

# Battleaxes, Spinsters and Chars: the Ageing Woman in British Film Comedy of the Mid-Twentieth Century

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## Abstract

‘Battleaxes, Spinsters and Chars: the Ageing Woman in British Film Comedy of the Mid-Twentieth Century’ explores the prominence of the mature woman in British film comedies of the mid-twentieth century, spanning the period from the Second War World to the mid-1960s. This thesis is structured around case studies featuring a range of film comedies from across this era, selected for the performances of character actresses who were familiar faces to British cinema audiences. Organised chronologically, each chapter centres around films and actresses evoking specific typologies and themes relevant to female ageing: the ‘immobile’ woman in wartime, the spinster in the post-war era, retirement and old age in the 1950s, and the cockney matriarch in the early 1960s. The selection of case studies encompasses the overlooked and critically derided alongside the more celebrated and better known in order to represent the range of British film comedy of the time. The final chapter spans the time-frame of the whole thesis, exploring the later life stardom of Margaret Rutherford. The thesis is centred on close textual analysis of sequences from the case studies, applying research into a range of historical texts relevant to the films and actresses, including biographies, letters, correspondence, press, posters and publicity materials. Each chapter draws on diverse scholarly disciplines to interrogate representations of female ageing, encompassing age studies, feminist studies, star studies, sociological research, genre studies, political philosophy, anthropology and social history. I conclude that film comedy of the mid-twentieth century offered familiar and reassuring typologies of the ageing woman for audiences in a time of upheaval and social change. My analysis of the films demonstrates how the representations of female ageing provided by these character actresses and stars were inflected by the cultural and social context. In her various guises the character actress in British comedy offered a fantasy of continuity, stability and reassurance within a country which struggled to define its national identity, and a national cinema which was struggling to survive.

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## Introduction

### **Female Ageing, Comedy and Performance in British Film of the Mid-Twentieth Century**

The scarcity of substantial film roles for the ageing woman has been the topic of much recent academic and industry debate, accompanying the growth of interest in the study of age and gender. British film continues to privilege the younger woman with the roles available for the older woman tending to be ‘narrative function’ rather than ‘narrative fulcrum’ according to Imelda Whelehan with ‘little engagement with representations of women who are beyond child-bearing years’.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless British film comedy has a history of mature actresses who have not just occupied the margins of the narratives, but have sometimes taken on more significant, even starring roles. Film comedy of the mid-twentieth century was marked by the performances of ageing actresses who were often household names, commanding an audience from other forms of entertainment, including radio, music hall, theatre and television. In some cases their fame was the envy of younger British starlets who struggled to cultivate a sustained career in competition with the glamour of Hollywood. The personae and roles taken by these mature actresses offered iterations of British identity rooted in traditions of popular culture and recurrent myths of ageing femininity, offering pleasures of the familiar and the recognisable. The careers of these ageing performers and their performances have not been the subject of serious study until relatively recently, only remedied by the interest in ageing studies and a growing impetus to take popular culture, and comedy, seriously.

This thesis offers a contribution to British film history in exploring the careers of film actresses who made a significant contribution to the success of British film comedy in the mid-twentieth century, whether as character actors or as stars. In this respect my primary concern is to challenge established histories of British film comedy, arguing that these performers should be central in considering the appeal and success of the genre for the national cinema. In exploring the work of these overlooked actresses the thesis also aims to make an intervention in terms of the

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<sup>1</sup> Imelda Whelehan, ‘Not to be looked at: older women in recent British cinema’, in *British Women’s Cinema*, eds. Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 170.



history of ageing femininity in the mass media, being an overlooked area of scholarly research, particularly with regard to British film.

Comedy has been one of the most successful of British film genres, no more so than during the so-called golden age of British film in the wake of World War Two. The relative invisibility of the ageing female character actor is prevalent, with Terence Pettigrew's collection of the 'British cinema's greatest character actors' being exclusively male, a gender bias which reflected the marketing of the films at the time they were released.<sup>2</sup> Whilst DVD box sets are available dedicated to the careers of film comedy actors such as Terry-Thomas, Tony Hancock and Leslie Phillips, the only female star of the same period to have received such an honour is Margaret Rutherford, albeit under the guise of Miss Marple, overlooking her many other significant roles. This invisibility is endemic of wider issues around women and comedy, with Kristen Anderson Wagner noting that female comedians of the Hollywood silent era were 'virtually erased from the public memory'<sup>3</sup> blaming 'longstanding misogynistic stereotypes about women's inability to perform comedy' for their exclusion from the canon of 'great' comedians.<sup>4</sup>

Andy Medhurst proclaimed that '[t]he notion of achieving huge success in the entertainment industry in one's middle age is almost incomprehensible' with regards to British sitcom star Hylda Baker, who was fifty when she attained stardom in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> Baker was not unique in her later life career success, as is made clear by Melanie Williams, noting the wealth of mature character actresses in British cinema,

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<sup>2</sup> Terence Pettigrew, *British Film Character Actors* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1982). Melanie Williams cites further examples of female character actresses been overlooked in the chronicles of British film in her article 'Entering the paradise of anomalies: studying female character acting in British cinema', *Screen* 52:1 Spring 2011, pp. 98-99.

<sup>3</sup> Kristen Anderson Wagner, 'Pie queens and virtuous vamps: the funny women of the silent screen', in *A Companion to Film Comedy*, eds. Andrew Horton and Joanna E. Rapf (Wiley-Blackwell: Chichester, 2013), p.37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p.78. Baker was also cast in films, most notably *Nearest and Dearest* (1972) and *She Knows Y'Know* (1962).

For consideration of other mature actresses in the British sitcom see Frances Gray on Penelope Keith in *Women and Laughter* (London: Macmillan, 1994); Mary Irwin, "'That's the last time I play the tart for you, Jerry!': Penelope Keith and British television situation comedy", *Critical Studies in Television* 10:2 (Summer 2015); Claire Mortimer, 'Angry old women: Peggy Mount and the performance of female ageing in the British sitcom', *Critical Studies in Television* 10:2 (Summer 2015); Rosie White, 'Funny old girls: representing older women in British television comedy' in *Ageing, Popular Culture and Contemporary Feminism*, eds. Joel Gwynne and Imelda Whelehan (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

although confined to playing supporting roles.<sup>6</sup> Age appeared to be a qualifying characteristic for a career as a character actor, defined by James Naremore as ‘a minor player, usually over the age of forty, with a face and voice so vividly eccentric that it saves writers and directors a good deal of trouble’.<sup>7</sup> There has been a move towards greater recognition of the mature comic actress, most recently Sarah Street’s consideration of Margaret Rutherford’s performance style and Estella Tincknell’s study of Hattie Jacques’s star persona, both following in the wake of broader popular awareness engendered by Andy Merriman’s biographies of the two.<sup>8</sup> Raymond Durnat was to remark of the era that ‘[r]oles abound for such excellent character actresses as Flora Robson, Brenda De Banzie, Margaret Rutherford, Kathleen Harrison, and Thora Hird [...] While England’s young stars languished in their limbos’.<sup>9</sup> Durnat described these actresses as being the ‘complete contrast to the equal and opposite Hollywood imbalance, all optimism, glamour and little character’, suggesting that they were effectively the antithesis of normative female stardom, offering a very British counterpoint to the dominant cinema. Sue Harper elaborates another list of ‘[e]ccentric, respectable women’ who were ‘positively positioned in film narratives’: ‘Edie Martin, Katie Johnson, Irene Handl, Margaret Rutherford and Joyce Grenfell had more room for technical manoeuvre than the sexpots’.<sup>10</sup> Yet Harper narrowly defines the narrative function of these ‘eccentrics’, noting that they ‘were all neutralized by their age, which confers absurdity onto their desires’. Harper overlooks the extent to which these roles offered an agency within the narrative, unrestricted by romance and the sphere of influence of family, which served as the parameters of most female roles.

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, ‘Entering the paradise of anomalies’.

<sup>7</sup> James Naremore, *Acting In The Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 249.

<sup>8</sup> See Sarah Street, ‘Margaret Rutherford and comic performance’, in *British Comedy Cinema*, eds. I.Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); Estella Tincknell, ‘The nation’s matron: Hattie Jacques and British postwar popular culture’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 12 (1), (2015); Andy Merriman, *Hattie: The Authorised Biography of Hattie Jacques* (London: Aurum Press, 2008); Andy Merriman, *Margaret Rutherford: Dreadnought With Good Manners* (London: Aurum Press, 2009).

Other notable works include Paul Matthew St. Pierre’s pioneering study of Doris and Elsie Waters, with a particular focus on their variety roots, *Song and Sketch Transcripts of British Music Hall Performers Elsie and Doris Waters* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003); Robert V. Kenny’s homage to the unruly Irish charwoman persona created by Arthur Lucan, *The Man Who Was Old Mother Riley* (Albany, Georgia: BearManor Media, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Raymond Durnat, *A Mirror For England* (London: BFI, [1970] 2011, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), p.219.

<sup>10</sup> Sue Harper, *Women in British Cinema: Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* (London: Continuum, 2000), p.99.

My focus on British cinema necessitates clarification of the importance of national identity to the thesis as a whole. The various iterations of female ageing which run through British comedy of the era are informed by complex discourses regarding national identity. My approach seeks to establish how the representations of ageing are not simply *reflections* of society but are more complex *refractions* of a sense of national identity challenged by wartime and shifting world order during the post-war period. The thesis is informed by Benedict Anderson's conception of national identity as an 'imagined community', which is cultivated in part by mass communication.<sup>11</sup> John Hill observes that this implies a dynamic relationship between national identity and its expression in cultural forms, being 'subject to historical change, redefinition and even 'reinvention''.<sup>12</sup> My interrogation of the case studies is informed by Hill's argument that national cultures are 'sites of actual and potential contestation and challenge', which are denied by the imagined unity of national identity which fails to take account the many differences which exist within the 'national community'. The construction of the personae, characters and narratives within the case studies are largely informed by nostalgia for an imagined Britishness, located in the recent past of Empire, in contrast to a Britain which was challenged by loss of global status.

What emerges in the course of this thesis, is the importance of national identity in forming the various iterations of ageing femininity in film comedy. Medhurst notes the 'multitudinous versions of Englishness that were in circulation during the twentieth century', evident both 'overtly or covertly, on comic sites'.<sup>13</sup> Film comedy has been responsible for one of the most enduring versions of national identity in the post-war era in the output of Ealing Studios, as celebrated in the plaque commemorating the 'many films projecting Britain and the British character'. Jeffrey Richards observed that the Ealing comedies projected 'a world that is essentially quaint, cosy, whimsical and backward-looking', identifying the prevailing nostalgia which permeates many of the comedies featured in this thesis.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly the following chapters set out to interrogate the historical and social context of the case

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<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On The Origin And Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, [1983] 1991), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> John Hill, 'The issue of national cinema and British film production', in *New Questions of British Cinema*, ed. Duncan Petrie (London: BFI, 1992), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 134.

studies, with regard to prevailing discourses regarding national identity, as embodied in the performances and personae of the ageing actresses.

The importance of age to national identity is laid bare in George Orwell's acerbic declaration, early in the war years, that the country 'resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family [...] in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts'.<sup>15</sup> For Orwell the older generation prevent progress, keeping the country trapped in the past, with nostalgia becoming symptomatic of this national crisis. Nevertheless Orwell's intervention typifies Medhurst's observation that for the most part attempts to evoke national identity through the twentieth century have tended to reflect a white male viewpoint.<sup>16</sup> He argues that 'other identity formations besides "the national" will always inflect and interweave with any individual's attempt to delineate emblematic Englishness'. My intervention breaks away from studies of nationhood in cultural texts which tend to be male-centred, by focusing on the symbolic resonance and role of the mature woman.

For the period covered by the thesis, 'Britishness' was essentially 'Englishness', the words used interchangeably, being indicative of the prevailing Anglocentrism. Philip Dodd observed that Englishness was the dominant national identity, rendering the culture of the rest of Britain meaningless 'other than in its satellite relationship with the cultural life of England'.<sup>17</sup> Raphael Samuel considered how useage of 'English' and 'British' evolved in the course of the twentieth century, noting in the wake of Dunkirk, ' "English" was the favoured idiom in which the idea of a nation was couched, and it was images of the English landscape [...] which served on the Home Front as morale-boosters'.<sup>18</sup> The case studies featured in this thesis are representative of the national cinema at the time, being largely 'English' rather than 'British', as noted by Lindsay Anderson who declared 'it is an English cinema (and Southern English at that), metropolitan in attitude, and entirely middle-class'.<sup>19</sup> Anderson went

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<sup>15</sup> George Orwell, 'The lion and the unicorn' in *George Orwell: Essays*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, (London: Penguin, [1941] 2000), p. 150.

<sup>16</sup> Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Dodd, 'Englishness and the national culture' in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1800-1920*, eds. Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Lindsay Anderson, 'Get out and push' in *Declaration*, ed. Tom Maschler (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1958), p. 157.

further condemning the national cinema, as ‘dedicated to an out-of-date, exhausted national ideal’.<sup>20</sup> Social class is a central focus in the case studies, consistent with Babington’s observation that the nature of a nation’s stars is ‘culture specific’.<sup>21</sup> British society was ‘more tradition-oriented, more class-bound’ in the first half of the twentieth century; post-war the nation faced ‘shrunk prestige, its loss of Empire [...] and the apparent dissolution of a middle-class hegemony into an anxious fluidity.’

A primary concern driving this thesis is to foreground the significance of the performances and personae of character actresses regarding British film comedy of the era. In this respect the thesis is setting out to refocus the history of British film comedy, and demonstrate the contribution of the character actress to the national cinema. The following section delineates the broader cultural traditions discernible within British cinema concerning the ageing woman and film comedy, within the context of a genre which proved to be reliably successful at the box office, despite a history of critical and academic neglect. I will then go on to consider the wider debates and scholarship regarding female ageing as a framework for interrogating the case studies, before outlining the broader cultural traditions regarding comedy and the performance of female ageing. Finally the chapter will establish the social and historical context regarding ageing femininities in the mid-twentieth century, being a time of challenges and change, consequent upon wartime and the introduction of the welfare state.

### **British film comedy**

The relative invisibility of many of the ageing comedy actresses featured in this thesis is indicative of the broader reluctance to take British film comedy seriously. By focusing on film comedy this thesis typifies contemporary scholarship in acknowledging the need to explore previously discredited popular genres. According to Andrew Higson, popular culture has been long dismissed on the grounds that it was ‘standardized, artistically impoverished, trivial, and escapist’.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.159.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce Babington, *British Stars and Stardom* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Higson, ‘British cinema’ in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 503. See also *British Comedy Cinema*,

Comedy could claim to be the genre of the masses, according to Alberto Cavalcanti, who wrote of the relative versatility of comedy established in the silent era: 'Unfettered by the rigid dignity of the drama, they could turn themselves to any subject that offered. They had no need to escape into history, therefore their films came much closer to contemporary problems [...] They came home to ordinary men and women'.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to the formal seriousness of 'drama', comedy worked on the premise of recognisable settings and subject matter, having an 'almost documentary aspect' which Cavalcanti located as the source of their appeal 'to all classes of the public', and what is more 'their great social importance'.

The period covered by this thesis encompasses the rise and fall of the British film industry, including its golden age during the 1940s, followed by the steady decline in box office during the 1950s, becoming increasingly reliant on American funding in the 1960s.<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Napper observed that the predominant trend in film criticism between 1920 and 1970 was to denigrate British cinema 'partly because it was so very British, because it retained the popular culture of Britain as its inspiration'.<sup>25</sup> Napper argues that this reveals an assumption that the expression of British national identity 'must necessarily make for bad cinema'. British comedy found success where other genres failed with the national audience. Higson argues that this was evident in the 1930s, with the film industry strategy being to compete with Hollywood by producing culturally distinctive films which exploited British cultural heritage.<sup>26</sup> British comedy was judged to be more culturally appropriate than 'wise-cracking' American comedy, and was the only British genre to establish national stars such as Gracie Fields. Higson notes that the consensus was that British comedies were 'virtually inexportable', because the humour did not translate well, particularly to the American market.<sup>27</sup>

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eds. I. Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); Medhurst, *A National Joke*; David Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> Alberto Cavalcanti, 'Comedies and cartoons' in *Footnotes to the Film*, ed. Charles Davy (London: Lovat Dickson, 1938), p. 78.

<sup>24</sup> By the end of the 1960s, ninety per cent of production capital was American. See Julian Petley, 'Cinema and state' in *All Our Yesterdays*, ed. Charles Barr (London: BFI, 1986), p.31.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence Napper, 'A despicable tradition? Quota-quickies in the 1930s' in *The British Cinema Book* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), ed. Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2001), p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Higson, *Waving The Flag* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 111.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

The figurations of female ageing found in this thesis were informed by the cultural context of British film comedy. The comic tradition was rooted in diverse modes of British popular culture, which encompassed the pre-cinematic forms of music hall, variety and the theatre. For David Sutton this became a crucial factor in the British comedy's relationship with its audience 'based on familiarity, on forms and materials already known from other non-cinematic media [...] from the everyday life which so much working-class comedy is intent on evoking'.<sup>28</sup> These were the same factors which fuelled the critical disdain for the genre according to Sutton, specifically its 'uncinematic nature' and its 'capacity for hybridization and cross-generic fertilization'.<sup>29</sup> The films featured in this thesis represent the two main traditions of British film comedy, differentiated by Richard Dacre between literary comedies, rooted in theatre, and performer based comedy, with their roots in music hall.<sup>30</sup> There was a clear differentiation in terms of social class between these two strands of film comedy, with the literary comedy having a middle-class pedigree, whilst the performer tradition was associated with working-class popular culture.

Of the actresses featured in this thesis, Flora Robson, Margaret Rutherford, Athene Seyler and Sybil Thorndike were identified with the middle-class respectability of the theatrical tradition. Their careers typified the tendency of the era by dedicating themselves primarily to the theatre, but going on to take film roles. The location of film studios made it easy to commute between film sets and the London theatres, yet it was notable that these performers made clear their preference for theatre over film, consistent with perceptions of its superior cultural worth. The casting of such prestigious performers helped attract a middle-class audience to the films, cast as distinctive types drawing upon their status as 'grandes dames' of the stage, and connotations of respectability and superior social class. Adaptations of plays offered the cinema 'pre-sold publicity, cultural prestige, and a magic gateway to ecstatic, patriotic reviews' according to Brown, as was the case with *Blithe Spirit*.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast the film careers of performers such as Doris and Elsie Waters, Hattie Jacques and Peggy Mount followed in the tradition established by the music-hall

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<sup>28</sup> Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries*, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Dacre, 'Traditions of British comedy' in *The British Cinema Book (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*, ed. Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2001), p. 233.

<sup>31</sup> Geoff Brown, "'Sister of the stage": British film and British theatre' in *All Our Yesterdays*, ed. Charles Barr (London: BFI, 1986), pp. 144-45.

comedies of Gracie Fields, George Formby and Will Hay. This tradition is characterised by Tom Ryall as manifesting ‘the vigorous strands of popular culture’ indicative of a ‘distinctive cinema of national identity’.<sup>32</sup> The music-hall tradition is central to the development of British film comedy of the era, described by Medhurst as the ‘motherlode’ of English popular comedy.<sup>33</sup> Medhurst observes that it informed the majority of film comedy during the Second World War with variety performers playing ‘a particular ideological role [...] offering a sense of continuity with pre-war times, attempting to defuse threats with humour, and most importantly reaffirming a notion of community’.<sup>34</sup> The imprint of the medieval carnival tradition is evident in comedy rooted in the music hall, made manifest in how it offers ‘some respite from the burdens of hierarchy to audiences stuck on low social rungs’.<sup>35</sup> John Fisher argued that the popularity of music hall artistes was rooted in ‘the basic social identity they shared with the bulk of their audiences’; their working-class origins being foregrounded in their personae.<sup>36</sup> Female music hall performers, had become more common in 1880s, tending to fall into the category of ‘either sexually alluring, but dependent on men, or independent and sexually uninteresting’.<sup>37</sup>

The figurations of ageing femininity in the music halls recurred across popular culture, as noted by Medhurst in writing about the ‘saucy seaside postcard’, depicting various ageing grotesques, including the nag, the ‘man-hungry or sex-phobic spinsters’ and fat ladies.<sup>38</sup> Medhurst argues that the persistence of these stereotypes across popular culture ‘is testament to the persistence in English popular culture of a relatively stable set of cultural groups and social situations deemed to be reliably funny’. Such types were manifestations of what George Orwell referred to as ‘low humour’ in his essay on postcard artist Donald McGill.<sup>39</sup> Women are ‘monstrously parodied’ in McGill’s work, yet this is ‘as traditional as Greek tragedy, a sort of sub-world of smacked bottoms and scrawny mothers-in-law which is part of

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Ryall, ‘A British studio system’ in *The British Cinema Book*, ed. Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2001), p.39.

<sup>33</sup> Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 63.

<sup>34</sup> Andy Medhurst, ‘Music hall and British cinema’ in *All Our Yesterdays*, ed. Charles Barr (London: BFI, 1986), p. 177.

<sup>35</sup> Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 71.

<sup>36</sup> John Fisher, *Funny Way to be a Hero* (London: Frederick Muller, 1973), p.14.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Waites, J. M. Golby and Bill Purdue, *The Historical Development of Popular Culture in Britain* (1) (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1981), p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 136.

<sup>39</sup> George Orwell, ‘The art of Donald McGill’ in *George Orwell: Essays*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Penguin, [1941] 2000), pp. 194-95.



western European consciousness'. Orwell noted that McGill characterised older women as either old maids, 'nagging wives and tyrannous mothers-in-law',<sup>40</sup> in a world where there is an abrupt shift in the ageing process as women metamorphose from hyper-sexualised caricatures in their youth to grotesque, 'grim-visaged' tartars.<sup>41</sup> In her work on British film comedy before 1930, Laraine Porter identifies similar examples of female grotesques, which she suggests were inspired by the Suffragette movement, offering 'comic expression for unease in the shift in post-Victorian gender relations in which women threatened to neglect the home and husband – a threat which is dissipated by turning her into a figure of ridicule'.<sup>42</sup> These same grotesques were identified by Sarah Street in many of the British film comedies prior to 1918, 'the joke frequently being on people who were obese, ugly, spinsters, suffragettes or hen-pecked husbands'.<sup>43</sup>

Of the case study films featured in this thesis, *Alive and Kicking* (1958), *Ladies Who Do* (1963) and *Make Mine Mink* (1960) belonged to the farce tradition, popular in the post-war period. Farce combined the music hall emphasis on comic performance with the plot absurdities of the more literary comic tradition. Characters tended to be 'simplified comic types' according to Jessica Milner Davis, with the termagant being an intrinsic element of the tradition.<sup>44</sup> Mary Brough made her name as a termagant in the Aldwych farces of the 1920s and 1930s according to Leslie Smith, playing 'variations on the theme of the bossy, physical formidable, rather vulgar middle-aged lady, interfering in other people's lives'.<sup>45</sup> The character type was indicative of the close relationship between farce and the wider world of popular culture, being recognisable from the music hall tradition and McGill's ageing female grotesques.<sup>46</sup> For Davis, farce was an essentially conservative form, despite its populist tendencies, its core message being that 'we are all levelled down by our common humanity. No airs and pretences - and no exceptions - allowed. But no preaching for a revolution, either'.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless a more radical tendency is discerned by Sue Harper and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>42</sup> Laraine Porter, 'From slapstick to satire: British comedy cinema before 1930' in *British Comedy Cinema* eds. I. Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce* (New Jersey: Transaction, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Leslie Smith, *Modern British Farce* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-65.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

Vincent Porter, notably regarding gender in the case of the *St. Trinian's* series, arguing that it explored 'fears about the changes in the traditional gender order'.<sup>48</sup> The *St. Trinian's* films were centred on a 'celebration of unruly females [...] Never before had the spectacle of women behaving badly – and not being punished – appeared on screen'.

The 1950s is chronologically central to this thesis, in terms of the range of films selected for inclusion. The era was deemed to be a 'Golden Age' of British film comedy according to I. Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter, benefiting from 'the confluence of a spirit of post-war change, a wealth of talent – much of it nurtured through ENSA [...] and kept afloat by healthy audience numbers, relative financial stability and a British film industry which maintained continuity by the approximation of a studio system'.<sup>49</sup> As a context for exploring representations of ageing it is notable that the age profile of cinema audiences was becoming younger and men started to predominate in the cinema audience.<sup>50</sup> There were moves to try and attract women back to the cinema, as made evident in a 1958 advertising campaign noted by John Hill, possibly as a consequence of the steady increase in the number of working women too busy to go to the cinema.<sup>51</sup> Producers were endeavouring to meet the changing audience profile, with Harper and Porter suggesting that film tastes were unpredictable, reflecting an audience who were 'in flux, unsure about their own place in the new, supposedly classless world of consumption and pleasure'.<sup>52</sup> Comedies worked by 'inviting the spirit of irreverence to play with fixed shibboleths',<sup>53</sup> with subordinate groups displaying 'energy, the release of tension, and the conquest of inhibition' in popular film series including *St. Trinian's*, *Carry On* and moreover in the representations of ageing within many of the films featured in this thesis.<sup>54</sup>

The time span of this thesis is curtailed by the decline of the British film industry in the 1960s. Robert Murphy opines that British film comedy lost its way in the 1960s,

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<sup>48</sup> Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 101.

<sup>49</sup> I. Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter, 'British comedy cinema: sex class and very naughty boys' in *British Comedy Cinema*, eds. I.Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Harper and Porter, *British Cinema*, p. 243-44.

<sup>51</sup> John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63* (London: BFI, 1986), p. 35.

<sup>52</sup> Harper and Porter, *British Cinema*, p. 264.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

blaming a more permissive society, and mourning the innocence of the humour of the ‘old repressive society’ wherein ‘humour came from the juxtaposition of sexual fantasies and grim reality – the ugly misshapen middle-aged man dreaming of sex with an attractive pliable young girl and being pulled up short by his stout, argumentative wife’.<sup>55</sup> The ‘grim reality’ of the middle-aged wife had disappeared in the permissive 1960s, as the middle-aged man was now free to ‘share the favours of sexually liberated young women’, as in the later *Carry On* films. Inadvertently Murphy equates the decline of British comedy with the disappearance of the ageing woman, who is seemingly rendered irrelevant in a culture increasingly concerned with youth and sex. Nevertheless the ‘stout, argumentative wife’ had not wholly disappeared, but had been relocated to the sitcom, soap opera and television spin-off films such as *Till Death Us Do Part* (1968).

The consideration of the role of the ageing women featured in this thesis is informed by a broader awareness of themes and narrative strategies which characterise British film comedy. Sutton asserted that British film comedy enjoyed a ‘subaltern status’ within British cinema, allowing it ‘to articulate the contradictory in a way which other discourses cannot’.<sup>56</sup> He argues that a significant strain of British comedy is marked by refusal of the adult world, marked by the comic protagonist’s ‘regressive flight back to their own generative disorder’.<sup>57</sup> The contradictory spirit is evident in Sutton’s recognition of the tendency for British comedies to depart from the classical narrative model, there being not even a ‘figuration of stability [...] but instead strategies of outright evasion’.<sup>58</sup> Medhurst examines the claims as to whether there is a national sense of humour in *A National Joke*, arguing that the comedy genre can often manifest the characteristics of ‘inexportable’ films, drawing on other forms of popular entertainment, featuring ‘favourite performers who tended to portray either recurring, stereotyped figures or elaborated versions of their own already established personas’, relying ‘heavily on verbal and musical codes’, and being firmly targeted towards popular tastes.<sup>59</sup> Medhurst adds that popular comedy works ‘through mobilising known and familiar pleasures’, thereby working to offer ‘solace,

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<sup>55</sup> Robert Murphy, *Sixties British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 252.

<sup>56</sup> Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries*, p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>59</sup> Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 205. The concept of the ‘inexportable’ is cited from the work of Jean-Pierre Jeancolas.

identification, confirmation, belonging’, trading on such specific cultural references that ‘they offer no way in for outsiders’. The casting of ageing and familiar faces, in roles which are based on familiar archetypes rooted in cultural references which have endured over time, works to deliver predictable pleasures to an audience beset by change in their everyday lives.

### **Female ageing**

That film academics have been so slow to engage with discourses concerning ageing is no surprise, given the context of a culture characterised by a denial of ageing. Literary scholar Kathleen Woodward noted this paradoxical repression of ageing given that ‘age – in the sense of older age – is the one difference we are all likely to live into’, for along with gender and race, age is one of ‘the most salient markers of social difference’.<sup>60</sup> The elision of ageing encompasses cultural studies and the arts, wherein ‘the older female body has been significant only in terms of its absence’ according to Woodward.<sup>61</sup> The extent to which the ageing woman has been overlooked and dismissed is evident when surveying feminist discourses, whose concern has predominantly been the younger woman, reflecting a youth-orientated society. Nevertheless there have been notable exceptions, led by Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer, whose interventions have been characterised by their own need to come to terms with what Susan Sontag referred to as the ‘double standard’ of female ageing, doubly marginalised on account of gender and age.<sup>62</sup> More recently Elaine Showalter observes that ‘It’s not easy to come out as an old person, especially as an old woman’, arguing that the shame and stigma of old age is greater for being so visible to all.<sup>63</sup> With contemporary society wrestling with the implications of an ageing population, the issue of old age has generated greater interest within the academy, there being a surge of studies regarding representations

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<sup>60</sup> Kathleen Woodward, *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. x.

<sup>61</sup> Kathleen Woodward, ‘Performing age, performing gender’ in *NWSA Journal*, 18:1 (2006), p.162.

<sup>62</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972); Germaine Greer, *The Change: Women, Aging and the Menopause* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992); Betty Friedan, *The Fountain of Age* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993); Susan Sontag, ‘The double standard of aging’ in *The Saturday Review* (23<sup>rd</sup> September 1972).

<sup>63</sup> Elaine Showalter, ‘Introduction’ to Lynne Segal, *Out of Time* (London: Verso, 2013), p.xi.

of ageing in the arts and popular culture, although predominantly concerned with contemporary examples rather than establishing a historical context.<sup>64</sup>

Whilst it is not the primary intent of this thesis to give a comprehensive review of the scholarship regarding ageing, it is apposite to indicate the interventions which have informed discussion of the actresses and films of the case studies. My approach sets out to interrogate the representations of age as regards the broader social context. The work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette is of particular relevance, coining the formulation ‘aged by culture’ to indicate how age identity is a social construction, for ‘[e]verything we know of as culture in the broadest sense – discourses, feelings, practices, institutions, material conditions – is saturated with concepts of age and aging’.<sup>65</sup> Gullette argues that our culture proscribes one inflexible narrative of ageing as decline, for “‘Aging’ even at the merely visual level cannot have a single, invariable, universal, and ahistorical meaning’.<sup>66</sup> She contests the binary narrative of young and old, arguing for narratives of ageing as progress, specifically stories ‘in which the implicit meanings of aging run from survival, resilience, recovery and development, all the way up to collective resistance to decline forces’.<sup>67</sup>

Perennial typages of ageing employed in cultural texts, including film, serve to perpetuate the fears and ridicule working to contain the ‘threat’ of the older woman. Women are not merely rendered invisible and marginalised on account of their age, but become inherently abject and the object of pity and scorn when their age becomes manifest. E. Ann Kaplan applied Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection to

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<sup>64</sup> For example see Andrew Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Sally Chivers, *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women’s Narratives* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003); Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell, eds., *Ageing Femininities: Troubling Representations* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012); Aagje Swinnen and John A. Stotesbury, eds., *Ageing, Performance and Stardom* (Berlin: Lit, 2012); Virpi Yläanne, *Representing Ageing: Images and Identities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne, *Ageing, Popular Culture and Contemporary Feminism: Harleys and Hormones* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014); Jeannette King, *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Deborah Jermyn and Su Holmes, eds., *Women, Celebrity and Cultures of Ageing: Freeze Frame* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Memoirs reflecting on a personal experience of ageing by feminist thinkers have included Jane Miller, *Crazy Age: Thoughts on Being Old* (London: Virago, 2010) and Lynne Segal, *Out of Time* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>65</sup> Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.11.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

explain the position of the ageing woman in the patriarchy, arguing that ‘old women are what we have to push away from both the social body and even the individual body in order for that body to remain clean, whole, pure’.<sup>68</sup> The older woman is both exiled and undesirable, the two being inseparable. Sontag wrote of ‘the visceral horror felt at aging female flesh. It reveals a radical fear of women installed deep in this culture, a demonology of women that has crystallized in such mythic caricatures as the vixen, the virago, the vamp, and the witch’.<sup>69</sup> Beauvoir observed that the status of the female in society was underpinned by the belief that she is ‘Other’.<sup>70</sup> Jeannette King elaborates this with regard to the mature woman who is ‘doubly Other, both Other to man, and Other to youth’, but the unstable nature of ageing drives the need to ‘assert the precarious distance between youthful self and aged Other’.<sup>71</sup>

Many of the ageing women featured in this thesis fail to conform to expectations of age-related behaviour. Age inappropriate behaviour is labelled as anachronistic by Mary Russo, being a rebellion against the normative life model of progression through birth, reproduction and death.<sup>72</sup> Anachronistic conduct entails risk, as ‘Not acting one’s age [...] is not only inappropriate but dangerous, exposing the female subject, especially, to ridicule, contempt, pity, and scorn’. Russo’s work evokes a possible context for understanding the role of the older woman within the context of film comedy, in terms of risk-taking and contravening the ‘normalization of aging’ which imposes ‘fixed patterns of tasks and challenges [...] keeping us in place and apart from the unsafe populations that are polluted by extremes and excesses’.<sup>73</sup> For Russo risk is associated ‘with disease, deficit, danger and abnormality [...] the turbulence which exists in every system’, and that the failure to conform and not act one’s age is transgressive.<sup>74</sup> Russo argues against the dominant view on risk-taking, seeing it as offering possibilities – and indeed life itself – rather than merely accepting the prevalent narrative of decline. Risk and transgression are perennial tropes of the comedy genre, with ageing characters refusing to accept decline when

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<sup>68</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, ‘Trauma and aging’ in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 188.

<sup>69</sup> Sontag, ‘Double standard of aging’, p.292.

<sup>70</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, [1953]1997), p. 16.

<sup>71</sup> King, *Discourses of Ageing*, p. 43.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Russo, ‘Aging and the scandal of anachronism’ in *Figuring Age*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 21.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

at the heart of the narrative in the films covered by this thesis, thereby contesting the normalization of ageing.

For many of the actresses and characters featured in this thesis, being deemed to be no longer young and effectively ‘past it’ is synonymous with early middle age, and beyond the optimum age of childbearing. It is menopause which is commonly identified as the marker of loss and invisibility, with Beauvoir describing it in the bleakest terms as a crisis and ‘mutilation’, with the loss of fertility being a loss of femininity, removing a woman’s ‘justification for her existence and her opportunity for happiness’.<sup>75</sup> Beauvoir reflects that ‘women of a certain age’ are no longer female, but ‘a third sex’, with some becoming ‘masculinized’.<sup>76</sup> Freud notes the innate comic status of the post-menopausal woman, or rather the “‘old dragon’ into which the charming girl, the loving wife and the tender mother have been transformed’.<sup>77</sup> Freud demonises the middle-aged woman, preceding the previous statement by stating that women often alter strangely in character after they have abandoned their ‘genital function [...] They become quarrelsome, vexatious and overbearing, petty and stingy; that is to say, they exhibit typically sadistic and anal-erotic traits which they did not possess earlier, during their period of womanliness’.

Feminist thinkers have argued that ageing can present new possibilities for women, no longer being defined by their looks, youth and fertility; their invisibility could offer a freedom from social constraints and expectations. Helene Deutsch likened ageing to adolescence, being a ‘developmental period[s] of life’.<sup>78</sup> Sontag suggested that ageing presents an opportunity for women to defy limiting notions of femininity, ‘actively protesting and disobeying the conventions that stem from this society’s double standard about aging’.<sup>79</sup> Greer is evangelical in arguing that ‘being a frightening old woman’ has many advantages, being one of the largest population groups in the West.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, those who reject the pressure to deny their

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<sup>75</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 587.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>77</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The disposition to obsessional neurosis’ in Vol. XII of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth and the Inst. Of Psycho-Analysis, [1913] 1958), p. 323-24.

<sup>78</sup> Helene Deutsch, *Conversations With Myself: An Epilogue* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), pp.215-16.

<sup>79</sup> Sontag, ‘Double standard’, p. 204.

<sup>80</sup> Greer, *The Change*, p. 4.

ageing are castigated as being ‘old bats and old bags, crones, mothers-in-law, castrating women’.<sup>81</sup>

### **Comedy and the performance of female ageing**

Actresses such as Peggy Mount and Margaret Rutherford were defined by the performance of female ageing, inflected by discourses concerning popular culture, social class and broader cultural archetypes. Richard Dyer argued that performance is an important aspect of understanding stars as an ideological text, relying on an audience knowledge that is ‘culture- and history- bound [...] no gesture is intrinsically meaningful but only culture makes it so’.<sup>82</sup> Dyer elaborates how stars have a ‘particular performance style’ which has a unique familiarity which will be drawn in each performance: ‘The specific repertoire of gestures, intonations, etc. that a star establishes [...] carries the meaning of her/his image just as much as the ‘inert’ element of appearance, the particular sound of her/his voice or dress style’.

The performances at the heart of this thesis foreground the essential performativity of age, the comic mode working both to accentuate and transgress the polarities of young and old. Scholarly work concerning the performance of age has invariably been rooted in Judith Butler’s writing on the performativity of gender, arguing that identity is ‘manufactured through a sustained set of acts’, and is a question of ‘repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body’.<sup>83</sup> Sadie Wearing points out that Butler’s consideration of gender as a process of repetition over time inevitably evokes consideration of ‘age as a moment when the “sustained social performances” of gender are at some risk’, with the implication that ageing jeopardises gender identity.<sup>84</sup> Butler was particularly interested in how the breakdown of certainties regarding identity and the dissolving of the gender polarities can expose the artificiality of socially constructed identities. Butler was writing with regard to drag which renders gender identity unstable in common with the comic mode, characterised by its play with socially inscribed identities, including age. The body is central to comic performance, often paying

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>82</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979), p. 142.

<sup>83</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, [1990] 2006), p. xv.

<sup>84</sup> Sadie Wearing, ‘Subjects of rejuvenation: aging in postfeminist culture’ in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p.286.



scant regard to verisimilitude, adopting an ostentatious performance style, constructing an accentuated performance of identity.

The few studies of performances of female ageing in film during the mid-twentieth century are concerned with Hollywood film, and overlook the comedy genre. Such work has concurred that the representations sustain prevailing cultural anxieties. Vivian Sobchack's exploration of low-budget science-fiction/horror films of the late 1950s and early 1960s show middle-aged women as monstrous in their ageing.<sup>85</sup> Karen Stoddard notes the increasingly pessimistic representations in the post-war era, with older women being increasingly obsolete, teetering on insanity and even a threat to younger women.<sup>86</sup> The same era featured performances of faded Hollywood stars playing the role of the ageing actress confronting the demise of her fame, with Jodie Brooks observing that stars such as Bette Davis represent an 'earlier moment of cinema', thereby being more than just the 'discarded' but 'souvenirs [...] brought into a volatile juxtaposition with the present of the films'.<sup>87</sup>

It is in the margins of popular culture that the marginalised can be located, with the ageing woman rarely being the star, but often to be found in a supporting role. Patricia White argues that the 'phenomenon' of the supporting character can be a 'site for a range of unpredictable effects [...] making visible patterns of marginality, functionality, and iconicity'.<sup>88</sup> Judith Roof explored the role of female comic supporting characters, noting that they inhabit a liminal space within the narrative, being 'degendered, masculinized, or queered [...] their presence hints at perverse alternatives of nonmarriage, independence, and business success'.<sup>89</sup> Roof hints at the radical potential of this role, fulfilling a function akin to that of the Shakespearian fool, in providing 'humor, wisdom, a point of identification, and the possibility of narrative alternatives [...] They are the site where minor, middle, and perverse overlap'. She indicates a clear correlation between social status and the role of fool,

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<sup>85</sup> Vivian Sobchack, 'Scary women: cinema, surgery, and special effects' in *Figuring Age*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>86</sup> Karen M. Stoddard, *Saints and Shrews: Women and Aging in American Popular Film* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983).

<sup>87</sup> Jodie Brooks, 'Performing aging/performance crisis' in *Figuring Age*, ed. Kathleen Woodward, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 233.

<sup>88</sup> Patricia White, *UnInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 148.

<sup>89</sup> Judith Roof, *All About Thelma and Eve: Sidekicks and Third Wheels* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 10.

being the ‘wise servant figure’ rendered marginal on account of their class, gender and single status. Nevertheless Roof overlooks the importance of ageing which also works to peripheralise these characters.

A central tenet of my argument in this thesis rests on the ability of comedy to stage narratives of escape from the dominant discourses of female ageing. The comedy genre is an ideal narrative space for women to challenge gender roles according to Wagner, who argues that it has ‘long been used as a means of masking transgression and of rendering acceptable a wide range of behaviours’.<sup>90</sup> Nancy Walker argues that comedy can be an effective channel for the oppressed and marginalised, its aim being to question the norm, ‘the humor of those on the “threshold” is apt to reveal a perception of incongruity, that not only questions the rules of the culture, but also suggests a different order.’<sup>91</sup> Moreover, as Zoe Brennan argues, comedy has the ability to ‘to undercut the dominant construction of senescence as void of interest’, thereby having a radical potential.<sup>92</sup> The possibilities of comedy in offering the potential for change are recognised by Sutton, who suggests that it can be seen to be ‘a socially productive, as well as socially produced, set of discourses’. The tendency to subversion is ‘a movement towards actual change, on the level of wish-fulfilment, utopianism and social and personal renewal’.<sup>93</sup> This view of comedy sees it working ‘in the gaps’ of society, outside dominant cultural practices, beyond the critical landscape, thus having the freedom to articulate tensions and conflict that are overlooked and absent elsewhere. Andrew Stott remarks how comedy questions dominant ideological discourses: ‘the rigid insistence on inflexible systems of being or thinking are ridiculed by transformations of different kinds, investigations of alternative realities, or a relaxation of social codes and a suspension of laws governing the body’.<sup>94</sup> Yet in terms of cinema this is bounded by institutional practices, making it ‘a negotiated and legitimate subversion [...] the “transgressions” of comedy [are] generically permissible and, indeed, obligatory’.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Kristen Anderson Wagner, “‘Have women a sense of humor?’: comedy and sensibility in early twentieth century film’ in *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 68, 2011, p. 36.

<sup>91</sup> Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 71.

<sup>92</sup> Zoe Brennan, *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), p. 113.

<sup>93</sup> Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries*, p. 59.

<sup>94</sup> Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

The films featured in the following case studies feature the mature woman negotiating the inhibitions and social confinement entailed by her age, endeavouring to find freedom and play, rather than decline into old age. Sigmund Freud suggested that comedy offers a reversion to childhood, its pleasures and freedom.<sup>96</sup> The potential of comedy to transport the ageing adult back to their youth was vigorously supported by Henri Bergson who had a bleak conception of old age, arguing that ‘after a certain age, we become impervious to all fresh or novel forms of joy, and the sweetest pleasures of the middle-aged man are perhaps nothing more than a revival of the sensations of childhood’.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless despite the perceived freeing effect of comedy, Freud noted it worked to marginalise and humiliate its object, writing that the comic ‘is found in persons, in their movements, forms, actions and traits of character’.<sup>98</sup> Comic devices had the capacity to ‘serve hostile and aggressive tendencies’, rendering the person ‘contemptible and rob[bing] him of any claim on dignity or authority’. Lynne Segal reflects how as far back as the writings of both Euripides and Aristophanes the elderly were portrayed as stock figures of ridicule, with old women ‘as helpless and pitiable, if not ridiculous’.<sup>99</sup>

Scholarship has established a tradition of the older woman finding a voice and platform in comedy, most notably in Mikhail Bakhtin’s work concerning folk culture of the Middle Ages. He explores the role of the grotesque in the tradition of carnival, citing the example of the Kerch terracottas depicting ‘senile pregnant hags’.<sup>100</sup> The inversion of social norms implicit in the time of carnival informs this image which conflates death with birth, rejecting and mocking classic aesthetics, and evoking the human in physical, animalistic terms. These ageing grotesques are defiant, and animated by a comic spirit, Bakhtin elaborating that ‘[m]oreover, the old hags are laughing’. Old age and distinctively feminine attributes are argued to be central in defining this image of the grotesque, evoking transformation and ambivalence: ‘the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and

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<sup>96</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (London: Penguin, 2002).

<sup>97</sup> Henri Bergson, ‘Laughter’ in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 104-5.

<sup>98</sup> Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 184-85.

<sup>99</sup> Segal, *Out of Time*, p. 41.

<sup>100</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1968] 1984), p. 25.

the end of the metamorphosis'.<sup>101</sup> For Bakhtin the grotesque informs the carnival spirit and the 'principle of laughter', offering liberation from the apparent order and stability of the normal world, promising the 'potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life'.<sup>102</sup> The carnival tradition of medieval folk culture has a radical potential, as exemplified by the Kerch 'pregnant hags', wherein death, and implicitly ageing, is a creative force, with laughter being a 'gay, liberating and regenerating element'.<sup>103</sup>

Victor Turner specifically saw film as the modern manifestation of the medieval carnival, a locus for the performance of public rituals, marked frequently by

a satirical, lampooning, comedic quality. Furthermore, they tend to stress the basic equality of all, even if this involves a status reversal and the setting up of hierarchies of roles, occupied by those who are normally underlings, which caricature the normative indicative hierarchy's power, wealth, and authority.<sup>104</sup>

For Turner public rituals were marked by an essential liminality, defined as 'betwixt-and-between the normal, day to day cultural and social states [...] it is a time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen'.<sup>105</sup> Turner likens the liminal to the rite of passage, marking a time of transition, in terms of both the personal and the public. Kathleen Rowe asserts that 'the motifs of liminality' define the carnivalesque, and are most fully employed in comedy, with its perennial narrative tropes of 'transgression and inversion, disguise and masquerade, sexual reversals, the deflation of ideals, and the leveling of hierarchies'.<sup>106</sup> A central theme of the films featured in this thesis is how the characters deal with their (lack of) status as ageing women, having crossed a threshold into post-menopausal state, finding themselves in a liminal status betwixt 'useful' fertile femininity and death.

The importance of the reversal of social hierarchies in times of carnival is made evident in the research of Natalie Zemon Davis into the tradition of sexual inversion

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p. 48.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p.51.

<sup>104</sup> Victor Turner, 'Frame, flow and reflection: ritual and drama as public liminality', in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6/4 ([1977] 1979), p. 470.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 465.

<sup>106</sup> Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 8-9.

as ‘a widespread form of cultural play’ in preindustrial Europe.<sup>107</sup> Davis charts a historical precedent for comedy being an arena within which the subordinate gender is given a voice, arguing that although the ‘holiday rule of the woman-on-top confirmed subjection throughout society’, it simultaneously promoted resistance to inequalities.<sup>108</sup> Davis suggests that festivities in France of the late Middle Ages illustrated that this reversal of status ‘was very much in the service of the village community, dramatizing the differences between different stages of life’.<sup>109</sup> The films at the heart in this thesis feature the ageing woman as unruly in the tradition of the disorderliness of the woman-on-top, the nature of this unruliness threatening established certainties regarding gender and age identity and provoking discourses concerning power, status and community. Rowe evoked the woman-on-top as the female grotesque for whom laughter has the power ‘to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place’.<sup>110</sup> The unruly woman in comedy offers the potential to rethink ‘how women are constructed as gendered subjects in the language of spectacle and the visual’.<sup>111</sup> Rowe’s theorisation of spectacle works to complicate the equation of visual pleasure and power, which is destabilised by the unruly woman, who is: ‘rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle.’<sup>112</sup>

Russo argues that ‘making a spectacle out of oneself’ is ‘a specifically feminine danger’, which implies ‘a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach’.<sup>113</sup> The ageing body is more at risk of being categorised as ‘grotesque’ by making a spectacle of itself. Nevertheless the ‘spectacle’ of the female grotesque is harnessed by feminist writers and artists as a ‘positive and powerful figuration of culture and womanhood’.<sup>114</sup> Feminist philosopher, Hélène Cixous, recognises the power of laughter in her evocation of the feminine grotesque as a figurehead for women’s liberation, declaring ‘You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her.

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<sup>107</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 129.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>110</sup> Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 3.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>113</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 53.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing'.<sup>115</sup> B. Ruby Rich drew on Cixous's work in coining the term 'Medusan' to evoke the power of humour, namely 'its revolutionary potential as a deflator of the patriarchal order and an extraordinary leveler and reinventor of dramatic structure'.<sup>116</sup> Laraine Porter argues that the 'essential anarchism' of comedy makes it a space where 'physical shortcomings can be translated into cultural capital', where the unruly physical form (dress, body shape, or behaviour) can be exploited to subvert sexual objectification.<sup>117</sup>

Nevertheless feminist criticism was slow to engage with women in comedy, perpetuating a reluctance to take comedy seriously, and thereby failing to combat the accepted 'truth' that women had no sense of the comic.<sup>118</sup> Both Lucy Fischer and Frances Gray typify a feminist critique of comedy as reinforcing gender inequalities, presupposing a male audience. Fischer argued that film comedy worked to excise, peripheralise and humiliate the female.<sup>119</sup> Gray observed that '[c]omedy positions the woman not simply as the object of the male gaze but of the male laugh – not just to be-be-looked-at but to-be-laughed-at'.<sup>120</sup> She identifies examples of 'relentless stereotyping' which are all defined by sexuality, including the older woman as 'the dragon who doesn't realise she is sexually past it'. Such critiques are informed by the 'superiority' theory of comedy, elaborated in the seventeenth century by Thomas Hobbes, who argued that 'Laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others...'.<sup>121</sup> The ageing woman is vulnerable in the terms of this theory, on account of both her gender and age.

Regina Barreca observes that cultural laws deem it morally dubious for younger women to participate in humour whereas 'Only old women – or women who are somehow outside the sexual marketplace – are permitted to make lewd remarks',

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<sup>115</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), p. 885.

<sup>116</sup> B. Ruby Rich, 'In the name of feminist film criticism' in *Heresies* Vol. 3, No. 1, Issue 9 (1980), p. 80.

<sup>117</sup> Laraine Porter, 'Tarts, tampons and tyrants: women and representation in British comedy' in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two*, ed. Stephen Wagg (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), p. 75.

<sup>118</sup> See Regina Barreca, 'Introduction' in *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), p. 4. Lucy Fischer, 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child' in *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, ed. Andrew S. Horton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 61.

<sup>119</sup> Fischer, 'Sometimes I feel like a motherless child', p. 63.

<sup>120</sup> Gray, *Women and Laughter*, p.9.

<sup>121</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature*, (1650), quoted by Stott in *Comedy*, p. 133.

suggesting a broader license to eschew convention accorded by ageing.<sup>122</sup> Porter suggests that recurrent typages of the ageing woman, including the ‘the tyrannical mother-in-law, the spinster hag or the nagging wife’ in British popular comedy, work through anxieties about female sexuality, ‘When the accoutrements of femininity, once so desirable, are no longer functional in the sense of eliciting male sexual arousal, they become obsolete, parodic and repulsive’.<sup>123</sup> Such figurations are evident in the earliest British comedy films according to Hunter and Porter, citing the old maid who proves an obstacle to the romance between a soldier and his sweetheart in R.W. Paul’s *The Soldier’s Courtship* (1896).<sup>124</sup>

Susan Glenn’s work on the tradition of female performance in popular theatre of the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century demonstrates how the codes of comic performance required women to make a spectacle of themselves. Transgression was rewarded, moreover ‘the stage encouraged women to cultivate their individuality and their uniqueness’.<sup>125</sup> Glenn cites Marie Dressler and British music hall star Nellie Wallace as examples of a generation of female performers who downplayed stereotypical feminine traits, making flaws in their appearance part of their act, ‘violating gender norms through their excessiveness’.<sup>126</sup> It was the element of excess which is central to the comic appeal of these performers, underlining their departure from desired codes of femininity, whether it be in terms of girth, verbosity, or age. This tradition was evident in the ‘difficult dowagers’ identified by Sue Harper in British film of the 1930s.<sup>127</sup> These mature female characters gained agency as a consequence of their age which freed them from male attention, Harper observing that ‘anarchy and bad behaviour are the just rewards for a long life of conformity’. For actresses such as Norma Varden and Marie Lohr the comic form

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<sup>122</sup> Regina Barreca, *They Used To Call Me Snow White, But I Drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor* (New York: Viking, 1991), p. 50.

<sup>123</sup> Porter, ‘Tarts, tampons and tyrants’, p. 92.

<sup>124</sup> Hunter and Porter, ‘British comedy cinema: sex class and very naughty boys’, pp. 3-4.

<sup>125</sup> Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: the Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 7.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>127</sup> Sue Harper, ‘From wholesome girls to difficult dowagers: actresses in 1930s British cinema’ in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, eds. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 147.

worked to defuse the threat made vivid in the spectacle of their masculine behaviour and ‘large or ageing bodies’.<sup>128</sup>

Henry Jenkins identifies a tradition of ‘the disorderly and unruly wife, the Wild Woman’ in early American sound cinema.<sup>129</sup> Performers such as Dressler and Winnie Lightner were characterised by their relative age compared to conventional Hollywood starlets, their unruliness, stature and homely looks refusing the pleasures of the male gaze, in favour of the spectacle of the grotesque. Their excessive performance styles overturned normative gender roles, with Jenkins suggesting that such performances ‘could be read in terms of the semitragic narrative of failed femininity’, but equally as ‘offering a utopian alternative to conformity and repression; it holds open a means to defining one’s own identity apart from rigid social categories’.<sup>130</sup> Dressler’s performance style resisted the marginalisation visited upon many supporting players according to Victoria Sturtevant, stealing scenes from younger stars she was ostensibly supporting.<sup>131</sup> Her ungainly body and ‘expressive performances’ monopolised the camera, her films ‘dignify the marginalized: older folks, women, and the poor’ prefiguring performances of many British character actresses who brought ageing femininity into the spotlight.<sup>132</sup>

Richard deCordova in his study of Hollywood stardom notes that ‘sex appeal’ was central to the popularity of stars, inscribed in the spectacle of the star ‘as an object of visual fascination’.<sup>133</sup> The possibility of the female grotesque attaining star status is suggested by Edgar Morin’s work on stardom in the 1930s, with the emergence of a new type of star for the burgeoning middle-class audience, a hero who was both extraordinary and ordinary.<sup>134</sup> The star was no longer a divine entity, but could encompass the trivial and the comic; furthermore the star goddess was allowed greater latitude in terms of age span and the range of physiognomies.<sup>135</sup> Morin observed that the ‘Max-Factorized heroine may actually reach 40’, and that ‘even an

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.149.

<sup>129</sup> Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p.275.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>131</sup> Victoria Sturtevant, *A Great Big Girl Like Me: The Films of Marie Dressler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p.7.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p.2.

<sup>133</sup> Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 145.

<sup>134</sup> Edgar Morin, *The Stars* (London: Evergreen, 1961), p. 20.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 23.



interesting homeliness is permitted to impose its particular charm'. The star was no longer inaccessible, but was allowed greater realism, being both 'familiar and familial'; Morin goes on to observe that '[f]ormidable girls, thunderous women, they have established a cult in which admiration supplants veneration'.<sup>136</sup> For Hollywood, Marie Dressler was the foremost example of this new type of star, yet the nature of British cinema was well suited to a stardom which departed from the Hollywood ideal.

Williams noted regarding the character actor in British film that 'unglamorous physiognomies' did not stand in the way of stardom.<sup>137</sup> For Williams this was indicative of how the national film industry could differentiate itself 'from Hollywood's emphasis on stellar glamour', as well as being indicative of 'certain concepts of national identity', being 'the ideal haven for idiosyncratic and offbeat character performers'. Annette Kuhn observed that Britain's favourite stars of the 1930s 'conspicuously lack attributes of overt, adult sexuality' in contrast to the 'excessive sexuality of Hollywood stars such as Mae West'.<sup>138</sup> The popularity of stars such as George Formby and Gracie Fields was indicative of British film comedy's success in 'eschewing Hollywood glamour for [...] down-to-earth asexuality' according to Hunter and Porter.<sup>139</sup> The success of Fields foreshadowed the popularity of many of the character actresses featured in this thesis, her appeal being firmly rooted in 'an ordinariness [...] evident in her appearance' according to Marcia Landy.<sup>140</sup> Fields departed from 'conventional stardom' creating an 'image of femininity outside Hollywood glamour', displaying a body language which verged on the masculine in terms of movement and gesture. Her claim to stardom was not on account of sex appeal, but the spectacle of her extraordinary qualities, listed by Landy as 'her energy, her humour, her versatility as a musical comedy performer, and, above all, the range and power of her voice'. Landy likens Fields's films to the 'cinema of attractions', with an emphasis on spectacle rather than narrative.<sup>141</sup> The comic spectacle of female unruliness featured in this thesis belongs to this tradition as

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>137</sup> Williams, 'Entering the paradise of anomalies', p. 98.

<sup>138</sup> Annette Kuhn, 'Cinema, culture and femininity in the 1930s', in *Nationalising Femininity*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 181.

<sup>139</sup> Hunter and Porter, 'British comedy cinema', p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> Marcia Landy, 'The extraordinary ordinariness of Gracie Fields' in *British Stars and Stardom*, ed. Bruce Babington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 58.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

identified by Tom Gunning, with its roots in the variety halls, delivering the pleasures of ‘the harnessing of visibility’.<sup>142</sup>

### **Female ageing and the welfare state**

Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins point out that ‘laughter has a history’; the nature of comedy evolves over time, to reflect ‘tensions of class, race, gender and sexuality’.<sup>143</sup> In his study of British comedy Medhurst argued that context was crucial in understanding the nature of comedy, the deep structures or ‘comic patterns are still enacted at specific times, in specific places, for specific audiences and to serve specific functions.’<sup>144</sup> Accordingly, the comic performances discussed in the following chapters are considered within the context of the time of their production, being an era during which ‘the problems of old age were discovered’ according to Peter Townsend and Dorothy Wedderburn.<sup>145</sup> Retirement and a life-long pension became a universal experience within the British Isles in the second half of the twentieth century, rather than the right of the more wealthy in society. In the wake of the Second World War, the welfare state established a new landscape for ageing, for a population which was living longer, and experienced better health in older age. The immediate post-war years continued to package age into stereotypes and traditions which can be traced back through the centuries. New figurations of ageing were starting to emerge which contested social expectations and which prefigured ageing identities in the twenty-first century, according to Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, wherein ‘an older population [...] tend to define themselves as older, but not old, and to move consciously the entry point into old-old age even later into the life-course’.<sup>146</sup>

Fears about an ageing population informed Richard and Kathleen Titmuss’s *Parents Revolt*, published in 1942, asking: ‘Clearly we do not lack ripe experience and Victorian memories, but are these the gifts we require to build a New Social

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<sup>142</sup> Tom Gunning, ‘The cinema of attractions: early film, its spectator and the avant-garde’ in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, eds. Thomas Elsaesser with Adam Barker (London: BFI, 1990), p. 56.

<sup>143</sup> Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 269.

<sup>144</sup> Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 14.

<sup>145</sup> Peter Townsend and Dorothy Wedderburn, *The Aged in the Welfare State* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1965), p. 10.

<sup>146</sup> Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, ‘Introduction’ in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500* eds. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (London: Longman, 2001), p.11.

Order?'.<sup>147</sup> The authors warn that the aged will stifle the ambition and life chances of the young, leading to a moribund society wherein the demand for 'arm-chairs and bedroom slippers' will exceed that for 'children's foods'. In 1948 J.H. Sheldon warned of 'the increasing burden' of an ageing population on the community, requiring a solution 'that shall be fair both to those who, having already served their generation, feel entitled to some measure of peace and happiness in their remaining years, and to those of the younger generation on whose shoulders this task has necessarily to be placed'.<sup>148</sup>

The number of over-sixties increased from 5.4 million to 9 million between 1931 and 1961, whilst the average life expectancy for women increased from 51.6 to 73.8 between 1901 and 1961.<sup>149</sup> Thane points out that by the 1950s 'for the first time in history, the overwhelming majority of people in Britain could expect to live from birth to their sixties and beyond as a result of falling death-rates at younger ages, especially in infancy, through the earlier part of the century'.<sup>150</sup> Whereas the Conservative election campaign of 1959 centred on the message that the British had 'never had it so good', Labour politician Antony Crosland responded with a list of those who were 'not having it so good', including 'the sick, old-age pensioners and widows'.<sup>151</sup>

The introduction of a universal state pensionable age (sixty for women, sixty-five for men) with the National Insurance Act (1946) was to inadvertently impose a universal threshold for old age, with inferences of obsolescence implied by the act of retirement from the labour market. Thane observed that the pension worked to define the onset of old age, leading to 'the creation of the 'old age pensioner' as a stock description of an old person', adding that 'a new cultural barrier was erected between the older and younger people'.<sup>152</sup> Thane concludes pensioner status acquired negative connotations, for not being a productive member of society, and

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<sup>147</sup> Richard and Kathleen Titmuss, *Parents Revolt* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1942), p. 42.

<sup>148</sup> J. H. Sheldon, *The Social Medicine of Old Age* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 1.

<sup>149</sup> Central Statistical Office, *Social Trends No. 17* (London: HMSO, 1987).

<sup>150</sup> Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.385.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957-59* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.360.

<sup>152</sup> Pat Thane, 'Old women in twentieth-century Britain' in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, eds. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (London: Longman, 2001), p. 212.

even a drain on resources.<sup>153</sup> The two decades following the Second World War witnessed the completion of a process of ‘ever-stricter stratification by age’ which had emerged since industrialisation according to Sarah Harper and Thane, entailing ‘the increasing separation of biological from socially defined old age’.<sup>154</sup> Respondents to the 1948 Mass-Observation enquiry into ageing indicated ‘a very real fear of senile decay; two in five dread mental debility; and as many as seven in ten are afraid of undermining their physical powers’.<sup>155</sup> In 1960 the Acton Society Trust’s report ‘Retirement: a Study of Current Attitudes and Practices’ observed that

age has a low status – partly, perhaps, because the accumulated experience of a long lifetime is apt, in a rapidly changing world, to be irrelevant to current circumstances. An elderly man or woman without a job suffers a loss of status instead of gaining, as in earlier times and more settled civilisations, the prestige and honours of a sage.<sup>156</sup>

It concluded that value is given to ‘youth and active work’ over age and retirement from labour.

Tunstall pointed out that ageing is largely a constant biological process, allowing the individual to adapt to their evolution through the life cycle, whereas retirement is abrupt, ‘accompanied by other important changes - such as loss of income, and loss of status’.<sup>157</sup> It is ‘role loss’ which leaves the old bereft: ‘They lose a variety of roles – as spouse, as employed person, as wage-earner, perhaps also as a friend, sibling, neighbour. The housebound lose their role as physically active person’. Old age is about learning new roles: ‘widow, retired person, pensioner [...] the “sick role.”’

This thesis is primarily concerned with the social context regarding female ageing, and how this informs the representations and discourses examined in the case studies. Sociologist Peter Townsend typified research of the time in concluding that women had less to lose upon retirement, their primary employment being within the household, although he found that ‘Spinsters and women with no children made

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>154</sup> Sarah Harper and Pat Thane, ‘The consolidation of ‘old age’ as a phase of life, 1945-1965’ in *Growing Old in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Margot Jefferys (London: Routledge, 1989), p.43.

<sup>155</sup> Mass-Observation, *Bulletin*, New Series, No.21 (1948).

<sup>156</sup> The Acton Society Trust, *Retirement: A Study of Current Attitudes and Practices* (London: The Acton Society Trust, 1960), p. 3.

<sup>157</sup> Jeremy Tunstall, *Old and Alone* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 232.

more complaints about retirement than others but even they protested less strongly than most men'.<sup>158</sup> In his study of residential care for the elderly, *The Last Refuge*, Townsend felt that the female inmates were better able to cope with the conditions of institutional care, they 'seemed to be more resilient and less depressed than the men, despite their greater age'.<sup>159</sup> Such observations maintained the prevalent discourse regarding female ageing, wherein women were better equipped for ageing, having less to lose and having the requisite social skills to survive in difficult circumstances. Nonetheless there were competing narratives of female ageing, including the Government appointed Committee on the Economic and Financial Problems of the Provision for Old Age (Phillips Report) of 1954, which revealed widely shared prejudice amongst a sample of employers against ageing female staff, judging that 'they became "a nuisance" and "deteriorated more rapidly" than men'.<sup>160</sup> One personnel officer maintained that women were finished mentally at fifty. The figures for sickness absence were at odds with employers' remarks, with the older woman proving more reliable than younger employees.<sup>161</sup>

The Phillips Report found single women were judged to be significantly more problematic, a finding echoed over ten years later by Dorothy Wedderburn, describing them as 'the largest problem group among the aged' alluding to their relative poverty compared to men and married couples.<sup>162</sup> Women were unable to earn and accumulate assets, and although outliving men, were more likely to be facing hardship in old age. Thane observes that a tradition of an 'economy of makeshifts' was maintained from earlier centuries, the indigent older woman piecing together income from a range of sources: 'paid work, public welfare, savings, family support, charity'.<sup>163</sup> According to Townsend the ageing single woman was also more likely to experience isolation and poor health.<sup>164</sup> At the time of publication of *The Family Life of Old People* in the region of 28% of women of pensionable age were single or childless.<sup>165</sup> Research showed that the solitary ageing population made the

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<sup>158</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Family Life of Old People* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p.149.

<sup>159</sup> Peter Townsend, *The Last Refuge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p.5.

<sup>160</sup> *Report of the Committee on the Economic and Financial Problems of the Provision for Old Age*, Cmd. 9333 (1954), p. 43.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49.

<sup>162</sup> Townsend and Wedderburn, *The Aged in the Welfare State*, p. 77.

<sup>163</sup> Pat Thane, 'Old women in twentieth century Britain', p. 214.

<sup>164</sup> Townsend, *Family Life*, p. 182.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p.209.

greatest demands on the state, and were more likely to be admitted into institutional care.<sup>166</sup>

In their pioneering analysis of post-war social trends regarding women and work Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein recognised the shifting life patterns, with earlier marriage and smaller families resulting in women in their forties entering their ‘third adulthood’, and becoming grandparents at a younger age.<sup>167</sup> Active motherhood was becoming just a passing phase of adult life, for ‘in the middle of their lives, in full possession of their powers, they have come to the end of their chosen career.’<sup>168</sup> Re-entry into the labour market was beset with obstacles including social prejudice, lack of suitable opportunities, skills or training and moreover ‘the traditional stereotype is still at work in the minds of women themselves, making them believe that they are much older and much less capable than they in fact are’.<sup>169</sup> Such studies led to a growing recognition of the prejudice and social inequalities inflicted upon the ageing woman, despite the new era of social equality promised by the welfare state.

Social class was an important factor in determining the fate of the ageing single woman, and plays a key role in informing the representations of ageing femininity in the case studies of this thesis. The prevalence of the figure of the ‘universal aunt’ in cultural texts and public debates of the era is indicative of the phenomenon of the middle-class spinster, whose duty was perceived as being to serve the needs of the wider family and community. Such duties worked to obviate the deviant status of the spinster, in departing from the normative life path for a woman, integrating her into family structures. Gertrude Maclean recognised the potential of the middle-class spinster, setting up her employment agency, ‘Universal Aunts’, in 1921 to harness their services in performing ‘those small commissions and odds and ends of human need which no-one else seems to find profitable to meet’.<sup>170</sup> Maclean identified ‘a yearning for a continued independence and, in many cases, a need for extra income’ for women ‘with the advantage of background, commonsense and family experience’, who had enjoyed the freedoms of wartime.

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>167</sup> Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, [1956]1968), p.38.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>170</sup> Kate Herbert-Hunting, *Universal Aunts* (London: Constable, 1986), p. 22.

The prevalent figure of working-class ageing femininity in cultural texts of the era is the figure of ‘our mam’, the working-class matriarch celebrated by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy*, a nostalgic evocation of his childhood in a traditional working class community in Leeds. Hoggart reflected that the matriarch reached the apotheosis of her maternal powers in middle age, ‘when she has fully established herself as the mother of the family [...] She is then the pivot of the home, as it is practically the whole of her world’.<sup>171</sup> Hoggart portrays a thankless life dedicated to serving the needs of others, concluding that early ageing was inevitable, with at least a couple of children by the age of thirty:

she will have lost most of her sexual attraction [...] between thirty-five and forty she rapidly becomes the shapeless figure the family know as ‘our mam’[...] By forty-five or fifty, ailments begin: you hear during the poorer periods that she is ‘nobbut middling’ [...]they] look after themselves badly, work too long or hard, do not know how to relax, take insufficient sleep, have a badly balanced diet. They expect to have to go on all the time, ‘fadging’, often muddling because the demands are complex and weary and yet must be met somehow.<sup>172</sup>

Hoggart speculates that the matriarch is haunted by the possibility of widowhood, when ‘she will have to ‘turn to’ and manage on her own, finding what ‘charring’ she can to supplement her pension’. The hardships of this existence are ingrained in the face of the ageing woman, evoked by Hoggart in terms of the grotesque:

a scaly texture [...] the lines, looked at closely, have grime in them; the hands are bony claws covered with densely lined skin, and again the dirt is well-ingrained there: years of snatched washes, usually in cold water, have caused that. The face has two marked lines of force – from the sides of the nose to the compressed lips; they tell of years of ‘calculating’.<sup>173</sup>

The ageing face bears the marks of ‘pollution’, and is rendered in terms of the bestial, with the marks of social class blurring the distinction between human and animal. The dirt of the ageing working-class woman separates her from the civilised,

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<sup>171</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, [1957] 2009), p. 29.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

her ageing being marked by progressive pollution, implying a life of physical toil and abasement, and a propensity for the most menial work. Mary Douglas wrote in *Purity and Danger* of the importance of avoidance of dirt in European culture, dirt having a symbolic value, suggesting the impure and the defiled.<sup>174</sup> The female working-class body is ‘other’ according to Rowe, and therefore ‘likely to be the source of embarrassment, timidity and alienation’ in failing to conform to cultural norms regarding the ‘legitimate’ female body.<sup>175</sup>

### **Methodology and overview**

This thesis examines female ageing primarily through historically contextualised close textual analysis, with particular regard to mise-en-scene, performance and narrative. My approach is largely consistent with that of the ‘New Film History’, in seeking to situate the films, and performers, with regard to the broader historical, cultural, and social context regarding ageing, in addition to consideration of the industry context and its significance in terms of casting and representation.<sup>176</sup> Extra textual materials, including biographies, letters, publicity materials and reviews, help to establish the context for consideration of the performances and performers featured in each chapter. The social context regarding ageing femininity is established through consideration of relevant reports, literature and research of the era, particularly regarding the emerging disciplines of gerontology and sociology. My approach to film comedy is informed by that proposed by Karnick and Jenkins, who cite the importance of a less hierarchical concept of ‘culture’.<sup>177</sup> Rather than merely identifying significant texts and auteurs, their approach involves consideration of a broader range of popular texts, within broader contexts, drawing on interdisciplinary sources, such as sociological and anthropological research to consider ‘a more culturally and socially complex account of comedy’. By foregrounding the cultural and social contexts the thesis examines how the specificities of film comedy reflect the shifts and continuities regarding representations of ageing femininities during the era. My approach necessitates that

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<sup>174</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, [1966] 2002), p.44.

<sup>175</sup> Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 64.

<sup>176</sup> See for example: Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985); James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper, eds., *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>177</sup> Karnick et al., *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, p. 267.



relevant theory is mobilised as an analytical framework, but that the focus is primarily on social and cultural history.

Rather than simply approaching the films and performers as being a 'reflection' of society, the approach of this thesis is informed by Graeme Turner's observation that films 'reveal something about the cultural conditions that produced them and attracted audiences to them [...] More often than not, they reflect back what audiences want to see rather than what is really there'.<sup>178</sup> Nevertheless this thesis is focused on film aesthetics, performance and representation rather than reception studies, situating the case studies within the broader cultural and sociological discourses concerning female ageing.

My approach to analysis of the actresses is founded in the work of Richard Dyer regarding star persona, with particular regard to the social significance of stars, and how 'stars relate to very general ideas about society and the individual'.<sup>179</sup> In considering how ageing femininity is articulated through performance and persona, my approach is informed by Dyer's framing representation in terms of the political, arguing that 'at all levels how we think and feel we are, how we are treated, is bound up with how we are represented as being'.<sup>180</sup> The analysis of the various comedy actresses featured is structured around Dyer's framework, specifically 'the constitutive elements of stars, what they consist of, their production; secondly the notions of personhood and social reality they relate to'.<sup>181</sup>

The thesis is structured around a series of case studies, each focusing on films which represent the work of significant mature actresses within British comedy. The choice of case studies encompasses a range of performance contexts and provokes diverse issues regarding social class, national identity and agency. The case studies represent the nature of a national cinema which is essentially English, rather than British, specifically a vision of Englishness located in the south-east. The case studies are true to traditions of British comedy of the early twentieth century identified by Hunter and Porter wherein gender, age and class were the 'most important

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<sup>178</sup> Graeme Turner, *Film as Film* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 129.

<sup>179</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: BFI Macmillan, 1987), p. 3.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

demarcations of comic difference'.<sup>182</sup> It is worth noting that the case studies reflect the predominance of white Englishness in the national cinema, which endured even in the face of the growth of diversity in the population as a whole in the post-war era. The choice of texts has also been governed by the imperative to represent a range of typages of female ageing, exploring the cultural currency of such perennial figures as the bluestocking, the termagant, the spinster and the char. The final, most substantial chapter, is distinct from the preceding ones, being dedicated to the film career of a single star, Margaret Rutherford. Her film career demands its own chapter, spanning the time period covered by the thesis, and attaining the status of an international star in her later years. The significance of her star persona as an ageing woman provokes discussion of issues regarding social class and national identity which lie at the heart of this thesis.

With the exception of the concluding Rutherford chapter, the chapters follow a broad chronological structure, spanning the period from the Second World War to the early 1960s. The performers and films selected serve to highlight issues regarding female ageing, during an era of significant social change regarding both age and gender. The case studies set out to reflect the range of film comedy of the era, deriving from both the literary and music hall traditions respectively, provoking issues around social class and national identity. Moreover the selection is also intended to reflect the trajectory of the British film industry during this period, with comedy being the most resilient of genres.

Chapter 1 centres on the film *Gert and Daisy's Weekend* (1941), one of three wartime films starring double act Doris and Elsie Waters, notable for making the working-class middle-aged woman central to the narrative. Social class and regional identity are important elements in the construction of their personae as unruly cockney matriarchs. The chapter seeks to establish how the characters of Gert and Daisy were deployed as part of a broader agenda to reassure and unify the Home Front, embodying discourses of working-class cockney identity which resonated with wartime audiences. The chapter focuses on Gert and Daisy as comic 'grotesques', whose film roles capitalised on audience familiarity with the characters, and the closeness of the comedy to everyday life.

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<sup>182</sup> Hunter and Porter, 'British comedy cinema', p. 4.

Chapter 2 focuses on the character of the ageing spinster in two contrasting film comedies: *Holiday Camp* (1947) and *Winter Cruise* (1951). My argument centres on how the spinster was increasingly vilified in the post-war settlement, exploring the broader social and historical context during the first half of the twentieth century. The chapter will explore how the spinsters in both films endeavour to come to terms with middle-age, resisting marginalisation with mixed results, their respective fates been determined by their social class.

Chapter 3 centres on two films concerning female ageing and the welfare state. *Alive and Kicking* and *Make Mine Mink*, share a preoccupation with retirement and ageing, featuring an ensemble cast spanning a range of archetypes of middle-class and working-class female ageing, including the grande dame, the battleaxe, the universal aunt and the neurotic spinster. *Alive and Kicking* deploys discourses around Ireland and otherness as a backdrop for the characters' quest to escape institutionalised ageing within the welfare state. The chapter sets out to explore how the films' representations of female ageing reflects a sense of social dissonance and alienation made explicit in two key texts of the late 1950s, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) and Peter Townsend's *The Family Life of Old People* (1957).

Chapter 4 takes as its theme anger and female ageing, with a focus on representations of the working-class matriarch in the films *Ladies Who Do* and *Morgan - A Suitable Case For Treatment* (1966). The chapter explores the representation of the matriarch within the context of the cultural fixation with youth, arguing that the angry old woman was the comic riposte to the angry young man. The films articulate broader concerns about the decline of the working-class communities through the talismanic figure of 'our mam'. I explore how the working-class matriarch is represented as grotesque and 'other' before exploring the comic tradition of the unruly woman as a battleaxe. The figurations of working-class ageing are indicative of how British film of the 1960s sought to find an audience, with *Ladies Who Do* endeavouring to build on the appeal of the soap opera matriarch whilst *Morgan* peripheralises the older woman to target a youth audience.

Chapter 5 focuses on the star persona of Margaret Rutherford, exploring how she achieved minor star status in a film career which flourished as she aged. Rutherford's persona centred on the spectacle of the grotesque, and was the antithesis of

Hollywood glamour. Her stardom is rooted in a fantasy of upper middle-class Englishness rooted in the inter-war years, encompassing the patriotism of wartime and the diminishing imperial power of the post-war era. The chapter is structured around the various iterations of female ageing at the heart of Rutherford's star persona, as exemplified by selected film performances. The chapter concludes by arguing that eccentricity and liminality were central to her persona, evoking other ages, and the supernatural, offering a nostalgic figuration of Englishness for audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.

The conclusion returns to consideration of discourses around female ageing, performance and comedy, in arguing that the films, performances, and actresses featured in the case studies exemplify the enduring appeal of figurations of the mature woman. Ultimately my point is one which is central to the practice of film history, arguing that we can better understand contemporary representations of female ageing, and ageing stars, through awareness of representations in the past. The case studies establish the prominent role played by the ageing actress in British film, specifically in the most enduringly successful British genre, film comedy.

## Chapter 1

### **'Immobile' Femininity: the Mature Woman in Wartime Film Comedy**

Doris Waters and Elsie Waters were the stars of three films during the course of the Second World War – *Gert and Daisy's Weekend* (1941), *Gert and Daisy Clean Up* (1942) and *It's In The Bag* (1943). The films were a showcase for their double act of Gert and Daisy, starring in narratives featuring topical issues for wartime Britain, articulating discourses concerning age, class, femininity and regional identity. The sisters were born around the turn of the century, their careers being rooted in the music hall tradition, yet spanning developments in popular culture of the early twentieth century, performing in variety halls, on the radio and making numerous gramophone recordings.

This chapter contextualises the Gert and Daisy films by first exploring how the contingencies of wartime allowed the mature woman freedom from the exigencies of normative models of ageing femininity. The use of the terms 'mobile' and 'immobile' in the chapter reflects the wartime differentiation between the women who were conscripted, and mobilised, on account of their youth and freedom from family ties, and those women whose contribution to the war effort was largely voluntary. Nevertheless 'immobility' did not preclude women making a vital contribution to the war effort, allowing for a validation of their skills and experience.

The fame of the Waters sisters peaked during the Second World War, particularly in the guise of their double act, Gert and Daisy, who became figureheads for the Home Front. The characters resonated with audiences, evoking the mythical image of the cheerful cockney, whose resilience in the face of the Blitz had become iconic for morale on the Home Front. Gert and Daisy offered an affirmation of cockney working-class identity, wherein the unruly middle-aged matriarch is heroic in her ceaseless labours to stabilise and protect the community. The sisters were established household names before the outbreak of war, yet the strength of their appeal to the working class audience made them invaluable in wartime propaganda campaigns.

Doris and Elsie Waters were pioneering in many respects, taking control of both the business and creative sides of their careers, and pursuing a career in the male

dominated world of variety and the double act, the female double act being rare.<sup>1</sup> Paul Matthew St. Pierre goes as far as to describe the sisters as ‘proto-feminists’, arguing that they manifested ‘the manners of the suffragettes and New Women’ and were typical of ‘women artists and stage performers who chose single status or the state of spinsterism to help maintain and protect their personal freedom to pursue their careers’.<sup>2</sup> They belonged to the generation of ‘surplus’ unmarried women of the inter-war years, of whom a privileged few from middle- and upper-class backgrounds challenged convention and established successful careers, enjoying a freedom and independence which had been denied previous generations.<sup>3</sup> The sisters were proud that they produced their own material for much of their early career, to the extent that they turned down the BBC when first approached about broadcasting their act, on the grounds that ‘we thought we would never be able to keep up the supply to make a change of programme every time we went on the air’.<sup>4</sup>

### **The immobile woman**

In order to establish a broader context for the Gert and Daisy films it would be apposite to briefly consider the role of the mature woman on the Home Front, and how this was inscribed in British films made during the war. Women played a more prominent role in the Second World War than any previous conflict, as was inevitable given the nature of ‘total’ warfare, with extensive casualties on the Home Front in addition to those on the battlefield. The home was no longer a haven, as recognised by *Woman’s Own* magazine in January 1941: ‘For the first time in the history of the world [...] the women of a nation are fighting in the front-line trenches’.<sup>5</sup> The Home Front was not much safer than the actual front for many women as the casualties of the Blitz made clear, the civilian death toll for women and children under sixteen being 33,135, fifty-five per cent of the total.<sup>6</sup> The British

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<sup>1</sup> There were a couple of notable female double acts in British music hall of the same era, namely the Houston Sisters, and the Cockney Kids, otherwise known as ‘The Long and the Short of It’, in reference to their disparate sizes. Cecil Hepworth’s ‘Tilly Girl’ series (1910-1915) were one of the earliest female double acts in British film, featuring Alma Taylor and Chrissie White.

<sup>2</sup> St. Pierre, *Song and Sketch Transcripts*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See Virginia Nicholson, *Singled Out* (London: Penguin, 2008). Nicholson explores the consequences of the losses of the First World War with a generation of women finding themselves spinsters, and unable to fulfil the life course they society had dictated for them.

<sup>4</sup> Doris and Elsie Waters, working script for performance at the Fishmonger’s Hall, London, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1972; Steyning Museum.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Waller and Michael Vaughan-Rees, *Women in Wartime* (London: Macdonald, 1987), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Nicholson, *Millions Like Us* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 86.

government were forced to contemplate the unthinkable and introduce conscription for women in 1941 in order to maintain the country's industry and agriculture, and even to mobilise women into taking supportive – albeit non-combat – roles in the military. Age served to differentiate between those who were deemed 'mobile' and those who were consequently deemed 'immobile' and faced different expectations of their role on the Home Front, their responsibilities being within the home. As the war progressed the strain on the country's resources necessitated a widening of the age range for female conscription and potential duties, leading to a raising of the upper age limit to fifty early in 1944, although the press protested that this was 'conscription for grandmothers'.<sup>7</sup>

Government propaganda sought to raise soldier morale by reinforcing traditional gender roles, wherein femininity was synonymous with home and nation, both in need of protection and a cause worth fighting for. The mobilisation of women during the war challenged this image, women being compelled to contribute to the war effort, either by law or by circumstance, often taking on work that had formerly been carried out by men. Diana Thomas appealed to the women of the nation on the BBC Home Service in May 1941: 'Every woman in the country is needed to pull her weight to the utmost – to consider carefully where her services would help most and then let nothing stand in the way of rendering such services'.<sup>8</sup> The deployment of women on the ground was reflected in British film narratives of the period although the focus was predominantly on the younger 'mobilised' woman.<sup>9</sup>

The Government's policy towards women's work was decried by Margery Corbett Ashby, writing for *Mass Observation* in January 1941, criticising the lack of status, poor pay, lack of training, and that 'Women over 35 are not wanted'.<sup>10</sup> Not everybody overlooked the contribution of the mature woman on the Home Front, with J.B. Priestley's *British Women Go To War* evoking sentimental images of

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<sup>7</sup> Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> Raynes Minns, *Bombers and Mash: The Domestic Front 1939-45* (London: Virago, 1980), p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> See for example: Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson, *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Sue Harper 'The representation of women in British feature films, 1939-45' in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. P. M. Taylor (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Minns, *Bombers and Mash*, p. 11.

working women, such as an elderly village woman's 'heroic' jam-making for the war effort,<sup>11</sup> and the 'matronly' worker in Royal Ordnance factories, who 'might be baking a pie for the family, but [...] she is helping to construct a weapon of war with which to defend the home she has had to leave'.<sup>12</sup> Priestley deployed the image of an elderly, incapacitated working-class woman as defining the 'national character', which was in danger of being stifled by bureaucracy at the start of the war.<sup>13</sup> He recalls Two Ton Annie being carried on a stretcher by 'six staggering, sweating, grinning bearers':

'She exchanged cheerful, insulting remarks with everybody. She was a roaring and indomitable old lioness, and where she was carried there was a cheerful tumult; and as she roared out repartee she saluted the grinning crowd like a raffish old empress. Yes; she was old, fat, helplessly lame [...] a sick woman, far from home. But she gave no sign of any inward distress, but was her grand, uproarious self'.<sup>14</sup>

This ageing matriarch manifests the cheery working-class resilience which Priestley believed was crucial to inspire the populace in wartime.

Social historians overlooked the experiences of the middle-aged in wartime according to James Hinton, being preoccupied by mapping a narrative of war and social change which focuses on 'the experience of the young'.<sup>15</sup> Yet there are notable exceptions to this homogenised narrative of femininity during wartime, including the first-hand accounts of the various Mass Observation diarists. Archivist Dorothy Sheridan observes a correlation between ageing and declining confidence in the sample of women writing about the war, typified by Mrs Grimshaw – 'a housewife in her late forties' – recounting how she was hesitant about joining Mass Observation 'thinking that I was not a good enough reporter, and in my uneventful and humdrum life there would be nothing worth reporting'.<sup>16</sup> The diaries of Nella Last make clear how the mature woman could be empowered by her contribution to

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<sup>11</sup> J. B. Priestley, *British Women Go To War* (London: Collins, 1943), p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>13</sup> J. B. Priestley, *Postscripts* (London: Heinemann, 1940), pp. 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> James Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: Continuities of Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Sheridan, *Wartime Women: A Mass-Observation Anthology 1937-45* (London: Orion, 1990), p. 21.



the war effort. Her early diary entries complain of ill health and problems with her nerves, struggling with the strain of the war, poignantly noting that ‘I’ve never realised till now that I’m old’.<sup>17</sup> Yet within months the tone of her entries changes as she becomes a significant force within the community of volunteers, many of whom were of a similar age: ‘Some days I am so busy I can only think of what I’m doing, or the immediate tasks ahead, and I’ll have a static feeling of happiness’.<sup>18</sup> Last was transformed by a new confidence, writing that ‘After all these peaceful years, I discover I’ve a militant suffragette streak in me, and I could shout loudly and break windows and do all kinds of things – kick policemen perhaps – *anything* to protest’.<sup>19</sup>

The mature woman was a resource harnessed by the volunteer services, such as the Women’s Voluntary Service, sixty per cent of whose membership were over forty years of age.<sup>20</sup> Its age profile and public image was made evident in the wartime joke that the initials stood for ‘Widows, Virgins and Spinsters’.<sup>21</sup> Minns noted of the women voluntary groups that they were ‘Technically ‘immobile’, these women were unpaid, often worked long hours, and took on many repetitious and joyless jobs of war’, arguing that the efforts of these women may well have saved the country.<sup>22</sup> One W.V.S. organiser declared that ‘It has been said that the middle classes are the backbone of England. I say that middle-age is the backbone of Women’s Voluntary Service’.<sup>23</sup> It was somewhat inevitable that the W.V.S. was largely composed of middle-aged and middle-class women, who were less driven by financial need, and had the spare time to devote to voluntary work, continuing a trend from the 1930s, described by Nicholson as the ‘era of the ‘do-gooder’, the ‘Lady Bountiful’, the charity ball and the charity pageant’.<sup>24</sup> This character type populates many of the wartime films set in rural England such as the committed Women’s Institute members of *Great Day* (1945), Rowena Ventnor’s efforts to organise a pageant in *The Demi-Paradise* (1943), and the lady of the manor’s self-sacrifice to save the

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<sup>17</sup> Nella Last, in *Nella Last’s War*, ed. Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (London: Profile, 2006), p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> R. C. Chambers, ‘A study of three voluntary organisations’, in *Social Mobility in Britain*, ed. D. V. Glass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), pp. 388-89.

<sup>21</sup> Norman Longmate, *How We Lived Then* (London: Arrow, 1971), p. 363.

<sup>22</sup> Minns, *Bombers and Mash*, p. 73.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership*, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Nicholson, *Millions Like Us*, p. 24.

evacuees in *Went the Day Well* (1942). These matriarchs evoked Empire Britain, motivated by a sense of patriotism, self-sacrifice and an awareness of their place in the hierarchy, harnessing their status for the ‘national job’.

### **Cinema during wartime**

The wartime films of Gert and Daisy are rooted in the day-to-day experiences of life on the Home Front, yet the films have received little academic interest and were largely dismissed by critics of the time, betraying a wider unease with popular comedy and working-class culture. The government were slow to grasp the potential of popular culture in fighting a war, both in terms of its ability to mobilize and unite the people, and as a propaganda tool. The declaration of war in 1939 resulted in cinemas, theatres and dance-halls being shut down by the government, as the country struggled to come to terms with what total war meant. *Kinematograph Weekly* devoted its first wartime editorial to a plea to reopen cinemas, arguing that the populace would be of greater need of escapism during wartime ‘Can one think of a safer anodyne to the disturbed public mind than the screen play?’<sup>25</sup> As it was, cinemas were reopened within a week. The Ministry of Information was to recognise the propaganda potential of cinema to promote national unity and consensus by conveying ‘British life and character [...] our independence, toughness of fibre, sympathy with the underdog etc’.<sup>26</sup>

The perennial narrative of British filmmaking during wartime has been that it was a golden age for the national cinema, both in terms of the quality of films and the popularity of British films with audiences formerly wedded to Hollywood product. Dilys Powell reflected that the war had ‘set the English film on the path in which masterpieces may be created; it has established precisely what was lacking in the English cinema before 1940, a traditional English style’.<sup>27</sup> It is unlikely that Powell had the work of Gert and Daisy in mind though, but rather films such as *In Which We Serve* (1942), *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *Millions Like Us* (1943), all of which bore the hallmark of the auteur and a theatrical pedigree, rather than the variety halls. James Chapman points out that these were films which were acclaimed

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Reopen the kinemas’, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7 September, 1939, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Memo, PRO INF 1/867; quoted in Jeffrey Richards, ‘National identity in British wartime films’ in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Philip M. Taylor (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 43.

<sup>27</sup> Dilys Powell, *Films Since 1939* (London: Longmans Green, 1947), p. 20.

for ‘their realistic qualities [...] sober, unsensational narratives with believable characterisations and a prevailing sense of stoicism and emotional restraint’.<sup>28</sup> This prizing of restraint was at odds with the exuberancies of performance and narrative which marked popular film comedies, including the Gert and Daisy films.

Whilst quality cinema prospered audiences were also keen to follow the adventures of characters and performers familiar from pre-war radio and variety, including Old Mother Riley, George Formby, Frank Randle, Will Hay, Arthur Askey and the Crazy Gang. Robert Murphy calculated that of the ninety-eight British films released in 1940 and 1941, forty-four were comedies, suggesting that the genre was a ‘safe path’ in the midst of the tumult and uncertainty of the early years of war.<sup>29</sup> Low production values ensured a continuing supply of film comedy in the early war years, being ‘notoriously quick and easy to produce’ according to Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, and therefore able to ‘capitalise upon the more topical elements, not least their themes and jokes’.<sup>30</sup> Academics confirmed the importance of comedy in wartime, with F. C. Bartlett, Professor of Experimental Psychology at Cambridge writing in 1940 that ‘If an English population loses its capacity to laugh its way through depressing circumstances, its morale will be on the road to destruction’.<sup>31</sup> Aldgate and Richards noted that comedy was notably overlooked in the Ministry of Information’s ‘Programme for film propaganda’, as a consequence of ‘fears that certain things might be interpreted on the Continent ‘as evidence of slackness and stupidity’.<sup>32</sup>

A Mass Observation report into film comedy, published in 1940, discerned a disjuncture between popular taste and the nature of the films made, of which ‘well over fifty per cent of films [...] concern the upper classes’, yet there was an overwhelming preference for comedy concerning the ‘working class or classless’,

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<sup>28</sup> James Chapman, ‘Cinema, propaganda and national identity: British film and the Second World War’ in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, ed. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 194.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), p.79.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass Observation At The Movies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> Aldgate et al., *Britain Can Take It*, p. 27.

concluding that humour needs to ‘concern events of everyday life.’<sup>33</sup> Writing in 1939, film producer Walter Mycroft was particularly disdainful of the perceived elitism of the Ministry of Information criticising the ‘intellectuals who have attached themselves like limpets in decorative clusters to film production’.<sup>34</sup> He believed in the instincts of the audience, arguing that ‘outwardly untutored people react instantly against anything phony, anything pretentious’. Comedy had been subject to critical disdain in the 1930s according to Lawrence Napper, regarded as ‘trivial, irrelevant, apolitical and anarchic, speaking of pleasure and entertainment where we expect to see want and hardship’.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly in 1938 John Grierson cited the work of Fields, Formby and Max Miller as symptomatic of the ‘blank outlook’ of British film.<sup>36</sup>

### **The mature woman in wartime films**

The world of the working-class matriarch found a space and ideological purpose on the cinema screens of the nation during wartime in response to the imperative for more relevant representations of femininity, far from the glamour of Hollywood. Nevertheless Gert and Daisy were unusual in being the stars of their films, the mature woman more typically to be found in the peripheries of British wartime film narratives. Narratives reflected the shift in gender roles according to Antonia Lant, with a relative elision of sexual difference: ‘couples were separated or their unions postponed; stories revolved around single-sex, military or civilian groups; the heroine was deglamorized’.<sup>37</sup> The celebration of female empowerment in *The Gentle Sex* (1943) and the exploration of the plight of working-class women during the Depression in *Love on the Dole* (1941) were indicative of a desire for a new more egalitarian society to be forged out of the suffering of wartime articulated in some wartime films.

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<sup>33</sup>Quoted in Richards et al, *Mass Observation*, p. 193. The importance of humour to morale motivated Mass Observation to analyse the results of a competition run by *The Sunday Dispatch* to find the three funniest film incidents since the coming of sound; the report was published 13 June 1940.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Mycroft, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 14 January 1939.

<sup>35</sup> Lawrence Napper, “No limit”: British class and comedy in the 1930s’ in *British Comedy Cinema*, ed. I. Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 40.

<sup>36</sup>John Grierson, ‘The course of realism’ in *Footnotes to the Film*, ed. Charles Davy (London: Lovat Dickson, 1938), pp. 157-58.

<sup>37</sup> Lant, *Blackout*, p. 6.

Nevertheless the mature woman played a more prominent role in a few notable films outside the comedy genre. *Great Day* (1945) featured an ensemble cast of mature female characters playing the roles of members of a branch of the Women's Institute preparing for a visit from Eleanor Roosevelt. The film is a paean to the 'immobile' women forming the volunteer Home Front, who are celebrated in the closing dedication, accompanied by 'Jerusalem', the anthem for the Women's Institutes:

the members of the women's institutes who throughout this war have revived the ancient crafts of the villages in the service of the community, who have given freely of their time and knowledge and who by the work of their hands and without gain to themselves have greatly increased their country's resources.

The film sustains a figuration of the matriarch as strong and resourceful, at the core of the community and the nation, her skills providing continuity between past and present. The mature female characters were inscribed by fundamental class differences, there being a preponderance of 'Lady Bountiful' types, in the tradition of the W.V.S. The representation of the Women's Institute epitomised the essence of what Angus Calder referred to as 'Deep England', a mythical 'Green and Pleasant heartland', eulogised as being at the heart of British national identity during wartime.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 1 Deep England as evoked by wartime poster, 1942 (Imperial War Museum).

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<sup>38</sup> Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p. 182.

Alberto Cavalcanti's *Went The Day Well?* (1942) also deploys the middle-aged English woman in defining Britishness in its narrative of the German occupation of the village of Bramley End. The older women of the village play a pivotal role being actively, and violently, embroiled in the conflict with the enemy. Postmistress, Mrs Collins (Muriel George) is the essence of working-class ordinariness, capable of violently hacking a German soldier to death with an axe, before being brutally bayoneted by a German soldier. The narrative of the film juxtaposes Mrs Collins with the well-to-do Mrs Fraser (Marie Lohr), another 'Lady Bountiful' figure, who is blithely dismissive of fears about the identity of the soldiers who arrive in the village. Nevertheless, she also dies heroically and violently, saving the lives of the evacuees in her house by grabbing a German live grenade and diving out of the room with it.



Figure 2 *Went the Day Well?*: Mrs Collins murders a German soldier.

The heroic spinster was also deployed to make a contribution to the fight against fascism, with Flora Robson and Muriel Ake being sent to a punishment camp in Germany for helping a group of RAF officers avoid capture in France in *Two Thousand Women* (1944). Margaret Rutherford plays the role of another upper-class spinster who takes on the Nazis in *Yellow Canary* (1943), kicking the ankle of a U-boat officer who has taken command of a British ship. As in *Two Thousand Women* the mature upper-class woman is both ridiculous and brave; Miss Cholmondeley's patriotic gesture serves as a comic inflection of the larger, more serious theme of the *Yellow Canary* concerning the contribution of women to the war effort.

Nevertheless the mature woman is largely located in a domestic environment in wartime films, maintaining the Home Front in preparation for the return of the soldiers from the front line. Her duties were outlined by *Woman's Own* magazine at the outbreak of war: 'In these hard times, when the utmost is required of everyone, the most important virtues surely are courage and kindness. Women's courage is the valour of endurance [...] keep your head – and your heart'.<sup>39</sup> *In Which We Serve* utilises the image of the matriarch to contrast with the plight of the crew of HMS Torrin as they struggle to survive the capsizing of their ship. Both Kath Hardy and her working-class counterpart, Mrs Blake, are defined by their stoicism and cheerfulness in the face of adversity. Their role is to stay at home, even if it means martyrdom, to accept their position as being second to the ship and to maintain family unity and continuity of the generations, in their role as matriarchs. The older women are killed in the raid, having ensured the survival of the younger generation, much as the older women are sacrificed in *Went The Day Well?* and *Two Thousand Women*. The war offers a means to revise national priorities and start anew, necessitating an emphasis on the emerging generations, and eliding their elders, both literally and figuratively. These films depict the mature woman as complicit in this pact of martyrdom and renewal, whilst endeavouring to fulfil their national duty.

The imperative for social unity necessitated by wartime created a space for the working-class matriarch in British film which had been denied during peacetime. The censors had previously blocked the filming of *Love On The Dole* (1941), deeming it to be 'a very sordid story in a very sordid surrounding' yet the British Board of Film Censors allowed filming to take place during wartime.<sup>40</sup> For Philip Taylor the film exemplified the impetus to depict the working class in a serious, rather than a comical light, disregarding the sisterhood of ageing women who provide a comic counterpoint to the relentless misery of the Hardcastle family, and the descent of Sally Hardcastle into disgrace.<sup>41</sup> Their role amounts to that of a Greek chorus, providing a commentary on young Sally's plight, and the struggles endured by a working-class community facing relentless hardships. The four matriarchs cluster together in each other's homes to drink, summon up the dead, and bemoan

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Waller and Vaughan-Rees, *Women in Wartime*, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Baker, 'Love On The Dole', Screenonline, accessed April 3 2014, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/485682/>.

<sup>41</sup> Philip M. Taylor, *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 9.

the times they find themselves in.<sup>42</sup> Clad in dark shawls, their constant bickering reveals a deep familiarity with each other's shortcomings yet they appear to find strength and solace together, unlike the isolated Sally. Director John Baxter had come to film from a music hall background, as is evident in the characterisation of these irrepressible harridans, their idiosyncrasies and barbed banter being that of the music hall 'grotesque' tradition shared with Gert and Daisy.



Figure 3 A Greek chorus of gossiping matriarchs in *Love On The Dole*.

The most successful ageing working-class woman in British film comedy during wartime was played by a man, with Arthur Lucan in the role of formidable matriarch, Old Mother Riley. Lucan had honed his performance skills in a pierrot troupe, graduating to pantomime and variety halls, before forming a double act with wife, Kitty McShane. His stage persona was in the tradition of the pantomime dame, playing an outrageous Irish washerwoman, rebranded as Old Mother Riley for the double act's first full length film in 1937. Ultimately there were fifteen Old Mother Riley films, of which ten are listed by Robert V. Kenny as being released between late 1938 and early 1945 and dealing with issues pertinent to wartime.<sup>43</sup> The films established a narrative template for the Gert and Daisy films, the story starting off in a working-class urban area, before moving the characters to an alien setting, such as Parliament, the ATS, a circus, or abroad. The films are cited as being the biggest

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<sup>42</sup> This image of a quorum of gossiping northern matriarchs was to become part of the landscape of British social realist films, and central to the community of Granada's *Coronation Street*.

<sup>43</sup> Kenny, *The Man Who Was Old Mother Riley*, p. 352.



money-makers of all British films during wartime, with Mass Observation reporting that ‘in some parts of England cinemas that nothing else can fill are packed to the doors by Old Mother Riley’.<sup>44</sup> The Old Mother Riley films originated from a similar production context and targeted the same audience as the Gert and Daisy films, defiant in their celebration of working-class culture and the matriarch for an audience that was not fully understood by the Ministry of Information and the critics.

### **The origins of Gert and Daisy**

The Waters sisters’ careers was rooted in the world of popular culture of the early twentieth century, following in the tradition of the spectacle of the comedy ‘grotesque’ in common with Lucan’s Old Mother Riley and other middle-aged female performers of the era. The sisters had graduated from being a variety act playing pier theatres and touring the music halls, making their first BBC radio broadcast in 1929.<sup>45</sup> Their first film appearance was in *Radio Parade* in 1933, an ensemble piece featuring a host of stars of British radio, and their fame warranted their inclusion in the Wills’ cigarette card collection of radio celebrities the following year. By the time war broke out they were established stars of the radio and music hall, becoming film stars as they entered their forties. They were greatly in demand during wartime, being the figureheads for Government campaigns for cooking and war bonds, featuring regularly in a variety of radio shows, for the Home Front and the forces, touring the Far East with ENSA, and making the three Gert and Daisy films. Their popularity was recognised in 1946 when awarded the OBE for their services during the war.

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<sup>44</sup> Richards et al., *Mass Observation*, p. 293.

<sup>45</sup> Denis Gifford, ‘Waters, (Florence) Elsie’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2011; accessed 13 April 2014, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/65437>.



**Figure 4** Doris and Elsie Waters featured on a cigarette card, 1934.

They found fame cultivating the personae of working-class cockney matriarchs, although coming from a middle-class family, both attending the Guildhall School of Music. Their performance style was honed as a variety act, performing as part of Will S. Pepper's White Coons, and Fred Beck's Modern Follies, undertaking summer seasons at seaside resorts, including Southwold and Clacton.<sup>46</sup> The concert party derived from the minstrel and pierrot tradition, dating from the nineteenth century. These popular performance forms in the first decades of the twentieth century allowed for subversive gender representations according to Sophie Nield, noting the 'gender-blurring of the pierrot troupes' implicit in the 'sexual slippage of androgynous costume'.<sup>47</sup> The masking of identity could be considered to be a liberating force for female performers such as the Waters sisters, allowing them a freedom from the constraints of the conventional roles dictated by their gender and age.

The sisters were part of a broader tradition of the 'grotesque' variety act, derived from the commedia del'arte and harlequinade, which thrived during this period. Performers such as Nellie Wallace, Lillie Morris and Hylda Baker rejected the codes of glamour in favour of the spectacle of the grotesque, inherent in the marginalised status of the ageing spinster. Their acts were typically distinguished by bizarre outfits, comic songs and patter, accompanied by outlandish dancing, with an appeal

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<sup>46</sup> Gracie Fields was another performer who honed her skills with a pierrot troupe, her experiences dramatized in the semi-autobiographical film, *The Show Goes On* (1936).

<sup>47</sup> Sophie Nield, 'Popular theatre, 1895-1940' in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 105.

centred on the everyday and the familiar. Nellie Wallace, was a particular influence on the Waters sisters, variously billed as ‘The Essence of Eccentricity’ or ‘The Quintessence of Quaintness’,<sup>48</sup> her stage persona that of ‘a clownishly unglamorous older spinster with delusions of attractiveness’.<sup>49</sup> Her grotesque persona was made manifest in her appearance, which accentuated her ageing spinster status with ‘outlandish costumes, with funny hats and flea-bitten furs, her face made comically gawky with exaggerated make-up, and sometimes thick, round-framed glasses’.<sup>50</sup> Age, gender, marital status and social class converge in the ‘grotesque’, for on all counts she was ‘other’, capitalising on this outsider status for comic effect. Glenn notes that ‘concepts of attractiveness and notions of the grotesque together defined what was funny about the funny woman’, quoting one reviewer writing of Nellie Wallace performing in New York in 1908 that ‘she sacrifices all attractiveness of appearance’, her comic business being ‘to make audiences laugh at any cost’.<sup>51</sup>



Figure 5 Nellie Wallace, photographed by Cecil Beaton in 1947.

Like the Waters sisters, Wallace centred her act as a grotesque on a working-class persona. She was featured as a double act with another music hall grotesque, Lily Morris, in *Radio Parade of 1935* (1934), playing a pair of singing charwomen. Their performance was indebted to the film debut of Gert and Daisy the previous year in *Radio Parade* (1933), replicating the formula which had brought the Waters sisters fame in their act as Gert and Daisy.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Kilgarriff, *Grace, Beauty and Banjos* (London: Oberon Books, 1998), p. 272.

<sup>49</sup> Oliver Double, *Getting The Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2005), p. 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38-39.

<sup>51</sup> Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, p. 46.



Figure 6 Lily Morris and Nellie Wallace as charwomen in *Radio Parade of 1935*.

The charwoman worked as an apocryphal figuration of working-class ageing femininity, as evoked by Richard Hoggart's description of a charwoman he knew in the 1940s, who 'represented the rougher, the 'knees up, Mother Brown' type of woman'.<sup>52</sup> Her appearance is that of the grotesque:

...she wasn't very clean. Over a torn, old, and grubby blouse and skirt she had for the street an ex-army gas-cape; from that there stuck what might have been the head of one of the witches in *Macbeth*. [Her face] was scored with hard work, insufficient attention, and the lines which 'making shift', doggedness, fighting for your own, and an overriding bravado bring. Her left eye had a violent cast and her lower lip a drop to the right [...] Her hair was a dirty mouse colour, hanging in straggly locks from either side of an old felt hat which she wore rammed hard and unshapenly to the head [...] Her shoes were split, sloppy, and entirely uncleaned [...] Her voice was raucous [...] developed over the years by area and backyard 'callings' [...] and 'bawlings-out'.

Hoggart cites the charwoman as encapsulating the spirit of the working class, linking her to the tradition of the comic grotesque: 'a note which has never been silent in English working-class life since the Wife of Bath, which sounds in Shakespeare's clowns, Mistress Quickly and Juliet's nurse, in Moll Flanders, and in the nineteenth century music-halls'. This is the persona which was perpetuated by characters such

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<sup>52</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 121. Hoggart makes specific reference to the 'English' working class, rather than British.

as Gert and Daisy and other female grotesques of the twentieth century, defying codes of desired feminine behaviour, being unclean, disruptive, loud and confrontational.

The Waters sisters' radio career flourished as the BBC made an effort to nurture its own star performers and originate its own material, turning to the concert party for a cheap source of new talent. In later years the sisters reflected how radio helped to attract family audiences back to the music halls 'to see these artistes in person. In fact that is what happened in our case. The Music Halls took on a new look'.<sup>53</sup> Although having already established themselves as a variety act, it was the characters of Gert and Daisy who came to define the Waters sisters' careers, the sisters alluding to their early career as 'BGD' – Before Gert and Daisy.<sup>54</sup> In this respect they were typical of working-class characters created by many of the later music hall stars according to Michael Chanan becoming 'very widely known not just as the trademarks of particular stars but as well-rounded social characters in their own right', despite starting as 'exaggerated parodies', the equivalent of later television characters such as Ena Sharples and Alf Garnett.<sup>55</sup> The characters were hastily created the night before recording when the sisters realised they needed more material to fill the B side of their latest Parlophone release in 1930. They decided on a speech based act for a change, concocting a dialogue between two cockney women watching a wedding, recreating the voices and characters from their East End roots, as explained by Elsie in later years: 'we were lucky because we knew how they spoke and how they behaved'.<sup>56</sup> The recording starts with a brief musical introduction, which marks the celebratory mood, but conveys a more ironic note regarding the institution of marriage:

Wedding Bells, wedding bells,  
They all seem so happy and gay,  
But when twelve months are gone,  
Will they still sing this song

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<sup>53</sup> Doris and Elsie Waters, script (undated); Steyning Museum archive.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Gillman, 'The BGD (Before Gert and Daisy) Days of Elsie and Doris Waters', *Radio Times*, 12 August 1971, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 144.

<sup>56</sup> Gillman, 'The BGD', p. 6.

Many happy returns of the day.

This is followed by several minutes of patter in which Gert and Daisy comment on the bride, groom and related family matters. The act essentially took the form of gossip in terms of style and content, interwoven with an arch humour, discussing matters that all listeners would be able to relate to. Gert and Daisy's discussion of the bride combines the familiar with comic observations of everyday life, as with their discussion of Daisy's new sister-in-law:

Gert: How did he come to meet her?

Daisy: He didn't. She overtook him.

Gert: Is she nice?

Daisy: No, I don't like her much. First time she come into the place she upset a cup of tea all over our clean tablecloth. We hadn't even read it.

Gert: Is she that fat girl I saw him with?

Daisy: Yes, that's her. Fat! She had mumps for three weeks before anybody noticed it. 'Course it was his property that she was after.

Gert: What, has he got a lot of valuables then?

Daisy: A bicycle, a picture of the death of Nelson...'

The content of 'Wedding Bells' can be traced back to the tradition of the female music hall performers who had started to make more of an appearance on bills in the 1880s according to Waites, whose acts would feature songs about courtship and the recurring theme of marriage as comic disaster.<sup>57</sup> Gert and Daisy's subsequent anecdotes about Wally and Bert, their respective fiancée and husband, was true to this earlier tradition of 'a rich vein of humour [...] portraying man as deceitful, unreliable and – after a certain age – of no sexual use to women'.

The success of Gert and Daisy was instant; radio presenter Christopher Strong played the record on the BBC one lunchtime, with the sisters being besieged by

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<sup>57</sup> Waites, 'Music hall', p. 62.

demands for the ‘cockney women’ when performing that evening.<sup>58</sup> The sisters hastily improvised suitably grotesque costumes appropriate for these working-class middle-aged women: ‘They found us two hats, we put them on back to front...’ Their costumes were refined as the characters became established, as detailed by the *Radio Times* in 1935: ‘Daisy’s famous raincoat, her string bag and the vegetables; Gert’s yellow jumper and check skirt – and the straw hat she wears in the summer’.<sup>59</sup> Their appearance defied glamour in the grotesque tradition, being unkempt and makeshift. Their scruffy clothes held together with safety pins were fundamental to the act, and were even worn for their radio broadcasts according to their Wills’s cigarette card of 1934.<sup>60</sup>



**Figure 7** Doris and Elsie Waters in costume for a publicity shot for *Gert and Daisy's Weekend*.

Their film debut saw the sisters performing a version of the Wedding Bells sketch in *Radio Parade* (1933), the first of a series of films to capitalise on the popularity of radio offering ‘millions of listeners’ a chance to see performers. *Kinematograph Weekly* was confident that ‘big box-office receipts to be assured’, the reviewer noting that Gert and Daisy were one of the acts receiving ‘the warmest applause’, sharing the bill with other female grotesques, notably the Houston Sisters and fellow

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<sup>58</sup> Doris and Elsie Waters, working script for appearance at Fishmongers Hall, London, 15 November 1972; Steyning Museum.

<sup>59</sup> Guy Fletcher, ‘People You Hear...Gert and Daisy’, *Radio Times*, 9 August 1935, p. 4. The Gert and Daisy costumes were a far cry from the glamour of the Norman Hartnell creations that the sisters wore for more auspicious public appearances.

<sup>60</sup> Archive held at Steyning Museum.

cockney act Mabel Constanduros.<sup>61</sup> The Waters sisters' low-key and intuitive performance style made the characters of Gert and Daisy vivid and realistic, far from the glamour of younger stars of the cinema screen. In their sequence they discuss a recent wedding whilst shopping, idly prodding the vegetables and munching on an apple whilst they gossip. The sisters play off each other physically, taking an apple off the other to take a bite and nudging each other, mirroring each other's movements. They continue their transactions buying vegetables and inspecting stockings whilst maintaining their conversation, only occasionally staying still. Close ups are used to accentuate Daisy's indignation and deadpan facial expressions, alternating with Gert's shock and disbelief. Their body language is that of the working-class matriarch, adopting the stance of a gossip with one hand to the side of her face, clutching her bag close to her with the other. Their act balances the familiar with the comic, lacing their verbal wit and acerbic observations with the realism of the setting, actions and dress.

The success of 'Wedding Bells' led to the release of a steady stream of further records including 'Just Jogging Along'(1932), 'Gert and Daisy and The Tandem' (1936), and 'Bert's Darts Club Dinner' (1939). The content centred on the mundane and the domestic, hinging on the experiences of the working-class middle-aged woman, featuring topics such as making Christmas puddings, spring cleaning or having a party. The sisters created a small community of familiar characters: Daisy's feckless husband, Bert, and Gert's fiancée Wally, and their arch-enemy, neighbour Ma Butler. The pressbook for *Radio Parade* emphasised the realism of Gert and Daisy, by recounting how the sisters would 'visit bargain sales, street markets, busy streets, shops and even cinemas in a search for the living counterparts of their wireless characters'.<sup>62</sup> Their research made sure that the act was true to the music hall tradition, evoked by Chanan as an '[a]ssimilation of common experience, rather than challenging it', drawing on cultural norms that were reassuring for the audience.<sup>63</sup> The humour was irreverent as was typical of the music hall, being

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<sup>61</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly*, 4 May 1933, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> *Radio Parade* pressbook, BFI archives, London.

<sup>63</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 150.



directed against ‘members of its own audience as well as against those who thought themselves above the common crowd’.<sup>64</sup>

The low-key informal style of the act was part of their appeal, described by one contemporary paper as ‘cheery, semi-confidential backyard chin-wags’.<sup>65</sup> They cultivated a naturalistic style, with pauses, interjections and repetition, positioning the audience as eavesdroppers. St. Pierre observed that the element of ‘extemporaneity’ was fundamental to the delivery of their dialogue, the improvisational spirit made evident in the interjections, with the sisters regularly finishing each other’s lines, and adding unscripted interjections.<sup>66</sup> The pace and wit of their repartee is indicative of their status of being Other, untrammelled by normative codes of feminine conduct, and a sign of their independence and ability to disrupt.<sup>67</sup> Gert and Daisy’s style of delivery derives from the music hall tradition of ‘pattering’, the patterer originally being a street vendor, who ‘patters’ their wares to attract an audience. The patterer only sings a small part of their song, for ‘the rest was delivered in a kind of chant, and interspersed with spontaneous verbal material’.<sup>68</sup> Being primarily a live act the Waters sisters relied on the interaction with the audience at the heart of the music hall tradition, always starting their performance with their signature warm greeting ‘Hullo! How are you, are you alright?’, building a rapport with the audience, even when on the radio.<sup>69</sup>

The cockney personae of Gert and Daisy was a defining feature of the act, highlighted in their billing and publicity. This foregrounding of regional identity was typical of 1930s British comedians, in common with performers such as Fields and Formby. They were praised for their authenticity by William Matthews, a scholar of the cockney dialect, who wrote that ‘Elsie and Doris Waters in their Dais and Gert dialogues[...]are brilliant exponents of the maudlin garrulousness of some Cockney

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Elsie and Doris Waters enjoy Manchester shopping’, *Manchester Evening News*, 23 June 1937.

<sup>66</sup> St. Pierre, *Song and Sketch*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>67</sup> Across the Atlantic during the same period the ‘fast-talking dame’ was prevalent in film comedies, with Maria DiBattista identifying verbosity as a comic trait as evident in the Shakespearian comic heroine and the pantomime dame, see *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. x.

<sup>68</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 144.

<sup>69</sup> This performance style informed the opening sequence of their 1959 ITV sitcom in which they would directly address the audience, following a ritual of greeting each other: ‘Hullo Gert!’ ‘Hullo Daisy!’ ‘Hullo everybody!’ before inviting us into their boarding-house, with Daisy winking to camera.

women'.<sup>70</sup> St. Pierre suggests that although their cockney dialect was purely affected for the stage, it was accepted by audiences 'as variously parodic, self-deprecating and celebratory', consistent with the irreverence of music hall.<sup>71</sup> Their East End identity suited the BBC as it endeavoured to move away from the crystal-cut accents of Reithian radio, widening its appeal to a working-class audience. They were not the only comedy cockney matrons of the time, with Mabel Constanduros, finding fame for her cockney sketches, particularly in her performances as various members of The Buggins Family (1928-48). These acts were in the tradition of the cockney charwoman dating back to the music hall of the late 1800s, as featured in Henry Walker's ballad *Betsy Wareing* : 'Which goes out a chairing, And don't in my temper much sweetness perffess...'.<sup>72</sup>

The Waters sisters' childhood in Poplar suggested an authenticity given the origins of the music hall in the East End. Their irreverence is true to the spirit of the original music hall, being an expression of 'the needs of [the] inarticulate, leaderless unskilled' according to Chanan, in the aftermath of the Reform crisis.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless their privileged upbringing provided them with the opportunity to develop their musical skills and nurture their talent to bring the East End working class to the public.

By the end of the thirties the sisters' celebrity status had been established with regular radio appearances and extensive touring. Their agent wrote to the BBC in 1935 insisting that they should be top of the bill for the annual Radiolympia,<sup>74</sup> described as 'Britain's biggest music-hall'.<sup>75</sup> Their national status was made evident by their inclusion in the BBC's *Coronation Party* radio show in 1937, following George VI's speech to the nation. The sisters took responsibility for all aspects of their career by writing to negotiate their fee, reminding the BBC that they are 'one of the highest paid radio acts' of the time.<sup>76</sup> They appeared at the Royal Variety Performance of 1934, and returned to headline the 1938 Royal Variety Performance.

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<sup>70</sup> William Matthews, *Cockney Past and Present: A Short History of the Dialect of London* (New York: E.P.Dutton, 1938), p. 100.

<sup>71</sup> St. Pierre, *Song and Sketch*, p. 8.

<sup>72</sup> *Diprose's Sixpenny Comic Song Book* (London: J. Diprose, 1865), p. 105.

<sup>73</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 150.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from Julius Darewski, 11<sup>th</sup> July 1935, to the BBC; BBC Written Archives, Caversham.

<sup>75</sup> *Radio Times*, 9 August 1935, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Doris and Elsie Waters, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1937; BBC Written Archives, Caversham.

Their public appearances made their star status evident, with huge crowds turning out to see them, and businesses queuing up to be endorsed by the ‘radio and vaudeville stars’.<sup>77</sup> The *Manchester Evening News* reported the sisters being greeted by a ‘solid block of fans’, having ‘to sign autographs on anything from bus tickets to tea-bags’, struggling to push through crowds of fans of all ages ‘calling out for ‘Gert and Da-aisy’. Their appeal to the housewife was evident with the ‘Gert and Daisy Song Book’ being a free gift with copies of *Home Companion* magazine in 1937, and the characters being utilised for product endorsement, featuring in a 1938 advert for Maclean’s toothpaste.

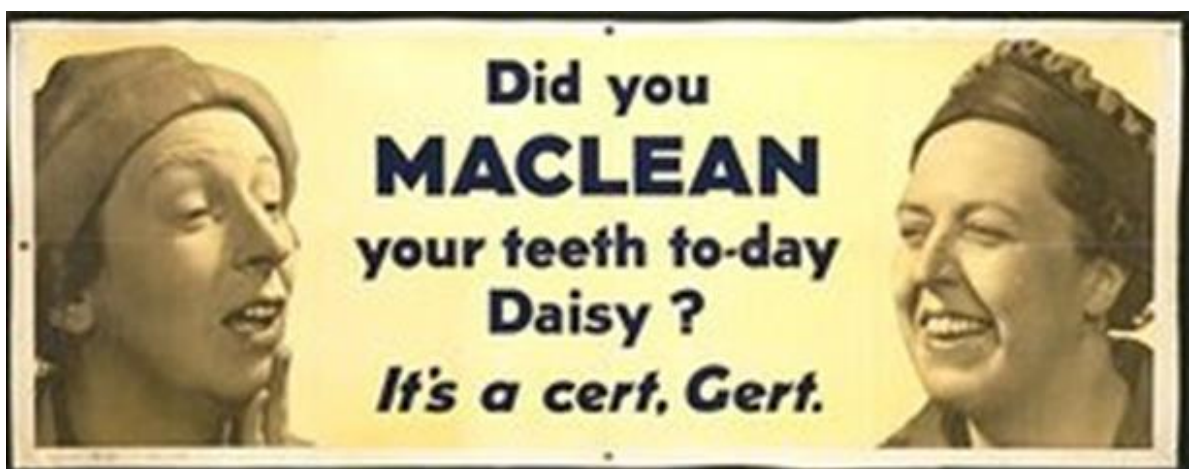


Figure 8 Gert and Daisy endorsing Maclean's toothpaste, 1938.

### Gert and Daisy in wartime

Radio proved to be a crucial propaganda tool in the Second World War given its popularity and reach, with ninety per cent of households having a radio, nevertheless the BBC struggled to find appropriate formats and voices to reach the masses.<sup>78</sup> Doris and Elsie Waters were well-positioned to fill this gap having established a fan base of working-class listeners. They wrote to the BBC within days of the declaration of war proposing ‘half-a-dozen Gert and Daisy radio half hours or so’, emphasising their commitment to the war effort by adding that they had been ‘entertaining evacuated women and children in a field’ near their home in Sussex.<sup>79</sup> The Minister of Food, Lord Woolton, identified the potential of Waters sisters ‘to establish a more meaningful rapport with the women of Britain’, capitalising on their

<sup>77</sup> ‘Elsie and Doris Waters enjoy Manchester shopping’, *Manchester Evening News*, 23 June 1937.

<sup>78</sup> Sian Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 71.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from Doris and Elsie Waters, 8 September 1939; BBC Written Archives.

personae as cockney comedy matriarchs, and commissioning them to present *Feed the Brute*, a series of eleven five-minute broadcasts, scheduled after the 6 p.m. news on the BBC Home Service, beginning on 9 April 1940.<sup>80</sup> The Food Economy campaign, launched in April 1940 was not just aimed at the typical middle-class audience for BBC food talks, but aimed to reform the country's long-term eating habits, targeting the 'really poor housewife, anxious to do her best for her family but without the means to follow the most conventional advice'.<sup>81</sup> The *Daily Express* described the programme as a 'curious (though effective) broadcast: part Saturday night music hall, part Whitehall statistics'. Mass Observation research found that the informal presentational style, familiar cultural references, use of humour and colloquialisms ensured that Gert and Daisy 'identified themselves and their problems with the genuine housewife'.<sup>82</sup> Individual respondents made evident the degree to which they could relate to Gert and Daisy, remarking 'they're good and I like the recipes they give because they're suitable for the poorer class of people [...] Not like some of them they used to have on the wireless'.<sup>83</sup> Their appeal was evident as thirty thousand listeners wrote in to request the recipes from the series.<sup>84</sup> Gert and Daisy were invited back to host *Kitchen Front* during the Christmas week of 1940, at the height of the Blitz. The BBC assured the Waters sisters that they were 'convinced that the psychological value of having you actually broadcasting [live] will be enormous'.<sup>85</sup> *The Times* concluded that their 'subtle combination of sound food campaign propaganda with humour [...] gets a message home when straight tutoring fails'.<sup>86</sup> The success of their food broadcasts resulted in the publication of the *Gert and Daisy Wartime Cookery Book*.

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<sup>80</sup> Jonah Barrington, *Daily Express*, 10 April 1940, p. 11.

<sup>81</sup> Nicholas, *The Echo*, p. 74.

<sup>82</sup> Mass Observation, *Gert and Daisy's BBC talks*; file report 77, 1940.

<sup>83</sup> The Mass Observation report was rather reserved as to how educational the programmes had been, clearly feeling that they had been successful in entertaining and capturing the attention of the target audience, yet 'to some extent the full impact of Gert and Daisy's talks has not been achieved. There has not been that extra something which has crystallised interested listening into universal action. If there had been a brief summary in a serious male voice at the end, this effect might have been more fully achieved'.

<sup>84</sup> Maggie Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (London: Continuum, 2012).

<sup>85</sup> Letter from BBC to Doris and Elsie Waters, 3 December 1940; BBC Written Archives, Caversham.

<sup>86</sup> *The Times*, 24 August 1940, p. 9.

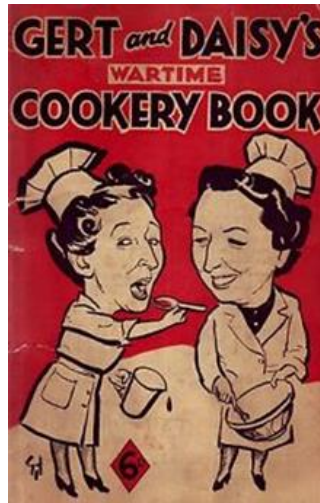


Figure 9 *Gert and Daisy's Wartime Cookery Book*, 1941.

The 'psychological value' of the Waters sisters identified by the BBC resulted in extensive work for the pair both on and off the airwaves. Their success was testament to Norman Longmate's observation that 'it was the variety artistes and comedians who were the real idols' of radio.<sup>87</sup> They made regular appearances on variety radio programmes, including *Ack-Ack-Beer-Beer*, *Navy Mixture* and *Workers' Playtime*.<sup>88</sup> They were enlisted for other propaganda purposes, including the promotion of War Bonds, and were also used for overseas broadcasts, with the BBC's North American Service Director commenting that 'I feel sure this is the sort of very English humour that Americans do enjoy'.<sup>89</sup> Their status was such that a pair of Spitfires which were on regular duty over Hastings, were named Gert and Daisy by the locals.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Longmate, *How We Lived*, p. 434.

<sup>88</sup> They also appeared in *Here's Wishing You Well* (1944 – 45), 'for our wounded men' and *Shipmates Ahoy*, a programme for the merchant navy, in May 1945.

<sup>89</sup> Memo, dated 27 August 1941; BBC Written Archives.

<sup>90</sup> Roland Gardner, 'WW2 people's war: Joan's story', BBC, accessed 27 April 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/user/40/u1682040.shtml>.



Figure 10 Doris and Elsie Waters opening a communal feeding centre in March 1941.

Doris and Elsie Waters provided the wartime audience with reassurance, a sense of community and continuity which proved invaluable during the fractured realities of everyday life. They performed an ideological role similar to that of Gracie Fields in the previous decade, who had been an iconic figure of unity for a working-class audience, her gift being to represent ‘a common denominator [...] an intimacy with each audience that can arise only out of the true traditions of English music hall’ according to a review of *The Show Goes On* (1937).<sup>91</sup> The characters of Gert and Daisy were trusted by the working class, much as Fields delivered ‘a message of courage and cheerfulness, delivered not by a politician or statesman but by one of their own’ according to Richards.<sup>92</sup> They followed in the tradition of Fields, evoked by Landy as ‘a figure of reconciliation [...] dependent on her physical appearance as well as on her talent, which allows her to play an active role in resolving conflict. Unhampered by the baggage of excessive femininity, she is freer’.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, whilst Fields was of a similar age to the sisters, her persona focused on her extraordinary abilities as a performer, with a gradual move to glamorise her in film roles in the late 1930s.<sup>94</sup> For the Waters sisters, their status as middle-aged matriarchs was central to their act as Gert and Daisy, assuming the role of universal aunts to the nation in their role on the *Kitchen Front*. The programme harnessed the

<sup>91</sup> Basil Wright, *The Spectator*, 2 August 1937.

<sup>92</sup> Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 172.

<sup>93</sup> Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 339-40.

<sup>94</sup> Landy, ‘The extraordinary ordinariness of Gracie Fields’, p. 63.

familiarity of their target audience with their act, having established their personae as matriarchs in their recordings and radio appearances during the previous decade.

The character of the forthright cockney matriarch was reiterated across the media during wartime, demonstrating her resonance with the mass audience. In addition to Gert and Daisy, and Constanduros' Grandma Buggins on the *Kitchen Front*, one of the stars of the hugely popular *ITMA* was Mrs Mopp, played by Dorothy Summers, a cockney charlady, who was known for her abrupt entrances with a clattering mop and bucket, her double entendres and popular catchphrases. Her first appearance on the show was in October 1941, the same month in which *Gert and Daisy's Weekend* was released. Raphael Samuel observed how the cockney charlady was part of configuration of cockney identity which served to unify and inspire the populace: 'Cockney heroism and good humour – the stoical indifference to 'Jerry' of Mrs Mopp, the working-class char, the 'business as usual' of the cabbies, the clippies and bobbies – were symbols of national courage, the miraculous survival of St. Paul's a talisman of the nation's will'.<sup>95</sup> The suffering endured by the East End during the Blitz had rendered the ordinary Londoner a hero figure, whose resilience was celebrated by the sentiment that 'London can take it'. The cheerful cockney was central to this myth perpetuated by 'journalists, Crown Unit film-makers, politicians of all parties and Londoners themselves' according to Angus Calder.<sup>96</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones observed how the image of the cockney conflated patriotism and humour, in an image which proved apposite in mobilising and engaging the populace in wartime, being based on an archetype which 'gathered together many of the ingredients of a populist and city-based conception of the nation and had projected the fantasy of a metropolitan community grounded in the good-humoured, if sometimes ironic, acceptance of social difference and subordination'.<sup>97</sup> *Gert and Daisy's Weekend* deployed this archetype in the course of solidarity and resilience on the Home Front, in the form of the East End matriarch.

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<sup>95</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 218.

<sup>96</sup> Calder, *The Myth*, p. 128.

<sup>97</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The cockney and the nation' in *Metropolis: Histories and Representations Since 1800*, eds. D. Feldman and G. S. Jones (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 314.

### *Gert and Daisy's Weekend*

*Gert and Daisy's Weekend* bore the hallmarks of production company Butcher's Film Service, known for its low budget comedies, working with a panoply of variety stars including George Formby, Old Mother Riley and Frank Randle. Its films were 'enormous money-makers' and it had distinguished itself by being the first British studio to resume normal production after the outbreak of the Second World War, producing films of a topical nature.<sup>98</sup> Butcher's reliance on the popular appeal of the variety tradition was at odds with most other British studios of the time for whom 'music hall was very old-fashioned, down-market stuff' according to Murphy.<sup>99</sup> The director of the first two Gert and Daisy films, Maclean Rogers, was a longstanding and prolific contributor to Butcher's output, including the wartime comedies *Old Mother Riley Joins Up* (1939) and *Garrison Follies* (1940). Screenplay credits for both of these films featured Kathleen Butler, who went on to script the first two Gert and Daisy films, helping to provide a strong female voice in the production. Indeed Sue Harper argued that the production regime at a studio such as Butcher's fostered the 'creative freedoms' of actresses to some extent, 'the smaller and cheaper the outfit, the more room there was for performative manoeuvre'.<sup>100</sup> The sisters were the creative bedrock for the Gert and Daisy films, based on the narrative world of their act, having the advantage of audience familiarity, low cost and speed of production.

*Gert and Daisy's Weekend* was made against the backdrop of Britain being in its second year of the conflict, with the populace enduring air raids and shortages of food and other materials. Filmed in the summer of 1941, the country was starting to emerge from its darkest hour, having survived the initial onslaught of the Blitz, and fears of imminent invasion. The narrative yokes together topical wartime issues with a plotline typical of 1930s comedies, featuring a mix-up over some stolen jewels, with a sub-plot of a young couple kept apart by the interfering Ma Butler (Iris Vandeleur).<sup>101</sup> Much as with similar low-budget comedies, the plot is very loose,

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<sup>98</sup> '40 years of feature films', *Cinema and Theatre Construction*, 1947, p. 30.

<sup>99</sup> Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939-49* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 201.

<sup>100</sup> Harper, *Women in British Cinema*, p. 149.

<sup>101</sup> Richards noted the prevalence of plots concerning jewel thefts in pre-war British films; see *The Age of the Dream Palace*, p. 298.

Vandeleur was fresh from her role as another curmudgeonly neighbour, Ma Nettle, in *Love on the Dole*.



providing a framework for a series of set-pieces to foreground the performance of the stars. The story starts with a complaint about a piece of fish resulting in Gert and Daisy agreeing to accompany some East End evacuees to Lady Plumtree's country house, Little Pipham Hall. The sisters are wrongly accused of the theft of Lady Plumtree's jewels, but the evacuees help reveal the identity of the actual jewel thieves. The unruly matriarchs are uninhibited by their menfolk, with Bert and Wally being conveniently absent in the forces, leaving Gert and Daisy engaged in combat with the mean spirited in their own community and the snobbery of the upper class.



Figure 11 Gert and Daisy confront Ma Butler in *Gert and Daisy's Weekend*.

The characters of Gert and Daisy are defined by the ordinary, but the film sees them fulfilling the role of guardians of the community, modelling the 'neighbourly services' for their working-class audience. The film evokes the spirit of the Housewives' Service, a division of the W.V.S. which originally emerged in urban centres, also known as the Neighbours' League or Neighbours Group. Ordinary women, particularly from a working-class and lower-middle-class background, volunteered to serve their community by providing 'neighbourly services'.<sup>102</sup> Suggested duties encompassed many practicalities in supporting the local community during wartime, including 'adopting' evacuee families, running social evenings, and offering to "mother" men or women in the services or girls engaged in

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<sup>102</sup> Patricia Malcolmson and Robert Malcolmson, *Women at the Ready* (London: Little, Brown, 2013), p. 68.

industry working away from home'.<sup>103</sup> One volunteer wrote in 1942 how the Housewives' Service provided 'a rare opportunity for the older women who would otherwise have felt frustrated and a little bitter in that they were not giving any special help towards winning the war and defeating the objects of the raiders'.<sup>104</sup>



Figure 12 Poster for the Housewives' Service.

The opening scene locates the film within the world of the housewife, competing against each other in queues for meagre rations and strange pieces of fish. The camera pans across bomb-damaged shops to the fishmonger, before tracking along the queue at foot-level, revealing smartly shod feet and wicker baskets, pausing at the scuffed shoes, wrinkled thick stockings and sagging hemlines of Gert and Daisy. The scruffy, ill-fitting garb of the comedy grotesque renders them eccentric in comparison to the conformity of the other women, typical of the variety act rather than the glamour expected of a film star. The spectacle is that of the comic grotesque whose appearance evokes the everyday, for a British audience, rather than the 'extraordinary' qualities of Hollywood stardom. The sisters' persistent good humour in the face of difficulty – whether it be a suspect piece of fish, pushing in a queue or Ma Butler's insults – models the idealised demeanour for the wartime housewife, maintaining cheerfulness when under pressure.<sup>105</sup> Old Mother Butler is the antithesis of Gert and Daisy, who mimic her moaning as she stands in the queue complaining

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<sup>103</sup> Mrs Atkinson, 'Story of the W.V.S. Housewives' Service', 1942, Royal Voluntary Service, [http://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/Uploads/Documents/About%20us/WVS\\_housewives\\_service\\_2013.pdf](http://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/Uploads/Documents/About%20us/WVS_housewives_service_2013.pdf), p. 7.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>105</sup> Lady Reading, the leader of the W. V. S. was a role model for her volunteers: 'I have a firm conviction that [...] gaiety and a lightness of approach should be cultivated' quoted in Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership*, p. 23.

about price rises. Her mean-spiritedness is made clear as she stands rigidly apart from the others, gimlet-eyed, her mouth pinched, huffing and puffing in evident disapproval of her neighbours. She is a snob, referring to the ‘scum’ she is surrounded by in the neighbourhood, whereas Gert and Daisy have no pretensions, countering Ma Butler’s insult with the retort ‘You must mean us, we’re the only scum around here.’



Figure 13 Gert and Daisy wait in the fish queue in *Gert and Daisy's Weekend*.

Gert and Daisy’s status as cockney matriarchs is central to the film, as is made vivid in the sequence when they entertain the people taking shelter in the underground. The sequence, filmed on location in Goodge Street station, is more of a party than a state of emergency, with Gert and Daisy taking a central role in the jollity, singing ‘Won’t We Have a Party When It’s Over’ and acting out the dance moves for the cockney anthem ‘Knees Up Mother Brown’. The camera tracks along the crowded platform to reveal the night-time community of singing Londoners, young and old, revelling in the party atmosphere. Gert and Daisy sing along with the other acts performing in the shelter, acting out the lyrics and hitching up their skirts to join in with the revelry. They are at the heart of the audience, cheering on other performers, as well as taking their turn to lead the revelry. The scene epitomises the spirit of carnival which animates the characters of Gert and Daisy, transforming the horror of the shelters into the world of the music hall, led by the unruly figures of two working-class middle-aged women. The Waters sisters’ self-penned ‘Won’t We Have a Party’ is typical of their style of song, conforming to a working-class

tradition of song identified by Hoggart as ‘cheeky, finger-to-the-nose and ain’t-life-jolly [...] the song of the working-class when they are refusing to be down-hearted simply because they are working-class, when they are raucously confident’.<sup>106</sup> This sequence encapsulates the appeal of Gert and Daisy for a wartime audience, celebrating working-class cockney culture, which had been frowned on by the authorities before the war on account of its supposed vulgarity. The BBC had suppressed any attempt to release a recorded version of ‘Knees Up, Mother Brown’ by hinting that they would not be able to broadcast it, with Mass Observation announcing that its release in 1940 was ‘the most spectacular war-time development so far’.<sup>107</sup> The music company explanation of its decision to release the record was ‘Now we can get away with it. It’s war-time’, with Doris and Elsie Waters being quick to release a Gert and Daisy version the same year.<sup>108</sup>



Figure 14 Gert and Daisy lead the dancing in the underground shelter in *Gert and Daisy's Weekend*.

In leading the dance Gert and Daisy are positioned as ‘Ladies of misrule’, and as figureheads for working-class culture. The sequence is testament to the popularity of vigorous communal dances during wartime, reported on by Mass Observation in 1939, noting that dance crazes such as the Lambeth Walk were evidence of the vigour of ‘native cockney culture’.<sup>109</sup> The report added that the ‘spontaneous talent for dancing and song is a Lambeth tradition, having its connection with music hall

<sup>106</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses Of Literacy*, p. 137.

<sup>107</sup> Mass Observation, *War Begins At Home* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1940), p. 232.

<sup>108</sup> The lyrics of ‘Knees up Mother Brown’ featured an added verse about the war including the lyric which the song in the film is based on, ‘Won’t we have a party when it’s over’ which was written by the Waters sisters.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan, *Speak for Yourself: a Mass-Observation Anthology, 1937-49* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 66.

tradition but also having a life of its own. It has many features in common with primitive dancing'. Such descriptions emphasises the Dionysian elements of these communal celebrations, with the report of a cockney party in 1939 mirroring the scene in the underground shelter, featuring dances, songs, solo turns – including accordion playing. This was a space where everybody is equal, and gender hierarchies could be overturned, with everybody dancing, irrespective of age or gender, although 'mostly the women asked the men to dance'.<sup>110</sup>

Not only are Gert and Daisy positioned as carnivalesque leaders, but they are the face of working-class defiance and solidarity in the face of adversity. Against official advice Londoners had colonised the underground as shelters during the early days of the Blitz, finding the provision for shelters less than adequate, preferring 'a greater feeling of security, camaraderie, and oblivion to the noise of the raids'.<sup>111</sup> These vast dormitories are cited by Calder as evidence of a strengthening left wing in the course of 1940, being 'a heroic assertion of popular rights against a legacy of inept bureaucracy and Tory rule'.<sup>112</sup> Minns cites accounts of the humour and camaraderie which flourished in the shelters, noting that 'Many found the life oddly elating as accordions and pianos played louder and louder with the din of the air raid outside'.<sup>113</sup> Gert and Daisy are cast in the role of the 'shelter leaders and shelter characters' noted by Mass-Observation, who emerged in these subterranean communities.<sup>114</sup>

This persona as guardian of the working-class community extends to their role in escorting the evacuees out of the East End. Gert and Daisy fill the role of caring matriarchs who protect the children away from home, yet are equally as unruly and troublesome as the evacuees, true to their comedy personae. The children are billeted at Little Pipham Hall, the home of Lady Plumtree (Annie Esmond), the dowager aristocrat and her elderly butler being horrified and overwhelmed by the energy and unruliness of the children. Lady Plumtree's characterisation stands in contrast to Gert and Daisy; her gentility is exaggerated for comic effect, as she patronises the sisters and their wards, her upper-class drawl being the recurrent

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>111</sup> Juliet Gardiner, *Wartime Britain, 1939-45* (London: Headline, 2004), p. 382.

<sup>112</sup> Calder, *The Myth*, p. 47.

<sup>113</sup> Minns, *Bombers*, p. 68.

<sup>114</sup> Calder and Sheridan, *Speak For Yourself*, p. 107.

source of humour as the pair fail to understand what she is saying. The humour is accentuated by contrasting Lady Plumtree with Gert and Daisy's blunt cockney dialect, with ensuing misunderstandings and confusion. Gert and Daisy charge around Little Pipham Hall, waving slippers and brushes and yelling at the evacuees in order to contain them, whilst Lady Plumtree is naïve and aloof, detailing her long-suffering butler to take control, and resorting to smelling salts to help her cope with the shock of this invasion by the East End working class. Lady Plumtree is refined and reserved in her body language, failing to correct Daisy when she addresses her as 'your royal highness'. In contrast Gert and Daisy are unrestrained physically and verbally, uncowed by their evident social inferiority, and proud of their cockney roots, as becomes clear when they endeavour to teach one of the guests rhyming slang.



Figure 15 Gert and Daisy meet the upper class in *Gert and Daisy's Weekend*.

Although Daisy is verbally obsequious towards Lady Plumtree, the sisters are defiantly themselves, failing to conform to codes of behaviour regarding class, age and femininity. Their failure to comply leads them to the brink of disaster, when they are arrested and deemed to be criminals. The contrast between Lady Plumtree and the sisters is notable in that they are all mature women, and moreover, single women, unconstrained by male authority, and exercise power. This is wartime, and a world upside down, where the rules of normal life have been suspended, and power resides in unexpected places, much as in the time of carnival. The working class have spilled beyond the streets of the East End, occupying the underground stations, and invading Deep England and the country estates of the aristocracy. Gert and Daisy's wartime

Britain places London as the symbolic heart of the nation, displacing the primacy of Deep England which prevails in many more 'official' wartime narratives. Gert and Daisy are Pied Piper figures, leading the children away from danger, using music and song to entertain and reassure. By placing the East End in the heart of the Little Pipham Hall they disrupt the complacency of the upper class and their sheltered existence away from the Blitz.

The carnivalesque status of Gert and Daisy as grotesques, outsiders and eccentrics, allows them the latitude to stray beyond the normal bounds of behaviour. Their status as unruly women is highlighted by the spectacle of their physicality, energy and inversion of the codes of glamour demanded by stardom. They are set apart from the other adults by their freedom from social graces and ready ability to transgress codes of conduct associated with the mature woman. Much of the visual comedy arises from the interaction of the two sisters, as they work in symmetry, echoing body language and facial expressions, but always working tightly together. The symmetry is enhanced by their outlandish outfits, featuring over-elaborate hats, decorated with fruit. The physicality of their performance works at odds with their appearance, often being dishevelled as a consequence of their energetic escapades, whether chasing the children, or playing leapfrog and ending up in the pond. The scene in which they steal the postman's tricycle is typical of the appeal of their characters, generating humour from the sheer incongruity of two middle-aged women crammed onto the tricycle, barely in control, in a desperate effort to get to the station on time. This incongruity between their age and actions was foregrounded in the publicity for the film, featuring an image of the two sisters on the tricycle, indicating the essence of their appeal for the audience.



Figure 16 Gert and Daisy on a tricycle: poster for *Gert and Daisy's Weekend*.

Gert and Daisy are more closely aligned with the evacuees than with the other adults at Little Pipham Hall, their anachronistic behaviour liberating them from the stuffy formality of their peers. Much like the children they are unfamiliar with aspects of etiquette and struggle to understand their hosts and fellow guests. The attitude of the inhabitants of Little Pipham Hall to their cockney guests resonates with apocryphal tales regarding the cleanliness and uncouth nature of many evacuees, made evident in Mass Observation research concluding that ‘The wider the social gap, the less acceptable the evacuee [...] the mutual hostility between class-separated hosts and guests led to endless tension’.<sup>115</sup> Much like the evacuees, Gert and Daisy struggle with the class divide, remaining defiant and irrepressible despite their ignorance, in a narrative which would resonate with a working-class audience. They are shocked and hostile when discovering a maid unpacking their bags, being fiercely independent and proud in the face of upper-class etiquette:

Maid: I was looking for your night attire to lay it out.

Gert: Stick your nose in our clobber again and you’ll get laid out!

Maid: I’m sure I have no desire to touch anything of *yours*. At what hour would you like your baths in the morning?

Daisy: Baths? In the morning? We shan’t be dirty by then.

<sup>115</sup> Mass Observation, *War Begins At Home*, p. 310.



Gert: No. We have our baths like any other lady on Saturday night.

Maid: Shall I help you to dress?

Daisy: [laughing] Help us to dress! Get out of it! We've got our health and strength.

The middle-aged sisters take no nonsense from the younger maid, ridiculing the excess of the upper class, which appeared self-indulgent and even unpatriotic in wartime.



Figure 17 'Now I want you to promise me you're all going to be really good little evacuees and not worry his Lordship.' Giles cartoon, *Sunday Express*, 30 July 1944.

The chasm between social classes is exploited for further comic effect when Gert and Daisy shock their fellow guests and host with their contribution to the evening's entertainment. After deciding against performing *Knees Up Mother Brown*, considering the dance as rather too provocative for the elderly vicar and his wife, they choose to perform a bawdy ballad, 'She Was a Lily'. The song narrates the story of a single mother in a typical music-hall style of delivery, Gert and Daisy breaking off the singing to add narrative details, calling for the other guests to join in, using animated gestures and facial expression, all in a pronounced cockney dialect. This rousing performance stands in contrast to the turgid warblings of the previous turn, the sisters clearly relishing their performance, and demonstrating a zest and energy singularly absent amongst their peers. The scene contrasts with the vigour and intensity of the party in the underground shelter, where the crowd throw themselves into the dancing and singing, whereas the guests at Lady Plumtree's

soiree are aloof and joyless, sitting apart from each other and resisting invitations to sing along. Gert and Daisy roll their eyes at the pomposity of their fellow performers, whose mannered performance adds to the comedy of their singing.

For a working-class audience Gert and Daisy offer affirmation, transparency and solidarity, true to the music-hall tradition, which Chanan suggested was essentially to 'remain as close to the audience as possible, on showing that they weren't putting on airs but still belonged to the people'.<sup>116</sup> Their performance of 'Lily' affirms the characters' pride in their working-class cockney roots, being steadfastly oblivious to the shock and distress of their social superiors. The authenticity and openness of the pair is contrasted with the barriers they encounter amongst their social superiors at Little Pipham Hall. The social gap is widened by the wrongful arrest of Gert and Daisy on account of the jewel theft, making them the victims of the inadequacies of the upper classes, Lady Plumtree having unknowingly invited the thieves into her home.<sup>117</sup> It is the working-class cockney matriarch who prevails, whilst the upper-class fail to recognise evil. The film offers the pleasures typical of wartime film comedies according to Murphy, which focus on dealing with 'enemy within', rather than dwelling on the greater dangers facing the country, for 'rooting them out is great fun'.<sup>118</sup>

In their roles as cockney matriarchs the sisters suspend the carnivalesque in favour of the maternal aspects of their personae at key points in the narrative, introducing a more sentimental and serious tone in line with the serious issue of evacuation. Gert and Daisy are run ragged by the evacuees but they demonstrate the firmness of the matriarch, threatening the children with a slipper and shouting over the top of their noise. Yet when a young girl is found crying for her mother, the sisters sing a lullaby, 'Goodnight Children Everywhere', kissing the children and tucking them into bed. The ballad made popular by Vera Lynn, was topical given its theme of family separation. Gert and Daisy's performance of this song is subdued and emotional, featuring a more constrained body language and contemplative demeanour in contrast to much of the rest of the film. This combination of social

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<sup>116</sup> Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks*, p. 269.

<sup>117</sup> Lady Plumtree's naivety is comparable to that of another lady-of-the-manor, Mrs Fraser, the following year in *Went the Day Well?* She also fails to recognise villainy, inviting the enemy into her home with terrible consequences.

<sup>118</sup> Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 44.

conscience and the maternal, founded in their radio broadcasts for the Ministry of Food, works to elevate them to the roles of godmothers for the nation, or more specifically the working class and the young.



Figure 18 Gert and Daisy demonstrate their more maternal side in *Gert and Daisy's Weekend*.

Gert and Daisy protect and nurture the younger generation, in contrast to the petty spite of Ma Butler, who threatens community harmony through her efforts to stand in the way of happiness, using her tools of gossip and spying on her neighbours. Ma Butler even aligns herself with the enemy, by boasting to her daughter that she has her 'own Gestapo around here' explaining how she knew her sailor sweetheart was hiding in Gert and Daisy's house. They take on the role of go-betweens, and provide shelter for the sailors on leave. Their status as matriarchs, whose partners are away fighting, removes them from being defined by their sexuality in the narrative, freed to occupy the centre of the narrative, whilst normal hierarchies are suspended. Their overt lack of sexuality is central to their role as ageing comedy grotesques. As middle-aged women their role is purely to serve the wider community, whilst enjoying a carnivalesque freedom to play, crossing boundaries imposed between generations and social classes.

Gert and Daisy usher the children of the East End to safety, working to reconcile differences regarding age and social class, and helping to ensure the future of the community. This celebration of community is typical of wartime film narratives according to Andrew Higson, negotiating the instability of the domestic and the

family, offering ‘a compensatory form of narrative resolution’.<sup>119</sup> This instability is implicit in the rather maudlin final scene as the sisters leave the children at Little Pipham Hall to return ‘back to the Blitz, it’s quieter’. They march together with the children to the gates, bonded together as equals, pariahs in the midst of the upper class. The children make them promise to come back, the sisters licking a finger to cross their throats in a childlike gesture to seal their promise. The shared gesture is defiant and underlines the solidarity between matriarch and evacuee, yet there is a pathos as the children are left whilst Gert and Daisy return to the Blitz.



**Figure 19** Gert and Daisy make a promise to the evacuees in *Gert and Daisy's Weekend*.

*Gert and Daisy's Weekend* delivers the straightforward pleasures associated with low budget British comedy of the 1930s, the narrative being a platform for the talents of the variety artist. To some extent the comedy and narrative were typical of such films, revolving around mistaken identity, miscarriages of justice, coincidence, petty crime and romance. Nevertheless the characters of Gert and Daisy have an added resonance for a wartime audience, being the embodiment of the cheerful cockney, made manifest in performances rooted in the music hall tradition. As matriarchs they are used to manifest the spirit of the Home Front, being cheerful, resilient, maternal and resourceful, and moreover nurturing and protecting the young. Strange pieces of fish, queuing, shelters and evacuation become opportunities for asserting and celebrating the communal, in the spirit of the carnival. Moreover Gert and Daisy contest any opposition to communal spiritedness, whether it be the spite of Ma

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<sup>119</sup> Andrew Higson, ‘Addressing the nation: five films’ in *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television*, ed. Geoff Hurd (London: BFI, 1984), p. 25.

Butler, the snobbery of the upper class or the trickery of the fishmonger. Their unruliness and agency is temporarily contained as a consequence of the inadequacies of the authorities and the upper classes and they are only able to obtain their freedom with the help of the evacuees, through their discovery of the real thief. The working-class matriarch cannot be suppressed, supported by the agency of children to overcome masculine authority. Harper argued that 'proletarian modes of behaviour' proved a cloaking device to enable 'wilful females' to appear in films during wartime.<sup>120</sup> Gert and Daisy take control of their space, whether it be a queue, the underground or Little Pipham Hall, assuming a benign authority which works to reassure and repair in the face of adversity.

The popularity of the double act made the film a success at the box office playing at most venues as a main feature, rather than the lower half of the bill customary for Butcher's low budget fare.<sup>121</sup> For *Monthly Film Bulletin* the realism of the film was key to its success: 'the authenticity of real English backgrounds and manners is refreshing after seeing so many Hollywood imaginative attempts to show England to the English'.<sup>122</sup> The Waters sisters' performances were applauded for their 'talent for conversational buffoonery and hilarious knockabout farce'.<sup>123</sup> *Gert and Daisy Clean Up* was released the following year, the topical narrative centring on a black market conspiracy to deprive children of tinned pineapple. Gert and Daisy start a salvage drive, help another pair of young lovers and lead a 'tribute to the Navy' grand finale. *Kinematograph Weekly* welcomed 'its topicality, good-humoured chaff at war time institutions, telling digs at profiteers and happy evidence that the proletariat can take it', concluding that 'It is the stuff to give the troops all right'.<sup>124</sup> Their final film, *It's In The Bag*, was released a year later, within a context of film production being increasingly squeezed by a shortage of studio space and resources, and fewer films were being released.

Doris and Elsie Waters came to be defined by their wartime work as Gert and Daisy, playing a leading role in some of the post-war celebrations, such as the 1944 Stand Down concert for the Home Guard at the Royal Albert Hall and the Burma Reunion

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<sup>120</sup> Sue Harper, 'The years of total war: propaganda and entertainment' in *Nationalising Femininity*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 208.

<sup>121</sup> Steve Chibnall and Brian McFarlane, *The British 'B' Film* (London: BFI, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>122</sup> *Monthly Film Bulletin*, v.8 n.94 October (1941), p. 130.

<sup>123</sup> *Today's Cinema*, 7 September 1945, p. 13.

<sup>124</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly*, 18 June 1942, p. 32.

at the same venue in 1947. Indeed their commitment to their war work appeared to have left them exhausted according to a letter from the BBC to the sisters in August, 1945, noting one of the two had been ordered to rest by their doctor. Alick Hayes writes that ‘frankly I cannot say that I am surprised. You two have certainly given full measure pressed down and running over, right through this war, and a few million people - myself included - are not likely to forget this’.<sup>125</sup> They continued to find success in the music hall and on the radio, with the BBC recommending a pay rise for the pair in 1945 on the grounds that ‘They are of course a very popular act, and very good [...] with the present dearth of good comedienne, they are a great asset’.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless the future of popular entertainment was in television, but the pair failed to develop a sustained career in the medium, despite various efforts including an ITV sitcom, *Gert and Daisy*, in 1959, which featured the pair running a boarding house.<sup>127</sup> Even in the early 1960s the BBC felt that the sisters were a ‘saleable commodity’ and persisted to try and find an enduring format for them.<sup>128</sup> The audience feedback on their appearance in *The Chars*, part of the BBC’s Comedy Playhouse series, in 1963, indicated their appeal was limited as far as the 1960s audience was concerned. Viewers complained that they had ‘had their day [...] Their style of humour went out years ago and they haven’t progressed one iota since their Gert and Daisy days. I’m sure there’s no-one under 60 who wants this kind of ‘Workers Playtime’ humour’.<sup>129</sup> On the other hand the report noted that a ‘retired Naval Officer observed: ‘There must have been a wealth of talent left high and dry when the Music Hall died and it is good to see such experienced comedy artists as Elsie and Doris Waters again’’.<sup>130</sup> In 1964 the Waters sisters were keen to do a ‘Coronation Street-of-London’s East-End’ serial comedy drama, which sadly did not

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<sup>125</sup> Letter from producer Alick Hayes, 28 August 1945, to the Waters sisters; BBC Written Archives, Caversham.

<sup>126</sup> Memo from A. H. Brown, Variety Booking Officer, BBC, 11 October, 1945; BBC Written Archives, Caversham.

<sup>127</sup> The sisters clearly felt insecure about their ability to write for television, writing on 25 August 1955 to Ronald Waldman, Head of Light Entertainment at the BBC that ‘We are not walloping comics as you know – more character people...’ regarding the proposed *Come to Tea with Elsie and Doris Waters*; BBC Written Archives.

<sup>128</sup> Memo dated 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1962, BBC; BBC Written Archives.

<sup>129</sup> Audience Research Report, Comedy Playhouse ‘The Chars’, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1963; BBC Written Archives.

<sup>130</sup> The report also notes a ‘school secretary’ taking great offence at the representation of charladies, who ‘do not...behave in this way either in the office or out. They are a very hard-working and trustworthy group and would surely take a dim view of the idea that they carried on in such a manner with other people’s property, cigarettes and drink, etc., even if it was only comedy’.

come to fruition.<sup>131</sup> It was clear that their status had inevitably changed by the mid-1960s, the BBC referring to the sisters as ‘rather distinguished elder stateswomen’ and ‘old-stagers.’<sup>132</sup>

The success of the Gert and Daisy films during wartime was testament to Chanan’s observation that the music hall tradition was ‘sustained directly by a working-class need to reflect *collective* experience’ finding itself to be newly relevant and meaningful in a time of national emergency.<sup>133</sup> As a cultural form originally emanating from the East End, it provided a sense of solidarity, affirmation, community and continuity through a musical and performance tradition which informed the act of Gert and Daisy. The film is typical of the sisters’ work in its debt to the cinema of attractions, whereby the spectacle of their clowning and exhibition of their musical abilities interrupts a loose narrative. Much as Gracie Fields was defined by shots framing her within a crowd, the sisters are located at the heart of their community, queuing on the street, at the heart of the entertainment in the underground or framed by the crowd of evacuees within *Gert and Daisy’s Weekend*. Wartime allowed the possibility of the star of the British film comedy being an extension of the East End working-class matriarch in the audience, exuding authenticity and vitality, but essentially ordinary. Mass observation research indicated that the most regular cinema goers were urban, working-class and female according to the 1943 Wartime Cinema Survey, for whom the characters, settings and narratives would have greatest resonance.<sup>134</sup> Indeed *Gert and Daisy’s Weekend* met many of the criteria outlined by Dilys Powell for ‘a traditional English style’ of film-making, including a ‘native truth of [ ... ] characterisation and setting [ ... ] the pleasure of recognition: they was themselves, their neighbours, their own shores’.<sup>135</sup> Although far from the masterpieces of wartime filmmaking indicated by Powell, the film provided the pleasures of ‘the commonplace, the touching everyday material of life’ for a working-class audience.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Memo from Charles Chilton, BBC, 16 September 1964; BBC Written Archives.

<sup>132</sup> Memo from Roy Rich, Head of Light Entertainment, BBC, 28 April, 1965; BBC Written Archives.

<sup>133</sup> Chanan, *The Dream*, p. 147. At the end of the 1930s Matthews saw the respective fates of the cockney dialect and the music hall as doomed, both being under threat from film, specifically Hollywood; see Matthews, *Cockney Past and Present*, p. 103.

<sup>134</sup> Richards et al., *Mass Observation at the Movies*, p. 221.

<sup>135</sup> Powell, *Films Since 1939*, p. 24.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

## Chapter 2

### **‘It Ain’t Natural Her Not Having A Husband!’: The Spinster and the Post-war Settlement**

In 1913 Christabel Pankhurst declared “spinsterhood [...] a political decision, a deliberate choice made in response to the conditions of sex-slavery”.<sup>137</sup> This spirited defence of the unmarried woman was the exception, as the spinster continued to be the focus of ridicule and disapproval, regarded as a threat to social cohesion in failing to uphold the centrality of the family. Rather than the double marginality endured by the ageing woman, the spinster was subject to a triple marginality, as her unmarried status exposed her to a further layer of prejudice. The emphasis on family in the era of post-war settlement rendered the spinster more of an outsider than ever before, made manifest in the reductive stereotypes in films of the era. *Holiday Camp* and *Winter Cruise* both feature spinsters as central characters, these figurations centring on the perennial narrative of the unmarried ageing woman being a tragic figure. Nevertheless the two films develop their characters in very different directions, reflecting divergent social attitudes towards the status of spinster, evoking narratives around the life choices of the middle-aged unmarried woman. This chapter will situate the differing figurations within the wider social context of post-war Britain. Whereas *Holiday Camp* was produced in the infancy of the welfare state, as austerity started to bite and the difficult business of rebuilding a country was under way, *Winter Cruise* was released four years later, in the year which was to see the end of the post-war socialist dream as the Conservatives returned to power, remaining in government until 1964.

Despite the impetus for social change which burgeoned during wartime, post-war Britain was essentially conservative in its outlook, thirsting after a return to normality after the years of suffering and hardship. Peter Hennessy described Britain as suffering from ‘Institutionalised staidness’ which would endure for at least a decade.<sup>138</sup> Women were central to the post-war efforts to build consensus according to Elizabeth Wilson, on account of their ‘traditional role as a stabilizing and

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<sup>137</sup> Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (London: Pandora, 1985), p. 89.

<sup>138</sup> Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-1951* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 436.



civilizing force – the ideology of the Victorians’.<sup>139</sup> Whereas wartime necessitated a suspension of traditional gender roles with women taking on roles of responsibility, resourcefulness and independence, the post-war settlement centred on the primacy of the family in rebuilding the nation, returning women very much to where they were in 1939. Such a social climate had no room for the spinster as evident in Phyllis Whiteman’s advice, writing in *Speaking as a Woman* (1953) that ‘The thing to avoid at all costs is celibacy’ whilst Beryl Conway Cross stated in *Living Alone* (1956) that ‘for a woman to be living alone was not only the path to loneliness, bitterness, and frumpiness, but was likely to be the lot of women who were selfish and egocentric’.<sup>140</sup> The importance of marriage in post-war Britain is made explicit in *Rising Twenty: Notes on Some Ordinary Girls*, recording Pearl Jephcott’s research into young women’s lives.<sup>141</sup> Jephcott cites the example of one mother who is adamant that her daughter should marry and not follow the example of ‘so incomprehensible a specimen’ as a spinster relation with a successful career.<sup>142</sup> By 1951 one in seven women aged fifty-five to sixty-four were unmarried according to the National Census, although as Katherine Holden points out that if widows and divorcees were included this would rise to over a third of the adult female population of that age group.<sup>143</sup>

With the post-war increase in the marriage rate there was a growing sense of the unacceptability of the unmarried woman. Katherine Holden’s research into representations of spinsterhood in films and literature of the period noted a recurrent theme of the danger posed to the younger generation ‘who might be turned away against marriage’.<sup>144</sup> Maggie Gale suggests that the recurrence of ageing single women, whether spinsters or widows, in plays of the era ‘is a reflection of the fact that they had become a problematized social phenomenon’.<sup>145</sup> Gale argues that the spinster was the ‘least ‘thought-out’’ of types of single female characters,

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<sup>139</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women In Postwar Britain 1945-1968* (London: Tavistock, 1980), p. 2.

<sup>140</sup> Both are quoted in Wilson, *Halfway to Paradise*, p. 94.

<sup>141</sup> Pearl Jephcott, *Rising Twenty: Notes on Some Ordinary Girls* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948).

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>143</sup> 1951 *Census General Report* (London: HMSO, 1958), p. 95 and table 45. See also Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England 1914-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 46.

<sup>144</sup> Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 12.

<sup>145</sup> Maggie Gale, *West End Women: Women and the London Stage 1918-1962* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 193.

consequently being either ‘a comic figure or ideological device’.<sup>146</sup> Nevertheless it was rarely that the issues regarding the status of the unmarried woman were foregrounded, serving merely ‘as adjunct to other more ‘marriageable’ women’, reinforcing the primacy and desirability of conventional female roles as wife and mother.<sup>147</sup> Fears of the consequences of spinsterhood are made explicit in John Huston’s comments regarding gender and national identity during this era: ‘The young Englishmen are all women-haters, because they live under a regime of terrifying old ladies, ruled over by a scarcely seductive girl guide. London’s no city for men – it’s a spinster’s capital’.<sup>148</sup> For Huston England - and thus Britain - had been emasculated by old ladies and spinsters; his comments are notable for a misogyny directed at the ageing woman, and moreover the unmarried woman. This misogyny is central to the narratives of both *Holiday Camp* and *Winter Cruise*, with the spinster being exposed to ridicule and cruelty, and perceived as a problem for male characters.

### **The politics of spinsterhood in the early twentieth century**

The term ‘spinster’ has fallen out of popular usage in recent decades, its connotations having become increasingly redundant as a consequence of social changes, with the marriage rate declining from the early 1970s. Nevertheless for much of the twentieth century to be labelled a ‘spinster’ was to have a certain pejorative value attached to a woman’s status connoting incompleteness, misfortune, even failure. In contrast the first half of the twentieth century saw prominent feminist thinkers including Christabel Pankhurst, Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain celebrating spinsterhood as offering a state of freedom, independence and empowerment, whereby women could embrace their eccentric status and all the possibilities consequent upon being outside the norm. Nevertheless this select group tended to speak from a position of privilege having the education and financial means to capitalise on their freedoms, whereas the reality of spinsterhood for most was dependency, marginalisation and frequently poverty.

The spinster had become an issue of particular concern in the early twentieth century, as a consequence of the generation of single women whose prospects of

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>148</sup> Quoted by Raymond Durnat, *A Mirror For England*, p. 220.

marriage died in the carnage of the First World War. The national census of 1921 had revealed that there were one and three-quarter million more women than men, leading to a national debate regarding these 'superfluous women'.<sup>149</sup> The 'war' spinsters were accorded widespread sympathy, regarded as having been 'defrauded of husbands'.<sup>150</sup> Ten years later only about three-quarters of women aged thirty-five to forty-four had ever married.<sup>151</sup> The childlessness of the spinster was generally perceived to be a tragedy and a curse, leaving her incomplete and unable to fulfil her biological and social destiny.

The emergence of the National Spinsters' Pensions Association in 1935 served to highlight the plight of the spinster, making it an issue of national concern, which was debated in the House of Commons.<sup>152</sup> The Association launched The Spinsters' Charter, campaigning for a state pension for unmarried women at fifty-five, arguing that poor health and discrimination made it harder for women to earn a living compared to men.<sup>153</sup> Sympathy was evident for the plight of a generation of spinsters in Parliament, although wider public attitudes were suggested by Viscountess Astor's observation that 'People very often make fun of unmarried women and spinsters, but I think that on the whole they are less pathetic than old bachelors. Financially they are more hard up, but spiritually they are better than old bachelors.'<sup>154</sup> Members of Parliament were urged to vote for 'some of the bravest, most courageous and most worthy people in the world.' It was argued that many of these women had to give up work to care for ageing parents, only to find it difficult

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<sup>149</sup>Nicholson, *Singled Out*, pp. 28-29. Holden asserts that there was a certain amount of scaremongering around these numbers, the census showing a shortfall of 239 000 of men aged twenty-five to thirty-four in 1921: 'Similar statistics had been used to raise alarm about earlier generations of unmarried women, but the war rekindled this debate'; see *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 29.

<sup>150</sup> Fred Simpson, M. P., *Hansard* HC Deb 16 February 1938, vol. 331 cc.1986-2027.

<sup>151</sup> Pat Thane, 'The 'scandal' of women's pensions in Britain: how did it come about?', *History & Policy*. 20 March 2006. <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-scandal-of-womens-pensions-how-did-it-come-about>.

<sup>152</sup> See Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, 'Paradoxes of gender and marital status in mid-twentieth century British welfare' in *Changing Relations of Welfare: Family, Gender and Migration in Britain and Scandinavia*, eds. Janet Fink and Åsa Lundqvist (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010). The Association had a largely working class membership, being founded by Florence White primarily to serve the interests of textile workers in northern England. At the height of the campaign in the late 1930s it had ninety-two branches, and organised marches involving up to ten thousand participants, collecting nearly a million signatures on a petition handed in to Parliament. It was influential in the Government lowering the pension age for all women to sixty in 1940. Florence White was herself a 'war spinster'.

<sup>153</sup> See for example, Dulcie M. Groves, *Women and Occupational Pensions 1870-1983: An Exploratory Study* (Ph.D. thesis). King's College, University of London, 1986.

<sup>154</sup> Viscountess Astor, *Hansard* HC Deb 16 February 1938, vol. 331 cc.1986-2027.

to return to the labour market after the death of their parents, and therefore facing poverty. This ‘domestic spinster’ was regarded as serving an important social purpose, as acknowledged in the House of Commons, described as ‘a sort of social buffer in the community, and not infrequently a refuge and help to the married folk who have attained another kind of status. The spinsters have frequently sacrificed themselves to help and maintain their parents [...] it would not be unfair to describe this section of the community as universal aunts.’<sup>155</sup> The precarious status of this previously overlooked social group is summarised in *The Spinsters’ Charter* concluding that ‘The struggle to keep head above water is proving almost too much for thousands of this class of eminently respectable women’.<sup>156</sup> Nevertheless Janet Fink and Katherine Holden argue that the image of the ‘passive’ grieving war spinster was particularly ‘unstable’; pictures in the press of marching spinsters ‘showing them not as sad sweethearts but as unattractive, elderly women marching and brandishing placards which made them seem not only pitiable but comic characters’.<sup>157</sup>

The National Spinsters’ Pensions Association certainly succeeded in drawing public attention to this generation of spinsters, with *The Spinster* magazine declaring that: ‘citizens have become spinster conscious and acknowledge the value of the spinsters work, not only for her home, but her country’.<sup>158</sup> The spinster was deployed as an apocryphal image of rural Englishness in the midst of wartime by George Orwell, evoking the image of ‘old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning’.<sup>159</sup> Such an image places the spinster at the heart of Calder’s ‘Deep England’ embodying tradition and duty in the face of threats to national identity.

### *Holiday Camp*

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<sup>155</sup> Simpson, *Hansard*. The ‘domestic spinster’ was a label employed by William Beveridge in his Report on Social Insurance in 1942 to refer to those seemingly destined to care for their elderly parents. Viscountess Astor makes an emotive plea for the spinster cause, arguing that ‘just when they should have someone to look after them are generally left entirely alone. They provide some of the most tragic cases in the country.’

<sup>156</sup> *Report of the Committee on Pensions for Unmarried Women 1939*, Cmd. 5991, p. 68. London: H.M.S.O.

<sup>157</sup> Fink et. al., ‘Paradoxes of gender and marital status’, p. 96.

<sup>158</sup> J. Blisland, ‘Sympathy and justice’, *The Spinster*, no.3, April 1938, p. 12.

<sup>159</sup> Orwell, ‘The lion and the unicorn’, p. 139. The power of this image of middle-aged spinsterhood endured to the extent of being cited over half a century later by John Major in a speech celebrating the best of Britain to the Conservative Group for Europe.

Director, Ken Annakin, argued that *Holiday Camp* and the subsequent films in the Huggetts series ‘absolutely caught the spirit and feeling that existed after the war’,<sup>160</sup> with one reviewer summarising it as ‘a triumph of youth [...] all pleasant young people who make the most of their opportunities’.<sup>161</sup> *Holiday Camp* projects the idealism and communal values of the new welfare state in its infancy; nevertheless the pursuit of social equilibrium comes at a price, as can be seen in the differing fates of the two spinsters, Elsie Dawson (Esma Cannon) and Esther Harman (Flora Robson). The two characters perpetuate two contrasting figurations of spinsterhood from the inter-war years identified by Holden: the ‘imaginary widow bereaved by the war or a disruptive force without husbands to control them’.<sup>162</sup> The familiarity of these character types is evident in one review noting the ‘the neglected spinster theme of Miss Harman, and the I’ll get-off-before-I’m-too-old theme of Elsie Dawson’.<sup>163</sup>

*Holiday Camp* was one of the first Gainsborough productions presided over by the new Sydney Box regime, and found success at the box-office, evidently tapping into popular tastes.<sup>164</sup> It was a film made with a ‘strong mass angle’ according to *Kinematograph Weekly*, ‘Made expressly for the ninepennies, its title and backgrounds alone assure it substantial box-office success’.<sup>165</sup> Box’s intention was to move away from the Gainsborough brand of melodrama, the film framing more serious narratives with a predominantly comic tone. This unsettled some critics, specifically the violence of the serial killer storyline, modelled on the Neville Heath case which had filled the headlines in 1946.<sup>166</sup>

Sydney Box aspired to bring a realism to the film’s evocation of post-war Britain, employing Annakin on account of his documentary experience, which was used in

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<sup>160</sup> Brian McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>161</sup> Felix Barker, *Evening News*, 4 August 1947.

<sup>162</sup> Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 29.

<sup>163</sup> Donald Alexander, ‘At your cinema this month’, *Amateur Cine World*, October 1947, p. 395.

<sup>164</sup> See Andrew Spicer, *Sydney Box* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 111. The film went into profit in less than three months after release, making £184 300 in the UK alone.

<sup>165</sup> Josh Billings, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7 August 1947, p. 17.

<sup>166</sup> See Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel*, p. 215. Marcia Landy dismisses the critics’ reservations as being endemic of their ‘condescending attitude toward the trials and tribulations of working-class life’, in their ‘inability to appreciate the importance of the element of violence’. Landy appears to assume quite the opposite, that violence is very much integral to the working-class. See Landy, *British Genres*, p. 316.

the location filming at the Butlin's camp in Filey.<sup>167</sup> Box had commissioned Godfrey Winn, a writer for women's magazines, to devise the initial story alongside Annakin whilst staying at the camp to enhance its realist credentials.<sup>168</sup> *Holiday Camp* can be situated alongside the social problem films produced in Box's time at Rank, in its concern with the working class, its realism and handling of issues regarding family and femininity in post-war Britain. Box's concern was 'with the legacy of the war and the difficulties of the transition to peacetime'.<sup>169</sup> Indeed, Catherine de la Roche cited the film as an example of one of the few post-war films 'that came nearest to reality' in terms of 'conquer[ing] new ground thematically [...] interpret[ing] modern characters and ideas in modern idiom. Here was thoughtful consideration of some of the problems confronting society, criticism of some of its faults and homage to several of its achievements'.<sup>170</sup> Box made no secret of his socialism, being openly critical of how films were commandeered to deliver propaganda by 'the forces of reaction and capitalism'.<sup>171</sup> The writing credits for *Holiday Camp* included the prolific Ted Willis, who was to become associated with the social problem film in the 1950s.<sup>172</sup> Nonetheless the film owed much to the variety tradition in seeking to appeal to a broad audience with its portmanteau structure, celebration of communal entertainments and popular culture, and the 'central, crucial ideology of community', which had characterised wartime cinema according to Medhurst.<sup>173</sup> The blend of comedy and sentiment, deploying a cast of broad stereotypes, including the desperate spinster could be traced back to the music hall. To this effect one of the central characters, Mr. Huggett, was played by variety star Jack Warner, the younger brother of Doris and Elsie Waters.

The film establishes an optimistic tone with repeated footage of communal festivities, and its overarching themes of the importance of family and young love. The marketing of the film put the emphasis on youth and sex appeal, foregrounding

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<sup>167</sup> Ken Annakin, *So You Wanna Be A Director?* (Sheffield: Tomahawk Press, 2001), p. 24.

<sup>168</sup> Annakin, *So You Wanna Be A Director?*, p. 24.

<sup>169</sup> Spicer, *Sydney Box*, p. 141.

<sup>170</sup> Catherine de la Roche, 'The mask of realism' in *The Penguin Film Review* 7 (London: Penguin, 1948), p. 43.

<sup>171</sup> Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel*, p. 88.

<sup>172</sup> Eight writers were accredited with contributions to the film, spanning a range of different backgrounds, and representing a male and female perspective: Ken Annakin, Godfrey Winn, Muriel Box, Peter Rogers, Ted Willis, Mabel and Denis Constandurous. The range of contributions reflected Box's determination to add realism, as well as drama.

<sup>173</sup> Medhurst, 'Music hall and British cinema', p. 181.

the image of a smiling young woman in a bathing suit, legs astride and leaning invitingly towards the camera.<sup>174</sup> Accordingly a campaign was launched for a nationwide search for a ‘holiday princess’ to generate further publicity for the film.<sup>175</sup> The première featured a foyer display of beachwear by members of the Lucy Clayton Mannequin and Charm School according to the programme notes.<sup>176</sup> Even though Flora Robson topped the cast list, the book of the film featured Hazel Court on the front cover, posing provocatively in her swimming costume, her hands behind her head.



Figure 20 The seaside sauciness of the *Holiday Camp* poster.

The storylines featuring the two spinsters were interwoven with the stories of a range of characters, thrown together by the holiday camp setting, differentiated by gender, social class, familial status and age. Geoff Brown observes that the film is not so much a social document with its range of social types, but that the popularity of the film proved the ‘resonance’ of the stereotypes, creating ‘a distorted mirror image’ of British life in 1947.<sup>177</sup> The diversity of the campers signalling the importance of the holiday camp in perpetuating the communality of socialist Britain in the wake of a war which had united the nation. The Huggetts are central to the film, the close-knit, working-class family encapsulating the family values at the heart of the post-war

<sup>174</sup> Philip Larkin’s poem ‘Sunny Prestatyn’ evokes a similar image of a bathing beauty, progressively defaced by violent and obscene imagery. Larkin was quoted as saying that the poem was intended to combine horror and comedy – much as *Holiday Camp* does 15 years earlier. See Sisir Kumar Chatterjee, *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2006), p. 201.

<sup>175</sup> Spicer, *Sydney Box*, p. 111.

<sup>176</sup> Programme for the film’s première in the Ken Annakin collection in the BFI Library Special Collections.

<sup>177</sup> Geoff Brown, ‘*Holiday Camp*’ in *The Cinema of Britain and Ireland*, ed. Brian McFarlane (London: Wallflower, 2005), p. 65.

settlement, serving as a counterpoint to the unhappiness and isolation of the lonely, the criminal and the outcasts who figure in the various narrative threads. The narrative constructs an impetus towards integration for the worthy and expulsion for the unworthy, promoting a vision of post-war society established around family values. The challenge for the spinsters is to resolve the conundrum of their place in the 'family' of the wider community, cut adrift by the post-war emphasis on the Home Front. Winn firmly believed that the plight of the spinsters of the film reflected a broader social issue, writing that 'there are many Esthers in this world, just as there are many Elsie's, too', adding that Elsie 'is so real a person'.<sup>178</sup>

The Huggetts are surrounded by unmarried women in a range of guises: their widowed young daughter, her 'good-time girl' best friend, the card shark's girlfriend, the two spinsters and the selfish elderly spinster aunt who turns her back on her niece, the unmarried mother-to-be. One reviewer observed that the holiday camp was 'as much a matrimonial agency as anything'.<sup>179</sup> Sue Harper argues that the film is essentially concerned with the quest to find a husband for the Huggetts' daughter (and a step-father for her baby): 'motherhood, and its most appropriate social arrangement, preoccupied the film, whose sexual morality and class politics were conservative'.<sup>180</sup> The film was endemic of a shift of tone at Gainsborough according to Harper, from being a studio 'which celebrated female desire to one which repressed it'.

Robson headed the cast of *Holiday Camp*, having become established as a national icon during the previous decade, as a consequence of her performances in historical dramas and patriotic melodramas, most notably as imperial spinster Elizabeth I in *Fire Over England* (1937), a heroic spinster standing up to the Nazis in *Two Thousand Women* (1944) and a long-suffering wife in *Great Day*. Born in 1902, Robson was forty-five when she made *Holiday Camp*, sharing a spinster status with the character having devoted herself to her acting career. Robson had been typecast

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<sup>178</sup> Godfrey Winn, 'Postscript' in Kit Porlock, *Holiday Camp* (London: World Film Publications, 1947). According to *The Spinster* (April, 1938) Winn had written in support of the National Spinsters' Pension Association in the *Daily Express* of that year.

<sup>179</sup> Hubert Griffith, 'We talk like this' in *Sunday Graphic*, 10 August 1947.

<sup>180</sup> Sue Harper, 'From *Holiday Camp* to high camp: women in British feature films, 1945-1951' in *Dissolving Views*, ed. Andrew Higson (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 105. Harper argues that this shift was a consequence of the Boxes taking over at Gainsborough, citing films they produced at a similar time outside the studio, such as *Good-Time Girl* (1948), which 'took female weakness or guilt as their leitmotif'.



from the start of her film career, suffering the fate of the character actress in being cast as middle-aged from her early thirties.<sup>181</sup> Indeed Brian McFarlane argued that she was ‘too plain for leading romantic roles, she *wisely* settled early into middle-aged parts, playing many a dangerous spinster [...] homely housekeeper [...] or regal personage’ [my italics].<sup>182</sup> Robson’s film persona was informed by her work on the stage, which tended to cast her as ‘the “tortured spinster” [...] the woman left over from the Great War’ according to Kenneth Barrow.<sup>183</sup> Her authorized biography drew inevitable comparisons between her star persona and her private life, constructing a portrait of an artist who forsook the normative life stages for a woman of her generation, in favour of ‘the possibility of rich, creative fulfilment’.<sup>184</sup> Kenneth Barrow casts her as the professional spinster, a pioneer dedicating herself to her career as she faced her thirtieth birthday in 1932, an age when ‘most unmarried women [...] realize that they had lost all hope of a secure and happy future, of the homes, husbands and families they might have had’. Her role in *Holiday Camp* was prefigured by various roles as spinsters beset by unhappiness and regrets. Robson had starred in the Ealing melodrama *Frieda* (1947) as an unmarried aunt ‘represent[ing] the attitudes of the nation’ in having to overcome her bigotry against the Germans.<sup>185</sup> This followed on the heels of a supporting role in *Black Narcissus* (1947) as Sister Philippa, another evocation of sublimated desires, agonising solitude and dutiful service. Andrew Higson notes how Robson was frequently cast as ‘an unmarried middle-aged woman deemed in some way abnormal or deviant’ as a consequence of her singleness and ‘because she does not play out the conventional roles of lover or mother allotted to women’.<sup>186</sup> He suggests that her performance style was typical of the English theatrical tradition, yet could also be

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<sup>181</sup> Kenneth Barrow quotes from a 1932 letter to Robson from J. B. Priestley in which he advises her not to allow herself to be typecast, particularly into ‘neurotic’ parts. Barrow details how Robson turned down ‘yet another role as a frustrated ageing woman’. See Kenneth Barrow, *Flora* (London: Heinemann, 1981), pp. 75-76.

<sup>182</sup> Brian McFarlane, *The Encyclopedia of British Film* (London: Methuen BFI, 2003), p. 571.

<sup>183</sup> Barrow, *Flora*, p. 95.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>185</sup> Joe Pihodna, an American critic, cited in Barrow, *Flora*, p. 162.

<sup>186</sup> Andrew Higson, ““Britain’s finest contribution to the screen’: Flora Robson and character acting”” in *British Stars and Stardom*, ed. Bruce Babington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 71.

seen as entirely apt for the roles she played ‘where the physical control and restraint suggests the repression of emotion’.<sup>187</sup>



Figure 21 Flora Robson as the ‘imperial’ or ‘sanctified’ spinster in *Fire Over London*.

The genteel Esther Harman was originally conceived by Winn as being central to the plot of *Holiday Camp*. It was a role which was consistent with Robson’s persona, Esther being the tortured spinster who encounters her former lover, presumed lost in the Great War, who is working as the announcer at the holiday camp. The war had left Alan (Esmond Knight) blind and an amnesiac and therefore oblivious to her true identity and her suffering as she is confronted with the life she could have had, discovering that he was happily married with his own family in contrast to her loneliness.<sup>188</sup> The role is a reprise of her part in *The Years Between* (1946), as the war spinster whose tragedy informs her efforts to reconcile an estranged couple.<sup>189</sup> In *Holiday Camp* she harnesses her suffering to become the guardian angel for the outcast lovers, Michael (Emrys Jones) and Valerie (Jeannette Tregarthen), after their families have turned their backs on them. Esther ends the film by engineering her own family unit, finding a role for herself in caring for other ‘children’, displaying a capacity for generosity and social-mindedness which chimes with the spirit of post-war Britain, in rebuilding and mending broken families. Robson’s next film role perpetuates this persona as a magistrate, Miss Thorpe, in *Good-Time Girl* (1948), whose advice rescues a troubled teenage girl Lyla Lawrence (Diana Dors) from

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>188</sup> The pathos is intensified by audience knowledge of Knight’s real life near-blindness as a consequence of injuries incurred early in the Second World War.

<sup>189</sup> *The Years Between* was co-produced by Sydney Box, who co-wrote the screenplay.

delinquency. In keeping with Robson's screen persona Miss Thorpe embodies compassion, wisdom and social conscience, her presence framing the main story, juxtaposed with the teen rebellion of Gwen Rawlings (Jean Kent) and the sultry waywardness of Lyla. Such roles reiterate her persona as the 'sanctified' spinster defined by her two performances as the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth I, firstly in *Fire Over England* (1937) and then in *The Sea Hawk* (1940). The sanctified spinster is regal, wise and dedicated to a life of servitude, either to God, her country or her community.

Class identity is central to the differentiation between the two spinsters in *Holiday Camp*, Esther being inscribed by Robson's persona of the spinster as middle-class do-gooder, whilst Elsie is the working-class spinster, rendering her comic and vulnerable in her unmarried state. Cannon was largely cast in comedy roles, capitalising on the anachronism at the heart of her persona, her appearance, voice and acting style conflating childlike qualities with her status as a middle-aged woman. As a character actor Cannon's physical appearance highlighted her marginal status, her diminutive frame imbuing her persona with a sense of vulnerability, rendering her childlike and fragile. Born in Australia, Cannon came to Britain in the 1930s to pursue an acting career, going on to appear in sixty-four films. She married and started a family in her forties, despite being typecast in her career as a spinster. Her film career prospered as she aged, cast in *Holiday Camp* in her early forties, although the character is an 'old maid' of twenty-eight according to the script, fostering a comic resonance based on the disparity between her age and her behaviour. Cannon became a household name in her fifties and sixties, predominantly in spinster roles such as the timorous Edie Hornett in *Sailor Beware* (1956), with regular appearances in the *Carry On* series and making the transition to television with roles such as 'Little Lil' in *The Rag Trade* (BBC, 1961-63).

The spirit of the Gainsborough melodrama haunts *Holiday Camp*, in particular regarding the storylines concerning the two spinsters, one of whom transgresses and is punished in contrast to the other who accepts her place in the social order, and is rewarded accordingly.<sup>190</sup> The Gainsborough costume dramas of the 1940s explored

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<sup>190</sup> Brown interprets Elsie's murder as a punishment for transgressing class boundaries, the 'working-class drudge' aspiring to romance with the middle-class Binky. Yet Esther equally transgresses class

the contemporary female condition within the context of historical settings, dramatizing the tensions between tradition and change through narratives revolving around women's life choices. Marcia Landy observed of the melodramas that 'While the resolutions often seek to recover female domesticity, disciplining women who violate social mores, the films are daring in their willingness to explore constraints on women'.<sup>191</sup> Cannon had developed a niche playing eccentric maids prior to *Holiday Camp*, most notably in the role as the vulnerable mute Lindy who meets a tragic end in the Gainsborough melodrama *Jassy* (1947).<sup>192</sup> She is typically anachronistic in this role, playing a much younger character. Her physical appearance is rendered odd by the disparity in age between the actress and the character, with repeated close ups of her imploring face used to accentuate her vulnerability. Her oddness is enhanced in juxtaposition with the youthful beauty of Margaret Lockwood as her mistress, Jassy. The role prefigures that of Elsie, being a vulnerable working-class woman destined to a tragic fate, in a melodramatic death caused by an evil man. The theme of sacrifice situates *Holiday Camp* within the tradition of the melodrama, which hinges on the importance of women's choices in perpetuating the harmony and stability of the home, and society as a whole.

The debt to melodrama is evident in the characterisation of a third ageing spinster in the film, the aunt who disowns her pregnant unmarried niece. The vengeful Aunt is not prepared to sacrifice the family name in contrast to Esther's self-sacrifice in taking in the expectant couple, having sacrificed her own youth pining for her lost love; whilst Elsie, in her desperation to acquire a husband, is murdered by a serial killer. These diverse characterisations of the spinster are consistent with the recurrent types identified by Gale in plays of the period, the most prevalent being either the 'virginal, naïve or simply judgemental'.<sup>193</sup> They are also consistent with what Landy identifies as the process of 'polarization and splitting' characteristic in the range of multiple female protagonists of a Gainsborough melodrama.<sup>194</sup> The characters of Elsie and Esther share their spinster status, but little else, being polar opposites in

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boundaries in the reverse direction, her respectable middle-class persona being out of place in a largely working-class environment. See Brown, '*Holiday Camp*', p. 71.

<sup>191</sup> Landy, *British Genres*, p. 210.

<sup>192</sup> Cannon was also cast alongside Robson in *The Years Between*, as a maid who again sacrifices herself this time by signing up to serve her country in wartime.

<sup>193</sup> Gale, *West End Women*, p. 174.

<sup>194</sup> Landy, *British Genres*, p. 210.

terms of social class, appearance, personality and social space, the contrast highlighted by the two of them being billeted in the same chalet.

Elsie's working-class status is characterised by her inability to contain herself within the rigid social boundaries required of a middle-aged woman. Her speech is unbridled and characterised by a distinctive regional accent, drawing attention to herself, much like her revealing clothing, painting and preening herself to compete with much younger women, forcing her way to the centre of all the social events, and disporting herself with abandon. She has had a perm especially for her holiday, and gamely wears a swimming costume when participating in the beauty contest. These anachronistic character traits appeared to be part of popular mythology of the era, with one review describing Elsie as one of those 'Middle-aged adolescents who turn up year after year in the hope of trapping a husband'.<sup>195</sup> Elsie's efforts are those associated with a much younger girl, such as the post-war 'ordinary' girls interviewed by Jephcott, who calculated on looking *older* to get dates.<sup>196</sup> Jephcott concludes that personal appearance can be 'the one field of their life over which they have complete control and where they can create a picture – of themselves – to present to the world', having more likelihood of success through their appearance than their job.<sup>197</sup> Yet Elsie's efforts are anachronistic, she is 'ageing disgracefully' according to discourses of ageing prevalent in the twentieth century according to Thane, that women over a certain age should 'cease practices' in terms of their personal appearance.<sup>198</sup> In terms of Erving Goffman's work on stigma, the middle-aged woman can 'pass' as younger through careful management of physical signs, taking care not to disclose 'discrediting information about self', in this case the stigma of ageing.<sup>199</sup> The pathos of Elsie's attempts to masquerade as younger is implicit when she betrays her age in her first scene, by wearing a hat on the coach journey to the holiday camp, in common with the other older women, setting them apart from the younger women. Nevertheless her diminutive figure highlights her girlish behaviour and attitudes, helping her to construct a younger self.

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<sup>195</sup> Fred Majdalany, *Daily Mail*, 1947 (full date not known).

<sup>196</sup> Jephcott, *Rising Twenty*, p. 62.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>198</sup> Thane, 'Old women in twentieth-century Britain', p. 217.

<sup>199</sup> Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 58.



Figure 22 Elsie attempts to disguise her age in *Holiday Camp*.

Esther towers over Elsie, both in physique and class status, defined by middle-class respectability; she epitomises attitudes of the time as to how to age *gracefully*, fully accepting her marginalised position. The book of the film reiterates her status as an outsider and a tragic figure, describing her as ‘a funny type of person to find at Silver Sands, in her middle forties, a refined sort of lady with something kind of sad about her’.<sup>200</sup> Her status is denoted by her drab appearance, wearing buttoned-up formal, dark suits throughout most of the film, reflecting her mournful and ponderous personality. She is restrained and self-effacing in her interactions with the other campers, taking no part in the general frivolity of the camp, keeping away from the frenetic communal spaces of the holiday camp. One review observes how she ‘introduces us to the more serious side of life, and for all her artistry seems a little misplaced in this hi-de-hi business’.<sup>201</sup> She is the dutiful spinster, having lost the chance of marriage and dedicating herself to caring for her ailing mother, trapped into a life of service rather than pleasure, confessing that she ‘hasn’t had a *real* holiday for twenty years’. The disparity between the two spinsters is made evident in Elsie’s response: ‘whatever kind of job did you have? Why didn’t you change it?’ Esther describes the monotony of holidays in Torquay with her mother, characterised by the same rooms and routines: pushing a bathchair along the seafront, doling out medication, afternoons knitting, bedtime after the nine o’clock news. Roy Martin and Ray Seaton suggest that Esther’s elderly mother symbolises ‘Mother England of a previous generation, content with set routines, complacent and

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<sup>200</sup> Kit Porlock, *Holiday Camp*, (London: World Film Publications, 1947), p. 13.

<sup>201</sup> 1947 film review – source unknown – courtesy of the BFI Library Special Collections.

moribund, crippled in imagination and indifferent to the realities of life'.<sup>202</sup> There was widespread social expectation that the spinster's duty was to support her parents, as made evident in Mrs Marryat's column in the *Women's Weekly* in 1929 which stated that the dutiful daughter 'should not be pitied or looked upon as 'a martyr to duty'.<sup>203</sup> This outlook was not universal as a letter to an earlier edition of the magazine argues that 'The most pathetic sight in the world to my mind is the spinster woman of uncertain years who has all her chance of happiness spoilt by her too selfish parents'.<sup>204</sup>

The personal cost of this self-sacrifice is evident to Elsie who observes that Esther can't have been very happy, before blithely adding that 'You couldn't come to a better place than this to take you out of yourself!' Esther has been liberated by her mother's death from the stifling routine of a life spent amongst the elderly. She has opted to experience the modern world of the new phenomenon of the holiday camp, a decision which proves to pay off as she leaves the camp having acquired a new role as carer, with new duties as befitted expectations of the ageing spinster.



Figure 23 Elsie and Esther find common ground as spinsters in *Holiday Camp*.

The fate of the two spinsters is informed by the perennial linking of desire to social class, as indicated by Sue Aspinall: 'Female sexual appetite is associated with being outside the upper class, and with the kind of rootless woman who has no claim to

<sup>202</sup> Roy Martin and Ray Seaton, 'Gainsborough in the 40s', *Films and Filming*, June 1982, p. 17.

<sup>203</sup> Quoted in Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 68.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

marriageability'.<sup>205</sup> Elsie's behaviour is rendered doubly transgressive because of her age. Her vulnerable status as a lonely, unmarried woman is exploited by the serial killer, as she is easily persuaded to go off with him into the darkness, away from the camp. She is committed, tirelessly, to the future, desperate to find a husband and rid herself of her spinster status; whereas Esther lives in the past, having committed herself to caring for her mother, and being unable to forget her lost lover. Elsie's aspirations drive her to throwing herself at any eligible men, including the sinister Binkie (Dennis Price), rendering her comic yet ultimately tragic in her desperation, for which she is punished. For him Elsie is an obstacle, as she has unknowingly stumbled on his true identity, whilst she sees in him the promise of male attention and excitement, more importantly the end of her spinsterhood. The pathos of her fate is heightened as she was the first character we are introduced to as the campers climb on board the coach, yet the coach leaves without her at the end of the film, with only the audience, and Binkie, aware of what has happened to her. The tension created by her unseen and undetected demise sits oddly with the comic image of the two card sharks struggling along the road carrying their cases, having had their just desserts at the hands of Joe Huggett (Jack Warner).

Critical response to the film tends to elide the importance of Elsie's fate, as typified by Landy's observation that Binkie 'is the embodiment of threats to the stability of the community [being ] [s]ingle, of uncertain origins, sexually promiscuous, he is the antithesis of the familial values that the film seeks to promote'.<sup>206</sup> Landy's prognosis could be equally applied to Elsie, who threatens the community with her transgressive behaviour, as an ageing spinster with desires.<sup>207</sup> The subsequent films forming the Huggetts series constructed a world wherein the family is 'the cornerstone of society' according to Christine Geraghty, looking after its own in

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<sup>205</sup> Sue Aspinall, 'Sexuality in costume melodrama', in *Gainsborough Melodrama*, eds. Sue Aspinall and Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 1983), pp. 30-31.

<sup>206</sup> Landy, *British Genres*, p. 317. Philip Gillett recognises how Elsie metamorphoses from a 'figure of fun' to a 'tragic character'; his interpretation rests on her status as working-class character who is preyed on by the middle-class Binkie, rather than as middle-aged spinster; see Gillett, *The British Working Class in Post-War Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 66.

<sup>207</sup> Landy notes the film's follow-up, *Here Come The Huggetts*, structures its narrative largely around the disruptive force of sexuality, although in this case that of the younger female characters, Jane Huggett (Jane Hylton) and her cousin Di (Diana Dors). At the end of the film order is restored as Di finds herself in prison for assaulting a policeman, and thus is exiled from the Huggett community. See Landy, *British Genres*, p. 318.



difficult times.<sup>208</sup> Elsie is left vulnerable by her failure to be part of a family unit, as is made clear by the ending when only Esther notices her absence.

The differing fates of the two spinsters form part of an overarching narrative of the holiday camp as a microcosm of a society trying to adjust to peacetime. This tension underlies the portentous words of Esther's former beau as he expounds the joy of the holiday camp as a 'Mass of people all fighting for the one thing you can't buy...happiness'. His words are ironic as he was unknowingly the cause for Esther's unhappiness, leaving her a war spinster. The camera lingers in close up to reveal Esther's suffering - unseen by the blind Alan - as she learns about his injuries, his wife and happy family life, struggling with her emotions when he observes 'Life would be very empty without children, wouldn't it'.<sup>209</sup> In her role as the 'good' spinster Esther accepts her lot, without feeling the need to expose her identity to her ex-lover; she proves herself to have the qualities of self-sacrifice and caring which enable her to quickly take responsibility for the homeless expectant couple. In this respect she follows the advice of preacher, Maude Royden, writing in 1922 to urge spinsters to divert their maternal instincts to caring for the children of others, or even 'to sublimate their creative and maternal talents into bettering society'.<sup>210</sup> Esther's storyline is typical of representations of spinsters in popular fiction of the 1930s and 1940s identified by Holden, with 'a child rescuing an old maid, alleviating her loneliness and maternal yearnings, and offering her an acceptable substitute for marriage', a 'dual rescue' of both child and spinster.<sup>211</sup> An earlier script for *Holiday Camp* accentuated Esther's frustrated maternal qualities as she becomes 'auntie' to the young Marina Huggett with Mrs Huggett tactlessly drawing attention to Esther's childlessness, remarking on her 'way with children. It's a shame you got none of your own'.<sup>212</sup>

For the majority of her scenes Esther is pushed to the outside of the frame, emphasising her status as an outsider who is resigned to a background role. Lurking

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<sup>208</sup> Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 136.

<sup>209</sup> The book of the film makes her grief at being childless more explicit as she verbalises her response to Alan's question – albeit in a whisper, agreeing that 'it *is*' empty (the 'is' being italicised for emphasis); see Porlock, *Holiday Camp*, p. 69.

<sup>210</sup> Maude Royden, *The Moral Standards of the Rising Generation* (pamphlet), League of the Church Militant, 1922, quoted in Nicholson, *Singled Out*, p. 121.

<sup>211</sup> Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 149.

<sup>212</sup> Master script in the Ken Annakin collection, BFI Library Special Collections.

in the shadows she witnesses the plight of the desperate young couple; sitting at the side of the ballroom she is witness to the fun others are having; she miraculously materialises on the cliff-top to prevent the young couple from putting an end to it all.<sup>213</sup> Ultimately Esther smiles happily down on the young couple she has rescued from the seat behind them on the coach home, presiding over their happiness, enjoying her role as part of a new family. Not all reviewers approved of Esther's attempts to overcome her status as an outsider, confirming an innate prejudice, with one reviewer describing her as 'a spinster grimly determined to do good by young people who might be better left alone'.<sup>214</sup> Elsie refuses to accept marginalisation, constantly intruding into the centre of the frame, only to be repeatedly humiliated. The refusal of the spinster to accept her place is exploited for comic effect, as with her appearance in the beauty contest, when she is dwarfed by her younger neighbours, her outfit being overly elaborate in contrast to their youthful good looks. Elsie giggles and turns the wrong way, appearing foolish in contrast to the sultry confidence of her rivals. One reviewer described her as 'the withered waitress competing vainly but doggedly with the pert, pretty, little good-time girls'.<sup>215</sup> This exhibitionism subverts how glamour is defined by youthful femininity, with the ageing grotesque refusing to accept her marginalisation.



Figure 24 Elsie competes in a beauty pageant in *Holiday Camp*.

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<sup>213</sup> The book of the film describes Esther as being 'rather like a scolding maiden aunt' when she reprimands the couple for being too close to the edge of the cliffs; see Porlock, *Holiday Camp*, p. 58.

<sup>214</sup> W. A. Wilcox, *Sunday Dispatch*, 10 August 1947.

<sup>215</sup> Elspeth Grant, *Daily Graphic*, 8 August 1947.

Whereas Esther knows her place, as a middle-aged spinster, and therefore is rewarded with an unforeseen happiness, Elsie enters into spaces which do not suit her status. Esther is pragmatic about her status, as is evident in the book of the film in which she predicts disappointment for Elsie for ‘There was no place in this world for the Elsie – nor for the Esther Harmans, either’.<sup>216</sup> Elsie dedicates herself to participating fully in all the activities, grinning gamely as she overcomes a string of disappointments and failing to find the husband she is yearning for. Esther, the war spinster, had directed her unhappiness into her grief for her lost lover, clutching onto her memories; Elsie has channelled her frustrations into a frenetic regime of beauty regimes and socialising, competing – hopelessly – against younger girls. Her naivety and foolishness renders her comic in the tradition of the spinster to be found on stage during the inter-war years, evoked by Gale as a ‘barrel of fun’, ready to try any new adventure and with great admiration for the new ways of the younger generation’, much as Elsie throws herself into the spirit of the holiday camp.<sup>217</sup> Ultimately her persistence in intruding where she should not go leads her to going with Binkie – the serial killer – onto the cliffs at night, and thus to her demise. Although she is rendered comic and ridiculous, she intrudes into the realm of youth, failing to learn from her mistakes as she is persistently turned down by the men she throws herself at. Her death is an indictment of her forwardness as an ageing woman, as it is she that approaches men in her desperation to find a husband. Her motivation is made clear as she confides in Esther that ‘it’s up to me to spot him first, before anyone else does if you follow me. That’s the trouble. They never do. Follow me, I mean. Do you think man is still the hunter?’ She is driven by a longing for traditional gender and life roles, her spinster status compounded by her social class in rendering her an outcast with no role in the post-war settlement.

Elsie’s characterisation is structured around the perceptions of the spinster which existed during the inter-war years as identified by Rebecca D’Monte, being a figure who is at best ridiculous and pathetic, but also disruptive in terms of the potential to prey on married men or ‘fighting over the men who were not already married’.<sup>218</sup> Elsie is the excessive spinster, contravening the codes of female ageing which

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<sup>216</sup> Porlock, *Holiday Camp*, p. 38.

<sup>217</sup> Gale, *West End Women*, p. 174.

<sup>218</sup> Rebecca D’Monte, ‘Passion, penury and psychosis: representations of the spinster by interwar dramatists’ in *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations*, eds. Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), p. 4.

Esther, in turn, respects. Her anachronistic behaviour renders her a comic spectacle, yet also exposes her to risk, being ridiculous but ultimately tragic, in accordance with Russo's identification of the 'specifically feminine danger' of 'making a spectacle out of oneself.'<sup>219</sup> The contrasting figurations of the dilemma of the spinster can be read in terms of the 'essential plot' of British films of the 1940s according to Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, being the conflict of 'forbidden impulses with conscience'.<sup>220</sup> Esther's situation is a familiar narrative of 'the regrets of the lost opportunity virtuously renounced. In the happy instance, wishes may coincide with the demands of virtue'. Whereas Elsie's narrative is endemic of another trait in showing 'In a cautionary way [...] what happens if these impulses break through, particularly where the weak become victims'. Philip Gillett argues that the holiday camp is not so much a microcosm of society, as argued by Robert Murphy, but its 'mirror image, in which the traditional rules and proprieties of behaviour do not apply [...] the woman can pursue the man'.<sup>221</sup> I would argue that it is ostensibly a liminal space, where new lives can be forged in its carnival atmosphere, but yet where ultimately strict social codes are still relevant and are reinforced. Ultimately everyone either knows their place, or has to learn their place. Those who have flaunted the rules do not leave on the coach: Binkie is arrested, the humiliated card-sharks try to hitch a lift, and Elsie does not leave at all, *her* crime being age-inappropriate behaviour.

The spinsters present an alternative, even subversive life course, which is outside of the normative life stages, and thus inherently threatening. The figuration of spinsterhood helps to reinforce the importance of family in defining happiness, concomitant with integration into post-war society. The threat of difference is resolved in differing ways, seemingly dictated by social class, as the working-class Elsie's efforts to escape spinsterhood result in her death, whilst the middle-class Esther has a residual value to society, diverting her frustrated mothering instincts to a worthy cause, facilitated by her independent means. The importance of rules – spoken and unspoken – underlies the narrative, and is fundamental to the choices and destinies of the two spinsters. The holiday camp setting raises issues of control and

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<sup>219</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, p. 53.

<sup>220</sup> Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1950), p. 295.

<sup>221</sup> Gillett, *The British Working Class*, p. 65.

authority, where campers are billeted according to gender and loudspeakers preside over events and set the agenda. At one point Esther compares the camp to a 'prisoner of war camp', Elsie laughingly retorting that 'We're the prisoners'. Esther repeats her words feelingly, indicating the relevance of the words to her situation, as she is a prisoner to her past, and the loss of her lover in the First World War. They are both imprisoned by their spinster status.

The setting of the holiday camp creates a liminal space offering the promise of leisure and happiness within an enclosed space, juxtaposing a spectrum of social identities.<sup>222</sup> As a liminal space it allows for change and assuming of different identities: a serial killer takes refuge from the police, card sharks search for victims, a lonely spinster searches for a husband, another spinster seeks relaxation following the death of her mother, a young couple seek a space to be together. The post-war popularity of the Butlin holiday camps reflected the popular desire to experience the benefits of peacetime, after years of travel restrictions and fractured families.<sup>223</sup> For Esther, as with many of the other characters, the holiday experience signalled a liberation from the traumas and difficulties of the past, the camp offering the possibility of a new start.

### ***Winter Cruise***

*Winter Cruise* features Kay Walsh in the role of Miss Reid, a contented, independent spinster, whose presence on a cruise works to provoke and affront the officers on board, exposing established attitudes regarding gender, age and marital status. The officers conspire to silence the garrulous Miss Reid, only to find themselves bereft when she withdraws her attention from them, before politely humiliating them. Walsh's fate was similar to that of Robson and Cannon in being offered roles older than her years once she approached middle-age, having established a career as a respected character lead in British films. Aged thirty-eight she was cast as Miss

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<sup>222</sup> Justine King's work on the use of liminal spaces in the British woman's films of the 1980s observes that the female protagonist crosses a liminal threshold signifying escape from the confines of their everyday lives, entering a world of possibilities, where inhibitions and restraint can be suspended and 'self-transformations effected'. See Justine King, 'Crossing thresholds: the contemporary British woman's film' in *Dissolving Views*, ed. Andrew Higson (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 221.

<sup>223</sup> According to Brown in 1946 approximately thirty million people 'set out on holiday bliss'; see '*Holiday Camp*', p.66.

Reid, an ‘old maid with young ideas’, a role which appeared to reflect her own struggles with prejudice regarding her age in the male-dominated film industry.<sup>224</sup> Walsh had enjoyed a successful career in leading roles in film comedies of the 1930s, before working with husband David Lean on some of the most critically respected films of the 1940s, including *Great Expectations* (1946), for which she co-wrote the screenplay.

*Winter Cruise* was featured in *Encore* (1951), the final instalment of a trilogy of adaptations of Somerset Maugham short stories, following on from *Quartet* (1948) and *Trio* (1950). A success at the box office, critics were united in believing that *Encore* was the best of the three Maugham films, and moreover that *Winter Cruise* was ‘the real gem of the collection’.<sup>225</sup> Despite this, it was the image of Glynis Johns in her tightly fitting showgirl costume in the companion story *Gigolo and Gigolette* which was foregrounded in the marketing campaign for the film, rather than the relatively dowdy Miss Reid. Sydney Box had been praised for the innovative style and format of *Holiday Camp*, and was to receive critical approval for the decision to work with Maugham, obtaining the film rights to his short stories for Gainsborough. The tone and style of *Winter Cruise* bears the hallmarks of the work of director Anthony Pelissier, whose work could demonstrate ‘a powerful sense of British middle-class angst and repression’ according to Charles Barr.<sup>226</sup> Pelissier’s theatrical background had been the source of some criticism according to Gillett, on account of relying on extended dialogue and emphasis on performance over filmic devices, yet this was to prove a winning formula in *Winter Cruise*, a film about talk and silence, which rests largely on the nuances of performance to reveal character.<sup>227</sup>

Kay Walsh’s performance as Miss Reid was warmly received by critics, yet some of the reviews indicated issues facing ageing actresses in the industry at the time. *The Standard* noted that whilst the performances of their male counterparts are praised, actresses tend to be overlooked: “‘We haven’t any,” is the frequent moan from

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<sup>224</sup> See *Encore* press pack, BFI Library Special Collections. The same notes refer to Glynis Johns, the star of one of the other *Encore* stories, *Gigolo and Gigolette*, as ‘a pert young actress’, joking that ‘despite her age and pleasantly assorted charms, Glynis is yearning to pull on a gray wig and spend an entire role in a rocking chair’. Johns was merely nine years younger than Walsh.

<sup>225</sup> C.A. Lejeune, ‘On the screen, Dickens and Maugham’ in *Britain Today*, February 1952, p. 37.

<sup>226</sup> Charles Barr in *The Encyclopedia of British Film*, ed. Brian McFarlane (London: BFI, 2003), p. 516.

<sup>227</sup> Philip Gillett, ‘*The Rocking Horse Winner*’ in *The Cinema of Britain and Ireland*, ed. Brian McFarlane (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 81.

producers and fans alike'.<sup>228</sup> Walsh was frustrated by the lack of roles for women,<sup>229</sup> with reviewers concurring that she was 'too-little-seen'.<sup>230</sup> The characterisation of Miss Reid seemed to resonate for reviewers, with one reviewer commenting: 'How well we all know this little bore who keeps a tea-shoppe and crashes through life with the most insufferable enthusiasm!'.<sup>231</sup> The familiarity of this type is made clear with Miss Reid being described as 'the sort of woman whom all travellers know and experienced travellers shun'.<sup>232</sup> The *Daily Mirror* indicated broader cultural stereotypes, evoking 'the kind of middle-aged female bore whom Joyce Grenfell caricatures [...] one of those busy little bright-eyes who have a cheery word for everyone and chatter ceaselessly'.<sup>233</sup> Miss Reid conformed to a national archetype, incorporating a strength and resilience which cannot be broken with one reviewer declaring that 'She bests them all, as English spinsters are apt to do'.<sup>234</sup> The part of Miss Reid 'invites easy caricature' according to Penelope Houston, as Walsh's performance 'contrives to suggest an Anglicised version of a Helen Hokinson cartoon', with reference to the American cartoonist's reputation for featuring mature, well-to-do society women.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> R. Nash, *The Standard*, 16 November 1951.

<sup>229</sup> Brian Baxter, 'Obituary: Kay Walsh', *The Guardian*, 29 April 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2005/apr/29/guardianobituaries.film>.

<sup>230</sup> 'Too-little-seen' in *Sunday Dispatch*, 18 November 1951. See also Elspeth Grant, 'Encore? Bravo!!' in *The Daily Graphic*, 16 November 1951.

<sup>231</sup> Jympson Harman, 'A new hope for 'typed' stars' in *Evening News*, 15 November 1951.

<sup>232</sup> Lejeune, 'On the screen'.

<sup>233</sup> F. Majdalamy, 'Three cheers for Maugham' in *Daily Mail*, 16 November 1951.

<sup>234</sup> Paul Holt, *Daily Herald*, 16 November 1951.

<sup>235</sup> Penelope Houston in *Sight and Sound*, January/March; v.21, n.3, 1952, p. 125. Helen Hokinson was a cartoonist for the *New Yorker*. She apparently became concerned that people were laughing at, rather than with, these 'strong-minded and occasionally befuddled' women; see 'Helen Hokinson', Mendota Museums, accessed 21 April 2013, <http://www.mendotamuseums.org/helen.htm>.



Figure 25 "Heavens! Who is that tall man standing beside Harriet?": cartoonist Helen Hokinson celebrates the strong-minded middle-aged woman.

*Winter Cruise* tells the story of Miss Reid, a spinster of independent means, who pursues her customary habit of closing her tea-shop for the winter and going on a cruise.<sup>236</sup> In her determination to make the most of her time with her relentless socialising and chatter she wears out the patience of the officers on board. Being the only passenger for the journey back to Britain the officers conspire to force the French steward to make romantic overtures to Miss Reid in order to silence her.<sup>237</sup> From this point onwards Miss Reid becomes very subdued, and the officers become perversely more and more anxious to seek out her company. On arriving back in Britain Miss Reid graciously reveals that she realised that the crew had engineered the romance, but leaves them – and us – in the dark as to what actually transpired between her and the steward. Nevertheless in the final scene she advises her spinster friend that one ‘must take things as they come’, elaborating ‘funny, unexpected, rather nice things’ when pressed.

The press notes included a fulsome discussion of the problematic nature of Miss Reid’s status, asking ‘Do emancipation and the chance of a career, of themselves, bring total happiness?’<sup>238</sup> The press release continues to cite Miss Reid as ‘superb

<sup>236</sup> The independent single woman taking a holiday abroad was a growing phenomenon noted by *The Times*, 3 April 1944, in an article concerning the numbers of female teachers enabled to do so as a consequence of teacher pay increases. See Gertrude Williams, *Women and Work* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1945), p. 68.

<sup>237</sup> The French were frequently characterised as being synonymous with sex in British films; it is the youthful and handsome Frenchman who is able to ‘subdue’ the spinster, in stark contrast to the older British crew who resist change in favour of pipe-smoking. It is ironic that Miss Reid defies archetypal British qualities of reserve and ‘silly old stand-offishness’, as she terms it.

<sup>238</sup> Press pack for *Encore*, BFI Special Collections Library.



example of the unmarried career-woman. She is, if anything, almost too integrated and self-confident a personality. No vinegary censorious gossip sessions for her, no bathchair- and- companion at Bournemouth – but a winter cruise complete with a smart new hat and shiny guidebook’. By being ‘too integrated and self-confident’ Miss Reid’s personality is implied to transgress beyond the acceptable limits for her age and gender. The press notes suggested the film is ‘controversial’ in its representation of the ‘career-woman’, but also made explicit the negative stereotype of the spinster: ‘a distressing vision of a desiccated character: “on the shelf” and “old maid” are not sayings which evoke thoughts of a bachelor’s freedom, but of loneliness, neglect, and pale fortitude’. The press release asserted a controversial angle for the film which was not pursued in the majority of reviews at the time, yet in hindsight seems oddly prescient of debates central to the gender politics of the next decades. Nevertheless its conclusion reiterates the undesirability of spinster status, noting that ultimately Miss Reid’s ‘façade of emancipation and freedom cracks wide open. An ordinary man, saying ordinary things accomplishes this remarkable feat [...] reveals an ordinary woman who finds that her freedom and business success perhaps, after all, not enough’. This judgement is at odds with the film’s ending which depicts a contented Miss Reid happy to continue her life and benefit from what her ‘freedom and business success’ has brought her.

The first half of the film places Miss Reid in the centre of the frame, refusing to be sidelined, and proving resilient in the face of the diffidence of the crew. Her sociability is contrasted with the reserve of her shipmates, as is quickly established when introducing herself at dinner: ‘I personally intend to banish all silly old stand-offishness, and to be really hail fellow well-met with each and everyone on board’. Nevertheless the tightly framed shot is arranged so that the audience are party to the rolled eyes, sidelong glances and muttered asides of the officers, in contrast to Miss Reid’s relentless humour and selective hearing. The camera cuts away to reaction shots of the passengers and crew, demonstrating amusement and incredulity, as she becomes isolated in her efforts to be sociable. Miss Reid is established as a comic stereotype in the first half of the film, verging on caricature as her insistent voice dominates the dialogue, with repeated use of reaction shots to emphasise the horror of the crew. Her characterisation as a relentless chatterbox builds momentum reaching its apotheosis in a montage showing empty gangways, tannoys and funnels

accompanied by her incessant monologue. The camera works to align the audience with the crew, as we are party to their muttered asides as they struggle to control their mounting irritation, referring to Miss Reid as a ‘parrot’, ‘Delilah’, ‘Niagara’, ‘that female’ and ‘a human long-playing record’. Miss Reid is a comic spectacle in her refusal to stay within expected bounds of behaviour, her unruliness underlined by her relentless chatter.



Figure 26 Miss Reid dominates the conversation in *Winter Cruise*.

For the crew her excessive chatter and bonhomie are symptoms of her spinster status, which they regard as an illness for which the doctor prescribes a cure: romance. His prognosis suggests that her chatter is effectively a sublimation of her sexual urges, consequent upon her celibacy. Sex would be the cure to the threat she poses to the all-male community on board the ship, as she would no longer be an autonomous being, but defined by her relationship with a man, and therefore made safe. She transgresses social norms in being uncowed by her unmarried status in a society where marriage is the marker of femininity; rather than concealing herself verbally and physically, she is confident and inescapable. Miss Reid is proud of her achievements and status, loudly referring to her tea-shop whenever she has the opportunity, she even boasts to the doctor that her friend ‘always says that I very nearly have a man’s mind’. The doctor retorts that his ‘great aunt Louise very nearly had a man’s mind’ before adding in an aside ‘she also very nearly had a man’s moustache’ as he abruptly takes his leave. The doctor’s inference about her masculine attributes is typical of the ridicule which is aimed at Miss Reid during the first half of the film, the audience sharing the jokes which trade on the popular

stereotype of the spinster as unnatural and defying normative gender roles. Likewise she is the butt of the joke when she is asked by a young girl how old she thinks she is. The girl retorts 'Eighty-seven' with great confidence, leaving Miss Reid mildly amused. The great age she is given is a marker of a status as an older unmarried woman; she is past it and therefore ancient, and seemingly irrelevant to others.

The diverse character traits attributed to spinsters are marked by a shared failure to conform to ideals of feminine behaviour, rendering them unattractive and thereby unmarriageable. The excessive traits which define Miss Reid's spinster status are highlighted in reviews, proving a quick means of evoking a familiar character type for their readers. Reviewers dwelt on her ability to bore, to chatter without end, her 'insufferable enthusiasm',<sup>239</sup> her 'absurd and infuriating ways',<sup>240</sup> 'a bossy busybody',<sup>241</sup> even coining a new word to evoke her quiddity: 'She is a batterchox (a cross between a chatterbox and a bore)'.<sup>242</sup> Holden argues that the single woman is disturbing for the 'possibility it represented of women competing or living apart from men'.<sup>243</sup> The press pack emphasised that Miss Reid is a 'career-woman', adding that she is determined 'to prove that she's interested in everything and is "just one of the boys."' Not only is Miss Reid an aberration in her single, independent status, but she transgresses gender boundaries, the press release continuing: 'The Captain is finally forced to make her understand that she is very definitely 'one of the girls'...'

Miss Reid is represented as being unnatural in terms of her spinster status, her sociability, her status as an independent business woman, her confidence in her own abilities, and her temerity in invading male spaces. Yet she demonstrates the confidence and independence which many women experienced during the previous decade, when women of all ages had to contribute to the war effort often by taking on responsibilities and work that had traditionally been a male realm, taking them into male spaces. One apt example of the freedom allowed the single woman is that of a middle-class nurse's journey through the Far East in 1940 where life on board on ship was transformed as she was 'hobnobbing naturally with all the men [...]

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<sup>239</sup> Harman, 'A new hope'.

<sup>240</sup> Lejeune, 'On the screen'.

<sup>241</sup> L. Mosley, *Daily Express*, 16 November 1951.

<sup>242</sup> Holt, *Daily Herald*.

<sup>243</sup> Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 7.

even getting as far as the bar' and feeling 'a much freer individual'.<sup>244</sup> Miss Reid maintains these freedoms, proving herself the match of the crew in a gale, and able to hold her own in the bar or playing cards. She even shows an interest in technical matters, begging to have a look round the engine room.

In taking the cruise Miss Reid manifests an energy, adventurousness and independence, untroubled by her solitary status, and open to all new experiences. Miss Reid gradually emerges as a subversive force in the film, after having sustained numerous insults from the crew, her dialogue starts to sow the idea that she has been more acute and observant than the men supposed her. She laughingly suggests that the doctor is very much the 'Emily Bronte' of the crew with his 'quiet, detached, clever mind', the 'compliment' teetering on ridicule, yet so charmingly delivered as to leave both the doctor and the audience in two minds, especially in the wake of the doctor's early inference concerning her gender identity. By the end of the film she reveals to the crew that she knew that they had contrived a romance for her, leaving them humiliated and guilt-stricken, as both they, and the audience are made aware of her acuity and good manners in the face of provocation. Her frankness leaves the officers tongue-tied as she thanks them for organising 'romance' for her: 'I'm not a complete idiot you know, and when a good-looking young man appears and tells me he's in love with me something tells me something fishy's going on. Oh, I try to make the best of myself, but I'm perfectly aware that I'm not a young man's dream of bliss.'

The narrative is true to the spirit of Maugham's short stories with the underdog gaining ascendancy over their adversaries in a final twist. The spinster – the pariah of post-war society – has the upper-hand, having relished the cruise and the benefits accrued simply from having being herself. Miss Reid has gained power over them by her knowledge of their conspiracy, but then leaving them ultimately in the dark as to how far the romance has gone '...your idea might have been a great success...' The crew gather around her anxious to say goodbye, the captain apologising: 'I'm afraid I underestimated your commonsense'. Their humiliation is complete as she waves farewell towards the ship, the captain mistakenly assuming towards him, only to discover her audience was the steward, looking somewhat lovelorn.

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p. 44.



Figure 27 A fond farewell for Miss Reid from the French steward in *Winter Cruise*.

There is an ambivalence at the heart of this figuration as Miss Reid emerges from a caricature to subvert the assumptions of the crew, and the audience. Initially she is ostensibly the mythical spinster identified so readily by the reviewers of the time, but develops a depth of character which confounds the stereotype to a large extent. But the doctor is proved correct in his diagnosis by the change in character of Miss Reid, the result being very much as desired by the men: she is subdued as a consequence of romantic attention, becoming withdrawn and moving out of the male spaces on the ship. Her excessive characteristics are contained, and it is then that the crew seek out her company, and she becomes of interest to them. Her body language becomes more subdued and less mannered, as she becomes less effusive.



Figure 28 Miss Reid is subdued by romance in *Winter Cruise*.

*Winter Cruise* works as a comedy, the cruise allowing for a liminal state of inversion of the normal hierarchy: the spinster is the mistress of misrule, invading the male space, testing the boundaries and challenging the normative conceptions of ageing femininity. The transformation of Miss Reid is comparable to that of two other spinsters who find romance on their travels in *Now Voyager* (1942) and *Summertime* (1955). Naomi Braun Rosenthal observes how the ‘unhappy and repressed’ spinster ‘is reborn, redeemed, and beautified’ as a consequence of a love affair.<sup>245</sup> In both films inhibitions diminish in a liminal space, the narrative suggesting that ‘The distorting effects of spinsterhood can only be removed through (heterosexual) intercourse’.<sup>246</sup> Although the parallels with *Winter Cruise* are striking, most notably the unforeseen holiday romance, nevertheless Miss Reid is clearly delineated as a happy and confident, independent woman at the start of the narrative, who is essentially unchanged by the experience. The transformation she undergoes is merely temporary as she withdraws from socialising, becoming more self-contained, although it is made clear that romance has had some impact on her given her decision to change the name of her tea shop to ‘Chez Molly’. Ultimately she is not ‘reborn, redeemed, and beautified’ in the same way as the spinsters of the melodrama, not starting from the same position of incompleteness.

As Miss Reid alights from the ship, she returns from liminality to normality, returning from the male environment of the ship to the world of the spinster, being welcomed home by her friend, Miss Price. The two women are mirror images of each other, sporting the uniform of the middle-class, middle-aged respectable spinster: sensible suits, smart hat, hair pulled back and no make-up. The final scene of the film suggests the dreary reality for the domestic spinster through Miss Price, who lacks the business acumen and strength of character of Miss Reid. Envious of the fun had by her friend, Miss Price voices the desire to go on a cruise herself, but then regretfully adds that her brother ‘says it’s a waste of money’, making it evident that she is answerable to her brother, not having the freedom to act that her friend has:

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<sup>245</sup> Naomi Braun Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), p. 131.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

MISS REID: Why don't you just tell your brother you've been ordered to go - by the Doctor?

MISS PRICE (doubtfully): Yes! But would he believe me?

MISS REID (smiling faintly): My dear, if one puts one's mind to it, one can make men believe anything.



Figure 29 The two spinsters discuss the joys of a cruise in *Winter Cruise*.

Miss Price is very much the domestic spinster cited in the debates over spinsters' pensions, who has no autonomy outside her familial duties, and is beholden to her male relatives in place of a husband.

The press notes cast a different light on the narrative, at odds with Walsh's performance, suggesting that Miss Reid 'finds that her freedom and business success perhaps, after all, not enough'. This is far from evident in the final scene, in which she smilingly concurs that 'travel definitely broadens the mind', and capitalises on her experiences in making the decision to change the name of her business to 'Chez Molly', clearly in reference to her relationship with the French steward. Whereas accounts of unmarried older women dwelt on the need to assuage the deep loneliness of their state, Miss Reid embraces it as an opportunity, having the energy and drive to indulge her desires, having no commitments to prevent her from taking a cruise. In 1935 Laura Hutton wrote in *The Single Woman and Her Emotional Problems* that: 'The basic problem of the single woman is loneliness [...] To a man love is but one

factor in his life. To a woman it tends to be her whole life.<sup>247</sup> Miss Reid's character breaks away from this tragic type, prefiguring the feminist ideal emerging later in the twentieth century of the single woman who prides herself on her self-sufficiency and freedom. She conforms to Holtby's vision of aspirational spinsterhood, writing two decades earlier in defence of the single woman, 'most of them live lives as full, satisfied and happy as any human lives can be', arguing that some women had deliberately remained unmarried in order to pursue a career.<sup>248</sup> Holtby was referring largely to the middle-class, educated, single woman, such as herself, arguing that their work 'enriched' their lives: 'They have contributed something to the world and know the satisfaction of creative achievement'. As a consequence sex, marriage and children are 'a matter of secondary importance'. Although Miss Reid is not an academic, artist or explorer, but of a more prosaic profession, as a tea shop owner, she is proud of her achievements and clearly successful, having the means to close her business during the winter and take a cruise. Her confidence extends beyond her business expertise, pushing herself into the centre of life on board the ship, demonstrating a personality which is forceful rather than retiring, and relentlessly cheerful in contrast to the popular image of the spinster as tragic and pathetic.

### **Erasing the spinster**

The spinster is defined by her incompleteness, specifically the lack of a male partner which is required to position and secure the woman in a patriarchy. Andrew Britton observes that the denomination of 'spinster' and 'old maid' is a means of resecuring the unmarried woman 'in such a way as to refer to a man to whom she does not relate'.<sup>249</sup> In this respect the unmarried woman is wholly defined by absence and deviation from normative gender roles. For Britton the spinster as an 'unnatural type may be found pathetic, funny or threatening', but these denominations are ultimately resisted by Miss Reid and Esther, both of whom prove to be more nuanced characterisations. Elsie is depicted as both pathetic and funny, and is punished for her unnaturalness, on account of her social class and anachronistic behaviour. Britton argues that the degradation of the unmarried woman is a recurrent trope found in a range of narratives, 'The spinster being reviled quite as much for her yearning for, as

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<sup>247</sup> Quoted in Nicholson, *Singled Out*, p. 186.

<sup>248</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (London: John Lane, 1934), p. 129.

<sup>249</sup> Andrew Britton, *Katherine Hepburn: Star as Feminist* (London: Studio Vista, 1995), p. 209.



for her renunciation of, sexuality, for her attempts [...] to de-repress herself as much as for her repression'.<sup>250</sup> Elsie is repeatedly humiliated as her attempts to kindle romance fall flat, her inability to learn her place leading to the desperation which results in her murder. Esther is emotionally humiliated as her romantic hopes are dashed on finally meeting her former beau, only to discover that he has moved on. The humiliation is short-lived as she takes on the nurturing role in supporting a new family within hours of this traumatic discovery. Miss Reid is beset by attempts to humiliate her by the male crew, leading to the potential degradation of the steward being forced to make romantic overtures to her, yet revenges herself on her male persecutors by humiliating them in turn.

Both Elsie and Miss Reid resist the attempts to peripheralise them, placing themselves at the centre of the community, and both are made the subject of humour for their excessive characteristics. Esther and Miss Reid have an enduring value to the community, primarily as a consequence of social class and material wealth which allows them to capitalise on their spinster status in very different ways. Nevertheless Elsie has little currency as a working-class ageing spinster and falls prey to a murderer in a melodramatic storyline, whereas Miss Reid emerges as victor in a comedy of manners, her middle-class credentials ultimately protecting her right to transgress the codes governing the unmarried ageing woman.<sup>251</sup> Her defiant independence is consistent with Williams's observation writing in 1945 that 'greater opportunities of economic independence' and a 'wider occupational scope' allowed women 'to exercise greater freedom in their choice of a life partner since they have an alternative to an undesired marriage'.<sup>252</sup> Miss Reid's confidence, independence and strength renders her an exceptional figuration of the spinster in the post-war era, pointing the way to the eventual extinction of the notion of the spinster as the twentieth century proceeded.

Kathleen Rowe argued that the 'parodic excesses of the unruly woman and comedy conventions surrounding her provide a space to "act out" the "dilemmas of femininity"'.<sup>253</sup> Both Elsie and Miss Reid are rendered comic spectacles in their

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>251</sup> Beverley Skeggs describes white working-class women as the 'object of the nation' in terms of having no 'exchange-value'; see Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 23.

<sup>252</sup> Williams, *Women and Work*, p. 69.

<sup>253</sup> Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 11.

failure to respect the invisibility merited by their social status, the fate of both making explicit the risks of unruly femininity. Middle age can become a time of emancipation according to Greer, when heteronormativity need not structure a woman's existence; she can form new friendships, lifestyles and living arrangements for 'Once we are past menopause we are all oddballs'.<sup>254</sup> Whelehan's analysis of contemporary filmic representations of ageing women identifies a recurrent tension: whether to undergo 'a gloomy sinking into ageing and death' or to become an 'active agent of her destiny'.<sup>255</sup> Both *Holiday Camp* and *Winter Cruise* feature spinsters making the same decision, yet within the context of a post-war society which is uncomfortable with their existence. They all opt to resist 'gloomy sinking' and attempt to claim their place in the community with mixed results.

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<sup>254</sup> Greer, *The Change*, p. 384.

<sup>255</sup> Whelehan, 'Not to be looked at', p. 180.

## Chapter 3

### The Age of Boredom: the Radicalisation of Retirement in Film Comedy

For Andrew Blaikie the ‘imagined communities’ to be found in popular culture can ‘represent “ageing social values” [or] a vision appropriate to the present or an aspiration for the future’.<sup>1</sup> Both *Alive and Kicking* and *Make Mine Mink* use the comic mode to reflect on wider debates around ageing and the human condition which had taken on greater urgency in the post-war welfare state. The ageing women in both films carve out a space wherein old age is respected and freed from constraints, yet both films were widely judged to be somewhat dated rather than radical at the time of release. This chapter argues that the representations of ageing suggest a nostalgia for an idealised society that appeared to be lost, and enact figurations of ageing from previous centuries.

*Alive and Kicking* and *Make Mine Mink* were typical of a broader trend in 1950s British film of comedies featuring the ageing single woman who proves her goodness and worth to society through her involvement in the world of crime. In common with films such as *Miss Robin Hood* (1952) and *The Ladykillers* (1955) the comedy rests on the essential unlikelihood of the ageing widow or spinster being in such a role, departing from the socially determined narratives of loneliness, desolation and decline. *Alive and Kicking* and *Make Mine Mink* were released within a couple of years of each other, in a society which was starting to question tradition as it emerged from the post-war consensus. Both films feature mature women resorting to criminal acts in order to affect their escape from the narrative of ageing sanctioned by society. *Alive and Kicking* centres on three women escaping from a retirement home to start a new life in a remote part of Ireland, posing as the relatives of a missing man. The crime is more overt and deliberate in *Make Mine Mink*, with boredom driving a group of friends to a life of crime, stealing from the rich to assist orphans. Both films feature ageing characters who overcome boredom and despair and gain a new role in the community, even though it takes subterfuge and criminal acts to conquer the restrictions of age, whether it be confinement to an institution or being consigned to a life of disappointment and emptiness. Ultimately the films are

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<sup>1</sup> Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, p. 197.

about finding happiness in later life by finding purpose and creating new community bonds. The performances and characters in both films foreground the spectacle of transgressive behaviour, challenging the bounds of social expectations as is licensed by the comic tradition.

The films' concern with the challenges of ageing came at a time of despair at the lack of progress regarding care for the elderly, in contrast to the optimism engendered by the birth of the welfare state in the previous decade. The isolation of the elderly was a central theme in Tunstall's *Old and Alone*, which commenced with the startling statistic that 'Old people are eight times more likely to live alone than are people aged under 65'.<sup>2</sup> The publication of Townsend's *The Family Life of Old People* in 1957 highlighted the dangers of isolation and desolation in old age, and the loss of fulfilment in the wake of compulsory retirement, the author having embedded himself in the world of the elderly in Bethnal Green. In *The Last Refuge* Townsend quoted Aneurin Bevan introducing the National Assistance Bill back in 1947, who had promised to: 'make a great departure in the treatment of old people. The workhouse is to go [...] it is in many respects a very evil institution'.<sup>3</sup> Townsend despaired that fifteen years later little progress had been made, in the face of the growth of the aged population and austerity budgets of the 1950s. The consequences were evident in his visit to an overcrowded old people's home, formerly a workhouse, a 'grim and sombre place', the inhabitants of which were withdrawn and resigned to their miserable existence:

Life seemed to have been drained from them, all but the dregs. Their stoic resignation seemed attributable not only to infirmity and old age. They were like people who had taken so much punishment that they had become inured to pain and robbed of all initiative. They had the air of not worrying much about their problems because of the impossibility of sorting them out, or the difficulty of getting anyone to understand or take notice.<sup>4</sup>

Such reflections on old age echoed a theme of social dislocation which was central to *The Human Condition*, published the year after *The Family Life of Old People*, in which Hannah Arendt voiced concern for the human condition in the face of social

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<sup>2</sup> Tunstall, *Old and Alone*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Townsend, *The Last Refuge*, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

change. Arendt evoked a modern society wherein ‘mass culture’ had engendered a pervasive sense of lack of fulfilment, a ‘waste economy, in which things must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world’.<sup>5</sup> For Arendt the human desire to be free from labour was increasingly becoming a reality in the age of automation, warning that ‘what we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse’.<sup>6</sup> Arendt’s words are particularly apt in the context of the post-war welfare state, wherein pensioner status could prove a crisis point for which a generation of ageing people were often unprepared. She saw post-war society as characterised by the drive towards consumerism, putting value on the transitory nature of experience rather than that which endures and is permanent. She cites Adam Smith warning that the ‘danger’ of such a society ‘dazzled by the abundance of its growing fertility [...] would no longer be able to recognize its own futility – the futility of a life which “does not fix or realize itself in any permanent subject which endures after [its] labour is past”’.<sup>7</sup> This sense of ‘futility’ is a recurrent theme in the accounts of ageing in the post-war period, and is what prompts the characters of *Alive and Kicking* and *Make Mine Mink* to become fugitives and thieves respectively.

### ***Alive and Kicking***

The three central characters of *Alive and Kicking* stage a rebellion against the model for ageing in the welfare state, running away from the oppressive regime of their care home to build a new life in a new country. Any intended message concerning society’s treatment of the elderly is packaged to appeal to a family audience, bearing all the hallmarks of distributors, the Associated British Picture Company: a modest budget, British stars and ‘safe’ subject matter. The film was typical of the ABPC’s output of low-budget comedies which found success in the late 1950s, often featuring female protagonists testing social boundaries to a certain degree. Films such as *Girls At Sea* (1958), *She Didn’t Say No* (1958) and *Operation Bullshine* (1959) were concerned with excessive female sexuality disrupting masculine worlds, in line with the vogue for ‘romps’ or sex comedies at the time. *Alive and Kicking*

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<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958), p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

was produced by Victor Skutezky, whose films of the 1950s have been argued to be relatively radical in their treatment of gender, exemplified by *Young Wives' Tale* (1951) which questioned normative gender roles.<sup>8</sup> Although not overtly radical in its message, *Alive and Kicking* is critical of the welfare state and the treatment of the elderly, with its protagonists only finding happiness away from a state which seeks to imprison and restrict old age. Screenwriter Denis Cannan was to establish a reputation as a playwright who demonstrated “noble indignation at the follies of mankind”, particularly his later work such as his Vietnam protest play *US* (1966).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless *Alive and Kicking* is typical of Cannan’s work of the late 1950s, writing conventional farces wherein comedy takes priority over social messages.

The opening scenes of *Alive and Kicking* are firmly rooted in the oppressive, crepuscular world of Townsend’s *The Last Refuge*, its inmates passive and mute as they are patronised by staff and royal visitors. Their piteous and futile existence is comically underlined as matron introduces one resident, who sits mutely whilst the V.I.P. is informed that her hobby ‘is making pincushions out of old tennis balls’.



Figure 30 The residents of Sunset Home await their royal visitor in *Alive and Kicking*.

Dora (Sybil Thorndike), Rosie (Kathleen Harrison), and Mabel (Estelle Winwood) use the royal visit as their opportunity for escape, their motivation becoming evident when the matron reveals that she had told them of their impending transfers to other care homes on account of overcrowding. The three women have lost any say over

<sup>8</sup> See Melanie Bell, *Femininity in the Frame* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Theatre obituaries: Denis Cannan’, *The Telegraph*, 2 November 2011, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/theatre-obituaries/8865604/Denis-Cannan](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/theatre-obituaries/8865604/Denis-Cannan).

their lives and are to be packaged off to other homes at the behest of the state, being comically portrayed as fugitives on the run from the authorities, pursued by the police. The incongruity of their fugitive status becomes obvious when we first encounter the three as they emerge from behind a bush. The women's plight restores their voice and ability to wrest back control over their lives. Rosie complains that she was to be forced to share a room with 'that Mary Adams who keeps kippers under her mattress!' Mabel rages that she was to be sent to 'a retreat for retired governesses. I never retreated in all my life!', before crying 'Advance', thrusting her umbrella into the air, and leading the women on their way.

The mental and physical resilience of the fugitives differentiates them from the passive, silent women incarcerated in Sunset Home. The matron assumes that her escapees are weak and in peril, fretting about their medication and clothing, whilst envisaging various disastrous scenarios. The irony of the narrative is that the women are pursued by the law for asserting their individuality and taking control of their lives. The ensuing montage labours this point to comic effect as shots of the police search are juxtaposed with the fugitives munching contentedly on chips at the seaside, amidst the sights and sounds of a holiday setting. Dora worries that the police will recognize them, 'wandering abroad without visible means of support'. Their quasi-criminal status renders them vulnerable, prompting them to hide from the police in a moored boat. A comic sequence features the incongruous spectacle of three ageing women accidentally finding themselves in a speeding motorboat, towing a policeman across the harbour before taking control of the boat in the open sea. The incongruity is cultivated further as they discuss where to head, with Mabel rejecting Bournemouth as 'it's full of old women'. They repeatedly refuse to be restricted by chronological age, rejecting the social imperative to consign the ageing to circumscribed spaces such as the care home or Bournemouth. The boat journey acts as a metaphor for their situation, initially spiralling out of control before *they* regain control in order to escape confinement. Far from being helpless and needy they speculate as to how they are going to make a living, Dora proclaiming 'Three able-bodied women like us. Well, you can't tell me that there isn't a use for us somewhere!'



Figure 31 The three fugitives at sea in *Alive and Kicking*.

The film promotes a discourse that there is no place for the older woman in post-war England, where the institutions and authorities collude in removing the ageing from visibility. It is only when the women escape the shores of England that they find freedom and respect in other communities. When rescued by a Russian ship they find themselves feted as ambassadors of their country, treated as honoured guests in contrast to life at Sunset Home where the inmates were patronised by the royal visitor. The horrors of ageing in England underly Rose's panic when she misinterprets the Captain's offer of asylum in Russia, exclaiming 'That's what we've just run away from!', further cultivating the image of the Home as oppressive and dehumanising.

Ireland is a haven for the women, made evident through the mellow Irish pipes accompanying the establishing shots of the rugged landscapes of the island of Inishfada. The locals' attitude to the ageing fugitives is comically at odds with that back in England in the care home. Far from wishing to incarcerate the threesome, they are more concerned about the rumour that they are the harem of the missing MacDonagh (Stanley Holloway), regarding them as 'pagan women', even 'call-girls' and a threat to the morality of the community. The fugitives are enraptured by their first glimpse of their future home, Rosie sighing 'What a picture! It's like something on a calendar.' For Dora it is 'the kind of place I have always wanted'. The Ireland of the film is untouched by modern times, with the indigenous population



represented as quirky and suspicious peasants, living a simple and idyllic life.<sup>10</sup> This idealised and nostalgic vision of Ireland is consistent with that perpetuated in John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952), celebrating a traditional way of life which was being dismantled with mass migration of the younger generation to America and Britain. Implicit to this narrative image is the sense of a golden age of community in the recent past, where all generations had a role to play, free from State interference as embodied by the retirement home and the police in *Alive and Kicking*. Luke Gibbons notes that such romantic representations of Ireland accord 'with the traditional primitivist view that nature, and particularly wild, unsubdued landscape, represents a more profound and permanent reality than the fleeting world of social appearances', wherein the true self can be liberated from the shackles of society.<sup>11</sup> For Gibbons the idealisation of the Irish pastoral in film represents 'primitive life as a golden age of plenty, innocence and happiness – in other words, as civilised life purged of its vices'.<sup>12</sup> What the fugitive pensioners find on Inishfada is the mythical golden age of old age located in the pre-industrial past charted by Margot Jefferys and Pat Thane, featuring 'an extended family system [...] whereby successive generations of kin lived together, the youngest ones caring lovingly for the oldest'.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless the three eccentric fugitives stand out in contrast to their peers on the island, who are shrouded in black, eliding any visual signifiers of individuality. The black garb implies a more primitive society wherein the older woman is rendered invisible, in contrast to the idiosyncratic outfits of the three English women, which make manifest their independence. The 'othering' of the Irish, much as for the Scottish and Welsh, was mobilised in the construction of English national identity, according to the work of Jane Garrity, noting how 'ethnic and cultural differences' were deployed to signal 'Otherness'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Associated British Studios claimed that the film was much more authentic in its representation of Ireland than other films with their 'perpetual blarney, leprechauns, shillelahs, shebeens and shinanigans' according to the press book. The publicity cites the costumes, knitting patterns and the score as being authentic, before advertising the fact that the outdoor shooting was on location in Scotland, as 'The real thing was too grey for the gaiety we wanted to convey', quoting Victor Skutezky; BFI Special Collections Library.

<sup>11</sup> Luke Gibbons, 'Romanticism, realism and Irish cinema', *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 224.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>13</sup> Margot Jefferys and Pat Thane, 'Introduction' in *Growing Old in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Margot Jefferys (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Jane Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 22.



Figure 32 Culture clash: Irish traditionalism meets English eccentricity in *Alive and Kicking*.

The women are liberated from the shackles of physical ageing by life on Inishfada, with Dora, the oldest of the three, gamely abseiling down the cliffs to collect bird eggs and shoot rabbits. The three women round up sheep on horseback and throw themselves into the organisation of a production line for the manufacture of jumpers. Their industrial enterprise demonstrates their mental acuity and resourcefulness, capitalising on their experience from their previous lives, and invigorating the whole of the community, providing work and prosperity. Ironically it is the stereotypical skills of the mature woman which ensures their ability to survive and prosper, with their interest in knitting leading to the mass production of the local knitwear.<sup>15</sup> The women find themselves at the heart of the community, with the eldest, Dora, being at the head of the enterprise, masterminding the business and issuing orders. Her character is a familiar archetype of female ageing, the middle-class do-gooder, ‘a tweedy widow you could well imagine [...] running her local WVS, Women’s Institute, Red Cross and Conservatives’.<sup>16</sup> Dora’s power is such that she can quickly summon the menfolk to do her bidding, taunting them when she commands them to get the sheep from the next island: ‘Call yourself men! Give me two oars and I’d do it myself!’ Meanwhile Mabel carries out quadratic equations in overseeing stock control, capitalising on her professional experience from her years as a governess.

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<sup>15</sup> The film was clearly pitched at a female audience, the press pack including the ‘Woman’s Angle’ boasting that ‘It’s a pretty safe bet that knitting needles all over the country will be twinkling twice as fast’ after seeing the film; BFI Special Collections Library.

<sup>16</sup> Isabel Quigley, *The Spectator*, 19 June 1959, p. 31.

Whereas the work of researchers such as Townsend and Tunstall evoked old age as characterised by isolation arising from the breakdown of community and family ties, *Alive and Kicking* portrays the redemptive power of friendship in constructing new communities which function as family units. It is the fear of being forced apart which drives the women to run away, and when fearful of exposure Dora and Mabel reassure Rosie that she will not face prison without them, 'Whatever happens we'll stick together'. The ending of the film sees the three ageing women at the heart of the community, having restored the fortunes of the island. Nevertheless, the narrative restores some semblance of conventional hierarchies with the return of MacDonagh who assumes the position of chairman of the company they started, with the three women taking a secondary role as directors. Moreover they assume traditional roles as carers for the patriarch, whose home they had commandeered: 'He'll want his mending done won't he, and his laundry...He wants someone to look after him, to make a fuss of him. Poor old man, all alone on a desert island with a dicky ticker'. The final sequence of the film adds a twist to the theme of the title, *Alive and Kicking*, with the island holding a wake in memory of the 'deaths' of the three women, the newspapers having mistakenly reported them as missing at sea. Dora, Mabel and Rosie join the rest of the community singing the title song and dancing a reel in a scene of celebration, far from the sterile formality of the opening scenes in the English rest home. Yet rather than a celebration of the symbolic deaths of their former selves, it is more a celebration of the return of MacDonagh to his native country, as he takes a lead role in the dancing. The matriarchal regime is subtly reconfigured into a more conventional patriarchy, the duties of the three now reflecting their position as dependents on MacDonagh.



Figure 33 The fugitives become carers in *Alive and Kicking*.

The three female leads were all to sustain their careers into late old age, Thorndike living to be ninety-four, Winwood passed away aged one hundred and one, and Harrison made it to one hundred and three. Associated British made a selling point out of the film's ageing cast, announcing that 'Les Girls' report for work' as filming commenced, elaborating that 'Three of the liveliest and spriteliest stars in the film industry reported for work' boasting that the total ages of the three female leads 'total 211!' <sup>17</sup> Nevertheless reviewers struggled to reconcile female ageing with the comedy genre, as typified by *The Spectator* declaring that: 'My heart unkindly and unaccountably sinks at the thought of a film on Game Old Ladies. And some of its worst fears are realised when Dame Sybil insists on going through acrobatic feats [...] or when the three of them dress up as cowboys'.<sup>18</sup> The *Monthly Film Bulletin* was much in agreement, making the point that 'Old age and eccentricity can be tricky springboards for comedy, needing a fair degree of astringency in direction and performance if the result is not to degenerate into whimsy'.<sup>19</sup> *The Observer* hints at a similar unease, commenting that 'The three old ladies form an antic trio which never, or hardly ever, becomes grotesque'.<sup>20</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly* refers to the three stars as 'girls' to labour the anachronistic nature of their roles, adding that the film had a 'sly feminine angle', suggesting a subversive element.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless the stars were

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<sup>17</sup> *Associated British Elstree Studios News Bulletin*, 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1958; BFI Special Collections Library.

<sup>18</sup> Quigley, p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1959, v.26 n. 301.

<sup>20</sup> C. A. Lejeune, *The Observer*, 19 June 1959.

<sup>21</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly*, 25 December 1959, p. 14.

applauded for their performances elsewhere, on account of their age, demonstrating ‘a verve which wouldn’t disgrace actors half their ages’.<sup>22</sup>

There is a differentiation between distinct types of ageing female characters in the film, informed by the respective star personae. Thorndike’s Dora is far from a passive and frail image of feminine ageing as is made clear by her assertive and energetic body language, her peremptory delivery and the physicality of her performance. Such confidence and strength contests gender boundaries, with one review describing her as being ‘in mannish tweeds’.<sup>23</sup> This mental and physical strength was integral to Thorndike’s persona, especially as she aged, with one interviewer remarking that in her eightieth year: ‘Everything about her – the powerful hands and robust movement, the indestructible voice, the clear-sighted sympathies and irrepressible explosions of fun – express an inexhaustible appetite for life’.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless the strength inherent in her performance as Dora renders the character’s plight somewhat implausible, as pointed out by one reviewer, wondering how ‘Dame Sybil - resplendent in sensible tweeds - could ever have been lured into an old people's home in the first place. With her unbounded energy, exuberant bossiness and dogged organising ability she would be much more likely to be running a string of the places single-handed’.<sup>25</sup> Thorndike clearly felt that the film carried a positive message about ageing, writing to her daughter of her role in *Alive and Kicking* that ‘I think people will like it – they’ll feel there’s a chance to have a bit of an adventure, even if they’re 70!’.<sup>26</sup> Thorndike was seventy-five when she made the film, being constantly in work until her final stage role over a decade later in *There Was An Old Woman*.

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<sup>22</sup> *The Daily Cinema*, 11 May 1959, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Lejeune, *The Observer*.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Actress with an inexhaustible appetite for life’ in *The Times*, 11 October 1962.

<sup>25</sup> Liz Frank, *News Chronicle*, 12 June 1959.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Croall, *Sybil Thorndike: A Star of Life* (London: Haus Books, 2008), p. 429.



Figure 34 Dora abseils to collect birds' eggs in *Alive and Kicking*.

Dora is accorded the status of 'massive battle-axe in charge' by one review, a label typically conferred on the strong older woman in film comedy of the era.<sup>27</sup> She assumes the authority commensurate with her superior social class, Rosie confessing to her that she was known as 'the Duchess' behind her back at the retirement home. She is a relic of Empire Britain, who recalls her married life in India, living in a palace, wife of a financial advisor to an Indian prince. This characterisation draws on Thorndike's persona as a grande dame of theatre and film, her roles encompassing St. Joan in 1924 and the Dowager Queen in *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1957). Her status was such that one interviewer compared her to the Parthenon, before describing her as 'Essentially English, she yet is nationless; essentially of her period, she is timeless'.<sup>28</sup> The grande dame is effectively an authorised role model for ageing, such status implying qualities of indefatigable strength, charisma and leadership, associated with a privileged social milieu, as is evident from one profile of Thorndike: 'she has always found time and vigour to speak, to act or recite for charity, to serve, to be the good friend, almost the Universal Aunt'.<sup>29</sup>

The character of Rosie provides a contrasting figuration of age to Dora, being resolutely working-class consistent with Harrison's persona as the 'chirpy charwoman'.<sup>30</sup> Harrison's customary cockney persona was central to characters such as Ma Huggett in the Huggetts' films and radio series, and Mrs Thursday in the

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<sup>27</sup> *Evening Standard*, 11 June 1959.

<sup>28</sup> Michéal MacLiammóir quoted in 'Actress with an inexhaustible appetite for life'.

<sup>29</sup> 'Profile: Sybil Thorndike' in *The Observer*, 6 June 1954.

<sup>30</sup> 'Kathleen Harrison: a chirpy charwoman' in *The Guardian*, 8 December 1995.

eponymous 1966 television comedy, a cockney charwoman who inherits a fortune. Harrison was sixty-four when cast as Rosie, her relative youth being evident in being more childlike and volatile than her fellow fugitives, her bright naïve façade being at odds with her light-fingered tendencies. Harrison’s characteristic performance style conflated the childlike with the signs of ageing, suggesting both alertness and vulnerability, as noted by Joyce Grenfell: ‘Her hands – full of washing and chores and kindnesses, hanging over her stomach with the elbows pressed to her side. And the bird movements of her incredible Cockney head’.<sup>31</sup> In the role of Rosie her appearance is that of an ageing eccentric, marked as belonging to a bygone era by her antiquated frock, bonnet and a capacious carpet-bag from which she conjures up various stolen items, including a plateful of food from the retirement home and the matron’s Post Office savings book. Rosie’s status as a working-class cockney spinster marks her as the social inferior to the other two women, as is reinforced by her criminal record. Her crimes are petty and add to the comedy of her character, as she is both hapless yet wily, vulnerable in her age yet also resourceful. Dora asserts her role as leader and moral arbiter by reproving and restraining Rosie from committing further offences.<sup>32</sup>



Figure 35 Rosie conceals her crimes in her carpet bag in *Alive and Kicking*.

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<sup>31</sup> Joyce Grenfell, *The Time of My Life: Entertaining the Troops* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> The conflation of the cockney charwoman and crime was repeated in other roles played by Harrison, having played the part of a charwoman wrongly accused of theft in a 1951 production of John Galsworthy’s *The Silver Box*. She also played a reformed petty criminal working as a cockney housekeeper for Thorndike in a 1938 production of Emlyn Williams’s *The Corn is Green*.

Whereas Dora and Rosie conform to familiar archetypes of ageing, Winwood's ethereal presence in the role of Mabel resists typage. Winwood brings Hollywood glamour to the character of the retired spinster governess, combining a coquettishness with a costume evoking Mary Shepard's illustrations of Mary Poppins. Her performance was highlighted by one reviewer as being more than a mere stereotype in comparison to the other two, she 'alone is determinedly not a 'dear old lady' and is delightful as a result'.<sup>33</sup> Her screen presence exerted an anachronistic allure with one reviewer commending 'the ageless Estelle Winwood, still unbelievably pretty and flirtatious at 76'<sup>34</sup> and the *Sunday Express* describing her as 'brilliantly bewitched-looking'.<sup>35</sup> Winwood's persona resonates with the glamour of the golden age of Hollywood, one reviewer commenting that her use of facial expression was comparable to Buster Keaton.<sup>36</sup> She is a relic of the cinematic past, reminding a mature audience of childhood pleasures, having sustained an acting career on Broadway and in Hollywood since 1916, after training and starting her career in Britain. Mabel is not hampered or determined by her age in the film, manifesting a glamour, agility and quick-wittedness which defied the constrictions of normative life stages. Winwood had a radical streak to her persona, labelled as 'the most elegant revolutionary ever' on account of her claim to be the first woman to wear lipstick in public in America.<sup>37</sup> Her performance of the role of Mabel accentuates her balletic grace and coyness, pirouetting for the Russians and exerting her winsome charms upon the locals. Mabel is both sophisticated and educated, as befits a governess, having a smattering of Russian and happily coping with quadratic equations.

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<sup>33</sup> *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1959, v.26, no. 301.

<sup>34</sup> David Robinson, *Financial Times*, 22 June 1959.

<sup>35</sup> Derek Monsey, *Sunday Express*, 14 June 1959.

<sup>36</sup> Ivor Adams, 'Island fun' in *The Star*, 11 June 1959.

<sup>37</sup> *Daily Mail*, 29 May 1956.





Figure 36 Mabel charms the Russians with her pirouettes in *Alive and Kicking*.

The characters of the three fugitive women are diverse in their figurations of ageing, but share an energy and optimism for determining their own life course, on their terms. The treatment of the elderly inmates of Sunset Home is comparable to that of labourers at the beginning of the modern age, who, according to Arendt were ‘hidden away and segregated from the community like criminals behind high walls and under constant supervision’, effectively punished for ageing.<sup>38</sup> Sunset Home represents a social system wherein ageing entails loss of self; the women escape from a meaningless existence, effectively incarcerated, to carve out a life which draws on traditional pre-industrial skills, turning to basic survival skills before starting their knitting enterprise. Ageing is shameful and renders the individual futile, no longer able to contribute through production or consumption. Arendt noted that ‘from the beginning of history to our own time it has always been the bodily part of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy’, with women and slaves been hidden away in domestic spaces.<sup>39</sup> The pre-industrial society of Inishfada validates the potential of the older woman, allowing her to be productive, visible and even suggesting her right to be sexually active when speculating about MacDonagh’s harem. The women are allowed to be their authentic selves amidst the romantic imagery of the landscapes of Inishfada. Paradoxically, the women find liberty within a community where traditionally the older woman effectively loses her visibility and individuality, being shrouded in black.

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<sup>38</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 73.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

### *Make Mine Mink*

Collective action was Hannah Arendt's solution to the futility of the modern condition, arguing that 'whoever, for whatever reasons, isolates himself and does not partake in such being together, forfeits power and becomes impotent'.<sup>40</sup> Through collectivity comes power, as is made evident in both *Alive and Kicking* and *Make Mine Mink*, with team work overcoming social isolation and the social imperative to experience ageing as decline. In both films collective action is made manifest in forming a new enterprise bringing the group together with a common aim, which benefits the wider community. Arendt argued that it is 'the nature of laboring to bring men together in the form of a labor gang where any number of individuals "labor together as though they are one"'.<sup>41</sup> Arendt argued that the modern age removes individuality, requiring its members to 'acquiesce in a dazed, 'tranquilized', functional type of behaviour', ending with 'the deadliest, most sterile passivity'.<sup>42</sup> It is this collective work which rouses an ageing household in *Make Mine Mink* out of their apathy and despair.

The pedigree of the film was far from radical, being an adaptation of *Breath of Spring* (1958), playwright Peter Coke being known for his 'boulevard plays'.<sup>43</sup> The film was criticised for its 'leisurely aspidistra-and-antimacassar humour', suggesting that the subject matter may have been somewhat dated for its audience.<sup>44</sup> With a production team responsible for Norman Wisdom's most successful films, the press release for *Make Mine Mink* stressed its suitability for 'all the family', consistent with Rank's comedy formats of the 1950s.<sup>45</sup> Despite the conservative remit of these films Harper and Porter identify a radical subtext to Rank comedies such as the *Doctor* series and Norman Wisdom films, 'using laughter both to show and to reflect

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 322.

<sup>43</sup> Patrice Pavis defines boulevard plays as 'light comedies [...] for a middle-class audience with traditional aesthetic and political tastes – plays that are neither disturbing nor original'; see *Dictionary of the Theatre* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1998), p. 34.

<sup>44</sup> *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August, v. 27, n. 319, 1960. Nevertheless the concept of the film, and the original play, proved to have an enduring appeal, being remade into a Broadway production in 1971, although making a loss, and closing after thirty-five performances. The setting was changed to an old people's home, with a member of the cast actually dying on stage; see James Leve, *Kander and Ebb* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 204.

<sup>45</sup> *Make Mine Mink* press book, BFI Library Special Collections.

the social tensions and choices faced by the British lower middle class'.<sup>46</sup> *Make Mine Mink* maps a similar terrain, exploring how ageing middle-class characters seek to counteract their marginalisation in a society increasingly orientated around youth.

*Make Mine Mink* was one of a clutch of comedies in the late 1950s scripted by Michael Pertwee which foregrounded ageing female characters in the narrative. Pertwee had been responsible for two other crime capers featuring strong mature female characters in supporting roles, who resort to crime to assert their independence. *The Naked Truth* (1957) starred Peggy Mount in the role of Flora Ransom, a middle-aged writer who conspires with other victims to eliminate a blackmailer, whilst in *Too Many Crooks* (1959) Brenda de Banzie played a scorned wife who is kidnapped before taking control of the gang of crooks to get her own back on her faithless husband. Although *Make Mine Mink* featured a predominantly mature female cast in the leading roles, it was Terry-Thomas who was foregrounded in the publicity and reviews, with *Time* magazine relegating the female leads to a brief mention in parentheses.<sup>47</sup> The marketing campaign had an eye on the growing popularity of the sex comedy, with one poster featuring the tagline 'He had a kink for mink' accompanying an image of Terry-Thomas grabbing a mink coat from an otherwise naked girl, with little indication of the true storyline.

The mature female leads were also side lined in favour of Billie Whitelaw, with Rank's marketing suggestions wanting to exploit her appeal at the box office, with her starlet potential being highlighted as 'one of TV's most popular and attractive young actresses'.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly the opening sequence of the film foregrounds the charms of Whitelaw in the role as the maid, Lily, as we follow her journey home, sashaying along the road in high heels, a nipped-in leather jacket and a tight skirt. The film constructs her as the incarnation of modern femininity, confidently making her way through Kensington, in her fashionable attire. Lily's sensuality prefigures the 'swinging London' of the early sixties, rendering the ageing central characters aberrant in a society that prizes youth and sexuality. Her sexuality is emphasised with repeated shots of her tightly skirted bottom, often from the point of view of male characters who are transfixed by the sight, the Major (Terry-Thomas)

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<sup>46</sup> Harper and Porter, *British Cinema*, p. 51.

<sup>47</sup> 'The new comedies' in *Time*, 6 January 1961.

<sup>48</sup> *Make Mine Mink* press book, BFI Library Special Collections.

wondering ‘Why does she always walk like that?’, whilst the lecherous next-door neighbour, Mr. Spanager (Sydney Tafler), gawps at her bending over.



Figure 37 Pinkie scurries to the bathroom in *Make Mine Mink*.

In contrast to Lily’s youth and desirability the inhabitants of the apartment constitute a range of comic representations of different aspects of ageing. To this effect the camera lingers on a close up of Lily’s skirt before cutting away to our first sighting of middle-aged spinster, Pinkie (Elspeth Duxbury) peering anxiously around the corner, her hair encased in a shower cap, her body enshrouded in a sensible dressing-gown. Whereas Lily is confident and attractive, Pinkie scurries down the hallway like a hunted creature, grasping her gown to her neck, her face contorted with fear. Pinkie is described as ‘small, thin, nervous, untidy and birdlike, and of indeterminate age’ in the stage directions for *Breath of Spring*. Duxbury played the role on stage prior to her first film part in *Make Mine Mink*, aged fifty. Pinkie seeks to hide herself away, having no agency in a society fixated on the allure of youth. Duxbury herself suffered the same fate, with Williams noting her relative obscurity, with few other notable film roles ‘suggesting yet another lost opportunity for British cinema in relation to its deployment of female talent’.<sup>49</sup>

Pinkie’s neurotic fragility contrasts with the domineering masculine characteristics of fellow lodger, and spinster, Nan (Hattie Jacques). Nan is solid and forthright, suited in tweed, her confident body language being matched by a vocal style which

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<sup>49</sup> Melanie Williams, ‘Let us now praise not very famous women: some reflections on British character actresses’, unpublished original draft of ‘Entering the paradise of anomalies’. Duxbury was not even honoured with an entry in McFarlane’s *Encyclopedia of British Film*.

is both deep and imperious, demanding the attention of others. The household is presided over by landlady Dame Bee (Athene Seyler), an upper middle-class widow and the most elderly of the group. Dame Bee's eccentricity is made explicit in the nature of her arrival, heralded by the backfiring of her ancient car, as it labours haphazardly along the street before mounting the pavement and crashing into another car. Such an entrance proclaims the association of old age with incompetence and even senility, as she struggles to control the car and comply with codes of civilised behaviour. The publicity for the film cultivated this eccentric persona with an anecdote about Seyler, recounting how 'Athene slipped on her oldest skirt and cardigan to buy ½ lb. of best streaky bacon and returned home with a mink cape worth hundreds of pounds'.<sup>50</sup> Dame Bee is a lovable grandmother-type, whose main concern is for the welfare of the young, devoting her old age to charitable efforts. One reviewer likened her to 'a homely hot-cross bun' adding that 'I could hug her for it; and if we meet, I may'.<sup>51</sup>

The storyline of *Make Mine Mink* hinges on the ageing household's boredom and feelings of futility, led by Dame Bee's decision to give up her charity work, declaring that she feels 'old and useless' being disillusioned by the money being squandered by the board. Her involvement in charity work befits her superior social background, conforming to the template of the 'do-gooder', much like Dora in *Alive and Kicking*. Bee's charity work is essential to her wellbeing, telling Lily that 'I did enjoy it so, and now I've got nothing to look forward to but getting as old and moth-eaten as this wretched thing [throwing her fur coat to Lily]'. Her malaise is shared by her lodgers who bicker ceaselessly venting their frustrations. The Major yearns for his military past, feeling emasculated and helpless in retirement: 'They were the happiest years of my life. Six years of doing something, being somebody. Look at me now, holed up here with a lot of dotty females, no job, no future...nothing to look forward to'. Ageing is commensurate with boredom, driving the group to comic measures to revitalise their lives. The household are imprisoned by their status and torpor within the flat, with Lily's role being to liaise with the outside world doing her errands. She has assumed the role of carer for Bee, helping her to remove her shoes and ensuring her comfort, whilst being essentially a warden for the lodgers,

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<sup>50</sup> *Make Mine Mink* press book, BFI Library Special Collections.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Dehn, 'Miss Seyler glows like a homely hot-cross bun' in *News Chronicle*, 22 July 1960.

imposing rules and reproving them for any infringements. The lodgers' dependent status renders Lily superior to them on account of her youth, allowing her to impose a regime in the interests of her employer.

The convergence of criminality and beneficence is addressed by Arendt, likening the 'doer of good deeds' to a criminal, for both 'are lonely figures, the one being for, the other against, all men; they, therefore, remain outside the pale of human intercourse and are, politically, marginal figures'.<sup>52</sup> As in *Alive and Kicking* it is by collective action that the group break out of their social torpor, bringing them into conflict with the authorities, assuming the status of criminals. Here too the group's actions are seen to benefit the needy, in this case by stealing fur coats from the rich in order to help orphans. Counteracting the boredom of ageing is tantamount to a crime in both these films, with anachronistic behaviour being both comic and criminal. Age is seen to marginalise the group at the start of the film, yet they use their lack of status to advantage, hiding behind the signifiers of respectable ageing to accomplish their crimes and evade capture. Their first collective action is to return the mink coat Lily appropriated from their lecherous next-door neighbour, thereby protecting their 'carer' from the consequences of her crime. Working as a team they manage to reverse the normative hierarchy by outwitting the young and attempting to restore an equilibrium. After the success of their elaborate plan to return the mink the 'gang' are euphoric, and realise that they have an alternative to the oppressive ennui of their existence, described by Dame Bee as 'the dullness of the tea-time of life.'

The group are brought together by their collective action, sharing the same sentiments and even finishing each other's sentences, their sense of empowerment heightened by the use of low angle close-ups. They are transformed from a disparate group of unattached and ageing individuals into a gang, with a collective sense of purpose and a group identity. Pinkie's fragile self-confidence is boosted by her involvement, excitedly insisting on the Major giving her a full role in the gang, and refusing to be peripheralised: 'I don't want to be the mobile reserve. It was just your way of giving me nothing to do'. She becomes animated, barely able to stay still, clasping her hands together and gushing that 'I'm so thrilled to be in the shock troops again!'

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<sup>52</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 180.



Figure 38 Collective action unites the household in *Make Mine Mink*.

By crossing the threshold into criminality the ageing gang are released from the constraints of age. Their criminal activities are essentially play, rendering them childlike in their enthusiasm and energy for their new lives. A key aspect of this ‘play’ is their use of disguise, assuming a range of identities to steal the fur coats. Dame Bee and Pinkie delight in their efforts to disguise themselves, much to the Major’s dismay, the former modelling a paper bin on her head in lieu of an extravagant hat and an eye patch out of a cracker. Pinkie is ordered to wear a false bosom by the Major, thereby concealing her true identity as a sexless spinster, becoming a parody of shapely youth. Her comically inflated cleavage is a ‘vast improvement’ according to the Major; Pinkie’s body language being transformed by her new sexualised persona, simpering and plucking at her new bosom. Pinkie is only able to transform herself with the liberal use of nerve tonic to bolster her nerves, comically teetering on the brink of reversion to her essential nature as the stereotypical neurotic spinster. Her criminal endeavours are constantly undermined by the frailties commensurate with her status, being prone to scattiness and hysteria, the other members of the gang having little faith in her. When late returning from her first job, Nan speculates that Pinkie may have had ‘to stop off for the usual reasons’, the Major retorting that ‘She ought to see a doctor’, the insinuation being a weak bladder.

Pinkie’s spinster status is at the root of much of the comedy involving the character. Her age renders her unrequited desire for the Major comic, regarding him as ‘some sort of Robin Hood’. The Major regards her with scorn and pity, responding ‘As

long as she doesn't see herself as some sort of Maid Marian'. The film draws on the popular myth of the pathological spinster in the scene when Pinkie finds a burglar under her bed. Dressed in a capacious nightie with her hair in curling papers, she goes through the bedtime ritual of checking that a whistle is kept under her pillow, before looking under her bed for intruders. This scenario would be familiar to the audience from music hall jokes and folk songs, specifically Nellie Wallace's rendition of 'My Mother Said Always Look Under The Bed', rendered comic by her persona as the frustrated spinster. The chorus summarised her hope that there *was* a man under her bed:

'But it's never been my luck to find

A man there yet.'

The comedy of this scene ensues from Pinkie's unexpected discovery, resulting in frantic blowing on her whistle whilst holding two small cushions over the bodice of her nightgown to protect her modesty. The misplaced fears of the hysterical spinster are met with the disdain of the Major and the ancient burglar's terror.



Figure 39 Pinkie defends her modesty from the burglar under her bed in *Make Mine Mink*.

The characterisation of Pinkie is consistent with Freud's thinking regarding the post-menopausal woman altering 'strangely in character', and becoming prone to neurosis.<sup>53</sup> Her nervous and childlike nature is consistent with the representation of the ageing spinster post-World War II identified by Rosenthal as 'an exemplar of

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<sup>53</sup> Freud, 'The disposition to obsessional neurosis', pp. 323-24.



feminine failure'.<sup>54</sup> Pinkie's work as a mender of broken china is symbolic of her efforts to repair her own damaged self, the metaphor sustained by the Major interfering with the oven settings to heat his macaroni cheese, permanently damaging her latest piece of work. This aspect of the spinster character is consistent with the ideas of influential sociologist Ernest R. Groves regarding the single woman sublimating sexual energy into 'devotion to business, painting, art or literature'.<sup>55</sup> Tellingly, Pinkie's bedroom is dominated by a table covered in pieces of broken china. Pinkie is patronised and pitied by the other members of the household, referring to her as being less than human, the Major calling her an 'ass' and 'a poor old trout', whilst Nan describes her as a 'poor beast'.

The film perpetuates the representations of spinsters from the inter-war period, identified by Rebecca D'Monte, which 'produced a tension between representing unmarried women as overly "feminine" – chattering, fussing, neurotic - or as having extreme "masculine" attributes'.<sup>56</sup> Whereas Pinkie's fragile state is symptomatic of her aberrant social status, the character of Nan is a contrasting figuration of the spinster as 'abnormal' in terms of their gender traits. Much like Pinkie, Nan is deemed comic in her deficiency of feminine charms, being decidedly masculine in her spinsterhood, presiding over the organisation of the gang's activities alongside the Major. She talks to the Major as an equal, and is uncomfortable with emotional outpourings, feeling sympathy for Pinkie, yet visibly awkward and unable to comfort her, standing at a distance, frowning with discomfort with her hands in the pockets of her blazer. Jacques accentuates the authoritative determination of the character of Nan, her head thrust forward, striding across the screen, or standing squarely, legs astride and chomping enthusiastically into an apple. With the discovery of the burglar in Pinkie's room she confidently orders the Major out of the way, thrusting a revolver at the intruder's chest, and warning him that 'One false move, and I'll fill you full of lead and spread you all over the room!' She takes command of the situation, and uses the opportunity to profit from the knowledge of an experienced criminal. Nan manifests a strength and bravado which diminishes the stature of the Major, challenging preconceptions regarding age and gender. She easily manages to carry Pinkie over her shoulder after having to rescue the gang by making her way

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<sup>54</sup> Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales*, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage*, p. 97.

<sup>56</sup> D'Monte, 'Passion, penury and psychosis', pp. 14-15.

through an air duct. Whereas Pinkie is nervous and fragile around the Major, Nan is brusque and unimpressed at times, being quick to put him in his place, taunting him for having been in the ‘mobile bath unit’, joking that he helped to ‘win the war with soap and water’. She undermines his masculinity, reminding him that his glory days ‘were a long time ago Major. Why do you keep harking back on it?’



**Figure 40** Nan takes control in *Make Mine Mink*.

The character of Nan is rendered comic on account of her size and age, whilst rendered queer on account of her heightened masculine traits, compounding her deviant status as a spinster. Her ambiguity and queerness is accentuated, as Williams points out, when she assumes the signs of youth, femininity and sexuality as a cover for a robbery, ‘masquerading as a blonde sexpot in a Veronica Lake wig, black satin dress and high heels, and attempts to make her voice more trilling and feminine’.<sup>57</sup> Coke envisaged Nan as ‘a gaunt, enthusiastic lady who dresses peculiarly and has a deep booming voice’, suggesting masculinity and oddness, commensurate with popular images of the spinster.<sup>58</sup> Jacques’s performance as Nan is informed by her persona from roles playing formidable authority figures in *Carry On Sergeant* (1958), *Carry On Nurse* (1959) and *Carry On Teacher* (1959). Although barely qualifying as middle-aged, being in her late thirties when cast in *Make Mine Mink*, Jacques is deemed to be facing the twilight years of her life as Nan, largely on account of her spinster status. Jacques came from a variety background, having

<sup>57</sup> Williams, ‘Let us now praise very famous women’.

<sup>58</sup> Peter Coke, *Breath of Spring* (London: Samuel French, 1959), p. 1.

performed in pantomimes and revues since 1944, before making her name in radio in *ITMA* (1948-49), *Educating Archie* (1950-54) and *Hancock's Half Hour* (1954-59). Jacques had not been short of film work since appearing in *Oliver Twist* (1948).

Her appearance transgressed codes regarding femininity, her size seemingly making her suitable for roles which transgressed traditional gender traits, and was therefore inherently comic in the tradition of 'the grotesque body of the unruly woman' identified by Rowe. Her girth had allowed Jacques to transcend normative figurations of femininity, elevating her into roles of authority where her size was equated with importance but also implied a threat to male characters. Tincknell points out how the comedy inherent in the overweight female body is characteristic of the "low" comedy tradition of British popular culture.<sup>59</sup> The publicity material for *Make Mine Mink* highlighted these aspects of the character, describing Nan as being 'built like a genial prize-fighter' and being 'militant, large-framed'.<sup>60</sup> Reviews would also put emphasis on her social class, referring to her as 'a hefty, horsy type' and 'a plum-tongued monument of hockey-stick philosophy'.<sup>61</sup> This emphasis reflects Rosenthal's observation that the image of the spinster in popular iconography was rendered an object of ridicule for working-class audiences on account of a 'combination of celibacy, status, and a claim to independence'.<sup>62</sup>

The transgression into criminal activities proves paradoxical in liberating the gang from the constrictions of age and gender. The final scene sees the gang posing as Beefeaters, their confidence growing as they masquerade as men in order to steal the Crown Jewels. The use of disguise allows them to try on different identities, and gain access to other spaces outside the confines of the flat, including an illegal gambling den and upmarket boutiques. Within the flat they need to maintain a semblance of their former selves to avoid Lily's suspicions, confined to the living room and to the behaviours expected of their age and status, largely static and in silence, reading magazines and sewing. In contrast their activities as a gang entail a frenetic activity, surrounded by fur coats and money, sending them into the world outside the flat to engage with other people. They are forced to suspend their activities when Lily discovers their secret, reluctantly resuming their circumscribed

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<sup>59</sup> Tincknell, 'The nation's matron', p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> *Make Mine Mink* press book, BFI Library Special Collections.

<sup>61</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 June 1960.

<sup>62</sup> Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales*, p. 84.

former existence, having lost the excitement and camaraderie, much to Lily's amazement: 'You do all look down in the dumps today [...] I think you enjoyed the thrill of it all, didn't you, you old devils?' Lily assumes a parental status, reproving the gang for their misbehaviour, and becoming someone to defy. The reversal of their situations is made greater by Lily becoming engaged to a policeman, becoming a conventional and law-abiding citizen, whereas her ageing charges have consolidated their aberrant status by breaking the law. Their criminal activities involve risks and thrills which were associated with youth, rather than maturity, as they depart from the expected life trajectory.

The gang elude detection by complying with the behaviours expected of their age with Lily advising them to 'pretend to be old, or dumb, or stupid' when the police pay a visit. Accordingly Nan rehearses golf shots across the living room, Dame Bee affects deafness and toothlessness, and Pinkie becomes hysterical accusing the Inspector of having 'pounced' on her in the park. The original script for *Breath of Spring* makes their strategy even plainer, as Dame Bee explains: 'We can be slow answering his questions – he'll expect that at our age. (*Excitedly*) Our age! That's the solution. If we behave as old people are expected to, we can detain him for hours'.<sup>63</sup> Their performance of old age was unnecessary, the police are blind to the truth, sharing the popular conception of the ageing population being eccentric, frail and inconsequential.

All of the central characters learn to exploit their age as a cover for their crime in the course of the film. As the most elderly member of the gang, Dame Beatrice finds her age a curse at the beginning of the film, but ultimately exploits it to affect confusion when confronted with the police. She uses her age as a cloak of invisibility when committing minor offences, most notably her erratic driving, and is therefore well qualified to be a getaway driver. Nevertheless, she is able to demonstrate great perspicacity when haggling with the 'fence' (Kenneth Williams), and is quick-witted whilst carrying out the thefts. At the end of the film it is Dame Bee who suggests that the gang resume their activities, despite their close-shave with the police, the irony being that the oldest and most respectable member of the group is the one that leads the others astray. It is clear that the household cannot deny themselves the

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<sup>63</sup> Coke, *Breath of Spring*, p. 62.

excitement and satisfaction of this collaborative endeavour to combat boredom and be of use to the wider community in redistributing wealth.

Seyler embraced ageing, declaring that old age suited her at the age of 101.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, it was her belief that the older actor took more readily to comedy, benefitting from “‘perspective” and a knowledge of human nature [...] One needs a large, tolerant and not too serious point of view – a view lacking necessarily in young folk’.<sup>65</sup> Seyler’s film roles in the course of the 1950s tended to be that of the eccentric aunt and benevolent ageing spinster, often in the role of benefactor to the younger generation. Dame Bee protects the young, whether it be the reformed delinquent Lily or the many orphans who depend on her charitable endeavours. The benevolent ageing woman demonstrates the quality of ‘good nature’ identified by Seyler as ‘indispensable’ to the spirit of comedy, arguing that ‘comedy is inextricably bound up with kindness’.<sup>66</sup> Dame Bee’s costume was interchangeable with that required by many of Seyler’s other film roles, informed by Edwardian era style, dressed fastidiously in formal outfits, with high collared blouses fastened at the neck with a brooch and elaborate hats. Her dated appearance is consistent with Seyler’s persona of grande dame of the theatre, much like Thorndike, being remembered as ‘Britain’s last great link with the Victorian theatre’, her career being ‘The history of modern acting personified’.<sup>67</sup> Having first performed on stage in 1909, she was awarded a CBE in 1959 in recognition of her status as a national institution. Accordingly, Seyler was largely cast in the role of eccentric nobility, the *Daily Telegraph* summarising her roles as ‘queens, dames, dowagers and duchesses, with their wreathed smiles, their clucking and fluttering, their nods, becks, quips and cranks. She wore a tiara as to the manor born’.<sup>68</sup> The combination of her age and plain appearance was cited as making her ideal for comedy, more specifically ‘playing redoubtable old dames’.<sup>69</sup> Seyler exploited the inherent comedy engendered by her looks and status, turning ‘her apparent plainness of countenance into a considerable comic asset’ according to *The Times*, her unruliness as a comic grotesque underlying

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Athene Seyler’, *The Times*, 13 September 1990.

<sup>65</sup> Athene Seyler and Stephen Haggard, *The Craft of Comedy* (London: Frederick Muller, 1943), p. 18.

<sup>66</sup> Seyler, *The Craft of Comedy*, p. 10.

<sup>67</sup> Sheridan Morley, ‘The history of modern acting personified’ in *The Times*, 5 March 1984.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Athene Seyler’, *Daily Telegraph*, 13 September 1990.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

one critic likening her to ‘an irritable hippopotamus’.<sup>70</sup> As an unruly ageing grotesque Seyler’s persona had much in common with Margaret Rutherford, with whom she was frequently confused in her later years.<sup>71</sup> Williams points out that Seyler, Rutherford and Katie Johnson were frequently cast as older ladies whose veneer of eccentricity was deceptive, for they were ‘actually frighteningly self-possessed’.<sup>72</sup>



Figure 41 Athene Seyler as Dame Bee in *Make Mine Mink*.

Dame Bee’s liberation from the shackles of age is starkly juxtaposed with the confinement of the aged mother-in-law of the lecherous next-door neighbour. She represents what the gang wish to avoid, shuffling along in a state of confusion, dressed in black, with a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. She believes that the Major is the ‘gentleman from the waterworks’ and clutches the mink coat her son-in-law was desperate to conceal. Spanager impatiently tells her off, snatching the fur from her and suggesting, somewhat ominously, to his wife that she should ‘put her to sleep’. The old woman is oblivious to the insults and lack of respect, living in her own world and treated like a child. Spanager apologises to the Major for her, explaining that ‘she imagines things...She’s a bit barmy’. Old age in the bosom of the family is a decidedly inferior option to the supportive household nurtured by Dame Bee.

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<sup>70</sup> ‘Athene Seyler’, *The Times*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Williams, ‘Let us now praise’.



Figure 42 Spanager's mother-in-law demonstrates the perils of old age in *Make Mine Mink*.

### Spinster cluster comedy

In seeking to define the stages of female ageing, Botelho quotes Maimonides, asking 'Who is an old woman? One who is called old and does not protest.'<sup>73</sup> The ageing women in both *Alive and Kicking* and *Make Mine Mink* protest against their status, and assert their right to a useful life by transgressing social boundaries and finding new roles for themselves. They are rendered comic in their departure from the expected life course for their age, gender and marital status, yet there are clear historical antecedents for their refusal to accept decline. Research undertaken by Amy M. Froid into ageing single women of early modern Britain reveals that they often chose to become more involved with the community as they aged.<sup>74</sup> Froid suggests that this latent flourishing could stem from enforced 'retirement' in early life 'as household dependants', with a significant number of single women taking a radical path in later life becoming involved with dissenting churches, even taking on leadership roles on account of their 'wisdom and authority' commensurate with their 'advanced age'.<sup>75</sup> The households formed in both *Make Mine Mink* and *Alive and Kicking* follow in the tradition of support through collectivity traced back to pre-industrial Europe by Peter Laslett, where social rules required individuals to live in

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<sup>73</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah*, ch.9 (5) quoted in Lynn Botelho, 'Old age and menopause in rural women of early modern Suffolk', in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, eds. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (London: Longman, 2001), p. 43.

<sup>74</sup> Amy M. Froid, 'Old maids: the lifecycle of single women in early modern England' in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, eds. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (London: Longman, 2001), p. 100.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

nuclear families.<sup>76</sup> Circumstances such as widowhood, sickness or senility left individuals exposed to hardship, having to rely on the charity of the wider community. Froid identifies a tradition of ‘spinster clustering’ in early modern England, whereby ‘poor old women who could often not afford to live alone were able to maintain their own household [...] with other lone women, or by taking in lodgers’.<sup>77</sup> More prosperous ageing single women chose not to live alone, but to form their own household populated by ‘family, extended kin, friends and servants’. Nevertheless the two films represent the kind of household which had been disappearing since the war, with a rise in the number of elderly women living alone between 1945 and 1962. As a consequence the number of households featuring elder men and women sharing a home with non-relatives had become a minority residence pattern by 1962, ‘as living alone came to replace living in lodgings’.<sup>78</sup>

Claire S. Schen identifies how women facing poverty without the protection of family would form an ‘economy of makeshifts’ in pre-industrial Britain: ‘Goodwives, mothers and widows created supportive female networks, worked for parishes and households, sought relief from parishes and collected private charity’.<sup>79</sup> Both Dora in *Alive and Kicking* and Dame Bee in *Make Mine Mink* occupy similar status in terms of upper middle-class widows, with a propensity for charitable endeavours and organisation, their status as leaders being consolidated by their greater age, superior marital status and social class, in comparison to their spinster friends.<sup>80</sup> Historically according to Anne Kugler’s research, upper-class widowhood ‘could be the height of a woman’s experience of freedom and autonomy [...] the early post-menopausal years could potentially be the most rewarding of a woman’s lifespan’.<sup>81</sup> Dame Bee takes in paying guests, yet carries out charitable work at the same time. Her role in supervising Lily is true to the template of the ageing ‘godly

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Laslett, ‘Family, kinship and collectivity as systems of support in pre-industrial Europe’ in *Continuity and Change* 3 (2), 1988, p. 153.

<sup>77</sup> Froid, ‘Old maids’, p. 96.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Wall, ‘The residence patterns of elderly English women in comparative perspective’ in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, eds. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (London: Longman, 2001), p. 143.

<sup>79</sup> Claire S. Schen, ‘Strategies of poor aged women and widows in sixteenth century London’ in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, eds. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (London: Longman, 2001), p. 17.

<sup>80</sup> The Phillips Report noted that half of all women of pensionable age in 1951 were widows. See *Report of the Committee on the Economic and Financial Problems of the Provision for Old Age*, p.43.

<sup>81</sup> Anne Kugler, ‘‘I feel myself decay apace’’: old age in diary of Lady Sarah Cowper (1644-1720)’ in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, eds. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (London: Longman, 2001), p. 68.



“mother” or widow’ who were appointed to a role of ‘shepherding the young’ by the parish, and therefore effectively ‘agents of social control’.<sup>82</sup> The comic twist to the film is that the reformed Lily is required to ‘shepherd’ her elders, who elude her efforts to control them.

For both widows there is little acknowledgement of family and their former lives as married women, their membership of their friendship group being paramount to their happiness and involvement in the wider community. In this respect they are ostensibly single women, in common with their spinster friends, and therefore the source of comedy consistent with cultural archetypes. Nevertheless they are ultimately positive, alternative models of ageing femininity, in contrast with the prevailing narratives of old age as decline, loneliness and adversity. Both *Make Mine Mink* and *Alive and Kicking* affirm the importance of communality on one’s own terms as a strategy for successful ageing. The women break away from socially inscribed models of ageing, either by returning to a mythical golden age by leaving England for a remote Irish island, or by defying the law and incidentally becoming Robin Hood figures in redistributing wealth. The antics of these ageing women challenge expectations of femininity and age in their excessive behaviours, true to the vaudeville tradition identified by Glenn, wherein ‘funny women’ were celebrated as ‘newcomers in grotesquerie’.<sup>83</sup> These actresses were known for ‘their tremendous displays of physical energy’, and cultivating ‘grotesque too-muchness’ as a central element of their act, challenging notions of attractiveness.

Arendt wrote that the modern world was centred on the ‘glorification of labour’ wherein one’s worth was decreed by one’s usefulness to society.<sup>84</sup> Both films explore how deviance from the norm can restore value for the ageing woman, within a society where retirement renders the individual superfluous and worthless. With value comes respect, the loss of which Arendt ascribes to the ‘increasing depersonalization of public and social life’ in the modern world.<sup>85</sup> The ageing women in the films gain self-esteem and also public status as a consequence of their ‘work’, in contrast to the singular lack of respect they suffer before their lives are transformed by collective action.

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<sup>82</sup> Schen, ‘Strategies of poor aged women’, p. 22.

<sup>83</sup> Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, p. 46-47.

<sup>84</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 92.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

## Chapter 4

### **Angry Old Women: Kitchen Sink Comedy of the 1960s**

Both *Ladies Who Do* and *Morgan – A Suitable Case For Treatment* share a concern with anger and rebellion of the working-class matriarch, who ultimately symbolises a working class community which is under threat. The working-class matriarch was marginalised and even demonised in the angry young man narratives of the late 1950s. The premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 had ushered in an era characterised by narratives of rebellion centred on youthful working-class masculinity and the realist aesthetic of the kitchen sink drama. This chapter examines the cultural and social contexts for the representations of the matriarchs in the two films, including how social class and widowhood determines the two characters. The chapter also explores the personae and performances of Peggy Mount and Irene Handl in the respective films, with particular regard to how discourses regarding ageing informed their careers in film comedy.

The title of Kenneth Allsop's *The Angry Decade*, published in 1958, was indicative of the mood of the times, most notably in the cultural phenomenon of the 'angry young man'. Rowe noted that the notion of 'angry young women films' was regarded as laughable, with aggression being 'taboo for women', much like laughter.<sup>1</sup> Despite the social unacceptability of anger for women, Rowe suggested that comedy offered the 'structures for expressing women's anger', allowing a liminal space wherein the unruly woman can make a spectacle of herself.<sup>2</sup> Ageing renders anger even more of a taboo for women according to Kathleen Woodward, who notes how 'anger in the old is outlawed'.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless she argues for the need for the ageing woman to engage in society by channelling their anger to effect social change.

#### **Our mam**

The matriarch's position at the organic centre of working-class life was woven into the narratives of the British new wave, the cinematic movement which arose from

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<sup>1</sup> Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Woodward, 'Against wisdom: the social politics of anger and aging' in *Cultural Critique*, no.51, 2002, p. 206.

the literature of the ‘angry young men’.<sup>4</sup> The iconic figure of the matriarch was central to Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*, published a year after the first performance of *Look Back in Anger*. Hoggart’s stance was animated by the sense that post-war affluence along with the encroachment of American mass culture was threatening the heart of the traditional working class, rendering the working-class matriarch an endangered species. Prime Minister Harold Macmillan declared in 1959 that prosperity had heralded the end of class divisions: ‘the class war is over and we have won’.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless this version of the 1950s is argued to perpetuate a myth of affluence, with John Hill suggesting it ‘disguised [...] the persistence of inequality in the enjoyment of “affluence”’ whilst ‘the overall contours of class relations [...] remained intact.’<sup>6</sup> Robert Hewison observed that the narrative of affluence of the early sixties went hand-in-hand with an ‘awareness that a sense of community had been lost’.<sup>7</sup>

The working-class community was increasingly subject to intense scrutiny, most notably in the work of the Institute of Community Studies founded in 1954 in the East End of London to investigate community life in Bethnal Green. Its first publication, Michael Young and Peter Willmott’s *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957), portrayed a world wherein the matriarch was the backbone of the community, as evident from one ‘informant’: ‘My dad died when I was 14. Mum was a brick. Even if we never had shoes on our feet, we always had good grub [...] Since we’ve had a family of our own, we realise how Mum’s worked for us in the past’.<sup>8</sup>

There were few occupations open to the ageing working-class woman in the post-war period, having little in the way of work experience, skills or qualifications to offer. Frederick Le Gros Clark’s research into the working lives of older women revealed that the mature working-class woman would ‘take it for granted that at their

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<sup>4</sup> The ‘angry young men’ label was used to market Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*. It was rapidly espoused by the media to lump together the work of other ‘angry’ writers who shared similar concerns, class consciousness and mode.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Conservative Nation* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties 1960-75* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 33.

age they may have to gravitate to a catering, domestic or cleaning job'.<sup>9</sup> There had been a noticeable influx of women into the workplace in the post-war period, a large proportion of whom are 'already middle-aged and married'.<sup>10</sup> An increasing number of women were working outside the home but largely in poorly-paid, unskilled work, with little status, or indeed power, compared to the status of the matriarch within her community.<sup>11</sup> Hoggart observed that 'A widow will 'work' 'erself to death' as a charlady 'rather than rely on charity'.<sup>12</sup>

Clark's research into the working-class woman in need of employment evokes a resilient and resourceful figure who manifests a 'tough and often humorous sanity, drained dry of most illusions by long and hard experience, and in many instances contending with some physical handicap or discomfort'.<sup>13</sup> He characterises the working mature woman as showing 'a remarkable genius for making herself 'at home' in her place of work', even to the extent of regarding work as a source of 'companionship'.<sup>14</sup> Most older working women were impelled to work by financial necessity, with a greater proportion of widows in work compared to married women.<sup>15</sup> For Clark these part-time workers were 'a very important marginal group', who by necessity do the jobs that no one else would do yet were taken for granted by employers.<sup>16</sup>

There was a marked decline of the 'powerful woman' in working-class households in the post-war period noted by Elizabeth Roberts, with the role being increasingly filled by the grandmother rather than the mother-figure.<sup>17</sup> Women were rejecting the role models of previous generations 'critical of the older women in their families whom they regarded as bossy, dictatorial, unfair to men and unfeminine'.<sup>18</sup> The matriarch was being pushed into the past by the very community which she had held

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Le Gros Clark, *Woman, Work and Age* (London: Nuffield Foundation, 1962), p. 9. The proportion of women in workforce in 1951 employed as domestic/kitchen/caretakers/charwomen was highest amongst those aged 55+, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 235.

<sup>12</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, *Woman, Work and Age*, p. 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105-6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. The number of women in employment increased by 550 000 between 1952 and 1957 – more than three-quarters of whom were over 40, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: an Oral History, 1940-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

together, communities which were under threat from plans to demolish large areas of dilapidated working-class neighbourhoods, either to be relocated into high-rise blocks, or relocated to the suburbs as in *Ladies Who Do*. For Hoggart the destruction of the working-class street was ultimately the destruction of the matriarchy, imperilling the survival of the working class. Such concerns inspired the television documentary series *Our Street* (1960) which centred on everyday life in a street in Camberwell, threatened by demolition of street and the break-up of community.<sup>19</sup> Whilst *The Spectator* argued that the chief appeal of *Coronation Street* was ‘its almost nostalgic sense of group interdependence [...] at a time when community feeling is rapidly disappearing’.<sup>20</sup>

### **Kitchen sinks**

In 1960 the *Times Literary Supplement* commented on the irony that ‘at a time when the British working-classes seem to be growing conservative in their political views and growing middle-class in their tastes and habits, we should be enjoying for the first time in many years something like a renaissance of working-class literature’.<sup>21</sup> The world of kitchen sink realism was a robustly masculine domain, wherein the mother was at best a relic of the traditional working class, at worst a barrier and threat to the happiness of the male protagonist. The ‘kitchen sink’ implies the domestic, the realm of ‘our mam’, yet this was merely the background for the protagonist’s struggle, with the matriarch being elided or pilloried. Ken Loach was to reflect that the label ‘kitchen sink’ was ‘a pejorative term [...] it was a way to dismiss and put down reflections on working-class life [...] from a middle-class or posh perspective’.<sup>22</sup> The working-class matriarchs to be found in the margins of the kitchen sink realist texts perpetuated myths of class and gender which persist in the cultural imagination. For Valerie Walkerdine enduring myths of working-class femininity were essentially middle-class fantasies: ‘We are the salt of the earth, the bedrock of the revolution; we are working-class women with big hearts, big arms, big breasts; we are stupid, ignorant, deprived, depriving; we are repressed,

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<sup>19</sup> Stuart Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life 1957-64* (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 184-85.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Hill, ‘*Coronation Street*’ in *The Spectator*, 29 December 1961, p. 948.

<sup>21</sup> Editorial, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 29 February 1960, quoted in Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life*, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ken Loach, ‘British social realism in film’, *Nightwaves*, BBC Radio 3, 23 January 2013.

authoritarian [...] We are revolting, anti-democratic. We suppress our children and do not allow them autonomy.<sup>23</sup>

An ambivalence towards the maternal was a persistent theme within the angry young man narratives, an inevitable aspect of the hero's crisis of identity, articulated through his struggle with family, community and social class. The matriarch is foregrounded in Arthur Seaton's list of foes in Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, all of whom represent the establishment which impedes him from pursuing his dreams : 'mothers and wives, landlords and gaffers, coppers, army, government'.<sup>24</sup> This distaste for the maternal is explicit in Sillitoe's evocation of Arthur's neighbourhood, the houses 'built around the factory, streets and terraces hanging on to its belly and flanks like calves sucking the udders of some great mother'.<sup>25</sup> The factory and the mother are as one to Arthur, imprisoning him within a fetid atmosphere of stifling intimacy and physicality.



**Figure 43** The generation gap manifests itself in the Seaton household in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1960).

Arthur's disgust with his parents was endemic of an attitude which defined a generation of 'underdogs' according to Frank Hilton's 1958 article, 'Britain's New Class', who 'loathe the scullery, the kitchen, and the front room they've left behind,

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<sup>23</sup> Valerie Walkerdine, *Schoolgirl Fictions* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 206.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (London: Harper Perennial, [1958] 2008), p. 219.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

and most of them – whatever they may care to say to the contrary – look upon their mums and dads as semi-prehistoric creatures, evolutionary missing links’.<sup>26</sup>

Arthur’s antipathy to the working-class matriarchy is channelled into his hatred of neighbourhood gossip, Ma Bull, a caricature of the working-class matriarch, rendered unsympathetic by Sillitoe’s caustic descriptions, reiterating references to her size and her role as a gossip:

Fat Mrs Bull the gossip stood with her fat arms folded over her apron at the yard-end, watching people pass by on their way to work. With her pink face and beady eyes, she was a tight-fisted defender of her tribe queen of the yard because she had lived there for twenty-two years, earning names like ‘The News of the World’ and ‘Loudspeaker’ because she watched the factory go in every morning and afternoon to glean choice gossip for retail later on.<sup>27</sup>

To be fat, working-class and middle-aged renders Ma Bull powerful within her community, but she is also a grotesque figure, in her refusal to manage the body and overcome the stigma of class. Beverley Skeggs argues that ‘Fat signifies immovability; social mobility [...] is less likely in a fat body’.<sup>28</sup> The body is a class signifier, the ability to manage and regulate the body being valued by society. The emphasis on Ma Bull’s porcine features places her on the threshold between animal and human, following in a tradition in western folklore likening unruly women to pigs: ‘the sisterhood of the swine’ according to Kathleen Rowe.<sup>29</sup> Rowe notes how pigs are associated with the excessive body, gluttony and dirt, their pink hairlessness endowing them with uncanny human characteristics. Rowe goes on to observe that ‘The transgressive, round female body is also the maternal body, and maternity ties women to the process of generation and ageing. As a result, the figure of the grotesque old woman often bears a masculinist culture’s projected fears of aging and death.’<sup>30</sup> Glenn notes how excess, as exemplified by ‘too much fat’, is an important

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<sup>26</sup> Frank Hilton, ‘Britain’s new class’ in *Encounter* 10, 1958, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Sillitoe, *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, p. 28.

<sup>28</sup> Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 83.

<sup>29</sup> Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 39.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

element of popular comedy tradition, with the spectacle of the large woman disturbing concepts of attractiveness and femininity.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 44 Ma Bull (Edna Morris) keeps an eye on Arthur (Albert Finney) in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*.

Rowe argued that matriarchs can ‘serve as targets for the hatred of repression [...] especially by the infantile, regressive, and misogynistic hero’.<sup>32</sup> The matriarch’s traditional position at the heart of the working-class community was under threat in an era which increasingly prioritised youth over age. Arthur takes pleasure in provoking Ma Bull in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, to the extent that he shoots at her with an air-rifle, to punish her for gossiping about him.<sup>33</sup> The film works to alienate the viewer from Ma Bull, establishing her as a comic figure, as we are positioned to laugh with Arthur at her anger and frustration in response to the shooting.

Nevertheless a nostalgia for the working-class matriarch was at the heart of the huge success of *Coronation Street* (1960- ).<sup>34</sup> *Coronation Street* was a celebration of matriarchies according to Marion Jordan: ‘the matriarchies of place, not of blood relationship [...] Ena Sharples and, earlier, Minnie Caldwell, are grandmothers to the street, with that combination of sentimentality and trustworthiness traditionally

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<sup>31</sup> Glenn, *Female Spectacle*, p. 46-47.

<sup>32</sup> Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, p. 105.

<sup>33</sup> The novel is rather more vicious as Ma Bull is hit in the face by the pellet, whilst the film renders the scene comic as she is shot in the backside.

<sup>34</sup> The programme commanded a regular audience of over twenty-two million in 1961; see Derek Hill, *The Spectator*.



(stereotypically) accorded to such legendary figures'.<sup>35</sup> These matriarchs and the actors who played them became household names, enjoying the popularity accorded to film stars. *The Spectator* declared that Ena Sharples is 'the second best-known lady in the land' recounting the rapturous welcome Violet Carson met with when turning on the Blackpool illuminations: 'handkerchiefs fluttered from fields and gardens, people lined the city route and a crowd of 6000 jammed the ceremony'.<sup>36</sup> Jordan argues that the representations of working-class femininity in *Coronation Street* tended to be distorted by caricature, as with Ena Sharples for 'There is nothing of Realism in the hugely square face or the large mesh hairnet clamped in place with metal pins'.<sup>37</sup> This over-statement of matriarchal attributes rendered the characters comic in the tradition of the unruly woman, marking them as 'other' to legitimised femininity.



Figure 45 Ena Sharples was at the forefront of the appeal of *Coronation Street*.

### ***Ladies Who Do***

*Ladies Who Do* was informed by an understanding of the basis of *Coronation Street*'s success, with a narrative centred on the matriarch set in an archetypal working-class neighbourhood, and featuring a cast familiar from television. The debt to television was typical of Bryanston Studios according to Charles Barr, promoting 'modest, unstarry films in black and white' which clearly aimed to attract an

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<sup>35</sup> Marion Jordan, 'Realism and convention' in *Coronation Street*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: BFI, 1981), p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> Hill, *The Spectator*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

audience away from the small screen.<sup>38</sup> The film met with a modest success, cited as being one of the forty or so most successful films of 1964 at the British box office.<sup>39</sup> Despite popular success there was a critical distaste for such prosaic fare as working-class matriarchs at war, with the film being judged derivative, Alexander Walker pronouncing that ‘Ealing Studios did the same thing more wittily. *Coronation Street* does the same thing more entertainingly.’<sup>40</sup> This was indicative of a wider pressure on the film industry from the Institute of Economic Affairs to move away from the ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday’ to ‘films with special and outstanding entertainment qualities’.<sup>41</sup> *Ladies Who Do* bore the hallmarks of ‘low’ culture, with a narrative which celebrated working-class community, deploying broad stereotypes, slapstick and farcical situations. Moreover the character of Mrs Cragg was the incarnation of the middle-aged battleaxe from the seaside postcard tradition. Penelope Huston condemned producers for ‘entertainment movies barely more ambitious in conception, execution and casting than the sort of thing their audiences are watching every night on television’.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless there was some praise for the film, notably for the performances of the middle-aged female cast, with Dilys Powell praising Peggy Mount and Dandy Nichols for being ‘some of the most reliable comics in the business’.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 46 The middle-aged matriarch dominates the poster for *Ladies Who Do*.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 224.

<sup>39</sup> Bill Altria, ‘Survey of success’ in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 17 December 1964, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Walker, *Evening Standard*, 16 January 1964.

<sup>41</sup> Terence Kelly, Graham Norton and George Perry, *A Competitive Cinema* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1966), p. 36.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*; Huston is quoted from an article in *Sight and Sound*.

<sup>43</sup> Dilys Powell, *Sunday Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1964.

The status of the film was indicative of a wider crisis within the British film industry, being caught up in the 1963-4 winter distribution crisis with several British Lion films failing to receive bookings from exhibitors. Felix Barker listed it as ‘one of the “held-up” independent films for which we are being asked to feel so sorry’.<sup>44</sup> Although Bryanston had taken a leading role in the production of some of the key films which constituted the British New Wave, *Ladies Who Do* was very much part of the ‘old’ wave in its production credentials, with key personnel having a track record in working with mature comedy actresses during the previous decade, including screenwriter Michael Pertwee. Director, C.M. Pennington-Richards, had worked on a series of popular comedies in the 1950s and 1960s, including directing Margaret Rutherford in *Aunt Clara* (1954) and Peggy Mount in *Inn For Trouble* (1959). Producer George H. Brown had a prolific and lengthy career, producing popular films including *Murder, She Said* (1961) and *Murder At The Gallop* (1963), both starring Rutherford.

At the heart of *Ladies Who Do* is a power-struggle between Mrs Cragg (Peggy Mount), the office char, and her employer, property developer James Ryder (Harry H. Corbett), who plans to redevelop her neighbourhood. The comedy mobilises the traditional narrative dynamics of the farce, which centres on the polarisation between pairings of like and unlike characters; young Ryder is pitted against the middle-aged charladies, with the working-class community against the world of the City. Although subservient and seemingly powerless in her work as a charlady, Mrs Cragg proves indomitable when her community is threatened, being both cunning and resourceful. Ultimately Ryder is exposed as the son of a charlady himself, and is taught a lesson by the matriarchy which he had betrayed. Nevertheless the inherently conservative nature of farce ensures that the chars’ insurgency is ultimately contained by their reliance on patriarchal institutions for the financial success which enables them to defeat the developers. It is the upper middle-class Colonel Whitforth (Robert Morley), Mrs Cragg’s other employer, who masterminds their financial dealings using his connections in the City. Having preserved the fabric of the matriarchy the chars prove their naivety by switching allegiances and working alongside their erstwhile enemy, developing new plans to demolish the street and replace it with modern apartment blocks, thereby alienating the older generation. The

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<sup>44</sup> Felix Barker, *Evening News*, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1964

chars are rendered comic grotesques on account of their transgression of their class status by gaining wealth, the final scene of the film creating a spectacle of their pretensions to glamour, being awkward and ungainly in their furs and high-heels as they parade triumphantly past Jim Ryder. The matriarchy maintains its power by saving the street, yet remains intrinsically ridiculous and dependent on the patriarchy.



Figure 47 The unruly charladies are rendered grotesque by their wealth in *Ladies Who Do*.

Peggy Mount heads the cast, having had a long career in repertory theatre before making her name in her forties as archetypal working-class matriarch Emma Hornett in the stage play *Sailor Beware!*, reprising the role in the 1956 film adaptation. She was cast in a very similar role as Ada Larkin in the popular sitcom *The Larkins* (1958-60, 1963-4) and the spin-off film *Inn For Trouble* (1960). Her film and television roles confined her to the role of harridan whereas a somewhat broader repertoire of roles were available to her on the stage, earning critical plaudits for her performances in classical productions ranging from Shakespeare to Chekhov. Mount confessed in later life how she had aspired to be ‘a slim glamour puss’ for the roles she wanted to play, but was told by a one director that she had ‘a character face, a character body, a character walk, and [will] never be anything but a character woman’.<sup>45</sup> Although such attributes would seem to dictate supporting roles, Mount’s lack of glamour did not preclude stardom in the tradition of the character actors in British cinema. Her performance style and framing within the scene worked to heighten the spectacle of an excessiveness licensed by the tradition of the female

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<sup>45</sup> Peggy Mount, interview with Sue Lawley, *Desert Island Discs*, BBC, 9 June 1996.

grotesque in popular comedy. Mount's press and publicity reiterated her ordinariness, making her relatable in the tradition of the character actor defined by Rudolf Arnheim as heightened imperfection, whose 'models exist in reality'.<sup>46</sup> Arnheim elaborates that the character actor 'shows man as he is' rather than as what 'he would like to be' wearing 'the individual aura of the genuine'.<sup>47</sup> Mount's working-class roots in Southend were central to her persona as the working-class matriarch, recalling the hardships of her childhood in interview: 'My father was an invalid and I had to help to support the family. There was no money for drama school...'<sup>48</sup> The ordinariness of her persona was sustained by an emphasis on domesticity and a life far from stardom, as made evident in one interview which described her as a 'warm-hearted, domesticated lady', committed to knitting and baking, 'Padding around in stockinged feet with a hole in the toe, hair awry, hands covered in flour'.<sup>49</sup>

Mount's appearance defined her performance and the roles she was given, repeatedly described in terms of excess and the physical eccentricities associated with the character actor. David Quinlan evokes her as monstrous in his *Directory of Film Comedy Stars*, being 'larger-than-life' and possessing 'an impressive mouthful of teeth',<sup>50</sup> whilst the obituary in *The Guardian* described her figure as 'suggesting an ample corsage filled with concrete, that wordlessly and hilariously forbade the taking of liberties'.<sup>51</sup> The solidity of Mount's body is rendered comic but also combative, being consistent with the middle-aged female grotesque moving beyond asexuality to a persona who actively 'forbids' sexuality. The *Daily Telegraph* echoed this aspect of her persona, commenting that her characters were 'entirely lacking sex appeal, their domineering nature stamping out such fancies'.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly the publicity material which accompanied the release of *Ladies Who Do* exploited her status as a comic grotesque suggesting a 'Peggy Mount Expressions Contest' in local papers,

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<sup>46</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Film Essays and Criticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>48</sup> Pamela Coleman, 'Things I wish I'd known at 18: Peggy Mount', *Sunday Express Magazine*, 21 August 1983.

<sup>49</sup> Liz Prosser, 'I may be fat and ugly but I'm a success', *The Sun*, 19 September 1977.

<sup>50</sup> David Quinlan, *Quinlan's Illustrated Directory of Film Comedy Stars* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1992), p. 214.

<sup>51</sup> Dennis Barker, 'Peggy Mount: the last of the great British battleaxes', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2001.

<sup>52</sup> Obituary in *Daily Telegraph*, 14 November 2001.

with a range of close ups from the film to be matched to the appropriate description.<sup>53</sup>



Figure 48 Promotional material for *Ladies Who Do*.

Mount’s persona belonged to a tradition of unruly women in female comedy, whose inversion of gender traits is the source of specularity. The most notable influence on Mount was Winnie Lightner, Warner Brothers’ top female star of 1929-31, who made a career in comedy approaching middle age, described by Jenkins as having a ‘robust manner, booming voice, and rapid movements exaggerate her physical size’.<sup>54</sup> Mount’s performance style is true to the variety tradition, summarised by James Agee as being characterised by stock gestures and performance tricks, a distinctive expressivity, immediacy and physicality.<sup>55</sup> Her persona was usually tagged with one of two descriptors in the press: ‘dragon’ or ‘battle-axe’. Both types suggest a domineering female character whose assumption of male characteristics is taken to an extreme, rendering her a rampaging threat, primarily to male characters. *The Spectator* wrote of her performance as Emma Hornett that ‘she roars and bullies, snaps and frets with the immense and hideous gusto of one whose mission it is to make other people’s lives a hell on earth’.<sup>56</sup> The roles which were to define her screen persona cast her alongside a weaker male character, creating a gender dynamic in which she is the monstrous female oppressor of the emasculated male. As Emma Hornett she frightens off her prospective son-in-law in *Sailor Beware!*,

<sup>53</sup> *Ladies Who Do* press book, BFI Library Special Collections.

<sup>54</sup> Jenkins, *What Made The Pistachio Nuts?*, pp. 260-61.

<sup>55</sup> James Agee, ‘Comedy’s Greatest Era’ in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 439.

<sup>56</sup> Anthony Hartley, *The Spectator*, 25 February 1955.

and in *The Larkins* Ada dominates her ineffectual husband Alf Larkin (David Kossoff). Her vocal characteristics were key to this persona, being celebrated for her raucous and bellowing style, the *Daily Mirror* describing her as a ‘foghorn-voice heavyweight’.<sup>57</sup> Mount bemoaned how she was type-cast, commenting that ‘People expect me to shout and rave. They’re disappointed if I don’t.’<sup>58</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* obituary remembers Mount in terms of her monstrosity, as belonging ‘to a hallowed tradition of Amazonian scolds. She had teeth which gnashed whenever she tried to smile, a gravelled voice which sounded like a cement mixer, a broad beam and an even broader, scowl-ridden face’.<sup>59</sup>



Figure 49 Peggy Mount displays her 'impressive mouthful of teeth'.

Military metaphors were frequently deployed to evoke her performances and characters, with *The Sun* summarising Mount’s career as consisting of ‘barrel-chested sergeant majors of women that Peggy Mount has played with such booming force [...] One crushing blow and instant death.’<sup>60</sup> In role as Emma Hornett she was described as ‘the most explosive character in drama since Hotspur’ and ‘more intimidating than a fixed bayonet – and with a voice to match’.<sup>61</sup> Military references are invoked in the press release material for *Ladies Who Do*, referring to the character of Mrs Cragg as ‘Commander in Chief’ and ‘the master mind, the generalissimo par excellence behind the famous Battle of Pitt Street’.<sup>62</sup> Such

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<sup>57</sup> Ken Irwin, ‘The star who’s stuck with a dragon’ in *Daily Mirror*, 23 October 1971.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Obituary, *Daily Telegraph*, 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Prosser, ‘I may be fat and ugly’.

<sup>61</sup> Obituary in *The Times*, 14 November 2001.

<sup>62</sup> *Ladies Who Do* press book, BFI Library Special Collections.

imagery evokes the battleaxe, a representation of the mature woman which is not confined to popular film and television comedy of the twentieth century, enduring through the centuries. The *Old Testament* condemns the termagant declaring that ‘As the climbing up of a sandie way is to the feet of the aged, so is a wife full of words to a quiet man’.<sup>63</sup> Pieter Brueghel’s *Dulle Griet* celebrated the ‘ill-tempered, scolding woman’ of Flemish folklore, such figures being prevalent in the literature and art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>64</sup> Brueghel’s painting depicts a warrior peasant woman dressed in armour, sword in her hand and mouth agape whilst clutching cooking utensils, leading an army of women to invade hell.<sup>65</sup>



Figure 50 Detail from Pieter Brueghel's *Dulle Griet* (c. 1564).

This figuration of the working-class matriarch as unruly, monstrous and ridiculous lies at the heart of the farce of *Ladies Who Do*. The character of Mrs Cragg was conceived as being rather antagonistic, of indeterminate age and lacking in glamour, in a tradition established by Ma Bull and Ena Sharples :

heavily built with an aggressive expression and wispy grey hair which pokes untidily from beneath the scarf which is knotted on her head. She could be anything from 40 to 60 years of age. She smokes the butt of a cigarette and

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<sup>63</sup> *Ecclesiasticus* 25:20.

<sup>64</sup> Walter S Gibson, *Pieter Brueghel and the Art of Laughter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 126.

<sup>65</sup> Caryl Churchill reclaimed the character of Dulle Griet in *Top Girls* as a feminist icon, portraying her as a revolutionary figure, explaining her invasion of hell as a defiant stand for her family and community: ‘I’d had enough, I was mad, I hate the bastards. I come out of my front door that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, “Come on, we’re going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out.” And they all come out just as they was from baking or from washing in their aprons...’ (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 28.



coughs [...] She wears a tweed coat, useful shoes and carries a large bag and an umbrella [...] sniffing the air aggressively.<sup>66</sup>

The combination of agelessness, aggression and shabbiness delineates a character who defies traditional gender boundaries. She is purposeful, assertive and unrestrained by her femininity, her appearance, stance and behaviour suggesting a strength of character and lack of concern for the opinion of others.

*Ladies Who Do* is set in the East End of London, the site of much of the post-war research carried out by the Institute of Community Studies, including Peter Townsend's *The Family Life of Old People*. Townsend had observed the strong sense of community based around a complex network of relationships involving family, neighbours and friends, particularly in some of the oldest streets. The film's opening sequence locates Mrs Cragg and her fellow chars firmly in a traditional working-class community, leaving their terraced houses to go to work. We follow the journey of their bus to the soaring shiny office blocks of the city in the course of the title sequence, establishing the conflict at the heart of the film between tradition and modernity, community and business, and ultimately the matriarchy and the masculine world of finance and power.



Figure 51 The charladies wait for their bus in *Ladies Who Do*.

Mrs Cragg is the incarnation of the spirit of Dulle Griet for the 1960s, leading an army of working-class charwomen in fighting their equivalent of hell: the world of financiers and the stock exchange. Just as Dulle Griet's army steals treasure from

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<sup>66</sup> *Ladies Who Do* shooting script, BFI Library Special Collections.

hell, Mrs Cragg's army plunders the stock exchange, with the intent of using the money to secure the future of their street. She organises a 'council of war in my 'ouse' when faced with demolition gangs, comparing her women to the French Resistance. A rattled James Ryder has to implore the police to oppose the women, although they are reluctant to take on the women:

Policeman: I don't see what harm they can do to a bulldozer.

James Ryder: You don't know these old dragons mate!



Figure 52 The army of matriarchs at the Battle of Pitt Street in *Ladies Who Do*.

A military soundtrack accompanies images of crowds of marching housewives, summonsed by their leader, Mrs Cragg, to commence the 'Battle of Pitt Street'. Stern-faced, attired in aprons and headscarves, they stream past the machinery and workmen threatening their neighbourhood. A key weapon used by this army of matriarchs is gossip, their strategy being to surround the workmen in gossiping clusters, giving them no room to start work, and even causing one workman to pass out at the gory medical details shared by two of the women. The marauding masses of gossiping women draws on a recurrent caricature of the working-class older woman. For Arthur Seaton the gossip of Ma Bull was oppressive and threatening; Ena Sharples's first appearance in *Coronation Street* is characterised by her relentless and merciless gossiping. Studies of the working class identified gossip as the lifeblood of the community with Roberts observing that in 'more traditional working-class areas gossiping was an integral part of women's lives; it confirmed their feeling of belonging to a social group with a common history, common traditions and shared standards of behaviour. It helped those experiencing difficulties

in their lives.’<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless gossip was not purely a benign force for it ‘was also feared; it could ruin reputations’.<sup>68</sup> The massed ranks of matriarchs are dressed identically and work seamlessly in co-operation with each other to overwhelm the workforce.<sup>69</sup> The iconography of the world of the matriarch becomes their weapons, with baskets of shopping being dropped in the path of oncoming diggers, garden shears being used to trim a police car aerial, washing-up liquid squirted into the police car’s loudspeaker, milk bottles placed under the police car’s tyres, and children used to establish lines of communication.



Figure 53 The matriarchs overwhelm the police and use gossip as a weapon in *Ladies Who Do*.

By working as a unified force, and using whatever resources and skills they have, they demonstrate resilience and cunning in protecting their community. It is the matriarchs who save their street, assisted by children, whilst the men are made irrelevant in their invisibility. Nevertheless the film positions the audience to laugh at the women’s naivety, which borders on ignorance, in the face of the machinations of business and the modern world beyond their street. This notion of the working-class matriarch as essentially uneducated and ignorant is cited as one aspect of the pathologization of the working class by Steph Lawler: ‘They do not know the right things, they do not value the right things, they do not want the right things’.<sup>70</sup> Mrs Cragg’s ignorance is made clear when presented with a cheque by the Colonel,

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<sup>67</sup> Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 208.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>69</sup> The scene evokes *The Ladykillers* (1955), when Mrs Wilberforce’s friends come around and overwhelm the gang by sheer numbers and small-talk, the frail old ladies being indistinguishable from each other, in their genteel antiquated clothing, and being of a similar stature to each other.

<sup>70</sup> Steph Lawler, ‘Escape and escapism: representing working-class women’, *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*, ed. Sally Munt (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 117.

having made five thousand pounds upon the strength of the information on the scrap of paper she had taken from the bin in Ryder's office. She is suspicious and adamant that the money must be illegal, insistent on taking the cheque to Ryder believing that the money must be his. Mrs Cragg's ignorance is short-lived in comparison to her fellow chars: Mrs Higgins (Miriam Karlin) cannot pronounce 'capitalism' and parrots communist ideology with a mouthful of cake or a fag on the go; Mrs Merryweather (Dandy Nicholls) assumes a persistently gormless expression, her mouth hanging open; and the particularly naïve Miss Parish (Avril Elgar) is in a perpetual state of nervous confusion. The chars only want the money in order to save their community, having no ambitions beyond that. Unlike the younger masculine protagonists of the kitchen sink dramas they do not want change, they want everything to remain the same. The representation is consistent with the East End matriarchs portrayed in Young and Willmott's *Family and Kinship*, with Ross McGibbin noting that they could seem somewhat 'dim' by revealing how limited their horizons were in their answers to questions, their social experience being limited to the family network, and their street, often seeming to have little wider knowledge.<sup>71</sup>

The *Daily Worker* was particularly critical of what it saw as the film's 'snobbery': 'Funny old chars, funny old trade unionists – you've never seen such a gormless lot'.<sup>72</sup> The *Sunday Express* reviewer was particularly critical of the 'condescension' implicit in the representation of the charladies.<sup>73</sup> The fundamental comic incongruity of charladies being successful business tycoons is highlighted in the pressbook, which proclaims that 'Cleaners with such a flair for business are extremely rare but nearly everyone owes a debt of gratitude to these unsung wielders of buckets and mops'.<sup>74</sup> The fact that the comedy centres on charladies is capitalised on in the promotional ideas supplied to cinemas, suggesting a competition to find the 'most attractive charlady in your town', a tie-in spring cleaning feature in the local press, a 'street stunt' with students masquerading as charladies scrubbing the town centre, even a red-carpet opening night for the cinema's own cleaners. Another suggestion

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<sup>71</sup> Ross McGibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 183.

<sup>72</sup> Nina Hibbin, *Daily Worker*, 18 January 1964.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Wiseman, 'I found little to laugh at in this' in *Sunday Express*, 19 January 1964.

<sup>74</sup> *Ladies Who Do* pressbook, BFI Library Special Collections.

was a ‘guess who?’ competition featuring a photograph of the rear-view of three of the charladies in the film, on all fours, all clad in similar housecoats.



Figure 54 'Guess who?' competition for *Ladies Who Do*.

The charladies work together organically in the film, being so well-practised in their day-to-day routine, that they have a system of using the office phones to quickly communicate any dangers which might infringe on their enjoyment of their work, making the time to sit at the desk and enjoy a book, smoke a cigarette and have a tea-break. The workplace is clearly made into their territory, despite the efforts of the supervisor to check on them. The comedy of the film works around this element of subversion and collaboration in the face of oppression. Although their work is menial and they are represented as essentially naïve in their understanding of the business world, they are able to work together to outwit their bosses. Mrs Cragg is able to summon an army of women and organise quasi-military manoeuvres in order to outwit the developers, whereas in the City she is subservient to her supervisor, and not even on speaking terms with the people whose offices she cleans. She crouches under the desk, scrubbing the floor, needing to make herself invisible whilst the businessmen talk above her head.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Michael Pertwee’s script was informed by his wartime experience of ‘an army of cheerful London charladies’ who found their way into the headquarters of Operation Overlord when a door had been left open by mistake. Pertwee had to hurriedly evict the charladies who were oblivious to the importance of what was inside the room. See Pertwee, *Name Dropping* (London: Lesley Frewin, 1974), p. 79.



Figure 55 Mrs Cragg knows her place as a char in the City in *Ladies Who Do*.

### ***Morgan - A Suitable Case for Treatment***

*Morgan – A Suitable Case for Treatment* portrays a world wherein the working-class matriarchy has lost its power, dislodged by youth and affluence. Irene Handl is cast as Mrs Delt, a working-class widow who deals with loss by clinging on to a fervent belief in the politics of her husband and the past. She is a relic whose irrelevance in the modern world is made apparent as her son, Morgan (David Warner) struggles to reconcile his roots with the middle-class world of his ex-wife, Leonie (Vanessa Redgrave).<sup>76</sup> Unlike Mrs Cragg, Mrs Delt is peripheral to the narrative, much as she is within her son's world. Whereas Mrs Cragg successfully takes on big business, Mrs Delt can only stand by and watch as her son unravels in the midst of the bourgeois milieu of swinging London. Mrs Cragg's anger is channelled to mobilise her community, whilst Mrs Delt's anger is confined to futile political diatribes in which she extolls the Marxist values held by her deceased husband.

*Morgan* is indebted to the cinema of the angry young man as might be expected given director Karel Reisz's previous work, including *Saturday Night*, *Sunday Morning*. This was not only evident in the John Dankworth soundtrack and monochrome film stock but also in the central concern with social class and gender, with the mother-son relationship being integral to the narrative. Nevertheless

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<sup>76</sup> Warner came to the part following acclaim playing Hamlet with the Royal Shakespeare Company (1965). Morgan is informed by the spirit of Hamlet in tracing the tensions between parent and child.

whereas the kitchen sink films centred on the disaffection of working-class youth, *Morgan* portrayed a world wherein the working-class matriarch was equally disenfranchised and possessed by anger. Karel Reisz was to recall that his vision for the film was as a comedy ‘about serious things. And I hoped there were enough pratfalls for it to work with the popular audience’.<sup>77</sup> This was a film with an agenda, which sought to be overtly engaged with contemporary issues, in contrast to *Ladies Who Do* wherein any sense of topical relevance is purely to serve the primary purpose of the farce to entertain. Age was central to Reisz’s vision of the film, arguing that the film was ‘extremely germane to the way young people are now’ and that it was ‘a way to bridge the generations’.<sup>78</sup>

The release of the film occurred on the day before the publication of the iconic edition of *Time* magazine celebrating ‘LONDON: the swinging city’ on its front cover, marking London’s position at the centre of 1960s youth culture. The editorial celebrated how London had been re-invigorated by young, and often working-class, talent, reflecting an impetus for change within a country enjoying continuing prosperity, ‘fuelled by the instant obsolescence of the new consumerism’ according to Colin Gardner.<sup>79</sup> *Morgan* portrays a world wherein the working class has been rendered obsolete, as dramatized by Morgan’s breakdown as he waivers between his mother, his ex-wife, Leonie, and a deep desire to forsake his human form to become a gorilla, thereby regaining his masculinity. The ethereal artiness of the bourgeois Leonie’s world is juxtaposed with the stolid grind of the steamy café where his mother works; the former is brightly lit, white and spacious, whereas the café is grubby, its customers ageing and inert. Morgan has moved from the world of the kitchen sink, presided over by his mother, to Leonie’s world, within which he struggles to retain his identity, whilst his mother-in-law tries to take control.

For Irene Handl the role of Mrs Delt was true to her stage and screen persona, typically that of ‘the Cockney char or mum’ according to *The Times*.<sup>80</sup> Quinlan summarised her career as ‘Cooks, gossips, busybodies and aggressive domestics of

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<sup>77</sup> Brian McFarlane, ‘Karel Reisz’, *An Autobiography of British Cinema* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 478.

<sup>78</sup> Alexander Walker, *Hollywood England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties* (London: Harrap, 1986), p. 311.

<sup>79</sup> Colin Gardner, *Karel Reisz* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 141.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Lennon, ‘Irene's best lines are her own’ in *The Times*, 26 September 1984, p. 9.

all shapes and ranks'.<sup>81</sup> Handl's persona was circumscribed by the iconography of the working-class matriarch from the very start of her career, the *Financial Times* obituary recounting how her success in an early role as a maid 'consigned her to floral housecoats, headscarves and chirpy skivviness for many of the next 50 years'.<sup>82</sup> As a character actor she was associated with a particular type, perpetuating the stereotype of working-class ignorance playing 'unmaliciously grotesque gallery of ignorant old dears' and 'pawky, gormless, unforgettable women'.<sup>83</sup> In contrast to the robustness of Mount's persona, Handl was described as 'small, dumpy and invariably cheerful', yet much like Mount's roles a military metaphor is used by the *Daily Express* to describe her characters as 'an army of Cockney battlers always getting their verbals in a twist march[ing] across our screens'.<sup>84</sup>

Born in 1901, Handl started her acting career at thirty-six, having dedicated her adult life to caring for her ailing widower father, true to the role of the old maid. She observed that her age had prohibited her choice of roles: 'I had to skip the romantic lead bit, which I would have liked because I am very romantic and I think I would have been good at it'.<sup>85</sup> Handl felt restricted by typecasting, lamenting that she was 'doomed to play cheery old cockney souls'.<sup>86</sup> She came from a privileged background, claiming that her cockney persona was based on family servants from her childhood.<sup>87</sup> There was clearly an enormous demand for her character type as she appeared in some of the most notable film comedies in the post-war era, including working with the Boulting brothers on several films including *I'm All Right Jack* (1959) and *Heavens Above!* (1963), as well as taking parts in prominent film comedy series featuring in two *St. Trinian's* films, two *Carry On* films, as well as *Doctor in Love* (1960). Nevertheless Handl was constricted to the fate of a character actor, failing to secure a leading role in any of her film parts, yet in common with Mount, she had established herself as a household name through her television work prior to *Morgan*, in the role as housekeeper Mrs Twizzle in *Educating Archie* (1958-59). She had been acclaimed for her first leading role on the stage as the cockney charlady Mrs Puffin in the 1961 production of *Goodnight Mrs Puffin*, which ran for three

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<sup>81</sup> Quinlan, *Quinlan's Illustrated Directory*, p. 121.

<sup>82</sup> *Financial Times*, 30 November 1987, p. 21.

<sup>83</sup> Shaun Usher, 'First lady of laughter' in *Daily Mail*, 30 November 1987, p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> 'Irene's such a dear' in *Daily Express*, 16 August 1982.

<sup>85</sup> Tom Hutchinson, 'Irene Handl' in *The Guardian*, 28 July 1971.

<sup>86</sup> 'Back page: happy ruin' in *The Observer*, 29 September 1974.

<sup>87</sup> Lennon, 'Irene's best lines'.



years, including a world-wide tour. These roles consolidated her persona as, in her own words, ‘the usual old girl in the cross-over apron’.<sup>88</sup>



Figure 56 Mrs Delt: ‘the usual old girl in the cross-over apron’ in *Morgan*.

Handl’s voice was integral to her unruly persona, foregrounding an identity which is defiantly cockney and working-class. The *Daily Telegraph* evoked her delivery as being ‘an extraordinary and endearing cockney whine’<sup>89</sup> whilst the *Evening Standard* referred to Handl’s ‘twisted Cockney vowels’ as being ‘raucous and uninhibited’.<sup>90</sup> Handl drew on her memories of sayings from her childhood ‘to give these old dears the flavour of quaintness’.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless her performance style was deemed to convey greater depths according to *The Guardian*, purveying ‘a sense of aloneness, a feeling beneath the jokey mannerisms of romantic isolation’.<sup>92</sup> This quality was central to her performance as Mrs Delt, who is bereft of family and community.

Handl’s performance in *Morgan* met with approval from the critics, with one reviewer suggesting that she was ‘employed for once as an actress rather than as a character’.<sup>93</sup> The role was ostensibly entirely consistent with Handl’s persona, with the notable exception of Mrs Delt’s political militancy. The character is finely balanced between the contrasting extremes of representations of the working class suggested by Walkerdine: the ‘proto-revolutionary’ on one hand, combined with the

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<sup>88</sup> *Time of Our Lives In My Experience: Irene Handl*, dir. Sarah Pia Anderson, Channel 4, 1985.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Irene Handl’ in *Daily Telegraph*, 18 November 1987.

<sup>90</sup> Ena Kendall, *Evening Standard*, 20 May 1970.

<sup>91</sup> Stuart Knowles, ‘Irene can handle anything’, *TV Times*, 28 January 1978, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> Hutchinson, ‘Irene Handl’.

<sup>93</sup> David Robinson, *Financial Times*, 15 April 1966.

‘gormlessness’ associated with Handl’s persona.<sup>94</sup> Reviewers identified the unruliness of the character, describing her as ‘militantly working-class’<sup>95</sup> and an ‘indomitable Cockney’.<sup>96</sup> Yet unlike Mrs Cragg she is a Dulle Griet without an army to lead, isolated and unable to snatch anything from the jaws of hell, although still possessing the impulse to rebel. Mrs Delt is impassioned and opinionated, venting a relentless communist rhetoric and revolutionary fervour. She is possessed by an anger which continually references the legacy of her dead husband, and provides a context for her disappointment in her son having married into the bourgeoisie, becoming ‘a class traitor’. When Morgan informs his mother of his visits to a psychiatrist she declares ‘Let’s hope he makes a man of you’, her son concurring. Morgan’s potential to be a revolutionary has been squandered; he returns to the family home to be tucked up in bed by his mother, having failed as an adult, and as a man, his wife having divorced him in order to marry a wealthy art gallery proprietor.

Handl’s performance accentuates Mrs Delt’s lack of sophistication, evident in her limited vocabulary and grammatical inaccuracies as she struggles to articulate herself. Her mouth hangs open and she struggles to walk due to her aching feet. Her dumpy form is encased in dowdy clothing consistent with the archetype of the working-class matriarch: a shapeless coat, cardigan and cross-over apron, topped by a knitted beret. Nevertheless in most of her scenes she is constantly bustling around whether serving in the café or putting Morgan to bed, her energy being reflected in her relentless verbosity. The film juxtaposes this energy with a sense of her vulnerability, making it clear that she has had a hard working life which has exacted its toll on her. She complains to Morgan ‘When I think of me slaving away in this place here, and you...Look at me, fat as a lungfish, heart trouble, and those aren’t lady’s hands!’ Mrs Delt makes the contrast between her world and that of Morgan into a point about social class, contrasting her unforgiving existence with the world of privilege he married into, ‘living luxury, on your backside’.

His mother’s vulnerability is keenly felt by Morgan, who insists on massaging her feet when they visit Marx’s grave. He feels a sense of responsibility towards her in his more lucid moments, made poignant by his sense of inadequacy: ‘You should

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<sup>94</sup> Valerie Walkerdine, *Daddy's Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 23.

<sup>95</sup> Robinson, *Financial Times*.

<sup>96</sup> Dilys Powell, *Sunday Times*, 17 April 1966.

give up work altogether ma. I should come home, I should take a job, and let you get a bit of peace ma.' Mrs Delt dismisses her son's offer, retorting 'I should only be bored stiff at home'. She articulates a deep pessimism about the future, knowing that the beliefs which promised hope for the working class have lost their currency. In this respect the visit to Marx's grave is rendered heavily symbolic, underlining how Mrs Delt lives in the past, citing the words and deeds of her husband to a son for whom politics offers no way out of his personal misery.



**Figure 57** Mother and son visit Marx's grave in *Morgan*.

There is a sense of pathos as the characters mourn what could have been, nevertheless the scene takes a surreal turn as Morgan insists on giving his mother a piggyback, racing around the cemetery as she screams with delight. The roles are reversed for one moment, as the mother becomes child again, all dignity being disregarded in the pleasure of the moment. The liminal space of the graveyard frees them from constraints, and they are able to play together. The graveyard is a place of deep personal significance for them, as they have visited every year to mark the birthday of their hero, being a place where they can remember the past, and Morgan's deceased father.<sup>97</sup>

The character of Mrs Delt is inhibited by a fundamental tension within the film between the realist tradition, engrained in Reisz's film making style, and the overt ideological intent of the film. Durgnat was critical of the use of 'caricatures' and the

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<sup>97</sup> The scene echoes Ma Tanner and Jimmy Porter's visit to the graveyard in the film of *Look Back In Anger* (1959), with its central theme of mourning the past and what could have been, as the working class face an uncertain future.

film's 'reduction of social reality to a mixture of whimsy, cliché and music-hall 'turns''.<sup>98</sup> Whilst the casting of Handl rendered Mrs Delt familiar, sympathetic, even comic, the heavy-handed direction of the film pushes the character towards a caricature used to signify the failure of ideology, the fragmentation of the working class and moreover the alienation of the younger generation from the values of their parents. Reisz uses Morgan's delirious visions to underscore these themes, as his mind collapses completely towards the end of the film. Morgan hangs from a crane in a strait-jacket whilst 'The Red Flag' plays, surrounded by images of Trotsky, Marx and Stalin, the landscape of his youth. As he lies in the symbolic industrial wasteland he is tortured by the vision of being executed by a firing squad, led by the triumvirate of powerful women in his life: Leonie, his mother-in-law and his mother, dressed in the uniform of the Red Army. The gender dynamics of this image makes vivid the film's insistence on the hapless young man as a victim of women, more so than the social divide, as it is a combination of his working-class mother and his upper middle-class wife who fire at him. The film perpetuates the gender politics of the kitchen sink dramas, women being oppressors entrapping the male protagonist. Whereas Mrs Delt seems harmless and vulnerable in the course of the film, this sequence makes vivid Morgan's feelings of alienation from all that she represents.<sup>99</sup> *Morgan* brings the era of the angry young man to a symbolic end with the hero destroyed by his mother amongst other foes, whereas Sillitoe's *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* ends with Arthur ebullient as he vows to continue to fight 'mothers' being one of his foes.

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<sup>98</sup> Raymond Durnat, 'Morgan – A Suitable Case For Treatment', *Films and Filming*, 1966, p. 10.

<sup>99</sup> David Paletz read Morgan's relationship with his mother differently, arguing that he is irresponsible, exploiting his mother and Wally in turn, showing a 'lack of social consciousness'. See 'Morgan' in *Film Quarterly*, 1966, p. 52.



Figure 58 Mrs Delt takes centre stage in the firing squad confronting Morgan.

There is an essential ambivalence to Mrs Delt, as indicated by the various critical responses to her role. Gardner reads the character as blameworthy as far as Morgan's mental state is concerned, as she 'cruelly denigrates her wayward son as a class traitor'<sup>100</sup> whilst Durnat describes her as a 'lovable old dear'.<sup>101</sup> Neil Sinyard noted that Morgan's disbelief 'in the comforting platitudes of his old Mum's Communism' reflected a similar political disenchantment on the behalf of both Mercer and Reisz.<sup>102</sup> Reisz was a Czech emigree, who is quoted as being able to relate to Morgan's 'left-wing youth [...] Morgan's type has a nursery full of idealistic and ideological toys', which he finds to be 'totally useless' in adulthood.<sup>103</sup> David Mercer's screenplay was indisputably autobiographical, his background being very much that of Morgan. His characterisation of Mrs Delt was informed by his interest in the work of R.D. Laing, specifically regarding schizophrenia as the consequence of the oppressive impact of family and society on the individual. Mercer had suffered mental illness and had undergone a period of psychoanalysis.<sup>104</sup> He described his mother as 'a most potent intra-psychic figure, in a castrating way but also in a loving way'.<sup>105</sup> His description of his mother evokes the archetypal working-class matriarch:

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<sup>100</sup> Gardner, *Karel Reisz*, p. 144.

<sup>101</sup> Durnat, 'Morgan', p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> Neil Sinyard, 'Karel Reisz' in *Directors in British and Irish Cinema*, ed. Robert Murphy (London: BFI, 2006), p. 508.

<sup>103</sup> Walker, *Hollywood England*, p. 311.

<sup>104</sup> Mercer used Laing as consultant on his 1967 play *Two Minds* which portrayed a young woman giving way to schizophrenia as a consequence of her oppressive upbringing.

<sup>105</sup> David Mercer, 'Birth of a playwriting man' in *Theatre Quarterly*, 1973, p. 51.

I did have an overpowering mother in the sense that I would have died rather than do anything that would upset her or annoy her. This towering woman figure, whom I had to obey in order to preserve her love, was also the woman who nursed me through that long illness, so that even the woman-image for me sort of splits into the demanding, castrating person, who must be obeyed or else, and the person who brings you your rice pudding and wipes your arse.

This mother-figure is both nurturer and castrator, as is Mrs Delt who both cossets and infantilises Morgan. She ensures he eats his custard, tucking him up in bed and wishing him 'sweet dreams', whilst relentlessly upbraiding him on his failures as a revolutionary and as a man. The mother that Mercer describes is the powerful figure who inhabits Hoggart's northern childhood, 'a sort of Lawrentian type, the dominator of the household who took most of the decisions'.<sup>106</sup> Mrs Delt represents the remnants of a fragmented working-class community and the erosion of the power of the matriarch. Her sphere of influence is restricted to the café in which she works, unlike Hoggart's matriarch who reigns over a close family network. The working-class matriarch can offer no solutions for the youth of the mid-sixties, being an oppressive presence for the younger generation, despite – or because of – her maternal instincts. The decline of the working-class matriarch is contrasted with the prosperity of the upper middle-class, the majority of the film being set in the salubrious environs of the leafier suburbs of swinging London, where Leonie's family exert power and influence, led by Morgan's nemesis, his interfering mother-in-law.

Mrs Delt bears the marks of her social class and age, true to Hoggart's image of the ageing matriarch as grotesque. The spectacle of the comic grotesque is heightened in counterpoint to the glamour and sexuality of Leonie, with Handl, the character actor, rendered 'other' in contrast to the star charisma of Redgrave. Mrs Delt's hunched ageing figure is juxtaposed with the languid beauty, sexuality and balletic grace of Leonie, rendering each more intensely symbolic in the sheer scale of difference regarding femininity, age and class. For Russo the grotesque body is 'precisely [that] which [is] abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics', being subversive,

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

rebellious and unsightly.<sup>107</sup> The grotesque body is ‘open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing’, whereas the classical body is ‘transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek’, associated with ‘high’ culture and ‘rationalism’. Mrs Delt is situated doling out custard in a back-street café, a relic of the kitchen sink drama, whilst Leonie’s world centres around an art gallery full of objects deemed to be valuable, a world of conspicuous consumption and artful gestures. Leonie is wealthy, successful and free, driven around the streets of fashionable London by her parents and lover, whilst Mrs Delt can walk with difficulty, restricted to the dark cramped spaces of her home and café, except for her annual visit to Highgate, when her son playfully insists on giving her a piggyback, freeing her from her painful feet.



Figure 59 Leonie and Mrs Delt: the ‘classical’ and ‘grotesque’ bodies in *Morgan*.

The elision of the maternal is typical of film comedy, as noted by Lucy Fischer, adding that the genre is ‘shaped by the critical off-screen space. The figure of the mother is largely absent, suppressed, violated, or replaced’.<sup>108</sup> Ultimately there is no place for Mrs Delt in Mercer’s evocation of male working-class angst, except as a source of angst, and she disappears from the narrative after the vision of her participation in the execution squad. There is no place for Mrs Delt in swinging London, she is confined within the cramped spaces of the café and Morgan’s childhood bedroom - the narrative spaces of the kitchen sink drama - whilst the

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<sup>107</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, p. 8.

<sup>108</sup> Fischer, ‘Sometimes I feel like a motherless child’, p. 64.

young and rich prevail. Her only moment of release is ironically in the cemetery, a space for the dead, riding on the back of her son.

### **Agency and widowhood**

*Ladies Who Do* and *Morgan* both feature working-class matriarchs who have been widowed, with Mrs Delt in thrall to her dead husband. Mrs Cragg only mentions her husband once in passing, asserting herself as a forceful woman in her own right, and therefore able to fight to maintain the community. The widow is an ‘anomaly’, being ‘without direct male guardianship’, and therefore resulting in cultural figurations which are often dichotomous stereotypes according to Marjo Buitelaar.<sup>109</sup> The anomalous status of Mrs Delt is heightened by her radical political beliefs, preaching violence and revolution, refusing to give way to the expensive car containing her son’s in-laws for ‘They got that car out of the sweat of the workers’. As in *Ladies Who Do* the world of *Morgan* is one where men are strangely devoid of agency on the whole. Morgan’s role models - his father, Marx and Trotsky - are all dead whilst his father-in-law is in thrall to his wife. The only working-class male he can turn to is Wally the wrestler (Arthur Mullard), whose assistance in helping him kidnap Leonie only worsens his plight.

Mrs Delt foregrounds her bereaved status; her physical frailty, the frequent references to her husband and her pessimism situate her in the shadows of death. Buitelaar concludes that: ‘As women are often more strongly defined by their partner when he is alive [...] so they are also more strongly defined by the death of a spouse’.<sup>110</sup> For Buitelaar the ambiguity of widows can be attributed to their status as ‘liminaars par excellence’; their age and proximity to death placing them ‘on the indefinite threshold between life and death [...] They are often associated with the power, awe or dread of the already dead’.<sup>111</sup> Buitelaar noted that the Latin for widow is ‘vidua’, derives from the term ‘to place apart’, for ‘in most cases widows are, in fact, placed apart from much more than just their husbands’.<sup>112</sup> The marginal status of the widow had been flagged up in Peter Marris’s 1957 report for the Institute of Community Studies, *Widows and their Families*. The working-class widow would be

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<sup>109</sup> Marjo Buitelaar, ‘Widows’ worlds: representations and realities’ in *Between Poverty and the Pyre*, eds. Jan Bremmer and Lourens van den Bosch (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.



forced to undertake menial labour, having not had the work experience or skills to qualify for better paid work. Mrs Delt no longer has the support structures of the traditional working-class community and is therefore circumscribed by the normative rules of the patriarchy, having to continue working despite her ill-health. The marginal status of Mrs Delt is inherent in her role as a supporting character in a film with an overt agenda to tackle issues surrounding parenthood, social class and the generation gap. She is little more than a cipher whose only moment of agency is imagined by her son, when she participates in his execution.

In contrast Mrs Cragg exerts an agency which goes beyond gender confines, leading her army of chars and matriarchs, animated by Mount's persona and its innate unruliness. She is typical of the widow or spinster as a figure of independence identified by Jordan in *Coronation Street*, for 'whom 'life' stereotypically demands a 'masculine' reaction'.<sup>113</sup> The framework of the farce allows Mrs Cragg to move beyond the confines of widowhood, gender, age and class, conforming to Buitelaar's definition of the widow as a woman 'in between':

By flouting cultural conceptions of women's place in the social order, these widows may indeed gain more freedom of movement and independence, yet this also enhances their anomalous position. Women who take on such masculine behaviour are neither feminine or masculine.<sup>114</sup>

The focus on the working-class matriarch in both *Ladies Who Do* and *Morgan* reflected the concerns regarding working-class communities, paying homage to a way of life which was under threat. Both films are characterised by a sense of ending and change, in particular the threat to the social fibre represented by the new affluence. Terry Lovell observed of *Coronation Street*, that the role of the matriarch 'is to be, not to do' true to the 'stolid and immobile figure from Hoggart's memory-washed streets'.<sup>115</sup> Although *Ladies Who Do* sought to emulate the success of *Coronation Street*, anger impels the working-class matriarch to take action, whereas *Morgan* sees the character of 'our mam' recede into the background, unable to act and isolated. Popular culture shifted its parameters to increasingly exile the older

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<sup>113</sup> Jordan, 'Realism and convention', p. 32.

<sup>114</sup> Buitelaar, 'Widows' worlds', p. 11.

<sup>115</sup> Terry Lovell, 'Landscapes and stories in 1960s British realism' in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. Andrew Higson (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 164.

woman, with Michael Pertwee deciding at the end of the 1960s to ‘face-lift’ his writing and ‘abolish mothers-in-law [...] I would have nothing but pretty girls in the female roles’.<sup>116</sup> After two decades of writing substantial roles for the mature woman in film and theatre his change of direction was endemic of the dearth of demand for such narratives, and a very different landscape in terms of British comedy and popular culture as a whole. Nevertheless both Handl and Mount remained lifelong spinsters, maintaining their acting careers into old age, although largely on the stage and in the television sitcom, rather than film.

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<sup>116</sup> Pertwee, *Name Dropping*, p. 209.

## Chapter 5

### **‘Mrs John Bull’: the Eccentric Stardom of Margaret Rutherford**

#### **Star credentials**

The career of Margaret Rutherford was notable on account of her star status, both in Britain and abroad, which flourished as she aged. Her roles articulated a nostalgic vision of Englishness during a period of upheaval and change, both in terms of national identity and the indigenous film industry. This chapter seeks to establish how Rutherford’s star image functioned ideologically in terms of discourses regarding age, national identity, class and gender, through close analysis of a selection of film performances which defined key aspects of her persona as an ageing woman, from her first film role as a deviant spinster in *Dusty Ermine* (1936), to her star billing as Miss Marple in the 1960s. The approach of this chapter is informed by Dyer’s argument that the star image embodies contradictions in ideology when considered in relation to the specific realities of the time, structured to foreground specific meanings and affects.<sup>1</sup> Her persona was defined by the eccentricity of the character actor, made manifest in her roles, performance style and appearance. One obituary described her as ‘English eccentricity personified’.<sup>2</sup> The ‘Englishness’ of her persona was that which defined British national identity, and the national cinema of the era. Her performance style was informed by a physicality at odds with her status as an ageing woman, with publicity materials and reviews evoking her in terms of the comedy grotesque.

Rutherford’s roles were an amalgamation of various iterations of female ageing, culminating in her casting as the iconic genteel ageing spinster sleuth, Miss Marple, transposing an actress defined by her comedy roles into the crime genre. For Rutherford ageing brought greater success becoming a box-office draw as Miss Marple in the United States, with *Variety* magazine noting that she ‘has an audience all her own that gives considerable assurance of success’.<sup>3</sup> Born in 1892 into an upper middle-class family, Rutherford was a child of the Empire spending her earliest years in India. She earned a living as an elocution and music teacher before

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<sup>1</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Sydney Edwards in the *Evening Standard*, 22 May 1972.

<sup>3</sup> ‘*Murder Most Foul*’ in *Variety*, 19 August 1964.

pursuing an acting career in her thirties. Rutherford was a late developer, being forty-four at the time of her film debut in 1936, having established a reputation as a character actress in the West End. She married fellow actor Stringer Davis in her early fifties, in the same year as her career breakthrough as Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* (1945). Rutherford was a perennial feature in the film comedies of the 1950s, becoming minor star of British ensemble comedies. Many of her roles placed her at the interface between British and Hollywood cinema, her debut film, *Dusty Ermine*, being an ambitious attempt to move beyond the 'quota quickie' and capture an international market for a British film studio. Her final decade was characterised by roles alongside international stars in films made with American funding, her status being such that she received an Academy Award for best supporting actress for *The V.I.P.s* (1963).

Rutherford's persona ensured career longevity, commenting later in life that she relished the 'nice meaty part[s]' she had been given.<sup>4</sup> She grew to exert a measure of control and power within the production process as a consequence of her star status, insisting that her husband was cast in the majority of her films dating from *Miranda* (1948), albeit in minor roles. This was indicative of the extent to which her private persona was foregrounded in her film career, with a blurring between her off-screen life and her screen roles. As her career progressed Rutherford became increasingly selective about her film roles, her status being such that producers would adapt the character and narrative accordingly. She had originally turned down the role of the Duchess in *The VIPs* as she felt that 'the character [...] had no beginning, middle or end. There was simply nothing there for me to get my teeth into', resulting in it being rewritten for her.<sup>5</sup>

In notable respects Rutherford's career path mirrors that of Marie Dressler, both challenging notions of stardom centring on sexuality and attractiveness by cultivating a performance style and persona which centred on the spectacle of excess and eccentricity. Both played roles which capitalised on their age and physical presence as comedy grotesques and shared a propensity for scene stealing, Sturtevant observing that Dressler was 'the woman you can't take your eyes off,

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford: an Autobiography as Told to Gwen Robyns* (London: W. H. Allen, 1972), p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

even in the films that tried in vain to push her to the background'.<sup>6</sup> Rutherford's career trajectory was similar to Dressler's, who moved from playing 'ugly ducklings and old maids' to 'imperious dowagers'. Nevertheless whereas Sturtevant summarises Dressler's star appeal for audiences as 'a maternal fantasy', Rutherford's persona was inscribed by iterations of the spinster, being a fantasy of benign female ageing offering a conflation of nostalgia, reassurance and eccentricity.<sup>7</sup> Her star image can be read as a barometer of national consciousness and desires, in the spirit of Durgnat's conviction that 'the social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars'.<sup>8</sup> Rutherford's persona was a fantasy of upper middle-class Englishness, which endured, whilst adapting itself to the changing social context of the inter-war years, the patriotism of wartime and the diminishing imperial power of the post-war era.

The majority of mature British actresses who featured in film comedy of the mid-twentieth century were judged to be character actors, rarely qualifying to be classified as stars. The fundamental issue regarding British film and stardom is highlighted by Geoffrey Macnab observing that 'somehow the idea of the "British film star" remained an oxymoron in many people's minds'.<sup>9</sup> Yet as Williams points out the tradition of the character actor is of greater importance to British cinema than to Hollywood, adding that 'the categories of star and character actor seem rather more permeable' in British cinema.<sup>10</sup> The career of Margaret Rutherford demonstrates this permeability, attaining a form of stardom which perhaps merits the 'minor' status more typical of British film as suggested by Babington.<sup>11</sup> The minor star is a significant attraction for film audiences according to Babington, who bears 'the marks of a special treatment, significant specularisation' in their roles, exhibits 'an iconic transtextual sameness beneath variations' across their roles, and to a limited extent was 'the subject of 'star discourse' in intertextual media'. Babington conferred 'minor star' status on Rutherford, noting that 'the popularity of comedians in polls is often forgotten when thinking about stardom'.

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<sup>6</sup> Sturtevant, *A Great Big Girl Like Me*, p. 1

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond Durgnat, *Films and Feelings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), p. 138.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Macnab, *Searching for Stars* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. vii.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, 'Entering the paradise of anomalies', p. 97.

<sup>11</sup> Babington, *British Stars and Stardom*, p. 7.

Rutherford's career certainly revolved around her value to the film industry as a character actor, delivering the familiar and, initially, supporting the stars of the film. Roof points out how particular female actresses are cast in the same 'comic second fool character' across decades of film, providing predictable pleasures and expectations, 'Their continuity [...] makes them seem unchanging and unchanged, subject to no continuous narrative or social movement'.<sup>12</sup> The character actor serves to fill out the movie according to Jeanine Basinger, they 'were fixed story units. Their character did not develop, change or provide surprises'.<sup>13</sup> Moreover Basinger states that 'In their own way, they *were* stars', adding that 'like top movie stars, they had a special type they had carved out for themselves that the audience wanted them to be'. Such character actors would be known by name, even feature in the publicity for a film and have their own fan following; their popularity might be such that they could actually headline a film. Although Basinger is concerned with Hollywood, she provides a template for character 'stardom' which is relevant to Rutherford's status within the British film industry. From her very first film role in *Dusty Ermine* her potential was acknowledged with her part being 'written up each day to make it more important' according to Rutherford's autobiography.<sup>14</sup> Similarly her part in *Yellow Canary* (1943) was only planned to last one day, but the director, Herbert Wilcox, 'used to have the part written up every day until it extended to three weeks'. Rutherford became more than just the character actor as defined by Basinger, who merely featured in a single scene to do a 'star role'.<sup>15</sup>

The issue as to whether Rutherford was a star or merely a character actor is endemic of the problematic nature of stardom in the British film industry. Whereas most British stars struggled to establish themselves within the restrictions of the British film industry, Babington observes that comedy and musical performers were different, being 'secure in a generic identity', and therefore not having to prove themselves by having to 'succeed across many genres'.<sup>16</sup> Rutherford's persona was absolutely associated with comedy, largely restricting her from branching out beyond the genre, but giving her a distinctive status within the British film industry on account of her age, cultural status and generic identity. Nevertheless Eric Keown

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<sup>12</sup> Roof, *All About Thelma and Eve*, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Vintage, 2009), p. 456.

<sup>14</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> Basinger, *The Star Machine*, p. 455.

<sup>16</sup> Babington, *British Stars*, p. 14.

decried the extent to which Rutherford was typecast, arguing that ‘she has rarely been intelligently used’, having a ‘disturbing power of pathos’ which deserved to be the ‘mainspring of a film and not merely one of its more amusing cogs’.<sup>17</sup>

Rutherford’s mode of stardom is consistent with that of the ‘performer’ as defined by Geraghty in her categorisation of stars. The acting skills of the performer are foregrounded in their roles and they are ‘often associated with the high cultural values of theatrical performance’ endowing them with cultural credibility and status.<sup>18</sup> Rutherford’s performance style foregrounded its theatricality, her acting career being rooted in the theatre, having received formal training at the Old Vic. She prided herself as being first and foremost a stage actor, declaring that she ‘would have loved to have been a great traditional actress like Bernhardt, Duse or Ellen Terry’.<sup>19</sup> Geraghty observes that the emphasis on performance benefits ‘the ageing star since it has the added merit of valuing experience and allowing a career to continue well beyond the pin-up stage’.<sup>20</sup> Although the ‘pin-up’ stage was not something that Rutherford had experienced, her star status grew in relation to her age, continuing to maintain an active career both on the stage and in film.

### **Stardom: glamour and the grotesque**

Babington points out that British stardom was ‘a more muted version’ of Hollywood, as a consequence of ‘lesser specularisation [...] more restrained publicity, and more emphasis on the ‘acting’ and ‘picture personality’ discourses [...] as well as persistent remnants of the suspicion of stardom’.<sup>21</sup> This disjuncture between British and Hollywood stardom is implicit in the coverage of the press conference for *The Mouse on the Moon* (1963) in an American trade paper.<sup>22</sup> After pointing out the failure of Elizabeth Taylor to attend the press conference for *Cleopatra* the previous day, the press were introduced to ‘bonafide royalty Her Royal Highness Gloriana XIII [...] “the Cleopatra of Grand Fenwick”’, noting that ‘the regal but buxom queen bore a suspicious resemblance to British personality Margaret Rutherford’. Whereas Elizabeth Taylor is the essence of Hollywood stardom in the early 1960s, Rutherford

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<sup>17</sup> Eric Keown, *Margaret Rutherford* (Aberdeen: Rockliff, 1956), p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> Christine Geraghty, ‘Re-examining stardom: questions of texts, bodies and performance’ in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), p. 188.

<sup>19</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> Geraghty, ‘Re-examining stardom’, p. 193.

<sup>21</sup> Babington, *British Stars*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> “Mouse has no fear of mighty Cleo” in *Independent Exhibitors Film Bulletin*, 24 June 1963, p. 13.

is defined as a ‘personality’, the contrast being cultivated as part of a topical campaign to launch a British comedy film. The ‘stars’ of British cinema are essentially personalities according to Macnab: ordinary, rather than extraordinary; present, rather than absent.<sup>23</sup> Macnab argues that the British star system ‘often relied more on a repertory company of studio actors than on glamorous individuals’, with films being the work of an ensemble rather than relying on the individualist culture of Hollywood stardom.

Rutherford’s persona is the antithesis of the glamour inherent to Hollywood stardom, as is teasingly implied in her obituary in the *Daily Mirror*, which describes her as being ‘rated as the most successful British blonde ever to assault the American box-office’.<sup>24</sup> The article appraises her body employing the voyeuristic phraseology associated with the starlet, adding that ‘her vital statistics – three chins and mouth like a ship’s funnel – enchanted their way around the globe.’ Rutherford’s body was central to her star persona, departing from the Hollywood template for female stardom as embodied by the image of the ‘blonde’. Dyer selected the iconic ‘blonde’ of the era, Marilyn Monroe, as a case study for stardom on account of her significance in being ‘a centre of attraction who seemed to embody what was taken to be a central feature of human existence at that time’, namely sexuality.<sup>25</sup> Whilst the British film industry repeatedly failed to launch comparable starlets to rival such glamour, Rutherford’s minor stardom hinged on an absence of sexuality, repeatedly cast as the ageing spinster, whose physical form is the cause of laughter, never desire. The body of the female star was inscribed with discourses relating age to sexuality, worth and identity.<sup>26</sup> Rutherford and Monroe offered opposing figurations of age and femininity, seemingly caricatures of polarised extremes of femininity: the sex symbol and the grotesque.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless Monroe’s career was to falter with the

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<sup>23</sup> Macnab, *Searching for Stars*, p. 99.

<sup>24</sup> Donald Zec, ‘Blithe spirit’ in *Daily Mirror*, 23 May 1972.

<sup>25</sup> Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> This contrast between the youthful American sex symbol and ageing British upper-class femininity forms a key dynamic in the casting of Monroe and Thorndike in *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1957).

<sup>27</sup> According to biographer Dawn Langley Simmons – although a unreliable source – Rutherford and Monroe’s paths crossed whilst both were filming at Paramount in 1961. Rutherford is quoted as describing Monroe as a ‘dear waif-child, whom life and Hollywood were destined to destroy’. Apparently Monroe dropped by Rutherford’s dressing-room, ‘played happily’ with Rutherford’s beloved cuddly toys, then ‘lay her sad little face in my lap’ for a nap; see Simmons, *A Blithe Spirit* (London: Arthur Barker, 1983), p. 128.



progress of time, whilst Rutherford's stardom grew exponentially with the years, after she struggled to find work in her youth.



Figure 60 Rutherford the cover star: publicising *Aunt Clara*.

Rutherford's stardom inverted discourses of glamour and youth, becoming a fanzine cover star to publicise the release of *Aunt Clara* (1954), sporting a straw bonnet festooned with flowers, tied with an elaborate bow, lace collar and pearls.<sup>28</sup> Her physical form was central to her persona of the eccentric, ageing grotesque with her lumpen body being concealed within a cocoon of antiquated fabrics, hats and capacious bags. Rutherford's face played a key part in cultivating a sense of 'otherness', with critics labouring to evoke her facial features and expressions deploying extraordinary imagery evoking the animal world. Dick Fiddy compared her to a bloodhound 'because of her loose jowls'<sup>29</sup> whilst Alexander Walker commented on her 'chin wagging like a windsock on an airfield'.<sup>30</sup> Such descriptions highlight the comic value of her appearance, although many of these features are merely signs of ageing. *Time* magazine concluded that such an idiosyncratic appearance makes it 'less an occupation than a duty to appear in the movies'.<sup>31</sup> Such comments support Anne Morey's observation that the role of the grotesque becomes an ironic marker of recognition of critical acclaim for the ageing

<sup>28</sup> *Picture Show and Film Pictorial*, 27<sup>th</sup> November 1954.

<sup>29</sup> Dick Fiddy, 'Super trouper: a salute to Margaret Rutherford' in BFI programme, October 2003, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Alexander Walker reviewing Rutherford's performance in *Murder She Said*, quoted in Merriman, *Dreadnought With Good Manners*, p. 225.

<sup>31</sup> 'Mrs John Bull, Ltd.' in *Time*, 24 May 1963.

female actress.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to the belief that such roles were demeaning for ageing actresses, Morey argued that ‘presentation as grotesque was often an acknowledgement of an actress’s artistic effort and ability to perform at the margins of conventional femininity’. The role of the grotesque was the starting point for Rutherford’s film career, in the tradition of the character actor, reversing the trajectory of Hollywood stars such as Bette Davis and Joan Crawford forced to turn to such roles once their looks had faded.

Rutherford had an ambivalent attitude towards her appearance, taking exception at times to some critics, yet also being quite candid about her face and its role in her career writing that ‘If you have a face like mine the thing is to learn to live with it and come to terms with it [...] it has, after all, been rather good to me’.<sup>33</sup> Her control of facial expression was integral to her stardom, reflected in the critical attention to the comic eloquence of her face. She understood the power of the close up, writing that ‘I can manipulate each part of my face with precision while the rest remains homely and normal [...] I do have every twitch and ripple of my body under control’.<sup>34</sup> Dyer observed that star performers will have a ‘particular performance style’ entailing a ‘specific repertoire of gestures, intonations, etc. that a star establishes [...] carries the meaning of her/his image just as much as the ‘inert’ element of appearance, the particular sound of her/his voice or dress style’.<sup>35</sup> Rutherford’s performance style was typical of comedy as defined by Brett Mills as foregrounding ‘physicality [...] making the body a key site of comedy’, made manifest in ‘larger movements, a wider vocal range, and more common stresses on the rhythms of language’ than would be found in ‘straight drama’.<sup>36</sup> Rutherford’s approach was informed by the same flair for comic performance as Chaplin, evoked by James Naremore as ‘so intent on exhibiting the virtuosity of theatrical movement that he is nearly always more stylized and poetically unnatural than the people he plays alongside’.<sup>37</sup> Rutherford wrote of her debt to Chaplin in cultivating signature

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<sup>32</sup> Anne Morey, ‘Grotesquerie as marker of success in aging female stars’, *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, eds. Su Holmes and Diane Negra (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 104.

<sup>33</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 220.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, p. 142.

<sup>36</sup> Brett Mills, ‘Contemporary comedy performance in British sitcom’ in *Genre and Performance: Film and Television*, ed. Christine Cornea (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 131.

<sup>37</sup> James Naremore, ‘The performance frame’ in *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television*, ed. Jeremy G. Butler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), p. 109.

mannerisms, working to try ‘to make my eyes expressive or twitch my nose or tremble my chin’.<sup>38</sup>

Rutherford’s career as an actress centred on performing old age, indeed many of her early roles were to cast her as older than her years, being denied the substantial roles written with a younger actress in mind early in her career. Her cousin Tony Benn was to note her talent for ‘an affectation of senility’ in contrast to the predominant ‘affectation of youth when [most people] are past their best’.<sup>39</sup> An early publicity photograph makes clear that she had an expectation of being typecast as the elderly eccentric, wearing a Victorian gown, with a lacy collar and fingerless gloves, an elaborate headdress, and peering over pince-nez in a quizzical manner. True to her persona as an eccentric, Rutherford performs at the margins of conventional figurations of female ageing, liberated, and yet circumscribed, by the codes of the comic grotesque.

Keown described Rutherford’s persona as ‘The universal aunt [...] emerging shining from her chrysalis, a rare and most lovable specimen’.<sup>40</sup> This persona was greatly influenced by her great-aunt Bessie who brought her up, cousin Tony Benn claiming that ‘many of [her] mannerisms later fed into Rutherford’s screen characters’.<sup>41</sup> Rutherford wrote that she owed her ‘carriage, ability to wear period clothes’ to her aunt, who ‘was unusually emancipated for that age’.<sup>42</sup> Aunt Bessie emerges from Rutherford’s autobiography and the Simmons’ biography as an embodiment of eccentric Edwardian spinsterhood, surrounded by her menagerie and a belief in the supernatural, a template for many of Rutherford’s roles. Rutherford’s film career was to feature a number of roles as an aunt, including playing Aunt Dolly in *I’m All Right Jack* (1959).<sup>43</sup>

### ***Dusty Ermine: eccentricity and spinster deviancy***

Rutherford’s film career was rooted in the tradition of the character actor, playing characters who by dint of their age, spinster status and various eccentricities

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<sup>38</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Macnab, ‘A quivering lip and a blithe British spirit’, *The Independent*, 29 July 2000.

<sup>40</sup> Keown, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 24.

<sup>41</sup> Macnab, ‘A quivering lip’.

<sup>42</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Other roles as aunts were in *Spring Meeting* (1941), *English Without Tears* (1944), *Aunt Clara* (1954) and *On The Double* (1961).

remained anomalous, yet whose familiarity and class status allowed them a voice within the narrative. The character actor is essentially eccentric in terms of status, role, performance and, frequently, their appearance. Jeanine Basinger notes that whilst stars are oddities in their exceptional qualities, character actors are ‘genuinely inexplicable examples of stardom – oddities’.<sup>44</sup> Eccentricity was central to Rutherford’s publicity and press, with one obituary which listed her ‘endearing eccentricities’ giving the example of how ‘she claimed that she wore cloaks because they suited her billowing personality; when she wore hot water bottles under her cloak for winter travels, and [...] asked engine drivers to fill them up for her’.<sup>45</sup> Rutherford was conscious of the importance of eccentricity to her persona, which led to her being typecast from early on in her stage career: ‘The parts I had been given had begun to show signs of the eccentricity that I later developed into my own special technique’.<sup>46</sup> Rutherford cultivated the blurring between her private self and her persona, reflecting on how she responded to being asked whether she was ‘an eccentric’: ‘I invariably answered that I hope I am an individual. I suppose an eccentric is a super individual. Perhaps an eccentric is just off-centre – ex centric’.<sup>47</sup> Her eccentricity was persistently promoted as the source of her comic persona, as made evident by Dame Flora Robson’s tribute to Rutherford: ‘She was sincere and serious, not trying to be a comic. As she was rather eccentric, she got all the laughs’.<sup>48</sup> Rutherford’s persona came to be defined by eccentricity, and was the obvious choice to contribute to a BBC radio discussion in 1962 as an authority on all that was eccentric.<sup>49</sup>

Eccentricity was integral to her casting in her first film, being ‘the kind of role which was to pursue me all my career’, playing an eccentric spinster leading a gang of counterfeiters in *Dusty Ermine*.<sup>50</sup> Director Bernard Vorhaus cast Rutherford as Miss Butterby, professing himself ‘bewitched’ by her on the stage and wishing to showcase her ‘eccentric gifts’.<sup>51</sup> Vorhaus’s work was characterised by a ‘wild

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<sup>44</sup> Basinger, *The Star Machine*, p. 421.

<sup>45</sup> ‘The five famous chins of lovable Dame Margaret’ in *Evening News*, 22 May 1972.

<sup>46</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Simmons, *A Blithe Spirit*, p. 159.

<sup>49</sup> Letter from Beryl Radley, 18 May 1962; BBC Written Archives, Caversham.

<sup>50</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 82.

<sup>51</sup> Geoff Brown, ‘Money for speed: the British films of Bernard Vorhaus’ in *The Unknown 1930s*, ed. Jeffrey Richards (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), p. 181.

profusion of apparently marginal but somehow essential characters', allowing supporting actors such as Rutherford the space to develop her role.<sup>52</sup> The role proved to be an anomaly in her career casting her as an ostensibly threatening, deviant character, yet Rutherford's performance is scene-stealing, providing a comic element to the film. As a middle-aged spinster crook, the character capitalises on the inter-war unease concerning the generation of ageing women whose unmarried status was regarded as problematic. However the role established the template for Rutherford's screen persona, the deviancy of her character being founded on an eccentricity made evident in her performance style and her narrative function. Her performance subverts the traits of the respectable spinster to suggest both the sinister and the comic, evoking the possibility of menace behind the veneer of conventional middle-class Englishness.

The characterisation of Miss Butterby conforms to a type described by Rosenthal as being 'extremely problematic [...] spinsters were almost always invoked to provide a negative foil for a preferred (female) self'.<sup>53</sup> Not only is she a criminal but it transpires that she was an inmate at Holloway, adding to the sense of deviancy, with its associations with the suffragette movement. Miss Butterby is both ridiculous and a threat; she inveigles her way into the family home of the Kents with the aim of enticing the reformed uncle back into a life of crime and succeeds in corrupting his hapless nephew by inducing him to join an international forgery ring. She is a warning of the consequences of a new era of emancipation; unconstrained by domestic and romantic ties, the spinster is a threat to civilised values. The anomalous status of the spinster is concomitant with both eccentricity and crime. The character is testament to some of the most acute fears regarding spinsters, with sexual psychologist, Walter M. Gallichan having argued in 1916 that the increase in spinsters would result in 'psychic' sclerosis, manifest in a predilection for criminal tendencies.<sup>54</sup>

Keown was to reflect that Rutherford offered a unique capacity to conflate the respectable with the extraordinary, writing that 'It began to dawn on the makers of films that the strange nonsense lurking behind her tweeded respectability was a

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<sup>52</sup> Dave Kehr, 'Director interrupted' in *Film Comment*, 2012, p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales*, pp. 130-31.

<sup>54</sup> Walter M. Gallichan, *The Great Unmarried* quoted in Nicholson, *Singled Out*, p. 47.

heaven-sent gift to the screen'.<sup>55</sup> Much like Dressler, her ostentatious performance style eclipses the other actors, who are rendered static and uninteresting in comparison with the abundance of Rutherford's physical and vocal mannerisms, and her outlandish appearance. Although lacking the benign rotundity of Rutherford's later career, Miss Butterby's appearance was the template for Rutherford's screen persona of the middle-class spinster. She is the image of respectability, dressed in a tweed suit, behatted, with a brooch at her throat, a fur around her shoulders, and clutching a bag. Miss Butterby's first scene hinges on the innate comic impact of the ageing spinster as deviant from the feminine ideal, with the reformed middle-aged forger, Jim Kent (Ronald Squire), just released from prison, eagerly awaiting a mysterious lady caller. He is unable to conceal his dismay as Miss Butterby blusters her way into the room, her dress and mannerisms suggesting ageing eccentricity rather than romantic interest. Rutherford employs what were to become her signature performance mannerisms and gestures in this first scene, constructing a persona which conflates the eccentric with the skittish, and hints at a calculating boldness behind the conventional exterior. She is the figure of middle-class authority, taking control, reprovably wagging her finger at Jim when he fails to understand her. On the other hand she masquerades as the scatty ageing woman, brandishing her handbag to add dramatic impact and underscore her emotions. Her enunciation is precise and nuanced, imparting an archness which was to be central to her persona throughout her film career. Keown notes that Rutherford's background as an elocution teacher made her 'able to enrich the taut, chopped language of the cinema'.<sup>56</sup> The precision of her delivery reinforces the sense of power and control commensurate with her upper middle-class status.

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<sup>55</sup> Keown, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 61 Miss Butterby tries to seduce Jim back into a life of crime in *Dusty Ermine*.

Miss Butterby exploits her status as an ageing woman to carry out her crimes, affecting absent-mindedness to try and pass off forged banknotes in the bank. Described to the police as ‘middle-aged, quiet, innocent-looking’, the veneer of ageing respectability is subverted by slapstick comedy as she resists the attempts to stop her from escaping, hitting a doorman over the head with an umbrella before making a run for the getaway car. Rutherford was to demonstrate her aptitude for undertaking stunts as she clambers into the front seat of the speeding car.

Rutherford’s performance was picked out for a special mention by reviewers despite her relatively minor role. In America the *Motion Picture Daily* identified her star potential, commending ‘a quite outstanding performance as a middle-aged woman crook. This actress looks a discovery for either humorous or macabre “characters.” Hollywood is likely to note her’.<sup>57</sup> The ‘macabre’ potential of Rutherford’s persona was to gain her renown as she went on to play the role of Mrs Danvers in the stage adaptation of *Rebecca* in 1940, with the *Telegraph* declaring ‘much depends on the sinister housekeeper and Margaret Rutherford acted so well that one almost shuddered at the very thought of her next appearance on the stage’.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless her potential to convey the macabre and sinister was seldom central to her subsequent film roles, with the exception of the character Miss Cynthia Beeston, another spinster criminal mastermind, in *The Runaway Bus* (1953). The ability to

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<sup>57</sup> Review in *Motion Picture Daily*, 22 September 1936, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Merriman, *Dreadnought With Good Manners*, p. 63.

convey a sense of otherness through a persona defined by eccentricity was prevalent throughout her career.

Rutherford's screen debut was made possible by an American director for producer Julius Hagen's J.H. Productions, which aimed to move away from the quota quickie to making bigger, more expensive films, for an international market.<sup>59</sup> Rutherford found her niche in British film at a time when it was searching for an identity to compete with Hollywood, rather than being merely imitative of America. Writing in 1938, Alexander Korda declared that 'Our only hope of salvation is to make good English films [...] We are told, too, that there is not enough of England in our plans, and America wants to see England on our screens'.<sup>60</sup> In her first film role Rutherford embodied a vision of English eccentricity which was successfully crafted to appeal to an international audience.

### ***The Demi-Paradise: eccentricity and Englishness***

Typically cast as an ageing spinster, most of Rutherford's roles perpetuated an iteration of Englishness which centred on a fantasy of upper-class eccentricity, and defined British national identity. The preoccupation in identifying Englishness with eccentricity was inflected by assumptions regarding class status, as made evident by Edith Sitwell, who saw it as a trait of the elite.<sup>61</sup> The Festival of Britain featured an 'Eccentrics' Corner in the Lion and the Unicorn Pavilion, dedicated to a 'characteristic of the British people [...] their love of eccentric fantasy'.<sup>62</sup> The post-war drive to celebrate national identity was fundamental to the work of Sir Ernest Barker whose *The Character of England* aimed to find 'room for what was curious, eccentric, or even comical'.<sup>63</sup> The essays included reiterated a conflation of the concepts of individuality with eccentricity as fundamental to the English character,

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<sup>59</sup> Linda Wood, 'Julius Hagen and Twickenham film studios' in *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939*, ed. Jeffrey Brown (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 48-49.

<sup>60</sup> Alexander Korda, 'British films: to-day and to-morrow' in *Footnotes to the Film*, ed. Charles Davy (London: Lovatt Dickson, 1938), pp. 167-68.

<sup>61</sup> Edith Sitwell, *Taken Care Of* (London: Hutchinson, 1965), p. 126.

<sup>62</sup> Becky Conekin, *The Autobiography of a Nation: The 1951 Exhibition of Britain, Representing Britain in the Post-War World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 97.

<sup>63</sup> Sir Ernest Barker, *The Character of England* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. v.



and take as a given that the English are, according to Vita Sackville-West, ‘perhaps the most eccentric race on earth’.<sup>64</sup>

Williams observes the aptness of the character actor’s significance to British cinema in reflecting the centrality of eccentricity in evocations of the national identity.<sup>65</sup> Durgnat identified a British ‘veneration for the eccentric’ evident in post-war film comedy, evident in characters who were ‘upper-class in origins and either of independent means or firmly ensconced in authority [...] variations on old-fashioned father and aunt figures’.<sup>66</sup> Rutherford recognised the appeal of these representations in accounting for the success of *The Happiest Days of Your Life* (1950), explaining ‘The plot appealed to English audiences who see themselves as rugged individualists and to the world at large who like to think of us as endearing eccentrics’.<sup>67</sup> As an archetype of Englishness, and thereby Britishness, Rutherford’s persona verged on caricature. *Time* magazine christened her ‘Mrs John Bull’ at the height of her fame during the early 1960s, declaring that she was ‘so British that by comparison with her, even John Bull himself seems the son of a miscegenetic marriage’.<sup>68</sup> The original Mrs John Bull, according to Madge Dresser, was ‘sometimes conflated with Britannia’, merging the middle-aged woman as warrior with this ‘nostalgic figure who embodies the domestic virtues of a pre-industrial England’.<sup>69</sup> Rutherford’s persona evoked a nostalgia and patriotism which was specific to this middle-aged mythical figure, conflating the ordinary with the extraordinary. *Time* listed the qualities which make Rutherford quintessentially British, evoking an image of rather mundane middle age: ‘fresh-air fiend in sensible shoes who parries with her nose and charges with her chin. She likes to scrunch into wicker chairs and sniff sea air. She has average tastes, nonexotic pleasures’.<sup>70</sup>

Rutherford’s role in defining the spirit of the nation contributed to the remit of *The Demi-Paradise* to affirm patriotic zeal on the Home Front, but also to cultivate

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<sup>64</sup> Vita Sackville-West, ‘Outdoor life’ in *The Character of England*, ed. Ernest Barker (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 421.

<sup>65</sup> Williams, ‘Let us now praise’.

<sup>66</sup> Durgnat, *A Mirror for England*, p. 161.

<sup>67</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Mrs John Bull, Ltd.’ in *Time*, 24 May 1963.

<sup>69</sup> Madge Dresser, ‘Britannia’ in *Patriotism: the Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 41.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Mrs John Bull, Ltd.’, *Time*. Although described as British, Rutherford categorically referred to herself as ‘essentially English’; see Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 36.

support overseas, being explicitly part of a propaganda effort to promote support for Russia as an ally against the Germans. The storyline centres on a young Russian engineer, Ivan Kouznetsoff (Laurence Olivier), struggling to come to terms with the quirks of the English, failing to understand such national institutions as cricket, Hyde Park, the British sense of humour and the eccentric spinster. The film was typical of director Anthony Asquith's wartime work according to Tom Ryall, reflecting his 'rhetoric of nation, his own commentary on Englishness [...] with a sense of the satirical and a hint of contradiction'.<sup>71</sup> Rutherford fitted into Asquith's canvas of the upper middle class, her persona suiting the film's 'conservative, pastoral, vision of England', the milieu of Asquith's upbringing. She was to work with Asquith on *While The Sun Shines* (1947), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952) and *The V.I.P.s* (1963).

*The Demi-Paradise* 'neatly catalogues all the traditional idiosyncrasies and foibles of the English' according to *Kinematograph Weekly*.<sup>72</sup> The film celebrated eccentricity as the essence of the spirit of England, binding the community together, and making it stronger to face its enemies. It is the older female characters who largely manifest this eccentricity, in bridging Britain's imperial past and the wartime realities of a country fighting against the odds to defend its values and beliefs. Rutherford's role as Miss Rowena Ventnor in *The Demi-Paradise* is inscribed by a conflation of eccentricity, class and authority, embodied by the benign spinster. Whereas Miss Butterby had mobilised pre-war distrust of the spinster as a disruptive and malign influence, Miss Ventnor is a charismatic 'do-gooder', an agent for community cohesion and an icon of Englishness. This was not Rutherford's first wartime role as a patriotic battleaxe, having been cast as the irascible Mrs Towcaster in the spy drama *Yellow Canary* (1943). Infuriated by the audacity of the Nazis in boarding an Atlantic crossing, Mrs Towcaster decides to act, declaring 'Wouldn't it be nice to do something violent', before kicking their leader in the shin, demonstrating that it wasn't just the younger, glamorous star, Anna Neagle, who was capable of taking risks to fight the enemy.

*The Demi-Paradise* is notable in the wealth of mature female characters utilised to construct crucial aspects of English identity which defined Britishness. Asquith

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<sup>71</sup> Tom Ryall, *Anthony Asquith* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 83-84.

<sup>72</sup> Review in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 18 November 1943.

deployed a range of stock characters to be found in British comedy, casting a panoply of British character actresses including Muriel Ake, Marjorie Fielding, Joyce Grenfell and Edie Martin. The older women evoke a bygone age, with their antiquated style of dress, and a lifestyle and manner imbued with a sense of Empire-era Britain. This nostalgic fantasy of British identity informs the setting in the fictional town of Barchester, supposedly a ship-building community, although more of a pastoral idyll, as is suggested by the name borrowed from Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Chronicles*. Barchester conforms to a larger myth of the village community, Calder's 'Deep England', which sought to 'freeze' an image of Britishness as rural, timeless and unchanging particularly during a time of national emergency. Russell Berman argues that this ideal of the village community contains 'a yearning not essentially for pastness but for a genuine community of pleasure, loyalty, and freedom, a charismatic community'.<sup>73</sup>

Berman's 'charismatic community' is embodied in the eccentric ageing female characters, led by Rutherford's performance as Rowena Ventnor, who is implacable in her charitable activities. Rowena makes her first, fleeting yet energetic appearance on the high street, collecting money for Daisy Day. She bustles into the shot, a tray suspended from her neck, insisting on pinning a daisy onto the reluctant Ivan. Rowena's status as a local eccentric is underscored by Ann's (Penelope Dudley Ward) explanation to the bemused Russian, pointing laughingly at the retreating Rowena: 'That...was Miss Rowena Ventnor. She's...well, you've seen for yourself'. The pauses emphasise the liminal status of the spinster, for whom words do not suffice; she has to be seen, but cannot be described, underscoring her comic value as a spectacle and experience. Rowena gesticulates wildly, her face is in constant animation, commanding attention by being placed centre frame. She is rendered more chaotic and eccentric in contrast with the youthful tall and slim Ann, whose movements are slight and graceful, her prettiness and stylish skirt-suit being unobtrusively sophisticated.

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<sup>73</sup> Russell A. Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 122.



Figure 62 Rowena Ventnor collects money for Daisy Day in *The Demi-Paradise*.

Rowena's eccentricity epitomises all that Ivan finds intolerable about the English, made manifest in her role organising the village historical pageant. Rutherford's signature performance style renders Rowena a comic figure, demanding attention with her grand swooping gestures, thrusting her chin forward and making every syllable resonate as she corrals the crowd of extras. Her leadership style evokes the spirit of iconic figures of female military leadership, Britannia and Boudica, wearing flowing robes, a cloak, and brandishing a staff as she barks out commands to her army of villagers dressed as Romans. Dresser notes how the image of Britannia evolved over the centuries, being represented as 'the nation armed' during the First World War, yet coming to be depicted 'like the respectable and decidedly upper-middle-class ladies she has come to represent'.<sup>74</sup> The incongruity of genteel female ageing and combative leadership is exploited for comic effect, her oddness being commensurate with her spinster status yet working to evoke past glories to both reassure and assert patriotic discourses in a time of war. In harnessing references to legendary figures of female leaders Rowena becomes more than a 'village lady given to good works' evoked by Keown, but a timeless and talismanic figure.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Dresser, 'Britannia', p. 41.

<sup>75</sup> Keown, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 37.



Figure 63 Rowena Ventnor commands her troops in the pageant in *The Demi-Paradise*.

The film's portrait of eccentric Englishness was well received on both sides of the Atlantic, Rutherford's performance being praised in one of the foremost American trade magazines, the *Motion Picture Herald*.<sup>76</sup> The role of Rowena Ventnor left its imprint on her persona, with *Picturegoer* commenting on Rutherford's use of 'down-to-earth, "horsey" phrases of the village pageant organizer in *Demi-Paradise*' as having become 'her film language'.<sup>77</sup> The role of the eccentric parish do-gooder was to be central to her film career, most notably in the role of Miss Marple. Wider publicity materials throughout her career helped to cultivate this persona, with press reports of her good works such as 'mothering' of Borstal boys, radio appeals for charities and even presenting a religious reading on the BBC. Asquith's casting of Rutherford in another incarnation of English ageing eccentricity twenty years later as the Duchess of Brighton in *The V.I.P.s* was to win her an Academy Award for best supporting actress.

### ***Blithe Spirit*: eccentricity and otherness**

The role of Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* proved to be pivotal to Rutherford's career, elevating her to minor star status both in Britain and in America, and redefining the eccentricity integral to her persona to encompass a sense of otherness which persisted throughout her film career. Her star power was evident in the considerable latitude she was given to capitalise on her original stage performance according to Kevin Brownlow, with director David Lean being under strict

<sup>76</sup> See *Motion Picture Herald*, 13 December 1943, pp. 69-70.

<sup>77</sup> Angela Best, 'Dowager Duchess' in *Picturegoer*, 27 November 1954.

instructions from Coward to change nothing from the successful stage production.<sup>78</sup> Rutherford's performance centred on a confluence of the ordinary and the extraordinary which had come to define her early film roles, combining the elements of fantasy, the mythic and the ordinary associated with stardom. Morin observed that stars are elevated above the mortal, being 'mediators between the screen-heaven and earth'.<sup>79</sup> Whereas conventional stardom is configured around glamour and desire, the extraordinary aspects of Rutherford's persona resided primarily in the eccentricity and otherness harnessed in her performance as Arcati.

The character of Arcati evokes enduring myths of the deviant, solitary spinster as witch. This archetype of female ageing draws on historical associations and prejudice prevailing since before the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The women persecuted during the witch-hunts tended to be old, poor and often living alone, and were deemed guilty of witchcraft on account of their seemingly 'magical' powers according to Silvia Federici: 'Even when they were not expert sorcerers/magicians, they were the ones who were called to mark animals when they fell sick, heal their neighbors, help them find lost or stolen objects, give them amulets or love potions, help them forecast the future'.<sup>80</sup> The inter-war period had been a time of revived interest in the occult, made manifest in the worship of nature, witchcraft and alternatives to established religion, coinciding with the anxieties about the generation of surplus women destined to be spinsters. Sylvia Townsend Warner's 1926 novel, *Lolly Willowses*, pursued this theme featuring a spinster who turns to the occult and rejects the stifling life course mapped out for her as a 'universal aunt' supporting her siblings. As Greer would argue witchcraft could be empowering, offering validation and the means for 'a coherent protest against the marginalization of older women and a strategic alternative to it'.<sup>81</sup>

Madame Arcati is a figure of ridicule for the other characters largely on account of her eccentricity as a solitary ageing spinster who dedicates her life to study of the supernatural. Charles Condomine (Rex Harrison) refers to her as a 'professional charlatan', and along with his guests expects to be entertained by her eccentricity.

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<sup>78</sup> Kevin Brownlow, *David Lean: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), p. 190.

<sup>79</sup> Morin, *The Stars*, p. 32.

<sup>80</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), p. 174.

<sup>81</sup> Greer, *The Change*, p. 353.

Arcati's entrance builds on Rutherford's persona of the village spinster, being the incarnation of George Orwell's evocation of Englishness as she cycles through an idyllic village setting.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless Arcati is a bohemian figure for such a bucolic setting, with her billowing cloak, scarf and red velvet dress, rendered comic by the jaunty music which accompanies her speedy progress. The sense of outlandishness is further cultivated by Doctor Bradman's (Hugh Wakefield) comment that 'She certainly is a strange woman. The vicar told me how he saw her up on the knoll on Midsummer Eve, dressed in sort of Indian robes'.



Figure 64 Madame Arcati speeds her way to the seance in *Blithe Spirit*.

Much like Rowena Ventnor, Arcati is forceful and unstoppable despite her aberrant status. From the moment she enters the Condomines' house she is clearly in complete control of the situation, being quick to counteract any flippancy, and demonstrating a professional commitment to her work. The guests are cowed into following her orders by her sheer strength of will and persistence, the previously cynical Doctor is praised as if he were a child as he anxiously confirms her instructions, Arcati slapping him firmly on the back for his obedience. Rutherford's performance style according to Street is not just about creating 'comic effect' but also demonstrating 'an essential goodness about her that exposes other characters moral weaknesses and exploitative motives', prefiguring her performance as Miss Marple.<sup>83</sup> Arcati does not conform to the popular image of the self-pitying and pitiable spinster, being an energetic, independent woman who embraces eccentricity,

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<sup>82</sup> Orwell, 'The lion and the unicorn', p. 139.

<sup>83</sup> Street, 'Margaret Rutherford and comic performance', p. 91.

being beholden to no one in her single life. She is deviant and other, in her lifestyle, beliefs and demeanour, reinforcing aspects of the spinster myth, yet is not afraid to state her mind, even if it is to reprimand the doctor for his apparent ignorance: ‘You should think Dr. Bradman, but I fear you don’t, at least not profoundly enough’. Arcati sets the precedent for many of Rutherford’s subsequent film roles by rejecting the marginalisation of the ageing woman and the conventional narrative of decline and loss, manifesting an energy and potency in comparison to other characters. The character offers an overt celebration of ageing and spinsterhood as a liberation from the pettiness and confinement of everyday married life. Whereas the other female characters are defined by their relationships with their husbands, Arcati is a free spirit, whose house is her own space, having upped and moved sticks from London seeking a less ‘sedentary life’ and demonstrating a pride in her professional achievements as a medium. Her eccentricity in terms of her status as a medium and a spinster is empowering. By the end of the film all three Condomines are deceased, united in marital disharmony beyond the grave, whilst Madame Arcati remains robustly alive, her life enhanced by the thrill of meeting the ghost of Condomine’s first wife, Elvira (Kay Hammond).



**Figure 65** Madame Arcati is thrilled by the presence of Elvira in *Blithe Spirit*.

The witch is aligned with nature, an outcast from the civilised world, roaming the countryside at night, and preferring the company of her familiars. Arcati’s opening line in the stage production of *Blithe Spirit*, mounted on her bicycle, celebrates the natural world: ‘It was wonderful cycling through the woods this evening. I was deafened with bird song’. She proves herself able to intuit the emotions of a cuckoo



and lives with her familiar, a parrot, being one of many Rutherford characters who has a special understanding of the animal kingdom.<sup>84</sup> This affinity between the ageing woman, the ‘hag’ and the animal kingdom according to Greer is integral to how the witch subverts male authority ‘by hobnobbing with creatures as unattractive and unnerving as herself’.<sup>85</sup> For Greer the witch and her familiars share a contradictory status being ‘actually harmless, serviceable creatures, subjected to unreasonable abuse because they are considered unappealing and their real usefulness is unrecognized’. The film’s publicity material described Arcati as ‘a haggard old medium’, drawing on the archetypal association of ageing with ugliness and witchcraft. The physical charms of the younger stars of the film were foregrounded, the dominant image being of Elvira posing seductively in a revealing gauzy gown, suggesting a narrative of sexual intrigue. In contrast the publicity photo of Madame Arcati emphasises her asexuality, as she peers, bespectacled into her crystal ball, intent on her work.



Figure 66 Madame Arcati peers into her crystal ball in a publicity photograph for *Blithe Spirit*.

An ageing character is inherently liminal on account not only of their relative proximity to death, but also their peripheral status in the narrative. This liminal quality informed many of Rutherford’s roles, her eccentric status endowing her with the power to effect transformation in the tradition of the trickster. Tricksters are defined by William J. Hynes and William G. Doty as ‘cultural clown-figures’ not to

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<sup>84</sup> The eponymous heroine of *Miss Robin Hood* (1952) is always accompanied by a flock of doves, whereas in *An Alligator Named Daisy* (1955) she plays a pet shop owner who attempts to communicate with animals using a trumpet and stethoscope; and in *Just My Luck* (1957) she plays the eccentric menagerie enthusiast, Mrs Dooley, who keeps an elephant outside the front door.

<sup>85</sup> Greer, *The Change*, p. 354.

be dismissed for ‘they are entertainments that are instructive’.<sup>86</sup> As a spinster and an intermediary between the living and the dead, Arcati follows in the trickster tradition, living on the margins of society, and creating havoc when asked to demonstrate her powers. Nevertheless her intervention exposes the frailties and foibles of those who occupy the social high ground of conventional and privilege. The liminality of Arcati enables her to defy the rigidity of social expectations regarding age, proving herself energetic and relentless in her efforts on the behalf of the Condomines. She channels her spirit-guide, a little girl, during the séance, singing nursery rhymes, skipping around the drawing room before reciting ‘Tommy Tucker’ with the voice of the seven-year-old and falling to the floor. Her excitable demeanour and zest for life is combined with what Elvira scornfully refers to as ‘school girl phraseology’ creating an anachronistic combination of the age and youth, transgressing boundaries of age and mortality.

Arcati’s liminal status is reflected in a campness which is congruent with her otherness, playing with roles and social expectations regarding gender and age. This prevalent sense of camp is rooted in a performance style, appearance and narrative role defined by excess and exaggeration. Camp performance is defined by exaggerated role-playing, which can seem ‘knowing’, to the verge to self-parody according to Jack Babuscio.<sup>87</sup> Rutherford’s performance as Arcati cultivates the anachronistic, evoking aspects of bygone eras through her diction, appearance, and performance style. This nostalgia was to be central to Rutherford’s persona and her enduring appeal, in the tradition of ‘Camp taste’ as defined by Susan Sontag, prizing the ‘old-fashioned, out-of-date, démodé’.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, ‘Introducing the fascinating and perplexing trickster figure’ in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> Jack Babuscio, ‘Camp and the gay sensibility’ in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 126.

<sup>88</sup> Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on camp’ in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 285.



Figure 67 Madame Arcati dressed for her work in *Blithe Spirit*.

The conflation of ageing, eccentricity and otherness within the character of Madame Arcati informed Rutherford's persona throughout her film career, and life, with the star herself requesting that 'A blithe spirit' should be inscribed on her grave. The degree to which the public and private intermingled in Rutherford's persona was made evident in Ronald Neame's account of how Rutherford wore her own clothes for the part, being suitably outlandish.<sup>89</sup> The studio publicity sought to cultivate this persona, quoting Noel Coward declaring that 'Margaret took possession of my pen', and highlighting the fact that her first acting role was that of 'a bad fairy' as a child.<sup>90</sup> Her autobiography fosters this sense of otherness, playfully describing herself as being inhabited by the spirit of Madame Arcati during the making of the film, stating that she could relate to the medium, being 'a wholesome woman who got down to business and worshipped fresh air'.<sup>91</sup> Rutherford describes her own love for 'wild' swimming and walking in the countryside, sometimes at night time and with her 'cloak flying behind' her.<sup>92</sup> The liminality and trickster energies of Arcati informed many of Rutherford's subsequent roles, such as Nurse Carey in both *Miranda* and *Mad About Men* (1954), who acts as the carer and go-between for a mermaid, and historian Miss Nicholson in *Castle in the Air* (1952), who develops a rapport with a ghost.<sup>93</sup> Even when not endowed with supernatural powers Rutherford's roles would essentially be that of the trickster, or the 'magical spinster',

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<sup>89</sup> Ronald Neame, *Straight From the Horse's Mouth* (Lanham: Scarecrow, 2003), p. 81.

<sup>90</sup> *Blithe Spirit* pressbook, BFI archives, London.

<sup>91</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 48.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>93</sup> She was also the star of an American documentary for television called *The Stately Ghosts of England* in 1964.

using her marginal status as the eccentric older spinster to intervene in the lives of others in order to right wrongs, facilitate romance or even solve crimes as Miss Marple.<sup>94</sup>

Whilst *Dusty Ermine* and *The Demi-Paradise* were testament to Rutherford's ability to scene steal, *Blithe Spirit* saw her steal the whole film from its younger, more glamorous stars.<sup>95</sup> *Kine Weekly* enthused about her performance: 'This is the fat part and she certainly does seize her chances!'<sup>96</sup> American reviews were unanimous in their praise for Rutherford's performance, with one fan magazine declaring that she 'is the real star of this show'.<sup>97</sup> *Variety* pointed out the essential contradictions of her performance, with reference to her girth and energy: 'Acting honors go to Margaret Rutherford [...] There is nothing ethereal about this 200-pounder. Her dynamic personality has all the slapdash of Fairbanks Sr in his prime'.<sup>98</sup>

### ***Passport to Pimlico* and *The Happiest Days of Your Life*: eccentricity and the bluestocking**

As a learned spinster, who puts the pursuit of career and knowledge before conventional family life, Madame Arcati was very much a bluestocking, a type which was to inform many of Rutherford's roles. According to Terry Castle the inspiration for Arcati was Noel Coward's 'lesbian muse' Clemence Dane, who had gained renown as a bluestocking. Dane was one of a generation of upper middle-class spinsters of the inter-war years whose status allowed them to enter higher education and even pursue a career.<sup>99</sup> The campness of Rutherford's performance is consistent with the provenance of the role, with Castle arguing that *Blithe Spirit* was an 'allegory of homosexualisation'. The ambiguity of Arcati's gender identity was typical of Rutherford's bluestocking characters, including the indomitable

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<sup>94</sup> Spike Lee coined the phrase 'magical, mystical Negro' in 2001 to describe the archetype of the token black character in a narrative having magical powers used for the benefit of white people. This archetype draws on the trickster tradition, the trickster typically being of a marginalised social group.

<sup>95</sup> Rex Harrison was unimpressed by Lean's direction and how it appeared to favour Rutherford, commenting that 'David set up a stage set and just photographed it. Four of us got up in line and then Margaret Rutherford would walk down the middle pulling faces'; see interview with Patrick Garland, Thames Television, 2 December 1987.

<sup>96</sup> *Kine Weekly*, 12 April 1945, p. 31.

<sup>97</sup> *Screenland*, November 1945, p. 10.

<sup>98</sup> *Variety*, 31 December 1944, accessed 26 May 2015, <http://variety.com/1944/film/reviews/blithe-spirit-1200414566>.

<sup>99</sup> Terry Castle, *Noel Coward and Radcliffe Hall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 99-101.

headteacher Miss Whitchurch in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*. To be a bluestocking was intrinsically eccentric, as was established with the first usage of the label in association with Elizabeth Montagu's Mayfair salons in the mid-eighteenth century, for as Jane Robinson notes 'The very idea of a female's opinion actually mattering to the intelligentsia was unconventional'.<sup>100</sup> 'Bluestocking' was used as a pejorative label according to Nicole Pohl being 'about the learned woman, the manly woman, the unsexed females, who were intellectual women who were a threat to men'.<sup>101</sup> This image informed the public perception of the female teacher in the early twentieth century, being the only plausible career option for the more educated woman, particularly for the generation of 'surplus' women of the inter-war period.<sup>102</sup>

Several of Rutherford's early supporting roles were as learned or professional women, including a magistrate in *Quiet Wedding*, the ornithologist Lady Christabel Beauclerk in *English Without Tears*, the village historian in *The Demi-Paradise* and as a doctor, Dr Winifred Frye, in *While The Sun Shines*. Such characters were unattached and therefore free to pursue their interests, to the point of obsession, making them comic figures in the excessive commitment to their vocation. This is often in contrast to the younger female lead whose pursuit of romance defines their femininity, as with the Penelope Dudley Ward roles in both *The Demi-Paradise* and *English Without Tears*. This strand to Rutherford's persona was central to her role as historian, Professor Hatton-Jones in Ealing's *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) whose expert testimony, interpreting historical documents retrieved from a bomb crater, leads to the declaration of independence for Pimlico. The role is typical of Rutherford's persona, being effectively that of the trickster, summonsed by the court, her intervention leading to a period of Bakhtinian carnival for the community, liberated from the petty restrictions and rationing of post-war Britain. By the end of the film with Pimlico absorbed back into British sovereignty, Hatton-Jones has disappeared from the narrative, her presence being as transitory as the period of independence. In comparison to the other female characters she occupies a liminal status, having no family and therefore unattached, but her knowledge conferring a

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<sup>100</sup> Jane Robinson, *Bluestockings* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>101</sup> Nicole Pohl, 'The bluestockings', *In Our Time* BBC Radio 4, 5 June 2014.

<sup>102</sup> Nicholson notes that the number of female teachers increased from 180 000 in 1911 to 210 000 in 1931; see *Singled Out*, p. 160.

power which elevates her to consorting with men almost as an equal. Her devotion to her scholarly pursuits is congruent with the elision of gender difference, rendering her femininity seemingly irrelevant.

True to the tradition of the bluestocking Hatton-Jones is a comic figure, despite her evident learnedness, with the depth of her knowledge of historical intricacies overwhelming her audience in the court scene. She is completely distracted and does not respond when called to testify, hidden by the ancient casket she is studying intently, peering through her pince-nez, establishing her obsessive nature, and detachment from reality. The image of a fusty academic is constructed through her archaic appearance, sporting a caped jacket, high-necked blouse fastened at the neck with a brooch, and an elaborate fob watch which chimes at inauspicious moments. The Professor's testimony is delivered to the court as if to a lecture theatre, her delivery and posture being expansive and dramatic; she thrusts her chest forward, throws her head back and brandishes the scroll, in the ostentatious mannerisms typical of Rutherford's performance style.



Figure 68 Professor Hatton-Jones in court in *Passport to Pimlico*.

Alaistair Sim was the original choice for the role of Professor Hatton-Jones with only one word of the dialogue being changed when Rutherford took over the role according to Harper.<sup>103</sup> This would suggest a measure of interchangeability between Sim and Rutherford, both offering a quiddity which bridged the normative gender

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<sup>103</sup> Harper, *Women in British Cinema*, p. 59. Harper argued that this was indicative of Ealing Studios' dismissive attitude to female characters, p. 58.

roles, as a consequence of their age and eccentricity.<sup>104</sup> The parallels between the two actors are exploited in their casting as the warring headteachers in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, wherein their characters are the mirror image of each other, with the two ultimately fusing into one with the casting of Sim in the dual role of headteacher, Miss Millicent Fritton and her rogue brother Clarence in *The Belles of St. Trinian's* (1954).<sup>105</sup> The blurring of gender identity is central to Rutherford's role as headmistress Miss Whitchurch in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, a character who is true to the bluestocking stereotype as a spinster teacher who transgresses traditional gender roles with her combative stance, going to war with the patriarchal stronghold of Nutbourn College for boys. Rutherford compared her to 'a trumpeting steam-roller' who 'flattened' her adversary, headteacher Wetherby Pond (Alastair Sim).<sup>106</sup> She had mixed feelings about the character in later life, wanting to distance herself from such a 'disgraceful exhibition of ruthless feminism', yet citing a review which praises her performance 'as a headmistress before whom an atomic bomb might quail'.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless despite her professed reservations the part was originally written specifically for her in the 1948 stage production, and thereby clearly informed by her persona.

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<sup>104</sup> This same interchangeability is pointed out by Roger Lewis regarding Peter Sellers and Rutherford, the latter taking over the role of Grand Duchess Gloriana from Sellers for *The Mouse on the Moon*. Lewis argues that it is difficult to tell the difference, musing 'Did Sellers have Margaret Rutherford in mind when he played the part originally?'; see Roger Lewis, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (London: Random House, 1994), p. 330.

<sup>105</sup> This blurring of gender identity was implicit in the origins of the label 'bluestocking', the first bluestocking having been a man, Benjamin Stillingfleet (1702-71), who turned up to one of Elizabeth Montagu's salons in bluestockings.

<sup>106</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 88.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.



Figure 69 Alastair Sim as Miss Meredith Fritton in *The Belles of St. Trinian's*.

Whitchurch and Pond represent a pre-war era of intransigence and tradition, who in their battle to protect their single sex schools, ultimately discover that the enemy is the modern world, and not each other. The themes and narrative of the film were of direct relevance to the post-war audience, within a time of educational reform, and the movement away from single sex education to a modern era of co-educational schools. This topicality was typical of the work of Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, according to Babington, their films were more than entertainment, being a response ‘to the ideological weather’.<sup>108</sup> The characters of Whitchurch and Pond share a ‘dottiness’ identified by Macnab as the preserve of the middle-class and middle-aged, made manifest in the *The Happiest Days of Your Life* in a ‘strained, even schizophrenic, relationship with bureaucracy’, where ‘Teachers and civil servants, the people expected to administer the system, are the ones most likely to rebel against it’.<sup>109</sup> Moreover there is no room for the bluestocking in the post-war era, as Whitchurch recognises at the end of the film, by taking the initiative and proposing to Pond that they could leave the country to grow groundnuts in Tanganyika, abandoning her vocation and her spinster status, as she stands hand in hand with her foe. Whereas Rutherford was customarily guilty of commanding the frame, with scene-stealing performances, the comedy of *The Happiest Days of Your Life* rests on her having to share the frame with Sim, as the headteachers battle for supremacy. The narrative starts with the two resolutely entrenched in their respective roles, both of them ageing, single and intolerant of the other gender. By the end of

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<sup>108</sup> Bruce Babington, *Launder and Gilliat* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>109</sup> Macnab, *Searching for Stars*, p. 128.



the film they are working together, on the brink of a shared future, united by their shared traits and being outmanoeuvred by progress. The pitting of the two characters, and two actors, against each other is highlighted by the camerawork and editing, which repeatedly juxtaposes the two.



Figure 70 Ronald Searle's title sequence image of Wetherby Pond and Evelyn Whitchurch, for *The Happiest Days of Your Life*.

Nutbourn School is established as a bastion of male complacency at the start of the film. Pond is the archetypal 'chap' whose disdainful attitude to women is summarised by one of his staff: 'The day Pond exchanges a smile with a woman I'll dance all night naked in the village green!' The film cuts away to the impending threat of a bluestocking invasion, with Miss Whitchurch leading her students and staff like a military commander marching towards Nutbourn. Whitchurch strides at the head of the school, clad in a sensible tweed suit and brandishing a walking stick and handbag with purpose and determination. Her strong sense of mission is made evident in her forceful body language, commanding unquestioned authority with her staff, who wait on her every word, anxiously responding to her orders and reprimands.



Figure 71 Miss Whitchurch leads her staff in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*.

The comic impact of this bluestocking headmistress is manifest in the sheer excess of her authority, as she demonstrates total disregard for the concerns of Pond and his pupils, commandeering his bedroom, his office, the staff room and the dorms with the military efficiency of an occupying army. She disrupts Pond's patriarchal stronghold, challenging his authority, and consigning him to sleep in the bath. The struggle between the two of them becomes physical at one point when Pond manages to wrestle his phone out of the hands of Whitchurch. Again, Rutherford plays the battleaxe, being the busybody who takes command, and is not prepared to tolerate weakness or fools gladly with one reviewer comparing her to 'Queen Boudica at a difficult dress fitting'.<sup>110</sup> Pond sums up his feelings regarding his adversary, and her gender, when asking his class to analyse 'that excellent phrase of John Knox: "The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women."' Whilst Pond takes an overtly misogynistic stance, Whitchurch manages to overwhelm him by her physical energy and masculine character traits. Whereas Pond is stooped and cowed, hiding from the women and girls, Whitchurch is brusque and energetic, swiftly moving to occupy any space, with a clipboard under her arm, and taking the upper hand in any verbal exchange.

Miss Whitchurch appears to represent the forces of change as she leads her 'regiment of women' into the patriarchal space, suggesting a more modern outlook in her disappointment at the 'ancient mausoleum' of Nutbourn. Nevertheless the actual curriculum she administers for her girls is retrograde with an emphasis on feminine

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<sup>110</sup> Paul Holt quoted in Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 91.

skills such as cooking, needlework and Greek dancing. She represents an educational ethos which is rooted in the past, with an overarching aim to prepare the girls for their role as ‘an helpmeet for man, not as his equal or rival’ according to an article published in 1882, ‘The Disadvantages of Higher Education’.<sup>111</sup> There is an inherent comic paradox in the bluestocking headteacher being a guardian of femininity given the wider prejudice against the spinster teacher, regarded as a poor role model. This generation of spinster teachers were subject to ridicule, and even contempt, as noted by Nicholson with reference to an article in *Woman’s Weekly* from 1920, entitled ‘Do teachers make good wives?’<sup>112</sup> The periodical ‘deplored their narrow minds, their domineering manners, their dowdy and frumpy appearance’, labelling them as bluestockings, and regarding cleverness with suspicion.



Figure 72 Whitchurch and Pond bond over their shared discomfort with co-educational schools in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*.

Fears of the influence of the spinster teacher were exemplified in A. S. Neill’s *The Problem Teacher*, arguing that they were responsible for ‘much frigidity in wives’, concluding that ‘A system that puts the education of girls in the hands of a body of women who have no sex life is a mad one’.<sup>113</sup> Neill’s antipathy to the spinster teacher reflects a strain of hostility which had been particularly pronounced in the inter-war years according to Alison Oram, with the spinster teacher being attacked

<sup>111</sup> *Girl’s Own Paper* quoted in Robinson, *Bluestockings*, p. 68.

<sup>112</sup> Nicholson, *Singled Out*, pp. 160-61.

<sup>113</sup> A. S. Neill, *The Problem Teacher* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1939), p. 99.

‘by accusations that they were warped, repressed and deviant’.<sup>114</sup> The National Association of Schoolmasters annual conference of 1939 voiced its concerns about women teachers wanting to be men, declaring that ‘Only a nation heading for the madhouse would force on men, many married with families, such a position as service under spinster headmistresses’.<sup>115</sup> The fear of such grotesques motivated the government to permanently lift the marriage bar for women teachers, with the parliamentary secretary at the board of education arguing that the marriage bar restricted headteacher roles to ‘sex-starved’ spinsters, causing ‘acute difficulties [...] on staffs when a Head Mistress in her fifties who had led a life of repression has to deal with young and good looking assistants’.<sup>116</sup>

Whitchurch belonged to a tradition of forceful, charismatic headmistresses of the Victorian era, two of whom had their gender deficiencies caricatured in a popular rhyme of the era:

‘Miss Buss and Miss Beale

Cupid’s Darts do not feel,

They leave that to us,

Poor Beale and poor Buss.’<sup>117</sup>

‘The sex-starved’ female teacher is often a bad teacher, characterised by ‘fuss and fury’ according to A.S. Neill, writing that the cure ‘is manifestly a love life’.<sup>118</sup> Accordingly, when Whitchurch realises that she has lost the battle to salvage the reputation of her school, she forms plans for the future with Pond. Consistent with the fears articulated about the spinster teacher, Whitchurch’s efforts are focused on keeping the two schools, and genders, apart and halting any ‘interschool poodlefaking’. Her fear of the consequences of the two schools mixing and the perils of relationships between the sexes leads her to demand that Pond cancels all Biology teaching. She is the embodiment of Neill’s spinster teacher; her actions can only

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<sup>114</sup> Alison Oram, ‘Embittered, sexless or homosexual’: attacks on spinster teachers 1918-39’ in *Not a Passing Phase: Reclaiming Lesbians in History 1840-1985*, ed. Lesbian History Group (London: Women’s Press, 1989), pp. 101-102.

<sup>115</sup> *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 April 1939, p. 142.

<sup>116</sup> Harold L. Smith, ‘The womanpower problem in Britain during the Second World War’ in *The Historical Journal*, 1984, p. 942.

<sup>117</sup> Robinson, *Bluestockings*, p. 36.

<sup>118</sup> Neill, *The Problem Teacher*, p. 97.

result in anarchy as she manifests male qualities of leadership and authority, undermining and overruling Pond and his staff. Such masculine traits are accentuated to comic effect when Whitchurch occupies Pond's office, positioned below a portrait of Churchill, indicating a parallel between their leadership in wartime, the feathers bristling in her hat as she imperiously demands action on the telephone. This comparison between the two was evoked by Simmons, who described Rutherford as 'a sort of feminine version of Winston Churchill, never admitting defeat.'<sup>119</sup>



Figure 73 Miss Whitchurch takes command of Pond's desk, under the watchful eye of Churchill in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*.

Age prevails over the gender divide, uniting the two middle-aged headteachers when faced with change. The horror they experience when confronted with the other sex is replaced by a horror for the modern world, embodied in the unruliness of a co-educational school. The sanctuary of celibacy is no longer as important as the sanctuary of social class within the private school system. By forming a partnership with her adversary Whitchurch abdicates from her role as bluestocking battleaxe, retreating to a remote outpost of the British Empire away from change.

The link between ageing and loss of gender identity is a key element of the image of the ageing woman as grotesque, who is an aberration in failing to conform to ideals regarding gender and age. The role of Whitchurch was typical of Rutherford's film roles in casting her as an ageing single woman, whose asexuality was central to her persona as a comedy grotesque. Many of her roles involving her transgressing gender boundaries, playing characters who challenge traditionally male territory.

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<sup>119</sup> Simmons, *A Blithe Spirit*, p. 21.

Babington described Rutherford's persona as 'absolute sexless', adding that her characters exhibit an 'absolute imperviousness to the nonsense of sex'.<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless innuendo and sexual references are mined for comic effect in *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, consistent with Harper's observation that 'the eccentrics were all neutralized by their age, which confers absurdity onto their desires'.<sup>121</sup> Rutherford's mannerisms, movement and physical presence create an asexual, if not rather masculine inflection to her performance. Comedy is 'fundamentally queer' according to Alexander Doty, elaborating that 'it encourages rule-breaking, risk-taking, inversions and perversions in the face of straight patriarchal norms'.<sup>122</sup> The bluestocking Miss Whitchurch is perverse by challenging the normative life course in common with many of Rutherford's other film roles, this perversity made evident in a performance and persona which transgresses boundaries regarding age and gender.

### ***The Smallest Show On Earth and I'm All Right Jack: eccentricity and nostalgia***

Miss Whitchurch is an embodiment of the past, her character being informed by a tradition of bluestockings and spinster headmistresses, forced to retreat to the outer reaches of what remains of the Empire, a concept which was equally in danger of extinction. This sense of a bygone golden age was central to many of Rutherford's roles, in association with characters exiled to the margins of society, or in the case of *The Smallest Show on Earth* (1957), a crumbling cinema. In her film roles from the late 1950s onwards she was increasingly cast as ageing aristocratic characters, evoking the glory days of Empire and Edwardian values. Many of these characters are struggling in the face of diminished resources or the exigencies of modern life, seeking desperate remedies to hold onto past glories, often in contrast to the aspirational youthfulness of the lead characters. Such roles threatened to relegate her to a purely symbolic function in the narrative, essentially a relic, within ensemble comedies such as *The Smallest Show on Earth* and *I'm All Right Jack*, whilst younger actors took the central roles. Her stage roles followed a similar trajectory, often cast as a mature, distinguished and respected figure of a superior social class,

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<sup>120</sup> Babington, *Lauder and Gilliat*, p. 158. Street argues that Rutherford is not always 'sexless', citing the innuendo in *The Happiest Days of Your Life* and Arcati's excitement, verging on arousal, when she meets Elvira in *Blithe Spirit*; see 'Margaret Rutherford and comic performance', p. 97.

<sup>121</sup> Harper, *Women in British Cinema*, p. 99.

<sup>122</sup> Alexander Doty, 'Queerness, comedy and *The Women*' in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 334.

typifying 1950s theatre, the era of the ‘theatrical *grandes dames*’ according to John Elsom, increasingly regarded as symbolising ‘stuffy bourgeois standards’.<sup>123</sup> Many of Rutherford’s roles are rooted in the past, whether it is in terms of their age, appearance or being historians as with Rowena Ventnor, Miss Nicholson in *Castle in the Air* (1952) and Professor Hatton-Jones. A sense of antiquity was foregrounded in Rutherford’s persona, with Keown detailing how she was ‘brought up a good little Victorian’, adding that she was a child of the Empire, who could recall an early childhood in India.<sup>124</sup>

Directed and produced by Ealing stalwarts, Basil Dearden and Michael Relph, *The Smallest Show on Earth* is an elegy for past glories, in the tradition of Ealing comedies characterised by the ‘iteration of timeless comic struggles between the old and the new and of deferential conformity pitted against resistance’.<sup>125</sup> Rutherford was cast as Mrs Fazackalee, left personally and professionally bereft following the demise of the owner of the archaic Bijou Kinema where she works as the cashier. The ageing staff face an uncertain future, given the superior modern facilities of their rival, The Grand, its scheming owner, and the inexperience of their youthful new owners, Matt and Jean Spencer (Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna).



Figure 74 Mrs Fazackalee in her mourning weeds in *The Smallest Show On Earth*.

Rutherford’s performance is unusually restrained and confined in *The Smallest Show On Earth*, playing a supporting role to the younger leads. She keeps herself static

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<sup>123</sup> John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 203.

<sup>124</sup> Keown, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 12.

<sup>125</sup> Tim O’Sullivan, ‘Ealing comedies 1947-57’ in *British Comedy Cinema*, eds. I. Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 72.

and controlled in the background or to the side of the frame, being part of the ensemble and the setting for the narrative rather than central in most scenes.<sup>126</sup> Her performance as the bereaved ticket seller, stranded in a bygone age renders her a ghostlike figure, bereft of the dynamism and energetic presence that characterises many of her other roles. Her performance is determined by the emphasis on her age and heritage as a relic of the past, she is a symbol rather than an individual. Mrs Fazackalee is essentially a figuration of ageing that is redolent of Miss Haversham, perpetually in mourning, entombed within an edifice which is little more than a museum to a bygone age. As the Spencers endeavour to make a going concern of the cinema she pitches in and supports them, even to the extent of standing in as the refreshments girl during the interval, although her lugubrious stately progress down the aisle is poorly received in contrast to the short skirts and flirtatious charms of her much younger replacement.



Figure 75 Mrs Fazackalee selling interval refreshments in *The Smallest Show On Earth*.

Mrs Fazackalee is the leader and spokesperson for the aged staff, her squat and archaic form mirroring that of The Bijou itself, which is progressively disintegrating with age and neglect. The character is rooted in the past, bedecked in Victorian mourning weeds and jet jewellery, her imperiousness emphasized by her pince-

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<sup>126</sup> Christine Geraghty makes the point that ensemble playing can be argued to have a significant impact on performance style, as actors have to differentiate themselves, working together, yet constructing distinctive characters: 'Difference is [...] displayed but a strong sense of complementary performances is also established'; see 'Re-examining stardom', p. 195. Rutherford's subdued performance is crafted to complement the Sellers' performance as the irascible and quirky Quill.



nez.<sup>127</sup> She overcomes her grief in the face of a new regime, to quickly establish herself as a commanding and stately presence, intolerant of the foibles of the bibulous projectionist, Mr Quill (Peter Sellers) and the inadequacies of the Spencers. Her forbidding persona is made manifest in her determined physical presence, much like an ageing headteacher, her hands crossed, lips pursed, chin jutting forth and maintaining a constant look of disapproval. She stands over Matt Spencer as he attempts to get to grips with the accounts, until exasperated by his amateurism she firmly removes the books as if from a recalcitrant pupil, snapping the volume shut and briskly issuing him with demands regarding her priorities. Mrs Fazackalee establishes an authority and experience which renders Matt even more naïve and hopeless; her taciturnity contrasts with his floundering in attempting to get control of a situation beyond his experience.



Figure 76 Mrs Fazackerlee tries to teach Matt Spencer (Bill Travers) in *The Smallest Show On Earth*.

The aged staff who haunt this decaying symbol of past glory embody the spirit of the somnolent family elders of whom Orwell writes in ‘The lion and the unicorn’, holding the country in thrall, and thwarting the younger generation.<sup>128</sup> The Bijou is a dysfunctional family, in common with Orwell’s metaphor of England as a family which ‘has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes its ranks. A family with the wrong members in control...’ A sense of

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<sup>127</sup> The costume designer Anthony Mendleson had been responsible for Mrs Wilberforce’s Edwardian outfits in *The Ladykillers*, which carried a similar symbolism connoting the glories of some bygone golden age.

<sup>128</sup> Orwell, ‘The lion and the unicorn’, p. 150.

pathos and nostalgia pervades the staff as they face an uncertain future, forming a spectrum of infirmity, a troubled, taciturn and inert presence which haunts the ancient cinema. Having lost their patron, they are thrown to the mercy of the clueless younger generation, facing the threat of a new era in which the corporate blandness of *The Grand* threatens to level them to the ground, literally, to become a car park.

Mrs Fazackalee is a ghost of the golden age of cinema, *The Bijou* being her life, her work being her passion. The Spencers return late one night to discover the melancholy sound of her piano playing accompanying a private screening of *Comin' Thro' The Rye*. The aged staff are completely rapt as they are transported back to the 'old days'. The elegiac tone to this scene permeates the whole film, the product of a British film industry struggling in the face of competition from a greater choice of leisure activities, most notably from television. Smaller cinemas were struggling to survive, much as British film studios faced an uncertain future.<sup>129</sup>



Figure 77 The dysfunctional ageing family of the *Bijou* meet the new owners in *The Smallest Show On Earth*.

*The Smallest Show on Earth* follows on from *The Ladykillers* (1955) in terms of its themes and characters, both scripted by William Rose and sharing an Ealing parentage. Director, Alexander Mackendrick, described the latter as being about post-war England coming to terms with the fact that 'the great days of the Empire were gone for ever. British society was shattered'.<sup>130</sup> *The Smallest Show On Earth* bore all the hallmarks of an Ealing comedy, with many of the key personnel having

<sup>129</sup> The 1950s had witnessed a steady decline in cinema admissions with the number of cinemas falling from 4851 in 1951 to 4391 in 1956; see Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 37.

<sup>130</sup> Alexander Mackendrick, *On Film-making* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), p. 104.

been stalwarts of the studio, including director Basil Dearden, producer Michael Relph and cinematographer Douglas Slocombe. Rose revisited the narrative and themes of his screenplay for *The Ladykillers*, both featuring elderly widows clinging to the past, isolated in a decaying building, yet ultimately successfully battling the forces of change. Mrs Wilberforce's house, like *The Bijou*, is a museum for a glorious past, presided over by an aged curator, whose values and way of life are threatened by modern times. *The Ladykillers* was intended as 'a fable wherein Mrs Wilberforce 'is plainly a much diminished Britannia' and the house 'is Edwardian England, an anachronism in the contemporary world'.<sup>131</sup> The casting of Rutherford in the later film was central to its evocation of British identity, a vision which was typical of the work of Rose according to Barr, 'His scripts deal very consciously with an England which has now committed itself spiritually to the old, cosy and traditional'.<sup>132</sup> As an American who had settled in Britain Rose had a distinctive viewpoint in his work, which for Barr dealt 'with picturesque symbols of age and tradition'. In both films the elderly emerge triumphant and the pace of change is arrested. The elderly guardians of *The Bijou* ensure their future by Old Tom (Bernard Miles), the doorman, burning down *The Grand*, and the Spencers sell off their inheritance to leave their elderly staff secure before leaving to travel the world. Mrs Fazackerlee changes from her widow's weeds into a bridal white to see the Spencers off at the end of the film, to mark a new start, liberated from mourning for the past.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., pp. 104-5.

<sup>132</sup> Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 165.



Figure 78 Mrs Fazackerlee is transformed from mourning weeds to bridal white as she sees off the Spencers in *The Smallest Show On Earth*.

Reflecting the age politics of the film's narrative, the performances of the elderly staff of the Bijou overshadowed those of the younger stars, with *The Monthly Film Bulletin* noting that 'All the fun is in them - an impossible, loony, genial, larger-than-life music-hall trio (The Bijou itself makes them a quartet); and the best scenes are exclusively theirs'.<sup>133</sup> Nevertheless the film was framed as a vehicle for the younger stars; McKenna's voiceover frames the narrative, foregrounding her status as the selling point for the film, being British cinema's 'English Rose'.<sup>134</sup> Her performance is the antithesis of Rutherford, as the relentlessly perky and supportive wife, turning up with refreshments whilst her husband fights to control the projector. McKenna is the idealised role model for the modern woman of the era, in contrast to Rutherford's status as a relic, closeted away in the decaying cinema. Rutherford is lugubrious and imperious, whilst McKenna leaves the Bijou, and Britain, to pursue a bright future as a devoted wife and mother.

*The Smallest Show on Earth* captures the mood and aspirations of post-Empire Britain. It was made under the shadow of the Suez crisis, which forced the nation to confront its diminished international status, and what David Kynaston summarised as the 'futility of clinging onto illusions of Empire'.<sup>135</sup> In hindsight David Kynaston sees Britain been caught between the desire for a 'modern' future and the

<sup>133</sup> Review in *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1957, pp. 56-57. Peter Sellers' biographer describes the young couple as 'insipid' adding that 'we resent them for being pushed at us as the stars'; see Lewis, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, p. 327.

<sup>134</sup> Bell, *Femininity in the Frame*, p. 107.

<sup>135</sup> David Kynaston, *Family Britain 1951-57* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), pp. 693-94.

‘recalcitrant forces of social conservatism [...] glancing anxiously over the shoulder at a disappearing past’.<sup>136</sup> Rutherford’s role had evolved to that of a relic of a golden age, a prevalent figuration of female ageing according to Stoddard, being ‘often treated as a burden or a social relic, someone who serves as a curiosity but has little relevance to everyday contemporary life’.<sup>137</sup> She was demoted on the cast list to support a younger actress who captured the zeitgeist of the era, facing a similar fate to that of Mrs Fazackerlee, both being consigned to the margins, and used to evoke past glories of Empire and cinema. Jodi Brooks identifies this as a key theme in Hollywood film of the era, with ageing female stars playing characters ‘trying heroically to avoid being placed on this doubly defined trash heap of history (discarded older women and discarded moments of cinema...)’.<sup>138</sup> The scene in which Mrs Fazackerlee accompanies the screening of *Comin’ Thro’ The Rye* makes clear her narrative function in common with the ageing stars of the era according to Brooks ‘brought into a volatile juxtaposition with the present [...] custodians and collectors of a discarded past of cinema’. The film asserts how Mrs Fazackerlee plays an important role because of her age, in terms of continuity and heritage. Accordingly, despite Mr Quill’s personal gripes with her, he is indignant when it is suggested that he wanted her sacked, proclaiming that she had ‘been here since the silent days. She used to play the piano. She’s the only one what knows how the place runs’.

Rutherford’s role as Aunt Dolly in *I’m All Right Jack* further developed her persona as a relic both of Empire and an endangered upper class. Aunt Dolly serves a symbolic function in the Boulting brothers’ satire of industrial relations, representing the attitudes of the upper class: out of touch and irrelevant, guarding their own interests, their wealth cocooning them from the harsh realities faced by the majority of the population. She is the remnant of what the opening voiceover refers to as ‘the edifice of what seemed to be an ordered and stable society’ threatened by ‘a new age, and [...] a new spirit’. The narrative reflected a collective concern regarding national identity and status on the world stage, with Kenneth O. Morgan noting the tone of public commentators ‘being full of cliché-ridden observations on the decline

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 697.

<sup>137</sup> Stoddard, *Saints and Shrews*, p. 10.

<sup>138</sup> Brooks, *Performing Aging*, p. 233.

of an ailing titan, and a fall from imperial and industrial greatness'.<sup>139</sup> The publication of Michael Young's provocative satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958) reflected an impetus for social change, with Charles Curran writing in *Encounter* that there were three insuperable obstacles to meritocracy in Britain: an ageing electorate who were 'social pacifists, against change and struggle'; secondly the family unit 'the historic fortress of favouritism, the nest of nepotism, the protective shell that guards the dull, the timid, the slow, the non-competitive weakling'; and lastly the British tradition of status being 'fixed by inheritance and tradition, rather than achieved'.<sup>140</sup> This tripartite barrier to social change is embodied by Aunt Dolly – formally known as Lady Dorothy - described by the *Monthly Film Bulletin* as 'sub-aristocracy [...] impregnably smug and reactionary'.<sup>141</sup> The satire of *I'm All Right Jack* reflected the mood in Britain in the late 1950s, summarised by Morgan as 'a bored bloody-mindedness, resentful at authority in general, but also caustic over stereotypes of Empire and class rule which still inhabited the land'.<sup>142</sup>

Aunt Dolly is horrified by her nephew's decision to betray his upper-class roots and work in industry, 'throwing in his lot with the working classes'. Nevertheless both Aunt Dolly and the naïve Windrush (Ian Carmichael) are the victims of her self-serving son's devious plot to provoke industrial unrest in order to facilitate a business deal. Despite Aunt Dolly being represented as a relic and the dupe of her own son's greed, she is still a force to be reckoned with as becomes clear when she takes direct action when Windrush goes on strike. She is transported in her fox stole and chauffeured Rolls Royce into the heart of the working-class community, her progress been underscored by an aristocratic musical theme. The remnants of Edwardian privilege comes face to face with the modern age as Aunt Dolly peers at the huddled media scrum through her pince-nez, before entering the terraced house belonging to union steward Fred Kite (Peter Sellers). She upholds the values of imperialist Britain, long after the apogee of its Empire might, using military metaphors, and dwelling on the importance of tradition, family loyalty and the behaviour fitting for a 'gentleman', arguing 'that it's quite unthinkable that a gentleman should go on strike, I mean officers don't mutiny do they?'

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<sup>139</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *Britain Since 1945: The People's Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 564.

<sup>140</sup> *Encounter* February 1959, pp. 68-72, quoted by Kynaston in *Modernity Britain*, pp. 202-3.

<sup>141</sup> Review in *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1959, p. 133.

<sup>142</sup> Morgan, *Britain Since 1945*, p. 140.



Figure 79 The Edwardian world of Aunt Dolly in *I'm All Right Jack*.

Spicer argues that the Boultings' 'aristocratic matrons [...] have strength and energy, but ultimately cannot control the course of events'.<sup>143</sup> Aunt Dolly convinces Windrush to cross the picket line, parroting her words to the beleaguered Kite. Nevertheless her interference results in an escalation of the crisis on all fronts, with British industry coming to a standstill. Windrush is evicted from Kite's terraced house, having to take refuge in the Edwardian splendour of Aunt Dolly's abode, having stayed loyal to the values of his social class inspiring a crowd of supporters waving placards celebrating the values of an imperialist British past, such as 'Empire loyalists against strikers', whilst singing 'Land of Hope and Glory'. Aunt Dolly is moved by such patriotism, commenting 'What a nation we British are, once we are stirred!' Nevertheless the youthful Windrush's supporters are largely elderly ladies similar to Aunt Dolly, including 'five Cheltenham ladies living on fixed incomes'. Her intervention blocks the younger generation from realising their ambitions and ideals, in exerting her social status to protect her class values, with Windrush losing his working-class girlfriend as well as his job.

*I'm All Right Jack* was a success at the British box office, being the third most popular film of the year, and did well in America, beating box office records in its initial run at New York's Guild Theatre.<sup>144</sup> For Rutherford the role became the template for many of her film parts as she entered the final decade of her career,

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<sup>143</sup> Andrew Spicer, 'Misfits and the marginalised: gender in the Boultings' feature films' in *The Family Way: The Boulting Brothers and Postwar British Film Culture*, eds. A. Burton, T. O'Sullivan and P. Wells (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), p. 77.

<sup>144</sup> *Kinematograph Weekly*, 17 December 1959, p. 6.

being cast as a series of eccentric aristocrats past their prime, clinging onto the remains of their personal empire, despite infirmity as a consequence of illness, drink or even drugs. This was the essence of her role as Grand Duchess Gloriana XIII in *The Mouse On The Moon*, a caricature of an ageing aristocrat, who is in a perpetual state of confusion, not helped by her drinking. Such roles perpetuated a narrative of age and decline in contrast to Rutherford's public persona as a role model for successful, even miraculous, ageing. The press release for *The Mouse On The Moon* asking 'How in the world does Margaret Rutherford keep it up at her age?'<sup>145</sup> In some respects these roles returned her to her early film career as a character actor, in being peripheral to the main narrative, yet continuing to steal scenes. Yet her status was quite different, supporting major Hollywood stars in films with a significantly larger budget and Hollywood studio involvement, in the trend towards the 'international' or 'mid-Atlantic' film. Such films tended to employ reductive national stereotypes in order 'to achieve a kind of international identity and consequently an international circulation'.<sup>146</sup> Babington observes that Hollywood tended to deploy British stars 'in ways that accentuated their Britishness (usually Englishness)', noting that whatever stars may 'mean in the larger cinema', with reference to Hollywood, 'they signify more complexly in relation to their original environment'.<sup>147</sup> The Hollywood Rutherford is a distillation of her British persona, signifying a key aspect of British identity for an American audience: an affectionate caricature of ageing aristocracy, benign yet largely redundant. It was to be this figuration of Rutherford's persona which was to be the apex of her career, earning an Academy Award for her performance as the Duchess of Brighton in MGM's *The VIPs*.

The character of the Duchess reiterates the theme of decline of Empire and the aristocracy, with the elderly aristocrat being forced to travelling to America to work in a holiday resort to earn the funds to save her ancestral home. Her situation could be read as an allegory in terms of the state of the nation, and indeed the British film industry, in looking to America for a future. The Duchess imbibes a heady cocktail of drugs and drink to cope with her fear of flying, resulting in a number of comic scenes of confusion for the elderly aristocrat. Rutherford's storyline was the least

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<sup>145</sup> *The Mouse on the Moon* press book, BFI Library Special Collections.

<sup>146</sup> Ryall, *Anthony Asquith*, p. 156.

<sup>147</sup> Babington, *British Stars*, p. 22.



substantial, providing comic relief in comparison to the other narrative strands, which focussed on the young, glamorous and rich. For Rutherford the role which brought her greatest acclaim was that which she felt reflected her private self, writing that she ‘felt very much at home in the part’.<sup>148</sup> For Rutherford it was important that she could ‘find something in common with the character’, and as with many of her roles she made important creative contributions, particularly as regards clothing.<sup>149</sup> This sense of her being in control of her performances, and her need to ‘own’ a role is noted by Benn who believed that ‘she developed her own characters in a way that was compatible with her own self’.<sup>150</sup> Her choices regarding costume sought to cultivate her eccentricity, professing that ‘I have always felt like a bird. I have always wanted to be free to take wing [...] to escape from convention [...] This is probably why I very early on found my own way of dressing’.<sup>151</sup> For the role of the Duchess she recalled ‘I was firm. I decided that I would not have ‘funny’ clothes’, deciding that such a character would wear her own ‘fur-trimmed travelling coat [...] a perfectly ordinary squashy green felt hat’ and ‘a capacious bag’, again much like her own.<sup>152</sup> Rutherford worked to develop the eccentricity and otherness of the character by introducing ‘my own little bit of ‘hat business’’, which aimed to make it ‘almost alive – magical’.

The film raised Rutherford’s international profile to its zenith, being a success at the box-office, becoming one of the highest earning films of 1963 in the United States.<sup>153</sup> Rutherford’s characters and persona coalesced, with the aristocratic roles in her films appearing to be informed by her professional status, with her being lauded as a ‘grande dame of the British theatre’ in one obituary.<sup>154</sup> She was honoured with an OBE and made Dame of the British Empire in the course of her career; the *New York Times* describing her as ‘the very embodiment of the dowager empress, British division’.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 193.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192.

<sup>150</sup> Macnab, ‘A quivering lip’.

<sup>151</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 69.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>153</sup> Ryall, *Anthony Asquith*, p. 150.

<sup>154</sup> Sydney Edwards, *Evening Standard*, 22 May 1972.

<sup>155</sup> Sylviane Gold, ‘Melancholy Empress’ in *New York Times*, 18 March 1984.

### **Miss Marple: eccentricity, crime and comedy**

Although peripheral to the narrative, Rutherford's eccentric aristocrats and relics worked successfully to resist change and uphold tradition. This too was the narrative function of the one role which moved Rutherford to the top of the bill in her final decade, as Miss Marple in the series of four films based on the Agatha Christie novels. Her performance as Marple can be seen as the culmination of the development of her persona as the eccentric spinster; her liminal status allows her to 'heal' the community, and her appeal harnesses nostalgic imaginings of middle England. Christie's Marple is cited as a role model for successful ageing by philosopher Gillian Rose, observing her uncanny abilities, being: 'decrepit nature yet supernature in one, equally alert on the damp ground and in the turbulent air [...] that invisible trespass and pedestrian tread, insensible of mortality and desperately normal'.<sup>156</sup> This evocation of Marple conveys her liminality, bridging life and death, and evoking an other-worldliness, alongside the ordinary, as foregrounded in Rutherford's performance of the role.

Rutherford's persona as an ageing woman rested on an imagining of conservative, middle-class ageing, in common with Christie's Marple. Nevertheless Rutherford's comic persona is sustained by subverting the dominant discourse concerning the ageing woman, made evident in the physicality and eccentricity brought to the role of Marple. Rutherford's public persona centred on valuing tradition, with patriotic tastes and values, proclaiming herself to be an admirer of the Royal Family, deploring 'the disrespect which some of the younger generation, and regrettably some newspapers, indulge in'.<sup>157</sup> This conservatism is reflected in interviews, describing her home as being distinctively that of an older middle-class English woman: 'olde world grace and the china dogs, trinkets and sundry fiddle-de-dee'.<sup>158</sup> Such a conventional image of ageing is sustained by detail of her rigid routine: 'Every day at precisely 11 a.m. and 3.30 p.m [...] she has hot milk and buttered biscuits'. The marketing of the Marple films in America cultivated this persona, with

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<sup>156</sup> Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning With Life* (New York: Schocken, 1997), p. 144.

<sup>157</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 210.

<sup>158</sup> Zec, 'Blithe spirit'.

‘Margaret Rutherford weeks’ featuring ‘hot milk and buttered biscuits available at her personal appearances’.<sup>159</sup>



Figure 80 Conventional old age: Rutherford and Davis relax in their garden (1972).

Rutherford’s persona as an ageing woman demonstrates the ‘contradictory tendencies’ which Ellis sees as being central to the star image, mixing the ‘ordinary and extraordinary’.<sup>160</sup> Her persona conflates the tropes of ‘ordinary’ old age with an anachronistic physical and mental energy, subverting the image of conventional ageing. Rutherford recognised the contradictions within her persona, commenting that ‘in my film life I invariably get landed with edgy parts’ in contrast to her private life where she was ‘invariably described as ‘gentle’, ‘ladylike’ or ‘nice’ – rather dull-sounding adjectives, I feel’.<sup>161</sup> Rutherford’s attitude to fashion demonstrates a dismissive attitude towards social expectations of age-appropriate dress: ‘Who would have thought that a woman of 79 could wear a pink and orange patterned summer skirt made from furnishing material as I do?’<sup>162</sup> *Time* magazine departed from the usual portrayal of a gentle, reticent off-screen persona, intimating the more forceful, irascible character central to her Marple persona: ‘Infractions of etiquette upset her. Vulgarity makes her eyes flash. “I am not an intolerant woman, but I abominate stupidity,” she says. Her withering stare could reduce a rabid dog to foaming jelly’.<sup>163</sup> She confessed her desire for a very different persona, that of Jane Russell for ‘She has that elemental, savage quality which I simply adore. I think I

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 92-93.

<sup>161</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 87.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., pp. 216-17.

<sup>163</sup> ‘Mrs John Bull’, *Time*.

have a little of that too'.<sup>164</sup> The press reiterated her exceptional energy, with details of her energetic exploits including scaling a mountain in Canada and 'having a quick "splasher" in Highgate Ponds'.<sup>165</sup>

The casting of Rutherford as Marple was not universally popular, most notably with Christie herself, although the film's producer George Brown argued that 'Miss Marple in the book was nothing like so interesting a character as the character we could provide for the screen'.<sup>166</sup> Rutherford noted that she was much too robust for the role, given that Marple had been based 'on a little aunt of [Christie's] who in no way resembled me physically [...] a fragile, pink and white lady'.<sup>167</sup> Indeed one reviewer evoked Rutherford's Marple as: 'A formidably blocky torso [...] draped in a regular tarpaulin of a sweater descending over a tweedy skirt of indefinite length [...] The effect is of a warmly bundled English bull-dog.'<sup>168</sup> Miss Marple's defining trait is her wisdom, perpetuating a stereotype of old age wherein the process of ageing is accompanied by growing detachment and 'evenness' of judgement. She exemplifies Woodward's observation that 'wisdom carries the connotation of dignified behaviour [...] a kind of transcendence of the social world'.<sup>169</sup> Nevertheless for Woodward the association of old age and wisdom defines the disengagement theory of aging, arguing that this amounts to a screen for ageism by perpetuating the social ideal that the old should withdraw from the world in preparation for their demise. Christie's Miss Marple physically withdraws and applies her wisdom from a distance, defined by her exemplary codes of 'dignified behaviour'. In contrast Rutherford's Marple is wise but *refuses* to disengage from the wider world, making it a point to be everywhere and do everything she can to engage in her quest for the truth. Rutherford's comic persona is centred on this eccentricity in departing from the norm; she transgresses expectations regarding old age.

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<sup>164</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 220.

<sup>165</sup> Bill Strutton, 'Queen of comedy on a "stamper" to Australia' in *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 9 October 1957.

<sup>166</sup> Quoted in Merriman, *Dreadnought With Good Manners*, pp. 231-32.

<sup>167</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 176.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p.178. Rutherford quotes Melvin Maddocks writing in *The Christian Science Monitor*. Barr notes that the 1950s British film was populated by middle-class chaps wearing tweeds – a defining symbol of class status; see "'Madness! Madness!'" The brief stardom of James Donald' in *British Stars and Stardom*, ed. Bruce Babington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 163. Medhurst refers to the 'hegemony of the tweed jacket' when referring to the masculine tone of films of the period, with this choice of fabric conferring masculine characteristics to Rutherford's Marple; see 'Can chaps be pin-ups? The British male star in the 1950s' in *Ten* – 8, no. 17, 1985, p. 3.

<sup>169</sup> Woodward, 'Against wisdom', p. 206.

Rutherford's first Marple film, *Murder She Said*, was an adaptation of the 1957 novel *4.50 From Paddington*, in which Jane Marple plays a background role judging herself too frail and elderly to physically carry out the investigation, being 'fluffy, dithery in appearance but inwardly as sharp and as shrewd as they make them'.<sup>170</sup> Instead she sends for a younger friend, Lucy, who takes a job as a maid at the home of the troubled Ackenthorpe family, gathering information and finding clues, supervised by Marple from a safe distance. In contrast Rutherford's energetic performance of the role actually combines three characters from the book: Miss Marple, Lucy and Miss Marple's friend, Mrs McGillicuddy, who witnesses the murder on the train. Rutherford's Marple displays the acuity and indomitable spirit of Christie's Marple, combined with the practical skills and energy of the much younger Lucy. Her performance of old age dispenses with the physical shackles which hold Miss Marple back, making the character central to almost every scene of the film as compared to the withdrawn elderly figure in the book. Rutherford's Marple demonstrates an indomitable physical ability which matches her mental energy, as she effortlessly takes control of the Ackenthorpe household, cooking, tidying, nursing, playing golf, even masquerading as a railway worker in order to scout the line for clues before clambering over a high wall. The climax of the film sees her risking her life as she lures the murderer to a confession.



Figure 81 Miss Marple disguises herself as a railway worker in *Murder She Said*.

For Sobchack the ideal model of ageing offers possibilities and 'endless transformation', adding that growing old was 'not so much aging as always

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<sup>170</sup> Agatha Christie, *4.50 From Paddington* (London: Harper Collins, [1957] 2002), pp. 23-24.

becoming'.<sup>171</sup> Rutherford's Marple defies fixed notions of old age in terms of her ability to 'pass' as other, shifting effortlessly between guises which transcend gender and age, in perpetual masquerade being both railway engineer and maid in *Murder She Said*. Rutherford's performance renders Marple a comic character, enhanced by the degree to which she departs from normative perceptions of female ageing, and moreover from Christie's original character. She is exuberant and idiosyncratic, combining a forceful physical presence, distinctive facial mannerisms and a commanding vocal style. Each of the Marple films featured comic set pieces with Rutherford defying her age by undertaking physical stunts and feats, including clambering over railway lines and walls in *Murder She Said* (1961), doing the twist and riding in a hunt in *Murder At The Gallop* (1963), and engaging in a swordfight in *Murder Ahoy* (1964).

The world of Marple according to Alison Light 'seems fixed in a mythic time, "a golden age", apparently outside history'.<sup>172</sup> The Marple films and their evocation of 'Deep England' were the antithesis of an emerging new sense of Britishness which centred on the urban, the sexual and the liberated, endemic in the lithesome youthful starlets of 'swinging London' films of the mid-sixties. Light argues that Christie's work downplayed 'sexual difference'<sup>173</sup> and promoted a new kind of femininity typifying the rejection of the romantic by middle-class women in the wake of the First World War, adopting 'many of the codes of what had been the model of an imperial masculinity'.<sup>174</sup> This blurring of gender identity informs Rutherford's performance of robust ageing as Marple embodying a nostalgic imagining of national identity which is rooted in the inter-war years, articulating a conservative femininity and the application of ostensibly masculine characteristics of dispassionate logic and reason. The role offered an imagining of old age far from the narratives of aristocratic decline which had increasingly dominated Rutherford's film career, yet rooted in an evocation of eccentricity and the values of an imperial past which was central to Rutherford's persona.

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<sup>171</sup> Sobchack, 'Scary women', p. 209.

<sup>172</sup> Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between The Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 62.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

## Ageing and stardom

Rutherford's persona subverted the narrative of ageing as physical and mental decline, being defined by roles which characterised by energy, confidence and authority. *Time* magazine summarised her persona as 'the ultimate symbol of resourceful, tweedily eccentric British womanhood, of the old gals who go stamping across the heath in the wild rain, looking for stuffed shirts to poke with their umbrellas'.<sup>175</sup> Such a description evokes Rutherford as being emblematic of a British type; the conflation of ageing with youthful energy being reiterated in many of her roles and performances, creating a narrative of liberation rather than decline.

Rutherford's performance of female ageing inhabits the sphere of the female grotesque, in departing from normative codes of gender and ageing. Whereas Street argues that her 'embodiment of eccentricity' is 'affectionate' rather than 'satirical or grotesque', I would argue that Rutherford's performance style cultivates the grotesque for comic effect, whilst establishing her as a benign and lovable character.<sup>176</sup> Her physical performance is imbued with a sense of otherness, exhibiting an exuberance and intensity in contrast to the relatively subdued and constrained performances of the surrounding cast in many of her roles. This performance style is central to a persona that subverts expectations of the ageing woman, in the tradition of the great Romantic actresses and circus artists of the late nineteenth century cited by Russo, who 'used their bodies in public, in extravagant ways [...] such latitude of movement and attitude was not permitted most women without negative consequences'.<sup>177</sup> Russo cites these 'female grotesques' as a 'deviation from the norm', and a 'space of risk and abjection', likening these performances to Charcot's photographs of the 'grimaces and leaps' of the 'female hysterics' of Salpêtrière.<sup>178</sup> Rutherford's performance style transgresses the norms in terms of expectations of gender and age, made manifest in her movement, facial expressions, costume and use of voice. Her persona exploits the liminal terrain of old age for comic effect, licensed to veer between reason and madness by the association of ageing with senility and regression to childlike behaviour. Characters such as Madame Arcati and Professor Hatton-Jones are defined by their eccentricity, in

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<sup>175</sup> 'Mrs John Bull, Ltd.'

<sup>176</sup> Street, 'Margaret Rutherford', p. 98.

<sup>177</sup> Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, p. 68.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

failing to fit into social norms regarding the ageing woman, whereas many of her later roles increasingly accentuated the behaviour associated with ageing for comic effect. Even when cast in a supporting role Rutherford is rarely marginalised or abject within the narrative, her performance being central to the frame, and inevitably disruptive in failing to comply with the expectations of ageing femininity.

Rutherford declared that the advantage of being typically cast as ‘dotty old ladies’ on the stage meant ‘the audience rarely notices if I become flustered and sometimes forget my lines’.<sup>179</sup> The sense of a troubled mind is consonant with typical figurations of old age and intimations of mental fragility. The boundaries between public and private proved to be a source of tension for Rutherford, admitting that she struggled mentally, particularly ‘as so many of the parts are so eccentric’. Since her death in 1972, the eccentricity so central to her persona has been reconfigured to reflect emerging narratives of her struggles with mental illness as she aged. Biographies revealed a tragic childhood, shadowed by family madness, patricide, maternal suicide, and depression.<sup>180</sup> Her carefully managed persona as Mrs John Bull, a nostalgic imagining of enduring British values, has been fragmented inviting a rereading of the eccentricity central to her characters as indicative of mental illness and madness.<sup>181</sup>

Rutherford is fundamentally different to other stars of British comedy of the mid-twentieth century such as Gracie Fields, George Formby and Norman Wisdom, who according to Macnab ‘promote an idea of consensus rather than individualism’.<sup>182</sup> The eccentricity at the core of Rutherford’s persona is congruent with individualism, her characters deviating from the normative paths of female ageing. Nevertheless her individualism is that of the trickster in many of her roles, a liminal figure who intervenes to restore social cohesion before returning to the margins dictated by age and gender. Street argues that Rutherford belongs to a tradition of ‘a very British celebration of eccentricity’, which defies Henri Bergson’s characterisation of

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<sup>179</sup> Rutherford, *Margaret Rutherford*, p. 114.

<sup>180</sup> See Merriman (2009) and Simmons (1983).

<sup>181</sup> The posthumous fascination with Rutherford’s eccentricity and tragic life story has helped cultivate a cult following, further added to by the Channel 4 production *For One Night Only* (1993) starring Timothy Spall in the role of Rutherford, a stage production *Murder, Marple and Me* (2012) and a documentary produced in Germany entitled *Truly Miss Marple – The Curious Case of Margaret Rutherford* (2013).

<sup>182</sup> Macnab, *Searching For Stars*, p. 99.



comedy as a social corrective working to contain the eccentric.<sup>183</sup> Rutherford's eccentricity is central to her status as a nostalgic imagining of Britishness, her role in the comedy narrative elevated above being merely an object of ridicule, as was so often the fate of the ageing woman. In his exploration of comedy and national identity Medhurst notes that 'conservative versions of Englishness' work to 'proffer an England where all that matter are myths of continuity and unity', synchronising with the comic mode which 'is centrally concerned with offering comfort and security'.<sup>184</sup> Rutherford's later supporting roles as a relic of the upper classes or archaic institutions centred on these 'myths of continuity and unity', whilst as Marple she inhabited a role whose central concern was to preserve and ensure 'comfort and security'. Her persona is rooted in iconic figurations of female ageing from what Raphael Samuel referred to as a 'national gallery' of caricatures in popular culture, the 'symbolic landscapes, that "sacred geography" which enters so largely into idealisations of national character'.<sup>185</sup> The bluestocking, battleaxe, universal aunt and eccentric spinster are the equivalent of Samuel's 'Everyman figures [...] types, instantly recognisable by dress and deportment, gesture or speech'.<sup>186</sup> Rutherford's roles are informed by this allegorical tradition, their function being to exemplify desirable qualities, 'often constituted in relations of opposition to demonised [...] others'.<sup>187</sup> Samuel notes how these figures 'carry ordinariness to excess' and often 'personify class extremes, behaving as born leaders or loyal servants according to their appointed station in life'. Rutherford reached the apotheosis of this allegorical role as Marple, her character being inscribed by the tropes of middle-class female ageing, but taking on a leadership role commensurate with her class and status as the 'universal aunt' to contest crime and the weaknesses of the social fabric.

Rutherford's core persona as the universal aunt was constructed around a fantasy of a benign golden age, articulated through a figure of English eccentricity, which draws on the iconography of bygone eras. She was a liminal figure, who evokes other ages, and other worlds, yet whose persona centred around an otherness which

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<sup>183</sup> Street, 'Margaret Rutherford', p. 90.

<sup>184</sup> Medhurst, *A National Joke*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>185</sup> Raphael Samuel, 'Introduction: the figures of national myth' in *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1989), p. xii.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

elevated her to a peculiar stardom far from the glamour of Hollywood. Charles Affron described stars as superlative entities, who ‘possess keys of entry to a never-never land [we] endow them with superhuman powers, magical modes that liberate our everyday activities from the confusion of circumstance’.<sup>188</sup> Rutherford’s persona was structured around known myths of female ageing, yet her eccentric liminality endows her with a quiddity which elevated her to a star.

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<sup>188</sup> Charles Affron, ‘Generous stars’ in *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television*, ed. Jeremy Butler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), p. 92.

## Conclusion

This thesis has been motivated by the desire to acknowledge and explore the role of the character actress in British film comedy in the mid-twentieth century. As cultivated in the rich comic personae of the actresses featured across these chapters, the ageing woman was, and arguably remains, indispensable to British cinema. The case studies have developed a fresh perspective on this period of British film, in addition to considering lesser known performers and films. The focus on ageing femininities and the work of the character actress sets out to challenge the existing scholarship, by making clear their importance to the national cinema. The role of the ageing character actress is central to understanding how the success of British film comedy depended on differentiating itself from Hollywood. The performances and personae of the mature actresses in British comedy were informed by complex broader factors, indicative of discourses regarding gender, class and nationhood, drawing on cultural antecedents and social contexts concerning ageing femininities. Awareness of the role of the ageing woman in the history of British cinema provides the basis for understanding representations in contemporary film and cultural texts, both within and beyond the comedy genre.

The performances of a quorum of mature actresses were a key element of the 'Golden Age' of British film comedy. The case studies represent a quarter of a century of British film, foregrounding a range of actresses, often playing leading roles, demonstrating that this was an enduring characteristic of film comedy. Although these actresses were frequently assigned to supporting roles as character actors, their popularity would often place them at the heart of the narrative, receiving star billing. The careers of actresses as diverse as the Waters sisters and Peggy Mount have been largely marginalised within a chronicling of British film which continues to be dominated by male performers, but also by more 'serious' genres. Nevertheless these actresses had long and illustrious careers, many of them being household names for audiences.

Film comedy proved to be a cultural space wherein the ageing female protagonist thrived, in the tradition of a genre which gives licence to the marginalised and 'other'. The sustained popularity and success of British film comedy at the box office, compared to other genres, helps to explain how these character actresses were

able to maintain their careers, generally in conjunction with sustaining careers in either the theatre, radio, the variety halls, or, as the century progressed, on television. The tradition of ensemble comedy dominated British film of the era, displacing the status of the star and allowing for the foregrounding of the character actress, as was evident in *Holiday Camp*, *Alive and Kicking* and *Make Mine Mink*.

The success of British comedy relied on articulating that which was familiar to the audience, in terms of cultural references, performers, and the detail of everyday life. This was particularly true of the 'low' comedy emanating from the variety and music hall tradition, with its strong tradition of the female grotesque which continued in popular film comedy, with the success of performers such as the Waters sisters and Peggy Mount. Such cultural traditions flourished in a cinema which could not hope to rival the glamour of Hollywood, with character actresses prospering in roles as charladies, bluestockings or battleaxes. The character actress in British film comedy offered pleasures which were the antithesis of the glamour and sexuality of Hollywood stars, offering the spectacle of the comedy grotesque in the tradition of the unruly woman, or 'woman on top', where the inversion of gender traits accompanied anachronistic behaviours.

The personae of these character actresses, and the characters they played, were rooted in enduring archetypes of female ageing, recycled in cultural texts beyond film, which could often be traced back beyond the start of the twentieth century. Archetypes such as the universal aunt or the cockney charlady were benign and eccentric figures, their familiarity offering reassurance and continuity for the audience. Although the object of ridicule they were granted a magical agency during the narrative space of film comedy, as befits their liminal status as ageing single women. The personae of many of these character actresses worked to articulate a nostalgia and fantasy of Englishness, which defined British national identity, during an era when the country was adjusting itself to the impact of war, the loss of Empire and decline in global status. For both Rutherford and the Waters sisters, this was capitalised on in their wartime work, when they were 'mobilised' for propaganda purposes. Rutherford represented the eccentricity of the English middle class for an audience with an international dimension, whilst the Waters sisters' films targeted the Home Front working-class audience, with their reassuring image of cockney cheer.

Social class played an important role in delineating the various figurations of female ageing, reinforcing the social hierarchy through broad stereotypes such as the char and the dotty dowager. Such archetypes made explicit the debt that British cinema owed to other cultural forms, specifically music hall and theatre, deploying recognisable character types informed by a class-bound society. The case studies suggest emerging anxieties regarding social change, as indicated by the changing representation of the working-class matriarch from wartime to the peripheral figure of fun of the 1960s. Nevertheless the chapters demonstrate that distinctive characteristics endured in the face of social change, with the working-class matriarch being a battleaxe who fights for her class and her community, whether during wartime or against the property developers in *Ladies Who Do*. The vision of Englishness – and ultimately British identity – perpetuated by British film comedy was typical of the national cinema in its focus on broad class distinctions, in the face of the social change in the post-war era.

My approach with the chapters was to foreground the cultural and social histories pertinent to the performers, films and figurations of female ageing. The case studies demonstrate the importance of the social context, particularly regarding ageing femininity, and how this is pertinent to consideration of the characters and narratives. Theory, primarily regarding ageing, comedy, the grotesque and the tradition of the unruly woman, has been applied to the case studies to make clear the continuities regarding the tradition of the ageing woman in comedy. In particular, the work of Bakhtin and Davis regarding the female grotesque, the ‘woman on top’ and carnival is fundamental in demonstrating that the performers featured in the chapters belong to an enduring cultural tradition. Rowe saw the potential of Bakhtin’s work in interrogating female comedy performances, although she repeated the omission made in many feminist critiques of perpetuating the invisibility of the older woman, failing to address this essential aspect of identity.

The majority of characters featured in this thesis are unattached older women, predominantly spinsters or widows, with Gert and Daisy’s husband and fiancé conveniently absent in the forces. The chapter on Gert and Daisy establishes how two middle-aged variety performers became household names in the guise of their

act as working-class cockney matriarchs, appointed godmothers to the nation during wartime, in particular for a working-class audience. The music-hall tradition of the female working-class grotesque informed their personae, with age, social class and spinsterism being central to the comic spectacle. The second chapter focused more specifically on representations of the spinster in British comedy, by situating the two films, *Holiday Camp* and *Winter Cruise*, within the broader historical and social context of the post-war settlement. The spinster is exiled as ‘Other’, being superfluous and troubling in a society driven by the prioritisation of family values and continuity. The chapter examines how Walsh’s performance as Miss Reid in Maugham’s *Winter Cruise* is a nuanced, forward-looking model of female ageing, promoting a more empowered and independent single woman.

Chapter three demonstrates the primacy of the mature actress to British comedy, exploring how the two ensemble comedies, *Alive and Kicking* and *Make Mine Mink*, featured an array of character actresses, many of whom enjoyed sustained careers in British, and even Hollywood, film. Despite the films extracting comedy from familiar stereotypes of female ageing, both narratives stage a liberation from expectations of ageing as decline, drawing on historical precedents for different, empowering models of ageing. The following chapter focuses on the apocryphal figure of the working-class matriarch in 1960s film comedy, comparing the performances of Peggy Mount and Irene Handl in *Ladies Who Do* and *Morgan – A Suitable Case For Treatment*. Social class played a pivotal role in their personae, as comedy grotesques informed by the enduring cultural tradition of the battleaxe and harridan. The endangered status of ‘our mam’ in both narratives mirrored that of the British film industry itself in the early 1960s, yet her resilience as a cultural archetype would see her relocate to television, with both Peggy Mount and Irene Handl having successful careers as sitcom perennials as film roles dried up.

The final chapter examines the career of Margaret Rutherford and how the character actress can attain star status in post-war British film. I argue that her career exemplified the nature of British film compared to Hollywood in terms of stardom, not starting her film career until middle age, and being ‘grotesque’ rather than glamorous. Her persona was centred on an eccentricity which was at the heart of the role of the character actress in British cinema, and representations of ‘Englishness’. Her various roles drew on a range of figurations of the older woman embedded in

the cultural imagination, spanning the deviant spinster, the witch, the bluestocking and the universal aunt. Nevertheless the very English, and thence British, nature of Rutherford's stardom, her career followed a trajectory comparable to the Hollywood star, Marie Dressler. The parallels suggest that the ageing female grotesque in film comedy had an appeal that crossed borders, in the tradition of the various cultural antecedents indicated by the work of scholars including Bakhtin, Davis and Jenkins.

The limitations of space within a thesis has meant that although the selection of actresses has not been comprehensive, yet they are representative in terms of the range of character types, the time span, themes and inflections of the comedy genre. A broader project could map the work of pre-war film comedy actresses such as Norma Vaden and Mary Brough, and even trace the older woman in film comedy back to the birth of British film. Although the thesis is concerned with British film, there is clearly a broader cultural history of representations of the older woman in film comedy.

During an era which continued to marginalise the single woman, seeing her as a threat to the very fabric of a family-orientated society, the case studies indicate how comedy could work to isolate through ridicule. Nevertheless, the chapters demonstrated how social class played an important role in determining the representations, with the differing fates of the spinsters in *Holiday Camp* and *Winter Cruise* holding a mirror up to the hypocrisy and prejudice inflected by the patriarchy judging the independent confident spinster as a threat. Most of the characters featured in the thesis are central to the narrative, rendering ageing femininity and its attendant issues subject to what Bakhtin termed as the 'essential ambivalence' of the laughter of the carnival, 'it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives'.<sup>1</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's state that the exclusion of the 'Other' enforced by social hierarchies is accompanied by an attendant desire, rendering the 'Other' as 'the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination'.<sup>2</sup> The ageing woman is simultaneously the object of ridicule and disdain, yet works as the locus for fantasies touching on cultural and historical reference points at a time of instability and uncertainty for the nation. As Stallybrass

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 191.

and White state 'the low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture'.<sup>3</sup> This thesis has demonstrated how the typology of female ageing such as the spinster, the witch, the universal aunt, 'our mam', and the bluestocking, played a vital role in the 'shared imaginary repertoires' of the nation during the mid-twentieth century despite often being 'despised and denied' in real life. The role of the ageing woman in film comedy adds to an understanding of why the genre was relatively successful for the British film industry, in terms of its cultural antecedents, and the pleasures offered by its imaginings of Britishness. It is not possible to understand the British film industry as a whole without grasping the significance of the older woman in film comedy of the era.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 6.



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