Rescue Me: The Filmic Beginnings of the 'Damsel in Distress' in Pirate Films through 1926

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A young girl secretly fantasizes about pirates. As she grows into a woman, she puts on a corset and conforms to societal expectations for a woman of her station, for the most part, yet her secret fantasies remain. She loves a blacksmith, but her father, the Governor of Port Royal, Jamaica, expects her to marry an officer in the British Royal Navy. Elizabeth Swann (Keira Knightly), the heroine of the contemporary *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, eventually emerges as a sword-wielding Pirate King by the end of the third film of the series, and yet despite all of her fantasies and exploits, her greatest desire – at least as she self-proclaims – is to be married. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films dramatize a seemingly new vision of the 'damsel in distress,' a character often more capable of rescuing than in need of being rescued, and yet the storylines and the function of the heroine remain predictably familiar. In order to understand this contemporary representation and its significance in 21st century culture, we must first consider how the representation of this character type differs from its earliest filmic incarnations. How far has the damsel in distress come from those first appearances?

This paper analyzes the heroine in the specific adventure genre of the pirate film from the first three decades of American cinema, by examining trade paper and fan magazine reviews and synopses of three films – *Peg of the Pirates* (Lund, 1918), *Dead Men Tell No Tales* (Terriss, 1920), and *The Black Pirate* (Parker, 1926). The impetus for this examination began with a contemporary narrative fiction, feature-length film, therefore the films chosen for analysis also, necessarily, needed to be fictional, feature-length films. As the intention of the analysis is to establish a foundation from which to chart the evolution of the heroine in action-adventure films, the films must cover a range of dates within the silent film era as well as varying plotlines to potentially offer a greater breadth of variation in the representation of the heroine.

As opposed to interpreting the visual representation of the heroine's image on the screen, I focus on representation through the narrative structure of each film and the heroine's function within that structure, considering the effects that the organization and practices of the studio system, specifically the development of the star system, had upon the establishment of the classical narrative style. The analysis also takes into account the generic conventions affiliated with action-adventure films of the silent era, specifically in reference to this genre's connection to melodramatic conventions, as the damsel in distress is a recognizable stock character from literary and dramatic narrative forms established prior to the invention of the cinema. Secondarily, I examine what effect the presence of a woman screenwriter may have had on the representation of the heroine, again keeping in mind the established narrative, generic and production conventions of the silent film era.

By 1917 the classical narrative style became the dominant model in American fiction films. According to David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson's collaborative work, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, two main elements constitute the core of this developmental process. First, the classical narrative style consisted of a pattern – a set of elements that could substitute for one another based on established rules – allowing for a variety of choices to filmmakers but still maintaining a unified system with a finite number of alternatives (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 5). Second, this style became standardized and uniform due to the economical factory-style mode of production that had developed within the studio system to meet the growing demands of consumption (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 5-6). Historically, then, the classical narrative style of film developed simultaneously with the studio system in Hollywood and the two influenced each other.

The key components to the construction of the classical narrative style consisted of causality, consequence, psychological motivations, a drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals, with character-centered causality providing the primary framework of this style (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 13). These characteristics of the style worked interchangeably, and depending upon the specific action of the narrative, action here referring to Aristotle's meaning of the word, different characteristics would dominate. In general, though, a specific narrative causality dominates most films, a character-based narrative (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 12).

Serving as the main causal agents of the narrative, these characters needed clearly defined and consistent traits or qualities (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 13). As a new storytelling medium, film borrowed this type of character development from previous narrative mediums such as literature and theatre. Initially turning to the melodramas of the nineteenth century, film initially utilized similar stock characterizations that would be recognizable across narratives due to their sharp definition and lack of ambiguity (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 13-14), characters such as the damsel in distress. In addition to borrowing from melodrama, Hollywood also looked to the more realistic characterizations found in novels, where the characters were individuals with traits specific to the one and not necessarily transferable to a similar character in another narrative (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 14). The short story provided the solution to these two distinct character styles – a combination of the melodramatic stock characters with recognizable traits across narratives and the more realistic individualized characterizations found in novels – as it revealed the way to narrow down the individualization to 'fixed limits (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 14).' Character conventions in film, like the older literary forms, included traditional typing by age, gender, ethnicity and occupation, clearly linked to

societal norms, and to these traits, specific and individual characteristics were added, creating unique characters (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 14). In addition, each character's narrative function would determine certain recognizable traits across films and genres, maintaining the link to melodramatic stock characterizations (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 14). This mixture was the happy medium that emerged during the formative years of classical Hollywood cinema (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 14).

These individualized yet fixed characters now had the ability to serve the causality of the film's action, based on specific desires, which for Hollywood protagonists meant goal-oriented characters (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 16). This goal-oriented desire usually manifested as either seeking to add something to the character's situation or to restore a situation to its previous state (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 16). Specific to this character-based causality, the classical narrative form further developed a narrative structure with two interconnected storylines, one of which followed a heterosexual romantic relationship (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 16). The romantic line of action followed the traditions of the literary forms, which came before, designating character functions within the romance along appropriate gender lines (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 16). It is worth noting that the romantic line of action shifted from primary to equal to secondary status depending upon the film. The determining factors for how this storyline would be presented depended in part upon the narrative and in part on production and marketing concerns.

From 1917 on, the studio system's production organization – utilizing a detailed division of labor, continuity scripts and a hierarchical managerial system – was established (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 9). In his seminal work, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, Tom Schatz describes the studio system as:

…a period when various social, industrial, technological, economic, and

aesthetic forces struck a delicate balance. That balance was conflicted and

ever shifting but stable enough through four decades to provide a consistent

system of production and consumption, a set of formalized creative practices

and constraints, and thus a body of work with a uniform style – a standard

way of telling stories, from camera work and cutting to plot structure and

thematics. It was the studio system at large that held those various forces in

equilibrium; indeed the "studio era" and the classical Hollywood describe the

same industrial and historical and phenomenon (8-9).

Each studio developed its own signature, based on narrative and generic focus – which

influenced the development of the overall narrative style, as well as different marketing

techniques for their films. The emphasis on character consistency in the narrative led to an

important aspect of the studio system – the star system, which was firmly in place by 1917. The

prominence of the stars and their personal characteristics and style reinforced the narrative

structure's tendency toward 'strongly profiled and unified characterizations' (Bordwell, Staiger

and Thompson 14). As the personal traits of the individual stars emerged, the studios would cast

specific stars with specific traits according to the similarity of traits between the real actor and

the fictional character (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 14). The reverse of this occurred as

well, where a character's traits would be written specifically with a particular star in mind. In

other words, the classical narrative style and the star system developed simultaneously and

influenced each other. As stars and specific genres grew in popularity, this process became more

prominent until it became an established practice. Again, Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson note

that between 1912 and 1917 film companies began to consistently use their stars, both developing and established, to distinguish their products (14).

While the specifics of the narrative style became the consistent form for fictional films, exceptions did emerge, specifically in reference to the development of generic conventions. The melodrama, in particular, often disregarded an emphasis on the logic of causality in favor of coincidence (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 20). The origins of melodrama began long before the cinema developed as a new narrative medium. Literally, the word melodrama means drama with music, and this is the basis for its origins as a dramatic form. Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination* states that the use of the term and the form originated with Rousseau who had created a new type of play that combined spoken soliloquy, pantomime and musical accompaniment in an effort to achieve 'new emotional expressivity' (14). Brooks goes on to point out the effect on character, situation and plot of musical accompaniment in cinema that was so aptly commented on by Jean-Paul Sartre (14).

In its literary and dramatic form, the melodrama shared characteristics with the gothic novel, including, specifically, an emphasis on evil as a powerful force in the world and the ever-present anxiety that it will ultimately overcome good (Brooks 19-20). The element of optimism in melodrama distinguished the form from that of the Gothic novel, where, as Brooks states it continually attempted 'to "prove" the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgment, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force among men' (20). As melodrama grew as a literary form, taking its subjects, plots and themes from legend and history, it also took a key element from the novel: an emphasis on the persecution of women and their struggle to compel and maintain morality upon society (Brooks 86-87). As the classical narrative style emerged, with roots in

melodrama, these two pre-filmic elements – overcoming villainy and the persecution of women –
remained important components to the narrative and the character types.

According to Ben Singer, five constitutive factors characterize melodrama. First,
melodrama arouses pathos, or extreme pity, and the best melodramas use this to their advantage
to heighten the emotional experience for the spectator (*Melodrama and Modernity* 39-40).
Second, the melodrama utilizes overwrought emotion within the narrative and characterizations
(Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* 45). Third, as already established by Brooks and reiterated
by Singer, the melodrama dramatizes a moral polarization, a simplified worldview of the
distinction between good and evil (*Melodrama and Modernity* 46). Singer notes that recent
scholarship attributes this particular trait and its popularity 'to a new condition of moral
ambiguity and individual vulnerability following the erosion of religious and patriarchal
traditions and the emergence of rampant cultural discontinuity, ideological flux, and the
competitive individualism within capitalist modernity' (*Melodrama and Modernity* 46). The
anxiety created by this situation lessened through the fantasy of the melodrama's clear-cut,
utopian morality (Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* 46). John Cawelti, in his discussion of
genre in literature and pop culture, also focuses on this moral certainty. He considers the chief
characteristic of melodrama to be a series 'the combination of a number of actions and settings in
order to build up the sense of a whole world bearing out the audience's traditional patterns of
right and wrong, good and evil' (Cawelti 45).

The fourth factor returns to narrative structure, as opposed to the more representational or
thematic elements expressed by the first three; melodrama tends to defy classical narrative
structure. Again, Singer provides a distinct take on how this applies. He states that melodrama
had 'a far greater tolerance, or indeed preference, for outrageous coincidence, implausibility,
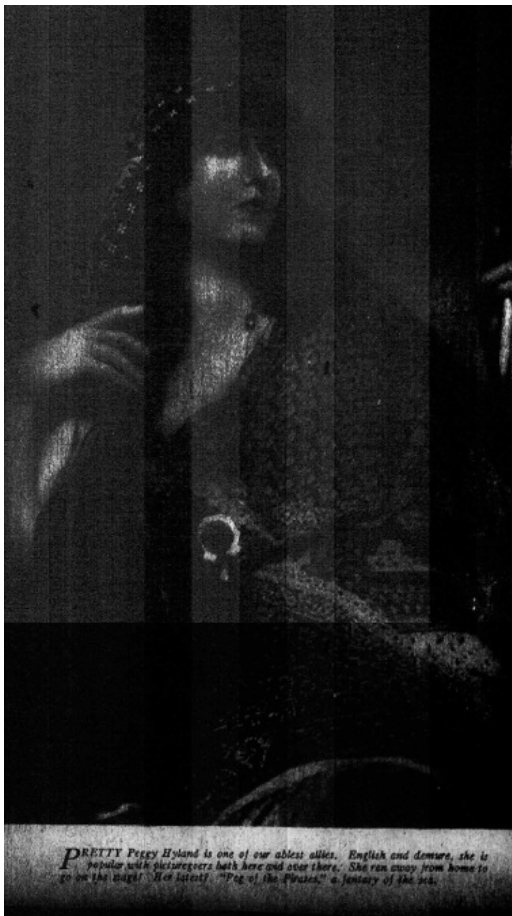
convoluted plotting, deus ex machina resolutions, and episodic strings of action that stuff too many events together to be able to be kept in line by a cause-and-effect chain of narrative progression' (*Melodrama and Modernity* 46). While the logic of causality, as it is understood in the world, may not have existed in melodrama, the hero versus villain scenario, continually popular in Hollywood cinema, depended upon opposing goals that still managed to produce a type of causality, logical within the conventions of the genre and the narrative created (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 16). Critics have noted the tendency in melodrama toward an episodic structure directly linked to a desire for sensation as opposed to continuity of story (Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity* 47). This leads to the final factor which is, in fact, sensationalism, which Singer defines as having an emphasis on action, violence, thrills, awesome sights, and spectacles of physical peril (Melodrama and Modernity 48). While this definition provides the foundation of the term, Singer also notes that sensationalism implied an atypical combination of 'scenic spectacle and credible diegetic realism' (Melodrama and Modernity 49).

While many associate the melodrama with films of domesticity focused on the internal emotions of female characters and family, such as those films by Douglas Sirk in the late 40s and 50s, Ben Singer established that melodrama in the silent film era was more identifiable with action than with emotionality (Singer, "Female Power" 166). Cawelti characterizes the adventure genre as a story with a hero who must overcome obstacles, often dangerous, and ultimately accomplish a moral mission (39). He continues to point out that the villain often creates these obstacles, and an additional reward is that 'the hero frequently receives, as a kind of side benefit, the favors of one or more attractive young ladies' (Cawelti 39-40). Action adventure, western and detective genre films have utilized both the dichotomous nature of the

battle between good and evil and the 'damsel in distress,' since the origination of narrative filmmaking.

While the narrative structure and generic conventions clearly demarcated established societal gender roles during the classical Hollywood era, the serial-queen melodrama provided a point of departure with a focus on female heroism. Singer points out that the serial-queen melodramas used an action/adventure framework – one traditionally devoted to male heroics – which narratively foregrounded a female heroine who exhibited "masculine" qualities, including physical strength, courage, social authority and freedom to explore novel experiences outside the domestic sphere (Singer, "Female Power" 163). These serials had in common with other melodramas – or action-adventure films – the emphasis on a hero (in this case a heroine) or heroic team in conflict with a villain out to obtain some prize and the action and violence affiliated with this struggle (Singer, "Female Power" 167-168). These serials also followed, to a certain extent, the classical narrative structure of two interwoven storylines, with a romance as one of the components. In addition to the emphasis on a female heroine and female empowerment on an active level, one of the distinguishing characteristics from the domestic melodrama was the complete absence of the mother, a key character in that version of the genre. Indeed, the serial-queen melodramas often had the heroine raised by a father with no mother even mentioned within the narrative (Singer, "Female Power" 170).

Singer considers these serial-queen melodramas an anomaly within the genre. While he considers the economic strategy these emancipated female characters offered in bringing women into the theatres, he emphasizes the sociological importance of a distinct moment in women's history (Singer, "Female Power" 175). Those qualities traditionally attributed to men – strength, courage, independence, success, sexual freedom, right to choose a partner – were redistributed to a female heroine as a form of escapist fantasy from the actual experience of women living in a patriarchal society (Singer, "Female Power" 176). As these films primarily appeared between 1912 and 1920, Singer notes that they 'drew heavily on a broader feminist discourse propelled by the woman's movement, which, mobilized around the campaign for suffrage, was extremely prominent in the 1910s" (Singer, "Female Power" 176). These films also drew on the emergence of the New Woman within American society – a more independent woman who was capable of direct contact with the world outside the home (Singer, "Female Power" 178).

PRETTY Peggy Hyland is one of our ablest allies. English and demure, she is popular with picturegoers both here and over there. She ran away from home to go on the stage. Her latest, "Peg of the Pirates," a fantasy of the sea.

It is via the serial-queen melodramas, such as *The Perils of Pauline* (1914), that I arrive at the first film under analysis. Fox Film Corporation's *Peg of the Pirates*, released in 1918, featured Peggy Hyland, a relatively new star the company was developing. In keeping with established star system conventions, Fox marketed the film as a Peggy Hyland feature. For example, in the August 1918 edition of Photoplay magazine, the caption to a portrait of Peggy

Hyland mentions her upcoming role in this film, as well as a movie theatre listing for the film from the Chicago Daily Tribune which prominently displays Peggy Hyland's name, establishing her as the star of the film (*see next page*).

Peggy Hyland plays the title character of the film, Margaret 'Peg' Martyn, and the narrative focuses on her story. Peg's father wants her to marry an older man, but she is in love with a poor poet Terry, of whom her father does not approve. She wishes to escape her fate – marrying a man whom she does not love – by being captured by pirates. Her wish comes true, but when the pirates plan to kill her, she must take matters into her own hands. She fakes her death and saves herself initially, but the pirates discover her deception and recapture her. Terry, in pursuit of the pirates, ultimately saves Peg. Terry's rescue of Peg wins over her father, and he allows Peg to marry the man she loves.


The film follows the classical narrative style and generic conventions established for the adventure genre during the late teens and early 20s – action and sensationalism, a heterosexual romantic storyline, moral polarization between the citizens representing good and the pirates representing evil, the ultimate rescue of the damsel from danger. Narratively, the film starts with an undesirable marriage proposal, the romantic storyline, which then becomes coincidentally intertwined with the action of the pirate abduction. The film foregrounds a marriage choice as the primary plotline while the entrance of the pirates becomes secondary yet inextricably

connected. While not a serial itself, *Peg of the Pirates* was released when these serial-queen melodramas were popular. As such, it is not surprising that the film contains some basic similarities to the sociological, feminist tropes exhibited in the serial-queen melodramas. Three specific aspects of the narrative appear most prominent. First, the protagonist of the story is, in fact, a heroine who desires to control her own fate within the established patriarchal society. While the character of Peg Martyn does not have quite the same amount of agency as the serial-queens did, her quick-witted plan, after her abduction, to fake her death and fool the pirates, reveals an intelligence and an ability to rescue herself from danger, similar to those of the serial-queens. Further emphasizing the patriarchal world of the film, as well as society, there is a father represented, but no mother figure. In fact, Peg is the only female of significance within the film. Finally, Peg desires to choose for herself whom she wants to marry, not have that determined by the patriarch of her family, and clearly has the judgment to make the decision for herself, despite the fact that she must still wait for her father to be won over by Terry's ultimate heroism.

Two years later, a shift occurs. In Vitagraph's *Dead Men Tell No Tales* from 1920, the narrative centers on the pirates' and their plan to steal gold from a ship and then blow it up. Catherine Calvert plays Eva Dennison. Eva's stepfather, Senor Santos, is the mastermind behind the plan. Santos convinces the Squire John Rattray to assist in the plan. Rattray agrees primarily because he has fallen in love with Eva. While on the ship, though, Eva falls in love with another young man, George Cole, a barrister from England, and he falls in love with her. The pirates' plot goes to plan, and Cole survives but believes that Eva has been lost. He eventually learns that he has been duped and discovers Eva hidden at Rattray's home. After an escape from death, he and Eva are finally united.

Again, this narrative utilizes many of the generic conventions of the adventure film, including a spectacular scene where the pirates actually blow up the ship. The two-storyline structure of the classical narrative style has again been used to its full advantage here with the romantic storyline of Eva Dennison interweaving with the primary narrative of the pirates' evil plans.   In a full-page advertisement from Motion Picture News, Calvert's photo is prominently placed in the center, and slightly larger than those of the male actors surrounding her, indicating Vitagraph's strategy to market the film as a star vehicle for the actress.

Although marketed as a Catherine Calvert film, the heroine is no longer the primary focus, but now serves as a catalyst for the primary plot. *Dead Men Tell No Tales* flips the primary and secondary storylines in terms of prominence from that of *Peg of the Pirates*. The character of Eva in *Dead Men Tell No Tales* has lost some of the narrative agency that Peg had in *Peg of the Pirates*. The narrative focus of the story is no longer primarily *her* story, although her function remains crucial to the overall plot. The patriarch in *Dead Men Tell No Tales*, Senor Santos, has changed as well. The patriarchal society has become much more sinister, represented by a stepfather, who is also one of the villains. Now the danger of the patriarch controlling Eva's life and decisions – including a marriage choice – takes on an added
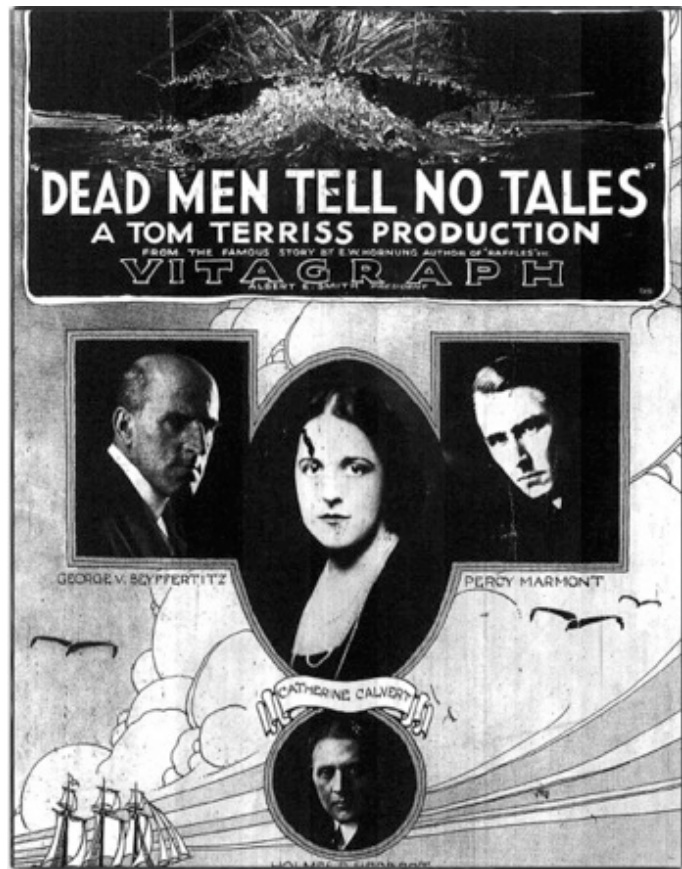
element of danger. Ultimately, Eva is rescued by the man she loves, the man of her choosing, but the stakes for a woman living in a man's world have risen. Finally, unlike Peg and her serial queen predecessors, Eva, as the heroine, no longer retains any ability to rescue herself, but is now dependent entirely on the man she loves. The heroine's narrative function has shifted from that of the subject of the narrative to an object, revealed through the actual narrative structure, even if not through the marketing strategy.

By 1926, the function of the heroine has shifted even more drastically. Unlike the two previous films, marketed as star vehicles for the female actress in each, *The Black Pirate* (1926) was a United Artist's star vehicle for Douglas Fairbanks, one of the largest stars of the silent film era. The narrative focuses on Fairbanks character. Fairbanks's character and his father are the only survivors of a pirate attack. After his father dies on the deserted island they have been living on, he vows to avenge his father's death. He joins the pirates – earning him the moniker of The Black Pirate – and falls immediately in love with the woman, the Princess, who the pirates have captured. When he attempts to save her from sexual assault, the pirates catch him in the act, but he manages to escape. He returns and rescues the Princess, ultimately revealing that he is a Spanish Duke making him a desirable marriage choice for the Princess.

With *The Black Pirate*, what would now be considered a traditional narrative structure and gender role delineation of the melodramatic adventure genre has emerged. The film itself was a perfect example of the spectacle of the action/adventure genre and was an early successful attempt at Technicolor. The heroine of the film has now become the pure 'damsel in distress' – an object only. Billie Dove played The Princess, the heroine of the film. The character has no other purpose in the narrative but as one of the challenges The Black Pirate must accomplish. She has no narrative agency; in fact, the romantic storyline can no longer be considered a

secondary storyline but has become one of a series of challenges for the hero of the film. A

review in Moving Picture World from March 20, 1926, states "Her role gives her little to do

except look beautiful and she certainly succeeds in doing this, for she is an ideal subject for

showing off color photography at its best" (Sewell, *Moving Picture World*, March 20, 1926). In

a two-page advertising spread from Motion Picture News, we clearly see the prominence of the
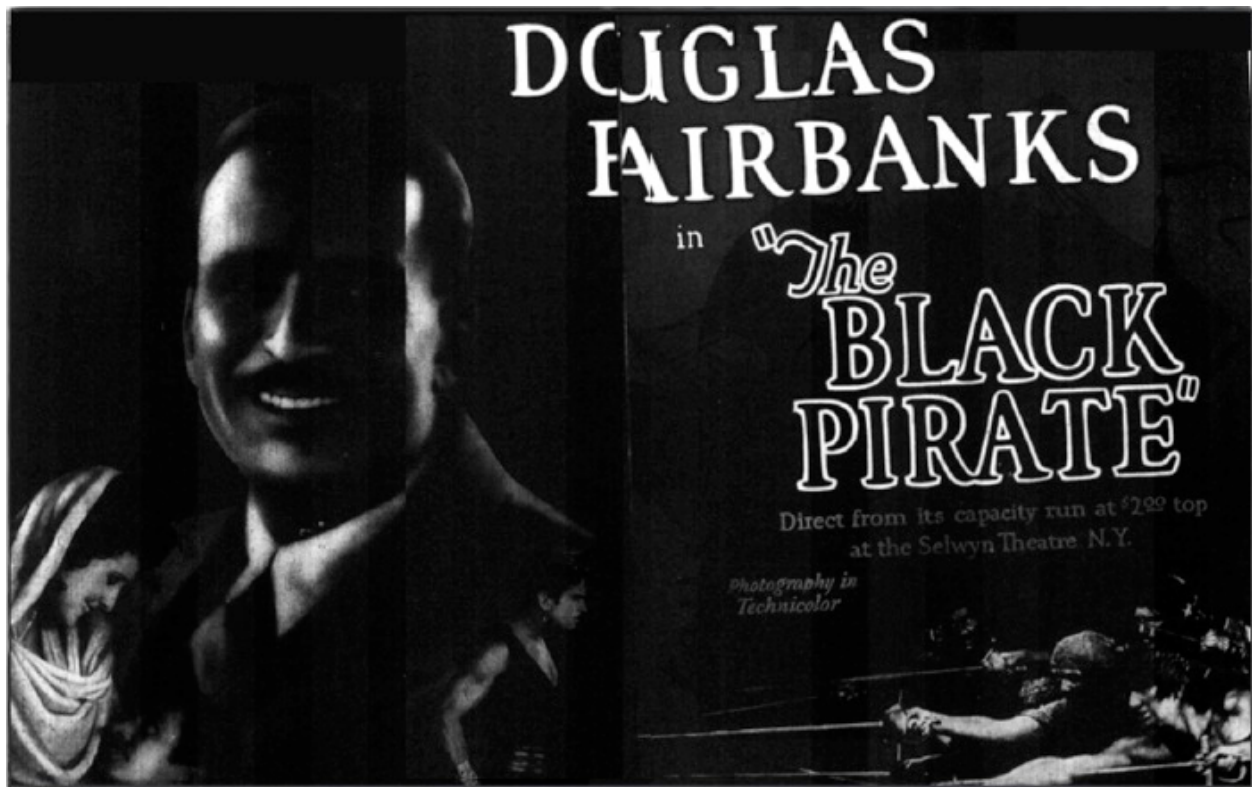
star, Douglas Fairbanks, who appears three times. Billie Dove appears once in the lower left-

hand corner, looking adoringly at her rescuer. In addition to her complete lack of a primary

narrative function, the character has also lost the choice between two men for marriage; now the

only option, presented as obviously desirable is the hero of the story. As her narrative function

has been stripped down, the possibility of the character having the mental acuity or physical

prowess to rescue herself is never entertained.

The three films have two things in common in reference to the heroine's role within the narrative – the ultimate rescue of the damsel from danger and her marriage to her rescuer. In addition, the similar generic conventions utilized in all three films include sensationalism, moral polarization, and a father figure for the heroine. The retention of the heroine's father figure, reminiscent of the narrative structure of the serial-queen melodramas, is an interesting development, and yet this seems to emphasize the connection between melodrama and the traditional masculine, action-adventure films of the silent era.

The films' differences lie primarily with whom the main character of the narrative is – the heroine or the hero, and consequently with the agency of the heroine within the narrative structure. While each of the films represents the societal norm of a woman's expectation to marry, an ability to choose whom she will marry declines within the narrative as we move from 1918 to 1926. In *Peg of the Pirates* and *Dead Men Tell No Tales*, the heroines have a choice between two men, one desirable and one undesirable, from the female character's perspective. The rescue of the damsel, in these two films, functions on two levels: 1) the actual rescue from physical danger and 2) the rescue of the character from marriage to a man she does not love. By 1926 and *The Black Pirate*, the heroine has completely lost that choice and the outcome of her rescue is to marry her rescuer – a man whom she has fallen in love with due to that very act. In part, we can attribute this loss of choice to the character's lessening prominence within the narrative structure, the move from subject of the story to object of the story, which in turn we can attribute to Hollywood's star system strategy. As already noted, the primary generic elements of the action/adventure melodrama have not changed – there are still pirates, heroes, damsels in distress and plenty of action and spectacle – but the specific narrative function and prominence of the heroine has shifted considerably in less than a decade.

As cinema developed as both an art form and a business at the turn of the 20th century, women played a crucial role as scenario writing and the classical narrative style emerged. Indeed, as Donna Casella has noted they came to dominate this aspect of filmmaking (Casella, 217). Noted biographer, Cari Beauchamp has even provided statistics which indicate that women comprised almost one-quarter of all scenarists in Hollywood in the 1920s and wrote half of all the films copyrighted between 1911 and 1925 (Harrison, 468). While their existence may be documented, even from the earliest days, credit and authorship went to the directors, who were primarily men (Casella 218-219). Scenario writing prior to World War I consisted primarily of one-page synopses of stories adapted from original ideas, novels or short stories, but as scenario writing developed, with more detailed stories and cinematic imagery, these writers gained more control, even if credit remained arbitrary (Casella 220). All writers, male and female, struggled 'for the right to claim authorship' (Casella 218). By the twenties, elaborate scenario departments within the larger studio system had emerged to manage the development and production of scenarios, considered by some to have contributed to the elimination of originality and creativity (Casella 221).

With a predominantly female writing force, their influence has been documented in many biographies on these early women writers. As the studios believed that female audiences were most interested in 'Victorian ideals of female desire,' many women writers heeded to this as the focus for the scenarios they wrote (Casella 218). Yet others fought to write narratives and female characters in less generic ways; although many of the female characters still fell into traditional societal roles, the writers 'afforded them power and autonomy inside those roles' (Casella 218). With the studios' emphasis on nineteenth century Victorian ideals of womanhood as the draw for women audiences, women scenarists were considered the best choice to write

these stories, and many were willing to 'write to gender' (Casella 223). While the majority of films written by women appear to be within the traditional gender roles and genres, women did write for the action-adventure film, primarily in serial form (Casella 227). As previously noted by Singer, Casella reiterates the point that these types of films provided a form of escapism – projecting the woman outside of the home and outside of many of those traditional Victorian female virtues (Casella 228). While critics and historians have noted that an 'overt "feminist" political agenda' did not exist, these women writers were often quite progressive in their portrayal of women breaking outside of traditional societal boundaries (Casella 231).

Both *Dead Men Tell No Tales* and *The Black Pirate* utilized women screenwriters as part of the writing team. Lillian Randolph Chester co-authored *Dead Men Tell No Tales* with her husband George Randolph Chester for Vitagraph, and Lotta Woods was the scenario editor for United Artists' *The Black Pirate.* Interestingly, the heroine with the greatest narrative agency was from the one film that has no credited women writers, *Peg of the Pirates*. This may be attributable more to the fact that it represented a similar narrative structure and character development to the serial-queen melodramas than to the lack of female authorship. As Lillian Randolph Chester often wrote with her husband, we can only speculate about the influence she may have had on the heroine, Eva, in *Dead Men Tell No Tales*. As Casella pointed out, many women remained true to the studio system's adherence to Victorian visions of womanhood. Yet, Eva is still given a choice between two men and the ultimate judgment to know which was the better choice. With *The Black Pirate*, Lotta Wood, along with the male co-authors Jack Cunningham and Elton Thomas, was clearly writing a film to exhibit Douglas Fairbanks and exploit his star status for economic purposes. As such, from a narrative and economic

perspective, providing any type of narrative agency to the heroine would have taken away from the primary focus of the film.

As writers for hire, regardless of gender, they will tend to serve the narrative and generic conventions. Creative choices affiliated with narrative and character development should not be denied or condemned based solely on gender. While issues of influence and authorship are often difficult to succinctly determine (and perhaps, ultimately, they are issues which should be eliminated) until equal credit is afforded to the women who contributed to the development of cinema – including a wide range of genres, even those considered to be masculine – these are issues that must still be explored.

In this paper, I have begun to trace how the heroine's role and narrative function may have changed during the silent era. Clearly, the subject of the narrative storyline shifted and, in part, the use of a particular star actor or actress for the film explains this. Why would you put a Douglas Fairbanks in a film where the narrative focus was on the heroine? This raises new questions directly connected to genre development as opposed to narrative development. Why did the genre retain certain characteristics of the serial-queen melodramas and lose others? Why did action-adventure film remain a primarily male-driven genre after the sociological and historical success of suffrage? The answers to these questions will be the subject of future research. This paper is merely the beginning of a larger historical project tracing the development and changes of the 'damsel in distress' from the silent era to the present, which ultimately will address not only the what and how of the changes, but the why as well.

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