Passion, Wildness and Metamorphosis in *Gone to Earth*

Cathy Lomax

Cathy Lomax, *Bad Blood*, 2026, oil on paper

If the actress Jennifer Jones is remembered at all it tends to be for her leading role in the overwrought *Duel in the Sun* (1946), or *Lust in the Dust* as John Waters delightfully named it. In this western epic she plays Pearl Chavez, an orphan consumed by her passion for the psychopathic Lewt (Gregory Peck), with whom she enacts a melodramatic hillside shoot out before they crawl into each other's arms to die. My first encounter with Jennifer Jones however was in the strangely haunting *Gone to Earth* (1950) which I came across while working on an exhibition called The English Museum. Made on location in Shropshire (on the borders of England and Wales) the story centres on Hazel Woodrus, a young passionate woman who loves animals and is unable to ignore the sexual feelings she has for a cruel country squire.

There are similarities in Jones' roles in the two films, notably the mixed-race heritage of her heroines – Pearl's mother was Mexican, Hazel's a Welsh Gypsy. I say 'was' because when we meet Pearl and Hazel their mothers are dead which means that the young women are without maternal love and guidance and their position as exotic outsiders in hostile environments leaves them vulnerable to predatory males. In both films the beautiful young heroine is haunted by her desire for a man she despises. Yet where *Duel in the Sun* is a Hollywood epic with the sexual appeal of the actress exploited for spectacle, *Gone to Earth* is earthy and British, with Hazel's sexual allure and desires part of her attunement with the natural world. This beautiful, dark, fairytale is made all the stranger by its amplified colour, courtesy of Technicolor, which is used masterfully by the British directors Powell and Pressburger. The colour saturated shots of characterful non-actors, Hazel in vivid green, blue, red or yellow costumes, and most ominously the local fox hunters in their scarlet coats, are variously set against green landscapes, the vertical stripes of tall tree trunks, odd rocky outcrops and clear blue skies. This chemical enhanced palette, and reference to the ghostly Black Huntsman who rides the night wind with a pack of hounds, gives the film an elevated theatrical reality which makes it something of a forerunner to contemporary folk horror.

The film opens (and ends) on the rolling Shropshire countryside which is bisected by Hazel running barefoot across the screen. The local hunt is out (led by her soon to be lover) and Hazel, dark hair flying wildly around her angelic apple cheeked face, scoops up her beloved fox before the hounds can catch its scent. Back home at the tiny cottage she shares with her father a violent tussle results in a tear to her only dress. The subsequent trip to buy a new dress sets in motion a series of events which lead to fear, sexual pleasure, humiliation, abstinence and ultimately death.

The Commitment of Jennifer Jones

Jennifer Jones' Hazel is a fully rounded character, her confusion, panic, satisfaction and determination, are all articulated physically. As she travels between the chaste marital harmony offered by kindly pastor Edward Marston (Cyril Cusack) and the excitement of fulfilled sexual desire with the cruel foxhunting squire Jack Reddin (David Farrar)

Miriam Bale aptly describes Jones' palpable sexual energy as 'vibrational' rather than simply physical [1]. Jones also adeptly embodies Hazel's enjoyment of her physicality. Her new form fitting dress, is disapproved of by her aunt who acidly remarks, 'A disgrace the way you look in that dress. You look like an actress [...] You quite draw men's eyes'. To which Hazel replies, 'it's nice to draw men's eyes. Ain't it?' In his memoirs Michael Powell describes Jones' conscientious attention to detail:

> She [...] had had corsets specially designed to pinch her in and to push her out. She knew where the camera was very well [and] insisted upon the wardrobe mistress pulling the corset tighter and tighter until her body moved within the dress like a panther in its skin.[2]

Alongside this physical commitment, Jones' mobile and open face animates her performance. She is perfect for otherworldly outsider roles, with an ability to adopt a faraway look which immediately places her beyond the diegesis. For the ethereal Hazel she moves between naivety, intensity and determination.

HIazel's Gypsy heritage manifests in her superstitions and free-spirited association with the natural world. This is reflected by commentary on the film which often mentions Jones' wildness. Michael Powell recounts that she: 'threw her shoes away and went barefoot over the Welsh mountains [...] the soles of her feet were like tanned buckskin'.[3]In this merging of the star and her role the suggestion is that Hazel, as a woman with Gypsy heritage, is driven by urges and desires, and as such is different from cultivated women. This plays into stereotypical ideas of the exotic other – non-white women who are closer to the natural world and the animals who inhabit it. These cliches/fantasies about wild natural women are however tempered by the complexity of Hazel's character who indulges in her fiery sexual relationship with Reddin on her own terms, when he is cruel to her animal companion, the indomitable Foxy, she has no hesitation in leaving.

[1] Miriam Bale, 'Basic Instinct', *Film Comment* (May-June 2008) https://www.filmcomment.com/article/basic-instinct-jennifer-jones-retrospective/

[2] Michael Powell, *Million Dollar Movie* (1995), 69-70

[3] Ibid, 70

The Hunted and the Hunter

Powell and Pressburger's *Gone to Earth* is a faithful adaptation of the 1917 romantic novel by Mary Webb, whose work is often unfairly dismissed as cloyingly sentimental. *Gone to Earth* however is not a standard romance, instead it foregrounds the battle between sexual excitement, domestic security and independence, and Hazel, as with Webb's heroines more generally, is an independent women defying convention. The reoccurring image of Hazel and Foxy being hunted by a pack of men is especially telling and strikingly illustrates Webb's concern over the status of women within a patriarchal society.

The prevalence of hunting in the film recalls the traditional folk song 'Hares on the Mountain' in which hunting is a metaphor for sexual desire. Shirley Collins, in her version of this suggestive song, enacts a gender swap over earlier renderings, which positions women as the hunters:

> If all you young men were hares on the mountain
> How many young girls would take guns and go hunting
> [...] If all you young men were fish in the water
> How many young girls would undress and dive after.[4]

This feminist twist promotes the fulfilment of womanly passion over the more usual tale of submitting to the lust of men, and it is here that we can position Hazel's desire for her handsome villain. Despite Hazel's strong will, the progressive nature of Collins' song is somewhat mediated by Hazel's enactment of a ceremony from her mother's spell book to determine whether to leave her new husband (who believes he is being kind by not having sex with her) to consummate her passion for Reddin. Although her actions are based on wrongly attributing non-magical music to fairies, it matters little, as nature itself concocts its own hypnotic spell to ensure that she and Reddin indulge their passion. This is poetically set out by Mary Webb in her description of the atmosphere at Undern – Reddin's imposing home which Hazel immediately moves to:

[4] Shirley Collins, 'Hares on the Mountain', 1965 (based on a traditional song)

The cattle drowsed in the meadows, birds in the heavy trees; the golden daylilies drooped like daughters of pleasure; the very principle of life seemed to slumber. It was then, when the scent of elder blossom, decaying fruit, mud and hot yew brooded there, that the place attained one of its most individual moods – narcotic, aphrodisiac. [5]

Cathy Lomax, *Two creatures taken in a snare*, 2026, oil on paper

The affinity Hazel has with nature is continually emphasised throughout the film, most often in her close relationship with Foxy. 'If you're a lost I'm a lost' she tells the fox after their initial brush with the hunt. Later Hazel observes that Reddin 'looks like a hound dog' and has 'the blood of little foxes on him'. As the narrative progresses and she leaves Marston to satisfy her desire for Reddin she reluctantly leaves Foxy behind to keep her safe.

Folklorist Roy Palmer observes that 'Hares on the Mountain' 'is not merely a series of sexual metaphors, but an echo of the ancient songs and stories of metamorphosis, in which the pursued woman runs out of transformations and falls to the man.'[6] In *Gone to Earth* transmogrification is also key, most particularly Hazel's identification as a fox. Reddin sees her sexual attractiveness as 'foxy' and describes her as 'a little vixen' when she returns to Marston. In her relationship with Marston Foxy effectively stands in for her. Rather than

[5] Mary Webb, *Gone to Earth* (Virago, 1992), 29

[6] Roy Palmer, *English Country Songbook* (Littlehampton Book Services, 1979)

embracing or touching her when he proposes marriage, he is all the while holding and stroking Foxy. The supposed lovers are joined not by looking at each instead their eyes are only on the fox.

Hazel and Foxy are also related in their wild nature. In the novel Hazel's father informs her that if the fox kills any more chickens 'it's the water and a stone round her neck'. Hazel tells the creature:

'You was made a fox, and you be a fox, and its queer-like to me, Foxy, as folk canna see that. They expect you to be what you wanna made to be. You'm made to be a fox; and when you'm busy being a fox they say you'm a sinner!'[7]

With this philosophising Hazel might have been talking about herself. Most particularly the desirous feelings she has for the loathsome Reddin which although wild and exciting she wishes she didn't have. When she returns from her sexual sojourn with Reddin she, like Foxy, is ostracised by polite society and marked as a sinner.

At the film's dénouement Hazel and Foxy are once again running at full pelt across the hills pursued by the hunt. Hazel who runs with the freeness of a wild animal wears a russet-coloured top that coordinates with the fox she holds in her arms. Jennifer Jones perfectly pitches the expression of terror on Hazel's face, as Reddin, at the head of the pack shouts, 'Give her to me you little fool, give her to me'. Ignoring his cries she heads towards God's Little Mountain, her home with Marston and a safe place for Foxy. Still holding Foxy, she raises her free arm to acknowledge Marston, who has heard the hunt and come to find her. As the mineshaft appears in front of her, she raises her chin, her mouth opens and twists, and she and Foxy disappear down the deep chasm. The huntsman's shout of 'Gone to Earth' acknowledges that the chase is over, and just like that Hazel and Foxy are effectively bound together for eternity.

[7] Mary Webb, *Gone to Earth*, 47

As Mary Webb notes, both Reddin and Marston see Hazel as they wanted her to be, not as she was.[8] Despite this she manages to confound the traditions she is expected to conform to. In Hazel's final run from the hunt, she effectively transforms into a fox, and it is in this form that her death, although tragic, allows her to escape from the men (her captors) that have never really seen her. As for Jennifer Jones, although her performance was appreciated by her director, she and the film did not receive good reviews. The American co-producer (and Jones' husband), David O'Selznick, was so unhappy with the film's gritty strangeness, that he added, deleted and reshot scenes – notably more close-ups of Jones in which she wears something akin to a Hollywood glamour makeup. This new US version, The Wild Heart, appeared two years later and swiftly disappeared. Despite the apparent failure of the film the original version, along with its visionary directors, has been reappraised and a screening of it in its restored glory at the 2023 Powell and Pressburger season at the BFI in London, was rapturously received.

[8] Ibid, 125