

Excavating forgotten critics from minor fictions: the film *Temptation* (1946)

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. I propose that the film *Temptation*, from 1946, presents us with a person, or type of person, who was once observed: she is very involved in evaluating the significance of highly specialist inquiries, in this case Egyptology, and evaluating borderline cases of literature, regarding which it is difficult to assess their long-term value. The film assists with addressing how *The Golden Bough* was actually received. An appendix proposes that the film is of interest to Derrideans.

Draft version: Version 1 (30th October 2022).

With various grades of heiress

Go various kinds of mess?

The previous Saturday evening and Sunday morning, I went to a university library and I watched a film which was freely available online, though I am not sure for how long. It is classified as film noir, but it is not a famous one; the famous film noirs I watched just over a decade ago are gone. Some days later I watched it again, as part of preparing this paper. The film is not highly rated, probably deservedly. The early scenes are good, in my opinion, but when the villain enters and fine plotting takes over, around one third of the way through, there is soon some ignorance of publicly available information within the fictional world (2022: 48min) and sustained ignorance on this matter is hard to believe and ruins the film, I think. Why take interest in it today then?

My intuition is that its leading character is based on an actual person, or type of person, once observed. The type would have been commenting on various works of history, anthropology, philosophy, and literature, but their views are difficult to find today. Though the film was made in 1946, the opening scene is set in 1900 and much of it is the leading character's recollection of what earlier happened. The (painted?) trees in the background when she narrates prompted me to recall a famous work of Victorian anthropology and its accompanying image (e.g. 2022: 9min, 26min), which I think is no accident.¹ Perhaps, like me (Edward 2022), the filmmakers, and the writers further in the background, thought there were sure to be dismissive readers of this work in the nineteenth century amongst wider audiences. My purpose below is to present more about this character, this critic – forgive the amateur film studies effort.

In the film, she is a beautiful divorced American heiress, short of money, who marries an Egyptologist. Her reading material must be noted here. She is an ardent consumer of detective stories (2022: 4min). She finds Egyptology boring (2022: 15min), but is prepared to feign interest if it serves an end of hers, such as marrying the Egyptologist. Prior to marriage, she passes judgment on a well-known writer of her time, declaring of George Bernard Shaw that his is a name destined to be forgotten (2022: 17min).² Sitting at a table later with some scholars, she declares her preference for contemporary scandals over ancient ones. And unable to end an affair she is having, which appears in a newspaper, she vividly describes it as a bestselling novel which she cannot put down. Towards the end of the film (2022: 93min), she tells a story which I knew earlier from Max Beerbohm (1897).³

The critic I “extract” from this film has the following qualities:

¹ Narrated to a materialist doctor, probably himself a critic. The image is before the dedication in the 1894 edition.

² She talks as if she has never read him, asking “What is the name of that writer he is always talking about?” he being the Egyptologist she is seeking to marry. But I take that to be an act, from the judgment she soon delivers on the writer's future prospects. I heard the name myself on a few occasions late in the last decade!

³ What about the Greek myth which the Beerbohm text contains? Did he invent that?

- (a) She is involved in judging the appeal of specialist works in academic research to wider audiences, despite presenting herself as unscholarly.
- (b) Like a Nobel prize committee, she is also involved with the judgment of literary cases whose long-term value is difficult to assess, such as a George Bernard Shaw. Her assessment method appears to be: the author must appeal to me in my lazier moods.
- (c) She exhibits some knowledge of these specialist works and these difficult cases and also detective novels, “trashy” bestsellers and tabloid celebrity gossip, but there is no reference to renowned mainstream literary authors who are generally believed to have endurance value. Temporally, she is in a momentous period of mainstream literature; the impact must have been felt throughout “cultured” circles but where are the big names: Jane Austen or Dickens or the Brontë sisters or, in her life, Henry James? By her confident judgment “A name destined to be forgotten” she presumably knows of these as a reliable alternative, but her world is one in which the less-likely-to-be-forgotten are never named. The only classic she refers to is *The Arabian Nights*.
- (d) She is around writers and scholars, but her assessments are mostly or all not in writing.

Apart from that it assists with my puzzle about earlier dismissive readers, I find the film interesting today, despite its grave plot deficiencies, because it captures this character who moves from one extreme, tabloid celebrity gossip and trashy romance, to the other – forgotten kings of Egyptology, George Bernard Shaw, and Max Beerbohm references – while avoiding the big literary names. Can one write a better film for such a character, who prefers night to day, for its nightwatchmen, its astronomers, and its lovers (2022: 44min), and the pound sterling to the dollar? I suppose so.

Perhaps I have made too much of the absence of heavyweight names in her conversation,

but her world of references reminds me of teaching a course in philosophy in which students encounter various little known philosophers and ask questions such as “Where’s Plato?” The course giver is not just well-versed in the contemporary world of his discipline, he is also an avid football fan; but of Plato there is no sign of knowledge! Economics too must be like that for some students. A set of references with this kind of hole is a real phenomenon, I think, and it is an interesting question why.

I believe one can encounter a person equally an heiress, or heir, and equally strategic and somehow in the academic world but their instinct is to generally avoid the little-known highbrow material the character filmed is perpetually involved with. Are there films about this other type and their preferences? (“Yes, but they are usually documentaries and they are not the main character.”)

Appendix: for Derrideans

The film may be of interest to Derrideans (or Derridians), with its theme of speech versus writing (Derrida 1977). Early on in her extramarital affair, the main character seeks to avoid the mistake of the previous woman, or girl, and not write letters to her lover and she also dismisses the seduction lines used on her as familiar text (2022: 41min). But she ends up drawn into the world of writing, soon enough asking, “Why don’t you answer my letters?” (2022: 51min).

References

Beerbohm, M. 1897. *The Happy Hypocrite. A Fairy Tale for Tired Men.* Available at:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36497/36497-h/36497-h.htm>

Chris T. 2022. *Temptation* (1946). Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8yruBUND0Y>

Derrida, J. 1977 (originally 1972). Signature Event Context. *Glyph* 1: 172-197.

Edward, T.R. 2022. Why was *The Golden Bough* so popular? Available at:

<https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWWWT>

Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The golden bough. A study in comparative religion. Volume 1*. New York: Macmillan and Company.