ARE YOU BEING SIRRED? WORK IN PROGRESS, NANETTE, DOUGLAS, AND THE NEW BUTCH MIDDLEBROW

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The fourth episode of Work in Progress (Showtime, 2019—), the comedy series created by comedian, writer, and actor Abby McEnany and director and writer Tim Mason, with Lilly Wachowski, foregrounds the mise-en-scène of that site of abiding terror for gender-nonconforming folks: the public restroom. Public bathrooms have a storied queer history, from their long-running use as cruising spots by gay men to their more recent weaponization in the right wing’s ongoing war on trans people. Work in Progress approaches the public toilet from a related yet distinct vantage point: that of the butch dyke. Repeatedly during the series’ first twenty-seven-minute episode, Abby (McEnany), its “self-identified fat, queer dyke” protagonist, gets mistaken for a man while simply trying to use the ladies’ room.
When Abby gets “sirred,” as queers call it, one time too many, she snaps. In the heavily trafficked water closet of the concert venue where she’s just arrived to see a performance by gay cultural icon Dolly Parton, Abby excoriates her fellow stall mates for their gender-policing behavior. The resulting scene (in both senses of the word) is a massive “selfown,” in that its humor derives not from Abby’s misgendering, as it might have in comedies past (as in Julia Sweeney’s mononymous SNL caricature, Pat), but rather from this white butch’s unyielding insistence on painting herself as the scene’s consummate victim.

“Does anybody know how hard life is?” she moans. A young trans woman emerges from a stall and snarks, “I’ve got some idea, but keep going, honey.” At the end of the scene (and the episode), Abby awakens on the bathroom floor, having passed out from the full force of her own narcissistic indignation. Her trans boyfriend, Chris (played by gender-nonbinary actor Theo Germaine), is crouched over her, his handsome face etched with concern. “You can’t be in here,” she admonishes him.

If Abby’s transformation, in this pivotal scene—from the victim of gender policing into a monologuing victimizer and finally into a victimizer who gender-polices her own partner—is unexpected, it’s the kind of twist that Work in Progress thrives on. To wit, when the aforementioned young woman (played by Riley Mondragon and named, merely, “Trans-Woman” in the show’s credits) reprimands Abby, her low-pitched voice serves to “mark” her as trans, with the overt joke being that, due to her transness, she’s had it harder than Abby has. But there’s also an implicit joke being made about her transness itself, one that authorizes the viewer to laugh with her but also at her. She’s a comic device, in other words, as much as she is a person.

The show, which both centers and normalizes the emotional and sexual relationship between a butch woman and a trans man in a televisial landscape that seldom depicts masculine intimacy of this variety, has been called “revolutionary” more than once. It’s been called “messy” more than once, too, not only because Abby is the textbook definition of a “hot mess” but also because Work in Progress takes for granted identity’s constitutive messiness: the eternally imperfect alignment between the axes of individual identities, as well as the endless failure of individuals’ self-identifications to match up with those of others.1

While Work in Progress breaks some fresh ground for major network TV, “revolutionary” it is not. Instead, it’s part of an expanding queer televisial landscape, one that—from Queer Eye to Sex Education to Euphoria to the ubiquitously problematic oeuvre of Ryan Murphy—explores new and not-so-new ways of being queer within the capitalist lifeworld of broadcast media. Unsurprisingly, the crossover campiness of Murphy’s empire, with its sancti-guish ghoulishness about representation’s capacity to effect change, remains too flamboyant for some straights and too gay for some queers. Work in Progress acts as a small counterweight, tugging queer TV toward the dykey modesty of a good-quality plaid shirt.

Work in Progress evokes what I call “butch middlebrow,” a contemporary aesthetic and affective sensibility distinguished by the cozy reception it enjoys among the straight, white, liberal viewers and critics to whom Showtime presumably pitches its product. Crucially, butch middlebrow productions are as much defined by the audiences and outlets that consume and laud their interventions as they are by their own audiovisual trappings and self-characterizations.3

Work in Progress and its butch middlebrow sistren, like Hannah Gadsby’s Netflix stand-up specials, have occasioned praise from cosmopolitan gatekeepers like the New York Times and the New Yorker for their self-aware brands of comedy rooted in unvarnished portrayals of butch trauma.5 In the light shed by these beacons of aspirational culture, a canon of butch respectability emerges: the white, liberal, leftist televisial fare of butch middlebrow.

Unlike the glossy, soft-core, LA aesthetic of its Showtime comrade The L Word: Generation Q (the original rebooted for today’s audiences), Work in Progress boasts a down-home queer realism that befits its midwestern setting. Sure, each episode is awash in absurdities large and small, from the untimely death of Abby’s therapist mid-session to an unexpected dinner party with “Weird Al” Yankovic. At the end of the day, though, the viewer goes to bed with a person with a relatable if slightly overwritten set of problems: depression, OCD, internalized fat-phobia, a dead-end temp job at the age of forty-five, and a budding relationship with a gorgeous twentysomething barista that seems too good to last.

By contrast, Shane (Kate Moennig), The L Word’s original, rail-thin butch (though she’d never have used that word to describe herself) and resident hot mess, enters the reboot of TV’s favorite “queer soap opera” as a nightlife entrepreneur with a glass-faced house in the hills and a gorgeous rock star ex-wife who wants to get back together.6 And Transparent, despite its status as a queer darling of middletowb media, soaks its most memorable butch, the silver fox poet-professor Leslie Mackinaw (played by the iconic Cherry Jones and based on the real-life poet Eileen Myles)
in glamour—intriguing even viewers like me who know all too well how unglamorous professorial life truly is. Critics queer and otherwise have claimed Work in Progress as a locus of queer realness and an implicit corrective to the butch erasure and transphobia of too much queer TV past and present. But I can’t help noticing that I’ve seen this butch before: just as she won’t be the last, Abby isn’t the first white butch to have graced the small screen, nor is she the lone representative of her particular morphology at present. For better and for worse, Lea DeLaria and Ellen DeGeneres have been major network fixtures since the mid-1990s. Today, Tig Notaro cracks relatable jokes about parenthood on her Netflix specials, while Alex Borstein splits straight audiences’ sides as brash butch Susie Meyerson on Amazon’s The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel. (Needless to say, butches of color remain less well represented on television, as is evidenced by the familiar refrains “But what about Lena Waithe? What about Orange Is the New Black?” every time the problem gets mentioned.)

TV viewers, especially queer ones, are not unfamiliar with the iconography of what “self-described butch lesbian” performer Hannah Gadsby calls—gesturing to her own bespoke-suited, ample body and fade haircut—“this situation.” As the comedian clarifies, “this situation” is gender nonconformity. In Gadsby’s case, it’s the not-unheard-of predicament of a white,cisgender, masculine woman whom those unacquainted with butchness are likely to misgender as a “good bloke” from far away. When Hannah Gadsby: Nanette (Madeleine Parry and Jon Olb, 2018), a filmed version of Gadsby’s live comedy special Nanette, debuted on Netflix in 2018, it elicited multiple glowing New Yorker profiles, the usual misogynistic and homophobic trolling, and a lively assortment of loving and hateful takes from fellow queers, some far funnier than Gadsby’s self-professedly somber act. Almost overnight, Gadsby became a more recognizable figure than she’d ever hoped, or wished, to be. Her “situation,” it turned out, was relatable, appealing, even hot, to queer and straight viewers alike.

Gadsby’s success and the success of McEnany’s Work in Progress (assuming that the show continues on its prepandemic upward trajectory) are not as “unlikely”
as critics insist. Rather, the unlikeliness factor of Gadsby’s and McEnany’s popularity is a crucial part of each figure’s brand, a questionable assertion that is central to their media personae. Setting any suspicion of brand calculation aside, consider that this claim to unlikeliness is pivotal to their shared butch middlebrow sensibility and reception.

Butch middlebrow encompasses the penetrating questions (and even more penetrating gaze) that make your straight sister “gay for Rachel Maddow.” And it is closely related to Fun Home (Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori, 2013), the wittily devastating Tony-winning musical whose copious New York Times coverage had your mother raving about Allison Bechdel and her “test” (as if you, a queer person, lived under a rock). And it is both worlds away from and intimately related to the ambience of the “mother” of them all, the blond butch DeGeneres, that lesbian Pied Piper of white middle-American housewives, whose own marital disputes and professional cruelties now regularly grace the tabloid covers and furnish clickbait.11

So what is actually “unlikely” about Gadsby and McEnany, the high-profile butches, and their sometimes award-winning cultural productions? Is it the apparent unglamorousness of their disparate styles of messiness, the much-noted “rawness” with which they approach their performances? Is it their self-parodied awkwardness, supposedly a social liability but one that Ellen and The Ellen DeGeneres Show have worked into a lucrative formula for queer success and celebrity, no doubt because queer ungainliness puts straight consumers at ease? Is it the mere fact that they’ve managed to cross over at all, receive so much attention from publications with “New York” in their names, and thus garner mainstream respectability in a heterosexist world? Or is it Gadsby’s and McEnany’s physical presences, their non-waifish physiques and unwomanly sartorial choices, that render them “unlikely,” like Abby in the ladies’ room: woman-identified and yet palpably masculine? Clearly, the middlebrow butch’s alleged improbability does not render her cultural accolades improbable; in fact, it may ensure them. Indeed, as marriage equality demonstrated, liberal heterosexuals love nothing more than a gay success story—until the Supreme Court tells them not to, that is.

As defined by popular culture in the twenty-first century, a gay success story is a story of queer attainment presented in an idiom that straight people can understand. Butch middlebrow, while it doesn’t always offer the success story that its media profile claims, takes care to paint within the lines of such an idiom, providing just enough difference to make a difference—but not too much of a difference.

Since the purveyors of butch middlebrow are mostly white, they tend to sport the Caucasian butch standards of black-rimmed glasses, cropped hair, and generically masculine dress (boots, suits, jeans, flannels). It’s such a reliable uniform that it appeared several times, with requisite flourishes, in a recent New York Times Style Magazine feature on butch and stud lesbians, “The Renegades.”15 As befits the consummate middlebrow outlet, the Style Magazine’s exploration of butch rebellion reaches beyond the pale wheelhouse to offer up a multiracial coalition of butches including longtime icons Meshell Ndegeocello and Jenny Shimizu. The article acknowledges that one can be butch but not woman-identified and includes a brief excursus on the figure of the stud—a term originally used in Black lesbian contexts to describe a more assertively masculine butch modality.

Disappointingly, though, writer Kerry Manders’s chronicle of the aesthetic history of the “butch community” sticks to a predictable list: k. d. lang, DeGeneres, DeLaria, and Bechdel (the latter two foregrounded in the accompanying photos). I was mildly shocked not to find Gadsby in the mix; she doesn’t appear in the photo, nor is she mentioned in the accompanying text. I imagine there are many reasons for the omission—including the difficulty of assembling so many successful butches together at once—but I do wonder if the NYT’s editors wished to avoid overrepresenting the very butch middlebrow archetypes they themselves helped to create (or missed).

Among the stereotypes the NYT piece seeks to shatter is the pop cultural image of “the butch as a tragic and isolated figure,” as memorably forged in Radclyffe Hall’s novel The Well of Loneliness.16 Butch middlebrow trades in this stereotype even as it chafes against it. In butch middlebrow productions, however, awkwardness replaces isolation.
Rather than retreating from the world’s sharp edges, the butch middlebrow protagonist grasps toward the social, even if she nearly impales herself along the way. Her stubborn insistence on taking up space in environments not built to accommodate her can have slapstick consequences that offset or erase the tragedy that lurks.

Still, like its tragic precursors, butch middlebrow traffics in trauma. As with McEnany’s autobiographical characterization of Abby in *Work in Progress*, Gadsby offers a solo performance of her life’s story, here centered on the dual traumas of queerness and disability. *Douglas* (Netflix, 2020), Gadsby’s recent follow-up to *Nanette*, explores the comedian’s autism; its predecessor had limned the edges of, and ultimately fixated on, the sexual violence perpetrated against her for “not-normal” gendering.

I don’t believe that queerness and/or disability are themselves traumas (nor do I view my own queerness as a trauma, though the phobia that this facet of myself sometimes elicits in others can surely be traumatic for me). Perhaps Gadsby feels the same, but both of her shows name and utilize trauma in a way that highlights its inextricability from her own queer and autistic identities. In so doing, they demonstrate the muddiness of the distinction between the violence perpetrated by a hostile world and the identity whose mere existence elicits such violence.

For Gadsby, as for McEnany, trauma is also, and critically, comic material. That is what many critics so loved about *Nanette*: that its rawness and its hefty portions of butch sorrow and anger were served so wittily and with such “self-awareness.” And those presumed and actual reactions then gave Gadsby yet more material. “What the fuck are you expecting from this show?” she asks the audience at the start of *Douglas*. “Because I’m sorry, if it’s more trauma, I . . . I am fresh out.”

She isn’t, though. *Douglas* is admittedly lighter fare than *Nanette*. I first saw *Nanette* live at the Largo in Los Angeles, alongside a couple hundred other queers and queer-adjacent Hollywood folks. The setting was relatively intimate, but Gadsby seemed poised to make it bigger, as the presence of several already famous queers in the audience suggested. Netflix’s *Nanette*, which premiered a few weeks later, had been filmed at the 5,738-seat Sydney Opera House in Gadsby’s home country of Australia. (She is originally Tasmanian.) In this *Nanette*, Gadsby is framed mostly in medium shots and medium close-ups, the better to see her expressive face, eyebrows customarily raised in indignation above her black-rimmed glasses. Her physical comedy is predominantly facial; the bulk of her body is largely left off-screen. Occasional long shots show Gadsby spotlight, dwarfed by the cavernous theater, sporting a decidedly middlebrow outfit of blue tuxedo jacket over navy T-shirt and slacks.

*Nanette*’s cropping of Gadsby’s body takes its cues from a central theme of the comedian’s act, which argues, in the vein of a motivational speech or a vexed Twitter post, that the queer comic tradition of self-deprecation (a mainstay of lesbian comedy) isn’t “humility. It’s humiliation.” When you already “exist in the margins,” Gadsby tells her audience, making fun of yourself is self-mortification—a replication of the violence already enacted upon you by those at the center. This is why Gadsby no longer jokes about her body, and why “this situation” needn’t be the focus of her performance.

In the past, she told Terry Gross, “I’d rewrap all the stereotypes about being, you know, a fat, depressed lesbian,” but now “I just think it’s unhelpful for a bigger-than-average woman to use her body as, like, a point of mockery because it’s so well-established in the world . . . . It’s like, of course your body is a joke. And it’s not.”

This is a lucid and sensible observation. When Gadsby, performing in *Nanette*, references self-deprecation by saying, “I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me,” cheers rather than laughs erupt from her audience. But Gadsby is going somewhere else, it turns out. Her declaration, made multiple times during *Nanette*, that her refusal to pillory herself means she “[has] to quit comedy,” enraptured the show’s critics, as if this obvious gimmick were born of sincerity rather than comic necessity, a literal resignation instead of a joke. Of course, Gadsby never does—and hasn’t yet—quit comedy, proving once again that, as Sianne Ngai argues, “the gimmick is capitalism’s most successful aesthetic category.”

Gadsby’s repeated references to leaving comedy provide the punch line to her thesis, advanced and reiterated throughout her act, that comedy is about the production and release of tension. “Punch lines,” Gadsby theorizes, “need trauma because punch lines . . . need tension, and tension feeds trauma.” Whether tension feeds trauma or vice versa, Gadsby views comedy as a form ill-suited to recovering from trauma, which neatly explains why *Nanette* is so nontraditional—so “deconstructive,” as some would have it. For instead of proceeding from point A to point B, Gadsby’s act circles back on itself, so that what was initially narrated as a defused instance of being “sirred” culminates in spectacularly unfunny homophobic violence.

In *Nanette*, as in *Work in Progress*, getting sirred is a persistent concern whose end result is blunt trauma. When
Gadsby first recounts being mistaken for a man, it’s funny. “Oh, good bloke!” she cracks, and everyone laughs, as they do when she later refers to herself as “a man at a glance.” But sirring turns ugly fast, as the comedian relates narrowly avoiding physical assault when an agro bro once mistook her for a “fucking faggot” at a bus stop. When the bro realized his error, he backed off. “I don’t hit women,” he reassured her. “What a guy!” Gadsby exclaims, and the audience laughs.

Gadsby later revisits the story, but this time the laughing stops, because she reveals that the bro did in fact end up “beat[ing] the shit out of [her] and nobody stopped him.” She didn’t share this information at the outset, she says, because she needed to “get the laugh at the right place.” But she’s sharing it now, she says, eyes reddening and voice quavering, because “You need to learn what this feels like.” Here, Gadsby is addressing “the men . . . particularly the white men.” Notably, “white” is only ever spoken in combination with “man” in Nanette. Gadsby’s alignment of whiteness with cisgender maleness shifts attention away from her own whiteness. It’s as if her gender nonconformity renders race a nonissue, though one could easily argue that white butches benefit from some of the very same patriarchal privileges accorded cis “straight white men.”

Douglas mirrors this tendency, except for a rare moment in which Gadsby acknowledges that “my core demographic is rich, white, entitled women.” Again, nowhere does Gadsby mention her own whiteness, since as Abby’s bathroom encounter in Work in Progress also implicitly—but only implicitly—suggests, racial privilege muddies matters for white queers. Gadsby’s butch middletwee appeals to liberal white women and queers, and to some liberal white men, precisely because its celebrated “tension” operates almost entirely along the axis of gender. In marking her very real trauma, the comedian seeks to elicit just enough liberal guilt to make her audience uncomfortable—but not too uncomfortable. She experiments with form, but she’s not too experimental. She’s like a doctor walking her audience through an operation, expertly analyzing her own act before they can interpret it for themselves.

The icing on the cake is Gadsby’s love for that most middletwee of subjects: art history. Oddly, that is where Gadsby gets physical in Douglas. Courtesy of Netflix.
Douglas lands. Despite her trademark self-referential opener in which she reveals that she will later reveal that she has autism, Gadsby spends a fair amount of the seventy-minute show calling out famous paintings and their creators for their blatant misogyny. She’d done so in Nanette, too, eviscerating Picasso as if his womanizing weren’t already the subject of so many reappraisals, but Douglas features a full slideshow, evidently for the purpose of pissing off Nanette haters who said they felt “lectured” by Gadsby’s performance.

Captured in long shots, animatedly pacing the stage, wearing a bright blue suit over stripes and snazzy Nikes, Gadsby plays the goofy butch version of Julia Roberts’s art history professor in Mona Lisa Smile, pulling the wool of patriarchy from her audience members’ eyes, one guffaw at a time. What’s more middlebrow than a fresh take on an old classic—in this case, a butch take on an old dead white man’s painting?

But the New Yorker wasn’t enamored this time, because Hilton Als got the assignment. After viewing Douglas live in Philadelphia, he wrote, “The art history Gadsby studied was, of course, shaped by the male gaze, just as she has been to some extent.” The comedian’s copious jokes at the expense of “straight white men” (and their paintings), so smoothly consumed by her predominantly white audience, led Als to surmise that “the white-male critical voice” to Gadsby performs such disgust is in fact “the one that really matters to her.”

His assessment resonates. As the Netflix special unfolds, Gadsby shells out dick jokes alongside antisexit banter: “Men calling women hormonal. Pretty much it’s the number-one hobby of mankind of all time.” Projecting an image of Rubens’s The Three Graces (1630–35), Gadsby comments on the gauzy piece of cloth that’s worked its way in between the middle Grace’s buttocks. “This is not an accidental photograph . . . taken of an unfortunate moment,” she says, her voice building toward a yell. “No, what this is, is a painting. Which makes this . . . a decision! It’s a decision [that] a man made and spent time on.” Gadsby sticks out her tongue and wiggles her arm as if she’s simultaneously painting and fingering someone, and it’s funny—the sort of physical lewdness that was totally absent from Nanette.

But it’s a ruse. As she pauses for laughs, she shifts her weight around, trying to get comfortable on the stage stool in a performance of awkwardness that elicits yet more guffaws. Then she says it. “I have autism,” she non sequiturs.

The self-conscious edginess of Gadsby’s brusque disclosure, which satirizes autism’s stereotypical directness, is missing from McEnany’s portrayal of Abby’s depression and OCD in Work in Progress. In its place is a chronicle of self-obsession that’s irritated some viewers, much as Lena Dunham’s enactment of Hannah Horvath’s narcissism did in Girls. While Gadsby’s specials make it plain to the audience that the comedian is supposed to be charming, it’s not at all clear whether Work in Progress entreats its viewers to love Abby or despise her.

The answer is, of course, messy: both/and. Unlike Gadsby, Abby does not eschew self-deprecation; she leans so far into shame and humiliation that she emerges on the other side into something resembling normality. Gadsby’s “not normal” is fundamentally opposed to normality. Abby’s not-normality encompasses several entries in a DSM catalogue of abnormalities. She’s a list of known disorders, not disorder itself. But both Gadsby’s performative rejection of self-deprecation and McEnany’s embrace of it are butch middlebrow. Each comedian elicits liberal respectability, the former by flouting it with awkward charisma, the latter by embracing it with charismatic awkwardness.

For New Yorker critic Emily Nussbaum, who situates Gadsby and Abby as “mirror image[s]” of one another, Abby uses self-deprecation as a “tool that . . . could renovate an unwelcoming culture in [her own] image.” Nussbaum seems to take for granted that such a renovation would be a good thing, proof that butch middlebrow appeals to the liberal white viewer on this very ground: that if respectable white culture can incorporate the white butch as part and parcel of normative representation, then love wins and everyone can go home.

As butch middlebrow television, Work in Progress aspires to exceed white butch representation in a way that Gadsby’s specials can’t. Its efforts read in retrospect like a commentary on butch middlebrow itself. When the viewer first encounters Abby, in episode 1, she’s dorking out on the phone with a friend, pacing on a street corner. Her cropped hair is fully gray, but her large backpack makes her look like an adult-sized kid. Someone sadly unacquainted with butch dyke morphology might find her an incongruous vision, like Big Bird in downtown Chicago. But the next scene unfolds inside Abby’s shrink’s office, where she appears perfectly at home, declaring suicidal ideation in a monologue that sometimes turns to voice-over as visions of her uneasily roving the cityscape flash across the image track. Squinting into nothingness, Abby laments, “I’m trying to be a feminist and I have this like princess, like prince fantasy, like not necessarily a man prince but I’m like a struggling damsel in fucking distress . . . “ Frequent cuts emphasize the speech’s interminable length, until a long shot reveals Abby’s therapist, sitting opposite her, mouth open, eyes glazed. She’s dead.
The mise-en-scène of the following scene, in which Abby relates the shrink’s midsession demise to her straight sister Alison, takes place in the equally bourgeois environs of a café, where Chris, the prince to Abby’s “damsel in fucking distress,” catches her eye. Their relationship is encouraged by Alison, a married mom and total “normie” who oddly doesn’t bat an eyelash at her butch sister’s interest in another masculine-of-center queer (an attraction that remains taboo even in queer circles, as *Work in Progress* itself acknowledges).

This relationship unfolds over the remainder of the show’s eight brief episodes. More than twenty years Abby’s junior, Chris introduces Abby to what McEnany has called a “queer wonderland”—a multiracial, multigendered, polyamorous, polymorphously perverse community of youngsters. At least at first, the generation gap is a learning occasion for Abby. With Chris’s encouragement, she speaks up for herself and jettisons past insecurities. Chris has it all figured out—so much so that, when Abby initially “hers” him, assuming he’s a woman, Chris is confident enough to not be dissuaded from going out with her. “I’m a trans man,” he replies understandingly; they begin dating soon after.

Though he’s already been subjected to misgendering by his new partner, his status as a trans man doesn’t seem to be nearly as difficult for Chris as being a butch dyke is for Abby. As the bathroom scene demonstrates, that’s the idea: Abby is so self-absorbed that she can’t believe anyone else’s struggle holds a candle to her own. In its effort to show this, however, *Work in Progress* flattens Chris’s individual world, a “queer wonderland,” into a backdrop for Abby’s personal dramas.

For instance, in the bathroom episode, neither Chris nor his friend King (Armand Fields), both of whom accompany Abby and her BFF Campbell (Celeste Pechous) to see Dolly, ever seem to have to pee. King is genderqueer. He’s also Black. It’s safe to assume that public bathrooms aren’t a picnic for him or for Chris. If either of them were to be stopped by the police after exiting a men’s room, the outcome would surely differ from the experience of Abby and the white femme Campbell after Abby is reported to the cops earlier in the episode for using a train-station restroom. Abby cringes, Campbell mouths off to the officers, and the two walk away unscathed.

Abby’s traumas, like Gadsby’s, are cyclical. Past violences bleed seamlessly into current ones before circling back again. *Work in Progress* uses matches on action and graphic matches to emphasize trauma’s historical continuity, such that the movement of a flag across the screen effortlessly transforms Abby’s present-day march to the concert-venue bathroom into a distressing ladies’-room visit eight years earlier. Abby’s ex, Melanie (Echaka Agba), is featured in this and many of the show’s other flashbacks.

Until the season’s final episode, Melanie is regularly depicted as a negligent partner, someone who failed to exercise sufficient care for her oppressed girlfriend. Melanie is also Black and a dyke, but there is zero acknowledgment or exploration of the traumas that lie at the nexus of her identities. When Abby manages to alienate even the easygoing Chris by seeking out his deadname (the one boundary he asked her not to cross) and concealing her transgression, Melanie finally is somewhat vindicated. Abby approaches her ex in the present to ask her to “help me figure out why this stuff keeps happening to me.” In no uncertain terms, Melanie tells Abby that this is not her job. “[S]till, after all these years, you’ve managed to make it about you,” Melanie asserts. “Let’s not do this again in eight years.” Would that all of butch middlebrow’s antitheroines had interlocutors like this one.

Gadsby’s and McEnany’s butch middlebrow oeuvres appeal less to potential interlocutors—say, fellow queers engaged in adjacent worldmaking projects—than they charm liberal white heterosexual viewers and (perhaps even more importantly) reviewers, who are touched by their trauma and wowed by their wonderlandia. To attain respectability without sacrificing its self-respect, butch middlebrow comedy authorizes its viewers to laugh along with its butches as they repeatedly get sirred.

But are these viewers really laughing *with* rather than *at*? Or is this merely the story butch middlebrow needs to tell itself to ensure its survival? Could it be that self-absorbed white butch masculinity must still rely on self-deprecation to achieve the kind of cultural acclaim so readily available to the ignominious “straight white man” of Gadsby’s routines? If so, the “radical narcissism” of Gadsby’s and...
McEnany’s performative personae may be precisely what makes the straight viewer comfortable enough to laugh at the dyke on their screen, or up onstage.26 Couched in neurotic self-awareness, “this situation” and the gendered violence it provokes can be funny again. But still serious enough to be written up in the New Yorker.

Notes

4. As Cecilia Konchar Farr and Tom Perrin ask in the introduction to their incisive cluster of essays on the middlebrow: “Is the middlebrow ‘a set of reading practices’ or ‘a characteristic of certain texts?’ And these are only two of many possible definitions that, taken together, suggest a certain slippage between the text and its reception. Cecilia Konchar Farr and Tom Perrin, “Introduction: Inventing the Middlebrow,” Post45, July 1, 2016, https://post45.org/2016/07/introduction-inventing-the-middlebrow/#identifier_12_7128.
   Editor’s note: For more on Transparent, see Amy Villarejo, “Jewish, Queer-ish, Trans, and Completely Revolutionary: Jill Soloway’s Transparent and the New Television,” Film Quarterly 69, no. 4 (Summer 2016).
10. The phrase is Gadsby’s.
11. See, for example, da Costa, “The Funny, Furious Anti-Comedy,” whose raptures are counterbalanced by the notorious tweets of Andrea Long Chu. See, for example, Andrea Long Chu (@andrealongchu): “nanette is like if you left a weak joint under everyone’s seats as a little gift and then tried to get the whole theater arrested on meth charges,” September 12, 2018, https://twitter.com/andrealongchu/status/10399665000906241.
13. DeGeneres’s most recent scandal—the widespread accusations that her talk show fosters a toxic workplace—have amplified the abusive aura that’s long surrounded the world’s most famous lesbian, especially for those in the know. One could argue that the humorous sentimentality that characterized Ellen’s middlebrow reception carried over to the star’s public persona as a megacelebrity, temporarily muting, if not entirely obscuring, her abusive tendencies.

14. Gadsby has received four Emmy nominations (two for each of her Netflix specials) and won the Emmy for Outstanding Writing for a Variety Special for Nanette in 2019.


17. This is quite literally represented at the beginning of the fourth episode of Work in Progress with a quick montage that shows Abby manifesting various physical injuries after several awkward, fumbling, and deeply pleasurable nights of sex with her new partner.

18. “Not-normal” is Gadshy’s phrase, used in Nanette. The word “trauma” appears several times in each of her Netflix specials. “Trauma” is less of a catchphrase in Work in Progress, though trauma is present and visually thematized throughout the show’s eight episodes.


23. Als, “Hannah Gadshy’s Song of the Self.”

24. This is admittedly anecdotal evidence, garnered from social media postings about the show by various people I know and do not wish to name. I have wondered if some of the irritation with the character of Abby that I’ve heard privately expressed by queers in particular reflects a kind of Freudian narcissism of small differences, which may also be what provoked my own hostile feelings toward Hannah Horvath—though I wouldn’t have been able to admit it at the time.
