

Hollywood Censors History

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In 1952, during the production of a costume drama about the childhood of Elizabeth I, the director of the Production Code Administration in Hollywood wrote to the head of MGM. This was standard practice for any film made between 1934 and 1968, with the PCA vetting every script before it went in production and suggesting changes. The provisions of Code required every detail to be checked against a list of articles, which stated what was and was not considered morally acceptable in American cinema. This time Joseph Breen took the producers of *Young Bess* to task on just one particular point, asking for a rewrite of the characterisation of King Henry VIII. The basis for this demand, delivered without any sense of irony, was that Henry's "attitude towards marriage and divorce" was found to have been "objectionably flippant!"¹

Every time I present this piece of evidence at conferences or seminars, it raises a good laugh. But why? Perhaps because it suggests two levels of philistinism that historians and other intellectuals often assume automatically when thinking about classical Hollywood. First, that the 'censors' of the PCA were puritanical and humourless, evident in that they held Henry's flippancy to be "objectionable" not because it offended the facts of history, but because it offended their moral sensibilities and the standards of decency of 1950s' America. Second, it also seems laughable that the PCA would rail against a stereotype of Henry VIII that we all know from popular culture, including the movies – the comically monstrous womaniser, casually chopping his way through a variety of wives; the objection has such an air of futility about it when measured against our expectations of the conventional Hollywood treatment of history.

The two aspects are interlinked, if it is also assumed that in order to meet the demands of the PCA, filmmakers were commonly compelled to deviate from the known facts of history. As drawn up in 1930, the Code made only one mention of history. Article 10, of the twelve article document, declared that "the history of all nations...shall be represented fairly."² The use of the term 'fairly', rather than 'accurately', was quite deliberate – reflecting the fact that the whole purpose of the Code was not to censor films *per se*, but rather to enable the production of movies which would avoid giving offence. The concern over 'fair' representation of history was intended to make certain that Hollywood's movies would be accepted by international audiences (and passed by the censor boards of the countries in question). This simply complemented the function of the rest of the Code's provisions, designed to ensure films were passed by America's local censorship boards with as few cuts as possible and were not condemned as 'immoral' or 'obscene' by the watchdogs of the National Catholic Legion of Decency. As Joseph Breen's successor, Geoffrey Shurlock, put it, the goal was to "protect the industry from being harmed by outraged viewers."³ Thus, prior to

production, every screenplay was submitted to PCA analysts who then worked with the filmmakers to ensure that the eventual film avoided all potentially censorable items – such as sexual indecency, nudity, irreverence towards law or religion. A script would be returned for rewrites if the PCA felt that it might “lower the moral standards of those who see it,” or if the screenplay left “the question of right or wrong in any doubt.”⁴ Aimed at actually facilitating production, it did however seriously circumscribe the ways in which filmmakers could depict the real world and real human behaviour. As Breen stated quite bluntly, when compelled to assert his position during World War II, “the function of the Code” was only “to be moral,” “not to create authenticity or realism.”⁵

Of course, the issue of lack of realism and authenticity has long been at the heart of criticism and dismissal of the ‘typical’ Hollywood history film, with critical writing commonly presenting period melodramas, costume dramas and so forth as (at best) an inadequate or outmoded form of representing the past. This has been true even among the historians most favourably disposed to studying history on film. Robert Brent Toplin, for instance, once held the opinion that the “majority” of such history films should simply be thrown on “the waste heap” for “grossly simplifying” the past.⁶ More specifically, Pierre Sorlin, in seeking to define the ‘historical film’, condemned most every example made “before the 1960s” for “relying on the most trite version of history.”⁷ The sense that filmmakers’ attitudes toward historiography improved *after* the 1960s is one that itself implicitly indicts the influence of the PCA on the perceived ‘triteness’ of earlier history films – since it is also a commonplace of writing on the Code that the ‘classical’ style of the Hollywood history film had been a parallel development. Both the PCA and the ‘prestige’ historical emerged in 1934 as related components in the industry’s campaign to ‘clean up’ its image and “convince middle-class America of the bourgeois respectability of the cinema.”⁸ *Variety* noted this as early as 1935, observing that “the files of history” – embodied in films such as *The House of Rothschild*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Viva Villa* or *The Story of Louis Pasteur* – were clearly less likely to “offend the Church and other busybody factions.”⁹ In consequence, the formulae and conventions of the ‘classical’ history film were ones which were forged in close conjunction with the Code – and a new wave of filmmaking was only able to develop fully when the restrictions of the Code were finally abolished in 1968 and replaced by the ratings system.

Is the assumption then valid, that between 1934 and the 1960s, the moral restrictions of the Code encouraged filmmakers not only to turn to history, but to ‘clean it up’, distort it and trivialise it? The assertion that the PCA distorted historical stories to reflect the moral viewpoint of contemporary mainstream America is often taken for granted - yet it has rarely been investigated, and the reality is rather more complex. Returning to the example of *Young Bess*, for instance, the truth of the matter – as any history of Tudor England or the Reformation makes clear – is that Henry VIII never did consider the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon to be a flippant matter; his defiance of the Pope and the break with Rome were affairs of enormous consequence, both personally and in terms of highly divisive national and international politics. Well aware of the history of the Catholic church, Joseph Breen and his staff would have been as conscious of this as they were that a humorous treatment of divorce was

unacceptable under the Code.¹⁰ In this instance, historical fact and 1950s' morality actually coincided.

The same is true of a number of other cases commented on in histories concerned with the Production Code. Indeed, a similar dynamic was evident in the first major test faced by Breen when Will Hays appointed him to head the PCA. As Gregory Black notes in *Hollywood Censored*, Warner Bros.' production of *Madame DuBarry* was little more than a saucy "bedroom farce" set at the court of King Louis XV of France, concerned with his relationship with the Comtesse DuBarry, Jeanne Becu.¹¹ The script presented plenty of bed-hopping, intimations of nudity, scenes of DuBarry coaching the Dauphin in sexual practices, sequences in which she 'procured' other women for the King, and the overtly suggestive innuendo of her redecorating the royal bedroom with a mirrored ceiling. In this, however, it violated numerous provisions of the Production Code, was likely to "prove highly offensive to the French nation," and presented DuBarry's position as the adulterous King's mistress in a positive light.¹² When the screenplay was submitted in spring of 1934, Breen simply refused to approve something so "filled with vulgarity, obscenity and blatant adultery."¹³

The studio was not quite prepared for this. Although the Code had been in existence since 1930, Warner Bros. in particular had flouted the authority of the Studio Relations Committee that was supposed to enforce its provisions. However, pressure groups concerned with the morality of the movies had grown in influence during the early thirties and the film industry had become very concerned about their calls for direct federal regulation. The PCA replaced the SRC in 1934, in reaction to the Legion of Decency's campaign, as a public act of atonement that would pre-empt federal intervention. Given more authority to act than the SRC had possessed, Breen took the opportunity presented by *Madame DuBarry* to bring Warner Bros. into line – and firmly rejected the efforts of producer Hal Wallis, who sought to argue with a straight-face that his film was "nothing more than a satirical account of 'historical fact'."¹⁴

The situation led to a standoff between the studio and the PCA – but when the industry's governing board (the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) sided with Breen, he was able to insist not only on major cuts, but also on the imposition of an unambiguous moral lesson. This message was embodied in a preachy prologue:

In the reign of King Louis XV of France the Power and the Glory of the French Courts began to wane. Extravagance and Folly had succeeded at last in arousing in the breasts of the Common People the smouldering embers of Resentment and Revolt.

This picture portrays a King unmindful of his People – selfish, arrogant, unscrupulous – a King who wrecks his kingdom and bequeaths the ruins to his incompetent grandson.

It is a picture to ponder in the light of the succeeding revolution for Freedom, Equality and Human Brotherhood.¹⁵

The implication that Louis XV's adultery was the principal cause of the French Revolution itself was a clear demonstration of Breen's attitude toward history, refashioning the past into a morality play.

Yet it was not a gross distortion – at least no worse than the rewriting of history that Wallis and his writers had already engaged in. Louis XV's sexual affairs with Madame de Pompadour and Madame DuBarry had indeed incited vitriolic denunciations from disaffected contemporaries. T.C.W Blanning notes that whereas historically “the king's mistresses had been a symbol of regal potency and virility,” French public opinion in the 18th century had turned, with Louis XV depicted by hostile pamphleteers as “a feeble decadent, wasted by a life of debauchery.”¹⁶ The manner of his death “only enhanced his sleazy reputation, for it was alleged that he had contracted the smallpox which killed him from a young peasant girl procured for him by Madame DuBarry.”¹⁷ This loss of respect for the monarchy was then inherited by his grandson Louis XVI, with Marie Antoinette often equated with DuBarry in pornographic libels.¹⁸ Sexual immorality may not have been the primary reason for the Revolution, but it certainly contributed to the rapid haemorrhaging of the Bourbon Crown's political legitimacy. Of course, the PCA's concerns were first and foremost for the morals of 1930s' America not 18th century France, and further changes “rendered the film incomprehensible,” but Warner Bros. could scarcely protest that Breen was distorting history to make his point.

The case of *That Hamilton Woman!* (1941) is another example of Breen's intervention which has generated particular academic interest. Ken Short's excellent study of the movie's production details Alexander Korda's efforts to turn the love story of Lord Nelson and Emma Lady Hamilton into pro-British propaganda during the early years of World War II, and explains how such intentions were hampered by the enforcement of the Code.¹⁹ Korda had Winston Churchill's backing, and apparently President Roosevelt's “tacit approval,” to “rouse American sentiment for the beleaguered British” by playing on the historical parallels between the threatened invasion of Napoleon in 1805 and the contemporary menace of Hitler.²⁰ Challenging neutrality and isolationism, the story of “Nelson saving England from invasion” offered an obvious and suitably uplifting” analogy to exploit the “new mood of sympathy” in the United States in 1940.²¹ Yet international politics were of little concern to Breen. Instead, he was focused on the fact that not only had Nelson been a married man, but that Emma too had been married to the British ambassador to Naples when their affair had begun. William Hamilton had, somewhat perversely, encouraged their relationship. Lady Frances Nelson, however, had steadfastly refused to divorce her husband, despite the fact that the scandal was a very public one and that the lovers had had an illegitimate daughter in the meantime. The problem with Korda's screenplay, for Breen, was that it treated “the adulterous relationship as a romance instead of a sin.”²²

As PCA script-analyst Jack Vizzard described it, the administration's position was not to prevent the depiction of any particular problem, but rather to ensure that “it should not be left up to the discretion of an immature mind to decide for himself or herself whether the characters had acted rightly or wrongly.”²³ Korda's screenplay left too much doubt; indeed by making the relationship between

Nelson and Emma “exciting and romantic,” Breen even suggested it would “lead an audience to suppose they could be heroes and heroines themselves if they did the same thing.”²⁴ The strategy for enforcing the Code was that if a character’s behaviour was wrong, it had to “be labelled as such.”²⁵ The PCA therefore specified a series of changes to the script, in which every significant character was given an opportunity to condemn the adulterous relationship. This included Nelson’s father – a Norfolk parson – warning the pair that “You can’t defy the laws of God without being made to pay the price.”²⁶ In consequence, Nelson’s death after Trafalgar seemed like divine retribution for his sin. Moreover, his father’s avowal that “unless you catch yourself now, both of you will surely end up in the gutter,” was brought to bear in a prologue and epilogue insisted upon by Breen, which depicted Emma later in life as a destitute alcoholic, living on the streets of Calais and jailed for stealing a bottle of wine.

As Short correctly notes, these scenes which book-ended the film severely “blunted” Korda’s intent to inspire through images of past British heroism. Instead they effectively reminded audiences that an “ungrateful England” had forgotten Emma’s selfless sacrifice and had rejected Nelson’s entreaty that the government should take care of her after his death.²⁷ But while regrettable for its connotations, the image of Emma in jail, her beauty decayed, did more harm to the film’s value as propaganda than to the facts of history. Emma had twice been committed to debtor’s prison, and had indeed died in obscurity in Calais, aged fifty and penniless, probably killed by cirrhosis of the liver brought on by alcoholism. Her relationship with Nelson had been the subject of considerable social disapproval – for while the rich and aristocratic of the time frequently flaunted their mistresses, few high-profile men had actually left their wives. Many friends and colleagues had condemned them and refused to visit them, with notable snubs from King George III and Lord Minto.²⁸ And letters clearly indicate that, at least initially, Nelson’s father was profoundly upset by the “deceitfulness of sin,” writing to his son that “I long to see the time when there shall be a door opened by which you may escape from present evil.”²⁹

Rather perversely then, these examples suggest that instead of compelling filmmakers to mangle history for the sake of contemporary morality, the Production Code may actually have encouraged greater historical accuracy (even if it was then accompanied with heavy-handed moralising) among filmmakers who otherwise saw history as a source of school-boy humour, or who thought of history first and foremost in terms of how it could serve the present. Certainly, these examples challenge simplistic readings of the Code’s influence. However, to understand the real nature of the impact of the Code on representations of history, one needs to probe even deeper. The archives of the Production Code Administration contain extensive files on films such as *That Hamilton Woman* and *Madame DuBarry*, which have obviously attracted the attention of film historians by providing a wealth of correspondence to analyse. Less obvious and underused, are the examples in which the files take much for granted and leave things unstated – but which can therefore be even more revealing of the unquestioned attitudes and preconceptions which governed filmmaking at this time. This is certainly true in the case of *Beau Brummell* (1954).

Work began in earnest in 1951 on this biopic of Regency dandy George Bryan Brummell, focusing the story around his friendship with the Prince of Wales, later King George IV. MGM had originally conceived of the project in the late 1930s, but unlike *That Hamilton Woman*, there was little sense that this story would ‘resonate’ with contemporary politics. When it was again dusted off the shelf in the early 1950s, there was similarly little intent of using history to develop ‘propaganda’ – although it did capitalise on revitalised interest in the affairs of the British monarchy. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953 generated such public fascination with royalty that it sustained a cycle of related films through until 1955, including *Young Bess* as well as *The Sword and the Rose* (1953), *Diane* (1955) and *The Virgin Queen* (1955). However, in seeking a vehicle for Stewart Granger and Elizabeth Taylor, the makers of *Beau Brummell* had been more directly inspired by the “the fantastic success” of the 1951 autobiography of the abdicated Edward VIII, *A King’s Story*, which had already ‘proven’ that “everyone is interested in the private life of royalty – providing that this private life is exciting and informal.”³⁰

Motivated by box-office rather than politics, and never intended to be ‘racy’, *Beau Brummell* was simply an uncontroversial ‘prestige’ costume picture. The PCA file reflected this, being particularly slim – indeed, it contains just one letter (only two pages long) from Breen to MGM, dated June 4, 1953. What is interesting about this, however, is that it attests to the extent to which Hollywood filmmakers had themselves internalised the provisions of the Code and were exercising self-censorship. One paragraph in the PCA letter draws attention to a minor character, the “Steward of the Brooks Club” to which Brummell and the Prince Regent belong. The problem with the steward’s characterisation was, according to the PCA, that it was “suggestive of a sex pervert” – and thus in contravention of the Code’s Article 2, and its restriction on “any inference” to “sex perversion,” specifically homosexuality.³¹ Strikingly, however, the filmmakers had clearly avoided – without the need for a prompt from the PCA – any reference to the reputed homosexuality of Brummell himself, even though their research had euphemistically implied that he was “a natural bachelor.”³²

In fact, the scriptwriters had determined quickly that “considerable footage” would need to be devoted to depicting a “virile” heterosexual love life for their protagonist. This was thought essential to compensate for the fact that the movie would unavoidably show Brummell as a man who not only “spent a fantastic amount of time on his clothes and appearance” but who was also “in great intimacy with another man – the Prince of Wales.” “We would run the risk of making him effeminate if we don’t strongly express his love for the other sex,” wrote Alec Coppel.³³ However, rather than simply ‘invent’ a completely ahistorical romantic interest for Brummell – which they acknowledged would have been “the conventional box-office standard” – producer Sam Zimbalist employed an English dramatist and critic, named Hugh Gray, to undertake the research for this project.³⁴ Gray insisted that “the possibility of a genuine love affair in Brummell’s life must be looked for among the facts,” and Zimbalist was highly impressed when Gray located a love letter “from an unknown woman” written when Brummell was fifty, which might be used to infer a relationship earlier in his life. Noting that there was “undisputed evidence that women idolized him,” Gray then suggested combining his known “devotion” to the

Duchesses of York, Rutland and Devonshire and to Lady Esther Stanhope, “and substitute for them one person unknown to history to whom he would write in the terms of the very emotional letter that dates from his days in exile”:³⁵

If we cannot go to actual recorded history to find in him a deep romantic attachment in his youth, we can reasonably argue to it by pointing to what happened in later years. Could we not reasonably surmise that the mysterious anonymous woman who came to catch a glimpse of him in his declining years might very well have been the one whom he loved and who loved him years before?³⁶

Coppel, by contrast, was immediately ready to “invent” anything that would be “more convenient for our story” without regard to the evidence; and so Gray’s demonstration of invention by process of historical inference was of a particularly rare standard in Hollywood.³⁷ His employment suggested that Zimbalist was more willing than most producers to treat history with respect; but meeting the moral demands of the Code, and the commensurate expectations of audiences, did require this invented romance however it was justified. Consequently the fictional role of Lady Patricia Belham was created for Elizabeth Taylor, and by the time the screenplay arrived on the PCA’s desks, Brummell’s sexual preferences were of no concern.³⁸

The same, however, could not be said of the Prince of Wales’ marital arrangements, which proved to be a more intractable problem. In December 1785, the Prince had unofficially married Maria Fitzherbert. This contravened the 1772 Royal Marriages Act, because the Prince was underage and did not have the consent of the King. Also, since Maria was a Catholic, it was prohibited by the 1701 Act of Settlement. Indeed, had the union been official, it would have disqualified George from ever becoming king. Thus while the marriage was formally denied by Whig leader Charles James Fox in the House of Commons in 1787, it remained an open secret. Their relationship even lasted when the Prince had to succumb to the pressure of his father and Parliament and make a forced legal marriage with his cousin, Caroline of Brunswick in 1795. Indeed, they continued to live together very openly until 1811. In June of that year, at a great party given at Carlton House to celebrate his becoming regent, the prince signalled that his relationship with Maria was at an end. Instead of being invited to sit at the head of the table as his wife, as the Prince had always insisted upon in the past, Mrs Fitzherbert was seated at the foot of the table – an affront which, in effect, represented a very public disavowal of her. Maria broke off any further connection with the Prince.³⁹

Zimbalist and his writers knew all of this. Gray had prepared for them over 175 pages of research notes, including a detailed summary of the affair. Furthermore, he again suggested how the scriptwriters could work with the historical materials at their disposal and mesh history with the demands of drama. In the story of Brummell’s relationship with the Prince, they had to find a reason for the end of their friendship, and Brummell’s subsequent exile. Historians, as Coppel put it, did not know “what the final bust-up was about.”⁴⁰ Gray, however, located evidence in a parody letter written by Irish poet Thomas Moore that dated the breach in 1811, and suggested then that one could justifiably infer that the two

Georges had quarrelled over the Regent's treatment of Maria at the great celebration. Brummell was known to have "espoused the cause" of Mrs Fitzherbert and, suggested Gray, it would have been entirely in keeping with Brummell's 'role' at court for the dandy to have taken the Prince to task for his display of bad manners.⁴¹ As with the romance, Gray had demonstrated that drama could be constructed in such a way that Hollywood's fictionalisation would have done no damage to the known facts of history. Indeed, had Gray's ideas been adopted, they would have appealed to modern commentators on the history film, amounting to what Robert Rosenstone defines as a "true invention" - a dramatic 'fiction' which is acceptable for its positive engagement with the existing discourse of history.⁴²

Unfortunately, the Code would not accommodate this. The story, as contrived, presented an "unacceptable treatment of adultery" and a "glorification of the immoral relationship" between the Prince and Maria.⁴³ In point of fact, the PCA had no problem with the unofficial marriage *per se*, since historically the Prince and Mrs Fitzherbert had indeed been married in the sight of God if not in the eyes of the law (and since the Act of Settlement had discriminated against Catholics, Breen did not seem overly concerned to recognise its legitimacy and insist that this particular law should have been upheld by the couple).⁴⁴ But it became - or at least "appeared" - illicit when it was presented as having continued during his official marriage to Princess Caroline. Whether interpreted as bigamous or adulterous, the situation was clearly "immoral." If their relationship was to be presented as such, the filmmakers could not then use the situation to elicit "the sympathy of the audience" for the couple, and the Prince - like Emma Hamilton and Nelson before - would have to be punished for his 'sin'.⁴⁵

Despite all of the research Gray had completed and his satisfaction with the dramatic solutions that had been proposed, Zimbalist did not even think of challenging Breen. Instead, he hired Karl Tunberg to revise the script, and in doing so history was rewritten. Tunberg's solution to the PCA's objections was to present all events in the film as if they took place before Caroline arrived in England in 1795, prior to the official marriage. In that situation, no adultery or bigamy would be involved or need to be condoned or explained. With the Prince already secretly married to Maria (or so it is implied), the plot of the film involves the Prince and Brummell trying to find a way to prevent the marriage to Caroline from ever taking place - devising a scheme so that the Prince can be declared Regent and void the Royal Marriage Act before her arrival. "No man," as Brummell puts it, "should be forced to make love according to an Act of Parliament." It was an elegant solution; but one which proceeded to make a complete mess of the chronology.

The narrative initially suggests a setting of 1794, just prior to the official marriage, when for a brief period the Prince had been compelled to 'give up' Maria. Yet, in reality, Brummell was barely sixteen at that time, and had only just joined the Prince's regiment of the 10th Light Dragoons. This presents an additional problem, since the film begins with Brummell *leaving* the regiment, when in reality he did not resign until 1798, and had played a significant ceremonial role in the royal wedding itself. It was only *after* the official marriage that he became part of the King's close entourage, and he certainly could not have

advised on the matter of negating the Marriage Act. Moreover, the rift between the Prince and Brummell in the film comes when Prime Minister Pitt frustrates their plans by using the House of Commons to limit the powers of the Regency. This references the historical 'Regency Crisis' when King George III had been temporarily incapacitated with porphyria, and Pitt's plans for allowing the Prince of Wales to become Regent would have restricted his ability to grant peerages and sell royal property. In the film, Brummell convinces his friend that no usurpation of the royal prerogative is acceptable – but since this refusal to compromise destroys the Prince's one chance to rule and legitimise his marriage to Maria, it results in Brummell's downfall. However, the Regency Crisis of history occurred in 1788, when Brummell was no more than ten years old, hardly in a position to influence the Prince, whom he had yet to meet! Further, the real breach between prince and dandy, as Gray had pointed out, did not occur until 1811 – and William Pitt the Younger could not have been involved at all, having died in 1806.⁴⁶ Conventionally, almost every history film starts with a title or foreword locating it in time and place; *Beau Brummell* simply refers to “the days of Napoleon, Nelson and Wellington” - it is small wonder that any references to dates are conspicuously absent throughout the production.

The filmmakers were versed in all these facts, and were clearly conscious of the distortions wrought by the changes to the screenplay. But all it took was one brief letter from Breen pointing out the problems in meeting the Code, and Gray's research was cast aside immediately without protest. Adapting to the Code had become such second-nature, and it did indeed occasion “trite” and unrealistic versions of history.

Yet the PCA file on *Beau Brummell* contains one other interesting document. Prior to the standard letter of June 4, someone at the PCA had evidently been asked to check the facts, and had produced a memo for internal reference – only 95 words in length, consisting of an entry on Maria Anne Fitzherbert copied from an unidentified biographical encyclopaedia. It notes that she “married George, Prince of Wales” in 1785, but that the marriage was “made illegal” under the Royal Marriage Act and the Act of Settlement. It also accurately records that she lived with the Prince of Wales, was “recognized by the royal family,” and “maintained relations with him even after his official marriage with Caroline of Brunswick.”⁴⁷ Its content was slim, but this little bit of research clearly informed the letter Breen composed to MGM. For not only did he object to the story of the Prince and Mrs Fitzherbert “engaging in an illicit sex relationship” on the grounds that it was morally “unacceptable”, but he also implied that it was historically flawed, stating that “we believe, in real life, these people were actually married at the time covered in this story.”⁴⁸

The fact that the PCA undertook some research of its own in order to argue this point, itself suggests a particular concern not to simply dismiss historical reality, but to find a way of accommodating it to modern-day morality. There was no practical reason for the PCA to find a way of appealing to the producers on historical as well as moral grounds – its power to enforce the Code's moral strictures had been upheld by the industry for two decades, and Zimbalist was evidently ready to accept that. Rather, the memo suggests that Breen did not want to leave the PCA open to the accusation that it was indeed forcing Hollywood to

rewrite history. To be seen as doing so could have been a public relations disaster, damaging the credibility of the Code (a particular concern in the early 1950s, when it was already under fire).⁴⁹ Gregory Black records that Breen had, from the very beginning of his tenure, been particularly concerned to find a strategy that would enable filmmakers to make acceptable films based on celebrated novels – realising in the making of *Anna Karenina* (1935) that “the industry would look foolish if it banned Tolstoy and other pieces of classic literature simply because they contained sexual themes.”⁵⁰ I would argue that he attempted to find a similar approach to dealing with difficult historical subjects – since objecting to historical facts would also “look foolish.” Thus, as in the cases of *Madame DuBarry*, *That Hamilton Lady* and *Young Bess*, Breen sought to maintain the posture that ‘real’ history *could* be made to coincide with the Code’s standards of moral behaviour.

Often this did indeed serve to deflect criticism and challenges – but the example of *Beau Brummell* belies the illusion. While it was certainly true that Mrs Fitzherbert and the Prince of Wales had married, the fact that George also married Princess Caroline and carried on his relationship was equally as true, and reflected another reality: that the standards of morality upheld by the Production Code were very different to the personal standards upheld by the Prince Regent 150 years before. Application of the Code required that the actual views of the historical personages themselves were of lesser consequence than the views of the Legion of Decency. And even when the factual content of history seemed to be compatible with the Code, it is possible to discern that Breen’s strategy in this regard did indeed contribute to the lack of ‘realism’ often associated with Hollywood’s history films.

To return to *That Hamilton Woman!*, for instance, it may well have been accurate to show that Nelson and Emma had been condemned and criticized by many of their peers and that Emma had suffered from the subsequent disgrace later in her life, but Breen had also compelled Korda to go beyond the facts in including on a scene in which the lovers themselves recognised their sin. Korda knew well that this *crise de conscience* – in which Emma was compelled to declare that “What we are doing is most dreadfully wrong” – was supremely ahistorical. Nelson had quite bluntly “dismissed” his wife in January of 1801, after she had given him the ultimatum of giving up “either he or me,” while Emma continually romanticised her own role in the scandal, describing herself as a “more lovely, more virtuous woman” than Lady Nelson.⁵¹ Overlooked by Short is the notable observation then that when it comes to this scene in the film, Vivien Leigh’s delivery of the line is (as even her admiring biographers admit) the “most unconvincing” moment of her performance.⁵² Moreover, Korda abandoned earlier levels of realism to accentuate the melodrama to the point of parody – with Emma startled, frightened, and “frozen” by the cliché of a clock chiming midnight, portending their doom. Disrupting the audience’s suspension of disbelief, the stylisation serves to implicitly acknowledge the dishonesty of the sentiments expressed. As the Code prevented the depiction of Emma and Nelson’s real feelings and emotions, so it encouraged a sense of ‘unreality’ to be adopted. Thus even when enforcement of the Code did not create as blatant a distortion of history as in *Beau Brummell*, the lesser falsehoods that resulted still contributed to the artificiality of classical Hollywood’s costume dramas.

As a British filmmaker, Korda had not become accustomed to the Code; but for the most part, the industry acquiesced in Breen's approach, just as they did in their adaptations of 'problematic' literature. The administration of the Production Code indeed contributed to a culture of production in which history had to be 'cleaned up' and realities of the past circumscribed – even if they tried to avoid 'rewriting' the facts as much as was possible. Only on a couple of occasions, when challenged by filmmakers who wanted to test the boundaries, did Breen ever need to be explicit about the PCA's project. Just prior to his retirement, when 20th Century-Fox was developing *The Egyptian* in 1955, he was left with no option but to state that items in contravention of the Code – including prostitution and mercy-killings – simply could *not* be justified by recourse to historical sources. The "portrayal, in our present-day civilization, of the customs and practices of ages gone by, which in the light of our culture, appear to be degenerate and depraved," represented an insurmountable "problem":

There is, about this story, a suggestion of these ancient degeneracies and depravities, and we are concerned that their presentation would be extremely offensive, *despite the fact that they may possibly be authentic and historically accurate.*⁵³

This, of course, presented standards of morality as being absolute rather than relative, fixed in the specific formulation of the Code, and the particular beliefs of the Catholic men who devised and implemented it. In the final analysis, history on film had to be construed in terms of present-day morality, no matter how anachronistic that might be. The PCA always sought to enable production, and often tried to find ways of squaring history with a moral lesson, but in the end, in Breen's judgement, there was no such thing as an 'inescapable fact' of history if it contravened the Code.

¹ Joseph Breen to Dore Schary, 19 May 1952, *Young Bess* file, Production Code Administration files (PCA), Margaret Herrick Library Special Collections, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles (AMPAS).

² Full versions of the Production Code of 1930 have been reproduced in Garth Jowett's *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) 468-70, and in Leonard J. Jeff and Jerold Simmons eds., *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (New York: Grove Wiedefeld, 1990), 283–286. A copy is also available on the internet at <http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>.

³ Quoted in Stephen Prince, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 38.

⁴ Quoted in Gregory Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality, Codes, Catholics and the Movies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 40.

⁵ Quoted in Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 38.

⁶ Robert Brent Toplin, 'The Historian and Film: A Research Agenda', *Journal of American History* 78.3 (December 1991), 1162.

⁷ Pierre Sorlin, 'Historical Films as Tools for Historians', in John E. O'Connor, ed., *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar: Kreiger, 1990), 42.

⁸ Richard Maltby, 'The Production Code and the Hays Office,' in Tino Balio, ed., *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 63.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Frank Walsh's book, *Sin and Censorship: the Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), cites numerous examples of the PCA expressing particular interest in films depicting religious history, intervening in cases such as *Joan of Arc* (1948), the portrayal of the Spanish Inquisition in *Captain from Castile* (1948), and even vetoing Gabriel Pascal's 1943 script on *The Hundred Years War* on the ground that it would alienate the church. Breen's rulings in such matters were supported by reference to Catholic historical authorities, and advisors such as Fathers Daniel Lord and John Devlin.

¹¹ Black, *Hollywood Censored*, 176.

¹² Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, 15 March 1934, 4-6, *Madame DuBarry* file, PCA, AMPAS.

¹³ Black, *Hollywood Censored*, 176.

¹⁴ Joseph Breen to Maurice McKensie, 16 March 1934, *Madame DuBarry* file, PCA, AMPAS.

¹⁵ *Madame DuBarry* (dir. William Dieterle, Warner Bros., 1934).

¹⁶ T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe, 1660-1789* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 401.

¹⁷ Ibid., 406.

¹⁸ Ibid., 412.

¹⁹ K.R.M Short, 'That Hamilton Woman! (1941): Propaganda, Feminism and the Production Code,' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 11.1 (1991), 10.

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- ²⁰ Alexander Walker, *Vivien: The Life of Vivien Leigh* (London: Orion, 1987), 207.
- ²¹ Charles Drazin, *Korda: Britain's Only Movie Mogul* (London: Sidgwick Jackson, 2002), 232.
- ²² Short, 'That Hamilton Woman! (1941),' 10.
- ²³ Jack Vizzard, *See No Evil: Life Inside a Hollywood Censor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 83.
- ²⁴ Joseph Breen to Alexander Korda, 15 October 1940, 6, *That Hamilton Woman!* file, PCA, AMPAS.
- ²⁵ Vizzard, *See No Evil*, 83.
- ²⁶ Joseph Breen to Alexander Korda, 30 October 1940, 1, *That Hamilton Woman!* file, PCA, AMPAS.
- ²⁷ Short, 'That Hamilton Woman! (1941),' 12-13.
- ²⁸ See Julie Peakman, *Emma Hamilton* (London: Haus, 2005), 111, 127.
- ²⁹ Quoted in Terry Coleman, *Nelson: The Man and the Legend* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 268, 276.
- ³⁰ Alec Coppel, 'Script Notes', 17 April 1952, *Beau Brummell* file 234-684, MGM Script Collection, AMPAS.
- ³¹ Joseph Breen to Dore Schary, 4 June 1953, 2, *Beau Brummell* file, PCA, AMPAS.
- ³² Hugh Gray, 'Research Notes', 7 June 1951, 50, *Beau Brummell* file 234-677, MGM Script Collection, AMPAS.
- ³³ Coppel, 'Script Notes', 9.
- ³⁴ Ibid. Gray was an English dramatist and critic for *The Listener* who worked as a script doctor on a variety of historical films in the 1950s, including *Quo Vadis* and *Helen of Troy*. For further information see David Eldridge, *Hollywood's History Films* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).
- ³⁵ Gray, 'Research Notes', 47, 43.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 50.
- ³⁷ Coppel, 'Script Notes', 6.
- ³⁸ It might be assumed that the inclusion of the effeminate steward was originally intended as a contrasting character whose presence would enhance the perception of Brummell's own 'heterosexuality'.
- ³⁹ Gray, 'Research Notes'; E.A. Smith, *George IV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 119.
- ⁴⁰ Coppel, 'Script Notes', 5.
- ⁴¹ Gray, 'Research Notes', 25, 173. In contrast to Gray's findings in 1951, historian Steven Parissien suggests that Brummell had "aroused royal ire" with his "constantly disparaging remarks about Mrs Fitzherbert." See *George IV* (London: St Martin's Press 2002), 113.

⁴² Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 72.

⁴³ Breen to Schary, 4 June 1953.

⁴⁴ The provisions of the Code asserted that no “sympathy” should be created for the violation of the Law, whether “natural or human.”

⁴⁵ Breen to Schary, 4 June 1953.

⁴⁶ *Beau Brummell* (dir. Curtis Bernhardt, MGM, 1954). For details of the actual chronology of the Prince of Wales’s relationships with Mrs Fitzherbert and George Brummell, see Saul David, *The Prince of Pleasure: The Prince of Wales and the Making of the Regency* (London: Little, Brown, 1998) 112-15 and 198-99.

⁴⁷ ‘Fitzherbert, Maria Anne,’ undated memo, *Beau Brummell* file, PCA files, AMPAS.

⁴⁸ Breen to Schary, 4 June 1953.

⁴⁹ Although the Code had been revised after World War II to make it even more restrictive, it was fundamentally undermined in 1952 when the Supreme Court ruled that state censors could not ban Roberto Rossellini’s *The Miracle*. This extended the protections of the right of free speech to the medium of film, and sent a signal to filmmakers that they could produce more ‘mature’ films without the risk of federal or state censorship battles. In 1953, Otto Preminger was the first major Hollywood director to ignore the Code and release *The Moon is Blue* without the PCA’s seal of approval. Breen left the PCA in October 1954.

⁵⁰ Black, *Hollywood Censored*, 207.

⁵¹ David Howarth and Stephen Howarth, *Nelson: The Immortal Memory* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1988), 242; Martyn Downer, *Nelson’s Purse*, (London: Bantam Press, 2004), 267.

⁵² Walker, *Vivien*, 212. As Walker notes, the lack of credibility at this juncture was doubled, with contemporary audiences well aware that Leigh had herself been carrying on a illicit affair with Olivier during his marriage to Jill Esmond. Olivier’s divorce only came through on 28 August 1940, and Leigh and Olivier married on the 31st.

⁵³ Joseph Breen to Frank McCarthy, 17 July 1953, *The Egyptian* file, PCA files, AMPAS. Emphasis added.