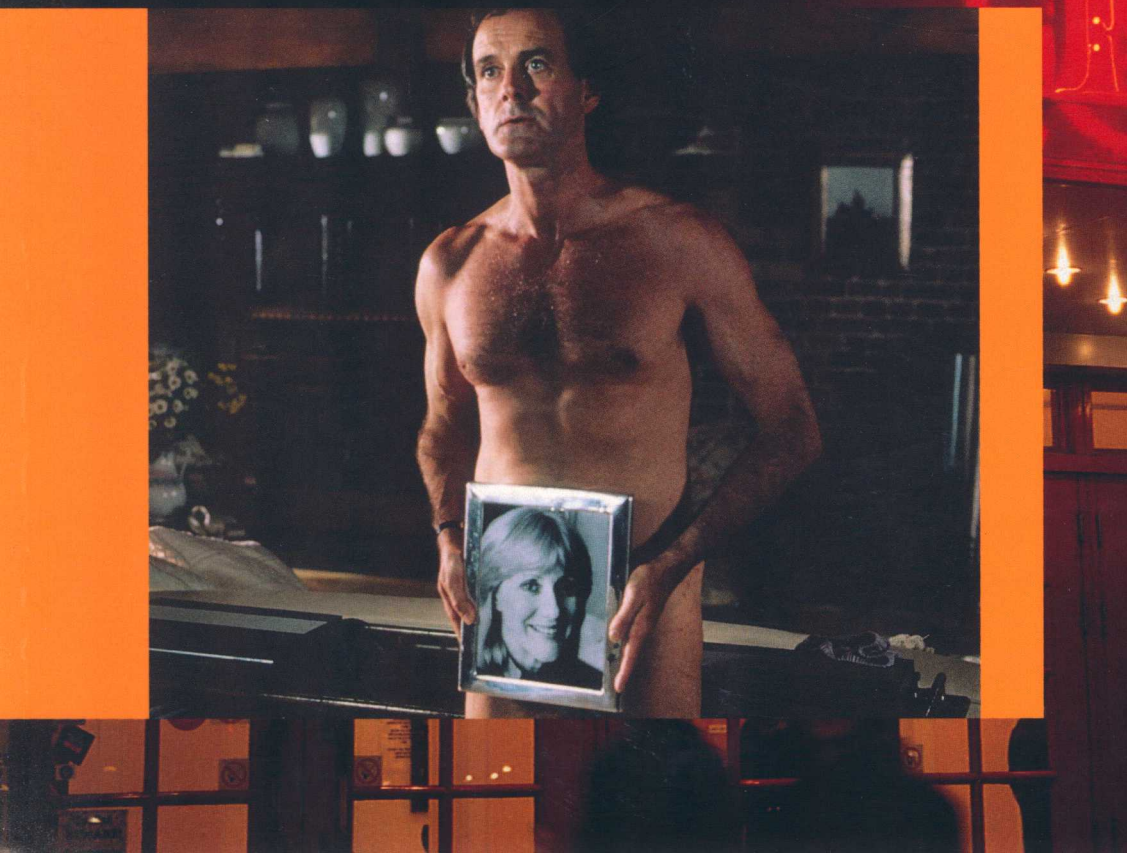
ROUTLEDGE

BRITISH COMEDY CINEMA

12

EDITED BY I.Q. HUNTER & LARAINE PORTER

BRITISH POPULAR CINEMA



British Comedy Cinema

Edited by
I.Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2012
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
British comedy cinema / edited by I.Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter.
p. cm. – (British popular cinema)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Comedy films – Great Britain – History – 20th century. 2. Comedy films – Great Britain – History – 21st century. I. Hunter, I.Q., 1964-II. Porter, Laraine.
PN1995.9.C55B75 2012
791.43'61709410904 – dc23
2011040908

ISBN: 978-0-415-66665-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-415-66667-1 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-203-14633-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Perpetua
by Taylor & Francis Books

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the MPG Books Group

British Comedy Cinema

British comedy cinema has been a mainstay of domestic production since the beginning of the last century and arguably the most popular and important genre in British film history.

This edited volume will offer the first comprehensive account of the rich and popular history of British comedy cinema from silent slapstick and satire to contemporary romantic comedy. Using a loosely chronological approach, essays cover successive decades of the 20th and 21st centuries with a combination of case studies on key personalities, production cycles and studio output along with fresh approaches to issues of class and gender representation. It will present new research on familiar comedy cycles such as the Ealing comedies and *Carry On* films as well as the largely undocumented silent period along with the rise of television spin-offs from the 1970s and the development of animated comedy from 1915 to the present.

Films covered include: *Sing As We Go*, *The Ladykillers*, *Trouble in Store*, the *Carry Ons*, *Till Death Us Do Part*, *Monty Python's Life of Brian, Notting Hill* and *Sex Lives of the Potato Men*.

Contributors: Laraine Porter, Lawrence Napper, C.P. Lee, Tim O'Sullivan, Alan Burton, Sarah Street, James Chapman, Andrew Roberts, Richard Dacre, Peter Waymark, I.Q. Hunter, Justin Smith, James Leggott and Paul Wells.

I.Q. Hunter is Reader in Film Studies at De Montfort University. He is the co-editor of the *British Popular Cinema* series.

Laraine Porter is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at De Montfort University and the Director of the annual British Silent Film Festival.

British Popular Cinema

Series Editors: Steve Chibnall and I.Q. Hunter
De Montfort University, Leicester

At a time when there is a growing popular and scholarly interest in British film, with new sources of funding and notable successes in world markets, this series explores the largely submerged history of the UK's cinema of entertainment.

The series rediscovers and evaluates not only individual films but whole genres, such as science fiction and the crime film, that have been ignored by a past generation of critics. Dismissed for decades as aberrations in the national cinema and anaemic imitations of American originals, these films are now being celebrated in some quarters as important contributions to our cinematic heritage.

The emergence of cult genre movies from the apparently respectable lineage of British film emphasises the gap between traditional academic criticism and a new alliance between revisionist film theorists and extra-mural (but well-informed) cinema enthusiasts who wish to take the study of British film in unexpected directions. This series offers the opportunity for both established cineastes and new writers to examine long-neglected areas of British film production or to develop new approaches to more familiar territory. The books will enhance our understanding of how ideas and representations in films relate to changing gender and class relations in post-war Britain, and their accessible writing style will make these insights available to a much wider readership.

Books in the Series:

British Crime Cinema
Edited by Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy

British Science Fiction Cinema
Edited by I.Q. Hunter

British Horror Cinema
Edited by Julian Petley and Steve Chibnall

British Historical Cinema
Edited by Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant

British Queer Cinema
Edited by Robin Griffiths

British Women's Cinema
Edited by Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams

British Comedy Cinema
Edited by I.Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter

Contributors

Alan Burton is presently Director of Studies for Film Studies at Hull University. He has published widely on British film-making and film-makers, including collections on Basil Dearden and Michael Relph, and the Boulting brothers.

James Chapman is Professor of Film Studies at the University of Leicester and editor of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. He has wide-ranging research interests in the history of British cinema, television and popular culture, and his recent works include *Inside the Tardis: The Worlds of 'Doctor Who' – A Cultural History* (2006), *War and Film* (2008), *Projecting Empire: Imperialism and Popular Cinema* (2009, with Nicholas J. Cull) and *British Comics: A Cultural History* (2011). *Projecting SF: Science Fiction and Popular Cinema*, again with Nicholas J. Cull, will be published in autumn 2012.

Richard Dacre is the author of *Trouble in Store: Norman Wisdom – A Career in Comedy* (1991). After spells with the Other Cinema Collective, managing London's Scala Cinema, and working on the cult children's TV series *Cloppa Castle*, he ran Flashbacks film memorabilia shop, and remains the distributor of Mike Leigh's debut feature *Bleak Moments*. He now divides his time between writing, lecturing and tour guiding. Published work includes contributions to *Time Out*, *Primetime* and *Movie Collector*, plus segments for *The British Cinema Book* (1997, updated 2009), *The Encyclopedia Of British Film* (2003) and *Directors In British And Irish Cinema* (2006).

I.Q. Hunter is Reader in Film Studies at De Montfort University, Leicester. He has published widely on British cult and genre cinema, including *British Science Fiction Cinema* (edited, 1999) and *British Trash Cinema* (forthcoming, 2012).

C.P. Lee is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at University of Salford and organiser of their annual International Comedy Conferences. He has written and presented a series of documentaries for BBC Radio 4 on topics ranging from regional film-making to Northern soul and has appeared on many documentaries for both the BBC and Channel 4. His published work includes chapters published in historical journals, academic textbooks and books on popular culture. He is the author of five books – *Like The Night: Bob Dylan and Manchester's Free Trade Hall*, *Shake, Rattle & Rain: Popular Music Making in Manchester 1955/1995*, *Like A Bullet Of Light: The Films of Bob Dylan*, a personal memoir *When We Were Thin* and, most recently, in

collaboration with Dr. Andrew Willis, *The Lost World of Cliff Twemlow*. He is also the leading expert on North-West film and curates a website that acts as an open-access resource for the history of the Mancunian Film Studio (www.itsahotun.com).

James Leggott lectures in Film and Television Studies at Northumbria University. He is the author of *Contemporary British Cinema: From Heritage to Horror* (2008) and the co-editor of *British Science Fiction Film and Television* (2011). He has published on various aspects of British film and television culture, including social realist cinema, television comedy, reality television and the work of the Amber Collective.

Lawrence Napper is a lecturer in the Department of Film Studies at King's College London. His book *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* was published by University of Exeter Press in 2009. He has also published on British musicals and is currently working on a study of British war films of the 1920s.

Tim O'Sullivan is Professor of Media and Cultural History in the Faculty of Art, Design and Humanities at De Montfort University. He has written widely on aspects of film and television history, including (with Alan Burton) *The Cinema of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph* (2009) and more recently a study of television and the 1948 Olympics in Britain.

Laraine Porter is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at De Montfort University's Cinema and Television History Centre. She is also the Director of the British Silent Film Festival which she founded in 1998 in partnership with the British Film Institute. Until 2008, she was the Director of Broadway Media Centre in Nottingham and the majority of her career has been spent at the intersection between higher education and the film industry. She has co-edited several volumes of essays on British cinema before 1930 including *Pimple Pranks and Pratfalls* (2000) on British silent comedy.

Andrew Roberts is a barrister with an MA in Contemporary British History from the University of London who is making (majestic) progress towards a PhD in 'The Middle Classes in Post War British Cinema' at Brunel. He contributes film articles to *Sight and Sound*, *History Today*, *The Observer*, *The Independent* and *The Guardian*.

Justin Smith is Principal Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Portsmouth. A cultural historian with a specialism in British cinema, his research interests and writing cover film fandom, reception and exhibition cultures, identity and popular memory. He is the author of *Withnail and Us: Cult Films and Film Cults in British Cinema* (2010) and, with Sue Harper, *British Film Culture of the 1970s: The Boundaries of Pleasure* (2011). He is the Principal Investigator on the AHRC-funded project 'Channel 4 Television and British Film Culture', www.c4film.co.uk.

Sarah Street is Professor of Film at the University of Bristol. Her publications include *Cinema and State* (with Margaret Dickinson, 1985), *British National Cinema* (1997 and 2009), *Costume and Cinema* (2001), *Transatlantic Crossings* (2002), *Black Narcissus* (2005) and (with Tim Bergfelder and Sue Harris) *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema* (2007). Her latest book is *The*

Negotiation of Innovation: Colour Films in Britain, 1900–55 (forthcoming, 2012). She is a co-editor of *Screen* and of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*.

Peter Waymark is a journalist who has written extensively about cinema and television for *The Times* and regularly contributes obituaries to the paper on actors, directors and writers. He was awarded a PhD by the Open University for a thesis on 'Television and the Cultural Revolution: The BBC under Hugh Greene'.

Paul Wells is Professor and Director of the Animation Academy at Loughborough University. He has published widely in the field of animation studies including *Understanding Animation* (1998), *Re-Imagining Animation* (2008) and *The Animated Bestiary* (2009). He is also an established writer and director in radio, TV and theatre conducting workshops and consultancies worldwide based on his book *Scriptwriting* (2009). He is Chair of the Association of British Animation Collections (ABAC).

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank all the contributors (some of whom kindly stepped in at very short notice), Natalie Foster and Ruth Moody at Routledge, the staff of the BFI library, and colleagues in the Cinema and Television History Research Centre (CATH) at De Montfort University for their support and patience during the editing of this book. Steve Chibnall was especially helpful in supplying images from the Steve Chibnall Collection.

Every effort has been made to obtain permissions to reproduce copyright material and if any proper acknowledgement has not been made we apologise and invite copyright holders to inform us of the oversight.

I.Q. Hunter would like to give special thanks (for everything) to Elaine Street and Laraine Porter would like to thank Martin Halliwell and her dad Ken Porter who loved Frank Randall and taught her all the best catchphrases.

Contents

Illustrations

1 British comedy cinema

Sex, class and very naughty boys

Laraine Porter and I.Q. Hunter

Comedy is the most popular of all genres in British cinema, sustaining the film industry in times of economic slump in the 1920s and 1970s, and drawing mass audiences when other genres fail. From adaptations of Oscar Wilde to showcasing Northern comedians, from sex comedies to 'rom-coms', the comedy film has dominated production, created major stars such as Peter Sellers and Hugh Grant, and often reached an international audience with cult hits like *Withnail and I* (1987) as well as slapstick blockbusters like *Bean* (1997). Along with horror, it is the genre that has created the most dissonance between critics and public, particularly in terms of personalities like Gracie Fields and George Formby, series such as the *Carry On*s and popular TV spin-offs like *On the Buses* (1971), but also *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and *Love Actually* (2003), which inspired a good deal of critical bile. Distaste for populism and the sheer vulgarity of much British comedy arguably misses the point. The strength of British comedy lies in its continuing appeal to niche markets and tastes. Whether Northern or Southern, intellectual or bawdy, verbal or visual, British comedy has nimbly adapted itself to a diverse range of cultural identities.

Despite this richness, and its continuing ability to thrive in spite of low budgets and fickle audiences, British comedy cinema has never really had its due and this book sets out, in its own modest way, to redress this. Critical focus has mostly been on Ealing, notably Charles Barr's seminal study of the relationship between production practices and the films themselves (Barr 1977); 'quality' satires like the Boulting brothers' *I'm All Right Jack* (1959); enduring personalities like Will Hay and Moore Marriott; and the *Carry On*s, which finally gained critical approval for embodying 'the standpoint of the common man, offering a proletarian, democratic version of what cinema might provide' (Gerrard 2008: 37). Recent critical attention has also focused on Richard Curtis's internationally acclaimed rom-coms, but there are swathes of British comedy left untouched. Virtually nothing has been written on the silent period for example, which is almost universally assumed to have been eclipsed by Hollywood. This is partly because the production of British comedies has always been patchy and, for the most part, aimed at niche tastes and domestic audiences. Few British comedy films have achieved instantaneous international appeal. Historically, critics have also been responsible for overlooking or denouncing popular or 'low' comedy, which has often taken them out of their comfort zones and away from their main interests in literary adaptations and social realism – in other words, more legitimate British cinema.

Equally, much British comedy cannot be reclaimed in terms of its cult status or transgression, though some critics have re-evaluated it in terms of its ability to connect with or reflect working-class tastes. But there too lies a problem, given comedy's innate ability to transcend boundaries. How can we assume a simple equation between low comedy and working-class tastes or literary comedy and middle-class tastes? Andy Medhurst has done much to bring these issues to critical attention, particularly in understanding the relationship between the bawdy and carnivalesque and what it means to be British in a much wider sense (Medhurst 2007). But much of British comedy cinema has been overlooked, patronised or misunderstood; Launder and Gilliat, the *Doctor* films of the 1950s and 1960s, TV spin-offs of the 1970s and so on. This book, without claiming to be comprehensive, takes another look at what is hiding in plain sight, this absolutely central, but often overlooked genre of British cinema.

Throughout its history, British comedy has also grappled with the unease and confusion about what it is to be British, not least because humour is considered intrinsic to the British 'character'. Rudeness and irony, understatement and farce – each has some claim to define the essence of Britishness. British comedy can variously be characterised as a comedy of class, social and sexual embarrassment, thwarted ambition and a love–hate relationship with convention, conformity and the Establishment in all its forms. In this latter respect, British comedy has often explored the space between consensus and revolt, both in terms of small communities, as in Ealing comedies such as *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) and *Whisky Galore* (1949), or through Norman Wisdom's disruptive little-man-outsider in farces like *Trouble in Store* (1953). The fine lines between conformity and anarchy, normality and chaos, and the genteel middle-class reserve of stereotypical Britishness, have been tested to breaking point throughout its history; from the early Mitchell and Kenyon silent shorts to the present day films of Simon Pegg (*Shaun of the Dead* (2004)) and Chris Morris (*Four Lions* (2010)). As Marcia Landy says, referring specifically to Ealing and Launder and Gilliat, British comedies are frequently 'carnivalesque':

> They focus on dominant social institutions – the public school, the world of commerce and industry, political parties – and turn them on their head. In these narratives, the complacency of the status quo and the rigidity of social structures is [sic] threatened by eruptions of physical and psychic energy.
>
> (Landy 1991: 333)

It would also be wrong to characterise British popular comedy only in terms of 'low comedy', for literate and sophisticated satire – the traditions of university wit and the cruel political cartoons of Cruickshank and Gilray – have always existed alongside pratfalls and bawdy. Important too is that 'eccentric' British strain of whimsy, surreal nonsense and downright silliness that leads from Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear to the anarchic 'madcap comedy' of The Crazy Gang, The Goons (who made two films, *Down Among the Z Men* (1952) and *The Case of the Mukkinese Battlehorn* (1956)), Richard Lester's *The Bed Sitting Room* (1969), Monty Python and Viv Stanshall's *Sir Henry at Rawlinson End* (1980) (Spicer 2007: 106–9).

Many comedy films have also been vehicles for comedians whose reputations were forged on stage and in other media. The influence of radio and television has been absolutely crucial. British comedy films since the 1960s have also had a close relationship to stand-up and the satirical sketch show format of the Cambridge Footlights and *Beyond the Fringe*. The genre's history is understood more easily in terms of its intersection with other media and its comic stars (from Betty Balfour to Rowan Atkinson), than its screenwriters and auteurs, notwithstanding the likes of T.E.B. Clarke and Richard Curtis. As Richard Dacre has suggested, British film comedy 'divides into two traditions: films which rely on the writer and films which rely on a star entertainer' (Dacre 2009:107). However, from the 1940s onwards, significant continuities have been ensured by certain studios (Ealing, Hammer), series (*Old Mother Riley*, the *Doctor* films, *St. Trinian's*, *Carry Ons*) and production teams (the Boultings, Launder and Gilliat, Betty Box, Monty Python and Working Title). These brands forged audience loyalties and gave producers the confidence to invest in recurring formulae.

Lack of large-scale finance is a perennial issue faced by the British film industry, and comedy is no exception. The inadequate returns from the domestic market have either required Hollywood co-productions, often with the inclusion of American stars, or kept production costs low and proportionate to the smaller UK market. Small-scale producers from the 1920s to the 1950s, such as Mancunian Films, aimed product at niche markets, but limited their costs by allowing their comedians simply to 'do their business' in front of the camera, which satisfied audiences' desires to see their favourite local comedians in the same way that the DVD-of-the-comedy-gig does today.

The key strength in British comedy cinema is its ability to draw on all these cultural traditions. Britain's highly demarcated regional cultures, language, accents and class continue to provide fertile ground for comedy based on difference, incongruity and the clash of opposing forces. Although regional differences are crucial (Northern and Scottish comedians, in particular), at the heart of British comedy, as with so many British genres, is class and its abiding theme – the tension between consensus and transgression.

An historical overview of British cinema comedy

The impulse to produce film comedy came with the very first experiments in the new medium at the end of the 19th century. The simple single sight-gag, borrowed or reworked from Music Hall, Circus or Pantomime, lent itself easily to film and was guaranteed to produce a reaction from audiences. Getting a laugh, along with creating surprise or wonder, was all important to early cinema showmen and women, who competed for attention with the ribald attractions of the fairground. The very first exhibition of the Lumière brothers' Cinematograph in the UK at the Polytechnic of London on 20 February 1896 consisted of actuality films and the earliest known film comedy, *L'Arroseur Arrosé* [*The Waterer Watered*] (1895). British producers rapidly got on the bandwagon, copying the film's simple gag format, and again it was a comedy, R.W. Paul's *The Soldier's Courtship* (1896), which is often credited with being the first 'made up' British film (Low 1948: 85). Comedy was therefore the first fictional film genre to be both exhibited and produced in the UK. Paul's film, like many others produced at this time, was essentially a *coitus interruptus* comedy, in which a soldier

courting a pretty young nursemaid has his intentions defeated by an 'old maid' who insists on sharing their park bench.

From these early short single-gag films, British film comedy developed alongside the institution of cinema itself. The arrival of comfortable purpose-built cinemas in the 1910s allowed longer narratives which required more complex plotting and characterisation. The development of the intertitle as an agent of comedic delivery later required the skills of writers, who included A.A. Milne; and soon adaptations from Noël Coward, H.G. Wells and Oscar Wilde appeared on the screen. But just as that first R. W. Paul comedy carries the DNA of the sex comedy, so other silent comedies laid down the templates for most of the subsequent sub-genres of British comic cinema. In particular, the early comedies of social or sexual embarrassment, such as *Mr Poorluck's First Tiff* (1910), in which the eponymous 'hero' has to win back his wife from his mother-in-law after he is discovered flirting at a party, or *A Wild Goose Chase* (1908), in which an elderly man is chased off by an enraged goose when he tries to kiss the young woman who owns it. Many early comedies combined sex with the comic chase, a formula that Benny Hill would revive in the 1970s, while others in which policemen, vicars and shopkeepers are fair game for comic torment, established a thread of anti-authoritarianism that would run throughout British comedy and find perfect expression in the great Ealing films such as *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951).

Gender and age are important demarcations of comic difference in these early years: amorous young men attempt to woo nursemaids, children are a perennial nuisance, and old maids are the butts of often cruel physical comedy. Suffragettes and independent 'new women' were popular figures of fun in 'henpecked husband' revenge comedies. These were partly a response to their perceived threat to the social and sexual order, and Suffragettes were sometimes played by men in drag to suggest their denatured femininity, but these comedies were also produced at the time of the Suffragette 'outrages' – acts of arson and suicide, reported in cinema newsreels that would have been screened alongside the comedies.

Class was a defining comic factor by the First World War as cinema strove for cultural legitimacy and started to reflect the wider range of comic modes which it imported from literature and theatre. This period also saw Hollywood secure its domination of the film industry and thereby the market for comedy. British cinema would never compete on equal terms again. This forced British films to adopt their own distinct forms of comedy, paying homage to Hollywood but asserting the difference and uniqueness of British humour. Pimple, the most prolific and popular home-grown comedian who emerged just prior to the First World War, was derided by American impresario Mack Sennett for his lack of subtlety and coarse burlesque humour. But films like the cheekily-titled *Pimple Has One* (1915) in which a drunk Pimple, mistaking a woman's request for help in fastening her boot for a come-on, literally whitewashes the screen to conceal the impropriety, or *Pimple's Battle of Waterloo* (1913), a parody of the serious feature film *The Battle of Waterloo* (1913) with Pimple's Napoleon falling off his (Pantomime) horse, attacked by Suffragettes and surrendering ignominiously to marauding Boy Scouts. These were fast, furious, and cheap, but sometimes ingenious burlesques that knowingly mocked their own lack of production values and parodied British cinema's pretensions to high culture. Although Pimple could never be compared