



Giada Goracci

MOCKING THE *QUEER* STEREOTYPE IN THE TV SERIES *LITTLE BRITAIN*

“Man is least himself when he speaks in his own person.

Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth”.

(O. Wilde, Aphorisms)

Introduction

This paper will analyze the sitcom *Little Britain* as one of the TV series which mocks and subverts the traditional British *queer* stereotype. The perspective of this paper is twofold. The primary purpose is to shed light on how the recurring character appearing in *Little Britain's*¹ episodes, Emily Howard, the transvestite, enacts a series of situations that satirize and spoof the British society, through a humour originating from the *queer* stereotype presented in the sketches. This will be better appreciated focusing on the concept of *gender identity*, in that it represents the central issue of this sitcom. This term has appeared recently together with other connected expressions such as *gender-bender*, introduced in the early 1980s. Indeed, as Glover and Kaplan state, “(...) phrases like *gender role* or *gender identity* are in fact relatively new”². The introduction of this term,

stems from the fact that, beginning in the nineteenth century, sexuality gradually assumed a new status as an object of scientific and popular knowledge. The last two hundred years or so have seen what the critic and historian Michel Foucault once described as a “discursive explosion” around the question of sex, by which he did not simply mean that it came to be talked about more widely or more often or more explicitly (...). Rather, what really revolutionized sex was the way in which ideas about sexuality began to spread out and touch every aspect of modern social life³.

Closely connected to *gender identity* is the concept of *gender role* in society. As Stoller argues, whilst

gender identity starts with the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other, though as one develops, gender identity becomes much more complicated, so that, for example, one may sense himself as not only male but a masculine man or an effeminate man or even as a man who fantasies being a woman (...)⁴.

gender role is meant as an act that a person “plays out”. On these premises, the character starred by Emily will be analyzed, reinserting her/his *gender identity* and *gender role* into the frame and stereotypes of the British society.

The second purpose has more specific implications, focusing on the feminist approach to *queer* stereotypes in gender representations to explore the influence this has had on *Little Britain*. The starting point will be the evolution of the modern idea of *queer theory* in opposition to the social prejudices and conventions. As such, with the birth of *gender studies* critics and writers have focused their research on how the translation of sex into gender has changed its peculiarities and idiosyncrasies in time, along with its social transformations. The result, as Judith Butler points out, is that

gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self⁵.

The changes which occurred in gender representations, as Teresa de Lauretis states, are

(...) produced by a number of distinct ‘technologies of gender’ such as cinema or advertising and that we, as gendered subjects, can be seen to be ‘constructed across a multiplicity of discourses, positions, and meanings, which are often in conflict with one another’⁶.

Emily Howard seems to undermine his/her “otherness” and “grotesqueness”, relying on the representation of the queer stereotype. As a matter of fact, assuming an intended “ghettoisation” of his character, Emily shows that stereotyped representations, in general, cannot be neutral, due to the clash between “acting” and “being”.

As it will emerge, these two concepts are undoubtedly fundamental to grasp the message the sitcom conveys, in that every sketch starred by Emily is based on this “apparent” dichotomy. As such, the gap that seems to separate these two categories should be clarified, in order to get to the core of its essence.

Little Britain

Great Britain has a long list of sitcoms, TV sketches and comedy series that are now famous worldwide, each of which represents, and often mocks, British stereotypes. This list includes *Peep Show*, *Mr Bean*, *Only Fools and Horses*, *BlackAdder* and *Little Britain*. This sitcom debuted on BBC radio 4 in 2001, running for two short series of five and four half-hour episodes respectively. In 2003, it appeared for the first time on TV on channel 3, running to eight episodes. The show is a compilation of short sketches, all featuring familiar characters, linked by narration from Tom Baker, known as the Fourth Doctor on *Doctor Who*. Distinctive characteristics are the voiceovers’ statements on the nation, such as, “...We’ve had running water for over 10 years and we invented the cat” or “Unlike other countries, Britain has people of two genders: male and female”. The series, aired between 2003 and 2006, includes 20 episodes divided into 3 seasons and 5 specials starring Elton John, George Michael and Robbie Williams. In September 2008, an American version of the series entitled *Little Britain USA* was created as a spin-off and then aired on HBO.

In order to better appreciate the value of this sitcom and to set it within its cultural context, it is important to define the literary genre to whom it belongs. *Little Britain* is an example of British “alternative comedy”. This term is a modern definition in that, as Deborah Finding points out, “alternative comedy itself has only been around since the late 70s, when comics such as Tony Allen, bored of the traditional comedian’s reliance on racist or sexist stereotypes (...), began to challenge and subvert them through their own comedy.”⁷.

This kind of comedy, Finding adds,

relied far more on observational humour, personal narratives, and a need for the audience to be intellectually and emotionally involved in the comedian’s train of thought in order to laugh. Both “old” comedy and alternative comedy relied on an audience’s identification or agreement with the comedian – however, the targets of the jokes became more complex with alternative comedy⁸.

This need for the audience to play the part of a comedian involves a further step: the ability to subvert the act of playing. Therefore, characters, comedian and audience become three standpoints that try to converge in one perspective, thus creating the incongruity of the sketches and the misinterpretation of identities. Thus, if the core of the British comedy is to be found, generally speaking, in the concept of “identity”, as regards *Little Britain* this term assumes a specific relevance in that every character “plays” the part of, belongs to and mocks a marginalized group. In this light, most of the characters peopling *Little Britain* are stereotypes based on people’s hatred for those who belong to a different social class, sexual orientation and race. Indeed, their physical traits are often projections of ‘prejudices’ rooted in people’s fears about the working class, homosexuals or other less powerful groups.

As shown above, the question revolves around the concept of identity, an issue which deserves a deeper analysis.

Identity: feminist approaches to the queer stereotype

After having introduced the sitcom, we should open a critical parenthesis on the concept of identity. Since in contemporary age masking and “masquerade” are considered as tools for deconstructing categories of identity, our reflection on the idea of “gender” will be mostly based on the term mask.

Already in its earliest representations, the mask is closely connected to the role of a person. In the classical theatrical Greek tradition the mask was indeed used in theatres to worship Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility and wine. There were a great amount of rituals and ceremonies that were associated with the worship of Dionysus and many of them included the wearing of masks⁹. The association mask-ceremonial is here essential in that, as we will see, also in the sitcom *Little Britain*, Emily’s character is framed into this relationship.

Later, at the beginning of the Middle Ages, Augustine maintained that there was a difference between masks and true identity, so that from this period on, the mask was characterized by evil connotations. According to this perspective, it

was related to artifice, contrasting the original identity.

In modern and contemporary society, the masquerade is the result of the adjustment that people have undergone, playing “roles” engaged to conform situation-appropriate behaviours: the paradox of the masquerade seems to be found in the fact that it shows the truth in the shape of forgery, revealing its presence by hiding it.

As stated above, contemporary times have changed the perspective through which a person should be perceived by other people, making the concept of stereotyping of “strangers” and “different people” reach its highest point. The interest in social order, especially in the British conception of nation, created in the past the myth of homogeneity. It goes without saying that this was pursued through a strict suppression of what was considered “different”, in that it represented a constant threat to the stability of the nation. Thus, the mask, representing the Other, was the enemy “within” the social system. It is therefore evident that masquerade deals with otherness, embodying the ambiguity of identity, in a continuous play on its belonging and not belonging.

As regards the concept of “identity”, closely bound to the term “masquerade” in that it represents its primary source, Teresa de Lauretis, maintains that

(i)n theoretical analysis on theatre and cinema, (...) the theme of constructed identities but also continuously “deconstructed” and “re-constructed” by actors and audience, highlights the concept of “parody” in the continuous change of “roles”. There is nothing fixed in identities, but every identity is a “parody” of another, a “simulacre” of something which is not (that is, something “given” in its natural steadiness)¹⁰.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, states that roles, bodies and sexual differences are only “acts” played and repeated according to specific behavioural codes. Starting from a reflection on Foucault’s thought, Butler considers corporeity and materiality as “constructed” realities. Her analysis aims at demonstrating that corporeity is not “given by nature” and that sexual differences and roles are “acts” played and repeated in conformity to behavioural codes; in fact, there are no men and no women, but “acts” according to which everyone is what he/she does¹¹.

After having introduced the term “identity”, we should define the concepts of “sex” and “gender”, in that they are deeply connected to it. Feminism commonly adopts the distinction between *sex* and *gender*, according to which the term *sex* indicates the biological phenomenon of the difference man/woman, whereas *gender* refers to the cultural code that defines male and female. Teresa de Lauretis maintains that gender is a symbolic construction, a representation that originates from different institutional systems, such as family, school and law, reproduced in the language, literature, religion, cinema and media. Its nature is artificial and it is a tangible reality when the representation becomes self-representation, when a character absorbs it as a component of his/her own identity¹².

The deconstruction of codified roles leads to a further step, that is the “plurality of sexual potentialities”. As Judith Butler writes,

(t)he “act” of attributing gender cannot, in a narrow sense, be an action or a human expression, an intentional appropriation and, surely, does not concern the adoption of a mask. Rather, it is the matrix through which every will becomes possible, it is its cultural condition that gives power and authority¹³.

A striking example of the relationship between power and authority can be found in the introductory lines of the third series’ sketch *Emily and Florence – Beard*.

TOM V/O: In Britain, we can proudly say we have transvestites from all walks of life. Between 1979 and 1990 even the British Prime Minister was a transvestite.

In this statement, the adverb “proudly” plays a primary role, in that it subverts the real intention of the words spoken by Tom. The voiceover is aware that the term “proud” has a strong influence on the audience, in that it evokes mutual feelings, shared by the British population and based on moments in history which have inspired and moved its ancestors. Thus, the association of the word proudly to transvestitism “teases” and “provokes” the audience comparing a concept, pride, that unites the British people, to a social phenomenon, transvestitism that, in some cases, is the direct cause of racism, a feeling that divides people.

There is another aspect to consider. This voiceover represents an evident critique to Lady Thatcher’s government and is deeply bound to the representation of Emily’s character in that, both, are the result of a failure. This concept can be better understood reading the following lines of the script:

Florence¹⁴ is standing by a plastic 99 ice cream cone and checking her watch, waiting for Emily on the seafront. Emily approaches briskly, blissfully unaware that she has a very full , quite long beard.

EMILY: Sorry I'm late, Florence. I overslept.

FLORENCE: I, um, think you may have forgotten something, my dear.

EMILY: Oh really, what's that?

FLORENCE: Er, well, er, ah, come with me, my dear.

Florence takes Emily by the hand and leads her towards a nearby vending machine. She shows Emily her reflection.

EMILY: Oh, this is exciting.

FLORENCE: Regardez...

EMILY: Oh, do my earrings not go with my – (realizing) Ooooooh! Florence, help me! I'm a lady with a beard! Help me!

FLORENCE: Calm down, dear!

EMILY: I can't calm down! I'm a bearded lady!

FLORENCE: What happened?

EMILY: I forgot to shave this morning. It grows so fast, doesn't it?

FLORENCE: Here, take this.

Florence hands her a Japanese fan. Emily takes it and uses it to conceal her face.

EMILY: What am I to do?

FLORENCE: I don't know. Um. There's a chemist over there. They may have something for you.

Int. Chemist. A lady is serving behind the counter. Emily and Florence enter. Emily is still concealing her full beard with the fan.

LADY: Yes, gents?

FLORENCE: My *ladyfriend* here needs to talk to you about something rather embarrassing.

EMILY: Yes. I have a very slight facial hair problem.

LADY: Can I see?

Emily removes the fan. The lady looks suitably horrified.

EMILY: It's not very noticeable, I know, but I know it's there and it's not very ladylike, is it?

LADY: No. Well, the razors are over there.

EMILY: I can't use a razor, I am a lady.

LADY: Well, some ladies who come here with your... problem...

EMILY: Problem? Yes.

LADY: ... they like to use this. It bleaches the hair.

She shows Emily the bleach.

EMILY: I see. And this is for ladies, is it?

LADY: Yes.

EMILY: Very well. I'll take twelve tubs.

LADY: (To Florence) Would you like to take a tub?

FLORENCE: I beg your pardon?

LADY: Well, you do have a slight moustache problem.

Emily nods subtly in agreement to the lady.

FLORENCE: (Indignant) How dare you?!

EMILY: (deep voice) You do. (mouths to the lady) He does!

Ex: Chemist doorway, Emily and Florence are exiting. Emily has the fan in front of her mouth again. Emily pauses.

EMILY: Are you sure you can't see it?

FLORENCE: Honestly , my dear, you wouldn't know it was there.

Emily lets down the fan to reveal that the beard is now white (but still very noticeable) . Emily and Florence link arms, smiling, then walk along the seafront.

[Emily Howard, - *Beard*, 2006]

In the introductory lines, we can already perceive an ironic tone as the speaking voice tells us that from 1979 to 1990, in England, the Prime Minister too was a transvestite, in that he is referring to Margaret Thatcher. Notoriously, Thatcher was called 'The Iron Lady' for her tough demeanour and was the first woman to become British Prime Minister, serving three consecutive terms for the Conservative Party. Margaret Thatcher was one of the most influent 1980s woman who embodied the symbol of an aggressively materialist, anti-communitarian and anti-feminist leader. To this respect, Restaino highlights the fact that, in those years, Thatcher, a woman, was politically associated to Reagan, a man:

(t)he last twenty years have highlighted the differentiation of the political scene in the areas of the western world in which feminism developed. In the Anglo-Saxon countries (with the governments of lady Thatcher in Great Britain and of Reagan in the United States) the Eighties are characterized by a social wave of wild liberalism that puts into question the function and the idea itself of the social status, whilst in the continental Europe the situation, especially in the Nineties, does not foster the conservation and the expansion of rights and social services (...) ¹⁵.

It is also because Margaret Thatcher symbolizes and embodies the problematic relationship between woman and power that she is here seen as a "transvestite", that is to say that she was a woman but she acted as a man. Normally, a woman is not supposed to behave so firmly. Therefore, she has the same features Emily has, but in a subverted and so inverted dimension. Indeed, "she", Emily, is a man who pretends to act like a woman, whereas Lady Thatcher "embodies" her role as a man, declaring her opposition to the feminist movement, trying to re-propose a bygone woman-like stereotype that is far from the actual condition of women in the contemporary English society.

Furthermore, in the sketch, Emily's ritual ceremonial expressed by the sentence "I am a lady" and by her masquerade underline, once again, the importance of images. Hence, on the one hand Emily's catchphrase "I am a lady" leads both, the character and the audience to look at her as a woman. On the other hand, her outfits and behaviour show the strength of images in representations. These two concepts have a long tradition in that, in the past, iconographic images played a primary role in the rituality of power. In this light, women were politically disadvantaged, in that they were considered inferior to men. It is for this reason that the power of images assumes a fundamental value. In this sense, an example is surely Elizabeth I. To this respect, Carpi and Fiorato argue that

(t)o reinforce their power, sovereigns (...) used various stratagems, amongst which the use of iconographic images, that underlined the rituality of power. (...) The great worldly pomp, focused on the theatricality of regality (...) highlighted the ritual, the staging and the acting of regality ¹⁶.

"Powerful" women who acted as men had to sublimate their identities, leaving their "biological nature" aside. Their role brought them to the definitive choice of "being unsexed", as already evoked by Lady Macbeth:

The raven himself is hoarse

That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, *unsex me here* ¹⁷,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! ¹⁸

Lady Macbeth, to convince her husband to do whatever is required to become sovereign, resolves to put her femininity

aside to help him and get the crown. The fact that she asks to be “unsexed” highlights the role that the biological identity plays in power. As a woman, Lady Macbeth is not supposed to be cruel but, as soon as she is unsexed, her biological identity disappears and she plays her role as an “empty body”, in which the feminine characteristics are relentlessly turned into an apparent inhuman strength. Another issue present in the previous sketch is the one of the *reflection of identity* in the mirror. As Lacan argues,

(...) we are "who we are" only in relation to other people. Our aims and desires are shaped by the desires of others, in interpersonal terms and in terms of social expectations and prohibitions. Our knowledge of the world comes to us by way of other people; the language we learn to speak pre-exists us, and to a great degree our thoughts conform to pre-established concepts and linguistic structures. As we assimilate to these social conventions, the pressures of our instinctual drives--sexuality, for example--appear to us as threats, as "dangers."¹⁹

To this respect, Emily sees her reflection in the mirror, at a first sight, as if she were a real woman (“Oh, do my earrings not go with my...”), but afterwards she realizes that “she is a woman with a beard”. This last intuition corresponds to the audience’s expectations and, eventually, to what Emily is forced to see and accept, in that the mirror represents the society in which she lives. In fact, as Lacan has argued,

(t)he *otherness* of the image the subject assumes in the mirror stage creates a negative dimension in the subject's existence. I am never, (...), fully "myself" because the relationship within which my ego, my "I", comes into being is a relationship with an image that is *not me*, that is an unattainable ideal²⁰.

After having realized that she has a beard, Emily hides her face behind a fan that, in its turn, becomes a “mask” used to conceal her real appearance. Fans have always had a glamorous aspect and a symbolic value, as

(i)s not the fan one of the chief weapons in the armoury of the Love-God? Is not the rampart from behind which the fiercest fire of love’s artillery is directed (...). Did not the Greeks early recognize this fact by placing the plumed fan in the hands of Eros himself? (...). A fan is so charming, so confident, so suited to give countenance to a young girl, and to extricate her from embarrassment (...). It strays over cheeks, bosom, hands, with an elegance which everywhere provokes admiration²¹.

There are other examples to mention about transvestitism and ceremonial in the sketch entitled “Hen Night”:

TOM V/O: Transvestitism was invented in 1986 by Dr Neil Transvestite, who came upon the idea purely by chance, when he was investigating nuclear fission theory whilst wearing his wife’s nightie.

(Emily and Florence are cycling on their tandem , calling out to passers-by)

EMILY: Two ladies, out on a hen night.

FLORENCE: Pay no heed!

EMILY: Good evening, barman.

BARMAN: Yes gentlemen?

EMILY: Two sweet sherries, s’il-vous plait.

FLORENCE: With lager chasers.

(Emily throws Florence a look , the bemused barman gets the drinks)

FLORENCE: Well, my dear Emily, it is to be your final night as a single lady.

EMILY: That’s right, Florence, my lady friend. I’m getting married in the morning. To a man.

FLORENCE: Well you would be, being a lady.

EMILY: So I suppose if any man should wish to take advantage of me on my one final night of freedom they should (raising volume) speak up now.

(There is silence. Everybody in the pub freezes. Emily looks suitably embarrassed. One of the customers drops a pin. We hear it).

FLORENCE: Well, it’s still early.

BARMAN: There you are. There is a gay bar down the road, you know. That’s where most of the trannies go.

[...]

[“Emily and Florence, Hen Night” – *Little Britain*, 2006]

The initial voiceover is a reference to a fake Dr Neil Transvestite, defined as the man who invented transvestitism whilst working on the nuclear fission theory. Obviously, the quotation is a means through which the TV series mocks the prejudice on transvestitism, assuming that also the most “respectable” man, in this case a scientist, hides a secret identity. This inference introduces the sketch, in which Emily and Florence celebrate Emily’s hen night. As the female ceremonial requires, the two “ladies” are in a pub, waiting for some men who “should wish to take advantage” of Emily on the night before her marriage. As she finishes talking, the embarrassed people in the pub do not answer. Eventually, the barman tells Emily and Florence to go to the gay bar down the road where, he says, transvestites go. As a matter of fact, Emily fails in her attempt to act as a woman on her hen night, and notwithstanding her female dress, the barman and the customers in the pub realize that she is not a real lady, but a man playing the role of a woman. Emily is aware of her fake acting; that is clear when she looks at Florence as she asks “lager chasers”, but her ceremonial must go on.

This analysis reveals how the concept of *identity* still represents a central issue in media, literary and cultural studies. The next paragraph aims at extending the comprehension of the *queer* theory, intended as a widening of the concept of identity, following a dynamic path along which the term taken into account will be expanded, revised and subverted to combine clarity of meaning with the social perspective.

Queering the man stereotype

In the English language, the word “gender” is always on the move, containing a great variety of nuances and inflections of meaning. As David Glover and Cora Kaplan state,

(w)e talk about *gender roles*, worry about *gender gap*, question whether our ideas are not *gender-biased* or *gender-specific*, and we might look for additional information on these and related topics in the rapidly expanding *gender studies* section of our local bookstore. The rich linguistic profusion is confusing enough, but all too frequently it is made worse by the discovery that many of these neologisms appear to be pointing in sharply opposed directions. *Gender role*, for instance, suggests something that constraints or confines, a part we *have to play*, whereas *gender-bending*, by contrast, implies a way out, the subversion of a role through parody or the deliberate cultivation of ambiguity: what was once dutifully thought to be fixed becomes chameleon-like, a part to be played with style, a chance to mock and shock²².

This introduction perfectly describes the function that Emily’s character plays within the sitcom *Little Britain*: a parody and a subversion of the Victorian woman, who tries to adapt to the contemporary society but, at the same time, tries to spoil the male stereotype in that, *biologically*, she is a man. It is worth remembering that Queen Victoria was, and still is, a symbol of the radical change England underwent during the nineteenth century, becoming a familiar figure to her people, as she represented in herself both a queen and, at the same time, a wife and a mother: that is to say, the incarnation of two contrasting *roles*. This dichotomy was also reflected in the way the English society faced the modern era in that, even though the Victorians could have been progressive in theory, in practice they showed an opposite behaviour. Yet, the fundamental Victorian ideals were based on values such as family, church and home. It is also true that middle-class women were supposed to conform to a submissive domestic role, known as “angel in the house”, whereas the “fallen woman” (a concept that could be referred to a wide range of people, from unmarried women to prostitutes) was judged by a hypocritically moralistic code.

A closer analysis of Emily’s sketches reveals that there are references to the male world that enact a process of demystification of the man stereotype: “I don’t have *testiclés*. Well, perhaps...little ladies’ testicles”, “I can’t use a razor” are sentences spoken by Emily, in order to spoof the fundamental male characteristics. Moreover, Emily often performs “supposed” male activities, such as DIY or watches football matches. According to her multiple identity, this character is the product of the social changes brought about by the Victorian era throughout the years until the contemporary times. Emily’s character is mocked by the humorous representations performed by the actor who, like a mirror, “reflects” himself on the audience’s interpretation. Thanks to this ambiguous play between Emily’s *exterior appearance* and her *biological nature*, the audience is asked to focus on the role of “gender”. The multifaceted essence of this term is another direct consequence of the innovations and traditions on which the Victorian society was based:

Part of the reason for this sense of semantic discontinuity stems from the fact that, beginning in the

nineteenth century, sexuality gradually assumed a new status as an object of scientific and popular knowledge. The last two hundred years or so have seen what the critic and historian Michel Foucault once described as a 'discursive explosion' around the question of sex, by which he did not simply mean that it came to be talked about more widely or more often or more explicitly, relaxing the grip of repressive conventions or taboos. (...) It [sexuality] has become a principle of explanation whose effects can be discerned, in different ways, in virtually any stage and predicament of human life, shaping our capacity to act and setting the limits to what we can think and do²³.

As the boundaries of the term "gender" are relentlessly fading away, the relation between *sex* and *gender* becomes more overt; indeed:

Sex and gender are therefore intimately related, but not because one is 'natural' while the other represents its transformation into 'culture'. Rather, *both* are inescapably *cultural* categories that refer to ways of describing and understanding human bodies and human relationships (...). Sex and gender necessarily overlap, sometimes confusingly so. What once was baldly called a 'sex change operation' is now, not entirely euphemistically, known as 'gender reassignment', a term that reflects the growing instability of the body's contours in many contemporary societies, its increasing malleability or openness to reinvention (...)²⁴.

Therefore, Emily *reassigns* his body that becomes "her body", exaggerating the female traits that she thinks a woman is eager to show in the social domain. Hence, the character's behaviour involves a revision of the current state of "the mainly ideal" and "the dominant masculine stereotype". Indeed, George Mosse, in his study on masculinity and modern times entitled *The Image of Men* (1996), argues that:

At the centre of this ideal lay a renewed emphasis upon the perfectibility of the male body (...). The body was to be a locus of self-discipline and restraint, able to concentrate its energies that any obstacle could be surmounted, any hint of emotional weakness could be held in check. This masculine ideal was intimately connected to the growth of a commercial and industrial bourgeoisie throughout western Europe, but far from being a wishful self-portrait of one particular social class, it was a complex amalgam of beliefs and practices drawn from many sources (...)²⁵.

One of the sources the writer is referring to is the ancient Greek ideal of male beauty:

One of the key element was the eighteenth-century revival of interest in the ancient Greek ideal of male beauty associated with the writings of the archaeologist and art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (...). Winckelmann's striking phrase brings out not only the fusion of the moral and the visual that was so important to the male ideal, but the carefully qualified sense of dignity and pomp conveyed here also suggests its political potential as an inspirational image that might be taken to symbolize the nation, alongside the national anthem and the national flag²⁶.

Emily's character voluntarily shows the weakness socially attributed to women in order to "appear" trustworthy but, inevitably, she fails in that she exaggerates her behaviour. Her male identity represents the case of a man who does not correspond to the ideal quoted above. To this respect, some contemporary critics have studied Kafka's most famous work, *The Metamorphosis*, shedding light on how the main character, Gregor, undergoes a process of *de-masculinization* as his story develops, becoming more and more passive, leading to the contemporary masculinity's vanishing point. The consequence is that,

(t)erms like 'masculinity' and 'femininity' carry an immense amount of cultural baggage, but they can also cover up far more than they reveal. Though regarded as a set of mutually exclusive binary opposites that constitute the bedrock of experience, it is possible that these categories are too restricted, too simplistic, to crude even to serve as an adequate shorthand for the pleasures of the body (...)²⁷.

Modernity, within its main idiosyncrasies, has also introduced the use of derogatory terms like "queer", "pansy" and "homo"²⁸, as a result of the increasing clash between old and new values related to the sexual sphere. These values, as Foucault writes in his work *History of Sexuality*, "(...) were the product of a complex interaction between familiar, sub-cultural values and practices on the one hand and attempts at control by the state and the professions on the

other.”²⁹ The term “queer” is used to describe someone who is homosexual, especially a man, whilst the verb “to queer” could mean to spoil, to ridicule or put out of order. In recent years, however, gay people have taken the word queer and deliberately used it in place of gay or homosexual, in an attempt, by using the word positively, to deprive it of its negative power. This use of queer is now well established and widely used among gay people (especially as an adjective or noun modifier, as in *queer rights*; *queer-bashing*) and at present exists alongside the other use³⁰. Yet this term, together with the *queer theory* and *stereotype*, has been revised throughout the contemporary era; as Glover and Kaplan state,

queer is also a term that has been virtually reinvented by gay critics and gay activists in recent years. (...) ‘queer’ seems to have passed through three main phases. When the word first came into use in the United States it was not a mark of obloquy or disdain (...) it just meant you were different. In deliberate contrast with the fairy, to identify oneself as queer tended to indicate a quietly controlled, ‘manly’ demeanour and a desire for other queer, or perhaps straight men³¹.

Following this perspective, it is possible to understand Emily’s “forced” behavior in the sitcom, in that she/he represents one of the ambiguities that characterize the English society: the difference between “acting” and “being”. Hence, the premise on which all the sketches in which Emily is involved is the unconvincing nature of her masquerade. The two characters, Emily and her friend Florence, through their voices, their facial hair and out-of-date frocks undermine every attempt “to be real ladies”. Given this, apparently, Emily’s perception of what “being a lady” entails seems to be associated to using French words, going to the theatre and wearing Victorian disguises. To a deeper analysis, it emerges that, far from being a mere parody of “blokes in dresses”, Emily produces the effect of presenting transvestite identities as “natural” and “authentic”, challenging the popular consciousness and social prejudices.

As shown in this paper, the contemporary society presents a vast array of *gender representations* and the impact this phenomenon has on people’s ideas and personalities. The insistent attention to the differences between men and women provides a multifaceted and fascinating field, in which it is possible to find answers on how our world evolves and forges human beings’ identities.

Humour in sitcoms

(h)umour has a high profile in our society. A glance through the television guides will show this: sitcoms and comedy shows are on prime-time television every evening. In 1997 the final episode of the sitcom *Only Fools and Horses* was watched by a record number of 24.5 million viewers³².

This statement reveals how humour plays a primary role in TV shows, because it represents a way to undermine the stereotypes on which our society is based, reaching an outstanding number of people. Indeed, the fortune of humour in sitcoms derives from playing around with the comic possibilities of the particular characterization types, interacting with each other, in a specific situation. More specifically, the analysis of humour focuses on the potential of the situation itself and examines its individual occurrences, expressed by each character. *Little Britain* is the logic consequence of this premise.

Humour is usually referred to as “something that makes a person laugh or smile”³³, but it has more implications than this definition shows in that, as Ross argues,

(p)eople laugh in company (...) there is a strong social aspect to the way people respond to humour (...) humour is a way in which people show their allegiance to a group. If someone signals their intention to say something humorous, the listeners are immediately ready to laugh. People often laugh when given this sort of cue, regardless of whether they even got the joke³⁴.

Humour also derives from the exploitation and subversion of social stereotypes. For example, Emily’s language is, in many cases, inappropriate if considering the different settings in which she *acts*; indeed, in the script of the sequence 3 *In the Pub*, Emily uses a language that is totally inadequate to such a location:

EMILY

Absolutely tipping it down out there. That’s the only reason I came in here alone, without a chaperone. I am a lady, you see. Please - pay me no heed.

EMILY GOES TO THE BAR

EMILY

I have never been in a pub before. Tell me what does one do?

LANDLORD

Well you can order a drink if you like, mate.

EMILY

Yes I'll have a lady's drink, s'il vous plait.

LANDLORD

What can I get you?

A LONELY MAN WITH THICK GLASSES APPROACHES

EMILY.

VIC

I'd like to buy the lady a drink.

EMILY IS RUFFLED

EMILY

What?

VIC

I said I'd like to buy you a drink, if that's ok.

Emily

But I am a lady.

VIC

Yeah I know. And I'd like to buy you a drink.

EMILY

Oh. A drinky-poopoo. Yes I'll have a slimline tonic water, please.

LANDLORD

Right you are.

EMILY

And two packets of crisps. Do you have the Barbecued Beef variety? Merci beaucoup.

VIC

Cheers.

EMILY

Chin Chin! Ooh it goes straight to my head.

VIC

So tell me a little bit about yourself.

EMILY

Well, my name is Emily. Emily Howard. And I am a lady.

And because I am a lady, I like to do ladies things, like attend the operettas and les ballets imaginaries. Do you like the theatre?

VIC

No but I like you.

EMILY

You must know that I am a lady. I press flowers and stroke kittens and swim in rivers ... wearing dresses and hats.

VIC

You're a very lovely looking lady.

EMILY ALLOWS HERSELF A COQUETTISH LAUGH. SHE CHIDES VIC AND FLIRTS WITH THE LANDLORD.

EMILY

You embarrass me, I must go and powder my nose.

EMILY EXITS TOWARDS THE TOILETS.

LANDLORD

'ere, you wanna be careful with that one.

VIC

She's gorgeous. Here watch my pint, I'm off for a slash (...)

[Pub, *Little Britain*, 2004]

People, generally, aim at confidence and informality when drinking in a pub. On the contrary, Emily's "sophisticated" words are not in tune with the place in which she is. Words like *chaperone*, *s'il vous plait*, *drinkypoopoo*, *slimline*, *operettas* and *ballets imaginaries* appear therefore odd. The importance of context for this character, but also for the others, is to be highlighted for it is because of her inability "to act" properly, according to the different situations, that the queer stereotype becomes more noticeable. Moreover, the context becomes an essential element in that it is "intimately" bound to humour, indeed, as Ross states,

(t)he context for humour is crucial for determining whether an individual finds something amusing or not. The incongruity theory focuses on the element of surprise. It states that humour is created out of a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke³⁵.

The repetition "I am a lady" makes the audience construct a cognitive representation (Emily is a lady) and, as a consequence, every viewer activates and identifies a specific script, relating to the semantic field of "lady". Surprisingly, this expectation is challenged by Emily's behaviour and body, as the sitcom relies so heavily on the corporeality of its characters. The following extract is an example:

Emily is in the X-ray room of a hospital, waiting for the doctor:

DOCTOR

Right, sorry to keep you. So, Eddie Howard.

EMILY

Emily Howard. I'm a lady, Emily Howard, yes.

DOCTOR

Right, uh, what happened?

EMILY

Well, I was disembarking a motor coach when I took a tumble.

DOCTOR

You fell off the bus?

EMILY

Quite.

DOCTOR

Right, well, I'm going to need to do an X-ray of the whole leg. So if you'd just like to place this over your testicles.

EMILY

Ooh, doctor, you do amuse!

DOCTOR No, it's not a joke. It's got a sheet of lead in it. It, uh, deflects the radiation.

EMILY

But I am a lady. I – I don't have *testiclés*. Well, perhaps... little ladies' testicles.

DOCTOR

I'm sorry. You need to use this.

EMILY

Well, would you mind if I brightened it up a little with some appliqué and décolage?

Yes, I could sew some lace around the edges.

DOCTOR

We don't really have time for this, Mr Howard.

EMILY

But I am a lady. . . .

[Emily Howard – X-ray, *Little Britain*, 2004]

In this sketch, the script tries to evoke and mock, in the use of Emily's language and outfit, the stereotype of the "Victorian lady". In fact, Emily's image of a woman is sophisticated and refined, as we can notice in her Victorian clothes, in her use of words, in the lexical items taken from the French language, such as *testiclés*, *appliqué* and *décollage*, that refer to a bygone era of whom Emily's "simulated" behaviour is part. Hence, the social mask that Emily "puts on" is unsuitable for a contemporary setting and representation of a lady that the audience, in watching her, is likely to evoke. As a result, whilst Emily represents a failure as a lady, her character embodies a failure as a transvestite: her character embodies therefore, ambiguously, two queer stereotypes that fit either, men and women. Consequently, the clash between Emily's perception of herself and what the audience actually sees leads to humour.

Moreover, Emily's language and her "sophisticated" use of it makes the scene humorous, but the same inappropriate formality, according to the script, subverts the logic that one normally expects in a similar situation. Indeed, when she says "I was disembarking a motor coach when I took a tumble", Emily deliberately offers a blurred explanation to the doctor's question, violating Grice's maxims of quantity and manner³⁶, thus resulting inappropriate to the context. The doctor corrects Emily and says "You fell off the bus", reinserting the dialogue into a contemporary frame.

According to the above examples, humour is activated by either, linguistic items present in the text (for example, the use of the French language) or contextual cues (Emily's old-fashioned clothes), that create expectations meant to compensate what is not explicitly mentioned in the text itself. Emily's inability "to act" as a woman represents what can be defined as the breaking of the "taboo" through innuendos created by, and present in, the audience's minds.

Analyzing the phrase "to act as", we notice that the verb has as many implications as the human identity. The peculiarity of Emily's character emerges from the incongruity that "her being a male/pretending to act as a woman" evokes.

Her/his identity becomes the means through which the different perspectives activated by the audience are used to interpret the text, thus absorbing the comic subversion. Indeed, as Stott points out, "(i)n this way, the comic can be thought of as a means of opening up the possibility of multiple perspectives, as each concept culturally established as orthodox simultaneously presents itself for the possibility of comic subversion (...)"³⁷.

This act of comic subversion can be found in the audience's minds, where unconscious images and systems of interpretations work. Hence,

Like dreams, jokes contain significant information about unconscious thoughts and the nature of inhibitions, and the production of a joke is a means of negotiating the psychological barrier between the conscious and unconscious mind. (...) In Freud analysis, joking is symptomatic of the division in

the psyche that characterizes human beings (...) ³⁸.

The importance of unconscious thoughts and inhibitions was also highlighted by Freud in his paper on “The Phycogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman” (1920)

(...) which argued that a person's physical sexual attributes, mental attitudes and objects of desire could “vary independently of another”; so that “a man with predominantly male characteristics and also masculine in his erotic life may still be inverted in respect to his object, loving only men instead of women”(Freud 1979: 9.398-9). (...) Not only do we tend to confuse sex and gender, however. We also assume too readily that the various components of gender are mutually reinforcing, whereas in fact they may well pull in different directions ³⁹.

This “pulling into different directions” creates the various possibilities that our identities contain, and that eventually express themselves through diverse “acting as”. Therefore, as shown above, Emily, in *acting* as a girl, tries to control her body and language in a woman-like way but, dramatically, every effort fails in that she subverts the audience's expectations. Precisely, even though she does not succeed in acting as a woman, she does get her primary goal: she undermines the queer stereotype.

This analysis highlights how the subversion of stereotypes and the presence of humour operate in the TV series *Little Britain*, according to the way in which the audience could interpret and appreciate the sketches, thus mirroring the changes of the British society. From this perspective, it emerges that the concept of gender continues to be a central issue, not only in literary studies but also in other fields such as, in this case, TV programs. With a relevance that crosses disciplinary boundaries, the discussion on intersex, transgender and gender reassignment inspires cultural debates and offers a starting point from which our imagination may overcome the limits of the human mind.

1 *Little Britain* is the name of a neighbourhood in the centre of London, that consists of narrow streets, courts and houses. Its boundaries are, on the west, Christ Church School and St. Bartholomew's Hospital, on the north, Smithfield and Long Lane, on the east, Aldersgate Street whilst, on the south, Butcher Lane and Newgate. It derives its name from having been, in the past, the residence of the Dukes of Brittany.

2 D. GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 2.

3 D. GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., p. 4

4 D. GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, pp. 12-13.

5 D. GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., pp. 17-18

6 D. GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., p. 19.

7 D. FINDING, “I can't believe you just said that”: Figuring Genders and Sexuality in *Little Britain*”, n. 13, *Media @else*, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, 2008, p. 4.

8 D. FINDING, “I can't believe you just said that”, cit., p. 5.

9 One of the main reasons for the wearing of Greek masks in theatres was the fact that there were female roles but women were forbidden to perform on stage. Therefore, men put on female masks when they played female roles. The use of masks was also helpful when an actor had to play more than one role. A simple change of masks was all one needed to switch characters.

10 T. de LAURETIS, in A. CARAVERO, F. RESTAINO, *Le Filosofie Femministe*, Milano, Mondadori, 2002, p. 66. (n)elle analisi teoriche su teatro e cinema, (...) il tema delle identità costruite ma anche continuamente “decostruite” e “ricostruite” sia dagli attori sia dagli spettatori, sottolinea il concetto di “parodia” nel continuo cambiamento di “ruolo”. Nulla di fisso c'è nelle identità, ma ogni identità è una “parodia” di un'altra, un “simulacro” di qualcosa che non c'è (nel senso di qualcosa di “dato” nella sua fissità naturale. [My translation].

11 T. de LAURETIS, in A. CARAVERO, F. RESTAINO, *Le Filosofie Femministe*, cit., p. 67.

12 T. de LAURETIS, in A. CARAVERO, F. RESTAINO, *Le Filosofie Femministe*, cit., p. 20.

13 J. BUTLER, in “Le Identità sono costruite, non sono naturali”, in A. CARAVERO, F. RESTAINO, *Le Filosofie Femministe*, cit., p. 215. L' 'attività' dell'attribuzione di genere non può, in senso stretto, essere un'azione o

un'espressione umana, un'appropriazione intenzionale, e certamente *non* si tratta dell'adozione di una maschera. E' piuttosto la matrice attraverso la quale ogni volontà diventa possibile, è la sua condizione culturale che conferisce potere e autorità. [My translation].

14 Florence is Emily's best friend from the second series of the sitcom on. Emily tries "to teach" her how to "act and speak as a lady" but, as her friend, Florence is an unconvincing transvestite.

15 A. CARAVERO, F. RESTAINO, *Le Filosofie Femministe*, cit., p. 54. Gli ultimi vent'anni vedono differenziarsi in maniera notevole il panorama politico delle aree del mondo occidentale nelle quali è nato il femminismo. Nei paesi anglosassoni (con il governo della signora Thatcher in Gran Bretagna e di Reagan negli Stati Uniti) gli anni ottanta sono caratterizzati da un'ondata sociale di liberismo selvaggio che mette in discussione la funzione e l'idea stessa dello stato sociale, mentre in Europa continentale la situazione, soprattutto negli anni novanta, comincia a non essere più favorevole alla conservazione e all'espansione dei diritti e dei servizi sociali. [My translation].

16 D. CARPI, S. FIORATO, *Iconografia del Potere*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2011, pp. 16-17. Per rafforzare il proprio potere i regnanti (...) si servivano di vari stratagemmi, fra i quali l'uso di immagini iconografiche, che sottolineavano la ritualità del potere. (...) La grande pompa mondana, incentrata sulla teatralizzazione della regalità (...) sottolineavano il rituale, la messa in scena e la recitazione della regalità. [My translation].

17 *Unsex me here*: Here, Lady Macbeth expresses her will to be deprived of her feminine weakness and of her womanly feelings of compassion in order to be invested with masculine strength. She needs to be "unsexed" because she knows that Duncan's murder is not only morally wrong, but it is also a crime against God, anticipating a reversal of what is natural: by nature, a woman should be good and compassionate, whilst Lady Macbeth refuses to show her humanity. In this passage, the stereotype of the good and passive woman is undermined because Lady Macbeth decides to kill a man, an action "normally" accomplished by men. Eventually, this decision reveals a paradox: his husband should kill Duncan but he is too weak. Macbeth's refusal to kill Duncan seems to suggest that women are stronger than men.

18 W. SHAKESPEARE, *Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 5, Milano, Garzanti, 1990, p. 66.

19 J. LACAN, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", *Écrits: A Selection*, London, Tavistock, 1977, pp. 1-7, in www.lacanonline.com.

20 J. LACAN, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", pp.1-7.

21 "The Fan", in *The Lotus Magazine*, Vol. 5, No. 5, (Feb. 1914), p. 329.

22 D.GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., p. 1.

23 D.GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., p. 4.

24 D.GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., p. 17.

25 D.GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., p. 89.

26 D.GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., p. 89.

27 D.GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., pp. 112-113.

28 These words seem to have entered the English language in the 1920s.

29 D. GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., p. 121

30 *Oxford English Dictionary*, (online version).

31 D.GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Genders*, cit., p. 131.

32 A. ROSS, *The Language of Humour*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 1.

33 A. ROSS, *The Language of Humour*, p. 1.

34 A. ROSS, *The Language of Humour*, p. 2.

35 A. ROSS, *The Language of Humour*, cit., p. 7.

36 H.P.GRICE, "Logic and Conversation", in Peter Cole & Jerry Morgan, *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. III, New York, Academic Press, 1975, pp. 41-58.

37 A. STOTT, *Comedy*, cit., pp. 7-8.

38 A. STOTT, *Comedy*, cit., pp. 10-11.

39 D. GLOVER, C. KAPLAN, *Gender*, cit., p. 12.

[Torna all'indice](#)