Universidad de Alcalá

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUEER REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA:

An analysis of *Our Flag Means Death*

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Abstract

As a witness of queer pairings that never became official couples, you might be wondering why audiovisual media does not allow LGBTQ+ representation to be clear and real. Many consumers have wondered about that while growing up under the influence of tv shows that never acknowledged their whole viewership, which includes the LGBTQ+ community. However, history is finally changing, and a recent series might have found the solution to be profitable while including a broader representation in its story. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to analyse the queer representation of *Our Flag Means Death* (2022) and hence highlight the importance of being able to identify with the media. To do so, I will first explore the branding of the series and how it avoided relating to queerness, to later analyse the main romance and the reasons why the audience did not foresee them as a expected or, in terms of serial television, "canonical" couple at the start. Finally, I will survey the reception of the series, with the aim to prove how including an actual representation of the LGBT community in the media can lead to better outcomes. This analysis will be supported by recent queer theory criticism.

Queer, Identity, Piracy, Taika Waititi, David Jenkins.

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever drifted apart from your peers? In a lockdown situation in which you cannot run away to find people like you, the only resource you can turn to, in order to fit in, is a good story. However, you are not looking for *any* good story, you need one in which you can identify with characters and find people with whom you can relate, share your fears and goals. That is what *Our Flag Means Death* (2022), a script written by David Jenkins, gave to a broad audience. In a truly inclusive rendering, this series introduces characters from many different parts of the world, and with many different capabilities: one of them has a speech impediment, another is physically disabled, there is a nonbinary character, a gifted+adhd adult, an autistic adult…. Besides, in the series, men are allowed to be sensitive, there is romance amongst middle aged people and, of course, queer representation. All of them are placed in a pirate ship, a choice that might fulfil many childhood dreams from people who can easily identify with those characters.

In short, *Our Flag Means Death* offers a safe space to look for identification, which I believe to be the main goal of fiction stories. Since the main plot of the series favours the LGBTQ+ community, that will also be the focus of my master's project. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to analyse queer representation in *Our Flag Means Death* and hence demonstrate how important identification with the media is for minorities. To do so, I will divide the discussion in two main sections: the exploration of how the story was sold without hints of any LGBTQ+ content, and how it then developed into a queer romance. Both aspects shape the reception of the series, as I will explain throughout the discussion. All in all, this research follows recent queer theory, mainly that proposed by Stanley (2022). Furthermore, branding theories, especially those proposed by Fransenn/Mourits (2022), and reception studies developed by Broitman (2015) will enrich my arguments on how representation affects audiences.

1. CONTEXT AND FRAMEWORK

1.1 Summary of *Our Flag Means Death*

The series follows the adventures of Stede Bonnet, an owner of a plantation in Barbados, who decided to leave his wife and children in pursuit of a life of pillage and plunder. In fact, he bought his own ship and gathered a crew to which he paid a weekly salary. Of course, Stede Bonnet did not have any sailing ability and did not look scary at all, until he found the person who could teach him piracy: Blackbeard. When the crew meets him, chaos runs in every direction. However, Stede is soon comfortable by his side because the two main characters find that they are very similar to one another: Stede was looking for adventure, which Blackbeard could provide; and this one looked for an upper-class experience, which Stede had. Both men decided to teach something to each other and, in the process, they developed a mutual attraction, supported by Lucius, Stede's first mate, who acted as the third wheel throughout their relationship.

However, Blackbeard's first mate, Israel (Izzy) Hands, is not happy with the pairing, and tries to get Blackbeard back by fighting Stede, thus sending him to a trap against the Spaniards and later using Blackbeard's old friend, Calico Jack, to get him back on his feet. None of his efforts work since, when Stede was about to face death, Blackbeard used his body as a shield and called the *Act of Grace*, a law that allowed both men to get pardons in exchange for fighting for King George. Giving up piracy for Stede, Blackbeard shows his inner self completely. Having shaved his beard and thus having eliminated his personal brand as a fearsome bloodthirsty pirate —in other words, Blackbeard as a pirate figure dissolves because there is no iconic beard to refer to—, he was now just Edward Teach, when he confessed his love for and to Bonnet. They promised each other to run away, but Stede, still recovering from trauma after his first murder, went back to his family. Nonetheless, his wife and kids are the ones who showed Stede that his true love was at sea, with Blackbeard. Finally liberated, he went back to find him. However, Blackbeard thought Stede had abandoned him and, under the influence of Israel Hands, went back to his previous life as a fearful pirate, releasing from any memory of Stede, yet crying for him when no one was looking.

1.2 Historical Context

Pirates were well known before the Golden Age of Piracy (1714-1730). Steven Johnson presents in his book *A True Story of Piracy, Power and History's First Global Manhunt* (2020) extended research about piracy during the Greek and Roman Empire, explores how Vikings pictured their own pirates, and even mentions some notorious pirates from non-European cultures, such as the Ganj-i-Sawai or the Fath Mahmamadi. His research ends with Captain Henry Avery, who founded the first Republic of Pirates in an island called Libertalia, also known as Madagascar. Although this achievement shortly vanished, Avery's work was an inspiration for the later Republic of Pirates in Nassau, during the Golden Age of Piracy, and established the image of pirates that we know nowadays.

Although our present-day reliable knowledge of the pirates from the Golden Age of Piracy derives from relatively few original sources, Frank Sherry's book, *Raiders and Rebels: A History of the Golden Age of Piracy* (2008) shows that "there has been no dearth of scholarly books in the past on pirates and piracy". Thus, the author had "relied upon many of them in assembling the facts of his own narrative" (7-8). In other words, pirate history lacks accuracy, it mainly relies on popular knowledge, oral narratives and folktales. Thus, Sherry decided to connect the pirate outbreak outburst with the events of those times, which provided an explanation to the cause-and-effect correlation with piracy.

To illustrate this point, Sherry gives an example of how the history of piracy has changed throughout time. For instance, why do we relate treasure hunting with pirates? A notorious pirate raid has the answer. One of the most impressive pirate raids took place on the vessel *Nossa Senhora Do Cabo*, on April 26, 1721. This was a Portuguese merchant ship that met its doom due to a storm that fractured the main mast. They stranded on the east of Madagascar and, even though the crew was filled with carpenters and other professionals that could have easily fixed the vessel, anxiety and fear ruined every sailor's mind, for they were on their most important journey.

Aboard the ship was His Excellency Dom Luis Carlos Ignacio Xavier de Meneses, Count of Ericeira and Marquis of Lourical, who was returning to Portugal after many years of service as viceroy of Goa. Obviously, with such a public figure on their ship, they were also carrying a wealthy cargo: not only their silks, textiles, spices and porcelains; but also Dom Luis' fortune: diamonds, Indian art and illuminated manuscripts, among other precious objects. Thus, the cargo had an estimated total worth of one million sterlings. They were found by John Taylor's crew who did not hesitate to claim their cargo. Dom Luis fought until the very end, whereas *Nossa's* crew soon surrendered. However, John Taylor spared Dom Luis' life because he had fought bravely. Later, they raided the vessel and got all of its treasure for themselves. This is the reason why nowadays we associate pirates with treasure hunters, because John Taylor was described as surrounded by jewellery and chests full of gold coins that his crew and him obtained from this merchant ship. However, as Sherry points out, pirates did not usually bury their treasure, they spent it in themselves or used it to secure the future of the Republic of Pirates (11-17).

Moreover, Sherry continues discussing why sometimes the government turned a blind eye when it comes to piracy, even though it increased criminality and danger world-wide. Nowadays, we understand piracy as actions against the law. However, during the eighteen century, there were some laws that allowed piracy to exist. Even though it was supposed to be a crime, Spain, England and France agreed upon similar laws: the three nations allowed freelance crews to raid vessels from the other two nations. Those captains and crews were called "privateers" and acted under their government's protection (18-30). One of the most notable privateers was Captain Thomas Tew of Newport, Rhode Island. As Sherry states, he was "easy-going, sociable mam… slim, clean-shaven… liked and respected by his Newport neighbours… and his crew" (20). This depiction is far from the image we have these days: rude, lousy, fearsome. Tew was, in fact, a civilian whom his government commissioned to capture the cargo from enemy nations in time of war and resented the suggestion that he was in any sense a pirate. Furthermore, this assertion was heartly supported by the majority of the merchants. However, as Sherry points out, "if the selling of privateer

loot was against the king's law, it was not against the law of the sea, or the law of supply and demand" and there were no discussions about "buying the luxuries that privateers made available" (20). This started a new profitable trading action at sea that sometimes nourished the kingdoms, but mostly helped the Republic of Pirates to flourish.

In fact, the number of privateers increased as a result of the economic issues brought by the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714), a struggle for control of the Spanish Empire among its heirs. The conflict drew in not only Spain, but also Austria, France, the Dutch Republic, Savoy and Great Britain. Some of the main battles were *the Great Northern War*, *Rákóczi's War of Independence*, *the Camisards* and *Queen Anne's War*. During those times, only the Spanish did not allowed privateers and "claimed the right to hang them as *piratas* [sic] whenever and wherever they might capture one of these independent operators" but, "despite the attitude of the Spanish and a few critics and lawyers, privateer captains … hotly defended privateering as legitimate warfare" because they still sailed under their government's flag (19).

According to Sherry, allowing privateers to act freely on the high seas soon ended when the soldiers were not paid after the Peace of Utrecht of 1715. Queen Anne, who allowed privateering under the English flag, was found dead August the first, 1714, thus, any opportunity for English sailors to get paid vanished with her. This might have been the origin of the legendary Blackbeard and his pirate ship, a slave vessel under the name of *La Concorde*, that was raided by Blackbeard's and Benjamin Hornigold's crew and renamed as *Queen Anne's Revenge*, under the jolly roger or the black flag that identified the vessel as a pirate ship (231-249).

Blackbeard, or Edward Teach (also, Thatch), was, in Sherry's words, a monster. He represented the pirate iconography we know nowadays: long black hair and beard, heavily armed, dark attires… and also the behaviour of a bloodthirsty pirate; he raided and killed ferociously and with no compassion (231). However, Sherry later quotes Defoe's (Charles Johnson) work to explain that Edward Teach was a master of deceit: he used smoke and mirrors to scare the royal marines, pretending thus to be the Devil

himself and, as a consequence, taking advantage of their fear to avoid engaging into battle (231-3). Although this speaks on Edward Teach's behalf, Sherry acknowledges that most of the sources speak about him as "an insane man of explosive nature" (232): he enjoyed humiliating other men and used violence to discipline his crew (232-3). Besides, he was also a rapist that exchanged women with his crew (232). All in all, he was the terror of the high seas. Nonetheless, he started his career as a young sailor under his friend command —Benjamin Hornigold—, long before he became a pirate captain himself. In fact, it was Benjamin Hornigold the first one to assume the role of captain for *Queen's Anne's Revenge*.

In 1717, Blackbeard found captain Stede Bonnet and the crew of the *Revenge*, after following his clumsy raids for a while. Stede Bonnet was a pirate captain because he was fascinated with piracy, not because he had no other option after the war. He was, in fact, a wealthy plantation owner that understood nothing of sailing. Thus, Bonnet tried to board a Spanish merchant vessel and catastrophically failed. He was stabbed and, consequently, he was on the verge of death. Therefore, Blackbeard assumed the captaincy of the *Revenge* and consequently taught Stede Bonnet how to be a pirate (234-249).[1] When they finally parted ways, Stede now with a new crew in a new vessel called the *Adventure*, and Blackbeard finally as the captain of *Queen Anne's Revenge*, the Golden Age of Piracy met its doom.

By 1717, Wood Rogers was named governor of the Bahamas, an archipelago that hosted the Republic of Pirates in Nassau and New Providence. He was a ferocious corsair, that is, a pirate hunter. The Republic of Pirates was not at its best when Rogers assumed the role of governor and, thus, the inhabitants of the islands started to think it might be best to surrender to the English navy. During that time, several law acts were signed to allow pirates regain their space under the king's commands. One of them was the *Act of Grace* (September 5, 1717), which offered the pirates a pardon for

[1] Although all the books mentioned in this section discuss Blackbeard's and Bonnet's story, Sherry's research is more detailed, thus I only relied on his ideas to provide the historical context of the fictional figures I am going to analyse further on.

their crimes if they enrolled in the British army. Benjamin Hornigold, Blackbeard's old mentor, was the first to surrender and accept King George's Pardon (214-218).

However, the real Edward Teach never accepted the treaty, and formed an alliance with Charles Vane, a pirate captain that was feared by most of the world, almost on equal terms with Blackbeard (218-220). Charles Vane and Blackbeard defended Nassau and the Republic of Pirates until the British army surpassed their forces (220-222). After that defeat, Vane and Teach carefully planned their revenge and burned Charlestown to the ground (222-230). Blackbeard used his own ship to crush Charlestown defences, firing his own cannons against the city walls. During that raid, Teach himself sank his own ship as his last act of piracy and ran away in Stede's Bonnet *Adventure* (240-248).

Nevertheless, that did not bring Nassau and the Republic of Pirates back, and thus Charles Vane succumbed to hysteria, whereas Edward Teach decided to withdraw from piracy for good and hid in Ocracoke island. Nevertheless, Captain Maynard, from the English navy, was following Blackbeard underneath Spotswood —governor of North Carolina, where Charleston is located— orders: to kill Blackbeard and turn it into a lesson for all pirates. On November 22, 1718, Maynard used two vessels, the *HMS Pearl* and the *HMS Lyme*, numerous crew members and an immeasurable firepower force to bring Blackbeard down. After a long fight, Maynard murdered Edward Teach and cut his head off, to hang it later in his mast and thus to remind all pirates what destiny they would be condemned to follow. Finally, that notorious defeat motivated many pirates to accept King George's pardon or to renounce their pirate titles and run away from the pirate hunters. It was the end of the Golden Age of Piracy (240-248).

Even though the Golden Age of Piracy was male dominated, there were actually some notorious women who changed the History of Piracy. One of them was Granuaile (1530 – 1603), or Grace O'Malley, crowned Pirate Queen of Ireland. Her story was an inspiration for Anne Bonny, who became the last pirate standing during the Golden Age of Piracy, when all men surrendered (1697-1782). Both Irish women

were undoubtedly clever, Granuaile by tricking Elisabeth I with a cunning meeting, and Bonny tricking the englishmen when she found a loophole to avoid being hung for piracy; she alleged that she was pregnant knowing that Christians would never dare to kill an unborn child.[2]

To finish with this section, it is interesting to highlight Alfred S. Bradford's *Flying the Black Flag: A Brief History of Piracy* (2007). At the end of the study, Bradford explains how pirates are made or, in other words, why such an image of criminality attracts so many people. For him, piracy is another term for terrorism (185). However, the first pirates we have records of —the Greeks and Vikings mentioned above— "all originated from lands that could not support them" (185). Both cultures had enough sea-going expertise and, thus, having as their only tools their vessels and crews, they believed that the sea might hold enough profit for them despite their governments (185-6). In other words, if their talent was sailing, their only resource to survive was, of course, the oceans and seas.

Besides, wars for those merchants were always the prime issue, which represented the tipping point for many merchants that lost everything during the battles and raids. Moreover, they felt abandoned by their leaders. One example is the story of the Tanka pirates, which Bradford described as "the story of all pirates: a disposed people with expertise at sea and nothing to lose, turn into piracy, are employed in a war by one side against another; they organise under a dynamic leader, but the war ends, conditions change, the pirates are no longer welcome" (187). All in all, pirates from all ages felt defenceless and abandoned, thus they turned to rage and revenge in their hunt for their own freedom. That might be the reason why many consumers of pirate-related media tend to hook upon the romantic idea of piracy: it is easier to identify with those feelings of abandonment and revenge, so audiences can enjoy the promise of freedom that the mainstream piracy proposes.

[2] For further information on these women, see: Schulte (2016) and Chambers (1979).

1. 3 State of the Art

Since there is no previous academic work on *Our Flag Means Death* due to its novelty, as it was released last March 2022, this dissertation can be considered original in its choice of this primary source. However, the analysis of queer representation has been the main focus of previous studies. Within this theoretical framework, there are two main aspects that I intend to explore in this dissertation: profit and inclusivity. It seems that queer research tends to pivot between both ideas, which leads to the same question: is this sample of queer representation an advocate of inclusivity or are the producers trying to make profit out of a social movement? To start with, Hennessy argues that cultural visibility can open the path to gay civil rights, yet, for him, the past few decades have used queer representation as a path towards money instead of liberation (31-2), and this is the starting point of my discussion. From that perspective, one could argue that avoiding queer narratives in mainstream media up until today might have been a consequence of fear of economic loses. These days however it seems that it is necessary to include queer representation if productions are meant to succeed and make profit. But my question is, is it done with full respect and understanding? Does it really work?

In this regard, Eleftheriadis states that queer representation is "an open call for people to identify with any form of gender and sexual orientation, attempting to create a space of radical inclusivity" (171). Indeed, the author has the impression that visibility, especially in festivals that go against the normative, is a powerful political tool that challenges identity as a whole (169-175). Nevertheless, the *norm* is a paradoxical term by itself because it is always changing; but something remains the same. Regarding queer representation, nowadays it seems "compulsory" to include it in fiction if the producers or publishing houses want to avoid backlash. Thus, it is common to encounter some queer coded characters. That is what happens for instance with series such as *Sherlock BBC* (2010-2020), *Supernatural* (2005-2021) or *Doctor Who* (2005-x). As a consequence, academic studies about queer representation have burst out throughout the years, and researchers such as Collier-Cassandra (2015), Portales

Machado (2017) or Talbot-Shelby (2020) have agreed upon the same topics: there is some queer representation, but it is always only subtle. That is the major issue we tend to encounter in the production and consumption of fiction, since it does not address the issue of inclusivity aiming at a real social change. Stories such as those mentioned above had real impact in a broad audience, yet they reduced the issue to what is known as *queerbait*.

Collier defines *queerbaiting* as "subtext and narrative techniques to code characters as potentially queer to viewers 'in the know,' allowing queer viewers a space to identify themselves within the show without needing to make an explicit statement regarding the issue" (2). This means that there is not a search for a proper identification but rather a profit study of the audiences. Knowing that the LGTBQ+ movement has opened the path for more people to come out of the closet, to start a transition or just to come to terms with themselves, producers had to make a shift in their target audiences to include queer consumers. However, this is again only a partial change, because their narratives never clearly showcased any real queer character with whom the audience could identify. It is all too open to interpretation and, therefore, this technique is being broadly overused by many recent series. One example is *Stranger Things* (2016-x), since their script writers and performers have expressed many times that one of the main characters, Will Byers, might be gay, but was never explicit. As Vary summarises,

> In the first episode, Will and Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) have to give a presentation in their new California high school on a hero they look up to; Will chooses Alan Turing, the gay mathematician who was prosecuted in the 1950s for his sexuality and forced to undergo chemical castration. Will also physically recoils from a girl who shows interest in him. And when Mike (Finn Wolfhard) visits from *Hawkins* in Episode 2 over spring break, Will appears heartbroken that Mike has been so indifferent to him in favour of his girlfriend, Eleven. ("Stranger Things" 2022).

This quote clearly exemplifies what might be the most recent example of *queerbait*. Indeed, the behaviour of the kid clearly resonates with the queer spectrum, yet the treatment of that character is reduced to a shared secret with the audience. That is not advancing towards a social change. On the contrary, it perpetuates the idea that being queer is a secret, a problem, or something that should not be celebrated, and that any queer behaviour should be masked.

It gets worse as soon as we dive into other different productions. For instance, I mentioned before that *Supernatural* has some queer content, yet the resolution of those characters falls into denying who they are. In fact, Talbot highlights that, "since 2008, fans have detected some serious chemistry between male characters such as Castiel and Dean, spawning the now internet beloved pairing 'Destiel' … and the subtext surrounding the pair often feels more like just plain text" ("Supernatural", 2020). Although it is true that at the beginning of the series there was no intention whatsoever to introduce queer representation, the natural flow of the relationships needed that representation. From a creative point of view, not allowing any character their possibility of growing and changing paths does not make any sense because it does not reflect real life. It breaks the storyline, it flattens their personalities and it is, once more, another form of *queerbaiting*. As Talbot argues, "although this lens of criticism may seem obscure, it's actually a fairly pervasive concern throughout mainstream television. Series like *Sherlock*, *Hannibal*, and *Teen Wolf* have all been accused of sewing references to romantic relationships between prominent male characters into their narratives without ever allowing those seeds to grow into genuine representation" ("Supernatural", 2022).

In Collier's words, "*queerbaiting* is usually done in hopes of expanding the audience for the show, attracting slash fans and LGBTQ+ folk while allowing producers to refrain from isolating viewers who would be alienated by the depiction of openly LGBTQ+ characters'"(1-2). In other words, inclusivity is still a profit move, no matter how companies try to mask it. That is the reason why, to *queerbaiting*, Collier adds that "this, however, is a move that denies queers real visibility, preserving the

status quo and enabling producers to pay lip service in support of ideas like equality. *Queerbaiting* is thus connected to homonormative ideology" (3). Even though there has been some research acknowledging queer representation in those series, such as Stack's Thesis *Queer Who: Doctor Who fandom, gay male subculture and transitional space* (2020), which explores the queerness of alien characters in *Doctor Who*; or Portales Machado's essay *Doctor Who was queer long before Jack Harness* (2017), which celebrates inclusivity even in the old *Doctor Who* series from 1963, all that research fails to realize that *Doctor Who* deals mainly with aliens. Although the "alien" word has different meanings, one of them being "strange", in this case, it means aliens as outer space living forms: proper aliens, with different biology. This is even more insulting, since the message for the audience is that queer people are allowed to be themselves… just not on this planet.

All in all, as Talbot manifested, "a key part of *queerbaiting* is intention, showrunners and writers looking to capitalize the increased viewership that comes with a queer audience" ("Supernatural", 2020). That is the reason why *Our Flag Means Death* proposes a solution against *queerbaiting*. At the very beginning, the show was not sold as queer because it did not need to target any specific audience. In fact, this show proves that there is no need to sell their work exclusively for the LGTBQ+ community to consume. Therefore, it does not present the community as something "special" or different. Finally, *Our Flag Means Death* brings in that inclusivity Eleftheriadis was searching for, though in a simpler, easier way: there is no radical movement, the inclusion issue in the series is as normal and expected as that of including ships in the storyline because it deals with pirates.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This section covers three main approaches to my research. First, I am going to showcase the contributions of most recent queer theory: how it started, what it means and the relevance for this essay. Afterwards, I am going to frame my approach within a comparative literature methodology, in order to deepen into the issues of emotionality and how reception shapes the importance of a fictional work. For Stanley et al., the queer movement started under the Stonewall Uprising. It was a riot organised by Marsha P.Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two trans women of colour. The riot took place on June 28, 1970. They were followed by thousands of other trans and queer people that marched and rioted to different planned destinations, such as the Women's House of Detentions (115). In other words, trans and queer liberation was a fight against criminal punishments about sexuality, a struggle that would be repeated throughout the years and that defines the theoretical framework chosen for this dissertation.

These events set the basis for the publication of *Critical Trans Politics, The Limits of Law* and *Captive Genders*, by the same authors (these three works were published at the beginning of 2022). They started writing the studies in the early 2000 but could not publish them until recently, since they argue that they needed a radical change in society to start sharing their queer theories in academic groups (116). In my opinion, even then they would have suffered backlash. Besides, the authors agree upon the idea that the cultural shift has occurred as a result of the organization of trans and queer groups and of the space they occupy to criticize imprisonment and punishment for their sexualities and genders. As they explain, punishment of sexual and gender nonconformity can be traced back to the first colonies of the United States (116-7), which might explain how homophobia still prevails. If identifying as queer means "resisting the criminal legal system … then gender, sex and sexuality deploy within a larger political, economic and social processes, driving mass incarceration in the United States" (118), at least before the Stonewall uprising. The employment of the term queerness as a synonym for crime is an ongoing trauma in the LGBTQ+ community throughout generations.

Indeed, trauma seems to be one of the most important aspects of queer theory. As Gay, Mosley et al agree, early queer theorists took their cues and key concepts from several sources, including the gay identity politics that grew out of the activism of the AIDS epidemic, feminist theory and cultural studies ("Queer Theory…" 2022). To that, they provide examples and short definitions for the topics other authors deal with, such as: Gayle Rubin's research *Thinking Sex* (1984), who examines the basis of marginalization from "sexual behaviour hierarchy" in society; Eve Kosofsky Sedwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), who explored gender identity, and which was also studied in *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler; and Teresa de Lauretis' career, since she was the first writer to coin the phrase *queer theory* ("Queer Theory…" 2022).

As Gay, Mosley et al explain, queer theory "represents a subversion of how many people assume identity politics should work—in other words, that inborn, benign differences between people entitle everyone to equal rights—" ("Queer Theory … 2022). This means that we, as a society, cannot deny that there are obvious differences amongst individuals. For me, individuals function as the opposite term to society: the individual or their individuality is a tool to remark what works and what does not work within the norms that define a given society and, thus, a nation. Nevertheless, it is, in fact, that precise individuality or the differences between the individuals what define the reasons behind the discussions and changes within society. Or, in other words, individuality defines politics. However, "queer theory doesn't deny that people deserve equal rights but rather that the basis of those rights should not be due to any kind of innate or unchangeable identity" ("Queer Theory" … 2022). This idea states that queer theory is, still, a political tool, as I showed before. As Gay, Mosley et al explain, "to 'queer' politics means dispensing with assumptions about characterization and division and instead focusing on the power structures responsible for division and hierarchy" (2022). In other words, there should be no separation between queer and politics as social ideological movements, because both are one of the same. All in all, "the queering of society as a whole imagines a future in

which people's identities are fluid and not subject to oppressive binaries" (Gay, Mosley et al, 2022).

However, the oppressive binaries mentioned in the last paragraphs might even have a place in queerness itself, as some scholars argue and I am going to discuss in the following paragraphs. Elia, Lovaas, and Yep state that queer remains a fluid and ambiguous term. However, several scholars (Angelides, 2001; Jagose, 1996, quoted in Elia, Lovaas and Yep) elaborate the queer definition in at least three distinct ways:

First, homosexuality (Gays and Lesbians): According to Elia, Lovaas and Yep, academics from the nineteens tend to narrow the queer term to a binary option: either you like feel attracted to the opposite sex and thus, you are heterosexual; or you like the same sex and thus, you are homosexual. Later, The queer term was coined to refer to a plethora of sexualities and gender identities, thus reducing queer theory to the two hegemonic options can be offensive to queer theory itself.

Second, Bisexuality: Further on, the authors explain that bisexuality started to be included in the queer spectrum after Freud developed his theory of psychoanalysis. In spite of the apparent advance, queer theory still relies on Freud's books, thesis, ideas and proposals, which are now outdated, as many other phychoanalists and neuropsychologists have proven. Besides, under this perspective, bisexuality is understood, again, as a binary term, obliterating the many possibilities that the term "queer" can offer.

Finally, Gender non-conforming: One of those possibilities is what the authors present as "gender non binary" or "gender non-conforming". Those terms engulf alternative identifications that drift away from solely identifying with sexual identity. Gender, in this case, (172-4) enlarges the queer term to its rightful definition.

These days, writers are starting to use the non-binary pronouns to refer to cisgendered people that are not explicitly identified, such as researchers and academics who are only refered to by their surnames. Thus, non-binary people cannot be addressed with she/her or he/him pronouns. In English, the neutral form is

"they/them". This is also a more accepting and respectful use of pronouns with transexual people, especially if a person has not labelled their gender yet. Although there is a whole spectrum that combines, she/them, he/them, they/her and they/him, from this point onwards I will use the generic "they/them" in this dissertation to refer to non-binary people and characters.

Indeed, oppressive binaries do not only define sexuality, since the term "oppressive binaries" might ovwershadow gender as well, which might sound obvious because it is a direct attack on transexuality. As Brzuzy and the Nagoshis explain:

> The experiences of transgender individuals, those who do not conform to traditional gender identity binaries, raise compelling questions about the nature of socially defined identities. Does one's identity in a category, such as gender, require that this identity be fixed in a particular body? What if the individual's central experience of oppression is about being forced to conform to a socially constructed identity category that one does not actually identify with? (1)

Bearing all these aspects in mind, I wonder how is it possible that such a controversial term is not widely represented in fiction and TV shows yet. Why is it difficult to include non-binary characters, or a truthful transgender character arc that contributes to the development of an interesting plot? It is obvious that the world is crowded with people who identify within this spectrum. However, as Brzuzy and the Nagoshis argue, "the core problem with gender is that it is based on a binary, mandatory system that attributes social characteristics to sexed anatomy" (3).

This might be the reason why gender seems to be so complicated to understand. The authors, however, provide an explanation, adding that: "in many cases, more than two types of sexed bodies may occur" (3). In the following paragraphs, I am going to elaborate on the types of sexed bodies that Brzuzy and Nagoshis introduce, thus extending their explanations about gender assignment, gender attribution and gender identification.

Firstly, the authors define what is known as *gender assignment*. This term basically describes the genitalia of a new-born the moment they are registered on the medical facilities. It is, once more, a binary term that only describes the physical sex of the infant, but not what it encompasses in terms of identification, behaviour or, to put it simple, choice. This is different from *gender attribution*, since that term is used to describe behaviour. It mainly refers to cultural assumptions about gender: girls are expected to play with dolls, boys are expected to play football. This also perpetuates the idea that "feminine" is only referring to emotions and beauty, whereas "masculine" is used to describe rebellion and lack of feelings. Hence, this term is, not only another binary explanation that again does not belong to queerness, but also a patriarchal segregation that might alienate a children during their process of finding their identity.

Finally, the authors present the term *gender identity*, which refers to choice, and which goes far beyond the other two terms, since it ignores genitalia and gender separation, from behaviour and thoughts. Within gender identity, not only transgender people find a space, but also anyone who is not defined by pronouns, that could be perfectly enclosed only in the gender attribution term. This idea breaks with the outdated interpretation that gender has to be binary, and even opens the possibility of identifying with both genders (non-binary) at the same time or neither (agender). Thus, this might be the most accurate term when it comes to describe most of the queer spectrum, even though it does not include sexuality.

Interestingly, Penny (2014), from a different approach, asks: "Is sexuality inherently, universally, queer? Or should it rather name a distinguished minority, an elite experimental constituency pushing the boundaries of community, social life, politics and subjectivity?" (3). In this regard, it is better to highlight that there is no real answer to these questions. In Penny's words, "These questions are no longer productive because they assume a false dilemma" (3). As he explains:

> If the former is the case, then we lack a rationale for queer's existence as a special field of inquiry and, in any event, we already know all about

> it from Freud's strong thesis about constitutive bisexuality in the subject, and the drive's resistance to reproductive normalisation. Even more importantly, on the level of theoretical practice, the premise of queer universality (the idea that sexuality is inherently queer) demonstrates against its own intentions how sexuality is an inauspicious starting point for a project invested in genuine social change, one which addresses itself to a humanity generically conceived" (3-4).

In simpler terms, Penny believes that queerness and, subsequently, queer theory, should not be a political tool that represents social change. This might have worked in the past, but if we want to advance towards accepting queerness, we must stop believing that there is something to be accepted. In other words, binary terms strike again: either you are queer or you are 'the norm', which perpetuates the idea that anything that drifts from the norm is still problematic. To sum up his work, Penny presents five main points[3]:

First, that all the valuable points queer theory has made about human sexuality were previously made by Freud and developed in (aspects of) the psychoanalytic tradition. Second, that the promise of queer universalism — that everyone is (potentially) queer — "is compromised by both an identarian gesture of self-privileging and reference, tending towards paranoia, to the quasi-omnipotence of heterosexism or 'heteronormativity' " (5). Third, that there is no such a thing as reproductive or fully heterosexual — 'normal'— sex. In this precise sense, sex as such is queer and, despite the protests … there is no existing normality to provide enough contrast. Then, that no positive social or political claim can be made in the name of queer when queer is defined, as above, as the generic real of sex. Finally, that there can be no meaningful, specifically sexual, utopianism from an authentic psychoanalytic perspective. Properly formulated, the psychoanalytic idea of sexual difference is neither heterosexist nor anti-feminist.

[3] Those points are detailed in the first chapter of his work as a summary. However, I am only presenting the general ideas. For more information, please consult the cited source (Penny 2014).

Although his proposal that everyone is queer is rather interesting, Penny's statement indeed acts as a detonant for a change in queer theory: if there is no political tool and everybody is somehow queer, why is the same dichotomy presented again and again throughout queer theory? It might be argued, that it is necessary to propose queer theory to trigger social change. As Penny explains, "excluding for the time being its elite theoretical vanguard, recent queer textual production can be divided into two moribund categories: introductions and textbooks that repeat old mantras from the 1990s, and a range of largely untheorized studies of cultural phenomena featuring non-normative sexual content, otherwise fully conventional in scope and aim" (3). All in all, Penny maintains that academics who develop their research in gender studies might be stuck in a unchangeable writer's block that might turn into the main problem for queer studies: there are no advances, no new ideas. Thus, according to him, the broad term "queer" narrows again to the same repetitive description.

Grounded on queer theory, this dissertation explores specifically one of the most common misconceptions within queer representation: *queerbait*. As discussed before, *queerbait* is a controversial tool that tries to include LGTBQ+ representation to acknowledge the current need of queer characters in the media, though never truly confirming their sexualities or romantic interests in their characters' arcs. As Ross points out, "in its depictions of humanity, narrative media often reflects how authors perceive the state of our society through fictional constructions, and as such we can discern our cultural tolerances and standards from the media we choose to consume and our reaction to it" (5). However, as I explained in the state-of-the-art section, the author's perceptions are usually shaped by economic interests that give form to their stories for profit and marketing purposes. That is the reason why the fandom phenomena became crucial to study any creative work as a whole. In other words, fan responses have become an extended universe for reception studies.

Ross describes fan studies as "a vehicle for understanding how people interact with this content, from which we can analyse how media represents this society through what fans enjoy, and where they find fault" (5). From this point of view, fan responses function as a tool that measures the outreach and impact of a script. It tries

to answer the questions proposed at the beginning of the writing process: will this series engage the audience? Is this series addressing current social issues? Will the audience identify with the characters? And, most importantly, will this series have any future? Besides, continues Ross, "this issue of how people are represented in narratives has become increasingly relevant as the digital revolution has given fans a more accessible platform to communicate with producers of entertainment, prompting the discussion of how marginalised groups are underrepresented in fictional narrative media" (1). In other words, fan response is, up to this date, the only device that measures the critical value of a creative work.

Following on this, Ross adds that "the symbiotic relationship between authors and fans can be a positive force for both, with fans supporting their work, and authors feeding fan engagement and creativity" (7) but, if the writers are unaware of the fan response, their product will lose value over time. For instance, there is a common practice amongst fandoms: reimagining couples through new creative art. This is called "shipping", and it can be done in the form of a drawing of the main characters holding hands or even expanding an intimate scene from the original series to a whole fan-novel or "fanfiction". If the writers are aware of this artistic production, as a result of? through interactions between characters they have created, avoiding that relationship at all costs is not an intelligent move. That is the example of *Sherlock*'s writers, as Ross pointed out: "Moffat and Gatiss' rejection of the possibility of queer representation leaves "shipping" fandom in a state of crisis. They are forced to choose if they trust the authors, who regularly contradict themselves, or if they believe the show's subtextual clues leading towards a queer relationship between Sherlock and John" (8).

In fact, the power of fandoms has always reached the unimaginable. From Dickens changing *Great Expectations* to Conan Doyle himself, original writer of *Sherlock*, who was also influenced by his readers. The writer killed off his main character at the end of the book *The Adventure of the Final Problem* (1893), but was forced to bring him back to life as a result of the response of his fans (Ross 10). This proves that stories, once they are released, are subject to the interpretation of the audience,

not to the creators. For that reason, not paying attention to the audience's interests and reception might might condemn any creative work to failure. As Geer points out, any homosexual reference affecting the main characters in series such as *Sherlock, Supernatural* or *Hannibal* (2013) is treated "as an inside joke" on the script (5-8) and this is where we must draw the line: sexuality should not be treated as a comedy gag, especially since beyond non-heteronormative sexual orientation there is a history of oppression.

That is the reason why *Our Flag Means Death* is an example of how a series must deal with representation. The main characters engage in a male loving relationship within a series that is branded as sheer comedy, yet their sexual orientation was never the joke. On the contrary, it was a celebration of joy and proof that the writers have gone through a previous discussion on the effects of this representation on the audience, as I will discuss throughout the present project. Basically, studying their target audience was part of the technical process behind the whole production.

Even though I do not intend to focus on comparative literature methods, this dissertation needs an audio-visual approach, and comparative literature is the origin for thematic audio-visual analysis. As Brooks, Chow et al agree, there is not a definite method for comparative theory, since it can be applied to many different areas and many different social contexts and cultures (8), which means any audio-visual analysis must include an approach to the historical and sociological context. According to the authors:

> It appears today that contextualization has become the watchword of the most influential approaches to literature. History, culture, politics, location, gender, sexual orientation, class, race – a reading in the new mode has to try to take as many of these factors as possible into account. The trick is to do so without … suggesting that a literary work can be explained as an unmediated reflection of these factors. The slipperiness of the evidentiary status of anecdotes in much new historicist writing testifies to the difficulty of successfully performing this trick of contextualising without reifying. (8)

In my view, as well as in Brooks, Chow et al.'s opinion, "literature is no more or less deceptive than other forms of cultural knowledge" (15), which allows the field not only to expand towards tv series as I intend to explain, but also towards art, music, drama and much more. In fact, Brooks, Chow et al say that "the space of comparison today involves comparisons between artistic productions usually studied by different disciplines" (42). Remarkably, the authors also state that the space of comparison extends to "gender constructions defined as feminine and those defined as masculine, or between sexual orientations defined as straight and those defined as gay" (42). Surprisingly, this study was published in 1995, yet it proposes that the term "literature" might not be as contrived as people usually expect (42). That is why they comment that "a perfect example of decontextualization … can be found in the accession of non-literary text to literature. … The report proposes that the production of literature as an object of study can be compared to the production of music, philosophy, history, or laws as similar discursive systems" (70). And this is the reason why I have chosen to analyse a television series from a critical literary approach.

Regarding the technical approach of audiovisual analysis, Mittell agrees that the fandom phenomena —thus the sociological context needed for comparative literature in the audiovisual field— might be one of the most important tools for a series to last: "one of the chief reasons that complex television has become a mainstream trend is the broad availability of online fan sites to facilitate collective discussions and decoding practices among fans, so these sites can provide research resources for accessing and understanding consumption practices among a program's dedicated and engaged viewership" (16). Stemming from his work, my purpose is to highlight his proposal grounded on the idea that fan activity influences audiovisual narration. Besides, for Mittell, there are three modifiers of any TV production:

1) We cannot isolate a text from its historical contexts of production and consumption;
2) We cannot treat a text as bounded (a television program is suffused within and constituted by an intertextual web that pushes textual boundaries outward);

3) Narrative content is consumed by a wide range of practices, sequences, fragments, moments, choices, and repetitions. // In media scholars' terms: "convergence", "overflow", "paratextuality", "televisual moments" (19).

In other words, the script text is never enough to analyse serial narration. Thus, devices such as colour codes, music, acting choices or how time is presented in the narration will also be part of my analysis. Furthermore, Mittel constantly mentions the importance of fan response to build a serial narration, which is the main focus of this dissertation. Although my interest is on the first two points because I am going to explore social issues and the reception of the series, their complexity cannot be addressed without looking at the third point.

Moreover, in Mittell's words, "narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration — not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance (…) a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode" (27). As Mittell explains, "most classically episodic programs are ambiguous on this front, simply choosing to ignore previous events rather than explicitly to deny their existence" (31). This series, however, requires that the different episodes are acknowledged as parts of a whole. Therefore, it sets the structure of *Our Flag Means Death*: it is not an episodic continuum of separate story lines, but a comprehensive plot line that has no resolution until the end. This is the difference in episodic narration: series such as *The XFiles* or *The Simpsons* rely on separate stories to build up the season, whereas nowadays the tendency is to release the opposite content, that is, a long complex story resolved in episodic form. Therefore, my intention is to take advantage of the serial narration to explore the main relationship —that is, Edward and Stede's — presented on the show. However, minor plotlines that take place only in specific episodes are going to be commented as well, since they impact the main storyline.

2. Marketing, content and social impact in *Our Flag Means Death*

2.1 The Branding of the series

The focus of this opening section of the analysis will be set upon the series' marketing. Thus, I will introduce *Our Flag Means Death* from the perspective of its historical context. Afterwards, I will compare it with that one presented in the trailers and sneak peeks, which rely mainly on comedy as a brand. Finally, I will discuss the content that the branding of the series did not display and is, above all, the main value of the show: the queer content. This last part will serve as an introduction for the following section, where I intend to deep into queer theory to prove the importance of its representation in the media.

First of all, it is crucial to highlight that any research on the golden age of piracy comes from one single book: *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates, from Their First Rise and Settlement in the Island of Providence, to the Present Time.* It was written in 1724 by Captain Charles Johnson, generally considered a pseudonym for Daniel Defoe. Although it is possible to contrast different documented records and laws from that time, having this only book as a tangible reference raises many questions about the veracity of the described events. In fact, Captain Charles Johnson acts as a character in the book, engaging in conversations with those most notorious pirates. However, I believe this lack of thorough research in the history of piracy is the origin of many stories included in books, films, series and video-games. In my opinion, it is imagination fuelling more imagination, which is at the heart of any creative activity. Therefore, playing with stories deriving from real characters such as Stede Bonnet or Blackbeard as *Our Flag Means Death* does, in my opinion, could never counteract the source material, since it is open to interpretation.

On the one hand, Blackbeard is described in this book as a wicked person of the most extraordinary gallantry, yet full of anger and quite deadly, but also passionate… and even as the Devil Incarnate (Johnson 68-9). However, Blackbeard's story lacks foundation for this depiction: Defoe/Johnson later adds that he dedicated

his most crucial years to look for medicines to cure the inhabitants of the republic of pyrates, because Nassau was under the plague (69). Since the three main empires that started the War of Succession had forgotten about the islands, Edward Thatch, alias Blackbeard, used his time to heal instead of killing, as one might have imagined. Besides, his fearful persona might have also been an hyperbole, since Defoe/Johnson described his Blackbeard alter-ego as a Greek or Roman character for his theatrical features, typically enhanced with smoke, lights and mirrors to project the image of the Devil (67-69).

On the other hand, Stede Bonnet is described in this book as a "gentleman of good reputation in the island of Barbados, master of a plentiful fortune and had the advantage of a liberal education" (71). He paid salaries to his crew and treated them in equal terms (72). Although it is said that he had no notion of sailing at all, Stede Bonnet was found guilty of taking thirteen vessels (82), probably under Blackbeard's wings (68). He benefited from the *Act of Grace* (82), a law that permitted *pyrates* to fight for King George in exchange of a pardon from *pyracy*. In my opinion, his story leaves too much room for imagination. The idea of him becoming a pirate just for fun (72) and then crossing roads with a legend such as Blackbeard feels as if a creative writing teacher proposed a game to the whole world. As I am going to discuss later, unresolved stories or lost records from this era are material for the artists that need to fill in the gaps.

Therefore, having both depictions as counterparts and, yet, having both characters share a common path together, does wonders to creators. It's not a surprise that David Jenkins, script writer for *Our Flag Means Death*, decided to bind these men together, even though academics have tended to interpret it differently. For instance, Frohock believes that Bonnet's sudden turn to piracy was the result of a mind disorder triggered by some discomforts of his married state, but insists that the only real reason to turn to piracy is running away from an abusive environment that many times occured at work —many hours, no rest, no payments or even violence as a torture tool to force the workers— (470). In my opinion, Bonnet does not fit in the original story, but neither does Blackbeard because his scary appearance or his "willingness to

empower himself over and at the expense of his fellows" (472) cannot cover his acts upon saving Nassau or integrating a multicultural crew after punishing slave traders (468). For me, using the "auteur" characters for a new story is the best move. What is truly surprising regarding the media we consume is that David Jenkins actually built a romance between both, but never intended to sell it that way.

Indeed, the advertisement of the series rests upon comedy. As Taika Waititi, the main director of the series said, "the snobbery of filmmaking is this ludicrous idea that comedy isn't art or that comedy can't change the world… that you basically have to depress an audience in order for it to be meaningful" (Usa Today, 2019). This idea resonates throughout the series and is the first sneak peek presented to a potential audience. First of all, viewers can gather from the trailer the general idea that Blackbeard is going to teach Stede Bonnet how to be a real pirate (1:08). Indeed, it feels necessary to give Stede Bonnet some pirate classes, because the trailer shows images of him falling out of his bed or being incapable of using the stairs to get off his vessel and plunder a small rowboat, whereas a voice over says "rumour is you upended your entirely comfortable life to become a pirate" (0:35). The mere idea of a clumsy middle-aged man deciding to change his life to one of the deadliest professions ever is comedy at its peak. However, it is as well the only meaningful message that the audience receives from the very beginning: this series is about reinventing yourself.

However, this reinvention does not need to be epic or impossible. All characters in the story seem to be proud of their inner selves even though circumstances might change. For example, Stede Bonnet wants to be a pirate, yet in the trailer we see him looting a library and "replacing the loot with the books he'd already read" (1:15). Besides, Blackbeard does not bother to live up to expectations, since we see him jumping out some stairs and failing spectacularly because he limps on one knee (0:57). As Stede said "a lot of the guys are sweethearts deep down" and even Blackbeard puts his mask down to share some sweet tea with his friend (1:50). Viewing all these images allowed HBO to sell the audience a story merely about having fun, whereas it is also an adventure about looking for their real identity, their real selves. In my opinion, that is a wonderful plot in itself. Indeed, after going through traumatic events brought by

the covid, viewers are looking for a source of laughter with which they can evade their struggles. Plus, these strange times have left a mark on people, and I believe it might serve all of us to share the common goal of changing the way we live. All in all, the trailer works. Yet, it does not explain the deep meaningful messages that this story engulfs.

As Mourits states, "the plot of the campaign is the brand; the plot of the book comes afterwards and is mostly irrelevant for marketing efforts" (360). This is what happened to *Our Flag Means Death,* because the light comedy that was sold to the audience is nothing compared with the actual plot: two middle-aged men find themselves in love. It strikes me to think that I had never expected to find a love story in which the main characters were not teenagers, not even that there would be a queer side that would not function as money maker, as some productions nowadays might search for. As Fernández-Menéndez suggests, to address this type of media —which it is tagged as "counter-reading"— it is necessary to have the basis of traditional reading (360). It seems as if the author is proposing to use prior narrative media that has been accepted broadly by the critics over the years. Nevertheless, I disagree with the argument, because having for instance a "classic film" to compare with *Our Flag Means Death* will reformulate our original opinion. In short, an oblivious —to the queer representation— trailer and no similarities with other series is what contributes to the positive reception of the show.

To explain this idea further, imagine that you need to teach at a college level classroom the basics and consequences of dystopian literature. It is easy to turn to *1984* by George Orwell to then approach modern dystopian stories such as *Divergent*. In other words, you can go back to past periods in literature to explain the characteristics of this genre. However, having these characteristics in mind before consuming that new literature such as the mentioned *Divergent* or any recent dystopian literature already breaks your expectations, which is equivalent to just reading secondary sources before approaching the primary source of your academic essay. That is why low budget or indie films are sometimes appreciated as priceless, because their primal audience would not expect any marvel-blockbuster paraphernalia. As Hutcheon and

O'Flynn argue, "If we know the prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly. When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship with prior works. … This is why adaptation studies are so often comparative studies" (6).

However, I do not wish to take a comparative path for this analysis, because to me it goes one step further than that. For me, experiencing *Our Flag Means Death* for the first time, not being influenced by press or social media, is indeed the real value of this work. The identification process that comes out of the series is not tainted by any marketing campaign that uses queerness or representation of people of colour (POC from now on) from the very beginning. In fact, it is the most genuine identification that a creative work of these characteristics can offer, because it has not been designed that way. It simply appears, just as love does, like Mary Bonnet says at the end of the show. It is simple and it works. In fact, how the process of identification functions in the show constitutes the following section of this analysis.

2. 2 Queer representation

This section is dedicated to the LGBTQ+ representation of *Our Flag Means Death*. To display a full picture of the many different aspects covered in the show, I will start by explaining how toxic masculinity is addressed throughout the plot. Then, I will analyse the main romance between Edward — also Ed or Blackbeard— and Stede, following their character arcs and how they both fight against toxic masculinity in their search for love. Finally, I will address other pivotal elements of the show, such as featuring non binary characters and introducing a racially and sexually diverse crew. With this, I intend to prove that "almost everything that would be called queer theory is about ways in which texts —either literature, mass culture or language— shape sexuality" (Warner 19, qtd in Cuklanz & Erol 212). In other words, the purpose of this section is to acknowledge the fact that all the elements of the show have the same chance to provoke a social change, because it makes an impact on the audience, which I will further develop in the next section.

First of all, Stede Bonnet is the opposite depiction of toxic masculinity. Starting in his early youth, he was a kid who liked to pick up flowers and could not stand animal death. In fact, he often remembers his trauma: watching his father dismembering a sheep, with blood staining his face, when he was just a little boy. His father triggers his awakening process, because that was "what a man's job looks like" (Pilot[4] 12:56). This moment resonates in Stede's mind every time they are going to raid a real vessel (Pilot 12:05) or he gets in trouble, because he knows it is going to be bloody and he is scared of blood. In that childhood event, his father called him a "weak-hearted, soft-handed, lily-livered, little rich boy. That's all you'll ever be, Stede Bonnet" (Pilot 13:13), which is how his peers also used to mock him. In fact, his schoolmates once tied him up to a boat and forced him to row while they threw stones at him (Pilot 19:30), which caused an emotional trauma that later defined his adult persona.

[4] From this point onwards, the tittles of the episodes I am analysing will be referenced in the following way: (Tittle of the episode minute:second). I will not use quotation marks nor the number of the episodes, since I believe the titles provide more meaning to the purpose of this dissertation.Please, note that "pilot" is how the first episode of any series is referenced, this is the actual tittle of the first episode of *Our Flag Means Death*.

Even though it is not morally correct to stereotype a person or a character, Stede Bonnet follows the usual queer coding in media, being soft and sensitive. However, he presents a huge change: he is not a secondary character that would probably get killed soon, he is the main protagonist and a pirate captain. In fact, he even proposes a challenge: "Traditionally, pirating is a culture of abuse, floogins, keelhaulers, and my thought is 'why?' and also, 'what if it weren't like that?'" (Pilot 3:37). This is the reason why his queer coding actually works; he initiates the question, faces the problem and becomes the solution. As Cuklanz & Erol state, "queering happens when … those who are not supposed to have a voice end up occupying the center stage" (218). In short, he is not just a comedy relief as he might have been treated in previous stories that featured gay characters, but rather this character sets up a challenge to social constructs from the beginning of his journey.

Due to this queer coding, Stede Bonnet can show kindness, worry or be thoughtful and still be a male character. Indeed, this idea is presented at the opening scene for the pilot episode —, which stands as a crucial moment to define the show's goals. As Mittell states, "The beginning of a narrative is an essential moment, establishing much of what will follow, including whether any given consumer is motivated to keep consuming. If we want to understand contemporary serial television storytelling, we need to account for how programs begin (62). For example, Stede's first interaction with the crew, saying: "What we are about to do will be perilous, very perilous! Some of us won't be coming back, others may be wounded, still others may come back looking totally fine but in reality, be mentally devastated by what they've witnessed. So, if that's the case, what do we do? … Not bottling up, that is the worst you can do; we talk it through as a crew" (Pilot, 1:08-2:00). From my point of view, this is the representation of a real male adult, or just an adult, if I might say. In fact, he acts as a caretaker for his crew, ensuring all ideas are represented when he decides to lift all the different flags the crew made (Pilot 29:43) or when he acknowledges that his goal is to help the crew grow as people (Pilot 7:13). This is someone who understands alcoholism is not a solution as some "tough bosses or negligent fathers" might have thought in the past, but who rather talks with their friends and family to find support. He even weeps in public when he is scared and his helm's master does not judge (Pilot 16:23).

Nonetheless, his ability to shed tears in front of people is only shown when Stede is with his friends. Back in his old life, Mary, his wife, tells Stede she has heard him crying, but Stede sweeps off the conversation (Pilot 10:55). He doesn't want to look weak in front of her, whereas he allows himself to cry in front of his crew. More examples of his openness can be seen in those moments when he is telling stories at night to help his crew to sleep: he does the voices and makes sure everyone is comfortable and having a good night rest, which is later used by the crew as an reason to protect their captain even though he was useless at piracy (Pilot 10:46), something that again proves that Stede's strength is based on his sharing his sensitivities in exchange for support. One of the stories Stede reads to the crew is Pinocchio and his journey to become "a real boy" (Pilot 28:34). This tale is a reflection of Stede's own journey.

In that scene, the series draws a comparison to Stede by stating that he has felt as Pinocchio: a puppet used by everybody instead of a real person with a real identity. However, he ends reading Pinocchio's story right after "accidentally" murdering general Badminton, an English naval officer that, when he was a kid, tormented Stede's until his last day of school. This action leads him to explore the darkest sides of his mind as well as gain respect for being "a real person", because he does what is expected of his gender: he kills to prove dominance, even though it is not in his nature to behave that way. Nonetheless, as the story develops, he will realise that he will have his own identity —he will become a real person like Pinocchio— the moment he understands that his mannerisms —picking flowers, reading tales, talking about feelings, etc.—, make him strong, and that he is accepted for who he really is.

In opposition, Blackbeard is a man forced to represent the stereotypes of his given gender, reinforcing toxic masculinity: he has to be strong, ruthless and scary. This is the man who turns into alcohol when things get out of hand, this is the man who might have everyone's respect, but no shoulder to cry on, because that will be interpreted as "weak". However, his figure is again a product of what others see in him. One might argue that all Blackbeard can be is, in Franssen's words, "just marketing" (132), or that his iconography is just a narrative. If we analyse how he created the story of Blackbeard, properly implying that he is selling a specific image

of himself to the world—, then it could be a possibility of interpreting his branding is, as Franssen states, "driven by a negative moment or, in terms of literary theory, by a deconstructive impulse" (132). Maybe, he created the story of Blackbeard to protect himself against colonialism, thus, his character arc will drive in Stede's opposite direction: he will need to show his emotions and his love for artistic ideas. In addition, Franssen also points out that "the idea that artists, too, can be thought of as brands has already been pursued by several marketing scholars —Schroeder, O'Reilly, or Clayton, among others—" (135).

Indeed, Blackbeard's brand becomes the central problem to his bearer. When Stede asks him whether he works for Blackbeard, he hesitates and does not really answer. At this moment, the audience understands that he really works for Blackbeard, but only because that is an alter ego of his true self. Then, he introduces himself as just "Ed" (Discomfort in a Married State 13:42), because that is who he really wants to be. Afterwards, he asks Stede if he has ever felt "trapped, like you are just treading water" (Discomfort in a Married State 18:40), because he is looking for what Stede has: someone to talk to. Thus, Ed complains about not needing to try anymore. It seems people only need to see his flag to freak out, so he does not even need to be on board (Discomfort in a Married State 19:00). In other words, he wants to start over, as Stede is doing right now, whereas Stede wishes to be at the point Blackbeard is.

Besides, when Ed says, "there is no chaos, there is no drama, there is no fucking life" (Discomfort in a Married State 19:00), he is in fact stating that he is ready to change his life. As Franssen agrees, "The branding of an author … has to be valued as an emergent process, entailing … spontaneous change and the addition of new texts and images by others" (135). The spontaneous change Ed is after goes by the name of Stede Bonnet. After meeting him, Ed allows himself to enjoy the new fabrics he is discovering on the captain's quarters, even rubbing them on his cheeks as a little kid would do with his favourite Teddy. This makes Stede happy, because, from all the pirates he knows, none of them have ever shared their love for "fine things", as he calls them. Therefore, he also opens in front of Ed and shows him his secret wardrobe, full of many different outfits. (Discomfort in a Married State 15:01).

At this point, both men are drawn to each other, thus sealing their fates. Nevertheless, the two have yet to kill their old brands, “baby Bonnet” and “Blackbeard”. Hence, Blackbeard suggests killing the “Blackbeard brand” by way of putting his clothes on a corpse that no one would ever identify. The camera points at Stede, suggesting that the target might also be him, to add some tension to the plot (Discomfort in a Married State 30:54). However, this is quickly resolved since Ed is deeply in love with Stede, but the idea reappears when Stede needs to kill his “Bonnet’s brand”. All in all, their respective "brands" are difficult to eliminate, but aiming to let "baby Bonnet" and "Blackbeard" go is also a goal that will define their romance.

It is interesting to highlight here Lackey’s opinion, who says that, “to give the character too much personality, individuality, or autonomy would undermine the figure’s function: to symbolise a larger representative reality from the past such as a nation or age” (101-2). This is where I draw the line between academic research and creative writing. Even though Lackey studies biofiction, it surprised me how there is no mention to individuality. In my opinion, this is what truly defines reality from the past. Besides, giving a character too much personality or autonomy allows the reader or the audience to establish a comparison between their reality and the fictional reality presented in the narrative.

To explain this idea further: I understand that if a character is so autonomous, that means it goes against the established rules of society, that is, the character goes against "the norm". It feels different, thus it is quite logical to state that this character does not symbolise a larger representation from the past. However, if a character is not given enough individuality, how can the readers or the audience establish a connection between them and the story? The process of identification is thus lost. With that, the story also loses the opportunity to point out the mistakes from the past, or the differences or similarities between nations or ages. Stories need complex characters. Blackbeard and Stede’s complexity relies upon trauma and how they are supposed to heal from it. To that, the series proposes a happy-ending solution: to admit they love each other. As Cuklanz & Erol agree, sexual identity or orientation had nothing to do with normativity. Rather “it was an indication of aligning with the

imposed normativity, which furthered the interests of state structures and, ultimately, social practices that benefited from distinctions such as normal/abnormal. Being queer, in this sense, meant to take an anti-normative stance" (216).

Therefore, the series continues its narrative by exploring Edward and Stede's romance. There are three main aspects of their journey that would define their new identities: how both protected each other from the dangers of their respective worlds —upper class vs piracy—, Edward's love confession and, finally, even how the chromatic scheme of the series follows their story as a metaphor for their different points of divergence. Those aspects are central to the series' narrative discourse. As Mittell explains, "a television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time", and his research intends to highlight "the distinction between the fictional story and its telling via narrative discourse" (19), which is the approach I am also going to follow to explain the pivotal elements of Edward and Stede's romance.

Indeed, their romance proposes a narrative complexity that redefines the series as a whole. In Mittell's words, "narrative complexity *redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration* – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance (…), all in all, a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode" (27). This is how Ed and Stede's romance increases tension and drives the plot. It commences right the night before Stede's wedding with Mary, when he says "I just… I thought that when I did marry, it could be for love" to what his father's response is "peasants marry for love" (Disconfort in a Married state 0:20). In my opinion, Stede's individual desires are based on fighting against the normative view of marriage as a contract. However, this also drifts him from the norm and, thus, from society. That is why in their first portrayal together, Stede only touches her shoulders with his fingers, and only where there is fabric (Disconfort in a Married State 0:40), pointing as well that he might be, in fact, homosexual.

In this series, homosexuality is considered a liberation or, rather, Stede's possibility to enjoy a long, healthy life. This is presented with a metaphor: after the pastor married Mary and Stede, he also condemned them to be, within said metaphor, a lighthouse: "a wilding light that guides and you shall be that for each other, for eternity", and they were later gifted a pair of tombstones, stating that the purpose of their union is to stay together until death parts them (Discomfort in a Married State 0:55). Indeed, even the episode's title is a hint of what is happening in Stede's heart. The only moments of happiness he shares with his family are when his kids are playing pirates with him (Discomfort in a Married State 2:00). However, I doubt his kids are doing it because they want to but, rather, they are playing because that is the only moment when they can see their dad happy, since he can be himself.

Moreover, death appears as a warning call for the characters and the audience. Indeed, Stede faces death upon being stabbed by a Spanish officer. He survives, yet he is badly wounded and rests on the captain's quarters. Stede has nightmares but, this time, Blackbeard is with him. These are hints about their romance that the audience will not catch if they have experienced *queerbaiting* before. Those moments start to appear right through their first scene together since, even when Stede is asleep, Blackbeard could not separate from his side. Besides, he even put up a ponytail to meet this "fascinating character" whereas before he had messy hair and did not bother to fix it up (Discomfort in a Married State 9:35). What is more, they slept together on the keel where they did the lighthouse drill to confuse the Spaniards and save the crew. Even Stede wakes Ed up with some tea, toast and marmalade. Thus, Ed's eyes glow in admiration and, surprisingly for an audience that is used to *queerbait*, love (Disconfort in a Married State 29:00). As I mentioned throughout the essay, most of the audience of this show might had experienced *queerbaiting* before, thus the first reaction might have been just to think that all those love hints were actually just cute scenes. In fact, if part of the audience is keen to consume what Taika Waititi produces, it is possible to think that those cute scenes were improvised, as he likes to do. However, everything is tied up, because Ed quickly confesses that "this was the most fun [he] had at sea in ages" [sic] (Discomfort in a Married State 29:37), which will be repeated closely at the end when it is confirmed that their relationship is real.

Moreover, Stede and Ed decided to attend a high-class party to allow Ed to practise being an upper-class man and eventually have some fun. Nevertheless, Stede kindly assures that they could go back to the ship at any moment Ed feels overwhelmed (The Best Revenge is Dressing Well 8:50). However, the rich people bully Ed for not being able to eat properly. Then, Edward goes to tell Stede what they did to him (The Best Revenge is Dressing Well 18:25). Thus, Stede looks for advice: he decides to talk with the servants and slaves on the ship, because they know every secret from the upper class. That is what Stede uses to mess up with their minds, so the upper-class sailors lose control and set their own vessel on fire (The Best Revenge is Dressing Well 23:57). In my opinion, this move is Stede's equivalent to the "if they hurt you in any way, I will kill them" catchphrase that stereotypical male characters tend to use, which only represents an overprotective behaviour from one member of the couple towards the other.

Furthermore, the audience is not given any clue to foresee the obvious romance when Ed teaches Stede a more advanced trick in sword fighting: how to get stabbed and survive. In other words, the images present two men using a large phallic instrument to penetrate each other. There is no subtext in the metaphor: this is the equivalent of having sex. In addition, the script insists on the lack of subtext within the scene by introducing Izzy —Blackbeard's quartermaster—, who was spying on Stede and Ed. At this moment, Izzy has no visualisation of the scene, all he can trust is whatever he can hear. Blackbeard is obviously in pain after having been stabbed, and produces a whimpering sound. This sound is imitated by Stede, who is scared and surprised by what he has just done. However, Izzy cannot see the sword or the wound. He can only hear the sounds, which are quite similar to moaning, resembling those coming from the sexual act (The Art of Fuckery 1:00).

As far as I am concerned, this scene can be interpreted in two if not three different ways: first, that Ed is ready for the next step in their relationship and desires physical intimacy. Second, that Izzy is aware that the relationship between both men has already evolved, since, from his perspective, that physical act of intimacy already happened. Finally, the scene also presents Stede as being oblivious to the development of his own relationship with Edward. This can be seen in his expressions and

movements: Stede only sees the first layer of that scene, that is, two friends practising sword fighting. From my point of view, in this scene, Stede also seems to be metaphor for how the audience will take the series in its first watch, before it was labelled queer. If the audience is used to consume content that never specifies queer representation —as it occurs in all the shows I presented in the State of the Art section—, the logical reaction to any new content is expecting the same lack of representation, or even the same mockery from the script writers and producers. Thus, the audience did not saw more than a funny swordfighting scene. Similarly, Stede has also been taught to think like this. From his point of view, queerness is not possible: the society where he is from only accepts a couple if it is formed by a man and a woman. Everything that defined him —his sensibilities, his interests, his kindness— was an excuse for his peers to mock him. Accordingly, his sexuality is another aspect of his definition, and it was something he was forced to hide or, more precisely, the opportunity to come to terms with the part of himself that was hidden

If one did not realise that the characters were absolutely in love, which they proved in every scene, chapter seven should have settled all in. In this story, Stede has found a treasure map and is eager to go on an adventure with Ed. Strangely, he is the voice of reason, since treasure maps are not that real in the pirate world —as I showed in the Historical Context section, with the raid to *Nossa* vessel—, but goes on that field trip with Stede anyway because he is a supportive "friend" (This is Happening 5:34). They stop for lunch during the trip, with Lucius by their side. Then, they start an inoffensive conversation about opening a restaurant. Their body language is so obvious —longing eyes, leaning towards each other, touching their faces, giggling, etc. — that Lucius realises "this is happening", meaning that they indeed love each other (This is Happening 11:34).

However, when Calicó Jack, an old friend of Blackbeard, enters Stede's life, he experiments for the very first-time what jealousy feels like. First, it seems Blackbeard has more fun with Jack, and his anecdotes seem to be more interesting (We Gull Way Back 3:00). This breaks Stede's heart a bit, it reminds him of his childhood trauma: he has never been tough enough to even have friends. In other words, during his childhood, his peers and school mates did not want to befriend Stede because he

offered to pick some flowers instead of throwing some rocks, which was interpreted as a weakness or a flaw. Thus, losing Ed for another "baddie" like his old school bullies makes him do the impossible, such as gathering strength to mock Jack and even fight back. However, he is still a gentleman and later tries to befriend him but, regardless of his efforts, Blackbeard goes with Jack, thus falling into a trap. Apart from their obvious romance, even Jack asks what was going on between both men, that maybe they were "buggering each other" (We Gull Way Back 15:06). What was most surprising for me in that scene is the openness Jack showed, no matter how much he hated Stede. It was a normal inquiry and not what we are used to watch on TV.

The next events are presented as a breakup, with Stede unable to sleep, crying all night and spying Ed and Jack through the window (We Gull Way Back 24:50). Lucius sees that and decides to act, giving all his stuff back to Blackbeard and threatening him to never come back to Stede. Moreover, Stede finds it difficult to explain to the crew that they are not "co-captains" anymore, and insists that neither him nor Blackbeard would like them less or more than they did before, as if he was a parent explaining to their kids that "dad and dad" are going through a divorce (We Gull Way Back 28:14). In short, every single interaction between both men is every single love story ever told. Nonetheless, only one thing keeps them apart: it is not homophobia, at least not an externalised homophobia, but rather the result of their childhood traumas, which I am going to explain in the next paragraph.

According to Edward, "fear is the most powerful emotion, and if you turn your enemies' fear towards them, you will own them" (The Art of Fuckery 3:25). For Ed, his worst fear is the Kraken, who killed his father. However, the depiction of this sea creature complicates Edward's depiction. In Mittell's words "frequently, complex television plays with story and discourse time through episodic variations on the serialised routine – …, one of the most exciting pleasures of contemporary fictional television is when a series breaks from its intrinsic norms to offer a new take on its conventional storytelling mode" (37). In this case, *Our Flag Means Deat*h plays with time by interchanging images from the present storyline with different traumatic events from Edward and Stede's storylines.

In the case of Blackbeard/Edward, while the crew is doing their little "theatre of fear" —that is, the *art of fuckery* presented on the series or, in other words, a trick to confuse victims so the pirates do not need to recur to violence but rather use a psychological game to scare their victims— to a bunch of merchants, Stede adds the grand finale of the Kraken, not realising he is also freaking Ed out (The Art of Fuckery 16:45). Then, time travels backwards to let the audience see how Ed's "father" is hitting his mum. That is when the audience realises a painful truth: it was Edward, just a kid and not at all "the kraken", who killed his father (The Art of Fuckery 17:30). Consequently, Ed is curled up on the bathtub, at the verge of tears, when he confesses to Stede that he has not killed any other man since he killed his father.

Again, it is all shown through Ed's reflection in the mirrors (The Art of Fuckery 18:22). This is his true self: he does not want to kill, and of course he does not want to kill Stede. Therefore, Ed, crying, says that "he is not a good person" and that is the reason why he doesn't "have any friends". However, Stede assures him that he is his friend (The Art of Fuckery 19:15), and Edward, who is a character that craves for physical contact to express love, finally leans his head over Stede's hand to look for comfort (The Art of Fuckery 19:52). In other words, their relationship is firmly established: they trust each other, they are friends, but they do not show their affection as it is expected from them. They are intimate with each other, which was not socially acceptable in 1717. However, at sea, as pirates, they are free to be who they are.

It is obvious that their friendship has escalated quickly, because, when Edward realises Stede is in danger, he screams at Jack that he is his friend and goes back to save him, telling the crew to raise the white flag and surrender, because, he says, "better alive than death" (We Gull Way Back 30:32). Indeed, this is a pivotal moment in Edward's plotline: from wishing to be dead, now he sees Stede as his reason to live. As a result, Ed and Stede get arrested together. Since they are hand tied and Ed's love language is physical touch, he uses his foot to comfort Stede (We Gull Way Back 31:59), which, in my opinion, functions as a sign to comfort Stede, suggesting that he has everything under control and will not allow any harm towards his friend. Even though Stede is facing a death sentence for his crimes, seconds before firing, Blackbeard, already in tears and out of breath, calls upon the *Act of Grace*, which allows

Stede to live in exchange of fighting for King George, after the crew backs him up. Consequently, and since he has been found guilty of crimes against the crown as well, he would have to give up piracy too (Act of Grace 6:45). Although Edward decided upon his fate the moment he got arrested with Stede, this one still had to overcome his trauma. He might have killed "the Kraken" (Blackbeard) inside Edward's heart, but Edward was not able to grow "baby Bonnet" out of Stede's mind. For that reason, the show does not favours the ethos of romantic comedies, which engage with "love" as the solution for every problem; a matter that I will discuss further on.

This is the point of divergence for Stede Bonnet: in the naval academy, he discovers Mary has reported him dead. This event would revive his last trauma: abandoning his family (Act of Grace 13:10). This scene is the saddest of all, yet also the happiest and most important scene in the whole series: Stede is at the beach, reviving the trauma of leaving his family, right after discovering Blackbeard has shaved his beard and has neither a plan nor any intention to escape. Then, Ed approaches, and explains why he does not want to change his fate: he is with Stede now, the person with whom he had the "most fun in ages" [sic], and with whom he wants to do "what makes Ed happy", namely, Stede. Then, before Stede rambles about it, Ed kisses him (Act of Grace 16:00). It is indeed a clumsy kiss, because one man has been closeted his whole life and the other is quite scared of freaking Stede out with his freedom. Yet, it was beautiful for them, as it was the start of the promise of running away.

This promise is what Stede breaks, because his trauma was still there: Badminton's[5] brother kidnaps him to get revenge for the death of his brother, saying that he defiles beautiful things. Out of fear and sadness, Stede kills again, damaging his mind even more. That is the reason why he decides to go back to Barbados, to his old family (Act of Grace 22:17). Edward waits for him on the docks for a whole night until he realises Stede is long gone. Consequently, he allows anger to control his body once more, just like he did when he was only Blackbeard. However, Ed is able to use song writing as a coping mechanism, since that was the only resource he had to avoid becoming Blackbeard again (Wherever you go, There you are 7:45). Afterwards, Lucius suggests letting go, but Ed, who is still very insecure and dramatic, thinks he

[5] Reminder: General Badminton was Stede's first murder.

is suggesting to "curl up into a ball and die", something that he was ready to do for Stede before surrendering to the English navy. However, Lucius kindly says that it is not death, it's just life beginning again. Yet, for Edward, life just stops. It is only Stede who has the opportunity to move forward.

Back at his house, Stede ends up dining alone, imagining he is still with Ed, only to figure out Mary has an adventure with his art teacher (Wherever you go, There you are 8:41). Yet, which adventure is there for Stede? Is he just being cheated on… or has he done the same with his love for piracy, which was the excuse he used to abandon his family? To answer that question, Stede finds an old school mate at the bar. He says there is a rumour going on, that Stede was a pirate. The poor man thinks he is going to laugh at his expense but, rather, his old mate says he admires his bravery (Wherever you go, There you are 13:55). At this point, Stede's arc is closing: he is finally recognized for what he wants to be; there is no mockery involved, just sheer respect. During that conversation, Stede realises he has gathered all that bravery as a result of the time he has spent with Ed.

On the opposite side, when Ed says "feels nice to tidy up a little, I can't believe I was living like this" (Wherever you go, There you are 15:26), he is also showing the first signs of healing. In fact, this represents the detox process that might start to drive a person away from depression: you first get out of bed, then clean your bedroom or, in this case, the captain's quarters. That is why the scene is so sad for viewers, because later Izzy points out that he does not admire Ed, who is just pining for his boyfriend, but rather the icon that Blackbeard represented. Then, Ed goes backwards to his instincts and tries to scrape Izzy, only to reveal Blackbeard is still within himself (Wherever you go, There you are 16:20). Yet the idea or metaphor for Blackbeard lives inside two different people now. In other words, when Stede stumbles upon Mary's painting event, all drunk, to threaten Mary's boyfriend with a knife, he is mirroring Blacbeard's reactions to anger. His mind is able to stop in time, but not before remembering this is what Blackbeard would have done in that situation (17:44). This leads Mary to take action.

After Mary's clumsy attempt to murder Stede in his sleep, they finally sit down to have an adult conversation. Then, Stede asks Mary how does it feel to be in love, to which she answers that "it feels easy, it is just like breathing" (Wherever you go, There you are 20:16). Her lover, Dough, "understands [her] idiosyncrasies, finds some charming even, [they] expose each other to new things, new ideas, and [they] laugh a lot, just pass the time so well" (Wherever you go, There you are 20:30). Mary hopes Stede could find that (Wherever you go, There you are 20:45), and Stede, who has been thinking about Ed for the whole speech, realises he has indeed found that. Mary wonders what her name is, but Stede's response is "Ed" (Wherever you go, There you are 20:46) a man's name. However, she does not hesitate, she just smiles and hugs Stede, in full support. Thus, Stede decides to "kill himself", or rather, his "brand name" (Wherever you go, There you are 24:45), since a fake death with Mary's support will allow him to be fully free and go back to Ed's arms, with no trauma involved, nothing behind, just himself.

On the other hand, Ed is also remembering the time he has spent with Stede, not near the golden fireplace light with the company of a friend as Stede was, but back at sea, at night, all alone. This is the same exact setting where Ed and Stede almost kissed. At that moment, Ed was remembering his mother saying he would never be an upper-class man. Yet, he still keeps that red fabric that she gave him, which is a representation of his heart. Then, back on the ship and under the moonlight, Stede discovers the fabric and handles it so gently to put it on Ed's chest. Obviously, Stede is completely oblivious of what he just did, but Ed's facial expressions reveal it all: he has Ed's heart in his hands (The Best Revenge is Dressing Well 25:00).

Now, Edward is all alone and, instead of remembering the love of his mother, which was supposed to be the only love he had, he remembers Stede. The differences of the setting matter because, whereas Stede has someone who fully supports his emotions, Ed has none, neither wants to have one, since he throws Lucius, the one who knew about his feelings, to sea. He also throws his red silk fabric, a representation of his heart and the last lighter tone of his environment, and becomes Blackbeard again (Wherever you go, There you are 21:30). Thus, Blackbeard swears he is the kraken, and the audience can only see his reflection on his knife (Wherever you go, There you

are 22:19). Moreover, Blackbeard's flag is raised and finally complete, since it previously lacked the historical red heart (Wherever you go, There you are 32:27). However, Edward weeps after throwing all Stede's properties at sea, except for the lighthouse painting, which is a reminder to avoid lighthouses so he doesn't get crack up on the rocks (Wherever you go, There you are at 32:45). In other words, he believes that love is something to run away from, since it is the reason why he got his heart broken again. Even though it is a sad ending, this precise scene lets the audience know that "love" never truly disappears.

Finally, for the series to function as a whole, I will highlight its "minor events". In Mittell's words, "one key distinction is between major and minor events, or what Seymour Chatman calls 'kernels' and 'satellites'. The major kernels are central to the cause-and-effect chain of a plot, while minor satellites are inessential to the plot and thus could be omitted without impacting narrative comprehension; however, satellites provide texture, tone and character richness" (32). There are so many satellites to the plot, that considering them might take the series to a further level of inclusivity. For instance, Black Pete shows his speech impediment and no one of the crew responds to it, the conversation flows normally (Pilot 5:41); or, when "the legendary Blackbeard" is introduced, all gloomy and dark, the audience can clearly see he cripples on one knee (The Gentleman Pirate 24:18). Thus, disabilities are part of this realm, not a fundamental part that might be used as propaganda, they are just part of our stories and descriptions, as someone being blonde or someone being a theatre nerd. However, two minor satellites have the potential to become major kernels, since the reception has been clearly enthusiastic about them.

On the one hand, there is the importance of POC representation. Indeed, the crew is racially diverse, thus Badminton asks Stede why his crew is so "colourful" (Pilot 18:55). In what could be a passive-aggressive manner, Badminton is being derogatory, since the camera shows Frenchie and then Roach, who are partially from an indigenous culture used by the English as slaves. Plus, one Englishman says that the tea they were served was clearly made by savages. However, Frenchie and then Oluwande are represented as cleverer than the other character, since the author gave

them the chance to invent the first pyramid scheme (The Best Revenge is Dressing Well 17:39), fooling the rich just as *Herbalife* does nowadays.

Perhaps, one of the most shocking POC representations has to do with Blackbeard himself. In the scene I am analysing, the captain of the merchant vessel that Stede and Ed looted together before, is tied up on the floor when Stede is teaching Ed how to dine with the upper class. When Ed gets overwhelmed by the amount of information, the merchant says: "my apologies. Hadn't imagined we'd be hosting your kind" (The Best Revenge is Dressing Well 3:02). This sentence is absolutely crucial for the veiled racist criticism it shows. In fact, Taika Waititi, who plays Blackbeard, is Māori, which might explain why the audience interprets this scene as revenge against the colonisers.

Although the dates are not accurate —the first English explorer in New Zealand was James Cook and Blackbeard's story ended around thirty years before his trip—, English sailors on *Our Flag Means Death* refer to the Māori as "donkeys", as if the colonisation had already taken place in this storyline. This is exactly what the merchant says to Blackbeard, thus forcing him to go full rage. In my opinion, there are deeper implications than what meets the eye, for Edward's childhood trauma is not only killing his father, or having witnessed him abusing his mother, it is also the fact that his Mãori ascendance has chained him to not being worthy of beautiful things. Interestingly, the historical Blackbeard was, in fact, an English sailor, before becoming a pirate. This is another historical licence that is easy to forgive, because the emotional link from the actor enriches the impact of the scene.

On the other hand, the series dares to represent a non-binary character. In other words, a non-binary person does not follow any gender standards. They might be a male sometimes, a female others, or both or none all the time. This goes beyond representing sexuality, since it dives into gender identity as well, and indeed the series takes a step further. According to Cuklanz & Erol "Over time, theorists began expanding queer theory beyond the realm of sexuality to include gender as well as any advocacy, activism or theorizing about being in the world that takes a counter position to the normativity of a given context" (212). Hence, the audience discovers

that Jim the mute is not exactly a man (they were dressing up as one), nor a mute (Pilot 29:06).

Regarding gender, the series does not present Jim as a questionable character either. In fact, the Swede, part of Stede's crew, asks: "so this whole time you were a woman?"; to which Jim answers; "yeah… I guess… I don't know", but then the Swede gives more importance to not being a mute than to their gender (Discomfort in a Married State 8:57). Later, the crew discusses if they should still call Jim just "Jim" (Discomfort in a Married State 14:10). However, the conversation about "Jim" being a man's name lasts only a few seconds, because the crew later argues weather some of them could be Jim instead, or even if Jim is in fact a mermaid (Discomfort in a Married State 16:33). As far as I am concerned, the series is assuring the viewer that there should not be any struggle, or question, regarding who one really is. According to Bibins-Domingo, Capriotti et al. "When you ask a person their identity, I think instead of giving them boxes and labels to choose, the nicest option would be to put a line and let you write what you want about yourself" (2309). Thus, this is what Jim offers to the viewers: a blank space to fill with any identity they find suitable, in a space where no one questions it.

In addition (discomfort in a Married State 17:02), it is interesting to highlight how the crew approaches the myth of bad luck when sailors have a woman on deck. It is nothing sexual or religious as one might think, but actually the crew starts discussing that it is pure science because women have crystals in their bodies that attract demons. Thus, Jim finally proposes a solution to all that nonsense, which is still calling them Jim. They say that their "nose might be different" or that they "don't have a beard" and surprisingly related to the issue at hand (note the irony), they "can speak now" (Discomfort in a Married State 17:37). They asked if anyone had a problem with that, and the crew immediately said no, that they liked Jim already, and that everything made sense. This is what Biblins-Domingo et al. referred to when one of their collaborators said that "questions about identity are always vague if coming out of nowhere. … If someone just randomly asked to describe myself, I would just answer 'I'm kind'" (2311). All in all, the series is proposing that labels might be useful,

but that they do not define you: gender, sexuality, personality and love are fluid concepts.

To wrapt it all up, as Mittell points out,

> "Such events clearly matter to the ensemble of characters and change the status quo of the story-world, but the narrative questions they raise are only about future events: what repercussions will this event have within the continuing story? There is no real ambiguity about what happened, how it happened or even why it happened; thus we can call such events *narrative statements,* as they assert a story element without raising questions about the actual event beyond the ubiquitous `what next?´ " (33).

However, questions are raised beyond the narrative statements that Mittell presented, because these events, however minor they might seem, have changed the reception of the show, and have thus affected the queer community (as much as other minorities represented in the series), which is what I am going to explain in the following section.

2.3 Social Impact

The ability that this series has to be "accidentally great" wraps up its purpose and its future. As I argued before, it seems there were no intentions to sell the series for the LGBTQ+ audience, thus that is the reason it worked so well in that community. Indeed, this community is so used to "queerbait" that it seemed rather hopeless to have a romance they could look up to. Most of the queer couples I have seen represented in the media tend to either die first, or suddenly turn heterosexual, even though it goes against their nature. Although this story uses separation as a cliffhanger, it is not exactly a prior agreement but rather, again, an accident. Both men had traumas to heal from, which makes their love story even better, because it means that the series insists on the idea of loving yourself first. This crucial idea resonated in the viewership, who shaped the reception and consequences of *Our Flag Means Death*.

To explore the reception and implications that *Our Flag Means Death* has on the audience, I need to quote Mittell once again: "The Internet's ubiquity has enabled fans to embrace a 'collective intelligence' for information, interpretations, and discussions of complex narratives that invite participatory engagement" (43). This is what he later calls "forensic fandom" (59), which, for *Our Flag Means Death*, created theories, stated relationships and allowed the series to be the most watched one for ten weeks in a row, thus drawing attention not only to more viewership, but also to researchers who might be able to explain why the series became so relevant for society. In other words, as Fernández-Menéndez states, texts that might have been discarded by traditional systems, are now part of the literary reception as a result of the apparent lack of hierarchies at internet communications (355). Since she insists on following a multidisciplinary approach to study the effects of Internet in Literature (368), I have felt the need to to look at videogame's literature to explore emotionality and identification in the media as key to social change.

Hence, in *El impacto emocional en la localización de aventuras gráficas: el caso de Life is Strange* (2022), Gonzalo-Caparrós insists that the translator —and, from my point of view, the author too— must bear in mind the emotional world of the target audience. Even though Gonzalo-Caparrós's research is closed to graphic texts, I need to

highlight the main topic of this research, for it concurs with mine. In my opinion, any creative work must be built upon the emotion that needs to be fulfilled by its reception. Specifically, the narrative of *Our Flag Means Death* is built upon a plethora of emotions: from typical childhood pirate games from which to drift away, or middle-age depression to a homosexual romance aiming at an audience that needs something to identify with. Thus, that is exactly what happened, as it was expressed on twitter, a non-academic source I have used since the TV series I am analysing is too recent to have produced any research yet.

Amongst the viewers, some discovered they are non-binary (@blackbeardsbby may 3, 2022); others felt free to express themselves freely through colourful clothes, tattoos, or dying their heads and, of course, using the pronouns they see fit as a result of the series (@_Lilsi_ may 6, 2022). Moreover, the series even triggered seniors to get back into creative writing after years of no inspiration (@ImYourNanaNow may 3, 2022) and assured millennials that there is nothing wrong in not acting your age (@orangekateenergy may 7, 2022), since our likes and interests shouldn't be defined by a date. But, most importantly, it gave people the strength to come out of the closet, accept themselves and be proud of who they really are (@Ed_Loves_Stede april 25, 2022).

However, I doubt any creative agent of *Our Flag Means Death* expected this outcome. As Broitman asks, how much control does the author have over the process of identification between the characters and their readers? (45). In the case of *Our Flag Means Death,* creator David Jenkins is still shocked by how the audience responded to the series. He decided to tweet an image of Stede and Ed some days after the final episode was aired, with the caption "A lot of what we are taught about being a man is wrong " (@david_jenkins__ March 27, 2022), and turned viral in less than an hour. As far as I am concerned, he had no intention behind that tweet, he was only affirming his pride for the series he created, but the response to that comment, as well as the series, was immense. Thus, it occurred to me that he was never writing to a specific audience in mind but, rather, he just had a story to share.

As a final note, I believe that just sharing art for the sake of sharing art, the old *arts artia gratis*, is what made the series' final product suceed. There was no prior thinking about the reception of the show, thus the romance between Ed and Stede went with the flow of the events. It reminds me of what Mary, Stede's ex, said about the show: love feels easy, it feels like breathing, and this is what *Our Flag Means Death* accidentally proved. As Taika Waititi (executive producer, director of of the pilot episode and Blackbeard) tweeted, "I'm very proud of this romantic comedy we made. Very proud. It's not "bromantic", it's ROMANTIC. If you hate this show, don't worry, I still love you. And I hope you begin to understand the many layers that love can encompass. Love is love baby" (@taika waititi March 25, 2022).

Conclusions

To conclude, I would like to stress that this dissertation provides an analysis of queer representation in the series *Our Flag Means Death* (2022), created by David Jenkins and produced by HBO. The series reimagines the story of the pirate captains' Blackbeard and Stede Bonnet, proposing that their relationship develops into a love story. Even though this series was not branded as an advocacy for the LGBTQ+ community, it had a serious impact on its audience. Presenting a positive queer representation allowed the viewers to engage with the series and to find similarities between themselves and the characters, which resulted in actual coming out moments for the audience and many other different identity affirmations. This response proves that queer representation in fiction is important and must always be addressed as such.

These ideas can be summarised in three main points. First, that using LGBTQ+ representation as a profitable tool is an error from the point of view of this community. The series was sold without any hint of queer representation but it draws on LGBT characters, which resulted in an economical success that was not initially planned. Second, that queer representation specifically in this series is not parodic or caricaturesque, even though there was a potential risk to be a mockery for queerness since the series is categorised as comedy. This means that even from a comic point of view, inclusivity can be achieved. Third, that this series had such a great impact that it has changed lives. I think that is the purpose of fiction, and that is why, in the creative process, the first and most important liability is to the audience, not to how much money the series is going to make, or if the story would win any award. In other words, with the premise of thinking about the reception before finishing a creative project, any work of fiction can reach greatness.

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