

**Title:** Elinor Glyn's British Talkies: voice, nationality and the author on screen

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**Abstract:** Existing accounts of Elinor Glyn's career have emphasised her substantial impact on early Hollywood. In contrast, relatively little attention has been paid to her less successful efforts to break into the UK film industry in the early sound period. This article addresses this underexplored period, focusing on Glyn's use of sound in her two British films, *Knowing Men* (Elinor Glyn, Elinor Glyn Productions Ltd., 1930) and *The Price of Things* (Elinor Glyn, Elinor Glyn Productions Ltd., 1930). The article argues that Glyn's British production practices reveal a unique strategy for reformulating her authorial stardom through the medium of the 'talkie'. It explores how Glyn sought to exploit the specifically national qualities of the recorded English voice amidst a turbulent period in UK film production. The article contextualises this strategy in relation to Glyn's business and personal archives, which evidence her attempts to refine her own speaking voice, alongside those of the screen stars whose careers she sought to develop for recorded sound. It suggests that the sound film was marked out as an important, exploitable new tool for Glyn within a broader context of debates about voice, recorded sound and nationality in UK culture at this time. This enabled her to portray a distinctively national brand identity through her new film work and surrounding publicity, in contrast to her appearances in American silent films. The article will show that recorded sound further allowed Glyn to performatively foreground her role as author-director through speaking cameos. This is analysed in relation to wider evidence of her practice, where she reflected on the performative qualities of the spoken voice in her writing and interviews, and made use of radio, newsreel and live performance to perfect and refine her own skills in recitation and oration.

**Keywords:** Elinor Glyn, sound, voice, talkies, speech, British cinema, Englishness, radio, accent, interwar, 1920s, 1930s, adaptation, authorship, archives, cameo, film, BBC

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Notions of the author's 'voice' were an essential part of Elinor Glyn's writerly persona. She penned first-person articles for newspapers and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic across the 1910s and 1920s, and in 1922 published an entire book on *The Elinor Glyn System of Writing*, offering 'guidance to new authors entering the professional field' (Barnett and Weedon 2014: 22). The craft of Glyn's authorial and journalistic voice has been explored by critics such as Nickianne Moody, who has discussed Glyn's extensive 'contribution to [...] gossip columns [...] articles, and advice manuals' (2003: 92), and Alexis Weedon, who has explored Glyn's mastery of 'the business of writing for different media to an unusual, and perhaps unique extent for the time.' (2006: 31)

Glyn's aural, spoken voice was equally important to her celebrity persona in other embodied and disembodied forms, however. Across her intermedial and transatlantic career, she was involved in lecture tours, radio shows, public meetings, public readings, newsreel recordings and on-screen film cameos. By the late 1920s, such cameo appearances were captured via the new medium of the 'talkie', allowing the author-turned-filmmaker to speak directly on screen for the first time. Existing accounts of Glyn's career have touched upon her work with the talkies, and her interest in the performative qualities of voice. Joan Hardwick, for example, makes brief mention of Glyn's work with sound film in her 1994 biography, noting that 'Elinor had a test for the "talkies" but she never seriously considered appearing in them.' (1994: 266). Vincent Barnett and Alexis Weedon have considered the role that speaking aloud played in Glyn's formation as a writer. She often recited her written work, speaking from the page 'in order to assess its dramatic potential', and was 'extremely proud of her reading voice' (2014: 25; 26).

This article argues that the spoken voice was central Glyn's creative practice as a writer-celebrity-filmmaker. I read a deep interest in sound and vocal performance as a connecting thread across Glyn's intermedial creative labour. She developed a strategic

approach to cultivating quality vocal performance throughout her career. In the later stages of her film work, she applied this to a distinct vision for how new technologies for recorded sound could both capture such performance, and sustain her relevance in transatlantic popular culture. Glyn attempted to direct her own movies in England during 1930 after her Hollywood career had ended. During this period, she herself appeared before the camera in support of the venture, featuring in newsreel footage and in a speaking cameo in her own feature film, alongside her work with radio. By closely examining these textual traces, I suggest that the exploitation of new sound technology and its possibilities for recording distinctly 'English' voices were a crucial part of her attempt to forge distinctly national film products. The intention was to use English voices to assist her in creating a new, central place for herself within UK film culture. To support these claims, I analyse Glyn's recorded voice alongside her writings about voice and vocal performance in her novels, magazine and newspaper work, and public appearances. I place these sources in dialogue with original materials drawn from Glyn's business archives, which reveal how sound and speech featured prominently in strategies to establish the author/filmmaker as a leading figure in the British film industry.

Combining these materials allows us to access for the first time an ephemeral history of Glyn's celebrity voice. An analysis of Glyn's approach to film sound offers a new understanding of her changing celebrity status at the turn of the decade as she entered UK film culture. In doing so, the article illuminates an underexplored period in existing critical considerations of Glyn's career and her contribution to interwar popular culture. By centralising Glyn's British film and radio work, the article fosters a new understanding of her distinctive role in British popular culture in the early sound era. This in turn facilitates new considerations of how the introduction of recorded sound affected constructions of celebrity identities during this period, and the complex intersections between ideas about celebrity,

nationality and vocal timbre which played out across film, radio and theatre between the wars.

### *Glyn and the talkies*

Business records and correspondence from Glyn's archives offer unique insight into her plan to infiltrate the UK film industry. Her strategy was twofold. First, she sought to adapt her previous Hollywood-inflected celebrity brand for Britain. Second, she aimed to exploit a complex moment of transition for British film culture. The early 1930s was, as Jeffrey Richards describes, 'an exciting, if uncertain time' (1998: 100) for the UK film industry. Aggressive American export strategies in the preceding decade had resulted in Hollywood productions dominating UK screens, impacting negatively on domestic production. Across the 1920s, it was exhibition, not production that operated as the domestic industry's most profitable aspect. The coming of sound, however, 'opened up new opportunities' (Richards 1998: 100), whilst the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 helped give a boost to domestic production. This resulted in a 'rapid expansion in the volume, if not necessarily the quality, of films made' (Richards 1998: 100). The 'quota quickies' – cheap, swiftly made, and critically derided British films that came about because of the Act – did little to assist the reputation of British film at this time.

Glyn's business records suggest that she intended to offer herself as a producer of high quality, entertaining talkie fictions within this production climate. As I have explored elsewhere (Stead 2016), her aim was to move from a Hollywood-based authorial star to national industry asset. She sought to reconfigure her celebrity brand as the 'Champion of the British Film' (RUA MS 4059 Box 5) and of an ailing UK film industry by combining film production with industry consultation, and presenting herself as a public figurehead for change and improvement in British cinema. These ambitions were centred around the idea

that Glyn could make sound films that would sell well at home and abroad, whilst keeping her own image and identity at the forefront.

During her time in Hollywood, Glyn had worked on a range of adaptations of her stories. Whilst she did not achieve clear creative control within the American film studios, she found other ways to exert her influence, as critics such as Hilary Hallett (2013), Laura Horak (2010) and Barnett and Weedon (2014) have documented. She advised on set design and performance, and supported the wider perpetuation of her philosophies on romance through interviews and articles in fan magazines and newspapers. Glyn also worked closely with her leading actors and actresses to forge a reputation as a 'star maker'. She reshaped the careers of American stars such as Gloria Swanson and Aileen Pringle, and later helped to cement Clara Bow's identity as the 'it' girl of the 1920s in the film adaptation *It* (Clarence G. Badger, Paramount, 1927), based on her serialised *Cosmopolitan* story.

The rise of sound cinema ran in tandem with the decline of Glyn's Hollywood career, however. Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz note that 'the arrival of sound [...] seems to have contributed to the statistic of female decline' (2006: 561) in the international film industries. They list examples of female producers and scriptwriters whose careers were stalled due to the prohibitive cost of talking pictures and changing writing conditions. Glyn's own waning influence in Hollywood was linked more directly to changing ideas about romance and sexuality on screen, however.

Anne Morey has argued that:

It would seem that by the end of the decade, Glyn's most acknowledged talent, her ability to create attractive commodities in the actors she singled out for fame, was itself no longer admired. Significantly, she left Hollywood in 1928, at more or less the moment at which the revulsion against the sex picture

seemed to be mutating into a revulsion against Glyn as a “maker of young men” (and women). (2006: 116)

Glyn’s existing Hollywood brand, therefore, was no longer so marketable in American film culture. Despite this, adaptations of her works were still produced in Hollywood in the late 1920s and early 1930s for the new medium of sound. *The Man and the Moment* (George Fitzmaurice, First National Pictures, 1929) was produced without Glyn’s participation by First National Pictures in 1929, containing sound sequences and a synchronised score and effects by Vitaphone. The poster for the 1930 Fox Film adaptation of Glyn’s novella *Such Men are Dangerous* (1928) billed it as ‘Elinor Glyn’s First Movietone Melodrama’. In the UK, the film was promoted as ‘Elinor Glyn’s First Talkie!’ (1930b: 1) and ‘Elinor Glyn’s First All-Talking Picture’ (1930a: 2).

Although Glyn did not direct or write the film, her name was used in promotion to give the impression of her creative influence. This cemented her pre-existing marketability with the novelty of recorded speech. Beyond adaptation of her writings, Glyn herself had entered sound cinema through cameo work. She appeared in *Show People* (King Vidor, MGM, 1928) in 1928, an early silent film with a Movietone soundtrack, synchronised score and sound effects. The film featured a range of cameos from prominent Hollywood figures of the era, and Glyn appeared, uncredited, in a sequence shot at a fictional ‘High Art Studios’. In leaving Hollywood for the UK, these three elements – the marketability of her authorial brand, and the novelty of sound, and Glyn’s own appearance on screen – fed directly into her attempts to break into the British film industry.

Archived business documents show that Glyn planned a meeting for British press in early 1930 to introduce herself to the UK industry. She promised to ‘consult with the best known and most experienced critics of film matters in this country with regard to her future

plans' in order to exploit the 'wealth of opportunity for the production of the best class of film and resources in the life, traditions, and scenery of the country unsurpassed elsewhere'. To realise these plans, she invited a host of press figures and magazine writers to the Claridge's Hotel in London in March of 1930 to 'Discuss the Possibilities of Expanding the British Film Industry' (RUA MS 4059 Box 5). Glyn's archive contains a range of other materials from the late 1920s that survey the UK industry's strengths and weakness, identifying opportunities for exploitation specifically in relation to sound. The archive holds collections of newspaper clippings, for example, that address the problems of the American talkie on British screen and its perceived vulgarity. Publicity documents focus heavily on her potential to foreground the quality of British voices as a counterpoint to this coarseness.

Glyn's two self-directed British talkies – *Knowing Men* (Elinor Glyn, Elinor Glyn Productions Ltd., 1930) and *The Price of Things* (Elinor Glyn, Elinor Glyn Productions Ltd., 1930 – could thus be part of her 'rebranding' for the early UK sound era, foregrounding uniquely British voices. A publicity document in her archive suggests that Glyn capitalised on the idea and that 'the advent of the talking film, in Mrs Glyn's opinion, has given a new opportunity to the British industry because of the undoubted superiority in general of British voices for this purpose.' (RUA MS4059 Box 15). In contrast to Hollywood movies, capturing the voices of her 'superior' English performers could help Glyn to brand her new films as distinctively British. Other publicity notes in the archive underscore this, suggesting that her 'views and intentions in regard to the British film and its development [...] should be not only positive with respect to the British film, but also critical with respect to the American "talkie"' (RUA MAS 4059 Box 5). Notes on exploitation strategies for her films further recommend that she pick up on 'typical vulgarities that seem to be inevitable in American films' (RUA MAS 4059 Box 5). These recommendations were designed to help Glyn capitalise upon wider anxieties regarding the Americanisation of British picturehouses

which were exacerbated by the coming of film sound, as documented by critics such as Mark Glancy (2014). They also afforded her the opportunity to revitalise her pre-existing brand of romance fiction. The ‘quintessentially British sense of class and her stories of romance in English country houses’ (Barnett and Weedon 2014: 147) had declined in popularity in her recent Hollywood productions. But these were qualities that could be exploited in a different way if they were to unite with ‘English’ *sounds* in UK film production.

### ***Sound, class and nation***

Alison Light has described radio and cinema as important new sites for representations of Englishness between the wars, underscoring the role that such popular media played in offering a reproducible, imitable sense of Englishness to British audiences (1991: 50). Film and radio texts constructed a ‘representation of English behaviour and character which could be copied by anyone who took the trouble to learn the right lines or surround themselves with the right props’, and in which ‘the “proper” intonation of voice became a matter of careful reproduction’ (1991: 96). English identity in the interwar period was increasingly decoupled from conventional signifiers of class difference. Profession and lineage no longer offered a clear indicator of class identity; rather, class identity could be increasingly ‘performed’ through the purchase and use of domestic goods, fashions, and leisure products like cinema and radio. These in turn had wider resonance for the performative qualities Englishness and nationality. As both a performance media and a leisure product that could be performatively consumed in the public space, silent cinema played an important role in making class and national identities visible. The coming of sound compounded this by making such representations audible.

Josephine Dolan and Sarah Street have described the ‘clipped, strangled extremes’ of the voices ‘that dominated British screens (and radio)’ (2010: 40) during this period. Light

also notes the ‘absurd accents’ and ‘clipped tones’ that constituted ‘the new and distinctive sounds of class’. BBC English in particular constituted *the* voice of the British middle classes in its “‘broadcasting” of superior speech’ (Light 1991: 215). Indeed, the BBC’s monopoly in the interwar period meant that it played a significant role in controlling and mediating the voices that British audiences heard during the silent and early sound era. Since its founding in 1922, the corporation had made specific choices about what kinds of voices it wanted to feature, and ‘exactly how those voices would sound’ (Fildes 2010: 92). It overwhelmingly endorsed Received Pronunciation, which ‘flattened out any regional accents’ and ‘carried connotations of prestige and authority’ (Fildes 2010: 95; 97). The BBC’s endorsement of Received Pronunciation was not without its detractors, however. Gill Fildes’ work highlights letters of complaint sent to *The Radio Times* about the ‘cold tones and attitudes’ (2010: 95) of radio announcers, for example, indicative of wider anxieties ‘about the BBC’s ominous potential to standardise pronunciation’ (2010: 98).

The recorded voice was therefore already coded in particular ways in regards to class, regionality and nationality when sound cinema developed in the late 1920s. Alongside this, the proliferation of the sound film accentuated a pre-existing interdependence between cinema and theatre. This added a further layer of complexity to the kinds of voices that appeared on UK screens. British theatre conventionally emphasised a more middle class, region-free representation of Englishness, and British films had long suffered complaints about their inherent theatricality, as critics such as Christine Gledhill have explored in depth (2003). Jeffrey Richards has suggested that British films failed to develop the talkie ‘in a new cinematic direction’ (1998: 100) in this early period, and instead extended this problematic reliance on theatre. British film-makers ‘were largely content to exploit an existing theatrical heritage’, and studios ‘relied heavily on the theatre for inspiration, freely adopting its codes and conventions, form and style’ (Richards 1998: 100). The influence of the West End play

now even more acutely ‘manifested itself in styles of acting and vocal delivery’ (Ryall 1996: 69) on screen. Tom Ryall has argued that the British sound film adopted ‘the vocal conventions of “stage” English as the norm’ (1996: 69), with some British performers using the ‘refined accent associated with the upper classes and the West End theatre’ (Leach 2004: 16).

Although regional accents were central to many popular British star images of the 1930s, their films were, to a degree, ‘regional in their origins’ and ‘regional in their appeal’ (Ryall 1996: 69). As such, they were perceived as less representative of a broader notion of ‘Englishness’. Dolan and Street note that domestic stars like Gracie Fields were prevented from being ‘representative of nation’ specifically because of the regional nature of their accents, where stars with more ‘neutral’ middle class accents were more seen as more ‘inclusively British’ (2010: 40). This emphasis upon a non-regional Englishness also meant that early sound films could be marketed as offering a sense of inclusive nationality. This was one strategy for differentiating domestic products from American imports. Jim Leach cites the poster design for *Blackmail* (Alfred Hitchcock, BIP, 1929) as one such example. As the first successfully exhibited British talkie, the film’s marketing ‘wittily played on the novelty of sound and the anxiety about exposing audiences to American English in Hollywood films, by inviting audiences to hear “our mother tongue as it should be – spoken!”’ (Leach 2004: 15).

### ***Exploiting the voice***

These broader contexts for sound suggest the heightened stakes for any early talkie seeking to engage UK audiences through representations of accent and class. Both of these elements were central to the kinds of film products that Glyn was trying to produce for UK audiences at this time. With *Knowing Men* and *The Price of Things*, Glyn had selected two stories for

adaptation about high society men and women, situated in lavish English and European settings. Glyn needed to consider what would make an English film product distinctive in an international market in bringing these stories to life in talkie form. She was working on the assumption of securing a US release for both films; a crucial consideration for British producers at this time hoping to turn significant profits. But Glyn also had to consider what would make her films accessible to domestic audiences, and how to create pieces of escapist entertainment that would strike, literally, the right ‘tone’. A clipped Received Pronunciation accent might have risked the ‘cold’ criticism of radio. But it might also have embodied the inclusive ‘Englishness’ that Glyn was seeking to exploit in order to establish herself as the Champion of the domestic industry.

This problem was arguably compounded by the lesser popularity of Glyn’s celebrity brand in the UK at this time. As Annette Kuhn (2008) has shown, Glyn’s films had previously been caught up in censorship problems in Britain, notably *Three Weeks* (Alan Crosland, Goldwyn Pictures, 1924), which had been entangled with the British Board of Film Censors in the early 1920s. Beyond this, Glyn’s particular brand of romance fiction had not achieved the same level of prominence in the UK as it had in the US. A 1930 article on ‘Elinor Glyn and the Film World’ in the *Portsmouth Evening News* highlights the distance between Glyn and British audiences at this time. The writer notes that:

Of late years we have not heard very much of her in this country, and the reason has been that she has been living for some time past in America, and is a well-known figure at Hollywood [...] she has probably a bigger following to-day amongst the flappers of the United States than she ever enjoyed in this country (1930: 6).

The writer gestures towards the foreign-earned glamour of Glyn's celebrity, and her appeal to a distinctly Othered American youth. To overcome these issues, and the implication that they would result in a hostile reception in the UK, Glyn's strategy coalesced into three identifiable strands. She focused cultivating and publicising her broader expertise in recorded sound and performed voice, on publicising the sonically 'English' qualities of her films, and on crafting her own spoken cameo appearance within one of these films.

Marketing and publicity materials in Glyn's archive reveal her close attention to the particular qualities of different voices on film. Archive documents describe her confidence in casting Carl Brisson in *Knowing Men*, for example, explicitly because of his voice. She explains that 'after seeing his recent talking and singing film', she felt assured that 'he is extremely suitable for the part, as his voice records well' (RUA MS 4059 Box 22). In a draft article about Elissa Landi, who starred in both of Glyn's talking films, she writes again about the distinct qualities of the actress's voice. Landi's vocal tone is used to distinguish her as the best choice of actress amongst a range of possible Hollywood stars. Recounting having seen her 'in a very bad play', Glyn explains that, '[s]he had a charming and cultivated voice – the kind of voice that suggests that it has not had to learn to speak properly, but does so naturally because its earliest surroundings have been among cultivated people' (RUA MS 4059 Box 13). Glyn emphasises the dual qualities of the ideal voice for film sound: one that is cultivated and crafted through theatrical training and good breeding, but also able to naturalise that training by making such 'proper' diction appear effortless. These ideas about developing the ideal voice were exploited in other publicity ventures surrounding her films. Newspaper reports from 1930, for example, cite her presence as a judge in 'personality and voice' contests. One such contest was held by British Filmcraft Productions, Ltd., in April of 1930. *The Era* reported that Glyn was present to assess 'diction, gesture and facial expression' in an effort to find 'two potential "talkie" stars' (1930: 6).

Pre-publicity and reviews emphasised the English sounds of Glyn's films and her selected performers. Advertising for *Knowing Men* explicitly nationalised its talkie status, for example. Promotion for a screening of the film at the Portsmouth Majestic cinema promised 'English Accent for English Audiences!' (1930a: 8). Whilst this seems to wilfully obscure the Danish accent of the film's leading man Carl Brisson, elsewhere the film was billed as offering 'Fine English Cast' (1930b: 1) in support of Brisson, as if in compensation. A small publicity piece in the *Burnley Express* further stressed that the 'well-known London players in the cast speak delightful English, and from that point of view there need be no doubts about the quality of the film' (1930: 9).

Publicity for Glyn's second British talkie, *The Price of Things*, was framed even more explicitly in terms of the film's 'Englishness' as a marker of such 'quality'. The *Yorkshire Post* included a small feature on the film's star, Alfred Tennyson, in April 1930. The article reports on the progress of the film's production, suggesting that 'the picture is to be thoroughly English in atmosphere and vocal accompaniment' (1930: 10). Indeed, in contrast to *Knowing Men*, which was set in Paris, *The Price of Things* put Englishness front and centre by casting Tennyson and his brother Walter (both aristocratic English personas turned film stars), and setting the picture within extravagant English country environments. Beyond *mise-en-scène* and casting, the specifically national qualities of the sonic elements of the film were again emphasised in pre-publicity. Another report in the *Yorkshire Post* stressed that the picture was to be produced 'with English intonation, and the minimum of the star-spangled manner' (1930: 6).

Marketing, casting and settings for *Knowing Men* and *The Price of Things* thus used the spoken voice to appeal to British audiences by packaging Englishness as a distinctly marketable quality. It was the novel use of Glyn's *own* voice on screen, however, that distinguished these strategies for exploitation from other British cinema marketing in the

early sound era. By cameoing as author-director in her own film adaptations, Glyn could attempt to re-establish her celebrity identity as a national authority on the recorded voice.

### ***Knowing Glyn***

Glyn's archive at the University of Reading contains final continuity scripts for *Knowing Men*. These scripts offer a detailed insight into the central role that Glyn intended to play in framing and establishing the film's narrative. The opening scene begins with Glyn herself placed before the camera, delivering a lengthy monologue. The script presents the scene as follows:

#### SCENE 1. L.S.

##### FADE IN.

Top of six steps painted shiny black.

Elinor Glyn in high-backed chair,

Italian gilt chair, black velvet

background. Her train falling down

steps. Her hand is resting on

writing table matching chair,

Holding pen.

##### TRACK TO –

#### SCENE 2. M.S.

Elinor Glyn speaking on the subject of

Knowing Men. (RUA MS 4059 Box 13)

The planned sequence represents a new phase in a longer history of Glyn's cinematic cameos. In 1927, for example, Glyn had appeared in the Hollywood adaptation of *It* (Clarence G. Badger, Paramount, 1927). She enters the fictional diegesis of the film to explain the concept of 'it' to her characters. Glyn sweeps into a restaurant to converse with the film's male romantic lead, Cyrus Waltham (Antonio Moreno). She informs him that 'it' constitutes: 'Self-confidence and indifference as to whether you are pleasing or not – and something in you that gives the impression that you are not all cold. That's 'IT'!' This explanation is delivered in the form of an intertitle, intercut with footage of Glyn wagging her finger at Cyrus with a playful grin.

With the coming of sound, Glyn was able to cameo in speaking form for the first time. As previously mentioned, Glyn had appeared as herself in the early talkie *Show People* (King Vidor, MGM, 1928), but in *Knowing Men* she was more fully in control of her talking cameo, and her appearance showcased what film sound could do in contrast to the silent cameo. Glyn addresses the camera directly from her writing desk. She begins with a note of welcome – 'Greetings, friends' – to invite the audience into her confidence. She then proceeds to deliver a monologue, explaining the title of her film:

Some of you might like to know what "Knowing Men" really means. I once wrote an aphorism about it which puts the matter in a nutshell. It states: "It is wise to know the species you are playing with. Do not offer tigers hay, or antelopes joints of meat." And this brings us to a point which really interests women. Since the darling creatures have to live with men for most of their lives in one capacity or another, it is really useful that they should *know* them.

Her message is delivered with a welcoming smile, and a vocal tone marked by a relatively middle-class neutrality. This would initially appear to chime with the wider emphasis upon region-free voices as connotative of ‘Englishness’ in British culture at this time. Yet Glyn’s voice does not represent the harsher, colder extremes of Received Pronunciation. Instead, her voice is surprisingly high pitched and youthful: she offers a softer and more accessible timbre. Recorded sound assists her in attempting to convey an intimate understanding of and exchange with her audience through such timbre, whilst simultaneously foregrounding nationality and Englishness. This enabled her to combine aspects of her former Hollywood image with her new incarnation as a British celebrity. Her Hollywood-inflected visual glamour, emphasised in her dress and the décor of the scene, could intertwine with her sonically English qualities.

The particular style of Glyn’s recorded voice can be further analysed by looking at other examples of her non-fiction film work from this period. A British Movietone News film from 1930, for example, includes an interview with Glyn. The feature is titled “Mrs. Elinor Glyn defines “IT””, and shows the author seated in a tasteful drawing room surrounded by books. A male interviewer quizzes her as to whether “it” is really just the same thing as “sex appeal”, speaking in clear, controlled Received Pronunciation. As she responds in softer tones, Glyn turns her head from the interviewer and looks directly towards the camera. She smiles before delivering her explanation: ‘Well you see if that was really the case, every good looking woman in the entire world would have “it”, whereas I suppose that if one counted, it’s about 1 in every 10,000’.

Glyn stutters once or twice (on her first line ‘good looking w-woman’, for example), giving the impression of a carefully rehearsed speech recounted slightly imperfectly from memory. Glyn’s grandson Anthony Glyn recounted in 1955 that the author ‘was extremely proud of her reading voice’ (1968 [1955]: 107). In performing her novels for her publisher,

his grandmother ‘would read slowly with long dramatic pauses’, considering it ‘the mark of a gentlewoman to be able to read aloud beautifully’ (1968 [1955]: 107). This description chimes with the ‘naturalised’ yet learned qualities that Glyn herself championed in Elissa Landi, and the other descriptions of Glyn’s reading practices cited earlier in the article. In the Movietone short, just as in her *Knowing Men* cameo, Glyn’s strives for this kind of ‘beautiful’ diction. Her voice flows with the musical quality of a practiced public speaker, attentive the way certain words can be extended and emphasised for dramatic and melodious effect.

This is particularly evident where Glyn describes a tiger in the zoo in an attempt to find an equivalent for the expression of ‘it’ in physical bearing and behaviour. She describes how the animal ‘doesn’t care an atom who’s passing [...] it just stays there lazing’. ‘Lazing’ is drawn out on the first vowel. Glyn’s voice bends the word to rise and fall in pitch across the two syllables – ‘*laaa-zing*’. This extension of specific sounds allows her to move to look directly at the camera as she speaks, folding her hands across the book in time with the delivery of the word to add physical emphasis. Across the short film entire, Glyn supports and punctuates her vocal explanation in this way with an expressive facial and physical performance, using her hands to gesture and to touch the book placed before her. She later reaches up to remove a veil from her face as she explains ‘you cannot have “it” if you’ve got the slightest self-consciousness’.

Press cuttings from Glyn’s archive give further clues as the tone and timbre of this performed and highly performative speaking voice. They also suggest the ways in which Glyn employed this attitude to cultivated vocal performance across a range of different media. Several archived newspaper clippings from April 1937, for example, refer to Glyn speaking about clothing for the BBC Alphabet Series. A review in *Granta* describes her performance on the show as ‘bright and chatty’ (1937: n.p.). Her archive at Reading contains

the final proof of the talk, which offers more detailed evidence of her practice. The document includes exclamation points and underlined words, suggesting carefully constructed points of emphasis and the intended flow of her speech. These annotations appear to echo the lilt of her *Knowing Men* and Movietone delivery. In all of these spoken extracts, she draws in her audience by posing questions, appealing to common gender stereotypes, and supplying illustrative examples in a 'bright and chatty' tone.

### ***Criticism***

Despite this detailed attention to achieving quality in talkie performances, Glyn's British talkies were very poorly received. Anthony Glyn's biography suggests that she 'had been unwise' to appear in *Knowing Men*'s prologue, and that her 'scathing speech about the failings of the male sex [...] alienated the audience from the start' (1968 [1955]: 318). He recounts that the 'notices that *Knowing Men* received were so bad as to be news in themselves' (1968 [1955]: 318). Reviews from the period indeed picked up on the amateurish quality of Glyn's production, and the thin subject matter of both filmed stories. *Knowing Men* did not secure distribution in the United States, and the attempts of its co-writer Edward Knoblock to obtain an injunction to prevent the film from being shown stalled its UK exhibition.

The technical difficulties of working with recorded sound in the early sound era very likely impacted on the quality of Glyn's finished films. Barnett and Weedon have discussed the 'slow and ponderous' dialogue of *Knowing Men* in particular, and its 'static visual style' (2014: 157). This might in part be due to difficulties with microphones: archived daily progress reports from the film's production note consistent delays caused by trouble with sound recording equipment, repeatedly listing hold ups 'due to microphones' (RUA MS 4059 Box 2). Achieving a clear vocal recording was not easy at this time: noisy cameras had to be

hidden from non-directional microphones, which caused an immediate reduction in the mobility of cinematography, and the mobility of performers. These issues would certainly seem to account for some of the aesthetic and technical awkwardness of *Knowing Men*.

Vocal performance itself came in for criticism, however, quite apart from the writing and shooting style of the film. Barnett and Weedon highlight a *Variety* review from July 1930 that denounced the accents in the film as ‘too Mayfair’ (2014: 157). Such accents may have been marketable as a novelty to non-domestic audiences, but the lack of an American release left this element redundant as an export strategy. As I have suggested, the films’ ‘Englishness’ was a significant part of its publicity, but by foregrounding accents that, unlike Glyn’s, were more closely aligned with an upper class register, this strategy may have backfired. Glyn appears to have further created a mismatch between sonic Englishness, and narrative arcs which took her characters beyond UK environments, featuring non-English leading men like Brisson. Although both her films might have ‘sounded’ predominantly English, *Knowing Men* specifically ‘looked’ French. In addition, it exploited the same sex picture qualities of her Hollywood movies which had not proved as popular in UK culture. Its risqué story made the film unlikely to overturn her existing, less positive reputation in her home country. The film’s focus on a young heiress who poses as a poor companion to test the true intentions of her male suitors seems out of synch with the promised refinement of its sonically ‘English’ qualities. At the same time, as the *Variety* review suggest, such refinement may have in fact proved alienating, aligning the film with the kind of criticism that the BBC faced in relying upon upper class and region-free accents. Glyn’s own voice could temper these extremes, but her on-screen performance did not and could not ‘speak’ for the film entire.

As the 1930s progressed and Glyn ceased her filmmaking venture, she continued to publish articles and novels and maintain a public persona. Significantly, she continued to find

ways to foreground the importance of voice within that persona. Various items in her archive and reports in national newspapers recount her ongoing public appearances, public talks and radio work. She is billed as a speaker appearing alongside the journalist Dr. Tidor Weber in 1932, for example. The *Portsmouth Evening News* reported that Glyn was to deliver an address at the Imperial Institute of Art in London on the topic of ‘Art in Relation to Peace’ (1932: 14). Other reports across the 1930s see her opening exhibitions and giving speeches at literary luncheons (including one presided over by R.C. Sherriff, at which her cat, Candide, made a starring appearance).

An article in the *Gloucestershire Echo* reporting on a public talk given by Glyn in Cheltenham in October 1935 is telling of her lasting interest in vocal performance beyond her work with sound film. The columnist recounts that ‘a very large number of well-known people from Cheltenham and the country’ were in attendance, gathered to hear Glyn’s ‘address on “What is ‘It,’ and how to acquire it”’ (1935: 3). One portion of the report focuses explicitly on Glyn’s voice and her deliberate play with the performative qualities of speech. Glyn describes how she has responded to ‘sackfuls of letters’ from people enquiring about how to acquire the elusive quality of ‘it’. She explains the advice she offers to her fans; her strategy is to imagine herself to be ‘an ordinary girl, say a shopgirl or a typist’, and practice speaking:

‘[...] I will begin to talk to myself alone at home and read aloud to myself on the very lowest note of my voice.’

Here Mrs. Glyn imitated, with laughable effect, the cackling voice so common among girls, to give contrast to the voice to which the culture of “It” should lead.’ (1935: 3)

Glyn's story noticeably echoes the opening chapter of her early novel *The Career of Katherine Bush* (1916). The heroine, a shorthand typist, recalls her efforts to better herself early in her life. These efforts include the cultivation of a 'singularly refined' voice: 'it was not for nothing that she had diligently listened to the voices of impecunious aristocrats over three years!' (Glyn 1916: 3). The newspaper article illustrates how these ideas are updated some nineteen years later for Glyn's more recent and lucrative concept of 'it'. Voice, and notions of the right *kind* of voice, become a central way to illustrate not simply refinement, but the labour that goes into making one's charm and appeal seem natural and effortless. By focusing on 'it' and reworking the early Katherine character, Glyn thus creates a linking chain from her early career as a novelist through to her magazine fictions (where 'it' first appeared), her Hollywood film work (where *It* became a film adaptation), and her own contemporary celebrity identity. This chain is sustained specifically through the connective link of sound and speech. Voice therefore remains central to her sense of her own career, her celebrity identity, and her understanding of her contribution to early twentieth century popular culture.

### ***Conclusion***

A month prior to her appearance in Cheltenham, Glyn had written to the *Gloucestershire Echo* asking readers' what they would like to hear her to speak about. She offered a list of possible topics, which included the question: 'Have you thoughts and desire to be a talkie actress?' (1935: 4). Her choice to include this topic is an intriguing conflation of her persistent interest in film sound and her continued investment in her own performative persona. As the article has shown, the medium of the talkie played a significant role in shaping and reshaping ideas about her creative control, her connection to national and transatlantic film cultures, and the circulation of her particular brand of authorial stardom.

A close examination of Glyn's British films and their particular contexts of production reveals a unique strategy for reworking this stardom through the medium of recorded sound. Archival investigation allows us to coordinate business strategies with marketing materials to build a new image of Glyn as a self-styled talkie celebrity in this brief, transitional moment in British cinema history. Glyn can thus be repositioned for the first time within that history, moving beyond dismissals of her failed film ventures. Writing in the 1980s, for example, British film historian Rachel Low described Glyn as having 'rashly' moved ahead with film production in England, citing the author's cameo as a key factor in the poor reception of *Knowing Men*, given that Glyn was 'already sixty-five and sadly out of date' (1985: 194). By focusing not on the failure of these films and the perceived oddity of her cameo, but instead on their value as textual examples of her wider practices with sound and voice, this article has re-read Glyn's British film work. It does so in light of her unique contribution to discourses surrounding 'Englishness' and the proliferation of sound media in interwar popular culture. Archival analysis in combination with an exploration of Glyn's publicity strategies and cameo appearances has further revealed how her philosophies on voice and recitation can be linked in productive new ways to her own film performances. She was able to navigate the difficulties of the inclusive and alienating effects of recorded British sound by carefully constructing her own distinctive celebrity voice. Illuminating this process forges new connections between her writings and her film work, and enables researchers to give new attention to the significance of sound and voice in Glyn's celebrity brand.

Focusing on Glyn as a case study opens a new space for further consideration of how ideas about celebrity and recorded voice were configured in specifically British contexts during this transitional period between silent and sound film. It highlights the rich potential for new, wider work on questions of early sound cinema and national representation, where

cinema connected to other kinds of sound media in British popular culture. Hearing Glyn, therefore, is just as important as reading and seeing Glyn on page and screen.

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