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Citation: White, Rosie (2023) Making fun of feminism: British television comedy and the second wave. *Feminist Media Studies*, 23 (3). pp. 1142-1156. ISSN 1468-0777

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1945648>
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1945648>>

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Making Fun of Feminism: British Television Comedy and the Second Wave

Rosie White, Northumbria University

Abstract:

This paper addresses the representation of second wave feminism in two mainstream comedy shows starring male comedians. *Scott On...* (BBC 1964-74) and a sketch narrative which featured in the 1980 season of *The Two Ronnies* (BBC 1971-1986) brought feminism into family living rooms. While these shows make fun of feminism they also represent key aspects of the second wave, often echoing debates taking place in the women's liberation movement. Despite their conservative politics *Scott On...* and *The Two Ronnies* put feminist ideas on screen in the 1970s and early 1980s; they represent a mainstream resistance and response to the second wave activism which was changing the British social and political landscape. Such shows make fun of feminist politics, yet in doing so they register and refract feminist debates.

Key Words:

Television, comedy, feminism, second wave, British

This article examines how mainstream British television comedy shows based around male stars dealt with second wave feminism. Saturday night family programming in the 1970s and early 1980s is not where one might expect political intervention, yet these shows work hard to make fun of feminism in an attempt to respond to shifting gender debates. In doing so they expose a fearful hegemony which is perhaps only now beginning to realize the extent of its white middle class privilege. My discussion emerges from work on the personal collections of British comedy stars June Whitfield (1925-2018) and Ronnie Barker (1929-2005) at the V&A's Blythe House archive in London during 2019. Whitfield addressed "women's lib" in interviews with newspapers and magazines

through the 1970s and 1980s, largely dismissing it and distancing herself from gender politics. Her professional work nevertheless saw her play feminist activists, first in *Scott On...The Sex War* (BBC, 1972) – the show discussed here – and then in the film *Carry On Girls* (Gerald Thomas, 1973), where she plays a town councillor who organizes a protest about a beauty pageant. *Scott On...The Sex War* is available to view at the BFI archive in London on videotape.

Work on Whitfield led me to the V&A's Ronnie Barker collection and "The Worm That Turned" (*The Two Ronnies*, BBC, 1980), which depicts a dystopian future England where women are in power. This sequential drama featured in the eighth series of *The Two Ronnies* and is still in circulation via YouTube. A mercurial medium, comedy is often proposed as an effective way of undercutting dominant norms (Stephen Wagg 1998; Helen Davies and Sarah Ilott 2018), particularly regarding gender (Kathleen Rowe 1995; Linda Mizejewski 2014; Rosie White 2018). What happens, however, when feminism is the comic object? This article examines how mainstream British television comedy in the 1970s attempted to "take feminism into account" (Angela McRobbie 2009, 12). Addressing women's liberation during the second wave, these comedies dismiss feminism's radical agenda, yet in doing so they have to represent feminist debates.

Feminism and Popular Media

The shows addressed in this article bookend the 1970s; *Scott On...The Sex War* was broadcast in 1972 as feminist activism was gaining media attention in Britain, and "The Worm That Turned" ran through the eighth season of *The Two Ronnies* in 1980, after Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government came to power in 1979. Kaitlynn Mendes examines second wave feminism in the British and American press during the long 1970s (1968 to 1982) arguing that it "represent[s] the period when the movements were most politically active in both countries" (2011, 85). Jilly Kay's discussion of the feminist talk show *No Man's Land* (ITV 1973) demonstrates that women's rights were a topical issue in 1970s media; that feminism was a "discursive context for television talk at this time" (2015, 68). Kay's work problematizes histories which position second wave feminism as

simply outside of or opposed to mainstream media, citing *No Man's Land* as a particular example of the nuanced and complex relation between popular culture and feminist politics. Feminism and femininity were negotiated during the 1960s and 1970s *through* the media, even where feminism was vilified (Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley 2006, 6). Su Holmes' examination of Paul Watson's ground-breaking fly-on-the-wall documentary series *The Family* (BBC 1974) offers an acute account of those complex negotiations. In this early reality show working class women are powerful figures who become entangled in contradictory discourses of class and gender: "*The Family's* relationships (the plural is appropriate here) with feminism were clearly complex, and exploring the programme's negotiation of the British women's movement is as much about tracking absences as presences" (Su Holmes 2015, 317). That absent presence of feminism in debates within and about *The Family* is replicated across print and visual media during the 1970s.

The comedies addressed in this article negotiate the popular fascination with second wave feminism in the 1970s, demonstrating how that fascination was tempered with suspicion and contempt. These shows represent a resistant response to the second wave and a backlash against the changes it proposed and effected; feminism is an object of ridicule. Nevertheless, they were broadcast during a decade when the effects of neoliberal politics were yet to be widely felt (Victoria Hesford 2015). Despite the conservative frame of these narratives, *Scott On...* and *The Two Ronnies* stage feminist ideas and images in the 1970s and early 1980s, bringing feminism into family living rooms during the analogue era, when fewer channels and less distraction from other media meant far higher viewing figures.¹ Looking back to the 1970s entails inevitable comparison with an allegedly more liberal, but also more fragmented present; as Victoria Hesford notes: "interpretations of that moment are both an acknowledgement of and also a desire to understand a present in which feminism's legibility is less obviously grounded in modern forms of political organization and contestation" (2015, 719). The evident purpose of *Scott On...* and *The Two Ronnies* is to render feminism silly and unfeasible. By representing feminist debate, however, these shows acknowledge

its social relevance and unwittingly elicit a potential for political transformation around gender and sexuality.

Comic Negotiations

In the late 1960s and early 1970s feminist activism and events began to appear in mainstream news reports and features, often presented in an unsympathetic manner (Susan Sheridan, Susan Magaray and Sandra Lilburn 2006, 25; Mendes 2011, 84). Such media, which saw the Women's Liberation Movement as a source of "novelty" news, quickly became part of the backlash against feminist politics in the wake of debates about "political correctness" (Sheridan, Magaray and Lilburn 2006, 25-26; Jane Littlewood and Michael Pickering 1998). Representations of second wave feminism on British television have, from the outset, appeared to sit uneasily with popular programming. *Shoulder to Shoulder* (BBC, 1974), a remarkable second-wave drama about the suffrage movement, was lost in the BBC archives until a recent revival during the centenary of some women gaining the vote in Britain (Vicky Ball and Janet McCabe 2014). Reflecting on the making of *Shoulder to Shoulder* Janet McCabe cites her fascination with

the culturally awkward relationship between what a feminist drama might look like and the institutional space which will make that possible in the first place; politics in its widest sense of making visible, and the politics of what is possible within a particular media ecology. (Ball and McCabe 2014)

The history of feminism on British television is one of continuing struggle. Other female ensemble shows in the 1970s offered a dilute reflection upon second wave politics. In genres as diverse as sitcom and musical drama – shows such as *The Liver Birds* (BBC, 1969-79) and *Rock Follies* (ITV, 1976-77) – British television attempted to take account of changing legislation and political consciousness. There is much work to be done on this material, with feminist scholars such as Charlotte Brunsdon (1997) and Vicky Ball leading the field (2013, 2021). In this article, however, I take a different route

by examining responses to second wave feminism in mainstream sketch comedy shows starring established male stars.

Comedy shows written by or centred on women have often made gentle fun of first and second-wave politics. Notable examples include *Up The Women!* (BBC 2013-2015), written by and starring Jessica Hynes, which satirised a motley group of suffragists, and *Girls On Top* (ITV 1985-6), written by and starring Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders, Ruby Wax and Tracey Ullman. The premise of *Girls on Top* is that a feminist journalist (French), who writes for *Spare Cheek*, is forced to share her Kensington apartment with three non-feminist women in order to pay her rent to a wealthy romantic novelist (Joan Greenwood) who lives in the flat below. These comedies have yet to be addressed in academic work; lasting only one or two series, they appear marginal to long-running mainstream Saturday night shows featuring male comedy duos, such as Ant and Dec or Morecambe and Wise. Those primetime Saturday night shows have also evaded academic scrutiny, but are often represented in popular media as part of a heritage of British television comedy, so that Ant and Dec, or Vic and Bob, are frequently situated in relation to their male comedy predecessors as “the new Morecambe and Wise”, for example. Women in comedy have been less visible and are frequently figured as “exceptional” rather than as part of a longer tradition (Morwenna Banks and Amanda Swift 1987; Frances Gray 1994; Mary Unterbrink 1987). This is where an examination of feminism in mainstream comedy may offer useful insights, if only as a means of breaking down the alleged apartheid between “women’s” comedy and the popular “mainstream” (Unterbrink 1987, 3).

Scott On...The Sex War (1972)

The first example is an episode from *Scott On...* (BBC, 1964-74), a sketch comedy series starring Terry Scott, who is largely remembered for the sitcom *Terry and June* (BBC 1979-1987). *Scott On...* cemented his television celebrity and is cited as the place where Scott and June Whitfield, his co-star in *Terry and June*, first created their on-screen marital routine (Mark Lewisohn 2003, 683; June Whitfield 2000, 229). Terry Scott was already an established television comedian when *Scott On...*

began in 1964. He had been paired with Bill Maynard in the sketch show *Great Scott – It's Maynard!* (BBC 1955-56) and then became sole named lead in the sitcom *Scott Free* with Norman Vaughan (BBC 1957) (Lewisohn 2003: 682-683). *Scott On...* marked a return to sketch comedy, and its post-watershed broadcasts on BBC2 after 9pm registered the show's ability to address risqué topics, which included Marriage, The Body, Progress, Wealth, The Home, Rebellion, and The Permissive Society. *Scott On... The Sex War* opened the fifth series in 1972 and offered a response to the second wave from a white, middle-class conservative perspective. This is feminism-as-novelty, yet the programme addresses topical issues and debates at a time when feminist activists were taking issues such as equality, housework and sexual rights onto the streets.

Scott On... The Sex War was written by John Kane, who would later write much of *Terry and June*; indeed the programme looks very much like an early episode of that later suburban comedy, even using the same theme tune ("Bell Hop" by John Shakespeare) over the opening titles. The episode is structured as a sitcom, with short sketches interjected throughout. The opening scene features Terry arriving home to discover that June is having a tea party in the living room with three women and Mr Umberto/Carlos, a camp hairdresser who he initially mistakes for a woman: "what with the flowery shirt and the long hair... and the handbag" (John Kane 1972, 2). It is characteristic of mainstream comedy at this time that misogyny and homophobia are aligned; femininity is registered as aberrant and doubly so when it is identified with the male body. June and the three women assert that they have "burnt their bras" and that they are "tired of being eunuchs". Mrs Skinner hands Terry a copy of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), stating: "Miss Greer has voiced the unspoken thoughts of millions of women" (Kane 1972, 6). Greer proposed that if in the first wave "genteel middle-class ladies clamoured for reform, now ungentleel middle-class women are calling for revolution" (cited in Kath Kerr-Koch 2017, 213). That second-wave address to the middle class is literally enacted in *Scott On... The Sex War*, as June's tea party is "the first meeting of Glenview Drive's Women's Liberation Front" (Kane 1972, 6). They engage in a debate about marriage, with Terry asserting that "Marriage is marvellous. It's a great big adventure", to which June retorts, "Like

going to war” (Kane 1972, 13). It emerges that the women of Glenview Drive are on strike: “We’re occupying your house, Mr Scott, and refuse to leave it until our husbands agree to all our demands” (Kane 1972, 54). *Scott On... The Sex War* thus reduces feminism to a binary war of attrition between men and women.

This corresponds with Mendes’ account of how the second wave was represented in the British press; the language of masculine conflict – “battles”, “sex war”, “guerrilla fighters” “militant” – deployed to depict feminists as deviating from feminine norms (2011). Nevertheless feminist activists did speak to the media, and thus to wider society, because they were predominantly cited as sources in interviews and articles: “the women’s movement provided a unique opportunity for women’s voices to be prioritized in the news” (Mendes 2011, 90). The Glenview Drive’s Women’s Liberation Front reiterates those voices in a scripted comedy and serves to highlight the inequities second wave feminism addressed, particularly regarding domestic labour. Following their election in 1970, Edward Heath’s conservative government had been in direct conflict with unionized workers, leading to more strikes, wage freezes and the beginning of the Miner’s Strike in 1973. By asserting that they are on strike and occupying the house in a bid for leverage against their husbands, the Glenview Drive housewives behave like a union. The public politics of the workplace are thus brought into the middle-class suburban home, exemplifying the second wave maxim that the personal is political.

The show’s comic focus on marriage and suburban domesticity also echoes contemporary debates: “Feminist writing in the early 1970s argued that love and marriage offered an impossible promise, a fantasy of fixed union and mutuality” (Sheila Rowbotham 1989, 4). *Scott On... The Sex War* demonstrates the dissemination of feminist issues across media in the 1970s, as well as contemporary ambivalences about and within British women’s movements. The Glenview Drive Women’s Liberation Front thus offers its viewers a comic representation of the zeitgeist. The women’s occupation and strike in *Scott On... The Sex War* echoes the demands of the Wages for

Housework campaign launched by Selma James and Silvia Federici in 1972, whose manifesto proposed:

We have been divided by the status and income of the men we marry, by whether or not we work fulltime in the home, by whether or not we are with men, by whether or not we have children, by whether or not we are natives or immigrants, and by language, race, and nation and the technology of our exploitation. But our destiny and the roots of our exploitation – our wageless work in the home – are the same in every country of the world, and so is our struggle against it. (Louise Toupin ND)

The unifying project of feminist groups such as Wages For Housework is pilloried in *Scott On... The Sex War*, just as the Glenview Drive Women's Liberation Front is undermined by arguments within and about the feminist project. Women united are clearly a threat.

Terry's initial response is to mock the women: "Ladies, you haven't got a chance, so why don't you just fold up your skirts and silently push off. We'll always be one jump ahead of you whatever you plan" (Kane 1972, 58). To evidence the superior intelligence of the patriarchy Terry refers to the "lunchtime safari" where male office workers go "Bird-hunting in the parks during the lunch-hour" (ie attempting to seduce young women), arguing that the practice is enabled by women's "predictability" (Kane 1972, 54). That assertion is immediately undermined by a sketch demonstrating Terry's lack of success on a "lunchtime safari". This draws upon stereotypes about heterosexuality – men as hunters of attractive women – but also debunks those stereotypes by undercutting Terry's misogyny with his inability to successfully perform hegemonic masculinity. Hegemony is endorsed and also ridiculed.

The alignment of gender and sexuality continues as the programme returns to the sitcom storyline, where June thinks Terry has been cheating on her because she has found a letter in his coat pocket addressed to "Boojums". It emerges that the coat is not Terry's but that of his neighbour, Lionel

Farmer. June is relieved and then distressed, worrying that Mrs Farmer, one of her fellow activists, does not know about her husband's infidelity. Terry is dismissive, saying that the note does not constitute concrete evidence: "Dogs chase cars, but they don't want to drive them" (Kane 1972, 64). Quite apart from Terry's misogyny, this exchange divides women over men. Mr Farmer's potential infidelity is kept quiet to maintain the status quo and June *apologizes* to Terry for suspecting *him* of being unfaithful. "Natural" order is restored. By the end of the episode Terry is leading all the other husbands "mincing" around their back garden; they claim to have joined "Gay Lib", carrying placards with mottos such as "God Save the Queens" and "I Believe in Fairies" (Kane 1972, 84). As the credits roll the "strikers" rush out of the house to confront their husbands, while Terry returns to embrace June, both laughing. The tactical assumption of a stereotypical "gay" identity ridicules liberation movements which organize around gender and sexuality, yet also confounds the notion that gender/sexuality is fixed and stable. Once again gender and sexuality are elided, demonstrating the extent to which heterosexual hegemony relies upon a binary understanding of both (Judith Butler 1990, 1993). As with most forms of comedy, identity is about play. Terry is figured as a brilliant tactician here; his crafty appropriation of "gay lib" merely a means of restoring heterosexual hegemony. The *process* by which he does so nevertheless raises questions about gender as performative and fluid. This is a feature of much comic performance, where heteronormative identities are often problematized and queered (Rosie White 2018).

The sitcom narrative that frames this episode of *Scott On...* is one of containment and stasis, pitted against short sketches that interrupt that narrative (Brett Mills 2009, 26-35). Victoria Hesford argues that "as a genre that re-presents domestic life as a comfortingly familiar repetition of daily life [the sitcom] cannot represent feminism as a political project" (2015, 727). Sketch comedy has a more fragmentary structure which lends itself to political topics (White 2018, 129-132). The sketches which pepper *Scott On... The Sex War* thus problematize the sitcom narrative's recuperation of heterosexual hegemony, addressing early childhood, marriage, romantic fiction and old age. In the "Baby Sketch" Terry Scott and Peter Butterworth appear as babies in a prison cell; this follows a

debate in the sitcom narrative about state-run child-care, in which June comments that this would mean “the death of the family and the birth of the convict” (Kane 1972, 68). June Whitfield, also in a baby costume, enters the cell and is misrecognised as a boy so that Terry reveals his plot to escape. Once her mission is revealed she is called a “stool pigeon”, to which she responds “us women have to stick together”, and the boys are left to be tortured by round-the-clock repeats of *Jackanory* (BBC 1965-96)(Kane 1972, 80-81). The implication is that the “sex war” begins at an early age. Again the comedy relies on a crude reversal; there is no acknowledgement that state-run childcare might also entail benefits for boys and men. Yet once again it echoes a key feminist issue: “The contradictory situation of the mother with small children, expected to care and yet denied an environment in which this was possible, was one of the factors that brought many women into the movement” (Rowbotham 1989, 129).

The subsequent ‘Wedding Sketch’ is equally problematic. A voice-over by Colin Jeavons, who plays “Carlos” in the sitcom narrative, introduces a church wedding: “On the surface, you would say a perfectly normal family, but underneath, a hot bed of tangled emotions and unnatural relationships” (Kane 1972, 26). As the service reaches “speak now or forever hold your peace” a series of wild revelations about the family emerges. “Harry,” one of the guests at the wedding, has slept with the bride, her mother and the groom’s father. Carlos appears in the church to accuse Harry of being unfaithful – it emerges that they are in a relationship – at which Terry Scott as the Vicar calls Carlos a “faithless bitch, I’ll scratch your eyes out. Come back here”, and chases Carlos down the aisle (Kane 1972, 33a). On the one hand this sketch questions the heteronormativity of the nuclear family unit and demonstrates the queered, carnivalesque tendencies of sketch comedy, yet it does so through a homophobic joke – we are expected to laugh *at* Carlos and the camp vicar, not *with* them. They represent “unnatural relationships”, yet this sketch echoes feminist, socialist and queer debates in the early seventies.

That comic critique of marriage is carried through into the next sketch, a parody of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Romantic tropes are exaggerated and unpacked; Terry Scott as Mr Rochester

makes an over-dramatic entrance, howling “Jaaaaane!” several times and seizing June Whitfield, who tells him “My name’s Edith” (Kane 1972, 41). They declare their love, but the end of the sketch reveals that the “secret of the padlocked room” is not Rochester’s first wife but “Fifteen years of washing up” (Kane 1972, 50a). The politics of “romance” are examined in a comic extrapolation of the feminist joke: “First you sink into his arms, then your arms end up in his sink”. The joke was printed on a purple dishcloth given away with early issues of *Spare Rib* (Geraldine Bedell 2008). The correspondences between this episode of *Scott On...* and feminist debate are evidenced by an article in *Spare Rib*, where Wendy Whitfield documents her attempt to change the terms of her relationship with her husband:

I’d been reading a lot of women’s literature – *The Female Eunuch*, *Wedlocked Women*, *Spare Rib* and the like. We were both becoming involved in left-wing politics. I participated in a strike at my place of work. So it seemed quite natural that I should pursue a course of industrial action in my domestic situation, where I was working long hours while the Boss read or watched the telly. ... I went on strike. I announced that from now on I would do only *my* shopping, cooking and cleaning. (Whitfield 1976, 6)

Wendy Whitfield recounts how she negotiated a more equal distribution of domestic chores with her husband, Dave: “I always try to keep it light and humorous. After all, business is business”, and how she managed to engineer “the chance of making a human relationship work” (1976, 7). This article could not have influenced the *Scott On...* episode – nor would I claim that *Scott On... The Sex War* inspired Wendy Whitfield’s domestic industrial action – but it demonstrates how close to debates within and about second wave feminism this comedy steers. As the 1970s proceeded feminist groups and campaigns began to fragment, producing “large schisms” in the British women’s movement, so that Sheila Rowbotham’s foundational account of the British second wave proposed that “Now, in the 1980s, there is no longer a single women’s movement. The context in which ideas have developed is more diffuse” (1989, xii). The beginning of that shift is visible in my next example.

“The Worm That Turned” (1980)

My second example is from *The Two Ronnies* (BBC 1971-1986); second only to *The Morecambe and Wise Show* (BBC 1968-77; Thames Television 1978-83) this comedy show dominated Saturday nights during the 1970s and early 1980s. It is interesting to note that both *Terry and June* and *The Two Ronnies* came to an end in the late 1980s, when feminist, gay rights and anti-racist activism was making itself felt in popular discourse. Older, more “traditional” television comedies gradually made way for a more youth-oriented “alternative” aesthetic during the 1980s, with shows such as *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982-84) and *French and Saunders* (BBC 1987-1996). “The Worm That Turned” was a dystopian fiction about a future Britain run by women, broadcast in 1980 during the eighth series of *The Two Ronnies*. It is still widely referenced in online material about the show and continues to circulate via forums such as YouTube. By the end of the seventies British feminists were drawn into different campaigns such as environmental and anti-nuclear issues: “In both [Britain and the USA], however, newspapers began declaring the movement was ‘dead’ in the late 1970s – a claim made so frequently in the mainstream media, it has been labelled ‘False feminist death’ syndrome” (Mendes 2011, 82). “The Worm That Turned” imagines a *successful* feminist revolution, albeit one which has instituted a fascist regime. This could indicate that second wave feminism *had* become laughable; that its aims were so allegedly outrageous or passé that they translated into dystopian comedy. That this comedy was at the centre of one of the BBC’s flagship Saturday night shows, however, demonstrates the extent to which the “death” of feminism was premature; it continued to feature in mainstream media as a topic of debate and concern.

The Two Ronnies was a sketch show starring Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett. They first worked together on *The Frost Report* (BBC 1966-67); a show driven by issues in the news and addressing a radically shifting British political and cultural landscape. Barker and Corbett were in a famous sketch about the British class system in which John Cleese, Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett line up in order of height and status; Cleese is upper class and Corbett is lower class, with the latter mulishly

delivering the punchline “I know my place” (Mark Lewisohn 2003, 304). *The Two Ronnies* was less political and more family-oriented, with sketches relying on the stars’ perfectly-timed character comedy and rarely addressing newsworthy topics. Mark Lewisohn classifies it as “safe, yes, but often very funny and of vast majority appeal” (2003,787). An interview with Barker and Corbett published in *The Daily Mail* to promote the eighth series describes them as “purveyors to millions of seaside-postcard sauciness”:

Highlight of the new series is the weekly serial within a series, *The Worm That Turned*, about Britain completely taken over by women. Diana Dors plays The Commander of the hordes and R[onnie] B[arker] and R[onnie] C[orbett] play Betty and Janet in wonderfully outrageous wallpaper-like floral frocks. R[onnie] C[orbett] says: “When my kids see my picture in Radio Times they’ll be frightened to come home. Actually, with all the punk thing going on they’ll probably be supremely uninterested: Oh, yawn, Daddy’s dressed in a frock again.” (Tim Satchell 1980)

The article is accompanied by a publicity shot of Barker and Corbett in their frocks, standing either side of a young woman who plays one of the state police, dressed in leather shorts and cap, holding a fearsome gun. Corbett’s comment registers the extent to which their comedy was already becoming anachronistic, with the advent of “the punk thing” and the unshockability of younger generations. The serial within a series had become a standard part of *The Two Ronnies*, with other serial sketches including “The Phantom Raspberry Blower of Old London Town” (1976) – a skit on Jack the Ripper – and stories featuring inept detectives Charley Farley (Corbett) and Piggy Malone (Barker). The serials were largely written by Barker, under his longstanding pseudonym Gerald Wiley, and the eighth series was expected to draw “around 19 million viewers” (Lewisohn 2003, 787; Satchell 1980).

“The Worm That Turned” appeared in each episode, lasting about ten to twelve minutes, so that it effectively forms a feature-length film narrative. The story is set in the far-off future of 2012, where

women have taken power. Men wear dresses and are housewives for their female overlords, who are dressed in military uniforms. The storyline and costuming is a combination of misogyny and fetish; the opening sequence features a cartoon of a feminine foot in a high heeled sandal, stepping on a worm in a top hat, which then turns and bites the offending toe. In the subsequent voiceover, accompanied by relevant visual clips and stills, Ronnie Barker states:

The dateline is 2012. England is in the grip of a new regime of terror. Traditionally a land of brave heroes and great statesmen – Nelson, Wellington, Disraeli, Churchill – Britain now laboured under the yoke of a power guaranteed to strike fear into the hearts of all men. The country is being run by women. It all started with Margaret Thatcher. Housewives all over England, delighted at her rise to power, voted more and more women *in* and more and more men *out*. A few years later the Germaine Greer Knicker Uprising made 1984 a far more terrifying year than even George Orwell predicted. Men’s clubs were abolished, gentlemen’s toilets closed, creating widespread distress among thinking and drinking men everywhere. Gay libbers, naturally, were the first to go to the wall. The advance of feminism was by now making itself felt in public and traditional spheres. Names of buildings were changed. The Houses of Parliament were still the Houses of Parliament, but immediately the all-woman government took over, Big Ben was renamed Big Brenda. By 1998 the newly-formed state police had established their headquarters in the old Tower of London. This historic fortress, with its grisly associations of torture and executions, had been given the name of a former folk heroine and was now known to all and sundry as Barbara Castle. [...] Women were the breadwinners. They gave the orders. They made the decisions. They were the union leaders, the captains of industry, and the men? Well, let’s start with this one... (*The Two Ronnies*, Series 8, episode 1, BBC, 1/11/1980)

This extended introduction to the first sketch leads into a storyline regarding Janet Cartwright (Ronnie Corbett) who is employed as “a tea-boy” at Barbara Castle; “he is the worm that is about to

turn”, as Barker’s voice-over states. Diana Dors is Commander of the State Police, who argues that men should not be allowed to wear trousers again as this is the source of their power. The State Police are represented by a military regiment of young women dressed in high-heeled boots, leather shorts and peaked caps, who march through the streets, rooting out dissenting men while offering a fetishized vision of disciplinary femininity.

Although Barker’s narrative delivers a parody of feminist politics it also raises some interesting questions. First there is the assumption that Margaret Thatcher, Britain’s first female prime minister, was an indication of feminist incursion. This is wildly inaccurate, as her policies would negatively affect many women:

Thatcher’s legacy to feminism is a complex one ... her rise to power at the 1979 General Election is marked by the strange “coincidence” (remembering that she had been [Conservative] party leader since 1975) that during this election there were fewer women returned as MPs than had been the case for nearly thirty years. Furthermore, during her time as Prime Minister she only appointed one woman to Cabinet rank, Baroness Young (Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords, 1982-3). (Imelda Whelehan 2000, 101)

It was already apparent in 1980 that Margaret Thatcher was not aligned with any shade of feminism, even if her election was enabled by ongoing debate about gender roles (Julie V Gottlieb and Beatrix Campbell 2019, 342-344), yet this narrative places her alongside news footage of feminist demonstrators under a banner calling for “Women’s Liberation”. Political incongruities continue in this sequence, as “voting more and more women *in*” is accompanied by images of the conservative campaigner Mary Whitehouse, who had just been made a CBE, and Pat Phoenix, who played Elsie Tanner in long-running British soap opera *Coronation Street* (Granada, 1960-). Phoenix was a lifelong Labour supporter, campaigning for her son-in-law, Tony Blair, in the 1983 general election. The men who are “voted ... *out*” are the Labour MP, Tony Benn, and the right-wing comedian, Bernard Manning. The third man to feature is Larry Grayson, a camp comic who was then hosting

hit Saturday night show, *The Generation Game* (BBC 1971-2001). Whereas the previous images have a tick for “in” and a cross for “out”, Grayson has both a tick and a cross, making a joke of his gender and sexual identity. This rapid succession of visual “jokes”, a scattergun attack primarily directed at women and LGBTQ+ identities, are riven with contradiction. Both *Scott On... The Sex War* and “The Worm That Turned” align misogyny and homophobia, yet *The Two Ronnies’* feminist dystopia *excludes* “Gay libbers”, who are “the first to go to the wall”.

The comedy in this introduction to “The Worm That Turned”, as in *Scott On... The Sex War*, anticipates an audience who agree that “we” are all clearly “masculine/men” or “feminine/women”, “straight” or “gay”. Yet feminism and sexuality politics are referenced directly in this serial, albeit often in a derogatory or offensive manner, and “gender trouble” is a key facet of the narrative, with men performing “feminine” roles and women “masculine” ones (Butler 1990). “The Worm That Turned” attempts to make fun of second wave politics by ridiculing what could happen if gender roles were reversed; as in *Scott On...* it is envisaged as a “sex war”. Comedy’s effects are not easily contained by a *simple* reversal, however. Having all men appear in drag, without *performing* drag – they are not feminized or camp in their performance other than wearing dresses and having women’s names – inadvertently anticipates twenty-first century debates regarding what constitutes gender. Is it a move from one side of a binary system to another or indicative of a more uncharted spectrum?

Marjorie Garber notes the disconcerting power of such comic transpositions in her work on cross-dressing and cultural anxiety: “that it disconcerted not only feelings of tradition, continuity, and naturalness (rather than arbitrariness) of association, but also a way of reading” (1992, 2). “The Worm That Turned” is thus not a simple or singular text; it draws upon a British tradition of cross-dressed male comedy performance but also references historical practice within British gay discourse, where men are identified by a woman’s name or referred to as “she” (Garber 1992; Medhurst 2007). There is an echo of “bad drag”:

Sometimes I like seeing the seams, not because I don't appreciate the artistry of illusion, but in fact, it is the seams that seemingly call my attention to the constructedness of the venture. In bad drag the appearance of rehearsal signals the everydayness of gender performance. (Bryant Alexander 2003, 351)

It is exactly the "everydayness" of men in dresses that makes "The Worm That Turned" culturally dissonant; are we *meant* to laugh? Much of the time their costumes are unremarkable. Clearly this adds to the comedy; Ronnie Barker in a fuchsia pink evening dress on the night of the works dance is something to behold. Because of the dystopian reversal of gender roles, however, men are subject to the same issues that women usually deal with. "The Worm That Turned" addresses the role of the "housewife" – which was at the centre of feminist debates (Maggie Andrews 1998) – but the "housewives" are men. The male housewives constantly bemoan the work they do and their spouse's lack of appreciation of their labours. In episode three "Betty" (Ronnie Barker) is sexually harassed by the female milkman, and in episode four "Betty" is propositioned by an older woman when waiting for "Janet" (Ronnie Corbett) to get her into Barbara Castle so that they can destroy their records before making an escape. Feminist politics are thus bizarrely transposed, with men-as-women addressing sexual harassment or housework as labour, implying that this is about *power* relations rather than an innate gender binary. Helen Wheatley (2016) has noted the incommensurable quality of television regarding pleasure and spectacle; the effects of "The Worm That Turned" are unpredictable. This is not feminist comedy by any means, but its humour refuses any singular reading.

Aftereffects

"The Worm That Turned" says a great deal about debates around gender, power and sexuality at the end of the 1970s; some of it not very pleasant or comfortable. This, remember, is prime time *family entertainment*, shown before the watershed on a Saturday evening; a time when viewers might be gathered around the only television set they own. One thing the show does reference clearly is fear.

While women in power are supposed to be *funny* there is at this time a female prime minister and there have been feminist politics on a public stage for over a decade. Cultural certainties about gender and identity are changing and comedies such as “The Worm That Turned” offer an incoherent response to those changes. In her work on British domestic sitcom Maggie Andrews notes that

an important shift occurs in sitcoms in the late 1970s, from texts within which women were portrayed as the objects of humour, or as merely in a supportive role, to what I call “housewives comedy” (such as *Butterflies*) where women have a significant voice; indeed at times theirs is the dominant voice within the text. (1998, 50)

That shift is not immediately apparent here, as women are indeed portrayed as the “objects of humour”, whether it is Diana Dors camping it up in her powder-blue Commander’s uniform, or the State Police with their tight leather shorts providing Pan’s People-style eye candy. There is misogyny but also a confused attempt to address issues of gender which other television comedies were approaching in a more sophisticated manner.

At times the sketches appear not to be comic enough and Barker’s voice-over which concludes each episode acknowledges this: “Find out next week in another excruciating episode of The Worm That Turned”. That lack of humour is noted in a twenty-first century blog about re-viewing “The Worm That Turned”: “Stretched over eight weeks, a lot of it was just running around and escaping capture, and it really needed tighter editing, greater tension and more jokes” (Alex Wilcock 2006). Despite the lack of jokes, “The Worm That Turned” has had a significant afterlife in popular discourse. On Saturday July 4th 1981, Mr Bernard Clayman’s bitter response to an equal pay case against his fashion company was reported in the *Daily Mail*: “I feel like the Two Ronnies in “The Worm That Turned.”” (David Williams 1981). Seven years later Mary Kenny references it in an opinion piece on the “Femail” women’s page about how campaigning for “equality” has destroyed “respect for women” (1988). A light-hearted feature in *The Sunday Times* in the late 1990s cites it in a discussion

about visual representations of men in advertising (Roland White 1997). More recently, a short piece in the *Daily Mirror* about how men need to play a role in the #MeToo movement remembers “The Worm That Turned” as a “cringe-making” spoof, recalled when “a bloke in the pub mentioned it, while ranting about the #MeToo movement and how you can’t even pat a girl’s bum these days...” (Rachael Bletchly 2018). For the last four decades “The Worm That Turned” has been part of discussions about gender and power, while *Scott On...The Sex War* is largely forgotten.

That these shows have become relics in the television archive is not necessarily a bad thing. They are primetime attempts to take account of second wave feminism but in attempting to make fun of it they also *represent* it – at times with surprising (if inadvertent) insight. These are not feminist comedies, nor are they promoting feminist politics, but they are addressing debates which continue through to the twenty-first century regarding gender, power and sexual politics. As in Kaitlynn Mendes’ account of news media and the second wave these popular comedy shows offer an account of feminism which is complex and contradictory. Mendes argues such discourse evidences “the complex process of hegemony at work”, as liberal feminism becomes incorporated into the mainstream and radical, more challenging feminisms are “de-legitimized” (2011, 92). Ridiculing the claims of the Glenview Drive Women’s Liberation Front and the hyperbolic role-reversal of “The Worm That Turned” are attempts to negotiate a more *acceptable* feminism; one which has arguably achieved mainstream endorsement without substantial shifts in the politics of gender relations. Yet the comedy in both shows merits more examination, rather than a simple dismissal. The questions they address have not disappeared. Equal rights exist in law but do not translate into real political change, as #MeToo and revelations about the gender pay gap demonstrate. These comedies, and works like them, merit our attention as a means of dealing with the present, not just dismissing them as dinosaurs from a distant past.

Victoria Hesford writes about how second wave feminism was represented in 1970s American sitcom and proposes that the recent surge of work on 1970s popular media and feminist activism is about coming to terms with twenty-first century politics:

This return to the 1970s [by feminist and queer scholars and artists] is not, for the most part, a nostalgic escape from the present but an acknowledgement that the 1970s were decisive in making the world we are in today – and here I am gesturing toward what various thinkers have called the age of Empire, neoliberalism, or late liberalism. This decade saw the privatization of national resources and industries in conjunction with the deregulation of financial markets asserted as global economic and social policies. This also makes the 1970s the last decade in which those policies had not yet come to define everyday life – in the United States and elsewhere. Put simply, to be interested in the 1970s is to be interested in the alternatives it offered to what has become our neoliberal present. (2015, 715)

This proposal may go some way towards explaining the continuing fascination of the wider public with that decade, as box sets, streaming services and online forums such as YouTube continue to circulate 1970s television. The 1970s represents a not-too-distant past, where political activists were trying to imagine different social structures in the light of emerging debates about gender, sexuality, race, class and the environment. That imagining of possible alternatives is strangely present in these British comedies; they should remind us that *we* are the worms that need to turn.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff at the V&A's Theatre and Performance Archive in Blythe House, London, for their help with my work on the June Whitfield and Ronnie Barker collections; also the staff at the BFI's Research Viewing Service in Stephen Street, London, for kindly enabling me to view

a VHS copy of *Scott On...The Sex War*. I am very grateful to Victoria Bazin, Julie Scanlon, Sue Regan, Karen Ross and Mel Waters for feedback, discussion and printouts during work on this article, and to the anonymous reviewers whose comments helped to develop and clarify the debate.

Notes on Contributor

Rosie White is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Literature, Theory and Popular Culture at Northumbria University in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. Her work includes *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture* (2008) and *Television Comedy and Femininity: Queering Gender* (2018).

E-mail: rosemary.white@northumbria.ac.uk

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¹ According to BARB statistics for 1981, *The Benny Hill Show* was the fourth most popular show that year and had 20 million viewers (<https://www.barb.co.uk/resources/tv-facts/tv-since-1981/1981/top10/>), but *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*, the third most popular show in 2020, had only 14.27 million viewers – and only 13.78 watching via a TV set (<https://www.barb.co.uk/resources/tv-facts/tv-since-1981/2020/top10/>) accessed April 14, 2021.