FRANZISKA RÖBER

Laughable Old Men:
Conceptions of Ageing Masculinities in the Britcom

1. Introduction

A popular adage states that men age like fine wine, in the sense that they improve with age, while women's ageing is likened to cheese, in the sense that ageing is "only good to a degree [before] the mould" (Webb 2011, 33) sets in; and hence they would need to be cast aside. This was described by Susan Sontag as the "double standard of ageing," a pattern according to which men are 'allowed' "to age without penalty, in several ways, that women are not" (1972, 31). In light of such droll statements, which on the one hand combine the mounting pressure to age successfully, stay fit and look young with a mounting social and cultural invisibility of women in older age, it seems unsurprising that ageing studies and gerontology have tended to explore female experiences of ageing – leading to what Arber et al. have termed the academic 'feminisation of aging' (2011, 7).

While gerontological literature has by no means ignored the experiences of ageing men – after all, "men's experiences have formed the basis for much research" (Hurd Clarke et al. 2014, 4) – this androcentric foundation has been largely under-theorised, as few "studies [have examined] old men *as men* or [have attended] to masculinity as a research topic" (Calasanti and King 2005, 4; original emphasis). Similarly, research on men and masculinities has been largely inattentive to older men. Although references to ageing, age inequalities, intergenerational relationships, disability, illness, care and death do occur, they arise as afterthoughts, usually secondary to matters such as class, race and ethnicity. It may, thus, "in some sense be plausible to speak of old(er) men as invisible" (Sandberg 2011, 48), at least academically. Ageing studies have focused on women, while masculinity studies have been centred around "experiences that typify younger men" (Spector-Mersel 2006, 76) in a "concerted effort to understand middle-aged and younger men's lives" (Thompson 1994, 9). Although this overview seems to imply that older men are untouched by old age, this is by no means the case, as older men may find themselves in a precarious situation in later life, perched between the ideals of mid-life and the (physical) realities of ageing. Ageing processes, ageism, "bodily changes and disruptions, and disability pose considerable problems to the established authority, social power and status of many ageing men […] and to their gendered, embodied identities" (Jackson 2016, 12). As such, older men are tasked with negotiating often disparate cultural representations that either regard later-life masculinities as 'failing masculinities' or as forever youthful.

And yet, such realities of ageing are scarcely explicitly portrayed both in advertisements and in works of popular culture. Indeed, older men "have typically been portrayed as esteemed, happy, and affluent experts, grandparents, professionals, […] active leisure participants," sportsmen, or surrounded by "material wealth, […] status

symbols" and, sometimes much younger, partners (Hurd Clarke et al. 2014, 27). While older men – coinciding with an increasing 'silvering of the screen' – have recently also featured in action narratives, heist movies, road movies or comedies (Dolan 2017, 36), such a 'silvering' and the subsequent research on older characters, ageing stars and visual culture has been largely confined to cinematic screens. As a result, there is a burgeoning body of work[1] that explicitly addresses not only the more frequent portrayals of older characters in general but also the intersections of masculinities, ageing, genre and visual culture at some point. Whilst this does not imply that TV, or the 'small screen,' has been neglected, such in-depth analyses of the aforementioned connections in the framework of television are few and far between. What is even more notable about the existing work is the seeming absence of research on ageing masculinities, TV and one genre in particular: the sitcom.[2] Whereas debates "about representation are central to the subject area, with analyses of gender, race, sexuality and nation recurrent in works on the sitcom" (Mills 2016b, 272), there is scarcely any analysis of age.[3] Therefore, it could be argued that older men on the cinematic screen have certainly become more and more visible, yet, funny older men on the small screen remain largely invisible – both academically and visually. Having noted this, sitcoms might be particularly well suited to such an analysis, as this format, due to its genre conventions and its role as a product of popular culture may help to reiterate, legitimise and subvert dominant concepts, and its use of verbal and physical humour might open up communicative possibilities because the sitcom occupies "a social and domestic role unavailable to many other media" (Mills 2016a, 13).

Therefore, the following article will first briefly elaborate on the 'in-between' position of older men, caught between performing idealised forms of white British masculinity and adapting masculinity to their changed social, cultural and physical position. Moreover, with the help of a case study of two Britcoms, namely *May to December* (1989-1994) and *Hold the Sunset* (2018), the article will explore how this state of uncertainty can be negotiated and how, or whether at all, Britcoms challenge existing notions of later-life white masculinities.

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1 This includes, but is not limited to, Josephine Dolan's *Contemporary Cinema and 'Old Age': Gender and the Silvering of Stardom* (2017), Sally Chivers's *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema* (2011) or Pamela Gravagne's *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life* (2013).

2 Both Neal King (2010) and Sadie Wearing (2017) examine TV series and representations of masculinity, dementia and the male body on the small screen, but their analyses are focused on specific genres as well as particular types of men, such as the (ageing) cop and the (ageing) detective.

3 Notable exceptions include Dustin Bradley Goltz's work on the British sitcom *Vicious* (Goltz 2016) as well as Brett Mills's exploration of the character of Victor Meldrew in *One Foot in the Grave* (Mills 2016b).

2. Men, Masculinities and Ageing

Talking about older men will eventually and, maybe, necessarily lead to an examination of the qualities that constitute a man, regardless of age. While gender studies have, for the longest time, been concerned with 'the female experience,' the last thirty years saw an increase in the amount of academic inquiry that sought to understand "men in their experiences as men" (Kahn 2009, xi). Concurrent to this trend, an awareness grew, both in academic and popular discourse, that masculinity was not an "obvious thing, something we can and do take for granted" with easily ascribed characteristics such as "'muscular,' 'strong,' 'hard,' 'brave,' and 'in control'" (Reeser 2011, 1). Yet, "[m]ale, white, middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied" (Schmidt qtd. in Horlacher 2018, 52) has remained an invisible cultural norm against which other identities are measured and are often found deviant or 'other.' Only in moments of 'crisis,' for instance, when expectations of 'appropriate masculinity' are violated and masculinity is perceived as absent or when masculine traits are displayed excessively, does masculinity become visible (Reeser 2011, 1).

Whereas earlier work on masculinity built on essentialist assumptions of (gender) identity, contemporary masculinity studies have come to see masculinity as a socio-cultural product, as much an amalgamation of biological realities as an "intersection of literary and cultural history" (Nünning qtd. in Horlacher 2018, 55). Thus, masculine identity, "like every identity, can be considered as [an] 'invented [category]'" and as a fluid construct that is "anchored in specific historical conditions" (Spector-Mersel 2006, 68). In this vein, manhood within any given society has been perceived as a "group of culturally available, recognised and legitimate themes which are more or less identified with certain aspects of being a man" (Ben-Ari 2001, 239), themes that are translated into social practices which may constitute, for example, gender differences, or result in certain ways of behaviour which are considered to be masculine. Such an understanding of masculinity as a social construct that incorporates certain themes, qualities, temporal, spatial and cultural dependencies, rather than masculinity being an innate, stable quality that is linked to biological, physical or mental realities, highlights that masculinity is "best understood as a performative and narrative [concept]" (Horlacher 2019, 76).

Yet, it is problematic to refer to masculinity in the singular. Though it could certainly be argued that "at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted" (Connell 1995, 77), eliciting the concept of hegemonic masculinity that represents "successful ways of 'being a man'" (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, 3), other conceptions of masculinity, usually seen as inferior or deviant, exist alongside hegemonic masculinity scripts. Therefore, it might be more appropriate to speak of masculini*ties* instead of a singular masculinity. Highlighting the plurality of conceptions of manhood also foregrounds their performative nature, emphasising that instead of being a man, men tend to 'do masculinities,' adapting and "[showing] different masculine 'faces' within different contexts" (Spector-Mersel 2006, 69). One such face, an inadequate masculinity and, incidentally, one of the 'crises' men will eventually be confronted with, is older age: a stage in life where hegemonic gender

scripts that foreground financial, physical, and social resources and power do not apply any longer. This has led to an "absence of cultural guidelines for being both a 'true' man and an aging person," as older people are considered to be 'ungendered' and older men are constructed as "an invisible, paradoxical and unmasculine social category" (ibid., 68).

Men and masculinities are necessarily about ageing, rendering the connection between men, masculinities and age inseparable. Age is, as Hearn notes, "implicated in the social construction of men – both in the distinction of men from young men and boys, and in the construction of particular types of men" (1995, 102). In this vein, men's social power can be understood in several 'aged' ways:

> Older age may signify power not just through the historical carry over of generational and patriarchal power, but through mental labour-power and the accumulation of resources. 'Middle age' may signify power for men through formal, organisational statuses as well as through physical labour-power and indeed patriarchal power. Youth may signify power for men through physical strength, body shape, cultural image, and sexual virility. (ibid.)

Whereas the connection of masculinity and age in pre-industrial contexts has been seen as one between mutually reinforcing and reaffirming means of social, political and economic power, industrialised societies have rendered this relationship far more complex. Ageing, with its stereotypical connotations of incompetence, decline, helplessness and passivity has been understood as contradictory to 'masculine qualities' such as being "strong, authoritative, decisive, disciplined, resourceful" and independent (Jackson 2016, 48). Hence, aged men have seemingly lost some but not all of their ascribed social power and have become a 'subclass' of men, due to the "valorisation of employed labour," shifts in employment and pension schemes, "generational, social and geographical segregation," changing familial structures, and increasing life expectancy (Hearn 1995, 100). Older men, thereby, live in a hybrid state, because "their situation is not consistent either with the typical characteristics of men, in terms of social power, nor with old people's characteristics, in terms of lack of power" (ibid., 103).

On the one hand, older men have a hegemonic position. Many men, especially heterosexual, white, middle-class, able-bodied, ageing men, retain and maintain some privileges accumulated over the course of their lives, for instance greater access to occupational pension schemes, the accumulation of resources or better access to health care, "by a complex web of gender relations that often subordinate women and other marginalised men of lesser power" (Jackson 2016, 39). Moreover, the introduction of the so-called third age has paved the way for a new kind of (male) retiree, because of its medicalisation of old age and its intertwinement with the concept of successful ageing, which is, at its core, "saturated by neo-liberal discourses of activity, [health,] autonomy and generativity" and equated "with low risks of disease, physical functioning and active engagement with society" (Sandberg 2011, 49-50). By offering a different and positive perspective on ageing, which runs counter to bio-medical discourses that provide narrations of inevitable decline and decay, the discourse of

successful or 'positive' ageing has substituted 'ageing as a disease' with a certain kind of agelessness that can be attained and cultivated by a plethora of recommendations, such as "a healthy diet, adequate amounts of sleep, moderate and regular exercise, decreasing alcohol intake, stress-management techniques, [no] smoking[, i]n specific cases psychotherapy and specific consultations" (Dominguez et al. 2016, 5). Access to such a 'patriarchal dividend' that still privileges men in later life and the concept of the "desired modern retiree" who is "independent, autonomous, responsible" (Jackson 2016, 44) and, above all, healthy have enabled older men to carve out spaces in which a construction and maintenance of

> idealised characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, irrespective of their chronological ages [is made possible], through [taking part in anti-ageing and health regimes,] physical dominance, if not professional success […], as well as resilience and tenacity. (Hurd Clarke et al. 2014, 31)

On the other hand, ageing can be a rupture – not so much an interruption – of hegemonic gender scripts. Age means, for most men, a loss of power – after all, age defines them as something they are not (any longer): mature, socially and economically productive adults. For all intents and purposes, age turns older men into 'others' (see Hazan 1999), an otherness that is reinforced by an array of circumstances which include "territorial estrangement, exclusion from the dominant work norms, a metaphor of childhood translated to infantilization practices" and the construction of "older men […] as pre-death" (Spector-Mersel 2006, 74-76). Moreover, the "exclusion from the dominant work norms" which retirement heralds, often means not only the detachment from domains such as occupation but also from other youthful domains that constitute valuable spaces for the construction of Western masculinities which are "synonymous with power and control" (ibid., 77) and "exemplified by accumulated wealth and wisdom, confidence, fame, [virility,] and physicality" (Hurd Clarke 2014, 30). While the loss of social power might not be immediately evident to those who are healthy, affluent and successfully ageing, the transition into the fourth age, marked by the onset of more significant health problems, amplifies and exacerbates their marginalisation and powerlessness. Yet, the loss of social power is not the only loss men may face in later life. As Sandberg has noted, later-life masculinities have sometimes, with the "advent of Viagra and other sexuo-pharmaceuticals on the market" (Sandberg 2011, 24), been exclusively constructed around the struggle for and loss of potency and sexual satisfaction. These conceptions of later-life masculinity are understood "to be linked to the penis and the ability to gain an erection, [thus] impotence [or erectile dysfunction] is consequently commonly understood [as] a threat to masculinity" (ibid., 19). Being outside of the aforementioned spaces, and having to face bodily changes that belie ideas of control and power reduces not only the social, physical and cultural power of men but subsequently decreases their masculinity and, by default, "heightens their femininity over time [meaning that] 'old men' are not men at all" (Thompson 1994, 7).

Older men are, thus, 'other men.' They are strangely effeminate, somehow deviant in the face of hegemonic gender scripts, trivialised and discriminated against by those younger or healthier than themselves – in short, "the central image of older men stands

in opposition to the dominant constructions of men and masculinities" (Thompson 1994, 13). Later-life masculinity is, as Spector-Mersel has noted, a 'different story,' a "never ageing story"; a story that is often told in binary terms as there are no respectable models available, because "hegemonic masculine stories are [usually] concluded at middle age" (2006, 75). Thus,

> [w]hile in relation to younger phases of life [hegemonic gender scripts] provide clear recipes of how to be a 'true man' […], the fundamental contrast between old age and Western ideals does not allow for the elaboration of such formulae for later life. (ibid.)

Men seemingly cannot age beyond middle age, even when they clearly do.

3. Imagining Older Men

This outlook is very prominent in popular images of older men. Instead of providing diverse portrayals, works of popular culture have mostly been centred around images of grumpy or 'dirty' old men, powerful and experienced older men, happy and healthy older men that portray "an aging youth culture" (Higgs and McGowan 2013, 22) in which financial and social privileges are maintained, or older men whose manhood can be regarded as hypermasculine, a form of manhood that is principally defined by exceptional physical strength, autonomy, domination, aggression and violence. Such depictions of 'exemplary life stories,' which are "culturally exalted narratives, based on real or fictitious lives," are, as Spector-Mersel has noted, "the principal channel for transmitting cultural key-plots" and therefore one way in which "hegemonic masculinity scripts [as well as later-life masculinity scripts can be] communicated" (2006, 72). Thus, masculinity, and especially later-life masculinity, remains something that is "a serious matter that has to be learned" (Horlacher 2018, 54). Yet, as representations of older people have either focused on women or have provided largely stereotypical portrayals of older men, it can also be assumed, as Woodward states, that our culture has not yet succeeded in creating persuasive, differentiated representations of ageing, later-life masculinities and the ageing (male) body (2006). Although there are multiple forms of broadcasting these 'exemplary life stories,' this article will, in the following, focus on the way TV series visualise and transmit scripts of later-life masculinities.

While TV series have certainly been implicated in the perpetuation of such stereotypical representations, television, due to changes in television programming and TV consumption practices, new forms of seriality, the increase of life-expectancy rates or the ageing of popular actors, has shifted its focus to a more precise exploration of ageing experiences.[4] Not only have series which are first and foremost about ageing started to experiment with visualising the passage or disruptions of time, such series have also sought to portray age and older age as a phase of life worth living – despite

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4   The most important recent series in this respect are *The Old Guys Still Game* (BBC1, 2006-2019), *Last Tango in Halifax* (BBC1, 2012-2016), *Vicious* (ITV, 2013-2016), *Transparent* (Amazon Prime, 2014-2019), *Grace and Frankie* (Netflix, 2015-), *Hold the Sunset* (BBC1, 2018-), and *The Kominsky Method* (Netflix, 2018-).

or because of its limitations and challenges. These comparatively recent visualisations of the ageing process are noteworthy because they "create expectations of what it is to be a person of a particular age" and thereby serve an instructive purpose as they not only "direct the way we see age" but also suggest ideals towards which individuals are encouraged to strive (Bytheway 2011, 80, 86).

What is significant concerning the influx of these more affirmative cultural representations of ageing is that most of them have been introduced in several TV series, both in the US and the UK. Moreover, most of them are not necessarily drama series but rather humorous series that, especially in the UK, could be classified as sitcoms. This is not necessarily unexpected, as humour has been seen as "a special type of communication impossible in everyday life" (Kamm and Neumann 2016, 6) which may reformulate, "for a temporary period at least, socially sanctioned power relationships, bringing the margin to the centre, making it visible and giving it voice" (Stott 2014, 35). Moreover, comedy is a genre that enables the portrayal of the grotesque, abject and unwatchable, while still using and negotiating "dominant cultural assumptions and commonplaces" (ibid., 7). That is, of course, not to say, that humour and comedy are generally tools to topple dominant societal orders; while they insist "upon the paradoxes, ambiguities, and tensions of authority, […] this apparent production of subversion is […] the very condition of power" (Greenblatt 1992, 44-45). Whilst comedy is, thereby, not able to operate outside of cultural norms, its potential to "[criticise] social norms, [unsettle] hierarchies and [depict] 'the unsayable'" (Kamm and Neumann 2016, 6) has led to comedy being "the genre in which older […] characters are represented as sexually active and in leading roles" (Liddy 2017, 170), suggesting, that the 'intrinsic unwatchability' of later life may be overcome by couching it in comedic terms. As Susan Liddy's argument suggests, humour seems to be one facilitating factor in the depiction of more varied representations of later life. Yet, humour and comedy cannot be seen as the only contributing aspects that render sitcoms worthy of critical attention with regard to age. In his book *The Sitcom* (2016), Brett Mills examines the genre from multiple standpoints; however, in the following, two facets will be highlighted which add to the sitcom's potential to communicate controversial or uncomfortable topics, namely that it is inherently 'small-time,' focusing on the domestic and "recognisable, stock social situations" (Lovell 1982, 22), and that it stresses circularity and repetition usually over a long period of time with recognisable, recurring characters. While the former may help to subvert social expectations and norms withs the help of laughter, which plays a "disciplinary, corrective role in society [by] ridiculing the deviant behaviour of others" (Kamm and Neumann 2016, 7), the latter helps to build a 'special relationship' between characters and audience as characters are seen not only "like us" but may be "seen to be part of the family" (Mills 2016a, 20). This 'small-timeness' and the familiarity with the characters engender intimacy and trust over the course of a series which may render problematic subjects more acceptable and may help audiences tolerate alternative, contested or disputed representations. Combining the focus on circularity, recognisability and repetition both in terms of character and in terms of setting, the subversive potential of comedic scripts as well as the emphasis on the domestic, it may

be argued that sitcoms "open up communicative possibilities [in that they occupy] a social and domestic role unavailable to many other media" (Mills 2016a, 13). Although cultural gerontological literature has so far focused more on the advantageous intersections between humour, genre and older women, it can be hypothesised that similar arguments could be made for more varied representations of later-life masculinities. Thus, it could be assumed that constructions of ageing beyond the decline discourses, and conceptions of later-life masculinities beyond the successful/unsuccessful, asexual/hypersexual binaries may be explored in sitcoms in ways unavailable to other formats.

Taking the potentials of sitcoms and the current dominant representations of later-life masculinity into account, I will try to answer the question whether sitcoms, with their unique use of humour, are able to subvert conceptions of later-life masculinity that focus on an 'ageing youth culture' in which men can be older but never old and, thus, offer alternative scripts of later-life masculinity that lie outside successful/unsuccessful and hegemonic/deviant divides. In order to do so, this article will analyse the two Britcoms[5] *May to December* and *Hold the Sunset*. While the latter is one of the most recent Britcoms to focus specifically on older protagonists, *May to December* was produced during the late 1980s; a time in which predictions of an ageing population and a turn towards more positive and diverse outlooks on later life took hold, both academically and culturally. Thus, both series can be taken as bookends to a larger corpus of similar television series that seek to negotiate realities of ageing, gender, class, race and sexuality by the help of comedic scripts.[6]

4. Re-assessing Erotic Potential: *May to December*

May to December was produced from 1989 to 1994 and broadcast in six seasons on BBC One. Throughout the course of the series, the ups and downs of a May-to-December romance between widowed solicitor Alec and gym mistress Zoe, 26 years his junior, are examined. The serial character of the show emphasises "linearity, open-endedness and [...] change and process over time" (Wohlmann and Oró-Piqueras 2016, 10). This applies both to the characters, who develop and grow over the course of six seasons, and to the storyline, which progresses overall in a linear fashion but leaves room for an "infinitely extended middle" (Fiske 1987, 180). The episodes do not quite follow this serial pattern. While each episode contributes to the entire storyline, the individual episodes usually deal with one particular topic or aspect of their relationship,

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5   The word 'Britcom' corresponds with the format of the sitcom insofar as it is "a half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise" (Mills 2016a, 28). While the term sitcom is more generally used, Britcom refers to a form of situation comedy that uses its genre conventions "in a manner which respond[s] to the British national character" (Mills 2014, 453).

6   Far more Britcoms produced since 1990 have focussed on varied representations of the realities of later life and ageing protagonists. More of these are discussed in my Ph.D. project on age, sexuality and sitcoms (current working title: '*Still Creating a Fuss*': *Negotiating Sexuality and Ageing in British Sitcoms*).

like Alec's latent homophobia, finding a house together, and others, which are ultimately resolved at the end of each episode's 22-minute runtime.

While Alec is just 53 at the beginning of the series and 60 at the end, and therefore not necessarily old, but middle-aged, his 'advanced age' is emphasised multiple times and seen through the lens of mental and physical decline. Thus, he is described repeatedly as "the old guy" (S1E3), "an old man" (S1E1) and "the old bloke" (S1E3) by those around him, and he refers to himself either explicitly or implicitly as old, as he notes that his "best years are gone" (S1E2), that he wonders whether he's becoming senile (ibid.), that he feels old, that he's "an old dog" (ibid.) and, more self-deprecatingly, that his stomach seems to be the only part of his body that is still fully functional (S1E5).

Humour within the series is often derived from such self-deprecating statements, and thus from Alec's acute awareness of his age, his limitations and the scripts he ought to follow as an ageing widower, but which he subverts and resists in numerous ways. Apart from the descriptions of his defiance and the way his age is emphasised, most of the humour stems from the various ways in which he a) tries to engage in hegemonic masculinity scripts and b) fails expectations of masculinity, mostly in terms of sexuality and physicality. To this effect, Alec is positioned as 'other' both in comparison to younger men and in comparison to his similarly aged co-worker Miles. Miles is not only physically fitter, but, though married, constantly pursues women often far younger than him. His pursuit is played as a joke, for instance in the case of his secretary Hillary: the futility of such an endeavour is constantly underlined not only by Hillary's inability to recognise his flirtations and her unwitting references to their notable age difference but also by the laugh track that follows his suggestive comments and often drowns them out. While he is certainly the epitome of successful and active ageing, his sole sexual focus on much younger women makes him appear as the 'dirty old man.' Whereas this stereotypical view is also replicated to an extent when it comes to Alec, the latter's attraction to Zoe is never portrayed as 'mindless' with sexual satisfaction as the exclusive goal – in fact, sexuality often takes a backseat in favour of a greater focus on the development of a loving, monogamous relationship. It is this contextualisation of sex as an essential part of a long-term relationship and the implication that sex only happens in such a relationship that renders Alec's sexual interest appropriate and highlights the normative expectations which are connected to later-life sexuality.

When it comes to Roy, Zoe's ex-boyfriend and co-worker, and Alec, the biggest point of contention for both is their physical and outward appearance which could not be more different: whereas Roy is a young man, "a fit sort of fellow" (S1E2), a "big strapping fellow" (S1E2) who does weight-lifting and sports, Alec is, in his words, "a lazy, old solicitor" (S1E2), not a sportsman, pot-bellied, and with a rapidly receding hairline. Their differences in bodily appearance and their different potentials as attractive bodies are summed up succinctly by Zoe's sister:

> Debbie: Oh, if you could have his body and the old guy's brains.
> Zoe: With my luck, it'd probably be the other way around. (S1E4)

While Roy initially perceives Alec as non-threatening, this eventually changes when Zoe repeatedly meets Alec for lunch and dinner. Yet, Roy is not overly worried that Zoe might be emotionally or sexually involved; instead he cautions her that Alec might have different designs on her:

> Roy: Zoe, I've been thinking. Just that this old bloke doesn't try anything, Sweepy. Sometimes old men can't control themselves, you know? […] He's probably seduced more clients than you had hot dinners. […]
> Zoe: Why does everyone make him out to be an 80-year-old sex maniac?! It's just two people going to the theatre, nothing more!
> Roy: You're right. Sorry, Zoe. You know what I'm like – my fiery Welsh temperament. Fancy being jealous of a little old solicitor [*laughs*]. (S1E3)

Not only is Alec defined solely by his advanced age, gender and occupation, and thus pigeonholed as a type rather than a character, but also any form of sexual desire on his part is deemed as deviant and abnormal, as any form of reciprocity of sexual desire on the part of Zoe is, by design, not even acknowledged as a possibility, turning Zoe into a passive target for inappropriate sexual behaviour. *May to December* thus perpetuates and, consequently, legitimises a construction of later-life sexuality as comical, as something to laugh at, and inadvertently intertwines sexuality with physical attractiveness and beauty. Moreover, by such a connection, later-life masculinity is seemingly inseparably tied in with sexuality and sexual conquest as spaces for constructing identities of older men – a focus which may very well be seen as problematic. While staying 'forever functional' is certainly possible, it is exalted as a necessity for the construction of 'successful' (later-life) masculinities, rather than being a matter of negotiation on an individual level.

Yet, expressions of sexual desire are not always and not necessarily ridiculed by innuendos, sharp wit or the ever-present laugh track. When physical attraction is expressed in private, the focus of the laughter and, thus, the ridiculed behaviour is no longer Alec's or Zoe's behaviour but the often negative reactions of others as well as their preconceived, stereotypical assumptions surrounding later-life sexuality and May-to-December romances. While Alec might seem lacking in direct comparison with hegemonic masculine scripts that instruct Roy's and Miles' masculinities, his bodily appearance as well as his sexual desires are ultimately positioned as positive – both by the fact that he gets and keeps the girl, and by the notion of an evolved and more mature sexuality. Even though Alec does not conform to male beauty standards, his body is by no means a hindrance to being a desirable lover – neither in the eyes of older women, nor in the eyes of Zoe.

In fact, *May to December* echoes what Sandberg has called a "re-assessment of the erotic potentials of [male] bodies" (2011, 256). Zoe's co-worker makes her aware of such potentials:

> 54? Oh that's a lovely age – they get all pot-bellied and cuddly! […] And by the way 54-year-olds make marvellous lovers. […] And remember Zoe, what they lack in stamina, they make up for in experience. (S1E3)

Thus, later-life sexuality is rendered just as, if not *more* desirable. Shaping the sexual self of older men as "more mature, considerate and skilled, can consequently be understood as a way of shaping masculinity and male sexuality by distancing oneself from" a more selfish sexuality in younger years (Sandberg 2011, 125). Moreover, the emphasis on such a considerate and mature sexuality in later life helps older men to retain their sexuality, and by extent their masculinity, while this conception simultaneously allows ageing men to avoid being regarded as too sexual.

5. Selfless and Mature Masculinities: *Hold the Sunset*

Hold the Sunset was produced in 2017 and 2018 and aired in 2018 and 2019 respectively on BBC One and tells the story of Edith and Phil, two neighbours and former lovers who are keen to start a relationship and a new life abroad. The series follows an episodic pattern in that it emphasises circularity, repetition and finitude, with characters and plot points recurring regularly, while most of the storylines are usually concluded at the end of each of the seven episodes. Yet, this distinction between the serial and episodic nature of the series is not quite clear. While most issues are resolved at the end of each episode and every subsequent episode starts with a restored *status quo*, the series follows an overarching plot that seeks its resolution in the eventual marriage between the two protagonists as well as their move abroad. Still, this resolution is vague at best, and not all of the given episodes contribute to the progression or fulfilment of this plot, rendering *Hold the Sunset* generally episodic, with enough room for change and progress and a potentially "infinitely extended middle" (Fiske 1987, 180).

Within the confines of the series, age is never seen as something exclusively negative – rather, the bodily changes that come with it are couched in positive ways. Though Edith's children view their mother and her partner as old, half-crippled, frail and in need of help (S1E1), this view is ridiculed as the camera inadvertently pans to Phil and Edith, both of which are comfortably, actively and rather successfully ageing. While some humour is derived from the various discrepancies between what is said (mostly by younger characters) and what is shown, most of the time humour derives from the ever-present questions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Thus, the series deals with contrasts: old vs. young, working-class vs. middle-class, selfish desires vs. selflessness, conformity with normative societal expectations vs. deviance. And nowhere is this more evident than in the character of Phil, who is constantly forced into situations in which he ultimately needs to negotiate and reformulate the scripts he engages in, whether it is about his own perceived moral and class superiority or the way in which he tries to engage in hegemonic masculinity.

Comic potential can be found, on the one hand, in the juxtaposition of Phil and Edith's son Roger, as the latter has left his wife without financial and emotional support, is presented as selfish, egoistic and childish, and, thus, constantly contrasted with Phil's emotional maturity, his considerate and reassuring nature and his ability to comfortably support Edith and her family. Moreover, middle age has traditionally "[signified] power for men through formal, organisational statuses, as well as through physical labour-

power, [sexual virility] and indeed patriarchal power" (Hearn 1995, 102). Such power structures have rendered middle age as more powerful and middle-age masculinity scripts as more persuasive. In contrast, *Hold the Sunset* connects middle age and 'youth' with egoism, while simultaneously associating age with maturity and unselfishness, which seem to be highly valued. Yet, while this form of 'mature masculinity' is positioned as positive and superior in comparison to the conception of middle-age masculinities, it is clearly guided by hegemonic masculinity scripts of mid-life such as men being providers and the accumulation of considerable wealth throughout the course of life.

Whereas Phil constantly emerges as considerate and mature as opposed to Roger's more selfish nature, it is the introduction of Bob in a later episode which provides a more compelling counter-narrative to Phil's, as Bob is clearly perceived as a threat, not only to the unity between Edith and Phil but also to Phil's self-conception as an ageing man. Bob is, in many regards, Phil's 'other': he has not accumulated any notable form of wealth, he is homeless, hoping to be arrested and put into jail, and he has not been able to hold down a job – except for burglary, with which he identifies himself, going so far as to introduce himself as 'Bob the Burglar' (S1E4). Additionally, while Phil does use a cane at random intervals, Bob has lost his arm and denotes himself as disabled. Thus, while both are white, older men and are, therefore, privileged, Bob has comparatively less social power – due to his class background, homelessness and his physical disability. From his introduction onward, Bob is a funny older man and the reason for most of the comedy. While he is, at times, the butt of some jokes, he might rather be linked to a trickster figure: "a witty and irreverent being who violates [most] prohibitions [and] is not confined by boundaries" (Stott 2014, 49). The trickster's "low social status gives him the freedom to move across social boundaries" (ibid.), such as being able to move freely between his realm and the realm of the middle class, signified by Edith's kitchen (S1E4-E7), using his disability as a pick-up strategy (S1E6), or being able to freely speak of sexual desire and attraction both past and present (S1E4; S1E6) – something that does not conform to standards prescribed by the middle-class. While his comments, his remarks and his openness on sexual matters might not be inherently funny, it is their coarseness, their lack of formality and their function as an interruption of and contrast to the rigid norms of propriety that Phil and others adhere to, which unveils their "comic logic, one that runs parallel to official, serious, [middle-class] culture, laughing at it, and sometimes violently humiliating it" (Stott 2014, 32).

Apart from this apparent freedom from traditional definitions of later life, Bob's perceived subordinate status is recognised as a threat to Edith's affection and to Phil's conception of masculinity. Therefore, with every subsequent meeting, Phil's perceived superior and more desirable mature later-life masculinity is defended and contested. Phil, for instance, becomes increasingly distrustful of Bob's intentions and repeatedly questions Edith about her feelings for Bob (S1E5; S1E6). When Phil threatens Bob, he not only reveals his insecurity regarding his relationship with Edith but also simultaneously mocks and perpetuates hegemonic gender scripts:

I'm struggling for words, Bob, and I hope I can find them, because if I can't, I'm going to strangle you, and that would not be morally good, because I would get altogether too much satisfaction. […] Now, if you come into this neighbourhood again ... No, no, if, if you come to this house again ... No. No, if you try to speak to Edith again, or I should ... No, – um ... You have no idea how hard it is to formulate this precisely right. […] If I see you again, if I think of you, if I dream of you, or if I hear your name mentioned, I shall hunt you down and remove your good arm. Is that clear? (S1E6)

This monologue highlights and ridicules, on the one hand, the toxicity and futility of such conceptions of hegemonic masculinity and their unsuitability for Phil. The constant re-formulation of this threat, the reference to a "precisely right" way of formulating such a menacing speech as well as the somewhat absurd phrase "if I dream of you," on the one hand, shows its own eventual and inherent failure because of the mismatch between what is preconceived as a threat and what is said in the episode. On the other hand, the monologue emphasises Phil's inability to perform such a form of masculinity, perpetuating the idea that scripts of hegemonic masculinity are somehow unsuitable for older men while being the only script available at the same time. In conclusion, *Hold the Sunset* partly invalidates the claim that older men are rarely provided with alternative conceptions of masculinity. The series represents later-life masculinity as desirable, more mature and, indeed, as a successful way of being a man in comparison to culturally exalted narratives of masculinity that usually focus on earlier stages of the life-course. Yet, *Hold the Sunset* simultaneously highlights the notion that, so far, later-life masculinity still relies heavily on learned masculine traits, behaviours, and accumulated resources that emphasise middle-class ideals, as well as on conceptions of later-life masculinity that centre around middle age.

6. Conclusion

Hold the Sunset and *May to December* were produced nearly 30 years apart. Therefore, it could be assumed that conceptions of later-life masculinities in popular culture have substantially changed during this timeframe. It is surprising, however, how similar such conceptions often still remain, while simultaneously providing differing ideas of the roles older men may take on in later life that stand in contrast to series that portray older men as dirty, deviant or browbeaten.

Both series provide similar outlooks on the construction of later-life masculinities; conceptions of masculinities which focus on characters who are non-threatening, considerate, emotional, nurturing and have not engaged in "diet and exercise in order to discipline [their bodies in order to] avoid 'being seen as sissy, feminine, or anything less than a man'" (Alexander 2003, 538). Instead, these 'weak' or 'feminine' traits are accepted and even welcomed. Both series also provide a foray into alternative conceptions of masculinity which value and portray the changes brought about by ageing positively in that they describe, for instance, a re-assessment of the erotic potential of older male bodies, a focus on intimacy, a tentative decentring of the phallus in the context of sexuality, the emphasis on maturity, emotion and consideration rather than assertiveness and selfishness. Thus, both series could be understood as

reformulations or routes towards a more diverse understanding of later-life masculinities.

Although both Alec and Phil are clearly positioned against hegemonic masculine ideals, their portrayals are incomplete scripts of such alternatives. Instead, both characters maintain, reproduce and perform idealised hegemonic masculinities that "assume, as [a standard] of normalcy, men of middle age or younger" (Calasanti and King 2005, 4). Rather than providing alternative points of construction, both series rely on well-known indices to shape their versions of successful later-life masculinities: (former) occupational status, sexuality (usually understood as heterosexual penetrative sex in the context of coupledom), competition and the 'claiming of a woman,' physicality, and accumulated resources that follow from class affiliation. In both cases, the success of Alec's and Phil's conceptions of masculinities are firmly tied to heteronormative romance; a framework in which positive male ageing is only possible by way of a committed relationship or marriage, both of which are presented as markers of success and an ultimately desirable goal. And yet, successfully adhering to and replicating these implicit directives does not necessarily constitute appropriate later-life masculinities, as the shows immediately ridicule and discipline such an engagement with hegemonic masculinity scripts – *May to December* through the help of a laugh track, and *Hold the Sunset* by virtue of the performances. Additionally, even if Phil and Alec are portrayed as 'other' men, their masculinity is still evaluated as successful, by its constant comparison to other, more deviant or 'failing' masculinities. In this regard, Miles and Roy, for instance, fail to treat women right in their pursuit of sexual satisfaction, while Roger and Bob fail as men because both are excluded from domains such as occupation, highlighting their failure as providers, or, in the case of Bob, by running counter to the invisible cultural norm – he is not able-bodied and decidedly not middle class. Therefore, both series construct masculinity within the narrow confines of hegemonic gender scripts that exclude a variety of other later-life masculinities, such as working-class masculinities, non-white masculinities, disabled masculinities, or masculinities that are part of the LGBTQ spectrum. Yet, if such varieties are included, they are ultimately found lacking or are openly ridiculed and devalued due to their perceived lower status. Thus, later-life masculinities in *Hold the Sunset* and *May to December* must go at the expense of 'other' masculinities.

Above all, both protagonists are placed on the safe side of the age spectrum, as both can be seen as third-agers and successful retirees, remaining healthy while health problems – frequently presented in an ironic, decidedly non-serious fashion – are easily resolved by their access to financial resources and better health insurance systems. The protagonists as well as the supporting characters in both series, therefore, shy away from showing a variety of physical and mental realities, changes and re-negotiations of identities which might go hand in hand with advancing chronological age.

In conclusion, older men in the series still remain 'other' men in a double-bind: they are caught between performing an idealised masculinity that is rooted in mid-life and, due to the changes brought about by ageing, they are simultaneously barred from such scripts. Therefore, as long as the notion of age fails to contain positive connotations that allow for an affirmative ageing process and as long as the ideals of middle age and

its idealised masculinity still serve as guidelines for later life in general and later-life masculinities in particular, the route to possible alternatives will be paved with funny old men, who will, ultimately, remain ridiculous.

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