

Elinor Glyn, Film History and Popular Culture: an Apologia

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Elinor Glyn has assumed an insistent presence in the interstices of my scholarly life over several decades. This has come about wholly through my interests in film history, for I can claim no special knowledge of Glyn's extensive career as a novelist and journalist: in the first place through a research project (on the history of film censorship) that had nothing obvious to do with Elinor Glyn; and secondly by way of a general interest in the history of women's contributions, behind the camera, to the cinema industry.¹

The research was for a doctoral thesis, undertaken in the mid 1980s, on censorship, sexuality and the regulation of cinema in Britain in the 1910s and 1920s. In the course of archival investigations in what was then the Public Record Office in London (and is now the National Archives), I came upon a Home Office file on the Goldwyn adaptation of Glyn's novel *Three Weeks* (Alan Crosland, Goldwyn Pictures, 1924).² I took notes, but did not use the material in my thesis. Glyn and *Three Weeks* remained in the back of my mind, however, and while on a visit to Los Angeles in 1991 for the annual meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies I grasped the opportunity to explore the MGM archive in the Doheny Library at the University of Southern California, taking notes from their substantial file on *Three Weeks*, which included various versions of the screenplay as well as the film's pressbook. The documented intertitles suggest that the film version deliberately replicated the novel's 'popular sublime' style. For example:

A great rush of tenderness filled Paul's heart and melted forever the icebergs of grief and pain. It seemed as if his loved Queen stood beside him, filling his soul with rest and consolation.³

Although intrigued by this wealth of information, I was preoccupied at the time with the demands of my teaching job, as well as with research and writing in other areas. And so, beyond a brief attempt to track down an archive copy of the film, another ten years were to pass before my next attempt to get to grips with Elinor Glyn.⁴

This came about because I was drawn to the groundbreaking new work on women film pioneers being conducted at the time as part of a broader movement within film studies that combined a rethinking of film history and historiography with ‘a renewed scholarly interest in cinema’s early years and the installation of film theory within film history’.⁵ Against this background, an international group of feminist scholars, archivists and curators had taken up the challenge of (re)discovering the forgotten and uncredited women who had worked behind the camera in cinema’s early years, while taking on board the revision and complication of the idea of film authorship espoused in the theoretical turn within film history.⁶ Work-in-progress was presented in a series of international conferences that began in 1999 in the Netherlands, and continues in various venues around the world under the rubric ‘Women and the Silent Screen’: the eighth conference in the series was held in Pittsburgh in September 2015.⁷

Keen to be involved, I successfully offered a paper for the third of these conferences, which took place in Montreal in 2004 under the co-ordination of Catherine Russell and Rosanna Maule. The Montreal paper set out the events surrounding the 1924 United Kingdom censorship of *Three Weeks* and considered the question of Glyn's 'authorship' of the film in the context both of contemporary developments around the regulation of cinema in Britain and of discourses concerning female sexuality current at the time. In preparing it, I returned to the archive, taking another look at the Home Office file; consulting the Elinor

Glyn papers held at the University of Reading, and finally reading the original novel in that curious corner of the British Library that is reserved for notorious books. This was written up as an article that was eventually published in 2008.⁸

The start of the Women and the Silent Screen initiative coincided with the launch of the Women Film Pioneers (WFP) project, helmed by Jane Gaines at Duke University and now based at Columbia University in New York. Focussing initially on early Hollywood, this project's ultimate objective is an exhaustive survey of women working in the global silent era film industry, and the reference book initially projected has morphed into a website hosting *pro bono* contributions from numerous scholars around the world.⁹ The Montreal paper and the subsequent article on *Three Weeks* brought me an invitation to write up Elinor Glyn's United Kingdom career to augment an existing WFP entry on her Hollywood work. The nature of Glyn's life and work makes disentangling her US and UK careers, not to mention establishing her film credits, rather tricky; but at the beginning of 2015 I finally found time to start researching this, including viewing the two films she made in the UK in 1930, *Knowing Men* and *The Price of Things*.

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As is well known, Elinor Glyn made her first visit to the USA in 1907, to publicise her sensational new novel *Three Weeks* and, as Vincent Barnett and Alexis Weedon note in their recent book, she was already fully aware of the potential of other popular media as vehicles for her work.¹⁰ In fact the first of a number of screen adaptations of the novel, with Billy Bitzer credited as cameraman, was released in the following year by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company.¹¹ By the time Glyn made her longer-term move from

England to Hollywood in 1920, screen versions of at least six of her novels, produced in Britain and Hungary as well as in the USA, had already appeared. Among these were two further adaptations of *Three Weeks*. (*Three Weeks*, Perry N. Vekroff, Reliable Film Feature Corp., US, 1914; *Három Hét/Seelige drei Wochen*, Márton Garas, Hungária Filmgyár, Hungary, 1917). The instant scandal surrounding the novel had already brought Glyn a degree of celebrity that she was to cultivate for the rest of her life. In Hollywood the Glyn ‘brand’ quickly proved very bankable, due largely, according to David Robinson, to her ‘success in marrying the old romanticism and the new morality in her novels and screenplays’.¹² Accordingly, her close involvement in the 1923 Goldwyn production of *Three Weeks*, not only as screenwriter but as all-round ‘supervisor’, mentor and consultant, was widely hyped in Hollywood.¹³

In Britain Elinor Glyn and all her works were looked on in a far less positive light, though, and when *Three Weeks* crossed the Atlantic it became ensnared in Britain’s highly idiosyncratic relationship between central government, local government, and the censorship of films.¹⁴ In fact, the very existence of a file on the Goldwyn *Three Weeks* in the National Archives is due to the fact that, when presented with the film, the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) called in the Home Office for advice because the censors’ fingers had been severely burned by Perry Vekroff’s 1914 adaptation, ‘one of several undesirable films which led in 1915 to the unsuccessful attempt to set up an official censorship’.¹⁵ The record reads as if no-one concerned had at this point actually seen the new version; but all were clearly acutely aware of the notoriety of the novel, which had been described as ‘grossly immoral’ by a high court judge (the book itself was not on trial: this comment had been made in a case brought by Glyn in 1915 for breach of copyright against the producers of an alleged film version).¹⁶ Both the Home Office and the censors wanted to keep a lid on things, avoid

publicity, and ultimately fend off any fresh demands for changes in the existing rather fragile censorship arrangements. In the end the BBFC gave up trying to suppress the film: the most powerful local cinema licensing authorities in the land saw nothing objectionable in it, and there is also a hint that the BBFC had been leaned on by the ‘powerful interests behind the film’.¹⁷ And so *Three Weeks* was passed for UK exhibition, with a few cuts and a recommended (and, as it turned out, widely unimplemented) change of title to *Romance of a Queen*.

In a country that had yet to embrace the concept of celebrity Elinor Glyn was never fully accepted, despite several attempts on her part to claim a leading role in the British film industry. Her early success in the USA—and perhaps also the trouble over the UK release of *Three Weeks*—prompted Glyn to contemplate bestowing her Hollywood magic on the ‘the work of Amateurs’ that was British cinema.¹⁸ The Glyn papers at Reading University reveal that between 1924 and 1926, she conducted in-depth research into the state of the British film industry, as well as a lively correspondence with some of its leading figures, including Adrian Brunel and Michael Balcon: ‘there are sadly very few people like yourself’, gushed Balcon (possibly tongue-in-cheek), ‘who have made such a serious study of all aspects of the business and really do things to help’.¹⁹ Plans for three British-made films were outlined, but these came to nothing and the scheme was abandoned. Glyn turned full attention once again to her Hollywood career as her much-hyped ‘It’ (a kind of personal or erotic magnetism) achieved wide currency both within and beyond the USA, alongside the release of the eponymous film (*It*, Clarence C. Badger/Josef von Sternberg, Famous Players-Lasky Corp./Paramount, 1927). Famously, *It* enjoyed considerable success worldwide and launched the career of Clara Bow, one of several young actresses whom Glyn could justifiably claim to have discovered or mentored.

But the later 1920s saw a shift in public attitudes towards class, love, romance and sex; and Elinor Glyn's signature combination of upper-class settings, old romanticism and *risqué* eroticism fell out of favour, with an attendant drop in the profitability of her films. When she left Hollywood and travelled back to England in 1929 Glyn probably did not intend this to be her final farewell. But with an ailing mother and considerable sums owed to the US tax authorities, she was unable to return to the USA. In any event, she was poised by this time to make a fresh assault on the British film industry, which since her earlier approaches had been faring better in terms of numbers of films made (the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927--the 'Quota Act'--mandated the UK exhibition of a set percentage of home-produced films). But with the notorious 'quota quickies' there had been no corresponding rise in the quality of British productions. The industry was also faced with the problem not only of securing US distribution but also of the technical, financial and aesthetic challenges of synchronous sound, as well as with a national economy in decline. But, as Lisa Stead has shown, Glyn remained supremely confident that her Hollywood knowhow could be brought to bear, with herself as the guiding hand and guardian of the British film industry as it entered the sound era.²⁰ Such an openly condescending attitude must surely have caused some offence. Glyn's plan was to form and finance her own company and so be in a position to take control of all aspects of production. Elinor Glyn Productions Ltd was incorporated early in 1930, and Glyn brought over from Hollywood the cinematographer Charles Rosher along with the talented, if unfortunately-named, screenwriter Edward Knoblock. She personally headed the production of two talkies, *Knowing Men* (1930) and *The Price of Things* (1930), at Elstree Studios.

Both these films turned out to be flops, for a number of reasons. Early plans to make a colour version of *Knowing Men* had to be abandoned due to technical and logistical difficulties; Glyn was inexperienced as a film director; and on its release the film received such a hostile reception that, fearing for his reputation, Knoblock tried to prevent its distribution to cinemas.²¹ This debacle sealed the fate of *The Price of Things*, which never even received a proper release. Nonetheless, to dismiss *Knowing Men* as ‘deplorable’ (as Meredith Etherington-Smith and Jeremy Pilcher do in their book *The ‘It’ Girls*) seems extreme.²² Both films are pleasingly photographed, Elissa Landi is well-cast and charming in her early roles in sound film, the settings are lavish and the costumes (by Glyn’s sister Lucy Duff-Gordon) gorgeous. Notwithstanding the films’ admittedly creaky plots (centring on masquerade, deception and mistaken identity), the accusation by some critics that their action is slow and their cinematography static seems unjust given that these were afflictions suffered by a great many early sound films.

An unusual feature of *Knowing Men* is that it includes an onscreen prologue delivered by Glyn herself, who is seen seated behind an escritoire, elegantly swathed in pearls, furs and velvet, dispensing words of wisdom about men in all their variety.²³ Aside from Glyn’s achingly stylish clothes and surroundings, what comes across here as particularly striking is her voice, the accent especially—unexpected, not what one might call upper-class or ‘posh’, but affecting a slightly Eastern European timbre (perhaps channelling the Ruritanian setting of *Three Weeks?*). *Knowing Men* is of course a very early sound film, and although Glyn had made personal appearances in some of the Hollywood films with which she was associated, her voice had probably never been heard in this way before. If it comes across today as rather unsettling, it does sit well with—and may even constitute a further elaboration on—the attentively-crafted ‘Madame Glyn’ brand.

In any event, if Glyn failed in her aim to singlehandedly rescue the UK film industry, she did continue to maintain a high profile in Britain as a personage with expert insider knowledge of matters cinematic and romantic. Throughout the 1930s, she made regular appearances in the British popular press and film fan magazines as a columnist and interviewee--and indeed as a news story in her own right--and continued writing novels and stories right up to her death in 1943.

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As a woman film pioneer Glyn is perhaps best remembered for her distinctive role within popular cinema culture, a role extending far beyond her official film credits. She exerted creative influence on the screen adaptations of many of her stories and was highly successful in building and publicising a distinctive branding for her own image and for her other creations. As a film and media personality—an ‘authorial star’ in Lisa Stead’s apt phrase—Glyn was, in today’s terms, clearly a celebrity, and was famous for more than simply being notorious.²⁴ Even—perhaps especially—a century after her heyday Elinor Glyn continues to be a fascinating figure. Her career and persona reveal a great deal about the ‘mentality’ of her times, especially of the disturbed and disturbing decade that followed the end of the Great War. It was during these years that Hollywood cinema rose to global prominence; while in the USA and elsewhere many aspects of popular culture became feminised, forged in the paradoxes of a consciousness shaped on the one hand by futurism, modernism and cosmopolitanism and on the other by the vestiges of Victorian chivalric romance and older attitudes towards sexuality and relations between men and women. In this contradictory cultural formation, Elinor Glyn played her part to the hilt--and here perhaps lies the secret of

my own enduringly accidental or accidentally enduring scholarly relationship with her; and more significantly of Glyn's continuing fascination for feminist historians of film and popular culture today.

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Notes

¹ Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-1925* (London: Routledge, 1988); Annette Kuhn (ed.), *The Women's Companion to International Film* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

² National Archives, London, Home Office papers (hereafter NA/HO), HO45/20045, *Three Weeks*, 1924. The Home Office was, and remains, the government department ultimately responsible for regulating cinemas in Britain.

³ University of Southern California, Los Angeles, Doheny Library, MGM Collection, final title sheets for *Three Weeks*, 17 December 1923. 'Popular sublime' is Martin Hipsky's coinage: see Martin Hipsky, *Modernism and the Woman's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011).

⁴ Laura Horak subsequently located a print of *Three Weeks* in Gosfilmofond in Moscow: see ~~Laura~~ Laura Horak, "'Would You Like to Sin with Elinor Glyn?'" Film as a Vehicle of Sensual Education', *Camera Obscura*, 25/2 74 (2010), 75-117.: 77.

⁵ Kay Armatage, 'The Women's Film History Project and Women and the Silent Screen', *Screen*, 49/4 (2009), 462-67.

⁶ A key publication emerging from this movement is Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (eds.), *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁷ *Women and the Silent Screen VIII*, <https://wssviii.wordpress.com/about/> [accessed 5 January 2015].

⁸ Annette Kuhn, 'The Trouble with Elinor Glyn: Hollywood, *Three Weeks* and the British Board of Film Censors', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 28/1 (2008), 23-35.

⁹ *Women Film Pioneers Project*, <https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/> [accessed 5 January 2016].

¹⁰ Vincent L Barnett and Alexis Weedon, *Elinor Glyn as Novelist, Moviemaker, Glamour Icon and Businesswoman* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014). 4

¹¹ This film is not extant.

¹² David Robinson, *Hollywood in the Twenties* (London: Zwemmer, 1968). 3

¹³ See Anne Morey, 'Elinor Glyn as Hollywood Labourer', *Film History: An International Journal*, 18/2 (2006), 110-18.

¹⁴ The history of this tortuous set of institutional arrangements is discussed in Annette Kuhn, 'British Board of Film Censors/Classification', in Derek Jones (ed.), *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001.

¹⁵ NA/HO45/20045 Memo of interview with representatives of the BBFC, 12 Feb 1924.

¹⁶ Jeremy Phillips, 'Elinor Glyn and the "Three Weeks" Litigation', *European Intellectual Property Review*, 4/12 (1982), 336-40. The film in question was a parody called *Pimple's Three Weeks (Without the Option)*. There is also a brief discussion of the case in Hipsky, *Modernism and the Woman's Popular Romance*, 10-11.

¹⁷ NA/HO45/20045, 23 March 1924, written minute by Sidney Harris. The local authorities concerned were London County Council and Middlesex County Council.

¹⁸ University of Reading, Elinor Glyn Archive (RUL-SC), MS 4059, Box 18, Glyn to Sir John Foster Fraser, 2 March 1924.

¹⁹ RUL-SC MS 4059, Box 18, Balcon to Glyn, 5 January 1925.

²⁰ ~~Lisa Rose Stead, 'Women's Writing and British Female Film Culture in the Silent Era', (University of Exeter, 2011).~~ Lisa Stead, *Off to the Pictures: Cinemagoing, Women's Writing and Movie Culture in Interwar Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016). 175

²¹ For details, see Barnett and Weedon, *Elinor Glyn as Novelist, Moviemaker, Glamour Icon and Businesswoman*, 163.

²² Meredith Etherington-Smith and Jeremy Pilcher, *The 'It' Girls: Lucy, Lady Duff Gordon, the Couturière 'Lucile' and Elinor Glyn, Romantic Novelist* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1986). 249.

²³ Lisa Stead discusses this scene in 'Glyn's British Talkies: the Author Speaks', [elsewhere in this issue](#) Page #

²⁴ Stead, *Off to the Pictures*, 27.