



A *Woman of Paris* is a 1923 silent feature drama directed by Charlie Chaplin. Below is Kino Ken's review of the Criterion Collection dvd release of that film.

9 of a possible 20 points = **1/2 = rather disappointing movie

United States 1923 black-and-white 81 minutes silent live action feature drama United Artists Producer: Charlie Chaplin

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

Points:

- 1 Direction: Charlie Chaplin**
- 1 Editing: Charlie Chaplin Literary Editing: Monta Bell**
- 1 Cinematography: Roland Totheroh and Jack Wilson**
- 0 Screenplay: Charlie Chaplin**
 - Music Editing (1976): Eddy Joseph**
 - Music Mixing (2010): Gilles Barberis**
 - Orchestrations: Eric Rogers (1976)**
- 1 Music: Charlie Chaplin (1976) and Eric James (1976); Timothy Brock (2010)**
- 2 Art Direction: Arthur Stibolt***
 - Research: Harry d'Abbadie d'Arrast and Jean de Limur**
- 1 Acting**
- 1 Ambience**
- 1 Creativity**

9 total points

Cast: Edna Purviance (Marie St. Clair), Clarence Geldert (Marie's step-father), Carl Miller (Jean Millet, artist), Lydia Knott* (Jean's mother), Charles French (Jean's father), Adolphe Menjou* (Pierre Revel, playboy), Betty Morrissey* (Fifi, Marie's young flapper friend), Malvina Polo (Paulette, Marie's false friend), Nellie Bly Baker (masseur), Henry Bergman (head waiter), Charles Chaplin (station porter), Frank Coghlan, Jr. (j) (orphan boy), Antonio Corsi (accordion player), Harry d'Abbadie d'Arrast, Jean de Limur, Charles Farrell, Granville Redmond (men in nightclub), Bess Flowers (mannequin), Karl Gutman (orchestra conductor), James Marcus (tramp), Harry Northrup (Revel's valet), Philip Sleeman (gigolo), Arthur Stibolt and A. Edward Sutherland (cooks), Wilhelm von Brincken (restaurant patron)

Chaplin's only silent film excursion into drama, *A Woman in Paris* is a lesser work, intended as a starring vehicle for Edna Purviance and loosely based on the romantic career of Peggy Hopkins Joyce up to that point. Though hailed by some for alleged realistic acting, both music that heavily underscores drama and hyperbolic acting in climactic scenes belie such a claim. There is, however, minute attention to props, background art, and foreshadowing, all expertly planned and executed throughout.

Chaplin himself only appears for a couple seconds as a seemingly grumpy porter who unloads perfunctorily a weighty box onto the platform of a railroad station in Marie St. Clair's hometown. Apparently he felt remaining on camera would compel him to perform in a clowning role. That would undermine whatever dramatic impact he hoped to achieve.

Audiences responded negatively to this picture on first release. For two main reasons: 1. They expected comedy and instead confronted tragedy and a bittersweet continuum rather than happy resolution in the movie's final reel. 2. The picture, albeit only incidentally, appeared to suggest non-committal dalliance was pleasantly amusing and typical of bored aristocrats. Setting this fairly sordid tale in France did nothing to divert attention away from critical jabs at parental authority and maternal prudence, both of which took quite a beating in Chaplin's drama of fate. For neither of Jean's parents practice forgiveness. Both are instead overly concerned about gossip and social

acceptance. Marie's stepfather behaves in a downright hostile manner to her, a gender-reversal substitute for the cruel stepmother of many fairy tales.

Insofar as a semblance of plot does take shape, the drama begins as young and single Marie St. Clair is locked out of her home for continuing to encourage courtship by neighbor Jean Millet, an impoverished artist and equally callow romantic. Seeking overnight refuge in the Millet house, the couple is made unwelcome in no uncertain terms by Jean's stubbornly conventional father, who insists his son show Marie the door. After a pointless argument, Jean and Marie retreat to their town's railway station, intending to travel to Paris and hastily marry there the next day. Presumably, *two* tickets are bought. Then Jean returns home to pack.

The strain of disinheriting his son proves too much for the senior Mr. Millet, who suffers a fatal stroke while attempting to light his pipe. Faced with a necessity for funeral preparations, Jean telephones Marie to inform her about what has happened. Arrival of a doctor at the Millet residence forces him to cut short his phone conversation. When Jean rushes to open his home's front door, Marie, sensing still another rejection, despairingly hangs up her phone. A few minutes later, she departs alone on a Paris-bound passenger train.

Once in the city of light, Marie comes to the attention of wealthy bachelor Pierre Revel. He's happy to provide her housing, meals, and an upscale wardrobe in return for sexual favors. The latter are merely implied, thus escaping censure from the Hays Office.

Though perfectly content with the new freedom Paris offers, one evening Marie wanders into a city apartment old friend Jean and his mother are renting. She's following a vague direction given over the phone by a friend as to where a small party was being held. Marie and Jean rekindle their flame, to the dissatisfaction of Jean's mom, who nonetheless plays amiable hostess to disdained visitor.

Pierre and Marie begin drifting apart, with the former turning amorous attentions on Paulette and the latter employing newly-discovered boyfriend Jean as jealousy kindling. Marie contracts for Jean to paint her portrait. This Pierre accepts with aplomb, knowing she's still purchasable, reluctant to lower high-maintenance demands.

Meanwhile, Jean's mother nags at him as a result of overhearing the young man's spontaneous expression of willingness to marry Marie. Worn out by her

incessant complaints, Jean says he only made that statement in “a moment of weakness.” Marie happens coincidentally to be present nearby. She decides to cut bait, leaving the contradictory weakling to whatever destiny his mom decides upon.

At the prospect of complete loss of his beloved, Jean blames suffocating mother love for misdirecting him, ultimately loading a pistol and setting out to exact revenge on rival Pierre. Unable to bring himself to execute murder, after absurdly causing public interruption of a dinner engagement between financier and mistress, he commits suicide, falling into a fountain pool beneath the statue of a nude nymph. So much for artistic inspiration.

Grief-stricken at this turn of events, Marie makes a mournful pilgrimage of atonement to Jean’s studio, There she and the painter’s mother, who at that point is contemplating murderous revenge upon someone she considers but a perfumed village vamp, reconcile with shared sorrow over the deceased’s corpse.

Cut to pastoral idyll with these two operating an orphans’ cottage accommodating four child residents, apparently sponsored by the local Catholic priest. He shows up with gifts for the youngsters and asks why Marie hasn’t married. She dodges direct answer. Shortly afterwards, the childrens’ “mother” excuses herself to fulfil a request for fresh milk. Marie accepts an entreaty from a boy in short pants to accompany her on rustic excursion to a dairy. En route, they accept a ride on a farm wagon carrying accordionist and two laborers aboard.

Soon afterwards, a touring car overtakes it, headed the opposite direction. To Paris. In it is Pierre, who fails to recognize forgotten lover Marie St. Clair in the peasant-outfitted woman on the cart.

So ends the picture visually. A concluding intertitle assures viewers true happiness lies in serving others.

Ah, if only the entire picture had been dedicated to representing how that’s accomplished.

Arthur Stibolt recreates the glitter and giddy gaiety of postwar Paris with sumptuously detailed sets, those being the high point of the picture by far.

Alas, few other virtues can be found here.

Despite a commentator’s remark that actor Adolphe Menjou was a Frenchman, *A Woman of Paris’s* debonair cad actually began life in Pittsburgh,

Pennsylvania. His Gallic boulevardier shtick was created to impress Chaplin, knowing the British director was seeking a credible French performer as male lead in his upcoming drama. This role served as Menjou's acting breakthrough, making him an overnight sensation. He is perfect as a cynical, engaging, unremittingly polite man about town who regards women merely as expensive toys.

Lydia Knott's possessive mother deserves commendation also. Like Menjou, she capably indicates through small changes of gesture or facial expression exactly what undercurrent is passing through her mind at any given moment.

Of supporting players, most impressive is Betty Morrissey, perhaps the cynosure of cinema party girls. Feline in both form and face, she shines as gossipy ally of Marie: garrulous, lively, still energetic and youthful enough to burn the candle at both ends yet remain fresh and alert.

Look for director A. Edward Sutherland as an aproned assistant cook disgusted by stinking poultry and art director Arthur Stibolt portraying a kitchen supervisor intent on flattering frequent customer Pierre.

Editing features a larger than customary number of iris shots, with their fadeouts connecting scenes far more smoothly than more primitive blackouts. It also efficiently links parallel scenes occurring simultaneously in real time, particularly in episodes where a huffy, bedbound Marie is contrasted with suave Pierre ringing up a dinner date with ever-accommodating Paulette.

Chaplin's original music is offered along with an alternate score also available on this Criterion release. The 1976 score, orchestrated by Eric Rogers, is a medley of frivolous, operetta-style melodies. Both it and the 2005 alternate version of Timothy Brock's re-orchestrations are available to relish, the former on Disc One and the latter as a supplement on Disc Two.

Please note the original score of the 1923 release, unused here, utilized music composed and / or arranged by Louis F. Gottschalk and Fritz Stahlberg.

Cinematography by Roland Totheroh and Jack Wilson gets restricted by Chaplin's overriding concept of fidelity to proscenium arch staging inherited from music hall experiences. Chaplin's approach therefore invariably resembles Victorian staging, here and throughout his entire body of work. Audiences are kept keenly aware of actors performing roles on a stage. As opposed to a probing camera peering into personal lives of people simply going about

customary routines or finding themselves caught in unusual, unpredictable events.

Lighting is mostly acceptable though nocturnal scenes are sometimes under lit and poorly defined.

Because of its dramatic suicide, “kept lady” protagonist, and undermining of parental authority, *A Woman of Paris* is suited only to adult audiences.

Below is a listing of Disc Two and accompanying booklet supplements this Criterion Collection release offers:

1. an Introduction by David Robinson: five minutes, twenty seconds
2. a 2005 alternate score developed from Chaplin original audio recordings by Timothy Brock
3. a video essay by Jeffrey Vance highlighting how Chaplin created specific scenes, foreshadowed key events, made use of German expressionistic lighting, etc.: twenty-two minutes, forty-six seconds
4. Chaplin Today: “A Woman of Paris” contains interviews with Liv Ullmann and archival commentary from Michael Powell about the influence of this film on future filmmakers: twenty-six minutes, twenty-nine seconds
5. Rollie Totheroh Audio Interview Excerpts detail how the railroad station scene was crafted with economically minimalist special effects, as well as recount Chaplin’s arrival at Essanay Studios and his progressive rise in living conditions through work at Keystone, Mutual, and First National companies: four minutes, thirty-nine seconds
6. ten deleted shots from *A Woman of Paris* totaling thirteen minutes, fifty-five seconds
7. archival footage of the creation of United Artists: three minutes, fourteen seconds
8. an essay on “A Woman of Paris” by Pamela Hutchinson, especially focusing on the role played by two women (Edna Purviance and Peggy Hopkins Joyce) in his story development process for that movie
9. “Discovering Chaplin’s Music for “A Woman of Paris” by Timothy Brock
10. Arnold Lozano’s mini-documentary with commentary “About *A Woman of Paris*”: nine minutes, sixteen seconds
11. two trailers, one for the 1976 re-release of *A Woman of Paris* and the other for the 2023 restoration re-release of it: total time: four minutes, five seconds

And on Disc One you will find the restored 1976 version of *A Woman of Paris*.