

ANARCHY AND MAGIC: FILM VERSIONS OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL MYTH

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Baroness Orczy's nationalistic hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel, first appeared in the theatre in 1903, in a novel in 1905, and in numerous short stories. There are a dozen full-length volumes in the Scarlet Pimpernel series, published from 1905 to 1940. They have been turned into films, cartoons and spoofs, a musical — even a children's ballet. This ability to cross genres, and the way each sheds light on our understanding of the pre-text(s), makes Orczy's creation an ideal study in remediation.

The Scarlet Pimpernel was originally conceived as the elusive leader of a league of titled heroes, all devoted to the aristocratic cause in the French Revolution. The stories were unashamedly elitist — their author was, after all, a Hungarian aristocrat — and they had clear links to Edwardian imperialist ideology. Yet the Scarlet Pimpernel story remains a potent force in popular culture. One of the reasons for this is the unique combination of myth, magic and anarchy that stems from its origins.

Many people's image of the Scarlet Pimpernel comes from film and television versions that portray him as the ultimate masked avenger (for example the 1999 BBC production starring Richard E. Grant), and/or as yet another swashbuckling hero. However, I would argue that these are the least effective adaptations of the myth. This paper will look at three films: Alexander Korda's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934), Leslie Howard's *Pimpernel Smith* (1940), and Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1950). These provide a unique insight into changing sensibilities before, during and after World War Two. They also retain echoes of the Scarlet Pimpernel's print origins as a story about anarchist plotters, and its links with the mystical chivalry and magic of Arthurian Romance. I trace these anarchic, mythical and magical elements, to give a new reading of what the Scarlet Pimpernel is 'about'.

It is a tribute to the success of the Scarlet Pimpernel myth that it is difficult to imagine the stories being set in any other period than the French Revolution. However — as my original research has revealed — Orczy's foppish, aristocratic eighteenth-century hero in fact made his first appearance in fiction as an anarchist revolutionary plotting against Tsarist Russia. This astonishing political and cultural transformation illustrates the lengths to which Orczy was prepared to go to please her

audience — and the spirit of these unlikely precursors survives in the Scarlet Pimpernel's adaptations.

The Scarlet Pimpernel's first incarnation — in a short story called 'The Red Carnation' (1898) — was as plain Eugen Borgensky, a nihilist Pole at the head of a secret band of men identified by the red carnations they wore in their buttonholes. They plot to assassinate the Russian Tsar, but the plot is foiled when Borgensky's wife puts herself between the Tsar and his would-be assassins.

His second incarnation, in 'The Sign of the Shamrock' (1903), was as an apparently dull and stupid Englishman, James Blakeney, who plans to raise an army to free the Poles from the Russians. Here, for the first time, Orczy experimented with the idea of an Englishman who becomes involved in foreign affairs through a mixture of altruism and a desire for revenge.

From plain Percy Blakeney, it was a small step to *Sir* Percy Blakeney, the hero of the Scarlet Pimpernel as we know him. Politically, socially, geographically, historically, these stories may seem to be radically different. The first two feature revolutionary anarchists — the third, an aristocrat who aims to rescue the victims of revolution. 'The Red Carnation' is set in *fin de siècle* Vienna; 'The Sign of the Shamrock' in London and Europe; *The Scarlet Pimpernel* in France under the reign of the *sansculottes* and Robespierre. But all share the idea of a secret band of men identified by a single flower, and there are many plot parallels and verbal echoes between the three versions of the story (Dugan, Appendix B).

The anarchist elements of the Scarlet Pimpernel's precursors clearly survive in all three adaptations I have chosen. In an extra scene inserted into Korda's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, we see a rooftop chase after one of the Scarlet Pimpernel's men yells out: 'Long live the King of France' just at the moment when a wagon-load of aristocrats are being taken to the guillotine. In the mob chaos that ensues, the aristocrats are loaded into a waiting cart, and Sir Percy — in the disguise of an old hag — gleefully rides off with them. In Powell and Pressburger's *The Elusive Pimpernel* — in many ways a tribute to the Korda version — Scarlet Pimpernel followers similarly create a diversion by climbing ladders and pelting pursuers with rotten apples. The boyish enthusiasm in each case suggests a delight in causing chaos.

Orczy's novels frequently use the metaphor of foxhunting to describe Scarlet Pimpernel rescues. As one of the Pimpernel's titled followers puts it: 'This is the finest sport I have yet encountered — Hair-breadth escapes...the devil's own risks! — Tally ho! — and away we go!' (*Scarlet Pimpernel* 37). Of course, in twenty-first century Britain,

where foxhunting has been made illegal, it could be said to be an anarchic activity — but I would argue that this has always been the case. As Linda Colley has pointed out, hunting in the form that we now know it is a late eighteenth-century ‘invented tradition’, enabling ‘elite males [to proclaim] their social utility, while at the same time enjoying themselves enormously’ (172). Huntsmen could ride wherever they pleased, taking little account of property ownership, in the name of ridding the countryside of vermin. The rituals of the hunt, and the carving up of Britain into hunting ‘territories’, mask its essentially anarchic nature. So the emphasis on skilled horsemanship in both the Korda and the Powell and Pressburger films link as much to this as to the more familiar screen cliché of the Western. Those mad horse chases may be gentlemanly anarchism, but it is still anarchism.

Orczy’s favoured candidate for the part of Sir Percy in the Korda film was Ronald Colman, who counted among his best-known roles that of Raffles, the gentleman burglar (Orczy, ‘Letter to Korda’). Raffles — who first appeared in print in 1899 — lives by a gentlemanly code of honour that deems a bouncing cheque more dishonourable than theft (Hornung 10). His specious self-justification — that ‘the distribution of wealth is very wrong to begin with’ (Hornung 21) — puts him, like Robin Hood, outside the law. However, his strongly anarchic tendencies are matched by an equally strongly held antipathy to violence as ‘a confession of terrible incompetence’ (Hornung 129). Orczy’s hero shares this antipathy.

The public perception of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* as just another swashbuckler can be dated back to adaptations such as *The Triumph of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1928). Here, spectacle takes over to produce scenes that would have been anathema to Orczy. One of the last of the British silent movies, the film’s spirit survives in its American alternative title — *The Scarlet Daredevil* — and in a graphic account by Matheson Lang of its filming (169–73). Lang, who came to the role of Sir Percy fresh from screen adventures as a highwayman, was described by *The Times* as one of those actors ‘who can wear the cloak and wield the sword’ (‘King’s Highway’ 8). His swashbuckling powers were showcased in a climactic fight orchestrated by the American director, T. Hayes Hunter, on a specially constructed staircase stretching the height of the studio. In the best tradition of Errol Flynn and Douglas Fairbanks Senior, Lang takes on ten *gendarmes* single-handed and kills them all. This display of violence runs completely counter to Orczy’s conception of the English gentleman.

By contrast, all three of my chosen ‘translations’ of the Scarlet Pimpernel myth are notable for their aversion to violence. Korda’s

Scarlet Pimpernel may have been the most expensive production ever mounted by London Films (Melman 271). However the money went into heritage movie-style lavish sets and costumes rather than fight choreography. Sue Harper has rightly stressed Korda's sound commercial instincts in capitalising on popular interest in the Regency period as 'the apotheosis of style' (26). He added scenes to highlight the sartorial theme and created extravagant settings for the great set-pieces, such as Lord Grenville's Ball. This turns into a fashion parade when the guests — who include the playwright Sheridan — glide up a central staircase as the camera pans slowly around the scene. The costume designs by B.J. Simmons — including multiple changes for the main characters — can be seen at the Harry Ransom Centre. Colours are carefully specified, despite the film being shot in black and white; the men wear absurdly high collars and a pencilled note specifies that Sir Andrew Ffoulkes should wear 'tight, close-fitting' breeches (Costume, Box 411.5: SK-L-47). This detail would emphasise his height, in line with Orczy's concept of the tall Englishman as opposed to the diminutive Frenchman.

An extra scene shows Sir Percy's wife, Marguerite, sitting for the fashionable portrait painter, Romney, the luxurious setting contrasting starkly with the grime and chaos of the streets of Paris. Marguerite is depicted as the archetypal lady of leisure, eating bonbons concealed in a basket of flowers as she speculates on the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Her Gallic gestures conform to the expected stereotype of the Frenchwoman; indeed, these are the only clue to her national origin. Like her rescued friend, Suzanne de Tournay, she speaks perfect English. This suggests the extent to which both women lose their individuality to become honorary Englishwomen. They are costume drama foils for the men whose anarchic daredevil exploits are charted in loving detail.

Korda draws on the conventions of both the romance and the Western in his use of a rooftop chase, dark moonlit nights and dramatic horseback scenes. However, the violence that is an inextricable part of the Western is carefully separated from the Scarlet Pimpernel's activities by another episode that does not appear in the novel: the boxing match. By showing the Prince of Wales and his circle going to watch a fight featuring the Jewish boxer Daniel Mendoza, Korda accomplishes several important pieces of cultural work. He provides a spectacle to ensure the engagement of male and female audiences alike, while making Sir Percy only an onlooker, not a participant in violence. He also counters Orczy's anti-Semitism. Korda was himself a Jew, and he was catering for an international 1930s audience. It is hardly surprising that he should have changed Orczy's original ending, with its stereotype of the grasping

Jewish horse-trader, Reuben Goldstein. The addition of this extra scene early on in the film also presents a potentially powerful image of inclusion. The figure of the Jewish boxer as a working-class hero, fighting his way out of inner-city deprivation, would have powerful resonances in the first half of the twentieth century (Schulberg xi). However, any such message is overwhelmed by the film's overall emphasis on the upper classes; the boxing simply provides background spectacle and entertainment.

The original American director, Rowland Brown, was sacked after a day for making the movie too violent. 'Like a gangster film' was Raymond Massey's memory of Korda's words (Massey 187). In true Orczy tradition, Korda's Sir Percy fights the French with nothing more lethal than a talent for disguise and native wit. A pistol appears briefly in his hands towards the end of the film, but no shot is fired. In Powell and Pressburger's *The Elusive Pimpernel*, this scene is given an added twist when Sir Percy pockets his pistol with a smile, telling Chauvelin (the French villain): 'We never load them'.

Leslie Howard, who played Sir Percy in Korda's film, and the lead character in *Pimpernel Smith* was himself the personification of peaceable eccentricity. In private, he was a fanatically keen horse-rider. Filming was frequently re-arranged so he could go riding — either at home on his Surrey estate, or at clubs around the Home Counties (Leslie Ruth Howard 197). According to C.A. Lejeune, he was known locally as 'the mad fellow with the polo ponies'; he kept sixteen of them, with a Californian polo-player and a Texan cowboy to train them (341). His own life reflected his portrayal of Sir Percy Blakeney as a split personality, able to switch from inanity to profundity at a second's notice.

With the advent of the Second World War, Howard's public persona became increasingly serious. Nevertheless, there was still room for a celebration of anarchic individualism. His most prominent wartime role was in 'Britain Speaks', a series of BBC broadcasts that his son, Ronald, suggested ought to have been called 'Britain Pleads' (Leslie Howard 152). Aired from the time of the Battle of Britain onwards, these were aimed at encouraging the United States to enter the war. In a series of word pictures, Howard painted a scene of bomb-devastated cities, and a green and pleasant countryside dotted with pill boxes and tank traps. However, his description of a visit to a fighter station mess conveyed a sense of the same devil-may-care attitude of members of Orczy's League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. 'You feel that if only you could live for the rest of the war among these smiling men in blue that you would

never know another moment of depression', he wrote, 'it seems they never stop laughing' (Leslie Howard 252).

Laughter and creative anarchy were key ingredients in *Pimpernel Smith*. Here, Howard acted as both director and star, transferring the Pimpernel's adventures from revolutionary France to Nazi Germany. His double involvement emphasizes the film's propaganda function — but, as his son points out, it was not really a war film at all. As he put it: 'It dealt not with blows or blood [but was] a kind of metaphysical essay in gamesmanship: the rigid-minded Nazi professional against the sporting English amateur, the bludgeon versus the butterfly' (Leslie Howard 99). As in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, violence was on the margins; the main emphasis was on the juxtaposition of English individualism and creativity against German inflexibility.

Howard plays the role of an eccentric Cambridge don who carries out Pimpernel-style rescues under cover of an 'archaeology expedition' to Nazi Germany. English humour is seen as his secret weapon, and he has a habit of reciting Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky* at key moments. As he tells the Gestapo chief, the corpulent Von Graum, *Jabberwocky* is a poem that 'means whatever you want it to' — a celebration of individualism that is seen as anathema to the rigid and humourless German. By invoking it when he later escapes from the German authorities, the poem becomes transformed into an anthem of freedom as potent as the National Anthem was for Orczy's readers.

Pimpernel Smith was a landmark film, credited with inspiring the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg to rescue thousands of Hungarian Jews. In the United States, it was released as *Mister V* (1942). The idea of Smith as a common name perhaps did not translate so well into the American idiom; equally the Churchillian 'V for Victory' sign had a potent popular appeal. However, the advertising slogan 'The Elusive Mister V — He's Everywhere!' invokes key mythical and magical elements in the *Scarlet Pimpernel* pre-texts. Most obviously, it refers to the jingle that had originally been written by Orczy's husband, Montagu Barstow, for the stage play:

We seek him here, we seek him there
 Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.
 Is he in heaven? — Is he in hell?
 That demmed, elusive Pimpernel?
 (*Scarlet Pimpernel* 117)

However, it also invokes the idea of the supernatural — an essential element in Orczy's conception of the *Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Aldgate and Richards, in their study of *Pimpernel Smith*, suggest that Howard represented to wartime audiences a ‘fey, mystical quality’ also found in the music of Elgar, the poetry of Rupert Brooke and the exploits of ‘soldier–mystics’ such as Laurence of Arabia (54). The Scarlet Pimpernel in his original incarnation may not have had such a cerebral brand of mysticism, but Orczy’s conception definitely incorporated this element. In her autobiography, she tells how Sir Percy Blakeney appeared to her in a vision on the London Underground. ‘I saw him in his exquisite clothes, his slender hands holding up his spy glass,’ she wrote, ‘I heard his lazy drawling speech, his quaint laugh’ (*Links* 97).

While film versions give him an armoury of disguises — false noses, wigs, masks and the rest — Orczy’s early novels gave few clues as to how her hero achieved his astonishing transformations. The reason is simple: she expected her readers to take on trust the idea that an English gentleman could work magic. Her hero’s immateriality links him to the mystical knights of Arthurian romance, and to Jesus Christ.

Orczy’s most faithful illustrator was H. M. Brock. The cover he provided for *Story–Teller* magazine, May 1916, shows this idea of the Scarlet Pimpernel as a superhuman, if not supernatural, figure. The picture shows a pair of astonished French guards, dwarfed by a giant figure with a giant ghostly shadow behind him. The caption reads: ‘Before those four men had had time to jump to their feet, the Scarlet Pimpernel had bounded across the room’.

Brock’s illustration uses the idea of the extreme height of the Englishman compared to the diminutive Frenchmen — a trope that is found throughout Orczy’s stories — but also conveys the sense of a larger–than–life yet elusive being. This was picked up in the United Artists publicity for Korda’s film. Predictably, the images laid most stress on the romance plot between Leslie Howard and Merle Oberon, the love story against the background of revolutionary chaos. However, the text suggests closer links to Orczy’s story in the sentence: ‘More feared than an army...this *phantom* adventurer was sharper than the guillotine he robbed!’.

Korda was very keen to stay close to the pre–text of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, as illustrated by his request to Orczy that she write a scenario for the film. The problem was that, due to a lengthy copyright wrangle over the film rights, he asked for a scenario that included new events, rather than the original ones. This proved impossible, and Orczy wrote to Korda:

There are incidents in the book that it would be rank folly to omit or to alter. The public would never stand it, and you as the producer would have the same worry you had over the casting of the title role: namely ‘this is all very well, but it is not *our* Scarlet Pimpernel’.¹

This use of ‘our’, and the idea of ‘the public’ united in appreciation of a national hero, evokes Benedict Anderson’s idea of an ‘imagined community’. Anderson makes a crucial link between war and the conceptualizing of a nation as a ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ that ignores actual inequalities. As he puts it: ‘Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings’ (9). Korda’s film — like Orczy’s novels — can be seen as helping to create the emotional climate that made it possible for Britain to go to war; not only in its creation of an imagined community, but in its implicit suggestion that the British have a supernatural invincibility.

Korda’s opening scene, showing the changing of the guard in 1792, creates the illusion of a happily stratified society. The Prince of Wales is seen looking down on the assembled populace from an upstairs window, to cheers from the assembled populace. In the centre of the parade is a trio of dark, turbaned musicians, invoking the idea of the British Empire. This is then contrasted with the chaotic scenes round the guillotine in Paris, where we see the *tricoteuses*, knitting furiously and screaming lustily as each head falls. We see the aristocratic victims, who are portrayed sympathetically.

Taking his cue from Orczy, Korda’s film loads the visual dice in favour of the aristocracy. Aristocrats are portrayed as exceptionally beautiful; the revolutionaries as exceptionally ugly. Maurice Elvey, who directed the silent film movie, *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1919), had surrounded his aristocrats with an ethereal glow. Korda similarly used filters in close-up views of Leslie Howard and Merle Oberon, emphasizing their idealised beauty — but also, particularly in Leslie Howard’s case, suggesting an other-worldliness.

This links to the idea of Sir Percy (the Scarlet Pimpernel) as supernatural being, and is embodied in the plot by the way he regularly cheats death. This climaxes with the penultimate scene, where he apparently goes to his death by firing squad — then suddenly re-materialises, making his arch-enemy, Chauvelin, think he is seeing a ghost. In fact, it turns out that the ‘firing squad’ was made up of his own men — but the audience is momentarily led to think, along with Chauvelin, that they are seeing a Christ-like resurrection.

Similarly, the Leslie Howard character in *Pimpernel Smith* — who is known as ‘the Shadow’ — has Christ-like elements. The Swedish scholars Furhammer and Isaksson suggest a parallel with Christ’s passion in a scene where Smith disguises himself as a scarecrow and is shot by a German concentration camp guard (228). They see the arm wound that later reveals his secret identity to his students as a version of Christ’s stigmata.

To this interpretation could be added Smith’s faithful disciples, his ability to appear and disappear at will — and the hint of a second coming at the end when he dematerialises in a wisp of smoke with the lines: ‘I shall be back — we shall *all* be back’. However, I would argue that the scarecrow — besides being reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) — also invokes another important archetype from popular culture: that of the clown. The camera homes in on the rigid painted smile on the ‘scarecrow’s’ hessian head as it turns to observe the action, and on the blood trickling down the sleeve after the shooting. Like tears on a clown’s face, this blood indicates the human being under the mask. It also presents a powerful visual image of the comic as a secret weapon.

Despite his Christ-like status, his cultured tones and his membership of the intelligentsia, Horatio Smith — the Leslie Howard character — describes himself as ‘a very ordinary person’. That this comment is made to an American student, with whom he has developed a relationship of mutual respect, emphasises the propagandist message of the film. It also indicates the democratisation of the Pimpernel myth.

Leslie Howard has been described as the ‘Englishman’s Englishman’ (Aldgate and Richards 44–75). His last public appearance — appropriately enough for a national hero — was in the role of Nelson in a pageant outside St Paul’s Cathedral. He died in 1943 when Germans shot down a civilian plane carrying him to a British Council mission in Portugal. Rumours that the Germans had mistaken him for Churchill, or that he himself was truly the target, contributed to the myth surrounding the man (Leslie Ruth Howard 177; Leslie Howard 129). The film critic C. A. Lejeune described him as ‘a symbol to the British people [who] had, and always will have, a very special place in his country’s affections’ (Morgan 89).

This made it very difficult for anyone to follow him in the roles that he had made his own: the Scarlet Pimpernel in Korda’s graceful homage to Orczy’s text, and the Pimpernel as a more democratic paradigm of multinational resistance, in *Pimpernel Smith*. So when Powell and Pressburger tried to rework Korda’s film with David Niven in the title role, it was a critical disaster. *The Times* described Niven making his first entrance ‘looking like the Dame in some nightmare pantomime’, a

criticism that summed up the film's identity problem ('New Films' 6). Powell had wanted to make a musical, aware that there was no simple return to pre-war nostalgia, and editorial tensions between the co-producers, Korda and Sam Goldwyn, led to a protracted legal battle.

Robert Stam writes of the 'productive tensions' between the magical and mimetic traditions when adapting novels (3). The fundamental problem with Powell and Pressburger's *Elusive Pimpernel* was that it couldn't decide which tradition the Scarlet Pimpernel belonged to. Taking it on the literal level, membership of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel was recast for a more egalitarian age so that not *all* Sir Percy's followers were aristocrats. But this rather misses the point that they are intended to be a chivalric band, the Sir Galahads of their time, in which case they should all have a title.

Not even Powell and Pressburger's admirers would claim *The Elusive Pimpernel* was their greatest film, and if you want to see it you have to go to the British Film Institute's archives; it is not available on DVD. However, in at least one respect, it suggests a way forward — in its use of the supernatural and magic. Like Korda's film, its penultimate scene has Sir Percy cheating death and making an apparently ghostly appearance; similarly there is a moment when he is fired at, and he dematerialises in a puff of smoke. But the most spectacular moment is when Chauvelin is tricked into sniffing pepper, he sneezes, and the screen dissolves into ever more extravagant Technicolor fireworks.

This is the Scarlet Pimpernel as magical realist fantasy. With the decline of the metanarratives round which Orczy's story was constructed, I would suggest this use of its mythical and fantastic elements — together with a recapturing of its anarchic spirit — can produce a fairy tale for the twenty-first century.

NOTES

¹ Baroness Emmuska Orczy, 'Letter to Alexander Korda' (Undated). I am grateful to the Harry Ransom Center and to AP Watt Ltd on behalf of Sara Orczy-Barstow Brown for permission to publish this quotation.

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