

PASTA OR PARADIGM:  
THE PLACE OF ITALIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN  
IN POPULAR FILM\*

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The year is 1930, the film is *Little Caesar*, and Hollywood begins its long and often irresponsible tradition of portraying the Italian-American male as gangster, thug, sociopath. The gangster genre has traditionally focused on male activities--men in groups, their rites of passage into underworld manhood, and their perverted American dreams of success achieved through community extortion, syndicated corruption, and blood murder. But hidden in the story of Caesar Enrico Bandello, who has justifiably been called our "archetypal" film gangster, we also discover fragmentary, but important, early portrayals of the Italian woman in America.

In his discussion of the family system of Italian Americans, Richard Gambino astutely and accurately comments on a paradoxical public image of the Southern Italian woman when he notes "the fiery, sensuous, outspoken willful 'Sophia Loren' image (indeed, the actress is a native of Naples) and the jolly, all-loving, naive, rotund *mamma mia* image."<sup>1</sup> The aim here is not merely to catalog almost half a century of unfair and reductive female ethnic stereotype, nor to test the extent to which Dr. Gambino's dichotomous images are fulfilled in our cinematic history, but also to speculate on some of the cultural forces at work in American society that shape and give rise to these portrayals. In doing so, perhaps we can begin to understand why so many ethnic groups are so conveniently channeled into stereotype in popular media, especially film, television, and television commercials. This last area of inquiry is just beginning to receive serious study, for commercials are highly significant barometers of attitudes toward minorities and sex roles in our culture.

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood* (New York, 1975), p. 27.

The focus of this article is on a small group of post-war films, but to return for a moment to those Italian women in *Little Caesar*, first to Mamma, the anguished figure of Antonio's mother, who consoles her distraught son, now-repentant driver of a getaway car: she is grey and gone to a grandmotherly silhouette as she enters her son's room to the accompaniment of sentimental "Italian" music. What dialogue screenwriter Francis Faragoh gives her is pure stereotype, as is the halting, broken English with which she questions Antonio. She laments, "Remember when you sing in the church, *cara mio*," and she offers an appropriately ethnic antidote to despair: "'I have some spaghetti for you on the stove. . . . You feel better . . . eat somethin' . . . do you good.'" With a tearful embrace and a kiss on the lips, she inspires her son to tell all to the priest, though it is on the pillared steps of the church itself that Antonio is slain by Rico, man without any family, man without a Mamma.

The other significant Italian woman we meet in *Little Caesar* is the *strega*-like figure of Ma Magdalena, who hides Rico from the police in a secret room in her fruit store. We know nothing of this woman except that she is harsh and brutal and moves with ease in the underworld. Her wild hair and explosively gruff manner are intimidating indeed, though no one really suspects that Ma is tough enough to bluff Rico out of the ten thousand dollars he has hidden in her store. We will encounter numerous women in later films that fit into the stereotypic frame of Antonio's mother, but Ma Magdalena, the female gangster, is a special creation--the very paradox of her name suggests the perennial American infatuation with an exotic mixture of maternalism and moral corruption--only could an *Italian* be both Ma and Magdalena at the same time. In this case, corruption is not complicated by female sexuality, but we would do well to remember that our popular culture immortalizes the whore "with the heart of gold," who is, after all, a thinly veiled attempt to satisfy the little boy that dwells inside even (or perhaps *especially*) the most manly of American heroes. In a similar vein, recall Hawthorne's classic heroine of corruption in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hester Prynne suffers for the pride and passion of pursuing true love in a repressive Massachusetts colony.

Hester Prynne is not Italian, but Hawthorne is careful to call her ancestry into question--she is a dark lady with raven tresses, she sports a flamboyantly embroidered scarlet "A" of shame, and her nose is "Hebraic" in shape. She is, of course, a prominent example of an Anglo-American heritage that goes back before Gothic romance. Xenophobic when not overtly racist, the ethnic boundaries of this Gothic tradition clearly establish Italians and other "Mediterraneans" and outsiders--the men are stock villains, trailing clouds of alien Catholicism and carrying daggers beneath cloak and cassock. But that is not all that lurks beneath their garments, for they are deliberately cast as sexual threats to the

pristine blond virtues of entrapped English maidenhood.<sup>2</sup>

A large portion of this same literature casts the Italian woman as Mediterranean voluptuary, a siren-like figure of primal sensualism that distracts and threatens to devour the male protagonist. The Jewish female is cast in a similar role, and we can justifiably include the maddened Creole, Bertha Rochester, in *Jane Eyre*. All these women are amber or honey-skinned, lush and redolent, and always in direct conflict with the domesticating and civilizing presence of the English or Scotch heroines, themselves persistently pale and frail. The dark women appeal to the archetypally Dionysian self-destructive passions that Calvinism ostensibly sought to control and suppress.

Since film is so pervasive and persuasive a popular medium, we must ask serious questions about the long-range effects of all ethnic stereotypes. Surprisingly little research has been done in this area, though all scholars would agree with Patricia Erens' recent observation that stereotypes are dangerous traditions. She says that even if "such portrayals provide relative truths or emphasize sympathetic qualities, the presentation of such limited characterizations, frozen into convention, remains detrimental to individual groups and socially demeaning."<sup>3</sup>

A curious irony is sensed upon examining the portrayal of Italian-American women, in that they may have benefited from neglect. Unlike Italian-American men, who are so caught up in the trappings of the gangster or *Film Noir* genres, the women at least manage to avoid stereotype within film form. Certainly Italian-American women conveniently caricatured within ethnic predictability will be encountered, but such figures will also be encountered as Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo*, mother and old aunt in *Marty*, Mamma and Connie Corleone in *The Godfather, I and II*, and a wide group of Italian-American women from various generations in the Renee Taylor and Joseph Bologna films, *Lovers and Other Strangers* and *Made for Each Other*. In a thematic overview, these women offer up often poignant testimony to the tensions between the *via vecchia* and the new life in a crass and complicated urban America. They may not be as dramatic (or perhaps melodramatic) in depiction as the men, but at least they are not constrained by the implied genealogy that begins with Rico and ends with Don Corleone.

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<sup>2</sup>For lively and often outrageous discussion of Gothic American tendencies and dark/light contrasts, see Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York, 1966), pp. 142-44.

<sup>3</sup>Patricia Erens, "Images of Minority and Foreign Groups in American Films: 1958-73," *JUMP CUT: A Review of Contemporary Cinema*, 1, 8 (August-September, 1975), p. 20.

In a parallel sense, consider the history of portrayal of Italians on television. From the infamous *Untouchables* series, called by studio executives themselves "cops and Wops," we find ourselves a generation later with very little substantive change. Informal lobbying has not completely eradicated the archetypal Italian mob leader from the screen, and we now also endure the gangster in training, the ingratiating figure of the street punk gone to high school--Vinny Barberino in *Welcome Back Kotter* and Arthur Fonzarelli in *Happy Days*. No doubt cleansed and homogenized for the family hour, these young men are far from boorish Frank Nitti and his horde of murderers; but, in terms of sex roles, Vinny and Fonzi are in the same psychological line--the Italian-American male as primitive, raw sensualist, wearing his machismo on the sleeve of his cabretta leather coat. Only in Coppola's *Godfather*, especially part *II*, can we see the possibility for surpassing male ethnic stereotype with dark and brooding inquiries into the larger prices that must be paid to join the new corporate America.

Of the women characters mentioned, only the Anna Magnani character in *The Rose Tattoo* is a fully realized major figure, and she is overtly in that American tradition of expectation--Italian woman as creature of basic desires. Recall her role in George Cukor's *Wild Is the Wind*, when lead character Anthony Quinn imports Magnani from the old country and gets a bigger sexual package than he bargained for. In *The Rose Tattoo*, author Williams acknowledges the appeals of expressive, if not decadent, sexuality. Magnani transcends limitations of role and becomes more than a comic repressed widow seeking fulfillment with Alvaro Mangiacavallo. Hers is a portrait on many levels, with wit and humor and insightful parental tenderness complicating her ongoing struggle with passion and guilt. Yet even Magnani must display some of the outward manifestations of the Mamma stereotype--she is highly emotional, given to violent alterations of mood, pious and reverent in often pagan dimensions, and assiduously protective of daughter Rosa.

Turn for a moment again to television as we see how pervasive the Mamma image is: for decades we seem to have been treated to an endless line of women distinguished by their ample breasts of motherhood, wearing the flowered housecoat of domesticity, and brandishing the stirring spoon of spaghetti sauce. Mamma Celeste is everyone's Mamma as she turns toward the camera, opens her plump arms, and pronounces her philosophy of "*abbundanza!*" in making the pizza. Whether it is pizza or matzoh ball soup, *czarnina* or black-eyed peas, the ethnic mother in the kitchen, insisting that we eat, *mangia*, is a standing joke of situation comedy and Alka Seltzer commercials. Here the stereotype threatens to obscure the very real place of food and the ritual importance of meals in Italian and other ethnic American communities. And in *Marty*, *Lovers and Other Strangers*, *Made for Each Other*, and *The Godfather*, feast and mealtime are very important, both as

setting and symbol. Richard Castellano, in *Lovers and Other Strangers*, has only a tradition of good eating to console him in his middle age. His wife, played in modulations of comedy and pathos by Beatrice Arthur, worries most about not offering up "grainy" veal to her spouse. This food motif comes to emphasize a mutual isolation and disaffection much more important than Italian kitchen humor. When he resurfaces in *The Godfather* as Clemenza, Castellano himself is in the kitchen, teaching novice Mike how to make spaghetti sauce, for the family is at war and the women are displaced as kitchen becomes command post.

Mealtime in popular film can be stereotype time, with yelling children, wild and gay laughter, and overflowing plates of the food the outside world expects to find. But no matter what the menu, family mealtime is also the crucial time for emotional transactions and plot foreshadowing--recall the major confrontations over questions of loyalty when Mike decides to enlist during World War II, or the introduction of Carlo to Connie, both so important in *The Godfather*.

The presence of Mamma Corleone in both parts of *The Godfather* is inextricable from the introduction, development, and resolution of major themes. Though her role is minor in terms of spoken parts, she is an established contrast to the Americanized generation of her children. The memorable wedding feast that opens *Godfather, I* is crystallized as family ritual by the joyous sexuality of Mamma's song. Gambino takes note of the tradition of the easy openness of these ribald lyrics, and even the non-Sicilian cannot mistake the comic sexual gestures of the old man who joins Mamma on stage.<sup>4</sup> Recall, in a similar sense, the place of Mamma Corleone at the opening of *Godfather, II*, where her major function is to register overt familial displeasure at Connie and the latest of her lovers. She turns her cheek from the welcoming kiss of her now tawdry and flashy daughter, who drags along a very uncomfortable blond outsider, Troy Donahue, playing himself in all his Western open good looks. Later in *Godfather, II*, Mamma will become family counselor for a troubled Michael, who recognizes the betrayal from within by Fredo. Mike asks if there ever is a way a family can lose its ties. Mamma says no, and the implication is clear--though she says little, Mamma's very presence is a reaffirmation of the last of the old ways, the New York ways, and the Sicilian ways before that. Even in death she is important, for Michael instructs his bodyguard that nothing must happen to Fredo as long as his mother is alive. Only when she is gone forever can he exact retributive fratricide, having Fredo assassinated on a foggy Nevada lake. From homemade spaghetti to a manmade lake, the thematic movement is clear.

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<sup>4</sup>Gambino, *Blood of My Blood*, p. 186.

The pattern of portrayal of Italian women suggests that they rise to significance only when the film itself is not overtly exploitative, when the aim is exploration of important issues and ideas that reach beneath surface renderings of ethnic stereotype. Only then can these women, even if they are still trapped in the kitchen, become more than *mamma mia*. The film version of Paddy Chayefsky's teleplay, *Marty*, amply demonstrates this notion. The film is more important than an ethnic slice of life, more significant than a prurient peek into the households of those who cannot be like us, to steal a phrase from Reverend Greeley. Marty's mother, played by Esther Minciotti, and, to a lesser extent, his aunt, played by Augusta Ciolli, become archetypally significant as parent and aunt, not merely Italian parent and aunt. The film, after all, is about the lonely and attenuated life of Marty, dutiful son and neighborhood butcher who seeks some kind of human relief from rainy weekend nights in his urban confines. The author places the film in its Italian milieu to emphasize and intensify the loneliness and isolation of all involved. As an Italian, Marty becomes a true oddity, thirty-six years old and living with his mother. Chayefsky himself says the teleplay was

. . . a comment on the social values of our times, and as such, its characters were not probed to the bottom. . . . I was only interested in motivating the mother on a social level--that is a displaced ex-mother, rather than as a woman tied by deep emotional bonds to her son. Marty does eventually break away from his mother. This was not a story about the silver cord.<sup>5</sup>

Chayefsky's comments are partial responses to the prevalent 1950's notion that Oedipal relationships lurked in every mother-son story. But they also address an argument that primary aim and execution is not portrayal of Italians per se. That we also learn much of the frustrations of the single older Italian male, of his retreat into joviality, food, and unnatural camaraderie with cohorts, that we see the aging Italian immigrant woman bemused and troubled by American cultural patterns and expectations--all this is important, but it supports the more generalized human dimensions of the film. The cadences may be Italian, but we detect intimations of the irrelevancy and loneliness of old age for all people in the speech delivered by Marty's mother late in the film. She describes the plight of her sister Catherine and anticipates her own potential shunting aside by children caught up in the process of Americanizing:

"It's a very sad thing. A woman, fifty-six years old, all her life, she had her own home. Now, she's just an old lady, sleeping on her daughter-in-law's couch. It's a curse

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<sup>5</sup>Paddy Chayefsky, "*Marty: Two Choices of Material*," *Television Plays* (New York, 1955), p. 176.

to be a mother, I tell you. Your children grow up and then what is left for you to do? What is a mother's life but her children? It is a very cruel thing when your son has no place for you in his home.<sup>16</sup>

Changing times and values can also be played for comic dimensions, and since American comedy depends so heavily on burlesque and hyperbole, there is an inherent danger of ethnic portrayal turning into stereotype. But Renee Taylor and Joseph Bologna, who wrote *Lovers and Other Strangers* and starred in *Made for Each Other*, use comedy for their astringent observations on the dilemma of the ethnic in America. In *Lovers and Other Strangers*, the Italian-American woman is set against a turbulent backdrop of intermarriage between Irish and Italian, Italian and WASP, divorces, and the casual infidelities of the American middle class. It is no accident that Bea Arthur's two sons in the film are at opposite ends of the marital condition--one about to be a groom and one estranged from his spouse and about to end his marriage. The mother's own marriage is offered up in a few subtle strokes, and her alternating moods of anguish and joy over her children mirror her own circumscribed and unfulfilled dreams.

In *Lovers and Other Strangers*, the Italian woman at least partially extricates herself from the kitchen, moving symbolically not only into the living room, but also into the bedroom. Beneath the chandeliers and plastic slipcovers, the cherubim and flocked wallpaper, we see the film as a genuine expression of the tenuous and bittersweet fate of the immigrant family in America. This is perhaps at the center of the film in the recurring catch-line from Richard Castellano as he questions his soon-to-be divorced son: "Richie, so what's the story?" Indeed, what is the story; what is the future for all of us caught up in the moral and material tides of American culture? What are we giving up and what are we getting back in return? Important films, like important novels and plays, ask these committed questions.

The motif of comic dissection of ethnic experience is carried forward in *Made for Each Other*, where the second and third generation Jew and Italian collide and fall in love in group therapy. Pandora Gold and Giggy Panimba are indeed made for each other by their respective ethnic parents. Giggy's mother is sexually repressed and mystically infatuated with the church. She tells her adolescent son that "he's marrying God" when he begins his brief and abortive study for the priesthood. She relates narratives of her favorite saint who, when he had "bad thoughts," plucked out his eyes. "And that's what love is," she proclaims in an exaggerated ecstasy of sadomasochism. Similarly, Pandora's Jewish mother is not the Molly Goldberg of popular expectation--she is a weird theatrical type, obsessed with astrology, who plots

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<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 162-63.

the stars to plan the perfect moment of conception for her daughter. Generational transitions in this film take us from kitchen stove to analyst's couch.

It may seem obvious to assert that the only time Italian women are permitted to be seen as people is when film addresses larger human questions than the thickness of tomato sauce. But it certainly is not obvious to an opportunistic industry that followed the success of *The Godfather* with a slew of spin-off and rip-off variations, now thankfully relegated to drive-in quadruple features. This same industry insists on churning out Blaxploitation films that insult and demean Black Americans, even if they no longer see themselves as Aunt Jemima or Uncle Tom. Is it a major step forward to portray Black women as big bad Mamas, submachine guns and musk oil, ready for action?

Responsible and perceptive filmmakers use the Italian experience as an American paradigm, not as ethnic anecdote or comic opera. Long before we had the alien and alienated Italian, Jew, or Black to use as ethnic Everyman, American culture and its literature almost instinctively took the voice of the outsider--the one-legged madman, the confidence man, the dwarf and cripple, the Indian, the artist *manqué*. The lonely figure outside the mainstream of society has always been its Cassandra, assessing the moral patterns and rhythms of that society. If the film portrayals of ethnics in general, and Italian women in particular, tell us anything, it might be that the loneliest place of all is in the middle of the mainstream. Ultimately, the films we should watch, the films we should teach, are those that at least attempt to show the complex and problematical situation of all Americans who hyphenate their ethnic affiliations.

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