

TV Sitcom *Fleabag*: How to Be a Funny Feminist on Television. Or Maybe Not

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You know that feeling when you really get into a series and happily binge your way through all the episodes in one late-night sitting, only to wake up the next morning with a hangover and a strange taste in your mouth? This is what happened to me when I watched the first series of *Fleabag* (BBC, 2016)¹, the sitcom created by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge. In 2017, the

show won the Writers' Guild of Great Britain Award for best TV situation comedy; Waller-Bridge won a BAFTA for best female performance in a comedy programme, the Royal Television Society Awards for Best Writing (Comedy) and Breakthrough Star of the Year, as well as the Broadcasting Press Guild Awards for best writer.² By 2018, Waller-Bridge was considered one of the leading

“dramedy queens: the women who built TV’s new golden age” (Press 2018). The same year, the BBC commissioned a second series of *Fleabag* to be broadcast in 2019. In short: Critics, TV executives and viewers are equally enthusiastic about *Fleabag*. But what about the strange aftertaste?

But maybe I should start at the beginning, with heavy breathing and the close-up of a door at night. A young



Not a happy family (from left to right):
Godmother, Fleabag, Claire, Dad

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woman in a trench coat enters the frame and addresses the audience:

You know that feeling when a guy sends you a text at two o'clock asking if he can come and find you and you've accidentally made it out like you've just got in yourself. So you have to get out of bed, drink half a bottle of wine, shower, shave everything. Decide I'm going to up my game a bit. Dig out some Agent Provocateur business – suspender belt, the whole bit and wait by the door until the buzzer goes? (ep. 1, 00:16-00:31)

You know that feeling? I don't. Never mind for the moment and dig out some suspension of disbelief. The buzzer goes, the guy enters and very soon the two have sex in all possible positions. Despite her obvious physical commitment, the woman delivers a running commentary into the camera:

After some pretty standard bouncing, I realise he is edging towards my arsehole. I'm drunk, and owe him a 'thank you' for coming over, so – I let him. He's thrilled. The next morning, I wake to find him sitting on the bed, fully dressed, gazing at me. [...] He touches my hair and thanks me with genuine earnest. It's sort of moving. He kisses me gently. [...] And I spend the rest of the day wondering: Do I have a massive arsehole? (01:08-02:41; cf. Waller-Bridge 2013, 23)

(Post-)Feminism(s)

The opening sets the tone for the entire show: *Fleabag* combines formal experiments with racy outspokenness. Protagonist Fleabag – the woman in the

trench coat – lives the life of an urban hedonist. She has on-screen sex, not only with Arsehole Guy (no offense, this is the only name we get to know him by), but also with her best friend's lover, someone she meets on the bus, her long-term partner Harry, a vibrator and – albeit indirectly – Barack Obama. She indulges in alcohol, nicotine and the occasional joint, usually hanging out with her best friend Boo (Jenny Rainsford) and guinea pig Hilary in their own rickety café.

The celebration of a liberated lifestyle is undercut by Fleabag's comments and her frequent moments of desperation. The sitcom developed out of a stand-up piece first performed at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2013, in which Waller-Bridge plays with the sympathies and antipathies of the spectators: "I knew I wanted to write about a young, sex-obsessed, angry, dry-witted woman, but the main focus of the process was her direct relationship with her audience and how she tries to manipulate and amuse and shock them, moment to moment, until she eventually bares her soul" (2013, vi). Adapting this strategy for TV seems to have worked brilliantly. As Stuart Heritage points out in his review for the *a*: *Fleabag* is full of unlikeable characters, "defeated and broken", but the series as a whole is "hilarious, obviously" (2016).

The protagonist's sarcasm not only highlights the absurdity of the situations she gets herself into;

her main target is herself. Behind the self-confident façade hide loneliness, insecurity and haunting memories, mainly circulating around two watershed moments: the death of her mother from breast cancer and the accidental suicide of Boo (after finding out about her lover's infidelity, she walks into a busy bike lane and is eventually killed by a car). This is enhanced by the filming and editing. The series works with a fast-paced montage of shot and counter-shot, thereby emphasising the isolation of the characters. We usually do not see two people engaged in a dialogue, but a succession of close-ups of (cartoon-like) talking heads, with Fleabag often addressing the audience and thereby adding even more distance between herself and her respective interlocutors.³ The interspersed flashbacks from her point-of-view – to her crises with Harry or the good times with Boo – create narrative complexity and suspense, hinting at some unresolved trauma.

The combination of sex, wit and melancholy lends the sitcom a very specific flavour. It seems to encapsulate the feelings of a new generation, who see through the cant of sixties feminism and still have to put up with old-style patriarchy. In interviews, Waller-Bridge positions herself firmly in the feminist camp: “I think feminism is integral to everything that I’m trying to write but I didn’t know how to articulate my own

feelings. I wanted to explode the myth that feminism is without personality, and that women who talk about it are sanctimonious. *Fleabag* is me trying to inject some humour into the issue” (quoted in Bullimore 2016). The author here seems to have forgotten or suppressed the existence of sitcoms like *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-1996; 2001-2004) that already feature loud, unruly, sexually self-determined, unlikeable, but funny main characters. Moreover, *Fleabag* itself perpetuates the myth of feminism as drab and sanctimonious.

When the lecturer of the “‘Women Speak’ (since 1998)” series (Tree Waller-Bridge) asks her audience: “please raise your hands if you would trade five years of your life for the so-called perfect body” (ep. 1, 13:52-14:03), Fleabag and her sister Claire (Sian Clifford) are the only ones to raise their hands, admitting: “We are *bad* feminists” (14:12-14:13). The stepmother (Olivia Colman) claims to be a good feminist, believing in the power of “innate femininity” (22:45). As an artist, she professes to celebrate the female body in a “sexhibition”. But behind her stance of female solidarity lurks a narcissist ego full of malice. The exhibition hosts only self-portraits, statues of naked men and sculptures of penises. And when the family gathers for the commemoration of the dead mother, she greets the sisters with: “It’s a sad day, sad, sad day. I’ll get the



At the “Sexhibition”: Godmother, Arsehole Guy and Fleabag

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champagne” (ep. 5, 03:18-03:19).

The ambivalent attitude of the series towards feminism is very obvious in episode four. In order to commemorate their mother on Mother’s Day, Fleabag and her sister Claire are gifted a weekend at a very expensive country house by their father (Bill Paterson). In the “female only Breath of Silence Retreat” (ep. 4, 05:34), the Retreat Leader (Jenny Galloway) admonishes them that “women don’t speak” (05:34) and “a word must not be heard” (06:50). They find themselves in a group of women who scrub the floors or cut the lawn in order to rediscover their own spirituality. The therapeutic women-centredness sells Victorian misogyny as Zen exercise. It appears a sham to make money (and to save on

personnel). “We’ve paid them to let us clean their house in silence” (14:39-14:42), as Fleabag whispers to her sister. While the women adopt traditional roles, a group of men nearby practices anger management with plastic doll ‘Patricia’, which basically boils down to them shouting “slut” at the top of their lungs and kicking ‘Patricia’ around.

These only slightly exaggerated oppositions of traditional masculinity and femininity serve as frame for the two sisters’ personal dilemmas. Claire received an ardently craved promotion, but does not want to go to Finland and leave her husband and stepson, claiming that “My husband is my life” (17:16-17:17). Fleabag tries to come to grips with her betrayal of

Boo. (We find out at the end of the series that it was her who had the brief sexual encounter with Boo's lover that motivated the lethal accident.) Moreover, she meets her nemesis, the bank manager (Hugh Dennis) who refused her a loan in the first episode, called her "slut" and threw her out of his office (ep. 1, 08:12). Now the two form a friendship and she admits to him, of all people, "I cry all the time" (ep. 4, 22:24-22:26).

The series here follows a post-feminist strategy: depicting old-style feminism as a thing of the past, because nowadays women are both sexually liberated and full members of the market force. As Angela McRobbie has pointed out in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, the participation in a global neoliberal culture as supposed equals correlates with a new "sexual contract" (2009, 54), a return to

traditional gender roles. "Young women are able to come forward on condition that feminism fades away" (2009, 56). This perfectly describes Claire's personal predicament and her decision for family and husband. Fleabag's life, however, is slightly more complex.

Fleabag does not indulge in simply cherishing neo-liberal consumption and a de-politicised, liberated and heteronormative life in the vein of Bridget Jones (cf. McRobbie 2009, 12; 20-23). It replaces the celebratory happy ending with a succession of problematic relationships. Arsehole Guy (Ben Aldridge) gets off on his own attractiveness, and a series of red herrings – him loving small breasts, anal intercourse and claiming that "I usually don't connect with women" (ep. 6, 02:09-02:11) – imply that he might be a closet homosexual. At the end, he confesses to Fleabag that he has to leave her for a woman who is not really his type, because "I'm in love. [...] I don't wanna have sex with anyone else" (07:14-08:10). While Fleabag's partner Harry (Hugh Skinner) has long and arduous sex ("making love", as he calls it), Bus Rodent (Jamie Demetriou) climaxes almost immediately ("I'm nearly finished. I'm nearly finished. I'm finishing. I'm finishing. I'm done, I'm done, I'm done", ep.



One of the few tender moments of the series: Fleabag and the Bank Manager having a smoke and a talk

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3, 22:40-22:49). Both men mean well and have a sensitive side, but they also lack Fleabag's intellectual acumen. When buying a sex toy for her sister's birthday, she runs rings around Bus Rodent when he is intrigued by a plastic vagina:

Bus Rodent: You should totally get one of those.

Fleabag: A vagina?

Rodent: Yeah.

Fleabag: Oh, I've already got one.

Rodent: Really? You have? No, you've got one?

Fleabag: I take it with me everywhere.

Rodent: Look, no, you lie. You don't have one on you now?

Fleabag: Yeah. [Into the camera] Never gonna get it.

Rodent: Where? [...]

Fleabag: Ha, you got me! I don't carry a vagina around with me. That'd be way too provocative. [Into the camera] Didn't get it. (13:45-14:18)

White Girls with Class

Decca Aitkenhead praises *Fleabag* as revolutionary, "[rewriting] the grammar of television comedy overnight [...] being unlike anything on TV before" (2017). She probably has not been watching TV for quite a while. Waller-Bridge herself admits to being indebted to the American series *Girls* (2013-; cf.

Bullimore 2016). The parallels are indeed rather striking. In both 21st-century London and New York, the characters are twenty-to-thirty somethings who enjoy sex, nudity, sending snapshots of their genitals via smartphone, drunkenness and drugs. Both *Fleabag* and *Girls* protagonist Hannah Horvath (Lena Dunham) leave their lovers and grapple with loneliness and lack of money.

British critics like David Baddiel and Stuart Heritage, amongst others, have found another possible source of inspiration: BBC One's popular flagship *Miranda* (2009-2013). Protagonist Miranda (Miranda Hart) also loves to break the fourth wall. Each episode opens with a brief monologue, contains occasional asides and conspiratorial glances into the camera. Both shows developed from semi-autobiographical stand-up pieces and feature inept entrepreneurs (Miranda owns a joke shop), who run businesses together with their blonde best friends and who have to deal with adulthood, their families and loves. Both also cultivate a self-deprecatory stance and show a predilection for hunky, funky and stubbly men.

More importantly, *Girls*, *Miranda* and *Fleabag* share the same ideological underpinning, representing a middle-class norm of white privilege. In *Miranda*, this serves as one of the central elements of the comedy. Hart relishes in making fun of the antics of

the Establishment, especially of her boarding school days. In one episode, the tall and lanky Miranda gallops in the corridor (s1, ep. 3). Meeting up with her school friends – “Milly, Tilly, Bella, Bunty, Hootie, Pussy, Puggle and Podge” (s1, ep. 1, 02:46-02:47) – always triggers a relapse into school jargon, giggles and “kissingtons” (09:05).

In contrast to *Miranda*, *Fleabag* neither makes fun of nor problematises the class position of its main characters. It takes white bourgeois entitlement for granted and thereby naturalises it. Even more, it creates sympathy for the plight of the well-off. The audience sees *Fleabag* struggling with her café: Hardly any customers come and when they do, they hardly consume anything. The question of getting or not getting a loan from the bank here serves as an important narrative frame. The clash with the bank manager introduces *Fleabag*’s precarious life in episode one (and lest we forget, at every meeting, the stepmother loves to remind her of her financial problems); the surprise encounter in episode four marks a turning point; finally, episode six culminates in the visit of the manager at the café, a reconciliation and a kind of happy ending.

The threatening bankruptcy and precariousness are relative, though. Affluent career-sister Claire could and would lend money, *Fleabag* just refrains from asking her (ep. 1, 10:07-10:30).

When she gingerly approaches the topic of a loan, her father prevaricates, because he plans to buy a farmhouse in France (ep. 5). It is quite clear, however, that he would and could help her out when push came to shove.

Money has nothing to do with happiness, anyway. On the contrary, the wealthy have problems that members of the underclass cannot fathom, or so the series seems to suggest. In sitcoms with a lower- or working-class cast like *Shameless* (2004-2013) or *Stella* (2012-2017), the families grieve the loss of a parent, but manage to muddle through and cope. In *Fleabag*, the whole family seems to be paralysed and traumatised by the death of the mother. We see wonderful houses, lovely apartments and stylish interiors filled with misery. In the case of Claire, money and wealth even aggravate her marital crisis, as husband Martin (Brett Gelman) feels inadequate in view of his wife’s career and takes to drink.

The critics praise *Fleabag* as representative of a whole generation of young women. They do not mention class or ethnicity. And indeed, the series is not *Midsomer Murders* (1996-), the “last bastion of [white] Englishness” (according to erstwhile producer Brian True-May). *Fleabag*’s politics of representation acknowledges London’s actual demographics. Bus Rodent and

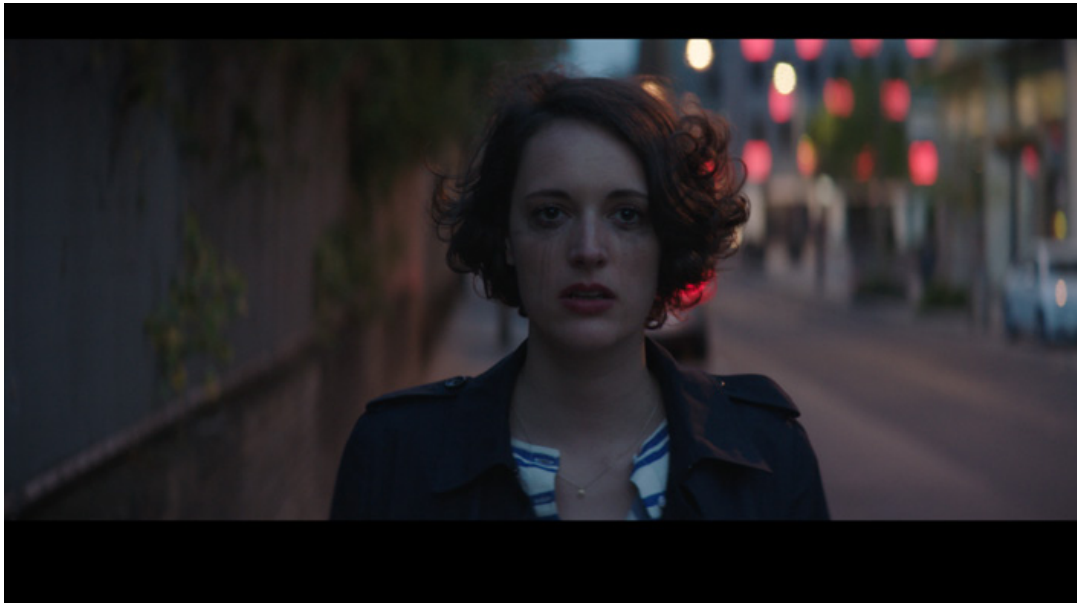
Boo's lover are mixed-race; most of the customers in the café and the passengers on the London Underground are black; Harry's new partner Elaine is Asian, all of them well-behaved and well-dressed. This framing implies that ethnicities no longer play an important role; racism and xenophobia do not seem to exist, everyone embraces multi-culturality; everyone is equal and equally middle class. The plot just happens to focus on white people.

Cultural Resonances

Naturalising a white upper-middle class lifestyle correlates with implicitly setting up the heterosexual family as norm. Admittedly, *Fleabag* presents patchwork and problem families, but this is a far cry from the ideal of collective living advocated by the Women's Liberation Movement and only highlights the traditional nuclear family as universal norm. *Fleabag* takes sexual emancipation into the 21st century without political agenda. She might be sex-obsessed, but she is so in a serially monogamous way with the implicit goal to have a partner to bring to family functions and to have children with. When copulating with Arsehole Guy, Fleabag feels the biological clock ticking: "Madame Ovary is telling me to run back to safe place. It can make baby in safe place" (ep. 2, 13:11-13:16). She panics and briefly gets back with Harry.

Queerness or homosexuality only figure in tiny doses, often as jokes, as when Fleabag threatens her sister with pretending that they are a lesbian couple (ep. 4) or when a completely drunken woman mistakes her for a man (ep. 1). In that respect, Miranda plays it less straight. Hart makes the most of her androgyny and has her character perform gender as if in female drag. In one episode she is even complimented by a cross dresser: "you could pass" (s1, ep. 1, 21:02). Where Fleabag always carries her vagina with her, Miranda sometimes sports a chocolate penis.

And yet. The high critical acclaim and the wide fan base indicate a high cultural resonance of the sitcom. What does it resonate with, then? The critics highlight the sex, sarcasm and the vulnerability of its protagonist. According to Elizabeth Alsop, in *Fleabag* (and also *Girls*), "'weak' characters undermine the conflation of complexity with an implicitly masculine code of values" (2016) and thereby destabilise fixed gender roles. But Fleabag hardly ever admits to being weak or vulnerable in public. The play with the camera indicates the split between her outer poise and the reactions which she only shares with the viewers but keeps hidden from others. With a view to her class position, one can read her behaviour as the return of the good old stiff upper lip. In this, she resembles yet another



Rare breakdown: Fleabag in the last episode of the first series

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young woman who has to struggle with her love life, family and job: Elizabeth Windsor in her most recent, equally dark, handsome and posh incarnation by Claire Foy in *The Crown* (2016-). In *Fleabag*, the thoroughbred horses have been replaced by a guinea pig, and compared to the stuffy and prudish morals of the 1950s, women have come a long way. What unites the two series is the notion that the best of international Britishness consists of a sense of class, humour and self-control. And maybe it is not a coincidence that Fleabag's stepmother Olivia Colman will replace Claire Foy as Elizabeth II in the third series of *The Crown*. 2019 promises to be another good year for dramedy queens: in February, Colman won an Academy Award as Queen Anne in *The Favourite* (2018); the second series of *Fleabag* (starring Colman, Waller-Bridge and Andrew "Moriarty" Scott) starts 3 March.

I will binge on. Never mind the aftertaste.

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Endnotes

1 Originally released on BBC Three in July, broadcast on BBC Two in August and lastly distributed by Amazon Prime in September 2016.

2 Waller-Bridge was also commissioned to write the first series of the award-winning *Killing Eve* (2018-).

3 Thanks to Ingrid von Rosenberg for pointing this out.