



Too Much: Melodrama on Film

Madonna of the Seven Moons

Madonna of the Seven Moons

Director: Arthur Crabtree
Production Company: Gainsborough Pictures
In Charge of Production: Maurice Ostrer
Producer: R.J. Minney
Associate Producer: R.E. Dearing
Production Manager: Harold Richmond
Assistant Director: Douglas Peirce *
2nd Assistant Director: D. Baker *
3rd Assistant Director: Ernest Morris *
Continuity: Rita Coleman *
Assistant Continuity: Doreen Hargreaves *
Scenario Editor: Brock Williams
Screenplay: Roland Pertwee
From the Novel by: Margery Lawrence
Director of Photography: Jack Cox
Camera Operator: Harry Rose *
Focus Pullers: F.A. McCombie, W. Matthews, J. Singer
Clapper Loaders: R. Digby, A. Munk
Stills: Ted Reed *
Backing: Albert Jullion *
Assistant Backing: Albert J. Whitlock *
Models: P. Guidobaldi *
Editor: Lito Carruthers
Assistant Editor: Francis Edge *
2nd Assistant Editor: J. Devis *
Art Director: Andrew Mazzei
Assistant Art Director: John Gow *
Draughtsmen: John Elphick, Harry White, Peter Murton, Charles Bishop, Len Townsend, Stephen Chapman, I. Willis *
Costumes: Elizabeth Haffenden
Incidental Music: Hans May
Music Director: Louis Levy
Sound Supervisor: B.C. Sewell
Sound Recordist: Les Hammond *
Sound Camera Operator: L. Coleman *
Dubbing Editor: Eric Wood *
Religious Scenes Supervisor: Father Carey
Cast:
Phyllis Calvert (*Maddalena Labardi/Rosanna*)
Stewart Granger (*Nino Barucci*)
Patricia Roc (*Angela Labardi*)
Peter Glenville (*Sandro Barucci*)
John Stuart (*Giuseppe Labardi*)
Nancy Price (*Mama Barucci*)
Reginald Tate (*Dr Charles Ackroyd*)
Jean Kent (*Vittoria*)
Peter Murray Hill (*Jimmy Logan*)
Dulcie Gray (*Nesta Logan*)
Alan Haines (*Evelyn*)
Hilda Bayley (*Mrs Fiske*)
Evelyn Darvell (*Millie Fiske*)
Amy Veness (*Tessa, the Labardis' maid*)
Robert Speaight (*priest*)
Eliot Makeham (*Bossi, the fence*)
Danny Green (*Scorpi*)
Helen Haye (*mother superior*)
Thea Wells (*convent sister*) *
UK 1944
110 mins
35mm

* Uncredited

A BFI National Archive print

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Contemporary critics almost universally derided *Madonna of the Seven Moons* for its ridiculous plot, crude melodramatics and 'purple passages'. To dismiss melodrama for its 'melodramatics', or a women's picture for its fanciful plot, is rather like dismissing a Western for relying on guns and shoot-outs. But critics who find the clichés and stereotypes of other genres perfectly acceptable often balk at the constituents of the women's picture. This may be because the genre is so blatantly constructed as fantasy, eschewing the realist mechanisms by which the Western or the gangster film, for example, acquire an illusion of authenticity. Or it could have something to do with the sexually and emotionally charged world projected by women's pictures. British critics, steeped in a culture which distrusts formal excess, were characteristically hostile to the Gainsborough melodramas' lack of coherence, and also to their subject matter: sadism, perverse sexual desire and sexual violence. Although the films always finally came down on the side of moral restraint, they were nevertheless seen to break the rules of the British 'quality' film: realism, aesthetic coherence and humanism.

Yet Gainsborough in the '40s saw itself as providing a quality product; good entertainment, certainly, but also technical accomplishment and formal innovation were to be the characteristics of the films with which they intended to challenge American domination of the world market. These were the terms in which *Madonna of the Seven Moons* was marketed: as magnificent entertainment, a remarkable technical achievement, and promoting British ideas and ideals. Its convoluted plot, covering a time span of almost twenty years and several different Italian locations, provided excellent material for the art direction and costume design which were the studio's hallmarks, while its psychological theme (the sexual and emotional conflicts of a 'schizophrenic' wife and mother) offered obvious dramatic opportunities in the way of lighting effects.

In terms of promoting British values, the story was ideal. Based on a respected British novel by Margery Lawrence, it revolved around a young Italian girl, Maddalena, whose repressed Catholic background renders her incapable of negotiating her sexual desires, awakened prematurely when she is raped by a gypsy. This childhood trauma causes her 'split personality': on the surface she leads a pious life as a respectable wife and mother, but every so often her repressed desire surfaces, and she flees respectability to live as the libidinous gypsy mistress of a Florentine jewel thief. Maddalena's predicament is treated sympathetically: she is seen as a sacrificial victim of a repressive social order which produces excess and conflict. Her daughter Angela, on the other hand, educated in England, represents the 'new woman': active, independent, capable of expressing her sexuality yet able to take care of herself and 'handle' men, she is one of several English characters in the film who possess the correct middle-class values of honesty, integrity and adventurous spirit (moderated, of course, by restraint) by which all actions are judged.

Madonna is classic '40s Gainsborough material: sensational subject matter presented much more explicitly than was usual in British cinema, set within a moral framework very much in line with the vision of a 'New Britain' projected

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Splendor in the Grass Mon 24 Nov 18:00
Now, Voyager Mon 24 Nov 20:40
Mamma Roma Fri 28 Nov 18:15 (+ intro)
Olivia Fri 28 Nov 20:45
Spring in a Small Town Xiǎochéng zhī chūn
Sat 29 Nov 12:40
Volter Sat 29 Nov 18:10
Madame X Sat 29 Nov 20:40
Leave Her to Heaven Sun 30 Nov 15:10
Imitation of Life
Tue 2 Dec 18:00 (+ intro); Sat 20 Dec 15:10
Beyond Camp: The Queer Life and Afterlife of the Hollywood Melodrama
Wed 3 Dec 18:15
Tea and Sympathy
Wed 3 Dec 20:25; Sun 7 Dec 18:15
Lola Montès Sat 6 Dec 14:30; Wed 17 Dec 20:40
Way Down East
Sun 7 Dec 12:15; Tue 16 Dec 17:50 (+ intro by Pamela Hutchinson, film critic and historian)
New Women Xin nuxing
Tue 9 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by Cynthia Gu, Milk Tea Films); Sat 20 Dec 20:45
The Heiress Wed 10 Dec 20:35; Sat 27 Dec 15:00
La otra The Other One
Fri 12 Dec 18:15 (+ intro by Camilla Baier, co-founder and curator of Invisible Women); Thu 18 Dec 20:40
The Silences of the Palace Samt El Koussour
Sat 13 Dec 20:30; Thu 18 Dec 18:00 (+ intro by Ifriqiya Cinema)
The Cloud-Capped Star Meghe Dhaka Tara
Sun 14 Dec 18:15; Sun 28 Dec 11:50
UK Premiere of Restoration: Beyond Oblivion
Más Allá Del Olvido
Fri 19 Dec 18:15; Mon 29 Dec 20:50
The Seventh Veil
Fri 19 Dec 20:35; Sun 28 Dec 15:00
Floating Clouds Ukigumo
Sun 21 Dec 18:15; Tue 30 Dec 20:30
Portrait of Jennie
Mon 22 Dec 18:20; Sat 27 Dec 18:15
Pandora and the Flying Dutchman
Mon 22 Dec 20:30; Mon 29 Dec 18:10
Rouge Yin Ji Kwan
Sat 27 Dec 20:50; Tue 30 Dec 18:10

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during and immediately after the Second World War. During the war, the value of fiction films as a powerful mass medium for propaganda had been proved, and *Madonna* is clearly, on one level, British propaganda: 'British' values are validated at the expense of a foreign culture, which is seen as corrupt, repressive, excessive and inferior. Yet the film is contradictory on this level; its most highly charged scenes, and those which afford the most visual pleasure, belong in the main to the old, corrupt order, to the 'low-life' sequences in which Maddalena lives out her passionate affair with her reprobate lover. The power of these 'purple passages' seriously undermines the film's propaganda value, a problem which lies less in its aesthetic competence or incompetence than in the nature of the women's picture itself.

In this, a 'feminine' world view is projected – often, though not always – through the perspective of a central female character whose desires structure and order (or disorder) the narrative. The imagery of female desire is drawn from popular romantic fiction – objects which take on erotic significance, music which indicates sexual or emotional moods, clothes which express social status or libidinous states of mind. The narrative task is to contain this desire, to find an acceptable balance, but the intensity of the focus on female desire makes this hard to accomplish, which is why so many women's pictures have uneasy, unsatisfactory endings which leave a sense of loss rather than resolution. *Madonna* conforms to this pattern. Its scenario of doomed desire is rich in the iconography of romance: Maddalena's elegant, restrained clothes as chaste wife and mother are contrasted with the voluptuous gypsy clothes she wears as the wild Rosanna; her expensive Labardi jewellery with the cheap earrings which signify her life of passion; the classical music she plays to her husband with the popular romantic melody whistled by her lover; and the cross which governs her pious life with the rose of sexual desire.

These objects and themes circulate in the film, linking the two sides of Maddalena's life and marking the conflict which must be resolved. In the closing moments of the film, although the conflict has been resolved at the story level, Maddalena dies with the signs of her impossible existence, the cross and the rose, on her breast, leaving the audience with an image of contradiction. *Madonna*'s ending is less a triumphant celebration of order restored than a mourning for the loss of those values which new, 'progressive' order has swept away.

Pam Cook, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1985