Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Egan, Kate (2020) Memories of Connecting: Fathers, Daughters and Intergenerational Monty Python Fandom. In: And Now for Something Completely Different: Critical Approaches to Monty Python. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, pp. 207-226. ISBN 9781474475150, 9781474475181, 9781474475174

Published by: Edinburgh University Press

URL: https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-and-now-... <https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-and-now-for-something-completely-different-hb.html>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link: https://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/43605/

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

Northumbria University NEWCASTLE

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE CSE UniversityLibrary

Memories of Connecting:

Fathers, Daughters and Intergenerational Monty Python Fandom

Kate Egan

In 2017, I began work on the audience research project *Monty Python Memories*. This project's central research tool was an online questionnaire – combining quantitative/multiple-choice and qualitative/free text questions and answers – asking respondents to share their memories and experiences of encountering Monty Python for the first time and then over subsequent years. The questionnaire was designed to encourage respondents to outline their emergent and enduring fandom for Python, with the first free text question asking for recollections of their first encounter with Python in any form (the television show, or one of the films, albums, or live shows). To my knowledge, this project has since amassed the largest dataset of audience responses to a comedy form/text to date – 6,120 responses from across the world, with a particular concentration of respondents from the US (2,848 responses) and the UK (1,123 responses), but with substantial numbers also received from Canada (409), Australia (264), Germany (144), Sweden (94), France (82), Denmark (76), and Poland (72). I received a relatively balanced number of responses from men and women: 52% men and 46% women, while 71% of the 1772 participants who responded to the (optional) question about education indicated that they were educated to at least university degree level. The scale of response was assisted by the project's promotion on Monty Python's official website http://www.montypython.com/ and official Monty Python social media outlets on Facebook and Twitter, leading to a dataset which is global in

scope and largely representative, because of its recruitment methods, of the memories and experiences of invested, self-identifying Python fans.

The project's focus on the memories and history of experiences of Monty Python fans related to a gap in both existing scholarship on Python and the broader, emergent strand of research on comedy audiences. In 2014, the Monty Python team were reunited on stage at London's O2 arena for the first time in over thirty years. The shows sold out, and a BBC documentary heralded them as the most successful comedy group of all time (*Imagine*, BBC1, July 2014). After nearly fifty years, Monty Python's popularity has clearly endured. However, while existing Python scholarship has made significant claims about the core audiences for Python as broadly young, middle class and University-educated (see, for instance, Wagg 1992; Miller 2000; Landy 2005; and Brock 2016), these claims have been based either on analysis of Python texts, or, in the case of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, institutional factors relating to the show's initial UK and US reception context of the late 1960s to mid-1970s (the show's target audience, the audience profile of the channel on which it was broadcast, or BBC Audience Research reports). While my questionnaire results go some way to supporting the claims of this scholarship, in terms of Python appealing to a predominantly educated audience, the *Monty Python Memories* project's focus on memories and histories of Python fandom allows for a much more detailed consideration of how this appeal has been sustained over the forty plus years since this initial period of reception, whether it has changed, developed or become qualified, and, if so, in relation to which public and private circumstances.

In contrast, the emerging body of work on comedy audiences has produced excellent and robust research and insights on 'comedy texts and audience practices' (Bore 2017: 8)

and ‘humor styles’ and tastes ‘in everyday life’ (Kuipers 2015: 19, see also Claessens and Dhoest 2010), but with a predominant focus on the contemporary reception of contemporary comedy texts and forms of humour. The main exception, in some ways, is Sam Friedman’s book *Comedy and Distinction*, a ground-breaking empirical study of contemporary comedy taste amongst attendees of the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Comedy Fringe. Here, Friedman identifies key patterns in comedy preferences for a wide range of both past and present British comedy (from *Last of the Summer Wine* and *Yes Minister* to *Little Britain* and *Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle*). His study’s primary aim is to consider the utility of Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and embodied capital when accounting for the ‘major fault lines in comedy taste’ amongst contemporary British comedy consumers (Friedman 2014: 43). Most prominently, his findings illustrate that, for a substantial number of his 901 respondents, taste in ‘highbrow’ or ‘lowbrow’ comedy relates clearly to respondents’ higher or lower cultural capital resources. However, he also argues that his study’s results ‘suggest important generational differences in comedy taste’, and notes that:

> older generations, particularly those over 55, tend to have a largely sceptical view of comedy, rejecting the vast majority of new comedians and instead reporting tastes for mainly older, 'lowbrow' comedians. In contrast, taste for 'highbrow' comedy appears to be much more prevalent among those 44 and under…one important contributing factor may be the post-1979 aestheticisation of comedy, which has coincided with the cultural socialisation of these younger generations (Ibid: 60).

Here, then, Friedman sheds light on potential generational taste fault lines between those born in or before 1964 and those born in or after 1965, with the rise of the British 'Alternative Comedy Boom' of the 1980s – exemplified by such comedians as Rik Mayall, Alexei Sayle and Ben Elton – put forward by Friedman as the key milestone that enabled younger comedy fans to begin to recognise and embrace comedy's 'artistic potential' (Ibid: 87), and thus distinguish their tastes and attitudes to comedy from their parents' and grandparents' generations. For Friedman, this 1980s boom was a crucial moment in shifting the status of British comedy because these comedians 'were united by an experimental approach to comedy that self-consciously attempted to push beyond the "low-brow" styles that had previously dominated the field', whereas earlier experimenters such as Monty Python and *Beyond the Fringe* 'in statistical terms … only made up a small fraction of overall comedy output…during the 1960s and 1970s' (Ibid: 19). As with the earlier cited Python scholarship, what Friedman seems to draw on here – when assessing British comedy's contemporary status, cultural hierarchies and impact – is a historical map of comedy and audience preference based on the immediate moment of their production and dissemination. What is not considered here (and in other existing scholarship on Python specifically and on comedy audiences more broadly) is 'the historicity of meaning beyond origins' (Klinger 1997: 112) of enduring comedy like Python – their diachronic reach and impact as they continue to circulate years and decades after their initial reception moment, both in their native countries and internationally, particularly after the rise of home video technologies, the internet and streaming.

Indeed, other *Monty Python Memories* results seemed to challenge and complicate Friedman's findings on generational differences in British comedy taste. For instance, one of the first searches I conducted on the free-text responses in my dataset revealed that one of the most prevalent trends crossing respondents' memories of first encountering Python were mentions of 'Dad' or 'Father', with 1,098 responses mentioning either term at least once in their, generally lengthy, answers, compared to only 576 responses mentioning 'Mother', 'Mum', or 'Mom'. On isolating these 1,098 responses (henceforth referred to as the 'Dad Memories Group'), it became apparent that there was a concentration of younger respondents in this group (particularly in the 18-35 age categories), pointing, crucially, to Python's durability across generations.

Figure 12.1 NEAR HERE

In addition, there was also a shift in the number of women within this group when compared to the dataset as a whole – specifically, and as illustrated by the chart below, an 8% rise in female responses and a 7% drop in male responses.

Figure 12.2 NEAR HERE

The focus on fathers in these Python memories connects, in some ways, with an emerging tradition of work within fan studies focused on familial influence and intergenerational fandom, in studies on, for instance, music fandom (Vroomen 2004), soap opera fandom (Harrington and Bielby 2010), football fandom (Dixon 2013), film star fandom (Ralph 2015), fandom of the *Alien* film franchise (Barker et al 2015), and wrestling fandom (Alcott 2019). All of this work, to differing degrees, has acknowledged the 'role of

the family' as 'a recurring social context' in people's accounts of their history of fandom (Barker et al 2015: 43), noting, in particular, how family members can function as gatekeepers, curators, tastemakers, or mentors, initiating younger relatives into an engagement with a film, television show, star, sport, novel or music artist. As acknowledged in Vroomen and Dixon's work in particular, these activities have clear connections to Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus – to the ways in which 'cultural knowledge' is 'acquired through family socialisation' (Claessens and Dhoest 2010: 50). However, scholars like Harrington and Bielby and Sarah Ralph have also considered the ways in which these shared investments relate to child and adolescent developmental processes, particularly in considering how forms of media can function in the history of relations between mothers and daughters. For Harrington and Bielby, mothers can operate, in this context, 'as a central figure' in a daughter's 'negotiation into adulthood as mediated through soap opera', facilitating 'adolescent explorations' and providing 'moral guidance' on a daughter's shifting emotional relationships with others through engagement with soap opera's fictional narratives (2010); while, for Ralph, shared engagement with film stars can 'open up conversations between mothers and daughters about potentially awkward subjects during adolescence', particularly in relation to sexual identity and romance (2015: 1).

These existing insights on intergenerational fandom prompt a series of questions, when thinking about the higher concentration of female respondents in the *Monty Python Memories* project's 'Dad Memories Group'. If, as this previous scholarship has indicated, mothers and daughters can use shared media engagements to discuss puberty and romantic and sexual relationships, then what might be the motivations, benefits, and consequences of a shared engagement with Monty Python between fathers and daughters? Is this shared

investment in Python informed by different forms of emotional engagement and ways of looking at the world? How might this relate to Python's status as sketch comedy, rather than dramatic narrative? These are particularly complex questions, when considering two factors. Firstly, Python's status as an all-male comedy troupe who has been critiqued, particularly since the 1990s, for the sexually objectified roles played by Carol Cleveland in *Flying Circus*, as well as the 'grotesque' and caricatured female characters (the 'Pepperpots') the Pythons have played in drag (Whybray 2016: 172; see also Wagg 1992). Secondly, the fact that respondent attitudes to these more problematic aspects of Python's comedy – and to their relationships with their fathers – will inevitably be complicated by the fact that the respondents are recalling, from the present, memories of Python and their fathers that are located, in some cases, 10-15 years ago (in the early 2000s) and, at the other extreme, 40 years ago (in the mid-1970s or even earlier). Consequently, these recollections of cross-gender relationships around Python will inevitably, as Jackie Stacey has noted, involve complex negotiations between changing 'public discourses' around Python and 'private narratives' relating to their 'own personal histories' and 'the feelings' they have 'about their past, present and future selves' (1993: 63 & 70). Further to this, the strong focus on paternal influence within these memories of first encounters with Monty Python seems at odds with Python's status as comedy producers fuelled by an anti-establishment spirit, which involved, for Eric Idle, being 'anti-authority, anti-school. anti-teachers, anti-church, anti-mothers, anti-fathers' (cited in Mills 2014: 134) and, therefore, as Robert Hewison notes, revolting against the 'deferential society' that the Python team 'were introduced to by their parents' (Hewison in Jones et al 2009). With this in mind, a further consideration, when analysing these responses, is the extent to which the association between Python and parental

influence appears to have impacted on Python's ability to, in Jeffrey Weinstock's terms, retain (or not retain) 'its transgressive edge' (2007: 111).

In the analysis that follows, these questions will be considered through exploration of the discursive repertoires/ways of talking about the association between fathers and Monty Python amongst the female respondents within the *Monty Python Memories* project's 'Dad Memories Group'. While it should be noted that some of these memories recount activities involving fathers and mixed-gender children (female respondents and their brothers or sisters), the focus will be on the father-daughter relations primarily discussed in these memories, in order to shed light not only on Python's durability across decades but also its surprising status as a cross-gender form of intergenerational media fandom.

Monty Python Fandom Amongst Fathers and Daughters: Motivations and Circumstances

Responses from women across the 'Dad Memories Group' make reference to the moment their father introduced them to the world of Monty Python, in a number of interlinked ways. Firstly, many respondents recall this paternal introduction in a way that suggests their father wanted to replicate, for their daughter, the conditions under which they had first encountered Python as a younger man. While some respondents note that their father sat them down to watch Python in order to 'pass on the laughter' or 'share the humour', others remark that their father 'wanted me to experience the same feeling of happiness that Monty Python gave to him as a teenager', that he 'decided to show me the first episode he ever saw once he decided I was old enough in middle school', or that he'd 'said he'd been to the cinema to watch it when he was my age about 12/13 and he knew I loved to laugh' (#2177 Canadian, 36-45; #2958 American, 26-35; #962

Portuguese 18-25; #900 American 18-25; #2338 British 18-25).[1] Akin to other studies of intergenerational fandom, the sharing of Python here involves, in many cases, a father 'packaging' it as a 'rite of passage' (Barker et al 2015: 42) that is passed on to the child when they are deemed 'old enough' or when they reach the same age or stage at which their father had first encountered Python. As illustrated in these examples, conditions of replication also extend to showing the same episode first viewed by their father, or of the strong indication being given that the respondent should 'experience the same feeling of happiness' that their father had experienced in his teenage past.

Extending this notion of passing on a family tradition or family experience of Python fandom, a substantial number of American and Canadian respondents also noted that this – almost ceremonial – introduction to Python was informed by their father's British roots. Respondents noted, for instance, that 'my father is English' and 'made me aware of my British heritage', that 'my British Dad was excited to share' Python 'with us as he loved it', and that 'it was very important' to 'my father, a British expat…that his Canadian child developed an appreciation for British comedy' (#2885 Canadian, 56-65; #259 American, 46-55; #3618 Canadian, 26-35). Further to this, there is a sense that – for fathers who were broadly first-generation fans who had encountered Monty Python during its initial British or North American circulation between 1969 and 1976 – the importance of passing on 'some of the comedy of his youth' (#2098 Danish, 18-25) also related to the 'specific cultural moment' of 'generational tensions', the breaking up of institutions, and 'the emergence of new forms of globalism' frequently associated with *Monty Python's Flying Circus*'s initial appearance (Landy 2005: 15). As one respondent outlined, for instance, 'many important social issues, stereotypes, tropes, themes, and miscellaneous objects are reflected in the seemingly nonsensical humor of the

Pythons. However, as my father explained the significance behind these things, many of which were vastly important for his generation, they became more relevant and understandable to me' (#3578 American, 18-25). There is a sense across these accounts that – at least as presented through reminiscence by their children – this paternal introduction to Python was frequently tied to what Harrington and Bielby have described as the transcendence of familial relationships through shared media engagements. In these examples, introducing Monty Python to their daughters seems to allow fathers to reveal more about themselves as a socially and culturally situated person (rather than as just these respondents' fathers), thus providing 'honest insight' into their 'preferences, values and interpretations' (Harrington and Bielby, 2010) in order to strengthen the father-daughter bond.

Alongside these packaged and purposeful introductions, many other female respondents recall being introduced to Monty Python by their fathers in a more incremental and diffuse manner, supporting Matt Hills' argument that becoming a fan can frequently 'form part of a routinised, habituated way of interacting with pop culture' rather than always occurring in one 'life-changing, pivotal moment' (2014: 10). For many of these female respondents, Python is remembered as a constant in their lives growing up. It was 'always on in our house', and, for a Swedish respondent, 'just was there, as soon as I understood enough English to appreciate it'; indeed, many respondents noted that 'I can't remember a time that I didn't know who they were' and that 'I've known about' Python 'for as long as I can remember' (#178 American, 36-45; #801 Swedish, 36-45; #2127 American, 36-45; #3444 American, 18-25).

Informing this sense of Python as a pervasive and quotidian aspect of their childhoods are the frequent references made to other ways Python pervaded their lives, outside of television broadcasts or screenings of home video versions of the shows or films. Firstly, Python's status as

a multi-media comedy phenomenon meant that, for some, Python's initial presence in their lives occurred when they skimmed through their father's Python books or when their father played Python albums at home or on tape during family car trips. This meant that the televisual origin of Python's comedy was initially unclear to some; for instance, one respondent recalls that 'It was years before I realised who the tape was, or even that the show existed as a television series', while another notes that '*Matching Tie and Handkerchief* was released after my first birthday so I have been listening to it and hearing it recited by family members since I was too small to understand all the words' (#723 British, 36-45; #1842 American, 36-45). Secondly and as illustrated by this last recollection, initial encounters with Python were also frequently initiated by their fathers' consistent re-enacting or quoting of Python sketches or scenes, which, once again, meant that the origin of the recited comedy was initially unclear to respondents. Respondents note, for instance, that 'when I was a child, my father's substitution for a bedtime story was to re-enact various Monty Python skits that he had committed to memory', that 'I think I probably learnt more MP quotes from my Dad's impressions than from the shows themselves', and that 'my dad used to recite them (I particularly remember him doing the Death of Mary Queen of Scots) on long road trips to entertain me…I think I probably thought my dad came up with it on his own' (#3578 American, 18-25; #2305 British, 36-45; #742 American, 26-35). What is significant here is the specificity of Monty Python as a form of comedy that is highly quotable and was disseminated via multiple forms of media, from television to albums to books to films. This leads to Python's status, in many of these memories, as a diffuse but constant familial text that permeated the childhood of many of these respondents – at home, in the car, at the dinner table – and often had use-value, for a father, as a repurposed bedtime story or as road-trip entertainment in album form or via re-enactment or quotation. As a consequence, these

processes shed fascinating light on key ways in which Python's comedy has maintained its presence and durability beyond its initial broadcast or release, as well as supporting Inger-Lise Bore's insight that quoting comedy 'offers a way to rupture the boundary between the text and our own everyday lives' (2017: 112).

The focus in many of these accounts on Python as providing a vehicle of communication and entertainment between father and daughter is also a key framework for understanding the importance of a father's association with Monty Python in respondent memories of their developing Python fandom. Whether initial Python encounters had occurred via an introduction or through the consistent presence of Python while growing up, the significance of engaging with Python as children and adolescents was consistently tied, for many respondents, to its status as an investment shared solely or particularly with their father. For many female respondents in the 'Dad Memories Group', Python was 'something we shared', 'my mother and sister didn't "get" the humor, but my dad and I loved it', and 'spending time, sharing something with my dad, that no one else in the family did, was special' (#2168 British, 26-35; #1371 American, 46-55; #1523 American, 46-55). This includes some cases where parents divorced or separated in the respondents' childhood, with one respondent noting, for instance, that Monty Python was the 'one thing we could all bond over' when her and her younger brother visited their father (#2243 Canadian, 36-45).

It could be argued that this establishment of a Python-informed bond between father and daughter might constitute evidence of the impact on intergenerational fandom of what Hannah Hamad has termed 'the reconceived gender norms in parenting that arose from the politically charged movement' of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and onwards (2014: 2). This interpretation needs to be tentative and qualified, however, not only because these memories

represent recollections of father-daughter relations that stretch over forty years (covering a great period of change in terms of feminist and post-feminist debate) but also because a shared father-daughter investment in Python, and the frequent marginalisation of a respondent's mother in this investment, doesn't tell us anything about the extent of the mother or father's role in the full range of the 'quotidian practicalities of parenting' (Ibid: 2) – indeed, as indicated, many respondents note that Python fandom was the only connection they had with their father. Despite this, these recollections do seem to chime with certain processes associated with this post-1960s conception of 'new fatherhood', in particular the use of Python sketches as bedtime stories (which could be conceived as a 'quotidian' practicality 'of parenting') and the idea of a father being 'involved with his daughters as much as his sons' (Joseph Pleck cited in Hamad 2014: 10).

Indeed, in many female respondents' recollections of their shared father-daughter investment in Python, there is evidence that this investment has functioned as a key developmental activity equivalent to – but distinct from - the forms of 'negotiation into adulthood' and facilitation of 'adolescent explorations' enabled by shared mother-daughter engagement with soap opera or film stars. This is most clearly illustrated by respondents' detailed accounts of learning, through their father, about comedy and laughter. Memories of this process of learning to laugh with their father are outlined in detail in respondent recollections that recount the process through which they learned, as children, to laugh at Python when their father laughed or 'paid close attention to what was happening' in order to understand why their father was laughing at particular moments (#2639 Canadian, 46-55). The fact that many of these childhood encounters with Python are presented by respondents as access points into distinctly adult comedy – evident in, for instance, one respondent's comment that they 'grew up having memorized some really inappropriate stuff for a ten year old' and another's remembered pleasure

at ‘sitting with my dad and being allowed to watch grown up telly’ (#388 American, 26-35; #2626 British, 46-55) – compounds this sense that sharing an investment in Python with their father ushered them into a space where they could develop their sense of humour through specific paternal mentorship. But, crucially, mentorship of not any form of comedy but one which, for many respondents, was remembered as silly and enjoyable – hence giving their younger selves an access point into the comedy – but also, as indicated, had a distinctly adult allure, through being ‘inappropriate’, confusing, ‘unexpected’, ‘unusual and different’, or because they ‘couldn’t believe that adults could be so silly and funny’ (#1115 American, 26-35; #3562 American, 26-35; #3372 Canadian, 26-35; #2339 Polish, 36-45; #3564 American, 36-45).

The special, and clearly important, ways in which Python enabled an exclusive bond to be built between female respondents and their fathers can also be related to the many vivid memories respondents have of observing or hearing their father’s laughter at Python during childhood. The extent to which they loved seeing or hearing their father laugh is emphasised in many of these recollections, and, in turn, the impact and significance of these memories is often signalled through acknowledging that their father rarely laughed or that they’d never seen him laugh so intensely at any other comedy show. As one respondent recalls, for instance, ‘it made my father laugh, which, being a hardened military veteran of several campaigns throughout my childhood, was not a regular occurrence, thus anything that made him smile brought me joy as well’, while, for another, ‘I remember how hard he was laughing. My dad didn't laugh very often at all and when he did, it was a mere chuckle so it made a huge impression on me. He was laughing so hard he was almost crying’ (#1610 American, 26-35; #3283 American, 36-45). In line with Harrington and Bielby’s argument that intergenerational fandom can assist or feed into a child or adolescent’s ‘developmental and/or maturational processes’ (2010), such accounts

once again foreground the idea that, through discovering and sharing their father's Python fandom, respondents can begin to learn about their father as a culturally situated human being, rather than solely being related to and understood as a parent and father. Further to this, the impression made on respondents witnessing their father 'roaring with laughter' (#405 British, 26-35; #2639 Canadian, 46-55) or 'almost crying' with laughter – a laughter which they ultimately engage with and share – indicates how fathers and daughters can connect affectively and emotionally through shared Python fandom. Here, fathers are remembered as exhibiting and thence sharing expressions of extreme amusement (and thus emotion) with their daughters which, for Sue Sharpe in her study of fathers and daughters, conflict with more traditional conceptions of fathers as needing to avoid emotional engagement with their children in order to adhere to 'the requirements of socially constructed masculinity' and patriarchal conceptions of fatherhood more broadly (1994: 168).

The Gift that Keeps on Giving? The Consequences of Monty Python Intergenerational Fandom

Beyond asking respondents to recall their first encounters with Monty Python, further questions in the project questionnaire asked them to reflect on whether their views had changed since their initial encounter and to give their overall assessment of Python's impact and popularity. The associations between Python and these female respondents' fathers continued to be referred to in their answers to these questions, with discourses of consistency and constancy permeating references to Python's role in respondents' continued bond with their father in adulthood. For many of these female respondents, investment in Monty Python 'continues to be a big bond

between me and my dad', 'me and my dad still quote it to each other', and it 'helped me connect with my dad' (#1839 American, 18-25; #2338 British, 18-25; #3527 American, 18-25). As one respondent succinctly notes, 'it's our thing'; while, for another discussing *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 'there is very little common ground between us and so the fact that we can still sit back and roar with laughter over this film makes it perfect in my eyes' (#1026 American, 26-35; #3318 American, 26-35). What is evident in these responses is the use-value of Python in initiating, strengthening and maintaining respondents' relationships with their fathers throughout the life course, giving them, through Python quoting sessions and continued shared viewings, a key 'currency of communication' (Ralph 2015: 14).

Alongside the maintenance of this father-daughter bond, the indelible associations between their fathers and Monty Python have also enabled Python's comedy to function, for these respondents, as a reminder of past memories of shared viewings and shared laughter with their father, particularly for those whose fathers have now passed away. As respondents note, 'I have that amazing memory with him and anything Python reminds me of him and the quality comedy education he gave me', 'it helped me when Dad died', and 'when my father suddenly died in 2005…[our] common interest in Monty Python comforted me – I could refer to the dead parrot sketch and the undertakers sketch and feel my Dad laughing with me even in this sad situation' (#61 American, 36-45; #263 British, 36-45; #1957 Danish, 36-45). Here, 'anything Python'-related, including Python sketches focused on addressing and laughing at death itself, help respondents hold on to what Jackie Stacey would term 'treasured memories' (1993: 64) of their father and the elements of his personality and humour that fed into the exclusive bond they had with their daughters. Not only do memories of Python spectatorship work here to enable the 'memorialising' of 'deceased loved ones' (Kuhn 2002: 44) but also to provide comfort when

faced with the loss of opportunity to keep experiencing the shared laughter that served, for many of these respondents, as the foundation of their distinct father-daughter relationship.

The sense that a love for Python is, for these respondents, fundamentally part of who their father is or was (as an individual, beyond his putative status as a parent) is further illustrated by mentions of the fact that, in one case, ‘The Galaxy Song’ was played at a respondent’s father’s funeral, that, in another, a respondent and her father danced to ‘Always Look on the Bright Side’ at her wedding and her thirtieth birthday, and, in many others, that Python films were watched annually by respondents and their fathers on his birthday or at Christmas or Easter (particularly and notably *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*). Such activities give a new spin on the idea that, as Barker et al argue, films or other media texts can become part of ‘ritualised viewing’ practices (2015: 53), with Python’s role in a range of family rituals or family life events – including in the form of songs – illustrating its marked utility as a source of (multi-media) comedy that can be drawn on and pervade all aspects of a person’s life.

In turn, if Monty Python is shown to be, for many respondents, indelibly associated with their father and the bond they have had with him, it is also presented as something which is now a fundamental part of these respondents’ identities too. Respondent answers here returned again to discourses associated with self-development, with many stating that their early encounters with Python had helped to shape, form, or had served as a foundation for, their sense of humour. As one respondent stated, ‘I owe much of my adolescent character development and sense of humour to them’, while, for another, ‘It opened a huge door for me and I couldn't imagine what my sense of humour would be like if I'd never seen Monty Python’ (#932 American, 46-55; #2709 Canadian, 18-25). Discourses of constancy and consistency also characterised these responses, in terms of their reflections on their repeated encounters with Python’s comedy over

the years. The words 'always' and 'still' are repeated constantly throughout these accounts; for instance, respondents note that 'I have always found' Python 'hilarious, no matter how many times I watch', 'I still feel great joy when I watch the programmes and the films', and 'Python still makes me hurt laughing' (#131 American, 18-25; #491 British, 36-45; #708 British, 36-45). In these examples, respondents engage in what Harrington and Bielby, drawing on developmental psychology, term 'autobiographical reasoning'. Here, respondents present a sense of continuity in their Python fandom, outlining how Python's continued capacity to amuse respondents, and produce the same kind of intense, physically impactful laughter experienced as a child, illustrates 'continuity in the self over time', and 'personality coherence from infancy to adulthood' (Harrington and Bielby 2010). Indeed, this sense of constancy and consistency is prevalent even in the group of female respondents who note that, looking back, aspects of Python's comedy can be read as sexist or dated. As one respondent notes, 'It is interesting that I retain such fond memories, even as I look back to what now reads as sexist', for another, 'some of the programmes now look a little dated and parts are a bit sexist' but 'that aside the silly humour and more sophisticated humorous way of looking at life still stands up in our modern society', while, for another, 'I still love it I'm just more aware of how sexist this time was' (#28 Belgian, 46-55; #1615 #1615 British, 36-45; #701 Canadian, 46-55). In these examples, then, there is clearly a pull and negotiation – when reflecting on their contemporary relations to Python – between, in Jackie Stacey's terms, 'private narratives' of their history of consistent Python fandom and its association with past memories, and a contemporary 'critical awareness' of the dated aspects of Python (1993: 63 & 65), which are frequently bracketed off, in these responses, from Python's pleasurable silliness or 'more sophisticated way of looking at life' or are put in context by being seen as reflective of the time in which Python was made.

Another key illustration of the impact of Python's continued presence in these respondents' lives is that a substantial number noted that they have either passed on, or intend to pass on, their Python fandom to their children, replicating the processes enacted by their fathers and passing on the family tradition in a manner akin to Dixon's insights on football fandom and family influence. Respondents note, for instance, that 'I'm loving that my kids are now old enough to *begin the process all over again*!', and that 'my daughter enjoys it *as much as I did*, because the humor references general experiences that most everybody shares' (#3797 British, 46-55; #263 British, 36-45; #1553 American, 36-45, my italics). This second example refers to a characteristic that has long been seen as a core component of Python's comedy, something which has enabled Python to travel and succeed outside of the UK in a way that has not been achieved by other forms of British comedy. In line with this respondent's comment that their comedy 'references general experiences', Jeffrey Miller has accounted for Python's success in the US, for instance, by noting that Python 'largely avoided topical satire that named specific names and/or issues; instead, it focused on institutions of authority familiar to both national cultures - the church, the military/police, the legal system, governmental bureaucracies' (2000: 131-132). While this broad applicability has its limits – with, as noted earlier, a number of female respondents acknowledging that, looking back from the present, Python can be seen as having problematically sexist elements – it also appears, in many cases, to have propelled Python's circulation and impact not only internationally but also through time and generations.

Many respondents also vividly gave the sense that they carry Python around with them, through their ability, like their fathers, to know and recite every word of particular Python sketches and films. As one respondent notes, 'I have since expanded my repertoire and I can proudly quote several Monty Python productions backwards and forwards', for another, 'it's so

wonderful to have all of their comedic skits etched into my brain', while, for another, 'some skits are just written on my bones at this point. I feel like they are old family friends' (#3873 American, 26-35; #1497 American, 46-55; #1842 American, 36-45). Once again, and illustrating Barbara Klinger's argument that 'dialogue' can 'define the means' by which media texts 'circulate culturally' (2008), the marked quotability of Python's comedy output is shown to be key to its durability and continued presence in the life cycles of these respondents, evocatively illustrated by the comment, from one respondent, that Python's sketches have now come to be 'written on my bones' after years of circulation through childhood into adulthood.

In line with the earlier respondent's comment that they 'owe much' of their 'adolescent character development' to Monty Python, respondents also demonstrate, in their responses, how their initial introduction to and engagement with Python served as 'crucial' in their 'adult identity-formation and self-definition' (Barker et al 2015: 62). For one respondent, for example, 'the stream-of-consciousness quality of it appeals to me. I have Asperger's and my brain is all over the place. I feel less alone when I watch anything Pythonesque. Somebody up there gets me'; for another, 'I can't think of my adolescent years and coming of age without Monty Python. They helped me discover who I am and where I 'fit''; while, for another, 'I was always a weird kid, who grew up into a weird adult who looks at life in a different way than most, and I gained a love for the Monty Python humour into my adulthood' (#2585 American, 46-55; #1698 Canadian, 36-45; #1722 Canadian, 46-55). For these respondents, then, embracing Monty Python, through the mentorship of their father, was about embracing difference or distinctiveness and then coming to terms with this, by allowing this engagement to help them work out 'where I "fit"', including, in some cases, recognising that, through their father's mentorship, they had become a fan of something that was conventionally associated with male comedy fans. In these

cases, some respondents reported that, as a youngster, they were often the only female in their peer groups who knew or were invested in Python, or that they recall pleasure in standing out from other girls through their investment in Python's adult comedy. For instance, as one respondent recalled, 'I remember being a Brownie in girl scouts. They asked each of us to share our favorite TV program. While the other girls mentioned *The Brady Bunch* or *The Partridge Family*, I proudly said, "Monty Python"' (#1230 American, 46-55).

Many female 'Dad Memories Group' respondents also reflected on how their enduring engagement with Python had impacted on their ways of seeing the world. As one female respondent put it, 'personally: their humour is stimulating my brain – my fantasy, my imagination, my curiosity. Monty Python has given me another way of looking at the world' (#1957 Danish, 36-45). For many, Python's comedy was seen to have multiple levels within it that not only encouraged repeat viewing and fed into its appeal as 'adult' comedy, but which also enabled respondents' relations with Python to grow and develop as they moved through different life stages. As one respondent notes, 'I think that I always liked their humor and nonsense, but I get their philosophical and social criticism ("we are all individuals!", the peasants in *Holy Grail*) more as an adult and appreciate that level of their humor' (#1429 Israeli, 26-35).

Indeed, relations to Python may develop for these enduring female fans due to the depth and layered nature of the comedy content itself, but can also shift in line with respondents' changing relations with their fathers. As one respondent notes, for instance, 'As a teen I related to the rebellion they offered by skirting the rules of decency in polite society (as a pastor's kid I could relate to toeing that fine line)' (#3885 American, 36-45). This respondent's reference to relating to Python as a tool of rebellion against (or criticism of) the religious aspects of their upbringing during adolescence is also mirrored in a number of other responses which note that

their engagement with Python (and, in particular, *Life of Brian*) impacted on their worldview. For one respondent, this film made 'me re-think my religious beliefs and why we believe', while, for another, 'I was raised in an evangelical Southern (US) Baptist family and never took to religion. Monty Python was the first truly (and innocently) funny take on the story of Jesus I had come across' (#3020 American, 36-45; #3564 American, 36-45).

In these examples, then, becoming a Python fan remains an 'anchoring event' serving as a 'touchstone for a continuing set of beliefs about the world' (Pillemer 1998: 65-83), which, as with the first Monty Python generation represented by many of these respondents' fathers, involves an engagement with the anti-authoritarian aspects of Python's comedy. As in these cases, however, this is an engagement which can lead to respondents' criticism of the same familial and paternal context through which they were introduced to Python in the first place. Such paradoxes and complexities illustrate the value of attending, in detail, to people's memories of enduring comedy fandom, and particularly the kind of durable, transnational, pervasive, culturally eclectic, polysemic and multi-medial comedy represented by Monty Python.

Conclusion

In some ways, the recollections of initial encounters with Python discussed in this chapter seem to point to processes which Jeffrey Weinstock has identified as informing the long-term circulation of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – where, through a new status 'as an inherited rite of passage', the 'necessity of viewing' an originally daring and countercultural text moves from 'subcultural demand to general cultural imperative', from an 'edgy' to a mundane and 'normal' act (2007: 112-13). In this respect, paternal encouragements for

daughters to watch the same episodes and experience the same pleasures as those first encountered by their youthful fathers could be seen to stymie and restrict the shaping of these daughters' comedy tastes and engagement with humour. While the recollections analysed in this chapter to some degree support such readings, there are two key discursive trends repeatedly crossing the responses which illustrate how enduring comedy consumption can shed new light on 'how young people, past and present, engage with popular culture and media as part of the process of growing up' (Kuhn 2002: 238), and, in turn, how they build and maintain meaningful familial relationships that cross both gender and generation.

Firstly, the fact that an investment in Python served as the (in many cases) singular or primary element in many of the father-daughter relationships discussed and recalled by these female respondents provides a new intergenerational perspective on the social uses and functions of comedy and, crucially, Giselinde Kuipers' important argument that humour is primarily 'a form of communication that is embedded in social relationships' (2015: 7). Despite the dated nature of some of Python's comedy (from the perspective of present-day reminiscence), the diversity and polysemic nature of Python's output (silly but adult, absurd but socially critical, irreverent but philosophical) has clearly enabled quotes and particular sketches to endure and to serve, for these respondents, as an enduring vehicle of communication which maintained father-daughter relationships while, paradoxically, transcending them, by foregrounding their father's status as a distinct person. Secondly, and in contrast to Weinstock's argument that the take-up of a text like *Rocky Horror* by younger generations has little to do with the assertion of 'transgressive individuality' (2007: 111), engagement with Python, in examples discussed across the chapter, has enabled respondents to embrace a sense of themselves as different, distinct or as standing out from their gender

or peer group in different contexts, and to, in other cases and in relation to Python's anti-authoritarian or socially critical dimensions, critically assess and reflect on aspects of their own social worlds and familial backgrounds.

In these respects, such cross-gender intergenerational forms of Python fandom can, arguably, be read less as a form of co-option of daughters into the comedy tastes of older generations, and more as continuing textual encounters. Enounters which, in varying ways, have enabled the 'expansion of self-experience' and 'knowledge' about these respondents' selves (Hills 2014: 11), their familial and social relationships, and their ways of seeing the world, both humorously and critically.

Works Cited

Alcott, Thomas (2019) 'Not Putting Away Childish Things: The Importance of Childhood in the Audience Reception of Professional Wrestling Stars', *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 16 (1), pp. 3-29.

Barker, Martin, Kate Egan, Tom Phillips, and Sarah Ralph (2015) *Alien Audiences: Remembering and Evaluating a Classic Movie*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bore, Inger-Lise Kalviknes (2017) *Screen Comedy and Online Audiences*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Brock, Alexander (2016) 'The Struggle of Class against Class is a What Struggle*? Monty Python's Flying Circus* and Its Politics', in Juergen Kamm and Birgit Neumann (eds), *British TV Comedies: Cultural Concepts, Contexts and Controversies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 51-65.

Claessens, Nathalie and Alexander Dhoest (2010) ‘Comedy taste: Highbrow/lowbrow comedy and cultural capital’, *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 7 (1), pp. 49-72.

Dixon, Kevin (2013) ‘Learning the game: Football fandom culture and the origins of practice’, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 48 (3), pp. 334-48.

Friedman, Sam (2014) *Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a ‘Good’ Sense of Humour*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hamad, Hannah (2014) *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film: Framing Fatherhood*. New York: Routledge.

Harrington C. Lee and Denise D. Bielby (2010) ‘Autobiographical Reasoning in Long-Term Fandom’, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 5, Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2010.0209. [Accessed: 20 August 2018]

Hills, Matt (2014) ‘Returning to ‘Becoming-a-Fan’ Stories: Theorising Transformational Objects and the Emergence/Extension of Fandom’, in Linda Duits, Koos Zwaan and Stijn Reijnders (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures*. Farnham: Ashgate, pp. 9-22.

Jones, Bill, Alan G. Parker and Ben Timlett, dir. (2009) *Monty Python: Almost the Truth – The Lawyer’s Cut*. London: Bill and Ben Productions.

Klinger, Barbara (1997) ‘Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies’, *Screen* 38 (2), pp. 107-128.

Klinger, Barbara (2008) ‘Say It Again, Sam: Movie Quotation, Performance and Masculinity’ *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 5 (2), Available at:

http://www.participations.org/Volume%205/Issue%202/5_02_klinger.htm [Accessed: 7 November 2018]

Kuhn, Annette (2002) *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Kuipers, Giselinde (2015) *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke*. Boston, Massachusetts: De Gruyter Mouton.

Landy, Marcia (2005) *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Miller, Jeffrey S. (2000) *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Mills, Richard (2014) 'Eric Idle and the Counterculture', in Tomasz Dobrogoszcz (ed.), *Nobody Expects the Spanish Inquisition: Cultural Contexts in Monty Python*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield, pp. 125-36.

Pillemer, David B. (1998) *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ralph, Sarah (2015) 'Using Stars, Not Just 'Reading' Them: The Roles and Functions of Film Stars in Mother-Daughter Relations', *Celebrity Studies* 6 (1), pp. 23-38.

Sharpe, Sue (1994) *Fathers and Daughters*. London: Routledge.

Stacey, Jackie (1993) *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London: Routledge.

Vroomen, Laura (2004) 'Kate Bush: Teen pop and older female fans', in Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson (eds), *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, pp. 238-53.

Wagg, Stephen (1992) 'You've never had it so silly: The politics of British satirical comedy from *Beyond the Fringe* to *Spitting Image*', in Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg (eds),

Come On Down? Popular Media Culture in Post-war Britain. London: Routledge, pp. 254-84.

Weinstock, Jeffrey (2007) *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. London: Wallflower Press.

Whybray, Adam (2016) ''I'm Crushing Your Binaries!' Drag in Monty Python and Kids in the Hall', *Comedy Studies* 7 (2), pp. 169-181.

Note

[1] Throughout the chapter, intext references to quotations from project questionnaire responses give the ID number of the response, the nationality of the respondent, and the age range of the respondent (e.g. #46, British, 26-35).