Chapter 5

Ginger Rogers and the (Hollywood) Proletarian Imaginary, 1939–1941

Ginger Rogers was one of the most popular stars of New Deal Cinema. From 1935 to 1939, Rogers’ film persona was firmly linked with her dancing partner, Fred Astaire. However, after The Story of Vernon And Irene Castle (1939), Ginger Rogers returned exclusively to solo work (at least until 1949, when she teamed with Astaire one last time for The Barkleys of Broadway). And, by 1940, Rogers had established an independent cinematic identity, and her films “were money in the bank for [her studio] rko” (Schatz 1999: 57). “While Astaire’s career temporarily flagged, Rogers scored in romantic dramas like Kitty Foyle (1940), winning an Oscar for best actress, and in light romantic comedies like Tom, Dick and Harry (1941)” (Schatz 1999: 103). Between her split with Astaire in 1939 and the U.S. entry into the Second World War late in 1941, Ginger Rogers made six films. While the films fall into different Hollywood genres, a consistent character emerges from the roles, a proletarian hero, but a hero whose strength and independence is ultimately tempered by her dependence upon men and her “natural” desire for motherhood.

This chapter explores the contours of this gendered proletarian trope through reading four of the six films Rogers made between 1939 and 1941. The films selected are her four most popular (in terms of domestic box office gross) of the period, with Kitty Foyle and Bachelor Mother being among the top grossing and most profitable RKO films of the decade between 1931 and 1941 (Sedgwick 1994; Jewell 1994). In addition, the films I have chosen all emerge from an engagement with the Popular Front politics of the late 1930s. The architects behind Rogers’s image include future blacklisted writers and directors like Dalton Trumbo, Donald Ogden Stewart, and Paul Jarrico, as well as sympathetic progressives like Garson Kanin and Allan Scott. This chapter begins with an examination of the collaboration between screenwriter Scott and director Gregory La Cava, 5th Avenue Girl (1939), followed by a brief examination of one of Rogers’ more successful efforts of the period, Bachelor Mother (1939). I then look at two products of Popular Front screenwriters, Rogers’s top grossing film of the period, Kitty Foyle, written by Trumbo, and Jarrico’s Tom, Dick and Harry. Each of the films I examine casts a critical eye on some elements of American society, and often on capitalism itself, but in doing so tends to reinforce the gendered version of left politics criticized by
the screenwriters behind Riffraff. This depiction of gender, and especially women’s dependence upon men, becomes a basis for social critique, but also disrupts the vision of social equality the films sometimes advocate.

Ginger Rogers may seem an unlikely choice to represent the proletarian imaginary of late 1930s, early 1940s. For instance, Buhle and Wagner describe Tender Comrade (1944) as “a great romantic-sloppy favorite with the pairing of real-life reactionary Ginger Rogers and real-life progressive Robert Ryan” (Buhle and Wagner 202: 231). And this characterization as a “real-life reactionary” was cultivated by Rogers herself after 1947, most notably in her autobiography (1991). Rogers’ mother, Lela Emogene Rogers, was a founding member of the anti-left Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, and testified as a friendly witness during the May 1947 Huac hearings, precursor to the October 1947 hearings that produced the blacklists (Rogers 1991: 334–335; Ceplair and Englund 2003: 255). Whatever the case with Rogers “real life” politics, the screen image she cultivated during the late 1930s and early 1940s was as a New Deal supporter of Roosevelt, often with a class consciousness, and sometimes with left sympathies. And it was precisely this screen persona as a class conscious, left leaning hero, that made Ginger Rogers one of the few RKO women “in 1940–1941 who definitely could carry a picture” (Schatz 1999: 103). In this sense, the popularity of Rogers’ screen persona signifies the high-water mark of the politicized proletarian imaginary in Depression era cinematic culture, but a proletarian imaginary that continued to police and enforce the normative boundaries of traditional conceptions of gender.

In the previous chapters, I presented careful analyses of entire films. In this chapter I proceed somewhat differently, concentrating, for the most part, on important film fragments. Kitty Foyle receives most extensive attention, and this because the film is both among the more radical of the group, and the highest grossing of Rogers’ films during the period. Thus, in order to contextualize the fragments I examine, I have provided a brief plot synopsis at the beginning of each discussion to provide context and help ensure clarity.

5th Avenue Girl (1939)

5th Avenue Girl, Rogers’ first film after separating from Astaire, comes closest to violating the normative taboos surrounding masculinity and femininity, even as it expresses an obviously ambivalent attitude toward the left and left politics. Directed by La Cava in a bid to recapture the success of My Man Godfrey, the later film has considerably more political and narrative complexity. The writer behind the picture, Allan Scott, had been a long-time