

What in the World interests Women? Hollywood, Postwar America, and *Johnny Belinda*

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During World War II, when the Office of War Information urged the American film companies to help the nation win the war, the OWI's Bureau of Motion Pictures delivered both moral support and guidance. The BMP "Manual" (1942), for instance, encouraged producers to show women dropping off their children at day-care centers, then cheerfully heading off to jobs where they enjoyed equal opportunity and equal pay. Scenes like those may have been fantasy, and for some women wryly amusing, and yet, in the late 1940s and beyond, as one historian says, World War II came to be thought of as "the best war ever," the war, according to myth, where there were no tensions over class, or race, or gender.¹

"The broad consensus after the war was that women with children should not work unless circumstances were severe," D'Ann Campbell reports in *Women at War*.² According to Hollywood, though, the consensus (like the myth) was dotted with rupture and resistance. In *Sitting Pretty*, a top-grossing release of 1948, Maureen O'Hara spends hours in her apron, in her kitchen, sweating. Moreover, she lets her husband (Robert Young, later the sage of television's "Father Knows Best") see and know how hard she toils. She was the ordinary housewife, *in extremis*. The "message" of the story turns more complex once the

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¹ Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), 312; Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994). The author wishes to thank Professor Linda Austin of Oklahoma State University for her constructive comments on an earlier version of this essay.

² D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 232.

family hires a nanny. O'Hara pursues her interest in sculpture; however, she works in her living room, where she is constantly reminded of her accountability as wife and mother. And, while the nanny denotes the postwar prosperity that rewarded the woman who stayed home, the sexual identity of the nanny (played by Clifton Webb) accents postwar bewilderment about gender roles. Finally, then, if the debate over feminism and World War II narrows to two points of view – the war as watershed, and the war as witness to the endurance of custom and tradition – one can hardly look to motion pictures as conclusive proof of one or the other.

Hollywood in the 1940s (as Mary Ann Doane, Andrea Walsh, and others have written) was pulled in two directions. The stress was inherent not only in the period, but also in the medium and in the genre of the so-called woman's picture: American movies were both a conservative art form that reinforced the status quo *and* a popular art that catered to its audience, in the case of the woman's picture its female audiences. Motion pictures strove to portray women as they were in the 1940s, as (per Walsh) “strong, maternal, and sisterly; desiring yet distrusting and angry toward men; excited about as well as ambivalent toward and frightened of independence and autonomy.”³ Walsh treats almost two dozen films at length and another several dozen more (as Doane does) in brief. Neither Walsh nor Doane nor others, though, offers more than an aside on one of the top-grossing releases of 1948, one that helped crystallize the debate over womanhood in postwar America.

Johnny Belinda, a woman's picture, bends the often rigid features of its genre. The representative woman's picture, usually set indoors, features “indoor” concerns, like romance or sexuality, and focuses on (as Walsh says) “the conflict between femininity and achievement.”⁴ *Johnny Belinda* places the heroine out of doors, in the field and the mill, where she plows and she lifts, and where, in short, she does “man's work.” And it introduces sex not as love, or seduction, or even adultery, but as rape – a plot point rare in *any* film of the Hays Office era and one that, here, occurs virtually outdoors, in a dark corner of an apparently doorless mill. Finally, Belinda McDonald's “achievement” exceeds that of even Mildred Pierce, for, while the latter (in the 1945 film *Mildred Pierce*) advances from pie cook to restaurateur *par excellence*, the former grows from a girl who

³ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Andrea S. Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience, 1940–1950* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 4 and passim.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

most people thought was retarded into a confident young single mother and nascent matriarch.

As (again) Doane, Walsh, and others have argued, woman's pictures of the 1940s generally contained contradictions: the pictures hallowed, devalued, championed, and underrated women. *Johnny Belinda* contains contradictions, and yet in another sense cannot "contain" them. Supervised by Jerry Wald, released by Warner Bros., *Johnny Belinda* lays bare a masculinist motion picture industry and American culture richly ambivalent about woman and womanhood. As such, because it swings so widely and obviously between sympathy and suspicion, because it cannot decide, finally, just how it feels about woman and womanhood, *Johnny Belinda* speaks eloquently of the anxiety about gender conventions in the postwar 1940s.

Johnny Belinda opens on a map of Nova Scotia and the island of Cape Breton. A dissolve leads to a shot of waters lapping the island, and a montage follows. According to a March 1948 Warner Bros. press release about the opening series of moving shots, Paul Ivano "manned the camera" from a helicopter that flew over the northern California towns (Ft. Bragg and Mendocino) that stood in for the cliff-lined lip of the island. An offscreen male voice narrates. The Scotch burr and dropped consonants sound native.

The island of Cape Breton, the northeastern end of Nova Scotia, is just a small chunk of land stickin' out into the Atlantic. Roads haven't been built through everywhere yet; you mostly have to come in from the sea. It needs an old hand to navigate through the shoals offshore, especially during the storms that come up suddenly in the summertime. And the little lighthouse has saved many a life. The village isn't much to shout about. Just a quiet, peaceful place where the people are proud o' their church, built with their own hands and what little money they could scrape up. Their farms don't bring in much. But for a few months each year when the cod are runnin' there's a lot of excitement. You should see the harbor then, alive with boats. They leave the women to take care o' the potatoes and livestock and put out to sea. Not many of them are lucky enough to have their own boat, but they all get a share when the catch is paid for at the cannery. A fair sized haul means everything. It means food for the long winter, new blades for tools, grain bought for cattle. That's why we watch each vessel as she comes in, to see how low she sets in the water.⁵

⁵ Warner Bros. Press Release (untitled), 3 Mar. 1948, *Johnny Belinda*, United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 168–1989, Microfilm. Unless otherwise indicated, dialogue cited in the text has been transcribed (as was "The island of Cape Breton ...") from the soundtrack of *Johnny Belinda* (Warner Bros., 1948).

While a woman usually narrates the woman's picture, as she does in *Rebecca* (1940), *Since You Went Away* (1944), *Mildred Pierce*, *I Remember Mama* (1948), *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949), and others, a man narrates (or at least introduces) *Johnny Belinda*: he is an early sign of the danger the heroine and her story pose. The male narrator here has dominance and authority. He comes in (via helicopter) over the sea, "you" come in *from* it. He uses relentlessly penetrative images, too, from the land "stickin' out" and the roads "built through" to the hands that navigate dark shoals, and the phallic shapes of church steeples and lighthouses that, as super-man, he calls "little." He admires "the people" and the church *they* have constructed with the money *they* have earned on the land *they* have farmed. Who are "the people"? "*They* leave the women," the narrator says toward the end of his speech, and thus renders "the people" "the [male] people." Once again in the final sentence, the narrator works pronouns as clay. As the "documentary" shows men lined up on the wharf, watching Locky McCormick's boat enter the harbor, the narrator's *they* becomes *we*. The Author God has passed His agency to His heir. The story proper may now be told; that it will turn on rape – an enforcement of sexual division that has the clarity of a Punch and Judy show – should not surprise us.

On hardscrabble land in Cape Breton, Black McDonald farms with two other workhorses, his sister Aggie and his adolescent daughter, the deaf mute Belinda. The dummy (as the locals call her) runs the McDonalds' mill, and, though she can neither hear nor speak, she has acquired language. "She's learned to identify every man by his mark," her father says of the account book where he records each order and Belinda, as she processes each, crosshatches through the line he has made. Another man, Robert Richardson, the new local doctor, teaches Belinda yet another language. Her first lesson concentrates on the signs for *rooster* and *ben*, then *tree* and *water*, on "marks" of gender, in other words, and notions of fertility.

One evening, a band of revelers stops at the mill. Belinda has washed her face and hair and, apparently for the occasion, put on a plain but pretty dress. As she watches the dancers, Doctor Richardson lays her hand on a fiddle, and soon she steps in place to the cadence she feels. "She looks cute, don't she?" says Locky McCormick, the burly fisherman. Stella (Locky's girlfriend) bristles. And so does Black, since, on the site of goods processed and exchanged, where she stands next to the bachelor local doctor, Black now sees Belinda as both chattel and daughter.

Everyone leaves, Locky and others for a party, Black and Aggie for the

train that will speed her to another of her kin. Black worries about Belinda alone in the mill. “Nobody’d bother stealin’ her,” Aggie snaps. Playing at dark comedy, Aggie uses *stealin’* rather than *kidnappin’* to annoy her brother and derogate Belinda. Unintentionally, though, she concedes that “things” have value, and Black can infer what, thanks to Hollywood censorship, Aggie cannot say: “Nobody’d bother stealin’ her... virginity.” For Black McDonald, *her* virginity and *her* fertility represent *his* property.

Locky returns alone to the mill. “Look what I brought you,” he says to Belinda. She draws near and places her hand near the *f* holes of the stolen fiddle he bows so roughly. The rasping chords constitute a *danse macabre* as Locky, in a cruel and grotesque parody of seduction, approaches Belinda, then seizes her. Here *Johnny Belinda* turns into a notably frank motion picture: it will portray the rape that follows *as* rape – and boldly so, and harshly so.

Until the advent of the Production Code Administration in 1934, rape had been at once screen perennial and screen puzzle. Though rapists had usually been degenerates and morons, like Popeye in *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933), even the corncob scene of Paramount’s adaptation of *Sanctuary* had baffled Miriam Hopkins. “Jean, are my legs opened at the right angle?” she asked Jean Negulesco, her “technical advisor” on the rape. “Shouldn’t my dress be up higher? Do I scream? And are my eyes opened in terror of what I see? Or do I close my eyes and let things happen? Jean, do I enjoy it?” With that, Negulesco later recalled, “the laughter exploded all around.”⁶

Like Hopkins, the Motion Picture Production Code also confounded seduction and rape.

II. 3. *Seduction or Rape*

- A. They should never be more than suggested, and only when essential for the plot, and even then never shown by explicit method.
- B. They are never the proper subject for comedy.

Seduction or Rape, persuasion or force, pleasure or pain. The “undecidability” of *Seduction or Rape*, on screen and off, endured well into the 1940s, when Warner Bros. assigned Irmgard von Cube and Allen Vincent to adapt *Johnny Belinda* for the screen. “Every time I see one of the numerous pictures in popular movies or magazines showing an anthropomorphous ape or a powerful, bearlike masculine creature with a completely helpless female in his arms,” Helene Deutsch wrote in 1946,

⁶ Jean Negulesco, *Things I Did and Things I Think I Did* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 92.

“I am reminded of my old favorite speculation: thus it was that primitive man took possession of woman and subjected her to sexual desire.” Locky indeed appears ursine as he crooks his arms and spreads his fingers and reaches out for the defenseless Belinda, saying, “I caught a seagull once... It had – the same scared look.” And, according to the 29 March 1947 screenplay, he seizes Belinda and “kisses her savagely.” But *Johnny Belinda* was no *King Kong*. The long low-angle shadows and the struggle of Belinda before the fade out suggest that the rape will have no silver lining, and that what Deutsch called “the powerful embrace of the prehensile arms” and “the defensive counterpressure” will not induce “strong pleasure sensations in the woman’s entire body.”⁷

Three transitional shots follow the fade out on Locky and Belinda. An aerial shot of the Cape Breton shore uses water as the “mark” of sexual discharge. Standard Hollywood iconography. The next two shots are raw and novel, one a distant shot, the other a closeup. Belinda pushes a wheelbarrow along a bleak landscape ruled by desiccated fence posts and stumps, and in both long shot and closeup the phallic shapes that bisect the frame convey not only her awareness of male dominance, but also her

⁷ 1930 Production Code, quoted in Leonard J. Leff and Jerold Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 285; Helene Deutsch, *The Psychology of Women: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1994), 222–23; Irmgard von Cube and Allen Vincent, *Johnny Belinda*, Screenplay, 29 Mar. 1947, United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, MSS 99AN Series 1.2, Box 208, page 45; subsequent references to this and the 22 Mar. 1947, 1 Aug. 1947, and 22 Aug. 1947 screenplays will be cited parenthetically within the text. As mediators between film and audience, posters and ads for *Johnny Belinda* spoke (in code) of rape – the fear, the pain, the sad consequences. “A story that has sensation written all over it! Never a picture like it! So daring it must be seen – this story of shame that came out of the shadows.” In the strong slanted lines of the key art, Locky McCormick towers over Belinda with his arm crooked and his fingers spread; she cowers, but with arm crooked and fingers spread, as though, at least graphically, per Helene Deutsch, what follows were “natural,” as though once Warner executives had seen what Warner producers had done, they were nonplussed about whether the shame that comes out of the shadows was his, hers, ours, theirs, or no one’s (Warner Bros. Pressbook [undated, unpaginated], *Johnny Belinda*, United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 1968–1989, Microfilm). *Johnny Belinda* nonetheless foreshadowed – and authorized – the candor of Warners’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), which the Production Code office approved with the understanding that the ads would forgo the sensational. “I think Joe [Breen] felt he was letting us down very easy as far as the seal requirements went,” Elia Kazan told Jack Warner, “and didn’t want to be put further on the spot by the Ads which might, as the ‘BELINDA’ Ads did, be selling the rape scene” (Kazan, Letter to Jack L. Warner, 7 Dec. 1950, *A Streetcar Named Desire* file, Motion Picture Association of America Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills).

separation from the audience and – more important – from herself. The three transitional shots were apparently added during production as replacements for a more conventional scene between father and daughter. “It was the only time in my experience that an actor (Charles Bickford) argued against his scene,” Jean Negulesco, the director of *Johnny Belinda*, wrote. “‘Unnecessary to the story – a silent mood shot of Belinda’s day’s work on the farm will be more significant.’”⁸

The three transitional shots nullify the prospect of “pleasure sensations” and, because of Belinda’s manifest innocence, make *Johnny Belinda* a “woman’s picture” in more ways than one. Rather than another word for intercourse, or seduction, or masked pleasure, rape in *Johnny Belinda* constitutes an “act of cutting, of dividing the flesh, destroying its wholeness, hence the subject,” an act that “alienates the victim from herself *and is meant to do so.*”⁹ Thus *Johnny Belinda* draws a line infrequently seen in the period, even in the social sciences of the period. Moreover, as the final reels of the picture show, the heroine suffers acute emotional suffering because of the “cultural conditioning” that silences her version of the assault. In *Johnny Belinda*, rape becomes the negation of female desire and female voice, *rape* and not *seduction*, force and not persuasion.

The rape creates enormous compassion for Belinda McDonald. As the introductory monologue hints, though, rape belongs to a larger and more disturbing pattern in the film. Belinda’s education, however elementary, functions as her initiation into the adult world and thus, potentially, her acquisition of the independence and “looks” of the postwar woman. As an abusive correction to the limits of female autonomy, the rape shows us the price that man may put on that new freedom. It also offers proof of how woman and womanhood threaten man and, potentially, manhood. The “broad consensus” of postwar America notwithstanding, one scene after another reveals an anxiety over gender and gender roles.

In reel one, for instance, Locky McCormick passes by a young woman (Dolly) who guts fish. (She has a “repetition job” typical of the ones that

⁸ Negulesco, 127. In *Things I Did and Things I Think I Did* Negulesco does not identify the scene. *Johnny Belinda* has only one unforgettable “silent mood shot,” though, and it occurs immediately after the fade out on the rape.

⁹ Mieke Bal, “The Rape of Narrative and the Narrative of Rape: Speech Acts and Body Language in Judges,” *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 20. On rape and negation, see Coppélia Kahn, “Rape, Repression, and Narrative Form in *Le Devoir de Violence* and *La Vie et Demie*,” in *Rape and Representation*, eds. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 150; see also “Mourning and Melancholia” in Sigmund Freud, *Therapy and Technique*, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

women had before and after – but less so during – World War II; despite her presence in the work force, she also has a name that reinscribes her in the austere sexual economy of the introductory monologue.) Once Locky fiddles with her scarf, and her feelings, he runs into Pacquet. Locky’s catch has been too small, says the local entrepreneur, fanning two fingers three inches apart; he also pokes Locky’s chest to italicize the point. Locky slaps Pacquet’s stomach, and then, leveling the long stem of a pipe at him, he threatens to gut him. Like the appearance of the Author God, this scene on the dock, alluding to size and evisceration, overdetermines and lays open the brittleness of masculinity.

As Roger Horrocks (among others) has noted, masculinity must ever convey the message, “I am not a woman,”¹⁰ and indeed both the tender Doctor Richardson and the violent Locky McCormick have an investment in sexual difference, an investment that uses Belinda as collateral. For instance, Belinda does not recognize her “nature” until the doctor and (in another sense) Locky school her. Only days after the rape, the doctor confesses to her that the war “and all that came after” caused him to “lose faith in everything, myself, too.” Belinda does not respond, and he goes on. The longer he goes on, the more he reminds us that it was his attention, early on, that gave Belinda an awareness of her social and sexual role as a woman, and thus fit her to hear his confession and thus assure that his weakness does not jeopardize his manhood. “I need you,” he says, another endangered male who crooks his arms and spreads his fingers and reaches out for her. “Oh, Belinda, don’t let me think I’ve failed again.” The plea calls on Belinda to make her mark, the crosshatch that shows she has done as she was ordered.

Later, Doctor Richardson asks to have Belinda, sad and distant, “looked at” by a specialist. Her father accedes, and the prospect of visiting nearby Charlottetown perks her up.¹¹ On arrival in the town – whose late model automobiles on the fringe of one shot fix the time as contemporaneous with the production of the picture – she and Richardson come on a Nova Scotian marching band with players dressed in kilts. Belinda looks puzzled. Having learned to identify the man by his mark, she signs, “Women?” “Oh, no,” Richardson responds, “men.” Belinda smiles, tentatively. Once the marching band passes, Belinda and the doctor peer into a store window at “an array of frilly lingerie of all descriptions, wispy stockings, girdles. A little on one side, a legless

¹⁰ Roger Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies, and Realities* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994), 33.

¹¹ The screenplays rather than the film identify the place as Charlottetown.

manikin posing seductively, smiling blankly, clad in nothing but a girdle and brassiere of black lace.” Though the film tones down the 22 August 1947 screenplay, the “array” restores the gender boundary that the musicians have transgressed: it associates women with adornment and fetishism and (in so far as the “array” connotes “plenitude”) fertility. Belinda answers the question, what do women want? She asks for the scarf she sees in the window, and when the doctor buys it, she smiles full force.

In his Charlottetown office, Doctor Gray (part physician, part scientist, or *Naturforscher*, literally “nature-poker”) examines Belinda’s throat and ears, then searches lower and discovers the pregnancy that, seemingly, valorizes the rape. As Kaja Silverman says in *The Acoustic Mirror*, the pregnancy

gives Belinda what psychoanalysis is always quick to propose as the final solution to the problem of female desire, the one thing able both to make good woman’s lack and to give her an ideologically recognizable and coherent “content” – a baby. That “supplement” also provides her with a surrogate voice, capable of emitting that most exemplary of female sounds (at least within classic cinema): the cry.¹²

That voice proves astonishingly dogmatic. When she learns of her pregnancy, for example, Belinda tells Doctor Richardson that she will call her baby Johnny. Her assertion contravenes medical science and its representative, her doctor mentor, who says, “But, Belinda, you... Well, if you want it so much I guess you’ll have a boy.” Following Silverman, one could argue that in the patrilineal world of Cape Breton (where, when Doctor Peterson retires, Doctor Richardson replaces him) Belinda wants her child to have the power that her “cultural conditioning” has led her to associate with the male. One could also argue, though, that in an era of song lyrics that presupposed male hegemony (“Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa/Men have named you”), Belinda has crossed gender boundaries by assuming for herself the power of naming. It will hardly be the only power she claims before the picture ends.

In the 29 March 1947 screenplay draft, as Belinda sweats and writhes in labor, Doctor Gray presides and Doctor Richardson attends. In the film, Richardson alone functions as obstetrician, a change that enlarged his part and determined that he would not play nurse to Gray’s doctor. Richardson was probably too “feminized” already for studio tastes. He was gentle and genteel; moreover, he was played by Lew Ayres, who rather famously

¹² Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 69.

had been the voice of pacifism in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and a conscientious objector during World War II. “Scenes of *actual child birth*, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented,” the Production Code read, and, by forcing the producers to minimize the shots of Belinda, the censors maximized the shots of Doctor Richardson. He was the male hand of science, the hero of the picture, the one who, merely assisted by the patient, delivered the baby solo.

Johnny Belinda should never have recovered from the name of the baby, Johnny Belinda, an affront to the patrilineal world of Cape Breton and, along with the posters and publicity and reviews that trumpeted the name, a confirmation of the confusion that nags at gender throughout the text. Both the heroine and the picture nonetheless soldier on. After the arrival of Johnny, for instance, when the farm needs more hands than ever before, the story has Belinda retire to the house to care for her baby and (her shining hair suggests) her appearance. She does not wear the new look of postwar fashion, the new look that put women in high heels, narrow toes, wired brassieres, and wide skirts, the new look that restricted movement and comfort.¹³ Instead, she wears her best manners: when she has a visitor, she plays Betty Crocker – she dresses like her, *looks* like her – and offers her guest fresh-baked cookies.

Weeks pass. An apparently fragile masculinity propels Locky to visit Johnny, and at the house, as he examines and (*sotto voce*) crows about the robust health of the child, Black slowly senses that the fisherman has raped Belinda and fathered her son. He and Locky come to blows along the edge of a cliff, where Black, pushed, falls to his death. There are no witnesses. Belinda mourns, but, again, soldiers on. And Locky pursues Stella, Doctor Richardson’s nurse.

Stella works for the doctor as nurse–housekeeper, a dual role that denoted both the bind of postwar women and a common perception among them that one role (the nurse) was good training for another (the housekeeper as wife). Stella yearns for the doctor. “I gave myself a permanent,” she says to him in the 29 March 1947 screenplay. “Very

¹³ Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 204. In *Mildred Pierce*, produced by Jerry Wald, who also produced *Johnny Belinda*, Mildred was caught between career and home, between the old look (the working woman) and the new. When the audience sees her on top of a ladder, cleaning a light fixture in the restaurant she will soon open, she wears a masculine-looking flannel shirt, a tight straight skirt, and high heels – the woman “being” (below the waist), the woman “doing” (above), her wardrobe caught in the cultural crosscurrents. The dapper and idle Monte Beragon tries to persuade her to stop working and come to the beach house, and when he complains about her spending too many hours at her job, the narrative offers yet another instance of the shift in gender balance.

dangerous,” he responds, aware that she adores him. He brandishes a medical textbook: “a ‘permanent wave, improperly administered, may result in the hair breaking off at the roots.’ However,” he concludes the lecture, using science to destroy her self-esteem, “I suppose there’s no harm done – as long as you don’t look into a mirror” (57). Undeterred, Stella continues her pursuit by inventing a chest pain. The doctor holds the stethoscope to her chest, no longer covered by her blouse, and she breathes as directed, “so deeply it’s a sigh. Shoulders bare above a lacey [sic] slip, she looks rather attractive – but Davidson [later changed to Richardson] has dissected too many females at medical school to be affected by this peaches-and-cream expanse” (60). The nexus of “females” and “cadavers” portends her barrenness, and the valuation (or devaluation) society places on it. Such scenes, as Mary Ann Doane and others have noted, have a long history in American movies, so Hollywood censorship was not the sole reason that this one vanished from the picture. Instead, it may have been cut because the man’s sway over the woman was so cruel and so transparent, or because the coolness of the doctor played queerly into the “feminization” of his character.

Though Locky apparently has musk to spare, he weds Stella not only for her inheritance, but also for her fecundity. Soon, however, the relationship founders. “A man wants children,” Locky gruffly tells her near the end of the picture, “and I want him [Johnny]. Something in ’ere wants him and by the godfrey I’ll have ’im.” He needs the child – the boy, Johnny – to prove at least to himself that he can perform sexually, for Stella has not conceived in the twelve or so months they have been wed, and, in the postwar 1940s, when sex succeeds war as a “potent sign of manliness,” when the courts begin to view the fetus as a legal entity rather than “a part of the mother,” children validate and valorize manhood.¹⁴ Locky’s, in other words, was “the problem of male desire.”

In the 29 March 1947 screenplay, Locky and Stella turn for redress to the local tribunal on matters domestic, the Ladies’ Saturday Club, but the

¹⁴ Froma I. Zeitlin, “On Ravishing Urns: Keats in his Tradition,” in Higgins (see note 9), 279. In 1946, as *Johnny Belinda* entered pre-production, a federal district court held that a viable fetus born alive could recover damages in the event of injury. Intended to provide education and medical assistance for children damaged before they were legal persons, *Bombrest v. Kotz* was called “the most spectacular abrupt reversal of a well settled rule in the whole history of the law of torts” (Lawrence J. Nelson, quoted in Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 87). For fetal-rights advocates, Bordo argues, “pregnant women are not subjects at all (neither under the law nor in the zeitgeist) while fetuses are *super*-subjects. It is as though the subjectivity of the pregnant body were siphoned from it and emptied into fetal life” (88).

script produces the matriarchs only to mock them, once with the “almost grotesque spectacle” the ladies present (“about twenty women squeezed into miniature seats [of a schoolroom], ample bosoms bearing down on desk-tops, posteriors bulging into aisles”) (133), and then with their decision to take Johnny from his mother. In the film as released, Locky petitions the town selectmen to declare Belinda unfit so that *her* child may become *his* property. Pacquet chairs the meeting that settles the question. Patrimony was the business of men: the law of the Father (“by the godfrey” was Production Code cant for “by God”) authorized the law of the father.

Belinda shoots Locky dead as he tries to “steal” the boy. When the police charge her, though, she will not tell why she has killed her victim. Stella knows, and tells. Her words denote seduction, her sobs connote rape, and both words and sobs silence the “mans/laughter” (Tania Modleski’s word) that could doom Belinda. The final sequence has an unmistakable symmetry: the degradation of Belinda McDonald has occurred at the hands of man, and the redemption of Belinda McDonald occurs at the hands of woman. Sisterhood was, of course, a common enough theme in the woman’s film of the 1940s: Eve Arden supports Joan Crawford throughout *Mildred Pierce*; Hattie McDaniel, though admittedly a stereotype, treats Claudette Colbert more as friend than employer in *Since You Went Away*; and David Wayne so admires Katharine Hepburn for winning over her maid, her secretary, and her client (Judy Holliday) in *Adam’s Rib* that (he says) he “may even go out and become a woman.” None of these characters, however, plays so pivotal a role as Stella in *Johnny Belinda*. Stella literally stands up for Belinda and thus dramatizes the female kin bonds that, according to Walsh, accounts for the appeal of the woman’s picture.¹⁵ In a story that both champions and fears womanhood, Stella’s action represents an important strain of contemporary feminism in postwar America.

Gradually, though, Doctor Richardson steps in to translate the emotionalism of Stella’s outburst into the quasi-legalisms the court may use to give Belinda her freedom; the court – not Stella – will have the last word. For good measure Richardson adds that Belinda placed maternal impulses over divine law. The impassioned defense, which tests the bounds of the Production Code (“Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation”), wins over the judge whose verdict reminds Nova Scotians (in the 22 August 1947

¹⁵ Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1988); Walsh, *Women’s Film*, 110.

screenplay) “that justice in this Dominion will always defend the private citizen against those who would interfere with his rights – and his dignity as a human being” (150A). Though the court harshly judges Locky – a subversion of the charge against Belinda, a subversion that allows rape to be spoken – it also underlines the sexual hierarchy on which the “good order” of Cape Breton is based; after all, males run the court (defense, prosecution, judge, bailiff, jury) and they intend to run the world beyond it.

Though *Johnny Belinda* struggles to make masculinity and femininity as natural and complementary as the flora and fauna of Cape Breton, quotation marks persistently surround “masculinity” and “femininity” as surely as they do the “Cape Breton” of Ft. Bragg and Mendicino. In the denouement, as elsewhere, an aura of gender anxiety and confusion lingers on. When Belinda asks for her baby so that they and Richardson and Aggie can return to the farm and mill (and to the Hollywood happy ending), she signs “Johnny.”¹⁶ The meaning, however, appears indeterminate. Has she accepted her “natural” role as mother in the culture? Or – her father dead, her assailant vilified, and her doctor friend bankrupt and broken – has she used that unique coalescence of silence and speech to assert her otherness and her lack, in other words her womanhood, which, according to Julia Kristeva, “disturbs identity, system, order”?¹⁷ *Johnny Belinda* turns, here and throughout, on undecidability.

What contemporary postwar audiences “heard” when *Johnny Belinda* “spoke” depended not only on the audiences’ attitudes toward gender and gender roles, but also on the way the audiences read the several texts of the picture. Some audiences, for instance, inescapably read the picture and the heroine against the backdrop of the endless publicity about its star, Jane Wyman. The source of such “news” was the syndicated gossip column and the fan magazine, and its reach was widespread.

Like the romance novel, the fanzine (so called) freed the woman to

¹⁶ In the final scene of the play on which the screenwriters based the picture, Belinda says, “John-ny” (Elmer Harris, *Johnny Belinda*, Mimeographed playscript [undated], United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, MSS 99AN Series 1.2, Box 208, Folder 1). In the 29 Mar. 1947 screenplay, as the prosecutor batters Richardson (the putative father of Johnny), suddenly “one single inarticulate outcry pierc[es] the air – a wailing tortured, guttural, protest.” Belinda says, “No!!” In the 22 Aug. 1947 shooting script (and also the film) Belinda does not speak.

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

serve herself rather than her husband or children; as Janice Radway says, the sheer act of reading was an assertion of independence.¹⁸ Like *Johnny Belinda*, though, the content of the fan magazine was hardly wholly conservative, especially when it featured female stars. On screen, the latter usually portrayed conventional, ordinary, or even mute women, and when (like Katharine Hepburn) they took on an unconventional or independent character, they were often cast against an actor (like Spencer Tracy) whose unabridged masculinity could moderate their high spirits and restore notions of sexual difference. On the other hand, the female star was usually billed above the title, and often, in the woman's film, above her male counterpart. More important, no matter how prosaic, or punished, or "inferior" the character she played, the glamour of the publicity about her accorded her a power and influence that began with fashion and coiffure but, arguably, ended with mores and conduct.

In the case of Jane Wyman and *Johnny Belinda*, the tension between on screen and off was acute. Though Belinda McDonald was apparently meek and mild, "Jane Wyman" was a celebrated and outspoken movie star whose public and private life was increasingly under her own control. And, because her private life became increasingly public during the general release of the picture, her presence in the narrative, like the narrative itself, offers yet another persuasive instance of the undecidability of the film and the postwar American culture that produced it.

Hollywood packaged stars as it packaged movies. Harlow was the "Blonde Bombshell" and Betty Grable the "Million Dollar Legs" and Jane Wyman (no sex goddess even in her early years as a blonde) "the perfect wife." Defined early on less by her talent than her husband, she had wed Ronald Reagan in January 1940. Two years later, a *Photoplay* story on the couple had been called "Love among the Reagans," and, in the war years, the press had lavished attention on her as spouse – on her soldier-husband in service (stationed in the Los Angeles suburbs at "Fort Roach" with the "Culver City Commandos"), on her daughter Maureen (born 1941), on her son Michael (adopted 1945), on her devotion to family and country. The Reagans were the ideal couple when there was no other in Hollywood, when in fact the only one in memory was Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, whose divorce had torn apart the movie colony.

Mary Pickford based her fame on many roles, Jane Wyman on only one – wife. By 1947, however, when Warner cast her as Belinda McDonald,

¹⁸ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

her career and her life had undergone a sea change. She had won acclaim in *The Lost Weekend* (1945) and an Academy Award nomination for *The Yearling* (1946), and her producer and Warner cohorts predicted that her work in *Johnny Belinda* would consolidate her success. At home there were fissures. “We wanted children,” she told one fan magazine when she and her husband adopted Michael, “but that was to be an incident in the overall development of our lives together.” In other words, like many other women in the postwar years, she would not abandon the workplace for her family. In the aftermath of *The Yearling* and *The Lost Weekend*, pictures she made on loan to other studios, she was renegotiating her Warners contract to reflect her independence as a performer. The contract bound her to twenty pictures over ten years, with her salary escalating handsomely by thirds: \$6,666 per week, then \$8,333, and finally \$10,000, with star billing guaranteed.¹⁹ When enduring stars like Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant were earning on average \$15,000, Jane Wyman’s salary was an index of her strength.

Since his discharge from service, Reagan had seen his career undergo an eclipse, and, having fewer screen roles than he had had before the war, he immersed himself in the workings of the Screen Actors Guild, the story of which has been recorded in memoirs, biographies, and such recent books as *The Politics of Glamour*. “Without resorting to notes, he reeled off facts and figures with an ease that flabbergasted members of the audience,” Hedda Hopper reported after his appearance at a SAG rally in December 1946. According to Sterling Hayden, he was “a one-man battalion.” In April 1947, he invited two FBI agents into his living room so that he could provide “information regarding the activities of some members of the Guild who [the Reagans] suspected were carrying on Communist party work.”²⁰ Wyman never had the zeal or even the interest her husband had in political action, though, and by September 1947 SAG politics lay near the core of their marital problems.

Gossip columns and fan magazines (which liked a divorce no less than a honeymoon) told readers that in Autumn 1947 Reagan went north to see Wyman on the set of *Johnny Belinda*. A surviving relic of the visit records the “temperature” of the couple. One evening, on stationery that read

¹⁹ Joe Morella and Edward Z. Epstein, *Jane Wyman: A Biography* (New York: Delacorte, 1985), 89; Jane Wyman, Contract with Warner Bros, 11 Aug. 1947, United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, MSS 99AN Series 1.7, Warner Bros. Contract and Copyright File, Box 38, Folder 221.

²⁰ David Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour: Ideology and Democracy in the Screen Actors Guild* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 48, 50.

“Mrs. Ronald Reagan,” Reagan recorded in longhand the “minutes” of a SAG board meeting, Reagan (chair) and Wyman and Agnes Moorehead in attendance. (Reagan was by then president and Wyman and Moorehead board members of SAG; Moorehead played Aggie in *Johnny Belinda*.) As the meeting opened, “motion was made, duly seconded & unanimously carried that three martinis should be ordered. (No discussion).” As the meeting continued, Wyman cursed an absent board member. “Discussion was held on this latter subject & ways & means were explored as to how social standing of Miss Wyman could be restored.” The group agreed that the absent board member was “a ‘shit-heel’ in the first place & motion was made, seconded & carried to order 3 more martinis.” Then, as Reagan started “yapping and yelping” about being on location, the tongue (and pencil) thickened.

Jane wanted to know what in h--l I was gettin’ in a uproar about – I wasn’ doin any work. Aggie told her not to change the subject & to lay off I wassa d--n pres. And where in h--l did she get off talking to the d--n pres with all that disrespect. I said lay off my wife thassa woman I love – we decided have 7 more martinis.²¹

The comedy wheezes under the strain of its correspondences to life. The sandpapery character that Moorehead plays in *Johnny Belinda* bosses the character that Wyman plays, just as the character that Wyman plays (a mute) stands about as others argue over her. The charge that “I wasn’ doing any work” also struck home. Though once based on many screen parts, his fame – along with his presence on location in northern California – was now increasingly based on only one.

In December 1947, one month after photography on *Johnny Belinda* ended, the Reagans separated. The press announced it, and the gossip columns and movie magazines hollered it; the February 1948 story in *Photoplay* was called “Those Fightin’ Reagans.” The couple temporarily reconciled, then he moved out in May 1948, the month that *Silver Screen* editorialized against “moody” Jane Wyman, the season that Reagan

²¹ “Minutes of Meeting Board of Dir. S.A.G. Tues. Sept. 9 [1947] – 6 P.M.,” Agnes Moorehead Scrapbook (unpaged), Agnes Moorehead Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. On location for *Johnny Belinda* in fall 1947, the cast and crew stayed about eighteen miles away from the town of Fort Bragg, at an inn that was (according to the producer) “a real rough-house place.” The company was forever “yapping and yelping about the accommodations,” Jerry Wald told another Warner executive (Wald, Letter to Steve Trilling, 5 Sept. 1947, *Johnny Belinda* File, Box 24, Jerry Wald Collection, Special Collections, University Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles).

quipped, tellingly, “I think I’ll name *Johnny Belinda* as the correspondent.”²²

Johnny Belinda was meanwhile gathering dust in a studio vault. Though the Warners archive nowhere accounts for the delay, Jack Warner (according to Wyman) disliked the picture and would not let director Jean Negulesco edit the final cut.²³ (Negulesco and Warner were not friendly, and though the production was a happy one for Negulesco, it was his last for Warner Bros.) Also, Warners may have had doubts about how to market the picture, since Wyman was not yet a star and television was making hash of the Hollywood marketplace. But neither reason seems compelling when weighed against the cost of keeping a nonproducing million dollar asset in inventory. So one factor – though not the sole factor – may have been Warners’ fear that the headlines about Wyman’s divorce would adversely affect the reception of her portrayal of a compliant woman, indeed (since *Belinda* was ostensibly still in her teens) a compliant child-woman.

Whatever the reason, *Johnny Belinda* was released in October 1948. The following year Wyman won an Academy Award for *Belinda* and a divorce from her husband. In one sense the announcement about the latter was overture to the ruptures and resistances of the 1950s, the era of togetherness that found expression in family vacations, family restaurants, family rooms, family cars, and family films, an era that consecrated *family* as one more response to the lapse of patriarchal control that had occurred in the 1940s, when many women had entered the work place and stayed, when the number of underage girls arrested for sex offenses rose, when prostitution and venereal disease flourished, and when, between 1940 and 1946, the divorce rate more than doubled. Less stigma than fact of life, divorce may have been key; it allowed the woman, publicly, to represent herself *as herself* and not as an accessory of her husband. “She [Wyman] and Reagan engaged in continued arguments on his political views,” the *Los Angeles Times* said, reporting on the divorce proceedings. “Despite her lack of interest in his political activities, Miss Wyman continued, Reagan insisted that she attend meetings with him and that she be present during discussions among his friends. But her own ideas, she complained, ‘were never considered important.’”²⁴

An audience that read Jane Wyman as an icon of postwar feminine independence could also read *Johnny Belinda* against the grain, just as an audience that ignored the “scandal” about Jane Wyman could also read

²² Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (New York: Putnam’s, 1982), 62.

²³ Morella, 128.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 128–29.

Belinda McDonald as an icon of postwar feminine submission. Because of the period, because of the star, because of the story, and because of publicity the studio could and (re the divorce) could not hold back, *Johnny Belinda* was a notably porous text.

The gender anxiety and confusion of both the era and the picture notwithstanding, conservative audiences for *Johnny Belinda* would probably not have had doubts about its politics: Johnny Belinda (unlike Michael Reagan) was *not* “an incident” in the development of the life of his mother; rather, he *was* her life. Hollywood often chose to portray marriage as woman’s good fortune and childbearing her glory, and, unquestionably, *Johnny Belinda* dilates on the wonder and joy of reproduction. Early on, as she watches the doctor deliver a calf on the McDonalds’ farm, Belinda exalts motherhood. “Motionless,” the 22 August 1947 screenplay describes Belinda, the audience seeing her for the first time, “holding lamp – but in her face a stirring power of expression – pity – fear – changing mercurially – then suddenly a smile” (17). She shows that her “natural” role was motherhood, her reaction underscored in the action of the doctor, whose “natural” role was the control and “creation” of motherhood. Maternity appears to function as *sine qua non* in *Johnny Belinda*, fertility as quod erat demonstrandum. So extraordinary was the fertility of Belinda that she became pregnant on the basis of one sexual encounter, with one man, Locky. So blessed was the shine of motherhood that Aggie’s hostility toward “the dummy” turned into affection and awe when Belinda became pregnant. And so devastating was the barrenness of Stella that, to compensate Locky, she co-operated in “stealin’” Johnny. The theme appears to reach even the margins of the picture. “Spry for a woman had her ‘arteries’ cut out,” one older woman remarks on another she sees at the dance in the mill. Though her cohort whispers the correct word (*ovaries*) in her ear, *ovaries* seem tantamount to *arteries* in the story: in an era of pronatalism, an era when the fertility rate for Caucasian women peaked, when psychologists called “feminists” neurotic, and when women’s magazines enshrined the housewife and mother, the loss of the reproductive capacity denoted the loss of the life force.

Reproduction lies near the centre of *Johnny Belinda*, a picture that forcibly ties destiny to female anatomy. Even the 29 March 1947 screenplay, intended for the actors’ eyes only, exaggerates the “naturalness” of that assumption. When the pregnant Belinda says that she will have a baby boy, Doctor Richardson smiles, “amused at the primitive directness of her reaction” (91). The word “primitive” shows again that

Johnny was no “incident.” If as D’Ann Campbell says, though, the “broad consensus” favored the woman working as the conventional mother or housewife, one wonders what compelled *Johnny Belinda* to enforce the consensus (so called) with such draconian intensity.

The answer lies in part in the culture that produced *Johnny Belinda*. He was man-of-the-house and breadwinner, in literature, films, and the popular press of 1946, and *she* was “naive, dependent, childlike, [and] self-abnegating.”²⁵ Such “propaganda” continued well into 1947 and 1948. In *The Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (the 1947 best seller) Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham blamed the increasing rates of juvenile delinquency, divorce, murder, crime, and alcoholism on married women in the workplace. In the late 1940s, when more and more women went to college and more and more women had jobs beyond the home, many women, for whatever reason, also dropped out of college or exited the work force. They were hardly the “lost,” not to the popular press. According to “Most likely to Succeed” in *Good Housekeeping* in June 1948, only months before Warner Bros. released *Johnny Belinda*, “the girl who has a C average in college...has the potentiality of achieving as real a success as, and perhaps a more humanly necessary success than, the girl who is regarded with something like awe by her classmates.”²⁶ Is the apologia for the C average a description, or a prescription? And what happens to the girl with the A average? “What in the world interests women?” *Time* magazine asked in an advertisement pitched to potential advertisers in June 1947, only months before Warners put *Johnny Belinda* into production. “Each week 1,500,000 women, most of them wives and daughters of the 1,800,000 *Time*-reading men, prove they are interested in just about all the news in the world a busy person needs to know.” Men were men, and women were... wives and daughters.

More than one year after Doctor Richardson starts tutoring her, Belinda still cannot read (or apparently write) cursive, and once she becomes pregnant, she stops using her bedroom chalkboard. *Johnny Belinda* tends to suggest that she needs only a scant education, passing as she does from one paternal relationship to another, from father to doctor. Finally, though, the hyperbole of procreation and the call of the hearth turns against the picture. As in *The Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, the rhetoric of overkill in *Johnny Belinda* hints at resistance to the broad consensus and

²⁵ Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda during World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 2.

²⁶ Judith Tarcher, “Most likely to Succeed,” *Good Housekeeping*, June 1948, 33+.

raises doubts about the contentment of the postwar domesticated woman; the very end of the picture only nourishes the uncertainty.

As though the writers had sensed the strength of the heroine, the close of the 22 August 1947 shooting script of *Johnny Belinda* had dulled the edge of the heroine's independence and determination by having Doctor Richardson drive the buggy home from the courthouse. "[H]olding reins firmly in one hand, his other goes out to Belinda – takes hers in a warm, strong clasp. As Belinda turns to him, all her love in her eyes, buggy starts" ("152–55").

The ability of a helicopter to fly backwards and gain altitude at the same time was employed in photographing the final scene of "Johnny Belinda." The scene is a traveling shot showing a buggy being driven along the rugged coastline. The camera pulled back and up going out to sea. The buggy reduced further and further in the distance leaving as a final impression only a small segment of earth on which the story was played. (Press Release)

Only the appearance of those late model automobiles on the fringe of that one shot in Charlottetown would have shown that Warners had set *Johnny Belinda* in the present, and by the end of the picture that brief shot would have been long forgotten. The buggy traveling along a road with no automobiles or utility poles, along with the camera "back and up going out to sea," would ally the end of the picture with the consciousness that opened it and that contextualized the ensuing narrative as male. The fade out, in other words, would ask the audience to "fly backwards" to a preindustrial world when, according to the lyrics of the song that won the Oscar that year, women were women...²⁷

As cut and released, however, the coda of *Johnny Belinda* contained strong marks of resistance. The final cut does not use the moony shot ("all her love in her eyes") of Belinda. Instead, set along a horizon on land rather than sea, it shows Belinda and the others in a long shot that stresses the return to the McDonald farm, the farm that Black McDonald has

²⁷ Warner Bros. Press Release (Untitled), 3 Mar. 1948, *Johnny Belinda*, United Artists Collection, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, 168-1989, Microfilm. Written by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, "Buttons and Bows" was the hit song from *The Paleface* (1948), where Bob Hope sings, "Gimme Eastern trimmin' / where women are women / in high silk hose / and peekaboo clothes / and French perfume / that rocks the room / and I'm all yours / in buttons and bows." Hope plays the dentist (and coward) "Painless" Potter, and Jane Russell plays the lawless Calamity Jane. In the opening reel, when Potter fumbles the reins and harness, Jane drives their covered wagon. Though the sharpshooting Jane twice saves Potter from death, she fumbles the reins and harness in the last reel and goes face down in dirt. The "outlaw" has been tamed, the picture ends.

passed along to Belinda, in a late 1940s version of primogeniture that plainly favors daughters no less than sons. In the buggy, too, the “family” of Doctor Richardson, Belinda, Aggie, and Johnny looks more jerry-built than nuclear or traditional; furthermore, it looks unlikely to solidify the masculinist patterns that elsewhere the film weaves.

As Doctor Richardson says (in the 1 August 1947 shooting script), he was wounded in the war and, afterwards, in love. “It’s called ‘not being able to readjust oneself’” (16), he confesses to Black McDonald. Though at the close he and Belinda favor the heterosexual couple that populates the fadeout of so many Hollywood pictures, *Johnny Belinda* never suggests that they will marry. Doctor Richardson has lost his moorings in the world, and, during the picture, his practice and his belongings. “Oh, Belinda, don’t let me think I’ve failed again,” he once said. As the one acknowledged “feminine” male in the picture and only recently the laughing stock of the town, he once more looks to Belinda for succor. Belinda, then, will be “mother” and “father” to the doctor and Johnny: she will help the doctor readjust, and she will teach Johnny how to farm and how to shoot. She will turn pronatalism inside out, in other words, showing the postwar audience the postwar phenomenon of the capable single mother, the woman who (like Jane Wyman) faces a brave new world without fear.

When the “good order” of patriarchal authority finds itself under siege, as happens in *Johnny Belinda*, as happened in the culture beyond the movie theater, those in control will use all the machinery at hand – from the horror of rape to the exaltation of motherhood – to recover its power. Though *Johnny Belinda* asserts gender borders and reasserts patriarchal authority, it does so with a self-defeating inconsistency. *Box Office* told readers in 1947 that *Johnny Belinda* “will go on the ‘must see’ list of most women [but that] doesn’t mean it is entirely a woman’s picture; there’s plenty for the males, most especially action, and atmosphere!”²⁸ The trade paper does not define the “atmosphere” – and perhaps just as well. The crosswinds of the postwar 1940s would probably have made the elaboration as undecidable as *Johnny Belinda* itself.

²⁸ Warner Bros. Pressbook (undated, unpagged), *Johnny Belinda*, United Artists Collection,