

# *Belle's* moving and enlightened story (and *The Immigrant*)

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*Belle*, directed by Amma Asante, screenplay by Misan Sagay; *The Immigrant*, directed by James Gray, screenplay by Gray and Ric Menello

“The state of slavery is of such a nature that it is incapable of being introduced on any reasons, moral or political, but only by positive law, which preserves its force long after the reasons, occasions, and time itself from whence it was created, is erased from memory. It is so odious, that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law.”

—Lord Chief Justice William Murray, Earl of Mansfield, in the *Somerset* case in 1772, which freed some 15,000 British slaves.

British director Amma Asante’s film *Belle* is inspired by a fascinating historical episode that helped pave the way for the end of the British Empire’s slave trade in 1807 and the outlawing of slavery in Britain in 1833.

The film opens in 1769 when a young mixed-race child is rescued from squalor by her father John Lindsay (Matthew Goode), a Royal Navy Captain. He proclaims his love for the girl’s mother who, the film implies, was a slave in the West Indies.

Lindsay places his illegitimate daughter, Dido Belle, in the care of his childless great-uncle, William Murray, Earl of Mansfield and England’s Lord Chief Justice (Tom Wilkinson), and his wife Lady Mansfield (Emily Watson). At their home, Kenwood House, the aging couple are raising another great-niece, Elizabeth Murray (Sarah Gadon), also left in their care by her father after the death of her mother. (The real Dido Elizabeth Belle [1761-1804] was the daughter of an African slave, Maria Belle, who may have been captured off a ship by John Lindsay.)

The film moves forward. Dido (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), now a beautiful, intelligent and cultured young woman, is beloved by Lord and Lady Mansfield and the former’s unmarried sister, Lady Mary Murray (Penelope Wilton). Dido is also a close companion to her half-cousin Elizabeth. Lord Mansfield commissions a portrait of the cousins, showing them on more or less equal social footing. (The double portrait of Dido and Elizabeth, c. 1779, at one point attributed to painter Johann Zoffany, hangs in Scone Palace in Perth, Scotland.) When questioned by Dido, Lord Mansfield defensively informs her

that the household’s black servants are paid a decent wage.

Lord Mansfield has privileged Dido with all the benefits her lineage allows, but her skin color is a barrier to being accepted by the aristocracy—her status is too high to dine with the servants and too low to dine with the white elite. (Lady Mansfield: “Any man of good breeding would be unlikely to form an attachment to Dido.”)

When Dido’s father dies and bequeaths her a substantial inheritance, she becomes the concerted focus of attention of Lady Ashford (Miranda Richardson), who must find suitable marriages for her two fortuneless sons. (“A good name and empty pockets” will only go so far.) It becomes clear that enough money can overcome any aversion the Ashfords may have towards “the mulatto,” as they find it advantageous to overlook the background of Dido’s mother.

As Dido and Elizabeth prepare for their debuts in London society, Lord Mansfield is getting ready to preside over the case of a slave massacre. The crew of the Liverpool-owned slave ship, the *Zong*, chained together 142 of its “cargo” of slaves, and threw them overboard, ostensibly because the vessel’s water supply was depleted. (The actual event took place in 1781.)

Dido, developing into an independent and radical thinker, makes the acquaintance of John Davinier (Sam Reid), a legal apprentice and zealous abolitionist who is involving himself in the *Zong* case. With Dido’s help, he gets hold of evidence that the slaves were “wantonly drowned to collect insurance money.” The attraction between Dido and John grows irresistible, both believing that “human beings cannot be priced, because they are priceless.” Davinier further believes that people should not be regarded as “those above and those below,” but as human beings. Davinier, Lord Mansfield and Dido want to use the law to change the world. Lord Mansfield rules against the slavers.

Asante’s film is a well-done and moving drama. It benefits from the outstanding and heartfelt performances of all its leads, Mbatha-Raw, Wilkinson and Gadon as Elizabeth. Richardson playing Lady Ashford, is, as always, a remarkable onscreen presence. *Belle* is a movie with commitment, a well-composed storyline and an intoxicating look and feel—although perhaps a little too smooth and palatable. Given the current state of

cinema and its general lack of attention to history, however, one is inclined to be lenient toward a certain rounding of the rough edges and even a simplification of the presentation.

One of the film's contributions is that it introduces audiences to William Murray, the Earl of Mansfield (1705-1793), a renowned judge and legal commentator, who became friends with John Adams, poet Alexander Pope, painter Joshua Reynolds and James Boswell, Samuel Johnson's biographer. Murray was a product of the Scottish Enlightenment, the remarkable intellectual movement that also produced Adam Smith, David Hume, philosopher Francis Hutcheson (a disciple of John Locke), philosopher and mathematician Dugald Stewart (a sympathizer of the French Revolution), historian Adam Ferguson ("the father of modern sociology"), inventor James Watt (developer of the steam engine), physicist and chemist Thomas Black and the great radical poet Robert Burns, among many others.

In 1762, Voltaire wrote that, "today it is from Scotland that we get rules of taste in all the arts, from epic poetry to gardening." The Enlightenment atmosphere in Edinburgh, known as a "hotbed of genius," also made possible the slightly later emergence of the most popular European literary figure of the first half of the 19th century, Sir Walter Scott.

Lord Mansfield served as Lord Chief Justice for 32 years, modernizing English law and the court system, as well as helping to undermine the country's harsh anti-Catholic laws. While attending Oxford, he was influenced by the philosophy of Locke (1632-1704), who had argued that "[s]lavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our Nation that it is hardly to be conceived that an Englishman, much less a Gentleman, should plead for it."

### ***The Immigrant***

American writer-director James Gray (*The Yards*, 2000, and *We Own the Night*, 2007) sets his new film, *The Immigrant*, in New York City in 1921. Escaping from the post-World War I nightmare of Poland, sisters Ewa (Marion Cotillard) and the tubercular Magda (Angela Sarafyan) arrive at New York's Ellis Island, the point of entry for vast numbers of immigrants, where they are separated when Magda is quarantined.

Ewa falls prey to Bruno (Joaquin Phoenix), a Lower East side pimp and exploiter of desperate woman he gets hold of by bribing officials at Ellis Island. With a soundtrack as intrusive as it is clichéd, the self-consciously dark film features the beatific Ewa (the camera obsessively lingers on Cotillard's elegant face) enduring one tawdry, humiliating incident after another. As Bruno's fortunes worsen, so do his girls', who are eventually forced to perform sex acts under a dank bridge in

Central Park.

For Ewa, survival means obtaining the money for Magda's treatment, regardless of the personal cost. A respite from Ewa's chronic mistreatment comes briefly when stage magician Orlando (Jeremy Renner) appears on the scene. His attraction to Ewa puts him at odds with his cousin and nemesis Bruno. Alas, the triangle becomes a duo and then a solo.

Gray does a fine job of realistically representing Ellis Island, its corrupt personnel and its harried refugees. Those scenes are the movie's best and most convincing. But, overall, the film is burdened by facile misanthropy and cynicism. One feels that Bruno's remark—"You think there is goodness in everyone, but there isn't"—is what director Gray believes, or postures at believing.

Nearly everyone in *The Immigrant* is viciously on the take, except Ewa. French actress Cotillard competently negotiates a flawed and, at times, implausible script—all the while, speaking in Polish, as well as in English with a Polish accent. Phoenix is uneven as Bruno and in his final speech to Ewa he pulls out all the dramatic stops—unfortunately. Renner falters in the love scenes, primarily because the script does not adequately assist him.

In its review of *The Yards*, the WSWS wrote: "In place of clear and devastating social characterizations, Gray settles too often for individual dramas which don't say much." This weakness also mars his latest work.

Furthermore, *The Immigrant's* religious overtones seem to flow not so much from Ewa's Catholicism as from the filmmakers' preoccupation with the notion that people are fundamentally contaminated and self-seeking. And those, like Ewa, who are not, are blessed with a pure, untouchable inner being. Neither proposition is the truth. Social being, not some a priori religiosity, primarily determines inner being.

*The author also recommends:*

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