
topless, passive women, cut with ecstatic dance-floor scenes from various wedding receptions, where John and Jeremy wave around, and even drink directly from, obviously phallic and sexualized, bursting champagne bottles. Male critics consistently praised the montage for its unapologetically “R-rated” quality and at least one female critic, Lisa Schwarzbaum from *Entertainment Weekly*, admittedly enjoyed the “boobs flashed in good fun...without concern for children or politicians or morals police” (52)—she might have also added “and without respect for women.” After the montage reaches its climax, the film cuts to John in bed with a duped female wedding guest, but he is unable to perform sexually and appears rather melancholic. In a distant, morose tone, he calls the woman by the wrong name and blames his temporary impotence on the fact that he does not even “know” her. John does, however, “know” Jeremy and their buddy sleepovers are quite possibly far more intimate and perhaps even more enjoyable affairs than their “sleepovers” with random women—an activity which seems to function more as a way to ward off homosexual feelings in the characters and accusations of homoeroticism in the narrative than anything else. Furthermore, while John and Jeremy have to feign sensitivity and compassion with women, their affection for and commitment to one another is genuine and officially protected by the wedding crashing doctrine: “rule number one: never leave a fellow crasher behind.”

In the next scene, which moves the male comedy into the neo-traditional romantic comedy territory, John and Jeremy are reclining on the steps of the Lincoln Monument the morning after another successful crash. The quintessentially phallic Washington Monument is positioned between the two men, at once standing as a testament to their heterosexual conquest and also suggesting a possible sexual attraction between them.
John suddenly interrupts the afterglow as he contemplates whether their wedding crashing routine is a little “sleazy,” or “irresponsible.” Jeremy casually dismisses the thought and claims they are simply “young and stupid.” Indeed, as several critics observe, “John and Jeremy are very charming and funny, which helps one to overlook the fact that, basically, they’re misleading and emotionally abusing women for sex” (Weinberg). As John replies, “we’re not that young,” the camera switches positions and places President Lincoln, a symbol of patriarchal law and order, between them. During this pivotal moment, the film officially begins to question the strange, unconventional male comedy space it just celebrated. Significantly, this scene ends with a long shot of both monuments, as it gently suggests that perhaps wedding crashing is a bit immature and “irresponsible,” considering that most men in their thirties are planning or participating in their own weddings. John and Jeremy’s homosocial bond and activities, however, are not yet made explicitly problematic or irresponsible. Also, it rightly suggests that perhaps lying to women in order to have casual sex is a bit “sleazy,” but significantly, that the promiscuous sex itself, for both men and women, is not. However, as the film officially moves into romantic comedy territory, it adopts a more reactionary position on all of these issues and attempts to resolve them through Jeremy and John’s monogamous heterosexual coupling with upper-class debutantes.

Upon arriving at the daunting Cleary event, the film actually hints at its shifting values by including a brief cameo appearance by Senator John McCain, a right-wing politician and harsh critic of Hollywood’s supposedly loose morals. Significantly, however, aside from this cameo and a few vague references to Secretary Cleary’s economic propositions, the film vehemently avoids any real discussion of contemporary
politics and never questions the Cleary family's rights to excessive wealth, power, and
privilege. As John and Jeremy decide to masquerade as brothers and venture capitalists,
the film provides a more dramatic indication of its plot shift through a conventional
"love-at-first-sight," slow motion sequence set to romantic classical music, that shows a
rather smitten John admiring the maid of honor, Claire Cleary, as she speaks to Senator
McCain. While John decides to pursue Claire, Jeremy unsentimentally eyes up her
redheaded sister, Gloria, as she walks down the aisle. Even though the film has entered
romcom territory, aspects of the male comedy space linger during the wedding ceremony,
which is made rather unsentimental and inane. For instance, John and Jeremy make bets
over whether or not the bride cries (she does—and looks ridiculous) and which Biblical
verse will be read. And even Claire cannot help but uncontrollably giggle at the couple's
exchange of vows laden with sailing references and sexism, especially when the bride
promises to take the groom as her "captain," and to be his "anchor, sail, starboard, and
port." While the vows—and the bride’s sincere enthusiasm for them—ultimately reflect
the reactionary notion that the bride is subordinated to "first mate" status, expected to
obey her "captain," and reduced to an object of his property, the humorous treatment
encourages the viewer to laugh at this sexist exchange, and perhaps more broadly, at the
institution of marriage.

While they may not yet subscribe to the vows of heterosexual marriage, John and
Jeremy's similar, disrespectful attitude and treatment towards women continues to be a
major source of humor during the Cleary reception, where they meet the women who will
temporarily tear them apart and guide them towards a state of mature, responsible
manhood and heterosexual monogamy. In a way, the reception sequence officially
introduces the film's spectrum and treatment of different kinds of femininity (the Cleary women), masculinity (John, Jeremy, Sac, Todd, the Secretary), and sexuality, which will all be further explored during the awkward weekend at the Cleary estate. First, the film re-emphasizes the notion that even highly intelligent women are romantic suckers for any display of "broken," vulnerable masculinity and the possibility of love. For instance, when John and Jeremy spot a woman whom Jeremy had slept with at another wedding, Jeremy immediately pretends to be deaf and mentally challenged and John explains that his condition resulted from a tragic scuba accident. The woman, who happens to be a doctor, is totally fooled and offers to help Jeremy in any way that she can. After she leaves, Jeremy decides that "she looks good" and plans on calling her sometime—he has complete confidence that she will believe in his tale of miraculous "recovery." While the film eventually repudiates John and Jeremy's deceitful, promiscuous practices, has Jeremy rightly fooled by Gloria's virgin-clinger masquerade, and upholds the conventional feminine decency and innocence of Claire, it does not exactly concern itself with correcting the general view of women as gullible nitwits, desperate to fall in love with a melodramatically pitiful man. In fact, it even celebrates this phenomenon at the end by showing Chazz juggling two women (who he most likely picked up at a funeral) at Jeremy and Gloria's wedding. While the film may have denounced Chazz as sleazy and pathetic, it still enthusiastically provides him with an endless supply of attractive, naïve women.

Significantly, while the film revels in the homosocial bond between John and Jeremy, and also acknowledges those between Secretary Cleary and Sac, as well as those between Sac and his own circle of male admirers, there is no solidarity or close bonding
between the women in this film. For instance, the Cleary sisters have minimal contact with their mother or grandmother, but all are rather close to their father and adore his attention and affection. Also significantly, the Cleary women have little to nothing in common ideologically, emotionally or even physically. The difference between the Cleary sisters (and to an extent, their mother and grandmother) is perhaps most evident in and symbolically embodied in their three different hair colors, for all three women more or less subscribe to the stereotypical behaviors and characteristics conventionally assigned to those hair colors. For instance, Christina, the bride, has blonde hair and is thus portrayed as idiotic, shallow, and traditionally virtuous (judging by her white wedding dress and willing submission to her “captain”). Gloria, on the other hand, is the redhead sister and is accordingly coded as aggressive, possessive, sexual, and is thus relegated to secondary character status where she is defined only by her manipulative sexuality.

In keeping with the dominant, cultural taboo on female sexuality, mainstream critics have widely dismissed Gloria as a “psychotic,” “deranged brat,” (Winter) or “nymphomaniac.” One male critic even warned viewers that her character “may be traumatic for guys who have had a lot of crazy girlfriends” (Hartlaub). Despite the film’s attempts to construct Gloria’s active sexuality as some kind of frightening pathology (she even talks to imaginary friends in imaginary languages), the humor is not so much derived from Gloria’s behavior, but more so from Jeremy’s panicked reactions and his desperate inability to embrace or satisfy her sexuality. The humorous treatment of Jeremy’s ineptitude is a recurring romantic hommecom response to the current male anxiety over an increasingly visible and demanding female sexuality that has in many
through her reddish hair and strong sexuality. Mrs. Cleary is unhappy in her apparently sexless marriage, and casually admits to John that she was faithful to her husband for only two years out of their thirty-year marriage. Unlike the young and single Gloria, however, Mrs. Cleary’s character suffers from the additional cultural burdens of age and marital status, and she is thus reduced to a kind of afterthought in the narrative. She rarely speaks outside of her brief attempts to seduce John and there is no real sympathy garnered for her unfortunate situation. Viewers are instead encouraged to laugh at her implied, depression-induced alcoholism. Similar to Gloria, critics were quick to label Mrs. Cleary as crazy and “oversexed” (Winter). At one point John also bluntly accuses her of being “out of her fucking mind” when she insists he feel her fake breasts. Her character thus functions as more of a vehicle to demonstrate that John is equally as inept and unwilling as Jeremy to embrace and satisfy assertive, demanding female sexuality. In addition, her character also provides one of the millennial hommecom’s signatures: token lip service to the potential pitfalls of marriage, only to ultimately insist on it for its two heroes. While Jeremy learns to love Gloria’s sexuality, and to an extent, manages to control or validate it through marriage, John is only interested in the comparatively sexless, traditionally nurturing and ordinary Cleary woman, Claire.

When placed against Gloria, Mrs. Cleary, and the dozens of nameless female wedding guests, Claire is ultimately upheld as the ideal woman and character in the film—she is the real “prize” that men will violently fight over. While one critic notes that the film’s “near-misogynistic tones are mitigated with the elevation of Claire to screen-level goddess” (Villarreal), a closer examination of Claire’s restricted, undeveloped character, limited subjectivity, and the kind of femininity she represents might suggest
ways redefined heterosexual relationships in favor of the woman’s sexual satisfaction. Interestingly enough, however, critics did not associate John and Jeremy’s excessive promiscuity with sickness, but instead tended to either celebrate their behavior or brush it off as immaturity.

At the reception, Jeremy first impresses Gloria with his gentle, fatherly skills by entertaining the children. Then his “broken man” dance-floor routine encourages her to follow him to the beach for some metaphysical discussion and a quickie. Afterwards, Jeremy is eager to return to John and the reception, while Gloria enthusiastically squeals about how “amazing” it was to lose her virginity on the beach, declaring her undying love for Jeremy. Although Gloria will later admit to Jeremy that her behavior was all an act intended to arouse him, he is initially aghast and distressed by her post-coital announcement and subsequent aggressive and public sexual acts at the Cleary estate. Gloria essentially practices the same deceitful tactics that John and Jeremy use to sleep with women and she is empowered through her virgin-cum-dominatrix masquerade. Her masquerade seems to be more for her sexual pleasure than Jeremy’s, although he certainly comes to enjoy his submissive position in her sexual fantasies. In addition to Jeremy, the film also emphasizes Gloria’s power over her father. At one point in the film Secretary Cleary acknowledges that Gloria has always gotten exactly what she wants, and it is precisely because of Gloria and her ability to manipulate her father—a self-proclaimed “very powerful man”—that John and Jeremy are even able to continue “the greatest crash of all time” at the Cleary estate and form relationships with these women.

While Jeremy is occupied with Gloria, John tries to attract Claire by dancing with the flower girl, but instead manages to attract Claire’s mother, who is linked to Gloria.
otherwise. While Gloria has a certain sexual awareness that allows her to beat Jeremy at his own game, Claire has a passionate, almost motherly concern for worldly problems and enthusiastically volunteers for various causes. However, neither she, Gloria or Mrs. Cleary have actual careers. While her mother expresses a bitterness towards the institution of marriage for reasons of sexual dissatisfaction, Claire expresses a more wholesome skepticism towards marriage and romance; she laughs at her sister’s wedding vows and is rather leery of marrying Sac, not because he is violent and verbally abusive, but because she feels that they both have a lot to “accomplish” first. Thus, for Claire, marriage is a frightening dead end that hinders personal growth and progress, and yet she accepts Sac’s presumptuous announcement of their engagement with nothing more than an awkward silence. Her acceptance, of course, is more determined by generic conventions rather than logic, for the classic romcom formula basically requires that the primary female character be placed in a situation where she can somehow be saved from the “wrong man” by the “right man.”

In addition to certain insights about marriage, Claire is also able to recognize the artifice of her sister Christina’s high society wedding, where all the guests are just “suckling” at her father’s “power teat.” However, even with all of Claire’s charitable impulses and her disdain for Christina’s love of money, she never questions her father’s power and seems to enjoy her family’s extravagant wealth and advantages. Furthermore, the film discourages her from publicly stating her mildly critical opinions on issues of wealth and power. For instance, during his moment alone with Claire, John agrees to proofread her honest, yet inappropriate speech for the wedding reception. While Claire insists that her speech will be a funny crowd-pleaser, John suggests that instead of
pointing out her sister’s greed and shallowness, she should talk about “true love.” In keeping with the romantic hommecom’s tendency to downplay the primary heroine’s comedic abilities, Claire’s attempt at being honest, witty and funny with her speech fail miserably and she is forced to reiterate John’s cheesy definition of true love in order to save herself from humiliation. From this point on, Claire, as a central romantic hommecom heroine, is only permitted to laugh at John’s jokes, not make her own.

As a brunette woman, Claire is assigned a certain kind of intelligence and awareness largely lacking in the other women in Wedding Crashers. Her intelligence, however, is significantly undermined, as she is unable to see through John and Jeremy’s masquerade or recognize and reject Sac’s rather pronounced, abusive behavior until the very end of the film. Claire’s character thus combines traditional feminine victimization and self-sacrificing compassion with token, contemporary feminist attributes, such as her skepticism of marriage, a yearning for personal accomplishments, and a willingness to play football with the men. While Claire may not have the threatening sexuality or villainy conventionally assigned to brunette women in Hollywood film, she does present a serious, albeit unintentional, threat to John and Jeremy. For instance, there is a brief prophetic moment when John is bonding with Secretary Cleary at the reception and Claire politely summons her father away from the light-hearted, manly conversation. Upon Claire’s intrusion into this male-bonding, cigar puffing moment, John declares “the fun’s over.” Indeed, as John’s obsession with Claire continues to creep between him and Jeremy, and as they each proceed to break their sacred rule system, the carefree fun of the male comedy gives in to a more overtly conservative and melodramatic vibe.
Before Gloria announces her father’s decision to allow John and Jeremy to join the family at the Cleary estate, the boys have somewhat of a “lovers’ quarrel” over the rules which ends in Jeremy’s reluctant, self-sacrificing decision to accompany John in his pursuit of Claire. During this dramatic and dysfunctional weekend at the estate, the film develops its definitive position on issues of gender and sexuality, particularly in terms of its portrayals of masculinity. When everyone first arrives at the estate, Sac and the Secretary insist that the men play touch football (Claire decides to participate, while Gloria and Mrs. Cleary remain spectators). Jeremy rolls his eyes at the suggestion, but John enthusiastically accepts, hoping he can impress Claire and have some physical contact with her. During the game, Sac, his friend, and the Secretary all display excessively macho and obnoxious behaviors and attitudes, including screaming orders at one another and aggressively bumping chests. Sac also unnecessarily attacks and injures Jeremy twice. The Secretary applauds Sac’s raw, masculine, aggression and attributes it to “five generations of Lodge family breeding,” adding that “nature always wins” over nurture. The Secretary actually makes several references to “family breeding” throughout the film, which have some disturbing implications. For instance, these repeated comments suggest that he views heterosexuality as a mere means of reproduction, which offers one possible explanation for his wife’s profound dissatisfaction with their sex life and marriage. Furthermore, the Secretary’s fascination with breeding “two of the fine American families” also seems to reveal a rather racist and fascist desire to create a superior race. Even John acknowledges this disturbing implication and makes a failed attempt to lighten the Secretary’s loaded comment by suggesting this superior brood “battle the Kling-Ons for interstellar domination.”
Ironically, however, the Secretary is clearly disappointed with his own attempt at breeding a son. Instead of producing a strapping political liability lawyer, he bred Todd—a skeletal, creepy, gay artist, who is fully aware of his father’s profound disappointment. For example, when the Secretary asks Todd to join the men for some “competitive sport,” Todd looks up from his “homo” paintings and shrieks, “will that make you love me?” Todd is first introduced at the wedding reception, where he is seen hunched over on a dock, throwing rose pedals into the ocean and screaming “death you are my bitch lover.” As a crass attempt to separate John and Jeremy and their “good” or desirable homosocial bond from “bad” or undesirable male homosexuality, the film goes to great lengths to portray Todd as deranged, unattractive, unsuccessful and frightening. Todd’s homosexuality, like Gloria and her mother’s active sexuality, is thus portrayed as some kind of scary pathology to be avoided, or, as the Secretary more vaguely puts it—a “situation. . .most American families would sympathize with.” The family’s grandmother also denounces Todd as a “homo” at the dinner table and follows up with a homophobic remark about Eleanor Roosevelt being a “real rug muncher.”

Significantly, however, John attempts to defend Todd when Secretary Cleary criticizes his morose disposition and “crap” artwork. John suggests that Todd just needs to find something he believes in, and that the Secretary should ease up on him. As for Jeremy, after he experiences a “midnight rape” from Gloria, which involved tying his limbs to the bedposts, he wakes up to find Todd on top of him. Todd claims that they shared a “moment,” and is convinced that Jeremy wants him sexually and romantically. As a token of his affection, Todd paints a nude portrait of Jeremy with a prudishly placed fig leaf, but Jeremy is horrified, of course and, to some extent, he is shown as being
disgusted by Todd’s sexual advances. Jeremy’s horror is intensified when he hears footsteps in the hallway and panics at the thought of the powerful and intolerant Secretary discovering him in bed with a half-naked Todd. Jeremy literally forces Todd “back into the closet” when the Secretary comes into his bedroom to investigate the shouting.

The humor in this sequence is unquestionably homophobic, as the viewer is encouraged to laugh at Todd’s creepy homosexuality and to identify with Jeremy’s distressing helplessness in forcefully resisting him. At least one critic, TIME’s Richard Corliss, observed that the film’s “carload of gay jokes” seemed odd, considering the “most heart-felt I-love-you’s” in the film are uttered by John and Jeremy (2). While the scene functions as a way to discount the homoerotic aspects of John and Jeremy’s relationship, Jeremy ultimately insists on keeping Todd’s painting as a gift and carries it with him as he and John flee the Cleary estate in defeat. I think the image of John and Jeremy strolling with this “gay” painting, appropriately entitled “Celebration,” away from the Cleary estate and all the heterosexual misery and reactionary principles it represents, actually affirms their status at the central couple in the film and the homoerotic undertones in their relationship. It also would have made a far better ending, for the morning before their expulsion, there is a rather touching make-up scene in the kitchen where they exchange (as Corliss finds) those sincere and convincing “I love you’s” and “win each other back,” thus completing the bromance plot formula.

However, in yet another blow to the women’s intelligence and agency in this film, it is Sac and his guru of macho admirers (one refers to Sac as the “master”) who uncover John and Jeremy’s true identities and agenda. Although John and Jeremy had their share of arguments and resentments towards one another during the Cleary weekend, they
remained unified in their mutual despising of Sac and the violent machismo he represents. There are actually several instances in the film where John and Jeremy are victims of Sac’s violence, such as when Sac intentionally shoots Jeremy during a quail hunting trip and when he repeatedly punches John for showing up at his and Claire’s engagement party. In addition to threatening the film’s heroes with violence, from the moment he is introduced at the reception, Sac is also blatantly coded as the “wrong man” for Claire. In an interesting shift from the screwball “wrong man,” who was usually presented as “comparatively inadequate, neurotic, and emasculated,” (this character was repeatedly played by Ralph Bellamy in films like *The Awful Truth* and *His Girl Friday*, for example) (Glitre, 36) the millennial, hommecom “wrong man” is typically characterized by his excessive machismo—Sac is violent, presumptuous, unfaithful and treats Claire as property. He shows no respect for Claire’s opinions, as he announces their engagement without even proposing to her, and he expects Claire to give up her volunteer work because he wants “a wife not a fucking martyr.” While John is indeed a better option for Claire, there is little evidence in the film to support that he is in fact the “right” one for her. The two share a romantic bike ride and a stroll on the beach, but there is no real chemistry or connection between them besides John’s ability to make her laugh and play an inane hand-slapping game. Nevertheless, I think one of the film’s most liberal messages lies in its continuous repudiation of Sac’s toxic machismo in favor of John and Jeremy’s more sensitive and playful, albeit still problematic, version of masculinity.

After Sac exposes John and Jeremy, Claire feels betrayed and insulted, but Gloria is not bothered at all by the news, in fact she seems rather excited. The most significant and melodramatic moment of betrayal in the film, however, comes when John discovers
Jeremy and Gloria having sex the night Jeremy promised to crash Claire’s engagement party with him. John’s reaction is one of horror and betrayal, as Jeremy is essentially “cheating” on him with Gloria. Jeremy immediately chases after John, attempts to explain himself, and desperately scrambles to re-establish the rule system. After the hurtful discovery, John stops talking to Jeremy and spirals into a deep depression. He crashes weddings alone now, but his solo attempts are not fun, joyous, or sexy. Instead his behavior is humiliating, pathetic, and entirely devoid of joy and sex. After all, it was never the wedding crashing itself that was so enjoyable to watch, but the chemistry and affection between the “screwball” John and Jeremy couple in action. John only becomes more resentful, and even suicidal, when Jeremy arrives for his annual birthday sleepover and announces his engagement to Gloria.

Although Jeremy and John remain the central and ideal couple in this film, Jeremy and Gloria’s semi-open, sexually exciting relationship makes for an interesting, even progressive heterosexual alternative. Gloria proves to be a playful and clever partner for Jeremy, and unlike with John, Jeremy’s affection and desire for Gloria can be openly expressed and satisfied sexually. However, because of their mutually satisfied, rapturous sexuality, Gloria and Jeremy are unfortunately relegated to secondary plot status and the film eventually forces Jeremy into proposing marriage—indeed they are, as Jeremy says to the divorced couple in the opening scene, “two kids who like to fuck just trying to make it honest.” When Jeremy proposes that they take their relationship to the “next level,” Gloria assumes the next level is having Jeremy watch her have sex with female Brazilian twins. Needless to say, however, they both willingly accept each other’s proposals. Yet the film does not dwell on or sentimentalize their wedding ceremony—we
do not see a teary-eyed Gloria walk down the isle and declare Jeremy her “captain.”
Instead, the ceremony is either off screen or constantly interrupted by John’s long-winded apologies and explanations. While this is partly due to the film’s obvious favoring of the more socially acceptable, romcom/melodramatic John and Claire saga, I think the treatment of their wedding also signifies the film’s reluctance about subscribing the free-spirited, strong-willed Gloria and Jeremy to the institution of marriage.

John becomes especially desperate and depressed after Jeremy announces his engagement and he decides to seek out Chazz as a kind of rebound to recover from his “break-up” with Jeremy. Chazz, broadly played by Will Ferrell, is a grown man who lives with—and orders around—his foul-mouthed mother and successfully preys on vulnerable, grieving women at funerals. Ferrell specializes at playing this sort of incompetent, usually sex-crazed, adult single male trapped in arrested development (i.e. Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy, Old School, Elf) and the film initially celebrates the humor in his bizarre character and his behavior. When John decides to accompany Chazz on a funeral crash, however, he sees an older, grieving widow and has a revelation. Suddenly, the once celebrated and revered “innovator,” Chazz, becomes the physical embodiment of all that is sick and immoral—his pathetic existence functions as a deterrent for prolonged bachelorhood, both for John and the straight male viewer. Just as Sac was clearly the wrong choice for Claire, Chazz is unmistakably the wrong choice for John and, therefore, the wrong model for straight male viewers to emulate.

John realizes that if he maintains his current irresponsible lifestyle, he will inevitably end up a sleazy loser like Chazz. While the film never forces Chazz to reform, move out of his mother’s house, and subscribe to heterosexual monogamy, he is both
celebrated and, in a way, "punished" at the end of the film. After Jeremy and Gloria's wedding, Chazz is seen in the crowd with two attractive women dangling from his arms. He just so happens to lock gazes with Todd, and makes self-congratulatory, sexually suggestive gestures about the two oblivious women, as a way of showing off to Todd his latest sexual conquests. Judging by Todd's deviant, excited expression however, he seems to take Chazz's sexual humping gestures as a come-on rather than a proud display of his heterosexual virility, and Chazz thus becomes the object of Todd's homosexual gaze and desire. In keeping with the film's underlining paranoia of homosexuality, Todd is once again reduced to functioning as a symbolic threat against displays of non-normative heterosexual masculinity.

Despite the final, derogatory treatment of Todd, the film's climatic scenes are actually loaded with homoerotic implications between Jeremy and John. When the film cuts to Jeremy and Gloria's wedding ceremony, John arrives late for his best man duties and interrupts the service. As he confidently walks down the aisle towards Jeremy at the altar, it seems as though this is as much, if not more, their wedding ceremony as it is Jeremy and Gloria's. John takes his place with the groomsmen, right next to Todd, and sincerely apologizes to Jeremy for his behavior and hurtful words. John then begins to murmur declarations of his love to Claire, which makes her so uncomfortable that she abandons her bridesmaid post and attempts to exit the church. In front of the entire congregation, John explains himself to Claire, admitting that his wedding and funeral crashing activities were "juvenile" and "pathetic," and asks Claire not to marry Sac and to date him instead. Claire, of course, needs a man to awaken her to the abuses of her fiancé, and, with her father's approval, timidly and apologetically breaks off her
engagement with Sac. Sac, however, condescendingly dismisses her decision and becomes verbally abusive toward her and the Secretary. Sac attempts to attack John, but in a loving, protective gesture, Jeremy knocks him out before John is harmed. Although the film’s general disdain for Sac and the type of toxic masculinity he represents is one of its more progressive attributes, it is undermined by the fact that Sac’s final punishment is left up to another male character—not Claire, the woman he has abused throughout the entire film. Furthermore, this particular dispute over Claire as “property” is settled in a conventionally masculine, violent manner. After the knockout, Jeremy winks at John and says, “let’s kiss the broad.” Gloria jumps on Jeremy and passionately kisses him, while John approaches Claire, grabs her neck, and kisses her. Although both of the men are kissing their respective “broads,” Jeremy’s wink, I think, suggests that, at this moment, they are also vicariously kissing one another.

In the final scene, the newlyweds do not drive off alone to consummate the marriage, but they instead drive off with John and Claire in the back seat of their convertible—for unlike other romantic hommecoms, such as *Superbad* and *Knocked Up*, *Wedding Crashers* is unwilling to completely sever the central male couple. While John and Jeremy are now officially reunited and paired off with their respective upper-class debutantes, they still remain primarily interested in one another and the scene’s composition resists showing the spatial separation between them. Rather than show the boys coupled off in separate sections of the car, the camera cuts back and forth between shots of Jeremy and John as they contemplate whether or not they should all crash a wedding that afternoon. It is ultimately Claire who makes the final decision and suggests they masquerade as a folk singing group. Claire, who just moments ago denounced
wedding crashing as “pathetic,” is now willing to play along with the group, thus supporting the notion that it was never the actual juvenile act of wedding crashing, but the promiscuous sexuality that followed, which posed such a threat to the dominant cultural value system. In an unusual move for the millennial romantic hommecom, *Wedding Crashers* ultimately closes on a sort of bisexual, ambiguous note, as signified by the lingering shot of the phallic Washington Monument. This final image can be read as a bold testament to the enduring homosocial and subconsciously homoerotic bond between Jeremy and John and/or to the overarching patriarchal tone governing the film—a tone, which, among other things, forces John and Jeremy into heterosexual monogamy in order to suppress the realization of their homoerotic desire.
Chapter 4: Close Reading of *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* (2005)

In August 2005, Judd Apatow’s directorial debut, *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*, was released and went on to become the first in an ongoing, widely popular and financially successful series of “Apatovian” romantic hommecoms (Denby, 59). The forty-year old virgin is timid, naïve Andy Stitzer, played by the film’s co-scenarist Steve Carell. Despite his prolonged, and as the film would have us believe, problematic, virginity, Andy lives happily in his so-called arrested development. He makes a decent living as a repair technician at an electronics store chain, Smartech, and keeps himself busy in a pleasant, albeit solitary, world filled with bicycle rides, collectible action figures, videogames, and the occasional homemade egg salad sandwich. When a group of his male coworkers discovers Andy’s virginity, they begin to take interest in him for the first time and commit themselves to revamping Andy’s image and lifestyle, introducing him to women (preferably “drunk bitches” or “hood rats”), and ultimately getting him laid. The gang features David (Paul Rudd), the sensitive guy in the bunch who has been permanently scorned by an ex-girlfriend; Cal (Seth Rogen), the laid-back, happily promiscuous stoner; and Jay (Romany Malco), a stereotypical black “player” who frequently cheats on his girlfriend—until he gets her pregnant.

Although the gang’s persistent efforts and advice for Andy fail miserably, he becomes involved with a fun, divorced, single-mother and grandmother, Trish (Catherine Keener). Much to Andy’s relief, Trish wants to hold off on the sexual part of their relationship, but is unaware of Andy’s virginity. Although they agree to have sex on their twentieth date, Andy becomes frustrated with the impeding sexual pressure of the situation and with Trish’s insistence that he sell his toy collection so he can start up his
own electronics supply store. After the breakup, Andy decides to get drunk with his friends and nearly loses his virginity to Beth (Elizabeth Banks), the sex-freak he flirted with earlier in the film. The gang, however, conveniently “rescues” Andy from this near sexual encounter with Beth. Andy then apologizes to Trish and confesses that he is a forty-year old virgin, which she freely accepts without judgment or disappointment. The film ends with their wedding ceremony, where each member of the gang is coupled off with a woman and Andy finally loses his virginity within the religious and legal confines of marriage and the security of “true love.” After Andy’s sexual conquest, the film transitions into a sort of utopian, musical fantasy featuring the gang and other characters dancing and singing “Aquarius” in an open field.

As mentioned above, *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* is the first in a series of Apatovian romantic comedies, which feature an engaging, recurring acting troupe (i.e. Seth Rogen, Paul Rudd, and Apatow’s wife, Leslie Mann) and can essentially be described as morality plays cleverly veiled by vulgar humor and a teasing possibility of homoerotic desire between the male characters. Indeed, many mainstream critics were quick to point out the family-friendly qualities in this especially bawdy Apatovian comedy. One critic, for instance, pithily tagged the film as “a gross out movie your mom could still enjoy,” (Burns) and another deemed it “as pure as driven snow” (Biancolli). Even Denby, a harsh critic of Apatow’s *Knocked Up* (2007) and this millennial wave of romantic hommecoms in general, appreciated the “human” quality in *40-Year Old Virgin’s* otherwise “dirty” comedy (102). However, as with *Wedding Crashers* and most other romantic hommecoms, critics have actually conveyed an overwhelming preference for the film’s “R-Rated”, sex-obsessed male-comedy space over its traditional “PG-rated” turn into
sentimental, romantic comedy mode (Burns). And yet, there is an overwhelming critical understanding that these “contemporary gross-out comedies” must, “somewhere along the line, before those closing credits roll... turn into a chick flick” (Burns).

While there is, as Denby notes, a human quality to The 40 Year-Old Virgin that explores issues of masculine insecurity and the inevitable messiness of heterosexuality, I think it ultimately offers only a rigid, reactionary response to these almost exclusively white, heterosexual, male anxieties. The 40 Year-Old Virgin is, then, a particularly crucial film in examining this trend in romantic comedy because it is so explicitly about the contemporary, so-called “post-closet” and “post-feminist” crisis in heterosexual masculinity—specifically about the uncoupled adult male and his failure to take up his proper role in the dominant social order (Negra in “Where the Boys Are”). As a standard romantic hommecom, the film is not so much about sex, romantic love and relationships as it is about Andy’s forced quest for masculine redemption via marriage, fatherhood, active participation in capitalism, and the disintegration of the male pack. Although Andy’s initially mocked, kinder, gentler mode of masculinity is ultimately revered in comparison with his misogynistic buddies, this more positive gain is, of course, made at the expense of its female characters. For the unlucky women trapped within this Apatovian hommecom are not only the targets of the film’s near-constant misogynistic humor and deprived of their own meaningful character growth, but they must also suffer the additional burden of uplifting these men from their seemingly pathetic states of arrested development and objectionable behavior.

The film opens in Andy’s tidy, toy-filled apartment, and, in what would become the first in a long line of Apatovian penis jokes, we see Andy sleepily strut around in his
pajamas, with a pronounced, awkward erection. Interestingly enough, when Apatow made an appearance on the Colbert Report, Stephen Colbert asked him what was possibly left to show in the male comedies and he immediately responded: “A penis.” As Richard Corliss correctly observes “I don’t doubt that Apatow was speaking ironically, yet there was self-revelation there too, since that’s exactly the sexual organ that the fellows in [his romantic hommecoms] are most obsessed by” (1). This fascination is most literally illustrated in Superbad, where Seth admits that as a child he was formally diagnosed with a rare compulsion to draw (erect) penises. The film ends with an indulgent homage to Seth’s masterpieces, which has been the closest the romantic hommecom has come to actually showing an erect penis. As with Seth’s caricatures and Andy’s fabric-draped erection, this organ of obsession in Apatovian romantic hommecoms is always obscured but yet always engorged. Hence, this penis fascination can at once speak to the underlying homoerotic tension in these millennial romantic hommecoms, and can also be read as a celebration and/or affirmation of the phallus—the symbol of patriarchal power and law—that, in many significant ways, governs the characters and their fates in these films.

In getting back to Andy, however, in contrast to his strange, childlike or adolescent apartment space, Andy displays a rather adult self-sufficiency in his morning routine, replete with physical exercise, personal hygiene, and a healthy breakfast. As Andy prepares to ride his bicycle to work, he makes plans with his elderly neighbors, who feel that Andy “needs to get laid.” Despite Andy’s prolonged virginity and his nearly friendless existence, however, he is noticeably happy and satisfied with his independent lifestyle and his personal space—as one critic puts it, he “is living every guy’s secret
dream [except for the lack of sex, of course]” (Chaw). Later on in the film when his male coworkers discover his virginity and “nerdy” lifestyle, Andy struggles, but fails, to convince them that he is perfectly content with his life and solitary, juvenile hobbies. His secluded lifestyle and in many ways infantile surroundings represent this increasingly common male fantasy of escape from societal pressures of work, family, home, and nowadays even sexual performance. As Denby astutely observes, “the only thing a forty-year-old virgin needs more than sex is to be left alone—that’s why he’s still a virgin” (102).

While the generally degrading and oppressive nature of patriarchal capitalism is largely responsible for these intolerable pressures, women are often unfairly associated with, and blamed for, these masculine anxieties—especially in the wake of an ongoing feminist movement. In an attempt to defend his pathetic virginity, Andy even claims that he “respects” (read: fears) women so much that he “completely stays away from them.” Furthermore, although the gang enjoys spending time at Andy’s apartment/videogame haven, they insist that women would find the juvenile contents and décor of his abode disturbing. In typical romantic hommecom narrative fashion, the male space it once enjoyed and embraced becomes associated with sickness and perversity. Accordingly, the gang orders Andy to hide all inappropriate items and displays when Trish comes to pick him up for their first date—an effort that leaves his apartment entirely empty and that perplexes Trish. While it is the gang that physically alters Andy’s male fantasy land, the effort is based on the collective male assumption that any woman would be instantly disapproving and eventually invade the space with her own feminine trappings and demands. Thus, it is not just Andy’s virginity that the film finds problematic, for he could
feasibly begin to have sex but still keep his quirky apartment and independent lifestyle. It is, however, this single and generally non-conformist lifestyle, which he enjoys, that is equally problematic and must be gutted and revamped to fit the cultural status quo that demands the formation of adult heterosexual couples, preferably married or at least monogamous.

Although the viewer can deduce from the film’s title and Andy’s strange surroundings that he is indeed the forty-year old virgin, his coworkers discover his secret during their after-store hours poker game. When one of their players unexpectedly drops out, the guys reluctantly invite Andy to play, even though Cal is convinced he is a “serial murderer.” During the game, the guys go around the table exchanging crass and overwhelmingly misogynistic tales of their sexual experiences with women and expect Andy to participate in the conversation. Andy makes an embarrassing effort to improvise a dirty sex experience with a woman whose breasts felt like “bags of sand,” but the guys quickly realize that he is making it all up and clearly has never touched a woman’s breast before. The gang is initially convinced that Andy must be gay, but Andy firmly denies the accusations and eventually admits his shameful virginity. Afterwards, Cal, in a sigh of relief, declares that it now all “makes sense.” Apparently, for Cal at least, an adult male virgin can easily be mistaken for a sociopath or a gay man.

In any case, the film does treat Andy’s virginity as a problematic, albeit humorous, condition, for it diverges from the rigidly defined, dominant cultural modes of adult masculinity—Andy is neither a married family man nor a suave playboy. The abnormality of his virginity is further intensified by its voluntary continuation, for Andy exemplifies an almost childlike disinterest in and fear of women or of anything sexual.
The film reveals how a few humiliating sexual disasters with women decades ago have stifled Andy’s sexuality to the point where he does not, and cannot, even masturbate or engage in any sort of sexual fantasizing. While the film’s recurring fixation on Andy’s erections indicates that he could have certainly continued experimenting with his sexuality after these unfortunate instances, Andy makes a conscious decision to repress his sexuality and abstain from this fundamental realm of human experience. His excessive virginity thus feminizes him because in the traditional cultural double standard, it is women who are supposed to repress sexual desire and retain their virginity until marriage, while men are expected to be sexually experienced and virile.

Furthermore, Andy’s virginity is also offered as the only possible explanation for his mediocre career, lack of friends, infantile hobbies, social awkwardness, and in certain cases, stupidity. While tracing Andy’s general underachievement to his voluntary celibacy certainly defies logic, in the conservative realm of Apatovian romantic comedy even the slightest deviation from dominant sexual norms is subject to ridicule and reform. Interestingly enough, while the film never really stops laughing at Andy and with the gang, it does actually find the gang’s sex-obsessed, promiscuous behavior more unacceptable than Andy’s virginity and arrested development. For instance, in contrast with Cal’s evening spent in Mexico watching a woman have sex with a horse, Andy’s pathetic evening spent making an egg salad sandwich is comparatively normal, even preferable. Furthermore, the film at least considers Andy’s virginity valuable enough to protect until he finds his “true love.” As one critic notes, for all the problems that Andy’s virginity presents, at the film’s heart it “believes there is actually something precious about chastity—even when its preservation has slipped beyond pathetic” (Chaw).
In this vein, I think *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* can be read in many ways as a contemporary, vulgar and male-centered version on the Doris Day and Rock Hudson sex comedy, *Pillow Talk* (1959). In *Pillow Talk*, Doris Day plays Jan, a successful, independent, and arguably "frigid" career woman who clearly enjoys her sexless, single lifestyle—much to the disbelief and dismay of her seasoned maid and persistent male admirers. Through an unfortunate party phone situation, Jan finds herself sharing a line with Rock Hudson’s arrogant, playboy character, Brad. While their characters are meant to be opposites on the sexual spectrum, their respective lifestyles are actually a response to a similar fear of losing their autonomy and personal space. Brad decides to play a cruel joke on Jan and masquerades as a southern gentleman, Rex, and they end up falling in love with one another. Before their relationship is consummated, however, Jan discovers Brad’s masquerade and takes revenge on him by redecorating his bachelor-pad with the most extravagant and worst possible playboy taste. They do, of course, reconcile, and by the end of the film, Brad announces that they are expecting a child. As with Andy, *Pillow Talk* seeks to remedy Jan’s virginity and independent lifestyle, even though Brad’s bachelorhood and chronic Don Juanism pose an equally, if not more serious, problem to the dominant social order. Although the film ultimately upholds Jan as morally superior to the cruel and promiscuous Brad, the film’s solution to both of their problematic lifestyles is marriage and parenthood.

There are also, however, potential queer spaces that open up for Jan and even more so for Brad in *Pillow Talk*. For instance, Jan, who the film repeatedly associates with blackness and female sexuality, is briefly shown as having a potentially desiring connection with a black female singer. The film, however, devotes considerably more
attention to the potential queer space presented by Brad, a masculine, yet sensitive Broadway composer, and his feminized, close friend and client, Jonathan (Tony Randall). Apatow also touches on the possibility of male homosocial relationships as an alternative to monogamous heterosexual coupling in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*. Unlike *Knocked Up* and *Superbad*, however, there is no clearly defined, central male couple in *Virgin*, but there is a closely-knit male pack, which, I think, has its own erotic implications. For instance, in one of the most-quoted scenes in the film, Cal and David have a lengthy exchange about why they each know that the other one is gay (Apatow uses this bit again between the same actors in *Knocked Up*). This exchange takes place during an intense videogame playing session, where Cal and David are rapidly maneuvering the phallic joystick controllers in their laps in a seemingly masturbatory gesture, as they attempt to violently kill each other’s avatars. Their reasons for one another’s gayness range from the ridiculous, “because I saw you make a spinach dip in a loaf of sourdough bread once,” to the more vulgar “because your dick tastes like shit.” While this signature Apatovian gay-joke exchange displays only a superficial understanding of gay culture and treats male homosexuality as a degrading insult, the exchange is complicated by the punchlines that deliver an accusation of homosexuality as well as implicate the joker. Cal obviously would not know that David’s “dick tastes like shit” unless they were both engaged in some kind of homosexual activity (in a deleted scene the punch-line is even more explicit: “because your dick tastes like my ass”). It is this kind of confused, simultaneous admission and repudiation of homosexuality that reveals the homoerotic tension beneath the surface of the male bonding in this film.
While *The 40 Year-Old Virgin* may lack a central male couple, Andy does grow closest to David, the most sensitive man in this dysfunctional, misogynistic group. David is a friendly guy who actually seems genuinely concerned about Andy’s “condition” and his personal feelings. For instance, when Andy runs away from work after being humiliated by his coworkers, David chases after him and takes him out for coffee and conversation. Much to the other guys’ disgust, David frequently reminisces about “making love” to his ex-girlfriend, Amy, who cheated on him with another man. As much as he still loves Amy and takes the blame for the failure of their relationship, David also bitterly refers to her as a “whore,” “immature bitch that blows everybody,” and “she-devil.” David has in fact been so scorned by Amy, that he eventually decides to swear off women and become celibate like Andy—a decision that Cal considers “gay.” David’s more sensitive impulses, then, are far less apparent in his treatment of women than they are in his relationship with Andy. For instance, unlike Cal and Jay, David treats Andy’s unfortunate virginity with sympathy and is sincerely concerned that Andy will never experience “not just sex, but a relationship, love, laughing, cuddling and all that shit.”

After their conversation, Andy sweetly acknowledges that they have known each other for years but have not spoken until now, which he finds “kind of nice.” Apparently David is the first person Andy has shared some kind of intimacy with in his adult life. Later on in the film, in a rather intimate gesture, David donates his entire pornography collection to Andy, including his customized “Boner Jams 2003,” the tape he watches while he masturbates. When Andy watches the tape for some inspiration, however, he is unable to climax because his imagined fantasy image of a woman speaks to him in his own, male voice—a fantasy slip-up that perhaps reveals Andy’s confused sexuality.
Compared to David, however, Jay and Cal are considerably less sensitive towards Andy’s situation and their own relationships with women. All three of them have different advice and rule systems for Andy to follow in his reluctant quest to get laid. As seen throughout other romantic hommecons, such as *Wedding Crashers* and *Hitch*, the male rule systems become irrelevant when it comes to “true love.” They unanimously agree, however, that Andy’s problem is that he has put “the pussy up on a pedestal”—meaning that he has uplifted female sexuality to an intimidating, unattainable goddess-like status of which he is unworthy or incapable of satisfying. Some of their collective efforts to help Andy get over his problem include taking him to get his chest waxed, forcing him to mingle with “drunk bitches” at nightclubs, signing him up for a speed-dating event, and arranging a liaison with a prostitute who turns out to be a transvestite. All of these collective, seemingly well-intended efforts fail miserably except for the gang’s final collective act of “rescuing” Andy from losing his virginity to Beth—the sex-crazed maniac.

As far as their individual efforts go, Jay believes that Andy needs to practice his skills on sure bets like “drunk bitches” and “hood rats” so he can gain some useful experience before he sleeps with Trish. Jay claims that every man is programmed with an internal instinct to “tackle drunk bitches” and that “it’s more important that she’s drunk than hot.” While Jay’s advice for Andy to violate vulnerable women and “try some wrong” may be offensive to both Andy and female (as well as some male) viewers, his advice expresses a genuine masculine anxiety over sexual performance that has sprung from an increasingly prevalent, demanding and critical mode of female sexuality. Although it may not seem the case in the realm of Apatovian comedy, more and more
women are raising their standards of potential sexual partners and are openly demanding sexual satisfaction—sex with women has thus become an increasingly stressful, intimidating endeavor for many men. Hence, just as homophobic humor is used to ward off the threat of homosexuality within the male pack, the male characters use misogynistic humor to unify the group against potential female invaders and to strip women of their threatening, intimidating subjectivity (the use of racist humor in this film has a similar function). For instance, this male anxiety over female sexuality, and female achievement more broadly, is perhaps most explicitly projected on to Paula (Jane Lynch), the sassy, smart and openly sexual female manager at Smartech who sports a butch-like haircut and wears business suits. The guys are both intimidated and repulsed by Paula’s authority as well as her active sexuality, and the viewers are encouraged to feel the same—especially when she offers to be Andy’s “fuck buddy,” and shares tales of her childhood sexual experiences. While the narrative resolves Beth’s assertive female sexuality by coupling her off with Cal at the end, Paula remains uncoupled but is practically eliminated from the narrative once Andy gets put in charge of managing Jay, Cal, David, and the other male workers. The film also makes sure to show that Andy is more fit and capable for this managerial position than Paula, and that unlike Paula, the male employees actually respect him.

Furthermore, one critic notes that the gang “could have easily been dismissed as misogynistic jerks, but the excellent script exposes them as being just as terrified of intimacy as Andy is” (Clinton). In fact, it is precisely this anxiety over sexual inadequacy in the eyes of women, and the possibility of humiliation at the hands of women, that has preserved Andy’s virginity and fueled Jay’s philandering. For instance, in a montage of
Andy’s failed sexual experiences, in all but one instance (when Andy receives oral sex from a girl with a mouth full of jagged metal braces) it is Andy’s awkward incompetence that destroys his chances at sexual intercourse. His internalized fear is only exacerbated by this sudden wave of male peer pressure and the subliminal stress of a seemingly omniscient, (hetero)sex-crazed visual culture—it is thus no wonder why Andy runs away in panic from a bus sporting a huge, sexually suggestive advertisement. In addition, later in the film Jay tearfully admits that his philandering, which temporarily costs him his girlfriend, was a result of his masculine “insecurity.” Yet in typical hommecom fashion, the film has Jay “grow up” and reform his “irresponsible” behavior once his girlfriend announces her pregnancy.

Back at the nightclub, however, the guys have hit the “jackpot” of drunk, horny girls—a bachelorette party. With a logic similar to that in *Wedding Crashers*, Cal exclaims “no one is hornier than a girl who’s about to watch her friend get married to some guy.” Andy agrees to join the guys at the party and for a moment everyone, including Andy, seems to be having fun playing with the various penis-themed novelty items the bride-to-be received. The guys then pressure Andy to approach Nicky (Leslie Mann), who is clearly inebriated and hurt that her best friend, the bride-to-be, is going to marry her ex-boyfriend. Once again, as in *Wedding Crashers*, there is little, if any female bonding in this film, only animosity and distance. Fortunately for Andy, however, Nicky actually initiates the sex, but her nearly fatal, habitual drunk driving and projectile vomiting scare Andy away, even though she tells him, after the crashing the car and puking on him, “I’ll still have sex with you if want.” Andy, of course, does not take her up on the offer since taking advantage of an inebriated woman would not only be the
“wrong” thing to do, but the film also feels that this drunken bimbo does not deserve him, let alone his precious virginity.

After Jay’s advice for Andy yields disastrous, nearly fatal, results, Andy tries out Cal’s words of wisdom. Cal admits to being conventionally unattractive, especially to women, but insists that his ability to “talk to women” is solely responsible for his sexual conquests. Cal tells Andy to “just ask questions, women only care about themselves, and be kind of a dick.” His advice is blatantly sexist and rooted in the misogynistic belief that women actually welcome degrees of sexual and emotional abuse from men (a notion also reflected in some male-produced pornography). Nonetheless, this tactic is effective on Beth, the “nymphomaniac” bookstore clerk. Beth is visibly aroused by Andy’s arrogant, subtlety sexualized questioning and he seems to enjoy the boost of confidence. Beth becomes even more attracted to Andy when she sees him yelling at David, Cal, and Jay in the Smartech sound studio. During this scene, Andy forcefully renounces the gang after the transvestite prostitute fiasco, and decides to repudiate all their advice and confidently march across the street to Trish’s store, determined to ask her out on a date.

Compared to the drunken sluts, sex-crazed maniacs, intimidating she-bosses, former lesbians, stupid bimbos, bitchy, possessive girlfriends and nerdy metal-mouths, Trish is held up as the film’s ideal woman, as well as the only woman worthy of deflowering Andy. Andy first meets Trish at Smartech, and to the disappointment of many critics, their brief flirtation signals the romantic hommecom’s inevitable sacrifice “of the raunchy comic momentum for the sake of a PG-rated love story” (Burns). Trish introduces herself, laughs nervously after every line in their conversation. Andy makes his very first sale to her, and Trish gives him her number and an invitation to her “empty
store” across the street where she sells other people’s things on E-bay. As a nod to the woman’s movement, the film allows Trish to own and manage her own hip business, but her position is significantly less threatening and much more acceptable than Paula’s because she has no (male) employees beneath her, nor does she make an intimidating salary. Similar to other leading hommecom heroines like Claire in *Wedding Crashers* or Alison in *Knocked Up*, Richard Corliss correctly observes that the main attraction of Trish is that she laughs at Andy’s jokes, adding that “the Apatow dictum... is that women can’t aspire to equality in cracking jokes, but will indulge them and be the receptive audience” (3). The film, however, not only deprives Trish of her own jokes, but it also suppresses her character growth with the burden of properly “uplifting” Andy into marriage, fatherhood, sexual maturity, and business ownership. Trish proves to be a more appropriate vehicle for “uplifting” Andy than his male buddies, who are all too busy making “you know how I know you’re gay” jokes and going through their own personal growth.

During their first date, Trish admits that she usually “avoids nice guys” like Andy, for Apatow seems convinced that women naturally gravitate towards abusive men. The date goes so well that they end up in bed together, and Trish suggests he take his pants off and put on a condom—which she warns are all possibly expired because she and her ex-husband rarely had sex. Even though Trish’s brief comment alludes to the idea that marriage signifies the end of rapturous, passionate sex, the film will ultimately insist that, for Andy, marriage is the best and only outlet for sexuality. While Trish is in the bathroom, the film lingers on Andy’s gratuitous ignorance as he struggles with condom after condom—at one point he is even shown sliding the condom over his foot. Just as
Trish is about to crawl back into bed, her sixteen-year old daughter, Marla, and her boyfriend enter the room, flick on the lights, and shriek at the sight of Andy and Trish in a bed covered with used condoms. Marla then screams how it is unfair that Trish is “allowed to have sex and [she is] not.” Interestingly enough, this idea that Trish is not “allowed” to be both a mother and sexual or sexually active is a common Hollywood film trope, a trope perhaps most essential, but by no means exclusive to, maternal melodramas. Conventionally, maternity is considered un-sexy and also implies a range of financial and emotional responsibilities for the man (or as Jay so eloquently puts it, “baby-mama-drama”). It is no wonder then why Trish chooses to withhold the fact that she not only has three children, but is also a grandma.

On their second date, it seems that Trish has, in a way, accepted this idea that a mother (and grandmother) should at least restrain her sexuality because she suggests that she and Andy hold off on “the physical part of their relationship.” Although Trish does not exactly provide a reason for her decision, as the romantic hommecom has a general disregard for logic, Andy enthusiastically accepts this chance to evade the intimidating realm of sex with a woman. Trish’s decision to postpone sex until their twentieth date is especially odd considering that she seems to enjoy sex and does not seem close enough to Marla to seriously care about her disapproval. In fact, Marla is actually quite resentful towards her mother for standing in the way of her own sexual fulfillment, and Trish is unable to communicate her concerns in a way that Marla accepts and understands. Trish, who became pregnant at a young age, is concerned that Marla will make the same mistake, but still refuses to put her on birth control to prevent this situation. In one
particularly reactionary outburst, Trish even threatens to start taking Marla back to
church if she continues begging for birth control.

After an explosive argument on the issue, Trish asks Andy to take Marla to a
family clinic. Trish’s odd request essentially thrusts Andy into a fatherly role in relation
to her daughter’s private, sensitive situation. At the clinic, Andy and Marla join a group
of other father-child couples (mothers, of course, are eradicated from this sexual
discussion) and learn about ways to express intimacy and achieve sexual fulfillment
without having sexual intercourse. While humorous, the discussion is a particularly
straightforward act in Apatow’s morality play supporting abstinence and post-marital sex.
During the meeting, Andy admits that he is a virgin to express his solidarity with Marla,
and then he and Marla bond on the way home in the car. After their trip to the clinic,
Marla’s desire to have premarital sex is completely eliminated from the narrative. This
decision to drop Marla’s sexual desire as an issue is consistent with the film’s noticeable
shift in focus from the thrills of heady sexual pleasure, to the superior value of mature,
heterosexual love and companionship. Furthermore, the romantic hommecom can usually
only resolve issues of female sexuality by containing it within a marriage-track
relationship (i.e. Beth is paired off with Cal), and/or significantly downgrading the
problematic female’s presence in the narrative (i.e. Paula).

As Andy eases into his relationship with Trish and his role as surrogate father
figure, all aspects of his life seem to improve dramatically. The film thus subscribes to
this traditional, romantic comedy notion that romantic, heterosexual love—not
necessarily sex—is the key to happiness and fulfillment in all areas of life. For instance,
Paula promotes Andy to floor manager, a position that requires him to solve conflicts
such as Jay’s heated argument with a belligerent African-American customer. Andy is also noticeably happier and more sociable, and he even gets a boost of macho confidence. For instance, when Jay’s girlfriend, Jill, finds his vulgar, misogynistic, speed-dating comment card, he lies and insists that it was Andy’s card. When Jill forcefully confronts Andy about the situation, she is understandably doubtful that such a nerdy guy would write comments such as “she is hurtin’ for a squirting,” but Andy immediately catches on to Jay’s desperate plan and attempts to prove his solidarity. Although he was once so opposed to this kind of disrespectful, misogynistic language, Andy starts using it against Jill in an attempt to convince her that he is indeed the “nasty” guy who filled out the speed-dating card. He then tells Jay to “keep his ho on a leash.” Jay only mildly, sheepishly protests this last comment, but Jill, of course, just accepts Andy’s disrespectful attitude and leaves the store. Trish also helps propel Andy into a more acceptable mode of adult masculinity by offering to sell his valuable toy collection on eBay. The idea is that with the profit he makes from selling the remnants of his happy, adult life of sustained infantilism and solitude, Andy can open his own business and, perhaps more importantly, release himself from Paula’s control and become his own boss.

Things certainly seem to be improving for Andy, but as he and Trish approach their momentous twentieth date, the pressure becomes intolerable. In addition to Andy’s intense performance anxiety and the crippling guilt he feels for not informing Trish of his virginity, he also becomes visibly frustrated over Trish’s persistent efforts to sell his precious toys and propel him into a more socially acceptable mode of adulthood. While they are preparing Andy’s toys for sale, Trish suggests that they just give in and “go
crazy on each other” before their arbitrary cut-off date. Trish throws herself at Andy, but he is more concerned with possibly compromising the integrity of the action-figure boxes on the bed than having sex. Trish assumes that Andy is avoiding sex with her because she is a mother. When she questions his strange, hurtful behavior, Andy snaps under the pressure. Although Trish is just following her duties as the central romantic hommecom heroine by “trying to help [Andy] grow up,” he accuses her of controlling his life and trying to “change” him, and stammers out the door. Andy then heads for Jay and Jill’s nightclub party, while Trish heads over to his apartment with hopes of working things out.

The vibe at Jay and Jill’s party is a bit uncomfortable, especially compared with the film’s earlier club scene during Andy’s single days. Instead of Jay preying on drunk women, Jill forcefully reminds him that his clubbing days are now over because he is going to be a father. David is more depressed than ever over the Amy scenario, which Cal finds especially irritating considering he hired a “ninety-five pound chick,” Bernadette, to work in the stockroom just to bring David out of his “funk.” After Cal punches David “where [his] nuts used to be,” David talks to Bernadette and they instantly bond over their past failed relationships. Like David, Andy is also depressed, but he gets sloppy drunk and runs into Beth, the sex-crazed bookstore clerk. She invites Andy back to her apartment, where tells him “I just want to please you,” and in a possible allusion to Andy’s potential homoerotic desire, “we can do it in the butt if you want to.” She then lures Andy into the bathroom and invites him to watch hermasturbate with a showerhead. Although the progressive potential of Beth’s active sexuality is complicated by her desire to service the man’s needs and her general attraction towards aggressive,
condescending, masculinity, the film still finds her threatening enough to relegate her to minor character status. And like Gloria in *Wedding Crashers*, Beth’s sexuality is written off as “crazy” and sick—she is thus considered unworthy of Andy’s virginity and her deflowering of Andy would certainly disrupt the film’s swelling moral crescendo. Hence, the film curtails Andy’s sexual opportunity once again, but this time it is the guys who “rescue” Andy from this crazy woman, who Andy admits, “scares the shit out of [him].” Even the sexually adventurous Jay, who apparently “hit that” before, is unwilling to repeat the experience and advises Andy not to go through with it. The gang collectively convinces Andy to reconcile with Trish, but Cal remains behind and joins Beth in the bathroom. In what would normally be a horrifying, dangerous scenario for a woman, Beth is not the least bit alarmed that a strange man has just entered her apartment, while she is naked and drunk in a bathtub, and the film implies that she just instantly replaces Andy with Cal.

Meanwhile, Andy arrives at his apartment to find Trish gawking at the vagina model he stole from the free clinic and David’s porn collection. Like Cal, Trish assumes that Andy must be some kind of serial murderer/sexual pervert and bluntly asks him if he is going to kill her. Trish flees the apartment and Andy chases after her on his bicycle, only to end up crashing through a billboard, which displays the same sexually charged advertisement on the bus he ran from earlier in the film. Trish then rushes to Andy’s aide and he finally admits that he is indeed a virgin and that he avoided having sex with her because he did not think it would be any good. Trish is relieved to find out he is only a virgin and not a serial murderer, considers his virginity “a good thing,” and assures him that the sex will be good because they “love each other.” Andy then has an epiphany and
realizes he must have been subconsciously preserving his virginity all those decades because he was waiting for Trish, his one true love. Trish and Andy’s Sunday-school, and perhaps even mythological responses, however, are not wholesome enough for Apatow. Apparently just “loving each other” is not enough for Apatow to allow Andy and Trish to have sex, for he prolongs their abstinence until their wedding night. It is no surprise then that more conservative critics such as Peter T. Chattaway, a contributor for ChristianityToday.com and a one-time 34-year old virgin himself, felt like the film was “affirming [his] own personal choice to wait until marriage.”

Indeed, at Andy’s wedding ceremony, all the members of the gang are also neatly and officially coupled off: David and Bernadette, Jay and a very pregnant Jill, and Cal and Beth. After a brief confrontation with a hotel custodian, Andy finally loses his virginity in a one-minute, church-and-state-approved, man-on-top, missionary style romp, and then makes a second attempt which lasts two hours and leaves Trish seemingly satisfied, but lifeless. While Trish lay limp and silent at Andy’s side, Andy begins to sing “Aquarius,” from the musical Hair. The scene then transitions into “a flight of lyrical fantasy,” (Denby, 102) as the scantily clad gang, accompanied by other minor characters, sings their own rendition of the song in an open field. It is thus fitting with the film’s moral tone that the utopia implied by this musical sequence is directly associated with Andy’s entrance into the sanctified realm of heterosexual marriage, as well as his acquired status as male breadwinner (he made half a million dollars by selling his toys), and father. Furthermore, it is also telling that only the central male characters are permitted to sing this song of new beginnings and “harmony and understanding,” for not only does the film deprive its female characters of silliness and humor (with the
exception of Paula), but it also explicitly deprives them of their own “new beginnings” and meaningful personal growth. Although the film might have winked at socially liberal markers, non-progressive straight male promiscuity, and other non-conventional possibilities along the way, the ending echoes the stale, underlying message of the 1950s sex comedies: that personal happiness, peace and fulfillment does not come from independence, uninhibited sexuality and individuality, but from marriage, parenthood, and active participation in capitalism (McDonald, 111).
Chapter 5: Close Reading of Knocked Up (2007)

As a follow up to Virgin, in the summer of 2007 Apatow delivered Knocked Up, which I would consider, along with New Yorker critic David Denby, as “the culminating version” of the millennial romantic hommecom (59). In Knocked Up, Alison (Katherine Heigl), a conventionally beautiful, up-and-coming host for the E! Entertainment television channel meets Ben Stone (Seth Rogen), a chubby, unemployed, stoner who lives with his equally indolent, foul-mouthed entourage of male friends. After dancing together at a bar, Alison and Ben end up having spontaneous, drunken, unprotected sex, which results in her unexpected pregnancy. Even though Alison just received a significant promotion at work and wears an essentially horrified expression of regret during her morning-after interactions with Ben, she accepts her inconvenient pregnancy without question. In an effort to “do the right thing for the baby” the hopelessly incompatible Alison and Ben try to force a romantic relationship before the baby is born, but they both fear ending up miserable like Alison’s sister, Debbie (Leslie Mann), and her husband, Pete (Paul Rudd). After a particularly explosive argument over Ben’s laziness and irresponsibility, they temporarily break up. During this breakup, Ben gets a job for the first time in his life, moves into his own apartment, neglects his friends, and reads parenting books. The couple is reunited during Alison’s nightmarish labor and the film ends with Alison, Ben, and the baby preparing to move into Ben’s apartment and begin a family—just like Debbie and Pete.

Like other romantic hommecons, and particularly those from the Apatow school, some mainstream critics have been quick to label Knocked Up as a kind of “nerd” fantasy or “wet dream” (Taylor) because the conventionally unattractive, unappealing, and
underachieving male protagonist is ultimately paired off with a beautiful and successful woman in a heterosexual, monogamous relationship. This “nerd fantasy” reading implicitly endorses the conventional Hollywood ideology of romantic love as an all-encompassing goal for men and women—an ideology that also implies that those “nerds” who go without this kind of love are in some way inadequate or incompetent.

Furthermore, labeling romantic hommeeoms such as Knocked Up as a “male fantasy rescue from irrelevance,” (Beifuss) overlooks the crucial fact that these male, romantic hommecom misfits are perfectly content with their anti-establishment, “nerdy” lives before the narrative forces romance and patriarchal responsibility on them. For instance, one may recall the publicity poster for The 40 Year-Old Virgin (Figure 6)—a poignant tribute to male “geek-dom” indeed—which features an especially “virginal-looking” Steve Carell conveying a look of “an almost incomprehensible happiness” (Dargis).

Indeed, the only “fantasy” in these current romantic hommeeoms, and specifically in Knocked Up, lies within these quirky, carefree, nerd spaces, which the films initially celebrate and then renounce as sick and dysfunctional (Denby, 59).

Knocked Up’s narrative in particular is loaded with evidence to suggest that the last thing these nerds desire is to be “rescued,” and once they do reluctantly acquiesce to their adult responsibilities, they can only wish for a time-machine to deliver them back to that blissful state of “irrelevance.” I thus agree with the New Yorker’s Anthony Lane that most straight male viewers are “watching [Knocked Up] through their fingers. To them, this is ‘The Omen’” (88). Somewhat surprisingly, many mainstream critics like Lane were able to see past the distracting gross-out humor in Knocked Up and offer critiques beyond the perfunctory “with heart” tag. For instance, one critic recognized that this
“heart” could more accurately be described as the film’s “unfashionably conservative center,” (Morris) and another observed that “Apatow is, at heart, a square. He clearly believes in marriage, family, bourgeois dutifulness” (Shickel). As a culminating, anxious response to the millennial crisis in masculinity, heterosexual marriage, and traditional family values, *Knocked Up* most vividly embodies the romantic hommecom’s implicit ideology, as it calls for the eradication of the individual and his or her homosocial bonds, in favor of establishing an often admittedly problematic, albeit socially acceptable, heterosexual union and nuclear family.

While the men and women in *Knocked Up* experience similar, cultural catch-22s and a kind of mutual resentment towards heterosexual societal pressures, much of the humor and narrative action depends upon the construction of gender difference. Indeed, *Knocked Up* is distinguished from most other films in the current romantic hommecom cycle because although it maintains a primarily male center, the narrative makes an explicit attempt to oscillate its focus rather evenly between Alison and Ben. As a standard romantic hommecom, the film opens in an unusual, amusing space, where a bunch of schlubby guys dance, box with flaming gloves, smoke pot with a fishbowl over their heads, and dive into a filthy swimming pool. This scene then cuts to a clean, white bedroom with the lovely Alison waking up for work. Alison, who lives with her sister’s family, is almost immediately placed in a maternal position. While Debbie and Pete are first introduced in the midst of an argument, as Pete had the audacity to forget to write something on Debbie’s calendar, Alison settles the spat by agreeing to drive their two bratty daughters to school. The film then cuts back to Ben and his gang, who are all unemployed but have big plans to launch a semi-pornographic, misogynistic website,
“Flesh of the Stars,” which catalogs scenes of female nudity in Hollywood films (they will eventually discover that such a site already exists). Alison, however, has received a promotion from a production assistant to an on-camera celebrity interviewer for “E!,” which also thrives on the “flesh” of male and female stars, including her own. In a nod to post-feminism, Alison’s promotion is contingent on her willingness to participate in her own objectification, as both her male and female supervisors ask her to “weigh less” and “tighten” up for the on-camera position. Although Alison’s career is far more lucrative and high profile than Ben’s, they both have essentially trivial, superficial occupations, as the romantic hommecom vehemently avoids the political in favor of popular culture references and cameos (i.e. Ryan Seacrest, Spiderman 3). Nevertheless, Alison and Ben both feel strongly that they are providing meaningful services.

Yet despite their occupational parallels, Alison is serious and motivated, while Ben is happily lazy and comfortable with his underachievement. As one particularly heated argument between Debbie and Pete reveals, it is this tension between the cool, funny men who “don’t give a shit,” and the serious women who “care” and want men to “care more” that drives the narrative and makes the heterosexual relationships seem so forced and mutually unsatisfactory. Even Katherine Heigl admitted in an interview with Vanity Fair that the film “paints women as shrews, as humorless and uptight, and it paints the men as lovable, goofy, fun-loving buys. It was hard for me to love the movie” (Nudd and Jordan). Heigl, however, has since “clarified” her comments about the film and now insists it was “the best filming experience of [her] career,” and that women should “not take [those elements] of the movie too seriously” and to “remember it’s a broad comedy” (Nudd and Jordan). Despite Heigl’s disturbing “clarification,” which
reads like some kind of romantic hommecom propaganda statement, both male and female critics have taken Knocked Up’s, as well as other romantic hommecom’s, degrading treatment of its female characters quite seriously. For in this neo-conservative era ripe with feminist backlash in cultural, political and media contexts, women simply cannot afford to not take these messages seriously, to allow the often-toxic ideology of these romantic hommecons to hide behind their self-professed triviality.

Just as Knocked Up stands as the culminating version of this contemporary romcom trend, Alison is, in many important and unfortunate ways, the quintessential romantic hommecom heroine. She is undeniably attractive by white, heterosexual male-defined standards, friendly, responsible, and career-oriented to the point where she will quietly tolerate anything that is asked of her. Alison also giggles once in a while, frequents nightclubs on special occasions, and as a result of one night of drunken, unprotected sex she finds herself impregnated by a vulgar, unemployed stoner with “man-boobs”—a seemingly alarming situation she accepts with little question or regret. The narrative does not deem it necessary to provide Alison with a past, with personal passions or interests outside of her meaningless career, with a complex thought process, with a circle of close friends or colleagues, with a strong sexuality, with an exceptional intelligence or wit, or with revelatory moments of explicit fear, joy or sadness. And while she does experience explicit moments of anger, they are immediately written off as psychotic pregnancy hormones.

Although the narrative, and much of the film’s mainstream criticism, is driven by this assumed idea that Ben is an excessively unworthy partner for Alison, there is never any narrative evidence to suggest that he is especially not her “type.” For instance, one
might think that Alison’s conventional beauty, docility, and minor celebrity status would attract at least some straight male attention, but Ben is never held up against another potential partner for Alison (perhaps with the brief exception of a young male OB/GYN who inquires if Alison is single). Alison never even contemplates her prospects of finding another, more suitable, partner, nor does she divulge any information about her past partners (if any even exist) or about the qualities she seeks in the opposite sex. As Los Angeles Times critic Carina Chocano observes, “Ben may have no job, no muscle tone and no clue what he’s doing, but he may be the best thing that ever happened to Alison [because] he’s pretty much the only thing that’s ever happened to her outside of work.”

As the quintessential romantic hommecom heroine, then, Alison’s pregnant body is quite literally used as a vehicle for Ben’s masculine redemption. She is reduced to what Greven describes as a “remote goddess” whose purpose is to exert a “smug influence” over the burdensome procedure of masculine redemption (18).

Alison’s older sister, Debbie, also shares this position as a smug, remote goddess, but unlike Alison, she has a wide capacity for complex emotion and is arguably the sharpest and funniest character in the film. However, because Debbie is such an outspoken, intelligent and assertive woman, she is accordingly relegated to secondary character status, where, outside of motherhood and household drudgery she does not have a career, nor does the film show her as having any kind of sex life or explicit sexual desire. Unlike most secondary female characters in this current romantic hommecom cycle, who are often shown as having excessive sexual desires that intimidate or repulse the male characters (i.e. Gloria in Wedding Crashers, Paula in Virgin), Debbie has a glaring disinterest in sex—she sighs in exhausted disgust at the thought of having sex.
with Pete and does not express any desire to seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere. And while she does have a refreshing assertiveness, its impact is often undermined by her profound insecurities. These insecurities mainly stem from her internalized sexism and her unhappy marriage to Pete, who admits he is incapable of giving Debbie the kind of love, attention, and emotional support that she needs and that he feels she deserves. For instance, on more than one occasion, Debbie reveals that her sense of self-worth, namely in matters of her physical appearance, is contingent upon male approval. Furthermore, the insecurity and frustration she feels in her miserable marriage drives her to nagging, nitpicking, and snooping—all aggravating behaviors that threaten male autonomy and ultimately impede the straight male viewer from empathizing with her unfortunate situation. As a final blow to Debbie, and in yet another instance where Apatow suggests that women appreciate abusive male behavior, Ben rudely expels her from Alison’s delivery room. Debbie not only gives in to Ben, she also suddenly realizes that she likes him and thinks he will be a good father.

Despite their mutual misery and resentment, the narrative has Debbie remain with Pete and even has her suggest that they have another baby. Their unhappy, sexless marriage is a signature romantic hommecom attempt at paying a fashionable lip service to the current crumbling state of marriage, all while trying to force two other incompatible characters, in this case Alison and Ben, into an identical situation. As Denby observes, Knocked Up “offers a marriage plot that couldn’t be more wary of marriage” (59)—Pete even describes marriage to Ben as an unfunny episode of Everybody Loves Raymond that lasts forever. In addition to Debbie and Pete’s marital disaster, there are also references to Ben’s father being “divorced three times,” and
Alison’s mother has a stepdaughter. Romantic hommecoms thus share a similar function to the screwball comedy, which endorsed marriage at a time when popular perceptions associated the institution with entrapment, misery and failure and yet still considered it “nice” because it is was legal and civilized (Glitre, 42). Through Debbie and Pete, the film openly expresses the struggles and failure of marriage to eternalize romantic love, only to have the characters uphold the institution for themselves and even their children. For instance, Debbie explains to her skeptical daughters that “people who love each other should get married and have babies.”

While Pete is by no means an unemployed schlub like Ben, he displays a similar carelessness and immaturity that drives Debbie to frustration, insecurity and tears. Their marital tension comes to a sad climax when Debbie seeks to confirm her suspicion that Pete is cheating on her with another woman, but instead finds him in a room full of men playing “fantasy” baseball. Indeed, the last thing on Pete’s mind, let alone his fantasy wishlist, is getting involved with another woman who would probably end up nagging and smothering him like Debbie. Unlike the earlier subgenres, such as the screwball and sex comedy, where much audience pleasure was derived from the couple’s snappy insults, the lovers’ quarrels in the romantic hommecom are often unsettling and acerbic. However, the emotional distress and unresolved tribulations of the romantic and family melodrama always lurk beneath the romcom’s fragile lightheartedness, and the raunchy romantic hommecom is no exception. Pete admits to Debbie that he needs to get away from his marital and parental responsibilities and feels that his discretion is saving her from additional aggravation. Although the narrative never permits it, Debbie admits that she would like to get away too, but is profoundly hurt by Pete’s secret, passive-aggressive
rejection and her forced disillusionment with the romantic ideology that promised all-encompassing, everlasting love in marriage.

While Alison attributes this failure to Debbie and Pete just not being “right for each other,” Ben, of course, insists their marriage has failed because “Pete’s awesome and Debbie’s a pain in the ass.” In any case, both Ben and Alison are admittedly nervous about ending up like Debbie and Pete, but the narrative never firmly suggests that their obviously forced relationship will be any different. Furthermore, the narrative is essentially at a loss for any rational explanation as to why Ben and Alison’s forced romantic relationship would be “the best thing for the baby.” After all, the film shows how Pete and Debbie’s marriage “for the sake of the kids” only ended up producing two miserable parents and a daughter obsessed with murder and gore. While Ben and Alison’s union cannot be convincingly attributed to any physical, sexual, intellectual or emotional chemistry, or even a mutual desire for the security of marriage, it can be explained by generic conventions and as a response to a cultural crisis in patriarchal family values.

After Alison informs Ben of her pregnancy, she asks him to accompany her to an OB/GYN appointment—an intimate request that seems far more appropriate for her close sister Debbie rather than a total stranger who repulses her. Alison and Ben actually warm up to each other as she drags him to doctor after doctor, all of whom happen to be male, save for one incompetent female. In addition to OB/GYN shopping, the unlikely couple also bonds while shopping for baby supplies. Alison begins to hang out with Ben’s grubby, foul-mouthed crew and even helps out with their website, while Ben mostly maintains his lazy, stoner lifestyle. However, after an awkward encounter with a group of Alison’s female friends, Ben, in a reverse twist of fate, has a sudden epiphany and
realizes he should be “responsible” and formally propose to Alison, while she prefers to hold off on marriage until she knows what their “love means.” Alison quickly realizes that their “love means” Ben rescuing his bong instead of her during an earthquake and that he never even bothered to open the baby books. Alison’s shining moment, however, comes when Ben refuses to admit that Pete was wrong for attending those secret fantasy baseball meetings. She kicks Ben out of the car and later screams at him for being irresponsible, insensitive, and unappreciative of the sacrifices she is making for this baby (read: his redemption). Her rage and behavior is, of course, written off as “hormones,” but her decision to break off the relationship with Ben is what finally gets him to “grow up.” During their breakup, Ben moves out of his friends’ house, gets a job for the first time in his life, reads the baby books, and gets to bed early instead of going out with his friends. He also musters the masculine authority to order Alison’s doctor around, and perhaps most significantly, to kick Debbie out of the delivery room. While the film seriously entertains the idea that Alison and Ben could just be friends and share the parenting duties as they go about their individual lives, it ultimately insists on their last-minute romantic reunion, as Ben’s redemption would not be complete without placing him a husband position.

In addition to Alison and Ben’s relationship, the narrative also fails to explain Alison’s decision to continue with the pregnancy. Why is Alison, at this important juncture in her life, so adamant about keeping the child she mistakenly conceived with an essentially useless man who repulses her? According to the latest figures from the Guttmacher Institute, about one in five pregnancies is aborted in America, but in recent Hollywood films every disastrous, unplanned pregnancy seems to be carried to term (i.e.
What is even more striking, however, is that the foul-mouthed characters in *Knocked Up* cannot even utter the word “abortion.” Within Ben’s circle it is briefly, uneasily referred to as something that rhymes with “schmaschmortion” and Alison’s stiff mother pleads with her to “take care of” the pregnancy. Her honest, practical advice, however, is twisted into something meant to shock viewers when she suggests that Alison can always have “a real baby” later in life when she is presumably married to a respectable man. Alison’s mother is thus vilified for her suggestion, but Ben’s cool and laid back father could not be more thrilled with the baby news. Alison’s decision to go through with the pregnancy, then, can unfortunately only be traced to her inexplicable desire to spite her mother.

Besides Alison’s refusal to disclose her pregnancy at work for fear she’ll lose her new job (luckily for Alison, however, pregnancy just so happens to be “in” at E!), one critic also points out that Apatow “has little to say about the struggles, economic and otherwise, of single-motherhood” (Edelstein). Although the narrative never permits Alison to express any regret or anger over her situation, Ben and Pete openly express their desire for a time machine that could take them back and give them another chance to “maybe put a condom on.” Debbie, being the sharpest, wittiest character in the film, suggests that Ben and Pete “go back in their time-machine and fuck each other”—to which Ben replies, “why wait?” While the heterosexual relationships in the romantic hommecom seem forced and discordant, the (overwhelmingly male) homosocial bonds are far more convincing and seem to offer a more fulfilling, durable alternative to marriage or the monogamous heterosexual coupling. For instance, in *Wedding Crashers*, Jeremy and John admit they love each other and although they are paired off with women
in the end, it still feels like they are the real couple in the film. Also, in Apatow’s more recent film, *Superbad* (2007), Evan and Seth admit they want to shout their love for each other from the rooftops, and they gaze longingly at each other when the film forces them to go their separate ways with their girlfriends.

In *Knocked Up*, when Ben is with his group of friends, they are constantly laughing, joking, or engaged in some kind of fun or silly activity. While the film ultimately repudiates this male space and revokes Ben’s membership once he becomes a “responsible” adult, it does develop a considerably lasting fondness for the relationship between Ben and Pete. These two are bound by their mutual apathy and disenchantment towards their marital, familial, and economic responsibilities and, in an attempt to get away from Debbie and Alison and related obligations, they take a trip to Las Vegas. However, they do not gamble or get laid—instead they stare at each other as thong-clad female strippers dance in their laps, take “shrooms,” and hang out in their hotel room (Denby, 59). Their male utopia, however, is punctured by their mutual guilt for resenting their responsibilities and for essentially being incapable of sustaining the kind of monogamous, romantic love society expects of them. After realizing how truly “irresponsible” they have been and how unworthy they are of their respective women, they feel ashamed and want to return home immediately.

While the romantic hommecom notoriously neglects to develop significant female bonds, Debbie and Alison have an unusually close relationship for any romantic comedy, as the narrative energy is usually reserved for the heterosexual couple, and then secondly for male friendships. For instance, Alison is an on-camera personality for a national television network, wears fashionable clothing and drives a new Volkswagen Jetta, but
for some unstated reason she still lives with her sister. Debbie insists that Alison remains
at the house so she can help her raise the baby, but Pete is anxious for Alison to move
out. Indeed, Knocked Up reflects current patriarchal anxiety over single-motherhood, for
the film is noticeably anxious by the threatening possibility of Alison as a content, self-
sustaining single mother—and especially with the idea of Alison and Debbie raising the
child together.

Like Alison’s potential single-motherhood, the close bond between the sisters
presents a threat to patriarchal masculinity, as it essentially renders men even more
useless than they already appear to be in this film. Unlike Ben and Pete, however, when
Debbie and Alison embark on their “new beginning” and flee from their relationships and
maternal roles, their efforts fail miserably. The two sisters attempt to get into an exclusive
nightclub, but the doorman refuses to lift the velvet rope. After Debbie shamelessly
screams an insulting tirade in his face, the doorman takes her aside and gently explains
that he cannot let them in because Debbie is “old as fuck,” and Alison is too pregnant for
the club. He goes on to say that he would love to “rip [Debbie’s] ass up” (a foul remark
Debbie silently accepts as some kind of compliment) but his club cannot have a “bunch
of old, pregnant bitches running around” and Debbie’s “old ass should know better”
anyway. Debbie and Alison can only walk away in silent defeat and shame for not
“knowing better.” The sisters spend the rest of their evening on a street curb, pouting
about getting old and unattractive, until it is time to go relieve the babysitter and return to
their motherly responsibilities. The real defeat of the sister bond, however, comes at the
end of the film when Ben banishes Debbie from the delivery room with no objection

85
from Alison. And to finally make the eradication of the sister bond complete, the film has Alison move out of her sister’s house and into Ben’s apartment to raise the baby.

In addition to the initial celebration and then repudiation of homosocial bonds, it is also worth noting that the romantic hommecom treats sex—the core of the romantic comedy—in a similar manner. Although these films are characterized by their initial emphasis on satisfactory, heterosexual sex, this emphasis is overwhelmingly male-centric and rather misogynistic. While promiscuous straight male sexuality is wildly celebrated, female promiscuity and sexual assertiveness is portrayed as something threatening, sick, and undesirable. While the hommecom may renounce the more explicitly misogynistic attitudes in the central male pack, the total disavowal of uncoupled, fluid sexuality is a reactionary response to changing sexual norms. Out of the hommecom cycle, Knocked Up is perhaps one of the least concerned with the importance of sex and sexual fulfillment. Debbie and Pete apparently have a sexless marriage and the film does not divulge any details about Ben and Alison’s sexual histories or desires, except that both characters are equally surprised that they had an actual sexual encounter. As a result of their one night of random, unprotected sex they are punished with an unexpected pregnancy. This perceived “punishment,” however is twisted into a blessing by the end of the film, as the “redeemed” Ben cradles his new baby daughter in his arms and essentially admits that not putting a condom on was the best thing that ever happened to him. The only other sexual encounter in the film is when Ben is unable and unwilling to satisfy Alison’s sexual needs because he is worried about offending and hurting his unborn child. There is also a certain male uneasiness in viewing the pregnant woman as a sexual entity and the mainstream Hollywood film has traditionally sought to separate the
maternal from the sexual. Unsurprisingly, then, the sex scene ends in a mutual frustration and the subject of sex and sexual fulfillment, or lack thereof, is virtually dropped for the remainder of the film. Sex is essentially dismissed as something too irresponsible and irrelevant for more important things like marriage and parenthood.

Like the other films in its steadily expanding cycle, *Knocked Up* is such a breezy pleasure to watch, at least from a detached position, for its engaging characters and humor that its implausible, even reactionary, impulses go undetected or accepted as “sweet.” As a paragon for the millennial, male-centered romcom, I agree with Denby that *Knocked Up* represents “the disenchantment of the romantic comedy the end point of a progression from... a popped champagne cork to a baby crowning” (59)—from a romance of mutual transformation to mutual resentment. Although *Knocked Up* successfully demonstrates that both men and women suffer in their forced acquiescence to an unsatisfactory modes of heterosexual relationships and gender roles, the hommecom heroines must ultimately bear the additional burden of pulling these men out of their happy states of arrested development. As Denby astutely summarizes, “women may bring home the bacon, but men bring home the soul” (59). And yet, although Brian Henderson was mistaken in his prognosis that the romantic comedy genre would die without its strong heroines, considering its current state the genre, I think, desperately needs to be put out of its misery.
Conclusion

Although the millennial romantic hommecom aims to pull humor and force romance from the struggle between male infantilism and female ambition (Denby, 59), this cultural phenomenon has been anything but funny or "sweet." Indeed, the social panic over male underachievement and the resulting feminist backlash is quite real, as female students now outnumber men at many universities (Negra in "Where the Boys Are") and men are becoming increasingly displaced from the workforce, "rendered socially and culturally subaltern by more intelligent, more sophisticated, more reliable, more responsible and less troublesome women" (Smith, 733). Meanwhile, less educated, poorer women are struggling to support their children, as more and more absent fathers default on their child support payments (Ehrenreich, 258).

While certain kinds of female agency and feminist gains, such as economic independence, have been absorbed by the dominant hegemony, active feminism itself has been widely repudiated—a postfeminist "double address" (Tasker and Negra, 107) evident in the romantic hommecom. In this neo-conservative era women are faced with the increasing pressure to "retreat" from their career-oriented, single lifestyles and fulfill more traditional roles as wives and mothers. Certain cultural phenomena, however, such as the $32 billion a year bridal industry (Negra in "Quality Postfeminism") and the disturbing media fixation on celebrity "baby-bumps" and high-profile child adoptions, have idealized these traditional feminine roles as something hip, glamorous and even empowering. As exemplified in the romantic hommecom, these postfeminist, societal pressures of "retreatism" and "downsizing" for women are at fundamental odds with
what these same terms imply for men: a retreat to infantilism and irrelevance from mainstream, domestic entrapment as represented by women.

*New Yorker* critic, Anthony Lane, thus poses the crucial question: "there are women out there who badly need men to grow up, and men don’t really want to, so who will referee?” (88) While the romantic hommecom and other media texts have enthusiastically risen to the challenge, the Bush administration has also offered to step in. For the current administration has endorsed at least one, “faith-based,” state antipoverty program that conceptualized marriage as a social and economic panacea for poverty, namely impoverished women (Negra in “Quality Postfeminism?”). However, when Katharine Boo, a journalist for the *New Yorker*, traveled to middle America to investigate this “faith-based” marriage initiative and its real social impact on the lives of her poor, struggling female subjects, she found that they were not exactly the beneficiaries of this warped and ultimately ineffective social policy, but its “beasts of burden” (110). In an unsettling resemblance to the narrative conventions of the romantic hommecom, Boo writes that “having already complied with social and economic pressures to work, poor women were now being asked to do something that their government had so far failed at: push their male counterparts into the cultural and economic mainstream” (110). Needless to say, these women’s efforts at “pushing” men into marriage and fatherhood proved overwhelmingly futile, even counterproductive.

Whether it is with state-sanctioned social policy, people’s private lives, or fictional texts such as the romantic hommecom, the act of reducing women to vehicles for any purpose (particularly for masculine redemption), will inevitably prove catastrophic for both sexes. The romantic hommecom is, I think, ultimately about the
repudiation of feminism in the face of a threatened patriarchal masculinity, for it is simply not enough for these films to provide women with a career, a sexual appetite, and/or a sharp-tongue as mere “consolation prizes” (Greven, 18) for their uneasy acquiescence to their own objectification or eradication. The romantic hommecom’s continued downsizing of its female characters as vehicles for masculine redemption only leaves men and women suspended in rigid cultural catch 22s, with their struggles hidden behind ceaseless bodily humor—it is a most unromantic disaster that stifles the potential for progressive resolutions or empathy between the sexes. And yet, despite its toxic ideological framework, blatant hypocrisy, and barely contained hetero-masculine anxiety, the romantic hommecom continues to gain momentum as the dominant mode of the genre, most recently with Apatow’s overly hyped *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008)—self tagged as “the ultimate romantic disaster movie.” What else could possibly go wrong in the millennial romantic hommecom?
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Appendix

Figure 1: John and Jeremy in *Wedding Crashers*

Figure 2: John and Jeremy in *Wedding Crashers*
Appendix

Figure 1: John and Jeremy in *Wedding Crashers*

Figure 2: John and Jeremy in *Wedding Crashers*
Figure 3: Claire Cleary in *Wedding Crashers*

Figure 4: Todd Cleary in *Wedding Crashers*
Figure 3: Claire Cleary in *Wedding Crashers*

Figure 4: Todd Cleary in *Wedding Crashers*
Figure 5: Sac Lodge and Claire Cleary in *Wedding Crashers*
Figure 5: Sac Lodge and Claire Cleary in *Wedding Crashers*
Figure 6: Official Poster for *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*
Figure 6: Official Poster for *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*
Figure 7: Cal and David in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*
Figure 7: Cal and David in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*
Figure 8: Andy and Beth in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*
Figure 8: Andy and Beth in *The 40 Year-Old Virgin*
Figure 9: Official Poster for *Knocked Up*
WHAT IF THIS GUY GOT YOU PREGNANT?

The next comedy from the director of
THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN

06/01/07 SAVE THE DUE DATE

Figure 9: Official Poster for Knocked Up
Figure 10: Ben with the gang in Knocked Up

Figure 11: Debbie and Pete in Knocked Up
Figure 10: Ben with the gang in *Knocked Up*

Figure 11: Debbie and Pete in *Knocked Up*
Figure 12: Alison and Debbie in *Knocked Up*

Figure 13: Ben and Pete in *Knocked Up*
Figure 12: Alison and Debbie in *Knocked Up*

Figure 13: Ben and Pete in *Knocked Up*
Figure 14: Alison and Ben in *Knocked Up*

Figure 15: Ben in *Knocked Up*
Figure 14: Alison and Ben in *Knocked Up*

Figure 15: Ben in *Knocked Up*
Vita

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