

The Apollonian

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies
Open-access | Peer-reviewed

Vol 3, Issues 1&2 (March-June 2016)

Submission details and instructions for authors: <http://theapollonian.in/index.php/submission-guidelines/>

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To cite this article: Shapiro, Bruce G. "Underscoring *The Broadway Melody* 1929: a Passing Drama of Lesbian Exclusion." *The Apollonian* 3:1-2 (March-June 2016): 43-52.

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The Apollonian

ISSN 2393-9001

<http://www.theapollonian.in/>



Underscoring *The Broadway Melody* 1929: a Passing Drama of Lesbian Exclusion

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The paper is an analysis of the film *The Broadway Melody* (1929). The focus of the analysis is on the lesbian narrative that underscores the heterosexual narrative. The essay begins by setting the context for the hidden lesbian narrative in *The Oresteia*. It then proceeds to set the context of the film within the 1920s Machine Age and Jazz Age, comparing it to other dramatic narratives of the period that also involve hidden lesbian narratives. The paper examines how the hidden narrative and the ostensive heterosexual narrative relate to develop the film's powerful message. The analysis also takes into account the period style of the acting in the film and explains how it fits the storylines. The essay concludes with an understanding of tragedy in the context of the film.

Keywords: *The Broadway Melody*, lesbian narrative, film analysis, drama, tragedy

In Aeschylus's classic trilogy, *The Oresteia* (458 BC), Clytemnestra lures her husband, Agamemnon, to his death by persuading him to tread upon a purple cloth she has laid down for his return. To avenge his father's murder, Orestes kills his mother, Clytemnestra. At his trial before the androgynous Goddess Athena and the ominous Furies, the ancient gods of revenge, sue for the dead matriarch, Clytemnestra. When the jury finds Orestes innocent, Athena placates the blood-thirsty Furies' ire by persuading them to become the Eumenides, new gods with power over human fertility. Silently led by a group of women and girls, the Eumenides, donning purple robes, descend into a cavern. Hidden from society, the Eumenides' supplicants worship them as the "daughters of darkness."

Their origins in *The Oresteia* suggest that, although the Eumenides were not overtly or even necessarily sexual, they were nonetheless lesbian deities tacitly worshipped by women while dreaded and repressed by the Athenian patriarchy. This classical motif also explains how lesbians were first literally and figuratively sent underground, hidden from view, and why storytellers have, therefore, symbolically encoded lesbianism's muted presence underneath heterosexual narratives.

Throughout history, patriarchy has excluded lesbians as principal characters in the theatre. However, during the 1920s – coined as either the Machine Age or the Jazz Age – the newly popular psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis, which proclaimed homosexuality to be both an illness and an aberration, prompted the lesbian character's brief but defiant reemergence on Broadway. Culminating in 1928, the repressive consequences of this lesbian revival were to last for decades. Freud's theory established the notion that heterosexuality was the norm against which psychiatry was to judge other sexual orientations. Therefore, homosexuality was both abnormal, the result of some crisis in a child's early upbringing. Hence, many of those "afflicted" came to believe their condition was treatable by psychoanalysis. Ellis postulated the theory of congenital sexual inversion. Homosexuality was an abnormality with which an invert was born. Thus, unlike Freud's theory, in which homosexuals could be called deviants whose life experiences had perverted them from the norm, Ellis determined homosexuality was a faultless biological condition.

The suggested scientific biases of both Freud's and Ellis's theories characterised them as Machine Age orientations, somewhat lacking in affective attributes. One of the most important issues of the Machine Age was the preservation of the family, an entirely patriarchal concern. The self-avowed "lesbian basher," Floyd Dell's book, *Love in the Machine Age* (1930), popularised Freud's theories in order to preach that the Modern Woman was seriously threatening heterosexuality and the patriarchy. Floyd wrote that women were under a "welter of neuroticism," that heterosexuality represented mental hygiene, and that to grow up meant to become a heterosexual, "the full and passionate love of the other sex [being] the normal goal of youth."

The most famous book about lesbian life which adopted the Ellis viewpoint was "John" Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), for which Ellis wrote a brief foreword. The book was banned in England, where it went on trial as obscene. The central character of Hall's story is Stephen Gordon, a lesbian who essentially lives as a man, dressing as a man, and so forth. This book gave rise (as did Hall's own life) to the mythic mannish woman by establishing a complete picture of the androgynous lesbian.

On the other hand, although it did not ostensibly advocate for homosexuality as an alternative, perfectly normal lifestyle or sexual orientation, the naturally intuitive non-scientific outlook of the Jazz Age was highly affective. This Jazz Age humanism accounts for not only its tragic dimension but also its impact on the drama of the period. Certainly, other factors were also in play socially in the 1920s, not least of all the end of World War I. However, the tacit competition between the Machine Age and Jazz Age orientations had the greatest impact on the emergence of lesbian stories on Broadway.

When an English version of Sholem Asch's play *God of Vengeance* finally opened on Broadway after playing on New York's Yiddish stage for ten years it created a short-lived storm of controversy. A passionate realistic drama about one man's cataclysm of religious faith, *God of Vengeance* is also sexually frank and homosexually explicit. Yankel, a Jewish man, runs a brothel with his wife, a former prostitute. As an act of penance, Yankel orders a Torah scroll for his chaste daughter, Rivkele's dowry. But before her match to the rabbi's son can be certified, Rivkele makes love to and then runs away with her lesbian lover, Manke, a prostitute from the brothel.

Soon after its first English performance, the producer and cast of *God of Vengeance* were arrested for putting on an obscene and immoral play. The production was closed and both the leading actor and the producer, Henry Weinberger, were convicted and fined \$200. Mr. Weinberger stressed that the case was "of national importance ... the first of its kind," but no other Broadway producers came to the play's defence. Furthermore, newspaper accounts of the event and the trial avoided any reference to lesbianism. Thus, it was never determined publicly or otherwise what precisely made *God of Vengeance* obscene or immoral; it simply was.

The trend continued in 1926 with Edouard Bourdet's psychological drama, *The Captive*. The central character, Jacques, agrees to play the role of fiancé and then husband to Irene, the woman he truly loves; but Irene cannot love Jacques in return because she is struggling with a secret compulsion, her lesbian identity. Jacques is defeated "in the face of a secret alliance of two beings who understand one another because they're of the same sex because they're from a different planet than he, the stranger, the enemy!"

The Captive's Lesbian storyline actually focused on how men dealt with finding themselves caught in a secret relationship between two women. However, Irene's lesbian lover never physically appears in the play. Instead, at the beginning and end of the drama, the lesbian is symbolised by "a large bunch of violets." These violets and the play's sensational publication in lavender covers restored to public consciousness the colour purple as a symbol of lesbianism.

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The Captive ran for four controversial months on Broadway before it was raided by the police; the company (including star Basil Rathbone) was arrested. The literary merits of the play were conceded by many; but, the legal authorities nevertheless deemed it an immoral and dangerous influence, because police reports indicated that women and unescorted girls sitting in groups of twos and threes accounted for over half the audience.

Likewise, Mae West and company were arrested that same year for the play *Sex*, and her play *The Drag* about homosexuality was never produced. Finally, in April 1927, a New York state legislature enacted a law declaring it a misdemeanour to present any work “depicting or dealing with, the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion.” That law, effectively exiling lesbian characters from Broadway, remained unchanged for 40 years.

Thus, by 1928, the only way to produce a drama with a lesbian narrative was to hide it underneath or within a heterosexual narrative. There it might either pass unnoticed by those with no symbolic consciousness of the hidden narrative’s iconicity or be conveniently overlooked by those who choose to maintain a narrowly repressed or strictly patriarchal outlook on love and relationships. However meaningful or even personally satisfying such a strategy may have been to those involved at the time, the tragedy of this approach is that the underlying truth of these dramas will inevitably disappear over time, as the allusions and symbolism drop out of public consciousness.

A case in point is Sophie Treadwell’s 1928 crime melodrama, *Machinal*. Like Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, *Machinal* adopts a narrative of damnation. Nevertheless, by that time a story sympathetic to a lesbian’s plight, even if she is executed as a murderer, could ever have been produced on Broadway. Although the play’s hidden lesbian narrative is as obvious as is its titular allusion to the Machine Age, contemporary audiences now see it as an anti-patriarchal “feminist” polemic rather than a lesbian tragedy.

Treadwell, a newspaper reporter, ostensibly drew inspiration for *Machinal* from the Ruth Snyder-Judd Gray heterosexual murder case of 1927-28 in which Ruth Snyder and her lover, corset salesman Judd Gray, murdered Snyder’s husband. Gray confessed to the killing, claiming Snyder forced him to it. But Snyder never confessed, claiming she even tried to stop Gray. They were tried together, convicted, and sent to the electric chair.

Although unacknowledged by Treadwell, the papers also carried the story of the Velma West murder case concurrently with the Snyder-Gray murder. Apparently, Velma West came home one evening and told her husband she wanted to go to a bridge game. He said no, so she took a hammer and hit him over the head with it

until he was dead. Then she went and played bridge. The day after Ruth Snyder's execution the papers reported that, under pressure from an outside source, Velma West plead guilty to second-degree murder in order to prevent the prosecution from revealing in court Ms. West's "attachment for another woman."

The proximity of the Synder-Gray and Velma West murder cases suggests that *Machinal* borrows from both stories. Thus, it is actually a lesbian drama couched in a heterosexual narrative. In addition, Lillian Faderman's article, "Love Between Women in 1928," explains how that year was the apogee of lesbian fiction. Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* appeared that year and like that novel, *Machinal* treated her veiled lesbian heroine as "rather an outcast, a neurotic, a peculiarity. . . ."

Machinal is filled with lesbian symbolism. But the most apparent of these symbols, besides the moon, is the kiss, which the heroine experiences with her secret lover. According to C. Stimpson's article "The Lesbian Novel," lesbian writers who were protective of their experience, often used codes, particularly within heterosexual narratives, to "encrypt" their meanings. The kiss is "a staple of lesbian fiction [having] vast metonymic responsibilities."

Coming almost as an afterthought at the end of the 1920s, MGM's first sound movie musical, the all singing, all dancing, all talking sensation, *The Broadway Melody* (1929) underscores its ostensibly heterosexual narrative with the sublimated story of a lesbian whose dream of stardom on Broadway is dashed by the prevailing forces of patriarchal subjugation. In effect, the heroine's tragic conflict resides in the narrative competition between heterosexual melodrama and lesbian tragedy.

The film won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1928-29, and Bessie Love was nominated for Best Actress for her emotionally wrenching portrayal of Hank Mahoney, the vaudeville hooper with her heart set on Broadway success. Hank's hopes perish when she saves her voluptuous sister-act partner, Queenie, from the clutches of a well-to-do would-be rapist, knowing it means she will have to lose Queenie instead to Eddie, the trusted Broadway song-and-dance man Hank had thought she was going to marry. In the end, exiled once again to vaudeville, with a tear rolling from her eye, Hank vows her return to Broadway.

Although film historians still fail to acknowledge the lesbian narrative in *The Broadway Melody*, it actually seems as obvious today as its heterosexual narrative seems dated. Naturally, in its own time, the heterosexual story was the only acknowledged narrative in the film and even that was not much appreciated by critics of the day. For example, in his prim *New York Times's* reviews, Mordaunt Hall concerns himself more with the language than the narrative, as if the former were the latter: "[I]t is questionable whether it would not have been wiser to leave

some of the voices to the imagination, or, at least to have refrained from having a pretty girl volleying slang at her colleagues.” “Under the paradoxical title of ‘The Broadway Melody,’ ...the participants appear in various stages of dishabille, ever doing obeisance to the ‘Great gawd’ slang ... If you could only take cotton wool and stuff your ears to avoid hearing some of the rasping lines, this show might prove a moderately good diversion.”

Film historians, such as, James Berardinelli, whose online essay shows little comprehension of the plot, also tend to excuse what they judge to be the film’s dramatic shortcomings in order to focus on its technical achievements:

The initial feature-length, full sound musical ... benefited from being first and, as such, some of its flaws – which should have been evident even at the time of its release, 1929 – were easily overlooked.... Anyone approaching it today will find it horribly dated, badly produced, and filled with uninspired musical numbers and over-the-top performances.

Unquestionably, but just as obviously, *The Broadway Melody* is technically historic. However, its technical novelty is not what makes it the least bit important. In fact, when looked at from the dramatic perspective, the film’s complex and richly unified dramatic narrative renders its technical achievements merely incidental.

The lyrics of the opening number, “Broadway Melody” clearly foreshadow the theme of the drama. Broadway is not interested in serious issues or sad feelings. It is not interested in depression or hardship. It is affectively distant. It requires clowning not frowning. Broadway always wears a smile. These classical oppositions, usually given equal value in the masks of tragedy and comedy, describe Hank and Queenie even before the audience meets them. As the drama unfolds, it becomes obvious that Hank wears the frown. She’s worried, she’s distressed, and ultimately suffers a terrible heart-wrenching anguish.

On the other hand, despite fearful apprehension, Queenie wears the smile of a dim-witted blond. Hank even acknowledges Queenie’s lack of insight in their very first scene together when she says, “Baby, they were plenty smart when they made you beautiful.”

The first scene also definitively establishes the lesbian narrative with the quintessential kiss. Hugging one another like two lovers in a Tamara Lempicka painting, Hank and Queenie sit staring out the window. Hank reminisces about the hardships they’ve endured out on the road, then tells Queenie, “Ah, honey, I wouldn’t steer you wrong,” whereupon she kisses Queenie on the lips.

As if that were not enough to establish the nature of their relationship, the girls

proceed to get undressed, preparing to take a bath together. The purpose of the scene is not so much to titillate, as to display a comparison between the ladies undergarments. Hank wears what appear to be men's style boxer shorts while Queenie wears a thoroughly feminine silk chemise.

Hank and Queenie have been on the vaudeville circuit doing a "sister act," the Mahoney Sisters, two girls who sing and dance. Such acts were common on the circuit, and many of the partnerships involved real sisters. On the other hand, the two girls were just as often not actually sisters. Although Hank and Queenie present themselves as such, the difference in their appearance is so striking and plays such an important role in the story, that it's unbelievable to presume they are actual sisters. Nevertheless, Hank compares their act to the famous real-life Duncan Sisters in order to support the heterosexual narrative and cast doubt on any suggestion that she and Queenie might actually be lovers.

However, when Eddie arrives and first sees Queenie, it's obvious she and Hank are not really sisters. To begin with, Hank introduces her to Eddie, saying, "That's my Queenie," followed by a short sequence of images that establishes the love-at-first-sight romance between Eddie and Queenie that will form the basis for the rest of the plot. Finally, a bit of contrived expositional dialogue weakly establishes their past relationship.

Although Eddie almost immediately proposes to Hank—without bothering to present her a ring—she puts him off, claiming she wants to establish herself on Broadway first. However, later in the story, Hank purchases Queenie an engagement ring for the latter's birthday. Unfortunately, by that time Queenie has already taken a path that will end in their separation.

The most archetypal feature of the heterosexual story is Queenie's decision to spare Hank's feelings by denying her own love for Eddie. To facilitate her plan, she accepts the rakish advances of the greasy looking Jock, whose lecherous interest in her is obvious to everyone. She even accepts Jock's more binding diamond bracelet over Hank's engagement ring. However, what makes this set of circumstances unique is how the heterosexual crisis between Queenie and Eddie directly forces the crisis of lesbian romance between Queenie and Hank, to which neither of them can openly admit.

Because none of the characters is capable or brave enough openly to express their true feelings, Queenie finds herself forced into accepting Jock's den of debauchery, the ultimate patriarchal sacrifice. When the moment of recognition comes for Hank, however, she gathers her strength and confronts Eddie, forcing him to confess his feelings for Queenie. She realises at the film's climax that the man who supposedly loves her is going to take from her the woman she loves. Hank,

thereby forges an alliance between the lesbian and heterosexual stories in order to save Queenie, the object of both her and Eddie's affections.

Hank heroically forces the resolution to the heterosexual conflict of the story by calling Eddie "yellow" and shaming him into the action of saving Queenie that she cannot take. By contrast, Hank's bravery propels the climax of the tragic lesbian narrative, as she suffers the full force disclosure and irony. In a final act of confession, she looks at the two photographs of Queenie and Eddie and then proceeds to wipe the make-up off her face, revealing her true self to herself. She knows at that moment that her dream is over. She'll never be on Broadway without a husband to give her heterosexual legitimacy. So she accepts 30 weeks back out on the road.

To denigrate the complex intermingling of affective issues the film at this point depicts by calling it "bad acting and pedestrian directing" is to miss the point of film criticism altogether. The filmmaking is obviously too finely pointed for pedestrian critical approaches to apprehend.

By contrast, the heterosexual climax of the play – when Eddie manages to rescue Queenie from Jock's clutches, just in a nick of time – receives comic treatment; it is really an epilogue masquerading as the denouement.

The final resolution of the film is more striking when considered in the light of its lesbian narrative. Upon returning from their honeymoon, Eddie and Queenie insist that Hank will come and live with them on Long Island, just as soon as Hank finishes her 30 weeks on the road. Hank knows different, however. As Uncle Jed, the agent says, "Hank, you're just a born trouper." And when Hank says good-bye, her feelings convey a sense of finality.

Left alone together, Eddie must console Queenie, and they assume very nearly the same pose Hank and Queenie had taken at the start of the story. Only this time, instead of Hank bolstering Queenie's confidence and diminishing her fears, Eddie tries to console her, rather selfishly defending their choices as a kind of inevitability: "Don't cry, honey. People can't help falling in love. It comes to you no matter what you do." The look on Queenie's face suggests that she may be thinking not of Eddie at that moment but rather of Hank, with whom she might really have been in love all along.

At the same time, Eddie never shows any understanding of the love that Hank and Queenie shared. He believes himself to be the hero of the story. He got what he wanted, after all, and displays the kind of shallow understanding that characterises heterosexual love when it is based upon nothing more than sensual attraction. The kiss he shares with Queenie at the end of the scene feels forced, hollow, the kind of kiss one might mistake for bad acting.

That the drama does not end with Queenie and Eddie but rather with Hank, who forces the audience to reflect not so much on the melodramatic triumph of romantic love but on the tragic consequences of impossible love, the kind of love society can neither acknowledge nor permit. Ironically, Eddie has already expressed these very sentiments to Queenie, "People can't help falling in love. It comes to you no matter what you do." Such was Hank's love for Queenie, the love to which she has been forced by circumstances to say goodbye.

Cast out of the bright lights of Broadway into the darkness of mid-America, Hank has little choice but to vow her return or else she will merely disappear. Thus, *The Broadway Melody* of 1929 is really a reflection of the lesbian character's brief return to the drama of the 1920s, a return that ended in 1927 just as it had 2400 years before in *The Oresteia*, with the lesbian again going underground, leaving only her tacitly encoded presence in the dramas of her times.

The Broadway Melody's greatest achievements were not its technical accomplishments. It did not win the Academy Award for Best Picture because it was a recognised milestone in the history of the cinema. It more likely won that prize because the members of the academy at the time recognised its hidden narrative as a statement about sexual freedom and liberation from the constraints of a patriarchal society. The voted for what they believed in, which is how they continue to vote in the present age.

Today, with the debate over same-sex marriage taking place around the world, *The Broadway Melody* assumes a renewed relevance. It begs the question, why would same sex relationships want to assume the formality of marriage, when that institution is nothing more than the invention of patriarchal repression? The answer cannot be for the sake of equality with heterosexual couples because marriage on its own actually sacrifices the truth of that concept.

The answer more certainly lies in one of the most revealing moments of the film, a moment when alone in her room spiritual faith takes hold of Hank and she prays for Queenie's safety. The truth of prayer may often nurture a cynical reality, that the blessings of the spirit often require sacrifice because prayer tacitly represents the pride that is the source of modern tragedy. Thus, to gain what she most desires, Hank secretly understands that she must first be willing to give herself up. Caught by Eddie in the act of making this sacrifice, she looks at him and suddenly realises, "I lost something." Then she runs into his arms, stating ironically, "Oh, Eddie, at least I've still got you."

It fact, it isn't Eddie or Queenie that she must give up. Rather, it is her dream, her desire to be under the lights of Broadway and escape forever from the dark cavern of loneliness and exclusion. The tragedy of *The Broadway Melody*, however,

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is the knowledge, the revelation that the real world is one of loneliness and exclusion. That's what makes us troopers, and "trouperers are all tramps. Here today gone tomorrow. No home, no nothing." That's what makes us equal.

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