

“Aaa, Aaa, Aaa” Repetition/Compulsion, and Queer Comedy in *Little Britain*

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“I am the only gay in the village,” Dafydd Thomas (Matt Lucas) earnestly declares in every one of the *Little Britain* sketches involving his life in the ‘Scarecrow and Mrs. King’ Pub in the small Welsh mining village of Llandewi Breffi. Wearing garish, crotch-hugging vinyl short shorts and belly-restraining muscle T’s over his marshmallow physique, Dafydd replays daily his conviction that the kindly denizens of his home-town are homophobic. In the face of a massive, accruing body of evidence to the contrary – other gay men in the bar, a meeting of the Gay Trekkie fan club, a gay hairdresser, a well-subscribed gay section in the town library, a gay minister and his lover, elder citizens proclaiming their allegiance to “bum-play” or “minge,” the number of responses to his rent boy advertisement, or his entire pub’s self-proclamation – Dafydd stubbornly repeats his mantra of oppressed singularity.

Some version of this bit appears in every episode of *Little Britain*’s four-year series (2003-2006), and typifies the queer comic method of writer/performers Matt Lucas and David Walliams. The series deploys numerous tropes typical to traditional comedy: repetition, caricature, satire, irony, changes in register, multiple reversals, and even Henri Bergson’s notion of “mechanical” behavior.¹ But somehow each bit always goes slightly awry, its narrative trajectory stuck perversely in what Peter Brooks calls the narrative “middle,” producing finally a self-conscious meta-commentary on both its own comic gambits and the narrative expectations it enlists.² By playing in the middle, *Little Britain* establishes a very gay form of comedy, not because either one

1 Bergson identifies one mode of comedy as consisting of “a certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being.” (67)

2 In “Freud’s Masterplot,” Peter Brooks notes that the narrative “middle” is a site of repetition and perversity. This middle is also the metaphorical site of the play of more eccentric textual elements. See Judith Roof, *Come As You Are: Narrative and Sexuality*.

3 The term “queer” here carries with it the confused complexity of a term that refers simultaneously to the political perspective of the non-heteronormative, the eccentric, and the perverse as that which deviates from normative heteronarrative. Because the term “queer” has so many and vast a set of referents to continue to be useful, this essay employs it in the strictly narrative sense of not conforming to conventional modes of closure. The term “gay” refers to a culture premised upon specific mode of non-heterosexual same-sex desire.

of its creators or half of its subject matter is gay, its skits often involve transvestism, or it normativizes (or queers) most subject positions. Instead, *Little Britain*’s comic gayness exists in its repeated unfoldings of perverse irony in its field of compulsive repetitions, in its repetitions of compulsion as a comically reversible force, and in its playing out the narrative middle ground as a new combination of the exaggerated flaneurism of “camp,” the imitative impetus of drag, and the directness of targeted understatement.³

For *Little Britain* the repetition of compulsions and the compulsions of repetition constitute the stubborn stuff of sociocultural empowerment and disempowerment. *Little Britain*’s skits critique of a variety of cultural hypocrisies and sanctimonious poses by casting them all within a dynamic of repeated compulsion. The forms of compulsion are varied; they are institutional, psychological, personal. They play on class, gender, sexual, and ethnic biases. They also play on various pious attitudes around such discriminations. These pieties range from Dafydd’s hysterical insistence on everyone else’s homophobia to the controlling ploys of perfectly-able, wheelchair-bound Andy to Vicky Pollard’s brazen *chavette* behaviors to Marjorie’s homophobic and racist FatFighter group leadership to Dr. Lawrence’s casual acceptance of crazy Anne’s feigned insanity.

Little Britain is an obsessively repetitive show. Each episode presents eight to ten skits involving recurring situations, characters, and narrative patterns. The situations are mundane: a wheelchair-bound man and his volunteer caretaker, a boys’ school, a diet club, the Prime minister and his assistant, a storekeeper, a bank loan officer, a talent agent, a mental patient, a health spa.

4 In "Chav Mum Chav Scum," Imogen Tyler points out the classist elements of *Little Britain*'s play on this figure, showing that in fact Vicky Pollard has come to stand publicly for a specifically classist dismissal of lower class white culture.

The characters, all a bit less mundane, are engaged in repeated power struggles with those around them who may or may not really be struggling back. Wheelchair-bound Andy persistently manipulates his caretaker, Lou, by perversely choosing the wrong consumer item or refusing to participate usefully in an improving activity, then rejecting the choice he has made. Gay man Dafydd compulsively sticks by his belief that he is "the only gay in the village" despite repeated proof to the contrary. Juvenile delinquent Vicky Pollard's rendition of lower class white, or *chav* behavior plays out the power struggles of class disparities.⁴ The Scottish Innkeeper repeatedly offers comically indirect answers to direct questions. Chubby fatphobic Marjorie abuses her FatFighter membership and refuses to understand the perfectly clear English of her East Asian participant. Kelsey Grammar School figures the repeated absurdity of class room manifestations of petty power. Mr. Man can never find what he wants to buy at Roy and Margaret's store, instead choosing to wait passive-aggressively, while Roy, who embodies the typically helpless husband, repeatedly enlists the help of his limbless off-stage wife. Upper class Harvey insists on breast feeding. Sebastian's compulsive crush on the Prime Minister is always frustratingly ignored by the Prime Minister himself. Transvestite Emily Howard compulsively insists on her special status as "a lady" despite the fact that no one around her either accepts the illusion or thinks her/his self-presentation is all that unusual. Tubby Bubbles De Vere repeatedly tries to wield what she mistakenly believes is her sexual irresistibility. Kenny, the Stage Hypnotist, repeatedly (and often desperately) tries to use his hypnotic powers to resolve everyday situations and often his subjects merely



Vicky Pollard

pretend to be hypnotized. The bland bank loan officer, Carol, deploys a computer and her cough to dash the hopes of all of her customers.

The bits persistently replay the same basic narrative pattern. Each involves some question of compulsion interpreted in its many meanings – as institutional force (the school, *FatFighters*, banks, mental institutions, small business), psychological necessity (Emily Howard, Andy, Dafydd, Sebastian), or social more (Vicky Pollard, Dafydd, Harvey). Each embodies a rebellious and/or appropriative response to such compulsion that produces an ironic reversal. Andy is not really handicapped, Anne is not really crazy, Dafydd is not the only gay in the village, no one thinks Emily either unusual or female. Vicky's rebellions never succeed, the schoolmaster's ploys demonstrate his own absurd lust for power, Bubbles manages to manage everyone with her well-upholstered body despite her grotesque lack of sex appeal. The narratives get stuck in what might be considered a narrative "middle," a point in which nothing can actually end; and the poses and compulsive behaviors of all of the characters, even if they are caught out, can and do continue. Andy returns to his chair, homophobic Dafydd is outraged by homophobia, Marjorie continues her abuse even as her own pretense is shown up, Vicky Pollard brazenly sticks by her lies, Sebastian never gives up. All is ready to begin again the next show, not so much as a status quo, but as a compulsively perpetuated fraud whose repetition becomes ironic in so far as those who abuse trust – and those who do so are very often from culturally disadvantaged groups – always get away

with it. The repetition of these compulsions becomes meaningful not because the skits suggest any change in the status quo, but because the repetition itself renders the unusual familiar. Repetition renders compulsion mundane.

The skits' narrative "middles" generally involve an exposure of the fraud perpetrated by socially-protected or politically-correct categories to the show's audience, exposing as well the pretense attaching to all cultural stereotypes and assumptions. The skits' repetitions of stalled scenarios reverse the skits' initial power relations, enacting the significant interpersonal power of persons thought to be culturally powerless, a reversal that exposes the social itself itself as reductive, hypocritical, and thoughtless in the narrative middle. The show's comedy appeals, as George Meredith suggests a good comic should, to "the narrow enclosure of men's intellects with reference to the operation of the social world upon their characters. He is not concerned with beginnings or endings, but with what you are now weaving." (46)

Redesigning Convention

Little Britain manifestly deploys many of the conventional tropes set out by Bergson in the early twentieth century. The most obvious of these is repetition. Bergson's description of repetition in comedy fits *Little Britain* surprisingly literally. Bergson describes repetition as "a combination of circumstances, which recurs several times in its original form and thus contrasts with the changing stream of life." (119) Bergson goes on to elaborate this method in light of "contemporary light comedy." (119) "One of the best-known examples," he suggests, "consists in bringing a group of characters, act after act, into the most varied surroundings, so as to reproduce, under ever fresh circumstances, one and the same series of incidents or accidents more or less symmetrically identical." (119) *Little Britain's* characters also embody Bergson's notion of comedy's "absurd" logic. Describing Molière's characters, Bergson notes the "simple type" of a "character following up his one idea, and continually recurring to it in spite of incessant interruptions!" (180) Bergson sees this obsessive characteristic as both an example of dream logic and as a concretization of an absurdity. It represents for him a specific type of comic character among the many possible, all of which, according to Bergson, should be capable of self-repetition." (167)

Little Britain redefines repetition and obsessive characters as species both of compulsive repetition and repetition compulsion, the series repeating the characters' repetition compulsions compulsively.

This results in the impression of another of Bergson's cardinal attributes of the comic: the "automatism" and "mechanical" appearance of the inhuman in characters. (155) But what Bergson describes as comic automatism à la Charlie Chaplin, *Little Britain* turns into something that is simultaneously more devastating and more absurd. The characters themselves are not mechanical, but the skits' narrative is – and it is a machine that constantly goes awry, forcing perpetual replay in a species of repetition compulsion. A repetition compulsion, according to Freud, is the impulse to re-experience traumatic events. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud suggests that one reason people compulsively repeat the experience of a trauma is to master it. Comparing this mode of mastery to the story of the child playing with the spool of thread and shouting "fort/da," Freud understands repetition as one means of attempting to control anxiety and fear. The repetitions take a symbolic form like the spool of thread, which represents the child's mother coming and going, thereby mastering through fiction a real anxiety.

Little Britain's repetitions likewise take on a symbolic or displaced form, but the repeated scenarios both present repetition compulsion and invert it in such a way as to show that not only was the precipitating trauma insignificant, it was probably never there at all. *Little Britain's* skits compulsively repeat in order to dissipate the compulsion to repeat and to displace the compulsion itself onto the audience. For example, "only gay in the village" Dafydd compulsively replays scenarios in which he invites gay men or seeks them out, only to deny their gayness to preserve his own gay singularity. The underlying 'trauma,' we are to imagine, is his sexual identity itself and the imagined handicaps it might occasion for someone in a small rural village. But Dafydd's repetitions of denial about the actual presence of other gays in the village suggests that this 'trauma' is not so much the 'trauma' of being gay as a necessary characteristic of Dafydd's own understanding of his identity, not so much as "a gay," but as unique. Dafydd's compulsively repeated scenario of denial is not about trauma at all, but about his self-positioning within a narrative of exclusion he projects onto the mainstream. The problem is that the mainstream simply will not cooperate with Dafydd's less liberal narrative. The Dafydd sketch then turns homophobia on its head, making Dafydd the homophobic character, rendering the mainstream immensely tolerant (and mostly gay), pulling the comic rug out from under Dafydd's imaginary victimization which comes to represent something more like Dafydd's comic fear of sex. At the same time, however, the reversal that makes the mainstream seem tolerant becomes a satire of tolerance itself. Dafydd

5 “Gay shame” refers to various self-loathing tactics argued to be characteristic of gay culture. See, for example, David Halperin and Valerie Traub’s *Gay Shame*.

6 This notion of identity through repetition is most famously promulgated by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*.

is intolerant and the mainstream tolerant to the hyperbolic extent that the mainstream’s tolerance is itself a parody of political correctness – a concretization of a generous instinct exaggerated to the point of absurdity.

The Daffyd skits circle from a beginning in which one might believe Dafydd’s assertions about homophobia to a point where it is clear that the homophobia has been continually displaced, first into the village, then onto Dafydd, and perhaps by implication onto the skit’s audience. And in the process, homophobia itself has been redefined from Dafydd’s sense of oppressed singularity to a social acceptance which is simultaneously inverted back onto Dafydd as himself homophobic and outward to an unknown audience witnessing the whole shifting play.



Gay man Dafydd

The exposure of the “gay” as homophobic, then, embodies the ironically homophobic blame-the-victim mentality, which may be imagined as a possible cultural perspective while also revealing the extent to which identity politics themselves are absurd, and enact a strangely convoluted version of “gay shame.”⁵

Each time the “Dafydd” skit appears, the stakes become slightly larger. Its repetitions ossify around a still point in Dafydd’s identitarian and sexual trajectories. His repeated insistence on the singularity of his gayness finally produces the suspicion that he is less secure in his gayness than he may think; the repetitions are an attempt to produce an identity that is not so secure at all. Dafydd’s repetitions actually play on Judith Butler’s idea that identity is produced through repetition, spectacularizing the process and showing, in his case, repetition’s failure.⁶ He cannot move from his self-imposed myth of singularity, a singularity which is singular not because Dafydd wants to be special, but because he cannot move from his middling position of trying to establish a gay identity to any kind of sexual realization of it with someone else. The repetition’s consistent evacuation of the category of homophobia in fact ‘masters’ social trauma while leaving its character in the dust of his utter inability to imagine an ending. Hence the repetition from both sides.

Compulsive Recursions

Stuck in the middle, then, *Little Britain*’s repeated bits plumb the possibilities of repetition, of endlessly putting off a conventional narrative ending. Each repeated bit goes a bit awry, presenting what appears to be a perverse narrative. While Dafydd is in endless denial, Andy endlessly takes advantage of Lou’s kindness, Vicky perpetually tries to get away with petty crimes, Marjorie never ceases her abuse of the dieters, Sebastian never gives up his pursuit of the Prime Minister who, for his part, puts up somewhat cluelessly with Sebastian’s overt flirtations. All is perpetuated. All is perverse in the sense that there is no closure; there is only irony that turns into a complex multi-edged satire. Combined with the repetition of compulsion, this perverse steering away from any sense of closure performs what Peter Brooks identifies as a narrative “middle.” In his analysis of narrative as a version of the tensions Freud maps in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Brooks suggests that “the beginning in fact presupposes the end. The very possibility of meaning plotted through time depends upon the anticipated structuring force of the ending: the interminable would be meaningless.” (283) *Little*

7 In *Three Essays on a Theory of Sexuality*, Freud defines “perversions” as sexual aims and desires that deviate from any heteronormative reproductive impetus. He also, however, sees perversions as normal.

Britain enacts something like the interminable, but as the pervertable, as a series of hijacked beginnings that shimmer in something that stalls. *Little Britain*’s apparent narrative stalling produces this sense of repetition, which Brooks links to Freud’s understanding of repetition as mastery. Brooks notes that “if mastery is an assertion of control over what man must in fact submit to – choice, we might say, of an imposed end – we have already a suggestive comment on the grammar of plot, where repetition, taking us back over the same ground, could have to do with the choice of ends.” (286)

Little Britain indeed illustrates a “choice of ends,” but the choices are inevitably ironic, reversing expectations, playing out the matter-of-fact acceptance of what should, by all norms, be unusual or egregious (i.e. Emily Howard, Andy, Dafydd, Vicky, Marjorie, Bubbles, etc.). Brooks admits that “the improper end indeed lurks throughout narrative,” (292) but he is most worried about the “short-circuit” of narrative energies of “the improper end.” (296) Brooks characterizes this “short-circuit” as a “temptation to the mistaken erotic object choice,” pointing specifically to incest and a surfeit of sameness as deadly. (297) The threat of this “mistaken erotic object choice” – this bit of too much sameness in the form of incest or perhaps homosexuality – “prolongs narrative.” (297) In fact, Brooks likens narrative finally to the interminability of psychoanalysis, which “never can be finally bound in a plot.” (297) “A narrative,” he says, “wants at its end to refer us back to its middle, to the web of the text: to recapture us in its doomed energies.” (297)

Instead of seeing the impetus towards a repeated middle as “doomed,” *Little Britain* operates it as a site of infinite play—a set of possibilities that enable a ranging irony

that can double and reverse itself over and over. This is not exactly an illustration of Ross Chambers' notion of "loiterature," in which the pleasures of roaming in themselves are much akin to what Roland Barthes proposes as the "pleasure of the text." *Little Britain's* skits' middles are more compulsive, more about playing with the ways narratives enwrap cultural expectations and produce projections of normativity the skits then veer away from. *Little Britain's* skits enact something more akin to Freud's accounts of perverse desire in that they persistently illustrate either a non-heteronormative (or non-closure producing) aim or object.⁷

If they are not overtly gay, then their characters' behaviors and desires inevitably veer towards the choice that will itself short-circuit the story. For transvestite Emily Howard, this always occurs at the moment she needs to visit the 'Ladies Room,' and instead ends up at a urinal. While this would seem to perform a revelation leading to closure, the other characters ironically pay only scant attention, hence undermining the potential shock value of Emily's already unsuccessful drag performance and shifting what we imagine the skit is about. Instead of playing on the absurdity of the very masculine Emily's feminine pretensions, the skit shifts focus to her observers' matter-of-fact refusal to regard him/her as anything other than a man in drag. Vicky Pollard's lies are so clumsy and transparent that the only response she gets is a rapid dismissal, which not-so-ironically underlines the disempowerments of her class status, but simultaneously recasts her attempts as curiously brave. Andy undermines every special treat Lou tries to provide by literally making the wrong object choice, then tossing it aside. Anne, offered as the 'model' mental patient, is neither model nor mental (nor for that matter is she female), destroying whatever is set in her path in a perverse attempt to prove the doctor wrong in his liberal treatment methods, then answering her cell phone in a normal voice. The doctor himself never notices, acting instead as if all were going well. Not only do the skits pervert narrative, they present its deliberate perversion and the constant misdirection of audience attention, which forces repetition by producing a multi-directional irony that leaves everything open.

The 'Anne' skits, for example, present the irony of the non-mental mental patient, the inattentive attentive doctor, the ironic ineffectiveness of liberal care regimes, and the irony of a broader social acceptance of unacceptable behavior on the part of the non-mental mental patient who cannot be expected to act normally. The skit first engages the audience as witness to Anne's unruly and deliberately destructive behavior,

8 A more thorough development of the argument about the gay character of narrative middles is presented in *Come As You Are* and *All About Thelma and Eve*.

but then reveals Anne's masquerade which ironically shifts the satire to the Doctor's mode of treatment and his disregard of Anne's whole ploy. The skit's irony then turns to how the medical profession's advanced treatments are more of a sham than the patient herself.

The endings of stories are, thus, ironic in that they not only reverse expectations, but also make consciously evident their reversals as well as the assumptions upon which any conventional closure might depend. Irony as both a tone and a range of knowledge depends upon having an illusion of the same mastery sought by the compulsion to repeat. Not only are *Little Britain's* endings most often ironic in that they shift the focus of their irony from character to situation to the audience's assumptions; they also ironize narrative itself by enacting a consistent perversion that avoids closure. For example, the somewhat perverse characters usually get what they want even though what they want is not what we think they want. The skits' repetitions play ironically with that irony, showing us each time that even if we expected both irony's reversals and some variation of that reversal, the same species of slight perversion will occur. This perversion both produces a repetition and ironically comments on the previous repetition of the same story. So if Vicky trades her illegitimate baby for a CD and only sees the trade as a problem because the CD for which she traded was not "that good," the next repetition will show Vicky with two babies. If Dafydd denies the evident gayness of one man who comes into his pub, the next time, he'll need to deny the gayness of four.

But even as the repetitions hyperbolize instead of conclude, such characters as Andy, Anne, Vicky, and Dafydd ironically take advantage of their perverse situations anyway,

turning circumstances into yet another occasion by which their own narrative positions are ironically ratified. Andy's clever manipulations of Lou sometimes backfire, but he always gets to wield his power. Vicky's exploits reconfirm her perverse inability to focus on anything, enacted in her trademark ambivalent rambling, "Yeah, but no, but yeah .. ." which both distracts and cuts off her listeners, enabling her to get what she really wants, which is to be seen as threatening. Dafydd's denials of other gays ironically show him up as the most homophobic of all. In the end, the skits' multiple ironies display the power of perversion itself as the ability to hijack the story, play around and against convention, even though ironically, in *Little Britain* we come to expect this as its convention. The skits' layers of irony – the ironies of failed endings, the ironies of perverse desire, the ironies of viewer expectation, the ironies of playing against social convention – produce an extended satire of narratives, characters, conventions, and attitudes that consistently implicates the viewers as well in the redistribution of assumptions and the occasional uncomfortable disregard of taboos, especially racial taboos (as when Matt Lucas travesties a black American preacher, or throughout the skits sending up mail order bride Ting Tong Macadangdang).

What defines narrative elements as short-circuiting, according to Brooks' logic – a logic that harnesses dominant heteroideologies to Freud's economic readings of a sexualized life history – is their lack of heteronormativity, their perversity in the sense that they refuse all normative ends.⁸ But hijacking that middle and playing out its compulsive character produces a stream of reversals, perversions, and ironies that "queer" any power relation premised upon a notion of narrative itself as leading towards a productive joinder such as heteronormative romance, corporate capitalist production, knowledge, et cetera. The association of the narrative middle with at least a metaphorical form of gayness as that which hinders such joinder locates as queer anything that refuses to end or end properly. This queer middle, sometimes literally gay, sometimes figuratively perverse (as for example when Harvey interrupts his own wedding to breast feed), but always compelling a repetition, thus becomes precisely the site of a compulsive repetition that denies any final mastery in favor of infinite review and comment, increasing hyperbole, multiple irony, and satire. Failure to play the story out, then, retrospectively produces a queering; and failing repeatedly to end situates the entire project within a very queer scenario in the sense that there is no normative closure to be had.

9 Occasionally critics and academics fault *Little Britain* for its use of stereotypes. Such critiques tend to rely either on personal taste or on a very literalist interpretation of image. See for example, Nicholas Fonseca's brief essay in *Entertainment Weekly* or reports on the work of economist Deborah Finding ("*Little Britain* Accused of Promoting Hatred Over Laughs").

Camping Out

Little Britain's play on narrative both hosts and reiterates other comic mechanisms associated with gay subcultures – camp, travesty, understatement. Although *Little Britain* has been faulted for its presentation of racial and gay stereotypes, such critique derives from an utter seriousness about its mode of characterization.⁹ When character comedy is taken as 'straight' satire, it appears as if the comedy is making fun of the stereotypes it hyperbolizes. Seen in this light, *Little Britain* skews its renditions of most minority groups. Its gays – Dafydd and Sebastian – are hyperbolically gay. Its overweight women are hyperbolically overweight; its transvestites travesty transvestism. Its portraits of black ministers and Ting Tong magnify racial stereotypes. Disabled Andy and crazy Anne are sensible manipulators. It is not a pretty politically-correct picture if these caricatures are taken literally or seriously. The show's obsessive ranging through all of these characters, however, constitutes a variety in which there is no single target. The show's serial flaneurism or casual tourism of the hinky top-side of British culture presents characters who are simultaneously stereotypes and hyperbolically stylized within the repeated scenarios where they continually pervert the normative will of others. The presentation of variety itself shows more a commonality among types in a massive critique of heteronormative culture.

In their hyperbolic stylization, however, the characters are camp – and a camp that both thrives in and helps produce *Little Britain's* perpetual middles. Camp, as Susan Sontag points out, "is a certain mode of aestheticism." "The way of Camp," she continues, "is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of

artifice, of stylization.” (#1 of *Notes*) Stylization is a perpetuated process, repeatedly elaborated, developed, evolved. *Little Britain*’s skits are meditations on a mode of stylization that develops through a repetition that never really works to accomplish anything other than stylization. Its apparent travesties of the politically-disempowered or petty dictators may produce social commentary, but in the form dictated by the skits’ repeatedly perverse trajectories. The caricatures, like all things Camp, “introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content.” (Sontag #2 of *Notes*)

But how can *Little Britain*’s ironic Camp characters not produce some form of satire or how can their satire have what Sontag calls a “depoliticized” or “apolitical” sensibility? (#2 of *Notes*) Because *Little Britain*’s satire derives from the characters’ narratives, their generally Camp comic presentation is fairly neutral in so far as the caricatures make more fun of Matt Lucas’s rotundity or the send-ups of travesty transvestism. The caricatures are so hyperbolic as to present what is almost exclusively stylization; there is no attempt to produce even meaningful character satire except in so far as the characters behave against stereotype. Those behaviors then constitute the repeated compulsions of *Little Britain*’s perpetuated narratives. At the same time, the characters’ rebellions are minor, understated, occupying a domestic misdemeanor terrain, as the characters take a stand over pirate memory games, greeting cards, backstage parties, wedding gowns, breast feeding, and goodbye parties. The show’s caricatures are hyperbolic, but the power scenarios are understated, which combination itself produces a wry irony in the disproportionate scales of the skits’ elements.

In the end, *Little Britain* can deploy this combination of compulsive repetition, Camp, travesty, irony, and satire because of a gay sensibility that has gone mainstream. Only when the Camp, the travestied, and the perverse constitute the basic premise of a comic method can comedy emerge from versions of literalized satire (i.e. as in caricatures of George Bush). Only then can it emerge to something that is more about the perversions of the stereotypical way of thinking, that is itself intrinsically oppressive. *Little Britain* does not not make fun of the character types it offers, but it makes fun of them as parts of a cultural inclination towards pathos and guilty exceptionalism. *Little Britain* makes camp fun of everything, almost dispassionately, delighted in the perverse vagaries of its unending stories. The gayness of this comedy is both pretext and effect of starting with the perverse, relying on camp, layering irony over and over. In the end it becomes our compulsion, our repetition, aimed at the intelligent, producing a sophisticated commentary on a village that has indeed become gay.

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SUMMARY

By playing in the middle, the British sketch comedy program, *Little Britain* (2003-2006), establishes a very gay form of comedy, not because either one of its creators or half of its subject matter is gay, its skits often involve transvestism, or it normativizes (or queers) most subject positions. Instead, *Little Britain's* comic gayness exists in its repeated unfoldings of perverse irony in its field of compulsive repetitions, in its repetitions of compulsion as a comically reversible force, and in its playing out the narrative middle ground as a new combination of the exaggerated flaneurism of "camp," the imitative impetus of drag, and the directness of targeted understatement. Obsessively repetitive, *Little Britain* repeats versions of its dozen skit characters and situations, leaving each perversely in the middle, without closure, and evolving in each episode with increasing irony. In the end, the series produces a sophisticated and ironic commentary on identity politics and the hypocrisies of liberalism, while rejuvenating comedy as a very queer form. What Lucas and Walliams produce is not simply a comment about gay characters or comedy in a gay sensibility, but a meditation on comedy itself.

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