

## Stella's Taste: Reading Stella Dallas



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IT IS, AS I HAVE SAID, only with this final installment or experiment in broaching the characterization of a public genre of film melodrama—one with intellectual properties of interest to me in thinking, for example, about philosophical skepticism in relation to gender difference, and in questioning the idea of film, especially the Hollywood film, as a homogeneous, and transparently popular art—that I explicitly and somewhat consecutively join issue with an instance of thematically feminist writing on film, Linda Williams's “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama.”<sup>1</sup> And, as I also said, it is the film *Stella Dallas* itself, so to speak, that made further postponement, from my side of things, more impertinent than continuing to go on waiting (I'm not sure for what better preparation, or for what reassuring invitation). A presiding question of the texts I have produced on the particular film comedies and melodramas I have been moved to read through is whether a male voice, constructed out of a history such as mine, is well taken into a conversation with women on the issues I find raised in such films. But this question is a way precisely of articulating the subject of *Stella Dallas*.

Like the women in the companion members of this film's genre of melodrama, its featured woman's subjectivity is manifested by her isolation (“unknownness”). (This condition is not absent from remarriage comedy, but there the woman's subjectivity is equally manifested by circumstances in which she can exercise her capacity for play [in private], and sometimes her capacity for work [in

public].) The women whose story is sought in these narratives is at some stage shown to be at a loss—not simply over the conflicting desires or demands between, as it is put, being a mother and being a woman, but over questions of what a mother does (about which Charlotte Vale is most explicit: “If that’s what motherhood is, I want none of it!”) and what a woman is (when the man asks Charlotte, “Is it Miss or Mrs.?” she replies, “It’s Aunt”), about what a mother has to teach, what a woman has to learn, whether her talent is for work or rather for the appreciation of work, whether romance is agreeable or marriage is refusable, how far idiosyncrasy is manageable. In finding herself, or finding somewhere to turn, she is helped by certain women; but the world of women, as it stands, is shown here not in general to hold a sufficient answer for her, and no man she knows can name it. For a man (like me) even to notice this lack of, or in, the men available to this woman, is something that periodically feels impertinent to me, ignorantly expansive, something rather going beyond the affront that criticism inherently courts. But it is internal to the idea of a genre that I am working with that a subject deemed significant for one member must be found significant—or its absence compensated for—in each of the others. So when I notice that the male’s explicit limitation in *Stella* is manifested as perceptual incompetence, in one man’s affable crudeness and in another man’s dulled conventionality, I have to go on to notice that in *Letter* it is manifested as a man’s virtuosic self-absorption and compulsive seductiveness, and in *Now, Voyager* as his courteous but advancing irrelevance, and in *Gaslight* as old-fashioned, fixated menace.

The reading I propose of *Stella Dallas* is one I began preparing in the fall of 1983 and presented in my lecture class on film in the spring of 1984. At that time William Rothman had just published a long review essay on the film in which he concentrates on its concluding sequence and contests the apparently uncontested opinion that Stella—in her concluding, isolating departure from the viewing of her daughter’s wedding—is, let’s say, vacating her existence in favor of her daughter’s. I agreed with Rothman’s resistance to such a perception of Stella, if not with his account of her prior obliviousness of the effect of her existence, hence of the transformations required to reach the concluding state in which we see her. This resistance and consequent transformations fit the mood in which I was then working out readings of *Now, Voyager*

and of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* for the same course of lectures.

The essay of Linda Williams I take up here appeared, I learned some years later, also in 1984. It explicitly challenges the arguments, at several points, of Ann Kaplan’s article “The Case of the Missing Mother,” and exempts it from her judgment that *Stella Dallas*, though “it keeps coming up in the context of melodrama, sentiment, motherhood and female spectatorship, . . . has not been given the full scrutiny it deserves” (p. 322n.10). I have read Kaplan’s reply to Williams, and I have read Mary Ann Doane’s pages on the film in her book *The Desire to Desire* in which she names the Williams and the Kaplan articles as “two other feminist analyses of *Stella Dallas* with somewhat different overall emphases” (p. 191n.15). I have no standing, and no motive, from which to attempt to place these different emphases nor to seek out others. My project, through its origin in an effort to bring into play, and relate, a small number of comedies and a smaller number of melodramas, is shaped by a set of preoccupations of mine with intersections between cinema and philosophical skepticism, between skepticism and tragedy and melodrama, hence (it turned out) between skepticism and gender, and between the two main traditions and institutional formations of Western philosophy, and between each of these traditions and psychoanalysis. (These matters, and my sense for a long time of intellectual isolation in pursuing them, is something I touch upon in my response to Tania Modleski’s Letter to the Editors of *Critical Inquiry*, cited in the Introduction. I hope that my use of Linda Williams’s text shows, for all my disagreements with it, my sense of its seriousness and pertinence to what I call “my project.” I am relieved to have come across it in good time. This sort of thing should go without saying, but even I, for all my overlaps yet asynchronies with the interests of my culture, have had to recognize that the expression of intellectual indebtedness or helpfulness is no longer dischargeable on exactly intellectual grounds. No doubt it never was. But it is as if a current preoccupation with an [anti]metaphysics of citationality and of authorship have come to mask a politics of who is citable by whom and who not.)

Running headlong, in working through *Stella Dallas*, into the question of the pertinence of the male voice, was not exactly a surprise (I go into the matter explicitly in the essay on *Now*,

*Voyager*, questioning my right to, as it seemed I might be wishing to do, speak for Charlotte Vale, but I did not find it there to be an unanswerable charge); nor is it unwelcome (since it must be an issue raised throughout the genre, I must have been trying to get it to the surface). Why it was only in 1991, writing the first full draft of the present essay, that I found myself willing to confront more systematically the provenance and pertinence of my own voice in these precincts (willing as it were to run headlong into them), is something I attribute to my willingness for taking further steps in autobiographical expression, the mode in which, increasingly, I am convinced that my encounter with feminism must take place. As I now turn to my reading of *Stella Dallas* with some consecutiveness, my opening paragraph of the reading will attest to this conviction. I do not say that it is because I was beginning to write autobiographically that I begin my thoughts on *Stella* with a moment of autobiography; it is exactly as true to say that it is because I began this opening with a moment of autobiography that I have subsequently gone on (in the first chapter of *A Pitch of Philosophy*) to take autobiographical expression distinctly further than I have ever done before. I trust this impulse will not be lost.

WHEN MY MOTHER asked for an opinion from my father and me about a new garment or ornament she had on, a characteristic form she gave her question was, "Too Stella Dallas?" The most frequent scene of the question was our getting ready to leave our apartment for the Friday night movies, by far the most important, and reliable, source of common pleasure for the three of us. I knew even then, so I seem always to have remembered it, that my mother's reference to Stella Dallas was not to a figure from whom she was entirely dissociating herself. Her question was concerned to ward off a certain obviousness of display, not to deny the demand to be noticed.

I have found *Stella Dallas* to be the most harrowing of the four melodramas to view again and again in the course of trying to formulate my experiences of the set. Let me therefore begin by saying what the thought was that allowed me, or forced me, to overcome the distress of witnessing over and over the events depicted in this film and to feel that the knowledge gained from its experience might be worth the price of the experience.

The enabling thought concerns the famous sequence—one of

the most famous, or unforgettable, I dare say, in the history of American cinema—in which Stella's excessive costume at a fancy resort hotel makes her an object of ridicule to refined society and—so the accepted view goes, unchallenged so far as I know—precipitates her plan to separate from her daughter, the act all but universally understood as Stella's "self-sacrifice." This understanding is based on the assumption, as expressed in the essay I have cited by Linda Williams, that Stella is "as oblivious as ever to the shocking effect of her appearance" when at the hotel she makes "a 'Christmas tree' spectacle of herself" (p. 312). My thought is that the pressure of this interpretation is excessive, too insistent, that there is massive evidence in the film that Stella knows exactly what her effect is there, that her spectacle is *part* of her strategy for separating Laurel from her, not the catastrophe of misunderstanding that causes her afterward to form her strategy (though a kind of supplementary strategy afterward also turns out to be necessary).

I say that the evidence for her knowledge of her effect is massive. But it need not, for my argument, have been stronger than is necessary to form a plausible alternative interpretation to the accepted one of Stella's oblivion at the hotel and her eradication at the end. For even a plausible alternative interpretation suggests the fixed, forced quality of the accepted response to her film. That response aligns itself too readily with the ironic misinterpretations that Stella is subject to by the march of respectable figures through her life—by her husband, whose rigorous self-pity, or disappointment, snatches at nourishment for itself; by the school teachers on the train, whom somehow we know to be childless, observing Stella's loud laughter and agreeing that "women like that shouldn't be allowed to have children"; by their cohort and its progeny at the resort hotel; arguably by Laurel at the end, unwilling where her father is unable to "read between those pitiful lines" of Stella's letter to her (we will come back to this); and even by Mrs. Morrison, though she is surely closer to Stella's event.

The evidence that Stella knows her effect at the resort hotel turns simply on her massively authenticated knowledge of clothes, that she is an expert at their construction and, if you like, deconstruction. The principle authentication is given in the sequence in which Mrs. Morrison, the highest and most humane judge of propriety in this depicted world, helping Laurel unpack her suitcases on her first visit, is impressed, even moved, to learn that

Laurel's mother has herself made all of Laurel's beautiful and, what's more, exactly appropriate clothes. But this might be taken to mean only that Stella is expert at "copying" clothes, for others to wear and in which to make their effect, not that she knows their effect when she herself wears them. But her sure knowledge of her own effect is separately authenticated in the sequence in which we see her hurriedly and surely alter a black dress in which to receive her husband Stephen, who has unexpectedly shown up to take Laurel away, this time for a Christmas vacation at Mrs. Morrison's house.

The resulting, not quite basic black dress is not exactly Stella's taste (though her alteration has demonstrated that it is just a rip and a stitch away from her taste), but it certainly satisfies Stephen's. He even goes so far as to suggest, as if in response, that he and Laurel might take a later train in order to stay and have dinner with her. But when Ed Munn barges in drunk, in a virtuosically destructive sequence, brilliantly played on all sides, Stephen reverts to the appetite of his disappointment and takes Laurel away at once, and Stella learns the futility of appealing to the taste of those who have no taste for her. This represents an unforeseen answer to the education she had asked Stephen for at the beginning of the film. Here he shows how effective a teacher he is.

It is this learning—on the way of looking at things I am following—that precipitates the scandal in the resort hotel in which Stella appeals, as it were, to the distaste of those for whom she knows she is distasteful. Why take it as certain that her overstatement in clothes in this sequence exactly expresses her own taste, any more than her understatement in the black dress exactly expressed her own taste? After all, we are shown—in the hotel as at home in the case of the black dress—the details of her preparation, as she piles on the jewelry and the perfume and the fur piece. On those occasions on which she is oblivious to her effect, there specifically is no preparation on her part, as on the occasion of the practical joke with the itch powder. Must the Christmas tree spectacle be conceived as expressing her taste because she must be conceived, as on the occasion of Stephen's sudden visit, to be seeking approval? But suppose, as I am suggesting, she has concluded from that visit that that strategy is hopeless and that what she seeks now, at the hotel, is disapproval. What is the benefit of public disapproval?



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On my theory of the film, Stella's plan for Laurel begins much earlier than in her raising it on her visit to Mrs. Morrison at home to ask her if she will take Laurel to live there when she and Stephen are married. I take the mark of its beginning to be precisely the close of the sequence of her final lesson from Stephen as he reneges on his expansively thoughtful suggestion that he and Laurel take a later train. Stella stands in that black dress, her back to the camera, watching the closed door behind which Stephen and Laurel have disappeared. The shot is held somewhat longer than one might expect, calling attention to itself. (Of course I cannot prove this. It can only be tested for oneself, like taste.) As elsewhere, a figure on film turned away from us tends to signal a state of self-absorption, of self-assessment, a sense of thoughts under collection in privacy.

It is a kind of further confirmation of this theory of the earliness of Stella's plan that when the initial attempt to send Laurel away backfires and Laurel is drawn all the closer to her mother in perceiving her as self-sacrificing ("Oh, my poor mother! My wonderful mother! She did hear what they said! I must go to her!") Stella

repeats the strategy—and again we are shown the elaborate details of its preparation. Again she scandalizes the respectable, now in the form of appealing to the distaste of her daughter, excessively and differently enacting the part of a woman with common desires of her own. I do not claim that this repetition of strategy can be demonstrated, taken alone, to be a stronger interpretation of Stella than one which takes her to have been oblivious or passive in her public disgrace but aware and active in her subsequent private disgrace. What makes the interpretation of repetition strong to my mind—beyond confirming the fact, and importance of the fact, that Stella is capable of, and gifted for, theater—is precisely that it does not require the fixation on oblivion as characteristic of Stella.

That the attribution of this characteristic to her does require fixation or insistence is suggested by a conflict of perceptions expressed by Linda Williams when she speaks of Stella at the resort hotel being as “oblivious as ever to the shocking effect of her appearance.” This seems somewhat at odds with Williams’s description on the previous page of Stella as “increasingly flaunting an exaggeratedly feminine presence that the offended community prefers not to see. . . . But the more ruffles, feathers, furs, and clanking jewelry that Stella dons, the more she emphasizes her pathetic inadequacy. . . . ‘Style’ is the warpaint she applies with each new assault on her legitimacy as a woman and a mother” (p. 311). I do not say that flaunting a feminine presence and applying war paint cannot be managed obliviously, but I find a certain unacknowledged tension or ambivalence in this registering of Stella’s consciousness, between wanting to see her as active and as passive, as triumphant and as pathetic. Someone may well feel that a struggle between triumph and pathos precisely fits the case of Stella Dallas. Without exactly denying that, I am attributing the cause of ambivalence not to Stella’s struggle but to ours in perceiving it. This is by no means to deny that Stella’s struggle can include more pain than we might imagine.

I see no linear build-up of feathers and furs and clanking jewelry. Stella’s taste in her presentation is, unarguably, more flamboyant, say “louder,” than it is refined; but only once, at the resort hotel, is it egregious to the point of scandal.

I count six events in which the community (or one or two of its representatives) takes offense at Stella’s behavior (apart from, or

later than, Stella’s father giving orders for her to leave the house when he discovers she hasn’t slept in her room): (1) Stephen’s reaction to Stella’s fun and earrings at the River Club; (2) Stephen’s shock coming in upon a scene of liquor and song in which Ed Munn and Stella seem to be sharing the care, or ignoring the care, of infant Laurel; (3) the school teachers’ contempt for Stella’s laughter as she and Ed Munn, having left the train car in which Ed spreads around his itch powder, lurch raucously into the parlor car; (4) Stephen’s revulsion as Ed Munn returns to Stella’s apartment, having earlier deposited his Christmas turkey, as Stephen is phoning about a later train; (5) the chorus of reactions of the older generation, but most vocally and individually of the younger, at the resort hotel; and (6) Laurel’s horror at her mother’s cliché expression of desire by listening to jazz, smoking a cigarette, and reading a cheap woman’s magazine—it is a scene from such a magazine, or from a movie.

Stephen retains enough human intelligence early in his and Stella’s history to recognize that “the earrings don’t matter.” And his later two revulsions at Ed Munn’s presence are caused by episodes not merely not of Stella’s flaunting but by ones she herself has no taste for and is in the act of trying to stop. Neither is the event of itch powder her idea, and her participation in it to the point of loud laughter may be understood otherwise than as her flaunting or battling anything; to evince appreciation, even perhaps overappreciation, for Ed’s practical joke is one of the few routes open to her to return Ed’s good feeling for her and friendship for her—she does not gamble or drink, so she cannot keep him company there, and he is of no erotic interest to her, to say the least. Far from her flaunting her feminine, reactive laughter before an offended community, this laughter depends on her feeling invisible to that community, as Ed’s itch powder joke itself depends upon its invisibility; this complex event forms the single instance of Stella’s obliviousness to her giving offense. As for Stella’s painful flaunting before Laurel, this involves no general increase of furs, feathers, etc.; it is the enacting of a specific setting designed as if for an assignation (we accompany her to Ed Munn’s squalid, anonymous rooming house from which, having failed to rouse him, she takes a photograph of him to set up on her mantle at home) with which Laurel’s presence is specifically incompatible. This leaves the

Christmas tree spectacle at the resort hotel as the only event, among the six events of Stella's giving offense, in which she scandalously flaunts the excessive piling on of ornamentation.

What then is the source of the fixation on Stella's self-oblivion, hence on her "pathetic inadequacy"? (p. 311). And how then are we to think about her plan to send Laurel away? If these questions put in question the perception that "the final moment of the film 'resolves' the contradiction of Stella's attempt to be a woman *and* a mother by eradicating both" (p. 314), then how are we to take Stella's ecstatic walk toward us at the film's close? Are we to think of her as having a future?

Something like the idea of the pathetic is named once in the film, in reference to an act of Stella's, when Mrs. Morrison tellingly asks Stephen, "Can't you read between those pitiful lines?" She is in the narrative referring to Stella's letter to Laurel beginning, "By the time you read this" (a fateful phrase); the letter continues by saying that its author will be Mrs. Ed. Munn. But I cannot doubt that Mrs. Morrison, or someone, is simultaneously referring to the lines of this film as such, hence asking their addressee—us—to read, to interpret, for example, her own line, and not alone as warning us to get beyond the film's lines to its silences and its images, which are equally to be contended with; but as asking us to get quite beyond an interpretation of the pitiful as pathos for the film's lines and its silences and its images more generally. Mrs. Morrison instructs Stephen, "Laurel is here. Who has accomplished this?"

To accomplish something is the reverse of being pathetic. What does Stella accomplish in placing Laurel there? Where is there? Who is Mrs. Morrison?

It seems generally recognized that her place may be located by the brilliantly lit, horizontally rectangular window, hardly avoidable as a figure for a film screen, through which, in the film's final sequence, Stella views Laurel's wedding. (Hardly avoidable now, yet doubtless on the whole avoided for four-and-a-half of the five decades since the film was made. Has our repression of film's power of significance all at once been overcome?) The general idea seems to be that Stella has placed Laurel into the fantasied film world that we had seen her absorbed in when we were first shown her and Stephen out together, at the movies. Walking out of that film, whose ending is with a kiss at a fancy ball, Stella thoughtfully nibbles the brim of the hat still in her hand as they reach the public

sidewalk. Then on the sidewalk at the end of her, or Laurel's, film Stella famously clutches her handkerchief between her teeth as if in a kind of apotheosis, and contesting, of the expected reaction to tearjerkers. On the walk home from the early film Stella says to Stephen something like, "I don't want to be like me. I want to learn to do things refined, like the people in the movie, like the people you're around." Hence, many people find it easiest to think that at the end Stella gets her wish and, eradicating herself, and seeing her daughter as a publicly unapproachable star, identifies herself as her creator, to her own infinite but private, necessarily mute, satisfaction.

This may account generally for the sense of Stella's obliviousness and pathos; and it specifically registers a sense of substitution or transformation. But is this surely to be tuned in a negative key, taking the substitution to be a denial of something; and not in a positive, taking the transformation to be an affirmation of something? Can we have this both ways?

Denial seems confirmed in certain stretches of feminist film theory's adoption or adaptation of Freud's theory of fetishism, according to which in patriarchal society men in general—not merely individual males with a particular choice of neurotic symptoms—undertake to reassure themselves of their own intactness by a mechanism of substitution which allows them to disavow (with half of the mind) the woman's horrifying lack of intactness. Linda Williams proposes a way of going beyond "the psychoanalytic model of cinematic pleasure based on fetishistic disavowal" (p. 318) by taking the contradiction between believing and knowing to be directed not to the question of the woman's biological givens, as it were, but to her "socially constructed position under patriarchy" (p. 319). A contradiction between believing and knowing is a way of characterizing the problematic of philosophical skepticism, and its occurrence in understanding the phenomenon of film is something that has marked my thoughts about film from their outset. This is not the time to go into Williams's proposal about psychoanalytic disavowal, so I simply note my impression that fetishism tends to be used at a phase of film theory to cover just about every Freudian mechanism of disavowal or denial, which is roughly to say, to cover just about every Freudian mechanism. Film seems to be the perfect agent for generalizing the Freudian fetishistic process, extending it to the masculine gender as such—a generalizing rati-

fied somehow by taking on at the same time a Marxian development of the idea of the universal commodification (in capitalist society) of women. But if these mechanisms or schematisms *determine* men's perception and representation of women—namely as Freudian monsters and/or Marxian objects, hence without human subjectivity, say without the complexity and reversals of human sexuality (but what does “human” mean now?)—then it is a wonder, a nightmare (a miracle, as Nora says at the end of *A Doll's House*), that women should converse with men at all about serious matters. (“Serious?” replies Nora's husband when she observes to him that they have never had a serious talk. “What do you mean by that?”)

The melodrama of the unknown woman raises this wonder of conversation between women and men thematically in showing repeatedly the defeat of conversation by circling densities of irony. What could be clearer in *Stella Dallas*, in which the line “Can't you read between those pitiful lines?” is said—courteously, and who knows with what depth of resignation and despair—by a woman to a man; a man, Stephen Dallas, known to us by then to be incapable of reading anything serious whatever, if that means seeing how something might be taken. He merely takes, without question; merely suffers from what he sees, in perfect oblivion of further possibility. Is *this* the figure, occupying the, so to speak, dominant masculine position in the film, with whom I am offered identification?—as if I am to read his masculine melancholy and his feminized subjection to the wishes, or say voices, of women (he is essentially speechless before other men) as expressing my own sense of being misunderstood.

Or am I to try to exempt myself from the charges against the masculine brought in such films, as in its representation by them in such a figure as Stephen Dallas? How can I try to exempt myself apart from going on with saying what these films are to me? And how can I go on with this without contesting the mechanisms that seem to show conversation with a man to be pointless on these subjects?

I would like it to be considered that the theory of fetishism is not an explanation for a victimization and self-oblivion of the woman of these melodramas and for a generalization of this process that confirms an essentially male stake in viewing these films: first because the film *Stella Dallas* itself contests a fixed view of the

woman's victimization; and second because the details of Freud's description of fetishization do not account for what becomes of things and persons on film, say for the relation between a photographic image and what it is an image of.

The second of these claims amounts, intuitively, to the idea that film assaults human perception at a more primitive level than the work of fetishizing suggests; that film's enforcement of passiveness, or say victimization, together with its animation of the world, entertains a region not of invitation or fascination primarily to the masculine nor even, yet perhaps closer, to the feminine, but primarily to the infantile, before the establishment of human gender, that is, before the choices of identification and objectification of female and male, call them mama and papa, have settled themselves, to the extent that they will be settled. And if it turns out that the theory of fetishism does not account for the experience of film, and if the theory thereby serves to disavow something about film, then it will follow, according to that theory, that the theory has been fetishized.

Why stay with Hollywood's self-perception about, or its intentions for, what it named “women's pictures,” adopt its position that they are made essentially, and appeal essentially, for and to women? This self-perception goes together in my mind with a fantasm repeated remarkably often in my hearing, of women crying through these films alone, on “wet, wasted afternoons.” I do not share this fantasm, I suppose because my mother went to work each day I was growing up and hence was no more free to sit in a movie theater afternoons than men who had jobs were, and because for a long time (as Proust's narrator says) I went to the movies with my mother and father both Friday nights and Sunday afternoons (rain or shine), where *Stella Dallas* or *Mildred Pierce* or *Mrs. Miniver* were as likely to be playing as *Stagecoach* or *Citizen Kane* or *His Girl Friday*.

I assume that films such as *Stella Dallas* and *Gaslight* and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Now, Voyager* could not attain their power—which I am not interested now to distinguish from the power of works in the other great arts in Western culture—apart from their discovery of one or more of the great subjects, or possibilities, of the medium of film. I claim of remarriage comedy that its subject, or a way of putting one of its principle subjects, is the creation of the woman with and by means of a man, something I

describe further as a search for the new creation of the human, say of human relationship, which implies that friendship and mutual education between the sexes is still a happy possibility, that our experience, and voices, are still to be owned by each of us and shared between us, say by dispossessing those who would dispossess us of them. I have formulated the subject of the melodrama of the unknown woman as the irony of human identity. And I have formulated the narrative drive of the genre as a woman's search for the mother. And now, having come to insist on the dimension of infantilization in the viewing of film (cutting across cultures, races, genders, generations)—something I have mentioned more than once in what I have written about film, without insisting on it—I will articulate this subject further as the search for the mother's gaze—the responsiveness of her face—in view of its loss, or of threatened separation from it.

That film gazes at us (or glares or glances) aligns it with the great arts, though its specific way of animating the world—unlike poetry's, or painting's, or theater's—is unprecedented, still being absorbed, worked through. We will doubtless think of animation as something that must be brought to works of art, say in terms of the powers of each of the arts to produce psychological transference, or as Emerson puts it, to return our thoughts to us with a certain alienated majesty.

The formulation in terms of the search for the mother's gaze should take us at once to Stella at the end of what we are shown of her existence, placed before, barred at a distance from, the shining rectangle of her daughter's departure into marriage, replying to a policeman's demand for her to disperse with the rest of the viewers by saying, "I want to see her face . . ."

May we read between her lines? There is another notation, early in the film, of Stella's revelation on seeing Laurel's face. She has succeeded in getting Stephen to take her to the River Club the first night she is home from her confinement in the hospital, in part by asking, "Why do husbands and doctors and nurses think they know more about having babies than mothers do?"; then on their return from the club, where she has met Ed Munn, she says to Stephen that she is ready to take her lecture but that while he can correct her grammar he is not to tell her how to dress; and she tells him to go to New York, for his better position, without her, saying, "I'm not leaving, just when we've gotten in with the right crowd." The

notation I have in mind comes now, as Stella walks into the next room, starts unloosening the top of her evening gown, looks into a crib and exclaims, "Can you beat that? Laying here wide awake waiting for her dinner and not a squawk out of her!"—as if what she sees in Laurel's infant face ratifies her decision to send Stephen away. We never, for example, hear another word about the crowd at the River Club.

What did she see? Visiting a seminar of mine in which *Stella Dallas* and its related melodramas were discussed, Anita Sokolsky replied, in effect, that Stella sees that she must teach Laurel to cry. That is a wonderful thing to say, but it got swamped in the ensuing discussion and I lost the chance to respond to it then. I felt two directions in the proposed teaching of tears. One direction—I felt the one meant—is the teaching of a daughter to raise the cry for justice, to demand a voice in her history. But another direction is the learning from a daughter to bear and express the pain of separation, that is, not to deny the need for satisfaction, say the right to define happiness. In imagining Stella's astonishment at the infant Laurel's silence in her hunger as an imperative to herself to learn about happiness, I put this together with her having just refused to learn this at the hands of her husband. My feeling, not surprisingly, is that she recognizes the question, resting with Laurel's satisfaction, not as decided but as posed: How can one be so certain that one's needs are appreciated as not to have to squawk about them? Can it be that the providing of happiness might yet be happiness enough, having just ruled out that version of mutuality with a man?

Before pressing further what Stella's ruling out this man betokens, let us ponder the end of the events we witness—Stella's witnessing of her daughter's wedding, her satisfying herself of Laurel's state of satisfaction, and her walking away from the world of the transparent and reflective screen. How we imagine her walk there is fateful. It is the completion of her education: she learns that the world of the screen, whose education in the world of refinement had at the beginning made her cry with longing, is not for her. But "not for her" is perfectly ambiguous, its interpretations melodramatically opposed. What I have called the accepted view (the perception of Stella at the end sacrificed as a mother and as a woman) takes Stella to accept her own barring from that world, and, still convinced of its incalculable desirability, to taste her belonging to it through her gift of it to and from her daughter.



My opposed view takes Stella to learn that the world Laurel apparently desires—of law, church, exclusiveness, belonging—is not to her own taste. (I say apparently. Laurel seems in a trance. Has she seen through her mother's strategy, and is she assessing her participation in the world to which her mother consigns her, resigning herself to a happiness her mother must not know? Would this constitute satisfaction for her?) Stella walks away from the world she had longed for, and from the only person she has loved, continues to love. She turns her back to that screen. But in favor—if she is not eradicated—of what? What is that screen? What, walking away, does she walk toward? Why almost straight toward us? May we imagine that we have here some Emersonian/Thoreauvian image of what Nietzsche will call the pain of individuation, of the passion Thoreau builds *Walden* to find, expressed as his scandalous pun on mo(u)rning, the transfiguration of mourning as grief into morning as dawning and ecstasy? And if just possibly so, wouldn't this be just one more proof—as if we needed more—that metaphysical speculation about freedom or self-creation is a cover for social injustice? Needless to say, such a speculation may be appropriated in this retrogressive way—as may the work of Emerson and Thoreau in general. They seem indeed, as steadily as these films, readily to permit, if not quite to invite, such a way of appropriation. My heart is set in the one case as in the other on making out another way.

We have just begun considering the closing sequence of *Stella Dallas*. Before following it further, I note that the interpretation of Stella's perception of the wedding image as her substitute, or reflected satisfaction in seeing her delegate enter the higher world to which she herself can never belong, fits a fact of American life more blatantly on the public mind during the period in which this film was made than issues of feminism were (though the issues must socially and psychologically be entangled)—namely the issue of immigrancy, particularly its consequences for the rising waves of children of immigrants, for whom belonging to proper, educated society had become a standing possibility. It is a possibility laced with the perils (the comedies and the tragedies) of correcting speech and manners and dress, and democratically colored by the fact that no one exactly knows what in America proper is nor how important it is, so that what Emerson and Mill call the demand for conformity becomes withering, both absolute and obscure.

Such a child—I speak from experience—recognizes subjection to the familiar double bind. If I am not different from them (my parents) and do not enter into a society to which they cannot belong, thus justifying their sacrifices, how can they love me? If I am different from them and do enter where they cannot belong, how can they love me? I would like to see this anxiety compared with the experience of women that Linda Williams invokes as fitting Bertholt Brecht's description of the exile as one who "lives the tension of two different cultures" (as on p. 317). But the position of women is neither that of exiles nor of immigrants: unlike the immigrant, the woman's problem is not one of not belonging but one of belonging, only on the wrong terms; unlike the exile, the woman is not between two different cultures but is at odds with the one in which she was born and is roughly in the process of transfiguring into one that does not exist, one as it were still in confinement. Hence the pertinence of some logic being worked out at the end of *The Awful Truth* in which one of the central pair says to the other, and receives a reply in kind, "You're wrong about things being different because they're not the same. Things are different except in a different way. . . . So, as long as I'm different, don't you think things could be the same again? Only a little different."

How did Stella get to her position in front of the rectangle of the wedding ceremony? Perhaps we imagine she read the announcement of the wedding in the society pages of a newspaper. But how does she find that window? Does this bear explanation? The explanation for that window being open to view is given a little sequence of its own as Mrs. Morrison says to a butler, "I told you those curtains weren't to be drawn. Open them please." After they are opened and the butler withdraws, she walks to the window, gazes out, and says to herself, "Yes." Is this to be understood as Mrs. Morrison making available to Stella what place she can have in the wedding? Or as proving to Stella that her wishes have faithfully been met? Or perhaps as offering to Stella a view that she is free to interpret in her own—unknown—terms?

Before any decision is made among these possibilities, supposing one is to be made, we should consider that, in Mrs. Morrison's knowledge that Stella will appear at that window, the film screen is being identified as a field of communication between women.—But isn't this simply obvious, simply a function of the



We have repeatedly seen Laurel mothering Stella, typically in scenes of rejection.

obvious fact that in a woman's film women speak to one another, mostly to one another? But this is not what I mean. Each way the film screen (or camera, or projector, or any of a film's conditions of existence) is acknowledged and identified in a significant film, enters into some as yet unassessed interaction with every other way—in the case of the screen, with, for example, the censoring blanket in *It Happened One Night*, and with the compact mirror held in the hand of a woman con artist in *The Lady Eve*; in the case of the camera, with the man's impenetrable gaze at the dreaming, aroused woman in *The Marquise of O*—, and with a home movie in *Adam's Rib*; in the case of the projector with a bright twirling object inducing suggestion and, in the case of the running strip of film, with the iterated elements of an archeological reconstruction in *Bringing Up Baby*; in the case of, let us say, the film itself, as an artifact, with the letter from the woman in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. . . . I have formulated the field of feminine communication



I have formulated the field of feminine communication affected by the film screen, as allegorized by the lit window at the end of *Stella Dallas*, as a search for the mother's gaze.

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How can that be what Stella is drawn to before the window screen? Isn't Stella the mother, the source of the desired gaze, not its desirous object? But how is this distinction to be understood? Does the fact or position of motherhood negate the fact or position of daughterhood? I do not mean merely that every mother is a daughter. I mean that we have repeatedly seen Laurel mothering Stella, typically in scenes of rejection—at the unattended birthday party (where was Stephen on that occasion?), and peroxiding Stella's hair, and preparing to leave the resort hotel while Stella cries like a child being treated unfairly, and on the train after the voices recount Stella's spectacle earlier that day at the hotel. (Linda Williams finely characterizes the mutuality of mothering between Stella and Laurel. Nancy Chodorow's work on mothering is of particular pertinence here.) When the daughter is motherly to her

mother both may be comforted (they may, for example, do what Laurel calls cuddle together); and mothering may be transmitted so. Fathering, for us, is not. When the son is fatherly to his father, the father is transcended. It seems the daughter's pain in transcending the mother is, in turn, not so dramatically, if ever, ended. Laurel, at the end, is prepared, for the time being, to imagine that her mother does not know about the wedding. (Here is a place from which to think about why, in remarriage comedy, the principal woman's mother does not, except carefully displaced, appear, as if not both can pursue happiness at the same time in the same environment.)

So it does not follow from Stella's wanting to see Laurel's face through the window that she wants to gaze motheringly upon it more than to be gazed upon by it. And recollect the extended sequence between Stella and Mrs. Morrison, the feeling of which is present in Mrs. Morrison's responsibility for communication by the shining window. I remarked that Stella is childish at the end of the resort hotel sequence; then on the train back home she is essentially silent, only recovering her voice again in the subsequent sequence, at Mrs. Morrison's house. I find that Stella presents herself there, and is received, no more as a mother than as a child, with her hesitant questions about whether this fine lady and Stella's husband, as it were, are going to, or would plan to, get married, and with motives disguised in a way that mothers are bound to see through. Mrs. Morrison, as the interview is closing, and the two women rise, cannot keep her hands off Stella. I do not say that this clinging is as to a daughter more than as to a mother; it seems rather that the blurring between these positions continues. So it is also Mrs. Morrison's gaze, real or imagined, coming to Stella from the screen she gazes at.

In the infantine basis of our position as viewers, Stella's gaze before the window, as the camera gives it to us, is the mother's, backed by mothers; and as Stella turns to walk toward us, her gaze, transforming itself, looms toward us, as if the screen is looming, its gaze *just* turned away, always to be searched for. (For what it grants; for what it wants.)

I have asked whether we are to imagine a future for Stella, since I deny that she is eradicated as a woman and as a mother. What is her walking (almost) toward us? Where is she walking? Let us ask again: What is she walking away from?



As Stella walks toward us, her gaze, transforming itself, looms toward us, as if the screen is looming, its gaze *just* turned away, always to be searched for.

The question arose: What does it betoken that Stella tells her husband she will not be instructed by him? In remarriage comedy and, it turns out, in the derived melodrama of the unknown woman, what it betokens is that the man is not her husband, that there is no marriage between them. In no other member of these sets of films is the feature of the woman's demand for education and its transformations more explicit and emphatic than in the early sequences of *Stella Dallas*. What Stella learns from the late gaze of the screen—from the ratification by Mrs. Morrison's acceptance of her terms and by Laurel's satisfaction perhaps not in those terms, including her willingness for the time being not to know that Stella knows—is that Stella has the right not to share their tastes, that she is free to leave not just the man of the marriage but the consequences of a marriage she allowed herself to believe would transform her.

We know that Stella has no taste for men in general. This is evident not only from her excuse to Ed Munn for her lack of

interest in him ("I don't think there's a man on earth that could get me going again") but from the opening sequence among the primitive sequences with her family as her brother teases and tries to kiss her and she pushes him away saying, "Take your filthy hands off me," and from their ensuing exchange about whether any mill hand's hand is good enough to touch her. Laurel's taking after her father is emphasized several times in the film, a matter to be contrasted with Stella's emphasis on education; but she takes after her mother in her distaste for the ordinary run of men. That Stella has given up the idea of partaking of life with a man, however, does not mean that she is asking Laurel to fill that lack (though there are indications that she is tempted to), that is, not asking Laurel to imagine her mother as for that reason lacking something. Laurel's readiness to imagine Stella so is expressed in her outcry when she returns to live with her father and Mrs. Morrison, handing the letter with its pathetic lines to them, saying, "I thought she did it [that is, sent me away] for me! But she chose *him!*" Laurel had left Mrs. Morrison's house saying, "My home will be with my mother for as long as I live." Stella undertakes to teach Laurel otherwise, to cause her to cry over separation, as for a solace preceding one's own happiness, not replacing it. But has Laurel learned this? What can we tell from the window?

I note that in speaking just now of the early sequences of Stella's family as "primitive" I did not mean that they were cinematically or artistically unsophisticated but that their apparent archaism of cinematic means is in service of the infantilization of perception, provides abbreviated perceptual clues of confusion and emotional violence—I recall the wooden, shadowy father delivering ugly orders; the monosyllabic, helpless mother; the noisy, nervous brother, the filthiness of whose hands is ambiguous as being caused by his work in the mill, or by his maleness, or by his incestuousness; and Stella primping before the cheap mirror, as if always knowing that, wherever else she finds to be, she does not belong, she from the beginning does not belong, here, at what the world calls home.

The striking source I know for the connection between a woman's leaving husband and children on the ground that there is no marriage between them because he is not the man to educate her, and setting out on her own to find that education, is Nora's exit and closing of the door to conclude *A Doll's House*. In leaving

the doll's house Nora is explicitly leaving a house of illusion, of moralistic sadism and anxious pleasures. I do not feel that any future I might imagine for her is as important as the sense that she has one, beginning with her saying in effect that the taste for the world she has known is not hers.

In fancying Stella walking away as one continuation of Nora walking out, there is the additional moment to consider of her walking toward us. Again a house is turned away from, one that for a woman contains (self-)destructive illusion, or a way of illusory perception she had taken as reality, a way allegorized as a perception of the film screen. The mother's gaze she has received from such a screen replaces that of the screen she had identified with the world of the man she married. The ratifying of her insistence on her own taste, that is, of her taking on the thinking of her own existence, the announcing of her *cogito ergo sum*, happened without—as in Descartes's presenting of it, it happens without—yet knowing who she is who is proving her existence. Her walk toward us, as if the screen becomes her gaze, is allegorized as the presenting or creating of a star, or as the interpretation of stardom. It is the negation, in advance so to speak, of a theory of the star as fetish. This star, call her Barbara Stanwyck, is without obvious beauty or glamour, first parodying them by excessive ornamentation, then taking over the screen stripped of ornament, in a nondescript hat and cloth overcoat. But she has a future. Not just because now we know—we soon knew—that this woman is the star of *The Lady Eve* and *Double Indemnity* and *Ball of Fire*, all women, it happens, on the wrong side of the law; but because she is presented *here* as a star (the camera showing her that particular insatiable interest in her every action and reaction), which entails the promise of return, of unpredictable reincarnation.

MY STAKE in the way of looking at *Stella Dallas* I have sketched out here is not alone in providing an alternative to an accepted account of the film but in providing *this* account, marked by the suggestion that its principle figure puts herself in the way of a transfiguration or conversion of her life that I associate with the teaching of Emerson and of Thoreau and that I claim is common to the members of both the genre of the comedy of remarriage and of the melodrama of the unknown woman. I came up against this transfiguration in my preceding remarks as I was led to speak of the pain of individua-

tion and of Thoreau's pivotal pun between mourning as grieving and morning as dawning or ecstasy.

The acceptance of such an idea (of the woman's transfiguration) would provide a certain verification of this philosophy, hence of philosophy as such, as I care most about it. To propose the idea may also be seen as part of my effort to preserve that philosophy, or rather to show that it *is* preserved, is in existence, in effect, in works of lasting public power—world-famous, world-favored films—while the Emerson text itself, so to speak, is repressed in the public it helped to found. (Some might take such a strategy of presentation as dispersing philosophy past recall.)

The sense of preserving philosophy as I care about it most—together with this way of expressing the care—comes from a companion effort of mine, the first I have made, to see the price of preserving this mode of philosophizing in the face of Emerson's apparent silence about the institution of slavery in his essay "Fate," which is in practice an essay on Freedom. In that work I characterize my task as one of showing Emerson's effort to preserve philosophy in the face of conditions (those which preserve the institution of slavery) that deny or negate philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

I might characterize an essential feature of my task in the present instance as one of testing a manifestation or consequence of philosophizing, as I care about it most, against an interpretation of that manifestation (Stella as oblivious, her film as analogously oblivious) that would in my eyes negate its value, hence negate the value of that philosophizing. The Emersonianism of the films I have written about as genres depict human beings as on a kind of journey—using terms of Emerson as drastically overfamiliar as they are drastically underinterpreted—a journey from what he means by conformity to what he means by self-reliance; which comes to saying (so I have claimed) a journey, or path, or step, from haunting the world to existing in it; which may be expressed as the asserting of one's *cogito ergo sum*, one's own "I think, therefore I am," call it the power to think for oneself, to judge the world, to acquire—as Nora puts it at the end of *A Doll's House*—one's own experience of the world.

I have written as though the woman's demand for a voice, for a language, for attention to, and the power to enforce attention to, her own subjectivity, say to her difference of existence, is expressible as a response to an Emersonian demand for thinking. I suppose

that what for me authorizes this supposition is my interpretation of Emerson's authorship as itself responding to his sense of the *right* to such a demand as already voiced on the feminine side, requiring a sense of thinking as reception (Emerson also says an "impressionableness"), and as a bearing of pain, which the masculine in philosophy would avoid. (That is not a straightforward empirical observation but a conceptual claim. If it is wrong it is not so much false as wrongheaded.) To overcome this avoidance is essential to Emerson's hopes for bringing an American difference to philosophy.

Does this idea of the feminine philosophical demand serve to prefigure, or does it serve once more to eradicate, the feminine difference?—to articulate or to blur the difference between the denial to woman of political expression and a man's melancholy sense of his own inexpressiveness? But my more particular question here is this: Is such a question of the relation of the Emersonian and the feminine demands for language of one's own a topic for a serious conversation between women and men? I answer the question here and now as follows. It is, to echo an introductory thought of this book, the logic of human intimacy, or separateness—call this the field of serious and playful conversation or exchange—that to exchange understanding with another is to share pain with that other, and that to take pleasure from another is to extend that pleasure. And what reason is there to enter this logic in a particular case? No reason.

IN DISCUSSION after essentially the forgoing text on *Stella Dallas* was given in May of 1991 as a lecture at Williams College, about a year after the seminar in which that version of the material had been introduced, it was again a late intervention of Anita Sokolsky's that bears repeating here. She commented that instead of characterizing the progression of Stella's concluding states as from mourning to ecstasy, she would rather say it is from melancholia to mourning. I find this a fruitful reformulation, to which I respond, I believe responded then, roughly by adding two complications to think about further. First, encoded in the idea of a Thoreauvian pun on morning and mourning is the idea that the ecstasy in question is still part of the *work* of mourning, not a sign that mourning is all at once over. Second, the "grief" of mourning is not one I am sure I understand here exactly as Freud's structure of melancholia

(say with ideas of self-abandonment) but with an interlocking depression and rage. Now I am recapturing another of my mother's moods, somehow associated with the demand to be noticed (perhaps with its explicit failure, perhaps with the implicit failure of having to demand it). She named this state migraine—definable, I assumed, assume, through her therapy for it, which was to play the piano, in a darkened room (her eyes were evidently affected), alone. (I am interpreting the mood, after the fact, from the few times I came home from school late in the afternoon to enter such a scene.) What music she would play then (mostly Chopin, her favorite composer), and how she became a prominent pianist in Atlanta, then largely a culturally unprominent part of the country, and hence what her relation was to a certain stardom, and to her refusal of the chance for more, are pertinent matters. They must concern the relation between searching for the mother's gaze and being subjected to her moods. Hence they concern the question of what her moods are subjected to, to what scenes of inheritance. Was the music filling the loss or impoverishment of a self-abandoned ego (so speaking to melancholia), or was it remembering, say recounting, the origins, hence losses, of her reception of, her glamorous talent for, the world of music (so speaking of dispossession and nostalgia)? Music, moods, worlds, abandonment, subjection, dispossession—of course; we are speaking of melodrama.

progress as from her early departure to find her “untold want,” to her late knowledge, having now “adventur’d o’er the seas” and found some untold want, of departure itself, living untold, without titles.

28. On “the experience of sexuality,” especially in relation to the complex history of what is categorized as morbid, and in relation, among many others, to Michel Foucault’s work, see Arnold Davidson’s “Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality.”

29. Plato, *The Republic*, p. 238.

30. Emerson, “Experience,” in *Essays: Second Series*, p. 473.

31. Such a way of seeing “Experience” is worked out in my “Finding as Founding,” pp. 77–118.

32. See Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, p. 17.

#### Chapter Five

1. All references to Williams’s essay are to its occurrence in Gledhill (see Bibliography).

2. See “Emerson’s Constitutional Amending,” in Cavell, *Philosophical Passages*.