



# RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
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## **Women and Screen Cultures**

**Series editors: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett**

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Women and Screen Cultures is a series of experimental digital books aimed to promote research and knowledge on the contribution of women to the cultural history of screen media. Published by the Department of the Arts at the University of Bologna, it is issued under the conditions of both open publishing and blind peer review. It will host collections, monographs, translations of open source archive materials, illustrated volumes, transcripts of conferences, and more. Proposals are welcomed for both disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contributions in the fields of film history and theory, television and media studies, visual studies, photography and new media.



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# 1

## **Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives**

**Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli**

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# Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

## Peer Review Statement

This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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Anne Morey

## School of Scandal: Alice Duer Miller, Scandal, and the New Woman

ABSTRACT: This paper examines adaptations of *Her First Elopement* (1920) and *Are Parents People?* (1925), based on novellas by Alice Duer Miller, in order to explore how both the underlying texts and the films derived from them explore the heroines' desire for autonomy, which is achieved through their strategic cultivation and control of scandal. While the films met with widely contrasting receptions, their exploitation of Miller's interest in scandal that gratifies rather than punishes the heroine suggests a complex relationship between a best-selling female author and the film industry in the first half of the 1920s.

Alice Duer Miller (1874–1942) had a long career as screenwriter and adaptee, beginning in 1918 with *Less Than Kin* (Donald Crisp) and concluding posthumously in 1944 with *The White Cliffs of Dover* (Clarence Brown). In addition to being a suffrage campaigner and booster of women's higher education, Miller was also a writer of note, having produced more than sixty short stories and novellas, several novels, and several plays. This article examines two of her three surviving silent films, *Her First Elopement* (Sam Wood, 1920) and *Are Parents People?* (Malcolm St. Clair, 1925), to argue that Miller saw scandal as a tool to give young women both the erotic freedom and the knowledge (including self-knowledge) that might otherwise be denied them. While Miller's narratives often confront her young heroines with humiliations both sexual and practical, they also imagine these reverses as the means to accomplishing female desire.

Because Miller's relationship to the film industry was long and complex, and because she saw herself as novelist and short story writer first and scenarist or producer of texts for adaptation second, a brief sketch of her literary career may be helpful. Throughout her career, Miller's writing emphasized the contemporary, the commercial, and the demotic, although how that might be realized in stylistic terms changed from the late nineteenth century, when she wrote as one of Henry James's epigones, to the late teens, by which time her style had become more accessible. Indeed, modulation away from Jamesian periods was a conscious decision; Miller noted in an interview that "when [she and Henry Miller] were married we were very hard up. I wanted to help all that I could and continued writing. After a time I decided that I was too ambitious in my writing attempts—Henry James was the model novelist so far as I was concerned—and turned to lighter material" (van Gelder 2). [fig. 1]

This mercenary delight in writing for a living connects Miller to other successful female contemporaries whose works were frequently adapted by the film industry, such as Mary Roberts Rinehart. Unlike Rinehart, however, who came from a lower-middle-class background in Pittsburgh, Miller came from one of New York City's oldest and most distinguished families, albeit one that had suffered a significant financial reverse in the Barings



1. Portrait of Alice Duer Miller circa 1918, photograph by Campbell Studios, courtesy of Barnard College Archives



Bank collapse of 1890. Publication was consequently important to Miller as it brought the means to do unconventional things otherwise prohibited to a young woman of her class and generation. Miller's earnings enabled her to study mathematics at Barnard College, an experience otherwise beyond her family's capacity or perhaps willingness to provide; that Miller's desire for education exceeded that thought suitable to women of her class was itself mildly scandalous. Writing in 1945, Miller's husband observed that "today one is surprised by a girl having any difficulty in going to college, but in 1895 it was no joking matter. Alice Duer shocked society and alienated her friends. Mrs. Astor called on Mrs. Duer to explain how she felt about the matter, and her expression, 'What a pity, that lovely girl going to college,' has been treasured in the family ever since" (H. Wise Miller 30). As was also the case with her heroines, then, Miller found that her readiness to break the social rules resulted in both social disapproval and increased freedom.

While Miller retained many of the attitudes of her generation and class to the end of her life, her appreciation of the popular suggests why Hollywood appealed to her. The contrasting receptions of *Her First Elopement*, which was not well received, and *Are Parents People?*, which was one of the most admired films of its year, suggests that her appeal to Hollywood was more complex. Most obviously, Miller represented that great prize, the personality as pre-sold property, to Samuel Goldwyn, who brought her to California in 1920 to work on her own and other authors' projects. Like Rinehart (who was one of Goldwyn's Eminent Authors [Cohn 135]), Miller was a major contributor to the *Saturday Evening Post*, the most significant literary weekly of its day.

Goldwyn was, of course, a notorious lion hunter, and Miller's class position was itself an inducement to collect her; like yet another Goldwyn trophy, Elinor Glyn, Miller was expected to opine on social matters of which Hollywood—precisely because its denizens were typically not aristocrats—had only a shaky grasp. She claimed "that her most valuable function [in Hollywood] was as a kind of glorified Emily Post, able to tell directors and producers how people behaved in 'Society'" (Walcutt 539). Given Miller's willingness to declass herself in certain ways in order to have the increased scope for movement available to women a few rungs down the social ladder, however, this advice was doubtless offered tongue in cheek. Indeed, her unpublished short story "The Nice Little Girl," which retails the experiences of a debutante who runs away to a film studio to avoid her coming-out, suggests that Miller had no great expectation that the advice would be followed. Her heroine says, "You know it would be more natural if I said: 'Isn't the music divine—or even swell,'" to which she receives the reply, "Look here . . . you are supposed to be a society girl. I guess they don't talk like that. I guess the author knows more about how society girls talk than you or I do" (Duer Family Papers, folder 8.11). Miller was not above guying herself and her class on film, playing the ineffectual governess who cannot make either her charge or her employer any less vulgar in the 1936 Ben Hecht/Charles MacArthur film *Soak the Rich*, a performance in contrast to Glyn's self-important role as social and sexual arbiter in *It* (Clarence G. Badger, 1927).

Miller's considerable reputation doubtless explained the decision to film *Her First Elopement* in 1920; seven of her stories were adapted and released as films in the forty-eight months between July 1918 and June 1922. *Elopement* was nonetheless an odd choice inasmuch as it was first published in *Lippincott's* in 1905 and described a world and a set of social mores that had essentially disappeared in the intervening fifteen years. Had it been treated as the period piece it was by 1920, namely an examination of the prewar world of Edith Wharton's New York, it might have been more admired. As it was, *Variety* described it as "a polite comedy with a shopworn theme," which "runs through without a single 'kick.'" The sole words of praise were reserved for its photography and its *mise-en-scène*, "rich in its interiors and settings" (Step). The problem for director Wood and scenarist Edith Kennedy was how to create a contemporary heroine genuinely at risk from her own actions. Indeed, the shifts required to update the story, and to maintain the tension arising from the requirement that Christina Eliot's actions fit contemporaneous criteria for the scandalous, are actually what render the film "shopworn," which becomes clearer as one examines it as a problem in adaptation.<sup>1</sup>

The novella insists that keeping a young woman attractively naïve may lead to sexual or social danger, which then requires all her ingenuity and nerve to repair. Privileged and self-important, Miller's heroine decides against her guardian's wishes to meet the woman with a past (represented to her merely as the daughter of a milliner) whom her cousin Gerald has just married. She arrives at the couple's Staten Island bungalow to find her quarry out; before she can leave, she encounters Adrian Maitland, who has come to prevent his brother from marrying the same woman; he mistakes Christina for the unacceptable match and carries her off on his yacht until the early hours of the morning, thus compromising her. When he realizes that he has kidnapped and ruined a wealthy, fashionable young woman who is, not coincidentally, the ward of his father's lawyer, Adrian contrives to keep the potential scandal dark by delivering Christina to her guardian's house in Newport and proposing marriage to her. Unfortunately, word of Adrian's escapade with the yacht, though not Christina's part in it, comes to her guardian's ears, making Adrian's marriage proposal unacceptable because Adrian is now a scoundrel in his eyes. Christina must be insubordinate and daring a second time to retrieve the fault, and elopes with Adrian since the marriage is prohibited.

The film updates this narrative by having Christina attempt to save her cousin from the blandishments of the unsuitable woman, Lotta, now a "snake dancer"; the abduction proceeds as above, with the reduced potential for ruination and compromise of 1920, although a scene in the cabin suggests Christina's growing anxiety. [fig. 2] Christina and Adrian marry secretly but do not live as man and wife; Lotta blows the gaff on the abduction to Gerald's family, at which point Christina and Adrian make all right by producing their marriage license, a shift that *Variety* particularly despised. Yacht notwithstanding, the fifteen-year gap between novella and film required a step down in class from the circles of Mrs. Astor's Four Hundred to the merely well-to-do upper middle class, and a considerable step up in the representation

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<sup>1</sup> The film changes the spelling of Christina's surname from Eliot to Elliott.



2. Wanda Hawley as Christina Elliott and Jerome Patrick as Adrian Maitland in *Her First Elopement* (Realart, 1920), from the Core Collection, production files of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

of Lotta as sexually predatory. While Miller's greatest problem was to find ways of putting her heroine in harm's way by sending her to Staten Island in the sort of clothing that would allow her to be mistaken for the wrong woman, which she does through a plausible and minute discussion of Christina's taste, the film's greater difficulty is to present the heroine (played by Wanda Hawley) as an attractively modest "good girl" who could nonetheless be mistaken for a potential sexual menace in the context of 1920.

Christina's desire for adventure explains both her presence in the "wrong" place and her brief willingness to impersonate the "wrong" sort of woman; the attempts to prevent the ensuing scandal permit her to see her love interest as both exciting and upright [fig. 3].

In contrast to the relative lack of critical interest in *Her First Elopement*, *Are Parents People?*



was lauded by *Photoplay's* reviewer, who admired its “finesse of touches that are subtle and amusing” (qtd. in Slide 23). The *New York Times* praised Mal St. Clair for direction that “obtained the most out of this light story” (Hall 256), while *Time* admired the “light and whimsical varnish of direction” that permitted the film to “[stand] gaily up as one of the best of the recent films” (“The New Pictures”).

*Are Parents People?* may also have seemed fresher in part owing to the topicality of its exploration of divorce, which had doubled in frequency between 1910 and 1920 (Musser 264). While *Parents'* superior direction no doubt helped to establish St. Clair's reputation as a domestic Ernst Lubitsch (Dwyer 98), and favored St. Clair in contrast to Wood, whose story selection at more or less this moment Richard Koszarski characterizes as watered-down DeMille (295), the narratives of the two films are more similar than one might suppose,



Christina eyes Lotta St. Regis (on the phone, played by Nell Craig),  
from the Core Collection, production files of the Margaret Herrick Library,  
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

hinging as they do on the play between scandal realized/scandal averted and the actions of a misprized heroine. What is more, *Parents* adopts a strategy from the film version of *Elopement* in order to ratchet up the potential scandal it explores.

Miller's story, published a year before the film was made, describes the experiences of Lita Hazlitt, whose parents have been divorced for some years. Each bids for her loyalty, causing the heroine to wonder, "wasn't it . . . that they needed her to fill the gap in their lives that their own separation had made? This . . . was the real objection to divorce—that it made parents too emotionally dependent on their children" ("Are Parents People?" 27). The first significant alteration made by the film to Miller's narrative is to change the divorce from a *fait accompli* that Lita must learn to manage to a tragedy that she must avert. In both story and film, Lita is expelled from school for apparently having written to an actor, although her roommate is the guilty party. Her mother's efforts to avert this unsuitable but nonexistent match cause Lita to think that "perhaps after all, it was not necessary to die in order to reconcile your parents; perhaps it was enough to let them think you were undesirably in love" ("Are Parents People?" 58). The film handles this moment by having Lita instead read a book entitled *Divorce and Its Cure*, which inspires her to take upon herself the romantic indiscretions of her roommate. [fig. 4] The second significant alteration that the film introduces, unexpectedly, is the analogue to the abduction scene in *Her First Elopement*. In the film but not the story, unbeknownst to her genuine love interest, Dr. Dacer, Lita spends the entire night in his apartment, thereby imperiling his reputation as well as her own. [fig. 5] Both story and film imply that the parents, who have acted rather worse than their child, will be reconciled upon their daughter's frank assertion of her own wishes. As Miller puts it after Lita's revelation that they have been less-than-ideal parents, "they clung together, feeling their feet slipping on the brink of that unfathomable abyss—the younger generation" ("Are Parents People?" 101).

Both Mary Celeste Kearney and Georganne Scheiner find Lita's transition from schoolgirl to young wife abrupt (Kearney 141n4, Scheiner 32). Scheiner comments of Lita's attachment to Dacer that "there is something insidious about an older man finding a child in his care sexually arousing" (32), suggesting a scandal that neither story nor film anticipated in 1925; Gwenda Young, however, somewhat undermines this point by observing that in this film the "youth generation . . . [is] the mature and sensible force, while the older generation is petty, materialistic, and whimsical" (152). Scheiner's concern appears unfounded when one also considers the considerable agency of Miller's heroines. But agency is exactly the problem when contemplating the translation of these stories from page to screen because the stories represent female agency linguistically while the films must represent it visually, which may be more ambiguous. Miller's fiction is characterized by the free indirect discourse of the actively strategizing young woman, to whose thoughts we are constantly privy, often in the words used to think them. Many of Miller's fictions might be described as *Bildungsromane* in which the heroine's thinking must both be accommodated to her circumstances and revised the better to adapt her circumstances to her desires, a survival from Miller's period as one



Betty Bronson as Lita Hazlitt reading *Divorce and Its Cure* in *Are Parents People?* (Paramount, 1925), from the Core Collection, production files of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

of James's acolytes. Scenarist Frances Agnew's treatment of the film, in contrast, strips as much language from the narrative as possible. William Everson, for example, discusses *Are Parents People?* in the same context as *The Last Laugh* as a film that dispenses with intertitles to the greatest extent possible, observing that in this case there is no title for the film's first five minutes (137), during which the complex social circumstances of Lita's family are laid out via exchanges of objects while the parents pack for their separation.

Scandal is, of course, both articulate and inarticulate, erupting often as a consequence of acting on desires that cannot be spoken, until those desires become themselves the objects of endless remarks addressed to the misconduct. The heroine caught between the romantic mores of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is similarly suspended between silence and speech where her desires are concerned. As Lita observes in Miller's story, "they had strange





Lita has overstayed her welcome with Dr. Dacer (played by Lawrence Gray), from the Core Collection, production files of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

old conventions about letting the advances come from the masculine side, or at least of maneuvering so that they appeared to. Subtle, they called it. Lita thought it rather sneaky” (“Are Parents People?” 81). In Miller’s world, scandal is the way in which a young woman comes to an understanding of what she wants when she cannot articulate it directly, either because she is not permitted to speak of it or because she does not yet know what she wants. This contention is perhaps best demonstrated by briefly glancing at Miller’s other surviving silent film, *Manslaughter* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1922).

Unlike the heroines of *Elopement* and *Parents*, the heroine of *Manslaughter* has considerable autonomy as a mature woman in possession of her fortune; yet even she experiences scandal, in this case a trial and imprisonment for the accidental death of a traffic cop, because she cannot bring herself to acknowledge her feelings for her love interest. The

crime and attendant humiliation are the necessary precursors to the heroine's articulation and understanding of her own emotion. Indeed, in a pattern we see in both *Elopement* and *Parents*, the scandal must also embrace or threaten to embrace the man the heroine discovers that she loves. In *Manslaughter*, the mutuality of the relationship between the proud, self-willed, and initially destructive heroine and her equally proud, self-willed, and destructive partner in attraction is manifest in their shared degradation and recovery. Thus, Lydia's crime, humiliation, and jailing are matched by O'Bannon's desire to see her humiliated and jailed, which is followed by his drinking, loss of position, and ultimate union with her. In the case of this couple, their interlocking scandals are the index of the sexual passion they share. Indeed, the pervasiveness of scandal in Miller's work suggests that she sees it as essential to female self-knowledge. Whether the heroine is powerless, merely naïve, or utterly unaware of her own desires, scandal can be a lever for the achievement of desire. As Henry Miller noted, Cinderella, that story of misprision and vertiginous social ascent, was Miller's ideal narrative template (69). That Miller's stories always end with a heterosexual pairing may obscure the female agency, assisted by scandal, that nonetheless goes into securing the right match.

Needless to say, Hollywood was alive to the utility of scandal in the creation and promotion of narratives to which scandal is central. Part of the lore of the making of *Manslaughter* is that Jeanie Macpherson, chief scenarist on the screenplay and assistant to Cecil B. DeMille, is purported to have arranged to have herself jailed for four days in order to collect atmosphere for her work ("Woman Goes to Jail"). Possibly more surprising is the suggestion that Miller herself spent time, although not as an inmate, at the women's prison in Auburn, New York in order to research the story, a piece of puffery more credible as Hollywood ballyhoo than as an accurate account of Miller's working methods in this particular instance (*Duluth News Tribune*, Nov. 20, 1921 9). Nonetheless, these accounts suggest that there is a shared frisson of delight for studio and audience in simultaneously claiming and disavowing scandal by presenting the experience of the scandalous as necessary background for the production of the narrative while at the same time insisting that scandal itself is not actually attached to the person of the scenarist/author. One might add that the exigencies of authorship, particularly the requirement of getting the atmosphere right, had by the 1910s become a kind of passport for women who wanted an entrée to social zones that sex and class might otherwise have barred them from. So, for example, Frances Marion conducted research at a prison for George W. Hill's 1930 *The Big House* (Beauchamp 256), and many female Progressive Era authors would have expected that their work required seeing the seamy side of life quite close up, an expectation they shared with female reformers during the same period (Morey, "Would You Be Ashamed?" 88).

Miller's novel *Ladies Must Live*, a film treatment of which was directed by George Loane Tucker in 1921 but which has not as far as I know survived, demonstrates the importance of the heroine's strategic creation, not merely experience, of scandal, in keeping with this pattern of female narrative agency in which we are to understand the heroine as author

of scandal and thus as author of her destiny. Christina and Riatt are stormbound alone in an abandoned house overnight; when they are rescued, Christina “had the choice between killing the scandal, or giving it such life and strength that nothing but her marriage with Riatt would ever allay it” (79-80), which is the course she chooses. *Ladies Must Live* also suggests the stakes of looking at Miller’s narratives as a group in relation to Hollywood’s story demands. In her important study of taste in film practice in the 1920s, Lea Jacobs uses a review of *Ladies Must Live* as evidence for the contention that moralizing taste was going out of style during this decade (80-81). Reasoning genealogically, Miller might be classed with other representatives of the genteel tradition in American letters, such as William Dean Howells, who are associated with narratives of moral uplift. Yet the success of *Parents* as “sophisticated” comedy, the genre that opposes the improving narrative, suggests a complicated relationship between original and adaptation, in which the same author, working in the same idiom, is nonetheless the progenitor of film texts as different as *Manslaughter*, which DeMille rendered into a cautionary tale for aggressive young women, and *Parents*, which St. Clair did not. I would argue that Miller’s narratives are not, in fact, as genteel as one might anticipate from her class position and generation. Her experiences as suffrage-agitator demonstrated for her that women’s demands for legal equality were by definition scandalous, a point suggested by the title of her best-known suffrage work, *Are Women People?* (1915). As I have argued elsewhere (Morey, “A New Eroticism”), Miller attempts to work out a new “erotics” that considers what difference legal equality might make to romantic interest between the sexes, a project complicated by her generation, which placed her between the original “New Women” born in the 1860s and what we might call the “New, New Women” born around 1900. In asking what female sexual desire looks like when women are neither supposed to be passive nor identical to men, Miller explores the risks of female agency while insisting on it. Sometimes, it seems, scandal can be a girl’s best friend.

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