

# The Wisdom of Folly: Disrupting Masculinity in *King of the Hill*

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*This essay examines the recurring themes of masculinity and sports that emerge in the first three seasons of King of the Hill and the ways in which the character Bobby Hill negotiates masculine performativity within a comic frame as the figure of the wise fool. Bobby's folly within the context of sports functions to highlight the slippage in masculinity, opening up a space of ambivalence where subversive performativity is realized. The utility of folly in disrupting gender normativity and underscoring the instability of gender norms is illuminated.*

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The construction of masculinity and its representation in the media have been areas of burgeoning interest in the past decade, as Ashcraft and Flores, and Vavrus, have demonstrated, and it is a topic that Hanke presaged (“Hegemonic,” “Redesigning,” “Theorizing,” “Mock-macho”). Performative and performance analyses of masculinity, while virtually absent prior to the 1990s, have begun to illuminate the myriad forces that influence the iteration and constitution of masculinity in a variety of cultural forms, such as the classical ballet company (Hamera), the Mythopoetic men’s movement (Gingrich-Philbrook “Good Vibration”), the 1936–37 Federal Theater Project production of *The CCC Murder Mystery* (Chansky), and the military (Knight). Gingrich-Philbrook has examined the intersection of masculinity, homophobia, and performance studies in his analysis of the masculinist research economy that informed some scholars’ reception of Corey and Nakayama’s “Sextext,” a critical exploration of gay male culture, underscoring the importance of examining cultural

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constructions and conceptions of masculinity not only in the broader culture, but also within the microculture of academia and academic discourse (“Disciplinary”).

Formerly perceived as a digression from the feminist project, the investigation and dissection of masculinity is now recognized as a necessary element in the disturbance of gender categories and the destabilization of the “normative power of the masculine” (Spitzack 141). Indeed, theorizing masculinity has become a pivotal facet of feminist critiques of society and the construction of gender identity (Mandziuk 105). Although hegemonic masculinity<sup>1</sup> is perceived as a social and political advantage to those men who occupy this position, in the last decades of the twentieth century an upsurge of public dialogue in the US has addressed the distress faced by white heterosexual men and their contradictory experiences of power. Both Kaufman and Consalvo have pointed out that white men in US society have notably different experiences of power and powerlessness, based on a complex web of social relationships. Ferguson contends, “While traditionally it was femininity that was seen as inherently weak and pathological, today . . . it is masculinity that is regarded as the troubled gender” (104), and, increasingly, the domestic comedy is a discursive space in which this tension is negotiated.

In his study of the performance of masculinity in *Home Improvement* and *Coach*, Hanke indicates that “parodic mode[s] of discourse . . . [are] 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 . . .” (“Mock-macho” 76). In said programs, “masculine discourse . . . takes up masculinity as an object of its own discourse” and, “by making a mockery of masculinity, these comic narratives simultaneously address men as objects of laughter and as subjects moving between ‘old’ and ‘new’ subject positions” (76). A similar narrative construct can be seen at work in the representation of the “old” and “new” masculinities showcased on Fox’s critically acclaimed animated domestic comedy set in Arlen, Texas, *King of the Hill*. Premiering on January 12, 1997, and at the time of this writing in its tenth season,<sup>2</sup> the program centers around the domestic adventures of the Hill family, including forty-year-old Hank Hill, whose fervor for selling propane and propane accessories is nearly apostolic, and his wife, Peggy, similarly aged, who is a substitute teacher and erstwhile writer and artist. They have a preteen son, Bobby, whose inability to iterate his masculinity properly is the subject of Hank’s consternation and frequently the focus of comedy on the program. A number of recurring visitors frequent the Hill household but of interest here is Hank’s father, Cotton, a World War II veteran whose shins were wounded during the war, resulting in his shortened height and wobbling gait.

According to Greg Daniels, a creator of the program, Hank Hill is “based on a lot of neighbors I’ve had. . . . He’s upset about how America is changing, and he doesn’t know what to do about it” (qtd. in Strauss par. 9). One aspect of the changing American landscape that the program addresses is the fluctuating expectations for white male gender performativity. The comedy on the program often centers on changing conceptions of white masculinity, represented by Bobby Hill who, in some

senses, articulates an alternative masculinity. Bobby frequently struggles with the hegemonic citation of masculinity, resulting in his positioning as a fool; these struggles are seen most clearly in his negotiation of various sporting activities with his father, Hank, who represents a version of traditional, hegemonic masculinity. Despite Hank's best efforts, Bobby has difficulty exuding hegemonic masculinity in word, deed, or embodiment. In one sense, Bobby's folly is used to bolster hegemonic masculinity and the status quo as the audience is prompted to laugh at his seemingly innocent transgressions. At the same time, however, his folly illuminates the rigidity and artificiality of US conceptions of masculinity and the absurdity of many of our traditional rituals. Hanke contends that "a major issue [in the study of masculinity] is how hegemonic masculinities are refurbished, reempowered, renegotiated, and reenvisioned" ("Theorizing" 193). Hanke's assertion prompts the question, does Bobby's slippage in the iteration of masculine norms refurbish or undermine hegemonic masculinity?

While Hanke focused on the role of mockery in the performance of middle class hegemonic masculinity, the aim of this study is to examine the role of the fool and folly as they relate to white working class alternative masculinity. Such a contribution is important because of the dearth of literature in performance studies focusing on alternative masculinities, with the exceptions of Delgado's analysis of the role of Chicano rapper, Kid Frost, in articulating alternative performances of brown masculinity and Gentile's examination of the "sissy boy as hero" in *The Texas Trinity*. Additionally, while masculinity has been examined in a range of artifacts, it has been ignored in animation. Animation is an ideal location to examine alternative masculinities because it is a transgressive medium that playfully undermines hegemonic strictures as demonstrated by such programs as *The Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*. Stabile and Harrison contend that "prime time animation . . . has become as important a part of our cultural landscape as live action domestic sitcoms were to a previous one" ("Introduction" 10). Unlike traditional domestic comedies that are largely limited to projecting a tame, normative, and uncontroversial version of family life, animation is able "to toy with, and in many cases destroy, existing narrative conventions" (9). Tueth observes that "animation seems to have given television comedy the appropriate mode in which a subversive view of family life could be presented even within the nexus of network and commercial demands" (140). The ability to explore the "darker, subversive aspects of family life" and, by extension, disruptions in hegemonic conceptions of gender, is "thanks mainly to the possibilities of the cartoon aesthetic" which allows for unusual and nonnormative presentations of everyday life (141).

In what follows, I analyze the recurring themes of masculinity and sports that emerge in seven episodes within the first three seasons of the program, and the ways in which Bobby negotiates hegemonic masculinity within a comic frame as the figure of the wise fool. I argue that Bobby's folly within the context of sports highlights the slippage in the iteration of masculinity, opening up a space of ambivalence where Butler's subversive performativity is realized. Butler conceives of gender performativity as the process by which subjects are compelled by a diffuse power structure to

reiterate idealized norms in order to become intelligible. For Butler there is no prediscursive subject, only subjects whose gender identities are, as Barvosa-Carter explains, “performative and socially constructed in and through the repetition of already given signs and norms” (125). Gender performativity is a “compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining” because within the citation of the norm exists the possibility for slippage, for a variation on the norm, that might enable a subversion of gender identity (Butler, *Bodies* 231). As Butler states, “In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; ‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (*Gender Trouble* 185). The instability created by the variation of the norm has the potential not only to undermine dualistic notions of gender, but also to deploy new conceptualizations of gendered identities that might enable all persons to inhabit “livable bodies.”<sup>3</sup> Of course, when citing the norm, one draws on the very structure that reifies the social order (*Undoing* 218). However, “these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. They can also be exposed as nonnatural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation” (218). It is the possibility of undermining gender normativity through the citational process of performativity that I wish to bring into conversation with the fool and folly, which are uniquely situated to shed light on the “nonnatural” and “nonnecessary” aspects of gender performativity. While Butler has demonstrated the subversive potential of drag, Shugart notes that she has ignored “subversive performances of femininity by women or of masculinity by men” that could lend additional insight into gender transgression (96). Additionally, while Butler and others, such as Shugart, have examined the role of parody in the destabilization of gender norms, the relevance of folly as a subversive mode of resignification has been unexplored. In this essay I illuminate the utility of the wise fool and folly in disrupting gender normativity and underscoring the instability of gender norms.

### The Wisdom of Folly

The figure of the fool has a long and rich legacy within the Western and Eastern worlds, achieving the greatest prominence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and witnessing a decline in the Enlightenment (Swain; Welsford; Otto). Although some contend that the fool and folly are nearly extinguished in contemporary society (Swain 172–83; Zijderveld 23–25, 153–55), Kaiser argues that folly is “far from dead” and fools continue to “call into question the claims of learning, religion and civilization” (“Wisdom” 520). Following the spirit of Kaiser, Gilbert locates contemporary manifestations of the wise fool in the female stand-up comic (44–50) and Verene sees the wise fool’s folly as a source of knowledge and as a vehicle to resuscitate philosophy (88–140). Moreover, Otto asserts that the fool is “due for a renaissance,” and while the political cartoonist and stand-up comic are sustaining the role of the fool currently (253–57), Otto suspects that the court fool of the past might find a new eminence within global corporations (266–67). I contend that the

character Bobby Hill is a current expression of the figure of the wise fool, demonstrating the continuity and vitality of the fool and folly in prompting audiences to be more critical of contemporary culture, specifically gender performativity. Through Bobby's folly, gender binarisms are placed into question and loosened, enabling more fluid and diverse conceptualizations of gender to emerge.

The fool is ubiquitous, dwelling across nations and time and coming in diverse forms and appearances. Welsford provides a sweeping history of fools, commencing with the professional buffoons of ancient Greece and the mythical buffoons of Arab legend and moving to the myriad manifestations of the literal and symbolic court fool before turning to the stage clown. Despite their variation, the aforementioned fools share the ability to reflect and caricature humanity and daily life; indeed, they are drawn from life (277). Among the various fools, a further level of distinction exists between the natural fool and the artificial or professional fool. The natural fool is one who genuinely exhibits some type of deficiency or abnormality, whereas the professional fool is of normal intelligence, perhaps even above average intelligence, but adopts the guise of the fool for his/her own advantage. Assuming the role of the fool is beneficial because it enables one to question hegemonic social structures without fear of reprisal as the fool is perceived as an innocent who is not responsible for his/her words. Kaiser states, "If anyone should object to what the fool said, it was easy to point out that it was, after all, only a fool who said it. Thus the license of the natural fool was appropriated for the artificial fool" (*Praisers* 8).

The distinctions among fools are numerous and varied, but an important prevailing attribute they all possess is the freedom of expression that comes with inhabiting a marginalized space. Some fools use this liberty to engage in simple tomfoolery or buffoonery. In contrast, the wise or sage fool uses his/her freedom of expression to engage in meaningful, if not profound, social analysis. The wise fool is exemplified by such historical figures as Socrates and Jesus, both of whom took on the guise of the fool and a doctrine of ignorance (Verene 126). Perhaps the most influential version of the wise fool is Desiderius Erasmus's *Stultitia*, who personifies folly in *Moriae Encomium* or *Praise of Folly*. In this mock encomium, Folly (as *Stultitia* is often called) moves between empathy and invective as she identifies humankind's weaknesses and vices before offering the solution of Christian faith. Watson argues, "Folly's oration means to release the common energies of its readers through its challenging, burlesquing, and inverting of institutional, hierarchical, and other everyday restrictions on those energies" (340). Following the insights of Zijdeveld, Erasmus's Folly holds a mirror to humankind so that audiences may view their folly and, through such recognition, develop sufficient self-reflexivity to provoke change. While folly is often used in a derogatory manner to indicate a lack of good judgment, this classic work identifies folly as a type of wisdom, as a way of understanding the self and the world.

Erasmus may have "given Europe the paradox of the wise fool" (Kaiser, *Praisers* 21), but Shakespeare brought the wise fool to the stage through such characters as Touchstone, Feste, and Lear's Fool, thus enriching our understanding of this figure (Goldsmith 14). Several defining characteristics of the wise fool may be gleaned from

such figures, including the fool's critical stance, potential for insight, and capacity to be taken seriously. Being both an outsider and an insider to society, inhabiting a type of borderland, the wise fool has enough intimate knowledge of a culture to understand its conventions and sufficient distance to be critical of those conventions. Even though the wise fool is a denizen of good society, the fool "does not belong to it and makes it the object of his inquisitive impertinence; he . . . questions what appears to be self-evident" (Kolakowski, qtd. in Nelson 112). Nelson explains that the sage fool provides insight into the daily life of society because s/he does not take the rules, norms, and ideologies of society for granted, preferring instead to constantly question, trouble, and invert the status quo. Consequently, the fool is capable of making more discerning observations of a society than its ordinary inhabitants and his/her marginal status enables him/her to speak freely about "the existence of more than one level of reality" (121). Further, the wise fool's observations have traditionally been accorded respect. As Gilbert maintains, "far from being merely a simple stooge or butt of others' ridicule, the wise fool was an extremely powerful critic whose words often carried enormous weight" (46). The wise fool confounds our understanding of what is true, proper, and normal, stimulating reflection on the self and society. By placing norms into relief, the fool prompts audiences to consider, if only briefly, that the cultural order could be entirely different from that which we know.

The wise fool promotes counterhegemonic reflection about the self and society through his/her form of wisdom, folly. Although folly is an unwieldy construct, one is compelled to gesture towards a definition while also recognizing that it is a multifaceted, fluid concept (Glasgow 164; Bell 183; Zijderfeld 10). Bell suggests that "generalizations about folly must be heavily hedged or expressed paradoxically because the fool by definition eludes definition . . . he exists to defy categories of understanding" (183). Similarly, Glasgow argues that folly assumes a wide variety of characteristics including "madness," vanity, "sin and satanic pride," "sexual excitement and love," "Christian (or Socratic) wise folly," and the "artificial or acted folly of the court-fool" (166–67). Of these, the wise fool predominantly expresses wise folly through his/her "tactical madness," which can, on occasion, yield profound insight (Glasgow 167). Other comic forms, such as satire, traditionally have posited folly as something to be exposed, ridiculed, and remedied, in favor of bolstering particular principles or ideals. However, here folly is seen as a site where critical thinking might be cultivated, and where principles and ideals are in perpetual question, resisting closure. The fool does not moralize; s/he questions, inverts, and confounds, and, in the process, gives audiences the space in which to create arguments, rather than follow them.

Folly provokes insight and self-knowledge through its most potent, defining and original feature, the power of reversal (Verene 135; Zijderfeld 27; Glasgow 177). By deploying folly, Zijderfeld asserts, the fool irreverently inverts the ordinary and through this transformative mirroring of society, prompts audiences to consider that the world could be entirely different, as could their functioning within it. Folly focuses "on the opposites of human existence" and plays "an irreverent game with them: male fools would dress up and behave like women, female fools would act like

men and assume male roles and responsibilities. . . . Left would be changed into right, right into left; sacred into secular, secular into sacred” (17). Historically such inversion was played out during the Festival of Fools, which was a celebration marked by a “complete reversal of ordinary custom” (Welsford 202).<sup>4</sup> During this time, the ranks and responsibilities of clergy were commonly inverted and, according to one theological condemnation, “priests danced, shook dice, played at ball, bowls and other games of chance in front of the altar” thus meddling with the sacred (Beleth, qtd. in Zijderveld 61). Further, Mere Folly, or Mother Folly, who presided over such events, was a man dressed as a woman, suggesting the degree to which gender bending did not merely exist, but was a grand gesture of the fool and folly (Welsford 206).

Such inversion of the ordinary provides a framework for the cultivation of self-knowledge and deeper insight into the complexity of cultural life because, as Verene explains, we are forced “to see through an order of things to an equally plausible order that is their opposite” (91). While folly prompts us to consider reversals, the inversion of the ordinary does not have to lead to intense dualities or endless binaries. The fool can provide more nuanced challenges to the social order. Verene states that the “inversion of events need not be the extreme inversion to the logical opposite” but rather “may be only to point ironically to a different order of meaning” (135). Focusing our attention on folly’s capacity to prompt critical, creative thinking, Watson draws on Erasmus’s famous encomium: “Folly deliberately attempts to undermine the everyday assurances of her listeners and readers: she transforms the certainties of popular ‘wisdom’ by using proverbs ironically to support both sides of a polarity, making contradictory positions seem equally plausible . . .” (342). In this way, folly transcends binaries as it “deliberately intends to confuse the reader . . . in order to convince him of the difficulty, complexity and relativity of truth” (343). As such, folly prompts audiences to “see the unseen within the seen” as it “unsettles the settled” (Verene 133). Folly’s capacity to prompt audiences to think of the self and society in new ways may be what prompted Welsford to proclaim that the “the fool is a great untrusser of our slaveries” (320). That is, folly has the capacity to release us from the static, seemingly immutable nature of normative social, cultural, religious, and political life by questioning whatever assumptions currently undergird a society’s perception of reality.

Gilbert’s analysis of marginal humor in the acts of female stand-up comics considers the strengths and limits of the wise fool’s capacity to engage in social criticism and undermine power structures. According to Gilbert, “Like contemporary comics ‘playing’ a crowd, wise fools typically used comedy as a leveler, bringing the ‘mighty’ down to the fool’s level” (46). Although marginalized humor provides the disenfranchised with a voice to speak to power, audiences often perceive humor as a form whose content is not to be taken seriously (177). Herein lies the dialectical nature of the fool. On the one hand, the fool’s marginal status and use of folly enable this figure to criticize the powerful in ways that would lead to censure for others. However, the fool’s very positioning on the margins and the vehicle used to deploy his/her thoughts also may undermine the potency of the fool’s critique. Yet, the very

articulation of counterhegemonic thought exerts some degree of influence in public culture because it provokes critical thinking and provides rhetorical empowerment for the marginalized (177). As Gilbert maintains, “Action must begin with critique . . . and humor—specifically marginal humor—is a powerful form of ‘prefatory’ social influence” (178). Through folly (which is the wise fool’s marginal humor), the wise fool provokes consideration of a different social order, which is a fundamental element in stimulating cultural change. The fool’s utility in showcasing the instability of gender normativity and prompting audiences to consider alternatives to the traditional gender regime is advanced in the next section as Bobby’s folly in the realm of gender and sports is investigated.

### **Unbecoming Masculinity: Sporting Bobby**

Throughout the series and particularly in the first three seasons, Hank tries to encourage Bobby to participate in a range of sporting activities including baseball, football, wrestling, fishing, and shooting. A frequent catchphrase on the program is a lamentation Hank utters about Bobby, “That boy ain’t right.” When Hank utters this idiom he suggests that Bobby does not cite his masculinity to Hank’s satisfaction. For Hank, sports are a vehicle through which he can move Bobby away from the alternative masculinity that he represents into a more traditional hegemonic male position. Sports are an important vehicle through which young men are taught to embody power and dominance in society; Trujillo asserts, “perhaps no single institution in American culture has influenced our sense of masculinity more than sport” (183). Whitson contends that the body plays an important role in the development of male identity because “to learn to be a male is to learn to project a physical presence that speaks of latent power” (23). Similarly, Parry-Giles states, the social focus on the male body in sports works “to reproduce and express hegemonic masculinity through . . . [its] emphasis on physical strength, power, and control” (344). Instead of being indoctrinated into hegemonic masculinity via sports, Bobby’s performativity continually upsets traditional notions of gender. As Butler has suggested, “To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate” (*Bodies* 231). This notion is realized in the example of Bobby. Whatever iteration of normative masculinity is in question, Bobby tends to explore, embody, and toy with alternatives, compelling audiences to recognize the contingency of masculinity.

Bobby emerges as the wise fool almost immediately, due to his persistent questioning of the seemingly self-evident and his suggestion that a different order of meaning may exist. In the pilot program, the viewer is prompted to recognize Bobby’s ability to put normative thought into relief. In the car on the way to Bobby’s first baseball game, Hank says, “So you ready to kick some Wild Cat butt, Bobby?” Bobby provides an unenthusiastic, “Okay.” Peggy thinks Bobby is nervous and attempts to calm his fears, “Now don’t you worry, son. You just do your best.” In an effort to socialize Bobby away from what he sees as Peggy’s feminizing practices in



particular and the realm of the feminine in general, Hank says, "Don't listen to her Bobby. If you wanna win you're gonna have to do better than your best." Bobby is confused by how a person can do better than her/his best. "How do I do that?" Hank replies, "You gotta give 110%. That's what'll give you that winning edge!" Bobby continues his line of questioning, "But what if the wildcats give a 110% too?" Bobby's inquisitiveness persists when he is on the field. Hank states, "You can't get on base without taking a swing." As the figure of the wise fool, Bobby takes nothing for granted as he plays with alternatives, "The pitcher could walk me couldn't he?" Hank replies, "Don't play lawyer ball, son!" In sports, as in life, the American male is taught that he must give 110% if he is to succeed, regardless of the impact such effort might have on the body, and if he does exert such effort, he is entitled to gain what is sought. However, ultimately in such events only one winner emerges and the playing field is not always equal. Even if everyone gives 110%, someone is still going to lose, despite one's best effort, as Bobby points out. Further, the playing field often is not equal because some are not allowed or are unable to enter the game.

An unequal playing field is demonstrated in "Bobby Slam" as Bobby inadvertently emerges as a powerful critic of gender relationships. During gym class, the boys are given the opportunity to join a host of sports teams while the girls are literally pushed out the way of the boys and given inferior opportunities and equipment. Bobby joins the wrestling team within this context. He immediately shares the news with Hank, "Dad, Dad, guess what? I've joined a team!" Surprised, Hank asks, "A sports team?" Bobby confirms his hope, but even in the context of his confirmation he indicates he lacks a penchant for sports: "Wrestling! It's the best sport ever dad; there's no running! . . . I'm in a very advanced weight class!" Bobby is a portly, pear-shaped boy who is not inclined towards physical activity, as indicated by the nicknames, "butterball" and "fat white lump," which were bestowed upon him by his football coach, Whitey Sours, and neighbor, Kahn Souphanousinphone, respectively. Later it becomes clear that Bobby has "made" the team simply because there is not enough male interest in the sport. However, when Connie, Bobby's neighbor, is encouraged to join the wrestling team by Peggy, the coach decides to make the kids try out for the team. Because Peggy pressed for Connie's inclusion on the team, the coach decides to pit Connie against Bobby. Indeed, the coach says, "Instead of a guaranteed spot on the team this year it will be based on ability. . . . I know it isn't fair, but apparently that's what some people like to call progress." In despair, Bobby tells his father, "Mom made the coach take Connie on the wrestling team and now he's out to get me!" Hank says, "Oh, no! We were so close! It's all well and good to talk about equal rights until some man loses his job. How's that equal?" Bobby says, "Ya, and it's worse when they take away our favors because we're used to getting them!" Bobby's humor is disarming as he provides an incisive critique of the social order while seeming to bolster it. Bobby's folly, his inability to recognize that such a blatant statement of honesty actually undermines his father's assertion, prompts the audience to reflect on the disparity in US gender relations. Additionally, Hank's fear that Bobby might lose to Connie works to undermine the notion that men are naturally better at sports than women, as does his portly and uncoordinated physique.

Bobby's inability to exude competence, let alone dominance, in the arena of sports is exacerbated when he is on the golf course and the football field, as his actions highlight the slippage in the iteration of normative masculinity. Kimmel suggests that the "fear of being seen as a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood" ("Masculinity" 131), and Hank takes great pains to ensure that Bobby will not be perceived in this manner. In "Hank's Got the Willies," Hank takes Bobby to the golf course. After Bobby scores a chance hole in one, Hank is enthused and gives Bobby the opportunity to start first at the next hole. Bobby completely misses the ball on his first swing. Concerned that Bobby's gender citation is not sufficiently "masculine," Hank states, "That's okay Bobby, you can do it. Just choke up on it and swing less like a girl." On his next attempt, the golf club flies out of his hands, into the air, and hits a man, rendering him unconscious, thus punctuating Bobby's lack of coordination. The humor elicited by Bobby's accident indicates that his problem is not that he "swings like a girl," but that he is unable to swing competently by any measure.

In "Three Coaches and a Bobby," Hank persuades Bobby to join the football team. During the first game, Bobby is not disturbed by the fact that he has been confined to the bench because he is enjoying dancing and cheerleading. After doing a dance on top of the bench, Bobby exclaims, "We need to blitz more! I haven't done my sack dance all day!" Hank gets out of his seat to tell Bobby to settle down. In the last two minutes of the game, Coach Maxwell provides Bobby with the opportunity to play, but Bobby protests: "You can't put me in now! We can win this. It is just bad strategy!" Hank also beseeches the coach not to put Bobby into the game: "Hey coach, Bobby has been cheering awfully hard today and I'm afraid he might have worn himself out already." The coach is determined to let every player have two minutes on the field and, consequently, he ushers Bobby into the game. In the next scene, it is clear that the team lost the game because Hank is leading the other fathers in drafting a list of recommendations for the coach. Bobby's lack of ability on the field tops the list: "Do not put Bobby in if outcome of the game could be affected in any way." Hank's response illuminates how serious an arena football is for the constitution and reification of hegemonic masculinity; so serious that performatives must be strictly regulated, despite (or perhaps because of) the bond between father and child. Messner (qtd. in Rowe, McKay, and Miller 246) contends, "In contrast to the bare and vulnerable bodies of the cheerleaders, the armored bodies of the football players are elevated to mythical status, and as such, give testimony to the undeniable 'fact' that there is at least one place where men are clearly superior to women." Bobby's inability to cite the masculine norm properly (and his penchant for citing the feminine) undermines the notion that masculinity naturally coheres to male bodies, and the fathers attempt to marginalize Bobby and hide his "lack" by ensuring he does not play in games where his slippage could be highlighted.

Later in the program, when Bobby leaves the football team to play soccer, one would think that Hank would be agreeable. Despite the fact that Bobby is a poor football player, Hank discourages him from playing soccer and persuades him to rejoin the football team:

- Hank: What's that on your upper arm there, Bobby, is that a muscle?  
Bobby: No, that's a lump from when I got hit by a football. You know, Dad, the kids playing soccer don't have any lumps or bruises and Coach Lucas gives 'em oranges at half time.  
Hank: Bobby, I didn't think I'd ever need to tell you this but I would be a bad parent if I didn't. Soccer was invented by European ladies to keep them busy while their husbands did the cooking.  
Bobby: Why do you have to hate what you don't understand?  
Hank: I don't hate you, Bobby.  
Bobby: I meant soccer.  
Hank: Oh soccer, ya, I hate soccer. Yes.

Hank indicates how important it is to him that Bobby participates in the masculine ritual of football, even if he only "sits on the bench," as is clearly Bobby's fate. Hank's statement "I don't hate you Bobby" demonstrates that he does not understand Bobby, suggesting the degree to which Bobby's subversive performativity renders him unintelligible to Hank. At the same time, Bobby prompts reflection on why Hank feels compelled to reject things he does not appreciate or understand. Indeed, in this interaction, Bobby's questions highlight Hank's folly and thus the folly of hegemonic masculinity, underscoring the notion that folly is a universal condition, from which no one is immune. Bobby functions as a mirror at the margins to reflect the absurdity of forcing a child to participate in a sport in which he has no interest or for which he has no ability simply because he is a biological male and the sport is perceived as a masculine ritual. In so doing, Bobby challenges the seemingly inherent relationship between biology and gender, maleness and masculinity.

Bobby unsettles his father's popular wisdom as he transcends both sides of a polarity in "Jumpin' Crack Bass," forcing Hank to recognize his shifting stance and ultimately undermining Hank's authority. Hank takes Bobby hunting for worms for his next fishing excursion and Bobby is not impressed by the experience. "I'm cold. Why don't we just buy the worms at the bait shop?" Hank replies, "Bait shop worms are factory farm worms. They keep 'em in little cages their whole lives. They never get to run around free. It's sad, really. And the fish know the difference." Bobby continues to critique the process. "Why don't you just buy the fish?" Hank lectures Bobby:

Bobby, you're missing the point. We don't fish for the fish. Ninety percent of what I like about this sport, and it is a sport, is sitting in the boat for five hours doing nothing and the icing on the cake is when God smiles on ya and ya hook one. And then when you're reeling it in everything else falls away. You don't think about taxes or traffic or that pushy gal that's trying to get into The Citadel or who's gonna take care of you when your mother and I are old and incapacitated. All there is, is a man, a rod, a lake and a fish and it all begins with a hand dug American worm.

Hank's lesson extends beyond bait in this monologue, but it is the bait reference that Bobby redeploys, thus throwing the rest of the soliloquy into relief. Later in the program, Hank mentions how impressive he finds Jack's Miracle Bait. Bobby questions Hank's inconsistency. "What are you buying bait for dad? Remember you said it all starts with a hand dug American worm?" Hank recants his previous statement. "Uh, no, I mean, yes, that's how it starts. But a lot of things turn out

different from how they start. Remember that time I started building you a club house and I ended up with a new tool shed?" The wise fool holds a mirror up to Hank to make him account for his shifting tenor. By supporting both sides of Hank's polarity, Bobby ultimately transcends the binary and redirects our attention to the relativity and arbitrariness of Hank's assertions. This move undermines Hank's authority in the narrative by highlighting Hank's tendency to shift his opinion when it benefits himself, while he is not generous in doing so when it comes to his gender socialization of Bobby.

While Bobby lacks the coordination and ambition necessary to be a viable participant in baseball, football, wrestling, golf, or fishing, he is skillful at ice-skating and shooting. In "Nine Pretty Darn Angry Men," Bobby and Luanne, his cousin, go ice-skating. While Luanne has difficulty maintaining her balance, Bobby glides skillfully across the ice with one leg up, like a figure skater. Bobby excitedly states, "Wait'll dad sees this!" This exclamation generates mirth because the audience recognizes from Hank's previous reactions that he would be dismayed to see Bobby performing so deftly at a sport (without Hank's micromanaging) that is often associated, however erroneously, with women or gay men. In his folly, Bobby fails to recognize that ice-skating is not among the condoned choices within masculine normativity, and this act provides his audience the ideal context in which to recognize that this activity should be a choice for him.

Hank is stunned when he learns that Bobby is a skilled shooter in, "How to Fire a Rifle without Really Trying." The program starts out like the other programs, featuring Bobby's failed sports attempts. Hank states, "Now ping-pong balls are tricky. Don't grip it hard. It requires finesse. Bobby what's in your mouth?" Bobby has two ping-pong balls in his mouth, pushing out his cheeks. He says, "Look, Dad, I'm the commish!" They move to the shooting gallery where Hank again thinks Bobby will fail, but Bobby quickly demonstrates that he is a gifted shooter. At home, Hank tells Peggy, "The boy shows a real talent for shooting. This could be his sport. . . . I never get to bond with Bobby on account of he's not good at much. Shooting stuff is something a father and son can do together." That shooting would make up for Bobby's lack in other arenas is not surprising. Katz asserts that "guns are an important signifier of virility and power and hence are an important part of the way . . . masculinity is constructed . . ." (140). However, shooting seems out of step with Bobby's gentle character, exhibited by his enjoyment of gardening and watching PBS with his mother. It is the gun's capacity to make Bobby more powerful and dominant, despite his apparent lack of masculine prowess, that gives the gun such an appeal to Bobby. Fiske suggests that young men are taught that "their masculinity requires them to be dominant," but more often than not they "have neither the physical strength nor the social position to meet this requirement" (200). For Bobby, the gun is a "mechanical extension" of the self that automatically and easily gives him the dominance that he cannot command in other sports (200).

It appears that Hank and Bobby will finally be able to commune in their mutual "masculine" appreciation of guns and shooting. However, a series of reversals in position takes place, challenging the illusion that any sport or body is inherently

masculine and underscoring the family as a primary site of the regulation of gender performativity. When Hank takes Bobby to the shooting range, he engages in a flashback of his dismal experience learning to shoot with his father, Cotton, a Second World War hero whose parenting style resembles that of a drill sergeant. In the flashback Cotton says, “You’re never gonna be a war hero like me if you shoot like that! No wonder that kid from the playground stole your pail. He knows you can’t shoot!” While Bobby has shot perfectly, the pressure of the flashback prompts Hank to shoot so poorly that he hides his target from Bobby. Kimmel argues that the father is the first to inscribe masculinity onto the son:

The father is the first man who evaluates the boy’s masculine performance, the first pair of eyes before whom he tries to prove himself. Those eyes will follow him for the rest of his life. Other men’s eyes will join them—the eyes of role models such as teachers, coaches, bosses or media heroes; the eyes of his peers, his friends and workmates; and the eyes of millions of other men, living and dead, from whose constant scrutiny of his performance he will never be free. (“Masculinity” 117)

The episodes reviewed here imply that Hank’s socialization of Bobby is guided by his recognition of the eyes that will be evaluating Bobby’s masculinity for the rest of his life. This ideological positioning works to justify Hank’s actions and his perpetuation of the dominant gender order. Hank employs what Kimmel calls “a ‘Father Knows Best’ kind of paternalism,” a “blend of patriarchy and paternalism—a father of fury and a father of compassion” in policing Bobby’s masculinity (“Cult” 249). Hank’s combination of censure and love works to frame his actions as loving, protective socialization. However, the flashbacks in “How to Fire a Rifle without Really Trying” underscore the inanity of regulating normative masculinity from generation to generation, as well as the slippage that can occur. The ridiculousness and viciousness of this cycle are emphasized when, in a complete reversal of their positions, Bobby begins advancing directives to Hank when he sees Hank falter on the range. “What’s wrong with you? Why don’t you steady yourself? . . . Close one eye. How can you hit anything the way you’re holding it? Don’t grip the barrel so hard.” Citing Hank’s own directive to Bobby while teaching him to throw ping-pong balls, Bobby states, “It requires finesse.” In this amusing reversal of positions, the production and normalization of masculinity are highlighted and rendered absurd.

A final reversal emphasizes the tenuousness of masculine identity. Bobby begs Hank to enter the Arlen Father and Son Fun Shoot, a shooting contest. Hank wavers, but Peggy cajoles him to participate. A reversal of positions is evident as Bobby deploys the rhetoric that Hank has taught him during his previous sporting experiences. Interestingly, Hank deflects the very advice he has provided, rendering his narrative authority suspect:

- Bobby: You mean it, Dad? You’ll shoot with me? Yea! On your team we have to win! You’ve never lost anything in your life.  
Hank: Well, Bobby, you can’t always expect to win.  
Bobby: No, Dad, I promise, I won’t choke.

Hank: Sometimes people choke, Bobby. We just gotta be proud that God took the time to give us a fault.

Bobby: That's loser talk, you taught me that. No Hill's ever been a loser. . . . We're gonna get a trophy!!

Amusingly, Hank feels overwhelmed by Bobby's expectations, which he is responsible for cultivating. The scenario functions to highlight and critique not only Hank's rhetorical positioning, but also the sporting arena's focus on winning and its inevitable intertwining with masculinity and dominance. During the contest, Cotton yells to Hank regarding their rivals, "Come on, Hank! I got money riding on this shot; on the Mackays!" Cotton's lack of faith in him, as evidenced by his flashback and this comment, unsettles Hank, causing him to miss the winning shot. The juxtaposition of three generations of Hill men demonstrates the contingency and variability of masculine normativity. That is, Hank fails to live up to his father's expectations for masculinity just like Bobby fails to live up to Hank's expectations. The audience witnesses three generations of varying dysfunctional, struggling relationships that are centered on what each perceives as the appropriate iteration of masculinity, which has shifted for each generation. Such positioning underscores the folly not only of perceiving that one, immutable, natural masculinity exists, but also of assigning such importance to gender.

### **Folly and Gender Performativity**

The process of policing Bobby's masculinity reflects a common practice in the socialization of young men in contemporary US society. These efforts undermine the idea that masculinity is a "natural" phenomenon. David Whitson states that the "time, effort and institutional support" channeled into boys' "masculinizing practices" as well as the "urgency . . . attached to the success or failure of such projects" contradict "any notion of biological destiny" (22). Whitson adds: "If boys simply grew into men and that was that, the effort described to teach boys how to be men would be redundant" (22). This sentiment becomes abundantly clear in the figure of Bobby, whose forced citation of the masculine norm defies expectations for masculine embodiment and behavior, despite Hank's continual policing. Few are less suited to being a sports figure than Bobby. Indeed, by US standards, few are less suited to citing masculinity than Bobby, who wears hegemonic masculinity like an "ill-fitting coat" (29). Bobby's folly creates a slippage in the iteration of normative masculinity as he exposes the "nonnatural" and "nonnecessary" elements of gender, stressing the importance of analyzing subversive citations of masculinity by men. Bobby's amazing resistance to his regulation and his inability to inhabit the ideal of hegemonic masculinity prompt the audience to acknowledge the fragility of masculinity and the intricate social work that goes into "making men." His inability to accept easily society's social conventions brands them suspect and, by looking through Bobby's eyes, the audience is prompted to question the notion that masculinity naturally coheres to or inheres in male bodies. Through his repetitive

folly, Bobby denaturalizes masculinity, disturbs gender norms, and poses a paradox in thinking regarding the hegemonic gender regime.

The medium of animation works fluidly with the figure of the fool to provide a space of ambivalence where gender subversion is achieved. The fool and animation have mutually reinforcing features that enable Bobby to habitually defy gender norms, receive reproach, and then return to transgressing gender norms again, as if nothing has occurred. As Hyers states, "Like the comic characters in the film cartoons who may be cut in shreds, smashed flat, riddled with holes, or stretched into a thin line, yet which suddenly spring back into their original form . . . the clown always seems to survive" (qtd. in Otto 135). Bobby is not subject to physical disfiguration, such as being "smashed flat;" however, he does dodge, seemingly continuously, his father's attempts at gender socialization, enabling this same theme to be explored repeatedly. Unlike a real life character, Bobby is never overcome or changed much by his father's policing because "animation eliminates any need to meet expectations of verisimilitude" (Mullen 82). With each new program he continues to act on his own desires and ambitions, as his folly opens a space in which audiences are consistently reminded of the arbitrariness of the gender order. The animation aesthetic is uniquely situated to deliver this critique because it enables masculine normativity to be in perpetual question.

Folly is poised to provide an important corrective to our collective illusions and hubris, but the utility of folly as a subversive mode of resignification has been overlooked. Indeed, folly has the potential to yield meaningful interpretive insight and the figure of Bobby begins to illuminate the relevance of folly specifically for analyses of gender performativity. Folly's capacity to undermine conventional wisdom and to place normativity into perpetual relief through its inversion of the ordinary provides a space in which subversive performativity may be realized. Folly provides philosophical insight by enabling a way of seeing that illuminates possibilities thwarted from existence as a result of contemporary norms. Cultural insight is facilitated when we apply this way of seeing to our daily lives, reconsidering our roles within society and the very structure of society itself. In folly's mirror we might gain sufficient self-reflexivity to reenvision our present social order and to consider that gender may be one of our most absurd illusions. At the same time, we are obliged to acknowledge folly's limitations. Folly enables new ways of seeing and understanding, but ultimately such insight is a response to the original image in the looking glass. Consequently, radically different conceptualizations or departures may be stymied by folly, because even as it troubles truths, customs, and traditions, it is still intricately compelled by the normative. Although in this sense folly may not be revolutionary, it still might be the very tool we need to create a space in which all bodies are livable.

## Notes

- [1] I draw upon the configuration of hegemonic masculinity first systematized by Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, and more fully deployed by Connell in *Gender and Power*. The term

describes a cultural ideal of masculinity that achieves ascendancy through a complex interplay of cultural forces, including “religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures,” political discourse, educational processes and so forth (Connell 184). The ideal does not have to resemble the actual men in society and might be comprised of a fantasy figure of proportions no man could achieve. Although some reject the ideal and most men are unable to meet it, some still support and sustain the image’s power for their own “fantasy gratification,” residual social benefit, and to displace aggression (185). The perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity requires “the maintenance of practices that institutionalize men’s dominance over women” and other nonhegemonic men, such as gay males or men of color (185). In the spirit of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, hegemonic masculinity is not a static or immutable category, but one that is responsive to competing forces.

- [2] The program has been nominated for numerous Emmy and Annie Awards. In 1999, the program won an Emmy in the Outstanding Animated Program category. In 2003, the program won an Annie Award for Outstanding Writing in an Animated Television Production.
- [3] At various junctures in *Undoing Gender*, Butler invokes the idea of inhabiting an unlivable body: “I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized makes life unlivable” (4).
- [4] For more information on the Festival of Fools, see Welsford (202–6, 212–13) and Zijdeveld (58–70).

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