

# The Nation's Matron: Hattie Jacques and British post-war popular culture

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## Abstract:

Hattie Jacques was a key figure in British post-war popular cinema and culture, condensing a range of contradictions around power, desire, femininity and class through her performances as a comedienne, primarily in the *Carry On* series of films between 1958 and 1973. Her recurrent casting as 'Matron' in five of the hospital-set films in the series has fixed Jacques within the British popular imagination as an archetypal figure. The contested discourses around nursing and the centrality of the NHS to British post-war politics, culture and identity, are explored here in relation to Jacques's complex star meanings as a 'fat woman', 'spinster' and authority figure within British popular comedy broadly and the *Carry On* films specifically. The article argues that Jacques's star meanings have contributed to nostalgia for a supposedly more equitable society symbolised by socialised medicine and the feminine authority of the matron.

## Keywords:

Hattie Jacques; Matron; *Carry On* films; *ITMA*; *Hancock's Half Hour*; *Sykes*; star persona; post-war British cinema; British popular culture; transgression; carnivalesque; comedy; femininity; nursing; class; spinster.

Hattie Jacques (1922 – 1980) was a gifted comedienne and actor who is now largely remembered for her roles as an overweight, strict and often lovelorn ‘battle-axe’ in the British *Carry On* series of low-budget comedy films between 1958 and 1973. A key figure in British post-war popular cinema and culture, Hattie Jacques’s star meanings are condensed around the contradictions she articulated between power, desire, femininity and class. Yet Hattie’s biggest role was one she never sought and probably did not anticipate: her recurrent casting as ‘Matron’ in five of the hospital-set films in the *Carry On* series had the (unintended) consequence of fixing Jacques within the British popular imagination as an archetypal figure. The contested discourses of nursing and nurses which inform this image are crucial to understanding Jacques. So too is the centrality of the NHS as a symbol of British post-war politics and culture. In this article I explore these issues in relation to Jacques’s star meanings as a ‘fat woman’, and her career as a comedienne. I argue that her iconic role as Matron continues to resonate in a nostalgic desire for the supposed social and cultural stability and fairness of post-war Britain symbolised by the NHS, and that this has been further cemented by the canonisation of the *Carry On* films within British popular cinema.

### *Fat is a Comedienne’s Issue*

Hattie Jacques began her theatrical career in 1944 when she joined the Players’ Theatre in revue, appearing in a range of popular shows such as *Late Joys* and the (with hindsight) politically suspect *Coal Black Mammies for Dixie*, for which she ‘blacked up’ in a role which earned comparisons with the American actor Hattie McDaniel, whose first name the then-Josephine Jacques subsequently adopted. She later appeared in minor roles on film, including Sidney Gilliat’s *Green for Danger* (1946) and Alberto Cavalcanti’s *Nicholas Nickleby* (1947), as well as in a more substantial part as a female welder in the allegorical *Chance of a Lifetime* (Bernard Miles, 1950). Jacques also continued to act on stage and her wide-ranging theatrical experience would stand her in good stead during her career. However, Jacques gained greater recognition for her work in radio where her gift for

comedy was more fully developed. In 1947 she was cast as 'Sophie Tuckshop' in the hugely popular 1939-49 BBC Home Service comedy show *ITMA* (short for 'It's that Man Again') which became the breeding ground for a host of regular radio characters such as 'Mrs Mopp' and 'Colonel Chinstrap'. At a time when radio comedy had secured its place as a major source of mainstream entertainment in British households via its pivotal role during wartime, such an opportunity was an important career move. Jacques's appearances in *ITMA* helped to establish her as an important player within the British radio and film comedy 'repertory company', something which was increasingly recognised by contemporary critics who greeted her arrival as a new star with some alacrity.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, although *ITMA* was Jacques's first major experience of national media fame, it effectively established the key aspects of her enduring comic persona, grounded in the comedienne's own excess weight: Sophie Tuckshop was a binge-eating, breathy-voiced schoolgirl whose 'turn' consisted of a series of anecdotes about marathon and unending feasts, before finishing her stories with the catchphrase 'But I'm all right now'. The character appeared regularly in *ITMA* until the show was cancelled due to its star Tommy Handley's death in 1949.

Jacques subsequently continued to build her career as a comedienne on stage and in radio, going on to be cast as the domestically inept secretary Griselda Pugh in *Hancock's Half Hour* (BBC Home Service, 1954-9), a radio programme initially conceived as a vehicle for the comic actor Tony Hancock.<sup>2</sup> Hancock's comedy persona offered a peculiar blend of lower middle-class melancholia and absurdly inflated social aspiration, mediated by the observational wit of its writers, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson. But the programme also became an important vehicle for two more members of what would later become the *Carry On* team in addition to Jacques: Sid James who played Hancock's petty criminal confidant, Sid, and Kenneth Williams who featured each week as a different, often ludicrously eccentric, secondary character, honing the vocal skills that would become his comedic signature. Jacques's role as Griselda Pugh was somewhat vaguely delineated however since, in a conflation of feminine roles characteristic of the period, she occasionally appeared to function as cook/housekeeper as well as Hancock's amanuensis.

One particular episode of *Hancock's Half Hour*, 'Sunday Afternoon at Home' (first broadcast 22 April 1958), is especially interesting for us here because it centres on the tedium of the British Sunday during that period and especially on Jacques's Pugh, the digestive consequences of whose roast lunch is transformed into the source of existential despair for the fictional Hancock household. Throughout the episode Pugh's supposed domestic shortcomings are the source of humour, while Jacques's own established comic persona as a large woman with an even larger (and indiscriminating) appetite is the subject of a run of jokes. Yet no overt mention is made of her size: it is all done through allusion and innuendo. For example, when Jacques as Pugh retorts to Hancock's criticism of her cooking with 'I ate all mine' it is greeted with knowing laughter by the studio audience, a response which intensifies when Hancock replies 'That is neither here nor there. You also ate Bill's and Sid's and mine.' Later, when asked by Pugh to do a few odd jobs around the house, Hancock comments morosely 'I'm not going to mend your bed again'. Cue gales of laughter.

The fact that this exchange is conducted on radio, with the listening home audience unable to see Jacques, is significant in two ways: first, that her comic persona as a 'fat woman' was clearly already established extra-textually, so that the radio dialogue effectively extends and renders grotesque an unseen but already-known image; and second, that so much of the comedy depended on this visual image of the 'fat woman' to work. Critics were already describing Jacques as 'portly' (see, for example, the *Angus Evening Telegraph*, Thursday 11 September 1947, the *Motherwell Times*, Friday 10 February 1950, and the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, Friday 28 April 1950, all at the British Newspaper Archive), and the roles in which she was cast reflected her emergent image as a lovelorn woman whose girth abnegates romance. As Laraine Porter baldly states, 'on women, fatness precludes desirability and connotes the absence of sexuality' (1998:79). Indeed, listening to the show again is a painful reminder of the degree to which 'classic' 1950s comedy relied so heavily on a strain of persistent misogyny. Pugh is the continuous object of derogatory comments, most damningly about her inability to find a man, in a tirade that is entirely one-sided. She offers no resistance or retaliation since the battle is unevenly matched: Hancock is a disappointed

curmudgeon but his own bachelor condition is less available for humour because he is not defined by it. In contrast, Pugh the middle-aged spinster, unchosen and unloved, is central to the discursive structure of the *Hancock* world and its wider cultural referents.

As Katherine Holden (2007), Virginia Nicholson (2008) and Rebecca D'Monte (2012) have demonstrated, the 'frustrated spinster' was by no means a 'new' cultural figure in the post-war period, and the anxieties which clustered around her during the 1950s and 60s frequently reiterated earlier articulations from the inter-war years when the spinster was demonised as both socially useless and sexually disruptive, pitied and patronised in equal measure. By the 1950s, the ideological pressure to marry and to inhabit a socially approved form of heterosexuality was a central tenet of dominant discourses of gender and, as I have noted elsewhere (Tincknell, 2005), the cultural fetishisation of the housewife intensified the pathologisation of the single woman whose 'natural' role and inclinations would become curdled if she remained unwed. The spinster was presented as necessarily sexually inexperienced, since marriage was the only legitimate space for women's desire, but also consumed by sexual longing ('unfulfilled' in the Freudian terminology of the day). Always already middle-aged and menopausal, the spinster's sexual desire was excessive because it could not be reproductive and respectable. And, in contrast to the 'constructed certitude' of masculinity (Beck, 1998), her desire spilled over into the public realm in ways that were depicted as both disgusting and ridiculous. In a central comedic example of the period, Dick Emery's character Hetty (featured in his television show which ran on BBC television from 1963 – 1981), in unsuitable mini-skirt and frumpy spectacles, is both forever available and continuously rejected, unaware of the revulsion she provokes. In the cultural logic of this discursive order, a character like *Hancock's* Griselda Pugh could never be a competent cook or an efficient housewife, since that would challenge the ideology of the spinster's extraneous status. In the cultural logic of the *comic* order, however, she was essential: a figure of even greater cultural abjection than the men by whom she was surrounded.

Griselda Pugh, like many of Jacques's characters and especially 'Matron', is thus a domineering yet vulnerable figure, a woman whose crisp certainty would be continuously thwarted or ridiculed by the male characters around her. Frequently cast as the 'feed' for Hancock's comic lines Pugh, alongside many female characters in comedy shows of the period, is both the butt of the joke and a culturally repressive figure, called on to embody the petty restrictions 'the boys' must endure in post-war Britain and the constraints women place upon men's entitlements (including, of course, the entitlement to be served a decent lunch).

Jacques's association with the comedy of suburbia and the tensions between middle-class respectability and the desire for escape was established through her association with *Hancock's Half Hour* and further developed in her long term working relationship with the comic actor Eric Sykes, first in the TV series *Sykes on...* (BBC, 1960-65) and later in the suburban surrealist sitcom, *Sykes* (BBC, 1972-9), in which she played his naively cheerful twin sister, both siblings living together at 28 Sebastopol Terrace, Ealing. Here, 'Eric' and 'Hat' encountered a series of mildly subversive domestic adventures that generally involved other regular male characters, including the local Police Constable, 'Corky' Turnbull (Deryck Guyler) and snobbish next-door neighbour Mr Fulbright-Brown (Richard Wattis). As with the Hancock shows, Hattie's lack of marriageability was a comic feature of the programme, whereas Eric's single status was not; most notably in the episode 'An Engagement' in which Hattie mistakenly believes herself to have become affianced to Fulbright-Brown, much to his horror. The comedian Bob Monkhouse, interviewed in 2000 for the ITV tribute programme, *The Unforgettable Hattie Jacques*, noted that Jacques's role in the show was, at best, underwritten and that she was cast as an 'unthreatening, because unsexual' foil for Sykes, but became an essential element in the programme's comic dynamic. Arguably, because *Sykes* was ended by Jacques's premature death in 1980, aged 58, the possibility of developing the character beyond these tropes became impossible, but Jacques's star persona had, in any case, become so well-established by the 1970s it seems unlikely that it would have been changed significantly. This is not to suggest that Jacques herself simply replicated the stultifyingly limited repertoire of the comedy spinster in her

performance, however. Indeed, while 'Hat' was clearly a riff on the stereotype, the actress's warmth and expert skill as a comedienne, as well as her rapport with Sykes, ensured that the character exceeded such restrictions.

### *Quite a character*

As noted above, Jacques's ability to add complexity and resonance to the characters of Pugh and Hat was characteristic of the skill many female actors were required to bring to such relatively one-dimensional roles in popular comedy. And it would be a mistake to claim that numerous parts of this kind were not available to women in British radio and films of the period. As Melanie Williams (2011) has pointed out, in contrast to much received wisdom about the post-war years, British films of the 1950s actually offered plentiful opportunities for female actors. Quoting Brian McFarlane's delightful phrase, Williams says, 'supporting players... [have] provided "moments of pure pleasure in films substantial and piffling" throughout British cinema history.' (2011: 97). Indeed, Williams notes that British cinema was more likely than its Hollywood counterpart to blend 'character' and 'leading' roles, eschewing the convention of the handsome 'straight' leading man as star player supported by less important cast members: 'the categories of star and character actor seem rather more permeable [than in Hollywood cinema]. Key British stars such as Alec Guinness and Peter Sellers appeared more akin to character actors, disappearing into their roles rather than asserting a definite personality within them' (2011: 97).

This trait may have derived partly from British cinema's continued dependence on theatre for many of its major performers and much of the material it relied on in the post-war years, and the national repertory theatre system's effective nurturing of an ability to play across a broad range. Many young actors gained valuable training in revue or in 'weekly rep' in provincial theatres throughout Britain, honing their skills in a wide range of roles in plays that were themselves later adapted for the screen or formed the basis for many British cinema genres and styles. We can certainly see the

influence of British theatrical farce (with its sexual themes, use of mistaken identity, cross-dressing, word play etc.) on the *Carry On* series, for example. The importance of the availability of such versatile actors certainly meant that talented performers such as Joyce Carey, Joan Hickson, Vida Hope and Edie Martin regularly appeared in a 'cornucopia' of film parts throughout the 1950s and 60s as 'landladies...charladies, snotty bureaucrats and batty aristocrats.' (Williams, 2011:97). These were, however, primarily in roles which did not automatically attract star billing and which frequently depended on reproducing stereotypes. With the possible exception of Margaret Rutherford, women were rarely the protagonist.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, too, scholarship on the main actors in films of the period has tended to privilege male players such as Alistair Sim and Charles Hawtrey rather than Joyce Grenfell or, indeed, Hattie Jacques.

Yet the skill of comediennes such as Jacques was often vital to the success of the material in which they appeared. As Williams points out, 'their ability [is] to imbue the slightest role with complexity or vigour', fleshing out stereotypes, lending vivacity to flat dialogue and, in the case of Jacques, rendering innuendo-laden lines culturally plausible through skilled acting. And, as Sarah Street argues in her discussion of Margaret Rutherford's career, but the claim is equally true of Jacques, adopting a 'performance style [which] often combined contradictory elements that made good roles exceptional and contributed to a comic persona that transcended individual films' (2012: 89). Perhaps because of this, Jacques's star persona was also more discursively complex than it might initially appear. Indeed, she was a glamorous and attractive woman with an ability to switch her voice from cut-glass clarity to breathy suggestiveness in an instant. A quality of underlying sweetness also made her immensely likeable. This meant that the meanings she presented throughout both her early career and the later *Carry On* films mobilised profound contradictions around gender and power: on the one hand, her roles frequently positioned her as a stereotypically sexually frustrated authority figure; on the other, they offered the pleasurable transgressive spectacle of her as an unconventional, sympathetic and clearly *desiring* woman.



### *Ooh, Matron...*

Despite the apparent immanence of the series to contemporary audiences, the *Carry On* films began modestly, with a low-budget comedy topically focused on the strictures of National Service, *Carry On Sergeant* (Gerald Thomas, 1958). While some of the actors who would later become *Carry On* 'regulars' featured, including Jacques as well as Kenneth Connor and Charles Hawtrey, *Carry On Sergeant* had more in common with other army comedies made during the period, such as *Private's Progress* (John and Roy Boulting, 1956), than with subsequent titles in the *Carry On* canon. The formula for the series was not in fact fully established until the second film, *Carry On Nurse* (Gerald Thomas, 1959), which, according to James Chapman, allowed 'space for the personalities of the *Carry On* regulars to develop' (2012: 104). This film also developed the reliance on bawdy, smut, slapstick and farce that would come to characterise the franchise. Here, too, the actors' experience of playing character roles was essential to the efficient establishment of comic figures with the minimum of expositional material. Crucially, Jacques was there from the beginning, and went on to appear in 14 of the 31 films in the franchise.<sup>4</sup> Her career trajectory thus became inextricably linked with the rise of the *Carry On* film, from the unexpected success of *Carry On Nurse* in the USA to the series's decline in the early 1970s in the face of more sexually explicit material. Hattie Jacques then, along with Kenneth Williams, Barbara Windsor, Charles Hawtrey, Sid James, Joan Sims and the rest of the 'gang,' is primarily memorialised in national film and media culture in relation to this unpretentious branch of British 'low' comedy.

Frequently using public institutions as settings, no fewer than five *Carry On* films were set in hospitals with all the farcical potential offered by 'bedpans, boils and curvy nurses' (Medhurst, 2007: 131), and the prototype was firmly established with the aforementioned *Carry On Nurse*, in which Jacques took what James Chapman rightly calls her 'defining role as the fearsome Matron' (2012:104). Clearly, Jacques as Matron struck a powerful cultural chord since she appeared in the

same role in further hospital-set films such as *Carry On Doctor* (Gerald Thomas, 1967), *Carry On Again, Doctor* (Gerald Thomas, 1969), and *Carry On Matron* (Gerald Thomas, 1972) and then, fairly gratuitously in the leisure-themed *Carry On Camping* (Gerald Thomas, 1969) into which 'Matron' is somewhat implausibly levered. Such frequent reappearances suggest not only that the Matron character as played by Jacques resonated within British comedic traditions, but also that she spoke and continues to speak to and about a wider set of cultural meanings. The *Carry On* version of 'Matron' has become definitive, both for Jacques herself and for the hospital matron as cultural icon, a figure whose disappearance in the 1970s and 80s was subsequently cast as a symptom of the decline of the NHS, of which more later. Indeed, the stories may have varied, but 'Matron' is barely distinguishable from one film to the next. Even in *Carry On Camping*, wherein Jacques plays the matron of a finishing school, Chayste Place, whose pupils are holidaying at the Paradise campsite, the character is a distillation of the more grotesque elements established in the earlier hospital films.

Furthermore, Jacques's fit for the part of Matron seems to have been recognised from the beginning: in the very first *Carry On* film, *Carry On Sergeant*, she even plays a prototype of 'Matron' in the role of the sternly sympathetic Medical Officer, Captain Clark, and in *Carry On Nurse*, she seems to appear fully-formed in her persona of the simultaneously reassuring and threatening female authority figure. Indeed, the very naming of Matron simply as 'Matron' also tells us a great deal about the discursive structures at play. Unlike the various doctors, nurses, patients and interlopers encountered within the purlieu of the *Carry On* hospital, 'Matron' is defined wholly through her role as the epitome of matriarchal authority. She requires no further nomenclature. The 'formidable' head nurse whose power lies not in scientific expertise but in a form of super-domesticity articulated through carbolic soap, starched uniforms and scrubbed hands is a fetishized figure, both monstrous mother and subservient handmaiden to patriarchal power. Matron silently assists the surgeon or consultant in his ministrations, yet also challenges his authority as the harridan who rules the hospital wards to which male doctors (and they are generally male in the

*Carry On* films) come only as invited – albeit exalted – guests. Matron can contradict, overturn or refuse the power of the doctor, but only within her own domain.

In these films Jacques was often teamed with fellow *Carry On* stalwart Kenneth Williams, playing either a surgeon or a doctor in his trademark combination of high camp, snobbery and repressed sexuality, thus offering frequent opportunities for the staging of forbidden desire between Jacques's plenitude and Williams's (implicitly homosexual) asceticism. Indeed, Matron is the would-be seductress both of Williams's horrified Dr Tinkle in *Carry On Doctor* and his Dr Soaper in *Carry On Camping*. In one exchange in the former film, clad in a starched cap tied beneath the chin that aptly resembles the frills on a trussed-up crown roast chicken, she reminds Williams's prim surgeon of the sexual possibilities the older woman promises through a classic bit of *Carry On* vocal innuendo: 'Youngsters may be soft and tender but the older birds have more on them'. This somewhat lame line of dialogue is infinitely enhanced by Jacques's roguish delivery which brilliantly captures Matron's blend of authority, hope and delusion. Williams's response, foregrounded through the framing of his facial expression centre-screen as Matron retreats, is one of disgust combined with the residual awakening of something dangerously resembling desire.

Later in the same film, the large-bosomed Jacques, clad in a diaphanous black negligee, entices Tinkle into her bedroom and forces the reluctant medic onto her bed with the immortal lines 'I want to give you my all' to which he (inevitably) replies 'I don't want your all, I don't even want a little bit of you.' While this scene is within a timeworn tradition and seems initially to invite a collective shudder at middle-aged female desire and the excessive 'all' Matron offers, because Jacques invests the role with genuine romantic longing and dignity it is also imbued with the poignant recognition that for many 'matrons' romantic love was sacrificed to professional commitment.

The idea of Matron as a sexually frustrated figure because of such commitment is clearly central to this and many other scenes in the *Carry On* films which pivot on the ridicule of the unfulfilled and therefore desperate spinster. In *Carry On Camping*, for example, Matron offers herself to Williams

again, here playing Dr Soaper (but like Jacques's Matron, the character is all but indistinguishable from Dr Tinkle), and is cast as taking advantage of the camping trip's freeing up of the usual social restrictions to do so. The film sets up Matron's burgeoning desire in a series of scenes between them in which she alludes to the importance of protecting the chastity of the girls in their charge while (wilfully) misreading Soaper's words and intentions. These exchanges culminate in an encounter on the staircase of the youth hostel where the Chayste Place pupils are staying en route to the camp site. Matron, clad unbecomingly in a girlish combo of yellow t-shirt and pleated white gym skirt and accompanied by a 'mickey-mousing' tuba refrain on the soundtrack signifying her 'elephantine' footsteps, refers to a misunderstanding the night before in which Soaper had inadvertently found himself in her room. The frustrated but eager Matron coyly requests Soaper to 'be patient with me – I think you will find it is worth waiting for' to which Soaper's predictable rejoinder, accompanied by the habitual musical cue of the brass raspberry, is 'so is Christmas but I don't think you'll find me stuffing your turkey'. It becomes clear from Soaper's response (and Williams's curled lip) that he has every intention of carrying on camping.

### *The allure of excess*

As I have noted, Jacques's size was a key constituent of the meanings attached to the roles she played in the *Carry On* series and was often a substitute for any complexity in the writing, which invariably relied on sexist cliché and stereotypes. As with each of the *Carry On* 'regulars', existing cultural conventions and a narrow version of their star meanings stood in for character development. Fatness was often simplistically equated with 'overbearing harridan' and female characters were largely divided between the rudimentary antinomies of 'busty blonde' and 'battle-axe', which both Barbara Windsor and Jacques repeatedly found themselves occupying in the *Carry On* canon. Other female character actors and comediennes such as Esma Cannon, Joan Sims, Liz Fraser and Patsy Rowlands also featured regularly in a range of films across the series, some in the

'crumpet' roles later defined by Barbara Windsor (Liz Fraser and Joan Sims initially), others in variations on the harridan, the frustrated spinster, the sexually unappealing wife (Joan Sims in latter films) and the dotty old lady.

The simplicity of the stereotypes in the hospital-set *Carry On* films also owed much to the reductively sexualised discourses deployed around nurses and nursing identified by Terry Ferns and Irena Chojnacka (2005), and were clearly linked to cultural anxieties about bodily functions, gendered power and the fear underlying the physical attention nursing requires. And, as these writers point out, '[t]he *Carry On* series ...made a significant contribution to the concept of the "naughty nurse"' as well as the 'battle-axe' matron (2005: 1028), by reproducing and fixing such meanings and by establishing polarities around 'fat' and 'thin' women in relation to the threat they present to male power and certitude. Having started out as the 'love interest', Joan Sims was increasingly cast in 'frumpy and grumpy' roles in the later *Carry On* films as she aged and became plumper. Jacques, in contrast, occupied a significantly stable if not always simple set of character meanings throughout her career in the films.

There is, of course, a long and pervasive history of representing the overweight female body as a form of sexually grotesque comic excess in British popular culture, from the tradition of seaside postcards with their henpecked husbands and harridan wives via Hancock's disparagement of Griselda Pugh to the censored vulgarity of Roy 'Chubby' Brown. As I have indicated, Jacques's comic persona and career in 'low' comedy was both created and perhaps thwarted by these conventions. I Q Hunter posits that 'the fat body [is] luxuriously expansive and cheerfully Falstaffian' (2012: 167) in such cultural forms, as well as a site of transgression and disgust. The carnivalesque pleasure in excess characteristic of the 'low' comedy tradition may include delight in these bodies that do not conform to conventional norms of bourgeois respectability in significant ways, and the *Carry On* films are part of this tradition. However, such discourses are also highly gendered. While a male stand-up comedian performing his own routines such as Brown can both claim and disavow his

fatness in the masculine role of discursive subject, Jacques was primarily a comedy actress who performed material written by others in which she was largely (if not exclusively) the object not the subject of discourse.<sup>5</sup> And, to develop my earlier point, the fat female body on film is always already transformed from an object 'to be looked at' to an object 'to be laughed at,' to paraphrase Gray (1994:9). As Kathleen Rowe has rightly noted, the body of the fat woman is constructed as 'unruly' because of its excessive nature and its potential to threaten dominant power structures grounded in male physical superiority and bourgeois bodily containment: it is 'the *looseness* or lack of personal restraint her fatness implies, that most powerfully defines her' (1995:60). Yet Jacques as Matron remarkably seems to embody both the unruly – she is 'too big', 'too unconfined' – and its opposite, bourgeois restraint. Her bodily plenitude promises pleasure while her cultural authority refuses it.

Matron is both model of bourgeois rectitude in the 'public spaces' of hospital wards and corridors and the carrier of forbidden sexual desire in the private space of the bedroom. Her suburban respectability, noted above, also carries with it the mythical promise of a repressed and therefore potentially transgressive desire, in which Matron's starched white uniform always conceals a black negligee beneath. Indeed, Jacques was often perversely given space to articulate female desire and sexual pleasure in ways denied to other female cast members. While the characters played by Windsor were variations on the British notion of 'crumpet' – a giggly, constantly sexually available and compliant young working-class woman later epitomised by the *Sun* newspaper's 'Page 3 Girl' – Jacques's access to sexual agency in the films is ultimately greater because of her class, even if that agency is usually thwarted.<sup>6</sup> When Matron offers herself to Dr Tinkle in *Doctor*, for instance, the film permits a doubling of the discursive position, inviting the viewer to position him or herself not only with Tinkle's evident fear but also with Matron's desire. In this way, it does not simply and unreflexively rehearse the misogyny of disgust, but rather simultaneously permits Matron herself a degree of subjectivity.

The figure of Matron thus holds these two positions in tension. Jacques's body is a site both of carnivalesque excess *and* of bourgeois respectability and her star meanings frequently oscillate between these two discourses as the *Carry On* narrative unfolds. The debunking of Matron's authority through her 'defrocking' is a key moment towards the climax of each of the hospital-set films, for example, and represents the moment at which the Rabelaisian overturning of power is further mediated by the silencing of female authority. And yet, Jacques clearly condenses a nexus of meanings, desires and connotations that not only exceed these conventions but speak to a wider set of cultural concerns.

The unconventional glamour that was perhaps as important a component of Jacques's popularity as her comedic skills has been relatively neglected in both mainstream and scholarly assessments of her star meanings, despite evidence of her sex appeal. This was partially revised by the BBC 4 biopic, *Hattie* (BBC, 2011), which focused on Jacques's five-year affair with John Schofield, a charming cockney lorry driver who met her while moonlighting as a cabbie taking her to a charity event and who subsequently moved into the marital home she shared with her then husband, the comic actor John Le Mesurier. The film cast the contemporary comedienne Ruth Jones as Jacques and presents a powerful antidote to the dominant image of 'Matron' from its opening sequences in which Jones, glamorously clad first in a negligee and then a red velvet cocktail dress, and accompanied on the soundtrack by some well-chosen contemporary popular music ('The Good Life', 'Let There Be Love'), is depicted as a sexually vibrant woman.

However, while this revision offers a useful reimagining of the actress's importance within British popular culture and may even work to counteract the extent to which Jacques has been reduced to the matron stereotype in many media representations, it does so by reiterating a highly conventionalised and equally problematic approach to the female biographical subject. *Hattie's* narrative structure makes the romance with Schofield the pivotal event in Jacques's life and career: the film begins at the point when Jacques was already a household name as an established *Carry On*

and *Sykes* star, stages the meeting and subsequent blossoming of romance in some detail, and concludes with the end of their affair and Jacques's decline into despair. Subsequent events are told as the credits roll and the ideological emphasis is very evidently on the awakening of Jacques's hitherto unfulfilled sexuality by a 'bit of rough' from the East End.

Significantly, the biopic used the filming of *Carry On Cabby* (1963) as a parallel narrative to its account of Jacques's love affair, in which Jacques was cast in a role that differed in significant ways from the Matron template. Jacques's own favourite of the *Carry On* series (see Merriman 2007: 28), the film sees her character, Peggy Hawkins, setting up a rival all-female taxi company, Glamcabs, in order to force her workaholic cabdriver husband, Charlie (Sid James, for once given a different character name) to take notice of her. She not only proves that she can beat him at his own game by stealing business from underneath the noses of her spouse's employees, but in so doing persuades him that a life focused on work alone is unsatisfactory. Of course, in the *Carry On* tradition, the female drivers in their short, tightly tailored uniforms have an 'unfair advantage' since their incursion into the masculine public sphere of the taxi trade involves attracting custom from an exclusively male and implicitly heterosexual set of passengers for whom the sight of female legs is inherently titillating. Yet the film's message is one that retains some cultural power in an age of neo-liberal economics (and it is striking that a *Carry On* film should appear to present such an apparently 'progressive' theme in this context): Peggy and Charlie Hawkins learn that domestic companionship is more important than money and that co-operation is preferable to competition.

*Carry On Cabby* offered Jacques the opportunity to play against her established spinster 'Matron' persona and to cultivate the more alluring dimensions within her star meanings in important ways. It is one of the few film or TV texts in which she appears not only as a domestically competent and ultimately 'fulfilled' woman by conceiving a child at the conclusion, but it also permitted her to play a much more central and active role within the narrative than is found in the other *Carry Ons*. In contrast to the conventional punishment of 'Matron' for her transgressive desire, Peggy Hawkins is



rewarded with the return of her husband and the re-establishment of the conjugal household on more equal terms. Inevitably, this means that Peggy must cede economic power back to her husband in order to achieve domestic harmony and the film's conclusion lazily rearticulates the post-war hegemonic version of marriage. Nonetheless, it is perhaps the only *Carry On* film that permits its female characters to occupy a broader spectrum than the 'battle-axes' and 'blondes' stereotypes.

### *Carry On (and On) Matron*

Despite their low budgets, hackneyed scripts, limited world view and crude stereotyping, it is the *Carry On* films which have proved to be the most enduring vehicles for Jacques's career – and her afterlife as a cultural icon. Indeed, it is Jacques's embodiment of starch-capped certitude that continues to be affectionately if somewhat absurdly invoked as the symbol of a well-run hospital. Furthermore, because nursing is the woman's profession par excellence, with its emphasis on 'vocational zeal and self-sacrifice' (Hallam, 2005:105), the deployment and repetition of these tropes within the *Carry On* series has helped to rearticulate the conventional discourse of nursing as an extension of feminine competences and the figure of Matron as a safe repository for the nation's wellbeing.

The cultural longing for a Hattie Jacques shaped 'Matron' to restore national pride in the NHS thus appears to be a powerful imperative. Since they were phased out in favour of general managers in the 1960s, there has been a recurrent and sporadic clamour for hospital matrons to return across the political divide and perhaps most especially within the popular press. Remarkably, Hattie Jacques is frequently cited as the model of a proper matron, effectively conflating Jacques's fictional comic character with social history. In 2001, proposals by the Labour Government for a 'return of Matron' were even greeted unfavourably by the Royal College of Nursing on the grounds that Jacques's performance of the role represented a damaging stereotype that bore no resemblance to

the real responsibilities involved, yet this response had no discernible impact on the apparent desire for Matron's reappearance.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the news media has intermittently celebrated or begged for the 'return of Matron' for many years, almost invariably with nostalgic reference to Jacques and the *Carry On* films. In 2004 the Guardian columnist Mark Lawson claimed that 'standards of hygiene have slipped since Hattie Jacques ran NHS wards', while in 2008 *The Western Morning News* suggested the government should 'clone a Hattie Jacques-type matron to run a tight ship everywhere'. Further articles also calling for Matron's reappearance (it seems that, like King Arthur, 'Matron' is still slumbering and yet to actually return) have used stills from the *Carry On* series to illustrate their plea even when Jacques herself is not named in the text (see, for example, the Online Politics.co.uk for 6 January 2012). It seems that the image of Hattie Jacques is often itself sufficient to signify a lost golden age of the NHS without further elaboration.

This fixation with Jacques's 'Matron' as a symbol of both medical and moral hygiene and of a stable regime of national health parity is fascinating. It has often been observed that the NHS has a uniquely powerful resonance within British political culture and, indeed, within the national imaginary more generally. It has been described as 'the nearest thing England has to a religion' (by a Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, no less) and frequent and regular cultural references to the NHS's symbolic place within post-war British national identity can be found from its initial establishment in 1948 onwards. It was the subject of numerous comedy films in the 1950s and 1960s alongside the *Carry Ons* (such as *Twice Round the Daffodils*, 1962, and the 'Doctor' series, including *Doctor in the House*, 1954, *Doctor at Sea*, 1955, *Doctor at Large*, 1957, and *Doctor in Love*, 1960, all directed by Ralph Thomas), as well as TV sitcoms such as *Doctor in the House* (ITV, 1969 - 91) and *Only When I Laugh* (ITV, 1979 -82) and a major stage play, Peter Nichols's *The National Health* (1971), as well as Lindsay Anderson's satirical film, *Britannia Hospital* (1982), which overtly depicts the NHS as the nation in microcosm. It has also been the respectful subject of various TV dramas, most notably the long-running *Casualty* (BBC, 1986 - ) and its spin-off, *Holby City* (BBC, 1999 - ), both of which have approvingly foregrounded the ideological principles of socialised medicine in

storylines and themes. Jo Brand's 'verite' sitcom, *Getting On* (BBC, 2009 - 12), despite the blackness of the humour, is the most recent dramatic expression of this: the show emphasises the humane values underpinning nursing in the face of increasing bureaucracy and a brutalising targets culture (and Brand is, as an 'unruly woman', arguably a contemporary comedienne working within Jacques's shadow). Perhaps the most extraordinary example of this enduring relationship was the 2012 London Olympics Opening Ceremony directed by Danny Boyle, which depicted the NHS as the core of British national identity in a climactic sequence featuring real nurses clad in 1940s style uniforms jiving energetically as their 'patients' bounced up and down on 'hospital beds' in a spectacular (if incomprehensible to non-Britons) tribute.

Crucially, as Gray points out (1998: 94), the *Carry On* films, while relishing the opportunity that hospital-set narratives offered for lavatorial and scatological humour, also evinced a clear-minded respect for the socialised medicine provided by the NHS. The fictional *Carry On* world is generally egalitarian in aspiration insofar as it involves a levelling-down of social hierarchies, and the hospital films in particular show a strong emphasis on fairness and the overturning of class pretension or privileges. Kenneth Williams's snooty surgeons and consultants are invariably hoist by their own petard, for example, while upper and middle class patients are subject to physical indignities and humiliations or verbal ridicule. As Gray observes, 'in *Nurse*, for example, patients sing the praises of free treatment and the one character who chooses to pay is mocked for his snobbery...[and] it is taken for granted that nurses do a wonderful job.' (1998: 98). Thus, Wilfred Hyde White's demanding private patient is left with a daffodil as rectal thermometer in *Carry On Nurse*, while the self-regarding 'faith healer' Francis Bigger (Frankie Howerd) in *Carry On Doctor* is punished for his constant complaints about the nursing care he receives.

At the same time, the NHS is depicted as the carrier of the social limitations of British post-war society. It is bureaucratic, lumbering, riddled with class consciousness (the same class consciousness that permits the carnivalesque overturning of power), petty rivalries between professionals, and a

tendency to unnecessarily strict rules. Yet while these rules are usually depicted as being regulated by women in the comedy tradition noted above, whereby men's desire for social or sexual liberation is thwarted by female restrictions, the power wielded by Matron and her staff is, ultimately, recognised as benign. As Gray suggests, the *Carry On* films offered a cultural space in which women regularly appeared in professional careers and as authority figures in ways that were ultimately cast as positive even while the stereotype of the frustrated spinster mediated their representation (1998: 97). Paradoxically, the brisk competence with which these professional women administer indignities to hapless male patients underlines their professionalism and their commitment to a 'national good'.

Jacques's specific relationship with post-war popular culture and with 'female' professions and professional identities – nursing, office work, teaching - is therefore more complex than might be anticipated, as is her positioning in relation to marriage and heteronormativity. Indeed, her ability to turn stereotypical, potentially anti-feminist figures into sympathetic (and even incipiently proto-feminist heroines) through skilled and nuanced acting helped to secure cultural space for female subjectivity in otherwise unpromising material. Above all, it is as Matron that Jacques has been immortalised and continues to be encountered anew as subsequent generations of viewers are introduced to the *Carry On* films.<sup>8</sup> This iconic role clearly continues to resonate as a symbol of vocational commitment, feminine competence and professionalism. It also speaks powerfully to nostalgia for the apparent stability and greater social equality of post-war British society and especially the overt political commitment to the egalitarian principles of socialised medicine.

Unlikely though it would have seemed in 1958, the figure of Hattie Jacques as Matron in a series of low-budget, lowbrow comedies has accumulated an extraordinary cultural resonance within the national imaginary in a period when the principles of a free National Health Service are the site of considerable contestation and struggle. Perhaps the most appropriate response to this quirk of cultural history is therefore to raise a catheter in celebration and say: 'Carry on Hattie!'

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, frequent favourable reviews of Jacques's appearances in both plays and *ITMA* in various national and regional newspapers in the British Newspapers Archive:

<http://www.britishnewspapersarchive.co.uk>.

<sup>2</sup> *Hancock's Half Hour* was of course later turned into a BBC television series (1956-61).

<sup>3</sup> It is notable, for instance, that Joan Hickson only received star billing towards the end of her career when she was cast as Miss Marple in the BBC's respectful series of Agatha Christie adaptations featuring the eponymous sleuth in the 1980s.

<sup>4</sup> 31, if we include later entries to the series such as *Carry On Emmanuelle* (1978) and *Carry On Columbus* (1992), both seen as outside the 'canon' by some critics.

<sup>5</sup> But not always. In her stage career in the 1940s and 50s she wrote and performed her own material. Unfortunately, while the films and TV shows were recorded, the stage shows were not and Jacques's reputation is therefore likely to rest on the former.

<sup>6</sup> Having said this, it is important to note that Laraine Porter (1998) emphasises the sexual agency of the characters Windsor played throughout the series, pointing out that her bodily presence consistently disrupts and destabilises masculine certitude.

<sup>7</sup> See 'Nurses unhappy at return of matron,' *Sunday Herald*, 25<sup>th</sup> May, 2001, available at:

<http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/nurses-unhappy-at-return-of-matron-1.186504>.

<sup>8</sup> *Carry On* films are regularly screened in the UK on the cable comedy channel, Gold, as well as on the ITV network channels, and have thus continued to reach new audiences across all generations. My own BA Film Studies students are familiar with the films and the actors, although opinion is frequently divided as to their merits.