Pretty Woman may be the film Cinderella of 1990. This story of a Hollywood hooker whose week in a New York corporate cannibal's penthouse changes both their lives was released without razzamatazz, reviewed without raves, lacks a name director or writer, has two middle-rank rather than mega-stars, and missed an Academy Nomination. Yet it has been Top Grossing Film in Australia for at least four weeks, a position that the more strongly promoted Bird on a Wire failed to reach, and which it reclaimed from the far more massively promoted Dick Tracy after only one week.

This is partly because Pretty Woman does perfectly what all Hollywood movies aim for: wish fulfilment. Its distribution of this largesse is remarkably even-handed. Men can vicariously enjoy power, money and Julia Roberts. Women can enjoy low society, high society, superb clothes and Richard Gere. Seldom has Hollywood presented glossy clothes and glossy bodies in glossier surroundings. In Pretty Woman even the street-people look like stars.

This unashamed wallow in material gratification gives Pretty Woman a pedigree going back past Cinderella into the fourteenth century, when Thomas Chestre reshaped Marie de France's Lai de Lanval to provide the "shameless wish-fulfilment of a petty tradesman"¹ in Sir Launfal: the knight bankrupted by the queen's enmity, and raised to glory – enough to ruin his queenly enemy – by the love of a fairy mistress. As Stephen Knight² points out, this is the mediaeval equivalent of Gold Lotto: struggling knights bypass contest for royal favours to gain private wealth from a great heiress. Pretty Woman offers both men and women a contemporary version: on the one hand the hooker who marries into money, the Cinderella motif personified by Patricia Kluge; on the other, the corporate raider who plunders companies like a mediaeval mercenary. (Picture Alan Bond as prince rather than frog.) However, the Cinderella motif also links Pretty Woman to a pair of more illustrious economic fairy tales, the canonical texts of Pride and Prejudice and Jane Eyre.
To mention these novels' "fairytale" aspects is common-place: but in a very real sense they are as much fairytales as Pretty Woman and Sir Launfal, for they present women who achieve wealth beyond their real economic reach. In Jane Austen's world Elizabeth Bennet could only have married Darcy in a fairytale, and Bronte has to strain plausibility to settle a fortune on Jane Eyre. Where they differ from Sir Launfal is that in both cases wealth is a reward for virtue. Elizabeth marries Darcy and gets the money after learning to distrust first impressions; Jane gets Rochester and the money after virtuously refusing his illicit love. It is a case of having a moral icing on your economic cake. Pretty Woman joins the succession because it has a moral icing too.

Where the two novels accept their economic status quo, Oliver Stone's Wall Street (1987) pointed out, in a fairly crude attack on capitalism, that "Greed does not pay." That Pretty Woman attempts a similar critique, however modest, of the economic dream it peddles, is made clear by the deliberate paralleling of Gere and Roberts as 'capitalist running dogs'. 'I never joke about money' says Roberts, when Gere questions her charge; to which he answers, "Neither do I." In his penthouse she tells him that she never "kisses on the mouth. It's too intimate... When I'm with a man I'm a robot, I just do it." So far, so conventional. But Gere refers to the street as "your office" and prostitution as Roberts' "profession"; and the vice of the corporate cannibal is exposed when she asks "What do you do?" He explains that he "buys companies and breaks them up in pieces to sell." To which Roberts comments with simplistic pertinence "You don't build anything. You don't make anything." Gere repeats her words to his killer-peer lawyer. "We don't make anything, Philip. We don't build anything." Most explicitly, Gere tells Roberts "You and I are such similar creatures. We both screw people for money." The message could hardly be more clear.

Where Pretty Woman differs from Wall Street is its intersection with the Cinderella fairytale. Wall Street presented a purely masculinist business world, where Gordon Gecko was felled by his male protege without hope of reclamation. Pretty Woman presents a Gecko figure; but here corporate raider and Hollywood hooker de-commercialize each other, a piece of fairytale against which Bronte's renovative work on Rochester pales into the grittiest realism.

What causes this fairytale difference is probably the same thing that, contrary to some views of the film, differentiates Pretty Woman from My Fair Lady. Roberts is not Gere's Galatea; the relationship of mutual change is nearer Elizabeth and Darcy or Jane and Rochester, and the cause may well be the exponentially spreading virus of popular feminism. Its scope shows in the distance from Wall Street to Pretty Woman, but also from Working Girl, which as recently as 1989 had a woman worker overthrow her unfair
boss — also a woman. It also appears in the way Pretty Woman has outstayed Driving Miss Daisy, which perpetuates the view of women as crusty but basically helpless tyrants who rely on strong silent men to spoonfeed them — literally — in old age. On the other hand, Pretty Woman is a long way from feminism's concept-mothers like Alma de Groen's character who bitterly tells her best-seller "feminist" husband, "You've packaged my pain, without knowing where it came from or the effort of will it's taken me . . . to make sense of it." But though popular acceptance has packaged this feminism into a glossy commodified variety, redeeming features do remain.

First is the woman's role as an agent of redemption from capitalism. In Wall Street Darryl Hannah was pure decoration. Second is the semblance of equality in the paralleling of hooker and corporate raider. Third, Roberts' role as the social rough diamond gives her most of the initiative and some of the funniest lines among the film's considerable street-wit, such as the throwaway retort at a polo match: "Edward's a very eligible bachelor. . . ." — "Oh, I'm just using him for sex."

This attempt to show female independence does glamourise prostitution. Roberts and her mentor, Laura San Giacomo, refuse to accept a pimp, and chorus the slogan "We say when, we say who, we say how much." However, prostitution is slammed as another form of capitalism, so Pretty Woman has its feminist cake and eats it too. But compared to Mel Gibson films like Lethal Weapon (1988) and Bird on a Wire, the film is refreshingly non-violent. Nobody shoots anybody, the only person who gets to drive a fast car fast is Roberts, and after Gere delivers the film's only punch he has to put his knuckles on ice.

More importantly, Pretty Woman blurs the persisting Victorian dichotomy of Damned Whores and God's Police. If Rochester was a bad man saved by the love of a Good Woman, Gere is a bad man saved by the love of a Bad Woman. In other Victorian novels like Ouida's Under Two Flags the hero can be saved by the love of a Bad — read Other, whether of race, class or profession — Woman, but only to end in the arms of the passive, married, socially acceptable Good. Roberts gets her man for herself.

This change extends to the women's relationships. In Pretty Woman, unlike Cinderella, Jane Eyre or even Pride and Prejudice, women do not compete for the desired man. As hookers, Roberts and San Giacomo should actually be commercial rivals, but they are shown as mutually supportive. "Take care of you" they farewell each other with a hug, whether for good or just to turn a trick. San Giacomo protects Roberts from the predatory pimp Carlos; Roberts shares her fee from Gere with San Giacomo, and her newly-won self-respect: "I think you've got a lot of potential" she says. And San
Giacomo is last seen planning to enter a beauty course, claiming "You can't turn tricks for ever. You gotta have a goal."

Roberts' actual rival for Gere is male: his lawyer, whose rage when Gere denies him his usual corporate "kill" erupts in the film's only violence, an attempted rape of Roberts. The dialogue highlights this rivalry. "I thought Edward was with you", says Roberts, to which the lawyer replies, "When Edward . . . was with me he didn't screw up billion-dollar deals. . . Oh no, I think Edward is with you." When Gere throws him out he echoes a deserted wife: "I've given you ten years of my life..." But here the parallel collapses to reveal their true relationship as Gere retorts, "You didn't like me, you only liked the kill...I've made you a very rich man, Philip." The violent break-up of the male capitalist hunter-pack is in striking contrast to the way the female relationship strengthens even as San Giacomo complains to a de-commercialized Roberts, "You fell in love with him! You kissed him, didn't you? You kissed him on the mouth! Have I not taught you anything?"

Roberts' clothes encode the interaction of feminism and capitalism. As hooker, down-market sex-object, she is gloriously vulgar in a crotch-high skirt and fishing-length boots. As Gere's mistress-in-residence she stalks through the hotel like a big-game hunter with her kill of shopping bags portered ahead of her, wearing a Fifth Avenue tailored sheath or the stunning red evening dress: packages for an up-market sexual commodity. When the "contract" expires and she declines Gere's offer of a pied a terre she is shown in jacket and matching long shorts, the uniform of the New Business-woman; and she wears jeans for the final scene, which lets feminism spell out the capitalist critique in the film's last word. Having scaled the fire escape to reclaim her, Gere asks "What happens after [the knight] climbs up the tower and rescues [the princess]?" Roberts retorts "She rescues him right back."

Like Steel Magnolias, Pretty Woman has self-reflexive elements. It sets its action in Hollywood, framed between the calls of a black street-person: "Welcome to Hollywood! Everybody comes here! What's your dream? What's your dream? Keep on dreamin..." When Roberts refuses the pied a terre she tells Gere "I want more." - "I know about wanting more" he says. "I invented the concept. How much more?" And she replies "I want the fairytale." Trying to convince her the relationship is possible, San Giacomo's search for precedents ends in "Cinder-fuckin'-rella!" The lightest touch is the allusion in the final scene, when as Gere climbs up to her with his bouquet between his teeth, Roberts laughs and lets down her hair.
So *Pretty Woman* ends with moral icing on its economic cake, as Gere and Roberts go off to "get a house together, buy diamonds and a horse" and live in virtuous productivity on his previous loot. Yet though the film commercialises feminism, idealises prostitution, and as a good Aristotelean reclaims Roberts AND Gere, ultimately it is a fairytale in a very different sense: the wistful expression of belief that even in the Golden Triangle of capitalism the skyscraper canyons cannot wholly imprison the ants; that individuals CAN resist the economic forces that warp the audience's lives.

NOTES


4 Anne Summers, Allen Lane, Melbourne, 1975.

5 "Poetic Licence. A convincing impossibility is preferable to what is unconvincing even though it is possible." *The Poetics*, trans. L.J. Potts, Cambridge University Press, Second Impression, 1962, Ch. 25, 58.