

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 04 | Spring 2007

Title	Charles Hawtrey, Kenneth Williams, and Susan Sontag: Campaigners of Camp and the Carry On Films
Author	John Bannister
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	04
Issue Date	Spring 2007
Publication Date	05/06/2007
Editors	Clare Bielby & Sally Henderson

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

Charles Hawtrey, Kenneth Williams, and Susan Sontag: Campaigners of Camp and the Carry On films.

John Bannister

University of Central Lancashire

If Camp was the twentieth century carminative for fear of “Being-as-Playing-a-Role,” (Sontag 280) *Queer*, its efficacy as a laxative for such a depraving “social disease”¹ in the twenty-first century, is quite ineffective. As Roger Lewis points out, “Everything has to be Camp now, from Eddie Izzard to Graham Norton” (68). To be Camp is not to be a la commodious.² It has passed into the mainstream. It is *a la mode*. How has this happened? Homosexuality had to be douched by lavatorial comedy.

For over twenty years the *Carry On* series of films portrayed the homosexual stereotype as if it had been set in stone – or more appropriately perhaps - in porcelain. Famous (or infamous) for its peculiar brand of *toilet* humour, the series struck new lows of vulgarity with the coarsely titled *Carry On At Your Convenience* (1971), a film with an unsavoury theme about the manufacture of lavatories. The factory owner was crowned with the crude yet, not unsurprising, *nom de [f]ume* W.C. Boggs, a character played still less surprisingly by the nostril flaring Kenneth Williams. If any further proof were needed that the toilet was the totem of homosexuality in the *Carry Ons* we do not have to sift too long through the ordure of the diegesis of the films to uncover it. As Roger Lewis put it “the bowels were the root of all humour” in the *Carry On* films (13). So too, states Andy Medhurst, when a *Carry On* film was not funny it is because there was “no Kenneth Williams or Charles Hawtrey” in it (18).

In *Carry On At Your Convenience*, Charles Hawtrey plays a character called Charles Coote. The scriptwriters’ habit of using names that were laden with sexual innuendo for certain characters simultaneously symbolised and stigmatised a character’s phase of fixated sexual development. A particular favourite theme of

¹ In the film *West Side Story* (1961) Riff/Russ Tamblyn singing to Officer Krupke/William Bramley tries to explain why he is a J.D. (juvenile delinquent): “My sister wears a moustache; my brother wears a dress/Goodness gracious that’s why I’m a mess/No-one wants a fella with a social disease.” Camp is explicit in the humour of the lyric here not the performance. The same social message is explicit throughout the *Carry On* films.

² “commode. *n.* a bedside table, sometimes in the form of a chair, concealing a chamber pot. a woman’s headdress. [C17]. commodious. *adj.* suitably convenient. From Latin *commodiosus*.” *Collins English Dictionary*, London, 1979.

Talbot Rothwell's,³ seems to have been the anal phase of sexual development explored by Freud (or at least those theories of Freud's that had entered into popular discourse).⁴ This practice not only serves to illustrate the kind of coarse, low comedy typical of the *Carry Ons* but it also identifies the Camp characters played by Kenneth Williams as castrated males. In *Carry On Cleo* (1964) he was 'Julie' "with a dagger in me vitals" Caesar, in *Carry On Again Doctor* (1969) he was Dr Carver and in *Carry On Matron* (1972) he was Sir Bernard Cutting. To popular audiences familiar with the ordure laden puns of the *Carry On* films, things could not have been clearer if (as Mr Boggs explains in *Carry On At Your Convenience*) they had been written on notepaper that was "perforated at both ends."

Hawtrey's characters' names personified public attitudes that associated homosexuals with the "goings-on" in public conveniences. His Camp characters (unlike Williams's) were never castrati, they were sexually promiscuous. His characters were always leering, lusting and lecherous, constantly intoxicated with copulation. In *Carry On Cabby* (1963), ex-army man Terry Tankard arrives at *Easy Cabs* looking for a job. Introducing himself, he explains to Ted/Kenneth Connor (the manager), "the boys used to call me Pintpot." "You sure it was (amused) Pintpot?" he asks. His stifled laughter implies that the "boys" probably called him "Pisspot" behind his back. In *Carry On Jack* (1963) he plays Walter Sweetly, a cesspit cleaner. In *Carry On Cowboy* (1965) he is the Indian Chief Big Heap, who first appears on screen coming out of a tepee to the accompanying sound of a flushing toilet. In *Carry On Screaming* (1966) he is Dan Dann "the lavatory Man," a cleaner in a public convenience. In *Carry On Up The Khyber* (1968) he is Private Widdle, Widdle being a convenient rhyme for "piddle": a play on the double meaning implied by the rhyme, both of which signify the same thing: to urinate.⁵ Both meanings help to throw some doubt on Private Widdle's sexual orientation. In *Carry On Again Doctor* (1969) Hawtrey is Doctor Stoppidge. Again the name implies a double meaning. Stoppidge

³ The scriptwriter for the films from *Carry On Jack* (1965) to *Carry On Dick* (1974).

⁴ Freud's theories of psychoanalysis litter the *Carry On* films. Norman Hudis, the scriptwriter for the first six in the series, included a scene in *Carry On Cruising* (1962) where Leonard Marjoribanks's 'Freud of the frozen North'/Williams and Captain Crowther/Sid James psychoanalyse each other on the couch in his cabin. Rothwell's characters are manifestations of the psychopathological patients that Freud identified in his *Three Theories of Sexuality* (1905) and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).

⁵ "piddle, colloquialism especially childish; in C.20, low coll." (Partridge, Eric. *The Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961). It is not difficult to connect Freud's theories of infantile sexuality and the fixation of the anal phase of hysteria with the *Carry On* Camp characters played by Williams and Hawtrey.

may imply a blockage in the plumbing, but more explicitly it indicates a blockage in the bowel or rectum by the penis. In *Carry On Loving* (1970) he is James Bedsop (Bedsop implying bed wetter), a detective who camps around public conveniences looking for clues.

It became common practise for the scriptwriters of the Carry On films to use the actors' own first names for the characters' first names throughout the films. The implications of this would have been as clear as "the writing on the wall"⁶ - or the public convenience - to cinema audiences who associated the actor's private life (Hawtreys was a practicing homosexual)⁷ with the characters he played.⁸ Using the actors' first names locked them conveniently into their characters forever. In *Carry On Spying* (1964), Hawtreys plays Charlie Bind, a "Double o, oooh!" agent. The double pun on the name Bind for Bond is less significant than the implied meaning behind the toilet humour. Bind meant constipated. "Double o, oooh!" implied that homosexual love was similar to laxative relief.

Similarly, audiences familiar with the *Carry Ons* would have been versed in the kind of cockney rhyming slang and colloquialisms that were the signature of Camp homosexuality. Charles Coote/Hawtreys was "as queer as a coot."⁹ Similarly, Rhandi Lal, the Khasi of Kalabar played by Kenneth Williams in *Carry On Up the Khyber*, was associated by name (the Khasi) with lavatories (kasi), public conveniences and cottaging.¹⁰ Sir Sydney Ruff-Diamond/Sid James calls the Khasi a "bit of a shot." "I hope I heard you correctly" replies the Khasi. The joke's success relies on the audience's familiarity with a common term of abuse; that an odious person is often called "a bit of a shit."

If Charles Hawtreys' and Kenneth Williams's characters are the butt of the toilet jokes in the *Carry On* films, then it could be argued that their playful and childlike Camp personae connote a similar kind of visual paederasty that makes fun of

⁶ When Seneca/Hawtreys (Caesar's father-in-law in *Carry On Cleo* (1964) has an omen he says, "I have seen the writing on the wall."

⁷ "Charlie was gay, of course," states Leslie Phillips in his autobiography *Hello* (204). Roger Lewis paints a more sordid picture, "in real life, had you been passing beneath his window in Deal, you'd have overheard him exhorting his partner to: "come on and give it to me, big boy. Slap your bollocks against my arse!" (14).

⁸ Kenneth Williams was "a self-confessed non-practicing homosexual" (Campbell 15); his characters' names imply impotence at an anal or Oedipal phase. Dr Kenneth Tinkle in *Carry On Doctor* (1967), and Dr Kenneth Soaper in *Carry On Camping* (1969). "I don't believe he was a practising homosexual" reflects Leslie Phillips: "He enjoyed a wank and that was it" (Phillips 205-6).

⁹ "The word queer was used from about 1700. It became a popular derogatory term for a homosexual by the mid-early twentieth century: 'he's a queer as a coote'" (Baker 183).

¹⁰ In *Carry On Loving* (1970), James Bedsop/Hawtreys, a private Dick, is arrested for cottaging.

exposing their closet homosexuality. In *Carry On Spying* (1964), when Desmond Simkins/Williams actually emerges from a closet, he jokes, “I thought I’d been filed for life.” His characters throughout the entire series *are* from then on.

To male heterosexual audiences Camp behaviour connotes one outrage; homosexuality. Yet, the Camp acting of Hawtrey and Williams is markedly different. In *Carry On Henry* (1971) when Sir Roger de Lodgerley/Hawtrey is released from the Iron Lady it is not just because he has at last confessed to committing adultery with the Queen. He is literally invited to come out of the closet. He has laid the Queen not played the *Queen*. Camp is “like a basket with two faces.”¹¹ Much of the humour derives from the fact that while the audience know Hawtrey is homosexual, the characters he plays are often rampant heterosexuals chasing women with as much gusto as Sid James’s characters. His sexual promiscuity provides him with a kind of moral protection that his Camp sensibility should betray, whereas Williams’s characters (and indeed any actor who minces and acts “Camp”) are betrayed by “Being-as-playing-a-role.” This insincerity insists that the characters are castrated as much by “camp” as they are by their inability to copulate with a real Queen. The characters are *queens who find themselves out of the closet* (and want to get back in). They are neurotic males castrated by their own cowardice and their inability to speak “the lie that tells the truth” (Core 7) about their own sexuality. Williams’s characters (and those who are Camp and consciously so, like Cardinal Wolsey in *Carry On Henry*) are funny only because the audience laughs at them for being queer. Wolsey and Cromwell are in collusion against the King for one reason; he wants an heir and is willing and able to copulate. They are not and cannot, but are charged with ensuring he does. Their dishonesty and intrigue are exposed because they communicate through a language neither of them understands. But, to audiences in the mid 1960s, Camp with a small “c” was understood to be something corrupt and sexually deviant. Cardinal Wolsey/Terry Scott is made by Cromwell (and later just needs to be encouraged) to smuggle out secrets on rolled up parchments up his anus. They are both condemned to death at the end of the film. Their beheading symbolises their castration, a castration exposed by the unnatural camp that they dared to hide behind a lie about its true sensibility. If they are condemned by the King for an act of treason,

¹¹ In *Carry On Up the Khyber* (1968) Rhandi Lal/Williams’s explains that “Top-ranking British diplomatist” (James) is “like a basket, with two faces.” This ironically could be said to explain the difference between Williams’s and Hawtrey’s camp.

they are condemned by the audience for the greater crime of high treason against heterosexuality. The audience accepts Hawtrey (the homosexual) as Sir Roger (the heterosexual) simply because his Camp sensibility is evidence enough of his honesty. They may enjoy watching Sir Rodger de Lodgerley being tortured but they enjoy his complete indifference to it even more. The very Campness of his gallows humour challenges the oppressive authority that heterosexual rule imposes on a gay audience's sexual freedoms. He is merely a man who has been accused of sleeping with another man's wife. Any heterosexual male would enjoy listening to another proclaim his innocence when he has been caught with his trousers down because he does what they dare not. The sole fact that Sir Roger de Lodgerley's defence is his Camp demeanour is hilarious because it lies in opposition to what any heterosexual male would believe to be a perfect defence against such an accusation. Being genuinely Camp was not a crime. Playing the role of the Camp homosexual was. Being Camp was not the same as being homosexual (even if it was). Playing at being Camp was.¹² Hawtrey's Camp Roger represents sexual promiscuity; and his propensity to "try everything" makes him a symbol of the "rogering"¹³ heterosexual males like those played by James.

If Honest Camp signifies sexual freedom dishonest "camping" signifies sexual incarceration. Camp is Janus faced. It is, as Rhandi Lal/Williams explains in *Carry On Up The Khyber*: "like a basket, with two faces" (the oral and the anal). It signifies two socially incompatible identities for the gay fool¹⁴; effeminacy and empowerment, impotency and sexual promiscuity. If Camp is a defence, it is not supposed to save the homosexual from his public execution, even if he put his own head on the block. He is supposed to be drowned at birth, quite literally. In *Carry On Screaming* (1966) Dan Dann/Hawtrey is drowned in a lavatory by Oddbod¹⁵ (a bestial phallic monster,

¹² Homosexuality was a crime until the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, but it was still perceived as a crime by many heterosexual males. This perception was enforced by the medical profession who still treated homosexuality as a psychopathological disease.

¹³ rog-er. *Taboo slang*. Had an old (1711) vulgar usage as a verb where it means sexual intercourse with a woman. After a number of comic references in the late twentieth century the word "roger" as a sexual act came back into more free use chiefly among the upper-class intellectual elite. From c.1650 to c.1870 it was slang for the word "penis." (Wikipedia 2006). See the character Prince Regent (Hugh Laurie) in *Blackadder The Third* (1987) who will "roger" indiscriminately with either sex. And whose excessive "camping" proclaims his impartial sexual promiscuity loudly and proudly.

¹⁴ See Anderson, Margaret. "Stop messing about!: The gay fool of the *Carry On* films."

¹⁵ This was the only film where a character played by Hawtrey is killed off. This is significant and illustrative of the audience's condemnatory attitudes to Williams's (non-practicing) homosexuality which was seen as a weakness, and Hawtrey's characters' sexually ambivalent promiscuity, which was praised. The fact that Hawtrey's characters were (practicing) guaranteed their reprieve.

rampantly heterosexual and raised from the dead by Dr Watt/Williams who drowns in a vat of vitrifying milk/semen). In *Carry On Henry* (1971), Cromwell/Williams would rather die than serve Henry/Sid James, the divine monarch of heterosexuality. “Carry On choppin’” he cries out hysterically to the crowd (to the audience) who are as happy to see him die as he apparently is to accept his fate a c[a]mpli.

Hawtreys characters though offer more resistance. Being Camp is an expression of their sexual autonomy. While the actor’s physical puniness dictates that he act in the traditional role of the pansy camp “who is obliged to leer and make nancy mannerisms” (Tyler 341)¹⁶ which he does, Hawtreys “irrepressible, virtually uncontrolled [Camp] sensibility” (Sontag 284) reveal an honesty about how sexuality is defined dishonestly by artificially prescribed gender roles. Hawtreys cavalier Camp sensibility “debags” those attitudes in such a manner that the idea of playing with gender roles becomes seriously funny business. As Sontag states, “the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious” (288) and Hawtreys “had a real talent for reproducing that fey, [...] character he’d aired in many films” (Phillips 204). He was never serious. He wore the jester’s crown and made low jokes, just as he made jackanapes with gender roles that were ordained by the judiciary.

If wit, as Sontag states, is the language of the “cognoscenti” (281) and Camp’s “first sensibility, that of high culture, is basically moralistic” (287) then the low humour and coarse language of the *Carry Ons* expose that artifice by “blowing a raspberry” at it (Orwell 193). Nowhere is this better exposed than in *Carry On Up the Khyber* when Rhandi Lal/Williams chastises Sir Sydney Ruff-Diamond/James, (the British Ambassador in India), for “lavishing his excruciating wit on us” or when Hawtreys character’s foppish Camp sensibilities are consigned quite literally to the cess-pit without a word of comment. In *Carry On Don’t Lose Your Head* (1966), the “old-style dandy” and the “new-style dandy” meet “in the muck pit”¹⁷ of the regency ballroom. The Duc de Pommfrit wafting away all prejudices about gender roles with a swish of his handkerchief represents the seminal moment when Camp dances its way into the sensibilities of the popular tastes.¹⁸ From now on all those who do not learn

¹⁶ Parker Tyler’s definition of “being symbolically homosexual belongs to the general metier of the professional sissies” (333).

¹⁷ This is how Ludicrus Sextus/ Michael Horden refers to the populace in *Up Pompeii* (1971).

¹⁸ Compare this to Williams’s character Desmond Wilkins in *Carry On Spying* who we follow into a lavatory just to overhear him say, “I’d give it a minute if I were you” before leaving without washing his hands. Again the audience associates the character with the ‘dirty’ anus. This is implied quite explicitly in the toilet humour.

the new dance step (bigots) are banished from the ballroom of society Camp. As Sontag points out: where once “the dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves” (Sontag 289).¹⁹ If the Camp manner filtered down from the “cognoscenti” to the common man it was inevitable that it would be purged of the prejudices towards him through the only means he possessed of attacking back, through coarse humour – through the vulgarisation of Camp.

The course and vulgar Camp humour of the *Carry On* films is as synonymous with homosexuality as wit is with Oscar Wilde’s comedy of manners. Similarly, Hawtrey’s characters are always genuinely funny. They are the epitome of what Sontag calls “pure camp” (Sontag 282) whereas Williams’s characters are not funny because they try to be. Their Camp humour is disingenuous. “The difference is clear [states Sontag] Intending to be campy is always harmful” (Sontag 282).²⁰ So, Williams’s characters are always sexual malefactors maligned by the campy mask and the contrived camp sense of humour that they employ to conceal it. They err because they exhibit a rampant erotomania through a campness that exposes them as hysterical impotent males. Charles Hawtrey’s characters are incorrigibly Camp so their sexual prolificacy is never in question. As Philip Core states: Hawtrey’s “Camp is the lie which tells the truth” (7). His characters are rampant not repressed neurotics like Williams’s whose narcissistic obsession with their mothers (Rubbatiti, the Egyptian mummy in *Carry On Screaming*) finds its expression through noisy hysteria, not natural humour. They are happy characters eager to live life and all its excesses to the full, even when, (and especially when) their own life is threatened.

While Hawtrey’s characters reflects what Sontag calls Camp’s “comic vision of the world” (Sontag 288), they ultimately “dethrone[s] the serious” (Sontag 288) “campy” characters of Williams’s with no sense of humour. As an actor, Lewis says, “he’s forced and hysterical – and that is not very lovable” (20) while Hawtrey who was “inimical and self-contained was much loved by the public” (pxi). This surely

¹⁹ The success of the *Carry On* films was at its height from the mid to late 1960s. This must be attributed to the popularity of the period costume comedies scripted by Talbot Rothwell. Stamped with a pantomimic quality which lent itself to Camp, the first was a parody of *Cleopatra*, *Carry On Cleo* (1964). The acme of success never surpassed was *Carry On Up The Khyber* (1968). Camp had become so popular that by the time *Carry On Don’t Lose Your Head* (1966) was released an alpha male like Sid James could “mince” and act “campy” alongside Williams and Hawtrey and still get a laugh.

²⁰ Williams’s characters reflect Sontag’s disavowal of Camp when it is “a piece of manufactured, calculated Camp” (Sontag 282).

accounts for the animosity audiences felt towards Williams's characters. And it is no accident that Williams's characters meet their deaths with a gulp while Hawtreys face theirs with a guffaw. Williams's characters' hysteria is never as well hidden as his attempts to conceal it with humour. In *Carry On Spying* Charlie Bind/Hawtreys dressed in cycling shorts runs into a restaurant on the Street of a Thousand Artisans to explain why he's late: "Somebody tried to shoot me" he explains unconcerned. "Shoot you? Where?" asks Simkins/Williams. "In the schnitzelstrasse" explains Bind. "Ooh, sounds as if it might be very painful" remarks Simkins laughing at his own joke. It is clear how much the humour in this scene is derived from the sight of Bind running around in cycling gear, as it is from Hawtreys's epicene mannerisms, pantomimic acting and air of fun. But the humour is also dependent on the audience recognising Hawtreys's "instant character [...] a continual incandescence- a person being one very intense thing" (Sontag 286). Without the recognition that Hawtreys's character "breaks the cardinal rule of camp in that he doesn't feel artificial; [and] there is no evident striving after effects" (Lewis 16), the black humour behind the tagline of the joke - that Bind was "shot in the schnitzelstrasse" would not be appreciated. The mincing that exaggerates the effeminate effaces any doubt about his maleness just as Simkins' cruel joke, which seeks to expose Bind as a homosexual, expose Simkins' homophobia. Bind is innocent of the sexual innuendo implied when he says he was shot. Simkins is not. It is Simkins who exposes himself by transferring his sense of guilt onto Bind. Williams's "camping" is over-acted and exposes his cruelty. Hawtreys's innocence is given credence purely through his Camp sensibility and it invites the audience's empathy. Bind's humour is Camp because it is aimed at himself but it is not self-deprecating.

It was essential then that *Carry On* audiences saw that "not everything could be seen as Camp" (Sontag 277) that "intending to be campy [was] harmful" (Sontag 282) to the humour. Camp consciously exaggerated for laughs could seriously undermine the genuine humour expressed by Camp. What was not funny was a serious threat to the totem phallus of teenage heterosexual desire. "The early-teen-age sex-yearning audiences just cured of thumb-sucking who were prepared to laugh at anything" (Tyler 326) were the target-audience for the *Carry On* films.²¹ But, they have to learn to despise the anally obsessed clown who is "unclean" and to be able to

²¹ The films were generally released with an A certificate.

recognise the “pure” Camp characters from the *impure* ones. Impurity denotes disdain and it is symbolised by the hysterical characters played by Williams who become the target of much of the cruel humour. But, Williams’s deviant characters suffered more because of their lack of a sense of humour than Hawtreys’s debauched characters who shared their sexual prolificacy with the audience’s own predilection to laugh at his dirty jokes. The adolescent males in the audience, conditioned to heterosexual normative behaviour by the films, would not find the neurotic characters played by Williams very funny. His characters symbolised the psychopathological deranged males whose lack of a sense of humour was symptomatic of their sexual dysfunction. His characters are constantly being told that their jokes are not funny. Laughing along with these characters then might suggest a psychopathological empathy and a castration complex shared. Similarly, an adolescent male’s inability to appreciate *Carry On* Camp humour could signify his own lack of a sense of humour and therefore be symptomatic of his own sexual ‘lack’ – his inclination to be grim and gay. It was better for a heterosexual male to think he could live the life of one of Hawtreys’s characters, as a debauched “womanising braggart with few redeeming features” (Campbell 44) - and laugh about it - than be forced, as Freud suggests, into a “comparison entirely within the other person” (“Jokes” 226) - and be miserable - like one of Williams’s characters.

Hawtreys’s Camp characters are the perfect elixir²² for the depressing effects that Williams’s melancholic characters cause in the creation of the humour. But just how Hawtreys’s characters function as a release valve against what is depressing can be analysed in the way his characters communicate their sense of humour to audiences and Williams’s do not.²³ This is important because it reflects how the producers’ sense of humour is communicated to *Carry On* audiences too. As Leslie Phillips states, “the scripts of the *Carry Ons* conveyed the World According to P[eter] Rogers” (200).

Crucially, the shared joke that created a dialogue between audience and producer was communicated in two ways: through the characters’ lack of ability to

²² Elixirs and love philtres were used to cure the impotent but heterosexual male Hengist Pod/Kenneth Connor in *Carry On Cleo*. When Caesar observes its effect he says, “ooh, I must ‘ave a try of some of that myself.” Of course he doesn’t and never would.

²³ The audience would thus be “depraved on account of being deprived” (of humour): Riff to Officer Krupke in *West Side Story*.

share a joke because it defined their difference²⁴ and conversely, through an actor's ability to share a joke with the audience through the Camp humour of his characters. Hawtrey's Camp sensibility inhabits all the characters he plays and this makes audiences laugh, not because the characters become the butt of the humour but because they become the focus of fun and play. The audience, the "people who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as 'a camp,' they're enjoying it" states Sontag (292).

Freud said: "It is not easy to say what happens in a person when humorous pleasure is generated; but we can obtain some insight if we examine the cases in which humour is created or sympathised with, cases in which, by an understanding of the humorous person, we arrive at the same pleasure as his. The crudest case of humour – what is known as *Galgenhumor* [literally, 'gallows humour'] – may be instructive in this connection" ("Jokes" 229).

If Camp is identifiable by a particular kind of humour in the *Carry Ons* it is gallows humour: by its very nature it is dialogue between an individual performer and his audience. It is a stand-up comedy act dropped into the most dramatic point of the narrative to disrupt the tension that the audience expects when faced with some horrible event. The humour is inevitably childlike, in the sense that it is delivered playfully with an air of indifference, not in the sense that the victim acts like a child and invites sympathy or scorn (as Williams's characters always do). There is only one true exponent of it in the films – Charles Hawtrey. In *Carry On Don't Lose Your Head*, the Duc de Pommfrit shows a complete disregard (a "detachment" [Sontag 288]) for his circumstances while he waits for his execution at the guillotine. He has delayed the executioner and the town officials because he wants to finish the Marquis de Sade's latest book. He dismisses the protestations of Citizen Camembert/Williams to "Get on with it!" with a mere swish of his perfumed kerchief as though he was wafting away a bad odour. The crowd would rather see Camembert's head drop into the basket. It would satiate their antagonism towards him as an unnatural symbol of

²⁴ In *Carry On Dick* Williams reveals the identity of Big Dick/James to the Reverend Flasher/Big Dick. He says, "do you know the difference between a man and a woman? It's his difference. It's on his difference." Big Dick has a conspicuous birth mark on his "dick." Obviously, it is big enough to be a badge of heterosexuality, and small enough to conceal the threat of castration, which is why Williams never sees through Big Dick's disguises – he does not want to face the fear of his impotency – a crime society would condemn and ostracise him for.

authority and a repressor of their earthly sexual appetites.²⁵ Our attention is quickly diverted back to the unconcerned Duc on the scaffold who is giving a jolly performance on his final stage on earth. A girl rushes up the steps of the guillotine and says (apologetically), “your grace, there’s an urgent letter for you,” to which he replies nonchalantly, “oh, drop it in the basket. I’ll read it later” (in Heaven!).²⁶

The crowd’s laughter (which represents the cinema audience’s) is spontaneous. But this is not the end; the Duc’s sense of humour reveals that he, like Hermie in *Rudolph the Red nosed Reindeer* (1964), knows he “is a mis-fit.”²⁷ He also knows (like Hermie) that he is “not a nit-wit” (unlike Rudolph who is) and that his Camp sensibility is a given gift to fight against the prejudice of ignorance and intolerance. His Camp sense of humour is his armour against the tyranny of being made to “fit in,” and of course it is precisely his sense of humour that makes him fit in. It is Camembert’s complete lack of a sense of humour, his inability to appreciate Camp²⁸ that marks him out as different and despised by the crowd that does. He is uncamp when he is “camping” it up. When the Duc looks up at the blade and says to the executioner, “short back and sides, not too much off the top” the crowd roar with laughter because they recognise that “his courage” is exhibited through his Camp sensibility; a virtue which Camembert fails to recognise and lacks. The mob/audience has no desire to see a man who faces his death with such gusto and gay abandon denied his right to entertain them. Camembert’s uncamp cowardice reveals his lack of a sense of humour and this is what makes him feels vulnerable to the attacks on his person (and to characters throughout the films). In *Carry On Cleo* when Caesar/Williams says “ooh I do feel queer” it is because he is ailing (miserable

²⁵ This is of-course the element of the ‘Carnavalesque.’ On the relationship between Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept and the Carry On film, see Chris Balchin, “Carry On Iconoclasts: The Carnavalesque and the Gay Male in the Carry On films” and Margaret Anderson, “‘Stop messing about!’ The gay fool of the carry On films,” *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, 1. 37-47. 1996.

²⁶ For Hawtrey it seems Camp was “Heaven sent.” In *Carry On Camping* (1969) Charlie goes into a camping shop to buy “everything!” he needs to go camping. Asked by the shop assistant if he likes camping, he replies joyfully: “Oh, rather, I’ve always loved camping.” Rather tellingly, Williams’s first words as Julie Caesar ailing from “a stinking cold” in *Carry On Cleo* are: “Ooh, I do feel queer.”

²⁷ Hermie (an elf who wants to be a dentist) and Rudolph (a reindeer with a red nose) each sing this song when they are lonely and made to feel like worthless members of society. They are condemned and cast out because of the way they look or the way they behave. They are (naturally), or are (by nature) different. When they befriend each other they agree to “be different together.” The moral of the story of course is that their differences are soon valued when a storm threatens to disrupt Christmas and the their true value as members of society is recognised: “We are mis-fits/that’s why we fit in.” *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964).

²⁸ “It’s not all in the eye of the beholder” (Sontag 277).

because he has no sense of humour) and failing (as an actor to be funny), not because he is Queer but because he is disingenuously camp.

So, one imagines Hawtrey's pure Camp realism is something which irked Williams and it was a constant reminder to him that his "camping" was only an imitation. He translated this as a confirmation of his bad acting, and understood it as the reason why audiences hated him.²⁹ He misunderstood the new purpose of Camp because he took it too seriously. He could not join in with popular Camp because he never understood it as anything other than a mark of homosexual chastisement and ridicule. Camp was only a defence for the honest Camp. "Camping" was harmful because it exposed the homosexual who felt harmed; to be effeminate made you an easy target because it enraged the heterosexual who despised the sissy that moaned.³⁰

Conversely, when Cromwell/Williams and Wolsey/Scott put their heads back on the block in *Carry On Don't Lose Your Head*, the young adolescent males in the audience knew enough about those characters to condemn them without pity. What was on trial was the crime that Camp is always accused of – concealed sexuality. By implication, that amounted no-less to a charge of homosexual complicity. It was a charge that the professional imitator of Camp always defended himself against with his self-confessed impotency. But the deviant masquerading behind the mask of Camp was never convincing enough and inevitably he was found guilty of depraving innocents with unnatural carnal desires. If he did not confess, as Caesar in *Carry On Cleo* realises when he runs from his assassins screaming "infamy! Infamy. They've all got it in for me!" he often went willingly to his castrators shouting "carry on choppin'."

In *Carry On Henry*, heterosexuality is the law of the land. The mob/audience is its judge and jury. Cromwell and Wolsey are in the dock not just because they are dishonest men but because their dishonesty stigmatises them as sexual deviants, as weak, anally fixated neurotics. Crucially, their "campy" acting does not conceal their crime, it exposes it, just like their attempt to conceal their psychopathology in rolled-up parchments pushed up their anus condemns them. The audience need no more proof than this. Their "campy" acting is a confession, more a crime against Camp

²⁹ Williams's despondency as an actor and his declamatory remarks about his fellow actors in the series permeate his Diaries (Reid 1983).

³⁰ See Davies, Reid. "What WOZ Lost Objects, Repeat Viewings, and the Sissy Warrior." *Film Quarterly* 55. Winter 2001-02: 2-13. Williams is the consummate sissy Lion, Hawtrey the sissy warrior.

humour than a manifestation of homosexual hysteria. Cromwell and Wolsey go to their deaths willingly rather than living a lie by living another day despised as humourless heterosexuals. Caesar is assassinated. Dr Watt drowns hysterically, still trying to make us laugh. But he is embalmed forever and lies entombed in the death chamber of *Carry On* films, remembered infamously as the Campaigner that lied about Camp. He represents the last in the line of a dynasty of campy actors that made a career of not being funny. Their weedy, sexually incompetent, mummification, bemused audiences who wanted to be amused. Instead these sexually mortified males represent the psychopathologically diseased; they were the equivalent of the horror film monster that must be driven out of society. In *Carry On Screaming* (1966), Dr Watt drowns clutching Oddbod (the monster-self he has created), in a vat of vitrifying liquid viagra (semen). In *Carry On Up the Khyber*, the Khasi is chased out of the grounds of the British Embassy and Judge Burke is run out of town in *Carry On Cowboy* (1965). The horrible monsters, the “hairy beasts”³¹ in *Carry On Screaming* represent pure heterosexual libidos. They satisfy the male audience’s aggressiveness towards Dr Watt’s sexual ambivalence. In film comedy that aggression must be replaced with humorous pleasure. As Freud says in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, “humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts itself in their place” (228).

Consequently, in *Carry On Don’t Lose Your Head*, the Duc de Pommfrit’s life is worth saving not merely because his licentious behaviour (is appealing) and his aristocratic bearing (is not), but because his Camp sense of humour is his defence against the world that threatens him and the monsters that threaten us (repressive governments). Camp is the monster tamed. The Duc’s raffish rampantly Camp sexuality makes for hilarity, and it is not an “aristo” trait the common man wanted to decapitate when a lack of it symbolised castration. His profane sexual prolificacy makes his characters closer to the lotharios played by Sid James and therefore, closer in nature, to the males in the audience who saw heterosexuality as the aristocracy of sexual behaviour. But, the “camping” cavalier Sir Rodney Ffing/James becomes more than a mirror image of the Duc de Pommfrit, the Camp carouser. Together they represent a marriage of acceptance, a kind of Camp alliance - the effeminate

³¹ In *Some Like It Hot* Daphne (Jack Lemmon) in drag warns Sugar (Monroe) not to trust men. They are monsters without morals whose behaviour is ruled by their basic heterosexual sexual desires.

voracious sheep in wolf's clothing howling at the Camp moon of government moralising. Camp had at last "dethroned the serious" (Sontag 288) taboo of intolerance and replaced it with a laugh-in,³² a free-for-all copulation regardless of sexual orientation or gender roles specified by authoritarian governments (including cinema producers) bent on instructing the populace in the two binary bigotries of heterosexuality. While the distinctive 'dirty' laugh of these two actors is the sexual signature that sutures their comedic maleness, the hysterical laugh of Williams's characters condemns them tragically to the traditional role of "screaming queens."³³ Significantly, Sir Roger is rescued by Henry/James just as the Duc is rescued by Sir Rodney Ffing/James. This is important. Sir Roger has been tried and forced to confess his crimes (of uncontrolled heterosexual desire) over and over again by his torturers (Cromwell and Wolsey). He is saved because he is innocent of the crime he is charged with in the diegesis of the film (adultery) and of the crime outside of it - of being sexually active. Conversely, Cromwell and Wolsey are found guilty of impotency (of replacing their natural sexual instincts with anger) by Henry (Head of the church of heterosexuality). Consequently, the male audience condemns them because they neither find sexual abstinence or crude jokes about fornication, funny or convincing, when "camping" disguises depravity. Hawtrey's characters' gallows humour is their ultimate defence against a corrupt state, not a wise King. It mirrors the taboos on sexual freedoms throughout the 1960s and 70s. Cromwell and Wolsey represent what would happen if heterosexual desire were repressed by the state that sought to repress all sexuality. Man was not naturally sexually repressed. Hawtrey's Camp sensibility championed sexual freedom – and did it laughing. The Duc's sense of humour was his defence against the death of his sexuality which is why the King pardoned him. "Humour," states Freud, "can be regarded as the highest of these defensive processes" ("Jokes" 233).

Hawtrey's characters provided a defensive alliance with their adolescent male audience and washed away forever the stain of defecating humour that had

³² The frustrations of living up to gender prescribed roles are represented in the slap-stick comedy of the pie-throwing scenes celebrating the success of the institution of marriage in *Carry On Loving* (1970).

³³ In *Carry On Spying* (1964) when Harold Crump/Bernard Cribbins and Charlie Bind/Hawtrey are sneaking about a dark warehouse looking for a spy hiding there, Charlie Bind screams out hysterically when he bumps into a carnival mask. Desmond Simkins/Williams chastises them, calling them both, "a couple of carnival queens." More irritated than insulted, Bind retorts: "Well if you're going to be personal."

contaminated the gay stereotype. “Camp taste [was], above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgement [...] a kind of love, love for human nature” observed Sontag (291). Hawtrey’s Campaign of comic cleansing was complete.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Margaret. “‘Stop messing about!’ The gay fool of the *Carry On* films.”
Journal of Popular British Cinema 1 Spring 1998: 37-47.
- Baker, Paul. *Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang*. London:
Continuum, 2004.
- Campbell, Mark. *Carry On Films*. Herts, Pocket Essentials, 2002.
- Core, Philip. *Camp: The Lie That Tells The Truth*. London: Plexus, 1984.
- Davies, Reid. Ed. *The Kenneth Williams Diaries*, London: Harper-Collins, 1983.
- Davies, Reid. “What WOZ: Lost Objects, Repeat Viewings, and the Sissy Warrior.”
Film Quarterly 55. Winter 2001-02: 2-13.
- Lewis, Roger. *Charles Hawtrey 1914-1988: The man who was Private Widdle*.
London: Faber and Faber, 2001.
- Medhurst, Andy. “Carry On Camp.” Sight & Sound 2. (4). Aug 1992: 16-19.
- Orwell, Sonia. And Ian Angus Eds. “The Art of Donald McGill” *George Orwell,
Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters: Volume 2 1940-1943*.
Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- Phillips, Leslie. *Leslie Phillips: The Autobiography, Hello*. London: Orion, 2006.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. London: Vintage, 1994.
- Freud, Sigmund. “*The Interpretation of Dreams*.” *The Standard Edition of The
Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 4-5 1900-1901. Ed. James
Strachey. London and New York: Hogarth, 1975.
- Freud, Sigmund. “*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.” *The Standard Edition Of
The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 7 1905. Ed. James
Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1975.
- Freud, Sigmund. “*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.” 8 1905 The Standard
Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Ed. James
Strachey. Hogarth, 1975.
- Tyler, Parker. *Screening The Sexes: Homosexuality In The Movies*. New York:
Anchor Books, 1973.

Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia. 2006. article “taboo” <http://en.wikipedia.org/>
[Accessed 20 Dec 2006]

Films Cited

The Scarlet Pimpernel. Dir. Harold Young London Films 1934.

The Elusive Pimpernel. Dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger London Films
1950.

Some Like It Hot. Dir. Billy Wilder. Mirisch Company 1959.

West Side Story. Dir. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins United Artists 1961.

Carry On Cruising. Dir. Gerald Thomas³⁴ Rank Organisation 1962.

Carry On Cabby. Rank Organisation 1963.

Cleopatra. Dir. Joseph Mankiewicz 20Th Century-Fox 1963.

Carry On Jack. Rank Organisation 1963.

Carry On Spying. Warner-Pathe 1964.

Carry On Cleo. Warner-Pathe 1964.

Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Dir. Larry Roemer Warner 1964 (renewed 2002).

Carry On Cowboy. Warner-Pathe 1965.

Carry On Screaming. Warner-Pathe 1966.

Carry On Don't Lose Your Head. Rank Organisation 1966.

Carry On Doctor. Rank Organisation 1967.

Carry On Up The Khyber. Rank Organisation 1968.

Carry On Camping. Rank Organisation 1969.

Carry On Again Doctor. Rank Organisation 1969.

Carry On Loving. Rank Organisation 1970.

Carry On Henry. Rank Organisation 1971.

Carry On At Your Convenience. Rank Organisation 1971.

Carry On Matron. Rank Organisation 1972.

Carry On Dick. Rank Organisation 1974.

*Up Pompeii*³⁵. Dir. Bob Kellet 1971.

Blackadder The Third. Dir. Mandie Fletcher BBC 1987.

³⁴ Gerald Thomas directed all the *Carry On* films.

³⁵ Significantly Talbot Rothwell was the scriptwriter of this television series and the film.