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**The Trouble with Normal in *Kath & Kim***

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In *The Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner asks: "But what exactly is normal?" (53). Warner points out that we are bombarded by statistics and norms which invite us to compare ourselves with the masses. He draws attention to Alfred Kinsey's findings published in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Kinsey was interested in the number of American males who had indulged in illicit sexual activity. Such sexual activity (extramarital sex for almost 50% of the males sampled and at least one homosexual activity for 37% of these males) may not have been socially accepted in mid-century America, but according to Kinsey it was well and truly normal. Answering the question "what exactly is normal?" Warner argues that this term has come to mean "right, proper, healthy" (57). "What most people do and desire is what people should do and desire" (57). This viewpoint, however, pathologizes what opposes normative standards and stigmatizes certain behaviours as "abnormal." In contrast with this generalized viewpoint, Warner believes that "Variations from the norm [...] are not necessarily signs of pathology. They can become new norms" (58).

The Australian comedy TV series, *Kath & Kim*, is reminiscent of Barry Humphries's creation, Dame Edna Everage. Like the characters from the series, Dame Edna also hails from the suburbs of Melbourne and she also reveals intimate details of the humdrum existence of normal housewives and their normal families in Australia. Jane Turner and Gina Riley, the writers, creators and producers of the program, are the principal actresses who play Kath Day (a Melbourne suburbanite

divorcée in her forties) and Kim Craig (her scatterbrained, loudmouth daughter). Two male characters are associated with the mum and daughter: Kel Knight, a purveyor of fine meats, who is courting Kath, and Brett Craig, Kim's husband. He works in an electronics store. The other remaining character present in each program is Sharon Strzelecki, a friend of the family who has befriended Kim. The first episode of the first series, characteristically entitled "Sex," introduced Australian primetime television viewers to the comic antics of the mother and daughter duo. Kath, the mother, actively seeks a new husband (this ambition is realized in the final episode of the first series when, not without commotion, Kath and Kel are married). Kim lands back at her mother's house after experiencing marital problems with Brett. What could be more normal in early twenty-first century Australia where around 52,000 divorces are granted each year? This paper concentrates on the second episode, "Gay," in which doubts are cast concerning the normalcy of all the main characters. I want to investigate what it means to be "normal" in *Kath & Kim* and to then to analyze what this episode of the series tells us about "normal" life in Australia.

*Kath & Kim* is based on a heteronormative model described by Judith Butler as "the culturally intelligible grid of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality" (135). This model or grid is represented by Kath and Kel (the older generation) whereas Kim and Brett represent a younger version of a typically heteronormative couple. Sharon is looking for a "real spunk" and temporarily finds one in this episode in the bush band musician Mark. Dialogues between the characters allow us to perceive normative gender performances. Femininity consists of shopping (Kath and Kim often go together to Fountain Gate, a nearby shopping centre), long hair (Kath advises Kim that "Guys like long hair on a lady, especially when it's on her head"), being offered flowers and treated like a lady (Kel brings Kath a bunch of lilies) and the waxing of "unsightly body hair," as Kath calls it. The final scene of Sharon watching the semi-final netball match between Australia and New Zealand on TV parodies old-fashioned normative femininity. Sharon has make-up on, her hair is blow-waved and she is wearing a pink dress. Earlier on in the episode, Sharon walks into the kitchen after her kissing session with the "desperado" Mark. It takes Kim seconds to work out that the ugly red marks around Sharon's mouth are the

result of heterosexual “pash rash.” Contrasting with these feminine rituals, normative masculinity performances in this episode include not being able to work a washing machine (Brett complains about this annoyance since Kim walked out) and a strong sexual instinct (Brett is said to have “one thing on his mind” which Kath interprets as “promising” and Kel compliments Kath by telling her “This guy is so into you”). Playing pool and discussing sports in the pub are also helpful in establishing masculine identity. The “normal” differences between the sexes in Australia are emphasized by citing these normative gender performances. They all participate in producing a stable relation between sex, gender and sexual identity. Here we have examples of Butler’s “disciplinary production of gender” which works “in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain” (135).

Of more interest, however, is the large number of factors which destabilize gender and sexual identity in *Kath & Kim*. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler speaks about the “gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual” contexts, contexts in which “gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally” (135). The “Gay” episode of *Kath & Kim* relies for some of its comedy on consistently outlining such discontinuities, first with gender, then with desire and sexuality. Kim, Sharon and Kel all have their gender questioned in this episode. Kim, for example, announces to her mother that she is thinking about getting her hair cut off. She informs Kath that she wants it “all cut off. Really short.” In losing her “crowning glory,” Kim threatens to renounce traditional femininity, as Kath only too well realizes. When Brett complains about not being able to use the washing machine, Kim retorts that she doesn’t either. Her domestic skills would seem to be as non-existent as her husband’s. Nevertheless, opening a tightly screwed sugar canister is not beyond Kim’s kitchen experience. This show of “masculine” strength elicits the following observation from her mother: “That’s very butch of you, Kim.” Obviously, for Kath, only males should be capable of such feats.

A discussion about Sharon’s golf attire reveals common prejudices about women and sports, opening up the larger question of gender conformity and sports. Dialogue exploits the stereotypical idea that there is something “unfeminine” about

women who play sports. Kath is loath to see Kim play golf given the fact that the uniform is “not very feminine.” On espying Sharon’s golf shoes, Kath pronounces to herself in disgust: “Men’s shoes.” Sharon’s obsession about sports masculinizes her. Proud of her knowledge on the subject, she boasts to the guys in the pub: “Anything you want to know about cricket—I’m the woman” and then adds “They don’t call me ‘Five Balls Sharon’ for nothing.” We are more used to hearing “I’m the man” and the accolade of multiple balls only enhances our perception of Sharon as a (wo)man of many talents.

Whereas shopping is usually scripted as a feminine activity and preoccupation in the series, when Kel first appears in “Gay,” he offers to go to the supermarket for Kath to do her shopping. This is why he casually asks, while wearing a short-sleeved pink shirt: “How are we off for toot paper?” Rather than know the approximate state of the said toot paper like any self-respecting Melbourne housewife, Kath admits: “I don’t know” and proceeds to go to the toilet to find out. Another two significant incidents draw attention to Kel’s non-traditional masculinity. In order to allay Kath’s doubts about his gender and sexuality, Kel offers to prove he is a “real man” by doing it “Right here, right now, on the shag.” Finding his gift of flowers an encumbrance to carrying out this quickly decided desire to have sex, he then says: “Just let me put these arum lilies in some water. They’re thirsty.” After arranging them, he compliments the state of the lilies: “Stunning.” What red-blooded Australian male would know what arum lilies are? What normally constituted heterosexual male would worry about how “thirsty” flowers were or want to arrange them perfectly? At the end of the same scene, Kel promises to do the deed with Kath on Saturday night instead. “After that,” he tells Kath, “there’ll be no doubt that I, Kel Graham Knight, am *all* the man you need.” A second later he quietly asks: “Now, what did I do with my man-bag?” This joke depends on viewers associating men carrying man-bags with effeminacy and homosexuality. The three gender discontinuities just mentioned (shopping, flowers and a man-bag) all act to undermine Kel’s claim to being a “real man” and demonstrate how such disruptions can occur in a heterosexual context.

As well as disruptions or discontinuities linked with gender, this episode of *Kath & Kim* contains repeated references to bestiality. In a country legendary for its sheep and dogs, zoophiles are part of Australia's historic past, and, if we are to believe the comic incidents of *Kath & Kim*, this "unnatural" liking for animals still exists. I have already had occasion to unearth some of Australia's early animal lovers in *Gender Trouble Down Under*. In 1838, an assistant surgeon in Tasmania gave this statement as evidence to a government committee: "I have had opportunities of hearing many trials for unnatural offences, with animals particularly. I think they are much more common than in any other country inhabited by the English" (qtd. 28). Two convicts in Tasmania were hanged for bestiality in the first half of the nineteenth century, one for an unnatural crime with a mare, another for carnally knowing a sow. The 1840s were a highpoint of convictions for bestiality on that island. Five convictions were recorded in that decade involving a dog, a cow, a mare, a bull and a goat.

This episode of *Kath & Kim* features a noticeable amount of comic references to animals, implying a dissolving of barriers separating the human from the animal and suggesting unnatural proclivities on the part of "normal" heterosexual females and males. Kim's opening line: "I'm not living with that bloody dog," referring to Brett's pet dog, Cujo, begins the line of thought developed throughout the episode that the "other party" in this ménage à trois who is responsible for Kim's departure from the conjugal bed is an animal of whom she is jealous. A series of close identifications linking Kim and Cujo acts to conflate official spouse and replacement "spouse," turning Kim herself into a "dog." They also imply that Brett's fondness for his canine friend is suspiciously abnormal. Kim places the responsibility on both husband and dog. She rails against the dog: "Cujo thinks she's me—she sleeps on my side of the bed, growls at Brett, she drinks out of the toilet bowl. Next thing you know she'll be smoking Pine Lights and shopping at Fountain Gate." And Brett gets his share of invective: "He treats that dog like a bloody princess. Did Brett stop to think that maybe I would have liked to have been given a bath?" The confusion between Kim and Cujo (inviting the question—who is the "real" dog?) reaches a climax in the scene in which Kim returns to spend a night with her husband. The camera shows

Kim with her eyes shut in bed with Brett, who is heard to say: "You're so beautiful, so pretty. You love your Bretty, don't you?" These tender words make Kim smile. However they are addressed to an out of camera range dog on the floor near Kim. Before biting the dog in a fit of jealous anger, Kim gives her husband an ultimatum which serves to increase her animalism: "Brett, either that dog goes or our marriage is over. Get it straight from the horse's arse – over!" To offset the idea that Kim might be a sort of dog, Kath offers a backhanded compliment to her daughter by telling her: "Kim, you may eat like a pig, but you're certainly not a dog." Kim's well calculated reply brings Kath into the kennel of dog-like characters. She snidely tells Kath: "Well, if I'm not a dog, how come I've got a bitch for a mother?" The most effective confusion between animal and human is kept to the end of the episode. We see Sharon uncharacteristically dolled up in hyper-feminine garb: a pink dress, pink hair clips and a black choker. She is shown watching a netball final on television and speaking to someone who is out of the range of the camera. For a moment we imagine her partner must be Mark, the bush band musician so disliked by Kim. The camera pulls back and the viewer suddenly glimpses Sharon's TV companion: a dog sitting next to her with a security bucket half over its head. Sharon then enquires if her "friend" would like some footy franks (small red sausages) and a glass of Tia Maria. We are left to ponder on the evening's entertainment between Sharon (dressed up for a date) and her canine partner sharing sausages while watching a netball re-run. Such is normal domestic life in suburban Melbourne.

Animal imagery is the basis of another scene in which the institution of marriage is critiqued. Kath is convinced of the normalcy of marriage and taken aback when her daughter questions its relevance. When Kim reveals her doubts about whether marriage is for her, Kath scolds her: "Don't be stupid, Kim, of course marriage is for you. It's the normal thing to do." This is the first time the word "normal" is used in the episode. Kath is clearly shown to advocate normalcy in contrast to other characters perceived to be deviant. Despite Kath's pro-marriage argument, the scene in the dressing room showing Kath trying on different wedding dresses with Kim sitting and judging each gown builds up into a parody of a white wedding with all its frills and fripperies. Refusing more traditional frocks, Kim is

astounded when her mother appears in a Little Bo Peep dress. Kath imagines that this choice will also please her intended by telling Kim "I think Kel's going to cream his jeans when he sees me in this." This comment moves Kim to voice a pro-feminist point of view, implying that the choice of a wedding dress should remain with the bride only. She chides her mother with "Don't worry about what Kel wants. Why does it always have to be about what the guy wants?" Impatient with the feminist stance of her daughter, Kath humorously reproves her by comparing her to the ex-Melburnian Germaine Greer (whose marriage famously lasted three weeks): "Gees Germaine, calm down." Kim's wild imagination about the possibility of a sheep-inspired wedding for her mother provides a comic take on the romanticizing of marriage, suggesting that couples stay together and copy each other like a flock of silly-minded sheep. She suggests to Kath that "a little boy sheep" and "a little girl sheep" could be attendants with the girl sheep dressed up (like traditional bridesmaids) in a "fairy costume, with bib and braces and jiffies." The practicality of using real sheep (as opposed to sheep-like children following a Little Bo Peep bride) then hits Kim: "Later at the reception, we could put them on the spit roast." Finally, in typical Kim style, she proffers an ingenious comment which sums up Kath's wish to imitate young brides in white: "That could be the theme of your wedding. Mutton Dressed Up as Lamb." Here Kath's sheepish desire to have a traditional wedding in order to demonstrate her normalcy is severely mocked by Kim's wicked sense of brutal reality. Behind the personal jibe we can also detect a swipe at the flocks of other brides in white, especially those of a certain age, who want to walk down the aisle *à la* Little Bo Peep.

Dogs, pigs and lambs aside, the main focus on the destabilization of heteronormativity in this episode of *Kath & Kim* concerns homosexuality. Kel admits to Kath that "We've all been there, done that," referring to his all-male exploits carried out during a six-year stint in the Navy. Kath is repulsed by the "seaman's revelations" of her fiancé, but her tolerance and prejudices are further tested when she convinces herself that Kim, her own flesh and blood, is to quote the mother, "a friend of Gertrude's." Added to these suspicions about Kel and Kim is the fact that Sharon, a netball freak, despite her desperate search for a male partner is persistently

typecast as a close friend of Gertrude Stein. The team she plays for is called the "Sapphires." Kel's open admission to Kath that he dabbled with same-sex practices in the Navy is problematic for his future wife, who is shocked by the idea of homoerotic experience. Kim criticizes Kath for her lack of tolerance, complaining: "That's classic mum. She thinks she is so open-minded and so out there. But she's so not." This observation is verified by Kath's homophobia. Sharon invites Kim to play women's golf. Sharon already has a golf tournament planned with her female entourage and is enticing Kim to join in the fun. There follows a comic confusion between sports and sex. Kim innocently asks Sharon which way she swings. Viewers are forced to consider the question in sexual terms, forgetting about the golf club and instead pondering about a choice between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Sharon's "straight"-faced answer, "Either way it's fine," makes us imagine that Sharon is bisexual. This possibility is clearly demonstrated by Sharon's golf lesson which immediately follows her "either way" comment. She brings her hands round the front of Kim to imitate holding a club, while pressing firmly into Kim's behind. Kim's reaction: "Yeah, that feels good. I like that" plants the idea in Kath's mind that her daughter is swinging in the "wrong" direction under Sharon's influence. This impression is confirmed when the two girls return from playing golf a little later on. We see them entering the house and Kath spies them from upstairs, but out of view of the new arrivals. In the meantime, Kim and Sharon have decided to increase their chances of finding a male partner by attending a speed-dating evening. Speaking about this event leads to a major misunderstanding which is played for its full comic potential. Kath overhears Sharon say: "You think it's weird?" and Kim answer: "I love the idea." They are referring to speed-dating, but given the earlier decision of Kim to accompany Sharon to a "guy-free zone" (that is, women's golf) and given Sharon's pressing into Kim's butt, Kath is now convinced that they are speaking about lesbianism. When Kim pleads with Sharon by saying, "Come here, I need you. Help me get this off. Quick before Mum comes," they are talking about shoes, but Kath who still cannot see them, begins to imagine, like the viewer, a phallic replacement. Kim then groans while reaching for the biscuits hidden next to the television. When she finally gets a Dippity Bix into her mouth, she cannot resist



voicing her oral satisfaction: "Mmm, Sharon." By this time, Kath is hysterical imagining what on earth her daughter and Sharon could be up to together.

The seeds of doubt have now been planted in Kath's mind that Kim might be gay. The following scene is the one in which Kel reveals his Navy confession. Fiancé and daughter are both tarred with the same brush according to Kath. Another variation of misunderstood dialogue now occurs. Kath overhears another conversation between Sharon and Kim which consolidates her initial impression that something fishy (or fruity) is going on. The girls speak about speed-dating again while Sharon asks for Kim's help in putting shoes on. When Kim, unseen by Kath, says: "Don't tell Mum, though. She wouldn't understand," Kath imagines they must be discussing homosexuality. Sharon's innocent request that Kim help, "Oh, can you strap this on?" provides Kath with the "proof" she needs. And when Sharon compliments herself on her adjusted shoe with "Oh, that is great," Kath is flabbergasted. Kim ends the scene by removing any doubt from Kath's mind that the girls have gone and got queer. "That is great," Kim agrees. They are ready now to attend the speed date which is why Kim announces: "Let's do it." Kath, however, interprets "it" as abnormal and unnatural sex.

Confronted with the "proof" that her daughter and Sharon are gay, Kath finds refuge in the fact that she, unlike everyone else in the house, is normal. Kim and Sharon take leave of Kath for their night out by inventing a lie, saying they will be alone. Kath falls back on heteronormativity as her only refuge: "Well, I hope you enjoy yourselves doing whatever it is you do. Don't mind me. I'll just be here on my own being normal. Having a nice normal type of night." Kath's comments justify Warner's observation in *The Trouble with Normal*: "Nearly everyone, it seems, wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us?" (53). This certainly appears to be Kath's point of view. Normalcy may be boring, but at least it is not criminal or immoral. Faced with the apparent gayness of her daughter and Sharon (exacerbated by the "issues" Kath is having with Kel's admission of same-sex experience), Kath has two options. Remain steadfast in her opposition to what she calls the "weird" (what could also be called the "queer") or try and find out what this weirdness is all about.

She chooses the latter course by visiting the bookshops of Melbourne, looking for material on homosexuality. We see the result of Kath's shopping expedition. She picks up a copy of a newspaper in which there is an account of the Queer Film Feast; she buys *Prick Up Your Ears*, John Lahr's biography of Joe Orton and  *Holding the Man*, a gay memoir written by Australian writer Timothy Conigrave. This "research" prepares Kath for confrontation with Kim during which she makes known to her daughter her revised feelings concerning homosexuality. In contrast to her former homophobia, Kath now expresses a queer-friendly point of view. She tries to convince Kim that she is "a Dutch sea wall. A dyke ... on a bike." Kim, however, denies being gay, despite her mother telling her "You know, we all have the potential." This open-minded attitude towards homosexuality is in direct contrast to Kath's previous thoughts on the subject. She even voices disappointment faced with Kim's repeated insistence that she is not gay, regretting that the "supportive parents float" at the Mardi Gras will never be for her, a float which she says "looks like a hoot." However, this turnaround in attitude needs to be put in perspective. When informed that Kim spent the night with her husband (after the speed-dating), Kath thinks that the couple is back together. "You're back to normal?" she enquires. This statement reveals that Kath still thinks Kim's putative gayness is a sign of abnormality. Kath may have talked herself into adopting a pro-gay stance faced with the prospect of her daughter being gay, but such queerness is still to be equated with abnormality and deviance.

The superficiality of Kath's revised position concerning queerness is revealed in the final scene of the episode. Kel arrives with a present for Kath in a rather bizarre get-up. He has his hair in a perm, he is wearing an open-necked shirt showing off a medallion and he is wearing leather trousers. The present turns out to be a CD of Barbra Streisand. Kel informs Kath that he is a big fan of Streisand, provoking Kath to exclaim: "Oh what a nong I am to think that you were gay when you're a big Barbra Streisand fan." Little does Kath suspect that the singer has always been extremely popular with so-called "gay fans." A male liking of Streisand is synonymous in the popular imagination with a declaration of gayness. Kath ignores this connection. In a voiceover, Kath then accepts Kel's gay past for its impact on

their sexual relationship: "I realize now that the time my fiancé had in the Navy has made him the wonderful lover he is." She goes on in typical Dame Edna style to reveal that "Kel has helped me to find the nooks and the unexplored crannies I never knew I had." Kath therefore attributes a positive influence to homosexuality. Kel's bisexuality makes him more sexually experienced and better able to satisfy his partner's sexual needs.

*Kath & Kim* always ends with an outdoor epilogue between Kath and Kim while the credits are rolling over. The epilogue in the "Gay" episode is particularly useful as a means of recapping the previous action. Kath begins by telling her daughter: "It's interesting, Kim, because I find sexuality is a fluid thing." This observation is remarkable for its perspicacity. It would seem that during her run around the Melbourne bookshops, Kath had a look at Richard Dyer's chapter on heterosexuality in *Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Here Dyer argues that "human sexuality is extraordinarily fluid and diverse, not reducible to the hetero, homo, bi formula" (263). Or perhaps Kath even made it to translations of Luce Irigaray and found out about fluid mechanics and fluid phenomenology. Who knows? Kath, the cornerstone of normalcy in this episode, the least queer character in the plot, then surprises us with the following declaration: "I have found this week that I've had more than my eyes opened. My mind as well. You know I could be bi." "Kel," she tells her daughter, "has been tapping into something that's lurking in me." Paradoxically, it is now Kim who wants to close her ears and refuse to hear this truth about her mother's fluid sexuality: "Oh, too much information, Mum." Kim's lack of knowledge about homosexuality and her unwillingness to accept her mother's sexual confession is then reinforced in the game the two women play – spotting gays in a magazine. It is Kath who begins by identifying who is queer: "She's gay. He's gay." Refusing one of Kath's choices, Kim falls back on the stereotypical idea that it is impossible to be gay *and* married: "Oh, he's not gay, he's married." We think of Kel of course, a man who is about to be married, but who has admitted to having "been there, done that." Who can be sure that Kel will not "be there and do that" again? Kath admonishes the naïveté of her gullible daughter: "Oh, as if that means diddly these days, Kim." Of course she is right. We have been lead to believe up till now that it is Kim who is

more open-minded than her mother. Earlier on, Kim derided her mother for thinking she was “so out there.” Instead, Kim saw herself as being the one who was “so out there” by claiming in a voiceover: “But she’s so not. Whereas I am willing to try new things.” Later, faced with Kath’s insistence on marriage as the “normal” thing to do, Kim had pondered: “Maybe I want to be different, explore things.” Finally, in another voiceover, Kim thinks about the benefits of being separated from her heterosexual partner: “I’m really discovering who I am, and I like what I’m finding.” The truth, however, is that away from the conjugal bed Kim does not explore anything new. Instead, it is Kath who changes and who learns to accept the possibilities and benefits of queerness. Still, Kath has some learning to do. The epilogue ends on a humorous note with a discussion on Elton John. Finding his photo in the magazine, Kim (who is not stupid), declares: “Elton John. He *is* gay.” Kath, though, is not convinced. “Oh, no way! He’s not gay. It’s all an act.” “Really?” asks Kim, whose confidence is shaken. “Absolutely,” affirms Kath, who may recall Elton John’s marriage in Sydney on St. Valentine’s Day 1984 to a German-born female sound technician.

This episode of *Kath & Kim* does imply, as Warner argued, that “normal” means something which is right, proper and healthy. Kath espouses this heteronormative point of view for most of the episode. This explains why she initially reacts negatively towards homosexuality, believing it to be wrong, improper and criminal. Even if Kath’s change in opinion towards queerness is satirized for being laughingly superficial (she equates homosexuality with the Mardi Gras parade, she adopts a pro-gay stance after an evening’s reading and she is one of the few people who has not heard Elton John’s *Parkinson* interviews), she does offer to embrace her daughter’s and her fiancé’s queerness. Furthermore, Kath even begins to wonder if she has a queer side herself. All this confessed, suspected and wished for queerness in Kath’s home tends to suggest that “normal” Australian households are rather queer places. This seems to be what *Kath & Kim* is demonstrating to the world. Television viewers in Australia, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Ireland are now discovering the trouble with normal in Australia. Australian men are bushwhackers (like Mark), spineless and useless encumbrances (like Brett) or old-

fashioned romantics like Kel. Stumpy women such as Sharon who live for sports are considered normal and a man who prefers his dog rather than his official spouse is a fact of life. A new Kinsey is needed to do a survey of twenty-first-century sexual behaviour. *Kath & Kim* could be used as evidence to show how variations from the norm elsewhere are now the norm Down Under.

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