

A Very Peculiar Practice: a very modern campus comedy, 35 years on

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Brief biography and contact details

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Abstract

On May 21st 1986, the BBC broadcast the first episode of Andrew Davies's black campus comedy *A Very Peculiar Practice*. 2021 celebrated the series' 35th anniversary. This article provides an analysis of the contribution of the series to the genre of campus comedy. It provides an evaluation of the major themes, plots and characters introduced throughout the series and how these reflected, and reacted to, the political environment and ideology of the time. The series is discussed in the broader context of the campus novel, the genre of fiction in which staff, students and university management are satirised, and its contribution to the genre of television and film medicine/hospital comedy is also discussed.

KEYWORDS: satire, campus novel, university, comedy, academics, higher education, television

On May 21st, 1986, the BBC broadcast the first episode of a black comedy that was to mark a milestone in BBC drama comedy and launched the television career of one of the UK's most prodigious adaptors of novel fiction for television and film. *A Very Peculiar Practice* (AVPP), written by Andrew Davies, ran for two series and a special, and was a very peculiar drama in many ways but in at least two. First, it was born of a degree of creative and fiscal desperation by the author and was, consequently, an almost serendipitous creation and, second, it revived a genre of comedy (and drama) which had been dormant since at least, arguably, 1981, when the BBC (again) had broadcast an adaptation of Malcolm Bradbury's novel, *The History Man*. It was also, unlike other televisual examples of campus comedy, an original drama and did not draw on some earlier novel for inspiration.

Until *AVPP*, the genre of campus comedy or satire had been the exclusive bailiwick of the novel where fiction portrayed a comedy of manners and action which ridiculed academics and life in higher education in the UK (mainly) and (rarely) elsewhere. Television and film had been no stranger to the paratelic characteristics of the University and the eccentricities of its staff, structures, operation and expectations (see below) but the novel was the most self-identifiable repository for satirising university life, gleefully chronicling a habitus fraught with alcoholism, polymorphism, professional and sexual jealousy, departmental politics, questionable management (and teaching) practices, rivalries, and pomposity.

Familiar examples include Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), Tom Sharpe's *Porterhouse Blue* (1974) and Sharpe's Henry Wilt series (starting with *Wilt* in 1976), Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975) and his assorted campus-related novels, David Lodge's campus trilogy (*Changing Places* in 1975; *Small World* in 1984; and *Nice Work* in 1988), and Howard Jacobson's *Coming From Behind* (1983). More recently, there is Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005). Most have been interpreted via a televisual or film medium at some point. *Lucky Jim* starred Ian Carmichael as probationary lecturer Jim Dixon in the 1957 film, with Keith Barron playing the role in the BBC1 sequel

of sorts in the *Further Adventures of Lucky Jim* (1967), Enn Reitel as Jim in the ITV series *The New Adventures of Lucky Jim* (1982) and Stephen Tompkinson in the ITV remake of the film in 2003. *The History Man* was broadcast by the BBC in 1981 and starred Antony Sher as the “theoretician of sociability”, Howard Kirk; *Porterhouse Blue* was made into a four-episode series by Channel 4 and broadcast in 1987; *Wilt* was made into a film by LWT in 1989 (called *The Misadventures Of Mr Wilt* in the US) starring Griff Rhys Jones as Henry Wilt, a FE academic who “had done his damndest to extend the sensibilities of Day-Release Apprentices with notable lack of success”. It was filmed at the now-demolished Bounds Green campus of Middlesex University. *Nice Work* was broadcast by the BBC in 1989 and starred Warren Clarke and Haydn Gwynne, who also appeared in the first episode of *A Very Peculiar Practice* (“A Very Long Way From Everywhere”).

A Very Peculiar Satire

A Very Peculiar Practice ran for two series (1986; 1988) of seven episodes each followed by a one-off special (*A Very Polish Practice*, 1992) in which the lead character was transplanted to a different environment and allowed to cope, thrive or fail. Whereas all other campus satires had at their core their academics as their dramatis personae, *AVPP*'s unique approach was to undertake the heavy-lifting of satire not directly via academic staff but indirectly via a constellation of picaresques supporting the University, namely staff at a University Medical Practice. In so doing, it provided additional, ostensibly objective social satire of the mores of mid to late 1980s Britain and was a none-too-subtle rebuke to the prevailing Conservative ethos which placed emphasis on marketisation, commercial self-interest, managerialism, and individual prosperity (Shattock, 1982; Middlehurst, 2004; Brown, 2011). A leitmotif, particularly in series 2, was the obsession with income generation and the pressures on universities to attract external private income to support their activities and so the University's precarious finances and management became a backdrop for the satire and for, ultimately, the collapse of the University. This was the pinnacle of the satirical message delivered by the series at the end of two series.

Curiously, *AVPP* does not warrant an entry in *The Radio Times Guide To Comedy* which concludes that although comedy dramas (such as *AVPP*) “undeniably featured great moments of humour they were still drama productions per se” (Lewisohn, 2003) A case can be made, however, that although *AVPP* is a comedy drama and not a sitcom (it does not completely meet the criteria normally established for sit-coms), the emphasis of *AVPP* is on comedy rather than the drama and that the dramatic ideas are a mere hanger for the cape of comedy. The appearance of the nuns at the beginning of the episodes is a clue that this is perhaps not a drama in the conventional sense and sets up a surreal premise similar to another 1980s comedy, Andrew Marshall and David Renwick’s *Whoops Apocalypse* (1982). The other two comedy dramas cited by Lewisohn as exclusions from his book are *Auf Widersehen*, *Pet* and *Minder* which are primarily dramas with elements of comedy. All three, of course, are bereft of a laughter track but so is *The Office* and *The Larry Sanders Show*. David Lodge had referred to the comedy/drama distinction in his novel, *Therapy* (1995). In an exchange between the author, Tubby Passmore, and his producer of a successful sitcom, *The People Next Door*, the producer says:

“You’re going to have to write Debbie out of the series?”

“You mean kill off Priscilla?”

“Good God, no. This is a comedy for chrissake, not a drama” (p.46).

Mills (2005), in *TV Sitcom*, wrote of the comedy drama that “comedy can function as a mode drafted onto something else and its funniness is limited by the requirements of the dominant genre” and cites *Sex In The City*, *Six Feet Under*, *Teachers* and *Shameless* as examples. *AVPP* shares some of the features of all of these - most obviously, their dramatic framework- but these do not express the same degree of surrealism, the winking asides, the satire, the occasional farce and jokes that *AVPP* does. *AVPP* is a sitcom that is really drama that is really a sitcom. If it was 30 mins in length, it would be a sitcom.

The series follows the typical structure proposed by Evanthius, but many genre dramas do: exposition (protasis), complication (epitasis) and resolution (catastrophe). The first episode sets up the principal protagonist and his work environment (protasis), the cynical nature of his workplace and the over-bearing nature of his colleagues (epitasis), and resolution (his relationship with a female character and the settling in to his new environment). The drama is also full of peripeteia (reversal of fortune) as the sections below illustrate, and anagnorisis (where there is a transformation from ignorance to knowledge, exemplified by the principal protagonist's character development)

AVPP: its medical centre

Most of the comedy in *AVPP* revolves around a dysfunctional campus medical practice at The University of Lowlands, a fictitious University set somewhere in the provinces of England. Its Head is a lugubrious, exophthalmic, eccentric drunk and author of "Sexual Anxiety and the Common Cold", Dr Jock McCannon (played Graham Crowden), and the staff include a sociopathic, white-collared, stereotypical 80s yuppie, Dr Bob Buzzard (a brilliant, scene-stealing David Troughton); languorous cod-feminist Dr Rose Marie who insisted that illness was something men did to women (Barbara Flynn); and our Ulysses, our everyman, our Pennyfeather, Dr Stephen Daker (Peter Davison), a GP from Walsall who beat Marie and Buzzard for the post he now occupies. Daker is described by Davies (2011) as being "a series of reaction shots" and his role is to respond to the madness and eccentricity around him. His is the character with whom we are expected to empathise and identify with largely because the rest of the characters are mad. Although in the tradition of Voltaire's *Candide*, Daker has much more in common with Pennyfeather from Waugh's *Decline And Fall*- another comic "university novel"- and with the ingenues from Sharpe, Bradbury and Lodge. He is similar in many ways to Henry Wilt but more competent, idealistic, sedulous and less professionally disastrous. His background is modest and monotonous. When Buzzard lists his prestige alma mater and asks Daker for his own potted career history, Daker replies: "Birmingham, Birmingham, Birmingham, Walsall." ("It has a sort of grim coherence"). Walsall is mistaken for Wolverhampton, for comic effect, throughout the series and this is the fate of Walsall. All Daker wants to be is a "really marvellous doctor" and later, in episode 2, says: "I'm a humanist. I believe in people" and this is the

character's core, defining, idealistic trait or failing, given the people he has to work with. This contrasts with the dramatis persona surrounding him: a lone, moral voice with which we inflexibly identify and which channels our surprise and sense of the ridiculous when other characters reveal their traits and actions. The comedy in *AVPP* reflects two dominant views of comedy: that we laugh at what we feel superior to, and what we find incongruous (Martin, 2021) and both of these are plentifully illustrated in each episode.

Buzzard is probably the stand-out comic character of the series and his persona -his type- is set up beautifully by his coiffure, his wardrobe, his brutal, clipped speech and our original introduction in which he ignores a weeping student and refers to Irish practice nurse Maureen as "simple Maureen from the bogs". According to Davies (2011), Troughton's preparation for this role was meticulous and painstaking. We are not expected to find Buzzard endearing; we are expected to find his Thatcherite extremes and stereotypical traits ridiculous and amusing and they are amusing because they are ridiculous, as some of the examples below illustrate. Apart from Daker, the other members of the practice were, in Davies words, "crazy and probably shouldn't be allowed to practice.", which is what provides the series with its comedic strength and its chemistry: the combination and conflict between these elements is at the core of the series. Satire stalwart John Bird played Vice Chancellor, Professor Ernest Hemmingway (sic), described as a "malevolent, back-biting dwarf". Davies had great fun with names throughout the series: Daker's predecessor was Blair Atholl. A Dick Dado is also mentioned.

Jock speaks in a kind of portentous, grandiose, self-deprecating poetry and this defines the comic essence of his character. Each "my dear boy", "my dear girl" or "dear lady" (or dear Bob or Stephen) is followed by some meditative observation on life's travails or the failings of some part of the University and its falling moral masonry. It is Jock who provides the moral and dramatic frame for what follows in the series, telling Daker and his ensemble: "This university is a swamp of fear and loathing. It's the cuts..." and describes a litany of University problems including voluntary redundancy, early retirement and inter-colleague rivalry. (Swamps become a running theme in series

two with the new Vice-Chancellor's wife routinely referring to the institution as a "piss-ant swamp" in virtually every episode she appears, an epithet so infectious even Jock is found using it later in that series). Jock can come across, deliberately, as an old buffoon. Draper (2000) distinguished between two types of fool in Shakespeare's comedies- the dupes and the clever fools (Touchstone and Feste, for example) and Jock certainly falls into the second camp of "licensed fool". He is ostensibly a bluff, confused, older medic out of touch with modern mores and borderline incompetent (he misses an acute appendicitis in episode one of series one, for example) but he demonstrates a cold, cynical understanding of what goes on around him and he is there as the gerontological cynosure around which the practice he runs revolves.

The character of Jock signals the satirical context of the comedy in episode 1. "Let me tell you about this place, Stephen," he says, "They call it a new University but it's 20 years old now. Concrete's crumbling; all these bloody silly flat roofs leak...It's like a very, very inefficient sector of British industry. Top management are morally corrupt and idle. Middle management are incompetent and idle. And the workforce is bolshy and idle. And, of course, there's no bloody product. No wonder people get ill here. There's nothing else for them to do." And this is the first stab of satire that directly hits at the heart of the series. Apart from explicitly setting the stage early on and providing the viewer with a caustic if realistic appraisal of the environment they find themselves in, this monologue also accomplishes the feat of reminding the viewer of the clarity and cleverness of the writing. The speech can be read in print with no detriment to its effect and this linguistic gift percolates throughout the series. Throughout series 1, we learn that Jock is writing a new book, "The Sick University" which is a book within a series which is making a similar point but funnier.

Jock also touches on another subject that was thematic in higher education at the time and later became even more salient, student fees. In response to the observation that the University encourages a lot of students to come to Lowlands, Jock's explanation is that this is because of "the big, fat fees". Jock is very much the Lear of *AVPP* and, in the second series, is seen staggering and wandering around campus at night as a group of feminist protestors chase an intruder, and

some beagles are let loose from one of the science facilities by student animal-rights activists. This illustrates one of the few elements of farce in both series which are largely free of broad, Cooney-like excesses but which do divert themselves occasionally. In episode 5 of series 2 (“The Values Of the Family”), for example, we’re introduced to Professor Bunn, the University’s resident nudist, to the propositioning of Jock by the Vice-Chancellor’s wife, and to Buzzard receiving advances from his male patient.

The comedy of the first episode of Series 1 (“A Very Long Way From Anywhere”) is marked, as is almost every episode, with the appearance of two feral nuns whose role is principally to rummage through bins and engage in general anti-social behaviour such as stealing milk bottles and terrorising binmen; a sort of out-of-order of nuns. The incongruity marks the comedy as being different from the usual run of comedy dramas. The nuns variously rummage in those bins (S1, episode 1), kick cans (S1, episode 2), fish (S1, episode 3), play hopscotch (S1, episode 4), and steal milk and carry a ghetto-blaster (S1, episode 7). Asked to comment on the genesis of the nuns, Davies explained in the DVD commentary that “I’d always been plagued by nuns...I used to see nuns doing slightly naughty things-going the wrong way out of a car park, throwing toffee papers...” (Davies, 2011).

Our introduction to Daker, conversely, is tense and comic. He is first seen driving, almost panic-stricken, along the deserted campus on his first day at work, navigating his Volvo through a maze of signage- speed checks, dead ends, prohibitions and, in one case, “Caution: Altered Priorities Ahead” suggesting that Davies’s comedy workshop was sometimes happier using a mallet than a chisel. The first recurring character Daker meets is Lynn, a police officer turned PhD student. He bumps into her when she is out jogging and later meets her again in the University swimming pool where, as the pool’s lifeguard, she saves him from drowning. That in both meetings, she is the active one in the relationship is a feature that comes to characterise the relationship later on and marks another comic leitmotif of the campus genre: the strong woman and the weaker man. The life-saving leads Daker to conclude: “I’m alive. And this is a beautiful University.” Their later sexual

relationship, hers more open than his, capitalises on her research on “body language” (idiolects) to help Daker with his somatophobia. (“I don’t get any cuddles, Lynn. My wife doesn’t even hit me any more”, a good joke).

The filming of the external scenes for the series took place at, among other places, the Universities of Birmingham (the opening shots of the arriving bin lorry) and Keele (most of the rest) in 1985. According to Davies (2011), the former was indifferent to the potential effect of the programme on its reputation and was too unassailable to care; the latter needed the money. Daker arrives at the grimmest student union known to human kind as he discovers a man in a donkey jacket weeping next to a drinks dispenser, and a wall bearing the graffitto legend “University kills intellect by degrees”. There is a lot of mocking of the modern university. In the first episode (“A Very Long Way From Everywhere”), a character remarks of the University pub: “looks like the gents at Euston Station. Smells like it, too.” And the earnestness of University discourse is mocked in episode two (“We Love You: That’s Why Were Here”) when a character refers to “phallogocentric hierarchy” and that “women are a colonised race.” Each episode opens with an animation of a bleak landscape of walking silhouettes to the tune of Elkie Brooks singing Dave Greenslade’s “We love you”, before the bleakness transforms into a literal sunny upland and the blues and blacks are replaced with a less bruising yellow. The opening is tonally reminiscent of *Whoops Apocalypse* (1982) in which a grim, apocalyptic opening is also replaced by a jauntier theme tune.

More satirical comedy is mined at the Vice-Chancellor’s drinks party later in the episode when jokes flow freely, with a knowing reference to a fellow campus author: “You are talking about Bradbury’s latest one?”, asks one academic. “No,” replies another, “I’m talking about the new parking regulations”. The comedy in this setting derives from duplicity (Daker has been conned into thinking it’s an informal affair), embarrassment (because Daker has been conned into thinking it’s an informal affair) and from satirising the small cocktail-and-sherry-circuit world of the modern academic. It also provides additional petrol to the engine of the series when one party-going academic remarks: “This University is emotionally bankrupt” - it is this bankruptcy which becomes the back-

drop to, and the source of comedy for, this series and the next. Related to the emotional bankruptcy is the occupational “craziness”. In episode six of series 1, Lynn says to Daker “this University’s a crazy place. That means when you’re in it, crazy’s the norm...This mad University’s got you in its grip.” Another academic (Lillian Hubbard) observes in the same episode: “we are voluntary inmates at a mental institution.”

Over seven episodes, we are introduced to a succession of academic-themed plots which touch on political issues of the time (working with industry, marketisation and monetisation of University functions) and a sense that all might not be well at the cash-strapped University of Lowlands. Episode 2 (“We love you: That’s Why We’re Here”) introduces us to the first of our students and the other staff- including an unappealing theatre studies tutor who Daker later discovers has a debilitating eye condition, and Welsh religious studies student, Megan, who ends up married to local preacher, Hugh Grant. The episode ends with Lynn and Daker holding hands after having spent and afternoon in a tin shed listening to a sermon.

Relationships, and a satire on a certain type of academic relationship, are developed further in episode three (“Wives of Great Men”), where the central plot concerns the workaholicism of ferocious bully and Pro Vice Chancellor, John Thomas Furie (of course), played by Timothy West. Furie suspects his wife is having an affair (she is) and becomes hysterically paranoid. The workload issue, and Furie’s drive to produce, is presaged by Jock’s opening remarks to his practice meeting at the beginning of the episode where he says that “the VC is baying for more cuts, more redundancies. How do we respond?”. The VC has already closed down Media Studies. Buzzard, naturally, wishes to develop private consultancy work that “would actually pull in some cash”, another theme of 1980s University life and which is another source of *AVPP*’s satire. It is referred to again throughout series two and in one particular cynical instance in the plot in which an art historian is at risk of redundancy -an academically poor student is permitted to pass because his wealthy father’s donations allow the University to build an art gallery; the academic is allowed to keep his job, until

the student graduates and the favour is no longer live and the staff member can be ditched. It is a cutting observation on the uncomfortable relationship between money, ethics and University work.

Furie is described by Anne Marie as “a bully of the crudest kind. I’d like to picture him as a hollow plaster phallus.” Davies describes him as swinging between “being your bosom buddy and wanting to kill you” and this tension is mined for comic effect throughout the episode, especially when he is seen by Daker in his surgery. When Furie’s wife suggests an alternative form of dinner, he barks “I need meat. I’m not a sociologist.”, a very neat joke and one in a tradition of sociology-bashing by campus comedians (sociologists come up again in episode five of series one in the context of the spread of a venereal disease on campus: “sociologists only do it with each other”). Furie also issues caustic observations of other colleagues. Over dinner with Daker, he points to a nearby table and says, “three half-wits kow-towing to a non-entity. There’s the philosophy department with their external examiner”. Philosophy also receives comic short-shrift in episode one of series two, “Philosophy”, says one character, “eight old boys with research constipation. Nothing in the pipeline so we need to take the euthanasia option.” The episode does end with a resolution and a touching mea culpa. Furie, commenting on his own condition, says: “we love our work, we let it take over us. And we ignore the women. We blind ourselves to their needs. And when we’ve realised what we’ve done, it’s too late.” which is profound self-reflection that could represent a reaction to any work environment; it is universal. Furie’s pre-occupation with livestock also finds its way into a final mea culpa regarding his bullied wife where he admits “I’ve eaten that woman like a piece of meat, Stephen”.

The next episode satirises Buzzard’s foray into entrepreneurship (“Black Bob’s Hamburger Suit”) and ridicules the obsession with privatisation and marketisation of HE. In his monomaniacal drive to be seen to succeed in obtaining money from a drugs company, he ends up prescribing the company’s anxiolytic, Confidan, indiscriminately to any patient whatever their presenting illness with the usual comic consequences. Bob is the embodiment of the Thatcherite ideal -BWM-driving, squash-obsessed yuppy with two identically-bespectacled children in private school and a fero-

ciously corrosive self-interest. In this episode, we see revealed his views of his academic clientele: “in reality, they’re here to avoid contact with students as much as possible while they write their books and articles no one’s going to read, and swan off to conferences to give papers no-one’s going to listen to. And the more of that they do, the more time off they get to do even more of it until they get so eminent there’s no danger of them ever having to see another student.” With his speech, you can hear Davies having a lot of fun at his old profession’s expense.

Bob returns to his theme in episode six of series one (“The Hit List”) where medical examinations are being required for all staff appointed before 1971. Speaking of the at-risk staff, he comments: “If the poor old buggers get through the medical, they’re laughing. If not, let’s get them on the front at Bournemouth with the old rug and wheelchair where they belong, eh?” To which, McCannon replies: “How very delicately you put things Bob”. His views on sexual politics can probably charitably be described as unreconstructed: “Gender on the agenda, again?” he says in one episode; “tell her to belt up and keep taking the tablets”, he says in another. He also has ripe views on academic disciplines, and his mockery of some is grist to Davies’s comic mill. In one surgery meeting with a member of the Education department, he asks: “And you haven’t set foot in a real school for what?”; “15 years”; “Off you go to Bash St. I shouldn’t worry too much, buddy. You’ll probably be a strike most of the time.” (S1, episode 7, “Catastrophe Theory”). The staff member is later seen reading a book titled “Unarmed Combat” in the University pub, in a nice visual joke.

Episode six is also the episode in which Jock reveals he is writing “The Sick University”, referred to earlier. Sickness, and sex -the other staple of campus comedy- is the theme of episode five (“Contact Tracer”) in which an outbreak of STDs is reported on campus (the spreader is a Reader in Interdisciplinary Studies) and the VC is found to have contracted it. Episode six (“The Hit List”) sees the peril enhanced significantly with the potential redundancy of Dr Lillian Hubbard, a historian and custodian of an all-women hall of residence on campus that the VC would like to see converted into a conference centre for Japanese investors- and there is much comedy mined between uni-

versity staff and students' principled occupation of the building and the VC' embarrassment over this with his Japanese visitors.

This theme of attracting external financial investment into public institutions such as Universities was emblematic of the political direction of government at the time and the ridiculousness of some of the initiatives (such as that described above) was exploited for comic effect in the series. In the final episode, the University is required to find a 25% cut in its budget and a fact-finding team is sent in to see what can be cleaved. "Fear stalks the campus," Jock says portentously, "and no-one is safe". Least of all the VC who ends up getting sacked, the reasons myriad: "he failed to keep his talented people, he backed all the wrong horses and he couldn't even flog the campus to the Japanese. His lack of principle is mitigated only by his lack of competence." This episode also sees the first appearance of Ron Rust, Arts Council Fellow in Creative Writing and Davies manqué who, as Daker's patient, confides that he's writing "a sharp, satirical, black comedy with a bit of Chekhovian understated pathos" for the BBC because he owes them £17000. This is virtually identical to the situation Davies found himself in and wrote *AVPP* in order to pay back the money for a rejected BBC project. Rust also channels a frustration that Davies himself has also recorded: "Every time I think up something really outrageous, reality comes up and tops it." The episode ends with the University becoming merged with Hendon Police College.

The success of the series led to an inevitable follow-up with an improved budget, but where do you go when you've already sacked your VC and your University has merged with a training college? Davies solution was to amplify the surreal and accelerate the peril with the introduction of a new, American Vice-Chancellor, Jack Daniels, zealous for a new kind of University. "We're going to make the earth shake here at Lowlands," says the VC. Or, as Jock alternatively puts it, "The University of Lowlands has sold itself to the Prince of Darkness". Jack Daniels, again, is a bit of an in-joke because one the wealthy benefactors of Warwick University where Davies taught English, was Jack Martin who ran the Smirnoff empire and whose name is attached to an existing Hall of Residence at the University (Shattock & Warman, 2010).

It is a cliché to describe generally grim and authoritarian contexts as Orwellian but this series justifies that description with its thuggish private security guards on campus, the besuited body guards in glasses, the axing of financially under-performing departments, and the drive to remove human obstacles if they are not perceived to follow University-think. Episode one (“The New Frontier”) opens with scenes of cactopian squalor on campus - students coughing, living outside in tents, later reporting malnutrition to medical staff because they cannot afford food because of university rents. It is all exaggeration but it is hyperbole for comic effect and it falls just the right side of plausible. In series two, Daker has become head of the medical practice and has a new love interest in the form of the aggressively Polish Art History lecturer, Dr Greta Gratowska who initially, with her later lover, Anne Marie’s, connivance accuses him of sexual assault following his medical examination of her. This is eventually resolved and this series ends more apocalyptically than does the first with rioting, violence and the University closed entirely. In episode 7 (“Death of a University”), the final scene sees the University of Lowlands becoming “Lowlands High Security Defence Research Establishment”. Gratowska and Daker have a child and the final shots sees Stephen lament: “It could have been such a good place you know. It could have been really...OK”. The characters were subsequently revived in a one-off special which did not take place on campus (*A Very Polish Practice*) and was more a fish-out-of-water comedy in which a character is transplanted from one culture to another.

***A Very Peculiar Practice* and its place in the university/campus literature**

A Very Peculiar Practice was, at the time, the latest iteration of what was, to all intents and purposes, the campus novel translated to television. It is probably fair, and accurate, to say that university, academic, campus novels were, until the postwar era (1950s and later) novels about two Universities: Oxford and Cambridge and, if we are being even fairer and more accurate, largely Oxford. The 19th century “university” novels which invoked Universities and their staff, invoked those specific Universities and their staff (Proctor, 1977) for historical reasons. Shaw (1981) notes that 85% of pre-20th century University novels were set in Oxford, a situation which existed up until the

post-war period when the literary domain became less exclusive and graduates other than those from Oxford began writing; out of the Tower and into the Provinces. But even these two institutions were different and, also, parochial because their ways of functioning and because the language of their operation were distinctive and idiosyncratic; they had their own idiolects. Thus, novels of the 19th century in which Universities played a core part were based on these two, very niche, environments which would not necessarily be comprehensible to most readers. Examples include John Gibson Lockhart's *Reginald Dalton: A Story of English University Life* (1823), Thomas Little's *Confessions of an Oxonian* (1826), Charles Henry Cook's *With the Best Intentions: A Tale of Undergraduate Life at Cambridge* (1884) and Anne Edwards's *A Girton Girl* (1885).

The genre of "campus novel" describes any work of extended literary prose fiction in which the subject matter is the University, its students, its staff and its functioning. Its tone and purpose is comedic, usually satirical, and often constitutes a comedy of manners. The campus novel ridicules or satirises personal peculiarities, professional rivalries, fears and insecurities, sexual ambitions (and insecurities), and work-related politics (which involve rivalry, fear and insecurity). David Lodge, in *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, wrote that "literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children; life is the other way around." And campus novels certainly follow this carnal template; even *A Very Peculiar Practice* was largely unblessed with or bothered by children until the end of series two, but it was deeply distracted by sex. Some comic novels are set at University but are not concerned with an analysis or comical exegesis of University life (Ian McEwan's *Solar* and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, for example, or Colin Dexter's Morse novels).

As noted in the introduction, the first successful, postwar novel to feature academics as a vehicle of comedy (and is, therefore, the first campus novel) was Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), originally titled "Dixon and Christine". Jim Dixon, "a shabby little provincial bore" is a history academic at a provincial University whose journey in the novel- psychologically, emotionally and professionally- is one of seeking to attain a full-time position at the university, an ambition he spectacularly fails

to achieve after a drunken lecture. On the journey, he meets a series of ridiculous characters and caricatures. A leitmotif seen throughout campus novels and in *AVPP*.

Inspired after a visit to his friend, Philip Larkin's, senior common room at the University of Lancaster, Amis wrote: "I looked around and said to myself: "Christ, somebody ought to do something about this." Not that it was awful...it was strange...a whole model of existence one had got on to from the outside, like the SS in 1940, say. I would do something with it." (Amis, 1991; cited in Belei, 2017). Larkin was a significant influence on *Lucky Jim* bequeathing the character's surname (Larkin lived on Dixon Street), suggesting that Dixon have a competitor for Margaret (Catchpole) and indirectly lending a major character (Dixon's girlfriend, Margaret Peel, is based on Larkin's partner, Monica Jones). The novel was dedicated to him.

The protagonist in *Lucky Jim* -fairly middling, besieged by the storm and drang of work and relationships, buffeted by personal and professional demands- is probably the archetype campus comedy protagonist and almost all of these features exist in Daker although Daker's portrayal is more sympathetic. Daker is a protagonist who is buffeted, yes; besieged, yes; but is constantly driven by the need to do the right thing and to challenge, even if naively, wrong-doing or irrationality when he encounters or experiences it. Daker is a less self-indulgent character than Dixon (he is not really a drinker) and has greater moral rectitude. You feel that Daker would be petrified of doing the wrong thing, and he is petrified of having been accused of doing the wrong thing in the opening of series two when he is accused of sexual harassment by a patient in what is an uncomfortable detour in a comedy which has, until then, been more comfortable in the broader world of university shenanigans and social satire. In a sense, it provides us with an indicator that the second series, despite being a comedy, will be more serious than the first (which, with the closure of the abolition of the university, it is).

The next significant swell in the campus novel wave, although the author regarded the work as a "universal" rather than a "university" novel, was *The History Man*, a more serious-minded, spiteful,

grim campus comedy than *Lucky Jim* or *AVPP*. If Bradbury's *Eating People Is Wrong* was a novel about leaving the Fifties, *The History Man* was about entering the Seventies but really wishing to leave them. Published in 1975, and adapted for television in 1981, *The History Man* reflected the author's fear of, possibly contempt for, the New Academic more broadly and for the discipline of sociology more explicitly, via the portrayal of Howard Kirk, the awful, radical, sexually incontinent sociology lecturer at the heart of the novel. The novel, reflecting "the malign stereotypical representation of life in the new universities" (Taylor, 1992), itself had as painful a gestation as Bradbury had an experience of radical University politics and their rejection of humanism and liberalism, having drafted at least seven different versions of the novel's opening lines (the manuscripts are in the repository of Indiana University, where Bradbury briefly taught) (LeMahieu, 2017). The novel was set at the glass and concrete edifice of the University of Watermouth, a new university which did "not educate its students, it teaches its teachers". Kirk becomes Professor of Sociology at the University of Dewsbury, voting Conservative in the 1979 general election. This is a template which *AVPP*, and other campus comedies, also follows: a fictitious university, perceived threat/element of peril, tense academic and personal relations and a satire on a current theme in academia (in *The History Man* it is the rise of sociology and Marxism, in *AVPP* it is the marketisation of HE).

The impact of the novel was made greater -the impact was arguably created- by the television adaptation and it is the first of the campus novels to receive this treatment. Television magnifies everything, draws attention and makes everything salient. A similar asymmetry characterised Tom Sharpe's *Blott On The Landscape* (1973) and *Porterhouse Blue* (1974), with the television adaptation creating a much greater impact, via wider exposure (*Blott* and *Blue* were televised in 1985 and 1987 respectively and both, co-incidentally, were scripted by Malcolm Bradbury). But the televisual interpretation of *The History Man* placed rather rancid flesh on the novel's skeleton, making some scenes and characters much more salient and vivid when portrayed on television. The novel, and the television play, were a satire of the new sort of academic, sexually liberated, radical, liberal yet hypocritical (all views are welcome unless they clash with the protagonist's own).

A similar radicalisation is found in the next of the successful campus novels, David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988), the last in a trilogy of campus novels by Lodge (*Changing Places* in 1975, *Small World* in 1984). The radicalisation is forced or imposed because the novel satirises the then Thatcherite ideology of marketisation, value for money, the lust for the enterprise culture, and the expectation that Universities pay their way, a theme that runs through *AVPP*. It is a comedy which examines the more sterile cross-fertilisation between gown and town (or factory) and of compelling the Humanities to justify their applicability and existence. Like all of the other examples of campus comedy discussed here, these works were created in the context of, or in response to, some significant shifts in political thinking and ideology and considered directly or indirectly the place of academia within this new thinking. Table 1 highlights some of the major developments in politics and in HE in the twentieth century which helped shaped the evolution of Universities in the UK and, directly and indirectly, the campus comedy.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Nice Work is the most political of the trilogy because it draws this explicit contrast between the seemingly impractical, pointless work of a Humanities lecturer with the ostensibly valuable work of a money-generating businessman and employer, another *AVPP* theme. Neither character is fully sympathetic and your sympathies dove-tail between the two. It might be thought that our original sympathies, our viewpoint, lie with that of the academic but she is quick to reveal her own snobbery (she is dismissively demeaning of her brother's girlfriend's job as a finance executive and disdains her cockney accent) and her entitlement (she comes from a wealthy family and really wants for very little).

The final example of campus comedy, which has echoes in *AVPP* is found in the novels of Tom Sharpe although these are comedies replete with bizarre incidents, surreal vignettes and highly stylised comic violence. Before examining Sharpe's comedies, it is worth also noting Howard Jacobson's (1983) *Coming From Behind*, a comic campus novel about Sefton Goldberg, an English

academic, entering middle-age and teaching at Wrotesley Polytechnic. It was the first significant novel to satirise the polytechnic campus (*Wilt* does so obliquely), drawing unfavourable comparisons between it, its campus, its staff and its students with its more moneyed and historically embedded competitors. The innuendo in the title is pretty much on par with the innuendo found in the novels of Tom Sharpe.

Sharpe's first comedies were satires on South African apartheid and police brutality, *Riotous Assembly* (1971) and *Indecent Exposure* (1973), but his reputation was made with a series of comic novels starring the English academic, Henry Wilt, and inspired by his teaching experience at what is now Anglia Ruskin University. These novels - *Wilt* (1978), *The Wilt Alternative* (1981), *Wilt On High* (1984), *Wilt In Nowhere* (2004), and *The Wilt Inheritance* (2010)- were distinctive in their portrayal of absurd sexual aggression and perversion. The plot of *Wilt* involves the protagonist waking up glued to a sex doll and being accused of murdering his wife by a clueless detective, an accusation that has some merit given that he had dressed the sex doll in the clothes of his wife and attempted to bury it under concrete. In *Alternative*, he has sex with a terrorist to distract her from taking his daughters hostage and the novel ends with the explosion of a bio-loo which covers the terrorists with excrement and kills them. Another confluence of the absurd and the sexual appears in the later novel *Porterhouse Blue* (2002) in which the student Zipster, in an attempt to hide his embarrassment at amassing a bag of condoms, attempts to get rid of them by filling them with gas and releasing them through a college chimney. The condoms become stuck and Zipster's housekeeper ends up blowing up the college Tower when she goes to light the fire. Both are killed.

Porterhouse Blue is closer in tone and content to the conventional campus novel than are Sharpe's *Wilt* novels involving, as it does, the satirising of the tension and animosity between conservative, sepulchral University grandees and incoming modernising arrivistes, a theme that is developed throughout the second season of *AVPP*. Sharpe's campus novels are significantly more ribald than other entries in the genre and, in a sense, are novel farces (trying to jettison a sex doll; mismatched, aggressive sexual advances; volitant condoms; exploding chimneys and lavatories).

AVPP was not immune to the use of sexual themes to generate comedy although it did so more primly and less burlesquely than did *Sharpe*- the STD episode of the series, is one example, as is the constant, manipulative sexual dominance of Rose Marie (in season two, she entraps the VC and Daker's love-interest, Greta).

All of these campus comedies share similar traits. Dalton-Brown (2008), for example, notes that the protagonist is normally male (*AVPP*) and this man is usually naive (*AVPP*) and the subject of ridicule or sympathy (or both; *AVPP*, again;). The department or University in which he finds himself in is a hotbed of politics, pretension, frothing envy, and pettiness which requires deft manoeuvring. All of these features are present in *AVPP* and create the tension, conflict and comedy in the series. "There are as many fools at a University as elsewhere," wrote William Gerhardie in *The Polyglots*, "But their folly, I admit, has a certain stamp- the stamp of University training, if you like. It is trained folly." The campus novel is riddled with trained folly and medically trained folly runs through *AVPP* like a saline drip.

The main theme of campus comedy, according to Dalton-Brown, is "survival"- the protagonist's journey will involve navigating, withstanding or eliminating all of these indignities, pettinesses and challenges (or not). She also suggests that the protagonist is involved in a battle for the "life of the mind or the life of desires" (which take the form of sexual appetites, professional ones or those involving status or money) and that this battle is played out across the course of the fiction as the protagonist attempts to achieve a new post, retain an existing one, or attain some other much-desired status. The sleazy, the malicious, the inept and the pompous are portrayed mockingly. There is discontent with the working environment and with the people the characters are forced to work with, features that are also core elements of *AVPP*- the potential closure of courses and departments, the (often petty but fierce) battles for promotion, the sacking of staff, the selling off of University real-estate. All of these are made key points in a plot wrapped around human relationships, including those of Buzzard and his wife and twins, Jock and his bottle, Rose and her various conquests, the medical centre staff and its students, and between Daker and Lynn (in series one) and

Daker and Greta (in series two). The comedy of sexual appetites - Daker's romantic relationships and Rose's minatory, manipulative pansexuality- is present but is not as coarse as it is in other campus novels/television series and not as ribald as in Sharpe.

In Sharpe's novels, there is "at least one graphically detailed scene of sexual perversion or unrestrained sexual appetite" (McCall, 1984). The women are sexually aggressive and the men are sexually pliant and compliant. Examples include Zipster's seduction in *Porterhouse Blue*, the sexual relationship with the leader of a terrorist organisation in *The Wilt Alternative*, and the various sex doll scenes in *Wilt* and the attempted rape of Wilt by his wife's friend, among others. *AVPP* continues the leitmotif. The women are not sexually aggressive but are sexually dominant and the men are sexually pliant and compliant. Davies, commenting on his rationale for the character of Rose-Marie, said: "I thought I'd written it so broadly...she was based on a number of women I've been seriously frightened by...she fucks with everybody's head." Lynn calls the shots throughout her and Daker's relationship and this contrast fuels some of the humour. Rose Marie is fully in control of her sexual domain, and Gretowska initially complains of Daker's sexual harassment during a medical examination of her in his surgery.

In campus comedy, none of what happens appears to matter very much to the outside world. We can enjoy the shenanigans safe in the knowledge that we are gazing at the petri dish of a delightfully baffling, yet harmless, strain of streptococcus. The idea that academia is a self-contained environment immune from the slings and arrows of life outside the campus is now probably naive, as Lodge's *Nice Work* demonstrated directly. The real-life consequences of political decisions made outside this parochial world are also illustrated throughout both series of *AVPP*.

Universities are no longer the preserve of the well-heeled and the moneyed (just). In the 16th century when the whole of England only had two Universities (and Aberdeen, famously boasted that it had two), there was little possibility of receiving access to university education unless you were independently wealthy or had other means or charity. With the creation of variously funded and es-

tablished Welsh and English Universities in the 19th century (the University of London was established in 1836), the 1944 Education Act, the development of the “provincial” “New” Universities in the 60s, the conversion of the Polytechnics to Universities in 1992, and the 1997 Labour government’s aim to ensure that 50% of school leavers studied for a University degree in the UK, the British University system became transformed and its nature and function became more familiar. Against this evolution, AVPP remains funny despite its temporal context and the aspic in which it finds itself and the reason for this is the comedy that derives from the character types in the series, but viewers can understand the issues and problems that these characters find themselves having to respond to (or find themselves generating).

***A Very Peculiar Practice* in the context of medical comedy**

A Very Peculiar Practice, more by dint of its setting rather than its purpose, is also a comedy that follows in the tradition of several British comedies that are set in, or emerge from, medical environments. The creation of the National Health Service in 1948 led to a series of notable film and television comedies which used the tropes and settings of medicine and as the source of conflict, confusion and comedy. Richard Gordon’s Doctor novels, which recounted the comic adventures of largely young doctors, were translated into a series of films starring Dirk Bogarde and Leslie Phillips (*Doctor In The House*, 1954; *Doctor At Sea*, 1955; *Doctor At Large*, 1957; *Doctor In Love*, 1960; *Doctor In Distress*, 1963; *Doctor In Clover*, 1966; *Doctor In Trouble*, 1970) and seven television series starring Barry Evans (the “Doctor In the House” franchise, 1969-1991; five made by London Weekend Television, one made by Seven Network and the last made by the BBC).

The opening of *Doctor In the House* introduces a trope also seen in AVPP- that of the weary, superannuated, cynical older medic advising (or repelling) a younger colleague. As Bogarde, as Simon Sparrow, enters St Swithin’s hospital on his first day, he asks an older doctor leaving the building where he should be going. “Take my advice”, the elderly medic responds, “straight into another profession.” The bluff, brusque, pompous senior medic trope is embodied by Sir Lancelot

Spratt (played by Robertson Justice). The no-nonsense, elderly cynic type is also, of course, seen in *AVPP* in the form of Dr Jock McKinnon.

The Carry On franchise generated four broad medicine/hospital based comedies (*Carry On Nurse*, *Carry On Doctor*, *Carry On Again Doctor*, *Carry On Matron*) with a fifth (*Carry On Again Nurse*) that was proposed but which remained unmade in 1988 and would have reflected the process of the marketisation of health provision begun by the Conservative government. The latter has echoes of *AVPP*. All of the Carry Ons, were “bright Rabelaisian spaces of innuendo, double entendre farce, carnival disruption and outrageous libido” (Melia, 2020), some of which is also seen, in more subdued form, in *AVPP*, especially in the demeanour, words and actions of Rose Marie.

Perhaps the most famous episode of Ray Galton and Alan Simpson’s *Hancock’s Half Hour* (1954-1961) is “The Blood Donor”, set in a hospital’s (South London General) blood donation clinic where Hancock complains that the request for a pint of blood is the equivalent of an armful. It is one of three Hancock episodes set in medical environments (the others are “Economy Drive” and “Hancock In Hospital”). Although the comedy does not principally derive from this, the staff’s irritation with Hancock (in response to Hancock’s own irritation and his hosing of stereotypes with the glee of an excitable fireman) is a source of some of the comedy of the episode and the view of the patient as an irritant is a common trope in almost all of these medical comedies, including *AVPP*. It reaches an apotheosis in Buzzard in *AVPP* where his conduct towards his patients could only be described as channelling a bedside manner only if the bed were made of nails. The only genuinely sympathetic doctor in *AVPP* is Daker, and Rose Marie, although less scabrous than McKinnon or Buzzard, often has ulterior motives. The comedy in Jock’s interactions arise largely from his old-fashioned views of medicine; the comedy in Buzzard’s more directly from his irritation with his patients, whether they are staff or students.

Conclusion

While *AVPP*'s environment and location were relatively novel for television comedy at the time, it is worth noting that it shares many features with another broadly satirical BBC comedy (this one with a laughter track) about a fraught and specific workplace, Anthony Jay and Jonathan Lynn's *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*. These sitcoms straddled *AVPP* from 1980 to 1988. They, too, made light work of departmental politics, inter-colleague conflict, the demands of a larger controlling management and the ridiculousness of ways of working and communicating. The comedy centred around a regular cast of characters, each with their different, idiosyncratic flaws, as did *AVPP*. They- clearly- were comedies about political activity, interference and governance (and the politics of the office), as in many respects was *AVPP* and its satirical coverage of the political demands for University marketisation and monetization. *Yes Prime/Minister* also had their own manipulated naïf (Hacker), a man ostensibly in control but routinely outwitted. Each character had his or her own motivations and agenda which brought them into conflict with each other and with others. The sitcom was comically dismissive of certain sectors of public life and of political departments (as *AVPP* was of certain academic disciplines). Looking back at *AVPP* now, and comparing it with Jay and Lynn's creation, it is an interesting example of a comedy drama that, although not having a laughter track or live studio audience, would not have been disadvantaged by the presence of either.

Since *AVPP*, there have been very few attempts at campus comedy in print and on television. Laurie Taylor's Poppleton column has been running in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* since 1979 and continues, *Porterhouse Blue* was broadcast the year after *AVPP*, and Jesse Armstrong and Sam Bain's *Fresh Meat* (a comedy about student life and behaviour than universities) ran for 30 episodes from 2011 to 2016 on Channel 4. 2011 also saw the one-series comedy, *Campus*, broadcast on Channel 4 and created by many of the talent behind another Channel 4 comedy, *Green Wing*. It was cancelled following poor viewing figures. Perhaps one Channel 4 comedy set in universities was enough although *Campus*'s focus was on staff rather than students.

It may be, as Ron Rust and Davies acknowledged many years ago, that the world of higher education is already so extraordinarily surreal that comedy may now be redundant. This may explain why, although *AVPP* included its fair share of the surreal, it was grounded in the relationships of its characters and the drama flowed from their interchange. The series opened with that song of Brooks with its refrain “We love you, we need you”. It probably referred to the students or the medical practice but, perhaps, it may just have been referring to Universities themselves.

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Table 1. A chronology of major and significant events in higher education in the UK in the 20th century

- 1900 The establishment of the University of Birmingham, the first “redbrick” University
- 1919 The University Grants Committee established to allocate funds to Universities; abolished in 1989 and replaced by University Funding Council
- 1920 A new college established in Swansea, followed by Leicester in 1921, Exeter in 1922 and Hull in 1927
- 1926 The University of Reading becomes the only University to be established between the two World Wars
- 1944 The Education Act proposes expansion of Universities and that more school leavers should be qualified to enter HE
- 1949 The University of Keele becomes first University College to become an independent University
- 1961 The University of Sussex established, the first of the “plateglass” Universities
- 1962 Education Act establishes student maintenance grant to be paid by local education authorities to students
- 1963 The Robbins Report recommends expansion of Universities and that University places “be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment”

- 1964 The University of Strathclyde becomes an independent University
- 1967 All University Colleges have become independent Universities
- 1969 The Open University is established, based at Alexandra Palace, London
- 1970 E.P. Thompson publishes *Warwick University Ltd*
- 1979 Margaret Thatcher becomes Prime Minister
- 1983 The University of Buckingham becomes the first private University
- 1985 The University of Oxford refuses to award Honorary Degree to Margaret Thatcher
- 1986 The first version of what would become the Research Assessment Exercise implemented
- 1988 Academic tenure removed in the UK
- 1988 University Funding Council established
- 1992 Introduction of the first Research Assessment Exercise
- 1992 The University Funding Council replaced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (abolished in 2018) and Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (abolished in 2005)
- 1992 The Further and Higher Education Act abolishes the division between polytechnics and universities

- 1996 Volume-based criterion removed as an assessment metric for research
- 1997 Tony Blair becomes Prime Minister
- 1997 Quality Assurance Agency formed
- 1997 University of Cardiff granted independent degree-awarding powers
- 1997 Dearing Report (the “National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education”) proposes that students should contribute financially to their University fees (£1000)
- 1998 Introduction of University tuition fees
- 1999 Tony Blair sets a target of 50% of young adults going into higher education