

Women in  
British Cinema

*Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know*

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SUE HARPER



RETHINKING BRITISH CINEMA

# Women in British Cinema

# Rethinking British Cinema

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## **Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know**

Sue Harper

CONTINUUM  
London and New York

Continuum  
Wellington House, 125 Strand, London WC2R 0BB  
370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6503

First published 2000  
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**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-8264-4732-5 (hardback)  
0-8264-4733-3 (paperback)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Harper, Sue

Women in British cinema: mad, bad and dangerous to know /  
Sue Harper.

p. cm.—(Rethinking British cinema)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8264-4732-5 (hb)—ISBN 0-8264-4733-3 (pb)

1. Women in the motion picture industry—Great Britain.
2. Women in motion pictures.

I. Title. II. Series.

PN1995.9.W6 H28 2000  
384'.8'0820941—dc21

99-086631  
CIP

Typeset by York House Typographic, London  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

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## Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the British Academy, which funded this research with travel money and with a grant from the Research Leave Scheme. I should also like to thank the History Research Centre at the University of Portsmouth, which generously provided me with funds for teaching relief and travel. Fergus Carr, the head of the School of Social and Historical Studies at Portsmouth, has been supportive of my research throughout.

Staff have been most helpful at a range of libraries: the Frewin Library at the University of Portsmouth, the Public Record Office and the British Library. I am particularly indebted to staff at the British Film Institute Library, who have been patient with my often importunate demands. Special thanks to Janet Moat and Saffron Parker at the BFI's Special Collections, and to staff at the National Film Archive.

I should like to thank Manchester University Press for permission to reuse some material from an article I wrote in Gledhill and Swanson's *Nationalising Cinema: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*. Stills were provided by the BFI Stills Department and my own collection, and acknowledgements are due to Canal + Image, Carlton International and Hammer Film Productions for permission to use them.

I am grateful to Jonathan Balcon for giving me permission to consult the Aileen and Michael Balcon Collection at the BFI. Thanks too to the custodians of the BECTU Archive (housed at the BFI), who have allowed me access to the interviews I needed. I am grateful to Wendy Toye and the late Jill Craigie for talking to me; it was a real privilege.

One of Dr Johnson's best apophthegms was, 'Sir, a man should keep his friendships in good repair.' I have been very fortunate in my friends and colleagues, and it seems to me that they have kept me in good repair (rather than vice versa) during the writing of this book. All the people named below have given me information, or painstakingly read over drafts. I should like to thank Tony Aldgate, Russell Baldwin, Tim Bergfelder, Sue Bruley, James Chapman, Pam Cook, Rajinder Kumar

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dudrah, Laurie Ede, Alan Everatt, Mark Glancy, Robbie Gray, Adrian Hill ('Sammy – could it be Wedding Bells?'), Searle Kochberg, Verena Wright Lovett, Madeleine Mason, John Moore, Robert Murphy, Lucy Noakes, Betty Owen, Ray Pettitt, Jeffrey Richards, Brigitte Rollet, Jason Smith, Andrew Spicer, Elizabeth Tuson and Linda Wood. Marilynne Hunt reminded me at a crucial juncture whose book it really was: 'However high a bird may soar, it must sooner or later perch on a tree top, to enjoy quiet.'

Sometimes writing this book has felt like going over Niagara in a barrel. I want to mention two friends who have kept me afloat, though there can be no adequate thanks for all they have done. Viv Chadder, who takes many intellectual risks herself, has listened to my daily telephone wails of despair over the project. While sharing with me some of her own Millennial Anxieties, she has been unfailingly supportive. Vincent Porter has been incredibly helpful. He read through the whole project, tightened it up, stimulated fresh ideas and helped with factual errors.

Finally I want to thank my family for putting up with the domestic maelstrom occasioned by this book. My mother Josephine Harper knows (none better) why it had to be written. My husband Walter Ditmar was heroically tolerant, and helped in more ways than I can say.

The book is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Florence Amy Rockley (1900–95). She loved 'the Pictures'.

It is common to end acknowledgements with a kind of benediction. Instead, I should like to end mine with an imprecation – a 'curse from the mouth of womanhood', as Elizabeth Barrett Browning puts it. May all those wither who have imperilled the creativity of others. May the Froth Be With Them.

There be four things that are little upon the earth, but they are  
exceeding wise:  
The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in the  
summer;  
The conies are but a feeble folk, yet they make their houses in the  
rocks;  
The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands;  
The spider taketh hold by her hands, and is in kings' palaces.

(Proverbs 30:24–28)

## Introduction

This book is both modest and ambitious. It refers exclusively to British cinema, and to the 'woman question' within it. In one sense, therefore, its focus is narrow. Hopefully there are infinite riches to be found in a little room, since my aim is to chart substantial transformations: the ebb and flow of mainstream representations of women from 1930 to 1990, and also the contribution made by women to British films. Such a large undertaking might seem foolhardy, and probably is so. But nothing venture, nothing gain.

Of course, much work on women in British cinema has already been done, and I hope to build on that, giving due cognizance to other people's work. However, I shall not waste much time on critical *frottage* – that engagement in so-called controversies which adds nothing to the sum of historical knowledge, but only to citation indexes. That is just a sort of academic 'feeding frenzy'. The time is ripe for a fresh look at the big issues – at the way in which the raw material of women's bodies and experiences can be variously shaped by the film industry, and at the relative strengths and weaknesses of women as players in the cultural game. We have scarcely begun to write a history which will chart the broad sweep of the representation of women in British cinema, and offer an explanation for its richness and variety. Nor has there been a detailed comparison of male and female cinematic creativity in this field. Shulamith Firestone valuably noted that

an exploration of the strictly female reality is a necessary step to correct the warp in a sexually biased culture. It is only after we have integrated the dark side of the moon into our world view that we can begin to talk seriously of universal culture. (Firestone, 1971, p. 189)

These are radical words, but they are salutary. This book aims to make the 'dark side of the moon' visible, and to ensure that, in the history of British cinema, woman is no longer the Dark Continent.

With such a broad remit, some organizing principles need to be made explicit. I choose to concentrate on feature films and fictional shorts, rather than documentaries, since the latter have a different history and social meaning. Since this is a 'grand narrative', a balance will have to be struck between interpretations and historical facts. The latter can never be neutral, since they have always been selected with a particular problem in mind. This book has been researched using revisionist methods – that is to say, using official documents, manuscript materials, interviews, studio publicity handouts and so on. But a satisfying account needs to combine such methods with textual analysis, and to be unafraid of making judgements about aesthetic quality. Moreover, just because the material is scholarly, there is no need for it to be dry. It is appropriate in a work of this kind to develop a 'buxom' style – a sinuous, moist, fruity manner which is capable of irreverence and humour.

Such a broad canvas must perforce make omissions, though some of them are deliberate. Not every key text or film-maker has had proper attention; with world enough and time, I suppose it might have been possible. It would have been nice, too, to draw a map of female film taste, and I have begun the task elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> But in the end I decided that a proper review of female audience response would unbalance the book, whose chief preoccupation is female creativity. In pursuit of my own creativity, I decided to abandon the notion of symmetry, and to be led by the richness of the evidence. Chapters are therefore of unequal length, according to the amount of new material I have found to excavate. But anyway, it is pointless to insist that all sections of a work can be equally weighted. Many an intellectual enterprise has been scuppered through a zeal for symmetry. And many an academic one too.

I shall avoid the comforts offered by orthodox theories. It would be convenient if the varieties in narrative forms could be completely accounted for by explanatory paradigms such as the Carnavalesque, the Monstrous-Feminine or the Unruly Woman. Such models are seductive because they impose order onto otherwise intractable material, but they do not help us to distinguish between the complexities of different texts, genres or periods.

This book rests on two convictions: first, that film is an industrial as well as a cultural product, in which the film text is the result of struggles that took place before and during its production. And second, it rests on a belief in the absolute nature of sexual difference, which is the condition

for entry into the symbolic order, the universe of meaning. The dynamic relationship between these two convictions is what informs both parts of the book, and sets the whole thing in motion.

I want to be eclectic and pragmatic in my method. Part I of the book is entitled 'Mainstream Representations' and is divided up by decade. This can be a problem, since cultural history does not necessarily occur in neat ten-year cycles. I shall buttress my analysis by reference to the economic and legislative constraints of the industry in each period, and will categorize film production in terms of what I see as the prevailing *agency* of the period. That is to say, in the 1930s and 1940s the production company operated as the ultimate determinant of the ways in which women functioned in film texts. In the 1950s, it was the distribution company; in the 1960s, the director. In the 1970s and 1980s, it became an unpredictable *mélange* of different types of agency.

Of course, film culture never reflects social reality. It responds in a selective way and according to its own inner laws, which change radically over quite short periods of time. Cinematic representations of women (or any other social group) are simply the traces left by the struggles for dominance during the production process – by the contest for creative control. We should not, therefore, judge films according to the extent that they replicate 'real life'. Rather, we should judge them by the coherence of their world-view, and the competence of the artistic discourses embedded within them. This may sometimes lead us to uncomfortable conclusions. For example, films expressing traditional gender values can often be stunningly beautiful: consider the seaside scene in *The Edge of the World* (1937), as the women sing and the child lies in its mother's arms. In addition, films which are artistically unexceptionable can often be morally loathsome – the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable (the 1960 *Peeping Tom*, for example). Some films can operate like a Maori *haka* – they are intended to intimidate the opposition before the contest or viewing begins. There is a category of 'masculinist texts' whose business is the keel-hauling of recalcitrant females, and the historian must decide what proportion of the overall output of a period can be characterized in this way. Then the colour, shape and pattern of the sexual politics of a particular film culture can be established.

Part II of the book concentrates on Women's Work, exploring the intervention women made in the production process, and the way in which female creativity generated different sorts of settlement with the

industry. Parts I and II are set in dialectical relationship to each other: one is structured diachronically, the other synchronically. The reader can come to conclusions about the meaning of the relationship between them, which may be different from my own.

Part II is divided into different professions – women scriptwriters, costume designers, directors and so on – but I have only selected those which I could fashion into a coherent linear narrative. There were hundreds of women involved in film production whose history is impossible to write. Secretaries, for example, have at all times been the grease which oiled the studio machine, yet there is very little surviving evidence about their labour and its complexities. The secretary of one 1930s Gainsborough producer had to learn

the art of buying, for it was left to me to choose gifts for the stars, and in one week to find a house for an Austrian film director, help furnish it, to make a heart of primroses to put on his little girl's pillow the first night of her arrival from Vienna, and to produce for his nursemaid an abortionist as quickly as possible.<sup>2</sup>

But the importance of secretaries was so minimal that few people thought to document them. The same goes for women's work in continuity. This area was regarded as a female prerogative, with all its attendant lack of status. Martha Robinson, one of the most experienced continuity girls, noted in 1937 that the job

is extremely important, but deals with the kind of details that appear insignificant. This apparent insignificance is made the most of by the men. In a typically good-humoured way they keep the Continuity Girl 'in her place'. Her various duties are regarded with tolerant scorn. She is subjected to leg-pulling even at her most harassed moments. Difficulties are wickedly put in her way, and information is withheld with an air of bland innocence.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the British film industry contained exceptional, powerful women who ploughed their own furrow but did not set up a professional dynasty. Jenia Reisser was casting director for *Romulus*. Olive Dodds became head of the Contract Artists' Department at Rank, and Molly Terraine ran the Rank Charm School with such a firm hand that she customized all the accents. She was

a very formidable lady. She would insist on this plummy accent

whatever their natural accent was. They came in all shapes and sizes but they all had to be ironed into this flat tone. I don't know whether it was what the producers and directors wanted, but it was what they got.<sup>4</sup>

Such women left clear tracks of their work, but they were eccentric individuals and we cannot imbricate them into a coherent professional narrative.

In an interview with me, the great director Wendy Toye suggested that if there were lacunae in the patterns of women's employment in the industry, it was simply that no women had thought those jobs important enough to struggle for; if women wanted to enter any particular cinematic profession, then they could. While I have the utmost respect for Miss Toye, I do wonder about this. We have to account for the absence of women as sound engineers or camera operators or lighting cameramen, until they performed these tasks in their own films in the 1970s. Doubtless union intransigence had something to do with it. But we also have to consider whether habits of production and management militated against certain kinds of female creativity. Freddie Young suggested that the British system worked by having 'star' cameramen who brought their chosen team of personnel with them, some of whom would be trained up in due course (Young and Petzold, 1972, pp. 23–39). Such a system was virtually impervious to outsiders, especially when they were of the awkward gender. Some areas in British cinema were run as a virtual closed shop until the late 1960s: the composition of musical scores, for example. The only woman to do any musical work in cinema until recently was Elizabeth Lutyens, who had scored documentaries from 1944. Lutyens had a healthy pragmatism about her craft: 'It's a form of musical journalism which can be excellent of its sort, like an enormously good and interesting article in a paper. In contrast, lyric poetry is written with a trust in a long future.'<sup>5</sup> She came into her own in the 1960s, specializing in composing for horror films such as *Paranoiac* (1962) and *Dr Terror's House of Horrors* (1964). Lutyens's work for such low-budget projects is adventurous, self-reflexive and often works contrapuntally to the script.

I decided not to have a discrete section on actresses, since it seems to me that, although they were called upon to play a broad range of stereotypes, the degree of autonomy they had in most periods was too limited to allow

performance style to be elevated into a separate category. Hence I have studied actresses' work in Part I rather than in Part II. Every period contains recognizable social stereotypes (the flapper, the bluestocking, the sex kitten) which are the result of historically specific constraints, and which are determined by shifting definitions of class identity and respectability. Cultural forms do not reflect these stereotypes; rather, they engage with them, sometimes critically, sometimes tangentially. Just as there is an ebb and flow of social stereotypes, so codes and patterns of representation shift too. In British, as in other national cinemas, there are discrete 'clusters' of gender types, which develop and dissolve over quite short periods of time, and vary according to their topicality and intensity. Some have deeper cultural roots than others. I have tried to sketch the ways in which different female types were invented in the industry, and the degrees of rigour with which it enforced them.

Let us begin, then, to sew the quilt, placing the red female cloth judiciously in the pattern – sometimes at the edge, sometimes at the centre, and sometimes not there at all.

### Notes

1. Harper (1994); Harper and Porter (1996, 1999); Porter and Harper (1998).  
Another field ready to be tilled is a history of British women film critics – not just the big figures like Dilys Powell and C. A. Lejeune, but lesser-known ones like E. Arnot Robinson, Freda Bruce Lockhart and Catherine de la Roche.
2. Unpublished autobiography of Grace Slater, in the possession of the author. Miss Slater refused to procure the abortionist. Quoted by permission of her family.
3. See Robinson (1937), pp. 34–5, and the BECTU interviews with Doris Martin and Betty Bigsworth in the BFI Library.
4. BECTU interview with Sheila Collins, production co-ordinator in the 1950s.
5. Interview with Lutyens in *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1974.

PART I  
MAINSTREAM REPRESENTATIONS

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## The 1930s: Chaos and Opportunity

It has been fashionable to characterize British society in the 1930s as fragmented, riven by contradictory notions about class and national identity. However, the 1930s can be interpreted as a period in the painful process of establishing a consensus about the significance of World War I and about (small) changes in class composition. Certainly, the cultural and social forms of the 1930s are a great deal more homogeneous than is commonly thought. The economic difficulties of the period – the failure of protectionist measures, the difficulties of internationalist interventions, the deteriorating business situation – preoccupied opinion leaders far more than constructing debates about women.

British film-makers of the period were much more interested in profiting from the volatile economic situation than in constructing a coherent response to any cultural, social or sexual change. The ‘Klondike era’ of British film production was characterized by flexibility, informality and financial crisis. Studios were acutely prone to market fluctuation, and they depended on the instincts (and often personal collateral) of their producers. Entrepreneurialism was the *raison d’être* of the industry, and expedience drove some film-makers to sharp practice. In order to avoid paying royalties or performing rights, they were prepared to invent tunes on the spot (Carstairs, 1942, p. 17). To evade paying union rates to actors, smaller companies would cast electricians or clapper-boys in quite important speaking roles (Hurst, n.d., p. 95). Some producers would shift props in their own cars to save removal fees (Grantley, 1954, p. 163). A few studios were notoriously informal in their payment arrangements, and would regularly fail to pay their salaried staff. Books or ideas could be bought, transformed and resold at lightning speed; actors and actresses could be hired, fired or exported. Companies flowered and faded, genres were unstable and star popularity was evanescent. Patterns of female representation and female creativity were volatile too.

There did exist official checks and balances which were intended to impose order onto the mass-culture industry. It was one of the tasks of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) to nuance the industry's representations of women, sexuality and family life. The Board displayed a puritanism (or prurience) about such matters. The Readers' Reports would not permit any reference to prostitution, of course, but female desire was taboo as well: in *The Water Gypsies* (1932), 'Jane's desire for Bryan would have to be very carefully handled and not overstressed'.<sup>1</sup> The list of prohibitions is endless: bridesmaids in their undies, fat ladies on vibrating machines, women engineers, a woman's despairing cry of 'Liverpool! What a place to commit adultery!'<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, the censors did not like *Lady Chatterley*: 'I cannot find any excuse for Constance. Her liaison with Mellors is just plain animal passion.'<sup>3</sup>

The government had intervened more directly in production with the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, which was a protectionist measure designed to boost the native industry. It obliged renters and exhibitors to show an increasing proportion of British films. This meant that many more British films had to be made if foreign films were to be imported. The number of films could be made up by native British companies; it could also be swelled by 'British' companies financed by Hollywood, but with three-quarters of the salaries paid to British employees. The scenario or scriptwriter had to be British. This had profound implications for the representation and employment of women. More films were made, more risks could be taken, and more women were employed in the industry, especially in scripting.

The industry produced few films addressing female audiences or dealing with women's issues. Tony Aldgate (1998) has suggested that, due to changes in BBFC personnel and flux in the industry, there was a short period between 1930 and 1932 during which films displayed a greater emotionality and some attention was paid to women's issues. But this phenomenon was short-lived. The plots of some later 1930s films toy with the themes of sexual equality, but closer examination reveals that they were deeply conservative. *Girls Will Be Boys* (1934) converts the potent theme of cross-dressing into an anodyne comedy. *The Dominant Sex* (1937) deals with a woman's struggle to keep her independence after marriage, but it was marketed with a very particular spin:

Now comes the decisive battle between husband and wife. Dick

has a chance to buy back the family farm and go and live in the country. Angela hates the idea and tries to dissuade Dick. But he insists, though it may mean the end of his marriage. What will Angela do? Will she refuse to go and live with her husband in the country, living a life she does not like? In the end, she submits, like a true wife.<sup>4</sup>

*Clothes and the Woman* (1937) also defuses a potentially explosive sexual theme. It deals with the way women use clothes to appear powerful, and yet again the studio's publicity material neutralizes the radical impact of the tale: 'clothes which are extravagant are a disadvantage in impressing men . . . what a woman wears and what she does go hand in hand ever since grandmama's day'.

Financial crises, various government demands and a volatile political situation meant that the studio system was under pressure throughout the decade. Nonetheless, it was capable of functioning as a system of authorship. The representation of women was an area where different powers in the film-making process struggled for dominance. The producer, or the executive producer, was the figure who held the most cards in his hand.

Alexander Korda's approach to film culture was liberal and eclectic. He combined an absolute respect for the mass audience with a high premium on artistic value.<sup>5</sup> His films evoked a high degree of audience creativity: he relied on the viewers' cultural knowledge without ever condescending to them. His costume films encapsulated a radical conservative view of history. He believed in its therapeutic powers, and thought that representations of the past gave mass audiences access to an aristocracy of style which could transform their own perceptions. His modern-dress films often deployed aristocratic motifs, and they insisted on the desirability of risk and surprise.

Korda's radicalism in social and cultural matters did not extend to the sexual sphere, however. The women in his films are statuesque figures who stimulate the social market to greater emotional and capital outlay. Although there is a sophisticated urbanity in the films' sexual politics – they are never puritanical – women are the providers rather than the receivers of pleasure. In Korda's costume films, the women are marginal to aristocratic style. In *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), they are whores, termagants or gorgons; the only good Queen is dead before the film begins. The solacing of female desire is the theme of *The Private Life*

of *Don Juan* (1934), but only the desire of young girls: the hero's 'favourite dish is a middle-aged woman's tongue, cut out by the roots, chopped very small, and eaten raw'. In *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1935) and *The Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1937), the women are peripheral to the main theme of masculine resourcefulness. *Rembrandt* (1936) contains a trenchant analysis of the artist's role in society. An essentially bohemian film, it argues that the conventional regulation of sexuality is not conducive to artistic creativity. The catch in this system is that women have to be passive. Rembrandt apotheosizes them in a set piece of remarkable intensity. It was written by American screenwriter June Head, who was specially bought in. The artist, declares Charles Laughton as Rembrandt:

had a vision once. A creature, half-child, half-woman, half-lover . . . he knew that when one woman gives herself to you, you possess all women – women of every age and race and kind, and more than the moon and the stars, all miracles and legends. The brown-skinned girls who inflame your senses with their play, cool yellow-haired women who entice you, the gentle ones who serve you, the slender ones who torment you. The mother who bore and suckled you, all women whom God created out of the teeming fullness of the earth, but you love one . . . lay your tousled head on her breasts, she is a Delilah waiting for you. Take her garments from her, strip the last veil from her, she is a chaste Susanna, covering her nakedness . . . never call her yours, for her secrets are inexhaustible. Call her by one name only. I call her Saskia.

The only Korda costume film which does not conform to this pattern of inspiration and titillation is *Catherine the Great* (1934), which had a more radical female scriptwriter, the playwright Clemence Dane.

Korda's modern-dress films adopt a similar view of women. In *Wedding Rehearsal* (1932), the twin aristocratic girls marry beneath them, thus opening up a debate about cross-class desire. One twin loves kittens, the other puppies, and the visual style concentrates on their similarity to their furry friends. *The Divorce of Lady X* (1938) extends the theme of female 'doubleness', but this time duplicity is centred in one character, Lady Steele (Merle Oberon). Although grossly manipulative and seemingly promiscuous, she is in fact virginal, and this contradiction impels

the hero-barrister (Laurence Olivier) to contrast two female types. In court he rails against the modern woman, who

has disowned womanhood but refuses man's obligations. She demands freedom but will not accept responsibility. She demands time to develop her personality, cogitating which part of her body to paint next . . . modern woman is unprincipled, relentless, and exacting. The sooner man takes out his whip again, the better for sanity and progress.

The traditional type of female is 'a tender, delicate organism put into this rough world to make life a little brighter, a little happier, by her beauty and her tenderness and her purity'. The film argues that both types can coexist within the same body. The same theme, and the same railing by Olivier against the female species, occurs in *Q-Planes* (1939). *Twenty-one Days* (made in 1937 but not released until 1940) contains the same vulnerable but duplicitous female role.

*Forget-Me-Not* (1936) is atypical. It was conceived by Korda as a 'woman's picture', for which he imported the great Italian singer Gigli. Both verbally and visually, the film privileges women's extraordinary arousal by the tenor voice. Although Gigli is short, fat and naïve, the erotic charge of his voice for the women in the film is indubitable. It is tempting to classify this film as a Tenor Romance. *Forget-Me-Not* has much in common with Richard Tauber musicals: BIP's *Blossom Time* (1934) and *Heart's Desire* (1935), Capitol's *Land without Music* (1936), Trafalgar's *Pagliacci* (1936). In all these films, the sublime effeminacy of the tenor voice transports the female listeners into such an intense state of ecstasy that it must be construed as orgasmic; but ratified, of course, by the status of high art.

The other major executive producer of the period was Michael Balcon, who led two studios. Gainsborough was located in Islington and Gaumont-British, the 'mother' company owned by the Ostrers, was in Shepherd's Bush. Although their production policies were intimately related, the studios had separate staff and different styles. Gainsborough was mainly dedicated to low-status fare, while Gaumont produced quality films with a tendency to high seriousness. Since the combined operation was so large, Balcon found it very difficult to put his personal stamp on the films it produced.

During the 1930s, Balcon concentrated on comedies and musical

productions at the Gainsborough studios. They were mainly frothy in tone, and dealt with gender relations in a conventional way. The performances expected from the female starlets were not demanding. The 'Gainsborough Girls' of the early 1930s were a means of marketing the studio, but they proved an irritant to directors: 'one forgets her powder, the other wants to telephone, a third has a date at the hairdresser's – no thanks, just one or two at a time is all I can handle'.<sup>6</sup> The Will Hay comedies were all produced at Gainsborough, both before and after Balcon's resignation in December 1936. The films had a stable production team, and most of them were scripted by Hay and Marriott Edgar, who had written the wonderful monologues performed by Stanley Holloway (such as 'The Lion and Albert'). The Hay films contain powerful females who set the narrative in motion: Lady Dawkins in *Boys Will Be Boys* (1935), Emma Harbottle in *Windbag the Sailor* (1936), Mrs Trimbletow in *Oh Mr Porter!* (1937). These women are all large and resentful, and once they impel the Hay character into action are of no further narrative significance. When Hay visits the old father in bed in *Ask a Policeman* (1939), the son enquires, 'Don't you want to see the old lady?' Hay recoils in horror, commenting, 'I've seen Adam, I don't want to see Eve.'

Society in the Hay films is irreparably ramshackle, and its members have no interests in common. Members of the same class are inevitably at odds with each other, and the enormous chasm between men and women can never be bridged. The films work on the premise that the central myths of the culture necessarily exclude women. However, there was another group of comedies made at both Gainsborough and Gaumont whose sexual politics provide a strong contrast to the Hay films. These were the Ben Travers farces, which originally played at the Aldwych Theatre. Balcon objected to the autonomy given to Travers, and conducted a long-standing feud with the director/lead actor Tom Walls. Nonetheless, the Aldwych films did very well at the box-office, and their star, Ralph Lynn, was then the highest-paid actor in the British film industry. The Travers farces were more sexually liberal than the Hay films, and their debates about class were thoroughly integrated into a coherent position on gender.

The Aldwych films were structured around the notion of equality in sexual pleasure. Men could adopt a buccaneering technique with impunity; but women could pursue their own pleasures as well, and would

only turn nasty if deprived of consummation. Unruly females abound in these films, which also contain seeming ingénues with an eye to the sexual main chance, fierce landladies in pursuit of their dues, large wives with a taste for humiliating their husbands, and older women too sophisticated to be churlish about a slice from a cut loaf. Two little scenes typify the films. In *Cuckoo in the Nest* (1933), the inebriated old husband (Tom Walls) tries to fondle the elderly landlady (Mary Brough): 'You're just the kind of woman I like!' His dalliance is met by a tornado of rage, and the final close-up of the film is of the triumphant Brough blowing a police whistle to summon the forces of law and order. In *A Cup of Kindness* (1934) the frustrated bridegroom (Ralph Lynn) dreams about courtship practices in the Stone Age, and imagines simple rituals of clubbing and abduction. When he awakes, he ruefully accepts modern problems such as female prevarication.

The Aldwych farces are the result of a unique combination of established scripts, strong direction and powerful stars. It was an intractable combination for Balcon, and the liberal sexual politics of the films cannot be ascribed to him. His other company, Gaumont-British, did not specialize in comedy but in high-quality entertainment with expensive art direction and a serious edge. The roles which women play in Gaumont films are qualitatively different from Gainsborough. In a range of films which require women to play the Eternal-Feminine role, their narratives punish those who are neither noble nor inspiring. *Little Friend* (1934) and *The Iron Duke* (1935) fall into this category, as does *Jew Süss* (1934). This film, which is a liberal pro-Jewish apologia, insists that the audience discriminate between the bad woman, who is rapacious and experienced ('choose an Englishman, they're as discreet as they're clean'), and the good woman, who is a despoiled virgin. For good measure, there are two of the latter in the film: the hero's beloved and his daughter. The motivation of the whole narrative depends on Süss becoming the *pater dolorosus*, mourning and avenging the lost girl.

The second function of females in Gaumont films is that of the decorative irritant. In *Rome Express* (1932), *King of the Damned* (1936), *Rhodes of Africa* (1936) and *King Solomon's Mines* (1937), the female protagonist is a piece of grit in the machine of the tale: she inhibits its smooth development, but is present in order to provide surface interest. The audience is encouraged to admire the woman's beauty, but also to censure her for delaying the dénouement. There remains *The Passing of*

*the Third Floor Back* (1934), which is the only Gaumont film to deal with female ambiguity – the possibility that fallibility and goodness might be mixed. It was directed by the German Berthold Viertel, who was a Marxist of sorts, a friend of Murnau and had worked at the Vienna Volksbühne. The film is based upon a play by Jerome K. Jerome, which the script (partly by Alma Reville) improves. It deals with the entry into a suburban guesthouse of a saintly stranger, who transforms everyone's lives. In Viertel's film, the lead role is played by Conrad Veidt, and the female characters are given much more prominence than in the original play, outnumbering and outshading the men. Displaying great subtlety, *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* deals with the pains of modernity. It considers the traduced servant girl, the daughter sold into a loveless marriage, the embittered spinster and the venal landlady, and shows them poised between autonomy and exploitation.

Gaumont-British's internationalist projects displayed more liberal sexual politics, and Michael Balcon's authorial control was intermittent. He left Gainsborough and Gaumont-British in December 1936, and the companies were then headed by the Ostrer brothers and Ted Black, who had quite different policies and cultural capital. More populist than Balcon, and less concerned with quality, their films were more directly attuned to the mass audience, and they were disinclined to take expensive risks. The Crazy Gang's 1930s comedies – *Okay for Sound* (1938), *Alf's Button Afloat* (1938), *The Frozen Limits* (1939) – were right up to date in their system of references. However, prewar Gainsborough could not manage contemporary references in the melodrama mode. *Bank Holiday* (1938) dealt with topics such as extra-marital sex and unrequited love, but gave them such a narrow spread that the film appeared limited and provincial. It would require the spin of wartime exigencies for Gainsborough to deal with contemporary issues in a vital and engaged way.

There were other large outfits too. BIP was owned by John Maxwell and run at Elstree by Walter Mycroft. In the early part of the decade, it specialized in comedies. After 1934, Mycroft shifted the studio towards more ambitious films, which looked expensive but were not. BIP production under Mycroft fell into three categories. The first was the Continental or Ruritanian romance. In such films as *Blossom Time*, *Invitation to the Waltz* (1935), *Heart's Desire* and *I Give My Heart* (1935), the women are there in order to make or cause mistakes. Their function is also to respond to the seductive power of the tenor voice. The

second category is the boisterous comedy with a working-class background, such as *The Outcast* (1934) and *Those Were the Days* (1934), in which the women do not initiate mayhem, but resolve it. The third BIP category is the up-market historical vehicle, such as *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1934), *Royal Cavalcade* (1935) and *Drake of England* (1935), in which women are the most decorative (and least intelligent) part of the national heritage. From 1937 the company was renamed as the Associated British Picture Corporation (ABPC) and, with Maxwell and Mycroft still at the helm, produced mainly stage adaptations and comedies in which women had little narrative significance.

Herbert Wilcox, as a smaller independent producer, was able to take control of his product, and can certainly be accorded authorship status. He was authoritarian in his management of visual style, narrative structure and acting interpretation. Wilcox favoured verisimilitude, insisting during an egg-eating scene that the actor consume it shell and all (Carstairs, 1942, pp. 12–13). He headed British and Dominions in the early 1930s, where he specialized in comedy. Wilcox's output became more focused after 1932 when he became involved with Anna Neagle, and his films accommodated his changing view of her image. *The Little Damozel* (1933), *Bitter Sweet* (1933) and *The Queen's Affair* (1934) all starred her in anodyne singing/dancing roles. With *Nell Gwyn* (1934), Wilcox radically revamped Neagle. As Charles II's mistress, Neagle's body language was transformed into a parody of erotic readiness: elbows akimbo, pelvis presented, pectoral muscles flexed. Neagle was instructed to play Nell with a hoydenish sexuality. Her erotic mark-up was extended with *Peg of Old Drury* (1935), in which she played the eighteenth-century actress Peg Woffington as a wayward harlot. Wilcox then established his own company, significantly named Imperator, and proceeded yet again to recast Neagle's persona. In *Victoria the Great* (1937), traditional femininity is re-established with vigour. In one marital tiff, Albert locks Victoria out of the bedroom. She knocks imperiously: 'Albert, it is the Queen', and receives no reply. Then, 'Albert, it is Victoria', which meets with the same response. Finally, 'It is your wife, Albert' (uttered cooingly) causes the door to open. The lesson which is enjoined is that only female submission will result in pleasure, and that goes for queens as well as for lesser mortals. With *Sixty Glorious Years* (1938), the case is made with greater emphasis. This is a revamp of the first Victoria film, but with one important difference: the more domestic

perspective (it is supposed to be based on the Queen's private diaries) presents the monarch as even less autonomous. *Sixty Glorious Years* is a powerful threnody on patriarchal marriage: 'When you are alone with me,' says the commoner to the Queen, 'you are nothing but my wife.' Nothing indeed.

Smaller studios had less coherent policies. Julius Hagen, who owned Twickenham Studios, believed in expedience rather than aesthetic coherence, and none of his films linked debates about society with considerations of gender. Max Schach's Capitol Film Productions only offered leaden roles to actresses in such films as *When Knights Were Bold* (1936). Basil Dean was motivated by his crusading attitude to high culture, and by his desire for a folkloric representation of society, but he had major financial problems with his company ATP, and only a spasmodic understanding of the box-office. Dean's major female star was Gracie Fields, but he was unsure how to make best cinematic use of her. He employed J. B. Priestley to script *Sing as We Go* (1934), possibly in an attempt to enhance Fields's status. The film locates her solidly in Lancashire working-class culture, but the imaginary locale of *Queen of Hearts* (1936) is unfocused. Fields's last film for Dean, *The Show Must Go On* (1937), is ill-proportioned and inconsistent. When Michael Balcon became head of production at ATP, he tried to revive the 'populist' aspect of a Fieldian character by using the young Betty Driver in musical comedies such as *Let's Be Famous* (1939). However, the times were out of joint for her informal feistiness, and the film sank without trace.

If a company was very small, it could afford to take intellectual risks. Mayflower Pictures did just that. Formed by Charles Laughton and Erich Pommer in 1937, it made three films, all of which were unusual in their treatment of the battle between the sexes. *Vessel of Wrath* (1938) deals with the subjugation of an over-assertive missionary wife. *St Martin's Lane* (1938), which was written by Clemence Dane, deals with a young artiste (Vivien Leigh) who becomes a star, abandoning the busker who loves her (Charles Laughton). The film portrays the heroine's naked hunger for fame, which is forcefully connected with her desire for sexual equality. She is accorded complex motivation, and the old guard of Laughton and his friends ruefully accept her as part of an emergent order: 'the hansoms have gone and the horses have gone and now soon we'll have to go'. The tone of the film is marvellously elegiac, and it works by making a connection between the new woman and the old ways. *Jamaica*

*Inn* (1939) has the same attitude. The lively heroine (Maureen O'Hara) carries all before her, and the squire (Laughton) dies quoting Burke's sublime evocation of the *ancien régime*: 'the age of chivalry is gone'.

The creative freedom in the 'quota quickies' was very variable. They were knocked out quickly, with minimal attention to 'finish', but they did function as a meal ticket or training ground for needy British technicians. Lawrence Napper has argued that the 1927 Act gave British film production a much-needed boost, and that the quickies appealed to those parts of the audience who were uneasy with American social and production values (Napper, 1997, p. 43). If we take the example of George King, who made 50 quota films for a variety of American companies, we can see that the aesthetic as well as social system embedded in his films is deeply residual and conservative. King's *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1936) is predicated on rigid gender roles. The cross-dressing motif only serves to intensify the separation between male and female behaviour. In all King's films, the body language refers to music-hall melodrama, and depends on its stereotypes of bad squire and outraged virgin. His *Ticket of Leave Man* (1937) is structured around the Maria Marten syndrome too. However, some quota films present gender issues in a less traditional or more aggressive manner. The early films of Michael Powell can be interpreted as a rehearsal for his complex later position on women. For example, *The Love Test* (1934) is about a women chemist, whom the other (male) scientists in the laboratory persecute and use as a butt for their wagers. Her vulnerability and unpredictable passion are symbolized by repeated shots of a blonde celluloid doll bursting into flames: the company tries to render it fireproof, in spite of its essential volatility.

If we now turn to the range of roles which women were required to play, we can see that the 'clusters' extant in 1930s cinema were remarkable for their range and quantity. As I suggested in the Introduction, all clusters feed important social hungers, and address specific parts of the audience. The conditions of production in the period meant that competition was fierce, and actresses would sometimes go to outrageous lengths to secure a part (Roye, 1955, pp. 65–6). The financial rewards were mixed. Potential starlets were given small retainers and then paid on a daily basis if they were chosen to appear (Bouchier, 1995, p. 67). Bigger companies would pay £20 a week on a five-year contract. Sometimes actresses were only paid per foot of completed film, and in order to