

The Appeal of the English Rose: An Analysis of British Female Stardom and Marketability in 20th Century Britain Through the Career of Deborah Kerr

This essay aims to look at how the British film industry of the 1940s/1950s produced stars, the stereotypes of the British female star and how the roles available to these actresses changed with the cultural, economic, political and social climate. I will analyse these subjects through the case study of actress Deborah Kerr, and ask whether her depiction as an English rose hindered or excelled her career.

To begin, we must look at what creates a star. According to Richard Dyer (1986, p.18), “stars function as embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives”. Two of the key social categories suggested by Dyer are nationality and gender, which I will be applying to Deborah Kerr as a British female actress. This analysis will begin by discussing what an English Rose is and its construction under the male gaze and relationship with race. I will then use this basis to examine the epithet’s effect on Kerr’s stardom in both Britain and Hollywood. The final part of this essay will look at the interaction between the two main social categories of nationality and gender, and another social categorization: age.

The Creation of an English Rose

An English Rose can be defined as a “typically attractive light complexioned girl” (Dent, 2012, p.445). It was first found in Basil Hood’s drama ‘Merrie England’ (1902) in which he describes a garden where “women are the flowers” and the “sweetest blossom” or “fairest Queen” is the “perfect English Rose” (Dent, 2012, p.445). This epithet is used to describe women from many different careers or time periods but I would suggest due to its beginnings in the theatre, is why it has primarily come to be associated with “fine-boned film actresses” (Dent, 2012, p.445); of which Deborah Kerr is one.

Before discussing how Kerr became attached to this description of the English Rose, we should note that Kerr was in fact Scottish. Born in Glasgow, she spent her early years growing up in the affluent Scottish coastal town of Helensborough before moving to England to be educated in Bristol then Weston-Super-Mare (Street, 2018)). As Williams (2017, p.) states, “Kerr’s Scottish origins were seldom emphasised and were overwritten instead with the hegemonic national identity of ‘English Rose’”. Englishness and Britishness are correlated, particularly to American audiences, something that is still seen today in American films where a ‘British accent’ is almost always meaning a Received Pronunciation (RP) English accent. This can be described as the problematic “‘Anglo-British tradition’, which makes Englishness the hegemonic identity of Britishness while confining other nationalities within it to a ‘Celtic fringe’” (Williams, 2017, p.14). Part of this is due to the fact that most of the British cinema industry, particularly in the 1940s, was produced in England and therefore a lot of Britain’s stars were anglicised.

Another reason for Deborah Kerr’s success as an English Rose, aside from physically fitting the description, would be her accent. Due to growing up in England, Kerr did not have a strong Scottish accent and I would argue this aided her success in both Britain and particularly America in the 1940s. Prior to the fall of the British Empire in the 1950s, the British Empire covered nearly a quarter of the world and the “British’ accent signified stature” (McGhee and Simple, 2018). The rise of the

mid-atlantic accent, a mix between both the English RP and 'Hollywood' accent, in the 1940s also meant that American audiences were more attuned to Kerr's voice. This made these audiences feel favourable towards Kerr due to the status and 'good person' stereotype that came with her accent. The anglicisation of the British star system and dominance of 'English' in relation to Deborah Kerr's identity is in fact, not intentionally, shown through my lack of further acknowledgment of Kerr's Scottish roots in the rest of this analysis.

Male Gaze and Race

Beginning her screen career in Britain in the early 1940s, Kerr's early roles and early stardom were often described through the male gaze. Words reported in articles at the time such as "class" and "lady" suggest she is the type of woman to marry whilst "delicacy" and "gentility" suggested she was someone who needed rescuing by a man (Soares, 2012). As reported in Time magazine, Kerr could be defined as "everything Englishmen mean when they become lyrical about roses" (Mooring, 1947), a quote that played into the well known epithet of the English Rose.

Another aspect of this sweet nature associated with that of the English rose and Kerr, was her often description as a virgin. "Sweet virgin, you have a spiritual face" (Deleyto, 2001), the words famously, although only reportedly, spoken by Gabriel Pascal when casting Kerr in her first film role Major Barbara (1941) came to coincidentally define her roles through the 40s. The description of Kerr as a virgin again relates to the Victorian and early 20th century idea that the man is in control of their woman (Blank, 2007). The virgin is not yet in touch with their sexuality, sexuality being something that most women couldn't express until during and after the Second World War. It is interesting that this description of virgin was used towards the beginning of Kerr's career, before her roles changed to represent the changing role of women in society which I will reflect on shortly.

We must also analyse what Kerr's star persona and the English Rose image mean in terms of race. French critic Jose Bulnes (1986) once described Kerr as a "petite piece de porcelaine". The use of the word 'porcelaine' suggests both the pale colour of her skin but also the supposed fragility of her character. The idea of fragility suggests she is someone to care for or look after, which plays into the role of women in the early 20th century as property of their husbands as opposed to people of their own right. The comparison to porcelain, a white translucent ceramic, not only literally describes her skin but also supports Williams (2017, p.198) idea of the "emphatic whiteness of British female stardom". The nomenclature of English Rose is also rooted in Britain's colonial past and is "far from being a neutral descriptive term; one does not have to dig very deep to find its imperial antecedence" (Williams, 2017, p.198). It is this whiteness that was also deemed inherently English in the 1940s, a time before segregation was abolished. A review in 1965 described Kerr as "so English you'd send a gunboat at her slightest distress" (Evans, 1965) which recalls colonial myths "centered on the protection and rescue of fragile white women" (Williams, 2017, p.198).

WWII and Post-War Britain

The historical context of when Kerr's career started is important to note. As Deleyto (2001, p.120) notes, Kerr's initial star persona was a continuation of the "stereotype of the Victorian lady" one which "in terms of both its femininity and its Englishness, was revived in order to attempt to soothe

postwar anxieties and frustrations through a fantasised return to the certainties and safe ideals of the past” (Deleyto, 2001, p.120).

However, the roles for women were changing during the Second World War. Women were given more opportunities, more responsibilities and more freedom. Looking at data from the Wartime Social Survey of 1943, the majority of cinema goers were women, with cinema audiences being made up of 48% women, 32% men and 20% children. With almost half of the cinema audience being women, the films shown and the female characters in the films needed to represent the more modern woman. As Deleyto (2001, p.122) notes, “the victorian model of femininity, while powerful and still attractive to audiences, was insufficient to encompass women’s gains in social and sexual independence”

One of Kerr’s first films which hinted towards the ideals of the more modern woman was *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943). In this Powell and Presburger film, she played three different women. Each role in the film displays characteristics of the ideal British woman, one who is “terral, sensible, forthright, independent-spirited” (Deleyto, 2001, p.121). Part of Kerr’s star appeal was that she was marketable to both men and women. Not only did she embody the male ideal of the British woman, she also spoke to the changing characteristics of the everyday British woman. In *Colonel Blimp*, the use of the same actress for all three female roles in this film, supports the idea that “English men always fall in love with the same type of woman” (Deleyto, 2001, p.122) and “Kerr is there to express Powell’s ideal but also to challenge romantic idealization” (Deleyto, 2001, p.122). The Second World war changed women’s perceptions towards sexuality and their attitudes towards society; women’s work was beginning to be recognised and women ‘don’t necessarily belong in the home and that they can also fight the good fight’ (Keisha, 2016). *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* subtly hints at these changes, for example the character of Edith rebels against her family and seeks to start a life in which she earns her own money and has more control. The character of Angela takes on male characteristics; she is gutsy and determined, even insisting on being called by the male name ‘Johnny’.

Deborah Kerr’s roles, and the stardom that had become synonymous with them, showed the subtle changes to women’s place in society but an important aspect of her appeal to the female audience was also her unthreatening nature. Although the characters she was playing were of a more sexually free woman, she wasn’t a ‘sexy’ star or a ‘bad girl’. She was easy to relate to in post-war Britain, still holding up the classic ideals of the British woman whilst also being open to her sexuality, without it being a defining feature of her stardom as it was for other British actresses such as Jean Kent or Deborah Dors.

However, it was not until Kerr’s role in *Black Narcissus* that her stereotypical character, the embodiment of the modern British woman, that of a “complex, often contradictory female type” (Deleyto, 2001, p.122) would be created and propel her to world-wide stardom. Reuniting with Powell and Presburger, her role as Sister Clodagh was controversial at the time due to its depiction of religion and sexuality. *Black Narcissus* can be defined as a “gauntlet-thrower” film, using Harper’s (2010, p. 126) three categorisations of films about women. These films are “intended to disrupt certainties about female identity and power, and which are innovatory in their sexual politics” (2010, p.126), as seen by *Black Narcissus*’ placing amongst the changing social and cultural environment of

post-war Britain. As Harper (2010, p.126) also states, “such risk-taking films make female viewers question who they are, and make male viewers question what they want”. I would argue that the casting of Deborah Kerr, an actress who is both desirable to men and inspirational to women, was a key aspect in making *Black Narcissus* so appealing to the late 1940s cinema audience.

The role of Sister Clodagh embodied all the contradictions of Kerr’s star persona. Kerr was seen as the embodiment of “white spirituality” (Deleyto, 2001, p.123) not only down to the porcelain colour of her skin as previously discussed but also the “decorum, decency and kindness” (Deleyto, 2001, p.123) of her characters’ spirituality. This notion of white spirituality is not often synonymous with sexuality. As Dyer (1997) states, “having sex and sexual desire, are not very white” and Kerr carries these contradictions with her in both the role of Sister Clodagh and her star persona. Deleyto (2001, p.123) suggests that Kerr and Clodagh both symbolise a “moment of change.., the movement from spirituality to desire”. *Black Narcissus* was also the first film to attract American audiences and the Hollywood system to Kerr’s stardom. Therefore, we can also see that she “moved from representing an idea of Englishness fraught with contradictions to being co-opted not only literally by Hollywood but also as part of filmic discourses of US imperial power” (Deleyto, 2001, p.124).

Going to Hollywood

To understand Deborah Kerr’s role in Hollywood, we must first look at how the Hollywood star system worked in comparison to the British star system. It has been argued that Britain does not have a flourishing star system partly because of its links with the theatre (Street, 2009). During the early stages of British Cinema, actors and actresses developed from the West End, most likely due to the close location between it and the major production companies. However, in America, the theatre scene in Broadway was on a completely different coast, making the ease of transition from stage to screen more difficult.

It has also been said that Hollywood stars had a “sheer sexual attractiveness” and the “way in which the Hollywood star system managed to articulate this sexual desirability to a powerfully developed ideology of individualism” (Street, 2009, p.137) was what made its films so appealing. We only have to look at the career of Kerr’s contemporary Marilyn Monroe to appreciate the differences in display of sexuality between British and Hollywood stars. These differences could be behind why Deborah Kerr, although beginning to play more sexually curious women in Britain, was at first typecast into the roll of proper English lady in Hollywood.

After the success of *Black Narcissus*, Kerr’s contract was bought by MGM and she moved to Hollywood. At the beginning of the 1950s, it was the “more rosily inflected British female stars” (Williams, 2017, p.37) such as Kerr and Jean Simmons who succeeded most in Hollywood, “fulfilling rather than confounding cultural expectations of English femininity” (Williams, 2017, p.37). Whilst Hollywood stars were expected to be sexy, English actresses were still expected to uphold certain moral qualities. Again, comparing the success of Kerr’s early 1950s career to that of her British contemporary Diana Dors shows the resistance of American audiences to yet accept English actresses as Hollywood sex symbols. Even when Kerr played characters who were not English, “the phrases moral fortitude and delicate exterior continued to define her screen personality and began to be

associated with her Englishness” (Deleyto, 2001, p.120). This can be seen in films such as *Please Believe Me* (1950).

Despite hints at a move to more risky roles as seen in *Black Narcissus*, MGM restricted her to more typical English or heritage roles in films such as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Young Bess* (1952) and *Julius Caesar* (1953). I would argue that her perceived suitability for heritage roles in Hollywood was in part due to the social implications of the British empire at the time. In the 1950s, under the leadership of Winston Churchill, the British Empire began to decline. Global power was in a balance between the US and Soviet Union, whilst most of Europe, which had held power for so long, was in ruin after the war (Abernathy, 2000). Therefore, the typical English lady stereotype was becoming synonymous with the past, and Deborah Kerr was the perfect fit to embody the historical English stereotype.

However, Kerr was growing tired of being typecast as a “refined English lady” (Street, 2018, p.8), something which was being used to “ensure consistency of box office returns” (Street, 2018, p.8) but made her feel her skills as an actor were not being used to their full potential. Kerr left her contract with MGM in 1953 to pursue more controversial roles, beginning with the film *From Here to Eternity* (1953). Kerr remarked in 1953 that she was “free at last. I’ll never again play the part of a woman who never existed ... In the future, parts I choose are going to be about women who are alive. Real women ... It’s going to be interesting” (Street, 2018, p.83). *From Here to Eternity* was a hit at the time, despite its controversial beach sex scene with Kerr and Burt Lancaster and Kerr’s role as a sexual leading lady. As Deleyto (2001, p.128) states, “there was nothing new about Kerr’s sexuality that had not already been part of her character’s personalities in earlier film” but her sexuality had previously remained just under the surface, whereas for the first time Kerr’s “gentleness, class and restraint gave way to passion and sexual anger” (Deleyto, 2001, p.128) on the beach.

Interestingly, Kerr returned to her more typical roles after this, but she had now proven her versatility as an actress and had “saved her career by playing openly sexual women” (Denby, 2007). This gave her the freedom to choose her roles and the recognition and respect from American and British audiences alike. Her biggest hit *The King and I* (1956) received acclaim and her return to playing a nun in *Heaven Knows, Mr Allison* (1957), proved incredibly popular, leading her to be included in a list of top 25 stars in the world in both 1957/58 for the first time since 1942 (*Motion Picture Herald*, 1958). The only real flops of her career in the 1950s came in 1959 with *The Journey and Count Your Blessings*. Both of these films were made at MGM, as part of a contractual agreement between Kerr and the company when leaving, that she must make two later films with them.

Turning 40 in the 1960s

It has been said that “no one loves a film star who looks forty’ or, heaven forbid, older” (Williams, 2017, p.24). The issue of age in acting is primarily one concerning women, supported by () statement that “It was rare for ageing characters to have a role that is more than merely functional within a narrative, more so for the ageing female character” (Mortimer, 2016, p.204).

Kerr turned 40 in the early 60s, and the first instance of her roles adapting due to her age came with the film *The Innocents* (1961) in which she plays Miss Giddens, an unmarried, 40 year old woman,

hired as a governess to care for two young children who appear to be under the influence of spirits (Slide, 2013). Critic Edmund Wilson suggest that the governess is “sexually repressed, that the ghosts are nothing more than her neurotic hallucinations” (Slide, 2013, p.41), which adheres to Bell and Williams (2010, p.101) assertion that “older women are positioned outside the sexual economy, the re-establishment of their feminity limited to activities considered, within patriarchal logic, ‘appropriate’ to their age”; in this case looking after children. Her role as a single, older isolated woman plays in to the stereotype of the “spinster”; a “demented and isolated woman”(Mortimer, 2016, p.209) as apposed to the other usual role, and more positive figuration, for older actresses of the “grandmother”, someone who has had children of their own. As Brennan argues, “the old woman as grandmother/spinster is an extension of the virgin/whore dichotomy that recurs throughout Western culture” (Brenna, 2005, p.2). Interestingly, it was the role of the virgin that Kerr was frequently typecast as in her earlier career.

The 1960s were also a time of distinctive cultural change, in which “the decade ushered in an affluent society in which traditional attitudes toward gender and sexuality, the feminine body ... appeared to be crumbling in the wake of the permissive society” (Bell and Williams, 2010, p.111). Younger actresses such as Rita Tushingham and Julie Christie were becoming embodiments of swinging femininity (Landy, 2010, p.111). The actress market was more saturated and this talent “was allowed to flourish in a much less restricted way” (Murphy, 1992, p.36). Not only was Deborah Kerr dealing with the issue of ageing in cinema, she also had to compete with an increase in younger, more uninhibited actresses. Kerr’s classic depiction of English beauty and femininity was now outdated and not as marketable. The 1960s also saw a rise in male characters in British cinema, with most themes being concerned with masculine problems and the gritty working class, the two antithesis of Kerr’s stardom (Street, 2009).

Her career continued through the 1960s by playing the roles of scorned wives/governesses and mostly contained themes around loveless marriages, such as in *Marriage on The Rocks* (1965) or *The Arrangement* (1969). In 1967 she defied expectations by becoming the oldest Bond Girl at age 45 until Monica Belluci at the age of 50 in *Spectre* (2015) (Saville, 2014). Returning to her Scottish roots, she played a brash and exaggerated caricature of a Scottish woman. Whilst the film was popular, her role was not critically well received and as Norman (in Saville, 2014) states “there are a handful of films after *The Innocents* which I think show she’s in a position where her career is winding down”.

Under pressure from younger actresses, Kerr appeared nude in the film *The Gypsy Moths* (1969), this being the only time she appeared nude in her whole career. There have been suggestions that she was bullied (Nathan in Saville, 2014) into it, in response to the notion that the “sexual aspect of identity is reserved only for the younger women” (Bell and Williams, 2010, p.101). She wanted to prove to herself that she still had a sexuality that people would respond to, even in a more “creatively daring world into which she probably didn’t fit” (Nathan in Saville, 2014).

This pressure scared her, with Kerr deciding to follow the often traditional route of older British actresses into the theatre, a place where audiences are often older and roles more varied for the older woman (Akbar, 2009). As Street notes, many actors, particularly in the 1970s, “did not trust the screen or the onerous trappings of associated stardom” (Street, 2009, p.14) which the theatre, particularly British theatre, did not have. As actress Glenda Jackson once remarked, ‘One marvellous

thing about Britain is that you can do your work and go home afterwards with no pressure on you to live off-stage what you represent on it' (Walker, 1985, p.111). Kerr remained in theatre, only returning to the screen once more in *The Assam Garden* (1985), to play yet another embodiment of the "spinster"; cold, recently widowed Mrs Graham, who attempts to find some warmth and joy in her later life. Despite the narrative being centered around an older woman, ageing is represented with "diminishing of powers, or loss of material resources, friends, health" (Bell and Williams, 2010, p.170). This fear of growing older that the character represents is also reflected in Kerr's own fear of acting when older. Kerr once remarked in 1975 whilst discussing the pressures of acting, "it's an unbelievable terror, a kind of masochistic madness. The older you get, the easier it should be but it isn't" (Daily Telegraph, 2007).

Conclusion

One of the most fascinating aspects of Kerr's British stardom is her determination to break out of the stereotype bestowed on her so early on in her career. Whilst in the early 1940s, being considered an English Rose was desirable, through this analysis we have come to see that this description has provided some challenges in her career. Kerr strived to challenge "the core identity that audiences liked and expected" (Street, 2018, p.131) of her, evident in the extreme differences in her roles. On the one hand, Kerr was considered a delicate actress, and yet she also delivered in both her career aspirations and her roles a level of determination that doesn't match with the fragility given by the epithet of the English Rose.

I would argue that although the image of the English Rose presented its obstacles, particularly in Hollywood in relation to typecasting, Kerr would not have appealed to the American audience if it were not for her 'Britishness' in the first place. Although she attempted to deviate from this English Rose image, she did admit that it remained "something innate in me" (Street, 2018, p.142), and she was able to support her interest in darker roles by committing to box office successes in which she played a proper English lady. I don't believe that it was her 'Englishness' that led to the end of her screen career, but rather a changing society, in which she also had to contend with aging, that was responsible. The fact Deborah Kerr's career spanned over 50 years, making her a household name in both Britain and America, would in fact indicate "that her englishness did not constitute an obstacle for her but, rather, it became a fundamental reason of her success" (Deleyto, 2001, p.130).

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QUOVADIS (Mervyn LeRoy, US, 1951) Lygia

YOUNG BESS (George Sidney, US, 1953) Catherine Parr

JULIUS CAESAR (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, US, 1953) Portia

FROM HERE TO ETERNITY (Fred Zinnemann, US, 1953) Karen Holmes

THE KING AND I (Walter Lang, US, 1956) Anna Leonowens

HEAVEN KNOWS, MR ALLISON (John Huston, US, 1957) Sister Angela

THE INNOCENTS (Jack Clayton, US/UK, 1961) Miss Giddens

MARRIAGE ON THE ROCKS (Jack Donohue, US, 1965) Valerie Edwards

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