



"Go be gay for that poor, dead intern"

Conversion Fantasies and Gay Anxieties in *Supernatural*

Darren Elliott-Smith

Academic writing about *Supernatural's* appeal to queer spectators has largely dwelled on the cult series' Gothic milieu and mise-en-scène. Further still, its knowing treatment of the homoerotic relationship between its two attractive male leads, the demon-hunting Winchester brothers Sam and Dean, clearly offers up their fraternal love for queer appropriation and fantasy. It remains to be seen whether such fantasies operate to subvert the show's (clearly problematic) presentation of heteronormative (heterosexual, monogamous, procreative) ideology. Most critical analysis of *Supernatural's* "queerness"¹ seems to focus upon Sam and Dean in particular and the scenes in which their traditional heterosexual masculinity is questioned, queered, and marginalized. A more informed understanding of the show's appeal for gay male spectators might be served by studying the show's representation of explicit gay male characters, specifically gay intern Corbett in "Ghostfacers" (3.13) and gay *Supernatural* superfans Damien and Barnes from "The Real Ghostbusters" (5.9). I will argue that the show's overriding appeal for gay men lies in a disidentification² with the show's hypermasculine protagonists, revealing a simultaneous desire *to be with* (to bed) and

eventually to *be like* Sam or Dean. This collapse of desire and identification, rather than allowing for a subversive queering of the show's presentation of brotherly love and straight masculinity, reveals instead the gay masculine anxieties in contemporary Western society. Horror narratives that have queer appeal such as *Supernatural* revisit, relect, and replay cultural notions of trauma pertinent for the gay male subculture, chief among them the association of a submissive femininity with gay men within a dominant culture that expects heterosexuality of its subjects.

Much of the critical analysis of *Supernatural*'s queerness revolves around the homoerotic fantasies inspired by the show, specifically the fan-scribed "slash fiction"³ that reconfigures the implicit homoerotic tensions between Sam and Dean as explicit gay sex between the brothers and between various peripheral male characters, including the angel Castiel. Catherine Tosenberger considers the show's queer (and incestuous) erotic and paratextual afterlife in "Wincest" slash fan fiction, which fantasizes a consensual homosexual relationship between the brothers. Her claim is that its transgressive elements do not build *subversive, perverse, or* oppositional texts that foster a "resistance to a heterosexual, nonincestuous show" ("The epic love story of Sam and Dean" o.1). Instead, she suggests, the romanticized, paratextual Wincest slash fiction offers Sam and Dean a redemptive happiness that they are perpetually denied by the show's writers both in a diegetic sense (via Chuck Shurley, the show's writer/prophet who publishes novels based on the boys' adventures) and in a non-diegetic sense (via Eric Kripke, Sera Gamble, and the show's returning writers). Tosenberger concurs with Sara Gwenllian-Jones' reading of "The Sex Lives of Cult TV Characters" and understands the queer inscription of Sam and Dean, not as an attack on the show's seemingly obvious celebration of straight machismo, but as "an actualization of [the show's] latent textual elements" (Gwenllian-Jones 82). Both critics agree that slash fictions merely tap into and foreground the cult television show's implicit queerness:

Cult television series are already "queer" in their constructions of fantastic virtual realities that must problematise heterosexuality . . . It is the cult television series itself that implicitly "resists" the conventions of heterosexuality; the slash fiction stories written by some of its fans render explicit this implicit function and, more importantly, are a reflection of cult television's immersive and interactive logics. (Gwenllian-Jones 89-90)

Tosenberger helpfully highlights instances of queerness inherent in *Supernatural*'s continuing story arcs across the seasons that work to comically foreground the show's central relationship as one that is open to gay and queer interpretation.

The "epic love story of Sam and Dean" (as characterized by the show's executive story editor Sera Gamble [Borsellino]) is in fact frequently referenced within the show itself. Such instances include moments where Sam and Dean are mistaken for a gay male couple (see for instance "Bugs," 1.8; "Something Wicked," 1.18; and "Playthings," 2.11). These instances often provoke a mildly homophobic panic — usually in Dean (arguably the more masculine of the brothers). Homoeroticism is also developed as a consequence of the narrative prevention of both brothers' heterosexual love lives (Dean's relationships with women are perpetually doomed, and Sam's female partners are frequently murdered).⁴ Perhaps most obviously the siblings' excessively dependent love for one another is also comically misinterpreted as bordering on the homoerotic. Tosenberger summarizes:

They don't have anyone but each other (and their father) to love, and since their father's death, they love none but each other . . . While this love is not necessarily romantic, our culture codes romantic love as similarly excessive, so the show makes it very easy to read Sam and Dean's excessive love as romantic. (2.2)

Tosenberger's analysis of Wincest slash suggests that it provides a cathartic vent for the sexual turmoil of Sam and Dean (and indeed for the show's fans). The brothers' destruction of the show's monsters (which can be read as projected metaphors of their own repressed homosexual and/or incestuous desires) remains unsatisfactory, and true catharsis is achieved in these unbridled erotic fictions that allow Sam and Dean to find fleeting moments of happiness with one another.

Not only do analyses of queer readings of *Supernatural* focus too tightly upon the characters of Sam and Dean, but I would argue that the study of the seemingly queer fantastical appropriations of Wincest fiction alone is not sufficient to understand the show's specifically homosexual appeal. If, as Gwenllian-Jones' suggests,⁵ the majority of slash fiction authors are well-educated, straight women, we must look elsewhere for a male, gay perspective. Further still, I would argue that such female-authored slash fiction only fosters increased perturbation for the gay male subject, who is continually feminized in dominant culture, sharing the same love object as the straight female and therefore considered *unmanly*.

Gay male spectators of the show negotiate a sense of gay masculinity via multiple identifications with the hypermasculine Winchester (taking pleasure in their attractive physicality, their closeness, and the show's tongue-in-cheek references to their homoerotic relationship), with their female love interests (specifically Ruby), and with the show's many queer-coded peripheral characters who simultaneously deflate Sam and Dean's own performed hypermasculinity while poking fun at clichéd gay male characteristics. In order to understand the pleasures and identification practices offered to the gay male spectator of *Supernatural*, we must return to the show's own treatment of queerness and homosexuality. Focusing on gay male characters from two episodes — "Ghostfacers" and "The Real Ghostbusters" — I hope to show that the gay male subject's (dis)identification with hypermasculinity (here in the form of Sam and Dean) demands a collapse of desire and identification that gives rise to conversion fantasies (bedding and converting the straight male to homosexuality). It also gives rise to

masculine masquerade and role-play (in wishing to become hyper-masculine) in order to disavow any anxieties in being shamefully associated with a "feminine" passivity and penetrability.

Despite the show's tongue-in-cheek portrayal of Dean's clichéd homophobic responses to misinterpretations of his and Sam's brotherly love, the show's inclusion of comic, yet sympathetic, gay male characters such as the novice intern Alan Corbett ("Ghostfacers") offsets accusations of homophobia. The representation of Corbett's unrequited gay love has garnered much praise in gay critical circles, awarding the episode a GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) nomination in 2009 for Outstanding Individual Episode. Corbett's homosexual feelings for Ed, one of the Ghostfacers' lead investigators, is an unusual acknowledgment of the show's legion of gay male fans who themselves nurse unrequited crushes upon its leads. On behalf of these fans Corbett also manifests a fantasy to seduce the straight male with whom he erotically disidentifies.

"Ghostfacers"

"Ghostfacers" stands out formally, aesthetically, and narratively from other episodes within the season because it is presented as a show in its own right, without the usual *Supernatural* opening titles and with its own contrived advertisement-break placer logos. True to form for a reality TV-style ghost-hunting show, most of the episode is filmed by the team themselves through handheld cameras, night vision goggles, and cameras that are set up at fixed points throughout a haunted building. In essence, "Ghostfacers" queers the cohesion of season 3 of *Supernatural*, with little or no references to the season's plot arc. The gang represents an amalgamation of amateurish, geeky fans on the margins of the dominant culture, all of whom retain a self-referential knowledge of Sam and Dean as übermasculine hunters. Taking the form of a pilot for a new show, lead presenters Ed and Harry introduce the episode's central case study, the Morton House, said to be the most haunted house in America, which reaches its paranormal peak

every February 29. The Ghostfacers' team is made up of Ed and Harry (re-appearing as recurring characters from "Hell House," 1.17, much to the chagrin of Sam and Dean), Ed's adopted sister Maggie, their cameraman Spruce and their new intern Alan Corbett (who clearly appears to have a crush on the seemingly heterosexual Ed).

The Ghostfacers enter the police-cordoned house and begin setting up their equipment for their amateur ghost hunting. The team, now split into two groups, are accosted by Sam and Dean, posing as police officers, but Ed recognizes the Winchester and reveals their true identities to the others. Meanwhile, Harry, Spruce, and Maggie witness a ghost who appears to shoot himself in front of them. Sam and Dean confirm that the inflicted spirit is acting out a "death echo," whereby a ghost relives its own death again and again. Venturing on his own, Corbett attempts to prove his worth to the Ghostfacers by exploring the upstairs rooms of the house, only to be kidnapped by Freeman Daggett (the house's former owner), another, more vengeful, spirit. The house becomes the team's prison as its windows slam shut and doors lock by themselves, just before another death echo appears, this time of a man who is hit by a train. When Sam and Dean attempt to interrupt the ghost's echo by waking it up, they find that their attempts will only work if they form a connection with the victim. While attempting to search for Corbett, Sam and Dean discover that Daggett, once a hospital janitor who stole bodies from the hospital morgue for company, died in 1964. The presence of the unburied bodies in the house explains the recurrences of death echoes. Corbett wakes up tied to a chair at a long dinner table somewhere in the basement of the house, with Sam tied to a chair opposite, having also been kidnapped by Daggett. Around the table sit various other dead bodies. Daggett approaches Corbett from behind and stabs him through the throat, killing him.

While Sam and Dean are assaulted by Daggett, the remaining Ghostfacers witness a spectral vision of Corbett in a death echo. Realizing that they need to end their friend's repeated suffering, Harry understands that the only person with a connection to Corbett

is Ed. He confesses to his friend that Corbett had feelings for him and pleads for Ed to "[g]o be gay for that poor, dead intern." Ed does so and connects with the spirit of Corbett, telling him that he loves him and pleading for his help. Corbett promptly snaps out of his death echo and prevents Daggett's assault on the Winchesters.

The formal structure of the "Ghostfacers" episode references the sub-genre of the paranormal reality TV show and, naturally, Sam and Dean's iconic place within a subculture of paranormal enthusiasts. Corbett can be read as a cipher for the gay male fan of *Supernatural* who desires to be accepted into a discourse of traditional macho masculinity by demonstrating it himself (as Corbett strives to prove himself as brave and independent by *going it alone*). However Corbett also erotically *desires* masculinity (here in the form of the geeky, but more mature Ed).

With the character of Corbett, the show initially connects with its long-running treatment of implied homosexuality and the resulting homosexual panic in its seemingly straight male protagonists, as Ed is totally unaware of Corbett's affections. Here homosexual desire becomes both a key narrative element but also remains a comic device. The representation of Corbett's homosexuality is decidedly passive. The youngest of the Ghostfacers, Corbett is a pale, thin, and softly spoken young man, marginalized as an intern and reduced to carrying equipment. He is clearly depicted as a supporting character. However, in death, Corbett is seemingly empowered *because* of this passivity rather than in spite of it, when the team relies on his spectral powers to save them from Daggett. As a gay male Corbett is symbolically represented as penetrated rather than penetrating. This finds its symbolic conclusion in his death, stabbed by Daggett. Within the camp gothic excesses of *Supernatural's* milieu, the homosexual remains the preferred Other, but an Other nonetheless, and as such gay love possesses a supernatural potency that Harry comically suggests "can reach beyond the veil of death." This implies something unnatural, an inherent morbidity and a spectrality in homosexuality that is configured as transient perhaps due to an assumption of its non-procreative

associations, being unable to 'naturally' reproduce. The episode seems to suggest that as a gay man Corbett is more able to make that transition, already straddling the border between masculinity and femininity and therefore able to transcend that between life and death.

If the gay male spectator, like Corbett, covets the ideal of hypermasculinity, what are the implications of his appropriation of a hypermasculine form that, in its purest sense, is symbolized in heterosexual masculinity? Leo Bersani considers the effects of the media representation of gay men in light of the AIDS crisis that links homosexuality with death, decay, and infection. Questioning Jeffrey Weeks' argument that gay macho style "gnaws at the roots of a male heterosexual identity" (Weeks 191), Bersani argues if this is true, it is not because of the parodic distance that they take from that identity, but rather because from within "their nearly mad identification with it, they never cease to feel the appeal of its being violated" (Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 15).

Bersani posits that sexual penetration is traumatic, even "self-shattering" for the gay man placed in the supine feminine position: "to be penetrated is to abdicate power" ("Is the Rectum a Grave?" 24). Further still he claims that anal sex provides a means through which the subject can lose one's self, disrupting "the ego's coherence and . . . its boundaries" (*Homos* 101). Moreover, the pain and pleasure imputed to gay penetration has the potential to shatter macho phallic pride where the façade of masculinity can also be exposed, "if the rectum is a grave in which the masculine ideal . . . of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death. . . ." (Bersani "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 29-30). Following this logic, Corbett's passivity, symbolized by his subjugated position in the Ghostfacers' pecking order, his unrequited (and seemingly feminized) gay love for Ed, and his eventual death, nonetheless gives him the spectral power to kill the phallic male, here ironically symbolized in Daggett (who is eventually exposed as a marginalized mama's boy desperate for his own effeminate, if monstrous, tea party). Corbett's position on the margins of masculinity provides the means for him to

"cross over" from life to death and back again. Through the repeated suffering of his own traumatic killing, he becomes re-masculinized. By suffering for his friends over and over and by accepting his death via penetration, Corbett becomes *more of a man*.

Just as Corbett wishes to be *with* Ed, romantically, he also aspires to *be* Ed by emulating his role as one of Ghostfacers' lead investigators. Similarly Ed is encouraged to perform *himself* in order to shatter Corbett's death echo, by offering him the false promise of his reciprocated love. Throughout the series, *Supernatural* thrills in parodying and critiquing masculinity in all forms: straight, gay, and queer. I would argue that it is in those moments of homoeroticized or queered masculinity that the fragility of the hypermasculine ideal is highlighted. In "After School Special" (4.13) Dean masquerades as a PE coach at his and Sam's old school, where he is clearly visualized homoerotically in tight red gym shorts and white polo shirt, tube socks and red sweat bands while brutally admonishing an all-boy gym class. "Criss Angel Is a Douchebag" (4.12) sees Dean being tricked into visiting a gay S&M club by two aging magicians (Charlie and Jay, whose relationship is suggestively queer) resulting in another resurgence of Dean's homosexual panic.

The question that remains for gay male spectators of the show's comic yet homoerotic parodying of masculinity is whether they "run the risk of idealizing and feeling inferior to certain representations of masculinity on the basis of which they are in fact judged and condemned?" (Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" 14). Is homosexuality treated as comic relief? If, as Bersani suggests, "Parody is an erotic turn-off and all gay men know this" (14), what pleasures do gay male spectators gain from an erotic worship of parodies of hypermasculine forms? The show's fairly innocuous sexual display essentially achieves only a flaccid eroticism, one that is not designed to arouse, but merely to provide "eye candy," though it nevertheless works to objectify masculinity as an erotic object of spectacle. Is it critiquing heterosexist machismo or simply appropriating such ideals for gay masculinity, effectively negating any subversive potential?

"The Real Ghostbusters"

The queer appropriation of Sam and Dean's characters is taken one stage further in "The Real Ghostbusters" in which the self-reflexivity of the series becomes more complex. When the show's slash fiction writer Becky misleads Sam and Dean into attending a *Supernatural* convention celebrating the writings of Carver Edlund (Chuck Shurley), they become aware that the venue is haunted by ex-owner Leticia Gore and the three spirits of the young boys who killed her son. The gathered delegates include Demian and Barnes, two male fans who masquerade for the duration of the convention as a copycat Sam and Dean. Demian (as Dean) attempts to make Dean understand the reason behind their impersonation,

In real life he sells stereos. I fix photocopiers. Our lives suck.
But Sam and Dean, to wake up every morning and save the world. To have a brother who would die for you. Well, who wouldn't want that?

Convincing Dean of the purpose of their fight, the four hunters eventually team up to burn and salt the bones of Leticia and the monstrous children. Before Dean leaves Demian and Barnes, the pair reveals that they met each other online in a *Supernatural* chatroom, and that they are "more than just friends." As the pair lovingly hold hands, Demian continues, "We're partners." Barnes, the taller of the two men, leans over and rests his head on his lover's shoulders in a comical pose, at which Dean looks assuredly uncomfortable and comments, "Oh . . . well, howdy 'pardners'" before retreating. With Barnes' camp response, "Howdy!" Demian coquettishly leans his own head into his partner's and the comical display of their height difference intensifies the visual ridicule of these nerdy, roleplay-addicted computer geeks.

In the masquerade theory discussed by Joan Riviere and Mary Anne Doane, the feminine masquerade is posited as an *exaggeration* of gender, performed as a defense against heterosexual male reprisals toward women should they display traits of empowered masculinity

in certain social contexts. The masquerading female subject achieves a distance from her own image by ironically performing an excessive femininity. Similarly, both the macho hypermasculinity as performed by Sam and Dean and its camp parody by Demian and Barnes work to disavow femininity one way or another. The clichéd comic revelation of Demian and Barnes' homosexuality on the one hand refreshingly seems to offer a non-stereotyped representation of feminine gay male subjectivity, but on the other undercuts their heroic masculine performance as being just that. Once the *mask* of masculinity (in performing Sam and Dean) is dropped, homosexuality is once more associated with passive, feminine traits. While this may offer a critique of all masculinity as performance and reveal the gay man's potential to be heroic, in the case of Demian and Barnes, heroism can only be achieved via the masquerade. In both Demian and Barnes' straight-acting performance, and Corbett's shamefully concealed affections for Ed and his eventual empowerment through the repeated masochistic suffering of the death echo, gay male passivity and its associations with feminine masochism are disavowed by means of a covering up of any shameful desires that may be construed as feminine.

Corbett's shattered masculinity in "Ghostfacers" and the parodic lampooning of masculinity in "The Real Ghostbusters" both operate to highlight the fragility of masculine ideals, which speaks particularly to the gay male subject who must negotiate his own masculinity within a culture that assumes heterosexuality, and frequently associates gay masculinity with the feminine. Though this conflation with seemingly shameful femininity gives rise to anxieties surrounding concepts of 'manliness,' I would argue that *Supernatural's* representation of gay masculinity instead offers a critique of the limited culturally gendered positions available for gay male subjects. In heteronormative culture the ambiguous appeal of a gay masculinity paralleled with femininity provides both an anxiety and a transgressive access to a subversive and unnatural potency, yet it also highlights the gay men's possession of an essential masculinity to a mere *performance* of it through *role play*.⁶