# New Visions of Queer Teenage Subjectivity in *Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude*

## *Noves visions de la subjectivitat adolescent queer a Merlí i Merlí Sapere Aude*

**Antoni Maestre Brotons**
***Universitat d'Alacant***
**antoni.maestre@ua.es**
*ORCID: 0000-0002-1469-2947*

### Abstract

*Merlí* (2015–18) and its sequel *Merlí Sapere Aude* (2019–21) are teen television comedy dramas that cover usual topics of the genre —parental and school relationships, adolescent maternity, drugs, sexually transmitted disease, gender and sexuality issues— with an educational approach for family and school audiences. Pol, the main character in both series, queers the typical heterosexual male school leader of many Hollywood films and teen comedy dramas, developing the commonplace coming-out storyline of a gay or bisexual young man who assumes a homonormative and rather individualistic identity. Drawing on scholarship related to queer media representation, this article explores the narrative of adolescent queerness in the *Merlí* saga. Despite the idealized style of teenage romance narratives and educational television programming, *Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude* struggle to undermine the traditional conservative version of masculinity. Their engagement with identity politics is ambiguous and controversial, as they promote a generally homonormative gender script for millennial young men, thus discarding other understandings of queer masculinity as obsolete, femininized or marginal.

### Keywords

Catalan television; Teen TV; Queer; Homonormativity; Education

### Resum

*Merlí* (2015–18) i la seqüela *Merlí Sapere Aude* (2019–21) són comèdies dramàtiques de televisió que aborden temes habituals d'aquest gènere —les relacions amb els pares i els companys d'escola, la maternitat adolescent, les drogues, les malalties de transmissió sexual, qüestions sobre gènere i sexualitat— des d'una perspectiva educativa, pensant en un públic familiar i escolar. Pol, el protagonista de les dues sèries, subverteix la típica figura del líder masculí heterosexual de moltes pel·lícules de Hollywood i dramèdies adolescents, si bé alhora reprodueix l'argument prototípic de la sortida de l'armari d'un jove gai o bisexual que adopta una identitat homonormativa i més aviat individualista. Basant-se en els estudis sobre representacions queer en els mitjans de comunicació, aquest article explora la representació del desig i la identitat queer adolescent en la saga *Merlí*. Malgrat l'estil idealitzat de les històries romàntiques juvenils i la programació televisiva educativa, *Merlí* i *Merlí Sapere Aude* intenten debilitar la versió tradicional conservadora de la masculinitat. La relació que estableixen amb la política identitària és ambigua i controvertida, ja que a grans trets promouen un patró de gènere homonormatiu entre els joves mil·lennials que descarta altres models de masculinitat queer per obsolets, feminitzats o marginals.

**Mots clau**

Televisió catalana; televisió per a adolescents; queer; homonormativitat; educació

**Table of Contents**



## 1. Queerness, Education and Catalan Television

This article examines images of teen queerness in Catalan comedy drama *Merlí* (2015–18) and its spin-off *Merlí Sapere Aude* (2019–21). Both TV series can be placed in a broader context of legal advances in LGBT rights in Catalonia and Spain over the last twenty years —including the same-sex act and the transgender law, passed by the Spanish administration in 2005 and 2022 respectively— progress in gender equality and sexual diversity, social debates on the role of education as well as the cultural agenda of the Catalan mass media.

Media representations of queerness are usually questioned by queer criticism because they tend to normalize sexual and gender diversity according to identity policies known as honomormativity and homonationalism. Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them whilst promising the possibility of demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (2002, 179). On the other hand, by homonationalism, Jasbir K. Puar refers to the process whereby racial and sexual otherness is segregated and disqualified from the national imaginary (2007, 2). In general, the notion is conjured when LGBT rights are offered as evidence of national superiority *vis-à–vis* supposedly backward immigrants such as Muslims. Nevertheless, over time, the term has designated any policy that presents a positive image of a country as a modern nation that tolerates sexual diversity, especially through media (Kerrigan 2021, 48). It is in this regard —shaping Catalonia as a modern European nation— that we can discuss homonationalism in Catalan television as unrelated to anti-immigrant or anti-Muslim politics. Homonationalism and homonormativity not only shape bodies, affect, desire and intimacy, they also consolidate policies of visibility; in other words, what forms of queerness are acceptable and can be screened publicly. In essence, normative media representations render queer sexuality tolerable, normalized, assimilated and unremarkable so that they can be easily consumed by large-scale mass audiences.[1]

[1] Whilst television promote homonormative and homonationalist images, cinema —particularly auteur and indie films— has given room for other non-normative sexual subjects whose experiences question the dominant heterosexual frame. Camp films by Zaida Carmona (*La amiga de mi amiga*, 2022) and especially Marc Ferrer (*Nos parecía importante*, 2016; *La maldita primavera*, 2017; *Puta y amada*, 2018; *¡Corten!*, 2021); provide relevant examples of this alternative cinematic trend that coexist with mainstream TV representations. Self-representation, oversimplified plots, self-parody and shabby thespian skills are distinctive features of these movies.

I agree with Silvia Grassi that Catalan TV shows have a didactic purpose as part of the cultural agenda of the Catalan administration known as "normalització", which was developed in the 1980s and 1990s (2016, 197). Josep Anton Fernàndez broadly defines "normalització" as a "transformation of the Catalan cultural domain" in terms of cultural infrastructures, political control of cultural production, cultural commodification —as opposed to the former politically engaged literary work under Franco's regime— and the creation of a Catalan communicative space (2012, 84). The hegemonic narrative of normalization used concepts such as "reconstruction" or "regeneration," thus implying that Catalonia was already a (medieval) nation that had lost its sovereignty in the eighteenth century. As a consequence, the "normalització" agenda aimed at strengthening national identity and projecting the image of a modern nation through symbolic discourses as well as cultural and communication frameworks. In short, "normalització" implies conceiving Catalonia as an independent nation with its own national institutions, symbols and narratives. The communication guidelines of the Catalan broadcast corporation that were laid down by the Catalan administration in 2020 prescribe that "[e]l servei públic audiovisual contribueix a potenciar, actualitzar i enriquir la identitat nacional i cultural de Catalunya" (*Butlletí Oficial del Parlament de Catalunya*, 20 December 2020, Article III). This national/educational agenda has been developed in a wide and profuse range of home-produced programmes: soap operas, sitcoms, film adaptations of master Catalan literary works, dramas, comedies and teen series.

Hence, if Catalan TV shows have a didactic goal that is related to the 'normalizing' agenda, we should infer that LGBT characters are meant to shape a sexually diverse citizenship as befits a modern European country where individual and collective rights are safeguarded. In other words, the representation of queerness on Catalan television could be described as homonationalist, as mentioned above. On the other hand, the homonationalist depiction of characters entails a homonormative approach to homosexuality that, as Grassi explains (2016, 197), excludes those who do not comply with mainstream gender rules and have no monogamous relationships; in other words, those who do not conform to the values and rules of the hegemonic heterosexual majority. The goal is to gain social acceptance at the expense of non-binary identities or non-monogamous gay and lesbian couples, even though the 2014 Catalan LGBT law demanded the promotion of "plural" images of queer people on mass media.[2] These legal requirements, which were further specified in a code of practice by the Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya —the Catalan regulatory broadcasting authority— in 2017, also encouraged "normal" and "positive" representations; therefore, the analysis of the representation of queer characters in *Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude* must consider to what extent they are "plural", "normal," and "positive."

The educational aim that Grassi observes in Catalan television is, by and large, a general feature of the teen series genre. Stefania Marghitu defines teen or youth television as "a comedy or drama centered around adolescent characters with a focus on cultural milestones and rites of passages —from issues of finding the right romantic partner, rebelling against or conforming to adults rules, choosing a

[2] In a recent essay about LGBT on-screen images in the Iberian context, Alfredo Martínez identifies an extreme version of homonormativity that he calls hypernormativity. Although the distinction between both terms is not significant, hypernormativity is shored up by either right and left-wing parties, thus achieving a broad social and political consensus (Martínez 2021, 234).

career path, coming to terms to with one's parents, and establishing a secure identity" (2021, 3–4). In addition, she points out the role of teen shows in producing gender norms, which is a crucial idea considered within this article: "Teen TV is a gender factory, much like high school themselves, where the subject matter continually fixates on good and bad versions of masculinity and femininity" (Marghitu 2021, 3). The author's claim is consistent with Amy Villarejo's view according to which TV is a "technology of sexual becoming and erotic life" (2014, 7), thus underlining how it shapes identities as well as fostering forms of recognition and identification between spectators and programmes.

*Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude* are not the first television shows to introduce queer youngsters, although they have been by far the most successful over the last few years in Catalonia, Spain and abroad. *Merlí* was directed by Eduard Cortés (Barcelona, 1959) with a script by Hèctor Lozano (Barcelona, 1974). It aired between 2015 and 2018 on TV3 and consists of three seasons of thirteen episodes each, except for the last one, which has fourteen. La Sexta televised the first season dubbed into Spanish between April and July 2016 and Netflix broadcast it in the United States and Latin America. The story focuses on the day-to-day life of a group of teachers and students at the fictitious Àngel Guimerà secondary school in Barcelona. Every season corresponds to an academic year. The leading role of Merlí is performed by Francesc Orella, the charismatic philosophy teacher who tries to enhance critical thinking skills among the students, as well as helping them with their personal concerns. In this regard, the series vaguely resembles the iconic film *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989). As the story comes to an end in the third season, it begins to centre more on the emotional seesaws of Bruno —Merlí's son, performed by David Solans— and his classmate Pol, Merlí's favourite student, played by Carlos Cuevas. In the last episode, Merlí dies suddenly, and through a narrative flash forward, we discover that Bruno and Pol eventually get married a few years later in a cheerful party with their former schoolmates. *Merlí* has been one of the smash hits of TV3; the last chapter had an audience share of 22.2 per cent. The whole show has tens of millions of plays online (Anon., 2018).

On the other hand, the sequel *Merlí Sapere Aude* (2019–21) was created by the same scriptwriter, Hèctor Lozano and directed by Menna Fité. It premiered in December 2019 via streaming on Movistar Plus+, which co-produced the two seasons of the series alongside TV3. Through narrative analepsis, the action brings us back to Pol Rubio's first year at university —also played by Carlos Cuevas— where he reads philosophy at the University of Barcelona. He thus follows in the footsteps of his admired teacher, Merlí. Nevertheless, he finds a sort of female substitute for him: the ethics lecturer, María Bolaño, a role played by María Pujalte. Bruno stars in the first season of the spin-off only to keep narrative coherence with the original series, as he does not play a significant role and his relationship with Pol is at a standstill. Pol falls in love with other boys whilst at university: his wealthy classmate Rai from Barcelona upper side and the elder, handsome architect Àxel. *Merlí Sapere Aude* shares the main narrative characteristics with the original series: first, the educational purpose —the relevance given to philosophy through the key role of a lecturer and the academic discussions in class—; second, the everyday life and conflicts of the young characters, including their relationships with their parents and love affairs; third, Pol Rubio growing up as a bisexual young man.

Before the *Merlí* saga, TV3 aired other series featuring queer teenagers in secondary storylines: the long-standing soap opera *El cor de la ciutat* (2000–09)

included a love story between two boys, Max and Enric. Some years later, the drama-comedy *Després de tu* (2022) introduced another couple of gay male teenagers, Òscar and Àlex. Nevertheless, only recently another teen series, *Les de l'hoquei* (2019–2020), gave another example of queer adolescence. In this case, the predominantly female cast —possibly to counteract the criticism launched at *Merlí* for being focused on male characters— incorporated a couple of lesbian girls, Flor and Lorena, whose love affair was called "Florena" by the audience. Like most teen dramas, *Les de l'hoquei* is basically a coming-of-age story and, whereas *Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude* enhance collective bonds through school, in this case sport —hockey— is the powerful cohesive element. Recently, *Jo mai mai* (2024) approaches sexual identity among other typical teen issues such as sexual awakening, drugs and alcohol, the use of mobile phone or personal insecurities. Again, we find a "team": a group of teenagers living together in the kind of summer camp Catalan culture is so fond of precisely because they promote "team spirit" or collective bonds, just as hiking clubs have been doing since the nineteenth century. Catalan hiking and scouting are deeply rooted in nationalist culture and provide an opportunity to discover the nation through its historical, linguistic and natural heritage (Balcells 1999). Apart from these examples, other TV series, especially soap operas —ever since *Poble Nou* (1994) introduced the first non-heterosexual character of Catalan television history— have incorporated adult queer subplots: *Secrets de família* (1995), *Nissaga de poder* (1996–98) and *Cites* (2015–23). Finally, *Com si fos ahir* (2019) was a groundbreaking TV show that featured two older women living a love story.[3]

## 2. The Millennial Queer Teenager in *Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude*

*Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude* are youth ensemble dramas; as explained before, the storyline unfolds throughout both series —which form a full saga— in interwoven episodes and seasons. Each series follows a linear temporal pattern, although, if we regard them as a whole, the second part actually constitutes a flashback: it tells the story of Pol's university years, before he goes on to become a high school philosophy teacher and marry Bruno in the last episode of *Merlí*. Whilst the first part features a large number of characters, the second part focuses on Pol, his friends and boyfriends, his philosophy lecturer, his father, and Glòria, his father's partner. Both series adhere to the conventions of realism to narrate ordinary life at school, at home, or at work in Barcelona. Accordingly, they do not boast any formal innovation such as a unique *mise-en-scène*, iconography, time sequence, metafiction, intertextuality, soundtrack, visual tropes or narrative voice. Only *Merlí* presents an original structure by introducing a philosopher in each episode: after Merlí Bergeron's lesson, the philosophical theory at issue is illustrated through the personal problems of the characters. Thereby, the educational agenda of the story includes the attempt to retrieve the prestige of humanities in secondary school and university. Merlí, who calls his pupils "peripatètics" ("followers of Aristotle") is

[3] Perhaps *Smiley* (2022) could be added to this list, although it is not a Catalan production, but a Netflix show. It is a romantic comedy based on the huge theatre hit by Catalan playwright Guillem Clua (Barcelona, 1973) who has been also a scriptwriter of other TV3 series.

depicted as a fatherly, heroic mentor who leads the students down the path of life.[4] *Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude* clearly give weight to the teacher figure, apparently as a strategy to counteract the loss of prestige that this professional group has suffered over the last decades. In both series, instructors are sometimes even more important for students than parents. Critics like Joan Burdeus (2020b) or Pere Solà (2024), though, have underlined that this educational agenda in *Merlí* and other shows like *Benvinguts a la família* (2018), *Les de l'hoquei* (2019–20) and *Jo mai mai* (2024) has led to lack of originality and formal innovation. These shows try to emulate international, award-winning dramedies and sitcoms such as *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–20), *Shameless* (Showtime, 2011–21) and *Girls* (HBO, 2012–17), which are premised on new types of families, unconventional masculinities and femininities as well as non-heterosexual sexualities. Nonetheless, as Burdeus claims with reference to Catalan teen television, the acting feels feigned and the instructive storyline is all too apparent.

The relevance of *Merlí*, in particular, lies in the way it increasingly turns queer sexuality into the main subject matter, specifically regarding boys, as the seasons go on. *Merlí Sapere Aude* merely reiterates this primary concern. Hence, whilst it deals with usual topics in teen television, as noted before, both shows specifically address many gender and sexual concerns such as visibility and coming out, internalized homophobia, unconventional masculinity, transgender, family acceptance, bullying, same-sex desire or gender variance. Although TV3 was the first station in Spain to broadcast a series with a non-heteronormative character—Xavier in *Poblenou* (1994)—concerns over homophobia and bullying were absent in Catalan television until the first season of *Merlí* was released in 2015. In general, *Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude* are glaring examples of the coming-out narrative as part of a coming-of-age story. Especially in the second part of the saga, we see the personal transformation of the hunky but closeted teen Pol from the first part into the bisexual young man "Apolo". An emblem of male beauty and refinement, Apolo is the nickname—the owner of Nou Satanassa, the Barcelona gay nightclub where Pol is employed—gives to Pol. The name symbolizes his coming out into the queer world, a re-baptism and desertion of a previous heterosexual identity that has become a ritual for many queer subjects as well as a narrative cliché in queer fiction.

Nonetheless, a number of reviewers have agreed that, despite the visibility given to queerness in adolescence, *Merlí* was too male-centred and that it provided a stereotypical and even parodic portrayal of female and trans characters.[5] Whilst the show was still on air, Arnau (2015) described Merlí character as a sexist, arrogant, and manipulative middle-age man who is basically interested in women as sexual objects. In addition, his male students mimic the seductive behaviour of their teacher by embodying the romantic, old-fashioned archetype of Don Juan. On

[4] The series echoes current education policies that enhance the role of teachers, not as 'purveyors of knowledge', but rather as 'purveyors of values' or 'learning facilitators'. Another pedagogical principle is that abstract knowledge must be transformed into life-skills training. Consequently, students learn philosophy in order to deal with everyday concerns as a form of self-help therapy. Changes in the role of teachers, students, methodologies, contents and examinations have fuelled considerable controversy among teachers and the administration over the last twenty years.

[5] As noted before, this imbalanced representation was corrected when the female-orientated teen series *Les de l'hoquei* premiered in 2019. The series revolves around a women's hockey team. Like the other teen series aired by TV3, it serves an educational purpose by dealing with issues typically associated with young people, although the most interesting and obvious is female sport. However, the series was also questioned for its clichéd view of gender and other teenage conflicts (Burdeus 2020a).

the other hand, whilst boys are portrayed as handsome devils, their female counterparts usually get traumatized because of failed love affairs in the past. Likewise, women play a more prominent role in domestic and family settings, whilst they are made insignificant at secondary school, where, on top of that, there exist more male than female teachers.

The reason why the female characters are secondary is that both series try to undermine the dominant masculinity pattern—what R. W. Connell calls "hegemonic masculinity"— by providing other models of "alternative," "dissident," or "new" masculinities (2005, xviii). These "other" masculinities do not necessarily amount to gay, trans, or queer; they refer in general to what Eric Anderson terms "inclusive" masculinities, that is to say, men who accept their feminine side —sensitivity, affection, compassion, kindness— whether they are homosexual or not (2009, 9). The relevant contribution of the *Merlí* saga in this respect is the attempt to offer more diverse understandings of traditional masculinity, especially through the portrayal of male adolescents who have grown up in an era of greater acceptance of homosexuality. The educational, gender-based agendas have usually ignored certain kinds of masculinities resting on competitiveness and aggressiveness that are harmful for both men and women. Both teen shows seem to fill the gap by showing adolescents embodying "failed" masculinities because of their lack of virility —Ivan— or queer sexuality —Oliver, Bruno, Pol—. In the original series, Merlí obviously personifies the caring father and teacher who helps some students fight against toxic male gender scripts. Thanks to him, his son Bruno eventually comes out of the closet; Ivan overcomes his agoraphobia and Oliver, previously a victim of homophobia, is fully accepted by his male schoolmates. In contrast, María Bolaño, Merlí's counterpart in the sequel, needs help because of her addiction to alcohol. At the same time, she epitomizes the archetype of the philosophy teacher who is admired for her intelligence, sarcasm, unconventional habits, and critical thinking.

However, Pol stands out among all the students as the storyline unfolds through the three seasons. He is the double of his favourite teacher, whom he tries to emulate. Both embody the archetype of the arrogant seducer at different ages: Pol in his teens and Merlí in his fifties. The relevant contribution of *Merlí* in this regard is that it queers the traditional heterosexual male school leader of many teen shows. In American television, this role has usually been performed by the football team captain. Additionally, the role of Pol Rubio is also rooted in Catalan literary tradition, since he rather typifies the televisual version of Juan Marsé's Pijoaparte in his well-known novel *Últimas tardes con Teresa* (1966). Like Pijoaparte, Pol is *xarnego*: a handsome, Spanish-speaking, working-class young man; Pol, though, also seduces men. Just as Pijoaparte wins the heart of Teresa, a member of the Catalan bourgeoisie, Pol entices Bruno, who belongs to the educated Catalan middle class: his father, Merlí, teaches in secondary school, whilst his grandmother, Carmina, is a renowned theatre actress; theatre stands as a prestigious expression of highbrow culture in Catalonia. In *Merlí Sapere Aude*, he seduces Àxel, an attractive, older architect who is restoring the main hall of the University of Barcelona.

As noted earlier, the educational goal of both TV series, especially *Merlí*, is achieved through a story of homonormative male gay/bisexual teenagers. Homonormativity can be understood in two ways: on the one hand, as a strategy to avoid negative stereotypes about LGBT people as well as lurid topics to which queer subjectivity is often attached; on the other hand, the shows dramatize the tension

between sexual exploration and identity politics; in other words, at first, Pol keeps insisting that he just has casual sex, rejecting identity categories until he eventually comes out in the second part of the saga. Both Bruno and Pol go through a typical first phase of denial, refusing to be called gay or bisexual, as a result of internalized homophobia, rejection of identity politics, gender variance, or non-binarism. In episode seven of the second season of *Merlí* —dedicated to Judith Butler— Bruno argues with his out-of-the-closet classmate Oliver about gays being bound up with femininity, hypermasculinity and other stereotypes like the gay pride parade. Bruno holds that labels essentialize his identity: "No tinc només una identitat, no m'etiquetis," he claims. He particularly refuses to be associated with Quima, the trans English teacher, which lays bare his transphobia and ultimately his fear of being pointed at as a gay boy. In contrast, Oliver holds that the three of them are members of the same non-heterosexual community, whose rights have to be defended; he also stands for Quima's freedom to be a woman. Later on, in episode ten of the second season of *Merlí*, Bruno is confronted with his own ideas when Pol refuses to be his boyfriend by claiming, just as he had done with Oliver some time ago, that he does not want to be categorized: "No em posis etiquetes; a mi m'ha donat morbo liar-me amb tu, però no ho he fet amb cap altre tio, així que ja està. Ni gay encobert ni hòsties." He is lying, because he has also had an affair with a male workmate at the supermarket where he is employed.

The characters' turning down of identity markers could be understood from a different standpoint as an example of adolescent "raging hormones" or "sexual exploration." Here, the TV show plays with an ambiguous message about sexual politics. Pol's wish to be "label-free" or "anti-identity" is not the only example of sex as an individual choice or a matter of enjoying open relationships. In *Merlí*, Oksana, one of Pol's female classmates, kisses another girl, Berta, who confesses that it did not feel special to her; she just "likes to try new things." Oksana epitomizes the more "broad-minded" girl in the group and is a teen single mother. She boasts that she had sex with her whole class when she was fifteen. Despite having also had affairs with girls, she denies being bisexual and refuses any social and moral restriction to what she calls her sexual freedom. In consequence, like Pol, Oksana stands for "heteroflexibility," which is actually a euphemism for bisexuality; however, "heteroflexibility" might have been a reality for her in the past, since she currently goes out just with boys: Gerard and Joan. Bisexual relations, then, are conceived as a casual, same-sex, one-night stands. Like Oksana, Oti —Pol's female classmate at university in *Merlí Sapere Aude*— hooks up with him and later with an American girl, despite having a boyfriend from town. However, after graduating in the last episode, Oti ends up with his previous boyfriend, thus reinforcing the conservative approach to sex and romantic relationships that often leads to marriage and family. Both series, in consequence, use the commonplace cliché of bisexuality as just a random teenage sex adventure, failing to present it as a serious option. In sum, they convey an unclear message about identity politics. As noted before, whilst this refusal of identity categories may appear to express a conservative attitude towards queerness, it can also be interpreted as an example of the instability associated with character formation.

Like bisexuality, the representation of trans identities remains controversial in *Merlí*, as Cruz and Roqueta have noted (2016). They argue that the series equates being trans with playing dress-up or drag performance with regard to the trans

English teacher character, Quima, starring in season two, episode seven.[6] Quima is a trans woman who has not undergone gender reassignment surgery; hence, she is perceived as a man dressed up as a woman by some teachers, particularly Coralina, the director of the school. She delivers a transphobic speech predicated on the authenticity of biological and surgical premises, which is confronted with Quima's claim on gender self-determination: "Que quedi clar: jo soc una dona trans, i una dona trans no és menys dona que tu." Coralina replies: "Potser no, però jo soc una dona autèntica." Quima's hard-hitting arguments debunk Coralina's discriminating, unfair treatment. Yet, Merlí's plan to rebuke Coralina and vindicate Quima's rights is awkward and unfortunate given that girls dress up like boys and the other way round to play a football match. Being trans is thus portrayed as an idle conflict about clothes and physical appearance rather than as gender performance, identity formation, affect, or sexuality. Merlí oversimplifies Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity —to which the episode is dedicated— through the example of disguise, acting, or role playing. Despite the misguided approach to trans subjectivity, the scriptwriters working under the educational principle of the TV series— obviously made an effort to engage with contemporary debates on the matter. The Observatori Contra l'Homofòbia, a private activist organization sponsored by public authorities, claimed in its report *L'estat de la LGTBIfòbia a Catalunya 2016* that 2016 marked the development of greater social awareness of trans issues.[7]

On the other hand, both *Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude* strengthen the binary between the campy, effeminate or mannered gay boy and the straight-acting, mannish, homonormative gay/bisexual young man. The homonormative characters Pol and Bruno are cast in opposition to Oliver and Germán, who are portrayed as effeminate gay boys in flashy clothes who enjoy nightlife activities. They run the nightclub where all the former schoolmates celebrate Pol and Bruno's wedding at the end of the first part of the series. Whereas Oliver is a victim of homophobia at school because of his effeminacy, Bruno and Pol are not. Straight acting —which fits the homonormative pattern— remains a controversial issue, since it is regarded differently as either a survival strategy to avoid bullying —like passing for trans people— or internalized homophobia and invisibilization.[8] In *Merlí Sapere Aude*, the effeminate gay is played by Ángel, the Venezuelan friend of Bruno who gets a job for Pol at Nou Satanassa gay nightclub in Barcelona where he works.[9] Also Dino, the owner of Nou Satanassa, interpreted by the iconic Spanish gay actor Eusebio Poncela, embodies, like Ángel, the campy gay type. Furthermore, some performers of the nightclub are famous drag queens of the Barcelona LGBT scene. To sum up,

[6] This name may be a tribute to the Catalan feminist writer M. Aurèlia Capmany's novel *Quim/Quima* (1971), which reworks the premise of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). Like Woolf's character, Quim/Quima shifts from one gender to another through the centuries. Campany's goal is to queer the traditional male-centred account of (Catalan) history.

[7] The trans debate actually sparked a bitter controversy. The so-called "llei trans" was passed by the Spanish Congress in February 2023 and guaranteed free gender reassignment for any person aged sixteen years or over, thus eliminating parental authorization, medical reports, and hormone treatment. The law caused strong disagreement, not only among right- and far-right wing factions, but also among the leftist governing coalition, specifically the socialist party, as the law was promoted by a minister of its partner, Podemos.

[8] In the past few years, there have been campaigns and young influencers on social media fighting against femmephobia (*plumofòbia* in Catalan), the term used to describe the prejudice and discrimination towards mostly gay men people who present effeminate qualities or adopt a camp style, although it is also used to refer to a masculine attitude as regards lesbians (Sánchez 2017).

[9] Satanassa was a well-know nightclub that was open between 1989 and 2002 in the gay district of Barcelona: the Gaixample—a term formed by "gai" and "Eixample."

some degree of stereotyping can be observed in the representation of these characters, which are linked to nightlife.

Love clichés and the romantic comedy genre play a special role in this narrative of teen coming out. Following the rules of the romantic comedy, both series hint that love pushes both Bruno and Pol out of the closet. In *Merlí*, Bruno's infatuation with Pol provokes his outing from the closet in season two, whilst Pol does the same in *Merlí Sapere Aude* when falling in love with Rai, his posh classmate at university. In this regard, *Merlí*'s storyline becomes more hackneyed than its spin-off because, although Pol is not in love with Bruno at first, they end up together and getting married, as previously explained. Pol has become by then a philosophy teacher and, consequently, he settles down to enjoy the comfortable life of a middle-class adult. In consequence, as is often the case in youth television, the power of love cures all problems. Pol's affair with Rai in *Merlí Sapere Aude* provides another example of unrequited love, but this time there is no happy ending, unlike wth the affair with Bruno. This series presents us with a more mature Pol looking for adult autonomy and self-realization through his studies and work.

The romantic happy ending of *Merlí*, therefore, confirms that the educational goal is more remarkable than that observed in the spin-off. Perhaps the fact that a paid television platform, Movistar Plus+, co-produced the series, helps us to understand the difference between the two parts of the saga, suggesting that TV3 is more concerned with instructing through optimistic, exemplary stories of perfect family and love relationships. The wedding of the male protagonists, Pol and Bruno, heralds the arrival of Netflix TV shows like *Smiley* (2022) and the internationally acclaimed *Heartstopper* (2022–23). These Netflix series delineate a recognizable recent trend: the representation of LGBT characters abiding by the rules of the established genre of the romantic comedy. By providing more positive messages, the romantic comedy format appears to normalize gay and lesbian relationships in heterosexual society. Therefore, the price that queer individuals pay for social integration is the heterosexualization of their lives or, in other words, the emulation of a homonormative lifestyle. Queer scholars such as Sara Ahmed and Jack Halberstam have criticized the conservative ideology of the romantic comedy. Ahmed notes that the family is legitimized by romantic love as an institution that is necessary for individual and national reproduction (2004, 144). To protect it, cinema idealizes the family by emphasizing its vulnerability in today's world. In the same vein, Halberstam underlines the obsolescence of romantic comedies that approach love as an impossible goal in our individualistic society, dominated by unstable and superfluous personal bonds. The protagonists' main purpose is not to meet an ideal partner, but to celebrate the perfect wedding, consolidating the business around sentimental relationships (Halberstam 2012, 115–16). In contrast, Deleyto points out that recent romantic comedies explore other forms of desire and intimacy (2009, 34), evoking changes in gender roles and the greater presence of queerness in the social scene. He holds that the genre even makes room for fantasy, imagination and utopia, where a community encourages affection despite a hostile social world. The romantic comedy thus circulates positive images of visible queerness among the broader public, severing it from stigma and marginalization. In this regard, McCann and Monaghan distrust the relevance given to marginal and antisocial subjects in queer theory. They claim that the "trouble with this approach [...] is that it has tended to over-emphasise certain sexual practices and identities as the key sites of radical transformative possibility, rather than seeing the rupturing potential of sites

assumed to be 'straight'" (McCann and Monaghan 2022, 14). In sum, the queer romantic comedy stirs up the ongoing debate between those who think that the heteronormative structures and values must be challenged entirely and those who claim that heteronormativity can be resignified in some way. As mentioned above, *Merlí Sapere Aude* offers a different ending because the educational purpose is not so strong like it happens in *Merlí*. The storyline closes with Pol becoming independent from his father, having graduated from university and his relationship with Àlex having come to an end. The series suggests that Pol has finally grown to be an autonomous, out-of-the-closet adult and that the coming-of-age cycle has concluded. As a result, he is ready to marry Bruno, as foreseen in the final episode of *Merlí*.

A final topic should be addressed with regard to sexual politics and the representation of queerness. The second season of *Merlí Sapere Aude* introduces another topic related to homosexuality: seropositivity and AIDS. Although some contemporary TV series, such as *Pose* (FX Networks, 2018–2021) and *It's a Sin* (Channel 4, 2021), revolve around the emergence of the pandemic from a historical point of view, in Catalan cinema and television only Carla Simón's short film *Después también* (2019) addresses the issue among current teenagers, whilst her film *Estiu 1993* (2017) explores how AIDS affects children of infected parents.[10] In *Merlí Sapere Aude*, Pol is diagnosed with HIV, something that comes as a nasty shock, making him feel anger, fear, and shame. His former colleague at the supermarket, with whom he had had an affair some time ago, has infected him. At first, Pol hides this information from his father and Glòria, his father's partner, but they eventually discover his diagnosis, showing all their kindness and affection. He does not tell any of his friends about the infection, except for Oti, his best friend. Pol seems to collapse, until Dino, his employer at Nou Satanassa nightclub, confesses to him that he is also seropositive. He has been taking anti-retroviral treatment for more than two decades, having lost many friends at the peak of the pandemic in the 1980s and 1990s. Thanks to Dino's confession, Pol feels better, both reassured and stronger, after understanding that there is nothing to be afraid of because he will be able to carry on a normal life with the help of medication, as his employer explained. Funnily enough, Pol does not tell him that he is seropositive too. Here, the usual metaphor of the virus as an element transmitted from one body to another, binding two generations of queer, seropositive men together, seems to fail. Once again, fear of stigma and discrimination is a driving force behind Pol's attitude to sexuality, just as it was in the first part of the saga when he had to face coming out as gay or bisexual. In any case, Dino's vigour and his example of survival help him to recover from his depression and carry on.

The end of the saga thus seems ambiguous. The scriptwriters have instilled dramatic impact into the typical teen show, to avoid an easy and substance-lacking storyline with feeble love affairs, wild parties, and rampant casual sex. On the other hand, the AIDS-related subplot is also a reminder that HIV still poses a dangerous threat to gay men and that they consequently need protection. However, why does Pol, a sensitive and intelligent young man, not empathize with Dino by telling him about his own situation? Is it just fear? Why would he be afraid of speaking his mind about the virus with another seropositive man? Does he want to be disconnected

[10] The film focuses on Frida, who, after losing her parents to AIDS, is relocated to her aunt and uncle's rural family home. The director emphasizes the child's experience of stigma around the virus, with her intermittent visits to the doctor and her struggle to adapt to a new family (Beaney 2017, 371).

from previous generations of gay men and the mainstream image of disease and debauchery usually projected on them? Why, then, does he accept work in a gay club? The answer has to do with homonormativity: although *Merlí Sapere Aude* has left behind the educational goal of *Merlí*, Pol remains a homonormative young man who, despite his coming out, wants to get rid of the stereotypes associated with gayness: he epitomizes the new, millennial, queer young man, unencumbered by any of the unquestioned prejudices affecting the gay community in the past.

### 3. Conclusion: A "Postgay" Young Archetype for Television?

*Merlí*, and to a lesser extent, its spin-off *Merlí Sapere Aude*, are typical products of TV3, the educational and public service-orientated Catalan channel that, accordingly, lacks innovative and provocative shows such as those found on premium television. Both series follow the Western pattern of the coming out story for a mass audience as a means of educating families and teachers, not only millennial young people. Coming out is part of a wider process of coming of age, through which the gay or bisexual boy becomes an autonomous, self-made man. Therefore, the storylines respond to policies of visibility and public queerness that fashion the dominant narrative of homonormative identity: coming out, getting married and starting a family.

Despite criticism about the minor role given to female characters, the *Merlí* saga strives to alter traditional understandings of hegemonic manhood, which is so difficult to undermine, and that is currently striking back over the past few years as a result of the rise of the alt-right across the globe. Specifically, sexism and toxic masculinity have bounced back among the youngest generation of men, according to recent polls (Alcobendas 2024). Pol, the male protagonist of both series, queers the traditional straight male school leader of many Hollywood teen television shows and films. He is also embedded in Catalan cultural tradition as a queer version of the *charnego*, that is to say, the attractive, working-class young man with a Spanish/Andalusian background that appears in certain literary works.

The previous discussion has focused on some controversial aspects of homonormativity in the series. On the one hand, it could be understood as an attempt to explain homosexuality and bisexuality to a mainstream audience, avoiding negative stereotypes. On the other, the queer teen characters —except for Oliver— reject identity politics by claiming their right to freely have sex with whoever they wish. The refusal of identity markers —gay, bi— ultimately reinforces ambiguity as regards sexuality. It can be an example of queerness —fluid, non-fixed identities resisting categorization— but also of the unstable character formation so typical of adolescence. Another strategy used by *Merlí*, in particular, to normalize queer sexuality is taking advantage of the romantic comedy genre to make it palatable for a mass audience. Queer critics have been harsh on this conservative filmic approach to love relationships. At the same time, there are other views that emphasize the positive value of the romantic comedy for queer teenagers, however platonic it may be, because of the affection and solace the stories bring about in cases of isolation and despair. Other contentious issues include the approach to bisexuality in both series as a casual affair; as less valid than heterosexuality. Moreover, there is a clear distinction between two types of gay characters: the campy, effeminate boy as and the virile, straight-acting hunk. Another hackneyed

depiction of sexual identity is the problematic portrayal of trans subjectivity in season two of *Merlí* as a drag show. Finally, perhaps as a device to push Pol towards adulthood, the AIDS storyline adds dramatic intensity. Nevertheless, the young character is not afraid of the illness itself *per se*, but of social stigma, and that is the reason why he does not tell Dino, his employer at the gay club, who is also seropositive, that he has been infected too. In conclusion, Pol behaves in an individualistic way throughout the whole saga, avoiding any link with social images of queerness as something related to the past or even marginal, effeminate, or stigmatized men. The question is whether a bolder representation would have been accepted by the millennial audience and, whether the younger Generation Z, which is better informed about sexuality issues, is ready to view more diverse, non-homonormative versions of queer subjectivities.

Screening these homonormative identities entails bringing to the fore this hegemonic prototype and eclipsing others —by presenting them as secondary characters, for instance— or associating them with nightlife or older generations. In other words, *Merlí* and *Merlí Sapere Aude* feature the millennial gay or bisexual young man as different from the previously marginal and/or radical versions of male homosexuality. The millennial type is straight-acting, manly and not very fond of identity markers. Lovelock holds that homonormativity has encouraged the emergence of a new stage in LGBT history that he calls "postgay" (2015). In this "post-gay" context, ethnicity and sexuality are irrelevant or funny peculiarities that become blurred within the "humanity" of characters in television programmes. The audience, therefore, can identify with dramatic situations on TV shows regardless of sexuality —or ethnicity—. In exchange, though, television does not have to take responsibility for sexual or ethnic minorities, giving an unreal sense of normalcy. In this regard, the social integration of minorities that most educational agendas in Western countries foster is confounded with neutralization of sexual diversity, which can lead to persistent homophobia and rejection of femininity in men (Martínez 2021, 234).

Despite the narrative coherence between the two parts of the *Merlí* saga, there are also differences to attend to, particularly in relation to their educational purpose. On the one hand, *Merlí* is an overtly pedagogical series directed at a family and school audience —teachers and classmates— whilst *Merlí Sapere Aude* looks for a younger target audience and, consequently, the educational factor is less obvious. These teen shows borrow some characteristics from British and American television: on the one hand, they share the concern about the "mundane everyday" of the British teen television, but ignore the "explicit content" —swearing, sexuality, drink, and drugs— and the "emotional bleakness"; on the other, a certain "conservativity," which is typical of American teen dramas, can be observed in the Catalan series (Woods 2016, 69). As a matter of fact, although the biggest innovation of the *Merlí* saga is its bold approach to teenage sexuality, including homo and bisexuality, as well as the shooting of steamy sex scenes between Pol and Bruno, the archetype the main character embodies is a dedicated, non-disruptive student who belongs to the white, Catalan-speaking, middle-upper class. Sexuality and sex in both series can be understood as an attempt to target the "millennial" generation, or those who were born between 1981 and 1996. In fact, Marghitu points out that "millennial programming began to break new boundaries in terms of representing sex and sexuality, and more inclusive representation" (2021, 18–19). However, sex scenes, casual sex, homosexuality, or bisexuality are not necessarily subversive,

especially if the series features homonormative characters. The first part of the saga, in particular, *Merlí*, seeks to educate through the students' exemplary behaviour and through the responses of their fictional parents and teachers. The students show great maturity in dealing with the usual teen drama topics: mental illness, maternity, friendship, love and sex, economic problems, and their relationships with parents. Overall, teenagers, parents, and teachers work as a team to tackle and solve problems; this school team is analogous to the sport team in *Les de l'hoquei*. The "team spirit" expresses the sense of community that, in soap operas, is enhanced by the collective bonds that are built around the neighbourhood —hence, the bonds are based on geographical and linguistic premises Castelló (2006, 200). In general, this communal sense hints at the nation-building agenda of TV3. However, the complexity of the current school system in Catalonia and of most Western school systems —multiethnic composition, different academic levels and personal skills, varied social and economic backgrounds, multiple languages— is far from the homogeneous group of the Peripatètics, as Merlí calls his pupils. In sum, the idealized school and family settings depicted as a feel-good milieu for exemplary characters are obviously linked to the normalizing work of TV3 as a whole: to infuse a collective spirit of union among Catalan people.

To conclude, in spite of the pioneering gay character of *Poble Nou* (1994) and other subsequent examples, Catalan television still faces major challenges regarding the representation of queer diversity and optimistic storytelling about queer people who do not necessarily have to adhere to normative patterns to be accepted.

## Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London: Routledge.

Alcobendas, Martina. 2024. "Els joves catalans, els més masclistes: 6 de cada 10 asseguren que les dones posen denúncies falses." *Ara*, Feb 22, 2024. https://www.ara.cat/politica/joves-catalans-mes-masclistes-6-10-asseguren-dones-posen-denuncies-falses_1_4944922.html

Anderson, Eric. 2009. *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*. New York: Routledge.

Anon. 2018. "*Merlí* s'acomiada amb rècord d'audiència en un convuls final." *Nació Digital*, Jan 16, 2018. https://www.naciodigital.cat/noticia/146708/merli-acomiada-amb-record-audiencia-convuls-final

Arnau, Eric. 2015. "Masclisme i estereotips de gènere a Merlí." *Zena*, Nov 18, 2015. https://web.archive.org/web/20200811225340/https://zena.cat/masclisme-i-estereotips-de-genere-a-merli

Balcells, Albert. 1999. *Barcelona d'excursió: Excursionisme i escoltisme més enllà del lleure ciutadà*. Barcelona: Ajuntament de Barcelona.

Beaney, Rachel. 2017. "Orphans at play in *Cría Cuervos* (1976) and *Estiu 1993*." *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 56, no. 4 (Oct): 367–88.

Burdeus, Joan. 2020a. "*Les de l'hoquei* o la mort per excés de chill." *Núvol*, March 31, 2020. https://www.nuvol.com/pantalles/les-de-hoquei-o-la-mort-per-exces-de-chill-91202

Burdeus, Joan. 2020b. "'Drama' i el plaer de follar-se la llengua." *Núvol*, June 6, 2020. https://www.nuvol.com/pantalles/drama-i-el-plaer-de-follar-se-la-llengua-109725

Castelló, Enric. 2006. "La construcció nacional a les sèries de ficció: visió sobre una dècada de producció de Televisió de Catalunya." *Quaderns del CAC* 23–24: 199–209.

Connell, Raewyn W. 2005. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cruz, Irina and Marta Roqueta. 2016. "*Merlí*: Mort al feminisme." *Zena*, Dec 13, 2016. https://web.archive.org/web/20161218103221/http://zena.cat/merli-mort-al-feminisme

Deleyto, Celestino. 2009. *Woody Allen y el espacio de la comedia romántica*. València: Filmoteca.

Duggan, Lisa. 2002. "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." In *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, 175–94. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fernàndez, Josep Anton. 2012. *El malestar en la cultura catalana*. Barcelona: Empúries.

Grassi, Silvia. 2016. *Gender and Sexual Dissidence on Catalan and Spanish Television Series: An Intercultural Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Grassi, Silvia 2018. "Gender Roles, Family Models and Community-Building Processes in 'Poblenou': Comparative Analysis of American, British and Catalan Soap Operas." *Rassegna Iberistica* 41: 317–41.

Halberstam, Jack. 2012. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Boston: Beacon.

Kerrigan, Páraic. 2021. "After Marriage: The Assimilation, Representation, and Diversification of LGBTQ Lives on Irish Television." *Television & New Media* 22, no. 1: 47–64.

Lovelock, Michael. 2015. "Cucumber as Post-Gay Television." *Critical Studies in Television Online*, April 3, 2015. https://cstonline.net/cucumber-as-post-gay-television-by-michael-lovelock

Marghitu, Stefania. 2021. *Teen TV*. New York: Routledge.

Martínez, Alfredo. 2021. *Disidencia e hipernormalización: Ensayos sobre sexualidad y masculinidades*. Barcelona: Icaria.

McCann, Hanna and Whitney Monaghan. 2022. *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures*. London: Bloomsbury.

Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Sánchez, Dani. 2017. "'Plumofòbia': El col·lectiu gai també discrimina." *Ara*, July 2, 2017. https://www.ara.cat/societat/plumofobia-collectiu-gai-tambe-discrimina_1_1331185.html

Solà, Pere. 2024. "'Jo mai mai', la ofensiva adolescente de TV3." *La Vanguardia*, Jan 23. 2024. https://www.lavanguardia.com/series/20240123/9503924/jo-mai-mai-critica-serie-adolescente-tv3.html

Villarejo, Amy. 2014. *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Woods, Faye. 2016. *British Youth Television: Transnational Teens, Industry, Genre*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.