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Funny Old Girls: Representing Older Women in British Television Comedy¹

Rosie White

Feminist academics have noted how age, like race, sexuality and class, offers a double discrimination with regard to gender. As Simone de Beauvoir writes: 'If old people show the same desires, the same feelings and same requirements as the young, the world looks upon them with disgust: in them love and jealousy seem revolting and absurd, sexuality repulsive and violence ludicrous.'² Ruth Shade lists the pejorative tendencies of jokes about older women as trivial, invisible, forgetful, mean-spirited, intimidating, toxic, embarrassing, over-talkative, unattractive, sexually frustrated, undesirable, and – paradoxically - both sexually predatory and sexually moribund.³ On network television older women have tended to inhabit the margins of mainstream programming as widows, grandmothers or eccentric spinsters. While soap opera and sitcom have traditionally harboured visible numbers of older female characters they have often been stereotyped as gossipy, asexual spinsters or as 'battleaxe' figures feared by their husbands. Vera Duckworth in long-running British soap *Coronation Street* embodied the latter, her marriage a seaside postcard caricature of a wife who wants to keep the romance going while her husband would rather tend to his pigeons. Such narratives repeat dominant ideologies about aging women as fearsome, abject or pathetic. This essay examines representations of older women in television comedy, arguing that television sitcoms and sketch shows provide a space in which ageing femininity can literally embody its contradictions, as both derogation and celebration. From Peggy Mount to *The Golden Girls* television comedy has offered an arena for older women to behave badly; more importantly it has allowed them to be the focus of the story, if not the hero. This essay also addresses the British tradition, founded in music hall and pantomime, of drag performances as older women, arguing that such representations can work to confirm *and* to

explode stereotypes about age, gender and sexuality. In the work of Les Dawson and Harry Enfield, Catherine Tate and Brendan O'Carroll, funny old girls confront Western attitudes to older women who are violent and sexual figures.

Patricia Mellencamp notes that because 'television is a medium of extended families and generational families' it has offered a space for older women to be seen: 'Since its inception in the late 1940s, television has been the stomping ground for middle-aged women.'⁴ A number of British programmes have made that stomping ground a forum for older men and women by basing comedies in an old people's home. In these sitcoms the elderly are presented as comic figures but take centre stage and, inevitably, such programmes address questions of *how* one should age, usually through the comedy inherent in older people behaving in age-inappropriate ways. By focussing on transgressive behaviour *You're Only Young Twice* (1977-1981) and *Waiting For God* (1990-1994) offer a celebration of aging; the mischievous activities of older protagonists in these comedy series represent a more positive model of aging than is often apparent in serious dramas. Sally Wainwright's *Last Tango in Halifax* (2012-) deployed this strategy to critical acclaim, basing a BAFTA-winning comedy drama around the late-life romance of two widowed pensioners and eliciting comparisons with *Gavin and Stacey* (2007-10) when the first series was broadcast on PBS in 2013.⁵ In the United States *The Golden Girls* (1984-1992) put women front and centre, and allowed them emotional and sexual lives. These 'girls' are, however the 'young-old' – women of pensionable age who are still healthy and active – rather than the 'old-old' – women whose health is failing and who have become dependent on carers for support.⁶ In these terms *The Golden Girls* offers a rather tidy account of growing old; death rarely makes a showing and Estelle Getty as Sophia Petrillo, the oldest of the 'girls', is clearly a younger woman in a wig. In *The Golden Girls* much of the comedy again centres on proper and improper behaviour for

women in late middle age, such as Blanche Deveraux's sexuality, or Sophia's age-inappropriate language.

These active, eccentric examples of older female character roles are swimming against more prevalent representations of the older woman as marginal, more sedate, secondary characters. Margaret Meldrew (Annette Crosbie), in *One Foot in the Grave* (1990-2000) embodies a sitcom stereotype – the long-suffering wife as foil to a central male protagonist. While this British sitcom broke new ground by addressing aging and death with dark humour, it stuck to the traditional gender dynamic of the suburban comedy by placing the middle-class wife in a secondary, reactive role.⁷ *Last of the Summer Wine* (1973-2010) is a notable example of this formula, and a candidate for the longest-running sitcom on British television, recently topping a poll for the most repeated British comedy series.⁸ The show focusses on the eccentric adventures of three elderly men but also features a number of older women – such as Ivy (Jane Freeman) and Norah Batty (Kathy Staff) – relegated to the role of humourless battle-axe:

Over the course of a series, male stereotypes become vivid and human, as we pick up little items of information about them. ... With female figures, however, it is difficult for this transformation to happen; the available stereotypes are strictly limited to the nag, the spinster and the dumb sex object. All of these define, rather than transgress, the 'norm', since they all relate at bottom to the invisible ideal of the family against which male eccentrics pull..⁹

Although older characters are given transgressive roles, the gender dynamic of many series still falls into stereotypical patterns as older women are aligned with a repressive domestic regime. Shows such as those listed above indicate the appetite for comedy material about aging and the elderly; whether this serves a growing demographic, in an era where the white

middle class are living longer, and baby-boomers are more visible and wealthy than preceding generations of pensioners, is debatable. Older characters may also embody the fears and desires of younger, middle-aged viewers, regarding the demands of caring for the older generation, or regarding their own aging in a future where social services are cut to the bone. Popular television comedy offers a space in which the question of *how* to grow old is debated. The statistical capacity of women to outlive men would seem to logically require a boom in female-centred comedy, or at least a comedy in which older women are more visible than their younger counterparts, but most mainstream shows since *The Golden Girls* have tended to focus on elderly male protagonists.

Transvestite Figures

One television format in particular has traditionally offered a strangely reflexive account of aging women; British sketch comedy. Transvestite representations of older women in British comedy sketch shows unpick some of the anxieties and contradictions of aging femininities. Just as Judith Halberstam proposes that women cross-dressing as men, or ‘female masculinity’, foregrounds contradictions inherent in hegemonic masculinity, so here younger performers who cross-dress as older women, expose contradictions inherent in popular representations of aging femininity.¹⁰ The cross-dressed figure of men or young women as older women, follows a British and American theatrical tradition of comic transformations; it is logically situated in the format of the sketch sequence with its heritage in burlesque, music hall, theatrical revue, variety and vaudeville.¹¹ Sketch comedy tends to rely more heavily on caricature than sitcom, offering an often stereotypical shorthand performance style which carries political weight. The anti-realist style of sketch comedy performance thus offers a means of articulating anxieties and fears about age and aging. Margaret Montgomerie, for example, proposes David Walliams’ controversial role as the elderly incontinent Mrs Emery

in *Little Britain* as ambivalently invoking both the ‘ultimate image of the abject’ and ‘a critique of British manners and taboos’.¹² The format is embedded in British broadcasting:

Sketch shows are usually half an hour in length, minus advertisements on commercial channels or station identification and trailers on BBC. Sketches on social, sexual, political or current mores last for up to four minutes; shorter sketches, usually 10-15 seconds, known as quickies, usually connect the sketches to each other.¹³

British sketch shows follow two broad comedy traditions. The older, working-class sketch shows, often based around named comedians such as Benny Hill and Dick Emery, are now associated with an outdated comedy style from the 1970s inspired by a theatrical tradition of burlesque and variety shows. This has largely been replaced on British television by middle-class sketch shows, such as *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (1969-74) and *Not the Nine O’Clock News* (1979-82), fuelled by performers from Cambridge University’s Footlights Society or from comedy revues at the Edinburgh Festival. Sketch series are usually written by the actors who perform in them, unlike sitcom which tends to have a separate writer or writing team.¹⁴

A number of female performers cross-dress as men in their sketch shows; most notably *French and Saunders* (1987-2005) and more recently *The Morgana Show* (2010), but the dominant tradition is for male comedians to perform as older women. In his examination of American film comedy Geoff King notes: ‘The female is the marked term, designated as more specific, more problematic and more visible, requiring a seemingly more active process of transformation: all those montage sequences in which make-up, wigs, foundation garments and other accessories are applied.’¹⁵ Where female protagonists have cross-dressed as men in films such as *Sylvia Scarlett* (George Cukor, 1935) or *Yentl* (Barbra Streisand, 1983) they appear to need little more than a pair of trousers and a haircut. This suggests that men cross-

cross-dressing as women is hard to divorce from its fetishistic and sexually transgressive implications, but also that it is somehow 'easier' for men to cross-dress because of all the equipment associated with heterofemininity.¹⁶ Cross dressing, in this figuration, shores up the binary illusions of heteronormativity yet at the same time the prevalence of men cross-dressing as women implies that aging femininity is unrepresentable in comedy except by impersonation.¹⁷ In her examination of transgendered fantasy film in the 1980s and 1990s Elizabeth Abele observes that transgender representation: 'simultaneously critiques, celebrates, reforms and reinforces traditional constructions of heterosexual masculinity and femininity.'¹⁸ Such arguments reiterate Judith Halberstam's claim that women cross-dressing as men trouble the 'natural' facade of heteronormative identity because it exposes the extent to which masculinity, too, is reliant on prosthetic accessories.

Much contemporary debate about cross-dressing references Marjorie Garber's work, *Vested Interests* (1992), where she argues:

The transvestite is both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification. ... The transvestite is a sign of the category crisis of the immigrant, between nations, forced out of one role that no longer fits ... and into another role, that of a stranger in a strange land.¹⁹

While Garber addresses gender, class and race, the category of age may equally be understood as interpellating the 'category crisis' which cross-dressing embodies. Many male performers who dress as older women expose the heteronormative limits of patriarchal discourse via their comic) discussions of gynaecological issues (or 'women's trouble') and also mark the limitations ascribed to the older woman, by embodying the grotesque, excessive aging body.²⁰ The 'category crisis' of male to female cross-dressing in television comedy does not automatically entail a radical or liberatory transgression; it can also reiterate

the binary understanding of gender that positions women as more subject to the vicissitudes of their natural bodies than men. Men cross-dressing as older women may thus be understood as both an exposé of the taboos which adhere to aging femininity *and* as misogyny in action.

Laraine Porter comments on the ambiguous dynamic of such performances:

On one level, these representations can be understood as a celebration of female solidarity and survival. They illustrate a fixation with aspects of femininity which are unknowable to men: dropped wombs, large bosoms and hot flushes.²¹

Porter maps the history of British comic female impersonators, proposing that they fall into two groups; from the ‘glamorous if over-determined drag’ of performers such as Danny La Rue and Edna Everage, to the ‘harridan, the older woman with coarse facial features, voice and body’, such as ‘Dick Emery’s parodies of inelegant 1970s womanhood, [and] Les Dawson’s celebrated Ada Sidebottom’, the latter played as a double act with Roy Barraclough as ‘Sissy’ in sketches on Dawson’s comedy shows (1974-1980).²² Such performances are also differentiated by their class identities; La Rue is glamorously bourgeois while Everage is an aspirational Australian housewife-turned-celebrity.²³ Emery, Dawson and Barraclough perform aging women who are marked by their accent and costume as emphatically working class and thus doubly ‘inappropriate’ in their feminine performance.²⁴

‘The Lovely Wobbly Randy Old Ladies’

Cross-dressing in British television comedy thus has an extensive genealogy which informs more recent examples such as *Harry Enfield and Chums* (1994-1997), *The Catherine Tate Show* (2004-9) and *Mrs Brown’s Boys* (2011 -). Harry Enfield and Kathy Burke’s

performances as ‘The Lovely Wobbly Randy Old Ladies’ from *Harry Enfield and Chums* demonstrate the complexities which representations of elderly women continue to expose.²⁵

‘The Lovely Wobbly Randy Old Ladies’, always introduced onscreen by a title card which presents them in these terms, only appeared in four episodes of *Harry Enfield and Chums* in 1994 and two episodes in 1997, but have had an afterlife on fan sites, YouTube and via their catchphrase ‘Young *man!*’ The Ladies’ generic name encapsulates the sketch content; in a variety of situations Hilda (Burke) and Gladys (Enfield) harass a younger man, reading sexual innuendo into his conversation and finally assaulting him. The scenarios invert the normative dynamic of masculinity/youth/activity and femininity/age/passivity for comic effect. In their second appearance on *Harry Enfield and Chums* Hilda and Gladys are shown in their living room, facing the camera in a pair of armchairs. The doorbell rings and Gladys gets up to answer it, saying ‘That will be the lovely young gas man’ and asking Hilda how she looks, to which Hilda responds: ‘Gorgeous!’. As Gladys leaves the room Hilda sprays herself with perfume, lifting her skirt to spray between her legs. Both women move slowly, shuffling in their slippers and displaying the ‘wobbly’ tremors of advanced years. Gladys is clearly not ‘gorgeous’ and their evident infirmity is deployed throughout in comic contrast with their monstrous desire for younger flesh. While Hilda and Gladys are dressed as cosy old ladies their dialogue and devious plotting give them a disturbingly vampiric quality – they uncannily enact fears about the elderly not ‘acting their age’. Their first exchange with the gas man (Simon Greenall) introduces their catchphrase:

Hilda: Cooeee!

Gas man: Hello ladies; have I come too early?

Gladys: [with delight] Young *MAN!*

Hilda: You wash your mouth out with soap and water, you naughty young man!

Gladys: Young *man!*

Hilda: Where's the lovely dark boy that was here yesterday?

Gas man: [disconcerted] Er, he begged me to come today. So where's the gas leak this time?

Gladys: You're a lovely young man too, you know, young man. Do you know, we think you're the spitting image of a young Lester Piggott!

Gas man: Right. Well, if you could just show me wh...

Hilda: [grabbing his arm] Go on, show us your muscles!

Gas man: [distinctly unnerved] Yeah... if you could just show me where you smelt the gas, eh?

Gladys: Oh! You saucy devil! It's in the bedroom this time. Follow us!

The sketch continues in this manner and concludes with Gladys and Hilda wrestling the gas man to the floor; Gladys straddles his crotch and holds his legs down while Hilda throws herself across his torso and secures his arms. Gladys finally looks into the camera, saying: 'Don't you just love being in control?', while behind her Hilda gives a thumbs up to camera with a big grin (*Harry Enfield and Chums*, 1:2).²⁶

How are we to understand this sequence? On the one hand it seems to confirm de Beauvoir's statement that sexuality and violence in the elderly are perceived as ludicrous. The repeated 'Young *man*!' emphasizes the difference in age between the ladies and their victims; the sketches also feature Gladys and Hilda chanting 'At my age!', 'At your age!', in response to any misconstrued advance from the 'young man'. We are constantly reminded that these are not golden *girls* but characters in their seventies or eighties. The sketches play upon what Mary Russo calls the 'scandal of anachronism', that 'Not acting one's age ... is not only inappropriate but dangerous, exposing the female subject, especially, to ridicule, contempt, pity and scorn – the scandal of anachronism.'²⁷ Hilda and Gladys are anachronistic; they are

not ‘acting their age’ – they confound the stereotype of the weak and passive old lady by asserting their hypersexual desires both linguistically, through constant innuendo, and physically, by assaulting the young men they encounter.

The sketch does not, however, position its audience unequivocally in ridiculing the old ladies. We are invited to laugh at their antics, but also to laugh with them, as in the final moment where Kathy Burke as Hilda looks into the camera and gives a triumphant thumbs-up. This is a complex and contradictory account of elderly women – the old ladies are laughable but also ‘in control’. They induce hilarity but also a potential for identification. In Russo’s essay she argues against the scandal of anachronism, proposing that one must risk anachronism as one gets older – particularly as a woman – she writes: ‘In my view, anachronism is a risk which is both necessary and inevitable as a *sign of life*.’²⁸ In these terms the comic anachronism that Hilda and Gladys represent is a necessary risk, as it opens up the possibility of truly living, rather than merely existing. Russo states that: ‘Acting one’s age, in a certain sense, can be understood as a caution against risk-taking, with higher and higher stakes associated with advanced chronological age until finally acting one’s age means to die.’²⁹ Hilda and Gladys represent a mischievous refusal to lie down and die.

Queer Transactions

Clearly this is not a simple or singular representation of old women; we are aware of the performers beneath the wigs and floral dresses throughout. Burke and Enfield are dressed and padded to look like old ladies but they are not heavily made up; they are not trying to ‘pass’ as old. Nelly Quemener addresses this disjunction in her examination of cross-dressed characters in sketch comedy on French talk shows, arguing that they ‘rely on actorly embodiment’ rather than visual artifice, so that the sketch character becomes a fluid

apparition rather than a concrete persona.³⁰ Quemener proposes that discrepancies between appearance and behaviour in comedy sketches offer a queer transaction between performers and their audiences, and that when women take on discrepant performances they open up a space ‘on a scale from female femininity to female masculinity.’³¹ At the same time Quemener is aware of the provisionality of comedy television performance and the dangers of assuming a singular or predictable reaction from its viewers:

The mainstream target of the performances and the entertainment contract with the viewer nevertheless produce performances that rely on a double speak mechanism ... In other words, they usually contain elements both of ambivalence and of reflexivity that either open up possibilities of destabilization or can be seen as elements of resistance.³²

This is how I understand Hilda and Gladys; not as unequivocal queer resistance, but just for a moment undercutting cultural norms of gender and age, not least through the evident discrepancies between the performance and the identities of the actors. Old age is mobilized in these sketches as a space of opportunity, where it is possible for women to behave badly, to be inappropriate, and not be punished for doing so.

It is worth noting here the queer trajectory of Kathy Burke’s career as an actor. From her roles as rough-diamond magazine editor Magda in *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC 1992-2012), to the delusional Linda La Hughes in *Gimme Gimme Gimme* (BBC 1999-2001), she has performed aberrant versions of heterofemininity, often based on working-class personae that undercut white middle class respectability.³³ As Hilda, too, Burke (and Enfield as Gladys) is marked as old and *working class*. Beverley Skeggs argues that in the nineteenth century: ‘Working-class women – both Black and White – were coded as the sexual and deviant other against which [middle class or ‘proper’] femininity was defined.’³⁴ In these sketches with

Harry Enfield aging femininity is queered; it is performed as a space of play and desire, where violence is tolerated and whimsical. Their male victims are disconcerted and embarrassed, but not apparently hurt. The Old Ladies' aberrant behaviour is made safe by their age. They are so evidently weak and incapable of 'real' violence that it is less their actions that lead to their triumph over the young men than their victims' inability to resist them, either through embarrassment, shock, or a gentlemanly unwillingness to hurt the older women. These Old Ladies thus take the disadvantages of age and deploy them as a guerrilla tactic; the surprise of the attack, the incongruity of the attackers. Who would think that these 'lovely' old ladies would have such desires or would act upon them?

In an essay on *Privilege*, Yvonne Rainer's 1990 film about aging and the menopause, Gwen Raaberg comments:

Although they express a range of responses to aging, a number of the women report experiencing themselves as more spontaneous, freer – 'off the hook,' as one woman says, 'free from needing to please other people in all kinds of ways.' And many report aging as a positive experience: feeling more focussed and less controlled by psychological and emotional forces; being more open, less judgemental of different perspectives, and more willing to act outside prescribed gender, class, ethnic, and sexual norms.³⁵

Rainer's film addresses the menopause as a means of examining how getting older is experienced differently by women of different races, classes and sexualities, according to their privileged positions. *Privilege* demonstrates the complex intersectionality of identity and the even more complex effects of such intersections on the experience of aging. It also addresses wider issues of privilege, in particular the privilege assigned to white people in American society. Rainer's film and performance work is informed by avant-garde practices

of art cinema and radical politics, which makes an odd juxtaposition with the ‘everyday’ medium of popular television. Yet the Lovely Wobbly Randy Old Ladies, Hilda and Gladys, also challenge our views of older women. They too ‘confound in a certain way’³⁶ by poking fun at our assumptions about what old women want; what they *should* be and what they *can* do.

Catherine Tate’s ‘Nan’

In the early noughties *The Catherine Tate Show* also featured a transgressive older character; Nan (Catherine Tate) is an East End cockney grandmother whose politically-incorrect opinions and bad language are suffered by her grandson Jamie (Mathew Horne).³⁷ Nan is usually depicted in her flat, often sitting with legs akimbo, ranting about the ‘fucking state’ of friends, relations, the country, and so on. Nan is *not* a ‘lovely’ old lady; she is an irascible character, occasionally breaking into song to illustrate her point of view. In the third series she is joined by the famous British actor Sheila Hancock as her sister Auntie Junie:

Auntie Junie: [of Jamie] Ain’t he handsome? Ain’t he handsome? I mean, he’s gonna break some hearts... Have you got a job darling?

Jamie: Oh, no, I’m at university.

Auntie Junie: You at university?

Jamie: Yeah.

Auntie Junie: You at *university*??

Jamie: Yeah!

Auntie Junie: [Turning to Nan] Fucking poof!

[Nan and Auntie June cackle uproariously]

Nan: Here June, have a look at these old pictures. Remember when that one was taken? That’s Frankie and Nelly Butty’s wedding.

Auntie Junie: They went to Great Yarmouth for their honeymoon.

Nan: That's right. And then Frankie turned over the guesthouse and spent the next four years inside. [Nan and June cackle]

Jamie: What? He went to prison?

Nan: Oh yeah, he was in and out of the nick all his life. But then they were the first people in their street to get colour TV so you got to weigh it all up, ain't you?

(The Catherine Tate Show, 3:6)

This sequence offers an interesting juxtaposition with Tate, then 38, cross-dressed as a much older woman and Hancock, at 73, very much playing her age. Like *The Lovely Wobbly Randy Old Ladies*, Catherine Tate's Nan sketches mine the discomfort of a young man when faced with the transgressive behaviour of old women. Once again, youth and masculinity are the 'norm' in contrast to the queer excesses of aging working class femininity. Nan is not nice; indeed in this sequence she and Junie reminisce over a series of horrific crimes by East End gangsters they knew in their youth, to the horror of her grandson:

Nan: Look, it was different years ago, son. I mean, yes, they boiled people alive in vats of burning oil; yes, they sent people to their death in concrete slippers; yes, they'd cut your head off for eating one of their biscuits; BUT, they were very good to their mothers and you could leave your back door wide open. [Pause] Not that you'd want to with that fucking mob running about!

Nan confounds the stereotype of the cosy old lady with fond memories of a golden past. Her past was clearly less than idyllic and she revels in her ability to control the present, by playing up to stereotypes of the nice old dear and then berating people behind their backs. Jamie, her grandson, is the middle-class avatar, expressing horror at her language, her behaviour and, in this sketch, her memories. Above all Nan is an angry old woman who refuses to be quiet and discreet.

In *The Catherine Tate Show Christmas Special* (2007) Kathy Burke appears as Nan's daughter, a younger woman who clearly follows her mother's lead, teasing Jamie about his sexuality, and launching into a tirade when Nan leaves the room. Her mother's daughter, she only pretends to perform filial fondness when in fact she is seething with anger at perceived slights. This sketch caricatures the tensions inherent in mother-daughter relationships, puncturing the fantasy of a happy family Christmas, just as Nan, and Hilda and Gladys, take the wind out of the stereotype of the lovely old lady. When the daughter's boyfriend arrives Nan asks if she looks alright; to which Burke's character replies 'Gorgeous' in a direct quotation of Burke's role as Hilda a decade earlier. Such tidy continuity between generations of comedy performance should not obscure the uncomfortable issues these sketches address. While Hilda, Gladys and Nan offer a celebratory (and hilarious) deconstruction of the patronizing view often afforded older women in popular media, they also carry the weight of contemporary fears about aging. As in the list of pejorative jokes about older women I cited at the beginning of this essay, Hilda and Gladys and Nan are, indeed, intimidating, embarrassing, over-talkative, unattractive and (in Hilda and Gladys' case) sexually predatory. Their strength as comedy characters, and as representations of older women, is that they are unconcerned by the social opprobrium around them. They are unafraid of aging and refuse to be cowed or controlled by their younger relations or by any 'young man'.

Mrs Brown's Boys

A more muddled account of aging femininity is visible in Brendan O'Carroll's hit show *Mrs Brown's Boys*. O'Carroll's performance as Mrs Brown depicts a post-menopausal Irish working class Mammy, in a shapeless cardigan and curled wig. Like Les Dawson's Ada Sidebottom, O'Carroll deploys Agnes Brown as a trickster figure who transgresses gendered

boundaries, through physical clowning, gynaecological reference and age-inappropriate language and behaviour. In one sequence Mrs Brown hides her son's mobile phone in her underwear because she thinks it is stolen; she is sitting at her kitchen table with two priests when her son's friend rings his mobile and she is given an orgasm by its vibrations (3:5). *Mrs Browne's Boys* is a ratings success on British and Irish television but has been slammed by critics for returning to the retrograde working-class comedy of the 1970s.³⁸ Agnes Brown is closer to Dick Emery than to Catherine Tate. Yet *Mrs Brown's Boys* revels in its postmodern disregard for the fourth wall; the camera reveals the audience and the studio set at the beginning and end of the show, Mrs Brown opens with a monologue to camera and cast members frequently fluff their lines or visibly 'corpse'. Instead of erasing these 'bloopers' in the edit (and preserving them for the DVD box set), the show embraces the 'liveness' of such mistakes as part of an authentically chaotic aesthetic.

This carnivalesque style is evident in Mrs Brown herself; a sweary working class matriarch, Agnes Brown is allegedly based on Brendan O'Carroll's mother, a Dubliner who had eleven children, became a Labour member of the Irish Parliament in the 1950s and established a shelter for victims of domestic violence.³⁹ As with the odd juxtaposition of clunky jokes and postmodern aesthetic, however, this is an uncomfortable version of the aging woman. It is unclear whether we are to laugh with Mrs Brown or at her; O'Carroll as Agnes Brown is a rubber figure, unbreakable and unbelievable. While the Lovely Wobbly Randy Old Ladies and Nan are made vulnerable and given a darker aspect, Mrs Brown is all surface. In one sense, of course, this corresponds to the idea of gender as performative, and the unruly woman as a grotesque. At root, however, Mrs Brown and her boys ventriloquize a series of tics and tropes that play heavily on established stereotypes about class, race, sexuality and gender. *Mrs Brown's* disturbing juxtapositions are evident in 'Mammy's Valentine' (3:4);

when Agnes is let down by a valentine date acquired via an internet dating site, she insists all her children go and have a good time with their partners, finally revealing that she has hired a 'Dial A Dick' gigolo by letting him out of the cupboard under the stairs. The gigolo character wears a g-string, leather chaps, a cowboy hat and a large moustache, coding him as gay, and is chased up the stairs by a frisky Mrs Brown as the credits roll. This confusion of gender and sexual identities opens an unreadable realm of signification. The 'Dick' emerging from the cupboard implies a 'coming out' process while Agnes Brown's avid sexuality in this scene sits oddly with her otherwise asexual characterisation.

How can we understand such a conglomeration of effects? Mrs Brown's unruly desires are figured as a confused layering of sexualities and genders which have little to do with the desires of aging women. In this sequence a mature woman's desire is, indeed, ridiculous because it appears to be unimaginable. While Quemener argues that the ambivalence and reflexivity embodied in transvestite performances entail 'possibilities of destabilization or ... elements of resistance', Brendan O'Carroll as Agnes Brown demonstrates that this is not always the case. Mrs Brown's performative palimpsest of genders and sexual signifiers renders the older woman merely ridiculous; it is hard to read resistance in a show which so determinedly evokes homophobic and sexist stereotypes. *Mrs Brown's Boys* demonstrates the limits of transvestite representations of aging femininity. While the slippage of identities within British sketch comedy may demonstrate the 'possibilities of destabilization', siting that performance within a traditional sitcom (albeit one with avant-garde leanings) tells a very different story. Agnes Brown takes the representation of aging femininity back to the misogynies of the pantomime dame and nineteenth-century music hall; a palace of complex negotiations for its time but a context that appears strangely anachronistic on twenty-first century television.⁴⁰ The success of O'Carroll's Mrs Brown indicates the endurance of

cultural taboos regarding age, femininity and sexuality. This funny old girl registers a warning for younger women; that to become old is to inhabit Ruth Shade's list of pejorative categories in jokes about older women – to become embarrassing, unattractive and sexually moribund.

As *Mrs Brown's Boys* beats *Downton Abbey* in the Christmas 2013 ratings, Agnes Brown serves as a reminder that, however transgressive and subversive cross-dressing comedic performances may appear, they can also demonstrate how aging femininities continue to be policed within popular culture. Recent research commissioned by Channel 4 sampled 386 hours of primetime television on the five British terrestrial broadcasters and Sky 1, concluding that 'in light entertainment, comedy and drama [women] make up just four in every 10 participants', and that 'only four in every 10 women on screen are aged over 40'.⁴¹ This offers a mathematical formula for older women on prime time television across all genres: $4/10 < 4/10$. You do the math. Such fractional visibility on network television underlines the work that continues to be necessary in producing, watching, analysing and critiquing representations of older women in popular culture. More to the point, it is still necessary to seek out those few representations of older and aged women that confront, expose and deploy the 'scandal of anachronism' rather than merely reiterating misogynist discourses regarding what older women can be or do. Mrs Brown, for all her clownish antics, is anchored to the conventions of propriety and family, always-already interred in her wig and cardigan. Hilda, Gladys, Nan and Auntie Junie deploy their aberrant behaviours to queer normative regimes of youth and masculinity, demonstrating that *living*, even at their age, is still possible.

Notes

¹ An early version of this paper was presented at *Console-ing Passions: International Conference on Television, Audio, Video, New Media and Feminism* (July 19th-21st 2012), Suffolk University, Boston.

² Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age* (Penguin, 1972), p.10.

³ Ruth Shade, 'Take My Mother-in-Law: "Old Bags", Comedy and the Sociocultural Construction of the Older Woman', *Comedy Studies*, 1:1 (2010), pp.71-83.

⁴ Patricia Mellencamp, 'From Anxiety to Equanimity: Crisis and Generational Continuity on TV, at the Movies, in Life, in Death', in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies Generations*, edited by Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p.316; see also Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, and Comedy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp.279-309.

⁵ Brian Lowry, 'An enchanting six-part series about lost love, missed opportunities and second chances', *Variety* (4th September 2013), available at: <http://variety.com/2013/tv/reviews/tv-review-last-tango-in-halifax-1200597888/> accessed 6th September 2013.

⁶ Andrew Blaikie, *Aging and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.97.

⁷ The final episode of the series appeared to acknowledge this; after Victor Meldrew's death his wife Margaret seems to take on some of his outrage, implying that she has now become a protagonist in her own comedy drama.

⁸ Jasper Copping, 'Last of the Summer Wine tops repeat charts with ten days of television', *Daily Telegraph* (6th April 2013), available at:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/9976718/Last-of-the-Summer-Wine-tops-repeats-chart-with-ten-days-of-television.html> accessed 10th June 2013.

⁹ Frances Gray *Women and Laughter* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), pp.85-86.

¹⁰ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998).

¹¹ See Robert C Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp.165-178; Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp.59-95; Oliver Double, *Britain Had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹² Margaret Montgomerie, “Mischief and Monstrosity”: *Little Britain* and Disability’, in *Reading Little Britain: Comedy Matters on Contemporary Television*, edited by Sharon Lockyer (London: I B Tauris, 2010), p.124.

¹³ Ian Mowatt, ‘Analysing *Little Britain* as a sketch show’, in *Reading Little Britain: Comedy Matters on Contemporary Television*, edited by Sharon Lockyer (London: I B Tauris, 2010), p.20.

¹⁴ Mowatt, pp.20-21.

¹⁵ Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), p.141.

¹⁶ See Carole-Ann Tyler, ‘Boys Will Be Girls: Drag and Transvestic Fetishism’, in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject – A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp367-392.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Imelda Whelehan for this acute observation.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Abele, 'Becoming a Better Man as a Woman: The Transgendered Fantasy in 1980.-1990s Popular Films', *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies*, 21 (October 2011), p.4.

¹⁹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp.37,79.

²⁰ For an overview of transvestism and the grotesque in British comedy see Peter Hutchings, 'Welcome to Royston Vasey: Grotesque Bodies and the Horror of Comedy in *The League of Gentlemen*', *Intensities*, 4 (December 2007), available online at:

http://intensities.org/Issues/Intensities_four.htm

²¹ Laraine Porter, 'Tarts, Tampons and Tyrants: Women and Representation in British Comedy', in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, edited by Stephen Wagg (London: Routledge, 1998), p.90.

²² Porter, pp.88-89.

²³ Danny La Rue is the odd one out in this list as his long career on stage and television involved 'passing' as a glamorous woman in a drag act that became normalized as family entertainment on British television; although his performance referenced comedy it more closely adhered to the tradition of female showstoppers such as Judy Garland, who he impersonated as part of his act. A regular on the annual *Royal Variety Performance*, La Rue was an outstanding example of a drag artiste; his closest contemporary equivalent is the American drag queen RuPaul.

²⁴ See Beverley Skeggs' account of femininity as implicitly white, middle class and heterosexual, in *Formations of Class and Gender* (London: Sage, 1997).

²⁵ Both Enfield and Burke have tended to play grotesques throughout their comedy work. A character sketch called 'Little Brother' from *Harry Enfield's Television Programme* (BBC, 1990-92) was elaborated for *Harry Enfield and Chums* into the Kevin and Perry sketches

with Enfield as spotty, sulky teenager Kevin and Kathy Burke cross-dressing as his sidekick Perry. Burke also partnered Enfield in the long-running Wayne and Waynetta Slob character sketch, which depicted a 'white trash' working class couple. All of these character sketches satirise British society, working through categories of class, gender and age.

²⁶ 'Don't you just love being in control?' was the catchphrase of a series of commercials for British Gas in the 1990s featuring British celebrities, including Enfield; this sketch with a gas man appears to directly parody that role.

²⁷ Mary Russo, 'Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism', in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies Generations*, edited by Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p.21.

²⁸ Russo, p.21.

²⁹ Russo, p.27.

³⁰ Nelly Quemener, 'Mockery or fantasy? Transvestite characters, cross-dressing and subaltern sexualities in sketches in French talk shows', *Sexualities*, 15:1 (2011) pp.80-92, p.86.

³¹ Quemener, p.85.

³² Quemener, p.88.

³³ Roberta Mack argues that Burke embodies 'heteroqueerness' in *Gimme Gimme Gimme* in her essay 'Heteroqueer Ladies: Some Performative Transactions Between Gay Men and Heterosexual Women', *Feminist Review*, 75 (2003), pp.20-37, p.32.

³⁴ Skeggs, p.99.

³⁵ Gwen Raaberg, 'Views from "The Other Side": Theorizing Age and Difference in Yvonne Rainer's *Privilege*', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 30:1&2 (Spring 2002), pp.120-130, p.124.

³⁶ Yvonne Rainer, referring to her film work, cited in Erin Brannigan, 'Great Directors: Yvonne Rainer', *Senses of Cinema*, 27 (July 2003), available online at:

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/rainer/#b1>

³⁷ Tate's Nan character has more recently been revived for an appearance in the BBC's *Comic Relief* (2013) and a new sitcom series, *Catherine Tate's Nan* (BBC 2014).

³⁸ The show has been an overnight success with a lengthy gestation; O'Carroll's Mrs Brown was the basis for a comedy series on Irish national radio in the early 1990s, as well as novels, straight to DVD films and a series of stage shows, before being commissioned by the BBC in 2009. In September 2013 a *Mrs Brown's Boys* movie was being filmed in Dublin. See Donal O'Donaghue, 'The Life of Brown', *RTE Guide*, 21st December 2013 – 3rd January 2014, pp.30-31.

³⁹ O'Donaghue.

⁴⁰ See Gray, Chapter 4, 'On the Halls: Ms/Readings and Negotiations', pp.115-132.

⁴¹ Cited in Deborah Jermyn, 'Past Their Prime Time?: Women, Ageing and Absence on British Factual Television', *Critical Studies in Television*, 8:1 (Spring 2013), pp.73-90, p.76.