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Of Peerenting, Trophy Wives, and Effeminate Men: *Modern Family*'s Surprisingly Conservative Remediation of the Family Sitcom Genre

Christina M. LaVecchia

When I read the call for Harlot's special issue on Family Rhetorics I immediately thought of Modern Family, a favorite on my Hulu queue. Here was a show, I thought, that was working to represent a new vision of "family" and a new kind of sitcom. But after I began writing I realized that, despite the show's edgy flirt with political correctness and mockumentary style, the reason this show is so successful is because it fulfills many of our expectations about what families should act like, feel like, and sound like. Weird, right?

Toward the end of the aughts, network studio executives and producers began to fear that the family sitcom was dead. In 2009, *Los Angeles Times* entertainment staffer Scott Collins described the trend by writing, “Family comedy? Come on. Those things went out with ‘Malcolm in the Middle.’ Thanks to cable and the Internet, families today just don't watch TV together anymore.” Instead, network producers decided that, “for the affluent viewers they sought, the workplace had

become the new household, the cubicle the new bedroom and young careerist upstarts the precocious toddlers of the urban nursery" (Bellafante). It may be because of these popular and prevailing notions that, after the demise of *Arrested Development* in 2006, the only network sitcoms that found success were those that took place outside of the home: shows like *30 Rock*, *The Office*, and *Parks and Recreation* (Havrilesky).

Network producers have been left scratching their heads this past decade when trying to develop family programming. The vogue of the family sitcom genre was uncertain: not only did family sitcoms seem outdated and stale, but reality TV had (perplexingly) dominated ratings far longer than most had ever expected it to. *New York Times* reviewer Ginia Bellafante comments on this uncertainty:

The vogue of the family sitcom genre was uncertain: not only did family sitcoms seem outdated and stale, but reality TV had (perplexingly) dominated ratings far longer than most had ever expected it to.

> In recent years reality television has exerted an even more powerful force in displacing the genre, not simply because of its prevalence but also because its commitments to unchecked domestic lunacy render the entertainment value of mere dysfunction, the family sitcom's lifeblood, obsolete.

Dramatized "reality" on TV was, in essence, out-crazying the family sitcom and normalizing the dysfunctional conflicts that drive the humor of shows like *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Roseanne*, or *Malcolm in the Middle*. To many, it looked like the age of finding humor in the everyday, internal workings of the family was gone.

And yet, today the family sitcom endures. In 2009, Steve Levitan and Christopher Lloyd's *Modern Family* exploded onto the network scene and challenged notions that the sitcom was no longer a genre ripe for comedic insight and entertainment gold. In fact, says Collins, "the pilot tested so highly among focus groups that, in May [2009], ABC executives took the unusual step of screening the entire episode to a crowd of advertisers in New York, where it drew

favorable reactions." The show and its popular characters were a surprise hit at the Emmy's after the show's debut season, garnering wins for supporting actor Eric Stonestreet and outstanding writing while also upsetting *30 Rock*'s three-year winning streak for best comedy of the year. Its popular success and enviable ratings, declared Brian Stelter of the *New York Times*, are why the 2010 "sitcom blocks on CBS, ABC and NBC are looking more stable than they have in years" ("Bull Market"). According to Tanner Stranksy at *Entertainment Weekly*, the show has also inspired networks to develop a whole set of family sitcoms with non-normative families (that is, "Dad-driven family comedies") to follow in the successful footsteps of *Modern Family's* first season.

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As a product of the ambivalent media landscape that I've attempted to describe (which simultaneously declares the death of the family sitcom and yet finds it a still-bankable genre), *Modern Family* carries the promise to rebrand, revitalize, renew, and rethink the sitcom and bills itself as a show that depicts the unique situations encountered by a, well, modern family. The show follows three family units that make up one extended family.

At the head is no-nonsense patriarch Jay Pritchett, who re-married a much-younger Colombian bombshell named Gloria (also divorced) and became a stepfather to her son, Manny. Jay's daughter, Claire Dunphy, is a homemaker who wears the proverbial pants in her nuclear family, which also includes her goofball husband Phil and three children: ditzy Haley, brainy Alex, and dunce-like Luke. Jay's other son, Mitchell Pritchett, is an uptight lawyer who, along with his gay partner Cameron Tucker, adopts a Vietnamese baby girl (Lily) in the series pilot.

Figure 1: Modern Family's characters

From left: Manny, Cameron (holding Lily), Haley, Luke, Phil, Alex, Jay, Gloria, Claire, and Mitchell (bottom right)

At first glance, *Modern Family* look like it delivers a new and different kind of family sitcom, as implied by its title. In a network TV milieu largely dominated by heteronormative nuclear families, *Modern Family's* portrayal of a May-December romance and an adoptive gay couple seems downright revolutionary.

However, the all-out genre transformation touted by *Modern Family* seems more like a mild genre *remediation* in actual execution. That is, although *Modern Family* promises to deliver a new, more provocative kind of family program, the show falls short of actually challenging our expectations for how families work. In the end, *Modern Family* delivers a non-normative family that still functions with normative family dynamics. While its conservative play on the family sitcom genre has led to the show's commercial and critical success, it has hindered *Modern Family's* ability to say, "Sayonara!" to conventional gender and familial roles: the show works because, in actuality, its "modern" families largely function in ways that ultimately reinforce the status quo.

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The term *remediation*, as I see it in this context, means representing key components from an old form in a new one: the old and new are different in form, yet they are closely linked. Because I see the show as reinforcing familial and gender roles (not subverting them), I argue that *Modern Family* is a prime example of remediation. That is, while its format and style deviate from many earlier family shows—its families look "different" and it recasts traditional family sitcom tropes with a new twist—*Modern Family* still bears a strong resemblance to these earlier shows because its families function in ways that strongly resonate with more conservative ones.

The concept of remediation has long been applied to new media discussions. In *Writing Space*, Jay David Bolter describes the theory of remediation he developed in collaboration with Richard Grusin and, he examines the ways in

which new media “define themselves by borrowing from, paying homage to, critiquing, and refashioning their predecessors” (24). In other words, remediation means that new media, genres, and modes are closely linked to—indeed, even still entwined with—their predecessors. When considering invention and beginnings in his book *Genre & the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*, Anis Bawarshi writes that texts have no “stable origin:” writers and texts are “always building on, always adding to other writers and texts” (ix). This intertextuality, I think, is also applicable to remediating genres: the new form and the old form are always in dialogue with each other and responding to other texts, whether consciously or not.

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One feature of the show that makes it obviously different from its predecessors in the genre is the format. There is no laugh track or studio audience, and punch lines are often delivered with a deadpan understatement. Taking cues from other mockumentary-style comedies like *The Office*, *Modern Family* uses documentary camera angles and reality-TV style confessionals in place of traditional close cuts and pans. Indeed, the characters are obviously aware of a camera or cameraman’s presence during episodes, and they even look directly into the camera on occasion. This creates “a disconcerting aside that has the effect of making the viewer feel both like a part of the family and an observer” (Feiler). According to Bruce Feiler at the *New York Times*, this mockumentary style is a first for a family program. Last, the show is also unique in its embracement of technology, which has such a pronounced presence

that nearly every scene is refracted through a digital funhouse: an iPad screen, a cellphone camera, a baby monitor, a YouTube video. Characters spend half their time glancing past one another rather than communicating directly.

"We used to talk about how cellphones killed the sitcom because no one ever goes to anyone's house anymore," said Abraham Higginbotham, a writer on the show. "You don't have to walk into Rachel and Ross's house, because you can call and say, 'Hey, what's up?' We embrace technology so it's part of the story." (Feiler)

Figure 2: A family that embraces technology. In the episode "Unplugged", frustrated that her family spends more time looking at their electronic devices than each other, Claire declares a no-gadget family challenge.

These developments certainly demonstrate a break from the genre, and do signify that *Modern Family* is doing *something* different in an attempt to reflect contemporary culture. However, other aspects of the show's format, like its story arc, seem to more closely align it with earlier shows. For instance, "in nearly every 22-minute episode, the music swells in the 19th minute, any conflict gets resolved, and a tidy embrace ensues" (Feiler). While these resolutions are often less tidy than those on earlier shows like *Full House*, *Family Matters*, and *Home Improvement*—staples of my childhood, where characters *always* had honest conversations and children received heart-warming lectures from their parents or siblings in the last two minutes of the show—because sometimes things go unsaid or full truths are not revealed, there *is* always such a moment at the end of each episode. And often, these resolutions take place at family meetings or gatherings.

The show resists breaking from a narrative structure that gives the audience a satisfying resolution and reinforces the centrality of the family unit.

Feiler sees the nineteenth-minute resolution as a measure of the show's resonance with contemporary culture, but I see it as evidence of *Modern Family's* strong resemblance to those nineties sitcoms of yore. The show resists breaking from a narrative structure that gives the audience a satisfying resolution and reinforces the centrality of the family unit. Further, the use of these end resolutions in each episode (usually accompanied by a character confessional voiceover) also give the show a platform for working with internal dynamics, reinforcing traditional family values like the importance of communication, understanding, support, or family togetherness.

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The clearest links between the old and new—traditional sitcoms and *Modern Family*—can be seen in familial roles and relationships on the show. What seems to have earned the show most of its critical acclaim and cultural currency is its reflection of our own experiences of "assigned roles, inherited patterns of relating and invisible rules" within families (Clyman). This can be seen in the passive-aggressive behaviors, marital mis-communications, sibling bickering, and goofy dad buffoonery that fill episodes of *Modern Family*. Gloria, for instance, is a master of the art of passive-aggressive behavior. In Season 2, Episode 2, a frustrated Gloria retaliates at Jay for teasing her about her beliefs about the dead.+

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Figure 4: Convincing Jay to slap the chicken

Pretending that ridiculous behaviors are part of her “culture,” Gloria successfully embarrasses Jay by convincing him to slap the chicken she is preparing for their meal. Though the scene’s premise relies on edgier ethnic jokes than many other shows might attempt, the behaviors that constitute the real substance of the scene could be straight out of any other family sitcom.

Although *Modern Family* might *seem* poised to redefine the assigned relationship roles in, expectations for, and communication within the heteronormative family—and does occasionally succeed at this—the relationships portrayed in the show feel remarkably familiar.

Take also, for instance, the strikingly heteronormative dynamics at play in the Pritchett-Tucker family composed of Mitchell, his partner Cameron, and their adopted daughter Lily. Although on the surface they represent the so-called “twenty-first century gay family,” Cam and Mitch actually play two extremely gender-normative roles—roles it seems that the show has taken pains to concretely define.

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Figure 4: : Disucssion of trophy wives with *Modern Family*'s cast

Though he’s also an affectionate father, his identity is so closely tied to his career that the briefest of hiatuses from his job (which he quit in Season 1, Episode 17 because it was interfering with his family time) is enough to make him frantic to return just three episodes later (Season 1, Episode 20). The flamboyant Cam describes himself as the “stay-at-home Dad/trophy wife” and embraces the role of overprotective mother to their daughter Lily. Cam is Lily’s primary caregiver, and the show makes it clear that he represents the mother figure in the Pritchett-Tucker household. For instance, he spends much of the episode in a hypervigilant watch over Lily’s baby monitor, saying, “I'm like a mother bear. When I hear my cub crying, I have to run to her” (Season 1, Episode 11).

Through such portrayals, the show implies that a “modern” gay family must still identify with and embrace gender-normative roles of breadwinner and caregiver. More ambiguous roles of shared responsibility, either for earning the family’s income or raising their child, are not seen in the Pritchett-Tucker household—nor, it should be said, in the heterosexual Pritchett or Dunphy households. All three households are structured around heterosexual arrangements. It seems that perhaps the show only remediates our idealized, heteronormative vision of what families *look* like, and not their actual function. That is, although *Modern Family* challenges our traditional notions of what *constitutes* a family with immigrant trophy wives and gay partners, the families in *Modern Family* still seem to fill familial and gender roles in much the same way as they did in more “conservative” predecessors.

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Modern Family further remediates the family sitcom through its reappropriation of genre tropes like sibling rivalries, the difficulties of raising pre-teen children, and marital disputes—tropes which often build off of the real-life family dynamics discussed in the previous section. Here the show does shift away from its predecessors.

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Figure 5: BB Gun punishment

Classic sitcom situations, like punishing children, are approached with a twist, as with Luke Dunphy’s punishment for shooting his siblings with his BB gun in the series pilot. We expect, in a family sitcom, for a father to punish his son for acting up and hurting his siblings; what we don’t expect is for his father to shoot him with the same BB gun in the backyard.

Indeed, the show's play on presentations of traditional parenting is arguably the most progressive, "modern" aspect of the show, and it's best seen in the Dunphy family.

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Figure 6: Phil throws Haley's cell phone in the pool

At times the Dunphy parents are somewhat callous, like when they dismissively shout "Not right now!" to Alex, who pointed out that she'd been the only child to complete her schoolwork on her own and on time (Season 1, Episode 18), or when Phil throws Haley's cell phone in the pool when she doesn't listen to her mother on their Hawaiian vacation (Season 1, Episode 23). But most frequently, they are simply ineffective. In other words, "Phil and Claire stand in for one of the more questionable trends of our time: the tendency of young parents to friend their children rather than discipline them" (Bellafante), an approach Phil coins "peerenting." Claire, though of a stronger personality and a more capable parent than her husband, is aware that her ability to manage her children has its limits: setting her expectations low, she tells us in the pilot episode, "If Haley never wakes up on a beach in Florida half-naked, I've done my job."

Nevertheless, though frequently manipulative of their children, Claire and Phil are still loving parents: their dysfunction never threatens the family stability. The family is always of central importance.

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Archetypes of the masculine father and husband figures of the family sitcom genre are also a site for remediation on the show. Unlike other characteristics—like narrative structure and format of the show, family dynamics and roles, and tropes like parenting—*Modern Family's* plays on archetypal roles that reify cultural notions of masculinity do seem somewhat progressive.

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Figure 7: Mitch's ineptitude with building things

Mitchell, for example, puts an effeminate twist on his role as the household breadwinner: there is Mitch's ineptitude with building things that terrorizes both his father Jay and partner Cam (Season 2, Episode 1) and his fear of pigeons that leads to a destructive freakout when one gets loose in his house (Season 1, Episode 25).

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Figure 8: Mitch's fear of pigeons and consequent freakout

Thus, Mitchell occupies an interesting position: although he has been cast in the conservative position of breadwinner dad, the show's daring use of gay stereotypes complicates the normative gender role that has been thrust upon him. Social norms say dads fix things and safeguard their families, but Mitch isn't handy around the house (or to be trusted with power tools), nor can he protect his family if menaced by a threat of some kind (be it a winged rat or something a bit scarier). In Mitch's remediated breadwinner role, therefore, we do see some of the most progressive work on the show.

Even more interesting is the effeminate writing of Phil Dunphy's character. Phil is, in fact, a highly effeminate character, as shown in scenes like the one when Jay calls Phil to help with the printer (Season 2, Episode 2), yet he plays the normative role of the "bungling husband" on the show.

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Figure 9: Phil is anxious to prove is manhood to Jay

In this scene, Phil is anxious to prove his manhood to his father-in-law, who sees Phil as a pansy. But it's a bit strange that Phil works so hard to preserve his masculinity and perpetuate masculine behaviors when he doesn't fully participate in these behaviors to begin with. It is a complicated and contradictory role that Phil plays.

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Figure 10: Phil at the spa

For instance, in one episode Phil is hyper-feminized by spending the day at the spa. And yet, the main conflict in this episode and a major theme of the show surrounds his normative male ineptness—in this case, being confused about how to respond to his wife in conversation (Season 2, Episode 17).

Take for another example the story arc for the episode "Earthquake" (Season 2, Episode 2). The episode opens with a small earthquake, which has trapped Claire in the upstairs bathroom, along with the plumber she has hired to help with repairs that Phil has repeatedly promised to make (yet never does). This small marital tension could be easily represented on a sitcom like *Home Improvement* or *Everybody Loves Raymond*: Phil, the undependable husband fails to follow through on his word, leaving the all-knowing wife, Claire, with little choice but to take action herself. Phil is hurt by Claire having called a repairman, an action that suggests he is incapable of fixing things around his house and thereby challenges the gender-normativity of his masculinity.

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Figure 10: Phil covering up his tracks

Additionally, Phil is upset Claire has called the plumber because he does not want to admit that he has not been keeping promises to complete house chores—a typical behavior that other inept TV dads like Tim Taylor or Ray Barone have surely shared in the past. However, unlike these other, normatively masculine TV dad characters (a tools salesman/home

repairman and a sportswriter, respectively), Phil is fairly effeminate, so his concern with preserving his masculinity via home repairs is strange and comical. Once Claire has been trapped in the bathroom, Phil capitalizes on his opportunity to cover up his tracks and purposefully delays helping her out.

At the end of the episode, Claire breaks free from the bathroom herself with the help of the plumber, which might symbolically point to Phil's ineffectiveness to make any practical contributions to the running of the household; she then rushes downstairs to find Phil. Now, in a traditional family sitcom, at this point the ineptitude of the bungling husband would be exposed to the all-knowing wife, shaming him and stripping him of social capital within the family circle. However, Phil's true motivations are never betrayed, because his children take the role-reversing step of covering for him:

Alex: Dad was incredible. He was running around here turning off the gas line, cleaning up broken glass, and taking care of Luke after he ran into a wall.
Luke: I got scared because the cabinet didn't fall down.

Instead of being chastised for his illicit actions—and, importantly for the family sitcom genre, *learning his lesson*—Phil is able to save face because his children decide to intervene on his behalf.

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Modern Family has found tremendous popular, critical, and financial success because it portrays the everyday workings of the family. Time after time, critics and journalists have praised the show for being "realistic" in one way or another. However, I wonder how many of these critics actually mean *heteronormative* when they use the word *realistic*. I think here of an article by Andrew Scott on the AOL website PopEater (and others around the web) that praises Cam and Mitchell's relationship as the best on television entirely on the grounds that it is "both relatable and ultimately realistic, no matter your sexual preference"—implying that realistic relationships must be those that can apply to both homosexual *and* heterosexual couples.

Modern Family *strives to subvert, but in the end represents an ideal of rich, suburban, stable families.*

Does something have to be universally applicable—or structured around heterosexual arrangements—to be considered "realistic"? Can't depictions of alternative family structures, familial roles, and behaviors still be considered realistic? Notably absent from the show are single parents, which arguably represent a significant portion of today's family landscape. Few would argue that working mothers, families with adopted children, or families where grandparents, aunts, or uncles play a prominent role in raising a child are any less realistic, despite their play with the conventional nuclear family. *Modern Family* strives to subvert, but in the end represents an ideal of rich, suburban, stable families.

The family situations, relationships, tensions, bonding, dynamics, and rhetorics portrayed in *Modern Family* may look different at first, but if the goal is to radically reconceptualize the family, then the show's remediation of the genre does not go far enough. Perhaps Bruce Feiler says it best:

> The particulars of the Pritchett-Tucker family may be different from those of the Huxtables, Bunkers or Cleavers. There are second marriages to immigrants, adolescent husbands who never grew up, gay dads. *But the core values are the same*. Perhaps that's why a study last year listed "Modern Family" as the third-most popular show among Republicans. In its fundamentally conservative vision, "Modern Family" turns out to be not so modern after all. (emphasis added)

Indeed, as my analysis has shown, aspects of the show like ending resolutions, dysfunctional parenting, and normative roles in non-normative families serve to preserve the conservative notion that the family is central to the fabric of American culture—to the delight of ABC's mainstream audience. Says actor Jesse Tyler Ferguson, who plays Mitchell, "There's been an absence of well-grounded, family comedy on television. Instead we've had fantastic snarky comedies, like 'Seinfeld' and 'Arrested Development.' I think people miss shows like 'The Cosby Show' and 'Family Ties' that showed

true family values" (Steiler). The most successful remediations I described, the Dunphy's parenting and the play on masculine archetypes, are those that *take place within and preserve* the traditional, nuclear family.

Maybe this surprisingly conservative vision that preserves the centrality of the family to American mainstream culture is why *Modern Family* works for a wide audience: the show doesn't have to take the risk of suggesting that families aren't needed anymore, or aren't the primary place where we locate safety and love in our lives. Though the show's writers and producers largely seem to see the show as a renegade, I do think they also recognize that it's inherently not. Says Steve Levitan, on writing the show, "I just wanted it to be real" (Stelter, "Celebration"): and it seems he's achieved that, as *Modern Family* still perpetuates the same "real" ideas we've seen before about how families operate. The description of the show on ABC's YouTube channel proclaims that "today's American families come in all shapes and sizes;" but, this begs the question: is that all it takes to be a "modern" family? That the family *look* different?

What makes a family truly modern? What makes a show break through the paradigms governing much of the family sitcom canon? It seems that *Modern Family* has not yet answered these questions for us.

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Figures

Figure 1

ABC/Danny Feld. “Family Portrait.” 2010. Photograph. *ABC.com*. <http://cdn.media.abc.go.com/m/images/image-util/624x351/6e9ac2c69541e2aaea8b29d2224b660d.jpg>.

Figure 2

ABC/Eric McCandless. “Unplugged.” 2010. Photograph. *ABC.com*. <http://cdn.media.abc.go.com/m/images/image-util/624x351/c6e55d573160bd86cc47e7776ce5f77c.jpg>.

Figures 3-5, 7, and 9-11

"Modern Family." *www.youtube.com/show/ModernFamily*. Web. 5 Apr 2011. <www.youtube.com/show/ModernFamily>.

Figure 6

“Hawaii.” *Modern Family: Season 1.* Writ. Paul Corrigan & Brad Walsh. Dir. Steve Levitan. 20th Century Fox, 2010. DVD.

Figure 8

"Family Portrait." *Modern Family: Season 1.* Writ. Ilana Wernick. Dir. Jason Winer. 20th Century Fox, 2010. DVD.

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