

Hegemonic Masculinity and Homoeroticism in *The History Boys*

by

Andrea Piekarczyk

Hegemonic Masculinity and Homoeroticism in *The History Boys*

Heterosexuality is usually a crucial component of hegemonic or dominant masculinity. This is not to say that homosexual men cannot be masculine or even hypermasculine, because they can be. However, homosexual men and men who engage in stereotypically homosexual activities- often perceived to be one in the same- generally cannot be hegemonically masculine because they do not exist at the top of the social hierarchy of power.¹ The 2006 British film *The History Boys*, based on a play by the same name written by Alan Bennett, presents a character who challenges this requirement for hegemony: Dakin (Dominic Cooper), who flirts with and propositions his male teacher, Irwin (Stephen Campbell Moore).

Normally, this supposed indicator of homosexuality would place Dakin firmly in the category of “subordinated masculinity.” However, I would argue that Dakin’s masculinity is *not* subordinated; it is hegemonic. Whatever his sexual orientation, his relationship with Irwin serves to bolster, rather than undermine, his position as a hegemonic masculine figure. There are multiple reasons for this strengthening, the most crucial being Dakin’s erotic and non-erotic dominance in his and Irwin’s relationship. This dominance is complemented by other aspects such as Dakin’s attractiveness to both men and women, as well as his status as a masculine role model within his group of friends. These factors work together to prove Dakin’s hegemonic masculinity even as he pursues a homoerotic relationship with Irwin.

¹ When I say “stereotypically homosexual activities,” I am referring to physical and erotic sex within one’s own gender category; men who engage in such activities may or may not consider themselves to be gay. Still, these men, as well as those who are self-defined as homosexual or gay, come to represent a kind of subordinated masculinity that is “oppressed by [traditional] definitions of hegemonic masculinity,” (Pascoe 7).

Central to hegemonic masculinity is the “ability to exercise mastery and dominance [over others]” (Pascoe 86). While often the case, this dominance does not necessarily need to be eroticized; the establishment of control is enough in itself. In one especially notable scene, Dakin and Irwin discuss the dynamics of dominance and submission through a thinly veiled metaphor of “Poland.” “How do you think history happens?” Dakin asks the confused Irwin, who responds with, “What?” Dakin repeats his question, “How does stuff happen, do you think?” “People decide to do stuff, make moves, alter things.” “I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” Irwin hedges, to which Dakin says, “No? Think about it.” Finally, Irwin gives a concrete response, telling Dakin “Some do... make moves, I suppose. Others react to events.” Through this exchange Dakin establishes himself as the one who acts, and in doing so he aligns himself with a tradition of imposing one’s will and demonstrating dominance- behaviors that are historically coded as masculine (Pascoe 86). Meanwhile Irwin is the one who *reacts*, essentially acting as the receiver of Dakin’s advances and taking on the more submissive role in their relationship. While this scene certainly can be read as having sexual undertones, these undertones are not essential to its message.

Still, the erotic component of Dakin’s dominance is intrinsically important to his hegemonic masculinity, and this eroticized dominance is most visible in what is probably the most shocking scene of the film: Dakin’s propositioning of Irwin. This scene has several key components, the first of which is the tone. Dakin is extremely bold in his advances; he knowingly subverts the usual teacher-student power dynamic by “coming on” to Irwin. “I’m just kicking the tires on this one,” he says nonchalantly as he stands, facing Irwin at a distance in a classroom. “But, further to the drink, what I was really wondering was

whether there were any circumstances in which there was a chance of your sucking me off." He pauses, but Irwin says nothing. "Or something similar," Dakin finishes. Despite this moment of hesitation, it never seems to cross Dakin's mind that Irwin might turn him down. His confidence in this matter is extremely masculinizing, an idea which I will revisit later.

The second, and most obvious, part is the nature of the proposition. If Irwin performed oral sex on Dakin, Dakin would, in fact, be penetrating Irwin, if not in the traditional sense. This penetration emphasizes Dakin's dominance in that it establishes him physically as the superior and Irwin as the subordinate. "Superiors touch subordinates, invade their space, and interrupt them in a way that subordinates do not do to superiors" (Pascoe 96). Bodily penetration is the ultimate invasion of personal space. Also notable is the conventional body positioning to "perform" the requested act; a tableau of subordination as well.

One last important component is Irwin's *acceptance* of his own subordinate position. The degree of control that he is willing to cede to Dakin is simply astonishing. This is especially apparent in the short exchange regarding Irwin's glasses, where Dakin asks, "Do you ever take your glasses off?" Irwin is puzzled by this question. "Why?" He asks, to which Dakin replies, "It's a start." Irwin quickly denies this assertion, "Not with me." He says, "Taking off my glasses is the last thing I do." Dakin seems to be fascinated by this. "Yeah?" He says, "I'll look forward to it." By removing his glasses for Dakin, Irwin would place himself in an extremely vulnerable position, ultimately surrendering himself to Dakin's "need to be the active, controlling, [and] deciding partner," (Bordo 98). Irwin's response is vital because, "it is important to attend to the manipulation, deployment, and

enactment of varieties of masculinity, not just as what men do, but as how respondents recognize it" (Pascoe 166).

Dakin's charm and attractiveness are certainly recognized, and by members of both genders. Irwin's interest is most important to the film, but Posner (Samuel Barnett), a fellow student who might be called openly gay today, also professes love for Dakin, and Fiona (Georgia Taylor), a young woman who works at the school as a secretary, actually engages in a sexual and emotional relationship with him. The sense of Dakin's wide-ranging desirability is built up through many short scenes and interactions. Dakin remarks that he got *his* test scores "last night," with a meaningful glance in Fiona's direction. Posner performs the song "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered," while looking longingly at Dakin, obviously meaning what he says about the other boy's effect on him. Perhaps the most notable is Posner's observation that "Irwin *does* like [Dakin]. He seldom looks at anyone else." When a classmate asks him how he knows this, Posner replies, "Because neither do I. Our eyes meet at Dakin." These scenes work together to paint a vivid picture of Dakin's outstanding ability to "get" both men and women; a major component of his hegemonic masculinity. This is because that while overpowering others' control of their own bodies certainly confirms masculinity, it is considerably *more* masculine to simply overpower them by sheer virility. This is what Dakin does, and others cannot help desiring him because of it (Pascoe 102).

Usually, these standards of masculinity are applied only to boys' relationships with girls, in the sense that an important part of being masculine is not just to desire girls but also to *be* desired by girls (Pascoe 94). However, Dakin also attracts boys, and instead of detracting from his masculinity because of the homoerotic connotations of such an

attraction, I would assert that it is a crucial component of what makes him hegemonically masculine in this film. After all, boys are taught to construct their gender as a relational construct, with emphasis being mainly on what they must *not* become: the allegedly lesser, more flawed type of human being- a female (Donald 129). Given this, it would seem a much greater triumph to dominate and attract other men because of their naturally greater strength and superiority. Additionally, Irwin is of rather ambiguous sexual orientation and cannot necessarily be associated with the stereotypic societal portrayal of the weaker and somehow deficient gay man. Indeed, he is quite a powerful masculine figure in himself, considering the environment of the school, where knowledge and scholastic success are generally equated with *masculine* success. Subsequently both men and women are sexually available to Dakin, and indeed, they *make* themselves sexually available to him. Theoretically, Dakin can have sex with anyone he wants, an opportunity to which he seems quite open.

Dakin's male classmates seem to greatly admire this openness, the charisma and self-confidence that is so very masculine. No matter what Dakin is doing, whether it is propositioning his young male teacher, blackmailing the school principal as he does toward the end of the film, or trying to reach "third" base with his girlfriend, it never seems to cross his mind that he might fail. Once again, this confidence is extremely masculinizing and much envied by his friends. When Dakin runs into his friend Scripps (Jamie Parker) on his way out of Irwin's office at the end of the movie, his friend is incredulous and tells Dakin that "Just because you got a scholarship doesn't mean you have to give him unfettered access to your dick." Dakin accuses Scripps of being jealous, and his friend finally admits that he is: "Not of the sex, just of your being up for it." It is important to remember too, that

enactments of masculinity require recognition (Pascoe 166). In the sense that men become masculine in groups (Pascoe 109) Dakin's classmates' admiration serves to magnify traits that were already very "masculine."

Historically, the potential for homoerotic pleasure has been expelled from the masculine and located in a deviant group (Connell 253). These men represent subordinated masculinity, and can never enter the space occupied by the hegemonically masculine in the social hierarchy of power. However, the character Dakin in *The History Boys* creates his hegemonic masculinity unencumbered by these traditional definitions; in fact, he exhibits such strong traits of traditional masculinity that even a homoerotic relationship serves to reinforce his masculinity. In that sense, the political message set forth by the film is quite progressive, in that it asserts that a man can express interest in another man- and even pursue an erotic relationship with another man- and still be hegemonically masculine. Whether Dakin's ultra-masculine, extremely aggressive approach is something we want to emulate is a different question entirely.

Bibliography

Bordo, Susan. *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private*. New York, NY:

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

Connell, R.W. *The Masculinity Studies Reader*. Ed. R. Adams and D. Savran. Malden, MA:

Blackwell, 2002.

Donald, Ralph R. *Men, Masculinity, and the Media*. Ed. Steve Craig. Aubrey Park, CA: SAGE,

1992.

Pascoe, C.J. *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. Berkeley, CA:

University of California Press, 2007.

The History Boys. Dir. Nicholas Hytner. Perf. Samuel Anderson, James Corden, Stephen

Campbell Moore, Richard Griffiths, Frances de la Tour. DVD. 20th Century Fox, 2007.