SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY AS PRETTY WOMAN PART II?
Robert B. Ray argues that mainstream American cinema has often dealt with a serious social ill by reducing it to a personal matter. The impact of racism or anti-Semitism upon a few individuals is portrayed, then a tidy reconciliation is served up involving a convenient change of heart or show of good will. Unwary viewers may thus be lulled into conceiving that complex difficulties can be cured just as magically outside the Bijou.

Their inclination toward simplistic answers notwithstanding, the better "problem" films of the past—*Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), *Home of the Brave* (1949)—did at least manage to give hot issues a reasonable public airing. Not so the recent box-office smash, *Pretty Woman*, in which director Garry Marshall slickly disposes of substantive questions about prostitution and related degradations from an ideological stance to the right of Marabel Morgan (author of *Total Woman* who, if memory serves, advised housewives to greet the big guy home from the reality wars at her door, wearing little else but a smile).

*Pretty Woman* centers around a love affair between Edward (Richard Gere), a schizoid, acrophobic corporate raider, and Vivian (Julia Roberts), a leggy young hooker with the requisite heart of gold and a (supposedly) refreshing vulgarity that could gag a goat. Edward is visiting Los Angeles to pirate a shipyard away from its crusty owner (Ralph Bellamy, so crusty as to appear sclerosed). After being discarded over the phone by a live-in lover because of his selfishness, Edward leaves a rich-and-famous party in a narcissistic snit; grabs his lawyer's Lotus with the unheard-of idea of heading back to his posh hotel sans limo.

He promptly gets lost on the Sunset Strip and asks the street-walking Vivian for directions. She takes him on a madcap drive to the Regent Beverly Wilshire and winds up in his penthouse, hired for the night. By morning, he's clearly taken by her beauty, kooky candor, and bedroom skills (inferred throughout in the conven-
“vegging out” before the TV, barefoot walks in the park, and such. The generous spirit concealed by Viv’s crass facade likewise blossoms as Edward whisks her to four-star eateries, decks her in diamonds, and flies her to the San Francisco opera—where this ditsy Camille proves her sensitivity to the finer things by weeping buckets over her fictional alter ego in La Traviata.

When the week ends, Edward opts to co-own the shipyard with Bellamy so he can build “things” instead of tear them down. He also wants to set Viv up as his mistress—a big move for such an emotional isolationist but a painful putdown for Viv. When she was a kid, her mother often locked her in the attic for being bad, which she bore by imagining herself a princess, imprisoned in a tower by an evil queen, awaiting rescue by a handsome prince. Being a mistress doesn’t speak to Vivian’s script; it just makes her feel like Edward’s whore—which is sort of what she’s been all along. But, as director Michael Curtiz said while filming Casablanca, “Don’t worry what’s logical, I make it go so fast nobody will notice.”

Viv’s pragmatic roommate (pert Laura San Giacomo as a sexpot a bit more the worse for wear than the one she played in Sex, Lies, and Videotape) urges Viv to take Edward’s deal and forget about her moonbeam hopes; the only gal ever rescued by a handsome prince was “Cinderfuckingella.” But—“I want the fairytale!” decides Viv. Then he actually does rescue her—from the sleaze partner who tries to rape her in revenge for her having wrecked the shipyard deal by airing out Edward’s parched psyche.

Still, Edward can’t better his first offer—“It’s all I’m capable of...a very big step.” She refuses; now she loves him so much she can’t even sleep with him, so he slips her the $3,000 and leaves for the airport. Sad but reconstructed, Viv is about to depart for a new off-street life in San Francisco when Edward pulls up in his limo, climbs the fire escape, and shakily sweeps her off her feet. He asks what happens to the prince after he saves Viv’s bacon. “She rescues him right back!” chirps the happy ex-hooker brightly.

Viv’s rejoinder is the summary example of how Pretty Woman veils its exploitative agenda with fashionably feminist leftoid blather. In their pioneering work on psychoanalytic film criticism, Wolfenstein and Leites noted that movies were pervaded by “false appearances”; a screenplay’s unconscious scenario could be profitably probed by ascertaining what it attempted to reassure the viewer wasn’t the case it initially proposed.

When he first meets Vivian, Edward smugly exclaims, “You and I are such similar creatures—we both screw people for money.” Pretty Woman then submits that Edward’s cynicism masks a bruised but beautiful soul; he’s really a prince of a guy whose barracuda business practice stems from his character neurosis (his CEO father abandoned him after a messy divorce; Edward became a corporate raider by way of revenge, his first target the father’s company). As for his callous manipulation of women, he’s just another Mr. Uncommitted who doesn’t want to risk the pain of repeating his parents’ divorce.

For her part, Viv really is a plucky, off-beat lady whose better nature withered on the vine because her mother chronically rated her a bum, precipitating Viv’s bummed-out self-image and the yen for bum boyfriends that brought her to Los Angeles. Her harlotry is clearly provisional until some prince climbs her tower (or jumps on her bones). Meanwhile, she’s turned prostitution into free-spirited, street-level capitalism: calls her own tricks, has no pimp, uses no drugs, flosses her teeth, and practices irreprouachable safe sex—offering johns a choice of colored condoms.

The truths Pretty Woman seeks to reassure us out of recognizing are that prostitutes and raiders do indeed egregiously screw people for money, but raiders usually get away with it; that neither the habit of whoring or raiding is likely to be easily surrendered after a few convenient parent bashings of childhood wrongs cribbed
from a co-dependency handbook; that for all the pop-culture platitudes surrounding it, prostitution is no fun, no victimless crime, and is rather a humiliating, often deadly enterprise, usually thriving on collusion with corrupt patriarchal authority and hidden with the most profound victimization imaginable.3

One further pierces the film's cloaking devices to discover that Edward in the end is little changed from the crude emblem of unprincipled patriarchy he embodied at the beginning (his Trumpish vulgarity actually exceeds Viv's, with his relentless parvenu pursuit of the "best" rooms, meals, deals). His facile identification with Bellamy's benevolent elder industrialist merely leads him to cease dismantling companies in aid of building destroyers for the military/industrial complex.

Pretty Woman's recommendations on mutual "rescue" are crucial to its devious work of disavowal. Despite Viv's pretty concluding speech, the film implies that Edward needs little rescue from his circumstances—certainly not from his megabucks—only to become a trifile humanized by Viv's bawdy vitality and the "special" qualities he discerns in her but never fully articulates. (Intelligence certainly can't be one of them. Although he repeatedly remarks upon Viv's smarts, she is presented throughout the film as a decrebrate dingaling. Other women are likewise painted as brainless bimbettes, or bitches, or both. Of similar skewed visions of the feminine in recent movies, more presently.)

Vivian, on the other hand, desperately needs to be extricated from her trashed-out lifestyle. Her rescue fantasies are wickedly constructed as a "natural" thrust of feminine psychology (Marabel Morgan and the Freudian Right aren't far apart on this score)—as native as the ravenous desire for "things" Edward provokes, then fulfills through the magic of his lucre.

Viewers are cleverly put in Vivian's place as she plays pixellated Jane Eyre to Edward's laidback Rochester; she undergoes ritual testing of her worth by her raider Pygmalion. A Top Gunish (1986) worship of macho power informs this post-Reaganite reinvention of the myth. Pretty Woman valorizes its Pygmalion's glamor over that of his creation (someone pointed out that Gere's naked flesh is displayed more exuberantly than Roberts'). With Vivian, we goggle at the accoutrements of Edward's loot; wax awkward in the splendor of his hotel and the other fabulous habitats of the unrepentently wealthy; participate vicariously in her triumph when Edward finally rescues her from her mean streets.

Although a few convenient potshots are fired at Rodeo Drive conspicuous consumption, the summary proof of Viv's metamorphosis unquestionably is her ability to consume elegantly, endlessly. Pretty Woman preaches that once tutored, then backed in classy spending by the man of your dreams, you, too, can be transformed into the submissive Cinderfuckingrella of every rich lout's predatory dream. One intuitves that your job in his script ever after would be abiding cheerfully at home—an icon of passivity in a one-gal harem—waiting to service the sahib.

At one point, Edward tells a pliant store manager that Viv requires "major sucking up" because she intends to spend an "obscene" amount of cash. Edward orders the manager to perform upon Vivian's person a sublimated version of the service one assumes she has been enthusiastically performing upon his member every night. In the daisy chain of possession energized by Edward's phallic mastercard, Vivian herself has become an extension of this consummate prick's prick, synechode of his potency, the more desirable for miming his obscenely extravagant expenditures.

The ironic wife of Isaac Bashevis Singer's Enemies: A Love Story says: "If men had their way, every woman would lie down a prostitute and get up a virgin." To vast profit both in theatrical and videotape distribution, Pretty Woman has busily hawked this dubious vision of woman as hooker cum handmaiden, Madonna and Whore made one flesh. An enormous constituency of women with widely varying backgrounds has bought the vision as a harmless—even inevitable—fantasy, raising complex questions about its ideological program.

I recently described a subgenre of "pseudo-engaged" films, movies with overtly liberal premises that covertly mock, subvert, and/or co-opt the very progressive developments of the 1960s and 1970s they would seem to be refuting. Films like The Big Chill (1983) and Personal Best (1982) have been
bimbos/bitches, evidently in aid of recuperating the challenged patriarchal status quo.10

Pretty Woman’s hooker may be read as a tarnished cousin of the Tess McGill heroine of Working Girl, herself a reconstructed dumb blonde seeking to overcome the implied stigma of her working-class background. Tess’s chief asset—a knack for tuning into popular culture—is subtly attributed to her base origins. The film intimates that the parched spirit of its WASP executives will benefit from an injection of her barbarian blood once she learns to paper over her slob behavior with the upper-class signatures she lifts from her boss, Catherine Parker, in retaliation for the latter’s stealing a major project from her.

Tess’s progress is facilitated by an upper-class lover, Jack Trainer (!). But her ultimate “empowerment” is furnished by a patriarchal deus ex machina, titan of industry Oren Trask. Trask summarily fires Catherine and offers Tess the chance to “prove her mettle” by giving her an entry-level stockbroker’s job. It’s meagre bounty compared with what a man in Tess’s circumstances would have received, but she is overjoyed with this crumb from the corporate table.

Pretty Woman reprises many of Working Girl’s strategies, albeit in much cruder fashion. Whereas Tess only appears naive, Vivian is manifestly stupid. Unlike Tess, Vivian is definitively immured in her degraded profession, no matter how “independently” the film would have us believe she pursues it, and her need for masculine “rescue” more pronounced. Edward’s character conflates Trainer’s “new man” vulnerability with Trask’s omnipotent patriarch power. Edward’s exercise of his prerogatives is generally more arrogant, more fueled by rampant narcissism than is Trask’s. Pretty Woman implies that Vivian’s lumpen warmth will “tame” Edward’s egregious insensitivity, as Tess’s ample good nature will soften the harsh competitiveness of her male associates. One notes that in neither film is there any fundamental critique of rapacious corporate practice. As I have elsewhere suggested, the system only needs a little gentling up and democratic fine tuning à la Frank Capra through the earthy offices of the “working girl.”

Instructive parallels may also be drawn vis-à-vis the table turning between Tess and the mean-spirited Catherine in Working Girl and between Vivian and the snotty Rodeo Drive couturiers who refuse to attend her in Pretty Woman. In both films, once the lower-caste heroine acquires the cachets of “respectability” through male mediation, she humiliates her former female humiliator.11

Although some possibility for empathic cooperation is permitted between women of less favored class, women are depicted as only too willing to trample upon each other as they claw their way higher up the social ladder. One intuits a subliminal hint that, absent the rare arrival of Mr. Right, it is better that a working girl keep to her (diminished) place in the scheme of things, where girl-on-girl relationships are more satisfying and trustworthy, no matter how limited one’s opportunities or impoverished one’s circumstances.

Given its less disguised repellant sexist themes, why are legions of female viewers even more taken with Pretty Woman than with Working Girl? Perhaps they are unaware of the film’s Neanderthal intentions, due to the often described work of cinematic apparatus toward effacing dominant
borne ideology, so forth. My own informal survey, however, backs the impression of several other commentators that a surprising number of women with feminist backgrounds or sensibility, knowing they should know better, still have greatly—if guiltily—enjoyed *Pretty Woman*.

I speculate that the pleasure that many women have found in this film may very well articulate with the stringency of their lot today. During the several decades since the emergence of the new American feminism, the manner of a woman's entry into the workplace has been increasingly dictated not by the freest of choices but by the inability to obtain better education, the shortage of better jobs, and/or the declining earnings of other family members as the economic outlook has turned ever darker.

Significant numbers of women, particularly from the working and middle classes, continue to see their supposed "power" mocked by the grim realities of lower wages, problematic working conditions, sexism, and other inequities (off-the-job challenges to previously hard-won rights erosive of self-esteem will not be considered here). When it comes to married women, for all the wealthiest, the notion of "having it all" is particularly ironic, set against the heavy burdens of double employment as wage earner (even when work is enjoyed) and homemaker.

I am suggesting that quotidian drudgery in or out of marriage—*nota bene* the escalation of single-parent families and feminine poverty—may provide one spur for nurtured fantasies of rescue by an omnipotent, wealthy hunk *cum* patriarch to flourish. It seems especially pernicious in this context to suggest that the attraction of a contemporary Cinderfalla tale like *Pretty Woman* springs from some "natural" feminine psychic thrust toward passive dependent gratification. Look rather to a woman's exhaustion of spirit and cheating of hope; to disillusion given way to eroticized illusion of a better life through the dubious blandishments of penny dreadful romance.

In a much discussed *New York Times* piece, Daphne Merkin duly noted the untenability or downright speciousness of *Pretty Woman*'s premises, yet nonetheless concludes:

It appears that in the post-modernist, post-feminist closing decade of the 20th Century, we still need our myths, our amatory fictions; they help us endure.11

The need these fictions fulfill is regressive; the endurance they sustain demeaning. In choosing her prince, and the tainted fairytale he incar- nates, Vivian has simply exchanged one form of whoring for another.

**NOTES**

5. These issues were thoughtfully interrogated by Paul Schrader's *American Gigolo* (1980), which, ironically, starred Richard Gere as its corrupted, victimized prostitute anti-hero.
6. In orthodox Freudian theory, feminine rescue fantasies are grounded upon innate (presumably biologically determin-
ed) passive trends, with farther the perennial rescuer. The deeper unconscious predicament the damsel in distress classically craves rescue from is likely to be the pre-Oedipal symbiosis with her mother—a function of gender-specific difficulties in negotiating the vicissitudes of the Oedipal stage.
7. Viewers were similarly seduced into identifying with Charles Ryder's good fortune at being invited into the sacrosanct halls of privilege and prejudice in PBS's *Brideshead Revisited* series (see Harvey Greenberg, "Anti-Brideshead," *Forum of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 26 [1982], pp. 21–23).
10. In a variation on this theme, *Fatal Attraction* (1989) subverts the assertiveness of the working woman by portraying her as a frustrated, lunatic slasher.
11. In *Working Girl*, the heroine's genuine achievement in business, however mediated by men, enables her to put down her rival. Apposite to its cruder scenario, Vivian is enabled to turn the tables on the Rodeo Drive shopgirls mainly by the goodies conferred upon her through Edward's credit card.