

# “God Forbid, a Man!”: Homosexuality in a Case of Quality TV

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## Gayspeak and Audiovisual Translation

Early explorations of language and sexuality concerned themselves almost exclusively with lexical items. The main reason for this was the assumption that the specialised vocabulary of a group reveals something about «the sociocultural qualities about that group» (Sonenschein 1969: 281). Although, by the 1980s, works that examined other dimensions of language were added to those on lexicon, the early focus on gay in-group vocabulary continues today, as is evidenced by the publication of various glossaries, dictionaries and articles on the subject (Kulick 2003: 121)<sup>1</sup>. Incidentally, one of the effects of the focus on lexicon has been the tendency to restrict research to the language practices of homosexual men, who were held to have an extensive in-group "lingo" that could be documented and which women do not have (*ibid.*: 121-122).

The interest on lexicon is immediately and quite obviously interesting for researchers in audiovisual translation (AVT) and for those interested in ideology in particular. Lexicon analysis can indeed be useful to unveil ideological manipulation in translation, but it can also tell us much about the language and cultural systems at play in

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<sup>1</sup> Among these investigations, notable are the ones on Polari, the most comprehensive extant form of British gay slang. Polari's high renaissance occurred during the 1960s, when it was popularized in England in the mainstream BBC Radio series *Round the Home* (Barry Took and Marty Feldman, 1965-1968, UK).

the translation process, by decoding the sets of representations through which language is imbued with cultural meaning for a certain community.

Gradually but steadily, the analysis of gayspeak<sup>2</sup> has benefited, in more recent years, from the intersection of other fields of studies. Research has thus been extended from lexicon to other linguistic and non-linguistic areas which may have ideological import: discourse analysis, feminist theory and, in particular, queer studies and queer linguistics. However, much remains to be explored, especially in the field of audiovisuals where the relationship between natural dialogue and scripted dialogue is crucial – scripted refers both to the original text and to the translated dialogue.

Analyses of speech traits can certainly be a valid starting point for investigation, and even more useful is research in discourse-organising and pragmatic strategies which in one place or another in the literature have been suggested as characteristic of gay male talk and writing<sup>3</sup>.

More than in other areas of research, gayspeak and topics relative to homosexuality appear to be sensitive to issues such as the time of production of the text, the context, the patronage (i.e. distribution

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<sup>2</sup> Gayspeak is a word coined by Joseph Hayes in a paper first published in 1976. Hayes argues that homosexuals are America's largest subculture and that they have their own way of speaking, of which he identifies a number of linguistic features (Hayes 2006). For an analysis of gayspeak and gay subjects in AVT, see Ranzato 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Zwicky summarises some of the features that have been suggested in the relevant literature as characteristic of gay male talk and writing: subjective stance; irony, sarcasm (distancing, saying and not saying, "not taking seriously"); resistance, subversiveness; double/triple/etc. vision, meta-commentary; embeddedness, discursiveness; open aggression; seductiveness; reversal, inversion (Zwicky 1997: 27-28). Also Keith Harvey has detected various features which go beyond the merely lexical (2004: 449-450) and Hayes has explored the idea of "acting within acting" which, with the allusions to film stars of the past or other iconic figures, can be considered a feature of gayspeak often portrayed in films and used stereotypically to depict campier characters (2006: 71).

companies and broadcasters), time of broadcast and type of audience, that is to Skopos and reception related issues. Descriptive data can be thus further investigated, for example, by studying the nature of the TV channels that first commissioned the adaptations, to try and fathom the implications related to the translation process. In this respect, the descriptive study carried out by Josu Barambones Zubiria on TV programming in the Basque Country is a very fruitful model to follow (2009, 2012). TV channels in Italy, as in most countries, are highly connoted, meaning that their programme selection often reveals their political stance, and on many occasions they display very different ideological imprints. In a clear narrowcasting strategy, some of them broadcast mainly mainstream programmes, whilst some others are aimed at more restricted and selected audiences, and are partially thematic, focussing mostly on music, documentaries, fiction series and so on. Data on the different TV channels could be useful to ascertain the pressures and influences, if any, that the patronage exerts on translators and adapters and it would also offer a detailed picture of which modes of AVT are favoured by which stations and for which audiovisual genres. In other words, it would help unravel the role played by patronage (people, institutions, broadcasting companies, TV channels, distributors, exhibitors) in this rewriting process. The double identity of audiovisual works as cultural objects and as products of an industry with the principal objective of attracting, pleasing, not disturbing their intended audience and, above all, making profits, is an area which needs further exploration, especially in the evaluation of the attitude of the professionals who create the dubbed versions. In this more complete picture, the role, the bearing and the composition of the pool of 'raw' translators who are customarily the first providers of the translated text in Italy should also be assessed, difficult as it is due to their 'uncertain' professional status (Pavesi – Perego 2006).

Reception studies, on the other hand, are another fruitful area of investigation: the audience reception of the first episodes of a television series, for example, can be compared to that of the following episodes, in an attempt to trace a correlation to translation practices which can be also diachronically meaningful.

Considerations of the kind explained above have influenced the analysis of the present case study.

### ***Six Feet Under: An Example of 'Quality' Television***

Quality TV and auteur television are the object of several television studies and of critics' reviews (see for example Edgerton and Jones 2009; Jancovich – Lyons 2003; Leverette *et al.* 2008; McCabe – Akass 2007; Nelson 2007). It is impossible to overlook the gap which divides the often very high standard – in terms of script-writing, acting, camera work, photography, art direction, costumes and editing – of the original quality programmes imported from countries such as the USA and the UK, and the often much lower standard of fiction shows produced by the Italian "neotelevision"<sup>4</sup>.

According to Robert Thompson, quality programmes feature all or most of these characteristics: a large ensemble cast; a memory; a new genre formed by mixing old ones; a tendency to be literary and writer based; textual self-consciousness; subject matter tending toward the controversial; aspiration toward realism; a quality pedigree; attracting an audience with blue-chip demographics (1996: 13-16). Drawing on this taxonomy, the series which is the object of the present case study certainly satisfies most of the desiderata for quality programming.

From June 2001 to August 2005, the American channel HBO broadcast the five seasons of *Six Feet Under*, a drama series created by

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<sup>4</sup> I use this term in the sense given to it by Umberto Eco (1985), to refer to the crucial change that occurred in Italian television in the early 1980s due to the arrival of "commercial" television as opposed to State, "public" television. A new language, new codes and new objectives, which have had a profound impact on the Italian society to this day, were introduced into what used to be an essentially pedagogic format. In the field of serialised drama fiction, in recent years, only three Italian products have been widely recognised as quality programmes and have enjoyed a good international distribution: *Il commissario Montalbano* (Andrea Camilleri, 1999 – in production); *Romanzo criminale* (Stefano Sollima, 2008-2010); *Gomorra – La serie* (Giovanni Bianconi *et al.*, 2014 – in production).

Alan Ball, at the time an already established cinema script-writer<sup>5</sup>. The series, which tackles morally compelling themes and is strongly tinged with black humour, has been unanimously considered one of the best TV shows of all time as well as having one of the best final episodes (Cericola 2005; Poniewozik 2007; Bettridge 2009; Wilson 2009). The media impact created by *Six Feet Under* was outstanding. It was the first drama series commissioned by HBO<sup>6</sup> after *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007) and, like its predecessor, it broke new ground in the field of television series. It is – and it was conceived as being<sup>7</sup> – ‘auteur’ television. Its bonds with the sociocultural context of the period in which it was produced should not be overlooked:

*Six Feet Under*, premiering only months before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, chimed in with an elegiac cultural zeitgeist obsessed with mortality. Arguably, American culture has long been obsessed with death – with guns, violence, and killing. But September 11 ushered in a period of national introspection, a questioning of the fragility of our lives and how well we live them [...]. No television series better captured this cultural mournfulness than *Six Feet Under* – the finality of death and what it means for the living. (Akass and McCabe 2008: 75)

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<sup>5</sup> Ball had already won an Academy Award for the screenplay of the 1999 acclaimed film by Sam Mendes, *American Beauty*.

<sup>6</sup> HBO, a US pay TV channel, is known for programming and producing pioneering fiction series - including *Sex and The City* (Darren Star, 1998-2004), *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007), *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002-2008), *In Treatment* (developed by Rodrigo Garcia, 2008-2010); *True Detective* (Nic Pizzolatto, 2014 – in production) – as well as influential drama films and miniseries, such as *Angels in America* (Mike Nichols, 2003). It is considered one of the main sites for what has come to be known as quality TV and its productions are regarded as having a distinctive, cutting edge style (Feuer 2007; McCabe – Akass 2007; Edgerton – Jones 2009; Leverette *et al.* 2008).

<sup>7</sup> All the publicity created for *Six Feet Under* (trailers, adverts and so on) shows the emphasis placed on the creative genius behind the show, Alan Ball.

Death is in fact the main theme of the series which centres on the life of a family of undertakers, the Fisher, and on the complex relationships between Ruth, the mother, who in the first episode becomes the widow of Nathaniel senior, and her three children: David, Nate and Claire.

Although killed in an accident in the pilot episode, Nathaniel senior is an important character, making what could be defined 'Shakespearean' appearances to his children after his death, in several episodes in the course of the whole series. His widow, Ruth, is a tormented but affectionate mother; she has grown up to repress her emotions which sometimes surge out of control in unexpected outbursts. She struggles hard to understand herself, her feelings, her sexuality, and her own relationship with the rest of the family.

The three Fisher children, in spite of being multi-faceted, complex characters, each offer their creator the perfect means to delve into contemporary, 'sensitive' social and personal issues. Nate (Nathaniel Junior), the eldest son, has the vocation of a free spirit and struggles hard with his commitment issues, both in his love relationships and in his job at the funeral home, a paternal legacy he has tried in vain to run away from. David is a tormented homosexual who stubbornly soldiers on in a family business he does not particularly like. One of the main themes of the series is how he learns to come out into the open and live his sentimental life with freedom and contentment. Claire, the youngest and only daughter, is an intelligent, aggressive and vulnerable girl who tries to come to terms with her variation of the heavy family burden through sentimental and sexual relationships, experiments with drugs and artistic explorations.

Many other characters join the Fishers along the way. Among these, the most important are Federico, a Latin American employee (and later partner) of the Fisher company, and Brenda, Nate's girlfriend and later wife, the character in *Six Feet Under* who is probably most responsible for the sophisticated register of some of its dialogues: in perennial conflict with her own dysfunctional family, Brenda has inherited an intellectual, sarcastic, detached outlook on life and relationships from her parents (a couple of somewhat irritating

psychoanalysts), which is in sharp contrast with her boyfriend's more straightforward views.

The sum of these contrasting personalities living unusual but profoundly realistic lives adds up to a show which is at the same time funny, deep, intelligent, moving and painfully true.

Homosexuality is just one of the several issues explored in this drama series, but one of the most diegetically important: all of the main characters, sooner or later, have to come to terms with it. David is followed in his progress from a closeted to an overt attitude towards his homosexuality. His relationship with his original family and the family that he creates with his boyfriend Keith gives the audience the opportunity to fathom virtually all aspects of homosexuality in the context of US contemporary culture, and the reactions of the other characters offer us insights into different mentalities: from the 'progressive' ones of Brenda, Nate and Claire, for example, to the initially more conservative and religion-conscious ones of characters like Ruth and Federico.

HBO broadcast *Six Feet Under* in its much vaunted 9 p.m. time slot. It averaged a very good viewership although numbers decreased steadily after the second season in spite of constantly good reviews. In Italy, the national private channel Italia 1 broadcast the first three seasons, after 11 pm, from 2004 to 2008. After a long break of three years, the satellite pay TV channel Cult repeated the first seasons and broadcast the two last, as yet unaired, seasons in 2008. *Six Feet Under* did well for its time slot at the beginning on Italia 1, with 1,274,000 viewers watching the first episode of the first season and 848,000 the second (Web 1). Audience numbers, however, rapidly decreased, and, in 2008, the amount of people watching *Six Feet Under* on the 21st of November were only 458,000 (Web 2).

Luca Intoppa and Antonella Damigelli were the authors of the Italian dialogues, the latter for season 3, and Fabrizio Temperini the dubbing director.

Despite the recent repeats on television and a fair amount of publicity, the series has never become 'mainstream' and it is unknown

to a large portion of the Italian general public. It is, in fact, a 'cult' show, as the name of the pay TV channel which broadcast it.

Given the nature of the problems the Fishers have to cope with and in order to make them presentable at open casket funeral viewings, I considered this programme a potentially problematic one in terms of translation, not least because of the sexual and gender-related issues which had never before been tackled in this upfront way in any Italian fiction programme, original or translated.

### **Dubbing homosexuality**

The series, whose seasons 1 and 3 have been investigated for the incidence of culture specific references (Ranzato 2015), also in relation to homosexuality (Ranzato 2012), and for its intertextual allusions (Ranzato 2014), and which has also been analysed for the translation into Italian of its humorous features (Bucaria 2006), has been examined here for the whole of its five seasons (63 episodes of 60 minutes, for approximately 3780 minutes of programme) in order to detect and analyse all the dialogues containing references to homosexuality and gay lexicon. The original dialogues have then been contrasted with their dubbed version into Italian.

The data relative to the relevant occurrences are uneven, as the following list shows:

Seasons	Number of dialogue exchanges containing references to homosexuality
Season 1	39
Season 2	8
Season 3	26
Season 4	21
Season 5	13

There are diegetic reasons and reasons of "character revelation" (Kozloff 2000: 33) to account for the remarkable differences in the



density of occurrences. Season 1, which features the highest number of dialogue exchanges dealing with homosexuality (39), establishes the tone of the whole series, lays out its controversial themes and introduces the characters, including one of the main ones, David, who is portrayed in his struggles to come out. The reactions of the people around him are also a prominent feature of season 1. It is natural then that a great number of the dialogues revolves around the theme of homosexuality. In season 2, on the other hand, which features the smallest number of occurrences (8), David's homosexuality has become a part of the Fisher family's everyday life, so there are fewer reasons to make explicit references to it. At the same time, other fundamental recurring themes, such as the discovery of Nate's serious brain condition, are introduced, and dialogues are constructed accordingly. While season 3 and 4 see other important facts related to homosexuality being elaborated (among others: Dave and Keith explore alternative ways of living as a couple; Claire falls in love with a boy who turns out to be gay and has a brief 'exploratory' relationship with a lesbian), most of the dialogues of the final season, in which the couple formed by David and Keith turns into a 'standard' family with adopted children, focus on other important facts which affect the life of the Fishers.

For what concerns the Italian dubbing, it is remarkable to notice that all of the instances in which the translation shows considerable semantic departures from the original are contained in the first season.

Skopos issues related to the demographic of the potential target audience and the time of broadcast seem to be at the heart of some translation strategies. In this sense, pilot episodes and first seasons in general, as well as programmes broadcast in prime time, tend to be more censored than others, probably because they have yet to build an audience and, in the interest of the broadcasters, that audience has to be as large as possible from the very beginning. The much lower percentage in the use of more manipulative strategies, in the second to the fifth series compared to the first one, seems to point in this direction: once the prospective target audience has been established, there is space for more latitude, which means in this case the freedom

to be more literal and closer to the original than constrained by the assumed norms of the target language and culture.

In the following paragraphs some relevant examples will be discussed. The first one was chosen in spite of its apparent lack of significant differences between the two versions:

*Example 1: Season 1 Episode 5*

CONTEXT: David, a practising Episcopalian, is talking to a friendly priest outside the church where he once used to go with his mother.

ORIGINAL FILM DIALOGUE

FATHER JACK: David, so glad to see you here. It's always nice when someone comes back to the fold.

DAVID: Oh, I've been going to church. I've just been going to a different church.

FATHER JACK: Really? Which one?

DAVID: St. Stephen's.

FATHER JACK: In the Palisades?

DAVID: No, St. Stephen's in West Hollywood.

ITALIAN ADAPTATION

PADRE JACK: David, mi fa piacere rivederti. E' bello quando una pecora torna all'ovile.

DAVID: Grazie, ma non è che ho smesso di praticare. Andavo solo in un'altra chiesa.

PADRE JACK: Ah bè, in quale?

DAVID: A Santo Stefano.

PADRE JACK: Quella sulla scogliera?

DAVID: No, Santo Stefano a West Hollywood.

BACK TRANSLATION

FATHER JACK: David, I'm pleased to see you again. It's nice when a sheep comes back to the fold.

DAVID: Thanks, but it's not that I stopped practising. I've just been going to another church.

FATHER JACK: Oh well, which one?

DAVID: St. Stephen's.

FATHER JACK: The one on the cliff?

DAVID: No, St. Stephen's in West Hollywood.

This is an example of an adaptation which fails to have the same impact on the target audience as it has on the source audience. West Hollywood is a town near Los Angeles which is well-known, in the USA, for its social justice legislation. It was, among other records, the first city to create same-sex domestic partnership registration and various related benefits for its residents. As a result, according to a 2002 demographic analysis (Web 3), 41% of the city's population is made up of gay or bisexual men. Father Jack's facial reaction to David's words in the scene reveals that he is well aware of the implied meaning of his change of church. A meaning that would not have been perceived by the vast majority of Italians for whom the name of West Hollywood, transferred with a loan, would only evoke cinema-related images. In this case, as in the following one, it could be argued that the adaptation reveals a lack of awareness of gay-related themes. More broadly speaking, it reveals an ignorance of some aspects of the source culture, which have not been widely exported. The same area of Los Angeles is omitted in the next exchange:

*Example 2: Season 1 Episode 8*

CONTEXT: David is mad at Federico who did a job for another company although he is a Fishers' employee. Nate is trying to find reasons to excuse him.

ORIGINAL FILM DIALOGUE

NATE: Stop being such a drama queen.

DAVID: Stop acting like you're honorary mayor of West Hollywood all of a sudden. He lied to our faces.

ITALIAN ADAPTATION

NATE: Non fare il melodrammatico.

DAVID: E tu non fare l'avvocato delle cause perse per difendere la carogna.

BACK TRANSLATION

NATE: Don't be so melodramatic.

DAVID: And you, don't act like the lawyer of lost causes to defend the rascal.

The dialogue is also relevant for its treatment of a feature of gayspeak. According to Hayes, the richest features of social gayspeak are found in the lexicon, particularly in compound constructions (2006: 71). In this sense, the lexical item 'queen' is possibly the most widely employed stem word for building compounds used for a limitless series of images to describe sexual preferences (i.e. 'size queen'), subculture types ('queen of tarts', a pimp for hustlers), to make fun of a man's hobbies or interests ('poker queen' for someone who likes playing cards) or as an all-purpose term of derogation ('Queen Mary' for someone fat). Arguably, the elimination of the 'queen' compound in this dialogue reveals, even more than the conscious will to replace a gay connotation, the lack of an appropriate term in the target language. The relative poverty of the Italian gay lexicon as compared to the richness of the corresponding English terminology is a fact. The Italian culture has opened up to homosexual themes much more slowly than the Anglo-Saxon world. One of the first consequences of this state of affairs is that the language of homosexuals has long remained in Italy the language of a ghetto and still today the relatively poor lexicon available is an objective obstacle even for the most unprejudiced translator. Sometimes, a poor translation might not be due necessarily

to a tendency to conscious manipulation but simply to the lack of a lexical counterpart (Ranzato 2012)<sup>8</sup>.

David's original repartee in the above dialogue mentions the same town of West Hollywood (practically an area of Los Angeles) which appeared in the earlier example. On this occasion, the reference has been eliminated. By mentioning the 'mayor of West Hollywood', David is reacting to a series of gay-friendly comments that Nate has been making for the whole episode, undoubtedly to show his brother, whom he has just discovered to be homosexual, his open-mindedness about the subject. Earlier on, Nate had in fact made this comment to David:

*Example 3: Season 1 Episode 8*

CONTEXT: Nate is encouraging David as he realised there's someone who clearly fancies him.

ORIGINAL FILM DIALOGUE

NATE: That kid wants to jump your bones. Oh, come on, David. I watch *Will and Grace*. I've got gay-dar.

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<sup>8</sup> The words 'gay', 'transgender', 'coming out', 'drag queen', are now words recognisable by most Italian people, but they are just about the only words of the homosexual jargon to have entered mainstream language. In the case of the English language, as early as 1941, Gershon Legman included 146 terms in his American glossary which contained «only words and phrases current in American slang, argot, and colloquial speech since the First World War, and particularly during the period between 1930 and 1940» (2006: 19). According to the author, the glossary was far from exhaustive, though it was part of a longer list of 329 terms – the selection being words which were used exclusively by homosexuals. A great number of these words are now part of standard English or are slang words used also by the general public. The Italian lexicon of homosexuality lacks the inventiveness of English, shies away from neologisms and prefers to resort to borrowing.

ITALIAN ADAPTATION

NATE: Lo sconosciuto ti vuole saltare addosso.  
Andiamo, sono un uomo di mondo e ho il gay-  
radar.

BACK TRANSLATION

NATE: The someone you don't know wants to  
jump on you. Come on, I'm a man of the world  
and I've got gay-radar.

Although the content of the line does not change in its substance, the elimination of the culture specific reference sensibly alters the effective lightness of tone. It is ironic that the sitcom *Will & Grace* (David Kohan, Max Mutchnick, 1998-2006, USA) – a successful, 10-year-long series whose male main character is gay – was in fact never heavily censored in its dubbing for Italian television.

The following example shows a more subtly ideological translation of a gayspeak feature:

*Example 4: Season 5 Episode 1*

CONTEXT: Nate and David are discussing  
Claire's love life.

ORIGINAL FILM DIALOGUE

DAVID: She should have stayed with her nice gay  
boyfriend.

NATE: That guy was an asshole.

ITALIAN ADAPTATION

DAVID: Era meglio se rimaneva con il gay tutto  
sommato.

NATE: Quello sì che era un coglione.

BACK TRANSLATION

DAVID: It would have been better if she had  
stayed with the gay, all things considered.

NATE: That one was an asshole indeed.

The word 'gay' is used as an adjective in the original dialogue and as a noun in the Italian translation. The use of 'gay' adjective versus 'gay' noun has long been an object of discussion in queer linguistics. As Zwicky notes, «many who are comfortable with the former are not with the latter» (1997: 22). The well-grounded objection is that the nouns denote an all-embracing, essential property, while adjectives denote one characteristic among many (*ibid.*). The choice of using the word as a noun in Italian reveals ideological undertones.

In other instances, references to homosexuality are suppressed, either more subtly, as in the next example 5, or more blatantly, as in the following, already commented instance (Ranzato 2012: 378-379):

Example 5: *Season 1 Episode 8*

CONTEXT: Nate and Federico are talking about one of David's typical character traits.

ORIGINAL DIALOGUE

FEDERICO: Your brother's got a bug up his ass about cleanliness.

NATE: I know. When we used to play G. I. Joes, he always wanted to give his a shower.

ITALIAN ADAPTATION

FEDERICO: Tuo fratello è stato sempre maniaco della pulizia.

NATE: Quando giocavamo ai cowboy si faceva sempre due docce.

BACK TRANSLATION

FEDERICO: Your brother has always been a maniac about cleanliness.

NATE: When we played cowboys he always had two showers.

In the original text, Federico's and Nate's exchange of opinions about David's love for cleanliness is skillfully used to serve as a nod to the audience who is already privy to a piece of information about him that the two characters do not yet share: David's insistence on giving his G.I. Joe a shower was probably not only a sign of his love for cleanliness. Cleanliness, however, is the Italian David's sole interest: so much so that when he played cowboys he always had two showers.

This is only a more subtler way of superimposing a heteronormative discourse on a homosexual one, a tendency of the adapters in translating the features of gayspeak which is more evident in the first season of the series and which, as I have previously noted (Ranzato 2012: 378-379), is particularly evident in the following instance:

*Example 6: Season 1 Episode 1*

CONTEXT: Ruth is talking about her husband's new purchase to her son David, a homosexual young man who, in this pilot episode, has not yet 'come out'.

ORIGINAL FILM DIALOGUE

RUTH: I think your father is having some sort of midlife crisis.

DAVID: It would have made so much more sense to invest in re-paneling for the chapel or adding coffee bars to the slumber rooms.

RUTH: Well, I'd much rather he buy himself a fancy new hearse than leave me for a younger woman, or a woman my age for that matter, or, heaven forbid, a man, like my cousin Hannah's husband did. God sure has dealt that woman some blows in this life.

ITALIAN ADAPTATION



RUTH: Tuo padre ci teneva, si è fatto un regalo per la crisi di mezza età.

DAVID: Era meglio investire per ridrappeggiare la cappella o mettere le macchinette del caffè nella camera ardente.

RUTH: È comunque sempre meglio che si sfoghi con un'auto nuova piuttosto che tradendomi con una ragazzina o con una donna della mia età. Gli uomini come il marito di mia cugina Hannah il cielo li dovrebbe castigare. Il Signore ha riservato dure prove a quella povera donna.

#### BACK TRANSLATION

RUTH: Your father wanted it very much, he bought himself a present for his midlife crisis.

DAVID: It would have been better to invest in re-paneling for the chapel or adding coffee bars to the slumber rooms.

RUTH: Anyway it's always better that he satisfies himself with a new car than betray me with a young girl or a woman my age. Heaven should punish men like my cousin Hannah's husband. God has reserved that poor woman some hard trials.

Ruth's lines in this exchange have been translated in such a way as to alter their meaning radically: no reference to the homosexuality of her cousin's husband is made in Italian. He is in fact described as a heterosexual womaniser. My contention is that this kind of departure from the original meaning was chosen by the adapters in the attempt to sanitise the script in order to attract, in airing the pilot episode of the series, a wider 'general' audience. A purpose which clashed with the sophisticated, and in a way more élitarian standard of the original audiovisual text.

## Conclusions: Dismantling the Gay Imaginary

*Six Feet Under* dealt with 'sensitive' issues in a way which was unprecedented for a television series broadcast in Italy on a public channel. Subjects related to death (Ranzato 2015) and homosexuality, in particular, had never been so openly displayed and delved into on any television show before<sup>9</sup>. The adaptation into Italian of *Six Feet Under* shows how the two concepts of manipulation and censorship are sometimes separated by a very thin line. It is difficult not to interpret this adaptation as aimed at mitigating and ultimately eliminating sensitive references. More instances could be given for a censoring attitude that is more evident in the first season of the series. Television series need time to 'adjust' and find their own target audience, in the original as well as in their translated reincarnation. This has also been the case with *Six Feet Under* whose Italian adaptation, with time, partly evolved to reflect more closely the reality of its main themes and its crude and sophisticated language.

Nonetheless, in the whole of its five seasons, the Italian rewriting never fails to convey the feeling that the purpose of the Italian adapters has been to produce a more reassuring programme, one that would lose its more sophisticated features and would dilute the more 'dangerous' contents. The result is that of a series that wants to be more palatable to the target audience than it was to the original audience, which entails sacrificing some of the most intelligent dialogue exchanges. Overall, this is a rather sad outcome for one of the most acclaimed examples of 'auteur' television.

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<sup>9</sup> The more specifically gay series *Queer as Folk* (Russell T. Davies, 1999-2000, UK) was cancelled after much controversy, before ever being aired, by the public channel La7, considered one of the most progressive in Italy. It was later broadcast in 2002, in the late evening/night, by the pay TV channel Gay TV. Its slightly more sanitised American version (Ron Cowen, Daniel Lipman, 2000-2005) was broadcast in 2006-2007 by the pay TV channel Jimmy.

It is my contention that one of the most telling areas that displays the Italian adapters' attitude towards this series is their bold, censoring handling of contents and words related to homosexuality. It is much more than just a matter of sanitisation: it is the purposeful dismantling of a network of associations which in the original text overtly relates to a gay imaginary. In the worst cases, homosexuality is not even acknowledged and it is translated into a heterosexual and normalising lexicon, through substitutions and eliminations.

The original *Six Feet Under* is notable for its clarity of intent. The series is clearly aimed at cultivated, liberal-minded viewers and does not make compromises in order to attract a more general audience. It does not pretend to be what it cannot be, that is, a mainstream product. The authors of the Italian version seemed to have been unsure of what was the best course of action to take was and although the series slowly tried to adjust to its intended target audience by keeping more literal to the original, there is ample evidence that the translators did their best not to miss any opportunity to appeal to a more general, broader public. This manipulative operation has also linguistic consequences: the idiolect of a speech community, gayspeak in this case, is betrayed and its original, creative traits neutralised in a vain attempt to meet mainstream taste.

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