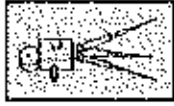


**The Censors Strike Back, from  
Complicated Women by Mick LaSalle**

# 9 THE CENSORS STRIKE BACK



Most Americans in the thirties agreed that films influenced the behavior of young people. Not everyone considered that a bad thing.

"In order to be sophisticated, fledglings turn to their primer, the movies," Dorothy Mackaill said.

Who has the good times, the swell clothes, the boyfriends, the jewels, the excitements, all the breaks? Why who but the Connie Bennetts . . . the Crawfords, even the Mackaills. And why? . . .

Not because we are portrayed as "nice girls" sitting at home with the old folks or practicing the piano. No, because . . . we are smoking, drinking, dancing, being made love to, getting into and usually out of . . . passionate situations.

Thanks to the movies, said Mackaill, "to be called a nice girl is to be blasphemed and socially undone."

Censorship put a stop to that. When censorship came, it came fast and irrevocably. Movies changed completely, and they changed overnight. The newly-formed Production Code Admin-

istration took control of motion picture content on July 1, 1934, a cataclysmic event that divided one year—and two eras—with the abruptness of an ax coming down.

There are two myths about Hollywood censorship, both the result of wishful thinking. The first is that the censors were predominantly concerned with the way things were expressed; therefore, all one had to do to circumvent censorship was to come up with subtle ways of saying the same things one might have expressed overtly. Some have even suggested that censorship made filmmakers sharper. The second myth is that the censors were stupid, that their witlessness made it easy for shrewd filmmakers to slip things by them.

Neither could be farther from the truth. Though the Production Code administrators brooked no lewdness or nudity, their main goal was to censor ideas. The censors were absolutely fixated on the *messages* movies transmitted. For example, crime had to be punished—period. There was no leaving it unpunished *subtly*. If you wanted to make a movie in which crime *did* pay, you were out of luck. You either had to give up your idea, or you had to compromise. The result: a movie in which crime didn't pay. Guaranteed.

Women got the worst of it. Under the Code, it wasn't only crime that didn't pay. Sex outside of marriage didn't pay. Adultery didn't pay. Divorce didn't pay. Leaving your husband didn't pay. Getting pregnant outside of wedlock didn't pay. Even having a job often didn't pay. Nothing paid. The Production Code ensured a

miserable fate—or at least a rueful, chastened one—for any woman who stepped out of line.

Accordingly, every female character in movies got her virginity back. If she lost it again, she was in big trouble. The price for non-conjugal relations was either death, permanent loneliness, or a profuse, protracted, and degrading apology. At the same time, women became the humble protectors of marriage. If a husband strayed and wanted to return, a wife not only had to take him back, she had to smile as she did it.

The censors were true believers. They agreed with Dorothy Macksall that movies influenced people, and they wanted to make sure that movies only put out the right messages. That is, ones that they agreed with. They were nostalgia buffs with an optimistic faith that they could turn the clock back to the 1890s—anything to stem the growing influence of the cities and city morality on American culture. They believed in the impossible. They believed they could close the barn door after the horse had run away, and that the horse would somehow be there in the morning. Like many who believe in the impossible, they had enormous success.

The truest of the true believers was Joseph Breen, who became head of the Studio Relations Committee in December 1933 and ran the Production Code Administration from its inception in June 1934. In the history of film censorship, Breen is the one indispensable man. Without Breen, it is likely that the Code would never have been enforced and that movies of the late thirties, forties, fifties and early sixties would have gone on in their merry pre-

Code way. Will Hays, the name most often associated with censorship, was a mere functionary. Breen was the real power, and a genuine crusader.

Breen was a lay Catholic with a priest for a brother and strong ties to powerful players in the church. He was also a political reactionary and an anti-Semite of the first order. Born in 1888, he started his career as a journalist. By 1926, he was the head of public relations for the Peabody Coal Company in Chicago. Active in Catholic affairs, he was also head of publicity for the Eucharistic Congress in Chicago, where he came into contact with publisher Martin Quigley, Father FitzGeorge Dinneen of the Chicago Board of Censorship, and others in the Catholic hierarchy. In 1929, Breen was part of the cabal that helped create the Production Code, and he participated in the February 1930 conference that led to its adoption. Following the conference, he took on the job of enlisting support for the Code among editors of Catholic publications. He won the endorsement of most of them, including the Vatican newspaper.

Breen was driven. He wanted to save America from the movies and movies from the Jews. His private correspondence is loaded with anti-Semitic invective. In 1932, while working as a public relations man for Will Hays, he wrote:

These lousy Jews . . . are simply a vile bunch of people with no respect for anything but the making of money. . . . These Jews seem to think of nothing but money-making and sexual indulgence. The vilest kind of sin is commonplace hereabouts and

the men and women who engage in this sort of business are the men and women who decide what the film fare of the nation is to be. . . . Ninety-five percent of these folks are Jews of Eastern European lineage. They are, probably, the scum of the earth.

More than once Breen referred to the Jewish moguls as "lice." In a letter to Martin Quigley, he wrote, "The fact is that these damn Jews are a dirty, filthy lot." In another letter he referred to the Jewish studio bosses as a "foul bunch, crazed with sex . . . and ignorant in all matters having to do with sound morals."

In December 1933, Will Hays appointed Breen head of the Studio Relations Committee. The appointment was an attempt by Hays to placate Catholic leaders who had been criticizing Hollywood and who'd begun openly discussing organizing in protest. Breen was, in fact, a big part of why Catholic leaders were becoming vocal. Behind the scenes, he had been encouraging them to put pressure on Hays to enforce the Code more stringently.

Yet when he first became head of the Studio Relations Committee, Breen had no more power than his predecessors. Some of the most risqué and progressive films of the era were released under his watch. One of them was *Queen Christina*, which opened in Los Angeles in the last week of 1933 and throughout the country in early 1934.

*Queen Christina* is a film worth looking at closely, in that it embodies everything that the Code wanted to destroy. Breen, indeed, tried to destroy it. He launched an all-out campaign to have it cut to pieces only months before he had the power to do so by

fiat. As such, *Queen Christina* ranks as one of cinema's close calls. It is also the era's most sophisticated examination of gender and identity, and Garbo's masterpiece.

*Queen Christina* was Garbo's pet project from the beginning. She agreed to a second MGM contract on the condition that the studio let her star as Christina, a bisexual Swedish queen from the seventeenth century. According to screenwriter Salka Viertel, Irving Thalberg had no problem with the lesbian element of the story, that he even encouraged her to include it. Thalberg stopped her one day and asked if she had seen the German film, *Mädchen in Uniform*, in which lesbianism was suggested. "Does not Christina's affection for her lady-in-waiting indicate something like that?" he asked.

In *Queen Christina*, Garbo played a monarch raised from birth as a boy. She hunts; she rides; she wears men's clothes; and she kisses her lady-in-waiting, Countess Ebba, on the lips. When she finds out that Ebba wants to marry a man, she becomes angry. Meanwhile, her chancellor wants Christina to marry and produce an heir: "You can't die an old maid." Christina relishes her ambiguity. "I have no intention to, Chancellor," she answers. "I shall die a bachelor."

Her life gets complicated when she meets Antonio (John Gilbert), while disguised as a man at a country inn. A shortage of rooms forces them to share a bed, and when she takes off her jacket and reveals herself to be a woman, he is pleasantly surprised. A master of understatement, he says, "Life is so gloriously improbable."

*Queen Christina* is a story of true love that takes place in a lusty atmosphere, the equivalent of a modern romance that begins in a single's bar. The drunken patrons of the inn get into a fight over whether Christina has had six or nine lovers in the past year. The queen (in disguise) settles it by telling them that Christina has had "twelve lovers this past year, a round dozen."

"Long live the queen!" they shout approvingly. Christina may be exaggerating. Yet even before Antonio, we know that she is carrying on at least two relationships: one with Ebba, another with her Lord Treasurer. But Antonio—who happens to be the Spanish ambassador, on his way to the Swedish court—is the real thing. At the inn, they spend three days in their room, in bed, behind a canopy. Antonio's assistant walks into the room, and standing outside the canopy, he is surprised to realize his boss is gay. This is funny, adult stuff.

One of Garbo's most famous set pieces is the furniture touching scene. Christina walks around the room, touching and caressing each object. "I have been memorizing this room," she explains. "In the future, in my memory, I shall live a great deal in this room." Christina is taking objects and turning them into thoughts, objects of the spirit. The process is analogous to what has happened between the lovers. Something physical has turned into something deeper, a union of the spirit.

Always with Garbo, if love is in the room, so is God. Near the end of her circuit, she lies across the bed and touches the pillows, in a reverie of bliss. From there, she moves directly to a medieval religious tapestry. "This is how the Lord must have felt," she says

moments later, "when he first beheld the finished world, with all His creatures breathing and living."

*Queen Christina* is unique in that it is a feminist film about a woman who abdicates her power. The film presents Christina's decision to leave the throne as a victory of the self. Her whole life, we are told, she has lived in the shadow of her father, a warrior king. She laments that she has to "live for the dead" and longs to be a human being. "This longing I cannot suppress," she tells her chancellor.

"And yet you must," the old man replies. "You will. His hand is upon you. The king's." It is at this point we catch on, if we have not already, that if Christina ever wants to be free, it is precisely "his hand" that she needs to come out from under.

*Queen Christina* can be seen as the ultimate expression of the twenties' and early thirties' preoccupation with individual concerns over matters affecting society. It was also the film in which Greta Garbo was most free to make her own statement. Made at a time when Garbo had artistic control over her projects, *Queen Christina* celebrated true love, in all its forms, as something from God. It was as direct a statement as the bisexual Garbo could have made in 1933, and a generous one, meant for all viewers. By showing Christina's sexuality as earthy to begin with, by placing her in a world of everyday human emotion and passion, Garbo held out the possibility of transcendence to every member of her audience.

Breen went ballistic. He wanted to cut everything from the point where Christina and Antonio are first in the room at the

inn — all the way to the scene, three days later, in which Christina memorizes the room. He wanted to chop up that sequence as well. "Miss Garbo should be kept away from the bed entirely," Breen wrote. "The business of lying across the bed and fondling the pillow is, in my considered judgment, very offensive." Breen also wanted to cut Christina's line, "This is what the Lord must have felt . . ."

He didn't get his way. A review board made up of the various studio heads passed the film over his objections. But he soon won the war. Within months, Breen had the power to impose his patently narrow vision of life, art, and morals.

THE OFFICE OF the Studio Relations Committee, Joseph Breen was an employee of the studios. His job was to get movies past the state censor boards with as few cuts as possible. But once entrenched at the SRC, Breen used his position to work against the very people who were paying his salary. Trading on his familiarity with the Catholic hierarchy, he encouraged bishops and cardinals in the various cities to generate and organize anti-Hollywood sentiment among Catholics. In November, a month before his appointment, he ghosted a speech for Bishop John Cantwell of Los Angeles to deliver at the annual bishops meeting. Speaking Breen's words, the bishop called Hollywood "a pest hole that infects the entire country with its obscene and lascivious moving pictures."

In March 1934, as SRC chief, he wrote to Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia, suggesting the cardinal threaten a Catholic boy-

cott of all motion pictures. Breen's main target was Warner Brothers, whom he'd been battling over the script for an upcoming film, *Madame Du Barry* (1934). Philadelphia had a high concentration of Warners' theaters, approximately three hundred of them, which made them the studio most likely to be hurt by a boycott. Breen also had another purpose. He wanted to use Philadelphia as a test case to flex Catholic muscle.

Breen developed his plan in detail. He instructed Dougherty not to negotiate with the Warners district manager, whom he described as a "kike Jew of the very lowest type." Rather, Dougherty should form a committee, including a couple of prosecutors, since "Jewish boys . . . are unfailingly . . . impressed and terrified by officials connected in any way with the police or the courts." The committee should insist on a meeting with Harry Warner and not listen to any of his "highfalutin' gab about art and the movies." The message needed to be conveyed: He had to change his ways or suffer the consequences.

As Breen hatched his plans, strong pre-Codes continued to get released. Norma Shearer's last pre-Code, *Riptide*, opened in theaters in the same month Breen was writing to Dougherty. She played Mary, a swinging single in New York who meets a stuffy English lord (Herbert Marshall), seduces him immediately, and after a whirlwind affair, becomes Lady Rexford, a wife and mother in England.

The Shearer of *Riptide* was different from previous Shearers. She was warm and poised, but also flighty and neurotic, with a

weakness for a good time. When her husband is away, she goes to a party, gets drunk, and lets a man kiss her. She explains the incident to her husband with an unsettling lack of embarrassment. "The moon was in the sky, I didn't put it there . . . And then he kissed me." When her husband refuses to be amused, she becomes irritated. "Well, you might have had grounds for divorce. But I'm intact, if that means anything to you." Eventually she gets even with her (now estranged) doubting husband by going out and doing precisely what he has suspected her of.

*Riptide* is no classic, but it is so peculiar and so pre-Code in its elements that it works. What makes it something to cherish, however, has less to do with the movie than with what was running in the world outside of it: It's the last Norma Shearer movie that feels just like a Norma Shearer movie. A couple of months later, in the June issue of his Catholic youth magazine, *Queen's Work*, Father Daniel Lord, the author of the Production Code, published a front-page condemnation of *Riptide*:

It seems typical of Hollywood morality that a husband as productions manager should constantly cast his charming wife in the role of a loose and immoral woman. In this case, she has an affair before marriage and an elaborate affair after marriage . . . We advise strong guard over all pictures which feature Norma Shearer. They are doing more than almost any other type of picture to undermine the moral code and the Producer's Code.

Breen, meanwhile, continued to amass power. On May 22, he wrote to Daniel Lord about his desire to work with a national organization "to get after the Jews in this business." The following day, also to Lord, he wrote, "The Jews are clannish. They are almost entirely without morality of any kind." That same day, Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia took Breen's advice about a boycott, but went him one better: Instead of threatening a boycott, he went ahead and announced one. All Catholics in his diocese were thereby forbidden to patronize any movie house, by "positive command, binding all in conscience under pain of sin." The result was an immediate fifteen to twenty percent drop in movie attendance.

Breen may have been a bigot—and, in private, a foul-mouthed thug—but he was shrewd. By June 1934, he was strong enough to dictate terms. The Catholic hierarchy had begun to organize along the lines Breen and others had envisioned. The Catholic Legion of Decency was formed, an organization that rated movies according to morals and permitted or forbade Catholics from seeing them. The studios, shaken by the Philadelphia boycott, were terrified of the Legion, which threatened to deny them twenty million Catholic customers.

Breen presented himself to Hays as the one man capable of maneuvering between the studios and the Legion. He demanded a new arrangement, and Hays caved in, giving Breen everything he wanted. The Studio Relations Committee was transformed into the Production Code Administration, with Breen in the driver's

seat. From now on, all scripts would have to be funnelled through the PCA, and starting on July 1, 1934, no film could be released without the PCA seal of approval. There would be no jury of appeal (the provision that had saved *Queen Christina*). Breen, heading a staff of nine, would hereafter have the last word on motion picture content. He would maintain that control for nineteen of the next twenty years.

Ironically, Hays and the studios may have overreacted. That summer, Hays dispatched an investigator to locations up and down the country to gauge the effect of the Legion, which had already condemned a number of films, among them *Dr. Morica* (Kay Francis), *The Life of Vergie Winters* (Ann Harding), *Design for Living* (Miriam Hopkins), *Men in White*, and *Riptide*. The investigator found that the Legion had less power than the studios feared. In fact, whenever the Legion banned a film, attendance increased. A Legion condemnation meant good box office. These findings were never publicized, however, and Hays kept them to himself. After all, thanks to Breen and the Legion, Hays finally had a way to keep the studios in line.

At the press conference announcing his appointment, Breen reveled in his image as a pugnacious Irishman. "I come from a long race of people who have a long history of committing suicide—on the other guy," he said. Like the man himself, the statement blazed with confidence, hostility, and obtuseness. Thus began the reign of the man *Film Weekly* was soon calling "the Hitler of Hollywood."



IN 1932, BETTY'S PREDECESSOR, Jason Joy, had written to Thalberg after a screening of *Red Dust*:

Jean Harlow's characterization, compounded as it is of honesty, humor and sympathy, we feel should go a long way to redeem whatever danger may lurk in the portrayal of her profession [prostitute]."

Joy, working for the studios, was essentially saying he believed they could slip this one by the local boards because Harlow's character was likable.

Now, in the era of Breen, a likable prostitute was worse than an unlikable one. A likable prostitute made immorality sympathetic and attractive. Breen's intent was not to protect Hollywood studios from what the public might not like, but to protect the public from what it most definitely would like. That's why in 1936, for example, Breen discouraged MGM from embarking on a remake of *The Trial of Mary Dugan*: "It glorifies a loose and kept woman and treats the details of the adultery of two persons in a manner which is condoned and not clearly shown to be wrong."

Within months of the Code's enforcement, *Riptide* was pulled from the screen, as well as *Queen Christina*, *Born to Be Bad*, *Female*, *Mary Stevens, M.D.*, *The Story of Temple Drake*, *Baby Face*, and other films.

The effect of the new policy on actresses and on their roles was

immediate. Jean Harlow's next film -- originally entitled *Eadie Was a Lady*, after a sleazy ballad -- was about a gold digger who uses her charms to make her way into society. In production as the Code crackdown was looming, and released after the Code took effect, the film's title was changed and its script rewritten. In the new version, Eadie was a gold digger and a young woman obsessed with maintaining her virginity. The character made no sense, and neither did the film, which made it to theaters under the title, *The Girl from Missouri*.

Likewise, in *Belle of the Nineties* Mae West was a shady Gay Nineties singer who, in the end, unaccountably embraces the prospect of married life. "I resisted the type of censorship that quibbled over every line as if the devil were hiding behind each word," Mae West said years later. Except there was no resisting. West had a censor on her set every day.

The Code had a dramatic effect on Marlene Dietrich, who, after a career of playing harlots, suddenly emerged as a devout Catholic in *The Garden of Allah* (1936). "Imagine having to say, as I did, 'Nobody but God and I know what is in my heart,'" Dietrich said, recalling a bit of Production Code cominess. "The conceit of it! I tell you I nearly died!"

Claudette Colbert's biographer, Lawrence Quirk, noted that Colbert "always resented Production Code restrictions, feeling that moralists with no talent had no right to tamper with creative productions." They had no right, but they had the power.

The differences between pre-Code and post-Code Hollywood become obvious when one looks at the remakes of pre-Code

women's films made under the Code. Take *The Last of Mrs. Cheney*, which originally had Shearer as a jewel thief who ingratiate herself into high society for the sake of stealing a valuable necklace. The big scene in that film was the one in which Mrs. Cheney was locked into a room with a man who threatens to expose her crime if she doesn't sleep with him. In the 1937 remake with Joan Crawford, that pivotal scene no longer appears. What's more, the emphasis of Mrs. Cheney's career as a criminal was seriously toned down in the remake. Breen had warned MGM:

{The story} tends to characterize Mrs. Cheney as a habitual criminal and further tends to show that the stealing of the Duchess's pearls is but the climax of a series of criminal associations with [her partner] Charles. Such treatment makes it necessary that it be indicated that both Charles and Mrs. Cheney be drastically condemned and punished.

That would have made one heck of an ending to a romantic comedy. Instead, MGM made Mrs. Cheney a novice criminal. What had been a sophisticated show in 1929 was rendered toothless and juvenile eight years later.

In the 1933 *When Ladies Meet*, Ann Harding, referring to her philandering husband, said, "I can always tell when an affair is waning." In 1941, Greer Garson said, "I can always tell when one of his infatuations is waning." In other words, we're to understand that the wife is upset, not because her husband is involved with another woman, but because he is harmlessly enamored. Of

course, in this case, any viewer of reasonable sophistication could read through this layer of nonsense, but the simple fact the layer exists is maddening.

In 1931, MGM had made a romantic comedy called *The Man in Possession*, starring Irene Purcell as a loose-living woman who has spent herself into bankruptcy and Robert Montgomery as the bailiff legally bound to spend the night in her house. In the original, the overnight stay results in the inevitable coupling, which was handled with no ambiguity. As the *Variety* critic put it at the time:

Next day the mistress's clothes are strewn all about the room, and one piece of undie is torn. By that and accompanying doubtless entente the audience is given to understand what it suspected all the while. The only way to get it over stronger would be to have the ushers explain it in person to all patrons.

*The Man in Possession* was not just risqué but a warm-hearted picture about imperfect people saving each other. When MGM remade the film under the title *Personal Property* in 1937, with Jean Harlow and Robert Taylor, not only was the sex gone, the movie absolved the woman of responsibility for her debts. The daring heroine was replaced by a mild victim of her late husband's extravagance.

Bad enough that Breen was killing good movies in the crib and rendering remakes pointless. He also did retroactive damage to many pre-Codes. When studios applied to re-release films, Breen

would screen them and either reject them outright or suggest cuts. In the latter case, studios would usually cut the original negative to comply with Breen's instructions. This practice was both shortsighted and heartbreaking, but from the point of view of the studios in the thirties, the films were of no value if they couldn't be seen in theaters. Television was vague on the horizon, and there were no such things as home video, laser disc, or DVD. There was also next to no awareness of these films as works of art to be valued by future generations.

As a result, the original version of *Mata Hari* (1931) is gone. The version we have today is one re-cut for release in 1939. In this cut version, Ramon Novarro and Garbo say goodnight in Mata Hari's bedroom, and he is shown picking up his coat to leave her apartment. In the original version, Garbo reappeared in a revealing negligee, and Novarro hung out for awhile. The only existing version also has a jarring cut in the exotic striptease that marked Garbo's first appearance in the film.

*Mata Hari* is hardly the only example. Many films were chopped mercilessly. The only available television print of *The Iron Man* (1931) is a butchered version that eliminates an entire nightclub scene in order to shield sensitive eyes from Jean Harlow's transparent blouse. The cut also shields viewers from the continuity, making the picture impossible to follow. Permanently missing from *Love Me Tonight* (1932) is the sight of Myrna Loy in a negligee singing a verse of the song "Mimi."

In some cases, original versions have been restored. The no-

torious lesbian dance, for example, cut from the 1944 reissue of *The Sign of the Cross* was returned to its rightful place in time for its 1993 release on video. Fourteen minutes cut from the 1935 re-release of *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* were restored in 1989.

The only bright side to this saga is that the more daring a pre-Code was, the more likely it was to escape mutilation. The reason for this is that the most outrageous films were deemed uncultable. They were never re-released and therefore never re-edited.

RKO was denied permission to re-issue *The Animal Kingdom* in 1935 and 1937. In 1935, Breen rejected two Mae West films that had been on screen just two years before: *She Done Him Wrong* and *I'm No Angel*. A pair of Kay Francis gems were denied re-issue in 1936, *Mary Stevens, M.D.* and *Mandalay*, the latter because of "the basic Code violation of presenting the heroine as an immoral woman." That same year, *A Free Soul* escaped Breen's butcher knife by also being rejected whole. Harlow's *Goldie* was denied reissue in 1937, because of its "vulgarity and low moral tone."

In 1940, Breen re-screened *Design for Living*, at the request of Paramount, which was considering a remake:

The picture we saw this morning is definitely, and specifically, in violation of the Production Code on a half dozen counts, because it's a story of gross sexual irregularity, that it is treated for comedy, and which has no "compensating moral values" of any kind.

Four years later, when Paramount asked permission to re-release the original film, Breen denied it.

Even in the fifties, pre-Code subjects were considered beyond the pale. In 1950, MGM proposed a remake of *Private Lives*, the playfully sophisticated comedy that had starred Shearer and Montgomery in 1931. But the script, based on the Noel Coward play, incited this reaction by a Production Code official: "The story is completely unacceptable . . . by reason of being a gross travesty of marriage."

Any Hollywood history inevitably mentions that in the late thirties Marlene Dietrich, Katharine Hepburn, Joan Crawford, and others were labeled box-office poison. To this historical fact, we might add two words: Well, duh. Of course women's films were tanking. True, Hepburn was making interesting pictures like *Alice Adams* (1935) and *A Woman Rebels* (1936) that deserved an audience. But Dietrich was mired in formulaic exoticism and Crawford was lost in predictable romance.

Under the Code, actresses lost their edge, their ability to surprise. As one studio executive grumbled, "The leading lady must start out good, stay good, and be whitewashed for the finish." Consigned by censorship to a fantasy land of purity, they lost their social relevance. After all, what is the point of a Kay Francis movie in which Kay Francis is less sophisticated than the viewer?

Newspapers in major cities—Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York—were soon reporting that audiences booed and hissed when the Production Code Administration's seal of approval flashed onto the screen at the start of

each movie. Audiences recognized the change in their films, and the changes in their favorite stars. For some actresses, these changes proved fatal to their careers. It is no mystery why the coming of the Code coincided with the decline of many top women stars.

Ruth Chatterton faded. So did Constance Bennett, Miriam Hopkins, Ann Dvorak, Madge Evans, Glenda Farrell, and Kay Francis. The Code damaged Garbo's stateside popularity and made Joan Blondell less important. *Belle of the Nineties* was a money-maker for Mae West, but once audiences caught on that Mae was defanged, her popularity waned. In the case of all these stars, there were other factors involved in their decline. There are always other factors. But they each shared a disadvantage. They were actresses whose stardom was tied up with their embodying modernity, the honest expression of which could not be tolerated under the Code.

Ann Harding was all but ruined. Hampered by a Code that scorned forcefulness in women and outlawed moral complexity, Harding was left to act either in weepies, in which she could only be long-suffering; or comedies in which she could be (unconvincingly) flighty but never genuinely naughty. In 1937, she left Hollywood and went to England, where she triumphed on the stage in *Candida*, Bernard Shaw's caustic critique of marriage. Shaw said she was the best Candida he had ever seen.

Other actresses maintained their popularity but were never again as vital as they were in the pre-Codes. This is a purely subjective judgment, but Loretta Young was never more sexy and nat-

ural than in *Midnight Mary*, *Employee's Entrance*, and *Born to Be Bad*. And while it would be ridiculous to discount the last fifty years of Barbara Stanwyck's dazzling career, one does develop a taste—after watching *Baby Face*, *Night Nurse*, *Ladies They Talk About*, and other early films—for the straight-up, uncut, unwatered-down Stanwyck we find at this stage.

Jean Harlow maintained her popularity until her death in 1937, though it's a wonder considering the pale comedies and dour dramas she was making after the Code. Today only *China Seas* has the old Harlow oomph. She played an "entertainer" (the Code equivalent of prostitute) in love with a cruise-line captain (Clark Gable) in a story not unlike *Red Dust*. Throughout, Gable thinks he is in love with the refined Rosalind Russell, but Harlow is his soul mate.

Under the Code, comedy, particularly screwball comedy, became the vehicle for expressing the anarchic impulse. Within that atmosphere of distracting freneticism, truths, at least some truths, could be told about men and women. Audiences responded, even if they didn't completely know why, and the genre became popular. Actresses not at home in zany comedy, such as Harding, died the death. But the handful who could manage the transition—Claudette Colbert, Myrna Loy, and Irene Dunne—thrived, and Carole Lombard came fully into her own. Meanwhile, serious films about the issues and concerns of women in society disappeared, only to come back in the forties as the "woman's film" genre.

Space prohibits an examination of the entire history of women

in American film. Yet Hollywood's "woman's films" of the forties are worth mentioning, since they serve to highlight the differences between the pre-Code era and what followed. The woman's films started high-powered actresses such as Rosalind Russell, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Olivia de Havilland. But since they were made during rigid censorship, they tended to be rigorously formulaic.

The forties woman's films have eloquent champions. Jeanine Basinger in her book *A Woman's View* (1993), celebrates the freedom that defiant women enjoyed in the beginning and middle of most woman's films, while acknowledging that the Code always caught up to them at the finish: "When the end of the movie came around, the . . . woman was usually dead, punished, or back in the fold, aware of the error of her ways." By this estimation, the endings of these films—in which the women turn masochistic, sacrificial, needy, and forlorn—were a small price to pay for what had gone before.

The endings hardly mattered anyway. According to Molly Haskell, author of the seminal *From Reverence to Rape*:

We see the *June Bride* played by Bette Davis surrender her independence at the altar; the actress played by Margaret Sullavan in *The Moon's Our Home* submit to the strait-jacket in which Henry Fonda enfolds and symbolically subjugates her; . . . Joan Crawford as the head of a trucking firm go weak in the knees at the sight of the labor leader played by Melvin Douglas. And yet we remember Bette Davis not as the blushing bride but as

the aggressive reporter and sometime-bitch; Margaret Sullivan leading Henry Fonda on a wild-goose chase through the backwoods of Vermont; . . . and Joan Crawford looking about as wobbly as the Statue of Liberty.

At the time those words were written, Haskell was undoubtedly right. With the Production Code only five years in the past, any adult movie fan in 1973 had grown up with the Code's conventions. People knew well how to see through and even ignore the straitjacket that every woman's story was stuffed into during the forties. They knew how to savor whatever flashes of life and truth could be gleaned. To be sure, there is no disputing that Hollywood, speaking in code to audiences during the Code, yet managed to communicate affirming messages and images through such woman's films, and that savvy audiences were able to dismiss the endings as reactionary propaganda.

But, oh, those endings. A younger audience, not raised on the Code, can only gag on them. The sight of a great woman knocking under is too galling, even when we know we should dismiss it. Indeed, the very fact that these women start off so strong makes their surrender all the more distressing. If Bette Davis has to surrender, what hope is there for anybody else, male or female? For a modern viewer, unlike the trained audience of a half-century ago, a five-minute ending can wipe out the pleasure of the ninety minutes that preceded it.

The woman's films of the forties demand that a viewer swallow lies about human nature, stories of ultimate defeat, and ridiculous

and frustrating plots in which the simplest expression of an honest feeling would make the whole mendacious edifice crumble. That is a lot to swallow. One could say these forties films force audiences to meet them on their own terms. But pre-Code women's films speak to us, one era to another, with a refreshing directness.

It's not just the lack of censorship that makes this communication possible. Our era and that of the late twenties and early thirties are not dissimilar. As social critic Barbara Epstein has noted, as the Depression deepened and the war years began, popular concern shifted to issues such as "economic democracy and the threat of fascism." As a result, "issues of family and sexuality (and for that matter, issues of culture and psychology more generally) faded from public attention." This shift is reflected in the films made during the Code.

But since the sixties, the pendulum has swung back. The turn of the millennium finds people in a more Queen Christina-like frame of mind, concerned with personal matters more than with the kingdom as a whole. Even people who dislike old movies find pleasure and points of identification in pre-Code women's films— which, unlike the woman's films of the forties, were not genre pictures. They were not ghettoized. They were made for all audiences at a time when filmmakers felt sure that everyone, male and female, was interested in women's stories.

To discover these films today is more heartening than just uncovering a trove of amazing movies. It's like finding out you had a host of long-lost aunts and grandmothers, free and fascinating ladies about whom, for reasons of their own, your parents never told you.