



JEZEBEL (1938)

Essay by Cary O'Dell

In the bible, Jezebel was a Phoenician princess, the daughter of Ethbaal, King of the Sidonians and the wife of Ahab, king of north Israel. Her wicked maneuverings behind the throne led to her legendarily evil reputation and the adoption of her name for any sinful or brazen woman.

In film terms, “Jezebel” is one of William Wyler’s most classic films and a signature (and Oscar-winning) role for its spirited leading lady, Bette Davis.

Though very much a classic in its own right, “Jezebel” has entered film lore as a lesser “Gone With the Wind,” a near knock-off property procured for star Davis as consolation for her “losing” the much-coveted role of Scarlett O’Hara in the Margaret Mitchell classic. And, true, the two works do bear striking similarities: both are set in the antebellum South, both tell the story of head-strong women, and both even have red dresses figuring prominently in their plots, but the timing of the two works calls into question this convenient theory.

“Jezebel” was based on a play by Owen Davis produced on Broadway in 1933. (Davis rival Miriam Hopkins played the lead; it was not a success and closed after a short run.) Mitchell’s book did not appear in print until 1936.

Interestingly, “Jezebel” was written with the fiery Tallulah Bankhead in mind for the lead. “Jezebel” therefore marks yet another instance where the careers of Bankhead and Bette Davis once again intersected. Davis would later star in film versions of two of Bankhead’s biggest stage successes, “Dark Victory” and “The Little Foxes,” and Davis supposedly based much of her Margo Channing characterization in “All About Eve” upon the controversial actress.

Despite the fact that “Jezebel” predated Mitchell’s tale of Tara, it was no doubt the massive popularity surrounding “Gone With the Wind’s” publication that helped bring the earlier, lesser known “Jezebel” to the screen. No doubt it was also the emergence of Bette Davis as one of filmdom’s most vibrant actresses that also propelled it into production. Studio executive Walter McEwen became aware of the play quite early and in a memo to producer Hal Wallis noted, “[B]ut it could provide a good role for Bette Davis who can knock the spots off the part of a little bitch of an aristocratic girl.”

Set in 1852, “Jezebel” is the story of Julie Marsden, the aforementioned tempestuous Southern belle. An orphan, she is being raised in gentility and comfort in New Orleans by her Aunt Belle. As we have seen repeatedly in literature--consider Dickens and his myriad of waifs--the orphan is a popular narrative device, presenting to their creators not only a blank slate but a character unbound by restricting familial ties.

The film’s bold opening title graphics set the film’s tone. They appear on screen and then not so much fade as melt away, symbolizing the humidity, fever and flames that will become reoccurring motifs throughout the film. They also represent the heated, angry emotions displayed by many of the film’s key characters.

From her first appearance in the film, riding astride an unruly colt, Julie Marsden (Davis) is shown to be breaking free of her traditional gender role and unconcerned with societal conventions. Along with wearing her “unsuitable” riding clothes into her own house party, she has arrived late and, at the party, quickly partakes of some whiskey, a drink normally reserved just for the gentlemen. Amid much whispering in the party scene about Julie’s inappropriate dress (which prefigures her scandalous red gown later in the film) is her Aunt Belle’s lament that Julie has always been a handful with a long history of flouting convention.

Julie’s imperious nature is underscored again later that same day when her patient fiancé Preston (“Pres”) Dillard (rigidly played by Henry Fonda) fails to attend a dress fitting with her. He has important business—men’s business--at Dillard and Sons Bank. Not one to be “stood up” though, Julie storms into the bank to confront him, once again breaking with decorum and tradition and successfully piercing this long-standing male sphere.

All of this takes place on the eve of the Olympus Ball, New Orleans’s highly formal, pseudo-debutante affair. At the dressmaker’s, Julie is seen being fitted with the customary costume for the event, a flouncey gown so she too can “flutter around in white” like all the other young ladies in attendance. But when a “saucy,” “vulgar” red garment, intended for a different client, possibly a prostitute, appears, Julie quickly reconsiders. She literally strips off her dress (and, figuratively, strips off the oppressing rules of Southern society) to try on the shocking frock. As she changes clothes, we see that beneath her dress the crisscrossing wire rigging for her hoop skirt, suggestive of the “cage” she—and all women of the time—is literally and figuratively encased in. Despite the protests around her that “proper” (read: virginal) young women only wear white, Julie seizes upon the red dress as revenge to the uptight Pres and as a statement against common patriarchal rule. She points out to those around her that this is “no longer the Dark Ages,” but “1852, 1852!”

At the Ball, Julie’s red dress (actually brown in real life but appearing “red” in the black and white film) immediately scandalizes the other guests. Though Pres stands by his date and does what he can to stare down the men who dare look at him in judgment, soon the other couples openly ostracize the shameful duo. They scurry to the edges of the ballroom, parting like the proverbial Red Sea. Soon, Julie, in her dress, and Pres on her arm, are alone and abandoned on the dance floor.

Though Julie immediately realizes her stunt has gone too far and begs to leave, Pres forces her to stay and endure the contempt of her peers. Since “Jezebel’s” debut, some film scholars have gone on to hyperbolically labeled this ball scene as Julie’s symbolic social “rape.” But she is simply reaping what she has sown and must now accept responsibility for her actions.

After their cataclysmic evening, and Julie’s reckless awkward rebellion, a humiliated Pres immediately breaks off their engagement. Julie tells him, “Evidently, you’ve made up my mind.”

Pres responds, “No, Julie, you’ve made up my mind.”



After their breakup, Pres moves to the North. After his departure, Julie, like the rambunctious colt at the beginning of the film, appears to be broken. We are told, via various characters, that she has withdrawn to her room and bed. And, later, that she has resorted to busying herself with the more commonly accepted womanly act of “tending house.” We are told she is obsessive in its upkeep, its order and pristine appearance, representing her desire to fix, control and repair the past.

Next, a title card announces that the film has progressed one year. Our next glimpse of Julie is of a resigned young woman, her visage and costuming reminiscent of a Davis film from two years later, “The Old Maid” (1939).

The news that Pres is to return eminently though jolts Julie out of her malaise and spurs her to reopen her other home, the weightily-named Halcyon Plantation. She is planning, on a grand scale, to beg for his forgiveness. When he arrives, Julie is contrite and pleads for him to take her back. She even prostrates herself, bowing to him in the subjugating gesture of a young maiden.

But Pres has not returned to Orleans alone. He has married and his new wife, Amy (Margaret Lindsay), has accompanied him. The moment of Pres’s marital admission is painfully well-played by Davis; emotions of disbelief, rage and regret scurry silently across her face and are reflected in her famous, oversized eyes. Still, ever the Southern hostess (another sign of her acquiescence to social standards), Julie welcomes Pres’s Northern bride into her home.

Nevertheless, now both embattled and embittered, Julie quickly reverts back to her old ways and turns that night’s dinner into a carefully orchestrated, yet polite, battleground. In a fool-hearty plan to make Pres jealous and win back his love, she successfully pits two other prideful men against each other resulting in a duel to be held at dawn. Even as the time of their duel nears,

Julie remains unrepentant, instead admiring the more “honorable” way men settle their differences. She says, “Kill or be kill!...We can’t do that—we’re women!”

The morning duel results in a death, as duels usually do. The blood that Julie now has on her hands is not as easy to remove as a satin dress. She is even further ostracized now, abandoned by her male guardian and condemned by her Aunt. Belle says upon looking at her, “I’m thinkin’ of a woman called Jezebel who did evil in the sight of God.” Julie’s standing within society is retained only due to her wealth and home, the latter now a healthy outpost against the sudden spread of the yellow fever (“yellow jack”) currently spreading throughout the city.

The fever has even infected Pres. In a scene shortly after, at one of the town’s saloons (seen earlier in the film), Pres collapses from the disease. As he slumps to the floor, the men around him retreat to the walls and corners in a gesture that is reminiscent of his and Julie’s earlier treatment at the Olympus Ball, only this time it is Pres—and Pres alone—who is the societal pariah.

It is only upon the news of Pres’s illness that Julie changes and does her first truly selfless act. He is a leper now and is soon to be evacuated (banished?) from New Orleans, sent to Lazarette Island, a quarantine for fever patients. Julie appeals to Pres’s wife to let her accompany Pres. Hers is an argument of life and death and an act of obligation, apology, necessity and love. She says to Amy:

Julie: Amy, of course it's your right to go. You're his wife. But are you fit to go? Lovin' him isn't enough. If you gave him all your strength, would it be enough?

Amy: I'll make him live or die with him.

Julie: Amy, Amy, do you know the Creole word for fever powder, for food and water? How to talk to a solid, over-worked black boy and make him feel he will help you? Pres' life and yours will hang on things just like that, and you'll both surely die.

Amy: Then it will have to be that way.

Julie: It's not a question of provin' your love by layin' down your life for Pres. Nothin's so easy. Have you the knowledge and the human strength to fight for his life and for your own as one will have to fight? Amy, it's no longer you or me.

Amy: What do you mean?

Julie: I'll make him live, I will. Whatever you might do, I can do more, 'cause I know how to fight better than you....

In the film’s powerful final scene, a black-cloaked Julie is seen on the back of a wagon departing New Orleans, her great love Pres, weak and barely conscious, is collected in her lap. As fires—the city’s inadequate protection against the pandemic—rage around her, Julie/Jezebel’s face finally registers a hint of nobility.

Interestingly, as much as “Jezebel” is a film about a selfish and spoiled girl, it is also a film about sacrifice. Pres sacrifices himself and risks his own social standing when he refuses to abandon Julie at the Olympus Ball. Amy sacrifices her husband to ensure him life or at least a more peaceful death. And even Julie eventually sacrifices her life (for surely she too will succumb on the island) in order to aid Pres in his last days.

Erudite film scholar Jeanine Basinger has analyzed “Jezebel” as the story of four major costumes, each propelling the story and reflecting the internal emotional arc of its main character. Along with the classic, radical red dress on which the film largely pivots, there is Julie’s opening costume, her riding clothes, which immediately signal her as a woman of action. That she refuses to change out of it before attending her own house party further shows her as a woman unafraid to assault social mores. It also her first affront to fashion, foreshadowing her later scandalous dress choice at the Olympus Ball. Next, the impossibly white dress Julie wears to

meet her beloved Pres after his one year absence is both pseudo-wedding dress and virginal offering, an appeasement in fabric and lace to both Pres and the societal rules she had taunted earlier. Finally, the long, black cloak she eventually shrouds herself in as she returns to Pres and then wears on her finale ride out of New Orleans successfully obliterates fashion. Appearing for all the world like a nun's habit, the cloak, while it might mute some of Julie/Jezebel's individuality, also, finally, symbolizes her willingness to let go of some of her intense and dangerous selfishness.



As important as the film's costumes are in conveying meaning and foreshadowing so too is the film's recurrent use of fire. Throughout the film, Julie recklessly "plays with fire" as she disregards social norms and toys with human emotions. As mentioned, the film's opening titles melt away as if in flame. When she attires herself in her flaming red dress, she accessorizes her ensemble with a large pendent; seemingly gold, it is of star- or sunburst, its flames radiating out of its center. Other aspects of the film also hint at embers: the mid-film duel (one "fires" a gun), the inferno-like spread of yellow fever. Finally, as Julie (the Jezebel turned nursemaid) rides out of the city in the film's closing moments, torches of fire from barrels burning in New Orleans's streets frame and then seem to encompass her face as if she is being purified by fire.

If matters of clothes and fire are not being debated in terms of "Jezebel," then certainly its feminist and neo-feminist themes are. Long has been the debate about just how "pro-woman" this motion picture truly is. Certainly, starring such a feminine force as Bette Davis seems to make the picture proto-feminist, but Julie Marsden herself is a conflicting heroine. While she openly assaults various aspects of the patriarchy, her motives are more selfish than societal or political; almost everything she does is either for attention or to spite the man she "loves." Until her final magnanimity, she shows a near socio-pathic lack of remorse, sense of responsibility, or concern for others.

And yet, "Jezebel" seems to suggest that--like the underutilized, overly-constrained housewives later described in Friedan's "The Feminine Mystic"—such volatile high-spiritedness (even in these extremes) is what occurs when vibrant, intelligent women are forced into (literally) corseted lives. Like the wild stallion at the opening of the film, or the slaves which also figure throughout, these women, too, are "property," ones that must be broken first in order for them to "properly behave."

But then again just how "feminist" is a film whose resolution occurs only when its rebellious female protagonist abandons her own life for a man, especially one who once so openly rejected her? Nevertheless, in the end, it is Julie's own choice to follow Pres into isolation, a certain purgatorial state. And, therefore, if she is to be labeled a feminist, then—much like the actress who played her—it is a type of feminism earned and practiced very much on her own terms.

“Jezebel” was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2009.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Cary O’Dell is the Boards Assistant for the Library of Congress National Recording Preservation Board, and the author of four books including “Women Pioneers in Television” and “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!”