

# Housewife's choice: *Woman in a Dressing Gown*

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What was the first sexy British film Frears remembers? '*Woman in a Dressing Gown*,' he says without hesitation. 'Actually, I don't think I ever saw *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, but its title always gave me a powerful erotic thrill.'

TO ANYONE WHO *has* seen it, Stephen Frears's response to *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957) seems laughably inappropriate. The dressing gown of the title is not the flimsy *négligé* of a seductress but a decidedly unerotic shapeless old housecoat worn by middle-aged housewife Amy Preston (Yvonne Mitchell), whose inability to find time to dress in the morning illustrates her poor organisational abilities, rather than a *déshabillé* sexuality. Amy aspires to be the perfect housewife but, despite several frantic attempts to get her house in order, never quite manages it. The *mise-en-scène* acts as a constant reminder of Amy's failure, showing her home crowded with piles of unironed laundry, unwashed plates and unfinished mending, all of which prompted Raymond Durgnat to describe the film as 'a rhapsody of bad housekeeping'.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Amy's husband Jim (Anthony Quayle) is having an affair with a young woman at work, Georgie (Sylvia Syms), who is neat, tidy and efficient; the absolute antithesis of Amy. On the surface, *Woman in a Dressing Gown* is a drama that counterpoints two different kinds of women: if Georgie is the ideal of 1950s femininity, serene, sexually attractive and 'mature', then Amy is its unacceptable face, scatty, scruffy and loud.<sup>3</sup> However, what prevents any simple reading of the film as purely an indictment of Amy as a bad housewife is, as Marcia Landy has argued, its insistent focus on 'the sights and sounds of Amy's life ... the visualization of her milieu'.<sup>4</sup>

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I teach film studies at the University of Hull. I have written on British film for the *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, the *Journal of Popular British Cinema* and the *Journal of Gender Studies* and I am currently completing a doctorate on the representation of women in the 1950s films of J. Lee Thompson. This interest sprang from spending countless afternoons watching the Channel 4 matinee when I should have been doing something more constructive with my time. I also harbour a secret crush on Stanley Baker, especially in *Hell Drivers*. *Melanie Williams*

Simply the fact that during most of the film we are with her rather than Jim or Georgie helps to skew our sympathies towards the character and prevent a one-dimensional portrayal of her as an object of contempt.

Yvonne Mitchell's bravura performance as Amy was the factor most frequently singled out for praise in contemporary reviews, but the distinctive landscape and atmosphere of Amy's world is primarily realised by J. Lee Thompson's direction. John Hill has noted how Thompson's baroque directorial style runs exactly counter to writer Ted Willis's more naturalistic bent.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Willis argued for a 'simple uncluttered approach' to drama, Thompson's direction of *Woman in a Dressing Gown* is a world away from the modesty and sobriety of Willis's preferences.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it was this kind of conspicuous direction that incurred the wrath of no less a cinema luminary than Jean-Luc Godard: 'It is putting it mildly to say that his style is as maddening as his heroine's behaviour. From beginning to end the film is an incredible debauch of camera movements as complex as they are silly and meaningless, and of cuts and changes in rhythm on cupboards closing and doors opening.'<sup>7</sup> I think Godard is right to make the link between the style of direction and its heroine (both 'maddening') but entirely wrong to cite this as one of the film's weaknesses. To employ a smooth style in filming Amy's world would detract from the complete realisation of that world from within. The 'cuts and changes in rhythm' are entirely appropriate for giving an idea of the bitty, piecemeal, having-several-things-on-the-go-at-once nature of housework. The choppiness of Thompson's style goes some way towards communicating the idea of the housewife's fragmented day and also, in her attempt to stay on top of it all, 'the frenzy so often a regular part of an apparently mediocre existence'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the frequent foregrounding of intermediary objects and the use of 'impossible' camera positions (from inside a cupboard or behind the cooker) are not the ostentatious showing off Godard proposes. Rather, they powerfully indicate a sense of claustrophobia and domestic entrapment, when we see Amy obscured by the toast rack or an unmade bed and her movement intercepted by washing dangling from a line or piles of ironing. Interestingly, these blocked and barred shot compositions irresistibly recall Thompson's film of the previous year, *Yield to the Night*, about a woman's last days in the condemned cell. Its shot of the condemned woman Mary Hilton looking through the rails of her bedstead, a visual trope of her incarceration behind bars, is repeated in *Woman in a Dressing Gown* with Amy, suggesting a similarity between the two women's situations despite their ostensible differences, one a real prisoner in the bare condemned cell, and the other a metaphorical prisoner in her own home.

Examining Godard's review further, it seems that his poor opinion of the

film has more to do with Anglophobia ('May the English lose the Middle East soon if the loss of their political power could restore their sense of beauty,' for example) and virulent misogyny. *Woman in a Dressing Gown* rejects Godard's suggestion that the basic situation 'should at least have been handled with humour. Alas! Alas! Alas! Cukor is not English'. Why is the possible abandonment and unhappiness of a middle-aged housewife an inherently funny subject, one might enquire. Instead *Woman in a Dressing Gown* both in style and the locus of its drama sympathetically attempts to enter the world of what Godard disparagingly calls a 'shrew' and a 'virago'. Looked at with this in mind, the film's frequent and striking use of extreme close-up and loud noises, singled out for opprobrium by Derek Hill in his review for *Tribune*, suggests another possible interpretation: 'Monstrous closeups of burnt toast and tea-cups fill the screen. Every speck of lather on Anthony Quayle's face is blown up to twenty times its size. China bangs, a radio blares, and a plate smashes with a crash that nearly bursts the loud speaker.'<sup>9</sup>

Hill, like Godard, fails to grasp the possible justification for Thompson's frequent focus on such mundane household items as squirting taps and button boxes. Thomas Elsasesser's essay on family melodrama, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', provides a clue to another way of looking at these shots. He notes how the peculiarly vivid visuals of melodrama can portray the characters' sublimated 'fetishist fixations', giving the example of Kyle Hadley in Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1956), who is accompanied by shots emphasising oil derricks, fast cars and bottles of alcohol, all symbolic reminders of his sexual impotence and the ways he tries to compensate for it.<sup>10</sup> In exactly the same way, *Woman in a Dressing Gown* reveals the 'fetishist fixations' of Amy – toast and teacups. Amy's identity as housewife is dependent on the successful execution of her household duties and that is why burning the toast or dropping a plate is treated in the extreme manner that Derek Hill describes above; for Amy, these *are* important things. 'Life is more than burnt toast' is the title of Hill's review and indeed this is the truth; it is Amy's tragedy that her world has narrowed into the trivial and the domestic where burnt toast is her major concern. When John Gillett complains that the film's 'stylistic exaggerations too often stress trivial details at the expense of the significant', he unwittingly makes exactly that point, that the mind of the housewife, Amy's mind, is colonised and consumed by triviality; if significant events have been effaced from the plot, it is because they have been effaced from the life of the housewife.<sup>11</sup>

These are all interesting instances of *Woman in a Dressing Gown's* *mise-en-scène* generating meanings that are concurrent with and often prophetic of feminist thinking. The idea of the housewife as a 'domestic prisoner' is a

cliché today, but in the 1950s this was an idea that ran counter to popular discourses of femininity. In 1957, the year of *Woman in a Dressing Gown's* release, these words were spoken by D.W. Winnicott, clinical psychiatrist and childcare expert, in one of his popular BBC broadcasts: 'Talk about women not wanting to be housewives seems to me to ignore one thing, that nowhere else but in her own home is a woman in such command. Only in her own home is she free, if she has courage, to spread herself, to find her whole self.'<sup>12</sup> In sharp contrast to Winnicott, *Woman in a Dressing Gown's* suggestion that a woman might not always be free and in command of her own home, that in fact, it might actually be firmly in command of her, seems positively radical.

The most useful touchstone for approaching *Woman in a Dressing Gown* as a 'proto-feminist' film is Betty Friedan's groundbreaking study of the disparity between the happy housewife image and the malaise and misery that lies beneath it, *The Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963. Although other feminist writers had mapped out the problems of women's confinement in the domestic realm before, Friedan's book reminded its readers that the 'woman question' had not gone away, merely mutated into a different form. Her work was instrumental in the international rebirth of feminism in the 1960s, especially her concept of 'the problem that has no name', that women's discourse lacks the means of public and collective articulation, because of shame and fear of ostracism, and consequently a widespread feeling of despair does not even possess that most primary means of identification, a name. Ironically, by calling it 'the problem that has no name', Friedan finally gives it a name and asserts that it does exist.

Of course, using Friedan's work as a critical tool for looking at a British 'social problem' film is not without its problems. Friedan is writing about Eisenhower-era American society; moreover, the majority of her work is concerned with the dissatisfactions of college-educated women living in the suburbs and not working-class wives in tower blocks. But despite these different national and class contexts, there is still a startling amount of common ground between Friedan's dissection of real-life female discontent and *Woman in a Dressing Gown's* fictional hapless housewife of six years before. *The Feminine Mystique* often discusses and illuminates exactly the same problems that *Woman in a Dressing Gown* indirectly hints at or alludes to, through its presentation of the character of Amy.

In the preface of *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan explains that she had first been put on the scent of 'the problem with no name' when she gradually came to notice 'a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I

came to call the feminine mystique' – exactly the same discrepancy between image and reality that is dramatised in the opening scene of *Woman in a Dressing Gown* where Amy attempts to prepare a cooked breakfast for Jim.<sup>13</sup> She burns the toast and has to scrape off the charred bits, while the neglected bacon and eggs in the saucepan blacken. We see her arrange the food artfully on a plate and the camera lingers on its disgusting appearance. To complete the meal, she pours Jim a cup of tea but overfills the teacup. All the time that this scene continues, her struggle and ultimate failure to make a good meal are exaggerated by the contrast of the music on the radio, a smooth, lilting, string-laden piece of easy listening (suggesting the popular radio programme *Housewives' Choice*) that dominates the film's soundtrack. The calm serenity of the music provides an ironic counterpoint to Amy's frenzied activity and the quick cutting in this scene illuminates exactly this idea of a disparity between image and reality that Friedan sees as the cornerstone of women's discontent.

One of Friedan's most important notions, and one very pertinent to *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, is her idea that 'housewifery expands to fill the time available', that despite the invention of labour-saving devices the American housewife was spending the same amount of time, if not longer, on housework. In her research, Friedan noticed how the full-time housewives that she interviewed always seemed to be incredibly busy, rushed off their feet in comparison with the women who held full- or part-time professions. She also discovered that when these 'frantically busy housewives' started working or studying or developed some other serious interest outside the house, 'they could polish off in one hour the housework that used to take them six – and was still undone at dinnertime'. How to explain this phenomenon? Friedan asserts that this illogical sixfold expansion of worktime is due to the central role that the doing of housework plays in the feminine mystique. She unambiguously puts it thus:

- 1 The more a woman is deprived of function in society at the level of her own ability, the more her housework, mother-work, wife-work, will expand – and the more she will resist finishing her housework or mother-work, and being without any function at all. (Evidently human nature also abhors a vacuum, even in women.)
- 2 The time required to do the housework for any given woman varies inversely with the challenge of the other work to which she is committed. Without any outside interests, a woman is virtually forced to devote her every moment to the trivia of keeping house. (p. 239)

Viewed with this in mind, Amy's Sisyphean relationship to her housework takes on a whole new meaning. As Brian tells her in the initial breakfast

scene, she does ‘a bit of this, a bit of that ... but nothing’s ever finished’. Amy’s inability to finish anything is perhaps less an inability and, if we believe Friedan, more a strategy for covering up the emptiness at her life.

Amy’s goal of finally tidying up the house once and for all, which she reiterates throughout the film, must never actually come to fruition and the home must remain in a state of flux because ‘after all, with no other purpose in her life, if the housework were done in an hour, and the children off to school, the bright, energetic housewife would find the emptiness of her days unbearable’. And yet, the fact that her work could be done in half the time places the housewife in a guilty, defensive position. We certainly see evidence of this in Amy, who repeatedly says things like, ‘Well, anybody would think I never did anything – I’ve been up since seven’. When her teenage son Brian says he doesn’t know what she does all day, she tells him she’d like to see him try to do better. Amy tries to trump the working hours of the men by repeating how she gets up before them, and also attempts to make a claim for housekeeping as an area of personal expertise that Brian would not be able to do as well as she can. A similar reaction to Amy’s was recorded by Friedan when a Minneapolis schoolteacher, a man, wrote a letter to newspaper saying that the housewife’s long working week was unnecessary and that ‘any woman who puts in that many hours is awfully slow, a poor budgeter of time or just plain inefficient’ and the paper was inundated by letters from ‘scores of irate housewives’ who dared him to prove it.

This is where the concept of creativity in housework gains its significance. Creativity acts as a way of covering up the essential monotony of household chores by suggesting that the housewife has some kind of individual, specialist input into the work, and thus the menial worker is transformed into a ‘professional’. As Friedan quotes from a study carried out by the advertising industry:

Creativeness is the modern woman’s dialectical answer to the problem of her changed position in the household. Thesis: I’m a housewife. Antithesis: I hate drudgery. Synthesis: I’m creative! ... The feeling of creativeness also serves another purpose ... It permits her to use at home *all the faculties that she would display in an outside career.* (p. 214)

Creative housekeeping tries to act as a recompense and a substitute for a paid career by taking on the appearance and the attributes of a profession so the housewife feels less like a drudge and more like ‘an engineer, an expert’. One of the ways the housewife raises her stature is ‘to “do things my way” – to establish an expert’s role for herself by creating her own “tricks of the

trade". All this comes together in one of the most interesting scenes in *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, interesting in terms of its portrayal of housewifery because it hints at an edge of melancholy and dissatisfaction in Amy's character that is not as a result of Jim's possible desertion because at this point of the film she has no idea about Jim's affair – everything is normal. And yet, this scene suggests, already all is not well in Amy's world.

Amy has prepared a special meal for Jim including apple pie and cream and a bottle of beer, and when he comes home from work she sits him in the armchair in front of the fireplace and presents him with the meal on a tray. She then sits at his feet and watches expectantly as he eats the meal. The camera shoots the scene from a low angle with Amy in the foreground as she describes one of her 'tricks of the trade' exactly like one of Friedan's housewives: 'I tried a new way with the chips. Cook 'em for a minute or so, then take 'em out. Leave 'em for another minute then put 'em back ... It makes 'em crisp. Don't you think it makes 'em crisp?' What is particularly interesting about this little monologue is the way it is performed and presented on film.

Throughout the speech, Amy does not look at Jim but gazes straight ahead of her into the fireplace and her face is shot in profile. The words are intoned very slowly with pauses between each of the sentences, and this combined with the vacant expression on her face gives the feeling of a recital by a somnambulant. When she gets to 'It makes 'em crisp', the intonation of the word 'crisp' is disconcertingly perky, like a bit of 'ad-speak' has inadvertently slipped into her speech. Then she slips out of this reverie and asks Jim quickly and anxiously, 'Don't you think it makes 'em crisp?' – he is the audience for her 'creative' cookery, and only his approval can validate her efforts. No amount of congratulation can assuage the self-recrimination that must always follow from being totally dependent on another's approval for one's sense of achievement. The pronunciation of these last two sentences is brittle and (onomatopoeically) crisp, which suggests an edge of hysteria. All through this scene, the radio has been playing Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* symphony – echoes of the use of Rachmaninov on the radio in the hearthside scene in *Brief Encounter* – and at this point the music swells. The film switches from the medium shot of Amy in profile with Jim in the background to an unobstructed close-up of Amy's face alone, as her thoughts shift from husband, hearth and home to herself and her feelings about the music; 'This Tchaikovsky, it makes me want to cry, it's so sad.' Music is used throughout in Amy's scenes but it is usually pop music, and it tends to be used as an ironic counterpoint to her action. This is one of the few times classical music is used at all and it seems to be used specifically to suggest

deep and sincere feeling. Amy is able to name the composer, indicating, albeit briefly, an appreciation and knowledge of the world of high culture which is not in evidence anywhere else. Earlier Amy's intellectual capacities are satirised, but in this later scene the tone is different, and far from mocking. This consciously quiet moment in an otherwise hectic film, together with the bathetic juxtaposition of Tchaikovsky and chips, high art and household drudgery, suggests a strong feeling of human potential gone to waste, creative energy channelled entirely into the trivialities of housework, being frittered away on devising pointless complicated methods for cooking chips. The sadness of that waste is evoked by Amy's wistful comment on the music, and most of all, by the music itself, which suggests the depth of feeling that cannot be expressed by the emotionally inarticulate characters.

Throughout *Woman in a Dressing Gown* melodramatic tropes such as the use of lachrymose music described above are important. The melodramatic elements become even more pronounced after Jim announces to Amy that he wants to divorce her and go off with Georgie. Once again, Raymond Durnat hits the nail on the head when he describes the film as 'embarrassingly moving', even linking Yvonne Mitchell's performance to those of Judy Garland and Anna Magnani.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, *Woman in a Dressing Gown* is almost unbearably uncomfortable to watch at points, and there is no better example of this than when we see Amy prepare for an 'adult discussion' of the situation with Jim and Georgie back at the flat. Amy resolves to reincarnate herself as the ideal housewife and sets out on an ill-fated outing to get her hair done and to buy some whisky and soda. This is the only scene apart from a brief visit to the pub where she ventures outside the confines of the flat and on the evidence of this, it is easy to see why. The outside world is a hostile and inhospitable place where Amy's attempts to beautify herself are ruined first by a sudden downpour of rain and then by the everyday cruelty and indifference of ordinary people. When the bus she gets on is full up and she has to get off, she is told by a woman to get to the back of the queue. When she tries to take cover in a doorway, she is jostled back into the rain. She tries to hail a taxi but someone else jumps in front of her and as the taxi pulls away, she is splashed with water from the gutter. She attempts to explain her situation to a man with an umbrella ('my hair ...') but he ignores her and refuses to let her share his shelter. Eventually she has to walk home as the rain continues to pour down.

The litany of disaster continues back at the flat when Amy rips her best dress trying to get into it, and ends up getting drunk on the whisky after her friend Hilda's encouragement to have a quick nip for Dutch courage. Another scene of frantic tidying up occurs but Amy's manic tipsy cheerfulness

is deflated when a line from the song she is singing, 'O Antonio', reminds her what she is actually preparing for: 'I'd like to see him with his new sweetheart.' She sits down at the table and begins to sob but is denied even this meagre comfort when the table suddenly collapses beneath her. All this relentless pathos is difficult to justify in terms of a realist methodology, but as melodrama, it makes much more sense. Just as contemporary critics of Douglas Sirk saw him as a failed realist rather than an intense fabulist, a similar mistake is made with J. Lee Thompson's films. One might also link *Woman in a Dressing Gown* with a more recent film, Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* (1995). Both films are, I think, primarily melodramas in the guise of 'social realism' – their power lies in the moments where the *melos* takes over. What is really striking though is the similarity between the performances of Yvonne Mitchell and Brenda Blethyn in the two films. Neither actor shies away from being over-the-top and pathetic, and the way Blethyn harps on the word 'sweetheart' is almost exactly the same as the way Mitchell uses 'Jimbo' (her pet name for Jim) repeatedly for the same effect of desperate neediness. Godard criticises Yvonne Mitchell's 'Look at me!' performance without understanding how well it fits the character. The more taciturn and neglectful Jim is, the more Amy must, in her own phrase, 'make a scene, or create', which suggests the performative nature of the character's life and her need for attention.

What does *Woman in a Dressing Gown* suggest would be the best thing for its heroine at this juncture? Again, we can discern an eerie prediction of Betty Friedan's ideas. For her, the only solution to 'the problem that has no name' is to go out to work. It provides the means of making contact with the larger world outside the home, and not having to live vicariously through husband or children. Towards the end of *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, when it looks as though Jim really will leave Amy, we see her face the prospect of paid employment with the following declaration of independence: 'I don't need you anymore, Jimbo. I can work ... Maybe this is the best thing that could happen to me. For years I haven't thought of myself, only you. Now it's changed. You go tonight.' It is true that in strictly realist terms this sudden burst of eloquence after years of inarticulacy is implausible, but like so much of the film, it obeys a different logic, one that works in melodramatic terms. It is interesting that Jim is firmly against Amy getting a job, and when he phrases this opposition as a statement in the imperative and not as a question ('You don't want to work, Amy'), he voices the terms on which he expects their relationship to continue. For a woman to work seems to be a blot on the character of the husband and his status as provider, despite the fact that not to work would reduce Amy to the status of domestic chattel

to be maintained by Jim after his absence.<sup>15</sup> Amy protests against this: ‘Yes, I do. I don’t want to sit down and weep for the rest of my life.’ Her face as she says these lines is shot in clear, unobstructed close-up and is brightly lit, which all suggest that this is a moment of clarity and self-realisation. At this point her character has a dignity and poise that is denied in the rest of the film, with its emphasis on her pitiable inadequacy. As John Gillett muses in his review, ‘it is interesting to speculate what would have happened to Amy if Jim had in fact gone away with Georgie’, and at this point the film seems to suggest that this might be the best thing for Amy.<sup>16</sup> However, the radical suggestion that her emotional dependence is fostered by her economic dependence and that Jim’s departure would be as good for her as it would for him is curtailed by the ending. Although Jim packs his bags to leave with Georgie, his severance from the family home is short-lived, lasting only a few minutes. Halfway down the street he has a change of heart and returns to the flat.

*Woman in a Dressing Gown* concludes with a resumption of the nuclear family, but one that is far from untroubled. The deeply conservative final tableau is almost parodic in its inscription of traditional gender roles, father and son in the foreground discussing current affairs, Amy silent and in the background making a pot of tea. But of course, the fact that this scene occurs only minutes after we have seen the same family on the brink of collapse adds an air of unreality to proceedings and serves as an implicit criticism of the situation. If this version of the family is improvisatory at this point, how real is it the rest of the time? And as John Hill notes, the camera placement at the end of the film, outside the flat’s window, means that the audience is ‘critically distanced from the film’s apparently “happy ending” by the deployment of a device ... saturated with negative connotations’.<sup>17</sup> What we see in the closing moments of *Woman in a Dressing Gown* is certainly not the conventional closure of a drama that sets out to endorse the status quo.

*Woman in a Dressing Gown* was very popular with contemporary audiences, making £450,000 on its first release, according to Ted Willis, and featuring in *Kinematograph Weekly*’s list of the top money-makers of the year.<sup>18</sup> Janet Thumim’s retrospective analysis of the most popular films in Britain in 1957, taking into account evidence from *Picturegoer* as well as *Kine Weekly*, places the film in the top twelve. This seems all the more remarkable for a ‘woman’s picture’ in a period of rapidly declining female cinema attendance, suggesting an interesting dynamic: women who are not getting out of the house very often *do* go out to see a film about a woman who doesn’t get out of the house very often.<sup>19</sup> *Woman in a Dressing Gown*’s popularity is the strongest argument that it struck a chord in the public psyche. One could

argue, as Geraghty does of other popular fifties British films, that its success comes from 'giving audiences a rest from the stress of being citizens in the grip of modernisation', but this does not really fit *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, a film far from being restful or conciliatory.<sup>20</sup> The elements of the film I have described above are not the result of reading 'against the grain': you do not have to look very hard for its cracks and contradictions.

Ted Willis, talking about a stage adaptation of *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, emphasises that the keystone of the piece is being able to identify with the characters, and explains how the character of Amy has meant something to women all over the world: 'Argentinian, German, Swedish, Dutch and British women have told me that they "know Amy", that a woman like this lives "next door" or "along the road".'<sup>21</sup> However, the women's recognition of Amy is not *personal* identification but *outward* identification; she is not like them but someone they know. If we compare this to the reaction to Betty Friedan's work, the difference is startling: "'I've got tears in my eyes that my inner turmoil is shared with other women", a young Connecticut mother wrote me when I first began to put this problem into words.'<sup>22</sup> In the radical feminist text, collective recognition of the feminine mystique is the first step in doing something about the problem. Instead, in *Woman in a Dressing Gown*, the problems articulated about housewifery are all projected onto a misfit character who is painted as a freak, albeit a sympathetic one. However, *Woman in a Dressing Gown* remains an eloquent presentation of 'the problem with no name' when it still has no name and no widespread acknowledgement – when, in Brandon French's phrase, women were 'on the verge of revolt'.<sup>23</sup> Being the product of a national cinema so frequently maligned for its lack of social awareness during the 1950s, especially when it came to women, it is all the more remarkable.

## Notes

- 1 Simon Hattenstone, 'A Very British View', *Guardian* (2 September 1995), p. 30.
- 2 Raymond Durnat, *A Mirror for England* (Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 181.
- 3 Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (Routledge, 2000), pp. 156–60.
- 4 Marcia Landy, *British Genres* (Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 235.
- 5 Derek Hill, 'Life Is More Than Burnt Toast', *Tribune* (18 October 1986), p. 98.
- 6 Ted Willis, *Evening All: Fifty Years over a Hot Typewriter* (Macmillan, 1991), p. 138. For the play, see Willis's *Woman in a Dressing Gown: A Play in Two Acts* (Evans, 1964).
- 7 Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard*, trans. Tom Milne (Secker & Warburg, 1972), p. 86.
- 8 Durnat, *A Mirror for England*, p. 181.
- 9 John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–1963* (British Film Institute, 1986), p. 30.
- 10 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in

- Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* ([1972] British Film Institute, 1987).
- 11 John Gillett, 'Woman in a Dressing Gown', *Sight and Sound* 27, 2 (1957), p. 92.
  - 12 D.W. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 120.
  - 13 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, ([1963] Gollancz, 1971), p. 9.
  - 14 Durgnat, *A Mirror for England*, p. 181.
  - 15 See Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 76.
  - 16 Gillett, 'Woman in a Dressing Gown', p. 92.
  - 17 Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p. 100.
  - 18 Willis, *Evening All*, p. 141.
  - 19 Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, 'Cinema Audience Tastes in 1950s Britain', *Journal of Popular British Cinema* 2 (1999), p. 67.
  - 20 Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties*, p. 37.
  - 21 Willis, *Evening All*, p. 6.
  - 22 Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 33.
  - 23 See Brandon French, *On the Verge of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties* (Ungar, 1978).