

Looking for Mr. Good "R"

The article in last 1983's final issue of Lambda, itself a summary of an article which appeared in Christopher Street entitled "Idols of the Tribe," discussed a division in the gay male community between conformist, macho "Rs" (real men) and non-conformist, outwardly gayified "Qs" (queens). According to the summary, the article maintained that both Rs and Qs idolize available Rs, while Qs find themselves scorned not only by Rs but even by other Qs.

It would be hard to deny that there is in fact some truth in this interesting attempt to explore the subliminal logic behind the baffling game of cruising in gay bars. Many of us would welcome any explanation of the pattern of frequent rejection and occasional acceptance that seems to be our lot in the sexual arena, particularly one which would make the problem seem less crushingly personal.

It is easy to make the criticism that the characterizations of Rs and Qs are too extreme. Most of us are neither excessively effete nor gay clones of the straight macho man. Surely it would be more accurate to say there is a continuum of traditional masculinity and traditional femininity along which all of us, male or female, gay or straight, find ourselves. Even the model of a continuum makes an unrealistic assumption of the rigidity of our personality, appearance, and mannerisms. Who hasn't felt insecure, dependent, incomplete, and unsure of human worth on some unhappy days? Certainly this has an affect on our projection of self-image and sometimes even on our sexual needs and fantasies.

Moreover, it's possible to react to our insecurities not only by looking and acting as bad as we feel, but alternately by assuming an image untrue to ourselves at the moment but in synch with what we'd like to be. The examples of this play-acting are so many and so obvious as to make mention of them unnecessary. Then there is the appreciation for the joys of perversity, which seems to me to be a talent peculiarly gay. A sexual role reversal out of synch with superficial physical appearances, societal norms, or sexual identity is sometimes immensely fascinating, not to say pleasurable.

This sense of the perverse and the popularity of false image projection means people cannot always be counted upon to behave as they appear. That the merchandise is liable to be packaged deceptively can be a source of great frustration if the object of the search be a true R.

Even if finding R were not so difficult, it would still be worth asking why a Q won't do instead. The answer is not a pleasant one, but then sex, it seems to me, is almost never politically correct. Many of the retrograde beliefs that modern enlightened society has made us forswear in polite company are far

from forgotten in the recesses of our minds. It is painfully obvious that one of the chief reasons why Rs are perceived as desirable not only by other Rs but also by Qs is the abiding belief that for men to be masculine is infinitely preferable to being (gasp) feminine. This fundamental tenant of the ugliest homophobia is in fact still shared by many gay men. Conversely, the predominant gay male attitude of despising males with feminine mannerisms (not to mention the much maligned drag queens) seems to me based on an almost frantic desire for Rs of any degree to distance themselves from the "swishy" qualities and stereotypes which they confronted with fear and loathing in an early stage of grappling with their sexual identities. "Surely I can't be like those people. I don't want to be a girl or a sissy." So follows the great neurotic struggle by so many to be both gay and "manly."

Maybe some small number of Rs really are essentially straight men with a gay sexuality. They have absorbed the retrograde social training or our locker room upbringing, that women are second best to men for everything except for sex. No wonder that the exception to the general principle isn't assimilated as totally as the rest.

Qs true to the stereotype are also probably fewer than the vast mass of gay men in the middle of the continuum. Tagged genetically by pitch of voice, slightness of build, and softness of physical features, Qs really bear the brunt of retrograde attitudes about the relative worth of the sexes. Their opportunities to masquerade as Rs have real physically-imposed limitations. It would be very hard to them too to keep from absorbing the politically incorrect but socially dominant notion that male and maleness is better.

What's to be done? Alas, not a great deal. If the search for R must go on, I think it's worth recognizing that traditional attitudes still govern our sexual if not our social behavior, shaping our erotic desires. On the other hand, I suspect that the more securely gay the individual happens to be, the less threatened he will be of his interest in someone more feminine in aspect. That great mass of aspiring, play-acting Rs are probably the least likely to change their ways. So also the more miserable of the Qs, who couldn't begin to question the rectitude of the negative judgment "macho" society has placed on themselves and their kind. Perhaps our enlightened "living room" social manners will someday seem so right and natural that our secret retrograde beliefs will really be seen for the drastic limitation of our erotic horizons that in fact they are.

-T.R.