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Norma Shearer, the Happily Married Divorcee: Marriage, Modernity and Movie Magazines

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July 2016

Word count: 92930

Abstract

The central aim of this thesis is to examine five of Norma Shearer's pre-Code films – all made between 1930 and 1934 - and to place these films and their accompanying fan magazine rhetoric into a wider context, both within Shearer's career and within Hollywood history.

It does this for two reasons. Firstly, it hopes to problematise the now commonly held view of Shearer as a noble, respectable, but ultimately rather dull star by demonstrating the ways in which these films allowed her to become an active advocate for a particular brand of often sexually transgressive modernity, in which she embraced consumer and leisure culture, female employment, companionate marriage and even the sexual single standard. Secondly, the thesis examines the fan magazine rhetoric on the star alongside these films and shows how her successful and happy marriage to MGM Head of Production Irving G. Thalberg served to strengthen, rather than soften, her position as a quintessential modern both on and off screen. After all, the marriage, in which Shearer and Thalberg were professional as well as romantic partners, allowed Shearer to promote a certain kind of companionate marriage, complete with mutual professional satisfaction, successful parenthood, and sexual compatibility. At the height of her fame, Shearer was the star who demonstrated to her female fans that a woman, in the brave new world of the early 20th century, should be able to have it all.

Finally, then, the thesis examines how Shearer's ultra-modern reputation came to an end in the mid-1930s, and attributes this development primarily to two influences, one historical and one biographical. Firstly, in July 1934, the Hays Production Code was enforced; particularly targeting female sexual transgression on screen, this censorship text would make it virtually impossible for Shearer to make the types of films she had become most famous for. Secondly, then, in September 1936, Shearer's husband's premature death ensured that the star, who had previously been characterised as a modern wife, now became identified as a tragic, aristocratic, noble widow. Since her films no longer allowed her to develop an alternative persona, this is how Shearer remained known after her retirement, after her death, and to this day.

**Norma Shearer, the Happily Married Divorcee:
Marriage, Modernity and Movie Magazines**

Lies Lanckman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Film Studies

University of Kent

July 2016

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Introduction: Then you up and married Irving...

I was faithful without swerving,
Norma, since your star was born!
Then you up and married Irving!
You the Shearer — I the shorn.

(*Photoplay*, January 1929: 88)

In February 1940, *Photoplay* magazine published, in its *Boos and Bouquets* section dedicated to readers' letters, a letter entitled "Matchmaking Movie" and purportedly written by female movie fan J. O. B. In the letter, the writer explained how her two-and-a-half month separation from her long-term boyfriend was ended when she went to see *The Women* (Cukor, 1939) in the cinema, and heard "Norma Shearer's wonderful quotation that 'Pride is a luxury that a woman in love can't afford'" (70). She thus swallowed her pride and sent her boyfriend "a little note"; he instantly responded, and the couple became engaged soon after. The author concludes her letter as follows:

So – long live the movies, and may Norma Shearer have all the happiness in the world for uttering that wonderful sentence, for she certainly has made me the happiest girl in the world. (70)

J. O. B. references here a moment at the very end of *The Women*, when central character Mary Haines (Shearer) rushes to reunite with her adulterous husband and – when asked whether she does not have any pride – explains "No pride at all! That's a luxury a woman in love can't afford!" before running, her arms open wide, toward the camera and toward the safety of respectable marriage in the movie's final seconds. Both the letter and the moment it references thus mark Norma Shearer as a very particular type of star: a respectable, noble, noncontroversial figure and, more crucially even, an advocate for the kind of traditional marriage of which unconditional female forgiveness is a key component.

This thesis aims to provide the first in-depth star study of Shearer and establishes, as its starting point, that this noncontroversial, respectable and rather dull persona is the one most commonly associated with Shearer today; secondly, however, it will argue that, for the majority of her screen career, this association is also an inaccurate one. Years before Shearer became the respectable Mary Haines in *The Women*, she was playing entirely different characters in pre-Code films with provocative titles such as *The Divorcee*, *A Free Soul* and *Strangers May Kiss*; these characters embraced divorce, extramarital sexuality, and professional independence in a way unheard of within the universe sketched in *The Women*. They, and the films they appeared in, will be at the heart of this project's examination of the Shearer of the early 1930s as a hyper-modern, intelligent star, and as an on- and off-screen advocate for the sexual single standard.

More specifically, the title of this project – *Norma Shearer, the Happily Married Divorcee* – summarises the key topic to be examined in terms of Shearer's pre-Code career, which is the seeming tension between the star's on- and off-screen identities at this point in time, as Shearer was involved in a happy and scandal-free marriage but, simultaneously, played a number of sexually transgressive roles on screen. The thesis particularly explores how this tension was resolved within fan magazine rhetoric between 1930 and 1934, and how this careful negotiation between both personas collapsed in the mid-1930s, to the ultimate detriment of Shearer's legacy.

As a starting point, I will thus, firstly, examine Norma Shearer's status as a happily married star. Shearer was a major MGM star from the mid-1920s to her retirement in 1942 and married the studio's Head of Production, Irving G. Thalberg, in September 1927; she would remain married to him until his death in September 1936, nine years and two children later.

(See Appendix A for a brief timeline of Shearer's life and career.) She was thus unequivocally the happily married Mrs Thalberg for the greater part of her career, which impacted her star persona and differentiated it from that of most of her contemporaries.

This difference can be demonstrated as follows. Between 1930 and 1934, Shearer was one of ten woman stars listed in the top-ten box office star polls released by exhibitors; she was listed in 1931, 1932, 1933 and 1934 (Basinger, 1993: 509). (Only Joan Crawford and Janet Gaynor were listed more, i. e. for each of these five years.) Of these ten stars, five (Crawford, Gaynor, Colleen Moore, Marie Dressler and Jean Harlow) had been divorced at least once by 1934; two others (Greta Garbo and Mae West) were supposedly unmarried adults at the time, which placed them at the centre of romantic speculation. One more was an unmarried child (Shirley Temple). The two remaining stars were Shearer and Clara Bow, who both had lasting marriages and were never divorced, but whereas Bow only married in 1931, at the very end of her screen career, Shearer had married in 1927 and was thus in a stable, well-publicised marriage throughout most of her career. In this, among these ten top stars, she was alone.

The only star with a comparable marital life at this time was Irene Dunne who, while not mentioned in the top ten polls for any of these five years (or indeed at all), was still a major star from the early 1930s onward, and who married Dr Francis Griffin in 1928, remaining married to him until his death in 1965. Dunne, too, was thus a star involved in a stable and lasting marriage throughout her entire Hollywood career. However, even here, a number of factors separate Shearer and Dunne.

Firstly, Griffin was a dentist, and as such a complete outsider of the motion picture industry, whereas Shearer was the only major star at this time married to a major studio executive.

Shearer thus became, upon marriage, a part both of a de-facto star couple and of Hollywood's production aristocracy. Secondly, Dunne, though slightly older than Shearer, made her Hollywood debut in 1930, and thus never made any silent films to provide a backdrop to her pre-Code career. Thirdly, and most importantly, Dunne's pre-Code characters never came to embody the concept of the "modern" the way Shearer's did.

This element of modernity is the second half of Shearer's star persona that this thesis will examine in detail; before highlighting the contrast between Shearer and Dunne in this regard, therefore, I will briefly summarise how I define this broad concept. This is important particularly in regard to what it meant for women during the late 19th and early 20th century, and it highlights a few specific elements that will become crucial within my discussions of Shearer's pre-Code career, and important to Shearer's star persona in general.

In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman usefully traces the historical roots of modernity as a concept, and provides a helpful starting point for an examination of the situation for women during the first half of the 20th century. Berman's definition, while lengthy, is extremely useful for the purpose of this thesis, and describes modernity as follows:

The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialization of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurtling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful national states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and

institutions along, an ever expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market. In the twentieth century, the social processes that bring this maelstrom into being, and keep it in a state of perpetual becoming, have come to be called "modernization." (Berman, 1982: 16)

His definition of modernity is thus centred on a key sense of instability, of breaking away from tradition, of perpetual change. In this narrative, scientific and industrial developments trigger demographic changes, both in terms of the displacement of large population groups across the world (in the context of this thesis particularly regarding immigration to the United States and, later, regarding urbanisation within the United States) and in terms of socio-economic changes for and driven by these population groups, as they come to terms with life within the modern nation state. This process, as Berman describes it, covers everything from the scientific discoveries of the Enlightenment to the mass communication developments of the 20th century and, as such, took place across a range of centuries. In this sense, the phrase "modernity at full throttle" (Singer 2001: 19), coined by Ben Singer in *Melodrama and Modernity*, is useful here; this is meant to highlight the decades around the turn of the 20th century, roughly from 1880 to the end of World War I, as a crucial moment in time. It is the latter part of this particular era, along with the two decades following it, that I choose to focus on, and the developments of which I aim to examine as they were depicted on screen and in screen-related textual media.

The cinema itself, of course, is a part of this wider development as well; as a system of mass communication reliant on technological developments and facilitated as an industry both by US immigration and by urban growth, it served to envelop and bind together the most diverse people and societies in an unprecedented manner. Additionally, however, the full quote from the *Communist Manifesto* from which Berman derives his title is useful in regard to the cinema, as well. In full, this quote reads:

[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Engels and Marx, 1888: 4)

This applies broadly to modernity, in the sense that Berman uses it, but also very specifically to the cinema; the ultimate medium that turns “all that is solid”, i. e. the tangible objects and people in front of the camera, into the “air” projected on the silver screen. Through this evaporation of all that is solid, then, the audience may be faced with its real conditions in life, with its relations with its kind.

The transformation thus described applies, within the context of my thesis, most clearly to the late 19th and early 20th-century societal changes for women, one of the key marginalised groups who did indeed face their “real conditions of life” and strive to “gain some control over their lives”. As such, they achieved an unprecedented degree of self-determination by challenging political, economic and social realities in myriad ways, as “workers, consumers and, finally, as voters” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 2012: 233).

A key concept, therefore, at the heart of the definition of “modernity” that I will use in this thesis, is that of mobility – as echoed by many words in Berman’s definition of modernity, such as “maelstrom”, “change”, “transform”, “cataclysmic”, “growth”, and others, which all evoke a sense of often brusque movement. I argue that this is especially useful in the case of women: during the period of “modernity at full throttle” and during the decades immediately after, women faced and reevaluated their “real conditions of life”, but they did so primarily through a re-examination of the degrees of mobility and autonomy available to them at the time, both in a physical and in a metaphorical (for example, social) context (D’Emilio and Freedman, 2012: 240).

I will examine this newfound, modern mobility particularly in terms of three different, interrelated themes connected to (American) women's lives in the 1920s and 1930s, which will become crucial within my discussion of Shearer's pre-Code films. These are, firstly and primarily, the growing permissiveness toward sexually knowledgeable and active young women and the concurrent development of the concept of companionate marriage, secondly, the development of a consumer and leisure culture, and thirdly, the rise of female employment, even among middle-class, married women.

In *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman describe this first aspect of early 20th century modernity in further detail, as "a new kind of sexual politics" (231). It was thus connected directly to sex, and particularly to the fact that

sexual expression was moving beyond the confines of marriage, not as the deviant behavior of prostitutes and their customers, but as the normative behavior of many Americans. (241)

This belief "weakened the connections between sexual expression and marriage by providing youth with room for some experimentation as preparation for adult status" (241); more and more respectable young men and, in what amounted to a much greater change, young women were engaging in sexual intercourse while unmarried without losing their respectability. In *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, Beth Bailey singles out particularly the generation born between 1900 and 1910 in this context, and notes that these women were "growing up as old sexual conventions crumbled in the face of new understandings of sexuality and new ways of life" (Bailey, 1989: 79), a statement which once again emphasises the ways in which this new era allowed women a dynamism, a mobility, which had been withheld from previous generations.

Physical mobility, in its simplest sense, is an important part of this: both Bailey and D’Emilio and Freedman refer to a number of elements already flagged up by Berman as crucial in this regard. These include broad developments such as increased urbanisation and the development of mass communication, but also specific technological advances such as cars, which allowed young people an independence they did not previously have and “marked the end of the gentleman caller who sat in the parlor” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 2012: 240), socio-cultural institutions like the high school or college, which allowed young people of both genders to leave the home and mingle without parental supervision, but also medical innovations such as affordable and relatively reliable birth control, which allowed women greater bodily autonomy to accompany their greater physical mobility.

These physical developments also had social, metaphorical connotations; they helped to impact the way marriage was defined, as “couples approached conjugal life with the expectation that erotic enjoyment, and not simply spiritual union, was an integral part of a successful marital relationship” (241). This new type of marriage was called “companionate marriage” since husband and wife were not simply together out of financial or procreative considerations, but were friends and companions as well as lovers:

a successful relationship rested on the emotional compatibility of husband and wife, rather than the fulfilment of gender-prescribed duties and roles. Men and women sought happiness and personal satisfaction in their mates; an important component of their happiness was mutual sexual enjoyment. (265)

It is important to emphasise also, however, that these developments in sexual permissiveness and equal rights did not entail a complete levelling of the sexes in regard to the acceptability of sexual behaviour. While women coming of age in the 1920s did have more premarital intercourse than their predecessors, “evidence also suggests that, for the

most part, young women generally restricted coitus to a single partner, the man they expected to marry” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 2012: 257).

As such, even as girls became more sexually knowledgeable and even experienced before marriage, nonetheless “a double standard survived that perpetuated differences in the meaning of sexual experience” (261). As opposed to male sexual expression, “female sexual expression continued to be deeply attached to the emotion of love and to commitment in a relationship” (263). While it was perceived as impossible for men to remain sexually abstinent without “impairment of health” (Bailey, 1989: 92), this ideology made women “the controllers of sex” (87) who “according to their nature and in their own self-interest must enforce sexual limits” (87). Female sexual desire was becoming semi-acceptable, but only if pursued within a framework of love and, ideally, after the promise of marriage – and if women partook in what was perceived as the “wrong” kind of sexuality, they, and not their male partners, were seen as culpable. As such, the woman who crossed the boundaries of acceptable sexuality “was not gaining sexual power or equality with men but was breaking the sexual ‘trust’ and so threatening the precarious position of woman in society” (96).

D’Emilio and Freedman emphasise particularly the importance of class within this limited increase in sexual freedom, especially in regard to middle-class men and women. On the one hand, middle-class men for the first time sought out sexual relationships with women of their own class, rather than with either prostitutes or working class girls. At the same time, however, sexual experimentation without any intention for a lasting relationship, or marriage, still often took place across class boundaries since “by pursuing sex with working-

class girls, middle-class males could expect chastity from their peers without relinquishing access to intercourse themselves” (263).

In terms of sexuality, therefore, the 1920s and early 1930s saw greater physical freedom and bodily autonomy for women, which in turn engendered more acceptance (without loss of respectability) for sexual expression by middle-class women. At the same time, however, these decades also maintained an emphasis on the need for monogamy – even before marriage – and for the expectation of marriage or at least for mutual affection. The double standard had therefore become less stringent in terms of what it did and did not allow respectable women to do, but was nonetheless still firmly in place.

Emily Post’s *Blue Book of Etiquette*, which was published in a new and enlarged edition in November 1927, mirrors this development; on the one hand, it noted that the chaperon was a “vanishing” convention (Post, 1927: 287) and that “ethically, the only chaperon is the young girl’s own sense of dignity and pride” (288), even stating that “the freedom of today allows [a girl] to meet [a man] halfway” (296), emphasising both her physical and metaphorical mobility. On the other hand, however, it also deemed the topic of “petting” to be “outside the subject of etiquette – so far outside that it has no more place in distinguished society than any other actions that are cheap, promiscuous and vulgar” (297) and decreed that a girl should not undertake any trip with a man that might, due to circumstances, last longer than a day, since even if the reason for the delay is weather-related and demonstrably innocent, “a girl’s reputation” might suffer because of the experience nonetheless (290). A sexual single standard, applicable both to men and women, was therefore still an impossibility. At the same time, however, D’Emilio and Freedman also cited research noting that many high school students, thanks to their greater mobility and

freedom from parental supervision, “participated in the recent vogue of the ‘petting’ party”, with girls who did not do so “decidedly less popular” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 240). Girls thus in a sense walked a tightrope between respectability and modernity, but they did so with greater autonomy and mobility than ever before.

The issues of sexual freedom for middle-class women, of companionate marriage (with its accompanying access to relatively easy divorce), and of female sexuality outside of the boundaries of marriage or even love are recurring themes within Norma Shearer’s pre-Code films and will be addressed at length within this thesis.

A second element connected to modernity – and mobility - in terms of women is the rise of consumer culture from the late 19th century onward. D’Emilio and Freedman connect this directly, once more, to the self-determination Berman highlighted as a key element of modernity, tying it – alongside the sexual developments of the era – to a growing “acceptance of pleasure, self-gratification, and personal satisfaction” (234). As the “nation’s economy was poised to move beyond the sober work ethic that had characterized nineteenth-century capitalist development” (188), “American entrepreneurs were ready to embark upon new directions” (188) beyond the 19th century focus on developing the infrastructure necessary for heavy industry.

One such “new direction” was linked directly to specific and tangible consumer products and embodied by the rise of the department store, a “palace of consumption” which specifically aimed to draw in female consumers through advertising of its selection of goods and through the representation of shopping as not just a necessary, but also a pleasurable social activity (Kleinberg, 1999: 171). As women’s domestic workload decreased – in part due to the growing availability of helpful household goods – they were instead “retrained”

as consumers in this way. By the late 19th century, women's role was described as "conspicuous consumption", displaying their husband's wealth through their apparel and possessions (171).

The urban department store as a space, however, is also a symptom of modernity in the context of the aforementioned modern mobility and autonomy; Parsons notes, in *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, that "by the late 19th century, women's access to the metropolis was expanding, both in terms of leisure and employment" (Parsons, 2000: 43), and this statement, as I will now demonstrate, is exemplified particularly by the space of the department store. As such, these two topics of leisure culture and of female employment, will be primary factors, too, in my coverage of the early 20th century modern woman, both on screen and off.

Firstly, the act of shopping at a department store is not just important because of its ties to the acquisition of consumer goods, but also as an experience in and of itself and an expression of leisure culture, another dimension of physical mobility available to women at this time. In this additional "new direction" related to consumerism, disposable income was spent on particular experiences, and not just on particular products. On the one hand, such activities – ranging from sports and commercialised travel to visiting attractions such as amusement parks, nickelodeons and, later, the movies – became more accessible to larger groups of people due to the decreasing length of the workweek and the mechanisation of certain household chores (Kleinberg, 1999: 172). On the other hand, most importantly for my purpose, many such activities were also heterosocial in nature, rather than restricted to one particular sex, which both encouraged and exemplified the further erosion of the 19th century model of separate spheres for men and women and further enabled unchaperoned

interaction between the sexes. This, too, then, is an element this thesis will address, particularly as the early cinema itself became an important element in “advertising” appropriate ways of engaging in conspicuous consumption or with leisure culture to women audiences - as well as a prime space for heterosocial leisure activity to take place (Higashi, 1994: 144).

A third element, then, which is connected to both greater sexual freedom and consumer culture, as well as increased physical mobility, is the rise in female employment at this time, and particularly the rise of employment among married women. This was directly connected to the development of consumer culture, since department stores offered respectable employment opportunities particularly to young, working class women, who increasingly worked as salesgirls and thus became active in the public sphere while establishing financial independence. At the same time, this potential financial independence encouraged further physical and social mobility in the context of courtship and marriage; for the first time, women’s choice to get married or not did not need to be primarily or even partially steered by a need for financial stability and support, since an avenue toward (limited) social mobility unconnected to marriage was now open to them. Similarly, women could retain their own financial independence during marriage by contributing to the household income.

Much like the relative sexual progressiveness of this era, however, this must not be exaggerated or seen as a universal development, particularly for married women; even during the early 1930s, the overwhelming majority of even university-educated men did not intend to allow their wives to work outside the home, and young people of both sexes appeared to believe primarily in “complete equality for women in the home but not outside of it” (Fass, 1977: 81). At least a part of the reason behind this was the common perception

that “if a woman took a job it meant that her husband had failed as a provider (and thus as a man)” (Bailey, 1989: 104).

Nonetheless, employment for married women did become a part of the national conversation at this time, and the percentage of married women with jobs doubled between 1900 and 1910 alone. Thus, while most women did still give up their jobs upon marriage, “a growing proportion either worked throughout their marriage or returned to the labor market at some point, prompted by financial necessity or a desire to use their education and training” (Kleinberg, 1999: 108). Particularly this last motivation is interesting in the context of Shearer’s mostly upper-middle-class characters, since it connects closely to the ideals of personal freedom and satisfaction which also lay at the base of the development of additional sexual freedoms, of consumer culture and, indeed, of what Berman defined as “modernity” in the first place.

Thus, the reference to Shearer as a “happily married divorcee” in my title does not only hint at her role in *The Divorcee* (Leonard, 1930) in 1930, but also more broadly at the type of modernity and mobility represented by these three elements: specifically, it does so by referring to the easy accessibility of divorce at this time. After all, a key element of the companionate marriage was also that it could be disbanded with relative ease if it did not prove satisfactory to both partners, and “women desired friendship and sexual satisfaction from their mates and rejected husbands who did not meet their emotional needs or did not fulfil their financial obligations” (Kleinberg, 1999: 141). The growing acceptability of women in the workplace aided this development along; for the first time, women of all classes had available to them a potential way to provide for themselves, which might enable them to leave unsatisfactory marriages.

As such, divorce rates rose steadily during the late 19th and early 20th century; whereas there had been 1.2 divorces per 1000 marriages in 1860, this number had risen to 8 divorces per 1000 marriages by 1920, which gave the US the highest divorce rate in the world (141). In this context, divorce could really be seen as a symbol for the increasingly progressive sexual politics of the early to mid-twentieth century and is here used to describe the different ways in which, even in films where Shearer did not literally divorce her husband, she transgressed and embraced a certain freedom which her rather conservative private life did not, at first sight, appear to mirror.

While Dunne's star image – in terms of her stable and long-lasting marriage – was similar to Shearer's, her pre-Code roles were not comparable in this way. A good example in this regard is *Back Street* (Stahl, 1932), arguably the most controversial of Dunne's pre-Codes. This film covers twenty-five years in the life of Ray Schmidt, the daughter of a Cincinnati storeowner, and Walter Saxel, a banker, as they, through coincidence, are unable to get married and ultimately embark on a relationship while Walter is married to another woman. Ray gives up her job and moves into an apartment paid for by Walter, where she spends the rest of her life in the "back streets" of his life, waiting for his phone calls and visits. Ultimately, the two die hours apart - Walter of a stroke, Ray of heartbreak - as she contemplates how different her life might have been had they been able to marry.

A number of similarities exist between Ray and the Shearer characters this thesis will examine in detail. Firstly, they have a similar (upper-) middle class background and hail from respectable and supportive families. Secondly, Ray is not an ingénue, and from the very first moment – in which we see her drinking beer and then dancing with an older man who is neither her husband nor her fiancé – we know she is independent enough to be able to

move through this café environment alone, and also clearly sexually knowledgeable, even if she is, at this point, not sexually experienced. Over the course of the film, then, Ray transgresses as she becomes Walter's mistress even though he is married to another. They have a sexual relationship, as is apparent in the scene where she, desperate to have something of his to call her own, asks him for a child. He refuses her this because "after all, Ray, you're not my wife!", but it underlines the fact that their relationship is such that it could easily lead to children.

While this plot might easily have been seen as problematic by the censors, however, since the film's sympathetic heroine is a kept woman living in sin with a married man, this heroine also steers clear of complete transgression in a number of ways.

A first and perhaps most obvious way in which this is done is through an extensive emphasis on the suffering of the main character throughout the film; the film's *Motion Picture* review praises the film and the performances of its stars, then goes on to state that "the most conventional cannot object to the theme in view of the long-drawn out punishment of the heroine for her mistaken love" (October 1932: 68) and its *Picture Play* review refers to Ray as a "martyr" (December 1932: 60). The film's Production Code Administration file proves this, stating that *Back Street* was deemed an acceptable version of the "kept woman" film, since it contained nothing "which would lead any girl or woman to follow her course"; even the fact that Walter forgets to provide for her when he first travels to Europe or in his will is seen as a positive in this regard (Joy to Hart, 1932: 1).

The tragedy of the situation is underlined also by the way Ray and Walter's relationship is attributed strongly to a strange twist of fate and not to choice; the film's *Photoplay* review describes Dunne's character as "a seemingly ordinary girl forced by fate to tread the lonely

back streets of life" (October 1932: 52). The film shows, in fact, that a conventional life with him is what Ray wants most in the world, which is also apparent when she asks him for a child. As such, Ray is never pursuing an unconventional lifestyle on purpose or for the sake of self-expression, but rather reluctantly finds herself living it.

This applies to all aspects of the story. While the affair is undoubtedly sexual, the sexual element is hardly emphasised, and risqué elements are altogether absent from the film. Even scenes of any kind of physical affection are few and far in between. At the same time, Ray is very clearly defined as monogamous throughout the film; the idea of her keeping a lover of her own is unthinkable, since only Walter, a man, may have two partners. As the film's *Box Office* review points out, Ray's "standard of morality is anything but loose" (8 September 1932: 13); even after the illicit affair starts, she is defined as "not the usual movie type, she is not a sexy gold-digger, but big-hearted and sensitive" in *Movie Classic* (October 1932: 56). The film itself stresses this as well, particularly during the 1932 scenes, when Ray is shown quietly following Walter wherever he may go; two women, commenting on this fact, remark that she "doesn't look like a dangerous siren, does she?" Ray does not experiment with her sexuality; she is, for all intents and purposes, as monogamous as she would be were she Walter's wife.

Just as Ray is not especially sexually liberated or progressive in this sense, she is also not a consumer, or even a particularly glamorous woman. While Ray lives in an apartment provided by Walter, she does not live in luxury; after Walter's death even his son, who is ready to disapprove of Ray (and does so initially), is surprised that she only received \$200 a month throughout the years – enough to live on, but not an extravagant allowance.

Additionally, thirdly, the reason Ray is receiving this allowance in the first place is the fact

that she left her job – at which she was the “highest paid woman in her firm” – upon embarking on her affair with Walter, to ensure she is available in case Walter chooses to call or visit her; essentially, to keep house for the man who is the closest thing she has to a husband. As such, she follows a trend still followed by most women in the 1930s and does not present a particularly progressive image in the way that certain Shearer characters would. In spite of the fact that, in responding to this film, *Movie Classic* wondered if “Norma Shearer doesn’t have a competitor at last!” (May 1932: 40), possibly due to the stars’ similar star personas, Dunne’s off-screen and on-screen personas did not create a seemingly sharp juxtaposition as, I will argue in this thesis, Shearer’s did.

This thesis will thus examine the ways in which Shearer’s complex star persona – perpetually balanced between happily married woman and sexually transgressive, mobile modern – developed during and after the pre-Code era (1930-4). In order to do this, it will specifically look at the values embodied by the star throughout her career and examine the way her on-screen and off-screen images interacted and were represented to fans, ending with an examination of the influences on her later career that upset this careful balance and brought about a radical change in her star persona. Practically, it will accomplish this through an analysis of Shearer’s key roles during this roughly 1925-1942 time period, but also through a focus on the representation of the star in extrafilmic texts; for this latter purpose, fan magazines will be a key resource. I will now briefly summarise the ways in which these popular periodicals can be useful for the study of a particular star’s image.

Firstly, it is important to stress that the fan magazine, described by Anthony Slide as “a transient publication offering dubious information on the equally transient world of the Hollywood movie star” (Slide, 2010: 3) is useful here as a primary, rather than a secondary

source. While such magazines often do not provide reliable information on particular stars or films, they are a valuable resource on how particular stars or films were represented to fans. This is particularly the case since, to a large extent, “the fan magazines and their writers published and wrote what the studios determined they should publish and write. The fan magazines and the studios fed off each other, and both had a healthy appetite” (73). As such, this close collaboration and negotiation with Hollywood essentially made the magazines into publicity organs for the movie industry, which makes them fascinating objects of study.

In contrast to films, which can provide snapshots of a particular star’s image at a particular time, the magazine format has several advantages to the star studies researcher. Firstly, as Jeffers McDonald (2013) has noted, a star may be the subject of several types of coverage within one issue of a magazine, thus building up, in the most extreme case, a “star trail” providing promotion for and information about one particular star (Jeffers McDonald, 2013: 39). Secondly, its seriality as a medium is an additional advantage; fan magazines offer the opportunity to build up nuanced narratives across months or even years, incorporating additional films and (pseudo-)biographical facts into their rhetoric across time and both working “to foster awareness of stars in the run-up to new releases and, just as importantly, to maintain this awareness in the gaps between film appearances” (Jeffers McDonald, 2013: 35). Particularly this last element will become crucial within this thesis, the first extensive star study of Norma Shearer.

At the same time, however, magazines also included a certain degree of (controlled) reciprocity and provided a means of communication between fans and Hollywood, as well as allowing fans a limited way of responding to the news they were fed. This is most

obviously the case in the form of letters from readers, which were published in fan magazines from their very genesis in the 1910s, sometimes responded to by the magazine or by other readers, and often rewarded with prize money. These letters could provide fascinating primary source material to fan scholars and historians alike, but have nonetheless been largely ignored; the reason behind this is the fact that those letters printed “may well [have been] concocted by office staff of the magazine” (Stacey, 1994: 55). Thus, since we cannot know which letters are real and which fabricated, the only possible course of action seems to ignore them altogether.

However, I propose a methodology through which at least a certain percentage of the available letters can indeed be verified and can thus be used as primary source material. Since most published letters had some degree of identifying information printed alongside them – from simply the name and location of the writer in *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture* to full names and addresses in *Picture Play*, *The New Movie Magazine* and *Screenland* – and since US census records are released after 72 years and are now freely available via Ancestry.com up to and including the year 1940, such letter writers can be looked up in these records with relative ease. As such, individual letters related to the topic of this thesis can be verified as the product of particular individuals – or, in some cases, identified as likely editorial fabrications.

Most chapters within this thesis will thus trace the fan magazine rhetoric – across all kinds of fan magazine content, including covers and images, editorial articles, short gossip items, advertisements, fan letters, etc. – on a series of films across a number of years. Additionally, each of these chapters will also trace the rhetoric on Shearer, the central star of these films, across the years during which these films were released. For each particular era discussed

here, I will focus on four or five key periodicals, i. e. those with the highest circulation,¹ and add selected other items from different popular publications where this seems most useful.

I will now briefly summarise the structure of the thesis. The first chapter will provide a review of the relevant literature, which will focus on four different topics: the life and career of Norma Shearer, transgressive femininity in 1915-1940 cinema, censorship and the pre-Code era, and, finally, the potential of fan magazines as a research tool. It will do this using three “phases” of Shearer scholarship, demonstrating in this way how my focus on transgressive femininity, on censorship, and on the study of fan magazines allows me to improve upon the Shearer scholarship available to date and to create a more thorough analysis of her star persona throughout her career.

The next chapter, then, will provide a precedent, partially chronological and partially comparative, to the central pre-Code chapter. As such, it focuses on Shearer’s early star history, particularly three early films, one from 1925 and two from 1929. Using the first film, *Lady of the Night* (Bell, 1925), in which Shearer plays a double role, as a starting point, I highlight a number of factors in regard to each character, including social class, interaction with modern life (clothes, pastimes, attitudes, etc.), and engagement with sexual knowledge and activity. I then combine this with an analysis of the early magazine coverage on Shearer and note the focus on Shearer’s middle-class identity, but also her modern ideas, and contrast this with the films and star identities of other female stars at this time, most notably Gloria Swanson. Additionally, I look at the way this rhetoric was impacted by

¹ These are, for 1925-9, *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture*, *Picture Play* and *Screenland*; for 1930-34, *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture*, *Picture Play*, *The New Movie Magazine* and *Screenland*, and for 1934-42, *Modern Screen*, *Photoplay*, *Movie Mirror* and *Silver Screen*. (Jeffers McDonald and Polley, unpublished)

Shearer's marriage to Irving Thalberg in 1927 and developed further through the early years of this marriage.

The third and fourth chapter, then, focus on the central topic of this thesis: Norma Shearer's pre-Code films, all made between 1930 and 1934. Beginning with *The Divorcee* (Leonard, 1930), this series of films, made under a range of directors but all at MGM, cast Shearer as a modern, sexually liberated woman who could marry and divorce as she pleased but who always received her happy end by the end of the film, without having to compromise. At the same time, as the fourth chapter will show, Shearer's fan magazine rhetoric, while focusing strongly on her happy marriage (as well as, from late 1930 onwards, her motherhood), did not cast her in an especially domestic light and instead championed a vision whereby the star's happy marriage did not contradict the modern connotations of her films, but enhanced them. As a modern, Shearer was able to have a career and a happy marriage at the same time and did not have to compromise, which set her apart from other stars at the time.

The fifth chapter explores the influences that led to the enforcement of the Hays Production Code in 1934, particularly as related to the Payne Fund Studies (1929-1934), a series of sociological studies focusing on the potential negative effects of the cinema. In this regard, I focus especially on the way these studies defined the dangers for women in terms of sexual, rather than criminal, transgression. I then look at the ways in which this emphasis impacted the final text and enforcement of the Code in 1934 and, finally, examine the Code documents on the Shearer films featured in the previous chapter: were they particularly controversial and, if so, why?

Finally, the sixth chapter analyses the ways in which Shearer's career evolved after the enforcement of the Code. I focus especially on the way her widowhood in 1936 collaborated with the advent of the Code to redefine Shearer's public image (and add to her fading in public memory). In this regard, *Marie Antoinette* (Van Dyke, 1938) is a useful film, since it includes elements from Shearer's pre-Code films, but also refers in many ways to her altered marital state in a post-Code cinematic universe. Finally, I return in this chapter to *The Women*, my starting point in this introduction and a particularly useful point of pre- and post-Code comparison, due to its divorce theme.

An analysis of this film, then, will serve to underline once more the basic contention of this thesis; that Shearer, despite and alongside her safely married star persona, made a number of extraordinarily progressive films in the early 1930s, and that these kinds of narratives had become largely impossible by the end of that decade, due both to Shearer's new status as a widow and to the enforcement of the Production Code after 1934. These factors condemned her to the kind of noble, dull and ultimately old-fashioned respectability embodied by the character of Mary Haines in *The Women*, and these qualities would remain associated with Shearer's star persona for decades to come – long after her retirement from the screen, and even long after her death.

Chapter 1 - Literature review

This literature review will examine the scholarship on a number of key elements of my research in a thematic fashion, comparing and contrasting different approaches and clarifying where my own contributions fit in. The review focuses on four broad topics or themes: the career of Norma Shearer, representations of transgressive femininity on screen, censorship and the pre-Code era, and the importance of fan magazine research to the study of stardom. In dealing with these different elements, I will also highlight how these come together within this research project.

The review is divided into three sections, starting out from three separate sources which deal with Shearer in completely different ways; these three sources are Richard Schickel's 1990 *Architectural Digest* article "The Santa Monica Beach House of a Hollywood Genius and his Leading Lady", Jeanine Basinger's *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women 1930-1960*, and Mick LaSalle's *Complicated Women*. They illustrate three "phases" of Norma Shearer: from the privileged Mrs Thalberg, over the noble and respectable Miss Shearer, to the modern Norma.

On the one hand, these three phases will serve to illustrate the ways in which scholarly sources have not, to date, paid appropriate attention to Shearer's star persona or career, and have in fact often misunderstood and misrepresented her. On the other hand, then, these will serve as jumping-off points to examine the other issues mentioned above, such as transgressive femininity, film censorship, and the importance of fan magazine research.

1.1 - Schickel and the Privileged Mrs Thalberg

Schickel's treatment of Shearer is the most simplistic and straightforward, in that it is extremely negative and essentially dismisses her as not worthy of further study. The article illustrates what almost amounts to a personal vendetta against Shearer on the part of the author; on multiple occasions, for example, Schickel chooses to focus on the star's physique as a source of criticism. In this context, he refers to her as an "awkward, cross-eyed girl" and continues to observe that "her nose was too long, her chin too prominent, her shoulders too broad, her legs rather heavy", calling even her voice "thin and overcultivated". One of Schickel's primary issues with the star, therefore, appears to be that she was not "anyone's dream of feminine perfection" in some respects.

In addition to his focus on Shearer's supposed unattractiveness, Schickel denounces Shearer as immoral, talentless and power-hungry. He claims the star was essentially a gold-digger who married Irving Thalberg for the influence it would grant her, noting that "once Thalberg and Shearer were married in 1927, he provided her with both the vehicles and the promotional backing that encouraged the public to suspend its disbelief in her, to take their word that she was a great actress". Despite the "constant rumours of hot affairs with directors and costars" (a claim Schickel does not support with any evidence and which no other work dealing with Shearer confirms), she was thus "Queen of the Lot by her husband's decree" and undeservedly received roles other stars rightfully merited, since "expensive, carefully modulated production values" could not "compensate for an essential emptiness".

Because of this, the author underlines that "without [Thalberg's] protection Shearer's career quickly waned" and once again underlines her mercenary nature, mentioning that L. B. Mayer "also greatly resented Shearer's demands for continuing profit participation in

Thalberg's productions after his death", not providing any further analysis of Shearer's post-Thalberg productions – such as *Marie Antoinette* or *The Women* – or of the legal ramifications of Shearer's position as Thalberg's widow and thus heiress.

This is in fact symptomatic of much of the article, which amounts to a tirade against the star, mostly unsupported by basic evidence. At no point does the author, for example, examine actual factual information about the films he criticizes; when he states that even in her pre-Code films, she never projected any "genuine wantonness", he does not examine or even refer to publicised opinion at the time and in general, the reader is expected to simply believe at face value that Shearer's popularity at the time was either a fiction or the result of an elaborate conspiracy (Schickel, 1990: 218-20).

Schickel is unusually brutal in attacking every aspect of Shearer's life and career, essentially aiming to erase her from film scholarship and even from public memory, but for the purpose of this thesis, his article provides an excellent illustration of the way Shearer has fundamentally been dismissed in many academic sources since her retirement in 1942. In this context, it highlights a number of important elements of her public persona, such as her status as a supposedly privileged, upper middle-class star and the perceived advantages she derived from the Thalberg marriage. These elements will be examined further particularly within my chapter on magazine coverage on Shearer in the early 1930s.

1.2 - Basinger and the Noble Miss Shearer

Basinger's *A Woman's View*, in comparison to Schickel's article, is much more sympathetic to Shearer's career and contributions, but nonetheless illustrates another way in which the star has widely been misunderstood and misinterpreted. Although the author provides a

generally excellent and in-depth overview of the “woman’s film” in Hollywood from the 1930s through the 1950s, focusing on themes, character tropes, common settings and on the stars who performed in these films, both the quantity and quality of Shearer references in this book are disappointing.

On the quantitative level, the book’s lack of proper treatment of Shearer can be illustrated using Basinger’s appendix, which I referred to in my introduction, and in which she cites which women were featured in top-ten lists based on motion picture exhibitors’ polls from 1929 to 1963. In these polls, which feature seventeen women between the years 1930 and 1939, Shearer appears four times, only beaten in this regard by Joan Crawford (7), Shirley Temple (6) and Janet Gaynor (5). She is thus (together with Marie Dressler and Bette Davis), the fourth most consistently popular female star during this decade. Nonetheless, looking at the book’s index, Shearer ranks thirteenth of these seventeen actresses in terms of her coverage, with three mentions; only Colleen Moore, Jane Withers, Sonja Henie and Alice Faye, none of whom feature in the polls as frequently as Shearer, are mentioned less.

The three times Shearer is mentioned, however, illustrate a deeper, qualitative problem in terms of the academic treatment of Norma Shearer. The first mention is simply a part of the caption of a group image from *The Women*, featured in a section dealing with the film’s fashion show sequence, whereas the second is a brief reference to Shearer’s lazy eye included in a list of examples of particular stars’ imperfections. The third reference, then, is a footnote which gives Shearer as an example of a star who played characters of “excessive nobility”, the 1930s predecessor of stars such as Greer Garson in the 1940s and Deborah Kerr in the 1950s. This last reference provides the most substantial analysis of Shearer’s contribution; unfortunately, it is also, in my view, an inaccurate one.

It is important to note that, as opposed to Schickel, Basinger does not take a negative view on Shearer; she notes that actresses like Shearer, Garson and Kerr often received a “bum rap” for playing these “noble” roles, even though they were also capable of playing “in an opposite mode”. This opposite mode, Basinger argues, is comedy, and she suggests films such as Kerr’s role in *Dream Wife* (Sheldon, 1953) and Shearer’s role in *Private Lives* (Franklin, 1931) as examples of this versatility (Basinger, 1993: 168). While it is good, however, that Basinger gives these actresses a slightly more thorough analysis than they are often granted, the example in terms of Shearer is one that is hard to defend.

Like other, similar sources, Basinger appears to be basing her judgment of Shearer’s entire 1930s career solely on her role as Mary Haines in *The Women*, a noble, almost saintly wife and mother. Looking further into the roles the star played throughout her career, however, it is surprisingly hard to find an additional example of this type of characterisation; perhaps the roles of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (Franklin, 1934) and of Countess Ruby von Treck in *Escape* (LeRoy, 1940) fit the best, although both are somewhat problematic since Elizabeth is shown rebelling against her domineering father and Ruby is a widow who earns her own living and who is involved in a clandestine affair with a Nazi officer. It is true that, as stated above, Basinger herself allows space for an exception of this kind of characterization, but that exception – comedy – also seems particularly ill-chosen in the context of Norma Shearer. Shearer did a number of comedies over the years, and Basinger’s example of *Private Lives* was certainly the star’s most successful one, but nonetheless the film stands out from her “noble” roles not because it was a comedy, but because it was one of a number of Shearer’s sexually transgressive pre-Code films. Many of these dealt with marriage or romantic relationships, two major themes

of Basinger's exploration of the woman's film, and I argue that it is these "free soul" films, and not comedies, which form the "opposite mode" in which much of Shearer's 1930s career took place.

The Divorcee (1930) is particularly relevant to much of this work, and particularly to Basinger's chapter about marriage. In this chapter, the author dedicates a few lines to the comparison of male and female adultery on film, stating:

There is definitely a double standard. While there is a great deal of tolerance for the straying husband depicted in these films, there is almost none for the straying woman. When a woman betrays a man sexually, it is a matter of cosmic significance, but when a man does it, it may be a casual fling. (Basinger, 1993: 354)

This is the very argument at the heart of *The Divorcee*, in which main character Jerry responds to her husband's adultery by having an affair of her own, after which she vocalizes the idea suggested in the above few lines by Basinger: that her adultery is regarded as infinitely "worse" than hers. A brief treatment of this film would have added to Basinger's argument here. As such, while Basinger does not entirely neglect Shearer, she does neglect the star's contributions to 1930s "women's film" culture.

In fact, this neglect of Shearer's contributions can be tied into a larger issue with Basinger's work, which is her relatively neglect of pre-Code cinema in general. Although Basinger's book promises an impressive chronological range ("how Hollywood spoke to women" between 1930 and 1960), this also means that occasionally its coverage of the decades concerned seems uneven. The author very clearly finds the 1940s the most interesting decade in terms of the "woman's film", and this is obvious throughout the book, for example when her final chapter, entitled "Proof", purports to support her entire definition of the "woman's film" but only deals with three films dating from 1940 to 1947 (Basinger,

1993: 486). In fact, a large number of the films she focuses on date from the mid-thirties or later, with the pre-Code period mostly neglected and often even treated dismissively; in terms of early 1930s cinema, she states that

women's films of the 1940s are frequently models of style and cinematic experimentation, but the majority of the early sound movies about women really *are* trash, which partially accounts for the genre's lack of critical respect". (Basinger, 1993: 393)

However, the innovative nature or lack thereof of the cinematography of these films seems less relevant in terms of a historical study of these types of films than the fact that women went to see them, and the fact that the characters represented in them were meaningful to their audiences.

Generally, Basinger's view appears skewed toward an unduly progressive view of the woman's film. She seems somewhat confused about this, since her primary focus is on the 1940s and in quoting Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, she agrees with Haskell that there were more positive roles for women in the 1930s and 1940s than in the 1950s and 1960s (Basinger, 1993: 207). At the same time, however, she discusses *The Long, Hot Summer* (Ritt, 1958) as "the beginning of a change in sexual attitudes" (Basinger, 1993: 40); here, she clearly considers this film as a part of a progressive chain of gradually improved images of women while failing to acknowledge the pre-Code era as potentially more progressive than the 1940s or even 1950s. The same sentiment surfaces when she compares the different versions of *Back Street* and notes that the three different versions progressively show Ray as having a more active professional life (Basinger, 1993: 203). She forgets, however – and here once again Shearer in *The Divorcee*, *Let Us Be Gay* or *Strangers May Kiss* would be an excellent example – that women in pre-Code films already had

successful careers, which remained – at least sometimes - unimpacted by their romantic life. The films she rejects as “trash” thus deserve a closer look in terms of the ways in which they embraced female modernity.

A similar, but more serious omission in terms of the pre-Code era takes place in Maria DiBattista's *Fast Talking Dames*, in which the author proposes a thesis of empowerment in regard to the women of roughly 1930-1950 screwball comedy, defined by the author as a time during which the United States “was reeling from the Depression and had not yet established its postwar, ‘modern’ identity” (DiBattista, 2001: x).

Whereas Basinger largely chooses to focus on films that postdate the pre-Code era, DiBattista makes the different and perhaps greater error of dealing with some pre-Code films but entirely ignoring the differences in historical context between pre- and post-Code films. Within her first chapter, for example, she refers to *The Hot Heiress* (Badger, 1931) and *Song of the Thin Man* (Buzzell, 1947) within a range of less than a page of text - without acknowledging that these films were made years apart and in a completely different world, divided by the Code enforcement of 1934. Although DiBattista briefly touches upon the Code in her preface – where she does acknowledge its restrictions in terms of the way marriage, for example, was to be depicted – she then continues to treat pre-Code and post-Code films in much the same way throughout the book. This lack of attention for chronology is also apparent in terms of the stars she singles out for case studies, many of whom had completely different careers at completely different moments in time. Some, such as Katharine Hepburn and Rosalind Russell, made their cinematic debuts barely before the end of the pre-Code era, whereas others, such as Barbara Stanwyck, Greta Garbo and especially Jean Harlow (who died as early as 1937) had significant pre-Code careers. DiBattista does

trace the evolution of the “fast-talking dame” from earlier theatrical and cinematic types, but does not show the dame’s evolution (and the factors that may have impacted that evolution) once she “happens”.

DiBattista’s selection of pre-Code films and her analysis of these films is essentially a superficial one and she, too, could be accused of neglecting cinema before the mid-1930s, particularly when she does analyse her fast-talking dames’ origins. In this regard, she focuses primarily on their fast and witty speech and its comedic origins in Shakespearian and Restoration comedy, as well as among the heroines of Mack Sennett’s slapstick films. At no point, however, does the author focus on another three particular characteristics so crucial to her arguments; these women’s intelligence, independence, and modernity. This partial explanation ties into a larger issue with DiBattista’s work, which is that she often appears to be writing two books rather than one; one book dealing with rapid, humorous speech in screwball comedies and one dealing with female empowerment and modernity in 1930s and 1940s cinema. In dealing with the dames’ antecedents, therefore, she only deals with the former and appears to imply by omission that the latter simply sprang into being fully-fledged sometime during the early 1930s. I believe, however, that it is possible to trace these traits back to earlier cinematic examples as well, primarily to (non-slapstick) silent and pre-Code cinema, neither of which DiBattista pays a great deal of attention to.

Her treatment of silent film in this regard is fairly simplistic and superficial. In her first chapter, she identifies as the key claim of this book “that when the film found its human voice, it simultaneously gave to the American woman, as performer and heroine, a chance to speak her mind, to have a real, not just a presumptive, say in her own destiny”

(DiBattista, 2001: 11) – a statement of purpose that leaves no room for any kind of

empowered or even intelligent silent heroine. This is apparent in the way she dismisses these women, who are categorized as either “heavy-lidded somnambules” or “glittery-eyed jazz babies with nothing on their minds but the pleasures of the moment” (DiBattista, 2001: 86). In support of this argument, she quotes Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* and argues that “We had faces then!” sums up “her career, her character, and the silent movies” (DiBattista, 2001: 12). Though this quote suits the character of Norma Desmond, who is not just a retired silent movie actress but also mentally disturbed and a megalomaniac, the statement neither fits Gloria Swanson nor the reality of (all) silent women. The silent era had its somnambules and its jazz babies; it also had women who fit in neither category; this thesis will periodically refer to a set of silent divorce comedies, directed by Cecil B. DeMille and starring Swanson as a central character, which embody a complexity deemed impossible by DiBattista.

I will now briefly deal with three sources which do fill this gap left by DiBattista, and which do deal with silent movie women in a more nuanced fashion. These are Janet Staiger’s *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema*, Miriam Hansen’s *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, and Sumiko Higashi’s chapter on “The New Woman and Consumer Culture: Cecil B. DeMille’s Sex Comedies” in the *Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*.

Staiger’s work, firstly, focuses on a very early period in American film (1907-1915) and deals especially with the representation of feminine morality within these films and on the ways these films (re)defined the meaning of “good” and “bad” womanhood. She argues that it was in part through the cinema that ideas in regard to the thinking New Woman and to a newly defined sexual morality based on companionate union were perpetuated. As such,

this work, which provides an in-depth examination of a number of films, directly contradicts DiBattista's rash rejection of the silent era as filled with "heavy-lidded somnambules" and "glittery-eyed jazz babies". Instead, it argues that women of the silent era were the direct ancestors of the empowered women of the talkies, as this thesis aims to do, as well; whereas DiBattista situates these later empowered women in 1940s comedy, however, I will locate them instead in the pre-Code era.

Hansen's *Babel & Babylon* deals with a similar chronological range (though running significantly later to include the career of Rudolph Valentino and his impact of female film fandom) but focuses more strongly on issues of female spectatorship and the development of a heterosocial public sphere through cinema. Her work provides an interesting summary of the theoretical work done to date on spectatorship, but is, in my view, correctly criticized by Staiger in a few different respects.

Firstly, Hansen appears to rely excessively on theoretical and psychoanalytical sources, rather than dealing with the historical reality of early 20th century spectatorship, as Staiger, who uses source materials such as historical journals and even movie magazines, attempts to do. Hansen does not particularly address the social, political or cultural developments occurring in the US throughout the first thirty years of the 20th century, for example, while this time period was of crucial importance perhaps especially for the women consumers/spectators on whom she focuses so strongly. This may not be the primary goal of this particular book, but it would have grounded Hansen's claims in a base of historical fact.

The same applies to the films Hansen chooses to deal with; the primary film she analyses (at great length) is *Intolerance* (Griffith, 1916), which can hardly be seen as representative of all

films made at this time, nor, as Staiger points out, even as especially mainstream (Staiger, 1995: 185). Additionally, she focuses on Valentino's career in some detail, but this postdates *Intolerance* by quite a few years and thus does not add to a more in-depth and varied look at the cinema of the teens. Staiger, on the other hand, deals with a greater variety of perhaps more representative films of this era and also focuses more strongly on a wide variety of potential contemporary readings of these films due to her use of historical source materials, rather than using psychoanalysis and a great deal of conjecture to arrive at one particular conclusion. For all these issues, however, both works show an appreciation of the silent era's importance that is lacking in DiBattista's reading.

Sumiko Higashi's chapter in the *Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* is also useful in this regard, particularly in terms of DiBattista's rather careless generalisation about Gloria Swanson. Instead of reducing the star to a stereotype, the author might have focused – as Higashi does - on Swanson's early divorce comedies under the direction of Cecil B. DeMille, particularly relevant to this thesis because of the focus on divorce of many of Shearer's pre-Code films. Illustrating the additional directions in which DiBattista could have taken her research, and rather than rejecting them as irrelevant, Higashi places these comedies and their main characters into a context of "modern consumerism" and of modern marital relationships in general. Particularly focused on marriage, divorce, and how to be a "good" spouse in the modern world, these films illustrate how traditionally virtuous behaviour is no longer what makes a good marriage, but how spouses (particularly, though not exclusively, wives) should also be consumers and focus on their "personality" as well as their character, which is often represented through a sartorial and physical transformation. This is a fascinating reading of these early films and ties them clearly into their historical context of

early 20th century modernity and consumer culture, echoing, in a slightly later context, much of Staiger's work.

These films – and indeed Higashi's chapter – are thus particularly useful to my own research, in that they provide a clear, earlier cinematic context for Norma Shearer's pre-Code films focusing on marriage and divorce. Particularly *Old Wives for New* (DeMille, 1918), *Don't Change Your Husband* (DeMille, 1919) and *Why Change Your Wife?* (DeMille, 1920)² are interesting in the way they contextualise the concept of divorce and highlight some particular motivations perceived as causing divorce at this time. In this thesis, I will periodically refer to them to demonstrate the cinematic development of the modern divorcée into an empowered, intelligent (and often professional) woman during the pre-Code era.

This pre-Code era in which Shearer flourished, however, is also largely absent from DiBattista's narrative; it is only addressed sporadically and without any clear distinction between it and what came later, and the comedy actresses DiBattista focuses on are never seen in any sense as the heiresses of the characters that – in many cases – they themselves played only a few years earlier. Nonetheless, I would argue that these characters were their precursors in a very direct way, and whereas DiBattista presents the later 1930s and early 1940s as “the most exhilarating and [...] empowering model for American womanhood” (DiBattista, 2001: x), I believe it was pre-Code cinema that showed them the way and that went much further than they ever could in this regard. An analysis of some of the major screwball comedy themes DiBattista focuses on can show this more clearly.

² For synopses of these and other films mentioned in this thesis, please see the AFI catalog at <http://afi.com/members/catalog/>.

In describing the natural habitat of her “fast-talking dames”, DiBattista notes that “although they can prosper in gangster and crime melodramas, [they] thrive primarily in a comic world – marriage, not jail or extinction, is the social fate decreed for them” (DiBattista, 2001: ix). This is an interesting remark in a number of ways, but primarily in the way it highlights the focus on marriage in romantic comedies of the time (and, one could argue, in romantic comedies ever since). This marriage, DiBattista is careful to point out, takes place on the dame’s own terms, after she has become her own “creator”. As such, the fast-talking dame redefines marriage as a companionate union, as is apparent in for example the *Thin Man* series, or in the way stars such as Rosalind Russell (in *His Girl Friday* (Hawks, 1940), as Hildy) and Irene Dunne (in *The Awful Truth* (McCarey, 1937), as Lucy) must “re-train” their husbands before they can reunite with them.

However, the way DiBattista phrases her observation on marriage also stresses the fact that it is indeed the “fate decreed for them”, that even if the fast-talking dame may in her individual way reform her particular marriage, she generally does not question the validity of the institution itself; marriage is still the end goal of every woman’s life, whether she is fast-talking or not. This is apparent in many of the films DiBattista discusses: though characters such as Hildy and Lucy divorce their unsatisfactory husbands, they do not consider the unmarried state as an option and almost immediately become engaged again to an entirely different type of man. Eventually, they return to their “changed” original spouses, because even though they want to define marriage in their own terms, they do realise it is their fate to be a wife.

Pre-Code cinema also dealt with issues of marriage and divorce, but went much further in its dealings with these issues. The heroines of these films could actually question whether

they wanted to get married at all and were aware of the fact that spinsterhood and virginity did not have to go hand in hand; Norma Shearer, this thesis argues, was one of the actresses crucial within this development. In both *A Free Soul* (Brown, 1931) and *Strangers May Kiss* (Fitzmaurice, 1931), for example, Shearer's characters decide that, upon reflection, one can be in a perfectly agreeable relationship with a man without having to marry him. Though both characters eventually end up in more conventional arrangements, they are allowed to have their doubts and are not especially chastised at the end of the film for having had these doubts in the first place.

I will, then, choose to focus more strongly than Basinger or DiBattista on the pre-Code era itself and on the way it can be differentiated from what came after. This means, however, that the Code itself deserves some further attention here, particularly in order to ascertain that it was a definite boundary in terms of what was and what was not permissible on the screen. This ties into a larger issue in terms of the chronological markers I consider relevant for the purpose of my thesis.

The issues of chronology in terms of research is dealt with in Bean's introduction to the *Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, in which the author discusses the book's broad chronological range (from the late 19th century through to the end of the silent era in 1929-30). In the context of the book's preoccupation with feminist readings of early cinema, Bean notes a distancing from previously accepted chronological markers (such as 1917 as the end of the preclassical film period) and thus concludes that periodisations themselves are not set in stone and that they often are simply research aids which are altered according to which specific aspect of a particular topic is being studied, which leads to the question of

the usefulness of traditionally recognised boundaries in studying film from a specifically feminist angle (Bean and Negra, 2002: 12).

This holds relevance for my own research, in that I must ascertain which chronological markers are relevant in terms of my topic. I will, for example, pay relatively little attention to the transition from silent to sound cinema in the late 1920s, since my work focuses more on thematic than aesthetic issues, and I see many later silent films – such as the Shearer silent film *Lady of the Night* (Bell, 1925) - as closely connected to early pre-Code sound films. On the other hand, I will focus strongly on the impact of the Code enforcement in 1934 and must thus prove that this year was actually pivotal in terms of what was and what was not permissible on screen, especially in terms of female characters and their storylines. This has been the source of some scholarly debate.

In *The World According to Hollywood*, for example, Ruth Vasey attempts to disprove the existence of a distinct pre-Code period running from 1930 to 1934 (as it was defined by, for example, Thomas Doherty in his *Pre-Code Hollywood*). Here, Vasey first addresses the earlier boundary by tracing a variety of regulatory measures that impacted the cinema throughout the first half of the twentieth century. As such, when she finally arrives in 1927, the year when a number of Hollywood producers produced a series of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” commonly seen as the direct predecessor of the 1930 Production Code, she notes that this list was not “the first systematic statement of standards of decency and morality to be adopted by the industry” (Vasey, 1997: 48). After all, she explains, the National Board of Censorship was founded as early as 1909 with the purpose of regulating the movie industry, whereas the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) had been

active under the leadership of Will H. Hays since 1922, and as such, neither 1927 nor 1930 were years of radical game change.

This in itself is a fair point, illustrating that the Production Code was not born out of a void, but was the product of a debate on cinema and morality that had a long backstory. Even though the societal effects of the 1929 stock market crash, which Thomas Doherty's *Pre-Code Hollywood* does mention, deserve more attention from Vasey, the relative unimportance attributed to the year 1930 is not a great issue in terms of the debate on pre-Code cinema. Even if Doherty defines pre-Code cinema as running from 1930 to 1934, this earlier date is not strictly necessary; I argue that Shearer's early sound films such as *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (Veiller, 1929) show enough similarities to those films made in 1930-1934 to be considered a part of the same historical movement, and even the silent/sound divide, slightly earlier, as I noted earlier, is not especially impactful in regard to the representation of women on screen at this point.

I do however find issue with Vasey's approach to interwar cinema in terms of the way she characterises the entire 1918-1939 period as one more of continuity than of change. In this context, she states particularly that although "the historians of the Production Code Administration have represented Breen's regime [from 1934 onward] as a radical departure from that established by Joy", she believes instead that "it should be remembered that this was part of an evolving process of supervision that had been tightening since at least 1922 (Vasey, 1997: 131). As such, she does not believe that Hollywood cinema underwent a radical change in 1934, as many historians of the period, such as Doherty, have argued, and thus denies the existence of a distinct pre-Code era.

I believe that while Vasey certainly proves conclusively that the Production Code itself did not appear out of nowhere in 1930, and that cinematic regulation entailed issues of cultural sensitivity as well as issues of sex and crime, she does not approach 1934 with the same caution, in part because she never attempts to address the year in any great depth.

Although she illustrates time and again that previous regulatory measures existed, she does not acknowledge the fact these measures were necessarily different from the Code of 1934 in at least one major way: they were essentially impossible to enforce. Though she mentions this fact on a number of separate occasions, she does not draw any conclusions from it or contrast these previous instances with the situation in 1934.

When discussing the National Board of Censorship in 1909, Vasey mentions that producers could submit their films for review “on a voluntary basis” (Vasey, 1997: 22), then continues to explain the process involved; later, she notes this committee turned into the National Board of Review in 1919 and abandoned all attempts to censor the industry, simply “reviewing and classifying movies as a public information service” (Vasey, 1997: 27). In terms of the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” of 1927, Vasey acknowledges that “perhaps the consensual nature of the guidelines had not done much to promote their observance in the past” and that “producers submitted synopses of scripts on a voluntary basis” (Vasey, 1997: 48), following this up with only an unsupported claim that producers were made to abide by the rules set down in the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” because not doing so would cause financial loss.

Even though Vasey claims that the rules were enforced economically in this way, this does not explain why “from May 1930 to April 1931, two-thirds of the industry’s output was not submitted during production for discussion and advice” (Vasey, 1997: 122) , which indicates

that although both the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” and the Production Code had been written by this point, much of the industry did not feel compelled to follow their rules or even submit scripts to the Studio Relations Committee. Some steps toward enforcement were taken soon after, when “on 8 October 1931, the submission of scripts to the SRC was made compulsory” (Vasey, 1997: 108). Vasey mentions this, but does not acknowledge it as the big step away from previous policies that it was. For the first time, the industry could be forced, at least in theory, to take action, whereas previous regulatory attempts had depended in large part on the goodwill of individual producers. Despite this demand for universal submissions of movie scripts, however, Vasey also noted that “in September 1932, both Hays and Joy worried that 24 out of 111 pictures in production dealt with illicit sex relations” (Vasey, 1997: 124); even if studios presumably submitted their scripts to the SRC by this point, the recommendations of the Committee were clearly not always taken into account. This will also become apparent within my discussion of the MPPDA correspondence on Shearer’s pre-Code films.

When in July 1934, therefore, the Studio Relations Committee turned into the Production Code Administration (under the leadership of Joseph Breen) and became an organ separated from Hollywood and thus able to exercise power over the studio moguls, with films which did not receive PCA approval unable to get funding from their New York financiers, this was an unprecedented situation. Cinematic censorship was not new by any means, but this was the first moment when all of Hollywood was essentially subjected to inescapable scrutiny by an outside body that they had little to no control over, since the Code reform of 1934 also meant the end of the Producers Appeal Board, through which producers had previously been able to easily appeal and alter the committee’s decisions

(Doherty, 1999: 325). Breen's connections not just with the MPPDA but also with outside pressure groups such as the Catholic Legion of Decency only strengthened this sense of an external body regulating the cinema. As such, a major breakaway from the previous situation (which had been, as Vasey correctly points out, in progress for multiple decades) did occur in 1934; this was underlined in contemporary sources, such as the trade magazines. In this context, on July 19th 1934, *The Hollywood Reporter* published a short item entitled "New Hays Plan To Clean Up Pictures" which explained that

the Hays organization is planning to do away with the studio rotating committee which handles decisions about studio product and to transfer its duties to the board of directors of the MMPDA (4)

so that "the industry will be able to keep a closer check on any pictures which may come under criticism as being suggestive or salacious" (4).

Vasey expressly denies such a breakaway, yet at the same time, her narrative is curiously indecisive on this front since, at numerous points, she does appear to acknowledge that a change took place around this time. In one such instance, she underlines the contrast between Joy and Breen's tenures of the Studio Relations Committee/Production Code Administration, noting that Joy saw himself "not as a censor but as a mediator", whereas Breen "would bring to the job a very different outlook" (Vasey, 1997: 123). Additionally, she notes that "the mechanics of self-regulation were strengthened considerably in 1934" (Vasey, 1997: 131), but also maintains, rather contradictorily, that Breen's regime was not a "radical departure" from that established by Joy.

Later, she describes the Production Code Administration as "a more rigorous environment" under which "narrative strategies that had been merely ambiguous became increasingly

cryptic” (Vasey, 1997: 324). In this context, she even mentions the three key forces behind the enforcement of the production Code also highlighted by Doherty, who espouses the opposing view and does see the pre-Code era as a distinct period in film history. These three forces are governmental (New Deal politics), scientific (the Payne Fund Studies and related research, which I will cover more fully in my sixth chapter) and religious (the Legion of Decency as well as a number of Protestant and Jewish pressure groups) (Doherty, 1999: 325); later, she notes that because of these, “by the mid-1930s the industry had learned to be extremely vigilant” (Vasey, 1997: 198). As such, Vasey’s account remains confused, on the one hand seemingly committed to a narrative of continuity, yet on the other hand also noting significant change in the mid-thirties – which brings Vasey much closer to more traditional interpretations of the pre-Code era. Maltby, who in his *Hollywood Cinema* provides an account close to Vasey’s, goes even further in this sense; although he too does not see the pre-Code era as distinct, he does acknowledge that “by 1938 [...] self-regulation [had] degenerated into political censorship” (Maltby, 1995: 279).

In addition to this rather confused negation of the importance of the year 1934, Vasey also does not attempt to address the difference, often remarked upon in traditional accounts of the Production Code’s history, between films of the early 1930s and films from the middle and end of that decade – something which one would have to explain if denying the pivotal nature of this year. Instead, all her in-depth case studies date from the latter half of the 1930s, with *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Schoedsack and Cooper, 1935) as her earliest example. Although her focus here is more on their acceptability to foreign rather than domestic markets, this aspect too is after all connected to the ability of the Production Code Administration to impact the decisions of Hollywood’s producers. In the context of this film,

she even mentions *The Sign of the Cross* (DeMille, 1932) and how this film contained many more scenes that were unacceptable to British (and domestic) censors, but she does not highlight the fact that in 1932, a film such as *The Sign of the Cross* could be made, even though surely it was just as unacceptable to local censors then as it would be in 1935, whereas the 1935 film had these elements removed before production even started (Vasey, 1997: 167).

My thesis will therefore, as opposed to Vasey but following Doherty, acknowledge the pivotal nature of the year 1934; this is relevant especially to the final chapter, which will also include a comparison between a number of films made before the enforcement of the Code with three Shearer films made after July 1934. I believe this to be a useful comparison due to the emphasis the Code put on the regulation of female sexuality, which is at the heart of my research and indeed at the very heart of Norma Shearer's pre-Code career; Shearer, neglected by both Basinger and DiBattista, is thus an ideal case study for this purpose.

1.3 - LaSalle and Norma the Modern

One work which does focus both on the pre-Code era and on Norma Shearer's career is Mick LaSalle's *Complicated Women*. Here, as opposed to both DiBattista and Basinger, the author suggests that the best era for women on screen was indeed the pre-Code era, from the advent of sound to the enforcement of the Hays Code in 1934. The work covers a great deal of ground in providing a chronological overview of the developments within the woman's film during these five years and is essentially a tribute to the careers of two pre-Code stars, Norma Shearer and Greta Garbo, arguably two of MGM's greatest stars and practically contemporaries.

It is obvious, however, that the author is really interested in writing about Shearer and – as the apt chapter title “The Great Garbo and Norma Who?” underlines – in restoring her to her proper place in cinema history. It is Shearer who graces the book’s cover, and while the author claims both Shearer and Garbo invented a new kind of “good bad woman”, occupying the space between the vamp and the ingénue, Shearer is the one who is credited with agency in this regard; Garbo’s good-bad woman status is shown as merely having developed out of a compromise between the star – who wished to play ingénue roles – and the studio – which had cast her as a vamp, whereas Shearer’s was a matter of personal choice.

Nonetheless, LaSalle provides a broad overview of key parts of both Shearer and Garbo’s careers and then covers the pre-Code careers of a number of stars, ranging from Joan Crawford to Ann Dvorak, whom he considers their successors. Finally, he addresses the way their roles were impacted by the advent of the Production Code in 1934, the way these characterisations by Garbo and Shearer nonetheless survived in different guises into the modern day and how they, as stars, are remembered today.

LaSalle’s book has a number of obvious issues, mostly related to the fact that it is essentially a labour of love rather than an academic work; the reader often feels LaSalle’s assessments may well be correct, but does not find these conclusions supported by a single footnote, even in terms of statistics - for example those on the number of women born between 1900 and 1920 who admitted not to be virgin upon marriage (LaSalle, 2000: 18). The biggest strength of his book, however, is its in-depth treatment of Shearer’s films; in this sense, the author certainly provides the most accurate, generous and well-researched overview of her

full career to date, underlining her massive popularity to a world that had, sixty-odd years after the fact, all but forgotten her.

His analysis is particularly interesting in terms of Shearer's silent and earliest talkie roles, many of which have similarly been ignored by film scholars. Examples of this include the double role of Molly and Florence in *Lady of the Night*, but also the role of Mary Dugan in *The Trial of Mary Dugan*. These three performances will become crucial, too, in my treatment of Shearer's early roles, which I will use as a precedent to illustrate the development of her star persona toward the pre-Code era.

It is especially in his examination of Shearer's star persona, however, that LaSalle's analysis remains superficial. He summarises his views at the beginning of his last chapter - "Norma in the New Millennium" - by presenting five characteristics supposedly typifying her. These five are personal integrity, an intense and driven life force, intelligence, sexual ardour and a sex life (LaSalle, 2000: 241). While these are all reasonably derived from the author's earlier film analyses, they show a certain shallowness in terms of the way he perceives Shearer's star persona; after all, the star's films were only a part of what constructed her star image in the eyes of her audience, and this star image may well have been influential to - as well as influenced by - the way she was perceived on screen.

LaSalle does occasionally use fan magazine materials (again unfootnoted) to highlight particular aspects of Shearer's off-screen life, but does so only intermittently and with few conclusions drawn. This is certainly so in the case of her marriage; the author does of course mention this, but focuses primarily on its negative effect on Shearer's career. This is understandable to some extent, since he is working against the stereotype that Shearer became a star due to the unfair advantages she received because of her husband's position

at MGM, but still means the author does not look at the marriage objectively, as a piece of information Shearer's fans had about her. He does not ask, for example, what it meant for her, a star renowned for playing divorced women and "free souls", to be simultaneously involved in what was arguably one of Hollywood's least scandalous marriages (LaSalle, 2000: 9). He has a chance to do this when he notes the juxtaposition of the filming of *Let Us Be Gay* and the birth of Irving Thalberg, Jr, yet fails to analyse this fact in any way (LaSalle, 2000: 74).

This failure to look at the way her private life might have impacted her movie roles (or the public perception of them) is particularly bizarre since he does do so, at least in some way, in terms of some of the other actresses he devotes significantly less time and space to. When discussing Joan Crawford, he does note her "rough" background and links it to her initially virtuous movie roles; she had to be shown to be chaste, even as a flapper (LaSalle, 2000: 121-3). Whether this is accurate or not does not necessarily matter here; at the very least it makes a link between roles and off-screen persona which in terms of Shearer the author fails to do – even when he notes she was, surprisingly, "escaping censure" for the roles she played (LaSalle, 2000: 102).

As the example of Crawford's "rough" background illustrates, class (or perceived class) is an essential element of Shearer's star persona that deserves to be addressed. LaSalle describes Shearer's childhood (and contrasts it to Crawford's, as a potential reason why Crawford may have disliked Shearer) as well as the patrician themes within her star persona, but does not connect the two and seems to see these patrician themes purely as following from her earlier ingénue roles, loose from any rhetoric on her actual life (LaSalle, 2000: 61). Later, he highlights her "exemplary public image" in passing as a possible explanation why *The*

Divorcee was accepted easily by the public, but immediately continues to talk about Shearer's performance and does not attempt to explore this public image any further (LaSalle, 2000: 68). Similarly, LaSalle touches upon the fact that Shearer's characters were usually upper middle class and thus did not have to commit their transgressions for the sake of money - except in the notable case of Mary Dugan, whose unapologetic love of money is interesting in and of itself (LaSalle, 2000: 57) - but fails to tie this in with her larger screen persona (LaSalle, 2000: 96). In this regard, and tied to her marriage to Thalberg, it should also be emphasized that Shearer, because of her perceived class, was seen as "choosing" these roles for herself. Whereas another actress might have been merely under contract, Shearer could not escape the perception – sometimes accurate, as in the case of *The Divorcee* – that she actually wanted to play roles such as these. This in itself is an interesting consequence of and addition to her star persona, which can be deduced from a fan magazine article, quoted by LaSalle, in which Cal York noted that Shearer "gets whatever she wants on the MGM lot" (LaSalle, 2000: 105) and thus *chose* to make *A Free Soul* in 1931, but is not dealt with by the author.

This also loosely ties in with a point made by Lea Jacobs in *The Wages of Sin*, when she deals with the "motif of mistaken class identity", in which a "Cinderella" plotline is employed in a specific way and in which a certain character dresses or acts in such a way as to make others believe she is from a different class background. However, films of this type, such as *The Bride Wore Red* (Arzner, 1937) and *The Lady Eve* (Sturges, 1941), focus primarily on the concept of a young, working class woman presenting herself (through her clothes, her demeanor and a fictional backstory) as a part of the upper class, and this is the only type of "mistaken class identity" Jacobs explores. This concept of a poor girl striving for wealth

(whether through playing a literal role or not) was certainly one scrutinised by the Hays Office both before and after 1934 and by previous cinematic censorship efforts as well. Janet Staiger notes that the late 19th century was the beginning of an era of conspicuous consumption, in which the wealth of the upper classes was highly visible to people on every layer of society, while at the same time rich and poor mixed at entertainment and leisure venues like never before (Staiger, 1995: 20). The impetus to acquire material wealth was considered so big that late 19th century sociologists considered it a part even of the discourse on the profession of prostitution, which some girls were forced into but some – so these scholars believed – entered willingly because it enabled them to make quick money to spend on the various luxuries newly available at this time (Staiger, 1995: 45). This is an element also evident from the Payne Fund Studies on the influence of the cinema of the early 1930s; young women who saw their cinematic equals rise in society through immoral means – sacrificing anything, including but not limited to their virtue, for their purpose – might well be motivated to give this road to riches a try as well. I will examine this rhetoric further in my sixth chapter.

The key thing to note here, however, is that though this dame-to-lady process was a worrisome one in the ways it was pursued, it was also a natural and easily understandable one. The goal, which was social mobility and a rise of social status, was not objectionable and especially within an early 20th century American context even laudable; at the very least these girls desired an existence generally considered preferable to their own (such as in *The Bride Wore Red*, when Joan Crawford transforms from a nightclub singer into a proper, wealthy young lady). It was the process that could be problematic, not the end. Staiger in a sense reiterates this when she discusses vamp characters in earlier films and states that “the

vamp was explained as wanting social mobility. The narrative did not, however, reward that goal, since her means were so heartless” (Staiger, 1995: 180).

This differentiates the dame-to-lady process from the lady-to-dame process which can be seen within the narrative of many of Norma Shearer’s films and indeed of her acting career in general. What Shearer aspires to be in these films – such as *A Free Soul* and *Let Us Be Gay* (Leonard, 1930), both films which will be discussed further in my pre-Code chapter – is not quite to be working class, but to be the “wrong kind” of upper middle-class, to be markedly not a lady. This willful desire to slum it, to break the boundaries of propriety, is in a sense at least as worrisome and much harder to explain than the desire of working class characters to pretend to be rich. Here, it is not just the means, but also the end which is wrong, rendering these roles potentially more problematic. My thesis will thus also highlight this particular issue in regard to Shearer’s films, while connecting her on-screen class identity and behaviour to their context of early 20th century modernity.

Although her purpose is a different one since I am not particularly concerned with the mechanics of censorship here, Jacobs too touches upon the idea that a heroine who is given all the markers of being a decent young woman – in terms of behaviour and often also in terms of class – might be at least as controversial as a working class gold-digger, given the correct narrative material. The reasons behind this warrant further examination, but one point Jacobs touches upon is the fact that when such a character does commit a transgression, that transgression is made to look somehow more attractive and more acceptable because of the person who is committing it. Adultery is wrong and must not – according to the Production Code – be displayed in an attractive fashion, but when Irene Dunne’s character in *Back Street* commits it, it certainly seems less problematic than when

Barbara Stanwyck does in *Baby Face* (Green, 1933). Apart from the way the crime is perceived, however, the character's nature itself is also meaningful in the ways audiences might identify with her; whereas the average cinema-going girl anno 1930 might find it hard to imagine having grown up in a brothel or being an accomplice in a bank robbery (elements of the plots of *Baby Face* and *Ladies They Talk About* (Keighley and Bretherton, 1933) respectively), she might recognize herself more in Irene Dunne's character in *Back Street*, or Norma Shearer's characters in *The Divorcee* or *Strangers May Kiss* (which display a similar middle- or upper-class "decency"). This will return particularly in my discussion of the Production Code Administration's treatment of Shearer's pre-Code roles, especially *Riptide* (Goulding, 1934), which she made on the cusp of the enforcement of the Code in 1934.

In terms of Shearer's post-Code roles, which I will focus upon in my final chapter, as well, LaSalle is useful; here, he focuses particularly on her roles in films such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Marie Antoinette* and *The Women*, and the way they locked the star into an uninteresting image of noble ladyhood for life and even beyond (LaSalle, 2000: 225). Once more, however, he does not tie these into a wider framework in which Shearer, someone perceived as privileged within an industry that prided itself (sometimes falsely) on its essential democracy, was always in danger of being singled out and vilified. The notion of Shearer as a privileged and noble Queen might have been tied down for good by the fact that *The Women* and *Marie Antoinette* became her best-remembered films, but the roots behind this image were there for many years beforehand. Here, as in terms of her pre-Code career, I hope to complicate some of LaSalle's conclusions by juxtaposing Shearer's revolutionary screen roles with her off-screen public image, as perpetuated through fan magazines.

This ties into a method of star analysis suggested by Richard Dyer in *Stars*, particularly in his third section entitled "Stars and Character", which is highly relevant to a potential comparative study of Shearer's on- and off-screen images. Firstly, it analyses the notion of a star's image using a number of characteristics of novelistic character, such as consistency (the idea that the star's image may evolve, but always retain a particular trace of their basic, consistent identity) and identification (the way a star image combines uniqueness with familiarity, enabling a viewer to identify with the star). Secondly, it discusses the notion of characters, analyzing the different "signs" audiences may use to construct characters upon watching films; this is particularly interesting when combined with the idea of star image as character, since it stresses the way in which a film character is essentially a double entity, meaningful within the diegesis of the film but also influenced by the non-diegetic reality of the star's image (which may fit with the film character in different ways, which Dyer categorises as selective use, perfect fit and problematic fit). This can form the theoretical basis in order to study the apparent contradiction between Norma Shearer's divorcee image and her off-screen star image as a wife and mother.

Richard deCordova's *Picture Personalities* makes a similar point. This more historically oriented work sketches the development of the star system within early cinema. In doing so, the author expressly stresses the actor/star as an important element in deciding a film's meaning, rather than privileging the voice or approach of a particular director as classic auteur theory does (deCordova, 1990: 13). This is the case because when the audience sees a particular character on screen, it does not just see this character as a fictional person, but also sees the actor behind the character; deCordova calls this the "double body" of the

character and the actor, and it means that when a star plays a character, he or she always brings his or her extratextual meanings into play as well.

In this context he highlights the harmony or lack thereof between on and off screen persona; during the earlier star years (mostly the 1910s) he notes a tendency of the fan magazines to remark on the similarities between actor and character, always in positive ways, emphasising for example the real-life bravery or sweetness of a particular star. From the 1920s onward, as star scandals erupted, a tendency to differentiate between star and character became more commonplace and was used to underline the ways in which stars did not resemble their more controversial characters. This “doubleness” of character and actor is an interesting one and allows us to speculate in terms of the meanings of particular films being affected by their key stars. This is particularly interesting in terms of both my precedent case study of Gloria Swanson – a divorced star playing divorcee roles – and especially in terms of my central case study of Norma Shearer, who was a star who played a number of divorced (or sexually free-spirited) characters but who also had a particularly noncontroversial off-screen life.

In terms of the source material from which to (re)construct such a star image, the third chapter of Dyer’s “Stars as Images” section proposes a useful division of the different types of available materials, which is once again interesting for my research methodology. The author divides these materials into the categories of promotion, publicity, films and criticism, and commentaries, and it is through an intertextual reading of all of these that a star image can be sketched. This is helpful to my thesis, yet it is nonetheless important to identify a few issues in terms of Dyer’s divisions between these different categories, particularly in terms of the time period I am concerned with and especially since my work

will be dealing strongly with fan magazines as a way to reconstruct a star's image during her heyday.

One such issue is reiterated in Anthony Slide's *Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine*, which provides the most in-depth research on this topic to date. In this book, Slide particularly stresses the "incestuous relationship" (Slide, 2010: 7) between fan magazines and Hollywood studios as follows:

Just as the entire Hollywood community needed the fan magazines as a collective mouthpiece, so did the fan magazines rely upon the film industry for their survival. (Slide, 2010: 7)

An understanding of and critical stance toward this world in which the trade papers often referred to fan magazine writers as "publicists" is thus a necessity for anyone who uses fan magazines as a primary source for film-historical research, since it means that the fan magazines – who often submitted their stories for studio approval prior to publication (Slide, 2010: 8) - would rarely go against the grain of the star image as it had been created by the Hollywood studios. This is particularly interesting in terms of Dyer's aforementioned division between promotion and publicity, in that it means that very little in the fan magazines could be truly regarded as "publicity" rather than promotion; for hints at publicity (Hollywood news unsanctioned by the studios) during the classic era, one would have to look at sources beyond the fan magazine world, whereas fan magazines themselves are a good representation of the way the studios wanted the audience to perceive particular stars.

The fan magazine is also interesting in another sense. In the brief introduction to the "Stars as Images" part of *Stars*, Dyer defines a star's "image" as a "complex configuration of visual,

verbal and aural signs” which “is manifest not only in films but in all kinds of media text” (Dyer, 1979: 34). This configuration is obviously composed of various sources, far beyond the reach of just the fan magazine, but nonetheless, a fan magazine in itself is interesting in its inherent multiplicity, combining images, interviews, contests, advertisements, readers' letters and even short stories into one whole, to be consumed by a wide variety of readers. It is essentially a palimpsest rather than a singular, united source, as is illustrated for example in Anne Morey's chapter on the *Photoplay* fiction of Adela Rogers St Johns in Bean and Negra's "Feminist Reader in Early Cinema".

In this chapter, Morey argues that it is particularly in fictional stories (which did not have to take into account the reputation of particular stars and studios) that one can read (particularly female) authors' ideas and preferences in terms of contemporary gender politics. She uses a number of specific stories and highlights how Rogers St. Johns particularly underlined the tomboy, who is not just a lover but also an equal companion of the male hero, as an acceptable and sympathetic type throughout the 1920s, rather than the flapper, vamp or mother.

This chapter is particularly interesting because it highlights the potential as a historical source not just of the fan magazine, but also of a specific, and perhaps often ignored, part within this fan magazine: that of popular fiction. Though fictional (and perhaps because of this), it too is a part of the multi-layered package formed by the fan magazine, which Morey defines, in my view correctly, as both a way of regulating cinema audiences and a way to engage in dialogue with these audiences. She also stresses the diversity of different discourses within one magazine, which is a good observation; my only criticism would be that she does not particularly stress the way different elements in a magazine could not only

contradict each other, but also form a particular coherence, particularly in terms of one star's image. My own fan magazine research on Norma Shearer will attempt to explore this in more detail, comparing and contrasting different elements within the same issues to examine how Shearer was defined both as a modern woman and a traditional wife and mother.

In this regard, Tamar Jeffers McDonald's *Doris Day Confidential* is extremely useful; in this book, Jeffers McDonald examines the presence (or absence) of the virginity trope within the star persona of Doris Day. In order to do so, she analyses both particular film performances and a range of fan magazine items and uses a combined analysis of these different materials in order to draw her final conclusions; this thesis will follow a similar methodological approach, in that each chapter or section sets out to analyse a set of films, then examines the simultaneous fan magazine coverage of the film's central star, both in terms of these specific films and more generally. Additionally, Jeffers McDonald's reading of fan magazines is interesting in that her

method of investigation with these periodical and magazine articles is not only to analyse a specific text and the myths that seem to underlie it, but also to see, wherever possible, what else in each issue contributes to, or detracts from, the overall message being propounded. (Jeffers McDonald, 2013: 39)

As such, I will not simply select a series of articles and deal with them in a vacuum, instead also examining coverage (including editorial articles, but also reviews, advertisements, gossip items and participatory elements such as fan letters) on Shearer as it occurred within the same issue of a particular magazine, particularly as it pertains to Jeffers McDonald's definition of the "star trail", and also more broadly within different magazines published during the same month or months. I believe an examination of such parallel coverage will

allow me to sketch Shearer's star persona, as it was presented to fans at the time, more fully.

Thanks to their connections to the Hollywood studios, their wide reach, their participatory possibilities and their wide range of types of coverage, therefore, fan magazines are an ideal resource for my project. While LaSalle provides – of the authors focused on here – the most interesting analyses to date of Shearer's pre-Code films, I believe these can be expanded and developed in interesting directions through an exploration of the fan magazine rhetoric on Shearer's private-public life. In this way, I will be able to further problematise the existing image of Shearer as either an unfairly privileged and unpopular, or inherently noble and uncontroversial (and thus uninteresting) star, as per Schickel and Basinger, respectively.

SECTION I - PRECEDENTS

Chapter 2 - “A Chance to Be Déclassée”: Three early Shearer films

2.1 - Introduction

This chapter will provide the starting point for my examination of Norma Shearer’s pre-Code films by examining what came before; it introduces Shearer as a star and then demonstrates the ways in which three of her earlier films form a historical precedent for these later roles. Additionally, it will highlight the corresponding development of Shearer’s star persona at this early point and examine potential connections between this star persona and her on-screen roles, partially by comparing and contrasting both star persona and roles to other significant stars and films of the time. In doing so, it will highlight the ways in which Shearer’s initially fairly conservative screen (and star) image became, over the course of the 1920s, an ideal vehicle to convey a particular brand of female modernity.

In 1923, Shearer signed a contract with Louis B. Mayer pictures (which would become a part of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer a year later), and the starlet made her first Hollywood film, *Pleasure Mad* (Barker, 1923), that same year. After playing secondary characters in films such as *Lucretia Lombard* (Conway, 1923), she soon graduated to starring roles and knew her first major success in the leading female role of *He Who Gets Slapped* (Sjöström, 1924), alongside established stars John Gilbert and Lon Chaney. The three films I will focus on here hail from the mid-to-late 1920s and include one silent film – *Lady of the Night* (Bell, 1925) – and two of Shearer’s earliest sound films - *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (Veiller, 1929) and *Their Own Desire* (Hopper, 1929).

In analysing and comparing these films, I wish to focus on three particular points. Firstly, I will ask how the films address key concepts connected to female modernity, such as

consumer and leisure culture, female employment, but also the developing sexual politics of the time, and how these modern concepts are impacted by the class identity of the characters in each film. Secondly, then, I will examine how these issues were contextualized, interpreted and commented upon within the fan magazine treatment of the films. Finally, I look at the ways in which the rhetoric on Shearer at this time matched or contradicted both the message conveyed within the films and the fan magazine rhetoric on these films.

2.2 - Synopses

Lady of the Night (Bell, 1925)

Originally and perhaps more aptly entitled *Two Worlds*, *Lady of the Night* tells the story of two young women born on opposite sides of the social spectrum. Though they meet only once, near the ending of the film, their lives are intertwined from the moment baby Molly's father, a criminal, is sentenced to twenty years of hard labour by baby Florence's father, a judge. Skipping eighteen years into the future, to the moment when Molly is released from Reform School while Florence graduates Select School, the film then traces their lives, their desires, and their search for happiness in love. It is this last element which once again provides a link between this unlikely pair, as – in spite of Molly's previous attachment to boyfriend "Chunky" - both fall in love with Dave, a young inventor – a man who knew Molly first but who likes Florence better.

The Trial of Mary Dugan (Veiller, 1929)

The Trial of Mary Dugan was the film adaptation of the stage play of the same name, which made its debut on Broadway in 1927 and which was written by Bayard Veiller, who was hired by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to direct the film adaptation. *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, play

and film both, covers the murder trial of showgirl Mary Dugan, known professionally as Mona Tree and accused of stabbing her millionaire lover to death. As the trial proceeds, the details of Mary's life, supported by a string of rich, oftentimes married men, are brought into the open as her younger brother, whom she put through law school, tries to defend her and save her life. After a long and suspenseful trial, the real murderer is identified and Mary is acquitted.

***Their Own Desire* (Hopper, 1929)**

In *Their Own Desire*, Shearer plays Lucia "Lally" Marlett, a wealthy girl who leads an ideal life of sports and fun. One day, however, her father decides to divorce her mother to marry his mistress, a divorced woman. While Lally previously had a close relationship with her father, this causes her to turn away from him and from the male sex in general, until she goes on vacation with her mother and meets Jack. The two soon become a couple and plan to get married, until Lally finds that her boyfriend is in fact the son of Beth Cheever, her father's former mistress and now wife. When she sees the toll the relationship takes on her mother, she breaks off her engagement, but still cannot forget Jack.

2.3 - Films

The three films discussed here are quite distinct from one another in terms of both plot and genre, and my discussion will, therefore, not focus on any obvious narrative similarities. Instead, I privilege the thematic similarities and differences that tie together the central female characters, all played by Norma Shearer, to demonstrate the way these three films essentially paved the way for Shearer's fully-developed "modern" characters from 1930 onward.

For this purpose, and indeed for the study of Norma Shearer's star persona in general, *Lady of the Night* (Bell, 1925) is a useful starting point. Firstly, it was a major early success for Shearer – as its fan magazine coverage will demonstrate further – but secondly and most importantly, it was also a film that allowed Shearer to expand her skill as an actress into new directions, since she played not one, but both of the central female characters, Florence Banning and Molly Helmer. These characters embodied a number of binary oppositions, and whereas one, Florence, closely matched previous Shearer roles, the other, Molly, covered significant new ground; in this way, both roles would, in a sense, inform the direction of Shearer's later career. I selected *The Trial of Mary Dugan* and *Their Own Desire* – two of Shearer's earliest talkies – because of their potential connections to this earlier film; each of the Shearer's roles in these two films can be seen as a variation on one of her roles in *Lady of the Night*. This earlier film, then, can be seen as "the keystone of Shearer's screen identity" (LaSalle, 2000: 27) out of which many, perhaps all, of her later roles developed. Here, I will use a series of contrasts between these two characters to examine the ways in which this happened.

Firstly, it is important to highlight that both Molly and Florence are sympathetic characters throughout the film; the doubling of the Shearer character here is not meant to create a good-bad binary. This is an element commonly overlooked in scholarly analyses, insofar as these exist, of the film. In *From Reverence to Rape*, Molly Haskell lists *Lady of the Night* as one of the examples of the "Jekyll and Hyde vehicle", in which "the beautiful, the virginal, the pure" is divorced from the "ugly, the fallen, the tainted"; to her, Molly is included in a list of representations of "the evil and unpleasant side of a woman's character" (Haskell, 1974: 59-60). This same rhetoric returns in *The Films of Norma Shearer*, in which Jacobs and

Braum characterize both Molly and her father as “lawless characters”. They explain Molly became a member of an underworld ring while still a teen, and refer to the “crooks” Chunky suggests Dave sells his invention to, as “Molly’s gang”, thus making her clearly into a criminal and corrupt element (Jacobs and Braum, 1976: 99). As such, Molly and Florence have, in various sources since the film’s release, been characterized as a simple dichotomy between good and evil; much like the common and easy perception of Norma Shearer as an essentially conservative star due to her respectable off-screen image, I believe this to be too simplistic an interpretation.

Haskell never mentions particular narrative elements within the film and glosses over it very quickly, using it simply to support her point about how films featuring good women and their evil doppelgangers in a sense show the evil woman to be an unreal, extreme and thus ultimately unthreatening figure, whose only role is to clarify the persona of her “good” counterpart. In terms of the treatment of Molly by Jacobs and Braum, this is more in-depth but simply factually inaccurate; Molly’s membership in any underground ring is never mentioned and the film never links her or even shows her to be familiar with the “gang” Chunky mentions. She is simply shown discouraging Dave from selling to criminals and encouraging him to sell his invention to the bank instead; even though her father was punished (too) harshly by the system, she retains a social conscience and knows crime “don’t pay”.

In fact, the film in general is surprisingly nuanced in its exploration of good and evil, and no character – apart from perhaps the man who makes unwanted advances on Molly at the very beginning of the film and who never appears again – is truly bad. Judge Banning, Florence’s father, sentences Molly’s father to twenty years’ hard labour, but is later shown

as a caring, somewhat indulgent father who misses his wife, loves Florence dearly, and approves of her relationship with Dave even despite Dave's lowly origins. Chris Helmer, Molly's father, is a criminal who gets tried in court at the very beginning of the film, but who clearly loves his wife and little daughter, and who, in one of his only intertitles, notes that the difference between Molly and Florence is purely who they were born to. In terms of the two heroines, neither does anything morally evil at any point in the film, which is perhaps most remarkable in terms of Molly since she is the one most sorely tested.

The key contrast drawn between the two characters is thus not one in terms of morality, but instead, it is connected to class: the film was originally entitled *Two Worlds*, and this sense of different universes colliding is still prevalent throughout. The girls are initially only connected through the legal system, as during their early childhood, Molly's father is arrested and sentenced to twenty years' hard labour by Florence's father, a judge. The fact that his main areas of employment are as a judge and on the board of directors of a bank shows clearly the judicial and economic power of Florence's class over Molly's, and this glaring difference is pointed out by Molly's father as he is arrested: "Pretty soft for your kid, but what about mine?".

The lack of a direct connection between class and perceived morality is reiterated throughout the film, and sets *Lady of the Night* apart from a number of earlier films dealing with similar issues, such as the three Cecil B. DeMille films mentioned in the literature review. These three films – *Old Wives for New* (1918), *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919) and *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920) – all deal, to some extent, with sartorial and marital modernity, and will serve throughout this thesis as a point of comparison to a number of Shearer's films.

In terms of class, the central couple in each film was very firmly defined as wealthy and middle class, and where working class women appeared, as they at least briefly do in each of the three films, they primarily served as one-dimensional devices to move the narrative along, most frequently as mistresses to more central, male characters. As such, they also tended to be morally condemned; in *Old Wives for New*, Jessie murders her lover, in *Don't Change Your Husband*, Toodles is the reason why Leila's second husband is unable to provide for his wife, and in *Why Change Your Wife?*, Sally throws what she believes to be acid at her husband's ex-wife. In these three films, the working class female characters are depicted as morally disreputable and also, ultimately, as peripheral to the central plot.

In *Lady of the Night*, however, Molly is neither morally problematic nor peripheral: she is very much a central character and, in fact, takes up more screen time than her upper middle-class counterpart Florence. Additionally, the very last scene of the film is hers: whereas the working class characters in the DeMille films ultimately vanish stage left in order to allow the middle-class central couple to have their happy end, it is Molly's future that is most clearly defined at the end of *Lady of the Night*, and it is not the future of a villain or of a victim. Even if she loses her love interest Dave to Florence, Molly does not die of a broken heart; though suffering, she approaches things pragmatically and decides to go out West with former boyfriend Chunky. The film ends with her statement that "at least there'll be a lotta laughs", and while her future is not quite what she might have wanted for herself, the viewer knows that Molly will be okay.

The class difference is also underlined visually throughout the film, for example in the establishing shots used to introduce particular environments in the lives of Florence and Molly. These often follow one another directly through use of cross-fade; in this way,

Florence's beautiful home is contrasted with Molly's rather dilapidated room, Florence attends the Girls Select School while Molly is seen graduating from the Girls Reform School, and Florence attends chaperoned dances, while Molly frequents Kelly's "Palais de Danse", a rather dingy nightclub.

Furthermore, the visual difference between the girls' class identities is demonstrated also in the star's appearance in each role; Shearer looked entirely different as Florence and as Molly. Underlining the class Shearer's characters were usually associated with, Florence bears a strong resemblance to previous Shearer characters and, indeed, to the star's usual appearance. She has long, curly hair that is usually pinned up and wears fairly modest clothes befitting her class and age; she is often seen in light-coloured ballroom dresses and ends the film in a long, white cape with a gauzy, white veil over her hair. Her appearance thus underlines her characterisation as an aristocratic, wealthy, and innocent young woman. As Molly, however, Shearer is practically unrecognizable; her hair is short and pinned back underneath a beret apart from a "spit curl" on each cheek and she wears heavy eye make-up and dark lipstick. Her skirt is shorter and tighter than Florence's, her blouse lower-cut, and she wears conspicuous, cheap jewellery, as well as striped stockings.

However, this visual contrast is not just an issue of class: Molly's clothes and apparel have a less refined and likely cheaper appearance than Florence's, but they are also connected to the rhetoric on the outward trappings of modernity that I highlighted in terms of the three DeMille films. Through Molly's appearance, the film shows how this character embodies a hesitant modernity while Florence represents a more old-fashioned lifestyle; I argue that this is a second key contrast between the girls, tied to yet also separate from the class difference.

On the most basic level, Molly's skirts are shorter than Florence's and end just under the knee, rather than around the ankle, and her hair, too, is different from the long, slightly old-fashioned curls that were Shearer's real hair at the time. Molly's hairstyle is in fact inconsistent throughout the film, in part, most likely, because of the necessity to mask Shearer's long hair for the role of Molly. In Molly's first scene, she is shown to have a classic, modern bob, but in the scene where Molly prays by her bedside, her hair is plaited and clearly longer. In either incarnation, however, the style is very different from Florence's almost pre-Raphaelite curls (Figs. 2-4).



Figures 1-4: The tonsorial contrast between Florence and Molly.

Her familiarity with make-up is yet another signpost of her tentative modernity, and is tied to the consumer culture highlighted in the context of the DeMille films, since “between 1909 and 1929 the number of American perfume and cosmetics manufacturers nearly doubled” (Peiss, 1998: 97). The use of cosmetics became increasingly accepted across the social spectrum throughout these decades, as illustrated also through advertisements (often movie star-endorsed) in popular magazines at the time (Fig. 5). Although Molly's make-



Figure 5: A star-endorsed cosmetics advertisement in *Photoplay* (December 1927: 117).



Figures 6-7: Florence and Molly apply lipstick.

up is perhaps exaggeratedly heavy, she is on board with this modern trend, whereas Florence appears completely new to the idea. This is illustrated visually through a juxtaposition of two scenes. In one of these, tinted in pink (a colour only used for certain of Florence's scenes and never for Molly's), Florence is shown secretly and hesitantly applying perfume and a light shade of lipstick – behind the back of her aunt who, as a middle-class woman from a previous generation, entirely disapproves of this practice. At this point, the image dissolves into a similar close-up of Molly, coating her lips in a much darker shade with fast, experienced strokes; unlike Florence, Molly looks straight into the camera in a way that is both brazen and direct, but also conspiratorial toward the audience (Figs. 6-7). She, and not Florence, knows how to be a modern woman in 1925, most likely just like many moviegoers. This type of transition, used at a number of points throughout the film to illustrate particular moments of contrast between the two girls, thus shows here how Florence is beginning to engage with a modern practice which Molly is already familiar with.

Lynn Dumenil also compares the use of cosmetics in the early to mid-1920s to smoking and drinking, practices which are also associated with Molly (but not with Florence) in *Lady of the Night*. She states that “smoking, drinking, and cosmetics, traditionally associated with prostitutes, further underscored young women's insistence on their right to sexuality and personal liberty” (Dumenil, 1995: 135); Florence's complete unfamiliarity with any of these,

therefore, once again positions her as pre-modern, whereas Molly's familiarity with them can be seen as a comment on her class (in that she is, while not a prostitute in any sense, certainly less respectable than Florence) but also a comment on her engagement with modernity. She straddles a line here; she is familiar with "modern" clothes and behaviour partially because she is of a disreputable background, but at the same time she is never shown as partaking in any criminal or even promiscuous activity and is thus also entering a world in which these elements are no longer associated with disreputability, but instead with modernity, a more positive quality. Dumenil also highlights this issue of class and modernity, with the "modern" appropriating particular characteristics usually associated with "bad" women without becoming identified with them or adopting their class identity. Molly is not quite there yet, but she is moving in this direction; later roles, such as Shearer's character in *Their Own Desire*, will make this development more apparent.

Molly's modernity is also directly connected to mobility; this is also linked to her appearance in a number of ways, in that her shorter skirts and simpler and shorter hairstyle are far more practical for a dynamic life in the public sphere. However, more broadly, in terms of the spaces they navigate and in whose company, the two characters are also clearly of different eras in regard to mobility. Florence's movements are very controlled and circumscribed; her father and her maiden aunt, who raised her after her mother's death, are clearly extremely involved in her courtship with Dave, and she is picked up and delivered back home before and after their date. Even the idea of her going out without a chaperone is shown to be a new and potentially problematic scenario. She never enters a space she is not supposed to go; when she wants to see Dave's workshop, a space clearly coded "male", she asks him if he would allow "a mere woman" to see it and goes there in her chauffeured car.

Molly, on the other hand, lives alone, presumably now orphaned and thus free from parental or other authority, and goes where she pleases. She enters Kelly's "Palais de Danse" by herself and most likely travelled there that way; both her friends and her boyfriend, Chunky, are already there. She moves according to her own rules and is not afraid to move away from Chunky and sit down by herself when he offends her. Similarly, when she wants to see Dave's workshop, she does not ask for permission, but instead just walks in and even explores his bedroom and eats his biscuits. Similarly, just as a "male" space does not stop her, class does not stop her either; she sneaks into Florence's car (which she calls "swell") when she wants to talk to her. Her movements are uninhibited and in a sense shameless. This was unusual and even disapproved of as late as 1937, when Emily Post's *Blue Book of Etiquette*, for all its understanding of the needs of "moderns", strongly advised that "no young girl may live alone" and that "the conventions of propriety demand that on certain occasions a young woman must be protected by a chaperon, because otherwise she will be misjudged" (Post, 1937: 288). As such, Molly is not quite respectable, but she is also far ahead of her time.

Molly's engagement with modernity also plays a role even when she decides to impress Dave by attempting to transform herself into someone of Florence's class, in that she instantly selects modern mass media as her tools of choice in order to accomplish this transformation; much like movie fan magazines, at this same time, taught their readers how to look like famous movie stars such as Norma Shearer. The first such scene is the one where she has invited Dave over for dinner and bases her table layout on a magazine article detailing what a "formal dinner" looks like; she proves her inability to conform to upper-class standards when she decides to feed some spaghetti to her dog and then steals its bow

to tie around her vase. In a later scene, she uses another magazine to learn how “respectable” people dress and attempts to imitate this, removing her jewellery and chewing gum in the effort; interesting here is, however, the fact that the girl in whose image Molly attempts to recreate herself does not resemble Florence, either. As such, just as Molly uses modern media to reinvent herself, she also does not want to surrender her emerging modernity to become a carbon copy of Florence (Figs. 8-11).

Ultimately, this effort as well is doomed to fail, of course, and in the end Molly and boyfriend Chunky decide to “go out West” in a much more traditional attempt at social mobility, but the use of popular magazines is still a sign that Molly, more than Florence, is a member of an increasingly cosmopolitan modern America. Such magazines are, after all, identified by Dumenil as a part of a “leisure and consumption” culture which “provided some of the most visible, modern changes of the 1920s”, particularly within the metropolis but also increasingly outside (Dumenil, 1995: 78). As popular media of mass communication, such magazines – including movie fan magazines! – were a key element of the development of early 20th century modernity; this is one of the main reasons why they are so central to my thesis.





Figures 8-11: Molly attempts to use magazines to educate herself.

Finally, however, the heroines' approaches to modernity differ not only on the superficial level of appearances, but also in terms of their engagement with gender relations and female sexuality. I highlighted earlier in this thesis that sexuality was a key area in which the modern woman differentiated herself from her predecessors, but whereas in Shearer's later pre-Code films, marriage and divorce will become crucial in this regard, the emphasis in *Lady of the Night* is more on the sexuality of unmarried women, since neither character becomes engaged to be married until the film's very end.

On the surface, the film's narrative in which a working class girl with traces of the modern loses her would-be lover to a more traditional, middle class rival is reminiscent of the scenario I highlighted in my introduction, in which middle-class males still often pursued sex with working class girls so they could "expect chastity from their peers without relinquishing access to intercourse themselves" (D'Emilio and Freedman, 2013: 263), thus experimenting sexually with girls they did not intend to marry before marrying a virginal girl of their own class. However, this is not entirely an accurate reflection of the film's narrative, in that Molly is never defined as especially promiscuous; while the title *Lady of the Night* carries with it the connotation of prostitution, after all, this is in no way actually shown or even implied within the film.

Molly actually shows signs of a peculiar and largely self-defined sense of decency throughout the film. When Chunky gets too affectionate at Kelly's, for example, she tells him that he shouldn't pull that "cheek-to-cheek stuff" in public, even if the background characters in the Kelly's scenes clearly don't subscribe to the same moral code; especially significant in this regard is the image of a sailor and an Asian woman dancing and kissing, a detail which may hint at prostitution. Molly, however, does not want the man who has been her boyfriend "for years" kissing her in public, and there is no reason to assume she goes any further than this with Dave. As such, the treatment of sexuality in this film is actually far more nuanced than a middle-class man experimenting sexually with a supposedly promiscuous working class girl; the difference between Florence and Molly in terms of sexuality has little to do with their sexual activity – whether with Dave or not – and everything to do with their display of sexual knowledge,

In this regard, in 1915, H. L. Mencken defined the modern girl as follows:

She knows the exact percentage of lunatics among the children of drunkards... She is opposed to the double standard of morality and favors a law prohibiting it... The Flapper has forgotten how to be simple, she seldom blushes, it is impossible to shock her. (LaSalle, 2000: 17)

By 1922, a college girl at Ohio State University in a sense built on this statement when she defined her generation in similar terms and stated emphatically that "we are not young innocents". The young girl of her generation "knows her game and can play it dexterously. She is armed with sexual knowledge" (Fass, 1977: 307). By 1927, even Emily Post, the guardian of proper mores and etiquette, advised her readers that a key element in the training of a modern child is the "banning of the exclamation 'Hush!'" ; even though in earlier days

it was not thought proper – because it was not necessary – that a girl should know any of the ‘ugly’ things in life”, this has changed in modern times, and “the signpost ‘HUSH’ should be changed to ‘SHOUT’. (Post 1927: 691)

Post acknowledges here that the modern child, but especially the modern girl – since the restraints put on her previously were much greater than those imposed on her male peers – is in need of knowledge of the world, of “matters of life, death, honor and ethical standards”, previously withheld her. Though Post does not specifically talk about sexual knowledge here – as the 1922 college girl did – she does acknowledge elsewhere in her *Blue Book of Etiquette* the existence of freer relations between young men and women, and approvingly refers to their “unreserved frankness [...] toward each other” (Post, 1937: 299). Therefore, even if the modern girl is not sexually active per se, she is knowledgeable about sexuality and about the ways of the world more broadly; she faces her life frankly and honestly.

This modern development can be applied to the Molly/Florence dichotomy, in which Molly is “armed with sexual knowledge” whereas Florence is one of the “young innocents”. Florence’s storyline is essentially that of a protected young girl who gradually realizes how restrictive her upbringing has been and who, in a limited way, discovers modernity for the first time and graduates from the nineteenth century into a hesitant twentieth. Molly, on the other hand, for all her deprivations, has all the knowledge Florence lacks. Although, as I highlighted above, she is not a promiscuous character, the way she elbows her friend at the beginning of the film (as her friends lament that their “jolly undertakers from Schenectady” dance on their feet the whole night and then crave affection), as well as what she tells her friend when she complains about aching feet (“Stop walking back from auto rides!”) prove that at the very least she knows what goes on in the world. Sex, crooks, and Charleston

music are no strangers to Molly, whereas Florence grows up in a huge Victorian mansion, attends formal and slightly old-fashioned dances, and seems completely taken aback when she accidentally witnesses one of her friends kissing a man. She is never ridiculous, but she is, in this sense as in others, pre-modern.

The two characters played by Shearer in this film, therefore, do not embody a good/bad contrast, but instead they are opposites in terms of class and, connected to this, in terms of their approaches to modernity. This is apparent on the surface, in terms of their sartorial choices, but also in terms of their access to sexual knowledge. Molly especially is interesting in this regard, as a character on the cusp of modernity; while her clothes and appearance are still classed, they also verge toward the class-transcending modern, and while her sexual knowledge is not, ultimately, rewarded with the love of the man of her choice, it is also not condemned or collated, as in the DeMille films, with promiscuity and moral turpitude.

I will now focus on two films, both made four years after *Lady of the Night* and both starring Shearer; each of these films features a central character which resembles either Molly or Florence in particular ways. Nonetheless, each film also develops its central character further and incorporates different modern elements, thus advancing Shearer's screen career further.

The first of the later films I will focus on is *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (Veiller, 1929), Shearer's first talkie, in which central character Mary Dugan is extremely similar to Molly in terms of social class – as such, both characters are somewhat of an anomaly within Shearer's career.

Mary, like Molly, hails from a lower-class, even destitute, background; at the start of her trial, she explains that she was raised in a poverty-stricken tenement by a father she

describes as “a drunken brute” and a mother who died when she was only fourteen. As such, like Molly, Mary was left a virtual orphan at a young age; left to care for her younger brother, she eventually became a showgirl and a kept woman. Nonetheless, like Molly, Mary also embodies a certain kind of modernity; she does this in terms of her clothes and appearance, if in a rather more toned-down fashion, but since the film is largely situated inside the courtroom, there are relatively few opportunities to analyse this superficial modernity further, for example in terms of housing or pastimes. As such, my observations on Mary and modernity will focus primarily on sexual morality, since this is at the heart of both trial and film.

In this regard, Molly and Mary, despite their similar backgrounds, differ strongly. While Molly, as I noted earlier, is not in fact a “lady of the night” at all, Mary Dugan is situated within *The Trial of Mary Dugan* as a classic “fallen woman”, and the film spends a long time exploring her “lapsed” nature. After her mother’s death, as she suddenly found herself burdened with the responsibility for her eight-year old brother, she initially found a job at a department store but eventually, at sixteen, took money from a rich man for the first time – because she “had something he wanted”. She slept with him in return for \$100 to hire a lawyer to get her brother out of an orphanage and continued this pattern when she gained custody of the child. Throughout the years, she sent her brother to better and better schools to make him into a “gentleman”, ultimately supporting him through college and law school with the help of five subsequent lovers who gave her a monthly allowance, as well as other perks such as apartments and cars, in return for her sexual favours. This is stated explicitly and repeatedly within the film; at one point, the District Attorney even outright

asks her whether she knows “the term they apply to women who sell themselves for money”. The question is objected to and she never answers, but it gets the point across.

Mary Dugan’s classification as a “bad woman” is stressed time and again in the film, particularly by the District Attorney and by the prosecution in general. Not only does the DA ask her outright whether she knows the word for “women who sell themselves for money”, he also attributes Mrs Rice’s agitation during her testimony to the fact that a respectable woman such as she has never met “a bad woman” before. As such, she is allowed to retreat and is deemed too ill to continue, whereas Mary is never shown any of the courtesies given to respectable women. Thus, the naked pictures the police took to show the blood stains on her body are shown in the courtroom and referred to repeatedly – though never shown on screen – and the District Attorney even refuses to allow her to swear on the Bible, considering such an oath from a woman like her to be automatically worthless. These actions are considered acceptable since, the DA says, “nothing can degrade her more than she has already degraded herself”.

As such, Mary’s transgressive sexuality is condemned within the courtroom, as she is represented as a morally evil figure and a potential murderer. This puts her in a similar position to some of the working class characters in the DeMille films, such as Jessie in *Old Wives for New* and Sally in *Why Change Your Wife?*, who are both represented as part of a “lesser” class than the main couple and who both either commit or attempt murder within the narrative of their respective films. *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, however, distinguishes itself from earlier coverage of similar characters through the approach both the character of Mary and the overall morality conveyed in the film take toward this situation.

Although the District Attorney and the prosecution paint Mary as an evil woman unworthy of any respect, the film does not support this idea. In part because of their obvious bias against Mary purely because of her background and occupation, these characters are from the very beginning painted as rigid and unsympathetic, with Mary and her brother, Jimmy, cast as the underdogs fighting against their prejudice. Jimmy's attitude is particularly interesting in this regard, since he comes into the case knowing nothing about his sister's occupation in life and is exposed to this knowledge literally in the course of the trial; one almost expects him to show disappointment and anger to find out his older sister is little better than a prostitute. Even Mary expected this reaction from him, explaining how, after she had told him everything, she thought that "this is the finish" – but then describes how he kissed her and simply said "Well, kid. Everything's jake with me". And so it is, even as Jim cross-examines Mary about the details of her life with her lover, Rice.

In part, this acceptability of Mary's crimes may be attributed to the fact that she did what she did in order to send her brother to school, a fact which probably plays a role initially in his relatively easy acceptance of her unorthodox life. This fact is also stressed in some of the film's reviews; *Picture Play*, for example, describes Raymond Hackett as "the brother for whom Norma Shearer bargained her soul" (October 1929: 68). This type of rhetoric, along with Mary's recollection of how she first gave herself to a man at sixteen to save Jimmy from the orphanage, would place Mary firmly in the category of the virtuous victim, forced into much loathed prostitution by her circumstances and positively waiting for her moment to be redeemed as a penitent whore, essentially respectable at heart.

As Mary's testimony continues, however, this redeeming factor appears to be not as crucial as it would be natural to assume, given the historical context. At a number of points

throughout the film, she is essentially given a way out, a way in which to define herself as basically virtuous and gone astray only due to her tragic circumstances and for the good of her brother. One of the most interesting elements of this film, then, is the fact that Mary does not grab any of these chances and is, all through her testimony about her unconventional life as the mistress to married men, unashamedly honest and truthful. One such moment happens when her brother interrogates her about the beginnings of her relationship with Rice and Mary describes the night she received a Rolls Royce from him, which took her to an expensive apartment he paid for. She tells her brother that Rice asked her whether she liked it; her brother asks her what she replied. Then, Mary looks him straight in the eye and simply replies “I said yes”. LaSalle notes this moment as the strongest of the film, seeing it as the moment when Mary assumes “full responsibility” and which suggests “a depth of experience too broad for the categories of easy moralizing” (LaSalle, 2000: 58).

I essentially agree with his analysis, but would suggest that there is a slightly earlier moment in the film that also does this, perhaps even more powerfully. A key element to Mary’s potential redemption as a “good” woman is, after all, the fact that she did what she did purely and solely for her brother, that without her brother to worry about and pay for, she would never have even considered such a life. This is an angle he, as her defense attorney, clearly recognizes as well, and as such, he asks her “Mary, if it hadn’t been for your brother, would your life have been what it has been?” One would expect Mary to promptly state that it would not – but instead she assumes a pensive look, cocks her head to the side, and seems to genuinely ponder that question. Finally, she responds: “I don’t know. I think so. I’ve thought about that quite a good deal” – and then, looking her brother in the eye, her

voice steady, "You know, I think a girl gets kinda used to luxury". I view this as the key moment of this film, the moment when Mary categorically refuses to take the easy way out and play herself as a victim, but honestly and straightforwardly accepts her agency in the matter. She is who she is, and refuses to be anyone else in the eyes of the world or in the eyes even of her adored younger brother.

This straightforwardness ties into the honesty I highlighted as a key characteristic of the modern. Mary Dugan, in facing her life choices honestly, embodies the "unreserved frankness" (Post, 1937: 299) which Emily Post praised in a certain group of young women at this time; in a chapter entitled "The Growth of Good Taste in America", Post noted that "young women and men of today" insisted "upon their right to see life how it really is" rather than allowing it to be "prettily papered over" (Post, 1937: 682-3). Mary, too, though in part a victim of her circumstances, faces facts squarely and honestly.

One such point of honesty is connected to the question whether she loved her married lovers or not, since love would be another mitigating factor in terms of this type of behavior, following the notion, somewhat acceptable among moderns, that "love made sex right" (Fass, 1977: 273) even if it was not necessarily sanctioned by marriage. Instead, in terms of her married lover, she does not feign love, but says she was fond of him because he was good to her. Later on, though she claims her four lovers before Rice were in love with her and wanted her to have things, she admits she was only ever in love with one of them, and even then she describes her lover in purely acquisitive terms, as "I loved everything he did for me". This monetary, rather than romantic, angle is also supported by the large amount of money Mary admits to having received from her lovers, which she describes as "quite a good deal"; she claims Rice gave her \$1000 a week, plus an apartment, a Rolls Royce, and

various items of luxury clothing. She thus does not hide behind her victimhood to mask the fact that in some sense, the situation had pleasant benefits for her.

Most interestingly, however, the film entirely embraces Mary's point of view and treats her not as something evil and cheap, but as a human being, and not just in terms of how the news of her behaviour is treated by her brother. In fact, the film poses the question whether it is possible to draw an easy line between a "good woman" and a "bad woman", which it shows particularly in drawing the contrast between Mary and Mrs Rice. Though the DA clearly believes there is a great difference between the two, in that he claims Mrs Rice has never met a "bad woman" before, this is later disproven when Mrs Rice, the respectable society matron, is shown to have had a lover herself (whereas Mary had only one lover at the time and was thus more faithful to Rice than his wife was) and when this lover turns out to have been Rice's killer. As opposed to the similar characters in *Old Wives for New* and *Why Change Your Wife?*, Mary is actually innocent of the crime she is accused of, and it is the "good", middle-class woman who is an accomplice to murder.

The contrast – or lack thereof – between Mary and Mrs Rice is underlined further when Mary herself compares the state she lived in to a marriage; when the monetary gains she derived from her affairs are raised by the DA, she simply says "When a man marries, he plans to support his wife. That's how it was in this – well, that's how it was". The DA appears shocked by this and asks her whether she believes her relations with these men were anything like marriage, and Mary responds "Why yes, just about". She does so without sarcasm or humour, simply stating a plain fact she believes to be the truth. The DA then calls her relationships "unholy" and "indecent", but the point has been made, and alongside Mrs

Rice's unfaithfulness and her complicity in the murder of her husband, this observation serves to further blur the line between good and bad woman, between wife and mistress.

As such, Mary Dugan is not yet entirely a modern character in this film; in some sense, her characterisation echoes a number of the "mistress"-characters from the earlier DeMille films, and her form of employment as well as her sexual transgressions are the result of her life circumstances, rather than of any conscious choice. Much like Molly, her modern mobility does not extend toward any social mobility through employment, which remains, even in this film, the prerogative of men; women can only seek social (and financial) mobility through marriage or extramarital sexuality. Nonetheless, the film goes beyond the DeMille films in that here, it is the mistress who is the central character and who in the most literal sense gets her day in court; in this film, she is acquitted of murder, and it is ascertained that it is instead the good, middle-class woman who is a criminal.

However, even more remarkably, she is not just acquitted of murder, but also of disreputability. Whereas Molly in *Lady of the Night* was allowed to be sexually knowledgeable yet a sympathetic character, Mary is allowed to be sexually knowledgeable and active, outside the boundaries of marriage, and remain sympathetic; the film's ending casts her neither as a criminal nor as a victim, instead remaining very neutral and not depicting Mary as ashamed, chastised, or intending to behave "better" in the future. We are left with no hint as to whether Mary bettered her life after the film's ending, nor are we left with any particular feeling that she should; she is straightforward, frank, and unashamed of her life choices, and these qualities serve to render her as a sympathetic character and, at least in this sense, as a modern.

My final transitional example, then, is *Their Own Desire*, released a mere five months after *The Trial of Mary Dugan* and as Shearer's third film of that year. This film is interesting because while *The Trial of Mary Dugan* reflected a development of *Lady of the Night's* Molly, its main character, Lally, is from a background very similar to that of Florence in the 1925 film. Her father is a successful novelist, and both the family and their relatives live in large, luxurious homes; they are able to take vacations both within the US and to Europe and partake in expensive, luxury hobbies such as polo. Additionally, the family is shown to be loving and essentially stable; both parents care deeply for Lally's wellbeing, and it is clear that she has experienced few hardships. She also has a supportive extended family, such as her aunt, uncle and cousins.

However, in every other way, she is very different from the pre-modern, naïve Florence. Her modernity and mobility is once again apparent firstly on a superficial level: Lally has a short haircut, which Shearer-as-star had also acquired at this time, and wears fashionable, modern clothes, including a bathing suit and, in one scene, slacks. In terms of her pastimes, she is seen playing polo, diving and swimming, she smokes, and she is allowed to go out by herself at night and to interact freely with young men. When she returns home at three in the morning, her mother expresses some worry, but no judgment, and it is clear that this has happened before and will most likely happen again.

Lally's mother is in fact used at numerous points throughout the film as a counterpoint to her modern behaviour; she cringes when Lally lights a cigarette, complains when Lally "hangs" rather than sits in a chair, and describes Lally's slacks as "not nice". Additionally, she finds polo terrifying and complains she does not understand Lally's way of speaking, saying that "half the time she doesn't understand her own child". No-one else within the film's

diegesis expresses a similar judgment, however, and Lally is not seen adjusting her behaviour in any way. This is different from Florence's relationship with her aunt: while Florence did gradually "push back" a little against her aunt's restrictive and pre-modern ideas (for example in terms of cosmetics), it is clear that Lally has gone far beyond this point and sees her mother as a relic from the past. She has achieved a physical mobility and freedom from parental authority approaching that of her male peers.

The most interesting aspect of this pre-modern mother figure is the contrast the film draws between her and Mrs Cheever, Lally's father's mistress for whom he eventually leaves her mother. Mrs Cheever does embrace modern life; she wears fashionable clothing, enjoys travelling and plays polo. Additionally, she understands that Lally is trying to insult her and, when Lally's mother complains that she does not understand her own child, she tells her that maybe it is best that she does not understand her daughter's rudeness. Therefore, whereas Lally's sympathy is with her mother, at the same time the film shows its audience quite clearly that Lally's actual behaviour and mentality are much closer to that displayed by her father's mistress and, later, second wife - a comparison directly made by Jack, Mrs Cheever's son.

The parents' divorce is a relatively peripheral but nonetheless interesting part of the film, particularly since it is reminiscent of DeMille's *Old Wives for New*; like the older film, this plotline focuses on a middle-aged couple who divorce not primarily because of infidelity, but because of basic incompatibility. This is stressed when Lally's father attempts to explain his actions to Lally and states that "we're not the same girl and boy that were married twenty-three years ago. We've outgrown each other".

He presents his relationship with Mrs Cheever as the consequence, rather than the reason, of this incompatibility, and the film never seriously questions this. Neither parent is particularly vilified throughout the film, and at the end, all parties, including Lally's mother, appear to have accepted the situation. Just as in *Old Wives for New*, the couple never reunite, and Lally's father's claim that Mrs Cheever is "the one mate in all the world" for him is never disproven; in fact, it is confirmed, as Lally finds herself repeating her father's words later in the film and grows to understand his feelings. This once again ties into the concept of modernity; what Lally's father finds in Mrs Cheever is a certain appreciation for modern life, which he could not find within his union with Lally's old-fashioned and rather dull mother.

Lally is to some extent aware of this and notes early on in the film that Mrs Cheever is trying to "vamp" her father, which ties into her general approach to gender relations which, despite her class, is closer to Molly's than to Florence's. She has a great deal of knowledge in this regard, more than her own mother, and is in fact the very opposite of gentle and protected Florence; whereas Florence finds it shameful to kiss Dave even after he has declared his love for her, Lally and Jack meet when he kisses her in the swimming pool. Her mother stresses the casual nature of this meeting when she asks Lally questions: were they introduced, does she know his last name? The answer to both questions is, of course, no, yet Lally is allowed to go to parties with him without a chaperone, and when she comes home in the middle of the night, nobody is shocked. Additionally, she is at least reasonably experienced in love, because when Jack asks her whether anyone has ever kissed her, she responds "What do you think?" Later in the film, her friends sing a song to her that contains

the line "She plays the men like toys". The song is not about her, per se, but it is applied to her situation after her breakup with Jack.

At the same time, Lally is also like Molly in that while she is certainly a modern girl with a great deal of freedom, she is never seen to go too far; there is no real hint at extramarital sexuality. Although Lally declares throughout the beginning of the film that she never wants to get married, this does not contain any of the subversive connotations found within Shearer's later films; it is most of all the complaint of a very hurt, very young girl who has not really thought the matter through. Ultimately, as soon as she falls for Jack, she is instantly willing to do the "right" thing and become engaged.

A second interesting element in terms of Lally's modernity is her straightforwardness and honesty, which connects her with Mary Dugan rather than, perhaps, with either Molly and Florence. *Their Own Desire*, however, adds a new angle to the unashamed honesty demonstrated by Mary Dugan, in that it is clearly defined here as a particularly "boyish" characteristic of the modern girl, who no longer lives in the atmosphere of protection of her mother or grandmother but moves around on her own terms. This boyishness is not, however, condemned; it is either praised, such as when Lally's father states he can "talk straight" to her as he would to a son, or treated neutrally, when he exclaims later, in anger, "If only you were a boy!" and she faces him squarely and replies "If only I were". The clear implication in this last case is that while her father cannot strike her as he would a boy, her reactions here are still more masculine than feminine.

This sense of "boyishness" in terms of the behaviour of young, modern women is also covered to some extent by Emily Post, who noted in response to a reader's letter about her sixteen-year old daughter "running wild" that one of the key aspects of a modern girl is the

fact that she requires “straight reasons for your opinion” and that, if provided with these, she will “take it exactly as a boy will take a blow that is deserved” (Post, 1937: 690). Post thus also addresses the importance of honesty and straightforwardness in terms of modern women and underlines the importance of a single standard; girls and boys are, in this sense at least, now more alike than different.

As such, Lally is another step in the evolution of Shearer’s characters toward the fully-developed, pre-Code women she would play from 1930 onward. Like Florence in *Lady of the Night*, she is a respectable, middle-class young woman, but contrary to Florence, she embraces modernity, and this not simply in terms of her sartorial choices or leisure activities, but also in terms of her sexual knowledge and her straightforward, honest approach toward the world and her own choices within that world, uniting qualities demonstrated by Molly and by Mary Dugan. Broadly, she unites Florence’s class identity with a more fully developed version of Molly’s modernity; nonetheless, like Molly, her approach to transgressive sexuality remains largely theoretical. Shearer’s pre-Code characters would push this agenda further.

2.4 - Magazines

Lady of the Night

The most remarkable element of *Lady of the Night*, within fan magazine rhetoric, was clearly the dual role played by Shearer. While the film was generally favourably received, views on the decision to have Shearer play both characters varied greatly. Both *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture* were reasonably positive; *Photoplay* noted Shearer played both “a daughter of the underworld” (dressed in “exaggerated” “extreme underworld fashion”) and the daughter of

a judge, and that this duality revealed her “ability as an actress” (May 1925: 44). A short feature a month before the official review of the film noted that while “everyone on the lot declared her miscast for the part” of the “tough little dance-hall girl”, it was particularly in this unexpected role that she was “superb” (April 1925: 47). *Motion Picture*, then,



Figure 12: Shearer’s transformation.

called Shearer’s performance in the dual role “exceptionally clever” (June 1925: 7) and “marked by real understanding and authority” (June 1925: 65). It also published a brief item entitled “What Next, Norma?”, noting it was a “wonderful and courageous thing” for Shearer to transform herself into Molly for *Lady of the Night* and emphasizing the point through a visual comparison with a much more demure-looking image of the “real” Shearer (July 1925: 86, Fig. 12). The magazine therefore clearly believed Shearer was more reminiscent of Florence than of Molly, but nonetheless praised her performance of the latter role.

The negative comments provided by *Picture Play*, however, are the most enlightening in this regard. Soon after the film’s release, the magazine published a short feature entitled “Another Bad Girl”, in which it explained that Shearer has apparently grown tired of playing “nice straight heroines” and is now playing “a very naughty little reform-school girl. She has her hair done up in spit curls and chews gum and may even be seen smoking a cigarette or two”. Contrary to *Photoplay* or *Motion Picture*, however, *Picture Play* sees this as a negative

and states it had hoped Shearer would “remain natural, as she did in ‘He Who Gets Slapped’ and ‘The Snob’”, two of the star’s most popular films at this point (March 1925: 115)/ A month later, an item entitled “Leave Well Enough Alone” furthered this argument and bemoaned the fact that Shearer played “such a rouged and spit-curved role” as she played in



Figure 13: A caricature of Shearer as Molly.

Lady of the Night. Calling the star “poor Norma Shearer” and implying she was made to play this part purely through the studio’s machinations, the writer suggests that she “is the type of sensitive beauty that should be utilized to its full appeal, as in ‘He Who Gets Slapped’ and ‘The Snob’” (April 1925: 73). These same sentiments then surfaced, finally, in the magazine’s review of the film, which included a caricature of Shearer as Molly

(Fig. 13) and claims the star was “guilty of bad acting” (June 1925: 61-2).

As such, *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture* focused their rhetoric on the film particularly on Shearer’s role as Molly and expressed surprise about this; nonetheless, they believed it made her a better actress. *Picture Play* essentially did the same thing, but saw it firmly as a negative. All three magazines thus focused on the fact that Molly was a jarring role for Shearer to play; this gives a hint both at the nature of her roles up to this point and at her star persona at this time.

A *Photoplay* reader’s letter from January 1925 – two months before *Lady of the Night* would be released – summarises this neatly. In this letter entitled “Girls That Boys Are Proud To Escort”, Shearer is named alongside Bebe Daniels as a “normal, wholesome girl” – “the sweet, well-bred, conservative type of girl that boys are proud to take to their fraternity

dances”. Both Shearer and Daniels are described as “natural and unaffected, the way real girls of good families are in real life” (January 1925: 12). This is an image that matched Shearer’s performance in *He Who Gets Slapped* (Sjöström, 1924), her previously most well-known film, in which she plays a young aristocrat called Consuelo who joins a circus as a horseback-rider. The part is that of an ingénue whose virtue is threatened, then saved, and who ultimately heads toward a happy ending by the side of romantic hero Bezano (John Gilbert). This description also, of course, matches the role of the innocent, well-bred Florence in *Lady of the Night*, but not that of “tough little dance-hall girl” Molly.

The letter likens Shearer to Florence – but not to Molly – firstly in terms of class; she is “well-bred” and like “real girls of good families”, indicating a middle-to-upper class persona. Magazine rhetoric rooted this class element in the reality of Shearer’s life through regular features covering her pre-Hollywood life: these emphasized that, contrary to many other starlets, Shearer hailed from a solidly middle class family and had started working primarily due to her father’s financial problems after the Great War. This was often illustrated through visual means, such as an image published in *Picture Play* in October 1926; here,



Figure 14: Shearer and her mother at tea together.

Shearer and her elegantly-clad mother are amicably seated at a beautifully decorated dinner table (October 1926: 73, Fig. 14). Images such as this implied that though the Shearers were not always wealthy, they were still a mutually supportive and effortlessly middle-class unit.

The letter also, however, links her class identity to ideas of morality, in which the “well-bred” Shearer is also “sweet”, “natural” and “unaffected”; this same connection was also made by *Motion Picture* in June 1925, when Shearer was called “a wholesome, charming, well-bred little thing” (June 1925: 112). The morality here outlined is thus a traditional and hyperfeminine one, in which young women are supposed to be “wholesome” (and thus sexually innocent), “charming”, “sweet” – and “unaffected” by modern ideals of sexual knowledge or personal assertiveness. This distancing of Shearer from modernity at this time was also highlighted within treatment of her looks; an item on Shearer’s hair from April 1926 demonstrated how Shearer pinned back her hair to play “an earful flapper” (a phrase underlining the exposure of the star’s ears), but “lets the locks come softly forth to portray the sweet kid she really is” (April 1926: 86). As such, Shearer-as-modern is seen as a false Shearer; she is no Molly, but a Florence, both in terms of class and in terms of her approach to modernity. As in the film itself, class and modernity are firmly linked at this point.

Nonetheless, this moment of Shearer’s career was a significant one; in August 1929, *Picture Play* would state that *Lady of the Night* “paved the way for [Shearer’s] subsequent proofs of versatility” (August 1929: 86). The magazine treatment of the next two films, and of Shearer as a star over the course of the next four years, demonstrates this.

The Trial of Mary Dugan

The Trial of Mary Dugan was Shearer's talkie debut, and as such a key film within her career; because of this, the film received extensive (and unanimously positive) coverage within the fan magazines. One particularly interesting article was published by *Motion Picture* in May of 1929 and was entitled "The Trial of Norma Shearer"; as opposed to more "regular" reviews of the film, this article essentially presented an interview with Shearer about the film in a courtroom format. It thus really sketches an image of Shearer's own feelings about the film, which was completely absent within the either surprised or negative reactions to her performance as Molly in *Lady of the Night*; this indicates, perhaps, the fact that Shearer was perceived as both a more firmly established and a more mature star by 1929.

The article establishes, first of all, just like the magazine rhetoric on *Lady of the Night*, that the role of "bad girl" Mary Dugan was an unusual one for Shearer to play. One particular exchange is interesting in this regard:

Q: If my memory serves me correctly, you have always portrayed a good girl in your previous pictures? Is that right?

A: Yes, Sir. Always a very good girl.

Q: But in playing *Mary Dugan* you have completely changed your characterization – to that of a bad girl. Isn't this a fact?

A: I believe so, Sir. I hope so, Sir! (May 1929: 33)

The original question is of course incorrect, and Shearer had played "bad girls" before, both in *Lady of the Night* in 1925 and in *A Lady of Chance* (Leonard, 1928) in 1928, but it does highlight once more the discrepancy between the role of Mary Dugan and Shearer's star persona, just like the magazines had done in 1925 in terms of Molly. However, the above

lines also indicate a key difference between this earlier coverage and the treatment of Shearer in terms of *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, in that whereas Molly was criticised as a role Shearer was essentially made to play by the (misguided) studio, *The Trial of Mary Dugan* is seen here as Shearer's own choice. She is a free and mobile modern girl who makes her own decisions.

The article delves further into this by quoting Shearer as stating that she "wanted to do something different. Besides, I really wanted to play a bad girl. I begged and begged for two months for a chance to be déclassée" (May 1929: 100). This statement once more underlines Shearer's responsibility in the choice of the role, but the article does not see this as a negative thing: it has a playful tone throughout and clearly completely supports the idea that this is an excellent film and an excellent choice for Shearer. At the same time, however, the statement also underlines a similarity between *Lady of the Night* and *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, in the use of the word "déclassée", which once more shows a collation of concepts of class and of non-traditional morality. In order to be "bad", or at least non-traditional, on screen, the obviously upper middle class Shearer must still become lower class and be "de-classed".

Nonetheless, the emphasis on Shearer's agency and the general positivity about her playing a "bad girl" role indicate that her star persona had in some sense evolved over the course of the past four years. Shearer's marriage, which is also referred to in the article – as Shearer states that "Norma Shearer is my professional name. I am known as Edith Norma Shearer Thalberg in private life" – is a key element in this development, as it happened in 1927, right in the middle between the release of *Lady of the Night* and the release of *The Trial of Mary Dugan*. I will now evaluate the fan magazine coverage on Shearer in between these two

dates in order to trace the evolution her star persona had undergone over the course of these four years, in part because of this highly publicised marriage.

Treatment of Shearer before *Lady of the Night* had been relatively scarce, but after the release of this film, she became increasingly acknowledged as a star who has “made remarkable strides forward during the last year or two” and who “may yet become an idol of the screen” (*Motion Picture*, February 1926: 25). Full magazine articles on Shearer began to be published in mid-1925, after the release of *Lady of the Night*, and magazine coverage of the star remained frequent from this point onward to the end of her career. Whereas Shearer’s full name had only been mentioned 34 times across the four magazines dealt with here in 1924, this was 124 by 1925 and 117 in 1926 (See Appendix C). By March 1927, *Motion Picture* (which had Shearer on the cover for that issue) declared Shearer the leading female star in the magazine’s monthly “Watch Them Rise!” barometer, beating such stars as Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson and Clara Bow (March 1927: 78).

Throughout these few years, a focus on Shearer’s aristocratic nature continued and was sometimes directly seen as the reason behind her rising popularity. In October 1926, a reader’s letter (the writer of which, Gates Hebbard of New York City, can be identified as genuine using the 1930 census records) in *Motion Picture* described her as “Your childhood sweetheart grown up, and just the way you wanted her to be. She looks best in flimsy white dresses and big picture hats. A girl you could be proud of”, thus emphasising Shearer’s aura of middle-class respectability and the way it had been successfully conveyed to audiences at this time. An item in the same magazine in June 1927 went even further; this was entitled “The Ladies Who Will Be First” and included Shearer in a list of four stars who will be “the next popular idols of the screen” because “fundamentally, they are ladies”. The item adds a

quote on Shearer which claims that “she is a young lady who would be gracious about someone using the wrong fork, but make a mental note of it just the same” (June 1927: 82). As such, not only is she respectable, she is also an aristocrat with a firm grasp on the rules of etiquette – echoing etiquette guides, such as Emily Post’s famous *Blue Book*.

During these years, however, the magazines also started performing a measure of damage control against the potential repercussions of Shearer’s upper class image within an American society founded upon the popular belief in a lack of class system. In June 1926, *Motion Picture* published an article entitled “No Casting Today” for this purpose; this article highlighted the extent to which Shearer had to struggle to achieve her (well-deserved, it is implied) fame. It quotes Shearer as referring to the ‘social butterfly myth’ in which she is universally seen as privileged and wealthy (June 1926: 29); whether or not Shearer actually ever said this is irrelevant, but the article clearly shows an awareness of the potential downsides of Shearer’s aristocratic image and tries to counter these. It still recognises her background, but tries to soften this by fitting the suitably middle-class Shearer nonetheless into a more democratic narrative based on hard work, describing her even as a “warrior maid”. A number of articles defending Shearer against accusations of snobbishness followed throughout this and the next few years, with mentions such as an item from December 1927:

Sometimes reserve is mistaken for snobbery, as in the cases of Norma Shearer and Betty Bronson. [...] They choose their friends carefully and are not tricked by flattery and fawning. Some people think they are ritzy – others think they are very wise. (*Picture Play*, December 1927: 98)

Other re-emphasised the aspect of hard work, such as an article in *Photoplay* in August 1927, in which Shearer claims she achieved her current position because she “hung on and

worked as an extra, and played bits and small parts” and never lost her “humor at herself, at the world in general, at the motion-picture business in particular” (*Photoplay*, August 1927, n. p.).

The developing focus on ambition and hard work also tied, as above, into a wider narrative of Shearer as a particularly intelligent and “sane” young woman; as early as May 1926, *Picture Play* chose the word “intelligence” to summarise Shearer in one word, whereas other stars were given epithets such as “kindliness” or “a strong sense of humor” (May 1926: 100). In August 1926, *Picture Play* described her as “as poised as a princess”, highlighting her aristocratic reputation but simultaneously tying this to her poise and noting that in spite of this “classed” star persona, Shearer was simply too “sane” to become conceited (*Picture Play*, August 1926: 57). In this sense, this rhetoric of sanity and ambition was used in order to undercut any potential accusations that Shearer was an overly aristocratic and thus unrelatable star.

This focus on sanity and intelligence echoed ideas about the “knowledgeable” modern in a way that previous descriptions of Shearer, including words such as “sweet” and “wholesome”, had not, and in May 1927, *Photoplay* referred to her, for the first time, as a “typical modern”, “so slim, so clean-cut, so coolly self-contained”. As such, the article was in a sense an outgrowth of previous, more cautious commentary on Shearer’s pluck and ambition, but simultaneously also provided an entirely new take on these attributes of the usually conservatively described Shearer. The title of the article – “‘I’m Not Going to Marry,’ Says Norma Shearer” – stresses this further. Although the article echoed previous characterisations which focused on Shearer’s wealthy background – comparing her to girls “just graduated from finishing school” – it was also the first to identify Shearer firmly as a

“modern” and to focus on conveying the star’s (supposedly) own and potentially controversial viewpoints on a topic as serious as marriage.

Its most interesting aspect is an outlining of the sacrifices Shearer has willingly made for stardom, including a decision not to marry. The star states that she believes ‘an entirely new marriage relation, in which the husband and wife and are equals’ will eventually evolve, “but that hasn’t come yet”. Thus, she will not yet marry, since she wishes to focus primarily on her career and believes she could not muster the energy or will to care for a husband as wives are still expected to do. Shearer claims here that she does not want to enter the institution of marriage because she believes that a true companionate union has not yet involved, and because she does not want her career to fall victim to the unfair demands on married women (*Photoplay*, May 1927: 32-3, 121).

As I noted earlier, this debate about the career-family balance for working women was particularly relevant to the social climate of the time; while female employment was on the rise, “public sentiment in the 1920s was hostile to wives working out of a sense of personal fulfillment, rather than dire need” (Dumenil, 1995: 124) and film stars were certainly a part of that group. The phenomenon of working wives had, in fact, been commented on in fan magazines a number of times before³; and Gloria Swanson, star of two of the three DeMille films mentioned earlier, is a good example to demonstrate the type of rhetoric usually associated with such articles. In a 1922 article entitled “Confessions of a Modern Woman”, Swanson, in spite of her own position as a married career woman, stated that “marriage –

³ One example is “Marguerite Clark – Today”, published in *Photoplay* in April 1925; this article reflected upon former star Marguerite Clark and her decision to give up her career for marriage, because a happy marriage “repays you more than [a] career can ever do” (133). Another example was published in *Picture Play* in 1922 and was entitled “Romances of Famous Film Folk”; here, former film starlet Vicky Forde, now Mrs Tom Mix, reflects “wistfully” on the fact that her husband would not let her keep working after marriage, since he “says that when he comes home he likes to find me here” (31).

happy, successful marriage [...] – is not possible if a woman insists on following a career”, and if a woman wants a career, she “must leave marriage alone” (*Photoplay*, February 1922: 21-2). This sentiment is not, in a sense, so different from the one expressed in the Shearer article five years later.

The crucial difference between both articles, however, is the fact that the earlier item cited the modern woman’s focus on work, rather than marriage, as her main cause of unhappiness, representing such a state as essentially unnatural. The Shearer article, on the other hand, quotes the star as repeatedly saying that the sacrifice is entirely worth it for a career; there is no sadness, and a focus on career rather than marriage is seen as a reasonable and even positive one. Additionally, the Shearer article is the more personal one, since the question of marriage versus work is applied to Shearer’s own life as a (happy) working woman; Swanson, on the other hand, had been married and divorced at the time and was a working woman, but none of these biographical factors were ever commented upon.

When Shearer did get married four months after the publication of this article, this did not simply lead to a complete reversal or denial of the positions expressed within its text; instead, just like Shearer’s single status had been, the marriage became a vehicle for Shearer’s views on modern womanhood. I will demonstrate this in the next section, which will deal with the remainder of Shearer’s magazine coverage throughout 1929, as well as in my next chapter on Shearer’s roles and magazine coverage between 1930 and 1934.

Their Own Desire

While Shearer herself had thus become characterised as a young “modern” by 1927, her part in *Their Own Desire*, her third film of 1929, was the first characterised by magazines as such; *Picture Play*, in May 1930, noted that in this film, Shearer captured “the mood of a young modern” (May 1930: 96, 100). As opposed to the roles of Mary in *The Trial of Mary Dugan* and, earlier, of Molly in *Lady of the Night*, Shearer’s role as Lally was thus seen as one close to her actual, off-screen personality.

Of course, a part of this easy identification of Shearer-the-star with Lally was connected to her upper middle-class identity, which remained a key element of her star persona throughout 1929, and which – during that year – often took the form of a connection drawn between Shearer and high-brow culture. In February 1929, *Motion Picture* published a photo spread featuring Shearer in the role of Marguerite in *Faust* (February 1929: 46-7), and seven months later, in September of that year, *Photoplay* remarked upon Shearer’s role in *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* (Reisner, 1929) – she played Juliet in the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, opposite John Gilbert – and noted that “Miss Shearer has the distinction of being the first woman to play a Shakespearean role in the talkies” (September 1929: 20).

In December 1929, then, *Photoplay* described Shearer as “the patrician of the screen”, “a perfect lady [who] may be held up as an example to young girls”, and linked this identity to her marriage, also describing Shearer’s husband, Irving Thalberg, as “pleasing and courteous in a drawing room. You can rest assured he won’t eat with his knife” (December 1929: 33). This singles Shearer and Thalberg out as a couple well-versed in etiquette, which is further underlined in the article’s subtitle, which directly references Emily Post herself (December 1929: 33). As such, Shearer and Thalberg are described as an upper-class, well-mannered

young couple – in contrast, perhaps, to many of their fellow Hollywoodians. The marriage is in fact at the heart of much of the rhetoric on Shearer, and references to and pictures of the happy pair are frequent. One article entitled “It Pays To Be Dignified” directly connects Shearer’s upper-class identity with her happy marriage, as it states:

It wasn’t one of the peppy gals, always rearing [sic] to go someplace, and distributing light favors indiscriminately, that Irving Thalberg, the prodigy producer, found occupying his thoughts when he should have been concentrating on the new skumpty-umpty-thousand-dollar production. Not at all. It was Norma Shearer. (*Picture Play*, April 1929: 114)

Shearer is simply used as an example, and is not the main topic of the article, but this still illustrates that Shearer’s dignified, classy identity was such an established fact that it could be used in this anecdotal, brief way to get a point across. Interesting is also the emphasis on the fact that Shearer did not distribute “light favors indiscriminately”, which connects once more her star persona to the sexually knowledgeable yet pointedly non-promiscuous character of the patrician Lally.

Nonetheless, just like the character of Lally, Shearer’s star persona at this time was strongly classed but not overly conservative, and the marriage was a part of this. One article entitled “Should Wives Pay?”, published in *Photoplay* in September 1929 included the Shearer-Thalberg marriage in a list of Hollywood homes operated “on a split-the-cost-even basis”, indicating a rather progressive sense of financial independence even within the marriage, and other articles also emphasised the non-traditional domestic life of Shearer and Thalberg at this time. An item entitled “Progressive Home-Making” discussed the way the Thalbergs “had continually kept moving from place to place since their marriage”. Shearer blamed this on their shared inhibitions about spending money and ends by saying that “We have a lot at the beach and maybe we’ll build there soon” but amends this by adding “provided we’re not

tempted to sell at a profit" (*Picture Play*, November 1929: 56). Once again, Shearer and Thalberg are depicted as financially independent and savvy people, with Shearer particularly characterised as having a head for business – and no real interest in settling down and being a homemaker. She is financially independent and physically mobile, even within marriage. This practical intelligence, related to the "sanity" she had been praised for in earlier years, continued as a key trope within Shearer's fan magazine coverage, both connected to and separate from her marriage. In April 1929, *Photoplay* published a short item which explained that:

She has organized her life and career with precision and perfection.

It is all according to plan, and her rise to fame and fortune is proof that never once did she allow herself to be flagged off the main line.

She refused marriage till she was certain she was firmly founded as a star. (April 1929: 49)

As such, Shearer is characterised as an intelligent professional who deliberately paused her private life in order to focus on her career. This is further stressed in *Picture Play*, in August 1929, when Shearer discusses the importance of diplomacy in "dealing with all people in the picture business". The item notes that "Miss Shearer's intelligent management of her career is proof of the benefits of the system" (August 1929: 96). Two months later, the same magazine described Shearer as

Less variable or susceptible to influences than the majority, she reduced the vagaries of acting to the rules of a business woman's job, and shaped her success methodically. (October 1929: 19)

In this way, it showed her again as a stable, rational and undeniably modern businesswoman.

Even the association of Shearer with high culture, while affirming her middle-class star persona, simultaneously served to distance her from the domesticated, conservative image she might easily and unproblematically have adopted as Mrs Thalberg. Her much-publicised performance in *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* did indeed make her the first Shakespearian actress of the talkies, in the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, and also contained a reference to her marriage; at one point, costar John Gilbert tells her he calls her “Auntie” because “I call Irving ‘Uncle’”. At the same time, however, it also featured a second take of the *Romeo and Juliet* balcony scene, in which Shearer and Gilbert reinvent the scene in twenties slang. Thus, Shearer was firmly defined as a middle-class star, and as Mrs Thalberg, but also as a modern girl with a sense of humour.

2.5 - Conclusion

The three films discussed in this chapter, then, show a clear evolution among the types of roles played by Norma Shearer throughout the 1920s. *Lady of the Night* separated modern and middle-class elements into two separate characters, with neither character pushing sexual boundaries; *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, then, allowed its character to commit sexual transgressions and remain sympathetic, but also condemned her to the lower class. *Their Own Desire*, finally, was Shearer’s first real role as a “modern” and allowed the star to embrace modern clothes and attitudes, modern sexual knowledge, and a respectable, middle-class background.

Shearer’s star persona, as defined by fan magazines throughout this period, underlined this evolution, as upper middle-class traces remained important, but Shearer’s personal ambition, intelligence and agency also came increasingly to the forefront. Her attitude toward, firstly, marriage as an institution and then, later, her own marriage in particular was

used to support rather than contradict these modern influences; Shearer did not allow her very public marriage to confine her to a conservative and domestic star persona.

Nonetheless, some limitations still existed at this time, most specifically connected to the modern nature of Shearer's characters; while Mary Dugan, as a lower class woman, could be openly sexually active and remain sympathetic, this was not so in the case of Lally, who for all her freedoms remains a sexually well-behaved figure and ends the film safely engaged to be married. As Shearer moved further into the pre-Code era, however, her characters would flaunt traditional sexual norms more openly and even question the very institution of marriage itself, thus completely contradicting the prevailing narrative on Shearer as a "safe" and conservative star, which this thesis aims to correct. Simultaneously, as well, her own very public marriage would no longer simply provide a backdrop for the characterisation of Shearer as an intelligent and ambitious modern woman, but would be actively used within fan magazine rhetoric in order to promote notions of both the sexual single standard and of female employment. This will be explored in the next chapter.

SECTION II: PRE-CODE SHEARER

Chapter 3 - "Where the Primroses Grow": Shearer's pre-Code films

3.1 - Introduction

This chapter, then, comes to the central topic of this thesis: Norma Shearer's career between 1930 and mid-1934. The earlier demarcation, while not strictly the beginning of the pre-Code era, indicates the release of *The Divorcee* (Leonard, 1930), which I argue indicates a new and important development within Shearer's career, essentially inspiring the other four films I cover in this chapter. The later one indicates the enforcement of the Production Code in July 1934. This chapter focuses on five films made in between these two points, and will examine the ways in which these films pushed the hesitant modernity of Shearer's earlier films even further, especially in terms of their approach to the sexual morality of the central characters. In this regard, I have identified two different narrative strands among the five films focused on here.

The first strand is connected to divorce; *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay* (both 1930) broadly follow a similar narrative, in which Shearer is or becomes a happily married woman, goes through a divorce, lives for a while as a divorcée, and eventually reunites with her original husband. The second strand is less well-defined (although nonetheless significant) and is apparent in *A Free Soul* and *Strangers May Kiss* (both 1931); here, Shearer is an unmarried, but sexually experienced, young woman who objects in some sense to the institution of marriage. I argue that *Riptide* (1934), then, brings both of these strands together in a single film.

This is thus the central chapter of my thesis, in that it demonstrates the ways in which Shearer was not, at the height of her career, a paragon of safe and traditional respectability,

as she is often remembered, but instead a sexually transgressive and ultra-modern figure. I will focus on the ways in which the characterisations and narratives within each film built upon Shearer's earlier career, but expanded the modern connotations already present in a nascent form in these earlier roles and embraced the sexual single standard to a degree previously unheard of within Shearer's career, but also largely unheard of more broadly, within Hollywood at this time.

This chapter will focus on the films themselves; here, I will attempt to identify particular elements connected to modern femininity and to trace the evolution of these elements from film to film. The next chapter, then, will examine the coverage of Shearer and of these five films in fan magazines at this time.

3.2 - Synopses

***The Divorcee* (Leonard, 1930)**

Based on Ursula Parrott's novel *Ex-Wife*, *The Divorcee* explores the boundaries of a modern marriage. When Jerry Barnard (Shearer) and Ted Martin decide to marry, they agree all things will be equal between them; after all, Jerry points out, Ted is just human, and so is she. Two years later, they are living in a happy, two-income household in New York City when Jerry finds out Ted has been having an affair, which he tells her should not upset her, since they are a modern couple. Distraught and appalled, she goes out with his best friend Don to drown her sorrows; upon her return home, she sleeps with him. When her husband finally returns home, in the interest of equality and honesty, Jerry tells him she has "balanced their accounts", only to find out that adultery is significantly more of a crime when she commits it than when he does. When she realizes his anger stems from hurt pride

rather than heartbreak, Jerry, furiously, leaves her husband, telling him to “look for her where the primroses grow”. The two divorce, and Jerry maintains a successful career while attending parties and dating various men, eventually being proposed to by her old flame Paul, who is still in love with her. Ultimately, however, she tells Paul to return to his wife, and Ted and Jerry reunite in Paris.

***Let Us Be Gay* (Leonard, 1930)**

Let Us Be Gay begins when plain housewife and mother Kitty Brown (Shearer) finds out her husband, Bob, has been cheating on her; although he begs her to take him back, the two divorce soon after. Three years later, Kitty, now a glamorous woman of the world, is a guest at the house of the eccentric Mrs. Bouccicault (“Bouccy”) who is entertaining a group of her friends. She wants Kitty to seduce the divorced man her young and engaged granddaughter Diane is falling in love with, and Kitty appears to regard this “mission” as an amusing challenge until she finds out that the man is her own ex-husband. Ultimately Kitty – who gains a number of admirers along the way – and Bob are reunited with each other and with their two children.

***Strangers May Kiss* (Fitzmaurice, 1931)**

Strangers May Kiss focuses on career woman Lisbeth Corbin (Shearer), who has two suitors: her old flame Steve, who wants to marry her, and her current boyfriend Alan, who wants to travel with her. Professing a disbelief in the institution of marriage – which is only strengthened when her favourite aunt commits suicide after finding out about her husband’s infidelity – and in spite of warnings by friends and family, Lisbeth chooses to travel to Mexico with Alan. The two are happy, until she finds out that the reason he does

not “believe” in marriage is the fact that he already has a wife, in Paris – and that he is planning to leave for his next job without her. Devastated, Lisbeth spends a few years as a party girl in Europe, but ultimately returns to America to reunite with Alan, who in the meantime has acquired a divorce.

A Free Soul (Brown, 1931)

After alcoholic but brilliant defense attorney Stephen Ashe manages to get gangster Ace Wilfong off the hook for murder, Ashe’s rather wild daughter Jan (Shearer), although engaged to be married to respectable, upper class Dwight Winthrop, ends up falling for the mobster. The two embark on a sexual relationship in which Ace becomes increasingly eager to marry Jan, whereas she sees their affair purely as a temporary and physical matter. When she discovers that she cannot break away from Ace so easily and the gangster threatens her with violence, Dwight comes to her rescue and ends up killing Ace. Ultimately, her father has to defend Dwight in court against a charge of murder.

Riptide (Goulding, 1934)

American party girl Mary (Shearer) and English nobleman Lord Philip Rexford meet by accident and are married soon after, then live happily in London. While Philip is on a business trip, however, Lady Mary is invited to a trip to the Riviera, where she meets old flame Tommie. While nothing serious happens, the couple make the headlines and scandal sheets, and Philip cannot be convinced that his wife remained faithful to him. His distrust and cold indifference drive Mary closer once again to Tommie. When Lord Rexford finally finds out from his lawyer that Mary was telling the truth all along, the two eventually reunite.

3.3 - Films

I will divide my discussion of the five films central to this chapter into three large sections. The first and second section will deal with two films each; I argue that *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay* (both made in 1930) and *Strangers May Kiss* and *A Free Soul* (both made in 1931) are examined most usefully in pairs, with the first film of each pair (*The Divorcee* and *Strangers May Kiss*, respectively) articulating a principle, and the second providing a less theoretical variation on the same theme. The third section, then, will provide a coda to this section, using *Riptide*, made in 1934 as Shearer's last pre-Code film, to sum up the key thematic factors that developed within the star's on-screen persona over the course of this five-year period.

3.3.1 - *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay*:

"Look for me in the future where the primroses grow..."

The Divorcee and *Let Us Be Gay* follow a similar pattern, much like that of the DeMille divorce comedies of the late 1910s; they each follow a married couple as they pursue a divorce, live separate lives for a short while, and are then reunited at the film's end.

In *The Divorcee*, central character Jerry is shown to be of a similar, wealthy, upper middle-class background as Florence and Lally; this is obvious from the very first scenes, which are set in a luxurious hunting lodge, where Jerry, her relatives and friends are gathered for a weekend getaway. It soon becomes apparent that her father is a doctor and that Jerry and her crowd are financially more than stable and while, when Ted proposes to her, he implies he would like to save more money first, it is clear that this is not a great impediment. When

Jerry objects, the couple are soon married anyway, and move into a luxurious city apartment, with money issues not dwelt on at all.

At the same time, as opposed to Florence but similar to Lally, Jerry is also instantly earmarked as a modern girl, even prior to marriage. She is modern in terms of her clothes and (short) hairstyle, as well as in terms of her engagement with leisure and consumer culture, but in the film's early scenes, her modernity is marked perhaps most obviously by her approach to parental authority. This presence of parents is in itself a classed concept within Shearer's career, in that her upper middle-class characters, like Florence and Lally, have supportive and involved parents, whereas her working class characters, such as Molly and Mary, are orphans. However, even within this classed group of characters with at least one supportive parent, an obvious contrast is present particularly between Jerry and *Lady of the Night's* Florence. In the earlier film, Florence's father is relatively permissive in terms of her relationship with Dave, believing him to be "a good sort", but nonetheless his approval is clearly crucial for the characters' futures together, and Florence's courtship with Dave and her comings and goings in general are extremely regulated by her father and aunt. This is, as I noted earlier, quite different in *Their Own Desire*, and this difference only becomes more pronounced within the narrative of *The Divorcee*.

This comparative lack of parental authority is a key characteristic of the modern woman, in that it is a clear example in which her greater physical but also metaphorical mobility and autonomy is made apparent: in this regard, Fass quotes a young woman from this era as saying that "revolt left the parent in the center of the stage, now he is not so much as hovering in the wings" (Fass, 1977: 40), and this is essentially the way Jerry deals with her father. There is no real generational conflict present in the film, mainly because he simply

does not have an influence over her life choices, including whom she chooses to marry. It is clear that she is fond of him, but she is her own independent person who makes her own choices without consulting him. Even though he would prefer her to marry Paul, she accepts Ted's proposal of marriage and then returns with him to the house to announce this to their friends – and to her father. Ted, rather than asking her father's permission, says "Hope you don't mind!", and her father responds "Would it make any difference whether I did or not?" To this, Jerry merrily replies "No!" Parental authority is no longer key in the search of modern youth for their mate; they choose their partners themselves and do not ask for permission, not even forgiveness, but simply for understanding. This would have been unthinkable in *Lady of the Night* and to some extent even in *Their Own Desire*, where the relationship between Lally and Doug becomes problematic due to the disapproval of their parents.

Jerry is also, from the film's beginning, privy to the (sexual) knowledge and connected appreciation for truth and honesty so crucial to the identity of the "modern"; in fact, these notions become key cornerstones of Ted and Jerry's marriage from the very beginning. During the first conversation we witness, Jerry mentions that she is unwilling to have a long engagement because she does not want to wait for Ted "to harvest an additional crop of wild oats", since he is "just human, and so am I". When Ted tells her she sure tells it straight, she asks "Isn't that the way we were supposed to be? Straight from the shoulder, open and above board?" As such, Jerry is shown to be aware of Ted's "wild oats", indicating that she has at least an understanding of relations between the sexes in a way that the pre-modern Florence did not, and she also defines their relationship as crucially and fundamentally a mutually honest one, echoing the frankness of characters like Mary Dugan and Lally. Then,

after she has remarked upon their openness as a couple, Ted compliments her by telling her she has “a man’s point of view”, after which Jerry tells him that between them, everything will be “fifty-fifty” – equal. Their marriage is very clearly outlined and planned as one embracing the single standard: a prime example of the companionate marriage.

The companionate nature of their marriage is also reflected within the film’s treatment of Jerry’s professional life, which once more sets her apart from the other characters dealt with so far in this thesis. In *Lady of the Night*, Dave’s workspace was clearly coded male, and Florence asked if she as “a mere woman” might be allowed to see it, and while Molly was not tied to the rules of propriety like Florence, and did not ask Dave’s permission to enter his workspace, the way she had to sneak in by night in order to look around still indicates that in this film, professional success is very much a male prerogative. It is also through this success that Dave, but not Molly, could become socially mobile; it is an avenue of advancement open to men, but not to women. Similarly, Mary Dugan, then, did initially work as a department store clerk – the ultimate modern form of employment for working class women, and one one could also imagine Molly embracing – but is nonetheless unable to aspire to social mobility in this way; when she acquires a wealthy lover, Mary eventually becomes a Broadway showgirl, largely supported by men. Even Lally, arguably the most “modern” of the characters focused on up to this point, was never dealt with in a professional context.

Interestingly, it is Juliet Raeburn in *Old Wives for New*, the first of the three DeMille films I have referred to, who is a different case: she does clearly have a successful career and is the owner and manager of “Dangerfield Inc.,” a famous fashion salon, thus not only enjoying

but also facilitating consumer culture as a working woman with her own business, rather than as a shopgirl working for an employer.

Nonetheless, Juliet is never mannish and, in spite of her modern attributes, displays appropriately and traditionally feminine responses at numerous points throughout the film. She hunts, but is overcome by grief when she actually fires at an animal, and canoes, but has to be saved when she loses her paddle in waist-deep water. She engages in flirtation and romance with central character Charles, but shrinks back and runs away when she finds out he does, in fact, have a wife; similarly, at the end of the film, she does not defend herself against accusations of promiscuity, but instead presumably abandons her business in fear and shame of the damage to her reputation and runs away to Europe. She is modern, but not threateningly so; ultimately, she understands that as a woman, her career is less important than her reputation and – more crucially – than her position as a wife. At the end of the film, when Charles and Juliet are reunited, her career is no longer mentioned.

This echoes a trend Fass noticed in terms of women's careers in the 1920s; she argues that modern men "seemed to believe in complete equality for women in the home but not outside of it"; despite their willingness to embark on a companionate marriage, most young men still expected their wives to give up their jobs after marriage and become a homemaker, and 94% of women at an Ivy League university in the mid-twenties claimed to be willing to give up their career if it ever interfered with their married lives (Fass, 1977: 81). Lary May suggests this trend was also paralleled by "working girls" in film, with over 95% of them ultimately leaving employment for marriage (May, 1983: 219). This is essentially what Violet is assumed to do in *Old Wives for New*.

The Divorcee shows a completely different representation of a professional woman, however; one in which, from the very beginning, Jerry refuses to be the financially dependent party in her marriage and does not want to wait around until Ted has made enough money to marry her. Three years later, this particular statement has led to its logical conclusion, and Jerry and Ted are living in a two-career household in New York City, both active professionals. At no point does Jerry appear to pursue a career to make a point, nor does her career seem to cause tension in her marriage; Jerry and Ted, in the brief scenes we see of them before his infidelity comes to light, appear to be an extremely happy young couple, both with complete professional independence.

In this context, it is important to note especially that the film does not deal with Jerry's professional ambitions and modern sensibility by making her somehow less feminine. Although her first name's androgyny – particularly in contrast with the rather flowery "Florence" and the traditional "Mary" – underlines the fact that she is a girl of a new era, she nonetheless wears appropriately feminine clothing even in scenes where she expressly articulates her modern ideas. Additionally, she is not shown to be comically incapable of performing domestic tasks – as would be the case in *Woman of the Year* (Stevens, 1942), starring Katharine Hepburn, twelve years later – and even prepares breakfast at one point in the film. Jerry does not have to sacrifice her femininity, or her basic domestic abilities, in order to have a career; she can have both simultaneously.

Nonetheless, the film stresses that both partners within the marriage have essentially chosen not to make domesticity their central priority in life. Potential children, for example, are never mentioned, even after the couple have been married for three years, and when Jerry's maid Hannah tells Jerry that she believes it to be unnatural for Ted to go away on

their third anniversary, Jerry simply explains that he has to go, since it's for business. She does not like it, but she understands its inevitability, since she is working equally hard as her husband to maintain a successful career. Jerry's career remains a constant throughout the film's narrative; importantly, it is not a factor within the couple's eventual divorce.

Nonetheless, the couple's divorce is tied to issues of modernity, in that it ultimately takes place because Ted fails to be an appropriately modern husband for Jerry. This also lies at the base of the divorces featured in both *Why Change Your Wife?* and *Don't Change Your Husband*; in each of these films, the central divorce does not take place because of a real desire of either partner to pursue a relationship with an outsider, but happens because of the basic inability of one partner to embrace modernity – most particularly modern consumer culture. This is especially significant, in the context of *The Divorcee*, in *Don't Change Your Husband*, since here it is husband Jim Porter who lags behind his wife Leila. While she is glamorous, fashionable and vivacious, Jim has lost both “his romance and his waistline”, does not approve of modern music or pastimes, and does not know how to dress himself in a modern and attractive manner – this while, the film reminds us, “the Apparel oft proclaims the Man”.

In *The Divorcee*, however, the difference between Jerry and Ted is also related to modernity, but Ted's lack of modernity is not, here, present on a sartorial level, or more broadly connected to leisure activities or consumer culture; Ted is modern-looking husband with a sense of fun, who does not object to his wife working out of the house. The issue only comes when Ted fails to live up to the ideals of truth and honesty defined so clearly as the very heart of the marriage, and when, furthermore, he shows himself unable to appreciate the single standard as it applies to sexual activity on behalf of his wife.

The truth element comes up firstly when Jerry suspects Ted has been having an affair; because honesty is a key factor within their relationship, she asks him outright about this. He, however, is somewhat more dubious and upon being asked initially ignores her, though when she keeps insisting, he says he wouldn't lie to her and admits he did cheat. When Jerry then commits a similar transgression with Ted's friend Don, however, she needs no such encouragement, or even any kind of questioning at all, and tells him spontaneously that she has "settled their accounts", even if she knows Ted might not readily accept that fact. It is her love of honesty, as well, which makes the fact that Ted believes she hasn't fully told the truth about her lover or lovers – "Someplace among the people we know there's a man. Maybe *men*, I don't know..." – even more painful, and it is this love of truth which in part gives rise to her bitterness post-divorce. Later in the film, she tells her would-be lover Ivan, when he asks her for the truth:

The truth. The last thing any man wants to hear from any woman. That's a lesson I learned from my husband. And what you learn at your husband's knee, you never forget.

This is a complaint also uttered in earlier films, such as *Our Dancing Daughters* (Beaumont, 1928), in which Diana (Joan Crawford), having been left by her boyfriend, exclaims that men don't want to know the truth about a girl – "Men want flattery, trickery, lies!" The difference between her complaint and Jerry's, of course, is that her indignity stems from a truth that is not so very bad at all; like Molly, but also like Jerry at the beginning of this film, she may be wild, she may be modern, but there is no reason to assume she is anything but a virgin. Jerry, on the other hand, told the truth about the fact that she slept with her husband's best friend – and was indignant when Ted did not even want to think of forgiving

her. This is something that would have seemed outrageous to even Diana, the quintessential flapper; Jerry is not a flapper, she is what the flapper may grow up to be – if she's lucky.

As such, truth and honesty are tied to sexuality, which is another aspect of Jerry's modernity, and which is connected to the idea of the equality, particularly the sexual equality, of man and woman. Ted's initial description of Jerry having "a man's point of view" is a key element of this, and echoes Emily Post's description of the modern as a girl who will "take [deserved criticism] exactly as a boy will take a blow that is deserved" (Post, 1937: 690). This quality is attributed, firstly, to Jerry at the film's very beginning, in order to underline her honesty and straightforwardness, but it is mentioned again three years later in a completely different context. When Jerry is visibly upset Ted has cheated on her, he tells her she should not mind because "it doesn't mean a thing" and because she does "a man's work" – didn't she have "a man's point of view"? In this context, therefore, the phrase is used on the one hand to emphasize her professional career, which is more reminiscent of a man's traditional life than of a woman's, whereas on the other hand it implies that a man would not be so shocked to hear this kind of information. This is also what Jerry means in the one scene where she uses the phrase, when she tells Don that while she is appalled by what happened between Ted and Janice, she is trying to "hold onto the marvelous latitude of a man's point of view".

The compatibility of this "man's point of view" with the single standard, however, is soon proven to be doubtful – as this "man's point of view" turns out not to be so very broad at all. It is here that the phrase links to the concept of sexual equality; when Jerry tells Ted of her infidelity, he spontaneously turns from a modern young man into something resembling the indignant paterfamilias from a 19th century melodrama. Although Jerry tells Ted not to

be conventional – surely the very basis of their supposedly unusual marriage – it is soon clear that conventional is exactly what he intends to be. When she dares to say that her crime and Ted’s are exactly the same, he points out that he is not the first man to do such a thing – and it is clear that from this moment onward, their relationship is no longer unique and modern and special, but just another in the long line of marriages governed by a sexual double standard.

Nonetheless, Jerry does make numerous attempts to hark back to the equality and freedom of movement she believed an integral part of their marriage (and to the “man’s point of view”, which was supposed to be so broad-minded). At the very beginning of this conversation, she asks him “Isn’t it a rather good time to remember what you said? That it doesn’t mean a thing?” – even if she is starting to realize that it does very much mean a thing when *she*, rather than *he*, does it. Even in spite of this realization, she still maintains that not she alone, but both of them “made a horrible mistake”, and can they not try again? When she understands, however, that his anger does not stem – as hers did – from sadness at her betrayal but from embarrassment and male vanity (“And I thought your heart was breaking like mine. But instead you tell me your man’s pride can’t stand the gaffe.”), she no longer wants to “try again” but keeps defending her actions and condemning his attitude in the light of the single standard. He cannot stand the thought that some man in their acquaintance might have slept with his wife, but then how should she, who was a virgin at their marriage, feel about the women he has known?

Appalled, then, at his inability to understand in how far he is betraying the principles she thought they stood for and at the true meaning of a “man’s point of view”, she leaves him – telling him:

No, I don't want to listen. I'm glad I discovered there's more than one man in the world while I'm young and they want me. Believe me, I'm not missing anything from now on. [...] Loose women, great, but not in the home, eh, Ted? The looser they are, the more they get. The best in the world, no responsibility! Well, my dear, I'm going to find out how they do it. So look for me in the future where the primroses grow, and pack your man's pride with the rest. And from now on, you're the only man that my door is closed to.

This quote is the clearest statement of Jerry's principles in the film, and emphasizes once more in how far she refuses to bow to the double standard and refuses to accept full and sole responsibility for the crisis in their marriage. Crucially, however, the film does not only condone this viewpoint, but also outright vindicates it as the correct one; in spite of Jerry's sexual transgression, her adherence to the single standard is to be celebrated rather than condemned.

After all, Jerry then goes on to live up to this statement, as she fully embraces the "man's point of view" after the divorce. Stating that "I take my outings on the subway and my exercise in the night club", because "you don't exactly take the veil when your decree is granted, you know", she is shown, or at least implied, to have had a series of lovers – her old flame Paul notes "several were killed in the rush" – and even her appearance has transformed since the beginning of the film, since in these "wild" scenes she wears significantly



Figures 15-6: Jerry's tonsorial and sartorial evolution.

tighter, more revealing and almost gaudy clothes and has a "wilder" and curlier hairdo (Figs. 15-6). Broadly, she behaves just as a bachelor might: in her own words, playing too hard and working too hard, dating whomever she pleases whenever she pleases, while relentlessly

pursuing professional success. This is underlined at the first New Year's party where the ex-spouses' paths cross, and where Ted seems appalled to spot her dancing with a man – while he himself is clearly there with a blonde woman. Jerry does the things a man might do, but because she is a woman, they are new, different, and – to those who choose to interpret them that way – shocking. Even Ivan, who claims to have been wildly in love with her “for a year or so”, tells her would-be lover Paul that she is no better than, it is implied, a whore, but the fact of the matter is that she is behaving a thousand times more like a man than like a prostitute. Jerry is no Mary Dugan, who entered sexual relationships with men to earn her keep; instead, she has sex because she likes it, which is in a sense far more controversial. She is a woman who moves around independently and who acts, in every way, with complete freedom.

Jerry's sexuality also stands in sharp contrast with the other characters dealt with previously; whereas Florence was not sexually knowledgeable at all and both Molly and Lally were sexually knowledgeable but not sexually active, Jerry is both sexually knowledgeable (before marriage) and sexually active (outside of her marriage). As such, when Emily Post wrote about sexual equality that it is not discussable but “perhaps practiced by a certain daring and self-destructive minority” (Post, 1937: 688), Jerry is among those talked about; nonetheless, and interestingly, she is never really shown to be self-destructive at all. As opposed to Leila Porter in *Don't Change Your Husband*, Jerry does not end up in a second, rash marriage to a wastrel of a husband whom she is nonetheless financially dependent on. Instead, she does perfectly fine throughout most of the film, in spite of the crises in her life. Her stability and financial independence are also reflected through the development of her career, which she retains through the entire film and which returns at key points of the plot,

even after the divorce; for example, when she is on the train in the company of a man, she reminds him that she cannot just go anywhere with him, since she is a businesswoman on her way to a convention in Toronto. On the one hand, her ability to travel alone is a testament to her modernity in and of itself, but in the context of her career, this also indicates that is clearly very successful; as such, when she contemplates moving to Japan with Paul near the film's end, her firm immediately makes a counter-offer of \$7500 a year and a position in London. When Jerry and Ted finally meet again and reunite, she tells him she is working in London, where she moved by herself – perhaps the greatest expression of her physical and personal autonomy in this film. Jerry is shown as a modern woman who is confident and successful in her career, and this career is never represented as a particular threat to her marriage; it is a part of the story's background but not a point of crisis or contention.

In fact, the representation of Ted and Jerry's respective careers in a sense shows the film's siding with Jerry, rather than with Ted, and shows how she, despite her post-divorce sexual escapades, is significantly less self-destructive than he is. As they divorce and each go their own ways, it is increasingly clear that while Jerry has kept her career in mind and is thriving, Ted is doing the opposite; when Don meets him again after a long absence, he confesses he is nursing a hangover because he just lost his job. Somewhat later, when Helen tells Jerry about meeting Ted in Paris, she says he is "trying to wreck a fairly good mind and an A1 body" and has been drunk for six weeks straight. She also expresses doubt about his ability to keep his current job. Though Jerry is clearly suffering from the divorce as well, her single life is in much better shape than his, and her free sexuality has in no way sabotaged her success as a human being. She demonstrates that a modern woman is truly able to have it

all; this was an extremely controversial and indeed unique viewpoint within film and within the wider rhetoric on gender relations at this time, and it would return time and time again within Shearer's films and magazine coverage.

Jerry's modern mobility also extends, however, to the wider story arc of the film: over the course of the film, Jerry demonstrates how she is able to move from respectable woman to sexually promiscuous woman and then return to respectability at the end, seemingly unharmed and uncondemned. This shows a flexibility that is lacking in each of the previous films; Florence is respectable because she never does anything wrong, Molly cannot become respectable because of her class and her lack of breeding. Mary Dugan manages to buy respectability for her brother, but never particularly tries to gain it for herself, even if she is depicted sympathetically. Lally, then, for all her modernity, never transgresses sexually and thus needs no redemption. As for the female characters in the DeMille films, they too are fixed in their particular behavioural pattern: Juliet, for all her modern careerism, flees to Europe at the slightest hint of scandal, whereas both Leila Porter and Beth Gordon never truly stray outside of the bounds of middle class respectability, but simply experience disagreements with their respective husbands connected to a modern appearance and attitude or lack thereof.

As Jerry moves to London and spends time in Paris nightclubs with friends, in order to try and find Ted again, she once more looks as she did at the film's beginning, with a more modest – if still chic and modern – hairdo and regular clothing; when she spots him, she asks one of her male friends to walk her over to where Ted is sitting, since she is a respectable woman and should not have to cross this space alone. Nonetheless, in the context of this film, what she does here is less a show of her inability to act as a free and independent

person, unbound by rules, and more a demonstration of the fact that she can lose and regain her respectability without shame or guilt. This is also stressed in the conversation she then has with Ted, in which he assumes full responsibility for what happened between them and essentially, encouraged by her, asks her for a second chance. In both *Why Change Your Wife?* and *Don't Change Your Husband*, wives are admonished at the end of the film to adapt themselves to their husband's wishes – even in *Don't Change Your Husband*, where it is husband Jim who is shown to be insufficiently “modern”, the final intertitle is geared at women, not men, and states that

And now you know what every Woman comes to know - that Husbands, at best, are pesky brutes; and at worst - are unfit for publication!

Thus, the conclusion of this film is still addressed to women; it therefore does endorse the idea that men should look after their appearance and provide romance and companionship to their wives, but ultimately stresses also that wives should not expect too much of their husbands, who are “pesky brutes” anyway. In *The Divorcee*, however, this does not happen; Jerry never has to assume half the blame for his initial transgression in order to be reunited with her ex-husband.

Finally, it is important to note that in spite of the couple's ultimate reunion, the film does provide a nuanced depiction of divorce, the relative availability of which was also a key element of a modern view on marriage. While both *Don't Change Your Husband* and *Why Change Your Wife?* depict the central divorce – and to some extent divorce in general – as a bad mistake, *The Divorcee* is much more neutral. Even though Jerry and Ted's divorce is essentially undone at the film's end, it nonetheless does not provide a condemnation of divorce in general, or even in their case. Firstly, the couple are shown to have grown over the course of their separation, which is particularly illustrated by Ted's apology for never

giving her “the break she deserved”, and secondly, they are not the only divorced people depicted in *The Divorcee*.

One other example is that of Janice, who tries to steal Ted away from Jerry and who is also established to be a divorcee. She represents the “evil temptress” divorced woman, who brought on her divorce through her own philandering (as implied by her statement that if she could think faster, “she might have stayed married”) and who is now out to wreck others’ homes. It is in part because of her example that Jerry ultimately decides to remove herself from Paul’s life and not become the cause of his divorce. Jerry’s friend Helen, however, is a more hopeful example of the definitely and irrevocably divorced woman who is a sympathetic character leading a seemingly successful life. Though she does at one point contemplate the loss of the idealism she felt at her first marriage, her second marriage, to rich Arkansan Bill, seems to be working out rather well, and her ex-husband, too, is now remarried and has a baby. In their case, the film appears to say, divorce was most likely the best option; the film is hardly a staunch advocate for the absolute sanctity of marriage and indicates that if a marriage does not provide fulfilment for both parties, it is the best course of action.

The Divorcee thus unites a number of elements from earlier films, particularly in terms of the character of Jerry, who is both a firmly middle class character and a sexually knowledgeable modern. At the same time, Jerry adds to this an emphasis on unproblematic female employment as well as – more controversially – an ability to question the sexual single standard and be sexually active outside of marriage, yet emerge respectable at the end, with no need for punishment or redemption. This made her a completely new character within Shearer’s career and also within Hollywood film, far transcending the

previous characters, whether pre-modern or modern, the star had played – and also a far cry from the dull, respectable star image Shearer would retain in decades to come.

I will now focus on *Let Us Be Gay*, which was released four months after *The Divorcee* and which follows the same basic pattern; here, Shearer is already married at the film's beginning and becomes divorced early in the narrative, with the rest of the film taking place two years later, as central character Kitty and her now ex-husband meet again, this time as guests at a mutual friend's country house.

Some key differences between the films exist, however. Firstly, the divorce in *Let Us Be Gay* occurs when Kitty catches her husband Bob embracing another woman; she, herself, is not adulterous at any point of this film. The divorce, then, is attributed to this infidelity, and is demanded solely by Kitty, rather than by Bob. Nonetheless, modernity also plays a role here, and in this sense, the film echoes *Why Change Your Wife*; part of the couple's incompatibility is the fact that Shearer's Kitty is clearly marked as a pre-modern wife at this early point in the film, for its first thirteen minutes. She is shown as a plain woman with an old-fashioned hairstyle and a face devoid of make-up, who wears glasses and extremely simple, slightly unflattering clothes, which she makes herself. While she is a good, attentive wife in the traditional sense, she clearly has little interest in consumer or leisure culture.

By the second part of the film, after the divorce, then, she has transformed herself into a more fashionable figure, much like central character Beth in *Why Change Your Wife*; like Beth, she is practically unrecognisable at this point, since her face is made up, her glasses are gone, her hairstyle is stylish and her clothes are well-fitted and modern (Figs. 17-8). Nonetheless, and like Jerry in *The Divorcee*, Kitty goes far beyond Beth in the earlier DeMille film in that her modern transformation goes beyond the sartorial, or the superficial, and affects her attitudes toward the world.



Figures 17-8: Kitty's transformation in *Let Us Be Gay*.

One example is that of sexual knowledge, and a modern outlook on relations between the sexes. Whereas Jerry in *The Divorcee* has her progressive ideas from the film's very start (i.e. from before her marriage to Ted), Kitty has clearly undergone an ideological transformation perhaps symbolized outwardly by her physical transformation. While this line did not make it into the film, in the original play, Kitty voices this sentiment by comparing herself to the (slightly younger) generation of Bouccy's granddaughter as she states "I was made. They just are" (Crothers, 1929: 54). This also illustrates the difference between Jerry and Kitty; Kitty was made, Jerry just is. Kitty acquires modernity over the course of the narrative, but Jerry

is a native modern, and perhaps the fact that Kitty, or Katharine, has a traditionally feminine first name, whereas Jerry's name is gender-neutral, underlines this.

Even the earlier part of the film, in which Kitty's former married life is shown, contains a reference to her fundamental lack of modern knowledge. When she discovers her husband's mistress, the "other woman" immediately, upon looking at Kitty, assumes that "naturally, you don't understand about Bob and me" but Kitty, in an attempt to seem worldly, counters that "why yes, Bob has spoken of you quite often". Later, she smiles and states that "one has to be quite broad-minded these days". It is obvious to viewers and, one assumes, to Bob's mistress, that Kitty did indeed have no idea at all and is defending herself as best she can, but it is significant that she uses pretended knowledge as a way to defend herself and represent herself as a woman of "these days" - a modern. It is equally clear that she is not yet modern at all in this sense at this early point.

However, the ignorance/knowledge trope returns frequently in the latter part of the film, after Kitty has essentially "moderned" herself. Here, Kitty is found reflecting upon the fact that her divorce was three years ago to the day; when Bob attempts to provoke her by asking if something unhappy befell her at that time, she responds that "I thought so then, but I've grown wiser since". Underlining her former naiveté, as well as her increased knowledge about the world, she discusses her wedding day by stating that, at the time, "she believed it all", but that her bridesmaids "all have their divorces now". Because of this, she will not allow her young daughter to make the same mistakes, but will instead guarantee that she will be "much more intelligent, much more prepared", since Kitty now "believes in preparedness". She extends this same tendency to define intelligence as sexual knowledge to Bouccy's granddaughter Diane, whom she claims is "much too intelligent" to believe Bob

wants to marry her. Once more, honesty is a key part of this modern knowledge; when Diane, who is drunk, talks about her feelings for Bob and everyone is appalled, Kitty finds it “delightful”, since “she’s only telling the truth”.

Additionally, like Jerry, Kitty is also sexually active outside of marriage in a way Beth was not even after her modern transformation in *Why Change Your Wife?*, as she travelled with her aunt as a chaperon. In a reversal of the double standard, Kitty too sees men as disposable and claims she’s been enjoying “different men for different months” since she last saw Bouccy. Bouccy then sets her the task to “get” a certain man who has been pursuing her granddaughter, and Kitty shows herself to be entirely willing and able to carry out this particular mission, only objecting once she finds out the man she is supposed to “get” is in fact her own ex-husband.

A final element of Kitty’s modernity also mirrors Jerry’s situation; as Bouccy asks her when she’s going to get married again, and Kitty responds with “Never”, Bouccy asks her what she will do instead. Kitty then states:

Well, my one little talent, clothes, is beginning to make money. When I can pay my own bills, men may come and men may go.

This implies she has become a career woman and, while she is currently supported by a string of lovers, she will soon be able to independently support herself and her children. It also, in the context of the film, shows clear change from the beginning of the film, in which Bob is obviously embarrassed at Kitty’s insistence on making, rather than buying, her own clothes. Now, it is this much-maligned occupation that is likely to provide a profitable career for the post-divorce Kitty, who is obviously thriving. Much like in the case of Jerry, her divorce has aided, rather than hindered, her professional success – but Kitty has gone even

furthered, in that she has essentially engineered her own social mobility by developing a successful career where previously there was none.

One final element separates Jerry and Kitty, however, and adds an additional layer of complexity to the character, which is not really present in any of Shearer's films from this time period, and that is her role as a mother. Although the children do not feature in the post-divorce part of the film until the very end, their presence is not simply forgotten. When Kitty arrives, Boucxy asks her about them, and Kitty explains they are staying with a nanny in the city for the weekend, since she knows "when to display [her] jewels and when not to". Within the narrative of the film, therefore, this motherhood performs an interesting role for the character of Kitty. On the one hand, it softens her "wild" persona somewhat, since it shows very clearly that she is essentially a responsible, adult woman, and not a flighty, unreliable girl. On the other hand, however, it makes her sexually and professionally liberated nature even more revolutionary, in that she does not allow her motherhood to define her or to desexualise her. In spite of this transgressive nature, the film's narrative does not punish her for her actions and beliefs and she is never shown as anything less than a good mother; when the children arrive at the house at the film's end, it is clear that they are extremely attached to her and well-cared for. Like Jerry, Kitty can have it all – sexual liberation, a career, and a respectable life – but in her case, this also includes successful motherhood.

3.3.2 - *Strangers May Kiss* and *A Free Soul*:

“Nowadays a girl may kiss, and ride on...”

Strangers May Kiss and *A Free Soul* (both made in 1931) are different in pattern from the previous two films, in that they do not deal with a marriage, but instead – like the three earlier Shearer films – focus on the lives of two unmarried girls.

In *Strangers May Kiss*, central character Lisbeth Corbin is similar to Jerry in terms of class; she is clearly a character from a wealthy background, with a beautiful apartment and a supportive circle of family and friends. She also mirrors Jerry in terms of her sartorial modernity, and, like Jerry, she expands this superficial modernity in terms of her modern professional life, since she works for a large firm and seems to enjoy her work, which in turn provides her with financial independence. Her job is not just a job, it is a career.

However, like in the case of Jerry, her modernity goes beyond this, and while Kitty in *Let Us Be Gay* claims that before and even during her marriage, she “believed it all”, Lisbeth is never shown to be naïve or gullible about relations between the sexes; like Jerry, she is sexually knowledgeable even at this point. In fact, her sexual knowledge – which led Jerry into an advocacy of the single standard and companionate marriage – leads her beyond Jerry’s stances into an extremely critical attitude toward the institution of marriage as a whole.

The film is often vague about whether Lisbeth’s anti-marriage feelings are in fact hers, or whether they are the result of the similar views of her boyfriend, Alan (who is actually already married, but separated). Most characters seem to refuse that these views could belong to any girl; this is most obviously in the character of Lisbeth’s boss and friend,

Geneva, who, when Lisbeth claims that “we don’t believe in the awful necessity of marriage”, responds “You mean he doesn’t”.

Nonetheless, the film underlines the strength of Lisbeth’s own convictions on numerous occasions, and it is clear that her views on marriage are not simply those belonging to Alan, parroted mindlessly. Even at the beginning of the film, she remarks that “not every girl is born with a marriage license in her hands” and asks, when the question of her possible marriage is a prime topic of conversation, whether there isn’t “anything else in the world to discuss but matrimony?” When her former boyfriend Steve responds that “after all, it’s our first largest industry”, she corrects him: it’s the second largest industry, because the first is divorce. Finally, upon discovering her uncle’s infidelity to her favourite aunt, she tells Steve, who has a habit of proposing to her, that

Old stuff, Steve. They all promise. Little girl, I promise you this and that, by all that’s holy. And [...] she says: yes darling, I believe you, I can see it in your eyes.

Her words and intonation clearly aim to mock romance stories and even romance films, and when her betrayed aunt commits suicide in the next scene, her opinions on marriage grow even more pessimistic. During a lull in her relationship with Alan, Steve proposes to her again over the phone, and this time she compares marriage to a man “packing [her] up in mothballs”. However, it is only when her adulterous uncle has the nerve to lecture her on the necessity of marriage that she voices her longest and most detailed critique of marriage.

You make me sick. You think women should all be shoved into a coop like hens. That is, good women. The only important thing you don’t mention at all. You can’t tell me anything. Women aren’t human things to you. They’re either wives or sweethearts. Get a house. And some furniture. And some rugs. And a wife.

This brief monologue, which takes place about halfway the film, is really its most poignant message, and Lisbeth's central concern: she is not necessarily opposed to a committed relationship, but she wants to be her husband's equal, rather than a home accessory, and she fears that even the good men of her time will not allow her to be just that within the traditional institution that is marriage.

However, this idea does not simply remain a principle in this film, rather, Lisbeth in fact lives it to its logical conclusion, when she decides to travel with her boyfriend Alan and becomes, it is heavily implied, sexually active with him before marriage, and without the promise of marriage. As such, *Strangers May Kiss* is the first film in which Shearer's character is firmly and respectably middle-class, but also remains unmarried throughout the entire film and thus sexually transgresses before she is ever married. Whereas, as I noted earlier, Kitty in *Let Us Be Gay* was not sexually knowledgeable or sexually active before her marriage, and even Jerry in *The Divorcee* claims Ted was her "first love" and she waited for him, sexually knowledgeable but not active, Lisbeth Corbin in *Strangers May Kiss* is the first Shearer character to be both explicitly sexually knowledgeable and sexually active before marriage.

This easy acceptance of sexuality outside of marriage is also illustrated in terms of what finally leads to her breakup with Alan. While they are in Mexico, he confesses to her that he is in fact already married, although he is separated and has not seen his wife in a long time. At this point, Lisbeth could think that his anti-marriage rhetoric has all been false, and she could leave him, but she doesn't; the breakup only occurs when he sends her back to America to move on to another assignment, rather than taking her with him. Lisbeth does not care one way or another about marriage, but she wants stability and consideration, and if she has these two things, a marriage license is not her top priority.

At this point, Lisbeth applies her views on sexual activity outside of marriage more widely and travels to Europe, engaging in relationships with a string of lovers. This is prefigured earlier in the film, when upon her boyfriend's return after a long absence, Lisbeth tells him "Why, haven't you heard? Nowadays a girl may kiss and ride on, just as well as any man ever could!" She is thus both physically mobile in much the way Jerry was, in that she can travel across the US and even to Europe without need for a chaperone, but also sexually entirely free outside of the bonds of marriage.

Once again, Shearer's character embraces the single standard, in which she can behave, sexually, with a "man's point of view", without becoming self-destructive and without having to do penance for her behaviour after the fact. After he breaks up with her, then, she states that she "has tried freedom for two" and may now "try it for one", which heralds a new phase in the film's narrative; this phase is introduced by images of Shearer, in slinky gowns and with increasingly wild hair, dancing with various men (Figs. 19-21).



Figures 19-21: Lisbeth dancing with a series of suitors.

Ultimately, we see Lisbeth at a party at the house of a rich man she has obviously promised sexual favours to; she describes her own situation as "I'm in an orgy, wallowing. And I love it". When she receives a telegram from her former boyfriend saying that he did get his divorce, and wants to reunite with her, however, she wants to leave, but soon realises her prospective lover will not let go so easily. At this point, Lisbeth does not become a victim

heroine of threatened virtue, nor does she engage in self-pity or dramatics; instead, while coolly eating a canapé, she asks Steve where his car is, since “I want to get away and he won’t let me go”. Steve is shocked by this, and seems ready to confront the other man, but Lisbeth simply responds with a knowing look, neither shocked nor inclined to make a scene. Instead, the two escape minutes later, and Lisbeth appears entirely unshaken by her adventure, ready to reunite with Alan.

Alan, however, has heard of her escapades, and in a confrontation in his office, tells her he finds her “cheap, contemptible, promiscuous”. Lisbeth, however, is not ashamed of what she did, and instead points out that he only decided to care about her behaviour once he found out he loved her. She reflects upon their past and his rejection of her as follows:

I once held out my very heart to you. But you liked your freedom best. You wanted it for yourself and so you let me have mine too. And now, because you don’t like what I’ve done with it, you’d kick me right back in the gutter where you think I belong. You’re great, you men – proud, arrogant creatures.

As such, she ties the situation back to his inability to appreciate the single standard, much like in *The Divorcee*: if he wanted his freedom at the time, how could he object to her using hers, as well? Of course, Alan reiterates that for her, as a woman, things are different, since “Men don’t marry the rotten world they know all about. Women like you won’t do”. Even though he is sexually experienced himself, he does not want his future wife to be so, a statement echoed by Steve, who tells Lisbeth that “we mix a lot of things, but we take our women straight”.

Essentially, this is a film about three women, all sympathetic, who represent different phases in female representation. Aunt Celia, while a lovely woman, cannot imagine life after her husband deceives her and throws herself out of the window, as in a 19th century play.

Geneva, Lisbeth's boss, is a rather more modern character; approaching middle age, she runs her own, successful business, while going out with a man she is not sleeping with, but whom she intends to marry. By the end of the film, she has accomplished this and seems very happily married and yet, based on her remark about "us tired businesswomen" retains her career. Lisbeth, then, is a character ahead of her time; she has a job and achieves financial independence, but, rather than marriage, aspires to total sexual freedom to be either with one man (without marriage) or with many men, and yet remain respectable.

The end of the film shows this to be a bridge too far, and Lisbeth is shown very rationally and calmly admitting as much to Alan, but crucially, at the film's end, he still asks her to marry him again and they go off into, presumably, a happily married future together in spite of her many transgressions – so she has at the very least made him breach his own principles. He is indeed going to marry "the rotten world [he knows] all about", and women like her will, ultimately, do quite well as marriage partners. Lisbeth revises her views on marriage, but she does not pay for her sexual transgressions by the end of the film, and is still allowed a happy life with her chosen mate, who at least to some extent has grown to appreciate the single standard.

A Free Soul, then, was released two months after *Strangers May Kiss*, and the two films are connected in a sense like *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay*, in that they deal with similar subject matter, and in that the first film strongly expresses a principle and the second provides a variation of the theme of the first. Thus, in *A Free Soul*, Shearer once more plays a wealthy, sexually liberated, unmarried woman.

An important distinction between this film and *Strangers May Kiss* is the lack of specific ideological justification behind the character's decisions in regard to marriage. While Lisbeth

voices her principles on the futility of marriage on a number of occasions, Jan is actually engaged to be married at the beginning of the film, even if she shows relatively little enthusiasm for the idea. When she breaks off her engagement, she explains this by saying:

I just don't want to get married, Dwight. I don't want life to settle down around me like a pan of salt dough.

Dwight accepts this and praises her honesty, but this view only seems to appear after she has become infatuated with another man, the gangster Ace Wilfong. Instead, her principles appear to align more closely with the broader philosophy taught her by her father, which she also shares with Dwight at the occasion of their breakup:

Don't run away from things, don't hide. Get out in the middle of life, and if the wind blows you over, pick yourself up again. Make your own mistakes and learn by them.

This ideology runs throughout the film, but it has little impact on whether or not Jan wishes to get married or not, and it ties in more closely with a broader sense of freedom, honesty and straightforwardness, also a key characteristic of the modern.

This sense of honesty and straightforwardness particularly finds its expression in the courtroom scenes at the film, which in a sense echo those in *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, a film which would have been well-remembered by filmgoers at the time, even though the situation that brings Shearer to the courtroom is completely different here. Once again, however, Shearer is called upon to testify straightforwardly to her sexually transgressive behaviour, and she does so honestly and – here – in spite of the option to escape this fate by allowing Dwight to insist he killed Ace over a “gambling debt”. Despite the dramatic situation, Jan is honest about her life choices, and remains unashamed of them.

The idea of marriage, however, is crucial here in a different sense, in that the desire or lack of desire of particular characters to enter the married state underlines the complete reversal of gendered roles and demands within Jan's relationships with men. Whereas in *Strangers May Kiss*, both Lisbeth and Alan oppose marriage and identify as modern people, in *A Free Soul*, both love interests do very much want to marry Jan. She turns down Dwight because she falls for Ace, but even though Ace offers her marriage very soon after the beginning of their affair, she turns him down too.

The scene in which this happens clarifies a number of things about their relationship, but it mainly shows us that Jan's primary interest in Ace is sexual: she essentially uses him for her sexual gratification, and very little else. When he tries to engage her in conversation, she mocks him by pointing out that "men of action are better *in action*". Ace rather bemusedly wonders whether women ever really want to talk and then proposes marriage, to which Jan responds, with amusement, "Why?" Later, she asks him: "But why make so much fuss about it, darling?"

In her only serious response to his proposal, Jan briefly ponders that while she is in love with him, "marriage means the end of a lot of things - my world would close up on me". This refers firstly to her wealthy, upper-class family, who would never accept such a *mésalliance*, but secondly, it also indicates that she does not wish to trade her current sexual freedom for married, monogamous life with one partner. As such, Jan has accepted the fact that her dalliance with Ace must remain primarily physical and will come to an end one day, even though he has not. Soon, she ends the conversation by requesting: "Come on. Put 'em around me!" as she leans back tantalisingly on a chaise longue, her arms spread wide. He obeys: the discussion is over.

Her rejection of Ace in this way is both a strongly classed one and one that reverses gender in a connected way; as I noted earlier, even in this brave new early 20th century world, sexual experimentation without any intention for a lasting relationship, or marriage, still often took place across class boundaries since “by pursuing sex with working-class girls, middle-class males could expect chastity from their peers without relinquishing access to intercourse themselves” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 2012: 263). Jan in *A Free Soul*, however, does the exact opposite, in that she is a wealthy, upper middle-class, unmarried young woman who experiments sexually with a lower class male yet who refuses marriage even when it is offered her. She does not only eviscerate gender roles – she reverses them.

In spite of this, the final scene of the film, which features Dwight – now acquitted of Ace’s murder – and Jan, once more involves no blame cast on Jan for her sexual promiscuity, but also, interestingly, no instantaneous transition into (safe) married life, unlike every other film discussed here. Instead, the couple are shown in Jan’s living room, as porters carry her suitcases out; at this point, Jan tells Dwight that if he wants her, she “will be in New York, working at something”. He promises he will come find her there, since “The secret of my success is: never say die”. As such, there is a potential happy end in the couple’s future, but it is not instantaneous, and it does not result in an immediate relinquishing of Jan’s independence. She is going to move to New York, and she is going to be financially independent, and marriage may or may not be in her future; we simply do not know; in this sense, she once more asserts her modern freedom and her independent mobility.

3.3.3 - *Riptide*:

“Torn between two loves, the old and the new...”

Finally, in March 1934, *Riptide* was released; this film, which had been especially written by director Edmund Goulding for this film adaptation starring Shearer, was thus released four months before the enforcement of the Hays Code in July of that year, and would be the star’s final pre-Code film.

The film is interesting because it essentially combines both “strands” highlighted in this chapter. In terms of its narrative flow, it echoes *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay*, in that it follows the same basic plotline: a man and woman marry, a crisis (related to infidelity) occurs, they decide to divorce and live apart from a while, and ultimately, they reunite. At the same time, however, central character Mary also resembles Shearer’s characters in *Strangers May Kiss* and *A Free Soul* in one crucial sense, related, once more, to the divide between sexual knowledge and sexual activity.

In my section on *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay*, I highlighted that Kitty Brown in *Let Us Be Gay* was neither sexually knowledgeable nor sexually active (outside of marriage) before her marriage or before her divorce; it is the divorce which made her into the woman she is for the larger part of the film. Jerry in *The Divorcee*, then, was sexually knowledgeable from the start but does tell her husband that she waited for him, i. e. she was not sexually active before her marriage. Mary in *Riptide*, however, is both (premaritally) sexually active and sexually knowledgeable from the very beginning of the film. She alludes to “all those things I’ve told you about me” at the beginning of the film, when Lord Rexford proposes, and he later describes her premarital self as “the kind of girl who didn’t stop at a kiss”. This is new, particularly since Mary is never depicted as less than respectable, even at the beginning of

the film. In this sense, she resembles Lisbeth in *Strangers May Kiss* and Jan in *A Free Soul*; she is the kind of girl who can “kiss and ride on, just as well as any man ever could”.

As opposed to these characters, however, and even as opposed to Jerry in *The Divorcee*, and in spite of her modern appearance and participation in consumer and leisure culture, Mary does easily and unproblematically agree to enter into a fairly traditional marriage, with little talk of modernity or companionate union. This traditional element is emphasised further through the lens of both class and, for the first time, geography; Mary starts the film as a comfortably middle-class character, but becomes, through her marriage to Arthur, Lord Rexford, an aristocrat – a first within Shearer’s career. Secondly, this respectable, but also traditional, emphasis is underlined through Lord Rexford’s British heritage, which is contrasted with Mary’s American and thus – it is implied – more modern background. Through her move to London and her social transition into the British aristocracy, Mary steps away from her former modernity.

Nonetheless, *Riptide* does not really represent a more conservative turn in Shearer’s on-screen roles, and in fact it goes, in a sense, beyond the female representation in these earlier films. A key difference in this regard, in connection to the sexual mores of the Shearer character and her husband, is the fact that in the earlier divorce-themed films, the marital misstep is not solely hers. In *Let Us Be Gay*, Kitty finds out Bob has been cheating on her, but has committed no such wrongdoing herself, and in *The Divorcee*, it is Ted who cheats on Jerry first, and she then mirrors his misstep a little later. Neither husband is innocent; they are certainly guiltier, in either case, than their wives. In *Riptide*, however, whatever guilt there may be is unequivocally Mary’s; while her transgression is not sexual (as her husband suspects it to be), she was still a willing participant in a drunken flirtation

with former flame Tommie, and although she does not exactly respond to his kiss, she is obviously tempted to do just that. Additionally, when she resumes her relationship with Tommie post-divorce, her transgression is made more visually apparent; the film actually shows her kissing Tommie and liking it, which is far more than Jerry or Kitty are ever shown doing – their sexual escapades are implied in much more circumspect ways. As such, Mary's guilt is not as great as Ted's, or Bob's, but it is certainly greater than that of Lord Rexford, who is never seen in any similar context and who is, for all intents and purposes, devoted to her alone.

In spite of this, the film does not depict Lord Rexford as without issues. While he is unquestionably faithful to his wife, the situation is nonetheless implied to be to some extent of his own making. Firstly, even his own friends and relatives consider him a rather humourless, dull person – his own aunt claims, before meeting Mary, that “she can't be very amusing or she'd never have married Philip!” - and secondly, his stubbornness is commented upon many times throughout the film. Mary does this, five years after their marriage, when she says she has “never known him when his mind *isn't* made up” and that he is “not so bad, but *very* stubborn”. This is recognised throughout the unfolding of the divorce by his relatives and friends and even by their servants and staff; Philip's secretary and friend, David, admires her courage and patience with him, and says “Good for you, Mary!” when she leaves to meet her sister at the club, refusing to sit around awaiting her husband's forgiveness any further.

This is connected to two major facts about Philip that divide him and Mary; the first is that he's an aristocrat, the second that he is British. When the two first meet, they are dressed in insect costumes, the ridiculousness of which serves to make these divisions temporarily

disappear; after they have arranged to skip the party and instead go on a date together, they meet again in normal evening dress, and Mary expresses her surprise that Philip really is a lord.

This highlights the difference between the upper middle-class Mary and the aristocratic Philip, which is only underlined through their geographically different origins; Philip is shown as essentially a decent man, but is also marked as an “other” within the film from the very first moment onward – when he comments upon the absurdity of his costume by saying that “this is an amazing country” to his servant. This othering returns throughout the film and is subtly underlined by the palatial and rather more old-fashioned surroundings of Philip and Mary’s house in England, which along with his aristocratic background serve to tie his “otherness” to a conservative sentiment very different from the modern, American Mary.

This “otherness” and conservativeness, as opposed to Mary’s modernity, are also tied by the film to the idea of truthfulness and honesty, which I also identified as a key element within the films previously discussed in this chapter. Here, however, it works in a different way; whereas in *The Divorcee*, Jerry’s truthfulness indirectly leads to the central divorce, that is because the result of her openness (i. e. the revelation of her infidelity) is offensive to Ted. In *Riptide*, however, the result of Mary’s openness leads to Tommie telling Philip in a fair and straightforward manner that nothing serious happened, and that Mary in fact rebuffed his advances – but it is the very act of being open in such a way that offends Philip, who believes it to be in very “bad taste”. This ties into the emotional repression he displays throughout the crisis, and which means he treats Mary coldly and distantly rather than

talking things over and hearing her side of the story. The problem in their marriage is not what she did or did not do, it is a lack of honesty and truthfulness on his part.

This is illustrated by the fact that the divorce only actually happens once Mary herself has subscribed to his philosophy and refused to tell the truth about what happened between her and Tommie during her separation from Philip. However, interestingly she is not shown to be lying for her own sake, but for his, as she claims that “there is something more sacred than truth, and that is protection” – essentially, the film implies, protection against his inability to face life in an emotionally healthy and progressive way. When he finally does find out, she admits the truth freely and decides they should get a divorce, since they do not love each other enough “to overcome everything”. Ultimately, therefore, it is she who decides they should get a divorce, because the problem in their marriage is not her (perceived) infidelity, but his inability to communicate with (modern) honesty.

In the film’s final moments, the two meet again one more time before they will go their own separate ways, and it becomes clear once more that despite all that has happened, Mary is still perceived by all involved as a noble and admirable character, and as a good mother to the couple’s daughter, and this even extends to her almost-ex-husband. Finally, they decide they love one another and that a separation “can’t be done”, and they remain married.

3.4 - Conclusion

Riptide, therefore, echoes all four previous films, and in this sense provides an excellent conclusion to an analysis of Shearer’s pre-Code roles. In this film, Shearer plays a sexually active modern who enters a respectable and advantageous marriage; even after she commits an indiscretion during this marriage, she remains a sympathetic character, and it is her husband’s lack of (modern) honesty that is seen as the key problem. This film thus

combines the premarital sexual activity of Shearer's characters in *A Free Soul* and *Strangers May Kiss* with the emphasis on modernity within marriage and on the possibility of divorce of *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay*, while portraying Shearer, once more, as a respectable, upper middle-class figure throughout the film and in spite of her transgressions.

It also, in a sense, develops these elements from previous films further, in new ways, for example in terms of Mary's essential guilt and her husband's innocence, but also in terms of her status as not simply a respectable married woman but also an aristocrat by marriage. She is both ultra-modern and ultra-respectable at the same time and in this sense underlines the idea, also present within the earlier films, that perhaps the most defining quality of Shearer's pre-Code characters was their ability to have it all, to be sexually transgressive and – often – professionally successful and yet emerge unscathed, respectable, and with the man of their choice. In a sense, this combination was the most modern statement of all, and my next chapter, which will focus on Shearer's magazine rhetoric for the five years dealt with here, will highlight the way it also permeated her star persona at this time.

Chapter 4 - “The Morals of Yesterday Are No More”: Pre-Code Shearer in magazines

4.1 - Introduction

This chapter echoes the previous one, in that it looks at the fan magazine coverage on Shearer between 1930 and 1934, both in regard to the five films dealt with in the previous chapter and in regard to the evolution of Shearer’s star persona over the course of these five years. I will thus examine especially how popular magazines negotiated the coexistence of Shearer’s hyper-modern on-screen roles and her more traditional off-screen star persona as a wife and mother, and argue that – in spite of this seemingly stark opposition – a number of tropes, especially connected to female modernity and a woman’s ability to have it all in the modern world, tied together these two personas into a coherent whole.

4.2 - 1930

The fan magazine rhetoric on Shearer in early 1930 echoed that consolidated throughout the silent and early talkie years. No longer, editorial article occurred in any of these five magazines⁴ throughout the first few months of the year, but Shearer was nonetheless very present in a number of shorter items, as a part of larger, more general articles, on photographs (with captions) and within reviews of specific films.

Various tropes returned, such as that of Shearer as a particularly aristocratic and respectable movie star. This was most explicit in *Screenland*, January 1930, which stated – underneath a picture of Shearer – that one of the star’s “chief charms” was her “sleek,

⁴ These are, for 1930-34, *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture*, *Picture Play*, *The New Movie Magazine* and *Screenland*.

beautifully-shaped aristocratic little head” (16), but it also returned in *The New Movie Magazine* in that same month, when a fashion image of Shearer modelling a “black velvet afternoon gown” described the star as “naturally conservative” (72, Fig. 22). This last instance also demonstrates the growing emphasis on Shearer as a glamorous fashion icon, which had begun in earlier years but became more pronounced from 1930 onward. In February 1930, *Photoplay* declared that Shearer was “famous for her stunning wardrobe and her ability to wear it” (124).



Figure 22: Shearer as a “naturally conservative” fashion icon.

The aristocratic, respectable element was also reiterated, as it had been before, using Shearer’s various relatives; *Photoplay* reported in January that Shearer invariably came to costume fittings with her mother (104) and in February, Shearer was discussed in the context of the wedding of Bessie Love and William Hawks, at which she was a bridesmaid along with her sister Athole, who was at this point married to William Hawks’ brother Howard (50). Shearer was thus shown to be at the center of an extended and supportive family circle. This was reiterated in articles on Shearer’s childhood, such as an April feature on “Home Towns of the Stars”, which sketched a narrative of an idyllic, pleasant and carefree youth in Montreal, Canada, while also stressing her successful career and the “genuine romance” between Shearer and her husband, as well as the cordial relations she still enjoys with both parents (*The New Movie Magazine*, April 1930: 88-9).

As this final item and the emphasis on “genuine romance” showed, Shearer’s happy marriage was also a crucial element of her respectable, aristocratic star image and remained a key part of the magazine rhetoric about her. In February, *Screenland* included the Shearer-Thalberg in a list of Hollywoodians who disproved the maxim that marriage and Hollywood could not go together, and even conveyed some advice from Shearer as to how to maintain a happy, stable, functioning marriage while working in Hollywood (120). This same article also featured a photograph of the couple together, which emphasized that “she would have married him even if he hadn’t happened to be her boss” (24). Another short item in *Picture Play* in January also reiterated the genuine romance between Shearer and Thalberg, as it noted that Shearer never removed her wedding ring while working on a film, but instead chose to cover it with “a piece of court plaster” (100).

Shearer’s aristocratic, respectable image, however, and its connection to the Thalberg marriage, also caused some backlash at this time, and some magazines relished mocking both Shearer and Thalberg as a wealthy and slightly out of touch Hollywood couple. This is particularly pronounced in *Motion Picture* in February of this year, which used Shearer and Thalberg in its rhetoric on the stock market crash. The magazine pointed out that Thalberg lost money in the crash and then noted that this impacted Shearer’s life as well:

Norma Shearer told a representative of *Motion Picture* that she had canceled an order for a new fur coat and some jewelry and told her maid to mend her silk nightgown. Under normal conditions she would, undoubtedly, have told the maid to keep it! (29)

The same issue also contains a short item entitled “The Unhappy Mending”, which recounts:

“This stock failure is awful,” said Norma Shearer. “I’m feeling so poor this morning I told my maid to mend my silk nightgown. (39)

The double mention of Shearer in terms of the stock market crash within the same issue of the magazine, barely ten pages apart, really drives home the emphasis Shearer's supposed privilege. In this regard, especially the last item contains clear (and in the context of Shearer's later career, almost prescient) echoes of Marie Antoinette's "let them eat cake" – the idea that Norma Shearer, as a major star and wife of a rich executive, is so out of touch with the reality of the collapsing US economy that her conception of poverty is asking the maid to mend her expensive nightgown. It was a sharp and rather vicious criticism in a magazine whose readers were most likely suffering far greater hardships in these early days of the Depression.

Apart from underlining Shearer's potentially out-of-touch aristocratic character further, however, the marriage also forced questions connected to Shearer's career, since Thalberg was both her husband and her boss. This was illustrated by *The New Movie Magazine* in August of this year, when an article on Marie Dressler, Shearer's costar in *Let Us Be Gay*, described the star as follows:

Besides being an excellent actress she is the wife of Irving Thalberg, dictator extraordinary of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer productions. He'd be a funny man if he didn't see to it that his wife didn't get any the worst of it in stories, directors and production value. (32-3)

As such, the happy marriage also fanned suspicions of unfair advantages acquired by Shearer, and this trope would return time and again in fan magazine rhetoric at this time.

Because of the two-fold potential danger inherent in Shearer's representation as an aristocrat and as Mrs Irving Thalberg, a measure of damage control became an increasingly obvious part of any treatment of Shearer. This took two distinct forms at this time.

On the one hand, in order to counter accusations of excessive privilege, Shearer was shown as the very opposite of an entitled, out-of-touch aristocrat; an item in *Screenland* in January quoted Madame Sylvia, the Hollywood fitness guru, describing Shearer as “a shy, modest girl [...] so modest that people sometimes think she is stuck up” (95) and then rather vaguely conveying a story in which Shearer helped Sylvia in an undisclosed way, so that Shearer now has Sylvia’s “loyalty as long as [she] draw[s] breath” (95). Shearer is not a pretentious aristocrat, this article tells us, instead she is a simple girl with a great heart for helping others. Similarly, a readers’ letter in *Picture Play* in January noted that while the author used to think of Shearer as “a girl with a big push behind her”, he or she now realizes, thanks to the talkies, that “she is where she is because of her ability” (10).

On the other hand, the emphasis on ability also served to counter the second criticism implied by coverage on the Shearer-Thalberg marriage – that Shearer was only a star because of her husband. As such, a key second trope of “damage control” was the representation of Shearer as a sensible, thinking modern girl, propelled to well-deserved fame by both great intelligence and great ambition. This is especially apparent in the first full editorial article published on Shearer in 1930, published in March of this year in *Picture Play*. This article was entitled “The Courage of Normalcy”, and its subtitle promised that normalcy was much more important to the star than her “patrician air”, thus distancing Shearer from her usual, aristocratic persona. In this article, writer Romney Scott begins by noting his initial dislike of Shearer, since he suspected she was “pretty pleased with herself”, and found that her status as Mrs Irving Thalberg only strengthened this impression. Of course, the article then delves into all the reasons why this impression was in fact inaccurate, reiterating Shearer’s fundamental modesty, but also her businesslike, well-

organised approach to everything from her career to magazine interviews and perhaps most of all her innate intelligence. He summarized that Shearer was in fact “a regular scout whom you’d like your best girl to imitate” (111); in this way, the author’s words echoed the reader’s letter from January 1925 which noted that Shearer was one of two “girls that boys are proud to escort”, reminiscent of “real girls of good families” (*Photoplay*, January 1925: 12). Along with underlining her “normalcy” and intelligence, he thus also reiterated her essential respectability.

This emphasis on respectable modernity became a key element of Shearer’s star persona at this time, echoing a similar balance between the middle-class identity and sexual transgression of her characters. This particular emphasis returned once more in April, as a “Girl on the Cover” feature in *Photoplay* once more reiterated a number of key elements of Shearer’s star persona and traced her career and marriage since their origins, but focused primarily on Shearer’s organised and rational mind; “nine times out of ten, Norma’s head rules her heart”. From the beginning, the feature states, Shearer “mapped out a path [...] as straight as her patrician nose”, underlining her social class but also her self-directed upward mobility, and applying this to everything including her marriage; she would not get married until she was established in her career, which meant she felt she could “give something” to her marriage (6). This both emphasized her innate good sense and ability to navigate the world, but also highlighted that Shearer was already established in her career by the time she married Thalberg.

However, the first months of this year also saw the introduction, even before any new films had been covered, of a number of new elements within Shearer’s star persona.

Firstly, whereas in previous years, Shearer had either been straightforwardly identified with or distanced from particular characters, the question of whether she was like the characters she played or whether she was fundamentally different now became more widely discussed. The “Courage of Normalcy” article, from March *Picture Play*, for example, included a brief reflection by Shearer

on whether the public likes to think of us as being the same off the screen as we are on. If they think of me at all after they leave the theater, do they think of me as being the same in private life as I have been in the picture, or would they rather believe that the grand air is simply acting? (111)

This early article saw this rhetoric on likeness and difference particularly in the context of whether or not Shearer was as “regal” as her characters, but the roles she would play later this year would make that question far more urgent and interesting in different ways, not really connected to her patrician reputation. In January 1930, *Picture Play* noted Shearer’s “natural poise and distinction” (108), which she shared with the characters she played, whereas *Screenland* argued in February that Shearer was “one of the most interesting personalities” in Hollywood because “she is a nice, cultured girl in love with her husband, and yet she can play a Mary Dugan and make your heart ache, or a Mrs Cheyney and make it throb” (80). As such, the on-screen Shearer was here identified particularly as prostitute Mary Dugan and jewel thief Fay Cheyney, and thus as fundamentally and crucially different from the off-screen Shearer, who was a traditional and respectable wife.

This trope returned in an article entitled “Discoveries About Myself” in *Motion Picture* two months later. On the surface, this article took a very conservative slant on Shearer and in a way moved away from the idea of Shearer-as-modern. Here, Shearer states that she no longer wishes to be thought clever and that she realizes her younger, extremely ambitious self was very selfish, and as such completely contradicts the simultaneous treatment of her star persona in other fan magazines (such as the aforementioned “Girl on the Cover” feature published in April *Photoplay*). In commenting upon her marriage, Shearer says she could previously see “no possibly romance to marriage – and less reason” but now likes “to be dominated” and to look after her husband, since she has discovered that “all a woman needs in order to know life in all of its phases is love and marriage” (100).

At the same time, however, the article also contradicted itself in a number of key ways. The image chosen to accompany it, for example, is a rather risqué picture of a scantily clad Shearer who, the caption reads, emphasizes the “physical temptress [...] side of her nature” (58) in this photograph (Fig. 23). This sense of Shearer as a complex woman with different sides and aspects also returns in the text of the article, when Shearer notes, at the end, that “every woman is all women”, and that



Figure 23: Shearer as a “physical temptress”.

In the heart of every woman is the good woman, and the bad woman, and the woman between the two. The mother. The wanton. The nun. The adventuress. I am all of these women; you are all of these women. Not one of us can see one of them without saying ‘There, but for the grace of God, go I’. (100)

This statement is used within the text to conservative effect, since the phenomenon described here is supposedly why Shearer can play women completely unlike her – even though she is initially convinced that she knows “nothing about such a character, that portrayal is impossible to [her]” (100). Nonetheless, it is the idea that “Norma Shearer [...] Is Mother, Nun, Adventuress, All In One” (59) that is reiterated in the subtitle on top of the article, and the idea that perhaps the superficially respectable Shearer has rather more complexity to her character than previously supposed is never far away. This reiterated a trope that had been present within Shearer’s star persona since her double role in *Lady of the Night*, and would become particularly relevant in terms of the roles the star would play during this year.

A second new trope within Shearer’s fan magazine rhetoric at this time is the news of her pregnancy with her first child, which was revealed in *Photoplay* and *The New Movie Magazine* in May of this year. The *Photoplay* item is the longer and most interesting one in that it emphasizes the particularly “royal” nature of the Shearer-Thalberg union, as it notes that “another royal Hollywood line seems to be in process of perpetuation” (48); as such, Shearer, Thalberg and their baby were marked out once more as respectable Hollywood aristocrats. By June, *Picture Play* also revealed the news, and *Motion Picture* and *Screenland* followed suit in July. Of these, *Screenland* was the most interesting, since it speculated that Shearer might “retire permanently from the screen”, as some stars did when they became mothers (112). This tied into a modern rhetoric on working wives and mothers that would also continue throughout Shearer’s career.

Since the magazines usually published issues for a particular month at least a month in advance, June was also the beginning of another important thread in Shearer's star image, in that it started the coverage of *The Divorcee*, her first film of 1930, which was released on April 19th of that year. *Photoplay* published an advertisement for the film in June; this ad is a good way to approach the magazine-guided reception of this particular film and of Shearer as a star within the film, since it highlights a number of key elements that returned throughout the film's magazine treatment.



It particularly highlights the controversial elements of the film, such as the focus on modernity (it "exposes the hypocrisy of modern marriage") and the double standard ("Her sin was no greater than his... but she was a woman."), and, with its imagery (particularly the image of a sultry-looking Shearer in glamorous



Figures 24-5: *The Divorcee* and *Their Own Desire*.

dress looking up at the reader, as if reclining on a bed), illustrates the contrast between this film and previous Shearer projects, perhaps especially *Their Own Desire*, which directly preceded it (132). An advertisement for *Their Own Desire* in *Motion Picture News*, 14 December 1929 (n. p.) illustrates this; here, Shearer is depicted looking sweetly just past the camera, with an accompanying text advising readers "And now give this little girl

all for herself!” Whereas Shearer was, at this point and in this film, seen as a young woman only just on the cusp of adulthood, the ad for *The Divorcee*, in contrast, clearly showed that she had now grown up (Figs. 24-5).

The maturity and potential controversy inherent in *The Divorcee* – which the ad described as a “frank, outspoken and daring drama” – returned time and again within the magazine coverage of the film, with its *Photoplay* review calling it “a problem piece, as neat an essay on marital unfaithfulness as has been made in Hollywood”. Additionally, it stressed that “You won’t forget this picture and you’ll undoubtedly go home and have a good long talk with your spouse”, highlighting the real-world relevance of the topic of the film (*Photoplay*, June 1930: 57). *Screenland* described Shearer’s character as “a worldly young lady who marries for love, gets into difficulties, and then goes about living her own life in a big ambitious way” (*Screenland*, July 1930: 85). Both magazines regarded the film’s narrative as a controversial, but essentially progressive and positive one. Other magazines also highlighted the controversy but problematized this; *The New Movie Magazine* notes the film claims “equal philandering rights for the wife and the husband” and that “it works out disastrously, of course” (*The New Movie Magazine*, July 1930: 85), whereas *Motion Picture* described it as

the story of a girl who believes she can live like a man, tries to theory out to the ruination of her marriage, and then tries it out some more to forget. There’s a complete victory for femininity and the double standard in the end [...]. (*Motion Picture*, July 1930: 60)

As such, the magazine represents the film’s narrative as a critique of Jerry’s life choices, which is also echoed in a picture feature focusing on the film in *Picture Play*. This feature mentions, for example, the “many moments that must come to a young wife, when she

regrets the step she has taken in leaving the protection of a husband for the thoughtless gayety of a crowd whose standards of right and wrong have long been swept away” – even though such regret actually plays a minimal role within the film – and even claims that Jerry, “as a wife on the primrose path of independence”, designs fashions to prove to herself her ability to pay her way. This is the only reference within the film’s magazine treatment to Jerry’s professional career, and it is not really an accurate representation of the film’s narrative, since Jerry has a career long before the divorce (*Picture Play*, June 1930: 81). Nonetheless, this treatment attempts to turn the film into a cautionary tale against modern life, which is not at all borne out by the actual film or by most magazine responses to the film.

One further element of the magazine discourse on *The Divorcee* was the novel it was based on, Ursula Parrott’s *Ex Wife*, described as “popular trash” in *Picture Play* (*Picture Play*, August 1930: 70-1). The book was in fact a fairly notorious novel, based largely on Parrott’s own experiences as a divorcée, and was referenced in almost every review of the film, with *Motion Picture* claiming the film was far more credible than the novel, whereas *Screenland* believed it to be a faithful (if extra thrilling) version of the novel; *Screenland* also referred to the novel’s scandalous nature by joking “Don’t let Will Hays hear us!” and by leaving out the vowels in the novel’s title (*Screenland*, July 1930: 85). The *New Movie Magazine* simply called it “Ursula Parrott’s tawdry but popular try for sensationalism” (*The New Movie Magazine*, July 1930: 85), and *Photoplay*’s review mentioned that the book was “banned” – although it does not specify where and by whom (*Photoplay*, June 1930: 57).

The most interesting piece of information on *Ex-Wife*, however, appeared in *Photoplay* in September and claimed that it was in fact Shearer herself who happened upon the book and

who read it and “it impressed her as possible picture material” (*Photoplay*, September 1930: 99). In this way, Shearer is not just represented as an actress hired to play the (controversial, particularly perhaps in the light of at least some of her previous roles) part of Jerry, but as the active instigator of this rather risqué film, and thus also someone who could easily be seen as supportive of its messages in terms of modern life and the single standard. This emphasis on agency echoed Shearer’s previous statement, about *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, that she “really wanted to play a bad girl [and] begged and begged for two months for a chance to be déclassée” (*Motion Picture*, May 1929: 34) – but developed this even further, and also once more emphasized the sense of self-driven mobility present also in Shearer’s career development. This further shifting of Shearer’s star image toward that of an extremely modern woman was also stressed in *Screenland*, which highlighted the contrast between Shearer’s character in the *Divorcee* and her previous role in *Their Own Desire* as a “metamorphosis, which is second cousin to a phenomenon and only slightly less interesting” (*Screenland*, July 1930: 85).

This emphasis of the modern, combined with Shearer’s established star persona as a respectable, married woman, returns in the August issue of *Photoplay*, which is a fascinating one in regard to Shearer since it is the first instance of a “star trail” for the star. In *Doris Day Confidential*, Tamar Jeffers McDonald identifies a star trail as follows:

Most rarely there is the star trail: here a star will appear on the cover of a magazine, then be commented on in the table of contents roundup; there might be an advert for a forthcoming film, a mention in the gossip column, and then an editorial piece on her, accompanied by photographs. Each of these provides a separate occasion to vaunt the star, but taken cumulatively they are much more weighty and impressive, with the shorter items setting up a trail for the star which leads the reader to her by magnifying the sense of her importance. (Jeffers McDonald, 2013: 39)

This issue, then, fits the idea of the “star trail” quite closely; even though Shearer is not the cover star for this month, she is featured in a wide range of items, such as readers’ letters, a review for *Let Us Be Gay*, a lengthy editorial article, a short gossip column item and in multiple mentions in another, more general article on the origins of particular stars. All these items work together to emphasise particular, already extant, elements of the Shearer star persona, such as her courage, ambition and intelligence, but I will focus particularly on two especially interesting items here.

One is the review of Shearer’s follow-up to *The Divorcee*, *Let Us Be Gay*, which emphasizes the “sophisticated” nature of the film and ties it directly to its predecessor but which also ends by stating that “Norma need not fear that her fans will forget her while she is off the screen for the blessed event” (56). As such, it establishes Shearer as the star of rather risqué, “sophisticated” films focusing on themes such as divorce, while simultaneously stressing her uneventful and indeed idyllic private life. This was echoed by an item in *The New Movie Magazine* during this same month; this short gossip item was entitled “Happily Married Divorcee” and reflected upon the “irony of Hollywood”, illustrated by the fact that “Norma Shearer, happy spouse of Irving Thalberg” was triumphing in *The Divorcee* (97).

The emphasis on this contradiction could be seen as a way to reduce the potential power of Shearer’s divorcee heroines – by reminding audiences that Shearer herself was not living the kind of life she illustrated on screen – but an editorial article published in *Photoplay* this same month suggested that this was not necessarily the case. The title of the article asked the question “Will Norma Shearer Retire?” - to which the answer was a resounding no. Here, Shearer suggests that not only is it possible to have both a career and a successful marriage, but she goes further, advising that “one should take up a career for the sake of

love" (47). Although she claims she would have given up her career had her husband asked, this statement is rather undermined by the remainder of the article, in which Shearer claims to "glory in women who have accomplished things" (47). Her work has strengthened her marriage, because on the one hand her husband is proud of her accomplishments, and on the other hand her work makes her a nicer and more interesting person to be married to.

This stands in sharp contrast with, for example, the rhetoric on Gloria Swanson less than ten years earlier, around the time Swanson, too, starred in a number of divorce-themed films, including two of the three DeMille films discussed earlier in this thesis. In the 1922 *Photoplay* article "Confessions of a Modern Woman", the star discussed "the Modern Woman, the twentieth century beauty, the ultra-advanced American female of whom [Swanson] is the screen's greatest exponent" (*Photoplay*, January 1922: 20). As opposed to the rhetoric on Shearer, however, the article served to separate Swanson from any suspicions of "ultra-advanced" modernity; Swanson here talks of "the ocean of feminism" (January 1922: 21) she must navigate as an actress to portray and study the characters she plays, and uses this conversation to decry the modern woman as a deeply unhappy one. A key reason behind this deep unhappiness, the article notes, is the fact that too many women attempt to have both a career and a marriage simultaneously, whereas they can only reasonably do justice to one or the other. This last element is particularly interesting, considering it was attributed to a 22-year old professional actress who had just sealed her second divorce and was already dealing with gossip about a third marriage; her statements here function completely separately from the reality of her own life.

The situation for Shearer in 1930 was clearly different, however; in a world where much film star coverage focused on romance and (perhaps particularly) romantic mishaps, Shearer's

stable marriage could be used to embrace a particularly progressive view on a happy, companionate, modern marriage between two people with two careers. This also returns as a trope within her pre-Code films, and thus ties her on- and off-screen personas together in a way that is carefully avoided in the rhetoric on Swanson: the Shearer article conveys a sense that while Shearer is not divorced, this is only the case because she has managed to make marriage work for her in a way that allows her to fully be herself, which none of her on-screen heroines could. In a sense, her happy marriage renders her star persona more progressive, rather than more conservative; Shearer is able to have it all, the successful career and the successful marriage both, and does not, as a modern woman, need to compromise. This idea will return within the magazine rhetoric on her marriage throughout the next few years.

Indeed, the final months of 1930 once more emphasized this mixture between the modern and the traditional which was becoming a trademark of Shearer's star persona. From October onward, news of the Shearer-Thalberg baby's birth dominated the rhetoric on Shearer across the magazines and, while praising Shearer's suitability to motherhood, reiterated a series of tropes related to her stardom in the process. *Picture Play* referred, in December 1930, to the baby as "The Prince Royal", the "crown prince of the Metro-Goldwyn establishment, since his father is one of its highest executives, and his mother one of the brightest stars" (28), thus once more stressing the royal, patrician connotations attached to the Thalbergs. Their union as a whole was stressed particularly in the *Photoplay* announcement in November, which noted that the couple was "both happy and successful in their home and their respective labors", and concluded by stating that "when the world seems unhappy, mismatched and out of joint – contemplate this pair of aces!" (47). This

item thus once more emphasized the respectable, stable union of the Thalbergs, but also the balance between professional and personal collaboration so crucial to their marriage, reminding readers that Shearer would indeed return to the screen and not retire to devote herself to motherhood. Other announcements, such as that in *Screenland* in November, also reiterated Shearer's future career plans and lack of solely domestic aspirations (94).

The emphasis on Shearer as a modern young woman, even in spite of her motherhood, also returned in readers' letters, such as a letter by Leona Andrews in *Photoplay*, October 1930, which compared Shearer to Greta Garbo. Andrews liked both, but preferred Garbo, since she was "the embodiment of all things glamorous and unreal", while Shearer embodied "all things modern and delightfully real" (120). Shearer had clearly come a long way from the ingénue roles of her career beginnings.

An item entitled "Time Out for Motherhood" published in *Screenland* that December, then, can be used to summarise the development of Shearer's star image over the course of 1930. On the one hand, it stressed the royal and aristocratic connection by, firstly, suggesting that Shearer and Thalberg "constitute cinema aristocracy" and by, secondly, noting the simultaneity of Irving Thalberg, Jr.'s birth with those of the child of the Duke and Duchess of York and that of the King and Queen of Belgium. At the same time, however, it also stressed Shearer's intelligence, ambition and hard work – alongside her good luck in having been "born a gentlewoman", in falling in love with a good man, and in bearing him a son (19). Here, the factors of breeding, ambition, hard work and good luck collaborate to constitute Shearer's multifaceted star persona.

4.3 - 1931

Due to the aforementioned delay in printing, the year 1931 began, for the fan magazines, with the announcement that Shearer had won the Academy Award for Best Actress on November 5th of the previous year, for her role in *The Divorcee*. The results in terms of the star rhetoric on Shearer of this news were two-fold. On the one hand, it was used as a means to illustrate that despite her wealthy background and advantageous marriage, Shearer did deserve her position at the top. This idea is reiterated as late as May of that year in the readers' letters section in *Picture Play*, when Kathryn M. Glass, whose name and address can be verified in the 1930 census, states that

nobody can say a word against Norma Shearer, as it was recently proved that she is a great actress. If any one doubts this, then why was Miss Shearer awarded the trophy for the best work of all the actresses? (12)

This letter thus indicates both the widespread nature of the privilege rhetoric on Shearer, but also the significance of her Academy Award in countering this.

Secondly, however, Shearer's Oscar win for *The Divorcee* also meant she had essentially been singled out for praise in her most transgressive role to date; this tied her even closer to the "sophisticated" roles which were increasingly becoming linked to her as a star. Roles such as this were not an anomaly within Shearer's career, but instead her very selling point.

The second major piece of Shearer news that was still at the forefront of the fan magazines' rhetoric on her was the birth of her baby. Contrary to Anthony Slide's assertion that "the fact that Norma Shearer and Robert Montgomery were both parents, a revelation that might hurt their romantic image" (Slide, 2010: 8) could not be mentioned in the magazines, the baby was in fact the bread and butter of Shearer coverage at this time and was used in a

number of ways, both connected to and separate from the Thalberg marriage. The baby news was, of course, firstly a piece of information for fans to get excited about, as well as a way to positively highlight particular elements of Shearer's star persona.

In this sense, the idea that Shearer gave birth to a son rather than a daughter was depicted as somehow a crucial part of her character, and thus her star image; in July 1931, an article entitled "Married the Modern Way" started by quoting "certain ladies of Hollywood", who said

Wouldn't you just know Norma would start her family off right by having a boy first? She's so efficient about everything! (58)

Somehow, and repeatedly, Shearer's ability to "bear a son" (*Screenland*, December 1930: 19) and thus give one of Hollywood's major producers a male heir to continue the line is considered a virtue in an almost feudal manner, while at the same time once more demonstrating her sense of organization and her innate intelligence, which apparently extended to the deciding of the sex of her future children.

At the same time, however, the royal persona thus underlined also helped perpetuate the idea of Shearer as an extremely privileged star, even within Hollywood. Two types of coverage in particular emphasized this idea of privilege in regard to Shearer's motherhood.

Firstly, the fact that Shearer would not allow photographs of the baby to be published anywhere, while initially held up as a sign of modesty, was reiterated time and again and eventually become something of an annoyance. As early as January, *The New Movie Magazine* published a readers' letter in which one Charlotte Rosenberg declared how "thoroughly disgusted" she was with the "silly views" of actresses such as Shearer, who would not let anyone photograph their children out of fear of publicity (53). The next

month, then, the same magazine published a short item emphasizing how “handsome” the baby was and how Shearer is a “devoted mother” to him – even if, this item again notes, she “won’t have her picture taken with the new heir” (31).

The second way in which the baby news was used negatively was in emphasizing how easy motherhood really came to a star of Shearer’s caliber – who had to perform very little of the labour required of those movie fans who were mothers. In January, *The New Movie Magazine* interviewed Marlene Dietrich about her (European) motherhood and quoted Dietrich as commenting on Shearer’s (American) motherhood with

In America, you women have babies – poof, like nothing. Norma Shearer has a baby and hardly is it noticed. (34)

Dietrich, on the other hand, could not think of anything but the baby for months, and then nursed it for six months. An October article in *Motion Picture* reiterated this idea of Shearer as a mother who “has it easy”. Sketching the difference between Shearer and “Housewife Jane Jones, damp with perspiration”, it reads

“We would hardly know there was a baby in the house,” smiles Norma coolly, every glittering hair of her smart coiffure unruffled by clutching baby-hands, “except when we slip into the nursery to see him. (47)

In this narrative, Shearer is glamorous and level-headed, but it is easy for her to be this way; she is extremely privileged and does not share the worries of ‘regular’ people. Additionally, the vocabulary used here further serves to mark Shearer as a particularly unsympathetic figure; she smiles “coolly”, her “smart coiffure” remains far away from “clutching baby-hands” and she only sees her son when she briefly “slips” into the nursery to see him. As opposed to Dietrich in the earlier article, Shearer is not represented as an especially warm or caring mother.

This same sense of privilege returned once more within the rhetoric on Shearer's marriage; while the Thalbergs were referred to, in *The New Movie Magazine*, as a "congenial and delightful couple", "sure to last" (February 1930: 45), the implication that the marriage gave professional advantages to Shearer was never far away. Even the generally positive article "How Norma Shearer Got What She Wanted" contains a number of rather sharper notes in its discussion of Shearer and Thalberg's love story. The author openly doubts, for example, the fact that Shearer claims she fell in love with Thalberg at first sight, even when she thought he was an office boy, stating that "if Norma Shearer fell in love then, it was with the producer". Furthermore, the article notes that Shearer only became "Caesar's wife [...] just as she was beginning to slip as a silent star" (102). But, the author stresses, "I'm sure it was coincidence". The article does not really doubt that Shearer and Thalberg love one another and do indeed have a happy marriage, but suspects the marriage was also very convenient for the career of the intelligent and shrewd Shearer. This was in fact not supported by empirical evidence; for all intents and purposes, Shearer's career had been in an upward spiral ever since her double role in *Lady of the Night*, and *The Student Prince of Old Heidelberg* (Lubitsch, 1927), her last film before her marriage to Thalberg, was the fourth highest grossing MGM film for the 1927-8 season (*Appendix I – MGM Financial Data, 1992: 2*). Nonetheless, the idea that Shearer's marriage had been a boon for her career would never quite vanish from the rhetoric about the star; a *Photoplay* item in August of this year reiterated this idea as well, stating that Shearer got "first choice of stories, directors, leading men, cameramen, photographers, etc." and followed up by noting her marriage to Thalberg. The author declares himself an "ardent admirer" of Shearer "as an actress and as a woman", but also notes he admires "women who have political sense" (106).

This sense of Shearer as a star with an advantage returned, particularly later in the year, in the context of the career of Joan Crawford. In August, *Motion Picture* pointed out that *Strangers May Kiss* had originally been bought as a vehicle for Crawford but then “switched” to Shearer (101). In December, then, a reader’s letter in *Photoplay* asked “Why don’t they give Joan Crawford some good stories?”, complaining that Garbo and Shearer “get all the breaks” instead (13). Another item in April *Picture Play* more broadly expressed a dislike of Shearer’s privileged background when a list of things fans are “tired reading about” included “Norma Shearer’s patrician upbringing in Montreal” (73).

Throughout this year, however, perhaps in part because of the potential implications of privilege inherent in this rhetoric of respectability, Shearer’s reputation of sophistication took over more and more from the patrician emphasis of earlier months. *Picture Play*, May 1931 highlighted Shearer specifically as a “grown-up” star, a far cry from the ingénue (or even the lady) she had been before (114). In July, *Photoplay* commented upon this “change” more expansively, commenting that Shearer was once “the most discreet little lady of the films”, but now:

When she is having her clothes designed for picture purposes, she insists that they show as much of her anatomy as the law and Will Hays allow. And certainly, being the wife of Irving Thalberg, she gets whatever she wants on the M-G-M lot. (38-9)

Once more, Shearer’s on-screen sophistication was not simply dealt with as separate from her star persona, but simply seen as an extension of this persona. This is also underlined by the fact that the article notes that even off screen “she is now appearing in gowns so sensational that they make even hard-boiled old Hollywood gulp a couple of gulps” (38). Additionally, the Thalberg marriage – which is mentioned in the text but also underlined by the accompanying image of Shearer and Thalberg – is used here not to counter the

“sophisticated” narrative, but to strengthen it; Shearer is not an ordinary star, so she has more, not less, agency in how she presents herself on and off screen. If she dresses or behaves in a way that could be seen as risqué, she does so because she wants to.

Shearer’s sophistication was also, of course, highlighted within the magazine rhetoric on both films she made during this year. The

advertisements for, respectively, *Strangers May Kiss* and *A Free Soul* were similar in layout to that for *The Divorcee*, featuring large images of a provocative and glamorous Shearer, and in fact directly tied the films to one another. The *Strangers May Kiss* ad mentioned both the film’s similarity to *The Divorcee* and the fact that both original novels were written by Ursula Parrott (*Photoplay*, May 1931: 14),

whereas the *A Free Soul* ad went even further and introduced the central character of Jan as “She wasn’t a divorcee, but she believed that strangers could kiss!”, thus using the titles of both earlier film (*Photoplay*, August 1931: 115) (Figs. 26-7). The film’s reviews also noted the film’s risqué elements, with *Photoplay* referring to Shearer in the context of *Strangers May Kiss* as “the last word in everything sophisticated”, and *Motion Picture* highlighting how Clark Gable, in *A Free Soul*, appealed to the “physical



Figures 26-7: Advertisements for *Strangers May Kiss* and *A Free Soul*.

side of the girl's nature", thus emphasizing the free sexuality that was a key element of the film's plot.

The continuity between star persona and on-screen persona was reiterated in "Married the Modern Way", published in July in *Motion Picture*. This article reiterated Shearer's ambitious and commonsensical persona, but also tied it into a more modern identity, not just, this time, in terms of modern marriage or female employment, but for the first time also in terms of female sexuality. The article quotes Shearer as saying "What is a good wife but a good mistress?" (59), and argues that remaining sexually attractive is a key part of any marriage. The article also has Shearer distancing herself completely from domestic entanglements; in the home, "there are no set rules", and meals may be had at any time. Finally, Shearer adds, "We stay up until all hours, and midnight just as good a time for us to drop in on our friends as any other time" (108). She concludes by saying that if her screen wives behave more like mistresses than good wives "then I'm going to have to agree with them that they are the best wives in the game of modern matrimony" (108).

The article concludes:

There is one thing that Norma proved to me with her argument, and that is that Ex-Wives are not necessarily a part of a modern marriage. It can be an interesting, romantic and thoroughly gay affair – if you are as smart a wife as Mrs Irving Thalberg. (108)

The article thus does a number of things. Firstly, it characterizes Shearer as a modern, sexually attractive and aware woman. Secondly, it establishes her complete approval of the behaviour of her on-screen characters. Thirdly, then, it shows the way the magazines used Shearer and Thalberg's marriage not to undermine, but to enhance the progressive nature of her image: Shearer is not a divorcee because she is a part of a marriage that has evolved

to the point where it is not necessary to divorce, since both partners are happy, career-oriented individuals – who are also sexually compatible. This last element, especially, was new within the fan magazine rhetoric on Shearer at this time.

The New Movie Magazine pointed out this same month that there is no other actress “who is as much like her screen self as Norma” (110), once more blurring the lines between characters and star, a pattern which continued in the September coverage on Shearer.

Photoplay noted that Shearer had once barely smoked at all, but can now “be witnessed smoking away at smart restaurants”, which she has “only taken [...] up in a big way since she’s been doing these sophisticated parts” (106). The same issue dwelled on Shearer’s sophistication in some more detail, contrasting the “sweet and pure Norma” of days past with the “spritely gay manner” and “madcap method of living” now displayed on screen.

The author dwells on a time when studio moguls pondered “for weeks” whether to “allow that rare exponent of girlish charm and simplicity, Norma Shearer, one teeny, weeny seduction. Would the fans stand it?” (39, 100). Now, however, “the heroine goes right out and gets her man and does with him as she wills. Nobody minds, and the fans seem to like it” – because Shearer now has “a self-made glamour” (100-1). Her characters can do what they do with impunity, because their actions match the star persona of the woman who plays them.

From May onward, however, the continued sophistication of both Shearer and her characters also caused some backlash; in this month, the *Motion Picture* review of *Strangers May Kiss* noted that “it is going too far with this type of unsympathetic picture for Shearer” (63). This too was a trope throughout the year; not only was Shearer a sophisticated, grown-up star, she was also consistently so, and the magazines increasingly began to wonder

whether Shearer was not going too far in this direction. In September, *Motion Picture* described Shearer as a star who does “sophisticated, clever, modern things” (80) but also printed a reader’s letter entitled “Longs For The Norma of Yesterday”. The author, a self-confessed Shearer fan, mourns the days in which “Norma, with her hair soft and lovely about her face, with her flower-like sweetness and country-girl style of unspoiled innocence, was as welcome as a cool, fragrant breeze in the heart of the desert” – before she “blossomed forth with patent-leather hair, peeled back from her face, slinky gowns, and all the other physical signs of sophistication” (100).

This anti-sophistication rhetoric returned throughout the three final months of 1931. In October, *Photoplay* published a readers’ letter that discussed the best dressed women on the screen, and then ended with “Jean Harlow and Norma Shearer vie for honors as the best undressed” (14). The magazine gave the letter the title “Chiding Norma”, singling out Shearer as a star who was going too far. This same month, *Motion Picture* published a letter entitled “Vary Norma’s Roles”, which praised *A Free Soul* but at the same time stated that “her roles are becoming too standardized” and “Norma is getting a little bit too gay” since fans were “getting a bit fed up on a steady diet of her indiscretions”. The writer ended the letter by stating that fans did not want to see Shearer “go to Paris in every picture” (6). Another fan, however, wrote in the same issue that she had heard “Irving Thalberg isn’t permitting Norma Shearer to have any more Free Love and Soul vehicles because they might endanger her popularity” and believed this to be proof that fans were not “an open-minded and democratic people” (6). A short letter in *Photoplay* in November, however, deplored the “glamour” of actresses like Shearer and instead asked for more “sweet” roles, played by actresses such as Janet Gaynor (15). Clearly, as the year drew to a close, discussions on

Shearer and the kinds of roles she played raged across the magazines; for the first time, backlash against Shearer did not occur because of her supposed privilege, but because of her excessive modernity and sexual sophistication on screen.

4.4 - 1932

Magazine coverage throughout this year echoed a number of tropes from previous years, such as an emphasis on Shearer's marriage and motherhood, but also her modernity. In January 1932, *Photoplay* started with an anecdote in which Shearer bought her 15-month old son a puppy, as well as a \$100 doghouse for the puppy (93), thus reiterating both the idea of Shearer as a good, involved mother and as a very wealthy (and thus very privileged) woman. This double emphasis on (good) respectability and (bad) privilege returned in *Picture Play* that same month, in a short item focusing on the Shearer-Thalberg marriage and highlighting, on the one hand, the extent to which the couple were "meant for each other from the beginning", but also emphasized their professional relationship and the fact that Shearer was in many ways Thalberg's discovery and, it is implied, product (44). Thus, the item once more celebrates the marriage as an ideal love match, but also as a union which might potentially bring Shearer unfair advantages.

Shearer is still represented at this time as a smart, savvy, practical modern, as well; in August, for example, she discussed the virtues of the short bob hairstyle in *The New Movie Magazine* as both smart and convenient for young women (110). Other articles, even those on her marriage, equally emphasized her sensible mind; in November, *The New Movie Magazine* published some of Shearer's marital advice for newlyweds. On the one hand, Shearer emphasized the importance of a "romantic attitude" towards one's spouse even years after marriage, but at the same time she also characterized her own marriage as a

“smoothly running home machinery”, which allows her to “pursue a brilliant career”. As such, she advocates both companionate marriage (for love) and a sensible, well-organised and practical approach to domestic matters (74, 78), both modern ideas. However, once more, the more radical emphasis on the sexual single standard, which originated in 1931, returned as well and became a key element of Shearer’s star persona at this time.

In this regard, April *Motion Picture* published an article entitled “Norma Shearer Tells What A ‘Free Soul’ Really Means”. Here, Shearer proposed that sophisticated women were “better wives than the so-called ‘virtuous women’ of another age – who knew how to sew a fine seam, and knew nothing, whatever, about living”. She hopes her son, too, finds such a woman, and claims she would not care if her son’s future bride had had affairs, since women “who have never had anything of their very own in their lives, like loving leeches, destroy the lives of their children with self-pitying love and drag their husbands to old age or open rebellion with neuroses, imagined ill-health or nagging”.

Shearer stresses here that while women have some physical limitations – such as the inability to have children after a certain age – they do not have any emotional limitations anymore and should be able to do whatever a man does – provided they are sensible and ambitious. The article ends with the following statements, attributed to Shearer:

I feel that the morals of yesterday are no more. They are as dead as the day they were lived. Economic independence has put woman on exactly the same footing as man. A discriminating man and a fastidious woman now amount to the same identical thing. There is no difference.

A woman to-day is good, or she is bad, according to the way she does a thing – and not because of the thing itself.

An adventure may be worn as a muddy spot or it may be worn as a proud insignia. It is the woman wearing it who makes it the one thing or the other. (96)

Never before had magazine coverage on Shearer expressed these viewpoints so clearly, outside a cinematic context. Previously, coverage on Shearer had posited that not only was it acceptable for women to have careers, it was encouraged and made them better wives. This article went miles further, in suggesting that not only was it acceptable for women to have sexual affairs before (and without) marriage, but that this, too, was encouraged and made such a woman a better wife and mother eventually. Women could do exactly the same things men could, and should not be blamed any more than men should; the single standard, to Shearer, was a requirement of modern life.

This further step toward the progressive and modern, however, also lay at the base of the increasing backlash against Shearer throughout this year. This backlash was not related to her privilege or aristocratic image, but instead, once more, to her scandalous modernity.

In January, *The New Movie Magazine* published a letter entitled “Why, Oh, Why?”, which deplored that both Shearer and Constance Bennett tended to play “the part of a mistress or a woman who falls” even though the letter writer admitted “they fall so gracefully”. The author suggests that even though “some people believe *Strangers May Kiss*”, he or she would appreciate Shearer far more as “a virtuous woman and not as a Free Soul or Divorcee treading the primrose path” (99). In February, *Motion Picture* published a similar and rather mocking letter which included, among its “new year’s resolutions”, the intention to “try to find out what keeps Norma Shearer warm with so few clothes” (106).

More broadly, as well, the magazines highlighted Shearer as a star playing particularly sophisticated and morally problematic roles, as well as the impact these roles might have on audiences. In April, *The New Movie Magazine* mentioned that “down South, the censors are so careful of the morals of the people that they won’t let Bob Montgomery make love to

Norma Shearer for fear of putting ideas in Young Heads” (50), which, while essentially a mockery of censorship, still singled out Shearer’s films as particularly objectionable, and in May, *Motion Picture* published a reader’s letter which stated the opinion that films such as *A Free Soul* teach not only “the breaking of the laws of man, but the laws of God” (6). The film, the writer claimed, allowed young girls to believe that they can “go wrong how and when [they] wish, and [their] Prince Charming is waiting just around the corner ready to forgive and forget. Bunk!” This emphasis on the leading astray of young women would, a few years later, become a strong motivation for the stricter enforcement of the Hays Code, as my next section will demonstrate.

Other letters and treatments of Shearer in the magazines specifically singled out the discrepancy between Shearer’s private life and her on-screen life as especially shocking. Particularly the release of *Private Lives* caused a veritable storm of such letters in *Photoplay* in March of this year. Alongside an image of the on-screen fistfight between Shearer and costar Robert Montgomery, the magazine printed the text “Why Mrs Thalberg, that’s no way for a lady to act! And you, with a boy of your own!” and claimed that “it was pretty generally agreed that Mrs Thalberg wasn’t the type to play the capricious Amanda” (6). It is interesting here that Shearer’s private life, but particularly her status as a lady (evoked by the continued use of the title “Mrs Thalberg” to indicate Shearer), is used here to demonstrate why her playing roles such as this is particularly inappropriate. A series of letters underlined this: while one praised Shearer’s talent as a comedienne, two others expressed shock and disgust. The first simply did not like this “new Norma [...], no longer alluring, who fought and kicked like a rowdy and shrieked like a shrew”, but the second went further than this and stated that:

Norma Shearer is known as a faithful wife, a devoted mother and an exemplary character in her “private life”. Why did she have to be dragged through the cheap role she played in *Private Lives*? There she played tag marriage, divorce and re-marriage. Mr. Playwright, keep congruity between the stars and their roles. (10)

During the next few months, this question about Shearer’s sophisticated on-screen yet respectable off-screen life continued taking up space on the pages of these magazines. In May of this year, *Photoplay* published a reader’s letter entitled “In Defense of Norma”, which posited that the fact that Shearer was “a devoted wife and mother” did not mean she could not play a “capricious, shrewish young woman” such as Amanda in *Private Lives*, since she was the only star with the “sparkle and sophistication” to play this role (11). This letter praises Shearer, but also draws a clear line between her off-screen and on-screen lives; she plays these roles in spite of her real self.

The topic of sophistication also appeared in discourse about Shearer’s future roles during this year. As early as February, *Photoplay* announced that Shearer would no longer “say those smart lines nor wear those revealing gowns”; instead, “it’s a right about face to the sweet and simple for Mrs Irving Thalberg”, who would soon star in *Smilin’ Through* and other, similar films. Shearer, the magazine states, can be trusted to keep up with the newest trends, and the star thus knows that “it’s wise to go and sin no more cinema sins”. The item also notes that while husband Irving Thalberg “has always preferred Norma sweet”, Shearer herself “loves the sophisticated stuff and no hours were too long for studio fittings if the dress was as shocking as possible” (36-7). This once more stressed the importance of the sartorial within Shearer’s sexually transgressive roles, but, more crucially, it also emphasized Shearer’s agency in choosing her own roles, and thus her approval of these roles. At the same time, it characterized her also as smart enough to know which type of movie sells best, even if this goes against her own inclinations.

Towards the end of the year, then, as *Smilin' Through* (Franklin, 1932) and *Strange Interlude* (Leonard, 1932) were released, the emphasis in coverage shifted even further away from sophistication, with one film a sentimental, historical melodrama and the other a family drama. Whereas July still featured, in *Picture Play*, a condemnation of Shearer as a bad “keeper of our morals” (10), it also, in *The New Movie Magazine*, indicated the new direction Shearer was now taking, as a “sweet thing” in *Smilin' Through* (122). This continued throughout the next months; in August, *Photoplay* printed an item on Shearer’s “right-about-face”. This letter mentions that the public was “annoyed” with Shearer for “substituting glamour for romance”, and fans wrote letters begging her to go back to romance, since they had “enough shady dames without little Mrs Thalberg”. It goes on to say that “several mothers, who always allowed their children to see Norma Shearer’s films, wrote to her, begging her to return to straight dramatic roles and clean pictures that children could see” (90). As such, Shearer’s own domestic status as Mrs Thalberg, wife and mother, is evoked once more – although interestingly, the article also claims Shearer obeyed these letters not out of sentimentality, but because she is a “smart girl”.

In November, two more such items were published, one as a review of *Smilin' Through* in *Photoplay*, which praised Shearer for her transition from “sophisticated heroines” to “this charming, old-fashioned girl” (56). The second is an image with caption published in *Picture Play*; Shearer is here shown as one of her characters in *Smilin' Through*, the Victorian, blonde, hoop-skirted Moonyeen Clare, and the caption reads that “the sophisticated modern heroine with her code of free love hasn’t satisfied the majority [of the public] after all and is rejected as shallow and false” (19). As such, Shearer’s role in *Smilin' Through* is used to criticize her own previous films, and to some extent, the commercial success of the

film bore this out, as *Smilin' Through* became MGM's third most profitable film of the 1931-2 season (*Appendix I – MGM Financial Data, 1992: 4*).

At this time, the element of nobility always present within Shearer's star persona was once more stressed more strongly than the sophisticated emphasis of earlier months, as well. This is apparent especially in the coverage of *Strange Interlude*; even though the plot of this film dealt with adultery and female sexuality, as many of Shearer's earlier films had, it was also based on a Eugene O'Neill play, and the experimental use of sound to show the characters "thinking out loud" in the film led to a reading connected more to the



Figure 28: An advertisement for *Strange Interlude*.

artistic nature of the film than to any potential transgressive elements of its narrative. In September, the film's *Photoplay* review praised it for its "significance [as a] contribution to screen art" and invited all "high-brow critics" to support it (52). Similarly, its advertisement in *Motion Picture* that same month did not stress the transgressive nature of Shearer's character, as previous such advertisements had, but praised the film as a "new and amazing development in talking pictures" (2). The ad retained little of the provocative nature of previous such images (Fig. 28).

Other magazine items, based more on Shearer's private life, reiterated the noble nature of the star. In July, *Picture Play* published an item entitled "The Bon-ton Passion", describing how Shearer had Lady Maureen Stanley, the daughter-in-law of the Earl of Derby, as a house

guest and deeming this “another triumph [...] by this ambitious and clever star” (61). In September, *Photoplay* published an item on Shearer’s famous formal teas, which it encouraged readers to emulate, and also published an image of Shearer alongside “first lady of the stage” Katharine Cornell; both these items lent Shearer additional credibility, both as a Hollywood social leader and as a member of a more high-brow art world.

In this sense, a familiar dynamic within Shearer’s star image thus became reversed; during previous years, Shearer’s modernity had been used as a way of damage control against her privileged and aristocratic image, but now, this very same aristocratic image was used to counter what was perceived as an excessive modernity, particularly in terms of the sexual single standard. Shearer was essentially modern, but safely and non-threateningly so, because she also retained an aristocratic and spotlessly respectable public image.

4.5 - 1933

The year started with additional debate on Shearer’s move away from sophistication toward sweeter and less transgressive roles; this was highlighted in, for example, the *Smilin’ Through* review in *Picture Play*, published in January. This review started out by pointing out that “Norma Shearer, no longer a free soul, a divorcee, or whatever else her liberal heroines may be called, recaptures a bygone mood and triumphs completely” (47). A reader’s letter in *Motion Picture*, that same month, expressed a similar sentiment about the film, stating that:

It was a pleasure to see Norma Shearer play the part of a good, wholesome woman, worthy of the love of a man like Fredric March. For so long, Miss Shearer has portrayed the part of “anybody’s woman” that she was beginning to appear to me as a little tarnished. (84)

The letter also interestingly pointed out that “if more pictures such as this would be placed before the youth of America, love would be looked upon as something sacred instead of a cheap plaything that can be broken to bits and tossed aside, feeling that there will be plenty more where that came from” (84). This echoed criticism from censors at the time, who feared that “sophisticated” pictures would negatively influence the morals of young people and now cast Shearer in the role of a star who might have a good influence on young people.

At the same time, Shearer’s transition into on-screen sweetness was by no means universally seen as a permanent or even particularly significant development, and to many fans and magazine writers alike, the star clearly remained a representative of the sophisticated woman. Two letters in *Picture Play* that same January demonstrate this. The first mocks a previous letter writer, who likened particular stars to their roles; the writer here points out that, if this were the case, Norma Shearer would be “a gay modern of decidedly loose morals”, which she is not. This was clearly the screen image many fans held of Shearer at this time (6). A second letter, mocking the hypocrisy of screen reformers, noted that everyone has known for a long time that, among others, Norma Shearer films are not for children (10). Often, Shearer’s own approval of her sophisticated roles is also connected to this; this same month, *Picture Play* noted that it was “somewhat to her dismay” that Shearer found out that “the sophisticates greatly prefer the latter [i. e. her sweeter roles] to her essays in smartness” (21).

In February, *Picture Play* published a longer article essentially examining the way Shearer continued to be a very divisive star among fans; the magazine used some of the fan letters I have quoted here earlier to underline this idea and also discussed the role of Shearer’s

sophistication (or lack thereof) in her popularity. Here, *Picture Play* suggested that while Shearer had now made a “romantic and old-fashioned” film, her next film would be *La Tendresse*⁵, which “offers a promiscuous, love-cheating protégée – and more than that – of a famous playwright. This is essentially the type Norma has made her forte since *The Divorcee*, and which has induced all the frenzied arguments” (36). This article, too, noted that Shearer enjoyed her “colorful heroines” in particular, and quotes Shearer discussing her roles, noting that her characters usually need a “transition to become worldly”, she becomes sophisticated “due to things that happen to me”, because if she just stayed “sweet and appealing, [...] the roles would become very dull and lacking in interest”. Shearer is thus not simply a vamp like Garbo or Dietrich; her characters are thinking, sensible women, who opt to become sophisticated because that decision makes sense within their lives (68). Just like the star is always represented as having agency in choosing her own sophisticated roles, her sophisticated characters are always given agency in choosing their sophisticated lives. This is yet another difference between Mary Dugan and the characters who succeeded her; whereas Mary became sexually transgressive almost accidentally and in order to be financially secure, characters such as Jerry in *The Divorcee* or Kitty in *Let Us Be Gay* chose their modern lifestyles because they wanted to, without any external considerations. This was far more controversial.

⁵ This film was ultimately never made, due to Shearer’s career hiatus as a result of her husband’s illness.

This duality between Shearer's modernity and her respectability was also applied, again, to her actual off-screen star persona and especially her marriage; in January, *The New Movie Magazine* described Shearer as "a fifty-fifty woman – the kind men want to protect and to be protected from at the same time". This combination of sweetness and "daring [and] speculation" is, according to the magazine, why her marriage is so successful. And "even though she's scheduled to play a sweetly romantic role or two you can depend upon it we'll never lose sight of Norma, the siren, again" (84). In June, this "fifty-fifty woman" focus was demonstrated physically by *Photoplay*, as it contrasted both halves - top and bottom – of Shearer's face. The lower half of her face was one of "true beauty", the upper half is where "beauty gives way to a definite allure" (31) – and these two elements essentially connect with the noblewoman/sophisticate dichotomy that continued to run through Shearer's star image and really defined the rest of her 1933 coverage.



Figure 29: Shearer and her "two personalities".

The idea of Shearer as noblewoman appeared frequently within discourse on the Thalberg marriage, and in March, *Picture Play* published two reader's letters dealing with Shearer's exalted social status. One responded to an earlier letter by noting that "ninety-five per cent of the Who's Who that winter here or pass through during the year, think that Norma is the last word in culture and refinement" (10). A second one noted that Shearer had recently been elected to the office of vice president of the Mayfair club, even though no actor or

actress had accomplished this previously; she is clearly distinguished in the social world (11). That same month, *The New Movie Magazine* exhorted readers to watch Shearer films if they wished to master the social graces. “There is an actress who reaches perfection in grace when she pours tea, greets callers, does any of the small social acts that fall daily to many women” (112).

In July, *The New Movie Magazine* noted that Shearer presided over some of “the most brilliant and exclusive salons” in Hollywood” and was one of a group of “social arbiters [who] have broken down the upper-set walls of Pasadena and Santa Barbara where once a screen actor was regarded as more or less of an ‘untouchable’” (33). In November, *Silver Screen* published an article entitled “Who Will Be Queen of Hollywood?” and noted that Shearer was a likely candidate for the position of “social leader” there, since she had “charm, elegance, friends, position (her husband, Irving Thalberg, is wealthy, successful, important) and popularity” (60). Shearer was clearly at the very center of the higher echelons of respectable Hollywood – and to some extent Southern Californian – social life.

Of course, this aura of respectability, fed by the Thalberg marriage, also led to further accusations of entitlement and privilege; in April, *Picture Play* published no less than three readers’ letters on this topic alone. The first complained – a good three years after the fact – about Shearer ever having received an Oscar, stating that “to run the gamut of emotions in exactly similar fashion as she had done on innumerable occasions previously did not entitle Mrs Thalberg to that insignificant award that heaps so much valuable publicity on the head of the chosen one” (11). The second concluded that “Mrs Irving Thalberg’s conception of any role she attempts, from society girl to neurotic matron, or sweet young thing, is never convincing to me” (14). A third letter, then, made the connection to Shearer’s marriage

directly; while the writer is not as negative, and in fact expresses an admiration of some of Shearer's work, he or she nonetheless ends the letter by telling Shearer

Come on, Norma, get husband Thalberg to find you another "Private Lives" and study the word "egoism" and you will find the meaning of it is not so hot. (11)

The idea that Shearer got all her roles simply by asking her husband for them, thus often surpassing other, more talented stars, was still firmly ensconced at this time. This is underlined further in the ways the letters choose to refer to Shearer; the two most negative letters here refer to her as "Mrs Thalberg" and "Mrs Irving Thalberg", respectively, whereas more positive letters usually use her first name. Thus, a negative opinion of Shearer is usually connected to her supposedly advantageous marriage.

At the same time, the emphasis on Shearer's sophisticated nature surfaced again within rhetoric on her marriage, as is demonstrated in an article on Shearer's marital advice, published in *Photoplay* in February. Here, a strong emphasis is put once more on the importance of a woman's retaining her own identity after marriage, with Shearer encouraging women to pursue their own careers and saying that:

I sincerely believe that, instead of giving up a career for love, a woman should take up a career. It makes her more interesting, more capable of inspiring and holding her husband's love. (117)

Even if a woman is unable to pursue a professional career, she should look for "any outside interest, any vital and absorbing work or hobby, which will keep her alert and alive" (117).

The element of sophistication returned both in casual descriptions of Shearer as a "chic young modern" (*Motion Picture*, June 1933: 92), and images of her in the latest fashions, such as "mess jackets" for women (*Motion Picture*, September 1933: 43), but also in longer

articles, such as “‘It’s A Grand Adventure,’ Says Norma Shearer”, published in *Photoplay* in October. Here, Shearer once again commented on “modern marriage”. On the one hand, she admitted to an old-fashioned insistence to go everywhere together as a married couple because

I don’t like to give him the chance to find he can get along without me. On the other hand, he says he wouldn’t trust me as far as you can throw a piano. (123)

At the same time, however, the star also praises the modern age, since the fact that girls now have “earning capacity” of their own means that they must no longer compromise and marry the first available party, but instead “the people who do stay married do so for no other reason than that they like each other better than anyone else in the world” (123). As such, Shearer once more speaks out for companionate marriage and underlines that while she is not a divorcée, this is the case because her marriage is happy, not because it is an obligation she could never decently escape.

Shearer thus became, on-screen and off, an icon for what *Picture Play* called, that February, “respectable sophistication” (66). This was reiterated by *The New Movie Magazine* in May, when that publication credited Shearer for showing us “what a really ‘nice’ woman can do” in terms of sophistication (112). Shearer was essentially nice and respectable, but also incontrovertibly a modern.

However, in April of this year, a new trope appeared within the rhetoric on the Shearer-Thalberg marriage, in the form of the mention of an event which would crucially impact Shearer’s star image for the rest of this year and, perhaps, for the rest of her career. In this month, *Motion Picture* printed a short item noting that

Irving Thalberg, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer executive and husband of Norma Shearer, is now on the road to recovery after a very serious illness caused by a run-down condition and severe heart attacks. Norma has been in constant attendance and her picture work has been postponed. (93)

Particularly in the May issues of each magazine, this became key Shearer news. *Photoplay* instantly printed an editorial article, headed by an image of Shearer, Thalberg and their small son, Irving Jr., and entitled “Norma’s Love Comes First”. The image is captioned

Husband, baby, happy family life! Isn’t this worth a sacrifice of one’s personal ambitions? Norma thinks it is, and is risking her movie career to safeguard the fulfillment we here see of every real woman’s heart. (31)

The article, which also focuses extensively on Shearer’s home and her relationship with her two-year old son, conveys Shearer’s feelings about her husband’s recent illness; it made her realise that “no career, no one picture, would ever be big enough or important enough to take [her] away from [Thalberg]” when he needed her (31). As such, both she and the child would be joining him on a recuperative trip to Europe.

It is therefore primarily a conservative statement, particularly in the context of Shearer’s reputation for smart modernity, and ties Thalberg’s illness into a wider narrative of Shearer’s development as a person.

Norma has always talked fast – she thinks fast – but it seems to me that there is a mellowness rounding the crisp edges of her words these days. Philosophy is taking a deeper hold on her. She appeared as gay and carefree as of old, but a new and very attractive quality of repose has superseded her former smart audacity. It’s a lovely development. (98)

Other magazines also highlighted Thalberg’s illness during this month. *Motion Picture* announced the news in a small, special announcement, noting that Shearer was “always the wife before the movie star” (38) – then reiterated it in a short blurb related to the lack of article on Shearer’s new clothes for her latest picture, stating that “Norma has gone abroad

with her husband on a 'recuperation holiday'" (81). *Modern Screen* announced that "Norma Shearer says no picture is important enough to keep her away from her husband" (84).

Picture Play waited until June to state that "Norma Shearer's plans are somewhat indefinite. She has been taking care of her husband, who has been seriously ill" and that "When he is rested and strong again, she will start thinking about her career" (65).

Nonetheless, the *Photoplay* article published in May was also permeated to some extent with traces of Shearer's previously established ambitious, sensible star person. After all, this article also quotes Shearer as stating that:

Of course, if I had been in the middle of a picture, it would have been wrong for me to have stayed at home, no matter how ill Irving was. You can't expect forgiveness for holding up a costly production under almost any circumstances. And Irving would never have permitted me to do so. (98)

Therefore, Shearer and Thalberg form a loving family, which is Shearer's first priority, but nonetheless, both parties are also aware of her professional obligations and accept these as reasonable and important.

This mixture between the modern and the traditional also appeared in more general treatments of the Shearer-Thalberg love story, which received more coverage at this time due to Thalberg's illness. This is illustrated perhaps particularly in an article entitled "The Love Behind a Film Throne", which was published in *The New Movie Magazine* in May of this year. The article promised readers "the story of one of the greatest movie romances and its glamorous principals" (37), but ultimately proved a simple reiteration of Shearer's life story before she ever came to Hollywood and only dealt with the Thalberg marriage tangentially at the very end. Here, it reiterated the importance of their careers to the couple, while also stressing once more that Shearer did not, indeed, owe her career entirely to unfair

advancement by Thalberg. “Neither,” it states, “could mate with failure. [...] Her earning power is more than a quarter of a million dollars a year” (106). At this point, other coverage, as well, resists rather than reiterates the idea of Shearer’s unfair advantages; a reader’s letter in *Picture Play* in August of this year affirms this as well, when it refers to Shearer as “a fine actress and a beauty” but points out that her greatest professional handicap “lies in the fact that she is the ‘lucky Mrs. Thalberg’” (14). Shearer is not, the letter notes, advantaged because of her marriage, but rather disadvantaged. She is a serious, talented career woman who simultaneously enjoys a happy marriage.

Even the final article of the year which deals with Thalberg’s illness – “Ready for Work...”, printed in *Modern Screen* in October of this year – balanced out the idea of Shearer as a sacrificial and loving wife with the sense of Shearer as a very capable, modern woman. After all, the article notes, Shearer did not simply care for her husband while he was ill, but also had to deal with “studio upheavals [...] as best she could, alone. [...] She had to take his place, as nearly as she could, in studio tasks which required immediate attention” (43).

Shearer is cast here in a very active role, as a woman who can take care of complex business matters while simultaneously caring for a seriously sick husband and organizing a European trip. Finally, while she prioritized Thalberg’s health while in Europe, upon their return she instantly “found herself eager to get back – with an eagerness for her work she had not felt in months. Within her there was a terrific urge not simply to do a job well, but to give something fine to her work” (109). Thus, Shearer is not wholly domesticated by the incident, but instead makes a rational decision to prioritise her husband’s health issues, only to then think again of her career after the danger has passed.

The clash – or collaboration – between the noble and the sophisticated returned once more in *Photoplay* in December in an article entitled “They’re All Queening It”, which focused on a number of stars who would be playing queens during the next year. In terms of Marie Antoinette, who would be played by Shearer, the article emphasizes particularly her dignity and courage in the face of tragedy, but also pointed out that “Shearer is, in certain respects, the antithesis of the tragic Antoinette” (89). Clearly, as a sophisticated, sensible modern, the notion of utter tragedy was alien to Shearer’s star persona at this time, even in spite of the conservative influence of Thalberg’s illness. By the time Shearer actually played Marie Antoinette, five years later, the situation would be entirely different in this regard, as in many others.

4.6 - 1934

The first few months of 1934 reiterated some of the coverage on Thalberg’s illness, and particularly used Shearer’s role in caring for her ill husband to praise her as an excellent wife and to present her marriage as an extremely successful one. In January, *Motion Picture* noted that Shearer’s last picture was released in October 1932, since the star had taken “a leave of absence to minister to her ill husband, Irving Thalberg”; the world, it added, “much as it missed her, cheered”, since this proved that “her marriage means more to her than her career” (43). In February, *Screenland* offered Shearer “the bed of lilies” for her “having the courage to leave her career at its height and devoting herself to her husband when he needed her” (85). That same month, a reader’s letter in *Modern Screen* offered “a carload of orchids” for the same reason, admiring “her pluck for staying with her husband, walking away from the public as she did” (116). In March, *Picture Play* went further and included Shearer and Thalberg in an article entitled “Tragic Mansions”, which noted that

All his box-office success and money have not been able to buy health for Irving Thalberg. [...] It is superfluous to add that his condition is a source of constant worry to Norma Shearer and himself. And that they would sacrifice, in a moment, all their worldly goods could they but secure his complete well-being. (52)

Thus, Shearer and Thalberg's marriage was highlighted as a truly companionate and loving one, but this article also linked the couple, for the first time, explicitly to tragedy. This would become an important part of Shearer's star persona throughout the years to come.

More generally, however, the couple featured in magazines even more than before as a demonstration of a functioning and healthy Hollywood marriage. In February, *The New Movie Magazine* accompanied a "beguiling" image of Shearer with a blurb ending in the following lines

Alluringly beautiful, Miss Shearer is one of the few women leading a professional life who has been capable of being a successful wife and mother at the same time. Holds the love of her public as well as that of her husband and child. Deserves great congratulations. (21)

In March, a reader wrote to *Photoplay* to cast her vote to nominate Shearer and Thalberg as "Hollywood's Ideal Couple", since "in spite of great success, they are unaffected. I believe they have found everlasting happiness" (12). In May, then, the magazine published a large image of Shearer and Thalberg in the letters section stating that "by readers' votes, received over a period of four months, Norma Shearer and her husband Irving Thalberg have been acclaimed Hollywood's Ideal Couple" (10). This was an accomplishment indeed, considering Thalberg did not even appear on the screen. That same month, *The New Movie Magazine* published an article entitled "The Norma Shearer Irving Thalberg Loves", which is framed, for the most part, as an interview with Thalberg. The article largely serves to balance out reports of Shearer's public image as an extremely well-composed, aristocratic society lady with some personal anecdotes about Shearer's occasional (but essentially well-meaning) fits

of temper and sense of adventure and concludes that she is a hard-working, sensible, but exciting and interesting young woman, without a trace of snobbery.

The final page of the article is the most interesting, however, in that it really reiterates a number of key elements of Shearer's coverage over the years. Firstly, of course, it briefly discusses Shearer's sacrifices for Thalberg's health; Shearer "unhesitatingly risked everything" for her husband, and he feels "humble [...] before such self-sacrifice".

Additionally, Thalberg contradicts the idea that Shearer "used her position as [his] wife to further her own ends", and in fact remembers that it was she who decided she wanted to play Jerry in *The Divorcee*, despite his own wishes, and that, like every star, she carefully campaigned to try and convince Thalberg of her suitability for the role. "The results," he states, "justified her instincts"; Shearer is intelligent and insightful about the direction she wants her career to take, without using her position as an unfair advantage. He concludes by calling Shearer "a modern young married woman", who "clings to all the phases of her varied life" and who can "leave a gay party in one room to tell her son a bed-time story in the other". Additionally, Thalberg concludes

Never, for an instant, has the breath of scandal touched her. She is a lady in Hollywood – and I am proud to her husband. (71)

Shearer's double nature – lady and sophisticate – as a person and as a star was in fact dealt with more widely throughout this year, as she starred once more in an explicitly sophisticated film, *Riptide*, for the first time since 1931. In January, for example, *Motion Picture* referred to Shearer as "a lady at all times" who "plays the siren with beautiful subtlety" and while "escaping vulgarity" (84); Shearer was a sophisticate in a high-class way.

Nonetheless, as ever, the sophisticated nature of the film was once more cause for some backlash; by July, a reader's letter in *Screenland* wished for "a chance for Norma Shearer to play once again a genuine lady, the intelligent, courageous gentlewoman that she can perform with reality and conviction" (8). That same month, a similar letter in *The New Movie Magazine* noted that "it actually hurt to see the beautiful and accomplished Norma Shearer in such a role" (95), and in August, a Shearer fan wrote to *Silver Screen* defending Shearer against the "vile criticism" she had been getting for *Riptide*, but noted nonetheless that "it is not the type of characterization we like to see our Norma portray" (10). This was also a part of the treatment of Shearer's second film of 1934, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, in which she played the role of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In September, *Screenland* printed a number of stills from the film, featuring Shearer in a Victorian gown with her hair in ringlets, and juxtaposed this page of "Victorian Romance" with Constance Bennett embodying "Modern Love" on the page opposite (36). In October, an ad for the film in *Picture Play* explicitly connected it to *Smilin' Through*, made two years before, as Shearer's other great step away from sophistication (2).

This time, however, the criticism of Shearer's sophisticated roles did not simply come from a relatively small segment of her fans, or even from the magazines themselves, but also from external sources invested in the enforcement of cinema censorship – particularly as the Hays Code was enforced from July of this year onward. This topic came up time and again especially throughout the final four months of this year. In September, *The New Movie Magazine* wondered whether Shirley Temple would prove to be Mae West's successor, since "reformers are massing with threats of blacklist and boycott against what they term screen indecency" (72). Aside from West and George Raft, Shearer was the only star singled

out as a part of this “indecent” issue; “a strong guard is urged over all pictures starring Norma Shearer because she’s been playing loose ladies” (72).

That same month, an article in *Modern Screen*, entitled “Let’s Fight for Our Movies”, harshly condemned the new enforced censorship and named a number of films which, in the new circumstances, could no longer be made. Shearer’s films *The Divorcee*, *A Free Soul* and *Riptide* were among these films (27, 76). This same issue also commented that “The League for Decency”, a religious, pro-censorship group, had decided that “Norma Shearer’s pictures were the most demoralizing films made in Hollywood”. This was the case because

Norma, they insinuated, was a more “sinning” screen lady than even Mae West, because Norma, who looked and acted like a lady, was permitted to get away with anything including screen “infidelity and divorce.” Norma’s picture *Riptide* was held up as the horrible example. (114)

In this way, Shearer’s spotless reputation was seen as actually enhancing the dangers she and her films posed to audiences; this echoes the point raised by Lea Jacobs and reiterated in my literature review, in which an attractive and respectable woman committing a transgression is seen as more dangerous, because she makes the transgression seem more tempting and normalized.

In October, *Picture Play* noted that Shearer’s marriage to Thalberg was also a part of the censorship effort against her films and cited an “editorial on the subject”:

It seems typical of Hollywood morality that a husband as production manager should constantly cast his charming wife in the role of a loose and immoral woman. [...] We advise a strong guard over all pictures which feature Norma Shearer. (13)

In November, *The New Movie Magazine*, too, reported that “screen reformers list Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford and Carole Lombard as the first, second and third bad women of the films” (44). Shearer was clearly particularly singled out by reformers at this time.

Nonetheless, her penchant for off-screen sophistication was still equally strong by December, when *Photoplay* published an article entitled “Let’s Be Civilized About Sex”. The article began

Norma Shearer Says –

SEX should figure in every picture story
SEX should never be regarded as vulgar
SEX should be approached subtly, suavely
SEX in screen productions is revitalizing (45)

The article was accompanied by images from *Riptide* and *A Free Soul* and – in the middle – a candid picture of Shearer with her husband. Although it started out expressly stating that Shearer (like all stars) had been asked by the studio not to discuss censorship, this mention in and of itself tied the article to the censorship debate. Here, Shearer stated that “sex is an important part of life and should be in every picture. It is electricity, color, vitality. It is the manner in which it is conveyed that shocks, angers, or wins an audience” (45). Particularly, “never should sex be regarded as vulgar. Anyway, we have recovered from that state of mind in the last century, I hope” (45). Shearer then goes on to discuss a number of her screen roles, singling out particularly *A Free Soul* as “as close to the primitive, elemental sex-urge as any [role] I have ever played” (106) and concluding that

Sex is terribly important on the screen because, even vicariously, it revitalizes people. It is an integral part of entertainment because it is something alive and stimulating. (106)

In the context of the year 1934, the year of the enforcement of the Hays Code and thus a year in which rhetoric on film censorship ran rampant, this was an extremely controversial statement.

At the same time, however, the article also supported Shearer's reputation as a great lady, noting both the "beautifully uncluttered" nature of Shearer's house – since Shearer "knows the value of space, of an exquisite old satinwood piano, bare of all superfluous decoration" – and well-ordered and intelligent, yet serene and polite nature of Shearer herself. "She looked," the interviewer concludes, "as if she knows what time it is – all the time. But as if it didn't make the slightest difference that afternoon" (106). As such, Shearer's forthright and overt statements about the value of sex in film – and indirectly the futility of censorship of this subject matter - are underlined, rather than contradicted, by her obviously respectable, obviously intelligent off-screen persona. This was a far cry indeed from the image of dull, traditional respectability that would become associated with Shearer afterwards.

4.7 - Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I established the way Shearer's characters in the five pre-Code films I focused on embraced a number of key characteristics of the modern, including companionate marriage, female employment, and the sexual single standard. At the same time, these characters retained a certain middle-class respectability throughout the narrative of their films and emerged happy and blameless at the end, often with the mate of their choosing; they were able to inhabit sexual modernity and guilt-free respectability at the same time and demonstrated how a modern woman was able to have it all.

Although Shearer's off-screen persona as the wife of producer Irving Thalberg would, at first sight, seem to contradict this modern persona, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate that in fact, Shearer's star persona in the magazines closely matched the principles espoused by her characters on screen.

As early as 1930, Shearer's naturally conservative, aristocratic persona was combined with references to her personal ambition and intelligence, in part to counter a narrative of privilege that sprung from her advantageous marriage to a major studio official. Over the course of this year, this narrative of respectable modernity incorporated the rhetoric on *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay*, films Shearer was seen as having chosen for herself, and particularly emphasised the way in which the star believed women should be able to combine a successful, companionate marriage with a successful career, as she herself did. In 1931 and 1932, then, still alongside rhetoric on Shearer's respectable marriage and now motherhood, advocacy for sexual satisfaction within marriage and, in 1932, even for the sexual single standard outside of marriage were added to Shearer's modern star persona. By this point, backlash against the star was no longer purely concerned with her potential privilege as Mrs Irving Thalberg, but also, perhaps more crucially, to her sexual transgression on screen and her radical modernity off screen. As the spectre of censorship appeared within rhetoric on Shearer's roles, then, the magazines started to emphasise her aristocratic nature once more, this time as a measure of damage control against her modernity, rather than the other way around. When she starred in *Smilin' Through* and *Strange Interlude* in 1932, and when she took time out of her career to look after her ill husband in 1933, this conservative persona became more consolidated, and Shearer was praised widely for the good example she set both on and off screen.

Nonetheless, by 1934, as Shearer once more returned to the screen for *Riptide*, it was clear that the rhetoric of modernity and of sexual sophistication surrounding her had never really died down. As the magazines attributed to Shearer views about the crucial importance of sex within the movies, she became, once more, singled out as a star setting a particularly dangerous example – not just within these same magazines, but also, more crucially, by the censors. Norma Shearer - happy wife, successful career woman and advocate for all things modern - echoed the principles set out by the central characters of films such as *The Divorcee* and *Strangers May Kiss*. In this way, Shearer, the happily married divorcee, had become a problem.

SECTION III - SHEARER AND THE CODE

This final section, then, examines the problematic nature of Shearer anno 1934 and traces her development as a star from this moment to the end of her career and beyond. As such, it is two-pronged once more and focuses particularly on the two different ways in which the mid-1930s were a turning point for Shearer, both professionally and personally.

Its first part will be broad and go, in a sense, beyond Shearer and her career; it will focus on the ways in which censorship at this time had as its particular goal to limit the exposure of young women to images of sexual transgression, partially to avoid imitation of this type of behaviour by these same young women. I will thus analyse how the Payne Fund Studies, the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” of 1927 and the final Production Code of 1930 approached this topic, then look more specifically at the Production Code files dealing with a series of Shearer’s pre-Code films in order to identify the issues that would mark these types of narratives as problematic in a post-Code universe.

The second part, then, will deal with the fan magazine coverage related to Shearer from 1934 onward. This will illustrate, on the one hand, the ways in which films such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Marie Antoinette* and *The Women* differed from earlier films in terms of their representation of female sexuality, but also, simultaneously, how this difference – which was in part due to the enforcement of the Code in 1934 – was impacted by the shifts within Shearer’s private life and thus her star persona. After all, while the Production Code was enforced in 1934, it was arguably 1936 that saw the most dramatic development within Shearer’s star image, as Irving Thalberg died and thus transformed the modern, married star into a tragic, aristocratic widow and single mother of two young children. I argue, then, that these twin influences crucially altered Shearer’s star persona at this time, moving her away

from the sexually transgressive modernity she had previously embodied, and condemning her in a sense to a dull, traditional respectability, ultimately rendering her forgettable. In this way, I explain the problems in terms of Shearer's legacy which I highlighted in my introduction and literature review.

Chapter 5 - “A Dangerous Kind of Opium”: Censorship and sexual transgression

5.1 - Introduction

In this chapter, I will take a step back from my specific focus on Norma Shearer to examine the politics of movie censorship in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and to establish how these impacted the reception of Shearer’s “free soul” films and made her the controversial figure she had, I argued in my previous chapter, become by 1934. I will thus demonstrate that movie censorship, alongside the evolution of Shearer’s public image due to particular developments within her private life, is one of the key reasons for the change in direction of her star image.

I will initially use the Payne Fund Studies (PFS) of 1928-32 to examine how they identified why particular films might have been seen as problematic from a censorship standpoint, particularly in terms of the contrast, in this regard, between films focusing on violent crime and films focusing on sexual transgression. I will then look at the way a similar rhetoric imbued actual censorship documents such as the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” of 1927, but particularly the actual finished text of the Code of 1930, as enforced in 1934, to demonstrate the way that particularly sexual transgression – of the kind so obviously present in numerous Shearer films – was seen as a major concern. Finally, I look in more depth at the way the Code was applied to some of the films I discussed in the previous chapters to illustrate once more the controversial nature of Shearer’s films.

5.2 - The Payne Fund Studies (1928-32)

The Payne Fund Studies (PFS) came into being when, in 1928, the Motion Picture Research Council invited a group of sociologists, psychologists and educators connected to various

universities to perform a series of studies examining the effects of the cinema, then relatively new, on young people. Its executive director, William H. Short, applied to the Payne Fund, a charitable organization with an interest in education, for funding, and from 1929 to 1932, the Committee on Educational Research of the Payne Fund produced a series of twelve studies and the beginnings of a never published thirteenth. These works, the first serious and extensive attempt to gauge the impact of cinema on youth, were published between 1933 and 1935 and are known today as *Motion Pictures and Youth*, or the Payne Fund Studies. A fourteenth volume, written by Henry Forman after the twelve completed studies but published slightly beforehand, contained a popularized summary of the Payne Fund Studies' conclusions and was entitled *Our Movie Made Children*.

The first chapter of this summary volume highlighted a number of reasons behind the concern for young people and their reactions to the cinema, such as the "all-pervasive and permeating quality" of the medium, "second in importance, if second it is, only to the art of printing" (Forman, 1934: 1). Citing Dr John J. Tigert, the president of the University of Florida, the text noted that "for the purpose of making and influencing public opinion and thought, the motion picture its present stage is the most powerful influence now known, and as its use increases and its field of operation develops, its power to influence the public will increase" (2). Thus, "many people already perceive the great possibilities for good in the motion picture and are not a little concerned lest it should be exploited in a contrary direction" (1). This "contrary direction" is exactly what the Payne Fund Studies attempted to examine, and what censorship efforts at this time attempted to prevent: the potential negative impact of the movies on the behaviour particularly of young people. I will focus

here particularly, however, on the way in which this impact was seen as a strongly gendered one, with young women somehow especially at risk in highly specific ways.

A difference in the ways boys and girls responded to the cinema could easily be attributed to a difference in their actual cinema-going behaviour, but the statistical information provided by the PFS shows that this was not really the case. In terms of attendance, both groups went to the cinema in great numbers; though Edgar Dale considered the MPPDA estimate of 115,000,000 weekly attendances at the cinema in 1929 overly optimistic and placed the number closer to 79 million, 28 million of these were minors (under twenty-one) and 11 million were children (under fourteen) (Dale, 1935: 72). He estimated that the cinema's audience across all age groups consisted of approximately 10% more men than women, but showed this difference to be smallest in the category of 14 to 21-year olds. Additionally, both boys and girls made the natural progression from going to the cinema with their parents to going to the cinema with friends and went more often at night than to the matinee as they reached their teenage years (Dale, 1935: 25). In terms of the films they went to see, which Dale analysed in great detail in his *Content of Motion Pictures*, approximately 70-80% of all films made in 1920, 1925 and 1930 had love, sex or crime as their major theme, with love as the most popular of the three in each of these years (Dale, 1935b: 124). As such, boys and girls were exposed to the cinema in similar ways and numbers and at least theoretically had the opportunity to see the same films; the PFS do not identify any difference in this basic sense.

Similarly, the PFS do not identify a great deal of gender differentiation within the impact of the cinema on very young children, which is the first type of impact they discuss. A great number of the interviewed college students noted that during their younger years, they

played such games as “cops and robbers” and “cowboys and Indians” or re-enacted specific pictures and divided the roles among them. These games were largely based on the adventure films or serials young children favoured and had action as their key attraction. In this context, the interviewees did mention some gender divide and explained that they often asked a little girl to play with them so “someone could rescue her, as we had seen it done in the movies” (Blumer, 1933: 14). In-game gender divisions were not always so strict, however; one girl noted that though usually one of the participating girls would be chosen to be the “victimized” heroine, captured and then saved, other girls helped “lasso the villain”. Another young woman mentioned that as a child, she was always chosen to play the part of the “policeman” since she was the tallest of her group (Blumer, 1933: 27).

The representation of gender in the PFS becomes more differentiated as they discuss the way adolescents were perceived to imitate the cinema. Whereas preteens primarily imitated the movies’ actual plotlines and focused on the action shown on screen, teenagers testified to the imitation of a wider range of behaviours associated with the movies, sometimes defined in terms of one or more particular stars. These adolescents incorporated elements of the movies not in their imaginative play – a type of imitation the Payne Fund authors found children shrugged off rather easily from game to game – but in their real life. In this regard, the Studies identified three different levels of impact, each of which included a degree of gender differentiation.

The first and most basic level is that of beautification; the movies inspired certain styles of clothing, hair, or make-up. This particular type of impact is associated more strongly with young women than with young men and is linked not simply to movie characters, but also and especially to stars. Girls admitted to imitating a “sleeveless jumper dress” of Clara Bow’s

or a “flapper type of dress” of Joan Crawford’s; they wore their hair to get the same “entrancing effect” as Greta Garbo (Blumer, 1933: 32). Male examples are deeply rooted in stardom as well; one young man noted that people such as John Gilbert inspired him to “dress as best as possible in order to make a similar appearance” (Blumer, 1933: 33). In this context he mentioned sport clothes, evening attire, and formals. This practice is thus, like the children’s games, similar for men and women; nonetheless, a difference in kind makes itself apparent here. After all, the sartorial and tonsorial choices highlighted as espoused by young girls are more potentially problematic; they are “sleeveless”, reminiscent of modern and potentially sexually transgressive “flappers”, and they are embraced in order to achieve an “entrancing” effect – in a way that a male sports suit simply would not.

On a second level in regard to appearances, adolescents are also quoted as adopting certain mannerisms from the movies. Some of these mannerisms were merely aesthetic, such as in the case of one girl, who noted that she attempted to imitate Greta Garbo’s “easy” walk, but was instead asked if she had weak knees (Blumer, 1933: 38). Other mannerisms held a deeper meaning and were mostly concerned with romantic relationships with the opposite sex; one 16-year old girl asked “What movie does not offer pointers in the art of kissing?” and noted that “A young couple sees the art of necking portrayed on the screen every week for a month or so, and is it any wonder they soon develop talent?” (Blumer, 1933: 48-9).

Others highlighted specific details, such as “the manner in which an actor holds and kisses an actress, how long, and the pose they both take” as particularly instructive (49). Such a situation, once again, clearly involved both male and female participants, but was nonetheless clearly more controversial as pertaining to young women, since it was their behaviour which had previously been – and still was – more clearly circumscribed. This

emphasis on the importance of gender, as well as a greater emphasis on gender differentiation, would become clear even in terms of the third level, in which the movies were supposedly influencing young people's very outlook on life.

On this third level, the movies are also shown to teach young people certain more complex attitudes, transcending the superficial level of physical appearances and resemblance to certain stars. In this regard, the cinema is often characterised as an "education", which may be at least as powerful as that received at home, in school, or at church. An example is the story of a girl who dimly remembered that "Mama said, 'Don't kiss the boys'" - just before the forbidden action, inspired by the movies, took place nonetheless (Blumer, 1933: 106-7). As opposed to these other educational institutions, however, the cinema has "no definite goal of conduct" it wishes to inspire and only seeks to stimulate young people's emotions in a relatively unregulated way (Blumer, 1933: 199). In spite of this, a number of the PFS volumes illustrate that retention of movie plot points among children was great (even multiple months after seeing the film in question) and that such plots were able to impact children's views on certain types of behaviour, both for better and for worse. These effects were shown to be relatively long-lasting.

These complex "lifestyles" impacted by the cinema can be divided into three categories as well, the first dealing especially with the cinema's effects on its audience purely through its new and unusual nature as a medium. In this context, the Payne Fund authors quote various factors such as the darkness of the theatre, the size of the screen, the visual directness and "realness" (often through close-ups) of the action, the music accompanying the (silent) movies and even the opulent furnishings of many movie theatres. Charters notes that these may have an effect that he refers to as "emotional possession", in which a child "loses

ordinary control of his feelings, his actions, and his thoughts” (Charters, 1933: 38). This effect is referred to almost as a trance, and Dale refers to it as “a dangerous kind of opium” (Dale, 1935b: 152).

The second and third categories are more strongly connected with the actual narrative elements of the movies; one applies this in a fairly narrow sense, in which a young person may see a delinquent act on the screen and use the cinema as an instruction manual for similar delinquent behaviour in his or her own life, whereas the other is connected to bigger life goals and priorities. Blumer emphasises that the content of the movies is remote from the lives of those who see them, and may as such inspire them to make radical changes – most often for worse – especially if the different lifestyle is depicted as desirable and the methods depicted on screen are shown to be effective in achieving this lifestyle.

I will now use these three categories – of emotional possession, cinema as instruction manual and cinema as an agent for lifestyle change – to analyse in some depth the ways in which the Payne Fund Studies differentiate between male and female delinquency, as impacted by the cinema.

The way cinema-inspired transgression was perceived as gendered is noticeable especially in the *Movies, Delinquency and Crime* volume, where it permeates even the table of contents. Whereas most chapter titles of this volume do not include any markers of gender, chapter five is specifically entitled “Female Delinquency”, which indicates both that Blumer draws a sharp gender distinction in his discussion of cinema-steered transgressions and that the rest of the book is, presumably, primarily concerned with delinquency as associated with males. As such, “male” crimes, according to Blumer, are primarily different kinds of theft and robbery, often accompanied by some kind of violent assault. I will now briefly analyse these

according to the categories of “emotional possession, cinema as instruction manual and cinema as lifestyle change”, and then contrast the outcome with crimes identified instead as “female”.

On the level of emotional possession, these types of crime were especially associated with the feelings of bravado many young men claimed to feel as they watched violent movies, particularly gangster movies; these, alongside “airplane pictures” were also the types of movies preferred by many of the interviewed young men (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 157). These feelings can operate on a mainly physical level, for example in the case of one man who said that he went “through the motions of hitting and moving [his] arms” as he watched a fight scene, but they can also lead to violent feelings and urges that last beyond the time spent watching the actual movie. One young man convinced for robbery and rape noted that even as a young teenager, he came out of the cinema feeling “tough, rough, and hard to beat”, and on one occasion, saw a newspaper boy, “punched him in the kisser” and took \$4.99 from him (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 51).

In terms of the movies’ negative impact through their narrative elements, the plot element considered most crucial is that of luxury; Dale’s study notes that a disproportionate number of all main movie characters – about 40% - were either wealthy or ultra-wealthy (Dale, 1935: 48). Since audience members were therefore likely to come from much more modest backgrounds than the characters they watched, the PFS argue that the movies instilled in young people unaccustomed to such luxury a desire for “the fast life”, which one interviewee described as the ability “to always have plenty of money and ride around in swell machines, wear good clothes, and grab off a girl whenever you wanted to” (Charters, 1933: 39). Additionally, the movies depicted “easy” ways to achieve this type of lifestyle,

often through criminal activities; at least 30% of the main characters of the movies studied either had no occupation, an unknown occupation or an illegal occupation (Dale, 1935: 52). Thus, the PFS argue that the movies created a desire not just for wealth (and all the benefits it entailed) but specifically for easily acquired wealth. Considering the fact that Shuttleworth and May established that movie magazines were quite popular among young people and that even 8% of the “non-moviegoing” children they interviewed still regularly read these publications (Shuttleworth and May, 1933: 4), it is easily imagined that the extravagant off-screen lives of the stars may also have encouraged this desire for luxury.

The issue of movie-induced desire for luxury is clearly linked by the PFS to issues of class; the Studies here argue, perhaps against the “movie-made children” argument in the purest form, that “not all observers of given motion pictures are affected alike” and that the social background of the audience may play a significant role in this difference (Charters, 1933: 149). This is applied especially to working class and immigrant milieus, for three different reasons. Firstly, especially immigrant children could be considered in many ways “blank slates” - even more so than children in general – and as such, the movies may play an important role in teaching them “American” values and goals. The movies tended to define “American life in terms of monetary success” and may thus encourage especially these children to acquire money by whatever means necessary (Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller, 1996: 185). Secondly, the cultural adaptation of second-generation immigrant children means conflicts between “Old World” parents and “New World” children are likely; these children might well, therefore, turn to the movies as their “school” in life (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 161). The third point is perhaps the most important one and certainly the most broadly applicable: it is the idea that images of luxury will affect the most strongly those whose daily

lives are the furthest removed from that luxury – and from the possibility of ever achieving that luxury through legal means. For this reason, the authors argue that working class boys were in an especially vulnerable position.

Girls are also occasionally referred to in terms of theft and robbery; however, by and large, they are associated with a completely different type of delinquency. The aforementioned chapter entitled “Female Delinquency” in Blumer’s *Movies, Delinquency and Crime* differentiates itself from the remainder of the book because it primarily highlights *sexual* transgressions, and because it marks these, rather than any kind of violent or pecuniary crime, as particularly female. I will now use the same three broad categories I used in my discussion of the “male” crimes to analyse these; I will use this classification to show the similarities and differences in how each gender interacts with its “assigned” type of crime.

In regard to women and promiscuity, “emotional possession” is also a crucial factor, but in a different way. Whereas young men may derive from the cinema a feeling of bravado, young women may “experience strong sex desires, sometimes even of a compulsive character” (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 81). This is considered the most vivid form of emotional possession and is mostly stimulated by love pictures, which more than a quarter of the polled girls indicated to be their favourite. Many of the interviewed girls describe this feeling in response to the movies; one sixteen-year old exclaims, upon being asked about this matter, “O! for a life in the movies with a vagabond lover!” (82). This sense of sexual excitement through the movies was so strong that various boys reported that they “used” the cinema in this way: one boy noted he took his girlfriend to a “racy sex movie” and found that, when he took her home, she was “in the vernacular, quite warm” (Blumer, 1933: 115). The authors believed, therefore, that sexual desire experienced during the watching of a

movie could influence real life decisions and even real-life patterns of behaviour. Many girls also testified to movie-induced daydreams of an amorous nature, most often starring themselves opposite their favourite male stars. Sometimes this daydreaming even went beyond the movie universe, as one girl explained when she described she used to daydream of marrying and divorcing all her favourite actors in a row (Blumer, 1933: 66).

Love films are also represented as “instruction manuals” in that many of the interviewed girls noted that certain of their love “techniques” were based on what they saw in the movies. Some of these cases were very practical; one girl noted that she found it educational to see “how two screen lovers manage their arms when they are embracing; there is a definite technique; one arm over, the other under” (Forman, 1934: 151). Others applied the movie-taught knowledge more broadly, such as one girl who, at fifteen, tried to use flirtation techniques she had seen a certain actress (name redacted in the original) perform on the screen. She noted that she got one of her schoolmates to the point where he would “do anything [she] asked”; unfortunately, at this point, “he moved to Iowa and [she] had to start all over” (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 103). Interestingly, young women also expected their male peers to have absorbed similar knowledge from the movies; one girl found her “Prince Charming” rather lacking and complained that she “thought him bashful and a fool for not knowing how to kiss after seeing so many movies” (Blumer, 1933: 48).

It is clear from the above examples that the promiscuity the movies supposedly displayed was also linked rather strongly not just to movie narratives, but also to stardom. The line between character and star was often extremely blurred, and sexual attractiveness was a part of many star personas - as illustrated by one interview, in which a young boy notes that Greta Garbo had “so much ‘it’, she calls it ‘them’” (Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller, 1996: 291).

Crucial elements of this connection are the imagined immoral pitfalls of the acting profession, which are not really a part of the overall argument of the PFS but are nonetheless referred to at numerous points. This is highlighted especially in regard to actresses and the sexual favours they may have performed in order to become stars, and can as such be seen as an extension of the goal of easily acquired wealth mentioned earlier in terms of stars and luxury.

One of the interviews in the unpublished Cressey study⁶ notes the “pseudo-knowledge” many young people appeared to hold as truth about actors and actresses, much of which was entirely untrue and some of which was potentially libellous. These anecdotes mostly refer to the sexual practices of certain stars and include the idea that “female stars of the entire history of the movie industry have gained favor with movie magnates by serving for a time as their mistresses” (Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller, 1996: 181). Similarly, Blumer’s private monograph on *Movies and Sex* (which he initially intended to include in *Movies and Conduct*) includes such notions as “I’ll bet you think Joan Crawford is a virgin!” and “You know what they say about movie stars...” (Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller, 1996: 301). Once again, the supposed reality of stardom is conflated with promiscuity, and this is linked to the actual behaviour of teenage girls in a very real way even by one sixteen-year old herself. This girl noted that “girls of older days, before the movies, were so modest and bashful. They never saw Clara Bow and William Haines”. She went on: “If we didn’t see such examples in the

⁶ This study, entitled *The Community – A Social Setting for the Motion Picture*, was commissioned by the Payne Fund in 1930, but was, due to the rapidly deteriorating personal relationship between author Paul G. Cressey and Payne Fund chairman W. W. Charters, ultimately never finished or published. For further information on this topic, as well as a partial reproduction of the incomplete manuscript, see Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller’s *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy* (pp. 133-216). This same book also included Herbert Blumer’s previously unpublished volume on *Movies and Sex*.

movies where would we get the idea of being 'hot'? We wouldn't" (Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller, 1996: 271).

The third way in which the cinema exerts an impact is through the general type of life it advocates, which was defined in the case of boys and gangsterhood in terms of wealth and the easy acquisition thereof. In the case of girls, therefore, this should translate into a parallel display of promiscuity, geared solely toward achieving various sexual encounters, but closer study of the PFS shows that the real situation is more complex. As the above examples show, sexual transgression was certainly considered a potential result of frequent cinema attendance, both in the case of boys (whose exploits are discussed in Blumer's chapter on "Male Sexual Delinquency") and girls. One girl voices her belief that only "the wild girl or the one that pets gets the one she loves", and similar statements are prevalent among many of the interviewed girls (Blumer, 1933: 52).

Nonetheless, most stories feature a broader kind of lifestyle change of which sexual freedom may be part, but not the essence; girls' multiple desires are shown to be intertwined and tied to what Blumer refers to as "modern life" (Blumer, 1933: 1). This concept, so closely tied to the life and career of Norma Shearer, was what was seen as particularly problematic in regard to the impact of the cinema and girls, and would form a thread through much of the PFS rhetoric on this issue.

This connection between the cinema and female modernity is already present at the level of physical imitation alone; when boys are shown to model their clothing styles on the cinema, they do so in traditional ways in order to look like a wealthy adult – rendering them possibly precocious, but basically socially acceptable. Girls, however, choose "sleeveless jumper dresses", or flapper dresses as their movie-inspired attire and aim to look "bewitching",

rather than good, proper, or like a respectable adult (Blumer, 1933: 32). These clothing choices were, as I pointed out earlier, far more sexually problematic than those made by the boys, but, connected to this, they were also not considered as standalone forays into promiscuity, but instead regarded as an integral feature of a wider, transgressive lifestyle embraced by these women – one of modernity. As such, when Forman talks about ill-behaved girls, he refers to them as “bobbed-haired bandits”⁷, tying their modern hairstyle irrevocably to their transgressive nature (Forman, 1934: 221) .

Beyond appearances, as well, girls’ desires are shown to be a part of a wider behavioural framework of conduct, whereas boys are shown to pursue both money and sex for their own sake. Blumer acknowledges this when he recognizes that oftentimes, girls may be inspired by the movies to aspire to an entire “scheme of life” which involves “fast life”, “good times” and especially, “freedom” (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 87). A number of the stories featured in the *Movies, Delinquency and Crime* volume stress such factors, often linked quite closely to personal independence and to physical and metaphorical freedom and mobility. One fifteen-year old notes the movies do make her want to have a good time, but does not seem to have decided what this “good time” should consist of. She says she enjoys going to “a cabaret or a lively dance” with a young man and that she simply craves excitement – “to be in a noisy crowd” and “to have a hell of a good time”. She also mentions singing the theme song of a certain movie and “mingling with the drinks” as she had seen

⁷ The phrase “bobbed-haired bandit”, in this context, was also likely a reference to real-life criminal Celia Cooney, who became notorious for a short while in 1924 both for her participation in a series of daring New York City robberies and for her identity as a young, attractive female criminal. Cooney was referred to as a “bobbed-haired bandit” in a number of publications, from *True Detective Mysteries* (May 1924, pp. 58-60, 91) to movie-specific periodicals such as *Motion Picture News* (8 March 1924, p. 1084).

“the modern girls of today” do on screen, but she is not especially promiscuous (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 87).

Other stories do mention “going with older boys”, but just as heavily stress a desire for popularity, financial independence, and a career as a singer or model (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 89). Different elements of what these girls refer to as “freedom” are therefore the freedom to date and go out with boys, but also the freedom to experiment with alcohol (and often cigarettes), the freedom to go into forbidden or restricted spaces and the freedom to spend their time with a peer group of their own choice. Just like Shearer’s pre-Code films combined a focus on the sexual single standard with a broader focus on other aspects of modern life – including sartorial modernity, but also the ability to travel alone, to participate in leisure activities, to pursue a successful career, etc. – the Payne Fund Studies also placed potential sexual transgression in such a wider context of independence and mobility.

Connected to this idea of mobility, some girls highlight their restrictive home life most of all, such as one girl who at sixteen was found too young by her father to have any male friends; the movies made her believe this was not quite normal, and she rebelled (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 92). Another girl points out that she took her behavioural cues from the movies, but also from the way she saw her older brother treated by her family. His greater freedom made her believe that “girls should be treated the same as boys by their parents” (Blumer, 1933: 58) – thus echoing once more the idea of the single standard, so very present in both its sexual and non-sexual guise within the Shearer films I analysed in my previous chapter. In fact, the Payne Fund Studies actually use Shearer as an example at this point and claim that Shearer was only moderately successful until she came out as “the

reckless girl" in *The Divorcee*, "ravishing and revealing", and most interestingly, as "almost a torch bearer for the single standard"; they then name films such as *Strangers May Kiss* and *A Free Soul* as further developments of the same pattern (Dale, 1935: 109). Indeed, as I established in the previous chapter, Shearer's characters essentially ask the world to treat women the way it treats men, and this concept of the "single standard" is really a basic element of the gender differentiation of the effects of the movies in the Payne Fund Studies. It is a key element of much of the behaviour here highlighted as "female delinquency".

This idea of the "single standard" highlights another crucial difference between the transgressions committed by boys and girls. Boys' "regular" delinquencies are defined primarily in terms of robbery, theft and violent assault, and their sexual transgressions are often defined in terms of rape; all of these are obvious crimes which involved harm done to someone else's property or person. Legal prosecution for these crimes was possible and was, as many of the interviewees show, carried out. Girls' "crimes", however, are harder to define and in a sense harder to punish, since they do not necessarily transgress against the law, but primarily against common morality and against established custom. Boys commit crimes that may have been exacerbated by what they saw on screen, but that had existed previously. Girls, however, transgress in ways that constitute a radical change away from the way they (but not their male counterparts) had been expected to behave in decades previous. Blumer and Hauser note in this context that "the relatively sheltered life and restricted range of contacts of women as compared with men made female delinquency or crime relatively rare" in the past, but that the modern girl was no longer relatively sheltered and that her range of contacts had broadened radically (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 80). Once again, their crime is that they advocate a change in accepted morality.

One last question that remains in terms of this change, then, is whether the Payne Fund Studies really live up to their *Movie Made Children* conclusion and represent the change entirely as an effect of the cinema. In this context, Blumer's quote on "modern" freedom at the very beginning of his chapter on female delinquency is once again useful, when he states that

formerly, the relatively sheltered life and restricted range of contacts of women as compared with men made female delinquency or crime relatively rare. In modern times, however, as we might expect from the changing role of woman with her unceasing participation in areas of life previously closed to her, female delinquency is on the increase. (Blumer and Hauser, 1933: 80)

In addition to talking about female delinquency as a change from what came before, this quote also sketches this change in women's lives not as a consequence of the movies, but as a circumstance, a contemporary fact.

Thus, whereas the Studies partially attribute modern and transgressive behaviour on behalf of girls to the influence of the movies, there is also much in their findings, filtered through the lens of the cinema's effects though they are, that indicates the opposite viewpoint to be at least to some extent correct. In the volume on attendance, Dale's chapter entitled "The Motion-Picture Problem" actually begins by stating the difficulties of raising a child in these modern times and does not especially single out the cinema in this regard. Instead, he highlights such issues as increased modes of transportation providing increased access to a wider range of experiences, the availability of mass media such as the press or the radio, the increased leisure time available, and so on (Dale, 1935: 6). The movies are a part of this picture, in that they were a hugely democratizing and popular mass medium quite quickly after their first invention, but they are not a single cause.

A number of the factors named by Dale appear elsewhere in the Studies as well, such as the effect of the automobile on the mobility and independence of youth, the widespread availability to children of affordable, popular magazines and cheap novels, the number of dances and social occasions attended by young people, etc. Others, not named by Dale, are nonetheless obvious; urbanization is a big topic in especially the unpublished Cressey study, which notes that this, alongside issues of immigration, in itself caused a breakdown of former social structures. The cinema was clearly a part of these issues; popular magazines were often movie magazines, the cinema was a social hotspot for young people of both sexes, and both easier transport and urbanization meant that more cities had access to theatres, which apart from showing films also provided a space for unchaperoned social interaction. Nonetheless, it was more a part of an organic whole than an instigator of new – and thus considered immoral – behaviour. After all, Dale also quotes a 1932 *Film Daily* editorial which notes that “The world moves with the pulse of the times”, and thus “so must the screen” (Dale, 1935: 161).

My analysis of the Payne Fund Studies has thus highlighted two key points. The first is that there is a crucial difference between the treatment of young men and young women within the Studies; whereas the authors believed the cinema to be an instigator of various types of criminal behaviour in young men, none of this behaviour was entirely new; people committed robbery, rape, theft and violent assault throughout human history. In terms of girls, however, their “bad behaviour” as steered by the movies constituted not a crime, but a change away from previously accepted morality toward what the authors described as “modern life”. In this new world, girls demanded to be treated in the same way as their male peers, which proved problematic to the authors especially in terms of love and sex; it

also meant that the line between a “decent girl” and a “bad girl” was no longer nearly as clear as it had once been. This blurring of the lines between good and bad women matches the contents of the Shearer films I analysed in my previous chapter, and thus emphasises their especially controversial nature at this time, as well as the need to censor particularly these types of films.

In this regard, the second point becomes relevant: that even the Payne Fund Studies, which set out as a key goal to identify the impact of the movies on children, noted that the relationship between modern life and the cinema was not simply a one-sided one. Cinema, they note, was a product of the modern age in itself and did not create the circumstances it represented, but at the same time it also – potentially dangerously – became a tool to propagate the characteristics of this modern age further, particularly to receptive, young, female fans. This, too, is echoed within the pre-Code Shearer films, which depict a universe of sexually liberated women embracing companionate marriages and successful careers, all concepts to some extent present or emerging within 1920s and 1930s society, but which, at the same time, also promoted these modern concepts through their lack of condemnation of their liberated, female central characters. These films, with their transgressive depictions of an actually emerging female modernity, were thus considered dangerously impactful.

5.3 - The “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” and the Production Code

I will now examine two key censorship documents, unconnected to but developed simultaneously with the Payne Fund Studies. In looking at these, I will particularly examine the ways in which they stressed female sexual transgression as a particularly problematic element of film at this time, once again demonstrating that films such as Shearer’s pre-Codes were especially challenging to censors.

The first comprehensive list of sensitive and censorable topics that I will focus on here was compiled in May 1927 by a group consisting of both studio executives (including Irving G. Thalberg of MGM) and MPPDA⁸ officials (including Will H. Hays). Now commonly known as the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls”, the text differentiated between things that would “not appear in pictures, irrespective of the way in which they are treated”, and topics which could be treated, so long as “great care be exercised” (MPPDA, 1927: 1).

The emphasis on sexuality, rather than violent crime, is apparent here especially in the list of topics which could not appear in pictures; of the eleven items listed in this way, seven were directly or indirectly connected to sexuality or nudity, with the broadest condemnation perhaps that of “any licentious or suggestive nudity-in fact or in silhouette; and any lecherous or licentious notice thereof by other characters in the picture”. Nothing related to any kind of physical, nonsexual violence is included in this list. Of the twenty-five topics that should be treated with “great care”, seven (thus a much smaller percentage) deal in any way with sexuality or nudity; these include “deliberate seduction of girls”, “first-night scenes”, “the sale of women, or [...] a woman selling her virtue” but also “the institution of marriage”. Whereas the “dangerous” topics are fairly evenly divided between scenes of violence and scenes of sexual transgression, therefore, the topics to be avoided focus disproportionately on sexuality. I believe this to be a pattern throughout censorship documents at this time.

⁸ The MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) was situated primarily in New York and dealt with the financial backing of the film industry, whereas the AMPP (Association of Motion Picture Producers) was situated primarily in Hollywood and consisted of the movie moguls themselves. However, all members of the AMPP were also members of the MPPDA, which functioned as an umbrella organization (Doherty, 2009: 34).

The text does not, however, really deal yet with the potential influence of the movies on their audiences, perhaps because the Payne Fund Studies had not yet been published or even begun at this time. In trying to explain the reasons behind its creation, this text primarily notes that

By eliminating these scenes and titles we not only save footage and the possibility of a mutilated picture when they are eliminated but also effectively forestall the demand for further censorship and further develop the groundwork for the repeal of such censorship as now exists. (MPPDA, 1927: 1)

The main reason is the need to avoid local censorship, therefore both preserving whatever artistic value particular pictures might have (by avoiding nonsensical cuts) and ensuring financial gain by making pictures widely acceptable and thus marketable; the decision is motivated in artistic, but really primarily in economic terms. The only reference to any particular potential for the cinema's nefarious influence comes as an afterthought to the fifth topic to be treated with "special care", which was "theft, robbery, safe-cracking, and dynamiting of trains, mines, buildings, etc". A parenthesised note after this point explained it was important to bear "in mind the effect which a too-detailed description of these may have upon the moron", emphasising the potential of the cinema to serve as an instruction manual for crime, but not really going beyond this basic notion.

This element of the effect of the cinema on viewers, however, was reiterated far more strongly in the original text proposed by Father Daniel Lord in his meeting with the AMPP on February 10, 1930, as a "Suggested Code to Govern the Production of the Motion Pictures". This demonstrated on the one hand that the concern of impact of the cinema on vulnerable audiences was far more a concern to outside religious bodies – such as the Catholic Church – than it was to the producers, whose worries were mainly economic, but also, in that this

emphasis on impact remained so prominent within the Code's preamble throughout the next thirty years, that these bodies, and thus this type of rhetoric, had grown significantly more important to industry-wide censorship efforts over the previous three years.

The "General Principles" of the Production Code discuss the ways in which the cinema might impact its audience at great length, reiterating that since "art enters intimately in the lives of human beings", it can be both morally good and morally evil in its effects. Films, for example, do this because, firstly, they "reproduce the morality of the men who use the pictures as a medium for the expression of their ideas and ideals" and, secondly, they thus "affect the moral standards of those who through the screen take in these ideas and ideals".

This is more problematic for film than for other arts, for two reasons. Firstly, film is "the art of the multitude" and appeals "at once to every class, mature, immature, developed, undeveloped, law abiding, criminal"; it is also a very mobile medium and thus "reaches places unpenetrated by other forms of art". Secondly, however, film also has a more profound effect on its viewers because of its very nature; whereas a book, for example, "reaches the mind through words merely", a film "reaches the eyes and ears through the production of actual events". Its influence is much more direct and vivid, and for this reason, too, it must be regulated more strictly (Lord, 1930: 119). This reasoning was later incorporated in the section of the Code entitled "Reasons Supporting Preamble of Code", and matches certain rhetoric in the Payne Fund Studies; the potentially nefarious impact of the cinema was clearly perceived as a real, biologically explainable, dangerous fact.

The actual text of the Code, then, clarified which elements the writers considered particularly dangerous in this way; it contained twelve "particular applications", of which the first two were both the longest and the most detailed. These two sections were "Crimes

Against the Law”, with subsections for murder, methods of crime, illegal drug traffic and the use of liquor, and “Sex”. This second category, the longest in the entire text of the Code, was introduced as follows:

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer [sic] that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.

It contained nine subsections, relating to: adultery and illicit sex, scenes of passion, seduction or rape, sex perversion, white slavery, miscegenation, sex hygiene and venereal diseases, scenes of actual childbirth, and children’s sex organs. Sex was also dealt with indirectly in other “particular applications”, such as that on “Costume”, which was entirely on various types of “indecent” apparel, and that on “Dances”, which also focused on the potential for sexual indecency. Altogether, nine of the Code’s twelve “particular applications” have at least a partial focus on regulating particularly *female* sexuality.

The section on “Reasons Underlying Particular Applications” comments upon this focus in an interesting way, in that it notes that “in the use of this [i. e. problematic] material, it must be distinguished between sin which repels by its very nature, and sins which often attract.” The first category, that of sin which repels by its very nature, includes actions such as “murder, most theft, many legal crimes, lying, hypocrisy, cruelty, etc.” – and this category needs less particular consideration, since “sins and crimes of this class are naturally unattractive” and “the audience instinctively condemns all such and is repelled”.

The second category, however, includes “sex sins, sins and crimes of apparent heroism, such as banditry, daring thefts, leadership in evil, organized crime, revenge, etc. This class needs “great care in handling, as the response of human nature to their appeal is obvious”. Sexual

transgression is thus among those “crimes” seen as a particular danger, particularly to be regulated, and the section outlining the “reasons” behind the rules regulating sexuality is once more the longest of all twelve points. Clearly, transgressive sexuality, a “sin” especially associated with representations of women, was an issue very close to the heart of those who wrote the Production Code; it could easily lead impressionable, female audience members astray and thus had to be curtailed.

5.4 - Norma Shearer and the Code

Since transgressive sexuality lay so closely at the basis of the Shearer films I have highlighted in the previous chapter, this section will briefly examine the actual Production Code Administration correspondence on a few of the films. In this way, it will demonstrate which elements were held to be controversial, and how the urgency of this transgressive nature evolved over the course of the late 1920s and 1930s.

I will begin with *The Trial of Mary Dugan* as an early example, produced before the Code text had been written; this film, which dealt openly with “a woman selling her virtue” (one of the topics highlighted for “special care” in the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” of 1927), was the topic of some debate between the MPPDA/AMPP and MGM. Jason S. Joy, the Director of Studio Relations of the AMPP, wrote to MGM producer George Kann in October 1928 to highlight the main issue with the film, which was

[...] the problem of portraying the heroine as a character which attracts the utmost sympathy, but which is at the same time measured by Main Street is a “bad” woman. (Joy to Kann, 10 Oct 1928)

Two days later, Kann wrote to Head of Production Irving Thalberg with a series of suggestions for the film’s editing process, including the suggestion to remove lines such as “I

had something he wanted” and “I gave him what he wanted”, which directly implied prostitution (Kann to Thalberg, 12 Oct 1928).

In April 1929, a memo from Frank Jenners Wilstach, assistant to Will H. Hays, to Joy flagged up additional censorship concerns, warning that particularly scenes such as “the testimony of Mary Dugan, revealing her life with her four lovers”, were dangerous in that “if censor boards will let dangerous material like this get by, then it seems to me the motion picture will very soon reach that stage of freedom of speech that has brought the speaking stage into disrepute, in late time” (Wilstach to Joy, 2 April 1929). Movies such as *The Trial of Mary Dugan* would thus be problematic for the whole industry. Nonetheless, the film was eventually passed without change, for mature audiences, by the National Board of Review, indicating the relatively limited power of the MPPDA at this point.

The film’s Production Code files do note some issues with local censorship boards, most notably that of Quebec, which recalled the film altogether, even if this only happened after “all of the larger runs” had been completed. William A. Orr, of MGM’s New York Office, described this action as “disturbing and peculiar and difficult to figure out”, especially considering the film had previously been approved by the censor board of the province with “one or two minor cuts” (Orr to McKenzie, 11 July 1929). Orr thus suggested that perhaps Hays could contact Quebec Premier Louis-Alexandre Taschereau to discuss this situation in person. This ultimately does not appear to have happened, partially because the film had already been shown in all first-run theatres and thus secured most of its projected Quebec profits, but Hays’ willingness to consider such a scheme indicates both that the emphasis of censorship at this point – even for the Production Code Administration – was primarily an economic one, and that even when suggested changes in potentially controversial materials

were ignored by the studio, the censorship body did not find this especially problematic.

Ultimately, the film was still considered defensible against censorship boards, even by Hays, who was far more on the side of the studio moguls than on that of the local censors.

This relatively limited focus on morality translated also into the treatment of *The Divorcee* a year later; pre-production concerns about this film appear to have been relatively limited once the novel had been turned into a script. In fact, Jason Joy's résumé on the film in January 1930 summarised that "a picture based on this treatment will do a tremendous amount of good in the deterrence of divorces" (Joy, 1 July 1930) – thus underlining the fact that the impact of movies on their audiences was becoming increasingly recognized as an issue, but also that this particular film, in spite of its celebration of the single standard, was not seen as a major problem since the couple reunite at the end.

This sentiment was also expressed by W. F. Willis, an associate of the Hays Office, in March 1930, when he remarked that the censors "must be callous indeed if they can ignore the positive moral worth of this film. The thoughts which will startle the censors are wonderfully handled, without losing anything of force" (Willis, 6 March 1930). Joy did ultimately flag up a number of problematic lines to Thalberg, including Shearer's statement that "You don't exactly take the veil when your divorce is granted!" (Joy to Thalberg, 7 March 1930) but ultimately no such changes were made, and in fact, the scenes that seemed most worrisome to the censors were those related to profanity (especially when involving the word "God"), to the "gruesome" nature of the car crash at the beginning of the film and most particularly to the film's displays of drunkenness and of alcohol consumption in general (Willis, n. d.). The relative lack of concern for the sophistication of the Shearer character was echoed in the Production Code files on *Let Us Be Gay*, that same month; drinking was flagged up as a

major concern here, too, and the main focus of Joy's résumé on the film was to flag up the importance of the inclusion of the children in the denouement of the film since they "would naturally prove the best argument and the best emotional appeal for reunion between the parents" (Joy, 17 March 1930). Both films were easily passed for mature audiences by the National Board of Review.

However, after *The Divorcee's* release, it soon became apparent that the primary concern with its narrative was in fact its emphasis on sexual sophistication, to an extent which neither the studio officials nor the wider MPDDA appear to have suspected at the time. In April 1930, upon the film's release, a number of cuts were instantly made by a series of censorship boards, mostly related to Shearer's more controversial statements such as "From now on, you're the only one my door is closed to!" and "Loose women, great, but not in the home, eh, Ted?". Alberta and British Columbia rejected the film outright due to its depictions of "immorality" and "infidelity" (Joy to Trotti, 21 June 1930).

Even with the cuts, the Code files show, the film proved problematic and controversial in many ways, all of them connected to sexual transgression; even more strongly, at this point, this became the primary focus of the censors, as also the Code text, written that same year, had demonstrated. In fact, the film rapidly became perceived as so controversial that it was seen as potentially negatively influencing other films. By June 1930, about two months after the film's release, Joy wrote to assistant Lamar Trotti that "we are struggling mightily with the cycle of sophistication which the success of *The Divorcee* induced" (Joy to Trotti, 21 June 1930). In October 1930, John V. Wilson forwarded a newspaper article to Irving Thalberg, in which *The Divorcee* was named as a picture that "knocked the code for a row of big figures",

and noted that the picture was “receiving [...] a name for salaciousness” (Wilson to Thalberg, 3 October 1930).

The full article in fact read that

By the way, whatever became of that Hays code? It seems that all the producers got together when Hays issued his proclamation of picture cleanliness and they all nodded their heads sagely and agreed to follow the code. Then along came Metro with "Divorcee," the picture version of "Ex-Wife," and knocked the code for a row of big figures. Now every picture concern is trying for something sensational and startling. (Vieira, 1999: 26-7)

The Divorcee, and thus indirectly Norma Shearer, was in this way particularly singled out as having set into motion an anti-Code sentiment within the film industry.

Strangers May Kiss, released in 1931, was instantly considered even more problematic than *The Divorcee*, partially no doubt because of the ensuing local backlash to this film, but also because of the film's specific contents. This was flagged up by Joy in December 1930, when he noted that “Mr T[halsberg] realizes that this story must be treated with even more care than *Ex Wife* because this plot dealt with infidelity while *Strangers May Kiss* deals with the single standard as opposed to marriage” (Joy, 7 Dec 1930). This matches my analysis of the films as presented in the previous chapter; while *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay* were certainly transgressive, the main characters still operated within a framework of marriage or not-marriage. In *Strangers May Kiss* and, to some extent, *A Free Soul*, they opposed marriage itself.

By this point, the rhetoric in the cinema's influence, as investigated by the Payne Fund Studies, had also gained further traction; in April of the next year, Dr Carleton Simon, a psychiatrist and criminologist then at work for the MPPDA, commented as follows upon the supposedly dangerous nature of the film:

The presentation of the immorality in the life of the young woman, in her reputation of being promiscuous with men, which is not denied by her but rather emphasized by scenes in the picture, could have been deleted, or such exploits upon her part should have been vigorously refuted. The idea as presented is that after she has intimate affairs with many men she still expects to marry the man she loves and that he should not find fault in such immoral activity. This is a situation that is fraught with great danger.

This was primarily the case because

the psychological influences of such plots are bad. If criminal activity as depicted in pictures is always meted out with adequate punishment, so also should licentiousness and loose living have its penalties forcibly implied and presented. (Simon to Hays, 18 April 1931)

This essentially echoed both the findings of the Payne Fund Studies and the sentiments expressed in the text of the Code itself, but not in the way the narratives of Shearer's films operated at this time.

In fact, a note from Hays' assistant Lupton A. Wilkinson to Carl E. Milliken and Maurice McKenzie of the MPPDA that same year discussed the film in even stronger terms, and this time involved Shearer directly in the criticism:

Either by design or by reason of inability to act an ingénue part, Miss Norma Shearer is silly and unattractive when she is supposed to be a pure young thing (pure in heart only because she is living with a boyfriend in Mexico) having her first love affair, but she is very attractive and appealing after she has become a high-class harlot.

As such, Shearer's own reputation for on-screen sophistication – and her skill at playing such parts – proved extra problematic, since it meant that she was most appealing when she was least virtuous, which could provide a negative influence on audiences. In spite of her noncontroversial private life, therefore, the star was becoming somewhat notorious at this time.

Wilkinson concluded that “the picture seems to me to violate the Code at every point. It is disgusting and a few recurrences of its type will result in destruction of what freedom the screen now possesses” (Wilkinson to Milliken and McKenzie, n. d.). Nonetheless, the picture appears to have been released in entirely unaltered form, thus causing a number of deletions by various censorship boards; the Saskatchewan censorship board stated that the film was rife with “promiscuous prostitution”, and Australia went so far to add an intertitle saying that Shearer and her (already married) boyfriend were actually married in Mexico, thus essentially ensuring the sense of the entire plot was lost (*Strangers May Kiss*, 24 March 1932).

Shearer was thus marked by the Code coverage of *Strangers May Kiss* as the particularly guilty star of especially problematic films, and this idea lasted even throughout the relatively inactive years of 1932 and 1933. I already flagged up the return of this sentiment within the fan magazine coverage on Shearer particularly in 1934, the year of the Code’s enforcement, and other documents at this time supported that viewpoint. An article published in *Time* in June 1934 cited, for example, a poster that was supposedly written by Code author Father Daniel Lord and that appeared “in thousands of Catholic churches, schools and colleges” at this time – and which contained the following paragraph:

"Riptide — Produced by MGM Unfortunately typical of the pictures that have been built around Norma Shearer, the much publicized wife of Irving Thalberg who picks her plays and her roles. It seems typical of Hollywood morality that a husband as production manager should constantly cast his charming wife in the role of a loose and immoral woman... We advise strong guard over all pictures which feature Norma Shearer... Protest... Protest... (36)

While the paragraph referred to Shearer as “charming” – perhaps a nod to her essentially well-bred persona - it also called for specific care in terms of Shearer’s films, even more so

than those of her fellow female stars. Clearly, even though the star had actually not made a “sophisticated” film for a number of years before *Riptide* came out, this film was nonetheless seen as but the next step in a series of such dangerous Shearer films which were “constantly” appearing.

A similar sentiment was echoed on the cover of the *Hollywood Reporter* of 7 June of this year; here, the trade paper’s largest headline said “THALBERG PICTURES HIT”, with a smaller subtitle noting “Catholics Told To Ask Him To Clean Up Productions – Shearer Roles Criticized”; the article below noted that Shearer’s divorced roles were a particular problem, since she had thus played “a type considered by the church to be a ‘harlot’ in her last five pictures” (1). The Church thus urged its adherents to write to Thalberg to curb specifically his controversial Shearer films.

The effect of the 1934 enforcement of the Production Code on films such as Shearer’s pre-Codes can be illustrated perhaps most clearly via the final mention of *The Divorcee* in the MPPDA files; this is a memo from March 23rd 1940, almost ten years after the initial release of the film and six years after the enforcement of the Code. This memo was written by Joseph I. Breen to Val Lewton at Selznick International Pictures and related to a potential remake of the film, which ultimately never materialised. Whereas previous rhetoric in 1930 by the MPPDA on *The Divorcee* had been mild and seemed relatively unconcerned about the film’s moral message, this had completely changed by 1940. While drunkenness was briefly mentioned, this was no longer the key problem. Instead, Breen noted that “the material is so thoroughly unacceptable under the provisions of our Production Code, as now administered, that it would be a very precarious undertaking to endeavor to develop a picture from this material” (Breen to Lawton, 23 March 1940). The reference to the Code

“as now administered” is interesting, which indicates a certain scorn toward the lax standards a decade earlier.

Breen goes on to “remind you also that the picture caused considerable unfavourable reaction among thinking people in various parts of the nation. This office was deluged with protests about it at the time it was circulated”. He adds that the film was “cut to shreds by the boards in NY, PA, OH and MD”, and while this is probably an exaggeration (considering the actual Production Code files relating to these particular boards), it does indicate the evolution of the Production Code Administration over the course of this decade, and the shift in emphasis in terms of what was and what was not experienced as problematic. The concern here was both economic and moral, and the film was eventually dismissed as entirely and utterly impossible to make.

5.5 - Conclusion

This chapter has thus attempted to establish some context behind the 1934 calls to censor particularly Norma Shearer’s pictures. Firstly, through an examination of the Payne Fund Studies of 1928-32, I have demonstrated the way in which the cinema was believed at this time to have a number of potentially nefarious effects especially on young viewers.

Whereas young men, however, might be tempted to commit violent crimes after watching gangster films, young women might be tempted to embrace a modern lifestyle, based on the sexual single standard but also on personal freedom and mobility in every other way, after watching romantic films – such as Shearer’s “free soul” films of 1930-4.

Censorship documents, such as the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” of 1927 and the Production Code of 1930, therefore, particularly emphasized the problematic nature of the depiction of sexual transgression on screen, as this both represented and encouraged modern

behaviour, whether sexual or otherwise, in young, female viewers. This same rhetoric also increasingly leaked, over the course of the early 1930s, into the specific Production Code Administration correspondence on Shearer's films; whereas *The Divorcee*, for example, had not been found especially problematic in pre-production, the reactions against the film by local censorship boards ensured that later films, like *Strangers May Kiss*, were scrutinized more thoroughly, and by 1934, *Riptide* was held up by censors as one of the films most in need of thorough and enforced censorship. By 1940, a film such as *The Divorcee* could never be made or even remade; its sexually progressive message was considered too potentially influential, and too dangerously modern. Post-1934, Norma Shearer would no longer be a free soul on the screen – or profess her firmly held belief that strangers could, indeed, kiss.

Chapter 6 - “As queenly as ‘Toinette herself’”: The Final Years

6.1 - Introduction

In the previous chapter, I established the ways in which Shearer’s films, with their depictions of potentially influential and thus potentially dangerous female sexual transgression and modernity, were particularly targeted by censorship efforts in the early-to-mid 1930s. It was clear that in a universe ruled strictly by the Code, as Hollywood was from July 1934 onward, Shearer would no longer be able to play the types of characters she had made famous as well as notorious.

This chapter, then, focuses on the post-1934 Shearer; it will give an overview of the way Shearer’s star persona evolved in a world where her pre-Code roles were no longer a possibility, and the way this star persona incorporated a number of key events within her personal life at this time. Finally, then, it will use the fan magazine rhetoric on two of Shearer’s final and most famous films – *Marie Antoinette* (Van Dyke, 1938) and *The Women* (Cukor, 1939) – to demonstrate how these films operated in completely different ways from the pre-Code films of Shearer’s earlier career, and how they shaped her post-career star persona, essentially condemning her to respectable oblivion.

6.2 - 1934 to 1936

In September 1934, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* was released; this costume drama starred Shearer as invalid poet Elizabeth Barrett and chronicled her romance with Robert Browning. It was thus far more in the vein of *Smilin’ Through* than any kind of attempted continuation of Shearer’s pre-Code films, particularly *Riptide*, which had been released mere months before. After the release of this film, however, much like during 1933, Shearer was once more off-screen for almost two years, until she made *Romeo and Juliet* (Cukor, 1936)

in 1936. This was mostly due to personal reasons; once again Thalberg faced a number of health issues and needed constant monitoring, while Shearer also gave birth to her second child, a daughter named Katharine, in June 1935.

Shearer's long absences from the screen, in 1933 and now in 1935-6, did not go unnoticed by the public, as is apparent in a reader's letter in *Motion Picture*, October 1936, in which a fan wondered if "loss of popularity in motion pictures" is not sometimes the player's own fault and gave the example of Norma Shearer to illustrate this.

We've waited eons for Norma Shearer to make a picture. From last reports, *Romeo and Juliet* will soon be released. Of course, Miss Shearer has been absent before and made a smash-hit when she returned – but that sort of thing, like Tennyson's brook, doesn't go on forever. (66)

This indicates a certain impatience with Shearer's absences from the screen; in order to preclude this kind of rhetoric, the magazines attempted to "maintain [...] awareness in the gaps between film appearances" (Jeffers McDonald, 2013: 35) by printing continuous coverage of Shearer throughout 1935, as they had done for 1933.

Throughout 1935, coverage of Shearer thus did not focus on any films, but instead – apart from some fashion features – focused on her private life. Whereas such coverage had, in the previous years, evolved to use her private life to underline her identity as a modern, however, 1935 saw the beginning of a return to a more conservative kind of rhetoric, in which – as had happened in years previous – Shearer's respectable private life was sometimes even contrasted positively with the (pre-Code) films she had become known for.

In June 1935, *Photoplay* published an article on "The Tragedy of Being A Hollywood Mother", but used Shearer as a non-tragic and indeed "outstanding example of sane motherhood in this business, which makes any kind of motherhood difficult enough". Her

absences from the screen are commented upon positively here, since it means she sees “more of her son than the average star”, yet at the same time the child is “not spoiled with too much attention or expensive toys” (52). Shearer is thus first and foremost an attentive and sensible mother. The same issue of *Photoplay* notes that stars are often quite different from the roles they play and demonstrates this by stating that Shearer

flaunts married convention and lives a free life – but strictly on celluloid. No more conventional, stainless reputationed wife and mother can be found in Hollywood or elsewhere, for that matter. (107)

A reader’s letter from December of that year (also in *Photoplay*) reiterates this again, when it notes that

although the characters she has portrayed on the screen may not have always been of the highest type, nevertheless this actress has not glorified them nor tried to canonize them. There is always a delicate finesse in her characterization. (9)

Shearer was clearly still remembered as the star of controversial, sexually transgressive films at this time, but at the same time such rhetoric served to distance the (sensible, respectable) star Norma Shearer from her (dangerously modern) roles. The two images were not conflated as they had been up to the previous year.

This fairly conservative rhetoric was aided by the birth of Shearer’s second child in June, which was announced by *Photoplay* in the September issue. Just like magazine rhetoric had always linked Shearer’s professional and personal life, this birth announcement was also linked to Shearer’s next film; a short item in October *Photoplay* announced that “the betting in Hollywood is now two-to-one that the first words little Katharine Thalberg (Norma Shearer’s new baby) will utter will be, ‘Romeo, Romeo – wherefore art thou, Romeo?’” The item goes on to note Shearer’s complete dedication to this picture, which is her favourite to

date, by stating that “only a few days before it was time to go to the hospital she was down at the studio making recording tests for the Shakespearian play” (41).

However, whereas the birth of her first child had been linked to *Let Us Be Gay*, a sexually transgressive film in which Shearer-the-star was nonetheless visibly pregnant, this second birth was linked to *Romeo and Juliet*, the connotations of which were entirely different from those of the earlier film. Fittingly, the film was built up to a very great extent in the fan magazines throughout 1936, but primarily in a context of high art, in which it was effectively credited with elevating the entire movie industry to a higher level. In November 1936, *Silver Screen* argued that “the screen has reached a more cultured point in its development” and included *Romeo and Juliet* as one of a few key films that made it so; film productions such as this are “a great boon to literature” since the film provides to viewers “a clearer and deeper explanation of Shakespeare’s immortal love story” (29). This high culture aspect also appeared in larger editorial articles on the making-of of the film, such as an article in *Modern Screen* in September of that year, which noted the fact that both Howard and Shearer were reading a 15th century etiquette guide (43), but also the presence on set of a number of Harvard academics specialising in Shakespeare in order to “keep Shakespeare out of the Brown Derby” (75).

Shearer’s performance as Juliet, too, was presented in this serious, high-culture light, and emphasised the amount of research done by all involved in the film’s production. In February, *Motion Picture* noted that Shearer’s Juliet coiffure, which it predicted would launch a “new hairdo rage” was in fact based on that of the angel in Fra Angelico’s “The Annunciation” (12). *Silver Screen* noted the challenges inherent in bringing Shakespeare to the screen and described it as “notably hard to read and hard to cast, and should never be

attempted by actors unversed in the ways of the theatre"; it also, however, noted that "Miss Shearer should prove a happy exception to the rule" (60). The *Modern Screen* September article confirmed this by quoting Shearer commenting on the way the film has treated the source text "with the utmost fidelity to the author's concept of the play", thus positioning her as an educated star with an understanding of high culture (75).

In July, *Silver Screen* even pointed out that "Norma's gone fifteenth century to the extent of having Metro's Juliet bedroom installed where once all was so stunningly modern" since "it kept her in the spirit of Juliet while rehearsing" (18-9). This was interesting especially since the magazine had done a brief feature five months earlier, in February, focusing on Shearer's "modern", "sophisticated" bedroom, which demonstrated her "tailored personality" since it was "about as modern as anything you've ever seen and it is Norma Shearer to a T" (81). As such, Shearer's star image was indirectly affected by her role as Juliet, particularly as more and more of the magazine coverage on the film associated her directly with her character.

In February, the "Photoplay Fashions" section of *Photoplay* printed two full-page pictures of Shearer; one of Shearer in a contemporary day dress, described as "a last glimpse of Norma Shearer before she becomes Juliet of Verona", and then one of Shearer "in a Juliet mood", wearing a long gown and embodying a "rare and lovely quality of distinction". Throughout the next few months, the sartorial would always be at the forefront of Shearer's transformation into Juliet, not just connected to her hair, but also to the clothes she wore in her off-screen life. In April, *Silver Screen* encouraged its readers to equip their hostess gowns with "Juliet sleeves", since, while these were originally designed by Adrian to be worn by Shearer in *Romeo and Juliet*, "Norma was so pleased by them that she immediately

had several new evening gowns made with them” (21). An article later in the same issue of the magazine was accompanied by a picture of Shearer in precisely such a hostess gown, complete with long sleeves and high waistline and reminiscent of her Juliet costumes (48) (Figs. 30-1).

That same month, *Motion Picture* published an entire article on how “the influence of Norma’s coming film, *Romeo and Juliet*, is seen in her clothes”. Although much of the article is simply dedicated to various fashionable outfits as modelled by Shearer, it also contains an interesting section on her star persona, as it notes

However, the Norma who is most in evidence these days is Mrs. Irving Thalberg, the gracious hostess and devoted young mother. Consequently, she finds a certain expression in those Juliet “home” gowns that look as if they’d been brought straight from 15th century Italy. (87)

As such, her role as Juliet was used to underline the extent to which her star persona became more and more dependent on respectable domesticity.

This tie between Shearer and the persona of Juliet also returned in *Silver Screen* in August, when a number of the stars of the film were interviewed on the question “Is Dying For Love



Figures 20-1: Shearer in Juliet fashions.

A Thing of the Past?" Shearer was the first person interviewed and was consistently identified as Juliet, as the interviewer noted that "it seemed, not Norma, but Juliet herself who spoke to me, her young eyes prescient of that last long sleep she was to sleep for love... it seemed not a set wherein we sat, but veritably the garden of the Capulets". Shearer opined that "young people of today love just as desperately as they did in the time of Romeo and Juliet" and might indeed choose to die for love, although "freedom is greater", so youth chooses to live for love, rather than die for love (30). This was actually not so different from the Shearer of yesteryear, who had advocated for freedom and spoken of the advantages of the modern world for young women, but was coated in Shakespearian rhetoric which stressed the romance of her statements, rather than the practicality (as had previously been the case). She concludes "For love, like Time, never dies", and the interviewer ended with "Thus spake Juliet in the scented garden of the Capulets..." (30).

Picture Play, then, in its section entitled "So They Say", which gleaned quotes from stars from other newspapers and magazines, quoted Shearer in October of that year as tying her own marriage to the love story of Romeo and Juliet:

Ours is not the usual Hollywood marriage. It's the same Romeo and Juliet union that Shakespeare discovered in Verona, and which today is prevalent in Keokuk and Kalamazoo. (35)

The full article this quote was derived from was entitled "Every Woman's a Juliet, Norma Shearer Believes", and was published in a series of newspapers and magazines throughout the country, including the *Pittsburgh Press* of 2 June 1936. The article began by noting that

The world, which is made to go 'round and around by love, receives its greatest impetus from woman, Miss Shearer believes, "because love is the most important thing in a woman's life". (22)

Then, in addition to the above quote which tied Thalberg and Shearer to *Romeo and Juliet* as the modern version of the ideal couple,

She pointed out how, at the height of her career, she sped to the sick bed of her real-life Romeo, Producer Irving G. Thalberg, jeopardizing her career by leaving the screen for a year and a half. She stayed with him in Europe until his health was restored. (22)

Shearer's sacrifice for Thalberg is once more reiterated and tied this time into the ancient love story she was about to re-enact on screen – as produced by her husband, as the magazines also would not let their readers forget. In October 1936, *Motion Picture* noted that “Shakespeare and Thalberg are a great combination” (98).

Thus, fan magazine rhetoric on *Romeo and Juliet* served multiple functions within the development of Shearer's star persona. Firstly, it tied her to concepts of high art, as an educated and mature star and a serious actress. Secondly, connected to this, it marked her as eminently respectable, since Juliet Capulet, a fourteen-year old, 15th century romantic heroine, was a far cry indeed from Shearer's pre-Code heroines. Thirdly, then, this identity as a romantic heroine was connected directly to the events of her own life, since the magazines cast Shearer as a real-life Juliet opposite her real-life Romeo, Irving Thalberg, for whom she would even sacrifice her career if necessary, as Juliet had sacrificed her life. The role served to underline her respectability, as her pre-Code roles had served to underline her modernity.

6.3 - 1936 to 1938

On September 14th of this year, then, Shearer's life and star persona were irrevocably altered, when Irving Thalberg died after a short battle with pneumonia. Since the publishing time lag meant that magazines usually published issues for a particular month at least a

month in advance, no magazine picked up on this major news until the November issue at the earliest, when *Photoplay* was the first magazine to publish the news. That month, the magazine's *Close Ups and Long Shots* section was taken over entirely by an article by Ruth Waterbury on the passing of Thalberg. The article was accompanied by two large images; one portrait image of Thalberg and one image of Thalberg, Shearer, and their baby son.

While Waterbury focused to a large extent on Thalberg's many professional successes, she addresses the Shearer-Thalberg marriage in the second paragraph, stating that "to Norma Shearer he was the sum of life. He was her husband, her love, her children's father – and even more important, her one great friend" (11).

The author reiterates in this way that Shearer was the one woman in Hollywood who had everything "while she had Irving Thalberg", but while this focus on "having it all" in a modern sense had a precedent within Shearer's career, it was here entirely disconnected from modern notions such as companionate marriage and female employment, but instead used to underline the ways in which Shearer had entirely depended on her husband for every aspect of her life. The article underlines this conservative emphasis by once more highlighting the sacrifices Shearer made in interrupting her career to have children or to travel with him for his health. The concluding paragraph highlights *Romeo and Juliet* as their final collaboration, as does a reader's letter in the same issue (4), as well as an announcement that the *Romeo and Juliet* premiere would still be held since "Norma Shearer insisted [...] he would have wished it that way" (28). It then ended with the following words:

Tragic Norma Shearer has this one comfort. Hollywood can never forget Irving Thalberg – not as long as beauty, and truth, and fidelity, and simplicity stay alive in the world. (12)

Shearer had thus become fully “tragic” – not simply in her role as Juliet on screen, but also in her private life. Later in the issue, the magazine also published what it believed the “last picture” taken of Thalberg (with Shearer), at a dinner for the Director of the Royal Danish Theatre (28), once more stressing Shearer’s new widowhood. A final Shearer feature in the magazine underlines the fact that the news of Thalberg’s death had been incorporated rather hurriedly into this issue; in *Photoplay Fashions*, Shearer, the “Juliet of 1936”, is depicted in a mess jacket with a long skirt, and “she has borrowed one of her famous husband’s neckties” (53). This content was clearly written and inserted before the news of Thalberg’s death had reached the magazine, but nonetheless, these three different elements – article, photograph and fashion item – combined to stress both the importance of the Shearer-Thalberg union to Shearer’s star persona and the tragedy of his early death.

Other magazines caught up the next month; *Picture Play* published an announcement similar in size and scope to *Photoplay’s* and focused primarily on Thalberg’s career, but also referred, for the first time in any magazine, to Shearer as “his widow, Norma Shearer”, underlining the identity shift Shearer was experiencing (13). Although a fair amount of the coverage of Thalberg’s death did focus on his career and on his importance for the film industry, the primary focus of much magazine treatment was instead on either the Shearer-Thalberg marriage or on the consequences of Thalberg’s death for Norma Shearer.

In a reader’s letter in *Motion Picture*, published in January 1937, for example, the writer admitted that while she recognised Thalberg’s “great ability”, she regretted “his passing because of the very evident happiness and success of his personal life”. She goes on to state that:

The marriage of Norma Shearer and Irving Thalberg has always been idealized in my mind. They were two people fine enough and with character enough to stand at the very top of their respective careers and yet maintain a wholesome, happy married life, unmarred by cheapness or scandal. (60)

The letter thus once again taps into the idea of Shearer and Thalberg as a professional as well as romantic partnership, but it counters this modern element by talking of Shearer, too, in the past tense, almost as if she had died alongside her husband. Clearly, the Shearer-Thalbergs were, to the writer, an indivisible team – much, perhaps, like Romeo and Juliet – and it was difficult to conceptualise Shearer’s stardom outside of this unit.

Shearer’s own grief received a great deal of coverage in the magazines, as well, even casually and in unrelated contexts such as in an interview with close friend Merle Oberon, who said she had been “spending every spare minute with Norma”. The interviewer admitted he could not “kid in the face of a simple statement like that” (*Silver Screen*, December 1936: 15). Additionally, both *Photoplay* and *Modern Screen* published editorial articles focusing purely on Shearer’s recent widowhood and her potential future plans before the end of 1936.

The first, entitled “How Norma Shearer Faces the Future” was published in *Photoplay* in December. This article suggests that Shearer, “the tragic young star”, will not make another film now she has been widowed, and connects the reasons behind this directly to the production of *Romeo and Juliet*, during which Shearer supposedly felt “a strange premonition” that this would be her last picture. She was, the writer states, “sincerely obsessed with the conviction that Fate decreed their greatest triumph together should be the last for both of them”. In spite of the rather sensationalist supernatural emphasis, the

article highlights some interesting aspects of the consequences of Thalberg's death for Shearer's star persona.

Once more – like the reader's letter in *Motion Picture* – his death is seen almost as a kind of death through widowhood for her, as well. Furthermore, this is directly tied to the tragic narrative of *Romeo and Juliet*, as the article asks “Was her inspired performance in the potion scene of *Romeo and Juliet* a reflection of her terror that she would lose him?” (36) and notes that Shearer's premonition struck especially as she “began to speak the immortal lines of a girl's fears and doubts and mental terror of death!” (80). While Shearer and Thalberg's love and long-lasting marriage had previously been used to draw parallels between them and the characters of Romeo and Juliet, now it was the tragic ending of their love story that was used to stress these parallels. Shearer really did become the “Juliet of 1936” to the fan magazines, having suffered her Romeo's death and suffering a kind of professional death, herself.

The article ends with a second reason why Shearer will retire now, which is the fact that she will now dedicate the rest of her life to carrying out Thalberg's legacy. While the article acknowledges Shearer's now extremely powerful position within the studio – highlighting that “by the terms of her late husband's will she becomes the largest single stockholder in Loews Inc., the company controlling the destiny of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer” – this does not mean she will take a position “as a power behind the throne in the company that formerly starred her” (80). Instead, she will first and foremost dedicate herself to the raising of their children in

the comfortable but unpretentious home her husband built with such glowing dreams of the happiness they would share in its walls – the home where she came as

a bride, where she knew her greatest joy as a wife and mother, and her greatest tragedy in widowhood. (81)

The emphasis on the house here underlines her now strongly traditionalised immobility – so different from the restless mobility identified with her while her husband was still alive.

Similarly, her only semi-professional activity will be the continued upkeep of the charities Thalberg sponsored; interestingly, this is the one context in which Thalberg's (and indirectly Shearer's) Jewishness is actually dealt with outright, as the writer mentions that

one of the few regular visitors at her home, since Thalberg's passing, has been the beloved Rabbi Magnin, devoted family friend, the man who married them eight years ago, and the chief guide of the many charities supported by Irving's millions. (81)

Nonetheless, the article also stresses that Thalberg's generosity was not necessarily limited to those of one particular faith or nationality. Shearer's new position in life is thus very clearly marked as that of a widow and devoted mother, whose only professional interests lie in continuing the charitable donations and organisations which were of interest to her husband. She had been a modern wife, but she was now defined as a traditional, aristocratic widow, irrevocably tied to and fixed in place by her late husband's interests.

The second editorial article was published in *Modern Screen* that same month, and was entitled "What's Ahead for Norma Shearer?" Like the *Photoplay* article, it, too, once more stressed the idea of Shearer and Thalberg as a twentieth-century Romeo and Juliet. Not only is the film titled "Irving Thalberg's great monument", but the possibility of this film becoming Shearer's last is described as

a gloriously dramatic gesture, to say her farewell with Irving Thalberg in the masterpiece which they made together, she as the star, he as the producer – to end Hollywood's most beautiful romance with the greatest love story of literature. (41)

The article delves into some detail about the nature of Shearer and Thalberg's relationship and emphasises the double nature of their marriage as both a personal and professional collaboration.

For nine years, since the October day when they were married, Norma and Irving had known not only a perfect love, but also a complete companionship, which included both their professional and their personal lives. They were a man and a woman who loved and married and became the parents of two children. They were also a brilliant, genius-tinged producer and a successful actress who worked, dreamed and accomplished together. (41)

Like the previous article, this article does then go on to discuss Shearer's devotion as a wife and as a mother since "always the woman has defeated the actress". After the birth of her first child, the article notes, Shearer offered to retire to devote herself to motherhood despite her success in *The Divorcee*, and later, she "deserted the screen for a year and went to Europe with her two Irvings" to seek solace for her husband's health issues (97).

At the same time, however, this article also reminds readers of Shearer's own, strong professional ambitions, as well as her convictions regarding women and work. "Only a short time ago", the writer notes, Shearer stated that

a woman, who has other activities, whatever they may be, is far more interesting to her family than the woman who is completely submerged in domesticity, who knows nothing beyond the four walls of her home." (41)

While the article does credit Thalberg for his excellent guidance of Shearer's career, it also notes that "all Hollywood knows and respects Norma's intelligence" (97) and that she has always had a hand in suggesting improvements for her own career. She did not do this through "the tearful pleadings which are the weapons of the average wife" but instead "accomplished her purposes by clean-cut, determined actions" (98), such as organising respectively a screen test and a photo session in order to convince Thalberg of her suitability

for her roles in *The Trial of Mary Dugan* and *The Divorcee*, both of which became major successes and both of which in a sense heralded a new phase of her career. As such, the article suggests, as opposed to the one in *Photoplay*, that Shearer “will return to the screen after a few months of retirement. She is too young and too energetic to be idle” (41).

Despite the essentially conservative emphasis even of this article – compared to the way Shearer had been written about in years past – therefore, it also left the door open to the star’s return to the screen.

Coverage of Shearer throughout 1937 was relatively light, and focused, initially, largely on Shearer’s new position in life, both emotionally and practically, and did this in a conservative way that echoed the *Photoplay* article rather than the *Modern Screen* one. As such, Shearer continued to be described as “brave” and linked to tragedy; *Photoplay* described her in January as a “brokenhearted woman” but also revealed how “courageously she carries on in her darkest hour”, highlighting her focus on both continuing Thalberg’s legacy and on caring for his children, since “knowing and realising the heavy responsibility that rests on her shoulders as controlling stockholder of her studio, she remains first a mother and then a business woman” (88). The emotive focus on tragedy was reiterated, as well, in *Modern Screen*’s predictions for the year 1937, which noted that the “shadow of sorrow” would remain upon Shearer and, rather ominously, that “1937 holds the threat of the passing of one more loved one” (35, 86).

In practical terms, the double themes of Shearer’s position as a majority stockholder of Loew’s and as a single mother return time and again. Both *Hollywood* in January and *Photoplay* in February note that Shearer inherited a vast amount of stock after Thalberg’s death and that she supposedly sold this stock to an English concern for more than

\$2,000,000. In May, *Silver Screen* delved further into this and stressed Shearer's initial, powerful position as a majority stockholder, as well as her attractive salary in her own right, but used the tragedy narrative to soften this information, stressing the "ache that lies so heavily upon her heart" and concluding that "perhaps Midas anticipated this great mental agony and that may be why he touched her with so much gold" (61). Even her financial situation and professional clout are thus cast in a framework of tragedy.

The children, and Shearer's position of responsibility toward them, appeared in almost every item connected to her widowhood. *Silver Screen* credited Shearer, in May of this year, with single-handedly ensuring Hollywood stars could now have "children, marriage and happy home lives" when she "smashed that taboo when she had a baby and still retained popular favour" (64). In the wake of Thalberg's death, the children are held up as the reason why Shearer remains at the house Thalberg built for her (*Photoplay*, February 1937, p. 88), and their care is her primary concern. In November, *Photoplay* published a long, editorial article – its first on Shearer in many months – entitled "The Man Who Guides Norma Shearer's Fatherless Children", which focused on her hiring a young college boy to help look after her children. The article began by reiterating the extent of Shearer's loss – now one year ago – and describing how

Toward twilight of that blackest afternoon of her life Norma Shearer stood on the beach before the home Irving Thalberg had built for her, and there, while the late sun set on her past, she made a promise to the present – that no dream of his should be left unfulfilled. (20)

This included the "great fortune left her" as well as the charities Thalberg contributed to, but it primarily included her care of their children. The article describes how one of the reasons why Shearer can now resume her social life - and "gather about her her friends and

go to the première and give her party in perfect freedom” (20) – because she has now hired “a young man to guard [her] children, to be a companion to them, to teach them the little ways of living and answer for them the questions Irving would have answered” (70). This young man received instructions not to “leave [the children] for an instant” (70) from the time they got up to the time they went to bed, and, reassured in this way, Shearer could return to “being – once again – the first lady of the screen”. The article concludes that she will now make *Marie Antoinette* soon, and thus keep both sides, the personal and the professional, of her promise to Thalberg.

Shearer’s return to the screen was heralded throughout the magazines during the second half of 1937; various pictures of her at studio-related social functions appeared from May onward, and in June, rumours of her taking on the role of Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With The Wind* were first published in *Modern Screen* – even if *Photoplay* put these definitely to rest by November of this year. In July, then, *Photoplay* published an image of a black-clad Shearer returning to the studio to “begin her first picture since Irving Thalberg’s death” (90) – a picture which, the magazine reported the next month, would be *Marie Antoinette* (95). In October, then, *Photoplay* published a full-page image of Shearer, welcoming her as she “bravely returns to her screen career again” (33), and that same month, *Hollywood* announced Shearer had been involved in make-up tests for both *Idiot’s Delight* and *Marie Antoinette* and that “her return to screen seems very close” (12).

At this point, it is important to provide a brief summary of the progression of Shearer’s career from 1934 to 1938. After an absence from the screen throughout 1933 (due to Thalberg suffering a heart attack), Shearer’s last pre-Code film, *Riptide*, was released in March 1934. The Production Code enforcement began in July of 1934, and in September of

that year, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* was released. In 1935, Shearer was off the screen again, once again due to her husband's health issues as well as the birth of her daughter. In August 1936, Shearer starred in *Romeo and Juliet*, but on September 14th, her husband died, and Shearer would be off-screen for almost two years after the tragedy and only returned in July 1938 with *Marie Antoinette*, in a sense her and Thalberg's last co-production.

As such, Shearer's career is essentially bisected not just by the advent of the Production Code in 1934, as LaSalle and Basinger have previously noted, but also by the major change within her personal life, the death of Thalberg and thus her widowhood, in 1936. Although these two events happened over two years apart, Shearer's relative inactivity over the course of 1935-6 essentially puts them within the same moment of the star's career, with most of her films falling on one side or the other.

As I have outlined, before this point, Shearer was presented as a hyper-modern wife and career woman, whose views on womanhood were given even more legitimacy by her stable marriage to Thalberg. At this point, however, around the time her films inevitably changed, the rhetoric about her personal life did, as well. The previously hyper-modern Shearer was reduced by widowhood to a pre-modern archetype: that of the heartbroken, but brave widow, carrying on after the death of her one true love for the sake of her children. This, rather than the marriage in the first place, changed the perception of Shearer brusquely and forever, and imposed on her the aura of excessive nobility that would be detrimental to her career for years to come. Articles dealing with her no longer featured titles such as 'Let's Be Civilised About Sex' but instead focused on "tragic Norma Shearer" (*Photoplay*, November 1936, 12) or "the tragic young star" (*Photoplay*, December 1936, 36), with the adjective

“tragic” replacing the previous favourite, “modern”. Thalberg’s death essentially sanctified her, and to someone who had always enjoyed mixing the saintly and the sinful, this did colossal damage to her carefully construed image. The fact that she had not made a film in the vein of her “free soul” films since early 1934 and *Riptide* did not help, and, as I have demonstrated, the Production Code regulations made the future production of such films entirely impossible.

6.4 - *Marie Antoinette* and beyond

Shearer’s comeback picture was thus *Marie Antoinette*, which was released in July 1938, almost two years after *Romeo and Juliet* in 1936 and exactly four years after the enforcement of the Production Code in 1934. The film was based on the best-selling biography by Stefan Zweig and presented a sympathetic image of the tragic queen. It chronicled her life story from her carefree girlhood at the Austrian imperial court, over her arranged marriage to Louis, would-be-locksmith and Dauphin of France, to her public execution more than twenty years later. While its first half focused to a large extent on her boredom and unhappiness in her strained and childless marriage to the awkward Louis, and her subsequent affair with a dashing Swedish aristocrat, the second half showed her becoming a mature Queen, a faithful wife, and a good mother to two children, and ended in her tragic but courageous death. It is an interesting film in that it covers a period of twenty-three years and thus allows Shearer to demonstrate a broad range of characterisations, from the ingénue of her early years (as the princess Maria Antonia) to the adulterous, glamorous wife she had portrayed in her pre-Code films (as the dauphine Marie Antoinette) and the “redeemed”, ladylike queen she was becoming after her widowhood (as Marie Antoinette in the second half of the film).

As such, the film showed at least some degree of narrative kinship with Shearer's earlier "free soul" films; certainly more so, for example, than either *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* or *Romeo and Juliet*, since it dealt extensively with the way Shearer's glamorous Antoinette, as an unsatisfied wife, strays from the marital bed. At the same time, the advent of the Code meant that there were a number of key differences, and *Marie Antoinette* was not really controversial in the modern sense in the way that Shearer's pre-Code films had been; the affair is not shown in the kind of explicit detail and, more importantly, at no point is the Queen shown articulating any particular sentiment in favour of the sexual single standard. She is simply a woman, unhappy in her marriage and wishing she might enter a different, happier union with a man she likes better. Additionally, the happy ending so significant within these earlier films was entirely absent, since even after Marie Antoinette redeems herself as a respectable Queen, wife and mother, she dies a tragic death on the guillotine, which entirely overshadows any previous traces of sophistication.

Nonetheless, some advertisements for the film clearly tapped into these elements of the film, perhaps in part due to Shearer's earlier, pre-Code films, to represent it as more controversial than the finished product really was; an ad in *Modern Screen* in October 1938 highlights these elements. Entitled "the life and sins of a royal bad-girl", the text of the advertisement describes

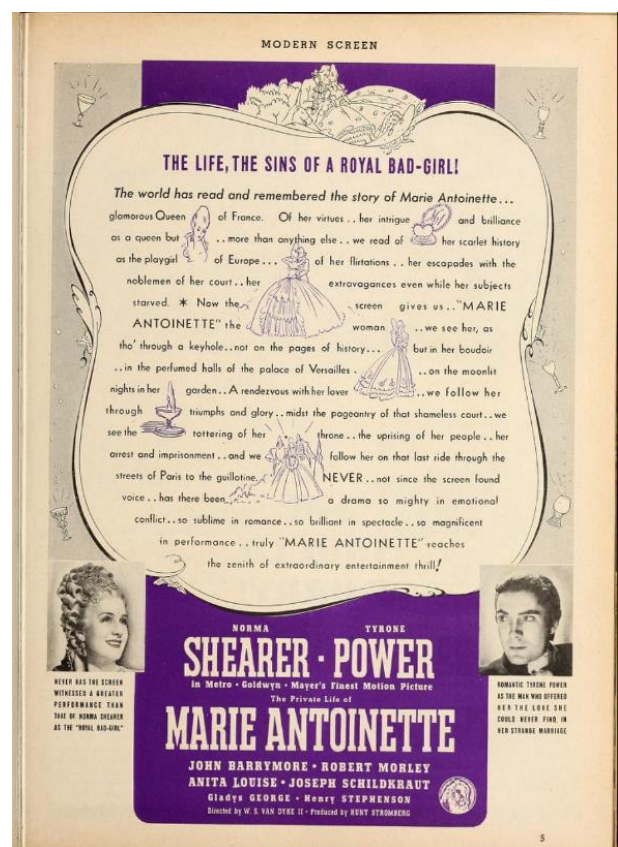


Figure 32: Advertisement for *Marie Antoinette*.

the way the film will delve into “her scarlet history as the playgirl of Europe, [...] her flirtations, her escapades with the noblemen of her court” (5). I will argue, however, that in a world circumscribed not only by Production Code restrictions, but also by Shearer’s reshaped star image, such rhetoric was entirely neutered by the fan magazine rhetoric of the time, which had entirely shifted since Shearer’s “free soul” roles of the early 1930s.

Throughout early 1938, fan magazine rhetoric focused primarily on Shearer’s return to public life. In May, *Photoplay* declared that Shearer had in fact transformed into a “New Norma Shearer”, who had become “more woman than actress” because “her deep sorrow [had] softened her and molded her anew”. A colleague is quoted as saying that Shearer is “rising above a blow that would have shattered most of us” and she is, in doing so, “more womanly, more beautiful, more kindly than ever” (46). The magazine thus highlights Shearer’s widowhood as a transformative experience which casts her in a positive light, but in a conservative way: Shearer has become more traditionally “womanly” through its sorrow.

This emphasis on genteel sorrow also ran through the rhetoric on *Marie Antoinette* specifically. In July, a month before the film’s release, *Photoplay* published a lavishly illustrated article tellingly entitled “A Queen Comes Back”. Forgoing most discussion of the film itself, the article provides the tale of “tragic Norma Shearer” and her brave return to the screen. Its first few paragraphs detail how she – “face white as chalk” (22) – humbly appeared on the set on the first day of filming, and the article goes on to elevate the film to the level of “more than any material thing” (20), since it is the product of “the perfect love of Norma Shearer and Irving Thalberg” (20), without which it could not have been made. The article details how the film was initially Thalberg’s idea in 1933 and became the couple’s

pet project, in spite of Thalberg's frequent illnesses; it was further delayed by his death, to Shearer "a personal drama, unmatched by any picture in the history of Hollywood" (23). Her love for Thalberg, however, finally pulled her back to the studio – "her eyes filled and she turned away" as she stated this – and the film was made (20).

Although the article defends Shearer against any possible accusations of entitlement – it stresses her humility, despite the fact that Thalberg's death left her MGM's largest single stockholder – it also, simultaneously, draws an obvious comparison between Shearer, Tragic Queen of Hollywood, and Antoinette, Tragic Queen of France. This only underlines the royal connotations associated to the title of the Widow Thalberg, particularly as it states, near its end, that "[The Thalbergs] were the royal couple and she is still queen. As queenly as 'Toinette herself" (86). The connection between Shearer and Antoinette is thus used both to underline the tragic elements and the aristocratic and traditional elements of her star persona.

This same month, *Silver Screen* essentially reiterated both these elements in two short items. Firstly, it announced an article for the coming issue by noting that Shearer lived "one of the quietest but most dramatic lives in Hollywood" (82), stressing once more Shearer's tragic, but wholesome private life. Secondly, it noted that "Norma Shearer once played ladies of ill-repute, before she broke away from type portrayals and finally demonstrated her mature acting power in *Romeo and Juliet*" (27). Thus, Shearer is now perceived as having "matured" away from her "free soul" roles of the early thirties; not only had these roles become impossible in a post-Code universe but – more importantly – the magazines also argued that Shearer herself was no longer the kind of person who wished to play them.

Links between Shearer's own tragic, aristocratic stardom and her role as Marie Antoinette continued throughout the rest of this year. The next month, *Hollywood* published an article entitled "A Day With a Queen", which used a jocular identification of stars with their characters to describe a day on the *Marie Antoinette* set; as such, the article starts by noting that "Marie Antoinette was fed up, trying to get married" (32) to express Shearer's feelings toward particular production delays. The article does the same for other stars, such as the Dauphin (for Robert Morley) or the Princesse de Lamballe (Anita Louise), but in Shearer's case goes beyond using this as a comical and rhetorical device, pointing out some real similarities between star and character. When director Woody Van Dyke called Shearer "baby", the writer stresses that the first time this happened, all those on set "looked as horrified as if he were addressing Marie Antoinette himself" (40), even if Shearer herself did not care. The article then notes that this film is the first Shearer has made after her husband's death and praises her for bringing "her own brand of courage" (40) to the set, despite her grief. When the wedding is then, finally filmed, the writer observes that

if Norma thought at that moment of her own wedding day, or of how she and her husband together had planned this very picture for her there was no sign on that calm, faintly smiling face. (40)

Shearer's on-screen royal wedding is thus tied to her own "royal wedding" of eleven years earlier; she is a tragic Queen, much like Marie Antoinette.

Throughout the second half of that year, two more editorial articles were published on Shearer; both of these dealt, to a large extent, with her widowhood. In August, *Silver Screen* published "Projection of Norma Shearer", which essentially provided an overview of Shearer's life and rise to stardom, but dedicated a significant portion of its text to Shearer's courtship with and later marriage to Thalberg, ending in his death "two years ago, mourned

heart-breakingly by his widow, his two children, his many friends, and the entire picture industry” (72). In October, *Photoplay* published “Norma Shearer’s Handful of Memories”, which similarly provided an overview of Shearer’s life, with great emphasis on the Thalberg chapter. It reiterated stories of Thalberg’s call on Christmas Eve to ask her for a date, of their honeymoon in Germany, and ultimately of “the September day when once more the world changed for her [...] for the one in whom she had found ideal happiness... was dead” (88). The article describes her grief and long mourning process, but concludes that Shearer has now reinvented herself again, “with a smile which succeeds in hiding any trace of unhappy shadow” (88). It thus declares her “the girl who came back” (88). An article in *Silver Screen* the next month, focusing on the most cherished memories of particular screen stars, also privileged Shearer’s years with Thalberg, since

Norma Shearer, the possessor of more triumphs and conquests and wealth of many kinds than you or I could hope to have in twenty rich reincarnations said to me, tears in her eyes, “...of all my memories? Oh, I can answer that. For all the memories which are the most precious to me belong with Irving.” (30)

Although these memoires are rendered sad by Thalberg’s death, Shearer is glad to have them since without them she faces “utter desolation” (30). Her widowhood ensured she was identified entirely as her husband’s wife, in a way that marriage had not.

The year 1939 brought less emphasis on widowhood



Figure 33: Shearer, before and after.

specifically, since three years had passed since Thalberg's death, but instead a connected and broader emphasis on propriety and domesticity. In February, *Modern Screen* published two side-by-side images of Shearer, one a promotional image for *Let Us Be Gay*, in which Shearer appears with wild, curly hair, and one an image from 1939, in which Shearer's hair is shorter and straight (Fig. 33). The images are captioned "Remember the days when hair looked as if it had never been combed?" and "How much smarter Norma Shearer is in today's simple coiffure" (44). These images demonstrate a transformation narrative on Shearer, in which she was once wild, but is now a smarter, more mature star. That same month, *Silver Screen* noted that Irving Thalberg had advised Shearer to "give no more interviews about herself as a wife, a mother", since he realised that "the Helens and the Guineveres are not remembered for their stable virtue, but for their dangerous allure" (64). This essentially countered the agency narrative that had imbued the fan magazine rhetoric on her pre-Code films; it represented Shearer's previous, controversial roles and her modern star image as symptoms of her essentially traditional home life. It was, the magazine says here, her husband's decision to emphasise the modern, and downplay the traditional, aspects of her persona; he thought this was best for her career, and she, like a dutiful wife, obeyed.

In November, *Photoplay* played a game of "Truth or Consequences" with Shearer, and the traditional emphasis also surfaces here, particularly, this time, in the area of female employment, which Shearer was previously extremely vocal about. To the question "Do you believe women can fill political jobs as well as men?" Shearer responds "Not usually, as we are too personal and emotional" (90) and when she, as a forfeit, is required to write an advertisement for employment outside of the theatrical world, she writes a letter praising

her qualities as a personal maid because “it gives me pleasure to wait on others and make them happy, so I am sure that in several respects I would make a capable personal maid” (69). This is a far stretch from Shearer’s previously non-traditional views on female employment; her desired role here is essentially a domestic one.

This same year, in September, *The Women* was released. This film remains one of Shearer’s best-remembered today, and is particularly interesting because it closely echoes films such as *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay* in terms of narrative. In this film, Shearer plays wife and mother Mary Haines who, through the machinations of her cousin Sylvia, finds out her husband, Stephen, has been cheating on her with perfume counter girl Crystal Allen.

Although her mother advises her to keep quiet and not confront her husband, Mary believes that, as a modern woman, she should seek a divorce. She thus travels to Reno and, once there, hears the news that her ex-husband has married his mistress. Two years later, Mary is living alone with her daughter when she finds out her husband’s new wife has been cheating on him; conspiring with a number of friends and a gossip columnist, she brings the entire scandal to light and ultimately reunites with her husband.

The film thus follows exactly the same narrative pattern of marriage-divorce-reconciliation as *The Divorcee* and *Let Us Be Gay*, and to some extent *Riptide*, but is also different in a number of key ways which demonstrate the film’s post-Code’s origins. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, Mary is not a sexually transgressive character. She is a beautiful, intelligent and attentive wife to Stephen and has neither been suspected of nor committed adultery. This was also to some extent the case in *Let Us Be Gay*, but *The Women* goes beyond this initial blamelessness and also extends it to the time after the divorce. While Mary does not, as Jerry in *The Divorcee* called it, “take the veil”, and seems to lead a

healthy, outgoing, socially active lifestyle, she also does not “take her outings on the subway and her exercise in the night club”. Perhaps she has a suitor, perhaps she does not, but she is hardly a promiscuous figure exercising her right to the single sexual standard.

This is also reflected within her physical appearance; whereas in each of the pre-Code films, Shearer’s sexual transgressions are underlined by a transformation in terms of the way she wears her hair – which often gets bigger and curlier at this point in the film – or in terms of the tight, revealing gowns she wears, this is not an element of *The Women*, where Mary’s look remains consistent throughout the film. She remains respectable throughout, and traditionally so, as is also underlined by the fact that she does not have a career or profession in this film. The only two working women in the film are Crystal Allen, who holds a job at a perfume counter until she marries Stephen Haines, and Mary’s self-described “old maid” friend Nancy Blake. In this universe, married women do not work, let alone pursue personally fulfilling careers.

Mary’s modernity in this film remains limited, primarily, to the decision she makes, after finding out about her husband’s infidelity, not to listen to her mother and not to close her eyes to the situation. She thus seeks a divorce, because modern women no longer have to condone their husbands’ sexual missteps. In the pre-Code films, such as in *Let Us Be Gay* and *The Divorcee*, this is seen as a defining moment; Jerry tells Ted to look for her “where the primroses grow”, and that she will no longer tolerate his hypocrisy, whereas Kitty discovers at this point that she can live alone as an independent and professional woman. These moments are crucial, cathartic moments within their respective films, but such a moment, at the time of divorce, is entirely absent from *The Women*. Here, the moment of realisation only comes later, after two years, when Mary decides to win her husband back from his

once mistress, now second wife. In this context, she tells her mother she has had “two years to grow claws [...] – Jungle red!” and adds, when asked about her pride – which made her ask her husband for a divorce upon finding out about his adultery – that “pride is a luxury a woman in love can’t afford!” The film essentially casts Mary as at fault in the divorce, because she did not stay around and fight for her husband, but instead surrendered him, like a sacrificial victim, to his malevolent mistress. As such, the central divorce was a mistake which essentially served no purpose at all; this was not the case in either *The Divorcee* or *Let Us Be Gay*, where the spouses reunite, but have nonetheless each learned their lessons, and where the adulterous husbands have to acknowledge their faults in order to be reunited with their former wives. In this sense, *The Women* has more in common with the older DeMille films *Don’t Change Your Husband* and *Why Change Your Wife?*, since these, too, did not focus on female modernity in terms of employment or sexual transgression, and yet put the responsibility for the success of a marriage firmly in the camp of the wife – regardless of the husband’s mistakes.

This idea of *The Women* as a rather watered-down version of a divorce drama, in which Shearer’s character was essentially a bastion of respectability rather than of sexual transgression, also returned, indirectly, within the fan magazine rhetoric on the film. In September, *Photoplay* wrote about Shearer in *The Women* that “she has the least interesting and the most difficult part of the three to play... she must play that essentially dull type of role, a devoted wife” (79). At the same time, however, the magazine stresses that Shearer’s lines, while not brilliant or witty, would be “heart-stirring” (79). Shearer herself is quoted as saying that she thinks people will like Mary, “because Mary stands for the right... Mary stands for undying love, and fidelity, and faith... and I believe those

qualities live forever, and are more important than all the brains, or wealth, or laughter in the world” (79). Shearer, the magazine notes, understands the truth of this “through her widowhood and motherhood” (79). In December, *Hollywood* reiterated this in its review of the film, where it stated that “Norma Shearer plays the only really pleasant person in the whole cast, and so has the hardest time of all in keeping the attention of the audience” (19)/ Similarly, the reader’s letter I used to introduce this thesis, and which praised the salubrious influence of Shearer’s line that “pride is a luxury a woman in love can’t afford” (*Photoplay*, February 1940: 70), echoed Shearer’s respectability in this role. Whereas previously, Shearer’s roles had allowed women to question traditional gender roles, the sexual double standard, and the very institution of marriage itself, therefore, they now inspired women to embrace their traditional roles. The star’s own respectable widowhood only strengthened this influence.

In 1940, then, the rhetoric on Shearer shifted slightly again as the star was the subject of serious romantic speculation for the first time since Thalberg’s death, when she began dating fellow movie star George Raft. The first mention of the stars together came in January in *Photoplay* and documented both Raft’s breakup with former flame Virginia Peine and his new friendship with Shearer. Although the article states repeatedly that no romance exists between the two stars – instead claiming that they share a “fitting and proper” friendship – this is nonetheless implied; additionally, the article presents the Shearer/Raft relationship as a highly classed one, which would return throughout that year. Shearer is cast as the “First Lady of Hollywood”, and “should a title be conferred upon her in private life it would carry no less esteem” (77), whereas Raft is instead someone from a poor background who started out as a dancer and “numbered among his friends men who served

time as underworld figures” (77). Nonetheless, he is “more truly a gentleman than many born to high places” (77).

This class difference was discussed again by *Silver Screen* in March in an article entitled, suddenly, “Will Norma Marry George?”. The author’s answer to this question is “yes”, but the greater part of the article is dedicated to an analysis of the reasons why most people might think Shearer would not choose to marry Raft, and these are largely class-based. The author initially even states that certain “Communists said George wouldn’t marry an aristocrat” because “they were hopelessly confusing Norma with Marie Antoinette” (38). However, even general Hollywood “dinner table talk” claims that tradition stands in the way of the two, since Shearer is “very proud of being ‘a first lady’” and “marriage to George Raft, a former hoofer, would definitely be a jeopardy”. Shearer is “society”, Raft is not, Shearer likes “a bit of swank”, Raft “likes his steak and French fries at the Brown Derby, without any fuss or bother”. In fact

they say that Shearer is Shearer, and Raft is Raft, and the twain might meet but they’ll never marry. In fact “they” can’t figure out how Norma and George even *met*. (31)

Nonetheless, the author posits instead that Shearer is growing bored of her “unenviable” role as “the first lady of Hollywood” and compares her to Mrs. Roosevelt who “gets criticised plenty because she doesn’t live up to the tradition of being a first lady”. And so, she states, “will poor Miss Shearer when she actually kicks over the traces” (72). Shearer is in fact represented as a little resentful and lonely, since “respect is a fine thing, but I think Norma would throw it over in a minute in exchange for a good batch of comraderie [sic]” (72). Raft, the author claims, is helping Shearer in this way, since he took her to Coney

Island, where she “ate hot dogs with mustard, and big drippy ice cream cones. She even went for a ride with him in the Old Mill” (72).

Various elements, such as the comparison with Eleanor Roosevelt, of course simultaneously establish Shearer firmly as an elite personality, even while claiming her dissatisfaction with this situation, and this returns within other elements of the Shearer-Raft romance throughout this year. In fact, the relationship is depicted more frequently as Raft adjusting to Shearer’s life than the other way around. That same month (March), *Modern Screen* published a short item noting that George Raft “has even gone in for conservative clothes as of late” (53), particularly since “dating Norma Shearer means more and better looking clothes” (55). Other items throughout the year show Raft integrating into Shearer’s life rather than other way around, even in terms of her family life; Raft referred to her and the Thalberg children as “his family” according to June *Silver Screen* (19) and according to July *Modern Screen*, he accompanied Shearer’s ten-year old son to a baseball game (70). As such, even this new romance really maintained the conservative and aristocratic aspect of Shearer’s star persona and incorporated Raft in this milieu, rather than other way around.

Shearer and Raft ultimately split up before the year was over, and the last significant magazine coverage of Shearer for the year 1940 was an editorial article in November *Modern Screen* entitled “An Open Letter from Norma Shearer” and purportedly produced by Shearer (and transcribed by Gladys Hall). In this article, Shearer answers a series of questions she is frequently asked by fans. Many of these focus on Shearer’s domestic situation, placing her once more firmly into this particular sphere; topics include her “friendship” with George Raft (yet also her lack of intention to marry him), her focus on her children’s happiness (yet refusal to expose them to extensive press coverage) and her

enjoyment of household tasks while she isn't working. Shearer describes herself as "really very domestic at heart" and notes she cannot often respond to fan letters because she is busy in this way when not filming (69). Her social life, too, is less "Hollywood" than fans might suspect and is described by Shearer as "cozy, warm and rather comfortable on the whole", since the claustrophobic Shearer dislikes crowds (70). While she enjoys dancing, she also loves "to go to bed early, read a book and eat an apple" (70); she might not have "taken the veil" as a widow, but she is far more Mary Haines than Jerry Martin.

Shearer's widowhood is also addressed, at the end of the article, when she deals with "a question asked me, often all too sadly", which is "When your husband died- how did you ever endure it?" Shearer states here that she doesn't believe there is any real consolation for such a situation:

I don't believe the "it's all for the best," "it had to be" kind of comfort. I can only tell you that I worked things out because, first of all, I suddenly found myself feeling that life is very short and that we simply have to live it as best we may. Gradually, then, everyday world responsibilities begin to bring their satisfaction. It's not that you forget, it's that the business of life catches up with you. (70)

This is arguably the most serious and certainly the most sincere-sounding part of this article; it once more casts Shearer as a courageous widow, struggling to go on after her husband's death but doing so anyway, in part for her children.

A second major strand of the coverage of Shearer in this "Open Letter" is the focus on and damage control against her perceived entitlement. Shearer starts out by responding to a recent interview in which she supposedly said her income of \$25,000 was insufficient to live on and notes she was misquoted and that she feels she enjoys "an extremely good income" and considers herself "one of the world's luckiest persons". Shearer also addresses

questions on her power and influence at the studio, and stresses that rather than taking advantage of this, she has in fact fought less for particular roles as she would have without her marriage to Thalberg and her friendship with other executives, since she “didn’t want to appear to be taking advantage of [her] association” (25). In fact, Shearer states that

I’ve never attempted to use any influence which I, as Irving’s wife, might have had – and all because I feared I would be accused of wielding a power I do not wish to have. (25)

Similar articles, essentially highlighting Shearer’s reputation as a “First Lady” of MGM and of Hollywood while at the same time noting how down-to-earth and kind the star really was, had appeared throughout the previous year, as well.

Additionally, in October 1940, *Screen Life* published an article on this very topic, entitled “Is Norma Shearer the Hollywood Dictator?”. The graphic layout of the article is extremely striking, particularly for 1940, and features an image of Shearer on the left side with an image of her *Escape* costar Robert Taylor doing the Hitler salute on the right, seemingly at her. It begins by once again reiterating some key negative elements of Shearer’s star persona, strongly stressing the royal undertones that had been a part of this persona for years. In fact, Shearer’s detractors

profess to believe that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is being operated today like a feudal kingdom, with Miss Shearer as the matriarch of a dynasty, reigning until such time as her two children, Irving Jr and Katharine, are ready to take over. (28)

She is First Lady of the screen because of “Thalberg’s dough”, these people claim; “you can’t beat \$10,000,000 and a 30 per cent interest in the studio” (29).

The article then goes on to disprove each of these claims, using images to show Shearer is a down-to-earth, kind person and an excellent dramatic and romantic actress. It also

describes, in some detail, the financial history of MGM as well as Thalberg's position within this history, in order to disprove both the myth of Shearer's interest in the studio and of her supposedly enormous inheritance; she cannot, in fact, touch the principal of this money, which instead goes all to the children, and receives only the annual interest. The article is extremely detailed and probably contains fairly accurate information; nonetheless, two things remain. Firstly, the information that essentially exonerates Shearer can be found only in the "continued" section near the back of the magazine, so casual readers could miss it entirely. Secondly, and connectedly, the shocking visual layout of the first two pages perpetuates the image of a tyrannical Shearer far more than the rest of the article manages to disprove this. This is indicative of how the star would be remembered by future generations, especially after her retirement in 1942; the fact that her later films, such as *Marie Antoinette* and *The Women*, would, for decades, remain her best-remembered ones did not help remedy this.

Fan magazine coverage in and after 1942 once more reiterated the two threads I have highlighted here as those most influential for Shearer's afterlife as a star. The star remarried in 1942, to ski instructor Marty Arrouge, an unknown more than a decade her junior, and rhetoric on this marriage contained a number of familiar elements. Firstly, there was Shearer's new respectable domesticity; in June 1945, *Modern Screen* highlighted Shearer as a first lady of "graciousness and dignity and charm", noting that Shearer was now happily remarried to Arrouge, and that since Arrouge was a Naval Officer on active duty, "Norma takes her place with the millions of other war wives, caring for her two children, her home, her heart for the husband who'll be home – 'soon'" (89). Shearer, who had not made a film

in three years and was considered highly unlikely to return, was thus now officially a housewife, waiting at home for her husband to return from his war work.

Nonetheless, the item also reiterated the tragedy that had befallen Shearer, even at this point nine years after Thalberg's death; it noted that while she "can now talk about her late husband, Irving Thalberg", "the sadness isn't quite all gone from her eyes" (89). Other coverage of the marriage talked about this, too; *Modern Screen* noted in December 1942, for example, that even though Shearer had remarried now, she signed her name as "Norma Shearer Thalberg Arrouge", rather than Norma Shearer Arrouge, or Norma Arrouge. (63) Even the announcement of the marriage itself, some months earlier in *Photoplay*, harked back to Shearer's widowhood, in noting that Shearer had her husband "agree to place over the ring that marked her marriage to Irving Thalberg his own wedding band. Imagine wearing two marriage rings, if you please" (10). Shearer would thus never entirely cease to be the Widow Thalberg, even after her second marriage; she wanted it that way.

At the same time, however, the marriage announcement contained a hint at the negative connotations present within Shearer's star persona, as well, noting that "with all the business acumen that has marked her career, Miss Shearer had her bridegroom legally waive all rights to community property" (10) which, while admittedly intelligent, also seemed somewhat cool, calculating and unsympathetic. Another anecdote, too, unconnected to the marriage but very much omnipresent within the magazines throughout the 1940s, showed Shearer as an aristocratic but not necessarily kind presence. This anecdote actually happened in the early 1930s, but was reported again in *Modern Screen* in March 1942, when the magazine reflected upon

the time, six or seven years ago, when Carole Lombard hostess-ed a party at which every woman including herself was to wear white. Everyone obliged except Norma Shearer who arrived in the middle of the evening, togged in shining scarlet! And how Carole raged! (52)

This anecdote marked Shearer out as a privileged star who considered herself to be above the rules, and it returned in the same magazine as late as February 1949, when the magazine remembered the night

Norma Shearer crossed Carole up, with a feminine dagger thrust, by making a grand entrance in scarlet red – the only color gown there. (Bette Davis later used that incident for a striking scene in a swell movie of hers, *Jezebel*.) Carole turned whiter than her satin gown, swiftly picked up her skirts and left the ballroom. (112)

As such, Shearer was likened to spoiled central character Julie in *Jezebel*, and in a world where she was increasingly remembered only in vague reminiscences on the time of “Norma Shearer and Vilma Banky, who were heavenly visions indeed” (*Modern Screen*, June 1950: 40), this privileged persona, underlined by anecdotes such as this, stuck. Shearer would go down in history as the tragic, respectable widow Thalberg, as the rather dull Mary Haines in *The Women*, and as a slightly unsympathetic, aristocratic figure from cinema’s past.

6.5 - Conclusion

After the previous chapter, which established the ways in which Shearer’s pre-Code films had become increasingly unacceptable to the censors over the course of the early 1930s, and would become impossible especially after the enforcement of the Hays Code in mid-1934, then, this chapter has attempted to trace the development of Shearer’s star persona after this date. In doing so, it has especially emphasised the importance of the year 1936 to

the magazine rhetoric on Shearer, as the star, soon after the release of *Romeo and Juliet*, her first film since 1934, became a widow upon the death of her husband, Irving Thalberg.

This widowhood, I argue, instantly accomplished for Shearer's star persona what her happy marriage had never been able to do; it cast her, almost overnight, in an ultra-conservative light, representing her as an aristocratic, tragic widow, bereft by the death of her one true love, and with as her only roles in life those of raising his children and carrying out his legacy. The fact that *Romeo and Juliet* had been their last co-production only underlined the romantic, but also tragic undertones of her new star persona, and, in this post-Code universe, it was impossible for Shearer to once more use a hyper-modern screen persona to reinvent herself. Both *Marie Antoinette* and *The Women*, films which contained certain transgressive elements reminiscent of Shearer's earlier, pre-Code roles, operated differently in this post-1934 world, and rather than underlining Shearer's modern characters, the films marked her as, respectively, a particularly royal and a particularly noble figure, and thus also a privileged, aristocratic presence within Hollywood. These elements, rather than the transgressive, modern characteristics previously part and parcel of her star persona, would remain attached to her for the remainder of Shearer's career, for the rest of her life, and even beyond.

Conclusion: The good woman, and the bad woman, and the woman between the two...

In 1956, John Springer, publicist for RKO Pictures, authored the first and only issue of *Old Hollywood* magazine. This publication focused on “Movieland’s Mad Past” and was essentially a curated collection of images, reminiscences and quizzes regarding the Hollywood of the 1910s to 1940s, with special attention paid to stars from different countries, the debut roles of still-famous stars, and so on. Its front cover featured portraits of ten 1920s-30s stars and named these as well; one of these stars was Norma Shearer, a small portrait of whom was placed in the bottom left corner of the cover.

Nonetheless, even though the star is thus semi-prominently featured on the cover, Shearer coverage within the pages of the magazine is extremely scarce. Echoing LaSalle’s chapter title “The Great Garbo and Norma Who?”, the magazine features Shearer’s MGM contemporary Greta Garbo, who also retired in the early 1940s, in its very first feature; here, Garbo is given the title of “Movie Memory Woman” who “although

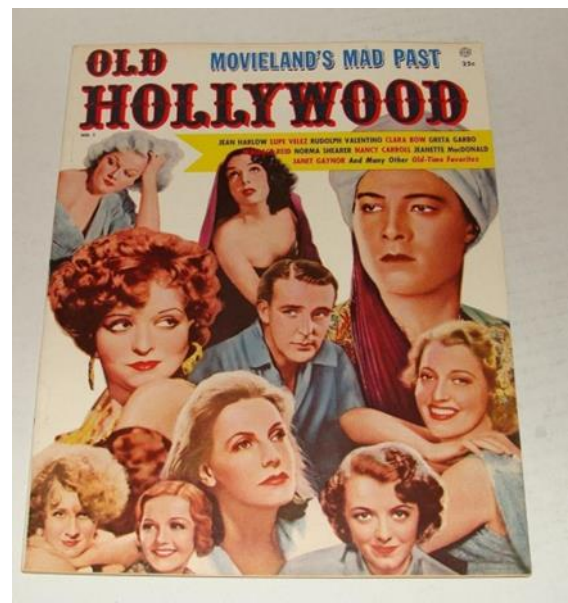


Figure 34: The cover of *Old Hollywood* magazine.

absent for years, remains the living symbol of the glory that can be the screen” (6). Shearer, on the other hand, in spite of her presence alongside Garbo on the cover, has no such presence within the pages of the magazine; in fact, her only mention outside of the cover happens on the magazine’s very final page. Here, a small item informs the viewer that soon, *The Opposite Sex* will be made as a remake of *The Women*, which starred “plenty of luscious

ladies, such as Norma Shearer, Joan Fontaine, Rosalind Russell, Paulette Goddard" (72). Shearer is here named first because she is shown at the very left of the picture, rather than in order to indicate her comparative importance; indeed, the image chosen depicts her as a peripheral figure, an onlooker to the fight between Russell and Goddard.



Figure 35: Shearer's only mention in *Old Hollywood* magazine.

The manner of Shearer's presence within the pages of this magazine, therefore, makes a number of points regarding both her career as such and how she was remembered at this point in time. The image on the cover, after all, is a hand-drawn version of a publicity shot for *The Divorcee*, and depicts Shearer sporting her bouffant, post-divorce hairdo; as such, it promises the reader a glimpse of the sexually transgressive, modern Shearer this thesis has attempted to unveil. At the same time, however, the coverage of the star inside the magazine both diminishes her importance – due to the scarcity of her coverage compared to her contemporaries – and condemns her to the role of dull, noble bystander in *The Women*. As the reader leafs through the magazine, Shearer is transformed from Jerry, who told her husband to pack his man's pride with the rest, to Mary, who told her cousin that pride is a thing a woman in love can't afford. A man's pride, scorned by Jerry, meant his inability to accept the sexual single standard; a woman's pride, scorned by Mary, meant her unwillingness to accept a philandering husband. While the first statement took Shearer to

the very height of her fame, it is the second that remains most strongly identified with her today – if she is remembered at all.

This thesis thus started out by analysing, in the form of a literature review, a number of previous readings of Shearer and her career by film scholars, with the first characterising her simply as an overly privileged and unfairly advantaged star who has rightfully been forgotten in the annals of film history. A second, more positive reading – and perhaps the most widespread today – instead identified Shearer as a star who built her career upon noble and ladylike roles such as *The Women's* Mary Haines, and who has been unfairly vilified because of it. A third reading, emerging only tentatively and purely, thus far, in a non-academic context, has begun to cast a light upon Shearer's unique, pre-Code sexual modernity; it is this third reading this thesis has attempted to develop further.

The core goal of this thesis, then, has been to place this pre-Code period, so seemingly anomalous within the framework of what we as film historians think we know about Shearer, within its proper context in her career trajectory, in order to examine where this focus on (often sexual) modernity came from, which themes it emphasised, and, crucially, where and why it ultimately went.

The thesis started with a precedential chapter, setting the scene in a number of different ways for the way in which Shearer's modernity would develop in the early 1930s. I examined a series of 1920s films in order to interrogate the ways in which these attributed, or failed to attribute, modern characteristics to the star. While *Lady of the Night* (1925), arguably one of Shearer's first great successes for MGM, still separated tentative modernity and middle-class respectability in two separate characters, the two later films covered here increasingly brought these characteristics together; in *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, the star

embodied transgressive sexual activity without guilt or repercussions, and in *Their Own Desire*, she combined sexual knowledge with a solidly middle-class, thoroughly respectable status. The films did not yet bring together extramarital sexuality and middle-class respectability; nonetheless, both they and the concurrent magazine coverage on Shearer focused on a modernity that was more than skin-deep and involved, not simply clothes and leisure activities, but also deeply-held beliefs and important life choices. This magazine coverage underlined this particularly by identifying her as a respectable and even aristocratic star, but also attributed to her qualities of intelligence and personal and professional ambition. In this context, Shearer's marriage in 1927 became a key element of her star persona, as it allowed rhetoric on the star to ponder both whether a career woman ought to be allowed to marry, and whether a married woman ought to be allowed to prioritise her career. The mere fact that these questions were asked set the coverage of Shearer apart from that on the earlier stars, such as Gloria Swanson, starring in similar films; even more controversially, however, the answer to both questions was given as a "yes".

The section on pre-Code cinema, then, demonstrated the logical continuation of the modern ideas already present within Shearer's 1920s films. From *The Divorcee* onward, Shearer's characters, whether divorcees or simply girls with a natural distrust in the institution of marriage itself, combined a respectable middle-class status with an extensive sexual knowledge, but also a belief in the sexual single standard and an embrace of extramarital sexual activity. These characters walked the "primrose path", but they did so with dignity, with respectability, often while maintaining successful and fulfilling careers, and twice while raising healthy and happy children. At the end of each film, these women, then, were not held accountable for their transgressions but were instead celebrated and

rewarded with the love of the man of their choice – a man who, more often than not, had to concede defeat and develop a more modern sensibility in order to deserve them. They embodied modern concepts of independence, freedom and mobility, sexually as well as professionally, and were rewarded for this.

Fan magazine coverage on Shearer echoed this developing modernity, with Shearer continuously identified as an intelligent and ambitious young modern who – crucially – chose to play sexually transgressive roles of this kind because she enjoyed them, and because she believed in them. While her own marriage could, at this time, have been used to assuage fears in regard to her increasing modernity, it was not used as such; instead, coverage on the marriage tended to emphasise the ways in which Shearer maintained both a successful career and a happy home life simultaneously – particularly after the birth of her first child – as well as, increasingly, the ways in which a healthy sexuality, possibly supported by premarital sexual experience, contributed to happiness in marriage. Shearer was not a divorcee, but not because divorce was outside the realm of respectable possibility; she was not divorced because she did not need to be divorced, since her marriage to a supportive and modern husband allowed her to balance a happy home life with a successful career. Norma Shearer was, at this point in time, the perfect modern, and the girl who had it all.

However, a degree of backlash against Shearer's sophisticated star persona had also gradually become a part of the fan magazine rhetoric on the star over the course of the first half of the 1930s; this echoed a wider development within the cinema industry and within society at large, as calls for more and stricter censorship became both louder and more widespread at this time. My next chapter thus stepped back from Shearer's specific career to examine the ways in which such censorship efforts specifically targeted female sexual

transgression. In examining the Payne Fund Studies, it became apparent that while young boys were seen as in danger of becoming criminals from watching films dealing with crime or gangsterhood, young women were perceived as particularly in danger of suffering the nefarious influence of on-screen sexual transgression. Such girls would not become criminals, but would, instead, embrace both the sexual single standard and, more broadly, a dangerously modern way of life. This same belief was codified within the actual text of the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” of 1927 and the Production Code in 1930, as both emphasised the dangers of particularly sexual transgression on the screen. Finally, the Production Code Administration files on Shearer’s pre-Code films, too, underlined this, as over the course of the early 1930s, in reaction to the censorship efforts of local censorship boards, both PCA and studio officials became focused more on cutting potentially sexually problematic moments from the screen.

The final chapter, then, explored in more detail the twin influences that would lead to the mid-1930s transformation of Shearer’s star persona, as *The Divorcee*’s Jerry Barnard Martin became *The Women*’s Mary Haines over the course of this decade. Firstly, the enforcement of the Production Code in mid-1934 would make it impossible for films such as Shearer’s *The Divorcee*, *Strangers May Kiss* or *Riptide* to be made; their sexual transgressions had been deemed too potentially influential to be allowed to persist, and in future, representations of marital crises such as that of *The Divorcee* would by necessity be coated in a thick, anodyne layer of female guilt, as in *The Women*.

However, simultaneously, something also changed for Shearer personally around this time, and I argue that it is the combination of this second influence *with* the enforced demise of the “free soul” film that led to the creation of her conservative, dull post-retirement

persona. This second influence was the death of Shearer's husband in September 1936; leaving her a young widow and single mother of two children under six, the event's impact on the fan magazine rhetoric on Shearer was nothing less than cataclysmic. Over the course of nine years, Shearer had moulded her position as a happy wife into a modern virtue, but aristocratic widowhood carried traditional and conservative connotations even the star of *The Divorcee* could not avoid; almost overnight, Norma Shearer's name, previously associated with intelligence, ambition and sexual modernity, became a byword for genteel tragedy, as the magazines specified, at length, the ways in which she would now live on purely to protect her husband's legacy, to raise his children, and to hold onto his memory. In a post-Code Hollywood that could offer Shearer no more roles of the kind that had, previously, allowed her to balance out her respectable and aristocratic reputation with a focus on the ultra-modern, her star persona became, and remained, an approximation of the character of Mary Haines in *The Women*: respectable, conservative and, ultimately, dull. This is how she would be remembered after her 1942 retirement in a world that had all but forgotten Jerry Barnard Martin's blameless stride down the primrose path, this is how she would be remembered in *Old Hollywood* magazine in 1956, and this is how she would be remembered in Basinger's *A Woman's View* in 1993, a full decade after her death.

This thesis, however, has demonstrated the ways in which this persistent image was, for the greater part of the star's career, a false one, and has, instead, begun to unearth the modern, sexually transgressive and professionally ambitious persona that is Shearer's far more natural legacy. It has performed this reappraisal primarily through two different methodological approaches.

Firstly, unlike any source on Shearer to date, this thesis has included a systematic study of a number of the most popular magazines across a range of years; in this way, it has been possible to reconstruct Shearer's star image not simply through an examination of her movie roles or using biographical details, but as it was presented to her fans month after month and year after year. In this way, the thesis has been able to trace particular tropes and themes both within the context of the magazines and as responses to extratextual developments, such as the advent of the Production Code in 1934.

Secondly, then, this emphasis on the Code is also crucial to the recovery of Shearer's progressive image; as opposed to the work of Ruth Vasey, which I highlighted in my literature review and which minimised the impact of the Code enforcement in 1934 on the Hollywood industry, this thesis has espoused the view that the year 1934 was, indeed, a watershed moment, for Shearer's career as for that of many of her contemporaries. The strict enforcement of the Production Code in this year meant, for Shearer, the end of the sexually empowered roles that had previously been so crucial to her star persona, and it also meant that, once her widowhood cast her in a more conservative light, she could no longer attempt a return to her former modernity by way of the screen.

While these factors – the study of fan magazines and a renewed focus on 1934 as a pivotal year – have enabled me to explore Shearer's life and career from a different angle, and offer a broader scope for future further study of Shearer, however, they also indicate one of the ways in which this thesis can open up new avenues for future research on different stars active during this era. This applies especially to previously relatively neglected stars, such as Irene Dunne or Kay Francis; while these and others have usually been analysed only superficially and in a rather simplistic light, they, too, could potentially be reappraised

through a double lens of fan magazine study and reappreciation of the importance of the year 1934.

Particularly the emphasis on fan magazine research is a relatively novel one, and in this regard, the thesis hopes to inspire further advances in the field of film history in two additional ways.

Firstly, the thesis would not have been possible without the recent advancements in terms of the digitisation of 1920s-1940s fan magazines, particularly through the Media History Digital Library and its search engine, Lantern. Especially important in this regard is the availability of full runs of magazines such as *Motion Picture*, *Picture Play*, *The New Movie Magazine* and *Screenland* – major publications at the time which sometimes outsold the now better-known *Photoplay*. Since a full run of *Photoplay* has been available on microfilm for decades, the danger of privileging its voice over that of other, similar publications has been significant. This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that while, usually due to the studio's attempts at control, most mainstream magazines followed similar narrative patterns, emphases still varied from magazine to magazine, and a broad examination of four or five simultaneously published periodicals can be fruitful in a way a study of *Photoplay* alone cannot.

In terms of the way these periodicals are studied, this thesis, by and large, concerns itself with fan magazines not as secondary sources – reporting factual information on particular stars – but as primary sources – demonstrating the way the industry chose to represent particular films and stars to audiences. Nonetheless, the thesis also briefly introduced a new methodology to deal with readers' letters, which form one of the few elements of these types of magazines which can be verified independently through census research; while

issues of selectivity still apply, this can prove at the very least that a certain percentage of the letter writers genuinely existed. While this has, for this thesis, mainly served to strengthen the evidence offered by such letters, the kind of census research performed here could be built upon in order to conduct real audience research on the readership of these magazines, for example in terms of the (potentially) evolving demographics of the readership of each magazine. This remains, to date, a rather unexplored field of study, yet carries a great deal of latent potential in order to access the views and experiences of a large number of fans now deceased and outside the boundaries of oral history.

This thesis, however, has used fan magazines more straightforwardly, in the first of these two ways: by using them as primary sources through which to reclaim Norma Shearer from the relative obscurity to which she has so wrongfully been condemned since her retirement in 1942, and through which to highlight the ways in which she was, in a truly unique sense, a crucial model of female modernity for much of her career.

Primarily and most obviously, Shearer's key contribution was that of rendering the sexual single standard a respectable and acceptable philosophy for young women on and off the pre-Code screen, but I believe that her importance as a star really goes beyond this.

Through her portrayals of clever, sexually liberated, respectable women and through her star persona as an intelligent, modern, happily married woman, Norma Shearer did not "just" advocate for the single standard, but complicated the very idea of what a woman ought to be – or even of what a woman was. She did this as early as 1925, when *Lady of the Night's* Florence and Molly proved that two women could be polar opposites without embodying simple values of right and wrong, and she continued on this path until the combined influences of the Production Code and her own tragic personal life made it

impossible to go further. At the height of her fame, however, Shearer was a paragon of modernity who gave the world not a good woman, not a bad woman, but the woman in between. And for a brief time, in pre-Code Hollywood, such a woman could, and should, and sometimes did, have it all.

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1934

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1935

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1936

Boos and Bouquets. (1936). *Photoplay*, November, pp. 4, 116.

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1937

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1938

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Willson, D. (1938). Norma Shearer's Handful of Memories. *Photoplay*, October, pp. 32-3, 87-8.

York, C. (1938). Cal York's Gossip of Hollywood. *Photoplay*, May, pp. 45-7, 68.

1939

Waterbury, R. (1939). Close Ups and Long Shots. *Photoplay*, September, pp. 13, 79.

1940

Boos and Bouquets. (1940). *Photoplay*, February, pp. 4, 70.

Ormiston, R. (1940). Virginia Peine – George Raft – Norma Shearer. *Photoplay*, January, pp. 12-3, 77.

1942

York, C. (1942). Inside Stuff. *Photoplay*, November, pp. 8-10, 12-5.

Picture Play

1918

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Mistley, M. (1918). What I Think of "Old Wives for New". *Picture Play*, August, pp. 251-4.

1919

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1920

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1925

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1926

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Wooldridge, D. (1926) What I Admire Most In A Man. *Picture Play*, May 1926, pp. 18-9, 100.

1927

Sylvester, A. (1927). Are All Movie Stars High Hat? *Picture Play*, December, pp. 19-20, 98.

1929

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Prisoners at the Bar. (1929). *Picture Play*, October, pp. 68-9.

Schallert, E. and E. (1929). Hollywood High Lights. *Picture Play*, November, pp. 56-9, 106.

Whitely Fletcher, A. (1929). It Pays To Be Dignified. *Picture Play*, April, pp. 32-3, 114.

1930

Gebhart, M. (1930). Their Dual Personalities. *Picture Play*, January, pp. 62-5, 108.

Lusk, N. (1930). The Screen in Review. *Picture Play*, August, pp. 70-3, 98.

Lusk, N. (1930). The Screen in Review. *Picture Play*, May, pp. 64-7, 96, 100.

Playing With Fire. (1930) *Picture Play*, June, p. 81.

Schallert, E. and E. (1930). Hollywood High Lights. *Picture Play*, January, pp. 44-7, 100, 106.

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Scott, R. (1930). The Courage of Normalcy. *Picture Play*, March, pp. 74-5, 111.

What the Fans Think. (1930). *Picture Play*, January, pp. 8, 10, 112-3, 116.

1931

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Tell, D. (1931). Aren't We All? *Picture Play*, April, pp. 73, 115.

What the Fans Think. (1931) *Picture Play*, May, pp. 8-13.

1932

Lusk, N. (1932). The Screen in Review. *Picture Play*, December, pp. 46-8, 60, 64, 70-2.

Reid, M. (1932). Help! Help! *Picture Play*, January, pp. 42-4.

Schallert, E. and E. (1932). Hollywood High Lights. *Picture Play*, July, pp. 38-9, 59-61.

Smilin' Through. (1932). *Picture Play*, November, p. 19.

What the Fans Think. (1932). *Picture Play*, July, pp. 6, 10-4.

1933

Hollis, K. (1933). They Say in New York. *Picture Play*, January, pp. 20-1, 64, 66.

Hollis, K. (1933). They Say In New York. *Picture Play*, June, pp. 20-1, 64-5, 72.

Lusk, N. (1933). The Screen in Review. *Picture Play*, January, pp. 46-8, 60-1, 70-1.

Maddox, B. (1933). All Work, No Love. *Picture Play*, February, pp. 35, 66.

Schallert, E. (1933). Norma on the Spot. *Picture Play*, February, pp. 36-7, 68.

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What the Fans Think. (1933). *Picture Play*, January, pp. 6, 10, 12-3, 62.

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1934

Benham, L. (1934). Tragic Mansions. *Picture Play*, March, pp. 14-5, 52.

Schallert, E. (1934). The Clean-Up Earthquake. *Picture Play*, October, pp. 12-3, 58, 65.

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1936

Lusk, N. (1936). Soft and Sharp Focus. *Picture Play*, December, pp. 13-4.

So They Say. (1936). *Picture Play*, October, p. 35.

The Pittsburgh Press

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1930

Evans, D. (1930). Reviews of the Best Pictures. *Screenland*, July, pp. 84-7.

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Now and Then. (1930). *Screenland*, January, pp. 16-7.

Reilly, R. (1930). Time Out for Motherhood! *Screenland*, December, pp. 18-9, 125.

Strider, G. (1930). Can Beauty be Hand-Made?. *Screenland*, January, pp. 24-5, 94-5.

Tildesley, R. (1930) Is Publicity Fatal to Happy Marriage in Hollywood? *Screenland*, February, pp. 24-5, 120.

1934

Mook, S. R. (1934). Medals! *Screenland*, February, pp. 20-1, 84-6.

Now You're Talking. (1934). *Screenland*, July, pp. 8, 11.

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Screen Life

Wilson, L. (1940). Is Norma Shearer the Hollywood Dictator? *Screen Life*, October, pp. 28-9, 88-9.

Silver Screen

1933

Babcock, M. (1933). Who Will Be the Queen of Hollywood? *Silver Screen*, November, pp. 21, 60-1.

1934

Fan Mail Department. (1934). *Silver Screen*, July, pp. 10-1.

1936

Mook, S. R. (1936). Studio News. *Silver Screen*, December, pp. 14-7, 77.

1937

Gillespie-Hayek, A. (1937). Alas! The Poor Players. *Silver Screen*, May, pp. 60-1, 71.

Dowling, M. (1937). "You Can't Do That!" *Silver Screen*, April, pp. 32-3, 64-5.

1938

Barnes, H. (1938). Are Screen Sirens Going Top Hat? *Silver Screen*, July, pp. 26-7, 70.

Announcement. (1938). *Silver Screen*, July, p. 82.

Wilson, E. (1938). Projection of Norma Shearer. *Silver Screen*, August, pp. 19-21, 72.

Hall, G. (1938). Treasured Memories. *Silver Screen*, November, pp. 30-1, 68.

1939

Hall, G. (1939). Allure! Mysterious – Provocative. *Silver Screen*, February, pp. 33-4, 64-6.

1940

Wilson, E. (1940). Will Norma Marry George? *Silver Screen*, March, pp. 38-9, 72-3.

Silver Screen – Topics for Gossip. (1940). *Silver Screen*, June, pp. 19-20.

Time

Legion of Decency. (1934). *Time*, 11 June, p. 36.

Filmography

A Free Soul (Clarence Brown, USA, 1931)

A Lady of Chance (Robert Z. Leonard, USA, 1928)

Baby Face (Alfred E. Green, USA, 1933)

Back Street (John M. Stahl, USA, 1932)

Don't Change Your Husband (Cecil B. DeMille, USA, 1919)

Dream Wife (Sidney Sheldon, USA, 1953)

Escape (Mervyn LeRoy, USA, 1940)

He Who Gets Slapped (Victor Sjöström, USA, 1924)

His Girl Friday (Howard Hawks, USA, 1940)

Intolerance (D. W. Griffith, USA, 1916)

Ladies They Talk About (William Keighley and Howard Bretherton, USA, 1933)

Lady of the Night (Monta Bell, USA, 1925)

Let Us Be Gay (Robert Z. Leonard, USA, 1930)

Male and Female (Cecil B. DeMille, USA, 1919)

Marie Antoinette (W. S. Van Dyke, USA, 1938)

Old Wives for New (Cecil B. DeMille, USA, 1918)

Our Dancing Daughters (Harry Beaumont, USA 1928)

Pleasure Mad (Reginald Barker, USA, 1923)

Private Lives (Sidney Franklin, USA, 1931)

Riptide (Edmund Goulding, USA, 1934)

Romeo and Juliet (George Cukor, USA, 1936)

Song of the Thin Man (Edward Buzzell, USA, 1947)

Smilin' Through (Sidney Franklin, USA, 1932)

Strangers May Kiss (George Fitzmaurice, USA, 1931)

Strange Interlude (Robert Z. Leonard, USA, 1932)

The Awful Truth (Leo McCarey, USA, 1937)

The Barretts of Wimpole Street (Sidney Franklin, USA, 1934)

The Bride Wore Red (Dorothy Arzner, USA, 1937)

The Divorcee (Robert Z. Leonard, USA, 1930)

The Hollywood Revue of 1929 (Charles Reisner, USA, 1929)

The Hot Heiress (Clarence G. Badger, USA, 1931)

The Lady Eve (Preston Sturges, USA, 1941)

The Last Days of Pompeii (Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper, USA, 1935)

The Long, Hot Summer (Martin Ritt, USA, 1958)

The Sign of the Cross (Cecil B. DeMille, USA, 1932)

The Trial of Mary Dugan (Bayard Veiller, USA, 1929)

The Women (George Cukor, USA, 1939)

Their Own Desire (E. Mason Hopper, USA, 1929)

Why Change Your Wife? (Cecil B. DeMille, USA, 1920)

Woman of the Year (George Stevens, USA, 1942)

Appendix A: Norma Shearer timeline

- 1902 Edith Norma Shearer is born in Montréal, Canada, on August 10th, the third child and second daughter of middle-class parents.
- 1919 Shearer stars as an uncredited extra in her first film, *The Star Boarder* (Semon, 1919).
- 1923 Shearer signs a contract with Louis B. Mayer Studios (which would become part of MGM in 1924) and has her first Hollywood role in *Pleasure Mad* (Barker, 1923).
- 1927 Shearer marries MGM Head of Production Irving G. Thalberg on September 29th.
- 1929 Shearer makes her first talking picture, *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (Veiller, 1929).
- 1930 Shearer wins the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role in *The Divorcee* (Leonard, 1930).
- Shearer gives birth to her first child, Irving Thalberg, Jr., on August 25th.
- 1935 Shearer gives birth to her second child, Katharine Thalberg, on June 14th.
- 1936 Irving Thalberg dies after a short bout of pneumonia on September 14th.
- 1942 Shearer stars in her final film, *Her Cardboard Lover* (Cukor, 1942), and marries Martin Arrouge.
- 1983 Shearer dies of pneumonia on June 12th.

Appendix B: Filmography of Norma Shearer

Silent films

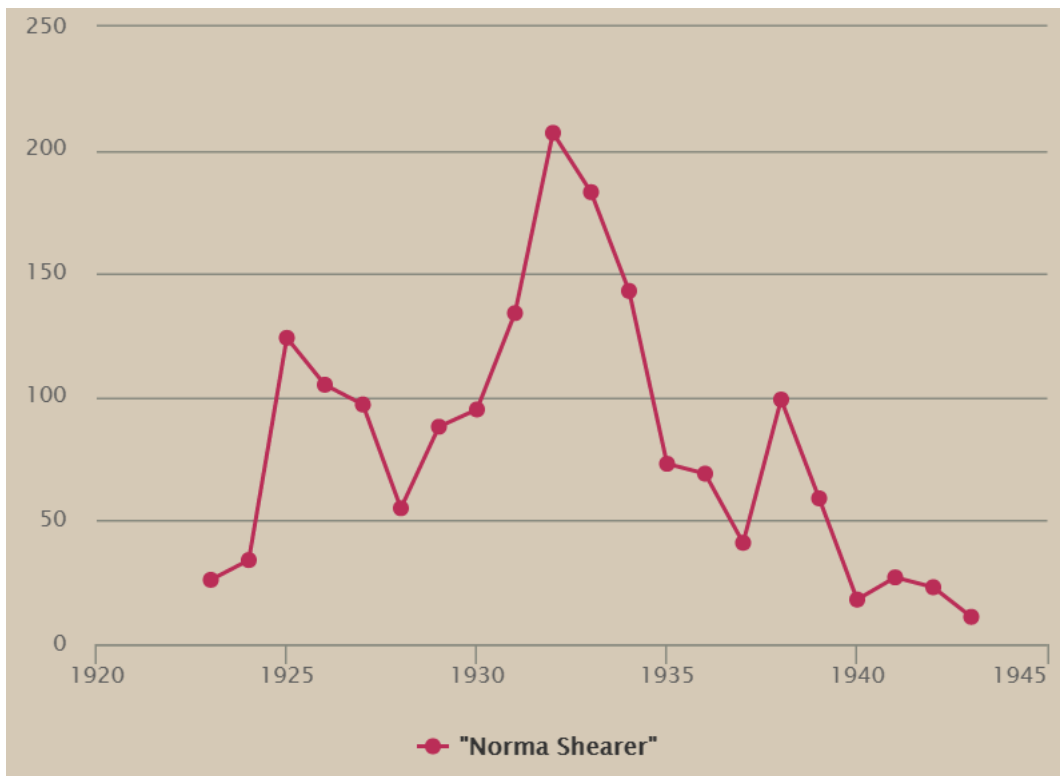
The Star Boarder (Semon, 1919)
The Flapper (Crosland, 1920)
Way Down East (Griffith, 1920)
The Restless Sex (D'Usseau and Leonard, 1920)
Torchy's Millions (unknown, 1920)
The Stealers (Cabanne, 1920)
The Sign on the Door (Brenon, 1921)
The Leather Pushers (Laemmle, 1922)
The End of the World (Matherson, 1922)
The Man Who Paid (Apfel, 1922)
Channing of the Northwest (Ince, 1922)
The Bootleggers (Sheldon, 1922)
A Clouded Name (Huhn, 1923)
Man and Wife (McCutcheon, 1923)
The Devil's Partner (Fleming, 1923)
Pleasure Mad (Barker, 1923)
The Wanters (Stahl, 1923)
Lucretia Lombard (Conway, 1923)
The Trail of the Law (Apfel, 1924)
The Wolf Man (Mortimer, 1924)
Blue Water (Hartford, 1924)
Broadway After Dark (Bell, 1924)
Broken Barriers (Barker, 1924)
Empty Hands (Fleming, 1924)
Married Flirts (Vignola, 1924)
He Who Gets Slapped (Sjöström, 1924)
The Snob (Bell, 1924)
1925 Studio Tour (unknown, 1925)
Excuse Me (Goulding, 1925)
Lady of the Night (Bell, 1925)
Waking Up the Town (Cruze, 1925)
Pretty Ladies (Bell, 1925)
A Slave of Fashion (Henley, 1925)
The Tower of Lies (Sjöström, 1925)
His Secretary (Henley, 1925)
The Devil's Circus (Christensen, 1926)
Screen Snapshots (unknown, 1926)
The Waning Sex (Leonard, 1926)
Upstage (Bell, 1926)
The Demi-Bride (Leonard, 1927)
After Midnight (Bell, 1927)

The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg (Lubitsch, 1927)
The Latest from Paris (Wood, 1928)
The Actress (Franklin, 1928)
Voices Across the Sea (unknown, 1928)
A Lady of Chance (Leonard, 1928)

Sound films

The Trial of Mary Dugan (Veiller, 1929)
The Last of Mrs Cheyney (Franklin, 1929)
The Hollywood Revue of 1929 (Reisner, 1929)
Their Own Desire (Hopper, 1929)
The Divorcee (Leonard, 1930)
Let Us Be Gay (Leonard, 1930)
Jackie Cooper's Birthday Party (Reisner, 1931)
Strangers May Kiss (Fitzmaurice, 1931)
The Stolen Jools (McGann, 1931)
A Free Soul (Brown, 1931)
Private Lives (Franklin, 1931)
The Christmas Party (Reisner, 1931)
Smilin' Through (Franklin, 1932)
Strange Interlude (Leonard, 1932)
Riptide (Goulding, 1934)
The Barretts of Wimpole Street (Franklin, 1934)
Romeo and Juliet (Cukor, 1936)
Marie Antoinette (Van Dyke, 1938)
Hollywood Goes to Town (Hoffman, 1938)
Idiot's Delight (Brown, 1939)
The Women (Cukor, 1939)
Escape (LeRoy, 1940)
We Were Dancing (Leonard, 1942)
Her Cardboard Lover (Cukor, 1942)

Appendix C: Mentions of Shearer's full name across four fan magazines (1920-1945)



The magazines used here are *Photoplay*, *Picture Play*, *Motion Picture* and *Motion Picture Classic*; graph generated using Project Arclight, via <http://search.projectarclight.org/>.