



**MONASH** University

**Female Stars in Classical Hollywood:  
Negotiation, Agency and Practices of Stardom**

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# Abstract

Female stars were a vital part of classical era Hollywood. On the screen, Hollywood studios geared their product to appeal to what they believed was their largest demographic, telling female-focused stories that starred female actors. Off-screen, female actors dominated the coverage in fan magazines and were among the highest paid people in America. In a period in which the opportunities provided to women were limited, female stars shone as a beacon of opportunity and chance, demonstrating that it was possible to achieve success, wealth and cultural prominence beyond the limits of the domestic sphere. However, despite their importance, there is little work that examines the subjectivity and agency of the female star, with research instead tending to focus on the female star as object and image. In this thesis, I examine the female star as a historical subject with agency who employed practices of negotiation to succeed within a particular time period. Using a methodology based on archival research, I analyse three stars from classical era Hollywood: Olivia de Havilland, Joan Fontaine and Ava Gardner. Each of these stars provides different insights into the way subjectivity and agency functioned at a particular moment in history, while at the same time broadening our understanding of female stardom in classical Hollywood more generally. By incorporating conceptions of subjectivity and agency into existing star studies approaches, I am able to explore how female stars navigated the fame, success and gendered constraints of the Hollywood system, thus offering a comprehensive account of the female star subject and her social context.

# Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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# Introduction: Hollywood, The Woman's Town

*Men must always play a losing game in Hollywood, both on the screen and off. For women surpass as stars and they are also the power behind the studio thrones. In every way they rule a modern Amazonia while a world of women fans bow to their mandates.*

(Laura Benham "The Battle of the Sexes" 34–35)

In the October 1934 issue of *Picture Play* magazine, writer Laura Benham weighed in on the battle of the sexes. "Despite frankness, feminism and freedom for women," she declared, "it is generally conceded that this is still a man's world." While Benham did concede that women had made advances into "most of the territory hitherto considered the exclusive property of the mighty male," she added that, "As a general rule, the emancipated woman is more a figment of fiction than a fact." That is, with one exception: "Though this is still a man's world, Hollywood is a woman's town, a modern Amazonia ruled by beautiful and astute women, who from their thrones of glamour unfurl their celluloid standards to the far corners of the earth." While this article is obviously hyperbolic – all of the studio heads in 1934 were men, for example – it did identify a particular peculiar trend: Hollywood in the classical era was a place where women had access to power and prominence in a way that was unusual for women at the time.

Women were a constant and visible part of classical era Hollywood. Female stars regularly appeared in the annual lists of the most popular actors in Hollywood and were among the highest paid people in America. On the screen, Hollywood studios geared their product to appeal to what they believed was their largest demographic, telling female-focused stories that starred female actors. Their prominence within Hollywood is even more remarkable when considered against the social and cultural period from which they emerged. After a period in the 1910s and '20s during which female actors, directors and producers flourished, opportunities for women to hold the most prestigious and highly paid positions behind the camera effectively vanished. In addition to this, there was widespread hostility to women working during the Depression and few support systems for the increasing number of women who were in paid employment. Against this background, female stars shone as a beacon of opportunity and chance, demonstrating that there were women who were able to achieve

success, wealth and cultural prominence beyond the limits of the domestic sphere.

The remarkable power held by women in classical Hollywood proved to be relatively short-lived; by the late 1950s, men had largely reasserted their dominance. But, during the classical Hollywood period, female stars held an exceptional and unique place in society. However, there is little research that examines the agency of female stars, exploring what the archive and popular media tells us about how individual historical female subjects navigated this particular moment in time to achieve success. In this thesis, I use case studies of three female stars to examine the agency of individual actors within the industrial and historical environs of classical Hollywood. By doing this, I am able to assert the subjectivity of female stars, repositioning them from being considered as objects or passive victims of Hollywood's star and studio systems, moving beyond established image-based approaches to extend current understandings of female stardom in classical Hollywood.

## The Importance of Studying Female Stars

Stars were central to the studio system that characterised classical era Hollywood. They were vital to the film industry, both as labourers who worked within it and as embodiment of the glamour it promised. Stars performed a narrative function, providing what John Ellis describes as a "foreknowledge of fiction": an invitation to the cinema, attracting audiences to the cinema and therefore encouraging distributors and exhibitors to rent and show the films in which they appeared (91). They were therefore a central organising principle of the production, exhibition and distribution of the studio system. For studios, stars were a valuable form of capital, and studios scheduled movies around the availability of stars and tailored films as star vehicles around their star image. Stars were also vital to the interrelations of the movie industry with advertising and other consumption industries such as fashion, cosmetics and publishing. The star in classical Hollywood can therefore be thought of as image, as labour and as a form of capital.

Within this circuit of commercial exchange, female stars held a privileged place. Convinced that women made up the majority of the film-going public, film studios tailored their product to cater for female audiences. Female-oriented film genres featuring female protagonists were among the most popular genres produced during the 1930s. Emily Carman finds that women's films – movies that revolve around a woman that are designed to appeal to mostly female audiences – made up more than a quarter of *Variety's* top-grossing film lists in the

1930s (12), demonstrating the industry's commitment to fulfilling the needs of their female fans. Female stars also fuelled industries ancillary to Hollywood and were a vital component of the consumer culture surrounding the film industry. Female stars worked as identificatory figures for audiences, acting as role models and demonstrating different ideals of feminine behaviour (Stacey). They also advertised products and were visible embodiments of the individualism and consumption inherent in capitalism. Anthony Slide notes that women dominated the coverage in fan magazines, with fans far more interested in female stars than their male counterparts (*Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine* 128). Female stars were central to classical Hollywood to the extent that Carman argues that "the female-driven star system [was] the economic underpinning of the larger industrial apparatus of Hollywood during the classical era" (14). Female stardom, therefore, is a vital component of classical Hollywood and the star system.

Within film studies, there is a large body of work that examines female stardom. Developing from scholarly understandings of the star in classical Hollywood as image, labour and a form of capital, star studies literature tends to focus on female stars either as texts, objects of a desiring gaze and sources of identificatory fantasies, or as a form of labour. This literature typically focuses on either a group of stars joined by a key factor (for example, ethnic female stars in classical Hollywood) or conducts a detailed examination of individual stars. The studies of individual female stars tend to identify the key meanings associated with each star at specific historical moments, identifying how and why these meanings change over time. This work primarily focuses on the star as image, following a Dyerian model of analysis that considers the star as discursively produced. While much of the research conducted is valuable and productive, it replicates the tendency from within film studies more broadly to deny the subjectivity of the female actor, situating her as an object whose value is external to the star herself. It fails to consider the female star as a historical subject with agency, whose actions influenced the discursive elements from which the star text is constructed. Although the lack of attention paid to the star image does not necessarily mean that scholars are unaware or dismissive of the historical agency of the person, it does demonstrate a methodological limitation within Dyerian analysis that disregards the female star agency.

Female stars within classical Hollywood held a remarkable place within society. They were not subservient vassals rendered powerless by the option contract held by the studios nor passive vessels for audience adoration. Instead, they were women working within a particular industrial and cultural framework that both enabled and restricted them. The mere fact of the

existence of female stars, with their visibility, economic power and public success, illustrates that female stars were able to enact agency that allowed them to successfully negotiate a system dominated by patriarchal values. Recent work by Carman demonstrates how female stars from the 1930s were able to parlay their prominence within classical Hollywood into successful freelance careers, not only negotiating better terms and salaries but garnering more control over their careers than actresses on long-term contracts (3). I suggest that Carman's work can be extended to the study of all female stars in classical Hollywood. The actions taken by these stars should not be understood separately from the considerations of how we study the star text – as an image, as labour and as a form of capital – but are an integral part of them and should be considered in the theoretical frameworks that examine stars.

Therefore, the first aim of this research is to develop a research methodology that builds on existing star studies practices to incorporate considerations of the subjectivity of the female star into existing theoretical frameworks, thus addressing the gap in the current scholarship. This is done in Part I of the thesis.

In addition to examining female stardom in classical Hollywood broadly, this research uses the methodology developed to closely analyse the early stardom of three female stars from classical Hollywood: Olivia de Havilland, Joan Fontaine and Ava Gardner. Each of these women provides unique insights into the strategies of negotiation employed by stars within different environments, making them vitally important for a study of agency in relation to female stars from classical Hollywood. All three women were hired at a young age by a Hollywood studio on a seven-year option contract. However, the detailed historical analysis of the process through which they became stars carried out in this thesis highlights the importance of industrial factors in the development of that stardom and the options available to the individual stars. Olivia de Havilland achieved early success at Warner Bros. but was typecast as “romantic prize” and did not receive the same financial rewards as her peers. To gain control of her career and receive appropriate financial compensation required a series of strategies that concluded in a lawsuit. Joan Fontaine, in contrast, was unable to find a character type that resonated with the public upon her initial contract signing so she moved to an independent and manipulated her off-screen persona in order to achieve success. Ava Gardner's initial fame came not because of her on-screen performances but due to her marriage to Hollywood's biggest star. While this disrupted the standard process through which starlets became stars, it also had ongoing consequences for her stardom, in particular the way her off-screen discourse represented her emerging stardom. The three case studies in

this thesis provide rich examples that demonstrate three differing expressions of star agency. A close examination has the potential to extend our knowledge of these stars in particular as well as female stardom in the classical era more generally.

## **Research Framework**

A star is a complex phenomenon and, as such, any framework designed to analyse and understand stars must take into account the many dimensions and aspects of stardom. The agency of the actress<sup>1</sup> is a vital and under-studied component of the complicated and constant interplay between on-screen persona (film roles), off-screen persona (fan magazine discourse) and the historical subject and therefore should be considered in all individual star studies. This research approach draws from different sources to examine the female star, utilising a range of data to locate the female star subject and the practices of negotiation they employed within classical Hollywood. To do this, this thesis utilises a multilayered archival approach, incorporating the study of fan magazines, trade papers, studio documents and personal correspondence, among other archival resources.

This research explores how the historical star subject is constructed from archival sources such as fan magazines, auto/biographies and film archives. Each of these sources contributes to determining star subjectivity, particularly in relation to the construction of identity and public persona. Yet, each of these sources contain implicit biases, especially concerning gender and bias in terms of what is remembered and celebrated. In this thesis, I examine how these sources contribute to representing the agency of the female star, noting the commercial and industrial factors that influence how the star subject is constructed. In doing this, I locate this project firmly within a feminist historical approach that aims to remedy the silences of the past, revising assumptions about women's experience in classical Hollywood that are still pervasive in historical narratives today.

## **Thesis Overview**

This thesis consists of five further chapters within two main parts. In Part I (Chapters One and Two), I situate the study within the relevant fields and establish the research

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “actress” and “female actor” are used interchangeably in this thesis.

methodology. In Chapter One, I map the historical conditions that enabled the female star of classical Hollywood. The development of the motion picture industry opened new opportunities for women, changing how women manoeuvred in public space while also contributing to the rise of consumer culture. Female stars, the most visible part of this new industry, contributed to the development of a social imaginary in which images of plucky and powerful women circulated, particularly in the pages of fan magazines, which celebrated the achievements of Hollywood's women workers. These factors contributed to the situation of the 1930s and '40s in which female stars experienced unprecedented power. Chapter Two examines the theoretical approaches to the female star. I first review star studies literature generally, looking at the ways scholars have engaged with stars and stardom as an industrial framework. By reviewing the historical antecedents of the discipline, the importance of considering the star as an image is established. I then examine the body of work on female stardom as a tool of historical analysis, identifying a gap in the existing research that examines the agency of female stars. I then examine how the female star subject can be uncovered in film archives, fan magazines and auto/biographical texts, interrogating the often unquestioned bias built into these valuable resources.

Part II (Chapters Three, Four and Five) contains the case studies of the three stars examined as part of this research. The subject of Chapter Three is Olivia de Havilland. In this chapter, I examine de Havilland's career during the period between when she arrived in Hollywood in 1936 and the Warner Bros. lawsuit in 1943. De Havilland achieved early success at Warner Bros. but was firmly typecast as a romantic lead. Her portrayal of heroines whose narrative conclusion was love and marriage contrasted dramatically with representations of her lived experience in fan magazines as an independent and unmarried working woman supporting her family and striving for more challenging roles. Examining de Havilland's early career allows for an understanding of how de Havilland deployed her agency and labour to challenge the institutional control of Hollywood but also how this challenge was both enabled and limited through ideals of acceptable feminine roles and types.

Chapter Four explores the practices of negotiation in the emerging stardom of Joan Fontaine. Born Joan de Beauvoir de Havilland, Fontaine arrived in Hollywood shortly after her sister and provides a fascinating contrasting study of different approaches to the enactment of star agency. Like her sister, Fontaine was signed onto a long-term contract soon after arriving in Hollywood; however, unlike her sister, she was unable to find a character type that resonated with the public and her contract option was not renewed. In this chapter, I explore the

processes through which Fontaine overcame this failure to achieve stardom, focusing on the period between Fontaine's arrival in Hollywood in 1936 as Joan de Beauvoir and her star-making performance in *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940). By analysing a series of key moments of Fontaine's career, including deciding on a new name and signing with an independent producer rather than a major studio, this chapter investigates how Fontaine's star discourse was characterised by the practices of resistance through which she navigated hegemonic practices and power relations within Hollywood.

Chapter Five shifts the focus of the research slightly, examining the rise to fame of Ava Gardner between 1942 and 1949. Gardner provides an excellent figure through which to study star agency because of her frequent and repeated presentation as an object of stardom rather than a subject with her own influence on navigating her star image. In this chapter, I look at Gardner's early stardom as it is represented in two forms: fan magazine discourse published contemporaneously to her emerging stardom and star biographies, most of which were published after the peak of her career. Although contracted to a major studio, MGM, Gardner rose to prominence not through acting performances but through her two marriages, first to Mickey Rooney then Artie Shaw. I examine the effects of this disruption on her fan magazine discourse, in particular in relation to how it challenges the standard narratives of agency and labour in the star-making process. I also explore how star agency in relation to the many biographies published about Gardner, interrogating how paratextual information can support researchers' evaluation of these texts.

The female star was a central part of classical Hollywood, performing a number of key functions within the studio system. They were a central organising principle of the production, exhibition and distribution of the studio system, while also acting as identificatory figures for fans and as a link between the film industry and consumer culture. At the same time, the female star also exists as public evidence of successful women outside of the domestic sphere. That the female star was able to take the position she did in the 1930s and '40s was as a result of a confluence of social, historical and cultural factors present in Hollywood that provided particular opportunities for women. This thesis addresses a gap in the knowledge in relation to female stardom by mapping the historical antecedents to stardom before proposing a new approach to the study of the female star that incorporates considerations of the agency of the female star subject. It also examines how archival sources are used in star studies, calling into question the frequently unexamined archival practices used by film historians and star studies researchers.

This research also contributes to scholarship through conducting detailed analysis of three important stars whose stardom has been undervalued. The study of each of these women provides a unique opportunity to examine how different female stars navigated the particular conditions in which they were able to achieve success while, at the same time, allowing for a broader investigation into the institutional and historical conditions that both enabled and made remarkable the agency of female stardom. This is feminist historical approach that aims to revise assumptions about women's experience in classical Hollywood. This work is important as part of a growing body of research that recognises and acknowledges the contribution of women in film history.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Other research in this group includes *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System* by Emily Carman, *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood* by Hillary Hallett, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* by Erin Hill and "Feminist Media Historiography and the Work Ahead" by Shelley Stamp.

**PART I:**

**NEW APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF THE FEMALE STAR**

# Chapter One: The Historical Antecedents of Female Stardom in Classical Hollywood

## Introduction

In the opening paragraph of his book *The Decline and Fall of the Love Goddesses*, Patrick Agan describes the female stars of classical Hollywood cinema as follows: “They called them ‘Pinup Girls’ and ‘Sweater Queens’, thought up adjectives like ‘It’ and ‘Oomph’ and ‘Ping’ to describe their teasing charms . . . They were the Love Goddesses” (1). For Agan, what made these actresses unique was how they looked, to the extent that it was “the way the lens caught and held [the actress that] determined her movie lifespan.” Agan describes these “Everests of glamour” (2) in various ways: as carefully constructed by the studios to sell movie tickets, as figures of identification for all women from homecoming queens to secretaries, and as objects of desire for both male and female audience members. Rarely considered as historical subjects with agency and desire of their own, the Love Goddesses were only depicted in terms of how they functioned for others.

Agan’s casual dismissal of the agency and desire of female stars is common. Much of the academic work on female stars, although productive, fails to address the agency of the stars themselves, denying them subjectivity the same way Agan’s depiction of them as Love Goddesses did. Research on stars tends to consider them as images, examining the cultural values and contradictions they embody over time, or as objects of exchange within Hollywood’s labour market. However, rather than being merely objects of a desiring gaze and sources of identificatory fantasies, female stars were historical subjects who made choices and took actions which affected their performance, both on- and off-screen. At a time in which women’s options for employment and independence were limited, the wealth and cultural prominence of female stars demonstrated that there were women who had been able to navigate barriers and achieve success. Through their public visibility as women with power and success, female stars are clear examples of women with agency; as such, incorporating considerations of female stars as historical subjects with agency is an important and necessary contribution to the broader fields of star studies and women’s history.

Yet, while understanding agency in relation to female stardom addresses a clear gap in star

studies research, it is important to place explorations of this agency within the social and industrial forces which shaped the subjectivity of the female star. To do this requires an understanding of the particular conditions that led to the possibility of the exceptional positioning held by female stars. This involves looking at the history of women working in America since the late 19th century, in particular the set of circumstances that led to the opportunities provided to women within Hollywood.

In this chapter, I map out the historical antecedents of the remarkable female stardom evident in classical Hollywood in the 1930s and '40s. I firstly examine the changes experienced by women in early 20th century America. The number of women working consistently increased, while many versions of the “New Woman,” a modern woman who differed from her Victorian forebears in behaviour, character and style, circulated throughout popular culture, challenging and extending ideas of acceptable womanhood. The new entertainment form – the motion picture – changed how women acted and operated in public space, while also contributing to the rise of consumer culture, a phenomena which had women at its centre. I conclude the chapter by exploring how female stars, the most visible part of this new industry, interacted with changing ideals of women, the growing consumer culture and changes in women’s access to public spheres.

## **Women in Early 20th Century America**

The late 19th and early 20th century was a time of dramatic change for women, with ideas of womanhood and femininity shifting widely within broader culture. One aspect of this change was women’s relationship to paid labour. Women’s participation in the workforce soared, shooting from 2.6 to 10.8 million between 1895 and 1920 (Hallett 23); however, while a consistently increasing number of women were engaging in paid work outside the home, class and gender divisions meant that their rewards for this labour were limited. In *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States 1900–1930*, Leslie Woodcock Tentler investigates the experience of the increasing number of women who entered the American workforce after 1875. She finds that although there were more women in the workforce in America than ever before, the conditions they faced and the pay they

received for their labour was poor. Most wage-earning women<sup>3</sup> were working class and their period of paid labour occurred in the six-to-eight-year period between leaving school and marrying. In the workplace, women's work was lowly skilled, lowly paid and precarious. Most women in industry operated or tended light machinery or performed routine hand work; what Tentler describes as "a single, simple task repeated again and again for the duration of a nine- or ten-hour day" (29). In industries where there were skilled or senior positions, such as managers, these were held by men. Women were also paid much less than men, from one-half to two-thirds of the standard male wage (19). In part, this was because the work women did was often less skilled than that of men; primarily, however, it was because men's wages were expected to support a family while women's were not. These low wages not only meant women were always dependent for survival on membership in male-headed homes, they also placed a low value on female paid labour; as Tentler notes, "Women would learn from their low wages an important lesson about society's valuation of women in nondomestic roles. The world of work . . . was a man's world, in which women were accorded a very limited place" (13). Women who lived alone outside of the family typically experienced extreme poverty and loneliness as the wages paid for women's work were not enough to live on and they were frequently socially isolated.

In the paid workforce, the low value placed on women's work was reflected in its low pay and low status. However, women had an acceptable personal and occupational identity entirely independent of paid employment: that of mother, wife and the practical head of the household. Tentler finds that for many women, their domestic role granted them the greatest possible measure of independence, personal authority and status (25). This is demonstrated by the demographics of the women who worked at this time – most white women before 1930 left paid employment when they married; only extreme poverty enticed a married woman back to work as "nearly all women's jobs offered less security and status than did life as a working class wife and mother" (10). Therefore, even though women's entrance into the workforce was vitally important economically, it did not provide working-class women with much freedom nor change to their social or economic position. As Tentler writes, "Women's work rarely provided the means to true economic independence; this meant that fundamental change in women's status could not occur" (25). Although they initially saw paid work as an

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<sup>3</sup> Tentler notes that her study ignores black female workers because she argues "theirs is a unique history that merits separate investigation" (6).

escape from parental supervision and domestic drudgery, after a few years slogging away at unrewarding and poorly remunerated work, running one's own household began to look more appealing.

Hilary Hallett, in contrast, notes that the opportunities provided to women by paid labour differed for some women in the workforce in some parts of the country, in particular those available to women who immigrated to the west. In *Go West, Young Women! The Rise of Early Hollywood*, Hallett tracks the migration of women to Los Angeles at the start of the 20th century where, differing from every other city in America, female migrants outpaced male ones in 1900 (21). She argues that, unlike Tentler's working-class wage-earning women, women in Los Angeles (the white and native-born ones at least) were able to work in offices, department stores and social services, the first time many of them had experienced work that was located outside a factory or other women's homes (23). This opportunity linked them to the ideal of the "New Woman," a phrase used to describe generations of women who from around 1895 challenged different aspects of Victorian "ladyhood" (21).<sup>4</sup> The idea of the New Woman synthesised and symbolised transformations in the social configuration of women, in particular the repercussions and changes resulting from the expansion of women's sphere of experience from the domestic sphere to other more public spaces.

The difference in Tentler and Hallett's findings is inherently linked with the fast-developing moving picture industry and the opportunities it provided women. Karen Ward Mahar notes, "In the 1910s and early 1920s the American film industry offered women opportunities that existed in no other workplace" (1). She continues:

In any given production the screenplay was likely to have been penned by a woman,

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<sup>4</sup> As noted by Hallett, the New Woman is a "frustratingly slippery term" that has been used to describe many different types of woman performing many different functions (27). Part of the difficulty in defining the New Woman may be because, as noted by Janet Staiger, the New Woman was "a sign with multiple meanings," representing not just one type of woman but many different explorations of how to enact womanhood within a particular historical juncture (xiv). Thus, any discussions of the New Woman must be placed within the specific context within which the reference is used.

as was the continuity script, the step-by-step guide outlining all production activities. A female director may have guided the female star, who quite often worked for her own production company. Some women did it all. Lois Weber, the most famous filmmaker of this period, was a screenwriter, actress, director, and producer, often on the same project. After the shooting ended, a woman may have edited the film, a film censor may have re-edited it, a female exchange owner may have distributed it, and a female manager might have exhibited it in her theatre. (1)

While Mahar's depiction of an all-female film supply chain is somewhat idealistic, it does highlight the opportunities available for women in the emerging film industry that they were denied in other fields with more fixed gendered responsibilities.

## The Emerging Film Industry

Despite the opportunities that soon became available to women within the nascent cinematic workplace, the development of the film industry occurred within a sphere dominated by men. The first films emerged from what Mahar describes as "the highly masculinized settings of the inventor's laboratory" (9), developing from the scientific and photographic industries where women were prohibited. Men were responsible for inventing the technology to make films, patenting and marketing it and, in the early days when film cameras were large and unwieldy, also making the movies. Given this exclusion, many film histories assume that women took no part from in the nascent industry. However, Mahar states that women were present from the very early days in the film industry, working in factories processing and inspecting film (much like they did in factories with photographs at the same time). Mahar notes that this type of work fit in with the "culturally defined area of women's work at the turn of the century: it was performed indoors, it did not require great strength or invited danger, and it required dexterity but not skill" (22); the same type of work Tentler also recorded women doing.

As the film industry developed, there were changes in how films were made, how they looked and how they were distributed. The early days of the new industry's development were focused on technical expertise – Mahar notes that the basis of competition in those years was not the films themselves but the technology by which the films were shown. However, by the turn of the century, the novelty of seeing everyday events on-screen had faded. As technological developments allowed for longer continuous films, story films started to be

made and by 1904, narratives made up over half of all copyrighted films in the United States (Mahar 31). The arrival of narrative films increased the popularity of the moving pictures, which in turn increased the demand for more movies. Exchanges from which it was possible to rent a film rather than buying it from a studio directly were introduced, which encouraged exhibitors to set up locations where local audiences could be presented with new films every few days and nickelodeons and picture palaces began springing up all over the country. These developments provided opportunities for women to stake positions within the new industry. For example, women frequently ran and owned the small movie theatres and film exchanges, often as part of a family business (32).<sup>5</sup>

Another way the industry provided opportunities for women at this time was working in the production of films, both behind and in front of the camera. In order to meet the growing demand for films, film producers began to reproduce a tradition from the theatre – the resident stock company, where a permanent group of actors filled roles as required. As many historians have noted, in the early days of the film industry, being a film actor was not a glamorous or sought-after role. It was seen as secondary and inferior to working in the legitimate theatre.<sup>6</sup> However, the industry’s hiring of professional actors to be part of these stock companies proved especially beneficial for women due to the nature of film production at the time. In order to meet the growing demand for movies, studios were built specifically for film production. To make story films in studios requires the building of sets, the use of props, an array of costumes and all the other accoutrements of the theatre. All members of the stock companies were expected to do whatever tasks were necessary to speed production along so film manufacturers used the actors and actresses on staff. This practice is called “doubling in brass” (Mahar 38). In this environment where men and women shared the same workspace (which differs from the experience of female workers described by Tentler, whose

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<sup>5</sup> The first experience of the film industry of the Warner brothers, who began their eponymous studio, was running a small nickelodeon. Sam was the projectionist, Harry and Albert handled the finances and box office takings, their mother Rose played the piano and Jack sang between the film shows (Finler 283).

<sup>6</sup> For an entertaining recounting of the conflict actors felt reconciling the opportunities of Hollywood with a desire to be serious actors, see Brian Aherne’s autobiography *A Proper Job*. In it he details amusingly at length his personal struggles between the temptations offered by Hollywood and his desire to be a Shakespearean stage actor.

workspaces were segregated by gender), there was a lack of formal boundaries between men and women's labour. This meant that even though men still dominated the numbers of film directors and producers, women were able to try their hand at nearly all types of production work, including screenwriting, producing and directing. The film industry, therefore, provided women with opportunities that were denied to them in other industries with more fixed gendered responsibilities.

Another effect of the development of the movie industry was a change in women's access to the public sphere. Miriam Hansen states that from the 1820s and '30s, public life in the United States was a predominantly masculine arena to which women had access only in a highly controlled and dependent form. She writes:

Accordingly, the private realm of the family came to be identified as the domain of an idealized femininity, defined by domesticity, motherhood, sexual purity, and moral guardianship. Throughout the nineteenth century the doctrine of separate spheres, the hierarchy of public/male over private/female, not only shaped—and maimed—relations between the sexes, but crucially determined the mappings of social life, of cultural institutions, itineraries of everyday life and leisure activities. (114)

The cinema as public entertainment opened up a space that was available to all women, regardless of their marital status, age or background, that could be easily incorporated into the rhythm of everyday life. Hansen states that a married woman would drop into the movies on the way home from grocery shopping, teenage girls would fill the theatres in the afternoon and at night young working women would find in the cinema both a diversion from work and an opportunity to meet men (117). Going to the movies was an acceptable activity for women unlike other forms of entertainment, such as vaudeville, which were generally prohibited to women. Nan Enstad argues that for working-class parents, the nickelodeon was seen as an acceptable location for young women to spend their time in a way that dance halls and amusement parks were not. Therefore, the movies signalled a new relationship of working women to public life (162). She writes:

When these women consumed motion pictures, they created new experiences and occupied the public spaces of streets and theatres in new ways. They built particular and distinctive social practices around their motion picture consumption and

incorporated the movies into their established consumer practices around dime novels and fashion, weaving motion pictures into their identity as ladies. (161–62)

As highlighted by Enstad here, the new modes of access to public spaces available to women through the cinema were inherently linked to the development of consumer culture at the start of the 20th century. Both Enstad and Hansen draw attention to how consumer culture opened up public space to women. By 1915, women were doing between 80 to 85 percent of the consumer purchasing in the United States. Hansen states that for middle-class women, this meant a liberation from the narrow confines of domestic space, while to working class and immigrant women, consumerist styles and fashions promised access to a modern American world of freedom, romance and upward mobility (116). Hansen argues that because women were being addressed as a group – an audience – female experience that had previously been denied any public dimension was being acknowledged and catered to. Charting how this public sphere was extended to women aids our understanding of the role of women in driving the celebrity culture related to the film industry that emerged later in the century. Consumer culture therefore “introduced a different principle of publicity than that governing traditional institutions, a more direct appeal to the customers’ experience, to concrete needs, desires, fantasies . . . offer[ing] an intersubjective horizon for the articulation of that experience” (116). Hanson does note, however, that this articulation was precarious and temporary, since it fluctuated between trying to satisfy as many diverse constituencies as possible and the long-term homogenisation of the notion of “woman” as white, straight and middle class. These changes, although transient and tenuous, did signify a considerable and remarkable change for women in society and public spaces.

The new cinema arena did not just contain a physical space and social environment: it also involved what Hansen describes as “the phantasmagoric space” on the screen and the “multiple and dynamic transactions between these spaces” (118). Hallett describes these new subjectivities as “Hollywood’s original social imaginary” and argues that early movie stars such as Pearl White and Mary Pickford “invited their female fans to identify with a protagonist liberated from many of the customary restraints that economic dependence and the cult of domesticity placed on their bodies and hearts” (37). She asserts that as movies and fan magazines began to cater for women, who were increasingly being perceived as an important and primary audience, tales of opportunities for plucky women prepared to take a chance on Hollywood circulated through culture (39). On screen, female adventure films and motion picture serials placed an “extraordinary emphasis on female heroism” (87). Ben

Singer describes these serials as follows:

The serial-queen melodrama gives narrative pre-eminence to an intrepid young heroine who exhibits a variety of traditionally “masculine” qualities: physical strength and endurance, self-reliance, courage, social authority, and freedom to explore novel experiences outside the domestic sphere. (91)

Given the everyday experience of women at that time, it is questionable whether self-reliance and courage were particularly “masculine” qualities; however, the “serial-queen melodrama” (to borrow Singer’s term) clearly engaged a female audience with tales of female empowerment. Female stars, both on-screen and off, were central to that engagement.

The popularity of serial queens is an interesting phenomenon to examine in relation to the contradictory discourses of femininity that circulated in relation to early female stardom. While remarking on the “striking” (91) emphasis on female power in these serials, Singer notes that the portrayal of female empowerment is sometimes accompanied by the sadistic spectacle of the woman’s victimisation. He remarks that: “The genre as a whole is thus animated by an oscillation between contradictory extremes of female prowess and distress, empowerment and imperilment” (93). Jennifer M. Bean argues that this oscillation is related to the development of the star system which, she states, placed a strong emphasis on the physical performance and body of the star, particular for early female stars. She argues that as the realism of the film enactments shown onscreen denied the technological processes through which the image was created (such as invisible editing which aimed to suture the spectator into the story), fan magazine discourse increasingly noted the effort of the picture players, such as the danger and physical skill required to play their parts. She writes:

Although a similar organization of features—a coupling of power and pain—characterize star discourse, the radical edge and effect of the system is this: suffering on (and behind) the screen is recuperated as a sign of the “real” player’s physical and psychical stamina. (414)

Thus, “the player’s body supercedes [sic] the body of the machine in the context of the industry’s self-professed realist project” (415).

Bean argues that what she describes as “the technologies of stardom” worked to “respond to realism’s call” with a complex discourse designed to enhance the believability of real peril to

the player's body (423). Naming an actor's characters after the actor (for example *The Adventures of Kathlyn* starred Kathlyn Williams) was one method used to optimise the proximity between player and performance. The star is a privileged site through which technological developments are framed and understood. That it was the female body through which this occurred in early stardom evinces a tension between interiority and exteriority that plays out through the oscillation between "empowerment and imperilment" identified by Singer. The physiology of the female star – petite, dainty, slender – contrasted with the dangerous and daring acts of those female stars onscreen.

This engagement extended outside the nickelodeon to other places in the cultural sphere. For example, when the Edison Company created the first adventure serial, *What Happened to Mary*, in 1912, they partnered with *The Ladies' World* mail-order journal<sup>7</sup> to release the 12-episode story monthly in both film and print format. The print version urged readers to see the film version, printed still images from the movie and included articles explaining how the films were made, while each serial concluded with a title urging audiences to read *The Ladies' World*. This was a mutually beneficial agreement. *The Ladies' World* had an existing readership of working and middle-class women, so partnering with the journal allowed the Edison Company to tap into existing reading patterns and create sustained interest in a series of related film products. In return, *The Ladies' World* was able to associate itself with the glamour and modernity of the movies while also gaining motion picture fans as readers (Enstad 173). Similarly, many Hearst chain newspapers published weekly instalments of other serials, such as *The Adventures of Kathlyn* and *What Happened to Mary?* (Fuller 136). These partnerships demonstrate the extent to which the developing film industry, consumer culture and female audiences were closely intertwined.

Stories about "plucky women prepared to take a chance on Hollywood" also circulated off the screen, particularly in fan magazines. When the first fan magazine *Motion Picture Story Magazine* was released in February 1911, it primarily consisted of short novelisations of one-

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<sup>7</sup> *The Ladies' World* was a mail-order journal, which was a type of publication that made money from advertising rather than subscriptions. They typically printed "low-brow" fiction with the aim of using that to draw consumers into looking at the advertisements. Common at the start of the 20th century, they were usually mass-mailed to homes for free and "contributed a great deal of fiction to working people" (Enstad 173).

reel narrative films. Fan magazines soon expanded to provide more and different types of information; for example, in the April 1911 issue, a photo portrait gallery of film actors and actresses was included in the magazine's opening pages along with new departments featuring interviews with the players and by 1912, *Motion Picture Story Magazine* had become a lively, interactive sharing of movie fans' knowledge and creative interests (Fuller 136–7). DeCordova notes that much of the public discourse in fan magazines focused on issues of family and relationships (105). However, as well as relating the romances of the stars, the fan magazines also told the stories of the female actors who starred in the movies; for example, Mary Pickford, who wrote, produced and acted in films and co-founded independent studio United Artists, and “serial queen” actresses like Pearl White, who did her own stunts as well writing and producing the adventure shorts she starred in. These stories romanticised and sensationalised their protagonists' quests for individual success, linking the worship of the first movie stars to supporting the ambitions of women. But, it was not just female stars who were made visible in and by the fan magazines. Hallett notes that the fan magazines told the stories of women like Lois Weber and Frances Marion, who wrote, directed and produced successful films. These stories were often told by female journalists and Hallett argues that “women journalists writing in newspapers and fan magazines did the most to help their female readers imagine these movie personalities as women-made women” (80). Thus, “Like no other industry of its day, the early American film industry publicized the accomplishments of its many successful women workers, including actresses, screenwriters, directors, producers, journalists, and publicists” (Hallett 41–42). The movie industry and the fan magazine discourse that grew alongside it demonstrated and celebrated the successes of both individual women and the women who worked within it generally.

The 1920s was a decade in which dramatic social, industrial and technological changes occurred, particularly within Hollywood cinema. America experienced a widespread population shift from rural to urban centres, with cities adapting to include their growth in residents. The consumer culture identified in this section continued to grow in importance, associated with “new freedoms in dress, behavior, and sexual attitudes that clashed with traditional morality and values” (Petro 4). Female stars embodied the contradictions and promises of the time, particularly in relation to changing views on sexuality and gender. Granted the vote in 1920, the newly emancipated women were shown onscreen and offscreen. As the decade passed, and the film industry transitioned from silent movies to sound, so too did woman's role in the film industry develop.

The cultural and historical conditions that led to the new moving picture industry became a space of unusual opportunity for women. Unlike the low-paid and poorly valued work available to most women in America, the developing film industry offered a variety of roles for women, behind and in front of the camera and in the exhibition and distribution of moving pictures. This coincided with and contributed to shifts in women's access to the public sphere and the development of consumer culture. The cinema arena opened up a space that was available to all women, while the address to women by consumer culture acknowledged and catered to female experience. The representations of women on- and off-screen revealed achievements beyond domestic constraints and created a social imaginary particular to Hollywood that encouraged the development of new subjectivities for women. This confluence of historical circumstances and phenomena gave rise to a unique set of opportunities for aspiring women with their sights set on Hollywood. In the next section, I describe how the physical space, social environment and social imaginary that emerged from within the cinematic area also contributed to the development of the specific positioning of the female star of the 1930s and '40s.

## **Women in the 1930s**

Women's roles and positions in society and the workplace continued to change throughout the 1930s. The stock market crash of 1929 precipitated a decade-long depression during which there was widespread unemployment and poverty. Susan Ware describes the 1930s as being "dominated by the gravest economic crisis the United States had ever faced" (xi), noting that at times during the 1930s, 25 percent of the workforce was unemployed (xiii). Throughout this time, there was continued debate about women's roles in the family and workplace. Women's participation in the workplace continued to grow, with the percentage of women who were working increasing from 24.3 percent to 25.4 percent. By 1940, women made up 25 percent of the workforce, an increase from 22 percent in 1930. Of these working women, the number of married and older women working also increased (Ware 24). Despite these increases, women faced persistent resistance to any advancements as paid workers.

The particular conditions of the Depression led to what Kessler-Harris describes as a "curious double message" for women (251). Unemployment and the fear of unemployment meant that those women who already worked continued to work and those who could looked for work, hence the increase in married and older workers (254). Yet, at the same time that the Depression imposed financial conditions on families that required women to undertake wage

work to support their family, it also “fostered a public stance that encouraged family unity and urged women, in the interest of job for men, to avoid paid work themselves” (251). Women faced much public hostility about being employed. A 1936 *Fortune* poll asked: “Do you believe that married women should have a full-time job outside the home?” 15 percent approved, 48 percent disapproved and 37 percent gave it conditional approval. The three most frequently cited reasons for opposing married women’s work were that it took jobs otherwise filled by men, that the woman’s place was in the home, and that children were healthier and home life happier if women did not work (Ware 21). A 1936 Gallup poll asked if wives should work if their husbands had jobs and 82 percent of all Americans said no (Ware 27). There were also restrictions placed on working women in the federal government. Section 213 of the 1932 National Economy Act prohibited more than one member of the same family from working for the civil service. Since women usually made less than their husbands, they were usually the ones who lost their government jobs. To ensure this rule was being enforced, in 1933 the Comptroller General ruled that female government employees had to take their husband’s name or face disciplinary action (Ware 28). These figures highlight the difficulties faced by working women.

The unprecedented opportunities available to women in early Hollywood outlined in the previous section proved to be short-lived. By the mid 1920s, women were largely no longer working as producers and directors, with these positions being increasingly and firmly designated as for men only. In 1927, Lois Weber advised young women to avoid filmmaking careers: “Don’t try it,” she cautioned, “You’ll never get away with it” (cited in Mahar 2). Mahar also notes a decline in female star-producers – women who could “easily slip” between acting, directing, writing and producing (203).<sup>8</sup> Mahar directly links the rise of a new corporate managerial culture in the 1920s to women, particularly female directors, being forced out of Hollywood. As Hollywood became what she describes as “big business,” gender roles shifted to bring the film industry more in line with other industries. To obtain the finance necessary to fund the ever-increasing budgets of films, the purchase of theatre chains and the transition to sound, Hollywood needed to remake itself to be more attractive to Wall Street financiers. As Mahar writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the women referred to by Maher include Lois Weber, Alice Guy Blaché and Nell Shipman.

Women in the American film industry had thus far enjoyed more latitude and leverage than women in any other industry, including the stage. But really powerful invisible positions were *not* the norm to most industries, particularly the financial industry. As the film industry began to look at itself through the eyes of the financial community, the theatrical legacy that encourage the participation of women behind the camera seemed as archaic, and perhaps embarrassing, as the haphazard production methods of the nickelodeon era. (emphasis in original 186)

Mahar writes that as the studio system emerged, female star power had “diminished, independent movement had ended, and the gendered studio emerged” to produce a thoroughly masculinised film industry that minimised women’s opportunities for the creative craft behind the camera (203). She argues that by the mid 1920s stars were still well paid, as they were still a necessity, but they had lost most of their clout behind the camera, describing their power as follows: “Stars were employees, albeit with generous paycheques” (178).

Recent scholarship has addressed gaps in Mahar’s original theorising. When describing how the different film crafts became sex-typed in the studio system, Mahar writes:

Art directors were male. Costume designers were mostly female. And screenwriting remained open to women throughout the 1920s. But directing, producing, and editing became masculinized. (196)

However, as Erin Hill points out, there are many more jobs in Hollywood than the six listed by Mahar.<sup>9</sup> Hill notes that women worked in service professions all over studio lots in the 1930s and ‘40s; for example, in the commissaries, teaching and caring for the child actors, researching productions in studio reference libraries, evaluating the filmic potential of new plays and books and responding to fan mail. She argues that, “These women were the fuel of Hollywood’s large-scale, industrial process” (4). She further explains:

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<sup>9</sup> In fairness, Mahar did state that women who wished to work in Hollywood did have the option of “feminized studio work” such as becoming a manicurist or script girl, but she, like the film historians Hill points to, appears to find this type of work insignificant enough that it rates only a brief mention (204).

Women were never absent from film history; they often simply weren't documented as part of it because they did "women's work," which was—by definition—insignificant, tedious, low status, and noncreative. In the golden age of Hollywood, women could be found in nearly every department of every studio, minding the details that might otherwise get in the way of more important, prestigious, or creative work (a.k.a. men's work). If film historians consider the classical Hollywood era's mode of production a system, we ought to consider women this system's mainstay, because studios were built on their low-cost backs and scaled through their brush and keystrokes. (5)

For Hill, it is important to recognise women's work in Hollywood because it redresses the tendency of film history to write out and ignore the female contributions to the film industry. As Hill writes, "This history reveals one such truth not yet universally acknowledged in Hollywood: that women's contributions to film history have been vast, important, and ongoing from inception to present, even when their names didn't appear above the titles—or in the credits at all" (6). Examining the types of work that women could and did do reveals their agency, both in their careers and in the film industry's history.<sup>10</sup>

Hill notes that scholars tend to characterise women's work as "invisible" and overlooked (8), so insignificant that it is just simply does not rate a mention in written histories. Her work makes visible the previously overlooked contributions of many women to the film industry and thus provides a valuable intervention into film history and the history of gendered labour. However, being visible does not necessarily mean that the contribution of women is noted or valued or, to use Hill's words, that their agency is revealed. Female stars were the most visible part of Hollywood from the 1920s to the 1940s; yet, for many scholars, female stars were wage labourers rather than active agents and contributors. Hill herself writes, "And, to be sure, the powerful women who survived in the studio system—writers like Frances

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<sup>10</sup> An interesting addition to the body of research on women working in Hollywood is J. E. Smyth's *Nobody's Girl Friday: The Women Who Ran Hollywood*, in which she argues that unlike Hill's portrayal of the women workers of Hollywood as "low paid, powerless female drones" (16), women occupied senior and powerful positions within Hollywood and made up to half of the overall employees of some studios. However, Smyth's book contains a number of factual errors that undermine its very persuasive argument.

Marion and stars like Bette Davis—were powerful in spite of the structural inequalities that undermined them throughout their careers” (2). However, in this context, the detailed study of the female star undertaken in this thesis highlights how individual women were able to succeed within a particular cultural and industrial movement that both enabled and made remarkable female star labour.

## A (Female) Star is Born

One of the key contributors to the development of the studio system was the increasing popularity of narrative film, which resulted in film studios implementing practices that allowed them to produce more consistent product to meet the demand of audiences for new movies, such as continuity style and the director/producer systems. One particular narrative of how the star system emerged from within the early days of the studio system has been commonly told in film histories. In this story, audiences responded to the individual actors they saw appear in different movies, writing to studios to ask for details about the performers. However, believing that they would have to pay higher salaries if audiences knew the names of the actors, film production companies refused to release any details of individual actors. Instead, individual actors were associated with their studios; for example, the most popular female actor from Biograph, Florence Lawrence, was known as “the Biograph Girl.” As the story goes, this practice ended due to the actions an enterprising film producer, Carl Laemmle. In March 1910, Laemmle’s independent production company Independent Motion Pictures Company (IMP) released an article stating that Florence Lawrence, who had been the original Biograph girl but was now an IMP girl, had not been killed in an automobile accident but instead was now appearing in IMP films. It was only after Laemmle’s publicity stunt that film companies started to publicise their actors and the star system as we know it was born (P. McDonald *The Star System* 15–16).

Although this story is appealing, it is not fully accurate. The article from the St Louis paper that Laemmle was reportedly responding to has never been located (deCordova 17), suggesting that Laemmle’s statement was not a genuine response to death claims but instead was a publicity stunt. Additionally, while actors generally were not named in the first decade of the 20th century, deCordova identifies a number of instances in which they were, disregarding the idea that there was one singular event that changed naming practices. Instead, he suggests that a more complex rationale lies behind the decision to name actors. In *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System*, deCordova identifies the three

factors necessary for the development of a star system. First, the industry must be organised based on systems of mass production, including implementing specialised or detailed division of labour (i.e., individuals held specialist positions such as director or actor rather than the “doubling in brass” described by Mahar, where all members of a group pitched in as necessary). The second factor was the increasing dominance of narrative film, which also led to changes in the organisation of on-screen space, for example the use of close-ups and character-centred narratives with dialogue. Paul McDonald notes that these changes, along with other film techniques such as shot/reverse shot cutting and eyeline matching, were all used to place further emphasis on the actor’s face as a source of meaning (*The Star System* 28). Finally, there needed to be active circulation of information about the identities of the performers in the films; basically, audiences needed to be able to access the information about the actors they were beginning to know on-screen.

For deCordova, the name of the performer was central to the intertextuality of the picture personality’s image. It was the name that served to unite performances and individuate performers across a body of films. It functioned to construct the picture personality as an on-screen identity and to help reinforce the undeniable specificity of each actor (87). The picture personality became what we think of as a star after 1913, where the industrial conditions were developed through which stories could circulate in the press about the off-screen lives of popular film performers; for example, through the new medium of fan magazine. This new realm of knowledge introduced audiences to life behind the screen, so that the star was known not only through their roles but also as “a character in a narrative quite separate from his or her work in any film” (99). The star system that eventually underpinned the studio system was thus established.

Despite its eventually proven inaccuracy, one thing the mythic story of the emergence of the star system did get right is the centrality of female actors to the star system. As I detailed in an earlier section, the opportunities available for women both behind and in front of the camera were one of the key appeals of early cinema to female audiences. Accounts of women who took chances and succeeded circulated both on- and off-screen, in the stories of heroic women on-screen who were played by working and successful women off-screen in movies that may have been written, edited, produced and directed by women. Stories of these remarkable women could be found in the newspapers and fan magazines. However, as women’s roles behind the camera were changing in the mid to late 1920s, so too were the type of stories being told about women in the fan magazines. The focus shifted from the

many types of working women in Hollywood – the actresses, writers, directors, producers – to an almost exclusive emphasis on the lives and loves of female stars, a focus that continued unabated throughout the 1930s. Anthony Slide quotes a 1933–34 survey of the stars who appeared on fan magazine covers conducted by *The Hollywood Reporter* found that no men made the cover unless they were accompanied by a female star (*Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine* 127–8). Coverage of and about women dominated fan magazines throughout the 1930s and '40s.

The films of the 1930s displayed a similar focus on female actors. Popular female-oriented genres prominently featured female protagonists in movies throughout the 1930s. In large part, this on-screen focus on female stars was an attempt of the film industry to cater for women audiences, who they believed were the largest audiences for motion pictures. The male executives of the film industry presumed that for a film to be successful (as measured in terms of making a profit), it must appeal to women. In an article called “Women Rule Hollywood” published in *The New Movie Magazine* in March 1935, producer Samuel Goldwyn describes the situation as follows:

Any producer who disregards the established preferences of women is committing professional suicide. His actors may have the talent of Bernhardt, his director the finesse of Reinhardt, his scenarist the power of Shakespeare—but, unless the finished picture possesses that elusive quality called “feminine appeal,” it is certain to fail at the box office. (18)

He then reports that that the average audience is more than 70 percent feminine before stating, “Without the steady patronage of women, theaters and studios could not survive” (18). Promoting female actors was not only understood as important, it was seen as vital to the success of the industry as a whole.

The promotion of female stars indirectly resulted in the promotion of working women. More than just featuring women, the films of this era that were centred around women were marked by what Sarah Berry describes as “a fascination with female power” (xvi). Stars such as Constance Bennett, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck, independent working women whose personal and professional activities filled the pages of fan magazines, played gold-diggers and sexually adventurous social climbers, displaying a determination and ambition in their on-screen personas that became a definitive aspect of their star texts

(Carman 12). The figure of the working women also featured prominently. Whether set in contemporary times as secretaries and shopgirls or in the many historical films of the decade, the American woman portrayed in Hollywood movies of the 1930s laboured to support herself and her family. There was constant interaction between the on- and off-screen presentations of women, with each working to reinforce the other. J. E. Smyth argues that nowhere was the image of the independent working women promoted more effectively on- and off the screen than in Hollywood (67). As women whose labour was public and obvious (as opposed to the invisible labour described by Hall), female stars were visible examples of successful women operating in the public sphere. More than that, however, “Female stars gave expression to aspirations for autonomy in the social world, self-definition, and the greater possibilities of female identities neither restricted to nor dependent upon the private, consumptive realm” (Larsen 188). Female stars were the very epitome of successful working women, both on-screen and off; more than that, they provided definitive proof of the possibilities for independence offered to women outside the narrow confines of domesticity.

## Conclusion

Amidst the background of shrinking opportunity and widespread public opposition to women working as well as dramatic changes in gendered employment within the film industry in the 1930s, female stars shone as a beacon of opportunity and success. During this period, their importance and status within the film industry increased, resulting in the foregrounding of women-centred stories that starred female actors made for an audience that was believed to be made up of mostly women. Unlike other prominent female figures, such as Dorothy Arzner, who was one of the only women to direct feature films in the classical era, and Virginia Van Upp, who was one of the few women to hold an executive producer position at a major studio, these were not individual women who were the exception to a general masculine rule. Rather, these women were central to the ongoing success of Hollywood and its ancillary industries to such an extent that Carman argues that “the female-driven star system thus became the economic underpinning of the larger industrial apparatus of Hollywood during the classical era” (14). Female stardom, therefore, is a vitally important aspect of classical Hollywood cinema.

In this chapter, I outlined the historical conditions that contributed to the emergence of the female star. With an increasing number of women joining the workforce, ideals of appropriate behaviour and work for women were being challenged. The developing film

industry provided opportunities for women, both in front of and behind the camera. The motion picture industry changed how women navigated public space while also opening up a new social imaginary that promoted and celebrated the achievements of Hollywood's female players, both on- and off the screen. At the same time, women were central to the growing consumer culture that privileged female subjectivities and was closely interlinked with the moving pictures industry. It was against this background that the female star emerged.

The history that is outlined in this chapter is important because it demonstrates that the female star cannot be considered separate from the industrial and social conditions within which she worked. Although stars are a cinematic phenomenon, female stardom is equally facilitated and constricted through economic and industrial conditions. To understand the female star as a historical subject with agency; that is, to assign subjectivity to female stars generally, the female star subject must be considered in relation to the time in which they operated. In the following chapter, I build on the historical context developed in this chapter by elaborating and contextualising the analytical tools that underpin my approach.

# Chapter Two: Theoretical Approaches to the Female Star

## Introduction

Stars were central to the operation of the studio system that characterised classical Hollywood. As well as being the most visible part of the film industry, they also worked to standardise and regulate the movie text and were a necessary connection between the film industry and interrelated industries such as advertising and fan magazines. Female stars held a privileged position within this circuit of exchange. Their faces graced the covers of fan magazines more frequently than their male counterparts, while within the pages of the magazines female stars sported current fashions and style, influencing women's fashion and patterns of consumption. For audiences, female stars provided identificatory fantasies, modelling different models of feminine behaviour. Female stardom, therefore, is an integral element of classical Hollywood and the star system.

Incorporating conceptions of female stars as historical subjects with agency into existing star studies frameworks is a vitally important project as it draws attention to the distribution of power within Hollywood institutions and how individuals were enabled or constrained according to gender. The existence of female stars, with their visibility, economic power and public success, illustrates that there were women who were able to work and thrive within hostile and non-supportive social and industrial conditions. However, academic work on female stars rarely considers them as historic subjects with agency. Instead, star studies literature tends to focus on female stars either as images, objects of a desiring gaze, sources of identificatory fantasies, or as a form of labour. This thesis instead proposes a model that explores the female star as a historical subject with agency who employed practices of negotiation to succeed within classical Hollywood. To do this, and to understand how this was possible, the female star needs to be explored within an analytical framework that considers the multifaceted and historiographic aspects of stardom.

Hollywood in the 1930s and '40s held particular opportunities for women. The emergence of consumer culture, the popularity of the New Woman and the fluidity of gendered skills in the nascent film industry provided fertile conditions for the emergence of the female star. In the

previous chapter, Chapter 1, I outlined the historical conditions that contributed to the emergence of the female star. In doing this, I demonstrated the importance of placing the female star within her specific historical moment in order to further understandings of the female star as a historical subject. In this chapter, I develop a methodological framework that addresses the theoretical aspects of female stardom, understanding that the female star is a complex figure, intersecting industry, culture, history, gender and identity, among other considerations. A brief review of the history of star studies demonstrates the ongoing importance of Richard Dyer's work on stars to the broader academic field of star studies. Recognising the importance of gender, I then look at star studies work specifically on female stars, identifying a gap in current conceptions of female stars. Finally, I consider the female star subject in two ways: firstly, through building on existing models of subjectivity and, secondly, through looking at the construction of the female historical subject as established through archival research. This multidisciplinary approach allows for an in-depth consideration of female stardom in classical Hollywood.

## **Star Studies: A History**

In this research, I propose a methodology that incorporates considerations of the subjectivity of female actors within the broader framework of star studies in order to understand them as historical subjects who enacted agency. To do this requires a multidisciplinary approach that draws from the star studies, women's history and archival studies. As the first part of this approach and in order to situate my research within the broader discipline of star studies, I will now discuss the history of academic star studies.

Although stars fascinated audiences from the earliest days of moving pictures, studies of stars in film scholarship were not common until the 1980s. Early sociological studies of stars adopted a sociological perspective, attempting to understand the role of stars within contemporary society. In *The Stars* (originally published in French in 1957 as *Les Stars*), Edgar Morin used anthropologic and Marxist theory to argue that stars operated as myths within modern society. Morin conceived of stars as both mythological, heroic cult figures and items of merchandise shaped and promoted by the film industry, writing, "The star straddles both sacred and profane divine and real, aesthetic and magic" (84). Morin also looked at the star-fan relationship, suggesting that fans often venerate stars as idols elevated above the level of common humanity, marked with an aura of impenetrable mystery and endowed with extraordinary gifts and superhuman powers. Importantly, *The Stars* laid the groundwork for

the consideration of stars as not inherent in film as a medium but inherent in cinema as a specific social institution; as Morin writes, “The stars are typically cinematic and yet there is nothing specifically cinematic about them” (6). This was an important development for star studies.

Drawing from but extending beyond Morin’s work is Richard Dyer’s *Stars*. Dyer argues that rather than considering a star as being something that exists only as part of other texts (for example, as an aspect of a film that has no existence without it), stars themselves represent texts that are interesting as objects of study in their own right. Dyer considers a star not as a person (although stars’ lived experience gives truth to the meanings that they represent) but as an image: a complex configuration of visual, verbal and aural signs (*Stars* 34). Dyer thus argues that the study of stars is not concerned with the stars as real people but as objects of signification. He divides this investigation into stars as a social phenomenon (how and why stars signify), stars as images (what do they signify and what meanings and images do particular stars embody) and stars as signs (how do stars work within film texts in relation to other aspects of the text) (*Stars* 3). For Dyer, there is no real or correct meaning of stars; rather, he is interested in exposing the multiple meanings that a star has for different audiences at different times.

Dyer understands stars as models of human subjectivity and social types, combining both ordinary/typical and extraordinary. He argues that stars have a structured polysemy, a “finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempt so to structure them that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced” (*Stars* 3). Stars thus perform an ideological function, working to either manage or resolve contradictions within and between ideologies. Much of Dyer’s work involves exploring the nature, functions and ambiguities of star images. Central to his understanding of stars is how they represent models of human subjectivity and social types. He identifies the major contradictions and appeal of stardom: that stars are special and unique but also real people, just like us. Stars are thus emblematic or representative of different types while also being a unique individual. As Dyer writes, “[the] star both fulfils/incarnates the type and, by virtue of his/her idiosyncrasies, individuates it” (*Stars* 47).

One of the key interventions of *Stars* that had been lacking in previous works such as *The Stars* was a methodology for how to consider and analyse stars. In *Stars*, Dyer defines a star image as being made up of everything we know about a star: their films, publicity, gossip and

biography. In *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, he extends this definition of stars further. He writes:

The star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars. A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and "private" life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech. (*Heavenly Bodies* 7)

As he notes, star images are always extensive, multimedial and intertextual and the material that is appropriate for the examination of individual stars differs depending on the star one wishes to examine. Further to this, Dyer acknowledges that star texts have a history and that the meanings associated with them changes over time and within social groups; for example, Judy Garland's relationship with and use by a gay subculture within San Francisco in the 1970s in comparison to how she was considered within 1940s mainstream society when she was most active as an MGM star.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of Dyer's work on the legitimation of the studies of stars. Paul McDonald notes that what Dyer's work did was to "offer a tight analytical focus on how well-known figures reproduce and produce beliefs about human identity" (*Hollywood Stardom* 3). As Dyer writes:

We're fascinated by stars because they enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism), with its particular organization of life into public and private spheres. . . . Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been culturally, historically constructed. (*Heavenly Bodies* 17)

In his work, Dyer both establishes the validity of the study of stars within academia and provides a methodology through which to analyse them. However, although Dyer identifies stars as both a phenomenon of production and of consumption (*Stars* 10–17), as noted by McDonald, Dyer is far more interested in the images of stars than the system that produced them (*The Star System* 2). Additionally, his interest in how stars operate ideologically places

his work within a particular theoretical framework of film studies that focuses on how the production of meaning and representation is related to questions of social, political and cultural power (P. McDonald *Hollywood Stardom 2*). This means that by focusing his attention on how and what stars signify, Dyer sometimes neglects the broader historical, industrial and financial frameworks that stars exist within. The centrality of Dyerian analysis of stars demonstrates a historiographical approach to many star studies that concentrates on image rather than subjectivity, in the process privileging the star text over considerations of the agency of individual star subjects.

In contemporary star studies, Dyerian analysis still dominates the field. However, other approaches through which to study stardom have emerged; for example, those that explore how audiences engage with stars and those which look at stardom as an industrial framework. In *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, Jackie Stacey explores the memories of British women in the 1940s and '50s. Stacey advertised in two British women's weekly magazines looking for women willing to write about their favourite stars from that time. After analysing the letters and questionnaires she received in response to her ad, Stacey found that the cinematic identification of real women was very different to that associated with psychoanalytic film theory. Stacey identifies eight different ways in which female fans used star images to fashion their identity. These include four cinematic identificatory fantasies – adoration, desire to become the star, pleasure in the star's female power and using the star to escape one's life – and four extracinematic identifications – pretending or fantasising about being the star, accentuating one's resemblance to the star, changing oneself to imitate the star and copying a particular aspect of the star. In *Star Gazing*, Stacey shifts the emphasis from star texts to the practices of audiences in fashioning stardom and her work provides a fascinating insight into the relationships between stars and audiences within a particular national and historical context. However, although the methodology employed in *Star Gazing* was unique and innovative, few star studies have used it since and, given that it relies on audience's recollections of their relationships with stars, it is of limited use in contemporary studies of classical era stars.

Another approach examines stardom as an industrial practice. Paul McDonald argues that the interest on the star itself ignores the broader implications of stardom: the fact that a star is a factor in a larger cultural and industrial framework. McDonald states that given the importance of stars to the films financially – their presence is often required for a film to be financed, they are used to sell films and they are one of the factors that influence box office

success – they need to be considered as part of a broader historical context. He writes: “Stars are texts, images, meaning and culture, but they are more than this. . . . In film culture, stars therefore form a point of intersection between meaning and money” (*Hollywood Stardom* 3). McDonald proposes that an industrial context needs to be incorporated in any star study, placing the star within wider historical and cultural fields. This is an important intervention, as it allows for an understanding of how stardom generally and individual stars specifically were positioned and operated within a bigger network of factors. It extends Dyer’s image-focused methodological framework to incorporate broader considerations of industry, resulting in a more complex approach that provides a more complete historiographical understanding of stars.

Outlining the historical background of the field of star studies serves two purposes. Firstly, by reviewing the historical antecedents of this discipline, the importance of considering the star as an image is established. Studying the star as a text is useful as it is as a text that the star is most accessible. It is through a film star’s movies that most audiences come to know a star and their persona and it is through extrafilmic discourse that this understanding is reinforced or problematised. Therefore, established frameworks within star studies provide the tools through which to understand how a star image makes meanings, how these meanings circulate throughout the various media at different times and how this image changes over time. But, at the same time, it is clear that considering a star *only* as an image limits our understanding of the star, especially female stars. Historical analysis such as the analysis of stars in classical Hollywood should be grounded in the understanding that cultural constructions of sexual difference fundamentally inform history. Thus:

the discourses of gender not only regulate the social behavior of men and women in sexuality, family, and work, but they also become ways of ordering politics and of maintaining hierarchies of all kinds. “Gender” describes a fundamental understanding of difference that organizes and produces other relationships of difference – and of power and inequality. (Melosh 5)

The star studies framework employed in this thesis is informed by a feminist approach that is grounded in feminist film studies. As a critical methodology, feminism makes central the category of gender in its interrogation of fields of knowledge. Feminist film studies, emerging from the critical framework of feminism, extends this focus to the cinematic arena, exploring gender as a point of analysis through examination of issues including

representation, spectatorship and the gendered hierarchy of Hollywood cinema and associated forms of cultural production. Gender therefore is a crucial and inescapable factor when considering female stars and analysis of these stars must include considerations of how gender difference informs the practices of stardom and the analysis of the stars themselves.

Historically, women faced different issues to their male counterparts both in the workplace generally and in Hollywood specifically. Succeeding in Hollywood required women to navigate a different series of expectations and requirements than their male counterparts and any study of them must take this into account. More than that, for female stars, their lived experience is not easily separated from their star persona. Female stars are such a productive site of analysis because of the strong influence they had on their audiences and the deep connections between fan and star. Part of that is because female stars acted as “signposts that informed women’s sense of identity as much as they indicated women’s fantasies and identificatory desires” (Ascheid 6). The freedom and opportunity represented by stars were produced by an interlinking of their off-screen actions and their on-screen personas, such that “the personality of a star, the mere fact of being a star, was as important as the roles they played, and affected the very conception of those roles” (Haskell 5). Audiences could believe that stars like Barbara Stanwyck could hold her own on-screen because they knew that off-screen she negotiated independent freelance contracts which enabled her to control her own career, a visible enactment of agency outside the domestic sphere. It is therefore important to recognise gender as a category within the broader discipline of star studies and incorporate considerations of gender into any star studies analysis.

## **Female Star Studies: A Review**

There is a rich and varied body of work that studies female stardom. Published book-length academic work on female stars can be divided into two main groups. The first group consists of works which study female stardom as a collective, examining a number of female stars within set parameters such as a specific time period (for example, classical Hollywood) or a specific type of star (for example, “sex goddesses”). The second group is made up of works which provide a close and detailed examination of one particular star. Within these broad groupings, these works examine stars in different ways and for different purposes, with the methodologies and stars chosen for analysis and the materials analysed differing depending on their aims. While there is a wealth of research in this area, there remain crucial questions about the female star that are as yet unanswered. In this section, I provide an overview of

some of the key texts and approaches to the study of female stardom. I am focusing on works that concentrate on the female star during the classical Hollywood era.

Some research uses stars as a basis for broader inquiries into the representation of women and how they were invited by the magazine industry to interact with consumer culture. In *Stars, Fans, and Consumption in the 1950s, Reading Photoplay*, Sumiko Higashi examines the role of fan magazines in constructing the female gender in postwar suburban America. Drawing from Dyer to argue that stars represent social types who defined social norms for fans who worshipped them, she uses female stars to investigate the social norms governing female behaviour during the fifties, which were a time of unprecedented and accelerating social change. *Stars, Fans, and Consumption* reconstructs the fan magazine publicity of 10 female stars who were selected on the basis of box office receipts and film industry awards. Higashi selected stars who represented “interesting variations of the most popular feminine social types” (17). She is interested in typical stars; that is, stars who were popular with broad audiences and successful but who were also representative of an actress in the studio system. She finds that although these female stars personified social types, the fan magazines *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture* constructed their subjectivities in terms of resurgent postwar domestic ideology and suburban togetherness. Self-fulfilment was based on marital love, adored children and comfortable homes; however, the stars who represented these values were also ambitious career women, resulting in contradictions and fissures surfacing in fan magazine discourse.

Gender is central to Higashi’s analysis. She argues that “women have historically embodied ideological values, especially during periods of unsettling change and dislocation” (15), which means that “analyzing the popularity of stars as social types thus reveals a great deal about the postwar construction of femininity that was idealized yet changing” (16–7). However, writing as a historian, Higashi is not particularly interested in the actresses themselves but rather how the study of these actresses “informs us about the social codes constructing feminine identity and behaviour in a standardized consumer culture” (129). For Higashi, the study of the actress provides a window into a particular historical period; however, her focus is purely on representations of stars in fan magazines. Little data beyond the fan magazines themselves is referred to.

Other researchers have used fan magazines in conjunction with a star’s body of films as a rich source of data for analysis of individual stars. In *Doris Day Confidential*, Tamar Jeffers

McDonald takes a two-fold approach to the study of Doris Day, using material from popular media and close textual analysis to examine how the virgin myth became intrinsically connected to Day's star image. By looking at how Day's persona changed over time, Jeffers McDonald demonstrates that the persona of "virginal prudish maiden" associated with Day originates in her later films and then, once established in her film vehicles (her on-screen persona), this figure started to dominate Day's off-screen persona "to the point that extra-filmic material, like fan and lifestyle magazines, had to try and incorporate it into their accounts of the star, with many resultant torsions to narrative logic in their stories" (9). Jeffers McDonald's research is valuable because, through tracing the evolution of Day's persona over time in both her film and television performances and in fan and lifestyle magazines, she is able to demonstrate how these two strands interacted, in particular how they reinforced and contradicted each other. Additionally, by providing an in-depth analysis of the source of particular tropes when identifying how they functioned at certain key moments in Day's career, Jeffers McDonald provides a methodological approach which moves beyond simply identifying what cultural values were associated with a particular star at a particular time.

Other scholars use female stars as a tool of historical analysis. In *Hitler's Heroines*, Antje Ascheid argues that in Hitler's Germany, female film stars were representative of an area of contestation regarding womanhood within German fascism. Nazi culture was able to synthesise its politicians onto its male stars, whose representations of masculinity supported the Third Reich, yet the star images and screen characters of female German stars struggled to incorporate National Socialist ideology. As glamorous and beautiful as their Hollywood counterparts, Nazi female stars publicly contradicted the ideal woman of the Third Reich, who was unadorned by make-up or any other artificial means and whose sole focus was on the home and the family.<sup>11</sup> More than that, female stars provided identificatory models beyond the limited femininity offered by Nazi ideology. Like Higashi, Ascheid is not particularly interested in the star herself; rather, Ascheid uses the figure of the female star to point to a wider historical problem and to reveal the underlying instability of National

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<sup>11</sup> Ascheid tells us that Hitler pronounced that the suffering of women in childbirth equalled that of a soldier in battle and therefore mothers received their own holiday, *Muttertag* (Mother's Day). In addition to that, women who had four or more children were awarded their own medal of honour, the *Mutterkreuz* (Mother's Cross) (26).

Socialism. As she writes:

Thus, I am interested not only in placing the representation of women into the context of Nazism, but also looking at the cultural descriptions and inscriptions of “woman” that surfaced under National Socialist rule related to larger cultural contexts in which these images circulated and operated. . . . By using the figure of the female star to point to the larger historical problematic and to reveal the underlying *instability* of National Socialism’s homogenous conception of femininity, I can offer a more complex feminist history of women in the Third Reich. (italics in original 8)

For both Ascheid and Higashi, the female star is the vehicle through which broader questions are explored.

Other analyses concentrate on the representations of female stars across a body of films. In *Like a Natural Woman: Spectacular Female Performance in Classical Hollywood*, Kirsten Pullen approaches the female classical Hollywood star through the lens of performance. Defining naturalism as “an acting technique that seeks close correspondence between performer and character to present motivated actions and genuine emotion” (4), she argues that naturalist performance in popular forms such as musicals and television sitcoms produces performative ideals of femininity. Her aim is to “recover” the performance techniques of five female stars who worked in classical Hollywood, writing:

For these actresses, and in general, a female star’s greatest asset was her face and figure. Film studios and audiences were assumed to be interested in exceptionally beautiful women rather than the subtleties of acting. According to studio narratives, female performers were little more than pretty mannequins manipulated by off-screen directors, their performances pieced together by talented editors. (4)

By recovering the work of acting and performance of female stars, Pullen also aims to recover their agency and labour and demonstrate how these contribute to developing nuanced, consistent, believable characters and personae.

Pullen’s correctly notes how female stars were objectified in classical Hollywood cinema, noting a clear focus on the faces and bodies of female stars rather than their talent or labour. However, there are some limits to Pullen’s claims. Even a casual perusal of any fan magazine published during the classical Hollywood era illustrates that audience interest in female stars

extended beyond their “face and figure” to every facet of their lives, to their homes and domestic lives, their romantic activities and, when they were working, their performance labour. For example, Adrienne McLean documents how Rita Hayworth’s labour as an actor and, in the later part of her career, a producer, were detailed in fan magazines (*Being Rita Hayworth* 12–13). Additionally, female stars of this period were also not exclusively extremely beautiful women: two of the most popular stars of the 1930s were Marie Dressler and Shirley Temple, an overweight elderly comic actress and a young child respectively (Jewell 268–69), and Bette Davis’ lack of conventional beauty was a key component of her star image (Shingler and Gledhill 69). Moreover, by focusing on the performance of a certain group of female stars, who Pullen argues “make a particularly hypersexualized, spectacular femininity seem natural, authentic and desirable” (22), other factors that contribute to how stars make meaning are ignored, such as how they functioned as workers within the industrial context of the Hollywood film industry. While Higashi’s in-depth study of the representation of female stars in *Photoplay* illustrates that it is possible to use the figure of the female star to make broader claims about the construction of femininity in society, she also analyses how fan magazines and stars proscribed different types of femininity through the purchase of consumer goods. While valuable for its exploration of female star performance, Pullen’s narrow focus on performance limits its applicability as a broad model for the analysis of female stars.

Other works place their focus primarily or exclusively on the image of the female star. In *The Sex Goddess in American Film, 1930–1965*, Jessica Hope Jordan situates the figure of the sex goddess within the context of feminist film theory. She notes that early feminist film theorists concentrated on the image of the woman, especially as she is presented in classical Hollywood cinema; for example, Laura Mulvey’s concept of the feminine woman’s connotative “to-be-looked-at-ness” which attracts the male gaze and, as Jordan notes, the feminist gaze as well (5). Jordan argues that the female body on film is seen not only as a sex object but an object of exchange, reproducing the sexual oppression and exploitation of women. As described simply by Jordan, “a woman in visual representation becomes sexually objectified through a projection of male desires, and the male desire gets represented in capitalistic terms” (7).

Jordan points out that by placing the figure of the sex goddess in an abject position, feminist film theorists are positioning her as a victim who is manipulated by culture as well as the mode of production (film) while at the same time embodying some of cinema’s worst aspects

of sexual, economic and even racist oppression. Jordan, however, argues that:

By demonstrating how not only the actresses performing the sex goddess, but the characters they play, as well as their screen images, manipulate culture more than they are manipulated by it and in fact, often drive capitalist modes of consumption rather than being consumed by them it is possible to complicate previous notions of the sex goddess in film while also recouping her image as one that, more often than not, can be read as empowering. (7–8)

Jordan argues that while the image of the “sex goddess” may be perceived in the popular imagination as a woman who is sexually objectified by Hollywood and American culture, the actress performing the role very consciously uses her awareness of her very sexual attractiveness (which is not the same sexual objectification) as a source of pleasure, for both herself and her audience, as well as a source of power (13). Therefore, rather than embodying or reifying popular stereotypes, the sex goddesses resist these stereotypes, expanding their social scenarios beyond the wife, mother and low-wage worker positions held by most women from the 1930s to ‘50s.

For Jordan, it is the difference of the sex goddesses that is their key appeal, one that extends the understanding of them from objects of visual pleasure presented for the benefit of men to agents who have power of their own. I instead argue that this difference was countered with a universal sameness that allows for and connected stars with audiences in a different way. The connection between female stars and consumer culture has been well established<sup>12</sup> and work on the presentation and reception of female stars such as Stacey’s and Higashi’s show all female stars, not just the sex goddesses, were positioned as cultural products to be imitated, with fashion and make-up features demonstrating how to reproduce the stars’ looks, recipe features to cook the stars’ favourite recipes and, in some magazines, even features on stars’ homes. But, as Jordan points out, each actresses’ awareness of performing a role is part of what de-objectifies the sex goddess, allowing for a knowingness of purpose that points to the agency of the sex goddess and that the lives of the actresses were similar to that of female

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<sup>12</sup> See Charles Eckert, “The Carole Lombard in Macy’s Window” and Jane Gaines and Charlotte Cornelia Herzog, “‘Puffed Sleeves Before Teatime’: Joan Crawford, Adrian and Women Audiences.”

audiences in certain ways. Alongside the ads for Lux soap and Woodbury face powder were stories of how actresses navigated the world as women: their romantic relationships, having and raising children and issues faced in balancing being a working woman and raising a family. The beauty and wealth of the female stars mean that they did not have to worry about low-wage work and had freedom and independence rare at that time but they too dealt with the problems of love, family and labour. This is the same practice of sameness and difference described by Dyer, where stars are both exceptional and ordinary; glamorous and heavenly yet also just like us.

Jordan's approach to female stardom in her discussion of the sex goddesses' relationship with both capitalism and their audience focuses on individual stars to support her overall thesis about sex goddesses rather than interrogating the concept of the star or exploring how the star system and its associated practices and features factored into how stars function. However, many of her arguments about sex goddesses can be applied not only to actresses who exhibit hypersexuality, such as Jean Harlow or Mae West, but can be extended to other female stars who worked within the representational system of classical Hollywood. For example, the concept of the female body as an object of currency and exchange was central to the development of the star persona of Barbara Stanwyck, such as in *Baby Face* (Alfred E. Green, 1933) and *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944). Therefore, although Jordan limits her focus to hypersexualised blond actresses, her work provides useful background in considering how the representations of sexualised female star bodies on screen can be, to use Jordan's term, de-victimised.

A number of scholars have explored the emergence and re-emergence of female star images over time; that is, their circulation in popular culture and how the meanings associated with their star texts has changed in different historical periods. In *Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon*, Ramona Curry examines how Mae West's star image fulfils various cultural functions at different historical junctures. In the 1930s, she was the centre of debates about morality and censorship, acting as a focal point of social questions about Hollywood and female sexuality. In the '70s, West's complex portrayal of gender made her a controversial figure for feminist and gay rights movements, transgressing race, class and gender expectations and conventions. By doing this, Curry illustrates how icons of popular culture can distil contested social issues, serving diverse and sometimes contradictory political functions. Curry's methodology involves close textual analysis of West's films and extrafilmic discourse, focusing on how West was represented in fan magazines in the 1930s

and tabloid magazines in the 1970s alongside archival censorship material. This approach adds depth and complexity to her analysis of West, providing a convincing argument for West's importance as a site for the contestation of meaning. Again, however, Curry is concerned more with West as an image rather than a historical figure.

In *Growing Up With Audrey Hepburn*, Rachel Mosely looks at the recirculation of Audrey Hepburn's image in the 1990s, examining why the values and qualities associated with Hepburn's image held a specific resonance for audiences, particularly female audiences, at that time. She compares this recirculation with how Hepburn's image was presented at the height of her stardom in the 1950s and '60s, exploring how the understandings and meanings of this image have shifted over time. In doing so, she utilises three methodological approaches: film textual analysis, archival research in women's and film fan magazines, and interviews with women in Britain who admired Hepburn either during the 1950s and '60s or during the '90s. Interweaving textual analysis with audience accounts, Mosely offers a reading of what she describes as the "'star-text' Audrey Hepburn and its address to a gendered spectator" (9). As evidenced by the usage of the pronoun "its" to describe the star image of Hepburn, Mosely's focus is on how a particular star-text circulated at particular times in history in one particular place. Audrey Hepburn as actor or historical figure is not the focus of the research.

One work that is representative of the complexity and trends in the study of female stars is *Dietrich Icon*, a collected volume of essays on the star Marlene Dietrich edited by Mary Desjardin and Gerd Germünden. In the introduction, "Marlene Dietrich's Appropriations," Desjardin and Germünden note the frequency with which analyses of Marlene Dietrich appear in film theory, from Laura Mulvey's 1975 article "Visual and Other Pleasures" to the volume they are introducing, which was published in 2007. They argue that over time, analyses of Dietrich "suggest a movement away from understanding her star persona as an inert, passive image entirely constituted by a collective phallogocentrism toward an understanding of the Dietrich star persona as performed, contributing to the enunciation of the films' meanings and multiple positions available for spectators" (11). They note that since the 1990s, works on Dietrich most frequently intervene as historiographical studies that

carefully delineate circumscribed industrial, national, and historical contexts for examining Dietrich, and in doing so, actually end up enlarging the perspectives of and places for Dietrich's star persona in film history and theory. (11)

Demonstrating this enlargement of perspectives and places, the essays within the volume cover a broad range of approaches, from analyses of Dietrich's performance style both in individual films and across her career, examinations of her stardom in single movies and across her career using queer theory and the investigation of production files and public discourse contemporaneous to different moments in Dietrich's career, how Dietrich's star persona functioned as an extratextual signifier in film advertising as well as how posthumous biographical texts shape contemporary understandings of Dietrich's career and stardom. In doing this, this volume makes clear the multitude of approaches and methodologies through which the study of a star can be constructed.

Although not explicitly describing it as "agency," several of the chapters in the book examine how Dietrich contributed to her own career. In "Playing Garbo: How Marlene Dietrich Conquered Hollywood," Joseph Garnarcz explores Dietrich's role in the development of her early pre-Hollywood persona. He posits that in her first starring performances in Germany, Dietrich modelled herself on Greta Garbo in order to attract the attention of Hollywood with the hope of becoming a Hollywood star. This contradicts with the common understanding of Dietrich's career, which usually identifies her performance in *The Blue Angel* (Joseph von Sternberg, 1930) as the role that launched her to stardom, with von Sternberg positioned as the Svengali who developed an unknown actress into Marlene Dietrich, the star. Garnarcz states that Dietrich herself was so dedicated to protecting this legend that she preserved material in her personal archive that supported it. This is a very interesting approach to examining the agency of female stars as, in effect, Garnarcz is using evidence from material such as film reviews, Dietrich's film performances and the structure of Germany's film industry to find evidence of the agency of Dietrich in the development of her career, against the desire of Dietrich at the end of her career, based on her actions in curating her papers. However, central to Garnarcz's argument is that Dietrich would have had control in shaping her early star persona because stars were freelance in Germany in the 1930s. This was not true for stars in 1930s Hollywood, hence Garnarcz's framework has little relevance for the methodology developed in this thesis.

One chapter in the book clearly demonstrates many of the disciplinary tensions present in the study of female stars, particularly between the star as subject, and the star as image and the star as worker in a particular historical and industrial framework. Lutz Koepnick's "Marlene Dietrich's Face" contains a description of Dietrich's intervention in her own publicity campaigns. He writes:

A good number of production stills and publicity materials, rejected by Dietrich for publication, and gathered at the Marlene Dietrich Collection in Berlin, document in a highly instructive manner Dietrich's quest for facial makeover during the 1930s. Time and again, we can see the trace of Dietrich's pen in these images, pointing out or even correcting certain unwanted aspects of her facial appearance: unwelcome shadows under her eyes; tiny wrinkles around her mouth; stray hairs, which by stubbornly sticking up seem to spoil a balanced framing of her face; and—of course—the much talked-about unsightliness of her nose, when seen in full or semiprofile. (45)

However, Koepnick provides no more detail than this. It would have been highly unusual for a studio to allow any star, male or female, final approval on publicity or promotional stills, especially one on their first long-term contract, as Dietrich was for Paramount between 1930 and 1936, after which she was signed to David O. Selznick. The presence of the amended production stills suggest Dietrich's agency in the promotion of her (literal) image, yet Koepnick does not explain what form this agency took – for example, was it written in to her contract? And if yes, which contract, and in what period of time. Were her alterations acted upon, or just placed in her personal papers without further action? Without this information, it is not clear how or even if Dietrich enacted agency.

Koepnick then shifts the discussion to a common strategy through which the female star is studied: an extreme focus on one body part; in this case, her face. He argues:

I suggest that Dietrich's facial appearance not only urges the viewer to question conventional notions of acting and thespian skill. More important, this face asks us to unravel the very trope of authenticity that, in so many ways, informed the Hollywood cult of stardom at the time as much as the avant-garde's emphasis on authorship and aesthetic self-realization. . . . Dietrich's face was a face without qualities; a site at which human and apparatical aspects, the corporeal and the technical, entertained symbiotic relationships. To read her face either as a sign of subjective expressiveness or as an auteur's text and language misses the point. For Dietrich's face invited her viewers to brush aside the whole conceptual matrix according to which critics and scholars had come and continue to evaluate the appearance of actors and images on screen, concepts such as authorship, expressiveness, authenticity, and intentional meaning. Instead of emphasizing the notion of the artist and star as a charismatic

demiurge, as the sole creator and proprietor of works, Dietrich's face reveals the material reality and excessive circulation of signs. (46)

Although Koepnick discusses how Dietrich worked to encourage a particular framing of her face through her performance in *Song of Songs* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933), his key focus on her face as an object of modernism, an icon separate from the actress herself and her performance and agency. He writes "Dietrich's face was a copy without original, a sign without a referent, pure surface without depth. . . . In its fluidity and technological hybridity, Dietrich's face encourages us to deface dominant notions of work and ownership" (53). Through its fetishisation of Dietrich's face, her labour is erased and with it, considerations of her agency.

Due to limitations in time and space, this literature review has concentrated on research that directly relates to the topics that are the focus of this thesis; namely, material relating to white, English-speaking female stars in classical Hollywood. However, there is a rich body of research that extends beyond these parameters. In *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only: Female Stardom and Cinema 1930s–1950s*, *Female Stars of British Cinema: The Woman in Question* and *The French Screen Goddess: Film Stardom and the Modern Woman in 1930s France*, Neepa Majumdar, Melanie Williams and Jonathan Driskell examine female stardom in India, Britain and France, respectively. Shifting the focus to an individual star within a national context, Irene González-López and Michael Smith's edited volume *Tanaka Kinuyo: Nation, Stardom and Female Subjectivity* is a rare English-language study of a non-English speaking female star and director. Work such as Diane Negra's *Off-white Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* and Priscilla Peña Ovalle's *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* place the focus on race and female stardom within Hollywood, while in *Creating Carmen Miranda: Race, Camp and Transnational Stardom*, Kathryn Bishop-Sanchez picks up many of these threads raised by Negra and Ovalle in relation to Carmen Miranda and explores these both within Hollywood and the other national cinemas implicated in Miranda's stardom. These works demonstrate the richness of the field of study of the female star beyond the narrow confines of this thesis.

As this brief review of literature on female film stars during the classical Hollywood era demonstrates, much of the work on female stars primarily focuses on the star as image, following a Dyerian model of analysis that considers the star as discursively produced. The studies of individual female stars tend to identify the key meanings associated with each star

at specific historical moments, identifying how and why these meanings change over time. While much of the research conducted is valuable and productive, it replicates the tendency from within film studies more broadly to deny the subjectivity of the female actor, objectifying her image and considering her in terms of what she means to others. Yet, as I outlined in the previous section, women – in particular female stars – were not only a vital part of Hollywood, from its inception through its classical years, but also consistently demonstrated particular kinds of agency within the film industry. Research that concentrates primarily on the star as image disregards other important aspects of female stardom. As Emily Carman notes, work that is focused on the cultural image of stars tends to “eschew issues of contract labor – in particular, freelancing – and how a star’s individual agency impacted her career and public persona,” unless they are talking about a star’s unsuccessful attempts to get out of their seven-year standard contracts (7). It is therefore urgent to consider the agency of female stars to address a clear gap in the current research in this area.

Recent work has made important contributions to understandings of the agency of female stars. In *Independent Stardom: Freelance Women and the Hollywood Studio System*, Emily Carman identifies what she describes as “the overlooked phenomenon of independent stardom” (5). Through extensive archival research, Carman tracks the presence of a number of freelance stars in the 1930s who worked without signing a long-term option contract with a single studio. Instead, they signed short-term contracts with multiple studios, using the contract to include terms that were favourable for the star, such as story and co-star approval and negotiating percentage deals rather than receiving a flat-rate fee, thus allowing the actress to benefit from the success of the films in which she starred. Through doing this, they were able to not only negotiate better salaries but also to garner more control over their career than actresses on long-term contracts (3). Carman describes these freelance stars as follows:

These were business-savvy women who challenged the hierarchical and paternalistic structure of the film industry. They took a proactive role in shaping their careers through their freelance labor practices, thereby dynamically participating in what Thomas Schatz has called (quoting André Bazin) the “genius” of the studio system: its fusion of art, human labor, and commerce on a massive scale. What is particularly striking about these female stars, however, is that they worked independently during a time when studio heads and producers presumably controlled and manipulated stardom as part of their oligopolistic business practices. (4)

Independent freelance stardom provided certain female stars of the 1930s with greater control of their on-screen image than non-independent stars. However, it also gave them the opportunity to take control of their off-screen images, for example through advertising campaigns and studio publicity, in a way that was not possible when contracted to a major studio. Therefore, Carman argues that, “In this way, they effectively became architects of their images by correlating their contractual agency with their creative-image commodity” (10). Through exercising their agency, these independent female stars were able to shape their careers in ways that are not acknowledged in research that considers them primarily as images.

Carman coins the phrase “professional agency” to describe how stars used the legal terms of their labour and their unique creative public personae (their celebrity images) to attain increased professional visibility in the Hollywood film industry. She uses multifaceted archival research to determine how individual stars enacted professional agency, examining material including studio contracts and legal documents, newspapers, fan magazines and industry trade papers. Carman’s research and methodological approach is an important intervention into the field of star studies. By recognising the agency of individual stars, Carman’s work highlights the extent to which some female stars were able to capitalise on the unique opportunities provided by Hollywood in the 1930s, a finding that upsets the “conventional narratives of the Hollywood studio system, which depict film stars as studio property and de facto indentured servants” (2). Studying the phenomenon of female independent stardom in pre-World War II Hollywood allows scholars to construct “an alternative experience of Hollywood,” particularly in relation to gender and labour conditions (3).

In *Independent Stardom*, Carman illustrates some of the different forms independent stardom took for different actors. She notes that independent freelance stardom was not of benefit to all female stars. Some, like Miriam Hopkins, not only lost bargaining power when their box-office appeal dropped, without a studio invested in their career they were overlooked for roles in favour of contracted stars. Others, particularly non-white actors such as Anna May Wong, had no options but to work freelance, as Hollywood’s discriminatory business practices meant they were not offered long-term contracts. Without the option of a long-term contract, freelancing represented their sole option for steady employment. Other stars, like Claudette Colbert, were semi-independent, signing deals which committed them to one studio primarily but allowed them to work on films for other studios a certain number of times per year.

Although this is not the stated aim of the book, through her extensive study, Carman provides us with examples of individual women who were not independent freelancers who attempted to parlay their popularity and on-screen success to improve their careers, with varying degrees of success. Carman notes the ability of female stars to improve their terms while under contract. Katharine Hepburn, for example, was able to use her increasing popularity to negotiate with RKO for a percentage of the profit of her films in addition to her weekly salary as well as regular increases in her salary (62–63).<sup>13</sup> After achieving “superstardom” at Columbia in the 1940s, Rita Hayworth was able to bargain for greater creative control and input into her film’s productions. She created her own production company, the Beckworth Corporation, in 1947 (the name of the company combining her own name with that of her daughter, Rebecca), which gave her a share of the distribution profits of her Columbia films, script approval and allowed her to expand her role from singer/actress to choreographer (87). Both of these stars navigated the specific industrial conditions in different ways to further their careers. Thus, it is possible to extend the idea of professional agency from just independent freelance stars to other female stars working in classical Hollywood.

In this section, I have mapped out some of the key areas of focus in the study of female stars. This discussion demonstrates there are a number of valuable and productive ways to approach this area of research. Female stars can be considered as a tool of historical analysis, allowing for the identification of different social types, providing a window into the social codes of feminine identity and behaviour of a particular time. The prominence and popularity of a female star always exists in relation to dominant discourses of gender but scholars have charted how, in specific cases, professional success of the female star contrasted with representations of ideal femininity and romance to expose contradictions. Additionally, research uses female stars to productively consider race and gender outside the boundaries of white, English-speaking Hollywood stardom. This type of study utilises the star as text following a traditional Dyerian approach, considering the star as an image constructed from on- and off-screen representations. However, as Carman convincingly demonstrates, the actions of female stars also had an impact on the construction of their star image. Through

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<sup>13</sup> However, as Carman notes, Hepburn’s films at RKO did not earn a big enough profit for her to make any money from her negotiated percentage deals. By 1938, Hepburn’s declining popularity led RKO and Hepburn to mutually terminate their agreement, with Hepburn repaying all advances paid in anticipation of future profits (62–63).

actions like contract negotiations, stars were able to influence their roles and the way their image circulated in promotion and advertising; in short, they utilised their star power to enact agency. This raises the question of how best, then, to include considerations of agency into existing understandings of the star image to most productively understand and appreciate female stars in classical Hollywood. In the following section, I propose an approach to female stars' agency that builds on existing work while introducing a unique understanding of the subjectivity of female stars.

## Subjectivity and the Female Star

In the previous sections, I outlined the major approaches within the discipline of star studies and reviewed the existing work on female stardom. This review identified the gaps and indicated there is more work to be done in this field to fully understand the figure of the female star, particularly concerning the way female stars functioned through systems of labour and within specific social and cultural historical junctures. I therefore propose a new approach to the study of the female star, one that considers what we know about multiple facets of the star's subjectivity, in a way that accounts for but is not limited to the star image. In doing so, I build on other existing investigations of the subjectivity of actors and stars, synthesising them with the specific historical and gendered contexts of my study.

In *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors' Labor*, Danae Clark takes a cultural studies approach to the study of stars. For Clark, Dyerian star studies is too focused on the image, considering the star as a text and then looking at the possible effect that this star image might have on spectators. She calls for a cultural studies approach to stardom that considers the star as a social subject who struggles within the film industry's sphere of productive practices, the relations of power that constitute subjects economically, politically and discursively (xi).

For Clark, the answer is to consider actors' subjectivity through the notion of labour power differences. She thus proposes a model that rearticulates the theoretical and historical relations between actors' labour and subjectivity by

introduc[ing] the notion of struggle into the scene of actors' labor, necessitating not only an investigation of the individual and collective political conflicts that actors

have encountered within the Hollywood production system, but the fragmented and fought-over position of the actor as a subject of film labor and film representation. (3)

She argues that the problem with star studies is that it examines the star system with a focus on stars rather than recognising that the star system refers to “the institutional hierarchy established to regulate and control *all* actors” (emphasis in original 5) with stars as a privileged class within the division of actors’ labour. She thus incorporates the industrial factors of stardom by examining the connections of individual stars to the working conditions of the film studios during the period of classical Hollywood and the resultant labour–management relations.

Clark argues that within star studies, when subjectivity is discussed it is in relation to the spectator, not the actor. She writes that:

within film studies, theories of subjectivity are essentially theories of *spectatorship*. . . . Thus, while the actor’s body—or, more specifically, the actor’s labor—allows for the production of images, the spectator’s relation to or identification with these images is what is thought to begin the process of subjectivity in the cinema. (emphasis in original 10)

She states that this model means that theories of spectatorship contribute to “the scholarly oppression of film workers, rendering their struggles as political and social subjects invisible.” Establishing a division between “star image” and “real person” creates the impression that “a fully formed, preconstituted subject exists somewhere behind the image, providing a stable signified for the image signifier” (11). Similarly, the idea of a “star persona” that exists between the real historical person of the star and the parts played by that actor in individual films does not address this issue of subjectivity. Clark argues that what she describes as the “triple articulation ([of] person, persona, parts)” is inadequate, creating unnecessary categorical divisions (11). Instead, she argues that “both actors and spectators must be viewed as heterogenous subjects who are caught up in a continual process of cultural resistance, pleasure, and negotiation” (11). Clark therefore proposes that the “actor as worker” be considered in formulating the actor’s subject position, understanding the actor as worker as the “site of intersecting discourses involving the sale of one’s labor power to the cinematic institution, the negotiation of that power in terms of work performance and image

construction, and the embodiment of the one's image (on-screen and off-screen) as it becomes circulated in filmic and extrafilmic discourse" (12).

Clark's work provides us with the tools to understand the actor as a historical subject who actively negotiates the economic, political and ideological discourses of identity. However, the focus of her study is on actors as a collective rather than individual actors and her analysis is not concerned with the detail of specific stars. As she notes, she often ends up "describing *modes* of subjectivity of any given actor (as social subject)" (italics in original 16), attributing this tendency to the lack of information on specific actors/stars in relation to specific events. However, her conception of the "actor as worker" is useful in the study of individual stars because, as noted by Adrienne McLean in *Being Rita Hayworth: Labor, Identity, and Hollywood Stardom*, it demonstrates that labour–power differences create a geography that can be mapped productively to breach the gap between "image" and "real person": it is a method through which a star's subjectivity can be understood.

McLean builds on Clark's theorisations of the actors as a collective in relation to the study of an individual star. To do this, she references Clark's positioning of the actor as worker operating as a site of intersecting discourses. She explains:

To write about a historical movie star's subjectivity, then, will mean always, if not only, to seek and to consider the discursive signs that at once indicate and produce struggles between being and doing, between working at making films and working at having a private life, between defining oneself and being defined by others. (*Being Rita Hayworth* 3)

McLean notes that Clark focuses on the labour of acting in relation to films. However, she argues that for Rita Hayworth, as for all female stars, work performance included domestic labour too, requiring "the ability to perform successfully as a wife and a mother as well as a film character or glamour figure" (3). Through this, McLean incorporates gender onto the mapped geography through which subjectivity can be established; therefore, she is able to further explore Hayworth's constructed star image, studying "how her subjectivity, as worker and as woman, and the commercial discourses in which it is produced and located interact with Hollywood's own labor power differences and with the social tensions and concerns of the culture at large" (3). As labourers within Hollywood, female stars clearly worked as movie actors. Yet, as McLean notes, any analysis that is restricted to just stars as labourers is

limited, particularly for female stars, whose stardom is informed by gendered discourses.

Female stars in classical Hollywood negotiated particular cultural pressures and situations that must also be considered in any star study. Additionally, it is not possible to fully understand a star without including considerations of how their star image circulated and the discursive nature of their stardom. Yet, to consider agency in this framework requires an understanding of how the historical subject navigated Hollywood labour practices and the myriad social and cultural tensions and concerns. Therefore, in addition to Clark's understanding of the star as worker and McLean's further exploration of star as worker and woman, a conception of the historical subject must also be included; an understanding that does not claim to be the "true" person of the star but another factor in the mapping of the discursive field of star subjectivity. I therefore propose a methodology that considers the subjectivity of actors as historical subjects alongside and inclusive of the components of star image outlined by Dyer, noting their agency and practices of negotiation. Such an approach shows that there is much we can learn about how female stars navigated the fame, success and the gendered constraints of the Hollywood system by looking to the archives and a range of sources that convey the star not only as an image but also as a professional and a historical subject. This knowledge is crucial for a nuanced approach to researching the production of female stardom in the postwar decades.

## **Finding the Female Star Subject: Evaluating the Sources**

This research approach draws from different sources to examine the female star, utilising a range of data to locate the female star subject and the practices of negotiation they employed within classical Hollywood. To do this, this thesis utilises a multilayered archival approach, incorporating the study of fan magazines, trade papers, studio documents and personal correspondence, among other archival resources. This is not a unique approach. These sources are commonly utilised in star studies; for example, in her book-length study of Carole Lombard, *Becoming Carole Lombard: Stardom, Comedy, and Legacy*, Olympia Kiriakou notes the range of archival research incorporated in her methodology included trade papers, newspapers, studio contracts and fan magazines (7). Many star studies, particularly those of stars from classical Hollywood, tend to draw from the similar sources: film archives at libraries, particularly the Margaret Herrick Library (MHL) at the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, and the online database the Media History Digital Library (MHDL). Additionally, the MHDL's digitisation of a broad range of books and magazines

relating to the histories of film have made new materials available to film scholars all over the world, contributing to a growth in the use of fan magazines in star studies in particular. However, while the sources themselves are frequently (and rightly) interrogated – in the previously referenced study, Kiriakou notes the need to critically engage with fan magazines given their history and role in cultivating stardom in the 1930s (7) – little attention is paid to the archives themselves or the discipline or practice of archival study. As Schwartz and Cook state, “the archives” and “archival study” are frequently mentioned without any further exploration of “archives as real institutions, as a real profession (the second oldest!), and as a real discipline with its own set of theories, methodologies, and practices” (2). This lack of attention is an issue because archives are not a neutral source of information – they play a key role in shaping social memory; that is, how the present understands the past. Understanding and addressing the gendered construction of the archive is vital in order to identify the agency of female stars.

The first step in incorporating understandings of archival study and practice into my research methodology is exploring the concept of the archive. Michelle Caswell notes that there is a difference between how humanities scholars and archival studies scholars view the archive. Archival studies scholars understand “the archives” are not just one place; rather, the term describes the collections of records, the places where they are physically located, the institutions that steward them and the processes that designate them “archival” (Caswell).<sup>14</sup> Humanities scholars, in contrast, tend to view archives differently, as a collection, physical or otherwise, of ideas and information. This is particularly clear in recent feminist film theory which has explicitly referred to the archive. For example, the introduction to the 2010 edited volume *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* does not mention any physical archives or discuss archival practices or theory; instead, editor Vicki Callahan describes the collection of essays that make up the book as “a kind of extended conversation about the role of feminism *today*, as both a disciplinary tool and a larger cultural critique” (italics in original 4). In 2006–7, *Camera Obscura* ran a series called “Archive of the Future,” which included essays that considered the state of feminist film studies (Callahan n1 6). In this context, it is pertinent to ask, as Maryanne Dever does, “What does feminist archival research look like in an era when the metaphor of the archive is invoked to cover almost any kind of memory,

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<sup>14</sup> In recognition of the multiple functions of the archives, archival studies uses the plural singular form – “an archives” (Caswell para 3).

collection or accumulation?” (1). It is vital, therefore, that feminist scholars clarify and define in what way they are using the terms “archives” and “archival.”

The lack of attention paid to the archive as a concept extends to a lack of acknowledgement and/or understanding of archival practices. Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook note that archival professional literature is rarely cited by non-archivists writing on “the archive” (2), while Dever similarly remarks that few humanities scholars have formal training in archival practice and so tend to discount the critical role of archivists in shaping the collections with which they are concerned (2). This oversight highlights a key gap in star studies methodologies as it means that the archives are not being considered critically. As Schwartz and Cook remark, “scholars us[e] archives without realizing the heavy layers of intervention and meaning coded into the records by their creators and by archivists long before any box is opened in the research room” (6). Given the importance of archival research to the historical project of star studies, this is a clear oversight in current star studies work that should be addressed. It is important to acknowledge how research and knowledge is influenced by the archives and archival practices. “The archives” is not a neutral place – archives are socially constructed institutions that produce knowledge about the past and shape our notions of history, identity and memory. Feminist researchers in particular must recognise that archives are “sites of power and privilege that have long been implicated in acts of violence and erasure” (Dever 1). Caswell highlights that even the erasure of the critical role of archivists by humanities researchers has feminist implications, writing, “Even those whose work focuses on gender and class have been blind to the intellectual contributions and labor of a field that has been construed as predominantly female, professional (that is, not academic), and service-oriented, and as such, unworthy of engagement” (Caswell). Studies of stars, particularly studies like this one in which gender is a key component of analysis, must therefore reckon with the gendered nature of the archives.

It is important that star studies researchers who are working in the archives acknowledge and recognise that archives are social constructs. Knowledge emanates from and is produced within a specific situationality and archives are knowledge producers that are constituted by political, social and cultural knowledge regimes (Jong and Koevoets 3). Understanding archives as producers of knowledge and places of social memory allows researchers to address the gendered nature of the archives. Feminist work increasingly understands archives themselves as “figured” – that is, enmeshed in histories, politics and power structures that must be accounted for before any investigation of individual collections can proceed (Dever

2). Curators make choices in what they include in the archives based on what they believe is worth collecting and preserving. In the process, they privilege certain voices over others. Therefore, archives as records “wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies” (Schwartz and Cook 2). Certain subjects have been (and still are) deemed as more historically important and therefore more worthy of preserving within the archives. Unsurprisingly, these are rarely the female subjects – since their very origins in the ancient world, archives have systemically excluded records about or by women from their holdings and, as institutions, have been willing agents in the creation of patriarchy by supporting those in power against the marginalised (Schwartz and Cook 16). Within this, the principles and strategies that archives adopt and the activities they undertake – like choosing what is archived and what is destroyed – fundamentally influence the composition and character of archival holdings and thus of social memory. Acknowledging these underlying cultural frameworks are central to understanding the nature of archives as institutions and as places of social memory.

Locating women in the archive is vital because of the role archives play in social memory. The term “social memory” reflects the rationale of popular memory of the past – how society remembers what happened and why and to whom. The archives are an important part of social memory. Jong and Koevoets describe them as “memory institutions,” which, because of their role in both collecting and preserving the cultural and intellectual record and making this information accessible and approachable, are “interwoven into the civic fabric of the collective identity of communities, cities and nations” (4). Archivists appraise material, deciding what makes something have value and be worth preserving and remembering. In doing so, archivists are “deciding what is remembered and what is forgotten, who in society is visible and who remains visible, who has a voice and who does not” (Cook 169). If this memory institution collects and preserves only certain records of certain subjects, if archives are created that focus on male voices and silence women’s, and if this bias is not acknowledged and dealt with, then the social memory constructed from the archive provides misleading and inaccurate view of the past. The bias is reproduced in the work that arises from research in these archives, erasing women from any history written. This is a particular issues for star studies, whose multidisciplinary nature means that scholars without experience in historical or archival practice engage in historical and archival studies.

This project is located firmly within a feminist historical approach that aims to remedy the silences of the past, revising assumptions about women's experience in classical Hollywood that are still pervasive in historical narratives today. I borrow Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight's description of this work: "As a feminist enterprise, women's film history has an investment in the careers, life stories, and assumed struggles of women who, through the decades and across the world, have staked a claim on the making, circulation and reception of films" (4). I situate my research within the continuously growing body of work in film studies that seeks to recognise and reacknowledge the presence and contribution of women in film history. My work addresses a gap in the current research by developing an approach that builds on existing star studies frameworks by incorporating strategies from the study of women's history and archival science that allows star studies to include considerations of the star as a historical subject. By interrogating the concept of archival research and looking at both the individual archives and scholars' relationships to them, star studies as a discipline can establish a better understanding of how archival practices (such as what is archived and access to the archives) influence our conception of both individual stars and stardom as a system. This is particularly important to female stars, who are visible within film history but underrepresented in the archives and frequently represented in film histories as without agency. Specifically, archival and historical practices are incorporated into star studies methodologies in this research.

### **Film Archives and Special Collections**

Given the ongoing and persistent lack of women in the archives, feminist film scholars have developed different methodologies to "trace shapes described primarily by absence" (Stamp "Feminist Media Historiography and the Work Ahead"). Citing Jon Lewis and Eric Smoodin, Shelley Stamp writes of the need to "look past the screen"; to move film scholarship beyond representations of female characters on-screen or the spectator-screen binary "into a world of culture, a world where women circulate, have agency, and make meaning." For example, Shelley cites the broad range of writing for and about the cinema that was published in the 1910s and '20s in fan and ladies magazines to demonstrate that women were an essential component of America's evolving movie culture. In *Never Done*, Erin Hill uncovers the vital but previously hidden labour of women workers in classical Hollywood through using personnel files, archival photographs and the floor plans of movie studios to demonstrate that women were working throughout all of early and classical Hollywood – just not in the type of

roles historians recorded. A key aim of this work (and much of women's history) is to make visible the spaces and practices that have traditionally remained invisible and a necessary component of that is to write women back into the histories from which they have been lost and forgotten.<sup>15</sup> By reinstating women in film historiography, research like this can lead us to change our basic understanding of what film history is and women's place within it.

The female film stars of classical Hollywood sit uncomfortably with the desire to make visible the invisible just because, simply, they were the most visible part of classical Hollywood. They adorned the covers of fan magazines far more frequently than their male counterparts, also dominating the coverage within the magazines. Even the most determined historian could not write out the presence of the highest paid and most frequently reported-on Hollywood cohort. However, this prominence is not reflected in film history. There are a number of reasons for this. As Carman notes, while the Hollywood studio system offered women "tremendous" professional opportunities, these are frequently disregarded due to common understandings of the star system that position the stars as serfs at the mercy of the studios, thus denying stars the power of their labour and agency (3). Additionally, the tendency of star studies to separate the star from their image, as discussed elsewhere in this chapter, means that issues of labour, such as how stars use contracts to control aspects of their careers their careers, are not considered. There is an additional factor that contributes to the invisibility of female stars as agents: the representation of women in the most commonly used film archives.

Women's historians have clearly established that women are underrepresented in archives. Joan Wallach Scott points out the extensive research that demonstrates that women were not inactive or absent from events that made history, but that they have been systematically left out of the official record (5). The absence of women in the film archives, given the archives' role as a knowledge producer, is a key contributor to this lack. Regarding the difficulties of locating women in film archives, particularly in relation to early cinema, Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight note, "Many women have left few historical traces, their roles in production or film culture obscured by more publicly visible or self-promotional male partners or concealed behind collective or collaborative practices" (4). Additionally, Eva Mosely notes

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<sup>15</sup> I borrow the phrase "lost and forgotten" from Shelley Stamp's essay "Feminist Media Historiography and the Work Ahead."

that the neglect of women in the archives does not only mean that little or no space has been given to women in historical writings, but also meant little or no space given to the personal papers of women in manuscript repositories and little or no effort to acquire these materials (215). Again, here the archivists and the archives shape present understandings of history: the omission women from accounts of the past “has distorted the way we view the past; indeed it warps history by making it seem as though only men have participated in events thought worthy of preservation and by misrepresenting what actually happened” (Kleinberg ix). If the special collections of some of the most frequently used archives disproportionately contain the records of and about men, then men will dominate social memory and, in this case, film history.

Given these issues with women’s placement within the archives, it is important to outline how this research addresses these problems. Two physical archives were visited as part of this research: the Louis. B. Mayer Library at the American Film Institute (AFI) and the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), both in Los Angeles, California. The data collection was conducted in February and March 2016.<sup>16</sup> The Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is based in Beverly Hills, California. Established to assist the aims of the AMPAS’ mission to advance the arts and sciences of motion pictures soon after the founding of AMPAS in 1927, the library began building a comprehensive research and reference collection of film-related paper materials and is now one of the world’s most extensive and comprehensive film research and reference libraries, collecting materials that document film as an art form and an industry. Collected material includes production files, scripts, correspondence, contracts and manuscripts. Open to the public free of charge,

the Herrick Library is dedicated to maintaining these collections of valuable primary source materials, ensuring their preservation and availability for the future, properly

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<sup>16</sup> I did intend to visit the Warner Bros. archive held by the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. As the only collection containing the production, distribution and exhibition records of a classical era studio open to researchers and as the home studio of one of the actresses I am using as a case study, the Warner Bros. archive is an invaluable resource. However, the archive was closed during the time of my visit to Los Angeles and did not respond to any emails or phone calls in the following twelve months.

housing and storing them in a safe and secure environment, to providing detailed and accurate inventories, and fully processing and cataloging these rare and historical items to facilitate their use by scholars, researchers, and students. (Chuck 42)

Of particular use for the study of stars are the special collections, which are “rich in unique material documenting individuals and organizations that have figured prominently in the history of motion pictures” (Chuck 41). The special collections include personal correspondence, production files, manuscripts, posters, contracts and scrapbooks, all valuable resources in the examination of the practices of negotiation employed by particular individuals working with Hollywood.

The Louis B. Mayer Library is located at the AFI Conservatory, a film school, in the Hollywood Hills in Los Angeles. Founded in 1969, the Louis B. Mayer Library is “dedicated to supporting AFI Conservatory studies by offering resources that complement the curriculum and promote scholarship” (“Louis B. Mayer Library”). In addition to providing support for students of the AFI Conservatory, the Mayer Library also hosts the AFI Archive, which “collects and preserves the heritage of the American Film Institute, filmmakers and the art of motion pictures” (“AFI Archive”). The Archive contains the papers of prominent motion picture industry figures as well as oral history interviews, audio and video recordings and manuscript and photo collections. The AFI Archive is open to researchers by appointment only, as its primary function is as a film school library rather than a research archive.

The process of searching differed slightly between these two libraries. The Margaret Herrick Library’s extensive collection is fully catalogued online, so researchers must locate the materials they wish to see in advance. The special collections staff will then arrange to have the materials ready for the researcher on date(s) agreed to in advance. To access materials from the Louis B. Mayer Library, researchers must send the topics/keywords they are interested in to the curator, who then searches for special collections for any relevant materials, which are made available for the researcher on date(s) agreed to in advance. As with most/all archival research, both of the methods required the researcher to sort through large amounts of material to find relevant information. The meticulous cataloguing at the Margaret Herrick Library means every single reference to a star in the special collections is brought up in the searches. At the Louis B. Mayer Library, in contrast, the cataloguing is

more broad and rudimentary, and I found mentions of my search terms in the material that the curator had not noted.

I am drawing attention to the process of searching the archives because this research (and all research that utilises archival research) is strongly influenced by the archives themselves.

Remembering the past through historical research in archives does not simply consist of the retrieval of stored information but understanding the conditions and circumstances of the preservation of material and what is not preserved. What is held in the archives – the choice of which records to obtain, store and preserve – influences the past that the archives contain and represent and therefore the histories that researchers using those archives can tell.

Archives thus sit at the intersection of past, present and future – “these spaces are the loci of power of the present to control what the future will know about the past” (Schwartz and Cook 13). Hill has noted the materials stored in studio archives were usually preserved because they could help tell the story of an important actor, writer, director or producer, roles that were rarely held by women during Hollywood’s classical era. (10). This tendency extends from the studio archive to the film library archive and is present in the special collections of both the Margaret Herrick and the Louis B. Mayer libraries. Only two of the 30 manuscript collections held at the Louis B. Mayer archives are those of women and, while this gender balance in the special collections held by the Margaret Herrick Library is better, there are still more personal collections of men than of women. In these libraries’ special collection, then, arises the odd situation where the most visible part of Hollywood in the 1930s and ‘40s lacks visibility in the archival material sources with which current-day film histories are written.

Personal records, such as the collections of papers held by the aforementioned libraries, can provide invaluable evidence of the agentic behaviour of individuals. However, if the personal papers stored in a particular repository reflect the place of men in a particular institutional framework, how, then, to determine female agency? In the absence of the personal collections of individual actors, researchers must excavate the records that are present to fill in the gaps. Honor R. Sachs argues that women’s historians must “read against the grain” to tease out hidden stories; to fill in the silences that occur when women’s voices are unrepresented. This approach “requires a certain level of suspicion” to “dig deeply into the archives and revive elusive evidence” (651). For example, one strategy employed at the Margaret Herrick Library was to follow up each mention of a star’s name in the special collections, regardless of the location of the mention. This uncovered evidence of stars’ agency; for example, the Alfred Hitchcock Collection contained a handwritten letter from

Joan Fontaine to Hitchcock asking for the role of Lina in *Before the Fact*, a role for which she eventually won an Academy Award (the film was released under the name *Suspicion* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941)) (“Dear Hitch”). At the Louis B. Mayer Library, an invaluable resource was the Charles Feldman papers. Charles Feldman was an actor manager who represented all three of the stars studied in this thesis. Although the Charles Feldman papers do not contain the actual writing of the star, the papers contained insightful information, such as the correspondence between Feldman and representatives from 20th Century-Fox negotiating conditions for employing Olivia de Havilland on *My Cousin Rachel* (Henry Koster, 1952). Through reading against the grain, the gender bias present within archives generally and film archives specifically can not only be acknowledged but also addressed.

### **Fan Magazines**

In contrast to the archival search, which involved uncovering information about female stars buried within archives, female stars were a central component of fan magazines. They adorned the covers of the fan magazines and the pages within are filled with information on the stars, such as profiles, advertisements, advice on cooking and fashion and glamour shots. However, Olympia Kiriakou notes that although fan magazines can be considered as “the cultural, ideological, and material arbiters of stardom,” their use as a source requires critical engagement (17). Therefore, I will now briefly discuss fan magazines in relation to this research.

Fan magazines were glossy magazines that were published, usually monthly, that focused on the lives and secrets of the stars. Slide describes a fan magazine as “fundamentally a film- and entertainment-related periodical aimed at a general fan, an average member of the moviegoing public who more often than not was female” (*Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine* 11). The first fan magazine was *Motion Picture Story*, which began publication in 1911, quickly followed by more including *Silver Screen*, *Photoplay* and *Hollywood*. These magazines were incredibly popular and at the height of their popularity were read by millions of movie fans each month (Jeffers McDonald and Lanckman 2). Regular features of fan magazines included interviews with stars, full-page colour photographs or portraits of stars that could be removed and pinned up or framed, reviews of movies, gossip columns and letters to the editor. Fan magazines are therefore a rich source of information, particularly in relation to female stars, who were the subjects of the majority of this content.

Fan magazines occupied a unique position within the film industry. These magazines were an integral part of studio-era Hollywood and were the main way that information about Hollywood was disseminated to fans. Studios relied on fan magazines to be “a collective mouthpiece” for the film industry, promoting films and individual players, while the fan magazines relied on the studios for publicity photos and access to the stars and the filmmaking process (Slide *Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine* 7). Anthony Slide describes this practice as “an incestuous relationship built on trust and mutual necessity” (*Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine* 7), stating that by the mid 1930s, virtually all fan magazines submitted their stories to the studios for approval. As Slide colourfully observes, “The fan magazines and the studios fed off each other, and both had a healthy appetite” (*Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine* 73). Therefore, by examining the type of stories told about a star, fan magazines become a way of establishing the preferred meanings associated with a star persona. In general, these meanings were designed to support the kind of persona promoted within a star’s body of films. However, because fan magazines were still commercial enterprises which needed people to buy *their* magazine (rather than the many other alternatives that were available) and because their content was driven by reader interest, they also work as a site through which conflicting discourses can be observed, particularly in relation to broader cultural concerns such as relating to female stars, who served as focal points for debates about women’s role in the workforce and as wives and mothers.

In “The Perils of Pleasure: Fan Magazine Discourse as Woman’s Commodified Culture in the 1920s,” Gaylyn Studlar uses the fan magazines of the 1920s to examine how women were addressed within broader social and cultural discourses by an industry that wanted to influence their view of motion pictures. Studlar argues that fan magazines worked as both a “woman’s magazine” and a supporting mechanism for the film industry. In fulfilling the distinct agendas of both of these functions, “fan magazines participated in discursive practices derived from women’s mass produced popular culture even as they extended beyond the concerns of marketing one film or studio into the wider arena of marketing stars” (277). The fan magazine, with its main address to women, was imbricated in the same circulation of discourse as women’s magazine, and therefore “continually compromised and equivocated in their discursive regulation of female sexual and social subjectivity” (277). The representation of marriage, romance and sex in fan magazines constantly negotiated narratives of liberation and repression, presenting marriage and romantic love as a choice that was enabling rather than constraining. Throughout the ‘20s, two patterns were repeated. Fan

magazines praised Hollywood's women writers, directors and stars. In the second, female stars either lauded or denounced the modern "new" woman. Both of these often opposing arguments were then able to be appropriated into the "more important imperative of encouraging the consumption of the star/commodity" (284). The film star becomes a vital component of the ideological address to women readers and fans and a key mechanism through which various types of subject positions were negotiated.

It is always important to remember that, despite the claims of fan magazines to provide a special insight into the truth of the star's lives, the value of fan magazines lies not in their ability to provide historical facts. Tamar Jeffers McDonald and Lies Lanckman state that as part of their commercial imperative, fan magazines sold individual stars, movies, advertisements and, underlying this, the ideas of stardom, cinema and consumption. Because of this, they argue that fan magazines are useful "not [for] their unreliable accounts of biographical facts and unknowable emotions, but *discourse*" (3). By treating fan magazines "not as sources of spurious information, but instead as conduits of historical assumptions," it is possible to illustrate

cinema's reliance of performer appeal, revealing how individual stars were manufactured and marketed. This reliance, then, can help us as researchers unmask contemporaneous assumptions about the relationship between fan and star, performer and viewer—politically important assumptions, particularly when one considers the specific gender and class identities of the magazines' readership. (3)

Further, as noted by Studlar, fan magazine's address to female readers was complicated by their positioning as drawing on the same subjects as women's magazine while operating with the aim of selling the movie industry (277). Situated at the intersection of the commercial interests of the magazines, the aims of studios to promote and manage their products and responding to the interests of fans, fan magazines contain varied and frequently contradictory discourse in relation to individual stars and broader cultural concerns, providing a rich source of analysis for star studies scholars. Fan magazine discourse is an integral source of information concerning how industrialised studio mechanisms and publicity mediation worked to produce and sustain cohesive star figures and allows researchers to track how these stars and ideals of womanhood and femininity changed over time.

However, star studies research using fan magazines should acknowledge the archival processes through which scholars access the magazines. Fan magazines are an ephemeral product, designed to be thrown out each month rather than stored. Their physical form (i.e., the paper they are printed on) disintegrates over time and holdings of fan magazines in archives are often limited and/or incomplete. This results in what Adrienne McLean describes as “problems of access, availability and evidence that surround the fan magazine as an object of study and historical investigation” (“‘New Films in Story Form’: Movie Story Magazines and Spectatorship” 7). Eric Hoyt finds that because of issues of access, film studies and film history has tended to use the same magazines over and over again – “a film studies trade and fan magazine canon” – disregarding a larger pool of publications in favour of those which dominate holdings, for example, *Photoplay* for fan magazines and *Variety* for industry papers, as these titles were the most likely ones to be available on microfiche or in physical forms in predigital times (148). This is exacerbated for researchers working outside of the United States, where Hollywood fan magazines had to be imported and archives have smaller or no holdings of this type of material.

Many issues of access were addressed with the introduction of the Media History Digital Library, a nonprofit initiative that digitises books and magazines relating to the histories of film, broadcasting and recorded sound (Hoyt 148). This has made a huge contribution to scholars of classical Hollywood, as it provides invaluable access to a number of titles free of charge via the internet. In addition to making available a broad database of archival material to scholars, the Media History Digital Library’s Lantern function allows for the searching of terms (such as the name of a star or movie) across multiple years and journals, bringing up individual pages without the researcher having to scroll through the rest of the fan magazine or trade journal. While the Media History Digital Library has opened up access to scholars all around the world, it does still have limitations. In relation to fan magazines, for example, it still features only a selection of the many titles that were being published in the 1930s and ‘40s<sup>17</sup> and, of the texts that are available, some runs are limited or incomplete or, as a reminder that the readers of fan magazines actively engaged with these texts, photographs of stars cut out. So, while researchers have access to a much larger range of titles, it is important

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<sup>17</sup> Eric Hoyt reports that there were at least 547 uniquely titled periodical publications classified as “pertaining to motion pictures, radio, television, or theatrical amusements” between 1900 and 1929 and 1930 to 1960 (149).

to remember that it is not exhaustive and the fan magazine discourse identified in this research is not representative of all titles.

A second issue relates the practice of using digital searches such as those provided by Lantern. While this type of digital searching aids the researcher by sorting through vast amounts of material in a fraction of the time it would take manually, it does have drawbacks. Of his work with using digitised newspapers to study the distribution, exhibition and reception of movies and movie stars in the mid-1910s, Richard Abel writes, “The longer I gaze at this and other newspaper pages, the more questions niggle at me: what lies beyond their borders or just offscreen?” (1). Hoyt et al. explain this further:

If we lack an interpretive context for the articles, reviews and advertisements we cite, then our practice of historiography threatens to [be] . . . cherrypicking interesting clippings from the archive, but failing to situate them in relation to the rest of the publication and, more broadly, the industries and cultures the paper was part of (19).

If researchers just look at individual articles or mentions of stars or movies in isolation without placing them within the context of that issue of the fan magazine and/or with the fan magazine and film industry more generally, then the findings of the research will be limited. For example, in *Doris Day Confidential*, Jeffers McDonald highlights how fan magazines habitually frame material around the star, for example by creating a star trail through inserting many snippets throughout the magazine to lead the reader to a specific article (131). By just looking at the individual pages returned through a keyword search, this important context would be missed. Therefore, in order to address this, when using the Lantern database, I used the “read in context” function. This feature allows the researcher to digitally “open” the magazine at the page on which the searched keyword is situated. It is easy, therefore, to see the keyword in relation to the pages around it. Where possible, I would move through the pages of the fan magazine from the cover onwards. This allowed me to uncover valuable information that I would not have found otherwise, such as editorials on subject matter relating to but not naming the stars examined in this thesis.

### **Auto/biographical Texts**

In addition to archives and fan magazines, another commonly used source of information in the studies of individual stars are auto/biographical texts. This grouping includes star

memoirs, autobiographies and star biographies. In this thesis, I have used the term “auto/biographies” to include all forms of writing about a life. I discuss the use of auto/biographies as a source in more detail in the three chapters that follow but I will briefly identify some of the key insights of the genre here.

Auto/biographical texts offer valuable insights into the agency of female stars through providing readers with an insight into the self of the star as they wish to be presented. Exploring this idea further, Ruth Amossy argues that the autobiographies of movie stars are part of an “abundant production centered on the presentation of the self” (673). Although Amossy does not use the term “agency,” for her the star autobiography provides a way for the star to express themselves and be heard (albeit within the constraints of the autobiographical genre and the star system). She writes that the autobiographical form “allows the star to express herself freely as a unique individual” (676). However, she also argues that the star autobiography’s participation in social practice is masked because of its supposed revelation of a “true-to-life personality”: “it is because the *doing* is forgotten or underscored that the *being* is brought to the fore” (italics in original 675). She explains:

Talking about herself, a great Hollywood star is supposed to prove her commitment to sincerity and truthfulness; her revelations are meant to establish a privileged communication with her audience. They are like the gifts of the gods which serve no mercantile, utilitarian performance. . . . All the images imposed on her, all the conventional attitudes displayed in public give way to the secret feelings of the real person. (676)

Therefore, although the process of producing the autobiography – which Amossy argues is the presentation of one particular self – is masked, it still exists and affects the form that the final autobiography can take. The desire for a reader to find out about the real star also involves wanting to know about the glamorous star image as well. As Amossy states, “The reader who asks for the true story behind the glamorous image also insists on getting the latter as well. If he is eager to see the woman, it is because she is a Hollywood idol. He wants the dream factory manufactured object as well as the real, intimate person” (676). The star autobiography for Amossy thus serves a dual function: “It has to break the collective frozen image while at the same time preserving it, both denouncing and preserving the stereotype” (676). The star has the ability to tell her own story, to write her place in film history and draw attention to her labour, but only within the constraints imposed by her stardom and the

stereotype she embodies.

Female star auto/biographies also serve an important role in writing female workers into Hollywood history, ensuring that their contributions are not forgotten. In *Cupboards of Curiosity*, Amelie Hastie identifies a number of tropes common to autobiographies authored by female stars and directors: to set the record straight, offering a counterhistory that corrects institutionalised histories about the subject; the autobiographer as a self-conscious producer of the genre, commenting on the complex production of a life history; and the reproduction of a teleological narrative, tracing a directional path towards stardom (72–73). Hastie cites the memoirs of women such as Alice Guy-Blaché, who “had to write their own histories such because no one else was doing it . . . These histories were not simply records of their achievements as individuals. Rather, their writings incorporate their work and presence into the wider field of film history” (73–74). In terms of agency, therefore, female star autobiographies are important because they allow individual stars to record their own version of events, writing themselves into histories from which they were otherwise absent and redressing past imbalances. They also express how the stars’ lives were intertwined in the production of movies and of their image; that the spheres of public/private, on/off-screen, performance/self and work/home were not separate but mutually interrelated. These autobiographies make clear the labour of the star; in this, they differ from both biographies and the star system, the first which tend to undermine the agency of the star and the second which works to make the labour of the star invisible.

However, when considering star auto/biographies it is important to remember they are a commercial product. Julie Rak defines memoirs as “commodities that are manufactured for a market by an industry” (4). As commodities produced by an industry for profit, star auto/biographies must conform to the expectations and standards of both the publishing industry and the reading public. It is useful here to think of the auto/biographies of classical Hollywood film stars as a genre and, like any genre, these books can be grouped by similar themes and narrative trajectory: a description of childhood followed by a moment of discovery, then the scandals/moments that defined a star’s career, usually written in a temporally straightforward manner. Their framing as part of a generic tradition influences their marketing and reception: readers approach star auto/biographies with not just expectations of what an auto/biography should contain and the form it should take but also their foreknowledge of the particular star. Therefore, the presentation of the self found in auto/biographical texts – the “in their own words” privileged access to the star offered by the

autobiographical form, and the insight into who the star really was claimed by each star biography, must be understood within the constraints of a commercial publishing imperative.

## Conclusion

In this research, I propose a methodology that incorporates considerations of the subjectivity of female actors within the broader framework of star studies. Examining the particular historical and industrial conditions that led to the emergence of female stars allows for a unique feminist historiographical understanding of the classical Hollywood female star in order to address a gap in our knowledge of female stardom. Archival research forms the basis of my methodological approach, enabling a study of the female star herself within a disciplinary approach that evaluates the star as image. By understanding the female star as a historical subject with agency who employed practices of negotiation to succeed within a particular time period, this study of the female star incorporates and moves beyond established image-based approaches to extend current understandings of female stardom in classical Hollywood.

This thesis extends current work in star studies by offering an innovative methodology that brings together understandings of how stars signify drawn from the work of Richard Dyer with an exploration of the agency and negotiation of female stars, producing knowledge about how they were able to navigate the cultural and industrial conditions of their time to achieve success. This is also a crucially feminist approach, structured by in-depth case studies of three female stars: Olivia de Havilland, Joan Fontaine and Ava Gardner. By using this unique methodology, this research offers a comprehensive account of the female star subject and her social context, thus addressing a clear gap in the research. The following chapters, in Part II of the thesis, contain the case studies of these three stars.

**PART II:**

**FEMALE STARS IN CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD**

# Chapter Three: Olivia de Havilland, the Wolf in Lamb's Clothing

## Introduction

*Lamb bites wolf? It was rare in the 1940s that Jack L. Warner lost a fight. The public, in fact, thought him invincible. Least likely of all to bring Warner and the whole movie industry to toe was the fleeciest lamb of Warner's flock—Olivia de Havilland.*

*Her image was meek and mild: she'd played Melanie in *Gone With the Wind* and Maid Marian in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. She played sweet heroines and handmaidens as opposed to ruthless roles, but beneath this public image, a slow boil was about to burn over. (Yeck np)*

In the mid to late 1930s, Olivia de Havilland was a fixture in the Warner Bros. stables of stars. Most frequently cast as the love interest, her main on-screen responsibilities were to gaze adoringly at her male co-star and provide unquestioning support for his adventures. Her on-screen persona was of sweetness, youth and love. However, further analysis of Olivia de Havilland during this period reveals a more complex star discourse, containing contradictions in relation to ideals of femininity and stardom. In fan magazines, a studio-sanctioned discourse of niceness coexisted with a distinct ambivalence towards issues such as love and marriage. At the same time, de Havilland was engaged in ongoing struggles with Warner Bros., using multiple strategies to gain opportunities to advance her career and play better parts. This contestation came to a head in 1943, when de Havilland successfully sued Warner Bros. This suit was a contributing factor to the end of the star system while also resulting in dramatic changes in both de Havilland's on- and off-screen representation. Thus, Olivia de Havilland provides a unique and fascinating example of how individual agency influences star discourse, while also demonstrating the impact of female stardom on the broader institutional apparatus of Hollywood.

However, despite the complexity associated with her stardom and how interesting and important it is, little academic attention has been paid to de Havilland other than references to her suit against Warner Bros. In this chapter, I address this lack of attention while also locating her within a broader inquiry into the agency and practices of female stardom. I first

discuss de Havilland in relation to autobiographical texts, examining the female star subject as constructed through this genre. I then closely examine the fan magazine discourse concerning de Havilland's emerging stardom, looking at how it is shaped by external industrial mechanisms while still challenging traditional ideals of femininity and romance. The final part of the chapter explores how de Havilland's career was defined by being cast in the role of Melanie in *Gone With the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), identifying the multiple strategies used by the actor to both obtain the role and capitalise on the opportunities provided by this, concluding with her 1943 suit against Warner Bros.

## Introducing Olivia de Havilland

Olivia Mary de Havilland was born on 1 July 1916 in Japan to British parents. In February 1919, her mother, Lilian, moved with Olivia and her younger sister Joan to Saratoga, California, where she divorced their father and married George Fontaine. In 1933, after finishing high school, de Havilland was hired to be an understudy in a Max Reinhardt production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Hollywood Bowl. The actress she was understudying for was unable to perform, so de Havilland played Hermia throughout the whole run of the play. Her performance must have been received well because in November 1934, de Havilland signed with Warner Bros. to play Hermia in the film version of the play. She moved to Los Angeles and filmed *Midsummer*, *Alibi Ike* (Ray Enright, 1935) and *The Irish In Us* (Lloyd Bacon, 1935) in quick succession.<sup>18</sup> Her breakthrough came when she was paired with another unknown actor, the handsome Australian Errol Flynn, in *Captain Blood* (Michael Curtiz) in 1935. The movie was successful, performing well at the box office and being nominated for five Academy Awards.<sup>19</sup> It also began for de Havilland what she describes as "incredibly boring" series of roles as a love interest that continued until she left

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<sup>18</sup> These films were released in a different order than they were made, with *Alibi Ike* most commonly referenced in biographies as the first film featuring de Havilland that ran in cinemas.

<sup>19</sup> In the early days of the Academy Awards it was possible to vote for people who were not nominated by writing their name on the nomination form. In 1935, Michael Curtiz received the second highest number of votes for Best Director for *Captain Blood* as a write-in candidate, losing to John Ford for *The Informer*. Not coincidentally, 1935 was the last year the Academy permitted write-in votes (Rode x, 163).

Warner Bros. in 1943 (“The Last Belle of Cinema”).

The brief biography outlined in the previous paragraph is compiled from a number of sources, including biographies, fan magazine articles, release date information from trade magazines and promotional material. This material provides an understanding of the star Olivia de Havilland. It also highlights one of the key aspects of this study: that it is not possible to gain direct access to a historical person – the historical subject that is the focus of this research, Olivia de Havilland, is only accessible through the data available to us. As such, we can understand the historical subject as being constructed through the rich and generative material available, especially autobiographies, interviews, promotional materials, fan magazines and legal archives. I am therefore not claiming to present the “truth” of what happened in any particular moment of de Havilland’s history or career; rather, I am interested in exploring the complex enactment of Olivia de Havilland, star, incorporating considerations of the historical subject into the study of the figure of the female star, particularly concerning the way female stars functioned through systems of labour and within a specific social and cultural historical juncture. I will now look at the role of autobiographical texts in relation to Olivia de Havilland, examining the construction of the self (and the selves of others) through star autobiographies.

## Every Star Has One

As was common practice for movie stars from the classical era once the peak of their stardom had passed, in 1962 Olivia de Havilland released a memoir. Called *Every Frenchman Has One*, this book differed from the typical Hollywood star autobiography. Instead of telling readers about de Havilland’s childhood or including salacious details about her life and loves, *Every Frenchman* contains a series of charming vignettes about de Havilland’s experiences in her adopted homeland of France. In this section, I explore how releasing a memoir instead of a tell-all autobiography affects the presentation of the self expressed through the autobiographic form for female stars.

The Hollywood star autobiography has long been a popular way for audiences to interact with stars, with the celebrity memoir/autobiography consistently one of the most popular publishing genres from the second half of the 20th century to today (Yagoda 181–2). Typically written near the end of the star’s career, the star autobiography usually follows similar themes and narrative trajectories. The structure of these tends to include the same sort

of information (with some small variations): a description of the star's childhood followed by the story of their discovery and their experiences of fame. Always included in these tellings are the star's own descriptions of the key moments and scandals that defined the star's career and the voice and tone of the author usually closely align with the star's existing persona. Star autobiographies are therefore an important resource through which to examine the construction of the self of the star because they promise access to the star in her own words; an invitation to hear the star tell her own story of her experiences.

The offer to provide access to the inner self of the star is central to this genre of publishing. One of the defining features of the star autobiography is its promise of access to the unfettered person of the star, an insight into who she *really* is. As Ruth Amossy notes, "The strength of the biography is that it is written by the protagonist herself, telling her side of the story in an inner search for truth" (679). This promise is made explicit in the titles of these books; for example, *Lana: The Lady, The Legend, The Truth* by Lana Turner, *Lauren Bacall: By Myself* by Lauren Bacall and *Ingrid Bergman: My Story* by Ingrid Bergman and Alan Burgess. These titles promise honest and truthful access to the self of the star, in her own words, written by herself (with a little help from a co-author or ghostwriter).

Their promise to provide the female star with the opportunity to present themselves to the public means that star autobiographies are of particular value in the study for female star agency. By providing access to the intimate self of the star, the autobiographical process allows her to assert her subjectivity. Through the act of telling their own story, the female star is provided with the opportunity to affirm their subjectivity as agents of their own careers and history. Amossy describes this process as follows:

From a mere commodity manufactured by a specialized industry, she turns into a full subject, an autonomous individual. Instead of an image built by others, she is now a narrator capable of shaping herself and mastering the meaning of her own life. (681)

This is of particular importance to female stars, whose discourse tended to cast them as passive subjects of the star process, discovered in their natural setting and then brought to Hollywood to be transformed into stars by the star system. Hollywood star autobiographies are thus opportunities for the female star to position herself within broader frameworks which tend to deny her agency, such as the histories of the star system that position stars as serfs to the studios or film histories that erase the contributions of women to Hollywood.

The stakes of this ability to act as one's own narrator can be high. Shelley Stamp argues that as the film industry shifted towards "corporate conglomeration" in the late 1920s and early '30s, written histories of Hollywood started to develop a historical narrative that sidelined or even completely omitted the women who were involved in the developing film industry. Stamp argues that early writing by female creatives in Hollywood emerged in response to the erasure of women from published histories of reports; for example, screenwriter, director and actor Nell Shipman published a chronicle of her experiences filming in extreme weather conditions in Idaho in 1925 and actress and scenarist Gene Gauntier published a memoir "Blazing the Trail" in *Women's Home Companion* in 1928. Stamp argues that through this act of writing and publishing, these women were "fighting against the erasure of their contributions to early Hollywood," transcribing and illuminating the roles that these women played in the film industry and in film culture more broadly. Amelie Hastie similarly identifies the trend of female star and director memoirs working as counterhistories, meant to correct institutionalised histories about their subjects as well as linking their careers to film history as a whole (73).

Yet, while the autobiographical form does provide opportunity for the female star in regard to subjectivity, star autobiographies exist within a particular discursive tradition. Julie Rak notes that star autobiographies are not just "mere textual vehicles for an author's thoughts . . . [they are] commodities that are manufactured by an industry for a market" (4). They exist within a generic tradition of publishing, where "genre is a powerful organizing set of principles, preconceptions, and practices that without calling attention to itself, drives much of the way memoir is produced, consumed, and received" (Rak 18). Star autobiographies do not just promise access to the star – they promise a particular type of access to the star and this access is rigidly constrained by both the generic expectations of the star autobiography and expectations relating to audiences' pre-existing knowledge about the star. Their framing as part of a generic tradition influences their marketing and reception: readers approach star autobiographies with not just expectations of what an autobiography should contain and the form it should take but also their foreknowledge of the particular star.

Thus, despite the promise of authenticity and their (impossible) claims to furnish the historical truth or provide unmediated access to a star's true self, these texts present a mediated description of reality and history filtered through memory, nostalgia, the requirements of the publishing industry and the expectations of readers based on the star's existing public persona, among other factors. Higashi notes that "Autobiographies and

biographies strain credibility in their claims to the nonfiction shelf, but they remain informative about the construction of the stars even after their popularity, if not their import, has faded” (23). In effect, autobiographies provide an authorised narrative of the star’s life, identifying the key elements of their stardom and career they want recorded and remembered. Their value lies not in providing biographical facts or historical detail but in the way they allow us to identify the historical self-fashioned subject, understanding that the representation of the self is limited by the very apparatus which promises authentic and truthful access. But, what does it mean for the historical star subject if the self they fashion does not align with the standard format of the star autobiography?

De Havilland’s memoir, *Every Frenchman Has One*, first published in 1962 and then re-released in 2016 to commemorate her 100th birthday, sits awkwardly within the genre of the Hollywood female star autobiography. Rather than following a teleological path from birth to stardom followed by a retelling of key moments in the star’s life and career, this memoir contains a series of unconnected anecdotes about de Havilland’s life and work after emigrating from America to France. Even its title differentiates this volume from other star autobiographies: instead of promising an intimate encounter with a Hollywood star, it refers to the liver, which (according to de Havilland), is “the most significant of all human organs as far as the French constitution is concerned. Constitution with a small *c*, of course” (italics in original *Every Frenchman* 27). *Every Frenchman* does not follow the traditional format of the star autobiographical genre – it does not mention de Havilland’s childhood, her discovery by Warner Bros. or her much-discussed relationships with Errol Flynn or Joan Fontaine. While there are references to Hollywood, these are not the juicy, gossipy mentions common in star autobiographies. For example, in the chapter “My French Blue Eyedrops,” de Havilland writes about the fondness of the French for having their medicine administered via suppository. To deal with her anxiety about sleeping while shooting a film, she asked her doctor to prescribe her sleeping pills, which he did in suppository form. She then shared her prescription with a colleague who was having difficulty sleeping. Rather than naming either the film or the co-star who had amusingly misunderstood how a “*French* sleeping preparation” was meant to be taken, she referred to making “a film in England and Spain in 1954” and “a black-bearded, six-foot-seven Englishman” in the cast (italics in original *Every Frenchman* 99). The film was *That Lady* (Terence Young, 1954) and the co-star was most likely Christopher Lee; however, de Havilland’s decision not to name either differentiates *Every Frenchman* starkly from the type of disclosures included in most star autobiographies,

the type of disclosures that are expected by readers and promised by the publishing industry with this genre of book.

By publishing a different type of star autobiography, de Havilland disrupts expectations of both the form and format of a Hollywood star autobiography. Part of the particular value of star autobiographies is the insight they provide into how the star attempts to present themselves in relation to their own history; as Hastie notes, through writing their autobiography, the female star memoir writer “bring[s] the past forward into the present” (72), shaping the way their past is understood and framed through the stories they tell. Through this, the star enacts a kind of retrospective self-fashioning that attempts to shape a particular position from which they present their historical self after the height of their Hollywood fame. Writing an endearing collection of fish-out-of-water stories rather than a tell-all autobiography situates de Havilland not as an actor at the end of her career, reflecting on her life as it happened, but as a cultured and well-travelled woman whose Hollywood career was part of her history but not its defining aspect. In doing this, *Every Frenchman* denies the teleological progress through a star’s life promised by the star autobiography, while also marking her as a Hollywood star not defined by her stardom and therefore different from the other stars who have published more traditional autobiographies.

However, choosing to not engage in the standard discursive tradition of the star autobiography has further consequences. Hastie notes that by writing their memoir, the “writer is at once the subject of a history and the historian” (72). Through its claim to contain a truthful account of the star’s life and career in her own words, written by herself, the star autobiography effectively provides an authorised narrative of the star; a presentation of the past with their contributions written in. In particular, by providing the star’s perspective of the particular moments and stories for which they are most well known, autobiographies become a key part of what is remembered and recorded about the star. A star’s autobiography is one of the main texts through which stars continue to circulate once they are no longer appearing in films. Star autobiographies are not compulsory for the continued circulation of a star. But, for de Havilland, the decision to publish a non-traditional star autobiography had one clear consequence: rather than contribute to the construction of her own star image “through her own words,” many of the key moments of her life were instead constructed using the words of her sister.

Joan Fontaine’s autobiography, *No Bed of Roses*, follows the traditional film star

autobiographical format. Released in 1978, in this book Fontaine charts the course of her life from birth through to the time of publishing. In it, Fontaine discusses the key moments of her own life and career; for example, her childhood illnesses that led her family to settle in California, the decision to choose Fontaine as her new last name, being cast in her career-making role in *Rebecca* and all four of her marriages. She also discusses many of the key moments of her sister's life, such as their shared childhood in Saratoga, California, and the events that happened in de Havilland's life during her first years in Hollywood when the sisters were living together with their mother. Fontaine even takes credit for de Havilland being considered for Melanie in *Gone With the Wind*, recounting that she auditioned for the part of Melanie but was turned down because she was too chic for the role. When told that the role required a plain girl, she immediately suggested her sister for the part (104). Building on Hastie's description of the memoir writer as being both the subject of the history and the historian, in the absence of de Havilland's own version, Fontaine becomes the historian of both herself and her sister.

This has a direct impact on stories about de Havilland. At the time of writing this thesis, there are three published biographies written about de Havilland: *Olivia de Havilland* by Judith M. Kass (1976), *Olivia de Havilland and the Golden Age of Hollywood* by Ellis Amburn (2018) and *Olivia de Havilland: Lady Triumphant* by Victoria Amador (2020). Renowned muckraker Charles Higham published *Sisters: The Story of Olivia de Havilland and Joan Fontaine* in 1984 and *Errol and Olivia: Ego and Obsession in Golden Era Hollywood* was published by Robert Matzen in 2010. Much of the information for these five books comes from Fontaine's autobiography, particularly information about the sisters' childhood. Moreover, the books tend to cite each other, repeating the same information or anecdotes (for example, Amburn and Matzen both refer to George Fontaine as the "Iron Duke," a term used by Fontaine in *No Bed of Roses*). This is an important distinction for current researchers because of the role of autobiographies in framing the past and constructing the image of stars held today. Effectively, through the widespread circulation of Fontaine's "authorised narrative" in de Havilland's biographical material, Fontaine's autobiography presents a version of both Fontaine and de Havilland, thus shaping the construction of de Havilland's stardom for contemporary audiences. De Havilland's decision to publish a different type of memoir to other Hollywood stars therefore marks her stardom as different but denies her the opportunity to write herself into the history of Hollywood, both her own history and that of Hollywood's classical era more generally.

## The Discovery of Olivia de Havilland

In the previous section, I identified how subjectivity is enacted through the autobiographical process. This is an important area of study because the autobiographical form of expression presents an opportunity for the female star subject to write herself into film history, providing valuable information for star studies researchers on how the individual star enacted agency. I will now examine the practices of negotiation employed by Olivia de Havilland by looking at the process by which she became a star.

Olivia de Havilland's journey to film stardom is commonly represented as a smooth process. As was briefly outlined at the start of the chapter, de Havilland was acquainted with a man who was an assistant on Max Reinhardt's live performance of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* at the Hollywood Bowl in 1933. Through this connection, she was able to travel to Los Angeles to watch rehearsals of the play and, while at a rehearsal, was introduced to Reinhardt. The often-repeated story states that the director asked her to read some lines and was so impressed by her performance that he cast her as an understudy for the role of Hermia. The original actress cast in that role, Gloria Stuart, was unable to perform and de Havilland took her place. When hired by Warner Bros. to direct a film version of the play, Reinhardt took de Havilland with him and she signed a seven-year deal with a starting salary of \$250 per week (Carman 134).<sup>20</sup> After *Midsummer* was finished, Warner Bros. immediately put her to work, featuring her as the female love interest in *Alibi Ike* against the established comedian Joe E. Brown and in *The Irish In Us* with established Warner Bros. star James Cagney. While both of these films performed well and she had starring roles in them, she played uncomplicated love interests in both – the *Photoplay* review of *Alibi Ike* simply noted of her performance in the film, “Olivia de Havilland is [the] romantic prize” (“Alibi Ike Review” 111). Her breakthrough to stardom came when she was cast in a leading role opposite another unknown Warner Bros. contract player, Errol Flynn.

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<sup>20</sup> The Warner Bros. Archive, which is housed at the University of Southern California, is the only classical Hollywood studio archive that is theoretically open to researchers. However, the archive was uncontactable between January and June 2018 and, as of 1 July 2020, the Warner Bros. Archive website lists the collection as closed until further notice. Therefore, I was unfortunately unable to see any of the original Warner Bros. de Havilland contracts.

After learning that MGM planned to film *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Frank Lloyd, 1935) with their contracted star Clark Gable, Warner Bros. decided to release their own seafaring adventure tale, *Captain Blood*. The problem they encountered with this was that the Warner Bros. stable of actors in the early '30s was mainly made up of actors like James Cagney and Paul Muni, who were character actors rather than the glamorous action stars needed for this type of role. Warner Bros. then attempted to borrow a more suitable type of actor from another studio but were unable to find one. This meant they were forced to look at their unestablished, inexperienced contracted actors such as the Errol Flynn (Hark 153). Since arriving in the United States from Australia, Flynn had had only minor and unremarkable roles in two films; however, he performed well enough in a screen test for Warner Bros. to cast him as the eponymous Captain Peter Blood, pairing him with de Havilland as his leading lady, playing Arabella Bishop. This gamble of casting two inexperienced and largely unknown actors paid off – the film performed well both critically and at the box office and catapulted both of the actors to stardom.

While *Captain Blood's* success resulted in immediate stardom for both of its leading actors, it did so in different ways. Ina Rae Hark sums up the immediate positive impact of *Captain Blood* on the career of both of the actors as follows: “Flynn became a movie idol overnight and de Havilland rose to first among equals as a Warner Bros. romantic lead” (156). Flynn repeatedly played a dashing leading man with a distinctive physicality and charm that established a unique star persona that resonated across the films in which he starred. De Havilland, in contrast, was firmly cemented in her position as “romantic prize” to her male co-star, who was the protagonist of the film. Hark sums this up as follows, “In essence she is ‘the girl’ the winning of whom accompanies the larger achievements of a male lead, or she is the other woman who competes for the man desired by a female lead” (162). This difference in the two actors’ treatment is evident in the film Warner Bros. cast them immediately following *Captain Blood*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (Michael Curtiz, 1936). In this movie, Errol Flynn plays Geoffrey Vickers, a major in the British Army who is stationed in India. De Havilland plays Elsa Campbell, the daughter of Colonel Campbell, Vickers’ commanding officer. Flynn’s Vickers is central to the story and Flynn appears in almost every scene and features in a number of action sequences that build on the character type he played in *Captain Blood*. De Havilland’s Elsa primarily operates as the third member of a love triangle between Vickers and his brother, Perry: she is again cast as the romantic prize with little to do except be prettily loved by both men throughout the course of the film.

De Havilland's positioning as the non-protagonist romantic lead is supported through her fan magazine discourse. One of the ways through which to identify the key discourses that a studio wished to be identified with a star is to look at their origin story; that is, how they were "discovered" and ended up in Hollywood. De Havilland's is fairly consistent across all publications. In "Destiny Beckoned," from the December 1935 issue of *Picture Play*, Dillon Franc writes:

Olivia was born in Tokio,<sup>21</sup> Japan, of English parents, but was brought to this country by her mother at the age of two-and-a-half. A year later the family settled in Saratoga, California, a village of less than one thousand inhabitants, about forty miles south of San Francisco.

There she lived most of her nineteen years and there she was dutifully making plans for college and a career as a school-ma'am when destiny stepped in. She had won a scholarship to Mills College . . . but she never did get to use it. (57)

A very similar tale is told in "Errol Flynn's Unofficial Sweetheart," published in the August 1936 issue of *Hollywood*:

Born in Tokio, Japan, when her father was practising law, that period of life means little to the actress. Her parents brought her to California when she was three years old. And amid the 800-odd occupants of the little town of Saratoga, Olivia grew up into the lovely lady you have met on the screen.

Her mother, an accomplished elocutionist, became a professional reader specializing in Shakespearean plays. Gradually her mother allowed her to read small rôles, then better ones. Last year Olivia won a scholarship to Mills College and on the brink of matriculating, met Max Reinhardt through a friend. (22)

In this origin story, an intelligent young girl from a small town was heading to university (on a scholarship, the articles repeatedly remind us), when fate intervened in the form of director Max Reinhardt and she ended up in Hollywood. As noted by Hark, this publicity "did not so much repress her origins as unusually emphasize the conditions of her birth over the rest of

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<sup>21</sup> Fan magazines in the 1930s used "Tokyo" and "Tokio" interchangeably to refer to the Japanese city.

her life” (160). For de Havilland, who had lived in the United States since she was two years old, placing the focus on her birth rather than her American upbringing along with the mid-Atlantic accent she had after years of elocution lessons with her English actress mother allowed Warner Bros. to claim her as a British actress and therefore perfectly suited to aristocratic roles set in the colonial past. This is in interesting contrast to Flynn, who the studio pretended was Irish rather than Australian for much of the early part of his career.

The elision of much of de Havilland’s life not only drew a connection between her “reel” and “real” lives, it also aligned her with a common trope of female stardom; as with the origin stories of many female stars from classical Hollywood,<sup>22</sup> stardom was something that happened *to* de Havilland rather than something that she actively desired. “Nothing Short of a Miracle” details a path to stardom that involved no action from de Havilland: her friends persuaded her to visit the set of *Midsummer*, Reinhardt offered her the understudy role of Hermia and then he took her to Hollywood with him to perform in the film version of the play. In “Victorian . . . With Variations,” Dorothy Spensity writes of how de Havilland “found herself with a Warner contract” (27), as if the actress herself had just woken up one day and discovered a studio contract lying on her doorstep. In actuality, Tom Kemper reports that de Havilland was represented by agent Ivan Kahn in negotiations with Warner Bros. in order to “lend a measure of fairness to her negotiations” (58). While, as Kemper notes, this was common practice for young actresses such as de Havilland. The presence of contract negotiations demonstrates that action and decision-making was required in signing up to a studio, even for a largely unknown actress; the contract was not simply “found” but negotiated and signed.

By presenting stardom as occurring almost by chance – nothing short of a miracle, to quote the *Photoplay* article title – de Havilland’s fan magazine discourse denies her agency in her career. This disguises the labour involved in becoming a star, both on the part of the actress and the studio to which the actress is contracted. In actuality, there were a number of processes that were employed between an individual person being signed to a movie studio and an actor becoming a star. Cathy Klaprat describes these as follows:

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<sup>22</sup> Other famous examples include Lana Turner being given a screen test after seen drinking a soda at a drug store and an MGM employee seeing a photo of Ava Gardner and promising her a screen test in exchange for a date.

Stars were created, not discovered, counter to popular myths. Entire departments functioned as components of star-making machinery. The scriptwriting department created vehicles for the star's screen persona. And in promoting the pictures, the advertising and publicity departments built up the uniqueness of the star by transforming his or her personal life to match the screen persona. (351–2)

To devise an appropriate screen image for an aspiring star, studios followed similar strategies. Studios would cast a player in different roles and then test the audience's responses to the actor. This response would be calibrated by fan mail, sneak previews and exhibitor preferences as well as audience reactions and box office grosses (Klaprat 351). Using this strategy, over time the studio was able to determine the type of role that resonated with audiences. As Tino Balio notes, "In essence, producers attempted to mold their protégés to fit consumer interest. Once the correct formula was found, the ingredients would be inscribed in narratives, publicity, and advertising" ("Selling Stars" 164).

Once the matching of actor and character was done, advertising and publicity took over to transform the star's personal life in accordance with the star's screen character. The publicity department manufactured an authorised biography of the star's personal life that was based in large part on the successful narrative roles of the star's pictures. The department would disseminate this information by writing features for fan magazines, press releases and items for gossip columns. A publicist would then be assigned to the star to handle interviews and to supervise the correct choice of make-up and clothing for public appearances. Finally, the department had glamour photographs taken that fixed the important physical and emotional traits of the star in the proper image. Therefore, as Klaprat summarises, "The audience was assured that the star acted identically in both her "real" and "real" lives" (361). However, this process for de Havilland was different than for many of the other hopeful stars who arrived in Hollywood and signed a contract with a major studio. To illustrate how she differed from other Hollywood starlets, I will now compare her to the female star used by Klaprat as an example: Bette Davis.

Like de Havilland, Davis was employed under a long-term contract to Warner Bros. during the 1930s. However, there were a number of distinct differences between Davis and de Havilland, including the process of becoming a star. Davis was brought to Hollywood by Universal Studios in 1930. Her films with that studio were unsuccessful and so they did not renew her contract. She was then signed by Warner Bros. in 1932. She was initially promoted

by Warner Bros. as a sexy blonde ingénue, “the flirt destined to be the object of men’s pursuit” (Klaprat 351). Fan magazines ran pictorial spreads of Davis as a glamour girl, staring at the camera with “come-hither” looks, but Klaprat argues the minimal text accompanying the images demonstrates that the studio had not yet determined the correct narrative for Davis’ “real” story. This changed in 1934, when she was loaned out to RKO for *Of Human Bondage* (John Cromwell, 1934) to play what Klaprat describes as “the sexual menacing destroyer of men” (357). The film was a success with both critics and audiences and Warner Bros. immediately cast her in a series of similar roles. This established a strong on-screen persona for Davis that was supported by fan magazine discourse. No longer blonde or in seductive poses, this discourse portrays Davis as forthright, fiery and independent, just as she is in her films. Even when she was cast against the vamp character, as in *The Great Lie* (Edmund Goulding, 1941), where she plays the good woman who attempts to allay the evil of the bad woman, promotional material emphasised that the movie was different to her vamp roles, using the offcasting to emphasise Davis’ skill as an actress. Through this process, a match between narrative role and actor was found (357). In addition to this, Davis was associated with a distinctive performative style that Shingler and Gledhill describe as “a highly visible form of acting . . . full bodied and emphatic, with an easily recognizable series of techniques,” such as a particular clipped vocal inflection, bodily movements such as darting eye movements and a striding walk, and repeated movements such as intense drags on cigarettes (68). Through this process, Bette Davis the star, who could be identified by a distinct set of performative and narrative elements, emerged.

The development of Bette Davis as a star follows the process outlined by Balio and Klaprat: a number of different types were trialled until one was found that resonated with the public; this persona was reinforced by an alignment between the star’s reel and real lives and a distinctive “Bette Davis” narrative and performative was established. A similar process can be followed for many other stars, for example the transformation of dark-haired Latina Margarita Carmen Cansino to red-haired all-American love goddess Rita Hayworth (McLean *Being Rita Hayworth*). However, this experience differed in many ways for de Havilland. As described earlier, unlike Davis, she was not cast in a number of different types of roles to try to figure out what type of persona the audience liked best; rather, de Havilland was consistently cast as the love interest of the main protagonist from the very start of her career. From the studio’s perspective, there was no need for the trial and error approach – box office figures and fan magazine discourse suggest that audiences were happy with de Havilland’s

casting in romantic roles. Many of the elements of transformation that happened for other female stars was lacking for de Havilland. Unlike Margarita Carmen, for example, she acted under her birth name; unlike Bette Davis, her hair colour was her natural brown and her mid-Atlantic accent, although unusual for American women, was attributed to lifelong training from her mother rather than any studio intervention.

Another difference between de Havilland and other stars such as Davis is in their on-screen personas. In Davis' films, there are very clear narrative and performative consistencies across her oeuvre that are repeated to a lesser or greater degree throughout her career, such as the aforementioned casting as a vamp and a distinctive acting style. Similarly, Errol Flynn performances were united by a distinct physicality and impish charm that was reinforced by his off-screen persona as an adventurer who was irresistible to women. It is easy to identify a Bette Davis performance in a Bette Davis film or an Errol Flynn performance in an Errol Flynn film. In contrast, it is incredibly difficult to identify similar stylistic or syntactic consistencies, such as in narrative or performance, for de Havilland in the 16 films she made at Warner Bros. between 1935 and 1939, when she was loaned out to David O. Selznick to make *Gone With the Wind* (*GWTW*). The characters she played were often (but not always) under the patronage of an older man, such as a father or an uncle (for example, an uncle in *Captain Blood* and her father in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*). While this patronage did result in an association with wealth and privilege, it primarily facilitated her introduction to the man with whom she would fall in love (for example, her uncle's slave in *Captain Blood* and a soldier serving under her father in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*). She is sometimes feisty and independent (for example, becoming a journalist after her brother's death in *Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, 1939) and planting an orchard to help save the family fortune in *Gold Is Where You Find It* (Michael Curtiz, 1938)) but she is also sometimes passive and reactive (for example, as the woman patiently waiting while two pilot brothers work through their issues in *Wings of the Navy* (Lloyd Bacon, 1939)). There are few distinctive performative characteristics that can be identified across these movies beyond a tendency to gaze adoringly at her male co-star and, very occasionally, bite her lower lip. De Havilland's on-screen persona is nondescriptly lovely, pleasant and nice.

The most characteristic quality of de Havilland's early Warner Bros. stardom in terms of her on-screen persona was a pretty niceness rather than the unique and distinctive semantic and syntactic elements that typically differentiate each star from one another. There was no "Olivia de Havilland" film – she was a star, but a star who appeared in, for example, Errol

Flynn movies as the romantic lead rather than being the person around whom the narrative was formed. This lack of individual and specific on-screen characteristics means that some aspects of her stardom do not fit within common understandings of what a star is. This is made particularly clear when she is compared to Davis. Bette Davis worked as a key organising principle for a film. In terms of the production of the film, her salary would have been a major part of budget of the film and the production schedule arranged around her availability. Beyond that, her presence would have had a profound impact on the narrative structure of the films in which she starred, as cinema in classical Hollywood was protagonist centred and roles were often tailored for the star so that movies would be vehicles to showcase the star's particular unique talents. Klaprat describes this relationship as follows:

The goals and desires of the protagonist generally motivate the causal logic of the action and, consequently, the structure of the narrative, the components of which included plot, the behaviour of the characters in their relationship to the star, as well the settings for the action. Thus, we can see that if the protagonist was constructed by the traits and actions of star differentiation, then the narrative was structured by the star. (369)

John Ellis describes this as creating a “narrative image” for a film; effectively, stars “provide a foreknowledge of the fiction, an invitation to cinema” (91). By featuring a particular star, who in turn promises a particular type of story, the star not only drives the form of the story but also the audience's expectations of what type of story it is going to be and, ideally, entices audiences to actually see the film. De Havilland's on-screen persona is indistinct and thus her ability to “motivate the causal logic of the action” or “the structure of the narrative” is minimal, meaning she contributes little to creating the narrative image of a film.

Economically and in terms of promotion, de Havilland can be considered a star – she received at least second billing on all of the films made between 1935 and 1939, with the exception of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, which was an ensemble production and her first film, and the two films she appeared in with Bette Davis, who was a bigger star than her at Warner Bros. She was heavily featured in advertising for the films (albeit usually in the arms of her co-star), which suggests that she had drawing power with audiences. However, the prominence of her figure in the film poster is far greater than her prominence in any of the actual films. In the poster for *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Michael Curtiz, 1938) in *Photoplay* June 1938 (2–3) (Figure 1), her name has second billing and her picture is bigger than anyone other than Errol Flynn. However, in *Robin Hood* (as in many of these early

Warner Bros. films), her character, Maid Marian, has little agency within the story. Given the descriptions of the function of a star in the studio system used in star studies, de Havilland thus challenges the conditions by which a star is defined.



Figure 1: Double-page advertisement for *The Adventures of Robin Hood*

Despite de Havilland's indistinct on-screen persona, she had a distinct off-screen presence. Since shortly after her signing by Warner Bros., she began to appear on the covers of fan magazines and was frequently the subject of many articles and profiles (Figure 2). Her almost immediate rise to fame at Warner Bros. ensured ongoing coverage. I have discussed earlier how these articles worked in relation to de Havilland's origin story. I will now discuss how de Havilland's fan magazine discourse contrasted with her on-screen persona to expose the tensions related to women in the workplace and female stardom.



Figure 2: *Screenland* Cover December 1936

As I have noted, Olivia de Havilland's on-screen persona is remarkable in its lack of the distinctive and unique semantic and syntactic elements that typically characterise a Hollywood star. However, there is one narrative consistency across all of de Havilland's work in this period. In all of the films de Havilland made pre-*GWTW* bar one, the narrative concludes with her either getting married or with the promise of marriage. Given the centrality of romance to classical Hollywood cinema – in a random study of 100 films from the classical era, Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger found that 95 percent involved heterosexual romance in at least one plot line and 85 percent had romance as the principal

line of action (16) – it is not surprising that romance features heavily in these movies. What is interesting in these films is that marriage is presented as the natural conclusion of the plot and the only option for de Havilland’s characters. For example, in the one movie from this period where she is in paid employment (as a journalist in *Dodge City*), the decision of whether to give up work when she is married is not even mentioned and the film concludes with her character marrying Errol Flynn’s character and devoting her life to cleaning up the lawless Wild West with her husband. This is typical for de Havilland’s films of this period and it makes narrative sense – the logical end for characters whose sole role in the film to have a romantic relationship with the main protagonist is to marry the main protagonist and that is all.

This focus on romance and marriage sits uncomfortably with de Havilland’s fan magazine discourse. A star’s fan magazine discourse and on-screen persona generally worked to reinforce each other, with the off-screen persona of a star aligning with their filmic performances. A clear example of this can be seen in the article shown in Figure 3, “Why Errol Flynn is Fleeing Hollywood.” The article states:

Errol Flynn is one of those souls, forever restless, forever in the pursuit of adventure. For him there is no glamour in the present, not even in glamorous Hollywood. The restless haunting look you see in his eyes is not from clever acting. The Errol Flynn of the screen is Errol himself, a man of the far horizons who refuses to linger long in one place. (31)

The article further explains that, “Years of adventure in the South Seas made Errol Flynn a husky, stalwart adventurer.” This fan magazine discourse does not just align Flynn’s on- and off-screen personas, it portrays them as one: the Errol Flynn we see on-screen is the real Errol Flynn.



Figure 3: “Why Errol Flynn is Fleeing Hollywood”

This alignment was lacking in de Havilland’s fan magazine discourse due to the ongoing and persistent absence of romance in her everyday life – at least the everyday life that was reported to the public. This lack of romance was a consistent theme in articles in these early Warner Bros. years, with profiles repeatedly reporting that she does not have a beau and is not interested in dating. The titles of the fan magazines promised romance – in February 1937 *Silver Screen* declared her “Ready For Love,” in September 1937 *Screenland* reported that “Olivia Looks at Love,” while, just over a year later in November 1938, “*Modern Screen* stated, “She’s Looking for Love.” However, despite their promise of romance, the articles themselves belied any romantic aims. Repeatedly, the articles shared de Havilland’s responses to questions about love and her decision to remain single all have the same response: love is all-encompassing for women and, if a woman is to marry, then that must be all a woman does. There is no space for a woman to work and also be in love. For example, in “Olivia Looks at Love,” Maude Cheatham quotes de Havilland:

Of course, real love is something every girl hopes for sooner or later, but right now, honestly, I’m too busy for romance or many dates or parties. They have to wait their turn.

...

I'm only twenty-one. I hope love doesn't come too soon. I have so much I want to do—*first*. (emphasis in original 100)

That romance or career is a choice that women must make is made even clearer in “Men, Stay Away From My Door!,” when de Havilland responds to a question about getting married as follows:

For her answer, Olivia drew a circle on the back of a menu card. Then she drew another close to it but without overlapping.

“Don't tell me you going to solve love geometrically?” I said.

She giggled. “I'm trying to give you a brief illustration of what I think of life,” she told me. “It goes in circles. Here's as Career Circle, for example. And here's a Romance Circle. I think you have to complete one before you can do a good job on the other.” (Lane 35)

There is a clear difference between de Havilland's on-screen persona, as the romantic prize for the protagonist of the film, and her fan magazine discourse. The characters she played all end up as devoted wives at the conclusion of the narrative; however, while the de Havilland represented in fan magazines acknowledged that love requires wholehearted and exclusive dedication from women, this dedication means that other aspects of life, such as a career, are excluded.

It is impossible to say how audiences of the time reconciled these contradictory elements of de Havilland's on- and off-screen personas. The fan magazine discourse may have served a recuperatory effect, reconciling the career-focused actions of de Havilland the actor with her on-screen persona by stating that even though de Havilland is currently focusing on her career, she still believes love is important and all-encompassing for women. However, it is certain that many women living in the 1930s experienced the same tension between work and family that these articles describe. Although women's participation in the workforce continued to increase during the 1930s, they faced constant opposition to advancements as paid workers (Ware 24). The particular conditions of the Depression, with unemployment and fear of unemployment widespread, meant that women in work continued to work and many women joined the workforce to provide necessary economic support for their family.

At the same time, working women faced public disapproval for being in the workforce. Working women were criticised for taking jobs that would otherwise be occupied by men and condemned for neglecting their families and home life. Restrictions on married women working extended broadly across a number of industries. A 1939 survey by the National Industrial Conference Board showed that 84 percent of insurance companies, 65 percent of banks and 63 percent of public utilities had restrictions on married women working (Ware 28). Seventy-seven percent of school systems in the United States refused to employ married women teachers and half of them dismissed female teachers who married (Kessler-Harris 257). Women were discriminated against for being married, even as economic conditions required them to work. Although the work that de Havilland was doing was far better paid and in much better conditions than the audience who attended her movies, choosing to work to support her household, mother and, for a time, her younger sister instead of getting married reflected the experience of women in the 1930s.

I have now looked at the four-year period following de Havilland's arrival in Hollywood. She achieved almost instant success following her signing by Warner Bros. but this success did not result in more substantial roles or remuneration equivalent of other stars at the studio. During this period, disparities between her on- and off-screen discourses reflected broader social conflicts for working women. This all changed in 1939, when de Havilland was cast in the role for which she remains best known and her on- and off-screen discourse experienced a dramatic shift.

### ***Gone With the Wind***

By 1939, Olivia de Havilland had consolidated her position as a Hollywood star. She enjoyed ongoing popularity with audiences, as can be seen in the extensive coverage in fan magazines and the consistent good performance of the films in which she appeared. However, this success failed to translate into more challenging roles, with Warner Bros. repeatedly casting her in the same sort of character types. During this period, de Havilland was typecast as a love interest in movies in which she was given a starring role but was not the protagonist of the narrative. In addition to being typecast, although she was paid well, she failed to reap the full financial benefit of stardom experienced by her colleagues. For example, in six of the 16 movies she made between 1935 and 1939, she was paired with Errol Flynn; however, Flynn received far more benefit from their pairings than she did. After *Captain Blood's* success, Errol Flynn's salary increased to \$750 per week. Thomas Schatz reports that after Flynn's

next few movies were successful, Jack Warner publicly “tore up” Flynn’s contract and signed him to a long-term deal starting in February 1937 at \$2,250 per week. However, as Schatz wryly notes, “Meanwhile de Havilland was learning that Warners was still very much a man’s world. She was set to play Maid Marian opposite Flynn’s Robin Hood, but her \$500-per-week contract of April 1936 remained intact” (*Genius* 226–7). Therefore, despite her co-starring billing in these films, de Havilland failed to realise the success of her movies in financial terms in the same way her male co-star did.

De Havilland was publicly displeased with Warner Bros. about both her remuneration and the type of roles she was being cast in. In the interview “Last Belle of the Cinema,” de Havilland describes her frustration with this period of her career:

The life of the love interest is really pretty boring. The objective is the marriage bed. That’s what the heroine is there for, and “Will he win or will he not? Will they finally make the marriage bed?” It was obvious it would be the marriage bed, not any other bed, but it was all about would they in the end get together that way, and the route to the marriage bed – and that was promised at the end of the film, of course – was a pretty boring route. The heroine really *heroined*. She really had nothing much to do except encourage the hero, and at the right moment . . . and you can’t imagine how uninteresting that can be, the route. The objective might have been different, but anyhow the route is very boring. So I longed to play a character who initiated things, who experienced important things, who interpreted the great agonies and joys of human experience, and I certainly wasn’t doing that on any kind of level of a significance playing the love interest.

Warner Bros. showed little interest in providing de Havilland with the type of roles that she professes she wants to play in this interview. Therefore, in order to play the type of character “who initiated things,” de Havilland needed to take some sort of action to change the direction of her career. To do this, she looked outside of her home studio to opportunities elsewhere.

In July 1936, David O. Selznick bought the rights for Margaret Mitchell’s bestselling novel, *Gone With the Wind*. This began a two-year long process of bringing what Schatz describes

as “the greatest blockbuster in film history” to the screen (*Genius* 193).<sup>23</sup> A key part of ensuring the film was a success involved making sure the perfect actors were cast for each of the roles. While the two-year search for the actress to play Scarlett O’Hara is the most famous, the casting process for all of the main female roles was extensive and thorough (McGilligan 137).<sup>24</sup> De Havilland was an early favourite for the role of Melanie, with Selznick writing in a memo to Daniel T. Shea, “Certainly I would give anything if we had Olivia de Havilland under contract so we could cast her as Melanie” (Behlmer 171–2). However, Jack Warner refused to loan her out. Legally, this meant she was unable to even audition for the role, taking her out of contention for the movie. This did not stop de Havilland. In a 2004 interview “Melanie Remembers: Reflections by Olivia” that was released as a special feature on the 2004 four-disk collector’s edition of *GWTW*, de Havilland recounts the process of being cast in the movie. One day, she unexpectedly received a call from *GWTW*’s director George Cukor, asking if she would be prepared to do something illegal – audition for the part of Melanie (both Cukor personally and Selznick International Pictures could have been sued for approaching de Havilland (Amburn 71)). She was and did do the audition, which Cukor liked enough to ask her to audition for Selznick. She was offered the part but could only take it if Jack Warner agreed to loan her out to Selznick International Pictures (SIP).

Loan-outs were an important part of the studio system for both stars and studios. It was standard practice in studio-era Hollywood for actors to be loaned out to other studios. Loaning out had a number of benefits for studios. It meant that their expensive salaried staff were not sitting idle between pictures and it gave the studios the ability to access the contracted stars of other studios. Studios could also profit on their contracted stars through this arrangement, as the loaning studio usually paid the star’s basic contract plus a surcharge, which was kept by the studio (Carman 26). For the stars, loan-outs could provide an opportunity to play a different sort of role. Many stars’ careers were launched or invigorated after being loaned out, for example Davis with *Of Human Bondage* in the example discussed

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<sup>23</sup> For a comprehensive description of the two-year process, see David Thomson’s *Showman: The Life of David O. Selznick*.

<sup>24</sup> Cukor biographer Patrick McGilligan reports that David O. Selznick “seemed to be obsessed” with screen tests, making Cukor do screen tests with dozens of actresses for *GWTW* (137).

earlier. For de Havilland, playing a role other than ingenue at another studio was a good opportunity to break out of the Warner Bros. typecasting and demonstrate she was able to play different parts. It also allowed studios to see how audiences responded to her in another sort of role. However, to take advantage of the opportunities provided by being loaned out, de Havilland and SIP needed Jack Warner's agreement.

In "Melanie Remembers," de Havilland describes the pathway to successful negotiations as follows:

I was desperate. I had to do something – I had to think of something to do that would bring negotiations to a favourable conclusion. Then I did something that I shouldn't have done. I was a star – that's true – but I was a little star, a sort of mini star. Nonetheless, I called the boss's wife, Mrs Warner. Ann Warner, the beautiful, elegant, warm-hearted woman. I asked her if she would have tea with me one afternoon at the Brown Derby in Beverley Hills. She said yes, so we met in the afternoon at the Beverley Hills Brown Derby and had tea together. I told her my story. She was very sympathetic and I said, "Would you help me achieve the role of Melanie?" And she said, "I understand you, and I will help you." And she succeeded and before you knew it Jack Warner was signing papers with Selznick Studios to get me to the lot to play Melanie.

In his autobiography, *My First Hundred Years in Hollywood*, Warner tells a similar story:

Olivia, who had a brain like a computer concealed behind those fawnlike brown eyes, did not come crying to me when she heard the news. I waited for her to make the stormy scene, but she never showed up, and I was congratulating myself for being a man whose decisions were respected.

Kipling once said—or so I was later told by one of my associates—that the silliest woman can manage a clever man, but it needs a very clever woman to manage a fool. Man, how I was managed! Olivia simply went to my wife, Ann, and they joined forces in a plot to change my mind. (49)

I am not claiming that these stories tell the "truth" of what happened. Rather, these stories work together to tell a story of a particular form through which a female star exhibited agentic behaviour to negotiate the strict conditions of classical Hollywood: subterfuge,

persuasion and her ability to use her networks to her advantage. These “soft” forms of negotiation demonstrate a form of submissive subversion – a “nice” way of upsetting conventions in order to achieve one’s goals. Additionally, the ability to use these forms of agency are represented as specifically female. In these stories, the all-important conversation between de Havilland and Ann Warner happened not on the golf course or in a boardroom but over tea and the illegality of de Havilland’s decision to audition is less important than her ability to find a way to change her boss’s mind. The actions taken by de Havilland to be cast as Melanie display a clear intervention by the actress in the decision-making process, illustrating the enactment of agency, albeit in an acceptable, feminine way, an intervention which had a profound effect on the direction of her career.

### ***After Gone With the Wind***

The risks taken by de Havilland and Cukor to cast her as Melanie proved to be worthwhile, as the movie was released to immediate and long-lasting success. *Gone With the Wind* dominated the box office and fan magazine coverage in the period following its release. The March 1940 issue of *Silver Screen* declared it “The sensation of the year,” proclaiming, “It really is the most wonderful, magnificent, and truly marvellous picture that you can ever hope to see” (“‘Gone With the Wind’ Review” 48). *Modern Screen* similarly pronounced, “This is a picture of such magnificence and breath-taking beauty that it must be seen—and lived—to be truly appreciated” (“‘Gone With the Wind’ Review” 8). The film set a record for Academy Award wins and nominations, winning eight Oscars from its 13 nominations.<sup>25</sup> Olivia de Havilland was nominated for Best Supporting Actress but lost to Hattie McDaniel, who became the first African American to win an Oscar.<sup>26</sup> The film was nominated as *Photoplay*’s Gold Medal Winner for 1939 – the motion picture selected as the most outstanding of 1939 by the readers of the magazine (“Photoplay’s Gold Medal Winner – ‘Gone With the Wind’” 68).

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<sup>25</sup> *GWTW* won awards for Best Picture, Director (Victor Fleming), Adapted Screenplay (Sidney Howard), Actress (Vivien Leigh), Supporting Actress (Hattie McDaniel), Best Cinematography, Color (Ernest Haller and Ray Rennahan) and Best Art Direction (Lyle Wheeler).

<sup>26</sup> Under the terms of her contract, Olivia de Havilland was the top billed female actress.

Many of the reviews of the film commended de Havilland for her performance as Melanie. *Silver Screen* wrote, “A third magnificent performance is given by Olivia de Havilland as the gentle and long suffering Melanie—in fact, there are those who will insist that Olivia steals the picture” (“Gone With the Wind Review” 48), *Modern Screen* stated, “Olivia de Havilland gives a beautiful and flawless performance as the loving Melanie” (“Gone With the Wind’ Review” 8). *Photoplay* declared, “Olivia de Havilland has done the finest job of her career as the sweet, gentle Melanie” (“The Shadow Stage – ‘Gone With the Wind’ Review” 62). There was a frequently repeated sentiment that through her performance in *GWTW*, de Havilland had proven her skill and ability as an actress and that this role had in a considerable and consequential way altered the public perception of de Havilland as well as the direction of her career. In the discussion of their Gold Medal Winner, *Photoplay* wrote, “Olivia de Havilland jumped many rungs up the ladder of screen fame with her tenderly sincere *Melanie* (italics in original “Photoplay’s Gold Medal Winner – ‘Gone With the Wind’” 68). It was made even more explicit in an editorial from Ernest V. Heyn in the March 1940 issue of *Photoplay*:

“Gone with the Wind” has changed the life and deeply influenced the personality of the lovely girl on our cover, Olivia de Havilland. She has told me about it. Her interpretation of Melanie surprised even those who admired her handling of the many anemic roles that preceded this difficult assignment.

...

A career is changed by such a vital force (and let’s hope this unexpectedly promising one will be fostered by Warner Brothers). (1)

However, as Heyn’s editorial notes, only Warner Bros. could materially change the direction of de Havilland’s career and, based on the roles she was cast in after *GWTW*, the studio was not particularly interested in doing so.

In the three years following *GWTW*, Olivia de Havilland appeared in an average of four movies a year with minimal or no breaks between movies. In the period between the release

of *GWTW* and de Havilland's suit of Warner Bros., de Havilland starred in 11 movies.<sup>27</sup> Two of these were Flynn vehicles (*Sante Fe Trail* (Michael Curtiz, 1940), *They Died With Their Boots On* (Raoul Walsh, 1941)), in which she played the same sort of role she had in earlier collaborations with him. She received first billing on three films (*My Love Came Back* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1940), *Government Girl* (Dudley Nichols, 1943) and *Princess O'Rourke* (Norman Krasna, 1943)) and second billing on six (to David Niven in *Raffles* (Sam Wood, 1939), James Cagney in *Strawberry Blonde* (Raoul Walsh, 1941), Charles Boyer in *Hold Back the Dawn* (Mitchell Leisen, 1941), Henry Fonda in *The Male Animal* (Elliott Nugent, 1942) and to Bette Davis on *In This Our Life* (John Huston, 1942) ) and third billing in one (to Bette Davis and Errol Flynn on *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Michael Curtiz, 1939)). This is a slight improvement on the period between signing with Warner Bros. and *GWTW*, during which she received one first billing, 12 second billings and one third billing. Additionally, she was the protagonist of the three films she received first billing in (*My Love Came Back*, *Government Girl* and *Princess O'Rourke*). However, the only film on which de Havilland received any recognition similar to that of her performance as Melanie was in *Hold Back the Dawn*, where she played a young, naïve woman tricked into marriage by a handsome Romanian who wants an American citizenship.<sup>28</sup> For this performance, for which she received an Academy Award nomination as Best Actress, she had been loaned to Paramount, suggesting that other studios were prepared to cast her in more interesting roles than her home studio.

Even though her on-screen persona remained fairly consistent at Warner Bros. both pre and

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<sup>27</sup> De Havilland did work on two films that I have not included in this paragraph. She made a brief appearance in *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (David Butler, 1943), an ensemble film musical made by Warner Bros. to showcase its stars and contribute to the war effort. The stars all donated their salaries to the Hollywood Canteen, a nightclub established by Bette Davis where Hollywood stars volunteered to cook for, serve, dance with and entertain servicemen on leave (Schickel and Perry 160–1). She also starred in *Devotion* (Curtis Bernhardt), which was made in 1943 but not released until 1946 because of her lawsuit against Warner Bros., so it would not have contributed to her on-screen persona during this time.

<sup>28</sup> The only role de Havilland reported being satisfied with during this picture was *Hold Back the Dawn*, for which she received an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress. She lost the award to her sister, Joan Fontaine, for *Suspicion* ("Belle of Cinema").

post-*GWTW*, there were marked changes in other aspects of her stardom. The first of these was a change in her fan magazine discourse. The mentions of beauty and goodness continued, but a new element replaced the endless discussion of romance. “Screen’s Cream Puff Goes Dramatic” opens with the lines, “Olivia de Havilland doesn’t want to be sweet anymore! Brace your shoulders, grip your chairs and we’ll give you the gruesome details.” The article continues:

Yes, sir, Olivia wants roles with more “character.” She is not only stamping her feet in utter finality, but live wire sparkles are beginning to flash from her enormous round brown eyes.

The bitter irony of the great de Havilland rebellion is that she never minded being the sweetest little thing on the screen until David Selznick cast her as *Melanie*<sup>29</sup> in *Gone With the Wind*. (25)

Again, as with the depiction of romance and marriage discussed in an earlier section, this challenge is directly linked to being female. In “Fresh Out of Sugar,” she is quoted as follows:

“You get creatively ill if you do nothing but goody roles,” declares Olivia. “You get bored. The sameness, the monotony, the synthetic quality of the women who are always good, who never lose their temper, who are long-suffering and so placid you want to stick pins in them, puts ambition and interest in moth-balls. Give an actress a sufficient number of these women to play, and she can kiss her career goodbye. (23)

References to how playing Melanie changed de Havilland as a person recur throughout articles. In “Don’t be a Doormat!,” an unnamed studio boss explains that people used to treat de Havilland like a schoolgirl, so she acted like one. The article explains:

For the first time at the Selznick studio people treated her like an actress instead of a schoolgirl. Because people thought of her that way, she began to think of herself that way and she gained self-confidence . . . She was standing on her own feet and facing

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<sup>29</sup> It was convention in fan magazines of this time to italicise or place in quotation marks character names as well as movie titles.

her own future. She had stopped being a doormat and she no longer felt like one. (98)

The characters she played, however, still demonstrated somewhat doormat-like qualities. One constant complaint in these articles was references to de Havilland's ongoing frustration with the lack of agency of her characters. In "Fresh out of Sugar," she decried the lack of agency given to her characters, stating, "No role is artistically constructive if it is stuffed with straw. Audiences like to see a woman who makes things happen, instead of waiting for something to happen to her" (Bennett 32). In this fan magazine discourse, de Havilland is no longer satisfied with being the romantic prize; instead of working to support her family until love comes along, post-*GWTW* de Havilland is looking to make her labour more satisfying and fulfilling.

This fan magazine discourse, which repeated de Havilland's publicly stated desire for more substantial roles, conflicted with Warner Bros.' continual typecasting of her in romantic roles. This resulted in disputes between star and studio that were reported on in fan magazines and therefore became part of de Havilland's fan magazine discourse. For example, *Silver Screen's* gossip column "Hollywood Earful" in May 1941 wrote:

Olivia de Havilland finished off one feud with her studio, Warner Brothers, but before you could say Jack Robinson she had started another. We don't like to take sides in star versus studio fights, but we can hardly blame Olivia for demanding better roles from her home studio after her superb performance as "Melanie." (16)

Similarly, *Photoplay* told its readers, "Olivia de Havilland is still under suspension as we write because she said [there is] absolutely nothing doing after 'Gone With The Wind'" (Wade 87). Through both feature articles and gossip columns, de Havilland's dissatisfaction with the type of roles she was cast in by Warners Bros. thus became a key element of her post-*GWTW* fan magazine discourse.

What is interesting in this discourse is the underlying sense of the justification of de Havilland's frustration. A common form of resistance employed by individual stars protesting against specific casting in the studio era was withdrawing their labour by refusing to act in particular roles. De Havilland responded to parts she felt would be detrimental to her career (or that she simply did not want to do) by withdrawing her labour and refusing to act in the film to which she was assigned. However, while the studios could not force their stars to act in movies, when their stars did refuse, the studios placed them on suspension.

Suspension was an option in long-term option contracts via which studios extended the star's contract length during the time they were suspended. As Jane Gaines points out, "Suspension effectively stopped the seven-year contract clock, thus adding more time to the actor's required employment for every day he or she was laid off" (152). Every time de Havilland refused to do a role, she was suspended by Warner Bros. and the time of her suspension added to the end of her contract.

In August 1943, Olivia de Havilland's seven-year contract with Warner Bros. expired. De Havilland had been acting in starring roles for almost all of that period but that stardom had failed to translate into the challenging roles that she states she desired. By 1943, her weekly salary had risen from \$250 to \$2,500 but her contract gave her no creative discretion over her roles (Carman 134). She had received two Academy Award nominations, yet both of these were for performances in films in which she was on loan to other studios. The type of roles she was cast in tell us her home studio seemed uninterested in developing her skills as an actress, instead happy to capitalise on typecasting by repeating the same sort of roles in the same sorts of lacklustre films, even though she had proven her talent and her market appeal. To change the direction of her career required de Havilland to take action unlike any other actor of the studio era, a decision that had ramifications for the entire star system that underpinned studio-era Hollywood.

### **Olivia de Havilland Versus Warner Bros.**

The conclusion of Olivia de Havilland's seven-year contract with Warner Bros. was marked by escalating conflict over the roles to which she was assigned. In "Last Belle of Cinema," de Havilland explains the situation she found herself in in August 1943 as her contract period ended:

I finally began to do interesting work like *Melanie*, but always on loan out to another studio. I was nominated for *Gone With the Wind*, and then two years later, I was loaned to Paramount for *Hold Back the Dawn*. And was nominated again. So I realised that at Warners I was never going to have the work that I so much wanted to have. After *Melanie* and *Hold Back the Dawn*, I knew that I had an audience, that people really were interested in my work, and that they would go and see a film because I was in it, and I had a responsibility towards them, among other things. I couldn't bear to disappoint them by doing indifferent work in an indifferent film.

De Havilland therefore made the decision to join the growing number of female actresses who had eschewed studio contracts in favour of being a free agent, signing short-term contracts with a number of studios. Other female stars had achieved great success using this practice. Carman notes that as a free agent, Carole Lombard was able to choose her own film projects and negotiate individual deals with multiple studios. Provisions in Lombard's freelance contract guaranteed her creative control, for example gave her the power to choose her directors and co-stars as well as make-up artists and costume designers. Carman argues that these provisions not only ensured Lombard was one of the highest paid actors in the world, it also enabled her to reach the apex of her career (1). De Havilland, however, did not intend to become a full free agent like Lombard. She was happy to continue to work for Warner Bros. but, instead of working as an exclusive long-term contract, she asked for a non-exclusive, freelance three-picture deal at a salary of \$75,000 per film, with the right to do one outside picture (Carman 134).

A memo from studio executive Steve Trilling explains de Havilland's rationale for this decision:

She originally preferred to be free at the end of her present contract, but realizes Warner Bros. have been very good for her and probably in some respects it would be best to be tied up with us. But she wants to reserve the right to do at least one outside picture each year, so that when a *Hold Back the Dawn* . . . role does come along she would be in a position to accept. (cited in Carman 136)

Jack Warner, however, was not interested in negotiating with de Havilland. Over the previous seven years of her contract, every time de Havilland was sick or refused to work on a movie, Warner Bros. had suspended her without pay. Warner responded to de Havilland's request for better contract terms by extending the duration of her seven-year contract for the cumulative sum of her suspension time, which was almost nine months (Carman 139). In response to Warner's actions, de Havilland took the advice of her agents, Phil Berg and Bert Allenberg, and turned to the legal system – she sued to have her prior contract declared unenforceable because it violated California Labor Code 2855, which limited personal-service contracts to no more than seven years (Carman 136).

In order to explain why this was so significant, I must first discuss the option contract. As discussed earlier, the star system was a central organising principle of the studio system that

characterised the film industry during the classical era. The star's popularity and drawing power created appeal for a picture, with the star's name and image dominating advertising and publicity while at the production level, the screenplay, sets, costumes, lighting and make-up were designed to enhance a star's persona and the narrative shaped to best fit the star's on-screen persona. Tino Balio describes this process as follows:

Because a star provided an insurance policy of sorts and a production value, as well as a prestigious trademark for a studio, the star system became the prime means of stabilizing the motion picture business. ("Selling Stars" 209)

To safeguard their "precious assets" ("Selling Stars" 209), the studios used the option contract to legally ensure they had control of the stars. Balio describes the option contract as follows:

In signing an aspiring actor or actress, the studio used a contract that progressed in steps over terms of seven years. Every six months, the studio reviewed the actor's progress and decided whether or not to pick up the option. If the studio dropped the option, the actor was out of work; if the studio picked up the option, the actor continued on the payroll for another six months and received a predetermined rise in salary. ("Selling Stars" 210)

In the option contract, only the studio had the right to drop or pick up the option, not the star. The contract did not provide reciprocal rights, meaning that an actor or actress could not quit to join another studio, could not stop work and could not renegotiate the terms of the contract. The contract could also include clauses giving the studio the right to change a performer's name, to force the actor to comply with rules covering interviews and public appearances and the studio held the ability to control the performer's image and likeness in advertising and publicity.

The language scholars have used to describe the option contract is similar. Take, for example, Tom Kemper's description:

On the one hand, the option contract represented stability, guaranteeing regular employment and salary to actors, often stipulating specific salary increases at each renewal, a promising prospect for the notoriously nomadic existence of the creative

professions. On the other hand, the contract represented a form of indentured, if starlit, servitude. (11)

The option contract did place the balance of power on the side of the studios, and the concepts of servitude were often invoked when talking about the studio contract; for example, “Although stars may have been well compensated, they were indentured employees, placed in a subservient position by the option contract” (Klaprat 351). Even de Havilland’s biographers use similar language, with Robert Matzen writing, “When Livvie signs a seven-year contract, she becomes the breadwinner of the family, but also the property of the Warner Bros. Studios—just like the lights, sound-stages, and grip trucks” (np).

However, Kemper notes that for many performers, the studio contract itself was an item of desire, achieved after years of working as an amateur or low-level performer. He writes:

A contract represented, then, a prize, an achievement all on its own. This symbolic status alone made a common studio contract an object of desire and value for artists. For an agent securing a studio contract was one of the first steps in building an artist’s career; it was also a test of the artist’s value or utility to the studio. (127)

More than that, a studio contract brought with it a guarantee that a film would meet certain conditions: it would be adequately financed, it would be of a certain quality, it would be distributed to theatres, and it would be worked on by other talented and qualified practitioners: all factors which potentially bolstered an artist’s career. The option contract was also a major means for working out conflicts between studio and star over the interpretation of the star image (Gaines 148). The studios attempted to secure on-screen continuity through provisions for illness and vacations, wardrobe fittings, absences from set and photographic sittings. Stars, in turn, inserted riders modifying wardrobe requirements, stipulating screen billing order and even specifying they would only work with particular specialists (for example, designers and cinematographers). The contract thus became a way for stars to exert agency over their work; as Gaines describes it, “Such demands were an attempt on their part to control the manufacture of their own images within the constraints of the studio system” (149). Therefore, although it did favour the studios, the option contract could be negotiated to ensure increase credit control and financial award for stars through special provisions; for example, Barbara Stanwyck and Irene Dunne were able to place terms in their contracts that allowed them to control key aspects of their career such as how many

movies they made per year, which directors and actors they would work with and how many weeks leave they could take per year (Carman 11). Thus, while the contract was a restrictive document which placed the balance of power with the studios, it also provided one tool for stars to negotiate conditions.

One of the major issues for stars concerning the option contract was its suspension practices. As with de Havilland, the option contract allowed studios to suspend stars if they did not meet the terms of their contract (for example, by refusing to act in a particular picture) and then add the suspension time to the end of their contract. This was particularly an issue for Warner Bros. stars, as Gaines reports that the “notoriously prudent” Jack Warner would offer stars unsuitable roles just so they would refuse them and he could suspend them and then not have to pay them (154).

There were few options for those who were unhappy with the terms of their contract. One was to just refuse jobs; however, as described above, this resulted in the time of the suspension being added to the end of the contract. The other option was to sue the studios. Two Warner Bros. stars, James Cagney and Bette Davis, walked out of their contracts in 1932 and 1936 respectively due to a number of issues, such as feeling that their salaries were not commensurate with the amount of work they did and because of lack of control over the amount and type of pictures they were cast in (“Selling Stars” 214–6).<sup>30</sup> Although both were able to negotiate improved terms after losing their court cases, neither of them were happy and after his contract expired, Cagney became one of the first stars to go into independent production. In these cases, scholars have suggested that the aim of the suits was not to actually defeat the studios but to wrest control over one’s careers. For example, Schatz argues that legal battles against the studios such as Cagney and Davis’ were motivated less by the hope of defeating the studio than by gaining some degree of control over their careers (*Genius* 233). This suggests that stars turned to the courts when bargaining and contractual negotiations failed in Hollywood (Carman 134).

One key difference between the suits of Cagney, Davis and de Havilland was the basis of the lawsuits. Cagney and Davis both contested the terms of their individual contracts with Warner Bros. De Havilland, in contrast, sued Warner Bros. about their ability to extend the

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<sup>30</sup> For more information on the rebellions of Cagney and Davis against Warner Bros., see Balio, “Selling Stars,” 214–6.

contracts of *all* actors, using California's anti-peonage laws. The state of California, in a provision that Matt Stahl states is almost unique, protects employees from contracts of excessive duration through Section 2855 of the California Labor Code, commonly known as the seven-year rule (6–7). This law states that employees in California cannot be forced to work more than seven years. De Havilland and her lawyer, Martin Gang, argued that de Havilland had served the seven years of her contract and was therefore entitled to free agency. In response, Warner Bros. contended that she had only rendered her service for “six years, twenty-six and three-eighths weeks” and that the studio was entitled by the option contract to seven years of actual service (quoted in Stahl 13). Judge Charles Burnell declared in favour of de Havilland on March 14 1944. In response to Warner Bros.' claims that the statute's seven years meant seven years of actual service, he noted:

Roles might be assigned to an artist which she could not consciously portray. It would even be possible, if an artist should incur the ill will of a producer, to require her to portray roles which would entirely destroy her popularity and value as artist, and because of her refusal to demean herself, suspensions and elections to extend the term of the contract would prevent her from ever seeking other employment. She might suffer long periods of illness and the life of the contract might be at the option of the producer be extended, as has been said, indefinitely, thus precluding her from ever working for any other employer. It was to prevent such a condition of peonage or serfdom that the statute was enacted. (quoted in Stahl 15)

Judge Burnell's decision placed the time limit of seven actual years on the seven-year contract as an inalienable right that could not be signed away by employees. This decision, called the De Havilland Law, is still in effect today (Stahl).<sup>31</sup>

This decision had a huge impact on the star system that underpinned the entire studio system. As it was no longer possible for studios to add suspension time to the end of actors' contracts, like Warner Bros. attempted to do to de Havilland when she tried to negotiate for a new and better contract, it removed a major impediment for stars becoming freelance agents or signing contracts with other studios. As Schatz notes, “This was a watershed event in Hollywood's history, a significant victory for top stars and a huge setback for the studios” (*Genius* 334).

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<sup>31</sup> Carman notes that de Havilland's name was misspelt as “De Haviland” by the court in issuing the “De Havilland Law” (197 n16).

Carman argues that de Havilland's legal victory "represents the delayed culmination of the quest for independent stardom in studio-era Hollywood" (137); therefore, she played a vital role in establishing the right of free agency in Hollywood. The De Havilland Law altered the balance of power between star and studio, granting the actor more freedom than they previously had.

While the de Havilland decision had considerable ramifications for the studio system, the victory came at a huge personal and professional cost for de Havilland. After the original decision was handed down, Warner Bros. appealed the ruling twice, losing their appeal both times, a process which took more than two years. As she was not under contract for the time during which she was suing Warner Bros., she was legally allowed to work for other studios. However, Jack Warner blackballed her within the industry, with the studio making clear that de Havilland was not available for hire. For example, on 16 March 1944, *The Film Daily* reports:

Warner Bros. has notified motion picture producers and legitimate theatre owners that the studio still considers Olivia De Havilland [sic] under contract to it and no court action becomes final until Warner Bros. appeal on Superior Judge Burnell's decision is acted upon. ("De Havilland Still Under Contract to It, WB Says" 2)

Not only did this result in a loss of income, coverage of de Havilland in fan magazines and on screen effectively vanished in this two-year period. There was therefore the possibility that this break might derail her career and that when she did reappear in films, the popularity she had previously enjoyed would also have vanished.

Fortunately for de Havilland, this fear proved to be unfounded. After her court battles ended, she received multiple freelance offers, eventually signing a non-exclusive three-picture deal with Paramount. Importantly, the contracts she signed after her legal victory granted to de Havilland something her Warner Bros. contract had not: control over the direction of her career. As an independent freelance star, de Havilland was no longer fighting with a studio head for roles; instead, she had clauses written into her Paramount contract that gave her control over key aspects of her films, such as director approval, and the contract itself was non-exclusive, meaning she was able to accept other roles if she wanted to (Amador 139). She was finally able to choose to play characters "who initiated things, who experienced important things, who interpreted the great agonies and joys of human experience" and was

rewarded for her choice with two Academy Awards in quick succession, for *To Each His Own* (Mitchell Leisen) in 1946 and *The Heiress* (William Wyler) in 1949. Through her agentic behaviour in suing Warner Bros., de Havilland effectively changed the course of her career and contributed to improving conditions for all contracted stars in the studio system.

## Conclusion

When Olivia de Havilland is mentioned in histories of Hollywood's classical era, it is almost always in relation to her successful suit against Warner Bros. and the ramifications of the de Havilland ruling for the star system. However, the examination of the early career of de Havilland conducted in this chapter demonstrates that de Havilland's stardom is of far greater importance than just for its legal contribution. Marked by a clear tension between opportunity and constraint, de Havilland's early stardom is remarkable for its demonstration of how the film industry enabled her success while still placing limits on it. Through her work at Warner Bros., she was provided with opportunities for social mobility through fame and financial rewards that resulted in visible autonomy in the public sphere. At the same time, however, these opportunities were restricted: the roles she was offered were as romantic leads playing characters with little agency or power to move the narrative and, given her popularity in her early movies, her home studio had little interest in moving her outside of that character type. The conflict plays out in the fan magazine coverage of de Havilland's early career, which worked to resolve the disparity between de Havilland's lived experience as an unmarried and independent female worker and her on-screen persona playing characters devoted to love. It did this through representing de Havilland as believing that marriage was so important it was an all-encompassing vocation that was incompatible with a career. While this discourse attempted to reconcile the disparity between de Havilland's on- and off-screen personas, it also reflected the conflict experienced by many working women of the 1930s, whose professional life frequently conflicted with the expectation of women in the domestic sphere. De Havilland's stardom at this time can therefore be understood as embodying the contradictions of female stardom: working as a public example of the opportunities available to women in Hollywood while at the same time being subject to limitations of conventional social roles and narratives of love and marriage.

To change the trajectory of her career and challenge the limits placed on her stardom, de Havilland employed a number of strategies of negotiation. She illegally auditioned for the role of Melanie in *GWTW* and then, after being told that Warner Bros. would not permit her to be loaned to another studio, enlisted the assistance of Jack Warner's wife, Ann, for support, employing soft negotiation practices to get the role she wanted. Her success as Melanie changed her fan magazine discourse, introducing a component of justified professional frustration to the existing discourse of the importance of all-encompassing but momentarily delayed love. However, despite this, Warner Bros. continued to cast her in the same sort of roles she had received prior to *GWTW*, still typecasting her as the romantic prize. This demonstrates how the enactment of star agency can influence representations of a star's career but also how this enactment is limited by the industrial framework of Hollywood, for example through the option contract, which granted de Havilland very limited ability to select her roles or control whether she was able to be loaned out to other studios for more challenging and interesting roles. To overcome this barrier, de Havilland used the legal system, a strategy that resulted in her finally being able to gain independent freelance stardom.

In this chapter I have contributed to both the knowledge about Olivia de Havilland and our understandings of female stardom in classical Hollywood more generally. Analysis of her early career identifies the methods through which institutional control and social typologies restricted the agency of female stars through mechanisms such as the option contract and character typecasting. Examining the early career of Olivia de Havilland provides an example of a star pushing back against these constraints, with sources demonstrating a desire for more challenging roles and less codified characters and narratives. Reading de Havilland's stardom through a lens of agency and subjectivity therefore reveals an image of aspirational femininity that could not be subordinated to the terms of Hollywood.

# Chapter Four: Practices of Resistance and Negotiation in the Early Stardom of Joan Fontaine

## Introduction

*Why does one write the story of one's own life, spread it out like a well-worn carpet for unknown feet to tread upon? Every actor is supposed to have one book inside him; every woman has a thousand disappointments, joys, sorrows, heartache she carries around within her secret self. Being both an actor and a woman, I cannot feel that my life has been a bed of roses. It has had many vicissitudes, many frustrations, many rewards. I write about it for many reasons, not the least of which is the hope that it may be a guidepost to others.*

“Introduction,” *No Bed of Roses* (vii)

In the opening of her 1978 autobiography *No Bed of Roses*, Joan Fontaine describes herself using two terms: “actor” and “woman.” The division she makes between the life of an actor, whose life generates enough interest that each one “is supposed to have one book inside him,” and that of a woman, with her “thousand disappointments, joys, sorrows [and] heartache,” was a central concern of all female stars in classical Hollywood, whose professional success often sat uncomfortably alongside the expectations of traditional femininity. It was also particularly relevant for Fontaine, for whom key career moments are characterised by conflict: between her and her more famous sister, between being a wife and being an actress; between her contracted requirements and her professional happiness; and between the satisfaction and interest of the actress’ life and the expectation of domesticity assigned to women in her time.

Defined from her earliest days as an actress in relation to her more famous and successful sister, Fontaine’s career and persona can be characterised by the conflicts they contain and the practices that Fontaine engaged in to resolve them. Even now, she is best remembered for her fraught sororal relationship, with books such as *Sisters: A Biography of Olivia de Havilland and Joan Fontaine* by Charles Higham and *Olivia de Havilland and Joan Fontaine: Twisted Sisters: To Each Her Own* by Darwin Porter and Roy Moseley promising the salacious truth about the two stars. There is little research or writing that looks at Fontaine

beyond this relationship. However, despite the lack of attention paid to her career and work, Fontaine is a valuable contribution to the study of the negotiation practices of female stars. From the time she arrived in Hollywood, Fontaine's star discourse was characterised by the practices of resistance through which she navigated hegemonic practices and power relations within Hollywood. She followed her sister to Hollywood and, like Olivia, she was quickly signed onto a contract with a major studio (RKO). However, she did not share her sister's smooth passage to stardom. Unlike many stars, she named herself, disrupting the patriarchal naming practices that were fundamental in studios' control over their female stars. After her first attempt at stardom failed, she signed with an independent studio and got married, two events which signalled a dramatic shift in her personal and professional lives and which altered the direction of her career. Following this, there is a duality in the production of her stardom between the different expectations placed upon women and stars.

Despite the importance of Fontaine to star studies and understandings of female stardom more generally, there is little academic work that considers and evaluates how she actively contributed to her status as a star and then mobilised it to develop this stardom further. In this chapter, I address this gap in the knowledge about her stardom through a detailed analysis of the early part of her career. Firstly, I explore the period after Fontaine arrived in Hollywood, examining how naming practices were used as a form of resistance to common studio practices. Second, I examine the re-establishment of Fontaine's persona after early failure, exploring how the marriage of Fontaine was used to alter and soften her previous persona in order to closely align Fontaine with her breakout role in *Rebecca*. In the final section, the influence of *Rebecca* on Fontaine's career is identified, noting the ongoing difference between her on-screen deferential, devoted persona and the fan magazine discourse that highlighted the struggle between success in marriage and career fulfilment. This study of the development of the career of Joan Fontaine provides a fascinating opportunity to explore the practices of negotiation of an individual star in prewar Hollywood working for an independent rather than major studio.

## **Emerging Stardom: Joan de Beauvoir Arrives**

Joan de Beauvoir de Havilland was born on 22 October 1917 in Tokyo, Japan, "one year,

three months, and three weeks [after] her only sibling,” Olivia (Fontaine 9).<sup>32</sup> The sisters moved to the United States with their mother, Lilian, after their parents’ divorce. Soon after arriving, they moved to Saratoga, California, where they lived until Olivia was 17 and Joan 15. As outlined in the previous chapter, Olivia was “discovered” by Max Reinhardt and moved to Hollywood to appear in the movie version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, signing a long-term contract with Warner Bros. When Olivia moved to Hollywood, Joan moved to Tokyo to be with her father, Walter. However, before long she returned to the United States, joining Lilian and Olivia in Hollywood, where she too was signed by a Hollywood agent and, shortly after, an independent producer.

The process through which Joan de Beauvoir became Joan Fontaine and an actress is somewhat disputed. According to the many fan magazine profiles that recounted her move into acting, Joan was asked by a family friend, Henry Duffy, to try out for a role in a play called *Call It a Day*.<sup>33</sup> A performance of the play was seen by producer Jesse L. Lasky, who immediately signed her on a contract to his independent production company, which he then sold on to RKO. An example of this can be seen in an article published in the July 1937 issue of *Motion Picture*. In “Future Favorites: Joan Fontaine,” John Schwarzkopf writes:

Six months ago, this young lady was an unknown. Then, through Henry Duffy, a personal friend of the family, she was invited to try out for a role in *Call It a Day*, a stage play produced in a Hollywood theatre. It was that role that gave her her start, for the opening night saw Jesse Lasky in the audience on a talent scouting tour . . . At that time, Lasky had his own company so, before he left the theatre, he had her signed to a long-term personal contract . . . Shortly after, Lasky became associated with RKO and took Joan with him where she got her first part in the pictures. (ellipses in original)

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<sup>32</sup> I would normally refer to stars by their last names. However, given that Olivia and Joan shared a last name for at least the first 19 years of Joan’s life, I use first names in this part of the chapter for clarity.

<sup>33</sup> Coincidentally, the screen version of *Call It a Day* (Archie Mayo, 1937) was the first film that Olivia de Havilland received top billing for, thus becoming a key text for both sisters.

This origin story does not mention Joan signing with an agent. However, Tom Kemper finds that signing with an agent was instrumental to Joan receiving a contract. He uses talent reports to argue that Joan's agent Ivan Kahn got her a small part in a stage production under the name "Joan St. John." Kemper reports that Kahn and his associate Harry Green convinced Jesse Lasky to see the play, after which Lasky signed Joan on a \$150 a week contract to his independent production company at Paramount, which he then sold to RKO. Kahn then sold her representation contract to Zeppo Marx's agency, where she changed her name to Joan Fontaine (59).

The difference between Kemper's claims and the fan magazine's recounting of events is an example of the difficulty of clearly establishing the historical veracity of the specific details of contracts in classical Hollywood in two ways. Firstly, it highlights the lack of attention paid to the role of talent agents in the discovery and development of new stars. Kemper argues that agents represented "a vital component of the complex conduct of classical Hollywood" (xi), drawing attention to the role of talent agents in the signing of new stars, a role that was rarely acknowledged by fan magazines and, as Kemper notes, is still not recognised in most histories of Hollywood. Agents acted as a sort of "filter" for the new talent for Hollywood, sorting through the many acting hopefuls to select actors who could be potential stars and presenting them to the studios (54). In addition to this, as noted in the previous chapter, agents also represented actors when negotiating contracts; for example, Olivia de Havilland was referred to Ivan Kahn by Warner Bros. to represent her in negotiations before signing her first contract (57). The lack of acknowledgment of the work talent agents in fan magazines and trade papers or even by the stars themselves in public reminiscences about their careers means that often the agents and their vital role in the development and ongoing success of stars are written out of film and star histories.

Secondly, the lack of access to contracts in the archives means that information must be extrapolated from other sources, which are not always reliable, consistent or detailed. The document referred to by Kemper reads:

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<sup>34</sup> The other "future favorite" identified in this issue is John Wayne, making this fan magazine particularly (and quite unusually) prescient in its predictions.

Met her at the apartment of her sister, Olivia de Havilland, and asked her if she was interested in pictures. She said she would like to try. Under the name of JOAN ST. JOHN I took her to all the studios and a number of tests were made, but they were turned down.

Finally, I took her to Henry Duffy and put her in one of his plays, "Call It A Day." My associate in the agency, Harry Green, and I took her to Jesse Lasky, who is producing independently and asked him to see the play. After seeing her performance, Jesse Lasky signed her to a long term deal and when he went with RKO he sold her contract to them.

After she went to RKO – through mutual agreement – I sold her agency contract to Zeppo Marx. ("Talent scout reports")

I interpret this document differently to Kemper. I believe that Kahn means that her unsuccessful screen tests were under the name "Joan St. John," not that that was the name she was signed to Jesse Lasky under and the document does not specify that she changed her name to Fontaine after signing with Zeppo Marx.<sup>35</sup> The file I found does not mention a dollar figure, which implies that there may have been a document in the contracts folder with that information which is now no longer there.

This issue is further confused by looking at fan magazines. While signings of new actors were rarely mentioned in fan magazines, Joan's family connections mean that her signing was newsworthy and in August 1936 *Picture Play* reported that "Jesse Lasky has put Olivia de Havilland's kid sister under contract, her name being Jean [sic] Fontaine" (Hollis 64). Joan's autobiography is little help in determining the order of events. She writes somewhat obliquely of these events, "I met a theatrical agent who soon placed me under contract with his agency" (74). She then describes her signing with Lasky in similar language to that used

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<sup>35</sup> Even after selling her contract, Kahn still had faith in Fontaine. In a 31 January 1939 memo to Lew Schreiber that is located in the same file as the previously quoted memo, he writes, "I still think this girl is a real bet. In her case it is only a matter of proper handling, and I would like to suggest that sometime you have her agents bring her out to see you on an interview" ("Memo to Lew Schreiber").

by the fan magazines:

I was given the ingenue role in Henry Duffy's *Call It a Day* . . . After the opening night performance at Duffy's Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard, the highly respected film producer Jesse Lasky was ushered backstage and into my dressing room. Mr. Lasky was noted for his good taste . . . I was extremely flattered that I had caught his attention.

Soon Mother and I found ourselves in Mr. Lasky's panelled office. I affixed "Joan Fontaine" to the bottom of a seven year-contract. No changing names for me now. Mr. Lasky shook our hands as we were about to leave and smilingly promised that Olivia's little sister would be a big star under his management. (77)

These examples demonstrate the difficulty of pinning down exact details about contracts and names in classical Hollywood. To the best of my knowledge, the original contracts cannot be found in any publicly accessible archives,<sup>36</sup> so it is impossible to know for sure the exact details of who signed what with whom exactly when under which name. I am not interested in determining the "truth" of the name change process, only acknowledging that the name change process from de Havilland to Fontaine is difficult to track with certainty. What we do know for sure is that before being signed by Lasky, Joan appeared in two films: *No More Ladies* (Edward H. Griffith, 1935) as Joan Burfield and *A Million to One* (Lynn Shores, 1937) as Joan Fontaine. Therefore, we can conclude that by 1937, Joan de Havilland had officially chosen Joan Fontaine to be her working name.

## **Becoming Joan Fontaine: Resistance Though Practices of Naming**

In the previous section, I provided a brief outline of the process through which Joan de Beauvoir de Havilland arrived in Hollywood and became Joan Fontaine. I also identified the difficulties encountered when establishing details concerning contracts and events through archival and biographical sources. I will now look at how Joan Fontaine used practices of

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<sup>36</sup> The Jesse L. Lasky archives at the Margaret Herrick Library do not contain these contracts and the Joan Fontaine archives held at the Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University do not contain contracts from this part of Joan's career or any correspondence between Joan and Kahn or Lasky.

naming as a form of resistance. Through the act of choosing her own name, Fontaine exercised agency and utilised the naming process as a practice of resistance. To demonstrate this, I will first establish the importance of the name and naming practices to both women and stars.

At its most simple, a name is the label that we use to describe and identify a person. In practice, however, naming is much more complicated. A person's name is a key part of their identity. Carolyn J. Eichner writes, "The name constitutes the most public form of personal representation and identity" (660). As Eichner explains, "A name binds a person to a history, to a familial line, in legal, social, and emotional ways" (660). Kif Augustine-Adams similarly notes, "Naming practices reflect conceptions of individuality, equality, family and community that are fundamental to identity" (1). However, the relationship between naming and identity is dependent on gender, because in Western societies, naming is an inherently patriarchal practice. Names are traditionally assigned in a patrilineal manner, where each individual's name is derived from their father's name (i.e., children take the name of their father and a wife the name of her husband). Traditionally, upon marrying, the woman "surrenders" her surname and accepts her husband's patronym, thus figuratively abandoning her natal family and becoming redefined as her husband's wife. Given the link between naming and identity, patrilineal naming practices affect women's self-identity; whereas the identities of women change based on their relation to others, men's identities are solid and consistent.

The name serves a heightened function for stars. Richard deCordova argues that knowing the name of the performer was vital for the development of the star system, as the name was central to the intertextuality of the picture personality's image. It was the name that served to unite performances and individuate performers across a body of films. It functioned to construct the picture personality as an on-screen identity and to help reinforce the undeniable specificity of each star (87). This understanding of the role of the star name is reinforced when we consider how stars have been understood within film studies. Richard Dyer describes a star text as being made up of everything we know about the star (*Stars* 3). This complex polysemic sign is unified by two key "sign vehicles" that mark the difference and the continuity of the star: the body and the name (P. McDonald *Hollywood Stardom* 49). Paul McDonald identifies a further three key functions of a star name. The first is that it provides a measure of uniqueness: the Screen Actor Guild's membership rules and regulations state no two members can have identical working names (*Hollywood Stardom* 50), therefore there is

only one Joan Fontaine, actress. The second function of the star name is as a source of signification. The star name functions to compress what is known of the person; as McDonald writes, “In Hollywood stardom, names alone are enough to bring to the screen rich collections of pre-conceived ideas about a performer” (*Hollywood Stardom* 50). The third function of the star name is to anchor the dispersal and repetition of the star’s performance (*Hollywood Stardom* 53), unifying the disparate components of the star that appear across different platforms. Thus, “naming identifies, individualizes and differentiates performers on-screen and so remains foundational to Hollywood stardom” (P. McDonald *Hollywood Stardom* 49).

In addition to the functions outlined by McDonald, a star’s name was a vital component of the organisation of the studio system. It was often necessary for a star’s name to be attached to a project before it could be approved. Additionally, the “rich collections of pre-conceived ideas about a performer” described by McDonald influenced the film being made when it was a star vehicle (i.e., an Errol Flynn movie had particular narrative, stylistic and promotional characteristics). Advertising campaigns were arranged around the name of the star, with the star’s name often above the title and far more prominent than any of the other contributors to the movies. Stars’ names were listed in lights outside movie theatres along with the movies’ names to advertise the currently screening features. A star’s name was also a vital component of the strategies of negotiation employed by individual stars. Individual star contracts specified the placement of the star’s name in movies posters and credit sequences and thus were a way for stars to formally ensure their importance and status.

Given the fundamental importance to stardom of the star name outlined here, the star name is therefore a site through which the workings of power within the studio system are evident, both in demonstrating who is dominant and subordinate and acting as a point through which power struggles are enacted. As illustrated in the previous chapter in regard to Olivia de Havilland, after being signed to a long-term studio contract, actors typically went through a period of extensive change, with studios altering their names, gait and look (for example, their hair colour and body shape). Danae Clark argues that changing the names of actors was one way to construct and establish control over a coherent, saleable persona – by erasing an actor’s previous identity (name, personal history), the studio could create a new image and identity (22–3). For studios, however, this process did not stop at the naming. Personal histories were created for the stars, with hobbies and lifestyles that aligned the actor’s “real” life with the on-screen persona established by the studio (Klaprat 360). Through these

practices – of naming and of creating personal histories, which they controlled – studios were able to control many aspects of stars’ lives.

As demonstrated earlier, Fontaine chose a name for herself before she signed with a studio. (Interestingly, she followed *both* matrilineal and patrilineal practices: she gave herself the same surname as her mother, Lilian Fontaine, but Lilian had taken her second husband’s name upon marriage.) I read this decision as an act of resistance: a way to deny any studio the power to name her and therefore to limit (to some extent) the power they held over her. I shall now demonstrate that this practice of negotiation became a key part of her off-screen star discourse once she was signed by RKO, allowing her to demonstrate her agency while still drawing on one of her biggest assets: her association with her famous and successful sister.

Fontaine’s first film for RKO was a very small role in *Quality Street* (George Stevens, 1937) as an ingenue. Following this, mirroring the career of her sister who was launched straight into the position of leading actress without first appearing in minor or supporting roles, she appeared in six starring roles over the next two years. The type of characters Fontaine played during her RKO years tended to be feisty, plucky and independent women with a certain level of class or education. If they were working women, they were not shopgirls or typists but in jobs that required training and/or skill. For example, in *Music For Madam* (John G. Blystone, 1937) she played a determined and ambitious composer who crashes the party of a famous conductor in order to show him her work and further her career. In *The Man Who Found Himself* (Lew Landers, 1937), she plays a capable nurse who perceptively uncovers a secret none of her male co-workers were aware of. She also frequently played women with either title or class: in *A Damsel in Distress* (George Stevens, 1937), she played an English noblewoman courted by Fred Astaire’s Jerry Halliday, while in *Maid’s Night Out* (Ben Holmes, 1938), she plays an impoverished but high-class woman who is mistaken for a maid by a rich man who is temporarily working as a milkman. In both of these films, her resolute attraction to an “unsuitable” man (i.e., an American and a milkman respectively, although eventually both of those men were found to be very rich) overcame all objections and the movies concluded with her successful coupling. These roles were united by a particular character type and narrative action; however, at this point in her career, there was no particular distinctive visual or stylistic component to her on-screen persona.

As is common in classical Hollywood, fan magazines worked to align her “reel” life with her

“real” one. As is typical with female stars, the oft-repeated story of her signing by Lasky is an example of her being discovered rather than intending to start a career. However, after this standard female-star beginning, the fan magazines focused on her hard work, determination and ambition. Reportedly very ill as a child, the young Joan de Havilland was forced to spend a lot of quiet time in bed. The fan magazines recount that due to this, she retreated into a world of books, reading the classics rather than spending time with friends. Upon arrival in Hollywood, this poor health translated into a determination to succeed. In “A Goal So High,” Williams describes her as being “intensely serious about her career” (62). In “Roundup of Youth,” an article surveying the new talent of 1938, Sara Hamilton notes that for Joan, “Ambition burns and eats like a living coal within” (“Roundup of Youth” 79). In “A Star is Born,” Fontaine is quoted as critiquing the idea so commonly associated with female stars that stardom happens rather than is something someone works for:

I’ve seen other girls discovered by the movies—pretty intelligent girls—who failed, and I’ve asked myself why. I think there is only one answer, in so many of the cases. They were not willing to work.

They were discovered so suddenly and effortlessly that they thought they had a God-given something that would make them stars overnight. When they learned about the long, dull, dreary hours that stars had spending in study, in rehearsal, in this and that, they said, “That kind of drudgery isn’t for us.” And then, when stardom didn’t happen, they blame “jealous stars,” “stupid roles,” “poor direction”—everything but themselves. Everything but their own willingness to work really desperately to succeed. (C. Craig 92)

Yet, while pointing to her hard work and dedication as the reason for her receiving starring roles, Fontaine disavows one of the key factors contributing to her circulation within the Hollywood sphere: her family connections. Articles on Joan frequently refer to her desire to succeed independently from her sister while, at the same time, mentioning her more famous sister at least once. For example, in “A Star is Born,”<sup>37</sup> Carol Craig writes:

Her studio, at Joan’s own specific request, is avoiding all mention of the fact that she

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<sup>37</sup> The film *A Star is Born* (William A. Wellman), to which the title of this article is a reference, was released in April 1937.

was born Joan de Havilland and that she has a sister named Olivia. She never mentions it herself if she can help it. She's fiercely "on her own." (91)

Despite the often-repeated desire to not be associated with her sister, I was unable to find a single article on Fontaine published in a fan magazine in 1937 or 1938 that did not mention their relationship. For example, in "Why Joan Fontaine Left Home," Sonia Lee writes:

Less than two years ago, a girl as fragile as a cameo, as delicate as a miniature in ivory, was introduced to the public as a potential new. She carried the intriguing name of Joan Fontaine. No mention was made by her studio that her sister was Olivia De [sic] Havilland, already entrenched with Fame. In a town where every family connection is capitalized, where every lasting bit of pull is used, this was a curious and amazing situation without equal in an industry where forty-second cousinship is claimed, if it will do any good. Neither Joan nor Olivia ever discussed the other. Interviewers caught onto the idea, and tactfully refrained from asking the wrong questions. (26)

In a particularly egregious example, in the *Picture Play* article "That Girl's Here Again," published in December 1937, Joan is commended for getting acting work "minus any assistance from sisters or family" and is described as a person who "makes it a law to travel entirely under her own steam" (Lane 97). The article, however, also spends two pages describing Olivia and Joan's childhood together and even has a strap along the bottom of the first page of the article that states in capital letters "Joan Fontaine: Olivia de Havilland's determined kid sister" ("That Girl's Here Again" 18) (Figure 4).

# THAT GIRL'S HERE AGAIN!

IT'S THIS way," said the producer. "You've got the looks, Joan, but you can't dance!"

"Humph!" said Joan Fontaine and rumbled her bright hair and squinted those perfectly good hazel eyes of hers. "I thought Fred Astaire was to dance alone in 'Damsel In Distress.'"

"You've been reading the papers again," said the producer. "Fred is going to do a number or two with the girl selected to be his leading lady. So-ooo..."

"So I'll be back!" said Joan. That should have warned him, but producers are seldom warned. He went right on searching for a new partner for Astaire.

Then one fine morning the producer's secretary announced in no uncertain terms, "She's back." And there was Joan in a practice outfit going into her dance on his bearskin rug. Doing a symphonic tap that was tops almost on the animal's head. It was too much for the gentleman. He ordered a test made. He ordered a

Joan chortled. "That's easy. I've been taking lessons during my noon hour and at night. Then I went to the dance director here at the studio and I've been working out with him." P.S. She got the part.

Until she was two years old, Joan was so ill they had to keep her wrapped in cotton wadding. Then, at three, Stanford University professors gave her the Terman Intelligence Test and rated her ten points higher than a genius. That's Joan Fontaine for you.

She is nineteen now—and beautiful. However, it's the flame of her you see first. There is something so young and eager and fearless about her, it's almost tangible. Once, on the way to Tokio, the ship she was on struck a typhoon. Instead of huddling in the main cabin with the other passengers, Joan strapped herself to a post on deck with her belt and watched in a fervor of excitement.

She was born in Japan—October 22, 1917, in the International Settlement in Tokio, the second daughter of an attractive young British couple. The elder daughter, aged three and affectionately known as "Ollie," asked Nikko for a baby sister. And Nikko, of course, could draw them from the sky. He was the estimable Oriental who divined your fortune in the sand for one yen and whose wisdom often startled even the older members of



She gets what she goes after, does our Joan, because she won't take "No" for an answer.

BY VIRGINIA T. LANE

the interested community. The first time he caught sight of Joan, he made an obeisance that swept the ground. His Nipponese calm crumpled surprisingly. "She will be great, this one. Among the famed of the earth," he said excitedly. But the mother only laughed gently. "You said that about our first baby!"

"That is well," Nikko nodded, unperturbed. "You are blessed." She felt pretty much that way about it herself, even though the baby was so frail and strangely quiet. Finally the doctors gave their decision. If Joan were to live at all, she would have to live on the mainland. In America. Without further to-do the family left for San Francisco and settled in a small town near it, sprawling in a sunny valley, a town ready-made for healthy, robust kids. Ollie was one of them from the first. But not her sister.

It was enough to give anyone a man-sized inferiority complex. But it made Joan want to fight. She had to show them, she had to travel under her own steam without help from anyone. It became the ruling obsession of her life and it explains much that happened later.

"Joanie, stop! You'll kill yourself!" Terrified screams from the neighbors. But she paid no attention. She had never ridden a bicycle before. Now she was on Ollie's, coasting down the steepest hill in town. Loving it. By a miracle, coming to a safe stop five blocks away.

"Joanie, if anything had happened to you I would have died, too." Ollie's dark little head was against the golden one. They clung to each other. Sensitive, sweet kids. Worlds apart in temperament, closer than two little peas in a pod in devotion.

THE NIGHT they learned their parents were getting a divorce, they cried in one another's arms for hours. Then Joan suddenly turned and thumped her pillow. "Up," she said on a last half sob. It was a by-word between them. You had to keep your chin up no matter what happened.

After it was all over, Meg, as they adoringly called their mother, and the two girls drew more together than ever. Meg always was interested in the theatre and she had drilled them in Shakespeare (Continued on page 97)

Meet Joan Fontaine—Olivia De Havilland's determined kid sister

Figure 4: "That Girl's Here Again"

The parallels between the sisters extended beyond just drawing attention to their connections: it included similarities in their fan magazine discourse. Like de Havilland, Fontaine was frequently described "beyond the age mentally of girls whose calendar years are no greater

than hers” (Lee 48). Also like de Havilland, a career is seen to be incompatible with being a wife. The fan magazines note that Fontaine has no boyfriends and is not interested in love. Williams writes that “to romance she gives not even a passing thought” (62). Hamilton states, “Loves to cook fancy dishes but wouldn’t give a dime a dozen for boys. The play’s the thing with Joan” (“Roundup of Youth” 79). Yet, just as the institution of stardom is predicated upon a system of sameness and difference, so too was the fan magazine discourse of de Havilland and Fontaine. Fontaine needed to be similar enough to de Havilland to attract the audiences who found Olivia appealing, but different enough so she could draw her own audience. The main difference between the fan magazine discourse of the two sisters is while de Havilland’s career focus and lack of romance was portrayed as being sweet and nice, as befitting her on-screen persona, in Fontaine these same qualities were framed as ambitious, focused and fiercely independent.

RKO featured Joan in nine movies over two years.<sup>38</sup> However, the feisty, plucky character played by Fontaine failed to resonate with audiences, and on 9 November 1938, *Variety* reported that RKO had “allowed Joan Fontaine’s option to lapse, in line with the studio’s recent policy to cut their contract list to a minimum” (“RKO Drops Fontaine” 5). The news item noted that Fontaine was currently working on *The Duke of West Point* (Alfred E. Green, 1938) on loan to Universal. Little attention is paid to Fontaine by fan magazines for the remainder of 1938 and 1939 until two major events happen: she is cast in Alfred Hitchcock’s adaptation of Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* and she marries fellow actor Brian Aherne. This is important because this period is where many of the characteristics of Fontaine’s star discourse coalesced. In this period, the centrality of naming practices to Fontaine’s persona is again made clear, as her identity as a married woman is a vital component of the changes we see at this time.

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<sup>38</sup> Of these nine movies, she was a main protagonist in five (*The Man Who Found Himself*, *You Can’t Beat Love* (Christy Cabanne, 1937), *A Damsel in Distress*, *Maid’s Night Out* and *Blond Cheat* (Joseph Santley, 1938)), had a minor role in one (*Quality Street*), was the love interest in one (*Sky Giant* (Lew Landers, 1938)) and was loaned out to Universal for one as a love interest (*The Duke of West Point*) and Jesse Lasky for another main protagonist role (*Music For Madam*). The size of her roles and the prominence of her name and image in the marketing suggest that RKO believed she had enough appeal to draw audiences into films.

## “Hollywood Calling for Miss Fontaine”: The Emergence of the New Joan Fontaine

After being let go by RKO, even though she was still appearing in movies (*The Duke of West Point*, *Gunga Din* (George Stevens, 1939) and *Man of Conquest* (George Nicholls Jr. 1939) were all released in this period), between November 1938 and September 1939, Fontaine’s coverage in fan magazines almost completely vanished. Given the mutually beneficial relationship between fan magazine and studio described by Andrew Slide, where the magazines received material from the studios and promoted particular stars accordingly in a particular way (*Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine* 14), this suggests that without the backing of a major studio, fan magazines had little interest in Fontaine. This changed at the end of 1939 when a series of events brought Fontaine back into circulation: positive reviews of her performance in *The Women*, marrying Brian Aherne, being cast in the lead role of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* and signing a seven-year contract with Selznick International Pictures.

The first of these events was Fontaine’s casting in *The Women*. *The Women* was a big-budget film directed by George Cukor, his first film under contract to MGM (McGilligan 155). Its central conceit was that there was not a single man in the cast (the tagline of the movie was “135 women with nothing on their minds but men”). Fontaine signed with a one-picture deal MGM for just this film, not a longer contract as was standard (Fontaine 91). It was only a minor role – she was seventh billed among the large ensemble cast. However, it was an important role for two reasons: it introduced a new on-screen star persona for her and provided an entrée to what would prove to be her star-making role in *Rebecca*. *The Women* centres around the relationships of a group of wealthy Manhattan women with their husbands and each other. In *The Women*, Fontaine played Mrs John Day, first name Peggy. (In this film all married women are introduced by their married name, with their first name being supplemental to this title. All of the single women are introduced by their first name only. A woman’s identity is thus centrally linked to being a wife). As a wife, Peggy does not work but she has a small income of her own which she gives to her husband. When her husband refuses to let her use her own money to buy a car, she decides to divorce him. On the train to

Reno,<sup>39</sup> (34) she exclaims, “He wouldn’t let me buy a car with my own money. Just because he can’t buy a car, I can’t buy a car. He wants me to be a slave!” Her pride will not allow her to be treated in this way. However, the day before her divorce is granted, she finds out she is pregnant and returns to her husband, her pride forgotten. While the treatment of women and marriage in *The Women* might seem anachronistic to current viewers, its message was clear: a woman’s role was to be a good wife to her husband, even if that means accepting infidelity, giving up her independence and, as is repeated often within the film, her pride. This is made clear from the opening credits, where each actress is introduced (with what might appear to modern audiences like quite shocking misogyny) as animals. Fontaine is represented as a lamb (Figures 5 and 6). For Fontaine, this role as a dependent woman who is defined in terms of her relationship with a man is a clear break from her earlier roles as plucky, independent women. However, it was one that resonated with audiences in a way her previous roles had not – she received better reviews for her minor role in this film than she had for her earlier RKO performances. This may reflect the complicated address to female audiences of female stars identified by Studlar, where individual stars were able to negotiate contradictory subject positions (284).

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<sup>39</sup> Dubbed “the divorce capital of the world,” Reno, Nevada had the most liberal divorce laws in the country, allowing a so-called “quickie” divorce to be had on almost any grounds provided one stayed in the state for six weeks. The Reno divorce was a popular plot device in books and movies of the 1930s and Jani Scandura describes *The Women* as “the most expensive and best known of a fairly rich genre of motion pictures” (353).



Figure 5: Opening credits, "The Women"



Figure 6: Opening credits, "The Women"

Although *The Women* was instrumental in introducing new elements into Fontaine's on-screen persona, it was in her next role that the new Joan Fontaine was consolidated. Producer David O. Selznick, who had had a massive hit with *Gone With the Wind* (*GWTW*) (from which, incidentally, he had fired *The Women* director George Cukor), was keen to replicate its success with his next film, *Rebecca*. There were numerous similarities between the two projects. *GWTW* was a highly anticipated adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's wildly successful novel of the same name; *Rebecca* was a highly anticipated adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's wildly successful novel of the same name.<sup>40</sup> Another thing he replicated was the search for the female star of the film. Famously, for *GWTW* this had been a two-year process that involved travelling all over America and testing hundreds of women before casting the unknown Englishwoman Vivien Leigh, who won an Academy Award for her portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara. While not as extensive as with *GWTW*, the casting process for the actress who would play the role of "I" de Winter was a key part of the film's publicity.

The casting process for the role of "I" de Winter has been extensively documented. Laurence Olivier was signed to play Maxim de Winter. Olivier was strongly advocating for Leigh to play the role of "I," which he had been promised she would be considered for (Spoto 216).<sup>41</sup> She was considered, but among many other actresses. A memo from Hitchcock to Selznick on 19 July 1939 discussed the casting of 27 actresses, including Leigh and Fontaine, and the

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<sup>40</sup> Kyle Dawson Edwards notes that at the time of the film *Rebecca*'s production, *Rebecca* and *GWTW* were among the top-selling books of the 20th century to that point (40).

<sup>41</sup> Rudy Behlmer reports that Olivier and Leigh were relentless in their pursuit of the role of "I," bombarding Selznick with calls and letters about the casting. In the telegram in which he advises Leigh that she will not be cast as "I," Selznick is bluntly unambiguous as to his decision, writing: "I regret necessity tell you we are finally convinced you are as wrong for role as role would be for you . . . And even though you must be completely wrong casting, we might still have put you in had we thought it was good for you, regardless of the picture, but I am positive you would be bitterly criticized and your career, which is now off to such a tremendous start with Scarlett, materially damaged" (270).

scheduling of a further nine more.<sup>42</sup> Fontaine is described by Hitchcock as follows:

Tested. Possibility. But has to show a fair amount of nervousness in order to get any effect. Further test to see how much we can underplay her without losing everything. (“Memo to Mr. David Selznick”)

By 19 August 1939, Selznick had reduced the selection to Ann Baxter, Joan Fontaine and Margaret Sullavan (Behlmer 272). In a detailed letter to his colleague John “Jock” Whitney, Selznick describes the “curiously complicated” situation regarding Joan, since she had decided that “she would be delighted and honored to play that part but that she didn’t want to make any more tests” (cited in Behlmer 272).<sup>43</sup> This is perhaps an unusual response for an uncontracted actress trying out for a possibly star-making role in a prestige production. It does, however, introduce the duality between career and romantic relationships that characterises her star persona from this time forward, because the reason that she turned down the opportunity to continue testing for the role of “I” is because she was getting married to Brian Aherne.

Brian Aherne (born Willian Brian de Lacy Aherne) was an English actor who had achieved

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<sup>42</sup> The actresses firmly dismissed by Hitchcock in this memo include Marjorie Reynolds (“too much gangster’s moll), Jean Muir (“too big and sugary”), Heather Angel (“unattractive to look at”) and Katharyn Aldrich (“too Russian looking”) (“Memo to Mr. David Selznick, 19 July 1939”).

<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, there was a chance that Fontaine would lose the part to her sister. In a memo to Daniel T. O’Shea, Selznick writes that before they decide on a lead, “I want to make sure we have exhausted every possible means of getting Olivia de Havilland” (cited in Behlmer, 272). He lists four barriers to her hiring: Warner Bros.’ reluctance to lend her out (as noted in the previous chapter, de Havilland had great difficulty being lent to Selznick for *GWTW*); a previous commitment to another movie; her agent Leland Howard wanting his wife Margaret Sullavan to be cast; and Olivia’s unwillingness to be considered because of the possible casting of her sister, Joan. Selznick had little time for this sisterly concern, responding, “I think that we would frankly have to tell Leland that Miss de Havilland would be foolish to take this attitude, since it might very well wind out that she would make the sacrifice for her sister only to have someone else play it, perhaps Vivian Leigh” (cited in Behlmer, 276).

some success in Hollywood by the late 1930s. He refused to sign a long-term deal with any studio, instead signing shorter six-month deals with studios including MGM and Columbia (Aherne). By the criteria used in this thesis, he is not a star in that he did not have the off-screen/on-screen persona interaction that required for stardom (a “real” life that reinforced his “reel” life); yet, although he is not considered a star in the traditional sense, he was still a very successful actor, regularly appearing in leading roles throughout the 1930s and ‘40s. The key distinguishing factor of his persona at this time was his ability to provide appropriate leading man support to actresses with strong characters like Joan Crawford and Bette Davis (George Brent played a similar role at Warner Bros., where he was frequently paired with Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck). This is well summed up by Roy Liebman, who writes, “While not really having a strong persona of his own he always made his female costars look good” (10). Aherne had worked with de Havilland in *The Great Garrick* in 1937. He invited Olivia and the de Havilland family to a party at his house, where he met Fontaine. After a short courtship of about six weeks, Fontaine and Aherne got married.

The courtship and marriage of Aherne and Fontaine are closely intertwined with the emergence of the new Joan and her role in *Rebecca*, in part because at the same time Fontaine was auditioning for “I” de Winter, she got engaged and married. In a memo, Selznick wrote about the situation:

Now the situation on Fontaine is curiously complicated since her engagement to Brian Aherne, whom she is marrying tomorrow, Saturday. I have told her of my feelings that she could not sustain the part and that she might be monotonous through the entire picture; and that as a consequence we would be very hesitant about casting her in the role until and unless we saw other tests which she had, for a couple of days before I spoke with her, refused to make (saying that she would be delighted and honoured to play the part but that she didn’t want to make any more tests). I said to her yesterday that what we would like to see is three or four scenes from various parts of the picture to get the full range of her performance. Unfortunately, her face is swollen with an impacted wisdom tooth (and not so good for a honeymoon) and therefore she couldn’t make the tests today or any time before her marriage tomorrow. She said that she would be delighted to cut her honeymoon short, coming back after a week if we decide to put her in the part; and further that she would cut her honeymoon short to make further tests. (Behlmer 283)

Fontaine's "curiously complicated" situation exposes a number of issues with the historiographical study of film history and film stars. The first of these intertwining issues is looking at the approaches to how stars are studied. Any narrative associated with a star has a history. When discussing this particular moment in Fontaine's stardom, it is important to place each source of knowledge in its context. In this section, I use material contemporaneous to the contract signing and film's release (fan magazines and trade papers) as well as Selznick's memos (written contemporaneously but not published until 1972) as well as Aherne's autobiography (published in 1969) and Fontaine's autobiography (published in 1978).

In her autobiography, Fontaine describes this period as follows:

I had met Paulette Goddard one night at Charlie Chaplin's the year before . . . a night that was to change the course of my career. At dinner, where Paulette presided, though it remained a mystery whether she was Mrs. Chaplin or not,<sup>44</sup> I found myself seated next to a heavysset, bespectacled gentleman who seemed particularly knowledgeable and pleasant. Soon we were chattering about the current best sellers. I mentioned that I had just read *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier and thought it would make an excellent movie. My dinner party gazed at me through his lenses. "I just bought the novel today. My name is David Selznick." Who was I and would I like to test for the part of "I" de Winter? Would I!

During the fall of 1938 and the spring of 1939, I tested many times, first with John Cromwell directing, finally with Alfred Hitchcock. So did every eligible actress in Hollywood, including Virginia Mayo, Vivien Leigh, Loretta Young, Susan Hayward, Lana Turner, Anne Baxter, and Geraldine Fitzgerald.

Against such competition, winning the coveted role looked hopeless. My agent advised me to forget it. Anyway, by August 1939 I was getting married to Brian Aherne, moving out of Nella Vista, starting a new life. A week before my wedding, David Selznick called me on the telephone. Would I delay my plans and test once

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<sup>44</sup> Fontaine is referring here to the debate as to whether Paulette Goddard and Charlie Chaplin were actually married that was ongoing in fan magazines through much of the 1930s.

again? I declined. (94)

As with many of the events described in *No Bed of Roses*, parts (or even all) of Fontaine's story are probably not accurate. She had auditioned for the part of Melanie in Selznick's *GWTW* and Selznick was an incredibly famous and powerful producer in Hollywood, so it is unlikely (although, of course, not impossible) that this dinner party conversation occurred as described here, with her being unaware of who Selznick was. However, what is of interest here is not the truthfulness of Fontaine's storytelling, but rather what these stories and moments represent in terms of gender and the processes of negotiation employed by Fontaine.

As described by both Fontaine and Selznick, when given the opportunity to do another test for the role of "I" de Winter, she turned it down to get married. This was a risky decision: as one of many actresses trying out for the role, she may easily have been passed over due to her unwillingness to do more tests. In *No Bed of Roses*, Fontaine describes the uncertainty around her employment following her marriage. She writes, after receiving her engagement ring from Aherne:

Looking at my ring thoughtfully, secretly wishing I had a microscope, I wondered what husbands did about pocket money for their wives. After all, if I was giving up my career . . . (ellipses in original 95)

This was a real dilemma faced by women at this time. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Depression had resulted in an increase in the number of married women in the workforce, with one-quarter of all working women in 1940 being married (Ware 24). However, these women generally worked due to financial necessity rather than personal and/or career fulfilment. Additionally, women who did work out of the home faced public criticism that they were taking jobs that could be otherwise be taken by men and were neglecting their families. Some, such as those who worked in the public service, were even prohibited from working after marriage. Fontaine worked in one of the few occupations open to women in 1940 where she had the option of continuing to work without public censure; however, she was still subject to the same ideological and cultural pressures as all other women.

With the hindsight of history, we know that she did get the job and she did leave her honeymoon early in order to take it. Here is what both Aherne and Fontaine said about this

time in their respective autobiographies. In order to best convey the meaning, I quote them at length. First, Aherne:

Almost by impulse, I married Joan Fontaine, sister of Olivia de Havilland, young, pretty, gay, and utterly charming—and no actress, thank God, or at least so I thought until the fifth day of our honeymoon in the Oregon woods, when my dream was abruptly shattered by a phone call from David Selznick, offering her the lead in his picture *Rebecca*, with Laurence Olivier. Over my despairing protests, the honeymoon was instantly abandoned, and we rushed back to Hollywood, where she was launched into orbit a big new motion picture star. (287)<sup>45</sup>

Fontaine has a slightly different memory of how events occurred:

I was basking in the quiet of the forest-edged lake, the chance to be away from the curious guests. A bellboy waved a towel at us from the bank. “Hollywood calling for Miss Fontaine!” Oops! We paddled to shore. . . . It was my agent. “You’ve got it, you’ve got it!” he crowed. “*Rebecca*. You’ve got the part and Selznick wants you to hurry back and sign a long-term contract!” Stunned, I could only murmur that I wasn’t sure I still wanted a career. I hung up and got into the canoe as Brian rowed toward the middle of the lake.

After another refrain of “Chu Chin Chow” and nary a nibble from a trout, I hesitantly relayed my agent’s offer. Brian looked up into the sky, rebaited his hook, and said, “Why not? You’re going to a new house, new friends. I shall be away all day filming *Vigil in the Night* . . . with Carole Lombard. You’ll be lonely.” Dropping his line into the water, he added, “Do it for hat money.” There! Mrs. Bruiner and God had put their heads together. I wouldn’t have to ask my husband for an allowance. Thus, despite his subsequent protestations that he did not want an actress for a wife, Brian

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<sup>45</sup> Aherne comments on the beginnings of their marriage obliquely in another part of the book: “A few years later, I married a very young girl who suddenly and unexpectedly became a movie star. Discovering the *Othello* notices on my desk one day [positive notices of a performance that had been collated for Aherne by a fan], she was so overcome by jealousy that she destroyed them” (261).

sanctioned my making *Rebecca* and signing the seven-year contract which was contingent upon getting the coveted role. (107)

The accounts of both Fontaine and Aherne must be understood within the tradition of autobiography/life-writing. Aherne published his autobiography in 1969, nine years before Fontaine published hers and, as is evident, she directly responds to his statements in her writing (“despite his subsequent protestations that he did not want an actress for a wife”). In *Reading Autobiography*, Watson and Smith note how in contrast to biographical writing, which tends to employ multiple forms of evidence such as historical documents and family archives, autobiographical writing uses personal memories as the primary archival source, with other sources employed as evidence “to support, supplement, or offer commentary on their idiosyncratic acts of remembering” (7). As they write:

In autobiographical narratives, imaginative acts of remembering always intersect with such rhetorical acts as assertion, justification, judgment, conviction, and interrogation. That is, life narrators address whom they want to persuade of their version of experience. And . . . memory is a subjective form of evidence that cannot be fully verified externally; rather, it is asserted on the subject’s authority. (7)

Thus, it cannot be determined whether Aherne or Fontaine’s version of events is correct and, in fact, even if the “truth” of an event could be determined, it does not actually matter. As stated by Watson and Smith:

Sometimes people read autobiographical narratives as historical documents, sources of evidence for the analysis of historical movements, events, or persons. . . . When life narrators write to chronicle an event, to explore a certain time period, or to enshrine a community, they are making “history” in a sense. But they are also performing several rhetorical acts: justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures, among others. The complexity of autobiographical texts requires reading practices that engage the narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text. To reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions. (13)

Thus this discussion around Fontaine's hiring for *Rebecca* needs to be understood in terms of functions other than whose narrative is the truth; rather, this moment becomes a site upon which different expressions concerning gender, stardom and the value associated with women's work are contested and explored.

In order to track how the discourse around the new Fontaine acted as a site of contestation, I now explore how she was reintroduced into public following her lack of success at RKO. Fontaine was signed by Selznick International Pictures in September 1939. Selznick International Pictures (SIP) was an independent studio headed by David O. Selznick that had been established in 1935 with the aim of making prestige productions. Signing with a small independent studio instead of a major studio had a large impact on the development and redevelopment of Fontaine's persona, in particular in relation to the casting and promotion of Fontaine as a star.

There was a considerable operational difference between the small independent studio SIP and the major studios; notably, the process of making and releasing films at an independent studio was vastly different to that at a major studio. Studios like RKO maintained a large roster of staff including actors, directors, cameramen and costume designers as well as a lot of physical infrastructure such as studios and cameras. They released a steady stream of films of varying budgets and quality in order to maximise these assets. Brian Taves states that during the 1930s, the major studios released around 50 pictures a year made up of both A and B films. The A films had bigger budgets, better production values, tended to feature stars and/or be designed as star vehicles and were promoted more heavily than B films. However, B films made up the bulk of the movies released (Taves states that 75 per cent of films released in the 1930s were B films (313)). He writes:

A's [sic] were made on budgets averaging \$350,000 or more, with stars who appealed to a wide cross section of patrons. Such films were intended to play the top half of a double bill, with a running time of seven reels or longer, and were produced on shooting schedules that allowed time for rehearsals and retakes. Among the A's would be a few prestige films, or "specials," with an extra investment of time, money, and star power, in anticipation of awards and major box-office success at first-run theaters. (314)

Bs, in contrast, were designed to fit in the second half of a double bill and thus often had leads with “moderate, questionable or unknown box office appeal” (314). Unlike A pictures, which were paid for by exhibitors on a percentage basis and thus had a greater potential to make or lose money, B films were usually paid for with a flat fee, meaning they rarely lost money. This information is relevant for a study on stars because many of the conflicts between stars and their studios related to issues concerning the quality of the film the star was cast in as well as the star’s role in it and position in the film’s marketing and promotion (for example, both Bette Davis and Olivia de Havilland with Warner Bros. as discussed in the previous chapter). Studios wanted to maximise the use of their well-paid staff of stars and, if no suitable A role was available, would cast them in B pictures. For a well-established star, appearing in a poor-quality film with no-name leads and directors could be potentially very damaging to their career (and, probably, their ego).

A subset of the A film was the prestige film. Balio describes the prestige film as “typically a big-budget special based on a presold property, often as not a ‘classic,’ and tailored for top stars” (*Grand Design* 180). When establishing SIP, Selznick boldly declared that he only wanted to make prestige films. At a SIP board meeting in 1935, he said:

There are two kinds of merchandise that can be made profitably in this business, either the very cheap pictures or the very expensive pictures. So, as far as I am concerned, there is no alternative open to us but to attempt to compete with the very best. (quoted in Schatz *Genius* 194)

In terms of production, this meant that SIP intended to make fewer pictures with higher costs, with Selznick preparing and supervising each SIP product. However, it also meant working without the efficiency, productivity and discipline of what Schatz describes as “the full-blown factory” of the Hollywood studio system. Instead of having an extensive roster of ongoing staff, Selznick tended to hire directors, writers and actors for one or two-picture deals (with the notable exceptions of Fontaine and Hitchcock, among some others) (*Genius* 203). He also lacked the infrastructure and the distribution and exhibition networks available at the major studios. This organisational structure had implications for the stars signed to the SIP stable.

SIP’s publicly stated mandate to produce only prestige films meant that signing with SIP provided Fontaine with a guarantee that any picture she was cast in would be of prestige

quality. Therefore, by signing with SIP she was potentially avoiding the disputes her sister experienced with Warner Bros., as SIP's aim to produce only prestige films would guarantee the high quality of her pictures, her roles and her co-stars and directors. However, as SIP did not have the promotional department of a large studio, the construction of her star persona would not be as comprehensive as it would at a larger studio. In a major studio, stars were one of the components that led to a studio's distinctive style (for example, Errol Flynn and swashbuckling epics at Warner Bros.) and the star themselves was one of the studio's key assets. Therefore, the studio worked on developing the distinct persona of each star through a coherency in aspects such as characterisation, style and publicity. While being signed by an independent rather than major studio gave Fontaine a freedom that other contracted stars did not have in regard to not being typecast as one particular character type (as experienced by her sister); at the same time, because she didn't have a major studio supporting her, there was less of an impetus to build a cohesive star persona as well.

As mentioned earlier, other than her good notices for *The Women*, coverage of Fontaine effectively vanished after she was dropped by RKO. This changed after she signed with SIP, when there was a sharp increase in the mentions of Fontaine in fan magazines. By looking at this wave of publicity, it is possible to identify a particular strategy through which Fontaine was being reintroduced to the public. However, at the same time it is also possible to identify points of tension in this fan magazine discourse between different female "types" and hence to locate practices of negotiation to nullify these points of tension. One of the most important tasks of this new wave of publicity is to reinforce the difference between the new Fontaine and the old, unsuccessful Fontaine. In "Handle With Care," Sheilah Graham made this intention clear:

Incidentally, the general impression of Joan Fontaine around Hollywood, I regret to say, for too long has been that she is a driving, ambitious, career-obsessed young lady with about as much sense of humour as a time clock. That's not only too bad, it's utterly untrue. (29)

Gone were mentions of hard work and a woman whose drive and ambition left her no time for love. The new Fontaine, in contrast, was focused on domestic happiness, primarily as demonstrated through her marriage to Aherne. Headlines such as "I Don't Want to Be A Career Girl!" in the August 1940 issue of *Motion Picture* loudly proclaimed the primacy of

domesticity over career. In this article, Fontaine was cited as describing marriage as more fulfilling than a career:

The glory of stardom? It's such a shallow, transitory glory. I can't think of it as important. There are other things that are so much more important to me—to any woman in her right senses.

Do you know a single woman in Hollywood who has been made happy—genuinely, permanently happy—by a career? I don't. (23)

This sentiment was repeated in “The Foibles of Fontaine”:

I've seen too many marriages put to death by a career, particularly by woman's career. . . . A career is not going to be the death of *this* marriage—it's NOT! The only thing that matters is Brian's happiness, and mine. *Our* happiness together. The oneness we have nothing in this world will take away from me, not while there is breath in my body, not while my mind functions. (emphasis in original Hall 89)

The message presented in these articles was clear: the most important role for the new Joan Fontaine was wife not actor; any career success occurred incidentally.

However, as the contemporaneous readers of the fan magazines would have known, Fontaine *was* a career girl. She did continue to work during this period rather than stay at home and, for all the declarations of the primacy of her marriage, she had signed a contract obliging her to work, and work constantly, for seven years after she married. Therefore, these articles employed several recuperative strategies to cover up this discrepancy between action and statement. The first of these is the appearance of “Mrs Brian Aherne,” Brian Aherne's wife, an identity that appears to sit alongside and separate to Joan Fontaine, actress. For example, in “Hollywood at Home,” Adele Whitely Fletcher writes, “Joan Fontaine is ‘Mrs. Brian Aherne’ to everyone but her associates in the studio. She wouldn't have it any other way. Either would Brian” (19). In “The Foibles of Fontaine,” Gladys Hall writes, “Like when I arrived at Mrs. Brian Aherne's—(‘They’ may call her Fontaine, she calls herself Joan Aherne)” (34). The repeated references to Fontaine's married name serve to reinforce the change from single, ambitious woman to devoted, loving wife.

Using a new name as an important element in the development of a star persona is particularly interesting in relation to Joan Fontaine, whose name was such a large part of the

discourse of her earlier star persona. I earlier argued that the act of choosing her own name was a demonstration of independence and a rejection of the ownership that comes when a studio signs a star. Yet, in the articles following her marriage, the name that signifies the enactment of agency (“Joan Fontaine”) is replaced by a name that symbolises a different type of submission (“Mrs Brian Aherne”). By giving up her self-chosen name (in part, at least), Fontaine publicly cedes the previously claimed independence. However, just as she was able to both declare independence but still benefit from her sister’s fame through the constant and repeated disavowal of her sister (which allowed her to constantly and repeatedly remind readers of her connection to her famous sister), the coexistence of the two names – “Joan Fontaine” and “Mrs Brian Aherne” – means she could continue to be an actress while realigning her problematic female independence with a patriarchally acceptable role.

The custom in America at the time was for women to take their husband’s last name upon marriage and be referred to publicly as “Mrs His Name.” Patrilineal naming practices, where the patronym forms the basis of the family, are a logical outgrowth of patriarchy and an acceptance of male priority and privilege. Men, in general, retain their names from birth to death, demonstrating social and cultural independence and constancy. In turn, their identities are seen as more firm than that of women; Eichner notes, “Their identities are worthy of permanence; they are the ones to whom women are related” (660). These naming practices highlight the insidious operation of patriarchy in everyday life. For example, the practice of women changing their names to their husband’s after marriage in the United States was one that was driven by custom rather than any legal requirement. Lucy Stone is usually credited as the first woman in America to publicly keep her married name (she generally signed legal documents “Lucy Stone, wife of Henry Smith”). In 1856, after 14 months of marriage to Henry B. Blackwell, she decided to go back to her maiden name. However, despite it being legal for her to do this, she was repeatedly faced with legal difficulties. For example, in 1879, she was prevented from voting for members of the school board in the state of Massachusetts, even though no law required a wife to use her husband’s name when married. (Stannard 115).<sup>46</sup> Other women were similarly prevented from voting or renewing their driver’s licence

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<sup>46</sup> For more information on the “variety of dubious means” (123) used to coerce women into using their husband’s surname in the United States by the legal system and various institutions despite no state having any law that required women to change their name upon

or passport in their birth name. These examples illustrate the pervasiveness of patriarchal traditions in everyday American life and practice and the role of institutions in reinforcing and reinscribing patriarchy.<sup>47</sup> Marie Maclean notes that, “In Western society the patronym embodies the forces of tradition and authority; it enables the dominant ideology and culture” (96). More specifically, American society was committed to enforcing patrilineal naming practices and therefore positioning women firmly within patriarchal traditions of marriage. Eichner notes, “The assumption that women change their names upon marriage reflects social and cultural suppositions as to the dependent and relational nature of women’s lives” (660). For Eichner, women “bear labels” announcing to whom they belong: father and husband (660); as the ones to whom women are related, men, in contrast, are independent and owned only by themselves.

Naming practices are also closely related to how women are represented and understood in society, defining types of social roles assigned to and expected of women and men. Nancy F. Cott notes when men and women get married, they step into the roles of “wife” and “husband” expected by society (3). By drawing attention to the use of her married name, therefore, Fontaine is aligned with traditional understandings of being a wife; that is, that her life will now be (to use Eichner’s words) “dependent and relational” to her husband’s, whose name she now bears. However, this alignment is problematised for Fontaine (and female stars more generally) because, unlike other married women in America, they were still known by their professional names. This fluidity of identity for women is inherent in any patriarchal naming system. Marie Mclean argues that “women’s lives lent themselves to multiple narratives” and that “the marginalization of women in a patriarchal society devalued their essential multiplicity, which was contrasted with male unity and stability” (8). This multiplicity extended even further for stars. Through the naming practice particular to female stars, where they were able to effectively separate their married identity from their professional identity through the adoption of different names, they not only disrupt the patrilineal naming system, they disrupt the idea that when men and women get married, they step into the roles of “wife” and “husband” expected by society. For, if these women can step

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marriage, see Una Stannard “Manners Make Laws: Married Women’s Names in the United States.”

<sup>47</sup> As noted by Stannard, when women in England made similar legal claims, their right to use whichever name they chose was allowed (117).

into and outside of the name of the married person, alternating their married name (“Mrs Brian Aherne”) with their professional name and the one by which they are best known (“Joan Fontaine”), then they can then step into and outside of the gender roles and expectations implicit in marriage.

Of course, many of the issues faced by Joan Fontaine in trying to succeed in both her career and marriage were not specific to her but experienced by many married female actresses. There is an interesting moment in “Foibles,” when after waxing lyrical about the pleasures of being a wife, the author, Gladys Hall, challenges her:

Are you going to tell me . . . that you are going to retire? Because if you are, you’re letting me down, and badly. Because that’s what they *all* told me; for 99 years the stars have been telling me that they’re going to retire and some of them have *been* retired but none of them, of their own good free will and volition. (emphasis in original 88)

This is interesting because it specifically identifies that the recuperative strategy employed by Fontaine – that really, she would really *rather* be a homemaker than an actress and she is ready and willing to give up work at any minute to be a full-time wife – is a common refrain of actresses after getting married. Fontaine is firm in her response:

I’m NOT going to retire. To say so would be merely to make an extravagant statement which I’d know in my heart I wouldn’t go through with, wouldn’t want to go through it. For if I retired, what would happen? Well, in about two years I begin to let down. I go about wearing two-year-old clothes. Brian, meanwhile, would still be acting, which means he’d be working with fascinating women. He’d come home and then there I’d be no make-up on, darning Junior’s socks. I know myself. I’m an extremist. So are most of my sex. We go career or we go cosy-sit-by-the-fire, the whole hog, either way. I shall compromise. I’ll break the jinx of the extremist by being moderate in all things. I’ll continue to work because I love my work, it fascinates me, liberates me. But my work won’t be my all, just a part of my all. (88)

There exists here in Fontaine’s fan magazine discourse a tension between the pleasures available as a wife and mother with a woman who gains genuine satisfaction from performing paid work. Statements like, “I need my career only for the joy and satisfaction the work itself gives me. I don’t have to depend upon the offshoots of it for my life!” (Fletcher

19) confirm the genuine enjoyment that can be obtained through the successful completion of paid work (“joy and satisfaction”). In addition to this is the acknowledgement of the tedium of domestic duties; of staying at home darning holes in socks while one’s spouse is working in a job that provides joy and satisfaction with fascinating women (the implication, of course, being that women who care for their family full time are not fascinating). Compare this to Fontaine’s quoted statement from “I Don’t Want to be a Career Girl!”:

I haven’t an urge to make another picture. I’m sure I’d be completely happy if Brian and I could have about six children, all freckled like me, and I could sit here watching them, with a basketful of socks beside me that need darning. Can you understand that? And don’t you think I’m right? (Reid 73)

These stances are clearly contradictory (although both do contain hole-y socks).

Another recuperative strategy employed in fan magazine discourse is to repeatedly refer to her job as unnecessary, thus trivialising both her (considerable) salary and its contribution to the household. Fontaine told James Reid, “The money is no attraction. Brian earns enough to supply us with everything we’ll ever need” (23). Even in Fontaine’s autobiography, she states that Aherne told her to take the job for “hat money” (107). This concept of “hat money” is rooted in the cultural practice of the allocation of married women’s money. Viviana A. Zelizer describes this as the dole or “asking” method, where a wife would ask her husband for money as required. Changes in the consumption pattern of women in the 1920s and ‘30s rendered this method insufficient for most households, so it was replaced with a regular allowance paid to the wife. She explains further how gender influenced women’s money, even when they earned their own money:

A wife’s wages or pin money, regardless of its quantity and even when it brought the family a needed income, remained a less fundamental kind of money than her husband’s wages. It was either collectivized or trivialized, merged into the housekeeping fund and thus undifferentiated from collective income, or else treated as a supplementary earning designated either for family expenses (a child’s education or a vacation) or for frivolous purposes (clothing or jewelry). (65–66)

This recuperative strategy draws on cultural practices to disavow the fact that Fontaine’s stardom would provide her with equal or greater financial remuneration than her husband and

thus avoid publicly challenging his position as primary breadwinner and therefore head of the household.

In this section, I have outlined the redevelopment of the star persona of Joan Fontaine following being signed by SIP for *Rebecca*, placing this signing within an industrial and cultural context. In order to align Fontaine with the well-known character of “I” de Winter, magazine discourse was utilised to either disavow or nullify her former ambitious and hardworking reputation in favour of that of a newlywed woman devoted to her husband. However, contradictory elements still remained, evident in a duality in roles reflected in the naming practices utilised by fan magazines. The famous actress, who gained satisfaction from her work and was remunerated well for it, providing her with an independence unavailable to most women of the time, was situated alongside the loving wife, prepared to give up her rewarding work for her marriage; not resolved but coexistent and contradictory. I will now look at the role of the film *Rebecca* in supporting and consolidating the new Joan Fontaine.

### **Joan Fontaine and “I” de Winter: Aligning the “Real” with the “Reel”**

Joan Fontaine’s fan magazine discourse changed markedly after she signed with SIP, with recuperative strategies employed to allay the challenge presented by her non-traditional femininity. However, while much of the fan magazine discourse around the new Joan Fontaine emphasised the changes from how she had been represented previously, some components from the persona developed earlier still remain. I argue that these components were used to consolidate the association of Fontaine with the character she played; in particular, to establish a close relationship between Fontaine and “I” de Winter in fan magazine discourse. It is important to examine the connection between Fontaine and this particular character because many of the syntactic and semantic components of her star persona in the early period of her stardom are directly drawn from her performance as “I.”

Before describing how her role in *Rebecca* became central to Fontaine’s on- and off-screen personas, I will briefly discuss the film itself. The film *Rebecca* was an adaptation of Daphne du Maurier’s bestselling novel of the same name released in 1938. It tells the story of an unnamed woman (commonly referred to as “I” de Winter) who, while working in Monte Carlo as a paid companion, meets the wealthy and handsome Maxim de Winter. “I” and de Winter marry and return to his family estate, Manderley, in Cornwall. There “I” is alone and

feels inferior to Maxim's dead first wife, the beautiful and beguiling Rebecca. She is also terrified of the housekeeper, Mrs Danvers, who was devoted to Rebecca. After a disastrous ball, where "I" is tricked by Mrs Danvers into wearing the same costume that Rebecca had worn to a previous ball, a boat washes ashore and Rebecca's body is found inside. In the book, Maxim confesses to "I" that he killed Rebecca after she told him she was pregnant with another man's child, then he placed her body in her boat and sunk it; in the movie, he merely buried her body after she died in an accident. Relieved that Maxim did not love Rebecca, "I" vows to support him. Eventually it is found that Rebecca had terminal cancer and taunted Maxim so he would shoot her. An inquest rules Rebecca's death to be a suicide and Manderley burns to the ground (in the book it is implied this is divine intervention to punish Maxim for his crimes, while in the movie, Mrs Danvers is driven mad by the new information about Rebecca and burns down Manderley).

Given the centrality of "I" to the story, correctly promoting Joan Fontaine was central to the marketing and success of the film adaptation of *Rebecca*. In "The Star as Market Strategy," Cathy Klaprat outlines the development of a star within the star system. After being signed by a studio, an actor was cast in different roles and the studio used audience responses to determine the type of roles the actor was most popular in. Once this had been established, the studio's publicity department worked to match the actor's off-screen discourse to their on-screen persona, transforming the star's personal life in accordance with the actions and traits associated with the star's on-screen character type. Thus, Klaprat writes, "The audience was assured that the star acted identically in both her 'real' and her 'reel' lives" (360). She describes this process in more detail as follows:

To begin, the department manufactured an authorized biography of the star's personal life based in large part on the successful narrative roles of the star's pictures. The department would disseminate this information by writing features for fan magazines, press releases, and items for gossip columns. A publicist would then be assigned to the star to handle interviews and to supervise the correct choice of makeup and clothing for public appearances. Finally, the department had glamour photographs taken that fixed the important physical and emotional traits of the star in the proper image. (361)

Klaprat uses Bette Davis as an example, tracking how Warner Bros. cast Davis in particular roles based on previous successes and then tailored her off-screen persona to correlate with

the character type that best resonated with audiences. This process was different for Joan Fontaine for two reasons. Firstly, unlike Bette Davis, who had the might of the Warner Bros. publicity department behind her, Fontaine was working for a small independent studio whose publicity department was much more limited in size and scope. Secondly, instead of retrospectively tailoring screen discourse with a character type, Fontaine's off-screen discourse worked to align her with a pre-existing character type.

One of the key reasons that Fontaine's off-screen discourse had to be brought into line with the character of "I" was because of how well *Rebecca* was already known by the audience. Because of this, her performance carried with it the burden of audience expectation. To demonstrate how extensive knowledge about the story of *Rebecca* was, I refer to its publicity and distribution. As well as being a bestselling novel, *Rebecca* had been heavily promoted in both England and America. The promotion for the novel included its serialisation in London's *Daily Express* and the *New York Daily Mirror*. The *New York Daily Mirror* also emblazoned the name of the novel on its delivery vans, ensuring even those who had not read the novel were aware of it. The story also circulated in subsidiary forms: Selznick sold the American radio rights to Orson Welles, whose Mercury Theatre aired a series of episodes based on the book in 1938. As Leonard J. Leff notes, these syndicated digests not only introduced new readers to *Rebecca*, they also helped familiarise the public with *Rebecca* and created a vast audience for the film (38–9). In addition to the promotion of the novel, SIP launched an extensive marketing campaign, including the release of three different book tie-ins (a \$2.75 hardbound version, a \$1.39 version that included a two-colour wrapper band featuring studio stills of the film's stars, and a 69-cent mass-market paperback) as well as an expensive furniture line, wallpaper patterns and a line of paint colours (Edwards 37–8).

SIP's extensive publicity campaign for *Rebecca* demonstrates the importance of the film to the studio. In "Brand-Name Literature: Film Adaptation and Selznick International Pictures' *Rebecca* (1940)," Kyle Dawson Edwards outlines how *Rebecca* was used by SIP to offset the industrial disadvantages the company faced as a small, independent studio without a distribution network of its own. He argues that within classical Hollywood, studios were motivated by more than just the desire to make money: while a return on investment was one of the main aims of the production and release of a film, symbolic forms of profit were required as well. Edwards classifies these as the studio's brand. He writes:

Studios at the time *Rebecca* was released needed to accumulate capital to sign talent, produce pictures, and remain solvent; simultaneously, they sought to develop an identity—a “brand”—that could help them cultivate relationships and maintain good will with prospective and current employees, industrial counterparts, and cinema audiences. (33)

The film adaptation of *Rebecca* was therefore vital for reinforcing the brand SIP had been developing for several years. Edwards argues that SIP’s brand strategy was to adapt well-known stories with broad appeal and literary cachet and then identify the demographic characteristics of that audience and tailor elements of publicity and film narrative to those potential spectators (35). As a studio which lacked the vertical integration of the large studios and therefore relied on competing studios and theatre chains to exhibit and distribute SIP films, creating a particular aesthetic style of film and filmmaking that led to an individual, prestige and distinct cinema-going experience was of great importance. As described by Edwards:

A Selznick picture had to be more than a night at the movies, it had to be an event that could invoke both “good feelings” from an audience and the desire to see current and future SIP releases again and again; in turn, promoting and presenting pictures in this manner could allow the company to leverage favourable terms from distributors and exhibitors. (36)

A key part of Selznick’s brand was that of “woman’s films.” Woman’s films are a genre of Hollywood films that were most popular during the 1930s and ‘40s. They are defined by Mary Ann Doane as follows:

The films deal with a female protagonist and often appear to allow her significant access to point of view structures and the enunciative level of the filmic discourse. They treat problems defined as “female” (problems revolving around domestic life, the family, children, self-sacrifice, and the relationship between women and production vs. that between women and reproduction), and, most crucially, are directed towards a female audience. (3)

For *Rebecca* to fully represent part of SIP’s brand, the character of “I” was of key importance. Therefore, it was vitally important that Fontaine was convincing in her performance to audiences. To do this required disavowing her previous persona. This

disavowal can be seen in the advertisement for the film that ran in the May 1940 issue of *Modern Screen*, which describes *Rebecca* as Joan Fontaine's "sensational starring review" (Figure 7). As if offering her a fresh start, this advertising ignored the many films Fontaine had had starring roles in previously, reinforcing the idea of a "new" Joan Fontaine. This was the first (of many) public disavowals of her years at RKO. However, some elements of Fontaine's previous fan magazine discourse were retained from her old persona; in particular, those which align her with the character of "I" de Winter and the gothic romance genre. The stories about Fontaine being ill as a child and reading a lot of classic literature are retold frequently, aligning the lonely and solitary Fontaine with the lonely and solitary "I." As outlined in "The Foibles of Fontaine":

A shy sort of girl because of the neurosis and inhibition her childhood illnesses gave her, she fought with different weapons, making her liabilities serve as her assets. For instance: "My illnesses," she said, "were really what made it possible for me to play the second *Mrs de Winter*. I didn't have to pretend to be neurotic and shy. I *was* neurotic and shy." (emphasis in original 88)

This alignment is further reinforced in a column reviewing the film, which promised to tell "the facts behind the fiction of the stars in review." This explicitly aligned Joan Fontaine the person with the character she played:

Joan Fontaine insists she doesn't deserve the widespread acclaim she's been getting for her subtle portrayal of Mrs. de Winter in "Rebecca." "You wouldn't praise Lincoln to the skies if he came back to life and gave a good performance in 'Abe Lincoln in Illinois,' would you?" she asks. "Well, Mrs. de Winter is myself in practically every respect, just as I was a few years ago. Why shouldn't I do the part with feeling?

...

Brian's pictures and his problems are her chief concern now. And even as the young wife in "Rebecca" blooms when she began to share her husband's worries, so has Joan, since her whirlwind courtship and marriage. ("Movie Review – Rebecca" 13)

In this quote, her recent marriage to Aherne becomes a supporting element of her portrayal of "I," both in its nature (a whirlwind courtship and marriage, just like "I") and its newness

(both “I” and Fontaine were newlyweds), using facts about her real life to provide veracity to her on-screen performance.



Figure 7: *Rebecca* advertisement from the May 1940 issue of *Modern Screen*

In this section, I demonstrated how fan magazine discourse worked to align Fontaine with the character of “I” de Winter and the importance of this process to the success of the film and to SIP. In the following section, I demonstrate how Fontaine’s portrayal/performance of/as “I” formed the basis of her on-screen persona in the next phase of her stardom.

## After *Rebecca*

*Rebecca* was a critical and commercial hit. It won the 1940 Academy Awards for Best Picture<sup>48</sup> and Best Cinematography and was the one of the highest grossing films of 1940. As Thomas Schatz points out, *Rebecca* was not only a critical and commercial hit: it was an enormously influential film, spawning a cycle of female gothic films that appeared during the 1940s (*Boom and Bust* 88). Beyond its remarkable influence on the films of the 1940s, *Rebecca* had a strong influence on the on-screen persona of Joan Fontaine, introducing a range of syntactic and semantic elements that were consolidated through her performances and fan magazine discourse following *Rebecca*'s release during the remainder of her contract period with SIP.

The first film Fontaine made after *Rebecca* was *Suspicion* (1941), again with Alfred Hitchcock directing. For this movie, both Fontaine and Hitchcock were loaned to RKO from Selznick. In *Suspicion*, a dowdy, spinster-ish woman (Fontaine) falls in love with a handsome and charming ne'er-do-well (Cary Grant) who she comes to suspect might kill her. *Suspicion* has a number of similarities to *Rebecca*. Beyond its pairing of director and star, its plot featured a number of elements that were frequently associated with Fontaine in this period of her career: a gothic romance narrative where a young and inexperienced girl blooms into adulthood after falling in intense love with a problematic man, with the story being mainly told from the perspective of Fontaine's character. Although the film does not feature a voiceover – another common occurrence in Fontaine's films of this time – the film trailer opens with Fontaine stating, "There was something strange about Johnnie Aysgarth. I knew it long before I married him," which Rick Worland argues is a direct reference to the start of *Rebecca* (8). *Suspicion*, therefore, worked to reinforce the association of Fontaine with a

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<sup>48</sup> *Rebecca* was the only Hitchcock film to win a Best Picture Oscar; however, as producer, Selznick accepted the award. In the following year, Joan Fontaine won the Best Actress award for her performance in *Suspicion*, becoming the only actor or actress to win an Academy Award in a Hitchcock movie. Despite his many years of success in Hollywood, Hitchcock never received an Academy Award. He was awarded the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award by the Academy in 1968. His acceptance speech was simply, "Thank you . . . very much indeed."

particular type of story, a particular type of character and a particular character arc.

This association was strengthened and reinforced in other films made by Fontaine in this time. In 1943, Fontaine starred in *The Constant Nymph* (Edmund Gouling) as Tessa, a young girl who falls deeply in love with an older man, Lewis Dodd (Charles Boyer), and dedicates herself to encouraging him to develop his musical talent. Again, the narrative of the film is driven by the devotion of Fontaine's character, who begins the film as a young, inexperienced girl, to the man she loves. She reprised this type of role again that year, playing Jane Eyre opposite Orson Welles' Mr Rochester, a man to whom the young, inexperienced Jane falls deeply and devotedly in love with. Beyond the films' narrative, other elements associated with Fontaine were repeated in these films; for example, the voiceover that opens *Jane Eyre* (Robert Stevenson, 1943) echoes that of *Rebecca*, while all of the films use costume design to emphasise the girlish aspects of Fontaine's slim figure, making her look more like a teenager than a woman in her 20s. Fontaine's casting and performance in these films therefore demonstrate the ongoing impact of "I" on the early years of her stardom. Given the process through which Fontaine ended up being cast in *Rebecca* that I have outlined in this chapter, the importance of "I" de Winter in Fontaine's career demonstrates the multiple ways through which the external mechanisms that shape the star interconnect with practices of self-fashioning in female stardom in classical Hollywood.

## Conclusion

In the quote from her autobiography that opened this chapter, Joan Fontaine defines herself as an actor and a woman, dividing herself into two separate identities, each with their own different responsibilities. The metaphorical division of Fontaine into two separate entities united in the one self is typical of the duality that characterised the development of her stardom. From fan magazine discourse that disclaimed Fontaine's willingness to capitalise on her connection to her sister even as it referred to Olivia de Havilland by name and to the split between "Joan Fontaine, actress" and "Mrs Brian Aherne, wife," Fontaine's early stardom is notable for its attempt to reconcile seemingly incompatible positions in order to further her career. Unlike her sister, whose star agency is evident in a series of escalating challenges to the structural limitations placed upon her, Fontaine's agency is instead shown through a complex negotiation of competing professional and personal forces, as demonstrated in the discussion of Fontaine's decision to leave her honeymoon early to work on *Rebecca*.

One of the most valuable original contributions of this research is establishing how naming practices were used as a form of resistance in Joan Fontaine's stardom. After arriving in Los Angeles, Joan de Beauvoir de Havilland renamed herself Joan Fontaine. In doing this, she not only disrupted patrilineal naming practices, she also prevented studios from exercising one of the key methods they use to exert control over their contracted actors. This playfulness with naming practices continued after being signed by SIP and cast in *Rebecca*. In the fan magazine discourse that worked to align her off-screen persona with her role as "I," the newly married "Mrs Brian Aherne" seemed to sit alongside and separate from the actress Joan Fontaine, signalling a questioning of the gender roles and identities experienced by female actors in Hollywood and working married women in America. In this way, Fontaine problematises the categorisation of the figure of the female star into straightforward social types and positions, highlighting the incompatibility of the expectations placed on stars as labourers and women.

# Chapter Five: Beauty, Biography and Agency in the Developing Stardom of Ava Gardner

## Introduction

Writing about Ava Gardner rarely focuses on her film performances. Instead, descriptions of Ava Gardner are frequently united by their use of superlatives to describe her appearance. Robyn Karney describes her as “the last, and least typical, of the screen’s Love Goddesses” (426), while Richard Lippe states that, “No more sublimely beautiful woman ever appeared on a movie screen” (469). In a profile for the *New Yorker*, David Denby writes, “When she was young, she was the most beautiful woman in the movies” (65), while John Huston, who directed her in *The Night of the Iguana* (1964), was slightly more circumspect, writing, “Ava Gardner, God bless her, was a wonderful person, a fine actress, and one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen” (154). In his autobiography, first husband Mickey Rooney writes, “I had known many beautiful women in my lifetime, but this little lady topped them all” (302). Nancy Sinatra Jr describes the moment she first met her stepmother as follows:

My heart melted just looking at her. I was only a kid. I didn’t *know* about beauty—that awesome kind of beauty . . . she was just the most beautiful creature I had ever seen in my life. I couldn’t stop staring at her. (ellipses and emphasis in original 106)

Perhaps due to the mythic qualities assigned to her beauty, Ava Gardner is often classified as a muse; for example, enough non-fiction, fiction and poetry have been written about the star to make up an anthology, *Ava Gardner: Touches of Venus* (Gigliotti). In addition to that, discussions of Gardner often focus on her relationships and hard-partying lifestyle rather than her film performances. Consistently throughout her career and even after her death, the discourse surrounding her stardom situates her as an object, denying her agency and subjectivity by positioning her in terms of her relationships to others.

Public narratives that emphasise a mode of femininity produced through associations with beauty, relationships and scandal mean that Ava Gardner’s stardom has not been fully explored in relation to agency, labour and the development from woman to star. Although she has been the subject of an extensive amount of writing – which, in addition to voracious coverage in fan and tabloid magazines at the height of her stardom, also includes numerous

biographies, autobiographies, plays, novels and even a musical – there is little academic work that explores the complexities of her stardom. However, examining the development of her career can provide insights into female stardom, agency and the industrial frameworks that both enable and restrict the subjectivity of the female star. Ava Gardner was able to achieve prominence but firm restrictions were placed on the acceptable forms her stardom could take, undermining her agency through portrayals of her in fan magazines and biographies. The first section of this chapter explores Gardner’s rise to prominence. Gardner gained prominence in the popular press through marriage, four years before her first starring role in a film in 1946 with *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1949). This sequence of events set her on a course that diverged from the standard trajectory of a female star. However, by becoming famous this way, her celebrity lacked vital elements specific to stars – an origin story and a sense of her as an independent actor, labourer and worker in Hollywood. The second section examines the extensive field of Ava Gardner star biographies, asking generally how these texts can be used to locate the agency of a star and specifically how they work in relation to Gardner. With each volume promising a true insight into who Gardner really was, each biography’s paratexts become a vital aspect through which to identify the framing of her stardom. Examining Ava Gardner using these two areas of analysis provides unique insight into a historical subject’s practices of negotiation within social and industrial frameworks that work to deny or limit agency and subjectivity.

## **Ava Gardner, Grabtown Girl**

Ava Lavinia Gardner was born on 24 December 1922 in the small town of Grabtown, North Carolina. She was the youngest of the seven children of Jonas and Molly Gardner, poor tobacco farmers who moved to Smithfield, North Carolina, after losing their farm. In 1941, she was signed by studio MGM and moved to Los Angeles with her sister Beatrice (known as Bappie). By 1953, she was one of Hollywood’s biggest stars, voted the All-American Favourite Actress in the exhibitors’ annual popularity awards (“The All-American Favorites of 1953” 19).<sup>49</sup> However, the process through which Ava Gardner, Grabtown Girl, became

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<sup>49</sup> Although the most popular female actress, Gardner was third All-American Favourite Star overall, behind Gary Cooper and Bing Crosby. Marilyn Monroe polled fifth overall in only her second appearance on the charts, with *Boxoffice Barometer* noting, “This little lady is doing very well” (“The All-American Favourites of 1953” 19).

Ava Gardner, movie star, was an unusual one, and differs in significant ways from that of many of her peers. As I outlined in the previous two chapters, the transformation of an actress into a star involves a number of different processes. Once signed to a studio, the studio trialled different types of roles for the actress until one is found which resonates with audiences. Studio promotion and fan magazine discourse work to align the actress' off-screen persona with her on-screen persona. Ava Gardner's name, however, started appearing before she had developed an on-screen persona when she began being associated with Mickey Rooney romantically. By looking at the development of her origin story as presented in fan magazine articles and auto/biographical texts, it is possible to identify a number of the recurrent aspects and contradictions present in her stardom. It is important to note here that I am not investigating the veracity of the stories told about Gardner; rather, I am interested in identifying the key discourses present at a particular time in her career. This will allow me to establish the meanings associated with her star persona at a particular moment in time.

*Ava: My Story*, the 1990 autobiography ghostwritten by Alan Burgess that was published after Gardner's death, contains the following origin story. After graduating from high school, Gardner started secretarial training at Atlantic Christian College in North Carolina. On a visit to her sister Bappie in New York City, Bappie's husband and professional photographer Larry Tarr took a photograph of his sister-in-law and placed it in the window of his Fifth Avenue studio. Barney Duhan, an errand boy for the legal department of Loews Inc., MGM's parent company, saw the photo and rang Tarr's studio, promising to pass the photo onto "the right people" at MGM Pictures if he could get the phone number of the girl in the photo in the window (*Ava: My Story* 30). He was unsuccessful in this, as the studio refused to share Gardner's details. Tarr, however, was inspired by Duhan's visit to take Gardner's photographs to the MGM office in New York. They called Gardner in for a screen test, for which she travelled to New York. The screen test was done by Marvin Shenck, who decided to make it a purely photographic test due to Gardner's strong southern accent. *Ava* reports that she was immediately signed up onto a \$50-a-week seven-year contract. She then moved to Los Angeles with Bappie. This story is told with little variation in most of the books about Ava Gardner. In Lee Server's *Love is Nothing*, it was Ben Jacobson who brought Gardner to Schenck's

attention and Al Altman who shot the screen test.<sup>50</sup> In *Ava's Men* by Jane Ellen Wayne, Tarr was invited to bring photos of Gardner to MGM by Ben Jacobson, who also shot the screen test and sent it to Hollywood, where George Sidney instructed him to sign her. Although the specifics change slightly, the general gist is the same – after the intervention of a number of men, Gardner had been “discovered” and signed to a seven-year MGM contract.

I have spent some time here on the background of Ava Gardner because of the importance of this background in identifying the key discourses associated with her stardom. The origin story of a star – the tale of how an ordinary woman became a Hollywood star that is repeated in discussions of the star – is an important element of any star study. These stories change over time and depending on the author and the place the story is being told. The point of determining a star's origin story is not to determine what “really happened” – there is no way to establish that and it is also not the key concern of this thesis. Rather, what I am interested in is what these stories tell us about the construction of “Ava Gardner.” The information that is included in a star's origin story in publicity shows us the qualities that were intended to be associated with the star – the origin story is the frame through which their stardom is located and understood. Just as star images have a history, looking at changes in the origin story of stars allows us to identify changes in preferred ways of understanding stars – for example, after being signed by Selznick International Pictures, Joan Fontaine's origin story changed to align her star persona more closely with that of the type of characters she was playing. Identifying the origin story and tracking changes within it are therefore vital components of any star study.

The path I described earlier – the young and beautiful Gardner being discovered due to the actions of a series of men – is typical of the origin stories of female stars. Through their emphasis on the discovery of the star – for example, for Gardner, due to her arresting beauty, while for Olivia de Havilland, her exceptional talent – the female star is positioned as passive; they have no agency in the achievement of their success. Stardom is something that happens *to* a female star, not something the individual woman desires or works hard to

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<sup>50</sup> In another reference to Gardner's extreme beauty, Server quotes Al Altman's daughter Diana Altman saying, “My father was not someone who often talked about a woman's looks or anything like that, but he always said that Ava Gardner was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen” (46).

achieve. For all female stars, therefore, origin stories play a role in reinforcing a particular relationship to agency and stardom, eliding their individual contributions. For Gardner, however, this relationship has an additional layer of complication due to her unusual path to prominence.

Gardner's signing to MGM was announced in the trade papers after her screen test. On 31 July 1941, *Film Daily* included this in its "Comings and Goings" section: "Ava Gardner: M-G-M's latest 18-yr-old Cinderella is on her way to the coast after successfully passing a screen test (2). On 30 July, 1941, *Variety* ran an item titled "N.C. Gal's Face 'Got' Metro":

Ava Gardner, 18-year-old North Carolina gal, was signed by Metro and sent to the Coast last week after eastern talent execs for the company saw her picture in a high school paper. They were so struck by photo they had the gal come to New York and made a quick screen test of her.

She has no previous dramatic experience. Metro has no particular role in mind for her but will put her in its stock training school. (3)

As described by *Variety*, after arriving in Los Angeles, Gardner was placed into MGM's "stock training school."<sup>51</sup> This was standard practice for all actors upon being signed by a major studio; as Ronald L. Davis reports, "All the major studios had a talent department, whose purpose was the discovery and grooming of young performers" (80). The talent

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<sup>51</sup> Some biographers state that MGM originally promoted Gardner as Lucy Ann Johnson/Lucy Johnson, feeling that changing an actress' name made it more like she would succeed (Flamini, 18; Wayne *Ava's Men* 23; Higham *Ava* 18). It was even mentioned in her obituary in the *Guardian* (Weatherby). However, I have been unable to find any reference to a Lucy Ann Johnson in fan or trade magazines or in any other printed material from the time and she was referred to as "Ava Gardner" by trade dailies at the time of being signed, which suggests that promoting Gardner as "Lucy Ann Johnson" may be a rumour whose repeated telling over time has conveyed a feeling of veracity. The ongoing persistence of this rumour highlights how audience expectations of the process by which an actor transitions to a movie star influenced the star's discourse, with the belief that a star would change their name overriding the factual evidence that Ava Gardner did not change hers.

department can be thought of as the preparatory process that newly arrived starlets went through in order to be made ready to become stars. During the classical Hollywood period, this was a highly regimented process that included hair and beauty “fixes” (such as changes in hair colour and minor plastic surgery) as well as training on deportment, dancing and voice training (including singing) along with fencing, boxing and horseback riding – “anything that might be needed in a motion picture” (Davis 88). Gardner biographer Server describes the process as being factory-like: “[Gardner] had to be made ready, moved as on an assembly line from department to department” (52), a description that fits with common representations of behind the scenes of the studio system. Davis’ book on the Hollywood film industry, one of the few that looks in detail at the organisation of the training process of the studios in the classical era, is called *The Glamour Factory: Inside Hollywood’s Studio System*, duplicating Server’s evocation of the factory. Janine Basinger’s history of stardom is called *The Star Machine*, a title that similarly calls forward a mechanical process for the production of stars. These representations of the studio system as creating fully formed actresses from the raw material of a regular woman elides the effort exerted by the individual women in the process; like the discovery story, these descriptions position this process as something that happens to the actress, not something she takes an active part in.

Despite the aforementioned descriptions, to go through this process did require work from the wannabe stars. In addition to the physical aspect of becoming a star, such as physical training and beauty treatments, the actors also took voice and acting training. Studios used on-site acting teachers, generally called drama coaches or dialogue directors, to train newly contracted players on acting techniques as well as working with established performers. These acting coaches both ran classes and worked individually with separate actors. Acting techniques taught included giving actors vocal training in order to speak clearly and evocatively, physical training to develop a flexible instrument, and practice with emotional recall, observation and concentration (Pullen 70–72). The style of acting taught was naturalist. Pullen describes this as follows: “Focusing on the script, [acting coaches] urged actors to imaginatively re-create their characters’ emotions and then live them out onscreen” (72); basically, when watching a movie, audiences were supposed to believe that the actor was fully embodying the role they were playing. The cinematic apparatus worked to support this naturalist paradigm. As I have outlined in previous chapters, studios used publicity to align each actor’s “real” life with their on-screen persona. Fan magazine discourse frequently stressed the ease with which actors were able to create their characters; for example, as can

be seen with Joan Fontaine and “I” de Winter in the promotion for *Rebecca* discussed in Chapter Four. This discourse presents acting as something natural and easy, downplaying the effort required to be a successful actress. While fan magazines frequently discussed the beauty and diet routines of the stars, the labour involved in acting was rarely mentioned, supporting this alignment of the on-screen character with the real life of the star. Fan magazines thus downplayed the effort required to be a movie star, much less an actor. As Pullen notes, the erasure of labour occurs in order to emphasise the correspondence between self and role (74). In general, mainstream discussions of stardom ignored the labour undertaken by actors, both in terms of their long on-set hours, but “more importantly regarding their development of performance technique and cultivation of talent and skill” (Pullen 73). Again, this discourse serves to obscure the work that actors undertake as part of their performance, including the extensive training they did after being signed by a studio, the preparation required for each role, and the labour involved in the performance itself.

Gardner received extensive training after arriving at the MGM lot. Server reports that she worked with speech coach Gertrude Fogler to lose her strong Southern accent and acting coach Lillian Burns to learn how to act (53–54). In addition to this work, Gardner posed in numerous cheesecake shots (Figure 8). Cheesecake shots were mass-produced glamour photographs that displayed female starlets in skimpy clothing. Joanne Meyerowitz describes these photographs as “publicly acceptable, mass-produced images of semi-nude women” (10). The term “pin-up” was used for this type of photograph because cheesecake images were literally pinned up, for example by servicemen away at war in their lockers or cockpits. During World War II, cheesecake shots were distributed by Hollywood studios to American servicemen, and Carol Dyhouse notes that the practice of using starlets to produce glamour photography reinforced their positioning as objects, arguing, “Cheesecake implied feminine passivity, rather than agency: women represented for the purpose of male consumption” (90). Gardner’s figure and face were particularly well suited to this type of work and she was a popular model. In 1947, *Modern Screen* quotes Gardner describing the sheer volume of the “glamour publicity stills” she was required to appear in while waiting to be cast in a role:

You could have carpeted Hollywood Boulevard with Ava Gardner from curb to curb.

Don’t remember how many swim suits I wore out—without getting near the water. I shot enough sultry looks around the M-G-M photo gallery to melt the North Pole

(“Confessions of an Ex-Playgirl” 97).<sup>52</sup>

These factors – common representations of the development of stars as mechanical and factory-like, the naturalist acting paradigm and the fan magazine discourse that supported it, and the objectification of actors through cheesecake glamour photography – all served to deny the agency and labour of young actors in developing their stardom. All three factors are evident in the discourse surrounding Ava Gardner, contributing to a denial of her agency and subjectivity.



Figure 8: A Halloween-themed cheesecake shot

(@avagardnerofficial “Happy Halloween from the Ava Gardner Museum!”)

Gardner’s Hollywood trajectory initially followed the same path as many of the other young

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<sup>52</sup> This quote appears twice in Ava Gardner biographies. In *Ava’s Men*, Wayne misattributes the quote to *Photoplay* and misquotes Gardner as saying “wore” instead of “wore out” (27). Wayne then repeats the same misquote and misattribution in *The Golden Girls of MGM* (237).

men and women hopeful of achieving stardom: appearing in glamour photographs and undergoing performance training while waiting to be cast in movies. For other starlets, the next stage in the development process was to appear in films to try and determine the character type that appealed to audiences. However, this process was disrupted for Gardner: instead of getting her big break through a star-making film performance, she married a movie star. Her breakthrough role did not come until 1946.

The stories about how Gardner met her first husband, Mickey Rooney, differ depending on the teller. Server states that Gardner met Mickey Rooney on her first day at MGM during a tour of the studio. While she was visiting the set of Busby Berkeley's *Babes on Broadway* (1941), "All at once there was a parting of the bodies and a spangly, fruited rush in their direction, Mickey Rooney clomping over in his high heels" (51–52). At that time, Mickey Rooney was 20 and was one of MGM's biggest and most important stars. He had been ranked the most popular star in the movies for the third year in a row (in 1939, 1940 and 1941), primarily due to his appearances in the extremely successful Andy Hardy series. The commonly repeated story of the Gardner–Rooney courtship is that after seeing her on the MGM lot, Rooney relentlessly pursued Gardner. When she would not sleep with him before marriage, he proposed to her and kept on proposing until she said yes. The young couple faced obstacles from studio boss Louis B. Mayer, who was worried that marriage would affect the popularity of the studio's biggest star, Rooney, but he was unsuccessful and the couple were married on 10 January, 1942.

As with the story of her "discovery" in New York, this tale is repeated with only small variations in biographies. Also, like the other parts of her origin story, this minimises Gardner's role. Rather than being an active participant in their courtship, in these retellings Rooney pursued the virginal Gardner until she gave in, as if her hand in marriage was a prize for his persistence. However, by marrying one of the biggest, if not the biggest, Hollywood stars of 1941, Gardner dramatically shifted the direction of her career, changing it from the standard path of starlets. In particular, she disrupted the process through which her name became public and she became famous, because it was after getting married to Rooney that Gardner's name starts to appear in fan magazines for the first time.

As described in detail in previous chapters, the process of introducing an actor to the public followed a standard procedure, with the publication of material in fan magazines designed to reinforce the association of the actor with their on-screen persona. Different character types

were trialed until one was found that resonated with the public. However, at the time she married Rooney, Gardner had not had a starring role that her off-screen persona could be aligned with. This resulted in some ambiguity in her fan magazine discourse. While all articles mentioned her origin in North Carolina – an incontrovertible fact that had been reported since she was first signed by MGM – few other details were listed. Instead, the articles framed her in terms of how she related to Mickey Rooney. “The Courtship of Mickey Rooney,” published in the March 1942 issue of *Hollywood*, describes the Gardner–Rooney marriage and Ava Gardner solely in terms of their effect on Rooney. The article opens with the statement: “A green-eyed Southern belle named Ava Gardner is the lovely lass Mickey Rooney chose for his bride” (Hunt 65). Even the title of the article is a reference to Rooney’s most recent release, *The Courtship of Andy Hardy* (George B. Seitz, 1942). This immediately places the focus on Rooney. The article then describes Rooney’s nervousness while watching Gardner’s first performance in a film (an uncredited role in *Kid Glove Killers* (Fred Zinnemann, 1942)). “We dunno whether Ava’s going to be an actress forever,” Rooney is quoted as saying, “But, boy, I wanted her to be good in that first shot.” The article continues, “Ava’s arrival in Hollywood was a beautiful piece of timing. It came at a season of Mickey’s life when he had graduated from the Jazz Age and settled down to being an eligible bachelor” (Hunt 65). Although Gardner’s MGM contract and work as an actress are mentioned, “Mrs Mickey Rooney” is not heard from herself – she is presented as an unknown, inexperienced “Dixie belle” who appeared in Rooney’s life at the right time to be chosen by him as his bride. The discrepancy in the discussion and relative seriousness of the pair can also be seen in a double-page spread in the *Screenland* May 1942 issue (Figure 9). Both Rooney and Gardner are posed similarly but the gravitas associated with each is different. Rooney is wearing a suit and his signature is above his image. Gardner, in contrast, is wearing a swimsuit in typical cheesecake style. The caption for the images refers to his movie, *The Courtship of Andy Hardy*, but Gardner is only referred to as “Mrs R,” not as an actor with a studio contract working in Hollywood. Even the photo of her is a cheesecake shot of her in a swimsuit, a reflection of her starlet status. Without a “reel” life to align her “real” life with, these examples demonstrate how coverage of Gardner in fan magazines lacked a clear coherency.



Figure 9: Double-page spread from *Screenland* May 1942

(“Special Art Section” 38–39)

The coverage of the marriage in a *Photoplay* article in March 1942 is even more explicit in its attempt to manage Rooney’s marriage in relation to his existing persona. In “Mickey Rooney Picks a Wife,” Sara Hamilton writes:

Mickey the so-called “smarty-pants of the kid set,” the “wild boy of the jive group,” as he’s been unfairly termed, is a man in love. He’s met the one girl in the world for him and he’s going to see she doesn’t get away from him. (27)

That quote, however, was the few times Rooney was referred to as a man in the article. Instead, the boyish aspects of Rooney are emphasised – his mother still gives him an allowance, his studio refers to him as “the kid,” and his dates with Ava involved hamburgers rather than nightclubs. In this article, Gardner is a “not particularly Hollywood-minded” young woman, who has “not been touched deeply by those ambitions that can change a girl’s whole outlook on life.” She “[takes] no part in the Ciro or Mocambo goings-on”; instead, the article informs us “she and Mickey bowled together, attended football games, went riding and

played tennis like any other two kids in the world: (“Mickey Rooney Picks a Wife” 27). In this article, this “real genuine girl” (not woman) works to reinforce Rooney’s association with youth.

The continued emphasis on youth in articles about Rooney reflects the close association of his star persona with youth; specifically, American teenage youth. In 1941, Mickey Rooney was the biggest box office draw in Hollywood and MGM’s most valuable property (Balio *MGM* 140). Born Joe Yule Jr., the name “Mickey” was taken from the character Mickey McGuire, his first billed role, which he played at six years of age. Although Rooney had been acting since he was a child, it was not until the early 1940s that his stardom reached its peak.<sup>53</sup> When he met Gardner, he was frequently being paired with fellow MGM stablemate Judy Garland in musicals and comedies while also appearing as the titular star of the Andy Hardy film series. The Andy Hardy movies were about a small-town judge and his family who lived in Carvel, Idaho, and Rooney played the family’s teenage son, Andy, in 15 movies between 1937 and 1946.<sup>54</sup> The Andy Hardy movies were immensely important to MGM: Tino Balio states it was the most profitable film series made during Hollywood’s heyday (*MGM* 140) and Anthony Slide describes the Andy Hardy series as “arguably the most popular, most commercially successful, and the most wholesome group of films ever produced in the history of the American motion picture” (*The New Historical Dictionary of the American Film Industry* 11). Rooney was very closely associated with the adolescent, energetic roles he played and Sean Griffin states that Rooney and Garland “personified a youthful energy and promise that seemed to embody America and its future” (121). Griffin notes that for both Rooney and Garland, this meant that MGM repeatedly attempted to continue to preserve this image of youthful innocence through preventing them from having “the personal lives of young adults” – including drinking, smoking, nightclubbing and serious romantic relationships (130). So, Rooney marrying Gardner brought her to the public’s attention, circumventing the usual routes available to starlets, the marriage threatened to

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<sup>53</sup> Like Olivia de Havilland, Rooney’s breakout role was in both the stage and film versions of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*, which he performed on loan from MGM to Warner Bros.

<sup>54</sup> There was an attempt to restart the series in 1958, with *Andy Hardy Comes Home* (Howard W. Koch). In this film, Andy Hardy, now a successful lawyer, returns to his hometown of Carvel with his wife and two children. The film was not a success and was the final incarnation of Andy Hardy in film form.

create issues with Rooney's star image. In 1939, only three years earlier, he had received an Oscar for Outstanding Juvenile Performance; now he was getting married and moving out of home.<sup>55</sup>

The effort to balance the real-life actions of Rooney that demonstrate he is an adult rather than a teenager with his on-screen continued association with the role of Andy Hardy is made exceptionally clear in "Mickey Rooney Picks a Wife." In the Andy Hardy series, Andy usually experiences a brief and chaste relationship with another teenager. MGM used this plotline as a way to launch many of its starlets, including Lana Turner, Esther Williams, Kathryn Grayson and Donna Reed. Blurring the lines between the "real" and the "reel," the article contains a picture of Rooney introducing Gardner to his film father, Judge Hardy (Lewis Stone), in an interesting conflation of character and person (Figure 10). This fan magazine discourse therefore served to cement the connection between Rooney and Andy Hardy, treating Gardner the MGM starlet marrying Mickey Rooney in real life the same way as the MGM starlets were treated in the Andy Hardy diegetic universe. The article concludes with the statement: "'And the *Hardy* series will go right on,' the studio assured us. 'Mickey's marriage will in no way affect his role of *Andy*.'" (70). Fans are thus reassured that the Gardner–Rooney marriage presents no threat to this very popular fan favourite.

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<sup>55</sup> The Academy Juvenile Award was a Special Honorary Award bestowed at the discretion of AMPAS to recognise performers under the age of 18 for their outstanding contributions to screen entertainment. The trophy given was a miniature Academy Award statuette that was approximately half of the size of a standard Oscar statue.



Figure 10: "Mickey Picks a Wife"

The Rooney–Gardner marriage proved to be shortlived, lasting only from 10 January 1942 to 21 May 1943. Fan magazine discourse around this event attributed the breakup to the immaturity of the couple, continuing the trend in the initial coverage of their wedding of focusing on their youth. In "Can the Rooney Marriage Survive?," published in *Hollywood* in February 1943, Gardner and Rooney are repeatedly described as "two kids" (M. Craig 23, 57) who were used to being looked after rather than looking after each other. The real problem in the relationship was that "Mickey and Ava married before they were ready for marriage" (57). In "Heartbreak for Mickey Rooney," the separation of "Hollywood's most talented boy and the beautiful girl from North Carolina" (28) was unavoidable. Sara Hamilton writes:

The true reasons are obvious and simple. They were too young and completely unsuited. The girl from Wilson, North Carolina might well have been an immigrant from the steppes of Russia, so far was she removed from Mickey Rooney's world. (29)

Similarly, "Why the Mickey Rooneys Fell Out of Love" also emphasised the couple's youth. May Mann writes, "When his marriage to pretty Ava Gardner broke up, Mickey Rooney was

a bewildered boy” (36). In complete disregard of the demonstrable fact that at 22 years of age Mickey Rooney was old enough to have married, divorced and served in the army,<sup>56</sup> this fan magazine discourse relentlessly reinforced the perception of Rooney as boyish and young.

Further blame for the marriage breakdown is attributed to Gardner in these articles. In “Heartbreak for Mickey Rooney,” Hamilton bluntly states, “It is generally believed that Ava Gardner was not genuinely and deeply in love with Mickey Rooney; that she may have thought so, but that in reality and flattered by his attentions, blinded by his fame, though honestly convinced she could make him a good wife” (91). In “Why the Mickey Rooneys Fell Out of Love,” Mann tells a similar story:

There’s probably one reason the Mickey Rooneys fell out of love. It was unfortunately a one-side love in the beginning. You can’t blame pretty little Ava for being swept off her feet by the attention of *Andy Hardy*, *Young Tom Edison*—Hollywood’s Mickey Rooney. But it takes a strong enduring love to build a solid foundation for marriage—and in Mickey’s case, there was only half enough! (73)

In these articles, the young and pretty country girl Ava was blinded by the Hollywood lights, marrying the young, boyish Mickey before leaving him to follow her dreams and become a star herself. Hamilton explains:

Ava came to Hollywood for a career. Most people do. As Mickey’s wife, she wasn’t having it. Whether Mickey objected or not we can’t honestly say, but Hollywood claims he was bitterly opposed to it. Certainly the opposition didn’t come from Ava. (“Heartbreak for Mickey Rooney” 92)

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<sup>56</sup> With a number of their leading men such as James Stewart and Clark Gable already away at war, MGM were initially reluctant to allow Rooney to join the armed services. However, Hollywood stars who avoided the military faced intense criticism, with the public believing they used their fame to avoid their patriotic duty. When MGM publicly appealed Rooney’s 1-A classification, arguing that a certain numbers of stars were required to make movies and movies were vital to keep and maintain morale, the resulting negative publicity was so severe that MGM rescinded the request. Rooney eventually joined the army in May 1944 (Griffin 134–5).

This fan magazine discourse performs two main functions. It serves to reinforce the association of Mickey Rooney with his boyish on-screen person, minimising any possible disruption to his image caused as a result of his real-life actions (both getting married and the infidelity that reportedly ended the marriage (Gardner *Ava: My Story* 58)). Gardner, however, had not yet appeared in a starring role and did not have an on-screen persona to reinforce, was associated with another Hollywood archetype from the classical era: the movie-struck girl with stars in her eyes who has travelled to Los Angeles in search of fame and fortune.

The movie-struck girl was a figure that had circulated through public discourse about women and the nascent film industry since the star system emerged in the silent era. Steven Cohan describes the movie-struck girl as “the figuration of the female fan of the silent era who went to Hollywood in search of economic, emotional, and sexual independence” (85). The movie-struck girl was a contradictory figure: at once a diehard fan solicited by Hollywood and therefore a vital component of the movie business, she was also a target of mockery and object of condescension, frequently presented in the press as a young girl who was unable to separate her love of movies from a desire to be in the movies herself. Shelley Stamp identifies the movie-struck girl as a disparaging representation of female spectatorship, purposely created by the American press to allay and negotiate anxieties about women’s practices (*Movie-Struck Girls* 94–97). Diana Anselmo-Sequiera, however, argues that although the press did characterise the movie-struck girl as a self-indulgent consumer of Hollywood, young women used the concept of the movie-struck girl to both self-identify as experts in the nascent film subculture and to emulate the female stars who represented the possibilities of self-improvement and social mobility. Anselmo-Sequiera uses correspondence published in fan magazines to show that the attraction of Hollywood for the “movie-struck girls” was the possibilities for agency and identity available to women within film industry. The rags-to-riches stories of female stars published in fan magazines contributed to the “highly circulated notion that movie acting presented young girls with a unique opportunity for economical bounty, increased self-worth, and enhanced social status”(23). Young women were not attracted to acting because they were unable to distinguish film fandom from film participation; rather, what Hillary Hallett describes as “women’s remarkable record of influence inside the movie colony of this era” (23) provided fans with examples of the opportunities available to them in Hollywood.

Depicting Gardner as yet another movie-struck girl, fan magazine discourse associated her with a well-known feminine archetype. Like the silly young girls who were unable to

differentiate between their love of movies and wanting to be an actress, in the articles quoted above Gardner was portrayed as having confused wanting to be part of the life of the most popular star in Hollywood with falling in love. In doing this, she was associated with a much-ridiculed stereotype. For Rooney, the more established star who had the might of the MGM publicity department behind him, this fan magazine discourse reaffirmed the values associated with his on-screen persona. Again, the institutional framework through which she was represented worked to minimise her agency, presenting her as a stereotype rather than an individual agentic subject.

## From Playgirl to Star

Ava Gardner married Mickey Rooney shortly after arriving in Los Angeles and, despite her ongoing studio contract, by the time the couple divorced she had only one credited role in a movie, in the low-budget Bela Lugosi vehicle *Ghosts on the Loose* (William Beaudine, 1943). *Ghosts on the Loose* was not even an MGM movie – she had been loaned to Poverty Row studio Monogram Pictures for this performance. Therefore, despite fan magazines suggesting Gardner may have married Rooney to further her career, this lack of acting work suggests that she received little personal career benefit from their partnership. She also appeared to receive little support from MGM in the years following her divorce. In the two years following it, she appeared in only three movies: *Three Men in White* (Willis Goldbeck, 1944), *Maisie Goes to Reno* (Harry Beaumont, 1944) and *She Went to the Races* (Willis Goldbeck, 1945), all in small supporting roles as the second or third female that did little to further her career.

Although she was not making much of an impact as an actress, Gardner continued to appear in the gossip columns of fan magazines, with her photograph appearing often in the candid nightclub shots shown in columns like “Louella Parson’s Good News” in *Photoplay* and *Screenland*’s “Here’s Hollywood.” In these columns, she was portrayed as a party girl and frequently mentioned with heavy innuendo. For example, in the March 1944 *Screenland*, gossip columnist Weston East writes:

A floor show isn’t necessary when George Raft takes Ava Gardner out to the night spots. Their dancing leaves nothing to the imagination and there are some pretty good imaginations in Hollywood. (56)

In these columns, she was linked romantically with a number of men, including Howard Hawks, Clark Gable, George Raft and Mickey Rooney, who it was frequently suggested she might re-marry. She did not re-marry Rooney, however, instead tying the knot with bandleader Artie Shaw in October 1945. Although not an actor, Artie Shaw had previously received extensive coverage in fan magazines when he eloped with Gardner's fellow MGM leading lady Lana Turner in 1940. The Turner–Shaw marriage had lasted for only four months and the Gardner–Shaw marriage did not make it much longer, with the couple divorcing in 1946. But, during their marriage, Gardner's career took a leap forward – she got her first leading role.

In 1945, Gardner was lent to producer Seymour Nemezel as the lead female actor for *Whistle Stop* (Leonide Moguy). Designed as a vehicle for ageing star George Raft, *Whistle Stop* is a B movie that would now be classified as a film noir but was then described as a “crime melodrama.” Ava Gardner plays Mary, who has returned to her small “whistle stop”<sup>57</sup> town after living in Chicago as what the script strongly implies was a kept woman. She becomes involved in a love triangle with former boyfriend Kenny Veech (Raft) and local nightclub owner Lew Lentz (Tom Conway). The film ends with Mary saving Kenny from making a bad decision and the couple (literally) driving into the sunset together. *Whistle Stop* was not well received (the *Photoplay* review opened with the disclaimer “Only for George Raft fans” (“*Whistle Stop* Review” 142), with reviewers complaining about the film's gritty tone and the over 20-year age gap between Raft and Gardner. However, Gardner's performance brought her to the attention of producer Walter Wagner, who referred her on to producer Mark Hellinger for the female lead in his new movie, the adaptation of the Ernest Hemingway short story “The Killers.”

Directed by Robert Siodmak, *The Killers* is often referred to as a prototypical film noir (Wager). Ava Gardner plays Kitty Collins, a femme fatale whose fatal beauty leads men, such as the Swede (played by Burt Lancaster in his first starring role), to their death and destruction. The film was very successful, with *Modern Screen* declaring, “This is one of the most brilliantly acted, excitingly paced pictures of this or any year. Don't miss it!” (“*The Killers* Review” 15). While *The Killers* did help bring Gardner to the attention of the public,

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<sup>57</sup> A whistle stop town is a town so small that the train does not regularly stop there – only if a signal (whistle) is sent.

it catapulted leading man Lancaster to fame and most of the coverage of the movie in fan magazines concentrated on him. However, despite the lack of coverage of Gardner in relation to the movie, her performance in it proved important for Gardner in two key regards. Firstly, it introduced a number of the syntactic and semantic elements that came to be associated with her on-screen persona. For example, when she appears on screen for the first time, she is wearing a black dress with a strap over one shoulder (Figure 11). The publicity shots for *The Killers* of Gardner wearing this dress are iconic in relation to her stardom. The dress and a life-sized version of the picture shown in Figure 11 are the first thing visitors to the Ava Gardner Museum in Smithfield, North Carolina see after entering the museum and it is the most common image used on the covers of Gardner auto/biographies (Figure 13). In this introductory scene, she is singing at a piano, which becomes a recurring motif in her films of this time,<sup>58</sup> repeated in *The Hucksters* (Jack Conway, 1947), *Singapore* (John Brahm, 1947) and *Pandora and Flying Dutchman* (Albert Lewin, 1951). Additionally, *The Killers* introduces a number of narrative elements that recur in her on-screen performance: being involved in a love triangle, being unlucky in love, and being so beautiful that men are almost bewitched by the sight of her.

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<sup>58</sup> This motif's close association with Gardner's introduction in films is referenced in *The Barefoot Contessa* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1954), which opens with Gardner performing on stage without showing Gardner. Instead, the camera watches the diegetic audience watch Gardner's character Maria Vargas perform, a cinematic device that is effective because of audience's familiarity with Gardner's common film introductions.



Figure 11: Publicity shot from *The Killers*

The second way Gardner's success in *The Killers* was important for her career is that it seemed to finally provide MGM with the impetus to start casting her in leading roles. In the three years following *The Killers*, she appeared in *The Hucksters* and *East Side, West Side* (Mervyn Le Roy, 1949) as the second female and *Singapore, One Touch of Venus* (William A. Seiter, 1948), *The Bribe* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1949) and *The Great Sinner* (Robert Siodmak, 1949) as the female lead, which is a considerable increase in both the number and quality of roles for Gardner. Additionally, after the success of *The Killers*, Gardner began to feature in fan magazine profiles for the first time in her career. While most starlets were introduced to the public as part of a carefully constructed publicity campaign that aligned the star's fan magazine discourse with a film performance and, eventually, a distinct on-screen persona, as discussed earlier, Gardner had come to the public's awareness after her marriage to Mickey Rooney. The disruption of standard procedures resulted in a somewhat confused fan magazine discourse, with few individual characteristics associated with Gardner outside

of her marriage and her birthplace of North Carolina. The post-*Killers* fan magazine discourse offered a new version of Ava Gardner, one that incorporated her pre-*Killers* Hollywood past while also introducing elements that aligned her real life with her newly established “reel” life.

Many of the post-*Killers* fan magazine articles addressed Gardner’s gossip column past directly. In “Confessions of an Ex-Playgirl,” Ava Gardner herself (remembering that, as Anthony Slide notes, articles attributed to stars in fan magazines were rarely penned by the actual star themselves (*Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine* 119)) acknowledges her own past failings, writing “Fun came first, and if work didn’t follow—that was good. I was the laziest starlet on the lot—the good-time kid, the night club trotter” (41). She continues:

So, here’s goes a confession: I’ve never been half as interested in any kind of career as I am in what happens to my own life, to me, to Ava Gardner. If it’s real life versus reel life, the real life wins, every time. (96)

The article tells us that after working on *Whistle Stop*, Gardner’s attitude towards work changed. She states:

I found myself anxious about what I had done after it was over. I sneaked inside theaters to see the picture, where I hadn’t bothered before. A minor upheaval was stirring inside me. Something new had been added. At long last—one touch of ambition. (97)

In this article, Gardner’s career had been hampered not by a lack of interest or support from her studio, who “had offered every possible opportunity to me for years” (97), it was due to Gardner’s laziness. The idea of Gardner as lazy and uninterested in work also appears in “Honey Chile.” When she received her contract from MGM, she immediately packed to move to Los Angeles – not “too tired—for once . . .” (ellipses in original Layng 117). However, author Rosemary Layng attributes Gardner’s lack of industry to her weakness with men, stating that every time Gardner got married, she stopped working: “With Ava, love comes in the door, and Ava turns around and goes on out with it. Out of M-G-M, that is” (117). “Christmas Eve” is even more explicit about the influence on men on Gardner and her career. Herb Howe tells us that when Ava “found herself Hollywood bound,” she was not particularly excited. “She thought it would be fun but that was all.” Then, however, Howe reports that “things began to happen, not to her career, but to Ava.” She got married to

Mickey Rooney, then divorced. She got married to Artie Shaw, then divorced. Howe explains further:

Ava was always an easygoing honey-chile who took nothing serious except love. Love unhinged her. Work, she was told, was the best way to forget. But Ava, born wise, regarded the remedy as painful as the heart bust. (102)

In this narrative, Gardner's well-known marriages to famous men become incorporated into her origin story: they are part of the process of her becoming a star because they prevented her from doing the work required to be a star. In this presentation of Gardner's stardom, her fan magazine persona at once incorporates a number of contradictory elements, such as the differing expectations placed on wives and working women and the ability of the female star to embody and live out this contradiction.

Presenting Gardner as unwilling to do the work required to become a star had an unusual consequence: it drew attention to the labour involved in stardom. For example, "Honey Chile" describes how, after seeing Gardner's photo in her brother-in-law's studio, MGM invited her for a screen test. After this, she was offered a contract, despite "an accent so thick it sounded phony" (62), and her first task upon arriving in Hollywood was to lose the accent. Similarly, in "Christmas Eve," Howe describes how "her Southern accent, thick as sorghum, candied the mike" during her audition (104) and required work with a dramatic coach to remove. In "Confessions of an Ex-Playgirl," Gardner explains the labour required to perform in *The Hucksters*:

I worked. I went to singing coach Harriet Lee and said, "Please, Harriet, will you teach me? I'm know I'm a dope—I know I should have had my voice trained before, I know. Now I have to, and fast. Can you?"

She worked days and into the night. So did I. We made it.

I went on my knees, so to speak, to dramatic coach, Lilian Burns. My face flamed at the memories of the hundred times she'd wanted me to work and I'd had something silly that seemed more important. "Please, Lillian, will you?" She would. We made it. (98)

Here, the work done when preparing for a film is not just something done by one actress, for example to remove a strong Southern accent. Gardner explicitly describes MGM as having

“highly-skilled training staff” that are there to train all of the actors signed to “the biggest studio in Hollywood” (“Confessions of an ex-Playgirl” 96). This disrupted the standard practice of fan magazine discourse to present the star performance as natural; of aligning the “real” character of the actor with the “reel” on-screen characters they played.

Although Gardner’s fan magazine discourse at this time differed in its portrayal of the labour of stardom, it still included all of the standard disclaimers for female stars that stardom is a temporary stop on the way to a conventional family life. In “Confessions of an ex-Playgirl,” Gardner states, “Hoot all you like, but what I really want is a home and kids—just as I keep telling anyone who asks me” (98). In “Christmas Eve,” Howe tells readers that “what she wants is to marry and have four children” (104). Similarly, in “Venus in Blue-Jeans,” Ida Zeitlin writes, “She can’t waste time pretending to be anything but what she is—and that’s a straightforward, warm hearted girl who wants a husband and kids more than she wants a career (45). The transgressive acknowledgement of ambition and labour is therefore situated within the safe confines of domesticity, thus allaying any threat presented by Gardner and her independent life.

In this section, I examined the fan magazine discourse surrounding the emerging stardom of Ava Gardner. I noted how, in an attempt to incorporate Gardner’s atypical pathway to fame into her origin story, her fan magazine discourse disrupted the naturalist representation of stardom that minimised the labour of actors in order to more closely align them with their on-screen personas. I will now look at the representation of agency in relation to auto/biographical texts.

## **The Many Stories of Ava Gardner**

Examining the journey of Ava Gardner from starlet to star illustrates how the options of how she was represented were shaped and restricted by existing practices of representation within fan magazine discourse. This is an important contribution to scholarship, as it demonstrates the limited ability of individual actresses within some conditions to have their agency recognised. It also shows how our understanding of a star is shaped by the writing about them. Given the impact of this writing on popular conceptions of the star, it is therefore productive to extend the object of our study to the relationship between agency and stardom in one of the other key mediums through which the star is presented: auto/biographical texts.

Film scholarship has been dismissive of Ava Gardner, with little academic work examining her stardom or career. What research there is tends to consider her in relation to other aspects of the cinema, such as a film or director. Indicative of this trend is Todd Decker's discussion of Gardner and *Show Boat* (George Sidney, 1951). In a book-length examination of race in the different stage and film performances of *Show Boat*, Decker highlights the impact of Gardner on the 1951 MGM version of the musical, writing, "The MGM *Show Boat* was all about Julie, or, more accurately, all about Ava Gardner, who played the role as a variant of her previous portrayals of sexually loose women whose stories ended either badly or sadly" (184). He discusses how Gardner's casting as Julie altered a role originally written for Judy Garland, an established musical performer who had had songs written for the film in order to best utilise her skills. Gardner had replaced Garland just weeks before the shooting started and the two songs that had been written for Garland were taken from the script and additional dialogue added to increase the emphasis on Julie's romantic relationship with Steve and her eventual descent into alcoholism. However, even while highlighting the direct impact that Gardner's casting and performance had on the final film text, Decker minimises the actress' role in it, stating:

She had no vocal or, indeed, performance identity, but she did have a beautiful face and figure, which in the ways of movie stars elicited audience reaction in an almost alchemical fashion . . . . Gardner was not a movie star who *did* things, like singing or dancing as Garland did with almost desperate commitment, but rather a screen image who simply *was*, the opportunity to look at her, to spend some time in her celluloid presence, enough to sustain a film and her career. (emphasis in original 187)

Gardner did do things, not least singing and dancing in the actual film *Show Boat* that Decker is writing about,<sup>59</sup> but Decker's representation of Gardner as a "screen image who simply *was*," who could "elicit [an] audience reaction in an almost alchemical fashion" replicates the pattern I have noted in this chapter so far any discussion of or reference to Gardner focusing on her beauty or physical presence while explicitly denying her agency and subjectivity.

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<sup>59</sup> Although Gardner's performance of "Can't Help Loving' Dat Man" and "Bill" were dubbed in the film version of the musical, for legal reasons the soundtrack of the film features Gardner's performances of the songs.

While there has been little attention paid to Ava Gardner in academic writing, there has been a constant fascination in her life in other forms of writing. Table 1 shows a list of various published works on, about or attributed to Ava Gardner.<sup>60</sup> These include 12 biographies, three autobiographical works, a novel and a play. In addition to this, Gardner has appeared as a character in a number of works; for example, Gardner inspired the stage show *Ava (At the End of the World)* by Eric McCusker that ran in Sydney in 2013, which fictionalises with music the time during the filming of *On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, 1959) in Melbourne when Frank Sinatra visited Gardner (Hawker 14). She has also been the subject of enough poems and short stories to make up an edited volume: *A Touch of Venus*. The number of works published in so many different forms across at least five decades demonstrates a consistent interest in Ava Gardner. What, however, can these works tell us about the agency and strategies of negotiation of Gardner as discursively produced through auto/biographical texts?

Table 1: Ava Gardner books

Release date	Author	Title	Type of book
1960	Hanna, David	<i>Ava: Portrait of a Star</i>	Biography
1974	Higham, Charles	<i>Ava: A Life Story</i>	Biography
1977	Kass, Judith M	<i>Ava Gardner</i>	Biography
1982	Daniell, John	<i>Ava Gardner</i>	Biography
1983	Flamini, Roland	<i>Ava: A Biography</i>	Biography
1990	Gardner, Ava (ghostwritten by Alan Burgess)	<i>Ava: My Story</i>	Autobiography
1990	Wayne, Jane Ellen	<i>Ava's Men: The Private Life of Ava Gardner</i>	Biography
2001	Cannon, Doris Rollins	<i>Grabtown Girl: Ava Gardner's North Carolina Childhood and her Enduring Ties to Home</i>	Biography
2006	Server, Lee	<i>Ava Gardner: "Love is Nothing"</i>	Biography
2010	Gigliotti, Gilbert L. (ed)	<i>Ava Gardner: Touches of Venus</i>	Edited volume
2012	Jordan, Maerene	<i>Living with Miss G</i>	Biography
2013	Rivers, Alton	<i>Love, Ava: A Novel</i>	Novel
2013	Peter Evans	<i>Ava Gardner: The Secret Conversations</i>	Autobiography
2013	Grobel, Lawrence	<i>Conversations with Ava Gardner</i>	Autobiography
2014	Dagneau, Gilles	<i>Ava Gardner: Beautiful, Wild, Innocent</i>	Biography
2015	Brady, John	<i>Frank &amp; Ava: In Love and War</i>	Biography
2017	Bean, Kendra and Uzarowski, Anthony	<i>Ava Gardner: A Life in Movies</i>	Biography

<sup>60</sup> Self-published works and foreign titles were excluded due to difficulties in accessing them.

2017	Druxman, Michael B.	<i>Ava &amp; Her Guys: A Play in Two Acts</i>	Play
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In order to establish the function of auto/biographies in considerations of Ava Gardner, it is necessary to first examine the usage of these texts within star studies. Dyer famously defines the star image as a “complex configuration of visual, verbal and oral signs . . . It is manifest not only in films but in all kinds of media texts” (*Stars* 3). In star studies, biographies have traditionally been considered as one of the “all kinds of media texts” that contribute to the construction of the star image, included along with other media texts such as movie posters, memorabilia and gossip columns. McDonald, for example, describes biographies as a form of commentary, alongside published star profiles and interviews (*The Star System* 1).

In theory, at least, auto/biographies are no more important or relevant than any other media text and are in fact less important than the films that hold a privileged place in a movie star’s persona. In practice, however, auto/biographies are a key component of many star studies.<sup>61</sup> They are frequently cited in scholar’s explorations of their subject’s career trajectories and the historical events related to the star, to the extent that Michael DeAngelis and Mary Desjardins state that biography “serves as the main vehicle of scholarly and popular knowledge of celebrities” (489). To demonstrate my point, I look at one of the few scholarly examinations of Gardner, “One Touch of Venus: Ava Gardner, Rita Hayworth, and the Production Code,” a chapter in Ana Salzberg’s *Beyond the Looking Glass: Narcissism and Female Stardom in Studio-era Hollywood*. In her discussion of Ava Gardner, Salzberg uses Lee Server’s 2006 biography *Ava Gardner: “Love is Nothing”* as her key source of knowledge about the star. For example, Salzberg cites “*Love is Nothing*” as a source for Joseph L. Mankiewicz stating that Rita Hayworth was the inspiration for the character of Maria Vargas from *The Barefoot Contessa* (Salzberg 88) and as a source for a quotation from the cinematographer from *The Killers*, Elwood Bredell, saying, “[A]ll we did was rub a little Vaseline into her skin for a sheen effect – otherwise she wore no make-up” (Salzberg 88). She uses Server as a source for Gardner taking voice lessons to moderate her Southern accent (Salzberg 90) and that Gardner worked hard on her singing voice during the making of *Showboat*, only to have her singing voice dubbed in the film version. A contractual technicality, however, required Gardner to appear on the soundtrack album (Salzberg 90). Finally, she cites Server noting that Gardner felt “skittish and uncertain of herself” as an

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<sup>61</sup> I use the term “auto/biography” to describe all forms of writing about a life.

actress during the filming of *The Night of the Iguana* and a documentary filmmaker chronicling Gardner blowing up and storming off the set after being filmed on an unflattering angle (Salzberg 99).<sup>62</sup> In this example, one biography is effectively being used as a compendium of information about Gardner and the environment in which she worked, including the training practices of MGM, plot summaries of her films, quotes repeated from the autobiographies and biographies of the people Gardner worked with and, finally, psychological insights into Gardner's thoughts and feelings.

By drawing attention to Salzberg's usage of a biography as a historically factual source, I am not suggesting that Salzberg's usage of auto/biographical texts is any worse or better than any other star studies scholar. Her approach is a common practice in the field and I selected her chapter as an example only because its subject is Ava Gardner. However, the common and frequently unquestioned practice of using auto/biographies in this manner has consequences for star studies that are rarely acknowledged. DeAngelis and Desjardins note, "Celebrity studies scholarship has rarely analysed biography – in terms of its formal, cultural, inter-media, ideological, and historical dimensions – even as it serves as the main vehicle of scholarly and popular knowledge of celebrities" (489). Auto/biographical texts perform a number of functions: they inform the construction of star discourse; they are a key source of the public's knowledge of the star; and they provide an opportunity for stars to engage with audiences and control the narratives of their own histories. They are not, however, an impartial compendium of information and should not be treated as such. Rather, auto/biographies should be understood as part of a network of knowledge and relationships that influence their production and reception. These factors should be considered when using auto/biographies as a source and this discussion is particularly pertinent for a study of Gardner, given the volume of auto/biographical titles about and purportedly authored by her.

An important consideration when using auto/biographies as a source is noting that auto/biographies are commodities produced by an industry for profit. Because of this, star auto/biographies tend to conform to the expectations and standards of both the publishing industry and the reading public. Furthermore, they are part of a generic tradition that influences their structure, style, marketing and reception: readers approach star

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<sup>62</sup> The subtitle of the book is in quotation marks because it references a quote attributed to Gardner – "Love is nothing but a pain in the arse."

auto/biographies with not just expectations of what an auto/biography should contain and the form it should take but also their foreknowledge of the particular star. I have discussed previously in this thesis the star autobiography and memoir in relation to the agency and self-fashioning of female stars. I will now discuss the star biography.

Although biography and autobiography are joined under the generic framework of “auto/biography,” a term used to describe all methods of writing about a life, there are a number of key differences between them. The autobiography has been recognised since the late 18th century as a distinct literary genre and as such it has been the subject of ongoing critical discussion. Sidonie and Watson include autobiography as a type of life writing, which they define as “as a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject” (4). This broad definition includes in it all of the forms of writing about Gardner (novels, biographies, memoirs, autobiographies). However, Sidonie and Watson note that while life writing and biography are both modes of narrating a life, they are not interchangeable, specifically in *how* they narrativise a life (5). They write:

In biography, scholars of other people’s lives document and interpret those lives from a point of view external to the subject. In life writing, subjects write about their own lives predominantly . . . And they write simultaneously from externalized and internal points of view, taking themselves as both subject and object, or thematizing that distinction. (5)

There are other differences too. In biography, the biographer determines what events are formative for the subject of the book (and in star biographies, these typically align with the persona of the star); in autobiography (or the more awkwardly phrased “self life writing”), the subject themselves decides what to narrate as formative. G. Thomas Couser notes that the difference between autobiography and biography is in terms of its subject:

Autobiography is conventionally distinguished from biography as follows: a biography can be about anybody (living or dead) other than its author, while autobiography can only be about its singular – indeed, presumably unique – subject, its author. (140)

In simple terms, therefore, the key difference between biography and autobiography (and memoir) is who is telling whose story and from what perspective it is told.

When looking at the difference between autobiography and biography in relation to Hollywood stars, one major difference is the material used as a basis for knowledge; that is, the proof of truth presented to the reader. In writing a life, the autobiographer and the biographer engage different kinds of evidence. For life narrators, personal memories are the primary archival source. For the Hollywood star autobiography, the privileged access to the star, who they really are in their own words, is a huge part of the appeal. Amossy explains:

The supposed superiority of the autobiography is its personal, authentic dimension. . . . The charm of the biography derives from what only an outsider can do; the strength of the autobiography is that it is written by the protagonist herself, telling her side of the story in an inner search for truth. (679)

A biographer, in contrast, must rely on other sources in their search for the “truth” of their biographical subjects. To do this, most biographers use multiple forms of evidence, including historical documents, interviews and family archives. Biographers of Hollywood figures also use movie-specific documents, such as fan magazine articles, production files and the movies for which these figures became famous in the first place. They also rely heavily on other autobiographies and biographies, building and reframing the extensive network of other Hollywood auto/biographical texts.

One important and under-considered aspect of star biographies is the extent to which they operate circularly as regimes of knowledge. This is particularly true of Hollywood star biographies, which repeat and reinterpret each other, frequently drawing from the auto/biographies of the star and the people the star interacted with. For example, Lee Server’s *Ava Gardner: “Love is Nothing”* lists eight other Ava Gardner auto/biographies as sources (*Grabtown Girl*, John Daniell’s *Ava Gardner*, Roland Flamini’s *Ava: A Life Story*, *Ava: My Story*, David Hanna’s *Ava: Portrait of a Star*, Charles Higham’s *Ava: A Life Story*, Judith M. Kass’ *Ava Gardner* and Wayne’s *Ava’s Men*).<sup>63</sup> In addition to the books about Gardner, almost all of the approximately 150 books in Server’s bibliography are auto/biographies (Server also lists many interview subjects and newspaper and magazine sources). John Brady’s *Frank & Ava* lists eight Gardner auto/biographies in its bibliography (*Grabtown Girl*, *Ava Gardner: The Secret Conversations*, *Ava: My Story*, Lawrence Grobel’s

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<sup>63</sup> Server did not list the full title of all of these books in her bibliography but I have used the full titles here to differentiate between the many similarly named books.

*Conversations with Ava Gardner*, *Ava: Portrait of a Star*, *Ava: A Life Story*, Mearene Jordan's *Living with Miss G* and *Ava Gardner: Love is Nothing*) as well as 26 books about Frank Sinatra.<sup>64</sup> *Ava: A Life in Movies*, the most recently published Gardner book at the time of writing this thesis, lists *Grabtown Girl*, *The Secret Conversations*, *Ava: My Story*, *Touches of Venus*, *Portrait of Star*, *Conversations with Ava Gardner*, *Living with Miss G* and "Love is Nothing" in its bibliography. All of these works are deeply interconnected, forming a network through which a biographical "Ava Gardner" is discursively formed.

The interplay and interconnection of these books have complicated and rarely mentioned inferences for star studies researchers. None of the Gardner books I have mentioned here use a formal referencing style, meaning it is often impossible to find the original source of the information mentioned in the body of the text. Quotes are often altered slightly in repetition, or, in one example of the works I have referenced here, abbreviated. John Brady, author of *Frank & Ava: In Love and War*, writes at the start of the book's bibliography, "All direct quotes are from print or interview sources; no scenes or conversations are fabricated. . . . When more than one source is available, I have combined or merged details and dialogue for completeness when maintaining narrative flow" (247). There is no indication in *Frank & Ava* which quotes are written verbatim and which ones are altered, which is an issue given the frequency that Hollywood biographies borrow and refer to each other.

In many instances, the repeated telling of a story provides it with an (often unearned) veracity. In *Art in the Cinematic Imagination*, Susan Felleman cites a story told in *Ava: My Story*, where Gardner tells how the sculptor Joseph Nicoli, who had been commissioned to make a statue of her for *One Touch of Venus*, sculpted her in the nude. Showing naked breasts was forbidden under the production code, so the sculpture had to be redone with the offending body parts covered (60). In *Ava*, Gardner writes:

Most Venuses I'd seen in art books were nude or had a magically clinging drape low on the hips, and Mr. Nicolosi clearly had the same idea. Because when I took off my clothes behind a screen and appeared modestly clothes in a two piece [sic] bathing

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<sup>64</sup> This include biographies, academic studies, studies of his music and memoirs from people who knew him, including both of his daughters. Sinatra never released an authorised autobiography.

suit, he looked at me rather severely and gave a sigh that could have been heard as far away as the Acropolis . . .

Nude? Me? Not even MGM had *that* in their contract. Bare my breasts? What would Mama have thought? . . . The artist, however, prevailed . . . . “Your body is beautiful. It will make all the difference.” And do you know what? He was right. Immodest as it may sound, I have to say the final statue looked very nice indeed. (italics in original 115)

After recounting the story, Felleman writes: “I have no reason to doubt Gardner’s account, but I have not independently verified that Nicolosi in fact executed a prior, nude version of the statue. The anecdote is repeated elsewhere, however” (n5 166). Felleman here acknowledges that the telling of the story in *Ava: My Story* is not in itself verification of an event occurring; however, she uses the story’s repeated tellings as support for the event having happened (it is cited in Flamini (101–2), Server (154) and Jordan (23)). Thus, through the act of repetition, this unverified anecdote becomes a part of Gardner’s star mythos.

Given these considerations, how do we then utilise and understand a star’s biographies when considering a star? Understanding that they are a valuable component of the construction and circulation of a star, how can they be incorporated into star studies research beyond the catch-all consideration of “media texts”? One effective way to evaluate biographical sources is to place them within their paratextual context. I am using the definition of paratext drawn from literary studies, where the term paratexts encompasses peritexts (material inside the book) and epitexts (material contexts outside the book). Philippe Lejeune describes a paratext as “a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text” (cited in Genette 2). Sidonie and Watson describe paratexts as follows:

These extranarrative components of books not only frame and contextualise the narrative but target certain reading publics and encourage certain kinds of audience responses and reading practices. (248)

Auto/biographical acts and texts are situated in a paratextual surround: the framing produced by their publication, reception and circulation (Smith and Watson 99). I have already discussed elsewhere in the thesis how the generic and commercial configurations of star auto/biographies affects the audiences and reading practices, with information already known about the star providing a foreknowledge of the form and content of the book. Another

paratext used to signal information about is its cover, which (in relation to star biographies, does frequently provide an insight into how the book should be judged). Figure 12 shows a selection of covers of Gardner’s auto/biographies. Most of the images selected emphasise the sexy and sultry components of Gardner’s image, showing her with bare shoulders, staring directly at the camera. Two of them – the 2007 paperback edition of “*Love is Nothing*” and the 1990 hardback version of *Ava: My Story* – even use the same image, showing Gardner in her breakout performance in *The Killers*. Another paratextual element is the name of the book. *Ava: My Story* promises a truthful life narrative from the actor herself, while *Ava Gardner: The Secret Conversations* invites the reader into the private, secret life of Gardner.

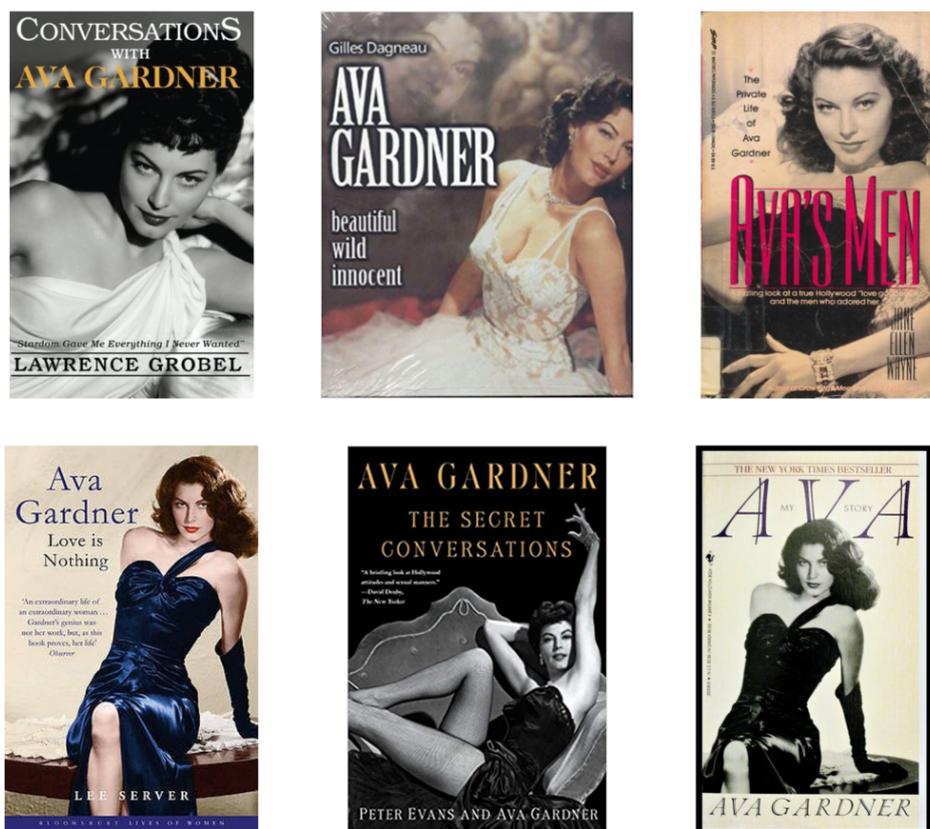


Figure 12: A selection of Ava Gardner auto/biography book covers

Another paratextual signifier is the author. *Ava’s Men: The Private Life of Ava Gardner* is Jane Ellen Wayne. This biography, as the title indicates, frames Gardner’s life story through her mostly romantic relationships with men. This framing is made clear in the author’s note, which states: “No writer has focused on the men Ava Gardner knew, loved, and sometimes hated. To understand her complexity is to seek out the men who were responsible for Ava’s

life-style and her escape to Spain in 1954” (*Ava’s Men* xi). The chapter titles chart Gardner’s relationships, with names like “Mickey,” “Artie” and “Frankie” (her three husbands). While these paratextual signifiers clearly designate the focus of the book to readers, the book’s focus on telling Gardner’s life through a framework of romantic relationships is consistent with Wayne’s other books, which include *Crawford’s Men* (published in 1988), *Gable’s Women* (in 1987) and *Grace Kelly’s Men: The Romantic Life of Princess Grace* (1991). Thus, with *Ava’s Men* both the author’s name and the peritextual information promise a particular type of story.

Another example of the author working as a paratextual signifier is Charles Higham’s *Ava: A Life Story*. In his prologue, he frames the writing of his books as “an act of discovery, of seeking out the essence of a legendary American figure” (x), thus fulfilling the common promise of star biographies of claiming to tell us the real and authentic truth of a star (a promise which Sarah Churchwell wryly notes usually ends up “telling us what we already think we know” (5)). This investigation, however, must be considered within the oeuvre of Higham’s biographical work. In the prelude, Higham notes the difficulty of distinguishing fact from fiction, in particular in relation to gossip “about her supposed nymphomania, lesbianism, alcoholism, her unreliability, her neurotic behaviour on and off the set” (*Ava: A Life Story* x) – a focus on the salacious that is a recurrent trait of Higham’s other Hollywood biographies. These claims include that Errol Flynn was a Nazi spy and a closet homosexual, claims which resulted in Flynn’s family suing both Higham and publisher Doubleday,<sup>65</sup> and that Howard Hughes was centrally involved in the Watergate scandal. His portrayal of Gardner, although generally favourable, is full of passionate love affairs, drinking to excess, botched backyard abortions and other equally scandalous (and generally unsourced) tales. This tawdry writing style is characteristic of Higham and influences the claims to truth made in *Ava: A Life Story*.

I have now demonstrated how analysing the peritextual components of a biography can signify the framing of the life story told within the book. This is an important development for star studies researchers, as it provides a framework through which the information presented within the book can be considered when evaluating its contribution as a source. I

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<sup>65</sup> The suit was dismissed because one cannot sue for libel on behalf of a dead person in the state of California.

will now demonstrate how this the paratextual context works through a close paratextual analysis of *Grabtown Girl: Ava Gardner's North Carolina Childhood and her Enduring Ties to Home*, focusing on issues of agency as represented by this text. By doing a paratextual analysis of one of the most frequently quoted biographical sources about Gardner, it is possible to identify how the text works to suppress Gardner's subjectivity.

*Grabtown Girl* was written by Doris Rollins Cannon, who was the founder and chairman emeritus of the Ava Gardner Museum. It was published in 2001 by Down Home Press, a small publisher established with the specific aim of telling stories about the American South. The difference of *Grabtown Girl* from other Gardner auto/biographies is immediately clear through its cover and its title (Figure 13). Unlike most of the other Gardner titles listed in Table 1, Gardner's name is not listed as the main title; rather, it is placed after the colon. The title "Grabtown Girl" is far more prominent than "Ava Gardner," as it is in a bigger font and a more central position. This serves to displace the focus from Ava Gardner the actress as subject to who Ava Gardner was before she became an actress, a shift that effectively erases her labour and success after she moved away from Grabtown, instead defining her by her "North Carolina childhood." This erasure is supported by the cover design. While the covers of Gardner auto/biographies frequently feature Gardner's famous and much-discussed body (Figure 11), *Grabtown Girl* instead has a close-up of her face. Unlike other covers, which feature promotional shots from films she is well known for (such as *The Killers* and *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*), the close-up is from the much less well-known film *The Naked Maja* (Henry Koster, 1959) further distancing her from her film successes.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, under the title there is a series of five photos of Gardner as a child. From left to right, she gets progressively older. The fifth and final photo is the photo that her brother-in-law placed in his shop window that led to her discovery. Again, this firmly frames this book around the pre-

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<sup>66</sup> *The Naked Maja* is best remembered now for its publicity campaign. The film is based on the romance between painter Francesco Goya and the Duchess of Alba, was reportedly the model for Venus in the painting *The Naked Maja*. Universal Artists attempted to mail 2,300 colour reproductions of the Goya painting of the naked Venus reclining on a couch to advertise the movie. These were banned by the Post Office Department on the grounds that, while the original painting was fine, colour reproductions for commercial purposes were obscene.

fame Ava.

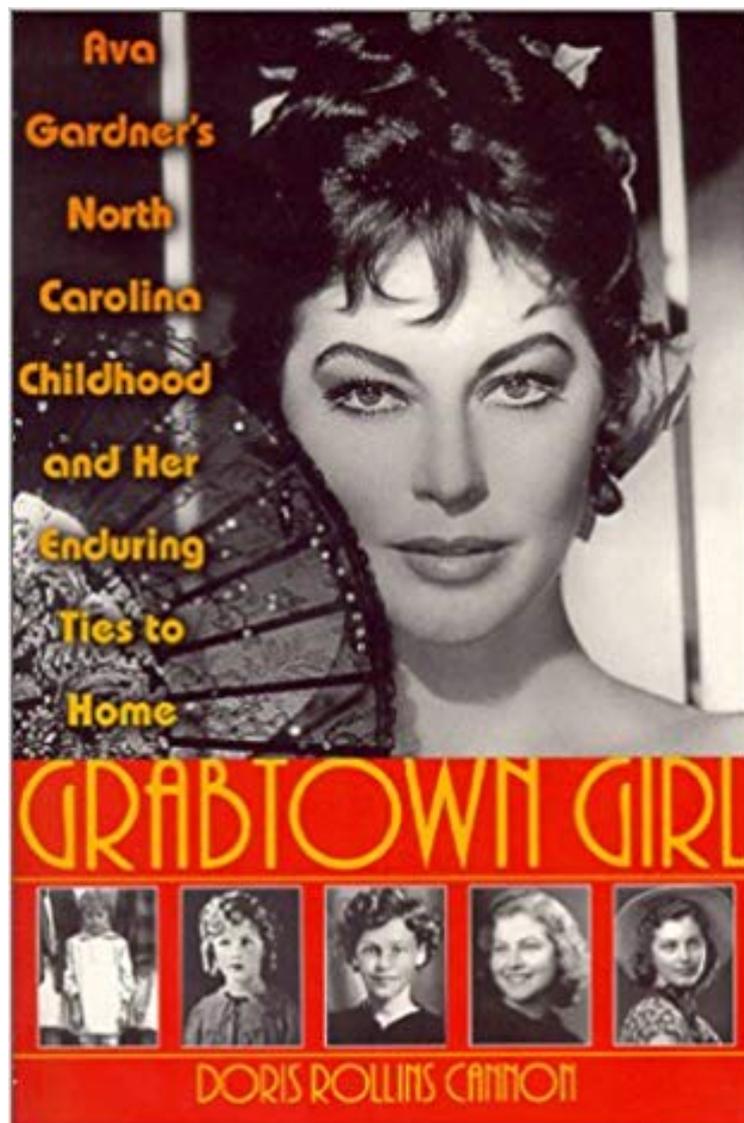


Figure 13: *Grabtown Girl* cover

The foreword of *Grabtown Girl* neatly outlines its mission statement:

A number of books have been written about Ava Gardner, one of the great legends of the golden age of the silver screen.

So why another?

The answer is that previous books, including her 1990 autobiography, largely focus on her years as a celebrated actress, her many romances, and her marriages to three famous men.

The aim of *Grabtown Girl* is to tell who Ava Gardner was at root level—a girl who was strengthened by and remained true to her North Carolina heritage. She never forgot those who were part of her life before the fateful summer of 1941, when at age eighteen, she and her sister, Bappie, boarded a train bound for Hollywood. (7)

As is traditional with star biographies, *Grabtown Girl* claims to be able to provide the truth of who Ava Gardner really was. However, for Collins, this truth is firmly rooted in Gardner's North Carolinian past, the time before she became a star. *Grabtown Girl*'s claim to authority extends to representing itself as offering a more truthful version of "who Ava Gardner was" than Gardner's own authorised autobiography, therefore dismissing or minimising the self of Gardner "in her own words" promised by the autobiographical form.

The book is divided into two sections: "They Knew Her When" and "And They Knew Her Then." These sections roughly divide Gardner's life story into before she was famous and after she was famous. Despite the aim outlined in the preface quoted above, the focus of *Grabtown Girl* is not on Gardner as a subject. The book is not interested in recounting Gardner's life story; instead, it tells her story through her interactions with the people from her home state. For example, of the seven pages devoted to Gardner's relationship with Frank Sinatra, four of them are told from the perspective of Gardner's nephew Billy Grimes. Grimes went to New York with three friends to see an opera and, while in New York, he visited his famous aunt. She and her husband took Grimes and his friends to see Sinatra's performance at Bill Miller's Riviera Supper Club, where Sinatra sang "My Boy Bill," which he dedicated to Billy.<sup>67</sup> Billy also accompanied Frank and Ava to the premiere of *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (Henry King 1952), a party at Club 21 and a box at the opera. The extreme detail in this example illustrates the lack of concern and interest of *Grabtown Girl* for its eponymous "girl" – Grimes's recollection of time spent with his aunt pays far more attention to what he and his friends did than Gardner's actions or thoughts. The book spends half a page on repeating Grimes' descriptions of how much clearer television channels were in New York than they were in Smithfield, North Carolina, but does not address other questions

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<sup>67</sup> In an example of the incredibly detailed minutiae that is spread throughout *Grabtown Girl*, Collins tells us that Billy's friends were "Robert Farmer, who eventually became a superior court judge; Albert Farmer Jr., who became a physician specializing in endocrinology; and Austin Stevens, who became a district court judge" (98).

specific to Ava Gardner, such as why Gardner appeared to be living in New York when her home at that time was in Los Angeles or what she thought about *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, a movie where the character she played had been written for her and for the movie and showed a high degree of intertextuality with her life.

In order to understand *Grabtown Girl*'s objectification (i.e. positioning Gardner as the object not the subject of a biography of her life), *Grabtown Girl* needs to be considered in the context of its relationship to the Ava Gardner Museum and the ideological project of the Museum. The Ava Gardner museum began as a collection of memorabilia collected by Tom Banks, a Gardner super fan who reportedly received a kiss from the young Ava before she became a star. Upon seeing her name in the paper, he started collecting newspaper clippings and over the next 40 years had amassed memorabilia including photos, costumes from her films and movie posters. In 1981, this collection was opened as "The Teacherage" in the house where Gardner grew up in the town of Brogden, North Carolina. When Banks died, the collection was donated to the nearby town of Smithfield, where it stands today as the Ava Gardner Museum (Rosenheck 108–111).

The Teacherage as a museum no longer exists but in her doctoral thesis, Mabel Rosenheck describes it in detail. Initially unlabelled as anything other than "The Teacherage," to even find the museum relied on local knowledge and an understanding of specific small-town geographies. Rosenheck describes the Teacherage as follows:

Here, movie posters and lobby cards adorned the walls. Publicity stills and magazine covers were attached to trellises spanning the room. Scrapbooks sat arrayed on tables, and mannequins stood at angles wearing costumes from Gardner's movies. (110–11)

Rosenheck notes how Gardner "overflows the localized space and small town place into which she is confined" (111): the posters on the wall imbue the museum with the feel of a teenage bedroom, with the pin-up images of Gardner's sexualised form evoking a teenage boy fantasising about being with Gardner while, at the same time, the association of pin-ups with GIs and therefore the international spaces of the military "mak[e] Gardner into a star that is defined both by local origins and national distributions" (111). However, when seen in the context of the female fan, this type of display suggests gendered way of relating to and remembering female stars. As Rosenheck states:

Though the museum doesn't recreate the viewing of *The Barefoot Contessa* or

*Mogambo* at the plush picture palace or the neighbourhood movie theater, it does allow the visitor to reenact an even more intimate domestic scene. In this, the glamorous movie goddess who is held at distance by studio publicity and the onscreen image is brought closer through an everyday encounter in the space of the home. (112)

The central artefact of Bank's collection were the scrapbooks that were laid out on tables at the Teacherage as part of the collection. As well as tracking Gardner's career, the scrapbooks also catalogue Bank's geographic life of collecting, telling Gardner's story through Bank's everyday life in Johnson County, such as "articles from tabloids and local papers where he has underlined her name, drawing little stars and pointed arrows beside her picture . . . . crosswords puzzles, where her name, but nothing else, is devotedly filled in a with a red-tipped pen" (113). Rosenheck's description of the museum is equally as applicable to *Grabtown Girl*:

Here . . . the memoir is not Ava Gardner's and the historical subject is not just the star, but is equally the movie fan and the community of cinema spectators. The historical subjectivity which has been lived and is recalled is not that of individual stardom, but that of collective fandom. (115)

This incarnation of the Museum therefore offered insight into who Ava Gardner was but also firmly located her stardom through the material connections of her and her history to small-town America.

In 2000, the Museum opened in its new permanent location in Smithfield. In this move, the Museum became increasingly institutionalised, moving the focus from showcasing an individual's collection to a more formal archive exhibited and displayed in traditional museum style. This move also evinced a development from an address to a fan/spectator and towards a more coherent narrativisation of Ava Gardner as a Hollywood star. This is demonstrated in the structure of the museum's displays. Upon entering the museum, the first image seen by visitors is of a life-sized copy of the famous photograph of Gardner in her break-out role in *The Killers* next to the actual dress she wore in the film. Then, surrounding this image throughout the 5,000 square feet of the museum, are a series of displays that travel through Gardner's life in chronological order, from birth through her career to her death. These include "Humble Beginnings," "The Gardner Family," "The Discovery of Ava," "Ava

Sings” and “Ava and Her Men.” Other memorabilia displayed includes many of the costumes and accessories Gardner wore in her films and a display of the awards she received over her career, including the certificate from the Academy that certifies she was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress (for her role as Eloise “Honey Bear” Kelly in *Mogambo*). The museum has also recently added its first interactive digital display. Titled “Ava: My Real Story,” the display aims to “highlight who Ava was away from the glare of celebrity” (“Take a Virtual Tour of the Ava Gardner Museum), continuing the discourse of authenticity promised by *Grabtown Girl*.

Despite its representation of Gardner’s Hollywood success, the museum firmly locates the “real” Ava Gardner in North Carolina. The website of the Ava Gardner museum outlines its aim as follows:

Discover the real Ava Gardner as you take the self-guided tour through more than 5,000 square-feet of exhibit space. You’ll see extraordinary costumes, movie posters, awards, and memorabilia that represent Ava’s 45-year career as a leading Hollywood actress. The Museum also houses a selection of personal items of china, jewelry, clothing, and fine art, including 33 portraits by Bert Pfeiffer, an artist whose collection was donated to the museum in 2001.

The tour also includes a screening of a short biography of Ava that features information about her life in Johnston County and commentary by family members, childhood friends, co-stars, and even one of her husbands, Mickey Rooney.

In its framing of Gardner’s life through the commentary of those who knew her, the Ava Gardner Museum, like *Grabtown Girl*, attempts to situate Gardner in terms of her childhood in an innocent small town, working as a locus where personal memories are shared collectively. *Grabtown Girl* similarly refigures Gardner’s stardom through localised collective memory. Through telling Gardner’s life story through the voices and framing of others, Gardner’s agency is minimised or discounted completely. *Grabtown Girl* is frequently used as a foundational text about Gardner’s upbringing and childhood but its othering of her – constructing her as an object of other’s stories rather than a subject of her own – have ongoing consequences for understandings of the agency of Gardner specifically and female stars more generally.

## Conclusion

The discourse surrounding Ava Gardner has been dominated by discussions of her appearance. This strong focus on beauty assigns to Gardner a mythic quality that works to minimise her agency, erasing the labour involved in her career. The erasure of her agency is furthered by a lack of attention to Gardner's stardom in academic work, with little scholarly attention paid to her. However, as one of the biggest stars of the 1950s whose influence extends to today and as a star whose rise to fame followed an atypical path in classical Hollywood, it is important that Gardner's unique stardom is critically examined, in particular in relation to the enactment of agency within particular industrial conditions and how that agency was represented.

In this chapter, I have contributed to the addressing this gap by taking a two-fold approach to the study of Ava Gardner. In the first part of the chapter, I explored representations of the transformation of Ava Gardner from a North Carolinian country girl to MGM star in fan magazines. This analysis revealed a complex interplay between Gardner as a historical subject, with influence in navigating her star image, and the mechanisms through which the star is represented, which minimise the agency of the female star subject. The naturalistic paradigm of classical Hollywood cinema and popular representations of the star system as a glamour factory work to support the eliding of the contributions of individual stars, with the star's origin story presenting stardom as something that happens to a woman rather than something she seeks or works towards. Gardner's rise to prominence through methods unrelated to film success disrupted this process and the attempts of fan magazine discourse to incorporate this disruption into a more conventional star story drew attention to the labour involved in stardom and therefore exposed the naturalist paradigm upon which the star system relies as constructed. However, the placement of this exposure alongside a firmly traditional framework of domesticity and female behaviour minimised its transgressive potential, ultimately subsuming this challenge to a more conventional female star image.

In the second part of the chapter I looked at the agency and subjectivity of Ava Gardner in relation to the many biographical texts about her life and work. Despite being the subject of a large number of biographical works, all of which purport to be the one that tells the real truth about who Gardner really was, the conventions of the biographical form of writing make complicated the relationship between agency and stardom. Recognising that biographical texts are a commercial product created by an industry, I developed a paratextual analytical

framework that gives star studies scholars the tools through which to contextualise and evaluate the information about a star presented by biographical texts. This is important because biographical texts are regularly used without interrogation as a source of information in star studies. Applying the paratextual framework to one of the most commonly cited Gardner biographies, *Grabtown Girl*, demonstrates how its portrayal of Gardner repeatedly frames her in relation to her association with place, family and her relationships with men, denying her subjectivity. The study of autobiographical works about Gardner conducted in this chapter highlights how these forms work structurally to undermine her agency in her own life and career, minimising her role in her own success and replicating the trend from her earlier fan magazine discourse to position her as an object of stardom rather than an agentic subject.

## Conclusion

Hollywood of the 1930s and 40s was a remarkable place for female actors. It was a period during which women's contribution was not only constant and visible but was essential to the successful operation of the industry. The faces of women beamed on the covers of fan magazines, with female stars featured in advertisements selling everything from Lux soap to shoes to the primarily female magazine readers. Female-oriented films featuring female protagonists were a popular staple at the box office, marketed to an audience that studios believed was mostly made up of women. At the centre of this circuit of commercial exchange was the female star: a vital component of classical Hollywood and the star system that underpinned it.

One of the main aims of this research has been to address how female stars were considered within film history, drawing attention to their complexity and importance and combating the erasure of women evident in much of the writing about this time. This is a crucial contribution to the recognition of women in film history. Female stars occupied an unusual position in the 1930s and '40s. As some of the most famous and highly paid people in America, female stars provided visible and inarguable examples of opportunities available for women beyond the domestic sphere. They were central to the studio system that characterised classical Hollywood, providing an integral link between the movie industry and consumer culture while also working as identificatory figures that drew audiences to cinemas. However, at the same time, female stars were subject to the restrictions and constraints faced by all women living in a patriarchal society, while also working in an industry that shaped the options available to them. That female stars were able to achieve such clear economic power and public renown illustrates the ability of these individuals to navigate these constraints, to varying degrees of success, making them valuable subjects for analysis.

Uncovering new knowledge about three highly significant stars of the period, this thesis has shown what can be gained from a detailed excavation of the institutional and cultural conditions that enabled and restricted stars' participation in their own processes of professional self-fashioning. Commonly depicted as existing in indentured servitude to the option contract, the contribution of female stars to their own careers and to the film industry more generally is frequently undervalued in film histories. Film studies contributes to this erasure, focusing on the woman as image and object rather than subject. But, female stars

were a vital component of the studio system and demonstrated agency in their careers, albeit an agency that was restricted by the same forces of industry and social values that enabled it. Throughout her career at Warner Bros., Olivia de Havilland employed a series of negotiation strategies in order to challenge to institutional control of Warner Bros., eventually obtaining to right to be an independent freelance star and take greater control of her own star story. Joan Fontaine's star agency is evident through the practices of resistance she employed which problematised simple categorisation in terms of female social roles and responsibilities, resulting in a duality evident in many facets of her stardom. Ava Gardner's rise to prominence through methods unrelated to film success disrupted the usual process by which starlets became stars, forcing the acknowledgement of the commonly disguised labour and agency of stars. Uniting all three case studies is the findings relating to the importance of interrogating the sources through which star study scholars examine each star, recognising the implications of each source on the findings of the research.

The idea of female stars as agentic historical subjects with power and control over their careers runs counter to how they tend to be understood and written about within the scholarship and film history. Richard Dyer famously conceives of the star as an image, a text made up of everything we know about them. Dyer is not interested in the star as a person; rather, he considers stars as objects of signification. Dyerian analysis, therefore, is concerned with establishing the multiple meanings that a star has for different audiences at different times. This approach does not allow for the consideration of stars as historical subjects. Other scholars have used different approaches for their studies of the stars. For example, Paul McDonald locates his analysis of stardom generally and individual stars within the broader cultural and industrial framework within which the star operated. For McDonald, the industrial context should be considered when examining a star's image, thus providing a more historiographical understanding of the star. However, McDonald's analysis did not focus on the star as a historical subject, instead incorporating considerations of the star as labourer into the star as image. This leads to a clear gap when these frameworks are used to study a female star.

Studying a star as a text or image is useful because it is as a text that the star is most accessible. It is through their movies that most audiences first experience film stars and extrafilmic discourse is a vital source for scholars studying stars. However, considering a star only as an image limits our understanding of a star, especially female stars. Gender difference informs the practices of stardom in a number of ways. In the complex interplay between on-

screen persona and off-screen discourse, the lived experience of female stars – as wives, mothers and working women – was deeply connected to the influence of female stars on audiences and the circulation of their image more generally through fan magazine discourse and consumer culture. Representing ideologically significant versions of femininity in both their on- and off-screen personas, female stars were figures of interest and identification to female fans, acting as both examples of women who had autonomy in the public sphere and the tension between that autonomy and social typologies. This research, therefore, proposed that in order to fully address the complexity of the female star, existing star studies models need to be extended to incorporate considerations as a historical subject with agency whose actions influenced their stardom. Doing this revises assumptions about women’s experience in classical Hollywood, allowing for a complex and nuanced understanding of female stardom.

One of the major contributions of this research is the development of a research framework that incorporates considerations of the agency of female stars into existing star studies frameworks. This methodology considers the subjectivity of actors as historical subjects alongside and inclusive of the components of star image outlined by Dyer and other star studies scholars by looking to the archives and a range of sources that convey the star not only as an image but also as a professional and a historical subject. This approach does not claim to have access to the “true” person of the star but includes considerations of the historical person in the mapping of the discursive field of star subjectivity through archival study. This approach allows us to identify how individual female stars navigated the fame, success and the gendered constraints of the Hollywood system at a specific historical and cultural moment.

A key aspect of the research framework was the interrogation of the largely unacknowledged implications of using the sources most commonly accessed by star studies researchers when examining stars from classical Hollywood: fan magazines, archives and auto/biographical texts. Although work on stars frequently acknowledges the in-depth archival research conducted, the contingency of archival research process is rarely discussed in detail. However, it is important to detail the archival process more specifically because the methods through which material is collected for research influences the findings, particularly in relation to female stars. One example of this is fan magazines. The Media History Digital Library’s digitisation of a broad range of books and magazines have made new material available to film scholars around the world, a development that is particularly relevant to star

study scholars given the importance of fan magazines to the understandings of stars and how their images circulated through culture at particular times. Additionally, the Media History Digital Library's Lantern search function allows for the searching of individual terms across multiple years and titles, making it easy for researchers to identify mentions of stars particular stars or movies over time. However, the selection of titles available on the Media History Digital Library is only a small selection percentage of all of the titles published at the time and relying on digital searches runs the risk of cherry-picking individual mentions and missing valuable context. Therefore, it is important that researchers acknowledge these limitations and account for them in their research practices.

Another finding of this research is the way in which the archives used by film scholars contribute to the ongoing minimisation of women in film history generally and female stars more specifically. Star studies research relies heavily on archival research as a source of data, yet this practice of archival research is rarely acknowledged or explored. This is a considerable oversight, as archives are not neutral but are constructed institutions that produce knowledge about the past and shape our knowledge of history, identity and memory. Through what is chosen to be included in the archives and whose voices are seen to be worth collecting and preserved, certain subjects are privileged over others. Historically, this practice has been gendered, systematically excluding records about or by women. This practice has strong consequences for research into feminist histories given the archives' role as a memory institution, acknowledging that remembering the past through historical research in archives does not simply consist of the retrieval of stored information but understanding the conditions and circumstances of the preservation of material and what is not preserved. This gender bias has implications for scholars of classical Hollywood stars, who often to use the same archives for their research. The Margaret Herrick Library and the AFI Archives are popular with film scholars due to their extensive holdings of material related to studio-era Hollywood. However, these archives contain strong gender bias, which impacts the film histories that are written using these sources. To address this, historians must read against the grain to tease out hidden stories and fill in the silences that occur when women's voices are unrepresented. Through reading against the grain, the gender bias present within archives generally and film archives specifically can not only be acknowledged but also addressed.

An important contribution of this research is case studies of three important but understudied female stars. The three stars chosen for this research were selected because they all provide excellent subjects through which to examine the interaction between industry and star in

relation to female stardom, in particular the tension between individual autonomy, industrial pressure, and social typologies and expectations. Each of the three case studies in this research provides an insight into how different female actors enacted star agency within these constraints, with each of the three women working for different studios and facing different obstacles. Each star was signed to a seven-year option contract at an early age but each achieved stardom in different ways. Olivia de Havilland achieved early success but was typecast as a romantic lead. Joan Fontaine's early characterisation as a plucky, independent woman did not resonate with audiences. Ava Gardner's publicity, in contrast, lacked the individuality that is a characteristic of stardom. Examining the early part of the stars' careers – their journeys from starlet to star – allows for an understanding of how the star-making process was shaped by the studio to which the star was contracted; for example, Warner Bros.' firm paternalistic management of de Havilland's casting in comparison with MGM's benign neglect of Gardner's career and Fontaine's relative independence at an independent studio. This examination also demonstrates how characteristics associated with the star changed over time in response to a complex range of factors, such as de Havilland's success in *Gone With the Wind* and her alignment with a new character type. For Fontaine and Gardner shifts occurred in ways that followed the normative patriarchal expectations of marriage (and divorce in Gardner's case). This study therefore illustrates the enabling and restricting forces experienced by these actors and, in an important contribution to the knowledge, not only how each woman navigated these limitations but also the impact of their actions on their career and stardom.

Fan magazines were a vital part of this research project. Situated at the intersection of their own commercial interests, the desire of studios to promote and manage their actors and movies and their need to respond to the interests of fans, fan magazines contain varied and frequently contradictory discourse in relation to individual stars and broader cultural concerns. Fan magazine discourse is thus a fascinating place through which to identify the values associated with each star as well as the tension between on-screen persona and lived female experience at different historical moments. Olivia de Havilland's fan magazine discourse initially struggled to resolve the disparity between her on-screen persona's primary focus on love and marriage and de Havilland's lived experience as an independent woman succeeding in her career and supporting her family independently. This fan magazine discourse changed following de Havilland's much-lauded performance as Melanie in *Gone With the Wind*, championing more challenging roles for the Havilland alongside continued

affirmations of the importance of romance consistent with her on-screen persona. This demonstrates the ability of individual stars to shape their own off-screen image to a limited extent, even when this places them in conflict with their home studio, as de Havilland was publicly with Warner Bros. The fan magazine discourse of Joan Fontaine illustrates how fan magazines shaped star images, with her off-screen representation changing drastically when she was contracted to Selznick International Pictures. As with de Havilland, there is clear tension between on-screen persona – for Fontaine, as meek yet devoted women transformed by love – and the historical subject who was experiencing dramatic career success. Ava Gardner’s unusual path to fame resulted in an indistinct fan magazine discourse in the early part of her career but became incorporated into her origin story once she achieved film stardom. From these results, this research finds that fan magazines worked in an interesting way in relation to the three stars studied, both shaping the star’s persona and responding to star’s public actions. In addition to this, fan magazine discourse worked to resolve the contradictions and tensions between the social expectations of women and the professional expectation of working women; yet, in doing so, exposed many of the issues faced by female Hollywood stars.

As with any research, there are some limitations with this thesis. Further research would benefit from exploring archives that were unavailable to this researcher, such as the Warner Bros. archives at the University of Southern California and the Joan Fontaine archives at the Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center. Examining the material contained in these archives might provide productive additions to the findings in this thesis. Additionally, all three of the stars studied in this thesis had long and productive careers, the analysis of which was beyond the scope of this research but which would be a fascinating subject for further study. For example, after leaving Warner Bros., Olivia de Havilland became involved in packaging the projects she worked on, sourcing material for film adaptations, selecting the directors, writers and co-stars for her star vehicles and working with costume designers. Studying this period of her career could provide interesting insight into an independent freelance star working as producer without a formal production company and into independent freelance stardom as the studio system was drawing to its end. Another area of interest would be looking at the influence of the long interviews given by de Havilland in the final decades of her career like “Melanie Remembers” and “The Last Belle of Cinema.” With a much smaller distribution than the traditional star autobiography, these autobiographical

interviews are addressed to a cinephilic rather than general audience, affecting the scope of the construction of the self “in her own words” promised by the autobiographical form.

Another option for further research would be to examine the period after Joan Fontaine left Selznick International Pictures. As part of her freelance independent career, Fontaine formed a production company with her then husband William Dozier called Rampart Productions, which operated as part of Universal Studios. As vice-president of the production company, Fontaine had control over all aspects of film production including selecting the project, the director and the advertising and she starred in each of the three films made by Rampart. This gave her incredible power in the shaping of her own star persona and it was while working at Rampart Productions that she appeared in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948), the film which, in addition to *Rebecca*, she is most closely associated with today. Rampart Productions ended when the Fontaine–Dozier marriage did and would be an interesting case study of the interaction and possible tension between the power of the female star, whose name was the main drawcard, and the social expectations associated with being a wife in the late 1940s and ‘50s.

Another interesting avenue for further research would be to continue the analysis of star autobiographies and memoirs to incorporate considerations of ghostwriters. Since Ava Gardner died in 1990 there have been three books released as Gardner autobiographies: *Ava: My Story*, by Ava Gardner in 1990; *Ava Gardner: The Secret Conversations*, by Peter Evans and Ava Gardner in 2013; and *Conversations with Ava Gardner* by Lawrence Grobel in 2014. Published posthumously, all of these books claim to be an authentic, truthful portrayal of Gardner in her own words, yet the Gardner in represented in each book is noticeably different. Additionally, only one (*Ava: My Story*) has been approved by the Ava Gardner Trust. A detailed examination of these books that incorporates the paratextual framework developed in this research could yield valuable findings about the agency of female stars in ghostwritten texts.

During the writing of this thesis, Olivia de Havilland passed away at the age of 104. Highlighted in the many obituaries and profiles memorialising her long and extraordinary life was the impact of her actions on Hollywood as an industry. In suing Warner Bros., she affected the power balance of the studio system and transformed our understanding of how women could intervene and transform labour practices and materially improve working conditions not just for herself but all stars. The headlines celebrating de Havilland sit in stark

contrast with the other reporting on women in Hollywood that has dominated the news over the last few years: #MeToo and the systematic culture of harassment and assault experienced by actors and a range of other personnel. Almost a century after de Havilland first arrived in Los Angeles, female actors continue to grapple with gendered structures that impact on the work and experience of women in the Hollywood system, including unequal pay for comparable work and lack of recognition in awards. These facts make concrete what we already know – that the gendered hierarchy of Hollywood cinema has real consequences. This reinforces the need to look closely at what history has shown, such as the structures in which women work, the barriers they navigate, how they are enabled to achieve success and particular examples of female agency.

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