

# *Dream Wife*

In 1953, just before Young Bess, Deborah Kerr appeared in Dream Wife, a comedy with Cary Grant. In making this black-and-white film Kerr and Grant discovered how much they liked playing opposite each other, and Deborah learned how much she enjoyed comic timing.

There is a lot of feminist stuff in Dream Wife, more than I'd realized. And I see now how it paved the way for my epiphany at Young Bess.

Deborah plays Effie, Priscilla Effington, a beautiful young woman high in the ranks of the State Department. Utterly fashionable, she is at the same time consummately competent, concentrating on her job, in



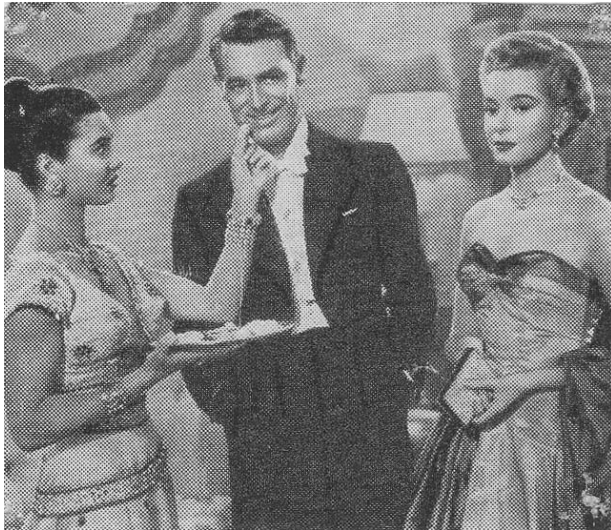
particular the current oil crisis with Buchistan. She wears 18 different outfits. Her clothes, by Helen Rose, take the basic shapes of the 1950's and run a fantasy rather in the style of Garbo, a' lá Queen Christina, with varieties of crisp white cuffs and collars.

Effie's existence high in counsels of state is treated as completely unremarkable, though in fact, she could not have existed.



...This confused me. Had I been wrong about what women could be in the world?

It's a good role. Deborah's onscreen a lot. And one of her most frequent expressions is a kind of private amusement.



This might be seen as one of her "lady" roles. But here "lady" means something more like "bluestocking": an independent, intelligent young English woman with enough access to class to pull it off. In this case transposed into the "the American woman", Deborah's British accent passed off as Vermontish.

Of course, there's a romance with Cary Grant at the center of the plot. As Clem, Effie's much-neglected

fiance, he decides he's had enough of coming second to her job, and instead of efficient Effie, will marry the Princess of Buchistan, "trained from birth to make a man happy".

The princess of Buchistan arrives with her entourage to prepare for the wedding. Effie, as the State Department's foremost expert on Buchistan, must serve as her ex-fiance's interpreter, and keep an eye out to avoid misunderstandings by our sensitive ally in the Middle East.



Effie eventually solves this dilemma by becoming friends with the princess, tells her the story of women's rights in America, takes her to the museum to learn about Clara Barton, Betsy Ross.



Effie clearly knows her feminist history: Susan B. Anthony, Amelia Bloomer, she speaks their names with affection and pride.

... And as if every American knew them.  
Again I was confused: I'd never heard of them.

There are some lovely scenes.  
Early on, there's a sort of gender-role reversal as Cary Grant at home prepares a candle-light dinner for Deborah in a fussy, almost feminine way; Deborah comes in, turns up the lights, turns off the music, her mind half on business. And yet both of them are doing their own gender to the nines when it comes to how they look.

How much people smoked in the movie! Even people who didn't actually smoke, like Deborah. (I'm convinced she didn't: I've seen



her "smoke" a lot, and I've never seen her inhale.)

Effie, however, would smoke, it being one of those things only men did until women got some rights.

And what a lot of drinking! As in Dumbo, drink is shown as something that can liberate us to be our truer selves, give access to other states of being than our habitual ones. Altered consciousness is shown as sometimes revelatory.



When I was young, I loved the scenes where Deborah as the translator speaks the words of love that pass between Cary and the Princess,

so that the Princess's words are spoken to Deborah, and Deborah says to the princess, "I've been longing to see you!"

"You are as beautiful as a flower."

Those scenes were part of what tugged me into my growing fascination with Deborah.

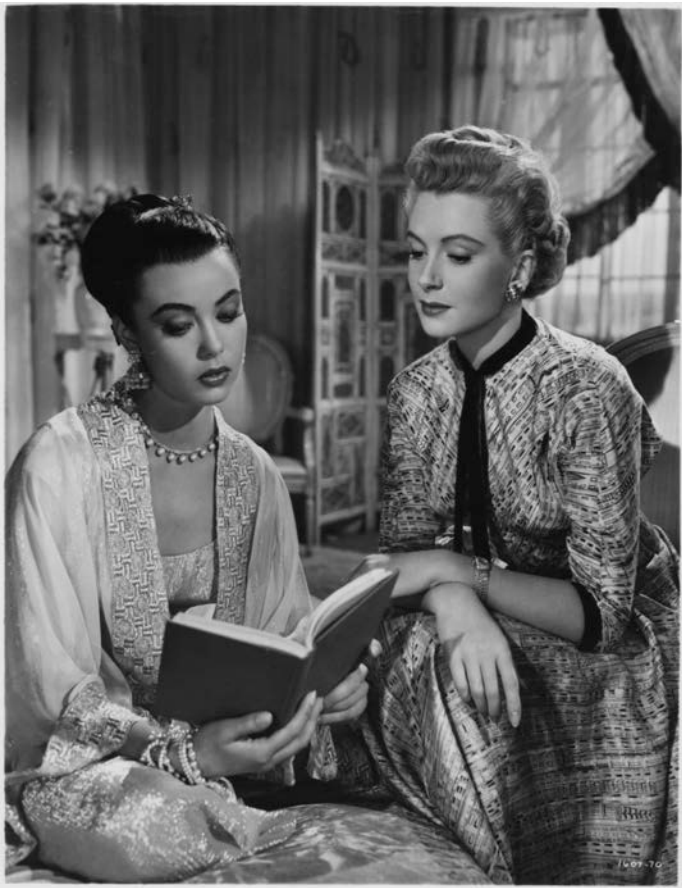
... I've been thinking that someone who reads my writing and then sees these 1950's movies may well be disappointed. There's lots any feminist, any lesbian, would find heterosexist, male-centered, as well as, often, racist, or classist. I don't know if anyone who didn't experience those times can understand. Where they may find heterosexual hegemony in the plot, to some of us the glimpse of more that was there was enough, was riches. It could deliver us to ourselves.





...And what exists *now* still seems to me utter paucity. There has yet to be a lesbian Tudor drama to equal Young Bess, or a feminist Roman spectacular like Quo Vadis

It was like panning for gold, as I used to do when I was a child in the Sierras, grinding the rock, pouring in the water, floating the mass of gravel and sand to one side, settling to a fine point the little flakes of gold, when I was in such need of that gold.



And though the moments in Dream Wife that I've described are fraught with lesbian potential, they're played with such a focus on Cary Grant that I wouldn't call them lesbian.

Though who knows what might be set in motion by the simple act of seeing Deborah say words of love to another woman.

And she did speak true words of love for the Princess; they were "Susan B. Anthony", "Amelia Bloomer".

Remember, when watching in these movies:  
The ending is less important than the early scenes.  
Even if in the final frames she does go limp in his arms.