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"SHOULD I SURRENDER?" -- WOMEN'S DRINKING AND COURTSHIP IN AMERICAN MOVIES¹

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In the 1961 film Love Come Back, the character played by Rock Hudson masquerades as a meek-mannered virginal inventor who is afraid he can never make a woman happy. Doris Day's character, a career woman without a romantic life who has told us how tremendously susceptible she is to liquor, is touched by this admission. She prepares a candle-lit dinner for two, but is afraid to open any champagne, "seeing how susceptible we both are". Eventually, however, she rises to the challenge of giving the inventor his self-confidence as a man. Leaving Hudson lying in the bedroom, "supposedly too shy to make a pass" (Haskell, 1974:266), she goes to the next room, dons a negligee and marches across the room to open the bottle of champagne and take a swig. On the soundtrack, a syrupy song plays, with the refrain, "Should I surrender?"

Since it was 1961 and it was a Doris Day vehicle, the answer for the moment turned out to be "no" -- a phone-call destroys Hudson's masquerade and saves Day's virginity for another time. The linking of the question of "surrender" with a woman's drinking, however, expressed a longstanding theme in American films. For women in films, drinking is conventionally linked with sexuality -- and often with sexuality outside the official moral code of the time. The drunken woman, and sometimes indeed the woman who has taken only one drink, is defined as sexually available. As portrayed in American movies, for men drinking has a much more equivocal relationship with sexuality. Sometimes, indeed -- as apparently almost always in Finnish movies (Partanen, 1980) -- drinking is contrasted with sexuality, being contained in and helping to define a world of men away from women (Room, 1988).

The gender differentiation in the relation of drinking and sexuality appears clearly in portrayals of alcoholism in American films (Room, 1989; Denzin, 1991). Sexuality is linked with alcoholism for women much more commonly than for men. Days of Wine and Roses (1962) is prototypical in this: the husband's heavy drinking is seen as starting in part from his disgust as having to provide sexual pick-ups for his clients, while the wife's drinking days involve "lots of detours, but I never looked at them". A drinking bout sends him off to the potting shed in search of more booze, but impels her in to make suggestive advances to her father.

But it is not only with reference to alcoholism that the films differentiate between the genders

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on the relation of drinking with sexuality. In the present paper, we focus on the special relation of drinking and sexuality for women in portrayals of courtship, particularly in the crucial period of the 1920s when new norms of courtship and for women's drinking were becoming entrenched.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF COURTSHIP

Courtship has always been a major movie focus (Herd, 1986). For instance, a study of films released in 1920, 1925 and 1930 found that love, marriage and sexuality was the predominant theme and the major goal of the characters in about half of all the films (Dale, 1935:17). The depiction of courtship in the movies to a considerable extent reflects the changes in courtship in American society in the present century. With considerable caution, then, the films can be used as documents of social history. But films also play a teaching role, suggesting and demonstrating possibilities to their audiences. And the terrain of courtship is perhaps where the movies have played this role most directly, playing to audiences in which many were about to embark or were already embarked on courting in their own lives. Certainly, the most constant fear of those who have sought to constrain what the movies can show, or who can see what is shown, has been of a presumed power of the movies to instruct and lead the audience into disapproved patterns of courtship and sexuality.

In the course of the last century, there have been three major distinct codes of courtship in American society. In focusing on the dating complex, the code of the middle period, Beth Bailey's From Front Porch to Back Seat (1988) offers definitions of the time-boundaries of these codes. The 19th-century code of the man calling on the woman at her parent's house begins to be replaced by the new convention of going out for a date after 1900, and the new dating complex becomes fully entrenched by the 1920s. At the other end, the mid-1960s mark the approximate watershed when the conventions of the dating complex break down into the "sexual revolution", chronicled by some of its participants in Lillian Rubin's recent book, Erotic Wars (1990).

The three codes of courtship imposed sharply different requirements on women. Nineteenth-century social calling took place in the woman's parents' home -- in more or less female territory, and chaperoned by the parents. To maintain respectability and her value as an object of courtship, the young woman's main duty was to keep her contacts with men within the boundaries set by social calling and chaperoned occasions. The dating complex posed a far more difficult challenge. Virginity -- not having "gone all the way" prior to marriage -- was still expected of a respectable woman, but her virginity had now to be guarded through courtship in a much more male-oriented territory -- away from the parental home, often in the man's car, and with the man planning and paying the cost of the date. To the dating woman fell not only the duty of self-control, but also the responsibility of resisting and controlling the sexual advances which it was assumed the man would make. As Bailey (1988) shows, the interactional context of these tasks changed at around the time of the Second World War. Before then a woman's popularity had been measured by the number of suitors she had, and the task of maintaining virginity was the task of fending off the advances of dates who might be barely acquaintances. In the postwar period, "going steady" came into fashion, and the woman's task became to fend off the relentless encroachments and importunings of a familiar steady date.

The goal of virginity at marriage, reduced to a technicality by the attrition of steady dating, lost its transcendent value for middle-class young women by the mid-1960s, becoming instead for many an embarrassment to be shed (Rubin, 1990). The eventual goal of courting for many woman -- as for many men -- remained marriage or an equivalent committed relationship, but renunciation or limitation of sexuality was no longer the sole normative path to that goal. Whereas in the dating complex the

question of commitment -- a putatively lifetime commitment -- was the prior battleground where access to sex was fought out, after the 1960s sexuality has often been the battleground or the symbolic arena in which struggles over commitment are conducted. But a normative connection between sexuality and commitment still remains: a woman's respectability and self-respect tend to demand that having sex be defined as part of building a longer-term relationship. With respect to sexuality, the woman's task becomes situational rather than transcendent: it is to maintain control over her sexuality -- and, indeed, over her body -- in any given situation, often in part in the interests of that longer-term aim.

WOMEN'S DRINKING AND CODES OF COURTSHIP: THE MOVIES OF THE LATE 1920S

The movies played a complex role in these changes in courtship patterns. On the one hand, they reflected the ongoing changes. On the other, they frequently led and amplified the changes, by putting idealized versions of new social patterns which had developed among bohemian or elite minorities before the eyes of a wider audience. Since censorship often threatened their ability to do this, by the end of the First World War filmmakers had developed an accommodative formula, as Sklar put it, of "titillating audiences while at the same time reinforcing their conventional standards -- of letting them eat their cake and have it too" (Sklar, 1975:95). The new and potentially shocking behavioral patterns were shown, often very attractively, but they were encased within a disapproving moral framework drawn from the older courtship rules.

In this complex frame, women's drinking played many roles, both as a symbol and in the plot development of films. As a symbol, drinking by a woman had an unequalled power in the 1920s. At the turn of the century, abstinence and indeed a militant identification with temperance had been very much identified with female middle-class respectability. To be seen drinking in public, in fact, was a guarantee of disreputability (Powers, 1991). In this framing, portraying a woman with drink in hand was often used as a code of sexual experience and availability. Thus that one sister drinks and the other doesn't -- though they both work in a nightclub -- is a major initial character differentiation of the bad sister from the good in *After Midnight* (1927). Conversely, in *Beggars of Life* (1928) an orphan girl's disguise as a boy tramp is revealed, putting her at risk of gang rape, when she maintains her virtue by refusing the offer of a drink in a hobo jungle.

By the late 1920s, ranged against the idea of drinking as emblematic of a woman's downfall was the new symbolism of drinking as cosmopolitan, and of drinking together as part of the new ideals of going out on dates and of a companionate relationship and eventual marriage. Drinking in fact had become one of the "symbols of liberation" for college women of the 1920s (Fass, 1977), and films of the late 1920s and early 1930s reveled in showing a fantasyland of gilded youth and drinking parties. The particular focus on women's drinking in the late 1920s (Room, 1988) had an edge of titillation, appealing at the same time both to the newer symbolism of liberation and the older frame in which this behavior was shocking. By the 1930s, the shock had worn off, and a woman's drinking was a more matter-of-fact symbol of modernity.

Cross-cutting the varying symbolism of women's drinking was its role in plot development. While the symbolism varied as courting codes changed, the role of alcohol as a motivator of behavior and of plot stayed more constant. The "disinhibition theory" of alcohol's action (Pernanen, 1978) -- the idea that alcohol depressed the higher centers of the mind and let loose the animal beneath -- which had been firmly established in the 19th-century temperance era (Levine, 1983), proved to be a durable plot device, providing motivation, attribution and excuse for otherwise inexplicable behavior, and in particular for transgressions of conventional behavioral norms. For women, the actions thus explained

almost always had to do with disapproved sexuality.

Where earlier a woman's drinking had been a symbol of her fallen status, in the new era of the 1920s the drink in hand was often a signal that she was about to fall. In the Road to Ruin (1928), a cautionary tale introduced by an earnest police chief, the heroine's downward path, ending in an assignation with her father and an abortion-related death, starts with a single drink, after which (as we see through her eyes) the room immediately goes out of focus. When the good sister in After Midnight (1927), disappointed in love, accompanies the bad sister to a party and takes a drink, she immediately becomes the frenetic and grandiloquent life of the party; she is only saved from the leering men by determined action on the part of her shocked and remorseful sister. In Our Modern Maidens (1929), the heroine's best friend Kentucky becomes pregnant by the heroine's fiance Gil, impelling the heroine self-sacrificingly to annul her marriage to Gil. The sexual action from which this starts occurs at a glamorous waterside party, complete with gondolas and gondoliers. Kentucky and Gil end up in the same gondola sipping champagne: "Let's drink -- to romance". Kentucky sips demurely and tentatively, but immediately she looks spaced-out and starts to cuddle up to Gil: "Gil, this is like all the books I've read -- so mysterious and romantic". At her suggestion, they go ashore on an island; she runs off through the long grass, and the camera, in soft focus, shows him following and eventually catching up; they fall in each others' arms.

Just as many films of the late 1920s and 1930s moved to reverse the old symbolism of drinking as a badge of dishonor, there were some attempts in films of this period to reverse the idea that drinking was a cause of sexual degradation. In The Last Flight (1931), a low budget semi-parody of The Sun Also Rises, four American flyers out on a postwar spree join forces with an American woman who they encounter holding a champagne glass in a high-class bistro. No sexual connotation surrounds her drinking, and it is not the drunken flyers but rather a sober foreign correspondent, berating the flyers on their drinking, who paws her objectionably in a dance-hall and tries to rape her on a train.

But more commonly, the varied symbolism and roles of alcohol existed side-by-side, often in the same film. Our Dancing Daughters (1928), a Joan Crawford vehicle which attracted a crowd of hundreds of girls and young women when it opened in New York, exemplifies the mixed messages that could result. Three alternative models of courtship behavior and drinking are presented by the heroine and her two woman friends. One friend presents herself as abstemious but actually drinks heavily in secret. Coached by her single mother, she maintains her virginity not out of any intrinsic moral sense but in the interest of marriage to a rich man. Eventually, after successfully winning the man both she and the heroine were interested in, she dies in a drunken fall down a staircase. The second friend is strictly controlled by her parents, who forbid her even to smoke. Rebellious, she manages to sleep with the man she loves. Although they then marry, her fall from grace becomes a continuing problem when her husband uses it as a source of recrimination.

In contrast, the relationship between the Joan Crawford character and her parents is presented as relaxed. They and she share a champagne toast, and joke about not waiting up for each other. Her drinking is presented as inconsequential, as an open and incidental part of a lifestyle of authenticity, breeziness and some flamboyance. She is flirtatious, but guards her virginity; "I'm just dying for ..." she begins the sentence as the hero moves in for a kiss, but "a cigarette", she finishes it, pushing him back. In the end, a decent interval of two years after the first wife's drunken death-fall, she gets her man.

While the message of the film about styles of courtship and parenting was thus clear, the message about drinking was much less so. The symbolism of a drink in a woman's hand varies from one character to another, as does the consequentiality of the drinking. Like oil and water, older and

newer definitions of a young woman's drinking, and its relationship to the threat of sexuality, coexist in the movie in an unblended mixture.

REPLACEMENT OR ACCRETION?

Writing of the changes in gender roles in the 1970s, Lillian Rubin (1983:3) remarks that change comes slowly, meeting enormous resistance both inside us and in the system of social institutions that supports our society's mandates about femininity and masculinity -- about how a good woman lives, how a good man behaves. . . . Indeed, always, no matter how revolutionary a period of change may seem on the surface, the old myths continue to whisper to us. Consciously derogated, unconsciously avoided and denied, they continue to speak with a power and persistence that will not be dismissed.

Though patterns of courtship and norms on women's drinking may be neatly periodized in overarching accounts of the twentieth century, the evidence from films suggests that in detail the history is rather messier, that codes of behavior and theories of motivation from different eras can coexist side by side, often without really jarring the viewer. With respect to women's drinking, even the temperance-era code of drinking as a sign of disreputability persisted past the Second World War, though usually tagged as old-fashioned. We can see it in operation in Hot Spell (1958), as a small-town housewife played by Shirley Booth struggles to keep her husband from leaving for a younger woman. Her slightly more sophisticated neighbor tries to tutor her in offering effective competition, by teaching her how to smoke a cigarette and to drink liquor. But Booth is a poor student, saying, "Oh, I can't do that!" Taking a cue from method acting, the neighbor advises, "Think of something real low", but Booth just giggles. "Say, 'How about a belt?'" , prompts the neighbor; "Where did you learn these things?", is Booth's slightly shocked reply.

The idea that getting a woman to drink will make her more sexually available maintains a strong presence in the culture (see Leigh, 1990) and in the movies, although it is something to be joked about in the recent film, Cross My Heart, which chronicles the mishaps of a man and woman on their way to bed on their third date (see Trocki and Thompson, 1993).

But the alternate ideal of a woman's drinking as inconsequential, detached from sexuality, is also there in the movies. In Baby It's You (1983), a film about a woman's coming of age in the mid-1960s, we are shown her first drink and her first drunken episode (out on a double date, she throws up at the diner), but there is no connection between these and her first sexual experience. For most of the recent film Thelma and Louise (1991), Thelma's constant drinking, even while driving, is shown as inconsequential and disconnected from sexuality.

But an alternative code shapes the early turning-point of Thelma and Louise. The man who attempts to rape Thelma after buying her drinks is presented as acting in terms of the older code which defines a drinking woman as sexually available. Furthermore, that she has been drinking tends to lighten the moral onus on Louise for shooting the man dead after he verbally abuses them.

From the evidence of the movies, it seems, then, as if an audience can countenance quite different and often contradictory models of the effects of drinking on behavior. We have found in American films a range of meanings and implications of a woman's drinking for her sexuality. These meanings and implications arise out of particular positions in the radically different codes of courtship and cultural positions of drinking which have held sway in the course of the 20th century. But it seems as if a particular code, however dominant, does not erase the patterns of an earlier code. Instead, elements of the codes persist side by side, to be called forth when the circumstances warrant. It is a

task for future investigation to pin down when and under what circumstances the invocation of a particular code is thought to be warranted.

As Thelma and Louise and current news reports remind us, however, the consequences of the meeting of discordant models of women's drinking and sexuality can be truly tragic. In my view, two elements in particular in the current uneasy mix of models deserve sustained attack. One is the strong tendency in the current culture, as demonstrated by Aramburu and Leigh (1991), for a victim's drunkenness to be viewed as increasing the victim's culpability for aggression against him or her. The other, related, element is the persistence of rationalizations that a drunken woman is fair game for male sexual aggression.

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