The "Mock-Macho" Situation Comedy: Hegemonic Masculinity and its Reiteration

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This essay examines how Home Improvement and Coach play off the stereotypes of conventional masculinity in order to describe how these texts work to reiterate hegemonic masculinity. The analysis focuses on how the "mock-macho" sitcom takes masculinity as an object of its own discourse and induces pleasure in the realization of masculinity as a gender performance. This study suggests some of the features and complexities of this discursive strategy and draws on Butler's (1990) concept of "gender parody" to theorize "mock-macho" gender performances and their comic effectiveness. The essay concludes with an assessment of the ambivalent gender politics of "mock-macho" situation comedies.

An essential aspect of power is that it only likes to laugh at its own jokes.

— Peter Sloterdijk (1987)

It's a dangerous game, that comedy plays. Sometimes it tells you the truth, sometimes it delays it.

— Elvis Costello (1994)

Comedy, according to Neale & Krutnik (1990), traffics in the "surprising, the improper, the unlikely, and the transgressive in order to make us laugh" (p. 3). Moments of television comedy typically "involve a departure from a norm, whether the norm be one of action, appropriate behavior, conventional dress, or stereotypical features" (p. 67). At the same time, as Bathrick (1984) aptly notes, situation comedies situate us, offering some of the subject positions which women and men may inhabit to make sense of their own lived gender relations and realities. This is indeed the case with Home Improvement and Coach, two popular ABC sitcoms. Analysis of these series provides an opportunity to explore situation comedies as gender comedies, and,

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Winter 1998

more specifically, to begin to explicate their parodic mode of masculine discourse.

In this essay, I examine Home Improvement (from September 7, 1991 to the present) and Coach (from February 28, 1989 through May 14, 1997), with a focus on the way in which signs of "masculinity" are expressed and played off one another within the parodic mode of US television situation comedy. The goal of this analysis is not to define a new comedic genre, but to identify some of the features and complexities of this comedic mode, and to examine the implications of mobilizing this type of gender parody for hegemonic masculinity.1

Various efforts have been made to theorize the specific effectiveness of humor (Berger, 1987) and comedy (Palmer 1987, 1994), to critique the gendered assumptions of comic theories, and to explore women's relationship to laughter (Gray, 1994). Palmer (1987) argues that comic articulation invokes background expectations of plausibility and implausibility, which, in turn, "stem from the discourses of the social formation." As he explains, "jokes create comic impact . . . by the contradiction of discursively defined expectations" (p. 139). In Palmer's formulation of the "logic of the absurd" specific to comedy, implausible actions or events reinforce a given discourse, while plausibility "constitutes an attack upon the discourse in terms of which the action is seen as absurd" (p. 179). However, it is one thing to describe the effectiveness of this logic and quite another to theorize the relation between situation comedy and social relations of power.

On the one hand, Palmer (1987) suggests that humor is "neither essentially liberatory nor conservative . . . its very basis is ambivalence" (p. 213).2 On the other hand, work in feminist media studies has identified how feminine discourse in relation to soap operas is often parodic:

It makes fun of dominant practices and discursive notions. By playing in this way with the conventions of the dominant discourse, feminine discourse constitutes itself as 'other' to it, and displays a potential resistance. (Brown, 1990, p. 190)

Women's reconstruction of humor and play with language, as Gray (1994) suggests, is a way for women to "insert themselves into history as agents of change" (p. 36). However, there are limits to the subversive potential of such comedy, for the "sitcom's dependence upon a consumer culture for its very existence will almost certainly preclude a laughter which provokes analysis of consumerism itself" (Gray, 1994, p. 45). Behind these considerations lies an ongoing debate over whether humor and comedy are basically subversive or conservative. But as the epigraph to this essay suggests, humor often entails the communication of paradox (Fry, 1987). Thus, comic articulation can be defined as a semiotic process that is both "subversive and conservative, offensive and inoffensive, serious and ridiculous" (Palmer, 1987, p. 182); comic narrative is simultaneously plausible and implausible (Palmer, 1994).
In light of the fundamentally incongruous nature of comedy, the question then becomes how we can theorize television's contribution to the hegemonic process in order to parody elements of dominant (masculinist) ideology? We can begin to answer this question and the specific issues it raises by examining two contemporary situation comedies, *Home Improvement* and *Coach*.

*Home Improvement* and *Coach* represent a paradoxical discursive event: masculine discourse which takes up masculinity as an object of its own discourse. In both series, a parodic mode of discourse is deployed to address white, middle class, middle-aged men's anxieties about a feminized ideal for manhood they may not want to live up to, as well as changes in work and family life that continue to dissolve separate gender spheres within white, professional-managerial, class life. At the same time, queer theory and politics have further pluralized and relativized the gendered meanings of "home," "family," "romantic love," and even "mass culture" (Doty, 1993). These discourses, along with the discourses of the "men's movement," intersect to produce the broader discursive context in which "mock-macho" sitcoms such as *Home Improvement* and *Coach* have appeared. Thus, it is within this context that we must examine how "mock-macho" sitcoms function as a discursive strategy through which the force relations of masculinity and femininity take effect.

Mock-macho sitcoms like *Home Improvement* and *Coach* offer viewers more than a postmodern spectacle of unenlightened or unreconstructed manhood. By making a mockery of masculinity, these comic narratives simultaneously present men as objects of laughter and as subjects moving between "old" and "new" subject positions. While this process of resubjectification may not signify a change in social structures of hierarchy and inequality, such comic texts can imply a lack of reverence for conventional masculinity, especially as it is defined in terms of competence and infallibility. As Gray (1994) suggests, humor, like sexuality, is a changing social construct; thus, the popularity of these sitcoms suggests a shift in the nature and parameters of domestic sitcom performance, as male comic television actors ridicule their own lack of self-knowledge and as more male viewers have learned to laugh at themselves (see also *Men Behaving Badly*). However, as I shall go on to argue, such self-reflexive humor also may signify and celebrate a neocolonial disposition. Indeed, in contrast to a neokynic or "bottom up" power which some media scholars have argued is enabled by popular media texts like *Roseanne*, I argue that *Home Improvement* and *Coach* display a neocynical stance that legitimizes a "master cynicism," a "cheekiness that has changed sides" (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 111). That is, these series articulate a particular discursive strategy in the sitcom "battle of the sexes," which reverses neokynicism (popular feminism from below) into its opposite, cynicism (the male power bloc tells the truth about themselves and denies any ability to do anything about it).

This essay advances a suspicious, rather than cultural populist, reading of "mock-macho" humor within the contemporary sitcom genre. Such a reading differs from Miller's (1987) aesthetic conception of the sitcom genre, and from his humanistic critique of its relation to American consumer culture. For Miller, even when "pseudopatriarchalist fantasy" is replaced with "pseudofeminist fantasy," such comedic texts only serve to promote television's assault on "individuality," and to promote consumption as a way of life. (However, Miller goes on to claim that the sitcom's recoding of fatherhood through "routine autosubversion" is evidence of an anti-patriarchal trend in television.) This argument has merit if one accepts Miller's conception of genre and "patriarchy."

More recently, Mellencamp (1992) has analyzed sitcoms from a feminist, neo-Freudian, and Baudrillardian perspective. While she contends that through witticisms and other transgressions the dominant discursive code of patriarchy might be undone, Mellencamp also acknowledges that the sitcom's strategy for containing women as "wives" and "mothers" is always contradictory and open to alternative readings based on women's experiences of and dilemmas within patriarchy. On the other hand, Craig (1996) has taken a more deterministic view of recent domestic sitcoms. In his discussion of *Home Improvement*, Craig describes how this popular "producerly text" is designed to enable both female and male viewers to derive different meanings and pleasures from the same series. Although the series takes masculinity and power as its theme, and the producers evidently intend to offer a "mildly feminist satire of men," Craig argues that it works to "restore (women's) consent by pointing out the inevitability and the 'naturalness' of... modernized hegemonic masculinity" (1996, p. 70).

While sitcoms offer many sources of contradiction for women viewers, which some series may even foreground (e.g., men as bumbling but loveable fathers as in *Everybody Loves Raymond*), what is unique about *Home Improvement* and *Coach* is their self-conscious foregrounding of masculine discourse. As this critical reading of these series highlights, playing off masculine stereotypes and playing upon the classification of men as "sexist" is one of the discursive strategies through which these series reiterate and recuperate hegemonic masculinity.

In order to develop this argument, I first discuss some of the textual features of *Home Improvement* and then of *Coach*, paying particular attention to the major male characters. Following Fiske (1987), I analyze these comic television characters discursively as metonymic representations of male social positions, values, attitudes, and beliefs. I argue that the central male characters Tim Taylor (Tim Allen) and
Hayden Fox (Craig T. Nelson) express not only each series’ distinctive features and its ideological practice and problematic but also its affective disposition. My analysis presupposes that these characters (and the actors who create these distinctive comic personae) are “the main agents for ‘hailing’ and then interpellating the prospective audience” (Fiske, 1987, p. 162).

The analysis which follows draws upon my regular viewing of individual episodes from each series’ premiere through April, 1993. While my observations are limited to this period, where appropriate, I also have utilized secondary media texts and their readings of each series’ characters.3

By April 1993, Home Improvement had displaced Roseanne to become the No. 1 “hit show” (Hall, 1993). Also, by that time, Coach, which first gained popularity by being scheduled after Roseanne, had been rescheduled to follow Home Improvement, temporarily creating a “mock-macho” sitcom line-up for the first hour of Wednesday evening viewing. Such scheduling practices, in pursuit of laughter, higher ratings, and comparable demographics, provided the opportunity to examine these two series in tandem as a prime-time site of “mock-macho” humor.4 What initially struck me and led me to undertake this study, was the juxtaposition of these sitcoms and the collision of their gendered viewpoints. It seemed to me that this was a unique moment in sitcom history in which one could see masculine discourse seeking, and gaining, precedence and economic value over feminine discourse.

Installing the New Man

Home Improvement is based on the stand-up comedy of Tim Allen, who had established a reputation for doing “Men are Pigs” jokes and making light of masculine stereotypes and machismo attitudes in his standup comedy club performances (Koltnow, 1994). The sitcom series became an extended vehicle for Allen’s brand of “mock-macho” humor and self-ridicule. Tim, “The Tool Man,” Taylor, is, like his sitcom father predecessors, “at once the joker and a joke” (Miller, 1987, p. 214), but he also followed female standup comic performers like Roseanne Barr who parodied the image of white, middle class women and joked about everyday, domestic life. His is a recombinant image of domestic manhood, combining middle and working-class series’ representations of men and families, to produce a novel, leading male character for a middle-class series—a middle-class, macho male buffoon.5 In contrast to Dr. Cliff Huxtable of The Cosby Show (September 20, 1984-April 30, 1992), who represented black, middle-class men’s accommodation of a “pro-feminist” stance, Tim Taylor represents a “pro-male” male stance within white, middle-class, domesticity.

Take, for example, Home Improvement’s representation of an improved home and what this series presents as “masculine” prerogatives, interests, concerns, and dilemmas within contemporary domestic life. The series’ parodic discourse of masculinity echoes Ehrenreich’s (1983) thesis about white, heterosexual, middle-class men in the 1950s. She argues that post-World War II American men, masculinity, endangered by the bureaucratic organization of corporate work, could be renewed at home by taking up power tools and outdoor barbecues. However, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the separation of spheres between domestic and public life, as well as within the household, were further challenged by the second wave of feminism. By the 1990s, the boundary between the “female” domestic sphere and the “male” public sphere had become even more permeable, at least for members of the white, professional, managerial class. It is at this historical conjunction that Home Improvement attempts to imagine and preserve a place for men within the “home,” the primary spatial institution of the family, by putting into circulation and valorizing “men’s talk” about their wives, tools, home repair, and other joys of domestic manhood.

Tim Taylor makes a professional career out of this 1950s handyman role by hosting a Detroit-based cable TV show called Tool Time, a take-off of the public television series This Old House and other “home-repair” cable television shows. His solution to every home improvement problem is the macho “More Power!” but his actions, instead of demonstrating competency and control, typically lead to comic mishaps and catastrophes. Tool Time is a forum that bridges the workplace and home, public and private spaces. There Tim Taylor not only dispenses how-to-fix-it or build-it advice as a tool “expert,” he also mocks and insults his assistant Al Borland, makes wisecracks about his wife Jill Taylor, jokes about everyday life at home, and ponder over gender relations and issues in general to a mostly male studio audience.

Allen/Taylor’s performance thus puts definitions of domestic manhood and valued men’s technical knowledge into circulation in an exaggerated form and makes these ideological elements of masculinity readily available to viewers. This semiotic excess may enable some viewers to “mock the conventional, to evade its ideological thrust, to turn its norms back on themselves” (Fiske, 1989, p. 114). This may account for some of Home Improvement’s popularity, especially for women viewers; however, other viewers (especially male ones), may be drawn to the text by the centrality of its male star/joke teller, its masculine viewpoint on men and women, and its preferred technical discourse of masculinity within the domestic sphere. Moreover, for some male viewers, Tim Allen/Taylor’s humor may express a barely concealed, hostile structure of feeling towards women (Craig, 1996).

In keeping with the conventions of the domestic sitcom genre, complications and entanglements of love, marriage, and raising children abound in Home Improvement. In most episodes, Tim Taylor engages in some kind of relational “home repair” to restore marital
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equilibrium or family harmony. More specifically, the series is about men; as Tim Taylor puts it to his studio audience, and to us watching at home:

Tool Time is more than home improvement. It’s male improvement. An improved male is more sensitive to his wife. How do we get sensitive? By digging down in our emotions and sharing your feelings with others. You guys up to it?

Such invitations towards the establishment of a more sensitive norm for masculinity, however, almost inevitably are subjected to further comic treatment, thereby making light of men’s efforts to get in touch with their “feminine” side and to “improve” themselves and their homes.

In contrast to Cliff Huxtable, arguably the most popular TV father of the 1980s, Tim Taylor does not direct his humor at exposing the inadequacy of sexist platitudes or machismo attitudes (Jhally & Lewis, 1992); rather, Tim’s humor is directed towards “soft” males, like his assistant Al, and towards his wife Jill and other female members of the cast, such as Jill’s “feminist” friend, Karen. When Karen voices feminist critiques of patriarchal ideology, this provides an opportunity for Tim Taylor to rebut her feminist arguments and to make nonsense of feminist sense. As one male viewer explained to one of my students, Home Improvement is not as concerned as other sitcoms about being “politically correct about men and women” (Harrell, 1993). Insofar as Tim’s comic style includes tendentious jokes that make women the targets, these moments offer male viewers the pleasure of seeing the rational norms of feminist criticism subverted.

While Home Improvement attempts to construct an “improved” home for men (specifically, for men who already have homes), whether it constructs an improved home for women is indeed open to question. In the series’ first year, Jill Taylor was a full-time wife and mother, who was most often seen working in the kitchen or looking after their three sons. Her character could easily be seen as continuing the tradition of the sitcom’s ideal middle-class wife/mother. Like 1950s wives and mothers Donna Reed, June Cleaver, and Harriet Nelson, Jill appears to be contained within her kitchen and living room. TV Guide has also compared her to the verbally assertive Alice Crandam of The Honeymoorers, and read her as “part of the earthier, more opinionated wave of TV wives. Women—like Roseanne—who have power and use it” (Hall, 1993, p. 9). Jill Taylor sometimes does not permit or recognize Tim’s jokes, and sometimes she makes her husband the butt of her own jokes or offers a contrasting “female” viewpoint on gender differences, but her comic persona does not include naming and attacking aspects of patriarchy.

Despite the dissymmetry in their joking relationship, TV Guide readers have been invited to see Tim and Jill as “affectionate and feisty equals” (Hall, 1993, p. 9). It is not unusual to see any discord between them resolved by the injection of a little romance. In this regard, Craig (1996) argues that Jill Taylor is similar to the “strong, fiery” heroines preferred by readers of romance fiction (as described in Radway’s [1984] Reading the Romance), and he suggests that this may account for the show’s popularity among women viewers. He also points out that Pamela Richardson, who plays Jill Taylor, has been lauded in women’s magazines for being “the most true-to-life mom on TV” as well for not being “shrewish nor saccharine as her character humorously takes apart gender-related cliches and jokes fun at machismo mentality” (New Woman’s people, 1993, p. 69). However, Pamela Richardson has also been praised for supporting and stabilizing Tim Allen’s position as “more likeable and funnier” (Craig, 1994). Furthermore, in the series’ second season, when Jill took a job outside the home, the series began to explore “true-to-life” conflicts that arise for many dual-career couples who must negotiate housework and childcare. Yet, while the series has featured many scenes of Jill parenting or doing housework alone, few scenes have shown Jill working outside the home, or even discussing her work with Tim Taylor. Even an episode in which Jill was to be honored for her work centered on how Tim Taylor’s effort to be supportive led to her humiliation.

While the relationship between Tim and Jill is central to the series and significant in representing gender difference, Frolick (1992) also suggests that the series has “taken on the new men’s movement, which encourages men to reassert their masculinity” (p. 14). According to men’s movement spokesman Robert Bly (1990), while the “fifties male” role has lost its relevance for men, the 1970s “soft male” image is also problematic for men. Feminism, according to Bly, may have liberated women, but it failed to liberate men. This can only be accomplished, in Bly’s mythopoetic vision, if men dig down into their collective unconscious and retrieve the forgotten “Wild Man,” the alternative to the “soft male.” This “Wild Man” is the mode of masculinity with which Bly urges men to get in touch. This is particularly important, according to Bly, for the younger generation of men for whom the transcultural metanarrative of masculinity is no longer available.

Bly (1990) valorizes an account of gender development that identifies the necessary separation of boys from their mothers as the problem, a separation made increasingly difficult as gender roles and traits have become increasingly androgynous and blurred. As feminist critics have pointed out, this mythopoetic effort to retrieve a lost coherence and unity for the masculine subject is a massive refusal of the cultural, social, and political contexts in which “masculinity” is constructed in ways that oppress woman (see, for example, Doubiago, 1992).

Home Improvement appears to refract this Blysonian version of the crisis of masculinity. Tim Taylor’s guttural “Arghh, arghh, arghhh!” is the vestigial verbal sign of Bly’s “Wild Man.” Tool Time, like Bly’s ceremonial men’s hut, is a place where “men’s talk” about “tools” and
“home repair” can be exchanged and homosocial relations can be recreated, uninterrupted, inhibited or constrained by the presence of wives and mothers. In fact, the only woman to appear here regularly is Tim Taylor’s assistant Lisa, the stereotypical “buxom tool girl,” whose brief appearances evoke a pre-feminist vision of women as “sex objects” and whose role is to fetch and stand by ready and willing to take orders at the beck and call of men.

*Home Improvement* also visualizes, more than other domestic sitcoms, a separate male place within the home. The series is a blueprint for gender relations that acknowledges the need for “male improvement,” yet simultaneously expresses men’s deep anxiety about further dissolving the boundaries between men’s and women’s spaces. In fact, the potential or actual dissolution of separate male/female spheres within the Taylor household is often a source of misunderstandings and arguments. Tim Taylor’s movement between his workplace and home workshop, and his clear demarcation of male-defined spaces and activities, constructs a “home” that is more obviously segregated by gender than most sitcom homes. The effect of *Home Improvement*’s remasculinization of domestic space is to reassert male knowledge and involvement concerning the management of the household and raising children and to undermine whatever historical claim to knowledge or authority in the domestic sphere women have had. At the end of one episode, for example, it is Jill who has learned to “let go of some things” to accommodate Tim Taylor’s knowledge of how to do things, to appreciate his domestic successes as well as failures, and to value his efforts to be “sensitive” as well as his natural “boyishness.”

In constructing a space for the male subject within the home, *Home Improvement* also expresses the ideological problematic of the “new father,” which is, in part, the problem of being a male heterosexual parent when domestic femininity is no longer hegemonic for women and single-parent families have become more common (Cohen, 1993). Within the sitcom genre, *Murphy Brown* (November 14, 1988—present) has represented the possibility of an independent, career woman who raises a male child without the involvement of the child’s biological father. Additionally, as the lesbian, bi-sexual, and gay civil rights march in Washington, D.C. on April 25, 1993, made clear to straight America, sexual minorities are no longer foregiving parenthood. Against this intertextual and extratextual context, Tim’s involvement with the all-male children of the Taylor family expresses the new paternal ideal for domestic manhood Bly sees as essential for the psychosocial development of boys. In Bly’s (1990) account, boys are in danger of becoming the next generation of “soft” men either because mothers ruin the intimate relationship between fathers and sons, or because fathers (not merely father’s incomes) are absent. In the face of the “breakdown” of the family, Bly believes heterosexual married men must reassert their paternal prerogatives. On *Home Improvement*, this is accomplished by Tim’s constructing male-dominated spaces within the home. These include the garage workshop, where Tim Taylor can show fatherly concern and masculine expertise with tools, and the backyard, where Tim and his sons can express their “natural” aggressiveness by roughhousing and wrestling. Tim’s worries about his sons’ “sissiness” also leads him into conflict with Jill over the proper sort of socialization for boys. Tim and Jill grapple with and debate their son’s choices of leisure activities; Jill prefers ballet and opera, while Tim thinks sports and monster-truck rallies are more fun. In one episode, Tim must deal with his son’s embarrassment at being hugged by his father in public. From Wilson, he learns that males display affection for one another by using forms rooted in male combat and competition. Tim proceeds to teach his son that hugging may be inappropriate in some circumstances, but that fathers can express love for their sons in less physical, but distinctly “male” ways: “After all,” Tim quips to his son, “I’m not a man, I’m your father.”

*Home Improvement*’s Blysonian intertext extends beyond father-son relations to Tim Taylor’s relationships with other men. From Tim Taylor’s point of view, his assistant Al represents dubious masculinity: Al is shy, sensitive, caring, co-operative, unwilling to take risks, too close to his mother, and too much in touch with his “feminine” side. To Tim Taylor’s further consternation, Al is more skillful with tools and more popular among guests and viewers of *Tool Time* than is Tim, the host of the show. As the embodiment of the “soft male,” Al is the constant target of Tim Taylor’s insults and ridicule. Still, Tim Taylor’s and Al’s joking relationship reflects the traditional use of joke-telling to secure the fraternity of heterosexual men (Lyman, 1992). That is, Tim Taylor, as the host of *Tool Time* is often upstaged by Al, and while gender is not the only content of their jokes, joking enables them to negotiate the tension they—and male viewers—may feel about their relationships with each other and with women (Lyman, 1992).

The other significant homosocial relationship in this series is between Tim Taylor and Wilson, the Taylors’ next-door neighbor. If some of Tim Taylor’s jokes may be read, in part, as an effort to police Al’s commitments to women in general, Wilson oversees Tim Taylor’s commitment to his wife Jill. Tim Taylor, unsure of how to act or respond when relational or familial difficulties or problems arise, turns to Wilson, the voice of mature masculinity, for counsel and advice. Wilson’s advice is an amalgam of popular culture wisdom (e.g., “A man’s got to know his limitations”), proverbs (e.g., “A great lover is not one who romances a different woman every night but one who romances the same woman for a lifetime”) and Blysonian remedies for the “problem” of the father-son relationship (e.g., when Tim and Jill consider the appropriate punishment for one of their ill-behaved sons, and Jill’s method fails, Wilson tells Tim he must find a unique way to “initiate his son”). In the course of these man-to-man talks, Wilson advocates some
reconsideration of traditional masculinity, but any gender antagonism in a social structural sense is translated into mere gender "difference." In these exchanges, Tim is taught the principles of a "successful" marriage (e.g., "compromise") and other "truths" about the paradox of male/female differences. Their exchanges typically translate the feminist debate about cultural difference and equality into one about inherent difference and "compatibility." Indeed, for the most part, Home Improvement construes gender politics in personalized and therapeutic terms, calling on married men to be more in tune with their feelings and to appreciate their wives more. Ultimately, Home Improvement's weekly spectacle of Tim's incompetence reasserts the notion of women's competence in the domestic realm. Despite Tim's concerted efforts at home repair and "male improvement," he inevitably fails. Through its representation of Tim as a middle-class, domestic male buffoon, the series simultaneously parodies domestic masculinity and circumscribes "natural" limits to the male subject's partnership with the "feminine" or involvement in the "feminine" sphere. Simply put, Home Improvement constructs a place in the home where the "new man" can be installed without contradicting the "old man" too much.

Reinventing Homo Vulgaris Anonymous

Coach offers a spectacle of masculinity that recalls and undermines another image of masculinity, the men-as-jocks stereotype. This series revolves around middle-aged, divorced Hayden Fox's efforts to build a successful college football team with his assistants Luther Van Dam—the zany, scatterbrained, older bachelor—and Michael "Dauber" Dybinski—the dumb, yet unselshock jock. In combining workplace and romantic comedy conventions, this sitcom offers a variation on the domestic sitcom: Problems of unity, allegiance, and obligation are centered not on the nuclear family, but rather are dispersed over male work/friendship relationships as well as heterosexual couple and parental relationships. Hayden Fox is not a joke-teller in the sense that Tim Allen/Taylor is, but he does display the same limited character development typical of television situation comedy. He is, in many ways, a caricature of the macho jock: His verbal style, at work and at home, is tactless; his views are chauvinistic; and his reactions are self-absorbed and insensitive. Despite these characteristics, viewers apparently found Hayden Fox sufficiently to their liking to keep the series on for seven years.

Ridiculous verbal exchanges and gag sequences that lead to physical comedy among the male characters are primary aspects of the series, but many episodes and scenes also foreground Hayden Fox's relationships with women. Fox's romantic partner is Christine Armstrong, a broadcast journalist who, until she became unemployed, represented the successful, independent career woman. She espouses liberal feminist viewpoints, and career conflicts between Hayden Fox and Christine have been a major issue and source of escalating arguments. A number of episodes centered around their premarital foibles and differing expectations of married life. In one episode, for example, Hayden Fox learns that Christine earns considerably more than he does, which causes him to worry about his role as "the strong one, the protector." In order to overcome the discrepancy in incomes, Hayden Fox decides to endorse a line of athletic supporters, a scheme to "get even" that backfires. Christine conspires Hayden by telling him that it is "silly to compete against each other," that "life is better when you get some support." Christine, as the "new woman," teaches Hayden the value of cooperation and represents a form of liberal feminist consciousness-raising that mainly helped consolidate the white, professional, managerial class (Ehrenreich, 1990). Hayden Fox, as the "new man," comes to understand he will be marrying the "new woman" rather than a mere wife. Hayden Fox is also reunited with Kelly, his 18-year-old daughter by a previous marriage, and also must come to an understanding of what it means to be a "new father." In one episode Kelly seeks advice from Hayden and Christine about how to deal with the emotional turmoil of her divorce. To Kelly's surprise, Christine's advice is not helpful, but her father's is. This episode makes comic sense because the narrative contradicts Hayden's comic persona, and overtures the presumption that fathers never know what is best for their daughters.

Thus, a great deal of the comic effectiveness of this series arises from the efforts of Hayden Fox to preserve his unreconstructed masculinity when the women in his life expect him to act like a New Man or New Father. Typically, it his incomprehension of these possibilities that makes his behavior incongruous and thus funny. Occasionally, he tries to masquerade as a New Man or New Father, which requires contriving to conceal from other female characters, his unreconstructed masculinity. For example, in one episode Christine, who is concerned about living arrangements after they are married, suggests that they start functioning as a "team" in searching for, and making decisions about, a new place to live. However, Hayden makes an offer on the first house they look at without letting Christine share in the decision, although he continues to act as a "team player" as they look at other places. Our laughter may come from Hayden's masquerade as a man who is co-operative, patient, and willing to compromise. At the end of the house-hunting episode, Christine's anger at being left out of the decision-making process is juxtaposed with Hayden's confession that he "jumped the gun" and an appeal to appreciate his "crazy" gesture for what it was. Whatever the complications or interpersonal catastrophes, the "unlovable jerk" who is prone to thinking only about himself is revealed as a man with a "heart of gold." Like Wood Newton in Evening Shade (September 21, 1990–May 30, 1994), Hayden Fox's struggles with "old" and "new" gender "roles" allows for a polyvalent response, appealing to some female and male viewers' sense of gender fairness, but also allowing some viewers to revel in his fakery (Steinman, 1992).
Hayden Fox clearly embodies elements of conventional masculinity which are narratively demonstrated to be anachronistic; as Hayden once put it, “I’m a man in back of his time.” Hayden is aware of the “great change” in gender relations ushered in by the liberal feminist movement. He attempts to become a more involved father, but he displays great scorn for Kelly’s sensitive boyfriend, and later husband and ex-husband, Stuart. He regards some women as equals, but he makes put-downs of his ex-wife and he is antagonistic toward and resentful of women like Judy, the women’s basketball coach, who successfully compete with him in the traditionally male domain of college sports.

The series’ reinvention of *homo vulgarius anonymous* is premised on the assumption that some men would prefer not to reformatulate their sense of masculinity because it means giving up certain masculine prerogatives, including a propensity for engaging in acts of deception, an overbearing and selfish demeanor, and an obliviousness to women’s feelings and concerns. Hayden is a butt figure by virtue of his exaggerated incomprehension of these aspects of his self-identity.

Like *Home Improvement*, which offers a blueprint for installing the new man within the physical interior of the home, *Coach* reconstructs masculinity so as to be more acceptable to the private or domestic (historically coded as feminine) side of everyday life. *Coach*’s weekly reinvention of *homo vulgarius anonymous* takes place on the private side of “personal rules and values” and “individual attitudes” (Weinraub, 1993); however, Hayden Fox’s public side—that of the unregenerate, traditional male—remains largely intact from week to week.

In ABC’s promotional spots, *Coach* has been billed as a “sports comedy,” and Hayden Fox as a bumbling football coach who nonetheless builds a successful football program. This draws upon sports symbolism that is deeply imbricated in the gender myths that divide power between men and women. Football, in particular, represents key elements of hegemonic masculinity such as aggression and violence (Real, 1977; Katz, 1995), and *Coach*’s parody of these models of manhood depends upon viewer’s familiarity with these codes for parodic effect.

Furthermore, as Pronger (1990) has suggested, sports is a masculine genre that is not without its paradoxes: “Sports, as a masculine genre, presents some men with an archetypal mythic form for homoerotic desire: the sexy, muscular, *masculine* athlete. That desire is paradoxical, being at once a reverence for and a violation of masculinity” (p. 9). The conventions of comedy, unlike those of televised sports, are flexible enough to sometimes allow this paradox to become visible. Episodes of *Home Improvement* and *Seinfeld* have been built on the premise of mistaken homosexual identity. In contrast, one episode of *Coach* was built upon the premise of mistaken heterosexual identity. In this episode, Hayden Fox learns that one of his star football players, Terry, is gay. Hayden’s assumption that Terry is a “man’s man,” and thus a suitable sexual partner for his daughter, turns out to be mistaken. What is more, Hayden discovers that there have been other gay Minnesota Screaming Eagles. Thus, the gay athlete, a paradoxical identity that calls into question heteroerotic orthodoxy, is made visible as the Other that was there all along. Hayden reiterates cliches about “homosexuals” yet obviously struggles to understand “gayness.” Like many *Coach* episodes, this episode is constructed to allow for a bimodal, or polyvalent, response. While “gayness” remains unthinkable to Hayden Fox, he does not believe in hurting anyone. So gay and nonhomophobic viewers may appreciate Hayden’s effort to be fair. At the same time, Hayden Fox’s discomfort, especially when he sees two of his former football players dancing with each other in a gay bar, may also be viewed as an invitation to homophobic, straight viewers who share Hayden’s unease to laugh at these models of “failed” masculinity.

Of course, episodes that explicitly address the relationship between straight and gay sexuality are rare exceptions to the heterosexual ideology and heterocentrist narrative conventions that rule this series and the sitcom genre in general. Still, *Coach* and other 1980s and 1990s sitcoms which have featured episodes about gays and gay characters (e.g., *Cheers*, *Roc*, *Murphy Brown*, *Roseanne*, and *Spin City*) indicate that hegemonic heteromasculinity no longer works to exclude alternative definitions of masculinity, but instead appears to require an image of its Other in order to remain hegemonic by reproducing the binary terms of gender signification.

### Hegemonic Masculinity and its Reiteration

Let us now return to the main questions of this study: What contribution does the parodic mode of “mock-macho” humor in these two situation comedies make to the process of hegemonic masculinity? How does this form of gender parody function as a discursive strategy?

Rowe (1990) offers a partial answer: Men secure their power not only by looking but by being seen, by fashioning a spectacle of themselves. One way this male power is realized is through control over the joke-telling form which has traditionally made women and/or other marginalized groups its targets. In contrast to *Roseanne*, which Lee (1995) argues inspires “feminist resistance” and Mellencamp (1992) argues works to shift the humorous target of jokes away from women to patriarchal structures, *Home Improvement* and *Coach* work to shift the target from patriarchal structures back to masculine discourse and its own ‘other.’ In doing so, these series’ express and reaffirm heteromasculine prerogatives, obsessions, and pleasures. As Hutcheon (1989) explains, it is “through a double process of installing and ironizing,” that “parody signals how present representations come from past ones
and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (p. 93). Through the "mock-macho" sitcoms' foregrounding of the "man question" from a male-centered point of view, its parodic masculine discourse acknowledges the precariousness of hegemonic (hetero)masculinity.

This parodic mode of masculine discourse enables male viewers to move between identification and disidentification. We may find ourselves, at different moments, laughing at, or with, Tim Taylor and Hayden Fox. The parodic mode also indicates a redistribution of some men's affective investments in past representations in favor of some investment in more up-to-date ones. Alternatively, this mode may also signify and celebrate a "neocynical" discursive strategy whereby "hegemonic power airs its secrets a little, indulges in a little semi-self-enlightenment, and tells all" (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 111). Parody depends upon the recognition of some original or traditional conception of masculinity; however, the neocynical stance seeks to avoid any contradiction between the present positioning of the male subject and its past representations. In any case, male agency is at work re-cognizing the interplay of differing subject positions. As Smith (1988) explains,

A person is not simply determined and dominated by the ideological pressures of any overarching discourse or ideology but is also the agent of a certain discernment. A person is not simply the actor who follows ideological scripts, but is also the agent who reads them in order to insert him/her self into them—or not. (pp. xxxiv–xxxv)

Poststructuralist feminist theorizing has further complicated the relationships between representations of gender and gender identity by emphasizing the politics of the signifier in a way that enables us to avoid essentialist implications. Butler's (1990) notion of gender parody, which theorizes gender as performative rather than expressive, is useful both for theorizing such "mock-macho" situation comedies as gender comedies, and for assessing their political significance. Her thesis, based on an analysis of the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the stylization of butch/femme identities, is that gender is a performance that maintains the illusion of a core feminine, or masculine, self. Gender impersonation, she argues, disarticulates gender signification from the politics of truth and falsity that makes for an essential, polarized female or male identity.

Only two sitcoms—The Ugliest Girl in Town (September 26, 1968—January 30, 1969) and Bosom Buddies (November 27, 1980—September 15, 1984)—have been based on a men-in-drag premise. However, sitcoms like Home Improvement and Coach, without resorting to drag or cross-dressing, also put the idea of an original and stable masculine identity into question by exceeding the norms of "real" (i.e., "macho") masculinity. Following Butler (1990), then, I offer the following formulation: "Mock-macho" sitcoms invite parodic laughter by parodying the mechanisms of the construction of some "original" domestic patriarch or macho stereotype and temporarily deprive the hegemonic norm of "its claim to a naturalized or essentialized gender identity" (Butler, 1990, p. 138). This representational strategy, which re-presents and plays off the stereotype, offers the opportunity for the renegotiation of hegemonic norms, or, alternatively, for their renegotiation, by virtue of the failure to completely embody the norm.

However, compared to the forms of gender parody that Butler considers, Home Improvement and Coach are light parody, and thus, far less subversive. Tim Allen's and Craig T. Nelson's performances may be viewed as part of a hegemonic process whereby masculine discourse constitutes certain traditional forms of "masculinity" as 'other' to its new, presumably "real" self. The "mock-macho" sitcom re-presents white, middle-class, middle-aged masculinity as an act of real-ization, caught in-between the "old" American man and the overly-feminized, model of the "new" American man. In this sense, these sitcoms construct male identity in a poststructuralist fashion, encoding "masculinity" as a conflict between "old" and "new" subject positions, and therefore, to some degree as "fluid: at once defined and redefined, at once real and (re)presented" (Saco, 1992, p. 24).

Although these sitcoms presumably speak to today's men and women, these programs indicate that traditional elements of masculine identity are still worth some affective investment on the part of television producers, writers, performers, and viewers. In the case of romantic comedy, this component of "gendered myth-making" by media creators ensures that "tastes and preferences constructed as masculine are more likely to be privileged even when the text in question is meant to appeal primarily to women" (Scodari, 1995, p. 24). As Scodari's analysis of Cheers, among other programs, suggests, patriarchal notions, disseminated by journalists and perpetuated in professional lore, shape "what is and what is not pleasurable storytelling," and, I would add, what is funny or not funny.

In their weekly engagement with this form of light gender parody, male viewers may experience as pleasurable, rather than as discomfiting or embarrassing, the destabilization and stabilization of the signs of masculinity, and perhaps be moved to some new understanding of their own "maleness" or of men as a social group. Apart from this possibility, these media texts make it clear that male agency has an investment in both "old" and "new" forms of subjectivity and in controlling the discursive terrain of any interplay or renegotiation between them. Therefore, the light parody of "mock-macho" sitcoms is less likely than men-in-drag sitcoms to constitute the kind of gender performance "that will compel a reconsideration of the place and stability of the masculine and the feminine" (Butler, 1990, p. 139).

Finally, it is important to note that sitcoms, as an institutionalized form of joking, are not funny in themselves; they require a "third person," the audience, for their completion (Mellencamp, 1992). Most
sitcoms, of course, provide a laugh track or the laughter of a “live” studio audience to cue us into the funny moments, but we should expect that it makes a great deal of difference whether that “third person” is a woman or a man. And so, the question of whether actual viewers/auditors are laughing with or at Tim Allen/Taylor, or Hayden Fox/Craig T. Nelson is important in judging the gender politics of these texts. I concur with Saco (1992) that reception analysis is vital if we are to understand the sorts of investments and dispositions that male and female viewers bring to television texts, including comic ones. Audience analysis might discover, for instance, how female and male audience members take pleasure in “mock-macho” humor, and how they make sense of Tim Taylor, Hayden Fox, and their weekly exchanges with other characters. Such research, as well as further investigation of the production context of these series, is beyond the scope of the present study. However, situation comedies are a form that can be described and whose effectivity can be analyzed through textual analysis, even if “the significance of that structure is negotiable according to certain principles: comprehensibility, performative adequacy and inoffensiveness” (Palmer, 1994, p. 174).

To summarize, in “mock-macho” situation comedies, masculinity, through parodic representation, is made visible to itself and allows itself to be called into question. In this sense, the actions and comic failures of these “mock-macho” characters articulate the notion that men are incompetent and fallible as a plausible generalization. Such revelations, of course, would be to the detriment of masculine identity as it is represented and naturalized in masculinist discourse. However, masculinity rendered as a comic spectacle in the parodic mode of situation comedy implies that masculinity is a performance or act that once met a hegemonic norm, but now obviously fails to meet it. To the degree that this performance is regarded as more implausible than plausible, this discursive strategy invites cynical laughter, a form of humor which is both an “element of praxis and an ‘operator of effects’” (J. Fontanille, paraphrased by Palmer, 1994, p. 159). Neocynical humour works to serve male agency by delaying the truth of male power, understood as collective cultural power imbricated in the reproduction of gender hierarchy and inequality. Because the butts of “mock-macho” humor—individual men—are represented as absurdly incongruous, this discursive strategy recuperates patriarchal notions and updates masculinity by putting the signs of masculinity into co-motion with the shifting horizon of our expectations and values. Like Tim the “tool” man’s puns which play on the dual meanings of words, “mock-macho” humour suggests that there is no primary or stable meaning of “masculinity,” nor is there a single, functional relationship between gender and humor (Palmer, 1994). Thus, “mock-macho” humor is structured to appeal to different perceptions of “masculinity” and its discontents/adherents. As I have previously argued, hegemonic masculi-