

“FAGGOT, FAIRY, PANSY... QUEER”:
GAY/QUEER CONFRONTATIONS IN MART
CROWLEY’S
THE BOYS IN THE BAND

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ABSTRACT

Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band* presents openly in 1968 a portrait of male homosexual life. For the first time, mainstream audiences see gay men talk explicitly about their sexual preferences, dance, kiss, and retire for sex. Characters recognize a common gay culture by paying homage to actresses (Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis), films (*Sunset Boulevard*, *The Wizard of Oz*), songs immortalized by Judy Garland, and theatre (Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, William Inge), which are appropriated in the construction of gay identities that react against a heteronormative structure which overwhelms homoerotic desire in 1960s America. Despite a stereotypical representation of its gay characters, which are posited as isolated and unhappy gay men, and consequently attracted widespread criticism in academia (Clum, 1992), through a queer reading of the play and its historical, political and social context, I argue in this paper that *The Boys* was at the time of its first production, and still is, an empowering text in the representation of gay male identities and in the construction of queer masculinities. Through my critical analysis of the play, I argue that the use of stereotypes and the representation of a group of gay men suffering from self-deprecation becomes in *The Boys* a skilful way of strengthening gay identities.

RESUMEN

Los chicos de la banda, de Mart Crowley, presenta abiertamente en 1968 un retrato de la vida homosexual masculina. Por primera vez, las audiencias convencionales ven a hombres gays hablar explícitamente sobre sus preferencias sexuales, bailar, besarse, y apartarse para tener sexo. Los personajes reconocen una cultura gay común haciendo homenaje a actrices (Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis), películas (*Sunset Boulevard*, *El mago de Oz*), canciones inmortalizadas por Judy Garland, y teatro (Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, William Inge), que son adoptados en la construcción de identidades gays que reaccionan contra el sistema hetero-normativo que oprime el deseo homo-erótico en los años sesenta en América. A pesar de la representación estereotípica de los personajes gays, que son planteados como aislados e infelices, lo que atrajo una amplia crítica por parte de la academia (Clum, 1992), mirando la obra y su contexto histórico, político y social desde la perspectiva Queer, definiendo en este artículo que *Los chicos de la banda* fue, en la época de su primera producción, y es aún, un texto fortalecedor en su representación de la identidad masculina gay y en la construcción de la masculinidad Queer. A través de mi análisis crítico de esta obra, definiendo que el uso de estereotipos y la representación de un grupo de hombres gays que se menosprecian se convierten en *Los Chicos de la Banda* en formas hábiles de reforzar las identidades gays.

Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* has a candour that never before its staging belonged to any other American mainstream production on gay themes and characters. The play portrays the life of a group of New York gay individuals conflicted with self-loathing and social accommodation in the end of the 1960s.¹ *The Boys* was first staged during the difficult transition between what is generally called by critics as the "closet" – where gay subculture lived hidden from mainstream American society – and post-Stonewall gay liberation, where this same subculture gained a place of visibility.

The representation of homosexuality in American theatre was outlawed until the end of the 1960s for fear that it would lead to "the corruption of youth or others", or that such productions would attract homosexuals to the audience "thus creating a visible presence and, therefore, a threat to the enforcement of invisibility" (Clum 74).² As a result, "closet dramas" saw sexual deviance as a tempting lure of

¹ Crowley stated that he based on his own experiences to write *The Boys*: "[a]ll of the characters are based on people I either knew well or are amalgams of several I'd known to varying degrees, plus a large order of myself thrown into the mix" (ix). Originally entitled *The Gay Bar*, *The Boys* is the first play of a trilogy: *The Boys* presents Michael (alter-ego of the author), a gay New Yorker in his thirties; *A Breeze from the Gulf* (1973) is an adolescence portrait of Michael; and *For Reasons that Remain Unclear* (1993) recaptures the same character, renamed Patrick, now forty-five years old, and takes place in Rome.

² Until 1967, The Wales Padlock Act of the New York Penal Code outlawed plays "depicting or dealing with the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion" (qtd. in Clum 74), giving police the power to shut down for a year theatres presenting plays that they determined to be obscene and to prosecute everyone associated such "indecent" productions.

the forbidden, wherein homosexuality was fluidly invoked and yet simultaneously disavowed actual articulation. Homosexual characters and relationships were commonly inferred through stereotype and an encoded structure of signs through which homosexuality could be deciphered. As John M. Clum proposes, a performative homosexuality was embodied through a "catalogue" or "combination of selections", from misogyny to pederasty (77). The aim of such "combination" was, of course, to attempt to universalize a system by which the invisible "danger" of homosexuality could be exposed. Heterosexist culture could thereby seem to be given privileged and empowered access to the identification and marginalization of its deviant other, but ironically the establishment of such a system also provided a means by which the homosexual could "pass" in heteronormative society by refusing to enact such a performative system: "[t]he homosexual character is often trapped in a ritual of purgation – of identifying and eliminating. Visual stereotypes allow the playwright and performers to enact this ritual without ever naming what is considered unspeakable" (Clum 78). The playwright William M. Hoffman also argues that the prohibition of producing gay-related plays until 1967 had consequences in the construction of gay characters: "Silence" (when there was a complete omission of gay-related themes or characters); "False Accusation" (when a character was negatively accused of being homosexual when he was not); "Stereotypical" (when the gay man was represented as feminine and the lesbian as masculine, or the gay as emotional or as mentally disturbed); "Exploration" (when the gay character appeared as comic relief) (p. xix).

Despite the transitional period that the production of *The Boys* experienced – seven months after the launch of the first issue of *The Advocate* magazine, still nowadays one of the most important publications directed to the American gay community, and fourteen months before the Stonewall riots – this is still a play dominated by guilt as a determining element in the construction of the gay individual. According to Nicolas De Jongh, *The Boys* is located between the transition of two realities: one, in which homosexuality is seen, and felt by the gay individual, as a sin, and a second one, when a gay identity is proclaimed by the Gay Liberation Front (133). Gavin Lambert, in the preface to the edition of the trilogy, defines this play as a comedy constructed around a potentially tragic situation: the conflicts between personal instinct and society rules (xii). Lambert argues: "[t]hey're role-players who play their roles (Guilty Catholic, Angry Jew, Flaming Queen, All-American Mixed-Up Kid) to the hilt, and at the same time are trapped in them" (xii).

Gay audiences hated almost everything about the play, and especially in the wake of Stonewall a year after the play's opening, *The Boys* became a symbol for what the next generation of gay men wanted to forget: pathetic, effeminate, self-hating gay men. Indeed, there is no gay pride in Crowley's play, only shame, self-hatred, jealousy, bickering, alcoholism, and regret. Kaier Curtin notes that during the first few weeks, *The Boys* played mainly to gay audiences, but with media attention,

it eventually drew a larger number of heterosexuals (328). As a result, the subsequent hatred against the play from homosexuals resulted from the exposition of the darker side of gay life to a mainstream audience. In a community in construction based in the principals of identity politics, where the gay individual looked for a positive and authentic construction of himself, *The Boys* was interpreted as a negative and artificial representation (Paller 184).

However, through a queer-inflected examination of the text, this paper aims to deconstruct these established conceptions on the play and argue for its subversive potential. Accordingly, Queer Theory is the theoretical lens adopted to support its textual deconstruction, and also to demonstrate its queer and non-queer constructions and representations. Theatre historians, gay critics, and queer theorists who have written key texts in the field contribute to this analysis through their leading readings of gay male sexualities in American drama.³ The main conclusion that emerges from a review of this literature is that this scholarship has been offering numerous examinations of gay individuals as continuously victimized and passive and consequently, it has been lacking a focused examination of gay individuals as active and victor, who, when represented on stage, confront the dominant ideology. Thus, this paper offers a reading of *The Boys* as a challenging text. The play is here examined not as plea for acceptance, but as a text that confronts heteronormativity. This queer-inflected close reading locates the queer potential of *The Boys* on its historical, social and political context, on the representation of a gay subculture shared by the characters of the play, on how this subculture is represented as result of an oppressive heteronormative system, and most importantly, on how Crowley redefines gay identities, namely through the association of gayness with manliness.

Central to Queer Theory, and consequently to the analysis offered in this article, is a relentless desire to challenge dominant concepts of both negative and positive homosexual discourse; a discourse that has presumed an essential homosexual 'subject', stable, unified and identifiable. By approaching identity constructs as multiple, unstable and regulatory, Queer Theory thus seeks to present (albeit contentiously) new and productive possibilities and perspectives that encourage the exposition of "difference", thereby attempting to articulate the multiple, fragmented voices, agendas and interests (Seidman 13). Poststructuralist Queer Theory hence ideally envisages a culture of sexual difference and fluidity, rather than the narrowly defined gay and lesbian liberationism. Rather than naturalising same-sex desire in the same way as lesbian and gay theoretical frameworks, leading theorists in the field, and particularly Judith Butler, alternatively contest the "truth" of gender itself as the performative effect of re-iterative "acts": "[t]he cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist' – that is, those in

³ See, for example, Duberman, Chauncy, Curtin, De Jongh, Senelick, Sinfield, Clum, Savran, Dolan, Vorlicky, and Román.

which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender" (*Gender Trouble* 24). According to Butler, "[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 45). Butler perceives gender as "an ongoing discursive practice [...] open to intervention and resignification" (*Gender Trouble* 45). Thus, through the theoretical framework here employed, I aim to explore forms of "deviant" (sexual) identities and gender performance in *The Boys* that are seemingly "free" of the demarcations and confines of common compulsory (hetero) sexual configuration. This paper proposes the play's characters as "gendered" and "sexualized" identities that in fact problematize "normative" categorizations.

Preceding the text itself, the queer subversiveness of *The Boys* resides namely to a great extent in its social, political and historical context. During the years leading up to the Stonewall riots, it was primarily within the avant-garde, underground and Off-Broadway theatres that gay explicitness can be seen to evolve. Influenced by similar experiments within avant-garde and underground cinema by such filmmakers as Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol and the Kuchar brothers, sexual dissidence and camp performance were freely explored in such a liberated environment. Underground theatre venues such as John Vaccaro and Ronald Tavel's "Playhouse of the Ridiculous" in New York, for example, specialized in:

extravagantly transvestite performance - pop, multi-media, loosely plotted, improvisatory, obscenely punning, frenetic, psychodelic, Artaudian, often alluding to old movies. This work may be regarded either as looking back to the drag shows of the 1940s and the notion of the gay man as a feminine soul in a masculine body, or as anticipating queer performance theory of the 1990s. (Sinfield 299)

And the drag performance of Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatre Company (1967) exposed, as Stefan Brecht recounts:

the problem of psycho-sexual identity: to what extent male and female conduct, masculinity and femininity, are social role-identities, cultural artifacts, what they are, might be, should be – how valid these roles are, how natural. Beyond both his enactment of the contemporary role conceptions and his mockery of them, he poses the ideal of a freely and playfully polymorphous sexuality. Or, more generally, the ideal of a free and playful assumption not only of this but of all forms of personal identity and social role. (54)

Artists such as Ludlam deliberately drew upon a rich history of liberated experimentation in the underground, and set out to celebrate a “perverse culture” in which “all social(ized) role-identities are not rational.” (Brecht 55). Pre-empting queer theoretical debates on identity, performance and gender by over twenty-five years, artists such as Tavel and Ludlam established a practice that much of contemporary performance theory was later inspired. Then, when the Off-Broadway space became dominated by political and economical pressures, it was in the flats and basements of New York’s Greenwich Village that an Off-Off-Broadway space appeared. Caffè Cino opened in 1958 in Greenwich Village and was the main Off-Off-Broadway space that during the 1960s continuously presented shows – in addition to exhibitions – with explicit gay content, to an audience also constituted by gay individuals (Duberman 60). In this space, with approximately fifty seats, Joe Cino, the Italian American owner, had the idea of putting a small stage between the tables, where shows by gay authors were presented, such as Lanford Wilson, Robert Patrick, Jean-Claude Van Italie, William Inge, Tennessee Williams, Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, William M. Hoofman or Doric Wilson. It was also in this same stage that actors like Al Pacino, Harvey Keitel or Bernadette Peters began their careers. Caffè Cino was the first, during the pre-Stonewall period, of many spaces that later hosted openly gay productions. In May 1964, Caffè Cino premiered *The Madness of Lady Bright* by Lanford Wilson – which during a time when police used to enter a room interrupting and cancelling shows when they represented explicitly homosexual desire, managed to add a total of 168 performances. *Lady Bright* has as main character a forty-year-old transvestite who faces a middle-life crisis. Despite the fact that Leslie Bright, the main character of the play, corresponds to a great extent to the gay stereotype of the time (effeminate, promiscuous, depressive and anxious), Wilson’s play is of great importance as it lasted on stage, in a time where representations of homosexuality were forbidden in New York stages. In 1967, Joe Cino committed suicide and Caffè Cino closed in the following year.

According to Jeffrey Escoffier, the five years before the Stonewall riots were determining in the history of the homosexual cause in America. On the one hand, events that took place during these years questioned the great American values, and on the other, these were years that shaped culturally the gay community post-Stonewall. Organisations that were created with the civil rights movements, the anti-war student movements and the Women’s Movement were decisive in the development of this process (Escoffier 124). The sexually liberated 1970s were formed based in the quest for affirmation, identity and legitimacy, having as model these organised minorities that outlined the first steps of identity politics.⁴ The

⁴ For a detailed historical account of the years leading to the Stonewall riots see, for example, Loughrey.

ideology and strategy of the homophile movement characterized the years preceding the riots. The homophile movement is the name given to that somewhat loose collection of disparate organisations, committees and initiatives which campaigned for law reform and a better understanding of homosexuality in the years before Stonewall. Originating in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, this movement laid stress on homosexuality as a natural phenomenon and took as its basis the “scientific” findings of late nineteenth-century sexology – findings which later were characterised as the fruit of the urge at this time to classify and compile. At least, this was the general thrust of a movement which inevitably encompassed within its disparateness a number of conflicting ideologies – ideologies, moreover, in which there is a tendency to self-contradiction. For instance, the homophiles argued that homosexuality was congenital in an attempt to remove it from the category of sin or illness, and took as their premise a belief in the natural origin of all forms of sexuality. But this created a problem for them: if “normal” heterosexual relations, together with the male/female binary, the sex/gender system and the characteristics conventionally ascribed to men and women, all have their origins in nature and are indeed the central constituents of the natural sexual order, how does homosexuality fit into this scheme of things? The homophiles responded to this with the claim that homosexuality was the natural practice of a “third” or “intermediate” sex. But in making this claim they tended to subvert their own argument and strategy, since a “third” sex – within an essentially binary view of sexual difference – is inevitably an “aberration.” It is thus a notion that contradicts the alleged normality of homosexuality – that denies that homosexuals are just like everyone else. Furthermore, there are also indications that the very concept of sexual “normality” was challenged by groups within the homophile movement.⁵

The ideology of the Mattachine Society, one of the first homophile organizations in America, in its early years, for instance, had a strong Marxist slant, which analysed the oppression of homosexuals from an essentially social constructionist standpoint. Hence, it viewed the concept of “normality” as the creation of forces in society that have a vested interest in the suppression of difference. But when such analysis became dangerous – in a United States gripped by McCarthyism – the Mattachine Society changed dramatically. In short, its oppositional stance became assimilationist: or, as one historian has put it, “accommodation to social norms replaced the affirmation of a distinctive gay identity” (D’Emilio 81). The affirmation of a distinctive gay identity is of course the central motivating drive of the later and more militant gay liberation movement. Yet the evolution of this movement parallels that of the former, as the ethnic model of gay identity it promotes becomes absorbed into the mainstream, to be eventually

⁵ For more, see Jagose 24-29.

reconfigured (in light of Foucauldian and later developments of social constructionist theory) as itself a form of accommodationism.

In this context, the opening of the *The Boys* by Mart Crowley at Theatre Four on 14 April 1968 was a significant milestone in the representation of dissident sexualities on the American stage. The play, directed by Robert Moore, played over 1,000 performances before it closed on 6 September 1970, and in that same year William Friedkin adapted it into a film. The production became centre of attention from various media and a commercial success as the first play with explicit gay themes set in a gay household. The play was considered the *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* out of the closet in its extremes of camp comedy and melodrama, the similarity of its structure and dramatic situations, and a version of the game "Get the Guests", that in Crowley's text has the name "The Affairs of the Heart" (Sinfield 300). There is nothing about *The Boys* that could be pointed as disguised homosexual theatre. The play is about gay life from the point of view of gay men.

The Boys is divided in two acts and takes place in Michael's flat – the living room and the bedroom – in Manhattan, where a group of middle-class urban gay friends gathers to celebrate Harold's birthday. It is the unexpected presence of Alan, Michael's friend from Georgetown, Washington, during the party that raises tension in the play. The presence of this (straight) external element works as a device to uncover a series of personal and collective traumas that haunt the individuals of this group. Possibly by Crowley's consciousness in relation to the particular time when the production of the play took place, in historical, political and social terms, the play works as a summary of different attitudes, backgrounds, and experiences of gay men in New York during the 1960s, from common places, fears, anxieties, to cultural references: "[f]or the first time, mainstream audiences see gay men talk openly about their sexual predilections, dance together, kiss, and retire upstairs for sex" (Clum 204). De Jongh sees the play's characters as representative of the urban gay subculture of the 1960s, where the gay individual assumed his homosexual desire, consumed the benefits that the gay subculture provided him (saunas, bars, nightclubs) although with a great lack of self-esteem (136).

The play opens with Michael preparing for the party he is hosting and with the arrival of Donald, Michael's ex-lover and closest friend, who lives in the Hamptons, but who comes regularly to Manhattan for his psychiatric appointments. The opening of first act introduces Michael, a "spoiled rotten, stupid, empty, boring, selfish, self-centred" gay man (Crowley 10). In the initial dialogue between Michael and Donald, Donald, while taking his medication, states that he is depressed and that he recently understood that the reason for his constant feeling of failure is result of the education he received from his parents:

DONALD: Naturally, it all goes back to Evelyn and Walt.

MICHAEL: Naturally. When doesn't it go back to Mom and Pop? Unfortunately, we all had an Evelyn and Walt. The crumbs! (11)

This mention to "momism" presents itself as a psychoanalytic reason and justification for the characters homosexuality. This kind of rhetoric was first echoed by Philip Wylie in his 1942 book *Generation of Vipers*, which had a major impact in Cold War America: "the growing fear of a rise of male homosexuality was the single most important reason for the dread of momism" (Cuordileone 133). Michael assumes himself as a thirty-year-old spoiled child, who jumps from country to country, from bar to bar, and from bed to bed, looking for pleasure, living above his economical possibilities. He says he was raised by his mother as a girl, without his father having ever intervened against it, but the invocation that Crowley inserts in the play in relation to this psychoanalytical explanation that puts the gay individual as victim of "momism" is not here placed in a pragmatic way. Michael is conscious that this is just a reductive theory, opposing an idea of personal affirmation in relation to victimisation: "And don't get me wrong. I know it's easy to cop out and blame Evelyn and Walt and say it was *their* fault. That we were simply the helpless put-upon victims. But in the end, we are responsible for ourselves." (16). While Donald takes a shower, the phone rings. It is Alan, a straight friend from college, who is in New York, and wants to meet Michael. Michael ends up inviting him to the party, but he is considerably worried about a straight man joining a gay party: "I mean, they look down on people in the *theater* – so whatta you think he'll feel about this *freak show* I've got booked for dinner?!" (18).

Emory, an interior decorator, Larry, a promiscuous artist, and Hank, a schoolteacher who left his wife to move in with Larry, an unusual, not to say radical act in 1960s America, are the next guests to arrive. Larry and Donald recognise each other, exchanging a few words throughout the night, and only later in the play it is revealed that they met before in the gay circuit and slept together, but they did not know each other's names. Another guest of the party, who arrives alone, is Bernard – the only African American in the party. Michael's greatest concern regarding Alan's visit is Emory's behaviour: "*No camping!*" (30), he says to Emory. Even in Michael's private space, he asks for heteronormative social norms to be respected and enforced while Alan is in the apartment, basically asking his friends to tone down their homosexuality. Emory refuses, however, to tone down his campiness.

Later, another phone call from Alan reveals that he is no longer coming to the party, and Michael becomes a lot more relaxed and starts dancing with Bernard, Larry and Emory. The bell rings, but Michael does not hear it, and it is Hank who opens the door. Despite calling to say he was not coming, Alan surprises Michael and shows up while they are dancing. Within 1960s heteronormativity, a group of men dancing together is a visible sign of homosexual behaviour and Alan's entrance interrupting the dance visibly represents the conflict between straight and gay

society. Michael, embarrassed, presents the only representative of the straight world to the group. Alan likes Hank from the beginning, with whom he later discovered to have something in common: a marriage and children. They talk about common interests, but Hank does not reveal that he left his family to live a relationship with Larry. In a private conversation in the bedroom between Michael and Alan, Alan, despite leaving a certain sexual ambivalence after commenting Hank's handsome body, expresses that he does not like Emory:

ALAN: I just can't stand that kind of talk. It just grates on me.

MICHAEL: What kind of talk, Alan?

ALAN: Oh, you know. His brand of humor, I guess. (51).

Alan likes Hank and even Donald as these characters are the ones who embody a more manly masculinity. On the other hand, his speech about Emory has obvious homophobic outlines, as he considers Emory too effeminate. This feeling ends up being verbalized when Alan, now in the living room, initiates a verbal conflict with Emory: "Faggot, fairy, pansy... queer, cocksucker! I'll kill you, you goddamn little mincing swish! You goddam freak! FREAK! FREAK!" (59). This conflict ends in physical aggression when Alan punches Emory in the face. What leads to this conflict was Emory's refusal to accommodate Alan's arrival by toning down his homosexuality, continuously using pronouns and gender-switching through name-calling, emphasized by his effeminacy and campiness. The Stonewall riots of 1969 and the Gay and Lesbian Movement of the 1970s mark a period of growing visibility of the gay and lesbian community, and the beginning of what many argue to be – or desire to be, inside the gay community itself – the death of camp. This period presents a radical alteration of the presentation strategies of the gay subject, in the most diversified representations and cultural productions. The implicit is replaced by the explicit, and *The Boys* makes the implicit explicit before its time. Camp crosses today all contemporary popular culture. Originally expressed and visible in a gay subculture – locating its more significant period of iconic production in the years that followed the World War I and then in the 1960s – in the 1970s camp becomes mainstream. In her article "Notes on Camp," an indispensable reference in studies about this topic, Susan Sontag argues that talking about camp is betraying it (53). "Notes on Camp" is one of the first attempts at defining a gay sensibility and camp culture. Sontag addresses homosexuality and Jewishness as responsible for the great cultural vanguards of contemporaneity (64). The author interprets camp not only as a way of observing the world and an aesthetical phenomenon, but also as a quality inherent to people, defined by strong element of artifice and theatricality in its presentation to the "outside" (54-5), as Emory's theatrical and effeminate presentation in *The Boys*.

Camp has become an object of theoretical discourse since the publication of Sontag's article in 1964, in the *Partisan Review*. Jack Babuscio defines camp in his article "The Cinema of Camp" of 1977 as gay sensibility, a form of expression, of interpreting and being in the world. Eight years after Stonewall, to sustain and defend this concept still makes a sense to Babuscio (these are the years of identity politics), and this is one of the first and most important articles that theorises camp from a gay perspective. According to the author, camp can only be conceived in this context of gay sensibility. To quote from Babuscio:

I define gay sensibility as a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, and defined by the fact of one's gayness. Such a perception of the world varies with time and place according to the nature of the specific set of circumstances in which, historically, we have found ourselves. Present-day society defines people as falling into distinct types. Such a method of labeling ensures that individual types become polarised. A complement of attributes thought to be "natural" and "normal" for members of these categories is assigned. Hence, heterosexuality = normal, natural, healthy behaviour; homosexuality = abnormal, unnatural, sick behaviour. Out of this process of polarization develops a twin set of perspectives and general understandings about what the world is like and how to deal with it; for gays, one such response is camp. The term "camp" describes those elements in a person, situation, or activity that express, or are created by, a gay sensibility. Camp is never a thing or person per se, but, rather, a relationship between activities, individuals, situations and gayness. (118-19)

Didier Eribon describes camp as a resistance strategy of reappropriation of the effeminate stigma to which the gay subject is target, and considers that camp expresses, mainly, the creativity of a minority culture and the way that this culture constitutes the best critic of itself and of all the other cultures it has relation to (160). Thus, camp, as constructed and represented in *The Boys*, was the found strategy for the gay subject to construct himself as fiction and outside himself to construct fictions in a world where he could not express himself freely. The affirmation of the "self" through performative strategies reveals the highly subversive character of camp, denouncing all the contradictions and ambiguities of a mainstream society, such as factors of oppression, not only of gay individuals, but also of heterosexual women and all individuals who are part of an ethnic or racial minority. Thus, and in relation to Emory in *The Boys*, his campiness is exactly that: a theatrical gay

sensibility that when faced with heteronormative hostility is projected against that oppressive force.

The two last characters to join the party are Cowboy and Harold. Cowboy is a twenty-two-year-old male hustler, blond and fit – “too pretty” (5), in Crowley’s description – and Emory hired him as a birthday gift to Harold. In the beginning of the second act Michael questions Harold about his lateness, and Harold replies: “What I am, Michael, is a thirty-two-year-old, ugly, porkmarked Jew fairy – and if it takes me a while to pull myself together and if I smoke a little grass before I can get up the nerve to show this face to the world, it’s nobody’s goddamn business but my own” (61). Further on in the play, Harold and Michael end up discussing the importance of external beauty, and in this discussion it is understandable a clear anguish derived from the model of physical beauty and sexual edge expected from a gay individual. Ironically, Michael criticises Harold by his excessive concern with his beauty and health, putting on several facial creams, and collecting pills so that when he finds that his time has arrived he can kill himself: “But I tell you right now, Hallie. When the time comes, you’ll never have the guts. It’s not always like it happens in plays, not all faggots bump themselves off at the end of the story.” (81)

During dinner, Michael says: “Ladies and gentlemen. Correction: Ladies and ladies, I would like to announce that I have just eaten Sebastian Venable.” Cowboy says he doesn’t know what that is: “Not *what*, stupid. *Who*. A character in a play. A fairy who was eaten alive. I mean the chop-chop variety.” (77), says Michael. Throughout the play, several other cultural references are made, from actresses (Barbara Stanwyck, Bettie Davies), films (*Sunset Boulevard*, *The Wizard of Oz*), songs by Judy Garland, and theatre (Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, William Inge), all appropriated as part of gay subculture. By making these stereotypical camp references to actresses, films, music and theatre, Crowley is also queering them and exploring their subversive power. Michael’s own sexual appetite is a direct reference to Sebastian in *Suddenly, Last Summer*: “Bored with Scandinavia, try Greece. Fed up with dark meat, try light.” (14), says Michael about himself in the beginning of *The Boys*. Additionally, Crowley also constructs these characters with a theatrical consciousness. There are moments in the play where the characters seem to be directing themselves as in a play inside the play, as for example when Alan finally comes from upstairs and Michael says: “Oh, hello, Alan. Feel better? This is where you come in, isn’t it?” (85). Babuscio argues in his analysis of camp that theatricality is one of its main dynamics: “camp, by focusing on the outward appearances of role, implies that roles, and in particular, sex roles, are superficial – a matter of style. Indeed, life itself is role and theatre, appearance and impersonation” (123). Thus, even in a more subliminal way than in Emory’s visible campiness, camp undermines the heteronormativity and homophobia present in the text.

In the second act, Michael presents the rules of the game "The Affairs of the Heart": each one of the guests has to call one person that they really love or loved, say their name and express their feelings. While Michael explains how the scoring of the game works, Alan surprises everyone when he asks Hank to leave with him. Michael says ironically: "Just the two of you together. The pals... the guys... the buddy-buddies... the he-men." (91). Hank does not know how to explain his situation to Alan, but Michael intervenes again, resolving the misunderstanding: "Alan... Larry and Hank are lovers. Not just roommates, *bedmates*. *Lovers*." (92). In *The Boys* heteronormativity is not undermined solely by camp, but also by an ambiguity in the construction of masculinity that questions if that masculinity is synonym of an heteronormative sexuality, or just a performance that hides a dissident sexuality. Michael destroys Alan's idea that manliness, even in a man that is married and has children, is not more than that, a performance. Masculinity is property both of the heterosexual individual as well as the homosexual. This duality is expressed by Crowley by putting Alan and Hank as characters which share everything – both Alan and Hank are manly, were married and have children. These external elements, regulated by a heteronormative power, are the place for a false stability and for gender deception. According to Judith Butler, the destabilization of this coherence brings to the norm the discontinuities in the construction of gender, as gender does not derive from sex, and desire and sexuality does not derive from gender ("From Interiority to Gender Performatives" 362). Similar to Michel Foucault's focus upon the importance of discursive strategies and their revisionist potential, Butler perceives gender "open to intervention and resignification" (*Gender Trouble* 45), and as Jagose surmises: "heterosexuality, which passes itself off as natural and therefore in no need of explanation, is reframed by Butler as a discursive production, an effect of the sex/gender system which purports merely to describe it" (84). Indeed, in *The Boys*, the disruption of this coherence denounces this norm, precisely, as artificial.

The first character to play "The Affairs of the Heart" is Bernard, but he is not able to take the phone call ahead. It is then Emory's turn. Bernard tries to dissuade him, asking him to keep his dignity. Here, Crowley explores very subliminally the racial issue:

MICHAEL: Well, *that's* a knee-slapper! I love *your* telling *him* about dignity when you allow him to degrade you constantly by Uncle Tom-ing you to death.

BERNARD: *He* can do it, Michael. *I* can do it. But *you can't* do it.

MICHAEL: Isn't that discrimination?

BERNARD: I don't like it from him and I don't like it from me – but I do it myself and I let him do it. I let him do it because it's the only thing that. To him, makes him my equal. We both got the short end of the stick – but

I got a hell of a lot more than he did and he knows it. I let him Uncle Tom me just so he can tell himself he's not a complete loser. (102)⁶

Bernard is mainly represented by Michael's speech as the stereotype of the African American that works as servant to white southern families. Bernard is constructed as a victim, assuming a masochist position in his relation with Emory, but this is a deal agreed between both parts. It is according to Bernard a relation of equal to equal, in the sense they are both individuals inserted in a marginalized group: Bernard is an African American and a homosexual and Emory is homosexual and effeminate, which does not provide him with the privileges that white masculinity offers. Emory also fails to identify himself in the phone call and the following player is Hank, who surprises Larry when calls his phone recorder and leaves a message saying he loves him. Alan intervenes for the first time since the beginning of the game, asking him not to do that. Michael already told Alan about Larry and Hank's relationship, thus, Alan's impulse to ask Hank not to do that is to prevent the verbalization of that same feeling. In the argument that follows this scene, Larry and Hank discuss questions of behaviour and sexual identity that will be central in a gay discourse that started to come together after Stonewall. Larry and Hank's relationship does not follow a heteronormative model of monogamy. In their relationship, Hank wants to be sexually and affectively involved with Larry and does not want to have any other sexual partners, while, Larry, on the other side, proclaims independence and sexual freedom.

Larry is the following player. He dials a number and the telephone in Michael's bedroom rings – it is Michael's private line. Larry asks Hank to go upstairs and pick up the phone, and this way wins the game with the maximum score: he manages to talk with the person he loves the most, identifies himself and tells him he loves him. Larry then goes upstairs to meet Hank and they both stay there until the end of the play, making for the one happy ending of the play. Through Larry and Hank's relationship, Crowley also certainly makes a statement: Larry and Hank are the most masculine of the gay guests, they have active professions, and they establish their relationship between the desire for sexual variety and the need for a stable relationship. However, Michael's intention for playing this game was not accomplished. He wants to find out if Alan is gay – a "closet queen", in his words. Michael wants Alan to admit he had sexual relations with Justin Stuart, an ex-colleague from college. He says that Justin, his ex-lover, told him that he slept several times with Alan, but Alan continuously says that this is not true:

⁶ The term "uncle tomism" had its origin in the character Uncle Tom from the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe – the author also adapted the novel into a play entitled *The Christian Slave* (1855). The expression "uncle tomism" is employed to define black men as non-conflictive and domesticated.

It is a lie. A vicious lie. He'd say anything about me now to get even. He could never get over the fact that *I* dropped *him*. But I had to. I had to because... he told me... he told me about himself... he told that he wanted to be my lover. And I... I... told him... he made me sick... I told him I pitied him. (121).

Michael's discomfort with his homosexuality is first revealed when he proposes "The Affairs of the Heart." His ultimate goal with the game – besides the public humiliation of the participants – is to show that homosexual desire and truth cannot go together. Telling the truth, revealing a desire, is to show a weakness, and showing weakness can only be allowed in a private circle – in this party, among equals – and never in the heteronormative circle. In the end, after not succeeding in finding out if Alan is gay, Michael, now without pills, alcohol, or psychiatric help, lets all his doubts and sexual anguishes come out. Harold, on the other side, reacts violently in relation to Michael's negative view of his homosexuality:

You are a sad and pathetic man. You're a homosexual and you don't want to be. But there is nothing you can do to change it. Not all your prayers to God, not all the analysis you can buy in all the years you've got left to live. You may very well one day be able to know a heterosexual life if you want it desperately enough – if you pursue it with the fervor with which you annihilate – but you will always be homosexual as well. Always, Michael. Always. Until the day you die. (124-25)

For moments in the play such as this particular one, for more than four decades *The Boys* has infuriated audiences. Gay audiences do not respond well to Michael's death-sentencing "You show me a happy homosexual, and I'll show you a gay corpse." (128). Emory's effeminacy is also insufferable to post-Stonewall gay audiences, who do not want to see homosexuality associated to effeminacy. However, it is through this same internalized homophobia and femininity that queerness is represented in *The Boys*. The bravery that Crowley exhibited when he wrote the play has been little appreciated. The play should not be dismissed but respected for calling attention to the destructive effects of the pervasive societal homophobia internalized by pre-Stonewall gay individuals. Emory's campiness should also be valued as a powerful political reaction against oppression, which defies heteronormativity, and promotes a queer identity. After all, before Stonewall, camp was "a kind of going public or coming out before the emergence of gay liberationist politics (in which coming out was a key confrontationist tactic)" (Dyer

qtd. in Robertson 4). Gay men can also see it as a piece of pre-Stonewall gay life: “[w]hatever one thinks of it, *The Boys in the Band*, more than any other single play, publicized homosexuals as a minority group” (Hoffman qtd. in Russo 176). After all, as its original appearance on stage brackets the Stonewall riots, the play offers essential social background for the most understudied revolution of American history. Alan Sinfield argues inclusively that the play does not only offer social context for the Stonewall riots, but that it also outlines the entire history of the representation of the gay individual in American theatre, closing to a certain extent, a cycle of that same history:

[b]y making explicit the familiar tropes of gay representation, *Boys in the Band* draws a line under the most significant gay theatre writing of the time. The tradition of discretion and innuendo is reviewed, item-by-item, reoriented, and rendered obsolete. To be sure, the sickness and quasi-tragic models that gay men are supposed to inhabit are still in place at the end. But the outcome of the play is not limited to its explicit statements. As a public theatre event, it helped dislodge the discreet conditions that had determined those models. (302)

In addition to all the subversive elements of the play above detailed, *The Boys in the Band*'s strongest queer construction is Hank and Larry's positive model of homosexuality. Larry and Hank construct individually an identity against heteronormative models and stereotypes. These characters create a model of their own to themselves and their relationship that opens way to multiplicity in terms of affection and of choice of the desired object: Larry is not consumed by any feeling of guilt regarding his sexuality and lifestyle, refusing the heteronormative model of monogamy in his relation with Hank. He has with Hank a sexual and affective relationship, but also has sexual relations with other men – predictive of the open-relationships of post-Stonewall. Larry does not allow any repression of his desire. It is Larry, after all, who wins the game. Moreover, Hank, who comes from a heterosexual relationship, assumes with normality his homosexuality, and by accepting Larry's terms for their relationship, breaks definitely with the model he lived in. Thus, the idea of sexual orientation is destroyed as a fixed model in which we are born and in which we die. Crowley, just like Tavel and Ludlam in the underground, pre-empted queer theoretical debates on identity, performance and gender by over twenty-five years, but in his case, in a successful and commercial play. In Larry's construction, gender is fluid choice which shifts and changes in different contexts and at different times. Butler's approach is that sex (male/female), which is seen to “cause” gender (masculine/feminine), which is seen to “cause” desire (towards the other gender) is a construct and gender and desire are flexible:

"there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender [...]. Identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 24). According to Butler, gender is therefore a performance, a form of expressions; it is what a person "does" at particular times, rather than a universal "who you are." Thus, what Judith Butler expressed in her theoretical writings, Mart Crowley constructed in *Larry* twenty-five years earlier.

In brief, Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* traces through the historical, social and political context of its first staging, the representation of a gay subculture shared by the characters of the play, camp as a subversive strategy, and the redefinition of its characters' sexual identities an already pre-existent queer dimension in the play that significantly pre-dates the emergence of a "theory." Thus, this article presents in the play an emancipated notion of "queer pride" that asserts itself in the play not merely as a transient ghettoist trend, but as a serious desire for the gay community to represent and explore itself upon the stage without having to apologize for its existence.

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