



## **BECOMING A GOLDEN GIRL**

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I am about ten years old in the early 90's. I live in Chalon-sur-Saône, a mid-size town in Burgundy, 400 km south of Paris. It is summer and I discover for the first time, thanks to FR3's (today's France 3) programming, a television series broadcast in English with French subtitles. If this is already common practice in big cities at the time, none of the five movie theaters in my hometown ever shows films in their original version (it still is the case, I believe). I am starting to learn English at school and I have the perfect excuse for watching TV in the morning. But my motive is more complex. The sitcom broadcasted by FR3 is called

The Golden Girls, a title clumsily translated into French by *Les Craquantes*. If I watch this series assiduously, it isn't really to improve my English – I barely understand it without the subtitles – or just to idle in front of the television. I am simply fascinated by the spectacle presented to me – that of four older women sharing a house, somewhere far away in Florida, and reinventing with each new episode a way of life that seems to belong to them only. What breach can this sitcom have possibly opened into the world of the young homosexual that I was? What kind of empowerment can actually take place across linguistic, cultural, and geographic boundaries?

My goal here is not to develop a theory that would clarify the system of thought that connects, in the West, heterosexual femininity, aging, and male homosexuality. This task would require a meticulous genealogical investigation – one that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has repeatedly undertaken (in her book *Epistemology of the Closet* in particular) and that I will not attempt within the time allocated to me. Still, based on a brief exercise in self-analysis, I would like to propose a couple of hypotheses, which suggest that the spectacle of femininity has, among other functions, the purpose of creating eroticized spectators, who thus become aware of the bipolarity of the social world, especially with respect to gender roles and the boundaries between the private and the public. Now, it seems to me that the irony that prevails in *The Golden Girls* results from the way that the inevitable failure of femininity (including its parodic glorification) is constantly displayed, and along with it, that of masculinity, of heterosexuality, and of sexuality itself – not as practices, but as grids to interpret the world. Indeed the idea of sexual complementarity turns «lack» into an organizing principle that only the power of words could compensate (what Derrida called phallogocentrism). The strength of *The Golden Girls* is to knock down this apparatus by creating its own counter-audience, for whom the failure of femininity confirms the meaninglessness of the sexual categories with which they are confronted every day, categories that, despite all the normative prescriptions, never seem to reflect their relationship to language and categories.

But let's go back to the *Golden Girls*. The four characters live together. They embody an ideal life of friendship, solidarity, and a concern for transmission that is reminiscent of some gay lifestyles, especially in a context (the 80s and 90s) when conjugality is not the object of any institutional recognition. But what is clever about the series has less to do with its mimetic qualities than its *décalage*. The lifestyle of the four friends is not particularly alternative. Indeed, two of the characters, Sophia and Dorothy, are mother and daughter. In this cohabitation, family and friendly relationships are thus intertwined, and the lines between them are purposely blurred by a playful treatment of the usual markings of gender, generation, age, and sexuality. Dorothy, the daughter (played by Bea Arthur) is a foot taller than Sophia, her mother (played by Estelle Getty). With her impressive stature and deep voice, Dorothy embodies certain standards of masculinity, and yet the way the *Golden Girls* interact is aimed at making masculinity less real, rather than at reinforcing it. Sophia's constant irony towards Dorothy helps to defeat any dominant position that could be associated with her daughter's gender identity. Sophia herself is the traditional matriarch (she comes from Sicily), but she is also frail enough physically so that her relationship

of dependence to the other three women (and to Dorothy especially) is inverted. Dorothy's masculinity contrasts with the character of Blanche (played by Rue McClanahan), a seductress in search of an archetypal form of femininity – that age never allows her to fully assume – and with the disarmingly naive Rose (played by Betty White), a character in which childhood and old age seem to co-exist. There is a lot to say about the characters' relationships with each other – the suppressed lesbianism, the drag performances they put on, the very peripheral role of heterosexual men, and so on. We would need to look more closely at particular episodes, follow the evolution of the characters over time, study the interface between the screenwriters, the audience and the fan communities, etc. But I was asked to write something personal, so this is the task that I will tackle now.

The four Golden Girls have known married life only episodically. Friendship is their main bond, and the more lasting value in the series. Living in a very homophobic environment, I must have felt comforted by this example of a sexuality detached from the couple and the social visibility it implies (which, at the time, could have exposed me to even more rejection and violence). The Golden Girls live in a female world. Raised by my mother, who was coaching a women's basketball team, I knew that world. As a child, I had my place in it. But as a teenager, I saw myself expelled from it (by some of the women, who no longer wanted me to be part of it because of the physical transformation that made me belong to the world of men, as well as by most of the men around me, who were unable to perceive me as anything else than one of them, and could not tolerate the idea that I would prefer another world to theirs). The Golden Girls contrasted sharply with the male homo-sociality I was subjected to at the time (involving both the demonstration of heterosexual conquests and the repression of homosexual desire – which both seemed meaningless to me). The age of the main characters also allowed me to avoid the rejection of the women themselves, any game of seduction in which I could be either the object or the agent, being, in the context of the prevailing norms, less likely.

Moreover, I believe that there are similar forms of subjection and subjectification in the experience of aging and homosexuality, which place you in a minority (something that obviously does not prevent other social relationships, of class and race in particular, from being very dominant – as Didier Eribon demonstrated masterfully in his book *Retour à Rheims*, and which explains why, as young white man living in a small provincial town, I was able to identify with the Golden Girls). I will go even further: I believe that in the Golden Girls, heterosexuality is not so much absent as offset by the type of gaze that emerges from their relationship with the audience. Heterosexuality is not just a spectacle – it is no longer anything other than a spectacle. In some ways, unlike the ostensibly heterosexual proustian narrator who discovers the homosexual world by observing Jupien and Charlus in the courtyard of the Hôtel de Guermantes, the Golden Girls give us the possibility to reverse this mechanism. They offer a parody of heterosexuality to the viewer who does not really believe in it – which raises the question of the self being mainly constituted of a dis-identification – an argument raised by David Halperin in his book *How to Be Gay?*. In fact, there are several homosexual characters in the series (Blanche's brother marries his partner with the consent of his sister and her three friends). The theme of homosexuality itself is alluded to several times. For example, Blanche and Dorothy are mistaken for a lesbian couple and invited to participate in a TV show. In another episode, when a mutual friend is «suspected» of being a lesbian, Blanche makes two clearly lesbophobic comments: First, she understands «Lebanese» instead of «lesbian» (the figure of the stranger covering that of the strange); then, she asks herself how this friend, being attractive, can be a lesbian. But very soon her seductress personality takes over and she cannot stand the idea that her lesbian friend is more attracted to Rose than to herself. The screenwriters thus shed an ironic light on the workings of lesbophobia (and the panic aroused by the feeling of dispossession). And yet despite multiple references to it, homosexuality remained invisible to me. It was neither the gay characters in the series nor the topic of homosexuality that caught my attention, but rather the possibility of a parodic dis-identification of heterosexuality via the spectacle of a femininity redefined by the experience of aging. Indeed,

the Golden Girls try to assert their independence within one of the most constraining normative contexts in the West, that of aging women. By analogy, it was the possibility of reclaiming myself as a homosexual, despised by all, that I found in this sitcom. The fact that it was just a fiction, far from lessening the «fantasy-echo» – to use Joan Scott's expression –, in some ways helped preserve its imaginative power by strengthening the belief I had in an «elsewhere». A few years later, the FNAC website reminded me ironically that this experience of projection had also been a «here»: my book *Le Choix de l'Homosexualité*, published by the EPEL Editions in 2007, was not associated with my name, but with the name “Blanche Perreau”. I was careful not to alert them to their mistake.