

TELEVISIONING ASEXUALITY: RETRACING A HISTORY OF ASEXUAL REPRESENTATIONS ON BRITISH TELEVISION

by

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ABSTRACT

Asexuality – referring to people who experience little-to-no sexual attraction – is an almost invisible identity on British television. Even so, this research sets out to explore what representations of asexuality do exist and question the impact these representations may have on societal understandings of asexuality. Across three chapters, I explore three key areas. First, the emergence of asexuality on TV through the “asexual resonances” in ‘Eleanor’ (1972) and ‘Celibacy: Putting Sex in Its Place’ (1993). Secondly, the ‘confirmed’ asexual representations within *Richard & Judy* (2004), *Doctors* (2014), *Emmerdale* (2016-2022), and *Steph’s Packed Lunch* (2021). And third, the asexual potentiality of ambiguously asexual characters, with a focus on *Doctor Who* (2005). From this, I conclude that current methodologies for exploring asexual representations on screen – past and present – are inadequate, but nonetheless representations of asexuality can be retraced throughout British television history. However, these representations have involved characters and representatives who are almost exclusively white, under-30, heteronormative, cisgender, non-disabled, and neurotypical, whilst focusing on narratives surrounding dating and coming out, which misrepresents the diversity of asexual experiences. “Asexual resonances” and ambiguously asexual characters can, however, escape these narratives, but this reveals a further issue within the erasure of asexual identities on screen.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the character 'David Rose' (Daniel Levy) came out as pansexual on the Canadian comedy, *Schitt's Creek*, and alongside other queer characters on the show, illustrated the power of television in creating a "queer revolution" of representations on screen (Garside, 2021). These representations highlighted a previously invisible and often misunderstood sexual orientation through Levy's "active choice" to not permit homophobia or bigotry of any kind on the show (Levy, 2021: 38). Instead, its queer characters were simply allowed to exist, and have a 'Happy Ending' (per the title of the 2020 series finale). Asexuality, describing people who experience little-to-no sexual attraction, is another "invisible" and misunderstood orientation (Decker, 2014), and has not yet received the same gift on television. On British television, which is the focus of my research, representations of asexuality *do* exist, but there are few such examples. When considering representations wherein asexual terminology is used onscreen (in what I describe as examples of 'confirmed asexuality'), specifically within British made television shows which have aired on British TV, just three fictional examples exist, with a handful more non-fictional representations. I do not set out to answer why so few representations exist, but to instead question *what* representations exist; to retrace an asexual archive of representations through British television history and examine their impact; to question how and if representations change; and to ask what this could mean for the future of asexuality, and asexual representations in Britain.

Asexuality in Britain: An Overview

Asexuality is most commonly defined as experiencing little-to-no sexual attraction. Importantly, there isn't one single 'correct' definition of asexuality, and definitions surrounding little-to-no sexual desire, interest, or behaviour have also been recognised in asexual histories, although I will focus on the definition of little-to-no sexual attraction in this writing. In contrast, someone who *does* experience sexual attraction would be described as an allosexual, although these terms are not binary opposites and instead exist across a spectrum of attraction. The term asexual (or ace, for short) describes people who do not experience sexual attraction but is also an umbrella term to represent asexualities – those who identify on the asexual spectrum. This spectrum includes (but is not limited to) demisexuality, wherein people may only experience sexual attraction to those they have a deep emotional bond with, and grey-asexuality, wherein people may only experience sexual attraction rarely. Importantly, asexuality doesn't necessitate any kind of behaviour, e.g., a hatred of sex, or lack of sexual desire, libido, or sexual behaviour – although these can be experienced by some aces. Attitudes towards sex also exist on a spectrum from sex-repulsed to sex-favourable, as well as sex-negative to sex-positive (these terms, however, are not specific to asexuality). Some asexuals may want and seek out sexual and/or romantic encounters or relationships, some asexuals may not, and there is no right or wrong way to be asexual.

Asexuality as an identity and orientation first started to gain prominence after asexual activist, David Jay, created the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) in 2001. However, asexuality has existed through other terminology, definitions, and studies since

at least 1868 when Kertbeny coined the term “monosexual”, describing those who only masturbated, alongside the more recognisable terms “heterosexual” and “homosexual” (see also: Hirschfeld’s (1896) “anaesthesia sexuals”, Kinsey et al.’s (1948, 1953) “category Xs”, Johnson’s “Asexual and Autoerotic Women” (1977) and Storms’s (1980) model of four orientation categories which includes asexual). Despite this history, asexuality remains *The Invisible Orientation*, per the title of aromantic asexual author, Julie Sondra Decker’s 2014 book. Additionally, asexuality’s recent recognition means it is often seen as an internet identity, with communities starting and continuing to exist online through AVEN, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. Due to this, the legitimacy of asexuality as a sexual orientation has been questioned, with asexuality often not taken as seriously as other, more established orientations, and as such there has been - and continues to be – discourse surrounding asexuality’s place in the queer community (however, asexuality *is* queer, and thus asexuals belong in the queer community – although individuals may not choose to identity in this way).

Furthermore, asexuality – like all queer and/or ‘othered’ identities can – and has – become the target of prejudice, animosity, and even violence. This is typically referred to as acephobia, which Brown (2022: 21-22) describes as “the hatred of and discrimination against asexuals, whether through active targeting, casual gestures and rhetoric, or otherwise,” and is “rooted in the fundamental belief that asexuality is a wrong or impossible way to exist ... and that asexual-identified people deserve to be punished, or need to be corrected, or both.” Importantly, Brown (2022: 22) also notes that acephobia is

“often entangled with other forms of bigotry, especially misogyny and racism” which can go on to have detrimental effects on intersectional members of the asexual community.

In 2004, Bogaert (p. 282) estimated that 1.05% of the British population did not experience sexual attraction. Although this figure did not indicate what percentage of people may *identify* as asexual, this figure has nonetheless informed a considerable amount of asexual research. Recent estimates on the prevalence of asexuality, however, differ greatly. For example, a recent report by Stonewall (2022a: 5) using Ipsos data suggested that 2% of the British population identify as asexual, which would currently equate to around 1.3 million British asexuals. However, data from the 2021 Census for England and Wales revealed that only 0.06% of the population (28,172 people) identified as asexual (ONS, 2023). Importantly, regardless of the exact number of asexuals in Britain, the National LGBT Survey by the Government Equalities Office (GEO) found that amongst both the cisgender and transgender people surveyed, “asexual respondents were the least satisfied with their lives” (2018: 29, 31). Cisgender asexual respondents also were the least likely to score their comfort of being LGBT in the UK highly (2018: 33), with 89% of asexual respondents “avoid[ing] being open about their sexual orientation for fear of a negative reaction from others” (2018: 49). This perhaps relates to Britain’s wider societal understandings of asexuality, with Sky News (2019) revealing that a Sky Data Poll found that “fifty-three percent of people said they were confident in defining the term [asexual], but when put to the test 75% were wrong or did not know that asexual people do experience a sex drive.” A similar figure was found by Ipsos (2020: 7), which indicated that 72% of Britons had “never heard of” asexuality or had heard “not very much” about it, in comparison to 28%

of Britons who were familiar with asexuality, albeit with just 7% having heard “a great deal” about asexuality. These figures indicate that not only is asexuality invisible, but it is also misunderstood.

However, of greater concern is the recognition – or more correctly the lack of recognition – of asexuality in British law. Under the *Equality Act 2010*, sexual orientation is a protected characteristic, but sexual orientation is defined as “meaning a person’s sexual orientation towards persons of the same ... opposite ... or either sex,” thus providing no provision for asexuality. That asexuality is not recognised as a sexual orientation may also explain why it hasn’t been recognised in the proposed plans to ban conversion therapy in the UK. The proposals for the ban were stated to be “...universal and protect everyone, whatever their sexual orientation and whether they are transgender or not” (Truss, 2021). However, only “an attempt to change a person from being attracted to the same-sex to being attracted to the opposite-sex” was mentioned, with it explained that “the reverse scenario” will be treated in the same way, as well as cases which attempted to “change another from being transgender or to being transgender” (Truss, 2021). Again, this offers no recognition to asexuals, wherein attempts are made to change a person from not being attracted to any sex to being attracted to a sex. This is despite research by the GEO (2021) revealing that “there is evidence that in mental health settings there are some potentially rare cases of minority sexual orientations (asexual) being misinterpreted as symptoms of a mental disorder,” and thus being treated as such. Furthermore, the GEO (2021) additionally reference the 2017 UK National LGBT Survey which also revealed that “asexual respondents

[were] the most likely (10%) [to have undergone or been offered conversion therapy]” (GEO, 2018: 83).

A study of British asexuality is therefore of extreme importance. When asexuality – and therefore potentially over one million people – are not protected by equality laws, aren’t recognised in a ban for conversion therapy, are living unsatisfying, fearful lives, and when asexuality cannot be correctly defined by 75% of the population, this reveals a problem. In these ways, the current asexual experience is akin to queer experiences of the 1800s and 1900s onwards when LGBT identities were first being recognised and becoming more visible within British society. Currently, Stonewall x Yasmin Benoit’s “Ace Project” is seeking to explore asexual communities’ experiences and needs to bring about policy changes relating to employment, healthcare and education, which is a vital step in seeking equality and recognition for asexuality and asexual experiences (Stonewall, 2022b). However, another way queer experiences began to change during the 20th century was through the visibility of queerness in Britain that was enabled through the advent of moving images, particularly television, which for the first time allowed depictions of queerness to enter people’s homes. As Sebastian Buckle (2015: 31-32), whose book *A Way Out* studied *A History of Homosexuality in Britain* tells us, “The media has provided a hugely influential forum in which ideas, attitudes, and perceptions of homosexuality have developed” which “created an increasing public perception of homosexuality in Britain and, in doing so, helped define a gay identity”. This means that from early documentaries such as *This Week: Homosexuals* (1964) and *This Week: Lesbians* (1965), to the first openly gay character in a TV soap in 1985 (Gordon Collins on *Brookside*, 1982), to the controversial explicitness of

Queer as Folk (1999), each has been a steppingstone towards the queer representations that are allowed to exist on television screens today, and how queerness and queer identities are understood and defined by wider society. Buckle notes this change within representations emerged within the gay liberation era, explaining that the attitudes of homosexual representations:

varied greatly through time, medium, and topic. But together they reflected a shift. They represented the arrival of images and examples of identity; they represented what people thought of them; and they represented what self-identified homosexuals thought themselves (2015: 88).

Although, as Chambers says, television representations “...can provide absolutely no political guarantees” and, simply, “norms of gender and sexuality may be changed by a show about lesbians, or they may not” (2009: 87-88), the increasing mass of queer representations that have appeared during and since the gay liberation era means that norms of gender and sexuality have been challenged and changed. Now queerness is allowed to be (somewhat) celebrated on screen through diverse (though not diverse enough) representations with queer characters who can live open (if not necessarily happy) lives.

These representations of queerness are nonetheless important to queer people, hence why we fight against poor representations and demand better ones. Similarly, as Decker (2014: 84) explains, “Representation matters a *lot* to asexual people because there is so little of it” (emphasis in original). My research therefore seeks to explore the emergence and continued representations of asexuality on British TV, building upon previous research which has explored, questioned, and built archives of queer media representations.

Defining Asexuality

Searching for asexuality on screen requires an understanding of two things; what is, and what is not, asexuality? To answer the first question, asexuality is nothing more or less than experiencing little-to-no sexual attraction. Przybylo (2019: 4) tells us that using the language of sexual attraction is important, as:

asexuality is granted visibility alongside other sexual orientations that likewise pivot the criterion of “sexual attraction” ... by articulating an absence ... of sexual attraction, asexual voices demonstrate that asexuality is thinkable within the modern regime of sexuality.

However, asexual author, Angela Chen (2020: 19) is critical of “the decision to define asexuality using the same linguistic and theoretical logic as other sexual orientations.” She calls this choice a “trap” as:

To explain asexuality and what it means to not experience sexual attraction, aces must define and describe the exact phenomena we don't experience. It requires us to use the language of "lack," claiming we are legitimate in spite of being deficient, while struggling to explain what we don't get.

But what *is* sexual attraction? A simple question with a difficult answer. As Yule et al. (2015: 148) explain, “Sexual attraction has always been thought be to a ubiquitous aspect of the human experience and necessary for propagation of species.” Thus, because sexual attraction is considered a universal human experience, defining, or describing sexual attraction has been deemed as unnecessary by many.

However, whilst admitting that asexuals may “struggle to explain what we don’t get,” Chen (2020: 21) nonetheless describes sexual attraction as the “horniness toward or caused by a specific person. It is the desire to be sexual with that person.” Decker (2014: 38) expands on this, discussing sexual attraction as relating to a “reaction that is sexual – that a person

can be seen in a sexual context even as a stranger” and that this may be “based on one’s physical senses – without knowing anything about their personalities. It can be based on looks or voice or chemistry or charisma.” In both definitions, sexual attraction is directional, specifically relating to another individual, or individuals, and is described as an internal experience. Both definitions are also clear in what sexual attraction is not, with Chen (2020: 21) distinguishing sexual attraction from “sex drive (or libido)”, which she describes as “the desire for sexual release” which “can come out of nowhere and for no obvious reason and not be about anyone”. Furthermore, Decker (2014: 28) clarifies that:

sexual arousal suggests a physiological response; *sex drive* suggests a desire to respond to arousal or a desire to pursue sex; and *sexual attraction* suggests an experience of finding someone sexually appealing (emphasis in original).

From this, it is possible to understand what asexuality is and is not. Asexuality is a ‘lack’ of sexual attraction, meaning asexuals (generally) do not experience sexual reactions towards anyone, or caused by anyone, that make another person sexually appealing. It must, however, be remembered that asexuality is not a monolithic experience and thus some people on the asexual spectrum *do* experience sexual attraction. Asexual identities are, however, united under experiences wherein *not experiencing* sexual attraction is more typical than *experiencing* sexual attraction.

Therefore, asexuality is not a lack of sexual behaviour, as asexuals may experience sexual arousal and/or a sex drive and engage in sexual activities (solo or partnered) without experiencing sexual attraction. Asexuality is not synonymous with celibacy, as celibacy is a choice to abstain from sex, and is a choice that can be made regardless of sexual orientation, or experiencing (or not experiencing) sexual attraction, sexual arousal, or a sex

drive. Asexuals, therefore, can choose to be celibate in the same way they can choose to have sex, and either choice has no impact on their asexuality. Furthermore, asexuality is different from aromanticism, which describes experiencing little-to-no romantic attraction, despite it being often assumed that sexual attraction and romantic attraction go hand in hand and are experienced simultaneously. As such, romantic attraction is distinct from sexual attraction, as well as other forms of attraction (e.g., sensual, aesthetic, platonic etc.,) and some, all, or none may therefore be experienced (or not experienced) alongside asexuality. Ergo, some asexuals are aromantic, and some aromantics are asexual, but these are not mutually exclusive identities.

However, whilst asexuality implies no specific behaviours, experiences, attractions, or attitudes relating to sex or relationships, research has nonetheless found trends relating to these regarding asexuality. For example, Brotto et al. (2010: 607) found that 73% of asexuals in their sample had never engaged in sexual intercourse, whilst 73% of women and 80% of men in their sample masturbated and masturbated with a frequency comparable to allosexuals. However, Prause and Graham (2007: 344) noted that asexuals “would not necessarily label [masturbation] as a “sexual” behaviour.” Furthermore, Prause and Graham suggested that asexuals report being less likely to desire or have an interest in sex, particularly when involving a partner (2007: 345) and are likely to find sex unpleasurable (2007: 344-345). However, they also conclude that “[a]sexuals may be willing to engage in sexually *motivated* behaviors to achieve nonsexual goals without experiencing sexual *desire*,” (2007: 346, emphasis in original) with Hille et al. (2020: 819) supporting this claim and reporting that “the vast majority” of asexual individuals have

engaged in activities “they personally define as “sex””. Beyond sexual activities and behaviours, Brotto et al. found that the majority of asexuals described their relationships “with a focus on the romantic (e.g., heteroromantic) as opposed to the sexual (e.g., heterosexual)” (2010: 606), but found it noteworthy that one-third of a sample with a mean age of 30 had had never been in a relationship (2010: 607).

Whilst these studies may be important in understanding an underrepresented group, the statistical averages revealed in these studies by taking the multitude of ace experiences and placing them neatly into boxes to reveal trends must be taken with caution. Importantly, the validity and existence of other asexual experiences, especially those experienced by a minority of asexuals (e.g., having partnered sex, being favourable towards or enjoying sex, and/or being attracted to people in non-sexual or non-romantic ways etc.,) must still be recognised. Furthermore, these studies also tend to position asexual spectrum identities against allosexuality, meaning the distinct experiences of asexual spectrum identities (e.g., asexuals, demisexuals and greysexuals etc.,) are often conflated and merged into one single entity under the umbrella term of asexuality.

Copulsky and Hammack (2021), however, explored the different experiences relating to sexual behaviour, masturbation, arousal, desire, and attitudes towards sex between these three identities based on data from the 2016 Ace Community Survey (Bauer et al., 2018). As such asexual individuals, in comparison to demisexuals and greysexuals, “had the lowest mean scores for sexual desire on all three measures of sex drive, ... masturbation frequency, ... and disposition toward engaging in sex” (2021: 4). Furthermore, asexual individuals “had the lowest rates for ever having sex ... and had the lowest mean score for frequency of sex

in the past year among those who had ever had sex” (2021: 5), and “were most likely to identify as aromantic” (2021: 6) when compared to demisexuals and greysexuals.

This reveals a clear, and ultimately unsurprising image of how different asexual identities each have distinct and differing experiences relating to sexuality, behaviours, and relationships. Each ace identity therefore should require – and deserves – its own exploration in research, rather than continuing the trend of discussing asexualities as a single, monolithic experience. However, the current state of asexual representations on British television, as well as the theoretical issues encountered when interpreting (a)sexuality through the audio-visual language(s) of television (as will be discussed next) means that, where appropriate, I will continue to group ace identities together under the terminology of ‘asexual(ity)’ or the asexual spectrum. I hope future research will go on to explore the unique experiences and representations of different asexual identities in more depth, but currently this is beyond the scope of my own research.

It is also true, however, that asexuality and aromanticism are distinct identities, and thus it could be argued that, whilst this work focuses on asexuality, aromanticism should also warrant its own exploration separate to my own. However, as Copulsky and Hammack (2021: 6) conclude, asexual respondents, as opposed to asexual spectrum respondents, were most likely to identify as aromantic, with Weis et al. (2021: 13) revealing that 62.7% of asexual respondents either considered themselves to be on the aromantic spectrum or were questioning or unsure of a possible aromantic identity (in comparison, 36.7% didn’t consider themselves to be on the aromantic spectrum). To explore representations of asexuality without considering the intersections of romantic orientation – be it

aromanticism or alloromantic orientations such as being heteroromantic, homoromantic, or panromantic, etc., – would be detrimental to understanding how asexuality and the multitude of experiences it offers have been represented. As such, whilst aromanticism is a distinct identity and thus should not be automatically conflated with asexuality, the intersection between asexuality and aromanticism, and what it means for representations of asexuality will be explored.

One way this will be discussed is through the concept of amatonormativity, which Brake (2012: 88-89) defined as “the assumption that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans” and that “such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types”. Now, an “amorous relationship” may relate more to romantic attraction, than to sexual attraction, however, regardless of romantic orientation, Weis et al. (2021: 42) also indicate that across the asexual spectrum, 76.1% of respondents were single. Furthermore, 40% of asexual spectrum respondents report to never having been in a significant relationship, which rises to over 50% of asexuals who report to never having been in a romantic relationship (Weis et al., 2021: 43). From this, a clear image of what type of asexual representations can be expected on screen appears – notably, non-sexual, aromantic and single individuals. However, whilst asexuality can challenge and complicate the notion of amatonormativity, this is not necessarily seen on screen, and thus amatonormativity plays a key role within how asexuality is represented (or perhaps misrepresented).

Theoretical Issues

Regardless of the many ways in which asexuality can interact with sexual arousal, sex drive, sexual behaviour, and other types of attraction, asexuality continues to be defined as an absence, a lack. Whilst I note that experiencing sexual attraction (allosexuality) and not experiencing sexual attraction (asexuality) are not binary opposites and exist on a spectrum which includes the existence of demisexuality and grey-asexuality, to question what an absence of sexual attraction looks like invites the question of what the opposite – the presence of sexual attraction – looks like, with a focus on how sexual attraction is depicted through audio-visual means on television. In considering this many things come to mind: a camera lingering on a person in slow-motion, often a woman who flicks her hair with a demure smile alongside a soundtrack which lyrically or melodically speaks of love; the heated glances between two people; two characters having sex (for polyamory is rarely depicted onscreen) – all of which are intrinsically linked with Mulvey's (1975) idea of "the male gaze".

Mulvey (1975: 11) describes the gaze as being a result of "a world ordered by sexual imbalance [which means] pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female." It is this "pleasure in looking" which is resonant with the audio-visual language used to express sexual attraction on screen. Mulvey (1975: 11) continues, explaining that:

the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly ... women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (emphasis in original).

The language of a pleasure in looking, styling women for erotic impact, and connoting to-be-looked-at-ness speaks of sexual attraction, of depicting (female) characters in a way that makes them sexually attractive to a – presumed to be – allosexual, heteronormative audience. As such, women on screen are coded to be sexually attractive to the other (male) characters who can express their sexual attraction to women through the gaze between female and male characters. Furthermore, the coding of women on screen creating a “pleasure in looking” through women connoting “to-be-looked-at-ness” allows (male) audiences to feel sexually attracted to women through audio-visual means, through costume which displays women’s bodies, through camera movements and framing which emphasise a woman’s body, and through the camera allowing audiences to themselves be passively gazed at by women.

Whilst the language of the male gaze becomes outdated when considering the cisheteronormativity of a pleasure in looking which is said to exist only between men and women, and limiting possibilities for queerness and non-binary genders, to use the gaze as an audio-visual language which depicts sexual attraction may seem plausible. However, the language of the gaze does not speak of sexual attraction, but instead eroticism, which in turn is defined as relating to sexual love, desire, and pleasure – all of which can exist without sexual attraction being involved. As such, just because a (female) character is depicted as sexually attractive through this connoted “to-be-looked-at-ness,” this is not a guarantee that another character on screen will experience sexual attraction to her. A character may visibly experience this “pleasure in looking” by gazing at the attractive character, but whether this gaze is one of sexual attraction, or indeed perhaps one of

aesthetic or romantic attraction cannot be deciphered. Could this gaze be one of love, affection or lust instead, and where is attraction's place in these emotions? One could take for granted that the gaze can depict sexual attraction, with the gaze suggested to be sexual in nature and directional, relating to a pleasure which is caused by a specific person. However, with the continual conflation of sexual attraction with other attractions, behaviours, and desires etc., and sexual attraction existing as an internal experience which therefore cannot be seen, can it ever be possible to isolate sexual attraction and recreate and depict it on screen? Can we even expect the codes and conventions of audio-visual language to be able to separate these different forms of attractions when, historically, these attractions were understood to operate together and be experienced at the same time?

Benshoff and Griffin asked a similar question in their exploration of queer images in American cinema (2006). Here, they followed in the footsteps of Vito Russo who retraced a history of homosexuality within American cinema in his book, *The Celluloid Closet* (1987), wherein the characters were not explicitly homosexual, but instead had their homosexuality implied, such as through the effeminacy of male characters as an indicator for a character's homosexuality, be it the way they dressed or walked, their hobbies such as cooking or interior design, or the feminine music that accompanied a character. Potter (2019: 24) similarly notes the masculinisation of female characters as a signifier for early representations of lesbian characters, with Benshoff and Griffin (2006: 9) adding that "This type of characterization, sometimes called *connotative homosexuality*, implied that a character might be queer, through subtle mannerisms, costuming, or speech patterns"

(emphasis in original). However, Benshoff and Griffin also note that in “all of its copious detail, [*The Celluloid Closet*] never actually questions or investigates definitions of sexuality or how cinema can convey these concepts to its audience” explaining that:

Unlike the social categories of race, age, gender, or disability, sexual orientation has few (if any) physical markers that the visual medium of film can exploit. Thus Hollywood filmmakers fell back on connotative means to suggest that a character was queer ... usually rely[ing] on stereotypes that invert traditional expectations about gender. (2006: 20-21).

This suggests that the ground-breaking work completed by Russo, and many academics after him who continued to trace queer images on screen, may indeed have searched for images of same-sex attraction, but whether this was *homosexuality*, rather than *homoromanticism* or *homoeroticism*, for example, should be questioned.

Of course, at the time of Russo’s writing, asexuality had only recently started to be recognised as a sexual orientation, and the split attraction model¹ commonly used in asexual and aromantic communities to decipher the different forms of attraction a person can experience would not be created until decades later, so to retroactively suggest these images aren’t homosexual would perhaps be incorrect. But nonetheless, the images recognisable as homosexual today may, therefore, have asexual potentials, whilst retaining their queerness and gayness. However, if we define sexual orientation as a pattern of experiences relating to sexual attraction, then Benshoff and Griffin suggest that there isn’t a visual language that can be used to depict sexual attraction, and if there isn’t a visual

¹ The Split Attraction Model (SAM) is used to model how someone’s experience of attraction can be split into different orientations such as sexual, romantic, aesthetic, or sensual, and notes that a person’s orientations may not be the same. In this way a person can be heterosexual and heteroromantic, as historically expected, however a person could be asexual and panromantic, or bisexual and homoromantic etc.

language of sexual attraction, there cannot be a visual language of the absence of sexual attraction (i.e., asexuality) either. But what does it mean if sexual attraction cannot be depicted visually onscreen? Here it is undeniable that heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, etc., all exist on screen – it is unfathomable to suggest otherwise – but, as such *something*, surely, must exist to connote these sexualities.

It is clear that queer identities emerged on screen through the queering or inverting of gender on screen. A masculine woman or an effeminate man may connote homosexuality, but what could connote asexuality? A man who is sexually passive rather than sexually aggressive, perhaps? But then sexual passiveness would traditionally be considered a feminine trait, and thus would the man still connote homosexuality rather than asexuality? As Russo explains, in early film, “sissies” or “effeminate men could imitate homosexuality while remaining essentially asexual and without threatening the status quo” (1987: 36). These characters were genderqueer men, who could have an attraction to other men, but this could never be sexual, let alone acted on. Here, would these characters be any more homosexual than they are asexual? Does the repression of sexuality, forced abstinence and desexualisation of the character negate reading the character as *homosexual* and instead allow for a reading of a *homoromantic* asexual character?

To suggest such characters are not homosexual would be a detriment to queer history and the vital images of queerness that homosexual people could first see themselves represented in. But asexuality complicates matters. If sexual attraction cannot be depicted visually, and thus all types of attraction – sexual, romantic, aesthetic, sensual etc., – are connoted and conflated together (as would be expected historically when these attractions

were assumed to be the same and thus were expected to be experienced alongside each other), is it possible to ever claim to know a character's sexuality? If we broaden the behaviours which may connote homosexuality into those associated with sexual attraction – i.e., kissing, touching, sex – does that necessarily help decipher sexual orientation? Benshoff and Griffin, too, question this, asking:

What about men who have sex with men but still label themselves heterosexual? This happens in racial and ethnic subcultures, prisons, frat houses, the military, and the porno industry where "heterosexual" actors are sometimes "gay for pay." What about two young women who kiss on the dance floor to turn on their respective boyfriends? Men or boys who masturbate together? (2006: 14)

These may nonetheless be queer images, but here behaviour is not necessarily an indicator of sexual attraction, nor sexual orientation. While, statistically, asexual people are less likely to have sex and more likely to be disinterested in sex (Weis et al, 2021: 61), asexuals *can* participate in sexual behaviours if they choose to.

Thus, if these presumably allosexual people/characters in Benshoff and Griffin's example can engage in sexual activity without it affecting their sexual orientation, or necessarily being attracted to the person or people they are engaging in the behaviour with, then this is no different to how asexual people can participate in such behaviours whilst not experiencing sexual attraction or negating their asexuality. As such, behaviour cannot indicate sexuality, nor can the *lack* of behaviour. Sexual orientation may be based on a pattern of behaviours relating to what gender, or what types of people someone is attracted to, and repeatedly representing a character as sexually disinterested may connote asexuality, but it might not. However, is it any wonder that, in lieu of a visual language of attraction that could be suitably absent when depicting an asexual character,

asexuality has been reduced – like other queer identities – to connotative suggestions? In this case, where the absence of sexual behaviours or a disinterest in sex may lead to stereotypes surrounding prudishness, coldness, and inhumanness.

But if there is no visual language of sexual attraction, and connotations of attraction (or lack therefore of) cannot accurately define sexual orientation, where does that leave us?

As Benshoff and Griffin (2006: 64) point out:

Since connotative homosexuality is expressed through signs that are veiled or suggestive, there is no way to prove that they are absolutely meant to be homosexual or, conversely, that they are absolutely not meant to be homosexual. Suddenly everything becomes suspect, and an entire universe of cinematic queerness becomes possible.

Here anything can be gay, straight, bi, or ace, and this is important in reflecting the multitude of experiences and complexities that can exist within the same sexual orientation. It also means that tracing a history of a sexual orientation onscreen is a difficult and flawed process. Brown (2016: 1) evidences this difficulty, noting that when tracing homosexuality onscreen in *The Celluloid Closet* (1987), Russo mistakenly labelled images as including homosexual content, such as two men dancing together in the *Dickson Experimental Sound Film* (1894), with Slide (1999: 25) explaining that the dancing of the men wasn't "... because they were sexually attracted to each other but simply because there were no female employees" at the laboratory where the film was made. The image is nonetheless a queer one, but to suggest it as an example of homosexuality would thus be incorrect. Would then, the image, devoid of sexual attraction as it is, have potential to be read as an image of asexuality?

Asexual Resonances

Little work has been done to trace an academic history of asexuality – onscreen or otherwise – and this is something which Przybylo and Cooper (2014) noted. Here, they saw that asexuality had been, and still is, mostly “absent in queer, feminist, and critical sexuality studies” and that attempts to retrace asexuality from archival sources have come from the perspective of searching for “true asexuality”, which references the idea of “an asexuality that is ever present in the body, more or less unchanging throughout one’s lifetime, and categorically not a ‘choice’” (2014: 298-301). However, they cautioned that using such strict criteria as a means for searching for asexuality results in it being “rarely” found, and “next to never historically” (2014: 301). Thus, they put forth a new methodology for “finding, interpreting, and assembling a queerly asexual archive,” explaining that:

asexuality *can* be found in history, in literature, and in the everyday—if ... we envision it beyond the dominant, exacting definitions and manifestations it has acquired in the present as a sexual identity of “no sexual attraction.” (emphasis in original) (2014: 304)

In their methodology they therefore “shift [their] focus to a blurrier imagining of asexuality ... attuned less to self-identified asexual figures than to asexual “resonances” – or traces, touches, instances” (2014: 303, 298). This approach has led to them locating asexuality in the women’s liberation movement in the form of political celibacy/asexuality, and in the abstract expressionist artist, Agnes Martin, who “publicly disavowed sex” (2014: 309). Przybylo later used this concept in her book *Asexual Erotics*, unearthing the possibilities of asexuality in childhood, spinsterhood, and the concept of lesbian bed death (2019).

In this way, political celibacy resonates asexually from its position that sex is unessential to a meaningful and happy life, and that sexual freedoms should involve the right to say no to sex, as well as to say yes to it (Densmore, 1972 cited by Przybylo and Cooper, 2014: 308); and Martin resonates asexually for choosing to live a nonnormative life which excluded sex (2014: 311). However, I feel that care needs to be taken when considering how the notion and methodology of asexual “resonances” can impact understandings of asexuality. As an asexual, I have a measure of concern for those who Przybylo and Cooper (2014), and Przybylo (2019) suggest are resonating asexually, when every example enforces being non-sexual as the reason for these resonances. As Berkey, Perelman-Hall, and Kurdek pointed out:

...the confusion surrounding sexual orientation is ... complicated when genital activity is used as the sole defining factor in identifying a person's sexual orientation while completely ignoring factors such as affections, attraction, affiliation, emotional preference, and fantasy. (1990: 69)

Now, it is true that many asexuals do not have sex, with Weis et al. suggesting that 72.2% of asexuals have not engaged in consensual sex (2021: 61), and many asexuals are therefore celibate or non-sexual *alongside* being asexual. However, as Canning (2015: 67) points out, “Those who confuse asexuality with celibacy may reinforce the idea that sexual orientation can be controlled or chosen, which is an idea the queer community has fought to eradicate.”

This is not to say that Przybylo and Cooper *do* confuse asexuality with celibacy, and they purposefully explain that “blurring the distinction between celibacy and asexuality may be integral to expanding notions of what and who might “count” as asexual” (2014: 307). However, this nonetheless illustrates the fine line between what may be resonant with

asexuality, and what may indeed be detrimental assumptions and conclusions about asexuality, especially in a time and a society where, from my own experiences, any admission of asexuality immediately assumes that I am anti-sex, celibate, immature, stuck-up, lonely, and fixable, to name a few expectations. However, I also recognise that, to search for historic examples of asexuality, it is vital to be aware of how definitions of asexuality have changed over time and allow these developments to be reflected in my research.

As such, Przybylo and Cooper are not wrong to search for asexuality within the women's liberation movement, with an "Asexual Manifesto" written by Lisa Orlando, a member of the New York Radical Feminists' Asexual Caucus in 1972 having recently been rediscovered. According to Orlando (1972: 1), this manifesto came about after several members of the group did not feel they would be comfortable in the proposed groups – heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual – to discuss their personal and political attitudes relating to their sexuality and formed their own group for asexuality. Here, Orlando explains that:

We chose the term "asexual" to describe ourselves because both "celibate" and "anti-sexual" have connotations we wish to avoid; the first implies that one has sacrificed sexuality for some higher good, and the second that sexuality is degrading or somehow inherently bad. "Asexual" as we use it, does not mean "without sex" but "relating sexually to no one". This does not, of course, exclude masturbation but implies that if one has sexual feelings they do not require another person for their expression. Asexuality is, simply, self-contained sexuality. (1972: 2)

Orlando further notes that "[w]e see asexuality as an efficient "alternative-lifestyle" for revolutionary women," and "[f]or us, asexuality is a commitment to defy and ultimately to destroy the baseless concepts, surrounding both sex and relationships, which support and perpetuate the patriarchy" (1972: 7-8). Here, asexuality is categorised a sexual orientation

comparable to hetero/homo/bisexuality, yet asexuality is a choice, and becomes almost unrecognisable compared to how it is understood today. Indeed, Orlando's endnote is to say "[t]his 'Manifesto' is not the last word on asexuality; it is only the beginning. I welcome your comments and criticisms" (1972: 8).

Similarly, Johnson (in one of the earliest articles dedicated to asexuality) notes that:

There appear to be few really appropriate words in the English language to describe the individual who, regardless of physical or emotional condition, actual sexual history, and marital status or ideological orientation, seem to prefer not to engage in sexual activity (1977: 97)

In this article, she explores two invisible groups: the asexual woman, who has "no sexual desires at all," and the autoerotic woman, who "recognizes such desires but prefers to satisfy them alone" (1977: 99) through searching for potential asexual writings from women's magazines from 1970-1975. From this, Johnson concluded that:

Asexual and autoerotic women seem seldom to have been accorded the equal right to be different, the equal right to celebrate their unique experiences in the world. For their violation of established female function, they have been oppressed by a societal consensus that they, as free and unique individuals, do not exist. Again and again, their personal experiences have been redefined for them in terms of socially constructed means: they are "ascetic," "neurotic," "unliberated," or "politically conscious". Their sexual preferences are explained away in the rhetoric of whatever sexual ideology seems currently to be in vogue. (1977: 104)

Firstly, this indicates how little societal consensus regarding asexuality has changed, with asexuality remaining invisible and our experiences considered as non-existent. Secondly, again, asexuality is described as an orientation defined by a disinterest in participating in (partnered) sexual behaviours, or by having no sexual desires. Here, asexuality is not a choice made for potential political gain, and this therefore is a step closer to modern definitions than Orlando's "Asexual Manifesto." Furthermore, the leap from definitions

surrounding “no sexual desires” to no sexual attraction is a small one, and even today, asexuality can be understood through a lens of no sexual desires, even if this is not the case for all asexuals. These are contrasting aspects of asexual history, but their importance as asexual history must nonetheless be remembered.

Thus, under these terms, searching for a lack of sexual behaviour – particularly partnered sex – as an asexual “resonance” would be correct – so to speak – even if this differs to modern definitions of asexuality. Therefore, when attempting to retrace a lost history of asexual representations before the year 2000 in Chapter One, I will use Przybylo and Cooper’s methodology of using asexual “resonances” which search beyond a definition of “no sexual attraction” and instead search for the implications of non-sexuality on screen. I do this for two reasons. Firstly, out of a respect for the history of asexuality. Although here I note that I am constrained by how little asexual history has been retraced and is available to consult currently. Secondly, I do this in absence of a ‘better’ methodology. I have highlighted the difficulties to retrace an audio-visual language of an absence of sexual attraction efficiently and accurately on screen and use asexual “resonances” as a starting point for explorations of historic asexual representations. However, whilst doing this I note that this methodology will never be able to express the complexity of asexual experiences beyond not having sex, and that furthermore, regardless of how asexuality has been defined throughout history, people who have not experienced sexual attraction have nonetheless existed, even if we cannot yet trace these people and characters on screen. Using this methodology will allow an exploration of one asexual experience – not having sex – but it is my hope that future research, my own included, will go beyond this search,

and question historic examples of asexual “resonances” surrounding having sex, consensually or not, being sex-favourable or repulsed, and the many other experiences which can and do exist under asexuality.

‘Confirmed’ Asexuality and Ambiguities

Whilst there is not a definitive audio-visual language to depict sexual attraction or its absence, there is one way in which sexual attraction and orientation can clearly be depicted on screen beyond an exploration of sexual activity: speech and/or text. Instances wherein a person or character uses terminology of their sexual orientation or discusses their experience or non-experience of sexual attraction on screen bypasses the need for connotative interpretation of often outdated stereotypes. Whilst, as Przybylo and Cooper assert, instances wherein asexuality is discussed in this way are “rarely” found, and “next to never historically” (2014: 301), there nonetheless is an archive that has developed of such representations on television, the bulk of which coincides with shortly after the formation of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network in 2001. It will be these examples, wherein people or characters use or discuss asexual terminology on screen, that I will use to explore asexual representations in Chapter Two. I do this to explore exactly how asexuality has been depicted on screen, and what can be learnt about asexuality through the narratives linked to asexual terminology.

However, I recognise that placing the need for sexual orientation terminology as the only marker to identify a confirmed queer character or person does a disservice to what counts or does not count as a representation of asexuality – or any other sexual orientation. It also puts the onus of coming out onto the queer person and does not necessarily recognise the

fluidity of sexuality, nor histories and changing languages of sexual orientation. Furthermore, this ignores people who are asexual, but don't know about asexuality or do not have the language to describe their sexual orientation, which is a particular concern in a heteronormative world wherein people and characters are assumed to be straight until proven otherwise. Indeed, Yule, Brotto and Gorzalka (2015: 149) raise their own concerns, saying that, "Very little is known ... about the experiences of individuals who lack sexual attraction, but who have not yet "come out" and adopted the label of "asexual"" and note speculation wherein these individuals who "... have not yet discovered "asexuality" may be more isolated, distressed, or confused than those who belong to the asexual community." Do these 'asexuals' offer any less meaningful representation than asexuals who can self-identify as asexual?

Few characters, asexual or not, use sexual orientation terminology onscreen, but characters' sexual/romantic orientations are still connoted and become recognisable through their relationships with others and their behaviours (such as gazing, kissing, dating, sex etc.,) expressing this – although, as previously discussed, this is an unreliable way of identifying *sexual* orientation. With asexuality, such behaviours may be seen less often, but simultaneously under current understandings of asexuality, it is not the absence of these behaviours, but the absence of experiencing – or experiencing little – sexual attraction. Under these terms, if a heterosexual character is no less straight for not using heterosexual terminology on screen, nor an LGB+ character no less queer for not using queer terminology, then an asexual character is no less ace for not using asexual terminology either.

Additionally, whilst asexual terminology has started to gain a presence on screen, there has also been a trend of asexual terminology being used off-screen in reference to characters or programmes. In several examples (e.g., *Doctor Who*, 2005; *Good Omens*, 2019; *Heartstopper*, 2022), programme creatives or actors use this terminology to reveal or suggest the possibility of a character's asexual identity (in other examples, asexual terminology has been used to deny an asexual possibility, e.g., *Sherlock*, 2010). However, because the terminology is not used *on* screen, the character is not textually asexual. Here, the character may indeed be asexual, and the character may have been portrayed as being asexual and resonate asexually onscreen, but their asexuality is an ambiguous representation. For whatever reason, there is a hesitance or an inability to confirm an asexual identity on screen, but nonetheless there is an opportunity to explore how asexuality, or asexual "resonances" have been portrayed in a time where (confirmed) asexuality is beginning to be recognised onscreen and in society, and it will be these ambiguously asexual characters who will be explored in Chapter Three.

Conclusions and Chapter Overviews

In my search for asexuality, I note the impossibility of exploring every asexual representation, resonance or ambiguity that has existed thus far on British television. Similarly, Buckle noted in his own work that "it is impossible to provide a complete history of every example of homosexuality in television and film that a British man or woman might have seen" and instead explored a "snap-shot of important examples" to question what was considered important when representing homosexuality on screen (2015: 53). Thus, the following chapters will attempt to give an accurate overview of how asexuality has

emerged and continues to be represented on British television, but it is only a brief overview using a “snap-shot” of examples, from both fictional and non-fictional depictions of asexuality.

In my search I come from the perspective that, regardless of whether asexuality is confirmed, ambiguous or a resonance, non-fictional television has been manufactured in similar ways to fictional television; be it through writing a script or structuring questions to ask asexuals, through cinematography, lighting, sound or costume, or through editing, the whole process of creating an image has been fabricated for the purposes of the investors, producers, channels and audiences etc., typically to push a certain agenda or ideology. Even live television (which perhaps offers the most true-to-life image of reality) has been manufactured in the choice of participants, the questions asked, the time an asexual is allowed to speak, and whether a third party mediates this, and that’s before considering the conventions relating to the camera, sound, and genre. An asexual person, when represented on television, therefore becomes a caricature of their true self; a character invited to talk about their asexuality, but nothing more. As such, when exploring non-fictional depictions of asexuality, I want to be clear that my judgements of representations are not judgements of the people themselves. I am not interested in questioning individual asexuals about how their asexuality was chosen to be represented on screen by TV creators, but to instead question how these creators chose to represent asexuality on screen through a handful of individual asexuals. For both fictional and non-fictional representations, I note that no single representation of asexuality can capture the wide spectrum and diversity of all asexuals and their experiences, however looking at these

representations as a whole will reveal what types of asexual experiences are acceptable, and those which aren't, and how asexuality has been presented to be palatable enough for heteronormative allosexual British audiences.

Notably, this palatability of asexuality means that, in many ways, when searching for asexuality on British television, this writing unintentionally becomes a 'white history' of asexuality. This is, in part, to blame for the systemic racism in the UK, and within the asexual community, partially caused, as Chen (2020: 69) explains by the fact that "many early figureheads [in the asexual community] were white, so a white culture with white artifacts developed" meaning "white people feel most comfortable in this community and join it, therefore making it even more white." Bauer et al., (2018: 15) evidence this, revealing that of the UK respondents from the 2016 Asexual Community Survey, 91.8% identified as "white-only", 2.4% as "Asian-only", 1.3% as "black-only", 4.0% as "mixed or multi race", and 0.5% as "other".

However, Chen (2020: 69) goes on to say that "asexuality isn't only associated with whiteness because of its most famous faces [but]...because of the complicated ways sexuality itself intersects with race." She explains the identity politics and intersectionality at play, wherein "Racial oppression is difficult to separate from class oppression and from gender-based or sexual oppression because they are experienced simultaneously." As Decker (2014: 74) summarises:

From an early age, people of color – especially young black people and to some extent Hispanic and Latinx/Latino/Latina people – are automatically sexualized to a higher degree by white observers in Western society. Women in these groups are more often considered sexual objects (along with Asian women being fetishized), while black, Hispanic, and Latino men in these groups are regarded as overwhelmingly sexual ... there are also cases of people of color being *desexualized*

in certain situations; certain ethnicities are regarded by white outsiders as less sexual or prudish (like, in some cases, East/Southeast Asian people, especially men, or people of Middle Eastern descent, especially women) (emphasis in original).

Decker (2014: 74) concludes that, “For these folks, being recognized as asexuals and respected for it is markedly less likely, in some cases from both outside and inside their communities.” As such, the television representations discussed are typically of white asexuality, as, particularly within ‘confirmed’ asexuality, white asexual representations are almost all that exist. I note my own role within reinforcing the whiteness of asexuality through my writing, but sadly this is reflective of what representations of asexuality are currently available and here I aim to highlight this issue in the hope that this will change in the coming years.

With all of this in mind, my research will attempt to discuss representations of asexuality in three ways. First, Chapter One will consider how asexuality emerged on British television screens since television started to become popular in the 1950s. This chapter will first explore a brief history of British television and prior writings on asexual representations, before exploring two asexual “resonances” found on British television from 1972 and 1993 (the *Play for Today*, ‘Eleanor’ and *Everyman* episode, ‘Celibacy: Putting Sex in its Place’) to question how asexuality emerged on screen and allow an insight into how past representations have impacted understandings of asexuality today. Chapter Two will then explore instances of confirmed asexuality on British television, beginning in this new millennium to coincide with the greater recognition of asexuality in society. The chapter will consist of two parts, first exploring ‘real’ asexuals on screen through two examples of asexuals speaking on talk shows (*Richard & Judy*, 2004; *Steph’s Packed Lunch*, 2021a) and

secondly exploring fictional asexuality through two asexual characters in soap operas (*Doctors*, 2014; *Emmerdale*, 2016-2022) to question how asexuality has been represented, and how – or if – representations have changed. Finally, Chapter Three will question how modern asexual resonances and ambiguous portrayals of asexuality on British television work alongside a greater understanding of asexuality as a legitimate identity in society. This chapter will use BBC's *Doctor Who* (1963; 2005) to explore how asexual resonances can both expand and limit ideas about asexuality and challenge the dominant norms of British society. It will also explore how the notion of resonances has changed from those in Chapter One, and question what this may mean for the future of asexual representations and resonances.

CHAPTER ONE: ASEXUAL “RESONANCES” ON 20TH CENTURY BRITISH TELEVISION

Introduction

Whilst asexuality is today understood as relating to experiencing little-to-no sexual attraction, this hasn't always been the case. Indeed, Orlando (1972), Johnson (1977) and Rothblum and Brehony (1991) have each used asexuality to describe people who do not participate in sexual behaviours, rather than people who do not experience sexual attraction. Of course, this begs the question, what do these asexualities have in common despite their notable differences? Similarly, as Halperin (1990: 46), regarding cultural and historic differences of homosexuality, asks:

Does the 'paederast,' the classical Greek adult, married male who periodically enjoys sexually penetrating a male adolescent share the same sexuality with the 'berdache,' the Native American (Indian) adult male who from childhood has taken on many aspects of a woman and is regularly penetrated by the adult male to whom he has been married in a public and socially sanctioned ceremony? Does the later share the same sexuality with the New Guinea tribesmen and warrior who from the ages eight to fifteen has been orally inseminated on a daily basis by older youths and who, after years of orally inseminating his juniors, will be married to an adult woman and have children of his own? Does any of these three persons share the same sexuality with the modern homosexual?

Here, a shared sexual act between men throughout history does not necessitate a shared modern sexuality, but nonetheless these examples can and have been used to inform homosexual and queer histories. As such, whilst asexuality is not synonymous with not having sex or celibacy, searching for examples of historic asexuality in this way may nevertheless be beneficial. Indeed, even today, asexuality is typically misunderstood to be an orientation solely concerned with not having or desiring sex (Sky News, 2019) and

exploring historic examples of how people who don't have sex have been represented on television may offer an insight into how asexuality continues to be represented today.

Following Przybylo and Cooper's (2014) methodology, I search for asexual "resonances – or touches, moments, instances" through a framework which blurs the lines between asexuality and celibacy and uses a lack of sexual behaviour as an indicator of asexuality, in line with understandings of asexuality in the 20th century. As such, I do not seek to label these historic characters and people as asexual, but to instead use the asexual "resonances" of 'not having sex' (which I will use interchangeably with 'celibacy' for conciseness) to explore the shared experiences and challenges faced by those who did not have sex in the past. In doing so, I aim to understand how ideas, behaviours or activities that can relate to asexuality have been represented, and the impact of these representations. Here, I recognise the limitations of asexual "resonances" and note that whilst a "resonance" of not having sex may be representative of some asexuals in the past and in the present, this is one aspect of asexuality and isn't representative of all asexuals.

However, as Jeffery-Poulter explained in 1996 when speaking about queer representations:

By studying the way in which lesbians and gay men have been portrayed by television we can begin to understand the many subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which the great British public have been taught to perceive us – and how we have consciously and sub-consciously learned to define ourselves in relation to those images. (Cited in Bourne, 2019: 20)

If not having sex/celibacy has always been represented negatively, is it any wonder asexuality today is perceived negatively? As such, by retracing how celibacy has been portrayed in bygone years on British television, I have a similar goal, and attempt to question the ways that British audiences have been taught to perceive asexuality, how

asexuals have come to recognise asexuality, and how these understandings of asexuality continue to influence representations of asexuality in the present.

Limitations

Whilst I am concerned with the emergence of asexuality on British television, and how, like all queer identities, this appeared on screen before terminology of the sexuality was allowed to be used on screen, I also note the difficulties and impossibilities which hinder answering this question. Television was first broadcast into British homes in 1936, albeit to just four hundred households (Creeber, 2021: 25). Even so, as Bourne (2019: 32) notes, “From 1936 to 1957, virtually no retrievable examples of drama productions exist”, with Caughie (1991: 24-25) explaining that recording television on film wasn’t possible until 1947, with recording television on tape “probably not readily available in Britain till around 1958”, and importantly that:

Neither was in routine use till the 1960s, and even when recording was possible there is a long chain of missing links which have been wiped from the record either to reuse the tapes or to save storage space.

Even when noting that television broadcasting was halted for the duration of World War Two and did not resume until 1946, this 20-plus year gap in British television history makes it difficult to answer the question of how asexuality *first* emerged on British television screens.

Furthermore, when television did appear, it was not a monolithic entity, but rather one influenced by the codes, conventions and narratives of film and radio which appeared before it. As Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson (1985: 16) reveal regarding a sample of one hundred classical Hollywood films from 1915-1960, “...ninety-five involved romance in at

least one line of action, while eighty-five made that the principal line of action.” They note that romance here emphasises “heterosexual romantic love,” and in doing so “continues traditions stemming from the chivalric romance, the bourgeois novel, and the American melodrama.” Furthermore, they explain that:

Screenplay manuals stress love as the theme with greatest human appeal. Character traits are often assigned along gender lines, giving male and female characters those qualities deemed ‘appropriate’ to their roles in romance. To win the love of a man or woman becomes the goal of many characters in classical films.

Beyond a narrative which enforces heterosexual romance, Nochimson (2002: 7) suggests that the “screen couple” involved in these romantic plots “has a significance beyond business and narrative issues. It is about the way we process information about eroticism and intimacy.” Of course, romance, sexuality, and love are not the same, but as Bogaert (2012: 7) points out:

We often use the words “sex” (or “sexuality”) and “romance” synonymously; in other words, sex equals romance and romance equals sex. “Romance” is perhaps the softer, gentler and euphemistic word for “sex”, but the two words are often used interchangeably.

This creates its own problems in attempting to trace celibacy on screen, especially when explicit depictions of sex(uality) have historically been censored from television, such as through the Television Bill 1954 which required “nothing was to be included [on television] which offended against good taste or decency...” (as quoted in Bignell, 2012: 56). As such, there is a question of whether a character is actually celibate, or whether sex – implicitly or explicitly – is denied a presence on television. Thus, it could be suggested that any depiction of romance implies sex, and cannot be used to trace celibacy.

I recognise both limitations and the fact that a much more substantive study would be required to answer the question of how asexuality emerged on British television and would require an exploration into early film and why romance so quickly became a driving narrative. These questions go beyond the scope of this research, but nevertheless it is still possible to explore how asexual “resonances” appeared on British television and use these examples to explore a historical context from which to understand asexuality. As such, this chapter will first situate historic representations of asexuality/celibacy through the expectations of other research in the area, before exploring two examples of asexual “resonances” through a *Play for Today* episode entitled ‘Eleanor’ (1974) and an episode of the *Everyman* documentary series entitled ‘Celibacy: Putting Sex in Its Place’ (1993).

Prior Findings

Many researchers have written about asexual representations, but little work has been done to retrace a *history* of asexual representations in ways like that of Russo (1987), Potter (2019), Buckle (2015), Bourne (2019) and the many others who have explored histories of the representation(s) of other queer identities. However, this does not mean that there isn’t any insight into how asexuality may have emerged and continues to be represented on screen, and the stereotypes and tropes which have accompanied such representations.

Decker (2014: 84), for example, notes that:

Most portrayals of people who do not have sex or are not interested in sex in the media also include aberrant or non-human behavior; uninterested people who are serial killers, aliens, mythical creatures, robots, or deeply damaged people who either have their lack of sexual interests used by the writers to show how strange or inhuman they are *or* are later “saved” or “made whole” by human emotion (in the form of a romantic relationship and sex).

Examples of these associations are rife within British television. For example, asexual aliens can be seen through the Doctor from *Doctor Who* (1963) – who will be explored in Chapter Three – or through the titular character in *Mr. Bean* (1990). Bean's (Rowan Atkinson) alienness is implied as he falls to Earth in a beam of light at the start of most episodes, and whose immaturity and non-normative behaviours for the sake of the audience's laughter place his disinterest in and lack of understandings surrounding sex and relationships as something else to be laughed at. The idea of asexuality in mythical creatures is also evident, for example in *Merlin* (2008), wherein its titular character, a warlock, (played by Colin Morgan) never shares more than a kiss with anyone else, or *Good Omens* (2019) which centres on the unlikely friendship between Crowley (David Tennant) and Aziraphale (Michael Sheen), a demon and an angel.

Additionally, Sinwell (2014: 166) comments about what kinds of bodies are associated with asexuality, suggesting that "Film and television frequently construct asexuality by desexualizing bodies and identities that do not fit cultural codes of desirability." She goes on to explain that:

Fatness, disability, Asian-ness, and nerdiness, for instance, have all been associated with asexuality. These characters are represented as asexual ... because they are not sexually attractive; they are not allowed to have a sexuality because, if they were, normative codes of sexual desirability would be threatened. These representations of asexuality conflate a lack of sexual desirability with a lack of sexual desire and redefine asexuality via the desexualization of non-normative bodies and identities.

The association between disability and asexuality has a long history, and Barnes (1992) supports this suggestion explaining that "The perception of disabled women as asexual is particularly pervasive in the media and frequently presented as the perfect alibi for men's

adultery.” Furthermore, for all that *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) isn’t a British-made television show, it nonetheless airs repeatedly on British television, and is a common example of an asexually resonant character (Decker, 2014: 83; Bogaert, 2012: 37-38; Casano, 2018). The series centres the experiences and nerdiness of Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons) as something laughable and a reason for his long-lasting disinterest in relationships, although he later marries a woman and learns to enjoy sex, as Decker (2014: 84) suggests is typical for representations of asexually resonant characters.

Furthermore, there are certain tropes which are tied into the history of asexual representations and associations. Lamerichs (2018: 90) citing MacCracken (1998: 60), for example, comments that the “detective as asexual seems to be a historical trope related to the view of detectives as loners or priest-like figures proclaiming rationality.” Lamerichs discusses this claim in relation to the asexuality of Sherlock Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) in *Sherlock* (2010), but can be evidenced across TV, such as through the character of police sergeant Oscar Blaketon (Derek Fowlds) from *Heartbeat* (1992 – particularly in episode ‘Vacant Possession’, 1995) and detective Hercule Poirot (David Suchet) from *Agatha Christie’s Poirot* (1989), as well as earlier adaptations of Sherlock Holmes (e.g., *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, 1984). These tie into what Cole (2020) describes as “the Workaholic” asexual character; characters who are too busy to have a romantic or sexual storyline and are thus ambiguously asexual by default. However, notably (and especially historically) the “detective as asexual” trope is male-dominated, and often involved older men. Thereby the asexual possibilities of the characters are somewhat respected, whereas older women as asexual – such as Miss Farnaby (Geraldine McEwan)

from *Mulberry* (1992), and continuing the “detective as asexual” trope, Marple (Joan Hickson) from *Miss Marple* (1984) – typically fall under spinsterhood and latch onto the negative connotations it offers. An example of such a character can be seen in ‘Eleanor’, in the character of Miss Haskins.

‘Eleanor’

‘Eleanor’ aired in 1974 as part of the *Play for Today* series. The hour-long episode explores the character of Eleanor Pawson (Pauline Quirke), a white schoolgirl, who is being bullied for not wanting to have sex. Interestingly, the play opens to images of exteriors of neon-lighted strip clubs, and advertising for “Soho’s Most Sexy Show,” before any characters are introduced, setting the scene for the hypersexuality – or *normality* – of society, and immediately placing Eleanor’s rejection of sex in opposition to this. Indeed, the synopsis for the play being, “Eleanor seems normal enough to her parents and teachers. Why, then, has she disappeared?” asks the audience to question Eleanor’s abnormalities, which quickly become apparent as relating to her disinterest in sex.

In the episode, this disinterest is portrayed through bullying which comes in the form of Eleanor being teased by her classmates at an all-girls school about a boy, Danny Price, who wants to have sex with her, and her rejection of the boy – or apparently any boy – which leads Eleanor to be seen as “prissy.” A classmate, Elizabeth Jones (Nula Conwell), puts up a sign in the assembly hall saying, “PAWSON HAS NEVER HAD IT!” and announces to her laughing peers and Eleanor that “The trouble with Pawson, she’s repressed.” Elizabeth goes on to ask, “What’s wrong with Danny Price” and “All right to fancy you, Pawson? All right to desire you, is it?!” but surrounded by laughing and taunting classmates, Eleanor seems

unable to respond. As such, celibacy is to be seen as abnormal, linked to there being something possibly mentally wrong through repression, and is therefore something to be mocked for, not only by one person, but all her peers. Soon after, two classmates tell Eleanor to ignore Elizabeth, which perhaps indicates that not everyone perceives her – or anyone – not having sex as strange, but Eleanor just responds, “Maybe she’s right. Maybe I am prissy.” To add to this, Eleanor is studious, often the only girl in class who attempts to learn amongst her peers’ disruptiveness, and this “nerdiness” only adds to her abnormalities and asexuality (Sinwell, 2014: 166).

Eleanor is later sent to speak with the headmistress, Miss Whitehead (Maureen Pryor), for passing notes in class after being found with a note Elizabeth sent around saying, “Danny Price wants to do you.” Eleanor explains she didn’t want to send notes, and we then hear Eleanor’s thoughts wherein she explains that:

[Elizabeth] writes me notes to get me into trouble, Miss Whitehead, ‘cos she doesn’t like me. She doesn’t like me because I won’t let Gareth Swells take my knickers off. It’s the fashion today, Miss Whitehead, to get yourself done by fifteen.

Aloud to Whitehead, she just apologises for sending notes, but this nonetheless paints a picture of a society wherein having underage sex is trendy and not participating in sex is worthy of ridicule and hate. Whitehead then asks if Eleanor is worried about sexual matters, and whether she has attended the sex education lectures. Eleanor says she has attended them, leading a confused Whitehead to ask, “Then what is troubling you?” which suggests that Whitehead, like Elizabeth and her peers, sees sex, even potentially underage sex, as normal and natural, with Whitehead seemingly demanding a legitimate reason to

why Eleanor has a problem with someone wanting to have sex with her. Again, we hear Eleanor's thoughts, where she admits:

I don't want to be made love to in the corner of the estate playground, Miss Whitehead, I don't want to spend the entire summer in a high-rise block, just 'cos my father spent the money on grey hound racing. I don't know what I want to do when I leave this place. I'd rather be dead than sit making plastic headphones. That's what's troubling me, Miss Whitehead.

Here it is clear that Eleanor's unhappiness goes beyond being bullied for not wanting to have sex, but instead stems from a life she doesn't want to live. In absence of an answer from Eleanor, Whitehead moves on, asking her if she gets on with her parents, and if she can talk to them. Through Eleanor's thoughts we hear that she "... sometimes pretend[s] they're not my parents at all." She thinks about how every morning in the holidays she has to "listen to them mucking about in their bed," and how "[her] mother's nothing, miss. She's been smashed to pieces" by her father, and that neither parent would listen to her problems. Under these terms Eleanor's want to not have sex can be understood, with her viewing sex as a patriarchal and violent way to control women.

Eleanor is soon dismissed to attend detention with Elizabeth, who comments on their teacher, Miss Haskins (Elaine Mitchell), after she leaves the room, saying that she pities her because:

She never had a fella. She wouldn't give herself. Nowadays, a girl's got to be sensible about a thing like that ... She's on the shelf, Haskins is. Happens, when you're left on your own. You grow hairs on your face, get stomach trouble. It makes your breath bad. Nervous frustration, see?

Elizabeth then writes "Homber is a nympho," on the blackboard, referring to a younger female teacher, and comments that Eleanor herself is growing a moustache before she exits the room, leaving Eleanor in tears. As such, not having sex or a romantic relationship

is seen as a medical problem, as letting yourself or your body go, and as something to pity. However, simultaneously, Elizabeth is critical of Eleanor and Haskins for not having sex, but shames Miss Homber (Yvonne Antrobus) for seemingly having too much sex, illustrating how nonsensical the debate surrounding the 'right' amount of sex is.

Throughout the play, the scenes have been intercut with footage of a younger Eleanor and her parents at the seaside, illustrating her desperate desires to return there. As the play continues, the footage changes from images of young Eleanor at the beach to teenaged Eleanor as her isolation from her peers progresses, and this seems to be the push which makes Eleanor disappear, as she takes herself to the seaside to start a new life. As such, Eleanor disappears wanting to escape the capitalist heteropatriarchy wherein life means having a menial factory job until she is forced to become a wife and mother to a man who will destroy her sense of self and "batter [her] to a pulp" (as Eleanor later comments about sex/relationships). After witnessing this happening to her mother, this can be read as a trauma response, however her complete rejection of wanting sex or waiting for what she calls the supposed "Mr. Right," nonetheless resonates asexually. Indeed, in many ways Eleanor's feelings perpetuate a feminist ideology wherein sex is a form of patriarchal violence against women, and women's liberation should include the right to say no, as well as yes, to sex. (Orlando, 1972; Densmore, 1972 cited by Przybylo and Cooper, 2014: 308). Indeed, the episode is very much a product of its era, and at one-point teachers are seen in the staffroom discussing some schoolwork wherein the girls have written about dreams of finding true love or spending time with male celebrities, viewing this with disdain. Miss Homber, a younger teacher, questions, "Has there ever been such a confused generation?

Drugs and sex and silly dreams, and more opportunities at their age than there have ever been before,” only for Miss Haskins, an older teacher, to blame this on the “permissiveness” of new generations, presumably as a response to the women’s liberation movement. Here, opportunities for women are a good thing, but only opportunities which maintain decency.

As such, celibacy/asexuality here is perceived as an abnormality, framed against a society wherein having underage sex is fashionable and strip clubs and sexy shows are normal (it is worth noting that modern documentaries about asexuality have taken a similar stance to the opening of this episode, wherein *Natalie Cassidy’s Real Britain* (2009) and ‘I Don’t Want Sex’ (2018) both use sexual imagery and advertising at the start of the episode before introducing asexuality to contrast the normality of society with the perceived abnormality of asexuality). Celibacy here is also a repression of desires, stemming from Eleanor’s affluent prissiness, and therefore something to be mocked. In Miss Haskins’ case, as an older woman, not (ever) having sex is also something to be pitied, as though she has missed out on something that would make her ‘whole,’ and instead is believed to have led to health problems, tying into the negative stereotype of spinsterhood. This is despite sex being represented as a tool of patriarchal control and violence. Notably, the idea of a “Mr. Right,” or there being a ‘right person’ who will fix all your problems has already been established and this continues to be used today as a response against the legitimacy of asexuality/not having sex (see: David Jay speaking on *Richard & Judy*, 2004; Yasmin Benoit speaking on *Steph’s Packed Lunch*, 2021a).

‘Celibacy: Putting Sex in Its Place’

‘Celibacy: Putting Sex in Its Place’ (1993) was a 50-minute episode part of the *Everyman* series which appeared on BBC One between 1977 and 2000 in a documentary format “looking at important human issues” (BBC, 2022). The episode opens to members of the public being asked to define celibacy, with the answers of “you don't wanna have sex anymore or have the urge. Your libido is down,” “to have no sexual relationships with anyone else,” “withholding from having sex” and “Being single and not having sex before marriage or maybe you might be married and don't have nothing do with sex.” When using historical definitions of asexuality as defined by not having sex, here the differences between asexuality and celibacy are blurred, with celibacy relating to a temporary or long-lasting period in life which doesn't include sex.

We are introduced to Barry and Chris Woodhouse who have been married for 13 years and have spent the last four and a half years of their marriage celibate, and “increasingly happily celibate”, according to Barry. However, the narration (provided by Stephen Cookman) states that their “choice to rule sex out of their marriage is certainly unorthodox and may even seem unnatural.” Here, not including sex in a marriage is unusual, and highlights how not having sex must be a choice, whereas having sex is seemingly an unquestioned aspect of a relationship/life. Despite the perceived strangeness surrounding not having sex, the narration nonetheless goes on to reveal that:

...celibacy and chastity are choices which an increasing number of people are making. They see it as a way of gaining some private space and time for themselves away from someone else's sexual demands. But for those who choose celibacy, the benefits are many. For those who don't, the imposition of it can be painfully difficult.

As such, celibacy is a choice made for personal benefit, but again the idea of someone not having sex is always a “choice,” and the idea of someone who is never inclined to want to participate in sexual activity is seemingly non-existent, or at least a great imposition.

The title then appears on screen, with ‘Celibacy’ written in traditional calligraphy amongst choral singing, evoking the Biblical and religious context associated with celibacy, although the episode attempts to escape this association, with the synopsis asking, “Celibacy, we are led to believe, belongs to certain strict religious orders, but does it? This film examines the role celibacy plays in an increasing number of lives.” Nonetheless, the religious history of celibacy is discussed, although Reay Tannahill, author of *Sex in History* (1991), illustrates how, similarly to how terminology and languages of asexuality have developed and changed over the years, so has celibacy. She points out that “nowadays we tend to use [celibacy] as if it were synonymous with chastity. It isn’t actually. Celibacy is refraining from marriage and chastity is refraining from sex,” and notes there was a clear distinction between the two up to the medieval period. Even within a religious context of celibacy, there is a question by Parish priest, Richard McKay of “You may wonder why a church that preaches relationships ... deny [our official clergy] the most fundamental and most human of relationships”, with concerns not surrounding the practicalities of being single or sexually abstinent, but rather that there is no choice in the matter. Indeed, McKay goes on to say that “Looking back on our history, we have to say that compulsory celibacy is a century long experiment that must be deemed to have failed by now.”

“Ironically,” the narration then says, “just as some members of the clergy are beginning to question the value of celibacy, the argument for it in the everyday secular world is

beginning to hot up.” Here, the episode moves away from religious contexts of celibacy, and we are instead introduced to Liz Hodgkinson, a journalist and author of books such as *Sex is Not Compulsory: Giving Up Sex for Better Health and Greater Happiness* (1986). In this context, Hodgkinson clearly views celibacy or not having sex as something that can be positive. She explains that:

I know a lot of people see [celibacy] as a lack in your life, but it can actually be a very potent kind of freedom when you are not having to deal with somebody else's sexual demands which may not always be welcome to you. And also, if you're not putting your consciousness in that area, it can leave your mind and emotions, and also time and space, free to do things which may be of very much more importance and relevance to you.

Again, celibacy is viewed as a choice that can lead to personal benefits, and the idea of celibacy playing a role in an “increasing number of lives” is situated in a context wherein the narrator comments:

Today, the western media are flooded with overt sexual imagery. The message: that nothing is more relevant or important than sex. You could be forgiven for imagining that everyone – except perhaps you – is at it all the time, but are they?

Examples of this “overt sexual imagery” are seen on screen, with pictures of nude and scantily clad female and male bodies touching, alongside a song with lyrics about falling in love – perhaps suggesting that sex and love or romance are inherently linked. The narration then attempts to answer its own question of ‘is everyone at it?’ citing a publication in *Nature* which reveals that:

...nearly one in eight men between the ages of 16 and 60 have not had sex within the last year. One in twelve have either abstained or have not had the opportunity to be sexually active within the last five years. And no less than one in 15 – about 7% – of the male population will still be a virgin when he dies.

The narration comments that similar figures exist for women, but women were slightly more sexually active than men, before questioning, “Are celibacy and chastity therefore more common in contemporary society than we're led to believe?”

In response, Marj Thoburn, introduced as head of Sex Therapy Relate, says:

I believe that there are, for many couples, episodes in their lives when they aren't actively engaging in sexual activity and that comes about for a whole range of reasons, some of it to do with choice, some of it to do with health, some of it to do with pregnancy or literally not just being together.

Here, there is a sense that temporary periods, or “episodes” of not having sex are normal, whether choosing to have sex or not stems from a choice or circumstance, however the idea of longer term, or even life-long periods of not having sex seems incredulous. Furthermore, this implies there must always be a ‘legitimate’ reason for celibacy. Hodgkinson elaborates on this explaining that saying that currently the choice not to have sex isn’t respected and instead it is seen as:

something wrong – dysfunctional – and we have to be put back in working order if we’re not having a sex life, or we’re not enjoying it. We have to go for therapy these days, to put us back into being sexually active, and yet I know from personal experience that nothing bad happens to you when you’re not sexually active.

Even with a ‘legitimate’ reason for not having sex, celibacy it would seem, is seen as a dysfunction, as something to fix, which mirrors how asexuality continues to be seen today.

We are then introduced to Sally Cline, author and researcher, who explains the term “the genital myth,” which she explains is an:

...ideology which seems to me to be saying that ‘sex is normal, sex makes you happy, sex makes you healthy’, and once you believe that then you get the message that celibacy is deviant, or a disease, and that people – particularly women – who are celibate are seen as failures or as freaks.

The narration suggests that this proposition of not having sex being deviant can be traced back to the 1960s, pointing to the Hippie movement as a visible cause for the sexual freedom that is now taken for granted. However, the narration also suggests that “Less conspicuous, but fundamental in its effect on sexuality and society, was the oral contraceptive pill,” explaining that “What had been a procreational act could now be a recreational activity” and that:

One of the inevitable consequences for women of this newfound freedom to be sexually active was that within a decade that freedom became an obligation to become a practiced and skilled sexual expert.

Indeed, Hodgkinson has seen the impact of this herself and suggests that “The problem with our age at the moment is that we are absolutely saturated with sexual images all the time.” She explains that she thinks:

...it's particularly sad for women, for teenagers, for young girls, that all the teenage comics and magazines aimed at their age group are all about relationships as if you've got to have one, you've got to have a sexual relationship, you've got to have a partner, you've got to have a boyfriend. And the feeling really that I'm picking up is that there really isn't equal weight given to a choice to do something different.

This illustrates the impacts of compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity, years before the terminology to describe such concepts even existed. Of course, it's not only women who can be impacted by the hypersexualisation that had taken root in society, as Angus MacKinnon, senior editor of *GQ Magazine*, revealed saying that:

I think men are largely encouraged to feel that they are completely inadequate unless they are performing successfully sexually with great frequency, and I think that is an obsession that borders on the unhealthy really ... And the fact of the matter is that you can actually do without sex and lead a perfectly, enjoyable fully functioning existence.

However, in MacKinnon's opinion, most problems about sex and the real-world stem from the fact that:

We don't talk about [sex] as an aspect of love. We don't talk about it as part of something bigger, of love, of tenderness, or part of something long term. We just consider it as this sort of brutal or squashy thing that happens in a few minutes and either pleases people greatly or disappoints them greatly.

However, in these terms, sex which is devoid of love or romance is something to be criticised, which can be interpreted as a critique of aromanticism, and a reinforcement of amatonormativity.

Considering the highly sexualised society, Hodgkinson therefore believed that it was "valuable" to test being both sexually active and celibate, however she comments that:

most people never give themselves that chance because even if they are celibate, it's possibly by default. It's not because I've said 'I'm going to give myself this period of celibacy in order to discover who I am and what I really want to do' but I think that when celibacy isn't a choice, the problem is that your thoughts may be highly focused on the lack of sex in your life, and it becomes a bigger thing that it really is.

However, there is a danger to considering "default" celibacy as an inherently detrimental state. To echo Johnson's (1977) definition of "the asexual woman who has no sexual desires at all," for example, celibacy may be a default state. Such a woman may not *choose* to be celibate, but rather never choose to have sex. Here, celibacy would be a non-choice, a default, and indeed forcing herself to have undesired sex may indeed be detrimental. However, simultaneously, there is some truth in the idea that celibacy not being a choice can be a negative thing. Does this not describe what we would now call incels (involuntary celibates)?

However, the idea of a “default” celibacy being a negative thing is unsurprising, with Thoburn suggesting that in relationships:

The major female dysfunction that presents – if you can call it a dysfunction – is loss of interest, loss of desire, where ... a woman has actually gone off sex or perhaps hasn't ever been involved or interested in sex in the first place.

Indeed, Cline comments about how not having sex has been seen as “a pathological symptom throughout the ages” and describes the reactions she has heard from women she has interviewed after they told their partners they wanted to be celibate, including:

...one man went to the doctor and got antidepressants for his wife. Another man told his wife that she was menopausal and sick in the head, and she needs to see a psychiatrist. Several women were told they're on a verge of having mental breakdowns. One boyfriend went to a GP and the GP calls the woman in and said that she was to go on holiday with her boyfriend so that sanity and sex could be resumed as soon as possible, normal service in other words.

Today we would call such reactions examples of conversion therapy, but here medical intervention is used as a tool for patriarchal control of women. However, in spite of these reactions, there is a distinct sense that temporary periods of choosing to not have sex are seen as valuable times, but only in so much as they may better prepare someone for a future sexual relationship, with Hodgkinson saying that “I don't know of anybody who wouldn't gain from having that – having a period of solitude,” and Thoburn suggesting that “celibacy should be considered as a positive option certainly” and that “there are times in one's life when that choice is the most sensible one you can make.”

As such, celibacy is a choice that an increasing number of people have made and is seen as a positive thing which can lead to self-growth, but only in moderation and presumably before a later sexual relationship. Throughout the episode, there is a focus on the idea that people choose *not to* have sex, rather than choose *to* have sex, which is indicative of the

idea of compulsory sexuality, describing “the assumption that all people are sexual” (Gupta, 2015: 132). Whilst I do not believe the episode’s discussions comment on debates surrounding consent (the choice to not have sex is always there), this nonetheless illuminates the expectations of sex within relationships and marriages. Whilst the religious contexts of celibacy are escaped and viewed with derision – even from within the Church – it is clear that wider society also view celibacy with contempt. Women who are celibate are viewed as “dysfunctional,” as “freaks” or “failures” for not having sex, and partners urge them to seek medical intervention (conversion therapy) to ‘fix’ them of their perceived problem. Whilst male celibates are given a voice in the episode, their experiences of societal expectations surrounding celibacy seem improved compared to women, although the limited voice given to men compared to women makes it difficult to ascertain whether this is an accurate image of society. Nonetheless, whilst choosing celibacy can be a positive thing for those who choose it, for those who don’t, not having sex is an imposition against the sexual society and those who feel they deserve or are owed sex in a relationship or marriage.

Conclusion

Attempting to retrace a history of asexuality on British television has its limitations, whether technological or historical. However, searching for asexual “resonances” nonetheless allows an insight into how asexuality/not having sex has been represented on screen, and can be used to explore a historic context in which to understand asexuality. In searching for examples of asexuality/not having sex I have considered the writings of Decker, Sinwell and Lamerichs to explore ways in which asexuality has been associated with

non-human and non-normative bodies and have evidenced this through examples from British television including *Doctor Who*, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *Heartbeat* and *Mr. Bean*. Furthermore, I studied two examples in depth to explore representations of celibacy. In 'Eleanor' (1974), celibacy is the cause of a young girls bullying. In 'Celibacy: Putting Sex in Its Place', celibacy – or typically short periods of not having sex – is a choice made for personal benefit and seen as a reaction against the hypersexuality of society. In both examples, celibacy is perceived negatively by others, leading to bullying in 'Eleanor' and suggestions of medical intervention in 'Celibacy'.

Using the asexual history afforded to us through the writings of Orlando (1972), Johnson (1977), and Rothblum and Brehony (1991), and taking for granted that the asexuality of not having sex is a precursor for the asexuality of experiencing little-to-no sexual attraction – as is required within the methodology of asexual “resonances” (Przybylo and Cooper, 2014) – this suggests that asexuality’s emergence on screen has been a negative one. In 'Eleanor', the patriarchal control of sex seems inescapable, and whilst Eleanor does disappear and escape her life, the ambiguous ending does little to suggest whether her choice against sex is for good or for bad. 'Celibacy', however, does offer some sympathy to those who choose celibacy, and represents individuals’ choices to not have sex as a positive one, but regardless, the societal implications of celibacy being about missing out on “the most fundamental and most human of relationships” nonetheless suggests those who don’t have sex are incomplete and less than human.

Of course, this is not a complete history of how asexuality/celibacy has been represented on screen, and these examples barely scrape the surface of how asexuality may have

emerged on British television. However, these examples nonetheless offer an insight into a history of asexuality which has yet to be explored.

CHAPTER TWO: CONFIRMED REPRESENTATIONS OF ASEXUALITY

Introduction

In creating the methodology of asexual “resonances,” Przybylo and Cooper (2014) suggested that traditional definitions of asexuality were “strict”, searching for “true asexuality”, thus limiting both asexual possibilities, and the chances of locating archival examples of asexuality. This may be true, however, in recent years an archive of ‘confirmed’ asexuality, wherein asexual terminology is used on screen has also emerged. This archive begins in the twentieth century, however evolving definitions of ‘asexual’ and ‘asexuality’ have interfered with retracing asexuality as a sexual orientation on screen. For example, in an episode of *Game On* (‘Working Girls’, 1995) a character is told they are asexual, but through the definition of the character being sexually unattractive, rather than not experiencing sexual attraction or being non-sexual. Does this nonetheless count as a representation of asexuality? Should this be ruled out as being a part of asexual history for not fitting into the common definitions of asexuality, or does it add to a history that has been lost?

A second example is Kenneth Williams. Best known for his roles in the *Carry On* films, Williams (1986) said he was “asexual” when interviewed by Joan Rivers for *Can We Talk?* Here, Williams explained that he “should have been a monk” and lived a life of celibacy, as he would find any form of relationship invasive to his privacy. Williams is, however, said to have been gay, though his purported answer when asked if he was indeed gay was “spiritually, yes. Mentally, yes. Physically, no” (Gyles Brandreth speaking on ‘Kenneth

Williams', *Heroes of Comedy*, 2000). Indeed, from these comments, there is a suggestion of Williams being a homoromantic asexual man. Whilst it is, however, more likely that Williams's asexuality/celebrity was a public persona, with his posthumously published diaries (*The Kenneth Williams Diaries*, 1994) suggestive of Williams as an outwardly closeted gay man who had engaged in sexual activity of some form with other men, there remains a question as to whether this use of asexual terminology can still benefit asexual history and research. Here, asexual is again used as relating to celibacy, but without the later context of Williams's diaries, at the time of the interview, an asexual resonance still prevails. Can this count as a representation of asexuality, nonetheless?

I suggest that any use of asexual terminology on screen (outside of scientific definitions surrounding asexual reproduction) *does* add to asexual history and allows us to retrace understandings of asexuality through time, even, and perhaps especially, when these understandings differ to modern understandings. However, in this chapter, I search for asexual representations in the twenty-first century, wherein asexuality is understood as experiencing no (or little) sexual attraction, rather than being non-sexual, even if this is not how it is defined on screen. It is these examples that are more meaningful in a study of asexuality on screen as it is these representations that continue to have a direct impact on understandings of asexuality today. Moreover, unless asexual terminology is used onscreen beyond the definition of being non-sexual, there is no inclusive asexual visibility and asexual possibilities become severely limited (although, even with modern definitions of asexuality being used on screen asexuality's seemingly inherent non-sexuality is still reinforced).

The ethos behind the Asexual Visibility and Education Network's (AVEN) goals are "creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community" (AVEN, 2022). Without making asexuality and asexual terminology and definitions visible, it cannot be educated upon, and outdated – though no less unimportant – understandings of asexuality being a solely non-sexual identity cannot be escaped. This lack of visibility and education is problematic, as Glass (2020: 11) explains, "When there is no affirmation of your existence, you can't understand yourself. When there is no sense of being or purpose in the world you turn in on yourself. Especially when you're a child," and it is often in childhood that our (a)sexuality becomes apparent. Confirmed depictions of asexuality, wherein asexuality is defined, and asexual terminology is used onscreen are therefore required to broaden recognition and understandings of the identity in society. However, as will be discussed, these depictions are only one part of the story; what types of asexuals and asexual experiences get represented tell another story which is poignant when questioning how asexuality is represented.

The importance of asexual terminology being discussed onscreen has been illustrated by Decker (2014: 84). In 2012, an episode of *House M.D.* ('Better Half') aired in America wherein Dr. House 'fixes' two 'asexual' people; one who was lying about being asexual and the other whose 'asexuality' was caused by a brain tumour. Decker notes that "[t]he Wikipedia article 'Asexuality' typically had around four thousand hits per day before the episode aired" but that "the day it aired, more than fifty thousand people clicked through to the Wikipedia article, and the *Asexual Visibility and Education Network* beat its previous record for the most users online at once (most of whom were not registered)" (2014: 84,

emphasis in original). Thus, an episode which poorly misrepresented asexuality still led to thousands of people seeking more information about it. However, thousands more people will have watched the episode and only taken away damaging information, highlighting the importance of researched and correctly defined representations of asexuality.

Therefore, the use of asexual terminology can limit the possibilities of asexuality, as Przybylo and Cooper suggest (and will be illustrated in this chapter), but under the fifth edition of America's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), having access to terminology and being able to self-identify as asexual can mean the difference between a person's asexuality being accepted as an orientation, instead of it being diagnosed – and (attempted to be) treated – as a female sexual interest/arousal disorder or male hypoactive sexual desire disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 434, 443). Whilst the DSM is not used in the UK, and the World Health Organisation's (WHO) International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) is used instead, the 'persistent lack of desire for sexual activity' – which is resonant with many asexual experiences – has been categorised as a potential "mental and behavioural disorder" as well as a "sexual dysfunction" without any recognition for asexuality (WHO, 1992: 191-192). As such, the idea of asexuality being a fixable disorder, or a mental condition is common, with there being evidence of asexuals facing conversion therapy in healthcare spaces (GEO, 2021) and thus the need to create better understandings of asexuality and use asexual terminology onscreen is clear.

This chapter, therefore, explores four instances wherein asexual terminology has been used on screen. Firstly, I will explore non-fictional depictions through an episode of the chat

show *Richard & Judy* from 2004, and an episode of *Steph's Packed Lunch* (2021a), both of which feature interviews with asexuals. Secondly, I will explore fictional representations of asexuality, through an episode of *Doctors* (2014), and then explore Liv Flaherty's asexual storyline on the ITV soap *Emmerdale* (1972) between 2016 to 2022. Through these examples, I contrast two of the earliest representations of asexuality with two of the most recent, offering an insight into how asexuality has been represented and how representations may – or may not – have changed, and questioning what representations of asexuality are missing from British television screens.

Part One: Asexuals on Screen

Richard & Judy: Early Representations

Richard & Judy was an early evening weekday chat show which aired on Channel 4 between 2001 and 2008. Hosted by married couple Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan, the episode from October 18th 2004, features David Jay, introduced as the 'acknowledged leader of the asexual revolution' for creating the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), as well Terri Barrett, who is in a sexless marriage, and the infamous Dr. Raj Persaud (a psychiatrist who has since been discredited, but was a well-known and authoritative figure on TV at the time). To introduce the segment about asexuality, Madeley explains that:

One of the fundamental forces in humanity is our sexual urge. It's led to wars, the collapse of civilisations, and, in our own age, an obsession with sex and all its trappings. But a new group is emerging, and they're claiming to be the third, hitherto unnoticed sex – the asexuals. They're not celibates, celibates choose their path, but these are people who genuinely have not got the slightest interest whatsoever in having sex with anybody else and they claim that far from being a tiny, freakish group, there are large numbers of them and they're totally normal.

Here, relating 'sexual urge' to a 'fundamental force' of 'humanity' suggests asexuals are something other than human. The distinction that asexuals are not celibates is useful, but, although Madeley suggests asexuals are *not* a "freakish group," this description nonetheless enforces this negative association. This, alongside Madeley having to tell the audience that asexuals "claim" to be "totally normal" reveals what the social understandings and attitudes towards asexuality were at the time: freakish and abnormal. Madeley then explains that over the last few weeks asexuality has been "all over the papers in this country," evidencing this with two digitised headlines which appear on screen from the *Daily Mail* and *The Independent* about asexuality. Madeley explains this recent "prominence" of asexuals in newspapers as the reason for the discussion that day – although this apparent prominence led to little in terms of wider societal understandings of asexuality given that almost two decades later asexuality is still almost invisible within British society.

David Jay

When asked to define what being asexual means, Jay explains that "The definition I would use is that an asexual person is someone who does not experience sexual attraction." This is the same definition that is still widely used today, and this is (perhaps) the first-time asexuality had been defined in this way on British television. This leads to Finnigan questioning him about seeing "pretty girls" of his age at parties or clubs, asking "you just don't fancy them?" Jay explains that he'd talk to them," elaborating that "I like going to parties, I'm very social, and I interact with people and have a lot of friendships and actively form relationships and date people..." Finnigan, however, interrupts and demands, "Sorry,

what do you mean ‘date people?’”, as though the notion of a relationship without sex is truly unfathomable. Jay explains that dating is the same thing, asexual or not, elaborating that “a number of asexual people will date, will find partners, will, you know, ask them out.” Here, there is a sense of what would later come to be known as a ‘Gold Star’ asexual (Cuthbert, 2017: 241) or a “real” asexual – which describes an asexual who is considered “legitimate” or “convincing” and thereby publicly accepted because they have “...all the characteristics of the ideal [allo]sexual person but [are] simply unable to be sexual and, therefore, should be accepted as asexual” and are “...white, well educated, articulate, and comfortable middle, or upper-middle class”(Chasin, 2013: 418). Jay as a white, well-educated, articulate young man can thereby discuss his asexuality and be – somewhat – believed, and ensuring the audience recognises his relative normality – by being social and dating – aids him in this.

Madeley moves on to ask about what it was like for Jay growing up different to his friends, saying, “...there must have been a period as you grew up when you thought, ‘I’m a freak, I’m really unusual, there’s something wrong with me’”. Whilst there are nicer ways to ask this, Jay nonetheless agrees with him, explaining that:

...through my teenage years, I kind of spent a lot of time struggling with it, trying to work out where I fit – I wasn’t certain if I was the only one. I independently thought up the word ‘asexual’ to describe how I felt, and then I came to a definition and an understanding of it that I was comfortable with, that I thought was accurate, and I made this website ... and all over the world, people ... found this website and a community just developed. I mean, it’s not huge, but considering there was nothing – nothing! – two years ago, it’s remarkable.

Here the benefit of an asexual community becomes known, in providing support and easing the isolation of feeling alone in your experiences. This also points to the relative newness

of asexuality as a known orientation, as, despite the terminology of asexuality having existed in many ways for at least 30 years prior to Jay creating AVEN in 2001, Jay had to work it out for himself, and build a community from there. However, in lieu of further discussion surrounding the asexual community, or the benefit of having this shared website, Finnigan instead wants to know if being asexual is something more than just having a low sex drive, asking, “Do you ever get aroused?” Jay explains that:

I do get sexually aroused. Some asexual people experience arousal, some asexual people don't. And for me, it's something that happens, it's a physical thing that happens with my body, it's not at all associated with a desire to be sexual with anyone else.

Here, the nuances of asexuality as not experiencing sexual attraction, but arousal being separate from this begin to be uncovered. However, rather than exploring the possibilities of asexuality relating to sex drive, desire, or behaviour, the discussion moves on to Madeley questioning Barrett.

Terri Barrett

Madeley explains that Barrett has been in a sexless marriage for ten years but has participated in sexual activities in previous relationships, explaining that Barrett had always been “...pretending – pretending that it is what you wanted to do, and pretending you in anyway enjoyed it.” Barrett agrees, explaining that “From the age of 19, when I had my first sexual encounter, I just didn't enjoy sex at all,” and that she was “Just going along with it. I've had a few sexual encounters, and each time I've just thought, 'No, I just don't like it'”. Here, a spectrum of asexuality begins to emerge, with Barrett repulsed by sex, but Jay

seemingly more neutral towards sexual activity, though still not wanting to participate in it himself (the possibility of being asexual and sex-favourable, however, is absent). Madeley then reveals that with her current partner, Phil, that Barrett "... just said to him, on your wedding night, you pushed him off and said, 'No, no, I hate it.' ... And you won't even give him a cuddle in case that gets him aroused? 'Cos he would like sex."

Barrett agrees, but Madeley quickly moves on, introducing her husband, Phil, who, Madeley explains, "as far as we can establish – and there seems to reason to doubt him at all or you – he's been completely faithful, he's been by your side and loves you very much", who they had interviewed earlier to ask, "the obvious questions". That the show felt the need to establish and then report on Phil's fidelity in a sexless marriage is indicative of the perceived impossibility of a loving relationship without sex. From Phil's answers, it seems that the "obvious questions" were along the lines of: 'Would you want to have sex knowing your wife wouldn't enjoy it', 'Do you look at other women instead', 'Do you wish that your wife was different', and 'Are you happy in your marriage'? Nonetheless, Phil reveals, "I'm 100% happy in our marriage, it might not be the norm of what other people expect marriages to be, but for us it's perfect", but even so, the entire debacle sensationalises their marriage, and Barrett's asexuality. But, as Cerankowski noted regarding asexuality on American television, the sensationalism of early images of asexuality was the norm. She explains that:

Often, in these media spots, with the announcement of their asexuality, Jay and other AVEN members are met with reactions of incredulity by the interviewer or they are pathologized and further ostracized for the sake of sensationalization. (2014: 140)

Furthermore, it is noticeable that Barrett has less of an opportunity to speak for herself, and Madeley and Phil – men – are used to speak on her behalf, perhaps an indication of women's asexuality being considered even more unlikely, as a continuation of attitudes wherein women were presumed to be less sexual anyway.

A voice of reason?

Finnigan then invites Persaud to speak, asking, "Are there really people who are totally asexual?" Sadly, the inclusion of a psychiatrist to mediate the revelation of asexuality falls back on representations of queer sexualities in the past. As Gross (2001: 37-38) explains regarding representations of homosexual people from the 1950's onward in America:

Radio and television producers of the period—and, unfortunately, many today as well—were unable, or unwilling, to allow lesbian or gay people to speak for themselves without the protection of a medical or religious expert to neutralize the threat to normalcy.

Here, again, a medical professional is used to neutralise the 'threat' of asexuality by pathologizing it instead. Persaud first says that "I think most scientists who specialise in the study of sex would agree that our sexuality is a lot more flexible than we realise," pointing to those who become supposedly "temporarily homosexual" in prison settings as evidence. But he then uses this "flexibility" to explain away the legitimacy of asexuality by saying:

So, what a lot of people would argue is our sexuality changes over time, and people who are calling themselves asexual might be going through an asexual phase, i.e., a phase in their life where they have low sexual drive for various reasons, perhaps with the wrong partner ... And the problem with the asexual category is you have a low sex drive; it stops you searching for treatments to improve your sexual drive.

Here, despite Jay's clear definition of asexuality relating to "not experienc[ing] sexual attraction", asexuality is nonetheless misconstrued as relating to having a low sexual drive, and discussed as a phase, just as other queer identities have been discussed throughout

history, and considered to be a medical issue that needs treatment. Due to this suggestion, Finnigan asks, "...do you think that someone like David could, with appropriate treatment, become a normally functioning sexual human being?" Whilst Persaud admits he is "worried about the notion of 'normally functioning'", his concern is that:

as a young guy ... at the beginning of his sexual journey, I would be a bit worried about him categorising himself in a label that constrains him. I would say he should be free to the idea of feeling asexual now, [but] that maybe in the future if you met someone else, or had different circumstances, your sexual drive might increase.

Here, the idea of compulsory sexuality is clear. Jay, like all young people, is supposedly at the start of a sexual journey that has been enforced on him by society, without a question to whether this is something he wants. The concept of someone, particularly a young man, not wanting sex is incomprehensible, and be it through medical treatment or otherwise, the belief that an asexual will change or be fixed outweighs the belief of the legitimacy of asexuality.

Jay finally gets a chance to respond, saying, "Well, I would be open to [changing in the future], and I always have been." He further explains that:

The way I think about it, any straight man could wake up, find the man of his dreams, and live as a gay person happily for the rest of their lives. The same way I could wake up and one day be in a sexual relationship. And if that happens, and I'm happy, then that's wonderful, but I'm certainly not going to seek treatment because I'm happy the way I am. I'm not going to sit around waiting to find the right person to be in a sexual relationship with, because right now I'm looking for the right person to be in an asexual relationship with because that fits me [better].

Consequently, the possibility of asexuality being a phase and later changing is entertained, albeit as an unlikely possibility, with asexuality also reinforced as having no relation to wanting or having a sexual relationship. Importantly, the suggestion of seeking treatment

is dismissed, and Jay can end on a statement of his happiness and intent to find a relationship which is best for him.

Closing remarks

To finish the interview, Madeley puts one last question to Barrett, to Persaud's laughter, suggesting to her that sex is a chore not unlike someone cooking dinner for their partner who hates cooking just to make them happy. Thus, he asks:

Given that your husband who loves you very much would dearly love to have a bit of sex with you from time to time, couldn't you regard it as occasionally cooking a meal that you can't be bothered to cook?

Barrett, rightfully, says "No," to which Madeley seems unsurprised, but no less dissatisfied by. Nonetheless, Madeley then continues, saying, "I'm not suggesting, I'm just putting it to you, some people out there will be saying, 'Why doesn't she just lay back and think of England'". Barrett, again, must explain that "Yeah, I've done that many a times ... It did no good for me. I don't want to keep a bloke happy; I'd rather just live the way I am." Here, whilst Madeley is apparently "not suggesting" Barrett has unwanted sex, it nonetheless seems like he is asking Barrett to agree to her own rape or sexual assault, attempting to use her husband's love to try and manipulate her into unwanted sexual encounters. Of course, asexuals can have consensual and wanted sexual relationships but, under Nagoski's (2011) model of consent (which has become popular within asexual communities, according to Chen, 2020: 147) wherein consent varies from "enthusiastic" to "willing" to "unwilling" to "coerced", Barrett's consent would be considered coerced, and indicative of assault.

But is it any wonder that a relationship, let alone a marriage, without sex is seen as an impossibility when sex is legally required to consummate a marriage between partners of different sexes under British law? (Gov.uk, 2022) Sex, therefore, is not only a legal requirement, but becomes a duty in a marriage, sex becomes owed to a spouse and without it a marriage can be annulled. Whilst marital rape has now been outlawed under the *Sexual Offences Act 2003*, only a year before this interview, attitudes have been slow to change, with sex (consensual or not) within marriage, or outside it, still deemed as an expectation owed to a partner (YouGov, 2018). The segment then thankfully ends, with Madeley and Finnigan thanking the three for “coming and talking so frankly,” and Jay just manages to announce AVEN’s website address before the episode moves on.

Conclusions

Here, we learn the definition of asexuality, but between Madeley, Finnigan and Persaud’s questions and comments, asexuality’s place as being about not experiencing sexual attraction is lost amongst comments on arousal, sexual encounters, and potential treatments for low sexual drive. Thus, asexuality is not represented as not experiencing sexual attraction, but rather not wanting – and hating the idea – of a sexual encounter or relationship and having no sexual desires, with it suggested that it’s caused by a low sex drive, which could be fixable. However, whilst this does not reflect current understandings of asexuality and how it interacts with sexual behaviour, desire, drive, and attractions, in 2004 community discussions surrounding this were still in their infancy and were continuing earlier discussions surrounding asexuality as defined by no sexual behaviour. As such, the numerous possibilities of asexuality – including greysexuality/demisexuality and

aromanticism, for example, which had not yet been labelled and defined – were not particularly recognised or understood (AVEN, 2003a; AVEN, 2003b).

Thus, whilst these understandings about asexuality from *Richard & Judy* may be outdated, they do nonetheless reflect some understandings of asexuality from the time. Regardless, whilst the pair are clear that “I’m happy the way I am” (Jay) and “I’d rather live the way I am” (Barrett), the legitimacy of their feelings and experiences are mocked by Persaud and Madeley and are offered doubt from Finnigan. With Jay and Barrett outnumbered and Madeley and Finnigan acting as viewer representatives alongside Persaud’s expert opinion to mediate between the audience and the programme, ultimately it is the narrative that there is indeed something wrong with them, which is treatable with time, or a different partner which prevails. As a result, Cerankowski (2014: 140) notes that rather than the visibility and education wanting to be achieved by AVEN, opportunities on screen such as this may have instead “create[d] a spectacle of fascination and entertainment ... rather than understanding and new comprehension of asexuality.” Asexuality had been made visible to thousands of viewers for perhaps the first time, but amongst dismissive remarks and misconstruing the orientation, did this do more harm than good?

Steph's Packed Lunch

17 years later, Yasmin Benoit (who also appeared in the asexual BBC Three documentary, ‘I Don’t Want Sex’, 2018) had become the face of asexuality in the UK and featured on a similar Channel 4 talk show, *Steph’s Packed Lunch* (2021a). The first change from *Richard & Judy* is obvious. Rather than Jay, who could be referred to as a ‘Gold Star’ asexual (Cuthbert, 2017: 241), Benoit is a young Black woman, still well-educated and articulate,

but who is hypersexualised through her modelling career, and thereby a less “convincing” asexual than Jay. However, this is ultimately more important in opening possibilities of who can be asexual and diversifying the whiteness of asexuality that has prevailed on screen.

Furthermore, unlike on *Richard & Judy*, Benoit is not mediated by a psychiatrist – or anyone else – and instead, the interview is a refreshingly open conversation between presenter, Steph McGovern, and Benoit. However, this is not to say that Benoit is not sensationalised, with her initially being introduced as the:

successful lingerie model who doesn’t fancy anyone. Not because she’s picky, she’s asexual. 24-year-old, Yasmin Benoit, says she doesn’t ever want to have sex, even though her job involves posing for risqué photos.

Whereas Jay was introduced as the “acknowledged leader of the asexual revolution” (*Richard & Judy*, 2004) for his activism, Benoit’s status as an aromantic, asexual and queer activist and the face of asexuality in the UK is dismissed in favour of sexualising her, with an example of Benoit’s “risqué photos” shown as she is being introduced. This sensationalism is used to grab the audience’s attention to titillate viewers into watching the programme but thankfully, moving into the actual interview, this sensationalism is left behind in favour of meaningful conversation.

Defining asexuality

McGovern first asks what it means to be asexual, which Benoit replies, “Being asexual just means experiencing little-to-no sexual attraction. So, I like to think of it as the sexual orientation that just isn’t oriented anywhere.” Here, we have a newer definition of asexuality, one which notes “experiencing little-to-no sexual attraction” – rather than Jay’s definition on *Richard & Judy* (2004) of “not experiencing sexual attraction.” This simple

qualifier is inclusive of the asexual spectrum including those who may experience sexual attraction rarely, such as demisexuals, and highlights the changes in understandings about asexuality from within the asexual community itself. Benoit also explains that “I didn’t learn the term until I was about 15, but I’d always like known I was asexual,” revealing, when asked how she felt when she realised, that:

Honestly, I wasn’t particularly concerned about it, but other people were, and it was everyone else’s kind of projections onto me that made me start to wonder like, ‘Oh, is this something I should be concerned about?’ ... But for everyone else that was like a primary worry. And then I started to worry about it.

Here, we explore how societal expectations regarding sexuality become detrimental to those who do not fit in with these expectations. If asexuality was known about and understood in society, then Benoit and other asexuals would not be forced to see themselves as different and othered from their peers. It is also revealing of how quickly expectations surrounding normative sexuality are taught, as it was Benoit’s school peers who would contribute to this concern. Regardless, she notes the benefit of having asexual terminology as, after Googling the term and seeing other people like her, she realised, “Okay, it’s not just me. This is an actual thing. It’s a sexual orientation. There’s nothing wrong with me.” However, she explains that having terminology is only one part of the story. Benoit elaborates saying:

... no one else knows what you’re talking about ... It’s not like being able to say, ‘Oh, I’m gay’ and people know what that means and they just kind accept it as a thing ... I knew what it was, I knew it was legitimate, but people still didn’t believe me for a long time.

This highlights the importance of having access to asexual terminology and the need for societal understandings of asexuality. It is also an indicator of the differences in

understandings of queer identities in the UK, with gayness generally understood and accepted, but asexuality invisible and regarded with suspicion.

Acephobia

Benoit then reveals some of the disbelief and acephobia she has received “countless” times from those who do not believe that asexuality is real, saying:

I’ve been literally getting the exact same things of, ‘you’re too young to understand,’ from the time I was nine to now, at 24 years old, being told that ‘maybe there’s just something physically wrong with you, mentally wrong with you. Maybe you think you’re too good for anybody. It’s a personality issue. A reflection of bad life experiences’ ... you name it, I’ve heard it. I’ve heard some ridiculous stuff.

Here, we can sadly see a continuation of the same acephobic rhetoric experienced by almost every asexual person and character discussed in this writing. However, in this case Benoit is recounting past acephobia, rather than receiving it from others on screen, unlike Jay and Barrett who were pathologized by a fellow interviewee. Whilst *any* acephobia is too much acephobia, this distinction is nonetheless an improvement. However, whilst Benoit does not discuss it here, the impact of racism and misogyny on the heightened levels of acephobia received by asexuals – particularly asexual women of colour and other intersectional identities – cannot be ignored, although this has not been explored anywhere on British television.

When asked how she responds to such acephobia, Benoit explains that:

I like to turn that around on people ... So, if like, a straight guy says to me, ‘Oh, you’re not asexual, you just haven’t found the right man yet,’ I’m like, ‘okay, maybe you’re gay and you just haven’t found the right man yet.’ It’s the same logic, right, that you’re just going to meet someone that’s going to somehow change your sexual orientation, and there are also loads of asexual people that have found their soulmates. Being sexually attracted to someone does not necessarily mean they’re the right person for you. I think anyone can vouch for that.

This is a similar statement to that of Jay's when speaking on *Richard & Judy* where he says that "...any straight man could wake up, find the man of his dreams, and live as a gay person happily for the rest of their lives. The same way I could wake up and one day be in a sexual relationship." Whereas Jay uses this as a possibility – albeit an unlikely one – Benoit is firm that this logic is incorrect, and a more convincing argument of the legitimacy of asexuality thus appears, especially through enhancing the idea that many asexuals have found the right person for them without experiencing sexual attraction or their sexual orientation changing. Furthermore, turning the statement onto allosexuals and saying, "Being sexually attracted to someone does not necessarily mean they're the right person for you. I think anyone can vouch for that," further adds credence that this logic is flawed, and invites the audience to agree with what Benoit is saying, and thus agree with the legitimacy of asexuality.

Asexual relationships and futures

McGovern then asks Benoit what relationships look like for her, and she explains that:

Personally, I'm not interested in romantic relationships either. I don't experience romantic attraction either. That's not specifically an asexual thing, that's just kind of how I am. So, I'm more focused on platonic relationships, and you can have platonic relationships where the person is like a life partner, and you can get a mortgage with your best friend. You can do all those things. I just place more emphasis on platonic relationships, and I don't really see them as being beneath romantic relationships in terms of significance.

This is the first time the potentiality of an aromantic asexual identity is featured on British television and given that almost every asexual represented on British TV has wanted, if not been in, a romantic relationship, highlighting the importance and possibilities of platonic relationships as equal to romantic relationship is important in widening possibilities of

asexuality. However, in response, McGovern then asks “Can you fall in love...? Like, do you still have that?” still reinforcing non-romantic love as secondary, or even non-existent. Nonetheless, Benoit explains that “Romantically, no. Not really, I feel like I’m not really wired in that way, but you can have that kind of a platonic attraction. ... I can still experience love like everyone else, it just isn’t in the romantic way.”

Finally, McGovern asks what Benoit would say to anyone watching who thought they were asexual. Benoit says:

I would say that there is nothing wrong with you because we’re kind of taught that there is something physically or mentally wrong with you and that you’re not going to be able to live a fulfilling life, or that people are going to treat you differently, and you’re going to feel like you’re missing out on something. So, I would just say that its totally normal. You can live a very awesome life and there is a whole community of millions of asexual people out there and as time progresses, we’re talking about it a lot more and you’re fine. You’re good. Live your life.

Here, we end with a message of hope, again illustrating a stark contrast to how asexuality has previously been represented on screen. Rather than Madeley asking why Barrett doesn’t “just lie back and think of England” whilst having sex with her partner on *Richard & Judy*, here Benoit gets to tell the audience asexuals or anyone questioning their asexuality that they are “totally normal” and to “live [their] life.”

As such the line of questioning and representations of asexuality have changed and, in many ways, improved since Jay’s and Barrett’s interview on *Richard & Judy*. Gone are the invasive questions about getting aroused and previous sexual encounters, gone is asexuality being pathologized and described as fixable, and gone is the presenter telling an asexual to have sex just to please a loving partner. Here, instead, Benoit is treated with respect. However, the respect afforded to Benoit is just one moment in a line of

representations of asexuality. For example, just weeks after Benoit's appearance on the show, *Steph's Packed Lunch* (2021b) had a discussion surrounding demisexuality, wherein it was called a "get out of jail free card" for failed relationships to the studio's laughter. Thus, whilst there is progress in the respect afforded to some members of the asexual community when represented on screen, the journey is not yet complete.

Part Two: Fictional Asexuality

Doctors

Doctors is a British soap opera which first aired in 2000 on BBC One. In comparison to many other British soaps, *Doctors* is a relatively new programme, with other soaps, such as *Coronation Street* (1960) and *Emmerdale* (1972) existing on British screens for over fifty years. Regardless of whether a soap has been on our screens for twenty years or sixty, the longevity of British soaps means they have borne witness to major societal changes, and have needed to incorporate such changes onscreen, often pushing boundaries in what has been acceptable to represent and reflecting developments in society which may not yet be acknowledged, understood, or welcomed. One way this has manifested is in LGBTQIA+ representations, with Buckle (2015: 429) talking about how soap operas became "the next frontier for gay characters" from the 1980s, with *Brookside* (1982) remembered for introducing the first gay character in a UK soap in 1985, and *EastEnders* (1985) introducing the first bisexual character in a British soap in 1995. Later, *Doctors* aired the first civil partnership between two male characters on British television in 2006, and, despite often being wrongly attributed to Liv Flaherty's appearance in *Emmerdale* from 2016, *Doctors*

also introduced the first confirmed asexual character, Connor (Joe Maw), in 2014. Connor appears in just one episode of *Doctors* for no more than ten minutes, but as the first (confirmed) asexual character on a British soap, and likely on the entirety of British fictional television, the episode is worth exploring.

Asexuality and healthcare

In an episode titled 'Not Coming Out' (2014), Connor is introduced by the sounds of him and his girlfriend, Leann (Lucy Jackson), laughing and kissing under the covers of his bed on his sixteenth birthday. Leann asks him what he wants to do to her, telling him that he can do "whatever [he] wants." They go back to kissing, but Connor stops her, telling her that his mum will be home soon. Rather than accept this very reasonable excuse – not that an excuse should ever be needed for not having sex and a simple 'no' accepted – Leann immediately questions what's wrong with him and asks why he isn't "gagging" for sex, reinforcing a damaging stereotype regarding (teen) men. Nonetheless, Connor says he is (gagging for it), but when he pulls away from Leann's next attempt to kiss him, she leaves in tears whilst Connor asks her not to be mad at him. This introduction is immediately problematic, commenting on issues surrounding consent wherein Connor must plead to Leann to not be mad about him not wanting sex, rather than having this accepted as a fundamental right. Connor's mum, Shelley (Julia Dalkin), who saw Leann leave, goes to find out what happened from Connor who himself is upset and isn't interested in talking to her, telling her to "Get lost!" However, this single encounter seemingly is the catalyst which leads Shelley to visit her cousin, Kev (Simon Rivers), a doctor, where she admits that she is worried about Connor, with Kev responding with "What, because you think he's gay?"

Shelley is adamant that she has no problem with it, but her concern is that Connor will not admit it and asks Kev to speak to Connor about this 'problem', to which Kev, begrudgingly, agrees.

Kev and Connor later talk during a meal at a cafe, with Kev asking him if he is seeing anyone, asking "why?" when he says he's not. This therefore reinforces being in a relationship as the default, whereas being single is viewed as a temporary state requiring a valid reason to explain why. Connor explains to him that Leann had got fed up, telling him "I don't blame her though, do I? She wanted to do it today. All the time she's going on about it. She just doesn't stop. It's not happening between us." Rather than see this as a potential case of sexual harassment, in that Leann keeps attempting to coerce Connor into sex he is not interested in, Kev just suggests that maybe he doesn't really fancy her. Connor says that he loves her, and Kev explains that fancying people and love aren't the same thing, but instead defaults to assuming that not wanting to have sex with a woman must mean he likes men instead. Connor asks whether Kev is "mental" for suggesting such a thing, and instead Kev suggests that "waiting for a special day can put a lot of pressure on you," still attempting to explain away Connor's lack of interest in having sex as normal and fixable, rather than accept Connor's own feelings. Again, reinforcing the seemingly inherent preoccupation all teen boys must have with sex, Kev comments that all Connor's friends are probably talking about sex all the time. Connor says that they do but tells Kev – to his disbelief – that talking about sex is "boring." Connor then asks if Kev thinks about sex and he says he does, "loads," and when he questions if Connor does, he replies, "not really."

Connor then leaves to find Leann, allowing Kev to speak to another doctor, explaining his “Hypothetical case – 16-year-old boy doesn’t think about sex”, which the other doctor replies, surprised, “what, never?!” before saying that if he was ever like that then he “erased that memory out of shame”. Kev says he would have done the same, and they agree that “on the spectrum, that’s comparatively rare.” This comments on gender norms, with a man’s lack of interest in sex being seen as shameful, and worryingly showing the lack of understanding and sheer ignorance of having little-to-no interest in sex within healthcare (even fictionally) – let alone recognition of asexuality itself.

“Real” relationships and sex

Connor later speaks with Leann, telling her that he loves her and that he is not gay, but is instead stressed by the pressure of sex, and that he is concerned he won’t be as good in bed as her previous partners. She tells him he just needs practice, telling him “Listen, if we have sex today, wouldn’t it be the best birthday present? You’d never forget it.” Connor agrees, and they go back to his house where they see all the party decorations which Shelley has put up. Connor grumbles about the party, but Leann tells him, “You know what, Connor? This party will be great ‘cos you’ll be able to say, ‘This is my girlfriend, Leann,’ and mean it, ‘cos it’ll be real by then.” Not only is this manipulative, but it highlights how sex is a requirement in a relationship to make it real, how sex is seemingly the necessary step to move between friendship and a relationship.

We later see the pair lying in bed after having sex, with Connor asking if it was okay. Leann’s lack of response confirms it was not, but soon Leann complains that he didn’t even look at her. Connor asks her whether she wanted him to look at her, and Leann exclaims, “you’re

supposed to want to, Connor,” and “You couldn’t wait to get it over with, could you?”, again reinforcing the compulsory sexuality expected in all people. Connor then attends his party, where there is a roomful of his relatives, including Kev, but Shelley is seemingly fed up with Connor’s behaviour, and announces that “...you’re gay, Connor. I can accept it, even if you can’t!” Not only is potentially outing someone wrong, but Leann also hears this, and calls Connor a liar whilst grabbing and shaking him.

Thankfully, Kev pulls him to the side, and they talk, with Connor bemoaning the fact that “everyone thinks I’m gay now, except me.” Kev tells him that he doesn’t, and Connor asks him what he is then. Kev says “Well, only you know how you feel, mate,” before asking “Is everything working down there?” still reinforcing a lack of sexual interest as a physical condition. However, Connor replies “it’s not that I can’t, I just...don’t want to. I don’t get it. Honest. I don’t.” He wonders if he should just pretend with Leann, but Kev tells him that would be wrong. Instead, Kev asks, “if you had a choice between enjoying sex with Leann, or Leann saying that it didn’t matter about sex at all. Which would it be?” Connor says the second choice, asking “that’s bad, right?” Kev says, “No, it’s probably normal for you. I think you could be asexual.” Connor asks, “A sexual what?” and Kev explains that “asexuals are people who have no desire for sex, at all,” and Connor seems comforted by the idea he’s not the only one who feels like this. Whilst it is true that some asexual people don’t desire sex, defining asexuality in this way is misleading, and adds to the common misconception that all asexual people have no desire for sex and/or don’t participate in sexual behaviours, when this isn’t the case.

Suggestions of conversion therapy

Connor and Kev go back to speak with Shelley and Leann, with Shelley questioning “How can not wanting sex be a sexual orientation?” which frustrates Connor, who says that he knew she wouldn’t understand. Connor and Leann leave, and Shelley asks “So is there nothing that can be done, Kev? I mean, is there some special treatment or something?” saying she will do “... whatever it costs, whatever it takes.” Kev is appalled, saying “I don’t believe I’m hearing this! Would you say the same thing if he was gay?” Shelley replies, “Of course not, being gay’s natural.” Kev tells her asexuality is natural too, but Shelley is adamant, saying “It can’t be. Sex is important.” This highlights the pervasive nature of conversion therapy and acephobia experienced by asexuals, often as the hands of people close to them. Conversion therapy is often linked to religious and health organisations, with queerness pathologized and incorrectly seen as fixable through traumatic attempts at therapy or prescribing medication. However, in this example, Kev, the symbol of healthcare, is the voice of reason and advocates against Shelley’s proposed idea of conversion therapy and her pathologizing of asexuality (unlike in the episode of *House M.D.*, 2012). Kev explains that Connor can have a happy life, and that he will be there to support Connor, but tells Shelley that Connor will need her support too. Shelley just says that “I’m going to be denied grandkids just because he can’t be bothered!” Not only is this ignorant of other means of procreation, but this also highlights the heteronormative ideal that it is a child’s duty to provide grandchildren for their parents and pass on the family name. Furthermore, Shelley believed Connor to be gay and was fine with it, and therefore

must have considered that any future grandkids may not come through 'traditional' means, highlighting the hypocrisy of her statement.

The scene then cuts to Connor and Leann who are walking down the street talking. Connor tells her that she'll have to find a "proper boyfriend" and that she "deserves better" than him, as though not wanting sex makes him less of a person. However, Leann doesn't accept this, asking him "you really fancy me, right? And you want sex to be great? More than anything in the world?" He responds, "Well, yeah, of course," and Leann tells him "So it will be, 'cos we love each other, yeah. I'll never give up on you. Ever." They kiss and walk off. Therefore, despite Connor earlier admitting he would rather Leann say that sex didn't matter rather than enjoy having sex with her, the power of their love will seemingly fix everything. Furthermore, Leann's admittance that she'll never ever give up on Connor after he agrees that he wants sex to be great is at odds with her earlier actions, with her giving up on Connor after he won't have sex with her at the start of the episode, possibly after they have unsatisfying sex together, and again after she believes Connor to be gay.

Villainisation of asexuality

As Gross (2001: 57) explains, it is typical "when members of a minority begin to appear on television screens, [that] the roles they are permitted to play are generally limited to two categories: victim or villain." In this case, Connor is villainised by Shelley for depriving her of grandkids, and by Leann for depriving her of (good) sex. This is somewhat negated by Kev's expert voice of medical authority, but regardless, Connor can only combat this by attempting to 'fix' himself of what Leann (and society) has deemed wrong about him by

agreeing to have undesired sex. This follows Henry's (1987: 43-44) overview of representations of gay people on television in the late 1980s, wherein he noted that:

when TV does deal with gays it typically takes the point of view of straights struggling to understand. The central action is the progress of acceptance—not self-acceptance by the homosexual, but grief-stricken resignation to fate by his straight loved ones, who serve as surrogates for the audience.

Henry concluded that “homosexual characters have been defined almost entirely by their “problem””, but sadly this almost 30-year-old critique of representations of queer characters on television continued in Connor's character. Shelley wants to fix him of his asexuality, his ‘problem’ and Leann believes she can fix him through more sex (perhaps corrective rape would be a better term?).

Therefore, as the first fictional representation of asexuality, the episode feels under researched, and often immature – although Connor and Leann are sixteen, so this is partially understandable. Asexuality is misleadingly defined, and thus asexuality's relation to not experiencing sexual attraction, rather than sexual desire is never understood. This definition isn't incorrect, but it is not inclusive of many asexuals or understandings of asexuality. Furthermore, Connor's experience in this episode, sadly, is not an uncommon one, with Bauer et al., (2017: 42-43) revealing that 43.5% of asexuals had experienced sexual violence including coercion, assault, rape, and/or non-consensual sex, and 50.6% of these asexuals experienced this from their partner(s). This episode, therefore, had the opportunity to explore an important asexual narrative, but rather highlight the coercive nature of Leann's behaviour as being wrong, the episode instead suggests that Connor (and thus other asexuals) accepting this behaviour is not only okay, but will lead them to a happy and loving end with their partner. This is not to say that asexual people can't have sexual

relationships with allosexual people to whom they're not sexually attracted, and perhaps don't desire sex from, but this often requires a more meaningful conversation, rather than the harassment and manipulation that Connor receives from Leann to convince him to have sex with her, and without any compromise on her end. This perhaps ties in with the choice to represent a male asexual character when fewer men self-identify as asexual than women or other genders (Weis et al., 2021: 16), as a 16-year-old woman who was harassed and manipulated into having undesired sex with a man would be seen in a different light than Connor is in the episode. Connor, as a man, also gives weight and authority to his feelings of not desiring sex, as this is often seen as a feminine trait and therefore may not have been believed to be relating to asexuality if experienced by a woman. Two years later, however, the first female asexual character appeared on *Emmerdale*.

Emmerdale: A Step Forward?

Emmerdale, named after the small fictional Yorkshire town the programme is set in, is a British soap opera which first aired in 1972 under the title *Emmerdale Farm* on ITV. The programme currently airs every weeknight, attracting audiences of over four million viewers (Ratings UK, 2022), and celebrated its 50th anniversary last year. Like *Doctors* (2000), *Emmerdale* has witnessed many societal changes during its decades on television (in terms of queer history, the programme first aired just a few months after the UK's first pride march) and in 2016, the soap took the step to introduce the first recurring asexual character on British television in the form of white teenager Olivia 'Liv' Flaherty, played by Isobel Stelle.

Early resonances

Liv was first introduced in February 2016, and within months, there were asexual resonances within Liv's character, after she refuted fancying a boy "like that" when teased (*Emmerdale*, 2016), and later admitted that "I don't get it...sex, relationships, and all that. Look at the hassle it causes" (*Emmerdale*, 2017a). With Liv being a teenager, her feelings towards sex and relationships could have easily been explained away as being related to her age, but in October 2017, her asexuality became more apparent. Liv's best friend, Gabby Thomas (Rosie Bentham) teased Liv about never fancying anyone, leading Liv to try to kiss a friend, although he pulled away (*Emmerdale*, 2017b). Liv later admitted to a relative that she only tried to kiss him to prove Gabby wrong about her not fancying anyone and explained that "I'm just not that into guys... I don't like anyone. At all. I know it's weird... I mean, everyone has feelings for someone, I've got nothing" (*Emmerdale*, 2017c). From this, a resonance of an aromantic asexual emerged, with Liv experiencing no feelings – sexual, romantic, or otherwise – towards others. However, as is sadly commonplace when questioning your sexuality at an early age, her relative blamed this on her age, with Liv being fifteen apparently meaning that she doesn't know what she wants. Liv, however, then asked her relative if she knew who she was into at her age, and her relative's silence confirms that she did, which in turn legitimised Liv's feelings rather than belittling them.

In 2018, Liv continued to question her sexuality, admitting to Gabby that she wouldn't choose anyone when Gabby asked her about boys she likes, clarifying "...boys, girls... no one" (*Emmerdale*, 2018a). Liv then asked Gabby what it's like to fancy someone, and Gabby told her she just needs to keep trying to find someone she likes and to stop overthinking it

– illustrating how poor sex and relationship education is in the UK (even fictionally) that forcing yourself to try and find someone you like is seemingly a better option than the suggestion of asexuality – so Liv kissed Gabby, before apologising and leaving. They briefly made up as friends, but after Gabby saw the boy she liked and Liv hug, and thus believed Liv was lying to her, Gabby chose to humiliate Liv at her birthday party, calling her a “skank” and revealing that Liv kissed her (Emmerdale, 2018b). Aaron Dingle (Danny Miller) – Liv’s older half-brother who she lived with – witnessed this, and later talked to Liv about his own experiences of coming out as a gay man, wherein Liv told him that she is not gay, but that she doesn’t know what she is. Aaron accepted this, telling her it’s okay that she doesn’t know and ending their conversation by saying “you’ll get there, wherever that is, with whoever. But you’re my little sister. I love you more than anything, so from now on, whatever you go through, I go through” (Emmerdale, 2018c). Whilst Aaron’s acceptance still reinforced compulsory sexuality and amatonormativity through the expectation that Liv will find someone she likes, what does it say about *Emmerdale*, and perhaps wider society, that the first person who accepted Liv questioning her (a)sexuality was another queer person, whereas every other character has either blamed her feelings on her age and/or expected her to change in the future?

Relationships

A year later, in 2019, Liv started dating Jacob Gallagher (Joe-Warren Plant) after admitting that she likes him, but told him, “I don’t even know what I’m asking for, really ... I just want to know if we can maybe be something together, more than friends, you know” (Emmerdale, 2019a). This highlights the lack of language readily available for talking about

non-sexual relationships in a society where romance and relationships imply sex, leaving any other (non-familial) relationship lacking status and worth, and instead being titled *just* friends. Regardless, they agreed to try together, beginning with Jacob asking about Liv's boundaries and whether she likes cuddling. She said she does, adding:

I just don't wanna do that other stuff... sometimes I feel, like I should just give it a try, but then I think, no 'cos, it's not me, is it? And I don't think that's 'cos I haven't met the right person, or I've not blossomed into a woman yet, I just don't want to.

The idea of not yet meeting the right person, or that a person might be a late bloomer are just two commonly used examples by allosexuals to question, dismiss and undermine the legitimacy of someone's asexuality. That Liv was able to dispel these, without having to suffer through her own asexuality being repeatedly questioned was an important step, which allowed asexuality to simply exist, unlike in prior representations wherein asexuality had been thoroughly questioned, required proof, and even then, had been presented with a sense of disbelief (e.g., *Natalie Cassidy's Real Britain*, 2009; *Doctors*, 2014).

Aaron later caught the pair cuddling on the sofa and believing Jacob to be just like any other teenage boy, he ordered Jacob out of their house before they got up to "all sorts," illustrating both the compulsory sexuality of the programme and society, and commenting on gender expectations relating to sex. Frustrated at Aaron's behaviour, Liv told him that Jacob "... knows that I'm not into all that and he's fine about it" (*Emmerdale*, 2019b). Aaron admitted that he was only trying to protect Liv, and she further explained:

Look, I've done my research, right, I've been looking online 'cos I knew that I couldn't be the only person that felt different. So, you know, I don't have sexual feelings for people and that's all right, you know, you can still have romantic feelings, you can still be attracted to people, just not physically.

Liv's explanation offered a depiction of asexuality that is based on not experiencing sexual/physical attraction, rather than the more common (and misleading) depiction of not experiencing sexual desire. This is an important distinction, as within understandings of asexuality, sexual desire and sexual attraction are two separate entities, meaning experiencing sexual desire or not has no bearing on whether a person is asexual. To ignore asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction, but instead depict it as a lack of sexual desire as we have seen in previous examples reinforces asexuality as a sexless identity. Although this is the experience of the majority asexuals, to use a more inclusive definition to refer to asexuality opens the possibilities of who can be asexual (although representations are still needed of asexualities which do experience sexual attraction and/or sexual desire, and asexuals who want and have sex to fully open such possibilities).

A couple of months after getting together, Liv told Gabby that she thought Jacob was starting to lose interest in her. Gabby was not surprised, telling her that boys lose interest when they don't have sex. Liv, not wanting to lose Jacob, decided to have sex with him, wearing a dress and make-up (rather than her usual hoodie, trousers, and bare face), telling him that some people like her have sex to keep their partner happy and explained that "I don't know if I'd be okay with it, but if you want, we can try. To have sex, I mean" (*Emmerdale*, 2019c). This continued to open the possibilities of what it can mean to be asexual, further dispelling the idea that all asexuals are celibate (although it does ignore the many other reasons why asexuals may have sex such as romantic attraction, intimacy, pleasure, procreation, or curiosity, according to Bauer et al., 2018). However, this also importantly highlights the unfortunate reality of how pressured asexuals (or anyone) can

feel to conform to having sex in a relationship. Jacob, however, declined her offer of sex and broke up with her. However, Liv later learned that Jacob was being groomed by an older woman after she discovered the two of them in bed together and was left feeling that she was not enough and questioning why she couldn't be normal. This was later made worse when Aaron got defensive when quizzed by Liv about him hooking up with men as a distraction from his divorce and told her that "it's not that big of a deal, you'd get that if you weren't so weird" (Emmerdale, 2020a). Aaron apologised, but Liv was left feeling hurt and that his easy acceptance and understanding of her asexuality had been betrayed, just to "score points in an argument."

Coming out

After all the illusions to asexuality, Liv officially came out as asexual in September 2020. Liv had been referred to as asexual in news articles about the show and by the actress playing her for several years beforehand, with Duncan asking, "Is Liv Flaherty asexual...?" in 2017, and Liv's own confessions heavily implying asexuality. However, many audience members do not seek out behind the scenes information and using asexual terminology onscreen was therefore required to confirm her identity, as well as create visibility for and educate about asexuality. As such, Liv came out to Mandy Dingle (Lisa Riley) telling her "If you must know, I'm asexual," after she tried to set her up with her son, Vinny Dingle (Bradley Johnson) (Emmerdale, 2020b). Mandy, however, misunderstood what asexual meant, leading to a conversation between Liv, Vinny, and Mandy, where Mandy called Liv "a sexual being" whilst emphasising the curves of her own body and thrusting her hips, and told her that it's nothing to be ashamed of. This left Vinny to explain that "asexual means that Liv

don't have any sexual feelings for other people. That's just who she is" (*Emmerdale*, 2020c). This misunderstanding of "a sexual" rather than "asexual" has been used repeatedly to introduce asexuality on British television, with examples from 1995 to 2020, and is indicative of how little understandings of asexual terminology have progressed in the last 25 years, with the word asexual as a standalone identifier of orientation continually missing from British vernacular and thus needing to be explained in this (and similar) ways (e.g., *Game On's* 'Working Girls', 1995; *Doctors's* 'Not Coming Out', 2014; *Friday Night Dinner's* 'The Cage', 2020). Vinny later apologised to Liv for his Mum's behaviour; Liv said it was fine, but Vinny instead told her "No, you being you is fine." Vinny's acceptance of Liv, and her asexuality, led them to continue to talk, meet up, and after a slightly bumpy beginning, they started a relationship together.

A few months later, in November, Vinny moved in with Liv and Aaron to escape his gambling addicted (and unbeknownst to them, violent) father. Even so, Liv's asexuality remained central to her storyline, with Vinny saying to her that Aaron must think it is weird that he's moved in despite them being "not even proper boyfriend and girlfriend," which left Liv thinking she was not good enough as a "proper girlfriend wouldn't let [him] sleep on the couch" (*Emmerdale*, 2020d). This illustrates the impact of compulsory sexuality, heteronormativity and amatonormativity, with language relating to relationships and romance having implications for what a 'normal' relationship between a girlfriend and boyfriend should look like, with one of those implications being sex. Liv admitted that she feared being labelled as his "girlfriend" due to such implications, but Vinny reminded her that he's fine with her asexuality. They discussed Vinny's thoughts about not having sex,

and he admitted he doesn't know if he'd always be fine with not having sex, but, right now, Liv is what matters to him. They promised to keep communicating and committed to being together with Vinny asking, "...at least let me ask you properly, all right, do the whole wooing thing. So, do you fancy being my girlfriend then?" to which Liv replied, "of course."

Going into 2021, Vinny and Liv said "I love you" to each other (*Emmerdale* 2021a), and in February, Liv told Vinny that "I want you in my bed. I want to spend time with you at night as well now that we're boyfriend and girlfriend" (*Emmerdale*, 2021b). The next morning, Liv revealed that she "never thought [she'd] feel close enough to someone, comfortable enough to be either spoon" to which Vinny replied "I got to fall asleep with you in my arms, you were the first thing I see when I wake up ... It were perfect [sic]" (*Emmerdale*, 2021c). This illustrates how *Emmerdale* worked to build this relationship between an asexual and an allosexual on trust and communication over time, which allowed for valuable moments such as this which reveal how intimacy can be created in a relationship, without sex, and without the asexual character having to change or compromise for their partner – unlike Connor's brief experience in *Doctors* (2014).

However, their happiness didn't last. In March, Vinny was hospitalised by his father, and Vinny broke up with Liv to protect her from a similar fate, although he ended things with an acephobic tirade, telling her "I don't love you. You're some weirdo who don't want sex, what were I thinking" (*Emmerdale*, 2021d). Whilst Vinny didn't seem to believe what he was saying, yet again, asexuality was conflated with being "weird," and Liv's asexuality was used against her to hurt her by someone she loves, as though the acceptance of her asexuality was conditional only for as long as it was beneficial to them. In April, after Vinny's

dad died in an explosion, Vinny did apologise to Liv for what he said, and they briefly re-entered a relationship. However, despite being injured in the explosion herself, Liv felt guilty over not trying to save Vinny's dad which led her to turn to alcohol (which she has struggled with previously) and was the catalyst for the end of her and Vinny's relationship.

Emmerdale and queerness

Two months later in June, *Emmerdale* had its first episode featuring pride celebrations as part of pride month (Emmerdale, 2021e). The village got covered in gay pride and trans pride flags, with a drag queen performing and other festivities. However, despite the message of inclusion from the priest whose church was hosting the event, Liv's – and therefore asexuality's – inclusion was minimal and not related to the celebrations. Narratively, Liv celebrating wouldn't have made sense given that Liv's ongoing issues with alcoholism were her main storyline at the time, but it was still disappointing to see asexuality removed from pride, especially when asexuality's place within the LGBTQI+ community – and therefore asexuality's place in pride events – continued (and continues) to be debated on British television, and elsewhere. For example, in Fin Taylor's comedic routine for *Live at the Apollo* (2018), he talked about not understanding why asexuals would want to be part of gay pride, commenting that asexuals are the people at the back of a pride march who say, "I want no part of this filth!" and "nothing, we want nothing!", before he told the laughing audience that asexuals should be on "a different march, surely". Despite the episode being first broadcast in 2018, it has since been broadcast multiple times a year on different channels, repeatedly spreading this acephobic tirade to new

audiences and highlighting the ongoing debate surrounding asexuality's place in the British queer community.

Asexuality, however, wasn't completely removed from *Emmerdale's* pride episode, with asexual pride flags hanging in the café – for those who recognised them – however asexuality was still solitary and removed from any true sense of queer community. However, this was and remains to be indicative of a wider issue wherein the show's LGB characters can go to gay bars and interact with the wider queer community, whereas Liv – and asexuality – gets no such thing. Other than Liv's brief mention of looking online when questioning her sexuality, there is no asexual community. Furthermore, there's no provision for queer youth in the show, or spaces for queer people to go which don't surround the drinking and hook up culture of gay bars, which exclude Liv on both fronts. But this is a wider issue than just in *Emmerdale*, as Canning (2015: 56) says:

Because 'queer spaces' are often identity specific— meaning that people who don't identify as, or aren't considered 'queer' are denied entry—and because many queer spaces do not consider asexuality to be "queer," there are few "real life," safe spaces for asexual people to explore or discuss their identity.

The benefit of a queer community, even a small one, was clear when Liv came out to Aaron, and his (then) partner, Robert Sugden (Ryan Hawley). Though, as Liv said, her feelings and experiences differed from Aaron's experiences as a gay man, and therefore Robert's experiences as a bisexual man, it's likely their easy acceptance of Liv's asexuality had something to do with their own place within the queer community. That asexuality has existed in isolation of other queerness in *every* other representation discussed hides asexuality's place in, and the benefit of, the queer community, and not for the better.

Furthermore, the genre of soap necessitates drama, and oftentimes, narratives can come off as over-the-top, with repeated murders, killings, blackmail, cheating, divorce, addiction, arguments etc., just to make a soap interesting enough to watch every night, year after year. In *Emmerdale's* and Liv's case, this means that she couldn't just be an asexual character; she had to suffer as an asexual character, with narratives wherein she was happy – or even just doing ok – restricted to brief moments before the next dramatic narrative twist, as we have seen. Whilst this is true of all characters in soap operas, it is especially true for queer characters. As Garside (2021: 10) says:

Whatever you do, don't be a queer character in a soap opera show – queer characters everywhere from *Emmerdale* to *Days of Our Lives* have met untimely, unhappy, and unnecessary ends.

In November 2021, a serial killer killed Aaron's new boyfriend, Ben Tucker (Simon Lennon), just as the pair had found happiness and were planning to leave *Emmerdale* for a fresh start together illustrating the truth of this (*Emmerdale*, 2021f). Furthermore, Liv was wrongly charged and imprisoned for Ben's murder. Thus, Liv's story wasn't over, but it continued to be an unhappy one. Indeed, it took two months of suffering wherein Liv's entire family turned against her, Liv was hospitalised twice, and Liv's ex, Vinny – who believed Liv's innocence and promised to prove it – was kidnapped and almost killed by the same serial killer, for Liv to be released from prison.

(Un)happy endings

Out of prison, Liv and Vinny agreed to a fresh start, admitting that they still loved each other and kissing for the first time on screen, before quickly moving back in together (*Emmerdale*, 2022a). A few weeks later, Liv and Vinny got engaged after Liv misconstrued

a romantic picnic where Vinny gave her jewellery as a proposal. Vinny explained that she'd "made [his] day" by agreeing to what she thought was a proposal, and Vinny later proposed to her properly (*Emmerdale*, 2022b). Liv was reluctant, but Vinny explained that regardless of Liv's answer nothing would change between them as "I know I'm gonna spend the rest of my life with you, with or without a ring." As a result, Liv said 'Yes' (*Emmerdale*, 2022c). The pair ended up eloping to escape their overbearing family and got married soon after (*Emmerdale*, 2022d). This was another first for an asexual character on British television, and its impact in expanding possibilities and experiences of asexuals cannot be ignored. Liv got her 'happy ending,' however, it wasn't long before their marriage became public knowledge, and the pair had to fend off questions regarding their sex life (or 'lack' of it) and how they will have children in the future. As Hart (2019) explains:

In our sex-steeped culture, the idea that deep, devoted love does not have to involve sex is unfathomable. It's why the very existence of asexuality is questioned. It's why we have phrases like "just friends" and "friendzone," implying that even the closest friendship, lacking that physical component, will always be on a level below.

As such, Liv and Vinny may have been husband and wife, but without consummating their marriage, it would always be seen as not quite enough. Nonetheless, Liv was defiant in telling people that it was none of their business, and Vinny made it clear to her that there were other options (i.e., adoption) should they decide they want that in the future, but this still left Liv thinking she was not enough for Vinny, continuing the narrative wherein Liv must suffer as an asexual character because of her asexuality (*Emmerdale*, 2022e).

Furthermore, a few months into their marriage, Liv's Mum, Sandra (Christine Brennan), returned to *Emmerdale* under the guise of wanting to recover from her own alcoholism

with Liv's help, when instead Sandra was only after Liv's money. Liv agreed to help her Mum but, seeing Vinny as a barrier for getting what she wanted, Sandra repeatedly attempted to use Liv's asexuality against her, searching the internet for the "10 worst things to say to an asexual person" and using these against her, trying to convince Liv that she wasn't enough for Vinny, and attempting to make it look like Vinny was spending time with, and interested in, other women (*Emmerdale*, 2022f). Ultimately, Sandra's plan failed, and despite the repeated acephobia on screen, it was instead the strength of Liv's and Vinny's relationship which was highlighted, illustrating that asexuality is in no way a barrier to a happy marriage. Indeed, not long after Sandra was arrested, Liv decided she wanted to have children in the future, with Liv telling Vinny that she's not sure how it would work, and that they should first practice by getting a dog (*Emmerdale*, 2022g).

With Liv's plans for motherhood, her happiness with Vinny, and Aaron's return to the village and reconciliation with Liv, her future looked brighter than ever. However, days later, as part of *Emmerdale's* 50th anniversary in October 2022, a storm hit the village, and Liv was killed after being crushed by a caravan which moved in the high winds, bringing *Emmerdale's* asexual representation to an emotional end (*Emmerdale*, 2022h). Purportedly, it was Liv's actress, Isobel Steele, who made the decision to leave the show (McPhee, 2022), but nonetheless, killing off Liv continued the "untimely, unhappy and unnecessary ends" offered to queer characters (Garside, 2021: 11), and leaves British television without any confirmed asexual characters.

Asexuality in *Emmerdale*: a conclusion

Though the above discussion of Liv's character has focused primarily on her journey towards understanding her asexuality, her characterisation was complex and was Liv more than just her (a)sexuality. Her storylines also focused on her large and tight-knit family, various friendships, her continued issues with alcoholism, her epilepsy diagnosis and being sentenced to time in a detention centre and prison. This depth to her character remains unheard of for asexual characters as thus far single episode arcs for asexuality, or arcs lasting no more than ten minutes (e.g., *Doctors*, 2014; *Sex Education*, 2019) haven't provided the space for characters to exist outside of their asexuality, with coming out being the be-all-and-end-all the character's representations. For this reason, despite taking until 2020 for asexual terminology to be discussed onscreen – an important marker towards normalising asexuality as a legitimate orientation, rather than a lack of sexual attraction/interest being a phase (due to her age) or a medical issue (as was suggested *Richard & Judy*, 2004 and *Doctors*, 2014) – the longevity of asexual representations across Liv's six-and-a-half years on screen cannot be criticised. Furthermore, confirmed asexual representations on screen to date have often been a means to an end wherein the inclusion of asexuality seems more about ticking a diversity box over the course of an episode (or three), rather than truly representing asexuality as more than its definition as we have seen here. Of course, Liv was yet another young, white asexual on the growing list of young white asexuals that have been represented on British television. Nevertheless, as an alcoholic, epileptic, asexual, Liv did explore aspects of intersectionality that are rarely represented.

However, across all the years of Liv's asexual journey she was burdened with being the only asexual on the show, and furthermore she has been the only recurring asexual character anywhere on British broadcast television, meaning Liv's character remains *the* representation of asexuality, and her experiences therefore practically define what it means to be asexual in Britain for the millions of British people who watch *Emmerdale*. To understand asexuality through Liv's experiences defines asexuality as not wanting sex but still being attracted to people in other ways, whilst reinforcing heteronormativity and amatonormativity, which only reflects the experiences of a limited number of asexuals. Chen notes, "there is no one asexual (or ace) story ... [that] can capture all of ace experience" (2020: xi), and therefore to expect Liv to represent the entire diversity of asexual experiences is ludicrous, although this is where representations of asexuality on the show (and across British television) seem to falter, with more asexual characters needed to express the multitude of ace experiences. Liv's recurring role across various storylines over the years allowed an ongoing exploration of her asexuality, as well as exploring Liv as a 3D character who had friends, family, a husband, jobs, hobbies, an addiction, and medical problems, which is more than can be said for any other representation of asexuality thus far. Therefore, as the first recurring representation of asexuality on British screens, Liv brought understandings (but also misunderstandings) of asexuality to millions across the country, although other representations of asexuality are needed, both on the show and on TV in different genres, to expand what it can mean to be asexual, and to allow asexual characters to exist who don't have to constantly suffer as a plot device.

Conclusion

On the surface, through exploring asexual representations in *Richard & Judy* (2004), *Steph's Packed Lunch* (2021a), *Doctors* (2014) and *Emmerdale* (2016-2022), examples that span across almost twenty years, it can be argued that asexual representations on British television have changed and improved over time. Whereas *Richard & Judy* (2004) was dismissive of asexuality, and indeed advocated for the inclusion of a psychiatrist to explain away any legitimacy of asexuality as a sexual orientation or identity, *Steph's Packed Lunch* (2021a) instead invited an open discussion surrounding asexuality, exploring beyond the sensationalism of discussions about sexual behaviours and instead exploring the lived experiences of Benoit. Similarly, whereas asexuality was villainised on *Doctors* (2014) amongst potential sexual harassment and talk of conversion therapy, *Emmerdale* (2016-2022) has treated Liv's asexual storyline with respect, allowing audiences to witness her on-screen journey towards accepting her asexuality, whilst being supported by the characters surrounding her. These are significant differences. However, this is not *the* history of confirmed representations of asexuality on British television, and instead *a* history. These examples were chosen for many reasons: *Richard & Judy* (2004) and *Doctors* (2014) for being some of the earliest (if not *the* earliest) representations of asexuality as it is understood today on British television, and also representations which have been lost and forgotten within asexual and queer histories. *Steph's Packed Lunch* (2021a) was chosen for giving a much needed voice to Black asexuals and asexuals of colour, with Benoit being the face of asexuality in the UK; and *Emmerdale* (2016-2022) for offering what is perhaps the longest asexual storyline anywhere on television. However,

there is an (albeit limited) archive of other asexual representations which would offer a different account of asexuality than those discussed in length here.

For example, the acephobic attitudes and sensationalism towards asexuality in *Richard & Judy* (2004) have been repeatedly replicated in similar ways (see *Natalie Cassidy's Real Britain*, 2009; 'I Don't Want Sex', 2018; *Live at the Apollo*, 2018; *Loose Women*, 2021; *Steph's Packed Lunch*, 2021b). Therefore, whilst *Steph's Packed Lunch* (2021a) can be seen as an improvement in terms of asexual representations compared to *Richard & Judy* (2004), these improvements are not linear. In fact, *Emmerdale* (2016-2022) itself is also an outlier in terms of fictional asexual representations. All other fictional representations of confirmed asexuality involve either a single episode (*Doctors*, 2014) or Florence's five-minute asexual journey on *Sex Education* (2019) wherein the bare minimum has been done to represent asexuality. Furthermore, in each of these examples the asexuals or asexual characters are almost exclusively white, under thirty, non-sexual, alloromantic and typically heteroromantic, which does little to further understandings about asexuality. Under these terms, is it any wonder that Sky News revealed that a 2019 Sky Data Poll found that of all respondents, "75% were wrong [in defining asexuality] or did not know that asexual people do experience a sex drive"? Additionally, the focus on sex-neutral asexuality means that both sex-favourable asexuals and sex-repulsed asexuals haven't been represented (except for Barrett on *Richard & Judy* (2004) who was mocked for feelings towards sex). As such, to be palatable, asexuality must be sex-neutral, with sex-favourability perhaps considered too confusing to understand, and sex-repulsion considered a threat to alloheteronormativity, and therefore not offered respect when represented. As such, whilst there may have been

an improvement in part when considering representations of asexuality on British television, there is also a question of who these 'improvements' have benefitted.

With asexuals making up such a small proportion of the UK population, it makes sense that when channels do attempt to represent asexuality, it will be through asexuals and asexual narratives that most resemble their target audiences; white, heteronormative, cisgender, non-disabled and neurotypical people, and through narratives which explore dating, love and coming out. However, this means that many asexuals and narratives have not been explored. As Przybylo (2019: 97) explains:

Because asexuals have been routinely represented by popular media as sad, dejected, lacking losers, asexual visibility politics are often committed to profiling a happy, "normal," healthful asexuality. Representations of asexuality as a healthy, happy state that does not impede on compulsory sexuality or challenge social structures also function to gain currency for asexuality by providing a non-threatening image of the identity.

This seems to build on ideas by Chasin (2013: 420) who notes that "there is some conformity pressure and self-censorship, particularly regarding who should speak as an asexual in interviews and in television segments" explaining that "many of us within the asexual/ace community recognize the conservative moves we are encouraged to adopt when advocating on behalf of asexuality." Linking to the idea of the "real" asexual, not only are all the asexuals represented and discussed above – with the exception of Benoit – white, heteronormative, cisgender, non-disabled and neurotypical people, but the "real" asexual must also be a happy asexual. As such: Jay and Barrett (and her husband) all enthuse their happiness at being asexual or having an 'asexual' relationship; Benoit expresses the awesome life asexuals can have; Connor, upon learning he is not alone in his asexuality, seemingly goes on to have a happy ending with Leann; and Liv, until her death,

was able to live happily as an asexual and got her (albeit brief) happy ending with Vinny. The fact that popular media representations are beginning to move away from representing asexuals as “sad, dejected, lacking losers” as suggested by Przybylo (2019: 97), and are instead starting to offer happier storylines does however indicate an improvement. Of course, this is not to say that positive and happy representations of asexuality such as these aren’t necessary; the inherent normality and lack of issue of asexuality remains a vital depiction when considering asexual outreach, especially when an unhappiness with being asexual or not experiencing sexual attraction or desire would more likely be read as a medical problem rather than a sexual orientation (e.g., depression, HSDD etc.). However, this ‘happiness’ is a barrier within its own right. Not every asexual is a happy asexual, and as the National LGBT Survey showed, asexuals in the UK are likely to live fearful, unsatisfying, and uncomfortable lives (GEO, 2018: 29-33, 49). Positive images alone won’t change this, but perhaps it is a step towards the much-needed wider education and acceptance of asexuality. However, when all of these positive images of happy asexuals appear (excluding Benoit), in each case this happiness is reinforced by the inherent romanticism depicted through asexuality. Jay is happy the way he is right now, but under the proviso of looking for the right person to be in a romantic relationship with. Barrett and her husband are happily married, as are Liv and Vinny, and Connor can be happy in his relationship because he and Leann love each other. As such, to be palatable, respected and believed asexuals must be in a relationship. Asexuals who are single are unsafe and stray from societal norms, whereas asexuals in relationships reinforce norms surrounding love and romance and become palatable because this narrative is a safe one. But what about

asexuals who aren't in relationships? What about aromantics? How do we move beyond amatonormative representations of asexuality in a society that privileges romantic relationships? Benoit's appearance on *Steph's Packed Lunch* (2021a) begins to challenge these notions, but this alone is not enough. With Liv's recent death on *Emmerdale* (2022f), in an average day in the UK asexuality will have no (confirmed) presence anywhere on British Television, and as Gross (2001: 258) says, "this is a media-dominated society and being left off the media's center stage is a form of symbolic annihilation."

CHAPTER THREE: AMBIGUOUS ASEXUALITY IN *DOCTOR WHO*

Introduction

Television which depicts self-identified asexuals has been and remains limited to two narratives: coming out, and dating. Whilst for many asexuals coming out is an inescapable, necessary part of life, like all other queer people, coming out – to ourselves, to friends, family, colleagues etc., – is but one step of our life's journey. It may not be the beginning, but it's not the end either. However, confirmed representations of asexuality typically refuse to explore these journeys. Furthermore, the near constant focus on depicting asexuals who are, or want to be, dating reinforces amatonormativity, and often heteronormativity, further limiting the narratives afforded to asexuals, and thereby restricting how society understands asexuality. From documentaries which offer just a glimpse into the perceived struggle that comes with being asexual (e.g., *Natalie Cassidy's Real Britain*, 2009; 'I Don't Want Sex', 2018), to soaps which thrive on (queer) character unhappiness (e.g., Connor in *Doctors*, 2014; Liv Flaherty in *Emmerdale*, 2016-2022), from drama which succeeds in forgetting about its asexual character(s) at the earliest opportunity (e.g., Florence in *Sex Education*, 2019), to talk shows that sensationalise asexualities (e.g., *Richard & Judy*, 2004; *Steph's Packed Lunch*, 2021a, 2021b), television is stuck in attempting to teach and legitimise asexuality to audiences, whilst simultaneously being misinformed about what asexuality is in the first place. As Osterwald (2017: 36) summarises:

Nowadays, while society is beginning to distinguish asexuality as distinct category, modern narratives attempt portrayals of "stereotypical" asexual characters that in no way reflect the complexity of asexuality ... not only is the stereotyping of asexual

characters detrimental to the understanding of asexuality, but also the treatment of these characters negatively affects society's chances of accepting asexuals by unfairly pigeonholing them...

But how can we progress beyond these limiting, stereotypical characters and narratives?

Here I move away from the 'confirmed' representations of asexuality of the last two decades wherein asexual terminology has been used on screen, and instead return to explore asexual "resonances." Unlike in Chapter One which explored twentieth century asexual "resonances," here I continue look for asexuality in the 21st century and explore how (or if) these resonances have changed over the years. I also question how asexual "resonances" work alongside, or potentially against, the understandings and representations of asexuality that have been achieved through 'confirmed' depictions of asexuality in the last decades.

A further key difference in this chapter is exploring asexual resonances wherein asexual terminology has been used *off*-screen in reference to a character's sexuality by the cast or crew of the television program. These announcements typically come in the form of Twitter discussions (Gaiman, 2019 in reference to *Good Omens*, 2019; Oseman, 2022 in reference to *Heartstopper*, 2022) or 'behind the scenes' interviews (e.g., Tennant, 2009; Smith, 2012; Cumberbatch, 2013; Moffat, 2014), meaning the impact of these revelations is limited to a minority of audience members. However, as asexual terminology is not used *on* screen, the characters are not 'confirmed' or textually asexual, and the use of asexual terminology off screen to discuss the asexual possibilities of the character without confirming it within the text is revealing of a separate issue within representations of asexuality. As La Marca (2020) explains:

Ambiguous representation is a problem because it tells the asexual audience that, although the character may indeed be asexual, they don't want to confirm it for fear of alienating the heterosexual audience.

Furthermore, Goshua (2018) suggests that:

... media refusal to explicitly articulate asexuality is exploitative in that it enables content creators and audiences to financially or emotionally benefit from a character without having to officially acknowledge asexuality and the issues with which the community contends.

Whilst I do not want to advocate for asexual representations which may exploit asexual audiences and communities whilst tokenising asexuality without putting in the work to confirm it, I do instead want to explore the asexual potentials offered by such characters. For example, in the case of Sherlock Holmes from BBC's *Sherlock* (2010), the series' showrunner, Steven Moffat has both said that Sherlock was one of the most asexual characters on television (2014), and that "If [Sherlock] was asexual, there would be no tension in that, no fun in that – it's someone who abstains who's interesting" (2012). However, regardless of Moffat's intent, Holmes's actor, Benedict Cumberbatch (2013), explains that he was nonetheless "... stopped on the street ... and thanked on behalf of asexuals everywhere" for the asexual "resonances" and representation the character offered. This raises an interesting question surrounding what makes a representation of asexuality 'good,' or 'beneficial,' so to speak. Asexuality is not textually confirmed on the show, (and asexual potentials are ridiculed off-screen) and therefore *Sherlock* (2010) does little to aid the visibility or education of asexuality. Furthermore, the asexual resonances of the character often seem to stem from his sociopathic tendencies and lack of social awareness, rather than a lack of attraction which paints its own concerning image of

asexuality being misunderstood as a legitimate sexual orientation. Yet asexuals have nonetheless been thankful for this image of asexuality.

Holmes's asexual potentiality, however, has been frequently discussed both in academic work and by fan communities alike (see Botts, 2016; Osterwald, 2017; Lamerichs, 2018). Thus, in favour of not rewriting and repeating the same analysis, I instead turn to the asexual "resonances" and ambiguities of the Doctor from *Doctor Who* following the character's return to British television screens in 2005. Importantly, because the Doctor's asexuality is 'ambiguous,' like Holmes and other ambiguously asexual characters, they do not have come out as asexual (or any other sexual orientation) and therefore are not restricted to the same narratives as 'confirmed' asexual characters. Thus, they therefore have the potential to broaden asexual possibilities, although they can just as easily reinforce misconceptions and negative stereotypes associated with asexuality, even when asexual terminology isn't used on-screen alongside such representations. Here, I will use these representations to explore how the notion of asexual "resonances" has changed between the show's initial run between 1963-1989 and its current run from 2005 to present. I will also examine how and if the Doctor is able to escape the limiting and stereotypical asexual narratives which have been afforded to 'confirmed' representations of asexuality, and question how these new narratives may benefit the future of 'confirmed' asexual representations.

Doctor Who's Changing Asexual Resonances

Doctor Who has existed on British television screens since 1963, with the programme first airing a twenty-six series run between 1963 and 1989, and later returning to screens in

2005. The programme follows the Doctor – an alien from Gallifrey called a Time Lord who can regenerate their² body into a new one when mortally damaged – and across the sixty years the show has aired, over fifteen actors have played the role. The Doctor travels through time and space in their TARDIS, a spaceship which has the form of an old Police Telephone Box, with the episodes surrounding the Doctor's travels with their companions, and their battles against other aliens, monsters, robots, or beasts who are often set on planetary or world domination. Furthermore, *Doctor Who* is part of British popular culture and is considered to be “quality TV”, gaining more than six million viewers throughout its first five years back on British television (Bignell, 2012: 189), making the asexual potentiality of the Doctor important, given the (mis)understandings that can be learnt about asexuality through the show.

The asexual resonances of *Doctor Who* have been present since the original series of the programme, with Casano (2018) noting that the “Doctor did not display any sexual interest until his eighth incarnation”, which references Paul McGann’s portrayal of the Doctor in the 1996 *Doctor Who: The Television Movie*, suggesting that all prior television appearances hint towards the Doctor's possible asexuality. These early resonances, however, may relate more to the older age of the Doctor’s actors, and production methods of the time. As Cockburn (2013: 56) notes:

... the “No Sex Please, We’re Gallifreyan” ethos was an unintended consequence of ideas about what was allowable in child-friendly family viewing – and also the fact that the first two Doctors were essentially “crotchety grandfather” (William Hartnell) and “eccentric uncle” (Patrick Troughton).

² The Doctor has been portrayed by men and women: ‘they’ will be used when referencing the character in general, and ‘he’ or ‘she’ will be used appropriately to refer to specific portrayals of the character in line with the pronouns used on the show.

Thus, the non-sexuality of the Doctor has created space for the Doctor to resonate asexually, though this typically relates to asexuality being synonymous with being non-sexual or celibate, rather than not experiencing sexual attraction, although this is in line with definitions and understandings of asexuality at the time. Nonetheless, this non-sexuality of early *Doctor Who* made space for queer kids to have an escape from heteronormativity. As Richards (2013: 194) explains:

By being the only show on television in which the male lead wasn't trying to get it on with the female lead, it lent a "breathing space" to the queer child. The show wasn't saying "You should be like this," it wasn't even asking, "Why *aren't* you like this?" It was just absent, open, a gap (emphasis in original).

Likewise, asexuals can also see themselves represented in the non-sexuality and asexual resonances of the Doctor. MacRury and Rustin (2018: 66) note that this relates to the scheduling of the programme, suggesting that there is:

... a particular "impossibility" in the idea of romance and sexual love which is central to the format of *Doctor Who* ... It has always been a programme made for an early Saturday evening, family entertainment slot. Because it is made to be watched by children ... there are constraints about what can be acceptably shown and talked about, not least in regard to sexual experiences and relationships.

Whilst this may be true to some extent, there is nonetheless a choice to restrict this "impossibility" of romance and sex in *Doctor Who* beyond that of comparable programmes in recent years at the very least. For instance, *Robin Hood* (2006) aired on the BBC in the same time slot as *Doctor Who* (2005), however, unlike *Doctor Who*, within the opening 10 minutes of the first episode of *Robin Hood* ('Will You Tolerate This?', 2006) Robin Hood (Jonas Armstrong) is seen deeply kissing a woman, who in turn is seen grabbing Robin's backside and encouraging him to stay overnight. As such, the asexual "resonances" of the

character are not purely caused by television restrictions of what is permissible to a family audience, but instead are a definitive choice.

This is not to say that sexual experiences and relationships have no place in *Doctor Who* (2005), although they still generally implied through subtext rather than being explicitly shown (as it is, for example in *Doctor Who*'s late-night spin-off *Torchwood*, 2006). Sex does exist, albeit generally associated with characters other than the Doctor. For example, the first episode of the 2005 series ('Rose') alludes to the Doctor's companion Rose Tyler (Billie Piper) and her boyfriend joking with about getting her "kit off" and having "any excuse to get in the bedroom". This is just one instance, indeed a rather tame one, that hints towards sex on the programme and as such, the Doctor does not resonate asexually because the show is non-sexual, but because the Doctor themselves is sexually disinterested and unattracted sexually to those around them. There are moments when the Doctor's sexuality is visible on screen (e.g., when the Eleventh Doctor (Matt Smith) discusses spending his nights with his wife as being "between me and her" ('The Wedding of River Song', 2011), or him unconsciously making an upwards motion with his sonic screwdriver making it 'erect' when a woman is revealed in a tight-fitting fight suit, indicating his apparent arousal ('The Crimson Horror', 2013)), but these are few and far between, and even then, discussing potential sexual participation or illusions to arousal do not negate asexuality. Even if these occasions do relate to the Doctor experiencing sexual attraction towards someone, asexuality involves little-to-no sexual attraction – thus the Doctor can still be asexual, or on the asexual spectrum.

However, whilst the non-sexuality of the original series allowed the Doctor's asexuality to remain an unquestioned truth, the introduction of an onscreen sexuality means the same cannot be said for the modern series. As Hadas (2013: 334) notes regarding the changes on the show from the 2005-2008 series:

... it is true that the classic series has never portrayed the Doctor in an explicitly sexual situation or relationship. In this respect, the change in the new series is drastic: ... the Doctor has kissed each and every one of his travelling companions, both male and female; has had several one episode romantic entanglements; and was established as having once been married and a father. The production crew have acknowledged and approved of the Doctor's romances in interviews and behind-the-scene[s] peeks. Perhaps arguing for an asexual Doctor in the new series is not impossible ... but certainly difficult.

Hadas is not the only one to suggest such a thing; Richards notes that "The Doctor was now a romantic lead, sexually available and clearly heterosexual in a way we had never seen before" (2013: 196), calling him "a straight man with a straight girl in a straight, straight world" (2013: 198) and going as far to suggest that "It's entirely likely an asexual Doctor would've flopped, that a large audience needs that romantic element front and centre now" (2013: 200). Furthermore, Huff discusses characters used on the show to "...lock down the Doctor's heterosexuality" (2013: 89).

The suggestion of the Doctor's asexuality seems to no longer exist; however, I see this to be an issue with wider societal understandings of asexuality which limit the identity to a synonym of celibate, non-sexual, and romantically disinclined, rather than recognising the multitude of asexual experiences. As Huff (2013: 85) notes, "The first time the ninth Doctor took Rose's hand, a mighty cry of protest rang out. "Oh Noes!" they wailed. "The nasty expectations of the modern world have sexualized the Doctor!"'" As such, if something as innocent as holding hands whilst running for their lives can be sexualised, is it any wonder

that asexuality seems an impossibility? Therefore, Hadas' (2013: 334) suggestion that arguing for an asexual Doctor is difficult-to-impossible is not that difficult at all. In her argument she points to the fact the Doctor kisses "each and every one of his travelling companions" as one way an asexual identity is ruled out. However, more correctly, in the four series Hadas focusses on in her research, the Doctor has *been kissed by* his travelling companions, and even then, not all of them. Regardless of who is doing the kissing, kissing itself has no impact on the Doctor's potential asexuality. Even when falling back on stereotypes of asexuality as being non-sexual and chaste, the two notable occasions where the Doctor initiates a kiss are both to save other people's lives, rather than out of attraction ('The Parting of Ways', 2005; 'Smith and Jones', 2007). Thus, asexuality cannot be ruled out in this way.

Hadas also points to the idea of romantic entanglements being a hinderance to claiming the Doctor as asexual, however, this is a common misunderstanding wherein asexuality and aromanticism are conflated and confused. Whilst it may be true that the classic series of *Doctor Who* (1963) never portrayed "an explicitly sexual situation or relationship" (Hadas, 2013: 334) which is perhaps suggestive of an aromantic asexual Doctor, the modern Doctor engaging in romance may negate their aromanticism (although aromantic people can engage in romance without experiencing romantic attraction), but romantic entanglements do not counteract asexuality. Nor do the suggestions that the Doctor getting married and being a parent somehow preclude asexuality. Furthermore, the Doctor's parenthood should not come as a surprise given one of the First Doctor's companions in 1963 was Susan, the Doctor's granddaughter. Considering this, whilst it is

true that the production crew have been in favour of the Doctor's romances, again this does not hinder the potential of the Doctor's asexuality. In actuality, the production crew have also acknowledged the Doctor's asexuality, although admittedly this has happened more often after the years Hadas explored. Nonetheless, David Tennant (2009), Matt Smith (2012) and Steven Moffat (2014) have all used asexual terminology when discussing the Doctor, with Moffat calling them one of "the most asexual characters on television." As such, Hadas suggests that arguing for an asexual Doctor in the modern series is difficult because the character is not the stereotypical asexual character we have seen in the past, and that is what makes the show's potential for expanding the possibilities of asexual narratives on television so great.

Here, it does not matter precisely whether the Doctor is asexual or not. The Doctor is not textually asexual and thus judging the representations of asexuality in the same way as my previous chapter is not my aim especially when considering, as Hartman does regarding the Doctor's sexuality in the new series, that "it depends a lot on the writer" and they "... don't feel that his characterization has been consistent in that regard" (2013: 35). Instead, I seek to highlight how the asexually resonant characterisation of the Doctor can expand asexual representations and narratives from the limited representations currently available for confirmed asexual characters.

Asexual Possibilities: The Doctor and River Song

Doctor Who returned to British television screens eighteen years ago, and in that time, there have been five Doctors, thirteen series, and 174 episodes, allowing for a diversity of

asexual possibilities to be represented. One such way is through the Doctor's relationships with the companions who join them on their travels. These relationships have been romantic – i.e., with Rose Tyler and River Song (Alex Kingston) – and platonic – i.e., with Amy Pond (Karen Gillan) and Bill Potts (Pearl Mackie), but the Doctor is just as happy in a relationship as they are being single. The Doctor visibly grieves when they lose their romantic interest, but similarly grieves the loss of their friends, and no single relationship, be it romantic, platonic, or implied to be sexual has any greater importance than any other.

Whilst the Tenth (David Tennant) and Eleventh Doctors have had romantic relationships with Rose and River, respectively, suggestive of a potentially heteroromantic character, other iterations of the Doctor resonate as being aromantic asexual, such as the Ninth (Christopher Eccleston), Twelfth (Peter Capaldi) and Thirteenth Doctor (Jodie Whittaker). However, the relationship between the Doctor and River is particularly noteworthy in this case when considering expanding asexual possibilities, as the relationship spans across three different Doctors (Ten, Eleven, Twelve). River Song, like the Doctor, is also a time-traveller, which causes them to meet out of sequence with each other, resulting in the Tenth Doctor meeting River Song in 'Silence in the Library' (2008) and having no idea who she is, but River knowing everything about the Doctor, including his true name – which remains one of the show's biggest mysteries. The Doctor watches her die in the following episode 'Forest of the Dead' (2008), but then continues meeting her in her past, but his future. This causes some struggle in their relationship, such as River snogging the Eleventh Doctor to his confusion because, in his timeline, they had never kissed before, but at no

point does the Doctor's potential asexuality become the cause of any struggles they face ('Day of the Moon', 2011).

That being said, the Eleventh Doctor is notably uncomfortable with sex, with Osterwald (2017: 41-42) noting that his:

... general awkwardness regarding his companions' relationship in the bedroom ... makes him very understandable to asexuals. ... for the Eleventh Doctor, any situation with even remotely sexual overtones becomes comically awkward.

This comical awkwardness is expressed through visual comedy and is used to represent his sexual disinterest. For example, in 'Flesh and Stone' (2010), the Doctor is visibly clueless when his companion, Amy, attempts to come on to him and he is then repeatedly forced to stop her from attempting to kiss, touch, and strip him of his clothing when she attempts to proposition him into a one-night stand with her. This is not ideal to say the least; comedically dismissing genuine feelings and attitudes experienced by some asexuals because they don't match with the 'normality' of society. What's more, if it were the male character who wouldn't stop kissing and touching a female character whilst trying to proposition her into bed despite her repeated refusals it would be seen as sexual harassment, but in this case, a male character who has shown no sexual interest in anyone refusing sex from a desirable young woman is to be laughed at. Thus, male asexuality is shown as something to laugh at.

However, in his relationship with River the Doctor can embrace his implied sex life wherein River flirtatiously admits to him that, "I'm quite the screamer" ('The Impossible Astronaut', 2011) and the Doctor can talk about the nights he spends with River ('The Wedding of River Song', 2011), whilst still being repulsed by sex involving other people ('A Good Man Goes

to War', 2011). Some may criticise this, suggesting it falls into the stereotype of the Doctor finding the 'right' person and thereby being 'fixed' of their asexuality through romance and sex, as Decker (2014: 84) notes is typical for characters who don't have sex. However, it must also be remembered that asexual people can participate in sexual behaviours for many reasons, and at no point does the Doctor suggest he is sexually attracted to River. Even if he is, it is perhaps suggestive of the Doctor being demisexual or greysexual (given that the Doctor is more likely to not be sexually attracted to others than be attracted to them, and the Doctor seems to need to develop an emotional bond with River – and others – before being intimate with them). Importantly, regardless of the Doctor and River's potential sex life (nothing is explicitly depicted on screen), his experience of arousal (as suggested by the Doctor making an unconscious upwards movement with his sonic screwdriver – making it 'erect' – in response to seeing a woman ('The Crimson Horror', 2013)), and marriage ('The Wedding of River Song', 2011), the Doctor can still be asexual, and these aren't possibilities typically given to confirmed asexual characters.

However, within moments of the Doctor regenerating into the Twelfth Doctor in 'Deep Breath' (2014), he makes clear that he is not trying to flirt, and that calling someone "my lady friend" is just a phrase, and for them to not get any ideas (the someone is a dinosaur, but still). This Doctor is romantically disinterested and touch adverse, claiming that he's "against the hugging" ('Listen' 2014), and doesn't seem to recognise differences in humans, such as their age and appearance, but nonetheless River accepts him when they meet – although she doesn't recognise his new face to begin with. In the episode, 'The Husbands of River Song' (2015), aliens attempt to use River as bait to lure the Doctor to them because

she is “the woman he loves”, but River tells them that “The Doctor does not and has never loved me.” What follows is an impassioned speech River gives where she explains that:

He’s the Doctor, he doesn’t go around falling in love with people ... God knows where he is right now, but I promise you, he’s doing what the hell he wants and not giving a damn about me! And I’m fine with that! ... If I find myself in danger, let me tell you, the Doctor is not stupid enough, or sentimental enough, and he is certainly not in love enough to find himself standing in it with me!

All whilst River is giving this speech, the Doctor is right beside her, which she realises at the end of the speech when he whispers their trademark “Hello, sweetie,” to her whilst sharing a meaningful look between them. Later, the pair go to dinner on the planet Darillium, in the knowledge that it’s the last night they’ll be together (in River’s timeline, the next time they meet will be when the Tenth Doctor meets her for the first time, and she dies). The Doctor tells her “You look, er, amazing,” to which River simply replies, “Doctor, you have no idea whether I look amazing or not” but tells him “It’s very sweet for you to try,” indicating that River knows that the Doctor is not sexually/physically attracted to her, but she accepts this about him, nonetheless.

As such, it is a powerful representation of potential asexuality wherein River accepts and loves the Doctor regardless of whether he loves her or is romantically – or otherwise – attracted to her. This episode takes place in 2015, and just a year before, Connor appeared on *Doctors* (2014), a ‘confirmed’ asexual character who was dumped by his girlfriend for not wanting to have sex with her and not being attracted to her, before he was manipulated into having sex with her under the guise of love anyway. Instead, here, River accepts whatever the Doctor is prepared to give her and expects nothing more – not even love. Whilst powerful in representing a relationship between an allosexual and asexually

resonant character wherein the asexual character is unquestionably accepted in their asexuality, River's steadfast belief that the Doctor doesn't love her does sadly play into a stereotype of asexual people as being incapable of love or feelings. However, the Doctor being there all along whilst River is claiming that the Doctor doesn't love her and would never be at the side whilst she's in danger does negate this somewhat. River, clearly, is wrong in her belief that the Doctor doesn't love or have feelings for her, even if he has never admitted such a thing. Furthermore, the Doctor later explains, in reference to the Singing Towers on Darillium, that no one knows what makes the towers sing, but "all anyone will ever tell you is that when the wind stands fair and the night is perfect, when you least expect it, but always, when you need it the most, there is a song", which is the closest declaration of love to River Song the Doctor ever gives, that he acknowledges that she'll always be there for him. And as a final gift to her, they may only have one night left together, but a night on Darillium lasts 24 years, which they'll spend together, living happily, if not happily ever after.

As such, asexual possibilities are expanded in being accepted by their partner in a relationship, in being able to have an implied (non-manipulative) sex life with their partner and be able to marry them. Asexuals can be sex repulsed, or neutral or favourable, they can be aroused, and romantically interested in others. These are more possibilities than have been entitled to 'confirmed' asexual characters. However, this continues the amatonormative assumption that all asexuals want a romantic relationship, which isn't the case. However, the numerous platonic relationships the Doctor has with their companions also gives rise to new possibilities, and here I will explore a few examples wherein non-

romantic narratives involving the Doctor are explored, without the narrative focusing on them finding a romantic partner.

Beyond Romance

The non-romantic and non-sexual potential between the Doctor and their companions was key in the original series of *Doctor Who* between 1963-1989, which is perhaps why the first series of new *Doctor Who* in 2005 continued this trend. As MacRury and Rustin (2018: 70) note, “For all the excitement of their adventures together, what ultimately defines the Doctor’s relationship with Rose is his feeling of responsibility for her.” Indeed, amongst repeated questions surrounding the relationship between the Ninth Doctor and Rose – which neither seem to be able to define – much of the first series deals with Rose’s on-off relationship with boyfriend Mickey Smith (Noel Clarke), and her brief relationship with Adam Mitchell (Bruno Langley), rather than attempting to romanticise or sexualise the relationship between her and the Doctor.

Indeed, in ‘The Empty Child’ (2005), Rose meets Captain Jack Harkness (John Barrowman), a flirtatious, omnisexual man from the 51st century. When the Doctor doesn’t understand why Rose trusts him so quickly, she explains that “I trust him ‘cos he’s like you. Except with dating and dancing” (‘The Doctor Dances’, 2005). The Doctor rolls his eyes and complains that “You just assume I don’t dance,” but he has seemingly no issue with the assumption that he doesn’t date. ‘Dancing’ does become a metaphor for attraction throughout the episode, with the Doctor explaining that Jack is “... a 51st-centruy guy, he’s just a bit more flexible when it comes to dancing” when he flirts with another man in 1940’s England. Rose later attempts to dance (literally) with the Doctor, but they are interrupted; the Doctor says

they were talking about dancing, but Jack says it didn't look like talking, and Rose says it didn't feel like dancing, which further becomes a metaphor for the different experiences of attraction. In this way, it's not that the Doctor can't 'dance', but rather doesn't want to, which resonates asexually.

As such, whilst the series focuses on the relationship between the Doctor and Rose, this is allowed to be platonic in nature rather than romantic or sexual, at least from the Doctor's perspective. Rose tells Mickey and her mum, Jackie Tyler (Camille Coduri) that the Doctor is "... not my boyfriend ... he's better than that. He's much more important" ('Aliens of London', 2005), which subverts the stereotype wherein it is platonic relationships that are seen as *just* friends and instead here a platonic relationship holds the higher status. Indeed, the Doctor is later baited by a dalek, the Doctor's alien nemesis, which asks him "What use are emotions if you won't save the woman you love?" which leads the Doctor to put the entire Earth at risk to save Rose out of his platonic love for her ('Dalek', 2005). However, the first series ends after the Doctor kisses Rose to save her life ('The Parting of Ways', 2005), and from that moment the boundary between what is permissible romantic or sexual behaviour between the Doctor and their companions seems to expand further and further.

As such, the non-romantic potential of the relationship between the Doctor and their companion isn't revisited until series four wherein the Tenth Doctor travels in the TARDIS with Donna Noble (Catherine Tate). Unlike the Doctor's previous companions in the new series, Rose and Martha Jones (Freema Agyeman), Donna was not attracted to the Doctor, nor was the Doctor to Donna. In fact, before Donna starts travelling in the TARDIS in

'Partners in Crime' (2008), the Doctor explains that he "just want[s] a mate." Donna misunderstands and questions, "You just want TO MATE?! You're not mating with me, sunshine!" The Doctor has to clarify that he just wants "A mate, I want *a* mate!" expressing his desire only for friendship before Donna agrees to travel with him. What follows is several episodes of the pair snarking at each other through time and space whilst repeatedly, vehemently denying that they are together, a couple or married when others assume that they are. Richards (2013: 196) calls this "a tiresome running gag," but rather I consider this to be beneficial; to have a male/female relationship, which is repeatedly denied and never turns into anything other than friendship is rare, but important.

However, of the thirteen episodes of the series, only five involve the Doctor and Donna travelling on their own (and even then, in one of the episodes Donna is completely removed from the action and gets just a handful of minutes on screen). A further two episodes introduce River, three episodes reintroduce Martha, and one episode reintroduces Rose, with the final two episodes starring every companion from the new series including Rose, Mickey, Jackie, Jack, Sarah Jane Smith (Elisabeth Sladen), and Martha, as well as key characters from *Doctor Who's* spin-offs, *Torchwood* (2006) and *The Sarah Jane Adventures* (2007). As such, whilst there is an opportunity to explore an asexually resonant narrative which does not involve a romantic storyline, this is not executed and instead replaced by (re)introducing past and future love interests of the Doctor. Whilst I, unlike Richards maintain that an asexual Doctor does exist in a new series, and the show obviously succeeds with an asexually resonant Doctor, this does indicate his suggestion that "a large

audience needs that romantic element front and centre,” to be true, or at least believed by the crew behind the show (2013: 200).

Between the Doctor’s ongoing relationship with River, the next opportunity to explore a non-romantic storyline is with the introduction of the Thirteenth Doctor. Rather than just travelling with one companion, which has been typical during the modern series, this Doctor instead travels with Yasmin ‘Yaz’ Khan (Mandip Gill), Ryan Sinclair (Tosin Cole), and Graham O’Brien (Bradley Walsh). As Jowett (2021: 93-94) explains:

The move to an ensemble cast rather than the previous dynamic of the (ostensibly male) Doctor and one (female) companion, established in the 2005 relaunch and more or less unchanged until series 11, did manage to avoid the unrequited love trajectory of almost every previous female companion.

As such, it is this “ensemble cast” that perhaps exemplifies the potential for a non-romantic narrative involving the Doctor best. Indeed, it’s Graham’s relationship with Grace (Sharon D. Clarke), who dies in the first episode (‘The Woman Who Fell to Earth, 2018), and his experiences with learning to live without her, that can be described as the main romantic narrative of the series. Instead, the Doctor can spend her first two series travelling in the TARDIS with her “fam” as she calls them, with the episodes focusing on tackling current issues, such as racism, sexism, and pollution, rather than focusing on romance.

However, this changes at the end of series twelve when Graham and Ryan leave the TARDIS. In their absence, despite what Jowett (2021: 100) asserts as “apparent BBC nervousness hovering around any denotative implication or representations of a queer Doctor, whether in relation to Yaz or River Song,” the following episodes nonetheless allow a closer relationship between the Doctor and Yaz to form. Yaz’s affection for the Doctor is first made clear to the Doctor’s new companion, Dan Lewis (John Bishop) (‘Eve of the

Daleks', 2022), but unlike the unrequited queer attraction Jack Harkness once held for the Ninth/Tenth Doctor, the Doctor later voices her own desire to date Yaz, and even reveals that she had a wife ('Legend of the Sea Devil', 2022). However, whilst the Doctor admits that if she were to date, it would be with Yaz, she admits she can't, explaining that:

Yaz, I can't fix myself to anything, anywhere, or anyone. I've never been able to. That's what my life is. Not because I don't want to. Because I might. But if I do fix myself to somebody, I know sooner or later, it'll hurt.

Here, because the Doctor is an over one-thousand-year-old alien, she is unable to live her life with someone. Instead, she asks Yaz if they can just keep what they have together, for as long as they have it. Now, whether this is an indication of a demi-sexual or demi-romantic Doctor is difficult to decipher, and importantly dating is not inherently romantic in nature, and may instead relate to platonic attraction. However, taking the romantic implications at face value, it is notable that the attraction the Doctor feels for Yaz doesn't become apparent until after the pair have spent several series together which is indicative of the Doctor needing to develop a bond with someone before she experiences attraction. Whilst this narrative may once again play into amatonormativity and reinforce a romance narrative, this nonetheless continues to expand asexual possibilities through a queer romantic attraction, the likes of which haven't been seen in an asexual character on British TV, nor in the character of the Doctor.

Limitations

The prior analysis has largely focussed on the numerous ways in which *Doctor Who* has been able to expand asexual narrative possibilities in romantic, platonic, and sexual

contexts. However, *Doctor Who* can also limit these possibilities. As Osterwald (2017: 42) summarises:

...in line with modern representations of asexuals, the Eleventh Doctor is still not very representative of typical asexuals, as he is still male and impossibly brilliant ... compounded by the fact that the Doctor is an alien.

Whilst Osterwald focuses purely on the Eleventh Doctor, this critique can be applied to almost every iteration of the Doctor: male, brilliant, and alien. Also: white, non-disabled (and can in fact 'fix' any disabilities acquired, such as losing an arm, blindness, and even death) and old in age – even if not in the physicality of the actor. However, exploring each of these critiques is revealing.

The Doctor is typically depicted by a male actor, and whilst statistics suggest that men make up the smallest group of any gender to identify as asexual (Weis et al., 2021: 16) – which doesn't make the many male Doctors representative of asexuality – given the socialisation of genders, wherein men are expected to be sexual, and women chaste, highlighting the possibility of male asexuality is vital. However, simultaneously men are overrepresented within television, and asexually resonant male characters are also overrepresented compared to other genders, and often fall into other negative stereotypes surrounding nerdiness, unattractiveness, and sociopathic tendencies (as suggested by Decker, 2014: 84 and Sinwell, 2014: 166), rather than necessarily contributing to a better awareness of asexuality as a sexual orientation and identity (e.g., Sherlock Holmes, Sheldon Cooper, Dexter Morgan etc.).

However, whilst most often portrayed by a male actor, the Doctor is not necessarily a man. Even before Jodie Whittaker's portrayal of the Thirteenth Doctor complicated the belief

that the Doctor was male, there were hints that Time Lord biology operated outside of the gender binary which is still enforced within humanity. As the Twelfth Doctor explains, “[Time Lords] are the most civilised civilisation in the universe, we’re billions of years beyond your petty human obsession with gender and its associated stereotypes,” (*‘World Enough and Time’*, 2017). However, Whittaker’s female-presenting Doctor added credit to the suggestion of a non-binary or genderqueer character, of whom representations are few and far between on British television, especially when considering the intersections between non-binary genders and asexuality which remain invisible within confirmed representations of asexuality.

In contrast, the Doctor being “brilliant” – a know it all, a genius – also contributes to a negative stereotype wherein asexuality is represented as a result of sex and sexuality being beneath the character – although perhaps there is something to be said about the fact that the Doctor is “brilliant” in all things except those relating to sexuality, romance, and, at times, genuine human emotions in general. However, as Osterwald (2017: 42) notes, the Doctor’s brilliance is “compounded by the fact that the Doctor is an alien.” This is highlighted multiple times throughout the show, but perhaps most clearly by fellow Time Lord/Lady Missy’s dismissal when the Doctor’s human companion, Clara, suggested that Missy and the Twelfth Doctor are in love and instead exclaims, “Oh, don’t be disgusting! We’re Time Lords, not animals,” telling Clara to “rise above the reproductive frenzy” of humans and to instead “contemplate friendship” between her and the Doctor instead (*‘The Magician’s Apprentice’*, 2015). The Eleventh Doctor himself says something similar when asked when his companions may have conceived a baby and he replies, “Well how would I

know? That's all human-y, private stuff, it just sort of...goes on" ('A Good Man Goes to War', 2011). As such, Time Lords, as an alien species, are seemingly above such basic things as romantic love, attraction, reproduction, and sex.

Because of this, the Doctor often blames their alienness as a reason for why they do not engage in sexual and/or romantic relationships, as seen in the Thirteenth Doctor's rejection of Yaz. This is an ongoing trend throughout the series, with the Tenth Doctor explaining to Rose in 'School Reunion' (2006) that:

I don't age, I regenerate, but humans decay. You wither and you die. Imagine watching that happen to someone who you— ... You can spend the rest of your life with me, but I can't spend the rest of mine with you. I have to live on, alone. That's the curse of the Time Lords.

And a curse it seems to be. On a couple of occasions, the Doctor has become human, and on these occasions, he embraces his humanity, kissing, falling in love and wanting to live out the rest of his life with a woman, including getting married and having children ('Human Nature', 2007; 'The Family of Blood', 2007; 'Journey's End', 2008). In each example it can be said that the Doctor is embracing his romantic attraction, rather than sexual attraction, and again, romance, kissing, marriage, and parenthood do not negate an asexual identity. Nonetheless, these moments teach us that it is human to embrace such desires, and inhuman to ignore them, and whilst many asexuals do seek romance, sensual activities, marriage, and parenthood, asexuals (and people in general) that do not are again represented as alien.

Conclusion

Doctor Who can both expand and limit possibilities for representations of asexuality. But why is this important? As Warren (2013: 140) explains:

Doctor Who has outgrown its television origins to become comic strips, paperbacks, a musical stage play, audio adventures, reconstructed dramas, slash/fiction, computer games, blog fodder, magazine blurb, screenplays (as yet unrealized), chart hit, parody, and more. Its ubiquity and longevity have transformed it from humble broadcast to zippy cultural text.

As such, the Doctor is a worldwide cultural icon. The ambiguity of the Doctor's sexuality has aided queer kids in the past which continues today through giving visibility to an asexually resonant character, not only in Britain, but across the world. That the Doctor can be read as asexual and considered to be asexual from actors and fans alike gives visibility to an identity which lacks it. Whether the Doctor is being snogged by Rose, getting married to Queen Elizabeth I or Marilyn Monroe, spending his nights with River, or in love with Yaz doesn't detract from the asexual possibilities of the character. Whilst some would rather avoid any romantic or sexual element of the Doctor, such as Richards (2013: 200) who says, "Do I want to watch a romance between a mature man and a woman 900 years younger than him? No. Apart from anything else it's just creepy." For others, the fact that the Doctor can have friends, relationships, marriages, and children, all whilst not showing sexual attraction towards others, or explicitly participating in sexual behaviours onscreen gives hope.

However, the Doctor is not textually asexual, and as such care isn't taken by production crew to depict the asexual resonances of the Doctor in a way which considers the potential benefits or harm caused by representing asexuality in such a way. Even if the Doctor were written as asexual this still would not guarantee a 'good' depiction of asexuality, as was the

case on *Doctors* (2014) or *Sex Education* (2019), for example. Furthermore, given Moffat's (2014) comments surrounding there being "no tension, no fun" within asexuality when discussing the asexual (im)possibilities of *Sherlock*, is it any wonder that the introduction of River and the sexual implications of their relationship came about through Moffat's writing and show running?

However, beyond the moralistic implications of how *Doctor Who* has represented ambiguous asexuality, there is still something to be said for how these representations point towards a change in how asexuality, and asexual "resonances" are understood. The Doctors from the classic series of *Doctor Who* (1963) were assumed to be asexual solely for not having any sexual or romantic liaisons with their companions (as well as implications of non-sexuality due to the elder age of the first Doctors). Today, however, the Doctor can partake in romantic and sexual activities without these negating their asexuality. Of course, it is true that many continue to suggest that such activities preclude asexuality (Hadas, 2013: 344; Richards, 2013: 196-200; Huff, 2013: 89), which indicates that there is still some way to go in educating the general public, but for asexuals, the Doctor nonetheless stands as an asexually resonant character with multitudes of asexual possibilities, beyond what has been seen anywhere within confirmed asexuality. If only television in general could take note of this...

CONCLUSION

This research set out to retrace a lost history of asexuality on British television. I set out to answer three main questions: how did asexuality emerge on British screens; how has asexuality been represented on television; and how can television move beyond the asexual stereotypes that pervade our screens? In answering these questions, I have searched for asexuality in many ways, taking care to note the difficulties that arise from searching for a 'lack' or an 'absence' of sexual attraction, and how ineffective audio-visual languages can be to decipher the presence or absence of sexual attraction on screen. Instead, I have used three methodologies to retrace asexuality, and have previously discussed the limitations of each.

In Chapter One, I turned to Przybylo and Cooper's methodology of using asexual "resonances" to search for asexuality in archival material (2014). Alongside "resonances", I looked to other research regarding representations of asexuality, retracing television histories between asexuality and aliens and mythical creatures; asexuality and disability and nerdiness; and asexuality and the detective (Decker, 2014: 83; Sinwell, 2014: 166; Lamerichs 2018: 90). I then explored two asexual "resonances" in depth through 'Eleanor' and 'Celibacy: Putting Sex in Its Place', both of which situate asexuality/not having sex within negative contexts leading to oppression, discrimination, and threats of medical intervention. Here it is clear that historically, asexuality/not having sex has been seen as missing out on something, that not having sex is a temporary period between relationships and is something to be fixed when it becomes an imposition in a relationship. These are all associations which then continued into 'confirmed' representations of asexuality, and the

lasting effects of these views can still be seen today. However, importantly, this chapter is nothing more than a starting point to question how asexuality emerged on British television, and further research is necessary to truly answer how asexuality emerged on screen, specifically by looking beyond definitions of 'not having sex' and looking for more expansive definitions and experiences of asexuality.

In Chapter Two, I searched for instances wherein asexual terminology has been used on screen, in what I described as 'confirmed' examples of asexuality. In exploring four representations of asexuality in this way (*Richard & Judy*, 2004; *Steph's Packed Lunch*, 2021a; *Doctors*, 2014; *Emmerdale*, 2016-2022), asexuality is represented as an almost exclusively white, under thirty, alloromantic and typically heteroromantic identity, which accounts for few asexual experiences. Furthermore, definitions of asexuality in these representations have typically reinforced asexuality as not having or not desiring sex, and whilst this is a common asexual experience, this is nonetheless misleading and damaging to understandings of asexuality in Britain. There is, however, some limited evidence to suggest that representations of asexuality are changing, and for the better, but this is only within a young, white, cisgender and heteronormative framework, and ignores the simple possibility of other asexual experiences, let alone their individual challenges and differences. As such, asexuality is misunderstood and conflated with celibacy, rather than being its own queer sexual orientation, and furthermore asexuality's links with queerness – be it the inherent queerness of asexuality, or the intersections of asexuality with other forms of queerness – are neglected. Whilst this chapter begins to explore a history of how asexual terminology has been used on screen, and the resulting representations of

asexuality, further research would do well to explore the impact these representations of asexuality have on asexual communities and wider audiences in informing society about asexuality.

In Chapter Three, I investigated the ambiguous asexuality of the Doctor from *Doctor Who* (2005), questioning whether the fact that the Doctor's asexuality is never confirmed on screen allows the character to escape the limiting stereotypes which exist within 'confirmed' representations of asexuality. Indeed, it is clear that *Doctor Who* illustrates a change in how asexuality and asexual "resonances" can be understood and represented. In Chapter One, asexual "resonances" were defined by not having sex and blurring the lines between asexuality and celibacy (Przybylo and Cooper, 2014), which is why so many label the Doctors of the classic series as being asexual and deny asexual possibilities within the modern series (Hadas, 2013; Richards, 2013, Huff, 2013). However here the Doctor is able to embrace an implied sex life and arousal, and participate in romance and relationships whilst remaining an asexually resonant character who is discussed as such by cast and crew of the series. Furthermore, the modern character rejects numerous stereotypes of 'confirmed' asexuality, and instead offers an elder genderqueer character who explores the spectrums between aromanticism and alloromanticism, sex-repulsion to sex-favourability and is able to voice a queer attraction to a companion. However, the Doctor as an alien still reinforces negative stereotypes of asexuality, with not wanting or having a relationship or sex linked with being inhuman. Furthermore, in *Doctor Who* (2005) asexuality remains an exclusively white identity. However, whether this will change with Black actor, Ncuti Gatwa's, upcoming introduction into the role of the Doctor is yet to be seen, but the

future is at least promising. However, importantly, these narratives need to move beyond ambiguity, and instead ‘confirmed’ representations of asexuality need to become more inclusive of all asexual experiences, like the multitude offered in *Doctor Who* (2005), not just the few experiences currently available.

But what does this all mean? Overall, this dissertation is amongst the first studies to academically explore British television representations of asexuality, and the first to attempt to retrace a history of asexuality in this way. For an orientation with (known) histories dating back over 150 years, asexuality has a limited television presence, but work *can* be done to retrace asexual television histories. In doing this research alone, I have been able to retrace two ‘confirmed’ representations of asexuality (*Richard & Judy*, 2004; *Doctors*, 2014) which have been lost from public view and are now only available through archives. I can now reshare these histories, and if these are just two examples from the last twenty years, what more awaits to be found in the entirety of television and asexual history? However, beyond the importance of searching for our histories, I must also look to our futures. Queer rights and visibilities are currently at a tipping point in Britain (and across the world), with homophobic hate crimes on the rise, a panic over the most basic rights of our transgender siblings, and the chance to ban conversion therapy in Britain seemingly ever smaller. However, asexuality is often missed out from conversations surrounding queer issues because asexuality hasn’t been afforded the visibility it needs to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our queer siblings. Television representations, being amongst the most accessible and free-to-view representations available, must increase and improve, and asexuals must be granted the visibility we deserve.

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