

**BFI Future Film member Nadine Vafi recommends
The Heiress (1949, dir. William Wyler)**



Olivia de Havilland, sister of Joan Fontaine, was one of the leading actresses during Hollywood's Golden Age. Signed by Warner Brothers in 1935, de Havilland landed her breakout role in *Captain Blood* (1936) with Errol Flynn, with whom she starred in several films throughout her career. She is most well known for her role as the kind-hearted Melanie Hamilton in *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

In 1941, with the support of the Screen Actors Guild, de Havilland sued Warner Brothers over the issue with her contract and won her case, which paved the way for actors to gain more self-determination. The case is still referred to as the "de Havilland law". De Havilland also changed the role of women in Hollywood, playing controversial characters such as an out of wedlock pregnant woman in *To Each His Own* (1946); a mentally ill woman in an psychiatric asylum in *The Snake Pit* (1949); and an empowered woman in *The Heiress* (1949). De Havilland proved that women could be more than just a love interest.

The Heiress (1949) is directed by William Wyler, who made films such as *Jezebel* (1938) and *Wuthering Heights* (1939). The film tells the story of a young and innocent Catherine Sloper who falls in love with a young and handsome man. However, the man is suspected of being a fortune hunter by her oppressive father. The film is based on Henry James' novel *Washington Square* (1880), which was adapted for the stage by playwrights Ruth and Augustus Goetz in 1947 (though they had changed the tragic ending into an upbeat one). After it had failed its theatrical trial run in Boston, the story was rewritten – they restored the original ending – and the revised play "The Heiress" premiered on Broadway in New York in the fall of 1947.

Olivia de Havilland had seen the play and encouraged director William Wyler to adapt it for the screen. Wyler bought the rights in 1948 and decided to stay true to the novel and to keep the original, tragic ending. Although the film was not a box office hit, it was nominated for eight Academy Awards. During

the second half of the 20th century, there were several other film adaptations of Henry James' novel.

De Havilland's powerful and heartbreaking performance as Catherine Sloper in *The Heiress* shows the hard lessons a young, naïve woman was forced to learn after enduring her father's oppression and being abandoned by her love interest. Though this melodrama is heart wrenching, the ending is powerful, showing a woman ultimately standing up for her own rights and choices. Famous to this day is Catherine Sloper's answer to her maid's question as to how she can be so cruel: "I've been taught by masters."

Nadine Vafi is a MA Film student at King's College London. She holds a BA in Popular Culture, Film Studies and Philosophy from the University of Zurich. She has worked for Switzerland's Arthouse group and a film distribution company. She has volunteered for several film festivals in Switzerland and is now a member of the BFI Future Film Steering Group. Nadine has a great passion for film history and film criticism, and she aspires to become a film festival programmer.